Pigsties and Sunsets: L.M. Montgomery, *A Tangled Web*, and a Modernism of Her Own

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"My sales have been slipping a bit of late years," L.M. Montgomery noted in her journal in 1928, commenting on a semi-annual report she had received from her American publisher. "Well, I suppose I have had my day and must make way for newer favorites. For twenty years I have been in the van and that is considered a long time for the fickle public to be faithful" (*Selected Journals* III [1 October 1928] 378–79). By 1928, two decades after her first novel, *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), thrust her permanently into the public eye, Montgomery had published thirteen novels, two collections of short stories (one unauthorized), a collection of poems, and numerous periodical pieces. While her comment of resignation may have been realistic for a popular writer in mid-career, Montgomery immediately contradicted that expectation: "Yet my publishers tell me there is another reason—and a rather flattering one. It seems the sales of my *old books* are keeping up *too well* and they cut the market from my new ones to a large extent" (379).

While Montgomery could afford to be smug about her continued high sales, there were some changes about which she could not feel so self-assured during this time period. After rereading Marie Corelli's *Sorrows of Satan* (1895) during a night of insomnia in 1930, she reflected, "What a

ESC 31.4 (December 2005): 123–146

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commotion that book made when it came out over thirty years ago. And now I suppose nobody under thirty has ever heard of it. It was about as wild and absurd as any book could be—but Marie could tell a story. After all, I prefer the Satanic sorrows to the modern sex putridity" (*Selected Journals* IV [30 August 1930] 65; see also *After Green Gables* [26 April 1931] 187). An avid reader who mixed recent popular fiction interchangeably with rereadings of favourite texts by canonical writers of the nineteenth century and whose choice of reading materials does not seem to have been affected by her public role as the wife of a Presbyterian minister, Montgomery was nonetheless not completely indiscriminate when it came to modern taste in fiction, given that she had difficulty adjusting to some of the latest literary trends. After reading a scene in Valentine Dobrée's *Your Cuckoo Sings by Kind* (1927) that included "the most hideous, loathsome bestial incident—the vilest thing I ever read in any book," something so obscene she refused to describe it, her reaction was so violent that "It turned me sick":

> I think what hurt me worst was that it was so unjustifiable. There was no *need* for it—it didn't *belong* to the book.... I am no prude. I have read a great many books where sex played a prominent part—great books which I enjoyed. But I have no use for the filth that is being spewed out by the presses of the world today. It is *not* sex—it is plain dirt. This was worse than dirt—it was verminous. (*Selected Journals* III [17 November 1927] 359; see also *After Green Gables* [7 April 1929] 162–63)[1]

As Mary Rubio and Elizabeth Waterston note in their Introduction to the fourth volume of Montgomery's *Selected Journals* (1998), which includes entries from 1929 to 1935, literary trends that evolved gradually after World War I gave a new set of tastes and offerings to Montgomery's "fickle public," which would cause sales of her books to decline steadily throughout the 1930s. "Fragmentation, angst, and disillusionment were

1 After stating that she threw the book into the fireplace and watched it burn ("Nothing but fire could purify it"), Montgomery continued: "*Why* did the author put such a thing into what else would have been a charming book. Was she afraid of the laughter of her world if she wrote a wholly decent book? Then why didn't she pour pornography over every chapter and omit that damnable half page?" (*Selected Journals* III [17 November 1927] 359). Irene Gammel quotes and discusses this "damnable half page," a scene of incestuous rape (56–57). For a detailed discussion of Montgomery's experience of reading throughout her life, see Karr.

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the vogue, and Montgomery's novels, set in pre-war Prince Edward Island, appeared to be works of nostalgia and sentimentalism to the Modernist critical eye," they write. Moreover, her books "were about domestic women at a time when the heroes of 'serious fiction' were mostly male, and suffering males at that, carrying the mysterious wounds of a generalized psychic disturbance" (xxiii). As well, shifts in the Canadian literary scene affected how Montgomery was received and read: although she had been given exceptionally positive press during the first half of her career, the Toronto literary world became increasingly more androcentric after the Great War, due to the influence of several new critics such as William Arthur Deacon, who became enormously influential as literary editor of *Saturday Night* between 1922 and 1928 (Thomas and Lennox 28). Deacon misread and denigrated Montgomery's preference to broach controversial matters implicitly rather than explicitly and instead favoured strategies of open ennui found in the work of authors such as Morley Callaghan, whom he supported and promoted from the mid-1930s onward (Thomas and Lennox 157–58). Deacon had viciously attacked Montgomery's "series of girls' sugary stories" in his volume *Poteen: A Pot-Pourri of Canadian Essays* (1926), claiming that "she is only mentioned to show the dearth of mature novels at the time" (169). In a journal entry dated 1928 but not published until 1992, Montgomery attacked Callaghan's debut novel *Strange Fugitive* (1928), calling it "a much be-trumpeted novel" which she found "the deadliest dull thing I ever tried to read":

> Callaghan's idea of "Literature" seems to be to photograph a latrine or pigstye [sic] meticulously and have nothing else in the picture. Now, latrines and pigstyes [sic] are not only malodorous but very uninteresting. We have a latrine in our backyard. I see it when I look that way—and I also see before it a garden of color and perfume—over it a blue sky—behind it a velvety pine caressing crystal air—a river of silver and aquamarine—misty hills of glamor beyond. These things are as "real" as the latrine and can all be seen at the same time. Callaghan sees nothing but the latrine and insists blatantly that you see nothing else also. If you insist on seeing sky and river and pine you are a "sentimentalist" and the truth is not in you. (*Selected Journals* III [30 December 1928] 387; see also *After Green Gables* [7 April 1929] 169–70)[2]

2 This distinction also appears in *Emily's Quest* (1927), in which Emily, a writer-in-embryo, is given some final advice by her beloved mentor, Mr Carpenter, on

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Such general statements about modernism and about Montgomery's fiction have led to two pervading myths about her body of work: one, that Montgomery rejected modernism, and two, that modernism rejected Montgomery. And yet, despite her harsh criticism of Callaghan's debut effort, Montgomery went immediately to work on *A Tangled Web*, one of her rare forays into a decidedly adult market.[3] Published in 1931, *A Tangled Web* is an experimental project that has been largely overlooked by critics and readers alike, compared to the critical and popular reception of *Anne of Green Gables*, by far her best-known work. The story of the actions and reactions of an extended clan in Prince Edward Island after its matriarch announces who will inherit an ugly but coveted family heirloom following her impending death, *A Tangled Web* is a "radical approach to form," to use Glenn Willmott's phrase in his broader discussion of Canadian modernism (7), especially to the forms most present in Montgomery's body of work—or, rather, to the forms to which her body of work is assumed to follow. Although the majority of Montgomery's post-Great War fiction uses nostalgia to look back to the pre-war period, presenting what Gabrielle Ceraldi calls "a modern world dressed up in period costume" (249), *A Tangled Web* is very openly concerned with the problems and anxieties of modernity. More specifically, the Prince Edward Island depicted in this novel does not enjoy the comforts, pleasures, or securities of the Prince Edward Island depicted in *Anne of Green Gables*.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to counter the assumption that Montgomery rejected modernism by exploring the extent to which *A Tangled Web* negotiates and responds to broader patterns of experimen-

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his deathbed: "Don't be—led away—by those howls about realism. Remember—pine woods are just as real as—pigsties—and a darn sight pleasanter to be in" (24). For more on how the *Emily* trilogy negotiates the tension between pine woods and pigsties in inter-war Canadian fiction, see Pike. Montgomery eventually sent her copy of Callaghan's book to her correspondent, Ephraim Weber, who tried to read it with his wife before eventually following Montgomery's example with *Your Cuckoo Sings by Kind* and throwing it in the fireplace (*After Green Gables* 183, n37).

3 No doubt another factor motivating her was her American publisher's request for "another book along the lines of *The Blue Castle*—which by the way was very successful" (*After Green Gables* [7 April 1929] 168). This comedy for adults had been published in 1926. The majority of Montgomery's novels, first published for a general audience but demoted to the children's shelves following a boom in literacy rates in the 1920s and 1930s, are now regarded as "crossover" texts for either child or adult readers. *A Tangled Web* will not likely appeal to children, despite its current location, along with the rest of Montgomery's novels (in identical editions), in the young adult section of most bookstores.

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tation, disruption, and subversion that are part of a female modernism theorized by feminist critics of the past fifteen years. In her influential chapter "Modernism and Gender," Marianne Dekoven describes what she sees as a dichotomy of gendered preoccupations found throughout texts of the modernist period by both male and female writers: on the one hand, the "male modernist fear of women's new power" brought upon by first-wave feminism (the suffragettes), which resulted in "the combination of misogyny and triumphal masculinism that many critics see as central, defining features of modernist work by men," and, concomitantly, "a fascination and strong identification with the empowered feminine," which led to "an irresolvable ambivalence toward powerful femininity" (174). My investigation follows the cues set out by Bridget Elliott and Jo-Ann Wallace in their project of recovering and re-evaluating the works of women writers and artists by "'imposing' them on an academy which has refused to recognize the degrees of their contributions to 'modernism,'" a project that requires a widening of the boundaries surrounding modernism to make it "a discursive and historical field" (1). In the first of her two-volume *Refiguring Modernism* (1995), subtitled *The Women of 1928*, Bonnie Kime Scott echoes Elliot and Wallace's statements as she examines works by women that led to "the complexities of a richly varied modernism of 1928" (184). Although Kime Scott's study focuses specifically on Virginia Woolf, Rebecca West, and Djuna Barnes as "central representatives of modernist writing," I add Montgomery's *A Tangled Web* to the widening of boundaries surrounding the "limited sense of modernism" (xvi) in order to examine this overlooked novel's explicit expression of Montgomery's own "irresolvable ambivalences" about marriage, patriarchy, and feminism—an explicit expression that she would largely abandon in her later novels.

But what would it mean to consider Montgomery to be a "woman of 1928"?

But what would it mean to consider Montgomery to be a "woman of 1928"? How can *A Tangled Web* be read here, particularly given the tangled web as both an allusion to Sir Walter Scott, a canonical male author of the nineteenth century, and as a central metaphor in the modernist writings of Woolf, West, and Barnes?[4] Kime Scott sees 1928 as "an active, exploratory period, when it was clear that women writers were developing a new sense of the literary world and setting their own objectives, largely through what they could learn from one another"; moreover, "On or about October

4 In a 1914 journal entry, Montgomery listed Sir Walter Scott as one of two favourite poets and one of several favourite prose authors (*Selected Journals* II [15 April 1914] 146), and allusions to Scott's work, peppered throughout her fiction, indicate his influence on her writing. The title *A Tangled Web* is an allusion to the following quotation from *Marmion*, canto 6, stanza 17: "O what a tangled

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11, 1928," the date of publication of Woolf's experimental and influential *Orlando*, ten days after Montgomery's journal entry quoted at the beginning of this paper, "the character of the woman writer changed" (183). And so, I do not mean that Montgomery deliberately wrote *A Tangled Web* as a modernist text, as an imitation of or a response to *Strange Fugitive*, in relation to the three writers that form Kime Scott's study (none of whom Montgomery appears to have read) or in an attempt to find new favour in a critic like Deacon, who "consistently denigrated" her and Ralph Connor for "their sentimental optimism" (Thomas and Lennox 37). Certainly, if we retain the limited definition of androcentric modernism, it would be difficult to support the claim that Montgomery was not anti-modernist or that *A Tangled Web* could be considered a modernist text, since Montgomery's comments clearly reveal that she saw herself and her work as anti-modernist. But by widening these boundaries, we can see how *A Tangled Web*—a text of the modern period, if not a modernist text—marks Montgomery's attempt to begin breaking away from what she saw as constraining and increasingly limiting literary forms for a general readership that would expect her to continue with themes and topics similar to those in *Anne of Green Gables*—in short, her attempt, however short-lived, to create a modernism of her own.

Montgomery often daydreamed about writing "a book with grown-up creatures—a psychological study of one human being's life" (*Selected Journals* II [24 August 1920] 390). She kept putting it off, claiming she lacked the sustained time to devote to such a project; she also wanted to first establish financial security for herself and for her two sons, fearing that too abrupt a move would not prove financially successful (*After Green Gables* [29 September 1920] 85; see also [17 October 1923] 110; *Selected Journals* III [3 May 1929] 396). Perhaps the self-assurance about her career

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web we weave, / When first we practise to deceive!" In *Anne of Green Gables*, thirteen-year-old Anne quotes this line after she dyes her hair green by mistake: "That is poetry, but it is true," she notes meditatively (218). Kime Scott notes that webs, "favorite figures of speech in Western culture" (xv), are recast in modernist fiction, not only in the texts themselves but in the complex personal and professional relationships between the writers of this period (xxii–xxv). More specifically, she traces the web as a repeated motif in the work of Woolf, Barnes, West, and their contemporaries in order to explore the ways that "women's webs encourage exploration of attachments and consider their difficulties" (xvi). Through the use of the web as the central metaphor that links her study of her three key authors, Kime Scott sees "the possibility of agency and selection for the weaver" (xx), which links the web to the question of "irresolvable ambivalence toward powerful femininity" voiced by Dekoven.

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voiced in late 1928 and quoted at the beginning of this paper gave her the impetus to take new chances in her writing.[5] She occasionally mentioned but never described in much detail the novel she always hoped to write, and she saw *A Tangled Web* as the opportunity to begin to gradually move her "fickle public" toward serious adult fiction. Still, several factors attest to her "irresolvable ambivalences" toward this project: one, Montgomery left virtually no mention of the writing process of this book in her published journals and letters, with the exception of the announcement that she was working on it and then that she had ended it;[6] two, she mailed the manuscript to her publisher without a definitive title, resulting in several months of heated correspondence about what it should ultimately be called;[7] and three, when it was released, Montgomery thought the image

5 For instance, Montgomery frequently mentioned her willingness to write sequels to her popular books because they helped provide her with financial security. In light of her self-assured comment that her slipping sales were caused in part by the continued popularity of her earlier books, Montgomery may have felt she had little to lose financially if she took a bit of a chance late in 1928. Because of the absence of a more substantial record of the writing process of this book, it is completely conjectural whether the stock market crash of October 1929, which badly damaged that financial security and which interrupted the drafting of *A Tangled Web*, made her reconsider whether or not this was the best moment for such a creative move.

6 Although Montgomery only occasionally offered detailed discussions of her own writing in her journals and letters, the absence of any substantial mention of the writing process of *A Tangled Web* is indicative of Montgomery's silencing of "her immersion into an imagined life," as Rubio and Waterston note (Introduction xx). Montgomery first mentions work on "an adult story, centering around the old Woolner jug" in her journal on 3 May 1929, noting that "my heart isn't in it" (*Selected Journals* III 396), but it is not clear when exactly she began brainstorming material for the project; she finished the manuscript on 1 September 1930 (*Selected Journals* IV [2 September 1930] 65). She offers few additional details to Weber: "The central idea is the fuss a certain clan brew up over the question—who is to become owner of a certain old heirloom jug. I think I showed you the jug when you were here and told you its story" (*After Green Gables* [7 April 1929] 168). In a later letter, she offers a brief update: "I have about one third of my 'jug' story done.... Some parts of it are good. The rest just padding" (*After Green Gables* [8 June 1930] 180).

7 Montgomery described this process in a 1931 letter to Ephraim Weber. All her suggestions for titles were vetoed by both her Canadian and American publishers, and their suggestions were either "ridiculous" or "nice sentimental blue-and-pink sweet-sixteen titles for a humorous novel mainly about middle-aged people, some of whom said *damn*. I got plain mad finally and told them to call it any darned thing they wanted to!!" (*After Green Gables* [27 December 1931] 194; see also *Selected Journals* IV [1 June 1931] 121). They eventually settled on *A Tangled Web*, but it was published as *Aunt Becky Began It* in the United Kingdom (*Selected Journals* IV [11 July 1931] 139, 142).

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on the dust jacket inappropriate and misleading.[8] The absence of authorial commentary about this novel not only compromises the possibility of a biographical reading but also makes it impossible to conjecture how Montgomery expected this transitional novel to affect how her readers viewed her.[9] "It is 'different' from anything I've done yet," she hinted to her correspondent of twenty-five years, G. B. MacMillan (*My Dear Mr. M.* [15 March 1931] 161), but that was as far as she would elaborate.

That Montgomery saw the novel as a sign of difference needs critical attention because of the implicit suggestion that her previous work is entirely uniform, a claim frequently made or assumed by both Montgomery's supporters and detractors. This assumption is challenged by the wide range of readings of Montgomery's novels by critics over the last twenty years. These critics have found the same texts to be both radical and liberating *and* conservative and restrictive simultaneously, a range of

8 As Montgomery complained privately, "[T]he figure in poke-bonnet and crinoline on it will suggest a sentimental novel of the Victorian Era, which is the last thing I want people to think it. I intend to speak my mind to Stokes. I [do] not think they have been doing what they might for my books [these] past five years. They do not bother 'pushing' them at all but are content to let them drift along on my reputation" (*Selected Journals* IV [21 August 1931] 146).

9 Although Montgomery hardly ever mentioned this book in her journals after its publication, her surviving business correspondence, part of the L.M. Montgomery Collection of the University of Guelph archives, fills in at least part of this gap. In a letter dated 14 February 1936, F.A. Stokes, president of the Frederick A. Stokes Company (her American publisher), wrote that sales of *A Tangled Web* "have practically ceased. Our last copies were turned over to Messrs. McClelland & Stewart," her Canadian publishers since 1916. Further correspondence from Miss T.F. Mahony of the Stokes company provides some details about the sale of a reprint edition of all Montgomery's books published by their firm to Grosset and Dunlap. On 26 September 1938, Mahony announced that this firm had "undertaken to reprint all of your older books with the exception of A TANGLED WEB, and, if I can possibly do so, I shall try to induce them to reissue this volume." A follow-up later dated 13 April 1939 included *A Tangled Web* on the reprint list, but Mahony informed Montgomery that it and *The Blue Castle* would earn her a reduced royalty: "You will perhaps recall that at the time these titles were published it was decided to have the jackets look a bit more adult in appearance than the 'Anne' and 'Rilla' books. Unfortunately the original jackets are not, according to Grosset & Dunlap, colorful enough for reprint sale." A later letter from Stokes, dated 27 May 1937, indicated the company's interest in "the possibility that you might do another novel for adults like the delightful 'BLUE CASTLE,'" apparently repeating an earlier request (see note 3, above) but with no mention of *A Tangled Web*. See Montgomery, "Business and Lawsuit Correspondence."

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responses that cannot be encompassed by Deacon's disparaging remark.[10] Montgomery generally wrote within the genre of the domestic romance, which Rubio calls both "a very restrictive genre" ("Subverting" 13) and "a safe space in which to write" ("Subverting" 19) for a woman of her era, but she disrupted its generic boundaries, thus simultaneously resisting and conforming to conventional paradigms (Rubio, "Subverting" 16) using strategies similar to those of a contemporary Canadian female writer, Sara Jeannette Duncan.[11] Thus, *A Tangled Web* comes into conflict with claims made about Montgomery's overall body of work, particularly her strategy of implicitly inserting what Rubio and Waterston call "secret messages of rebellion and resistance against authority (especially patriarchal authority) into her sunny stories" (*Writing a Life* 12).

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For instance, Montgomery's novels usually centre on the transition from childhood to adolescence or from adolescence to adulthood and are thus designed to foster "a healthy sense of female self" (Rubio, "Subverting" 10) for both their individual protagonists and their implied readers. Montgomery always felt more at ease writing about children, focusing on gendered development before the moment of sexual awakening and the pressures of compulsory heterosexuality; she felt awkward writing about romance, in part because her own marriage was "a disaster" (Rubio, "Montgomery" 749) and also because of what she consistently saw as her strengths and weaknesses as a writer: "My forte is in writing humor," she declared in 1913 while writing what would become *Anne of the Island* (1915). "Only childhood and elderly people can be treated humorously in books. Young women in the bloom of youth and romance should be sacred from humor. It is the time of sentiment and I am not good at depicting

10 In this respect, Montgomery's work fits a pattern described by Lyn Pykett in her overview of modernist English novels by women: "Women writers have all too often been excluded from the canon because they didn't write enough to have a significant oeuvre, or because they wrote so much and in so many different—sometimes fugitive—forms that the oeuvre is difficult to classify and place" (103). Given the many ways in which *A Tangled Web* refutes or complicates assumptions made about Montgomery's overall body of work, perhaps it is not so much of a stretch to consider *A Tangled Web* to be the "strange fugitive" of that body of work, even though Montgomery would not likely appreciate that designation.

11 In her novel *The Imperialist* (1904), Duncan uses the boundaries of the domestic novel, a "safe" and "acceptable" genre for a female writer, to frame her political narrative in the language of romance; consequently, the domestic space in her novel becomes a metonym for the nation (Kertzer 13, 24). Montgomery's strategy overlaps with Duncan's, even if Montgomery's novels are (arguably) less obviously "political."

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sentiment—I can't do it well" (*Selected Journals* II [27 September 1913] 133). In fact, in most of her novels in which wedding bells appear to be the "natural" resolution for her title heroines—*Anne of the Island*, *Rilla of Ingleside* (1921), *Emily's Quest* (1927), and *Mistress Pat* (1935)—Montgomery avoids the romantic tension altogether for most of the narrative and delays the "inevitable" dénouement as long as possible, making her "happy" endings appear unconvincing and contrived. Complex characterization supersedes plot structure—Rubio even states that "Plot is unimportant" in her novels ("Montgomery" 750)—and Montgomery almost always uses a third-person, omniscient, and occasionally intrusive narrator who for the most part remains sympathetic to the protagonist even when recounting points of view of supporting characters. In her examination of *Anne of Green Gables*, for example, Elizabeth Rollins Epperly claims that the narrator "helps to orchestrate a book-length comic deconstruction and reconstruction of romance" by inviting readers to enter "into a complex arrangement between reading about and participating in Anne's story" (19). In addition to inserting fair doses of irony, imitation, and commentary in her constructed narrators, Epperly suggests, Montgomery infuses into her narratives "idealized, late-Romantic, occasionally transcendentalist nature descriptions," which "are wonderfully attractive and versatile" (9).

A Tangled Web reverses or rejects all of these specific analyses, which have led to generalizations about how her entire body of work is read. In addition to creating a complex plot that is directly responsible for the motivations and actions of all the novel's characters as well as juxtaposing multiple subplots, including four romance plots (three of which involve adults who are no longer "in the bloom of youth and romance"), Montgomery drastically changes her mode of narration. Replacing the occasionally intrusive, occasionally preachy, almost always sympathetic omniscient narrator is a new narrative voice that relies much more heavily on a form of heteroglossia, a term that Bakhtin defines as "*another's speech in another's language*, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way" (324). Montgomery modifies this definition of heteroglossia, which Bakhtin sees as part of double-voiced discourse. She reverses the refracted expression of authorial intention in order to distance herself as the novel's implied author from the disruptive actions and speeches of her numerous characters. More specifically, Montgomery inserts gossip and hearsay directly into the narration while remaining silent about the accuracy of the claims being made; by doing so in a novel whose narrative focuses on multiple focalizations, Montgomery experiments with late-Victorian and Edwardian conventions of a narrative voice that purports

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to objectively represent reality for readers, making the truth claim that opens the book ironic: "A dozen stories have been told about the old Dark jug. This is the true one" (1).

The few critical responses to this book have been mostly negative. Genevieve Wiggins claims that the book "appeals, with reservations, only to adult readers" (143); more specifically, "Not only does the shifting viewpoint produce confusion and hinder identification, but the six major plots and several subplots repeat familiar Montgomery themes and are by no means exceptional" (140). Waterston, writing in 1966, claims that "The novel 'up-dates' the Island girls, now lipsticked, silkstockinged, bobbed, and given to small swearings.… But in spite of this minor naughtiness the stories are still the conventional tales of 'Avonlea,' not really lifted into any newly mature vision" (21). Nearly thirty years later, Waterston's biography co-written with Rubio, *Writing a Life*, presents a slightly more positive spin on the novel: "[T]he tangled plot of this amusing book involves a series of studies of love.… [But] Montgomery had by now written so much about love that her writing, even after a sardonic start, eventually turned around to affirm her readership's sentimental expectations" (87, 89). Theodore F. Sheckels Jr., searching for a consistent plot structure throughout Montgomery's entire body of work, states categorically that "the novel simply does not cohere" (533). In a more well-rounded analysis, Epperly reacts positively to some of the shifts from Montgomery's earlier fiction but responds negatively to its plot structure: "Montgomery always had trouble constructing a plot, and though the jug cannot be dismissed, since it is the motivator behind and the reason for the stories themselves, we must often ignore it in order to think about the human interactions Montgomery paints so well" (247). The final line of the novel, which contains one of the most vicious racial slurs in Montgomery's entire body of work, is ignored by all critics except Epperly. Laura M. Robinson discusses *A Tangled Web* and *Anne of Green Gables* in terms of communal bonds and national identity, pointing out that "the desire for ethnic purity is voiced in openly xenophobic fashion" (21) in these two novels, but this sequence is not part of her discussion.

It is precisely the novel's centredness on the heirloom jug that first needs to be reconsidered. Montgomery takes a material artifact from her own life narrative, an object passed down to her through a matrilineal heritage and that she "prize[d] beyond all similar possessions" (*Selected Journals* II [28 January 1912] 88),[12] and places it in the hands of Aunt Becky,

12 Montgomery records the history of "the old Woolner jug," which is nearly identical to that of its fictional counterpart, in her journal (*Selected Journals* II [28

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undisputed matriarch of an apparently limitless cast of characters from the Dark and Penhallow clan. Bearing in mind Dekoven's identification of the modernist motif of "the predominance of symbolism as conveyer of the novel's central meanings" (176), I locate the jug of the novel, described as "a household god" (44) for the clan members, as a representative symbol for a previous existence, one not only located in a former country (England) but in the time that preceded the Great War. The "passionate and misguided" characters (Epperly 244) who compete for the right of ownership of this coveted artifact are all shown to be disillusioned by the modern world, and their desire to own this object of the past signals a manifestation of a latent desire to own a piece of that past, to somehow return to the old world. All the characters in the novel are shown to be not only flawed and prejudiced but also in some ways dissatisfied with their modern lives; whether they are described as bored or angry or stagnant or spiteful or impatient, this dissatisfaction frequently stems from some public or private trauma of the past that prevents them from moving forward. In the opening sequence of the novel, Aunt Becky stuns her entire extended family by announcing that the next owner of the jug will be decided by the contents of a sealed envelope that will not be opened until a set date beyond her death. Although she admits that the contents of the envelope may reveal a particular name, she claims it is also likely that her chosen executor will get to choose the new owner under the purview of her particular prejudices against clan members who are unmarried, who swear, who are lazy or dishonest, who write bad poetry, and so on; on the other hand, it may also be decided by lot, making their actions irrelevant (62–64). By refusing to be in any way specific about the identity of the jug's new owner, Aunt Becky prompts all the clan members, each of whom feels attacked by one of her prejudices, to confront their past traumas and to struggle to evolve toward an uncertain future. Although the novel is principally concerned with a set number of subplots, Aunt Becky's strategy affects every single person present. As one

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January 1912] 88). There is, however, one major difference: when the matriarch of her own maternal family, Grandma Macneill (née Woolner), died in 1911, there was apparently no question that the jug should be bequeathed to her. A similar heirloom jug appears in the short story "Old Lady Lloyd," included in *Chronicles of Avonlea* (1912). Photographs of Montgomery with the original jug were taken as publicity shots for the *Globe and Mail* the year after *A Tangled Web* was published (*Selected Journals* IV [18 September 1932] 201–02). Thirty pieces of the jug are now housed at the University of Guelph archives, but I have not been able to ascertain how or when it was broken (see Montgomery, "Ceramic Woolner Jug"); for a photograph of these fragments, see Rubio and Waterston, "Untangling the Web" (275).

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clan member states, "If that jug doesn't set everybody on ears in a month's time, may I fight with Irishmen to the end of my life" (66).

The novel introduces this group of characters thusly: "In three generations sixty Darks had been married to sixty Penhallows.... There was really nobody for a Dark to marry except a Penhallow, and nobody for a Penhallow to marry except a Dark. Once, it had been said, they wouldn't take anybody else. Now, nobody else would take them" (1–2). Although Aunt Becky is not "particularly beloved by her clan" because of her propensity to always tell "the plain truth" without thought to anyone's feelings and to "make them squirm" (6) by conjuring up past embarrassments and mistakes at the most inopportune times, the invitation to a "levee" in which she will reveal the fate of the beloved jug leads to near perfect attendance among the clan members, all of whom attempt to endure Aunt Becky's painful remarks, suppressing their feelings of humiliation and anger out of fear of losing any chance of inheriting this coveted heirloom. As willing and fearful puppets, the clan members confirm this "cantankerous old woman's manipulation of her entire community. Even after her death, the content of her will ensures that she will dominate" (Rubio and Waterston, Introduction xx; see also "Untangling the Web" 276).

Aunt Becky is a fascinating innovation on Montgomery's behalf.

Aunt Becky is a fascinating innovation on Montgomery's behalf. Undemonstrative and unsympathetic matriarchs are hardly a novelty in her fiction—we need only think of Marilla Cuthbert in *Anne of Green Gables*, Aunt Elizabeth in the *Emily* trilogy (1923–27), Old Grandmother in *Magic for Marigold* (1929), or Grandmother Kennedy in *Jane of Lantern Hill* (1937)—but while Grandmother Kennedy is unquestionably the most inflexible and vicious of the group (unlike the rest of the matriarchs, she is never redeemed and remains positively evil at the end of *Jane*), Aunt Becky's cruelty toward her relatives is prompted more by a twisted delight in their discomfort, which Montgomery offsets through the use of comedy. Re-emphasizing the statement quoted earlier in which Montgomery claimed that "Only childhood and elderly people can be treated humorously in books," I see Aunt Becky as Montgomery's attempt to characterize her "irresolvable ambivalence" about powerful femininity, to borrow Dekoven's phrase. Although Aunt Becky dominates over her entire extended family within a larger patriarchal system, the phony obituary she reads to her shocked relatives indicates the limits of—or her own dissatisfactions with—this power:

> *She longed for freedom, as all women do, but had sense enough to understand that real freedom is impossible in this kind of a*

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> *world, the lucky people being those who can choose their masters, so she never made the mistake of kicking uselessly over the traces. Sometimes she was mean, treacherous and greedy. Sometimes she was generous, faithful and unselfish. In short, she was an average person who had lived as long as anybody should live.* (48; italics in original)

And yet, one of the other characters suggests that Aunt Becky will be remembered *because* of her viciousness and not because of her apparent generosity. As Joscelyn Dark reminds her after the levee, "We won't be half so much a clan when you're gone. You've always made history for us somehow.... When the girls are old women they'll tell their grandchildren about [the levee]—you'll live by it fifty years after you're in your grave" (75–76).

Aunt Becky dies in the first third of the novel, and while it would seem that her disruptive position as matriarch within a patriarchal system is likewise put to rest, the consequences of her final actions reverberate long after her death. The remaining subplots that unfold are all concerned with romance, but none of them are entirely typical for Montgomery, who "modernizes" romance but undercuts that modernization through the use of comedy, irony, and what appear to be consistently positive resolutions, thus continuing to give her readers the "safe" happy endings required of her but simultaneously exaggerating the demands of the domestic romance genre. For Margaret Penhallow, a middle-aged spinster, dressmaker, and aspiring poet, the romantic dream is not of a husband or of "the glamour of being Mrs." (205) but of her own home and an adopted baby, an arrangement that has always been socially and financially impossible to her. Feeling that her status as a marital "failure" will ultimately eliminate any chance for the jug, she agrees to marry bachelor Penny Dark, even though they feel no attraction whatsoever for each other and even though they would both feel much more fulfilled if they remained single. After a half-hearted courtship, Margaret's dream of self-sufficiency has a chance of coming true, but only if she remains single: the copy of *Pilgrim's Progress* bequeathed to her by Aunt Becky turns out to be a first edition that she sells for ten thousand dollars, and with that money she buys the house of her dreams and adopts Brian Dark, an illegitimate and neglected clan orphan (233–34, 241–43). And so, while there are numerous single women throughout Montgomery's body of work, Margaret Penhallow is the only one whose "resolution" depends not on wedding bells but on the active decision to reject the opportunity to marry in order to gain home ownership and

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adoptive parenthood. This type of resolution for a female character occurs nowhere else in Montgomery's fiction, signaling her ambivalence toward the marriage plot as the "natural" resolution for all women.

The ambivalences about female power become more pronounced in the novel's remaining romance plots, but two of these entanglements merit especial consideration. The novel shows that the clan's stifling environment has taken its toll on Donna Dark, whose husband, a soldier in the Great War, has been dead for eight years. Montgomery had addressed the "romantic" aspect of war in *Rilla of Ingleside* a decade earlier, but Donna is an example of the limits imposed on women in the war's aftermath. Because she neither is a "failed" spinster (like Margaret Penhallow) nor has the social sanction of a married woman, her status as war widow now involves playing a public role that has long since spiraled into stagnation. Looking around the room at her fellow assembled relatives, "She suddenly felt sick and tired of the whole thing—of the whole clan—of her whole tame existence.... She wondered impatiently if anything pleasant or interesting or thrilling were ever going to happen to her again" (58). As if on cue, she falls in love at a glance with Peter Penhallow, who reciprocates her feelings in a series of comic, exaggerated exchanges. This newfound passion for Peter, which happens solely because Aunt Becky's levee draws them together for the first time since they were children, forces Donna to give up her accoutrements of "widow's weeds" (her actual grief over the loss of her husband having long since ceased) and to discover that romance did not necessarily die with Barry. But Peter and Donna's tempestuous relationship, which Epperly calls "a violent and sudden thing" (244), is atypical for Montgomery, whose courtship plots tend to drag on half-heartedly. Donna's father, Drowned John Penhallow, whose rages, swearing habits, and enactment of patriarchal privilege are treated humorously in the novel, opposes the alliance because of an ancient family feud and forbids Peter from even speaking to Donna ever again. Thus, the *Romeo and Juliet* plot is reworked for adult characters living in the modern world. Donna and Peter eventually conclude that there is nothing for them to do but elope, even though the "romance" of running away to be married is marred by the inevitable public scandal that is sure to ensue. Donna agonizes over the fact that eloping will likely eliminate her candidacy as the jug's inheritor, given Aunt Becky's disapproval of rushed marriages. There are also practical details to be considered: "The Island was such a poor place to murder or elope. You were sure to be caught before you could get away from it" (156). Although Donna has no trouble sneaking out of the house to meet Peter, with the narrator reflecting that "Really, eloping was ridiculously

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easy" (156), ultimately the fact that they do not make it to the altar is, to Epperly, "in perfect consistency with their pride and temper" (245). At the end of a conversation where their bickering escalates to the point of no return, they part after the following exchange:

> Donna opened the car door and sprang out, her eyes blazing in the pale starlight.
> "Peter Penhallow—I deserve this—but—"
> "You deserve a damn' good spanking," said Peter.
> Donna had never sworn in her life before. But she was not Drowned John's daughter for nothing.
> "Go to hell," she said.
> Peter committed the only sin a woman cannot forgive. He took her at her word.
> "All right," he said—and went. (160)

While the courtship of Peter and Donna continues with similar hits and misses, this subplot unfolds alongside the love triangle between Nan Penhallow, Gay Penhallow, and Gay's fiancé Noel Gibson. Gay Penhallow is the closest of all the characters to a character expected of Montgomery, even though none of Montgomery's major female heroines, including Anne Shirley, is as innocent or naive or frivolous as Gay, who, at eighteen, basks in the "romance" of being engaged to Noel. The narrator relates her syrupy thoughts: "What difference did anything make in the whole wide beautiful world except that Noel loved her and she loved him?" (13–14). Gay's innocence and naiveté is overshadowed by her cousin Nan, "about whom clan gossip had been very busy ever since her arrival in Rose River":

> It was whispered breathlessly that she wore pajamas and smoked cigarettes. It was well known that she had plucked eyebrows and wore breeches when she rode or "hiked," but even Rose River was resigned to that. Aunt Becky saw a snakey hipless thing with a shingle bob and long barbaric earrings. A silky, sophisticated creature in a smart black satin dress who instantly made every other girl in the room seem outmoded and Victorian. But Aunt Becky took her measure on the spot.
> [...] "I understand you consider yourself a modern. Well, there were girls that chased the boys in my time, too. It's only names that change." (12)

Gay chafes under the contrast between her and Nan; although they are the same age, Nan's patronizing speeches and "modern" appearance make

Gay feel outdated and immature, and Nan's open decision to "capture Noel Gibson" (13) gradually picks away at Gay's innocence and self-confidence. The narrative makes this contrast explicit:

> Nan, with her subtle, mysterious face, her ashgold hair, her strange liquid emerald eyes, her thin red lips, who was not now really half as pretty as Gay but had odd exotic charms unknown to Rose River.... Gay did not want to be quaint and Victorian. She wanted to be smart and up-to-date and sophisticated like Nan. Though not exactly like Nan. She didn't want to smoke.... Noel didn't like girls who smoked. He didn't approve of them at all. (21)

By using adjectives like "mysterious," "strange," and "exotic," Montgomery presents Nan as an alien threat to the world of Rose River—metonymically, the world of her fiction. Despite her modern outlook and attire—her decision to wear lipstick to Aunt Becky's funeral is commented upon disapprovingly by the rest of the clan (97)—Nan is decidedly not a suffragette, given that she reveals at the end of the subplot, after she has lured Noel away from Gay and then broken off her own relationship with him, that her goal is to marry for money (218). While the modern girl is clearly vilified by the text, Gay's internalization of male prerogative, both in her awareness of Noel's apparent disapproval of girls who smoke and then in her eventual projection of this prerogative on her new relationship with Roger Penhallow, is much more old-fashioned and oppressive than previous romantic entanglements involving Anne or Emily. In other words, even though Gay's romantic resolution confirms expectations of how a Montgomery novel should end, Montgomery nevertheless undercuts that expectation by leaving both the "good" girl and the "bad" girl disempowered.[13]

Montgomery distances herself from these ambivalences by reducing the presence of her usually intrusive narrator. Despite the narrator's claim that "a veracious chronicler can only tell the truth" (136), this "truth" is filtered through the subjectivity of sixty-five major and minor characters, whose thoughts and perspectives are all touched upon in the heteroglossic narrative. Although Montgomery generally writes in what Rubio calls "a

13 Another aspect of Gay's romantic resolution that makes her storyline unique is that Gay actually rejects the man she initially loved and marries Roger Penhallow, whose interest in her she long resisted. Anne, Emily, Rilla, and Pat all have only one serious suitor; although all four narratives delay their romantic resolution in different ways, all four women eventually end up with men they were obviously destined to marry, despite brief infatuations or substantial relationships with other men along the way.

gossipy storytelling mode" ("Montgomery" 750), the voice of *A Tangled Web* frequently uses gossip to self-narrate as part of its heteroglossia. For instance, when describing possible causes for the separation of Hugh and Joscelyn Dark on their wedding night, a situation that Wiggins considers to be "entirely implausible" (140), the narrator gives equal space to the surmise, gossip, and exaggeration that circulated before actually providing the "truth" about what actually happened:

> She had found a love letter some other woman had written him and gone mad with jealousy. After all, Joscelyn's great-grandmother had been a Spanish girl from the West Indies. Spanish blood, you know....
>
> No, it was worse than a letter. Joscelyn had discovered that Hugh had another wife. Those years out west. Hugh had never talked much about them. But at the last he broke down and confessed.
>
> Nothing of the sort. That child down at the harbour, though. It was certain *some* Dark was its father. Perhaps Hugh—
>
> Naturally, it made a dreadful scandal and sensation. The clan nearly died of it. (23-24)

These conjectures and prejudices usually make for amusing or insightful reading, particularly since this narrative draws attention to the way stories can become distorted by the subjectivity of the person telling them. However, contrary to what may be expected of the author of *Anne of Green Gables*, the novel does not end with a romantic resolution per se. Indeed, the four major romantic threads are all tied together before the fate of the jug is revealed, indicating that none of these romance plots are the main tension to be resolved. Instead, following the climatic scene in which it is announced that Aunt Becky's executor has lost the envelope with the identity of its new owner[14] and a crazy clan member instinctively smashes the jug as the only solution to this unexpected development, the final "romantic" resolution occurs between Big Sam and Little Sam, two sailor cousins who lived together for decades but who parted company due to an argument earlier in the novel caused by a disagreement about a second material object, a statue of a nude woman that Little Sam won in a raffle. In this final scene, Big Sam agrees to return home and to learn to live with the statue in the house even though it offends him, a resolution

These conjectures and prejudices usually make for amusing or insightful reading, particularly since this narrative draws attention to the way stories can become distorted by the subjectivity of the person telling them.

14 Perhaps not surprisingly given Montgomery's comments about Callaghan's novel, Aunt Becky's executor is "almost sure [the letter] fell into the pig-pen" (248).

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that rewrites traditional (heterosexual) romance, but his discovery that Little Sam has painted the statue bronze leads to the final line of the novel, which will offend many readers: "'Then you can scrape [the paint] off again,' said Big Sam firmly. 'Think I'm going to have an unclothed nigger sitting up there? If I've gotter be looking at a naked woman day in and day out, I want a white one for decency's sake'" (257).[15]

It is not enough to say that this speech is shocking and offensive, and even though it may seem pointless to condemn the book's racism retroactively I am not satisfied with the critical avoidance that would overlook such a speech because of the novel's moment of publication. I echo Montgomery's words about the indescribable passage in *Your Cuckoo Sings by Kind:* the racist slur does not "belong" to the narrative, and certainly there is "no *need* for it."[16] Perhaps the racist slur is part of Montgomery's attempt to position herself firmly as a bourgeois white woman, making her modernism not only firmly rooted in her gender but also in her middle-class and Anglo (Scot) background. The object itself of a nude woman likewise speaks to Montgomery's irresolvable ambivalence toward powerful femininity and agency (I certainly can't think of any similar object elsewhere in her body of work or in her life narrative), but the way that the variable of race is introduced once the statue is painted bronze makes it even more difficult to ignore the implications of that artifact. Perhaps Montgomery is using shock value for one final disruption, one final break from the generic convention that obligates her to provide an appropriately happy ending; certainly, if nothing else, the fact that the novel ends with the Sams once again arguing over the statue that caused their separation earlier in the novel makes it difficult to find the resolution "satisfying." It seems more likely to me that, as with the only other use of that term that I could find in her fiction,[17] Montgomery is once again letting the speech

15 As with many plot threads from her novels, Montgomery first publishes a version of the Sams subplot as a short story. "A House Divided against Itself," published in *Canadian Home Journal* in March 1930 and reprinted in the posthumous collection of short stories *Along the Shore: Tales by the Sea* (1989), is nearly identical to what is included in the novel, except that Big Sam and Little Sam are renamed Big George and Little George, respectively. The offensive final line also appears. After apparently sending Weber a copy of the story, Montgomery mentions that "I am working 'A House Divided' into my new book as a sort of side-show" (*After Green Gables* [8 June 1930] 180).

16 On the other hand, the fact that this word was not removed by Montgomery's mainstream publishers implies that they did not consider this terminology to be problematic.

17 In *Rainbow Valley*, an uncouth little orphan girl named Mary Vance, in almost every way the antithesis of Anne Shirley, uses the term in a conversation with

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of one particular character speak for itself, and the absence of narrative intervention is another example of the novel's overall attempt to satirize the narrow-mindedness of her characters. I offer this possibility not in an attempt to legitimize the inclusion of the racist term in the novel but as a way of linking this final moment to other instances of narrow-mindedness or prejudice that seem less offensive by comparison. More so than the remaining moments of prejudice, Montgomery's use of a heteroglossic narrative highlights in this instance the problems of distancing herself completely from her character's word choice.

Ultimately, by destroying the jug in the climactic scene of the novel, Montgomery hints that the link to the past world must be broken and that the modern world should look forward, not backward. Likely Montgomery also hoped to look forward and not backward in her own writing, but the lukewarm reception of this novel, coupled with the consequences of the stock market crash of 1929 to her financial security, caused her to go backward rather than forward in her writing, making her subsequent work appear increasingly more old-fashioned to her evolving audience of readers and critics. Montgomery herself addressed this perception in a Toronto Women's Press Club speech around 1936: "The critics condemn my books because of what they call my lack of realism. My reply to them is that sunsets are just as real as pigstyes [sic] and I prefer writing about sunsets" (quoted in Colombo 428).[18] What Montgomery does not state directly in this obscure reference to her opinion of Callaghan's *Strange Fugitive* recorded privately eight years earlier, and what many critics have

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her young friends to indicate the level of hard work she offers to her new guardian: "I work like a nigger to make it easy for her and have everything just as she likes it" (131). It is clear throughout the text that Mary is not meant to be seen as a "model" girl, but it is worth noting that the "good" children to whom her remark is directed do not comment on her use of the term. Later in the novel, the Presbyterian Manse children put on an impromptu concert of hymns in the graveyard during a Methodist prayer meeting, prompting the horror of the locals because "they finished up with *Polly Wolly Doodle* at full length" (186). The impropriety of including "that frivolous song" (186) stems from the ongoing denominational rivalry in the village, but it is worth noting that the third verse of the song begins as follows: "Oh, I came to a river, an' I couldn't get across, / An' I jumped on a nigger, an' I thought he was a hoss" ("Old Favorite Songs"). The short story "Tannis of the Flats," published in periodicals in 1904 and 1914 and included in *Further Chronicles of Avonlea* (1920), includes numerous racist terms and assumptions concerning its Aboriginal and Métis characters. Likewise, Montgomery's unpublished late typescript, *The Blythes Are Quoted*, contains a peripheral character who is called "the Squaw Baby."

18 Colombo provides no source for this quotation.

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glossed over, is that while Montgomery always considered her books to be realistic, the definition of realism had shifted by the mid-1930s to no longer include the narrative styles she preferred. Following the uneven success of *A Tangled Web*, Montgomery returned to writing about childhood and courtship, but these later novels still retain traces of some of the anxieties brought forth to the public in this unique novel.

Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this paper was presented at ReCalling Early Canada: Reading the Political in Cultural and Literary Production, McMaster University (2003). My thanks to Mary O'Connor, Lorraine York, and my two *ESC* readers for their feedback. I gratefully acknowledge the Fonds québécois de la recherche sur la société et la culture and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for doctoral fellowships that helped make this research possible.

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