

The Decline of Anne: Matron vs. Child

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It is a cliché of popular literature that sequels tend to be disappointing, and students of children's literature are all too sadly familiar with the decline of writers who turn themselves into human factories on the basis of a successful first book. After the phenomenal success of *Anne of Green Gables*: in 1908, L. M. Montgomery wrote well over a dozen more books with a similar setting, five of which concentrate on Anne herself as the central character. Although these five other "Anne" novels are by no means without interest, they lack many of the qualities which make the first book so appealing. Montgomery herself described *Anne of Ingleside*: (1939), which records Anne's life as the matronly mother of five children, as "just a pot-boiler",¹ and one doubts if she would have taken Anne as the main character for another novel even if her writing career had been prolonged further.

The progressively unsatisfactory nature of the five Anne sequels reveals a good deal about why their forerunner was so successful. Several important factors are missing from the grown-up Anne. When we meet the young Anne, she is an orphan sitting alone in a railway station. As most children's librarians know, "books about orphans", evoking, as they do, a mixture of pity and envy, enjoy an immense popularity among child readers. However, far from being alienated and unwanted, Anne in the later books is totally absorbed in a dense social network of family and rural community. Similarly, much of the young Anne's appeal to female readers stems from the substance of the book's initial episode, in which Anne is almost sent away because Marilla and Matthew had wanted a boy but the orphanage has sent Anne by mistake. In a world in which most female children rapidly become aware that they would have enjoyed a higher status both within the family and in the outside world had they been born male, this episode is bound to have a powerful effect on its readers. By contrast, the grown-up Anne enjoys (at second-hand) the social status of her doctor husband and willingly accepts the social restrictions which result from that role.

If the Anne of the first book is often considered a spirited individualist, then the Anne of the final book seems a rather dreary conformist. A somewhat priggish tone is established at the very beginning of *Anne of Ingleside* where, when Anne remarks to her old friend Diana that Marilla still makes red-currant wine "in spite of the

minister and Mrs. Lynde . . . just to make us feel real devilish", Diana giggles at the piece of wickedness and thinks that she "did not mind 'devilish' as she would if anybody but Anne used it. Everybody knew Anne didn't really mean things like that. It was just her way."²

One of the episodes in *Anne of Ingleside* which is most revealing of the adult Anne is the one in which her eight year old daughter, Di, becomes friendly with Jenny Penny, a new pupil at her school. Jenny's "background" is told to Anne by Susan, the Blythe family servant:

They are a new family that have moved to the old Conway farm on the Base Line, Mrs. Dr. dear. Mr. Penny is said to be a carpenter who couldn't make a living carpentering . . . being too busy, as I understand, trying to prove there is no God . . . and has decided to try farming. From all I can make out they are a queer lot. The young ones do just as they like. He says he was bossed to death when he was a kid and his children are not going to be.³

Jenny, although a distinctly tougher character, has much of the storytelling ability of the young Anne and constantly fantasizes a more alluring family history for herself. Di is forbidden to go and stay overnight with Jenny because the Penny family are obviously "unsuitable" friends for the Doctor's children. When Di, at Jenny's instigation, sneaks away to the Pennys' house, she is appalled by its run-down appearance because she is "accustomed to the beauty and dignity of Ingleside". As the episode progresses, the Penny family fit more and more into the stereotype of the feckless working class and the sequence culminates with the terrified Di playing dead and being dumped outside Ingleside by the equally terrified Penny children. Interestingly, however, there is no hint throughout this episode that Jenny's storytelling has a source similar to the fantasies of the young Anne in a lonely childhood, or that her behaviour merits any response short of condemnation.

The first few chapters of *Anne of Ingleside* are taken up with the deadening and interminable visit of Gilbert's Aunt Mary Maria. The old woman is an intolerable prude and bully, but Anne, out of loyalty to Gilbert, is unable to exert pressure to persuade her to leave despite the fact that it is very clear that the situation is something of a nightmare for her:

"I feel as you do in dreams when you're trying to run and can only drag your feet," said Anne drearily. "If it were only now and then . . . but it's every day. Meal times are perfect horrors now . . ."⁴

This Anne, who seems the willing victim of social convention, is bound to disappoint the readers who so admired the spirited Anne of the first book. The child who stamped her foot at Mrs. Lynde and who walked the ridge-pole for a dare has vanished and left in her place a woman intent on observing the social proprieties and for whom "imagination" has come to mean something which very closely resembles

sentimentality.

Curiously enough, in the midst of its flights of sentimentality, the final "pot-boiler", *Anne of Ingleside*, and its predecessor, *Anne's House of Dreams*,⁵ touch on much darker themes than the previous Anne novels. Anne's first baby dies. Her friend, Leslie Moore, lives out a death-in-life existence with her brain-damaged husband. Neither of these situations is permitted to become a permanent blight on the House of Dreams, however, for the stork (*sic*) brings Anne another child, and a highly contrived series of events, culminating in successful brain surgery, leads to the discovery that Leslie Moore's husband has been dead for many years and that "Dick Moore" is in fact her dead husband's amnesiac cousin. In *Anne of Ingleside* there is also the recurring theme of Anne's own death. Early in the novel, Anne's little son Walter, who is sent away in a state of mystification to stay with neighbours while his mother is due to give birth to another child, develops the obsession that she is dreadfully ill and likely to die. Naturally the episode ends cosily with hot milk, cookies and comfort being dispensed, but the same theme recurs soon after when Anne almost dies of pneumonia.

Amid these reminders of death, the final Anne novel contains two other very odd episodes. In the first of these, Anne "remembers" what happened at Peter Kirk's funeral. Kirk had evidently treated both his wives quite brutally and was generally disliked in the community. His first wife's sister, Clara Wilson, attends the funeral and delivers a tirade against the dead man:

"He smiled when he told her after her little baby was born dead that she might as well have died too, if she couldn't have anything but dead brats. She died after ten years of it . . . and I was glad she had escaped him. I told him then I'd never enter his house again till I came to his funeral. Some of you heard me. I've kept my word and now I've come and told the truth about him. It *is* the truth . . . *you* know it" . . . she pointed fiercely at Stephen Macdonald . . . "*you* know it" . . . the long finger darted at Camilla Blake . . . "*you* know it" . . . Olivia Kirk did not move a muscle . . . "*you* know it" . . . the poor minister himself felt as if that finger stabbed completely through him.⁶

The truth of Clara Wilson's tirade is confirmed by the action of Kirk's widow:

Olivia Kirk rose before her and laid a hand on her arm. For a moment the two women looked at each other. The room was engulfed in silence that seemed like a personal presence.

"Thank you, Clara Wilson," said Olivia Kirk. Her face was as inscrutable as ever but there was an undertone in her calm, even voice that made Anne shudder. She felt as if a pit had suddenly opened before her eyes. Clara Wilson might hate Peter Kirk, alive and dead, but Anne felt that her hatred was a pale thing compared to Olivia Kirk's.⁷

This episode, the strangest and most powerful one in the novel, is

immediately undercut by the "explanation" provided by Stephen Macdonald that Clara Wilson had been jilted in her youth by Peter Kirk. Thus the source of her hatred which was originally shown as outrage at her sister's suffering becomes instead the trivial vindictiveness of the jilted woman.

The novel, as a whole, ends on a muted note after an odd episode in which Anne believes that she is "losing" Gilbert to an old college acquaintance of theirs. They go to dinner with Christine Stuart, in whose company Gilbert is animated while having been quite remote and abstracted when with Anne. In the familiar Montgomery pattern, the darkness is quickly dispelled with the explanation that Gilbert's abstraction has been caused by his concern over a seriously ill patient who has now made a dramatic recover. The book ends with a determined celebration of marriage and family which remains curiously unconvincing.

Marian Engel has remarked that Margaret Laurence's novels, "unlike the sentimental novels of . . . L. M. Montgomery . . . pull no punches about their community."⁸ This remark, taken in relation to some of the elements in the later Anne novels discussed here, leads to some interesting conclusions about the nature of L. M. Montgomery's writing. If "serious" literature tends to explore individual consciousness and awareness, then popular literature tends more frequently to celebrate social bonding. The re-union with the long-lost relative and the cunningly engineered marriage of true minds make up the familiar fabric of 19th century melodrama and "romantic" novels as well as of contemporary television soap opera.

If the young Anne's role is to transform Green Gables and its surroundings by the exercise of her "imagination", then the role of the grown-up Anne is more and more that of social engineer, bringing about the unions and re-unions on which popular literature is so dependent. Once she is married, Anne becomes an indefatigable matchmaker:

"But they're all happy," protested Anne. "I'm really an adept. Think of all the matches I've made . . . or been accused of making . . . Theodora Dix and Ludovic Speed . . . Stephen Clark and Prissie Gardner . . . Janet Sweet and John Douglas . . . Professor Carter and Esme Taylor . . . Nora and Jim . . . Dovie and Jarvis . . ."⁹

Despite the incident at Peter Kirk's funeral which raises the spectre of sadism, and despite Anne's temporary apprehension that her own marriage may be failing, all of Anne's matches are presented as bringing about nothing short of perfect and permanent bliss for the objects of her schemes. The only one of her matches which goes awry does so because the couple she has marked out for one another have already secretly planned to marry, and thus her scheming is merely superfluous. The idea that some marriages can be unfulfilling or destructive is scarcely allowed to intrude on Anne's world. Similarly, while *Anne of Green Gables* and *Anne of Avonlea* incorporate and come

to terms with some of the narrowness and petty meanness which is a familiar component of life in a small community, this element is more and more firmly thrust aside in the later Anne novels.

In part the shortcomings of the sequels to *Anne of Green Gables* develop naturally from the genre of the sentimental novel to which they belong. Their failings also spring from the social limitations on Anne Blythe who must behave appropriately for her role as "Mrs. Dr." It is a sad thought that, if the young Anne Shirley with her sharp eye for social hypocrisy were to meet her own grown-up self, she would probably not find that she was a "kindred spirit".

NOTES

¹Quoted in Francis W. P. Bolger, *The Years Before 'Anne'* (Charlottetown: The Prince Edward Island Heritage Foundation, 1974), p. 207.

²L. M. Montgomery, *Anne of Ingleside* (Toronto: McClelland and Steward, 1939 repr. 1972), p. 7. Subsequent references are to this edition.

³*Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁵Although it immediately precedes *Anne of Ingleside* in terms of the course of Anne's life, *Anne's House of Dreams* was actually published twenty-two years earlier in 1917. Another Anne novel, *Anne of Windy Poplars*, which takes up Anne's life as a teacher before her marriage, was published in 1936.

⁶*Anne of Ingleside*, pp. 255-6.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 256.

⁸*The Globe and Mail*, Toronto, Saturday, April 19, 1975, p. 37.

⁹*Anne of Ingleside*, p. 102.

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