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## Colette's Study of Love: A Survey of the Study in Relation to Her Life and Work

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COLETTE'S STUDY OF LOVE

A Survey of the Study in Relation  
To Her Life and Work

by

Arthur LeBlanc B.A.

A Thesis

submitted in conformity with the requirements

for the degree of Master of Arts

in Waterloo Lutheran University

1968

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# I

## NOTICE

Because of the nature of this paper I have prepared a chronology of Colette's life and a selected list of her works, chronologically arranged and including the date of publication. I feel that these would prove useful to the reader who is not thoroughly familiar with Colette.

The sources upon which I have based the entries are numerous. The information is available from various biographies and could be classified under "general information". Therefore, I have not foot-noted each separate entry.

I would specifically like to acknowledge the aid received from Dr. A. Vassou of Waterloo Lutheran University who through lectures and private consultation, has contributed greatly in the preparation of the paper.

## II

### CHRONOLOGY OF COLETTE'S LIFE

- 1873 28 January, birth of Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette in Saint-Sauveur-en-Puisaye, a village of 1,500 inhabitants in Bourgogne.
- Father was Jules Colette, born in Toulon in 1829. He had been a career soldier and reached the rank of Captain when he was wounded and had one leg amputated in Italy in 1859.
- Mother was Sidonie Landoy, born in Paris in 1835. Before her first marriage to Jules Robineau she lived in Belgium. Widowed at thirty, she ~~was~~ married Jules Colette one year later. Similar to the first, during her second marriage she had two children, Léo 1868 and Colette 1873.
- 1890 Due to financial difficulties, the family was forced to sell their home in Saint-Sauveur. They moved to Châtillon-Coligny.
- 1893 At the age of twenty, Colette married Henry Gauthier-Villars, aged thirty-three. She began her life in Paris at 28 rue Jacob.
- 1895 Colette and Willy made a <sup>visit</sup> ~~retreat~~ to Saint-Sauveur on their return from a trip to Germany.
- 1905 Death of Jules Colette.
- 1906 The divorce of Colette and Willy. In order to support herself, Colette began her music-hall career which would last until 1912.
- 1907 3 January, the scandal of "Le Moulin Rouge". The Marquise de Belboeuf played opposite Colette in "Le Rêve d'Égypte" and a prolonged kiss caused an uproar, especially on the part of the Marquise's noble family. She was replaced by Wague, Colette's dancing teacher.

- 1910 Colette began yet another career; journalism, for "Le Matin".
- 1912 Death of Sidonie Colette, the author's mother.
- 1912 19 December, married to Henri de Jouvenel, who was three years her junior. He was editor-in-chief of "Le Matin".
- 1913 3 July, Colette gave birth to a girl, Colette de Jouvenel.
- 1920 Colette was named "Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur".
- 1923 December, Henri de Jouvenel left Colette.
- 1924 Divorce of Colette and Henri de Jouvenel.
- 1924 Colette bought "La Treille Muscate", a house which she loved dearly in Saint-Tropez. She was forced to sell it in 1939.
- 1925 Easter vacations, through Marguerite Moréno, she met Maurice Goudekot, fifteen years her junior. They immediately became close friends.
- 1928 Colette was named "Officier de la Légion d'Honneur".
- 1930 Easter vacations, she and Goudekot were invited by Baron Henri de Rothschild to take a cruise on "L'Eros" (his 1,000 ton, thirty-three man crew yacht with accommodations for twenty guests, which cost twenty-two million francs in 1929), through the Norwegian Fiords.
- 1932 Colette opened a "Beauty Salon", but her career as hair-stylist and beautician was to last only a little over one year.
- 1934 Colette began writing drama critiques for "Le Journal". Goudekot had entered journalism after Colette's failure in business.
- 1935 3 April, she and Maurice Goudekot were married.
- 1935 4 June, Colette and her husband (thanks to their recent marriage) were invited as journalists on the maiden voyage of the "Normandie" and spent a few days in New York city.

- 1936 Colette was named "Commandeur de la Légion d'Honneur". In the same year she was received at "L'Académie Royale de Belgique", replacing Anna de Noailles.
- 1938 Colette began to complain of pains in her right hip. By 1949 she was almost completely immobilized by arthritis.
- 1941 12 December, Maurice Goudekot, who was of Jewish blood, was arrested and transported to the German concentration camp at Compiègne.
- 1942 6 February, Goudekot was released, but stayed in hiding until the end of the war.
- 1945 Colette was unanimously elected a member of "L'Académie Goncourt". She was the only woman.
- 1946 With her husband, she travelled to Geneva for treatments for her arthritis.
- 1948 Oeuvres Complètes de Colette began rolling off the presses.
- 1949 Colette became president of "L'Académie Goncourt" after the death of Lucien Descaves. The presidency is generally passed on to the senior member of the academy but Roland Dorgelès graciously bowed out in favor of his only woman confrère.
- 1953 Colette was named "Grand Officier de la Légion d'Honneur", the highest position obtainable.
- 1954 3 August, at the age of eighty-one, Colette died a peaceful death. She was refused a Christian burial by the Catholic Church because of her two divorces. She was given a state funeral.

### III

#### SELECTED WORKS IN ORDER OF PUBLICATION

- 1900     Claudine à l'École.
- 1901     Claudine à Paris.
- 1902     Claudine en Ménage.
- 1903     Claudine S'en Va.
- 1904     Dialogues de Bêtes.
- 1907     La Retraite Sentimentale.
- 1908     Les Vrilles de la Vigne.
- 1909     L'Ingénue Libertine, originally published  
in two instalments, Minne (1904) and  
Les Egarements de Minne (1905).
- 1911     La Vagabonde.
- 1913     L'Envers du Music Hall.
- 1913     L'Entrave.
- 1919     Mitsou ou Comment...
- 1920     Chéri.
- 1922     La Maison de Claudine.
- 1923     Le Blé en Herbe.
- 1926     La Fin de Chéri.
- 1928     La Naissance du Jour.
- 1929     La Seconde.
- 1929     Sido.
- 1930     Douze Dialogues de Bêtes. It consists of the  
five original Dialogues de Bêtes (1904) plus  
others.

- 1932 Ces Plaisirs. It was retitled Le Pur et L'Impur when republished in 1941.
- 1933 La Chatte.
- 1934 Duo.
- 1934-1938 La Jumelle Noir. A collection of drama critiques that Colette had written for "Le Journal".
- 1936 Mes Apprentissages.
- 1937 Bella-Vista.
- 1939 Le Toutounier.
- 1941 Journal à Rebours.
- 1941 Julie de Carneilhan.
- 1942 De Ma Fenêtre.
- 1944 Le Képi
- 1944 Gigi et Autres Nouvelles.
- 1944 Trois...Six...Neuf...
- 1946 L'Étoile Vesper.
- 1949 Le Fanal Bleu.

## IV

### OPENING REMARKS

Colette and her work have not yet received a permanent place in the ivy-covered world of higher education. At most she receives an honorable mention. Those in the academic circle who are accustomed to Proust, Gide and Sartre, after reading one, two or even a half-dozen of Colette's novels, cannot help but immediately brand her as a woman's author. This refers to the author whose "cute" little anecdotes appeal to soap-opera fans. To brand Colette as a woman's author is justifiable if one concentrates his view only on individual novels. It is however a premature judgement, for that which appears on the surface of her work is nothing short of misleading. In order to get a true picture of Colette, it is necessary to be familiar with her life, her thought and the ensemble of her work.

Colette's voluminous work, which spans over a period of fifty years can be seen, among other points of view, as a study of love. It is not a theoretical study because the conclusions which she draws are based upon the past experiences of her first-person heroines. Since the heroine is always Colette, her personality

and ideas evolve as Colette becomes older, and as the work increased in size. Love and all its aspects affected Colette differently during the various stages of her life. Because of this, we have in Colette what is perhaps one of the most complete studies of love ever conducted.

In order to execute any study one must have a basis from which to proceed. Often, the starting point is a truth or supposed truth revealed by an established philosophy. Many French novelists of the Twentieth Century use a philosophy as a foundation for their writings. Colette, in her study of love refused to support any of her ideas by any form of established thought. For an answer to her questions, she consulted her past experiences and solved the problem as she saw it, using the analytical approach. The irrefutable truths which she used came from her past experience. They were custom-made to suit her; they were true for her, however, for her only. Although Colette's prime concern was with answering her own questions, the problems which she confronted in the process were basically the same as those that the other novelists of her time were attempting to resolve for mankind. Using the <sup>personal</sup> ~~subjective~~ approach Colette solved her problems; mankind is left with his.

When one examines a particular study which is based on an established thought, it is necessary that he know the philosophical foundations of that study in order to arrive at the correct interpretation of it. So too, with Colette. In order to arrive at a meaningful interpretation of her work it becomes necessary to have a clear picture of the active life of this exceptional woman. Fortunately, through much of her later "recueil de souvenirs", Colette can be called upon to give direct witness on her thought during many of the different periods of her life. Since all of her ideas are based upon the experiences of her life, a survey of Colette's study of love, in my opinion, must be seen in relation to her life and work.

When she began her writing career, Colette used her past experiences as a starting point for her novels out of necessity rather than out of choice. Unlike her fellow authors, Colette had only received an elementary-school education. She had been raised in Saint-Sauveur, a small village in Bourgogne. Although she constantly read and re-read her favorite authors, especially Balzac and later Proust, one cannot credit her with having given herself a well-rounded education.

Unlike many of her confrères, furthermore, Colette had never received the inspiration to write. "Non" she exclaims in Journal à Rebours "je ne voulais

pas écrire":

Dans ma jeunesse, je n'ai jamais, JAMAIS désiré écrire ... Je sentais que j'étais justement faite pour ne PAS écrire ... J'étais donc bien la seule de mon espèce, la seule mise au monde pour ne pas écrire. Quelle douceur j'ai pu goûter à une telle absence de vocation littéraire!<sup>1</sup>

With high hopes of realizing her adolescent fantasies, Colette had left Saint-Sauveur with her husband Willy, who was thirteen years her elder. She had been plucked from a bed of roses and placed in a dingy apartment, 28 rue Jacob, in the midst of the Parisian bohemian society of the "Gay Nineties." Her husband's infidelities and his weird friends constituted a personal tragedy for Colette. Still, the idea of writing had not crossed her mind. About one year after this life began, Willy, who was constantly on the search for a new ghost-writer told her: "Vous devriez jeter sur le papier des souvenirs de l'école primaire. N'ayez pas peur des détails piquants, je pourrais peut-être en tirer quelque chose..."<sup>2</sup> Tired of reading, which had been until then her only escape from solitude while in Paris, Colette embarked on her career as

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, Journal à Rebours, Vol. XII of Oeuvres Complètes de Colette, p. 96.

<sup>2</sup>Colette, Mes Apprentissages, Vol. III of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 389.

an author "avec application et indifférence"<sup>1</sup>, following closely the specific instructions given to her by her husband.

Although Willy told her what it was that he wanted, Colette had difficulty in creating it. She began by relating situations--with the added spice that Willy suggested--strung them together, and called the work Claudine à l'École. Situations strung together: that was the method which Colette used in her entire work, for she found it extremely difficult to create a well rounded story. "All her life Colette found that plot constituted a major difficulty: once, even, she had to abandon a detective story which she had been asked to write because she simply could not cope with the intricate mechanics of the plot."<sup>2</sup> She got into the habit of relating situations from her past life, analysing them to see how they had affected her, and often using this analysis as a basis for solving her present problems. This is a process that mentally healthy people employ daily, sometimes on the conscious, often on the unconscious level. Those with problems, who are incapable of employing

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, Mes Apprentissages, Vol. III of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 389.

<sup>2</sup>Margaret Davies, Colette, p. 14.

such a method seek professional help. Colette's many problems were solved by her own efforts, through her writing.

Colette's work has been described as belonging to the classical school. This is most significant because it clearly reflects the attitude of moderation which is necessary for an objective examination of one's problems. In her novels, the passionate scenes, strong emotions and biting pain always remain on the paper before her. Colette remains unattached, like a psychologist, keeping her mind lucid, her thoughts clear, looking at everything in perspective. Because of this aspect of her literary style, Colette could examine her past experiences, analyse the situations, and arm herself, for the present and the future, with the solution of the problems which had remained, until then unsolved. The solution of these problems became the custom-made truths upon which she conducted her study of love.

Colette's characters fall into the same category as her plots do. "Her characters are too monotonous and they wander complacently in an atmosphere of venal loves, carnal concerns, and gigolos, without rising to the stature of Proustian lovers or Toulouse-Lautrec's mournful seekers of joy."<sup>1</sup> This can be said of

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<sup>1</sup>Henri Peyre, The Contemporary French Novel, p. 283.

Colette's first-person heroines, as they are seen through the individual works in which they appear. Claudine is essentially the same in the first half-dozen novels. Renée is the same person in La Vagabonde and L'Entrave, just as middle-aged Léa is the same in Chéri as she is in La Fin de Chéri. Madame Colette, the first-person heroine of the author's late novels, is the same mature woman throughout the novels in which she appears. Each is different, yet each is the same, for they are all Colette. "Dans celui-là, une petite fille; dans celui-ci, une femme aux approches de la vieillesse. C'est la même."<sup>1</sup> If seen in the ensemble of the work this one character who assumes different names goes through a remarkable change. The entire work forms one story of the evolution of one person--Colette. When seen in this light the first-person heroines are nothing but exciting!

Because Colette concentrated her attention on her first-person heroines, the male characters naturally suffered. "The men whom she depicts, including weak-willed Chéri and a number of vain Don Juans more often jilted than jilting, seldom come to life."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>André Rousseaux, Âmes et Visages du XXe Siècle: Le Paradis Perdu, p. 29.

<sup>2</sup>Henri Peyre, The Contemporary French Novel, p. 283.

With few exceptions, the male characters never play the major part in Colette's novels. They are forces, as it were, threatening the equilibrium of her first-person heroines. The portrait which she draws of man, in a sense shows more about Colette the person than Colette the creator. She had lost all faith in the male sex after her marriage with Willy. For her, man had become a mere object to be used at her discretion. The characteristics that she placed in him were carefully chosen so that he would appear weak, vulnerable and much inferior to her first-person heroines.

Maugis, who plays a secondary male-role in a few of Colette's first novels, has more life than any of her other male characters, including Chéri. He is the intelligent literary critic who has a flair for words, liquor and women. Maugis would show that Colette could create a character and bring it to life; however, she admits in Mes Apprentissages: "Ce Maugis-là n'est pas de moi."<sup>1</sup> He was Willy's creation--of himself.

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, Mes Apprentissages, Vol. III of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 412.

Colette's work does not consist of many stories; it does not contain many characters. The fifteen large volumes recount the struggle of a soul, in the search of a remedy which would combat solitude. Intricate well-rounded plots give way to a series of situations; individual characters are deprived of "life" for the sake of one undeviating human being. Analysis is THE aspect which characterizes the work.

Much is sacrificed for the search--and a study. The study is on love, for only love can fight Colette's solitude. By examining herself, her past and the problems of the present, Colette learned about love. She analysed the sentiment and constantly readjusted certain elements of it to suit her personality. Often she was forced to change certain characteristics of her personality to suit love. By so doing, Colette achieved and maintained a state of equilibrium; a state of mental and emotional stability which she earned through the contemplation and analysis which were the fruit of her work.

A woman's author? Possibly: for few are the men who will admit that they are interested in the sentiment of love.

THE CLAUDINES AS A PRELUDE  
TO COLETTE'S SYMPHONY OF LOVE

Jamais oeuvre n'a mieux  
reflété son auteur.  
Comment pourrais-je  
désormais les séparer?  
-Goudeket-

A survey such as the present one, cannot hope to do justice to Colette's work because so much must be sacrificed for the sake of clarity. From what has been said so far, one might imagine that Colette's work is little more than an academical study of love. Nothing could be further from the truth! Even though it is a study, I like to think of Colette's work as a symphony of love.

As there are three movements in some symphonies, so too, three basic themes exist in Colette's study. The first is that of solitude, that is, a realization of man's "condition humaine", as it is called by André Malraux. It is a recognition on the part of the heroines that they cannot communicate as they should with anyone but themselves, because they can see within their own consciences, whereas everyone else can only hear words to which they attach their own interpretations. At first, Colette believes that solitude can be combatted

through love. This forms the second theme of her study. Through love, the heroine can presumably attain a more perfect form of communication with another human because it becomes possible for her to learn more about the man she loves, and about his conscience. From her own experiences Colette found out however, that this was not so. The third theme is Mother--Sido, nature and Colette's childhood days--which eventually replaced man and provided an answer to the problem of solitude. These are the three basic themes which constitute Colette's study of love. They are also three of the basic themes of her entire work. They appear and reappear, sometimes individually, oftentimes combined, like the different movements of a symphony which are first developed, then blend together with force and harmony. Colette's study of love is art. It is as moving as a musical symphony. Though music and literature are different forms of art, the same ideas can be expressed; the same effects can be produced.

Like all good music, furthermore, Colette's work, even with all its tragedies, never depresses the reader. On the contrary, it often elevates the spirits, giving the reader a sense of light-heartedness. In part this feeling is due to the unattached analytical approach of the author towards both the characters

and the themes. The greatest contributing factor however, is Colette's keen perception of nature, which she succeeds in transmitting to the reader. Along with her, we can smell the cherry blossoms or the acrid opium smoke; we can hear the crisp crack of a dry twig underfoot; we can visualize the soft blues of the sea or the bright crimsons of the music-hall; we know the taste of pencil leads; we can feel the slippery sensation of velour butterfly-wings. Her unusual perception gives her a unique view of the world which is so rare that in the mind of the reader, the tragedy always appears in relief. Colette's descriptions act as the light chords of the harmony of her symphony.

The symphony originally developed from the overture to the opera. Colette however, has her own prelude which acts in the same way as the overture.. It presents in undeveloped form the three movements which will be fully developed in the body of the symphony. The Claudine series which includes: Claudine à l'École, Claudine à Paris, Claudine en Ménage, Claudine S'en Va, and La Retraite Sentimentale form the body of the prelude. In this series, the three themes of Colette's study are presented with all their aspects, but are further developed separately in the later works. The Claudines therefore act as

a prelude to Colette's symphony of love; a symphony which has a harmonious mélange of light chords which depict her view of the world, and deeper chords representative of her life. These chords are an intricate part of the three movements which symbolize the three basic themes in her study of love.

Claudine à l'École serves to present the personality of Claudine, the adolescent school-girl from Montigny. More intelligent, much more curious about what is going on, and always prepared to play practical jokes, Claudine is different from her school-mates. Her school had been almost all of her whole life. It compensated for the normal home environment which she did not have. Her mother had died while Claudine had been only a child, and her father had imprisoned himself in his den with his work on the "Malacologie du Fresnois", a study which he would probably never finish. Her school however, could not completely compensate for the lack of a normal home environment. She therefore sought refuge in the woods surrounding her home.

When she moved to Paris in Claudine à Paris, Claudine missed her woods, most of all because she could no longer find an adequate refuge from her solitude. She became very ill, and for two months her life was in danger, partially because she had

given up the will to live. One day her father took time off from his study and purchased for her a bouquet of violettes. "L'odeur des fleurs vivantes, leur toucher frais, ont tiré d'un coup brusque le rideau d'oubli que ma fièvre avait tendu devant le Montigny quitté...."<sup>1</sup> The image of her woods which the violettes evoked, became real to her, and for a while at least, became a substitute for the real woods. But this vision did not last for long. After she had regained her health, she began to occupy her mind by reading. "Je n'ai que ça pour m'occuper, pour me tirer d'ici et de moi."<sup>2</sup>

Just as the image of Claudine's woods could compensate for her real woods only for a time, so, too, reading could act as an adequate escape from her solitude only for a short while. She became more and more occupied with her solitude, unable to find a new escape from it. One day she cried out in anguish: "Est-ce que ça va finir, cette obsession, cette angoisse de la solitude?"<sup>3</sup>

With some variation Colette's adolescent

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, Claudine à Paris, Vol. I of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 167.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 242.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 244.

life was similar to Claudine's. Her father, as he is described in the later works, is withdrawn, suffering from "la tristesse profonde des amputés."<sup>1</sup> Colette admits that there was no reciprocal understanding between her and her father. Although in her later life, Colette shows a great admiration for her mother, Sido, in my opinion, is not portrayed as the model of motherhood in either La Maison de Claudine nor Sido. In part, this is due to the fact that she was such an exceptional person. Like Claudine, Colette's "libre et solitaire adolescence" was occupied uniquely in directing the "subtiles antennes" of her childhood and adolescence "vers ce qui se contemple, s'écoute, se palpe et se respire."<sup>2</sup> That was how she escaped from her yet vaguely recognizable solitude in her youth.

The solitude which Colette experienced in Paris was similar to that of Claudine's in Claudine à Paris. Like her heroine, Colette also became ill with a fever, and for two months "cette jeune fille décolorée était en chemin de mourir, mais ne mourut point."<sup>3</sup> Like

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<sup>1</sup> Colette, Sido, Vol. III of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 278.

<sup>2</sup> Colette, Journal à Rebours, Vol. XII of Oeuvres Complètes de Colette, p. 97.

<sup>3</sup> Colette, Mes Apprentissages, Vol. III of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 398.

Claudine she also was on the precipice of despair, as she confesses in Mes Apprentissages: "Il y a toujours un moment, dans la vie des êtres jeunes, où mourrir leur est tout aussi normal et aussi séduisant que vivre."<sup>1</sup> Colette did not let herself die, for she also, received from her father a bouquet of violettes which brought back her forgotten Saint-Sauveur. The bouquet was not simply flowers; but her mother Sido, who nursed her back to health and made her forget her solitude.

With her regained health, and Sido gone, Colette was again left alone with her solitude; "la solitude de l'incompréhension mutuelle, et cette espèce d'exil sur place de la créature obtuse ou incomprise."<sup>2</sup> Even Willy and the many diversions which he presented to her, could not cure Colette of her solitude. Reminiscing on her first marriage she remarked in Mes Apprentissages: "Dix ans de Paris, et malgré les apparences, un isolement bien singulier."<sup>3</sup> Her real home was not in Paris, for there she could not find understanding, and in turn could not understand.

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, Mes Apprentissages, Vol. III of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 398.

<sup>2</sup>Beaumont and Parinaud, Colette par Elle-même, p. 46.

<sup>3</sup>Colette, Mes Apprentissages, Vol. III of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 437.

Her real home was in Saint-Sauveur.

The close harmony between Colette and her work is quite evident as seen in the above parallel between the solitude of Claudine and that of Colette. She used her own solitude as a basis for developing her study of love. Although Colette always stressed the dangers of remaining in solitude, Germaine Beaumont, who had been Colette's secretary for many years at "Le Matin", remarked: "Je n'ai pas souvenir que Colette ait édifié une théorie de la solitude. Elle en a constamment souligné le pouvoir de destruction."<sup>1</sup>

La Fin de Chéri is a perfect example of the destructive power of solitude. But Chéri is not the only example. Indeed throughout her work, one can hardly find a major character who does not suffer greatly because of the recognition of his solitude. Claudine presents this theme which will be further developed in the individual works. Because of this, the Claudines are a prelude to Colette's symphony of love.

In Claudine à l'École, Claudine found refuge from her solitude by means of her sensitive antennae which were directed towards everything that could be perceived through her five senses. The messages which she received however, were not transmitted exclusively

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<sup>1</sup>Beaumont and Parinaud, Colette par Elle-même, p. 46.

by nature. From the beginning Claudine perceived that people also transmitted signals, in the same way that the animals, plants and insects did. For her, this revelation opened up new possibilities through which she could evade her solitude. She first came to this realization when she met Mlle. Aimée Lanthenay. Because Aimée was intelligent, older and more experienced in life, a very high degree of mutual understanding was quickly achieved. Before their relationship reached what might be called a Lesbian relationship however, Mlle. Sergent, Aimée's supervisor seduced her, shattering all of Claudine's hopes. Claudine soon realized that she could never compete with Mlle. Sergent for Aimée's affection.

Through her short relationship with Aimée, Claudine became aware of a method of escaping her solitude which appeared superior to her vagabondage in her woods. She was not willing however, to accept the affection of just anyone. Luce, Aimée's younger sister did all in her power to succeed with Claudine as her sister had done. Through cunning and violence the heroine succeeded in fighting Luce off, both in Claudine à l'École and later in Claudine à Paris. It is not that Claudine is disgusted by a Lesbian relationship at all. It is because she cannot accept the affection of her equals. If she were ever to

accept love, she states; "ce serait avec quelqu'un de plus fort et de plus intelligent que moi, qui me meurtrirait un peu, à qui j'obéirais, et non pas avec une petite bête vicieuse ... trop inférieure."<sup>1</sup>

Claudine does not even want friends who are inferior to her, as we see in Claudine à Paris. Marcel, her homosexual second-cousin had hoped that each could console the other by sharing each other's secrets. After the first few visits, however, Claudine had to force herself to visit him and her aunt Coeur, thinking to herself, "j'aimerais bien mieux arcader [travailler] ici, même à quelque chose d'embêtant."<sup>2</sup>

For all intents and purposes Claudine had no father; neither did she have any friends. While in Montigny, she could at least escape in her woods. In Paris she could not. Tired of reading, she became obsessed with her solitude. At last, she confessed to herself what it was that she was lacking. "J'ai besoin d'un papa, j'ai besoin d'un ami, d'un amant... Dieu! d'un amant!..."<sup>3</sup> In Renaud, Marcel's father, Claudine found all that she needed in one person.

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, Claudine à l'École, Vol. I of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 86.

<sup>2</sup>Colette, Claudine à Paris, Vol. I of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 193.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 267.

He was old enough to be her father. He was sympathetic and kind as a friend should be. He was also an experienced lover. Renaud was therefore the crystallization of the vague dream that she had attempted to realize in Claudine à l'École with Mlle. Aimée Lanthénay. Finally she had found the ultimate, the miracle as she called him, who would deliver her forever from her life of solitude.

It is significant, I think that Colette should choose to portray innocent Claudine with such unordinary demands when it came to choosing a husband. Claudine's desire for a mature man is basic to Colette's concept of a suitable partner for a young girl. This idea is, of course, directly attributable to Colette's past experience. She confesses in Mes Apprentissages that like Claudine she had also begun by "un affreux et impur élan d'adolescente"; she also had dreamed of becoming "le spectacle, le jouet, le chef-d'oeuvre libertin d'un homme mûr."<sup>1</sup> Psychologists would agree with Colette's analysis in Claudine à Paris, that this desire was in part due to the inadequate relationship between Claudine and her father.

Willy, who was perhaps the only man that Colette

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, Mes Apprentissages, Vol. III of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 392.

ever really loved, was for her what Renaud was for Claudine. He was ~~thirteen~~ years her elder; intelligent, charming and "an avid connoisseur of erotica."<sup>1</sup> He was the fulfillment of her dreams. "Comprendra-t-on que le fait d'échanger mon sort de villageoise contre la vie que je menai à dater de 1894 est une aventure telle qu'elle suffit à désespérer une enfant de vingt ans, si elle ne l'envie pas?"<sup>2</sup> Had he remained faithful to her, Colette's problem of solitude would have been solved.

Although Colette's marriage with Willy terminated with a divorce, she still insists that a mature and experienced person makes the best partner for an adolescent seeking an answer to his solitude through love. The Claudines present this concept which is fully developed in some of the later novels. Phil in Le Blé en Herbe for example, is seduced by Mme. Dellaray, the middle-aged lady dressed in white who is more of a "belle missionnaire"<sup>3</sup> than a seductress. Let us not forget Chéri either, and the role which Léa played in the love affair. Colette is convinced,

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<sup>1</sup>Elaine Marks, Colette, p. 28.

<sup>2</sup>Colette, Mes Apprentissages, Vol. III of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 392.

<sup>3</sup>Colette, Le Blé en Herbe, Vol. II of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 285.

as she stated in Le Pur et l'Impur, that "la jeunesse n'est pas l'âge de séduire, c'est l'âge d'être séduit."<sup>1</sup> If one is to succeed in love one must be informed and the best person from whom one can receive this information is from a mature, older person, who is experienced in matters regarding love.

Claudine en Ménage shows the beginning of Claudine's disenchantment with Renaud. The father, the friend and the lover that she had imagined him to be did not correspond to her expectations. In the course of the story Mme. Rézi Lambrook, a Lesbian, became attracted to the amiable Claudine. At first, out of the sheer pleasure of being admired, Claudine played Rézi's game, however, the relationship became serious. In order to force Renaud to exert his authority of father and husband, Claudine asked him if he could acquire a bachelor apartment so that Rézi and she could arrange to have rendez-vous together. To her great surprise, Renaud was more than willing to assist in the project. The father figure which he had until then represented was shattered.

Renaud was never actually much of a friend for Claudine either. As early as the honeymoon he became

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Colette, Le Pur et l'Impur, Vol. III of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 318.

jealous because he discovered that she was always curious about her surroundings. He disliked this in her because it took her attention away from him. "Tu me trahis," exclaims Renaud, "avec tous les bruits, toutes les odeurs, tous les visages retrouvés; chaque arbre te possède...."<sup>1</sup> A real friend would have understood and would have been selfless enough to let Claudine enjoy the surroundings which appeared so rich and full of life to her. But Renaud was only concerned with himself, and "sa fièvre de parade."<sup>2</sup>

Renaud, having failed as father and friend also failed in the role of husband. After he had arranged for the bachelor apartment for Rézi and Claudine, he himself took advantage of the meeting place to indulge in a little infidelity of his own--with Rézi no less! When Claudine found out, her whole exalted image of the man crumbled. The situation would have been bearable had Claudine felt at home in Paris. But Claudine in Paris was a plant "arrachée de sa terre"<sup>3</sup> the roots of which extended all the way to Montigny.

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, Claudine en Ménage, Vol. I of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 300.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 325.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 311.

After a brief stay in Montigny and nature, Claudine forgot Renaud's infidelities and returned to him. They led a frivolous life together until, in La Retraite Sentimentale, the reader discovers that Claudine is living with Annie, a friend who is separated from her husband, while Renaud is receiving treatments in a sanatorium for a lung disease. After Renaud's death, Claudine remained alone with her solitude at Casamène surrounded by her animals, flowers and childhood memories. "Solitaire je les aime, et ils me chérissent solitaire."<sup>1</sup> But Claudine does not experience a total solitude in nature, because He was probably in her woods, the ideal which could eventually replace Renaud. While walking in the woods Claudine often heard His footsteps:

Si l'écho, sur le sol élastique et feutré  
d'aiguilles de pin, double parfois mon pas,  
je ne presse pas le mien et je me garde de  
tourner la tête...peut-être qu'IL est là,  
derrière moi, peut-être qu'IL m'a suivie,  
et que ses bras étendus protègent ma route  
mal frayée, démêlent les branches....<sup>2</sup>

Claudine's suspicions that she could eventually find the answer to her solitude in nature rather than in frivolous humans like Renaud, presents the third

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, La Retraite Sentimentale, Vol. I of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 577.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 577-578.

theme of Colette's study of love. Again, Colette's only basis for this belief comes from her past experience. Her childhood days, when she experienced through her sensitive antennae the mysteries of life and all that bears life, come to symbolize for her "a whole lost world of savage innocence from which she had sadly fallen: and it is always on a note pitched passionately high, sometimes on the level of incantation, that she celebrates what are, for her, the magical qualities of her native countryside."<sup>1</sup> Although still a young woman, Claudine had a vague realization that she could reach a form of perfect understanding only with the Man in nature. Colette was in sympathy with Claudine's sentiment, but it was not until La Naissance du Jour, written over twenty years after La Retraite Sentimentale, that she could reconcile the substitution with herself. It was not until Colette was middle-aged that "she began to apply herself systematically to re-creating her childhood: until then her impassioned, lyrical outbursts about it had tended to be a sort of safety valve."<sup>2</sup> We cannot help but feel that Claudine's retreat into nature is only a retreat. It is not a thorough acceptance of nature and a rejection of love for men. It is a preview of what will eventually occur in La Naissance du Jour. Need I repeat that the Claudines are a prelude to Colette's symphony of love?

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<sup>1</sup>Margaret Davies, Colette, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

## VI

### THE ART OF WRITING USED FOR THERAPY

Pouvais-je me douter que  
Colette projetait sur le  
papier un avenir encore  
lointain?

-Goudekot-

The close harmony between Colette's early life and her writing is self evident in the Claudines. As she developed to the level of a mature author, the direct relationship between her private life and the individual works becomes less apparent. She uses "tricks" if you will, not merely to disguise herself, but as an aid. She uses devices to make her characters static. Unchangeable, Colette can study them, the problems which confront them, and the best method to approach these problems. The situations which confront her characters are taken from her own experience. Her heroines are all <sup>Colette</sup> her. She is examining herself in rapport with her daily life. The problems which occur are immediately solved, on paper at least. Colette is in fact using the art of writing as a form of therapy. It is through her work that she keeps her conscience appeased and her emotions calmed. It is through her writing that she attains mental stability.

It takes but a quick scan--once the mind is directed on the proper path--for the reason behind the voluminous work to make itself apparent. The method which Colette employs is sound from a therapeutic point of view. In fact, "a doctor was once known to prescribe Colette's books as part of a cure for neurosis."<sup>1</sup>

In order to illustrate some of the techniques of Colette's method, I have chosen to examine the characters of Claudine and Annie as they are revealed in the last two novels of the Claudine series, because direct witness can be had from Colette herself, through Mes Apprentissages. The confessions which Colette made in this work show the close similarity between her heroines and her own personality during the last few years of her marriage with Willy.

Claudine's "retraite sentimentale" is an ideal in Colette's mind which was based on her experiences during childhood. Always down to earth, she knew that Claudine did not represent a realistic solution to the problem of how to permanently conquer her solitude. How would she appease her feminine passions? Colette therefore created Annie, a new character in the Claudine series and sub-titled a whole novel: Claudine S'en Va

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<sup>1</sup>Margaret Davies, Colette, p. 67.

as the "Journal d'Annie".

Annie has baffled many of Colette's admirers. At first this character, who is the heroine of Claudine S'en Va, does not seem to fit into the Claudine series. She is most significant however, because she is Colette of the early 1900's. She is the Colette who had come to the realization that her marriage was a failure and that she must learn to live without her husband. Margaret Davies maintains that while Colette was writing Claudine S'en Va she "was realizing that she no longer loved her husband and that she must achieve some sort of independence from him. He obviously was incorrigible. It was up to her to change and become capable of living without him."<sup>1</sup> A survey of the problems facing Annie, and the methods by which she confronted them, after her separation with Alain bear a remarkable semblance to the method and thought of Colette during the last few years of her first marriage.

Annie was left alone when Alain departed for South America. In order to occupy her time and examine her situation more closely she began to write a diary. "Il vaut mieux, cent fois mieux, radoter sur ce papier et écouter Calliope et Claudine, que m'attarder seule, dangereusement, avec moi-même...."<sup>2</sup> As a result of her

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<sup>1</sup>Margaret Davies, Colette, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup>Colette, Claudine S'en Va, Vol. I of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 443.

contemplation and writing, Annie began to realize that she no longer loved Alain. As the days passed she found that she could get along without him, and because of this she began to see herself in a better light.

"Je me regard mieux, à présent. Isolée de cet homme blanc dont la peau brillante me faisait si noire, je me trouve plus jolie."<sup>1</sup> Before, she had been totally dependent on Alain, and even though she had been disillusioned by him, like Colette with Willy, she had still remained dependent on him. This dependence had made her ugly because she was not using her own capabilities to live under her own initiative. She had never seen herself as a separate person; Alain had always been in the foreground. For the first time in her life she saw herself, and she loved what she saw.

Because all of her life Annie had been dependent on other people, including Alain, she found it extremely difficult to exercise her newly-found freedom.

"Libre" she exclaims, "le singulier mot...Il y a des oiseaux qui se croient libres, parce qu'ils sautillent hors de la cage. Seulement ils ont l'aile rongée."<sup>2</sup> She needed time to grow new feathers before she could

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, Claudine S'en Va, Vol. I of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 464.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 454.

accept total independence. She therefore sought the companionship of Claudine: "Parce qu'en elle, en elle seule, j'ai rencontré la pitié, la loyauté, la tendresse un instant fouguese, tout ce que m'a refusé ma vie...."<sup>1</sup>

We meet Annie again, a few years later at Casamène with Claudine in La Retraite Sentimentale. She had been divorced in the meantime and had had several love affairs. While Claudine was finding peace in nature, Annie found only anxiety. She felt the compulsion to be constantly busy, and constantly moving about, from place to place, seeking new adventures. Annie states that her compulsion to travel is "une maladie, un empoisonnement; ce n'est même pas une idée Claudine! je vous jure que c'est à peine mental."<sup>2</sup> Although fully independent in the common sense of the term, she still misses what Alain had given her during their marriage. She has now learned however, to get along without him, and that "un autre homme, que plusieurs autres hommes, que beaucoup d'autres hommes pouvaient me rendre ce que pleurait ma quasi-ignorance...."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, Claudine S'en Va, Vol. I of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 483.

<sup>2</sup>Colette, La Retraite Sentimentale, Vol. I of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 499.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 503.

Unlike Claudine who retreated in nature, Annie could not get along without men--for it was men and not love that she wanted. She was not being immoral because she had purged herself of conventional morals. She was not being unethical because she was not being unfaithful to anyone. She believes that "changer n'est pas être infidèle puisque je n'aime et ne comble en vérité que moi-même."<sup>1</sup> She rejected love, but at the same time she was satisfying her needs.

Colette's admirers are probably puzzled by Annie because of the "chair fraîche"<sup>2</sup> philosophy which she follows; a philosophy which they cannot, or refuse to identify with the older and amiable Colette. It should be realized that Colette changed as she progressed in years. Let us not forget her adolescent fantasies of becoming the play-thing, the libertine master-piece of a mature man. "Je fut donc punie, largement et tôt",<sup>3</sup> confesses Colette in Mes Apprentissages.

De la première, de la seconde année de mon mariage, je conserve un souvenir net et fantastique, comme l'image que l'on rapporte du fond d'un rêve, abandonné dont tous les détails, sous une incohérence apparente, contiennent des symboles clairs et funestes. Mais j'avais vingt et un ans et j'oubliais à chaque moment les symboles.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, La Retraite Sentimentale, Vol. I of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 504.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 577.

<sup>3</sup>Colette, Mes Apprentissages, Vol. III of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 392.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 397.

In her "purgatory of hypocrisy and suffering"<sup>1</sup> Colette learned, because of her unfaithful husband, that real life was not the bed of roses that she had thought it to be while still a school-girl in Saint-Sauveur. It was in Paris where she learned how to live. "On apprend donc à vivre? Oui, si c'est sans bonheur. La béatitude n'enseigne rien. Vivre sans bonheur, et n'en point déprimer, voilà une occupation, presque une profession."<sup>2</sup> Like Flaubert's Frédéric Moreau, Colette received her "éducation sentimentale" in Paris, and, like him, after the suffering had faded away with the years, she did not regret what had happened. Although her life in Saint-Sauveur had been nothing but roses, she felt no grief for having exchanged it for her life in Paris. "Mais qu'aurais-je fait, d'une vie qui n'eût été que roses?"<sup>3</sup> exclaims Colette in 1936.

In Mes Apprentissages, Colette claims that she had not divorced Willy sooner partially because she had no place to go, partially because she did not want to hurt Sido, but mostly because she was not yet

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<sup>1</sup>Elaine Marks, Colette, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup>Colette, Mes Apprentissages, Vol. I of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 426.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 388.

ready to accept her independence. Like Annie she was not yet ready to exercise her capabilities to live independent of Willy. "Mais je chang<sup>e</sup>ais," she exclaims "qu'importe que ce fut lentement. Le tout est de changer."<sup>1</sup> Like Annie the method by which Colette learned how to change, and thereby earn her independence was through her writing. It was to her writing that she attributed all of her art, "qui n'est pas celui d'écrire, mais l'art domestique de savoir attendre, dissimuler, de ramasser des miettes, reconstruire, recoller, redorer, changer en mieux-aller, le pis-aller, perdre et regagner dans ce même instant le goût frivole de vivre...."<sup>2</sup> By relating the situations which had caused her suffering, and analysing them with the objectivity of a psychologist, Colette learned how to live "sans bonheur".

Like Annie, she began to love herself when she realized that she actually could live without Willy. "Derrière lui je me sentais redevenir meilleure, c'est-à-dire capable de vivre sur moi-même, et ponctuelle comme si j'eusse déjà su que la règle guérit de tout."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, Mes Apprentissages, Vol. III of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 426.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 418.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 425.

She also felt that "avec lui [Willy] s'éloignaient mes tourments les plus réels."<sup>1</sup> Her greatest torment was that she felt that she could never learn to use her own capabilities to live an independent life. When the door of freedom was flung open to her, she fled to the rear of the cage.

Ouvrez à l'écureuil, au fauve, à l'oiseau lui-même, la porte qu'ils mesurent, assiègent et supplient: presque toujours, au lieu du bond, de l'essor que vous attendez, la bête déconcertée s'immobilise, recule vers le fond de la cage. J'avais tout le temps de réfléchir, et j'entendais si souvent le grand mot dédaigneux, sarcastique, tout luisant de maillons serrés: "Après tout, vous êtes bien libre...."<sup>2</sup>

At Willy's insistence, Colette was forced into a life independent of him. Although she probably would have liked to take a "retraite sentimentale" as Claudine had done, for financial reasons she began her music-hall career. Although never accepting love, Colette, like Annie after her divorce, followed the "chair fraîche" philosophy. Whether out of her complete disappointment in men, curiosity, or maybe to defy the public "she began to frequent a notorious Lesbian milieu, and even appeared publicly en travesti."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, Mes Apprentissages, Vol. III of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 425.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 446.

<sup>3</sup>Margaret Davies, Colette, p. 29.

The most interesting aspect about Claudine S'en Va and La Retraite Sentimentale is not only the similarity between Colette and Annie. More important is the role which Claudine played in the lives of the two women. Although Claudine had tasted much of life from the time she had left Montigny for the first time to her life with Renaud in Claudine S'en Va, she had not evolved into a different person. She remained the intelligent, curious, yet innocent 'bourgeois' country-girl from Montigny. In a letter which Colette wrote to a friend while she was writing the Claudines she remarked: "I've discovered a marvellous girl, do you know who? She's the split image of me before my marriage."<sup>1</sup> The girl which Colette had discovered was the unblemished country-girl from Montigny: Claudine. Throughout the work she remained the image of Colette before her marriage. In Claudine S'en Va, Claudine was the innocent part of the conscience of Colette at the turn of the century. Because she is a separate entity in Colette's mind, Claudine can be used to give Annie a solution to the problem of a man that a woman no longer loves. At the same time Claudine was also advising Colette.

Claudine gave Annie the sympathetic understanding which was necessary for her to acquire the strength

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<sup>1</sup>Margaret Davies, Colette, p. 16.

to accept and develop her capabilities of living an independent life. But Claudine was more than a friend. She was "un petit médecin ignorant, intelligent et superstitieux, un peu rebouteux, un peu devin, mais sans expérience."<sup>1</sup> She told Annie openly what Annie did not want to admit to herself. She told her to get a divorce. "Je ne veux pourtant pas, bon sang! vous dire tout à trac: 'On ne vit pas avec un homme qu'on n'aime pas, c'est de la cochonnerie', bien que cette opinion ne diffère pas sensiblement de ma pensée."<sup>2</sup> This was what the Claudine in Colette was telling her everyday. This was what Colette's 'bourgeois' principles were advising her to do. Yet she could not yet accept a life of complete independence. She needed time to adjust. She needed time to think. She needed time to formulate a plan of action for the future. Through her writing Colette changed. She finally earned her independence and purged herself of the 'bourgeois' country-girl from Montigny. It was not that Colette necessarily wanted to rid her conscience of Claudine, it was simply that Claudine was "ignorante", "superstitieuse" and "sans expérience". Claudine was the one who departed. She was no longer compatible

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, Claudine S'en Va, Vol. I of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 487.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 475.

with Colette. "Je ne reste pas, Annie. Je suis déjà partie. Ne le sentez-vous pas?"<sup>1</sup> The split between Colette and Claudine is <sup>clearly</sup> felt in Claudine S'en Va; it is a fait accompli <sup>//</sup> four years later in La Retraite Sentimentale.

The portrait of Annie is a frank and somewhat uncomplimentary reproduction of Colette during one stage of her life. Always courageous, she had no fears "même celle du ridicule" when she retold her life story for all the public to examine: "Pourquoi suspendre la course de ma main sur ce papier qui recueille, depuis tant d'années, ce que je sais de moi, ce que j'essaie de cacher, ce que j'en invente et ce que je devine?"<sup>2</sup> By placing herself on the paper before her, Colette could examine the problems which confronted her more easily. In a sense she is an "auteur engagé" for she does not see herself as one who writes simply for the sake of creating beautiful works. She sees herself as a person examining her conscience, with her life on the paper in front of her. She sees herself as one who goes back to a yet unsolved

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, Claudine S'en Va, Vol. I of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 487.

<sup>2</sup>Colette, La Naissance du Jour, Vol. II of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 342.

problem "et revient, et recule, repousse à son rang quelque scandaleux détail, attire au jour un souvenir noyé d'ombre." She sees herself as one who becomes "--par un art inespéré--équitable...."<sup>1</sup> What we witness, in the ensemble of Colette's work, is the workings of a mind in an endeavor to achieve and maintain a state of equilibrium.

Following her divorce with Willy in 1906, Colette became a mimic in the music-halls of Paris. It was during this period of her life that she frequented a Lesbian milieu. She began a relationship with the Marquise de Belboeuf, but according to the uncomplimentary Colette, Willy et Moi of Sylvain de Bonmariage, she also had men friends during this time. It has been speculated, however, that the latter wrote the book out of revenge because Colette had refused his advances.

The analysis which Colette conducted on herself during this period resulted in La Vagabonde. Renée Nerée, author of several works, turned music-hall mimic, became very attached to the wealthy Maxime Dufferein-Chautel. He had everything, even a castle in the country. Suddenly Renée realized that she loved him, and the psychological examination of herself became more intense.

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, La Naissance du Jour, Vol. II of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 328.

Maxime wanted her to abandon her career and become wholly dependent upon him. Remembering her first tragic love she states: "si je n'espère plus qu'en toi seul, n'est-ce pas déjà désespérer à moitié?"<sup>1</sup> She had been hurt because of love before; she would not allow herself to be hurt again. After the tragedy of her first marriage she had idealized the plants, the animals and the insects. They had become for her "les merveilles de la terre". "'Et s'il n'y avait d'urgent, en effet que cela? Si tout, hormis cela, n'était que cendres?...'"<sup>2</sup> In her mind this justified leaving Maxime. She escaped to South America.

In December of 1910 Colette began her career in journalism at "Le Matin", which was under the editorship of Henri de Jouvenel. On December 19, 1912 they were married. Colette's second husband had money, a good name and Castel Novel, a mansion in the country. "No doubt Colette was conscious of the material advantages of her second marriage."<sup>3</sup> She was also pregnant.<sup>4</sup>

Immediately after her marriage, Colette began working on L'Entrave, which became a sequel to La Vagabonde.

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, La Vagabonde, p. 226.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 233.

<sup>3</sup>Elaine Marks, Colette, p. 43.

<sup>4</sup>Colette de Jouvenel was born 3 July, 1913.

Renée Nerée returned to France after spending three years in South America. She found that in the meantime Maxime had married. One of her friend's lovers developed an attraction for her. Although Jean was no match for the Maxime that she had loved, she did not resist him. "Viens, bel écueil sur ma route tranquille, viens que je te franchisse, puisque je ne veux pas t'éviter."<sup>1</sup> From this point of the novel on, Renée conducts an exciting psychological study of herself, in an attempt to reconcile love and conjugal life with her inner compulsion for liberty. Margaret Davies complains that in L'Entrave, "analysis has led away from the novel into the realms of the psychological treatise, art has given way to therapy. It is the stage when introspection grows obsessive to the point of destruction."<sup>2</sup> Colette was not overly concerned about what the public wanted. In L'Entrave she was outlining for herself the role which she would play in the marriage which she had not wanted to avoid.

With La Vagabonde and L'Entrave, Colette had gained a position of prestige with her reading public and her publishers. When asked what she would write

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, L'Entrave, Vol. I of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 895.

<sup>2</sup>Margaret Davies, Colette, p. 43.

next she constantly replied that she did not know. Assured about herself in the present, she began to think about the future and what it held in store for her. She quickly perfected this way of thinking and developed it into what has been called "l'art de transformer ses romans en amulettes personnelles, peut-être afin d'exorciser l'avenir."<sup>1</sup> I take this to mean that Colette was driving out the evil omens of the unknown, that she strove to find out her fate in future years through contemplation and analysis.

Pouvais-je me douter que Colette projetait sur le papier un avenir encore lointain, imaginait la défense qu'elle lui opposerait, savait déjà qu'un jour elle en arriverait à préférer son mal à toute guérison?<sup>2</sup>

In 1920 Colette was forty-seven years old. Her mind was preoccupied with the questions which confront most middle-aged women. That was sufficient reason for her to write Chéri. With a demi-mondaine background, Colette recaptures in an extremely well-connected series of situations, the brand of love which she had developed in the "psychological treatise" L'Entrave, written seven years earlier. Projecting only a few years into the future, she realized that "le monstre--la vieille femme"<sup>3</sup> in the near future

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<sup>1</sup> Beaumont and Parinaud, Colette par Elle-Même, p. 169.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Goudekot, Près de Colette, p. 223.

<sup>3</sup> Colette, Chéri, p. 139.

would no longer allow her to love. Chéri is significant also because it is one of the few novels where Colette examines a man's feelings about the woman he loves, instead of treating him only as an influence threatening the equilibrium of the heroine.

During the Easter season of 1925, following her divorce with de Jouvenel, Colette met Maurice Goudekot through Marguerite Moréno. In Près de Colette Maurice reveals:

J'avais quinze ou seize ans quand je découvris Colette et que je reçus de cette lecture un choc délicieux. Avec l'incroyable orgueil et l'esprit chimérique de cet âge, je déclarai à mes parents: 'J'épouserai cette femme, elle seule saura me comprendre.'<sup>1</sup>

He and Colette became close friends from the beginning, and she began writing her next novel which was to be a sequel to Chéri. "La Fin de Chéri, livre dur, amer, sans un sourire, fut composé à une époque où elle avait lieu de se sentir heureuse sans restriction."<sup>2</sup> Colette had now reached the age of Léa at the end of Chéri. As stable as the Rock of Gibraltar, Colette had no fears for herself. "Je craindrais plutôt pour lui, une forme d'attachement amoureux."<sup>3</sup> She meant the sort

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<sup>1</sup>Goudekot, Près de Colette, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>3</sup>Colette, La Naissance du Jour, Vol. II of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 342.

of attachment that Chéri had had for Léa, which led to Chéri's depression and eventual suicide. Could this novel have been a prophetic message to Colette's "best friend" Maurice Goudekot?

"Imagine-t-on, à me lire, que je fais mon portrait?" asks Colette in La Naissance du Jour. "Patience, c'est seulement mon modèle."<sup>1</sup> Goudekot is baffled by this, his favorite novel:

Si jamais roman a paru autobiographique, c'est celui-là. ... Tout y est, sauf que La Naissance du Jour évoque la paix des sens et un renoncement à l'amour, dans le moment que Colette et moi vivions ensemble des heures ardentes, exaltées par la chaleur, la lumière, le parfum des étés provençaux.<sup>2</sup>

Colette was then in her mid-fifties. As a result of her experience, it was easy for her to anticipate how she would feel about love in the not too distant future. Analysis of these feelings is conducted to the ultimate. With La Naissance du Jour Colette finally became, for the future, the innocent Claudine portrayed at the close of La Retraite Sentimentale.

There are numerous other works which could be consulted to show the inseparability of Colette and her work. The process of self-examination and therapeutic analysis which she had discovered in the

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, La Naissance du Jour, Vol. II of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 328.

<sup>2</sup>Goudekot, Près de Colette, pp. 51-52.

Claudines was employed throughout her life. La Vagabonde reveals Colette's refusal to give up her independence by abandoning herself to love. In L'Entrave she developed, contrary to her natural instinct, a brand of love which would satisfy both her marriage and her duty to herself. With Chéri Colette discovered that even this love had its dangers for her, the greatest of which were old age and <sup>fragility</sup> ~~impotency~~. Perhaps a greater danger falls upon the lover who does not have the stability of Colette. He therefore must be warned about the risk he takes when he falls in love with a middle-aged woman. La Fin de Chéri forecasts the imminent doom of him who does not beware of the gathering clouds. A climax is reached with La Naissance du Jour. Colette's <sup>fragility</sup> ~~impotency~~, which had been only a threat seven years earlier, is now seen as a reality for the very near future. Love therefore came to an end. It was necessary to renounce it in favour of nature, and a contemplation of that which could be experienced through the senses which she still possessed. None of these novels, nor any of the others, save one, can be called joyous novels, even though many were written when Colette was experiencing a high degree of happiness. Gigi written in 1942,<sup>1</sup> a period of constant worry

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<sup>1</sup>Although not published until 1944, Goudekot in Près de Colette, p. 63, reveals that it was written in 1942.

and many heartaches for Colette, is the only really happy novel that she ever wrote.

On June 14, 1940 the Germans entered Paris. By the next summer there was cause for alarm and Colette, her husband and their maid Pauline left the city. After spending three weeks in Corrèze at the home of her daughter, Colette de Jouvenel, Colette who "had the habit of spending her wars in Paris"<sup>1</sup> suggested that they return to the occupied city. Armed with a pass from the Swedish Consulate at Lyon, they entered Paris early in September of 1941. On December 12th Maurice Goudekot, who was of Jewish blood, was arrested and transported to the German concentration camp at Compiègne. Colette thought that she would never see her "best friend" again. Only after having exhausted all the possibilities of having him released, did she sit down at Maurice's desk and begin to write the only happy novel of her entire work. Colette did not invent the plot of Gigi. The novel is a reproduction of a story told to her and Goudekot in 1926:<sup>2</sup> Unable to reach Colette's house, "La Treille Muscate" before night-fall, she and Goudekot had decided to spend the night in a "tourist home" run by two elderly ladies. Since

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<sup>1</sup>Goudekot, Près de Colette, p. 188.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 63-66.

they were the only two occupants of the hotel, they chatted the evening away with the two sisters. The topic of conversation was the niece of one of the ladies. From a very young age the niece had been rigorously trained to become the mistress of a particular wealthy young gentleman. When the day arrived for him to make his proposal, she refused. The refusal shocked the demi-mondaine society of the Paris of 1918. Yet, all was not lost, for the niece had made such an impression on the young gentleman that he asked her to be his wife. She accepted.

The novel appeared in 1944, at a time when everyone was satiated with the war. It provided a temporary escape from the realities of life. Undoubtedly due to the happy ending, Gigi immediately won the heart of America and made Colette famous all over the world. But Gigi is the least typical of Colette's work, for it is a fairy tale, the only fairy tale that she ever wrote. It is designed to lift the spirits and cheer the soul, for Gigi is a Cinderella who captivated the heart of the Prince. Gaston is Prince Charming who brought Sleeping Beauty back to life. It bears no resemblance to the life that people were leading in the 1940's. It acted as a tranquillizer which kept Colette's--and incidently her reader's--unhappiness dormant for awhile. Gigi

is the least typical of Colette's works for it is a happy story, with very little psychological analysis; yet it is most typical, for by writing it, Colette fought her unhappiness and maintained her emotional and mental equilibrium.

## VII

### LOVE IS NOT AN HONORABLE SENTIMENT

Une des grandes banalités  
de l'existence, l'amour,  
se retire de la mienne.  
-Colette-

In the preceeding pages it has been established that Colette's life had influenced her work to the point that it is difficult to separate one from the other. The other aspect of her career as an author, which cannot be over-stressed, is the long period of fifty years which separates her first from her last work. As Colette matured, she emphasized different aspects of love. Often, one work is devoted entirely to examining only one element of it. At other times Colette's mind was dominated by certain problems which consequently reflected upon the love situation which she was relating, giving the reader a false impression of her true idea of love. It is therefore impossible to obtain a true picture of what Colette means by the sentiment of love by examining one or only a few of her works. In addition Colette never formulated a theory of love, she merely conducted a study of this complex sentiment.

Before reconstructing what I consider to be Colette's idea of love, I have chosen to enumerate what appear to be the major elements which compose the sentiment. By looking at the elements separately, it will be possible to see how love, for Colette, could have been renounced as the greatest banality of mankind, after having evolved to the point of being the most honorable sentiment one could possess.

. . .

a) The elements of love

Sex, used in the Freudian sense to mean the pleasure-seeking drive, is probably the most important element of Colette's love. It is a drive which finds satisfaction through the senses. Throughout her work Colette has shown herself to be an expert in describing the pleasures received by her various lovers through their five senses. One of the better examples in Colette's novels is found in Chéri. Chéri was leaving Léa forever. Suddenly she received the urge to touch him:

Elle parlait sur un ton de supplication précipitée. Il l'écoutait debout, campé devant elle, la poitrine nue, les cheveux en tempête, si tentant qu'elle noua l'une à l'autre ses mains qui allaient le saisir.<sup>1</sup>

The sex-drive dictated Léa's desires. Her mind, once awakened, entered into the picture to halt the fulfilment of the desire.

Colette believes that "un lien assez solide"<sup>2</sup> can be created between two people who find satisfaction exclusively through the pleasures experienced via the five senses. Colombe and her married friend Balabi in Le Toutounier are one example. They have

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, Chéri, p. 189.

<sup>2</sup>Colette, Le Toutounier, Vol. II of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 653.

"un lien d'une essence...supérieure"<sup>1</sup> because they have contented themselves with the "simple" pleasures of life. They have not "gone all the way", they have not yet experimented with the "sixth" sense; they have an advantage over those who have.

The five senses serve to prepare the lovers for the ultimate pleasure. Once the lover is satiated with one "simple" pleasure, another is immediately created in the mind until, presumably, a whole hierarchy of pleasures have been experienced, all through the five senses. The ultimate pleasure, that to which all the other simple pleasures lead, can be experienced only through a sixth sense which is much superior than the five common senses in pleasure-granting power. "Les sens? Pourquoi pas LE sens? Ce serait pudique, et suffisant. LE SENS: cinq autres sous-sens s'aventurent loin de lui,"<sup>2</sup> states Colette in Le Pur et L'Impur. The pleasures experienced through the five senses are like the faint carbon copies of the bold type which represents that pleasure experienced through the sixth sense. The former, however, play a much greater role and are

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, Le Toutounier, Vol. II of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 653.

<sup>2</sup>Colette, Le Pur et L'Impur, Vol. III of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 310.

actually more important in the sentiment of love, for it is the "pleasure-seeking" aspect of sex and not the actual realization of the pleasure that dominates. This is one of the main points made in Mitsou. Robert, after many impatient weeks of waiting, had been granted a short leave from the war-front. In bed, beside Mitsou, he exclaims to himself: "Évidemment nous serions contents après, contents comme des enfants qui ont brisé une vitre pour avoir l'air, et qui constatent après que la vitre valent--peut-être--mieux que le courant d'air...."<sup>1</sup>

It is because it is the ultimate that "rassasiée, l'idée de la volupté porte avec elle la froideur et l'indifférence. Affamée elle ne veut rien d'autre que ce qui la sustente."<sup>2</sup> After the pleasure has been realized, an atmosphere of deadlock exists between the lovers. "'Voilà, c'est fini'" exclaims one of the characters in Le Pur et L'Impur "'nous sommes arrivées au delà de nous deux, il n'y a plus rien, même pas une route pour l'évasion.'"<sup>3</sup>

Because sex is a "pleasure-seeking" drive it

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, Mitsou, Vol. II of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 51.

<sup>2</sup>Colette, L'Entrave, Vol. I of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 921.

<sup>3</sup>Colette, Le Pur et L'Impur, Vol. III of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 335.

is rare that the pleasure received through the sixth sense reaches the expectation of the lovers. It is often only an "à-peu-près" a "demi-succès" a "demi-désastre."<sup>1</sup> Colette concedes however, in Le Blé en Herbe that this pleasure, "mal donné, mal reçu est une oeuvre perfectible."<sup>2</sup>

Since the pleasure received through the sixth sense creates an atmosphere of deadlock between the lovers, because they have reached their goal; and since the goal once attained, rarely meets with the lover's expectations, the moment of attainment is the most crucial moment in the love relationship. It is a time for him to imagine and rationalize, contemplate and idealize. It is a time when the heroine must remain obscure in order to assure that her lover's ideals are not sullied by the banal. Marco the heroine of Le Képi "avait touché à la hache" because she jumped out of bed "dans le pire moment" and placed upon her head "le képi fatal" belonging to her lover:

...dans le moment, où l'homme est une harpe triste, qui frémit encore, un explorateur qui revient d'un pays qu'il a entrevu et n'a pas atteint, un pénitent lucide qui jure "je ne le ferai plus" et se meurtrit les genoux...<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, La Chatte, p. 49.

<sup>2</sup>Colette, Le Blé en Herbe, Vol. II of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 305.

<sup>3</sup>Colette, Le Képi, Vol. III of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 653.

After that, young Alexis desired Marco no more. She had committed a crime against him--and against herself.

Selfishness is inherent in the definition of sex, for it is a pleasure-seeking drive. One often expects, for pleasure given, the same degree of pleasure in return. A conflict arises because there is no measure for pleasure. Colette claims that a woman for example, who gives "une importance exagérée aux signes extérieurs" could assume that her mere presence gives a certain amount of pleasure to the man that she is with.<sup>1</sup> Because of this assumption, she acquires, for the moment, an exalted image of herself. "Il lui faut ensuite déchanter, et elle crie après ce qu'elle appelle son dû...."<sup>2</sup> Because of the sex-drive which motivates her, she is selfish; she therefore demands for herself the same degree of pleasure which she assumes that she has given.

Although the demand for one's "dû" does not apply only to the pleasure received through carnal relations, I shall examine the "dû" in the context of the pleasure received through the sixth sense because

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<sup>1</sup>What she experiences is probably what psychologists call projection.

<sup>2</sup>Colette, Le Pur et L'Impur, Vol. III of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 364.

it is the most clearly defined in Colette's work. An excellent example of a woman who demands her "dû" is Minne, the romantically minded heroine of L'Ingénue Libertine. In her adolescence, she had dreamed of becoming the mistress of Le Frisé, the leader of a fictitious, notorious, underground gang. At her mother's request, she married her cousin Antoine, a colorless, ordinary youth. Since they were sexually incompatible, Minne began demanding her "dû", and searched for it through lovers. Even they, however, could not give her satisfaction. She was convinced that the pleasure which she gave to others should in turn be received by her. Her frantic search led nowhere and she began to loathe her lovers:

Encore une fois, il succombe seul, et Minne, à le contempler si près d'elle immobile, mal ressuscité, d'une bienheureuse mort, déchiffre au plus secret d'elle-même les motifs d'une haine naissante: elle envie réroccement l'extase de cet enfant fougueux, la pâmoison qu'il ne sait pas lui donner: "Ce plaisir-là, il me le vole! C'est à moi, ce foudrolement divin qui le terrasse sur moi! Je le veux! ou bien, qu'il cesse de le connaître par moi!...<sup>1</sup>

Part of the reason for Minne's impotency was that she went too far in the meaning which she accorded to pleasure. She expected too much--"un crédit illimité"<sup>2</sup>--

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, L'Ingénue Libertine, Vol. I of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 652.

<sup>2</sup>Colette, Le Pur et L'Impur, Vol. III of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 326.

from pleasure, like Damien in Le Pur et L'Impur. She therefore received nothing.

A bond is created between two people who, due to each other, experience pleasure. The sex drive which pushes them forward in an attempt to realize new pleasures, creates an attitude of possessiveness on the part of the lovers. Each begins to feel that he owns the other. This attitude is an essential part of love. It is called jealousy.

The most obvious expression of this attitude is seen in the heroine, when the loved-one grants attention to another person in her presence. Colette has devoted a whole novel, La Seconde in the study of the various nuances of this form of jealousy. Fanny, the heroine, <sup>vies</sup> ~~is~~ not really bothered by her husband's infidelities. When she learned however, of his relationship with Jane his secretary, who was at the same time her best friend, Fanny was stricken with grief. When present she wanted to be his property. She wanted him to use her, and her only when she was present, because she felt that she was his. "Une autre fois" she exclaims, after Farrou unjustly got angry with Jane, "tu passeras ton humeur sur moi, s'il te plaît, pas sur d'autres. Pas sur d'autres, du moins devant moi."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, La Seconde, Vol. II of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 437.

In La Chatte Camille reveals the same attitude because of Alain's love for his cat Saha. "Je vous ai vus!" she exclaims:

Le matin quand tu passes la nuit sur ton petit divan ... Avant que le jour se lève, je vous ai vus, tous deux... Vous ne m'avez même pas entendue! Vous étiez comme ça, la joue contre la joue..."<sup>1</sup>

The type of jealousy which is revealed by Fanny and Camille was caused by a feeling of not being needed enough. It is the same form of jealousy which Renée experienced in L'Entrave.<sup>2</sup> Renée realized that she was Jean's property: "Il pouvait user de moi royalement, s'il eût su, et trouver en moi ce qu'on n'épuise point ... Tout, je pouvais être tout, sans effort et sans faute, et tu ne t'en doutes pas..."<sup>3</sup> Because he did not take advantage of his position, because he received pleasures through means other than her, she was jealous. In essence it is the same attitude which Fanny had towards Farrou; that Camille had towards Alain.

The attitude described above can be projected into the past. A great threat to love is created if

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, La Chatte, pp. 150-151.

<sup>2</sup>Colette, L'Entrave, Vol. I of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 932.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 933.

this occurs. Colette devotes the novel Duo, to the study of Michel and how he reacted to Alice's infidelities, which had occurred while he had been away a year earlier. He refused to forget that she had used another person (on three occasions) in his place. Though he realized that Alice had been unfaithful to him only because she needed an appeasement of her sexual desires, he could not bear the thought that she had received pleasure by any other person but him. He had not been needed enough for he had had a substitute. His pride could not bear the fact that he had been replaced; he therefore committed suicide.

Thus far we have examined the type of jealousy which finds expression in the attitude that one is not needed enough. On the other side of the coin is the attitude that one needs the lover--possibly too much. This need leads one to become obsessed with the future, and the possibilities that exist which threaten love. Employed in this form of jealousy is the faculty "de prévoir, d'inventer ce qui peut, ce qui va arriver."<sup>1</sup> This nuance of jealousy makes one blind to one's surroundings; it makes one concentrate only on that which might happen in the future. It is clearly reflected by Renée in L'Entrave early in her liaison

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, Le Pur et L'Impur, Vol. III of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 374.

with Jean. On her way to her own apartment to get dressed for the evening, Renée met May, Jean's ex-mistress whom he had left only a week earlier. May felt no bitterness, nor was she vicious. She states however, "je voudrais voir la tête de la femme qui me déloge, quand Jean ref...ra le camp!"<sup>1</sup> The germ was seeded; Renée lost control of her senses. All she could see was Jean--possibly with another woman. She barely noticed the rain as she hailed a taxi which led her, not to her apartment, but back to Jean whom she had left only a short while earlier. This form of jealousy is "une sorte de purgatoire gymnique" claims Colette in Le Pur et L'Impur, "où s'entraînent tour à tour tous les sens..."<sup>2</sup>

The above aspect of jealousy can also be projected into the past for "une chose qu'on connaît bien pour l'avoir bien possédée, on n'en est jamais tout à fait privé."<sup>3</sup> The lover always feels as if he owns at least a part of the loved one. He becomes especially certain of this if he is at all proud; if he feels that he had created, as it were, the woman whom he had loved. The latter attitude is exemplified

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, L'Entrave, Vol. I of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 911.

<sup>2</sup>Colette, Le Pur et L'Impur, Vol. III of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 374.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 310.

by Hubert, Julie's ex-husband in Julie de Carneilhan.

"Laisse-moi!" he exclaimed to Julie when he learned that his step-son had attempted suicide because of her:—

Je ne tolère pas qu'ici, que devant moi, que t'adressant à moi, tu parles d'une créature masculine comme si tu pouvais délibérer d'en disposer, ou de n'en pas disposer! Dehors, tu fais ce que tu veux, c'est entendu! Tu es libre et je suis marié, c'est encore entendu! ... Tu es le pré que j'ai tondu, que j'ai foulé! Mais je te garantis que si d'autres en ont fait autant après moi, tu ne viendras pas ici me mettre sous le nez les marques qu'ils t'ont laissées!<sup>1</sup>

Hubert felt that part of Julie still belonged to him, because it was he who had made her into the person that she was.

All the elements of love which have been examined above--the pleasure-seeking drive, the demand for one's due, and jealousy--are all selfish elements of the sentiment, for the emphasis in each case is placed on the self. There is a fourth<sup>u</sup> element however, which brings to love a selfless attitude. It is the simple desire to make the lover happy. It is this realization which finally came to Antoine in L'Ingénue Libertine: "Sois heureuse, je ne demande rien pour moi: je te donnerai des parures, des bonbons,

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<sup>1</sup> Colette, Julie de Carneilhan, Vol. II of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 706.

des amants..."<sup>1</sup> Never had Minne been asked what would make her happy before, neither by her husband, nor by her lovers. It was only when Antoine forgot his selfish desires that he made Minne forget that she hated him. He made her forget that he had not given her that which was her "dû". In order to show her gratitude, Minne in turn desired to make Antoine happy, and the best way that she could do this, was to invite him to her bed. With a tender phrase Colette reveals the effects caused by the selfless desires of the couple: "C'est cette nuit qu'un miracle acheva de créer Minne."<sup>2</sup>

Whereas Minne found at home, because of her selflessness, that for which she had been searching through adventure, Renée in L'Entrave was certain that by giving of herself without expecting too much in return, she had found that happiness which surpassed her expectations:

C'est moi qui défais et dissimule l'épingle qui blessait, la boucle, le ruban; c'est moi, couchée et les reins sur le tapis, qui donne à Jean le coussin de mon corps un peu meurtri, et c'est moi pourtant, quand il repose au creux de mon épaule son front voilé de cheveux, ses yeux fermés et sa bouche entr'ouverte, c'est moi la plus heureuse...<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, L'Ingé<sup>ne</sup>ue Libertine, Vol. I of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 699.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Colette, L'Entrave, Vol. I of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 901.

The above are probably the clearest examples in Colette which show that happiness in love is achieved because of the selfless desire to make the "other person" happy. This does not apply exclusively to the pleasure received from the sixth sense. It covers all the senses which are part of the "pleasure-seeking" drive.

Léa's prime concern in Chéri was in keeping her lover happy, by giving him advice, by picking up after him, and by giving him gifts. She was more than a simple mistress; she was his "nourrice". Julie de Carneilhan's only concern was fulfilling her ex-husband's wishes. She went against her principles to conspire with Hubert in order to embezzle one million francs from Marianne, his wife. She did not even resent that in turn he had given her only one-fifth of what he had promised. Her only regret was that she could not do more. "Je n'ai rien qui me presse, puisque rien ne me reste à faire pour lui. Ni pour personne...."<sup>1</sup>

The search for pleasure and the desire for happiness find their realization in love. Alone, they cannot sustain love. The element of selflessness is necessary, at least from one party. The desire to make the "other person" happy is therefore a very important element of love.

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, Julie de Carneilhan, Vol. II of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 729.

b) The sentiment of love

Why do Colette's heroines love? In all cases the answer is the same: to escape from solitude. Claudine, though still in her youth was well aware of her solitude, as we have seen in a previous section. Renée Nerée of La Vagabonde and L'Entrave classified herself as "la dame seule". Middle-aged Léa, Julie de Carneilhan, Marco, even Madame Colette, all were escaping from solitude through love.

Sex--the pleasure-seeking drive--when active in two people creates an atmosphere of mutual understanding between them. Every glance, gesture and word has its meaning for them. A beautiful example exists in La Chatte. Before their marriage, Camille payed an unexpected visit to Alain, one morning while he was having breakfast on the terrace:

Elle baissa les yeux, cueillit une feuille, ramena sur sa joue le pinceau lustré de ses cheveux, mais, au mouvement de son menton levé et au battement de ses narines, Alain voyait qu'elle cherchait dans l'air, sauvagement, la fragrance d'un corps blond, à peine couvert, et dont il jugea secrètement qu'elle n'avait pas assez peur.<sup>1</sup>

Alain understood that Camille was receiving a pleasureable sensation from the smell of his bathed body. At that moment he was no longer in exile; he understood; solitude was no more.

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, La Chatte, pp. 43-44.

-- A search for one's "dû", jealousy and the "charitable" aspect of love also serve as a method of evasion from solitude. When one is preoccupied in the search for his "dû", there is no time to think about solitude. This is why Minne in L'Ingénue Libertine does not seem to be suffering because of solitude-- she is too busy searching for her "dû". Jealousy pervades all the senses; solitude is therefore forgotten. The charitable element of love has the same effect as jealousy. The heroine creates obligations for herself towards her lover. As Germaine Beaumont states: "là où l'obligation commence, la solitude perd pied."<sup>1</sup>

In the final analysis, love for Colette is a sentiment which consists of various elements (described in the previous section), through which two people attain a degree of communication and mutual understanding which far exceeds the rapport which would normally occur between them. . . .

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Because the sentiment of love is little more than a method by which one achieves a rapport with someone else, it is impossible to know beforehand with whom one will fall in love. Renée never imagined

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<sup>1</sup>Beaumont and Parinaud, Colette par Elle-Même, p. 47.

at first that she could ever love Jean. Léa was only being catty--and seeking a pleasureable experience--that evening when she kissed Chéri. One cannot choose because love is a sentiment; it has little to do with the mind. "Un coeur, ça ne choisit pas. On finit toujours par aimer."<sup>1</sup>

Because one cannot choose, homosexuality, in Colette's opinion, is not an abnormality.<sup>2</sup> Because of the similarity which already exists between two people of the same sex, mutual understanding is quickly achieved and easily maintained. Colette tells us in Le Pur et L'Impur that "l'étroite ressemblance rassure même la volupté. L'amie [lesbian] se complaît dans la certitude de caresser un corps dont elle connaît les secrets, et dont son propre corps lui indique les préférences."<sup>3</sup>

The unique relationship existing between Alain and Saha his cat shows that communication is also possible--and normal--between a man and an animal. Because carnal relations are not a necessary part of love, the bond which exists between Alain and Saha is love, a superior form of love. In fact, Saha is more

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, Le Pur et L'Impur, Vol. III of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 309.

<sup>2</sup>This refers to remaining true to oneself rather than deviating from the norm.

<sup>3</sup>Colette, Le Pur et L'Impur, Vol. III of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 351.

of a person than we at first realize. She seeks pleasure from Alain as a lover would do, she is jealous of Camille, and she even became ill when Alain and <sup>she</sup> ~~her~~ were separated after his marriage. Alain is nothing less than her lover. "Dans l'ombre elle lui donna un baiser de chat, posant son nez humide, un instant, sous le nez d'Alain, entre les narines et la lèvre. Baiser immatériel, rapide, et qu'elle n'accordait que rarement...."<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Saha was Alain's love, his only love: "Après toi [Saha] je serai sans doute à qui voudra...À une femme, à des femmes...Mais jamais à un autre chat."<sup>2</sup>

The rapport which exists between two people in love, according to Colette, is the greatest achievement of man, for it is a conquest over solitude. Because, through love man finds that communication is possible to a greater degree than usual, it is possible that he would sacrifice himself to it--since avoidance of solitude is the ultimate aim of most of humanity. Ideally, an abandonment of oneself to love would be a good thing, however, man is frivolous, as Colette has so often maintained, and he who does "half despair" is on the road to self-destruction.

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, La Chatte, pp. 24-25.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 161.

A person therefore owes it to himself to retain a certain amount of independence. In other words, he must resign himself to the fact that solitude is a part of life which must, to a certain degree, be faced. Colette shows furthermore, that it is possible to evade part of solitude by other means when love is no longer feasible. When love is lost, it is essential for survival to find some preoccupation "pour boucher un grand trou"<sup>1</sup>; it is essential to find something which can replace love until either a new love is found or a harmonious solitude reconciled with oneself.

Colette stresses this point throughout her entire work. Claudine in La Retraite Sentimentale communicated with nature and the Man in nature as a substitute for the love of her dead husband. Annie after her divorce, searched after "la chair fraîche" to appease her passions, but rejected all love that might have developed. Renée in La Vagabonde refused the love of Maxime and replaced it with contemplation of the marvels of the world, the rapport which she achieved with them, and her career as a music-hall mimic. Léa replaced Chéri, who had been uniquely hers for seven years, by finally resolving to occupy

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, Chéri, p. 139.

herself with becoming a middle-aged woman. Edmée, Chéri's wife, successfully combatted her solitude when she realized that he was incorrigible, by working in a military hospital. Madame Colette, when she rejected love in La Naissance du Jour for a more complete communication with nature, occupied her mind and combatted solitude by writing and working in her garden. After Michel's death in Duo, Alice returned to her "toutounier",<sup>1</sup> occupied herself exclusively with her two sisters. This became her way of replacing him. "Depuis que je suis ici, ai-je eu le temps seulement de penser à Michel? Ai-je même le désir de penser à Michel?"<sup>1</sup> Fanny in La Seconde took away a great amount of the love that she thought she owed exclusively to Farrou and gave it to Jane, his mistress. She realized that Farrou could be replaced by common understanding and the amity of a friend. Julie, in Julie de Carneilhan, when she had exhausted the possibilities of being charitable to her ex-husband, replaced him by withdrawing to her native Carneilhan, nature, and her childhood memories. Marco in Le Képi pursued with greater vigor her career as an author after her young lover abandoned her. The above are all heroines of

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, Le Toutounier, Vol. II of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 641.

Colette's work who had suffered because they had lost the love which had been a force combatting solitude. Each, in her own way, successfully replaced love by activity or a minor form of communication, which helped to dull the blow of the loss of love.

There are two characters in Colette's work, who had abandoned themselves so completely to love that a replacement could not be found to combat their solitude, when it became evident that love could no longer exist for them. In La Fin de Chéri, Colette depicted an "étranger" who refused to change. Chéri is the only person in the novel who could not accept the war and its after-effects. He could not accept that Léa was an old woman; that she had successfully replaced him with the profession of becoming an old woman. Everyone, including his mother had changed; only he and Léa's pearl necklace remained the same. He could not continue being an "étranger" alone, misunderstood and not attempting to understand. He therefore committed suicide.

Michel in Duo is the other example. He could not face up to what he envisioned to be loss of love. Alice's affair of one year before, meant, that, because of his jealousy, a future rapport between them would be impossible. He could not ask for a separation because she was the only woman he had ever loved. Unable to foresee a recovery of the love that he had had for her, he committed suicide.

c) Evolution and final renunciation

There is often a change in thought when an author writes on one basic theme over a period of fifty years, especially when the topic is on love. This is particularly applicable to Colette because all of the ideas on love are based on her life experiences and not on an established philosophy. As a result, we see in Colette's "symphony of love" a progression in her ideas which culminates in an almost perfect or ideal sentiment with Chéri, but which is completely rejected in favor of a harmonious solitude with nature in La Naissance du Jour. A survey of Colette's study would be incomplete in my opinion, if one were to overlook the progression and final renunciation of what Colette calls the sentiment of love.

The love which is seen in the Claudines and La Vagabonde is basically an egocentric sentiment with emphasis placed upon the heroine who is in love. Though Colette never evaluates, it seems to me that the love portrayed in the early part of her work is of a rudimentary form because it is completely selfish. It is not dissimilar to the love that a small dependent child has for his mother. In order to show that the love in Colette's early work is egocentric I shall refer exclusively to La Vagabonde, for I feel that the Claudines

have been sufficiently covered in an earlier section of the paper.

In La Vagabonde, Maxime Dufferein-Chautel fell in love with Renée Nerée, a divorcee turned music-hall mimic. She, at first, did not allow herself to love him, for her ex-husband's infidelities had made her frigid, "toute hostile aux 'choses de l'amour'."<sup>1</sup> She soon realized that Maxime was a force which made her forget her solitude and that "sans lui, je n'existais pas!"<sup>2</sup> Renée was very susceptible to love and she could not resist taking what was offered to her. His great love for her made him so irresistible that she could not help but love him.

While on tour she realized that for a moment Maxime had skipped her mind; for one moment she had forgotten him:

Pendant combien de temps venait-je pour la première fois, d'oublier Max?...  
Oui de l'oublier, comme s'il n'y avait d'urgent au monde que mon désir de posséder par les yeux les merveilles de la terre!  
C'est à cette même heure qu'un esprit insidieux m'a soufflé: "Et s'il n'y avait d'urgent en effet, que cela? Si tout, hormis cela, n'était que cendres?"<sup>3</sup>

Renée's desire to possess Maxime had for a moment been surpassed by her desire to possess the marvels

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, La Vagabonde, p. 94.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 232-233.

of the world. Never was Maxime consulted about what he desired. She was concerned only with herself. This is also seen in her second-last letter when she stated: "Il me semble que je ne dois plus vous revoir."<sup>1</sup> Maxime never knew why she left him, for he had offered her everything. But even his offerings were turned against him:

N'es-tu pas, en croyant donner, celui qui accapare? Tu étais venu pour partager ma vie ... Partager, oui: PRENDRE TA PART! Être de moitié dans mes actes, t'introduire à chaque heure dans la pagode secrète de mes pensées, n'est-ce pas? Pourquoi toi plutôt qu'un autre? je l'ai fermée à tous.<sup>2</sup>

It would be unfair to Renée if one were not to mention that the motives for her attitude towards love were probably justified. She had experienced a disastrous marriage and was guarding herself against any future tragedy. Her preoccupation with herself, what she desired from love and all that love could give her should however, not be overlooked. Renée's attitudes bear a striking resemblance to Claudine's attitudes. Their ideas on love are not far from Minne's search for her "dû". Indeed, it is this type of love which characterizes the first fifteen years of Colette's writing.

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, La Vagabonde, p. 238.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 249.

Beginning with L'Entrave Colette placed the emphasis on charity in matters of love. Renée Nerée was no longer the selfish music-hall mimic who ran away from Maxime. She beckoned Jean to come her way and when he did, she did all the giving. It turned out that she experienced the greatest happiness. The relationship between Léa and Chéri was nothing short of charity on the part of Léa. She was his "nounoune". She was everything for Chéri that Claudine had wanted Renaud to be for her. In return, "il ne livrait rien de lui que lui-même, et restait mystérieux comme une courtisane."<sup>1</sup> But Chéri unknowingly gave something to Léa: her youth. With him she felt younger than the quinquagenarian that she was, for she was his mistress as well as his mother, teacher and friend. Always thinking of him first she could not help but exclaim: "Ah! Chéri...Mon pauvre Chéri..." when he left her forever:

Est-ce drôle de penser qu'en perdant, toi ta vieille maîtresse usée, moi mon scandaleux jeune amant, nous avons perdu ce que nous possédions de plus honorable sur la terre...<sup>2</sup>

Their love for each other was the most honorable thing that they possessed not only because it was

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, Chéri, p. 47.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 150.

an escape from solitude, but also because it was the only pure aspect of a life of vulgarity, venal preoccupations and compromise. Léa's love for Chéri was almost perfect, because she was not restricted by him when he was not with her. Unlike many of the other heroines in Colette's work, Léa's lover was not constantly on her mind. She experienced a minimum amount of jealousy. She never asked for her "dû" from the Chéri--"trop vert"--that she loved. She is like Julie de Carneilhan; she is all charity.

Madame Colette, the heroine of La Naissance du Jour was no longer able, or no longer had the desire to give freely of herself in order to establish a rapport between herself and Vial. Since her sex-drive had left her, she could no longer serve a lover as she thought she should. She found herself in the position of her old mother, who woke up one morning and saw the barn next door on fire. "Comme je ne peux servir à rien en personne," wrote Sido, "et qu'il ne s'agit que de paille, je puis donc m'abandonner à mon amour pour les tempêtes, le bruit du vent, les flammes en plein air..."<sup>1</sup> Madame Colette rejected Vial's love for her garden, her animals and the dawn of a new day--"puisque'il ne s'agit que de paille".

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, La Naissance du Jour, Vol. II of Oeuvres de Colette, p. 345.

Colette believed that love is an escape from solitude because through it a rapport is created between two individuals. In the last stages of her life, she also believed that solitude was a human condition, and that to escape from it through love would be ignoble and common. In La Naissance du Jour Madame Colette was ready to face up to life with all its conditions, for as she declares, love "une des grandes banalités de l'existence ... se retire de la mienne ... Il faut désormais que ma tristesse si je suis triste, ma gaîté si je suis gaie, se passent d'un motif qui lui a suffi pendant trente années: l'amour."<sup>1</sup>

Because true love is an escape from solitude it causes happiness. But it also causes suffering. Jealousy, a search for one's "dû", infidelity and loss of love are all elements of this sentiment which cause suffering. But the suffering caused by love is not a grave matter. It is "une manière d'occupation sans dignité."<sup>2</sup> It is egotistical like jealousy. It pervades all the senses; it occupies the mind; it drains the spirit. Yet it is part of love. That was the reasoning which caused Colette to come to the realization in La Naissance du Jour that "l'amour, ce n'est pas un sentiment honorable."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Colette, La Naissance du Jour, Vol. II of Oeuvres de Colette, pp. 319 & 367.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 320.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 321.

## VIII

### CLOSING REMARKS

It all began with a request that she jot down what she could remember of her school-days. Fifty years and fifteen large volumes later, Colette's writing career came to an end. In the space of some eighty titles she had written on various topics. She had also conducted a painful study on the complex sentiment of love. It was a painful study indeed, for Colette, using her past experience as a source of information, conducted more than an impersonal *étude*. At the same time she was performing a therapeutic study of herself.

Throughout her study, Colette made no attempt to disguise her personal attitudes towards love. In 1907, after her divorce with Willy, love was a sentiment which was to be detested and exploited. By 1911, she could no longer hate; love therefore became a sentiment which was to be feared, and from which she had to escape. Two short years later Colette was forced to accept it, and so she did, but with reservations. She no longer felt that she was abandoning herself to love, for love became a just and rewarding aspect of charity. In 1920 Colette

began to realize that she would soon have to accept that love for her would presently come to an end. The selflessness which had proved so rewarding for her, became a dangerous pitfall for the man who loved her. With La Fin de Chéri in 1926 she meant to guard the man who loved her against his love, by her message. Two years later, love was reduced to a common-place sentiment which should be renounced for all that her remaining five senses could experience in nature.

Colette's long life and her equally long work are inseparable. Her work tells the story of a search, Colette's search, for an answer to the problem of solitude. For many years the answer lay in a very common but complex sentiment, which she could feel in her heart, but could not visualize in her mind. With innocent courage and meticulous grace she conducted an *étude* on the sentiment of love. It turned out to be a symphony.

## IX

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