

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Two English Girls 1971

Francois Truffaut

OVERVIEW

Ten years before *Two English Girls*, Truffaut was working on *Jules and Jim*, a forerunner in that it confronted the theme of trio disparity in a lasting love affair. In the earlier film it was a question of two young men in Paris, full of the life and fantasy of the Belle Epoque, who found what at first seemed fulfillment in their pleasure with one another; sports, jokes, café and night life, dates with passing girls, who were no more serious than they, Jules and Jim. Into his flitting bachelor life came a woman who appealed to both men, separately, and as part of a threesome. So close were all these varieties of relation, among the three enthusiasts, that for a while it seemed the configuration could simply last at it was. This was not to be—that is another story—but what lasted was the commitment of Truffaut to the kind of *amour a trois* he mastered in *Jules and Jim*. In the film before us, Truffaut shows how deeply captivated he was by the theme in question. He picks it up in *Two English Girls*, this time pairing one early twenties man with two English sisters. While this later film is haunting and sad, in the end, it is not fatal, like *Jules and Jim*, which concludes with two drowned corpses.

CHARACTERS

Claude	French lover of both Anna and Muriel
Anna	British sister of Muriel, lover of Claude
Muriel	British sister of Anna, lover of Claude
Mrs. Brown	mother of the two sisters
Diurka	lover of Anna, takes her to Persia
Mr. Flint	neighbor of Mrs. Brown
Francois Truffaut	the narrator

SYNOPSIS

The narrator (Truffaut) explains that Claude Roc, and his widowed mother are visited by Anne Brown, the daughter of an old friend. Anne then invites Claude to visit her—and her widowed mother and her sister Muriel—on the coast of Wales. Claude falls for Muriel, proposes marriage, but the mothers involved plead for a year's wait before the marriage can be approved. Muriel withers during this period, while Claude flourishes in the Paris art world. Eventually Claude breaks his engagement with Muriel; Anna comes to Paris to work on her sculpture, and she and Claude make love. Claude agrees to an 'open affair' relationship; she goes off with a Persian publisher, with Claude's encouragement, while in the meantime Claude receives a confessional letter from Muriel, revealing her addiction to masturbation. Muriel comes to Paris, falls again with Claude, with whom she makes love, before learning of his affair with Anna, which sends her deeply into depression. Anna falls ill in Wales and dies, surrounded by her family. Claude reengages with Muriel for a final time, before she leaves him for good, having explained in detail why she believes marriage between them would never work out.

STORY

Love: Muriel and Claude. The narrator, Truffaut, tells us of a young Frenchman, Claude, who has been invited to England for the summer, by Anna, the daughter of a family friend. He accepts, with the special emphasis that he should try to draw out Muriel, Anna's sister, who has health problems, especially with her eyes. Things go as hoped, Muriel and Claude fall in love, and by summer's end Claude proposes marriage.

Cooling off. Thanks to the scruples of the two mothers-in-law to be, the marriage is postponed for a year, during which the two young people will lead their own lives, remain incommunicado, and mature. Claude makes his way to the Parisian art scene, where he has various affairs, and before the end of the year breaks off the marriage. Muriel is devastated, sinks into depression.

Anna and Claude; open affair. Anna meanwhile has gone to Paris to pursue her own sculpture studies. There she falls in love with Claude, makes love to him, and in short order agrees to live with him in a state of 'open affair,' each giving the other freedom, while each is to think of the other as his/her central love interest. Claude ratifies Anna's desire to go away with a dashing Persian publisher.

Muriel's Confession. Muriel sends Claude an extensive diary journal, in which she lets it all out, to him, about her own psychological issues—childhood addiction to masturbation, a childhood Lesbian affair.

Muriel and Claude, Paris. Shortly after, Muriel returns to Paris; she and Claude resume their love affair. But when Muriel learns, from Anna, that Anna and Claude have made love together, the blow to Muriel is overwhelming. She returns to Wales, crushed. Her sister, Anna, has by now married, and soon after dies. Muriel meets Claude again—for his sense of loss and failure has brought him back to Wales—and they make love for a first and final time.

Separate ways: Muriel and Claude. In emotion laden language Muriel brings Claude to understand, that he is not the type to marry, and that they must leave each other. Claude becomes a successful author, but lives haunted with the dream of what might have been, had he and Muriel married and had children.

THEMES

Freedom Anna and Claude, at her persuading, agree on an open relationship. She wants freedom to lead her own life, and Claude follows her lead. The same took place with the three lovers in *Jules and Jim* who accept that relationship.

Transience Life and the feelings that accompany it pass quickly. Claude is attracted alternately, and for brief periods of time, to each of the two English girls. The same rapid transience is seen in the interrelating emotions of the trio in *Jules and Jim*.

Appearance Much is not seen on the surface in this film. In the diary she sends to Claude, Muriel confesses her past sexuality. This tale is of foundational importance to Muriel's personality, but no one knows the story until she shares it with Claude.

Passion. The ingredients for intense physical passion await the tale to join them, and as it is there is partial fulfillment of desires. Satisfaction of physical desire, however, is not sufficient to bring lasting union to any of the three main players in this drama. Anna's main concern is Muriel, Muriel's main concern is Claude—but not the Claude before her, and Claude is just curious and hormonal, and not ready to carry his passion into maturity.

Landscape The Romantic landscapes of Wales build into the strong feelings of this haunting love story, which is so plainly destined for an unhappy conclusion. We are reminded of the splendid nature scapes that set off the efforts of 'society' to tame the *wild child*, in Truffaut's film of that name. Stark views of the sea, grey cobblestone farmhouses, and burnished wood interiors: these components compel us to pay utmost attention to the human landscape traversing them.

Shock There are alternations of peace, as in the landscape, with violent outbursts of feeling. The height of the intensity promised by the whole theme, of this film, plainly occurs when Muriel learns from Anna that Claude has not been faithful. Muriel explodes from this shock. Arguably she never recovers.

Seduction It takes two for seduction, yes, but we might say that the truest example, in this film, is Claude's seduction of Anna in Paris. He has from the outset, in Wales, been drawn to Muriel—especially by her eye condition—but Anna is the more proactive and enticing of the two sisters, and brings a full court press out of Claude.

Illness. Muriel brings with her the atmosphere of illness. From the first sight of her we find her withdrawn, and preoccupied by eyesight issues. In the long confessional letter about her childhood, which she sends to Claude in Paris, she makes it clear that her childhood was embedded in unhealth, both of body and mind, and that her Lesbianism and masturbation had taken much vitality away from her.

Fatality. Sadness spreads like a cloak over this entire tale. The triangulation of the three lover-partners never enjoys the kind of group energy that infected the world of Jules and Jim, especially before the War drove obstacles between the two men. The *belle époque* ebullience, which brought Jules, Jim and Catharine together, running and playing in the streets and parks of Paris, was never to occur in the present tale, even in the placid days when Claude has first arrived in Wales.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

CLAUDE Claude is a romantically susceptible man in his twenties, with a leaning toward the arts. When he receives a summer visit from Anna, a friend of his mother, he gladly accepts an invitation to spend the next summer in Wales, visiting Anna and her sister, Muriel, who as we learn has serious eye problems. Being romantically susceptible, Claude falls pretty quickly for Muriel—in fact proposes marriage. The marriage having been postponed for a year, to make sure that cool heads will predominate, Claude finds that he is no longer in love with Muriel—although he will later be drawn to her again—and he quite precipitously breaks off the engagement, with little attention to Muriel's feeling. In his subsequent affair with Anna, Muriel's sister, Claude finds himself in the weaker position. Anna opens up their affair, more or less forces Claude to accept her conditions. Claude, we see, is pretty cavalier when he is on top, as in the breaking of Muriel's heart, but more than compliant when another, like Anna, is calling the shots.

Adolescent. When we first meet Claude he is at home with his family, and has just fallen from a swing. His loving siblings surround him, cheer him up, laugh with him. We would say, a kid surrounded by a loving family, used to having his way, and a natural for the kind of torment and joy filled young loves which are soon to occupy his life.

Indifferent. After having broken off his engagement with Muriel, Claude shows no particular sign of regret. He is immersed in Paris art life, is not concerned with marriage at all, and easily forgets about Muriel, to whom, at the very end of the film, he will be begging for a second chance.

Passive In the Paris art world young Claude is a passive, intelligent twenty year old, without much sense of how to master his life. We remember him in his childhood home, spoiled by siblings, comfortable in a highly civilized natural setting.

Reluctant. In Paris, after their love making, Anna and Claude are faced with defining their relationship. Anna prevails, with her then rather trendy idea of an open engagement, which will leave each partner free, but preserve the special relation between the two primary lovers. Claude reluctantly agrees to let her lead the way.

Parallels Claude, and Goethe's Werther, have a lot in common, though their stories are different. Werther is a spoiled middle class romantic, susceptible (like Claude) to adventurous sceneries, unfamiliar life styles, and women both drawn to him and independent, or out of reach. Werther, in other words, is a natural for romantic suffering, and must endure all the expected hardships. Lotte is elder, more sophisticated than he, and already engaged into the firmly fixed class marriage expectations that lie ahead of her. For Claude, too, the enticement of the female other is set to cause pain. Muriel and Anna are relatively free, as marketable young ladies, but each has her own sharply etched personality, which must be negotiated. The fact is that Claude, like Werther, is not mature enough to convince his beloved

that he is worth her making a strong exception in his case. We sense that Claude's support system—family, writing—will pull him through, while Werther has no recourse except suicide. In this regard—odd though the comparison may seem—Werther resembles a tragic figure like Dido, who has no recourse against removing herself from the equation with Aeneas.

MURIEL *Muriel* is arguably the more developed of the two sisters, Anna and herself. She is neurotic, hesitant, but passionate—as we feel the tale unfold. Although she watches the visitor, Claude, when he arrives in Wales, she is actually playing a kind of peek a boo with him—and it fascinates him. Her confessional letter to Claude, in Paris, is a way of telling him how much she would like his deepest confidence. Her final discourse for Claude, as she is telling him good bye, is a tough minded assessment of the present condition of this big but not yet developed boy.

Careful. Muriel is careful as a potential love object for Claude, when first he visits in Wales. She absents herself from dinner, quite possibly to make herself more interesting. She yields subtly to her sister's suggestions, for bringing Muriel and Claude together.

Astute Muriel knows what she is doing, when she sends her confessional letter to Claude in Paris. It strikes him where he is weakest, in his sense of having done less than he should have for her.