

Little Orphan Mary: Anne's hoydenish double

Rosamond Bailey

L.M. Montgomery's *Rainbow Valley* – a novel without a protagonist – contains a strong anti-heroine in the ragged waif Mary Vance, who not only dominates much of the book but also represents a bold, battered version of Anne Shirley.

Rainbow Valley is supposedly about "Anne's children growing up",¹ their mother being little more than a background figure. Yet the story is really about the Meredith family: in particular, the efforts of the manse children to protect their father from parish criticism. At first, the impulsive and quick-tempered Faith Meredith, who is continually getting into scrapes, seems intended as a successor to the Green Gables heroine. "Just like me. I'm going to like your Faith", Anne Blythe remarks.² As the book progresses, however, Faith's timid sister Una becomes increasingly important, acting on several occasions with the desperate courage known only to the very shy. Elizabeth Waterston notes that in comparison with "the motherless brood at the nearby manse" the young Blythes are "shadowy".³ The sole exception here is the bookish Walter, who briefly abandons the realm of literature to defend his mother and Faith with his fists. In structuring *Rainbow Valley* around the adventures and misadventures of a group of children, Montgomery looks back to *The Story Girl* and its sequel *The golden road*. Like the Story Girl's cousins, the young Merediths and Blythes find themselves enthralled by a child with strange tales to tell (though Mary Vance and Sara Stanley have very little else in common). Perhaps the author realized that something was needed to inject vigour into the anticlimactic first meeting between the Blythe and Meredith children. The newcomers are accepted immediately into the Rainbow Valley circle, sharing a sacramental meal of dry bread and fried fish. "When the last trout had vanished, the manse children and the Ingleside children were sworn friends and allies. They had always known each other and always would. The race of Joseph recognized its own" (*RV* 39). Such absolute harmony among eight children is admirable, but it makes dull reading. Fortunately, Montgomery was inspired to introduce an additional outsider: the half-starved runaway who, once discovered in the old barn, proceeds to occupy the next four chapters.

Now the centre of an admiring and horrified group, Mary recounts her ill-treatment at the hands of Mrs. Wiley:

"She's an awful woman. . . . She worked me to death and wouldn't give me half enough to eat, and she used to larrup me 'most every day. . . . She licked me Wednesday night with a stick. . . . 'cause I let the cow kick over a pail of milk. How'd I know the darn old cow was going to kick?" (RV 47-8).

She reveals her confused theology:

"Hell? What's that?"

"Why, it's where the devil lives," said Jerry. "You've heard of him – you spoke about him."
"Oh, yes, but I didn't know he lived anywhere. I thought he just roamed round. Mr Wiley used to mention hell when he was alive. He was always telling folks to go there. I thought it was some place over in New Brunswick where he come from" (RV 51).

And on a later occasion she vents her rage at the overdressed lispng Rilla Blythe:

"You think you're something, don't you, all dressed up like a doll? Look at me. My dress is all rags and I don't care! I'd rather be ragged than a doll baby. Go home and tell them to put you in a glass case. Look at me – look at me – look at me!" (RV 69).

In an effort to shift this colourful interloper and return to her central characters, Montgomery gets Mary out of the manse and into the home of Miss Cornelia. Yet even after having been cleansed, clothed, fine-tooth-combed, and set to learning the catechism, Mary persists in reappearing to disturb the serenity of Rainbow Valley. In her new role as self-appointed critic of her former playmates, she acts as catalyst for much of the subsequent action of the book.

No matter how hard the manse children try to avoid disgracing their father before his congregation, they generally make matters worse. Mary, echoing the officious Miss Cornelia, provides a constant and maddening refrain: "The talk is something terrible. I expect it's ruined your father in this congregation. He'll never be able to live it down, poor man. . . . You ought to be ashamed of yourselves" (RV 112). The Merediths never consider that the situation might be exaggerated by Mary, that accomplished teller of tall stories.

For example, it is Mary who breaks the news that Faith and Una have acted scandalously in staying home from church on Sunday in order to clean house. Faith is accordingly inspired to explain the mistake – in church:

"It was all Elder Baxter's fault" – sensation in the Baxter pew – because he went and changed the prayer meeting to Wednesday night and then we thought Thursday was Friday and so on till we thought Saturday was Sunday. . . . And then we thought we'd clean house on Monday and stop old cats from talking about how dirty the manse was –" (RV 120).

Again, Mary brings word that the well-off and influential Mrs. Davis has left the church. Summoning her courage, Faith confronts the fearsome Norman Douglas to request that he attend church and pay towards her father's salary.

He turns on her in fury: "If you wasn't such a kid I'd teach you to interfere in what doesn't concern you. When I want parsons or pill-dosers I'll send for them" (*RV* 173). But Norman is not to get off scot-free: Montgomery turns the situation around. Her temper aroused, Faith retaliates with a vigour worthy of Anne:

"I am not afraid of you. You are a rude, unjust, tyrannical, disagreeable old man. Susan says you are sure to go to hell, and I was sorry for you, but I am not now. Your wife never had a new hat for ten years – no wonder she died. . . . Father has a picture of the devil in a book in his study, and I mean to go home and write your name under it" (*RV* 174–75).

Faith's winning-over of Norman, who admires her "spunk", provides temporary relief from the ever-present fear that the Rev. Meredith will lose his church. Mary Vance, however, keeps reappearing with further accounts of the manse children's dreadful behaviour (such as holding a praying competition in the Methodist graveyard). The Merediths are eventually goaded into forming a Good-Conduct Club – from which Mary is to be excluded:

"We agree to punish ourselves for bad conduct, and always to stop before we do anything, no matter what, and ask ourselves if it is likely to hurt dad in any way, and any one who shirks is to be cast out of the club and never allowed to play with the rest of us in Rainbow Valley again" (*RV* 248–49).

Heretofore the efforts of the manse children to defend their father have had relatively harmless – and comic – results. On two occasions, however, the stern judgments handed down by the Good-Conduct Club result in near-tragedy. The delicate Una collapses during a fast day endured by the children as punishment for having sung "Polly Wolly doodle" in the graveyard during a Methodist prayer-meeting. A short time later, Carl nearly dies of pneumonia following an all-night vigil "on Mr. Hezekiah Pollock's tombstone". By running from what he thought was a ghost, Carl has acted like a coward and thereby brought disgrace upon the family. Mary Vance has been indirectly responsible for this incident: it was her vivid account of Henry Warren's ghost that caused Carl and his sisters to run screaming from the supposed apparition.

Mary's lurid imagination has also caused trouble in another quarter. Local speculation concerning the possible remarriage of the Rev. Meredith leads Mary to warn her friends: "It'll be awful if you get a stepmother . . . the worst of stepmothers is, they always set your father against you" (*RV* 99). Una in particular becomes terrified at the prospect of her father's marrying Rosemary West, especially since Mary seems unable to leave the subject alone. "Mary has told me blood-curdling things about [stepmothers]. She says she knew of one who whipped her husband's little girls on their bare shoulders till they bled,

and then shut them up in a cold, dark, coal cellar all night. She says they're *all* aching to do things like that" (RV 251). At the end of the book, the reconciliation of John Meredith and Rosemary West is made to depend ultimately on Una's overcoming her fears and facing the woman who (according to Mary) is a potential Wicked Stepmother.⁴ Rosemary is quick to dismiss Mary as "a silly little girl who doesn't know very much" (RV 334). Nevertheless this silly little girl has figured prominently in the novel, despite the author's efforts to keep her in her place. In contrast, Anne Blythe (the nominal heroine) is almost completely passive. It is Mary who fulfills, however imperfectly, the role that Mrs. Blythe supposedly adopts: sympathetic friend and champion of the Meredith family.

At the beginning we discover Anne, upon hearing of these motherless newcomers, "beginning to mother them already in her heart" (RV 11). We never actually see her with these children; we must take on trust Faith's averral that Mrs. Blythe "always understands – she never laughs at us" (RV 210). What we do witness, on the other hand, is Mary Vance immediately taking over the disordered manse household, cleaning and mending and tidying, even chasing the poor minister out of his study. We see Mary informing the Meredith children of their disgraceful behaviour, in the lofty tone of someone four times their age. Blunt, tactless, and eminently practical, Mary Vance is the one who actually "mothers" the manse family. Even allowing for her love of exaggeration, there is considerable truth in her warnings, which come as a shock to the children. Apparently Anne Blythe, who disdains to repeat gossip, has never thought to caution her protégés about the dangers of antagonizing the "old cats" in the congregation. Anne defends the children in private, soothing the agitated Miss Cornelia, who rushes to Ingleside after every fresh scandal to wail "What is to be done?" As though tired of this constant refrain, Anne eventually asserts herself, announcing that she would like to speak out in defense of the Merediths before the community. Saying she would "like to" is as far as she goes. Mary Vance, on the other hand, does not hesitate to lock horns with the formidable Mrs. Davis:

"Mrs. Elliott [Miss Cornelia] says she never saw the like of me for sticking up for my friends. I was real sassy to Mrs. Alec Davis about you and Mrs. Elliott combed me down for it afterwards. The fair Cornelia has a tongue of her own and no mistake. But she was pleased underneath for all, 'cause she hates old Kitty Alec and she's real fond of you. I can see through folks" (RV 244).

Mary's defense naturally counts for little – who will heed a nobody of an orphan? But at least she is not afraid to "stick up for her friends", while the more socially prominent Mrs. Dr. Blythe remains silent. The once lively Anne, as Elizabeth Waterston points out, has been "reduced to some cliché gestures".⁵ Gillian Thomas suggests that Anne's reticence as a matron stems from the realization that she "must behave appropriately for her role as 'Mrs. Dr.'",⁶ but

total passivity scarcely seems appropriate in a woman who has achieved such status.⁷ Anne Blythe is curiously reluctant to express any opinions at all; it is almost as though she still feels herself the friendless orphan on probation before the community. As we have seen, Mary Vance – who is actually in this position – has no such qualms at first. As the story progresses we find the shadows of the prison-house of respectability beginning to close about her. "I simply feel that I can't associate with you any longer," she tells Faith unhappily. (Faith has disgraced herself by appearing at church without stockings.) "It ain't that I don't want to . . . [but] I'm in a respectable place and trying to be a lady" (*RV* 265–66). Compare Anne's rueful "we must be conventional or die, after we reach what is supposed to be a dignified age" (*RV* 277).

Mary Vance, whether or not intended as a substitute for Mrs. Blythe, is presented as the exact opposite of that more famous orphan Anne Shirley. That both children come from Hopetown Orphanage⁸ seems a coincidence meant to heighten the subsequent contrasts. Anne twice remarks that she too was once a "homeless little orphan"; Miss Cornelia on one occasion retorts, "I don't think this Mary-creature is or ever will be much like you" (*RV* 94). Elizabeth Waterston recognizes Mary as a different breed of orphan – "a brassy, skinny, pale-eyed, pugnacious one".⁹ There are, however, many surprising similarities between these children, and even the contrasts often suggest Mary as an inverted double for the Green Gables heroine: a rough, street-wise Anne.

Mary's initial description seems to set her apart from her predecessor. Anne is discovered more or less respectably outfitted for her journey and calmly awaiting Matthew at the station; Mary, wearing nothing except a ragged dress, is found cowering in a hayloft. Her "lank, thick, tow-coloured hair and very odd eyes – 'white eyes'" (*RV* 45) are an unattractive contrast to Anne's red braids and large green-gray eyes. Note, however, that both children have braided hair; both are garbed in dresses "much too short and tight" – the typical hand-me-down wear of an orphan; both are equally skinny. Anne is eleven, Mary approximately twelve. Anne has a striking and expressive countenance; Mary's face is "wizened", unchildlike. Drain the colour from Anne's hair and eyes, and (more important) eradicate from her face the hope and innocence and love of life – and what might be left? Mary Vance.

Mary, despite her pale colouring, is far from insipid. Fortified by a square meal, she reverts to her "natural vivacity", dominating her rescuers almost at once. She is slangy, ungrammatical, near-profane; she is boastful and bossy among the other children; she is impudent to adults. Montgomery has gone to great lengths to create in this bold orphan the antithesis of the well-spoken and (usually) well-mannered Anne. Not that the Green Gables heroine is shy or withdrawn; she has a spirited nature of her own, a tongue and temper as quick as Mary's. Both heredity and environment appear to be responsible for making one child a hellion, the other a lady. The author supplies Mary with parents far different from those of Anne:

"I was two years in the asylum. I was put there when I was six. My ma had hung herself and my pa had cut his throat."

"Holy cats! Why?" said Jerry.

"Booze," said Mary laconically (*RV* 49–50).

In the same matter-of-fact way she adds that her parents used to beat her. More extreme opposites for those tragic lovers Walter and Bertha Shirley, who cherished their infant daughter, would be hard to imagine. Again, the child-battering Mrs. Wiley seems intended as a contrast to Anne's former guardians, who overworked and neglected her but stopped short of active ill-treatment. Or at least we assume so: Anne, normally so talkative, is reticent about her early life. "I know they meant to be just as good and kind as possible," she tells Marilla. "And when people mean to be good to you, you don't mind very much when they're not quite – always".¹⁰ We hear, almost in passing, of Mrs. Thomas's telling Anne that she was "desperately wicked"; of Mr. Thomas's habit of smashing things when he was "slightly intoxicated". Anne escapes the memories of drunken rages or verbal abuse by retreating into her fantasy-world; Mary, lacking such inner resources, boasts of her traumatic childhood. "She divined that the manse children were pitying her for her many stripes and she did not want pity. She wanted to be envied" (*RV* 50).

Given her long history of abuse, Mary's tough and belligerent exterior is believable. What is unrealistic, by comparison, is Anne's educated vocabulary and ladylike deportment. A child reared first by a scrubwoman with an alcoholic husband and then by a large backwoods family might be expected to turn out speaking, if not behaving, more like Mary Vance than Anne Shirley. The latter has actually had less formal education than her counterpart: four months in the orphanage as against Mary's two years, plus an even more sketchy attendance at public school. And neither the Thomas nor Hammond household seems to have contained books.¹¹ The explanation for this striking contrast in behaviour between the two orphans lies in the wide social gulf established by Montgomery. Jean Little points out that Anne, "although definitely an orphan, is discovered to have sprung from genteel stock. By their relatives shall ye know them".¹² Contrast Anne's polite opening speech, "I suppose you are Mr. Matthew Cuthbert of Green Gables?" (*AGG* 15) with Mary's wail of "I haint had a thing to eat since Thursday morning, 'cept a little water from the brook out there" (*RV* 46). That "haint" immediately suggests Mary's social level. Her ancestors may have had pretensions – such as the rich grandfather who was a "rascal" – but they exist now only in her overloaded name, her sole legacy: "Mary Martha Lucilla Moore Ball Vance". Mary would doubtless scorn Anne's plain, single Christian name which the owner herself must embellish "with an e." A genteel background presumably accounts also for Anne's quickly acquired love of literature. Mary's domestic talents again place her on a lower plane: she seems actually to relish doing servants' work.

Regardless of their origins, both Anne and Mary find that to be an orphan

is to be at a social disadvantage. The myth of the Wicked Orphan who poisons wells and sets farms afire (one of Mrs. Lynde's favourite topics) is given a comic application in *Anne of Green Gables*: Anne not only gets Diana drunk but also offers the minister's wife a cake flavoured with liniment.¹³ In *Rainbow Valley* the community of Glen St. Mary is suspicious of "home children". "You know yourself what that poor little creature the Jim Flaggs' had, taught and told the Flag children", Miss Cornelia warns the Rev. Meredith (RV 88). But Mary, another such poor little creature, is surprisingly restrained in her speech: "If you knew some of the words I *could* say if I liked you wouldn't make such a fuss over darn" (RV 67). Gossip is her downfall; the ill effects of her wagging tongue have already been pointed out. (We may recall, in this connection, that Anne Shirley is reprimanded by Marilla for bringing home tales about the schoolmaster and Prissy Andrews.) Unwanted at first, both children are eventually accepted into the homes of strong-minded, spinsterish women.¹⁴ Miss Cornelia, who retains her maiden title, is a former old maid who married an old bachelor (see *Anne's House of Dreams*). Her mild, long-suffering husband Marshall echoes Matthew in encouraging the adoption of the orphan. Mary, however, goes into no Anne-like raptures at the prospect. Unable to visualize a home in which she might be wanted or even loved, she is content to know that she will not be beaten. Miss Cornelia admits, "I've no fault to find with Mary. . . she's clean and respectful – though there's more in her than I can fathom. She's a sly puss" (RV 127). Mary is shrewd enough to learn almost overnight the best way of getting along with her new guardian – how different from the impulsive, blundering Anne! The relationship between Mary and Miss Cornelia reflects a mutual, if grudging, respect, rather than the genuine affection that develops between Anne and Marilla.

Indeed, Miss Cornelia seems the nearest thing to a "kindred spirit" that Mary encounters. "We was made for each other. . . She's pizen neat, but so am I, and so we agree fine" (RV 199). Among her contemporaries Mary seeks no bosom friend; she prefers to be at the centre of the group, bossing, bragging, telling her horrific yarns. Oddly enough, only the introverts Walter Blythe and Una Meredith have any real influence over her. And even Una, once her confidante, is eventually provoked into resentful envy over the new velvet cap and squirrel muff that Mary flaunts. Fine feathers, for Mary, seem more important than friendship. On the very day she is rescued she turns on Faith for having made an unwise remark about the ragged dress: "When I grow up I'm going to have a blue sating dress. Your own clothes don't look so stylish" (RV 53). She chases Rilla Blythe – with dried codfish – simply for being better attired (although the author admits there was some provocation, Rilla being all too aware of her finery). Anne Shirley is also capable of rage over slurs on her appearance – witness the famous attacks upon Mrs. Lynde and Gilbert – and she has her own vanities: she longs for raven-black hair and fashionable puffed sleeves. Yet behind this attitude is a strong desire to be loved.

She is convinced that no one wants an ugly child: "If I was very beautiful and had nut-brown hair would you keep me? (AGG 33). Having acquired her stylish clothes, she does not show them off quite as Mary does. Mary, whose emotional development has been stunted by ten years of abuse, craves status: she must feel superior even to her friends. Would Anne, in the same circumstances, still be capable of putting affection first – or would she, too, settle for good clothes and respectability as her highest goals?

It is hardly surprising that both Anne and Mary, neglected upon earth, should place little confidence in a loving Deity. Hopetown Orphanage has provided some religious instruction: Anne can recite the catechism flawlessly, while Mary has learnt "an old rhyme" to repeat at bedtime. Anne, however, has never said any prayers: "Mrs. Thomas told me that God made my hair red *on purpose*, and I've never cared about Him since" (AGG 65). Mary is more tolerant:

"Mind you, I haven't got anything against God, Una. I'm willing to give Him a chance. But, honest, I think He's an awful lot like your father – just absent-minded and never taking any notice of a body most of the time, but sometimes waking up all of a sudden and being awful good and kind and sensible" (RV 97).

The good ladies Marilla and Cornelia endeavour to overcome the ignorance of these little near-heathens by conventional methods: Anne is given the Lord's Prayer to learn, Mary the Shorter Catechism. Neither orphan is thereby transformed into a pious child of the Elsie Dinsmore variety. Instead, we find Anne moved to "irreverent" delight over a picture of Christ blessing little children: "I was just imagining . . . I was the little girl in the blue dress, standing off by herself in the corner as if she didn't belong to anybody, like me" (AGG 73). Once she finds she is to remain at Green Gables, she finds it easy to pray. On the other hand, Mary – despite the kind efforts of the Rev. Meredith – remains dubious. She even speculates that it might be wise to ask the devil not to tempt her, thereby unconsciously paraphrasing part of the Lord's Prayer. Her subsequent model behaviour at Miss Cornelia's appears, as previously suggested, to be due to expediency rather than religious conversion.

Finally, Mary – although created as Anne's opposite – is by no means lacking in imagination. We find her moved almost to tears by Walter's prophecy of the Piper who will one day lead the boys away to war; we find her terrified at the prospect of going to hell because of her lies. She entertains the Rainbow Valley children with accounts of ghosts and superstitions and cruel stepmothers, much after the manner of Riley's Little Orphant Annie.¹⁵ The young Anne also enjoys Gothic horrors: her misadventure in the Haunted Wood has its parallel in the incident of Henry Warren's ghost, which Mary herself claims to have seen. Mary's imaginings are almost invariably morbid: we find no Snow Queens, no dryads, no Lady Cordelias. Like Anne, she enjoys self-dramatization, but rather than playing romantic heroines like Elaine the Lily Maid,

she draws from her own history, presenting herself as the victim of Mrs. Wiley (that real-life Wicked Witch). Mary might be accused of exaggeration here, were it not that she bears actual bruises. For she is less careful of the truth than is Anne (whose constant refrain of "I'll imagine" as a preface to every fantasy becomes somewhat tedious after the first few chapters). Mary swears to have witnessed apparitions "all in white with skellington hands and heads" and actually to have met the Wandering Jew. The Merediths are charitable about these yarns – (RV 82). Nevertheless Mary has told actual untruths, thereby committing one of the worst childhood sins in the Montgomery canon. She is given some excuse: she lied to avoid further ill-treatment from the Wileys. (She is not a malicious troublemaker like Emily's false friend Rhoda in *Emily of New Moon*, or Nan's playmate Dovie in *Anne of Ingleside*.) Once informed of her wickedness, Mary repents. She continues, however, to confuse fiction with falsehood, calling Walter's readings "int'resting lies". There are some indications here that she might develop some appreciation of literature, given the opportunity. She will never, of course, be permitted by the author to reach Anne's cultural level. Mary belongs to a lower order, spiritually as well as socially.

Mary Vance is one of Montgomery's best comic characters. Considerable insight is shown as well in this portrait of a child warped both emotionally and intellectually by a brutal environment. Yet the author seems never to have considered that psychological abuse might have been just as harmful for Anne, destroying the capacity for affection and the rich imaginative vision that make her what she is. Matthew and Marilla might well have been confronted with a Mary Vance: but that is a story L.M. Montgomery never wrote.

NOTES

- 1 Mollie Gillen, *The wheel of things: a biography of L.M. Montgomery, author of Anne of Green Gables* (Don Mills: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1975) 78.
- 2 *Rainbow Valley* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1923) 12. Subsequent page references to this book are in the text and are identified by the abbreviation RV.
- 3 "Lucy Maud Montgomery 1874-1942," *Canadian Children's Literature* 1 (Summer 1975) 18.
- 4 One can only speculate on the extent to which Mary's condemnation of stepmothers reflects Maud Montgomery's own feelings about her father's second wife. Note that a stepmother's worst sin is not to beat her stepchildren but to separate them from their father's affections.
- 5 Waterston, 18.
- 6 "The decline of Anne: matron vs. child," *Canadian Children's Literature* 1 (Summer 1975) 41.
- 7 Frances Frazer's review of *The road to yesterday* contains a pertinent comment: "a kind of goddess, with Susan Baker as her priestess, Anne dwells apart". See "Scarcely an end," *Canadian Literature* 63 (Winter 1975) 91.
- 8 Note the change in spelling: "Hopeton" in *Anne of Green Gables*, "Hopetown" in *Rainbow Valley*.
- 9 Waterston, 18.

- 10 *Anne of Green Gables* (Toronto: L.C. Page, 1908; rpt. Ryerson Press, 1948) 53. Subsequent page references to this book are in the text and are identified by the abbreviation *AGG*.
- 11 Anne informs Marilla that Mrs. Thomas used her bookcase to store preserves, while Mrs. Hammond had no bookcase at all. See *AGG* p. 76.
- 12 "But what about Jane?" *Canadian Children's Literature* 1 (Summer 1975) 74.
- 13 After "intoxicating" Diana, Anne redeems herself by saving the life of Diana's little sister. A parallel incident occurs in *Rilla of Ingleside*: Mary Vance saves little Jims, who is also dying of croup.
- 14 It never appears to occur to Anne Blythe to admit a home child into the sacred circle of Ingleside; she sees no reason to do as she was once done by.
- 15 See James Whitcomb Riley's "Little Orphant Anne," lines 5-12:
 An' all us other childern, when the supper-things is done,
 We set around the kitchen fire an' has the mostest fun
 A-list'nin' to the witch-tales 'at Annie tells about,
 An' the Gobble-uns 'at gits you
 Ef you
 Don't
 Watch
 Out!

Rosamond Bailey is a former university lecturer. Her short fiction has appeared in *Canadian Woman Studies* and *The Atlantic Advocate*, and also on *CBC Radio* (Alberta).