

# L.M. Montgomery and the literary heroine: Jo, Rebecca, Anne, and Emily

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L.M. Montgomery has reported how, shortly after *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) was first published, she was pleased to receive a congratulatory note from Mark Twain, who described Anne as “the dearest, and most lovable child in fiction since the immortal Alice.”<sup>1</sup> Twain, of course, was himself renowned as a creator of memorable fictional children. In fact, it seems possible that Twain had recognized some points of affinity between Montgomery’s novel and his own famous boys’ book, *The adventures of Tom Sawyer*. One particularly striking similarity between the two books is the protagonist’s fondness for play-acting and self-dramatization. Tom’s imaginative life is shaped by his reading of lurid adventure stories. Anne, for her part, is infatuated with sentimental ladies’ fiction. Anne’s penchant for casting herself as an actor in romantic adventures — which leads, for example, to her disastrous impersonation of the Lady Elaine — is a feminine analogue of Tom’s compulsion to play out scenarios based on the adventure stories that are his favorite reading. We should not press this comparison too far, however. Montgomery’s story, in which Anne eventually puts aside her personal ambitions in order to take care of the failing Marilla, differs significantly from the fantasy of irresponsible adventures and unearned rewards that Twain creates.

The link between Montgomery and Twain may be tenuous, but it does provide a convenient way of introducing the main argument of my paper. I want to suggest that relatively little attention has been paid to the literary context within which Montgomery’s books took shape. Montgomery inherited a tradition of juvenile fiction that had become prominent in the later years of the nineteenth century, and was well-established by the time she began to write. It is quite natural that Montgomery’s novels should bear a closer resemblance to nineteenth-century girls’ books than they do to the boys’ books written by Twain and other male authors. In fact, Montgomery’s two best books, *Anne of Green Gables* and *Emily of New Moon* (1923), belong to a tradition that descends from one of the most important books in nineteenth-century children’s literature, Louisa May Alcott’s *Little women* (1868). The heroines of Montgomery’s two books are examples of a particularly interesting character who was first introduced into children’s fiction in Alcott’s story, the aspiring young writer or literary heroine.

In a general way, the emergence of children’s fiction during the nineteenth

century can be traced to an important shift in the prevailing view of children and of childhood itself. Philippe Ariès in *Centuries of childhood* has described the process whereby childhood was recognized as a distinct phase in the cycle of human development, and children ceased to be regarded simply as small adults.<sup>2</sup> This acceptance of childhood and adolescence as distinct phases in the human life cycle eventually affected the literature that was written specially for children. Throughout much of the nineteenth century, ordinary fiction — the novels of Dickens are a leading example — often showed sympathy for the child's viewpoint, and a recognition that children could not be expected to conform to impossibly perfect standards of behaviour. By the latter half of the century, however, authors of children's books even started to judge society by how well it treated the children in its midst, rather than judging children by how well they adapted themselves to society's expectations.

The nineteenth century, then, virtually created the idea of a "literature" that was specially written with children's needs in mind. Before that, children had been forced to borrow occasional books from adult literature (outstanding examples are *Pilgrim's progress*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *Gulliver's travels*), or sustain their imaginations on the meagre fare contained in the didactic tales and moral verses that their elders considered suitable for young readers. This overtly didactic literature was written without regard for the real imaginative needs of its proposed readers. As a result, very few of the early works written for children are still read today. Indeed, out of all the books written specifically for children and published prior to 1800, Lillian H. Smith can find only one work, Oliver Goldsmith's *Goody two shoes*, that has survived to become a children's classic.<sup>3</sup>

During the nineteenth century, however, a significant change took place. In the latter half of the century, an increasing number of authors of children's books began to depict their juvenile heroes and heroines as neither paragons of virtue nor examples of vice incarnate. The authors of these books must have shared the attitudes Alcott attributes to Jo March in *Good wives* (1869), the continuation of *Little women*. Alcott tells us that Jo could not bring herself to use the simple didactic patterns expected in stories for young readers: "much as she like to write for children, Jo could not consent to depict all her naughty boys as being eaten by bears or tossed by mad bulls, because they did not go to a particular Sabbath-school, nor all the good infants, who did go, as rewarded by every kind of bliss, from gilded gingerbread to escorts of angels, when they departed this life with psalms or sermons on their lisping tongues."<sup>4</sup>

*Little women* was a landmark in the development of fiction for children. The four March sisters have been described as "unique in the children's literature of their time, for they are not perfect, but neither are they wholly depraved."<sup>5</sup> The March sisters "are the first 'naughty' children allowed to survive and prosper in American children's literature. After them comes a long line of literary children who are accepted and loved in spite of their faults: Katy Carr in *What*

*Katy did* by Susan Coolidge (1872); Tom Bailey in *The story of a bad boy* by Thomas Bailey Aldrich (1870); and most important, Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *Huckleberry Finn* (1884)."<sup>6</sup> That is, along with boys' books such as *The story of a bad boy* and *The adventures of Tom Sawyer*, girls' books such as *Little women* and *What Katy did* helped to pioneer the creation of a children's literature that was realistic rather than moralistic.

Despite Alcott's very real understanding of children's psychological make-up, her book ultimately judges human conduct by a standard that is moral rather than psychological. Indeed, *Little women* is structured as an illustration of the moral allegory contained in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's progress*. Each of the March sisters has a "burden" which she must learn to overcome before she can become worthy of happiness. That is, Jo and her sisters are presented as "little women" with exactly the same moral responsibilities as adults. Their immature years do not entitle them to special consideration when they err.

On the other hand, Alcott's male contemporaries allow their heroes a much greater degree of freedom than Alcott and other woman writers grant to their heroines. In other words, the attitudes that shaped girl's fiction remained more conservative than did the attitudes that shaped boys' fiction. For every story like Susan M. Coolidge's *What Katy did*, whose heroine "tore her dress every day, hated sewing, and didn't care a button about being called 'good',"<sup>7</sup> there was a book like Martha Finley's *Elsie Dinsmore* (1868), whose heroine remains an insufferable paragon in the old-fashioned manner. And even the rambunctious Katy Carr rather quickly turns into the proud and capable chatelaine of her father's home. The heroines of girls' books, then, could not enact the dreams of adventure and temporary escape from society that were permitted to the heroes of boys' books as a matter of course.

Tom Sawyer, for example, is able to evade his Aunt Polly's supervision virtually at will, and whenever he desires he joins the happily irresponsible Huck Finn. Of course, Tom's rebellion against society (unlike Huck's) is not deep-seated or lasting. In fact, although Tom often joins the disreputable Huck Finn, he is drawn to the daughter of a member of the town's social elite. And Twain eventually rewards Tom for his youthful adventures by providing him with money, the key to Tom's acceptance into middle-class respectable society. In girls' fiction, however, the heroine seldom leaves the domestic setting, and she earns the greatest adult approval by acting as a homemaker. In other words, there exists in children's fiction a counterpart of the gender gap that has often been pointed out in conventional fiction.

A surprising number of the major landmarks in the male-dominated mainstream of nineteenth-century American literature possess a sort of dual citizenship: although they are monuments in the elite or high culture, they are also fixtures on the shelf of children's classics. The most outstanding examples are Cooper's Leatherstocking tales and Twain's *The adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. These books present variations on a theme that is particularly congenial

to the American male imagination: the flight from a restrictive civilization that is perceived as female-dominated, and the dream of finding ideal male companionship in some place far removed from conventional society.

At the same time as male authors such as Cooper, Melville, and later Twain were producing the books that have made them famous, a great many female authors were writing sentimental domestic melodramas, often centred on homes in which men are conspicuously weak or absent. These books have not been acknowledged as "high art," nor have they been accepted as enduring children's classics. But they have an interest of their own, and some of the attitudes they expressed were incorporated into the tradition of girls' fiction that stems from Alcott's best-known novel.

According to Nina Baym, the sort of "women's fiction" exemplified by Susan Warner's *The wide, wide world* enjoyed an extraordinary vogue in pre-Civil War America. Most of these novels, Baym writes, "tell, with variations, a single tale. In essence, it is the story of a young girl who is deprived of the supports she had rightly or wrongly depended on to sustain her throughout life and is faced with the necessity of winning her own way in the world."<sup>8</sup> Whatever the details of her story, the heroine's dilemma stems from the vicissitudes of sexual politics: "Her dilemma, simply, was mistreatment, unfairness, disadvantage, and powerlessness, recurrent injustices occasioned by her status as female and child. The authors' solutions are different from case to case and somewhat less simple than the dilemma, but all involve the heroine's accepting herself as female while rejecting the equation of female with permanent child."<sup>9</sup>

Baym argues that a quietly subversive ideology underlies much of this fiction. The authors assume "that men as well as women find greatest happiness and fulfillment in domestic relations, but which are meant not simply spouse and parent, but the whole network of human attachments based on love, support, and mutual responsibility. Domesticity is set forth as a value scheme for ordering all of life, in competition with the ethos of money and exploitation that is perceived to prevail in American society."<sup>10</sup> This domestic ideology is opposed to the values that prevailed in most fiction by men, for "to the extent that woman dominated the home, the [domestic] ideology implied an unprecedented historical expansion of her influence, and a tremendous advance over her lot in a world dominated by money and market considerations, where she was defined as a chattel or sexual toy."<sup>11</sup>

The domestic ideology began to lose currency after the Civil War. Baym suggests: "The Civil War had demonstrated the feebleness of the affectional model of human relationships, and the Gilded Age affirmed profit as the motive around which all of American life was to be organized."<sup>12</sup> But woman authors did not give up all hope of changing their society. The ravages of war and the ensuing ravages of capitalism conclusively demonstrated the faults inherent in the male-dominated social system. Although women could not immediately reform society

because grown men were already too firmly set in their ways, perhaps women could use their control of the domestic environment to influence the values of the next generation. Perhaps, through a combination of educational reform and domestic influence, women could help to shape a new sort of man, who would adhere more closely to the humane values of the domestic ideology. Such an idea seems to lie behind Alcott's series of novels about Jo March. In *Little women* and *Good wives* Jo absorbs her mother's gentle ideals, and later in *Little men* (1873) and *Jo's boys* (1886) she collaborates with her husband in creating an unconventional school where affection and understanding transform potential delinquents into upright and generous young men and women.

Although Jo's management of Plumfield makes her the centre of a rather large "family," Alcott's heroine is not a typical representative of her sex. As a child, she is more enterprising and active, as well as more outspoken and spontaneous, than the common run of girls. Moreover, she gets into far more mischief than girls normally create for themselves. In short, she is a tomboy. In effect, Jo's conduct expresses a rebellion against the restrictive conception of proper feminine conduct that prevailed in Alcott's society. Yet in the end, as Patricia Meyer Spacks points out, *Little women* endorses a viewpoint that equates femininity with submission, self-restraint, and service to others.<sup>13</sup> As a result, Jo eventually learns to restrain precisely those traits that make her character so distinctive and interesting. Yet Jo does retain one trait that distinguishes her from most of the other juvenile heroines of her day: in late adolescence she earns money and at the same time asserts her independence by embarking on a literary career. Jo March is thus the earliest example in nineteenth-century girls' fiction of that character I have already labelled the literary heroine.

Jo March's literary aspirations are undoubtedly in part a response to the enormous popularity attained by woman authors in nineteenth-century America. Baym points out that the woman's fiction of mid-century "was by far the most popular literature of its time, and on the strength of that popularity, authorship in America was established as a woman's profession, and reading as a woman's avocation."<sup>14</sup> Although later in the century woman's fiction gave way to other "more androgynous" forms of the novel,<sup>15</sup> the link between women and authorship remained strong, for literature offered women of the middle classes one of their very few respectable alternatives to a career as wife and mother.

The writers of girls' books often used literary ambition as a clear sign of a heroine's reluctance to submit to all the restrictions imposed by her society. In consequence, the literary heroine usually experiences a conflict between her desire for personal autonomy and her reluctance to upset her family by opposing the conventional social proprieties. The literary heroine is therefore a potential rebel, for the logical outcome of her youthful protests would be a systematic rejection of the values and attitudes that prevail in the heroine's male-dominated

society. But the literary heroine's rebellion is never carried through into adult life. Instead, she resolves her inner conflict in favour of submission to social convention. That is, although the creators of literary heroines attach considerable importance to the right of children to follow their own bent without undue restraint, they cannot allow adult women the same freedom to express themselves in socially unconventional ways.

Even Jo March, the most original of all literary heroines, moves towards conventionality as she ages. The lapse into propriety is even more striking in the stories of subsequent literary heroines. The most conspicuous of Jo's successors are probably Rebecca Rowena Randall in Kate Douglas Wiggin's *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1903) and Anne Shirley in Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*. Like Jo March, these heroines are also given to impulsive behaviour and occasional acts of rebellion. But as they grow older, Rebecca and Anne increasingly yield to social pressures. Above all, they start to take care of other people, as respectable women are supposed to do. In later life, then, the unconventionality of these literary heroines narrows to a single trait, a penchant for literary self-expression. And in the end, like most other fictional heroines, even Rebecca and Anne must be married off — although this conventional denouement is postponed to the sequels of the stories in which these literary heroines make their debuts.<sup>16</sup>

It seems likely that the popularity of Wiggin's book provided the stimulus that prompted Montgomery to tell the story of her vivacious orphan child. There are even a few phrases in *Anne of Green Gables* that may be verbal echoes of Wiggin's book. For example, both Rebecca's Aunt Miranda and Anne's guardian Marilla Cuthbert use the distinctive phrase "what under the canopy."<sup>17</sup> At one point, when Rebecca's aunts are debating whether to return Rebecca to her family, Aunt Miranda remarks grimly: "We have put our hand to the plough, and we can't turn back" (*RSF* 244). Marilla remarks at one crisis in Anne's upbringing, "I've put my hand to the plough and I won't look back" (*AGG* 106). Perhaps these verbal echoes may simply result from the imitation of regional speech patterns. But it seems less likely that the numerous and striking parallels between Anne's story and Rebecca's story are purely coincidental. Rebecca and Anne are both poetic spirits set down in a pragmatic community; they are about the same age when the reader first meets them; they both come to live with elderly, unmarried guardians, whose emotions have partially atrophied, and both girls reawaken their guardians' interest in life; both girls attend a one-room local school, where they encounter an unsympathetic teacher; later they both move on to a collegiate in a nearby town, where they prove their intellectual mettle in a wider arena. Most importantly, both girls become embroiled in a series of scrapes that exasperate their staid and conventional guardians; and eventually the guardians of both girls suffer from illness, and must be looked after by their wards, now grown almost to adulthood. Many of these details have a basis in the events of Montgomery's own life;

but not until Wiggin's novel had appeared did she feel emboldened to make them the basis of her own fiction.

Wiggin and Montgomery do not make their fiction illustrate a systematic feminist theory, as Alcott did. Wiggin does make her youthful heroine complain: "Boys always do the nice splendid things, and girls can only do the nasty dull ones that get left over. They can't climb so high, or go so far, or stay out so late, or run so fast, or anything" (*RSF* 13). But Rebecca, and Anne as well, soon abandon their incipient feminism as they approach maturity. Yet Wiggin and Montgomery are not entirely innocent of ideas. Examined carefully, their fiction embodies a view of human nature that differs markedly from Alcott's view. I mean that Montgomery and Wiggin understand their heroines primarily from a psychological perspective, whereas Alcott understood her characters primarily in moral terms. In other words, Rebecca and Anne are not presented as "little women" but as children: they are part of a separate class of humanity, with special emotional and intellectual needs that adults have a duty to meet. However, Rebecca and Anne lose their privileged status as they approach maturity; Wiggin and Montgomery could never allow an adult the latitude that they permit to their juvenile protagonists.

When *Anne of Green Gables* was first published, one American reviewer astutely described it as "a sort of Canadian 'Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm'."<sup>18</sup> But Montgomery has done more than imitate Wiggin's successful formula. She has improved on her model. Montgomery takes a more penetrating look than Wiggin does at the feelings of rejection and the longing for approval and love that childhood insecurities can create. Montgomery also displays greater literary skills, particularly in her use of irony, than Wiggin does. For example, Wiggin's book includes a great deal of effusive emotional posturing, of the sort Montgomery makes into an object of humour when she satirizes the stereotyped language and idealized emotions that Anne has learned from her reading of sentimental popular fiction. The divergence in tone between the two books can be readily illustrated. Wiggin describes Rebecca's offering of a public prayer as "an epoch in her life" (*RSF* 209). Montgomery allows Anne to describe her visit to Diana's Aunt Josephine in Charlottetown as "an epoch in my life" (*AGG* 252), but Montgomery clearly intends her readers to recognize that Anne's phrasing is naively borrowed from her reading.

Montgomery also shows a greater sociological acuity than Wiggin does in depicting the sometimes oppressive nature of life in a small rural community. Consider just the novel's opening scene, in which Mrs. Rachel Lynde is described as the self-appointed watchdog of Avonlea society. Mrs. Rachel is effectively portrayed as a busybody and a gossip; and she is self-righteous and offensive into the bargain. The narrator later tells us: "Mrs. Rachel was one of those delightful and popular people who pride themselves on speaking their mind without fear or favour" (*AGG* 68). We meet this Avonlea avatar of Mrs. Grundy even before we meet Marilla, Matthew, or Anne. That is, we are immediately

introduced to the restrictive nature of Avonlea society, where convention and custom rule all conduct. Marilla and Matthew have never left their family home; their inhibited natures are the natural product of this convention-bound society. The effervescent Anne supplies what Marilla and Matthew — and Avonlea in general — have been missing. Like Rebecca, Anne has a salutary impact on many of the adults she meets — think of her enlivening effect not only on Marilla and Matthew but also on other adults, such as Diana's imperious Aunt Josephine.

One of the great strengths of Montgomery's book is her ability to present events from Anne's point of view. In the scenes in which Anne confronts adult authority, we invariably side with Anne rather than with her older opponent. Even Anne's most childish enthusiasms are accorded a dignified treatment, for Montgomery wants her readers to remember the overwhelming importance that children can attach to trifles such as wearing puffed sleeves, attending a community concert, eating ice cream, or sleeping in a spare room bed. If these things are important to any child, they are doubly significant to Anne, who has never done any of them before.

Anne's sufferings are treated very lightly. She was three months old when she was orphaned, and she tells Marilla "nobody wanted me even then" (AGG 43). We are told: "Evidently she did not like talking about her experiences in a world that had not wanted her" (AGG 44). But we can infer the urgency of her need for a home of her own when she tells Matthew: "Oh, it seems too wonderful that I'm going to live with you and belong to you. I've never belonged to anybody — not really" (AGG 14). Marilla and Matthew, as well, quickly find that Anne fills a void in their lives. Matthew starts to accept Anne from the moment he first sees her, and finds: "He could not tell this child with the glowing eyes that there had been a mistake" (AGG 13). He soon finds her lively conversation enchanting, and Marilla is not far behind: "She *is* kind of interesting, as Matthew says. I can feel already that I'm wondering what on earth she'll say next. She'll be casting a spell over me, too. She's cast it over Matthew" (AGG 38). It is clear that Montgomery approves of her heroine's wide-eyed approach to life. In fact, Anne's exuberant outlook is held out by Montgomery as a fruitful way for adults to meet the world — or at least as a healthy corrective to the overly sombre outlook adopted by most adults in Avonlea.

Despite its attractiveness for adult readers, *Anne of Green Gables* is fundamentally a children's book. In *Emily of New Moon*, on the other hand, Montgomery may have aspired to higher things. Certainly, *Emily of New Moon* rather than the overtly "adult" novel *A tangled web* (1931) is Montgomery's closest approach to the serious study of Maritime clan life that she once expressed the ambition to write.<sup>19</sup> But in *Emily of New Moon* Montgomery has not managed to work the sort of transformation on children's fiction that Twain achieved in *The adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Like Twain's book, Montgomery's novel often reveals the shortcomings of the adult world seen by her young pro-

tagonist; however, Montgomery's book avoids the satire and the social criticism that Twain injects into his story. Moreover, Huck's adventures lead to his estrangement from society, but the first volume of the Emily series culminates in Emily's heart-warming reconciliation with her previously unsympathetic guardian. Both of Montgomery's best novels, then, remain children's books, whereas Twain's best novel crosses over into the category of "adult" fiction.

In the shape of its plot, *Emily of New Moon* resembles *Anne of Green Gables*. Like Anne Shirley, Emily Byrd Starr eventually finds a secure and affectionate home, and Emily displays a contagious vitality that enables her to enrich the lives of the emotionally reticent adults who reluctantly take her in. But the two novels differ considerably in tone. *Anne of Green Gables* is a far sunnier book than is *Emily of New Moon*. Anne begins to feel at home virtually from the moment she arrives at Green Gables; Matthew immediately takes her side, and Marilla is not far behind in extending her affection to the winsome orphan. In *Emily of New Moon*, however, Montgomery looks more deeply into the emotional consequences of being left as an unwanted burden with virtual strangers. Emily is not made welcome by Aunt Elizabeth Murray, the imperious relative who dominates life at New Moon. Although Cousin Jimmy and Aunt Laura ease Emily's discomfort, the stern Aunt Elizabeth is only won over after Emily has endured several confrontations with her strong-willed guardian, and demonstrated that she possesses an equally strong determination herself.

The differences between the books also mean that *Anne of Green Gables* is suited for younger audiences than is *Emily of New Moon*. For example, at seven years of age my own daughter enjoyed having Anne's story read to her. She could even perceive that the rhetoric in some of Anne's speeches was overdone and made Anne appear momentarily ridiculous. *Emily of New Moon*, on the other hand, is best suited for readers who are themselves nearing or passing through the turmoil of adolescence. Throughout the novel, Emily is pressured by her relatives to give up her literary ambitions, and adopt a more conventional outlook. Moreover, Emily is urged by nearly everyone she knows — by her relatives, by the eccentric Old Kelly, and by the vindictive Aunt Nancy Priest — to define her identity through her relationships with men.

In Emily Byrd Starr, the heroine of *Emily of New Moon*, Montgomery has created a literary heroine who is a worthy successor of Alcott's Jo March.<sup>20</sup> All of Emily's most striking assertions of her individuality revolve around her determined pursuit of her literary ambitions. When Emily insists that she simply must write — the need to express herself is part of her very being — she is defending herself against those who view her as little more than another piece of family property. Like Anne, Emily is given to imagining romantic fantasies, which she projects into her youthful literary efforts. But Emily's literary ambitions are central to her being in a way that Anne's are not. Anne's writing is not meant to be taken very seriously. Anne has learned to spin romantic stories as compensation for the bleakness of her life before she arrived at Green

Gables, and once she begins to feel secure in the emotional support of her new home she feels less need for a private fantasy world. Emily's emotional scars are less easily healed, and she can only express her feelings of isolation and loss by projecting them into her writing so that the progress of her various literary efforts becomes an integral part of her story.

Montgomery has skillfully arranged her plot so that Emily's need to express herself by writing precipitates a series of conflicts with adults, especially with the imperious Aunt Elizabeth. The first such incident occurs when Aunt Elizabeth discovers the notebook in which Emily has recorded her earliest attempts at literature. "'You mustn't read that, Aunt Elizabeth,' she [Emily] cried indignantly, 'that's mine, — my own *private property*.'"<sup>21</sup> Emily's assertion of children's rights makes no impact on Aunt Elizabeth, for whom children are little better than a rather troublesome kind of chattel, the property of whoever is charged with their upbringing:

"Hoity-toity, Miss Starr," said Aunt Elizabeth, staring at her, "let me tell you that I have a right to read your books. I am responsible for you now. I am not going to have anything hidden or underhanded, and understand that. You have evidently something there that you are ashamed to have seen and I mean to see it. Give me that book." (*ENM* 48-49)

Emily, however, has other ideas. She burns the book in the stove rather than let Aunt Elizabeth read it. Her writing is identified with her innermost being. She cannot let an unsympathetic stranger invade her personal identity in this way.

Later in the novel, the vindictive teacher, Miss Brownell, discovers that Emily has been writing a poem instead of doing her arithmetic. Sarcastically she tells the class, "Really, children, we seem to have a budding poet among us" (*ENM* 167). Emily's pain is acute when Miss Brownell makes fun of her poem before the class:

Miss Brownell held up the slate and read Emily's poem aloud, in a sing-song nasal voice, with absurd intonations and gestures that made it seem a very ridiculous thing. The lines Emily had thought the finest seemed the most ridiculous. The other pupils laughed more than ever and Emily felt that the bitterness of the moment could never go out of her heart. (*ENM* 168)

Moreover, this is not the end of the incident. When Miss Brownell is informed that Emily has more poems in her desk, she immediately takes possession of them, over Emily's protests. Again, Emily's poetic efforts are held up to ridicule. Despite her humiliation, Emily retains sufficient presence of mind to snatch her papers back before Miss Brownell can throw them in the fire. "You are an unjust, tyrannical *person*," she tells her teacher (*ENM* 172). When Miss Brownell tells this story to Aunt Elizabeth, Emily is forced to apologize without being given an opportunity to explain her side of the incident. Yet Emily does gain a small recognition of her right to personal dignity, when Aunt Elizabeth

— prompted by Cousin Jimmy's apt Biblical citation — relents on her initial command that Emily kneel before the triumphant Miss Brownell.

Emily's writings often serve her as an emotional outlet. This is particularly true of the letters she addresses to her dead father, whom she salutes as "Mr. Douglas Starr, On the road to heaven" (*ENM* 97). Emily's first letter to her father is written immediately after her humiliation by Miss Brownell, and the effort to articulate her grievances proves to be therapeutic. When Emily has finished writing, she regains her equanimity: "she had emptied out her soul and it was once more free of evil passions. She even felt curiously indifferent to Miss Brownell" (*ENM* 97). These letters to her father serve several purposes: they enable Emily to vent her hostile feelings towards people, usually adults, who treat her unfairly; and they help her overcome the loneliness she feels at New Moon. In addition, as she writes her letters Emily feels a renewed companionship with her father, who was once her sole confidant.

Emily's letters to her father come to an end as a direct result of another confrontation with Aunt Elizabeth. Relations between the two are already strained because Aunt Elizabeth disapproves of Emily's insistence on writing fiction. Then Aunt Elizabeth discovers the place where Emily has hidden the letters, and reads them:

Elizabeth Murray would never have read any writing belonging to a grown person. But it never occurred to her that there was anything dishonourable in reading the letters wherein Emily, lonely and — sometimes — misunderstood, had poured out her heart to the father she had loved and been loved by, so passionately and undertandingly. Aunt Elizabeth thought she had a right to know everything that this pensioner on her bounty did, said, or thought. She read the letters and found out what Emily thought of her — of her, Elizabeth Murray, autocrat unchallenged, to whom no one had ever dared to say anything uncomplimentary. (*ENM* 320)

Aunt Elizabeth summons Emily, intending to scold and punish her, but Aunt Elizabeth meets an unexpected response from Emily, who reacts to this invasion of her privacy in words that echo her earlier refusal to let Aunt Elizabeth peer into her private papers. Emily feels as though "Sacrilige had been committed — the most sacred shrine of her soul had been profaned," and she is indignant: "'How dare you?' she said. 'How dare you touch *my private papers?*'" (*ENM* 321).

When Emily snatches back her papers, Aunt Elizabeth is overcome by an unfamiliar emotion: "a most unpleasant doubt of her own conduct suddenly assailed her — driven home perhaps by the intensity and earnestness of Emily's accusation. For the first time in her life it occurred to Elizabeth Murray to wonder if she had done rightly" (*ENM* 321-22). Aunt Elizabeth's immediate response to this disquieting idea is a defensive anger, and Emily is convinced that she will be sent away from New Moon. But when Aunt Elizabeth comes to Emily's room, something surprising happens. Aunt Elizabeth says, "Emily, I had no right to read your letters. I admit I was wrong. Will you forgive

me?" (*ENM* 324). The emotional release that follows clears the air on both sides, and reveals to Emily that the undemonstrative Aunt Elizabeth, despite her forbidding exterior, does love Emily. The next time Emily tries to write to her father, she finds that she is unable to do so. This happens because the revelation of Aunt Elizabeth's affection has completed the process by which New Moon has become a real home for Emily. She no longer needs to feel close to her ghostly father; she is secure now in the affections of her surrogate parents.

The two subsequent volumes of the Emily series are rather disappointing. The most interesting moments occur when Emily's literary ambitions bring her into conflict with her family's very circumscribed conception of the options open to women. As she grows older, however, Emily's story turns into a disappointing series of abortive courtships, which only end when Emily finally recognizes her attachment to her childhood companion, the painter Teddy Kent. It is small compensation that Montgomery makes Emily's soul-mate an artist, who will — presumably — allow her to continue her literary career. As she approaches maturity, Emily confides to her diary: "I don't like the thought of my life belonging to any one but myself."<sup>22</sup> It is a definite comedown for her to finish as an ordinary romantic heroine, however unconventional some of the details of the romance may be.

Like Anne, Emily becomes both less assertive and less interesting as she grows older. After her marriage to Gilbert Blythe, Anne subordinates herself to the former classmate with whom she once competed on terms of equality. In the Emily series, Montgomery tries to avoid the problem of waning reader interest by ending Emily's story when her marriage becomes certain. Montgomery's ploy is not entirely successful, for once the Murray family accept Emily's literary vocation — and write her off as a permanent spinster — most of the sparkle goes out of Emily's tale. Emily no longer has to defend her personal identity against the assaults of society, and she experiences no inner conflict that can sustain an intense reader interest.

Montgomery wrote most effectively when she dealt with juvenile heroines, whose difficulties appeared to be associated with a special phase of life. Privately, in her journals and letters, she sometimes chafed against the restrictions that both publishers and readers imposed on the writer of children's fiction. However, she never attempted to break free from the conventions that hedged the form in which she cast the great majority of her work. As a result, Montgomery never made her fiction a vehicle for expressing a mature criticism of society. Social criticism entered her work principally when she protested against the overly strict and repressive way that adults sometime treated children. Her stories of literary heroines contain her strongest assertions of an individual's right to pursue her own course in life. But in her fiction she seldom expressed her awareness that grown women, too, could be subjected to constraints that were very similar to those she criticized when they were inflicted upon children.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Quoted by Montgomery in a letter to Ephraim Weber, 22 December 1908, in *The Green Gables letters: from L.M. Montgomery to Ephraim Weber, 1905-1909*, ed. Wilfrid Eggleston (Toronto: Ryerson, 1960) p. 80.
- <sup>2</sup>Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood: a social history of family life*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Vintage, 1962).
- <sup>3</sup>Lillian H. Smith, *The unreluctant years: a critical approach to children's literature* (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1976), p. 24.
- <sup>4</sup>Louisa May Alcott, *Little women; or Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy* (Cleveland and New York: World Publishing, 1946), p. 395.
- <sup>5</sup>Ruth K. MacDonald, *Louisa May Alcott* (Boston: Twayne, 1983), p. 19.
- <sup>6</sup>MacDonald, *Alcott*, p. 19.
- <sup>7</sup>Susan M. Coolidge, "What Katy did" and "what Katy did at school" (London: Collins, 1955), p. 23.
- <sup>8</sup>Nina Baym, *Woman's fiction: a guide to novels by and about women in America, 1820-1870* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 11.
- <sup>9</sup>Baym, *Woman's fiction*, p. 17.
- <sup>10</sup>Baym, *Woman's fiction*, p. 27.
- <sup>11</sup>Baym, *Woman's fiction*, p. 27.
- <sup>12</sup>Baym, *Woman's fiction*, p. 50.
- <sup>13</sup>Patricia Meyer Spacks, *The female imagination* (New York: Avon, 1975), pp. 120-128.
- <sup>14</sup>Baym, *Woman's fiction*, p. 11.
- <sup>15</sup>Baym, *Woman's fiction*, p. 198.
- <sup>16</sup>There is no sequel, properly speaking, to *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*. But Wiggin did publish additional stories about her heroine's childhood in *New chronicles of Rebecca* (1907). In both books Rebecca's eventual marriage to Adam Ladd is strongly implied.
- <sup>17</sup>Compare Kate Douglas Wiggin, *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1904), p. 149 and L.M. Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gables* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1968), p. 77. Subsequent page references to both books are given in the text and are identified by the abbreviations *RSF* and *AGG*.
- <sup>18</sup>*The outlook*, 89 (22 August 1908), 956.
- <sup>19</sup>Mollie Gillen, *The wheel of things: a biography of L.M. Montgomery, author of "Anne of Green Gables."* p. 142.
- <sup>20</sup>It may be more than coincidence that Jo and Emily both have youthful male companions named Teddy. It is a measure of Alcott's originality, however, that she resisted having Jo marry Teddy Laurence. Montgomery, on the other hand, makes it clear at an early stage in the Emily series that Emily and Teddy Kent are destined to be united.
- <sup>21</sup>L.M. Montgomery, *Emily of New Moon* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1923), p. 48. Subsequent page references are given in the text and are identified by the abbreviation *ENM*.
- <sup>22</sup>L.M. Montgomery, *Emily climbs* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1925), p. 26.

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