

The Sweetness of Saying “mother”?

Maternity and Narrativity in L.M. Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables*

Christa Zeller Thomas

Volume 34, Number 2, 2009

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl34_2art03

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Thomas, C. Z. (2009). The Sweetness of Saying “mother”? Maternity and Narrativity in L.M. Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables*. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 34(2), 40–57.

The Sweetness of Saying “mother”? Maternity and Narrativity in L.M. Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables*

CHRISTA ZELLER THOMAS

IN OBSERVING THE MOTHERLESSNESS, actual or effective, of many heroines in nineteenth-century fiction, and the childlessness of the women writers who created them, Nina Auerbach asks, “Did the Brontës, Jane Austen, and George Eliot write out of a thwarted need to give birth, sadly making substitute children out of their novels? Or did they produce art that allowed them a freer, finer, more expansive world than the suppressions of nineteenth-century motherhood allowed?” (3). Auerbach’s questions define a contradiction commonly found in Victorian women’s writing, namely that between motherhood and authorship, between procreativity and creativity. Writing in a late-Victorian cultural context, Lucy Maud Montgomery¹ relies on the trope of motherhood to identify *Anne of Green Gables* as “a labor of love,” “*mine, mine, mine*, — something to which *I* had given birth” (*Selected* 331, 335). Later Montgomery would “dare . . . to unite creation and procreation,” “resolutely insist[ing] on . . . both book and child in her own life” (Steffler 178, 179); her journals, however, record a “conflict between woman as writer and homemaker” (Buchanan 153). Accordingly, recent studies of Montgomery have tended to stress “the complexity of the writing mother” (Steffler 181). Montgomery’s first novel, by contrast, written years before she became a mother, is generally seen as an affirmation of motherhood, as a depiction, even, of “maternal feminism,” which employs a “discourse of maternalism” (Rothwell 133; Devereux, “Imperial Motherhood” 366). My own psychoanalytical reading of *Anne of Green Gables* as a narrative of female identity and self-development offers an alternate view, which, I hope, will contribute to the increasing attention given to Montgomery’s stance vis-à-vis maternity. My analysis discovers a subtext that calls into question the family romance plot that centres on the “bringing together of an older woman characterized by childlessness and a girl who immediately draws

our attention to her own motherlessness" ("Imperial Motherhood" 366): far from producing an idealized reunion between mother and daughter, the text, I suggest, offers an enormously ambivalent representation of the maternal that discourages identification with the mother. Maternity in *Anne of Green Gables* exists in particular and acute tension with narrativity, presenting a conflict of the kind pervasive in Victorian women's writing.

Some months before the writing of *Anne*, Lucy Maud Montgomery, as Irene Gammel reports in a recent study of the novel's background sources, "had reread an old letter that a girlfriend had sent to her mother, Clara Macneill." The activity of going over some of her dead mother's correspondence brought on a "self-inflicted storm of mourning [that] cannot be overestimated in the shaping of her book" — a book whose plot, as Gammel also notes, "is prompted by the heroine's loss of mother and father" (*Looking* 60). The novel's writing is released by Montgomery's "storm of mourning," or by reliving her primal loss. The writing emerges from this disconnection, from the lack caused by the mother's death. According to Margaret Homans, who in *Bearing the Word* theorizes the link between nineteenth-century women's writing and the maternal silence that gives rise to it, "language and culture depend on the death or absence of the mother and on the quest for substitutes for her" (4).² In Montgomery's case, according to Rita Bode, the "search for the lost mother, the attempt to locate her emotionally, psychologically, and physically, haunts Montgomery's fiction as it does the journals throughout her writing life" (55). For the fictional Anne, similarly, the mother's absence creates the space that makes her plot possible. In both life and art, therefore, narrative is engendered by the mother's death.

This narrative — the story of *Anne of Green Gables* — may well describe a "search" or "quest" for the mother (Devereux, "Imperial Motherhood" 366), but an analysis of the novel's structures of plotting in conjunction with its representations of mother figures reveals that Montgomery's exploration of the maternal is highly ambivalent. The plot's underlying trigger, as already noted, is the death of Anne's biological mother,³ Bertha Shirley. This death results in the exclusion of her maternal discourse from the text. Since Bertha did not "live . . . long enough for [Anne] to remember calling her 'mother,'" she is absent from any mother-daughter dialogue and her story remains mostly unspoken

and unspeakable (Montgomery, *Anne* 38). From this near-total erasure of the biological mother's story — "biological mothers in Montgomery do not fare well," notes Bode (58) — the text moves to a struggle between the opposing discourses of mother figures and the daughter. While the world of Avonlea appears to be "predominantly maternal" (Rothwell 134), it is not motherly in an altogether benign way: aside from other deficiencies in their interaction with Anne — excessive strictness, for instance, as well as rigidity, impatience, coldness,⁴ bluntness, and discourtesy on the parts of Marilla, Mrs. Barry, and Rachel Lynde — Avonlea's women are characterized in particular by their consistent attempts to cut off Anne's speech. This observation applies especially to Marilla, who begins her upbringing of Anne with the very notion that "[Anne]'s got too much to say, . . . but she might be trained out of that" (*Anne* 40).

Later occasions on which Marilla interferes with Anne's speech are almost too numerous to mention; she constantly tells the girl to be quiet. On the way home from apologizing to Mrs. Lynde, for instance, Anne's imagination takes off with musings on the landscape and the stars, prompting Marilla's order, "Anne, do hold your tongue," as well as her expression of "devout relief" at the cessation of Anne's narrative (66-67). Also, early in the story, as Anne is describing her alter egos Katie Maurice and Violetta, Marilla cuts her off with the remark, "it seems impossible for you to stop talking if you've got anybody that will listen to you. So go up to your room and learn [your prayer]" (53). When Anne is anxious before meeting Diana for the first time, Marilla tells her not to "use such long words. It sounds so funny in a little girl" (73). As well, immediately after expressing her admiration for the Premier by noting that "he can speak," Marilla silences Anne's account of Minnie May's rescue (although she admits that she herself "wouldn't have had any idea" how to deal with "a case of croup"): "I can tell by the look of you," she says, "that you are just full up with speeches, but they'll keep" (120). Similarly, Anne's excitement before the concert organized by Miss Stacy is halted by Marilla's sarcastic remark, "As for your tongue, it's a marvel it's not clean worn out" (157). Marilla associates speech in a young girl with unruliness and non-conformity and considers both unacceptable flaws in female personality.

Diana's mother, Mrs. Barry, is similarly represented as "suspicious" both of Anne's "speech," of her "big words and dramatic gestures," and

in general of narrative engaged in by girls: when Anne is introduced to Diana, Mrs. Barry comments about her daughter that "She reads entirely too much. . . . She's always poring over a book" (109, 74). Both of these instances are in stark contrast to Mrs. Barry's trust in male narrative, which, in the case of the doctor's speech on Anne's behalf after the Minnie May affair, works in Anne's favour by restoring her to the good graces of Diana's mother (119). Rachel Lynde, unlike Mrs. Barry, is repeatedly swayed by Anne's narrative — most notably when Anne apologizes to her early in the story — but she also finds this narrative "too kind of forcible" and asserts that "[Anne]'ll likely get over that now that she's come to live among civilized folks" (64-65).⁵ Furthermore, Mrs. Lynde attempts to meddle with Anne's plot in a critical way by arguing vigorously against Anne's pursuit of higher education. "Well, Anne," she says, "I hear you've given up your notion of going to college. I was real glad to hear it. You've got as much education now as a woman can be comfortable with. I don't believe in girls going to college with the men and cramming their heads full of Latin and Greek and all that nonsense" (241-42). In all these encounters, the novel enacts what amounts to a pervasive and drawn-out conflict between the mother's and the daughter's speech.

What discredits the mother figures as role models is precisely their interference with the Anne's ability to tell her own story and to chart her own plot. For the writer this ability would translate into a life of freedom to create, apart from the demands that marriage and motherhood bring with them — marriage *without* motherhood being unimaginable at the time of Montgomery's writing.⁶ In *Anne of Green Gables*, motherhood again and again opposes writing. This problematic is literalized in Marilla's reaction to Anne's composing stories, an activity for which Marilla offers nothing but criticism by finding it all "stuff and nonsense" (*Anne* 168). Thus, when Anne — who, like her author, "love[s] writing compositions" — reports the creation of the story club (not accidentally an all-female undertaking in which "No boys were allowed"), Marilla's response is predictably negative: "I think this story-writing business is the foolishest yet," scoffed Marilla. "You'll get a pack of nonsense into your heads and waste time that should be on your lessons. Reading stories is bad enough, but writing them is worse" (155, 169-70).⁷ The representation of writing in fiction always signals, in Terry Eagleton's terminology, a "point . . . of intensity" in the text, allowing

“access to the ‘latent content,’ or unconscious drives, which have gone into its making” (158). *Anne of Green Gables* is no exception: Marilla’s repeated negative attitude toward Anne’s literary efforts may be decoded not just as the mother’s stab at silencing the daughter’s story, but in a broader sense as the fear that motherhood and creativity, specifically motherhood and authorship, may prove to be incompatible.

In *Anne*, maternity’s opposition to speech and writing unsurprisingly ensures the daughter’s disidentification with the mother. In the lead-up to the school concert, for instance, into which Anne “threw herself . . . heart and soul, hampered as she was by Marilla’s disapproval,” the narrative insists on the difference between mother and daughter, and on the mother’s resistance to the daughter’s desire for singularity. “Oh, Marilla,” asks Anne, “I know you are not so enthusiastic about [the concert] as I am, but don’t you hope your little Anne will distinguish herself?” “All I hope is that you’ll behave yourself,” replies Marilla. “You are simply good for nothing just now with your head stuffed full of dialogues and groans and tableaux” (*Anne* 156-57). Anne wants distinction, where Marilla wants only silence and conformity. Again, the difference between mother and daughter is articulated explicitly in a scene that occurs shortly afterwards, when Anne reflects on the difficulty of settling back into daily routines after the stimulation provided by the concert. “I suppose that is why Marilla disapproves of them [concerts],” she tells Diana. “Marilla is such a sensible woman. It must be a great deal better to be sensible; but still, I don’t believe I’d really want to be a sensible person, because they are so unromantic” (165). Yet again, the mother’s sensibleness, her conformity, are constructed as being in opposition to art. They drive the daughter’s wish to resist compliance and instead to come into her own by inventing her own story. If Anne’s tales and games make for a marvellous way of connecting with her friends at school, her “art” — her narrative, her imagination — vis-à-vis the mother is centred not in connection but in distance. Arguably, this autonomy is the result of Anne’s (as well as Montgomery’s own) fractured genealogy.

An entirely different pole in the spectrum of maternal examples (of maternal reactions to female narrative and plotting) is represented in the character of Miss Josephine Barry. Unlike Marilla, Mrs. Barry, and Mrs. Lynde, Diana’s elderly spinster aunt is interested in Anne’s narrative and even encourages it: “Sit down here,” she commands Anne during their

first meeting, "and tell me about yourself." During the same meeting she asks Anne, "if you will come over and talk to me occasionally," and then informs the Barry family that she has decided to remain at their farm "simply for the sake of getting better acquainted with that Anne-girl" (131). Yet this positive model is diminished by the character's portrayal as self-centred. "Miss Barry was a rather selfish old lady, if the truth must be told," the narrator informs us, as though reluctantly, "and had never cared much for anybody but herself. She valued people only as they were of service to her or amused her" (190). By showing that Miss Barry is less keen on providing a fostering, nurturing presence than on satisfying her own desires, the narrative discredits her interest in Anne's story and by implication her value as a mother figure, thereby undermining what might have been maternal support of narrative.

Overall, the novel offers a problematic *intergenerational* model of maternity. The only positive female figures are Miss Stacy, the much loved schoolteacher, and Mrs. Allan, the equally admired minister's wife. Both of these women are depicted as encouraging Anne's speech and creativity. Mrs. Allan shares with Anne that she herself "was a dreadful mischief when she was a girl and was always getting into scrapes," and Miss Stacy, not incidentally, gives Anne advice on her writing and furthermore "lets us choose our own subjects [in composition]," as Anne tells the disapproving Marilla (170, 155). "The female teacher," observe Gammel and Dutton, "was incorporated into the female pupils' imaginary as an object of fantasy and adulation. The female role models became part of an active girls' culture, shaping their positive identification with women" (116). I would argue, however, that this "positive identification with women" in *Anne of Green Gables* extends first and foremost to young women. Both Miss Stacy and Mrs. Allan are explicitly characterized in the text as young, and presumably, especially in the case of Miss Stacy, are not much older than Anne herself, based on the latter's youth when she becomes a teacher. In a similar vein, the novel celebrates nurturing relationships among girls and young women, a feature of Montgomery's writing in general that has been the subject of much critical attention. Mothers are noticeably excluded from this celebration. While "the connection between mother and daughter is fraught with potential dangers, *intragenerational* friendships among women offer only the benefits and not the pitfalls of same-sex bonding" (Hirsch 133; emphasis added). *Anne of Green Gables* suggests strongly

that female development and subject formation rely heavily not on a mother-daughter bond but on a sisterhood, on intimate relationships between women of approximately the same age. Such fostering is the purpose, for instance, of the story club and it is the reason behind Anne's intention, "when I am grown up, . . . to talk to little girls as if they were, too, and I'll never laugh when they use big words. I know from sorrowful experience how that hurts one's feelings" (122). The knowledge and experience to be shared are *not* the mother's, who instead remains in a position of conflict with the daughter.

At the same time, however, it is precisely the enthusiastic celebration of friendships among girls and young women that highlights the ambivalence of Montgomery's exploration of maternity in *Anne of Green Gables*. These relationships, in which female silence and negativity in/toward language are replaced by speech and connection, give access, I argue, to a deeper level of engagement with the maternal, an engagement that is rooted in a longing for primal closeness and bonding. According to American and French feminist revisions of Freudian-Lacanian theorizing, including by Nancy Chodorow, Margaret Homans, and Julia Kristeva, a woman's sense of self is based not in the oedipal but in the preoedipal period and specifically in the primal completion with the mother. This bond results in the desire, later in life, "to recreate the lost feeling of oneness" (Chodorow 79). As a consequence of the originary closeness with the mother, girls and women tend to create and maintain intimate female relationships. "These relationships are one way of resolving and recreating the mother-daughter bond" (200). Homans argues that women writers articulate this bond through representations of nature as the "final, maternal object of desire" and that they use a special idiom, a "presymbolic language of presence," to do so (85, 25). Similarly, for Julia Kristeva, women may more easily access the presymbolic — the "semiotic," in her terminology — as a result of their preoedipal position. The semiotic is maternally oriented and located in the prosody and the bodily qualities of language; it is opposed to fixed signs and significations. In writing that exhibits these characteristics, "the pre-oedipal realm figures as a powerful mythic space, not irrevocably lost but continually present because it is recoverable in ideal(ized) female relationships" (Hirsch 133).

Montgomery narrates just such a semiotic realm in the form of the natural world of Avonlea, a world intensely experienced by Anne both

on her own and in the company of her female friends. The island's gardens and landscapes emerge as venues of sensual pleasure, "bowery wilderness[es]" of thickly growing trees and flowers, divided by "narrow, twisting" "paths . . . like moist, red ribbons," and always perfumed by "a delightful spiciness in the air" (74, 89). The language itself in place names such as "White Way of Delight," "Lake of Shining Waters," "Idlewild," "Willowmere," and so on, is characterized by a certain "fluidity" and "plurality," demonstrating "a kind of pleasurable creative excess over precise meaning" (Eagleton 163). These verbal images set up an undercurrent in the text that disrupts "ordinary" language.⁸ Labels such as "Idlewild," "Willowmere," and "Dyad's Bubble" matter as much (or more) for their tonal quality as for their meaning, and for their rhythmic properties as sounds issuing forth from the body. The "mythopoetic world of Avonlea's *Anne of Green Gables* is charged with visual, oral, haptic, and olfactory sensuality that solicits the reader's desire and draws her into the sensual world of Avonlea" (Gammel, "Safe Pleasures" 117).

Furthermore, Anne's relation to the landscape, as if replacing the maternal closeness she lacks, is one of unmediated intimacy as though she were "twinned with the spirit of the land" (Epperly 109). She is "acquainted with every tree and shrub about the place," and, specifically, the natural world "speaks" directly to her: "fir boughs and tassels seem . . . to utter friendly speech," and trees, such as maples, are found to be "sociable," because "they're always rustling and whispering to [her]" (*Anne* 55, 56, 152). Nature's speech makes possible close contact, allowing Anne to partake of the natural world and reproducing a sense of primal closeness and belonging. This speech is reminiscent of the presymbolic language Homans postulates, which, like an infant's preverbal vocalizations, relates to the natural, material, and maternal (16). It fuels the imagination with a desire — projected onto the eroticized landscape — for a sort of semiotic, symbiotic union. "I'm going to imagine," sighs Anne, "that I am the wind that is blowing up there in those tree-tops. When I get tired of the trees I'll imagine I'm gently waving down here in the ferns — and then I'll fly over to Mrs. Lynde's garden and set the flowers dancing — and then I'll go with one great swoop over the clover field — and then I'll blow over the Lake of Shining Waters and ripple it all up into little sparkling waves" (*Anne* 67). Yet nature as a surrogate for the maternal engenders what is strictly a young women's realm, highlighting just how daughter-directed

and daughter-centric, *not* maternal, the novel really is. “The woman as *mother* remains in the position of *other*,” still excluded from any dialogue with the daughter (Hirsch 136).

There is, however, one prominent character in the story who becomes a target for identification *within* the family structure at Green Gables: shy, quiet Matthew Cuthbert, though constructed by Montgomery as distanced from Anne’s upbringing by Marilla — “you just leave me to manage her,” she tells him — functions in the plot, firstly, as an alternate source of nurturance (*Anne* 45). Anne’s original “kindred spirit” is represented as “maternal” (Bode 57), as a “feminized” male figure, who, “better than Marilla understands Anne’s longing for puffed sleeves and shows indulgence” on more than one occasion (Gammel and Epperly 7). While Marilla embarks on her raising of Anne with the idea of training her to conform, as already noted, Matthew’s advice regarding Anne to his sister is to exercise love and understanding: “be as good to her as you can be without spoiling her. I kind of think she’s one of the sort you can do anything with if you only get her to love you” (*Anne* 45). Marianne Hirsch’s study finds ample evidence for just such a pattern of familial relations in the (American and English) texts she studies: “women writers . . . attempt to compensate for the loss of mothers by replacing authoritative fathers with other men who [are] endowed with nurturing qualities” (57).

Matthew’s function, furthermore, is not limited to “indulgence” toward Anne. Secondly, and more importantly from the viewpoint of both plot and family structures in *Anne of Green Gables*, Anne enters into (again in Hirsch’s terminology) a “paternal alliance” with Matthew that throws into particularly strong relief the absence of a comparable mother-daughter bond. Matthew is charmed — “bewitched,” in Marilla’s perception — by Anne from the beginning, and instrumental in bringing about her residence at the Green Gables farm (31). “Well now, she’s a real nice little thing, Marilla,” he says to his sister, who is determined to have “[Anne] despatched straightway back to where she came from.” Matthew persists: “It’s kind of a pity to send her back when she’s so set on staying here” (30-31). When Marilla, in conversation with Mrs. Blewett, begins to change her own mind about adopting Anne, she refers (and defers) to Matthew’s paternal authority. “Matthew is disposed to keep [Anne],” she informs Mrs. Blewett. “I feel that I oughtn’t to decide on anything without consulting him” (43). If Anne’s loss of her

mother (and father) underlies the orphan plot, Matthew's actions ensure that the story in Avonlea does not grind to a halt as soon as it has begun. "The story of mother and daughter comes into being only through the intervention of the father," notes Hirsch (with regard to a different text), "who, here, . . . offers the occasion for narrative itself" (35).

Thirdly, and most importantly within the context of female speech, Matthew consistently encourages Anne's narrative. While Marilla "always promptly quenched Anne by a curt command to hold her tongue," Matthew "listened to [Anne's talking] with a wordless smile of enjoyment on his face" (*Anne* 56). Just as the instances in the novel when Marilla silences Anne are numerous, so the text abounds with moments of Matthew fostering Anne's speech, writing, and creativity. A few examples will help to illustrate my point. On the way home from the Carmody train station where he has picked her up, he says, "you can talk as much as you like. I don't mind" (19). Sometime thereafter, Anne is "talking to Matthew nineteen to the dozen," prompting Marilla's reflection, "The more she talks and the odder the things she says, the more he's delighted evidently" (77). Matthew is also only too happy to have Anne "[tell] him a lovely fairy story," while they are waiting for the tea she has forgotten to make, and he is further supportive in that "he couldn't tell where the join came in" when she invents a new ending to the tale, thereby, unlike Marilla, not insisting on conformity to a given script (101-02). Similarly, in the run-up to the concert, of which Marilla, as noted, disapproves, Anne is able to "talk . . . the concert over with him, sure of an appreciative and sympathetic listener." Matthew also assures her, on the same occasion, that "it's going to be a pretty good concert" and that he expects she will deliver a fine performance herself (157). Reading him her school composition, "he said it was fine," as Anne tells Diana (while Marilla was disparaging) (168). The "father" thus encourages Anne's imagination and narrative, later urging her "[not] to give up all [her] romance . . . but [to] keep a little of it" (184). Nor is Matthew the only father in the novel who is supportive of the daughter's narrative: Diana's father "aids and abets her [reading]," much to Mrs. Barry's chagrin (74). The power that comes from paternal alliance, the text thereby suggests, is precisely the freedom to plot.

While *differentiation* characterizes the daughter's relations to the mother, the father's fostering of her makes him a primary figure of love, emulation, and *identification*. Again, a few examples will serve to

demonstrate this point. When Marilla calls Matthew “a most ridiculous man” on Anne’s first morning on the farm, Anne counters “reproachfully,” “I think he’s lovely. . . . He’s so very sympathetic. He didn’t mind how much I talked — he seemed to like it. I felt that he was a kindred spirit as soon as ever I saw him” (34). Upon being asked by Matthew to apologize to Rachel Lynde, Anne agrees because, “I’d do anything for you” (63). Later, when learning that Matthew votes Conservative, Anne says “decidedly,” “Then I’m Conservative too” (116). When it comes to her narrative in general, Anne quickly acknowledges that, always, “Matthew is such a sympathetic listener” (78). Similarly, her efforts to win a good place at Queen’s school are motivated by the desire to please the “father”: “she did hope fervently that she would be among the first ten at least, so that she might see Matthew’s kindly brown eyes gleam with pride in her achievement. That, she felt, would be a sweet reward indeed” (209). Her first thought when she finds out how well she has done in the exam is, “I must run out to the field to tell Matthew” (211). Once at Queen’s, she is spurred on to win the Avery scholarship because she thinks that Matthew would “be proud if I got to be a B.A.” (224). Paternal favour is a prime motivator for the daughter’s efforts and supports her self-development in *Anne of Green Gables*.

Looked at within the larger context of nineteenth-century women’s writing, the reason for such differing portrayals of mother and father figures may be found in the primary benefit of allegiance to the father, suggested by Hirsch: protection “both from marriage and from maternity” (34). This protection is necessary because of women’s susceptibility to commodification and because what is often missing from a plot’s economy, as a result of the mother’s death, is the transmission of maternal inheritance. In *Anne of Green Gables*, the girl who has been deprived of the maternal heritage from her biological mother by that mother’s death, is faced with the challenge of re-establishing her “worth.” With her arrival in Avonlea, Anne’s story turns on the question of her value or “usefulness” as a result of her gender, and the plot readily lends itself to discussion along lines of economy and exchange. Not accidentally, for example, the narrative of Anne’s residence at Green Gables (up to Matthew’s death) is framed by two scenes that draw attention both to the powerlessness and the empowerment that result for the daughter from the father’s protection and from the economic security that protection brings. In the first of these scenes, shortly after Anne’s arrival,

Marilla, un-maternally, asks Matthew, "What good would she be to us?" while Anne spends a difficult night over her realization that she lacks the value of a boy. "We might be some good to her," is Matthew's paternal response (30-31). In the second scene, on the eve of Matthew's death, Anne, concerned about his health, muses that if she had been the sent-for boy, she would now be useful by being able to help him in his work. Matthew assures her that her value to him does not rest on this kind of exchange: "'Well now, I'd rather have you than a dozen boys, Anne,' said Matthew, patting her hand. 'Just mind you that — rather than a dozen boys. Well now, I guess it wasn't a boy that took the Avery scholarship, was it? It was a girl — my girl — my girl that I'm proud of'" (232). The father here underwrites Anne's economic security and the freedom to chart her own plot.⁹ The mother cannot, or will not, provide the daughter with the inheritance that could help her avoid commodification: from its beginning, *Anne of Green Gables* constructs a "male-female binary [that] poses the issue of a woman's value," highlighting the centrality of economic considerations to female freedom and self-determination (Davey 165). With the father's death, the "ancestral home," from which this security derives, is in danger of being lost. The mother cannot bequeath it and, in fact, hardly considers Anne in her decision to sell, effectively foreclosing the possibility of passing on Green Gables to the next generation and of continuing the family line. As a consequence, Anne only narrowly avoids the same rupture that caused her predicament in the first place, that is, the loss of both family and home. The death of Matthew, the "feminized," nurturing father, in a sense re-enacts that original rupture, and, ironically, it also engenders speech: Marilla, who throughout the entire narrative has been unable to express her feelings for Anne, now tells her that she loves her "as dear as [her] own flesh and blood" (235).

As well, Matthew's death sheds further light on the complex nature of authorship. By feminizing the character who is potentially the father figure, and by softening and obscuring traditional paternal qualities in Matthew, such as decisiveness and determination, Montgomery's storytelling also captures the difficult position, with regard to creativity, of the motherless daughter-writer: the mother's absence signals the challenge for the author of self-placement within a female literary tradition, while a nurturing quasi-father may offer an alternative. Such a father figure might combine maternal nurturance with paternal influence,

“provid[ing] access to the issues of legitimacy and authority central to plotting.” Even as the daughter attempts, however, to imagine her own plot, her story reproduces existing power structures (as the ending of *Anne* and its sequels suggest), because of her alliance “with the ‘fathers’ . . . in their own literary “tradition” (Hirsch 58, 34).¹⁰ At the same time, by virtue of his “feminine” attunement to natural rhythms and his encouragement of female speech, Matthew may be considered an “agent of the semiotic” whose death inevitably precipitates the plot’s conventional ending, as the symbolic closes in on Anne.¹¹

Moreover, the breach produced by Matthew’s death forces Anne to assume a position of authority herself in order to hold on to the house. This move is made all the more necessary by Marilla’s rapid decline, which sees her formerly bustling briskness and crispness replaced by dependency and ineffectuality. The novel thus continues its representation of maternity as deficient, as “in one way or another, . . . inadequate” (Bode 58). In a scene constructed as an indicator of Anne’s maturity, but remarkable for its narrative distortion of the expected pattern, the two women “switch . . . natures” (Doody 26), insofar as the daughter, Anne, becomes mother to the mother and “delivers” her from her problems. Marilla even says, “I feel as if you’d given me new life” (241). In a sense, Anne compensates for the loss of the mother by assuming her place in the house, a role that, in this case, manages to evade actual maternity.

In addition to the ancestral home, there is a further item of inheritance that could (or should) be transmitted from mother to daughter, but which, in the novel’s ambivalent economy of mother-daughter relations, is not. I am referring to the family jewels, which signify not just as commodities but as tokens of difference and connection in the depiction of familial relations. The primary item is the amethyst brooch, which “was Marilla’s most treasured possession. A sea-faring uncle had given it to her mother who in turn had bequeathed it to Marilla. It was an old-fashioned oval, containing a braid of her mother’s hair, surrounded by a border of very fine amethysts” (80). The jewels, worn by both Marilla and her mother, embody the close, physical connection between them, a connection wrought by genealogy and intimate bodily contact: the mother’s hair, enclosed within the precious stones, rests against the daughter’s “throat,” while she is “pleasantly conscious” of them (80-81). The extent to which the narrative fails to reproduce that kind of intimacy between Marilla and Anne becomes evident in the former’s denial

of access to the brooch to Anne, who “had been smitten with delighted admiration when she first saw [it].” While Anne desires a place within the female line that the brooch here signifies — “Will you let me hold the brooch for one minute,” she pleads — Marilla’s decree that Anne “had no business [to touch it]” turns the ornament into a sign of difference and disconnection and of Anne’s exclusion (81).¹² Instead, the (family) jewels are passed on by the father, who brings Anne a string of pearls, which, as she subsequently comments, he likes to see her wear (213). Anne’s apparently naive declaration, “I don’t want to be any one but myself[;] . . . I’m quite content to be Anne of Green Gables, with my string of pearl beads,” holds meaning directly related to the importance of inheritance to a young woman’s desire for self-determination (219). The statement even names the two commodities — the family home and jewels — that the novel explicitly associates with the paternal, not maternal, transmission of inheritance.¹³

Matthew’s death, by necessity, ends the daughter’s alliance with the father and precipitates a narrative return to the conventional marriage plot that implicitly and inevitably also means motherhood. This return “stands revealed as a desultory move, a tacked-on storybook convention” (Gubar 364). Focusing on the structures of plotting and the drivers of narrative, as I have been doing in this essay, makes apparent that, while the mother’s absence engenders narrative, what brings it to an end is “compulsory heterosexuality” (in Adrienne Rich’s terminology).¹⁴ “Each of the first four books [in the *Anne* series],” notes Marah Gubar, “delays a reunion between Anne and Gilbert until the last few pages of the narrative. . . . Montgomery thus links Anne’s love for Gilbert to the cessation of the pleasures of narrative” (363). At the novel’s end, Anne certainly appears set to repeat her mother’s plot — marriage and being a schoolteacher — but aside from these and a few other details, the mother’s story is precisely what, throughout *Anne of Green Gables*, has remained untold and unspeakable. Marriage and motherhood have not resulted in speech. Implied in the narrative’s final passage is the understanding that the scene between Gilbert and Anne, which reluctantly prefigures the *Anne* series, is so contained that (to borrow from a different context) “the novel can no longer render [it] because it stands too much inside convention and therefore narratability” (Hirsch 60): all Anne can say about her conversation with Gilbert is that it did not seem to her to have lasted more than a few minutes (*Anne* 245). Nor

does the maternal role in the later *Anne* books, as Rita Bode shows in her recent study, come naturally to Anne. “The adult Anne,” observes Bode, “only rarely seems fully alive as a mother. The vibrancy in her character in the later books occurs mostly in recalling the younger Anne of *Green Gables*” (58). Anne, I suggest, continues to identify as a daughter. If Anne is Montgomery’s alter ego, the entire series, and perhaps all of Montgomery’s literary output, point to her continued ambivalence towards the maternal. This possibility is supported by Margaret Steffler’s recent reading of Montgomery’s journals for “display[s] of maternal dissonance.” Quoting Irene Gammel’s observation regarding Montgomery’s “masquerading” in the production of self, Steffler finds that Montgomery “performs” motherhood to some extent: “Montgomery inflates maternal love in order to produce maternal passion,” thereby “calling into question the very existence and essence of the maternal” (183, 187). Authorship, in some ways, perhaps came more easily to Montgomery.

In *Anne of Green Gables*, argues Frank Davey, “Montgomery had somewhat vaguely identified a mismatch between the possible dreams of women and the opportunities society would allow them” (164). Much of this “mismatch” is embodied in the figure of the mother, for that figure is approached with great hesitancy and ambivalence in *Anne of Green Gables*. While the novel creates a world of memorable female characters and relationships, the father is, in fact, the one who makes the story of mother and daughter possible. The mother, meanwhile, in a daughter-directed and daughter-centric narrative, is cast in a role that sees her opposing the daughter through consistent attempts to cut off the daughter’s speech. If Montgomery “displays a persistent need for biographical refashioning of her perspective on and relationship to the elusive maternal figure,” the story told in *Anne of Green Gables* suggests itself as an artful exploration of the daughter-writer’s own writing (Bode 52). Within it lurks the unspeakable anxiety that maternity may equal the death of creativity and thereby silence.

NOTES

¹ Montgomery identified with the Victorian era. Her journal entry for January 14, 1900, begins with these words: "How strange it seems to write that date! It really makes me feel homesick for the old 18's. It seems to me as if I belonged back in them" (*Selected* 247).

² Both Freud and Lacan later theorized this perception. Freud located the basis of identity in the oedipal period and particularly in the separation from the mother and the fear of castration by the father. His concept of the "family romance [as] an imaginary interrogation of origins . . . which embeds the engenderment of narrative within the experience of family," provides the starting point for Marianne Hirsch's study, *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, which analyzes female/feminist revisions of Freud's formulation. Hirsch's analysis supplies many of the terms and concepts for my reading of *Anne*. Anne's story, which initially literalizes and then revises the Freudian version of family romance, also has her imagining more noble parents for her fellow inmates in the orphanage (*Anne* 17; 22), an imaginative act that is at the very core of Freud's conception.

³ I do not mean to diminish the role of the father, or the death of Anne's father, but just as Montgomery herself was largely raised by her grandparents after her mother died, so it is difficult to imagine a widowed father caring for an infant girl in the novel. Furthermore, Nancy Chodorow, in her rewriting of Freudian developmental theory, persuasively argues for the mother-daughter bond as the growing girl's primary relationship; the father is added on to that. See *The Reproduction of Mothering*.

⁴ The women's emotional coldness obliquely echoes Montgomery's words in her journal that the "only remembrance of . . . actual contact with my mother" was that of the "peculiar coldness" of touch when, at her mother's wake, she "laid [her] baby hand against mother's cheek" (*Selected* 331).

⁵ This expectation of orthodoxy is prepared, as a number of critics have remarked, by the image of the "headlong brook" with which the novel opens, and which, by the time it passes Rachel Lynde's house, shows "due regard for decency and decorum" (*Anne* 7). For critical observations, see, for instance, Davey (164).

⁶ In a related observation, Irene Gammel also notes, "For Montgomery, sex and fertility are inseparably intertwined" ("Confession" 153n2).

⁷ Marilla is equally scathing about other forms of Anne's creativity. When Anne wants to "fix up the table with ferns and wild roses" for the Allans' tea visit, for instance, Marilla's deprecating reply is, "I think that's all nonsense. . . . In my opinion it's the eatables that matter and not flummery decorations" (142).

⁸ This point may also be extended to the novel's narrator, who lyricizes the natural world of Green Gables and Avonlea in "irregular" language that surprises the reader with unexpected word images and willed word creations. For instance, we are told that in the October sunshine, "fields sunned themselves in aftermaths" and "valleys were filled with delicate mists as if the spirit of autumn had poured them in for the sun to drain" (101, 154). As well, maples are described as "red-budded" or "crimson-budded," woods are "many-stemmed," mists are "pale-purple," and fir shadows are "sharp-pointed" (132, 154, 171). The extent to which Montgomery herself drew maternal comfort from nature is illustrated in Elizabeth Rollins Epperly's *Through Lover's Lane* (2007), among others.

⁹ Carole Gerson discusses Montgomery's own preoccupation with the power derived from financial security through writing in "L.M. Montgomery and the Conflictedness of a Woman Writer" (*Storm and Dissonance* 67-80).

¹⁰ Montgomery herself was strongly influenced by male writers.

¹¹ I am grateful to the anonymous reader for this insightful point.

¹² Early in the novel, Marilla also explicitly suppresses Anne's desire for self-location within a female line by denying the girl's wish to call her "Aunt Marilla" (49).

¹³ In a related plot line, Diana's great asset, her friendly and cheerful disposition, is defined as "her inheritance from her father" (74).

¹⁴ Marianne Hirsch also borrows this term in her analysis of women writers' plot patterns (21). In the context of *Anne of Green Gables*, it has been used by Laura Robinson in a paper delivered to the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English (ACCUTE) 2000, in which she argued that Montgomery both drew attention to and attempted to subvert the oppressiveness of compulsory heterosexuality (qtd. in Devereux, "Anatomy" 33).

WORKS CITED

- Auerbach, Nina. "Artists and Mothers: A False Alliance." *Women and Literature* 6.1 (1978): 3-15.
- Bode, Rita. "L.M. Montgomery and the Anguish of Mother Loss." Mitchell 50-66.
- Buchanan, Roberta. "'I Wrote Two Hours This Morning and Put Up Grape Juice in the Afternoon': The Conflict between Woman and Writer in L.M. Montgomery's Journals." Gammel and Epperly 153-58.
- Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1978.
- Davey, Frank. "The Hard-Won Power of Canadian Womanhood: Reading *Anne of Green Gables* Today." Gammel and Epperly 163-82.
- Devereux, Cecily. "Anatomy of a 'National Icon': *Anne of Green Gables* and the 'Bosom Friends' Affair." Gammel, *Making Avonlea* 32-42.
- . "The Culture of Imperial Motherhood." Montgomery, *Anne* 365-70.
- Doody, Margaret. "L.M. Montgomery: The Darker Side." Mitchell 25-49.
- Eagleton Terry. *Literary Theory. An Introduction*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2008.
- Epperly, Elizabeth Rollins. *Through Lover's Lane: L.M. Montgomery's Photography and Visual Imagination*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2007.
- Gammel, Irene. "'I loved Herman Leard madly': L.M. Montgomery's Confession of Desire." *The Intimate Life of L.M. Montgomery*. Ed. Irene Gammel. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2005. 129-53.
- . *Looking for Anne: How Lucy Maud Montgomery Dreamed Up a Literary Classic*. Toronto: Key Porter Books, 2008.
- . "Safe Pleasures for Girls: L.M. Montgomery's Erotic Landscapes." Gammel, *Making Avonlea* 114-27.
- , ed. *Making Avonlea: L.M. Montgomery and Popular Culture*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2002.
- Gammel, Irene, and Ann Dutton. "Disciplining Development: L.M. Montgomery and Early Schooling." Gammel and Epperly 106-119.
- Gammel, Irene, and Elizabeth Epperly, eds. *L.M. Montgomery and Canadian Culture*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1999.
- Gammel, Irene, and Elizabeth Epperly. "Introduction: L.M. Montgomery and the Shaping of Canadian Culture." Gammel and Epperly 3-13.

- Gerson, Carole. "L.M. Montgomery and the Conflictedness of a Woman Writer." Mitchell 67-80.
- Gubar, Marah. "The Pleasures of Postponement." Montgomery, *Anne* 359-65.
- Hirsch, Marianne. *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989.
- Homans, Margaret. *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986.
- Mitchell, Jean, ed. *Storm and Dissonance: L.M. Montgomery and Conflict*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008.
- Montgomery, L.M. *Anne of Green Gables*. Norton Critical Edition. Ed. Mary Henley Rubio and Elizabeth Waterston. New York: Norton, 2007.
- . *The Selected Journals of L.M. Montgomery*. Vol. I. Ed. Mary Rubio and Elizabeth Waterston. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1985.
- Rothwell, Erika. "Knitting Up the World: L.M. Montgomery and Maternal Feminism in Canada." Gammel and Epperly 133-44.
- Steffler, Margaret. "Performing Motherhood: L.M. Montgomery's Display of Maternal Dissonance." Mitchell 178-93.