Pessimism is as Pessimism Does: L.M. Montgomery and the Transformation of Experience

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We invite your responses to the following discussion piece and questions. Responses can be made on the L.M. Montgomery Institute's Facebook page, moderated by Dr. Caroline E. Jones.

The field of female authorship, especially in the subgenre of books for girls, has long been dogged by the conflation of author and creation, as if women can only write autobiographically. No one ever says that Mark Twain is Huck Finn, but many people (often including those adapting the works) conflate L.M. Montgomery with Anne Shirley, Emily Starr, or both. This disservice to author and creation can also complicate examinations of the context in which the author worked and that the readership experienced.

Beyond the issue of conflation, there is, however, an examination of context as it applies to the transformation of experience. This concept is what marks the difference between fiction and autobiography, whereby the author takes experiences from their own life, almost rewriting in fiction what they could not transform in their own life. (The most familiar example of this is perhaps Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, which basically "rights" the wrongs of her actual life; this is why Father is largely absent and silent, appearing only toward the end as a quiet, calming influence, the complete opposite of Bronson Alcott.)

In terms of Montgomery, it is well documented that she was, in fact, not Anne Shirley or Emily Starr, two characters who seemed born under a lucky star of

optimism. Montgomery could not be described as an optimist and was, at the very least, a depressive, with a pessimistic mindset. How, then, do we account for her creating characters who are most often optimistic, or, if pessimists, transformed or redeemed by the optimistic character in their orbit? In short, how does an author's pessimism (in particular Montgomery's) account for optimism in characters and storylines? Does the optimism ring authentic if it comes from a pessimistic authorial context? Is the transformation and redemption of a pessimistic character believable? What is Montgomery suggesting about the nature of optimism and pessimism? Since Montgomery's work covered the transition from late-nineteenth-century Victorian culture to early-twentieth-century modernity, does the redemption/transformation of the pessimist mark her work as dated? In other words, is the redemption/transformation of the pessimist by an optimist something that is not seen or not considered probable to today's readers? Ultimately, is the redemption/transformation of a pessimist worth scholarly or even casual examination for us today?

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K.L. Poe is a professor of English at McHenry County College, Crystal Lake, IL. She is the author of "The Whole of the Moon: L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* Series" in *Nancy Drew and Company: Gender, Culture, and Girls' Series*, edited by Sherrie A. Inness (1997), and "Who's Got the Power?" in *Making Avonlea: L.M. Montgomery and Popular Culture*, edited by Irene Gammel (2002). Besides her work on Montgomery, she has also presented papers on the works of Lois Lenski, Maud Hart Lovelace, Lenora Mattingly Weber, and Bruce Springsteen.

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Caroline E. Jones is an independent scholar whose work on Montgomery goes back to her M.A. thesis, which explores the "happy ending" of the Emily trilogy. She has since presented and published on class, motherhood, the young artist, and play in Montgomery. Her most recent publication is "Idylls of Play: L.M. Montgomery's Child-

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