

# Alice of New Moon: The influence of Lewis Carroll on L.M. Montgomery's Emily Bird Starr

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**Résumé:** *Certaines phrases d'Anne aux pignons verts faisant allusion à Alice au pays des merveilles font percevoir un processus d'intertextualité.*

Emily Bird Starr, the heroine of L.M. Montgomery's *Emily of New Moon*, is a very bookish young girl, whose writing is strongly influenced by what she reads. Behind the chintz-lined glass doors of the bookcases at New Moon are Thompson's *Seasons*, *Rob Roy*, *The Royal Road*, and *The Memoirs of Anzonetta B. Peters*, "who was converted at seven and died at twelve." But when Emily plunders the small resources of her aunts' library, it is "*Alice in Wonderland*, which is perfectly lovely" that captures her imagination. "I think I might be an Alice under more favourable circumstances," she writes to her dead father (*Emily* 93). In fact, Emily is Alice, as Montgomery makes clear to the careful reader, for Montgomery, like her child heroine, was quite capable of borrowing from writers she admired and she borrowed liberally from *Alice* for *Emily of New Moon*.

The identification several years ago of Colleen McCullough's unacknowledged use of L.M. Montgomery's *The Blue Castle*, for her novel *The Ladies of Missalonghi* sparked considerable debate about the whole issue of literary borrowing. Constance Classen, for instance, has shown that Montgomery obtained "raw materials" for *Anne of Green Gables* from Kate Douglas Wiggin's *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, and supports her contention with "what appear to be 'verbal echoes' of *Rebecca* in *Anne*" (Classen 47). These echoes are not coincidental, nor does Classen suggest that readers would have recognized them as deliberate allusions to the earlier, widely-known *Rebecca*. But Classen does not imply that there was any real dishonesty in Montgomery's use of *Rebecca*; Montgomery used Wiggin's novel as a model for her own, no more.

Montgomery's use of *Alice in Wonderland* in *Emily of New Moon* is somewhat more complex than her use of *Rebecca* for *Anne*. *Alice* is a model, certainly, and there are fairly specific verbal echoes, but Emily is also a homage to Alice, and the allusions are intended to be noticed, at least subliminally. The connections between Montgomery's Emily and Carroll's Alice go beyond the passing reference of the homage, however. I would suggest that Montgomery was doing more than paying her respects to the author of the *Alice* books in

*Emily of New Moon*, for while using Alice as an inspiration for her portrait of the artist as a young girl, she comes to a very different conclusion about the duty, if not the nature, of the artist.

Before considering the similarities between Emily and Alice, it is perhaps best to keep in mind the obvious dissimilarities. First, Carroll's fragmented, episodic, dream-style is radically different from Montgomery's tight, occasionally tiresome plotting in which every "i" is dotted and every "t" crossed. Secondly, if Carroll was writing to a formula, it was a mathematical formula of some complexity; Montgomery was aiming to please a wide, popular audience, and she tailored the work to appeal very broadly by following a conventional pattern. Third, Carroll never wanted *his* model, Alice Liddell, to grow up, and rather lost interest in her when she did, while Montgomery's heroine grows more adult, book after book, until she finally manages to marry her off. Lastly, while both authors satirize the rigid, stuffy world of Victorian adult life, Carroll doesn't try to make Alice conform to it, while Montgomery slowly, unremittingly shapes Emily to fit in with the rest of the world. Thus, there are major differences – and also many very interesting similarities.

Emily, with her despised pinafore and her beloved cats, certainly bears a superficial resemblance to Carroll's Alice. Both lonely young girls amuse themselves by conducting "little cat dialogues" (*Emily* 47), with Emily addressing her remarks to Saucy Sal and Mike, and Alice confiding in Dinah and her kittens. Alice is "very fond of pretending to be two people" (*Alice* 33) while Emily talks to herself in a mirror and calls her image "Emily-in-the-glass" (*Emily* 5). However, it is in their artistic visions that the real similarity lies. In penetrating into the world of the imagination, Alice draws the curtain that covers the door to Wonderland (*Alice* 4), just as for Emily, the "world of which the flash has given her glimpses" is behind a curtain (*Emily* 18). These worlds are one and the same – the world of the writer's ego which both children recognize as deserving attention. Alice is so amazed at her own marvellous imagination that she says "There ought to be a book written about me...And when I grow up, I'll write one" (*Alice* 24). Emily agrees. "I am going to write a diary," she says "that it may be published when I die" (*Emily* 339).

Both Alice and Emily escape into their Wonderlands from worlds that are essentially boring. Alice is lying on a river bank, with her head in her sister's lap, peeping into a rather dull book. Emily is hidden away in the countryside with a devoted, ailing father, and although she has access to books, she lacks the company of other children. Emily's life is sparse, monotonous and restricted. Just as Alice tumbles down the rabbit hole, the death of her father tumbles Emily out of her safe little world into one inhabited by strange and unpredictable creatures. When the Murray relatives arrive to decide her fate over supper, Ellen Greene tells Emily that "There ain't room" at the table (*Emily* 30), just as the creatures at the Mad Hatter's tea party tell Alice that there is "No room!" (*Alice* 50). But Emily and Alice are stubborn, irrepressible

children and they somehow make a space for themselves in these worlds of the imagination.

Emily's journey of discovery, like Alice's, is in two parts; initially to New Moon and then to Priest Pond. Unlike Alice, who travels first into Wonderland where the rules she is familiar with are disregarded, and then to Looking-Glass Land where the rules are rigidly applied, Emily's journey is more circular. Emily goes from a fairly structured life with her father to the rigid discipline of New Moon and the schoolhouse, and only when she has learned to function within the confines of social order does she escape to the anarchic freedom of Priest Pond. By the time Emily has finished with Great Aunt Nancy, she is as glad to escape Priest Pond as Alice is to escape Looking-Glass Land, but both girls come back with greater insight into themselves, both are more mature.

Emily responds to the Murrays, a mixture of friendly and hostile personalities, much as Alice reacts to the creatures she encounters. She wishes the New Moon adults wouldn't call her "the child" (*Emily* 38) which is how the Queen of Hearts, the train guard and the fawn refer to Alice. Sleeping with Aunt Elizabeth is like being "in bed with a griffin," (*Emily* 57) and the Blair Water children are much like little animals; Ilse has paws (*Emily* 113), Teddy has a snout (*Emily* 289), and like Alice, Emily is called everything from a serpent to a crocodile (*Emily* 120). When the children play "damsel in distress" (*Emily* 182), Perry and Teddy wear tin boilers and saucepans for armour, in imitation of Tweedledum and Tweedledee (*Alice* 150). Gentle cousin Jimmy, who like the White Knight recites poetry after falling on his head, provides the little girl with support and companionship and receives, in return, her materialistic affection. Kindly alcoholic Mr. Carpenter with his bottle, fills in for the Caterpillar with his hookah – in Maritime Canada, a wood-louse or potato bug is commonly called a *carpenter*.

Just as the people take on animal characteristics at New Moon, the flowers take on personalities that correspond to those Alice encounters. In Wonderland, the tiger lilies display a fierce disposition while the roses are kindly; Emily reports from New Moon that she is "trying to love [the tiger lilies] because nobody seems to like them at all," but deep down in her heart, she "just can't help loving the roses best" (*Emily* 288-9). Emily's first published novel, *The moral of the rose*, brings to mind Alice's Duchess, who tells her in the rose garden that "Everything's got a moral, if only you can find it" (*Alice* 120), and who proceeds to demonstrate the maxim with irritating determination. One of Montgomery's earlier creations, Marilla Cuthbert, had already been compared to the Duchess.

The Murray woman are particularly reminiscent of the cross and autocratic women of Wonderland and Looking-Glass Land. "When I was a girl," says Aunt Ruth to Emily, "I never spoke until I was spoken to." Emily "argumentatively" replies that "if nobody ever spoke until they were spoken to there would be no conversation" (*Emily* 30). Aunt Ruth is echoing the Red Queen, who commands

Alice to "Speak only when you're spoken to," to which Alice responds with the "little argument" that "if you only spoke when you were spoken to...nobody would ever say anything" (*Alice* 318). Emily's blunt comments, and her habit of taking language literally, constantly offend her Aunt Elizabeth. When her aunt says "Night air is poison," Emily asks "What air is there at night but night air?" (*Emily* 56). When she is told "Don't ever let me see you kissing that cat again," Emily cheerfully agrees "I'll only kiss her when you don't see me after this" (*Emily* 62). Carroll would have been delighted with Emily's logic.

At New Moon, the looking glasses are not "hung low enough for [Emily] to see her reflection" (*Emily* 136), so it is on the way to Priest Pond that Emily slips back into the Looking-Glass Land. Through chance, she travels there with Old Kelly, the tinker, and he presents her with a dainty hairbrush that has a little mirror set into the back. Emily gazes into the mirror rapturously and cries; "Oh, thank you, thank you! Now I can have Emily-in-the glass whenever I want her" (*Emily* 236). At Priest Pond, Aunt Elizabeth's harsh rules are overturned and Emily is told "You can write what you like here – and say what you like – and do what you like" (*Emily* 241). This is, indeed, Wonderland for the curious, stifled little girl.

The house at Priest Pond, with its "miles of rooms and halls" (*Emily* 245), is just like the hall Alice finds at the bottom of her rabbit hole, but Emily, who has read *Alice*, at least has some warning of the peculiar world she is about to enter, and most readers, if they haven't already got *Alice* in mind, will think it too. Aunt Nancy's back parlour has a door with "a quaint old brass knocker that was fashioned like a chessy-cat, with such an irresistible grin that you wanted to grin too, when you saw it" (*Emily* 239). Inside is the formidable old woman who, in her own words, "queened" it over everyone (*Emily* 243).

Nancy and Caroline, who mirror Elizabeth and Laura, are red and white queens, as well as Duchess, cook and Queen of Hearts, all rolled together. As Emily tells her father, they are "very sarcastic to each other" and "fight quite frequently" (*Emily* 248) just like Carroll's old women. Caroline knits, just as the white queen does in *Alice* after she turns into a sheep (*Alice* 158), and Nancy plays cards to pass the day (*Emily* 251). Emily is "allowed to go into the kitchen to help Caroline cook" (*Emily* 250), but Caroline's mistakes with the soup vex Nancy, who is given to scolding the cook, just as the Duchess is (*Alice* 43). When Nancy offers Emily "another cooky," Emily reminds her resentfully that she hasn't had one at all (*Emily* 242); Alice is similarly offended by the March Hare's offer of "more tea" when she hasn't yet had any (*Alice* 101). When Emily finally leaves Priest Pond, she returns to a changed perception of herself. Her aunts argue about whether she has actually grown taller or if this is just an illusion, but they both see that she is "not the Emily who had gone there," she is "no longer wholly the child" (*Emily* 282).

It is at this point that we see rather less of Carroll's influence in *Emily* and rather more of Montgomery's. Emily has grown tired of the crazy old women

of Priest Pond, with their gossip and their quarrels and their unlimited freedom; she's glad to go home to the rules and the housework. Even more radical for this child with her unlimited curiosity is the discovery that sometimes the truth is better left untold. She is sickened and worried by the tale she has heard about Ilse's mother and wishes the old women had kept it to themselves. Even though Emily later proves the story to be untrue, the knowledge that people enjoy such malicious gossip is at the root of Emily's loss of innocence. Carroll's Alice is spared such a discovery while she is down the rabbit hole.

*Emily of New Moon*, as Montgomery acknowledged and as Tom Tauskey confirms, was her most autobiographical work, and it is in the light of this fact that we must consider her radical shift away from the *Alice* model. Carroll, an Oxford don with no dependents and an audience of his own choosing, perhaps saw no reason why Alice should grow up. Girls, and even women of Carroll's acquaintance, must have appeared to be very cosseted creatures, protected from the ugly realities of life. Montgomery had no such illusions. Abandoned as a child (in a psychological sense, at least), she took on the emotional and financial responsibilities of elderly grandparents, a mentally ill husband and dependent children. Time and again, Montgomery sacrificed herself and her work to the demands of family and social propriety. The part of Emily that is Montgomery does not reject the stultifying drudgery of housework and the stifling domination of her spinster aunts, as an Alice might have done. The triumph of Montgomery's characterization is that she convinces her readers that Emily can still manage to thrive and dream and write within the confines of such attitudes and expectations.

L.M. Montgomery has frequently been criticized for her decision to subordinate her art to her duty. Modern readers find it hard to accept Emily's promise to her aunt that she will not write fiction in exchange for the chance to go away to school, just as they find it hard to accept Anne Shirley's decision to return and care for Marilla when she has just won a scholarship. Montgomery, like her heroines, made a choice that a great many women and few men have made over the years – she put her family ahead of her work. Unfortunately, when the work is "art" such a decision is seen as a betrayal of a greater cause. What would be called admirable in a lawyer or an entrepreneur is treason in an artist. In *Emily of New Moon*, Montgomery is arguing that it is not only possible for some artists to compromise, it is necessary.

Emily, for all her compromise, is an artist. James Souchan, in "Alice's journey from alien to artist," examines Alice's need for both logical social order and uncontrolled play. Emily, too, has to put these two things in balance before she can climb the "alpine path" of the writer. At *New Moon* and *Priest Pond*, Emily learns how to play with other children, but she also learns how to do domestic chores and mask her unsociable feelings. Alice, according to Souchan, learns to transform her dream of "forbidden, socially destructive, 'monstrous' impulses" into "a highly organized work of art – the Looking glass story" (Sou-

chan 79). Emily, who is already self-consciously artistic, learns to pack pickles decoratively in a jar, to scrub the floor in a herringbone pattern, and to knit stockings with a cable stitch. She learns to combine work and play with adult control, all without losing the childlike sense of wonder that is her father's legacy.

Montgomery takes her final image of Emily's artistic aspirations and integrity from Carroll, whom she would have willingly acknowledged as the greater artist. Emily returns from Priest Pond to a new kitten and a room of her own, a room with a large mirror in which she can see all of herself, all of Emily-in-the-glass. Having survived her fall down the rabbit hole, Alice of New Moon is ready to climb.

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