

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ***The Story of Adele H.*** 1975

Francois Truffaut

### OVERVIEW

The film plunges us into the storm and turmoil of ocean just outside Halifax, Nova Scotia. A shipload of passengers from Europe is arriving, and as they step ashore they are being closely vetted by the British customs agents, who await them in the port. It is a time of international tension, in North America, for the Civil War is raging in America, and the rival forces of French and British Canada are maintaining close watch over one another. Though our eyes soon fall on a young single lady traveler, we are caught up in the sense of the historical as well as the personal. As in *Wild Child* or *Two English Girls* we are directly and manifestly deposited in a certain place at a certain time—a place and time not aligned with our own present. And yet, as in both those films, we engage intensely with an individual, a single individual, who is intensely present to us.

*Past-present Synthesis.* This past-present synthesis seems one trademark of Truffaut's work. In this synthesis lies the complex personal quest with which Truffaut crashed into the New Wave industry. Perhaps we may think back to some of the biographical hints he leaves behind him. Already in *400 Coups* we see that he is a creative historian of himself, putting us, with him, back in his past through the vibrant present eye he casts on life. He both is, and is an eye looking back on, the Doinel figure who represents him. He is the leading ladies with whom he so passionately identifies—regularly falling in love with them—and the eye who sleeps in a single room during the filming of *Day for Night*. He who has a manner of knowing past and present in one refuses identity with anything smaller than the world itself.

*Versatility.* The film we launch on here, which tracks an historical event—we have the published life time diary of Adele Hugo—Hugo, Adele, *Le Journal d'Adele Hugo*, Paris, 1968—was first presented in 1975, the year after the screening of *Day for Night*. *Day for Night*, while no comedy, took the observer into the hyper social drama of a film shoot, an event at which egos collide, local drama sustains a high level of social emotion, and the hearty sociology of the entertainment business preoccupies all engaged parties. *Day for Night* is as different—one might say as different as day from night—from the study in passion and individual madness that drowns us the next year in *Adele H.* (A contrast by the way which might have something to do with the relative box office failure of *Adele H.* in France.) Versatility, a hallmark of all Truffaut's work, from start to finish, could not be more stunningly illustrated than in the two back to back films we are discussing.

### CHARACTERS

Adele Hugo	daughter of Victor Hugo, French writer and patriot
Lt. Albert Pinson	British officer, Adele's passion, and her would-be husband.
Mrs. Saunders	Adele's landlady in Halifax
Mr. Saunders	Adele's landlord in Halifax
Mr. Whistler	kindly bookseller in Halifax
Mme. Baa	elderly lady in Barbados; saves Adele's life

### SYNOPSIS

*Arrival.* Film opens as a young lady lands in rough water in Halifax, Nova Scotia. She is seeking for the love of her life, a British Lieutenant, whom she has fallen in love with—back home in the Island of Guernsey. She takes a room in a boarding house, and sets out to find her beloved. She makes contact with him several times, spies on his love life, intrudes violently on the private planning of the Lieutenant

and his fiancée, and, with increasing insistence, promotes the impression that she is married to the Lieutenant.

*Madness.* The unfolding of madness becomes devastating, to Adele, when the Lieutenant, who is plainly no longer interested in her—in fact dreads her—ships out to Barbados for his next assignment. In an increasingly obsessed state she follows him, by this time convinced that the two of them are married. In a torn gown, walking distractedly through the busy hot streets of Barbados, she hunts for her ‘husband,’ but when on one occasion she passes him she does not recognize him. The lieutenant, meantime, has made some efforts at repatriating the delusional woman, and with the precious help of a freed African slave she is reunited with her father in Guernsey.

## STORY

*Romance.* Adele, the daughter of Victor Hugo, was brought up on the island of Guernsey, where her father was in exile. In her teen age years she was stricken by an inescapable passion for a Lieutenant in the British Navy, who was stationed in Guernsey. He had not made any serious commitment to her—nor was he the type to settle down quickly—but he reciprocated her feelings.

*Suffering.* When he was transferred to Nova Scotia, as part of the British Canadian force on the Canadian East Coast, Adele followed the lieutenant, and soon—to put it through his eyes—became the bane of his life. She tracked him everywhere he went, sent him passionate love letters, wrote to her parents to provide money to settle Pinson’s gambling debts, in fact told her parents—who disapproved of Pinson anyway—that she and the Lieutenant were married. The Lieutenant himself, now long regretting that he once spoke to Adele about marriage, does all he can to turn her away. Incrementally she attacks him with outrages, designed to fetter him. A single example makes the point. The lieutenant is engaged to be married to a Halifax girl, and Adele, fully informed of the details of the plan, puts a pillow inside her blouse, to make herself look pregnant, and announces, to the girl’s father, that she, Adele, is carrying the Lieutenant’s infant. Noteworthy assistance, in Halifax, comes from Mr. and Mrs. Saunders, well intentioned landlords, the careful bookseller, Mr. Whistler, who keeps an eye on her. Miraculously she makes it through this difficult period.

*Indifference* For the most part, even in face of such outrages, the Lieutenant is indifferent to Adele, for he has not, from the time of Guernsey on, been in love with her. It might be said that the world at large is surprisingly content to let Adele alone, travelling unaccompanied and without an official mission, at a time of political turmoil.

*Collapse.* When Pinson ships out to Barbados, he does so as engaged to another woman, and Adele cannot fail to see that he is abandoning her. She follows him to his new assignment, in the teeming central streets of the capital of Barbados. By this stage—for she passes Pinson in the street without recognizing him—she cannot even concentrate on her quest. At the end of her rope, shabbily dressed though in a once beautiful gown, she falls flat on her face in the market place. She is pulled to her feet by a large ex-slave mamma, who cares for Adele while helping her with the protocols of identity necessary for the return to France.

*Denouement.* It is at this point, in fact, that the Lieutenant has become worried about Adele’s condition, and is ready to intervene on her behalf. Between them, Pinson and Mamma Baa help Adele to return to Guernsey and France. Adele is placed, by her father, in the Asylum of Saint-Mandé, where for the next forty years she lives in relative comfort, gardening, playing the piano, and keeping up with her journal entries.

## THEMES

*Romance* The starting point, of this romantic tragedy, is the affection that draws together Adele on Guernsey, where she is a young teen ager, and Lieutenant Pinson, a British naval officer stationed on the island. Shall we call this stage puppy love?

*Passion* Sometime before Lieutenant Pinson leaves Guernsey, he and Adele fall in love. There is talk of marriage, between them, and what she hears will remain unforgettable to her. But not to him. He is a

young and adventuring young sailor, without too much precision in his talk about love. Furthermore, he has no idea whom he is dealing with.

**Obsession.** By the time Adele has left Guernsey, for Halifax, she is arguably trapped in delusion. She does not have nothing to go on, in her assumption of Pinson's feelings for her, but she is pretty much whistling in the dark, by the time she makes her first searches for the Lieutenant, through a Halifax notary.

**Madness.** A series of episodes signal the growing frenzy of Adele in Halifax. She tries for a while to spy on the private and love life of the Lieutenant, whom she pursues night and day, to the cinema where he goes with his girlfriend, to a hypnotist she believes capable of winning Pinson over to her, to the bookstore of a kindly bookseller, in whose shop she has recently seen her lover. In the madness stage Adele is beginning simply to repeat her search preoccupation, without much insight into plan or strategy

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**ADELE** Adele is the central figure, and we track her closely from childhood in Guernsey, to Halifax, to Barbados, back to Guernsey, and ultimately to the curative French Asylum, where she will pass the last forty years of her life. From stage to stage she shows fortitude, persistence, even recklessness in her passion for Lieutenant Pinson, although by the time he has shipped out of Guernsey she has had little encouragement from him. She is able to make his life quite miserable, especially in Halifax, where she harasses him recklessly. She is at the mercy of her profound search, and in the end collapses into the mercy of a woman who herself has suffered slavery, and emerged into a twilight of peace. Her character has been defeated by loss, although for as long as possible she invents excuses for hope. Ultimately, she is broken by Pinson's indifference to her, Her fortitude has limits.

Stages in Adele's character formation:

**Adventure.** When we first see Adele, disembarking in rough waters in Halifax, we feel that we are on an adventure. She is an adventurous and daring person. We quickly discover, however, that this adventure is a function of her relation to Lt. Pinson; We have entered a fixated search. Adele is adventurous enough to pursue her love, but the compulsion for this pursuit takes her over.

**Sense of loss.** By the time Pinson has shipped out to Barbados, Adele knows that she has no further recourse for reaching him. Her compulsion to rejoin him has led nowhere. He has rebuffed all her efforts to contact him in Halifax, and he is well on his way to marriage to another woman. Her character is discouraged now. She is no longer able to withstand the loss of her idol.

**Morbidity.** Adele's weakness feeds on itself. There is a progression in her character degeneration. Critics of the situation tracked in Adele's journal, on which the film is based, have taken two paths to interpreting this film: either the whole film is a psychiatric case study or it is a 'humanistic' portrait of the kinds of generation of illness possible in an unresolvable love affair; the kind of decline Goethe portrayed so grippingly in Werther.

**Fragility.** Viewed from the existential standpoint, the story before us illustrates the fragility of an individual's life course. Adele is easily deluded by the indicators that society and its members give off. Her initial puppy love becomes a platform on which she builds a house of imaginary expectations. Faced with the winds of daily life, her edifice of cards collapses. Her character cannot be restored.

**Collapse.** In Barbados Adele has become an automaton. She knows no one, does not even recognize Pinson, and is simply waiting to collapse, as she does. Her character has frozen around her.

**Parallels** Again, Goethe's Werther comes to mind, for there is no sharper example, in literature, of the remorseless progress of romantic love which cannot find an object, and which, accordingly, pulls the structure of life down around it. Like Adele, Werther passes from preoccupation with a love object, Lotte, to preoccupation with his love itself. He renders himself unable to read the external world or the motives and actions of people in it. He disappears inside his love.