

[Back to index](#)**In After Years: Retrospection and the Great War in the Work of L. M. Montgomery.****by Lisa DeTora,  
University of Rochester, NY**

Canadian author, Lucy Maud Montgomery is best known for her first novel, *Anne of Green Gables*, the story of Anne Shirley, a lovable red-haired orphan adopted into the Prince Edward Island Community of Avonlea in the late 1800's. Extremely popular since its first publication in 1908, *Anne of Green Gables* has been translated into over twenty languages, two full-length films and a television mini-series. Montgomery's novels and stories are generally valued for their verisimilitudinous representation of everyday life in Maritime Canada during the late 1800's and the early part of the twentieth century. Some writers, like Carolyn Stone Collins and Christina Wyss Eriksson attribute the "charm" of *Anne of Green Gables* and its sequels to "details of everyday life" (ii), during a period no longer easily accessible. Collins and Wyss instruct readers, in the context of the "life" of Anne Shirley, to better understand the Anne books by recreating certain aspects of life during the late nineteenth century. Although best-known for her earliest work, Montgomery wrote through the 1930's and into the 1940's, and renewed popular interest in her books was noted during the 1950's, the mid-1970's, and again during the late 1980's and 1990's. These periods of interest coincide with widespread interest in domestic life in popular culture, described in feminist histories of these periods. Significantly, as Elizabeth Rollins Epperly notes in *The Fragrance of Sweet Grass: L. M. Montgomery's Heroines and the Pursuit of Romance*, Montgomery wrote the "only contemporary fictionalized women's account of the First World War" (112), *Rilla of Ingleside* (1944), the story of Anne's daughter, Rilla Blythe, as she grows to womanhood during the Great War.

In scholarly circles, Montgomery's work was long considered popular trash. She is not counted among Canada's well-known writers, like Margaret Atwood, in most descriptions of Canadian literature even today. Further, although her books for girls are considered "classics," they are not frequently mentioned in literary discussions of canonical children's literature. In his 1950 collection on Canadian Writers, Arthur L. Phelps groups Montgomery with popular sentimental writers, who make no serious contribution to literature, yet notes that Montgomery's "unpretentiousness and simplicity" may "have life and even art in it" (88). During the 1990's, feminist and Canadian Studies scholars showed more sustained interest in Montgomery's work. New collections of her stories appeared, most edited by Rea Wilmshurst. Contemporary feminist readings, like the essays collected in *Such a Simple Little Tale*, center largely on *Anne of Green Gables*. Critics and biographers frequently concentrate on Montgomery's romantic vision, the congruence of her life and fiction, or on the relation of historical fact to her novels. While the *Anne of Green Gables* books have received the most sustained attention, a number of articles have been published on the *Emily of New Moon* series, three novels first published during the 1920's. Yet, although Montgomery wrote the only contemporary women's novel about the Great War, no one has yet commented extensively on the change her fictions during and after the Great War.

Throughout her writings, Montgomery uses retrospective presentation of certain thoughts and events to foreshadow future plot points. She uses this device to explain the importance of seemingly trivial occurrences in the light of narrative events to come. By presenting thoughts and ideas with a certain amount of "bleed" from future recollections, Montgomery effectively sets the tone of her work, incorporating narrative actions with nostalgia and recollection, and produces coherent narratives through series of novels. The opening lines of *The Story Girl* (1910), for example, center on Beverly King's recollected first impressions of his ancestral home in the light of his later experiences there. Beverly's first-person narrative, set later than the events of the novel, places "the spirit" of a later remark, "thrilling in our hearts" as he and his brother made their way to the family farm. In the main body of the novel, Beverly reflects that while children, he and his cousins "felt then what we did not understand until later years" (70), about relations who did not work and maintain family responsibilities. Similarly at the end of *Anne of Avonlea* (1909), Montgomery marks Anne Shirley's entry into womanhood with a blush made more meaningful by future events. Gilbert Blythe, her future husband, "read the history of the next four years in the light of Anne's remembered blush" (277). Montgomery presents this event in terms of later memory to explain its significance, and to hint at future events which do not occur until the sequel, *Anne of the Island* (1915).

Montgomery's use of this device changes in novels written during and after World War I. While Beverly King contemplates adult responsibility or future childhood pleasure, and Gilbert Blythe his future marriage to the woman he loves, after memories are not always full of hope. Marigold Lesley of *Magic for Marigold* (1938), recalls her great-grandmother's shocking speeches "in after life" when she is better able to understand them. Twenty years after the old woman's death, the narrative hints, Marigold comes to understand how you can hurt people by loving them. Although these memories are not full of foreboding, they are made meaningful through their relation to death, not life. Whereas Gilbert and Beverly remember the promise of love and friendship in after years, Marigold recalls a relationship lost to her forever. In *Anne of Ingleside* (1939), a cross-shaped shadow on the wall above a sleeping child marks later events of a far less cheerful sort.

In long after years, Anne was to remember that and wonder if it were an omen of Courcelette...of a cross-marked grave "somewhere in France." But tonight it was only a shadow (276).

Although to Anne, the cross is only a shadow, Montgomery still introduces the Great War into this narrative years before such awareness should be possible. The little boy sleeping under a shadow will later die on the battlefield at Courcelette. While diegetically, the shadow only becomes meaningful long after the events described, the narrative injects future significance into ongoing events, by describing characters' later thoughts. This device helps the *Anne of Green Gables* novels cohere as a single continuous narrative, but they make it difficult to locate the differences between pre- and post- Great War settings, especially in novels Montgomery wrote during and after the war. Although *Rilla of Ingleside* (1944), and its prequel, *Rainbow Valley* (1919) generally are read as war books, different in character from the remainder of Montgomery's novels, every novel Montgomery published after the beginning of the Great War presents a darker world. This change can be seen in plot, characters, narrative tone, and context. Even in more domestic novels, an increased focus on retrospection, and a change in the character of harmful or troublesome events contribute to a shift in narrative voice. Together, these changes contribute to the picture of life before and after the war in Montgomery's fictions. However, it is often difficult to separate the "before"

and "after" in diegetic terms because Montgomery allows the Great War to bleed backward into her fictions.

Critical consideration of Montgomery's work often begins with parallels to her life, and with regard to the Great War, this approach is particularly apt. In her biography, *The Wheel of Things*, Mollie Gillen notes Montgomery's investment in Red Cross work, the war, and their influence on her family life. Many critics, including Epperly, have commented upon Montgomery's experience of the Great War, as described in her journals. Montgomery's experience of the war, as recorded in her journals, reads very much like the text of her later novel, *Rilla of Ingleside*. In fact, the novel contains a number of passages lifted almost directly from the pages of her journals. In Montgomery's ongoing journal entries as the Great War raged in Europe, homely events like planting rhubarb are interspersed with dreams of the Kaiser and the movements of armies. The journal text reflects a life suffused with national, international, and domestic concerns. Montgomery was active in the Red Cross, and her activities there centered on performing tasks that would have been domestic chores if they had not been part of an ongoing war effort. In effect, the war transformed domestic labors like knitting into a public and political action when intended for use in the Army. This transformation is important when considering women's roles in later novels, but other transformations are equally profound. By the end of the war, Montgomery felt that her world had changed. On December 1, 1918, she wrote:

The War is over! many things are over...Huge epoch-making world events have jostled each other...And in my own little world has been upheaval and sorrow-and the shadow of death (270).

Although Montgomery describes her world as "little," a great deal of evidence points to the contrary, even in her own journal. Her writings betray a preoccupation with the movement of men and armies on different continents, the epoch-making events she describes. Further, she viewed all of humanity as connected in the struggle that was World War I. Her own struggles derived at least in part from these events, and were part of this greater whole. On March 31, 1918, she wrote, "the whole planet must have been agitated with universal convulsion" (243), hardly the observation of a woman occupied with a "little" world. Montgomery discounts the role that larger events played in her life, and her contributions to these events from within her circle.

Montgomery presents these events and struggles associated with the Great War most directly in the *Anne of Green Gables* sequels. While other novels mention the war, these books concentrate on the period immediately before, during, and after the war. Depictions of the married life of Anne Shirley Blythe explicitly recount the development and contribution of private and domestic circles to the worldwide political efforts of the Great War. In the world of Montgomery's novels, these contributions begin decades before the war, with the births of the men and women who will fight and win it. Epperly notes that *Rainbow Valley* is about "the children who were to mature into the soldiers and workers of the war" (96). In contrast, *Anne's House of Dreams* (1922), "was written in the middle of the war as though there was no war in store for Anne" (95). Epperly reads Montgomery's reaction to the Great War as mythic, a struggle of good against evil, and the construction of *Anne's House of Dreams* as the good home life that can conquer evil. Epperly notes that this novel "suggests that love is an active force that can defeat evil" (95). However, Montgomery clearly presents this home life as fragile, punctuated by tragedy, and short-lived. The house of dreams is too small for a growing family. The Blythes move into the house temporarily, and when they leave, it becomes a vacation house. Further, *Anne's House of Dreams*, like *Anne of the Island* presents a

frisson of fear behind all happiness in a world full of tragedy. The final chapters of *Anne of the Island* demonstrate the nearness of death to all young people as Anne's friend Ruby Gillis dies, and typhoid fever nearly kills Gilbert Blythe. Although Gilbert lives, the possibility of his death presents Anne with the potential for an empty and unhappy existence.

*Anne's House of Dreams* begins with the happiness that almost frightened Anne on her engagement, and ends with the purchase of their future home. Retrospection plays an important role in this novel. Anne and Gilbert plan their house of dreams in the light of their shared past and the hopes of a shared future. At *Four Winds*, Anne and Gilbert must rely on other characters to tell them the history of their new home, friends, and community. Yet, even among the familiar world of home, past events must be reviewed once more. The novel begins as Marilla Cuthbert, Anne's adoptive "mother," recalls past events in *Green Gables*, noting Anne's wedding will make *Green Gables* "a real home," now consecrated by birth, death, and marriage. Marilla's stream of recollection is echoed later by framing narratives and other characters who review the past. Before the wedding, Anne and Gilbert review their friendship, their knowledge of each other as "kindred spirits" from childhood through young adulthood. As the novel progresses, continual reference is made to the possibility for deeper and more profound tragedy than Anne Shirley had ever encountered.

Happiness and sorrow are intertwined in this tale. While fundamental changes in the first two Anne novels lead to happiness and only momentary sorrow, *Anne's House of Dreams* begins with the hint that happiness is not perfect, that sorrow lurks around the next corner, and that happiness itself is a harbinger of pain and fear to come. Although earlier novels depict Anne crying at the happiest moments of her life, the qualities of happiness and sorrow change profoundly. Anne's happiness before her wedding "almost" scares her, as her happiness on Gilbert's second proposal did, even when obstacles to complete happiness are few. She can't invite all the friends she'd like because they have moved about the globe. This difficulty is easily overcome. Future troubles are not. By the end of *Anne's House of Dreams*, unadulterated happiness will never visit Anne and Gilbert again. Histories of sorrow greet them when they move to *Four Winds*. The house of dreams Anne and Gilbert rent was built for a bride lost at sea, but found again. This tale of narrowly averted tragedy resonates through the novel, suggesting repeatedly that tragedy lurks nearby.

Earlier novels also hint that misunderstandings can mar love, as with Miss Lavendar and Marilla Cuthbert. *Anne's House of Dreams*, however, introduces the impact of tragedy and selfishness on a particular young woman, Leslie Moore, presenting a different type of childhood unhappiness than previously presented in the Anne books. Much of *Anne's House of Dreams* revolves around Anne's budding friendship with Leslie Moore. Anne describes Leslie as an exile from "the race who knows Joseph," the *Four Winds* term for "kindred spirits." Leslie's early hopes were crushed by the selfishness of others. At a young age, she was tied by marriage to an invalid, without family or support, with no hope of future advancement, education, or love. Anne reflects on the difference in their situations, and asks "What right had she to be so happy when another human soul must be so miserable?" (77). Her reflections on the injustice of her own happiness compared to others' misery recurs in later novels as well. This difference is heightened when Anne reflects that she and Leslie were similar in nature, bright, happy, intelligent. Only circumstances divided their situations. Anne never experienced true tragedy in her childhood, only neglect. Not until Anne experiences a tragic loss, nearly dying in order to give birth to a child that dies soon after, do the two women become true friends. For the few hours her child lived, Anne "tasted of happiness so

rare and exquisite that she wondered if the angels in heaven did not envy her" (116). Afterward, Anne's world and smile take on a hint of never-ending sadness. Events like Matthew's death in *Anne of Green Gables* do not change Anne's character the same way as events in her house of dreams.

Epperly's analysis of *Anne's House of Dreams* as a corrective to the realities of the war is interesting. Yet, the novel's tone and presentation of life-changing events that leave characters forever touched by tragedy and sorrow belies the effectiveness of Montgomery's attempt to counteract an ongoing war with happiness even in a fictional world. That is, while Epperly correctly identifies Montgomery's most obvious aim, proving that love can correct tragedy and sorrow, this proof is not supplied. Although the text contains no overt hint of evil to come, throughout the novel, Anne and Gilbert discover a darker side to life. Leslie Moore acts a foil to their happiness. While she is happily married by the novels' end, and a surface reading suggests that Anne and Gilbert free Leslie from her torments, all three are forever changed by the experience. The overall effect of this is a narrower gap between their experiences, not an erasure of the unhappiness of Leslie's past. Furthermore, Leslie's happy marriage is not the pivotal transformation of the novel for either character. That comes with the death of Joy Blythe, Anne and Gilbert's first child. Only by bridging the gap between tragedy and happiness do all three characters leave the house of dreams and move into adult life and parenthood.

*Anne's House of Dreams* depicts the beginning of a period marked by tragedy and war, for the last generation of young people who can go "hand in hand all the way through life" (277) as Gilbert suggests in *Anne of Avonlea*. Illness or shyness or misunderstanding may have prevented this previously, but more sinister forces will come to prevent this possibility for a whole generation. Furthermore, characters like Miss Cornelia, a hardened veteran of the battle between the sexes, mimics the activities of Red Cross workers, continually knitting and sewing for the underprivileged. Montgomery punctuates each of the novels set in Ingleside, Anne and Gilbert's second house, with references to the Great War. *Anne of Ingleside* (1939), written well after the Great War, is filled with references to it on a number of levels. Set a few years after the ending of *Anne's House of Dreams* but before *Rainbow Valley*, the novel depicts life in the Blythe household as they negotiate everyday difficulties. Most significant is Montgomery's treatment of Walter Blythe, the second son, who dies at Courcellette. From his first appearance in the novel, Montgomery hints that he will not live an ordinary life. The young Walter has "an old soul" (37), and earth is not his native habitat (87). By the time Anne sees the shadow above his bed at novel's end, Montgomery has hinted numerous times that this child will not live a long life. Significantly, Montgomery published *Anne of Ingleside* in the same year that France and England again declared war on Germany. Her reflections on war, on the future death of little children in past wars were likely influenced by her view of war as an evil. The earlier published *Rainbow Valley* (1919) maps out the early lives of the children who will later fight the Great War, in it, Montgomery's narrative reveals indirectly that Walter Blythe will die in battle.

Montgomery published a number of novels that make mention of the Great War during the 1930's. Like *Anne's House of Dreams*, they appear to be constructed with the idea that a happy home life can counter the effects of war. The stories in *A Tangled Web* (1931) all contain some reference to the Great War. Peter Penhallow could not enlist because he is left-handed. Lawson Dark was crippled and lost his memory on the battlefield. Donna and Naomi Dark were war-widows who vowed never to marry again. These stories are related not merely through family relationships, a past history of intermarriage or individual characters' desires to own the Dark Jug, an heirloom that is

eventually destroyed in the course of the narrative. Each story describes the trajectory of some clan member away from the others. As in the later *Jane of Lantern Hill* (1937), the happiness, marriage, reconciliation and growth come as characters break from the past, end old feuds, and refuse to meekly obey their elders. Andrew Stuart describes falling in love with his future wife in contrast with his experiences of the Great War.

When I first saw her, I was just out of the mud and stench and obscenity of the trenches and I thought she was a creature from another star (131).

Despite this initial attraction, and their later marriage, Robin and Andrew Stuart are separated for ten years, unable to find common ground between widely divergent backgrounds and family situations. Their daughter, Jane, finally becomes the means of reuniting them, but only after a decade of bitter separation, and a near death from pneumonia. Similarly, Roger Penhallow in *A Tangled Web* (1931), was a noted flying ace and "brought down fifty enemy planes" (20). He loves the young Gay Penhallow, the clan beauty and a fourth cousin, who does not come to love him until her heart is broken by her first love. In both novels, love is not enough to conquer evil. Transformation and suffering, are required in both cases to reach a happy conclusion, especially for the young butterfly-like, golden-haired girls beloved by former soldiers.

Montgomery published a number of texts before she tackled her fictional account of the Great War, *Rilla of Ingleside*. Characters in this novel note that the old world will come to an end, and Montgomery's depictions indicate profound transformations in public and private life. In *Rilla of Ingleside*, the Blythes enlist in the army or join the Red Cross, depending upon gender, in response to their patriotic duty. Montgomery notes patriotic allegiance to Britain as a positive emotion in early work, including *The Story Girl*. Much of this novel is devoted to depictions of attempts to counteract the war through sustained attention to domestic life and family responsibilities. In so doing, they exhibit "the self same [spirit] that captured Vimy Ridge and held the German legions back from Verdun" (217). Child care, cooking, and singing all become political activities as a result of the war. Rationing makes a refusal to go to the black market for food an act of service to the British empire which was simultaneously being dissolved by the war. Child care becomes a political act when Rilla adopts a war baby. Singing in a concert, once a venue for schoolgirl rivalries, is transformed into a means of supporting the health and comfort of troops located on the Western front. In effect, public and private spheres become conflated as a result of the Great War.

Temma Berg has noted that *Anne Shirley* occupies both spheres, public and private. While one might expect a young woman in that period to have been more confined to the domestic sphere, this does not happen in the *Anne of Green Gables* books. Berg's analysis relies on a great deal of textual evidence, yet *Anne's* occupation of both spheres in her youth differs from her daughter's in later books. This difference relies on the articulation of the Great War into Montgomery's work, as well as the historical circumstances under which Montgomery is writing. *Anne Shirley* may occupy both spheres, but these spheres are still somewhat separate in Montgomery's narratives. The Great War, however, merges the spheres in Montgomery's *Prince Edward Island*. Public and private concerns overtake each other and are combined during the exigencies of war, and are never fully separated again. In fact, the early *Anne* books center on the adventures of a young girl coming to womanhood, learning the housewifely arts, and obtaining an education that will best fit her for a role as a wife and mother. These depictions coincide with historical realities, as college education was first widely available to women in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but its role after school ended was still uncertain.

Anne's marriage to Gilbert Blythe at the beginning of Anne's House of Dreams, marks the beginning of an adult, domestic life separated from the variety of college and teaching. Anne's separation from public life is marked by her relinquishment of geometry, the subject Montgomery described as "her Waterloo" in *Anne of Green Gables*. By putting aside geometry on her wedding day, Anne is separating herself from public life and earning, but also from the conflict that geometry symbolized. Although much mention is made of Anne's B. A., she settles into a home routine. Throughout the Anne books, it is clear that Anne's worth as a B. A. is equally important as her ability to bake and rear children. Equally clear are doubts among members of older generations of women that young women can attend college and also keep a proper bread box, pantry and scrap bucket. Anne Shirley does both, but clearly places her academic achievements as secondary to her personal and domestic responsibilities. Ultimately, Anne's B. A. not so much a professional qualification as an added means of effective mothering, training that will better enable her to supervise her children's educations as they grow older.

In contrast, public and private life become combined in the course of the Great War, and in novels written after the Great War, home work is seen in terms of a greater variety of public life. While the women of Avonlea and Carlisle depicted in *Anne of Green Gables* or the *Story Girl* were judged by their housekeeping, sewing, and cooking, in later novels, some women perform these tasks specifically to free other men and women for public activities. While Emily Starr writes from her home, supporting herself with her pen, and Anne Shirley teaches until she marries, characters like Pat Gardiner relinquish a chance of education in order to free a sister to marry. Rilla Blythe's contributions to home life at Ingleside help enable her sisters to support the war effort abroad. Furthermore, the relationship between home and school also changes. The Blythe's neighbor goes to take a domestic science course at college after the end of the Great War. College no longer endangers future domesticity, it now teaches it. These representations do not hint at a complete combination of spheres, but at a more complex relationship between what had formerly been women's work, and its public significance. Simpler choices that clearly define the relative importance of education, work, and domesticity in women's lives, like teaching until marriage, do not disappear from Montgomery's texts, but they are accompanied by a variety of other options, and reasons for performing these tasks.

The Great War marks a critical period of change in Montgomery's fictional world of Prince Edward Island. In novels written after the war, the world is a smaller place, and foreign travel is less exotic. While the King family thought of Europe as akin to the moon, in *The Story Girl*, by the time *Rilla of Ingleside* was published, characters in various novels had traveled and settled over the globe. This change is equally apparent in novels set before and after the Great War, and is only one of a number of significant shifts in Montgomery's novels before and after the Great War. Domestic realities have also changes, leaving a world with additional options for young women. These changes speak to the nature of life, and the potential for good, evil, and happiness in the diegetic realms they inhabit. As seen above, Montgomery often works nostalgia and recollection into her texts through characters' thoughts, reflections made years after. In passages written before the war, retrospection is tied closely to nostalgia and development, the ability of adults to look back on childhood with increased understanding. In retrospective passages during and after the Great War, Montgomery includes hints of a darker world to come. This darkness is presented as a violent disjunction from past realities to present ones, a disjunction made more meaningful by looking back in after years.

## Bibliography

Berg, Temma F., " Anne of Green Gables: A Girl's Reading" Such A Simple Little Tale. Ed Mavis Reimer. Toronto: 1984.

Collins, Carolyn Strom and Christina Wyss Eriksson. The Anne of Green Gables Treasury. New York: Penguin, 1997.

Epperly, Elizabeth Rollins. The Fragrance Of Sweet-Grass: L. M. Montgomery's Heroines And The Pursuit Of Romance. Toronto: U Toronto P, 1992.

Gillen, Mollie. The Wheel of Things. Don Mills, Ontario: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1975.

Montgomery, L. M. Anne of Avonlea (1910). New York: Bantam, 1983

\_\_\_\_\_ . Anne of Green Gables (1908). New York: Bantam, 1983

\_\_\_\_\_ . Anne of Ingleside (1939). New York: Bantam, 1987

\_\_\_\_\_ . Anne of the Island (1915). New York: Bantam, 1983

\_\_\_\_\_ . Anne's House of Dreams (1922). New York: Bantam, 1987

\_\_\_\_\_ . Emily of New Moon (1921). New York: Bantam, 1988

\_\_\_\_\_ . The Golden Road (1910). New York: Bantam, 1988

\_\_\_\_\_ . Jane of Lantern Hill (1937). New York: Bantam, 1992

\_\_\_\_\_ . Magic For Marigold (1936). New York: Bantam, 1992

\_\_\_\_\_ . Rainbow Valley (1919). New York: Bantam, 1992

\_\_\_\_\_ . Rilla of Ingleside (1944). New York: Bantam, 1987

\_\_\_\_\_ . The Story Girl (1910). New York: Bantam, 1987

\_\_\_\_\_ . A Tangled Web (1931). New York: Bantam, 1993

Phelps, Arthur L. Canadian Writers. Toronto:McClelland and Stewart, 1951.

Rubino, Mary and Elizabeth Waterson, eds. The Selected Journals of L. M. Montgomery. New York: Oxford UP, 1987.