

**The shape of motherhood  
in selected novels by Louisa May Alcott  
and Lucy Maud Montgomery**

by

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*In memory of*  
*Juanita Shiralee Hall,*  
*my very own Marmee:*

*I know I never gave you your wish in life,*  
*but you were and always will be to me*  
*what Marmee is to Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy.*

*I miss you every day.*

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# Abstract

## **The shape of motherhood in selected works by Louisa May Alcott and Lucy Maud Montgomery**

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This study explores, through detailed analysis, the many and varied depictions of mothering, in a broad sense, in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* series, published between 1868 and 1886, and in Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne* series, published between 1908 and 1939. Definitions of the role of 'mother' and of 'motherhood' point to the active choice to mother and the exercise of motherly attributes as the primary requirements for identification as a mother, suggesting that the role is not limited to biological relationship or gender. Many attributes that are still identified, in many circles, even in the twenty-first century as characteristic of the ideal mother are embodied in *Little Women*'s idealised mother figure, Marmee, who is established as a benchmark of traditional, successful motherhood, born out of Alcott's progressive dialogue with dominant nineteenth-century sentimentalist discourses. The study shows that there is power in mothering, and the success of a mother can be measured by the harvest reaped through the mother's exercise of traditional mothering attributes, as seen in the futures of those who are mothered. While Alcott does begin to explore successful alternative mother figures in her *Little Women* series (such as Beth, Jo and Aunt March), Montgomery focuses almost exclusively in her *Anne* series (1908-1939) on the orphaned Anne's bountiful harvest of alternative mother figures, particularly of spinsters such as Anne's primary mother figure, Marilla. The analysis of the chosen works shows that the shape of motherhood is both simple and complex and that its manifestation in a vast variety of mother figures forms a great sisterhood of mothers in whom the ideals of traditional mothering are preserved for the betterment of society.

**Key words:**

Alternative mother figures

*Anne of Green Gables*

Biological motherhood

Ideal mother

*Little Women*

Louisa May Alcott

Lucy Maud Montgomery

Motherhood

Mothering values

Spinsters as mothers

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## List of abbreviations

### Alcott

*LM: Little Men*

*LW: Little Women*

*JB: Jo's Boys*

### L.M. Montgomery

*AA: Anne of Avonlea*

*AGG: Anne of Green Gables*

*AHD: Anne's House of Dreams*

*AIn: Anne of Ingleside*

*AIs: Anne of the Island*

*AP: The Alpine Path: The Story of My Career*

*AWP: Anne of Windy Poplars*

*BQ: The Blythes Are Quoted*

*ENM: Emily of New Moon*

*JLH: Jane of Lantern Hill*

*RI: Rilla of Ingleside*

*RV: Rainbow Valley*

*SJ I: The Selected Journals of L.M. Montgomery Vol I: 1889-1910*

*SJ II: The Selected Journals of L.M. Montgomery Vol II: 1910-1921*

*SJ III: The Selected Journals of L.M. Montgomery Vol III: 1921-1929*

## Chapter 1: Introduction

*BLESSINGS on the hand of women!  
Angels guard its strength and grace.  
In the palace, cottage, hovel,  
Oh, no matter where the place;  
[...]  
Woman, how divine your mission,  
[...]  
For the hand that rocks the cradle  
Is the hand that rules the world.*

(Wallace, [1865] 1890:n.p.)

### 1.1 Background

William Ross Wallace's 1865 poem, 'What Rules the World', from which some lines are quoted above, celebrates the power of motherhood with its refrain, which has become almost proverbial: 'The hand that rocks the cradle / Is the hand that rules the world'. This is a fitting image to introduce a discussion about the shape of motherhood in selected works by Louisa May Alcott and Lucy Maud Montgomery, because Wallace's poem was published just three years before the first publication of Alcott's *Little Women* (1868), and the refrain had become almost proverbial by the turn of the century, suggesting that it can be fairly assumed that the sentiments expressed in the poem reflect discourses on motherhood that were relevant to both authors in some way. What interests me about the sentiments expressed in Wallace's poem, however, is the way that the middle-class Anglo-American discourses on motherhood expressed in these lines are still familiar to me more than 150 years later.

Throughout my life I have witnessed a deliberate distancing on the part of some women who identify themselves as feminists from the domestic roles of wifedom and particularly of motherhood as primary female roles. Those who adopt this position consider the values associated with these roles as antiquated, outdated and limiting to women's potential, and resist acquiescence with such roles as perpetuating the rule of patriarchy. In fact, when I was fourteen years old, growing up in white middle-class South African society, I saw myself as one of those women; I was determined never to be tied down by the roles of 'mere' wife and mother, because I felt that I was capable of so much more and that 'giving in' to the traditional pressures of accepting a domestic role would deprive me of opportunities to use any talents and academic

acuity I have for the betterment of the world. But as I entered my later teenage years, I changed my mind.

As I learned more about motherhood at church and at home, I began to realise that, even, and perhaps *especially*, in today's world, when motherhood is only *one* of the reproductive choices women can pursue (unlike in previous eras, when it was not necessarily a matter of choice), the role of being a mother can indeed fulfil a 'divine mission' (Wallace, [1865] 1890:n.p.). It can reap a harvest that cannot be quantified in the way that success in science, mathematics, or even art or literature can be. Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), 'one of the most influential education reformers of the [nineteenth] century' (Curtis, n.d.:n.p.), and inventor of the kindergarten, 'represented the child as a seed or plant for nurturing' (Doody Jones, 1997:426), conveying a sense of a perpetual cycle of sowing and reaping that evokes an image of a harvest. The harvest of mothering is eternal, and it should not be isolating in the way that I used to believe it was, because its chief characteristic is *connection*, a quest that delves down into the roots of where one comes from, reaches up into the branches of future generations that are born through motherhood, and even stretches outward into sprawling connections with other mother figures in a united 'sisterhood' of mothering.

In more recent years of my adult life, with the advent of social media, it has become apparent that there is a rising movement, especially in white Western middle- to upper-class circles, that is willing to celebrate women's choice to become mothers and take on the role that Wallace ([1865] 1890) praised as uniquely powerful. This new attitude stems from the hard-won agency given to women in modern Western societies, which must logically allow a woman not just to choose fame, fortune or career but also the roles of wife and/or mother. There is a push to recognise the *power* that is inherent in motherhood (rather than especially second-wave feminism's ideas about its oppressive and limiting nature). This shift points to the very values expressed in Wallace's poem, suggesting perhaps that some authors, particularly in the Anglo culture cluster, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries already recognised the power in motherhood and valued the influence that mothering had inevitably had on society's progress throughout the ages and would continue to have into the future. A mother is powerful, because a mother brings into this world and raises the next generation, thereby exercising immense power to influence the values held dear in society's future.

I read Alcott's *Little Women* (1868),<sup>1</sup> including its second part, *Good Wives* (1869),<sup>2</sup> as a child but reread it as an adult in a module on Children's Literature in my first postgraduate year of study. At that time, I remember wondering if I had ever really read the novel before (even though I knew that I had), because the characters and events struck me in a way that they never did when I simply read for pleasure as a young girl. In this re-reading, I noticed for the first time that Marmee is presented as an *idealised* mother figure. She may not be intended as the image of the perfect mother, but in her, Alcott clearly radically reshapes ideas of the process of mothering. She constructs in Marmee an embodiment of many of the values that those who have been raised particularly in the white middle class in several Western societies in the twenty-first century still associate with ideal motherhood. She is a confident mother who has advice and guidance for her four daughters in any situation, and her guidance is always presented in a positive light, particularly as the outcomes are always successful when each of her four very different daughters follows her suggestions, leading to the further growth and development of each daughter into a woman in her own right, but inspired by the example set by her mother. This eventual outcome is what I would like to term Marmee's 'harvest', and it is what I see as the mark of a successful or effective mother, then and now.

My interest in the continued relevance in my own life and realm of experience of the ideals of motherhood as embodied in Marmee is what spurred me towards this dissertation topic. I became fascinated with the fact that many of the mothering ideals embodied by her have endured, particularly in the United States and therefore arguably in spheres influenced by American culture. In this regard, Strickland (1985:3) points out that

[Alcott's] influence may in fact serve to explain, in part at least, the strange persistence of Victorian values among Americans, despite the nearly unanimous declaration of intellectuals that those values are no longer relevant to life in the twentieth century. (Strickland, 1985:3)

I therefore decided to trace the constructions of motherhood into later fiction (for girls) that was influential in my childhood. I immediately gravitated towards Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) and the rest of the *Anne* series (1908-1939),<sup>3</sup> because Montgomery's

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<sup>1</sup> All literary works referred to throughout this dissertation are presented in the text with their original date of publication. Full reference information, including any appropriate reprint date, is given in the reference list.

<sup>2</sup> The first part was published in 1868, and the second in 1869. The two parts were published as one volume after 1869, although separate editions can still be found. Throughout this dissertation, when referring to *Little Women* (1868-1869), I mean *Little Women* (1868) and *Good Wives* (1869). I used the basic Kindle edition (see reference list). When *Little Women* is referred to in parentheses, for the sake of brevity, the title is abbreviated as *LW*. A similar procedure is followed for key texts – a full list of the abbreviations is included on page viii.

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of my argument, I have excluded two of Montgomery's short story compilations in the series, *Chronicles of Avonlea* (1912) and *Further Chronicles of Avonlea* (1920), because they mainly present events that are peripheral to my focus on Anne's main storyline.

portrayal of motherhood is so different from Alcott's in that there is no central biological mother to raise Anne, but Anne herself still becomes a successful and effective mother who is ideal in many ways that are reminiscent of Alcott's Marmee. Clear evidence exists of Montgomery's reading Alcott's works (*SJ II*, 32): Montgomery wrote in her journal entry for 29 November 1910 about visiting 'the "Orchard House" where Louisa Alcott wrote', observing that it 'gave a strange reality to the books' of Alcott's that Montgomery had read to experience for herself 'where [Alcott] once lived and labored' (*SJ II*, 32). Hence, a focus on the most famous series by each of these two authors allows for an in-depth study on the intriguing question of how depictions of effective mothering and its power of connection shifted and/or how they remained the same over the period of about 70 years covered by the writing and publication of the two series, 1868 to 1939.

## **1.2 Aim and scope of the study**

My aim in this study is to explore the many and varied depictions of mothering in selected works by Louisa May Alcott and Lucy Maud Montgomery, with a particular interest in how each kind of mother measures up against the benchmark of the traditional, ideal mother (Marmee, as reflected in discourses on motherhood current in late nineteenth-century middle-class (read: white) Anglo culture, specifically in the United States and Canada), as established in Section 1.1 above, defined in Section 1.3 below and discussed in detail in Chapter 2. I also focus on the success of the mothering by the mother figures I have selected to demonstrate how these authors constructed mother figures that expand the image of the discourse-based traditional mother to include alternative forms of effective and impactful mothering that reap a traceable harvest in the lives of those who are mothered. I thus aim to trace the persistence and relevance of the attributes of traditional motherhood in the novels over the decades spanned by the creation of the novels which I focus on, to confirm the power that lies in 'the hand' that literally and/or figuratively 'rocks the cradle' (Wallace, [1865] 1890:n.p.), in the influence of a mother (or mother figure) on a child (or children), young adult(s) or adult(s) – including at times mothering other mother figures.

The works that I focus on in most detail are Alcott's *Little Women* (1868-1869) and Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908). I also pay some attention, where relevant to my argument, to parts of Alcott's sequels, *Little Men* (1871) and *Jo's Boys* (1886), and to Montgomery's sequels, *Anne of Avonlea* (1909), *Anne of the Island* (1915), *Anne's House of Dreams* (1917), *Rainbow Valley* (1919), *Rilla of Ingleside* (1921), *Anne of Windy Poplars*

(1936), *Anne of Ingleside* (1939) and the posthumous *The Blythes are Quoted* (2009), which was only published in its full form very recently, just over a 100 years after the publication of *Anne of Green Gables* (1908).

### 1.3 Defining a ‘mother’

In *Anne’s House of Dreams* (1917),<sup>4</sup> Anne’s dear friend, Captain Jim, tells her: “[T]he smell of sweet-grass [...] always makes me think of my mother” (*AHD*, 162). He explains that this is because, to him, sweet-grass “has a kind of *motherly* perfume—not too young [...]—something kind of seasoned and wholesome and dependable—jest like a mother” (*AHD*, 162; my emphasis). It is plausible to assume that for most people there is some sight, sound or smell that makes them think of their mother – whether it is their biological, adoptive, absent or alternative mother, or perhaps all of these – because of aspects that they associate with their own personal experiences of the process of being mothered, whether that experience was positive or negative. With such a broad range of possible associations with the terms ‘mother’, ‘motherhood’ and ‘mothering’, it is important that I define these for the purposes of my approach in this dissertation, which focuses specifically on the ideals of motherhood as defined by discourses on motherhood current in late nineteenth-century middle-class Anglo culture, specifically in the United States and Canada.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2021:n.p.) defines the noun ‘mother’ as

[t]he female parent of a human being; a woman in relation to a child or children to whom she has given birth; (also, in extended use) a woman who *undertakes* the responsibilities of a parent towards a child, *esp.* a stepmother. (my emphasis)

As a verb, to ‘mother’ is defined as

[t]o be or *become* the mother of, give birth to; [...] to be the source or originator of, give rise to, produce [...]; [t]o attribute the *authorship* of (a work) to a woman; (also) to ascribe the origin of (something) to a person, a cause, etc. [or] [t]o bring up, take care of, or protect *as a mother*; to look after in a (sometimes excessively) kindly and protective way. (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2021:n.p.; my emphases)

When observed together, the definitions quoted above highlight an acknowledgement that the primary characteristics that identify a person as a mother in Anglo societies are not, as might perhaps be expected, a biological familial relationship. Instead, the definitions seem to highlight

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<sup>4</sup> This is the fifth book in Montgomery’s series in the chronology of the storyline, but it was published fourth, as Montgomery expanded the *Anne* story at the insistence of her publishers and reading public. The fourth book chronologically, *Anne of Windy Poplars*, was published in 1936. *Anne of Windy Poplars* (1936) is the title of the version of the novel published in the United States and Canada; the version published in the United Kingdom and elsewhere is titled *Anne of Windy Willows*. In this dissertation, I used a Canadian version of the novel and therefore refer to *Anne of Windy Poplars* (1936) throughout.

in some way the centrality of the *act* of mothering, or the *decision* to mother: someone who ‘*undertakes* the responsibilities’ of motherhood, and engages in a specific relationship to the child, someone who *is* not simply a mother but ‘*become[s]*’ one, someone who ‘*author[s]*’ a ‘work’ or to whom ‘the origin’ of something (or someone) can be ascribed because the mother is the source responsible for its (or his or her) production, someone who *actively* ‘bring[s] up, take[s] care of, or protect[s] *as a mother*’ (read: takes on a role *like* that of a mother, as defined by discourses relevant to middle-class Anglo societies – an idea that is not only biological).

Even the definition of ‘motherhood’ as the ‘state, condition, or fact of being a mother’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2021:n.p.) allows for more than the purely biological dimension, suggesting that while motherhood can be a ‘fact’, it can also be a ‘state’, which is in turn defined as ‘[t]he combination of circumstances or attributes belonging *at a particular time* to a person or thing; a particular manner or way of existing *as defined by the presence of certain circumstances or attributes*; a condition’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2021:n.p.; my emphases). When these (Western) definitions are unpacked as shown, a mother does not necessarily even have to be a woman, so long as the person labelled as a mother possesses attributes associated with motherhood.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I therefore define a mother primarily as a person who already possesses or learns attributes consistent with what I establish through my analysis of Alcott’s Marmee (see Section 2.2 in particular) as the dominant construction in late nineteenth-century middle-class (white) Anglo culture, specifically in the United States and Canada, of a *traditional mother*. Furthermore, a mother is someone who *chooses to act* as a mother, either by fully embracing biological motherhood or by seeking and/or accepting a maternal role in providing nurture to and/or influencing the development of the mothered person (in particular of a child) within the person’s (mother’s) reach. A mother is thus also someone whose influence can be traced through a harvest showing the fruits of effective or successful mothering, which I define as mothering that produces positive results in the child as the child grows into an adult, as the mothered person becomes a useful member of society. A further harvest may be reaped if the mothered person chooses to act as a mother in some capacity in his or her own life.

The attributes of motherhood that I explore in my analysis of motherhood as a broader concept in Alcott’s *Little Women* series (1868-1886) and Montgomery’s *Anne* series (1908-1939) can be categorised into different dimensions, each encompassing certain ideals or values (and these are not confined by gender). One dimension relates to personal qualities: dependability, particularly as a source of consistency, peace and comfort – offering a refuge from the world;

protectiveness; kindness; selflessness; patience and devotion. Mothers are also supposed to display to a greater or lesser degree gentleness; affection; love for the mothered person; understanding; empathy; compassion; wisdom, at least in some areas, that surpasses that possessed at the time by the mothered person; honesty and transparency. A second dimension focuses on the ability to educate or pass on knowledge or attributes, particularly in a manner tailored to the maximum benefit of the individual being taught, so that the mothered person can and does make use of what has been taught in the future. This dimension also encompasses the ability to teach by word and/or example. A third dimension involves the commitment to act in a nurturing capacity in the life of the person or child being mothered (be that nurture physical, spiritual, emotional or mental). This commitment includes a willingness to learn and improve oneself in spite of one's elevated status as a mother figure. A fourth dimension incorporates the ability to enrich a house, making it into a home. Not all mother figures display all of these attributes, and the combinations may vary widely across the characters discussed.

Given the above definitions, which focus on the *act* and attributes of motherhood, a mother can be a person of any gender, biologically related to the mothered person or not. Therefore, to differentiate between the different *kinds of mother* that I focus on throughout this study, I adopt two sets of terms. First, when I refer to a character as a *traditional* or *ideal* mother, I mean a *biological* mother who possesses at least some of the characteristics associated with Alcott's portrayal of idealised motherhood. Second, I refer to any other kinds of mother (those who possess, adopt or learn such characteristics) as *alternative*, *less-than-ideal*, or *non-traditional* mother figures, or 'othermothers'.<sup>5</sup> This serves to highlight how even those who are not traditionally considered mothers, because they are not biological mothers, as presupposed in most of the discourses on motherhood current in late nineteenth-century white middle-class Anglo culture, can be effective mother figures like Alcott's Marmee, who – as my inspiration for this dissertation – acts as the benchmark figure of effective motherhood.

As the benchmark mother, Marmee embodies the characteristics that Captain Jim associates with motherhood (quoted above): she is 'sweet' (in a wider sense of kind and loving), 'seasoned', 'wholesome' and 'dependable' (*AHD*, 162). This description in *Anne's House of Dreams* (1917) indicates the continued relevance in Montgomery's middle-class Anglo-Scottish sphere in Canada of the benchmark motherly qualities in Montgomery's work 49 years after Alcott's *Little Women's* first publication in the United States in 1868. Moreover, characteristics such as these are still commonly associated with motherhood in middle-class Anglo culture

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<sup>5</sup> This is a useful term used by O'Reilly (2008:7).

today. In her introduction to *Feminist Mothering*, O'Reilly (2008:10) describes how she tends to 'open [her] women's studies course on "Mothering–Motherhood" [by] asking students to define a "good" mother in contemporary culture'. The adjectives that are 'frequently mentioned' by her students 'to describe the personality of th[e] ideal [...] mother' are '*altruistic, patient, loving, selfless, devoted, nurturing, cheerful*' (O'Reilly, 2008:10; O'Reilly's emphasis).

O'Reilly (2008:10) argues that '[t]he dominant ideology [...] reserves the definition of *good motherhood* to a select group of women' (my emphasis). Based on the potential universality of the characteristics of the 'good mother', I posit that the 'dominant ideology's' definition can be extended to include a vastly wider group of women, and even men, who possess such attributes and choose to exercise them in nurturing and/or influencing those around them, particularly those younger than themselves. Attributes such as these also confirm that mothering is not simply a passive condition arising from biological functions but must involve some kind of choice to act on and thereby *live* these characteristics. Where in the course of my argument I indicate that some characteristics of motherhood are depicted by the authors as coming 'naturally' or as being 'instinctive' or 'intuitive' for certain characters, I use these terms to indicate that little to no evidence exists in the text that the characters learned or were taught these attributes.

The active exercising of the attributes of a 'good mother', as outlined in more detail in Chapter 2, seems to be the key to successful motherhood as shaped and reshaped in the works by Louisa May Alcott and Lucy Maud Montgomery that I explore in this study. The fact, as O'Reilly (2008, quoted above) asserts, that these attributes are still acknowledged as *expected* of mothers in the twenty-first century (how widespread those beliefs are beyond the middle-class Anglo society is a matter of debate), and that this remains a dominant ideal, suggests that a brief investigation into the origins of Alcott's connection between these attributes and ideal motherhood would enrich and inform the idea of Marmee as the benchmark of good motherhood. I therefore give some background in the next section on the historical discourses on motherhood relevant to the idealised mother.

#### **1.4 Background: nineteenth-century motherhood**

The time range I cover in my analysis of works by both Alcott and Montgomery – using 1868, the year when *Little Women* was published as my starting date, and 1939, the year when *Anne*

of *Ingleside* was published, as the ending date<sup>6</sup> – fall within a time of rapidly increasing change in the perception of women and their roles in middle-class Anglo society. Cruea's article, 'Changing ideals of womanhood during the nineteenth-century Woman Movement' (2005), explores the 'series of new images for women' that were promoted by the nineteenth-century Woman Movement (Cruea, 2005:187) and thus establishes a useful contextual background from which to start my exploration of motherhood as presented in Alcott and Montgomery's works. These new images were phases identified by labels such as 'True Womanhood, Real Womanhood, Public Womanhood, and New Womanhood' (Cruea, 2005:187). Cruea examines these phases 'as overlapping parts of a long-term change in cultural attitudes towards gender, a gradual shifting of power away from its patriarchal basis, and a steady movement for women toward twentieth-century feminism' (Cruea, 2005:187-188).

'The Cult of True Womanhood' (Cruea, 2005:188-190) was characterised by a nigh-unobtainable, idealistic, superior moral pedestal – sometimes referred to as the 'Angel in the house' image (Cruea, 2005:190; Yildirim, 2012:116) – of circumspect, virtuous and selfless domesticity with an all-encompassing focus on the rearing and educating (particularly spiritually) of children in the home. In terms of the domestic concerns of the time, Strickland (1985:1-18), in *Victorian Domesticity: Families in the Life and Art of Louisa May Alcott*, explores the 'sentimental revolution [that] brought about during the early years of the nineteenth century a transformation in the opinions of the American social elite on such sensitive matters as courtship, marriage, religion, education, and child-rearing' (Strickland, 1985:3). He points to the fact that, given the intense moral obligation that women had to raise and educate their children as spiritual beings preparing for redemption, 'most sentimentalists opposed the movement for women's rights, for they perceived it as a threat to the very institution upon which they counted for moral redemption' (Strickland, 1985:5).

With the power that came of a woman's moral superiority in the home, subject to these discourses, however, women were in fact well equipped to stretch their influence beyond the home, into society, and, since it was impossible for all classes to maintain the ethereal image of the 'True Woman', 'Real Womanhood' (Cruea, 2005:191-193; my emphasis) began to emerge – 'Real Womanhood' refers to a more realistic, somewhat less idealistic version of the 'True Woman'.<sup>7</sup> This phase began to reach toward the world outside of the home, particularly with

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<sup>6</sup> I do not include *The Blythes are Quoted* (2009) in this timeline, as the full text was only published recently.

<sup>7</sup> The contextualisation offered is only intended as a brief summary of the historical circumstances surrounding the changing discourses on womanhood and motherhood. Cogan, in her book, *All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America* (1989) explores the ideals of Real Womanhood in detail.

the roles that women had to take on of necessity while men were away fighting in the American Civil War (1861-1865). This phase valued education and work for women (but not at the expense of responsibilities at home) as a means to learn self-reliance and to become even better mothers and educators in the home. As the discourses around 'Real Womanhood' began to take a stronger hold, these women's unique influence increased even further in terms of moral and cultural reach and some began to enter the phase of 'Public Womanhood' (Cruea, 2005:193-198) and seek involvement in politics and other public domains, in many cases by "cloak[ing] woman's public activity with the aura of woman's sphere" (Matthews, 1992:95, quoted in Cruea, 2005:194) by engaging in work such as teaching and nursing, with their purportedly maternal focuses on caring for children and for the sick. Women also began to expand their involvement in religious and charitable organisations and increasingly to assert their claim to moral superiority to influence the behaviour of men in the home and in more public spheres such as the workplace.

Finally, as the 'Public Women' grew older and had daughters of their own, the place of women in society began to be challenged even further as this new generation of women, with limited suffrage in some states,<sup>8</sup> sought to break down even more barriers and distance themselves from any traditionally limiting dominant discourses on women, in creating what has been termed the 'New Woman' (Cruea, 2005:198-202). According to Cruea,

Participants in this phase of the Woman Movement were interested in gaining greater access to education, employment, and economic and civic rights, and in changing expectations concerning personal behavior. They believed that gender, no more than race, should determine human rights or a person's sphere of living. (Cruea, 2005:199)

The 'New Woman' rejected traditional female roles such as wife- and motherhood so vehemently that societies for a time found themselves concerned for the future of home life (Cruea, 2005:201-202). However, by the end of the nineteenth century, values associated with the domestic sphere for women and their necessary roles as wives and mothers were still held very dear, largely due to the perception of women's unparalleled ability to shape the minds of future generations and thereby influence society for generations to come. The place of a woman in the early twentieth century was thus still seen primarily as being in the domestic, private sphere of home. A woman, particularly white women in the middle and upper classes, was seen as having a unique ability to improve her children and her home, and the concerns of society at large were that 'the home without its guiding spirit and votary would cease to be anything but

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<sup>8</sup> Louisa May Alcott supported women's suffrage. She voted herself for the first time, for the local school board, on 29 March 1880 (New England Historical Society, n.d.(a):n.p.).

a structure [... void of] such necessary virtues as grace, gentleness, beauty, courtesy, and piety' (Cogan, 1989:259-260).<sup>9</sup>

Alcott grew up during a time when the values of True Womanhood, intertwined with the ideals of the sentimental revolution, still held a great deal of sway. These views essentially acknowledged the [moral] power of the mother's influence but largely tended to limit this to the idea that a 'woman was to fulfill herself in the "instinctive" arts of child rearing, domestic pursuits, and spiritual comfort' (Cogan, 1989:68). The dominant Anglo discourses surrounding the domestic place for women 'held up passivity [in women] as an ideal' (Strickland, 1985:10), embracing the 'Angel in the house' image (Cruea, 2005:190; Yildirim, 2012:116), which thus represented a largely passive, servile role, where the mother stood as a moral symbol rather than as a unique and well-developed human individual that others could identify with. Furthermore, a woman was typically completely materially dependent on a male provider, usually her husband (Cruea, 2005:189; Yildirim, 2012:118). It is clear from *Little Women* (1868-1869) that Alcott, based on her experience of the marriage of her parents, Bronson Alcott and Abigail (Abba) May Alcott, takes issue with some of these ideas, to reshape familial relations around the central mother figure in her novel, who becomes a breadwinner out of necessity and, to some extent, vocation. Alcott also shifts her narrative forward into the Civil War to reframe her vision of the (middle- to upper-class) American domestic sphere.

Strickland (1985:8-13) explores the sentimentalist cults of domesticity, motherhood and childhood that began to herald new, eventually dominant discourses and ideals for the place of the home in American society in the late nineteenth century and for the role of the mother and her relationship with her children. In terms of the cult of domesticity, he points out the importance of the sanctification of the home and that, in this 'process [...], the sentimentalists widened into a yawning chasm the boundary between the nuclear family and the world around it' (Strickland, 1985:8). With this separation of the home from the rest of the world, the cult of motherhood likewise reflected this kind of isolation:

In keeping with the cult of domesticity, [the mother] was advised not to share [her] sacred responsibility [to nurture and teach her children] with others. It was assumed, as a matter of course, that the father would be incompetent, uninterested, or absent, but the

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<sup>9</sup> In the British Empire, this refocusing on a woman's duties as wife and mother was centred on the fear that the 'New Woman's' rejection of traditional home and family would threaten the stability and growth of the Empire (Devereux, 2003:126). Devereux (2003:126) indicates that in spite of other factors contributing to the 'decline in the British birth rate', such as diseases and war, blame for how 'the race was in decline' was placed on the shoulders of 'new' women who 'were not doing their duty'. Thus, the newly elevated status of motherhood as part of the broader mission of 'mothering the race' meant that the socially acceptable idea of 'imperial motherhood' began to overshadow the previously-emerging discourse of 'New Womanhood' (Devereux, 2003:129). This background is relevant to Montgomery's Canada, since Canada operated as part of the British Empire during the time in question.

sentimentalists also discouraged mothers from seeking aid in other directions. [...] mothers were enjoined to erect around their children a screen behind which the subtle process of mother nurture could do its work. (Strickland, 1985:11)

The sanctity of the Victorian home and the mother's role within it were fed by the cult of childhood, in which 'the image of the child [...] was [...] both saintly and vulnerable' (Strickland, 1985:12), thus advocating for the ideals of *nurture* and *affection* as opposed to the previously dominant 'Calvinist notions of the depravity of children' which encouraged 'parents [...] to rely on the child's awe of authority or fear of punishment as the principal sanction for discipline' (Strickland, 1985:12). Strickland thus indicates that '[i]ncreasingly, with the emphasis on the mother's role in child-rearing, the sentimental books of advice advocated [...] that a bond of affection between parent and child would provide the leverage for obedience' (Strickland, 1985:12). The increasing prevalence of such advice meant that '[b]y the middle of the nineteenth century parents were being advised to combine firmness with love, to reason with children and, if the children misbehaved, to punish them by withdrawal of approval and affection' (Strickland, 1985:12).

When one looks at Alcott's Marmee in relation to her historical context, the progressive nature of Marmee's character as a mother is clear. Moving away from older discourses that were focused on rearing children in fear rather than in love, the sentimental revolution's cults of childhood and motherhood provided the avenue in which the image of the traditional, loving mother could develop and take root in late American-Victorian society, along with the ideal motherly attributes of nurture, affection, devotion and selflessness (to name a very few). While Marmee does indeed embody these characteristics and has a profound 'Angel in the house' influence in her home, Marmee is never left upon a pedestal of moral superiority; rather, as I show, she finds common ground with her children and assists them by involving them in their own upbringing and education. Furthermore, instead of simply keeping her home a haven from the rest of the world and separating her children from the influences of others, Marmee establishes a firm foundation that allows for a balance between domesticity within the home and outside it and community within the home and outside it: she mothers beyond the walls of her own home, in keeping with the more far-reaching ideals of Real Womanhood and even Public Womanhood and encourages her daughters to find inspiration both at home and in outside sources, and even, in the case of Jo, to leave home to live independently in a distant city. When it comes to discipline and punishment, Marmee never withdraws her affection and often does not even withdraw her approval – or at least her understanding – from her children. Instead, she treats them as beings capable of self-criticism and self-reliant learning, with gentle and often

subtle guidance in what she maintains is the right direction.<sup>10</sup>

In terms of the way that Alcott stretched and redefined the sentimental conventions within which her parents, Bronson and Abigail (Abba) May Alcott, and thus Alcott, were raised, Strickland (1985:18) observes that Alcott ‘drew upon her experience to sort out the meaning of the sentimental revolution, attempting to salvage its strengths and strip it of its ludicrous excesses’. Alcott’s Marmee thus redefines the role of the American middle- and upper-class mother of the mid-nineteenth century through her realism and reshapes the ‘Angel in the house’ figure to an image that many Western readers even today can recognise and still appear to relate to, making hers the new *traditional* and normative form of motherhood, which was to become the dominant form in Anglo-American culture. Marmee’s ‘Victorian domesticity’<sup>11</sup> (Strickland, 1985:3) in a number of ways pushes beyond sentimentalist views to advocate for some of what was represented by the Woman Movement and the realities of the household Alcott grew up in, both in terms of how Marmee’s influence reaches far beyond the walls of her own home and in terms of how she relies on her own talents and abilities to earn a living for her family, because she cannot depend upon her husband: at the start of *Little Women* (1868-1869), Mr March is absent, doing his duty by serving his country in the Civil War; in real life, Alcott’s father was not financially successful (Saxton, 1978:3). Marmee similarly does *her* duty both inside the home and outside of it and encourages education and the learning of useful skills and hard work for men and women, boys and girls, reflective of some of the most characteristic values of True, Real, Public, and even to some extent New Womanhood.

In Marmee, Alcott supplies the reader with the ideal of oxymoronically imperfectly perfect motherhood and shows that motherhood that pushes the boundaries of the dominant American discourses or ideologies is effective and fruitful motherhood: Marmee is a complex mother who is widely influential in that her example and teachings inspire her own daughters and grandchildren, as well as generations of readers to want to be more like, or have a mother who is like, this benchmark mother. Thus, Marmee became the standard for the evolving discourses on motherhood, specifically for middle-class Anglo culture, that still reverberates in discourses today when those of us raised within these traditions think about a traditional mother (see definitions given in Section 1.3).

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<sup>10</sup> Alcott’s source material is the ideals held dear by her own parents – this aspect is explored in much greater detail by Strickland (1985) and James (2015).

<sup>11</sup> This is a term applied by Strickland (1985) to Alcott’s work. Strickland (1985:3) indicates that the term refers to ‘a product of a confrontation between the ideals of sentimentality and the reality experienced by nineteenth-century Americans’.

In *Marmee* and beyond, Alcott's depictions of mothering in the *Little Women* series (1868-1886) and in other works – which James (2015) explores in detail in her dissertation entitled 'Constructions of motherhood in selected works by Louisa May Alcott' – broaden the sentimental values of the nuclear home watched over by a traditional mother as the only place where a child can experience effective mothering. This is a specific focus in works such as *Eight Cousins, or The Aunt Hill* (1874), in which 'Alcott "critiques and evaluates certain conventions, particularly those conventions concerning mothers and their roles in the domestic sphere"' (Dyckfehderau, 1999:154, quoted in James, 2015:115).

One of the conclusions offered in James's study of alternative mothering in Alcott's fiction is that 'Alcott's emphasis of the positive role of aunts as important maternal figures opens up the possibility of singlehood as an option for women that still allows single women to be maternal' (James, 2015:153). Alcott's exploration of motherhood for single women (she herself chose not to marry), like her exploration of the ideal mother, breaks through the boundaries of sentimental ideals, since '[m]ost sentimental authors made it clear that marriage was the only possible destiny for a woman [...] and] drew the most unflattering portraits of the spinster, making her the object of contempt and ridicule' (Strickland, 1985:8).

A close friend of Bronson and Abigail (Abba) Alcott,<sup>12</sup> and, as James (2015:59-68) demonstrates, a strong influence in Louisa May Alcott's thinking, Margaret Fuller, in her seminal text, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1855), defied the dominant privileged East-Coast American discourses of the day and asserted that 'the business of society ha[d] become so complex, that it could [...] scarcely be carried on without the presence of these despised [spinsters and bachelors]; and [that] detachments from the army of aunts and uncles [were] wanted to stop gaps in every hedge' (Fuller, 1855:74). Moreover, Fuller (1855:74) points out the 'genius ... [of] recognizing in these personages the *spiritual parents*, who have supplied [remedied] defects in the treatment of the busy or careless actual parents' (my emphasis).

In line with Fuller's progressive views, Alcott's *Little Women* (1868-1869) includes the following musing by the narrator:

Don't laugh at the spinsters [...], for often very tender, tragic romances are hidden away in the hearts that beat so quietly under the sober gowns, and many silent sacrifices of youth, health, ambition, love itself, make the faded faces beautiful in God's sight [...].

[...] be courteous to the old maids, no matter how poor and plain and prim, [...]. Just recollect the good aunts who have not only lectured and fussed, but nursed and petted, too

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<sup>12</sup> Fuller taught with Bronson Alcott in Boston (Stern, 1996:12), and Alcott describes a visit by Fuller to her parents in Concord (Stern, 1996:24), when Fuller witnessed the Alcott girls' wild play, which Alcott reworked as a scene with Nan, Daisy and Bess in *Little Men* (1871) (*LM*, 116).

often without thanks, the scrapes they have helped you out of, the tips they have given you from their small store, the stitches the patient old fingers have set for you, the steps the willing old feet have taken [...], and if death, almost the only power that can part [traditional] mother and [child], should rob you of [your mother], you will be sure to find a tender welcome and maternal cherishing from some [spinster ...]. (LW, 581)

It is therefore clear that Alcott's work simultaneously celebrates and establishes a benchmark for the American ideal of the traditional mother and recognises that there is a place for alternative mothers. Montgomery's work decades later entrenches and expands upon this idea of spinsters and other alternative mother figures within the community, not just as maternal individuals, but as *effective mother figures*, making a strong argument for broadening the definition of ideal mothering as limited to the nuclear home that is still prevalent in middle-class Anglo culture today.

Some of Alcott's work, particularly *Eight Cousins* (1874), as explored by James (2015:132-142; see also Strickland, 1985:125-127), also reflects a broadening of the roles that were more or less exclusively assigned to the mother in the cult of motherhood in the nineteenth century to include fathers' or father figures' playing a larger role in childrearing, particularly in terms of nurturing. This can be connected with the rising ideals of New Womanhood, whose proponents propounded that neither gender nor race 'should determine human rights or a person's sphere of living' (Cruea, 2005:199), opening up the way for men too, instead of 'exclusively [...] women' (Strickland, 1985:12), to be seen as nurturers. This paved the way for further portrayals of male mothering, seen for example in Montgomery's *Matthew* (see Section 3.4), by men who possess and exercise attributes typical of the traditional, ideal mother of these discourses and choose to act as nurturers, leading to a harvest similar to that of a successful female mother – a concept that is certainly becoming increasingly accepted in Western societies today.

## **1.5 Approach and outline of the study**

My study primarily follows the approach of close reading and detailed critical analysis of relevant excerpts from the texts by Alcott and Montgomery listed above (see Section 1.2). The discussion is enriched by contextualisations of the details and awareness of the critical scholarship on these authors and their work. Given the limited scope of a Master's dissertation, I limit biographical context to brief references to the authors' lives that enrich and illuminate my argument, since detailed biographical connections to their most famous fiction have already been pursued extensively in other critical works – for Alcott, these include studies by Strickland (1985), Stern (1996) and James (2015); for Montgomery, these include research by Åhmansson

(1991), Epperley (2007) and Rubio (2008).

In Chapter 1, I have introduced my topic by explaining my motivation for undertaking this study. I have also established the aim and scope of the study and given definitions of the ‘traditional mother’ and ‘alternative mother figures’, which are central to the argument I present in the chapters that follow. I have also provided some background in order to contextualise the discussion and have summarised my approach to the study.

In Chapter 2, my focus is on Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868-1869). I establish how Alcott depicted Marmee’s central characteristics and the mothering approaches which have made Marmee the benchmark of traditional, idealised motherhood in middle-class (often white) Western culture. I investigate Marmee’s mothering harvest in the form of the effectiveness of her methods in her daughters’ upbringing and in how Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy come to reflect their mother’s values in their own lives and futures. I also touch on how Alcott includes intriguing depictions of effective alternative motherhood in *Little Women* (1868-1869), even if the text is predominantly centred on Alcott’s then progressive ideal of mothering by Marmee, shaping the iconic motherhood that set the tone for the expectations around motherhood in dominant discourses since then. The examples of alternative mothering that I discuss are offered by Jo, particularly as depicted in the sequel, *Little Men* (1871), and by Beth and the widowed Aunt Josephine March.

In Chapter 3, I turn my attention to Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) and to depictions of alternative motherhood. Given its premise of the adoption of Anne Shirley by the Cuthbert siblings, Marilla and Matthew, Montgomery’s text inevitably focuses on alternative motherhoods, because the orphaned protagonist, Anne, has no living traditional mother. However, this chapter explores the power that Anne’s deceased biological mother still holds to influence her daughter. The chapter then focuses in detail on Anne’s adoptive parents, Marilla and Matthew, and on how each of them becomes a powerful figure of successful alternative motherhood, even if Marilla has to learn how to be an effective mother and how to develop some of the attributes of the traditional (Marmee-like) mother.

In Chapter 4, I broaden my focus on mothering in Montgomery’s *Anne* series (1908-1939) to include a variety of different figures of alternative motherhood who prove highly influential in Anne’s life. The first area I explore is mother figures in Anne’s community who assist with Anne’s education and upbringing as a child. Next, I analyse Montgomery’s repeated depictions of spinsters as mother figures who help shape Anne’s journey through life. I also provide a brief

investigation of Anne's own influence on various women in her life, providing a glimpse into the power of reverse mothering, in what I consider to be her harvest of mothers.

Finally, Chapter 5 – the concluding chapter – reflects on the study and its findings. In it, I draw together the conclusions that my discussion leads to and consider whether the study's aims have been achieved. I reflect on the strengths and primary contributions of my study and also provide suggestions for future research into related topics, as well as suggestions for alternative approaches to the study I have undertaken here.

## Chapter 2:

### ***Little Women: traditional, idealised motherhood***

*A breath of fresh air seemed to blow through the house, and something better than sunshine brightened the quiet rooms. Everything appeared to feel the hopeful change. Beth's bird began to chirp again, and a half-blown rose was discovered on Amy's bush in the window. The fires seemed to burn with unusual cheeriness, and every time the girls met, their pale faces broke into smiles as they hugged one another, whispering encouragingly, "Mother's coming, dear! Mother's coming!"*

(LW, 254)

#### **2.1 Introduction**

Several months after my mother died in 2014, I found a little journal that she had given me a few years earlier. The journal was designed to be used to document progress in completing what was then my Church's 'Personal Progress' programme for young women. In the front of the journal, my mom had written a message encouraging me to try again to complete the programme, because I had never actually finished it while I was young enough to participate officially. What struck me about this discovery in 2014 was that my mom had signed the note 'Marmee', with a brief postscript about how she had always wanted to be called 'Marmee' by her children and an added thought that when I eventually became a mother, perhaps I would be able to get my children to call me 'Marmee'. I knew she always found the names 'Mom' or 'Mommy' grating when she heard them called from all corners of the home every day, and upon reading her little note, I felt a deep sense of regret for never granting my mother her wish to be called 'Marmee', like the central mother figure in Alcott's *Little Women* (1868-1869) and its sequels.

It became clear to me, too late, what weight my mother attached to the connotations of the affectionate name. To her, it represented everything beautiful about being a mother, and the idea of herself being assigned that term of endearment, discovered in one of her favourite books, *Little Women* (1868-1869), when she was a child, had once given her hope for her own role as a mother and for how she too could somehow be associated with everything beautiful about motherhood. In short, the name Marmee was representative of the ideals my mother associated with motherhood, and her regret at not being called by that name came across as a lament that my mom rarely, if ever, felt like the ideal mother she so wanted to be recognised as. My brothers and I did not, as children, see, or express appreciation for, the indelible influence she had on our lives from day to day. But the very act of encouraging me to complete my own 'Personal

Progress' was evidence that my own mother *was* a Marmee figure who wanted me to become the best possible version of myself, just as Alcott's Marmee encourages her daughters to play at 'Pilgrim's Progress' in improving themselves and overcoming their little burdens (*LW*, 14-15) – an allusion to Alcott's chief intertext, Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678).

Strickland (1985:3) observes that rare is the modern 'American girl who has not read one or more of Alcott's books during the highly impressionable preadolescent and adolescent years'; I would venture to extend Strickland's observation by asserting that rare is the modern girl or woman in many a country around the world who has not read the books, heard of or seen one of the television or film adaptations of Alcott's ground-breaking semi-autobiographical nineteenth-century novel, *Little Women* (1868-1869).<sup>13</sup> The characters were based on Alcott's own family, Abigail 'Abba' May (1800-1877), Amos Bronson Alcott (1799-1888), Anna Bronson Alcott Pratt (1831-1893), Louisa May Alcott (1832-1888), Elizabeth Sewall Alcott (1835-1858) and Abigail May Alcott Niericker (1840-1879) (Myerson & Shealy, 1989:xvii-xxvi). However, the basic events were telescoped into a shorter time frame and rewritten to suit the purposes of novel.<sup>14</sup> Alcott idealised some of the events and people in her life in this text: in *Little Women* (1868-1869), Alcott 'recreat[ed] her past into shapes and pictures of what it should have been' (Saxton, 1978:3).<sup>15</sup>

In *Little Women* (1868-1869), Alcott explores the lives of the March sisters, Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy, as they grow from girlhood to womanhood under the guidance of their mother.<sup>16</sup> The

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<sup>13</sup> Acocella (2018) mentions six major films, 12 television versions, not including a 48-part Japanese anime version, and 48 radio adaptations. The book has been translated into about 50 languages, selling an estimated 10 million copies to date, and is reported still to be the second most popular Western book among Japanese girls (Acocella 2018).

<sup>14</sup> For example, Anna ('Meg') married John Bridge Pratt in 1860, before the Civil War (1861-1865), and Lizzie ('Beth') died even earlier, in 1858 (Myerson & Shealy, 1989:xvii-xxvi).

<sup>15</sup> For Saxton (1978:9), this is a flaw in the text, which she considers 'a regression for Louisa as an artist and a woman', claiming that in *Little Women* (1868-1869), Alcott 'had abandoned the struggle for multifaceted truth and replaced it with programmatic morality'. In her anti-didactic second-wave feminist biography, this critic sees the novel as the novelist's surrendering in the struggle to be herself, in what she argues to be Alcott's desire to oppose what Bronson, Abba and their friend, transcendentalist philosopher Emerson, stood for. Saxton goes so far as to dismiss all the characters except Jo and claims that the book *merely* 'outlines the adolescence of American morality', adding, inaccurately: 'It has an ethical structure with no gray areas, no grown-up dilemmas, no confusions, no sensuality or ambiguity' (Saxton, 1978:9). Saxton's highly speculative interpretation of Alcott's intentions is very different from more sympathetic and nuanced readings by Strickland (1985), Showalter (1989) and Stern (1996).

<sup>16</sup> This is foregrounded by the titles of the Dutch versions of the novels, *Onder Moeders Vleugels* [Under the Mother's Wings] and *Op Eigen Wieken* [On Their Own Wings] (Cheney, [1889] 2010:191). The first Dutch translation was done by Aleida Doedes (1850-1902) (Pletting, 2016:n.p.); a newer translation (published by De Sfinx) by Francine Schregel-Ornstein in 1995 retains the title *Onder Moeders Vleugels*, but another recent translation from 1993 (published by Chevron), translated by a male translator, Attie Spitzers, in a surprising move for a more feminist era, shifts the emphasis to the father, changing the title to *De Vier Dochters van Dr March* (Desmet, 2007:277) and gives Mr March a title for which there is no evidence in Alcott's text.

character who stands out to me as an adult (re)reader of the novel – and clearly did to my mother – as the most influential in the novel is the ever-present, idealised figure of the girls’ mother, Mrs March, affectionately known to her daughters as ‘Marmee’. Marmee is memorable because she is there – either physically or inspirationally – for every trial, every success and every adventure; her example, guidance and counsel are key to the happiness and success of her daughters, particularly in their own individual and unique journeys towards motherhood. Strickland (1985:3) asserts that Alcott’s work ‘served to perpetuate the values of Victorian domesticity to subsequent generations’ (while pointing out how the Alcott family’s lives both reflected and reshaped those values). He adds that ‘Alcott’s fiction [...] has served to shape the attitudes of subsequent generations of women toward the sensitive issues of women’s roles and family life’ (Strickland, 1985:3). I argue that nowhere is the truth of Strickland’s assertion made clearer than in Alcott’s portrayal of Marmee as an ideal mother figure. As my mother’s personal example demonstrates, Marmee’s mothering reached far beyond the confines of the narrative to touch my own mother more than a century later in giving her a series of mothering ideals to strive for in her own life. Through my mother, Alcott’s Marmee also touched me – so much so, that I was inspired to puzzle out what it was about Marmee’s character that made my mother want to be recognised as a Marmee too.

In *Little Women* (1868-1869), Alcott explores many aspects of her own life through her portrayal of Jo, and she explores the idealisation of motherhood through the figure of Marmee, who represents Alcott’s own mother, Abigail ‘Abba’ May (1800-1877) (Myerson & Shealy, 1989: xvii-xxvi), with whom Alcott shared an intimate and treasured bond, much as Jo and Marmee share in the novel. James (2015:30) argues that ‘in their intimate interactions, discussions, and experiences of life as women in one household, Abigail’s ideas must have had a profound effect on Alcott’s own ideas concerning [...] the representation of mothers and daughters in her work, particularly the construction of Marmee in *Little Women*’. Keyser (2000:vii, quoted in James, 2015:71) asserts: ‘The great love of Alcott’s life ... was doubtless her mother, whom she idealised as Marmee in *Little Women*’. A detailed study of Alcott’s relationship with her own mother is offered by LaPlante (2012). I concur that Marmee is an idealising construction of the mother figure, and for the purposes of my study on motherhood, which encompasses generations of fictional mother figures and how they measure on the scale of idealised motherhood, Marmee, with her mothering success and with her influence on mothering ideals that still endure in the twenty-first century, must necessarily be considered as the benchmark or yardstick against which other potential mother figures are measured.

In this chapter, I commence by providing evidence for the extent and reach of the construction of the mother in the portrayal of Marmee in *Little Women* (1868-1869) and how Marmee's idealised motherhood has the power to influence those outside of her immediate home circle, with a brief recognition of how her influence extends into the sequels, for example, in *Little Men* (1871) and *Jo's Boys* (1886). Next, I explore some examples of Marmee's mothering in action: how she inspires her daughters' behaviour, particularly by sharing her own experience and by involving them in their own education to give them agency in their growth into characteristics such as the ones Marmee possesses. I then explore some of the outcomes of Marmee's successful mothering by looking at examples of her individualised approaches with Meg, Jo and Amy, with a particular focus on how each daughter learns to overcome her specific weakness(es) through Marmee's guidance and example, as Marmee prepares her daughters to take their own place in the adult world and to become mothers themselves – helping them in their 'struggles to find a balance between what they personally want, what society wants from them and their own internalisation of the codes of their society' (Noomé, 2004:143). Critics usually dismiss Beth from discussions of the sisters as adults and mothers, but I argue that she – with her few and small imperfections and almost saint-like status in her family, particularly with her death in young adulthood – is in fact portrayed as an alternative figure of idealised motherhood. Finally, I briefly consider alternative motherhood in the form of Aunt March in *Little Women* (1868-1869) with the purpose of launching my discussion on alternative, non-traditional, less-than-ideal motherhood in L. M. Montgomery's *Anne* series (1908-1939), which follows in Chapters 3 and 4.

## **2.2 The sanctity and reach of idealised motherhood**

The reader's first introduction to Marmee is telling, because the narrative only introduces Marmee in person after her influence on the domestic sphere that she manages has been foregrounded in a description of the home as the centre of happy family life. The contrast between the cold of the 'December snow f[alling] quietly without' and the warmth of 'the fire crackl[ing] cheerfully within' (*LW*, 7) highlights the warmth of this loving space. The room in which Marmee's daughters sit, 'knitting away' is described as 'comfortable' in spite of the faded carpet and plain furniture (*LW*, 7).<sup>17</sup> This is a space that is built by love and the small nurturing touches of the mother figure who works with her daughters to make their environment into a

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<sup>17</sup> This image of the warmth and comfort of a home presided over by an idealised, nurturing mother figure may be contrasted to the cold image of Marilla's domestic sphere at Green Gables before Anne's adoption in Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908); see Section 3.3.

home, not only through domestic endeavours but also through an emphasis on education and aesthetics, shown by the presence of ‘a good picture or two [...], books [which fill] the recesses, [and] chrysanthemums and Christmas roses bloom[ing] in the windows’ (*LW*, 7),<sup>18</sup> as well as industriousness in many areas, such as the girls’ knitting for the soldiers on the front in this scene, since the opening of the story is set during the Civil War. Overall, the comfortable, cheery ambiance in the room is attributed to the ‘pleasant atmosphere of home peace’ (*LW*, 7), not just to the fire. This image is reinforced by Alcott’s later inclusion of Laurie’s observation that “‘it’s like looking at a picture to see the fire, and you all around the table with your mother’” (*LW*, 66).

Alcott soon reveals, through the change wrought in the daughters when they think of Marmee, that the central source of the ‘pleasant atmosphere of home peace’ is this home’s mother. At first, three of the four girls come across as negative, out-of-sorts and materialistic,<sup>19</sup> as Jo laments that “‘Christmas won’t be Christmas without any presents’” (*LW*, 3), Meg complains that it is “‘so dreadful to be poor’” (*LW*, 3), and Amy whines that it is not “‘fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things, and other girls nothing at all’” (*LW*, 3). However, their negativity and bickering cease the moment that the ‘clock str[ikes] six’ (*LW*, 8), which is a signal that ‘Mother [is] coming’ (*LW*, 8). All four girls immediately begin to perform voluntary acts of service that continue after their mother arrives:

Beth put a pair of slippers down to warm [...]. Meg stopped lecturing, and lighted the lamp, Amy got out of the easy chair without being asked, and Jo forgot how tired she was as she sat up to hold the slippers nearer to the blaze. (*LW*, 8)

The girls flew about, trying to make things comfortable, each in her own way. Meg arranged the tea table, Jo brought wood and set chairs [...]. Beth trotted to and fro between parlor and kitchen, quiet and busy, while Amy gave directions to everyone, as she sat [in her mother’s lap] with her hands folded. (*LW*, 11)

Additionally, before their mother actually arrives, the girls’ conversation about all the things that they can buy for themselves with their own money to make up for a Christmas without presents shifts to the recognition that Marmee’s slippers “‘are quite worn out’” and that “‘Marmee must have a new pair’”, which leads to the decision that each of the girls will get

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<sup>18</sup> Meg’s future home is described in very similar terms, with its ‘simple furniture, plenty of books, a fine picture or two, [and] a stand of flowers in the bay window’ (*LW*, 323), suggestive of the power of Meg’s upbringing to influence how she continues into her adult life, repeating patterns effective for her in her parental home. The comfort and warmth attributed to these poor homes is reflective of Alcott’s 1852 description (1989:67) of her own family’s ‘poor little home [which] had much love and happiness in it’ in spite of its poverty.

<sup>19</sup> Beth is the only one who contributes to the discussion ‘contentedly’, quietly reminding her sisters of what they do have to be grateful for (*LW*, 3). Such selflessness is characteristic of Beth, who shows a maturity beyond her years and is labelled as an ‘angel in the house’ (*LW*, 320). See Section 2.4.4 for a more detailed discussion of Beth’s character.

Marmee something for Christmas, instead of buying things for themselves (*LW*, 8). Thus, even without yet being physically present in the home, Marmee brings about change for the better, inspiring the girls away from selfishness and self-pity, and towards service and empathy.

The selflessness and service brought about by the girls' thoughts of Marmee's imminent arrival are immediately embodied in Marmee's character when she finally makes her first appearance. She is described as 'a tall, *motherly* lady with a "can I help you" look about her which [is] truly delightful' (*LW*, 11; my emphasis).<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, her first thought upon returning home from 'her busy day' is for her children (*LW*, 11). Marmee's first words ring with motherly tenderness, as she immediately greets her daughters with concern for their wellbeing, noting that she is glad "to find [them] so merry", and making 'maternal inquiries' as to how her girls have "got on" while she has been at work (*LW*, 11). In spite of the fact that Marmee also acts as a provider for her family,<sup>21</sup> working outside of the home during the day, and thus has more responsibilities than most Victorian mothers of the middle class, to which the Marches (and the Alcotts) belong, she still foregrounds and even delights in her domestic responsibilities, seeing them as 'the happiest hour of her busy day' (*LW*, 11) – Alcott specifically chooses the superlative to express this sense. The parallel superlative is found in the description of the reciprocal love of the girls for their mother, whom they believe to 'the most splendid mother in the world' (*LW*, 11), echoing Alcott's words in a note to her mother, written in 1845, at the age of 12, about her own mother as "the best woman in the world" (Cheney, [1889] 2010:42).

Throughout the novel, Alcott's central mother figure is referred to mainly by her daughters' affectionate nickname for her, 'Marmee', and by the more formal title, 'Mother'. This seemingly small detail indicates that Marmee's identity as an individual is absorbed into the greater context

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<sup>20</sup> Most editions since the 1880 edition contain the description quoted above (Showalter, 1989:xxi). However, the original edition, reproduced in the 1989 Viking Penguin edition, edited by Showalter, shows that the original description was of a '*stout, motherly* lady' (Alcott, [1868-1869] 1989:7; my emphasis), who is explicitly painted in less elegant terms as follows: 'She *wasn't a particularly handsome person, but mothers are always lovely to their children*, and the girls thought the gray cloak and *unfashionable* bonnet covered the most splendid woman in the world' (my emphases). Showalter (1989:xxi) specifically points out this change in the 1880 wording as an example of the sentimentalisation of Alcott's text. Interestingly, the original description also resembles how Jo is described as 'not at all handsome' but with saving features that identify her as a mother in *Little Men* (1871) (*LM*, 4); see Section 2.4.2.

<sup>21</sup> Mrs March's becoming the breadwinner for her family reflects the circumstances of Alcott's own family: from 1839, when his experimental school in Boston failed, Alcott's father, Bronson, did not earn money regularly (Saxton, 1978:3), focusing instead on developing his transcendental philosophy, and leaving it to his wife, Abigail, to provide a living for the family; the family also depended on the charity of family friends such as Emerson. Alcott's sister, Anna ('Meg'), and Alcott herself ('Jo') also taught at various times to eke out the family income (Myerson & Shealy, 1989:xviii-xix). Alcott described her mother's diligence in her journals, stating in a journal entry in 1852 that Abba 'always did what came to her in the way of duty or charity, and let pride, taste, and comfort suffer for love's sake' (Alcott, 1989:67; also cited in Cheney, [1889] 2010:67).

of family, identifying her ‘principal task’ as that of mother (Strickland, 1985:11) and thus her central focus as the rearing and nurturing of her children. Even for the orphaned Laurie, living with his grandfather, Marmee is what he imagines an ideal mother figure to be – he tells Jo that Marmee’s “‘face [...] looks so sweet’” from what he can see from next door that he “‘can’t help watching it’” (LW, 65),<sup>22</sup> and he comes to identify Mrs March as “‘Madam Mother’” (LW, 216, 601), showing that her role and attributes as a mother have a more far-reaching impact than just on her immediate home and family. Mothering is not just something that she *does* but is the central manifestation of *who she is*. Poignant evidence of this is innocently given by Beth in the second chapter of the novel. Beth gives her mother new handkerchiefs for Christmas and marks them all by embroidering ‘Mother’ on them instead of ‘M. March’, as would be more conventional in marking property – Beth argues that “‘Meg’s initials are [also] M.M.’”, and Beth does not “‘want anyone to use these but Marmee’” (LW, 19). Meg’s pleased comment that “‘no one can ever mistake’” whose handkerchiefs these are now” and that the embroidered name “‘will please [Marmee] very much’” (LW, 19) confirms that no reader can ever mistake the fact that Marmee’s role as mother transcends everything else about her; indeed, her purpose in the novel is to be the embodiment of what it means to be a mother.

Marmee’s selflessness is not just exercised on behalf of her children. The “‘can I help you’ look about her’ (LW, 11) is also relevant to the way that she reaches beyond her domestic sphere to assist others in her community. On Christmas morning (a time traditionally spent with family), Marmee first sees to the needs of her daughters by leaving a simple gift under each of their pillows,<sup>23</sup> but she is nowhere to be found when the girls emerge from their bedrooms. When they ask Hannah where Marmee is, Hannah responds: “‘Goodness only knows. Some poor creeter came a-beggin’, and your ma went straight off to see what was needed. There never was such a woman for givin’ away vittles and drink, clothes and firin’ [...]’” (LW, 18).<sup>24</sup> The word ‘goodness’ here is a play on words, suggesting that Marmee’s inherent goodness is what dictates her whereabouts at all times, be it with her family or with others who are in need of nurturing,

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<sup>22</sup> This reflects the sentimentalist ‘Cult of Domesticity’ or the idealisation of the home itself, as explored by Strickland (1985:8-10).

<sup>23</sup> I elaborate on this gift and its significance later in this section.

<sup>24</sup> Strickland (1985:150) points out that although Alcott depicted such acts of charity in her fiction, ‘she elsewhere made clear her belief that charity was of little use to the poor and might even be harmful’. Rather, Alcott ‘contributed [...] most of her money [...] to the Alcott family, for it seems she believed that charity both begins and ends at home’ (Strickland, 1985:76). Alcott does, however, mention acts undertaken by her parents of what she called ‘practical Christianity’ in her journal (1989:67): ‘Our poor little home [...] was a shelter for lost girls, abused wives, friendless children, and weak or wicked men. Father and Mother had no money to give, but gave them time, sympathy, help, and if blessings would make them rich, they would be millionaires.’

both in her paid social work and in her private charitable acts.<sup>25</sup> Such a revelation foregrounds the importance of (Christian) charity as part of Alcott's shaping in *Little Women* (1868-1869) of the ideal mother figure; it is an extension of the nurturing implied by mothering, particularly as the imperative of charitable service is passed on to Marmee's daughters.<sup>26</sup>

When Marmee returns from assisting the destitute Hummel family, she invites Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy to participate in this far-reaching mothering, asking them if they will give their own "breakfast as a Christmas present" to the poorer family (*LW*, 20). The girls participate practically in this mothering by ministering to these German immigrant children, feeding them quite literally 'like so many hungry birds', and they witness how their mother provides mothering to other children and even to another mother as she serves Mrs Hummel, giving her 'tea and gruel, and comfort[ing] her with promises of help, while she dress[es] the little baby as tenderly as if it [is] her own' (*LW*, 21).<sup>27</sup> The sheer reach of Marmee's universal mothering in her community is also suggested in the second part of the novel where it is the brief interruption in or absence of her communal endeavours when she is preparing for Meg's wedding to Mr Brooke that marks the effect of Marmee's constant work, as 'the hospitals and homes still full of wounded "boys" and soldiers' widows [...] decidedly miss the *motherly* missionary's visits' (*LW*, 319; my emphasis).<sup>28</sup>

Marmee is no less caring to those closer to home (and who are, in material terms, wealthier than

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<sup>25</sup> Marmee's work, like that of Alcott's mother, involves an early form of paid social work, assisting those even poorer than herself (Stern, 1996:60-61). Regarding the March family's poverty, Strickland (1985:153) notes:

[...] when [Alcott] spoke of poverty in her stories – as she often did – [...] s]he liked to tell her readers that poverty strengthens families and ennobles character, a comforting thought that is plausible only if one remembers that for Alcott poor families usually meant those of modest circumstances, not those who were utterly destitute. Although the March girls complain frequently of their poverty, the fact is that the family can afford a housekeeper and they are able to fill their stomachs and dress decently if not fashionably.

Marmee thus recognises that there are still others in her society who are worse off than the Marches are and who could be blessed by some of what the Marches have.

<sup>26</sup> In the 'Preface' to Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1855), Fuller's brother, Arthur B. Fuller (1855:n.p.) resists the view, commonly held in the first half of the nineteenth century, that 'women [...] who are active and earnest in promoting great intellectual, philanthropic, or religious movements, must of necessity neglect the domestic concerns of life'. He explains:

It may be that this is sometimes so, nor can such neglect be too severely reprehended; yet this is by no means a necessary result. Some of the most devoted mothers the world has ever known, and whose homes were the abode of every domestic virtue, themselves the embodiment of all these, have been women [...] who [...] were active in philanthropic and diffusive efforts for the welfare of the race. (A.B. Fuller, 1855:n.p.)

Marmee is clearly one of the latter women.

<sup>27</sup> Marmee's universal mothering links to the community of mother figures explored in Montgomery's *Anne* series (1908-1939); see Sections 4.2 and 4.3.

<sup>28</sup> As already indicated, Anna married John Pratt in 1860, before the start of the war (Myerson & Shealy, 1989:xx, 99; Stern, 1996:96-97), but Alcott chose to transpose the event (and rewrite the smooth courtship to introduce more romantic difficulties), allowing for more dramatic characterisation.

the March family, but in whose home motherly love is absent): their neighbours, Mr Laurence and his grandson, Theodore, known affectionately to the March women as Teddy or Laurie. As mentioned above, the motherless Laurie quickly becomes like a son to Marmee (and eventually her son-in-law). The wealthy Mr Laurence in turn recognises Marmee's wholesome influence and thus accepts her freely as an authority on matters of childrearing. He is shown deferring to her expertise when he tells Mr Brooke: "The good lady next door says [Laurie] is studying too hard and needs young society, amusement, and exercise. I suspect she is right [...]" (LW, 79).

Marmee's influence on Laurie proves similar to her transformational influence on her daughters (as explored in Section 2.4). When Laurie is concerned at one point in the novel that he will not "have done something to be proud of" by the time he is in his twenties, because he is "such a lazy dog" and is afraid he will "dawdle" (LW, 196), he receives a burst of conviction and 'sudden energy' when Jo reports: "You need a motive, *Mother says*, and when you get it, she is sure you'll work splendidly" (LW, 196; my emphasis). This encouragement inspires Laurie with clearly renewed faith in his own ability because of the faith of the woman he idolises as a mother: "Is she? By Jupiter, I will, if I only get the chance!" (LW, 196). This reflects the view of Emerson (1855:n.p., quoted in James, 2015:45) of women as "the civilizers of mankind".<sup>29</sup> Later, when the young adult Laurie pursues his studies at university but returns home periodically to visit, Marmee's role as part of his 'talisman against evil'<sup>30</sup> as 'the motherly friend who watch[es] over him as if he [is] her son' (LW, 321) is subtly revealed:

"Here I am, Mother! Yes, it's all right."

The last words were in answer to the look the elder lady gave him, a kindly questioning look which the handsome eyes met so frankly that the little ceremony closed, as usual, with a motherly kiss.' (LW, 327)

The fact that the 'little ceremony' closes 'as usual' indicates that it is something that occurs every time the two see each other after an extended separation. It also hints that Marmee has communicated to Laurie her motherly expectations of him, and the fact that he meets her eyes 'frankly' suggests that he can be completely open and honest with her, because his conscience is clear, and he is clearly doing his best to meet her expectations.

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<sup>29</sup> Cogan (1989:88-89) asserts, in her exploration of Real Womanhood: 'Most [...] writers of didactic intent [...] would agree that the woman's influence in the home on the moral development of the men around her – or potential men, in the form of sons – was enormous.' Alcott sustains the notion of a female civilizing force in *Rose in Bloom* (1876) and in *An Old-Fashioned Girl* (1870).

<sup>30</sup> The other parts of Laurie's talisman are 'the memory of the kind old man', his grandfather, who is 'bound up in his success [...] and [...] the knowledge that [the] four innocent [March] girls lov[e], admir[e], and believ[e]' in Laurie 'with all their hearts' (LW, 321). Meg and Jo both also use their mother as a talisman against their personal weaknesses; see Sections 2.4.1 and 2.4.2.

Alcott strengthens Marmee's iconic status by connecting her with images of godly light and warmth repeatedly throughout the novel. The very first time she is introduced, her influence is associated with images of amplified light, where the dimness of 'twilight' and the merely crackling (*LW*, 7) fire seen before the 'clock str[ikes] six' to signal her imminent arrival transform to stronger images of light in the light of 'the lamp' and 'the blaze' of the fire as her arrival draws nearer (*LW*, 8).<sup>31</sup> Later, as shown in the epigraph to the chapter, when Meg and Jo, who are caught in the darkest despair of watching young Beth fade quickly as a result of scarlet fever, hear that their mother is finally on her way home from taking care of their father, who has fallen ill while serving as a chaplain in the Union army,<sup>32</sup> the news transforms their despair to 'watching, waiting, hoping, and trusting in *God and Mother*' (*LW*, 254; my emphasis). This use of zeugma, placing Marmee on the same level as God in their perceived ability to provide light, hope, healing and renewal, is a powerful indication of the strength and influence wielded by the traditional mother figure and of the sacred nature and far-reaching impact of a mother's role.

Just as Marmee's presence is associated with light and warmth, her absence is explicitly connected with disaster and with darkness. The moment when Marmee leaves for Washington to care for her sick husband, Jo notes that Marmee's absence makes Jo feel "as if there ha[s] been an earthquake", not just a storm, and Meg confirms that it "seems as if half the house [is] gone" (*LW*, 229). Indeed, Marmee's extended absence brings terrible darkness for the March daughters, because Beth becomes severely ill as a direct result of this absence.<sup>33</sup> The relief brought by Marmee's return is again reflected in imagery of light:

[...] something better than sunshine brightened the quiet rooms. [...]. The fires seemed to burn with unusual cheeriness [...]. (*LW*, 254)

Never had the sun risen so beautifully, and never had the world seemed so lovely as it did to the heavy eyes of Meg and Jo, as they looked out in the early morning, when their long, sad vigil was done. "It looks like a fairy world," said Meg, smiling to herself, as she stood behind the curtain, watching the dazzling sight. "Hark!" cried Jo, starting to her feet. Yes, there was a sound of bells at the door below, a cry from Hannah, and then Laurie's

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<sup>31</sup> The striking of the clock is used again later, when Meg and Jo eagerly await the arrival of their mother to assist with nursing the very ill Beth, as the first sign of the coming light of Marmee's arrival, as 'every time the clock str[ikes], the sisters [...] loo[k] at each other with *brightening* eyes, for each hour br[ings] help nearer' (*LW*, 254; my emphasis).

<sup>32</sup> The background of the Civil War (1861-1865) to Alcott's novel made it very contemporary for the original readers. One fact of her own experience that Alcott alters in the fictionalised version of her family is that it was she herself who went to serve as a nurse in the war in a Georgetown hospital in 1862-1863 before becoming too ill to continue her work (Stern, 1996:115-127); her father did not serve as a chaplain. Alcott captured some of her experiences as a nurse in *Hospital Sketches* (1863).

<sup>33</sup> Beth assumes her mother's responsibility to take care of the poor and now sick Hummel family and subsequently falls ill herself with scarlet fever. This would probably not have happened with Marmee at home – Marmee would probably be caring for the Hummels herself and would have prevented Beth's exposure to the illness from holding the dead baby (*LW*, 239-240).

voice saying in a joyful whisper, “Girls, she’s come! She’s come!” (*LW*, 256-257)

These dramatic changes in mood reflect Alcott’s intentional depiction of the quasi-divine power this mother figure has, and her association with the holy and sacred is pointed to more directly with the description of the ‘Sabbath stillness’ (*LW*, 269) that follows her arrival – this stillness is attributable to the peace and security that Marmee’s presence brings, as it enables the rest of the household to feel ‘quiet and reposeful’ for the first time since the beginning of Beth’s illness (*LW*, 269).<sup>34</sup>

Marmee’s consistent influence is felt in every aspect of her daughters’ lives, framing their individual and collective adventures. An example of how she frames the day-to-day lives of the girls is given when the narrator describes Marmee’s voice as the ‘first sound’ the girls hear ‘in the morning’, as Marmee goes ‘about the house singing like a lark, and the last sound’ the girls hear ‘at night’ (*LW*, 16).<sup>35</sup> Further evidence of her constant and abiding influence is seen in the fact that when any of them leave the house, they always look ‘back before turning the corner, for their mother [is] *always* at the window to nod and smile, and wave her hand to them’ (*LW*, 48; my emphasis). The idea that the girls perceive Marmee as *always* there is important, because the narrator makes a point of mentioning how busy Marmee is in working for her family and her community, suggesting that Marmee makes a concerted effort to put individual connection with her daughters first and foremost in her responsibilities, regardless of how busy she is.

Such steadiness is even apparent when Marmee must leave her daughters to care for their father. The narrator explains: ‘They tried to be calm, poor things, as their mother sat up, looking pale *but steady*, and put away her grief to think and plan for them’ (*LW*, 218; my emphasis). Thus, even in the crisis of the possibility of Mr March’s dying, which is equally, if not more devastating to Marmee than to her daughters, she is ‘steady’ and constant for them, always putting their needs above her own. Her care for them even continues unseen by them, as she watches over them that night:

The clocks were striking midnight and the rooms were very still as a figure glided quietly from bed to bed, smoothing a coverlet here, settling a pillow there, and pausing to look long and tenderly at each unconscious face, to kiss each with lips that mutely blessed, and to pray the fervent prayers which only mothers utter. (*LW*, 226)

And when the girls return inside after waving goodbye to their mother the next morning, they

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<sup>34</sup> The narrator also uses seafaring metaphors to describe first how Marmee’s daughters feel “‘all at sea’” without their mother, because there “‘doesn’t seem to be anything to hold on to’” when she is absent (*LW*, 244), and later how Meg and Jo feel ‘a blissful sense of burdens lifted off’ and are able to close ‘their weary eyes, and [lie] at rest, like storm-beaten boats safe at anchor in a quiet harbor’ after Marmee returns home (*LW*, 269).

<sup>35</sup> Beth is described in similar terms later on in the novel. See Section 2.4.4 for an exploration of the significance of this and other similarities that she shares with her mother.

see material evidence of her reliably putting their needs above her own:

Beth opened her lips to say something, but could only point to the pile of nicely mended hose which lay on Mother's table, showing that even in her last hurried moments she had thought and worked for them. It was a little thing, but it went straight to their hearts, and in spite of their brave resolutions, they all broke down and cried bitterly. (*LW*, 229)

Such acts of love and service, selflessly exercised for the benefit of her daughters, inspire each of them to try to be a little more like Marmee.

Although it is tempting to see Marmee as omnipotent and perfect, this is an oversimplification of her character, as Alcott makes clear. In a tender encounter with Jo regarding how to manage her temper, Marmee tells Jo that her greatest inspiration for managing her own propensity to anger is her duty as a mother (implying reciprocal effects of mothering as well as a chosen vocation to help her daughters grow), recalling how her husband once counselled her to “try to practice all the virtues [Marmee] would have [her] little girls possess, for [Marmee is] their example” (*LW*, 111).<sup>36</sup> This powerful moment reveals that, although Marmee appears to have mastered the art of controlling her own imperfections, she has been and still is subject to weakness and temptation just as her daughters are. Marmee's imperfections are also seen in a few other places in the text. At one point, Marmee expresses impatience with her daughters while she is writing an urgent letter: “Girls, girls, do be quiet one minute! I must get this off by the early mail, and you drive me distracted with your worry,” cried Mrs. March, crossing out the third spoiled sentence in her letter’ (*LW*, 48). On another occasion, the very busy mother forgets to provide the specific umbrella that Meg asks her for: “I told Mother black with a white handle, but she forgot and bought a green one with a yellowish handle” (*LW*, 113). Additionally, a surprising aside is given near the end of the novel: when Marmee is already a grandmother and Beth has been dead for a time, it is revealed that Marmee watches over Meg's daughter, Daisy, ‘with untiring devotion, as if trying to atone for some past mistake, which no eye but [Marmee's] own [can] see’ (*LW*, 609), suggesting that Marmee harbours regrets about her relationship with her daughter, Beth, of whom Daisy reminds her.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Mr March's counsel suggests that their marriage embodies what Margaret Fuller (1855:59) explored and Alcott embraced, as the ideal of companionate marriage, a progressive idea for its time: ‘The [...] highest grade of marriage union is the religious, which may be expressed as pilgrimage toward a common shrine. This includes [...] home sympathies and household wisdom, for these pilgrims must know how to assist each other along the dusty way’. Fuller (1855:145) believed that ‘the very fault of marriage, and of the [...] relation between the sexes’ in her time was that ‘the woman does belong to the man, instead of forming a whole with him’ – Marmee and Mr March parent with the aim of creating a whole out of their equal contributions (when Mr March is present or mentioned in the novel, which is admittedly not very often). Strickland (1985:102-120) explores Alcott's sentiments toward and portrayals of companionate marriage in great detail, as does James (2015:30, 59-68, 97-112).

<sup>37</sup> More about Marmee's human imperfections is discussed in Section 2.3 when dealing with how Marmee teaches by example.

Alcott's realism, highly progressive in children's literature at the time, is reflected in her openly showing Marmee's lack of perfection and therefore Marmee's humanity, which allows her daughters to relate to her easily. The fact that Marmee is someone the girls can identify with, because she shares her own experiences and tells them about her own mistakes and flaws, is a crucial point to understand, because it forms the foundation of her approach – radical for its time – to educating her daughters, which is to teach from her own experience and through her own example in a way that is tailored to be relevant to and to suit the individual needs of each child, reflecting Bronson Alcott's philosophy that “teaching [should be] adapted to the needs of individual pupils” (McCuskey, 1940:145, quoted in Kerns, 2009:66). By unpacking and demonstrating this approach, Alcott humanises what otherwise might be a lifeless icon in Marmee to suggest an attainable outcome in the pursuit of motherhood.

The fact that Marmee's role as a mother transcends her imperfections is attributed to her explicit position as fulfilling an overtly religious (but non-denominational) mandate by acting as a guide whose primary mothering strategy is to connect her children to the spiritual and selflessly to direct them to God as their fundamental and eternal parenting influence – in line with the sentimental role of women in the nineteenth century as stewards over their family's religious or spiritual wellbeing (Strickland, 1985:5-6).<sup>38</sup> Marmee reminds the girls early in the novel of their old habit of playing “Pilgrim's Progress” (LW, 14) and encourages them to “begin again, not in play, but in earnest” to progress towards “the peace which is a true Celestial City” (LW, 15). When Jo then asks what is to be done about their having a “roll of directions, like Christian” has in *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), Marmee tells them that they will find their “guidebook” under their pillows on “Christmas morning” (LW, 15). Indeed, Marmee provides each of her daughters with ‘the beautiful old story of the best life ever lived [: ...] a true guidebook for any pilgrim going on a long journey’ as the only gift each girl gets on Christmas morning,<sup>39</sup> ‘with a few words written by their mother, which [make] their one present very precious in their eyes’ (LW, 17). The novel repeatedly confirms the success of Marmee's direction of her children to God. One example is that when the first ‘shadow of a real trouble’ comes into the lives of the March daughters in the form of their father's illness, ‘the little

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<sup>38</sup> Strickland (1985:5-6) points out the following as part of ‘the cultural context within which Alcott came of age’: Religion, which had been disestablished in the public sphere during the upheavals of the eighteenth century, [... was in the sentimental revolution of the nineteenth century] reestablished in the private sphere of the family and placed in the keeping of women [... who were thus] perceived [...] as [...] the very institution upon which [society] counted for moral redemption.

<sup>39</sup> Since the book is not named, it is uncertain whether this is a personal copy of *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), as Showalter (1989:xvii) insists, or of the New Testament, as suggested by its presenting ‘the best life ever lived’, a superlative which does not fully apply to Bunyan's Christian on his arduous journey but which may more logically apply to Christ (Noomé, 2021:pers. comm.).

[guide]books' Marmee gives them at the start of the novel prove to be 'full of help and comfort' (*LW*, 227), as they anticipate being without their mother for a time while she goes to Washington to nurse their father. Thus, Marmee directs her daughters away from lamentations about material gifts and draws their focus instead to the eternally accessible gifts of the spirit.

Jo points out that Marmee performs the allegorical role of "“Help”" in the real life journey each girl is on (*LW*, 15), which is seen repeatedly as Marmee teaches her daughters in various ways the lesson she gives Jo (when Marmee is trying to help Jo to overcome her weakness of not controlling her temper)<sup>40</sup> in the following excerpt, from the discussion between Jo and her mother already mentioned above:

“If I don’t seem to need help, it is because I have a better friend, even than Father, to comfort and sustain me. My child, the troubles and temptations of your life are beginning and may be many, but you can overcome and outlive them all if you learn to feel the strength and tenderness of your Heavenly Father [...]. The more you love and trust Him, the nearer you will feel to Him, and the less you will depend on human power and wisdom. His love and care never tire or change, can never be taken from you, but may become the source of lifelong peace, happiness, and strength. Believe this heartily, and go to God with all your little cares, and hopes, and sins, and sorrows, as freely and confidingly as you come to your mother.”<sup>41</sup> (*LW*, 110)

Marmee’s ability to teach her daughters to rely on a more constant source of comfort than herself is further depicted beautifully through the repeated imagery of the mother’s hand working to lead her children to the hand of God.<sup>42</sup> The narrator comments that Jo is ‘led by her mother’s hand [...] nearer to the Friend who always welcomes every child with a love [...] tenderer than that of any mother’ (*LW*, 110; my emphasis).<sup>43</sup> Much later, Marmee has the sad privilege to more literally lead a child to God, as ‘Beth, who, like a tired but trustful child, [clings] to *the hands that led her all her life*, as Father and Mother [guide] her tenderly through the Valley of the Shadow, and [give] her up to God’ (*LW*, 553; my emphasis). It is clear that Marmee

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<sup>40</sup> This incident is looked at in more detail in Section 2.4.2 in the context of my discussion of Marmee’s specific mothering approach with Jo.

<sup>41</sup> Marmee’s encouragement that her daughters have free and open communication with God is reminiscent of the freedom with which Alcott’s father, Bronson Alcott, referred to spirituality and religion within his home and outside of it in his philosophical and educational pursuits. Kerns (2009:46) points out that Bronson’s ‘unconventional approach to religion [...] seen in] the act of questioning or simply looking critically at doctrines [...] was a step too far for most of Alcott’s contemporary Bostonians’. In fact, Bronson’s open, personalised sense of religion was a factor that led to the failure of his school, because all of his ‘talk of the children’s Spirits and the like made the parents and the area religious leaders nervous’ (Kerns, 2009:46).

<sup>42</sup> The overt didacticism and pious stance that are apparent in *Little Women* (1868-1869) can be attributed both to the period and to Alcott’s own devout upbringing. These characteristics have fallen out of favour with many modern critics as evidenced by the elision of these (particularly the religious) elements in modern adaptations of the novel for film – see, for example, the 2019 film, *Little Women* (Starr, 2019:n.p.).

<sup>43</sup> The girls do seem to learn this from their mother; however, it is evidently an ongoing struggle for them, much as it was for Alcott herself, who expressed in her journal at the age of seventeen (1989:62): ‘I know God is always ready to hear, but heaven is so far away in the city, and I so heavy I can’t fly up to find him.’

attributes her own perceived idealness to God, giving her daughters powerful evidence for the success of the guiding principles she gives them, with the outcome that they revere her and aspire to be like her.

Marmee experiences her own ‘dreary night’ after hearing of her husband’s illness (*LW*, 226), and she has no physical mother to help her through it in the way that she helps her daughters through their hardships. Alcott, however, points to a divine force with similar gentle caring attributes to those of a loving mother (or father) watching over Marmee: as Marmee looks out of a window after checking on her sleeping daughters, she experiences comfort that springs from an undefined source; the moon breaks out from ‘behind the clouds’ to shine upon her, and a simile compares its light to a ‘bright, benignant face’ which seems to speak to Marmee in a voice very similar to that which the reader has come to expect from Marmee herself (*LW*, 226). The voice gently encourages Marmee to be comforted and reminds her of the perpetual promise of light that can break through any darkness (*LW*, 226), which comes from the influence of God, or Marmee’s “‘better friend’”, even than her husband, who comforts and sustains her (*LW*, 110). Alcott thus suggests that the light that Marmee freely imparts to those around her does not simply come from within her but originates from the self-same heavenly ‘Friend’ (*LW*, 110) to whom she directs her daughters. The fact that Marmee here seems able to access that light to give her the comfort and light that she needs for herself strengthens the purpose of her focus on teaching her daughters to rely on the source of light that transcends even what the best mother can offer. This incidentally elevates Marmee as a human mother doing God’s work, as she is humble enough to direct her daughters to a more eternal and reliable foundation than herself, perpetuating her mothering influence far beyond what she can mortally reach. The transcendent nature of what she teaches her daughters locates the lessons in an eternal space, where these principles remain accessible even after Marmee is gone, just as Marmee can access this source of light herself, without the presence of her own mother, when she faces her own crisis.

Even as Marmee teaches her children to rely on a more eternal source of parenting and consistency than herself, her mothering influence reaches far beyond simply raising four little girls into little women in the idealised domestic sphere in that it persists well after the girls leave home as young women and as adults. This is seen in instances such as the one in which counsel given by Marmee in the past provides help to Meg in dealing with little trials in her marriage, as the ‘words [come] back to Meg’ when Marmee is not there (*LW*:373).<sup>44</sup> Marmee also sends care packages (*LW*, 456) and presumably corresponds diligently with young adults Jo and Amy

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<sup>44</sup> More of Marmee’s counsel for Meg as a young wife is explored briefly in Section 2.4.1.

(when Jo goes to work in New York for a time and Amy travels Europe): both girls write regularly to their mother, confessing their follies and keeping her abreast of everything that occurs in each of their lives. Beth, as an invalidish young adult, remains in the home and thus continues to receive the direct influence of her mother. Later, after Beth's passing away, the adult Jo, hardest hit by the tragedy besides her mother, finds that her burden seems 'easier to bear, duty [grows] sweeter, and life [looks] more endurable, seen from the safe shelter of her mother's arms' (*LW*, 571). Thus, whether Marmee's daughter are near or far from her, the fruits of Marmee's counsel, guidance and even of the mere thought of her presence in the lives of her children are always immediate and bountiful.<sup>45</sup>

In *Jo's Boys* (1886), the second sequel to *Little Women* (1868-1869), which takes place many years after the conclusion of *Little Women* (1868-1869), the narrator describes a portrait of Marmee 'in the summer-parlour' at Mount Parnassus (*JB*, 21), the adult Amy and Laurie's home:

In the place of honour, with the sunshine warm upon it, and a green garland always round it, was Marmee's beloved face, painted with grateful skill by a great artist whom she had befriended when poor and unknown. So beautifully lifelike was it that it seemed to smile down upon her daughters, saying cheerfully:

"Be happy; I am with you still." (*JB*, 22)

Evidently, even Marmee's memory is associated with 'sunshine', warmth, and life (shown in the 'green garland' that is 'always around' the picture). Her continued influence is tied not just to the painting but to the power of the 'sweet memory' that she leaves 'behind her', which acts perpetually as 'both an inspiration and a comforter to all the household' (*JB*, 22), which is the same influence that Marmee has in life. Her influence also continues to draw her daughters 'closer to one another', and it still inspires Laurie – highlighting the broad reach of her mothering – as he notes that he owes the best he has to their 'dear saint' of a mother, instinctively including himself as her child with the possessive 'our' in referring to her as 'our mother' (*JB*, 23).

Finally, Marmee's influence continues to be transformational through her mothering harvest, as while the adults gaze at the portrait, Marmee's granddaughter, Beth, known as Bess (the daughter of Amy and Laurie), begins 'to sing [...] the air Marmee used to sing' (*JB*, 23). This connects to Marmee's singing a 'familiar lullaby' both morning and night while her daughters

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<sup>45</sup> An example of this is that Jo's first true writing success comes only after Marmee encourages her to take up writing again after Beth's death (*LW*, 574) to find a new purpose. The result is immediate and surpasses Jo's wildest expectations (*LW*, 575).

are growing up (mentioned previously) that ‘the girls never [grow] too old for’ (LW, 16). When they hear Bess’s rendition of Marmee’s air so many years after their youth, it leads ‘the [adult] listeners back into the world again from [their] momentary reaching after the loved and lost’ (JB, 23), thus snapping them away from any potentially melancholy thoughts and back to the business of reality, echoing Marmee’s influence on them throughout their lives in bringing them back to positive thoughts and constructive living. Indeed, they never do grow too old to be mothered by Marmee, as the relevance of her influence simply does not go out of date.

### 2.3 Idealised mothering in action

The power of Marmee’s role in her daughters’ lives is made clearer by understanding how Alcott’s construction of her reflects Bronson Alcott’s ‘agreement with Pestalozzi’s idea that the mother is the child’s first – and often best – teacher’ (Kerns, 2009:61). Indeed, Marmee’s approach to mothering is consistently didactic, as shown from the earliest pages of the novel, and it works effectively because of the nuances of her approach, such as her focus on her children as individuals and her desire to share the bond of common experience with them.

When Marmee lays out her daughters’ mission for the first part of the novel, which is to begin playing at “‘Pilgrim’s Progress’” again, “‘not in play, but in earnest’” (LW, 15), she explains:

“[...] it is a play we are playing all the time in one way or another. Our burdens are here, our road is before us, and the longing for goodness and happiness is the guide that leads us through many troubles and mistakes to the peace which is a true Celestial City. [...]” (LW, 15)

This is the first indication of Marmee’s mothering through unifying experience. Marmee’s use of the pronouns ‘we’ and ‘our’ suggest a sense of community and shared burdens. This points to Fuller’s (1855:114) conclusion that ‘at present, women are the best helpers of one another’ and also highlights the observation made by Strickland (1985:128) that the ‘secret of Marmee’s influence over her daughters is that she practices what she preaches’. This is most clear in how the lessons often include her sharing how she overcomes a similar struggle or weakness, either recently or in the past, notably when she counsels Jo in controlling her temper (LW, 105-111), as already mentioned, and when she counsels Meg about her marriage and as a young mother (LW, 371, 514-519; see also Section 2.4.1). Marmee never pretends to be anything more than is practically attainable for her daughters through following her own lived example. She goes further than to perform the allegorical role, from *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), of “‘Help’” (LW, 15) in committing to better herself along with her daughters, leading by example, as together they try not to “‘grumble but shoulder [their] bundles and trudge along [...]”

cheerfully” (LW, 46). (The oxymoron of trudging cheerfully acknowledges that this remains a challenge and that success cannot be taken for granted.)

A crucial part of what Strickland (1985:128) terms ‘the secret of Marmee’s influence over her daughters’ is that ‘her intimacy with them is marred by no secrets’. Indeed, Marmee is careful to ensure that her daughters are well aware of her expectations of them, and her communication with them is consistently completely open and honest. An eminent example of this is Marmee’s response when Meg’s ‘faith in her mother [is] a little shaken by the worldly plans attributed to [Marmee] by Mrs. Moffat’, whom Meg overhears at a party gossiping about how “‘Mrs. [March] has made her plans [...] and will play her cards well’” in supposedly setting Meg up to someday marry the wealthy Laurie (LW, 118-119). Meg’s complete confidence in being able to go to her mother about anything is not shaken by this incident, however, and she is able to question a parent about her intentions. Here again, one sees Alcott’s progressive educational thinking, reflective of her father’s philosophies about children’s role in their own learning through engaging with ‘their own understanding of the world around them’ (Kerns, 2009:37). This gives Marmee an opportunity to rectify the situation and dismiss the “‘foolish gossip [...] full of vulgar ideas about young people’” (LW, 131) at once.

Marmee is ‘ill pleased that such ideas should be put into Meg’s innocent mind’ (LW, 130) and does not hesitate to clarify her true position, openly revealing the following to her two oldest daughters:

“Yes, my dear, I have a great many [plans], all mothers do, but mine differ somewhat from Mrs. Moffat’s, I suspect. [...].

“I want my daughters to be beautiful, accomplished, and good. To be admired, loved, and respected. To have a happy youth, to be well and wisely married, and to lead useful, pleasant lives, with as little care and sorrow to try them as God sees fit to send. [...]. My dear girls, I am ambitious for you, but not to have you make a dash in the world, marry rich men merely because they are rich, or have splendid houses, which are not homes because love is wanting. Money is a needful and precious thing, and when well used, a noble thing, but I never want you to think it is the first or only prize to strive for. I’d rather see you poor men’s wives, if you were happy, beloved, contented, than queens on thrones, without self-respect and peace.”

[...] “Better be happy old maids than unhappy wives, or unmaidenly girls, running about to find husbands,” [...]. “Leave these things to time. Make this home happy, so that you may be fit for homes of your own, if they are offered you, and contented here if they are not. [...].” (LW, 132-133)

For the nineteenth century, her response is radical – through Marmee, Alcott advocates for openness and free communication between the mother and her daughters, particularly about sensitive matters such as those of the heart. Marmee reiterates to Meg and Jo that they should

recall that they can always come openly to her with their worries, as “‘Mother is always ready to be [their] confidant’” (*LW*, 133), much as Abigail Alcott was always ready to listen to Alcott’s ‘troubles’ (Alcott, 1989:62).

Moreover, Marmee’s anti-materialist stance allows for the possibility of female agency and independence outside of but also within marriage, in line with Fuller’s (1855:144-145) ideals:

I wish Woman to live, *first* for God’s sake. Then she will not make an imperfect man her god, and thus sink to idolatry. Then she will not take what is not fit for her from a sense of weakness and poverty. Then, if she finds what she needs in Man embodied, she will know how to love, and be worthy of being loved.

[...]. That her hand may be given with dignity, she must be able to stand alone. (Fuller’s emphasis)

Indeed, as James (2015:94) points out, ‘[t]he order of Marmee’s wishes for her daughters [as quoted above] is important, as it reveals that her primary wish is for them to be beautiful, accomplished, and good [...] implying that she sees their future roles as extending beyond those of wife and mother’.

Marmee is willing to speak so openly with her daughters in spite of their youth because she trusts in the security that comes from their being educated, even on such sensitive matters, by the “‘lips’” of a mother, which “‘are the fittest to speak of such things’” (*LW*, 132).<sup>46</sup> Her open approach even extends further to her inviting her daughters’ participation in their own learning and future, encouraging them to “‘listen to [her] ‘plans’ and help [her] carry them out, *if they are good*’” (*LW*, 132; my emphasis), or to “‘act upon’” her counsel “‘*if it seems good*’” (*LW*, 519; my emphasis).<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the fruits of Marmee’s simple but difficult-to-realise plan for her daughters prove to be many, and as Marmee basks in the fruits of her mothering years later, she confirms this by exclaiming ‘with face and voice full of motherly love, gratitude, and humility’: “‘Oh, my girls, however long you may live, I never can wish you a greater happiness than this!’”

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<sup>46</sup> The gossip that Marmee denounces comes from a woman who is also a mother, but a more materialistic one than Marmee. Much later, when Marmee agrees that Jo should do what she can to deflect Laurie’s developing infatuation, Marmee shows great generosity of spirit towards Mrs Moffat, in spite of their differing viewpoints, when Jo jokingly brings up this old gossip: “‘Ah, Jo, mothers may differ in their management, but the hope is the same in all—the desire to see their children happy’” (*LW*, 440).

<sup>47</sup> These caveats can be connected to the Biblical assertion that false prophets are easily discernible, because ‘by their fruits you shall know them’ (Matthew 7:20), which invites the reader, along with Marmee’s daughters, to find and recognise Marmee’s harvest of happiness for her children, particularly when compared with the harvest of ‘false prophets’ like Mrs Moffat. Meg’s good friend, Sallie Gardiner, eventually marries Ned Moffat and is a foil for Meg, as it becomes evident that all the Moffat wealth (which Meg longs after as a young woman; see Section 2.4.1) cannot produce the fruits of a true home:

Home [at Meg and John’s little ‘Dovecote’] grew homelike [...]. Even Sallie Moffatt liked to go there. “‘It is always so quiet and pleasant here, it does me good, Meg,” she used to say, looking about her with wistful eyes, as if trying to discover the charm, that she might use it in her great house, full of splendid loneliness, for there were no riotous, sunny-faced babies there, and Ned lived in a world of his own, where there was no place for her. (*LW*, 528)

(*LW*, 647). These words are powerful, because they both acknowledge the success of Marmee's mothering and reiterate the invitation that her daughters choose to follow in her footsteps so that they too may receive the good fruits that are both gratefully reaped and confidently promised by their mother.

Marmee knows how best to inspire and motivate her daughters to action.<sup>48</sup> Her methods reflect the revolutionary teaching methods that Alcott's father, Bronson Alcott, believed in with his advocacy for the 'abandonment of mundane teaching practices in favor of creative practices' (Kerns, 2009:60). Marmee repeatedly uses a storytelling approach to educate and direct her daughters, beginning with her challenge to play at 'Pilgrim's Progress' (*LW*, 14-15). The familiarity of the story, with the 'great evocative power' of 'a purposeful journey through life' (Sharrock, 1965:25), offers a safe space for her daughters to personalise their challenges.<sup>49</sup> Jo is 'delighted with the fancy' of Marmee's creative suggested approach to bettering themselves – a method which lends 'a little romance to the very dull task of [Jo's] doing her duty' (*LW*, 16).

Other stories extend this style of teaching – for example, Marmee and her daughters sit 'sewing together' one evening and sharing stories about their "'dismal day'" (*LW*, 55). After listening to her daughters' varied tales of dissatisfaction and woe (Beth's is different in that it is a heart-warming recollection of observed generosity), Marmee contributes her own tale:

"As I sat cutting out blue flannel jackets today at the rooms, I felt very anxious about Father, and thought how lonely and helpless we should be, if anything happened to him. It was not a wise thing to do, but I kept on worrying till an old man came in with an order for some clothes. He sat down near me, and I began to talk to him, for he looked poor and tired and anxious.

"'Have you sons in the army?' I asked [...]."

"'Yes, ma'am. I had four, but two were killed, one is a prisoner, and I'm going to the other, who is very sick in a Washington hospital.' he answered quietly."

[...]

"He spoke so cheerfully, looked so sincere, and seemed so glad to give his all, that I was ashamed of myself. [...] I felt so rich, so happy thinking of my blessings, that I [...] thanked him heartily for the lesson he had taught me." (*LW*, 58-59)

Beginning her story with a description of her own melancholy state at the start of her day invites

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<sup>48</sup> This contrasts with Marilla's early mothering of Anne in *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), because before she knows Anne very well, Marilla's approach to mothering is based completely on imposing ideals and morals on situations rather than tailoring her approach to best fit Anne's needs. See Section 3.3 for an extensive discussion on Marilla's mothering journey.

<sup>49</sup> Miller (2005:3) points out that *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) was a book that Bronson Alcott found to be very influential and explains further that it is 'a moral tale that warns the reader not to follow the seductive path of acquiring wealth or seeking success; instead, one should focus on the spiritual path'. Reflective of the focuses encouraged by her father, therefore, each of Alcott's young protagonists in *Little Women* learns on her individual pilgrim's journey that more important things than wealth or success exist, such as a focus on one's relationship with God and with family; see Sections 2.4.1 to 2.4.4.

her daughters to relate to her experience. Then, only after freely recognising her own imperfection, does Marmee bring her story around to its educational points, which begin with the fact that she can recognise that her dwelling on negative thoughts at the start of the day is ‘not a wise thing to do’.<sup>50</sup> Her self-awareness opens her heart to learn, and teach, the lesson of humility and gratitude embodied in the man with whom she interacts. The fact that their beloved Marmee can experience a day like theirs and learn to overcome its negativity means that her daughters can get to that point too. Hence, Marmee’s influence on her daughters reflects what Alcott (1989:59) expressed in her journal in March 1846: ‘Now I’m going to *work really*, for I feel a true desire to improve, and be a help and comfort, not a care and sorrow, to my dear mother’ (Alcott’s emphasis).

Jo immediately asks Marmee to tell ““another story [...] one with a moral to it, like this””, because Jo enjoys thinking ““about them afterward, if they are real and not too preachy”” (*LW*, 59). Marmee smiles because she has ‘told stories to this little audience for many years, and [knows] how to please them’ (*LW*, 59), and she shows this by wisely using the invitation Jo extends as an opportunity to personalise the lesson by cleverly reinterpreting her children’s own experiences of the day into the new requested story (*LW*, 59). This method therefore ‘teaches the girls through metaphor [by] drawing connections between their own experiences and the moral lessons which Marmee feels are so important to the spiritual and intellectual development of her children’ (Kerns, 2009:60). Marmee’s lessons can be personalised to any situation and still hold universal truth for readers, reflecting the parable-focused style of teaching that Bronson Alcott often implemented in the home (Kerns, 2009:63).

One of Marmee’s primary objectives in bringing up her daughters is to teach them the importance of work, not to impose a life of drudgery, but to empower them with skills that offer agency. According to Noomé (2004:145), ‘Alcott [...] was one of the first authors to be so radical as to emphasise the need for *skills* in women, because such skills *empower* them to be valuable to their society (whether in the workplace or in the home)’ (my emphases), reflecting Alcott’s own desire, expressed in her journal in May 1850 (Alcott, 1989:61) to be ‘a truly good and useful woman’.<sup>51</sup> Marmee embodies Alcott’s views on what the best of mothers can achieve, as she is ‘called to devote her skill and energy’ to raising her daughters, to working in the ‘Soldiers’ Aid Societies’ (*LW*, 52) and to managing charitable social service in her

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<sup>50</sup> This kind of self-reflection is in line with the reflective journaling that Bronson Alcott asked his daughters to engage in (Stern, 1989:3-6). He himself left 30 000 pages of journals (Stern, 1989:3).

<sup>51</sup> Marilla has the same attitude towards the importance of Anne’s education in *Anne of Green Gables* (1908); see Section 3.3.

community, not just as a job, but as a vocation. The influence of Marmee's hardworking example is clearly reflected in the overarching spirit of industry that characterises the March home. Even recreational 'home festivals' such as the gift giving ceremony the girls hold for their mother on the novel's first Christmas are immediately followed by productive activity: all the March women fall to work in various ways (*LW*, 23).

Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy are clearly used to working diligently in various capacities both in the domestic sphere and outside of it: at the start of the novel, Meg and Jo both work outside of the home to earn money to help with the family's finances by doing something to support themselves; Beth, too shy to deal with classroom life, engages in domestic tasks and home schools herself, while Amy is initially in school.<sup>52</sup> However, the girls begin to *truly* learn to value opportunities to engage in constructive work, as well as the value of balance, on one occasion when they ask their mother's permission to be allowed to devote their vacation time to relaxation. Marmee agrees to allow her daughters to engage in this "experiment for a week and see how [they] like it" (*LW*, 148). However, her prediction that "by Saturday night [the girls] will find that all play and no work is as bad as all work and no play" (*LW*, 148) is fulfilled. Later, in the second part of the novel, the narrator explains: 'Mrs. March knew that experience was an excellent teacher, and when it was possible she left her children to learn alone the lessons which she would gladly have made easier, if they had not objected to taking advice as much as they did salts and senna'<sup>53</sup> (*LW*, 347). The negative effects of the girls' work-free days begin to show immediately, as seen in the unpleasant descriptions of the usually warm and welcoming home, suffering from shirked duties, as 'solitary', 'lonely' and 'untidy' (*LW*, 149). As usual, however, Marmee is associated with consistency and security – although nothing else in the home is 'neat and pleasant' because of the girls' shirking their normal duties, "Marmee's corner" [... looks] as usual' (*LW*, 149).

Marmee's willingness to allow her daughters to learn from their *own* mistakes and experience proves a powerful teaching tool in a practical lesson that reflects Bronson Alcott's belief that, in spiritual learning, 'children would come to correct moral conclusions if they were encouraged to examine their own moral natures' (Kerns, 2009:62).<sup>54</sup> Accordingly, the girls soon begin to

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<sup>52</sup> Marmee removes her from school after an incident of corporal punishment (see Section 2.4.3), but it is not spelled out how her homeschooling proceeds thereafter.

<sup>53</sup> Both epsom salts and senna remain common natural laxatives. Readers at the time would know this – as many twentieth-century readers would know castor oil.

<sup>54</sup> Kerns (2009:62) points to the revolutionary nature of this argument:

Many of Bronson's critics thought that this idea was ludicrous, that children were not capable of such complex thought, and that it might lead to egotism in children to have them spending so much time thinking about themselves. But Louisa [Alcott] showed that children are indeed capable of such

realise that their experiment with relaxation is not all they hoped it would be:

It was astonishing what a peculiar and uncomfortable state of things was produced by the 'resting and reveling' process. The days kept getting longer and longer, the weather was unusually variable and so were tempers; an unsettled feeling possessed everyone, and Satan found plenty of mischief for the idle hands to do. (*LW*, 150)

In their own individual ways, the girls find that having too much time for leisure becomes tedious: Meg begins 'snipping and spoiling her clothes in her attempts to furbish them up a la Moffat'; Jo reads 'till her eyes [give] out and she [is] sick of books'; and Amy 'soon [finds her] accomplished and important little self a great burden' (*LW*, 150). Only Beth gets on 'pretty well', mainly because she 'constantly forg[ets] that it [is] to be all play and no work, and [falls] back into her old ways now and then' (*LW*, 150), which are her natural and selfless tendencies to work diligently in the home for the benefit of her family. But even she is affected by 'something in the air' that disturbs 'her tranquility' (*LW*, 105). By the end of the week, each of the girls acknowledges 'to herself that she [is] glad the week [is] nearly done' (*LW*, 151). Furthermore, the fact that Beth gets along best of all of them throughout that week demonstrates Alcott's lesson that an inclination towards constructive labour plays an important role in creating and sustaining personal and domestic peace and happiness.

Alcott's realism is revealed when none of the girls wants to admit that she has had enough of the 'experiment'. Marmee has been shielding the girls to some extent, because she and the housekeeper, Hannah, quietly do the girls' 'neglected work, keeping home pleasant and the domestic machinery running smoothly' (*LW*, 150) for most of the week, but eventually Marmee gives Hannah a 'holiday [to] let the girls enjoy *the full effect* of [their experimental] play system' (*LW*, 151; my emphasis), namely to experience what happens when *all* members of the household shirk their work responsibilities in favour of leisure. Basic day-to-day taken-for-granted luxuries disappear: 'When they got up on Saturday morning, there was no fire in the kitchen, no breakfast in the dining room, and no mother anywhere to be seen' (*LW*, 151). Marmee thus also removes her physical influence from their lives for a day. She tells Meg that she is "'very tired, and [... that] she is going to stay quietly in her room all day and let [the girls] do the best [they] can'" (*LW*, 151), and Marmee eventually also goes "'out to dinner'" (*LW*, 153), leaving the girls to fend for themselves. The narrator points out the 'strange sense of helplessness' that falls 'upon the girls [when] the gray bonnet', a metonymy for their mother, vanishes 'round the corner' (*LW*, 155).

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complex moral thinking and understanding and that self-reflection improved character rather than diminished it.

Although Marmee largely leaves the girls to take care of themselves, she continues to mother them quietly, providing just enough support to ensure that the lesson, though difficult, is not completely unbearable for them. She quietly protects her daughters' feelings by performing the 'motherly little deception' of secretly feeding herself and 'disposing of the bad breakfast' that her daughters lovingly bring her, 'so that their feelings might not be hurt' (*LW*, 152). She also peeps in on them before going out for dinner (*LW*, 155).

Marmee's seeming neglect of her duties is in itself a form of tough mothering. Her method in increasing the difficulty of the girls' lesson on the last day ensures that the girls realise that taking care of themselves is not as "easy" as they initially suppose (*LW*, 151), as Hannah says: "Housekeeping ain't no joke" (*LW*, 151). They openly confess that the day has been "dreadful", "so uncomfortable" and not "a bit like home", particularly, as Beth observes, in the absence of "Marmee and little Pip" (*LW*, 158) – the canary dies because Beth forgets to feed him in her week of trying to live at leisure (*LW*, 154). For the reader, this last incident has an element of shock, driving home that the consequences of dereliction of duty can be serious.<sup>55</sup> The difficulty of applying this kind of 'tough love' is visible to the readers when the narrator reveals that Marmee looks 'as if her holiday [has] not been much pleasanter' than that of her daughters when she returns home (*LW*, 159). The last day of the experiment in particular helps the girls to see how much they rely on diligent work as a necessary constituent of what makes their mother who she is and how such work is therefore vital to the wellbeing of the home environment. This shows them that if they wish to be like their mother, which they say time and again throughout the novel that they do, a willingness to work is a fundamental characteristic that they need to develop.

Once the experiment is over, each daughter commits to her own way of working a little harder and more selflessly, which satisfies Marmee that they have all begun to learn what she set out to teach them, extending the practical domestic lesson to a larger moral lesson in the social contract, and she reminds them that they should also be cautious that they "don't go to the other extreme and delve like slaves" (*LW*, 160). This reveals the full extent of the lesson that Marmee wants her daughters to learn, which is that they should have "regular hours for work and play [and] make each day both useful and pleasant", proving that they understand "the worth of time by employing it well" so that they can reap the blessings that she promises them: that "youth will be delightful, old age will bring few regrets, and life become a beautiful success,

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<sup>55</sup> The lesson of the seriousness of the outcomes of dereliction of duty, anger, and laziness are also brought home to the reader with Amy's near drowning (see Section 2.4.2) and with Beth's bout of scarlet fever, discussed below.

in spite of poverty” (LW, 160-161).

Part of the lesson the girls learn through Marmee’s allowing their experiment can be seen later, when Marmee is confronted with the news of her husband’s illness and must plan for the difficult path ahead. The narrator notes: ‘Writing, thinking, and directing all at once might well bewilder the poor lady [Marmee], and Meg begged her to sit *quietly in her room* for a little while, and let them [her daughters, Hannah, the Laurences and Mr Brooke] work’ (LW, 219; my emphasis). The use of exactly the same phrase here as is used to describe Marmee’s taking time away from her responsibilities to sit “*quietly in her room*” during the girls’ experiment (LW, 151; my emphasis) stresses the outcome of this learning curve: they now understand that even their mother can get tired and overwhelmed, and they voluntarily take over when she needs the extra help and support.

No lesson is learned in an instant, however, and when Marmee is about to leave for Washington to care for Mr March, she – well knowing that most of her daughters are easily susceptible to the allures of idleness – imparts the following counsel:

“I am anxious that you should take this trouble rightly. Don’t [...] think that you can be idle and comfort yourselves by being idle and trying to forget. Go on with your work as usual, for work is a blessed solace. Hope and keep busy [...]”

[...] “Meg, dear, be prudent, *watch over your sisters* [...]. Be patient, Jo, [...] and be my brave girl, *ready to help* and cheer all. Beth, [...] *be faithful to the little home duties*, and you, Amy, *help all you can* [...]” (LW, 227-228; my emphases)

Alcott’s realism, which was so progressive for the children’s literature of the time, thus surfaces again – these admonitions are valid. Following their mother’s counsel, the girls initially ‘seem in a heavenly frame of mind, [with] self-denial [...] all the fashion’, but this does not last for more than a week:

Relieved of their first anxiety about their father, the girls insensibly relaxed their praiseworthy efforts a little, and began to fall back into old ways. They did not forget their motto [to hope and keep busy], but hoping and keeping busy seemed to grow easier, and after such tremendous exertions, they felt that Endeavor deserved a holiday, and gave it a good many. (LW, 237)

Only Beth diligently performs all her ‘little duties [...] and many of her sisters’ also’ (LW, 237). Her sisters’ lapse proves far more damaging than the earlier death of Pip the canary: Beth becomes infected with scarlet fever as she single-handedly cares for the sick Hummels<sup>56</sup> after her pleas for her sisters’ assistance fall on deaf ears (LW, 238-256), and she experiences the

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<sup>56</sup> Interestingly, one of the Hummel family, presumably one of the Hummel children that Marmee assists in *Little Women* (1868-1869), later becomes ‘Nursey Hummel’ in Jo’s school at Plumfield, as described in *Little Men* (1871), taking forward the mothering received from Marmee and Beth.

traumatic death of the Hummel baby. The long-term effects of this illness eventually lead to her own early death (*LW*, 554). Meg, Jo and Amy are thus forced to learn through their own experience once again but this time without the careful safety net previously provided by their ever-watchful Marmee – the lesson is finally learned ‘through much anxiety and regret’ (*LW*, 238).

In spite of tragedy, each girl’s future, in its own way, does stand as evidence of the fulfilment of some of the promises made by Marmee for learning to balance work and pleasure, in that their “‘youth [is] delightful’”, and their lives “‘become a beautiful success, in spite of poverty’” (*LW*, 161). This underlines how the wise and deeply personal lessons taught by a good mother, however difficult they are to learn, are so important and effective that they echo through years and even through generations, as each girl, save for Beth,<sup>57</sup> also eventually acts as a caring and wise mother figure in raising a child or children of her own and even other people’s children (see Sections 2.4.1 to 2.4.3 for brief reflections on Meg’s, Jo’s, and Amy’s future motherhood). This is clear in the novel itself and in its sequels: Meg’s journey as a mother is explored in some detail in the second part of *Little Women* (1868-1869) and is also touched on in *Little Men* (1871) and *Jo’s Boys* (1886); Jo’s mothering is merely mentioned at the very end of *Little Women* (1868-1869) but is explored in great detail in *Little Men* (1871) and *Jo’s Boys* (1886), in both of which she is the primary idealised mother figure, who even acts as a significant mother figure to her sisters’ children (Meg and Amy feature less in the novels, but their children play significant roles in the goings on at Plumfield) and to the boys at her Plumfield school; and Amy’s motherhood is similarly only touched on at the very end of *Little Women* (1868-1869) and is also touched on in *Little Men* (1871) and *Jo’s Boys* (1886).

## 2.4 The harvest of the good mother

Significantly entitled ‘Harvest Time’, the closing chapter of the second part of *Little Women* (1868-1869) ends with Marmee’s sitting surrounded by her three surviving daughters and by five of her six grandchildren,<sup>58</sup> with Mr Laurence, the March women’s husbands and Jo’s schoolboys in the background, at ‘the yearly apple-picking’ (*LW*, 641) in the grounds of Plumfield – an event that is combined on this day with the celebration of Marmee’s sixtieth birthday (*LW*, 644-647). Jo points out that Marmee is at that moment surrounded by her mothering harvest and observes that Marmee’s family “‘never can thank [Marmee] enough for

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<sup>57</sup> While she is alive, however, Beth mothers in her own ways, which are explored briefly in Section 2.4.4.

<sup>58</sup> The five children present are Meg’s twins, Demi and Daisy, Jo’s sons, Rob and Teddy, and Amy’s daughter, Beth (or Bess). Meg later has another daughter, named Josy (or Josie), who is mentioned in *Little Men* (*LM*, 50).

the patient sowing and reaping [she has] done” (LW, 646). Marmee’s ‘sowing and reaping’ can indeed be seen in the detailed portrayal of the growth of her daughters from girlhood into ‘little womanhood’ and eventually into full-fledged womanhood and motherhood.<sup>59</sup>

In the four subsections below, I therefore explore some examples of Marmee’s mothering harvest through brief discussions about how Meg, Jo and Amy overcome their individual weaknesses and struggles with the help of the ever steady, guiding hand of their mother. I also discuss how each girl’s hope for the future is transformed as each arrives at a place in her life that transcends her youthful dreams and fancies, revealing that the ultimate reward comes through achieving the solid rewards of a life fulfilling what their mother has taught her daughters. I then discuss how Beth is an unusual manifestation of her mother’s mothering harvest because, although shy Beth dies without marrying, Beth is depicted as already being a version of the idealised mother figure from the start of the text.

#### 2.4.1 Meg

In the first part of the novel, when the March girls and Laurie discuss what they imagine their ‘castles in the air’ on their ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’ journeys will look like (LW, 193-195), Meg’s heart’s desire is the following:

“I should like a lovely house, full of all sorts of luxurious things— nice food, pretty clothes, handsome furniture, pleasant people, and heaps of money. I am to be mistress of it, and manage it as I like, with plenty of servants, so I never need work a bit. How I should enjoy it! For I wouldn’t be idle, but do good, and make everyone love me dearly.” (LW, 194)

The narrator reveals early in the novel that Meg believes her ‘chief trouble [is] poverty’ (LW, 50). Her castle in the air reveals a fondness for material things, but also a recognition of the need to do good, although she sees the rewards of doing so to lie in earning affection, rather than in the intrinsic reward of doing good for its own sake. The narrator also notes that although Meg is only seldom seen complaining about her material position, ‘a sense of injustice [makes] her feel bitter toward everyone sometimes, for she [has] not yet learned to know how rich she [is] in the blessings which alone can make life happy’ (LW, 50).

Marmee is well aware of Meg’s weakness, and a profound teaching opportunity in this area arises in the form of the invitation to Meg from her friend, Annie Moffat, to visit with the

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<sup>59</sup>The details of the text suggest Alcott’s emphatic endorsement of the developmental trajectory towards what Noomé (2004:147) describes as ‘shaping *both* capable selfhood and a socially responsible persona’ (my emphasis); hence I cannot agree with Saxton’s (1978:4) scathing assessment that the novel depicts the protagonists’ only ‘achieving complete diminution’.

wealthy Moffat family for a “whole fortnight” (*LW*, 112). Marmee is reluctant to allow Meg to go, ‘fearing that Margaret [will] come back more discontented’ (*LW*, 115), but, in line with Marmee’s educational approach of allowing her children at times to learn from their own experiences, she yields and even assists in helping Meg to put together her outfits, albeit simple ones, for her ‘first taste of fashionable life’ (*LW*, 115). Marmee’s concern is well founded, however, because even as Meg prepares for her visit, she begins to long for more than the ‘little store of finery’ that has already been carefully and lovingly supplied by her mother and sisters (borrowing, buying and altering where needed due to their limited means). She falls into the trap of complaining that her “tarlaton dress [...] isn’t low-necked, and it doesn’t sweep enough”, that her “silk sacque isn’t a bit the fashion”, that her “bonnet doesn’t look like Sallie’s”, and that she is “sadly disappointed in [her] umbrella” because, as mentioned in Section 2.2, Marmee forgets to buy the correct colour (*LW*, 113).

Meg’s discontent continues to grow after leaving home for the visit:

The more [Meg] saw of Annie Moffat’s pretty things, the more she envied her and sighed to be rich. Home now looked bare and dismal as she thought of it, work grew harder than ever, and she felt that she was a very destitute and much-injured girl, in spite of [her] new gloves and silk stockings. (*LW*, 115)

Meg even allows her friends to turn her ‘into a fine lady’, changing her hair, her face (adding cosmetics), her figure (with tight lacing), embellishing her with jewellery, flowers, and ‘a pair of high-heeled silk boots [that] satisfie[s] the last wish of her heart’ (*LW*, 122). The efforts of her friends leave Meg ‘a newly dressed doll’ (*LW*, 122). Alcott carefully constructs the text: she tempers the description of this Cinderella-like transformation with realism, by pushing the description to excess and introducing details that reflect Meg’s actual discomfort with enjoying this borrowed finery, scattered amongst the descriptions of how beautiful it all is. The gorgeous ‘sky-blue dress’ is laced so tightly that Meg can ‘hardly breathe’, and its neckline is so low that it makes ‘modest Meg’ blush (*LW*, 122) even as this neckline remedies one of the faults she laments in her own tarlaton dress (*LW*, 113); she cannot walk in ‘the high-heeled silk boots’ without practice, fearing that she could ‘trip herself up’ (*LW*, 123); and even the many compliments from her wealthy benefactors, admiring their own handiwork, do not entirely reconcile Meg to her finished appearance (*LW*, 123). She is compared repeatedly – by the narrator, by a guest at the party, and, as a result, by herself – to a ‘doll’ (*LW*, 122, 125, 128, 130); Meg feels unlike herself, as if she is simply watching herself rather than enjoying the experience. This distance between Meg the doll and Meg the young woman is made obvious when Sallie tells her: “You don’t look a bit like yourself, but you are very nice” (*LW*, 123).

Ultimately, the artificiality of the situation becomes nightmarish for Meg when Laurie grumbles that he does not know Meg, because she looks “so grown-up and unlike” herself that he is “quite afraid” of her (*LW*, 125).

Alcott shows Meg’s quick recognition of the error of her ways. Meg laments, “I wish I’d been sensible and worn my own things, then I should not have disgusted other people, or felt so uncomfortable and ashamed of myself” (*LW*, 125), proving for the reader the validity of Marmee’s concern and the effectiveness of Marmee’s approach. Meg admits that she “only wanted a little fun, but this sort doesn’t pay” and that she finds that she is “getting tired of it” (*LW*, 127). But as with the lesson on sloth, the initial lesson is not fully internalised, and Meg has to learn it even more thoroughly: she decides to embrace the part and do “all sorts of crazy things” (*LW*, 128). She thus drinks champagne, dances, flirts, chatters and giggles ‘as the other girls’ do for the rest of the night and romps ‘in a way that scandalize[s] Laurie’ (*LW*, 128). The outcome is more than a hangover headache, well deserved for not observing the family’s teetotaler stance of which Laurie reminds her (*LW*, 128) – she overhears scathing criticism and is shaken in her innocence by the worldly Moffats and Gardiners.

Marmee acts as Meg’s conscience, and Meg receives timely reminders of this: a few nights before the big party, just as the ‘hard, bitter feeling’ that Meg frequently feels about her poverty (*LW*, 50) begins to get ‘pretty bad’ (*LW*, 116), she receives a box of hothouse flowers from Laurie, with a note from Marmee (*LW*, 116). This incident aligns Marmee and Laurie, who acts as Marmee’s proxy to jog Meg’s conscience at the big party described above. The flowers probably remind Meg of her mother’s counsel that “*real* flowers [are] the prettiest ornament for a young girl” (*LW*, 113; my emphasis), a stark contrast with the image of Meg a few nights later, dressed up in flowers *and* finery as an artificial ‘doll’. Meg symbolically slips ‘the note into her pocket as a sort of talisman against envy, vanity, and false pride’ (*LW*, 117). However, when Meg agrees not to wear her tarlaton dress (*LW*, 116), with that talisman in its pocket, Meg symbolically tosses the talisman and its protection aside and opens herself up to the very temptation she hoped it might help her to avoid. Even the warnings of Laurie, as Marmee’s proxy, fail to protect Meg fully.

Laurie’s presence reminds Meg about her mother’s concern, and the frank criticism of a boy of her own age who represents her mother and endorses Marmee’s opinion forces Meg to look at her decisions and follies. He first makes Meg feel ‘ill at ease’ because of his unusual behaviour around her doll-like person (*LW*, 123). Later he apologises for his initial reaction and tells Meg that although he does not admire her borrowed plumes, he does think that *she* is “just splendid”

(*LW*, 126), a subtle reminder for Meg to remember who she is at heart and how she has been raised to be above ideas about material wealth and fashion.<sup>60</sup> When Meg has forgiven Laurie and asks him not to tell anyone at home how she has been behaving, Laurie pointedly asks her to explain why she has allowed her lapse in judgement to happen if she does not want her family at home to know (*LW*, 127). The fact that Meg deliberately keeps ‘away’ from Laurie for the majority of the last half of the party (*LW*, 128) proves that his presence has a powerful effect in reminding her of what she should and should not be doing. Meg learns the insubstantial reward of wealth and finery when they are put above the simple good breeding and modesty taught to her by her mother, leaving her with a renewed sense of appreciation for the “‘pleasant [...] quiet’” of her simple home life when her taste of the fashionable life has ended (*LW*, 129). Evidence for her appreciation of home is given in Meg’s ‘restful expression’ (*LW*, 129) when she is once again in her own home, which is contrasted with the way that she feels ‘quite used up’ by the end of her fashionable ‘fortnight’s fun’ (*LW*, 128).

The incident allows Alcott to make a progressive anti-materialist point in the discussion between Meg and her mother when Meg confesses her follies, which ‘weigh upon her spirits’ (*LW*, 129). The narration’s lengthy build-up to Meg’s eventual confession proves that she is heavily affected by her conscience. Eventually, Meg ‘suddenly le[aves] her chair and, taking Beth’s stool, lean[s] her elbows on her mother’s knee, saying bravely ... “Marmee, I want to ‘fess’”’ (*LW*, 129). The image of the submissive child freely and humbly confessing her mistakes to her loving parent conjures religious, prayer-like connotations which highlight Marmee’s position in the home.<sup>61</sup> It also conveys Meg’s complete trust and childlike confidence in her mother: she does not fear confessing (she knows she will be forgiven and given counsel) but does not want to disappoint her mother. Marmee looks ‘silently at the downcast face of her pretty daughter, and [cannot] find it in her heart to blame [Meg’s] little follies’ (*LW*, 130). Marmee freely acknowledges that Meg’s fondness for being praised and admired “‘is perfectly natural, and quite harmless, if the liking does not become a passion and lead one to do foolish or unmaidenly things’” (*LW*, 131). Marmee again encourages a balance between one’s natural inclinations and keeping oneself in check through self-awareness and discernment between what is truly important and what is not.

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<sup>60</sup> Laurie similarly attempts to remind Amy of who she is when she talks to him in Europe, years later when they are both young adults, about how important she thinks it is for her to marry for money. He openly tells her that he is surprised to hear such ideas coming “‘from the lips of one of [... Marmee’s] girls’” (*LW*, 538).

<sup>61</sup> This image reminds me of Marilla, with Anne submissively at her knee as Marilla contemplates how to teach Anne to pray (*AGG*, 699), marking the start of Marilla’s journey in the act of mothering (see Section 3.3).

As is the nature of weakness, in spite of the powerful lesson Meg learns on her visit to ‘Vanity Fair’ (*LW*, 112), as outlined above, she continues to struggle with her weakness for material things throughout the rest of *Little Women* (1868-1869), but she learns from each struggle and gradually continues to strengthen her recognition of what really is most valuable in her life. Even after her marriage, Meg has times where she falls into the trap of wanting more than her budget allows, and she has to learn that, as with her mother, open communication and honesty is needed with her husband, and that working together in love and unity is more important and valuable than any pricey ‘lovely violet silk’ (*LW*, 375) could ever be. Meg’s marriage proves the value in Marmee’s dearly held hopes for her daughters:

“[...] I’m not ambitious for a splendid fortune, a fashionable position, or a great name for my girls. If rank and money come with love and virtue, also, I should accept them gratefully, and enjoy your good fortune, but I know, by experience, how much genuine happiness can be had in a plain little house, where the daily bread is earned, and some privations give sweetness to the few pleasures. I am content to see Meg begin humbly, for if I am not mistaken, she will be rich in the possession of a good man’s heart, and that is better than a fortune.” (*LW*, 275-276)<sup>62</sup>

Meg even confesses, when she defends her relationship with John to the disapproving Aunt March, “[...] I’m not afraid of being poor, for I’ve been happy so far, and I know I shall be with [John] because he loves me [...]” (*LW*, 311).

Meg’s appearance on her wedding day clearly invites a comparison between Meg the bride and Meg the doll, at the Moffats’ big party:

Meg looked very like a rose herself, for all that was best and sweetest in heart and soul seemed to bloom into her face that day, making it fair and tender, with a charm more beautiful than beauty. Neither silk, lace, nor orange flowers would she have. “I don’t want a fashionable wedding, but only those about me whom I love, and to them I wish to look and be my familiar self.”

So she made her wedding gown herself, sewing into it the tender hopes and innocent romances of a girlish heart. Her sisters braided up her pretty hair, and the only ornaments she wore were the lilies of the valley, which ‘her John’ liked best of all the flowers that grew.

“You do look just like our own dear Meg, only so very sweet and lovely that I should hug you if it wouldn’t crumple your dress,” cried Amy, surveying her with delight when all was done.

“Then I am satisfied. But please hug and kiss me, everyone, and don’t mind my dress. I want a great many crumples of this sort put into it today,” and Meg opened her arms to her sisters who clung about her with April faces for a minute, feeling that the new love had not

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<sup>62</sup> James (2015:110) points out that ‘Meg’s marriage to John, although not altogether a traditional 19<sup>th</sup>-century marriage’ in that it does progressively cross the divide between the two separate spheres for men and women, ‘does not move beyond Fuller’s (1855:72-73) idea of the household partnership into the higher grades of marriage’ in the way that Marmee’s marriage does.

changed the old. (*LW*, 333-334)

The simile comparing Meg to ‘a rose’ and the fact that her wedding attire is not ornamented with anything but ‘lilies of the valley’ are reminiscent of Marmee’s counsel – which young Meg ignored at the Moffats’ party – about fresh flowers being the best “‘ornament for a young girl’” (*LW*, 113), symbolically connecting Meg’s wedding day with the lessons that she has since learned and confirming that Meg is one with her mother on this most important of days.

The superlatives used to describe Meg’s beauty on her wedding day are not juxtaposed with any negative qualifications, as the descriptions of her attire at the Moffats’ party are. This reflects the confidence that Meg feels now, and the rightness of the situation is confirmed with repeated references to Meg’s wanting to be her ‘familiar self’ and her sisters’ praise of her being ‘just like [their] own dear Meg’ instead of an unrecognisable doll. Meg makes ‘her wedding gown herself’, and the absence of vanity is reflected in how she welcomes ‘crumples’ to her wedding dress if they are made by hugs from her loving family. Even the wealthy Sallie Moffat comments to her husband, Ned: “‘That is the prettiest wedding I’ve been to for an age [...], and I don’t see why, for there wasn’t a bit of style about it’” (*LW*, 340).

Marmee continues to advise Meg even when Meg is an adult, especially about the balance required between the demands and pleasures of being a mother and personal growth in being a woman and wife. This reflects the ideals of Real Womanhood, as explored by Cogan (1989:82), who asserts that ‘Real Womanhood was [...] characterized by its balance – a hard-won balance between the demands of home, family, intellect, heart, and soul’. The most notable example of this guidance comes when Meg has been a mother to her twins for a year. The narrator points out that Meg, ‘a womanly little woman [in whom] the maternal instinct [is] very strong, [... becomes] entirely absorbed in her children to the exclusion of everything and everybody else’ (*LW*, 512). James (2015:109) observes (quoting Strickland, 1985:123) that ‘the cult of motherhood was not “necessarily of benefit to the mother herself”, as can be seen in Meg’s declining vitality and mood’, and beyond its effects on herself, the effect of Meg’s lack of balance is even reflected in how her marriage suffers because of her extreme devotion to her children, to the point of neglecting her relationship with John.

When Meg approaches Marmee for advice on how to rectify things at home, Marmee gives Meg progressive counsel. She tells Meg that “‘children should draw [married couples] nearer than ever’” and that the way to this nearness is through Meg’s giving some of the tireless devotion to her children into John’s keeping by “‘teach[ing] him how to help’” in the nursery and recognising that “‘[h]is place is there *as well as* [Meg’s]’” (*LW*, 517; my emphasis), reflecting

Fuller's (1855:52) celebration of the 'deep communion [and] real intercourse [...] implied in sharing the joys and cares of parentage, when any degree of equality is admitted between the parties'. Marmee's philosophy is that "'at home'", a married couple should "'work together, always'" (*LW*, 518) and show interest in and share in each other's spheres and interests. She encourages Meg to find balance between mothering, housework, wifedom and self-care and points out that keeping an optimal balance in all of these areas – even in educating herself about the goings-on of the world, in spite of her being "'a woman'"<sup>63</sup> – will ultimately benefit all of the areas at once, because Meg is "'the sunshine-maker of [her little] family, and if [she gets] dismal there is no fair weather'" (*LW*, 518). The reference to sunshine aligns these ideals with the sanctity and reach of idealised motherhood discussed in Section 2.2 and points to the *power* of the woman inside the home as the force around which the home revolves and thus to the empowerment that can be found for women in the roles of wife and mother, particularly when these roles expand to reach across the separate spheres of the sexes. James (2015:110) points out that 'Marmee's suggestion not only counteracts the 19<sup>th</sup>-century belief in separate spheres, but it also calls for women, especially mothers, to be more aware of societal concerns that would usually have fallen outside of their prescribed scope as wives and mothers'. Furthermore, this counsel, coming from Marmee's own experience, reflects the fact that Marmee is already an embodiment of the balance she prescribes for Meg, pointing to Marmee's progressive stance and the potential for Meg to find a similar power.

At the end of *Little Women* (1868-1869), Meg contemplates how her 'castle in the air' has changed since she first expressed her wishes as a girl (*LW*, 194):

"My castle was the most nearly realized of all. I asked for splendid things, to be sure, but in my heart I knew I should be satisfied, if I had a little home, and John, and some dear children like these. I've got them all, thank God, and am the happiest woman in the world," and Meg laid her hand on her tall boy's head, with a face full of tender and devout content. (*LW*, 644-645)

It is clear to the reader that what Meg achieves in her poor and 'little home' with John is far from the old dream of a "'lovely house, full of all sorts of luxurious things [...] and heaps of money [...] with plenty of servants, so [she] never [needs] work a bit'" (*LW*, 194). But Meg still feels that she has achieved nearly all of her dreams, because she has learned to recognise, just as her mother's counsel and example teach her, that the true treasures lie in a harvest of love for others, especially her husband and children, and self-respect, which in turn engender affection

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<sup>63</sup> James (2015:110) notes the progressive nature of this counsel in that 'Marmee's suggestion that Meg educate herself mirrors Fuller's (1855:95-96) and even Abigail [Alcott]'s emphasis on the need for women to develop and educate themselves on an individual basis'.

and respect from those she cares about.

## 2.4.2 Jo

When Jo reveals her ‘castle in the air’ to her sisters and to Laurie, she describes it as follows:

“[...] I’d have a stable full of Arabian steeds, rooms piled high with books, and I’d write out of a magic inkstand, so that my works should be [...] famous [...]. I want to do something splendid before I go into my castle, something heroic or wonderful that won’t be forgotten after I’m dead. I don’t know what, but I’m on the watch for it, and mean to astonish you all some day. I think I shall write books, and get rich and famous, that would suit me, so that is my favorite dream.” (LW, 194-195)

Jo’s dearest ambition is to make something of herself through her writing. Her qualification “‘before I go into my castle’” (LW, 194; my emphasis) suggests that she sees even a castle as restrictive; she wants to fulfil dreams of fame through her writing. Furthermore, Jo’s love of physical adventure (suggested by the mention of “‘Arabian steeds’”) clashes with her love of babies (LW, 573). Because she sees herself as “‘homely and awkward’” rather than as pretty and ladylike and “‘love[s her] liberty too well to be in a hurry to give it up for any mortal man’” (LW, 483), she can only envision herself as a dotting spinster aunt, rather than as a wife and mother.<sup>64</sup>

Much earlier in the novel, in the fourth chapter, the narrator reveals the following, which can be connected with Jo’s ‘castle in the air’:

Jo’s ambition was to do something very splendid. What it was, she had no idea as yet, but left it for time to tell her, and meanwhile, found her greatest affliction in the fact that she couldn’t read, run, and ride as much as she liked. A quick temper, sharp tongue, and restless spirit were always getting her into scrapes, and her life was a series of ups and downs, which were both comic and pathetic. (LW, 51)<sup>65</sup>

Such descriptions of Jo’s ‘restless’ nature, along with the recognition that Jo carries ‘her love of liberty and hate of conventionalities to [...] an unlimited extent’ (LW, 348), confirm her freedom-loving, expectation-defying disposition, as well as her tendency towards stubbornness. Marmee is well aware of her second daughter’s chief characteristics and adapts her mothering style accordingly, and as a radical procedure openly reveals her method directly to Jo herself: “‘You I leave to enjoy your liberty till you tire of it, for only then will you find that there is something sweeter’” (LW, 440).

A particularly powerful incident in Marmee’s mothering of Jo, and one that leaves a strong

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<sup>64</sup> Alcott herself chose a life as a ‘literary spinster’ (LW, 580) over marriage and mothering children of her own.

<sup>65</sup> This description of Jo as having a propensity for getting into scrapes connects her to Anne’s equally, if not more, scrape-prone character in *Anne of Green Gables* (1908). Both girls eventually become successful mothers.

impression on young readers, arises from Jo's stubbornness and 'the fiery spirit which [...] continually [gets] her into trouble' (*LW*, 99) when Jo's temper gets the better of her and leads her to neglect taking responsibility for the safety of her youngest sister, Amy. In a chapter appropriately named 'Jo Meets Apollyon' (*LW*, 97), alluding to the most frightening monster in *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Bunyan, [1678] 1965:90-94), Jo has to wrestle against her greatest weakness – her temper.<sup>66</sup> When Meg and Jo are on their way to the theatre with Laurie one afternoon, Jo impatiently dismisses Amy's inconvenient desire to join them, resulting in Amy's 'threatening' promise that Jo will "be sorry" (*LW*, 99). Amy takes her revenge by burning the only copy of 'Jo's book', which is 'the pride of [Jo's] heart' and 'the loving work of several years' over which Jo has 'worked [...] patiently, putting her whole heart into her work, hoping to make something good enough to print' (*LW*, 101). Jo's anger at this betrayal is thus well justified, even to the reader, because with this book, her dearest dreams and ambitions literally go up in smoke. Even though Amy repents, Jo refuses to forgive her (*LW*, 102). How angry Jo is becomes evident from the fact that 'even Mrs. March' knows that 'when Jo [is] in that mood words [are] wasted, and the wisest course [is] to wait till some little accident [by which she means some small incident], or [Jo's] own generous nature, soften[s] Jo's resentment and heal[s] the breach' (*LW*, 102). Marmee is aware that Jo's anger covers a more sensitive and injured soul than Jo wants to reveal, and the narrator grants the reader a glimpse into the tomboyish Jo's tender consciousness, showing that 'Jo [wants] to lay her head down on that motherly bosom, and cry her grief and anger all away, but tears [are] an unmanly weakness, and she [feels] so deeply injured that she really [cannot] quite forgive yet' (*LW*, 103).

In this instance, Marmee's approach of allowing Jo freedom to learn for herself almost ends in disaster, because Jo turns a deaf ear to Marmee's counsel: "My dear, don't let the sun go down upon your anger. Forgive each other, help each other, and begin again tomorrow" (*LW*, 103). The 'accident' that occurs is very serious – it is life-threatening. Jo still harbours the 'little demon' of anger and resentment the next day when she goes ice skating with Laurie (*LW*, 104), and she allows her temper to direct her decisions regarding Amy. Amy follows Jo – a sign of Amy's own stubborn insistence on having her own way – but Jo decides not to care whether Amy hears Laurie's warning about how thin the ice is in the centre, determining that Amy should "take care of herself" (*LW*, 105). The price required for Jo to learn her lesson is that she has to watch 'Amy throw up her hands and go down [under the ice], with a sudden crash of rotten ice, the splash of water, and a cry that [makes] Jo's heart stand still with fear' (*LW*, 105).

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<sup>66</sup> Temper is a recurrent motif in children's literature and a very real issue which many readers can identify with.

Realising later that Amy's 'golden head [...] might have been swept away from her sight forever under the treacherous ice', Jo comes to the painful realisation that her own 'dreadful temper' is at fault (*LW*, 105-106).

Amy is rescued, however, and Marmee can call Jo to her later and literally and symbolically 'bind up the hurt hands', reassuring Jo that Amy is "safe" (*LW*, 106). As Jo confesses her fault, much as Meg does after her taste of the fashionable life, Marmee can reassure her and allow Jo to express *her own* insight:

"[...]. She is not hurt, and won't even take cold, I think, you were so sensible in covering and getting her home quickly," replied her mother cheerfully.

"Laurie did it all. I only let her go. Mother, if she should die, it would be my fault." And Jo dropped down beside the bed in a passion of penitent tears, telling all that had happened, bitterly condemning her hardness of heart, and sobbing out her gratitude for being spared the heavy punishment which might have come upon her.

"It's my dreadful temper! I try to cure it, I think I have, and then it breaks out worse than ever. [...]" (*LW*, 106)

Now that Jo has come by herself to this understanding, Marmee simply advises: "Watch and pray, dear, never get tired of trying." She adds encouragingly: "[...] and never think it is impossible to conquer your fault" (*LW*, 106).

Two aspects of this teaching moment make it a powerful experience that Jo carries with her for the rest of her life. First, Marmee allows Jo to come to recognise on her own that she needs help, preparing her to follow the counsel offered. Second, Marmee connects with Jo on the level of shared experience by sharing her own struggles with the same weakness, offering empathy and a willingness to help carry the shared burden. Marmee reveals that her temper "used to be just like" Jo's and that, while Marmee has "been trying to cure it for forty years, [... she has] only succeeded in controlling it" (*LW*, 107). Jo is shocked to hear that her beloved Marmee is "angry nearly every day of [her] life", because it seems to Jo that her mother is "never angry", in response to which Marmee tells her: "I have learned not to show it, and I still hope to learn not to feel it, though it may take me another forty years to do so" (*LW*, 107).

Jo begins to piece together evidence of her mother's anger and temper, a process that helps Jo to feel 'nearer and dearer to her mother than ever before' (*LW*, 107). Jo asks: "Mother, are you angry when you fold your lips tight together and go out of the room sometimes, when Aunt March scolds or people worry you?" (*LW*, 107). Marmee admits that Jo is right: "I've learned to check the hasty words that rise to my lips, and when I feel that they mean to break out against my will, I just go away for a minute, and give myself a little shake for being so weak and wicked" (*LW*, 107). This discussion enables the reader to identify further evidence of Marmee's

controlling her temper, which helps the reader to relate to her too. For example, when Marmee later hears about Mrs Moffat's gossip about Marmee's supposed 'plans' for Meg's future (*LW*, 118; mentioned in Section 2.3), Jo sees 'her mother fold her lips tightly, as if ill pleased that such ideas should be put into Meg's innocent mind' (*LW*, 130). Even later, when Aunt March sends a sharp note to accompany a loan to enable Mrs March to go to her ill husband, Marmee puts the note 'in the fire, the money in her purse, and [goes] on with her preparations, with her lips folded tightly in a way which Jo would [...] underst[and] if she [...] were] there' (*LW*, 221). Both examples draw attention to the intimate bond between Marmee and Jo, who can understand the destructive force of each other's anger and the shared strategies to curb their tempers.<sup>67</sup>

Marmee's frank willingness to admit to her own weakness to assist Jo in overcoming hers is again reminiscent of Strickland's (1985:128) observation that 'the secret of Marmee's influence over her daughters' is that 'her intimacy with them is marred by no secrets'. She does not attempt to come across as in any way falsely superior to her daughters but shows them – and particularly Jo on this occasion – that Marmee too must fight her own battles every day to be successful in her role as their mother. Marmee's motivation for trying to be a better person is her love for her daughters:

“[...] It was easier to try for your sakes than for my own. A startled or surprised look from one of you when I spoke sharply rebuked me more than any words could have done, and the love, respect, and confidence of my children was the sweetest reward I could receive for my efforts to be the woman I would have them copy.” (*LW*, 108)

The efficacy of Marmee's transparent approach is made apparent when the narrator observes:

The patience and the humility of the face [Jo] loved so well was a better lesson to Jo than the wisest lecture, the sharpest reproof. She felt comforted at once by the sympathy and confidence given her. The knowledge that her mother had a fault like hers, and tried to mend it, made her own easier to bear and strengthened her resolution to cure it. (*LW*, 107)

Marmee never claims moral superiority – her status as the benchmark of loving motherhood is accorded to her by her daughters and generations of readers of this seminal text.

A few months after the above experience, Marmee sends Jo a note that makes Jo's 'cheeks glow and her eyes fill' with the joy that comes of being recognised for her diligent efforts (*LW*, 163), reminiscent of the 'encourag[ing]' notes that Alcott would receive as a child from her own mother (Alcott, 1989:63):

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<sup>67</sup> The bond depicted here reflects that between Alcott and her mother, and it idealises a bond that Bronson Alcott experienced as excessive – he deprecated their tempers and wrote in his journal on 16 March 1846: “Two devils, as yet, I am not quite divine enough to vanquish—the mother fiend and her daughter” (quoted in Strickland, 1985:29). These shocking words reveal the sometimes antagonistic moments in the real-life Alcott family that Alcott transformed into her luminous idealisation of family life in *Little Women* (1868-1869).

My Dear:

I write a little word to tell you with how much satisfaction I watch your efforts to control your temper. You say nothing about your trials, failures, or successes, and think, perhaps, that no one sees them but the Friend whose help you daily ask, if I may trust the well-worn cover of your guidebook. I, too, have seen them all, and heartily believe in the sincerity of your resolution, since it begins to bear fruit. Go on, dear, patiently and bravely, and always believe that no one sympathizes more tenderly with you than your loving ...

Mother. (*LW*, 163)

Marmee's acknowledgement is valued by Jo as "worth millions of money and pecks of praise" (*LW*, 163-164). As Meg does with the note from Marmee that she receives while exposed to the height of material temptation on her fashionable visit to the Moffats, Jo pins Marmee's 'note inside her frock, as a shield and a reminder, lest [Jo] be taken unaware' by temptation to let her temper get the best of her (*LW*, 164).

The next day, at "Camp Laurence" (*LW*, 169), Jo manages to subdue her anger, using a technique similar to the one Marmee tells her about, when a game of croquet does not go Jo's way, because her opponent cheats, and she is justifiably angry:

Jo opened her lips to say something rude, but checked herself in time, colored up to her forehead and stood a minute, hammering down a wicket with all her might, while Fred hit the stake and declared himself out with much exultation. She went off to get her ball, and was a long time finding it among the bushes, but she came back, looking cool and quiet, and waited her turn patiently. (*LW*, 170)

Jo uses her talisman from Marmee to help her keep her temper (*LW*, 164), even if she only reduces her 'rage' to a 'simmering' point (*LW*, 171) – Jo tells Meg: "I should certainly have boiled over if I hadn't stayed among the nettles till I got my rage under control enough to hold my tongue" (*LW*, 171).

What Jo learns from her potentially life-and-death encounter with the consequences of her anger, the lesson she tries to apply in a lifelong struggle,<sup>68</sup> is that her pride and ambitions (in the form of her burned book, for example) are not as valuable to her as her relationships with her family. She eventually even demonstrates that she has learned never to allow the sun to set on her anger, telling her mother:

Oh, I must tell you that I came near having a quarrel with Laurie. I freed my mind about a

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<sup>68</sup> Alcott (1989:61-62) expressed in her journal her own perpetual struggle with her own weaknesses which made 'every day [...] a battle', for example in May 1850, when she wrote: 'I [...] must always think of the wilful, moody girl I try to manage, and in my journal I write of her to see how she gets on'. Alcott's struggles as a teenager seem to reflect a combination of Meg's, Jo's and Amy's weaknesses (as detailed in Sections 2.4.1 to 2.4.3):

If I look in my glass, I try to keep down vanity about my long hair, my well-shaped head, and my good nose. In the street I try not to covet fine things. My quick tongue is always getting me into trouble, and my moodiness makes it hard to be cheerful when I think how poor we are, how much worry it is to live, and how many things I long to do I never can. (Alcott, 1989:61)

silly little thing, and he was offended. I was right, but didn't speak as I ought, and he marched home, saying he wouldn't come again till I begged pardon. I declared I wouldn't and got mad. It lasted all day. I felt bad and wanted you very much. Laurie and I are both so proud, it's hard to beg pardon. But I thought he'd come to it, for I was in the right. He didn't come, and just at night I remembered what you said when Amy fell into the river. I read my little [guide]book, felt better, resolved not to let the sun set on my anger, and ran over to tell Laurie I was sorry. I met him at the gate, coming for the same thing. We both laughed, begged each other's pardon, and felt all good and comfortable again. (*LW*, 233)

The value of the kind of self-control that Marmee tries to teach Jo is reiterated in broader form in a passage from *Little Men* (1871), when Jo herself is the mother guiding her flock of boys – Demi, Jo's nephew, is described as follows:

He was not a perfect child, by any means, but his faults were of the better sort; and being early taught the secret of self-control, he was not left at the mercy of appetites and passions, as some poor little mortals are, and then punished for yielding to the temptations against which they have no armor. (*LM*, 12-13)

This description reiterates the responsibility of parents to inculcate values that serve the child on his or her journey through life.

Jo's recognition of the value of her most treasured relationships leads to a need for connection that transcends her desire for untrammelled liberty, fulfilling her mother's prediction that Jo will eventually "find that there is something sweeter" (*LW*, 440). Indeed, Jo, similar to Alcott herself, eventually comes to devote her life to caring for her family, as Jo takes on her role as a motherly woman, first looking after her sister, Beth, and then becoming a mother herself.

At the start of the novel, Jo resents being "a girl" because she revels in "boy's games and work and manners" and hates having to "stay home and knit, like a poky old woman" (*LW*, 6). When her father returns from his year-long absence in the army, however, he observes that his "son Jo" whom he remembers leaving a year before, or his "wild girl", is now "a strong, helpful, tenderhearted woman" (*LW*, 300). Additionally, the narrator later comments that three years after the end of the novel's first part, 'Jo's angles are much softened' (*LW*, 334) as a young adult, suggestive of the more 'maternal' (*LW*, 644) character she slowly comes to develop as she increasingly takes mothering in her stride in various aspects of her life. For the rest of Beth's 'delicate' life after her initial illness with scarlet fever, Jo devotes 'herself to [...] Beth', guarding, protecting and providing anything that her sister needs (*LW*, 320) and also providing much needed love and support to their parents when she and Beth are the only sisters still left at home (more so after Beth dies). Jo also uses 'the magic of a pen' to afford 'comforts for them all' (*LW*, 360), channelling her pursuit of independence and monetary success through her writing into bringing joy to her family, and her success is doubly sweet because she achieves

some of the fame she desired, and her “magic inkstand” (*LW*, 194) now supports the family she loves.

Marmee even tells Jo at one point that she finds Jo “a great comfort”, that she “always [feels] strong when [Jo is] at home [... because] when the tug comes, [Jo is] always ready” (*LW*, 428). This fulfils Marmee’s ‘plan’ for her daughters in Jo’s truly becoming a “pride and comfort of [her parents’] lives” (*LW*, 133) and shows Jo’s maturing in a powerful way because she and Marmee seem to reciprocate roles, as Marmee comes to find ever greater comfort in the womanly and maternal presence of her Jo in the home, just as Jo always has in the presence of her mother. Jo’s increasingly motherly role, particularly in relation to Beth, is further highlighted through the use of zeugma that aligns Jo with Marmee when Jo tells a troubled Beth to “remember [...] that *Mother and Jo* are always glad to hear and help [...] if they can” (*LW*, 437; my emphasis), echoing Marmee’s offer to Jo years earlier that Jo may tell her anything, because it is Marmee’s “greatest happiness and pride to feel that [her] girls confide in [her] and know how much [she loves] them” (*LW*, 109).

Jo’s experiences bring her the wisdom and maturity that she needs to revise her ‘castle in the air’ ambitions and finally figure out what the ‘very splendid’ (*LW*, 51), “heroic or wonderful” (*LW*, 195) something is (or as it turns out, somethings are) that it is always her ambition to do with her life. While caring for the dying Beth, who tells Jo (echoing Marmee’s words mentioned above) that she feels “stronger” when Jo is with her, Jo finds herself ‘prouder of being chosen than than of any honor her life [has] ever brought her’ (*LW*, 550). During this time, Beth, a little mother figure herself, openly tells Jo that Jo will need to “be everything to Father and Mother when [Beth is] gone” and that Jo will “be happier in doing that than writing splendid books or seeing all the world, for love is the only thing that we can carry with us when we go, and it makes the end so easy” (*LW*, 553). The narrator immediately reveals that, impulsive and fully committed to her action as always, “then and there Jo renounce[s] her old ambition, pledg[ing] herself to a new and better one, acknowledging the poverty of other desires, and feeling the blessed solace of a belief in the immortality of love” (*LW*, 553). Then, while Jo learns to grapple with life at home after Beth’s death, the narrator opens a glimpse into Jo’s consciousness:

[Jo] had often said she wanted to do something splendid, no matter how hard, and now she had her wish, for what could be more beautiful than to devote her life to Father and Mother, trying to make home as happy to them as they had to her? And if difficulties were necessary to increase the splendor of the effort, what could be harder for a restless, ambitious girl than to give up her own hopes, plans, and desires, and cheerfully live for others?

Providence had taken her at her word. Here was the task, not what she had expected, but better because self had no part in it. (*LW*, 574)

She finds the “something sweeter” (LW, 440) that life can offer her if she forgets herself, ‘in patience [...], the loyalty to duty that makes the hardest easy, and the sincere faith that fears nothing, but trusts undoubtingly’ (LW, 550). Jo’s heart is eventually so changed that she tells Marmee that she wants to love even more than her narrow circle: “[...]. I’d no idea hearts could take in so many. Mine is so elastic, it never seems full now, and I used to be quite contented with my family. I don’t understand it” (LW, 577).

Jo’s increased capacity for love is echoed in the words used to describe Marmee at the close of the novel, when Marmee’s harvest of family is described as a “large sheaf” for which, “there’s room in [Marmee’s] heart” (LW, 646). This is suggestive of Jo’s potential to grow in her capacity to love as a mother just as her mother loves. Jo does indeed finally fill the emptiness in her heart by marrying her beloved friend, Professor Friedrich (Fritz) Bhaer. Furthermore, her ‘elastic’ heart continues to expand to take in her own children and the boys for whom she and Professor Bhaer open “a good, happy, homelike school, with [Jo] to take care of them and Fritz to teach them” (making good use of Jo’s inheritance of Aunt March’s Plumfield home) (LW, 635). Jo’s ‘castle in the air’ is filled with life:

And three times a day, Jo smiled at her Fritz from the head of a long table lined on either side with rows of happy young faces, which all turned to her with affectionate eyes, confiding words, and grateful hearts, full of love for “Mother Bhaer”. She had boys enough now, and did not tire of them [...].

Yes, Jo was a very happy woman there, in spite of hard work, much anxiety, and a perpetual racket. She enjoyed it heartily and found the applause of her boys more satisfying than any praise of the world [...]. (LW, 639-640)

Jo’s own natural tomboyishness and wildness, as well as her restlessness and her inclination to independence, eventually, when channelled through wisdom and experience, become qualities central to the success of her future endeavour as a mother to so many boys, enabling her to understand and support them in much the same way that Marmee understands and supports Jo from a place of shared experience. The image painted of Jo in the above quotation, along with the fact that Jo’s continuing story as a mother is the focus of the next two books in the series, *Little Men* (1871) and *Jo’s Boys* (1886), supports Strickland’s (1985:151) assertion that Marmee’s ‘place is taken by Jo, who becomes Mother Bhaer and rules her kingdom as firmly as Marmee ever did’. The implication of a legacy similar to her mother’s also ensures that Jo, who is equally immortalised in the real world through Alcott’s writing, “won’t be forgotten after [she is] dead” (LW, 195).

In *Little Men* (1871), descriptions of Jo firmly establish her as the ‘Marmee figure’ of Alcott’s continuing story. Alcott follows a similar procedure in *Little Men* to that used in the opening to

*Little Women*: just as Marmee is only introduced once the domestic scene has been established, Jo is introduced only after the effects of her management of her domestic sphere are shown. Plumfield is described as ‘a hospitable-looking house, with [...] lights shining in many windows’ and where ‘[n]either curtains nor shutters hid[e] the cheerful glimmer’ (*LM*, 1). It is a place whose chief characteristics are ‘light and warmth and comfort’ (*LM*, 1), reflective of the light and warmth and comfort at its heart in the form of its matriarch. When Jo is introduced, it is through the eyes of Nat, her “‘new [orphan] boy’”, who sees her as possessing ‘a motherly look, which ma[kes] Nat’s lonely little heart yearn toward her’ (*LM*, 4). She is then described as follows:

She was not at all handsome, but she had a merry sort of face that never seemed to have forgotten certain childish ways and looks, any more than her voice and manner had; and these things, hard to describe but very plain to see and feel, made her a genial, comfortable kind of person, easy to get on with, and generally “‘jolly,” as boys would say. (*LM*, 4)

She is evidently not the same dignified kind of mother as Marmee, but her childlike nature and the very awkwardness she once saw as faults that would prevent her from being a successful wife and mother (by society’s standards) are what endear her to the boys (and girls) in her care. She has clearly embraced motherhood with all her heart – hinted at in the closing chapter of *Little Women* (1868-1869) when the reader is told that she ‘now sp[ea]ks in a maternal way of all mankind’ – and happily introduces herself as “‘Mother Bhaer’” (*LM*, 4), a play on words (read: ‘Mother Bear’) established through her married name that fittingly attests to her role as a universal mother to her own children, to her nieces and nephews, to her schoolboys, and to any child in need of mothering.

Jo thus expands motherhood beyond the traditional mothering embodied by Marmee, as she recognises her status as an othermother to many of the children within her care, whereas most of the focus on Marmee’s mothering is on her own children (as noted in Section 2.2, Marmee’s mothering does reach beyond her own biological family, but not to the extent that Jo’s does). Later in *Little Men* (1871), Jo acknowledges to the hardened orphan, Dan (the seemingly hopeless case that she dearly hopes to reform): “‘I think an own mother would have been a great deal to you. But as that cannot be, you must try to let me fill her place’” (*LM*, 177). The simple qualification required to be an effective alternative mother figure is revealed to be a love for giving ‘a home and motherly care’ to those who need it (*LM*, 7).

The power of the alternative ‘replacement’ mother figure is shown in the ‘earnestness’ of Jo’s boys, as they ‘desire to make Mrs. Bhaer “glad and proud,” not “sorry and disappointed’” almost from the moment that they first meet her (*LM*, 19), just like the March daughters and Laurie are

guided by their desire to please Marmee. Like Marmee, Jo also becomes a refuge for all of her children, biological and non-biological, as '[w]hen sick or in trouble [the older children] instinctively tur[n] to Mrs. Jo, while the little ones ma[ke] her their mother-confessor on all occasions' (*LM*, 25). In fact, she is described, after finding Rob (her son) and Nan (a female pupil or ward at Plumfield) when they get lost while picking huckleberries, as 'cuddling both children as a hen might gather her lost chickens under her motherly wings' (*LM*, 133), aligning her with Christ who, in Matthew 23:37, similarly describes his perpetual desire to 'gathe[r the] children [of Jerusalem] together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings'. This alignment with the divine also connects Jo with Marmee, as Marmee is repeatedly connected with God and leads her children to Him and to Christ (as explored in Section 2.2) – an ideal that Jo perpetuates with her own children in both *Little Men* (1871) and *Jo's Boys* (1886). The sanctity and reach of Jo's alternative mothering is also shown in how, as we saw with the darkness created in the absence of Marmee's influence on her home in *Little Women* (1868-1869) (see Section 2.2), Jo's absence from the lives of her boys is described as 'cast[ing] a gloom over their souls, for when Mother Bhaer desert[s] them, their sun [...] set[s] at noon-day, as it were, and they ha[ve] no refuge left' (*LM*, 93). Jo thus furthers Marmee's benchmark traditional mothering example by becoming the embodiment of how *alternative* mothering can be just as powerful and far reaching as traditional, idealised mothering.

Although Jo is far from the seemingly perfect mother embodied by Marmee, it is her imperfections and uniqueness, reflected in how Nat wonders if 'Mother Bhaer [is] a trifle crazy, or the most delightful woman he ha[s] ever met' (*LM*, 20), that give her the particular mothering appeal that she possesses. Nat is immediately 'inclined to the [...] opinion' that Mother Bhaer is delightful, '*in spite of her peculiar tastes*, for she ha[s] a way of filling up a fellow's plate before he ask[s], of laughing at his jokes, gently tweaking him by the ear, or clapping him on the shoulder, that Nat f[inds] very engaging' (*LM*, 20; my emphasis). Thus, while Jo is simultaneously praised and almost caricatured, she is also presented as the imperfect, great mother, undercutting critiques of the impossibility of becoming like Marmee (such as those noted by Brooks, 2005:n.p.; also quoted in Starr, 2019:n.p.), because the point is *loving* like Marmee, not *being* Marmee. And Jo very successfully becomes a mother who, in her own way, caters to the individual needs of all her children with a sensitivity that comes of the easy-going, liberty-loving, scrape-and-lesson-filled childhood she herself experienced, which equips her to guide each of her own and 'adopted' children to grow into his or her own strengths and combat his or her own weaknesses.

When Jo recalls her original ‘castle in the air’ with her sisters and her mother at the end of the novel, she muses:

“[...] the life I wanted then seems selfish, lonely, and cold to me now. I haven’t given up the hope that I may write a good book yet, but I can wait, and I’m sure it will be all the better for such experiences and illustrations as these,” and Jo pointed from the lively lads in the distance to her father, leaning on the Professor’s arm, as they walked to and fro in the sunshine, deep in one of the conversations which both enjoyed so much, and then to her mother, sitting enthroned among her daughters, with their children in her lap and at her feet, as if all found help and happiness in the face which never could grow old to them. (*LW*, 644)

Jo, like Meg, clearly comes a long way from her original ambitions, learning for herself what is most valuable in life and specifically the rewards that come from living for others, with the steadying and helping hand of her mother to set an example that is worth following. It is also significant to note that inasmuch as Jo seeks not her own ambition but seeks rather the happiness of her entire family (including her ‘adopted’ children),<sup>69</sup> she is eventually rewarded with tremendous success when she chooses to start writing again ‘to help fill up the gaps in [Plumfield’s] income’ (*JB*, 33). She discovers that the “‘magic inkstand’” she envisions writing out of for her ‘castle in the air’ (*LW*, 194) does in fact find its source in “‘such experiences and illustrations’” as those quoted above, or the very real pool of ‘scenes and adventures in the lives of herself and sisters’ that becomes the foundation of her new stories, as it is through these heartfelt, realistic stories that she finds herself ‘famous in a small way, and, better still, with a snug little fortune in her pocket to clear away the obstacles of the present and assure the future of her boys’ (*JB*, 33). Thus, Jo’s lived experiences come to bless her life in a greater way than she expects, even as she shares her experiences with a broad readership who thus reap an extended harvest for the original idealised mother, as Marmee’s lessons and mothering influence reach far afield through Jo’s writing.<sup>70</sup>

### 2.4.3 Amy

Amy’s ‘castle in the air’ is extravagant and broad and reveals the chief weaknesses that she must overcome as she matures into a young woman. She expresses the following initially vague, but ultimately greedy desire: “‘I have ever so many wishes, but the pet one is to be an artist, and

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<sup>69</sup> This observation reminds me of two verses from the Bible, both reflective of the idealised virtue conveyed in how Jo’s life turns out. First, ‘But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you’ (Matthew 6:33). Second, ‘Charity [...] seeketh not her own [...]’ (1 Corinthians 13:4-5).

<sup>70</sup> The parallel between Alcott and Jo here is evident, and Marmee’s mothering harvest can thus be said to even reach so far as to include all those real-life readers who appreciate Alcott’s novels. This can also represent a mothering harvest for Alcott herself as the spinster author, as Marmee is her literary creation.

go to Rome, and do fine pictures, and be the best artist in the whole world” (LW, 195). Amy’s wish is particularly interesting when compared with Meg and Jo’s wishes, because Amy’s does not include wealth (although it may indeed be one of the ‘ever so many wishes’ that she does not bother to mention). Instead, Amy’s wish focuses entirely on one goal: that of being an artist – not simply a famous artist in the same vein as Jo’s wanting to be a famous author, but “*the best artist in the whole world*”. Such a wish reveals Amy’s self-centred nature and her pride. Indeed, near the beginning of the novel, the narrator somewhat sarcastically observes that as the youngest daughter in the family, Amy is ‘in a fair way to be spoiled, for everyone [pets] her, and her small vanities and selfishnesses [are] growing nicely’ (LW, 54).<sup>71</sup>

A significant incident in Amy’s life that helps Marmee to propel Amy forward on the journey to learning how to temper her vanity is Amy’s public humiliation at school for disobeying her teacher’s rule about bringing pickled limes, a kind of fashionable currency among the schoolgirls, to school. When Meg gives Amy some money to buy pickled limes to pay off her “debt” to her schoolmates (LW, 87), Amy, predisposed towards pride and vanity, cannot ‘resist the temptation of displaying [the tempting,] moist brown-paper parcel, before she consign[s] it to the inmost recesses of her desk’ (LW, 88). She subsequently basks in the attention that the ‘rumor’ of her ‘twenty-four delicious limes’ creates, as ‘her “set”’ vie for one of these treats (LW, 89). But Amy’s vanity and pride come to a fall, because she spitefully refuses to promise a lime to Jenny Snow, a girl who has previously made snide comments about Amy’s nose, which Amy sees as her ‘greatest trial’ (LW, 53), and Jenny Snow reports Amy to the teacher. Amy publicly has to throw her limes out of the window, and her hand is caned by the teacher before Amy is displayed as a naughty girl “stand[ing] on the platform till recess” – a very severe punishment for ‘the proud and sensitive little’ Amy (LW, 91-93).

The way that Marmee turns this humiliation of her youngest daughter into a teaching opportunity is intriguing. One of the things that makes Amy’s punishment so terrible for the young girl is the fact that ‘during the twelve years of her life she [has] been governed by love alone’, and she has never been struck (LW, 93). When Amy first gets home, Marmee, Hannah, Meg, Jo and Beth all show loving support for Amy with empathetic ‘indignation’ at what has occurred (LW, 93). Marmee disagrees as a matter of principle with corporal punishment<sup>72</sup> and

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<sup>71</sup> The depiction of Amy is less sympathetic than that of Meg and Beth, and, as may be expected, of Jo, who represents Alcott herself in this family. This reflects some of the sibling tensions that existed between Alcott and her youngest sister, May (for which Amy is an anagram), whose ‘ship floated over smoother seas than Louisa’s [...], a midsummer girl upon whom the gods had smiled’ (Stern, 1996:228), while Alcott laboured for her fame and the money to support her parents, and ultimately, May’s daughter, Lulu, after May’s death.

<sup>72</sup> This reflects Bronson Alcott’s aversion towards corporal punishment, which was progressive for its time. Kerns

withdraws her daughter from the school until Marmee and Mr March can decide how to have Amy proceed with her schooling (*LW*, 93-94). Marmee is willing to question ““Mr. Davis’s manner of teaching””, but she is also aware of unhealthy peer pressure, as she does not ““think the girls [Amy associates] with are doing [Amy] any good”” (*LW*, 94). But once the raw smart of Amy’s disgrace has had some hours to subside, Marmee’s response shifts to a lesson in tougher love, as she will not pander to Amy’s pride or naughtiness and will not allow Amy to nurse her wounds as if she is a ‘martyr’ (*LW*, 94).

After the loving coddling that Amy is used to as the ‘baby’ of the family (*LW*, 345), Marmee’s altered approach must come as a shock. Amy sees her mother’s denouncing of Mr Davis’s teaching methods as an invitation to bemoan the terrible fate of ““those lovely limes”” (*LW*, 94). But instead of commiseration, Amy receives a ‘severe reply’ from Marmee: ““I am not sorry you lost [the limes], for you broke the rules, and deserved some punishment for disobedience”” (*LW*, 94). Taken aback, Amy asks: ““Do you mean you are glad I was disgraced before the whole school?”” (*LW*, 94). Marmee bluntly replies:

“I should not have chosen that way of mending a fault, [...] but I’m not sure that it won’t do you more good than a [mil]der method. You are getting to be rather conceited, my dear, and it is quite time you set about correcting it. You have a good many little gifts and virtues, but there is no need of parading them, for conceit spoils the finest genius. There is not much danger that real talent or goodness will be overlooked long, even if it is, the consciousness of possessing and using it well should satisfy one, and the great charm of all power is modesty.” (*LW*, 94-95)

Marmee shows awareness of the need for a hard-line approach to cut through Amy’s pride when Amy is possibly particularly receptive after the serious injury to her pride. But Marmee’s approach moves beyond the sentimentalist notion that children should be punished by the ‘withdrawal of approval *and* affection’ (Strickland, 1985:12; my emphasis): she remains accessible to Amy but allows Amy to puzzle out for herself the lesson intended by Marmee’s withdrawal of approval (Meg and Jo likewise largely come to a realisation of their own individual lessons without the withdrawal of Marmee’s affection – see Sections 2.4.1 and 2.4.2).

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(2009:33-34) observes that Bronson’s ‘belief that all students should be treated with dignity and respect [was] a natural precursor to his strong feel[ing]s against using corpor[al] punishment as a means of disciplinary intervention’ either at home or in the classroom – this in spite of ‘the dominant thought’ held dear by most educators at the time that ‘physical punishment was a necessary element of the classroom setting [because w]ithout it, many schoolmasters [...] believed that the teachers would lose control of the classroom and the students’. The mainstream belief was disproven by Alcott, who ‘truly believed that students would learn better in an environment free of violence of this sort’ and whose classroom maintained order without the use of corporal punishment (Kerns, 2009:34). Instead of focusing on punishment, Bronson’s ‘approach affirm[ed] children’s innate goodness and s[ought] to develop their potential through an education in love without punishment or competition’ (Kerns, 2009:28).

Amy falls silent after her mother's reprimand and remains 'pensive all evening' (*LW*, 95). Marmee uses one of Amy's own experiences to point her sharply in the right direction and then leaves her to come to her own conclusions. After observing Laurie's entertaining the family that evening with piano playing and singing, Amy questions her mother:

"Is Laurie an accomplished boy?"

"Yes, he has had an excellent education, and has much talent. He will make a fine man, if not spoiled by petting," replied her mother.

"And he isn't conceited, is he?" asked Amy.

"Not in the least. That is why he is so charming and we all like him so much."

"I see. It's nice to have accomplishments and be elegant, but not to show off or get perked up," said Amy thoughtfully.

"These things are always seen and felt in a person's manner and conversations, if modestly used, but it is not necessary to display them," said Mrs. March.

"Any more than it's proper to wear all your bonnets and gowns and ribbons at once, that folks may know you've got them," added Jo, and the lecture ended in a laugh. (*LW*, 95-96)

The lesson is successful as a starting point on Amy's path to learning how to conquer her weaknesses, particularly since Amy comes to an understanding of Marmee's lesson by observing the accomplishments of someone other than herself, showing progress in moving away from her usually self-centred reality. The lesson that Amy learns from her 'valley of humiliation' (*LW*, 87) teaches her to look beyond her pampered self and become more self-critical.

Evidence for Amy's progress in self-criticism and self-improvement is given later in the novel when she has to stay with Aunt March to avoid becoming infected with Beth's scarlet fever. When Marmee returns from Washington and comes to visit Amy as Beth begins to recover, Amy reveals the 'earnest and sincere [...] little plan' to wear a ring (given to her by Aunt March and previously coveted only as a pretty ornament for her plump little hand) as a reminder "not to be selfish" (*LW*, 272) – a plan that she develops on her own through many long hours spent by herself while at the grand house at Plumfield, worrying about her sister's life and unable to do anything to help. Amy explains her plan to Marmee as follows:

"I've thought a great deal lately about my 'bundle of naughties', and being selfish is the largest one in it, so I'm going to try hard to cure it, if I can. Beth isn't selfish, and that's the reason everyone loves her and feels so bad at the thoughts of losing her. People wouldn't feel so bad about me if I was sick, and I don't deserve to have them, but I'd like to be loved and missed by a great many friends, so I'm going to try and be like Beth all I can. I'm apt to forget my resolutions, but if I had something always about me to remind me, I guess I should do better." (*LW*, 272)

Thus, just as Amy discovers, through her own reflection, an example in Laurie of how to become less conceited, she finds in Beth an example of selflessness, which motivates her to work on her

weakness of selfishness so that she can become more like her sister (even if it is mainly to be loved more, which is not precisely a selfless wish). Marmee encourages Amy: “I think you will prosper, for the sincere wish to be good is half the battle” (*LW*, 272).

Amy too must fight against her weakness throughout her life, but she bears much fruit by her growing awareness of the need not to fall into the trap of selfishness. When Mr March returns from the war, he sees a marked change in his youngest daughter:

“I observed that Amy [...] ran errands for her mother all the afternoon, gave Meg her place tonight, and has waited on every one with patience and good humor. I also observe that she does not fret much nor look in the glass, and has not even mentioned a very pretty ring which she wears, so I conclude that she has learned to think of other people more and of herself less, and has decided to try and mold her character as carefully as she molds her little clay figures. I am glad of this, for though I should be very proud of a graceful statue made by her, I shall be infinitely prouder of a lovable daughter with a talent for making life beautiful to herself and others.” (*LW*, 301)

A description offered by the narrator of Amy at sixteen shows that Amy has learned to channel a great deal of her vanity into an ‘indescribable charm called grace’ which is ‘as attractive to many as beauty itself’ in its ‘unconscious yet harmonious’ manifestation (*LW*, 335).

The older Amy also demonstrates much progress on the issue of her pride, when she experiences meanness from her peers at the elegant Mrs Chester’s fair (*LW*, 404). Amy is able to conclude without her mother’s guidance that the meanness of Amy’s peers “‘is no reason’” for Amy to respond in kind, and she receives confirmation from Marmee that “‘a kiss for a blow is [indeed] always best, though it’s not very easy to give it sometimes’” (*LW*, 403). Amy is able to find inspiration in the Bible verse, “‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself’”, for her own conscience to preach her ‘a little sermon [...] then and there’ and then to take ‘the sermon to heart, and straightway put it in practice’ (*LW*, 404) by repaying meanness from her peers with acts of kindness. Amy thus learns to channel her pride into what she describes as follows:

“[...] I want to be a lady, but I mean a true gentlewoman in mind and manners, and I try to do it as far as I know how. I can’t explain exactly, but I want to be above the little meannesses and follies and faults that spoil so many women. I’m far from it now, but I do my best, and hope in time to be what Mother is.” (*LW*, 410)

Beth, whom Amy wanted to emulate, freely endorses Amy’s action – a detail that elevates Amy’s progress through Beth’s accolade, when Beth confesses that she could not have dealt ‘as kindly’ with the situation as Amy does (*LW*, 410). Amy is self-effacing when her family praises her, saying that they “‘needn’t praise [her] so’” because she has only done as she would “‘be done by’” (*LW*, 410). Amy’s general graciousness subsequently reaps the reward of an offer from Aunt Carrol for Amy to accompany her on her trip to Europe (*LW*, 411), allowing Amy to

reach one of the goals in her ‘castle in the air’ as a reward for learning to see beyond herself.

Amy’s eventual marriage to Laurie is interesting in that Laurie’s accomplishments and lack of conceitedness as a boy spur Amy to balance ‘real talent’ and ‘goodness’ with ‘modesty’ (*LW*, 94-96), just as Amy later spurs Laurie to be less idle and wallow less in the disappointment of Jo’s rejection of his love (*LW*, 537-545). Jo and Marmee observe when hearing about Amy and Laurie’s engagement that love truly ““does work miracles””, because their ““cool, reserved, and worldly Amy”” is seen confessing with completely open vulnerability: ““Oh, Mother, I never knew how much like heaven this world could be, when two people love and live for one another!”” (*LW*, 578). Marmee and Mr March observe that love ““has done much for [their] little girl””, because they see that ‘the [new] cordial sweetness of her manner [is] more charming than the new beauty or the old grace, for it [stamps Amy] at once with the unmistakable sign of the true gentlewoman she [has] hoped to become’ (*LW*, 591). Thus, Amy’s vanity, which she channels into gracefulness when she is a teenager, is channelled further as a young adult until it becomes – with the help of the selflessness that comes of love – the true inner beauty that marks a ‘true gentlewoman’. The tangible fruit of Amy and Laurie’s love is a daughter, whom Amy names Beth (*LW*, 645-646), after her own deceased, lovingly remembered sister, a constant reminder of the other person in whose example Amy finds inspiration to learn to overcome her weaknesses.

By the end of the novel, Amy too looks back at her youthful visions of her ‘castle in the air’:

“My castle is very different from what I planned, but I would not alter it, though, like Jo, I don’t relinquish all my artistic hopes, or confine myself to helping others fulfill their dreams of beauty. I’ve begun to model a figure of baby, and Laurie says it is the best thing I’ve ever done. I think so, myself, and mean to do it in marble, so that, whatever happens, I may at least keep the image of my little angel.”

As Amy spoke, a great tear dropped on the golden hair of the sleeping child in her arms, for her one well-beloved daughter was a frail little creature and the dread of losing her was the shadow over Amy’s sunshine. This cross was doing much for both father and mother, for one love and sorrow bound them closely together. [...].

“[...] in spite of my one cross, I can say with Meg, ‘Thank God, I’m a happy woman.’” (*LW*, 645-646)<sup>73</sup>

Evidence of Amy’s progress in combating her weaknesses of pride and selfishness is thus given in that Amy learns to channel her artistic ability not into making herself into ““the best artist in the whole world”” (*LW*, 195) but into developing ““a talent for making life beautiful to herself and others”” as wished for her earlier by her father (*LW*, 301). Her artistic hopes now are centred

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<sup>73</sup> Marmee’s advice, this time about little Beth (known as Bess), once again proves prophetic, as little Beth is indeed shown to be more than ‘better’, as a healthy, talented young girl in *Little Men* (1871) and *Jo’s Boys* (1886).

on creating a marble ‘figure of [her] baby’, and the fact that this work of art is labelled as ‘the best thing’ Amy has ever done artistically shows the power of family relationships over fame and any accomplishment that is merely for accomplishment’s sake.<sup>74</sup> Similar to how Jo finds true and lasting success when her writing becomes about the simple adventures of her real-life family, Amy finds her own true artistic skill in creating art out of love for her family.

#### 2.4.4 *Beth*

Beth’s modest ‘castle in the air’ is quite different, as is her story, since she does not get to reminisce and reflect on her old castle in the air with all of her sisters at the ‘yearly apple-picking’ celebration at Plumfield (*LW*, 640), because she dies as a young adult. Whereas Jo and Amy express their desires for fame and fortune, and Meg wants all the creature comforts, and all three ultimately find a different ‘castle’ from what they wish, Beth’s wish is fulfilled completely:

“Mine is to stay at home safe with Father and Mother, and help take care of the family,” said Beth contentedly.

“Don’t you wish for anything else?” asked Laurie.

“Since I had my little piano, I am perfectly satisfied. I only wish we may all keep well and be together, *nothing else*.” (*LW*, 195; my emphasis)

Beth’s wish aligns with Meg’s description of her in the first pages of the novel, when, after Meg criticises Jo for being “‘a tomboy’” and Amy for being “‘a goose’”, Beth asks what Meg would call her so that she too can ‘share the lecture’ (*LW*, 7). Meg immediately responds that Beth is “‘a dear, and *nothing else*” [...] and no one contradict[s] her, for the “‘Mouse’ [is] the pet of the family’ (*LW*, 7; my emphasis). The fact that the phrase “‘nothing else’” is repeatedly associated with Beth shows the purity of her simple, selfless heart.

Unlike her sisters, Beth does not explicitly review her ‘castle in the air’ wish from her youth. However, she comments indirectly on it when she tells Jo she is going to die:

“[...] I have a feeling that it never was intended I should live long. I’m not like the rest of you. I never made any plans about what I’d do when I grew up. I never thought of being married, as you all did. I couldn’t seem to imagine myself anything but stupid little Beth, trotting about at home, of no use anywhere but there. I never wanted to go away [...]” (*LW*, 495)

Beth’s self-deprecating comments, suggesting that the very absence of ambition and extravagant

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<sup>74</sup> Although tensions existed between May and Alcott, Alcott paid for some of her sister’s training, and (Abigail) May Alcott Niericker was to become a serious artist, exhibiting in the Paris Salon and later training the sculptor of the Lincoln Memorial statue (New England Historical Society, n.d.(b):n.p.). Alcott also explored her sister’s dilemma as well as her own in choosing between art and a family, much more sympathetically and seriously, in *Diana and Persis* (1978), which she did not complete; it was only published posthumously.

desires is a flaw, only serve to confirm her original ‘castle in the air’ wish, because her desire for the happiness of others and not herself is what ultimately makes her so successful and is also what gives her a harvest that reflects the fact that she is a little mother figure too.

Beth’s ‘castle in the air’ wish contains no self-interest and reveals no significant weaknesses the way that her sisters’ ‘castles in the air’ do.<sup>75</sup> This means that instead of her needing to be taught and guided to become more like the mother she idolises, Beth is already uniquely equipped herself and from the start of the novel possesses attributes and qualities that are aligned with those of her mother, although these are not brought to bear on children of her own.

Beth dies before being allowed to experience the wifhood and biological motherhood that fulfil her three sisters, but Beth overcomes her small set of weaknesses early in her life and has nothing more to learn to become fulfilled in terms of her dream. There are also no significant instances in the text of Marmee’s mothering Beth to guide her to improve herself in the way that is necessary with Meg, Jo and Amy. But Marmee still provides the guidance Beth most needs, for example, approaching her untimely death, Beth can be found ‘reading in her well-worn little [guide]book’, the gift Marmee gives all her daughters at the start of the novel (see Section 2.2), as she tries to ‘wean herself from the dear old life, and fit herself for the life to come’ (*LW*, 550).

The narrator reveals early on that Beth’s self-professed chief weakness and trial is her shyness. Whereas each of Beth’s sisters is given a dedicated chapter in *Little Women* (1868-1869) that elaborates on that girl’s greatest weakness(es) and how she learns through trials to begin to overcome it, the chapter dedicated to Beth shows how she starts to step beyond her shyness in wholehearted expressions of gratitude and affection that are her responses to the blessings others wish to give her reciprocally for her gentleness and willing, selfless service (although accepting such blessings is perhaps a trial to Beth, because she is so shy and believes herself undeserving). The pattern of the chapter titles, all alluding to episodes in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), points to the contrast – the bright promise of ‘Beth Finds the Palace Beautiful’ (*LW*, 78) stands out sharply against the dark foreboding of ‘Meg Goes to Vanity Fair’ (*LW*, 112), ‘Jo Meets Apollyon’ (*LW*, 97) and ‘Amy’s Valley of Humiliation’ (*LW*, 87), although even Beth’s

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<sup>75</sup> Beth’s intrinsic goodness leaves some modern readers uncomfortable. I have to disagree, for instance, with Saxton’s (1978:5) facile dismissal of Beth, when she claims that Beth ‘doesn’t even assume her life for very long’, adding that ‘[s]he teaches the lesson of self-sacrifice, demonstrating how the quintessential little woman fades away behind other people’s needs and desires until, in a display of ultimate good manners, she disappears forever’. Beth, like Marmee, does *not* disappear but remains an active force for good in those she leaves behind and continues inspiring readers of the novel – the ultimate reflection of her clear visibility.

seemingly wonderful experience involves her overcoming her own ‘lions’ (Bunyan, [1678] 1965:78) in combatting her shyness before she can enter into the ‘Palace Beautiful’. Beth overcomes some of her shyness after being subtly invited by Laurie’s grandfather, Mr Laurence (of whom Beth is quite afraid at first), to “‘come and drum away’” as often and as much as she wishes on the disused ‘grand piano’ next door at the wealthy Laurences’ home (*LW*, 79-81). The invitation leads to Beth’s not feeling ‘frightened’ of the old man any longer, seen in the ‘grateful squeeze’ she gives his hand ‘because she [has] no words to thank him for the precious gift he [has] given her’ (*LW*, 81), and the narrator reveals that when ‘Beth at last touche[s] the great instrument, [she] straightway forg[ets] her fear, herself, and everything else but the unspeakable delight which the music g[ives] her, for it [is] like the voice of a beloved friend’ (*LW*, 81).

Beth’s passion for her music (her gift, like Jo’s writing and Amy’s painting and sculpture) helps her to overcome her shyness, and in the safe space created around her music, she can respond with compassion for her benefactor, resulting in a tender relationship between her and Mr Laurence, when he sees reflected in her now-trusting eyes the eyes of his deceased granddaughter (*LW*, 81). She repays kindness with kindness: in gratitude for the gift of allowing her to play the grand piano whenever she wishes, Beth asks her mother to allow her “‘to work Mr. Laurence a pair of slippers [... to] thank him’”, and Marmee approves, promising Beth that the “‘girls will help [Beth] about them, and [Marmee] will pay for the making up’” of the slippers (*LW*, 82). The narrator tellingly reveals that Marmee takes ‘peculiar pleasure in granting Beth’s requests because [Beth] so seldom ask[s] anything for herself’ (*LW*, 82). Beth’s selflessness and thoughtfulness thus become their own reward, as Mr Laurence is so pleased with Beth’s gift that he sends her another gift in return, writing:

“I have had many pairs of slippers in my life, but I never had any that suited me so well as yours [...], and these will always remind me of the gentle giver. I like to pay my debts, so I know you will allow ‘the old gentleman’ to send you something which once belonged to the little granddaughter he lost. [...].” (*LW*, 84)

The gift of the ‘little cabinet piano’ that accompanies this note (*LW*, 83) is the very piano Beth speaks of in her ‘castle in the air’ wish, meaning that Beth’s selflessness and tender spirit earn her the only material thing she ever pines for, which is ‘a fine piano’ (*LW*, 53).

Later in the novel, even Beth’s ‘burden’ of shyness is confirmed not to be as much of a weakness as she supposes it to be. The narrator remarks while Beth is ill with scarlet fever:

Everyone missed Beth. The milkman, baker, grocer, and butcher inquired how she did, poor Mrs. Hummel came to beg pardon for her thoughtlessness and to get a shroud for Minna, the neighbors sent all sorts of comforts and good wishes, and even those who knew her best

were surprised to find how many friends shy little Beth had made. (*LW*, 248)

Thus, Marmee's observation from early on in the novel is correct: "Each of you told what your burden [to carry on the 'Pilgrim's Progress' journey] was just now, except Beth. I rather think she hasn't got any" (*LW*, 15) – even though Beth sees herself as having a 'burden' and does work on it, as shown above.

Beth unconsciously cements her role as 'an angel in the house' (*LW*, 320)<sup>76</sup> and selflessly fulfils her wish for her 'castle in the air' through her perpetual and instinctive 'unselfish ambition to live for others' (*LW*, 248) and her inclination towards diligent work and self-improvement. I therefore argue that Beth, albeit in a smaller ambit, can be seen as a second motherly influence in *Little Women* (1868-1869), serving, providing inspiration and inviting change in her sisters, echoing Marmee's influence to some extent, although her sisters do not recognise this until the threat of Beth's being taken away from them looms (perhaps because she is a non-traditional, unexpected source of such power, unlike Marmee from whom such power seems to be a given). The narrator provides the following warning early in the novel, foreshadowing Beth's eventual illness and death that comes of her sacrifices (to serve her family and others) not being recognised until it is too late: 'There are many Beths in the world, shy and quiet, sitting in corners till needed, and living for others so cheerfully that no one sees the sacrifices till the little cricket on the hearth stops chirping [...]' (*LW*, 53). The description of Beth as 'the little cricket on the hearth' is an allusion to Charles Dickens's *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1845) and presents Beth as a 'Genius of [...] Hearth and Home' (Dickens, [1845] 2007:n.p.)<sup>77</sup> and as a fairy-like creature who acts as a bringer of good luck and who protects the happiness of the family and enables each member of the family to better see things as they really are. Such a view of Beth as a kind of 'little mother' expands the definition of motherhood by branching it away from the narrow role of biological motherhood, showing that the attributes of motherhood do not always have to be taught and learned but that they can exist naturally even in a young girl who never gets the opportunity to marry or have children of her own. Since the focus of this discussion on *Little Women* (1868-1869) is Marmee's individualised parenting of each of her daughters, however, I only consider Beth's alternative kind of motherhood briefly to show that Marmee's mothering harvest does continue through Beth, although not necessarily because of any specific parenting influence that Marmee has, other than her own wholesome example.

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<sup>76</sup> Alcott described her sister, Lizzie, like motherly Beth (Alcott, 1989:67), as the family's 'little housekeeper, – [their] angel in a cellar kitchen'.

<sup>77</sup> The University of Michigan's *Dictionary of Symbolism* (2001:n.p.) defines the hearth as follows: 'At the center of the home, the hearth provides warmth and light, food and protection. Symbolizes love, fertility and life.'

References to Beth as a little mother are obvious.<sup>78</sup> The first detailed description of her in the novel, for example, is the following:

She was a housewifely little creature, and helped Hannah keep home neat and comfortable for [the family], never thinking of any reward but to be loved. Long, quiet days she spent, not lonely nor idle, for her little world was peopled with imaginary friends, and she was by nature a busy bee. There were six dolls to be taken up and dressed every morning, for Beth was a child still and loved her pets as well as ever. Not one whole or handsome one among them, all were outcasts till Beth took them in, for when her sisters outgrew these idols, they passed to her because Amy would have nothing old or ugly. Beth cherished them all the more tenderly for that very reason, and set up a hospital for infirm dolls. No pins were ever stuck into their cotton vitals, no harsh words or blows were ever given them, no neglect ever saddened the heart of the most repulsive, but all were fed and clothed, nursed and caressed with an affection which never failed. (*LW*, 52)

This extract shows just how different Beth is from her sisters – her daily household routines are stronger than any aversion to dusting and doing dishes; she is satisfied with keeping the home fresh and neat, rather than hankering for expensive and gorgeous trifles; her temper is even and sweet; and she is far too shy for vanity. After she dies, Jo remembers ‘her housewifely spirit’ that seems ‘to linger around the little mop and the old brush’ used by Beth, and as Jo uses them, she finds ‘herself humming the songs Beth used to hum, imitating Beth’s orderly ways, and giving the little touches here and there that [keep] everything fresh and cozy, which [is] the first step toward making home happy’ (*LW*, 572).

When Marmee is away looking after Mr March, Beth takes over her mother’s tasks: she looks after the Hummels (*LW*, 238), becomes the source of ‘comfort or advice’ for ‘everyone [...] in their small affairs’ because of how ‘sweet and helpful’ she is, and fulfils the motherly ‘little household ceremony’ of being ‘at the window to nod and smile, and wave her hand’ when Meg and Jo go ‘out to their daily tasks’ (*LW*, 48, 231). These trademark motherly acts become her own traits, “‘so like [...] Beth’” (*LW*, 231) – evidence of her motherly nature.

Besides carrying out her mother’s roles when needed, Beth is subtly described with imagery similar to that used for Marmee. One example is Beth’s singing ‘like a little lark about her work’ (*LW*, 53), a miniature version of Marmee, similarly described as ‘singing like a lark’ morning and night in the home (*LW*, 16). (Interestingly, the lark, while it has a lovely voice, is a nondescript small bird that blends into its environment, much as Beth creates beauty without

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<sup>78</sup> All of the March girls at times are referred to as ‘maternal’ or ‘motherly’ in some instances before they become actual mothers. This is because the girls are used to “‘playing mother’” with each other (*LW*, 55), as can probably be expected in any sibling group where the children try in any way to be there for and take care of each other. Beth is unique in her motherliness however, because it also accompanies a largely faultless character and is therefore elevated and described as more influential throughout the text than the other sisters’ mothering influences on each other.

recognition, which only comes when it is almost too late.) Both Beth, the little mother, and Marmee, who has become the benchmark idealised mother, prove an inspiring influence in the home, as Marmee's daughters take comfort in the singing that frames each day for them (*LW*, 16 – mentioned specifically with reference to Marmee in Section 2.2). Jo, after Beth dies, finds herself encouraged and soothed in her grief when 'humming the songs Beth used to hum' (*LW*, 572), which can be connected to how Marmee's songs likewise continue to inspire the girls long after Marmee's death.

Like Marmee, Beth's 'sunshiny presence' (*LW*, 53) is frequently associated with light (images of light are also included in descriptions of Meg and Jo as mothers – see Sections 2.4.1 and 2.4.2), and her absence, or the threat of her absence, is accompanied by shadow. The narrator's foreshadowing of Beth's death includes a description of her as a 'sweet, sunshiny presence' which, once it 'vanishes, leav[es] silence and shadow behind' (*LW*, 53). Furthermore, when Beth first takes ill with scarlet fever, the images of darkness, despair and loneliness in the simultaneous absence of Marmee and threat of losing Beth are overwhelming:

How dark the days seemed now, how sad and lonely the house, and how heavy were the hearts of the sisters as they worked and waited, while the shadow of death hovered over the once happy home. Then it was that Margaret, sitting alone with tears dropping often on her work, felt how rich she had been in things more precious than any luxuries money could buy— in love, protection, peace, and health, the real blessings of life. Then it was that Jo, living in the darkened room, with that suffering little sister always before her eyes and that pathetic voice sounding in her ears, learned to see the beauty and the sweetness of Beth's nature, to feel how deep and tender a place she filled in all hearts, and to acknowledge the worth of Beth's unselfish ambition to live for others, and make home happy by that exercise of those simple virtues which all may possess, and which all should love and value more than talent, wealth, or beauty. And Amy, in her exile, longed eagerly to be at home, that she might work for Beth, feeling now that no service would be hard or irksome, and remembering, with regretful grief, how many neglected tasks those willing hands had done for her. (*LW*, 247-248)

Beth's transformative influence parallels Marmee's; Jo even desperately laments at one point, "Beth is my conscience, and I can't give her up. I can't! I can't!" (*LW*, 251). While Beth is not called upon to exert discipline, as Marmee is, and to take her nurturing to the level of being a breadwinner, her example sets unspoken limits which make more active discipline unnecessary, and she helps to provide the domestic support that enables her mother to work away from home. It may be argued on the one hand that Beth's power lies purely within the domestic bounds of the Marches' home and therefore does not suffice to mother young women for a future outside that home, especially in a world where women's roles were changing, but on the other hand, the lessons in patience and kindness given through Beth are applicable far beyond the home.

Beth's transformative power stems from her never-failing selflessness and her dedication to her family and all within her reach. This devotion is not a sign of weakness: her *active* devotion is a strength, as in Marmee. It is seen even when she is herself extremely ill and at risk:

Meanwhile she lay on her bed with old Joanna [her poorest invalid doll] at her side, for even in her wanderings she did not forget her forlorn prot[égé]. She longed for her cats, but would not have them brought, lest they should get sick, and in her quiet hours she was full of anxiety about Jo. She sent loving messages to Amy, bade them tell her mother that she would write soon, and often begged for pencil and paper to try to say a word, that Father might not think she had neglected him. (*LW*, 248)

Beth's commitment to everyone but herself proves transformative to many, even throughout the final few months of her life, as she sits 'tranquil and busy as ever, for nothing [can] change the sweet, unselfish nature, and even while preparing to leave life, she [tries] to make it happier for those who should remain behind' (*LW*, 548). She even extends her (fairy god-)mothering influence to 'make little things for the school children daily passing to and fro'; she drops 'from her window [...] gifts miraculously suited to their tastes and needs' until they come 'to regard the gentle giver as a sort of fairy godmother' (*LW*, 548-549), and until even a needle becomes too heavy to lift (*LW*, 549).

Beth attracts only the best and brightest from everyone by being the best and brightest for them, even in her sick room, where all that she and they love comes together:

The pleasantest room in the house was set apart for Beth, and in it was gathered everything that she most loved, flowers, pictures, her piano, the little worktable, and the beloved pussies. Father's best books found their way there, Mother's easy chair, Jo's desk, Amy's finest sketches, and every day Meg brought her babies on a loving pilgrimage, to make sunshine for Aunty Beth. John quietly set apart a little sum, that he might enjoy the pleasure of keeping the invalid supplied with the fruit she loved and longed for. Old Hannah never wearied of concocting dainty dishes to tempt a capricious appetite, dropping tears as she worked, and from across the sea [from Amy and Laurie] came little gifts and cheerful letters, seeming to bring breaths of warmth and fragrance from lands that know no winter. (*LW*, 548)

Beth's expansive circle of motherly influence reaps rewards that are solid, as the narrator affirms, building her 'castle' on the rock of love. By contrast, her sisters' quests to achieve their youthful 'castles in the air' are centred on their own desires for achievements and recognition and all need to be adjusted to become a reality, one very different from what they initially dreamed of. Beth's rewards are both material and intangible, both temporal and spiritual, enabling her to enjoy her life on earth with all the material things she could ever hope for (all the more plentiful because she never wishes for anything but her piano) and make herself fit to finally attain "the peace which is a true Celestial City" (*LW*, 15) through the rewards of her ever-sweetening character that reaps for her 'treasures in heaven' (Matthew 6:20).

Beth reaps her own modest mothering harvest for accompanying her sisters on enough of their journeys towards overcoming their weaknesses to realise what their true ‘castles’, not ‘in the air’, but on earth are. Meg is married and has her twins before Beth dies<sup>79</sup> and has learnt fully what she realised at Beth’s first sickbed – ‘how rich she [is] in things more precious than any luxuries money could buy— in love, protection, peace, and health, the real blessings of life’ (*LW*, 248). Amy, in Europe and falling in love with Laurie, has come a long way in learning to curb her vanity, pride and selfishness (at times using Beth as her example, as discussed in Section 2.4.3). Finally, although Jo is lonely and depressed when Beth dies, in first living for Beth and then grieving Beth’s passing while simultaneously trying to be more like Beth in living her life cheerfully for her parents, Jo finds the capacity of her heart growing enough to “‘take in so many” more loved ones than she ever realises is possible (*LW*, 577) in her former more self-centred life and goals. Thus, Beth’s illness and death are what Jo needs to fully learn what she begins to see when Beth first takes ill, because in learning ‘to see the beauty and the sweetness of Beth’s nature’, Jo begins ‘to acknowledge the worth of Beth’s unselfish ambition to live for others, and make home happy’ – an ambition that results in the ‘deep and tender [...] place [Beth fills] in all hearts’ (*LW*, 248; quoted in full above), and which Jo can thus find too by following Beth’s example.

In following Marmee’s example, Beth thus provides one alternative idealised version of mothering in *Little Women* (1868-1869) and offers an interesting extension to Marmee’s traditional, linear mothering harvest of children and grandchildren. Marmee’s harvest becomes Beth’s harvest too, since Beth plays a significant role in Marmee’s harvest, and Marmee’s full harvest represents a fulfilment of Beth’s ‘castle in the air’ wish, which is in part brought about by Beth’s transformational influence, as ‘tender thoughts’ of her continue to inspire (*LW*, 580, 638). Jo in particular acknowledges that Beth has helped her more “‘than any one in the world””, and that she is “‘learning to feel that [...] death can’t part”” her and Beth (*LW*, 553). Beth agrees, saying, “‘I know it cannot, and I don’t fear it any longer, for I’m sure I shall be your Beth still, to love and help you more than ever”” (*LW*, 553).

Beth’s legacy also continues through her sisters’ daughters: as Meg’s daughter, Daisy, grows a little older, she is described as ‘as serene and loving’ as Beth – so much so that Daisy’s grandfather, Mr March, sometimes calls Daisy ‘Beth’ (*LW*, 609); and Amy and Laurie’s

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<sup>79</sup> Alcott inverts the real-life events (Lizzie Alcott died in 1858, the year before Anna married John Pratt, but Beth lives to see her sister’s marriage and children), possibly to shape Beth as a positive influence who has a legacy beyond the memory of a painful final illness.

daughter is actually named after Beth (although she is referred to as ‘Bess’ in *Little Men* (1871) and *Jo’s Boys* (1886)). Beth’s primary harvest is the legacy she leaves in her mothering influence on Meg, Jo and Amy, because Beth is the embodiment of all that Marmee teaches: she is a true ‘angel in the house’ who fully and instinctively applies the virtues taught by her mother and, in doing so, unconsciously provides a second example for her more ‘human’ (*LW*, 53) sisters to follow. Beth’s wish for her whole family to “‘keep well and be together’” (*LW*, 195) is indeed fulfilled, even if she is not there to see it, proving to her sisters and to the reader that her ‘castle’ is built on the solid bedrock of the ‘exercise of those simple virtues which all may possess, and which all should love and value more than talent, wealth, or beauty’ (*LW*, 248; quoted in full earlier in this section).

## 2.5 Expanding motherhood: Aunt March

There are other examples of alternative mother figures in *Little Women* (1868-1869), besides Beth and even Jo – whose alternative mothering is primarily shown in *Little Men* (1871) and *Jo’s Boys* (1886), as well as in many of Alcott’s other works. However, since the primary purpose of my exploration of the novel is to establish Marmee as a benchmark figure of idealised traditional motherhood, within the limited scope of this dissertation I can only consider one more alternative mother figure here: Mr March’s childless, widowed sister, Aunt March. This discussion broadens my argument from this text that focuses mainly on idealised motherhood to Montgomery’s *Anne* series (1908-1939), where my discussion focuses primarily on alternative motherhoods.<sup>80</sup>

The irascible Aunt March enjoys considerable material wealth but is crotchety, fussy, rigid and ultimately, lonely. She has been married and is now a widow, and she has no children. The narrator reveals at one point that Aunt March has ‘a soft place in her old heart for her nephew’s children, though she [would not] think it proper to confess it’ (*LW*, 258). At the start of the novel, she has found a way to assist the family by employing Jo, her namesake, as a paid companion and keeps Jo constantly at her beck and call. Aunt March also ‘usually [gives] the sisters a present of twenty-five dollars apiece at New Year’s’ (*LW*, 375) but makes it her business to try to ensure that their futures turn out the way she believes they should. She sees

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<sup>80</sup> Other characters who I believe could be read as alternative mother figures are the March girls, as they practise ‘playing mother’ with each other throughout their lives (*LW*, 55; see also James, 2015:100-112); Laurie’s grandfather, Mr Laurence; and the Marches’ housekeeper, Hannah. Even the omniscient narrator can be seen as an alternative mother figure, as the narrator constantly comments on the events in *Little Women*, adding opinions or underlining for the reader’s benefit moral lessons that can be gleaned from the examples set by the March girls.

the March parents as ““a pair of babies”” in terms of ““worldly wisdom”” (*LW*, 310) and thus focuses her attentions on the daughters – even offering, at a time before the opening of the novel, ‘to adopt one of the girls when the troubles’ of poverty come upon the family but ending up ‘offended because her offer [is] declined’ (*LW*, 50).

When Amy stays with Aunt March during Beth’s bout of scarlet fever, Aunt March deliberately tries her hand at mothering Amy, feeling it ‘her duty to try and counteract, as far as possible, the bad effects of home freedom and indulgence’, so she takes Amy ‘by the hand, and [teaches] her as [Aunt March] herself [was] taught sixty years ago, a process which carri[s] dismay to Amy’s soul, and ma[kes] her feel like a fly in the web of a very strict spider’ (*LW*, 258). But in spite of Amy’s distaste for Aunt March’s lessons, Amy’s obedience pleases Aunt March so much that Aunt March decides to replace Jo with Amy as her companion (*LW*, 320). This eventually leads to an indirect kind of mothering harvest for Aunt March, when Aunt March’s funding of Amy’s trip to Europe leads to Amy’s marriage to Laurie – a match that Aunt March no doubt approves of as the March family’s last hope of making a wealthy connection – and, more indirectly, to Jo’s marriage to Professor Bhaer, whom she would not have met had Aunt March elected to send Jo to Europe, which is an option that Aunt March does initially consider (*LW*, 411).

What is particularly interesting about Aunt March as an alternative mother figure is that her direct and deliberate attempts to influence the girls in ways that seem proper to her frequently backfire, so the majority of the fruit borne of Aunt March’s mothering is largely sown unintentionally. For example, when John Brooke confesses his love for Meg, and Meg is unsure of how to respond, because she does not yet know how she feels about him, Aunt March’s vehement disapproval of the match (because John is poor) rouses Meg to defend and accept him (*LW*, 305-313). The narrator allows a glimpse into Meg’s mind: ‘If Aunt March had begged Meg to accept John Brooke, [Meg] would probably have declared she couldn’t think of it, but as she was p[re]mptorily ordered not to like him, she immediately made up her mind that she would’ (*LW*, 309-310). Meg’s happy marriage and its fruits (including Meg’s second daughter whom Meg names Josy (Josie) – or Josephine – after Aunt Josephine March and Jo) are an unintended harvest for the old woman, who, as an entertaining aside tells the reader, finds herself much softened by the time of the Brookes’ wedding three years later and is seen wiping ‘dew’ from her ‘sharp old eyes’ and sniffing ‘audibly’ (*LW*, 336).

The most abundant harvest that comes from Aunt March’s actions on behalf of her nieces,

however, is revealed in the last chapter of the novel (*LW*, 634-646). Aunt March expresses her largely unacknowledged affection for her namesake through leaving Plumfield, Aunt March's spacious old house, to Jo, which enables Jo to fulfil her dream of starting a school for boys that need mothering. The narrator comments that 'poor, dear Aunt March would have lamented had she been there to see the sacred precincts of prim, well-ordered Plumfield overrun with' the boys in the school (*LW*, 639) and adds that there is 'a sort of poetic justice about [this arrangement ...], for the old lady had been the terror of the boys for miles around, and now' her home has become 'a sort of boys' paradise' (*LW*, 639).

Aunt March's unwitting assistance in bringing about an ever-expanding harvest of motherhood is rewarded: in *Jo's Boys* (1886), Meg observes that "a home like this will keep Aunt March's memory green as long as it lasts" (*JB*, 2). Given Aunt March's less-than-ideal alternative mother status, it is telling that in the final pages of *Little Women* (1868-1869), both Aunt March and Marmee are acknowledged when toasts are given at the festive family harvest gathering:

When no one could eat any more, [Jo's husband] proposed the first regular toast, which was always drunk at such times—"Aunt March, God bless her!" A toast heartily given by the good man, who never forgot how much he owed her, and quietly drunk by the boys, who had been taught to keep her memory green.

"Now, Grandma's sixtieth birthday! Long life to her, with three times three!"

That was given with a will, as you may well believe, and the cheering once begun, it was hard to stop it. (*LW*, 642-643)

This moment acknowledges how the harvests of these two very different mother figures are intertwined, reminding the reader that both are needed in facilitating the eventual family harvest.<sup>81</sup> This suggestion thus works to enhance one aspect of the argument that I present in Chapters 3 and 4, which is that mothering is not a role that can be exclusively assigned to the biological mother figures who figure in dominant discourses on motherhood, but rather that alternative mother figures must also be acknowledged as influential and given the credit that is due to them for their roles in the harvest of mothering.

## 2.6 Conclusion

Alcott's idealised representation of motherhood in Marmee provides a benchmark mother figure for my study of different kinds of motherhood in novels by Alcott and Montgomery. Marmee clearly expresses the view that 'a woman's happiest kingdom is home, her highest honor the art

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<sup>81</sup> Intriguingly, in the Alcott family, although Abba's relatives sometimes assisted the family, it was mainly Louisa May Alcott herself who mended the family fortunes with her writing. It thus seems that she invests the two Josephines – Jo and the widowed Aunt March, the most unlikely of fairy godmothers – with her own ability to assist the family in its financial troubles.

of ruling it not as a queen, but as a wise wife and mother' (*LW*, 528). However, the fact that she is presented, with the bounty of her harvest, at the end of *Little Women* (1868-1869) as 'the queen of the day' (*LW*, 643) underlines her status as a successful mother, who is celebrated with greater reverence with every additional generation that becomes part of her extensive, eternal harvest. Marmee is clearly not only a mother figure to her own children; she becomes an inspiration for mothering in the lives of each of her daughters too, particularly Jo, who manages to combine mothering with a creative career, inspiring many readers.<sup>82</sup> Marmee's harvest thus goes beyond her fictional life to make her an idealised mother figure to generations of real "little women" (*LW*, 13) who find value in her qualities and seek to emulate her, symbolically giving "her a check for a million, to be spent in charity" (*LW*, 604) for the success of her mothering efforts in making timeless most of the values she embodies.

The action of mothering points past itself to teaching those within its circle of influence a greater reliance on self and, according to Alcott, on an eternally reliable source beyond either the self or the mother figure, such as God. Wholesome motherhood, as embodied in Marmee, enlightens and uplifts, inspires and directs; it is open, honest and keeps no secrets from those it teaches and provides a consistently gentle, reliable source of comfort and peace to which those being mothered can always turn with complete confidence. Alcott's vision of the best kind of motherhood acknowledges that there is a need to recognise one's individual weaknesses and to commit to "trying" (*LW*, 77) to battle against them every day, driven by the simple and "sincere wish to be good" (*LW*, 272), rather than to pretend to perfection. Her depiction of mothering is also an invitation to recognise the value of love over recognition, wealth and ambition, and that although the principles applied are universal, the teaching and learning of them must be adapted to suit the individual.

Marmee's mothering influence undoubtedly guides each of her daughters to the realisation of what is truly important. She embodies the sentimentalist belief that 'a bond of affection between parent and child would provide the leverage for obedience' (Strickland, 1985:12). She (like her deputy, Beth) acts as a kind of conscience or compass for her daughters in that they come to know her example, values and guidance so well that they can judge their own actions through

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<sup>82</sup> Even powerful females in present-day politics were once inspired by Jo in *Little Women* (1868-1869). Hillary Clinton (quoted in Gonzales, 2016:n.p.) said in a 2016 interview conducted by an 11-year-old girl:

"When I was young, I really identified with *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott, particularly the character of Jo. The book was written at a time when there weren't as many options for women and girls as there are now. [...] I remember reading that book and thinking, I want to be like that when I grew up." (see also *Hillary Clinton*, n.d.)

the lens of her eyes to become agents of their own learning through their experiences. Furthermore, she teaches them in word and by example to be generous in spirit and deed, essentially encouraging them to be mothers to everyone, as she is, through generosity. Marmee's influence even enriches the more secular passions and hobbies of her daughters by inspiring Jo and Amy in particular to centre their exercise of creative talents around the very real influence of family, allowing Marmee to reap an even greater harvest through their art, because their art can reach others far beyond their own family (Jo's successful books can be said to influence the fictional children who read them much as *Little Women* (1868-1869) mothers readers in the real world).

My brief focus on Jo, Beth and Aunt March as alternative mother figures with plentiful harvests rooted in alternative motherhood suggests that idealised traditional mothering is not the only way to reap a bountiful mothering harvest. This launches me into my in-depth discussion of the fruits of alternative motherhoods (in Chapters 3 and 4), as depictions of motherhood progressed from Alcott's idealised Marmee into Montgomery's exploration primarily of alternative mothering in her *Anne* series (1908-1939).

## Chapter 3:

### *Anne of Green Gables: adopting motherhood*

*Anne suddenly came close to Marilla and slipped her hand into the older woman's hard palm.*

*"It's lovely to be going home and know it's home," she said. "I love Green Gables already, and I never loved any place before. No place ever seemed like home. Oh, Marilla, I'm so happy. [...]."*

*Something warm and pleasant welled up in Marilla's heart at touch of that thin little hand in her own—a throb of the maternity she had missed, perhaps. Its very unaccustomedness and sweetness disturbed her.*

(AGG, 68)

#### 3.1 Introduction

In James's (2015) analysis of the constructions of motherhood in the works of Louisa May Alcott, she uses the Bakhtinian notion that constructions and reconstructions of ideas are like garments that are passed on – some kept, some altered, some discarded (James, 2015:4) – to posit the idea that the unmarried and childless Alcott is 'trying on motherhood' (James, 2015:4). She explains it as follows:

Motherhood as a construct, like a particular item of clothing or outfit, holds a certain allure. Biological motherhood is one of those choices which are absolute – one either has children or one does not, but that does not mean that one cannot be maternal, if one so *chooses*. [...] I would argue, Alcott, who did not marry, tried on various images of mothers and motherhood in her texts. (James, 2015:6; my emphasis)

This strategy is played out in Alcott's fiction, giving 'the reader different kinds of mother figures – both good and bad – to grapple with and explore' (James, 2015:5). With the above in mind, I argue that although Lucy Maud Montgomery did marry in July 1911 (Rubio, 2008:151), and was later to raise two sons,<sup>83</sup> she undertakes a similar endeavour in her *Anne* series (1908-1939), which she began to write years before she was married. Published 40 years after the first part of *Little Women* (1868), her novel *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) expands the ideal construct of motherhood through its focus on a young orphan girl, Anne Shirley, who must get on with several less-than-ideal mother figures, rather than a focus on daughters in a more 'ideal' nuclear family such as the March family.

Drain (1992:40) asserts that Montgomery's novel 'allows, even demands, exploration of the

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<sup>83</sup> She had three sons – Chester (1912–1963), Hugh (1914–1914), and Stuart (1915–1982), but her second son died at birth (Rubio, 2008:184-185), much like her character Anne's first baby, little Joyce in *Anne's House of Dreams*, published in 1917, when Montgomery's own loss was still raw (AHD, 172-179).

ideals and realities, both individual and social, of femininity and femaleness'. One of the aspects traditionally associated with these 'ideals and realities' of 'femininity and femaleness' is motherhood and thus the act of mothering. I would therefore argue that the fact that at a very young age Anne loses her biological mother (who remains an idealised traditional mother figure in the series) but still needs to be mothered opens up a multitude of ways to explore representations of *mothering* that stretch far beyond the ideal when they are redefined by less-than-ideal realities, as shaped by Montgomery. Bode (2008:55), in her article 'L.M. Montgomery and the anguish of mother loss', points out that 'Victorian literature, with its abundance of texts featuring orphans in which Montgomery was well-versed, offered her a viable literary precedent for focusing on parentless children'. Since Montgomery herself lost her biological mother at a young age, Montgomery, through the use of the orphan story, formed 'a powerful source for exploring the maternal figure on various levels' (Bode, 2008:55). As James (2015:6) points out, *mothering* does not depend on biological motherhood. Indeed, Drain (1992:40), who claims that 'no other novel of its period is as widely read today as Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*',<sup>84</sup> attributes part of the novel's continuing appeal to how the 'novel both conforms to and resists conventions' and to how 'the novel weaves intricate individual patterns on the standard feminine frame', including, I would posit, reshaping conceptions of mothering and being mothered.

Lucy Maud Montgomery was born in 1874 in Clifton (now called New London), on Prince Edward Island (Rubio, 2008:27). As Montgomery recounts in her autobiographical work, *The Alpine Path: The Story of My Career* ([1917] 2005), her mother, Clara Woolner Macneill, died of tuberculosis when Montgomery was just 21 months old (*AP*, 16), and young Montgomery was left in the care of her maternal grandparents in Cavendish by her father, Hugh John Montgomery, who moved to Western Canada to work. As biographers such as Rubio, in *Lucy Maud Montgomery, The Gift of Wings* (2008:13-78), and Gillen, in *The Wheel of Things* ([1975] 1983:1-18), have shown, Montgomery's most famous work, *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), and other works draw on her own life as a young girl who was essentially orphaned by her mother's death and her father's decision to go West, and the realities of her being raised as an only child by her elderly grandparents on Prince Edward Island (*AP*, 18; Rubio, 2008:27-28), since all their children were already grown up. Some of the mother figures in Montgomery's life were

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<sup>84</sup> Even 29 years after Drain's (1992) article was published with its claim of the continuing fame of *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), the novel continues to appeal to widespread audiences, particularly as it is repeatedly adapted for film and television. In fact, the most recent adaptation of *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), the Netflix drama *Anne with an E* (2017-2019), was so popular that a petition to revive the show after its cancellation had reached over 1.5 million signatures as of 16 January 2021 (Gupta, 2021).

her Grandmother Macneill, her Aunt Mary Lawson, her Aunt Emily and her Aunt Annie (*AP*, 16-19; *SJI*, 300).

Bode (2008:51) observes that '[w]hile the remaining parent and other mothers can frequently and effectively compensate for maternal loss, late twentieth-century theories on female socialization and psychological development suggest that the early loss of the maternal parent has a particularly intense effect on surviving daughters'. The trauma of Montgomery's loss is manifest in how her alternative mother figures seem, at least initially, to prove insubstantial in terms of what Montgomery suggests – and her characters think – a mother should be. Montgomery recorded the following in her journal: 'It is a dreadful thing to lose one's mother in childhood! I know that from bitter experience. How often, when smarting under some injustice or writhing under some misunderstanding, have I sobbed to myself, "Oh, if mother had *only* lived!"' (*SJI*, 300; Montgomery's emphasis). She qualifies this immediately, however, by hinting that it would perhaps have been difficult for her mother to live up to the idealised notion of being 'all [Montgomery] could wish in a mother' (*SJI*, 300), stating that the thought of her mother's having been 'like Aunt Emily, or even like Aunt Annie' with all of their faults is 'worse' than the reality of her mother's death (*SJI*, 300). Additionally, Virokannas (2011:27, quoting Rubio, 2003:72) points out that 'the emotional coldness and strict discipline of Montgomery's grandparents who raised her "made her feel abandoned and unwanted" and that she "grew up without [...] psychological support"'. Thus, the 'failure' (*SJI*, 300) of mother figures in Montgomery's life 'seems to have increased the motherless daughter's longings for the absent parent and intensified the dead mother's appeal as an endlessly stimulating focus for [Montgomery's] vivid imagination' (Bode, 2008:52). Montgomery's preoccupation with 'trying on' various iterations of motherhood in her literature and 'examin[ing them] from a broad range of perspectives' is thus a perpetual 'search for the lost mother' who is 'essentially unknowable' (Bode, 2008:53, 55).

It is not surprising therefore that scholars such as Kornfeld and Jackson (1987:70), Åhmansson (1991:128-142), Rothwell (1999:134) and Devereux (2003:123) argue that a focus on the maternal provides the thrust of the entire *Anne* series (1908-1939). I too posit that Montgomery foregrounds motherhood as a focus from the very beginning of *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), as she considers many possible mother figures, such as biological and adoptive mothers, spinsters, women from the lower, middle and upper classes, aunts, members of the community, trusted housekeepers – all of whom play a role in the 'world of female guardians who nurture Anne' (Rothwell, 1999:134) – and even men as 'mothers'. Feminist scholars such as Berger

(2008:92) recognise that '[m]others might be aunts, grandmothers, or even people, male or female, in the community unrelated by blood to the children they mother'. Similarly, Kornfeld and Jackson (1987:71) confirm that since 'the ideal of motherhood' in nineteenth-century female fiction 'transcended sexuality and is not necessarily considered to be a biological function, it is possible [...] for a man to act as a mother'.<sup>85</sup> Through her many examinations of mothering therefore, Montgomery 'endorses and even enshrines maternal capabilities and power' (Rothwell, 1999:135) through subverting and expanding the idealism of traditional mother figures. She subtly suggests therefore that motherhood is not solely a biological or even a gendered role, because whatever their background, Anne's 'maternal guardians on the whole have a healing and nurturing effect' (Rothwell, 1999:135) much what would be expected from an idealised biological mother.

Rather than focusing on ideal or idealised mothering, Montgomery explores what it takes to raise an idealised mother figure – because that is what Anne eventually becomes in the later books of the series, as portrayed in *Anne of Ingleside* (1939), *Rainbow Valley* (1919) and *Rilla of Ingleside* (1921) – in a less than ideal world. She does this by delving deeply into the reality of raising a young girl into womanhood, with all of its complexities and imperfections; she also explores how less-than-ideal mother figures are themselves able to grow through their experiences with mothering. Through this approach, Montgomery makes a case for the value of mothering by *choice*, for the value that can be developed in the imperfect humanity of mother figures, and for the power to overcome foibles and imperfections gained from choosing to love and nurture a child. Ultimately, Montgomery broadens the ideal construct of motherhood with clear evidence for the success that can be achieved at mothering if one is willing to learn.

The scope of a Master's dissertation only allows me to focus in detail on certain examples of what I see as Montgomery's comprehensive exploration of mothering, so I have selected characters for analysis whose influence I feel is most important for Anne's upbringing to illustrate my contention. This chapter therefore focuses entirely on Anne Shirley's primary mother figures, while Chapter 4 branches out to explore a few of Anne's other significant mother figures. As with my discussion of Alcott's writing, my exploration of Montgomery's approach to expanding the definition of motherhood takes the form of close reading and detailed textual analysis. In this chapter, I focus on *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) but include some

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<sup>85</sup> For example, in Alcott's *Eight Cousins* (1874), it can be argued that Rose's Uncle Alec is presented as a male mother figure (James, 2015:132-142). With the rise of New Womanhood, the role of gender in determining a person's place in society was disputed, paving the way for a more meaningful recognition of the nurturing power of men in the home (see Section 1.4).

references to other novels in the *Anne* series (1908-1939), particularly *Anne of the Island* (1915) for information about Anne's biological mother.

I begin by discussing the brief but poignant influence on Anne of her biological mother, Bertha Shirley, whom the reader never meets directly. I then move on to explore the development of Anne's adoptive mother, Marilla Cuthbert, in consequence of choosing to adopt and mother Anne, from being an emotionally repressed spinster who is set in her ways to being a more open-hearted and pliable mother. Finally, I argue that Matthew Cuthbert's role as Anne's primary emotional nurturer opens the possibility for reading him as a male mother figure,<sup>86</sup> as his powerful role in Anne's life makes a case for mothering that is not limited to traditionally gendered roles.

### 3.2 Bertha Shirley: the power of idealised motherhood

Anne Shirley's mother, Bertha Shirley, dies when Anne is just three months old (*AGG*, 38). In *Anne of Avonlea* (1909), the following interaction between Anne and her pupil, Paul Irving, reveals some of the pain and loss that Anne feels as a result of having no mother:

"[...] My little mother used always to sit beside me and hold my hand till I went to sleep. I expect she spoiled me. Mothers do sometimes, you know."

No, Anne did not know this, although she might imagine it. She thought sadly of *her* "little mother," the mother who had thought her so "perfectly beautiful" and who had died so long ago and was buried beside her boyish husband in that unvisited grave far away. Anne could not remember her mother and for this reason she almost envied Paul. (*AA*, 117; Montgomery's emphasis)

Anne does not remember her birth mother, who dies when Anne is three months old – unlike Montgomery, who claimed that her 'earliest memory' (*AP*, 16) was one of her own mother's funeral, who died when Montgomery was 21 months.<sup>87</sup> Bertha thus cannot realistically be said to have mothered Anne in any particularly impactful way, but the traditional weight assigned to the role of biological mother necessitates at least some investigation into how Bertha influences

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<sup>86</sup> Matthew can also be read as an idealised kind of father figure, particularly based on Montgomery's history with her own father:

In effect, Maud was orphaned by a father who insisted on being absent and invisible. Desertion by her father was a deep wound in young Maud's life, and she had no wish to probe it too hard. [...] Maud has to reinvent [this] relationship, turning her father into a spiritual intimate. This imaginary "near and dear" spirit becomes satisfactorily embodied at last in Anne's Matthew [...]. (Doody, 1997b:13)

A discussion on father figures falls beyond of the scope of my current discussion, however, so in this chapter I focus on Matthew solely as an alternative mother figure.

<sup>87</sup> Montgomery draws on these memories, as described in the autobiographical *The Alpine Path* (1917) almost *verbatim* in *Emily of New Moon* (1923) (*ENM*, 15-16). The small house in Bolingbroke where Anne is born, and which Anne visits as an adult (*AIs*, 176-180), also draws on the tiny house where Montgomery was born, in Clifton (New London), Prince Edward Island.

Anne's life. I find that there is clear evidence throughout the *Anne* series (1908-1939) (such as the instance quoted above) that, like Montgomery, Anne is haunted by '[w]hat her mother was like and what kind of relationship they might have had if she had lived' (Bode, 2008:53), and these questions 'remain disturbing, open-ended subjects' (Bode, 2008:53).

Crockett (2001:72) posits that Anne 'does know something about her poor but educated and thoroughly respectable parents – just enough to idealize and romanticize both'. Indeed, Anne's reverence for the mere word 'mother' suggests her idealisation of the traditional mother figure, indicating that she has spent time dwelling on the idea of her lost mother. She muses when she tells Marilla about her birth family: "I think it would be so sweet to say 'mother,' don't you?" (AGG, 38). The hopelessness of the modal verb "would" implies that the name is reserved only for biological mothers, and that the fact that Anne's mother is dead suggests that, as Montgomery similarly felt, Anne has completely lost any opportunity to experience the mothering she longs for. Anne thus tasks her characteristically powerful imagination with making up for what she lacks, which results in the evolution of an idealised biological mother figure in Anne's mind that is tangible enough to Anne to manifest as a weighty influence on her life, even if just in terms of how the loss affects her.

Anne's first foster mother, the fairly uneducated Mrs Thomas, who helps with housework in the Shirley home when Anne is a baby, is the only source from whom young Anne is able to learn anything specific about herself as a baby or about her birth parents. Mrs Thomas describes the infant Anne as "the homeliest baby" she has ever seen, because baby Anne is "scrawny and tiny and nothing but eyes" (AGG, 38). This is similar to how others in the novel describe Anne as a young girl, suggesting that it is an impartial and accurate description of her: Mrs Lynde, for example, calls her "terribly skinny and homely" (AGG, 58). Yet the opinion of Anne's idealised biological mother of baby Anne as "perfectly beautiful", related to Anne by Mrs Thomas (AGG, 38), supersedes the opinions of anyone else for Anne. Anne reasons to Marilla (referring to Mrs Thomas's description): "I should think a mother would be a better judge than a poor woman who came in to scrub" (AGG, 38). For Anne, the simple virtue of the role of biological mother, however short-lived that role was, makes Anne's imagined idealised mother a far more reliable source for Anne than another woman who plays a more physical and lengthy but non-biological role in mothering Anne.

During Anne's time at Redmond College as a young adult in *Anne of the Island* (1915), she takes a trip to her birthplace in Bolingbroke and is there able to gain some first-hand information about her birth home and family that is not filtered through Mrs Thomas's eyes. Anne's trip

proves ‘the sweetest incident of Anne’s sojourn in Bolingbroke’ (*AIs*, 176), solidifying her idealistic imaginings about the ‘sweetness’ of her birth home and mother by providing some evidence for the image Anne holds in her heart. Even the house where Anne is born, described to young Anne by Mrs Thomas as “‘a weeny teeny little yellow house’” belonging to the Shirleys who are “‘as poor as church mice’” (*AGG*, 38), looks to the adult Anne “‘almost exactly’” the way Anne has imagined it all her life. It is indeed ‘little’ and ‘shabby’, but the ‘lilacs’<sup>88</sup> Anne imagines are actually present in the “‘lilac tree by the gate’”, and the “‘muslin curtains’” Anne dreams of are indeed hanging “‘in the windows’” (*AGG*, 38; *AIs*, 177).

Anne’s ability to craft a more concrete connection with her past through her visit to her birth home is undoubtedly what makes the visit ‘the *sweetest*’ for her (*AIs*, 176; my emphasis). This links it to the *sweetness* she associates with the name ‘mother’ (*AGG*, 38 – see above) and thus also to what she sees as ‘the *sweetest*’ in the small bundle of her mother’s letters that she receives from the house’s current occupant: a letter written by Anne’s mother to Anne’s father that is ‘full of a proud young mother’s accounts of “baby [Anne]”—her cleverness, her brightness [and] her thousand *sweetnesses*’ (*AIs*, 179; my emphases).<sup>89</sup> The deep joy that Bertha expresses in her letter are fruits of motherhood that Anne also enjoys when she becomes a biological mother. This can be seen with the birth of Joyce, Anne’s firstborn, who dies after a few hours (*AHD*, 172-179), and with the births of Jem and Rilla, Anne’s eldest child and youngest child, in *Anne’s House of Dreams* (1917) and *Anne of Ingleside* (1939) respectively (*AHD*, 287-288; *AIn*, 48). Thus, Anne can be seen continuing the legacy of loving and idealised motherhood that she imagines for her biological mother.

The repetition of the notion of ‘sweetness’ suffuses Anne’s idealisation of her biological mother figure, but derivations of the adjective ‘sweet’ are in fact repeated throughout the *Anne* series (1908-1939) in connection with various manifestations of motherhood. Examples are the ‘*sweetness*’ Marilla feels when Anne’s affection connects Marilla with ‘the maternity [Marilla] ha[s] missed’ (*AGG*, 68, 80; my emphasis) and the ‘*sweetness* of [Anne’s] eyes and lips’ as her influence awakens a repressed desire for motherhood in the elderly spinster, Miss Josephine

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<sup>88</sup> In Victorian flower language, which Montgomery almost certainly knew, lilacs, as sweet-smelling early spring-flowering plants, symbolise the first emotions of love (Kirkby, 2011:n.p.), making the lilac an apposite flower to connect with Anne’s birth home, as the home of the Shirleys as a young couple and as new parents.

<sup>89</sup> The pure delight found in celebrating the tiniest details about one’s baby in this 1915 novel reflects Montgomery’s own ‘thrill’, recorded in her journals, of her first son in 1912 – bathing him, watching him sleep and realising his individual intelligence (*SJ II*, 102-103). Thus, examples of the *sweetness* of mothering can even be found in Montgomery’s journals, such as an experience she notes on 10 September 1914 with her son Chester, who, snuggling with his mother at night, spontaneously gives her ‘the softest, *sweetest* little kiss on the back of [her] hand’ – she describes it as ‘the *sweetest* experience’ and reveals that it ‘thrilled [her] soul with its *sweetness*’ (*SJ II*, 155; my emphases).

Barry (*AGG*, 198; my emphasis). The word also reappears in the descriptions of the ‘*sweet* old-fashioned flowers’ which remind Matthew of his mother (*AGG*, 245; my emphasis) and which Anne gathers and places about him in his coffin and continues to bring to his grave for years (*AA*, 115, 119), and in the way that Anne mothers her pupils and friends through ‘her own *sweet* personality’ (*AA*, 231; my emphasis) and ‘*sweet*, impulsive earnestness’ (*AHD*, 115; my emphasis). Furthermore, the adult Anne realises that motherhood is “‘very *sweet* ... but very terrible” (*AIn*, 187; my emphasis).<sup>90</sup> Descriptions of sweetness thus subtly highlight how different manifestations of motherhood are connected: married or not, ideal or not, all mother figures can be linked in the sweetness of choosing to mother, suggesting that all manifestations of motherhood labelled as ‘sweet’ have the same significance as the treasured, idealised image Anne has of her birth mother.

Although Bertha is only in Anne’s life for three short months, it is subtly pointed out in what Anne comes to know about her that Anne shares some key attributes with her idealised biological mother, most of which are significant to this study because of their broader symbolic significance, given that Anne cannot remember Bertha. The primary connection made between Anne and Bertha is genetic, a matter of nature, not nurture: they share the same striking eyes. Mrs Thomas sees the fact that baby Anne was ‘nothing but eyes’ as a mark of Anne’s queer and homely appearance (*AGG*, 38), but the woman who lives in Anne’s birth home when Anne visits it notes twice that Anne’s eyes are remarkable enough to remind her of Bertha’s. The woman first describes Anne as “‘complected”” like the red-haired Walter Shirley (Anne’s father) but then points out that Anne favours Bertha in her “‘eyes and mouth”” (*AIs*, 177). Additionally, when Anne later becomes emotional about receiving Bertha’s old letters from the woman, Anne’s eyes convey such clear emotion that the woman reiterates: “‘Laws, but your eyes is like your ma’s. She could just about talk with hers”” (*AIs*, 179). Indeed, from the first time the reader meets Anne, Anne’s ‘glowing eyes’ (*AGG*, 16) are foregrounded as one of her most defining features: they are described as ‘large [...] eyes, which [look] green in some lights and moods and gray in others’ and as ‘big eyes’ which are ‘full of spirit and vivacity, [...] indicating] that no commonplace *soul* inhabit[s] the body of this stray woman-child’ (*AGG*, 15-16; my emphasis). Such a link between Anne and her mother reverses the ancient belief that ‘the body was inherited from the mother, the soul from the father’ (Fuller, 1855:36), as both Anne’s and Bertha’s eyes reveal their souls, since they both ‘talk with’ their eyes, whereas

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<sup>90</sup> These are just a few examples of the sheer number of times the word ‘sweet’ is used significantly in the *Anne* series (1908-1939), particularly when connected with motherhood.

Anne's most notable purely physical trait of bright red hair comes from her father. Since Anne's eyes are more revealing of her personality than her red hair is, the genetic influence of Anne's mother is elevated above that of Anne's father.

When one considers the idealised mother figure that Anne becomes,<sup>91</sup> her eyes' being like her mother's indicate the soul of one idealised traditional mother figure reflected in the idealised mother figure of the next generation. This is particularly significant since Anne passes on characteristics of these eyes to two of her own daughters: Joyce, 'a wee, white lady, with her mother's big eyes' (*AHD*, 173), and Di, who is 'very like her mother, with gray-green eyes that [... shine] with a peculiar lustre and brilliancy' (*RV*, 27). Thus, this symbolic connection of three generations in the female line (Bertha, Anne and two of Anne's daughters) suggests that inevitable connections form in the perpetual cycle of motherhood,<sup>92</sup> even when the ability to mother practically is cut short for the original mother figure. This points to the power of Anne's idealisation of Bertha, and thus to the power of traditional, idealised motherhood.

The next trait that Anne shares with Bertha is a love for and skill at teaching. Anne already knows, presumably from Mrs Thomas, that before marrying Anne's father, Bertha was "a teacher in the High school" in Bolingbroke alongside Walter Shirley (*AGG*, 38).<sup>93</sup> Anne's knowledge about this is expanded when the woman who now lives in Anne's birth home tells Anne that her daughter "went to school to [Bertha] and was nigh crazy about her" (*AI*s, 177). This piece of information creates a link between Bertha and Anne's childhood teacher, Miss Stacy, whom Anne is also 'crazy about' and who proves a motherly influence for Anne.<sup>94</sup> It can thus be deduced that Bertha has a similar motherly influence on her pupils. Furthermore, the reader at this point should have been witness to Anne's time as a teacher in Avonlea, as explored in *Anne of Avonlea* (1909), which is also filled with instances of her acting as a mother figure

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<sup>91</sup> I agree with Devereux (2003:121, 125), who argues that throughout the series it can be deduced that 'motherhood is [Anne's] ambition, and reaching it is her story', seen in how 'the narrative of Anne's "progress" and all of her "dreams" concludes with the realization of this ambition [...] a maternal ideal'. Anne is a mother figure in many ways throughout the series, and in becoming a biological mother, many descriptions of Anne align her with the idealism of motherhood. Some examples are seen when she gives birth to her first child, and 'her eyes [are] aglow with the holy passion of motherhood' (*AHD*, 174; my emphasis). When her second child, Jem, is born, she rejoices, describing motherhood as "the best dream of all" (*AHD*, 288).

<sup>92</sup> Anne's son, Walter, who inherits Anne and Bertha's shared ability to write (see below), also has eyes reminiscent of Anne's (*AI*n, 53). Joyce, Anne's firstborn, dies after just a day and thus does not grow up to become a mother herself, but she is involved in reverse mothering in that she makes Anne a biological mother for the first time – see Section 4.4 for a brief exploration of reverse mothering. Furthermore, while Di's marriage and childrearing are not described in the series, it is certainly possible that she eventually becomes a wife and mother and perhaps passes the symbolic eyes to the next generation.

<sup>93</sup> Montgomery was also a teacher as a young adult, and, like Bertha and Anne, she 'loved teaching' (Gammel & Dutton, 1999:110).

<sup>94</sup> Anne's relationship with Miss Stacy is discussed in more detail in Section 4.2.2.

for her pupils, such as Paul Irving. Such connections show the reliability of the cycle of mothering, as although Bertha does not mother her own child for more than three months, she does serve as a mother figure for her pupils before she marries, and this same role as teacher mother manifests in the teacher, Miss Stacy, who mothers Anne (who presumably has good mothering influences of her own), and then in Anne's becoming a teacher mother to her own pupils. All three women are thus connected in exercising their motherly tendencies to mother children, *in loco parentis*, as educators,<sup>95</sup> and since all three women are unmarried when they become teacher 'mothers', the connections between them also point to how mothering is not dependent on marital status and tradition, but on personality and nurturing instinct.

Another thing that links Bertha with Anne is their love of the beauty of nature. Bertha's love of the natural world is revealed by the current occupant of Anne's birth home as she comments: "The east room was the one you were born in. I remember your ma saying she loved to see the sunrise; and I mind hearing that you was born just as the sun was rising and its light on your face was the first thing your ma saw" (*Als*, 178).<sup>96</sup> Anne's thoughts seeing this room for the first time are described by the narrator as follows:

Anne went up the narrow stairs and into that little east room with a full heart. It was as a *shrine* to her. Here her mother had dreamed the exquisite, happy dreams of anticipated motherhood; here that red sunrise light had fallen over them both in the *sacred hour of birth*; here her mother had died. Anne looked about her *reverently*, her eyes dim with tears. It was for her one of the jeweled hours of life that gleam out radiantly forever in memory.

"Just to think of it—mother was younger than I am now when I was born," she whispered. (*Als*, 178; my emphases)<sup>97</sup>

The highlighted religious language and the whispered awe in this excerpt again highlight Anne's idealisation of biological motherhood, showing how she reverences it as something as divine and beautiful as nature itself (hence its connection with the rising of the sun, symbolic of hope and renewed life). The 'red sunrise light' baptises the image in a dream-like glow that is – by nature – fleeting, just like Anne's experience with her biological mother.

When Anne first becomes a biological mother herself, she too is baptised into her own sacrament of motherhood by the rising light of the sun: 'at dawn, when the rising sun rent apart

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<sup>95</sup> All three women can thus also be linked back to Alcott's Jo, who mothers 'her boys' through the school that she opens with her husband, Professor Bhaer; see Section 2.4.2.

<sup>96</sup> Anne's room at Green Gables is also east-facing (*AGG*, 113), linking her with her birth mother and symbolically aligning the two homes in their influence on Anne's life: the home of her actual birth and the home of her rebirth into her adoptive family.

<sup>97</sup> Montgomery shows other heroines also connecting with their late mothers through a visit to their mothers' past bedrooms, such as Constance Foster in 'Her Own People' and Charlotte in 'Charlotte's Quest' (Bode, 2008:55-56), or Emily in *Emily of New Moon* (1923).

the mists hanging over the sandbar, and made rainbows of them, joy came to the little house. Anne was safe, and a wee, white lady, with her mother's big eyes, was lying beside her' (*AHD*, 173). Anne's first experience of motherhood, while it begins with the symbolic promise of the brighter light of day, is also brought to an unfulfilled close: 'At sunset the little soul that had come with the dawning went away, leaving heartbreak behind it' (*AHD*, 175). Thus, while their experiences are reversed in that Bertha dies, leaving her baby daughter, while Anne's baby daughter dies, leaving her 'poor, broken, tear-blinded little mother' (*AHD*, 176), Anne is linked with Bertha in 'the happiness so rare and exquisite' (*AHD*, 174), hand-in-hand with the pain of idealised biological motherhood cut short. While the promise of motherhood brought with the rising sun for Anne seems to be rescinded with Joyce's death as the sun sets, the fact that the 'first thing' Bertha sees on the morning of Anne's birth is 'the light' of the sun on Anne's face proves prophetic in spite of the end of Bertha's mothering through death, because it points to a metaphorical passing of the torch as the promise of the brighter light of day is fulfilled through Anne's being mothered effectively, even without her biological mother, by non-traditional mother figures, and through Anne's subsequently becoming an idealised biological mother through the powerful upbringing that these alternative mother figures provide. Thomas (2009:n.p.) suggests that Anne's characteristic natural 'relation to the landscape' acts as a manifestation of her pursuit to 'replac[e] the maternal closeness she lacks'. Indeed, this observation, seen alongside my analysis of the two images of motherhood baptised by nature confirms nature as a bridge that connects Anne with her biological mother.

The final clear link between Bertha and Anne is their love of and gift for writing. This is revealed when Anne reads the "bundle of old letters" written by Anne's parents 'during their courtship' that is given to her by the woman living in her birth home (*AIs*, 179). Bertha's letter writing is described as 'a gift [... which] embodied the charming personality of the writer in words and thoughts that retained their beauty and fragrance after the lapse of time' (*AIs*, 179). This description links Bertha's courtship with Walter Shirley and her skill in writing to Anne's courtship with Gilbert Blythe, which is likewise recorded in a series of Anne's letters written to Gilbert while the two are separated for three years before their marriage, while Gilbert is studying to be a doctor. Anne's letters to Gilbert can also be said to have 'retained their beauty and fragrance after the lapse of time' (*AIs*, 179), since her letters to Gilbert are largely what constitute the next novel in the series (chronologically speaking), *Anne of Windy Poplars* (1936).<sup>98</sup> This is also a gift that Anne passes down to posterity, in that her son, Walter Blythe,

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<sup>98</sup> Just as Anne has to wait for Gilbert, Montgomery had to wait to get married while her fiancé Ewan MacDonald

is a poet, and the vividly written journal entries of her youngest daughter, Rilla, make up significant portions of the final novel (chronologically) in the series, *Rilla of Ingleside* (1921). Anne is also linked in her passion for writing to other characters for whom she becomes a mother figure, such as Paul Irving in *Anne of Avonlea* (1909).<sup>99</sup>

After reading the letters, Anne feels that she is “not an orphan any longer”, because the letters make her parents so “real” to her that she feels like she has “found [her] father and mother” (*AIs*, 180; Montgomery’s emphasis).<sup>100</sup> In discovering that her parents are ‘real’ people (*AIs*, 180; Montgomery’s emphasis) and not alive only in her imagination, and in finding out about some of her mother’s ‘real’ traits and interests – and that Anne has developed similar ones, connecting her more closely with her mother – Anne feels as though she has found herself, a connection which is particularly significant given how the traits Anne shares with Bertha also connect Anne to so many other people who play an important role in her life as mother figures and as part of Anne’s mothering harvest. This is a powerful moment in the *Anne* series (1908-1939) in terms of motherhood, as there is nothing in Anne’s life up to this point – not even the reliable presence of Marilla as an adoptive mother – that makes Anne feel completely as if she is “not an orphan any longer” except knowledge of and connection with her ‘true’ and idealised mother figure. The importance of discovering these roots for Anne thus also points to the magnitude of the influence of her non-traditional mother figures who play their own roles in Anne’s development of the very traits that she can now identify in her idealised biological mother, showing how alternative mothers enable Anne’s connection with her traditional, idealised mother, particularly since Anne eventually becomes a traditional, idealised mother too.

Keen (2018:165), referring specifically to *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), claims that aside from the ‘basic credentials’ that can be attributed to Anne’s birth family based on her being placed in

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completed his studies (in theology, not medicine, however), and they corresponded regularly, as Anne and Gilbert do (*SJ I*, 323, 324). In Montgomery’s case there was the added impediment that she could not marry until after her grandmother passed away.

<sup>99</sup> Bertha and Anne’s letters, and Rilla’s journaling, are reflections of their author’s own love for letter-writing, for example, in her detailed correspondence with G.B. MacMillan (published in 1980 in *My Dear Mr. M: Letters to G.B. MacMillan from L.M. Montgomery*, edited by F.W.P. Bolger and E.R. Epperly) and for journaling.

<sup>100</sup> Montgomery recorded in her journal on 2 January 1905 that reading a letter written to her mother, in her mother’s girlhood, ‘by a girl friend [...] gives [Montgomery] such a delightful realization of [her] mother’ (*SJ I*, 300; Montgomery’s emphasis). She lamented not having any letters written by her mother, however, asserting that a letter written by her mother would have ‘something of herself in it’ (*SJ III*, 34; Montgomery’s emphasis). Thus, the gift to Anne of a bundle of letters written by her mother can be seen as a kind of wish-fulfilment for Montgomery – a manifestation of the experience she imagined would await her in learning about her mother through her mother’s letters. Montgomery did, however, note that when she tried on a petticoat made from the remnants of her mother’s wedding dress, her mother seemed ‘a little real to [her] for the moment’ (*SJ III*, 33; my emphasis) – echoing the poignant moment she writes for Anne, as discussed above.

a protestant orphanage,<sup>101</sup> ‘nothing else is known’ about Anne’s heritage. My discussion above, however, proves that as the series progresses, Anne finds out a great deal about her birth mother and discovers that, in terms of shared traits at least, Anne has indeed always had “‘thing[s] that belonged to [her] mother’” (*Als*, 178). Her connection with Bertha implies that the impact of a mother figure is powerful and cannot be ignored, no matter how briefly the life of a child is touched by the mother figure’s influence.<sup>102</sup> The traits which Anne seems to inherit from her biological mother support Robinson’s (2018:177) assertion that ‘Montgomery’s depiction of clans and families suggests that biological roots determine character and are essentially inescapable’, although Montgomery’s depiction of alternative mother figures, as I show, suggest that nurture can be as strong as nature. Montgomery’s decision to remove Anne’s birth mother from her life at such a young age, however, simultaneously problematises the true extent of the influence of the idealised biological mother, revealing ‘Montgomery’s [...] ambivalences about what constitutes the natural’ (Robinson, 2018:175), because Bertha cannot realistically be said to have any direct mothering influence on Anne, however idealised Anne’s perceptions of her traditional mother are, but most of the attributes Anne shares with Bertha develop during a childhood that consists of years without a steady mother figure.

Chlebek (1999, quoted in Robinson, 2018:174) suggests, with reference to a subplot in Montgomery’s *Jane of Lantern Hill* (1937), ‘when the orphan Jody is adopted by two spinster sisters’, that “‘within the [non-traditional] family structure an *emotional kinship* comes to replace bonds of consanguinity, which stress hierarchy and possession” (my emphasis). This proves true for Anne, as the early removal of Anne’s biological family invites numerous alternative mother figures into Anne’s life to fill the need that she has for being mothered, making a case that powerful mothering influences do not have to be biological. Furthermore, no clear definition of less traditional or alternative mothering is imposed on any of Anne’s relationships because she never directly identifies any of her mother figures as a true substitute ‘mother’, which broadens the definition of mothering to invite a focus on several of the influences in Anne’s life as potential mother figures. The primary example of alternative or non-traditional mothering in Anne’s life is Marilla, Anne’s adoptive mother, who – instead of being anything close to an ideal mother or one who can be idealised – relies almost too heavily on her

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<sup>101</sup> These orphanages ‘picked the best, that is to say, the “worthy” as opposed to the “unworthy” poor, the unemployed, the drunkard or the lazy’; the children also had to come from ‘married parents’ (Doody Jones, 1997:426-427).

<sup>102</sup> The same can almost certainly be said for the reverse of this effect, for a child’s influence on a mother figure is also significant, however brief the interaction – see, for example, Anne’s experience with her first child, Joyce, in *Anne’s House of Dreams* (1917).

own perceived *ideals* of motherhood and of bringing up a girl when she finds herself in the unexpected situation of choosing to be a mother to Anne.<sup>103</sup> I explore Marilla's mothering in the next section.

### 3.3 Marilla: learning how to mother

When Marilla Cuthbert announces to her brother Matthew that Anne can stay at Green Gables permanently, she tells him:

“[...] I suppose I'm willing [to adopt Anne]—or have to be. I've been thinking over the idea until I've got kind of used to it. It seems a sort of duty. I've never brought up a child, especially a girl, and I dare say I'll make a terrible mess of it. But I'll do my best. [...]” (AGG, 45)

This comes not long after she makes it clear to Mrs Rachel Lynde (her good friend and the town gossip) before meeting Anne that she would ““never dream of taking a girl to bring up”” (AGG, 13). Despite Marilla's initial hesitation, however, her ““best”” effort in making it her ““business”” to train Anne to be ““useful”” (AGG, 45) results in ‘a relationship [...] that becomes progressively motherly’ (Devereux, 2003:123). Marilla's offering in choosing to inhabit the role of Anne's primary mother figure proves to be more than enough – in combination with Anne's other mothering influences that give Anne what Marilla cannot<sup>104</sup> – to result in Anne's upbringing as a capable woman and fruitful mother, in spite of Marilla's status as a middle-aged spinster.

When Anne first arrives at Green Gables, Marilla is catapulted into a mothering role that she neither anticipates nor desires. Marilla expects to greet a capable young boy who is able to help Matthew on the Cuthberts' farm but is instead confronted with a dramatic and ‘high-strung’ (AGG, 44, 102) young orphan girl who ““isn't the style [Marilla would] pick out”” (AGG, 30) if she wanted a girl in the first place. This leaves the usually clinically organised Marilla quite unprepared, particularly when Anne realises what the unfortunate mistake means for her:

“You don't want me!” she cried. “You don't want me because I'm not a boy! I might have expected it. Nobody ever did want me. I might have known it was all too beautiful to last. I might have known nobody really did want me. Oh, what shall I do? I'm going to burst

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<sup>103</sup> This is similar to the humorous treatment of Anne's youngest daughter, Rilla, Marilla's namesake, in *Rilla of Ingleside* (1921) because Rilla also tries at first to raise her adopted war baby, Jims, ‘by the book’ in relying on what she reads about as the *ideals* of raising a child. Like Marilla, she eventually realises that every situation is unique and that mothering must be tailored to fit the needs of the individual child – and of the individual mother. The specific ‘book’ authorities of the time which Montgomery was likely to have read are discussed in depth in an article by Stallcup (2001), ‘She knew she wanted to kiss him: Expert advice and women's authority in L.M. Montgomery's works’.

<sup>104</sup> These ‘other mothers’ are discussed in more detail in Section 3.4 (in relation to Matthew as a male mother), and in Chapter 4.

into tears!”

Burst into tears she did. Sitting down on a chair by the table, flinging her arms out upon it, and burying her face in them, she proceeded to cry stormily. Marilla and Matthew looked at each other deprecatingly across the stove. Neither of them knew what to say or do. Finally Marilla stepped lamely into the breach. (AGG, 26)

Here, the narration aligns Marilla with a male, her elder brother, in her discomfort around a forsaken child (although Matthew very quickly comes to take on the primary nurturing role in Anne’s life – see Section 3.4), revealing that she does not instinctively know how to *behave* in a motherly way, even though she can respond to the emotional distress Anne feels. Marilla appears to realise that, as a woman, she is the one who is expected to soothe Anne, and thus Marilla steps ‘lamely into the breach’ – into the awkwardly vacant position of nurturer. This is the first instance where Marilla takes on a mothering role for Anne, and it is rewarding to trace how her initial sense of ineptitude, even embarrassment, as a mother figure improves as she later *chooses* to take on the role of mother to Anne actively (whereas here she does so simply out of necessity) and ‘discovers what is significantly represented as [Marilla’s] own innate maternalism’ (Devereux, 2003:123).

Marilla’s personality is characterised by logic, practicality and reason. Her first order of business after encouraging Anne to stop crying is to ask Anne what her name is (AGG, 26), and this name-establishing incident serves to clearly delineate the differences between the imagination-driven Anne and the ‘sensible’ Marilla, as well as to highlight the possibilities of their future mother-daughter relationship. Anne wants to be called ‘Cordelia’, ““a perfectly elegant name”” compared to her own ““unromantic name”” (AGG, 26). She sees this new place and these new people as a chance to claim her identity as whatever she imaginatively and romantically chooses. She is aware that this is only make-believe: ““My hair is of midnight darkness and my skin is a clear ivory pallor. My name is the Lady Cordelia Fitzgerald. No, it isn’t—I can’t make *that* seem real”” (AGG, 56). But the name comes to represent her idealised self until she is much more mature. She appears to choose the name because of its elegance, but Crockett (2001:70) astutely implies that there is perhaps also a subconscious connection between Anne’s desired new name and the unconditionally loyal Shakespearean daughter, Cordelia, from *King Lear* (1606): ‘Not for nothing does Anne announce to Marilla that she wishes to be called “Cordelia” [...]; she has the desire and capacity to be a loving and faithful daughter, if the opportunity is presented to her’.

In terms of Crockett’s (2001:70) argument, Anne’s imagined identity reflects both her longing for a loving family to which she can belong and offer her unconditional love and the

acknowledgement that this desire may meet rejection.<sup>105</sup> Anne's desire to identify herself with a new name is perhaps suggestive of how "[m]ajor disruptive events", such as Anne's early loss of her mother, her traumatic, labour-filled childhood and her sense of another imminent disaster in the possibility of being sent back to the orphanage after thinking she has been adopted by the Cuthberts, "disorient a person's sense of rightness in the world and thus establish a need for her to refashion her biography, thereby realigning her sense of self with her social world" (Davidman, 2000, quoted in Bode, 2008:52).<sup>106</sup>

When Marilla pushes Anne to reveal her real name, she scolds Anne for trying to escape it, reasoning: "Anne is a real good plain sensible name. You've no need to be ashamed of it" (AGG, 27). This description of Anne's name can be linked to Marilla herself, suggesting the value of the 'real good plain sensible' mother figure that she becomes – a role that is reflected in Marilla's own name, which, Doody (1997b:26) suggests, is a name derived from Mary, making it reminiscent of Mary the mother of Christ and thus labelling Marilla as a divinely appointed mother figure, in spite of her unmarried virgin status. When Anne counters Marilla's reasoning with the desire to be called "Anne spelled with an E", Marilla questions quite practically what difference the spelling would make (AGG, 27), particularly since the specified change in spelling would not change the pronunciation. Anne then offers a compromise, promising: "If you'll only call me Anne spelled with an E I shall try to reconcile myself to not being called Cordelia" (AGG, 27). When Marilla accepts Anne's proposal, she acknowledges Anne's individuality for the first time by actually calling her "Anne spelled with an E" (AGG, 27). This back-and-forth establishes a pattern in what is to become their mother-daughter relationship: one filled with compromise and growth on both their parts. Furthermore, Marilla's encouragement for Anne to accept her given name, and Anne's eventual willingness to do so, symbolically shifts Anne's alignment with the tragic figure of thwarted daughter love in Shakespeare's Cordelia and aligns her with the steady Christian figure of motherhood, Saint Anne, traditionally believed to be the mother of Mary (Doody, 1997b:26), prophetically hinting at Anne's being a mother to Marilla, which proves true in the sense of reverse mothering, or

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<sup>105</sup> Cordelia is the only one of King Lear's three daughters who is truly devoted to her father with no hidden agendas targeting his power. However, he is blinded by his desire to be adored and banishes her after she apparently fails his test of pitting his daughters against each other in asking them to describe in grand terms how much they love him, because she merely confesses the simple sincerity of her love instead of entering into competition with her sisters. Despite her banishment, she continues to love him and actively seeks to help him when he loses all of his power as his other two daughters turn on him (Shakespeare, [1606] 1998).

<sup>106</sup> This can also be linked to Montgomery's use of writing to process her own losses and trauma through realigning "her sense of self" through her fiction (Davidman, 2000, quoted in Bode, 2008:52), as suggested in Section 3.1.

Anne as Marilla's first adopted daughter making Marilla into a mother.<sup>107</sup>

Marilla begins to feel the stirrings of compassion, which she justifies as a sense of duty to adopt and educate Anne, after asking about Anne's history. Her stubborn feelings against adopting a girl – particularly *this* girl – gradually begin to change when she hears Anne's life story, magnifying what Marilla already possesses in 'the rudiments of emotional wisdom and a latent capacity for love' (Doody, 1997b:18):

Pity was suddenly stirring in her heart for the child. What a starved, unloved life she had had—a life of drudgery and poverty and neglect; for Marilla was shrewd enough to read between the lines of Anne's history and divine the truth. No wonder she had been so delighted at the prospect of a real home. It was a pity she had to be sent back. What if she, Marilla, should indulge Matthew's unaccountable whim and let her stay? He was set on it; and the child seemed a nice, teachable little thing. (AGG, 40)<sup>108</sup>

Marilla is able to 'divine' a sense of the harsh realities of Anne's past through her recognition of the revealing subtext of Anne's experience as 'a kind of maid-of-all-work to poor families living precariously on the edge of the economy' (Doody, 1997b:18).<sup>109</sup> Marilla's pity thus seems to arise out of her recognition that a child needs to be loved (seen in how she equates Anne's 'unloved life' with literal starvation), and it gradually pushes aside her purely logical motivation for returning Anne to the orphanage, replacing it instead with compassion and a budding connection with nurturing instincts that were previously largely dormant.

Marilla's heart softens further when she sees 'the child's pale face with its look of mute misery—the misery of a helpless little creature who finds itself once more caught in the trap from which it had escaped' (AGG, 44) when Anne learns of the prospect of going to live with Mrs Peter Blewett, a woman in Avonlea who wants to take Anne from Marilla to play a similar labour role as unpaid servant and child-minder that Anne plays with her first two foster mothers, Mrs Thomas and Mrs Hammond. Marilla recognises that sending Anne back to the orphanage

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<sup>107</sup> Doody (1997b:26) connects this 'switching [of] natures as mother and child, mother and daughter' to Marilla's and Anne's symbolic Christian names. Doody (1997b:26) also points out that Marilla's early desire to be called "'just plain Marilla'" (AGG, 50) instead of labelling her position as Anne's adoptive mother with any title 'is a significant sign of their equality'.

<sup>108</sup> Montgomery describes her own childhood without effective, present parent figures as 'starved [...] *emotionally*' (SJI, 300; Montgomery's emphasis).

<sup>109</sup> Crockett's (2001) article, 'Outlaws, outcasts, and orphans: The historical imagination and "Anne of Green Gables"' explores in detail the desperate plight of orphans in Canada during the time in which *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) is set. Doody Jones's (1997) article, 'The exceptional orphan Anne: Child care, orphan asylums, farming out, indenturing, and adoption', also explores the historical context behind how children, and particularly orphans were viewed and treated in the nineteenth century, with a specific focus on Prince Edward Island. Although the harsh realities Anne had to live through before coming to Green Gables are not openly elaborated on in any detail, Doody Jones (1997:422) points out that Montgomery's depiction of the 'more realistic [...] brash and bruised Mary Vance', who is introduced in *Rainbow Valley* (1919), is 'Anne's rough, aggressive double, a kind of shadow side' revealing some of the stark reality of the horrors faced by many orphans less lucky than Anne.

or to live with someone like Mrs Blewett will mean that Anne never gets a chance to learn how to be “a useful little thing” (AGG, 45) beyond the immediate needs of those who see her as a servant rather than as a child. Doody (1997b:19) observes that ‘Montgomery takes particular care with the use of the word “child” in these early sections of the novel’, which means that when Anne is finally openly referred to by Marilla as a child, the identification highlights Marilla’s softening. Crockett (2001:73) argues that ‘Marilla’s change of heart represents the historically older, practical attitude toward children as workers giving way to the newer one – viewing childhood as a special time for nurturing, growth, education, and play’.<sup>110</sup> Indeed, Marilla’s mothering instincts surface for the first time with her ability to recognise in Anne a helpless child whom Marilla has the power to save from further neglect and provide with the love that the child needs (although Marilla does not admit this directly), beginning the journey in which ‘Anne transforms from a potential labourer to a cherished daughter’ (Virokannas, 2011:34).

Marilla also recognises that a young girl who is trapped in a cycle of hard physical labour instead of embarking on a linear trajectory to spiritual, intellectual and social growth via education cannot achieve any significant potential as a person who is useful both to society and to herself. Marilla voices her views of the importance of education for women later, when she presents Anne with the possibility of attending Queen’s Academy:<sup>111</sup>

“[...] When Matthew and I took you to bring up we resolved we would do the best we could for you and give you a good education. I believe in a girl being fitted to earn her own living whether she ever has to or not. You’ll always have a home at Green Gables as long as Matthew and I are here, but nobody knows what is going to happen in this uncertain world, and it’s just as well to be prepared. So you can join the Queen’s class if you like, Anne.” (AGG, 203)

Collins (2013:52), in her analysis of gender in *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), points out the following:

[Anne’s] best friend, Diana, is denied [the] experience [of being part of the Queen’s class] as “her parents did not intend to send her to Queen’s” (Montgomery, 1942, p. 259). The Barry family’s decision to not enroll Diana in the course underscores the progressive view of the Cuthberts, as it would have been common in the early 1900’s for young Prince Edward Island women to be directed towards marriage and domestic responsibilities rather than education or career training.

Indeed, Marilla’s later remarks when encouraging Anne to go to Redmond College reveal the

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<sup>110</sup> Doody Jones (1997:422) claims that Montgomery aimed to change ‘attitudes toward the vulnerable young, as valuable simply for themselves’ as opposed to being valued for their potential to provide ‘cheap labor’.

<sup>111</sup> Similar to Anne’s studies at Queen’s College, Montgomery studied at Prince of Wales College, Charlottetown in 1893 (Rubio, 2008:72-74).

dominant discourses on women's roles at the time as expressed through Mrs Lynde, whose view is juxtaposed with Marilla's: "Mrs. Lynde [...] doesn't believe in the higher education of women at all; she says it unfits them for woman's true sphere. I don't believe a word of it" (AGG, 242).

Marilla's position as a largely independent spinster (Stairs, 2004:260;<sup>112</sup> Virokannas, 2011:21) makes her uniquely qualified to teach Anne the importance of education, as Marilla recognises that not all women have the opportunity to marry and have a husband to look after their financial needs and thus need the knowledge and skills necessary to look after themselves.<sup>113</sup> Åhmansson (1991:116) argues that '[g]etting an education ultimately means gaining control over your own life, whatever option you might choose afterwards', meaning that Marilla's focus on empowering Anne through education is intended to leave Anne 'free to decide between marrying and teaching and/or studying further [so that] [s]hould [Anne] choose it, economic independence is within her grasp' (Virokannas, 2011:30). Marilla's 'qualm of conscience' (AGG, 43) when first learning of Anne's history thus guides her to the 'uncomfortable conviction that, if she denie[s] the appeal' of Anne's look of mute misery, it will haunt Marilla 'to her dying day' (AGG, 44) because she would have rejected the unexpected opportunity to empower and uplift Anne through granting her access to choice. Marilla ultimately decides that taking 'the responsibility' (AGG, 44) of giving Anne back to the system that will suppress her true potential is far worse than adopting the responsibility of motherhood, and she subsequently takes motherhood on knowingly and fully, if awkwardly at first. The fruits of this aspect of Marilla's mothering are subsequently seen in how Anne exercises the freedom gained through her education to the fullest, first by choosing to postpone her tertiary studies to be a kind of mother figure to Marilla while teaching at the Avonlea school at the end of *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), then by choosing to take up her studies once more in *Anne of the Island* (1915), and eventually by choosing to marry and become a mother, teaching for three years during her engagement – a variety of choices she would not have access to were it not for Marilla.

Anne's first two nights at Green Gables establish a benchmark from which her relationship with Marilla progresses, as the differences between the two of them become clearer, along with

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<sup>112</sup> Stairs's (2004) study on 'Matthews and Marillas: Bachelors and spinsters in Prince Edward Island in 1881' explores how common bachelorhood and spinsterhood really were during this time, how bachelors and spinsters were integral parts of rather than outsiders to society, and how spinsters were commonly independent financially.

<sup>113</sup> Marilla's unmarried status and her views on education connect her with another of Anne's mother figures in Anne's teacher, Miss Stacy. Collins (2013:52) observes that 'as single women [...] Marilla Cuthbert and Muriel Stacy would certainly recognize the value in acquiring a teaching certification' because of the opportunities for female independence presented by education, especially as a passport to respectable employment. See Section 4.2.2 for further discussion on Miss Stacy's mothering influence in Anne's life.

Marilla's intended approaches to parenting Anne and Anne's attempts to conform with these approaches, in line with both Marilla's intent and Anne's desired outcomes. Marilla's initial distance from mothering is highlighted by what seems to be Anne's subconscious response to the hall at Green Gables as 'fearsomely clean' (*AGG*, 28) when Marilla takes her to bed on that first night, with 'the little gable chamber' (or Anne's future bedroom) as 'still cleaner' (*AGG*, 28) and thus more fearsome. Anne further notices the 'whitewashed walls' that are 'painfully bare and staring', and the 'bare' floor (*AGG*, 29). The negative language Montgomery employs encourages the reader to question the importance of cleanliness when it is taken to this extreme. Also, the repetition of the word 'bare' can be connected with the suggestion that this 'painfully clean' atmosphere is associated with Marilla's emotional bareness, or the effect of her 'narrow experience' (*AGG*, 10) in never being married and never having children in her domestic sphere, leaving the house with a clinical rather than a homey feel because keeping her domestic sphere clean and tidy is Marilla's primary source of pride and social approbation until she becomes a mother to Anne.<sup>114</sup> Devereux (2003:123) similarly posits that Marilla is 'characterized by childlessness' – a fact which, when seen with Anne's clear 'motherlessness' suggests that the two need each other and are destined to fill the holes in each other's lives (Keen, 2018:166-167). The description of the gable room can also be linked to the description of the kitchen at Green Gables that is given in the first chapter of the novel, where its potential to be a 'cheerful apartment' (*AGG*, 9) is undermined by its description as 'painfully clean' (*AGG*, 9). This is most definitely not the image of a warm and welcoming home such as the one inhabited by the March family in *Little Women* (1868-1869) with its 'pleasant atmosphere of home peace' (*LW*, 7).

The negative language used to describe Marilla's primary occupation in her domestic sphere invites the reader to feel some sadness that the Marilla described at the start of the novel does not seem to have any deeper meaning or colour in her life than her mission to keep her house clean. Her kitchen (like her entire home) ironically looks 'unused' even though she spends much of her life in it (*AGG*, 9). This suggests a pointlessness in the repetition that encompasses her existence before Anne comes. Later on, the narration even reveals that Marilla plunges 'fiercely

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<sup>114</sup> Drain (1992:46) argues that Marilla 'has broken Avonlea's usual pattern of womanhood by not marrying, although she conforms to it in every way as housekeeper for her brother' and has lost agency when 'Marilla turns out to be single not by choice but by a stubborn mistake'. I do not view Marilla quite so harshly. Although she is a spinster, however she came to be one, she actively asserts the value of her position in the home. Repeatedly Marilla is described as 'determined not to be eclipsed' or 'surpassed' in housekeeping by any women – married or not – in her society (*AGG*, 146, 148). She is exceptional in the sphere she shares with women in Avonlea who enjoy the status conveyed by marriage in a patriarchal society. This suggests a determination not to be perceived as less than they because she is a spinster. Marilla works hard to prove her usefulness and value to society exactly as she is and encourages Anne to work hard too so that she does not have to be defined by societal values and expectations.

into *unnecessary* work' (AGG, 231; my emphasis), cleaning her already spotless home when she is upset, or when she feels unsettled, as seen when Anne leaves for Queen's Academy. Marilla thus clearly finds a sense of purpose and comfort in distracting herself by tackling the most domestic of duties with all that she has to give, gaining a greater sense of control when she feels uncertain, as seen in the following instance when Marilla is upset about Anne's apparent role in the loss of Marilla's amethyst brooch: 'Marilla worked fiercely and scrubbed the porch floor and the dairy shelves when she could find nothing else to do. Neither the shelves nor the porch needed it—but Marilla did' (AGG, 88). Thus, when Anne's imagination personifies the walls of the gable room on Anne's first night at Green Gables with the thought that 'they must ache over their own bareness' (AGG, 29), this hints at some recognition that Marilla's desire for a sense of purpose, though as yet unacknowledged by Marilla to herself, manifests in the bare, clinical sphere that she unnecessarily keeps so painfully clean. This provides a blank canvas that invites analysis of how Marilla's decision to become a mother to Anne helps to make the bare, inhospitable Green Gables into a warm and welcoming home, or in other words, how Anne's presence helps to make the tightly wound and unmotherly Marilla into a softer and more freely nurturing mother.

Anne's perception of the bareness of the gable room links to how she later fills it with her own decorative flair, which juxtaposes Marilla's initial bare-bones domestic existence with a manifestation of how Anne views the world. Marilla believes that bedrooms are "made to sleep in" and thus sees no harm in bare walls, but Anne sees bedrooms as made to "dream in too" and argues that "one can dream so much better in a room where there are pretty things" (AGG, 104). The before and after views of Anne's gable room confirm visually Marilla's tendency to find security in the 'safe concrete' versus Anne's delight in what Marilla sees as the 'dubious paths of the abstract' (AGG, 74) and as 'clutter[ing]' Anne's room (AGG, 55), such as the apple blossoms Anne wants. In terms of historical context, Doody (1997a:449-450) explores how 'Anne is truly up to date in her tastes in home decoration, whereas Marilla represents old-fashioned views [... that have] not caught up with the 1890s'. Doody (1997a:450) explains Marilla's tastes in decoration further in asserting that '[i]n everything Marilla prefers solidity [...] and dependability' over the transient allure offered by perishable decorations and that 'her taste is really the earlier Victorian taste of the 1850s'. Marilla's appreciation for 'solidity' and 'dependability' can also be connected to Marilla's dependence on supposedly reliable morals and ideals in her approach to parenting, which prove insubstantial even if they are seemingly logical.

Progress in Marilla's mothering is echoed in the evolving picture of the gable room in that with Anne's influence it gradually becomes 'a very different [homey] place from [...] that [first] night [...] when Anne [feels] its bareness penetrate to the marrow of her spirit with its inhospitable chill' (AGG, 221). Marilla 'conniv[es ...] resignedly' at the changes that Anne gradually makes, until the room is 'as sweet and dainty a nest as a young girl could desire' (AGG, 221). That Marilla plays along, albeit 'resignedly' in allowing Anne's decorations and personal touches as Anne makes her gable room into a place to 'dream in' shows Marilla's gradual progress in recognising that the reward of allowing Anne to flourish as who she wants to be (within reason) outweighs the purpose that Marilla finds in the certainty of her previously housework-focused domestic existence. How far Marilla comes in being an effective mother figure for Anne is then also shown symbolically when Anne returns from Queen's Academy and Marilla is the one to voluntarily add a decoration to Anne's gable room by setting 'a flowering house rose on the window sill' (AGG, 241) to welcome Anne back home. This aligns with Alcott's description of the family-centred sitting room in *Little Women* (1868-1869), where 'Christmas roses [bloom] in the windows' (LW, 7), which connects Marilla with Alcott's idealised mother figure who presides over the 'pleasant atmosphere of home peace' that pervades the Marches' domestic sphere (LW, 7). Marilla's contribution to Anne's 'nest' is thus reminiscent of Fuller's (1855:144) observation that mothers 'delight to make the nest soft and warm' – but since this kind of warmth is not something that Marilla's domestic pursuits produce automatically, Anne's influence is clearly a necessary part of the recipe that makes Marilla into a mother figure, as is Marilla's active *choice* to make strides towards becoming one. These two factors also work together to effect the change seen in the Green Gables kitchen, which appears like an 'unused parlour' at the start of the novel (AGG, 9) that offers only 'cold comfort' to Marilla (AGG, 179) but is eventually transformed completely to a warm and welcoming family space with 'briskly snapping wood fire' (AGG, 179) that 'wink[s ...] through the open door [...], sending out its warm red glow' (AGG, 199) – another description reminiscent of the idealised mother-daughter setting in *Little Women* (1868-1869) with 'the fire crackl[ing] cheerfully within' (LW, 7).

On her first night at Green Gables, when Anne notices the inhospitality of her future bedroom, something that contributes to this feeling for her is the 'rigidity' of the 'whole apartment' (AGG, 29). Since the adjective 'rigid' is attributed to Marilla at the outset of the novel (AGG, 10), it is not difficult to make the connection between her character and the character of the objects in the sphere of life at Green Gables of which she is so diligently in charge. The initial description of the bedroom's rigidity includes the 'pin cushion', which – while outwardly perceived as 'fat'

and ‘velvet’ soft – defies its expected purpose by being in reality ‘hard enough to turn the point of the most adventurous pin’ (AGG, 29). Unlike the pincushion, whose ‘fat’, ‘velvet’ outward appearance (AGG, 29) suggests softness that does not exist upon closer investigation, the initial rigidity of Marilla’s personality is evident even in her physical appearance. A *leitmotif* is assigned to Marilla’s character in the first pages of *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) as she is described here and repeatedly throughout the series as a woman whose dominant physical feature is that she is made up of ‘angles’ and no ‘curves’ (AGG, 10).<sup>115</sup> This reflects her stern and rigid personality and distances her completely from the notion of softness, particularly as even her hair is ‘always [rigidly] twisted up in a hard little knot behind with two wire hairpins stuck aggressively through it’ (AGG, 10). Marilla’s overall rigidity at first extends to her ability to mother effectively too; she is not an obviously motherly or feminine character – in fact, in *Anne of Avonlea* (1909), she is painted as the archetypal spinster (see Section 4.3.1).

The pincushion described above can be seen as a metaphor for the rocky start to the mother-daughter relationship between Marilla and Anne. The ‘adventurous pin’ is the imaginative and bubbly Anne, whom the initially ‘hard’ Marilla struggles to understand and connect with and whom she thus attempts ‘to turn’ (AGG, 29) through rigid ideals and morals which ultimately do not have the effect she expects, as the responsibility of mothering this unique girl has the opposite effect in that the adventurous pin softens the hard (pincushion) Marilla into a loving mother. Later, after Anne has become thoroughly at home in her gable room and has been allowed to create of it a place to “‘dream in” (AGG, 104), the new life she brings to it and therefore to Marilla, to whom the whole of Green Gables is connected, is reflected in the following description:

In all essential respects the little gable chamber was unchanged. The walls were as white, the pincushion as hard, the chairs as stiffly and yellowly upright as ever. Yet the whole character of the room was altered. It was full of a new vital, pulsing personality that seemed to pervade it and to be quite independent of schoolgirl books and dresses and ribbons, and even of the cracked blue jug full of apple blossoms on the table. It was as if all the dreams, sleeping and waking, of its vivid occupant had taken a visible although unmaterial form and had tapestried the bare room with splendid filmy tissues of rainbow and moonshine. (AGG, 138)

Furthermore, looking back on this room later, when Anne is a mother, as “‘the first” room she ever has of her own in her life (BQ, 210), Anne shares a poem that she writes “‘the night before

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<sup>115</sup> This is similar to Aunt Elizabeth in *Emily of New Moon* (1923), who is described as ‘tall, thin, austere’ (ENM, 27), and ‘long and stiff and bony’ (ENM, 57), but unlike in Aunt Elizabeth, who has ‘steel-blue’ and ‘cold’ eyes (ENM, 27), in Marilla there is the potential for softening, reflected in the ‘saving something about her mouth’ (AGG, 10) pointed out by the narrator as part of the first description of her.

[her] wedding day” in which she celebrates the personification of her old gable room as a “friend” to her (*BQ*, 209) – a far cry from the terrifying bareness she sees when she first comes to Green Gables. This establishes her room as a metonymy for the happiness of her childhood and the success of her upbringing by Marilla because, unlike the rigid pincushion, Marilla proves able to change through embracing her adoption of motherhood.

The effect on Marilla of mothering Anne is foreshadowed when Marilla returns to the gable room after leaving Anne to change into her nightgown on the first night and finds the previously strictly ordered room now disorganised with ‘various skimpy articles of raiment scattered most untidily over the floor and a certain tempestuous appearance of the bed [as] the only indications of any presence save her own’ (*AGG*, 29). The metaphorical scattering of evidence of Anne’s personality all over Marilla’s tidy home sphere serves to highlight how different the two are and how entwined their futures become, hinting at Marilla’s development into a mother. Marilla’s development is shown through further similar instances of Anne’s bringing her personality unapologetically into Marilla’s sterile sphere, such as through a ‘jugful of apple blossoms’ that Anne brings inside to decorate the kitchen table (*AGG*, 53).

Keen (2018:159, 161) notes that during ‘the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century, people tended to view [...] orphans as dangerous, alien figures’, which links with Mrs Lynde’s initial opposition to the Cuthberts’ decision to adopt, because they will be “bringing a strange child into [their] house and home and [they] don’t know a single thing about [the child] nor what [the child’s] disposition is like” (*AGG*, 12). Keen (2018:161) further observes that ‘to introduce the trace of the foreign into the heart of the domestic, would be to risk a moment of uncanny disruption at the very site of all that, conventionally speaking, should be most reliable’. But intriguingly, since Marilla’s ‘reliable’ domestic sphere is initially connected with a lack of fulfilment and meaning, Anne’s ‘foreign’ intrusion into the ‘heart’ of the secluded world previously emptily inhabited and cared for in excess by Marilla proves to be exactly what Marilla needs to challenge her previous values and perceptions and ultimately to change her heart. Marilla’s initial reaction is to eye physical manifestations of Anne’s intrusion ‘askance’ as unnecessary and unwelcome (*AGG*, 53), but Marilla later comes to accept and even embrace such intrusions as she and Anne find a space for harmony in spite of their different personalities. Anne’s imaginative and open influence tempers Marilla’s closed-off rigidity because Marilla comes to love Anne for what she is. The following description given in *Anne of Avonlea* (1909) quietly acknowledges the change in Marilla’s rigidity, as Anne’s steady command of the kitchen sphere in Marilla’s absence is intermingled with Marilla’s unspoken acceptance of Anne’s

decorations in the now warm and welcoming kitchen: ‘Anne had tea ready when Marilla came home; the fire was crackling cheerily, a vase of frost-bleached ferns and ruby-red maple leaves adorned the table, and delectable odours of ham and toast pervaded the air’ (AA, 53).

The image of Anne’s clothing scattered all over the gable room leads to one of the first instances in which Marilla attempts to educate Anne into being “‘a useful little thing’” (AGG, 45). This is because on Anne’s second night at Green Gables, Marilla has come to the decision to keep Anne and bring her up and thus attempts to bring the characteristic picture of Anne’s scattered clothes to order by instructing Anne on what behaviour is considered appropriate:

“Now, Anne, I noticed last night that you threw your clothes all about the floor when you took them off. That is a very untidy habit, and I can’t allow it at all. As soon as you take off any article of clothing fold it neatly and place it on the chair. I haven’t any use at all for little girls who aren’t neat.” (AGG, 46)

Marilla thus begins her mothering of Anne by literally (and symbolically) showing her how to fit ‘neatly’ into Marilla’s life and sphere – attempting to turn Anne’s seemingly characteristic (adventurous pin) personality to adapt to the rigidity of Marilla’s (unyielding pincushion) ways. Ultimately, Marilla’s characteristic careful dominion over her domestic sphere does influence Anne, as it is revealed later in the series that the Anne as a married woman keeps her own ‘little domain in the speckless order one would expect of anyone brought up by Marilla Cuthbert’ (AHD, 93), but without the sense of inhospitality created by Marilla’s initial extremes. Thus, the balance that the two women create in and reap from each other manifests in the transcendence of Marilla’s deep-seated need to keep things clean from its bare, cyclical and seemingly pointless existence of clinical cleanliness to a fruitful expression of Marilla’s character as a mother as it is passed down in the skills she teaches her adopted child.

Another way that Marilla tries to fit Anne into her way of doing things is when Marilla makes new dresses for Anne for the first time. The narration reveals that the dresses Marilla presents to Anne are ‘serviceable’, ‘stiff’, ‘ugly’ and ‘all made alike—plain skirts full to plain waists, with sleeves as plain as waist and skirt and tight as sleeves could be’ (AGG, 69), where the diction used in ‘all [...] alike’, the repetition of ‘plain’ and even the steady rhythm in the sentence reinforce this as an ideal pattern for Marilla. Aesthetic and romantic Anne can only “‘imagine’” that she likes the dresses because, as she reluctantly observes, “‘they’re not—pretty’” (AGG, 69) and they lack the “‘thrill’” of the coveted “‘puffed sleeves’” which are “‘so fashionable now’” (AGG, 70). Marilla, however, sees the fruits of her labour as just right because Marilla’s only concerns are that the dresses are “‘neat and clean and new’” and are “‘good, sensible, serviceable dresses, without any frills or furbelows about them’” (AGG, 69-

70). Furthermore, she sees fashionable, puffed sleeves as “ridiculous-looking things” that are a “waste” of material, and she prefers “the plain, sensible ones” (AGG, 70). The adjectives used in these two differing opinions link both Anne and Marilla symbolically to the dresses: Anne sees herself and is often perceived by others as ‘ugly’ or ‘plain’, and she therefore finds joy in flamboyant imaginings to make up for what she lacks; and the adjectives ‘stiff’ and ‘tight’ link to previous descriptions of Marilla’s personality and physical appearance, and ‘plain’, ‘neat’ and ‘clean’ recall descriptions of the domestic sphere that she is in charge of.

Marilla has learned to value usefulness over beauty and she tries to teach Anne not to be vain, because “[h]andsome is as handsome does” (AGG, 68) (and *doing* is far more useful than beauty). This is possibly because Marilla has also had to overcome the stinging memory of being seen as a pitiable “dark, homely little thing” as a child (AGG, 61). It is also perhaps because she sees the overarching importance of being able to take care of oneself as a woman, particularly when one does not have the opportunity to marry and fit neatly into society’s expectations. While it is positive that Marilla’s sense that beauty is a trivial concern ensures that she never comments on Anne’s homely and odd appearance as Anne’s defining feature the way that others do, in focusing on distracting Anne from Anne’s obsession about her physical appearance, however, Marilla also does not help Anne to treasure her own unique beauty.<sup>116</sup> Anne wants to be beautiful and have fashionable clothes and live a romantic life; Marilla wants Anne to come down more frequently from her lofty fantasies and be willing to settle for Marilla’s well-established pattern of simply being ‘neat’, ‘clean’, ‘good’, ‘sensible’ and ‘serviceable’. Mrs Lynde later notes Marilla’s weaknesses when it comes to raising Anne when Mrs Lynde muses to herself that “flesh and blood don’t come under the head of arithmetic and that’s where Marilla Cuthbert makes her mistake” (AGG, 168), suggesting that logic and patterns cannot be what dictate successful outcomes with children, as Marilla indeed learns.

The following private comments made by Anne when Marilla leaves her with the new dresses are revealing:

“I did hope there would be a white one with puffed sleeves,” she whispered disconsolately. “I prayed for one, but I didn’t much expect it on that account. I didn’t suppose God would have time to bother about a little orphan girl’s dress. I knew I’d just have to depend on Marilla for it. Well, fortunately I can imagine that one of them is of snow-white muslin with lovely lace frills and three-puffed sleeves.” (AGG, 70)

The excerpt’s connection between God and Marilla echoes the comfort that the March daughters

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<sup>116</sup> This is an area in which Matthew’s influence is absolutely essential in terms of Anne’s learning to accept herself for who she is as an individual.

find in their ability to trust ‘in God and Mother’ (*LW*, 254) in *Little Women* (1868-1869), but for Anne here it shows Marilla’s failure at this early stage in her mothering to provide a similar sense of reliability at least in providing Anne with her dearest desires – it is Matthew, not Marilla who quickly becomes this ideal source of comfort to Anne, aligning him with the idealised mother figure instead, as explored in Section 3.4. Anne’s thoughts also reveal how she frees herself from any confined expectations through her imagination and moulds what she is taught by Marilla to fit into her own world of ideals instead of fitting perfectly into Marilla’s. Although Anne’s attempts to comply with what Marilla expects do tend to produce “‘something like’” what Marilla asks for (*AGG*, 46; my emphasis), Marilla does not yet realise that the “‘something [she does not] understand’” about Anne (*AGG*, 30) represents a difference in their personalities that is significant enough to mean that Anne cannot simply fit ‘neatly’ into Marilla’s literal or metaphorical dress pattern (or in other words, Marilla’s perceived pattern for the ideal child).

The literal dress pattern used by Marilla does in fact link Anne with Marilla in the physical description of how the dresses emphasise ‘every corner and angle of [Anne’s] thin figure’ (*AGG*, 70), creating an appearance that recalls Marilla’s own angular appearance. This creates an image of Anne’s being forced uncomfortably into the ‘stiff’ pattern that meets Marilla’s expectations for bringing up a child, suggesting that Marilla at first tries to create another version of herself in bringing Anne up. Marilla’s attempts to help Anne to literally and figuratively fit in with the pattern that Marilla deems correct and acceptable highlight a kind of hypocrisy in Marilla, because *she* does not fit ‘neatly’ into *society’s* patterns for women and wants to give Anne an education specifically so that Anne similarly has the freedom to choose her own path, yet also wants Anne to fit into a predetermined mould deemed acceptable by Marilla. Shortly after Marilla gives Anne her new dresses, Marilla talks about needing to “‘borrow a skirt pattern from Mrs. Barry’” (*AGG*, 74) – a detail which can also be connected to the image of fitting Anne into a preconceived pattern of upbringing. This hints at how Marilla’s initial approach is to ‘borrow’ ideal ‘patterns’ for what her motherhood and Anne’s upbringing should look like instead of allowing a personalised pattern to arise from her own experience with Anne’s unique personality. It is thus telling that Anne does not wear the dresses given to her by Marilla as Marilla intends them to be worn, instead adding her own flair to ‘the extreme plainness’ of the new hat given to her by Marilla to wear with her church dress by ‘liberally’ garlanding it ‘with a heavy wreath’ of roses and buttercups (*AGG*, 71, 74) on her way to church – she cannot fit naturally into any predetermined pattern that Marilla wants to mould her into. Importantly, Marilla does eventually come around to regularly adjusting her literal dress pattern for Anne, eventually always making Anne’s dresses “‘fashionably’” with puffed sleeves and flounces

(AGG, 194), suggestive of how Marilla also adapts her ideal pattern for what she wants Anne to be as a child and perhaps adjusting what Marilla expects herself to achieve as a mother.

Anne's mention of turning to God for her heart's desire of having a white dress with puffed sleeves – quoted above – is another example of Anne's adapting what she is taught by Marilla to suit her own needs: in this case, Anne's education in prayer.<sup>117</sup> When Marilla learns that Anne has not received a proper religious education, she takes firm ownership of the fact that “‘it's about time somebody adopted that child and taught her something’” (AGG, 49). Thus, Marilla prioritises religion as the most important category of Anne's education and makes her first strides towards it by instructing Anne in how to pray, linking Marilla with Alcott's Marmee in prioritising her adopted daughter's relationship with God. Devout Marilla learns with much horror that Anne has “‘never said a prayer in her life’” (AGG, 47) – a result of Anne's sheer exhaustion after each day of labouring for her foster mothers, and of Mrs Thomas's telling her “‘that God made [Anne's] hair red *on purpose*’” (AGG, 47; Montgomery's emphasis). Religious education from a less effective mother figure in Anne's life has therefore resulted in the fruitless fact that Anne has “‘never cared about’” this God who curses her with red hair (AGG, 47) – a response from Anne which implies a warning from the author against passing platitudes about God on to children – something Marilla is almost from the outset sensitive enough not to do.<sup>118</sup>

The fact that Anne does not have much of a relationship with God<sup>119</sup> and knows nothing of the value of religion aside from the bare facts that she is made to learn “‘at the asylum Sunday-school’” (AGG, 47) spurs Marilla to the first educational encounter in which Marilla's perceived ideals of mothering cannot simply be applied unthinkingly to raising Anne:

She had intended to teach Anne the childish classic, “Now I lay me down to sleep.” But she had, as I have told you, the glimmerings of a sense of humour—which is simply another name for a sense of fitness of things; and it suddenly occurred to her that that simple little prayer, sacred to white-robed childhood lipping at motherly knees, was entirely unsuited to

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<sup>117</sup> Anne's daughter, Nan, also fits prayer into her own set of ideals after learning about it from her mother and from her Sunday school teacher. Nan's experience with the ‘idea that God might be induced to grant her petitions by promises of good behaviour or displays of fortitude’ (AN, 135-136) is found in Chapters 25 and 26 of *Anne of Ingleside* (1939).

<sup>118</sup> In her journal, Montgomery recalls the effects of her own experience as a child with the sorely misguided use of religion, twisted to suit the purposes of the adult caregiver. Her grandmother punished her when she was ‘about five or six’ by making her ‘kneel down [...] and pray to God to forgive [her] for being such a bad girl’; and this ‘dreadful’ choice of punishment ‘filled [Montgomery] with a lasting sense of disgust with and hatred for prayer and religion – what [her grandmother] called prayer and religion at least’ (SJ III, 21).

<sup>119</sup> Although Anne harbours childish resentment towards God for her physical features, she feels a childlike, natural connection to the human-like figure of Christ, as can be seen in her encounter with the picture of “‘Christ Blessing Little Children’” (AGG, 52). This natural familiarity with Christ makes the more rigid and orthodox Marilla uncomfortable, as she does not feel that imagination has any place in religion.

this freckled witch of a girl who knew and cared nothing about God's love, since she had never had it translated to her through the medium of human love. (*AGG*, 48)

This excerpt clearly places Marilla in the position of mother as the reader is informed before the above thoughts that Anne is 'at Marilla's knee' (*AGG*, 47), waiting for instruction on how to pray. However, Marilla's own thoughts, as quoted above, reveal that the traditional 'sacred' picture of 'white-robed childhood lisping at motherly knees' is not destined for Anne and Marilla. This is perhaps because Anne has been deprived of her biological mother and has thus been robbed in her past of the stereotyped path of childhood, since her childhood before adoption consisted more of her acting as a mother figure, or othermother, to the children of her foster mothers than experiencing life as a child herself. Anne is distanced from the image of the expected childhood pattern with the reference to her as a 'witch of a girl' – she is in fact aligned repeatedly 'with the supernatural' throughout the novel, signifying how she is, 'to borrow Homi Bhabha's formulation, "almost the same [as other girls] but not quite" – a border phenomenon whose blend of identity and difference proves to be more troubling than any more clearly oppositional status' (Keen, 2018:162,165).

With Anne's oddities and all of her life experience at the young age of eleven, it would seem that what Marilla perceives as ideal or appropriate approaches to the upbringing and education of traditional children by traditional mothers may not be suited to the 'stray woman-child' (*AGG*, 16) that kneels at the knee of this old spinster. This is the first indication shown in the text of Marilla's recognition that she needs to personalise her approach to mothering and adjust her expectations in order to fulfil Anne's needs. Marilla also recognises here for the second time (the first is when she hears about Anne's neglected childhood, as discussed previously) that Anne has been deprived of 'human love', subtly showing Marilla's recognition that love is needed to raise a child successfully and hinting at the fact that Marilla eventually comes to love Anne.<sup>120</sup>

Marilla initially decides about Anne's education in prayer that Anne is "'old enough to pray"' herself (*AGG*, 48) without learning any unsuitably innocent 'childish' prayers that cannot be appropriate to Anne's traumatic life experiences. Marilla's instruction is immediately followed by the description of Anne's 'burying her face in Marilla's lap' (*AGG*, 48), placing Anne in a position of total submissiveness and dependence on Marilla as she looks up to the older woman

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<sup>120</sup> This recognition of Anne's need for love is also an admission of Marilla's limitations, as acting as a 'medium of human love' does not come naturally or easily to Marilla. This invites the need for another influence in Anne's life to fulfil Anne's need for experiencing human love more freely than Marilla can. Thus, once again, Matthew's role as the loving and doting parent becomes essential in raising Anne successfully.

‘gravely’ for instruction and direction (AGG, 48), just as in the very idealised picture of a mother teaching a child to pray, reflecting some of the very innocence that Marilla originally dismisses in Anne. This shows the importance of Marilla’s role as a mother to Anne, however far from traditional or ideal their mother-daughter relationship may be, because Anne has been deprived of a mother and needs one, and Marilla is the immediate answer to that need. When Anne’s first solo prayer subsequently shocks Marilla, Marilla is again able to adjust her parenting plan by recognising that Anne is still a child and thus still needs some of the idealistic guidance Marilla imagines in spite of all of Anne’s premature life experience. Marilla thus ultimately decides to give Anne closer direction by encouraging Anne to learn “‘The Lord’s Prayer’” (AGG, 51) rather than leaving Anne to her own praying devices, although Anne does still adapt what she learns about praying to suit her own personality, as seen, for example, in the way she prays for a dress with puffed sleeves (discussed above).

Marilla’s encouragement for Anne to engage with her own spirituality in developing a real and sincere relationship with God bears fruit well into Anne’s future, as it opens the path for Anne to find her way to the more independent desire Anne expresses to “‘feel a prayer’” (AGG, 47-48). Indeed, Marilla’s invitation for Anne to think for herself enables Anne to extend what she is taught by Marilla in the realisation that *saying* “‘one’s prayers isn’t exactly the same thing as *praying*’” (AGG, 68; my emphasis). Anne’s intuitive connection with the transcendent guides her to learn that *saying* a rehearsed prayer can be taken further to having a *personal relationship*, through sincere personal prayer, with God, which is something that Marmee teaches her daughters in *Little Women* (1868-1869).<sup>121</sup> The fruits of Marilla’s mothering Anne in terms of religion are thus highlighted later in the series when Marilla’s idealised picture of the traditional ‘sacred’ image of ‘white-robed childhood lisp[ing] at motherly knees’ (AGG, 48) can actually be seen (not just imagined) in Anne’s more traditional, idealised mothering relationship with her own children. Anne’s children *are* young and innocent enough to be ‘*started* in life with the old classic, “Now I lay me” ... then *promoted* to “Our Father’” and are only ‘encouraged to make their own small petitions also in whatever language’ they choose when they are older and are well-versed in their learned childhood prayers (*AIn*, 135-136; my emphases). Sorfleet (2003:182) argues that ‘Anne’s original values, based in nature and the imagination, [... are]

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<sup>121</sup> Like Marmee, Anne encourages her future children to develop a deep and personal bond with their “‘Friend who is always near [...] to give strength and courage’” (*AIn*, 136). White (1994:87) points out that Montgomery had a similarly individualised approach to ‘faith [which] was not dependent on sermons or reading, but on her own working out of problems as she found necessary’. Montgomery reflects in her journals that prayer to her is ‘an aspiration and an up-reaching not a string of more or less selfish and material requests’ (*SJ II*, 113), suggestive of Anne’s distinction between *saying* prayers and actually *praying* and indicative of a personal communication between the one reaching up and the One reaching down.

*enriched* [not replaced] by Christian love and ethics' (my emphasis) as taught to her by Marilla in both example and instruction. Accordingly, the idealised mother Anne maintains the value in combining Marilla's more formal approach to prayer *with* her own instinctive, natural approach, suggesting that the marriage of Marilla's foundational principles with Anne's individuality is specifically what makes Anne into the idealised mother figure she becomes, rather than Marilla's ideal, moral-based approach on its own.

Marilla's initial ideal, moral-based approach to fitting Anne into preconceived notions of upbringing is seen even before Marilla decides to keep Anne. She tends to try and take some of Anne's most nonsensical fancies and questions and ground them in sense, such as when Anne tells Marilla about her birth parents and is relieved that they have "nice names" rather than disgraceful ones – Marilla retorts that "it doesn't matter what a person's name is as long as he behaves himself" (AGG, 38).<sup>122</sup> Marilla feels that as an older woman whom a child might look up to for an example of appropriate behaviour, she is 'called upon to inculcate a good and useful moral' (AGG, 38) in any situation. In fact, the narrator notes that Marilla is 'as fond of morals as the Duchess in Wonderland, and [is] firmly convinced that one should be tacked on to every remark made to a child who [is] being brought up' (AGG, 54). The allusion to the character of the Duchess in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) is ironic, as the Duchess believes that "[e]verything's got a moral, if only you can find it" (Carroll, [1865] 2008:n.p.), but her morals do not often make sense and they even contradict one another at times. The Duchess is also a twisted figure of motherhood: although she is 'nursing' and singing a 'lullaby' to 'her child' when she is first introduced to the reader, the nursing involves shaking the baby 'violently' and the lullaby justifies speaking 'roughly' and 'severely' to him and beating him for supposedly sneezing deliberately, even though he sneezes because of the overabundance of 'pepper' in the air (Carroll, [1865] 2008:n.p.). This allusion therefore suggests that Marilla's initial excessive fondness for morals cannot be a sound foundation for effective mothering, because it provides a contrived view of a mother's role and the assumed needs of a child and threatens to blind Marilla to the immediate needs of the individual child's circumstances.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> This moral can also be linked to Anne's trying to rename herself when she first arrives at Green Gables. The moral is thus suggestive of the good behaviour that Marilla expects from her child, whatever the child's name or background.

<sup>123</sup> Meg, in the second part of Alcott's *Little Women* (1868-1869), also tries to make 'many moral rules' (LW:611) early in her traditional mothering journey (in spite of her mother's more individualised approach to bringing up Meg and her sisters). But Meg soon learns that no 'mother [is] ever proof against the winning wiles, the ingenious evasions, or the tranquil audacity of the miniature men and women who so early show themselves accomplished

Indeed, Anne rarely responds to such platitudes, but in many instances waves Marilla's chosen 'moral inconsequently aside and seize[s] only on the delightful possibilities before it' (AGG, 54). One example of this is when Anne finds out that her possible future bosom friend, Diana, is "a very pretty little girl" (AGG, 54). Anne is determined to focus on the importance of having "a beautiful bosom friend" (AGG, 54) and does not even acknowledge hearing Marilla's moral, namely that being "good and smart [...] is better than being pretty" (AGG, 54). It is not surprising that the moral does not take root in Anne's mind, as a bit later in the novel she even waves Diana's later reference to this same moral aside by defiantly stating, "I'd rather be pretty than clever" (AGG, 94-95). Only after Anne's later hair-dyeing mishap does Anne verbalise her recognition of the truth of this moral:

"I mean to devote all my energies to being good after this and I shall never try to be beautiful again. Of course it's better to be good. I know it is, but it's sometimes so hard to believe a thing even when you know it. I do really want to be good, Marilla, like you and Mrs. Allan and Miss Stacy, and grow up to be a credit to you." (AGG, 184)

The key to Anne's learning here is that Anne ultimately has to *confirm* this truth for herself through the more effective medium of *her own experience* rather than through simply listening to Marilla's hollow platitude.

Anne confirms this approach of learning through her own experience when Marilla asks, after Anne's romantic fantasies result in the loss of Mr Barry's dory, whether Anne will "*ever* have any sense" (AGG, 191; Montgomery's emphasis). Anne responds as follows:

"Oh, yes, I think I will, Marilla," [...]. "I think my prospects of becoming sensible are brighter now than ever."

[...].

"[...] Ever since I came to Green Gables I've been making mistakes, and each mistake has helped to cure me of some great shortcoming. The affair of the amethyst brooch cured me of meddling with things that didn't belong to me. The Haunted Wood mistake cured me of letting my imagination run away with me. The liniment cake mistake cured me of carelessness in cooking. Dyeing my hair cured me of vanity. I never think about my hair and nose now—at least, very seldom. And today's mistake is going to cure me of being too romantic. [...] I feel quite sure that you will soon see a great improvement in me in this respect, Marilla." (AGG, 191)

Anne's response shows a keen self-awareness which promises great sense. She thus clearly *does* learn each lesson that Marilla sets out to teach her, but not in the way that Marilla imagines she will or with the moralising help that Marilla feels she needs to give.

While morals do not work reliably in changing Anne's behaviour, Anne does learn that morals

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Artful Dodgers' (LW, 611). Even Montgomery herself notes (about her time as a teacher): 'I was enthusiastic and had many "ideals" – which suffered a good deal from contact with the real' (SJI, 389-390).

are important to Marilla and can be used to garner Marilla's support. Anne later takes what she has learned about Marilla's fondness for morals and uses it in her argument to try and convince a sceptical Marilla that writing stories is constructive by reasoning as follows: "But we're so careful to put a moral into them all, Marilla [...] I insist upon that" (AGG, 177). This acts as a comical reflection on the effect of mothering to instil values in future generations – it certainly shows Anne's learning from Marilla and passing the information along, but it undermines the value of Marilla's morals by connecting them with fanciful stories that Marilla heartily disproves of as "a pack of nonsense [...] and [a] waste [of] time that should be put on [a young girl's] lessons" (AGG, 177). This connection of Marilla's morals with stories that she perceives as a waste of time inadvertently makes Marilla's suggestion seem like a suggestion that her own morals are also frequently a waste of time and need perhaps to be revised for use in the real world. The humour of the situation is further enhanced by the knowledge that Montgomery herself disapproved of forcing morals into her writing to suit the requirements of some of her editors (SJI, 263) and that *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) 'came after the writing of such a moral work [... whose manuscript] Montgomery finally burned [...]' "vowing that never again would [she] try to create a Sunday School heroine" (Doody, 1997b:11).

Marilla's initial inability to understand how to meet Anne's needs effectively and her justification for educating Anne with preconceived ideals and morals are highlighted in a paragraph from Chapter 22 of *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), when Marilla encourages Anne to "learn to take things calmly":

For Anne to take things calmly would have been to change her nature. All "spirit and fire and dew," as she was, the pleasures and pains of life came to her with trebled intensity. Marilla felt this and was vaguely troubled over it, realizing that the ups and downs of existence would probably bear hardly on this impulsive soul and not sufficiently understanding that the equally great capacity for delight might more than compensate. Therefore Marilla conceived it to be her duty to drill Anne into a *tranquil uniformity* of disposition as impossible and alien to her as to a dancing sunbeam in one of the brook shallows. She did not make much headway, as she sorrowfully admitted to herself. The downfall of some dear hope or plan plunged Anne into "deeps of affliction." The fulfilment thereof exalted her to dizzy realms of delight. Marilla had almost begun to despair of ever fashioning this waif of the world into her model little girl of demure manners and prim deportment. Neither would she have believed that she really liked Anne much better as she was. (AGG, 151-152; my emphasis)

This shows the root of the problem with Marilla's initial approach to motherhood and also reveals Marilla's inner softness and concern for Anne's future heartaches – an indication that she does attempt to understand Anne, but her early attempts fall short.

Marilla's desire to fashion 'this waif of the world into [Marilla's] model little girl' confirms that

Marilla mothers from a foundation of ideals and reliance on her own perceptions. She sees Anne as a 'waif', or (by definition) as a neglected child who needs to be nurtured out of unconstructive tendencies. Marilla's lack of 'headway' in her attempts to fashion a 'model' of Anne is attributed to her inability to understand that Anne's nature provides just as much security for Anne as Marilla's ideas of 'tranquil uniformity' do for Marilla because Anne's vivacious experience of life is all Anne knows. Descriptions of Anne as 'spirit', 'fire', 'dew' and 'dancing sunbeam' create an image of something so natural and abstract that it is impossible to fully comprehend or physically hold down, let alone 'drill' into any practical kind of mould. Marilla's comfort in the 'tranquil uniformity of disposition' is 'impossible' and 'alien' to Anne because Anne is at home in the "“deeps of affliction”" and the 'dizzy realms of delight' and – as touching as Marilla's concern for Anne's wellbeing is – does not need to be trained out of who she is. Marilla's blindness to this fact is confirmed with the conclusion that she simply does not realise 'that she really [likes] Anne much better' (AGG, 152) as Anne is, at least not until she raises placid Dora, and the narrator remarks that 'it might even be suspected that she liked the harum-scarum best after all' (AHD, 29). Anne therefore needs to be taught that her natural *is* good, rather than how to be 'naturally good' (AGG, 153).

The narration later reveals Marilla's progress in moving away from her connection with the moral-loving Duchess (while Anne frets about how to behave at a tea at the manse):

“The trouble with you, Anne, is that you're thinking too much about yourself. You should just think of Mrs. Allan and what would be nicest and most agreeable to her,” said Marilla, hitting for once in her life on a very sound and pithy piece of advice. Anne instantly realized this.

“You are right, Marilla. I'll try not to think about myself at all.” (AGG, 152)

Marilla clearly succeeds here at educating Anne – she is credited for the first time with giving Anne sound advice instead of inculcating an ironically ineffective moral out of a sense of duty. The proof of the success of this piece of advice lies in the fact that Anne 'instantly' recognises the advice as valuable, tells Marilla that she is 'right' and commits to act on the given counsel. Thus, Marilla succeeds more often at educating Anne when Marilla sincerely expresses what she observes as faulty in Anne's very individual behaviour as opposed to when she tries to compose morals (which are based on a perceived set of societal expectations designed to fit any situation) to force into each situation in an attempt to carve Anne to fit into a predetermined mould.

Another area in which Marilla's attachment to her own views and ideals proves insubstantial is in the area of punishment and discipline. When Mrs Lynde expresses her first impression of

Anne's appearance so bluntly that she hurts Anne's feelings "worse than they were ever hurt before" (AGG, 59) and thereby elicits an angry retort from Anne commensurate with the hurt that Mrs Lynde has caused, Mrs Lynde suggests – citing her own experience with bringing up "ten children" – that Marilla whip Anne "with a fair-sized birch switch" as a punishment for Anne's display of temper (AGG, 60). Marilla is clearly sensitive enough, however, to realise at times – as she does in the matter of Anne's education in prayer – that traditional approaches may not always work on a child with Anne's unusual background. Indeed, the fact that Anne finds Mrs Lynde's offensive comments more hurtful than "Mrs. Thomas' intoxicated husband" (AGG, 59) implies that she may have numbed herself to physical pain as a result of physical abuse during her neglected childhood (Crockett, 2001:73) and that beatings may thus not work as a form of discipline for her. Marilla thus muses:

And how was she to punish her? The amiable suggestion of the birch switch—to the efficiency of which all of Mrs. Rachel's own children could have borne smarting testimony—did not appeal to Marilla. She did not believe she could whip a child. No, some other method of punishment must be found to bring Anne to a proper realization of the enormity of her offense. (AGG, 60)

Marilla's distaste for the idea of whipping a child points to the fact that Marilla is really 'a rather exceptional person, one who has really no cruelty in her' (Doody, 2008:34). It also reflects her desire to ensure that any punishment she inflicts upon Anne is not simply for the sake of punishment but is simultaneously didactic. This approach opens the possibility for Anne to learn not just *that* some behaviours are unacceptable but also *why* this is the case (bringing Anne 'to a proper realization of the enormity of her offense'). This is a progressive approach, particularly considering that the dominant discourses surrounding discipline in Montgomery's time, and which Montgomery herself seemed to favour,<sup>124</sup> involved at least some corporal punishment when necessary: an idea that was 'popularized in the United States and Canada by Lydia Maria Child in a best-selling motherhood manual' (Gammel & Dutton, 1999:111) called *The Mother's Book* (1831). The progressive nature of Marilla's complete disapproval for corporal punishment in the late nineteenth century thus highlights just how progressive Marmee's philosophies in *Little Women* were (see Section 2.4.3).

The alignment of Marilla, the non-traditional mother figure, rather than Mrs Lynde, the biological mother, with the idealised mother figure of Marmee suggests that idealised mothering beliefs and qualities are not defined by whether one is an alternative or traditional mother figure. Although this detail could simply be seen as pointing out that all mothers are different, it is

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<sup>124</sup> Gammel and Dutton (1999:113) point out that '[u]ltimately, Montgomery's message [on corporal punishment] is an ambivalent and uneasy one, signalling her own wrestling with the issue'.

certain that Marmee's approach in not beating her children but rather rearing them with love and respect yields a plentiful, fruitful harvest of happy and effective future mothers and that Marilla's eventual harvest is also bountiful, whereas the reader never actually sees the impact of Mrs Lynde's 'birch switch' mothering. When Anne becomes a teacher, she too opposes the idea of corporal punishment, connecting her with Marilla in this particular set of ideals (although Anne does seemingly allow some corporal punishment when it comes to her own children):<sup>125</sup>

"I could *never* whip a child [...]. I don't believe in it *at all*. Miss Stacy never whipped any of us and she had perfect order; and Mr. Phillips was always whipping and he had no order at all. No, if I can't get along without whipping I shall not try to teach school. There are better ways of managing. I shall try to win my pupils' affections and then they will *want* to do what I tell them." (AA, 29-30; Montgomery's emphasis)

Anne's comment above also recalls how it is Matthew who wins her over through affection and a resultant desire to please *him* in accepting Marilla's punishment for what Anne says to Mrs Lynde (see Section 3.4).

Marilla decides to discipline Anne by making Anne apologise to Mrs Lynde and ask for forgiveness (AGG, 62). The punishment is intended to force Anne to put aside her pride and conform to societal expectation, even at the risk of "humiliating" herself (AGG, 64), and to learn that she is always expected to be "respectful" to someone who is "a stranger and an elderly person and [Marilla's] visitor" (AGG, 61-62) despite the validity of Anne's own hurt feelings. But Marilla's 'triumphant' victory (AGG, 65) at coming up with such an ideal, 'wholesome punishment' (AGG, 66) is undermined both by the fact that (unbeknownst to Marilla) it is Matthew who convinces Anne to see the apology through and by Anne's ability to romanticise everything, which helps Anne to actually enjoy 'her valley of humiliation' by 'revelling in the thoroughness of her abasement' (AGG, 66). Thus, Marilla's 'uneasy feeling that she ought to scold Anne for apologizing so well' (AGG, 67) displaces Marilla's initial triumph.

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<sup>125</sup> Montgomery never actually shows Anne whipping her own children. Rather, she more often depicts how Anne – in *Anne of Ingleside* (1939), *Rainbow Valley* (1919) and *Rilla of Ingleside* (1921) – follows a more didactic school of discipline, reminiscent of Marilla's (and Marmee's), that enables her to parent each of her children as individuals and rely on them to learn their own lessons from their wrongdoings. However, Anne does end up whipping one of her pupils, who seems unwilling to be won over by affection (AA, 91). Gammel and Dutton (1999:111) point out that her 'transgression, namely, the violation of her own professional ideals [...] ultimately turns into a *felix culpa*, resulting in the conversion of Anthony Pye, who now pays Anne respect'. Furthermore, Gammel and Dutton (1999:112) highlight the *implication* that 'Susan Baker [...], as well as Gilbert and Anne [...] span[k] the Blythe children when necessary', indicating that Anne's idealism is tempered to allow corporal punishment in her own home according to Gilbert's rule – like the view favoured by Montgomery – of "Corporal punishment as a last resort" (AA, 30).

Although Anne does learn from the experience of apologising to Mrs Lynde that it gives one “a lovely, comfortable feeling to apologize and be forgiven” (*AGG*, 68), she does not receive or execute Marilla’s punishment the way that Marilla expects her to, forcing Marilla to continue revising her approaches to disciplining Anne. The promise of future success is hinted at, however, with the ‘cheerful light’ that greets the two ‘from the kitchen at Green Gables’ through ‘the shadows’ before them on their walk home from the apology (*AGG*, 68), and the sweet reward Marilla receives from her happy adopted daughter is also telling:

Anne suddenly came close to Marilla and slipped her hand into the older woman’s hard palm.

“It’s lovely to be going home and know it’s home,” she said. “I love Green Gables already, and I never loved any place before. No place ever seemed like home. Oh, Marilla, I’m so happy. I could pray right now and not find it a bit hard.”

Something warm and pleasant welled up in Marilla’s heart at touch of that thin little hand in her own—a throb of the maternity she had missed, perhaps. Its very unaccustomedness and sweetness disturbed her. (*AGG*, 68)

Montgomery describes one of her own similarly tender experiences as a mother as ‘one of those brief, fleeting joys that transform life and illuminate the meaning of motherhood’ (*SJ II*, 155). The first explicit connection between Marilla and ‘the meaning of motherhood’ thus comes on the heels of what she sees as a less-than-ideal punishment outcome. This implies to the reader that it is not ideals but sweet imperfections, affectionate connections and indeed the love of a child that can make an ideal mother figure even out of an old spinster.<sup>126</sup>

Marilla’s ideals about Anne’s behaviour and about discipline and punishment prioritise Marilla’s own logical belief system, but when such views cloud her ability to see Anne for who she is and prevent her from trusting Anne, they invite regression from Anne instead of progress. This is most evident when Marilla assumes that Anne has taken and lost her beautiful amethyst brooch. Marilla’s assumption can be understood somewhat from her perspective, particularly since Anne has only lived at Green Gables for a few weeks by this time, meaning that Marilla cannot realistically be expected to know her very well; even Matthew admits ‘that circumstances [are] against’ Anne in this situation (*AGG*, 85) since the brooch apparently disappears after Anne is “the last person to handle it” (*AGG*, 84). Marilla’s approach to punishing Anne for what she assumes is a falsehood in Anne’s adamantness that she did not lose the brooch is laced with dramatic irony: “She’ll stay in her room until she confesses,” said Marilla grimly, remembering the supposed success of this method in [Anne’s decision to apologise to Mrs

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<sup>126</sup> Matthew instinctively knows that love is the key to parenting Anne and tells Marilla so right from the start (*AGG*, 46; see Section 3.4).

Lynde]’ (AGG, 85). The irony lies in the fact that Marilla’s success *is* assured in producing the result that she wants, but the made-up and rehearsed confession she eventually succeeds in getting is the very presentation of falsehood that Marilla accuses Anne of in the first place and which Marilla dreads having to live with in a child (AGG, 85). This makes Marilla’s ‘success [...] very bitter’ to her (AGG, 86) not because Anne tells a lie, but because of Marilla’s own role in Anne’s eventual decision to lie, as Anne only confesses to taking the brooch because that is what she perceives will satisfy Marilla.

Fortunately, Marilla is “willing to own up” (AGG, 90) to her mistake once she discovers the brooch in her shawl, and to accept responsibility for Anne’s falsehood. Marilla is also humble enough to realise that there are still lessons she needs to learn and revisions she needs to make to her mothering approach, and she thus resolves to “start square again” (AGG, 89) if she and Anne can agree to forgive each other their follies. Crockett (2001:74) points out the following:

[...] the amethyst brooch itself represents what Marilla cherishes and Anne lacks – family history, a physical link to the past, a maternal heritage. It is a gift that literally embodies the mother, since a lock of Marilla’s mother’s hair is incorporated into the braid around the brooch [...]. Thus, it symbolizes the biological and emotional mother-daughter or parent-child link, and Anne has neither a parent nor a gift from a parent to mark her heritage.

The above observation marks Anne as unknowable because of her lack of a traceable heritage, justifying Marilla’s suspicions about Anne’s culpability in the brooch’s disappearance. However, since Anne proves innocent, the brooch’s connection to Marilla’s treasured maternal heritage (which, ironically is the heritage – not Anne’s – that the reader actually receives little to no information on) incidentally comes to symbolise the failure of Marilla’s attachment to her preconceived ideals about mothering and thus also Marilla’s progress towards becoming an effective mother figure by ‘losing’ her reliance on these ideals and confessing their shortcomings. Marilla here finally seems to turn a corner from being very worried about the task of raising a girl to giving herself the grace of trying again with less regard this time for measuring up to any preconceived ideals – to the point that she is ready to admit that Anne, although “hard to understand in some respects” will probably “turn out all right yet” (AGG, 90). This, along with Marilla’s acceptance of the fact that the only real certainty in this fairly new parenting relationship is that “no house will ever be dull” that Anne is in (AGG, 90), shows Marilla’s willingness to let go of some of her more rigid ideals and allow Anne’s presence in her life to chase away the dull ‘bareness’ (AGG, 29) that exists in both Marilla’s life and home before she begins her mothering journey.

Anne’s daydreaming nature disrupts the easy flow of Marilla’s formerly only having to rely on

and worry about herself and her own behaviour. This in turn results in the distressing unsettling of Marilla's reliability on herself, as her self-assurance, particularly in her domestic sphere, becomes a force that results in some of the very scrapes that Anne gets into. When Marilla's brooch goes missing, it is she who loses track of it, but she is temporarily persuaded by Mrs Lynde's early warnings about adopting an unknown orphan (*AGG*, 12-13) and quickly assumes that she cannot trust Anne, only to come to the eventual realisation that '[w]hat makes Anne deviant, among orphans at least, turns out to be her very lack of deviance' (Keen, 2018:166; see also Crockett, 2001:74).<sup>127</sup> Later, when Diana gets drunk at the tea Marilla encourages Anne to invite her bosom friend to, it is because Marilla muddles her own organisation by putting the bottle of raspberry cordial down in the cellar instead of in the sitting-room closet pantry as she has told Anne (*AGG*, 105, 110). And even later, when Anne flavours a cake for a tea with the minister and his wife (the Allans) with liniment, it is because Marilla accidentally breaks "the liniment bottle", pours what is left "into an old empty vanilla bottle" and does not think to warn Anne of this (*AGG*, 149). Marilla's role in these scrapes results from the fact that she has to get used to accounting for Anne's illogical and scatter-brained personality; Marilla takes for granted that Anne will see or smell things like currant wine or liniment for herself and thus avoid such mistakes, but Anne is a child and does not possess Marilla's logic, knowledge or experience and thus needs more careful help and direction.<sup>128</sup>

Marilla's role in these mishaps is an outward manifestation of her initially clumsy, largely unprepared venture into motherhood and of how the venture destabilises her, placing her outside of her comfort zone and forcing her to open her life and heart to change and to making a personalised place for Anne. The mishaps also work to loosen Marilla out of her rigid strictness and teach her to laugh at herself as she sees her own imperfections through the lens of Anne's mishaps and her own role in accidentally enabling Anne's propensity for trouble: Marilla has 'to laugh in spite of herself' after the mystery of the brooch incident and Anne's forced

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<sup>127</sup> Doody (1997b:32) notes that amethysts, which are the stones in the brooch which Marilla so treasures, 'mar[k] her as possessing, if only potentially, the saving quality of true vision, spiritual insight', so it is significant that '[w]hen she has "lost" the amethyst [brooch], Marilla loses her sense of reality in accusing Anne, then regains her senses when it is restored'. The potential for spiritual insight that the amethysts represent also hint at Marilla's continual progress towards more insightful mothering, facilitated by her learning from mistakes such as the one resulting from the loss of the amethyst brooch.

<sup>128</sup> Montgomery expressed in her journals that her grandparents also struggled to take into account her unique nature as a child who, while capable of many things, was not capable of all of the things they were capable of: 'They seemed to cherish and act upon contradictory opinions that a child of ten or a girl of fifteen was as old as themselves and as young as a baby' (*SJ I*, 300). According to Doody Jones (1997:426), the broadly accepted understanding of childhood [at that time] was that either 'the child was a repository of original sin' or was thought of as 'a miniature adult [who must] do its share of the work'. Doody Jones (1997:426) further explains that the new notions of 'the Romantic idealization of the child' did not begin to penetrate broadly, 'particularly in rural areas, before 1880'.

falsehood connected to it are revealed (AGG, 89), and Marilla's 'face twitch[es] in spite of herself' upon discovering her role in Diana's drunkenness (AGG, 110). When Marilla is first introduced in the novel, she is described as having 'a saving something about her mouth, which, if it had been ever so slightly developed, might have been considered indicative of a sense of humour' (AGG, 10). Thus, the humility brought by Marilla's venture into mothering connects her with her sense of humour, 'rusty from long disuse' (AGG, 26) and with joy.

Marilla's developing sense of humour and joy softens her into becoming more generous with Anne and more aware of Anne's needs as time progresses, even in circumstances that demand discipline. It is Marilla, for instance, who brings up Diana as a possible candidate to fill Anne's longed-for position of bosom friend (AGG, 53). It is also Marilla who softens her stern scolding of Anne for going to church with her "hat rigged out ridiculous with roses and buttercups" with the gentler invitation to accompany Marilla on an errand to the Barrys' home so that Anne can "get acquainted with Diana" (AGG, 74).

Another instance of Marilla's softening her scolding with an immediate generous action is when Anne comes in late from playing with Diana, because Anne is excited about the upcoming church picnic. Marilla makes it quite clear that when she tells Anne to do something at a specific time, Anne should obey at "that time and not half an hour later" (AGG, 79),<sup>129</sup> but Marilla also shows that she does listen to Anne's incessant chatter, even if she seems to dismiss it, by responding to Anne's desire to go to the picnic immediately after making her own disciplining point. Marilla even offers to bake things to fill a basket for Anne to take to the picnic so that Anne does not have to "feel terribly humiliated" by attending empty-handed due to Anne's lack of cooking ability (AGG, 80). This incident shows promise in Marilla's coming to understand how to deal with Anne's personality, as it reflects Marilla's trying to teach Anne to prioritise her wants and responsibilities without ignoring either category. That Marilla has achieved some level of progress by this time in mothering Anne as an individual is signalled once again by the reward offered to Marilla in the form of Anne's display of gratitude and pleasure, which marks Marilla as a mother figure through her first kiss from a child:

"Oh, you dear good Marilla. Oh, you are so kind to me. Oh, I'm so much obliged to you."

Getting through with her "ohs" Anne cast herself into Marilla's arms and rapturously kissed her sallow cheek. It was the first time in her whole life that childish lips had voluntarily touched Marilla's face. *Again that sudden sensation of startling sweetness*

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<sup>129</sup> Anne later becomes better at being obedient with regard to time; she is even able to keep a quick visit with Diana about attending a concert for Diana's birthday (something the two bosom friends see as terribly important) 'within the limits of [the] ten minutes' that Marilla allows, in spite of what it 'costs' Anne (AGG, 127).

*thrilled her*. She was secretly vastly pleased at Anne’s impulsive caress [...]. (AGG, 80; my emphasis)

It is clear that Anne’s connection with Marilla develops most successfully when Marilla shows love and generosity alongside the instilling of education and discipline.

The fruits of Marilla’s generosity are bountiful once again when Marilla suggests that Anne invite Diana over for tea. This suggestion is so wonderful to Anne that she imagines it could only arise from Marilla’s actually also possessing an imagination after all ““or else”” Marilla would ““never have understood how”” Anne has ““longed for”” just such a tea (AGG, 104). Anne’s suggestion that Marilla must possess some imagination (a trait that links Marilla to the ever-imaginative Anne) further solidifies Anne’s growing sense of connection with her, just as Anne’s kiss above does. Marilla thus makes clear progress in learning more about fulfilling Anne’s needs, and she expresses this through voluntarily showing real trust in Anne. Not only does Marilla allow Anne to grow in this chapter of the novel by giving her a second chance to fulfil a responsibility that she has failed to fulfil correctly previously (putting ““the tea to draw”” (AGG, 104) in time for supper for Matthew and the hired boy, Jerry, while Marilla is not home), but Marilla gives Anne the added opportunity to take full responsibility for a *new* task (having Diana to tea) without any help and with only some firm guidelines in place about what dishes Anne can use and what Anne may serve for food and for drink (AGG, 104-105).

Marilla’s generosity in her suggestion that Anne have Diana over for tea – Anne even tells Diana that ““Marilla is a very generous woman”” (AGG, 106) – clearly shows her relaxing her control over her domestic sphere, which also hints at Marilla’s growing faith in herself as a mentor for Anne in this domestic sphere. And when Marilla’s less than ideal instructions are inadvertently the cause of Mrs Barry’s decision to ban Anne and Diana’s friendship (through Diana’s becoming drunk at the tea), Marilla acts every bit the mother figure in defending Anne’s integrity against the ““unreasonable”” Mrs Barry (AGG, 111). This incident represents so much growth in Marilla’s mothering that the unprecedented description of Marilla after Anne has gone to bed, hopeless of ever having her friendship with Diana back, is very like a description of the idealised traditional mother figure in Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868-1869):<sup>130</sup>

[...] when [Marilla] slipped into the east gable before going to bed and found that Anne had cried herself to sleep an unaccustomed softness crept into her face.

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<sup>130</sup> Alcott’s description of Marmee that the quoted description of Marilla recalls is the following:

The clocks were striking midnight and the rooms were very still as a figure glided quietly from bed to bed, smoothing a coverlet here, settling a pillow there, and pausing to look long and tenderly at each unconscious face, to kiss each with lips that mutely blessed, and to pray the fervent prayers which only mothers utter. (LW, 226)

“Poor little soul,” she murmured, lifting a loose curl of hair from the child’s tear-stained face. Then she bent down and kissed the flushed cheek on the pillow. (AGG, 113)

Thus, not only does Anne mark Marilla as a mother figure with displays of affection (mentioned earlier), but Marilla – facilitated by the obvious distancing from her old rigidity and her more frequent connection to ‘softness’ (AGG, 113) and ‘sweetness’ (AGG, 80) – reciprocates by marking Anne as her daughter through her own – albeit mostly unspoken – affection.

Although Anne and Marilla share the clearly developing connection mentioned above and although it grows even stronger as more time passes, Anne never refers to Marilla as a ‘kindred spirit’, even though Anne does describe a number of other adult parent or mentor figures as kindred spirits, such as Matthew, Miss Stacy and Mrs Allan.<sup>131</sup> It is tempting to assume that this undermines the quality, strength and effectiveness of the relationship between Anne and Marilla, particularly when Anne simply notes at one point, in response to an invitation to stay and visit longer with another of her spinster mother figures who *is* labelled as a kindred spirit to Anne (Miss Barry): “[...] it is my *duty* to go home to Miss Marilla Cuthbert. Miss Marilla Cuthbert is a very kind lady who has taken me to bring up properly” (AGG, 136; my emphasis).<sup>132</sup> Moreover, in respect of Anne’s strong feelings of connection with women besides Marilla, Doody (2008:34) rightly points out Marilla’s ‘genuine lack of pride’, adding:

[Marilla] has so little sense of her own claims that she puts up patiently with Anne’s adolescent gushing idealization of Miss Stacy and Mrs All[a]n, two important female models who yet have done nothing for her in comparison with Marilla, who has given her not less than everything. But Marilla has no hurt feelings, no jealousy – but calmly allows Anne to develop outside the home as well as within it.<sup>133</sup>

While it is true that Marilla is not naturally a ‘kindred spirit’ for Anne, she does hold the exclusive position of primary acting mother figure to Anne and is the first mother-like figure in Anne’s memory to provide her with a real home – a decision which Marilla *chooses* to make, albeit initially out of a sense of *duty*. Anne’s sense of duty in her commitment to returning home and in her loyalty to Marilla, ‘remembering what she owe[s] to Marilla’ (AGG, 200), can thus be read as reciprocal to Marilla’s sense of duty in adopting Anne: just as Marilla *chooses* to take on Anne as her daughter, Anne reciprocates by *choosing* to acknowledge Marilla as her primary mother figure, even if neither refers to the other explicitly as daughter or mother.

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<sup>131</sup> These kindred spirit parent figures are discussed in more detail in later sections in this chapter and in Chapter 4.

<sup>132</sup> This sense of duty to a mother figure who is not necessarily a kindred spirit is echoed in *Anne of Avonlea* when Anne’s beloved pupil, Paul Irving, tells her, “‘I’d love you next to father if it wasn’t my *duty* to love Grandma Irving best, because she’s doing so much for me” (AA, 116; Montgomery’s emphasis).

<sup>133</sup> This is reminiscent of Marmee’s approach to encouraging her daughters to be women who achieve balance in their pursuits of domesticity, community and self-fulfilment.

The notion of choice in Anne's and Marilla's connection is important because it means that each is exactly where she wants to be in the other's life, and each is therefore committed – not merely out of obligation, but out of choice – to the relationship. Thus, Marilla's position as Anne's primary mother figure by choice is elevated for Anne, even above Anne's relationships with women with whom Anne shares a more relaxed 'kindred' connection. Where other women may be motherly 'kindred spirits' to Anne, it is to Marilla that Anne returns and in Marilla that Anne confides (*AGG*, 184) about all of her adventures, thoughts, hopes and even about her kindred spirits. Anne's esteem for and recognition of Marilla as her primary mother figure, standing beside the idealised position held by her biological mother, is symbolically shown in the fact that Anne names her youngest daughter 'Bertha Marilla Blythe' (*AIn*, 48). This name highlights what Robinson (2018:172) points out:

In her journals as well as in her fiction, Montgomery's insistence on clan qualities being bred into people constructs a kinship identity that is essential and unchanging. At the same time, her fiction also suggests that individuals can transcend the biological to *forge their own* kinship relations.<sup>134</sup> (my emphasis)

Anne and Marilla's loyalty to one another and the power of the bond that develops between them to influence future generations clearly demonstrate this transcendence of *chosen* kinship above simple biological kinship. It is also thus highly significant that Montgomery's series of *Anne* novels traces (Ma)Rilla's life beyond that of any of Anne's other children, specifically into Rilla's own future as an adoptive mother in *Rilla of Ingleside* (1921), highlighting her connection with Marilla not just in name, but also in becoming an adoptive mother and thus the connection between mother figures and the successful mothering of future generations.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Robinson (2018:173) later explains the stance of material feminism, which is that '[r]ather than uphold[ing] the traditional, discourse-driven construct of biological family and kinship, Montgomery's novels challenge this tradition, and they do so in order to unleash their heroines from oppressive regimes'. Robinson (2018:176-177) further argues, however, that Montgomery's application of discourses of traditional 'kinship' to metaphorically define influential non-traditional relationships is limiting in its reliance on traditional terminology to define what is non-traditional. While this progressive stance presents a rich avenue for further exploration, any detailed consideration of this line of reasoning falls outside of the scope of my current discussion.

<sup>135</sup> This connection is made more powerful by the fact that Rilla starts out not liking babies "one bit" (*RI*, 57), much less desiring to mother one that is not hers, which links to Marilla's hesitance at adopting a child that requires dedicated mothering – connecting Marilla and Rilla via the bridge between them of the more traditionally idealised mother figure that Anne becomes. This also highlights the idea that many women – whether they are inclined to be maternal or not and no matter their age or situation in life – *can* become good mothers if they choose to invest the necessary effort and attention. It is significant too that Rilla's grudging willingness to take on the upbringing of Jims rescues Jims entirely from the asylum, Hopetown (*RI*, 87-88), taking Marilla and Matthew's rescue of Anne from the orphan life further, since Jims does not have to experience the asylum or multiple foster parents, unlike Anne. Rilla's experience is also unique in that Jims can go back to his own biological father and a new stepmother, who pledges to "be as good to him as if he was [her] own" (*RI*, 309), after the war, but Jims's new mother acknowledges that he "is more [Rilla's] baby than anyone else's", that she will "always be glad of any advice from [Rilla] about his bringing up" and that she will see that Rilla gets a "fair share of him" (*RI*, 309). Huse (1986:61-63) makes connections between Marilla's and Rilla's mothering journeys that are similar to the ones I make, particularly in terms of how both Marilla and Rilla are 'mothers-by-choice' and are not naturally motherly

Marilla's success in mothering can also be traced in Anne's development into a useful little girl as a testament to the skill of her teacher and mentor. Marilla's skills in housekeeping include her being "a famous cook" (AGG, 107) according to Anne, and Marilla's tutelage makes Anne into a cook who "can make a pretty good cake" (AGG, 146) herself in spite of her "feather-brained" (AGG, 208) nature. Under Marilla's watchful mothering, Anne becomes "real steady and reliable" (AGG, 208); Marilla even tells Mrs Lynde three years after Anne comes to Green Gables, "I used to be afraid she'd never get over her feather-brained ways, but she has and I wouldn't be afraid to trust her in anything now" (AGG, 208). It is also significant then that later in the series, Anne's words to Gilbert about their daughter, Rilla's growth echo Marilla's words to Mrs Lynde about Anne: "Rilla has developed in a wonderful fashion these past four years. She used to be such an irresponsible young creature. She has changed into a capable, womanly girl and she is such a comfort to me" (RI, 298). This connects Anne to Marilla through the fruits of their successful mothering – the idealised traditional mother, Anne, connected with the unlikely, less-than-ideal archetypal spinster, Marilla – challenging the idealised version of traditional motherhood as the only option for achieving a successful and fruitful mothering harvest.<sup>136</sup>

Although Marilla starts out completely opposed to the idea of adopting a child who cannot clearly prove useful in terms of making her and Matthew's lives easier, Anne's usefulness to Marilla proves itself in how Marilla softens into a mother. Accordingly, the most important aspect of Marilla's development into a mother is that she grows to love Anne. I thus see tracing Marilla's softening as the best gauge for measuring how mothering Anne grows on Marilla. Marilla's affection for Anne starts to grow in her from the first day that Anne arrives at Green Gables and progresses through phases: from mere pity to moments of sweetness when Marilla's mothering instincts are awakened by Anne's affection, to Marilla's expression of affection for Anne while Anne is asleep, Marilla's acknowledgement that she sometimes wonders 'how she could have lived before Anne came to Green Gables' (AGG, 139), and Marilla's realisation of just how much she treasures Anne.

Indeed, it is a powerful moment when Marilla is forced to acknowledge her true motherly feelings about Anne through the fear of something terrible happening to Anne (after Anne goes

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like Anne is.

<sup>136</sup> Rilla's reflection on overhearing her mother's words about her progress reveal another connection between the traditional and the spinster mother, because Rilla attributes her own success to "mother and Susan who have been this family's backbone" (RI, 298-299), showing that her own upbringing is influenced almost in equal parts by her idealised traditional mother, Anne, and her spinster housekeeper mother, Susan. Susan's mothering role in the series is discussed in more detail in Section 4.3.2.

out to play with her friends on one occasion). The depth of Marilla's feelings in the instant when she sees Anne's limp figure carried to the house in the arms of Mr Barry is conveyed by how distant the picture of Marilla as 'more white and shaken than the self-contained, sensible Marilla [has] been for many years' (AGG, 157) is from Marilla's previously cool and collected self as she experiences her epiphany:

At that moment Marilla had a revelation. In the sudden stab of fear that pierced her very heart she realized what Anne had come to mean to her. She would have admitted that she liked Anne—nay, that she was very fond of Anne. But now she knew as she hurried wildly down the slope that Anne was dearer to her than anything else on earth. (AGG, 157)

Marilla's softening is also seen in how much she lets Anne know of her affection. She progresses from being unwilling to go so far as to let Anne know how deeply she cares, admitting to Matthew that she is "proud of Anne" after the school concert but asserting that she is "not going to tell [Anne] so" (AGG, 172), to freely telling Anne after Anne's trip to Charlottetown: "I'm glad you've got back, I must say. It's been fearful lonesome here without you [...]" (AGG, 199). Marilla also expresses her 'extreme pride' in Anne's Queen's entrance exam results by telling Anne: "You've done pretty well, I must say" (AGG, 220).

The narration at the start of Chapter 30 of *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) reveals Marilla's musings on learning to love and the depth of her true feelings that she cannot bring herself to express openly to Anne:

The lesson of a love that should display itself easily in spoken word and open look was one Marilla could never learn. But she had learned to love this slim, gray-eyed girl with an affection all the deeper and stronger from its very undemonstrativeness. Her love made her afraid of being unduly indulgent, indeed. She had an uneasy feeling that it was rather sinful to set one's heart so intensely on any human creature as she had set hers on Anne, and perhaps she performed a sort of unconscious penance for this by being stricter and more critical than if the girl had been less dear to her. Certainly Anne herself had no idea how Marilla loved her. (AGG, 200)

The reference to 'a love that *should* display itself easily' reflects recognition of what is considered ideal in terms of motherly characteristics. And while the distance between Marilla and easily expressed love also seems to distance Marilla from Anne, the fact that the religious image of Marilla's feeling 'sinful' for loving Anne so much is echoed in the description of Anne's later stooping '*repentantly, gloatingly over*' her own children and finding joy in the fact that they are still hers, 'wholly hers, to mother and love and protect' (AGG, 187; my emphasis) connects the traditional mother, Anne (who freely expresses her love for her children) with the spinster mother, Marilla (to whom such love does not come comfortably). This identifies the feelings Marilla feels towards Anne as true manifestations of motherhood, equating the spinster

mother with the idealised biological mother in that they both feel the profound emotional impact of motherhood.

In *Feminist Mothering* (2008), O'Reilly (2008:12) asserts that 'for the older woman, the choice to mother involves an extension of the self rather than its contraction' and that older mothers, with all of their life experience, mother from 'a position of privilege: one of power rather than of dependency'. While I agree that Marilla extends herself and develops more fully in her own character as she learns how to mother, particularly because mothering extends so far outside of her initial comfort zone, I do not agree that she mothers from a position of privilege or power. It is true that she is a capable figure, but mothering is one thing that destabilises her self-assurance, and it teaches her how to depend on another person – seen specifically in instances like the one quoted above, where the narrator reveals the depths of Marilla's feelings for Anne, and in the fact that Marilla's mothering Anne leads to opportunities for Anne to mother Marilla, such as when Marilla's eyesight begins to decline (AGG, 251; Rothwell, 1999:135-136).

Marilla cannot fully express her feelings directly to Anne, but she does feel the following when Anne is about to leave for Queen's:

Marilla would have given much just then to have possessed Anne's power of putting her feelings into words; but nature and habit had willed it otherwise, and she could only put her arms close about her girl and hold her tenderly to her heart, wishing that she need never let her go. (AGG, 230-231)

The fact that Marilla's love for Anne grows too deep for her to contain is manifest when she is taken aback by how quickly Anne grows from a child into a girl and indulges 'in the weakness of a cry' at the 'queer sorrowful sense of loss' that she feels over this change in her daughter (AGG, 212-213).

Even more powerfully, Marilla ends up shedding tears *in front* of Anne, as Anne's departure nears, and Marilla in this instance hints to Anne at what Anne means to her:

“I just couldn't help thinking of the little girl you used to be, Anne. And I was wishing you could have stayed a little girl, even with all your queer ways. You've grown up now and you're going away; and you look so tall and stylish and so—so—different altogether in that dress—as if you didn't belong in Avonlea at all<sup>137</sup>—and I just got lonesome thinking it all over.” (AGG, 230)

Marilla's sense of loss at her daughter's growing up is a natural motherly response which stems from the depth of love and affection, explained by Anne when she is a mother herself as being the essence of the fitting oxymoronic description of motherhood as “very sweet ... but very

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<sup>137</sup> This is ironic given the fact that Anne is considered alien when she first arrives in Avonlea but ultimately finds her place in the society.

terrible” (AIN, 187).<sup>138</sup> Indeed, Marilla’s love for Anne unsettles the keen sense of control that Marilla treasures previously so much that Marilla’s typical personality traits are turned upside-down when she dismisses Matthew’s logical attempt to comfort her despair at Anne’s absence, choosing instead to ‘enjoy her luxury of grief uncomforted’ (AGG, 213). This self-indulgent behaviour links Marilla to the typically dramatic young Anne who frequently weeps ‘as one who refuses to be comforted’ (AGG, 149) – a far cry from Marilla’s usual composed attitude about everything. Even Marilla’s physical description is altered by mothering Anne, as by the time that Anne has qualified for Queen’s Academy, Marilla is described as ‘a gaunt figure with grayer hair than of yore and no fewer angles, *but with a much softer face*’ (AGG, 223; my emphasis).<sup>139</sup> Marilla even comes to identify herself as something like Anne’s mother, as she thinks of Anne possessively as ‘her girl’ (e.g. AGG, 224, 231, 242).<sup>140</sup>

Another vital mark of the success of Marilla’s transformation into a mother figure is in the development of Anne’s own expressions of feeling towards Marilla. Where at first Anne is grateful to Marilla for giving her a home and sees Marilla as a caretaker and a mother figure out of indebtedness and duty and as someone who is ‘very hard to please and distinctly lacking in sympathy and understanding’ (AGG, 200), Anne progresses to telling Marilla openly: “‘It won’t make a bit of difference where I go or how much I change outwardly; at heart I shall always be *your* little Anne, who will love you and Matthew and dear Green Gables more and better every day of her life” (AGG, 230; my emphasis). Anne thus openly reciprocates Marilla’s secretly identifying Anne as ‘her girl’ and fulfils what Matthew predicts when Marilla first makes the decision to adopt Anne, saying: “‘I kind of think she’s one of the sort you can do anything with if you only get her to love you” (AGG, 46). It is apparent from both Anne and Marilla’s feelings for each other near the end of the novel that Marilla’s gradual softening and her learning to love Anne are indeed just what get Anne to love her in return, bringing with Marilla’s increasing motherly love the reward of Anne’s success and, by extension, the success of Marilla’s mothering.

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<sup>138</sup> Montgomery conveys her own realisation of some of the sweet and terrible aspects of motherhood in her journals, such as when she reflects on her loss, in 1914, of her son Hugh. She wrote on 30 August 1914: ‘All the agony and pain I have endured in my whole life heaped together could not equal what I felt when I realized that my baby was dead – my bonny *sweet* boy, so beautiful and perfect’ (SJ II, 151; my emphasis).

<sup>139</sup> This is reminiscent of Jo’s evolution in *Little Women* (1868-1869) from her independent, tomboyish ways to her willingness to embrace womanliness and motherliness, seen symbolically in how her ‘angles’ become ‘much softened’ (LW, 334) as she grows up.

<sup>140</sup> This is contrasted with Matthew’s open *verbal* recognition of Anne as “‘*my* girl” (AGG, 243). Where Marilla’s possessive references to Anne are only noted within the narration, Matthew’s are verbally confessed to Anne, showing his ease with his emotions and Marilla’s inability to openly acknowledge hers, even when they are internally recognisable to her.

The power of Marilla and Anne's connection is seen clearly in how close they become. This is depicted in particular when Anne leaves for Queen's Academy, and the narration draws parallels between the two women in their grief at being separated from what each has come to identify as home. Both Marilla and Anne feel the grief of their lonely separation well up at the thought of the empty 'little gable room' (AGG, 231): Anne's 'own white room at Green Gables' (AGG, 233). Their influence on each other is reflected in the way that each responds to her grief: where usually Marilla buries her feelings, she now indulges in emotional behaviour that is more characteristic of Anne by burying 'her face in her pillow' and weeping 'for her girl in a passion of sobs' (AGG, 231). Conversely, Anne, who is usually far freer in expressing her emotions, but who also learns (probably from Marilla) to be more self-aware, can tell that she is 'going to cry, and f[ights] against it', attempting to suppress her feelings and logically brush away crying as "silly—and weak" (AGG, 233; my emphasis) as Marilla is wont to do.

Anne's attempt to convince herself that crying is silly and weak aligns Marilla's unsuppressed sobs with silliness and weakness, toppling Marilla's usually stern and rigid persona and showing that Anne is her weakness. Anne further equates 'home' with the picture of Marilla "at the gate" (AGG, 233), marking Marilla as the gatekeeper of the domestic bliss of their Green Gables home. The fact that Anne's tears begin "coming in a flood" (AGG, 233) as she pictures Matthew, and Marilla at the gate when he arrives without Anne, also links to how Marilla's tears are conversely a result of her feelings of loss over the image of Anne's 'vivid young life' and its absence from Green Gables (AGG, 231), linking the two in their deepest sorrows which are experienced at the thoughts of loss linked to each other. This cements their bond as mother and daughter with the suggestion that each woman's emptiness would be filled by the presence of the other, particularly as the description of Marilla's sobbing alone in the east gable room also 'bookends and recalls Anne's first night, when "a lonely, heart-hungry friendless child crie[s] herself to sleep"', highlighting the mother and daughter's 'shared frustration with the difficulty of making a sense of home stay in place' (Keen, 2018:167): initially motherless Anne with dashed hopes of finding a mother, and temporarily daughterless Marilla who must get on without Anne's influence on making the house a home while Anne is at Queen's. Marilla's reflection on 'how very wicked it must be to "take on" so about a sinful fellow creature' (AGG, 231) is indicative of how transforming her love for Anne is for her as the 'weakening' change in her character can be attributed to this love for a child. She clearly possesses the heart of a mother.

The crowning moment in Marilla's mothering comes when she is finally able to actually *tell*

Anne how much she loves her. This step is only attainable for Marilla when she has experienced the profound sorrow of losing her brother – an experience which leaves her completely vulnerable and free of her old rigid emotional armour,<sup>141</sup> as she is consumed by ‘impassioned grief, breaking all the bounds of natural reserve and lifelong habit in its stormy rush’ (AGG, 245-246). The unity Anne and Marilla share in their sorrow over the loss of Matthew brings them closer than ever, because this is the first time that they truly share something that affects each of them equally and in the same way. Matthew – who acts as a bridge that assists in Anne and Marilla’s drawing closer to each other while he is alive – connects the two women fully in his death, because they need to rely completely on each other in his absence:

“[...] It’s *our* sorrow—yours and mine. Oh, Marilla, what will *we* do without him?”

“We’ve got each other, Anne. I don’t know what I’d do if you weren’t here—if you’d never come.<sup>142</sup> Oh, Anne, I know I’ve been kind of strict and harsh with you maybe—but you mustn’t think I didn’t love you as well as Matthew did, for all that. I want to tell you now when I can. It’s never been easy for me to say things out of my heart, but at times like this it’s easier. I love you as dear as if you were my own flesh and blood and you’ve been my joy and comfort ever since you came to Green Gables. (AGG, 246; my emphasis)

Marilla here openly takes full ownership of her position as Anne’s mother in firmly identifying Anne as like her “‘own flesh and blood’”, and she officially recognises the influence of “‘joy and comfort’” that being a mother to Anne brings into her life, which simultaneously at last offers Anne an explicit invitation to embrace Marilla’s heritage as her own.

After this turning point in their relationship, Marilla and Anne continue to become closer than ever before. Their connection is enabled to grow through increased mutual understanding and empathy, which is particularly evident when Marilla remembers her old “‘beau’”, John Blythe, and tells Anne about why Marilla’s friendship and courting with John Blythe did not lead to marriage (AGG, 249) – reflective of how ‘being close to Anne inevitably enables – or forces – Marilla to understand more about herself than she ha[s] ever allowed herself to do’ (Keen, 2018:167). Marilla’s new openness with herself and with Anne enables their connection to deepen as Anne’s realisation that Marilla has “‘had a bit of romance’” in her life too gives Anne the chance to see at last some glimmer of a kindred spirit in her primary mother figure. Furthermore, the similarity between Marilla’s “‘quarrel’” with John Blythe and her refusal to forgive him and Anne’s own quarrel and refusal to forgive John Blythe’s son, Gilbert, reflects one of Marilla’s most powerful and successful mothering moments, which comes from teaching

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<sup>141</sup> Mrs Lynde later notes to her husband what seems to be a permanent overall change in Marilla: “‘Marilla Cuthbert has got *mellow*. That’s what’” (AGG, 255; Montgomery’s emphasis). This more overall change comes largely as a result of her love for Anne softening her into a motherly figure.

<sup>142</sup> This links to Matthew’s influence too because it is largely because of him that Anne is there at all.

Anne by sharing *her own particular experience*, without any real intention of teaching Anne – a long way from the inculcating of morals that Marilla relies on so heavily in the beginning of what the narrator refers to later in the series as ‘Marilla’s education’ in mothering (AA, 179). This aligns Marilla with Alcott’s Marmee in terms of the openness and unity that are established through Marmee’s not keeping any secrets from her daughters and through her striving to connect with them through the medium of shared experience.

Although the lesson of Marilla’s feeling “rather sorry” and “always kind of wish[ing]” she had forgiven John Blythe when she “had the chance” (AGG, 249) elicits no obvious response from Anne besides her awe that Marilla has indeed experienced “romance” (AGG, 249), the lesson is powerful in its fruits, as the novel later shows Anne’s simply heeding its importance in the last chapter by reaching out to Gilbert and confirming that *she* has forgiven *his* “old fault” (AGG, 256).<sup>143</sup> Indeed, no more powerful immediate mothering success can be attributed to Marilla than the lesson which helps Anne to forgive Gilbert; it ends the novel and leads Anne happily down ‘the bend in the road’ (AGG, 256) and eventually to her marriage to Gilbert (symbolically righting Marilla’s old mistaken path) and to her own motherhood, passing Marilla’s torch of mothering down to future generations.

Marilla’s newfound motherhood is not allowed to go dormant when Anne grows up, as her mothering harvest expands further when she chooses once again to take on the role of mother, this time to the orphaned twins of her late third cousin in *Anne of Avonlea* (1909). Anne manages to convince Marilla that taking on the upbringing of the six-year-old Dora and Davy is Marilla and Anne’s ‘duty’ (AA, 54-55), drawing a parallel with how Marilla describes her decision to adopt Anne as a “duty” (AGG, 45), which suggests that this new venture will continue the rich harvest that Anne’s adoption begins for both Anne and Marilla. The fact that the now much older Marilla, who struggles with her eyesight, volunteers to take mothering upon herself again reflects Marilla’s growth in and willingness to embrace her motherhood. Devereux (2003:124) significantly points out that ‘Marilla’s conversion [to motherhood] is Anne’s work, and it is she who awakens in the older woman what we see the novel implying is an essential female instinct, a “natural” desire to have children, and to care for them’. Fittingly therefore, Marilla’s decision to adopt the Keith twins allows her to experience a literal multiplication of her mothering

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<sup>143</sup> Keen (2018:166) sees the parallel between Marilla and Anne’s relationships with Blythe men as evidence for his argument that ‘Anne was always already [predestined to be] Marilla’s daughter, predisposed to renew and to redeem Marilla’s most fundamental traits’.

influence, as this time she adopts not one, but two children and does so well aware of the possible difficulties that she volunteers for in taking on this ‘duty’.

Adopting the Keith twins does indeed prove a further bountiful harvest for Marilla. One way this is reflected is symbolically in how Dora eventually takes over Anne’s ‘little porch room’ (AHD, 28-29) when Anne gets married. Of this change, Anne muses:

[...] today she must leave it forever. Henceforth it would be hers no more; fifteen-year-old Dora was to inherit it when she had gone. Nor did Anne wish it otherwise; the little room was sacred to youth and girlhood—to the past that was to close today before the chapter of wifehood opened. (AHD, 28-29)

This hints at the role that this home plays as a training ground for both present and future mother figures and highlights Marilla’s importance as the matriarch of this harvest. She is not just the home’s first mother, but is connected metonymically with the gable room’s bare appearance in the beginning of *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) (discussed earlier in this section) and thus with the room’s development into a home for young girls to grow in, reflecting this spinster’s development into a mother who can raise capable young women, particularly as it can be assumed that, like Anne, Dora moves on from her ‘sacred [...] youth and girlhood’ in this room to become a mother figure to others (who could also go on to become mother figures).<sup>144</sup> It is also thus symbolically significant that when Anne’s children visit Green Gables, Anne’s own twin girls sleep in ‘their mother’s old porch-gable room’, where ‘Aunt Marilla’ comes when she thinks they are asleep ‘to gloat over them’ (RV, 23), reminiscent of how she tenderly watches over the young, sleeping Anne who thinks she has lost her friendship with Diana forever (AGG, 113) – showing once again how the gable room stands symbolically at the centre of Marilla’s mothering journey.<sup>145</sup>

It is clear that Marilla Cuthbert transforms through the course of *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) (and beyond) from a stern, fruitless spinster into an effective and fruitful mother and adoptive

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<sup>144</sup> Indeed, fifteen-year-old Dora is already described in terms of mothering by Marilla, who notes that Dora is “more sensible and careful than most of the mothers [Marilla has] known” (AHD, 29), although this seems intended as a kind of backhanded criticism of Dora’s not being enough like Anne to Marilla – a kind of lament perhaps that Dora seems to skip childhood to embrace mothering prematurely (the reverse of Anne, who is forced to mother from an early age but then gets to embrace her carefree childhood for a few years after being adopted).

<sup>145</sup> The poem Anne writes on the eve of her wedding to celebrate her old room also blesses it for the room’s new occupant:

*So I say good-bye with tears  
To my room of happy years,  
And if she who comes to stay  
Here when I have gone away  
Be a girl I leave her, too,  
All the fairy dreams I knew,  
All my fancies, all the hosts  
Of my little friendly ghosts.*

*May she have as I have had  
Many things to make her glad,  
Beckoning sunshine, singing showers,  
Long, serene, contented hours,  
Muted wind in boughs of fir,  
Nights that will be kind to her,  
And a room that still will be  
Friend as it has been to me. (BQ, 209)*

grandmother. Doody (2008:34) points out that ‘[w]e may mistakenly think of [Marilla] as cruel because she is stern and strict, but she is only repeating what she believes to be the right method for tackling life’ and that she ‘is really at heart very like [the openly soft and motherly] Matthew’, whom I discuss in the next section. Marilla’s character certainly goes far deeper than her apparent rigidity and lack of open emotional expression, and her journey to motherhood specifically demonstrates how mothering can be successful even when undertaken by the sternest of archetypal spinsters if she *chooses* to embrace and learn from it out of a sincere desire to succeed. Montgomery’s exploration of adoptive motherhood clearly shows how Marilla’s decision to take on Anne’s upbringing reaps the bountiful harvest of children and grandchildren traditionally reserved for idealised mother figures such as Alcott’s Marmee. Indeed, it is the spinster, Marilla Cuthbert’s decision to adopt and ‘experiment’ (AGG, 46) with mothering an eleven-year-old ‘witch of a girl’ (AGG, 48) – however incapable and underequipped Marilla feels at times and however society disapproves of the venture – that bears the fruit of Anne’s content novel-closing words: ““God’s in his heaven, all’s right with the world”” (AGG, 256).<sup>146</sup> Sorfleet (2003:179) notes that Anne’s statement here reflects her developed ‘trus[t] in God’s providence’, bearing witness of the fruit of Marilla’s very first lesson in educating Anne in having a relationship with God through prayer. This aligns Marilla with the idealised traditional mother figure in Alcott’s Marmee in that Marilla successfully inspires her daughter to look past a reliance solely on mothers to a reliance on an eternal, transcendent source of comfort and direction, situating Marilla’s harvest, like Marmee’s, beyond the confines of mortality.

Marilla’s harvest by the end of the novel is made all the more powerful by the fact that some of Anne’s contentment at the novel’s close is attributed to Anne’s satisfaction with her decision to become a kind of reciprocal mother figure to Marilla, as Anne chooses to defer her attendance at Redmond College in order to help Marilla with maintaining Green Gables,<sup>147</sup> the symbolic

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<sup>146</sup> Sorfleet (2003:179) explains that ‘in this passage Montgomery is quoting Browning’s poetic drama “Pippa Passes”—and the lines suggest that, like Browning’s Pippa, Anne too has become an influence for spiritual good in a world where evil is all too common’ – this points to the reciprocal [mothering] effect for good that Anne and Marilla have on each other. Doody and Barry (1997:461-462) explore the allusion to ‘Pippa Passes’ in more detail.

<sup>147</sup> Montgomery (AP, 75) reflects that when she wrote Matthew’s death, she ‘thought he must die, that there might be a necessity for self-sacrifice on Anne’s part’. Fittingly therefore, Kornfeld and Jackson (1987:74) note that Anne makes the decision to defer her education for a time because ‘the womanly virtue of self-sacrifice has been thoroughly inculcated in [her]’. This links her journey to Jo’s in *Little Women* (1868-1869), as Jo learns to lose herself and live for others, finding her path towards a greater harvest through first being selfless.

Although both Rothwell (1999:135-136) and Devereux (2003:122) argue that Anne’s sacrifice shows her decisively focusing on the maternal or domestic, Anne does not simply give up her studies at Redmond completely but rather decides to make an alternative arrangement to begin studying by taking her ““Arts course right [...] at Green Gables, and study[ing] everything that [she] would at college””, while she remains in Avonlea with Marilla (AGG, 254). She therefore finds a balance between her selfless, maternal commitment and her personal desires for development, permitted by the education Marilla insists on her getting from the outset. Alcott’s exploration of mothering similarly highlights *choosing* the domestic duty to nurture in order to reap the benefits of love for and

centre of the mother figure's growth. As has been mentioned before, Marilla feels at the start of the novel that adopting Anne, thereby allowing her to remain at Green Gables, is a "sort of duty" (AGG, 45; my emphasis). At the close of the novel, Anne sees her own choice to *stay* at Green Gables instead of attending university as 'her *duty*' (AGG, 251; my emphasis).<sup>148</sup> This framing reference to duty and the rewards that it offers suggests that motherhood is a cycle of growth and interdependency, which is part of what makes mothering so complex and fulfilling and is also perhaps what makes it accessible even to a spinster like Marilla. Marilla's mothering journey in *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) is thus framed with two *decisions* to pursue mothering: first hers, then her adoptive daughter's, suggesting a passing of the baton of motherhood from one mother figure to another – proof positive of successful and effective mothering, even when such a pattern begins with a matriarch who is less than traditionally ideal and who is in no way idealised by Montgomery.<sup>149</sup>

### 3.4 Matthew: Anne's male mother

When Marilla comes to the decision to adopt Anne, she and Matthew have the following exchange which, as noted briefly in the previous section, proves prophetic:

"[...] Perhaps an old maid doesn't know much about bringing up a child, but I guess she knows more than an old bachelor. So you just leave me to manage her. When I fail it'll be time enough to put your oar in."

"There, there, Marilla, you can have your own way," said Matthew reassuringly. "Only be as good and kind to her as you can 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."

Marilla sniffed, to express her contempt for Matthew's opinions concerning anything feminine, and walked off to the dairy with the pails. (AGG, 46)

Marilla's words are filled with irony because even in this brief exchange, it is Matthew the middle-aged bachelor, not Marilla the spinster, who shows a keener understanding of Anne's

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reciprocal love from others that leads to an eventual bettered sense and richer development of the self, advocating for a *balance* between selfless domestic pursuits and pursuits for personal development or ambition (like Anne's approach), although the domestic duty certainly must come first – see Chapter 2.

Rothwell (1999:135-136) adds that Anne's 'maternal commitment [... as] a mothering and nurturing figure to Marilla [... is] further enhanced by her new responsibility of teaching the Avonlea school and bringing up a new generation of children', reflecting the fruit that Anne herself bears first as an alternative mother figure to both Marilla and the school children and eventually as an idealised biological mother figure to her own children.

<sup>148</sup> Montgomery's giving up teaching when her grandfather died so that she could return home to help her widowed grandmother was likewise a "duty" and one that proved richly rewarding for Montgomery because it enabled her to focus on her writing (Gammel & Dutton, 1999:109; Rubio, 2008:106).

<sup>149</sup> Thomas (2009:n.p.) too narrowly views Marilla's character progression as going from 'her formerly bustling briskness and crispness [... to] dependency and ineffectuality' when she allows Anne to defer Redmond to care for her, using this as evidence for the claim that '[t]he novel [... ] continues its representation of maternity as deficient'. A view such as this is insubstantial, however, because it seems to deliberately ignore the evidence which points to the subtleties of Marilla's growth and the depth of her transformation into someone who truly loves and supports Anne, playing a significant role in enabling Anne's future freedom of choice, and whom Anne truly loves in return.

character and needs as a child.<sup>150</sup> Virokannas (2011:28) confirms that ‘Marilla’s lack of innate motherly feelings is juxtaposed with Matthew’s feelings which seem to be maternal in their depth and gentleness’. Further, Matthew opens himself to understanding feminine things in providing for the ‘feminine’ needs that Anne has beyond those that Marilla feels comfortable with, as he feeds Anne emotionally from their first meeting at the Bright River train station and gives Anne her heart’s desires. In the second novel in the series, *Anne of Avonlea* (1909), the narration reveals approximately a year after Matthew’s death that Anne ‘could never forget the kind old man who had been *the first* to give her the love and sympathy her starved childhood had craved’ (AA, 115; my emphasis).

It would thus be amiss to leave Matthew Cuthbert out of my discussion on mothering Anne because of the essential and intimate role he plays in the success of Anne’s upbringing, particularly since even critics such as Thomas (2009:n.p.), who view Anne’s other mother figures very harshly, see Matthew as ‘a primary figure of love, emulation, and *identification*’ (Thomas’s emphasis). Bode (2008:56-57) compares Matthew with the maternal figure, Grandmother Elizabeth Jasper, in Alcott’s short story, ‘Charlotte’s Quest’, indicating that ‘the spontaneous harmony, love, and mutual sense of entertainment between [Grandmother] Elizabeth and her granddaughter recall Anne’s relationship with Matthew’. Bode (2008:57) further affirms that ‘[i]n *Anne of Green Gables*, [Montgomery’s perpetual] search for the lost mother appears cross-dressed in the maternal Matthew’. Indeed, it is Matthew, not Marilla, who acts as Anne’s primary source of emotional nourishment: a role that is traditionally reserved primarily for idealised biological mother figures, but which Matthew is more suited to fill at the outset of Anne’s adoption because of his inherent softness and unexpected sensitivity, which are traits that take time to develop in the emotionally repressed and rigid Marilla (as seen in the previous section).<sup>151</sup>

The differences in Matthew and Marilla’s personalities and in their tendencies to take charge suggest that Marilla is more of a household head than her elder brother is, inverting what was traditionally expected of the roles and characteristics of men and women at the time.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Bode (2008:58) suggests the possibility that ‘Matthew’s maternal tendencies, in opening up the significant possibility that a male figure can fulfil the role of the absent mother, are a subtle critique of the opportunities that Montgomery’s own father missed’.

<sup>151</sup> Kornfeld and Jackson (1987:71) assert that ‘[t]here is no room for traditional masculine qualities’ in a nineteenth-century fictional matriarchal utopia, suggesting a deliberate feminisation of a character such as Matthew to foreground a focus on alternative manifestations of motherhood.

<sup>152</sup> Montgomery inverts these expectations in a few instances, including in Mrs Rachel Lynde and her husband. The novel’s introduction to Mrs Lynde states that ‘Thomas Lynde [is] a meek little man whom Avonlea people [call] “Rachel Lynde’s husband”’ (AGG, 34), suggesting that she too takes the lead in her household. Miss Cornelia, who is introduced later in the series, is another example of a powerful head-of-the-household woman, seen

Virokannas (2011:21) likewise argues that ‘being a capable woman with a strong will [Marilla] can easily be seen as the dominating figure in the Green Gables household instead of the shy, quiet, withdrawn Matthew’.<sup>153</sup> This line of thinking supports Rothwell’s (1999:134) observation that ‘Anne’s world is a decidedly matriarchal one in which the power of decision making belongs to the women’. Drain (1992:45) asserts:

[...] the only real and strong characters in the book are the female ones. The men either do not really appear (like Thomas Lynde and Mr. Allan, both mere appendages of their wives) or are inadequate in various ways. The schoolteacher Mr. Phillips is unjust, inconsistent, sarcastic, and neglectful, except of Prissy Andrews for whom he has an unprofessional, and ridiculous, interest. Gilbert is too good to be true, a storybook hero, tall, “with curly brown hair, roguish hazel eyes, and a mouth twisted into a teasing smile”. Even Matthew, endearing as he is, is crippled by his extreme shyness.

Compared with the men, Marilla and Mrs. Lynde are strong, individual and vital. They have their weaknesses, but they are all of a piece, and undeniably real.

Indeed, Marilla is a stern figure who is not overtly emotional and who confronts most situations with self-assurance and efficiency. This enables Matthew, who is described as ‘the shyest man alive’ (*AGG*, 8), to defer difficult situations involving dealing with people to her. An example of one such situation is when Matthew is confronted with an orphan of the incorrect gender (Anne) waiting for him at the train station, whereupon he wishes that Marilla were ‘at hand to cope with’ the difficult predicament (*AGG*, 15).

Although Matthew’s timidity and lack of self-assurance make him terrified of the ‘mysterious creatures’ (*AGG*, 14) known as women, and although he is even more terrified of little girls (*AGG*, 19), his friendship with Anne is set apart from what is typical for him almost immediately. Where Anne is often painted in a negative light by those she meets for the first time, because she is a very unusual girl whom people struggle to comprehend from within their own limited spheres of experience, what makes Anne ‘different’ from ‘the Avonlea type of well-bred little girl’ (*AGG*, 19) is actually what endears her to Matthew shortly after his initial trepidation – Crockett (2001:70) points out that Anne’s ‘loquacity, aesthetic responses, openness, and imagination are perfect contrasts and complements to his taciturnity and practicality’.

One of the keys to Matthew’s response to Anne is that Matthew notices and is profoundly

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particularly in how she subverts convention by insisting that her own husband-to-be, Marshall Elliot, come “‘to live at [her] place’” instead of uprooting her life to move to his house (*AHD*, 318) – see Section 4.3.3 for more about Miss Cornelia.

<sup>153</sup> Virokannas (2011:22), quoting Mack-Canty and Wright (2008:146), attributes this open reversal of roles at Green Gables to ‘[t]he Cuthberts’ family structure [which], made up of siblings as adoptive parents, not husband and wife and the adopted child, lacks “the dualistic values of hierarchy and coercive authoritarian control”’.

affected by Anne's 'glowing eyes' (AGG, 16) upon first meeting her, suggesting that he sees to her soul from the outset of the novel.<sup>154</sup> When it comes then to facing the likelihood that Marilla will send Anne back to the orphanage, the 'thought of that rapt light being quenched in [Anne's] eyes' gives Matthew 'an uncomfortable feeling that he [is] going to assist at murdering something' (AGG, 25). Thus, with his determination that Marilla should decide to keep Anne, Matthew immediately begins to 'pla[y] advocate for the tribulation-prone Anne' (Collins, 2013:50), becoming Anne's most loyal defender and ally. He actively tries to shield Anne from anything which may hurt her, making it his mission to provide Anne with anything that may increase her happiness or further kindle the light in her eyes.

Matthew sees Anne as perfect from the moment she arrives in Avonlea, and he seems to be intuitively aware of what she needs. Bode (2008:57) asserts that '[f]rom Matthew's and Anne's first ride together [...] Matthew accepts Anne unconditionally; sensing their mutual bond, he instinctively knows that she belongs to Green Gables and understands her character'. Marilla's main purpose in wanting to adopt a (male) child is that the child will prove "useful" (AGG, 45) in lightening Matthew's load at Green Gables, and Marilla does not see Anne as fitting such a brief because Anne is a girl; Matthew, however, can immediately see that Anne's need for love far outweighs his and Marilla's need for assistance with labour. Thus, when Marilla very practically questions what "good" Anne could be to them,<sup>155</sup> Matthew counters 'suddenly and unexpectedly' with the pithy rejoinder that the two unmarried siblings "might be some good" to Anne (AGG, 30). Rubio (2003:71, quoted in Virokannas 2011:37) suggests that these words from Matthew comprise "one of the most important lines in the book", and Doody Jones (1997a:427) notes that given the sentiments towards orphans during those times, 'Matthew's quiet comment [...] is revolutionary, an example of true Christian charity'. Indeed, this is the first time that Anne's need for nurturing through parenting is subtly acknowledged, along with the possibility that in spite of their being unmarried and their inexperience with children, Matthew and Marilla could effectively fill the vacant roles of Anne's parent figures.

In line with the need for nurturing Matthew perceives in Anne, he is always a willing listener to anything that she desires to tell him and, as a result, becomes one of her most trusted confidants. Anne admits that she often bothers people because they think she "talk[s] too much" (AGG,

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<sup>154</sup> Anne's eyes are a soul-revealing feature she inherits from her biological mother, Bertha, as discussed in Section 3.2.

<sup>155</sup> Marilla's question is answered in the transforming effect that Anne begins to have almost immediately on the lives and characters of the Cuthberts and on almost everyone Anne comes into contact with – see the brief exploration of Anne's reverse mothering in Section 4.4.

19), and Marilla is one of these people, as her immediate impression of Anne is that her incessant talking is “nothing in her favour”, because Marilla does not “like children who have so much to say” (AGG, 30). While Marilla does eventually get “used to” Anne’s “chatter” (AGG, 56) and comes to mind it less than she does at first (AGG, 185), Matthew’s response to Anne’s incessant talking stands apart in that he encourages Anne to “talk as much as [she] like[s]” (AGG, 19) from the moment he meets her, because he “kind of like[s] her chatter” (AGG, 19). Matthew also supports Anne in her other quirks, such as when he thinks it “seems reasonable” that she uses “big words to express” her “big ideas” instead of laughing at her about her vocabulary (AGG, 19). Evidently, where Marilla often tries to train Anne’s frivolous and carefree behaviours and her infatuation with the romantic out of her, Matthew indulges Anne in being who she naturally is, encouraging her, even after her mishap as the lily maid (AGG, 185-192) in the sinking flat on the pond, not to “give up all [her] romance” and explaining, “a little of it is a good thing—not too much, of course—but keep a little of it, Anne, keep a little of it” (AGG, 192). Anne’s own future mothering shows marks of this attitude of embracing her children for their quirks and encouraging them to talk and to dream according to their individual natures instead of changing who they are,<sup>156</sup> suggesting that Matthew’s timid and quiet influence has a more deep and lasting effect than anything that Marilla initially tries to teach Anne.

Just as it is important to note the differences between Marilla and Matthew’s initial perceptions of and attitudes towards Anne, it is equally important, if not more so, to note how different Anne’s perception of Matthew is compared with her early perceptions of Marilla. As discussed in the previous section, Anne only finds out years after her adoption, after Matthew has died, how much Marilla loves her (AGG, 246-247). Matthew’s position as ‘the first’ to recognise and fulfil Anne’s need for love (AA, 115) is thus unique, and Anne’s perception of Matthew right from when she first meets him shows how fully and easily she reciprocates this love. She thinks that Matthew is “lovely” and explains to Marilla: “He is 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” (AGG, 34).<sup>157</sup> This sympathy is something that Marilla does not freely show because such displays of emotion are not in her nature. But Matthew either does not know how or does not see a need to hide his emotions when it comes to Anne, as is clear from the outset in the ‘glow

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<sup>156</sup> The limited scope of this dissertation does not allow room for going into detail analysing incidents that reflect Anne’s future experiences as a mother, but it is easy to see, when reading any of the novels that depict her mothering, that she naturally encourages her children to be who they are – see particularly *Anne of Ingleside* (1939) and *Rainbow Valley* (1919).

<sup>157</sup> The instinctive connection Anne and Matthew share is also seen when Anne later notes: “Matthew and I are such kindred spirits I can read his thoughts without words at all” (AGG, 121).

of delight' (*AGG*, 45) he feels wherever Anne is concerned, which can be seen as kindled by the characteristic glow in her eyes. Anne's two primary parent figures are juxtaposed with one another powerfully in this regard when Anne performs in her first concert: Marilla asserts, "I was proud of Anne tonight, although I'm not going to tell her so", while Matthew's reply is: "I was proud of her and I did tell her so 'fore she went upstairs" (*AGG*, 172). Åhmansson (1991:140) points out:

[Matthew] is gentle, he touches [Anne], he loves her and he tells her so. He is openly proud of her and because of all this he understands her better than Marilla, who is hampered by her severe and self-denying nature and who needs to understand herself first before she can allow Anne to get close to her.<sup>158</sup>

Matthew easily echoes and reciprocates Anne's enthusiasm and affection, which in turn feeds her enthusiasm and affection and creates a clear cyclical bond between the two of them as they instinctively fulfil each other's needs in their own unique ways.

A specific area in which Matthew is Anne's closest ally is when it comes to discipline. Collins (2013:50) asserts that 'it is set up early on that Matthew will be the nurturing parent and Marilla the disciplinarian—a reversal of conventional gender roles in which women are expected to be caretakers and men figures of authority'. Indeed, Matthew's characteristically unassertive nature and his desire to delegate difficult things to Marilla, who is far more comfortable with asserting stern control over any given situation, result in the cementing of Marilla's disciplinarian role, particularly since Matthew is only too happy to distance himself from punishment, telling Marilla that she will "have to punish" Anne if she thinks punishment is needed, because Marilla has prohibited Matthew from getting involved in serious disciplinary interventions (*AGG*, 85). This leaves Matthew free to act solely as Anne's defender.

One example of this is seen as a result of Anne's first encounter with Mrs Lynde (described in the previous section). Marilla expresses some willingness to understand that Anne's retaliatory behaviour could be due to a lack of a civil upbringing, as can be seen in her defence to Mrs Lynde of Anne's behaviour. Marilla even acknowledges to Anne that "Rachel is too outspoken" (*AGG*, 61), however, Marilla's keen sense of self-mastery does not allow her to freely admit that she also feels 'amusement and [...] a most reprehensible desire to laugh' (*AGG*, 62) at what she must feel to some extent is a deserved response to Mrs Lynde's outspoken ways. Rather, Marilla adopts the sternness that she feels is needed in response to Anne's shocking

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<sup>158</sup> The responsibility for raising Anne is precisely the catalyst that Marilla needs to get more intimately acquainted with herself (Keen, 2018:167), hence the profound journey into mothering that she embarks on as dealt with in Section 3.3. This also supports my argument for how Anne makes Marilla into a mother as touched on in Section 3.3 and as directly, albeit briefly, dealt with in Section 4.4.

behaviour through the stern and specific punishment of expecting Anne to stay in her room until Anne decides to apologise to Mrs Lynde. Matthew's response to hearing about the situation, however, reflects only his determined sense of loyalty to Anne, as he *freely* remarks: "It's a good thing Rachel Lynde got a calling down; she's a meddling old gossip" (AGG, 63). Furthermore, although he does see that Anne "ought to be punished", he indicates that the needed punishment should only be "a little" and pleads 'uneasily' with Marilla to not "be too hard on" Anne (AGG, 63), and whereas Marilla is determined to teach Anne a lesson in acceptable behaviour, Matthew's concern is more for Anne's wellbeing than for her less than socially acceptable deportment, as he is 'troubled' by Anne's not eating when the 'well-filled' trays of food that Marilla takes up to Anne return 'not noticeably depleted' (AGG, 63).

Eventually, Matthew's personalised, empathetic approach proves more effective in inviting changes in Anne's behaviour than does Marilla's initially more distanced, rigid, moral-based approach. While Anne is closed in her room contemplating her punishment, Marilla seems mainly to check on Anne for the purpose of ascertaining whether Anne is willing to accept her punishment yet and apologise to Mrs Lynde. Matthew, however, reaches out personally to Anne to see how she is "making it" through the trial of being in solitary isolation and to encourage her to give in to Marilla's requirement simply to "have it over", so that Anne can be freed from this worrying isolation (AGG, 64).<sup>159</sup> He also encourages Anne with the justification of satisfying Marilla's "dreadful" determination (AGG, 64) rather than with the aim of Anne's learning any particular lesson. His gentleness and empathy in turn make Anne feel able to admit that she does in fact feel "sorry now" and that she is willing to put aside her fear of humiliation to actually apologise to Mrs Lynde if that is what Matthew wants, because she is willing to "do *anything* for" Matthew (AGG, 64; my emphasis). This diction links to Matthew's earlier insight in observing that one can "do *anything* with" Anne if one only gets Anne's "love" (AGG, 46; my emphasis), which suggests that Anne loves Matthew already. Such an assumption is supported by her views of him as her first kindred spirit. It is thus Matthew's quiet gentleness, empathy and love that ultimately reap the results in this incident and not simply Marilla's stern punishment, although Matthew does not reveal his role in the success of the punishment. Matthew's humility and lack of preconceived notions about parenting Anne, as shown by how he is 'scared at his own success' (AGG, 65), also open him up to such success. He is thus contrasted with Marilla who initially relies heavily on her generalised ideals and morals and

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<sup>159</sup> Montgomery uses a similar pattern in *Emily of New Moon* (1923) and extends it in Cousin Jimmy, who does intervene in Emily's punishment (ENM, 171) and later provides her with what Emily calls 'Jimmy-books' to write in as a budding author.

feels ‘triumphant’ when she thinks that her ideal punishment has succeeded (AGG, 65).

Another incident in which Matthew’s gentler and more forgiving approach to parenting proves more effective than Marilla’s stern, more one-sided approach is when Marilla’s amethyst brooch goes missing. Even when all apparent evidence, including an apparent confession from Anne, points to Anne’s culpability in taking and losing Marilla’s amethyst brooch, Matthew’s loyalty to Anne stays sure, and he expresses how “‘rough’” he thinks it is to deprive Anne, as a punishment, of anything that could make her as happy as the church picnic (AGG, 88), when she has ‘talked picnic and thought picnic and dreamed picnic’ for a week (AGG, 82). Matthew’s perceptiveness in this instance proves more accurate than Marilla’s practical attention to facts and probability when it is revealed that – true to Anne’s word from the start – Anne does not deserve punishment at all, because she does not actually take the brooch. This detail undermines Marilla’s reliance on logic to come to her conclusions and instead elevates Matthew’s intuitive trust as a response to the situation.

Where Marilla is central to the exploration of mothering in *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) because she needs to *learn* how to become a nurturer through her experiences in mothering Anne, Matthew is a *natural* nurturer in terms of instinctively nurturing Anne’s need for love and validation. Thus, while it is Marilla who teaches Anne the need for practical and rote things such as *saying* one’s rehearsed prayers, it is Matthew who truly nurtures Anne’s spirit by showing her how to love with generosity and by being an actual *answer* to her girlish prayers, such as her prayer for a dress with puffed sleeves (AGG, 70) – it is he who first ‘translate[s]’ God’s love to her ‘through the medium of human love’ (AGG, 48).

When Anne dreams of romance and of rich and luxuriant lifestyles, it is Matthew who brings a touch of luxury and extravagance into her life, because he truly listens to her – even to her wildest imaginings – and tries to make her reality a little more like what she imagines it to be, doing his utmost to ensure that her eyes are always glowing with joy. The narrator explains Matthew’s position in this regard as follows:

Those two were the best of friends<sup>[160]</sup> and Matthew thanked his stars many a time and oft that he had nothing to do with bringing her up. That was Marilla’s exclusive duty; if it had been his he would have been worried over frequent conflicts between *inclination* and said duty. As it was, he was free to, “spoil Anne”—Marilla’s phrasing—as much as he liked. But it was not such a bad arrangement after all; a little “appreciation” sometimes does quite as much good as all the *conscientious* “bringing up” in the world. (AGG, 164; my emphases)

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<sup>160</sup> Robinson (2018:176) highlights the power of non-traditional ‘family’ ties by observing that Montgomery’s ‘critique of traditional kinship emerges through the sense that *friendship*, rather than families, is where emotional kin reside’ – this is seen clearly in Anne’s love for Matthew and other ‘kindred spirits’ throughout the text.

The words ‘inclination’ and ‘conscientious’ highlight Matthew and Marilla’s respective approaches to their individual relationships with Anne, where Matthew is focused on what comes naturally and instinctively to him, and Marilla is focused on deliberate, preconceived ideologies.

Virokannas (2011:35-36) asserts that ‘Anne’s upbringing becomes a balancing act between Marilla’s often unfairly strict methods and Matthew’s softer touch, leaning rather towards overindulgence’. While I do not necessarily agree that either Marilla or Matthew takes one parenting approach to any ‘unfair’ extreme, there is certainly an argument to be made for how Anne’s successful upbringing relies on a balance of both of their approaches. Indeed, Kornfeld and Jackson (1987:70) point out that ‘[t]he nineteenth-century fictional mother had to strike a careful balance between love and duty, nurture and reproof’; it can thus be argued that Marilla represents a focus on duty and reproof, whereas Matthew represents a focus on love and nurture – together creating an ideally balanced nineteenth-century mother. Matthew’s approach of ‘appreciation’ does, however, seem to prove more influential on Anne’s behaviour and even inspires Marilla to revise some of her strict ideologies and become more engaged with her repressed emotional side, helping to balance her as a mother so that she is more prepared to take up the full mantle when Matthew dies.

Examples of how the ‘appreciation’ offered by Matthew *alongside* the ‘bringing up’ offered by Marilla proves to do much good for Anne can be seen throughout the novel. Matthew causes Anne’s ‘cup of happiness [...] to overflow’ (after she establishes her bosom friendship with Diana) by arriving home with “‘chocolate sweeties’” for Anne (despite the knowledge that Marilla will disapprove) because he hears Anne say that she likes chocolates (AGG, 78). Furthermore, although he largely tries to stay out of Marilla’s way in terms of Anne’s upbringing, Matthew asserts his views determinedly when he feels that Marilla is being unjust in depriving Anne of her heart’s desires. Such instances are particularly significant because of Matthew’s characteristic shyness and reserve: to be driven to insist four times in the case of the trip to “‘the Debating Club concert’” for Diana’s birthday, for example, that Marilla “‘ought to let Anne go’” (AGG, 128) shows just how important Matthew feels such experiences are for Anne’s wellbeing and happiness. And while Marilla thinks she understands “‘that child’s disposition and what’s good for it better than [...] Matthew’” (AGG, 128), it is, ironically, Matthew whom Anne credits with truly understanding her after Marilla ultimately gives in to his persistence in this instance, as seen when Anne tells Marilla: “‘You didn’t know just how I felt about it, but you see *Matthew* did. Matthew understands me, and it’s so nice to be

understood, Marilla” (AGG, 129; my emphases).

Matthew is also the one who nurtures and indulges Anne’s natural talents, whereas Marilla’s focus is on teaching Anne more traditionally useful skills. The difference between Marilla and Matthew’s approaches in this regard is clear when Anne prepares for another school concert. Anne very obviously seeks Marilla’s approval and support, exclaiming, ““Oh, Marilla, I know you are not so enthusiastic about it as I am, but don’t you hope your little Anne will distinguish herself?”” (AGG, 163). But Anne is met with a simple retort that does not rise to the easy opportunity for parental indulgence, when all Marilla offers is: ““All I hope is that you’ll behave yourself. I’ll be heartily glad when all this fuss is over and you’ll be able to settle down”” (AGG, 163). With Matthew, however, Anne is ‘sure of an appreciative and sympathetic listener’ (AGG, 163), and she is not disappointed at his response: ““Well now, I reckon it’s going to be a pretty good concert. And I expect you’ll do your part fine,” he said, smiling down into her eager, vivacious little face. Anne smiled back at him’ (AGG, 163-164).

Marilla seems to learn from Matthew’s way with Anne – perhaps seeing that the reward of Anne’s happiness transcends the reward of Anne’s fitting into a mould that does not quite suit who Anne is. One of the most powerful indications of this is seen in the effect of Matthew’s gift to Anne of her first fashionable dress with puffed sleeves. Matthew observes Anne with her peers and realises that there is ‘something about her different from her mates’, and he is ‘worried’ about this, because he has the impression that this ‘difference’ is ‘something that should not exist’ (AGG, 164). Matthew’s concern is highlighted by how he is ‘haunted by this question’ (AGG, 164). He determines that he cannot discuss the matter with Marilla, who will ‘sniff scornfully and remark that the only difference she s[ees] between Anne and the other girls [is] that they sometimes ke[ep] their tongues quiet while Anne never d[oes]’ (AGG, 164-165). Although Matthew does acknowledge Marilla’s position as Anne’s obvious mother figure, as well as that Marilla knows ‘best’, and that Marilla is bringing Anne up and therefore ‘some wise, inscrutable motive’ must probably ‘be served’ by her decisions for Anne (AGG, 165), he also clearly recognises that Marilla is not sensitive to some of Anne’s unique needs, and he therefore takes it upon himself to work out what is amiss. Matthew’s determination to make Anne happy is also shown in how he studies it out and spends two hours not just ‘haunted’ by the issue but in ‘hard reflection’ before finally coming up with the answer that Anne is ‘not dressed like the other girls’ (AGG, 165).

Matthew’s ability to notice that Marilla keeps Anne ‘so plainly and soberly gowned’ (AGG, 165), his determination to give Anne a ‘nice new dress [...] for a present’ (AGG, 165) –

specifically one with sleeves ‘made in the new [puffed] way’” (AGG, 168) – and his decision to go to Mrs Lynde for advice because he is sure that Marilla will ‘throw cold water on his project at once’ (AGG, 167) show that ‘unobservant Matthew’ (AGG, 164) has an eye for feminine concerns involving beauty that Marilla does not have. Additionally, he is happy to allow Anne to fit metaphorically into whatever pattern she chooses for herself (such as her wish to own a fashionable dress with puffed sleeves) rather than forcing her into any pattern of his own making (like Marilla’s, explored in detail in Section 3.3). Matthew’s meticulous care and concern for Anne’s happiness are subsequently rewarded by Anne’s purely delighted reaction to her Christmas present: “Matthew, it’s perfectly exquisite. Oh, I can never thank you enough. Look at those sleeves! Oh, it seems to me this must be a happy dream” (AGG, 169-170). Anne even determines that she “really will make an extra effort” to be a good girl after this loving and indulgent gesture from Matthew (AGG, 170). Finally, the entire incident inspires Marilla to “always [make Anne’s] dresses fashionably” from then on, as Marilla “says she doesn’t intend to have Matthew going to Mrs. Lynde to make them” (AGG, 194), reflecting Marilla’s pride as a mother and her willingness – albeit grudging at times – to change when she recognises that she must.

After this incident, Matthew becomes more involved in this area of Anne’s upbringing, seeing to Anne’s having what is “pretty and fashionable” (AGG, 224) by insisting on and buying many things for her, such as “a new coat” and “cap” (AGG, 194), a dress of “white organdie” (AGG, 224), and a string of “pearl beads” (AGG, 223). Marilla, meanwhile, softens further, to the point of making almost no objections to his purchases or suggestions for Anne (AGG, 224), particularly when it comes to special occasions that make both parent figures proud, such as Anne’s departure to Queen’s College, when *Marilla* is the one who goes out of her way to provide Anne with “something real dressy to wear” (AGG, 229). The newly fashionable dresses thus stand as symbols for Matthew’s role as the ‘medium of connection’ between Anne and Marilla (Doody, 1997b:27). Doody (1997b:27) explains: ‘Matthew helps bring [Anne and Marilla] together and make an harmonious narrative where there might otherwise be only friction and separation. Matthew modulates individuality so that it is not utter separateness.’ Marilla’s softening therefore highlights Matthew’s role in helping her to become a more effective mother figure, as his willingness to accept Anne for who she is and provide her with her heart’s desires creates a chained reaction which results in the softening of the initially rigid and pattern-focused Marilla. Indeed, as Bode (2008:58) aptly observes:

Matthew has a place [...] in helping Marilla grow into her maternal position. Near the novel’s end, when, in the sorrow over Matthew’s death, Marilla acknowledges her complete

acceptance of Anne and confesses [... her love,] *it is Matthew's bond with Anne that she invokes as her standard* [when she tells Anne]: “you mustn't think I didn't love you as well as Matthew did” [...]. (my emphasis)

This establishes Matthew as the yardstick for ideal mothering in Anne's life.

Anne's esteem for Matthew as the most treasured parent figure of her girlhood is most evident in her desire to be deserving of the pride that he so freely feels in her. Thomas (2009:n.p.) asserts that in contrast with Marilla's prevalent early habit of silencing Anne, ‘[p]aternal favour [from the idealistically maternal Matthew] is a prime motivator for the daughter's efforts and supports her self-development in *Anne of Green Gables*'. His motivating influence is reminiscent of Marmee's influence on her daughters even when she is not physically present, aligning Matthew with the idealised mother. I would further Thomas's argument, however, in suggesting that Matthew's favour is particularly motivating because he bestows it *unconditionally* on Anne, allowing her to choose her own path to self-development because he is proud of and supports her for who she is, not for what she chooses to do. Matthew's motivating influence on Anne is obvious when Anne dedicates both her preparation to attend and her studies at Queen's College to him:

But she had another and nobler motive for wishing to do well. She wanted to “pass high” for the sake of Matthew and Marilla—*especially Matthew*. Matthew had declared to her his conviction that she “would beat the whole Island.” That, Anne felt, was something it would be foolish to hope for even in the wildest dreams. But 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 for all her hard work and patient grubbing among unimaginative equations and conjugations. (AGG, 218-219; my emphasis)

The above shows in action the cycle of purpose and fulfilment that Matthew and Anne find in each other, seen particularly in Anne's desire to see Matthew's eyes ‘gleam’ – a reflection of Matthew's constant desire to keep Anne's eyes glowing that proves how each finds fulfilment in the other's joy and how each is thus also motivated by the joy and satisfaction of the other.

Accordingly, when Anne finds out that she is “one of the first” in the class that takes the Queen's entrance exam, she immediately runs “right out to the field to tell Matthew” before telling “the good news to [...] others” (AGG, 220). Matthew is the first person she feels compelled to share her good news with; Marilla's presence nearby as she talks to Mrs Lynde ‘at the lane fence’ is merely labelled as ‘luck’ (AGG, 220), as seeking out Marilla is not mentioned as a priority for Anne. The more emotionally reserved Marilla observes from the side-lines as Anne excitedly reveals her life-altering news to Matthew, labelling Matthew as the primary nurturer in Anne's mind. Matthew reciprocates Anne's enthusiasm at pleasing him by showing

his unreserved joy, which rewards Anne with the very pride she is motivated to seek: “Well now, I always said it,” said Matthew, gazing at the pass list delightedly. “I knew you could beat them all easy” (AGG, 220). It is true that Marilla also feels ‘extreme pride in Anne’, but unlike Matthew, Marilla ‘trie[s] to hide’ it<sup>161</sup> (AGG, 221).<sup>162</sup> Anne subsequently continues to put Matthew at the forefront of her motivation towards her educational ambitions, contemplating, “Wouldn’t Matthew be proud if I got to be a B.A.?” (AGG, 235). It is thus fitting that Matthew’s final words to Anne in the novel reflect the very pride in her that drives Anne to be better, as Matthew is not just proud of her for her ambitions but for who she is as the now well-raised little girl (a status attributable to both him and Marilla) who is brought to the Cuthberts by accident years before instead of the expected boy: “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” (AGG, 243).

Ultimately, Matthew acknowledges that “putting in [his] oar occasional” into raising Anne “never [does] any harm” (AGG, 231). Indeed, Marilla’s early comment that when she fails, “it’ll be time enough” for Matthew “to put [his] oar in” (AGG, 45) proves prophetic because he does take it upon himself to fill areas in Anne’s life in which Marilla falls short. And while shy and humble Matthew does not directly recognise that his own tender parenting influence or mothering is part of what moulds Anne into the “smart and pretty, and loving” young woman (AGG, 231) that she is by the end of the novel, it is quite clear to the reader that Anne’s upbringing would not be so successful without Matthew’s particularly nurturing influence. Bode (2008:57) summarises ‘Matthew’s maternal position’ in pointing out that it ‘stems from his fulfilment of a complex of qualities that together suggest Montgomery’s *maternal ideal*: along with love and acceptance, which entail tenderness and care, must also come harmony, empathy, and complete understanding’ (my emphasis). Bode (2008:57) also notes that ‘Matthew’s quiet, supportive acquiescence often fulfils the Journal’s jubilant declaration at the prospect of maternal fulfilment by the unknown mother’, quoting Montgomery’s words from her journal:

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<sup>161</sup> The narration justifies Marilla’s reserved response to Anne’s news as an attempt to hide from ‘Mrs. Rachel’s critical eye’ (AGG, 221), but this points to the narration’s speaking from Marilla’s perspective, since the reader knows that Marilla’s personality does not allow her to openly express affection to Anne at this stage in the novel. Thus, this attempt to justify why Marilla does not freely express her own glowing pride in Anne’s achievement further supports Marilla’s lack of effusiveness when it comes to emotional things, as she even avoids admitting to *herself* that she simply cannot be as free as Matthew with her feelings about Anne.

<sup>162</sup> The differences between Matthew and Marilla’s responses are also seen later on when Anne is asked to recite at a concert at the White Sands Hotel:

Matthew was in the seventh heaven of gratified pride over the honour conferred on his Anne and Marilla was not far behind, although she would have died rather than admit it, and said she didn’t think it was very proper for a lot of young folks to be gadding over to the hotel without any responsible person with them. (AGG, 222)

“*She* would have understood – *she* would have sympathized” (*SJ* 1:300; Montgomery’s emphasis). Matthew is clearly not just *a* mother figure to Anne but can be seen as a mothering *ideal* – high praise akin to that sung of Alcott’s idealised Marmee, which is fitting because Matthew possesses many of the same ideal attributes that the traditional idealised mother possesses.

Like any idealised mother figure, Matthew also reaps a mothering harvest in the influence that he has on Anne’s future and, through her, on the futures of countless generations. After Matthew’s death, his mothering harvest is symbolised in the ‘sweet old-fashioned flowers which his mother had planted in the homestead garden in her bridal days and for which Matthew had always had a secret, wordless love’ (*AGG*, 245) which Anne gathers and brings to him when he dies and continues to bring to his grave for years following his death (*AA*, 115, 119), suggestive of the immense impact that he has on Anne’s life and even on the person she becomes in later novels because she never forgets her first kindred spirit. These flowers link to the “‘first mayflowers’” gathered and brought to Anne as a mother on a yearly basis, first by her eldest son, Jem, then by her next son, Walter, after Jem goes to war, then by her youngest son, Shirley, after Walter also goes to war, and finally by little Bruce Meredith after Shirley goes to war too (*RI*, 121, 242-243).<sup>163</sup> These symbolically pay homage to the idealised mother figure – even when given by Anne to Matthew – and mark Anne as a universal mother figure when a child outside of her family also participates in the ritual. The repeated image of the mayflowers thus subtly highlights the extension of Matthew’s mothering harvest through Anne. Furthermore, Jem’s full given name is James *Matthew* Blythe, as he is named by Anne after “‘the two finest gentlemen [she has] ever known’” (*AHD*, 291): her first kindred spirit, Matthew, and her good friend and kindred spirit, Captain Jim, whom she meets in *Four Winds*. The passing of Matthew’s name, like Marilla’s, to the next generation thus likewise becomes a symbol of the immortalised harvest reaped of his love for and mothering of Anne.

### 3.5 Conclusion

Anne’s primary mother figures in *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) redefine the ideals of motherhood by expanding what qualifies as an effective mother figure when it comes to the raising of a capable young woman. Montgomery’s decision to have the story focus on an orphan girl whose biological mother is given life only through Anne’s idealised fantasies creates the

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<sup>163</sup> Montgomery notes the following in her journal about her own sons’ gathering flowers for her: ‘Stuart and Chester were gathering trilliums today and brought me big bunches of them. Stuart is especially thoughtful about bringing me posies’ (*SJ III*, 6).

perfect situation in which to compare the very real figure of imperfect motherhood in Marilla with the dreamlike fancies of ideal motherhood. This offers Marilla as the more intriguing of Anne's two primary female mother figures, because, as a spinster, she is not given the benefit of a status as an ideal biological mother, like Anne imagines Bertha to be, but has to work hard, learn from her blunders and mistakes and change to become recognisable as a mother figure. Of the two primary mother figures, it is also quite clear that Marilla's is the mothering most central to Anne's upbringing as Marilla actually has a lived, measurable role in disciplining, educating and showing love for Anne.

The way that the initially rigid, moral-focused Marilla softens and comes to love and raise Anne as an individual who does not necessarily fit into Marilla's perceived notions of the ideal pattern for what a young woman should be suggests that effective mothering does not have to be biological and idealised but can be undertaken by those who *choose to learn* how to be a mother in their own right and even simply by those who come to love a child dearly. Through Marilla, to whom effective and loving mothering does not come naturally, a voice is given to the difficulties of mothering, and the picture of the idealised mother figure is brought down from its pedestal, as the central mother in *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) is far from possessing a perfect and instinctive understanding of how to raise and communicate with her daughter (particularly when compared with a mother like Alcott's Marmee). The fact then that Anne becomes a traditionally idealised mother figure later in the series is a testament to how imperfect and less-than-ideal mothering can be just as effective in harvesting successful future mothers as idealised biological mothering.

Although Marilla does eventually become an effective mother figure who softens into loving Anne as her own, she does not raise Anne alone, and Marilla's success in mothering is in fact frequently facilitated by her elder, bachelor brother, Matthew. While Marilla is either oblivious to or simply does not acknowledge the fact that some of the success she sees in parenting Anne is also due in part to Matthew's quiet influence and trust in Anne, the reader is by no means kept in the dark on the matter. I feel that Montgomery thus purposefully invites us to consider Matthew as a co-mothering influence in this regard, since Marilla's early mothering proves insubstantial without him, and Matthew's instinctive mothering proves to be more closely aligned with the idealised mothering exemplified in Marmee's benchmark. Matthew has an undeniable influence on Marilla's decision to allow Anne to be adopted into the family at Green Gables. Furthermore, Matthew is the necessary balancing force to Marilla's initially narrow-minded parenting approach, and they do co-parent even though Marilla does not want Matthew

putting his ‘oar in’ and ‘interfering with [her] methods’ in bringing Anne up (AGG, 45, 231). This is important because the idealised picture of mothering for Anne does not exist without Matthew’s influence. It is also thus important to note that he only dies once both Marilla and Anne have adapted enough to understand each other better (and Marilla has come to a better understanding of herself) and work together even without his quiet, bridging assistance.

The influence of Anne’s three primary mother figures in the success of her upbringing is undeniable. Each plays a vital role in giving Anne values upon which to build her own future motherhood, and the effect of each mother, ideal or alternative, is seen in the well-balanced characteristics Anne develops into adulthood and into her own motherhood, a few of which have been identified in this chapter. Montgomery thus shows that it is not simply idealised biological roles that produce the kind of ideal mother seen in novels like *Little Women* (1868-1869), because Anne becomes a mother like Marmee without ever experiencing such ideal motherhood for herself. Rather, Anne learns all that she comes to know about mothering from the most imperfect and non-traditional mothers, who demonstrate that effective mothering can be instinctive *or* learned – and even at times can show elements of both – and can come from the most unexpected of sources. This is an idea that is expanded throughout Montgomery’s *Anne* series (1908-1939) in how she depicts Anne’s collecting an array of mother figures, even outside of Green Gables and Avonlea, who each provide Anne with something that she needs and from each of whom Anne is able to learn skills that she uses throughout her life in her own various mothering roles. I explore these additional mother figures in Chapter 4.

## Chapter 4: The *Anne* series: adopting mothers

“[...] What was lacking in her you have supplied. Between you, I think [the child’s] training [...] has been as nearly ideal as a motherless [child’s] could be.”

(AA, 232)

### 4.1 Introduction

When Anne is about to move away from Green Gables for a time to attend Queen’s College, Marilla’s lament (AGG, 230; quoted in Section 3.3) reveals Marilla’s insecurities about Anne’s leaving the nest. The extract, which speaks of Marilla’s impending loneliness, reveals an unspoken fear that Anne’s growing up and leaving the nest mean that Anne may no longer need Marilla’s mothering and that Marilla’s life may thus go back to its pre-Anne, stark, fruitless reality. Anne’s response attempts to provide comfort by reassuring Marilla that, in spite of the imminent changes in their family life, Anne herself is “not a bit changed—not really” (AGG, 230). Anne qualifies this assertion by explaining: “I’m only just pruned down and branched out” (AGG, 230) – words which have a broader significance in my reading of Montgomery’s *Anne* series (1908-1939) because they align with the overarching imagery of the harvest that I use in my discussion on effective mothering and its fruits.

Anne’s assurance, “at heart I shall always be your little Anne, who will love you and Matthew and dear Green Gables more and better every day of her life” (AGG, 230), emphasises Anne’s childlike nature. It implies that, in spite of any changes she goes through, she will always be “just the same [...] little Anne” (AGG, 230; my emphasis) that Marilla knows and whom Marilla has learned to love so deeply. It acknowledges that Anne depends upon her parent figures and will do so for the rest of her life: they have become her central root system and have guided her through the ‘pruning’ refinement of her character. The reference to “little Anne” subtly recalls the motherlessness of the orphan Anne. It suggests that Anne will always need mothering, even as she “branch[es] out” and away from Green Gables. Devereux (2003:123) reasons that ‘[i]t is Anne’s desire to find her mother [...] that sets in motion Marilla’s “progress,” or the story in which she discovers what is significantly represented as her own innate maternalism’; it follows that Anne’s continuing need for mothering attracts more mother figures into Anne’s life, as I argue in this chapter.

Throughout the *Anne* series (1908-1939), Montgomery depicts Anne’s formation of ‘a series of deep bonds with other women’ (Gubar, 2001:52), not just with her primary mother figures.

Anne's experience with being mothered branches into every phase of her journey to womanhood and motherhood, even when Anne is already an idealised and successful mother figure herself. This is reminiscent of Montgomery's own perpetual search for 'the absent mother, essentially unknowable [who] keeps reasserting herself and forms the source of a lingering tension for Montgomery' (Bode, 2008:53), driven by the trauma of Montgomery's losing her mother at a young age. Anne too is presumably ever searching for the mother that she loses as an infant (see Section 3.2), but the search contributes to the abundance of what I term her *harvest of mothers*. Anne's propensity to 'collect' mother figures throughout her life reflects Åhmansson's (1991:137) suggestion that Anne's "good friends" [...] together [...] combine to replace the mother that Anne never knew'. Thus, although Anne's "branch[ing] out" certainly extends outward to the branches of her posterity and even in her friendships and life experiences, it simultaneously extends downward, deeper into her root system, branching her roots out too in that she continuously builds her collection, or reaps a harvest, of mothers.

In this chapter I define Anne's extended harvest of mothering influences as those women who "support, direct, and serve Anne as models throughout her life" (Berg, 1992:160, quoted in Collins, 2013:50-51). I thus explore how Anne is mothered by women in her community in Avonlea while she is growing up in *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) and even when she is the teacher at the Avonlea school in *Anne of Avonlea* (1909), in the house where she boards in Summerside while she works as principal of Summerside High School in *Anne of Windy Poplars* (1936) and in her future home environment and community in Four Winds and Glen St Mary in *Anne's House of Dreams* (1917), *Anne of Ingleside* (1939), *Rainbow Valley* (1919) and *Rilla of Ingleside* (1921). This exploration of mothering outside of the childhood home is interesting, because only one of Anne's many mother figures is a traditional mother figure in the sense of being a wife and mother to her own biological children, and that is Mrs Rachel Lynde.<sup>164</sup> Most of Anne's mothering influences are spinsters, or childless women by definition. Yet, expanding what I explore with Marilla and Matthew in Chapter 3, each reaps a mothering harvest through Anne's upbringing into a successful young woman and later into a successful mother, proving again that one does not have to be a traditional mother to be an effective mother figure.

The handful of mother figures whom I have selected for analysis are the ones I see as most significant in Anne's life, particularly in terms of how each woman's influence extends beyond

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<sup>164</sup> Mrs Allan does become a mother for a short time in *Anne of Avonlea* (1909), but her baby dies when it is three months old (AA, 111, 213).

her immediate relationship with Anne. I believe that Montgomery provides far more examples of this kind of expanded mothering than the ones I have chosen, but it is beyond the scope of this study to cover the list exhaustively. I thus begin this exploration of Anne's harvest of mothers by considering the significant secondary mother figures in Anne's childhood as depicted primarily in *Anne of Green Gables* (1908). These include Mrs Rachel Lynde (Marilla's only close friend and neighbour to Marilla and Matthew), Mrs Allan (the wife of Avonlea's new minister) and Miss Stacy (Avonlea's first female schoolteacher). I then explore some of Anne's mothering influences when she is a young adult and then when she is a wife and mother, as depicted in later books in Montgomery's *Anne* series (1908-1939). The mother figures I discuss in Anne's later life are all spinsters, and I thus group them into one section that considers Montgomery's powerful exploration of spinsters for mothers. These mothers include Miss Lavendar, a friend that Anne makes in *Anne of Avonlea* (1909), Rebecca Dew, the housekeeper in *Anne of Windy Poplars* (1936), Susan Baker, Anne's own housekeeper from *Anne's House of Dreams* (1917) until *The Blythes Are Quoted* (2009), Miss Cornelia, Anne's first new female friend after Anne moves to Four Winds in *Anne's House of Dreams* (1917), and a few other examples of less significant spinster mothers. Finally, I briefly consider Anne's own role in her harvest of mothers, or her knack for creating mothers out of women who come into her life (and out of Matthew) – a phenomenon which I term reverse mothering and which I have already alluded to a number of times in my discussion of Marilla and Matthew in Sections 3.3 and 3.4.

#### **4.2 A community of mothers**

The well-known adage that it takes a village to raise a child acknowledges that sources outside of the nuclear family inevitably have an influence on what a child becomes. This idea of communal mothering can certainly be said to influence all young girls in some way, as interactions with people outside of the home within her extended family and community shape a girl's views of herself and of the world. Such communal influences are particularly important for Anne when she is a child, as she does not find an adequate combination of kindred spirit and strong female role model in either Marilla or Matthew: Marilla is a unique, strong, female role model, but she is not a kindred spirit for Anne, while Matthew is Anne's first true kindred spirit, but cannot be a role model for Anne when it comes to filling female roles in society, and neither Marilla nor Matthew can be looked to for examples of marriage or higher education. Anne thus needs outside influences to properly fill these positions in her esteem, so that '[w]ith the bonds of womanhood supporting [her], [... she can] exercise some choice over the paths of [her] li[fe]' (Kornfeld & Jackson, 1987:72). Montgomery thus gives Anne three other powerful female

influences in *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) in Mrs Lynde, Mrs Allan and Miss Stacy. Each of them plays an integral role in the creation of Montgomery's 'matriarchal utopia' (Åhmansson, 1991:128-142), with Mrs Lynde as 'the female pivot around which Avonlea moves' (Åhmansson 1991:137) and Mrs Allan and Miss Stacy's replacing previously male influences in 'the church and the school [...] tilt[ing] the community towards a more matriarchal structure [...] and] assuming their place in the female support network ['maternal guardians'] that surrounds Anne' (Åhmansson, 1991:140).

#### 4.2.1 *Mrs Rachel Lynde*

The first communal mother figure Anne meets in *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) is Mrs Rachel Lynde, whom MacLulich (1983, quoted in Åhmansson, 1991:137) calls the "self-appointed guardian of communal standards", and whom Åhmansson (1991:137) describes as 'a paragon of Avonlea virtues'. Marilla remarks at one point in *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) that nobody "has much of a chance to go wrong in Avonlea with Rachel to oversee them" (AGG, 210). Indeed, Mrs Rachel Lynde plays the role of ostensible guardian of the traditional, dominant discourses on women in society, but she simultaneously lives a reality that illustrates the possibility of a more matriarchal society in her own circle. Doody (1997b:26) observes accordingly: 'Mrs. Lynde's name, after all, is *Rachel*, evocative of [...] *the* mother in Israel, the mother of Joseph. Rachel is an emblem of motherhood and female power, of femininity under the old law' (Doody's emphases). She is foregrounded from the opening paragraphs of *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) as the 'all-seeing eye' (AGG, 7) of the community, in other words, as society's eye looking down critically upon everyone who deviates from societal expectation. Mrs Lynde is thus also depicted as absolutely confident in her own assessments of right and wrong. In fact, the repeated use of the statement "that's what" acts as a *Leitmotif* for her character that is indicative of her confident, dominant discourse-based approach to how everything should be.

Ironically, while Mrs Lynde believes in women's inhabiting and not reaching beyond their traditional societal sphere, she is the head of her household in her own right: her husband, Thomas Lynde, is 'a meek little man whom Avonlea people [call] "Rachel Lynde's husband"' (AGG, 8). Drain (1992:47) notably points out that although "woman's true sphere", as Mrs. Lynde sees it, is restrictively enclosed and confined, the reader and Anne would do well to judge by Mrs Lynde's practice rather than by her words'. She explains:

For Mrs. Lynde [...] combines an inexhaustible domestic energy with insatiable curiosity and decided views about the community in which she is an active participant (some would

say busybody) and about the larger world, too. Even when she is apparently cloistered, sitting at home “knitting ‘cotton warp’ quilts”, she maintains a comprehensive overview and understanding of “everything that passe[s] ... and ... the whys and wherefores thereof. For Mrs. Lynde, woman’s true sphere includes national politics and an up-to-date knowledge of all the disasters that happen outside Avonlea. (Drain, 1992:47)

Mrs Lynde is also the primary figure of biological motherhood in the novel, as she raises ten of her own children, although her children are not shown, intriguingly suggesting that the primary mothering role of the main figure of biological motherhood is actually an *alternative* mothering role which draws attention away from the traditional value ascribed to biological motherhood and magnifies the overall focus on Montgomery’s exploration of other, non-traditional mothering.

The overall image painted of Mrs Lynde in the text is one of “a good Christian woman [who] means well”, and the fact that there “isn’t a kinder soul in Avonlea and she never shirks her share of work” (AGG, 211) shows that there is some value in Mrs Lynde’s dominant discourse-based approach to womanhood and mothering. But some of Anne’s responses to Mrs Lynde’s counsel expose areas where Mrs Lynde’s overall approach is ineffective in changing Anne’s behaviour for the better, as can be seen from the following confidences between Anne and Marilla about the well-meaning Mrs Lynde:

“[...] when I’m with Mrs. Lynde I feel desperately wicked and as if I wanted to go and do the very thing she tells me I oughtn’t to do. I feel irresistibly tempted to do it. Now, what do you think is the reason I feel like that? Do you think it’s because I’m really bad and unregenerate?”

Marilla looked dubious for a moment. Then she laughed.

“If you are I guess I am too, Anne, for Rachel often has that very effect on me. I sometimes think she’d have more of an influence for good, as you say yourself, if she didn’t keep nagging people to do right [...]” (AGG, 211)

While Mrs Lynde’s approach is not always effective, Anne does listen to (even if she does not always act on) what Mrs Lynde says and can often be found quoting Mrs Lynde to Marilla and commenting on what Mrs Lynde has said (as in the above example). This shows that Anne is influenced in some way by Mrs Lynde, even if it is at times simply to help Anne know what she does not want to be. Anne acknowledges the validity of many of Mrs Lynde’s views but reveals how human stubbornness can override common sense at times.

Mrs Lynde’s views on women and on raising a girl are often conservative and limiting. She initially thinks that a female teacher coming to Avonlea is “a dangerous innovation” (AGG, 154), and she believes that a simple school education is “as much education [...] as a woman can be comfortable with”, as she does not believe “in girls going to college with the men and

cramming their heads full of Latin and Greek and all that nonsense” (AGG, 253-254).<sup>165</sup> Marilla and Matthew, however, both believe that it is imperative for Anne to get as much education as she can, so that she can fend for herself in society. It is telling therefore that the main characters in *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) are often shown undermining Mrs Lynde’s views and methods (see some examples above and in Sections 3.3 and 3.4), suggesting that what she represents is limited and needs revision. One poignant example of this is when Marilla mentions how pleased she is that Mrs Allan defends Anne against Mrs Lynde’s criticism at an Aid meeting. As the narrator humorously notes, Marilla says to herself: ““Anne’s got plenty of faults, goodness knows, and far be it from me to deny it. But I’m bringing her up and not Rachel Lynde, who’d pick faults in the Angel Gabriel himself if he lived in Avonlea”” (AGG, 180). Marilla’s taking firm ownership of her role as Anne’s mother and rejecting Mrs Lynde’s perspective is powerful, because it shows how Marilla comes into her own as a loving mother figure and embraces her own unique position as a spinster mother over the dominant expectations of society. This can be linked back to the potential Biblical symbolism of both Mrs Lynde’s and Marilla’s names, as Doody (1997b:26-27) posits that Marilla’s name (as connected to the name Mary, the mother of Christ – mentioned in Section 3.3) labels Marilla as ‘the Mother under the *New Law*, the law of love rather than of authority’ as opposed to Mrs Lynde’s name representing ‘motherhood [...] under the *old law*’ (my emphases), pointing at Marilla as more of a Marmee-like idealised mother than Mrs Lynde, even though Marilla is a spinster.

Mrs Lynde’s methods and values are far from being presented as ideal, but she still has immense value as a mother figure to Anne. Drain (1992:47) asserts:

Though by no means a universally satisfactory pattern of womanhood, *the example of Mrs. Lynde – forthright, kind, critical, contradictory Mrs. Lynde*, whose opinions are narrow but her involvement wide – is the best guide Anne has to what it is to be a fully realized woman. (Drain’s emphasis)

This is true, because, as I have already mentioned, Anne lacks any one figure in her life who can behave independently as an ideal example for her to follow and learn from. Mrs Lynde, as the only one of Anne’s mother figures who fully inhabits a woman’s traditional, societal roles,

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<sup>165</sup> Åhmansson (1991:116-119) outlines the dominant discourses to do with ‘the possible harmful effects that higher education for girls could entail [that were] a much debated issue at the end of the nineteenth century’. She elaborates on the ‘medical model commonly known at *the life force theory*’ (Åhmansson, 1991:117; Åhmansson’s emphasis) which underscored the dire consequences for the female reproductive system awaiting a woman who spent too much of her ‘life force’ studying at a time when her ‘life force’ should be dedicated to properly developing the organs required for ‘the achievement of true womanhood’ (Smith-Rosenburg & Rosenburg, 1973:340, quoted in Åhmansson, 1991:117) – probably referring to childbearing. Ironically, even with her higher education, Anne’s reproductive system produces a number of healthy, capable children – problematising even while apparently succumbing in the end to the expectations of society.

as well as plays prominent roles in the community as ‘a notable housewife ... [whose] work [is] always done and well done; [and who “runs”] the Sewing Circle, [helps to] run the Sunday-school, and [is] the strongest prop of the Church Aid Society and Foreign Missions Auxiliary’ (AGG, 7), however misguided her views are at times, is a vital model for Anne to observe to gain a balanced understanding of the possibilities for her own eventual place in society. Thus, supportive of Mrs Lynde’s elevated status in society and acknowledging her status as an experienced biological mother, each of Anne’s non-traditional or not yet fully realised primary mother figures, Marilla and Matthew, is depicted at one point *seeking out* Mrs Lynde’s experienced advice on matters of Anne’s upbringing (rather than merely receiving her usually uninvited input), and each subsequently finds success in seeking her assistance and heeding her counsel. The first example is when Anne decides that she will never return to school after she is humiliated by the teacher, and Marilla – who realises that she will ‘have trouble in overcoming’ Anne’s ‘unyielding stubbornness’ (AGG, 101) – decides to ““run down and see Rachel””, because Mrs Lynde has ““sent ten children to school and she ought to know something about it”” (AGG, 101). When Mrs Lynde, somewhat surprisingly, advises Marilla to not mention ““school to [Anne] again until [Anne mentions] it herself”” (AGG, 102), with the assurance that Anne will ““cool off in a week or so and be ready enough to go back of her own accord, that’s what”” (AGG, 102), Marilla takes Mrs Lynde’s sage advice with the result two chapters later that Anne *does* decide of her own accord to go ““back to school””<sup>166</sup> much to Marilla’s ‘delight’ (AGG, 115).

Later in the novel, Matthew asks for Mrs Lynde’s help when he decides to get Anne her first fashionable dress with puffed sleeves, ‘and that good lady promptly t[akes] the matter out of the harassed man’s hands’ (AGG, 167) in offering to see to the purchasing of the material and the making of the dress, which is ultimately received with much joy by Anne and even leads to Marilla’s increasing flexibility in terms of fashion for Anne – see Section 3.4. Mrs Lynde muses the following to herself after Matthew asks for her help:

“It’ll be a real satisfaction to see that poor child [Anne] wearing something decent for once. The way Marilla dresses her is positively ridiculous, that’s what, and I’ve ached to tell her so plainly a dozen times. I’ve held my tongue though, for I can see Marilla doesn’t want advice and she thinks she knows more about bringing children up than I do for all she’s an old maid. [...].” (AGG, 168)

Mrs Lynde’s quoted musings ironically show that although she thinks that Marilla has fallen

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<sup>166</sup> Anne decides this because she feels that school ““is all there is left in life”” for her (AGG, 115) after her friendship with Diana is banned by Mrs Barry because of Diana’s returning home drunk after tea with Anne (AGG, 111).

short in trying to force Anne to fit into a specific literal and metaphorical dress pattern, Mrs Lynde herself is also all too eager to dress Anne in what Mrs Lynde (or society) sees as a ‘decent’ pattern, metaphorically (both the actual dress and fitting into Avonlea society are certainly something that Anne wants desperately for herself). This irony points to society’s also possessing specific criteria, or a pattern that it expects young girls to model themselves after, much like Marilla’s ideals for mothering Anne. And placing the two sets of ideals at loggerheads with each other here perhaps hints that a balance of the two patterns for raising a child would be a more ideal approach, particularly if each set of preconceived ideals eventually takes into account Anne’s individuality as part of the recipe needed to succeed in making a successful woman out of her. This balanced approach is ultimately what comes to pass, as both women come to love Anne for who she is (already discernible in Mrs Lynde in the quoted extract as she identifies with Anne as a “poor child” and takes Anne’s side against Marilla) and give Anne the freedom to make her own decisions about how to mould her future.

Mrs Lynde, the apparent epitome of society’s dominant discourses on mothering, and thus a source for Anne’s being taught where she fits into the world around her, seems to serve primarily to highlight, through Marilla’s non-traditional and unexpected growth into a secure and successful mother figure, that dominant expectations and perceptions of mothering need to be revised and expanded. Åhmansson (1991:138) suggests that because of Mrs Lynde’s status as guardian of the dominant, conservative discourses in Avonlea, Anne’s first ‘disastrous’ encounter with Mrs Lynde, which I explore briefly in Sections 3.3 and 3.4, ‘implicitly means that [Anne] is on a collision course with Avonlea itself, challenging its norms and everything that Mrs Lynde represents’. Thus, Mrs Lynde’s coming to more readily accept Anne for who she is suggests a possible compromise between Anne’s ‘pruning’ and Avonlea’s acquiescence to the needed revision of the dominant discourses. Montgomery suggests a possible coming together of what Anne and Mrs Lynde individually represent, at least in mothering, in *Anne of Avonlea* when Mrs Lynde gives Anne’s mothering approach with the Keith twins, Dora and Davy, her stamp of approval in noting that “Anne’s methods seem to have worked fairly well with Davy [... as he] is a reformed character, that’s what” (AA, 212).

Mrs Lynde’s invested involvement in all areas of her community, particularly as she asserts herself firmly into the standards of upbringing of Avonlea’s children, make her a powerful and influential (albeit misguided at times) mother figure, particularly as she reflects how the community of women work together to improve children and fit them for society. Mrs Lynde thus does not hesitate to claim some influence in Anne’s development into a well-rounded

young woman, reflecting the idea of communal parenting with her assertion that Anne's excellent results at Queen's Academy make Anne "a credit to [her] friends" (AGG, 221), where being a credit means that Anne's achievements draw attention to how she has been brought up and to the good influences that Anne has in her life (which include Mrs Lynde). Mrs Lynde's influence as a mother figure in Anne's life expands as the book series continues, since Mrs Lynde moves into Green Gables with Marilla after the death of Mr Lynde in *Anne of Avonlea* (1909) and is thus featured more in her own small role in Anne's young adulthood and into Anne's married life. Mrs Lynde and Marilla both make up Anne's trousseau when Anne marries Gilbert (AHD, 10-11), symbolic of how both women – or how both old and new discourses on mothering do find some kind of balanced influence on the future wife and mother that Anne becomes.<sup>167</sup> And later, Mrs Lynde even (grand)mothers Anne's children, as can be seen in the following:

A visit to Green Gables was always considered a great treat. Aunt Marilla was very good to them, and so was Mrs. Rachel Lynde, who was spending the leisure of her old age in knitting cotton-warp quilts against the day when Anne's daughters should need a "setting-out". (RV, 23)

Mrs Lynde's presence in the novels is thus continually felt alongside Marilla's, and both women's mothering influence is felt into future generations.

#### 4.2.2 *Mrs Allan and Miss Stacy*

The second communal mother figure Anne meets in *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) is Mrs Allan, the young wife of the new minister who moves to Avonlea just a year after Anne's arrival, and the final prominent communal mother figure Anne meets in the novel is Miss Muriel Stacy, who comes into Anne's life shortly after Mrs Allan does, when Miss Stacy replaces Mr Phillips, for whom Anne has scant respect. Both women – 'and Anne rarely omits to mention one without the other' (Åhmansson, 1991:141) – become clear pillars of example for Anne's various aspirations for womanhood. Åhmansson (1991:140-141) calls them 'role models [...] that Anne adopts' and asserts that '[t]ogether they make up a combination of the traditional female accomplishments of nurture inside marriage with the addition of ambition'. Thus, they fill roles for Anne that neither Marilla nor Matthew, nor even Mrs Lynde is equipped to fill.

Mrs Allan's position as the minister's wife places her on a pedestal in the community, and her approval is often what drives Anne's desire to improve, as Anne finds in Mrs Allan a female

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<sup>167</sup> Due to its limited scope, this dissertation does not allow for the space to explore Mrs Lynde's influence on Anne in more detail, but more about her mothering influence on Anne can be gleaned from a close reading of the series' subsequent books.

role model and kindred spirit combined – something that, as I have argued above, she cannot find in either Marilla or Matthew. Anne’s love and admiration for Mrs Allan are quite clear in how Anne speaks of and responds to her – far more so than Anne’s more quiet love for Marilla because of the more spontaneous connection that Anne has with Mrs Allan. Anne recognises that “Mrs. Allan is one of the naturally good people” and states that she loves Mrs Allan “passionately” (AGG, 153) and that she tries “to be as much like Mrs. Allan as [she] possibly can”, because she thinks Mrs Allan is “perfect” (AGG, 174). Mrs Allan’s influence in inspiring Anne to be and to do good is clear as Anne informs Marilla: “Mrs. Allan says [doing good] ought to be our object in everything. I do really try to make it my object but I forget so often when I’m having fun” (AGG, 178). Mrs Allan does not, however, expect perfection and she rewards any sincere attempts at goodness, because she remembers what it is like to be a child – one of the keys to her appeal.

Mrs Allan’s easy connection with childhood and the ease with which Anne can “imagine Mrs. Allan as a little girl” (AGG, 159) help Anne to identify with Mrs Allan more easily than Anne can with her other mother figures, enabling Anne’s strong connection with Mrs Allan.<sup>168</sup> Anne’s exchange with Marilla about Mrs Allan’s childhood is revealing:

[...]. I hope I shall be a little like Mrs. Allan when I grow up. Do you think there is any prospect of it, Marilla?”

“I shouldn’t say there was a great deal” was Marilla’s encouraging answer. “I’m sure Mrs. Allan was never such a silly, forgetful little girl as you are.”

“No; but she wasn’t always so good as she is now either,” said Anne seriously. “She told me so herself—that is, she said she was a dreadful mischief when she was a girl and was always getting into scrapes. I felt so encouraged when I heard that. [...].” (AGG, 178)

Being able to see Mrs Allan (who is full of natural goodness and is a self-actualised and influential woman) as a little girl, particularly as a little girl who is prone to getting into scrapes just like Anne is, is powerful because it gives Anne hope that she too can grow into a self-actualised woman with the power to influence others, which Anne does.

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<sup>168</sup> Neither Marilla nor Matthew has this easy connection with their childhoods. In fact, Mrs Lynde muses at the start of the novel that it “seems uncanny to think of a child at Green Gables somehow; there’s never been one there, for Matthew and Marilla were grown up when the new house was built—if they ever *were* children, which is hard to believe when one looks at them” (AGG, 13; Montgomery’s emphasis). However, while Marilla in particular struggles to connect with Anne because she cannot easily understand Anne’s childish imaginings and woes, Anne does have the powerful effect from *her* side of connecting both Marilla and Matthew with their childhoods, albeit not in very happy memories. One example of this is when Matthew drives Anne home from the train station on the day she arrives, and Anne’s incessant chatter and questions make him feel ‘a little dizzy’, with the following elaboration: ‘He felt as he had once felt in his rash youth when another boy had enticed him on the merry-go-round at a picnic’ (AGG, 20). Another example is when Anne tells Marilla how upset she is about being called homely by Mrs Lynde: ‘An old remembrance suddenly rose up before Marilla. She had been a very small child when she had heard one aunt say of her to another, “What a pity she is such a dark, homely little thing.” Marilla was every day of fifty before the sting had gone out of that memory’ (AGG, 61).

The openness of character that is so characteristic of Mrs Allan also enables her to easily connect with Anne through empathy (reminiscent of Marmee's open approach with her daughters), leading Anne to hold Mrs Allan's motherly approach as a standard in comparing it to Mrs Lynde's, and even to Marilla's approach when Anne breaks her ankle in *Anne of Green Gables* (1908). Anne explains:

“Mrs Allan [...] never tells you it's your own fault<sup>169</sup> and she hopes you'll be a better girl on account of it. Mrs. Lynde always told me that when she came to see me; and she said it in a kind of way that made me feel she might hope I'd be a better girl but didn't really believe I would.” (AGG, 159)

Mrs Allan's approach of kind understanding that comes from a place of her own childhood experiences clearly has a more powerful impact on Anne than either Marilla or Mrs Lynde's telling Anne that it is Anne's own fault that Anne's ankle is broken, especially since Anne is well aware of her culpability in the situation. She tells Marilla: “[T]hat is just why you should be sorry for me [...] because the thought that it is all my own fault is what makes it so hard” (AGG, 158).

Mrs Allan shows a great deal of trust in Anne's character and ability to make good choices that benefit others, which pushes Anne to actually make the good choices that Mrs Allan preemptively credits her with, because Anne dearly desires to make Mrs Allan proud. An example of this comes after Matthew dies, when Anne tells Mrs Allan that “Marilla is all alone and she gets lonely at twilight”, and Mrs Allan replies meaningfully that Marilla “will be lonelier still [...] when [Anne goes] away again to college” (AGG, 248). The meaning of this hint from Mrs Allan is made clear when Anne “[looks] her duty courageously in the face and [finds] it a friend” (AGG, 251) by deciding to defer her tertiary education at Redmond to stay at Green Gables to help Marilla, as discussed in Section 3.3. While Anne's selfless action in this regard can simply be attributed to her own growth and maturity, her growth and maturity can certainly be linked to her upbringing and the examples provided by her mothering influences. Most of ‘the good folks, not knowing about Marilla's eyes’ believe Anne to be ‘foolish’, whereas her idol, Mrs. Allan, approves of her decision and tells her so ‘in approving words that br[ing] tears of pleasure to the girl's eyes’ (AGG, 253), giving weight to Mrs Allan's initial hint at what Anne's duty might be as a formative influence in Anne's ultimate decision.

Clearly Anne's desire to see ‘Mrs. Allan's approving smile’, which ‘brings almost too much happiness for this world’ (AGG, 148), influences Anne's character development from the first

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<sup>169</sup> Anne's words are said to Marilla not long in the chapter after Marilla has told Anne: “It was your own fault” (AGG, 158).

instance of their meeting. Mrs Allan continues to be an influence in Anne's life even after the two move away from each other and even attends Anne's wedding in *Anne's House of Dreams* (1917) (AHD, 17). One significant example of their continuing connection is seen in how Anne extends the reach of Mrs Allan's mothering of her deceased baby when Mrs Allan moves away, and Anne volunteers to be a proxy mother and "put flowers on the baby's grave" as long as Anne is still in Avonlea (AA, 213). This connects Anne and Mrs Allan in mothering roles, particularly because Anne later also loses her first child soon after little Joyce is born, linking the two women through shared experience.

Drain (1992:45) critiques Mrs Allan and Miss Stacy as less 'believable' female characters than either Marilla or Mrs Lynde, labelling 'Mrs Allan and Miss Stacy [as], respectively, moral and intellectual ideals, [... who also] exert a strong influence on those around them'.<sup>170</sup> Anne's attachment to these women is certainly idealistic, as while Mrs Allan's influence on Anne's ideals is reflected by the fact that the walls of Anne's bedroom are 'adorned with a few good pictures given Anne by Mrs. Allan' (AGG, 222), Miss Stacy's influence seems even stronger in terms of Anne's desire to model her own life (not just her ideals or values) after what she idealises specifically about Miss Stacy, as 'Miss Stacy's photograph occupie[s] the place of honour' on Anne's walls 'and Anne ma[kes] a sentimental point of keeping fresh flowers on the bracket under it' (AGG, 222), suggesting something of a shrine for Anne, or an image that she truly reveres.<sup>171</sup> Åhmansson (1991:141) observes that both of Anne's role models are necessary, citing particularly the fact that 'Miss Stacy's 'enthusiasm and encouragement provide Anne with those aspects of potential female development that Mrs Allan lacks'. Miss Stacy is the role model for Anne's career aspirations as a teacher, for Anne's mothering through teaching and later for how Anne educates her own children. As Miss Stacy is Avonlea's first *female* teacher, Anne feels sure that she "shall find that Miss Stacy is a kindred spirit" (AGG, 160). Anne's hope is confirmed when in "the new teacher she [finds] another true and helpful friend" (AGG, 161). Miss Stacy encourages Anne to be the best version of who she is and is the only female

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<sup>170</sup> Miss Stacy's status as an ideal rather than a realistic character is confirmed by the fact that Gammel and Dutton (1999:116), in specifically asserting that 'Montgomery's [idealised] teachers are far from perfect', do not give any example of supposed imperfections when it comes to Miss Stacy, who is an important focus in their preceding argument on Montgomery's teachers.

<sup>171</sup> Anne's daughter, Rilla, also reveres her teacher, Miss Gertrude Oliver, and Rilla's teacher actually boards 'at Ingleside'; the Blythes take her 'to please Rilla who [is] fathoms deep in love with her teacher and [is] even willing to share her room, since no other [is] available' (RI, 20). This connects Rilla and her beloved teacher with Anne and hers, showing another example of a young girl – one who actually grows up with a traditional, idealised mother in Anne – who longs for and benefits from the companionship and completeness that come from communal or sisterly mothering.

figure in Anne's life who encourages her "to cultivate [her] imagination" (AGG, 177).<sup>172</sup>

Gammel and Dutton (1999:114) point out that Miss Stacy, as 'Montgomery's fictional teacher ideal', is modelled on one of Montgomery's teachers, Miss Hattie Gordon, to whom *Anne of Avonlea* (1909) is dedicated in 'grateful remembrance of her sympathy and encouragement' (AA, 4). In her journals, Montgomery referred to Miss Gordon as 'a true friend' (SJ I, 81), and Gammel and Dutton (1999:117) highlight that she 'served Montgomery as an inspiration'.<sup>173</sup> Miss Gordon and Miss Stacy accordingly share many of the same characteristics and teaching approaches (Gammel & Dutton, 1999:114), and it is Miss Stacy's example and the principles she teaches her pupils that make her a successful mothering influence through her teaching. Åhmansson (1991:124) attributes Miss Stacy 'with modern ideas and an unusual talent for inspiring her pupils to grow mentally', characteristics which Montgomery's Miss Gordon and Anne as a teacher both likewise possess. Gammel and Dutton (1999:114) further explain that 'Hattie Gordon, Miss Stacy, and Anne Shirley all exploit the pleasures of learning, giving their pedagogical innovations an added transgressive element in a pleasure-denying and duty-oriented society'.

Miss Stacy is described as follows:

[She] was a bright, sympathetic young woman with the happy gift of winning and holding the affections of her pupils and bringing out the best that was in them mentally and morally. Anne expanded like a flower under this wholesome influence and carried home to the admiring Matthew and the critical Marilla glowing accounts of schoolwork and aims. (AGG, 161)

The image of Anne as 'a flower' hints at Miss Stacy's mothering harvest through teaching. Indeed, Miss Stacy's harvest is confirmed when Anne later tells Marilla, "I would call it a worthy purpose to want to be a teacher like Miss Stacy [...] I think it's a very noble profession" (AGG, 204) and when Anne does indeed become a teacher in *Anne of Avonlea* (1909).

The nobility and reach of Miss Stacy's position are made clear in the following description of the influence that she has on her pupils:

New worlds of thought, feeling, and ambition, fresh, fascinating fields of unexplored knowledge seemed to be opening out before Anne's eager eyes.

"Hills peeped o'er hill and Alps on Alps arose."

Much of all this was due to Miss Stacy's tactful, careful, broadminded guidance. She led her class to think and explore and discover for themselves and encouraged straying from the old beaten paths to a degree that quite shocked Mrs. Lynde and the school trustees, who

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<sup>172</sup> Matthew also encourages Anne in this; see Section 3.4.

<sup>173</sup> Miss Stacy contrasts strongly with the cruelty and bullying of Miss Brownell in *Emily of New Moon* (1923) (ENM, 160-173), who derides Emily's poetry, whom Montgomery admits in a journal entry for 29 August 1923, was based on one of her own less likable teachers, a woman called Izzie Robinson (SJ III, 147).

viewed all innovations on established methods rather dubiously. (AGG, 212)

The expansive images of ‘new worlds’, ‘fields’ and the ‘broadminded’ replacement of homely ‘hills’ with majestic ‘Alps’<sup>174</sup> are linked to Miss Stacy’s actively leading her pupils ‘to think and explore and discover for themselves’ and to the idea of deliberately ‘straying from the old beaten paths’ or the old dominant discourses in society which Mrs Lynde (particularly as seen by her shock) clearly represents. The imagery also implies that limitless possibilities exist outside of what is easily known – that new ideas that are better and more meaningful than the old, well-established ideas and are within reach if pupils take the initiative and exercise their natural abilities to explore these undiscovered realms.<sup>175</sup> Such a view empowers the pupils as individuals and makes Miss Stacy only a lamp guide down a path of predominantly self-discovery that is aimed to lead to the empowerment of self-reliance for each pupil. This powerful imagery shows clearly why Anne is so affected by Miss Stacy as a mentor or motherly influence and shows the power of the very education that traditional figures ‘in conservative Avonlea’ (Åhmansson, 1991:124) such as Mrs Lynde struggle to accept.

Miss Stacy’s harvest of mothering through teaching is thus all the more powerful when Anne patterns her own teaching after Miss Stacy’s. This suggests that Anne too brings such empowerment as explored above to her pupils, expanding the reach of education further as it multiplies across the generations of new teachers who are educated in their youth by great, motherly teachers. Anne, as a teacher, is determined to “‘win [her] pupils’ affections [so that] they will *want* to do what [Anne tells] them” (AA, 30; Montgomery’s emphasis)<sup>176</sup> and to have her “‘pupils love [her] and look back to [her] in after years as a real helper” (AA, 31) – ‘a bond to be cherished even many years later’ (Gammel & Dutton, 1999:117).<sup>177</sup> Furthermore, when Anne resigns from teaching at the Avonlea school before going to college at Redmond, she is described as a teacher who teaches her pupils ‘more by her own sweet personality than by all her careful precepts’ (AA, 231). This is a clear reason for the success of her methods and a clear reference to why Miss Stacy’s methods as an example for Anne are often more successful than

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<sup>174</sup> The metaphor of ‘Alps’ to signify an ambition that needs to be fulfilled is picked up in the title *The Alpine Path* (1917), in which Montgomery describes her path to fame.

<sup>175</sup> Montgomery similarly refers to Miss Gordon in her journals as one who ‘had the power of inspiring a love of study for its own sake and of making the dry bones of the school routine alive with interest’ (*SJI*, 385); Gammel and Dutton (1999:117) accordingly refer to Miss Gordon as ‘an innovative, enthusiastic teacher’.

<sup>176</sup> Anne’s approach here reflects the persistence of sentimentalist ideals for inspiring obedience in children through affection, outlined by Strickland (1985:12), that were prevalent in Alcott’s time.

<sup>177</sup> Montgomery clearly looked back on Miss Gordon with fondness, evidence of which is given in her using Miss Gordon as a model for Miss Stacy. Montgomery remembered Miss Hattie Gordon as ‘the only one in Cavendish who sympathized with [Montgomery] in [her] ambitions and efforts’ (*SJI*, 81).

Marilla's early moralising (discussed in Section 3.3) in that the empathetic and caring *example* do more for children than the inculcation of morals.

Miss Stacy's position as someone after whom her female pupils are able to pattern their own lives and aspirations also gives weight to whatever advice Mrs Stacy gives, because the fruits of Miss Stacy's advice manifest in who Miss Stacy is. She takes it upon herself to mother the teenage girls in her school in one instance as follows:

“Miss Stacy took all us girls who are in our teens down to the brook last Wednesday, and talked to us about [getting older]. She said we couldn't be too careful what habits we formed and what ideals we acquired in our teens, because by the time we were twenty our characters would be developed and the foundation laid for our whole future life. And she said if the foundation was shaky we could never build anything really worth while on it. [...] And we decided that we would try to be very careful indeed and form respectable habits and learn all we could and be as sensible as possible, so that by the time we were twenty our characters would be properly developed.” (AGG, 201)

This advice, together with Miss Stacy's example and her encouragement to foster imagination and thereby find a balance as an adult between the serious and the imaginative,<sup>178</sup> helps Anne to gradually let go of some of the very “childish matters” (AGG, 201) that Marilla tries to train out of her and move towards embracing her future as a capable woman like Miss Stacy, perhaps because a balanced future such as the one Anne sees in Miss Stacy is not as daunting as the idea of growing up and completely letting go of *all* childish pursuits.

Collins (2013:52) posits that ‘Muriel Stacy's influence on Anne's development as a scholar and as a young woman is profound—she helps her harness her remarkable imagination and sets her on a path that leads to her own successful teaching career’. Indeed, Anne does become a successful teacher and eventual mother, reaping bountiful harvests of her own, and, like Miss Stacy does for her, she encourages her children to grow up with this balance of romance or imagination and seriousness. Miss Stacy thus capably takes Anne exactly as she is and trains her up within the bounds of Anne's own personality, hobbies and desires. For example, Anne's love of reading is tempered from her reading any books that suit her fancy, such as the “fascinating and creepy” book lent to her by Ruby Gillis, to her determining that she “never [reads] ANY book now unless either Miss Stacy or Mrs. Allan thinks it is a proper book for a girl thirteen and three-quarters to read”, because Miss Stacy makes Anne “promise that”, and Anne is able to accept and do “agonizing” things to improve her character because she is “truly anxious to please” Miss Stacy (AGG, 203; Montgomery's emphasis).

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<sup>178</sup> Encouragement towards balance such as this is reminiscent of what Marmee advocates for in *Little Women* (1868-1869) – see Chapter 2.

Another way in which Miss Stacy influences Anne's future life and mothering is that she helps Anne to direct and refine her writing ability – something that Montgomery's own Miss Gordon did for her as 'the first of Montgomery's teachers to require the writing of compositions' (Gammel & Dutton, 1999:114). I have already established that Anne, like her birth mother, has a natural gift for writing, but Miss Stacy is the first of Anne's motherly influences to help Anne to focus and direct her childish infatuation with "“big words”" (AGG, 213) and with fanciful and romantic stories towards more realistic and constructive writing, thus indirectly honing Anne's connection with her birth mother. When Marilla questions why Anne, as she grows older, does not "“use half as many big words”" as she used to (AGG, 213), Anne explains:

“[...] somehow I don't want to use big words any more. It's almost a pity, isn't it, now that I'm really growing big enough to say them if I did want to. It's fun to be almost grown up in some ways, but it's not the kind of fun I expected, Marilla. There's so much to learn and do and think that there isn't time for big words. Besides, Miss Stacy says the short ones are much stronger and better. She makes us write all our essays as simply as possible. It was hard at first. I was so used to crowding in all the fine big words I could think of—and I thought of any number of them. But I've got used to it now and I see it's so much better.” (AGG, 213)<sup>179</sup>

When Marilla then asks what "“has become of [Anne's] story club”", because Marilla has not heard Anne "“speak of it for a long time”" (AGG, 213), Anne explains her greater reflectivity and new-found ability to apply more rigorous and constructive self-criticism:

“The story club isn't in existence any longer. We hadn't time for it—and anyhow I think we had got tired of it. It was silly to be writing about love and murder and elopements and mysteries. Miss Stacy sometimes has us write a story for training in composition, but she won't let us write anything but what might happen in Avonlea in our own lives, and she criticizes it very sharply and makes us criticize our own too. I never thought my compositions had so many faults until I began to look for them myself. I felt so ashamed I wanted to give up altogether, but Miss Stacy said I could learn to write well if I only trained myself to be my own severest critic. And so I am trying to.” (AGG, 214)

Miss Stacy tries to focus Anne on Anne's own experiences and the richness that real life has to offer in terms of inspiration. This does indeed filter into Anne's later writing and Montgomery shows the harvest of this part of Anne's education in Anne's poignant poems that detail her own experiences, shown in *The Blythes are Quoted* (2009), and in the poems written by Anne's son, Walter – particularly “The Piper” which is ‘a classic from its first printing’ and becomes ‘the one great poem of the [Great] war’ (RI, 196).

Overall, it is undeniable that Anne's education and upbringing into an ideal mother figure are

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<sup>179</sup> This sentiment is echoed in *Jane of Lantern Hill* (1937), when the journalist and author Andrew Stuart tells his daughter Jane: ““The most awful as well as the most beautiful things in the world can be said in three words or less – ‘I love you’; ‘he is gone’; ‘he is come’; ‘she is dead’; ‘too late’ – and life is illumined or ruined”" (JLH, 140).

moulded by a variety of ‘maternal guardians’ (Rothwell, 1999:135) in her community. Anne herself admits that she is influenced in growing up “‘successfully’” by “‘such good friends as [Marilla] and Matthew and Mrs. Allan and Miss Stacy’”, who make Anne “‘really want to be good [...] more than ever’” because she wants to do “‘just what would please’” her mother figures (even if Mrs Lynde acts more as a depiction of what Anne tries to avoid or to push towards progress) and what they “‘would approve of’” (AGG, 210-211; my emphases). Thus, when Marilla tells Mrs Lynde after Anne makes the selfless decision to give up her scholarship to Redmond and stay at Green Gables that there is “‘a good deal more of the woman’” about Anne than there is of the child, this observation is clearly influenced not just by Marilla’s upbringing, but by Anne’s desire to be “‘a credit’” to *each* of her “‘friends’” (AGG, 221) or mothering influences, as each plays a unique and vital role in helping her grow out of her careless and scrape-filled childhood into successful womanhood and ideal future motherhood. And Anne continues to find such “‘friends’” or mothering influences throughout the *Anne* series (1908-1939).

### 4.3 Spinsters as mothers

Anne’s harvest of mothers is one of the most interesting aspects of Montgomery’s exploration of mothering, particularly because she depicts Anne’s primarily adopting childless mothers (particularly spinsters), much as Anne herself is adopted as a motherless child.<sup>180</sup> While the dominant discourses in Montgomery’s (and Anne’s) society label spinsters as unfruitful and as figures of unfulfilled purpose, I argue (beginning with my discussion about Marilla in Section 3.3) that spinsters in Montgomery’s *Anne* series (1908-1939) are presented as capable mother figures even though, by choice or fate, they have not married and had children. Anne does not seem to attribute much, if any, weight to the negative connotations associated with spinsters in her society. In fact, as a young teenager, she tells Marilla: ‘Young men are all very well in their place, but it doesn’t do to drag them into everything, does it? Diana and I are thinking seriously of promising each other that we will never marry but be nice old maids and live together forever’ (AGG, 201).

Kornfeld and Jackson (1987:72) assert that spinsters in nineteenth-century novels for women

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<sup>180</sup> As mentioned before, even Mrs Allan and Miss Stacy are childless when they have their primary influences on Anne’s life. The same holds true for all of Anne’s spinster mothers, although Miss Lavendar and Miss Cornelia both do eventually become *de facto* mothers – Miss Lavendar as Paul Irving’s new mother and Miss Cornelia by adopting Mary Vance. These are the only two of Anne’s spinster mothers who marry, and I therefore cannot agree with Gubar’s (2001:52) contention that ‘[i]t cannot be disputed [...] that most of Montgomery’s old maids ultimately embrace marriage’.

‘are portrayed quite differently than in American culture in general: not bitter, disillusioned, or unfulfilled, spinsters in these female Utopias are independent financially and mentally; they play an important role in the lives of the heroines and their communities’. Stairs (2004:247-248) suggests that the quiet, rural setting had some bearing on the gentle view of spinsters on Prince Edward Island and confirms that spinsters here were involved in their communities, noting in her study of the 1881 census that ‘[m]ost lived, not on the margins of society, but at the heart of families and households on the Island’ and that ‘their marginalization appears to be far more a result of the failure of academics to appreciate their role than as a consequence of familial relations’. Collins (2013:52) notes accordingly then that ‘within the *Anne of Green Gables* series, single female characters are seen in abundance, and rather than being portrayed as “cautionary tales” for young readers, their lives are presented as very satisfactory’.

I argue in this section that the very singlehood that sets them apart from stereotypical societal expectation is what leaves spinsters free to find satisfaction in mothering in their own ways outside of and with little regard for the constraints or restrictions that would be placed upon them if they had the responsibility of caring for their own husbands or children. Their freedom allows them to choose who, when, how, why and where they mother. I even see Anne’s housekeepers as spinster mothers to her. Pike (2008:161) points out that Montgomery’s ‘fiction paints a picture of longstanding service by maids who become part of the family with whom they have made accommodations and adjustments over years of service and mutual affection’.<sup>181</sup> Thus, they not only become part of the family but also become friends to Anne.<sup>182</sup> Indeed, the spinsters in the *Anne* series (1908-1939) commonly choose to mother through their formation of and participation in nurturing female friendships which are often inherently motherly. Mothering in this way is universal, as it is not limited by biology or societal position and can

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<sup>181</sup> Pike (2008:161) points out that Montgomery’s depiction of maids in her fiction is at odds with ‘[t]he relationships with maids revealed in L. M. Montgomery’s published journals [which are] never easy ones, in terms of either work standards or personal relations’. She elaborates: ‘Montgomery expresses discontent with maids’ lack of intellect, lack of organization, laziness, and temper at various times’ (Pike, 2008:161). Pike (2008:161) thus suggests that Montgomery’s contradictory portrayal of housekeepers in her fiction is attributable to ‘literary traditions regarding the depiction of servants, which place servants in stereotyped roles with a particular plot function rather than as fully developed characters’. I, however, see Rebecca Dew and Susan Baker in particular as well-rounded characters who each play a role in Montgomery’s use of her fiction as a tool to enable her ‘search for the lost mother’ (Bode, 2008:55).

<sup>182</sup> Hannah, in *Little Women*, can also be read as one of these housekeeper mothers. She teaches the March girls how to cook and is an example to them in improving their housekeeping skills. It is even revealed at one point that Hannah teaches Marmee to cook when Marmee is a wealthy housewife before her family falls into poverty, making Hannah a kind of mother figure even to the central benchmark figure of idealised motherhood (*LW*, 325).

freely expand to include limitless mothering relationships and influences.<sup>183</sup> Some examples of Anne's spinster mothers are discussed briefly in the subsections below.

#### 4.3.1 *Miss Lavendar*

In *Anne of Avonlea* (1909), when seventeen-year-old Anne gets lost on a walk with Diana to visit a friend for tea, Anne finds “a real “kindred spirit”” in Miss Lavendar Lewis: “an old maid [of] forty-five” who also instantly recognises ‘a kindred spirit’ in Anne because they both “imagine things” (AA, 172). Their rapport is described as ‘one of those fervent, helpful friendships possible only between a woman who has kept the freshness of youth in her heart and soul, and a girl whose imagination and intuition supplie[s] the place of experience’ (AA, 181). Anne's ability to connect the adults with whom she comes into contact with their youth is one of the traits that ultimately makes her company irresistible to so many of the grown-ups in her life.<sup>184</sup> Thus, what makes Anne's relationship with Miss Lavendar so rich is that Miss Lavendar's continued connection with her youth (as likewise in Mrs Allan) meets Anne closer to Anne's own imagination and vigour than do the personalities of any of the other adults in Anne's life who are much older than Anne. The two women are connected in their youthfulness even years later when Anne is about to get married, and her old pupil, the now nineteen-year-old Paul Irving, tells Anne: “You'll never grow old, Teacher [...]. You are one of the fortunate mortals who have found and drunk from the Fountain of Youth, – you and Mother Lavendar” (AHD, 21). Indeed, Anne's character as an adult woman and mother can be linked back to descriptions of Miss Lavendar's youthfulness in middle age, as Anne is still described as ‘wild and young again’ (RV, 126) and ‘full of ginger’ up until the time when Anne's eldest son, Jem, goes to fight in the Great War (RI, 102).<sup>185</sup>

Before physically meeting Miss Lavendar, Anne fancifully predicts that the spinster will be what Diana calls “a spellbound princess” (AA, 169), who is, according to Anne, “young and beautiful still” at heart (AA, 169), because the older woman's house “looks like a bit out of a story book or a dream” (AA, 169). Anne's whimsical prediction about her ‘real “kindred spirit”’ (AA, 181) is proven correct when Miss Lavendar is revealed not to be ‘the usual type of elderly

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<sup>183</sup> Such mothering friendships exist in some of Montgomery's other works too, such as Little Aunt Em, Mrs Meade and Mrs Jimmy John in *Jane of Lantern Hill* ([1937] 1954).

<sup>184</sup> The way that Anne does this for both Marilla and Matthew is mentioned in footnote 169.

<sup>185</sup> Anne's intention to stay young at heart and to remain connected with her imagination is clear in a letter to Gilbert during their engagement, when she pleads: “But, oh, Gilbert, don't let's ever grow too old and wise ... no, not too old and *silly* for fairyland” (AWP, 77; Montgomery's emphasis). Here she turns the assumption that old age equals wisdom on its head, referring to rigid old age as not being ‘silly’ enough to remain enchanted. This suggests that it is the young who are wise in their silliness which allows a connection to the imagination.

spinster' known to Anne and Diana, which is 'a rather angular personage, with prim gray hair and spectacles' (AA, 171), in other words, Marilla, or Aunt Josephine Barry.<sup>186</sup> This links to the description of Anne early in *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) as a far cry from 'the Avonlea type of well-bred little girl' (AGG, 19). Indeed, Gubar (2001:50-51) attributes Anne's kinship with Miss Lavendar to how far each strays from societal convention, observing:

[...] it is not coincidental that their meeting occurs as a result of straying from the beaten path [...]. Just as Miss Lavender wanders away—intentionally or not—from the traditional marriage plot, Anne and Diana "t[ake] the wrong path" and, in doing so, happen upon a far more enjoyable experience than the one waiting for them at their intended destination [...]. [...] Montgomery emphasizes that this unconventional old maid's oddness not only serves as the source of her attractiveness, it also finds an answering echo in Anne's own character [...].

Miss Lavendar's distance from the stereotypical spinster is enhanced through her physical description. She has 'wavy' hair that is 'arranged in puffs and coils', an 'almost girlish face, pink cheeked and sweet lipped, with big *soft* brown eyes and dimples', and a 'very dainty gown [...] with [...] roses on it' (AA, 171; my emphasis). The description of her is one of soft femininity that clearly contrasts with the 'angular' features associated with those of the archetypal spinster. The obvious contrast between Marilla and Miss Lavendar points to how much more easily Anne can relate to Miss Lavendar than to Marilla.

The following extract gives Miss Lavendar's own philosophy about her spinsterhood:

"But you aren't an old maid," said Anne, [...]. "Old maids are *born ...* they don't *become*."

"Some are born old maids, some achieve old maidenhood, and some have old maidenhood thrust upon them," parodied Miss Lavendar whimsically.

"You are one of those who have achieved it then," laughed Anne, "and you've done it so beautifully that if every old maid were like you they would come into the fashion, I think."

"I always like to do things as well as possible," said Miss Lavendar meditatively, "and since an old maid I had to be I was determined to be a very nice one. People say I'm odd; but it's just because I follow my own way of being an old maid and refuse to copy the traditional pattern. [...]" (AA, 183-184)

This reference to the 'traditional pattern' of old maidenhood links to the earlier pattern metaphors that I explore in Sections 3.3, 3.4 and 4.2.1 in terms of bringing Anne up to fit into a set pattern, such as Marilla's stiff, practical, plainness (reflected in the dresses she makes for Anne) or Mrs Lynde's wish to clothe Anne in something more fashionable, or more current in terms of society's expectations. Neither Anne nor Miss Lavendar easily fit into the patterns established for them by society or by those around them, and they both thus create their own

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<sup>186</sup> Miss Barry, Diana's great-aunt, is described as 'thin, prim, and rigid [... with] gold-rimmed glasses' (AGG, 134). She is discussed in more detail in Sections 4.3.4 and 4.4.

versions of who they should be. This also reflects how Montgomery breaks apart and expands upon patterns for ideal motherhood in the *Anne* series (1908-1939) by showing that not all spinsters' lives are fruitless, because they have the capability to mother as effectively as traditional, idealised mothers, be the mothering instinctive or learned by choice through much trial and error.

Miss Lavendar is so close a kindred spirit for Anne that she recognises all of Anne's fancies and romantic tendencies and educates her from the mature perspective of a spinster who is also very similar to Anne. Miss Lavendar thus acts as a kind of echo of what Anne may be like as an adult (reminiscent of Anne's childhood connection with her kindred spirits in Mrs Allan and Miss Stacy, who are both younger than Miss Lavendar), and Anne's recognition of herself in Miss Lavendar makes it easy for Anne to apply the lessons she learns from Miss Lavendar's example. Miss Lavendar's connection with imagination and romance thus gives Anne the hope that she can be happy while holding onto some of her romantic ideals well into adulthood. From Miss Lavendar's own lived experience with heartbreak, however, she also surprises Anne with some disillusioned realism about the traps of 'real life': "That's the worst ... or the best ... of real life, Anne. It *won't* let you be miserable. It keeps on trying to make you comfortable ... and succeeding ... even when you're determined to be unhappy and romantic" (AA, 185; Montgomery's emphasis). This is something that Anne comes to learn for herself and that her daughter, Rilla, comes to learn too, particularly after the losses they experience as a result of the Great War later, in *Rilla of Ingleside* (1921) (primarily of Anne's son, Walter) – that life moves forward in the minutiae of everyday life, and 'new happiness' (RI, 310) is eventually inevitable, however changed and mixed up it becomes with traces of sadness and thankfulness.

Another point that I find significant about Anne's association with Miss Lavendar is that it subtly highlights the fact that vastly different kinds of mother are all connected. This is done through Anne's pupil, Paul Irving, the son of Miss Lavendar's former suitor and eventual husband, Stephen Irving. Paul's mother dies when he is just eight years old, and he remembers this idealised biological mother as his "little mother" (e.g. AA, 115, 151). Paul's attitude towards the women in his life thus reflects his own perpetual search for the lost mother, much like Anne's (and Montgomery's). When he comes to Avonlea, Paul adopts Anne, his teacher, as a kind of mother figure because of how she understands him and his imagination in a way that no one else does, a fact that is reflected in Paul's repeated, "You know, teacher" (e.g. AA, 116; Montgomery's emphasis), when he talks to Anne, giving her credit for understanding things about him without the need for much explanation. Consequently, Paul draws a connection

between Anne and his 'little mother' too, as can be seen in the following instance: "Now, teacher, please sit here; and I'll sit at your feet. May I lay my head against your knee? That's the way my little mother and I used to sit. Oh, this is real splendid, I think" (AA, 151). This image of Paul sitting with his head in Anne's lap echoes Anne's childhood time spent with her "curly head in Marilla's gingham lap" (AGG, 153), connecting Marilla with the image of the idealised 'little mother' too. Furthermore, the way that Paul speaks of his 'little mother' reminds Anne of her own equally idealised biological "little mother", whom she does not remember (AA, 117; Montgomery's emphasis).

Paul also draws a connection between his 'little mother' and Miss Lavendar when he meets her:

"You may kiss me if you like," said Paul gravely.

Miss Lavendar stooped and kissed him.

"How did you know I wanted to?" she whispered.

"Because you looked at me just as my little mother used to do when she wanted to kiss me. As a rule, I don't like to be kissed. Boys don't. *You* know, Miss Lewis. But I think I rather like to have you kiss me. [...]" (AA, 186-187; Montgomery's emphasis)

His words here also highlight the fact that his connections with Anne and Miss Lavendar are equally filled with instinctive awareness and understanding, as he credits Miss Lavendar with the familiar "[y]ou know" that he repeatedly uses to convey his sense of Anne as a mother figure. Later, on a separate visit to Miss Lavendar, Paul's recognition of a mother figure in Miss Lavendar is made clearer by his identifying her explicitly as a motherly character: "I tell you what, Miss Lavendar ... I think you would make a splendid mother. You have just the right look in your eyes ... the look my little mother always had" (AA, 228). Paul's connecting Miss Lavendar with his 'little mother' proves prophetic, since Miss Lavendar later marries his father to become Paul's second mother.<sup>187</sup>

The connection between Anne and Miss Lavendar, when their friendships with Paul are added into the analysis, outlines a complex web of mothering. Miss Lavendar mothers Anne as a 'kindred spirit' and (atypical) spinster mother figure; Anne mothers Paul as his teacher who is also a 'kindred spirit' for him; and Anne brings Miss Lavendar and Paul together, playing an essential role in Miss Lavendar's eventually becoming a new mother to Paul. Furthermore, Paul's references to his own 'little mother' and his recognition of 'little mother' attributes in both Anne and Miss Lavendar connect Anne's idealised birth mother, Paul's idealised birth mother, Marilla (as Anne's primary, archetypal spinster mother), Anne (as a mother through

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<sup>187</sup> Stepmothering is another kind of mothering that Montgomery explores in many different cases in multiple books in the *Anne* series (1908-1939), but stepmothering goes beyond the scope of this dissertation, since my focus is significant mothering influences who directly influence Anne and her children.

teaching) and Miss Lavendar (as a motherly, atypical spinster and an eventual loving stepmother).<sup>188</sup> This shows how mothering in its different forms and manifestations is connected through the common attributes shared by women who mother affectionately and impactfully – particularly seen in how the image of idealised mothering is even connected back to an archetypal (typically desiccated) spinster figure such as Marilla, reiterating that successful and effective mothering follows no set pattern.

#### 4.3.2 *Rebecca Dew and Susan Baker*

When Anne takes up the position of principal at Summerside High School while Gilbert (now her fiancé) completes his medical studies at Redmond, she meets Rebecca Dew, the spinster housekeeper at Windy Poplars (the house in which Anne boards, belonging to two widows, Aunt Kate and Aunt Chatty). Rebecca Dew pays special attention to Anne and diligently takes care of Anne's needs, going above the call of duty to the point that Anne often speaks about how there is “nothing that woman can't do” (*AWP*, 38). When things get particularly challenging in Anne's life in Summerside, Anne tells Gilbert that she does not “know just what [she would] do if it wasn't for dear Rebecca Dew and [Gilbert's] letters ... and little Elizabeth”, the young neighbour whom Anne takes it upon herself to mother (*AWP*, 30). Anne thus places the comfort that Rebecca Dew provides on the same level as the comfort of Gilbert's letters and the purpose Anne feels in mothering lonely children, which shows just how elevated Rebecca Dew is in Anne's esteem and essentially labels the spinster as a member of Anne's family.

Anne's sense of Windy Poplars as home is highlighted by its comparison to Green Gables. When Anne returns to Windy Poplars from a visit to Green Gables, she writes that she has “left dear Green Gables” but has “returned to dear Windy Poplars [where] Rebecca Dew ha[s] a fire lighted in the tower room for [Anne] and a hot-water bottle in the bed” (*AWP*, 161). The parallel used thus confirms Windy Poplars as a second home for Anne. Furthermore, the detail about Rebecca Dew's preparation for Anne's homecoming associates Rebecca Dew herself explicitly with warmth, suggesting that she is the primary reason for Anne's sense of Windy Poplars as home. Rebecca Dew's association with the warmth and comforts of home is seen in many instances in the text. Some examples are when she provides Anne with “a comfortable old wing chair of faded brocade that just fits [Anne's] kinks” (*AWP*, 21) and “a small chubby,

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<sup>188</sup> In *Anne's House of Dreams* (1917), the now young adult Paul shows how his relationship with his new mother has developed by referring to the former Miss Lavendar as “*Mother* Lavendar” (*AHD*, 21; my emphasis), showing how she fits fully into her role as a mother without the need for the distinction of being a *step*mother, rather than simply an ideal mother (while also retaining a sense of her youthful self in the retention of her first name).

oblong wood-stove in [Anne's] room [... in which] she always has a fire lighted for [Anne] when [Anne] c[omes] home from school” (AWP, 37-38). Such references link Rebecca to images of warmth associated with the idealised mother figure in *Little Women* (1868-1869), thus suggesting that Rebecca Dew is a similarly effective central guardian of hearth and home in her own way in this non-traditional household.

Rebecca Dew becomes Anne's most valiant ally while Anne is at Windy Poplars. She does what she can to protect Anne's reputation with “the Royal Family” of Summerside (the Pringles) (AWP, 6), and she is “cross” when she feels that anyone has disrespected Anne (AWP, 38). Furthermore, Rebecca Dew makes no secret of her faith in Anne (AWP, 83), as Rebecca Dew believes that if Anne cannot do a difficult thing, “nobody can” (AWP, 83). Rebecca Dew also tries to counsel Anne at times and does so with such a clear understanding of other people that Anne, who is sometimes misled by her own desire to connect with people, has to admit that Rebecca Dew is right, giving weight to Rebecca Dew's role as a mothering influence for Anne. One example of this is when Anne is too preoccupied with how Hazel Marr, a new Summerside resident, reminds Anne of Anne's own ‘early youth, with all its raptures and ideals and romantic visions’ (AWP, 176), to see Hazel's character clearly. Anne sees no harm in Hazel's chatter, because it reminds Anne of how Anne is also “a dreadful little chatterbox when [Anne is] a child” (AWP, 182), but Rebecca Dew can see that Hazel's chatter is insincere and tells Anne so pithily by pointing this out: “I didn't know you when you was a child but I'm sure [...] you would *mean* what you said no matter how you expressed it and Hazel Marr doesn't. She's nothing but skim milk pretending to be cream” (AWP, 182; Montgomery's emphasis). Thus, when Anne lets herself get caught up in Hazel's romantic problems only to find out that Hazel indeed does not mean anything that she says, Anne is humbled and admits that she has “a few things to learn yet ... things that even Rebecca Dew could have told [Anne] ... *did* tell [her]” (AWP, 188; Montgomery's emphasis).

Another example of Rebecca Dew's wise counsel is when Anne decides “to look after Mrs. Raymond's twins while [Mrs Raymond] goes to Charlottetown to the funeral of some relative” (AWP, 198). Anne, who loves children, sees eight-year-old Gerald and Geraldine as “a pair of angelic-looking youngsters”, but Rebecca Dew warns that “them's holy terrors” (AWP, 198). Indeed, when Anne returns from a harrowing babysitting experience, she confesses: “Rebecca Dew, I used to think the adage, ‘Children should be seen and not heard,’ entirely too harsh. But I see its points now” (AWP, 212). What Anne learns from Rebecca Dew's keen perception of the character of young people and children in *Anne of Windy Poplars* (1936) is later also

reflected in how Anne is “sceptical” of Jenny Penny and Delilah, two friends of her daughter, Diana Blythe, in *Anne of Ingleside* (1939), because Anne can now tell that they are insincere girls who merely “tell interesting stories” (*AIN*, 243). Diana thus also learns from her mother to be a little more careful about the people she believes in, showing Rebecca Dew’s wisdom reaping a harvest in future generations.

The connection that develops between Anne and her spinster mother-from-home, Rebecca Dew, proves to be an influential treasure to both women. When Anne leaves Windy Poplars, Rebecca Dew writes her a touching letter in which she expresses her feelings:

“[...] the homage of one faithful though humble heart will ever be yours, and my prayer will ever be for your happiness and welfare in this world and your eternal felicity in that which is to come.

“My esteem and, may I say, my affection for you will never lessen [...]” (*AWP*, 257)

This makes Anne’s effect on Rebecca Dew clear, and the effect of Rebecca Dew’s affection on Anne is shown in how Anne’s ‘eyes [are] misty as she [folds] the letter up’ and in how she asks Aunt Kate and Aunt Chatty to tell “‘dear Rebecca Dew” that Anne will never forget her and that Anne will come back to see them all “‘every summer”” (*AWP*, 258).<sup>189</sup> It is also significant that ‘as Anne dr[ives] away from Windy Poplars the last message from it [is] a large white bath-towel fluttering frantically from the tower window’, because it is ‘Rebecca Dew [who is] waving it’ (*AWP*, 258), which focuses attention on Rebecca Dew as the primary mothering influence for Anne in *Anne of Windy Poplars* (1936).

Furthermore, Rebecca Dew’s influence as a motherly spinster in Anne’s life proves to be long-lasting, as it can even be seen further into the *Anne* series (1908-1939), as seen in the rippling effects of her wise cautions against insincere young people, mentioned above. Another particular way that Rebecca Dew’s influence can be traced is in the connection drawn between Rebecca Dew and Anne’s housekeeper in Anne’s future home, Susan Baker. Anne notes at one point in *Anne of Windy Poplars* (1936): “‘Aunt Chatty tells me that when I’m not here Rebecca Dew sets my place at the table just the same, so it won’t seem so lonesome”” (*AWP*, 84). Similarly, in *Rilla of Ingleside* (1921), Susan insists ‘on setting out Jem’s place for him as usual’

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<sup>189</sup> *Anne of Windy Poplars* (1936) was written and published seventh of the eight books that I focus on in the primary *Anne* series (1908-1939), although it comes fourth in terms of the story. It represents Montgomery’s effort to fill in gaps that were left in the original series. This also means that Anne’s relationship with Rebecca Dew is technically Anne’s second experience with a working-class housekeeper as a spinster mother figure (with Susan, whom Anne employs in *Anne’s House of Dreams* (1917), as the first). This means that in spite of Rebecca Dew’s influence on Anne, she does not appear in *Anne’s House of Dreams* (1917), *Rainbow Valley* (1919) or *Rilla of Ingleside* (1921). But Rebecca Dew does appear again in *Anne of Ingleside* (1939), the last of the books in the *Anne* series (1908-1939) to be published, which also fills in gaps of time in the main storyline, as it takes place chronologically between *Anne’s House of Dreams* (1917) and *Rainbow Valley* (1919).

for the first Christmas when Jem is away fighting in the Great War, and she does so with the determined view that “he is here in spirit and next Christmas he will be here in the body” (*RI*, 108). This highlights the significance of the two working class spinster mothers in Anne’s life by explicitly connecting them in their fiercely loyal care for the young people whom they choose to mother. The two housekeepers are linked further when Rebecca Dew visits Ingleside (the Blythes’ home) in *Anne of Ingleside* (1939), and Susan and Rebecca Dew seem ‘to discover at first sight that they [a]re kindred spirits ... perhaps because they both lov[e] Anne’ (*AIn*, 58).

The connection made between Rebecca Dew and Susan as two spinster mother figures is intriguing because *Anne of Windy Poplars* (1936) was published nineteen years after Susan’s introduction in *Anne’s House of Dreams* (1917). Thus, it seems that Montgomery deliberately reincludes Rebecca Dew as a spinster mother similar to Susan in her extended focus on Anne’s young adult years, possibly reflecting how influential Montgomery came to find such figures to be in her works after writing the powerful role that Susan plays in the Blythe family, particularly during the Great War, as depicted in *Rilla of Ingleside* (1921); Susan’s impact on the family is so profound that she is even placed on the same level as the ideal mother figure Anne, seen when Anne’s youngest daughter, Rilla, notes: “It is mother *and* Susan who have been this family’s backbone” (*RI*, 298-299; my emphasis). Indeed, even Rebecca Dew holds an elevated position at Windy Poplars, as she is perceived by the community in Summerside as the ruler of “the roost at Windy Poplars” (*AWP*, 5).<sup>190</sup>

Susan’s role in Anne’s life begins when she provides needed assistance with housekeeping duties while Anne is pregnant with her first baby, Joyce. Susan’s deep love for Anne is pointed out just a few paragraphs after her introduction into the novel, with the observation from the narrator that ‘Susan Baker, [...] during her few weeks’ sojourn in the little house, c[omes] to worship “young Mrs. Doctor”’, as Susan calls Anne, ‘with blind fervour’ (*AHD*, 172). Susan’s adoration of Anne is so strong that she even looks ‘rather jealously askance at Marilla at first’ (*AHD*, 172) when Marilla comes to visit the House of Dreams for the birth of baby Joyce. Susan’s ‘blind fervour’ and possessiveness over Anne show her unyielding loyalty to Anne and perhaps her jealousy that Marilla holds a more prominently influential position of primary

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<sup>190</sup> Anne notes, however, that “Summerside and Rebecca Dew may think she rules the roost but the widows [Aunt Kate and Aunt Chatty] know differently” (*AWP*, 14). This still elevates Rebecca’s influence, in my opinion, however, since the women who own the house are willing to allow Rebecca Dew to believe that she holds a great deal of sway in the running of the home as opposed to putting her in her place. This is important particularly because Rebecca Dew takes care of all of the women in the house and the cat too; everyone at Windy Poplars relies on Rebecca Dew, suggesting that the influence they choose to allow her is real influence that she also earns through how she takes care of, or mothers, the household.

mother figure to Anne (Susan does not recognise that she too acts as an influential mother figure to Anne in her own right). Furthermore, Susan's deep love for Anne manifests in a powerful sense of empathy, as she feels deeply for Anne in anything that causes Anne pain – a response to a child that is often identified as instinctive for effective traditional mothers. An example of this is when Marilla finds Susan 'weeping' in the kitchen at the knowledge that baby Joyce cannot live for more than a few hours, and Susan cries, lamenting Anne's suffering: "“Oh, the poor lamb—the poor lamb! How can she bear it, Miss Cuthbert? I am afraid it will kill her. She has been that built up and happy, longing for that baby, and planning for it”" (*AHD*, 175).

While Susan is initially just supposed to lend a helping hand to Anne until Anne can get back to taking care of the housework herself, Susan eventually becomes an integral part of the Blythe family. Anne's initial attitude towards keeping Susan on as housekeeper after Anne recovers physically from giving birth to Joyce is reflected in her protesting to Gilbert: "“Life here with just the two of us is so sweet, Gilbert. It spoils it a little to have anyone else. Susan is a dear soul, but she is an outsider”" (*AHD*, 195). But Gilbert insists on Susan's staying to help Anne, and Susan's determination to not have 'Mrs Doctor' worry about or suffer a thing that is within Susan's reach of control is reflected in Susan's repeated assurances in *Anne's House of Dreams* (1917) that "“Susan is at the helm”" (*AHD*, 174, 195, 204). Indeed, Susan is so set on not having Anne "“worried”" and Anne's second-born "“blessed child [Jem] upset in consequence”" that when Susan's sister needs Susan's help after she breaks her leg, Susan is determined not to leave Anne "“for any number of legs”" unless Anne "“can get someone to help her while [Susan] is gone”" (*AHD*, 308-309), showing how Susan esteems Anne above her own family, just as a mother typically puts her child's needs before anything else. Fittingly, Susan's mothering of both Anne and Anne's children has such a profound effect on Anne that she later tells her old bosom friend, Diana: "“Susan is such a duck ... I can't imagine what I'd do without her. And I remember once calling her 'an outsider'" (*AIn*, 17).<sup>191</sup> Furthermore, Susan's role in the Blythes' future home is elevated by the narrator's description of Ingleside as Susan's 'world' in which she 'reign[s] supreme' so that even 'Anne seldom question[s] her decisions' (*RV*, 3-4).<sup>192</sup> This

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<sup>191</sup> It is interesting once again to note here that the publication dates of the novels in question reflect a deepened appreciation shown by Montgomery for figures such as Susan and Rebecca Dew. *Anne of Ingleside* (1939) was published last in the *Anne* series (1908-1939), and this reference back to Anne's initial labelling of Susan as an outsider in *Anne's House of Dreams* (1917), which was published twenty-two years earlier, is a deliberate effort on Montgomery's part to indicate with absolute clarity just how influential this working-class spinster housekeeper is on the lives of the central character and her family – and thus how profound the impact of a non-traditional mother figure can be.

<sup>192</sup> Rothwell (1999:138) connects Susan with Mrs Rachel Lynde both in their conservatism and in their simultaneous positions of strength in their circles of influence: 'Although through what they say Rachel and Susan perpetuate traditional restrictions placed upon women, they strongly oppose these restrictions through their

is a step above Rebecca Dew's position of merely believing that she is in control at Windy Poplars and shows just how much Anne relies on Susan.

Like Rebecca Dew, Susan is able to counsel Anne in her own way and help her to come to see things from a perspective that Anne cannot initially access. One instance of this is when Gilbert suggests that he, Anne, Jem and Susan should move out of the House of Dreams and into a bigger home in Glen St Mary, the village nearest to the House of Dreams. Anne's personality gravitates towards the romantic, resulting in her resisting the move as "unthinkable" – while she reluctantly acknowledges to herself that it is a necessary step for her family, her heartache allows her to dwell in her imagination, which pictures 'so vividly the coming degeneration of her dear little house' when it is left without her 'that it [hurts] her as severely as if it [is] already [...] an accomplished fact' (*AHD*, 342).<sup>193</sup>

Susan, upon finding out why Anne is having 'a long, bitter cry' does 'not enter into Anne's feelings at all' (*AHD*, 342), because Susan is focused on the practicality of and benefits to be afforded by the move and thus tries to bring Anne around to see the joy in it. While Anne is determined to "hate big houses", Susan prophetically assures Anne that she "will not hate them by the time [she] ha[s] half a dozen children" (*AHD*, 342), which is exactly the number of children that Anne eventually has, excluding Joyce. And when Anne despairingly questions why Susan does not "weep with those who weep",<sup>194</sup> Susan – ever desiring only the best for her dear 'Mrs Doctor' – tries to "cheer [Anne] up" by pointing out that the House of Dreams "is very well and has served" its purpose for the Blythes, but that "it is high time" the Blythes have "a better" home (*AHD*, 343). Susan's 'point of view' is validated by the fact that it is also the point of view 'of most people' (*AHD*, 343); even Anne's dear friend, Leslie, who is 'the only one who sympathise[s] understandingly with Anne', points out that Anne "will like that lovely old place at the Glen after [Anne] ha[s] lived in it long enough to have dear memories woven about it", because "happiness will glorify it" for Anne and "the years will make it a

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actions.' Indeed, like Marilla, Mrs Lynde and even Rebecca Dew, Susan can be seen as a kind of household head in her own right at Ingleside with the influence that she wields in the Blythe family.

<sup>193</sup> Anne's reluctance to leave the home she loves also highlights her connection to generations of other women, as seen when she contemplates her years in the House of Dreams: 'She loved *everything* about it – the garden she had tended, and which so many women had tended before her [...]' (*AHD*, 340; Montgomery's emphasis). It is thus significant that upon Anne and Gilbert's decision to leave, the home is purchased by Leslie and Owen Moore (who are discussed briefly in Section 4.3.3) as a home for their "summer vacations" (*AHD*, 344), allowing the cycle of motherhood to continue from Anne to Leslie, as Leslie now has the opportunity to experience her own fruitful experiences of consecrated wifeness and motherhood, for which the little home stands as a symbol – truly a house of womanly dreams fulfilled, even for the spinsters who visit it and have the opportunity to see the fruit of their own mothering in the home's inhabitants.

<sup>194</sup> There is irony here, because the reader knows all too well how Susan is capable of weeping for her beloved 'Mrs Doctor', as seen when the loss of baby Joyce is imminent (*AHD*, 174).

home” (AHD, 344). Rothwell (1999:136) points out that Glen St Mary is ‘a name that aligns [the women in the town] with Christian maternal tradition’,<sup>195</sup> meaning that both Leslie’s and Susan’s encouragement of the move thus symbolically act as encouragement for Anne to move towards embracing idealised motherhood. This gives weight to Susan’s counsel, as Anne’s ‘half a dozen children’ are indeed the ones who create the very ‘dear memories’ that ‘glorify’ Anne’s home for her in ‘happiness’ over the decades that follow, particularly as she embraces her position as idealised mother, with Susan as her most ardent motherly supporter.<sup>196</sup>

Another powerful instance where Susan gives motherly advice and comfort to Anne is seen in *Rilla of Ingleside* (1921), at the height of the Great War, just a few months after Anne and Gilbert’s son, Walter dies in combat. The following interaction is recorded by Rilla in her diary:

“‘I wish it were possible to take some magic draught and go to sleep for the next three months—and then waken to find Armageddon over,’ said mother, almost impatiently.

“‘It is not often that mother slumps into a wish like that—or at least the verbal expression of it. Mother has changed a great deal since that terrible day in September when we knew that Walter would not come back; but she has always been brave and patient. Now it seemed as if even she had reached the limit of her endurance.

“‘Susan went over to mother and touched her shoulder.

“‘Do not you be frightened or downhearted, Mrs. Dr. dear,’ she said gently. ‘I felt somewhat that way myself last night, and I rose from my bed and lighted my lamp and opened my Bible; and what do you think was the first verse my eyes lighted upon? It was ‘And they shall fight against thee but they shall not prevail against thee, for I am with thee, saith the Lord of Hosts, to deliver thee.’ [...] I knew then and there, Mrs. Dr. dear, that it was a manifest leading, and that Hindenburg will never see Paris. So I read no further but went back to my bed and I did not waken at three o’clock or at any other hour before morning.’ [...]” (RI, 269)<sup>197</sup>

Susan recognises Anne’s vulnerability in this moment and Anne’s resultant childlike need for mothering and reassurance. Susan’s offer of comfort lies in the hope that comes of simple faith and of finding solace in the Bible. Such simple faith on Susan’s part links back to Marilla’s

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<sup>195</sup> This is suggestive of the idealised mother figure Anne becomes there and of the mothering that can be connected with many of the women who are depicted in the novels which focus on the Blythes’ life at Ingleside.

<sup>196</sup> This is particularly clear in how the series shifts its focus from Anne as the first protagonist to Anne’s children, culminating in Rilla, in *Rilla of Ingleside* (1921), as the child who carries the torch of motherhood that is passed down by Anne. This is demonstrated symbolically in how Anne’s ownership of places in the titles of the chronologically earlier books – Green Gables, Avonlea, Prince Edward Island, Windy Poplars, the House of Dreams and Ingleside – is transferred to Rilla in the title of *Rilla of Ingleside* (1921). Since *Anne of Ingleside* (1939) was published after *Rilla of Ingleside* (1921), the deliberate retrospective link between Anne and Rilla in the titles of the novels points to Montgomery’s possible desire to highlight the role that the mother plays in the successful outcomes in the life of the daughter – drawing the parallel between a focus on Anne’s experiences with motherhood, as detailed in *Anne of Ingleside* (1939), and Rilla’s first experience with motherhood in mothering her adopted war baby, Jims, in *Rilla of Ingleside* (1921).

<sup>197</sup> During the War, Susan’s mothering influence extends to helping Anne to be a well-rounded woman by keeping her informed about the current political affairs of the war. Rothwell (1999:136-137) observes that the maternal feminism symbolised by the act of ‘knitting now mingles with politics’ in that the ‘formerly apolitical Susan becomes intimately acquainted with the politicians of the day and bestows her judgment upon their actions’.

attempts from early in Anne's adoption to instil simple religion in Anne, as discussed in Section 3.3.

Susan's providing the aforementioned comfort to Anne in the despair of the War is powerful because it shows that even now, as a matriarch of the stature Anne has here (with so much life experience with both joy and loss: seeing three of her sons go to war and losing two of her seven children but having five living children who are all adults), she still needs to be mothered and comforted by one of her spinster mothers. Once again, Susan's comforting words are given a great deal of weight here because they prove prophetic in that Paris truly never falls to the German armies.<sup>198</sup> Susan's mothering is also shown here to have a further-reaching impact than simply on Anne, to whom it is directed, as it is Rilla who records the incident in her diary, and while she does not record what influence Susan's words have directly on Anne, Rilla herself leans on Susan's words for some comfort, writing further:

“I say that verse Susan read over and over again to myself. The Lord of Hosts is with us—and the spirits of all just men made perfect—and even the legions and guns that Germany is massing on the western front must break against such a barrier. [...]” (RI, 269).

This indicates that the mothering undertaken by even Anne's housekeeper spinster mothers reaches across generations, much like the reach of a traditional mother figure like Montgomery's Anne or Alcott's Marmee.

Susan's mothering influence on Anne thus also extends into how she acts as a mothering influence for Anne's children, which is seen clearly in almost every chapter of *Anne of Ingleside* (1939), *Rainbow Valley* (1919) and *Rilla of Ingleside* (1921). Bode (2008:58-59) makes a connection between Susan and Judy Plum, another example of a housekeeper as a mother figure in Montgomery's *Pat of Silver Bush* (1933) and *Mistress Pat* (1935), arguing the following:

In both the *Anne* and the *Pat* books, two women, Susan Baker and Judy Plum, respectively, function in the maternal role more prominently than do the adult Anne and Pat's mother. The opening scene of *Rainbow Valley* provides a good example of Montgomery's deliberate focus on Susan's maternal position while Anne is also present [...].

Anne recalls the old dreamy Anne; she gazes outward, with her back to her youngest; in contrast, Susan occupies the Madonna-like position of the mother absorbed by the child in her arms. Both Susan and *Silver Bush*'s Judy represent a loving, maternal presence, but as surrogate mothers they become problematic, for, in a sense, they usurp the place of the biological mother.

While I do agree that Susan functions in a distinctly maternal role, I am inclined to see Susan

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<sup>198</sup> Rilla's entry is dated March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1918, and accurately records the start of the offensive codenamed Operation Michael on March 21<sup>st</sup>, but it was led not by Hindenburg, who is Susan's bugbear, but by General Ludendorff. The offensive, which ended on July 17<sup>th</sup>, 1918, involved the shelling and bombing of Paris, but although the German front advanced to less than 100km from Paris, the city was indeed not taken (Watson, 2016:n.p.).

as more of an equal companion to Anne in mothering her children, rather than as a usurper of Anne's idealised biological mothering position – complementing rather than overthrowing the central mother figure. As mentioned above, Susan is placed *on the same level* as Anne in one of Rilla's diary entries when Rilla writes that *both* “*mother and Susan* have been this family's backbone” (*RI*, 298-299; my emphasis).

One example of Susan's mothering Anne's children that perhaps leans more towards Bode's argument, quoted above, is Susan's love for Anne's youngest son, Shirley Blythe, whom Susan holds in a 'Madonna-like position' in the opening of *Rainbow Valley* (1919) (Bode, 2008:58-59). The reader is told that after Shirley's birth, Anne is 'very ill for a long time, and Susan “mother[s]” the baby with a passionate tenderness which none of the other children' bring out in Susan, 'dear as they [a]re to her' (*RV*, 3). The opportunity to mother a child more or less exclusively as an infant transforms Susan into a woman whose influence is now explicitly recognised in the text as “mothering” so that even Susan herself can recognise her role as quite like that of an actual mother (something that she does not recognise in her connection with Anne), particularly because 'Dr. Blythe sa[ys] that but for her, [Shirley] would never have lived' (*RV*, 3). The following excerpt describes Susan's mothering role in Shirley's life further:

“I gave him life just as much as you did, Mrs. Dr. dear,” Susan was wont to say. “He is just as much my baby as he is yours.” And, indeed, it was always to Susan that Shirley ran, to be kissed for bumps, and rocked to sleep, and protected from well-deserved spankings. Susan had conscientiously spanked all the other Blythe children when she thought they needed it for their souls' good, but she would not spank Shirley nor allow his mother to do it. (*RV*, 3)

Evidently, seeing herself as a mother to Shirley, even though it is clear that Susan definitely also has a mothering role in the lives of the other Blythe children, whom she sees as 'all her darlings' (*RV*, 3), makes Susan feel empowered to make decisions for how her “little brown boy” (*RV*, 2) is raised, to the point of overruling his biological mother.

Ultimately, Susan's role as a mother to Shirley (and by extension, to the other Blythe children, if to a lesser extent) is confirmed by Shirley himself. Rilla notes that Shirley describes Susan as “one half angel and the other half good cook” (*RI*, 56), connecting her with the traditional Victorian image of the mother as the angel in the house; additionally, when he leaves to fight in the Great War, he says goodbye to his “*mother Susan*” (*RI*, 240; Montgomery's emphasis), labelling her explicitly as the mother figure she has continually proven to be since her first appearance in *Anne's House of Dreams* (1917). Indeed, it is reasonable to assume that the power of Susan's spinster mothering influence even ripples through Anne and her children to influence how the Blythe children parent their own children, beginning with how Susan helps Rilla with

Rilla's adopted war baby, Jims, in *Rilla of Ingleside* (1921). Susan also teaches Rilla to cook in spite of how hopeless Rilla is in the kitchen at first (*RI*, 175), which connects Susan with Marilla, who teaches Anne how to cook in *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) (*AGG*, 107), in spite of its being “uphill work” (*AGG*, 50, 107). The fact that Anne and Susan raise the Blythe children as a team of mothers and that Susan's mothering influence is connected with Marilla's shows how the mothering influence of a spinster housekeeper can be just as powerful and far-reaching as that of a biological idealised mother such as Anne, or as the influence of an adoptive spinster mother of a higher class than Susan.

### 4.3.3 *Miss Cornelia*

The last of Anne's significant spinster mother figures I wish to focus on is Miss Cornelia Bryant who, like Mrs Lynde in *Avonlea*, acts as the outspoken source of gossip and information in Glen St Mary and Four Winds,<sup>199</sup> but unlike Mrs Lynde is a proto-feminist.<sup>200</sup> Miss Cornelia is the first woman in Anne's new community with whom Anne becomes well acquainted in *Anne's House of Dreams* (1917), and Anne quickly identifies her as a ‘kindred spirit’ (*AHD*, 66). She is described as a woman who has ‘a fresh, round, pink-and-white face, and jolly brown eyes’ and, like Miss Lavendar in *Anne of Avonlea* (1909), Miss Cornelia does ‘not look in the least like the traditional old maid’ (*AHD*, 66). Instead, she is immediately depicted as a spinster who has long since chosen to become a kind of universal mother figure. Miss Cornelia's mothering instincts developed prematurely because of her own partially motherless childhood, as she was left to care for her younger brother when she was just eleven years old:

“Mother died before he was three years old and I was sister and mother to him both. Poor little lad, he was never strong, and he died when he wasn't much over twenty. Seems to me I'd have given anything on earth, Anne, dearie, if he'd only lived.” (*AHD*, 293)

<sup>199</sup> At one point, Mrs Lynde comes with Marilla to spend Christmas at the House of Dreams, placing her and Miss Cornelia in close proximity for the first and only time. The narration points out how similar the two women are in personality by euphemistically describing how ‘Miss Cornelia and Mrs. Rachel d[o] not take a very violent fancy to each other [because] “Two suns hold not their courses in one sphere”’ (*AHD*, 134).

<sup>200</sup> Gubar (2001:49) notes that ‘Montgomery presents an immense number of confirmed spinsters for whom marriage itself serves as an unconvincing sequel to a long, happy life lived alone or in the company of other women’ and that ‘Miss Cornelia provides a prime example of this’. Gubar (2001:49) further explains:

[...] still single at a relatively advanced age, [Miss Cornelia] confides to Anne, “I have had a real placid, comfortable life, dearie, and it's just because I never cared a cent what the men thought” [...]. Tired of depending on the services of unreliable hired men, Miss Cornelia finally agrees to wed Marshall Elliot; Montgomery's characterization of her as a tart-tongued, kind-hearted spinster proves so skillful and engaging that this marriage utterly fails to alter her—distinctly singular—character. As her neighbors acknowledge, Miss Cornelia's lifestyle changes not a whit after the wedding, nor does her habit of “running down the men”; Marshall remains a shadowy background figure, whose relative insignificance is attested to by the fact that even after thirteen years of wedded life, “more people referred to [his wife] as Miss Cornelia than as Mrs. Elliott” [...].

Being thrown into mothering at such a young age creates a parallel between Miss Cornelia and Anne, who is also forced to care for children from a young age, although Anne cares for the children of older women to whom she is not related.

Miss Cornelia's inclination towards mothering continues throughout her life, as she takes it upon herself to care for children in her community. When she first shows up at the House of Dreams to introduce herself to Anne, she tells Anne that she has brought her “work” with her on her visit, and Anne is surprised to find that the mentioned work is ‘a baby’s dress’ (*AHD*, 66-67). The detailed description given of the ‘beautifully made’ dress with its ‘tiny frills and tucks’ and of the careful attention given not to any regular stitching but to ‘exquisite stitches’ (*AHD*, 66-67) reveals Miss Cornelia’s profound commitment to providing what mothering she can to children (and their mothers) within her reach. This is elaborated upon in the following extract:

“This is for Mrs. Fred Proctor up at the Glen,” [...]. “She’s expecting her eighth baby any day now, and not a stitch has she ready for it. The other seven have wore out all she made for the first, and she’s never had time or strength or spirit to make any more. [...] I don’t know how Mrs. Proctor would ever keep her children decently clothed if her neighbours didn’t help her out.”

As Anne was afterwards to learn, Miss Cornelia was the only neighbour who troubled herself much about the decency of the young Proctors.

“When I heard this eighth baby was coming I decided to make some things for it,” [...].

“[...] I’ve done more [sewing of baby clothes] than if I’d had a hundred children of my own, believe *me*! I s’pose I’m a fool, to be putting hand embroidery on this dress for an eighth baby. But, Lord, Mrs. Blythe, dearie, it isn’t to blame for being the eighth, and I kind of wished it to have one real pretty dress, just as if it *was* wanted. Nobody’s wanting the poor mite—so I put some extra fuss on its little things just on that account.” (*AHD*, 67-68)

Miss Cornelia is thus set apart from any of her “neighbours” in the far-reaching generosity of her motherly heart, despite not having her own children.

Much of Miss Cornelia’s dedication to mothering other women’s children can be attributed to her primary philosophy that women should support (and essentially mother) other women. She tells Anne: “[...] us women ought to stand by each other. We’ve got enough to endure at the hands of the men, the Lord knows, so I hold we hadn’t ought to clapper-claw one another, and it isn’t often you’ll find me running down another woman” (*AHD*, 105-106). This is reminiscent of Margaret Fuller’s conclusion that ‘at present, women are the best helpers of one another’ (1855:141). Thus, beyond doing what she can for children in her community, Miss Cornelia also takes it upon herself to mother grown women. She has acted and continues to act as a fiercely tenacious substitute mother for the tragic Leslie Moore from the time that Leslie was a young girl, because Leslie’s biological mother had become a destructive mothering

influence for Leslie by pushing Leslie into a fruitless and unhappy marriage;<sup>201</sup> when Leslie's mother then died, Leslie was left utterly alone – save for Miss Cornelia – to deal with the traumas of her past and to care for her husband who later became an invalid. Furthermore, when Anne comes to live in Four Winds, far from her own primary mother figure (Marilla), Miss Cornelia also takes Anne under her mothering wing, mothering Anne through a trusting and loyal friendship.

Miss Cornelia's persistence in recognising those who lack adequate mothering and finding ways to meet their needs is seen in how she insists on Anne's forming a friendship with Leslie. Her insistence hints at her awareness that the friendship between Anne and Leslie has the potential to be significantly influential for the two young women:

“[...] You *will* be her friend, won't you, Anne, dearie?”

“Indeed I will, if she'll let me,” said Anne, with all her own sweet, impulsive earnestness.

“No, you must be her friend, whether she'll let you or not,” said Miss Cornelia resolutely. “[...] Just *make* her be friends—you can do it—you're one of those who have the knack. [...]” (*AHD*, 115; Montgomery's emphasis)

Indeed, Anne and Leslie's eventual hard-won friendship not only provides a great deal of comfort and support to each young woman, as they lean on each other through tragedies such as the loss of Anne's firstborn, Joyce (*AHD*, 172-179), but their connection leads to the revelation that Leslie's husband is in fact dead and that the invalid she has spent years caring for is her late husband's cousin, freeing Leslie from the trap of her marriage (*AHD*, 250-279). It is also through Anne's and Miss Cornelia's influence that Leslie subsequently marries Owen Ford (*AHD*, 309-315) and begins a renewed life of fruitful wedded bliss that results in the birth of children, including Kenneth Ford, Rilla Blythe's eventual husband (*RI*, 318).

Leslie's story supports Robinson's (2018:172) assertion that '[b]y having [...] women [such as Leslie] escape their familial prisons, Montgomery's texts argue that the “natural” is in some cases most unnatural by undermining the belief that family must be a specifically biologically determined entity'. This is because Miss Cornelia's and Anne's mothering influence over Leslie – or the influences of Leslie's othermothers – outweigh and ultimately conquer the influence of her destructive 'natural' mother. The failure of Leslie's dependence on her “clannish” values

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<sup>201</sup> Miss Cornelia openly admits that Leslie's mother is an exception to the rule to never put down other women. She admits: “[...] I never had much use for Rose Elliott. She was spoiled to begin with, believe *me*, and she was nothing but a lazy, selfish, whining creature” (*AHD*, 106; Montgomery's emphasis). Miss Cornelia also tells Anne that she “will never forgive” Rose for manipulating Leslie into a destructive marriage (*AHD*, 110). Her attitude towards Leslie's mother shows how Miss Cornelia's mothering instinct to protect those she loves most fiercely overrides her dearly held philosophy of supporting other women.

(Robinson, 2018:178) thus merely serves to highlight Miss Cornelia's determined and unremitting influence as a spinster othermother figure and extends the reach of her universal mothering well into the future generations of families that are not directly related to her. The fruits of Miss Cornelia's mothering thus confirm again the power of mothering that lies within reach for any woman who chooses to mother, even in her own less than traditional ways.

Along with the sheer reach of her mothering that I have already mentioned, Miss Cornelia is set apart from the other spinsters in Anne's life (save for Miss Lavendar, who also gets married but becomes a mother to her husband's son from his first marriage, not to an adopted child) by the fact that Miss Cornelia eventually gets married and later adopts an orphan, Mary Vance, creating a parallel with Anne's original storyline. Although young Anne and Mary Vance are very different characters,<sup>202</sup> the link between Mary Vance's and Miss Cornelia's story with Anne's and Marilla's is made obvious through the inclusion of recycled elements from Anne's original story. One way this is done is through the repetition of language, as seen in how both Marilla and Miss Cornelia think of adopting their respective orphan daughters as an almost fated "duty" (AGG, 45; RV, 93), and both Marilla and Miss Cornelia are committed to seeing their respective adoptions through once they have put their hands "to the plough" (AGG, 87; RV, 94). More examples of recycled language are seen in Miss Cornelia's telling Anne after some time has passed since the adoption of Mary Vance, "[...] I don't encourage [Mary Vance] in gadding. Besides, I miss the creature when she isn't around, Anne dearie. I never thought I'd get so fond of her [...] and she is a *great* help [...]" (RV, 279; Montgomery's emphasis). These words echo Marilla's distaste for Anne's "gadding about" (AGG, 127-128); the fact that Marilla comes to miss Anne when Anne is away, because Marilla "can't imagine [Green Gables] without her" (AGG, 78); the way that Marilla quickly finds herself "getting fond of" Anne (AGG, 78); and the way that Anne eventually proves "a great help" to Marilla (AGG, 208). More significant a connection between the two adoption stories is the fact that both Anne and Mary Vance save a child from a severe case of croup when there is no other experienced help at hand: Mary Vance saves Rilla Blythe's war baby, Jims, from a bad case of "the dipthery croup" in *Rilla of Ingleside* (1921) (RI, 234-235) much as young Anne saves Diana Barry's little sister, Minnie May, from croup in *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) (AGG, 121-123).

The link between Anne and Mary Vance is too obvious to be anything less than deliberate on the part of Montgomery. This has interesting implications for Montgomery's study of

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<sup>202</sup> Keen (2018:160) points out that Mary Vance's "slangy, ungrammatical, near profane" style marks her as Anne's antithesis'.

mothering. The framing of Anne's story with a manifestation of effective mothering that comes from the least obvious and least traditional source (an orphan girl who is thrust into premature mothering in caring for the children of older women prior to being adopted into a caring family) connects Anne's mothering harvest as an adult back to her experiences with premature mothering as an orphaned servant girl, where '[a] "girl" is not a child, only a machine for child care' (Doody, 1997b:18). This suggests that motherhood is a complex cycle that manifests in many different forms that cannot be overlooked as less influential than the traditional image of the ideal mother. Indeed, the power of such unusual mothering is made clear in how the repetition of a similar croup incident to the one from Anne's childhood has a clear impact on the mothering of one of Anne's own children, because in saving Jims, Mary enables Rilla to continue her own non-traditional mothering journey. Furthermore, Miss Cornelia's non-traditional mothering is extended, as, without her adoption of Mary, Mary would not be around to save Jims. The parallels between Anne's and Mary Vance's adoption stories thus provide evidence of the mothering harvest reaped by the entire *Anne* series (1908-1939) in that recycling the story of mothering by adoption creates a framework of non-traditional mothering that is inextricably connected with Anne's traditional mothering harvest, inviting the possibility that Anne's bountiful mothering harvest, and her harvest of mothers, is exponentially greater than is shown in the books in the series.

#### **4.3.4 Other spinster influences**

Other spinsters throughout the *Anne* series (1908-1939) do have an impact on Anne's life and form a part – however small – of her harvest of mothers, but they do not all have an extensive enough influence for me to include them at any great length in this discussion. The following examples of less influential figures are, however, discussed briefly below: Miss Josephine Barry, Miss Patty Spofford and Miss Patty's niece, Maria.

Anne meets Miss Josephine Barry, Diana Barry's great aunt in *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), when Anne and Diana jump onto 'the bed' in the spare room, not knowing that Miss Barry is there (AGG, 132). When Anne goes to apologise to Miss Barry, Anne's personality appeals to and softens Miss Barry's angered heart, and the old spinster continues to find joy in 'the Anne-girl[']s' (AGG, 170) company for the rest of her life. The wealthy Miss Barry's influence in Anne's life is significant in that her affection for Anne leads her to give Anne generous gifts. Miss Barry gives Anne a Christmas gift as a child that completes Matthew's Christmas gift of Anne's first fashionable dress; Anne opens a box brought to her by Diana and finds 'a card with

“For the Anne-girl and Merry Christmas,” written on it; and then, a pair of the daintiest little kid slippers, with beaded toes and satin bows and glistening buckles’ that make Anne feel as if she “‘must be dreaming’” (*AGG*, 170). Miss Barry also later bequeaths Anne the large sum of one thousand dollars (*AIs*, 164),<sup>203</sup> which enables Anne to complete her degree at Redmond.<sup>204</sup> Perhaps more significant in the relationship between Anne and Miss Barry is the effect of reverse mothering, or the way that Anne connects Miss Barry with Miss Barry’s dormant mothering desires, which is discussed in more detail in Section 4.4.

The influence of Miss Patty Spofford and her niece Maria on Anne is far more symbolic than tangible. The spinster owners of Patty’s Place (the house that Anne and her friends rent while they are at Redmond College) cannot be said to have any real effect on Anne in terms of a significant, emotional mothering influence, as they spend no more than a short period of time on a single day with Anne (when they show her their home). Gubar (2001:52) argues that the influence of Miss Patty and Maria is felt through how they indirectly enable Anne to enrich and extend her female community and see the value that exists in an independent, female-centred life: ‘These two contented old maids rent out their residence while they travel the globe, enjoying the pleasures of companionship, freedom, and economic independence, and their cozy house offers Anne and her college chums Priscilla, Stella, and Philippa the same privileges’. Åhmansson (1991:142) similarly views this opportunity in Anne’s life as an extension of the ‘matriarchal utopia’. Anne’s female communities formed with her peers fall outside of the scope

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<sup>203</sup> Rilla Blythe’s adopted war baby, Jims, is also left a large sum of money by an old woman, Mrs Matilda Pitman, who takes a fancy to him through an unusual and fateful encounter and identifies him as a child who has “‘no common destiny in store for him’” (*RI*, 305). This parallel with the endowment of money from Miss Barry to Anne suggests that Miss Barry leaves money to Anne because she too sees a child with an uncommon destiny, which is supported by Miss Barry’s clear recognition of Anne as extraordinary compared to the repeated ‘same mould’ of other girls (Åhmansson, 1991:141): “‘That Anne-girl improves all the time,’” she said. “I get tired of other girls—there is such a provoking and eternal sameness about them. Anne has as many shades as a rainbow and every shade is the prettiest while it lasts” (*AGG*, 237-238).

<sup>204</sup> Åhmansson (1991:141) makes an argument for how ‘[i]t is within the sphere of Anne’s education that the matriarchal traits of Avonlea become the most prominent’, in that it is in the financing of Anne’s studies at Redmond that Montgomery removes ‘the problem of male economic influence’, because Matthew loses his savings to the collapse of ‘the Abbey Bank’ and subsequently dies, and because Anne turns down ‘the prestigious Avery Scholarship’. Åhmansson (1991:141-142) elaborates:

Left entirely to its own resources the female support network nevertheless manages to send Anne to college. Her further education is taken care of by the united efforts of four women: by herself, saving parts of her teacher’s salary, by Marilla, who contributes the money obtained when she sold out the stock; [... by] a small inheritance [... from] Miss Josephine Barry [... and by] some of Anne’s duties at home [being] taken care of by Mrs Lynde who gratefully moves in with Marilla at Green Gables after her husband’s death [...].

Similarly, in Montgomery’s own life, her hard work at teaching and a contribution from her grandmother that was ‘a considerable outlay for a seventy-one-year-old woman from a farm community where cash was scarce’ (Rubio, 2008:78) pay for Montgomery to attend Dalhousie University, where she studied for one year between 1895 and 1896 – unfortunately, Montgomery could not afford to complete a full BA as Anne does (Doody, 1997b:14; Rubio, 2008:78).

of my current discussion, but Gubar's assertion does also serve to highlight the far-reaching influence on Anne of the spinster mother figures within her community.

After they meet Anne, Miss Patty and Maria keep in touch with her through periodic letters and send a gift to her on her wedding day in the form of Miss Patty's "china dogs" which Miss Patty intends to leave to Anne in her will because she knows that Anne has "sincere affection for them" (*AHD*, 24).<sup>205</sup> These 'twin guardian deities of Patty's Place' (*AI*s, 90) – which are linked with the archetypal image of the spinsters that Miss Patty and Maria are (similar to early descriptions of Marilla and Miss Josephine Barry),<sup>206</sup> with their 'grim and ancient' appearance, 'steel-rimmed spectacles', 'cap[s] and [...] gray shawl[s]' (*AI*s, 90) – go on to become 'the famous china dogs of Ingleside [who] k[ee]p ceaseless watch and ward, as bec[omes] deities of the hearth' (*RV*, 216). The Ingleside hearth, surrounded by the deities given to Anne by two spinster mothers, is the heart of Anne's future home, as seen in the following extract:

The big fireplace was the centre of the home those evenings. It was the high spot of the day when they gathered around it after supper. Anne sewed and planned little winter wardrobes ... "Nan must have a red dress, since she is so set on it" ... and sometimes thought of Hannah, weaving her little coat every year for the small Samuel. Mothers were the same all through the centuries ... a great sisterhood of love and service ... the remembered and the unremembered alike. (*AI*n, 150-151)<sup>207</sup>

The dogs are thus always a gentle reminder of the spectacle-wearing spinsters from whose hearth they come and, by extension, symbolic of all the spinsters who watch over Anne in her life and help her to reap her bountiful harvest of children and mother figures. Seen this way, the connection between the china dogs and Anne's spinster mothers as guardians of the hearth suggests that spinsters can be just as much the defenders of home and family as traditional, ideal mother figures, as the hearth stands metonymically as the heart of the home.

Gubar (2001:53-54) points out that 'the cheerful aunts, merry widows, and charming spinsters who inhabit Anne's world serve as role models for [...] young women interested in the allure of unmarried life', and I would add, as role models even to young women who wish to be wives and mothers. Indeed, Montgomery's focus on spinsters for mothers allows the typically 'unremembered' mothers to come into the light and stand shoulder to shoulder with the idealised 'remembered' mothers of generations past; like traditional mothers, the influence of spinster

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<sup>205</sup> Montgomery owned a pair of such china dogs herself (*SJ II*, 87-88), which she purchased on her honeymoon, having seen similar ones in her grandfather Montgomery's house (*SJ II*, 76). She loved them enough to mention them in her journals and to photograph them in her home in Leaskdale, Ontario (Epperley, 2007:75).

<sup>206</sup> In *Anne of Avonlea* (1909), 'the usual type of elderly spinster [...] known' to Anne and Diana is described as 'a rather angular personage, with prim gray hair and spectacles' (*AA*, 171), as mentioned also in Section 4.3.1.

<sup>207</sup> Anne's reference to her willingness to accede to Nan's desire for a red dress links back to Anne's childhood longing for a fashionable dress with puffed sleeves, which Matthew eventually fulfils for her (*AGG*, 164-171).

mothers can be felt in their mothering of those around them, including of future biological mothers. The influence of Anne's spinster mothers even reaches to those who read Montgomery's novels, proving that marriage and biological motherhood are not the only avenues through which women can have a far-reaching impact on the lives of other women and children.

#### 4.4 Making mothers: reverse mothering

In *Anne of Avonlea* (1909), when Anne and Gilbert have a conversation about their individual aspirations for the future, the following part of their conversation stands out:

"I'd like to add some beauty to life," said Anne dreamily. "I don't exactly want to make people *know* more ... though I know that *is* the noblest ambition ... but I'd love to make them have a pleasanter time because of me ... to have some little joy or happy thought that would never have existed if I hadn't been born."

"I think you're fulfilling that ambition every day," said Gilbert admiringly.

And he was right. Anne was one of the children of light by birthright. After she had passed through a life with a smile or a word thrown across it like a gleam of sunshine the owner of that life saw it, for the time being at least, as hopeful and lovely and of good report. (AA, 53; Montgomery's emphasis)<sup>208</sup>

Although it is probable that the quoted exchange is intended to highlight Anne's love and gift for teaching, particularly since it comes after a conversation that is largely focused on Anne and Gilbert's chosen professions, the observation from the narrator about the effect of Anne's light can also be seen as an indication of how Anne so easily adopts a vast community of mother figures for herself. The influence of Anne's natural light cannot be ignored in considering the mothering of the women around her, because the text often suggests that it is specifically Anne's influence that softens those around her into mother figures, 'show[ing] what people can do if they realize their best nature' (White, 1994:84), which, the series suggests, is characterised by the "'natural' desire' to mother (Devereux, 2003:124).<sup>209</sup> I would argue that this light that Anne naturally passes on to those around her stems at least in part from what Devereux (2003:124) identifies as Anne's configuration 'as a child [and therefore also as a woman later] whose salient characteristic is not only her motherlessness, but her *motherliness*' (my emphasis) – a 'stray

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<sup>208</sup> Montgomery expressed her own desire 'to be a messenger of optimism and sunshine' when reacting to reviews of *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) (*SJ I*, 339), although Doody (1997b:10) indicates that 'Montgomery in other moods would have disassociated herself from too much "optimism and sunshine"'.

<sup>209</sup> This notion of mothering as the highest calling for a woman is problematic in terms of feminist approaches to the *Anne* series (1908-1939), but since a focus on feminism falls outside of the scope of my discussion, I address such concerns by pointing to Devereux (2003:125-129), who addresses the issue by discussing her assertion that the *Anne* series (1908-1939) should be 'positioned in relation to early twentieth-century feminist discourse [... which was] characterized in English Canada [...] by the idea of woman as imperial "mother of the race," something Anne Shirley arguably realizes more fully than any of her fictional contemporaries'.

woman-child' indeed (AGG, 16).<sup>210</sup> This is a fascinating avenue for research, because it presents an argument for *reverse mothering*, wherein the child has a role in creating the mother. Although an extended discussion on this is not possible within the scope of my dissertation, I thought it useful to mention a few examples of Anne's reverse mothering influence in this section.

Anne's influence on Marilla and Matthew's mothering is mentioned where relevant in the discussion presented on each of the Cuthberts in Sections 3.3 and 3.4, but a few more examples are provided below. The first of these is the way that Montgomery draws the reader's attention to Anne's influence on the Cuthberts by having Marilla pose the dramatically ironic question: "What good would she be to us?" (AGG, 30) when trying to convince Matthew that Anne should not be allowed to stay at Green Gables. This encourages the reader to pay attention to just how much of a powerful influence Anne eventually proves to have on her adoptive parents. Furthermore, Marilla acknowledges Anne's ability to make the adults around Anne care for her by suggesting that Anne is a kind of supernatural force that acts first on Matthew – seen when Marilla exclaims: "Matthew Cuthbert, I believe that child has bewitched you! I can see as plain as plain that you want to keep her" (AGG, 30) – and then on Marilla too – seen when she later muses:

"I never in all my life saw or heard anything to equal her [...]. She is kind of interesting as Matthew says. I can feel already that I'm wondering what on earth she'll say next. She'll be casting a spell over me, too. She's cast it over Matthew." (AGG, 35)

Marilla, Matthew and Mrs Rachel Lynde each think of Anne at one point as a 'witch' to convey her inexplicable fascination and unusual nature. She is a witch to Matthew, because she is not as terrifying to his timid self as 'the Avonlea type of well-bred little girl' (AGG, 19); she is a witch to Marilla, because she does not fit into Marilla's mental picture of innocent childhood (AGG, 48); and she is a witch to Mrs Rachel Lynde, because there is 'no ciphering [Anne] out by the rules that [work] with other children' (AGG, 209).

Keen (2018:165) asserts that Anne's association with the supernatural reflects how she is 'consistently identified as having transgressed Avonlea's most reliable cultural coordinates'. Drain's (1992:44) explanation for 'Anne's unusual status' is that it is located in her 'differences' in that 'she is bolder, more practical, more imaginative, and more decisive than her female peers,

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<sup>210</sup> Anne is drawn to the motherless. For example, when she learns of the motherless Meredith children who move to her community in *Rainbow Valley* (1919), she is described as 'beginning to mother them already in her heart' (RV, 11), reflecting her natural tendency towards nurturing, even beyond the walls of a traditionally nuclear home. Alcott's Marmee also encourages and is an example of nurturing any other women and children within the circle of her influence. Beth in *Little Women* (1868-1869) is likewise a naturally motherly child and young woman who has the ability to 'adopt mother figures' as Anne does, particularly her own sisters – see Section 2.4.4. Beth even softens characters outside the nuclear family, for example, Laurie's grandfather, Mr Laurence.

although she never sets foot outside the realm allotted to little girls'. Referring to Anne as a witch (AGG, 48) highlights the power that she has to cast her spell over those around her or bewitch them (AGG, 30, 35), which is seen as all three parent figures come to love Anne specifically *because* she does not fit in with their expectations but expands their horizons and the depths of their experiences instead. Anne's extraordinary nature thus leaves an indelible impression on both Matthew and Marilla and ultimately contributes to their desire to offer her a permanent home, making a mother of Marilla, who takes on the primary responsibility to bring Anne up, and of Matthew, who becomes Anne's closest ally, the answer to her dreams and her devoted confidant.

Anne's ability to make mothers of the adult figures in her life is enhanced by her deep desire to learn what is expected of her and to please those she respects through meeting their expectations. She promises Marilla, "I'll try to do and be anything you want me, if you'll only keep me [...]" (AGG, 45), and she confesses to Matthew, "I'd do anything for you" (AGG, 64). Thus, Anne opens herself up to being mothered and thereby opens the avenue for her mother figures to become successful in mothering, because Anne wants to be a good daughter. Another example of Anne's openness to being educated and parented is when she and Matthew are alone at home at one point, and she explains the following to him about how to help her focus on her schoolwork instead of her love of reading books for pleasure:

"I think I'll carry that book into the sitting room and lock it in the jam closet and give you the key. And you must *not* give it to me, Matthew, until my lessons are done, not even if I implore you on my bended knees. It's all very well to say resist temptation, but it's ever so much easier to resist it if you can't get the key." (AGG, 121; Montgomery's emphasis)

Anne therefore enables Matthew's parenting by educating him in how best to parent her in this instance when Marilla is away, helping him to be a better parent figure by Anne's essentially parenting herself.

The powerful influence that Anne has on both Marilla and Matthew's character development is clear in that Anne connects them to parts of their personalities that are largely inaccessible to them before Anne. Sorfleet (2003:181) notes that '[a]s time goes on, both Matthew and Marilla are awakened and transformed by the values associated with Anne'. Marilla's previously stern, rigid, emotionally repressed and unimaginative character is depicted as profoundly changed fewer than two years after Anne's arrival, as shown in the following extract:

Marilla, walking home one late April evening from an Aid meeting, realized that the winter was over and gone with the thrill of delight that spring never fails to bring to the oldest and saddest as well as to the youngest and merriest. Marilla was not given to subjective analysis of her thoughts and feelings. She probably imagined that she was thinking about the Aids

and their missionary box and the new carpet for the vestry room, but under these reflections was a harmonious consciousness of red fields smoking into pale-purple mists in the declining sun, of long, sharp-pointed fir shadows falling over the meadow beyond the brook, of still, crimson-budded maples around a mirrorlike wood pool, of a wakening in the world and a stir of hidden pulses under the gray sod. The spring was abroad in the land and Marilla's sober, middle-aged step was lighter and swifter because of its deep, primal gladness. (AGG, 179)

The diction used to describe Marilla's 'thrill of delight' and the details of her 'harmonious consciousness' of the beauty of nature surrounding her echo Anne's characteristic awe-filled responses to nature that are established early in the novel and are reiterated throughout the series, connecting Marilla to Anne in this extract<sup>211</sup> and suggesting therefore the extent of Anne's influence in softening Marilla and inviting imagination and a connection with the instinctive and natural. If, as suggested by Thomas (2009:n.p.), Anne's deep connection with nature is a manifestation of her search for 'maternal closeness', Marilla's eventually embracing some connection with nature signals her own venture into the realms of the natural and instinctive nurturing that is linked with mothering, particularly since Marilla's new appreciation of nature also connects her, through Anne, to Anne's biological mother, Bertha, who is idealised in Anne's imagination – showing Marilla's progress in her venture into motherhood, as she comes closer to the imagined ideal.<sup>212</sup>

The initially largely unassertive Matthew is likewise 'empowered by his mothering' of Anne (Virokannas, 2011:40), as shown in Section 3.4. Åhmansson (1991:140) observes that '[h]is painful shyness and lack of aggressiveness have stood in the way of his asserting himself in the community at large, but when it comes to Anne, he stands up to Marilla and defends and protects Anne in a motherly fashion'. Thus, Matthew finds his voice through his connection with and love for Anne as his daughter.

With the clear evidence of Anne's power to affect change in her adoptive parents, both Matthew and Marilla come to directly acknowledge the answer to Marilla's initial question about Anne's adoption, "What good would [Anne] be to us?" (AGG, 30). Anne asks Marilla less than a year after the adoption: "Are you sorry you kept me, Marilla?" (AGG, 139). Marilla replies: "No,

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<sup>211</sup> White (1994:86; *SJ II*, 113) draws on Montgomery's journals to show how Montgomery at times sought connection with God by finding Him in nature, suggesting that Anne's – and now Marilla's – sense of awe and oneness with nature connects them with the divine. This is also reminiscent of Bertha's connection to nature, as discussed in Section 3.2. The ability to connect with the divine in nature reflects Montgomery's movement towards a more open and freeing secular view on religion than is seen in the overt religious didacticism in *Little Women* (1868-1869).

<sup>212</sup> Seen this way, Marilla's developing closeness with Anne and with the ideals of mothering contests what Thomas (2009:n.p.) sees as "[t]he woman as *mother* remain[ing] in the position of *other*," [...] excluded from any dialogue with the daughter' (Thomas's emphases) in the novel.

I can't say I'm sorry" (AGG, 139). The narration reveals more than Marilla openly says in the fact that Marilla 'sometimes wonder[s] how she could have lived before Anne came to Green Gables' (AGG, 139), showing how much Marilla depends upon Anne for the happiness Marilla has come to enjoy. Later, when Anne is preparing to attend Queen's College, Matthew's words likewise recognise Anne's influence, but openly and verbally, as he mutters 'proudly', "She's been a blessing to us, and there never was a luckier mistake than what Mrs. Spencer made—if it was luck. I don't believe it was any such thing. It was Providence, because the Almighty saw we needed her, I reckon" (AGG, 231). Ultimately, when Anne marries Gilbert and leaves Green Gables to begin her own family in her House of Dreams, her earlier wish "to add some beauty to life" and "to make [people] have a pleasanter time because of [her, and] ... to have some little joy or happy thought that would never have existed if [she] hadn't been born" (AA, 53) is pointed to directly as fulfilled when it comes to her home at Green Gables and its inhabitants: 'She was gone – Green Gables was her home no more; Marilla's face looked very gray and old as she turned to the house which Anne had filled for fourteen years, and even in her absence, with light and life' (AHD, 32). The contrast between Marilla's 'gray and old' face and the thought of the 'light and life' brought to Green Gables while it is Anne's home clearly labels Anne as 'one of the children of light' who brings 'a gleam of sunshine' to those whose lives she touches (AA, 53).

Anne touches the life and heart of each one of her motherly influences, often softening them into mother figures who all share a common interest in their love for and mothering of Anne, much as Anne's adoption and influence make Marilla and Matthew into the mother figures that I discuss in detail in Sections 3.3 and 3.4, respectively. Rebecca Dew and Susan, for example, get along so well because they are connected by the common denominator of their love for Anne (AIn, 58; see Section 4.3.2). Due to limited space for this discussion, however, I only briefly explore one example of Anne's reverse mothering influence on her secondary (or communal, often spinster) mothers in the form of her influence on Miss Josephine Barry, whose softening is one of the most poignant examples of Anne's power to "teach" [other] wom[e]n to tap into th[e] "instinct" of motherliness' and thus of nurturing (Devereux, 2003:124) through Anne's own freedom with these characteristics.

When Anne has thoroughly enjoyed a visit with Miss Barry in Charlottetown, she 'throw[s] her arms impulsively about [Miss Barry's] neck and kiss[es] her wrinkled cheek' to thank the old woman for giving Anne and Diana a wonderful time, a reaction which is contrasted with Diana's more restrained manners around her great-aunt (AGG, 198). Although Diana is 'rather aghast'

at the ease with which Anne shows affection to the intimidating spinster, ‘Miss Barry [i]s pleased’ (AGG, 198), and the now elderly woman subsequently ruminates on Anne’s influence on her:

[Miss Barry] valued people only as they were of service to her or amused her. Anne had amused her, and consequently stood high in the old lady’s good graces. But Miss Barry found herself thinking less about Anne’s quaint speeches than of her fresh enthusiasms, her transparent emotions, her little winning ways, and the sweetness of her eyes and lips. “I thought Marilla Cuthbert was an old fool when I heard she’d adopted a girl out of an orphan asylum,” she said to herself, “but I guess she didn’t make much of a mistake after all. If I’d a child like Anne in the house all the time I’d be a better and happier woman.” (AGG, 198)

Miss Barry’s thoughts present a parallel between her and Marilla, suggesting that Anne’s continued influence would reap similar changes in Miss Barry as in Marilla. Miss Barry thus seems to feel a sense of loss, because Anne does not belong to her the way that Anne belongs to Marilla, suggestive of an awakened recognition in Miss Barry of inclinations to mothering that is attributed to Anne’s unusual nature and emotional transparency. Later, Miss Barry also tellingly observes, “[Anne] makes me love her and I like people who make me love them. It saves me so much trouble in making myself love them” (AGG, 238). This points directly to Anne’s power to reap a bountiful harvest of mother figures by being a figure of idealised nurturing herself.

As explored in Sections 4.2 and 4.3, Anne ‘adopt[s] a slew of female mentors’ (Gubar, 2001:54; my emphasis), reaping her harvest of mother figures throughout her childhood and well into her adult life, arguably reaping a greater harvest of mothers as an adult than she does as a child. She continuously seems to have the ability to make people love her – Rebecca Dew observes at one point that Anne “can wind people round [her] little finger” (AWP, 140), suggestive perhaps of a power to effect change in those around her by becoming a force in their lives that they look to for inspiration, like Marmee and Beth in *Little Women* (1868-1869). Anne’s ability to create mothers even extends through her friendships with those close to her own age,<sup>213</sup> seen in *Anne’s*

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<sup>213</sup> Thomas (2009:n.p.) argues that *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) specifically ‘celebrates nurturing relationships among girls and young women [... or] intragenerational friendships among women’, whereas the ‘intergenerational model of maternity’ in the novel is ‘problematic’ and fraught with ‘conflict’ (Thomas’s emphases). While it is true that Anne’s relationships with younger characters such as Miss Stacy and Mrs Allan are described only in positive and uplifting terms, as noted by Thomas (2009:n.p.), these characters represent ideals that are not necessarily realistic in their apparent perfection (Drain, 1992:45). The older women in Anne’s life, however, prove imperfect and complex, providing a far more intriguing study of nurturing, because many – for example, Marilla herself – must stretch themselves to *grow* into a more ideal picture of motherhood, and they do. Particularly as the series of novels progresses, Thomas’s argument loses some of its power, as intragenerational relationships such as Anne’s with Leslie prove to be sources of new kinds of conflict, and intergenerational relationships such as Anne’s with Miss Lavendar, Rebecca Dew, Susan and Miss Cornelia prove fundamentally enriching. I thus maintain that Montgomery deliberately explores and celebrates both kinds of nurturing relationship throughout the *Anne* series (1908-1939) and that both prove both complex or conflicted and rewarding.

*House of Dreams* (1917), for example, in how her influence leads her friend Leslie Moore out of ‘thwarted womanhood’ (*AHD*, 116) and into fruitful and fulfilled womanhood with a happy marriage and a harvest of children and grandchildren (see Section 4.3.3).<sup>214</sup> Anne’s unique light and motherly personality clearly leave a marked impression on those around her in that she manages to elicit their imaginations and connect them with their repressed inner life, leaving every place and life “‘a different place’” (*AWP*, 161) and creating and collecting a harvest of mother figures along the way.

#### 4.5 Conclusion

In *Anne of Avonlea* (1909), Paul Irving’s father “‘thinks housekeepers are no good to bring up little boys [... and that] Grandmothers are better [for this purpose], next to mothers’” (*AA*, 116). Montgomery disputes this viewpoint as applied to boys and girls by exploring in great detail how successful upbringing can be undertaken by a variety of women from different backgrounds and walks of life and therefore that biological mother figures are not the exclusive ideal candidates for raising children. Indeed, Paul’s grandmother does not understand him as well as his teacher, Anne, or his new mother, Miss Lavendar. Furthermore, Anne’s friend, Leslie Moore, has a biological mother who proves destructive to her daughter’s future, as a manipulative, selfish and insensitive woman who “‘sacrifice[d] her own flesh and blood’” by pushing Leslie to marry Dick Moore against Leslie’s will (*AHD*, 110) – trapping Leslie in a fruitless marriage which results in Leslie’s ‘thwarted womanhood’ (*AHD*, 116). The universal spinster mother figure of Miss Cornelia thus ends up being a more effective and constructively influential mother figure to Leslie, who refers to her as “‘the best friend’” she has (*AHD*, 111). Montgomery seems to advocate through examples like those given above for the value of a communal approach to mothering to meet a child’s needs fully, seen in Mr Irving’s eventually telling Anne:

“I want to thank you for what you have done for Paul. I think that your influence has been just what he needed. [Paul’s grandmother] is one of the best and dearest of women; but her robust, matter-of-fact Scotch common sense could not always understand a temperament like my laddie’s. *What was lacking in her you have supplied. Between you, I think Paul’s*

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<sup>214</sup> Feminist readings of *Anne’s House of Dreams* (1917), as mentioned by Gubar (2001:62), see the reference to ‘thwarted womanhood’ as reflecting how ‘Leslie’s marriage represents a terrible waste of potential’, because it ties her down to caring for who she supposes to be her invalid husband rather than allowing her to pursue “‘the dreams and hopes she once had’” (*AHD*, 114), such as continuing her education and perhaps creating a career for herself. Based on how Leslie’s future with Owen Ford turns out so happily, however, I maintain my position that her ‘thwarted womanhood’ in her first marriage links more closely with her marriage’s lack of fruitfulness, particularly in terms of its sterility, seen particularly in Leslie’s reaction to Anne’s becoming a mother: “‘I envy Anne,’” said Leslie suddenly and fiercely, “‘and I’d envy her even if she had died! She was a mother for one beautiful day. I’d gladly give my life for *that!*’” (*AHD*, 176-177; Montgomery’s emphases).

*training in these two past years has been as nearly ideal as a motherless boy's could be."*  
(AA, 232; my emphasis)

This chapter begins with the image of harvesting mothers, and it shows throughout that as Anne reaps her harvest of mothers, her roots do not just stretch directly beneath her into a traditional, direct line of mothers but branch out into a complex root system that connects Anne to countless different kinds of mother figure who all reap a harvest shared *between them* through the roles that each plays in Anne's attaining her future successes.

Anne's mothering influences come from within her community at every stage of her life. When she is a child, she finds a powerful, if flawed, mother figure in the conservative and opinionated Mrs Rachel Lynde whose example presents the possibilities for empowered womanhood and mothering within the expectations of society and allows Anne to construct her own view of a woman's role by rejecting some of what Mrs Lynde (or society in general) pushes her to do or accept. In Mrs Allan and Miss Stacy, Anne finds young, idealistic role models who give her moral and intellectual ideals to strive for that she does not find in the same way in Marilla, Matthew or Mrs Lynde. As Anne grows up and throughout her adult life, various spinsters become her most influential mother figures. The fact that Marilla, Anne's primary mother figure, is also a spinster (and is in fact established as an archetypal spinster when compared with some of Anne's other unmarried mothers) makes Montgomery's push for such unmarried and childless women to be recognised as mothers all the more powerful, particularly as their influences on Anne can clearly be seen in Anne's future mothering and in the lives of Anne's children, rejecting the dominant discourse of spinsters as fruitless and unfulfilled in terms of mothering.

Evidence of Anne's bountiful harvest of mothers and their powerful influence on Anne's life is poignantly shown in how Anne's first House of Dreams is made into a home using the trousseau of gifts made for and given to her by her various mother figures, from Marilla and Mrs Lynde to Miss Patty and Maria (see Sections 4.2.1 and 4.3.4). A similar example is also seen when Anne prepares for the birth of her first child in *Anne's House of Dreams* (1917) and receives gifts of baby clothes made beautifully by many of her female friends and mother figures.<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> New babies born to members of a sisterhood of women who are connected through family, friendship or community provide ample opportunities for communal mothering. This can be seen clearly in the following example from *Anne's House of Dreams* (1917):

Leslie's gift was not alone in the little house. Miss Cornelia had, for the time being, given up sewing for unwanted, unwelcome eighth babies, and fallen to sewing for a very much wanted first one, whose welcome would leave nothing to be desired. Philippa Blake and Diana Wright each sent a marvellous garment; and Mrs. Rachel Lynde sent several, in which good material and honest stitches took the place of embroidery and frills. (*AHD*, 157)

Such gift-giving opportunities paint a clear picture of how women who have experience as traditional mother figures and those who do not all leave their indelible influence on each other – an influence which literally transforms Anne’s new house into a home and later equips Anne with what she needs to become a mother (influences which are not just felt in physical gifts, but in gifts of love, friendship, education and upbringing too). This creates a parallel with what Anne does for Marilla’s house at Green Gables in making Marilla’s almost clinical domestic sphere into a home by making Marilla into a mother. Marilla tells Mrs Lynde before Anne’s marriage to Gilbert:

“When I was a child I heard an old minister say that a house was not a real home until it had been consecrated by a birth, a wedding and a death. We’ve had deaths here—my father and mother died here as well as Matthew; and we’ve even had a birth here. Long ago, just after we moved into this house, we had a married hired man for a little while, and his wife had a baby here. But there’s never been a wedding before. [...]” (AHD, 9)

Anne’s wedding thus fulfils the criterion, confirming Green Gables’ status as a true home.

Anne is thus also shown repeatedly throughout the series influencing the lives of her mother figures for the better. She softens the hearts of those who seem to have no desire to mother and gives gifts of imagination to her mother figures as well as connections with their youth and opportunities to act as mothers to her. Montgomery thus also broadens traditional notions of mothering by suggesting that Anne does not reap her harvest of mothers passively but that Anne actively creates mothers out of unlikely candidates for mothering, suggesting that mothering can be a reverse process in which the child teaches or influences the mother figure to become a better mother, just as the mother helps the child to become a successful adult and potential future mother figure. This reverse mothering thus also highlights the universal nature of mothering that is not limited by time or age.

Montgomery presents powerful evidence throughout the *Anne* series (1908-1939) in support of the ability that any woman has to be a mothering influence in the lives of children and of fellow women. She does this by showing across all of the books in the series that I have included in my discussion, and in *The Blythes are Quoted* (2009), how Anne grows up into a successful mother figure not only to her own children after her marriage, but in her earlier capacities helping Marilla to raise Dora and Davy Keith, primarily in *Anne of Avonlea* (1909), developing relationships with her pupils through teaching in *Anne of Avonlea* (1909) and *Anne of Windy Poplars* (1936), and simply mothering children and adults she meets throughout her life, such

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The sisterhood of women supporting each other becomes even more apparent in *Rilla of Ingleside* (1921) when so many men are away at war and women have to take on new roles and hold each other up through mutual empathy in the midst of great tragedy.

as Little Elizabeth in *Anne of Windy Poplars* (1936) and Leslie in *Anne's House of Dreams* (1917). Anne's successful and fruitful life after her adoption by Marilla and Matthew sees Anne constantly held in a web of mothering security, surrounded by her communal and spinster mother figures in every significant event in her life, from her wedding in *Anne's House of Dreams* (1917) to the births of her children in *Anne's House of Dreams* (1917) and *Anne of Ingleside* (1939) and beyond. The continuation of Anne's story through figures mentioned in this chapter, like Mary Vance and Rilla, then also hints at the multiplication of Anne's own bountiful harvest of both non-traditional and traditional mothering, extending well into future generations.

Although the scope of my dissertation does not allow me to go into detail exploring Anne's own successful mothering ventures, there is no doubt that the indisputably fruitful, idealised alternative *and* traditional mother figure that Anne becomes is a credit to her reverse harvest of communal mothers and supposedly 'fruitless' spinster mothers who bring her up, teach her and love her, meeting her needs with their own unique approaches and being taught how to mother Anne by Anne's own reverse mothering influence – all indicative of the complex web and cycle that is mothering.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

*Mothers were the same all through the centuries [...]*

(*AI*, 151)

*[...] the tie of motherhood made them more one than ever.*

(*LW*, 517)

### 5.1 Introduction

This study of the shape of motherhood in selected works by Louisa May Alcott and Lucy Maud Montgomery that I have presented in this dissertation confirms what I already knew from my own lived experience both as the child or young adult being mothered and as a mother figure myself to others within my family, church and friend groups and even as a mother figure to my own parents when their needs required reciprocal or reverse mothering: mothers come in all shapes and sizes, with many personalities, from all walks of life and with all manner of strengths and weaknesses. Some mothers are biological mothers, some are adoptive, some ‘mothers’ are almost entirely absent and some seem to never have existed to their children at all. More often than is recognised openly either in literature or society at large, mothering, in its broader sense, as demonstrated in this study, comes from people who are not actually biological mothers at all (even at times from people who are not female) but who choose to nurture, and whose influence on the lives of those within their reach possesses the characteristics that one would expect from a traditional mother, defined according to the construction of motherhood emerging from Alcott’s seminal novel, which became dominant in late nineteenth-century middle-class Anglo culture.

In the introductory chapter of this dissertation, I pointed out many of the attributes of the traditional effective ideal mother that arose in the dominant discourses on mothering in middle-class Anglo culture in nineteenth-century America and that were also evident in Canadian literature, as seen in L.M. Montgomery’s *Anne* series (1908-1939). These attributes remain part of the expectations regarding mothers and mothering even today, particularly in middle-class Anglo societies. During my own upbringing, I myself found that my mother was both perfect and imperfect; we fought bitterly and embraced tenderly; we detested many of each other’s habits and ideals and yet strove to be more like one another. It was a relationship filled with contradictions and often outright hurtfulness, but it was still effective, because through it all, my mother still made sure that I recognised that even in imperfection, the seemingly timeless values and ideals of traditional motherhood would ultimately conquer the very real, often even

negative experience of mothering, leaving a sense of unconditional love, tenderness, affection, unity and nurture behind. I also learned from my experience growing up that my mother never attempted to tackle the successful rearing of her children on her own. She relied – even if at times grudgingly (as the domestically independent woman that she was) – on my father’s influence in our lives and on the influence and support of my maternal grandmother, my aunt, my mom’s cousin, family friends and teachers from church, and teachers from our schools. We had undeniable mothering influences from family members and friends, both female and male. Each of them was integral to our successful upbringing, and each of them played a role – and some still do – in the successful adults my brothers and I have become, and all of them thus have claim to some of our successes as part of their mothering harvests.

## **5.2 Summary of the key findings**

Alcott’s Marmee reshaped the definition and the image of early nineteenth-century middle-class Anglo-American motherhood, moving it away from the passive role of the sentimental ‘Angel in the house’ to a new image of real, active mothering by a real human being with faults and imperfections of her own, which give her the experience she needs to guide her children towards overcoming their own weaknesses. She is a mother who stresses the importance of the child’s own role in his or her upbringing, extending Fuller’s ideal of a collaborative marriage of equals (Fuller, 1855:59) to a possible notion of collaborative motherhood, where the child is a partner in the mothering process. Furthermore, Marmee focuses in the rearing of her children on the importance of self-mastery and the exercise of agency toward attaining education in many useful spheres – not unilaterally domestic for the woman versus commercial for the man, but each learning about both – and finding balance between duties within the home, without the home, to family, to society and to self. Marmee stresses putting others above oneself in order to harvest the greatest joy but also demonstrates and teaches that selfless mothering should not come at the expense of one’s own soul or the wellbeing of central familial relationships such as the marriage relationship. Marmee’s idealised mothering ultimately harvests, in her biological children, four daughters who are “‘true to the mother’s teaching’” (*LW*, 604) in most of what they do and who become more like Marmee through their own individual journeys, suggesting that even the reader can reach this goal of ideal motherhood, as each of the clearly human, less-than-perfect March girls does in her own way. Three of them – Meg, Jo and Amy – have children of their own, and Jo even becomes a kind of supermother as Mother Bhaer, the universal mother to a whole school full of boys and a few girls; the fourth daughter, Beth, dies as a young adult but is still a modest mother figure throughout her life in her own way. Alcott’s readers can also

be included in Marmee's bountiful harvest. Beyond her own daughters, the good fruits of Marmee's influence are thus undeniably varied and widespread, pointing to both a literal harvest of people and progeny and to a symbolic harvest of perpetuated values and ideals centred around Marmee as the primary sower and tender of the crop and as the pruner of her little orchard of girls.

Alcott's focus on motherhood in *Little Women* (1868-1869) and its sequels also moves beyond Marmee, hinting at the value that lies in alternative motherhoods. Jo broadens the application of Marmee's traditional mothering further into the realms of alternative mothering than Marmee's character reaches, in that Jo's influential nurturing and educating of her nieces and nephews and of the boys and girls with no biological relation to her whom she takes under her motherly wings at her and Professor Bhaer's Plumfield school extends her harvest far beyond Marmee's. As I have demonstrated, Beth stands out as a particularly intriguing alternative kind of idealised mother figure who mothers her sisters (and others), backing up Marmee, and whose harvest is thus inextricably connected with Marmee's, even though Beth dies before having the chance to become a wife and mother herself. I have also identified Aunt March as another significant depiction of alternative mothering in *Little Women* (1868-1869). Her acerbic, rigid, unmotherly character appears to be unfruitful, but my analysis establishes that her choice to pursue a kind of mothering of her nieces results in her actually sharing in the harvest that Marmee reaps, even if the outcomes are unintended by Aunt March.

My analysis of Montgomery's *Anne* series (1908-1939) side-by-side with Alcott's *Little Women* series (1868-1886) shows that Montgomery's work develops what is only hinted at regarding the power of alternative mothering in Alcott's *Little Women* (1868-1869) as a central focus of Montgomery's own exploration of motherhood. Anne's identity as an orphan, particularly as one who is raised by non-traditional primary parent figures when she is adopted, invites this broadened exploration and redefinition of ideal mothering to include a broader sense of nurturing, as the series begins with a largely blank family tree that Anne gets to fill in for herself and in her own unique way. Anne's biological mother is given life only through Anne's idealised fantasies, which invites the reader to look beyond discourses about mothering as primarily biological to the myriad of potential mothering connections that are possible as explored throughout Anne's life. Anne's unique and continually developing family tree also demonstrates how mothering that comes from numerous different sources can come to envelop a 'motherless' child (AA, 232) in a web of mothering that is portrayed by Montgomery as an accumulation of (or a gain in) mothering love rather than a focus on the loss of the original,

biological, idealised mother and the impossibility of filling the gap left by the missing mother.

Montgomery's focus on finding a vast array of mother figures for Anne rather than allowing Anne to remain stuck in the effects of the loss of her own mother suggests that motherhood, according to the definitions I use in this dissertation, is universal and that a successful mother figure (which Anne already is, from a young age, in terms of alternative mothering and becomes eventually in terms of traditional mothering) can be raised by a myriad of different mothering influences that are perhaps less constant than those provided by the ideal, traditional mother but are equally reliable in their own ways and are equally bountiful – if not more so at times – in their eventual harvest. As Montgomery's mothers 'look to friends, family, and their partners to assist with childcare and often raise their children with an involved community of what may be termed *co-mothers* or *othermothers*' (O'Reilly, 2008:7; O'Reilly's emphasis), this can be seen as pushing Alcott's implied notion of collaborative mothering even further to include not just the child's own role in his or her upbringing but also the influence of countless mother figures.

Interestingly, Anne never directly acknowledges any of the female influences I discuss in this dissertation as being a mother to her. Instead, she sees those with a powerful influence in her life as simply having a hand in bringing her up (such as Marilla) and sees others as idealised role models (such as Mrs Allan and Miss Stacy), caretakers (such as Rebecca Dew and Susan), or simply as friends (such as Miss Lavendar and Miss Cornelia). This points to the idea of motherhood as 'a great sisterhood of love and service' (*Ann*, 151) that has the potential to develop amongst women (and men) who nurture each other and who fill unique needs in each other's lives, no matter their station or relationship, essentially all mothering each other as they influence each other's development, fleshing out the 'vague hints of a sisterhood of mutual support' found in Alcott's fiction (Strickland, 1985:140). Mothering clearly possesses a rich complexity far beyond what Anglo societies in Montgomery's time had come to see as the traditional ideal, with women who have been mothered in their own individual situations sharing in and contributing to values that are developed and passed down through previous generations to future generations of mother figures who are also mothered by their own mothers and/or by a society of mothers around them and continue to pass down the values of traditional mothering. This process confirms that mothering does not need to be biological and does not need to consist of a long-term relationship with the child or person being mothered (and does not necessarily even need to be gendered) in order to be effective in the perpetual cycle and harvest of universal mothering, perhaps because the needs of those being mothered vary so greatly from person to person and from situation to situation.

Montgomery's *Anne* series (1908-1939) also suggests that the influence of the child, or the person in need of mothering, is impossible to ignore, because without this necessary ingredient, no one could ever lay claim to the title of mother. Mothering by the child (or the mothered) in the form of reverse mothering and/or reciprocal mothering is shown in how Anne's influence is most often what makes mothers of those who ultimately choose to mother her.

Berger (2008:92) suggests that '[c]ommunal mothering [...] configur[es] mothering as a verb and recogniz[es] mothering as a chosen practice rather than a biological destiny'. Indeed, it seems that it is the *choice* to act in a mothering capacity (even if the characters do not specifically see it as such) and the willingness to learn and develop the attributes needed to benefit those who need mothering, through traditional mothering values (as represented by Alcott's Marmee), that lead to the reaping of a bountiful mothering harvest, whether by traditional mothers or alternative mother figures – and frequently by multiple kinds of mother simultaneously.

### **5.3 Alcott and Montgomery – tracing the shape of motherhood**

This analysis of motherhood in Alcott's *Little Women* series (1868-1886) and Montgomery's *Anne* series (1908-1939) indicates that what I call the *shape of motherhood* is both quite simple and quite complex to outline. The complexity lies in the fact that it is impossible to simply define who can be seen as a mother, because, as my study has discovered, it seems that almost anyone can be a mother in some way if the person makes the choice to act in what can be interpreted through the dominant ideals of Anglo societies as a mothering capacity and to pursue or maintain the development of these traditional mothering ideals. The shape of motherhood is also complex in that it stretches through a vast network of roots and branches, creating a myriad of connections through the many manifestations of motherhood.

While Steffler (2008:182) highlights the view that 'the range and variety of maternal figures in [Montgomery's] fiction prevent the emergence of generalizations about motherhood', I argue that this very range can be seen as part of what *simplifies* the outlining (generalising in a way) of the shape of motherhood. This is because the widely varied manifestations of motherhood in the novels covered by this discussion are ultimately always rooted in the same core mothering values that became the new middle-class Anglo tradition in the wake of Alcott's seminal nineteenth-century novel. Alcott's *Little Women* series (1868-1886) begins with a focus on the mother in a nuclear home and her influence primarily on her biological daughters, setting the benchmark for what, even in twenty-first century societies influenced by the Anglo-American

ideal, is perceived as traditional mothering, and the series then progresses to focus on alternative mothering that reaches far beyond the confines of the nuclear, traditional home, as Jo reaps her mothering harvest through the complexity of the varied life paths pursued by her biological children, nieces, nephews and pupils, seen particularly in *Jo's Boys* (1886). Conversely, Montgomery's *Anne* series (1908-1939) begins with an orphan who is mothered by a myriad of alternative mother figures who reach her from far beyond the confines of Anne's adoptive home, and the series later progresses to focus somewhat more narrowly on Anne's ideal traditional mothering harvest in her nuclear family (including Susan, and others at times).

Thus, the shape of motherhood over the decades covered by Alcott and Montgomery's novels seems to be circular in that the explorations of motherhood all come back to the idealised domestic sphere. Montgomery's depiction of an ideal mother figure in the adult Anne, which I have mentioned repeatedly throughout my analysis, is at once a validation for the importance of the place and power of a mother, specifically in the white Western home and an acknowledgement of the powerful influence of alternative motherhood, as each of Anne's many mother figures can certainly claim a role in the harvest of Anne's traditional motherhood.

#### **5.4 Reflecting on the study**

This dissertation contributes to the body of knowledge on Alcott's *Little Women* series (1868-1886) and Montgomery's *Anne* series (1908-1939) by providing a comprehensive close reading and analysis of constructions of motherhood in the selected works, with a focus on the values and ideals of traditional motherhood as established through an exploration of the dominant construction of motherhood in late nineteenth-century middle-class Anglo culture, specifically in the United States and Canada, and how these values and ideals can be exercised in successful mothering by many different alternative mother figures. While a number of studies individually on Alcott's and Montgomery's depictions of motherhood exist, none that I have discovered combine these two authors in an extensive, detailed analysis of their constructions of motherhood and how they relate to each other, as mine has done, or with the focus of Marmee as the benchmark mother figure against whom Montgomery's mother figures are measured. My exploration of multiple mother figures encompassing the entirety of the *Anne* series (1908-1939) also broadens the area of Montgomery scholarship on mothering, as most analyses tend to focus only on a few of these mother figures or texts at a time. While many studies on motherhood individually in the selected works by Alcott and Montgomery deal in great detail with context and biographical background to enhance the discussion, my analysis focuses heavily on textual

analysis (showing some awareness of relevant background), allowing the text to stand largely on its own and thereby allowing an almost exclusive focus on the characters themselves to enhance my argument. This approach strengthens my point of the continued relevance of the traditional mothering principles outlined here even in the present day in many Western cultures, because it enables my argument to be applied broadly by the average reader with few contextual constraints.

In terms of scholarship on *Little Women* (1868-1869), my close analysis of Beth as an alternative kind of idealised mother figure who shares in Marmee's harvest is a new contribution, as is my inclusion of Aunt March as an influential figure of alternative motherhood. In terms of scholarship on Montgomery's *Anne* series (1908-1939), my contributions include my close engagement with descriptions of Anne's biological mother, Bertha, and my detailed analysis of her powerful influence on Anne's life and of how the imagined ideal of Anne's biological mother measures up against the real and direct influence of Anne's non-traditional primary mother figure (Marilla) on Anne's future. My use of the harvest image, carried over from *Little Women* (1868-1869), as a measure for successful and effective mothering is also a contribution to the existing scholarship on Montgomery.

## **5.5 Limitations and suggestions for further study**

Due to the limited scope of a Master's dissertation, there are a number of areas of interest to which I could not do justice in this study and which would thus be intriguing avenues for further investigation. One of these limitations is the fact that, although I mention discourses to frame some kind of background for my study, I do not explicitly trace the evolution of the discourses on mothering and womanhood throughout the studied texts or relate them to different discourses in the working class or in other societies of the period. Future research could delve more deeply into how the evolving societal discourses are reflected in the expansive timeframe covered by my exploration of mothering. A similar approach can be taken to reframing the thrust of my argument with a feminist focus, which my scope did not allow for.

Throughout this study, I mention relevant details from the future lives of the girls who have been mothered (Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy and Anne), particularly in terms of how each girl's mothering influences can be seen in her own future mothering. I could not, however, go into any great detail about this, because my focus was primarily on the influential mother figures themselves and how they mother the March girls and Anne. This is a rich avenue for further research, because future studies could focus in detail on the connections between the mothers

analysed in my discussion and the future mothering of each girl and even her offspring, as in the case of Rilla, Anne's daughter, who fosters a war baby in *Rilla of Ingleside* (1921), which would give greater evidence for the extensive harvest of mothering that I attribute in my study to both traditional and alternative mother figures.

Anne's life as a mother reflects a balance of alternative mothering and her own biological mothering almost as equally important, because she allows Susan a great deal of influence in the lives of the Blythe children, which speaks to Anne's respect for the unusual influences that shape her own life. An investigation specifically into the balance of mothering power between Anne and Susan and how this affects the upbringing of each of Anne's children would be fascinating and would also speak to the importance of a variety of mothering influences to effectively raise a child. Furthermore, Anne's future home is not just a sacred bubble of mother and children but is an expansive home sphere that reaches further and welcomes more even than does Marmee's home sphere. An extended comparison of Anne with Marmee as idealised traditional mother figures would also thus be an intriguing avenue for future research.

The idea of reverse and reciprocal mothering, which I have touched on, because it is also an alternative manifestation of mothering to varying extents in both series, would be a rich area for further study. My discussion only touches on it briefly, but the influence of the child on the mother in Alcott's and Montgomery's works is easily seen upon close inspection and would be fascinating, perhaps even overturning the idea that the mother is the primary figure of power and influence in the home sphere. This is particularly significant in terms of the suggestion in my argument that the mark of a successful mother is the mothering harvest, because if this is the case, no mother can be successful without a child.

A notable limitation in my study is that I focus exclusively on effective mother figures and do not consider – save perhaps in the brief mention of Mrs Thomas in *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) and Leslie Moore's mother, Rose, in *Anne's House of Dreams* (1917) – ineffective or 'bad' mothers, even though Anne's life does indeed include some of these. This is a significant limitation because I imply with Anne's influence of reverse mothering that she makes effective mothers out of her mothering influences. A future study could perhaps compare and contrast examples of ineffective or harmful mother figures, particularly in Montgomery's *Anne* series (1908-1939) and other works, with the positive mothering influences given in my dissertation. This could strengthen my argument about the continuing relevance of the traditional mothering attributes I have outlined in the societies concerned and elsewhere, because the fact that ineffective mothers always exist in some form suggests that even if the cycle of effective

motherhood is interrupted by ineffective mother figures, the ideal qualities of mothering still resurface eventually through other mother figures in the ever-connected sisterhood of mothers.

Robinson (2018:179) mentions Epperly's point that '*Anne's House of Dreams* is primarily about friendship rather than Anne's marriage, despite the book's title, therefore subtly privileging affiliation over kinship connections or marriage'. I would add that as a result of this focus on (female) friendships, the focus of the novel is also almost exclusively mothering, in its broader sense, in a vast variety of forms. It would thus be intriguing to mount a study of nurturing as mothering specifically through friendship (especially between women who are close to the same age, such as Anne and Leslie Moore) throughout Montgomery's *Anne* series (1908-1939).

Another notable limitation of my study is that I simply read the primary male influence in the selected novels (Matthew) as an alternative *mother* figure, without considering how his character reflects or even reshapes the ideals of *traditional fatherhood*. I attribute this limitation to my study's focus on *mothering* and on the matriarchal utopias in the primary texts. However, future research that explores the *shape of fatherhood* in the selected novels, through characters like Mr March, Matthew and Captain Jim, would undoubtedly provide other intriguing discoveries, particularly when *alternative fathering* is considered in relation to some of the female 'head of household' characters I explore in this study, like Marilla, Mrs Lynde and Miss Cornelia.

My study is limited to the *Little Women* series (1868-1886) and the *Anne* series (1908-1939), both of which are popular amongst critics and scholars already, but application of my line of argument to other works by Alcott and Montgomery, particularly works that are not studied as frequently, could add interesting nuances to this discussion. The same can be said for a study of depictions of motherhood and the traditional mother attributes in works by other writers contemporary to Alcott and Montgomery, or even writers bridging the decades-long divide between the works of these two women. Also, my discussion focuses on the dominant construction of motherhood in late nineteenth-century Anglo culture, specifically in the United States and Canada – the scope could be broadened to include a comparison with literary depictions of traditional motherhood from other cultures.

## **5.6 Concluding remarks**

In *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1855), Fuller (1855:73) asserts: 'Earth knows no fairer, holier relation than that of a mother. It is one which, rightly understood, must both promote and require the highest attainments.' My exploration of the power of biological and alternative

motherhoods affirms that the sanctity of motherhood in whatever form it takes is constructed by Alcott and Montgomery through the ‘attainments’ they depict of traditional mothering values. The torch of benchmark traditional motherhood in white Western societies that Marmee carries has been passed down through the readers of Alcott’s ground-breaking *Little Women* series (1868-1886), and its reach has been extended by the broader depictions of motherhood explored by Montgomery in her *Anne* series (1908-1939) and its influence on its readers. The *power*, not the limitations, of traditional motherhood is what enables these novels to influence the dominant ideologies surrounding motherhood in white Western societies to this day.

Rothwell (1999:133-134), in her article entitled ‘Knitting up the world: L.M. Montgomery and maternal feminism in Canada’, traces the act of knitting as portrayed in Montgomery’s works as a symbol of ‘the maternal as a strong, positive force rooted in tradition’. The power of this image when applied to my study is clear, and I will use but one example to illustrate it, though there certainly are more. Marmee’s daughters are introduced in the first chapter of *Little Women* (1868-1869) as they sit, knitting army socks for the soldiers in the Civil War (*LW*, 6, 14). Much later, in Montgomery’s *Rilla of Ingleside* (1921), the image of knitting is scattered throughout the text, as the women who remain at home at Ingleside during the Great War knit army socks for the soldiers on the front. This connection symbolically reflects the values of *traditional* motherhood – established by Alcott’s benchmark mother – being exercised in a monumental show of *alternative*, universal mothering that is engaged in undoubtedly by countless women who exercise, in each of the two generations, the power that they have to mother in mothering, through nurture, the soldiers whose actions decide the fate of entire communities and nations. The power and influence of motherhood is depicted meaningfully in this image, as it shows the work of mothers at the heart of events ‘that rul[e] the world’ (Wallace, 1890:n.p.).

Perhaps the most significant piece of my argument on the persistent, world-ruling power of the attributes of traditional motherhood, in whatever mothering shape they take, is their continued influence, through novels like those discussed, on the mothering endeavours and goals even of present-day readers, particularly in the middle class in various Western societies. This is a mothering harvest not just for the mother figures within the texts but for the authors who created them, pointing to the true carriers of the torch of traditional motherhood as those who continue to document and explore effective motherhood in writing that becomes seminal to generations of readers who still seek and aspire to such impactful mothering in their own lives, as did my mother, and as do I. Indeed, ‘[m]others [are] the same all through the centuries (*AIN*, 151), because ‘the tie of motherhood’ continues to make us ‘more one than ever’ (*LW*, 517).

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<sup>216</sup> *Little Women* appeared in 1868; *Good Wives* was published in 1869. The first edition combining the two was published in 1869. A restored edition, edited by Showalter, was published in 1989, but it is not the form in which the vast majority of readers read, or have read, the novel, so it was consulted in this study as a secondary text, rather than as a primary source.

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