Career Stories
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LESS THAN TWENTY YEARS after the French Republic passed a law requiring primary education for both boys and girls, the surprising Claudine à l’école (Claudine at School) took Paris by storm. The charming schoolgirl heroine created a fad for Claudine hats, cigarettes, soap, perfume, and other items. The public demanded a theatrical version of the story and, of course, more Claudine novels. How could an education novel, and specifically a girls’ education novel, produce such a monstrous popular response? To answer this question, I will examine the development of the image of the girls’ school, both in Claudine à l’école and in other more sober female education novels from the early years of the twentieth century. Historically, the images of girls’ schools put forth in these novels offered readers an insider’s view of this relatively new social structure within French culture. But the novels also demonstrated the women authors’ mixed narrative techniques: while these writers used certain familiar bildungsroman structures, they also introduced new aspects to the novel of educational development, such as the “official” women’s community, utopian subcultures for women, and most important, the emergence of girls and women alongside (although not necessarily in parallel with) the emergence of general French society.

In these works, two social spheres are set in contrast with the heroine’s development: the general French society of the turn of the century, and the specific women’s community found inside the school. In this chapter I will focus on four different women’s education novels, each offering a different example of these dual societies. The first, Colette’s Claudine à l’école (1900) takes place in a generally unchanging provincial village and could therefore be understood to belong to the first category of bildungsroman, or novel of development, that Bakhtin describes, where the protagonist emerges in a private way against the backdrop of a static society (Bakhtin 19). But the public school that the protagonist is attending throughout the novel

1. For a brief plot summary of this novel, see Appendix 2.
actually begins the process of emergence along with the main character, thus classifying the novel in the second category of Bakhtinian novel of development, those in which protagonist and social structure emerge simultaneously (23). Likewise, in Gabrielle Réval’s *Sévriennes* (*Women of Sèvres, 1900*), the city of Paris is a backdrop so distant from the women’s world of the École Normale Supérieure de Sèvres that it goes almost unnoticed, rarely mentioned in the narrative. In contrast, the school’s pedagogical philosophy makes rapid changes, but not always in step with or as a result of the personal emergence of Marguerite, the main heroine. *Sévriennes* thus provides an interesting divergence from Bakhtin’s second category of the novel of development. Louise-Marie Compain’s *L’Un vers l’autre* (*The One Toward the Other, 1903*) takes place in a relatively volatile world, both because of the feminist thoughts and actions of the heroine, Laure, and because of conservative political forces beyond her control in the city where she is teaching. Yet her own school appears to be a relatively stable force in her life, a tranquil oasis for her during a period of radical changes and emergence. Finally, Esther de Suze’s *Institutrice* (*Woman Schoolteacher, 1902*) transpires in an isolated Alpine village that does not accept change. The heroine, Marie-Thérèse, finds herself in a quiet and sleepy girls elementary school that is similarly immutable, and her own coming of age proceeds against these two very static backdrops. As we shall see, the heroines’ character development and their force in both the “real” and the “academic” worlds change considerably, depending on the type of environments in which each author has chosen to set her particular heroine.

These different environments also produce changes to the traditional *bildungsroman* traits discussed in Chapter 2. Many of the main protagonists have difficulty finding mentors who are strong or nurturing role models. Further, the classic move from the provinces to Paris is usually absent, although in *Sévriennes* we find heroines who move to Sèvres, in the suburbs of Paris, in order to pursue their teacher training degrees. And finally, the lessons learned along the way are not the same as those that men learn: the false starts and other detours that the traditional *bildungsroman* hero makes while pursuing his goals are usually delayed until the ending of the female novel of education, with a renunciation of school or teaching or both. The idea of a successful reintegration with the heroine’s family and society at

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2. For a brief plot summary of this novel, see Appendix 2.
3. For a brief plot summary of this novel, see Appendix 2.
4. For a brief plot summary of this novel, see Appendix 2.
the conclusion of the texts is also quite rare, although one novel, *L’Un vers l’autre*, does reunite the heroine Laure with her estranged husband at the end of the story. Thus some of the basic structures of the archetypal bildungsroman are modified or eliminated to accommodate the new female student or teacher character, depending on the social environment of the school and the community where she lives.

The authors of the novel of women’s educational development also included several innovative narrative structures in their texts, such as the development of a utopian subculture and the enactment of rites of passage. On one hand, the description of a rite of passage follows closely the patterns of the traditional bildungsroman but it also permits the writer to disclose accurate depictions to readers of the pedagogical practices and innovations for French girls and women during the time period. On the other hand, the creation of a utopian women’s space in the novels allows for a range of critiques of the national education system for girls, from wildly sarcastic, as in *Claudine à l’école*, to mildly disapproving, as in *Sévrniennes*. While these first two novels direct their attentions to the problems that arise within the school system itself, those in the second group, *L’Un vers l’autre* and *Institutrice*, focus on pressures issuing from sources outside the schools that affect the ways in which the women protagonists are able to learn and teach. Each novelist also divulges a more idealized vision of what the national education system could and should provide for girls and for women teachers. These visions include cooperative superintendents, enthusiastic teachers, and supportive townspeople. At the very least, the heroine offers some suggested improvements for her own school.

Whether or not the world surrounding the heroine is stable or changing, for the individual protagonist who is beginning a new stage in life, there is usually some required ceremonial ritual, a marker of change, or what turn-of-the-century cultural anthropologist van Gennep labeled “les rites de passage” (rites of passage) in his work of the same name. It is useful to employ the three stages that form van Gennep’s definition of the rite of passage—the preliminal, liminal, and postliminal stages—and the accompanying “territorial passage” to the site of the actual event, especially when discussing these key moments of change in the women’s education novels.

The education system in France (and in many Western societies) has traditionally been based on a series of hierarchical exams; the passage of each one gives the student access to a new level of learning and a new status in the

5. Arnold van Gennep’s original *Les Rites de passage* (1909) describes the rites of passage of “timeless” non-Western cultures that he had studied during the early part of the twentieth century.
educational and social community. The exams for the *brevet*, the *baccalauréat*,
the *licence*, the *capès*, and the *agrégation* still exist today in French education.
One of the major rites of passage for French students therefore was (and
still is) the final exam. Although all students may now take the baccalauréat
exam at the end of the high school years, at the turn of the century, girls’
schools offered the brevet exams at the primary and superior levels. For
small village schools, the series of written and oral exams were given at the
chief town of the department by a group of professors chosen from regional
schools. All eligible students from the surrounding area assembled for two
or three days to undergo the exams together. This relatively new social and
cultural event for girls continued to arouse curiosity in the general public,
and we find a correspondingly detailed view of this particular rite of passage
and its various stages in Colette’s description of Claudine’s brevet exams in
*Claudine à l’école*.

There is first the “territorial passage,” ushering the students away from
the village of Montigny to the site of the exam, an unnamed central city
for the Fresnois region. All the eligible students and the headmistress, Mlle
Sergent, take the coach to a nearby train station and embark on the three-
hour train trip together (Colette 1984a, 123–24). During the preliminal
stages, Claudine notes her separation from her cat Fanchette (123) and
the joking or risqué comments from the drunken coach driver and three
traveling salesmen that their group receives during their departure from
Montigny (123–24). Once they have arrived at the hotel where they will
be staying, she notes their incorporation into the new setting through a
communal meal at the hotel (125). The liminal stage for this rite of passage
includes the students’ huddled counsel with the headmistress before and
after each exam (136, 139, 149, 155–56, 162), the description of the exams
themselves, including specific questions and various attempts at cheating,
and then the group’s walk over to the posted lists of students who have
passed (*les reçues*) after the exams are over.

Within each individual ceremony, there are several stages that are
repeated and ritualized, such as the walk to see the grades posted on the
school door. Immediately after the last written exam, “They put us out,

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He eventually began to apply these theories to French society in his later works. I find the categories
especially helpful in defining the newly established patterns and exercises for girls’ education.
Furthermore, I find that when discussing the fictional portrayals of the new schools for girls, van
Gennep’s interest in and focus on the sacred versus secular debates are of particular relevance, since
they were hotly contested topics during the turn of the century in France.
feverish and noisy at the thought that, this very evening, we should read, on
a big list nailed to the door the names of the candidates who had qualified
for the Orals the next day” (Colette 2001a, 135). After dinner, the students
have their eyes glued on their teacher, Mademoiselle Sergent, as she looks
at her watch and then signals that they can go check the scores. At the
school, using a candle in the dark to read the lists, Claudine goes over the
initials to determine who has passed the preliminary exams and made it to
the next level (Colette 1984a, 147). After the oral exams on the following
day, the same series of events are narrated in the same fashion, indicating a
ritual that the students of all the schools assembled are following (Colette
1984a, 163).

The postliminal stages include the description of the train ride back to
Montigny (Colette 1984a, 164–65) and the reintegration with the school
and family community. In contrast to the drunken and impertinent com-
ments that they received on their departure, there is a welcome from the
students and other teachers at school, the inhabitants of Montigny, and even
from Claudine’s absent-minded father, who had actually noticed her three-
day absence and had been wondering what had happened to his daughter
(167). Van Gennep states that those members of the community who have
been initiated are endowed with a “magico-religious” status for the rest
of the group. Claudine and the other students are greeted by townspeople
waving to them from windows during their triumphant return to the school
(166). Their status has been raised in the eyes of the citizenry, and they are
treated with a new respect and honor.

Several other women’s education novels include similar rites of passage
concerning the final exam or the entrance exams to a new school, including
Reval’s Sévriennes (1900) and Lycéennes (1901), Compain’s L’Un vers l’autre
(1903), and Babin’s Pharmacienne (1907). For several heroines, their entire
teaching career could be viewed as one long rite of passage. For example,
the teaching career of Compain’s heroine, Laure, spans the period of time
when she is separated from her overbearing husband and their home. The
preliminal stages include the detailed description of her train ride to the
new school and her incorporation into the new setting with her supervisor.
The liminal stage is represented by her yearlong experience as a teacher,
including the trials, experiments, and decisions that she makes. Her return
to her home and husband at the end of the novel indicates the postliminal

6. “on nous met dehors, enfiévrées et bruyantes à l’idée que nous viendrons lire ce soir, sur une
grande liste clouée à la porte, les noms des candidates admises à l’oral du lendemain” (Colette 145).
stages of reintegration with the community, but with a new, more elevated status vis-à-vis her husband and their marriage. The rite of passage, traditionally found in novels of development, is thus often a part of Belle Epoque women’s education novels, whether they discuss the rites of passages of female students or those of new women teachers.

Because each novel centers on a women’s or girls’ school, there are traces of the classic utopian island, isolated or separated from the harsh realities of the world. Each narrative develops the portrait of a women’s community that exists in a state of semidetachment from the outside, and the arrival scene is therefore a primary element for all of the heroines in these women’s education novels. Whether the protagonist will be studying or teaching, the texts include the details of her travel to and arrival at the new school, her first impressions of the town and school, and her initial difficulties with the new environment and strangers.

In Esther de Suze’s novel *Institutrice*, the heroine, Marie Thérèse, describes in detail the stages of her transition from student to teacher. First, she notes the anxious wait for the letter containing the governmental assignment to a girls’ school (common also in Reval’s novels, including *Sévrivennes*). For Marie Thérèse, this period is prolonged; she does not receive a teaching assignment until January. The train ride to her new school is experienced as a mixture of apprehension and excitement, but it soon turns into a disaster as she mistakenly gets off the train too early, thirty minutes before her station. Since there are no scheduled means of transportation for five hours and it is already six in the evening, she realizes that she must walk the last miles to her new village in the snowstorm by herself. At first it appears that she will not be able to survive the cold and dark. She stops to cry on a frozen bridge, feeling sharply her loneliness and the indifference of the train officials and the villagers who could not arrange some kind of transportation for her. Yet as she contemplates the beauty of her natural surroundings—the stars, the snow, and the mountains around her—she regains confidence and presses on alone. The protagonist in *Institutrice* thus finds her inspiration in nature, a trait harking back to the classic eighteenth-century bildungsroman and to texts from the Romantic era of the nineteenth century.

During the transitional voyage from a known way of life to the new school, the heroine often undergoes a trial of moral character and a new opportunity to test her fortitude. The journey to the new school may also be uplifting and encouraging, serving as a moment of reflection that reinforces the new teacher’s ideals. Laure Deborda, in *L’Un vers l’autre*, after reading her subscriptions to “des revues féministes” and “L’Eve nouvelle”
during her train trip to her new school, explains that she feels “a powerful feeling of communion with unknown women pursuing, by diverse means, the same work of emancipation, for themselves at first, and for their sex” (Compain 1903, 167).

In contrast to the voyage section, the arrival scene in these women’s education novels usually involves an initial disappointment with the physical housing arranged for the new schoolteacher: Laure in *L’Un vers l’autre* and Marie-Thérèse in *Institutrice* are both disheartened by the severe and unadorned rooms they are assigned to live in. In Reval’s second education novel, *Un Lycée de jeunes filles* (1901), the protagonist cannot find a place to rent. The townspeople harbor such strong hostility toward the public girls’ high school that they refuse to rent their rooms to its teachers. It is only through the ingenuity of a Sévrienne alumnna, Berthe Passy, who has been teaching in the town for several years, that the newcomer is able to find a place to stay.

The initial contact with the town’s mayor and priest and the school’s headmistress provide one of the moments of greatest tension for the new schoolteacher. In *L’Un vers l’autre*, Laure is fortunate to find that the headmistress, Germaine Lachaud, is friendly and supportive. Marguerite Triel, in *Sériennes*, however, finds her headmistress, Mme Jules Ferron, to be icy and distant. In *Institutrice*, Marie-Thérèse’s introduction to the mayor is deferred: he is not available to greet and welcome her, as she had hoped. Instead, the mayor’s maid shows her around the schoolteacher’s humble living quarters and the rudimentary classroom that she will be using. The mayor and priest in her new town are initially supportive of Marie-Thérèse, an exception in the novel of education, where generally such people are skeptical of the unmarried and independent women who have been sent to teach or practice in their towns.

For students, in contrast, the arrival is usually marked by awe and excitement. In Reval’s third education novel, *Lycéennes* (1902), the protagonist, Françoise Tréveray, is pleasantly surprised by the beauty of her new high school in Paris, the Lycée Maintenon. Fresh from the provinces, she writes to her sister in a naïve, but appreciative, voice: “I made my entrance at the Lycée Maintenon yesterday. God, a high school is a beautiful thing! That, a high school! No, a palace.” Her lengthy description of the exterior

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7. “un sentiment puissant de communion avec des femmes inconnues, poursuivant, par des moyens divers, la même œuvre d’affranchissement, pour elles-mêmes d’abord, et pour leur sexe” (Compain 1903, 167).

8. “J’ai fait hier, mon entrée à Maintenon. Dieu! que c’est beau un lycée! Ça un lycée! Non, un palais... Notre lycée porte très haut, vers le quatrième ou le cinquième, une coiffure de géraniums...”
demonstrates her favorable impression, but it also contains an unusual organic simile, as she compares the urban facade to a small waterfall or stream from her native countryside. As she continues her acclamatory description of the building’s interior and her new headmistress and teachers, she marvels repeatedly at the expense the state has gone to in order to provide such sumptuous facilities for her and her peers (Reval 1902, 30). Claudine, usually cynical and faultfinding, is similarly impressed by the clean classrooms and updated furniture in her new school building in Claudine à l’école (Colette 1984a, 89). Thus, all of the plot elements that constitute the arrival scene in these novels—the voyage, the new school, the first meeting with new peers and supervisors—play an important role in confirming the notion that the women’s community will be remote from mainstream society. These elements are useful for establishing the novel’s setting, but they are also employed as a means to separate the heroine, to place her in an isolated educational space that is only partially connected to mass culture and her previous life. Once she has become detached from the “real” world, the protagonist is free to engage in intellectual activities in a purely female environment.

This opportunity to live in a stimulating intellectual female community is one of the great changes that this particular genre brings to French literature. Previous representations of the women’s community in French literature had mainly been “unofficial,” as feminist theorist Nina Auerbach describes it: “Women in literature who evade the aegis of men also evade traditional categories of definition. Since a community of women is a furtive, unofficial, often underground entity, it can be defined by the complex, shifting, often contradictory attitudes it evokes” (Auerbach 11). In contrast to the “unofficial” women’s community so typical in French literature before this era, the educational establishments in these particular Belle Epoque novels have been founded by the French government and are therefore not “furtive” or “underground” communities. As publicly funded schools, they do have some restrictions regarding curriculum and final exam guidelines, for example, which are determined by the national Ministry of Education, an all-male office of bureaucrats and educators. In addition to the laws and requirements set by male academicians, these women’s classes are sometimes interrupted or invaded by male intruders: suspicious local officials, inspectors, inspectors,
regional superintendents, members of the boys’ school staff, or guest lecturers from the local university. The women, however, do live, teach, and learn in a mainly female environment, and the individual directors and professors have some authority to lead their students according to their own personal philosophies. The women’s communities that they construct therefore result in a diversity of learning and living environments specifically aimed at educating women. These utopian women’s environments may not be described explicitly as a future world of happiness and equality or some isolated island of paradisiacal beauty. Women’s education novelists often employ their critical views of the school system and its dystopian or negative aspects as a springboard for their more hopeful dreams of a better education and a better future for students and teachers alike.

There exists, of course, many different types of communities of women, including some that are organized in a familial structure, some in a businesslike structure, and others still in a romance structure; being located in schools, these communities are usually intellectual as well. The variety in the form of the community is equal to the complexity of each, for every one of these schools contains a network of women: directors, teachers, staff, and students of various ages, personalities, and abilities, all of whom contribute to the community in assorted ways. In the following close readings of the four novels, the focus will remain on the development or “emergence” of the main protagonist, to use the Bakhtinian term. But this larger community of women constantly shapes the heroine’s thoughts and molds her system of values, and thus it will be important to refer to the community often as well.

Colette’s Claudine à l’école (1900) is probably the best-known female education novel from this era in France, and it is the only one of the four discussed here that is still in print today. The eponymous Claudine, from a bourgeois family in the tiny village of Montigny, gives a cynical but at the

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9. Frances Bartkowski explains, “Few feminist utopias . . . take on a total revision of the world women might make; the social planning of earlier utopias is instead transformed into an extensive social critique which exposes and makes use of the dystopian as well” (Bartkowski 12). Bartkowski is speaking of feminist utopian novels from the 1970s, but the education novels that we will be studying here contain similar features.

10. I am borrowing here from some of Nina Auerbach’s categories (familial, businesslike, and romance structures) for communities of women.

11. Excerpts from Louise-Marie Companis’s L’Un vers l’autre have been published in English translation (see Hause and Waelti-Walters, Feminisms of the Belle Epoque (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1994)).
same time affectionate description of her last year in the local public schools. Her critique covers both the subject matter taught at the school and the behavior displayed by her teachers, but her argument against the academic program is shaded differently than her attack on the dubious morality of her elders.

On nonacademic issues, and specifically the behavior of her superiors, Claudine’s diary observations do not hide anything or protect anyone. One of her greatest sources of amusement involves uncovering the incredible corruption, scandal, and politics that she finds rampant in her school. Typical of most protagonists in novels of educational development, Claudine may have sought a mentor figure at her school. All her female “role models,” however, are involved in various intrigues, usually sexual. Claudine tries to remain an aloof outsider to their activities even as she chronicles them with great detail in her journal. The beautiful new instructor, appropriately named “Aimée” Lathenay, becomes the center of school gossip, as she simultaneously engages in a love affair with the headmistress, Mlle Sergent, and accepts a proposal of marriage from the boys’ teacher, Armand Duplessis. The powerful district superintendent, M. Dutertre, rather openly initiates a sexual relationship with Aimée, when he asks her to leave her classroom in the middle of the afternoon in order to “verifier une fissure” (check a crack) in the walls of the headmistress’s new bedroom in the new school buildings (Colette 1984a, 74–79). When Aimée’s fiancé finds out about this “crack checking” episode, he spends the night wandering in the woods, returning completely disheveled and exploding in a violent fit of rage in front of the students the following afternoon. Claudine narrates his attack on Aimée, Dutertre, and Sergent: “He shouted: ‘Filthy little bitch! Ah, so you let yourself be fumbled for money by that swine of a District Inspector [Monsieur Dutertre]? You’re worse than a streetwalker but that one there [Mademoiselle Sergent] is even worse than you that damned redhead who’s making you like herself. Two bitches, two bitches’” (Colette 2001a, 78–79).

These two disruptive classroom invasions by male outsiders result in the closing of the school for a week and the transfer of Duplessis to another school by the “cochon de délégué cantonal,” Monsieur Dutertre. The teachers’ dubious behavior takes yet another twist when the headmistress and

12. “Il crie: ‘Espèce de petite rosse! Ah! tu vas te faire tripoter pour de l’argent par ce cochon de délégué cantonal (M. Dutertre)! Tu es pire qu’une fille de trottoir, mais celle-ci (Mlle Sergent) vaut encore moins que toi, cette sacrée rousse qui te rend pareille à elle. Deux rosses, deux rosses’” (Colette 87).
Dutertre are caught by surprise in bed together during the end-of-the-year school dance. The comportment promoted by government officials for women schoolteachers, “exemplary in conduct, avoiding local disputes and gossip, and keeping a distance from men” (Clark 16) is ripped to shreds in the local Montigny school system. Our heroine Claudine is able to laugh at these hilarious scenes specifically because she has not become directly implicated in them.

Claudine is not exempt from their seductions, however, as she also found Aimée attractive and enjoyed her intimate moments with the young schoolteacher during private English lessons at her home. Yet Aimée cannot serve as a mentor figure for Claudine because she is too young and inexperienced to be a role model. Rather, she turns into a romantic interest for Claudine. The idea that the headmistress, Mlle Sergent, might serve as a mentor for Claudine is also improbable. Sergent, jealous and possessive, forces Aimée to cancel her private English lessons with Claudine and then pettily jubilates over this victory against Claudine, as if she were a rival to compete with rather than a student in her school. The result of this confrontation is a lack of respect for Mlle Sergent on Claudine’s part that verges on animosity, all of which she cleverly cloaks as a form of harmless adolescent rebellion. The farcical and occasionally subversive actions of the characters in Claudine’s school may tend to confirm the popular image of the Belle Epoque woman. That is, she is sexually perverse and ludic. The portrait of Claudine, however, does not remain static or stereotypical. In her search for a possible mentor figure, she offers an image of a developing modern heroine: independent, intelligent, sensitive, and highly aware of her elders’ misdoings.

In her critique of the academic side of things in her novel of educational development, Colette depicts in exacting detail the “technical” side of being a student, in great contrast to the men’s novels studied in the previous chapter. She includes numerous descriptions of coursework, exams, and school activities. What is intriguing in this narrative is that Colette elaborates the socialization process the students must undergo by linking that process to a variety of technical or academic tasks they must perform.

For example, Claudine’s middle-class background gives her a general advantage over her classmates, who come mainly from working-class and farming families. Labeled an “assistant” to the imported male music professor, Claudine is the one who teaches the required class to her peers since she is the only one in the school who knows how to play the piano and read music (Colette 1984a, 50–53). In this scene, Claudine actually takes on the role of mentor to her working-class peers. Her extensive reading and her critical
mind also enable her to write excellent compositions, for which she receives the near-impossible grade of 19 out of 20 points on the brevet exam (162). She is not aloof from her working-class friends, however, and realizes that her classmates have skills that she does not possess. For example, Claudine comments that she finds arithmetic problems very difficult and looks to her peers for help in that subject area: “Most of these little daughters of grasping peasants or shrewd seamstresses are gifted for arithmetic to an extent that has often amazed me” (Colette 2001a, 133). Claudine’s tone concerning her classmates and their parents may appear condescending and critical, but she does admire their abilities and openly seeks their help in math. In fact, most of the students in her class help each other with their weaker subjects, with the exception of the humorless Jaubert twins.

Claudine’s class status is without doubt bourgeois, yet she did not learn the traditional activities taught to girls of her class, in part because she did not have a mother or governess to teach her these “feminine” skills. As a result, she prefers climbing trees and playing marbles to embroidering handkerchiefs. In school, this lack of feminized training becomes obvious: Claudine’s disdain for and disinterest in the required needlework and drawing classes are shown both directly and indirectly, through cheating and bribing other students to do her assignments for her (Colette 1984a, 60, 68, 94–95). In the novel, Claudine is the only student who, at age fifteen, continues to use physical force to retaliate when insulted or embarrassed. In several scenes, she slaps or punches classmates who have made particularly humiliating remarks about her. Whereas her working-class school friends struggle to acquire those ladylike talents deemed prerequisites for a young bourgeoisie of the leisure class, Claudine has already acquired some of them (music, writing) and belittles others as old-fashioned and boring (needlework, drawing). The socialization process is of secondary importance for Claudine, but it is key for her working-class schoolmates.

Claudine is capable of engaging in a spirited critique of the school’s academic curriculum because of her family’s intellectual background. Since her youth, she has had open access to her father’s library and has read

13. “La plupart de ces petites, filles de paysans avides ou d’ouvrières adroites, ont d’ailleurs le don de l’arithmétique à un point qui m’a souvent stupéfait” (Colette 143). It is interesting to note that Claudine associates good math skills with a particular economic class (working-class or peasant), and not with a specific gender (male). One hundred years later, of course, most educators decry the bias against girls in current teaching practices that creates a disadvantage for them in math and science skills, whether they are from the upper, middle or the working classes.
everything that she could find. Unmonitored reading was considered scandalous behavior for a middle-class schoolgirl at the turn of the century, and her teachers’ and examiners’ reactions to her extracurricular reading activities give proof of this common attitude. During the final oral history exam for the brevet, Claudine reveals her advanced reading knowledge and her strong powers of critical thinking when she challenges the examiner to a theoretical debate on the politics of historical writing:

“Yes, Sir, I read it in Michelet—with full details!”
“Michelet! But this is madness! Michelet, get this into your head, wrote a historical novel in twenty volumes and he dared to call that the History of France! And you come here and talk to me of Michelet!”
“Anyway, Michelet’s less boring than Duruy!” (Colette 2001a, 141)\(^{14}\)

Claudine’s bold rejoinder not only critiques the prescribed positivist historian, Victor Duruy, she also puts forth her idea of a better choice of historian: Jules Michelet. Underlying her disapproval, moreover, is a subtle and extended critique of the national school system for girls in general, since it was Victor Duruy who, as minister of public instruction, established the first curriculum and wrote the first proposal for government-funded secondary schools for girls in 1867. Surprisingly, after her unruly outburst, Claudine passes her history exam and her examiner even praises her independent thought, relieved to hear a critical response rather than yet another brainless recounting of historical facts. He proclaims to Mlle Sergent, “there’s no harm done . . . we see so many dull ones!” (140–41).\(^{15}\)

This exam scene provides an example of the dual emergence of the main character and the academic world in which she lives: as the powers of critical analysis of the Claudine character become more refined, we find a simultaneous emergence of examiners who appreciate original ideas and strong

14. — Oui, monsieur, je l’ai lu dans Michelet, avec des détails!
   — Michelet! mais c’est de la folie! Michelet, entendez-vous bien, a fait un roman historique en vingt volumes et il a osé appeler ça l’Histoire de la France! Et vous venez me parler de Michelet! . . .
   — Michelet est toujours moins embêtant que Duruy! (Colette 152)

15. “il n’y a pas de mal. . . . On voit tant de dindes!” (Colette 152).
opinions in young women. Similarly, when asked to take over the class while Mlle Sergent is busy helping another class, Claudine decides to dictate to her peers a poem by the Symbolist Gustave Kahn, rather than the bland examples provided in the school manual. When Mlle Sergent discovers the switch, she is angry that Claudine disobeyed her, but Claudine can see that she privately enjoys the poem and admires Claudine’s knowledge and spirit: “But there was no conviction behind her scolding, for in her secret heart, she’s rather amused by these hoaxes” (Colette 2001a, 38). Even though Mlle Sergent feels obligated to chastise Claudine publicly for testing her authority in front of the other girls, she tacitly approves Claudine’s independence.

Claudine’s academic experience is affected by the transitional stage in French pedagogical history, when attitudes about the reasons for and the goals of women’s education were changing significantly. These changes influence her last year of classes in very concrete terms as construction of the new Montigny school during the academic year forces Claudine and her classmates to continue their education during a period of actual physical change. As a result, the plot and the characters are part of “the landscape,” as Bakhtin labels it in his essay on the bildungsroman. They “do not enter it from the outside, are not invented to fit the landscape, but are unfolded in it as though they were present from the very beginning” (Bakhtin 49). In numerous scenes, Claudine’s class is asked to interrupt its lesson to help move the schools’ books and furniture, the professors’ private property, and themselves from one temporary classroom to the next. Throughout the novel, her class is held in the elementary school, in the town hall, and in both the old and the new high schools. The chaos created by each move is an excuse for distractions from the academic program: pranks, spying, and games. But each new setting usually brings with it new books, new desks, new classroom activities, and sometimes even new students. On the final day of Claudine’s formal education, when she receives her certificate and graduates from school, the new school is also “certified,” as elected officials arrive in Montigny to publicly dedicate the new building. The symbolic emergence of the heroine is thus accompanied by the physical emergence of the new permanent school building.

After Claudine’s critique of her teachers’ behavior and the restrictive school system, it would be preposterous to expect her to find maternal or intellectual role models in her provincial school. The women’s “community” is more of a farce than a utopian subculture in Claudine a l’école, and we do

16. “elle gronde sans conviction, car, tout au fond, ces fumisteries ne lui déplaisent pas” (Colette 45).
not find familial-like structures here. Yet Claudine is no lost orphan, even though she has neither teacher nor advisor nor parent to whom she can turn for help and counsel. Rather, she takes on an identity that reflects her changing surroundings, and unhampered by specified feminine roles or constraints, she develops her own counterauthority to the school.

Colette is therefore not simply criticizing the Third Republic school system in her farcical portrayal of Claudine’s village school. She is also creating an alternative to the rigid definitions that government school reforms offered: an alternative space and time in which her Claudine character could express her own thoughts freely. After school, during a long illness, and on school vacations, Claudine engages in activities that allow her to build her own identity. Her private English lessons with Aimée (Colette 1984a, 14–16, 26–27, 38–41), her long strolls in the Montigny woods with her friend Claire (8–9, 98, 109–10), and her days spent reading and writing alone in her father’s library (113) are described in her diary as moments of significant value to her. She complains that she is bored with classroom work, often assigned to pass the time and leave her professors free to gossip and caress each other in the hallways. She claims that she attends school only to keep herself informed of (and entertained by) the latest scandal. Claudine’s heavy cynicism serves as a cover for her idealized visions of a school where girls would thrive, and where teachers might actually be passionately interested in teaching and could provide strong role models for their students. Such an ideal school would include a curriculum that allowed students the freedom to read extensively and think critically, rather than simply memorize facts and test well. And probably most important for Claudine, girls would be allowed to run free; one of her greatest dreads is the idea of being enclosed or imprisoned inside the walls of a convent school or a lycée boarding school. Thus, by way of negative or dystopian examples, Colette points to a possible utopian women’s space in French culture.

Like Claudine, Gabrielle Reval’s heroine, Marguerite Triel, also critiques an eminent pedagogue of the Third Republic. Rather than Victor Duruy, Reval’s target is the first director of the Ecole Normale Supérieure de Sèvres, the prestigious teacher training school for women, located in the suburbs of Paris. Mme Jules Favre directed the school at Sèvres for fifteen years, from its inception in 1881 until her death in 1896, and left her mark in a number of ways. A devout Protestant, she believed in intellectual liberation and freedom of movement for her female students. She allowed her Sévriennes to come and go from the school grounds as they wished, because she felt that, as adults, they were responsible for their own actions. She also
held formal dinners with her students in her apartment on Wednesdays, to encourage critical thought and debate, and every evening before bed, each student came to spend a few minutes with her and discuss her progress, both moral and intellectual. Although most Sévriennes applauded Favre’s efforts to liberate her students’ minds, there remained a certain disagreement over her treatment of students’ emotional and moral development (Margadant 88–92).

In the novel Sévriennes, the director is named Mme Jules Ferron, a thinly disguised transformation of the last name Favre, but with an interesting “iron” (fer) connotation added. The fictional director has all the characteristics of the original Mme Jules Favre, and the heroine Marguerite engages in a two-part critique of the school, from both a pedagogical and a personal viewpoint. Marguerite’s conclusions, however, are the opposite of those of the Claudine character. Marguerite confesses in the diary sections of the novel that she has been seeking a mentor figure at the school, but she is disappointed in her professors and the headmistress of l’Ecole Normale Supérieure de Sèvres. This is not because they are all involved in multiple love affairs with one another, as was the case at Claudine’s school. On the contrary, Marguerite believes that her professors are too aloof, too cold, and generally too dispassionate in their rapport with their students, thus rendering a true mentor-disciple relationship impossible. After her first official meeting with the director, Marguerite feels that the director was “glacial” and “engulfed in her armchair, looking me over with her gray eye.” She asks Marguerite a few dry questions and dismisses her after only five minutes (Reval 1900, 27). Marguerite’s main problem with the teacher training school at Sèvres is the fact that the women in authority do not take her into their arms, comfort her as a mother would a child, and guide her through difficult times. While she knows that the professors are all deeply committed to their “mission” (l’apostolat), as the teaching profession is often labeled throughout the novel, and they do provide a certain intellectual mentorship to the students, they simply do not exude any warmth, charm, or maternal qualities. This last trait Marguerite finds especially wanting in the women’s community at Sèvres, but at the same time, particularly crucial to the Sévriennes’ student experience.

Instead of giving them maternal support, Mme Ferron wishes to instill the values of independence and responsibility in her students. As Marguerite reports in her diary, “[she wants] to prepare us to live on our own, to

17. “engouffrée dans son fauteuil, me fouillant de son oeil gris. D’une voix sèche, elle s’est brièvement informée de la famille que je n’ai plus, de mon humeur, de mes projets. En cinq minutes ce fut fini; sans un mot bienveillant, me voilà congédiée” (Reval 1900, 27).
be self-sufficient, so that a failing will not stop our teaching mission” (Reval 1900, 29). Ferron also insists that they are “responsible and free beings” (29). The primary advisor and tutor for the first-year students, Mlle Vormèse, confirms this approach when she states the dual goals of the school: “Learn to think, Learn to act.” On the methods used to achieve this end, Vormèse repeats Ferron’s official ideology: “The greatest tolerance reigns at the School. You are free. A system of compression would only produce weakened individuals, without resilience, submissive from fear, incapable of acting with vigor in difficult circumstances. . . . Madame Jules Ferron has too much respect for your freedom to require spiritual advising for you. You are free, responsible for your actions.”

In almost every passage concerning the official goals of the Sévrienne education and the values implicit in the education of young women, the words “free” (libres) and “responsible” (responsables) appear. Academically, Marguerite and the other students praise this emphasis. The women’s community at Sèvres encourages students to question each other and their textbooks. They are actually required to go beyond a simple memorization of the facts for the final exams. Several scenes in the classroom, library, and residence halls indicate that the women held lively debates, not only on academic subjects, but on their professors’ pedagogical methods and their own. Such academic freedom proves to be the key to Marguerite’s intellectual and spiritual development throughout her years at Sèvres. Further, these values are essential ones for the young professors who would be sent alone to teach in the provinces, which were often hostile to or suspicious of the new teachers of the Republic. The personal emergence of the main characters of Reval’s novel thus proceeds simultaneously with the development of new pedagogical goals for women at the postsecondary school level and a refreshingly modern view of women’s capacities and rights.

18. “Elle veut nous préparer à vivre par nous-mêmes, à nous suffire, sans qu’une défaillance arrête notre mission de professeur. Elle veut que Sèvres nous donne cette force virile sans laquelle on s’aventure désarmé . . . nous sommes des êtres responsables et libres, nous ne devons attendre d’elle, qu’un mot d’estime ou de blâme” (Reval 1900, 29).
19. “Apprendre à penser; Apprendre à agir” (Reval 1900, 76).
As in other novels about women’s educational development, we find in Sévriennes the utopian label. Mlle Vormèse calls Sèvres a utopian oasis or “paradise” (Reval 1900, 77) for these young women; it is a “port” (76) they have been struggling toward for years, a “propitious refuge” (75) they will be able to recall for moral support after they depart. She recommends that they take advantage of their brief stay in this sheltered haven to prepare themselves for a future life of hardship and service. During her brief inspirational talk, Vormèse, who is named “the soul of the school” by the first-year students, indicates that Sèvres’s basic pedagogical tenet is that it does not follow a single ideology. Each student will be encouraged to find her own path and develop her own system of thought. Her speech indicates clearly to the reader that the students’ professional lives will form a type of quest plot. Once they leave the sanctuary of Sèvres, they will seek new experiences and reach new goals in distant provinces, using the skills, both technical and social, acquired at the school.

But Vormèse also notes that this new class of Sévriennes is much younger than her own class from several years ago. Since the school’s creation ten to fifteen years earlier, the average new student has become younger (entering directly after high school) and more naïve. Although the director, Mme Ferron, does not appear to have adjusted for this change, Mlle Vormèse is aware of the girls’ difficulties and encourages them to seek support in each other and with her. Her advice thus indicates a change from the official Sévrienne pedagogical guidelines of freedom and responsibility to one of community and mutual support. The women’s community at Sèvres thus begins to resemble the conventional and patriarchal nuclear family, in which Vormèse takes the role of maternal nurturance and support while Ferron takes the distant and rational role of father figure. The school’s unofficial pedagogy begins to evolve in the same general direction as Marguerite’s developing pedagogical opinions. The official ideology of Sèvres, however, as stated by Mme Ferron, remains pointed in a direction precisely opposite to the thoughts of Marguerite.

On the nonacademic level, the new liberty and self-sufficiency can be intimidating for first-year students, especially after years of living in the restrictive world of boarding schools. Marguerite comments that she is worried about so much independence of movement and thought: some of the Sévriennes are too young and prey to frivolous behavior (Reval 1900, 38). In response to this glut of freedom, Marguerite and other new students are occasionally confused or lost. As Marguerite’s friend Berthe Passy comments,
“Today I’m just as dumb as six months ago, and I’m less calm!” Adrienne Chantilly, who entered Sèvres at the top of the first-year class, is given an indefinite leave of absence from the school when it is discovered that she is involved in an affair with a philosophy professor from the Collège de France (249–54). After three years at Sèvres, of course, each student will have developed her own rules of conduct, but at first they express their confusion, stray down undesirable paths, and look to others for indications of a system of values to embrace. It is through these “false starts,” so typical of the classic novel of development, that the women characters begin to build their own identities, even though they never leave the safe haven of the school while conducting their explorations.

In Marguerite’s case, the values she begins to embrace as essential to her new identity are maternal ones: her desire to find a mother figure in her professors uncovers a hidden set of goals in the Sèvrienne education. The dominant rhetoric of independence and intellectual freedom espoused by Sèvres’ leaders may camouflage this unspoken aspect of the educational mission, but even the most stoic and virile of the first-year students, Victoire Nollet, picks up the underlying message and believes that her goal as a teacher will be to shape the hearts (as well as the minds) of her students (Reval 1900, 179–80). Unstated but clearly a factor in the educational goals of Sèvres: teachers-in-training were expected to be capable of molding their future students’ values and to act as “a little mother” (une petite mère) to them, in addition to increasing their knowledge of facts.

In response to this hidden agenda, Marguerite not only searches for a maternal role model at the school, she and her fellow students seek opportunities to develop their own maternal skills. In a surprising scene, Marguerite and a number of close friends race to her attic room after class to “baptize” a doll given to them by their literature professor, M. D’Aveline, because he thought that they were all working too hard. Following the baptism, they debate D’Aveline’s merits and faults and, more generally, the quality of their education at Sèvres. The discussion is typical of the spirited exchanges that these intelligent women engage in every day. What is notable about the scene is the fact that the doll offered to them in jest is taken seriously and without question. Not only is it passed around for all to hold and cuddle, but Marguerite, who appears to have designated herself the primary caretaker, clothes the doll and sings a Schubert lullaby to it while the others

21. “Aujourd’hui je suis aussi bête qu’il y a six mois et je suis moins tranquille!” (Reval 1900, 118).
debate heatedly around her. At the close of this episode, an older student, Renée Diolat, remarks on the importance of Marguerite’s quiet maternal gesture for these young women: “There’s that wisdom that you were searching for so far away . . . and it’s d’Aveline who has sent it to us.” D’Aveline’s gift, meant as a joke to raise the students’ spirits, simultaneously relegates the maternal or missionary values of the Sévrienne education to a level of secondary importance, since it is a toy and a prank. Nevertheless, the students find comfort and wisdom (cette sagesse) in maternal values, whether in their professors at Sèvres (Mlle Vormèse, for example) or in themselves as future schoolteachers.

In the real world outside of Sèvres, citizens and school directors do not always appreciate those values. The tragic suicide of Isabelle Marlotte after a difficult first year as a high school teacher provides the Sévriennes with an upsetting example of the complexities of adjusting to small town expectations. A superior student at Sèvres, well balanced and high-spirited, Isabelle began her new job by working foremost on her maternal qualities and quickly won the affection of her students (“I insisted on being their little mother”). She is immediately mistrusted by the town, labeled “a dangerous woman emancipator, a revolted woman, a nihilist” by her director, and given a public reprimand from the regional inspector (Reval 285). Unwilling and unable to accept these false accusations, a job demotion, and a miserable existence without friendship in the provinces, Isabelle decides to end her life. The importance of the official values of Sèvres, responsibility and freedom, prohibits Isabelle from seeking help from Mme Ferron or other professors with influence at the Ministry of Education. She writes to her friends who are still studying at Sèvres only when it is too late for their aid. In her farewell letter, her critique of the school’s emphasis on principles and independence is mixed with a fond nostalgia for her years there.

22. “La voilà cette sagesse que vous cherchiez si loin . . . et c’est d’Aveline qui nous l’envoie” (Reval 1900, 120).
23. “j’ai voulu être leur petite mère” (Reval 1900, 284).
24. “The School has a soul. Something binding attaches us to Sèvres. You will see, you will miss it. . . . And yet, it’s just that, it’s the overly ardent life, it’s the habit that Sèvres forms in us too young of generalizing, of applying the logic of an ideal system to the abundance that submerges us, that makes us so unhappy. But I love it even more for being so beautiful and so dangerous.” (L’Ecole avait une âme. Quelque chose d’indénouable nous attache à Sèvres. Vous le verrez, son regret vous suit. . . . Et pourtant, c’est Elle, c’est sa vie trop ardente, c’est l’habitude qu’elle nous donne trop tôt de généraliser, d’appliquer, au fourmillement qui nous engloutit, la logique d’un système idéal, qui nous rendent si malheureuses. Mais je l’aime encore plus d’être si belle et si dangereuse.) (Reval 1900, 283).
Isabelle’s inability to reach a compromise with her new director or to work out a deal with the inspectors who want to relocate her is thus blamed on the idealistic training at Sèvres. Her story also offers a prime example of the contrast between men’s and women’s novels of educational development. In *Les Déracinés* the high school students returned to their mentor Bouteiller for encouragement and help during difficult moments in their first year in Paris, but Isabelle refuses to contact her former professors and mentors, driven by their insistence on independence and self-reliance.

Marguerite’s critique and praise of the Sèvrienne education point to her views for the ideal teacher training school. It would obviously include professors who had a passion for teaching and who were highly capable academics. But it would also include more professors who were interested in developing the emotional side of their students. They would act in more caring, maternal ways to better prepare their students for the isolated and difficult life of a provincial schoolteacher by emphasizing cooperation and adaptation rather than independence and competition. Her utopian vision of the schoolteacher’s world also includes supervisors and townspeople who appreciate a young teacher’s situation as a lonely newcomer and support her.

Reval’s description of student-professor relationships thus contributes to her portrait of a school whose intellectual and emotional atmosphere is the polar opposite of the climate found in Colette’s fictional school. Yet, in both novels, the authors create heroines who long for some sort of positive affective relations with their female mentors and their peers at school, in addition to someone who will challenge their intelligence. Because both Marguerite and Claudine have difficulties finding women in positions of authority whom they could emulate, they must develop their own definitions of the femme nouvelle.

The heroine of Louise-Marie Compain’s *L’Un vers l’autre*, Laure Deborda, is unusual by comparison, as she is able to find positive role models in her school and her critique is directed at French society more generally, rather than at the French public schools. After less than a year of marriage, Laure decides to leave her comfortable bourgeois residence in order to escape a suffocating marriage with a dominating husband who does not allow her to pursue any activities outside the home. Her decision to study for a teaching degree, so that she may live as she chooses, is an act so daring that it produces panic and consternation in her conservative, middle-class family. The benefits of her education and her new career, however, outweigh the negative criticism that Laure receives both from her parents and her in-laws.
At the beginning of the novel, Compain presents us with an emerging heroine whose world is static and stifling. But in reaction to her decisions, her world is roused from its dormant state and begins to emerge along with the main protagonist.

In great contrast to Colette’s and Reval’s emphasis on students and student concerns, Compain spends less than one paragraph on her heroine’s studies and exams. Instead of focusing on these traditional student rites of passage, the novel examines Laure’s initiation into life as a teacher and her interactions with other professors and with the citizens of the town where she has been assigned a teaching post. This new location, Villebelle, is in the midst of turmoil and debate, reflecting Laure’s personal situation. While Sèvres and Montigny are relatively calm towns, Villebelle’s citizens, on strike at the local factory, are questioning the status quo in the same way that Laure Deborda is. Her school, while providing an oasis for Laure, does not entirely escape the general feeling of upheaval prevalent in Villebelle.

In another contrast to Claudine and Marguerite, Laure admires the women teachers at her new school for their openness and concern for students and colleagues alike. She sees in these women the utopian image of the future; the modern woman who will be considered an equal to man, not his servant or possession. And she has colleagues at the school who are positive and sympathetic role models, people whom she labels “generous” and “enthusiastic,” rather than, as she had feared, “unconscious of the greatness of their task.”25 The literature professor, Mlle Charlotte Ringuet, who comes from a peasant family, holds strong beliefs about the teaching profession and the goals of the regional teacher training school where they work.26 Mlle Germaine Lachaud, the school’s headmistress, comes from a family of educators and knew early in life that her vocation would be in the field of education. Her professors had provided her with positive encouragement, and she appears to Laure to be one of what she calls the

25. “Elle avait trouvé en cette ville lointaine des femmes généreuses et enthousiastes de leur oeuvre; non, comme parfois elle l’avait redouté avec terreur, des êtres inconscients de la grandeur de leur tâche” (Compain 1903, 178).

26. “To give to the children of the French people devoted and enlightened guides. Shouldn’t the country be regenerated by these chaste and educated young girls who would go out to the far away countryside to fight against ignorance, vice and superstition?” (Donner aux enfants du peuple français des guides dévouées et éclairées. La patrie ne devait-elle pas être régénérée par ces jeunes filles instruites et chastes qui s’en iraient, dans les campagnes éloignées, lutter contre l’ignorance, le vice et la superstition?) (Compain 1903, 187).
“new nuns” (religieuses nouvelles), women who will use education to provide a social emancipation of the people. Germaine became a headmistress at age twenty-four, and seven years later, when Laure Deborda first meets her, she is still enthusiastic about her life’s “mission.” Although Laure had not planned on becoming a teacher as these women did, she finds encouragement and guidance from the strong role models they provide for her.

Unfortunately, Laure’s utopian visions for her new vocation are undermined by the jealousies of one colleague at school, Mme Vergnier, and by her political alliances with hostile citizens of Villebelle. Vergnier disrupts the community of women that the headmistress had established in the school because she covets her position and power. After the fall of the republican ministry, she decides to launch her attack (Compain 1903, 217). Vergnier is also jealous of Laure’s friendship with the headmistress, and to injure both women’s reputations, Vergnier quizzes her niece, who is a student in both Laure’s and the headmistress’s classes (200–202). Based on her niece’s reports of their lectures, Vergnier accuses the professors of atheism and internationalism, and rumors begin circulating around town that Laure and the headmistress are indulging in “a Jacobin and libertarian education” (204).

Although antipathetic, Mme Vergnier is a significant character for this education novel because she provides the important link between the isolated and utopian school for women and the public spheres of the town and of the Ministry of Education. She commences a chain of inquiry in the education department when she notifies her cousin Deriou, who notifies the inspecteur d’académie (the regional superintendent), who in turn notifies his superior, the recteur (rector), to investigate Laure’s, Charlotte’s, and the headmistress’s teaching. She also stirs up gossip in the local paper La France Progressiste (whose editor is also related to her) about Laure’s and the other women teachers’ attendance of a meeting of socialists to support the strike of a local union of factory workers. The published article addresses the intentions of the professors, implying that they were drawing inspiration for their classes from the “declamatory diatribes” of the “atheist” socialists speaking at the rally (Compain 1903, 219). The rector, of course, can find nothing inflammatory in either the teachers’ lectures or their students’ compositions when he comes to inspect the classes. The newspaper article, however, is a threat not only to Laure’s and the other teachers’ personal reputations, but also to the “standing” of the entire school. To make amends,

27. “sans espoir de récompenses futures, se donnent à la grande œuvre d’émancipation sociale par l’éducation” (Compain 1903, 189).
the rector requires that Laure and the other teachers apologize to the editor of *La France Progressiste* for having attended a political meeting during their free time, the implication being that their jobs were on the line should they refuse (230–34). It becomes clear that the teachers’ liberty outside the utopian space of the school is severely limited.

The rumors spread by Mme Vergnier, along with her potent political connections, almost ruin Laure’s reputation, but even worse, they force Laure and her colleagues into a position of powerlessness that proves too difficult for Laure to bear. Even though the truth about the scandal is finally revealed, Laure is devastated by the tension and humiliation of having to please the all-male juries of town authorities and regional school superintendents in order to keep her teaching position. The intrusions by male investigators into her school’s sheltered women’s community finally result in a recurring nightmare about male administrators physically assaulting her in her classroom, where she is rescued at the last minute by her husband (Compain 1903, 239).  

The novel creates two separate spheres: the tumultuous political and social world of the provincial city of Villebelle and the relatively stable educational world of the teacher training school for women. On one hand, Laure, Germaine, and Charlotte are interested in the city’s political meetings and the factory workers’ strike, and in a peripheral way, they become involved in the debates that are circulating around these issues. But when they do venture into the world outside their women’s community, restrictions and hostilities rain down on them, invading their classrooms and their personal lives. If the regional inspector chooses to demand an explanation from the teachers, they must present a point-by-point justification of every one of their lectures for his approval. And they must deny any personal political leanings.

On the other hand, their stable school environment is, in fact, shown to be rigid, and they are powerless to make any changes in the curriculum or in the educational structures mandated by the state. Laure is disappointed to find that her classes must be closely monitored, not only because of the unannounced inspections by suspicious superintendents but also for the

28. In Belle Epoque history, we find that there were very few *inspectrices*, or female school inspectors, in France, so the fact that all the regional inspectors are male in both *Claudine à l’école* and *L’Un vers l’autre* is historically accurate, and not only a plot element used by the authors to create conflict for the women schoolteachers. For more on the fight to authorize *inspectrices* in the public education system, see Linda Clark’s 1988 article “A Battle of the Sexes in a Professional Setting: The Introduction of *Inspectrices Primaires*, 1889–1914.”
students’ sake. They are required to pass exhausting exams at the end of the year and therefore cannot spend time in class discussing ideas, but rather must memorize facts and figures. Because students must learn so many facts for the brevet supérieur exams, the aspect that Laure had believed would be most challenging in teaching young girls—“the development of their minds”—is almost completely set aside. “How can we develop the originality of each individual with such a method that tends to make of each young girl’s brain a drawer filled with the same knowledge imposed by the identity of the programs.” 29 The curriculum requirements of the national pedagogical system thus place considerable constraints on the academic freedom that Laure and her students might have enjoyed. When Laure decides to offer a course on English literature, in addition to the required English language courses, the students are less than enthusiastic, explaining that the subject matter will not appear on the final exams and is therefore a waste of time (Compain 1903, 197). No one openly criticizes her efforts, but Laure discovers the real academic goals of her students when she overhears a conversation where one of them says of her literature course, “What’s the use?” (“A quoi bon?” Compain 1903, 216). So Laure decides that she must conform her lesson plans to student needs, spending less time on ideas and more time on factual information. The narrator concludes, “Thus even in her teaching she did not find the freedom that she had dreamed of.” 30

What Laure had hoped would be a liberating and intellectually stimulating career set in a quiet refuge far from the injustices of the real world reveals itself to be an imprisoning and discouraging environment where freedom of thought and action is almost as impossible as it was in her marriage.

L’Un vers l’autre thus offers an alternative perspective of the educational system: on the affective level, the main protagonist finds that her headmistress and most of her fellow teachers do provide an emotional support system for their students and each other, in contrast with Colette’s and Reval’s heroines. Thus the strong mentor-disciple relationship typical in the male bildungsroman is not only desired but achieved here. What is interesting with Compain is that the heroine never demonstrates feelings of disappointment with her role model, as was often the case in male novels of development. Rather than faulting the mentor, Laure Deborda

29. “Comment développer l’originalité de chaque nature avec une pareille méthode qui tend à faire, de chaque cerveau de jeune fille, un tiroir rempli des mêmes connaissances imposées par l’identité des programmes” (Compain 1903, 197).

30. “Ainsi, dans son enseignement même elle ne trouvait pas la liberté qu’elle avait rêvée” (Compain 1903, 216).
finds shortcomings with the institutional structures of the public education system for girls. Thus Compain’s novel also diverges from the viewpoints expressed by Colette and Reval on such traditions as final exams. Whereas Colette and Reval considered exams to be an unpleasant rite of passage, but a necessary fact of student life, Compain points out in her novel that the exam-based structure of the educational system placed severe limits on the curriculum and on the students’ opportunities to develop and learn. And while both Reval and Colette found that the major source of negative influences came through the administrators of the education system, Compain underlines the damaging affects that outsiders may have on the morale and the educational possibilities of the women’s school. Through her critique of the system, we can understand that Compain’s idealized version of the girls’ school would include cooperative and supportive men: townspeople, politicians, and superintendents would be helpful and encouraging, instead of the disbelieving and petty individuals who harass the women professors in her book. She would also place a stronger emphasis on critical thought and emotional development in the women’s classroom, rather than on memorizing materials for the required brevet exams.

Esther de Suze’s *Institutrice* (1902) also includes a protagonist, Marie-Thérèse Romane, who begins as a stranger to the world of teaching, as did Laure Deborda. After recovering from her miserable arrival and shabby welcome, Marie-Thérèse comes to feel that the tiny alpine village school of Chavoux fulfills her dreams of isolation and devoted work (de Suze 84). In contrast to some of Claudine’s wily and willful antics, the students of this village school are innocent and good-natured country folk: “The sweet little faces with round contours, the fresh good cheeks, leaned studiously over their open notebooks. I dictated slowly.”

In contrast to Laure Deborda in *L’Un vers l’autre*, Marie-Thérèse does not undergo any initial hostility or suspicion from the citizens of her town. On the contrary, during the first months of her stay, the curé and the villagers of Chavoux appear to love the new schoolteacher. At his speech before the annual prize distribution ceremony in July, the curé gives his praise and thanks to Marie-Thérèse for her first six months of teaching, stating that the whole town cherishes her, just as she cherishes their children and mountains (de Suze 178). Marie-Thérèse’s easy integration into this new village is a stunning exception to the rule for the novel of women’s education, where

most teachers are treated as suspicious outsiders who have been imposed by the state. From de Suze’s initial treatment of the townspeople in the novel, one might assume a new twist on this genre, yet her heroine’s success with the general public does not last long.

Marie-Thérèse is satisfied with her activities and situation, and she is publicly applauded by her students and their parents. Yet even at the beginning of the narrative, everyone around her constantly bemoans her “lonely” and “isolated” fate. Victorou, an old woman who shows her to the mayor’s house on her first day in Chavoux, tells her that schoolteachers are “too young” and “too alone” to serve as role models for younger girls, and she blames the administration for these errors (de Suze 54–55). Marie-Thérèse hears the same worries from a variety of people about her potential need for companionship and love, and the implicit dangers that those desires entail for a young, unmarried instructor. Not only Victorou, but also the mayor’s maid (Phrasie), the mayor himself (M. Raibert), the curé of Chavoux (M. Broardel), and the curé of the nearby village Saint-Romain (M. Chavard) warn her, telling her tales of woe about other young schoolteachers who have been seduced, abandoned, and sent away in shame. Phrasie narrates the story of the stoning of the Gréoux schoolteacher, who “sinned” and left the village to give birth to her illegitimate child in the city of Gap (120). These pessimistic voices underline de Suze’s main critique of the educational system: the women teachers are too inexperienced and are not defended properly by the Ministry of Education, whose mission they are performing, nor by the local citizens, whose children they are educating. Esther de Suze thus echoes Reval’s comments on Sèvres and the lack of protection and preparation the Ministry of Education offered for young schoolteachers. De Suze’s commentary is particularly grim because of the problems of isolation: unlike the other education novels studied here, Institutrice does not include a community of women. The elementary school children whom Marie-Thérèse teaches are too young to form part of a women’s community, and the village is too small to warrant more than a single professor.

In typical bildungsroman fashion, however, the novel offers a series of encounters where Marie-Thérèse might find possible solutions to this dilemma for the single woman in the provinces. To counteract the effects of such negative warnings and sad stories about other young schoolteachers, Marie-Thérèse goes to visit her friends Monsieur and Madame Albert, a married couple who both teach in the village school of Pinet. Their life and work together conform to Marie-Thérèse’s model of happiness in the education system, as they are both intelligent, they work together well, and
they are full of life and joy (de Suze 94). This happy couple appears to be one type of arrangement that de Suze proposes for the disheartened teacher, and Marie-Thérèse believes that their situation is ideal: it appears to be a harmonious linkage of the quest plot and the romance plot for a woman schoolteacher. Yet Monsieur Albert complains that they will never be able to afford to have children because of their poor teaching salaries. He rages indignantly that schoolteachers, both men and women, would be wonderful parents but are not given the chance to raise their own children given the poor salaries the government offers. His indignation is even greater for the unmarried woman schoolteacher, who, being well educated but extremely poor, has almost no hope at all for a good marriage and family. In the words of Albert, de Suze reiterates her open critique of the teaching career for single women professors and gives a glimpse of her idealized version of the national education system in the form of a married couple that teaches together.

The author de Suze also presents us with Mlle Morin, a contented schoolteacher, even though she is isolated and unmarried, from the nearby village of St-Romain. Mlle Morin urges Marie-Thérèse to go to confession often and to become a spiritual being, since it has brought so much joy and meaning to her own life. After visiting Mlle Morin's curé, Marie-Thérèse begins to understand why Morin benefits so much from her religious faith. The curé Chavard and Mlle Morin have an extremely strong spiritual bond between them, and, contradictory to the standard stories about schoolteachers and local men, there is never a hint of sexual attraction between them. The Morin-Chavard couple is thus presented as another ideal choice for women schoolteachers, because their love is spiritual and intellectual. But the text repeats constantly that Mlle Morin and M. Chavard are two unusual and exceptional beings who have miraculously found each other

32. “France dreams of a regeneration. . . . Is it not in the home of the schoolteacher that the child should flourish with the most abundance? The government does not want to see that. It abandons us without an honorable remuneration. . . . If it were not for the solid faith in the beauty of our mission, which keeps our spirits high, where would we fall, in the esteem of others and our own self-esteem” (La France rêve d’une régénération. . . . N’est-ce pas au foyer de l’instituteur que l’enfant devrait fleurir avec le plus d’abondance? . . . Le gouvernement ne veut pas voir cela. Il nous abbandonne sans une rétribution honorable. . . . N’était-ce la solide foi en la beauté de notre mission, qui nous maintient haut, quand même, jusqu’où ne tomberions-nous pas, dans l’estime des gens et la nôtre propre.) (de Suze 136).

33. In this, de Suze concurred with popular opinion during the late nineteenth-century. In L’Ecole, L’Eglise, et la République, 1871–1914, Mona Ozouf comments on this situation as evoked in both republican and conservative publications during the period: “l’accent sera mis sur la
in this world. Marie-Thérèse tries to emulate Morin’s purity and religious devotion, but with a less interesting parish priest, she has less successful confessions and goes back to wandering in the beautiful alpine scenery for spiritual inspiration. These indications lead the reader to believe that the Morin-Chavard example may not provide a practical or common solution to the young woman teacher’s fate either.

As her situation of isolation progresses, Marie-Thérèse writes less and less in her diary of her school tasks but more and more about her struggles to remain a passionless and pure individual. She does not reproach students who daydream in class, frequently joining in herself. As if in response to her wandering mind and soul, Sylves Moutet, the village drunk, asks her to marry him, threatening suicide if she responds negatively (de Suze 160–64). Given the fact that he is uneducated, an alcoholic, and very poor, Marie-Thérèse does not consider his request seriously, but his pleas strike a chord in her. Finally, she begins to live her seclusion in the alpine country in a negative way, as everyone had been predicting she would. A few days after the closing ceremony for the school year, the mayor, Pierre Raibert, comes to save her from Moutet, then confesses his own love for her (190–96). After platonically exchanging books and notes with her during the summer vacation, the mayor makes another confession of love to Marie-Thérèse, they are seen together, and Marie-Thérèse’s reputation is immediately destroyed. The village turns against her overnight, making even the five-minute walk to the local market a frightening gauntlet to cross.

Esther de Suze’s novel demonstrates most clearly the difficulties of combining the quest plot with the romance narrative in a novel about women’s professional development. Marie-Thérèse’s professional interests in her school are quickly undermined by the villagers’ constant worries about her personal life, and in the end, these same villagers force her to leave her teaching position to find work somewhere else. The hints that de Suze proposes for possible solutions to these conflicting plotlines include married schoolteachers who could aid and comfort each other, women teachers who could support each other, and local villagers and clergy who could praise

situation misérable de l’institutrice. Le “ménage d’instituteurs,” qui, vingt ans plus tard, sera une figure essentielle des constellations villageoises, est encore l’exception. Pour le moment, la solitude de l’institutrice, avec son dénuement matériel et moral, est donc le thème essentiel” (Ozouf 1982, 137). (The accent will be placed on the miserable situation of the woman schoolteacher. The “teaching couple,” which twenty years later will be the essential figure in the village constellations, is still the exception. For the moment, the solitude of the woman schoolteacher, with her material and moral penury, is thus the essential theme.)
and encourage their young teachers. Yet de Suze’s novel also stands out against the other examples of the women’s education novel studied in this chapter because *Institutrice* deals the least with the curriculum requirements and educational structures for girls’ schools during the time period. Her silence on this subject could perhaps be interpreted as a sign that the author found the educational goals of the national school system sufficient, which would place her in direct opposition to the three other novelists. Further, *Institutrice* is the only novel in which both the town and the school appear locked in time, eternal in their attitudes about and their goals for women and education. During her months in Chavoux, Marie-Thérèse learns a great deal about the education system and the position of the village schoolteacher, but neither the school nor the village changes or develops along with the heroine.

In spite of their different views on education for women, all four novels discussed above include an idyllic vision on the part of each heroine as to her future role in society and the part that her school and its learning environment would play in creating that future. Each utopian vision may be quite different, but the common thread that links the novels, as a genre, is that they all contain such idealized structures.

These structures are similar to Rita Felski’s notion of the feminist “counter-public sphere,” where author and reader share a common ground both within and in opposition to mass society. In these women’s education novels, the heroine establishes a counterpublic position where she may voice her criticism of patriarchal society (the national school system, for example) while at the same time define a position for herself within that society that corresponds more closely to her own worldview. Because the subject matter, women’s education, was a common historical and cultural experience for authors and readers of the Belle Epoque, we can assume that the counterpublic position that the heroines held may have been shared by author and reader.34

The most surprising feature of these women’s education novels is the final location of the heroines’ counterpublic positions within mass society, at least in the context of Belle Epoque culture. One might assume that in novels such as these, the female protagonist would find her utopian

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34. For more on Felski’s notion of a counterpublic sphere, see my 1996 article in *MLN* on Colette’s *Claudine à l’école* and *La Naissance du jour*, where I explain the author’s creation of a “gendered collective” that would permit transgressions while remaining a part of the mainstream culture.
counterpublic sphere within the all-female community of the girls’ school, especially because the school is located within mass culture, while at the same time allowing some opportunities, however limited they might be, for opposition to and changes in mass culture. Each of the novels that I have discussed presents ways to change the position of women in French society through education. Furthermore, each of the novels presents idyllic moments of the female community at work: Claudine in her private lessons with Aimée; Marguerite in her study groups at the Ecole Normale Supérieure de Sèvres; Laure in her discussions with her school director, Germaine Lachaud; and Marie-Thérèse in her conversations with a fellow schoolteacher, Mlle Morin.

These women’s communities, however, constitute only temporary passages for the protagonists. In the final pages of each story, the heroine ceases her critique of the education system and abruptly announces her decision to withdraw completely from the field of pedagogy. Claudine claims to have no idea what will happen to her after she has earned her brevet, even though her middle-class background leads the reader to the impression that she will probably marry in the near future. At any rate, she firmly rejects all suggestions by her teachers that she might want to continue her brilliant studies by enrolling in a teacher training school during the following year. Marguerite and Laure both quit the teaching profession: Marguerite leaves even before she has been given her first teaching assignment, announcing that she wishes instead to live with and take care of her lover, the sculptor Henri Dolfière. After a fifty-page section devoted to a description of the “awakening” of Laure’s husband Henri, L’Un vers l’autre concludes with a dramatic moun-taintop reunion of the couple. Laure immediately resigns from her school and returns to her newly converted spouse and their comfortable home. She wishes to return to her role as a full-time femme au foyer and to devote herself to her husband’s wishes. Marie-Thérèse resigns from her position in Chavoux in order to escape the false rumors about her alleged promiscuity. She moves to Marseille with the old woman Victorou, who has become a caring mother figure to her. In the final pages of her diary, she hints that she will soon be marrying a young man whom she has met in Marseille.

35. In Claudine à Paris (1901), the sequel to Claudine à l’école, after moving to Paris with her father, cat, and maid, Claudine is completely free of school or work obligations to wander aimlessly, looking for fun and adventure. In the final pages of the book, she does fall in love and becomes engaged to a cousin, Renaud, whom she marries in Claudine en ménage (1902) and then leaves in Claudine s’en va (1903).
The counterpublic sphere that the heroines finally choose, therefore, is very often located in the home or in the private domain. That is, the protagonists actually become reintegrated into mainstream culture, in traditional bildungsroman fashion. The utopian views of the teaching world that they had dreamed of earlier appear to be easily discarded for a rather traditional solution: get married and live happily ever after. As a subgenre of the classic eighteenth-century bildungsroman, this type of conventional reintegration into society is not unusual. But as Felski has argued, the conclusion of the feminist bildungsroman does not necessarily imply a conservative return to patriarchal society. She states: “The feminist text, however, reveals a rather different trajectory; the journey into society does not signify a surrender of ideals and a recognition of limitations, but rather constitutes the precondition for oppositional activity and engagement” (Felski 137). If we understand the goals of the protagonist’s education to be better self-awareness and heightened critical reasoning, rather than a form of job training, then the flight from academia is often a final proof of the successful influence that the education has had on its pupils. The years of study or teaching have provided each of the heroines with the “precondition for oppositional activity” that Felski claims, that is, they have learned the valuable skills in critical assessment and independent thinking that they did not have before they entered the school or the teaching profession. By selecting an alternative to the highly structured, repressive, and uniform tracking of the state-regulated education system, all of our heroines have in some way demonstrated their independence and their ability to opt out of a system that they did not wish to endure. Similar to Michel’s decision in L’Immoraliste to quit the teaching profession, these women leave the educational system because they find it stifling. And although they may be choosing marriage or cohabitation in a patriarchal setting, the partners that they choose (or return to) must understand and encourage their intellectual independence and their freedom to act on their own.

Their final choices may appear to be conservative ones, and it must be admitted that the authors of these works did portray the Belle Époque women’s educational experience in a negative light: their female protagonists rejected the schools and their patriarchal structures. But their criticism of the school system was by no means a call for the cancellation of public schooling for girls in France. Their ultimate message is clear: an educated heroine may be more skeptical, more critical, but she is also, in the end, happier and freer than her uneducated counterparts. The public school system thus acts as a sort of rite of passage for these young women.
characters who will leave behind their educational experiences, having come to terms with their own identity and having situated themselves within French society as free, adult members of that culture. As such, these works not only continue the tradition of the male novel of development in French culture, they also provide us a new model for women characters within that literary tradition.