



**From Victorian Girl Reader to Modern Woman Artist:  
Reading and Seeing in the Paintings of the Canadian Girl by  
William Brymner, Emily Coonan, and Prudence Heward**

—Loren Lerner

In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, “the girl reader” was a popular theme for artists. Concurrently, what girls should read and how this would affect their growth and development was the subject of numerous advice manuals, novels, magazine articles, and books written especially for and about girls (Flint 71–136; Lyons; Bollman). Creating effective visual documents of the transformation of the Victorian girl into the modern girl through reading and seeing were three Canadian artists: William Brymner (1855–1925), director and teacher for thirty-five years at the Art Association of Montreal (AAM); and two of his female students, Emily Coonan (1885–1971) and Prudence Heward (1896–1947). Brymner’s depictions of late-nineteenth-century daughters, and the more enlightened girls depicted by Coonan and Heward, advanced educational ideals that linked reading,

looking at images, and making art.

The subject of this essay is the representation of the “girl reader” by these artists.<sup>1</sup> The analysis considers the formal features of the images, elements such as composition, colour, line, scale, and rhythm, to explain how the artists arrange and use these aspects to communicate certain beliefs and ideas. The discussion focuses on the context in which the artworks were produced and how and why each work with the same subject is a variation on the theme. This encompasses the ways that the paintings involve larger meanings like gender, artistic creation, culture, art trends in which the artists participated, and intellectual influences. The interpretive approach is synthetic, taking into account these factors and, more specifically, the biographies of the artists, the art education of girls, and the books read by women during this era.

Central to this inquiry is a painting by Brymner,

titled *The Picture Book* (1898) (Figure 1), which captures two girls reading, and his painting done a year earlier of a girl in the process of drawing, titled *The Grey Girl* (1897) (Figure 2). In both, Brymner proposes certain beliefs that are expanded on many years later in Coonan's *The Fairy Tale* (c. 1911) (Figure 3), *The Arabian Nights* (c. 1929) (Figure 4) and *The Blue Armchair* (1930) (Figure 5), and again in Heward's *At the Theatre* (1928) (Figure 6) and *Rollande* (1929) (Figure 7). In these twentieth-century works, Coonan and Heward appear to go beyond investigating the feminine values associated with reading and looking to projecting themselves into their paintings of girls. In the late-nineteenth century, however, when society was still dominated by Victorian ideals, Brymner was at the forefront of a new way of thinking when he adapted the theme of the girl reader to communicate ideas about how educating Canadian girls in the visual arts contributed to their spiritual and creative growth.

Born in Greenock, Scotland on December 14, 1855, Brymner came to Canada with his parents as a child of two, settling first in Melbourne in the Eastern Townships, then, when his father, Douglas Brymner, became editor of *The Herald* newspaper in the 1860s, in Montreal. In 1870, his father was appointed first head of the Canadian Archives, and the family moved to Ottawa, where

Brymner took up the study of architecture in the Chief Government's Office. He was sent to Paris in 1879, at the age of twenty-four, to complete his architectural studies, but once there decided to take up painting and enrolled at the *Académie Julian*, determined to become a professional artist. He lived in Paris for nine years, painting in the French countryside, visiting Belgium and England on occasion, and returning to Canada for short periods of time. It was in France that he learned how to paint realist works with academic precision. He also discovered early on that to be successful he had to master the painting of girls. Brymner's early paintings revelled in the sweet innocence and other pubescent qualities of the youthful feminine ideal.

Brymner realized that pictures of young girls as lovely, good, and healthy were appealing to the general public and sold well on the art market. This was, after all, the Victorian era, sometimes described as "the age of children" due to the public's fascination with children's minds and bodies (see Gillis; Hunter; Mitchell; Vallone). In January 1885, during his last year in Paris, he wrote to his father about several paintings he had shipped back home, most of them depictions of girls:

I would like to get \$50 for the sketch on a



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panel, sky, sea and red roofed house against the sea and in the foreground a common with flowers and a little girl in the distance with a group of little children further away still . . . . The other small panel with two little girls, one plaiting rushes perhaps . . . \$25 . . . . The picture called comrades—a girl speaking to another in a boat with a baby in her arms, \$40 or \$50 . . . ." (Letter to Douglas Brymner)<sup>2</sup>

A year later, Brymner returned to Canada and presented *A Wreath of Flowers* (1884) as his diploma work to the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts (RCA). He was elected a full member of the Academy and shortly thereafter became the director of the AAM. *A Wreath of Flowers* marked Brymner's prominent entry into the Canadian art world. Painted out of doors at Runswick Bay, Yorkshire, England, he used as his subjects four country girls from the local school (Brymner, "Village Life"). Executed in rich detail, the painting shows three of the girls sitting on a steep grassy

slope while the fourth, more subtly drawn to reflect the soft atmospheric tones of the landscape, gathers flowers further up the hill. The painting has a sentimental charm and a narrative appeal typical of the genre scenes so popular during this era. One of the three girls knits absentmindedly as she gazes with envy at the play of her companions, who are making wreaths of daisies on the other side of the path. A moral tone underscores the carefree spirit of the scene: blissful innocence is a brief moment in time before girls become women, responsible for domestic chores and consumed by the daily routines of adult life.

Beginning in the 1890s, Brymner devoted most of his attention to making oil paintings of Quebec landscapes, but in 1897, he returned to depicting girls, and a year later included a large-scale watercolour painting—102.9 x 74.3 centimetres—on this subject in the RCA exhibition. First shown with the title *Sisters* (1898), the painting was exhibited often over the course of his lifetime, with varying titles: as *Two Girls*

*Reading* in 1903 and throughout the 1920s, and as *The Picture Book* in 1898, 1900, and 1903. Known today as *The Picture Book*, the painting reflects the careful drawing, engaging composition, and subtle tonality Brymner learned while in Paris. It was unusual, however, for a painter to use watercolour for a work of this size, and the image of girls reading signified a new theme, different from his earlier depictions of girls in country settings.

*The Picture Book* is Brymner's interpretation of a type of representation that had been popular for a long time. Pictures of the female reader that contained various encoded meanings had proliferated in Europe from the eighteenth century well into the nineteenth century, in conjunction with longstanding debates on the proper education of women and their role in society.

In William Hogarth's *Before* and *After* prints (December 1736), the novel and poems on the woman's dressing table indicate that her loss of virtue will have resulted from reading the wrong kind of literature. *After* depicts the pathetic state of the woman pleading with her male admirer, having been seduced by him because of her frivolous thoughts and overwrought emotions. Over one hundred years later, in *La Liseuse de Romans* (1850), Antoine Wiertz shared the same negative idea of the female reader in his depiction of a nearly naked woman reclining in bed surrounded

by popular novels she was presumably given by the devil. Despite her obvious enjoyment of the sexual pleasure the stories arouse in her, she is portrayed as foolish and ill advised. Similarly, in *Les Bas-bleus* and *Les Femmes socialistes*, two series of caricatures drawn by Honoré Daumier in the 1840s and 1850s, a woman in the act of reading implies corruption, dangerous erotic fantasy, unsuitable educational aspirations, and the inappropriate allure of public life. In Daumier's *A Female Author Neglecting Her Home and Child* (1844), the seated woman has abandoned her responsibilities in favour of literary ideas she cannot possibly comprehend.

The tide began to turn in the latter part of the century with such artists as Thomas Sully (*Portrait of a Girl Reading*, 1842), James McNeill Whistler (*Reading by Lamplight*, 1858), Edouard Manet (*Reading*, 1865–73), Mary Cassatt (*Young Woman Reading*, 1876), Lord Frederic Leighton (*Study: At a Reading Desk*, 1877), Sir Edward Burne-Jones (*Portrait of Katie Lewis*, 1882–86) and Berthe Morisot (*Little Girl Reading*, 1888), all of whom favoured a more positive interpretation of the woman reader. Cassatt and Morisot in particular expanded the depiction of reading females to include girls with books in their hands.

By this time, girls reading books had become associated with leisure time and the ideal of the

middle-class home. The focus had shifted away from the evils of reading to what kind of reading girls should undertake for their edification. John Ruskin, the Victorian social commentator, art critic, and educator, was recognized for championing a more liberal view of how girls should be educated. In 1865, he wrote an essay on the education of the female child in which he promotes giving girls more freedom to choose their own reading material: "Keep the modern magazine and novel out of your girl's way," but do not hesitate to "turn her loose into the old library, every wet day, and let her alone. She will find what is good for her . . . . Let her loose in the library, I say, as you do a fawn in a field" ("Of Queens' Gardens" 165).

In Canada during these years, it was common for books, magazines, and newspapers to dispense advice on what a child, particularly a girl, ought to read to better herself. Yet beliefs about the dangers of young girls reading persisted. In 1884, in *Serious Hours of a Young Lady*, Charles Sainte-Foi warns girls that "the country is flooded with productions that sap the foundations of morality . . . flimsy productions of depraved minds, which, besides all the other injuries they cause, rob them (the young ladies) of a most precious time" (284). Almost a decade later, Madge Merton, a writer and journalist, along with the editors of *Canadian Magazine*, offered a more positive

approach to reading. The "true use of reading," Merton professes, is "to build character." Girls, she insists, should read all kinds of books, even books being read by boys, including "those that teach something or inspire the reader to learn something . . . books that honour old age and venerate childhood, that unlock the mysteries of nature, and point to the Divine through them all" (285–86). In the follow-up issue of the magazine, regular contributor Reginald Gourlay explored the relationship between a girl's mind and body and affirmed that reading was important for her development. In an article titled "The Canadian Girl," he explains that rural girls living "in the backwoods" are the wellspring of Canada's "healthy, vigorous race." Complementing their physical traits—"fine eyes, good complexions, and magnificent hair . . ."—is their "intense desire for self-improvement," which inspires them to "read more than all the rest of the family put together and often amazingly good books" (507).

With the rise of female readers in Canada, female authors started writing novels for mothers and daughters that extolled the difference that reading made to a girl's intellectual growth and maturity. In stories such as *The Tree of Knowledge* (1889) by Reynolds Baillie, *Brooke's Daughter* (1891) by Adeline Sergeant, and *Marguerite Verne*, or *Scenes from Canadian Life* (1886) by



The cool light, the texture of the subjects' clothing, the touching heads, and the masses of tumbled hair evoke a subtle sensuality. Absorbed in their activity, their dresses innocently pulled up to expose their black stockings and legs, the girls are unaware of the presence of the viewer.



Rebecca Agatha Armour, girls are portrayed either as avid readers or as non-readers whose lives are about to be changed by deriving knowledge from reading. For example, Miss Brabourne in *The Tree of Knowledge* is a girl of nineteen who, because she “had read astonishingly little,” was considered “utterly unformed,” with a “dull expression” that “looked as if the girl had no thoughts” (Baillie 11). In *Brooke's Daughter*, the daughter “was not only pure and innocent, but she was ignorant, she did not know how the poor lived: she had only the vaguest and haziest possible notions concerning misery and want and disease” until she was awakened by “the strong and burning words which she was reading” (Sergeant 108). Armour's protagonist, *Marguerite Verne*, already a keen reader, tells her mother: “Don't mind me, mamma. Please bear in mind I am good company for myself. I remember once reading a passage in some book which said that all the pleasure we

derived had its source in ourselves, and not in external objects. I often think of it, and believe it to be true” (16).

Brymner's *The Picture Book* sits firmly within this new tradition. By depicting the everyday life of two sisters at home, tenderly engrossed in the act of reading, *The Picture Book* celebrates the modern Canadian girl. The younger sister is sitting on a chair, her head bent forward, fully absorbed in reading a book she holds firmly in her lap. Her sister is leaning over her shoulder with a look of intent concentration, wanting to be closer both to the book and her sister. The girls' thoughts appear to be as virtuous as their faces are naturally charming, their emotional lives innocently stimulated by the picture of a landscape they see on the pages of the book before them. Safe in their refuge, they are bonded not only in the act of reading but by virtue of sharing tastes, values, and interests. The warm browns and creamy white

tones of the painting, the closely knit composition, the subdued interior light, and the sweet rounded forms of the girls in their plain attire express the serenity that imbues this private, homey activity. The cool light, the texture of the subjects' clothing, the touching heads, and the masses of tumbled hair evoke a subtle sensuality. Absorbed in their activity, their dresses innocently pulled up to expose their black stockings and legs, the girls are unaware of the presence of the viewer. Brymner not only invites the viewer to envision a narrative that focuses on the girls' immersion in reading, he asks us to savour the aesthetics of the picture, which arise from the emotional association of the girls with one another and with the content of the book that so captures their attention.

*The Picture Book* was typical of the kind of work being produced by Canadian artists in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. One example is Laura Muntz Lyall's *Children's Hour* (1897), painted a year earlier, which depicts small children comfortably propped up on pillows, the light from the window shining on their faces and the pages of a book. Several years later, Franklin Brownell painted *An Interesting Story* (1905), in which the pose of the girls—the two are pressed together, one girl looking over the other's shoulder—is reminiscent of the positioning of the girls in Brymner's rendition of the subject.

While the pictorial similarities between Brymner's painting and the works of his contemporaries are striking, a significant difference separates them. The older girl in *The Picture Book* is not reading out loud; in fact, she is not reading at all, but, like her sibling, is engrossed in looking at a landscape spread across the open pages of the book. Given the repeated use of the title *Two Girls Reading* for this painting, it seems obvious that Brymner understood his subject to be two girls privately and silently "reading" pictures in a book.

By creating a painting that was more than a charming middle-class domestic scene, Brymner expanded on the theme of the young female reader. The representation is positive, affirming a new belief in encouraging the intellectual and emotional development of the female child. Historically, reading was linked to the authority and self-knowledge that belonged to men, as well as to the skills of thinking and speaking they were encouraged by society to develop (Flint 40–43). As a fundamental tool of socialization, reading was capable of shaping a member of society and even of influencing and changing society itself. *The Picture Book*, as the alternative title *Two Girls Reading* suggests, brings girls into the circle of those who can possess power through learning. Furthermore, the emerging self-knowledge of Brymner's girls comes not from reading a text but

from gazing appreciatively at pictures in a book.

This idea of a reader appreciating images in a book belongs within the Victorian discourse about the relation between text and art. *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë begins with Jane reading a book “stored with pictures.” The book is Thomas Bewick’s *The History of British Birds*, which Jane translates into visual images: “Each picture told a story; mysterious often to my undeveloped understanding and imperfect feelings, yet ever profoundly interesting” (Brontë 6; cited in Losano 27). By the latter part of the nineteenth century, with the invention of better paper and type and the introduction of colour printing, pictures in books were increasingly considered to be works of art (Whalley and Chester 92). As more adults became enamoured of print illustrations, the status of this type of book improved and the idea developed that children’s literature was a serious visual narrative form.

Edward Evans (1826–1905), an engraver and printer, was instrumental in redefining the picture book, with brightly coloured pictures taking up most of the pages, and only a line or two of text included on each page. Evans worked with three outstanding illustrators to create books such as Walter Crane’s *The Baby’s Bouquet* (1880), Randolph Caldecott’s *The House that Jack Built* (1878), and Kate Greenaway’s *Mother Goose*

(1881). Moreover, adult best-sellers from the 1870s into the 1890s were often children’s literature for older children, filled with full-page illustrations and inserted vignettes. Popular editions included Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868–69), Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* (1883), Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), and Rudyard Kipling’s *Jungle Book* (1894). In all forms of children’s books, from the magical tales of Palmer Cox’s *The Brownies* (1887–1899) to the science fiction of Jules Verne and the fables of Rudyard Kipling, the pictorial effect was crucial in defining the text.

As the art of illustration flourished in children’s books, adult books, and journals, a public evolved that was receptive to perceiving the close relationship between reading a book and looking at a work of art. Brymner was keenly involved in this development as the illustrator of two books, Joshua Fraser’s *Shanty Forest and River Life in the Backwoods of Canada* (1883) and *Bonhomme: French-Canadian Stories and Sketches* (1899) by Henry Cecil Walsh. Obviously, Brymner had the connection between reading and seeing in mind when he was illustrating *Bonhomme*, a book with twelve half-tone drawings of pioneering life in Canada, which he was working on around the same time that he was painting *The Picture Book*.

When *The Picture Book* was originally exhibited at the Academy Exhibition in 1898 as *The Sisters*, the reviewer, Norman Patterson, wrote that the “medium in which this was painted aroused considerable interest among the artists. It was a water-colour done on canvas in an unusual manner” (513). The sketchy, less precise, and textured effects of *The Picture Book* are the result of Brymner using a linen surface that could withstand large amounts of scrubbing, rinsing, and scraping. The only other known watercolour Brymner painted on linen was *The Grey Girl*, exhibited at the RCA in 1897. The painting pictures a girl drawing on a tablet. She sits at an angle, propped up in her chair, her head turned slightly as she looks with concentration at the subject, her pen held firmly in hand. She is creating an image rather than simply “reading” a picture, as the two girls are doing a year later in *The Picture Book*. Another difference is the highly detailed wallpaper and floor space of *The Grey Girl*.

Yet, the similarities between the two works are such that one is tempted to see them as companion pieces. They are the same size; they both make use of muted colours and a restricted area; all three girls are engaged in looking, reading, and imagining; and, in *The Grey Girl*, the subject’s attentive, introspective mood and the sense of domestic intimacy that pervades the

scene are analogous to the mood and setting of *The Picture Book*. Upon closer viewing, one is aware of another reason why the two works are warmly related: is it possible that the images in *The Picture Book* are not only stimulating the girls’ appreciation but inspiring them to create their own pictures? We are reminded of Ruskin’s advice on how to educate girls: “Then, in art, keep the finest models before her, and let her practice in all accomplishments be accurate and thorough, so as to enable her to understand more than she accomplishes. I say the finest models—that is to say, the truest, simplest, usefulest” (Ruskin, “Of Queens’ Gardens” 164).

For Ruskin, seeing was a fundamental way to acquire knowledge of the world and could be cultivated through drawing nature and copying works of art. Brymner was well acquainted with Ruskin’s writings on art, and advised his students at the AAM to read Ruskin’s *The Elements of Drawing*, first published in 1857. A summary of a drawing course Ruskin taught at the Working Men’s College and introduced at Oxford University in 1869, *The Elements of Drawing* included a substantial section on watercolour painting, which he considered to be an integral part of the drawing process. Here, Ruskin emphasized that he was not interested in training artists but in training the eyes of his students. For him, the objective of

drawing lay in recovering the “innocence of the eye.” The drawing exercises he included in the book encouraged his students to see the world aesthetically and with more accuracy, with an innocent perception free from the conventions learned by society. Through the use of watercolour painting, they would learn to translate visual experience into a mosaic of hues and tones copied from nature.

According to Ruskin, this intellectual activity involved not only seeing and drawing but also reading the visual image. In *The Elements of Drawing*, Ruskin describes the visual details of a landscape additively, situating the reader at different vantage points and allowing the reader to borrow his eyes to progressively create a visual image with language (Landow 124–45). This word-painting, the creation of visually composed descriptive passages by means of image sequences, accurate observations, and dramatized acts of perception, is characteristic of Ruskin’s depiction of nature. Moving the reader’s eye through the elements of the landscape in a visually oriented prose, he focuses on the authenticity of the experience, including its light, motion, and energy, and the colours and textures of the image. Seeing, for Ruskin, is intrinsically linked to reading, whether viewing nature, Turner’s landscape paintings, or William Holman Hunt’s

print illustrations for Alfred Tennyson’s *The Lady of Shalott*; or reading books by Plato, Shakespeare, Thomas Carlyle, or Francis Bacon. Reading, Ruskin emphasizes in the appendix to *The Elements of Drawing*, “will also be of the greatest value in teaching you to feel the same characters in art” (351–2). Ruskin ends his treatise on drawing by affirming seeing and reading as closely related intellectual and moral activities. He concludes: “. . . your teachers are wisest when they make you content in quiet virtue, and that literature and art are best for you which point out, in common life, and in familiar things, the objects for hopeful labour, and for humble love” (353).

*The Grey Girl* and *The Picture Book* link Ruskin’s treatise on the importance of watercolour painting with his ideas on the education of girls. In fact, given that both paintings contain subjects engaged in the act of seeing so critical to Ruskin’s concept of drawing, they can be interpreted as representations of his philosophy of art education in general. In *The Grey Girl*, the girl is learning to draw from what she sees in the world; in *The Picture Book*, the girls are studying a landscape image, possibly with the intention of making their own drawings. The lines and colours of the landscape are reminiscent of Turner’s watercolour paintings, so admired by Ruskin in *The Elements of Drawing* for being an expressive







Figure 4. Emily Coonan. *The Arabian Nights*.



Figure 5. Emily Coonan. *The Blue Armchair*.



Figure 6. Prudence Heward. *At the Theatre*.



Figure 7. Prudence Heward. *Rollande*.



Figure 8. Honoré Daumier. *Bas bleus no.7*: La mère est dans le feu de la composition, l'enfant est dans l'eau de la baignoire!



Figure 9. Honoré Daumier. *Mœurs conjugales no.55*: Interieur parisien.



. . . the beauty and sweet demeanour of Brymner's girls suggest how looking at pictures of landscapes in a book and drawing from nature foster the moral vision and spiritual health envisioned by Ruskin as being part of a girl's education, and part of a good art education, regardless of gender.



representation of visual fact. All three girls are very much the cultivated young ladies described by Ruskin. In particular, the beauty and sweet demeanour of Brymner's girls suggest how looking at pictures of landscapes in a book and drawing from nature foster the moral vision and spiritual health envisioned by Ruskin as being part of a girl's education, and part of a good art education, regardless of gender. Brymner's girls reflect Ruskin's belief that accurate, penetrative perception has an effect on other forms of understanding, enabling the student to use the eye and mind to comprehend reality directly as visual experience. As a reader of the visual image, this young person would learn that one could not separate the visual from the emotional or the aesthetically pleasing from compassion for humankind (Hewison 33).

Ruskin's teaching was echoed in Brymner's attitudes toward art education at the AAM, particularly in reference to educating girls. In

"Notes on Teaching," a lecture given at the AAM in 1895, Brymner states: "But the producing of artists is only secondary work. The primary object of an art training is to teach people to look at nature intelligently, to teach them, in fact, to see nature at all; to look at pictures intelligently; to make them see that the only interest in a picture may not be its prettiness—the prettiness is not necessarily a disadvantage on the contrary—but that the thought, character, form of expression are all of greater importance" (2). In 1897, in a newspaper article in the *Montreal Witness*, Brymner emphasizes that AAM classes are not meant to make artists: "I prefer to call the teaching we give in the class as the finishing of education." Most of the students, he explains, are "naturally drawn from what may be called our leisured classes . . . for the most part they're young ladies." The purpose of art training, he believed, was to nurture young ladies to recognize "the social and

domestic relations of what is refined and graceful and sympathetic” (qtd. in Braide 11–12).

In 1900, when the Art Association Council of the AAM gave Brymner more classroom space, he introduced new courses in watercolour painting and the art of illustration. The watercolour class was associated with Ruskin’s advice on art training, whereas the class in illustration responded to the need to educate Canadian book and magazine illustrators. In the same year, Brymner started classes for senior-high-school students that attracted mainly young women. These were his two main innovations at the AAM, likely derived from ideas he developed while painting *The Grey Girl* and *The Picture Book*. The paradox is that the curriculum Brymner introduced was to a large extent a contradiction of the convictions he shared with Ruskin. Brymner referred to the AAM as a finishing school for young ladies, a place to acquire the aesthetic tastes and creative skills associated with the Victorian idea of a well-bred middle-class woman. In his three and a half decades as director, however, the program at the school consisted primarily of the same academic training for aspiring artists that he had pursued as a young man in Paris. For Brymner, “academic training” implied a specific procedure for learning how to draw the human figure. While Ruskin emphasized learning through depicting

nature, academic drawing meant learning how to draw a live model. Brymner insisted that his students follow a rigorous system of drawing that stressed linear modelling and the gradual mastery of the human form. While students at the AAM were expected to paint all types of subjects and were well aware of new movements in painting, particularly Impressionism, figurative art was always the main focus of the curriculum.

At the same time as he was claiming that the AAM was the right environment for “finishing” refined young ladies, Brymner was offering them a professional art education. Moreover, a good number of the women entering the AAM were committed to becoming artists in an environment where serious training was an asset.

In common with his own experience, Brymner expected his female students to paint the girl figure. There were a number of reasons for this, the first being that women artists were expected to concentrate on women’s themes, such as painting portraits of women and children, or pictures of children alone or in groups, with family members, or in other domestic scenes. The second reason was the increasing attention focused on the child at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Childhood continued to be both a major focal point of imaginative and philosophical speculation and a flourishing literary

and artistic preoccupation. The female child, especially, was a popular subject. As Jean Graham writes in *Canadian Magazine*, “[i]t is difficult for the modern girl to keep from considering herself an exceedingly important character, for magazines, newspapers and even advertisements are crammed with appeals to the Young Person” (372).

In the annual juried Spring Exhibition of the AAM, Brymner led by example, submitting such paintings as *The Grey Girl* (1897), *The Picture Book* (1898), *Girl’s Head* (1903), *Little Girl in Red* (1906), *Miss Butler* (1909) and *The Trinket (Girl in Blue Hat)* (1916). His female students followed this example and, well into the 1930s, more often than not painted pictures of the same theme. Two of Brymner’s students, Emily Coonan and Prudence Heward, eventually transformed the theme of the reading and seeing girl. Though they followed in Brymner’s footsteps for a time, as they developed as artists they began creating images that reflected the thoughts and feelings of a new kind of girl, one who was more individualized, more real than the ideal depictions so popular during the Victorian era. In the process of drawing girls whose psyches were clearly enlivened and influenced by reading and looking, they showed that these activities were not only similar modes of perception, but were related one to the other. They also showed, by imbuing their subjects with their own experiences

as readers and viewers, something of their own selves. This was their most significant contribution to the theme of the girl reader.

Emily Coonan (Antaki) was born on May 30, 1885, in the Point St. Charles area of Montreal. She was the youngest daughter of William Coonan, a machinist and property owner, and Mary Anne Fullerton. Coonan attended the parish school, St. Ann’s Academy for Girls, where her aptitude for art was recognized at the age of eight or nine. Her mother supported her daughter’s dream of becoming an artist and made sure that money was always available for her studies. While it is unlikely that Coonan attended secondary school, during her early teens, her mother brought her twice a week for several years to the *Conseil des Arts et Manufactures*. In the late 1890s, Coonan painted several icons for the parish church, including a portrait of Father Strubbe. Other subjects at the time were thematically related to the Irish Catholic community. She studied with William Brymner at the AAM from 1905 to 1909. In 1907, in the annual student show at the AAM gallery, her painting of her sisters dressed for a costume ball, *Eva and Daisy* (1907), won first prize, which was a two-year scholarship to continue her education at the AAM. In 1912, she went to Europe with another AAM student, Mabel May, first to Paris, then to northern France, Belgium, and Holland.

She returned in 1920 on a travelling scholarship she had received from the National Gallery of Canada in 1913. Until 1933, Coonan showed regularly with the Royal Canadian Academy and at the AAM Spring Exhibition, and her works were consistently included in the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto. Her subject matter was motivated by her immediate milieu, and included figure works drawn from life and Quebec landscapes.

In Coonan's early painting, *The Fairy Tale* (c. 1911), a mother who is reading out loud from a book shares an emotional bond with her two daughters. The type of book is particularly significant to the construction of the image in that fairy tales were understood to nurture the vision of the child as well as re-awaken in the adult the child's freedom to imagine (Lundin 48). The mother sits squarely in the centre of the painting, her daughters nestled one at each side in what appears to be an extension of her ample form. The younger daughter is smiling in response to the reading while the older girl's mouth is hanging open, signifying the intensity of her involvement with the story. Despite the smile and intense involvement, there is no hint that the girls are searching for meaning in the text or images. Rather, the mother and her girls are totally engrossed in the feelings and fantasies that emanate from the mother's

reading.

In this painting, Coonan succeeds in communicating two distinctive aspects of the act of reading: the mother's solid attention to the narrative, and the sensations of the mother and the girls. This image of the mother—who, as the protector and provider of warmth for the family—is nourishing the sentiment, piety, and humanity of her girls, belongs firmly in the domestic sphere. She is the ideal mother, educating her girls at home. Jean Graham's advice in an August 1909 issue of *Canadian Magazine* resonates in this image: "[t]he girl whose mother cares for good books and true pictures has had a 'course' of instruction worth all the academies in the world" (373).

*The Fairy Tale* is innovative in its expressive colours and sketchy quality, but the intimacy of the domestic scene links it unequivocally with the typical interpretations of the theme. *The Arabian Nights* (1929), painted eighteen years later, pictures an adolescent girl reading alone. This makes it very different in meaning from *The Fairy Tale*. Here, the subject is totally immersed in the book she holds firmly in her hands, her elbows comfortably resting on the arms of the chair. The light filtering into the room brightens the colour of her face. The shadow on the wall echoes the form of her head and torso, as if to suggest an invisible companion at her side.

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The title of the painting, *The Arabian Nights*, is a pointed reminder of how far society has come since the 1880s. When the Canadian artist George Reid painted *Forbidden Fruit* in 1899, he based its content on his own experiences as a young boy who loved to read (Miller 16). The painting shows Reid devouring *Arabian Nights* secretly, lying in the hayloft of the barn, away from the surveillance of his father. *Arabian Nights* was considered inappropriate reading for a young person due to the content of its tales, which included erotic nuances and passionate imagery. The stories, originating from a Persian book called *Hazar Afsaneh (A Thousand Nights)*, about a vizier's daughter who cures a murderous caliph of his madness with her nightly storytelling, were translated and modified for an English audience in

Edward William Lane's annotated and illustrated edition published in 1838–40. This edition was widely available, as well as the versions by John Payne in 1882–4 and Sir Francois Burton in 1885–6, and many inexpensive imitations. While the translations emphasized the fantastic elements and glossed over or expunged the sexual aspects of the tales, the social concern remained that reading books like this would arouse sexual awareness in the young, and a yearning for improper romance and the exotic. The girl in Coonan's painting, however, is free of the sensual connotations suggested by the supine figure and pursed lips of the boy in Reid's *Forbidden Fruit*. Despite her bare arms and the way she holds the book close to her breast, and the expressive colour of her dress and its low geometric neckline, the image created by Coonan is modest and sincere, with no hint of the female body concealed beneath the girl's simple attire.

With the painting of *The Arabian Nights* and, a year later, *The Blue Armchair*, it is apparent

that Coonan decided to bring new meaning to the depiction of a girl with a book. In *The Blue Armchair*, the girl, who is about ten years old, seems to be consumed with anxiety and nervous tension. Wearing a purple dress and holding a large black hat, she sits stiffly in an overstuffed chair, waiting to leave. Her timid features and rigid posture express her discomfort, while the closed brown book on the floor conveys even further the strained atmosphere. The girl has either ceased to read or is too agitated to do so, given the gravity of her situation. Something is weighing heavily on her mind, perhaps the unpleasantness of the home she is in or the thought of leaving a safe place. The domestic serenity has been invaded by a sense of gloom and apprehension.

The girl in *The Blue Armchair* is at an age when reading should be a source of delight, yet the closed book on the floor suggests that something is not as it should be. In every respect, the painting emits visual sensations. This includes the deliberate modelling of the figure, the focus on the chair's bold pattern, the sheen of the girl's purple dress, the vacuous black space occupied by the hat, and the thin brown book that lies abjectly in the corner. The painting is aesthetically directed to perception, making even more palpable the intense introspection of a girl who is afraid to look and cannot read.

Clearly, Coonan's paintings of girls exude a strong attachment between the artist and her subjects, and may even be acts of self-reflection. We know very little about Coonan's life. She always kept to herself, though she associated briefly with the Beaver Hall Group of women artists, which met regularly in 1920 and 1921, and consisted of a handful of Montreal artists and several of Brymner's female students. In 1933, she abruptly stopped exhibiting. She never married, nor did she pursue another career. She painted throughout her life, but at the time she stopped exhibiting, she separated herself completely from the Montreal art milieu. Perhaps insights into her mind and motivation can be found in *The Arabian Nights* and *The Blue Armchair*, both painted in mid-career. In the former, the girl is at peace, completely absorbed in the private activity of reading. The serenity of this scene, however, contrasts sharply with the tension that reverberates in *The Blue Armchair* and others of her paintings of girls in public spaces (*First Communicants*, c. 1912; *The Italian Girl*, c. 1920–21) or about to leave home (*The Green Door*, 1913). It is possible that *The Arabian Nights* evokes the private nature of Coonan's disposition, that the girl reading in seclusion is a reflection of her own creative energy. Perhaps the girl's act of reading represents the independent space Coonan needed

to create for herself before she could paint her own personalized pictures of the world. For Coonan, painting, like reading, may have been a way to expand her experience of the world without having to struggle as a participant in society.

Significantly, *The Blue Armchair* is one of Coonan's last paintings of a girl, if not the last. Until her death in 1971, she devoted herself almost exclusively to painting landscapes of the Quebec countryside, an unpopulated world markedly different from the personalized subject matter she had explored in the past. This sudden ending to her focus on the girl subject may have had its source in personal matters or may simply have been a reflection of a new trend that was attracting the attention of her colleagues. More and more women painters who had studied at the AAM, such as Nora Collyer, Anne Savage, Sarah Robertson, Kathleen Morris, and Ethel Seath, were now painting landscapes instead of figurative works, following the celebrated painters of the Group of Seven. One exception was Prudence Heward, who continued to paint girls and whose works, like Coonan's, demonstrate a keen understanding of the girl subject and a strong connection with the psychological formation of girls.

Born on July 2, 1896 to Arthur R.G. Heward and Sarah Efa Jones, Prudence Heward was the sixth of eight children in an affluent Protestant

Montreal family. Two of her sisters, Honour and Dorothy, took art classes at the AAM, and as a child, Heward often modelled for Dorothy and her AAM friends. Educated privately, she was encouraged at an early age by her mother and sisters to study art, and in 1908, when she was 12, she took her first drawing lessons at the AAM. At 16, her father and two of her sisters, Dorothy and Barbara, died, yet despite the difficulties related to the deaths, Heward continued her studies at the AAM. She won a scholarship, and exhibited her work for the first time at the institute's Spring Exhibition in 1914. When Heward's brother Jim went to the Front in 1914 and her youngest brother Brian was a student at Cambridge University, Mrs. Heward decided to take the remaining members of the family to England, where Prudence worked for the Red Cross during the war. On her return to Montreal in 1918, she resumed her studies at the AAM under William Brymner and Randolph Hewton. She made many friends there, including Sarah Robertson, Kathleen Morris, Anne Savage, and Ethel Seath, who became the basis of a community she sustained throughout her life. These friendships resulted in her participation in the Beaver Hall Group of women artists in the 1920s, where she would have known Emily Coonan. It was during these formative years that Heward read extensively about art and actively

followed all the exhibitions. From 1925 to 1926, during a stay in Paris, she took classes at the *Académie Colarossi* and studied drawing at the *École des Beaux Arts*, an academic training that reinforced what she had learned at the AAM.

Heward's life was ostensibly more worldly than Coonan's, but nonetheless it was restricted. Like Coonan, she never married, and though outwardly she maintained the conventional decorum of a well-to-do woman, privately she adopted the strict discipline of a professional artist. She painted daily in her studio, which was located on the top floor of her mother's home on Peel Street, where she also lived. The mainstay of her practice was painting girls. The young nieces who posed for many of her works recall the fairy tales she spun to keep them still while she worked. In the summer, Heward also drew landscapes, sketching at her family's home on the banks of the St. Lawrence near Brockville and, further afield, at locations such as Manitoulin Island in Ontario and Saint-Sauveur in Quebec.

Significantly, the only time Heward painted a girl reading, the girl was older than her usual subjects and was reading a program, not a book. *At the Theatre* (1928) depicts two girls seen from behind, waiting for the performance to begin. The girl on the right is turning her head to the side to read the program while her companion gazes with interest in another direction. These older

girls are firmly in the centre of the composition, fully at ease intellectually and with their bodies, despite being clothed in sleeveless dresses with low-cut backs. The profile of the girl who is reading the program is fully visible, while the girl who is looking elsewhere is shown to be doing so deliberately by the muscles that are emphasized in her neck. Both are self-assured as they wait for the performance to begin in an environment that is familiar to them.

Notwithstanding Heward's attention to the girls' bodies in *At the Theatre*, this painting is a depiction of a girl's right to look and appraise in a public space. The image of a person's back turned to the viewer has often been used in art as a sign of religious devotion and estrangement from the world. Here, Heward stands this tradition on its head to express a state of active contemplation and engagement. The girl reading the program in *At the Theatre* is definitely in the here and now. She is not a picture of a reader who, in the presence of others, remains engrossed in her own reading. Nor is she the introverted loner in a public place, steadfastly staring into a book or newspaper, leaving the viewer with an impression of her inapproachability. This girl reader confidently peruses the theatre program to more fully imbibe her understanding of the performers and the performance she is about to view.



. . . she is a very real person, self-aware and defiant, who is healthy, muscular, and at home with nature. She is independent and strong-willed. But she is more than the ideal Canadian girl of the last century. Significantly, her vigorous and full character is an extension of her ability to observe and think.



With Prudence Heward's paintings of girls a different interpretation of the Canadian girl was soon to develop. It began with *Rollande* (1929), which she painted a year after *At the Theatre* and exhibited in 1930 at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington in a show titled *Paintings by Contemporary Canadian Artists* (Luckyj 34). The international critics recognized that *Rollande* was created by a woman who was making vivid and complex art. They could also see that it defied expectations and forced viewers to question their preconceptions. *Rollande* also came to epitomize the era's new Canadian girl. On one hand, the subject recalls the Canadian girl described by Gourlay in 1896 in *Canadian Magazine*, who inhabits the "backwoods" and whose admirable physical traits and intellectual aspirations are the foundation of a strong nation (507). This ideal image of the Canadian girl was sustained well into the twentieth century. In 1913, as Dr. Logan wrote in "Canadian Womanhood and

Beauty: An Essay in Social Psychology," the Canadian girl

engages the senses by her well begotten physique and form; and the imagination, by the spiritual expressiveness of her face and movements. Her beauty is uniquely the beauty of a well-rounded, well-muscled, firmly-nerved, and mentally alert and vigorous creature. Consider her a Child of Nature, if you will, ruddy as the rose, robust, hardy, and athletic . . . in whom all the fresh beauty, open-air charm, of her country is incarnate, and is expressed vitally in her form and mind. (253)

The girl in *Rollande* abundantly shares these qualities; she is a very real person, self-aware and defiant, who is healthy, muscular, and at home with nature. She is independent and strong-willed. But she is more than the ideal Canadian girl of the last century. Significantly, her vigorous and

full character is an extension of her ability to observe and think. The emphasis on Rollande as a thinking person is shown by her head, which is prominently set against the large, white pyramidal shape of the barn in the distance. Rollande has moved beyond the property lines to stand in front of a fence that traverses the painting. The artist has unapologetically placed her subject in the world where she inspects, analyzes, and reflects on what she sees. Her hands, resting firmly on her hips, and her one leg thrust forward emphasize that she is in control of her surroundings and cannot be fenced in physically or intellectually.

A girl on the cusp of womanhood, in a rural landscape, who is not afraid to observe the world around her, is a constant theme in Heward's oeuvre. In an earlier work, *The Girl on a Hill* (1928), the subject is strong but somewhat hesitant in her gaze, while the girl in *Girl in Yellow Sweater* (1936) looks out of the painting with more directness and composure. In *The Farmer's Daughter* (1945), the blonde-haired daughter is decidedly self-assured and determined. Heward's older girls are unafraid, independent beings. Were Heward's many explorations of the rural girl who observes and contemplates an embodiment of her own view of herself as a modern woman artist? From these paintings, one is encouraged to assume that Heward, who lived in the heart of the city, believed that her

creativity lay in her rural roots, and that each summer at her country home she was reinvigorated by drawing nature and observing young women whose strength radiated from their rural life. Heward, unconcerned as she was with the pictorial details and prettiness of Brymner's early paintings of girls (such as *A Wreath of Flowers*), brought a new connection to nature. For her, the mental and physical potency of the female mind and body was affirmed in the act of looking intensely at the hills, trees, and land that made up the natural world.

Although their backgrounds were different—Heward came from a wealthy Protestant family, Coonan from a working-class Catholic family—both women were products of their time, Victorian daughters who attended what Brymner referred to as a finishing school for amateur women artists. One can imagine Coonan and Heward as young women at home, fascinated by paintings in a book, like the girls in Brymner's *The Picture Book*, or practising their drawing like the girl in *The Grey Girl*. One can also see them fully and seriously engaged in art-making, according to the strict professional training they received at the AAM. But there the parallels end. Coonan was similar to her girl reader in that she did not develop into the kind of modern woman artist who engaged in public life and participated in art exhibitions. Rather, she continued her experimentation with

new ways of making art in isolation, away from the art community. Heward, on the other hand, became a professional artist, actively involved in cosmopolitan life and the art scene in particular. In the 1930s, she was a founding member of the Canadian Group of Painters and a member of the Contemporary Arts Society and the Federation of Canadian Artists. She was also an effective participant in the 1941 Kingston Conference, an event that brought together many recognized artists to consider the role of the artist in Canadian society.

There is one further similarity between the two artists: although Coonan and Heward were restricted by the times they lived in, they each learned to ignore the conventions that strongly encouraged them to use their art to celebrate the idealized girl. For both, the ability to read and see coalesced with the capacity of the artist—and

her subject—to imagine, to think, and to look. Coonan’s girl was decidedly a city girl who read and expanded her universe at home. Heward’s girl was neither a city girl nor a reader, with the exception of the girl in *At the Theatre*, who reads in a public place. Rather, from the modern city girl, Heward created a rural incarnation, an older girl whose confidence, vigour, and self-awareness were intimately connected with the sustenance she drew from the land. Brymner had developed ideas about reading that associated a girl’s education with making art; Coonan and Heward transformed these ideas by showing that the act of “reading” visually—looking and creating with the same intensity and depth of perception as reading a text—extended far beyond what was pedagogically valuable for a girl’s upbringing to reveal the mental and emotional states of their girl subjects and expose their own identities as women artists.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Many of the art works cited in this essay can be found on the Internet.

<sup>2</sup> The papers at the McCord Museum Archives in Montreal

include letters Brymner sent to his family about his travels and the progress of his work in Europe and Canada, 1878–1925, and letters from his father, Douglas Brymner, concerning family matters and encouraging his son’s work as an artist, 1883–1885.

## Figures

### Figure 1

William Brymner. *The Picture Book*. 1898. Watercolour, oil, and resin(?) on linen. 103 x 74.5 cm. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Accession # 3517.

### Figure 2

William Brymner. *The Grey Girl*. 1897. Watercolour on linen. 102.5 x 74.6 cm. Art Gallery of Hamilton. Anonymous gift, 1955.

### Figure 3

Emily Coonan. *The Fairy Tale*. c. 1911. Oil on wood panel. 23.4 x 24.7 cm. Collection of The Winnipeg Art Gallery. Gift of Mr. Peter Dobush. Accession #G-65-65.

Photo credit: Ernest Mayer, The Winnipeg Art Gallery.

### Figure 4

Emily Coonan. *The Arabian Nights*. c. 1929. Oil on canvas. 71 x 56 cm. Private collection.

### Figure 5

Emily Coonan. *The Blue Armchair*. c. 1929. Oil on canvas.

77.2 x 61.3 cm. Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec. Accession # 89.17.

Photo credit: Patrick Altman.

### Figure 6

Prudence Heward. *At the Theatre*. 1928. Oil on canvas. 101.6 x 101.6 cm. Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

### Figure 7

Prudence Heward. *Rollande*. 1929. Oil on canvas. 139.9 x 101.7 cm. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Accession # 3709.

### Figure 8

Honoré Daumier. *Bas bleus no.7: La mère est dans le feu de la compoition, l'enfant est dans l'eau de la baignoire!* Published in *Le Charivari*, February 26, 1844.

### Figure 9

Honoré Daumier. *Moeurs conjugales no.55: Interieur parisien*. Published in *Le Charivari*, May 15, 1842.

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