The Marriage Plot in L.M. Montgomery’s Emily Books, with a Guest Appearance by Robert Burns

DOI
http://doi.org/10.32393/jlmms/2024.0027
Published on
Fri, 11/22/2024 - 10:00

Recently my friend M.T. Anderson read *Emily of New Moon*, at my recommendation. I felt a fool for suggesting it to him—if you know his books, you understand—but he outwitted me, loving its “meandering, summery pacing, the nuanced characterization” (Anderson). He was also struck by Montgomery’s description of a phenomenon he, too, experiences—a sudden, ecstatic, glimpse of the sublime. This was, of course, Emily’s flash. I’m mentioning it here because it’s consequential to my friend, but since the flash has never come to me, I can’t say much more. Except that until Anderson told me about his flashes, I hadn’t felt the lack of it, but now I wonder what I’m missing. I suppose I could try hallucinogens—would they help?—but I’m a coward about altering my mind. It’s never been that solid to begin with, and, really, who knows where one could end up? Maybe someday my friend will himself write about the flash.

Before I get to the topic I *can* write about, I want to touch on Emily’s passionate attachment to the flora of Prince Edward Island. I admit to skimming through some of Montgomery’s nature descriptions (as I do in the *Anne* books) and am heartily sick of the Wind Woman. But that’s a quibble that pales beside Emily’s comedic battle with neighbour Lofty John, owner of a lovely grove of spruce and maple trees that abuts New Moon. To Emily, this grove is Fairyland, full of “the frolic of elfin lights and shadows” and “one of the places where dreams grow” (Montgomery, *ENM* 65–66). More pragmatically, it shelters her Uncle Jimmy’s beloved garden from the ravages of winter. But after an (also comedic) misunderstanding over a poisoned—or perhaps

not—apple, Lofty John threatens to destroy the trees, and Emily is determined to stop him. She courageously—as a Protestant—visits a Catholic priest and asks him for help.[1] Lofty John, you see, is a Catholic, and Emily hopes he'll abandon this brutal, senseless murder if asked to do so by Father Cassidy. She's right. Father Cassidy speaks to Lofty John, Lofty John is amused that Emily dared seek aid from a Catholic priest, and the trees are saved. That Emily also asks Father Cassidy for help with one of her epic poems—as in, what's the best way to free a nun from a nunnery?—is an example of the fun Montgomery had weaving her spells. The liberation of the nun (by dispensation from the Pope!) advances Emily's story not a bit. It's just one of the small, charming detours Montgomery couldn't resist.

The trees aren't the only lives Emily saved. In *Emily Climbs*, there's also a lost little boy, but this rescue's helped along by what seems to be Emily's second sight, something she fears and never wants to talk about. But because she saves the trees with a clear head, she's able to prize this victory over the other. If she prizes the trees themselves over humans, she doesn't tell us so. But I think it's a close call for her, and for Montgomery, too, and how fitting this is now, one hundred years later, with climate change reaping its horror. I'm glad Montgomery didn't live to see it. She'd be heartbroken, along with the rest of us.

Which—finally—takes me to the theme I have chosen, the marriage plot in the *Emily* trilogy, not because her love life is more important than her literary career. It's not. But because I enjoy the gleeful confusion Montgomery created with Emily's three major suitors,[2] and the hint she gave us to cut neatly through it.

Teddy Kent is the first suitor to appear, one hundred pages into *Emily of New Moon*. Not in person but via snotty Rhoda Stuart, who says this to Emily: "Oh, everybody in our class has a beau. Mine is Teddy Kent … [who has] been sick all June. He's the best-looking boy in Blair Water. You'll have to have a beau, too, Emily" (85). Emily fiercely repudiates the idea of beaux, and Teddy drops out of the story. When we next hear about him, fifty pages later, his health is improving, but he's lonely and moping, and Emily and her new friend, the magnificent Ilse Burnley,[3] visit, to cheer him up. We discover that he's handsome and, on further visits, that he loves to draw and can whistle like a bird. We also become acquainted with his crazed, possessive mother, who's wary of anyone or anything that threatens to take her son away from her. Including, horribly, a kitten Teddy loves. She drowns it. Perhaps to balance out his awful mother, Montgomery made him the only suitor with a psychic link to Emily. She uses it to summon him across space, begging to be rescued from a crazed old

man threatening to molest her. Later, in *Emily Climbs*, Emily again calls to Teddy, this time across space and time, preventing him from boarding a ship that collides with an iceberg and sinks into the Atlantic Ocean, killing all aboard.

Hearty, energetic Perry Miller arrives next, lunging into the story to rescue Emily from a marauding bull.[4] Saving her life acts as an aphrodisiac for Perry, if not for her. He decides on the spot to become a hired hand at Emily's home and to start attending school with her, his attempt to make himself worthy of her. Though the second suitor to arrive, Perry is the first to decide to marry Emily. (Teddy is still just drawing her.) He knows it will be a tough road. Emily's a member of the proud Murray clan, who keep themselves apart from anyone less exalted, particularly those, like Perry, who come from Stovepipe Town, the dregs of Prince Edward Island. But Perry has the confidence of a dozen Murrays, an obsession for personal advancement, a sense of humour, and an endless fervour for protecting Emily, whether it's from a nasty teacher or the aforesaid Rhoda Stuart, whom he spitballs to distraction (while Teddy makes rude drawings).

Last up: Dean Priest, an old schoolfriend of Emily's father, thus inarguably old enough to be her dad. The uncivil call him Jarback—one shoulder is higher than the other, and he has a minor limp. (I suspect a forceps delivery gone wrong.) He enters the contest for Emily's heart with a rescue even more dramatic than Perry's, saving her from falling thirty feet to a rocky shore and certain death. Dean, too, falls in love with Emily but, more aggressive than the boy, states his intentions immediately. "Because you see your life belongs to me henceforth. Since I saved it it's mine." And when she admits she doesn't know how to write love talk, he says, "*I'll* teach you some day" (*ENM* 270–71). Because Emily is only twelve, she doesn't understand him. She continues not to understand for many years, as he lures her into his web with gifts of books (including a dirty one, putatively by mistake) discussions about art and literature, and stories of his travels abroad.[5]

Those are our three suitors, a mixed bunch. I asked M.T. Anderson which of these suitors he thought would triumph. He couldn't choose. In his reading of *Emily of New Moon*, Montgomery had made a good case for all of them. If he did have a favourite—the one he hoped would win—he didn't tell me, but he did call Dean a groomer, without definitely removing him from the race. Anderson is correct to hold back on that. We don't know how an older man's obsession with a young girl could have played out a hundred years ago. But I do wonder if Montgomery gave Dean a disability to make him slightly less threatening

So my friend was no help in cutting through Montgomery's false trails. (This is a testament to Montgomery's skill, not a measure of Anderson's brilliance.) And I've read the series too many times to be objective. All three suitors have something to offer and, in the second book, Emily does agree to marry Dean. But, last week, as I was mulling this over, I realized that Montgomery provided us with a hint, a shining clue.[6] Here it is:

> Emily always knew when Teddy was coming, for when he reached the old orchard he whistled his "call"—the one he used just for her—a funny, dear, little call, like three clear bird notes, the first just medium pitch, the second higher, and the third dropping away into lowness and sweetness long drawn-out … That call always had an odd effect on Emily; it seemed to her that it fairly drew the heart of her body—and that she had to follow it. She thought Teddy could have whistled her clear across the world with those three magic notes. (*ENM* 143)

If "sweetness and long-drawn out" and "it fairly drew the heart out of her body" (143) aren't enough evidence, Montgomery has given us a sneaky nod to a Robert Burns's poem, about whistling. I can't be certain she did so on purpose. But Montgomery's ancestors were lowlander Scots, from the heart of Burns's territory, and she reminds us of her connection to Burns twice, in *Emily Climbs*, using bits of Burns's poems as chapter headings—"As Ithers See Us"[7] for Chapter Four, and "If a Body Kiss a Body"[8] for Chapter Seventeen.

Here is Burns's poem about whistling:

> Chorus:
> O whistle an' I'll come to ye, my lad,
> O whistle an' I'll come to ye, my lad;
> Tho' father, an' mother, an' a' should gae mad,
> O whistle an' I'll come to ye, my lad.[9]
>
> But warily tent, when ye come to court me,
> And come nae unless the back-yett be a-jee;
> Syne up the back-style and let naebody see,
> And come as ye were na comin' to me—
> And come as ye were na comin' to me.—

O whistle and I’ll, &c. (793)

And there we have it, an eighteenth-century poem about Teddy’s whistle that Emily “had to follow” (Montgomery, *ENM* 143). There are two more parallels to note. “Tho’ father, an’ mother, an’ a’ should gae mad” (Burns 793) neatly takes care of Teddy’s mother. And “For fear that she wyle your fancy frae me” (Burns 793) references that low point in Emily’s life, when Teddy almost marries Ilse.10

Once, and only once, toward the end of *Emily’s Quest*, does Emily let her pride keep her from following Teddy’s whistle, and immediately she regrets it. The scene is painful to read, and it must have been painful for Montgomery to write. I wonder if she used it to help spin the book out to a decent length. As it is, *Emily’s Quest* is still the shortest in the trilogy.

Later, Teddy gives Emily another chance, and this time she comes to his whistle, and all’s well that ends well.

If Emily has to have a husband (Montgomery didn’t sugarcoat the spinster lives of Aunt Elizabeth and Aunt Laura), we’re glad it’s Teddy. By now, his appalling mother is dead, he’s a successful, well-respected painter, and he has the generosity—we hope—to support Emily’s writing career. I’m not saying that Perry wouldn’t have had that generosity—he did buy her a typewriter—but he doesn’t understand Emily’s writing, or anyone else’s, as far as we can tell.

Plus, by the end of *Emily’s Quest*, he’s risen high in Canadian politics and will rise higher. Marriage with him couldn’t have provided a quiet life for a writer. But Perry does fine without Emily, ending up with Ilse, who’s adored him since childhood and will be an excellent Premier’s wife.

Should we pity Dean, who has the keys to heaven (Emily) snatched away at the last minute? No. Grooming her is only part of his nastiness. As she grows up, and becomes more serious about writing, he plays down her talent (“pretty cobwebs” [*EQ* 30], “charming things of their kind” [*EQ* 31]), trying to squelch her interest in anything that could get in his way. Nevertheless, she perseveres, and eventually writes a book. “[It was] not a great book—oh, no, but hers—her very own … And it was good. She knew it was—felt it was” (*EQ* 48). But when Emily asks for Dean’s opinion, he goes in for the kill. The book is “flimsy and ephemeral as a rose-tinted cloud” and “makes overmuch of a demand on the credulity of the reader” (*EQ* 51–52).11 Although he’s lying, Emily believes him, burns her only copy of her book,

12 and gives up on writing. He's crafty enough not to admit to the lie until she's broken off the engagement. Would he ever have told her, had they gotten married? I could write the scene myself. He'd taunt her with the lie, needing to punish her for some small sign of independence. At a social occasion with old friends, for example. Or—this would be more fun to write—when Perry punches Dean in the nose for tamping down Emily's fire.13

This is a satisfying place for me to stop, with Perry punching Dean. Many thanks to Liz Rosenberg, for inviting me to write this essay. I reread *House of Dreams*, her excellent biography of Montgomery, before re-embarking on the trilogy, and would have enjoyed writing about how Emily's flash relates to Montgomery's own mental health. And why neither of them seem all that interested in the ocean (which is right *there*). And the parallels between Emily's and Montgomery's suitors, including the improbable number of them. On a more granular level, I'd like to explore the idea that Perry Miller had his roots in the real-life, uneducated Herman Leard, the son in a house where Montgomery boarded during her teaching days. Although she was at the time engaged to a cousin who alternately bored and disgusted? enraged? her, at night Herman would slip secretly into her bedroom and introduce her to hitherto unknown and welcome pleasures, including … no, no, I really must stop. *Finis.* I love you, L.M. Montgomery.

Bio: Jeanne Birdsall, who won the National Book Award for *The Penderwicks*, owes much to L.M. Montgomery. For example, she stole a scene from *Emily of New Moon*. But it's Montgomery's ability to give characters equal measures of rapture and despair that Birdsall treasures the most and, while she doesn't do it as well as Montgomery did, she tries.

Banner Image: Photo by Jeanne Birdsall.

- 1 Montgomery had a good time writing this scene.
- 2 I'm leaving out Cousin Andrew Murray, even though Emily was engaged to him for a while. While her elders are pleased with the union, she herself thinks "He always seems as if he had just been starched and ironed and was afraid to move or laugh for fear he'd crack." I'm also leaving out Rev. James Wallace, Aylmer Vincent, Mark Greaves, and possible others I've forgotten.

- 3 Would anyone else choose being Ilse over Emily, or is it just me?
- 4 I stole this scene for my first Penderwicks book, unconsciously, I swear. My bull was less murderous than Emily's. He had a bit of Ferdinand in him and just wanted the small girl away from his daisy patch.
- 5 If these trips of Dean are, as I suspect, a handy excuse for wallowing in foreign fleshpots, Montgomery didn't let Emily catch on.
- 6 I'm certain many people have been ahead of me with this, but if I delved into that research, I'd be trapped on Prince Edward Island forever, unable to finish this essay, let alone the book I'm supposed to be writing.
- 7 "To a Louse, On Seeing One on a Lady's Bonnet at Church."
- 8 "Comin' Thro the Rye," famously misunderstood by J.D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield.
- 9 Burns wrote several versions of this poem. In one, he changed the last line of the chorus to "Thy Jeanie will venture wi' ye, my lad." For obvious reasons, I prefer this version, but it didn't stick. Not enough Jeanies out there to claim it, I guess.
- 10 See note 3.
- 11 Dean's a brute, but a well-written and realistic brute. He's one of Montgomery's masterpieces, and more believable than Teddy.
- 12 This reminds me of Amy burning Jo's manuscript in *Little Women*, and the fragility of manuscripts back then. Say what one will about the digital age, backing up files is a luxury.
- 13 Although besotted with Ilse, Perry will never stop wanting to protect Emily, from bulls, mean girls, and abusive men. That's just who he is.

Article Info

Creative Commons License**Copyright: Jeanne Birdsall, 2024.** This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (Creative Commons BY 4.0), which allows the user to share, copy, and redistribute the material in any medium or format and adapt, remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially, PROVIDED the Licensor is given attribution in accordance with the terms and conditions of the CC BY 4.0.

Peer reviewed
No

Works Cited:

Anderson, M.T. Personal email, 29 Jan. 2024

Burns, Robert. *The Canongate Burns: The Complete Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*. Edited by Andrew Noble and Patrick Scott Hogg, Canongate Classics, 2003.

Montgomery, L.M. *Emily Climbs*. 1925. Bantam, 1983.

---. *Emily of New Moo*n. 1923. Bantam, 1983.

---. *Emily's Quest*. 1927. Bantam, 1983.