

“Queer Children”

L. M. Montgomery’s Heroines

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When I was a child, the novels of L. M. Montgomery occupied half a shelf in our glass-doored bookcase. First editions, mostly, they had been inscribed to my mother and aunt by various gift-giving relatives. I read them eagerly, supplementing our own holdings with others borrowed from the public library, until I had gone through the *Anne* books, the *Emily* books, *Kilmeny of the Orchard*, *The Story Girl* and the rest. My own daughters, at a time when they were reading almost nothing but horse stories, showed a similar enthusiasm for L. M. Montgomery. Evidently she is one of those perennial authors whom girls in their early teens cannot resist.

It was with some hesitation that I recently returned to *Anne of Green Gables* (Boston, 1908), *Emily of New Moon* (Toronto, 1923), *The Blue Castle* (Toronto, 1926) and *Pat of Silver Bush* (Toronto, 1933); a hesitation stemming partly from reluctance to burst the bubble of nostalgia, partly from an awareness of critical disapproval. In her study of Canadian children’s literature, Sheila Egoff, while grudgingly accepting the original *Anne* as a national institution, condemns “the increasingly sentimental dishonesty of the succeeding books”.¹ E. K. Brown is equally disparaging about an author “who was satisfied to truckle to mediocre taste”.² On rereading, *Anne* seemed not at all bad and *Emily* interested me so much I wanted to read the rest of the series to see how things turned out. Admittedly, the charm was partly that of a period piece. Canadiana is “in” at the moment: though we no longer use gin jars for hot water bottles or keep up a parlour for serious occasions, hooked rugs, patchwork quilts, and butter churns are highly prized and highly priced. Is the appeal of L. M. Montgomery’s novels simply a matter of nostalgia or do they contain something of lasting, if minor, literary value? In what context do her child heroines operate? What makes *Anne* and *Emily* particularly interesting, and *Valancy* and *Pat* less so?

When Mark Twain describes *Anne* as “the sweetest creation of child life yet written,”³ he is implicitly setting her in the context of English children’s literature, a genre that originated with the Puritans in the seventeenth century. Because the Puritan child was regarded as a “brand of hell,”⁴ it was the duty of parents, teachers, and guardians to impress on him both the sinfulness of his fallen nature and the ideal

which he should follow if he would escape the fires of hell. Gratitude, duty, reverence, sobriety, humility, industry, and above all obedience were the desired virtues; vanity, impertinence, impiety, and disobedience were the faults which, in the didactic literature that adults thought suitable for children, inevitably led to horrendous ends. Transported to New England by the Pilgrim Fathers and to the Maritimes and Ontario by the Presbyterians, the Puritan ethic continued to affect the life and literature of Canadian and American children for many generations.

Marilla Cuthbert, Rachel Lynde and Mrs. Barry in *Anne of Green Gables*, and Ellen Greene, Aunt Elizabeth and Miss Brownell in *Emily of New Moon* are purveyors of the moral and religious ethos which controls the lives of Montgomery's heroines. It is a highly ritualised society, supported on the twin pillars of church and work. Labour in the rural community is determined by the cycle of the seasons; social intercourse, by the round of Sunday church, midweek prayer meeting, Ladies' Aid, and school. Propriety and conformity, a regard for "decency and decorum," prevail. Explanations must be found for uncharacteristic behaviour, a necessity that leads to the prying and gossiping that characterise any closely knit society. So Mrs. Rachel Lynde cannot rest until she finds out why Matthew Cuthbert, dressed in his best suit, is driving off in the middle of the afternoon when he should be sowing his late turnip seed in the big red brook field of Green Gables.

The odd and the out of place are immediately suspect. It is the queerness of Anne Shirley, both in physical appearance (bright red hair, wild flowers on her hat) and character (garrulity, imagination) that catches the eye and ear of Avonlea and of the reader. The orphaned Emily Starr is told that her Murray relatives won't like her because "you're queer, and folks don't care for queer children." One mark of her queerness is pointed ears, indicating that she is "kin to tribes of elfland." (Calvinist orthodoxy combines with Celtic Fantasy in the world of Prince Edward Island). Even Anne's "bosom friend" Diana, an entirely conventional child in most respects, is set apart by the fact that she is named for a pagan goddess -- "I'd ruther Jane or Mary or some sensible name like that," is Matthew's comment. Inevitably, Ilse Burnley's unconventional upbringing causes much head-shaking in the Blair Water community.

Almost as suspect as the odd is the beautiful, utility being preferred when it comes to making value judgments. Thus the blossoming cherry tree to which Anne responds so ecstatically is dismissed by Marilla:

It's a big tree . . . and it blooms great but the fruit don't amount to much never - small and wormy.

Girl's dresses should be "good sensible, serviceable dresses, without any frills or furbelows" rather than the prettily fashionable garments with extravagant puffed sleeves that Anne longs to wear. The high buttoned shoes and "terrible" gingham sunbonnets and aprons in which Emily is dressed are models of utility and defences against vanity. The rigorous criteria regarding clothes extend also to reading material (novels are "wicked books and have ruined many souls"), to bangs, to

whistling. In fact, "a great many jolly things" are, if not wicked, at least unladylike.

The Puritan view required that the child should be taught by exhortation, example, and punishment. "Correction in itself is not cruel." Dr. Samuel Johnson had proclaimed. "Children, being not reasonable, can be governed only by fear. To impress this fear is therefore one of the first duties of those who have the care of children."⁵ Mrs. Lynde has no hesitation in impressing on Anne that she is full of original sin and in recommending to Marilla the use of a switch. The fearful Calvinistic doctrine of election is apparent in Anne's view of herself:

No matter how hard I try to be good I can never make such a success of it as those who are naturally good.

Attendance at Sunday school and church, saying one's prayers, learning to cook, clean, and make patchwork squares are all part of a proper bringing up. The adults provide sustenance, direction, and good example; the children are to respond in the way that Aunt Elizabeth expects:

Emily, you must understand right now that you are to be grateful and obedient and show your appreciation of what is being done for you. I won't have tears and repining. What would you have done if you had no friends to take you in? Answer me that.

In spite of genuine effort on the part of the children, the old Eve will out. Vanity, disobedience, lying, anger, stubbornness, pride, a regular Pandora's box of "viciousness," are illustrated by their careers. Yet unlike the children in the "horrendous example" school of literature,⁶ these heroines do not come to a bad end. Rather, in the tradition of Rousseau's *Emile*, they learn by experience, as Anne realises:

Ever since I came to Green Gables I've been making mistakes, and each mistake has helped to cure me of some great shortcoming. The affair of the amethyst brooch cured me of meddling with things that didn't belong to me. The Haunted Wood mistake cured me of letting my imagination run away with me. The liniment cake mistake cured me of carelessness in cooking. Dyeing my hair cured me of vanity . . .

In the end, Anne conforms pretty closely to the adult view of propriety, a fact that makes her a much less interesting character in subsequent books.⁷

The Puritan idea of the child is not the only determiner of character in the novels of L. M. Montgomery. Combined with it is the idea of the child as innocent victim, orphaned, abandoned, often doomed to an early death. That this was a popular motif in Victorian literature the novels of Dickens, MacDonald, and Kingsley, among others, testify. The pathos of Anne and Emily depends to a considerable extent on the fact that they are orphans.⁸ The awareness of deprivation is vividly illustrated by Emily's response to New Moon:

She felt utterly alone and lonely -- there in that darkness, with an alien, hostile world all around her -- for it seemed hostile now. And there was such a strange, mysterious, mournful sound in the air -- far away, yet clear. It was the murmur of the sea, but Emily did not know that and it frightened her. Oh, for her little bed at home -- oh, for Father's soft breathing in the room . . .

At the same time, their dramatisation of this awareness is psychologically convincing. Whenever Anne thinks it can benefit her, she reminds the critical adults -- Marilla, Mrs. Lynde, Mrs. Barry, Miss Josephine Barry -- that she is "a poor little orphan girl" whose mistakes result from ignorance rather than intention. As a member of the proud and successful Murray clan, Emily is not so rootless as Anne; she has a sense of belonging to a family group even though duty rather than love has motivated the Murrays' acceptance of her. On the other hand, while Anne is immediately popular with her classmates, Emily suffers at school for being a "proud" Murray and a stranger. "Why don't you like me?" she asks. "Because you ain't a bit like us," is the reply.

Isolation is the favourite punishment inflicted by Marilla and Aunt Elizabeth -- being banished to one's room, being forbidden to attend parties and picnics, being ostracized. When Emily refuses to kneel before the unjust teacher, Miss Brownell, and beg her pardon, Aunt Elizabeth tells her

. . . you will be outcast in this house until you do. No one will talk to you -- play with you -- eat with you -- have anything to do with you until you have obeyed me.

The prospect is so horrifying to a sensitive child that she prefers the shame of yielding.

Eventually, the qualities which in the beginning tended to isolate them -- Anne's rootlessness and active imagination, Emily's pride and poetic gift -- provide them with the motivation to overcome misfortune and win acceptance. Anne's severest critic, Rachel Lynde, is forced to admit:

. . . I did make a mistake in judging Anne, but it weren't no wonder, for an oddder, unexpecteder witch of a child there never was in this world, that's what. There was no ciphering her out by the rules that worked with other children. It's nothing short of wonderful how she's improved these three years, but especially in looks . . .

Although Valancy Stirling, the heroine of *The Blue Castle*, is a twenty-nine year old spinster, she also is a type of rejected child. Her father having died, she has been brought up by her mother, Mrs. Frederich, and Cousin Stickles with the advice of assorted relations. All of them are proponents of the Puritan view of child-raising and all of them persist in treating Valancy as a child. An awareness of her loveless condition stems from the time when, at the age of the nine,

she was standing alone on the school playground while the other

girls of her class were playing a game in which you must be chosen by a boy as his partner before you could play. Nobody had chosen Valancy -- little, pale, black-haired Valancy, with her prim, long-sleeved apron and odd, slanted eyes.

Valancy inhabits two homes: an ugly, red brick box on Elm Street and a Blue Castle in Spain where there are

courts, marble-pillared where shimmering fountains fell and nightingales sang among the myrtles; halls of mirrors that reflected only handsome knights and lovely women - herself the loveliest of all, for whose glance men died.

The likelihood that she will, in her state of sexual frustration, become completely unhinged, is aborted when she receives a doctor's letter informing her that she has a fatal heart disease that will carry her off within a year. Realising that she cannot be worse off than she is now -- "I'm poor -- I'm ugly -- I'm a failure -- and I'm near death" -- she ticks off her relations and leaves home to keep house for the village drunk and his betrayed daughter who, having lost her illegitimate child, is now about to die of consumption (the wages of sin motif neatly combining with that of innocent victim).

Unfortunately, we can neither sympathise with Valancy nor admire her. The Castle in Spain fantasy, realised as an island retreat in the wilds of Ontario, is pure corn, but not less so is the heroine's marriage to frog prince Snaith who turns out to be not only the famous nature writer, John Foster, but also the son of a multi-millionaire Purple Pill producer (a fact that brings Valancy's disapproving relatives round in a hurry). Nor are we surprised to learn, after a Perils-of-Paulinish episode involving a shoe heel caught in a railway track before an onrushing train, that Valancy's fatal heart condition really belonged to another Sterling and that violet-eyed Barney has married Valancy out of love not pity. It is tempting to exculpate L. M. Montgomery by regarding *The Blue Castle* as a parody of romance rather than as a serious attempt at the genre, but I cannot quite convince myself that such is the case.

In the final book which I am to discuss, *Pat of Silver Bush*, the author returns to the female child as protagonist. Pat Gardiner is the fourth of five children. Because her mother is sickly and occupied with a new baby, Pat's upbringing, like that of Anne and Emily, is left to a surrogate parent. Judy Plum is a shanty Irish family retainer whose influence on the "quare child -- touched wid a liddle green rose-thorn" by a leprechaun on the day she was born -- is, from the modern point of view, deplorable. Judy can speak "English" when the Gardiners' fine relatives are present, but in the bosom of the family she affects an Irish brogue in which dialect she fills the child's head with fairy nonsense, assures her that babies are found in parsley beds, passes on malicious gossip, and instills in her a conviction that she is socially superior -- "Remember the Binnies may sweat but the Gardiners perspire". That the lesson has been well learned is evident in a letter that Pat writes to her brother, Sid:

Sylvia Copilla says that Fred Davidson and his sister Muriel

used to be devoted to each other just like you and me but they quarreled and now they never speak . . . Of course they are only Davidsons. Sylvia says May Binnie is your girl. She isn't, is she, Sid? You'd never have a Binnie for a girl. They are not in our class.

Pat of Silver Bush contains many of the ingredients found in *Anne* and *Emily* -- the P.E.I. setting, the clan feeling, the visits to eccentric relatives, the bosom friend, the admiring boys, the education at Queen's -- yet when I read *Pat* as a child I found it a disappointment. Pat seems a bore and a snob. Rereading has not changed my mind. Part of Pat's failure to interest us results from the lack of development in her character. Petted by the family and Judy, she is never placed in a position of real crisis where strength of character is required. Moreover, the love of nature which she shares with the other heroines is expressed in such tritely sentimental rhetoric that the character cannot help being diminished. Whether running about in the garden to kiss the flowers or dancing naked under the impression that she is a bewitched princess, she comes across as a girl who is queer to the point of being dim-witted.

Why are Anne and Emily such memorable characters while Valancy and Pat are best forgotten? It is not a question of time bringing to slow fruition a writer's skill, for Anne, the first of Montgomery's creations, is also the best. The answer must be found in the fictional character's relationship to reality. Much of the interest in *Anne* and *Emily* results from the tension between the adults, with their rigid view of how a child should act, and the children, with their strong sense of justice and clear-eyed awareness of adult shortcomings. Though the heroines' characters may have been influenced by such fictional rebels against the establishment as Lewis Carroll's Alice⁹ and Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, they must also represent the way in which real children reacted to the authoritarian adults who controlled their destinies. Even Kenneth Grahame in that sensitive recreation of happy childhood, *The Golden Age*, inveighs against the Olympians:

This strange anaemic order of beings was further removed from us, in fact, than the kindly beasts who shared our natural existence. The estrangement was fortified by an abiding sense of injustice, arising from the refusal of the Olympians to defend, to retract, to admit themselves in the wrong, or to accept similar concessions on our part.¹⁰

When Anne shouts furiously at Mrs. Lynde,

"How dare you call me skinny and ugly? How dare you say I'm freckled and red-headed? You are a rude, impolite, unfeeling woman!"

she is expressing a justifiable sense of outrage at the insensitivity of adults. And when Emily confronts Aunt Elizabeth with "How dare you touch *my private papers?*" she is asserting her right to be treated as an individual.

Moreover, in *Anne* and *Emily* there is such genuine interaction between children and adults that the adults themselves are changed.

Matthew and Cousin Jimmy, the weak but kindly father figures, are given an interest that lifts them out of the humdrum routine of their daily lives and enables them to stand up to formidable females. Aunt Elizabeth learns that she cannot treat children according to standards that differ from those applied to adults. And Marilla so far overcomes her distrust of emotion that after Matthew's death she confesses her true feelings about Anne:

I know I've been kind of strict and harsh with you maybe -- but you mustn't think I didn't love you as well as Matthew did, for all that. I want to tell you now when I can. It's never been easy for me to say things out of my heart, but at times like this it's easier. I love you as dear as if you were my own flesh and blood and you've been my joy and comfort ever since you came to Green Gables.

By the same token, what makes Valancy and Pat inadequate is their lack of influence. Valancy's pert put-down of the riddling uncle and boring aunts strikes us as rudeness rather than as a courageous expression of ego, while the self-dramatisation which brings Anne so vividly to life seems, in Valancy, to be maudlin play-acting. There is no better testimony to the adults' immobility in *The Blue Castle* than the fact that, regardless of how queerly Valancy behaves, her mother and Cousin Stickles continue to sit "drearily, grimly knitting. Baffling and inhuman as ever."

In *Pat of Silver Bush* there is no lack of incident -- births, weddings, the departure of a brother, the death of a friend -- but all is surface fussiness. Because the characters fail to interact with one another we remain uninterested. The lachrymose seems the dominant mood but there is no sense of proportion. Tears gush forth as profusely when Father shaves his beard as when the bosom friend dies. At the same time, there is no development of Pat's character. The woman who becomes "the Chatelaine of Silver Bush" is really no different from the seven-year-old listening to Judy's stories.

In the end, what contributes most of all to the sense of reality projected by Anne and Emily is the fact that the fabric of their lives is that of L. M. Montgomery's own experience."¹¹ Lucy Maud, too, was a motherless child brought up by relatives in a farmhouse at Cavendish, Prince Edward Island. She, too, struck callers as "queer" because she talked to objects, individually named apple trees, and imaginatively created child companions who were "kindred spirits". She suffered from the tension between Puritan expectations and the working of original sin. Years later, she wrote to Weber, "Some of the me's are good, some *not*".¹² Like Anne and Pat, she had to stay at home to care for an elderly, ailing lady rather than embarking on travel or a career:

You say you wonder why I didn't travel. It is simply because I cannot leave home. Grandma is 82 and I cannot leave her, for even a week's cruise. We live all alone and there is no one I can get to stay with her. I am very much tied down but it cannot be helped.¹³

The most nearly autobiographical of her child characters is Emily Starr. The jet black hair and deep blue eyes, the affection for cats, the stories of Scottish ancestors, the family pride, the strict Calvinistic upbringing, the sensitivity about being different from other children at school, the escape on the wings of imagination and the gift for the written word -- "the best method of soul cultivation there is"¹⁴ -- belong to Lucy Maud. By using the epistolary device -- Emily's letters to her dead father -- the author projects an intimacy of experience that her other books lack:

There has been a dark shadow over this day. I dropped my cent in church.. It made a dreadful noise. It felt as if everybody looked at me.

My heart is very sore tonight. Mike died this morning. Cousin Jimmy says he must have been poisoned.

I think maybe I'll write novels when I grow up as well as poetry. But Aunt Elizabeth won't let me read any novels so how can I find out how to write them?

The success with which Montgomery presents teen-age boys -- Jingles, the only believable character in *Pat*, Perry and Teddy in *Emily*, and Gilbert who achieved immortality when he whispered "Carrots!" -- results from her childhood association with Wellington and Dave who boarded at her Grandmother's, while the vivid pictures of uncles, aunts and cousins testify to the close observation of experienced clan life.

Because the author is so closely identified with Anne and Emily, she is able to present events, settings and other characters as they would be seen through the eyes of children. Anne's exuberant and exaggerated response to Green Gables is acceptable to the reader because it is appropriate to the character. Emily's appreciation of the Murray kitchen is what one might expect from a sharp-eyed eleven-year-old:

The sanded floor was spotlessly white, but the boards had been scrubbed away through the years until the knots in them stuck up all over in funny little bosses . . . In one corner of the ceiling was a large square hole which looked black and spookish in the candlelight, and made her feel creepy. *Something* might pop down out of a hole like that if one hadn't behaved just right, you know.

In *Pat of Silver Bush* and *The Blue Castle* there is a confusion between the persona of the character and that of the author, with the cliché, cuteness and excessive romanticism which are evident in the author's own letters being imposed on the characters. For example, Valancy's rhapsodizing over the Blue Castle "drowned in sunset lilac light, incredibly delicate and elusive" seems inappropriate language for a thirty-year-old woman, even one who is considered queer.

In a letter of March 2, 1908,¹⁵ Montgomery somewhat deprecatingly describes *Anne* as "a story written more especially for girls and

not pretending to be of any intrinsic interest to adults." Whether an author is justified in placing limits of age and sex on a book is a questionable point; even more questionable is the implication that inferior writing is permissible in a book intended for children. That this kind of condescension mars many of L. M. Montgomery's books is unfortunately true. She wrote her "little yarns . . . with an eye single to Sunday School scholars"¹⁶ as she told Weber in the last of the extant Cavendish letters. But Anne, the queer child, was approvingly received by the prestigious adult periodical, the *Spectator*. "I *did* feel flattered."

NOTES

¹ *The Republic of Childhood*, (Toronto, 1967), p. 252.

² "The Problem of a Canadian Literature" in *Masks of Fiction*, ed. A.J.M. Smith (Toronto, 1961), p. 41.

³ Cited in M.M. Mitchell's Foreword to Hilda M. Ridley's *The Story of L. M. Montgomery* (London, 1956). L. M. Montgomery gives another version of Mark Twain's views: "He wrote me that in *Anne* I had created 'the dearest and most lovable child in fiction since the immortal Alice'." See *The Green Gables Letters from L. M. Montgomery to Ephraim Weber 1905-1909*, ed. Wilfrid Eggleston (Toronto, 1960), p. 80.

⁴ cf. James Janeway's *A Token for Children: being an Exact Account of the Conversion, Holy and Exemplary Lives, and Joyful Deaths of several Young Children* (c. 1670).

⁵ Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, Oxford Standard Authors (London 1953), p. 487.

⁶ See Leonard de Vries, ed. *Little Wide-Awake, an Anthology from Victorian Children's Books and Periodicals in the collection of Anne and Fernand G. Renier* (London, 1967); *Young Wilfred or the Punishment of Falsehood* (London, 1821); Frederic Farrar's *Eric, or Little by Little* (London, 1858); and Heinrich Hoffmann's *Struwwelpeter* (trans. London, 1848) for examples of the type.

⁷ Writing to Weber on September 10, 1908, L. M. Montgomery expressed her own awareness of the problem: "Anne, grown-up, couldn't be made as quaint and unexpected as the child Anne." *The Green Gables Letters*, p. 74.

⁸ The germ of Anne was a newspaper clipping about a couple who applied to an orphanage for a boy and were sent a girl instead.

⁹ That Montgomery admired Carroll is evident from her allusion to *Through the Looking Glass* in a letter to Weber written on December 16, 1906. See *The Green Gables Letters*, p. 10.

¹⁰ *The Golden Age* (London, 1895), p. 10.

¹¹Biographical details are found in Hilda M. Ridley, *The Story of L. M. Montgomery* (London, 1956), and in *The Green Gables Letters*, the General Introduction to which includes a brief autobiography by Montgomery, pp. 5-7.

¹²*The Green Gables Letters*, p. 25.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 45-56.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

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