

---

Theses and Dissertations

---

Spring 2010

# Usage of books in domestic space in Colette's *La Maison de Claudine* and other writings

Lauren Elaine Clark  
*University of Iowa*

Copyright 2010 Lauren Elaine Clark

This thesis is available at Iowa Research Online: <http://ir.uiowa.edu/etd/480>

---

## Recommended Citation

Clark, Lauren Elaine. "Usage of books in domestic space in Colette's *La Maison de Claudine* and other writings." MA (Master of Arts) thesis, University of Iowa, 2010.  
<http://ir.uiowa.edu/etd/480>.

---

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ir.uiowa.edu/etd>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#)

USAGE OF BOOKS IN DOMESTIC SPACE IN COLETTE'S  
*LA MAISON DE CLAUDINE* AND OTHER WRITINGS

by

Lauren Elaine Clark

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree  
in Comparative Literature in the Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

May 2010

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Steven Ungar

Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

---

MASTER'S THESIS

---

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Lauren Elaine Clark

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the Master of Arts degree in Comparative Literature at the May 2010 graduation.

Thesis Committee:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Steven Ungar, Thesis Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Wendelin Guentner

\_\_\_\_\_  
Rosemarie Scullion

In memory of Faye Beauchamp.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the members of my thesis committee, Steven Ungar, Wendelin Guentner and Rosemarie Scullion, all of whom I studied under at the University of Iowa and whose courses helped me to envision and pursue this project. I am especially grateful for Professor Ungar's editing and suggestions for these chapters. Other professors to whom I wish to extend my thanks for their support and/or teaching include Sabine Gözl, Blaine Greteman and Michel Laronde. To numerous others, I extend my gratitude.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER ONE THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS OF DOMESTIC SPACE .....	7
Domestic Space: The Complexities of Escape .....	7
Spaces .....	20
Relationships with Order Within Space: The Father Figure and Writing .....	26
CHAPTER TWO USAGE OF BOOKS IN <i>LA MAISON DE CLAUDINE</i> .....	31
Gendered Reading Practices .....	31
Non-engagement .....	42
Privileged Ways of Reading .....	45
Forgotten Books .....	50
CHAPTER THREE USAGE OF BOOKS IN <i>COLETTE</i> IN CONTEXT .....	53
<i>Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée</i> .....	56
<i>La Souriante Madame Beudet</i> .....	60
CONCLUSION .....	65
WORKS CITED .....	69

## INTRODUCTION

*Fire Opal* is a turn-of-the-century watercolor on ivory portrait of a woman, Grace Mutell, who is sitting in an interior domestic space and holding an open book in her lap. The portrait, painted by Laura Coombs Hills in 1899, is on the cover of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts 2010 calendar entitled “Reading Women,” wherein each month displays a woman or women holding a book or books. The image caught my attention as I was (and still am) interested in the way book-objects can be used in domestic space. Since domestic space was primarily the ‘woman’s place’ at the beginning of the twentieth century both in the United States and in France, the calendar intrigued me. However, the statement on its back cover is what drove the present inquiry, namely: “She may be finding escape from her daily routine in the pages of a novel. Or searching the pages of a more serious work for a way to broaden her horizons or transform her life.<sup>1</sup>” Here, my attention is struck by the conjunction *or*, which serves to indicate multiple ways of escaping from, or changing, one’s experience in domestic space.

Ultimately, I consider the book that the woman holds an object that can be used in more than one way. Here, I consider how on one hand, it functions as an escape from a mundane existence in the domestic space that she occupies as a result of patriarchal social constructions, in line with the above citation. On the other hand, the book-object can serve as an element in a more harmonious landscape, functioning as a source and prodger of the imagination in domestic space that is the creative/fertile site of childrearing,

---

<sup>1</sup> The citation continues: “Regardless, the reading woman herself is a long, complex story that has fascinated generations of artists, and though the artworks rarely reveal the tales being read, each offers its own story uniquely composed in the viewer’s imagination. A book can stop time, transcend circumstances, conjure a world in which to lose oneself. These paintings achieve the same thing. Just as the reading woman has temporarily set herself free from her life’s narrative, so can we leave ours as we contemplate her image.”

cooking, and (what can be seen as) other pleasures. In this way, it is an object among many, perhaps privileged by the subject that inhabits the space. Whichever usage of a book is employed, the woman's reading is treated here as a practice that she appropriates to a number of possible ends. Escape is the central problematic contended with in this essay.

The difference that I suggest regarding these usages of book-objects points to what Michael Sheringham describes as one take on the basic paradox of everyday life: "it is everything and it is nothing"—an "everyday" that I relate to the routine activities that play out in the domestic space with which the woman in *Fire Opal*, or any of the other reading women, would be deeply familiar (37). Does one's usage of a book-object aid in escaping from, or engaging with, domestic space? Here, I am interested in the way that the book-object serves not as an escape, but as an invitation for creative engagement with that space, or rather, if it is an escape, it is so in the way that it seeks to break conceptions of space from a strictly patriarchal imagination.

In particular, I find this image relevant for considering books as they appear in a text by Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette, *La Maison de Claudine* (1922). The text, which is a memoir that she wrote at forty-nine years old, reflects on her childhood home among other homelike spaces. Also, it is a text wherein thirty-five short stories frequently explore various usages of books. Colette's treatment of book-objects in the home (and oftentimes similar treatment of other objects) via her prose that tends toward reverie and concrete descriptions of various spaces is the reason I consider it here. Ultimately, I aim to show that the book-object serves as a productive point from which to analyze the problematic of escape outlined above, and that is further detailed in chapter one.



Furthermore, I seek to acknowledge how implications of this problematic are mirrored in Colette's poetics in my reading of her memoir. However, it might be easily remarked (by anyone familiar with Colette's writings) that both usages of books and Colette's poetics are linked, most simply, by her affirmation of life and its processes that she first grew familiar with through her mother's open garden, kitchen, etc. To *escape* would be to step away from that world, or to abandon similar engagement with the materiality of domestic space post-Saint-Sauveur, where she was raised.

In chapter one, entitled "Theoretical Implications of Domestic Space," I seek to set out the theoretical lens that influences my reading of *La Maison de Claudine*. In this chapter, I use other autobiographical texts by Colette to help frame my analysis, as well as her earliest published works, the Claudine novels. First, I look at domestic space as gendered territory and spell out the way I believe Colette complicates an escape from it. Next, I bring in Bachelardian notions of "house" and "space" that sets up a relation so that escape, if it can be called such, has roots in contemplation. Differences between what he postulates as material and formal imaginations are considered as well; this offers one approach to establishing Colette's poetics in a material versus more abstract world. I then look at book-objects as they are presented in *La Maison de Claudine* in order to make preliminary comments on the function of book-objects within domestic space as depicted by Colette. The next portion of chapter one focuses on theoretical notions of space in order to consider how space functions in Colette's texts. Here, I rely heavily on Doreen Massey's and Michel de Certeau's analyses. The chapter ends by looking theoretically at representations of order, and specifically, in the form of printed materials

and objects used for writing, which is important regarding the way I read these materials as they appear in *La Maison de Claudine*.

In chapter two, entitled “Usage of Books in *La Maison de Claudine*,” my focus is on the memoir. I will first look at the short stories in terms of their depiction of domestic space as a gendered domain, and how interactions with printed material within that space are also gendered. The first section, “Gendered Reading Practices” shows how Colette’s prose critiques attempts at mastery within domestic space, but it also shows how order, taken in a compassionate light to be fragile, falls into the rhythms of domestic space and is inseparable from it. Secondly, I look at what Colette depicts as her first engagements with books. Here, it is clear that the materiality of the book-objects is important, as is their role in inciting imaginative play. Also, regarding her first interactions with texts, it is seen that the written word is ultimately put on trial in the material world. Challenging texts (taken in the memoir to be poor or false depictions of the world) symbolize obstacles in a subject’s passage from naïve to astute reader, where the latter readings deepen the reader’s perception of his/her world. Next, I examine the short stories “Le Curé sur le mur” and “La Noisette creuse”—stories in which interpretation practices and the flight of the imagination have roots in the material world. This yields to a final section, “Forgotten Books,” in which I concentrate on a usage of the book that I feel is privileged in the narrative, where a book-object does not impose law nor is it “poached” by a reader, rather, it serves as Bachelardian house for the daydream—an indicator of reverie—a usage for which the above mentioned conditions are crucial (an astute reader that is “unhurried by the affairs of men”). This usage is not limited to book-objects, but crosses over to other objects as well, such as hollow nuts in “La Noisette creuse.”

Ultimately, the chapter details ways in which Colette depicts usages of books that aid in engaging with domestic space, and critiques any active or passive “escape” from it, as she equates these usages with death or failed attempts to perform mastery.

In chapter three, I put the observations that I make in my reading of *La Maison de Claudine* in further context. Rather than try to situate Colette within the entire tradition of French women writers or her contemporaries, my analysis is meant to be suggestive, looking only at two more examples of works by women that depict the relationship between domestic space, book objects and the problematic of escape in early twentieth century France. Both Simone de Beauvoir’s *Mémoires d’une jeune fille rangée* (1958) and Germaine Dulac’s film *La Souriante Madame Beudet* (1922) are considered.

When Colette wrote *La Maison de Claudine*, she was once-divorced and already remarried. Her career as a writer was well established, and for all practical purposes, had in fact left what was the traditionally defined role in domestic space. Still, domestic space, with its rhythms and more plain glories, remained at the forefront of much of her writing. If I consider Colette’s works in a feminist light, it is in the way that they “identify the source of oppression in the very structure of the logos which supports Western culture” and reject, “the desire for mastery whether it be of language or of abstract thought” as cited in the introduction of the *Yale French Studies* issue entitled “Feminist Readings: French Texts/American Contexts” (13). In this way, I reconcile in my mind what can be seen as a contradiction: Colette left a traditional role at the hearth yet privileges activities that play out in domestic space. Elaine Marks argues that Colette’s writings, although typically far from anything in the realm of politics, do have a “moral imperative” that was “applicable, not to groups of men or their salvation, but to

the individual and his everyday existence” (8). Here, I seek to sort out ways in which book-objects, domestic space, and perhaps reverie are part of this imperative.

There have been challenges in preparing these chapters, namely, working with an author and work on whom/which so much has been written. Several studies enhanced my reading of the text (Anne Freadman, Emily Groscholz, Michèle Hirsch, Helen Southworth, Julia Kristeva, etc.), as did Gaston Bachelard’s work, of which my discovery helped me to think through the problematic of escape tremendously. There are numerous studies on ways of reading and the significance of book-objects. The articles and books that I refer to are selective, one goal being to find a cohesive approach to reading book-objects as they appear in *La Maison de Claudine* and to address the problematic of escape. A book-object has multiple usages, and so of course, there are multiple ways to write about them. Here, I attempt to draw out one.

Because *La Maison de Claudine* is a memoir in which facts are thought to be embellished, I will refer to Colette the author as simply Colette, and when appropriate, will cite her name in quotations, ‘Colette’ to refer to her voice as the narrator, which oscillates between third and first person. The only text that is cited in the original French is *La Maison de Claudine*.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS OF DOMESTIC SPACE

#### Domestic Space: The Complexities of Escape

Considering domestic space in Colette's *La Maison de Claudine* to be coded as female requires some degree of qualification. Feminist-geographer Doreen Massey writes on the evident yet important notion that "national ideologies and [local] conditions worked together to produce a unique set of patriarchal relations based on extreme separation of men's and women's lives"—a separation that manifests spatially so that place is thoroughly gendered and remains a means of subordination in some societies (209, 179). Massey continues: "The construction of 'home' as a woman's place has, moreover, carried through into those views of place itself as a source of stability, reliability and authenticity. Such a view of place, which reverberates with the nostalgia for something lost, is coded female"(179).

In *Space, Place and Gender*, the book from which the above citations are taken, Massey maintains that the 'woman's place' is ultimately a manifestation of social, political and economic rather than biological processes—an argument, or rather an assumption, that Colette is conscious of in her writing. To offer one of several possible examples, I consider the situation of the character Annie in the fourth of Colette's Claudine novels, *Claudine s'en va* (1903), who finds herself trapped in a relationship with her husband that she eventually realizes is oppressive. The plot is centered on a realization that occurs in the book's final pages, where Annie finds the courage to abandon her debilitating role at the hearth. Having done so, she buys a revolver and sets

down the path of her unknown future. The following passages are from the final two pages of the book:

I am only taking my two little black friends, Tony the dog and Toby the revolver... I shall be a very well-protected woman, shall I not? I am going away resolutely, not hiding my tracks, but not marking them with little pebbles either... this escape of mine is not a crazy flight on the spur of the moment. For four months I have been slowly gnawing away at my rope till it has finally frayed and parted. All that was needed was simply that the [jailor] should carelessly leave the prisoner unguarded. Once his back was turned, she became aware both of the horror of the prison and of the light shining through the chinks of the door. [...] No Claudine, I do not shudder. All that is life, time flowing on, the hoped-for miracle that may lie round the next bend of the road. It is because of my faith in that miracle that I am escaping. (559-60)

These passages depict the character Annie as she breaks away from her situation, and the notion of escape is of central importance; here, it is captured in the final words of the novel (*je m'évade*). The jailor is her husband, Alain, who leaves her at home while he travels. The metaphor that Colette sets up conveys the animal nature of the female character's entrapment (via her slow gnawing at a rope) and the "light through the chinks in the door" that catches Annie's attention is the impetus behind her decision to leave. Immediately, there is contrast between the light that she sees and the space in which she is trapped.

Colette's treatment of domestic space in *La Maison de Claudine* contrasts markedly with the above passage. In the later memoir, domestic space is (as in *Claudine s'en va*) the woman's place; it is dominated by Colette's mother, Sido, from whom the young Colette, affectionately referred to as Minét-Chéri in her youth, learns to assert herself in relation to patriarchal order and canonical texts.<sup>2</sup> When it comes to looking at the relation between autonomy seeking subjects and those who impose order, *La Maison*

---

<sup>2</sup> Due to the blending of fiction and autobiography characteristic in Colette's works, I will refer to subjects in *La Maison de Claudine* as people and as characters.

*de Claudine* depicts a home that is the site of deeper paradox where escape, if it occurs, is ironic. The issue seems to no longer concern merely *leaving* “home,” but rather, concerns the realization of autonomy within it and in relation to apparent ruling structures. As Laurel Cummins argues by looking at reading, writing and sexuality in several of Colette’s works, “identity in Colette emerges through an assertion of self *in relation* to discourse and to the power it represents” (19). Cummins notes that Sido is depicted in much the same way; as Michèle Sarde adds, “Sido was the very model of a ‘traditional wife,’ devoted to home, to domestic duties, and yet within this narrow frame, she was still a free woman” (8).

Colette lyrically articulates these complications of what it means to be liberated from domestic space in her memoir and other writings, and this to the point that the “escape” can be read as a key problematic that grounds her writing in the material world. Referring back to the quote by Massey, the problem regarding domestic space is as much about being able to question the place that is ‘coded female’ as fixed or stable as it is about breaking out of the ‘woman’s place’ altogether. Challenging notions of fixed space (and because fixed, conquerable) is what Massey does in *For Space* (2005), which will be addressed in a later section when looking at specific instances where Colette depicts the heterogeneous nature of space in some of her earliest writings.

Thus, although some of Colette’s novels (*Claudine s’en va*) articulate a real escape (that is, a physical exodus), it is also apparent in her writing that she questions its terms. The following passage, which appears in *Earthly Paradise* (1966) and which is taken from *Mes Apprentisages* (1936), was written by Colette about the time when she

contemplated whether or not to ‘escape’ from the difficulties and unhappiness of her first marriage:

And it should be realized, too, that captives, animals or men, are not constantly absorbed by the notion of escape, for all their restless pacing behind the bars and the way they have of gazing far away into the distance, through the encircling walls. The long glance, the unquiet step are only reflexes, brought about by habit or the size of their prison. Open the door that the bird, the squirrel, the wild beast have been eyeing, besieging, imploring, and instead of the leap, the sudden flurry of wings you expected, the disconcerted creature will stiffen and draw back into the depths of its cage. I had plenty of time to think, and I was constantly hearing the same grand, contemptuous, sarcastic words, shining links of a fine-wrought chain: ‘After all, you are perfectly free . . .’ (128)

Here, even more than questioning what readers might expect of freedom, she turns the notion of escape into a fundamental problematic of human/animal nature, by suggesting a more ambiguous interpretation of cages—or by extension, walls—than normally assumed. The gate is lifted, there is change, but not in the way of a creature that flees. The chain that prevents the animal’s movement becomes entirely figurative. Still, the passage reflects an inability to escape that *results from* the chain of the oppressor. However, in consideration of Colette’s abundantly descriptive prose that is so grounded in the material, it is possible that one variation of the passage’s meaning is a more overt refusal to leave—an act that would be against the creature’s nature. The “size of [the] prison” is arbitrary or secondary to the creature’s “long glance,” and it is the glance that most strikes my attention here.

Colette continues her reflections on escape in the passages that follow, writing about her own emancipation from her traditional role at the hearth which further adds to the problematic. She had been planning to leave her adulterous first husband, Henry Gauthier-Villars (who went by his nom-de-plume, Willy), but, “While I had been dreaming of flight,” she tells, “close beside me someone else had been planning to turn



me quietly out of the house—out of my own house” (133). Ultimately, it was Willy who ended the marriage with Colette. Here, Colette’s main problem and disappointment is in the fact that she was unable to “[...] make eviction lyrical” (134). The humorous passages, which turn the “escape” into a defense of territory, further reflect its importance in her writing. If it is a root of her poetics in the prose of *La Maison de Claudine*, as I aim to demonstrate, it is also important when looking at her treatment of book-objects in relation to domestic space—instances, again, where she seems to critique their usage as an escape.

To stretch the complicated terms of escape that Colette lays out regarding physical space to her prose, I consider Gaston Bachelard’s comments on what he views as two types of imagination:

The imagining powers of our mind develop around two very different axes./ Some get their impetus from novelty; they take pleasure in the picturesque, the varied, and the unexpected. The imagination that they spark always describes a springtime. In nature, these powers, far from us but already alive, bring forth flowers./ Others plumb the depths of being. They seek to find there both the primitive and the eternal. They prevail over season and history. In nature, within us and without, they produce seeds—seeds whose form is embedded in a substance, whose *form is internal*. / By speaking philosophically from the outset, we can distinguish two sorts of imagination: one that gives life to the formal cause and one that gives life to the material cause—or, more succinctly, a *formal imagination* and a *material imagination*. (*Water*, 1)

I relate the above description of the material imagination to Colette’s lyricism that engages with objects associated with certain activities such as a hanging pot or a shining blade—sites from which she draws her imagistic prose. These activities, as Colette observes them via her mother’s work, become “Le Fruit défendu,” or as I read this short story in connection with the above passage, “seeds” of her prose. Ultimately, in the short stories that comprise her memoir, notions of escape (unless it refers to the contemplative

faculties of a subject) are complicated by her usage of concrete language that shows how space is appropriated, or how the usage of space is variable. If Colette's imagination can be called one that is material rather than formal in the Bachelardian sense, it is the formal imagination that she seems to critique—one that is detached from immediate experience of the world. For example, she writes about her father's non-engagement with his surroundings when on a picnic in the country, where he is consumed by his thoughts:

What did the fox and the lily of the valley, the ripe berry and the insect, matter to him? He liked them in books, and told us their learned names, but passed them by out of doors without recognizing them. He would praise any full-blown flower as a "rose," pronouncing the 'o' short, in the Provençal way, and squeezing as he spoke an invisible 'roz' between his thumb and forefinger. (*Paradise*, 52)

Here, in this passage taken from *Sido* (1930), it is clear that she favors the material realm over the realm of ideas. The latter is often treated as an escape from the former in Colette's prose.

To further consider implications of escape in Colette, and to extend this line of thought to readership, I consider a parable that she wrote soon after her first divorce. Just after the fourth Claudine novel, Colette wrote *Dialogues de bêtes* (1904), then the last of the Claudine novels, *La Retraite sentimentale* (1907), followed by the parable "Les Vrilles de la vigne," which appears in a collection of short stories under the same title—*Les Vrilles de la vigne* (1908). In it, 'Colette' tells the story of a nightingale that would "go to bed promptly at seven o'clock or half-past seven," usually on a grapevine, where it would sleep peacefully until morning. In the beginning, the nightingale does not sing, or, has not yet recognized/ established his own voice, as the parable later suggests. One night, one of the tendrils of the vine grows around him so that he is "bound fast [...] his wings powerless." The terrified nightingale escapes, and sings a song at night to keep

himself awake: “As long as the vine shoots grow, grow, grow,/ I will sleep no more!”

The narration then switches from third to first person, in which the narrator tells how she observed the nightingale, artfully singing for the pure pleasure of singing, but still, the narrator remarks in a deeper, more insightful tone: “I can still hear, through the golden notes, the melancholy piping of a flute, the quivering and crystalline trills, the clear and vigorous cries, I can still hear the first innocent and frightened song of the nightingale caught in the tendrils of the vine” (136). Next, the narrator continues the first person account, while changing the experience into her own when she writes how “[...] to keep from falling again into a happy sleep, in the treacherous springtime when blossoms the gnarled vine, I listen to the sound of my voice.” The final affirmation, “I no longer enjoy a happy sleep, but I no longer fear the tendrils of the vine ...” in my reading reflects unfettered imagination firmly grounded in the material and in nature, and marks the narrator’s transition from a naïve to astute reader of signs, more aware of the world and of his/her condition (137). To read the vine metaphorically and to recognize that the trace of the vine is present in the nightingale’s song is to place escape in awareness. The parable is included in *Earthly Paradise* under a section entitled “Freedom” by its editor. It does mark a break from Willy, under whom she had been writing (Marks), but it is not a simple song of rejoice—it also suggests a deeper, more informed engagement with the world that is carried through in Colette’s writing after her divorce from Willy. I will return to this passage several times in my analysis of *La Maison de Claudine*, as certain characters of Colette’s are shown metaphorically to be entangled.

Returning to domestic space and its gendered aspects, even in *La Maison de Claudine*’s title, translated into English as *My Mother’s House*, Colette creates

boundaries that are deeply gendered in the way that the home comes to represent the site of an autonomous, feminine way of being in relation to the patriarchal order that reigns (feebly) in the same domain. In consideration of academic debate that surrounds the exact significance of the title, the house in *La Maison de Claudine* is considered here, essentially, as the house of a mother's daughter—the space that the daughter grows up in. More generally, it is the child's home. This notion is established in the French title, but is lost in the English translation. It is the site of parent-child relationships and, for Colette, it is the mother-daughter relationship in particular that allows her to develop a ludic approach to using books and habitating domestic space, while to the contrary, the father is depicted as a character that seeks to uphold semblance of order<sup>3</sup>. Perhaps most importantly, *la maison* is the site where the child's imagination is developing. In this sense, Colette is able to illuminate a space on the margin of symbolic order, which is articulated in a number of the memoir's short stories, such as “Le Curé sur le mur” and “La Noisette creuse” which will also be looked at in the next chapter.

To consider the poetics of this space, I find it useful to cite Bachelard's *La Poétique de l'espace* (1958) in which he writes of houses, which he likens to a human being's first cosmos: “House and space are not merely two juxtaposed elements of space. In the reign of the imagination, they awaken daydreams in each other, they are opposed” (43). This notion is provocative in the way that it allows the two words that comprise “domestic space” to be words that play against each other—a site where children and parents, or simply individuals, reside. It posits possibilities regarding ways that space can

---

<sup>3</sup> Sido actually criticizes her husband for not doing so in a letter to Colette: “What a pity he should have loved me so much! It was his love for me that destroyed, one after another, all those splendid abilities he had for literature and the sciences. He preferred to think only of me, to torment himself for me, and that was what I found inexcusable!” (*Paradise* 59).

be inhabited in contrast to boundaries for domestic space that connote shackles and chains, or in the case of a bourgeois woman at the turn of the century, a “gilded cage.” In chapter three, Germaine Dulac’s film *La Souriante Madame Beudet* (1922), will provide an interesting contrast to *La Maison de Claudine* through which conditions under which imagination (and a specifically feminine imagination) is frustrated is apparent.

Emily R. Grosholz also connects Bachelard’s work and Colette’s *La Maison de Claudine* in the last chapter of *The Legacy of Simone de Beauvoir*. In the chapter entitled “The House We Never Leave: Beauvoir and Colette,” she writes: “Indeed, it is the house that makes exploration of the world possible, both because of its protective walls and evening lamps, and because of its windows and garden, as does Sido herself, sending her children out and then anxiously watching for their return (190). Thus, the house is established as a fertile site for imagination—a site that enables coming and going. Sido is depicted mythically and can be read as synonymous with house. Julia Kristeva asks another pertinent question, in view of the fact that it is difficult to determine which details of Colette’s memoir have been embellished, namely, “was Sido a woman then? Or rather a world, a space itself [...]?” (13). This points again to the problematic of boundaries of domestic space, and by correlation, the problematic of escape.

To connect the home with book-objects and to consider them within the home, Bachelard offers one last image that I adopt in my reading of book-objects in Colette’s text, namely, that: “[...] we will have books, and they give our day-dreams countless dwelling places” (*Space*, 25), and that above all, “space calls for action, and before action, the imagination is at work. It mows and ploughs” (12). Again, Colette’s depiction of the gaze as prerequisite to the escape (if/however it occurs) is crucial. Here, I consider

the way a book can adopt the qualities of a house, a house for an individual's thoughts or daydreams. This brings me back to the central thesis regarding where and how a book-object serves as an essential object in rather than an escape from domestic space.

Colette's adult imagination is firmly rooted in the material world, and book-objects are depicted as important among others in space that is lived in.

Elaine Marks considers the "small world" that Colette records in the memoir symbolic of ideal childhood, and writes that "the mere mention of such words as 'my mother,' 'my province,' 'my house,' evokes a series of poetic images which carries the reader beyond *La Maison de Claudine* to his own real or imagined childhood" (204). By extension, looking specifically at book-objects in the memoir allows for a consideration of book objects in the author's readers' hands, as well as in her own, in both textual and physical space.

I now turn to the domestic space as presented by Colette in *La Maison de Claudine*, where beyond the "rim" of her own book's cover, she establishes the boundary of the domestic space/daily life, or what could be considered the private sphere.<sup>4</sup> The first words of the book are "La maison," and Colette instantly gives the impression of peaking over a garden wall, her text allowing the reader to imagine how "l'odeur du feuillage de la tomate se mêlait, en juillet, au parfum de l'abricot mûri sur espaliers" (5). However, the iron-gate that marks that boundary is described as twisted and overgrown with wisteria, giving the sense that the contents that the gate encloses exceed their limits. Colette's descriptions of those contents contribute to the boundary-breaking effect of the prose. The writing seems to blend interior and exterior perspectives.

---

<sup>4</sup> Michel de Certeau asserts: "[T]he book creates a threshold: there must be a rim, a border, so that there is an otherness in relationship to the quest of the subject" (*Absolute* 9).

Contemplating whether or not to use writing to invite the reader further into the space that is the site of her memories, she asks:

Le reste, vaut-il que je le peigne, à l'aide de pauvres mots? [...] si le secret est perdu qui ouvrait, —lumière, odeurs, harmonie d'arbres et d'oiseaux, murmure de voix humaines qu'a déjà suspendu la mort,— un monde dont j'ai cessé d'être digne ? (6)

By writing “à l'aide de pauvres mots,” Colette shows once again that her writing is secondary to the memory of, or to what was, the experience itself; which is to say, her writing appears to occupy a subordinated position in relation to other practices of reading and living. The intention seems not to be an exercise of mastery by way of summarizing events as they occurred in the past, but rather to revisit, suggest and engage a reader's imagination as her own is engaged with a domestic space that has since gone, but whose oneiric properties remain intact. Kristeva cites Colette as having also said, however, that “[b]etween the real and the imagined, there is always the place of the word, the magnificent word, larger than the object” (9)—pointing to a pleasure of engaging with that experience linguistically at the level of the signifier that honors the materiality of what is being described, emphasizing, again, a Bachelardian *material* rather than *formal* imagination. Her answer to the above query (*vaut-il que je le peigne*) is yes; she uses the rest of the book to describe it.

Just after the above quote, she presents the first book object. “Il arrivait qu'un livre,” she starts :

ouvert sur le dallage de la terrasse ou sur l'herbe, une corde à sauter serpentant dans une allée, ou un minuscule jardin bordé de cailloux, planté de têtes de fleurs, révélèrent autrefois, dans le temps où cette maison et ce jardin abritaient une famille, la présence des enfants et leurs âges différents. (6)

Here, the book object is part of a more complex scene that surrounds its unnamed pages. It is a site where the practice of reading is activated, but the book-object is also independent from its contents. The position of the book at the start of the description adds to my consideration of book-objects as privileged objects among others described in the scene. The fact that the open book's pages are undescribed, (and in later short stories, are depicted as reflecting light) contributes to my consideration of its mere presence important beyond its contents or the ways that characters engage with the book's pages—a reading informed heavily by Michel de Certeau's "Absolute Reading," and also noted by Southworth and Hirsch.

The variation in Colette's descriptions of the usage of books (in the way that they are actually read) grows more and more complex over the course of the short-stories. In "La Maison et le livre dans *La Maison de Claudine*," Josette Rico points out that "le livre, métaphore de la bibliothèque paternelle et objet d'intérêt pour Sido – constitue, dans la reconstitution littéraire de l'enfance bourguignonne, l'élément précieux que s'approprie de sa façon, chaque membre de la famille" (4). Again, prerequisite to the reading is the materiality of the object, which I point out mainly to relate Colette's treatment of books with the materiality of her poetic prose. With this in mind, Colette seems to privilege a way of actually reading a book that de Certeau would describe as:

[...] not, properly speaking, a 'reading' if one hears by that an interpretation, but rather a practice of reading: 'modus lectionis', 'modo di leggere,' one used to say, a way to read which shows how to circulate in a space made up of signs, and how to use such a space, similar to the proliferation, during the same period, as travel "guides" aiming at the instruction of the traveler, rather than at a description of the visited countries. (1)

This method of reading (not limited to de Certeau's conception of it, and in my view supported by both Grosholz and Cummins) is rooted in an experience with the physicality



of the book and a non-linear way of reading as opposed to one geared toward mastery. It does not need to be limited to literary space. It is in this way that I see her treatment of the book as ludic in nature in relation to social codes and codebooks in general. As Cummins points out, drawing from de Certeau's theories in *L'invention du quotidien* (1984), she favors a reading that does not subvert, but "poaches" in an ordered domain (textual) much like one can do in physical space (25-7)—again, not escaping via its contents, but grounding further into the materiality of the reader's world. This way of acting within domestic space depends heavily on conceptions of space that I explore in the next section.

In the short story "La Petite," Minet-Chéri, a name given to Colette when she was a child, contemplates wanting to be a sailor, even though the sea has ignored her until this point. "Le voyage? L'aventure?" Minet-Chéri thinks, and Colette continues, "...Pour une enfant qui franchit deux fois l'an les limites de son canton [...] ces mots-là sont sans force et sans vertu. Ils n'évoquent que *des pages imprimées, des images en couleur*" (my emphasis). Colette writes that she would say "'quand je ferai le tour du monde' comme elle dirait 'quand j'irait gauler des châtaignes...'" (21-2), which is suggestive of her satisfaction in daydreaming. These are her thoughts while sewing, and the story finishes with a similar image that textually interweaves the act of sewing by candlelight (a traditional activity in domestic space) and her contemplation of life as a sailor. This brings up again the relationship Bachelard asserts between space and the home as opposed terms, the faculty of the imagination being central in that relationship between what is inside and outside of the home. The image renders escape unlikely (in the sense of physical exodus), but the imagination is unfettered/ unthreatened by oppressive norms.

It is important that Colette depicts herself as a young girl rejecting an escape from the traditional hearth. She soon explains: “L’aventure? Le voyage? L’orgueil qui fait les émigrants? Les yeux attachés au dé brillant à la main qui passe et repasse devant la lampe, Minet-Chéri goûte la condition délicieuse d’être[...]” (23). Here, Odysseus’s journey is a daydream, and Penelope’s house a site for the dreamer; the processes that fashion an immigrant are not seductive for her. Colette articulates the activities of the dreamer, conscious of the play between house and space and unfettered by functionalist norms that she critiques.

Grosholz makes a similar observation, when she asks: “Why should we value voyage and war – Achilles’ and Odysseus’ Trojan war, for example, over home and hearth?” Colette, reflecting on Sido’s values and the dreams of her young self, seems to ask if it is possible to not do both. This concept is developed throughout *La Maison de Claudine*. I will consider in depth the final short story “La Noisette creuse” where she writes the character of her own daughter, Bel-Gazou, who comes to similar realizations. This leads to a further investigation of the term “space” that Colette’s prose complicates an escape from—space that Doreen Massey insists must be conceived as contemporaneous and heterogeneous in nature. If there is a dialectic between home and space, what space?

### Spaces

Secondary literature devoted to *La Maison de Claudine* often treats models of space as a central means to reading the memoir as a feminist text. My usage of the expression domestic space denotes the home, but (returning to Bachelard) also assumes a relation between the home and space; again, not only the “woman’s place” but spaces

where daily routines, some characterized as necessities and others are performed. Questions addressed in this section and applicable to reading *La Maison de Claudine*, the *Claudine* novels and glimpses of others of Colette's writings include: how was space conceived by the society in which Colette was writing? How do conceptions of space limit or shape one's experience in it, or the artist/writer's depiction of it? Also, I will consider Massey's question: what does it take to imagine *space* differently—as contemporaneously heterogeneous in nature rather than flat, conquerable, and straight forward in its representation? For as the reader of *La Maison de Claudine* moves from the first to the last short story, s/he finds that flat, non-dynamic conceptions of space are challenged by the way characters put forth perspectives that mark original experiences contrary to expectations within space, and in the way that the boundaries of domestic space shift altogether. Toward the end of the short stories, it is no longer Minet-Chéri's house, but the account of a new mother-daughter relationship, that between Colette and Bel-Gazou. Southworth draws a similar conclusion when she notes that “[t]he reality of a home disintegrates as the text moves forward. A metonymical use of space, space as such, is replaced by one that is more metaphorical, space representing something else—home is no longer somewhere with a roof and four walls, and a *home*, a man [...] but somewhere of her own” (262). The following pages invoke modern theory that I find pertinent to my reading of Colette's text, before transitioning to changed conceptions of space in the early twentieth century French paradigm. Finally, I look at the ways I see space working in some of Colette's early texts.

In *For Space*, Massey puts forth two major assumptions that I adopt in my reading of textual space. As a geographer, she alludes to physical space but also considers

literary space when she argues: “[...] that we recognize space as the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny,” and second: “...that we understand space as a sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality; as the sphere in which distinct trajectories co-exist; [...] without space, no multiplicity; without multiplicity, no space” (9). The notion of space’s inherent “contemporaneous heterogeneity” is crucial in considering how Colette depicts the experiences of her characters in the home. For Massey, not conceiving of it in this way has real ramifications. Space conceived as fixed and continuous is a reflection of the imagination of the conqueror. Ultimately, Massey’s work is a call to break old, illusory conceptions of space, space coded female. These assumptions draw attention to space that cannot be escaped via a single leap, but that can be experienced in multiple ways. My interest here is to address domestic space, or the home, specifically, but to keep multiple notions of space in mind, in consideration of Southworth’s observation that the boundaries of ‘home’ in *La Maison de Claudine* seem to disintegrate.

In *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880-1918*, Stephen Kern explores the ways in which technical and cultural advancements lead to entirely new ways of “experiencing time and space” between 1880 and World War I, the period of time in which Colette was establishing herself as a writer. He connects these shifts concerning Kantian conceptions of time and space with changes in the arts. He purports, “[t]echnological innovations including the telephone, wireless telegraph, x-ray, cinema, bicycle, automobile, and airplane established the material foundation for this reorientation” (1). Kern cites the

stream-of-consciousness novel, psychoanalysis and Cubism as movements where it is valuable to take these shifts into account (1).

As an example, he looks to Robert Delaunay's Cubist *Eiffel Tower* (1910-11) which he describes as "assembled to suggest the ubiquity of the tower in Parisian life. Houses from different parts of the city are clustered under and about its base like gifts under a Christmas tree. Their windows peer at it from all sides, even from inside it" (143). The "ubiquity" of the tower challenges notions of fixed space and depicts simultaneity. It is representative of what Kern calls the keyword for Delaunay's generation of artists: perspectivism.

I suggest that it is reminiscent of the first page of *Claudine à l'école*, which is to say the first page she ever wrote, when Willy asked (forced) her to write the novel that would be published under his own name, in which the fixed image of a place is broken up and reframed according to the character Claudine's alternative perspective. This is the first page of *Claudine à l'école*, in the format of Claudine's diary:

My name is Claudine, I live in Montigny; I was born there in 1884; I shall probably not die there. My *Manual of Departmental Geography* expresses itself thus: 'Montigny-en -Fresnois, a pretty little town of 1,950 inhabitants, built in tiers above the Thaize; its well-preserved Saracen tower is worthy of note...' To me, those descriptions are totally meaningless! To begin with, the Thaize doesn't exist. Of course I know it's supposed to run through the meadows under the level-crossing but you won't find enough water there in any season to give a sparrow a foot-bath. Montigny 'built in tiers'? No, that's not how I see it; to my mind, the houses just tumble haphazard from the top of the hill to the bottom of the valley. They rise one above the other, like a staircase, leading up to a big château that was built under Louis XV and is already more dilapidated than the squat, ivy-sheathed Saracen tower that crumbles away from the top a trifle more every day. Montigny is a village, not a town: its streets, thank heaven, are not paved; the showers roll down them in little torrents that dry up in a couple of hours; it is a village, not even a very pretty village, but, all the same, I adore it. (11)

To start, the passage is written so that Claudine breaks her confinement to the space she is about to describe by saying “I shall probably not die there.” Thus, she announces a certain degree of autonomy in relation to the place in which she lives. Second, she refutes the written description of that place – that which is recorded in the geography text that she consults. The narrative shows how Claudine unpins one translation of the space and provides her own. For example, she nearly erases what are written to be the town’s most important features and privileges, by use of simile, the tumbling houses that are forefront in her vision. Moreover, the houses both “tumble” and “rise.” The passage challenges fixed, linear conceptions of physical and literary space, similar to Delaunay’s depiction of pictorial space. Of perhaps unrelated interest is that rather than privileging the tower as Delaunay does, it is crumbling in Colette’s passage – an alternative critique of the notion of it as a transcendental signifier, rather than revealing it as ubiquitous.

As a second example for changes in art, and specifically in the development of Cubism, Kern cites a letter Paul Cézanne to his son, which he wrote in regard to a particular viewpoint from a river’s edge: “[...] the same subject seen from a different angle gives a subject for study of the highest interest and so varied that I think I could be occupied for months without changing my place, simply bending more to the right or left” (142). Again in *Claudine à l’école*, Colette depicts a scene where Claudine and her classmates are forced to produce a still-life sketch of a decanter under the direction of their loathed Headmistress. Problems with the paper itself (one student has a rip in her paper, and another runs out of charcoal) are central to this scene:

Drawing lesson, under the direction of Mademoiselle Aimée Lanthenay. ‘Reproduction in line of an everyday object.’ This time it was a cut-glass decanter, placed on Mademoiselle’s desk, that we had to draw. These drawing lessons were invariably gay, since they furnished a thousand pretexts for getting

up: one discovered ‘impossibilities’; one made blots of Indian ink wherever they were least desirable. Promptly, the usual storm of complaints broke out. I opened the attack: ‘Mademoiselle Aimée, I *can’t* draw the decanter from where I am – the stove pipe hides it! (62)

In this passage, Colette further illustrates playfulness in resistance to order and representation. “Lower your head forward. You can see it then, I think” is what Mademoiselle Aimée replies. Everyone is moving around the object, establishing perspective in order to reproduce the “everyday object.” One of the schoolgirls, Anaïs, says: “I *can’t* see the model *at all* because Claudine’s head gets in the way!” Then, “Mademoiselle, I haven’t any more charcoal. And the sheet of paper you’ve given me has got a tear in the middle and so I *can’t* draw the decanter” (62). Here, representation is a disaster. There is a shortage of materials and unwillingness amongst subjects to cooperate. The schoolgirls, out of defiance more than any real disability, are not able to record the image. The scene comes to an end when the headmistress distributes new pieces of paper and threatens to have them draw a full dinner-service if they do not oblige. The gaiety of the upcoming evening is threatened by the dark idea of having to draw a single-perspective representation of an entire dinner set. A terrified silence ensues until six minutes later, when as Claudine writes in her diary, “[...] a faint buzzing began again; someone dropped a sabot; Marie Belhomme coughed; I got up to go and measure the height and breadth of the decanter with outstretched arm. The lanky Anaïs did the same [...]” (62). Upon consideration, the girls oblige. They champion the possibility of further play at a later time and sacrifice it to order in the moment.

These two passages are exemplary of how space works in Colette’s writing, but are not explored here to argue that Colette purposefully took formal literary elements into account or was part of these avant-garde circles. Importantly, they are the first and sixty-

second pages that she wrote at the beginning of her career, under the conditions of an unhappy marriage—arguably, the pages came naturally to her. After the first novel’s success, Willy forced Colette to write the subsequent novels according to a schedule that he imposed. At its start, *Claudine à l’école* was just an idea, something that her husband told her to do. They were not touched for three years afterward when he decided the pages were quite good and ran to the publisher. Colette recounts this story in a later preface to the collection of Claudine novels. However, already, these notions of free/creative space in relation to that which is structured are at work. These themes of representation in space, or ways of experiencing spaces in contrast to space that is subject to order are also important in *La Maison de Claudine*, published twenty-two years after *Claudine à l’école*.

The function of space in these texts is relevant to a consideration of the experience of subjects (women) confined to the home. Southworth supposes that the female imagination prefers “a continual questioning rather than a resolution of the problem of space” that early and late examples of Colette’s texts are a reflection of (254).<sup>5</sup>

#### Relationships with Order Within Space:

##### The Father Figure and Writing

The short stories found in *La Maison de Claudine* privilege the private sphere. That is, Colette details daily life in a way that is in line with Henri Lefebvre’s thought when he says, “everyday life is compared to fertile soil. A landscape without flowers or magnificent woods may be depressing for the passer-by; but flowers or magnificent wood

---

<sup>5</sup> Southworth cites Virginia Woolf of employing the metaphor “dance” to Colette’s writing, which she believes “fittingly anticipates the unraveling of a closed system that I argue is characteristic of Colette’s writing” (254).



should not make us forget the earth beneath, which has a secret life and a richness of its own.” This passage reflects what he calls a cliché, namely, that there is a tendency to: “...compar[e] creative moments to the mountain tops and everyday time to the plain, or to the marshes” (87). As I have already argued, Colette’s writing tends to reverse this trend, looking at the elements of daily life that inform her prose. Elaine Marks asserts that three books recorded the Second World War’s impact on Colette, including *De ma Fenêtre* (1942), *L’Etoile Vesper* (1946), *Le Fanal bleu* (1949), but also:

None of Colette’s fiction published during [the Second World War] period, *Julie de Carneilhan* (1941), *Le Képi* (1943), *Gigi* (1944), contains even a faint echo of war and occupation. Colette was continuing to build her own particular world, whose roots remained in the early years of the century. (52)

It is a world that, for better or for worse, is largely retracted from such global episodes and the associated devastations.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau makes a connection between logocentrism and the physical practice of writing that is of interest here. He associates that practice with the teleological drive, and what he calls a ‘scriptural economy’: “the triumphal *conquista* of the economy that has, since the beginning of the “modern age” (i.e. since the seventeenth or eighteenth century), given itself the name of writing” (*Practice* 131). This sweeping image of writing is useful in conceptualizing the canon at the early- to mid-twentieth century, and the position of Colette’s text within it. The pages that Colette added to the canon reflected her sexual difference, but as Marks points out, for Colette, “[w]riting was a means of making money, and she was often in need of money, and writing had become a habit. [...]A large part of Colette’s work, even after she left Monsieur Willy, was conditioned by demands” (56). Writing maintains the qualities of what she considered masculine or driven by logos, her feelings toward the

practice, as noted by interested scholars, seem contradictory at times. Compare the following passage from *La Vagabonde* (1910):

To write, to be able to write, what does it mean? It means spending long hours dreaming before a white page, scribbling unconsciously, letting your pen play around a blot of ink and nibble at a half-formed word, scratching it, making it bristle with darts, and adorning it with antennae and paws until it loses all resemblance to a legible word and turns into a fantastic insect or a fluttering creature half butterfly, half fairy. (*Paradise* 140)

with: “I don’t like to write. Not only do I not like to write, but I especially like to not write” (qtd. in Kristeva 13). At first, writing is depicted as an activity that allows her to engage imaginatively with the material world, whereas secondly, it is the activity that deprives her of or keeps her away from it. Moreover, there is the fact that she constantly privileges practices of reading over those of writing. For example, in the following passage, she considers her schooldays:

I believe, yes, I believe that I would be content. In those combined scents I believe I would capture the very breath of that wizard’s book of spells which unveils the past, that key to childhood, and I would have restored to me my sixth year, when I knew how to read but refused to learn to write. / No, I would not write, I did not want to write. When one can read, can penetrate the enchanted realm of books, why write? (77)

Here, Colette privileges the act of reading. The act of writing, her profession, is attached to memory of her father and the order that he represented in her childhood domestic space.

Theoretically, I adopt de Certeau’s ideas in my consideration of writing materials as they appear in Colette’s texts. For de Certeau, writing is a practice associated with a teleological drive, and to write, there are three essential elements. To summarize, there is first a blank page toward which a writer approaches in order to start his/her practice; second, a series of strokes that mark the page and impose an order; and third, there is an

intention behind what is written that distinguishes it from the world outside the boundary of its pages (*Practice* 134). De Certeau likens this process to the establishment of law, as any law is written or executed in a particular domain.<sup>6</sup> In this way, writing materials that appear in Colette's texts can oftentimes be read as symbolic of patriarchal order. The following passage is useful to a consideration of writing materials as they appear in later texts:

My father, a born writer, left few pages behind him. At the actual moment of writing, he dissipated his desire in material arrangements, setting out all the objects a writer needs and a number of superfluous ones as well. Because of him, I am not proof against this mania myself. As a result of having admired and coveted the perfect equipment of a writer's worktable, I am still exacting about the tools on my desk. Since adolescence does nothing by halves, I stole from my father's worktable, first a little mahogany set square that smelled like a cigar box, then a white metal ruler. Not to mention the scolding, I received full in my face the glare of a small, blazing gray eye, the eye of a rival, so fierce that I did not risk it a third time. I confined myself to prowling, hungrily, with my mind full of evil thoughts, around all these treasures of stationery. A pad of virgin blotting paper; an ebony ruler; one, two, four, six pencils, sharpened with a penknife and all of different colors; pens with medium nibs thicker than a blackbird's quill [...].  
(48)

The paper is virgin and the utensils are measured and used for measuring. There is competition via the gaze of her father. There is a materiality of the objects through which thought performs order, characteristic of de Certeau's analysis. Colette's description continues:

[...] from the age of ten I had never stopped coveting those material goods, invented for the glory and convenience of a mental power, which come under the general heading of 'desk furniture' . . . sitting on the footstool, I would gaze at the three mahogany shelves in front of me, on which were displayed the objects of

---

<sup>6</sup> De Certeau expands, "[b]ut in times of crisis, paper is no longer enough for the law, and it writes itself again on the bodies themselves" (140). Considering that which escapes law, Blanchot supplies another insight that is useful here: "Hence the everyday must be thought as the suspect (and the oblique) that always escapes the clear decision of the law, even when the law seeks, by suspicion to track down every indeterminate manner of being: everyday indifference" (Blanchot 13).

my worship, ranging from cream-laid paper to a little cup of the golden powder.  
(48)

These passages tie in well with de Certeau's description of writing as a practice, and is primarily about imposing order on space that is inherently unordered.<sup>7</sup> Again, writing practices and articulations of order are crucial in my reading of *La Maison de Claudine*.

---

<sup>7</sup> However, de Certeau also suggests two interesting ways to look at text: "writing's effort to master the 'voice' that it cannot be but without which it nevertheless cannot exist" and secondly, by observing how "the illegible returns of voices [cut] across statements and [move] like strangers through the house of the imagination" (159). The second implies alterity in relation to the scriptural economy as he depicts it, and is highlighted here to suggest that reasons for writing are not exhausted by what is the trace of law in de Certeau's analyses.

## CHAPTER TWO

### USAGE OF BOOKS IN *LA MAISON DE CLAUDINE*

This chapter examines selected scenes in *La Maison de Claudine* that articulate the argument developed in chapter one. Namely, that Colette's prose, infused with imagery that reflects a Bachelardian material imagination, depicts privileged ways of reading in which the reading subject engages with books and other objects creatively within his/her domestic space. Southworth categorizes the work as "composed of fragments (thirty-five in all), like beads in a necklace, shiny items in the magpie's nest, or objects found in a pocket" (255). Treating the short-stories in *La Maison de Claudine* as found objects is a starting point for considering how Colette treats books in domestic space. As opposed to other objects (which, arguably, can also be read), books more often provoke a question from the subjects that view them: what might the books say? If this is an appropriate assumption to make, it serves as a reason for which the book-object becomes an appropriate "house" for daydreams. Other objects, (thimbles, shells and hollow nuts, for example) are not immediately subject to this consideration—although Colette, via her poetics, shows that they can be.

#### Gendered Reading Practices

The father's relationship with the written word within the household and that which threatens its law—namely, Sido and the children—is apparent in *La Maison de Claudine*'s third short story, "Amour." The narrative depicts petty jealousy between long time lovers who are still in love, Colette's parents, but also focuses on spatial patterns associated with books and the printed page within the home. Before addressing these relations, the narrative opens with an entirely different focus on Sido's meditation on the

evening meal which yields to Minet-Chéri's thoughts on aesthetics at the local butcher's. In the monologue that opens the short-story, Sido is painted as the shining star of practicality—she knows that her family will not provide respectable opinions on the matter of dinner. Tomatoes and pepper and bowls of chocolate are among some of the imagined suggestions relayed by 'Colette,' from Sido's husband and youngest son, respectively. Sido decides to go to the butcher's, and Minet-Chéri, not to go with her. This is a site she visits frequently with her mother, but it is presented here simply as Minet-Chéri's daydream through Colette's voice as narrator:

Il y a des jours où la boucherie de Léonore, ses couteaux, sa hachette, ses poumons de bœuf gonflés que le courant d'air irise et balance, roses comme la pulpe du bégonia, me plaisent à l'égal d'une confiserie. Léonore y tranche pour moi un ruban de lard salé qu'elle me tend, transparent, du bout de ses doigts. [...] Le son affreux de la peau qu'on arrache à la chair fraîche, la rondeur des rognons, fruits bruns dans leur capitonnage immaculé de « panne » rosée, m'émeuvent d'une répugnance compliquée, que je recherche et que je dissimule. (15)

The description starts with shining, sharp objects that give way to organic images (ses poumons) that take on figurative qualities; all of this makes up the concrete imagery of the reverie, which emphasizes objects that struck the imagination of the child and are important in her memory. And then, there is an abrupt shift to the scene in which the father's relationship with text and order is revealed. In this scene and frequently thereafter (and in instances not limited to this memoir), Colette's father is depicted as holding or seated behind a printed text, *Le Temps*. "Mon père n'insiste pas," is what Colette writes of his response to Minet-Chéri's decision to not join her mother to the butcher's, but he "se dresse agilement sur sa jambe unique, empoigne sa béquille et sa canne et monte à la bibliothèque. Avant de monter, il plie méticuleusement le journal *Le Temps*" (16). This passage emphasizes the father's association with the library and

newspapers within domestic space. Here, I suggest that the newspaper operates as a barrier between him and life in the private sphere, to which he gives only secondary attention. Colette's detailed description of his position with or behind the paper paints it as a cage of sorts, again, complicating the notion of where and by what one is trapped. This barrier, the newspaper, represents contact with public affairs but blocks his gaze from the domestic space that she associates with Sido. Maurice Blanchot's assertion that newspapers, "...keep to the anecdotal and hold us with stories—and thus have replaced the 'nothing happens' of the everyday with the emptiness of the news item" illustrates the father's preference for the world of recordable events over those that slip unnoticed on the other side of *Le Temps* (18).

Continuing the scene, 'Colette' depicts how the father normally scans the room for other printed material to take with him before going to the library. However, the children have learned to remove those materials from his view before this happens:

- Tu n'as pas vu le *Mercur*e de France ?
- Non, papa.
- Ni la *Revue Bleue*?
- Non, papa. (16)

The fact that the children steal written works displeases him. Employing language that signifies possession, 'Colette' tells how he is upset that "sa maison est devenue *cette* maison, où règne *ce* désordre, où *ces enfants* 'de basse extraction' professent le mépris du papier imprimé, encouragés d'ailleurs par *cette* femme...." Just after this passage, he asks the children, "...Au fait, où est *cette* femme?" (16). From here, father and children await Sido's return. The story, though it primarily details subtleties of the relationship Colette admired between her aging parents, serves as a critique of the logocentric desire for order. The children make a game of it.

More provocatively, Colette couples this critique with a more compassionate portrait of the man that shows appreciation for his attempt to master, or impose order in, domestic space. The following scene shows this change in tone in which the father's attempt to uphold order, reflected in his bodily maneuvers, is incorporated into her prose and the flow of daily life:

Il tire sa montre, la remonte comme s'il allait se coucher, agrippe, faute de mieux, l'*Office de Publicité* d'avant-hier, et monte à la bibliothèque. Sa main droite étreint fortement le barreau d'une béquille qui était l'aisselle droite de mon père. L'autre main se sert seulement d'une canne. J'écoute s'éloigner, ferme, égal, ce rythme de deux batons et d'un seul pied qui a bercé toute ma jeunesse. Mais voilà qu'un malaise neuf me trouble aujourd'hui, parce que je viens de remarquer, soudain, les veines saillantes et les rides sur les mains si blanches de mon père, et combien cette frange de cheveux drus, sur sa nuque, a perdu sa couleur depuis peu... C'est donc possible qu'il ait bientôt soixante ans?... (16-7)

The father's firm and steady rhythms are part of this cradle-like reflection of 'Colette's' which brings her great comfort. His rhythms manifest in the rhythm of her sentence, as those rhythms were a part of her childhood, and therefore, the structures of her memory. Ultimately, the scene where the father seeks to impose or maintain order via an interaction with printed materials appears between two others that address eating and aging, and the power that he associates with the printed word is further weakened. Here, 'Colette' starts to play with the ironic prospect of separation or escape from the domestic sphere. But ultimately, Colette criticizes her father's usage of texts.

Colette describes the mother's engagement with written works entirely differently. In "Ma Mère et les livres," the reader is presented with a purely aesthetic description of books followed by an articulation of Colette's own interaction with them in her youth. She remembers how all aspects of the books were important, "[I]eur présence, leur odeur, les lettres de leurs titres et le grain de leur cuir..." and how, "avant de savoir



lire, je me logeais en boule entre deux tomes du Larousse comme un chien dans sa niche” (32). Here, Minet-Chéri is recognizing objects and carving out spaces within domestic space— she carves a space between the books that figuratively house her. Her memory is of the colored rows of “Balzac noir” and “Shakespeare olive” (31). These and her other images she supplies are only suggestive of the books’ effects. Again, the physicality of the book-object is important, for reasons that include its colors, scents and textures. It is possible that Minet-Chéri imagines: what might they say? And this in opposition to the “papier imprimé” that is admired for its law-like authority in “Amour.”

Southworth makes a similar observation, but uses it to a different end—her emphasis is on the books that “provide the young narrator with a landscape (note the colors—greens, browns, blacks) within which she seeks her own form of expression.” She insists on Colette’s “movement around the periphery of the book, of tradition, of the space of the library” and uses the scene to show how Colette refuses the French tradition and seeks to build, rather, “a new vocabulary, a new combination” (256). While this reading of these acts is critically important to mine as well (as the books generate creativity), I aim to emphasize, also, that “avant de savoir lire” does not necessarily imply before knowing the function of a book, or before recognizing that the books represent another world of signs beyond the material world, whose signs she could already read and respond to. This is to say, the scene does not only represent alterity and resistance to preexistent norms, but also a sense of the old—a book-object that she had already seen used in different ways by her mother and father, and in different locations within domestic space, though normally housed in the library. Thus, there is in this scene both the possibility for newness and the recognition of something old in association with

books. The short story highlights gendered approaches to reading, but ultimately, the book stands alone as a material object in Colette's material world—one that provokes her to wonder what it indicates. Of the book object, Michel de Certeau writes: "It creates division, separateness, the elementary structure and minimal condition so that a dialogical practice might begin: without difference, there cannot be a relation" (9). The scene shows an early recognition of this relation.

The narrative continues, illustrating that Minet-Chéri's relationship with books is a process, and that it is Sido who demonstrates what are considered to be positive ways to read. What Minet-Chéri extracts from the books mentioned in the above passages are disjointed images, "de dahlias, de perroquets, de méduses à chevelures roses et d'ornithorynques," that she had associated with Alcide d'Orbigny, among other lists of images (31). 'Colette' insists that she used to read the same books multiple times, and describes Sido's reading habits as having been repetitious as well—referring to the quantity of pages she read, which were often the same ones. Sido reads the same books, and frequently one author: "Les dix-huit volumes de Saint-Simon se relayaient au chevet de ma mère, la nuit; elle y trouvait des plaisirs renaissants [...]" (33). This way of reading points to a practice contrary to one geared toward mastery through the acquisition of knowledge, and suggests the possibility of new experiences with familiar texts. Bachelard authored another quote that is crucial to my reading of book-objects as they appear in domestic space in Colette's memoir; namely, that "linear reading deprives us of countless daydreams," and additionally, "[p]eople who are hurried by the affairs of men will not enter there" (*Space*, 162). The lack of linearity in both Minet-Chéri's and Sido's readings, as Colette portrays it in her prose, upholds this very idea. 'Colette' certainly

aligns this manner of interacting with books with the figure of her mother. To conclude these thoughts, Colette links reading habits and their spatial manifestations—thereby questioning conceptions of what is possible in domestic space. This way of reading resists conceptions of domestic space as a site that limits its occupant. It is an active engagement with book-objects that does not demote the space that is lived in.

In the next passages of “Ma Mère et les livres,” Sido asks Minet-Chéri to consider thoughtfully what she reads. The passages are important because of the way they link reading books with reading the world. When she asks Minet-Chéri if she has been reading a specific ghost story, she says:

Comme c’est joli, n’est-ce pas? Y a-t-il quelque chose de plus joli que cette page où le fantôme se promène à minuit, sous la lune, dans le cimetière? [...] Ce doit être ravissant, un fantôme. Je voudrais bien en voir un, je t’appellerais. Malheureusement, ils n’existent pas. (34)

Sido takes an image of what is normally terrifying to a child and rejects it as a fanciful use of the imagination that lacks ties to the concrete, material world that she comprehends via experience.

In the following paragraphs, ‘Colette’ says that Sido’s influence helped her to become a critic when she was older, especially when reading canonical works. The scene is addressed at length by Cummins as one that portrays ways a reader—and specifically a female reader—asserts autonomy in relation to what is written, which is largely the writings of the male authored canon. In “A Creature Has Passed This Way: Devices of Generic Self-Situation in Colette’s *La Maison de Claudine*,” Anne Freadman writes on this trial that concerns encountering a text that challenges one’s perception of the world, and focuses on Sido as the figure who serves as a role-model for a wise approach to written works—one that children must learn. She asserts: “[I]t is not only the crude

opposition of fiction and reality that is needed, but a criteria known as the rules of the *vraisemblable*, which, in Colette's account, give fiction its place in and not outside of, ordinary life" (35). Cummins's and Freadman's readings of this scene are particularly important in suggesting Sido's role as a model reader who brings fiction to trial in the concrete world of her daily life. Cummins asserts: "It is curiosity (again, a form of pleasure) that motivates her to contemplate [books], not a desire to judge or to order reality" (45). Sido's usage of the book is one that does not destroy the reader or inhibit his/her ability to engage with concrete aspects of the world. It contrasts markedly with a different usage – Juliette's and Voussard's – that is addressed later.

Following the above passage, Colette recalls Sido having said, in regard to a different book: "Celui-ci? Celui-ci n'est pas un mauvais livre, Minet-Chéri" and "Oui, je sais bien, il y a cette scène, ce chapitre... Mais c'est du roman. Ils sont à court d'inventions, tu comprends, les écrivains" (34). Finally, she says "Que veux-tu! débrouille-toi là-dedans, Minet-Chéri. Tu es assez intelligente pour garder pour toi ce que tu comprendras trop... et peut-être n'y a-t-il pas de mauvais livres..." Here, Sido insists that Minet-Chéri remain quiet, thereby recommending that she not subvert the suggested falsity that the texts represent. The shared but unspoken knowledge is a further insistence upon the texts weakness, while at the same time, does not insist on imposing new order. It becomes their shared knowledge, and ultimately, the teeming garden and the voice of the mother do speak via Colette's voice as narrator in the text. Sido does not seek to unravel the social fabric of which she is a part—rather, she affirms it, as seen in the following passage that precedes the one above, where 'Colette' recollects: "Imitais-je encore en cela ma mère, qu'une candeur particulière inclinait à nier le mal, cependant que

sa curiosité le cherchait et le contemplait, pêle-mêle avec le bien, d'un œil émerveillé ? (34). Here, it becomes a story of living in, and accepting, the garden that becomes synonymous with domestic space. However, this is soon challenged.

Returning to the location of book-objects in domestic space, Colette continues : “Il y avait pourtant [des livres] que mon père enfermait dans son secrétaire en bois de thuya. Mais il enfermait surtout le nom de l’auteur.” Here, the child’s inquisitive mind is immediately hostile to this censorship, and wants to comprehend the contents of this forbidden object. The author that is locked away is Zola, and it is Colette’s father who decides it is banned for children. Sido hesitatingly agrees, and so it is both parents who decide that Minet-Chéri’s imagination is better off without Zola’s books. Minet-Chéri, who is now fourteen years old, is upset by having certain books made inaccessible to her, in a space where normally, “les portes battaient, où les chats entraient la nuit” and where she is generally encouraged to read. I read this latter assertion as a crucial point in the narrative, as it indicates not only the gendered aspects of the upcoming encounter with Zola’s book, but the inevitability of such an encounter where a reader is free to take any book he/she likes. It is a freedom prerequisite to the transition from naïve to astute reader that I read as a similar transition in “Les Vrilles de la vigne,” which I return to below.

Compelled to know, Colette recollects her deviant action in response: “[j]e m’en allai au jardin, avec mon premier livre dérobé,” which can function figuratively as her forbidden fruit, and inside, she discovers Zola’s depiction of childbirth (35). Minet-Chéri goes cold and describes how she felt “crédule, effarée, menacée dans mon destin de petite femelle...” upon reading the text. It is Zola’s portrayal of the birth process that terrifies her, and so she is terrified of one of the natural functions of her own sex and the very

thing that brought her into the world. The text shows how Minet-Chéri's thoughts quickly jump from the text to the fertile elements of domestic space she is familiar with :

“Amours des bêtes paisantes, chats coiffant les chattes comme des fauves leur proie, précision paysanne, presque austère, des fermières parlant de leur taure vierge ou de leur fille en mal d'enfant [...]” (36). Here, she is alone in the garden and the male-authored text warps her perception of her surroundings. She tries to rid herself of the fear derived from her reading, and so calls on “la voix conjuratrice” of her mother—in what Freadman also observes as a “crucial moment” in which she fails in “her capacity for detachment in literary judgements” (36).

Flipping perspectives, Sido provides a wildly different angle on childbirth: the loving tale of her own pregnancy with Minet-Chéri, and in this way, provides her daughter with an alternative reading of the space in which they live. Minet-Chéri still struggles between the two interpretations, and upon considering the words of Zola once more, “la chair écartelée, l'excrément, le sang souillé...” she faints (36). The story ends with a final conversation with Sido when Minet-Chéri returns to consciousness. Sido exclaims:

‘[...] c'est beaucoup plus beau dans la réalité. La peine, qu'on y prend s'oublie si vite, tu verras !... La preuve que toutes les femmes l'oublient, c'est qu'il n'y a jamais que les hommes—est-ce que ça le regardait, voyons, ce Zola ? – qui en font des histoires.’ (37)

Importantly, these last lines of the short story show an important evolution in Minet-Chéri's relationship with books, as they contrast markedly to the beginning of the short story, at which point books were delightful, physical objects: “A mi-hauteur, Musset, Voltaire, et les Quatre Evangiles brillèrent sous la basane feuille-morte. Littré, Larousse, et Becquerel bombaient des dos de tortues noires” (31). She encounters a challenge

(crude aspects of domestic space) through which she is forced to consider her environment more deeply. I liken this process to “Les Vrilles de la vigne” in which ‘Colette’ recounts one of her later transitions through the story of the nightingale: “I no longer enjoy a happy sleep, but I no longer fear the tendrils of the vine...” (*Paradise* 137). The scene shows book-objects as a site for this transition, and is a crucial vignette that indicates an experience that perhaps informs Colette’s affirmation of the garden in its material complexity—established by way of the oral conversation between mother and daughter outside of the text itself.

Finally, in “Ma mère et le curé,” Colette tells of her mother’s behavior in church where the book-object again plays a central role in the narrative. Her usage of books is subversive, and she questions what they signify as well as their effects, as illustrated in the following passage:

Qu’est-ce que Dieu? qu’est-ce que ceci? qu’est-ce que cela? Ces points d’interrogation, cette manie de l’enquête et de l’inquisition, [...] Et ces commandements, je vous demande un peu! Qui a traduit les commandements en un pareil charabia? Ah, je n’aime pas voire ce livre dans les mains d’un enfant, il est rempli de choses si audacieuses et si compliquées... (103)

The short story begins, “Ma mère, mécréante [...],” thereby establishing Sido’s position regarding ecclesiastical norms at the beginning. Sido brings her dog to church, and appreciates the priest largely for his plants that she covets. She attends church only to preserve her ability to function within her community. But at church, a site of social interaction and Foucault-like panoptic surveillance of each community member’s moral goodness, Minet-Chéri observes her mother in the following scene:

Pendant la messe, elle lisait dans un livre de cuir noir, frappé d’une croix sur les deux plats ; elle s’y absorbait même avec une piété qui semblait étrange aux amis de ma très chère mécréante ; ils ne pouvaient pas devenir que le livre à figure de paroissien enfermait, en texte serré, le théâtre de Corneille... (106)

Sido's usage of the book can be defiant (as Minet-Chéri's can be), yet we gather that the book-object is important to her in the wider scene of her everyday life; it is one of the many elements present in it. Whether it is the copies of Saint-Simon, Corneille at church, or the Bible (however scrutinizingly she interacted with it) book-objects are frequently in her presence. Ultimately, a book holds a harmonious position in her domestic space/daily life. As de Certeau argues, it marks otherness: "it supports it, marks it, but without filling it." He continues, "there is otherness, there is meaning. But what other? What meaning? To that there is no answer" ("Absolute" 10). Sido appreciates books, but is skeptical of their meaning. Colette uses short-stories such as "Amour," "Ma Mère et les livres" and "Ma mère et le curé" to critique considerations of text as "law" and thus, critiques the "scriptural economy" detailed by de Certeau. Concurrently, in all three stories considered here, Colette establishes the possibility of imaginative play with book-objects (and their contents) in domestic space.

### Non-Engagement

Other scenes relate reading as an escape from the reader's daily life. Colette does not skirt judgment of this mode of reading—she portrays it darkly. Ultimately, she equates this reading with absence from life, or, death. According to Freadman, the scenes of the reader (in her reading of Juliette) are *unheimlich*—evoking the Freudian categorization.

In "Ma soeur avec les longs cheveux," the central character is Colette's half-sister Juliette who committed suicide in 1911, eleven years prior to the publication of *La Maison de Claudine*. In the narrative, she is cast behind the dark veil of her hair, and just as prominent in her image is her relationship with and position behind books. Cummins reads this as a story where hair and reading practices both symbolize her "[submission] to



a discourse of femininity, or the symbol of one, generated by patriarchal order” (32). Here, the reading is viewed as passive—her submission to the text allows it to conquer her complete being. But more than this, I consider the possibility that the reading is an active pursuit of the fictional universe unconnected to the reader’s world—a practice that Colette strongly critiques. In this way, it fulfills what de Certeau describes as “an exercise of absence,” through which “[b]y going beyond the text, it hastens toward the nothing which it represents”—a reading that is seen a second time in “Ybenez est mort” (“Absolute” 13).

‘Colette’ describes how as a girl, she would visit her long-haired sister, Juliette, where “[à] midi, elle lisait déjà, le grand déjeuner finissant à onze heures. Le matin, couchée, elle lisait encore.” Here, Juliette is described as so thoroughly absorbed in her reading that she does not notice the entrance of Minet-Chéri, who remarks of her sister, “ses yeux noirs mongols, distraits, voilés de roman tendre ou de sanglante aventure” as well as “une bougie consummée témoignait de sa longue veille” (66). The description continues later in the short story—she is “toujours pâle, absorbée” a girl who “lisait d’un air dur” (68). Once again, Colette’s critique is embedded in the concrete portrait of the reader’s body—the ill-effects of the reading have bodily manifestations. The images invoke rigidity and death. Change in skin-color and an empty gaze are physical traces of this reading. Sido is negatively affected by Juliette’s reading: “Et, comme saisie de honte, elle cacha son visage dans ses deux mains” (71). This is a rare instance in the memoir in which Sido is depicted as experiencing shame.

Then, in “Ybenez est mort,” ‘Colette’ considers a man in the community who arrived as a foreigner and remained one until the day he died by never interacting with

the community's members. This, despite the many years he was part of the community. She starts the reflection: "J'ai oublié son nom. Pourquoi sa triste figure émerge-t-elle encore, quelquefois, des songes qui me ramènent, la nuit, au temps et au pays où je fus une enfant ? Sa triste figure erre-t-elle au lieu où sont les morts sans amis, après qu'il eut erré, sans amis, parmi les vivants ?" (99). She wonders why the memory of him, every detail of his being, is singled so perfectly in her memory. Again, there is a portrait of the reader, which starts: "mais nous ne regardions jamais Voussard, penché sur un journal plié en huit." Voussard is depicted as an overtly thin man who neglects his eating habits. Holding his newspaper that contains the *feuilleton* that entrances him, he is in effect, caged in<sup>8</sup>—he is unable to see beyond it. "Voussard semblait ignorer notre présence et nous n'avions guère l'idée qu'il fût vivant" the narrator continues (101). The reader is lifeless, caught up in an imagination that has no roots in the material world of the subject— "Voussard, comme inanimé, lisait" (101). In the final page of the short story, we learn that "Ybenez est mort" – a character from the *feuilleton* that he identifies with, was killed by 'traitors' in a fictitious realm:

Voussard arriva en retard, au coup de cloche, de l'école. Il marchait vite et gauchement, comme quelqu'un qui se hâte dans l'obscurité. Un journal ouvert qu'il tenait à la main balayait la rue. Il posa une main sur l'épaule du petit Ménétreau, se pencha et lui dit d'une voix profonde et précipitée :  
—Ybenez est mort. Ils l'ont assassiné. (102)

His fingers are trembling as he delivers the news. The final paragraph offers a detailed image of the man whose reading habits Colette's prose critiques:

Puis, il ôta son chapeau pour s'essuyer le front et demeura un moment immobile, laissant errer sur la vallée ses yeux que nous ne connaissions pas, les yeux jaunes d'un conquérant d'îles, les yeux cruels et sans bornes d'un pirate aux aguets sous

---

<sup>8</sup> Michèle Hirsch's article (listed under Works Cited) also includes interesting points on certain readings in *La Maison de Claudine* serving as screens between readers and their worlds, and other readings that do not serve this function.

son pavillon noir, les yeux désespérés du loyal compagnon d'Ybanez, assassiné lâchement par les soldats du Roy. (102)

Colette reserves this critique for those readers who do not engage with the materiality of their world. Her critique is embedded in her physical description of the man. He is a conqueror of fictitious lands, lost to the community in which he lives. The title “Ybanez est mort” associates this reading with death and furthermore, equates reading as *escape* from one’s material world with death. Voussard is hardly separate from Ybanez in this short story.

### Privileged Ways of Reading

What usage of the book is privileged by Colette in *La Maison de Claudine*, perhaps less by intention than as a result of her upbringing? Arguably, it is a non-linear reading which corresponds to heterogeneous readings of space(s)—where reading of that space is captured in concrete images (as seen via Colette’s poetics) that open dreamlike possibilities in regard to the objects themselves. I adopt again, the idea that “linear reading deprives us of countless daydreams” (Bachelard, *Space* 162). A number of short stories in *La Maison de Claudine* depict readers (of objects/books) engaging creatively with their environments at the level the signifier, privileging a usage of signifiers that plays on the margin of symbolic order. As de Certeau suggests of the book-object, “it carves, it marks, it makes present,[...] a place where one is entitled to expect a flow of meaning” (“Absolute” 6)—but meaning which again is not fixed, or necessarily of primary importance, “what meaning?”

The intimate relationship between children and books is a thread that runs through the short stories of this memoir. Again, in “Ma Mère et les livres,” ‘Colette’ refers to books by D’Orbigny as “déchiqueté par le culte irrévérencieux de quatre enfants” (31).

The daydreams of the children easily jump from books to other objects that show potential for story making. For example, a snail shell in “Le Curé sur le mur” that Minet-Chéri lovingly calls a “presbytère.” This violates even Sido’s pact with linguistic symbolic order, and Minet-Chéri’s playful usage of the word leads Sido to reprimand her daughter. The story resolves when Minet-Chéri appropriates the word, despite the disapproval of her mother. ‘Colette’ recalls, as a child, discarding the snail shell but collecting the word “presbytère” and taking it to her terrace. She names the terrace “presbytère” and herself “curé” (30).

Other stories in *La Maison de Claudine* depict this same relationship between children and linguistic signifiers. Sido observes Minet-Chéri’s creative language and Colette later observes that of Bel-Gazou. An illustration of this is the final vignette “La Noisette creuse.” The story calls attention to conceptions of temporal and spatial restrictions by crossing generations and addressing the similar themes beyond the limits of traditional domestic space. “La Noisette creuse” is set at a beach where Bel-Gazou investigates the contents of her pockets, which the matter-of-fact tone of the narration suggests are negligible everyday items. The left pocket contains “trois coquillages,” “une sorte de pomme de terre difforme et cartilagineuse,” “un couteau cassé,” and “un bout de crayon” among other objects. In the right pocket is a piece of coral (whose scientific name is troublesome for Bel-Gazou in the way *presbytère* had been for her mother) and of course “la noisette creuse” whose appearance is portrayed as odd, since there are no nut trees within a distance of many miles (157). Colette starts with concrete language to depict the pocket contents. The narrator tells that when Bel-Gazou is asked where the nut is from, she responds “de l’autre côté du monde” and proceeds to tell of its extravagance

and rarity: “...elle est ancienne, vous savez. Ça se voit au bois qui est rare. C’est une noisette en bois de rose comme le petit bureau de maman” (158). Here, Colette shows how the little hollow nut (to which a maggot is attached) has an entire narrative in the mind of the child. The nut has a story—it incites a daydream.

Next, Colette writes how Bel-Gazou holds the nut to her ear and says, “Ça chante. Ça dit ‘hû-û-û’ (158). In this moment, she is in a trancelike engagement with the nut: “Elle écoute, la bouche entrouverte, les sourcils relevés touchant sa frange de cheveux plats. Ainsi immobile, et comme désaffectée par l’attention, elle n’a presque plus d’âge.” Connected to this hidden story, the reader is depicted as alienated. But by giving deeper attention to the object itself, she appears ageless—contrasting with the deathlike portraits of Juliette and Voussard. ‘Colette’ appropriates the child’s gaze, and continues:

Elle regarde sans le voir l’horizon familier de ses vacances. D’une niche de chaume ruiné, abandonnée par la douane, Bel-Gazou embrasse, à droite, la Pointe-du-Nez, jaune de lichens, bardée de violet par la plinthe de moules que découvrent les basses marées ; au milieu, un coin de mer, d’un bleu de métal neuf, enfoncé comme un fer de hache dans les terres. A gauche, une haie de troènes désordonnés en pleine floraison, dont l’odeur d’amande trop douce, charge le vent, et que déflourissent les petites pattes frénétiques des abeilles. Le pré de mer, sec, monte jusqu’à la hutte et sa déclivité masque la plage où ses parents et amis pâment et cuisent sur le sable. Tout à l’heure, la famille entière demandera à Bel-Gazou : ‘Mais où étais-tu ? Mais pourquoi n’entend rien à ce fanatisme des criques. Pourquoi la plage, et toujours, et rien que la plage ? La hutte ne le cède rien à ce sable insipide, le bosquet humide existe, et l’eau troublée du lavoir, et le champ de luzerne non moins que l’ombre du figuier. Les grandes personnes sont ainsi faites qu’on devrait passer la vie à leur tout expliquer – en vaine. (158)

From a ruined hut, abandoned by someone else, ‘Colette’ depicts an imagination that engages with material objects, objects in her view that are “seeds” for material imagination. Colors, sounds and shapes lead the reader (through the child’s gaze) to the site where the adults are located, the beach, from which the hut appears secondary or useless. The child finds the hut exciting—a site where adventure is waiting. Bel-Gazou

rejects the beach and its proximity to the open sea. The word “horizon,” perhaps ironically, is attached to familiarity, yet still the horizons are unexpected<sup>9</sup>. Importantly, through Colette’s reflection of this gaze, her suggestion is the same suggestion that Sido gave Minet-Chéri when learning to assess fiction in books—to be quiet:

Ainsi de la noisette creuse : ‘Qu’est-ce que tu fais de cette vieille noisette ?’  
Mieux vaut se taire, et cacher, tantôt dans une poche, tantôt dans un vase vide ou dans le nœud d’un mouchoir, la noisette qu’un instant, impossible à prévoir, dépouillera de toutes ses vertus, mais qui pour l’heure chante, contre l’oreille de Bel-Gazou, ce chant qui la tient immobile et comme enracinée... (158)

The passage draws attention to silence and its power, which she emphasizes oxymoronically in the following sentence, where Bel-Gazou yells out, “Je vois ! Je vois la chanson ! Elle est aussi fine qu’un cheveu, elle est aussi fine qu’une herbe !...” (159). This reading depicts a usage of the book described by de Certeau as “a monument and not a document” and one that can be replaced by other elements, “a flowing stream, flowers, etc.” (“Absolute” 11).

These final stories show Colette’s perspective as a mother who fears that as Bel-Gazou grows older and more susceptible to wordly systems or codes, her perception will change. Colette draws toward a more provocative question, “L’an prochain, Bel-Gazou aura plus de neuf ans. Elle ne proclamera plus, inspirée, ces vérités qui confondent ses

---

<sup>9</sup> This invokes the scene in “La Petite” mentioned in chapter one in which Minet-Chéri rejects the life of the sailor for the comfort of the hearth, and where again, Colette’s prose refutes notions of domestic space as a site where one is trapped. Here, Minet-Chéri decides (when night falls) that she has no intention to be a real sailor: “Le ‘marin’, à petits pas, éprouve la terre ferme, et gagne la maison en se détournant d’une lune jaune, énorme, qui monte. L’aventure? Le voyage? L’orgueil qui fait les émigrants?... Les yeux attaches au dé brillant, à la main qui passe et repasse devant la lampe, Minet-Chéri goûte la condition délicieuse d’être – pareille à la petite horlogère, à la fillette de la lingère et du boulanger, —une enfant de son village, hostile au colon comme au barbare, une de celles qui limitent leur univers à la borne d’un champ, au portillon d’une boutique, au cirque de clarté épanoui sous une lampe et que traverse, tirant un fil, une main bien-aimée, coiffée d’un dé d’argent » (23). Here, I am interested in the variety of spaces and boundaries described.

éducateurs.” She also suggests that there is a chance that Bel-Gazou might cease to read the world this way:

Mais peut-être ne retrouvera-t-elle pas sa subtilité d’enfant, et la supériorité de ses sens qui savent goûter un parfum sur la langue, palper une couleur et voir—‘fine comme un cheveu, fine comme une herbe’—la ligne d’un chant imaginaire....  
(159)

These are the final lines of the memoir. In this way, “La Noisette creuse,” the final short story, can be read as a dénouement that emphasizes readership—a way of engaging with signs which escapes “people who are hurried by the affairs of men” (Bachelard, *Space* 162).

The array of objects in Bel-Gazou’s pocket parallels a different list of objects that are treasured by Sido in “Ma Mère et le fruit défendu”—an earlier short story. It depicts how Sido’s health starts to fail and how she clings vehemently to habitual activities that she associates with particular objects. The forbidden fruits are : “le seau trop lourd tiré du puits, le fagot débité à la perquette sur une bille de chêne, la bêche, la pioche, et surtout l’échelle double”—ornaments of her everyday life (sharing via Colette’s poetics both wondrous and non-wondrous qualities) that her impending death prevents her from interacting with (122). In “Ma Mère et le fruit défendu,” Sido approaches various objects with the enthusiasm of a young girl, so that ultimately, the words “le fruit défendu” both reflect a loss of innocence and preserve it. In these stories, and others, a character’s perception of the objects is a focus in the prose. Connecting these two stories to those considered earlier, reading/ engagement with objects seems to mirror reading/ engagement with books. The importance of the materiality of these engagements are evident in Colette’s reverie and poetics, which arguably take root in her mother’s garden.

### Forgotten Books

In transition, I find it useful to compare these usages of books with the way Colette refers to the book when Minet-Chéri returns from a journey to Paris in “Ma Mère et les bêtes,” when returning, she sees in the garden “la lumière déclinante qui s’attachait, rose, à la page blanche d’un livre oublié” (47). Instead of concentrating on reading habits, the narrative centers on the greater domain of the domestic space that she has been away from. New offspring and the sounds of animals lapping milk and suckling are amongst the first things Minet-Chéri notices. ‘Colette’ announces the nature of her own reverie—: “Tout est encore devant mes yeux, le jardin aux murs chauds, les dernières cerises sombres pendues à l’arbre, le ciel palmé de longues nuées roses,—tout est sous mes doigts : révolte vigoureuse de la chenille, cuir épais et mouillé des feuilles d’hortensia,—et la petite main durcie de ma mère” (50). In this short story, the book-object appears only one more time, and as a centerpiece in the story of a spider. As ‘Colette’ relays later, it is both her reverie as writer and a reverie that was hers as a child:

[...] l’araignée que ma mère avait—comme disait papa—dans son plafond, cette même année qui fêta mon seizième printemps. Une belle araignée des jardins, ma foi, le ventre en gousse d’ail, barré d’une croix historiée. Elle dormait ou chassait, le jour, sur sa toile tendue au plafond de la chambre à coucher. La nuit, vers trois heures, au moment où l’insomnie quotidienne rallumait la lampe, rouvrait le livre au chevet de ma mère, la grosse araignée s’éveillait aussi, prenait ses mesures d’arpenteur et quittait le plafond au bout d’un fil, droit au-dessus de la veilleuse à l’huile où tiédissait, toute la nuit, un bol de chocolat. Elle descendait, lente, balancée mollement comme une grosse perle, empoignait de ses huit pattes le bord de la tasse, se penchait tête première, et buvait jusqu’à satiété. Puis elle remontait, lourde de chocolat crémeux, avec les haltes, les méditations qu’imposent un ventre trop chargé, et reprenait sa place au centre de son gréement de soie... (49)

Here, there is little to say about the book on the mother’s nightstand; it is mentioned as an activity that takes the place of sleep; it is then overshadowed by the decadence of the myth of the spider in prose that moves from concrete to more figurative language. The



tale marks the place of Minet-Chéri's daydream when she was in Paris, and when she returns, it is the first thing she asks about:

Couverte encore d'un manteau de voyage, je rêvais, lasse, enchantée, reconquise, au milieu de mon royaume.  
 -Où est ton araignée, maman ?  
 Les yeux gris de ma mère, agrandis par les lunettes, s'attristèrent :  
 -Tu reviens de Paris pour me demander des nouvelles de l'araignée, ingrate fille ?  
 Je baissai le nez, maladroite à aimer, honteuse de ce que j'avais de plus pur :  
 -Je pensais quelquefois, la nuit, à l'heure de l'araignée, quand je ne dormais pas...  
 -Minet-Chéri, tu ne dormais pas ? On t'avait donc mal couchée ?...L'araignée est dans sa toile, je suppose... (50)

Sido curtly replies that the spider is in her web, as if to suggest where she belongs—at home. Here, the book-object is an invitation to look at—rather than escape from—domestic space. The story of the spider takes place in the area of the book-object. The spider awakes with the mother, as the lamp is turned on and the book, opened. This story of indulgence, drinking creamy chocolate until “satiété,” relates a satisfaction that corresponds with that of Minet-Chéri, and of Colette as narrator via their reveries.

In the memoir's second short story, “Le Sauvage,” Colette tells of her mother's first marriage, and her transition from the domestic space associated with her childhood home into the home of her new husband. Again, the book object appears as a symbol of childhood freedom in domestic space relative to the constraint she discovers where she is unhappily married. In this story, Sido must leave the house where “[...]le piano, le violon, le grand Salvator Rosa légué par son père, le pot à tabac et les fines pipes de terre à long tuyau, les grilles à coke, *les livres ouverts* et les journaux froissés” had offered a nurturing space for living, and potentially, dreaming (my emphasis). She does this in order to enter “dans la maison à peron que le dur hiver des pays forestiers entourait” (11). When she enters her new husband's home, called “le sauvage,” there is no mention of

books. This again draws attention to where books have a presence in Colette's narrative and where they do not, or, where they are open and where they are closed, and the ways that readers approach them. The dreamer, in the way Bel-Gazou is fashioned as a dreamer, is lost or stunted in the home where Sido is unhappy in her marriage. Or in this story of Sido's own experience, "Sido, maigrie d'isolement, pleura, et le Sauvage aperçut la trace des larmes qu'elle niait. Il comprit confusément qu'elle s'ennuyait, qu'une certaine espèce de confort et de luxe, étrangère à toute sa mélancolie de Sauvage, manquait. Mais quoi?" (12). She is bored.

Lastly, there is of course, the book object referred to in chapter one and that is found in the first short story, the open book that invites the entire memoir:

Il arrivait qu'un livre, ouvert sur le dallage de la terrasse ou sur l'herbe, une corde à sauter serpentant dans une allée, ou un minuscule jardin bordé de cailloux, planté de têtes de fleurs, révélassent autrefois, dans le temps où cette maison et ce jardin abritaient une famille, la présence des enfants et leurs âges différents. Mais ces signes ne s'accompagnaient presque jamais du cri, du rire enfantins, et le logis, chaud et plein, ressemblait bizarrement à ces maisons qu'une fin de vacances vide, en un moment, de toute sa joie. Le silence, le vent contenu du jardin clos, les pages du livre rebroussées sous le pouce invisible d'un sylphe, tout semblait demander : 'Où sont les enfants?' (6-7)

The book-object (whose exact location is irrelevant) appears first as a privileged object among many—objects whose functions are to reveal—*révéler*—a verb that is multivalent in the way that it both indicates the presence of something and/or allows something to be seen. Here, it is ambiguous which function is intended by the author. Carefully, 'Colette' insists on the book's presence even when its readers are gone. Enclosed in the garden and forgotten, it is only touched by an invisible reader. Its pages are accessed via reverie.

## CHAPTER THREE

## USAGE OF BOOKS IN COLETTE IN CONTEXT

Colette moved to Paris when she married Willy in 1893. She observed Bohemian Paris and was a part of the *Belle Époque*. Writers, artists and friends whom she met via her notorious husband inform her novels and other works (Marks 26). However, the themes that most inform her writing remain grounded in that which she came to appreciate through Sido—namely, animals and nature. Colette’s commitment to reverie and the wisdom drawn from her childhood can make it a challenge to situate her amongst her contemporaries. As Marks notes of Colette’s style, once she was free from the obligation to collaborate with Willy: “[...]Colette, left to herself, tended toward poetic reverie and anecdote rather than toward fiction. This change from fiction to reverie, from Claudine to ‘Colette,’ is accompanied by a movement away from the adult human world to the world of memory and the world of animals” (176).

In *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830-1930*, Jerrold Seigel writes that many pursuits in the arts in the time period between 1830 and 1930 were geared toward the “escape from the unbearable weight of ordinary life,” which manifested in new artistic forms or manipulation of old ones (321).<sup>10</sup> This desire incited the use of alcohol and other substances to achieve new perspectives on everyday life, in the pursuit the truly “exceptional” as opposed to versions of everyday life that were seemingly monopolized by bourgeois culture. Such are trends in the arts with which Colette’s work can be contrasted, as her work nearly always has roots in the concrete world, and reflect an affirmation of it. Situating Colette with what she was familiar with via her husband is constructive here only in comprehending tendencies of

---

<sup>10</sup> The particular quote is taken from a passage in which Seigel writes in reference to Alfred Jarry.

Colette's writing and the themes that they relay, such as escape. In her first days or years in Paris, Colette mostly accompanied her husband who enjoyed being in the public eye and spent large amounts of time alone in her and Willy's rue Jacob apartment (Marks 27). There was much to contrast between her life in Paris and the world she had known in Saint-Sauveur.

Reaching again to Colette's fiction to shed light on her views, I consider the following passage from *Claudine à Paris* (1901) as a reflection of her attitude toward literary and Parisian norms. In it, she refers to Francis Jammes, with whom she became friends and corresponded during the years she wrote the Claudine novels. *Claudine à Paris* is the second in the collection. Once again, the narrative takes the form of Claudine's journal, which narrates her transition from her childhood home in Montigny to Paris due to her father's desire to better his chances at publishing a book. In a two-page chapter (which is short in relation to others), Claudine recounts a walk she took through the Luxembourg Gardens. There, she reflects "I wanted to eat young tree-shoots as I used to in Montigny, but here they're covered with coal-dust and scrunch under your teeth," a statement after which she slips into a reverie-like remembrance of the gardens in Montigny (241). She then exclaims her misery in Paris outright, which is followed by a passage that addresses her response to constricted space. Like the passages considered from *Claudine à l'école* and *Claudine s'en va*, it invokes Massey's desire to dismantle conceptions of space as static:

I've kept myself supple even though I've no longer a tree to climb. One of my efforts was to balance myself in my tub on my right foot and lean back as far as possible with my left leg raised very high, my right arm used as a balancing-pole and my left hand under the nape of my neck. It sounds nothing – but just you try! Flop! Over I went backwards. [...] But I do other exercises with brilliant success; putting my feet alternately on the nape of my neck or bending back till my head is

on level with my calves. Mélie is full of admiration, but warns me against too much of these gymnastics. (241-2)

Here, Colette depicts Claudine's manipulation of the constrained sense of space via her body while in a bathtub. It is a play with space matched by Colette's prose, which includes multiple verbs, adjectives and prepositional phrases such as "lean back," "raised very high," "backwards," "bending back," and "on level" to relay the scene. At the close of the chapter, retired to her room, she writes: "Up to now, the net result of all this for Claudine has been an unexpected passion for Francis Jammes because that odd poet understands the country and animals and old-fashioned gardens and the importance of the stupid little things in life" (242). These passages, considering Colette's tendency to blur fact and fiction, are telling of her views on cramped, domestic space as specifically related to living conditions in Paris, even though she and Willy belonged to a more libertine social milieu.

Women writers and thus women's perspectives in the historical French literary tradition before Colette are sparse. Unfortunately, in relation to literature, women appear "against a background of socially accepted misogyny" only as "muses, mistresses or angles of the hearth;" in general, women writers are "confined to the margins of the historical picture" before the twentieth century (Kay, Cave and Bowie 237). In this chapter, my aim is not to position Colette in the entire (though perhaps sparsely documented) history of French women writers.<sup>11</sup> The further aim of this chapter is to look at Colette's work in comparison with other female voices in the earlier half of twentieth-

---

<sup>11</sup> To this aim, that is, for a further in depth depiction of the social situation of women in France in the nineteenth century specifically, I recommend Naomi Schor's article, "The Scandal of Realism," included in *New History of French Literature*. References to the 1804 Napoleonic Code are particularly useful, by which women were deprived of their rights, and which "fixed" women "in their (inferior) sexual roles, according them the same legal status as minors and madmen" (1833).

century France, looking specifically at the function of book-objects within domestic space as can be understood by their usages. I do this in order to put forth non-conclusive considerations for why Colette's depiction of a books usage in *La Maison de Claudine* is perhaps unique at the time she was writing. To this aim, works by Simone de Beauvoir (from a generation later) and Germaine Dulac are considered. References to the work of these women in comparison with *La Maison de Claudine* are not meant to exhaust all possibilities for usages of books. Instead, the gesture is suggestive and aids in considering the richness of Colette's depiction of the book-object as a motif.

*Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*

First, I consider Simone de Beauvoir, for which I will rely on Emily Grosholz's reading of *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* (1958)—published four years after Colette's death. Grosholz's reading, as does my own, focuses on conditions for imagination when considering a woman's response to conceptions of domestic space. As cited in chapter one, she invokes Bachelardian notions to explore Colette's *La Maison de Claudine*; she also draws useful comparisons between Colette's and de Beauvoir's depictions of their childhood homes. Grosholz sums up a point of de Beauvoir's in *Le Deuxième sexe* (1949) where she asserts that “a precious moment of freedom” exists in a young woman's life, namely: “Just on the onset of adolescence she is old enough to exercise some autonomy and to range beyond the confines of the family house, but she has not yet fallen into the adult constraints of married life. She is still well protected, but she is at liberty: optimal circumstances for cultivating imagination” (173). The perspective already shifts conceptions of the imagination from a faculty of the mind that is easily unfettered and free (as seen in Colette) to one which a young woman must seize

in a fleeting moment between two households in which she is trapped. That is, if economic conditions permit that moment to exist.

Grosholz highlights major differences between Beauvoir's text and Colette's memoir, one of the most important being that de Beauvoir's mother was primarily an "enforcer of patriarchal law" (177). As a result, the relation between *nature* and *home* are different, which is not observed in *La Maison de Claudine*. With Sido, the house "opens up into the garden," whereas for de Beauvoir, to go to the garden, or to get away into the countryside, is depicted as an escape (176). It is in the countryside, away from the home, and away from Paris, that she experiences some of her most pleasant childhood memories. Grosholz cites the following paragraph in *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* to draw attention to the difference between her experience in the domestic space with that in nature—a passage in which I find it useful to emphasize the position of the book-object as well. Here, de Beauvoir details her experience in her grandfather's garden:

First of all my joys was to watch the meadows wake up, very early in the morning; *book in hand*, I left the sleeping house and pushed the gate open. I couldn't sit on the grass, misted over with white frost, but walked down the avenue, along the meadow planted with select trees which grandfather called 'the landscaped garden.' *I read a little*, taking small steps, and felt against my skin the coolness of the air begin to soften; the delicate glaze that covered the earth gently began to melt; the purple beech, the blue cedars, the silver poplars, shone with a radiance as fresh as the first morning in paradise: and I, I alone was the bearer of the world's beauty and the glory of God—though all the while dreaming of hot chocolate and toast. (qtd. in Grosholz 178, my emphasis)

Clearly, there is contrast with Colette's depictions of reading practices in the garden – de Beauvoir pushes the gate open to *leave* the "sleeping house." The garden that resembles the first morning in paradise is also apart from the house, as Grosholz specifies. But also, it is in these moments that she suggests her manner of reading is interrupted— she "read a little" while walking. The same sentence that depicts this motion yields to a description

of her sensorial experience. She feels the air on her skin and notices “purple beech,” “blue cedars,” “silver poplars”—a series of colors and forms that she relates to her newfound paradise, where the book is part of her exploration. Her thoughts drift toward other tangible pleasures, “hot chocolate and toast,” and the tone of the prose reflects comfort in that dream.

In another passage that Grosholz underscores the ways de Beauvoir depicts her time in nature is when de Beauvoir reports having been, with her sister: “[d]azed by the smell of freshly mown hay, of honeysuckle, of buckwheat and flour, we lay down on moss or grass, and read” (179). Space, in this abundant description, seems again to open via her suggestive descriptions, “moss or grass,” that link scents and images that daze her. The passage also emphasizes the functions of the book-object and of reading in the overall setting. Her sentence shows the practice of reading as being absorbed by the other elements of her experience, while at the same time, ending the sentence with the verb “read,” seems to further extend, or question, the limits of that which dazed her. In these moments in the garden, Grosholz emphasizes that de Beauvoir’s writing actually mirrors Colette’s – it breaks from the discursive form her readers are more familiar with in other parts of her memoir and other writings. In these instances, it fulfills the function seen in *La Maison de Claudine* where the book functions as a symbol of freedom – a site at which imagination is unfettered and engages with the material world, the book-object being one of many with which she engages. However, for de Beauvoir, the possibility of this usage of the book is a chance occurrence—she escapes the house to find it.

The following passage indicates an alternative function of the book, and here, Grosholz considers passages from both *Le Deuxième Sexe* and *Mémoires d’une jeune fille*



*rangée*. First, from *Le Deuxième Sexe*, de Beauvoir writes about, “[...] a refuge the adolescent girl finds in the fields and the woods. In the paternal house, mother, laws, customs, routine, together rule; she wishes to tear herself away from the past, to become in turn a sovereign subject” (qtd. in Groscholz 182). She compares this with an episode in the memoir where one evening, after staying out beyond the appropriate amount of time allotted by her parents, “reading and watching the moon rise,” de Beauvoir relates: “By way of punishment, my mother ordered the next day that I not be allowed outside the boundaries of the estate. Frankly, I did not dare disobey. I spent the day sitting on the lawn or pacing up and down the avenues with a book in my hand and fury in my heart” (qtd. in Groscholz 182). Here, the book-object is a companion against the perceived oppressor. The “boundaries of the estate” evokes the idea of boundaries that are insurmountable, which contrasts with those in Colette’s memoir, which are fragile and overgrown by wisteria. In de Beauvoir’s situation, the book-object is the way out of traditional domestic space—an object that enables her to envision and better the ‘woman’s place’ in society through the usage of it. And she gives it attention in order to do so, as both philosopher and author.

Though I do not explore the full implications of the book-object in Simone’s works, considering *Mémoires d’une jeune fille rangée* here is useful for putting Colette’s usage of book-objects in further context. For a more in depth comparison of book-objects within the home, I consider a film by Germaine Dulac that was produced in 1922, precisely the same year that *La Maison de Claudine* was published.

*La Souriante Madame Beudet*

To describe Germaine Dulac's work in film, Sandy Flittermen-Lewis writes in *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema* (1996):

For Dulac, feminist filmmaking meant working at the very sources of cinematic expression through the manipulation of formal elements, in order to provide an alternative to the dominant film practice, to speak in *another* voice. Her formal preoccupations were thus indivisible from her feminist politics. (48)

Unlike Colette who was a self-declared anti-feminist, Dulac's aims were clearly political. The usage of book-objects and of other printed materials in the film reflects these political aims. Considering the film shifts the present analysis away from one which is strictly literary, but provides further perspective on usages of books in domestic space in regard to a problematic of escape.

*La Souriante Madame Beudet* is a fifty-two minute silent film with French intertitles set in Provençal France. In order to portray the female imagination on film, Dulac uses innovative cinematic technology. The film's aim is to target and explore a specifically female subjectivity (102). Madame Beudet, played by Germaine Dermoz, is an intelligent woman who occupies a subordinated position within the domestic space in which she lives. Several shots demonstrate how Mme. Beudet is completely disempowered and alienated within her homespace. For example, the piano that she enjoys playing (which is one of the only activities that she is shown to enjoy, aside from engaging with printed materials) is locked by her husband when he exits the home. Incidentally, the melody that she plays is "Le Jardin sous la pluie"—adding to the garden motifs in both Colette and de Beauvoir's memoirs. Other shots are meant to demonstrate a similar lack of power. Specifically, M. Beudet manipulates the placement of objects in the house, which demonstrates his insistence to exercise control over them. One

prominent example that plays into the film multiple times is a vase that contains a flower arrangement. M. Beudet insists that it remain at the center of a round-top table, whereas Mme. Beudet prefers that it be placed off-center—symbolizing two different desires for influence. Here, engagement with objects reflect a power-struggle, and the engagements point to the vast separation between *le fruit défendu* that Sido engages with and the Beudet's possessions. The film supplies other familiar symbols. The husband frequently seated at his desk on which lies the “desk furniture,” namely: accounting books, calendars, writing utensils, a revolver.... Clocks, calendars and a bell are motifs that appear intermittently throughout the film and that reveal the monotony, and the harsh tendency toward mastery, through which Mme. Beudet senses oppression.

Regarding the function of book-objects, the film starts where Mme. Beudet is alone in domestic space—she is holding a book and reading. Specific lettering cannot be discerned on the page—they appear blank to viewers. The question, what is she reading and seeing? that can be posed in *La Maison de Claudine* can be posed here, and Dulac, like Colette, offers suggestions. To start, I consider Mme. Beudet's gaze. At first, it is drawn nowhere in particular and other times, through windows or into mirrors. A fair interpretation of this gaze is that it invokes the desire for escape – a physical exodus from the location in which the woman finds herself. When M. Beudet returns home, he walks to and sits at his desk, and when the household maid then enters the room, Mme. Beudet's fingers anxiously fumble the pages of her book. The maid brings a newspaper that Mme. Beudet is awaiting, which she hurriedly grabs and attends to. Quickly thereafter, viewers see that her usage of the printed materials is as an avenue of escape, as both words and images project her imagination outside of her environment. Madame's

imagination is shown on film, and the images of her imagination actually appear in the domestic space, moving, as Flitterman-Lewis proposes, “from purely mental representation of Madame Beudet’s thoughts through a metaphoric image signifying her wish for escape to an imagined scenario of desire in which a fantasm of her creation actually interacts with the space of the room in which the Beudets sit” (102). In Mme. Beudet’s imagination, M. Beudet is carried away by a tennis player whose image corresponds to one she sees in the paper. Her imagination is at work only in ways that signify desire for escape. Usage of books and other printed materials are central to how these imaginative activities are portrayed.

A subsequent scene shows Mme. Beudet interacting most intimately with a book. It follows several shots over which the Beudets receive an invitation to see *Faust* with another married couple. M. Beudet wants to attend, while Mme. Beudet decides to stay at home. Alone, and after first discovering that the piano is locked, she picks up a book. “La mort des amants” are the words that appear on the page and are seen by viewers via a close-up shot.<sup>12</sup> Here, only her face and the book-object are illuminated. The film reveals the connection between her thoughts and her attention to words and objects. She reads the word *lit* in the sentence “*des lits plein d’odeurs légères,*” and looks at the bed that she shares with her husband, which leads to contemplation of her unhappiness. This exchange between reading and observing objects in the space around her repeats with a series of words and objects. The shots show how both signifier and signified, for Mme. Beudet, reflect her oppression—her imagination does not escape it, nor does it produce satisfying dreams. In this dynamic, house and space do not incite daydreams in each other, but rather, space in her imagination is a light that renders “house” intolerable. The scene

---

<sup>12</sup> Mme. Beudet is reading Baudelaire’s poem, “La Mort des amants.”

changes when, exasperated by her conditions and her frustrated imagination, she throws the book onto the ground as if to separate herself from the object as quickly as possible.<sup>13</sup> This depiction correlates with conceptions of space that Massey seeks to break in *For Space*—a product of linear conceptions of space, where here, it appears that the female subject is trapped by its mapping.<sup>14</sup> Creative play with the objects is rendered impossible by oppressive conditions. The objects (vase, bed, pillow) do not incite creative play at the level of the signifier, but invoke feelings of *ennui*. Imagination circulates in a space where there is little room for bend or play. Dulac's portrayal of a usage of a book-object once again serves as a constructive point from which to analyze the problematic of escape.

Ultimately, the film shows Mme. Beudet's desire to escape from domestic space. It captures, as Flitterman-Lewis sums up, "...a momentary display of the power of the female imagination, to a situation which locates the productive capacity to dream (and thereby enact the possibility of liberation) with the female psyche itself" (102). Here, dreaming is associated with liberation, and relates to Colette's character Annie in *Claudine s'en va*, who emancipates herself from domestic space with a revolver in hand as referred to in chapter one. It is not the domestic space that Colette privileges in *La*

---

<sup>13</sup> Flitterman-Lewis draws a similar conclusion from the shots: "The fourteen shots of the next sub-segment are thus patterned on an alternation that shifts between images of Madame Beudet reading and thinking, intertitles of lines from the poem, and corresponding shots of objects around the house. The implication of this logic of Montage, the cinema's discursive process, is that Madame Beudet is trying to imagine the poetic images as she reads by calling to mind objects in her quotidian reality./ The result, of course, is undeniably ironic, as the banality of the objects only reinforces her dissatisfaction with a loveless marriage" (108).

<sup>14</sup> Again, I am invoking Massey's call to "liberate 'space' from some chains of meaning (which embed it with *closure* and *stasis*, or with *science*, *writing* and *representation*) and which have all but choked it to death, in order to set it into other chains [...] alongside *openness*, and *heterogeneity*, and *liveliness*) where it can have a new and more productive life" (19).

*Maison de Claudine*—the domestic space she knew as a child and whose oneiric structures are embedded in her memory.

In conclusion, this chapter, my references to Germain Dulac's *La Souriante Madame Beudet* and Simone de Beauvoir's *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*, enhances perspective on the usage of book-objects in domestic space, (and specifically, by women) and say much in regard to environmental conditions that are crucial for free, unfettered imagination. The comparisons reveal Colette's portrayal of multiple usages of books as exceptional, in the way that those usages indicate an unfettered imagination *within* domestic space.

## CONCLUSION

The problematic of escape is articulated in *La Maison de Claudine* and other writings by Colette. The book-object serves as a useful point from which to analyze it, as one usage of the book indicates a method of escape from, or non-presence in, the site where a book is read. The passages considered in these chapters show that Colette's material and imagistic prose offers insight into the nature of that problematic, and vice versa.

Colette ultimately privileges a usage of the book in which a reader does not escape from, but engages with, domestic space. In these instances, the book is an object among others, but via the imagination, there is play between a "house" and the "space" beyond it. In this way, domestic space can be viewed as a site of the dreamer, and the book, a possible "dwelling place" as well – for daydreams (Bachelard). In this line of thought, escape is rendered largely contemplative, which is perhaps related to the fact that, as shown in chapter one, Colette provides an image of the boundaries of domestic space that is fragile. The iron-gate that she describes as separating the domestic space of her childhood from an outside world is depicted as twisted and overgrown by wisteria, and it is just after this depiction of the physical marker of that boundary that she presents the first book-object in the text: "Il arrivait qu'un livre..." Here, it is presented as one object among many whose function it is to reveal—*révéler*—a verb whose polyvalence suggests the function of indication, but also, of allowing something new to be seen. It is through this object that Colette's readers engage with her reverie.

The boundaries that are fragile are at once spatial and temporal, and the way that they are depicted in *La Maison de Claudine* contrasts greatly with what is portrayed in

*Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* and *La Souriante Madame Beudet*. This is perhaps because Colette depicts domestic space as inseparable from nature: the house and the garden are one, and it is her mother, Sido, who most influences that space. Where the home of de Beauvoir's youth is a symbol of patriarchal order, Colette portrays patriarchal order as fragile within an overwhelming complexity of domestic space. Various usages of books mirror the spatial differences evident in these three works; but engagement with book-objects is not always a blissful enterprise in *La Maison de Claudine*. In "Ma Mère et les livres," Colette emphasizes that reading involves trial. Through Minet-Chéri's interaction with a text by Zola, Colette shows how certain texts challenge, or threaten, a reader's perception of the material world. It is through this reading (and multiple others) that Minet-Chéri deepens her perception of the garden where she reads. And ultimately, *La Maison de Claudine* is a book that affirms the garden and the house of her mother. In "La Noisette creuse," Colette ends the memoir with the question of whether or not Bel-Gazou will continue to creatively engage with the material world, or *le chante imaginaire*—emphasizing again this process in readership.

Emphasizing reverie in this problematic is not to negate the importance of gender as a lens for analysis of book-objects and the problematic of escape, or Colette's critique of logocentrism in her writings. Colette's first novel, *Claudine à l'école*, and even the first page of that novel, conveys resistance to fixed conceptions of space, where the main character Claudine challenges a text's description of her native town, Montigny, by insisting that houses "just tumble haphazard from the top of the hill to the bottom of the valley. They rise one above the other, like a staircase [...]" (*Claudine* 11). A decanter *cannot* be forcefully reproduced via sketching by a group of schoolgirls, and the character



Annie, in *Claudine s'en va*, is depicted as partaking in a physical exodus from domestic space that is oppressive. These are themes that also play out in her memoir; however, the depiction of domestic space in *La Maison de Claudine* is overshadowed by the one experienced in her childhood, whose oneiric properties remain intact and are the source and subject of her reverie. It is a house she refuses to leave, and by continuing to foreground domestic space and the relations therein, she privileges what is seen as the private sphere over any ambition to leave it.

Where Colette critiques alternative usages of books—that is, as escape—is equally important. Colette shows this usage as either a futile attempt to impose order in domestic space, as seen via her father in “Amour” who is hidden behind *Le Temps*, or as equitable with death, as seen in “Ma Sœur avec les longs cheveux” and “Ybenez est mort.” Ultimately, in *La Maison de Claudine*, reading as an escape is a failure to engage with the materiality of the space in which a reader lives.

In this analysis, the privileged reading is found to be one that is non-linear and that corresponds to heterogeneous readings of space(s)—where reading of that space is captured in concrete images that emphasize the dreamlike possibilities of objects, including books. As Bachelard asserts: “linear reading deprives us of countless daydreams” (*Space* 162). In this way, Colette shows that books, thimbles and hollow nuts have comparable functions, as seen in “Ma Mère et les livres,” “La Noisette creuse,” “La Petite,” and “Le Fruit défendu”—where Colette explores engagement with and perception of certain objects via characters that span three generations.

Returning to my interests specified in the introduction, a book-object is read here as something that can be used in multiple ways. Colette’s depiction of various usages of

books is perhaps exceptional, as Grosholz highlights, because Sido's house "opens into the garden," allowing for unfettered imagination that is evident in Colette's poetics and that she also portrays as the experience of her characters. Though the usage of the book-object held by Grace Mutell in *Fire Opal* is perhaps no clearer to the portrait's onlookers, Colette's memoir provides numerous creative and critical ways for us to consider it.

## WORKS CITED

- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language and the Cosmos*. Trans. Daniel Russell. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969. Print.
- . *The Poetics of Space*. Trans. Maria Jolas. Boston : Beacon Press, 1969.
- . *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*. Trans. Edith R. Farrell. Dallas: The Pegasus Foundation, 1983. Print.
- Blanchot, Maurice. "Everyday Speech." Trans. Susan Hanson. *Yale French Studies* 93 (1998) : 12-20.
- Certeau, Michel de. "Absolute Reading." Trans. Victor Aboulaffia. Unpublished.
- . *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984.
- Colette, Sidonie-Gabrielle. *The Claudine Novels*. Trans. Antonia White. London: Penguin, 1987. Print.
- . *Earthly Paradise*. Trans. Herma Briffault, Derek Coltman, et al. New York : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966.
- . *La Maison de Claudine*. Paris : Hachette, 1960. Print.
- . *My Mother's House*. Trans. Una Vincenzo Troubridge and Enid McLeod. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1953.
- Coombs Hills, Laura. *Fire Opal*. 1899. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
- Cummins, Laurel. *Colette and the Conquest of Self*. Birmingham: Summa Publications, 2005.
- Flitterman-Lewis, Sandy. *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.
- Freadman, Anne. "A Creature Has Passed This Way: Devices of Generic Self-Situation in Colette's *La Maison de Claudine*." *Forum* 34.1 (2009): 33-52.
- Grosholz, Emily R. "The House We Never Leave: Beauvoir and Colette." *The Legacy of Simone de Beauvoir*. Ed. Emily R. Grosholz. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004.
- Gaudin, Colette, et al. "Introduction." *Yale French Studies* 62 (1981): 2-18.

- Hirsch, Michèle. "Philomène de Watteville ou livre et créativité dans *La Maison de Claudine*." *Roman 20-50* (1986). 147-64.
- Kay, Sarah, Terence Cave and Malcolm Bowie. *A Short History of French Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Colette*. Trans. Jane Marie Todd. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.
- Kern, Stephen. *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880-1918*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983.
- La Souriante Madame Beudet*. Dir. Germaine Dulac. 1922. VHS.
- Lefebvre, Henri. *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume 1*. Trans. James Moore. New York : 2008.
- Marks, Elaine. *Colette*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1960.
- Massey, Doreen. *Space, Place and Gender*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.
- . *For Space*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2005.
- Rico, Josette. "La maison et le livre dans *La Maison de Claudine*." *Voix Plurielles* 5.1 (2008) 1-5. Web. 24 March 2010.
- Schor, Naomi. "The Scandal of Realism." *New History of French Literature*. Ed. Denis Hollier. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Seigel, Jerrold. *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830-1930*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.
- Sheringham, Michael. *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Southworth, Helen. "Rooms of Their Own: How Colette Uses Physical and Textual Space to Question a Gendered Literary Tradition." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 20.2 (2001): 253-278.
- The Reading Women 2010 Calendar*. Petaluma: Pomegranate, 2009.