

WOMEN IN CANADIAN LITERATURE

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Most women don't even live lives of quiet desperation. (Quiet desperation is far too dramatic.) Most women live lives like doing the dishes, finishing one day's dishes and facing the next, until one day the rectal polyp is found or the heart stops and it's over. And all that's left of them is a name on a gravestone.

BRIAN MOORE'S HEROINE comments thus in *I Am Mary Dunne* (1968), his study of the confused Canadian woman of today. Moore may have been only transiently a Canadian writer, but he has caught exactly the mood of the Canadian girl who seeks a way out of the faceless secondary role the world offers her.

How did the situation arise? For Canadians the best record is found in Canadian fiction. Literature, much more than sociological or psychological studies, provides the rounded picture, the most complete expression of the social and psychological nature of a society, and does so not necessarily in the best writing.

Since the essence of literary art is to show us what a human being is within a particular culture, in a particular time and place, a glance at some fairly representative Canadian novels in English can be expected to demonstrate what has been the position of women in English Canadian society. Fashionable plots and popular attitudes, varying over the years, provide the clues to understanding the society contemporary to both author and audience.

The earliest novel in English which had a Canadian setting and was to some extent written here is Frances Brooke's *The History of Emily Montague* (1769). In popular epistolary style it gives a rather charming but limited view of garrison life in old Quebec at the end of the eighteenth century. Romantic love triumphs amid sleigh rides, balls, and afternoon teas. The position of women is simply that of transplanted Englishwomen. To understand Emily's place in society one cannot seek for Canadian roots, but must look back to England and its current *mores*. That, in fact, is just what Emily does.

Emily's story is concerned with only English men and women in a then new and rather exotic setting. Garrison officers and government appointees have social importance; they are pleasantly surprised to discover elegance and charm in seignorial society. But the French Canadian girls are more coquettish — hence less “ladylike” — than the English girls, and this not only causes the English women to accept this as proof of their own superiority; it also seems to be the first example of what Ronald Sutherland terms “the myth of *la femme fatale canadienne*” (*Second Image*). All the women have importance only as wives or daughters of important men, and this attitude was to prevail not only in Canadian colonial society but long after the creation of the nation.

Such was the basis of Canadian novels until reading books became more of an activity of the lower and middle classes, since people like to read about themselves, or what might be their own situations. The English ideal dominated in Canadian society generally and therefore in its literature. Both actively and passively the influence was reinforced to produce a watered-down imitation of English social values. The Church of England was fashionably inclined to poetic expression; Methodists and Presbyterians believed in education but for practical, “useful” purposes; English-speaking Roman Catholics were often poor, and like their French Canadian contemporaries, were usually encouraged to make the most of the situation in life to which they had been born. The priesthood was a high vocation that attracted bright young men since it offered education along with its dedication, but cultivation of a deep interest in literature was rarely part of their training. Every congregation's admiring dependence upon its clergy increased the latter's influence and encouraged the *status quo*, which in turn meant that the secondary role of women in society was praised as the true one. The romantic place of nature in nineteenth century fiction encouraged the popularity of “nature” novels, where the absence of women is a negative indication of woman's place in contemporary society.

Managing a well-run household was the proof of the Canadian woman's worth. In pioneer circumstances, this was a necessity. Physically, it was a natural division of the vital work to leave outside work to the men and inside work to the women. The Strickland sisters, Susanna Moodie and Catherine Parr Traill, were unusual in the cultivation they brought to the backwoods. They exemplified the educated Englishwoman of genteel birth whose leisure might well be occupied in writing. To express herself, or to earn some much-needed money, there was little else that a woman could do, apart from the manual labour to which some hard-pressed women were reduced, though if she were sufficiently

well-born, she might open a school for young ladies, where a doubtful education would be dispensed, along with some training in managing a household.

There was still something of the feudal lady of the manor in the style in which women administered the many facets of running a home. Even Mrs. Moodie was conscientious about such duties, since to her, as to her contemporaries, this was only doing her share in the partnership of marriage. Every mother of young women became the administrative manager, assigning actual duties to daughters and to servants. Mrs. Moodie might despair of the servants available in Canada, but she had them; the work involved in running a house then was accomplished by a great deal of manual labour done by those who usually had no education at all. In a supposedly democratic country, varied social levels were an accepted fact of life.

During the 1850's and 1860's, Rosanna Leprohon wrote with some success when she turned her emphasis towards Canadian society as she knew it in and near Montreal. She quite accepted the established social hierarchy, and her stories seem to vary from the currently popular style chiefly in their novel setting, involving French Canadian society, with women who did belong to their environment.

In large part, Canadian writers sought the more lucrative and prestigious American markets, which determined the kind of writing they could undertake. Most of the fiction appeared serially in magazines, in stories that were usually highly moral and infinitely dull. About the time of Confederation, the American market had become even larger, and more Canadian writers were attracted. Most simply catered to popular tastes, but some, like Sara Jeannette Duncan, had genuine talent and some originality.

Besides literary ability, Duncan demonstrates shrewd objectivity and an accurate eye for her society. *The Imperialists* (1904) remains the best portrayal of life in a small Ontario town during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Duncan's characters are closer to actuality than those of her rivals, and the gossipy atmosphere of little towns is clearly mirrored. The central character, Lorne Murchison, is romantically in love with Dora Millburn. Dora is not very bright, the product of the superficial standards of her society, and she turns from Lorne to a young man, shallow as she is, whose greatest recommendation is that he is English. This lends him a cachet which home-grown heroes cannot equal — except in the author's eyes. Here we see the tide turning against the former tendency to worship anyone and anything imported from Britain. Here, at least, England no longer sets the pace, though the ties are not yet cut.

Dora and her young Englishman illustrate the false social standards condemned by Miss Duncan, and they deserve one another. Lorne's sister, Advena, is much more the ideal young Canadian woman of the period. She is high-minded, kindhearted, pure and constant in her love. She has also something of the martyr complex, then considered attractive since it implied faithful endurance of great trials and misunderstandings. The hard work and self-sacrifice so vital in the pioneer are now metamorphosed into a kind of subservience to society. The original importance of the group over the individual has been replaced by the Victorian male domination of the family and especially of the women in it. Negation of personal desires is no longer a requirement for survival but a quality sanctified by society as the mark of the true "lady".

The only gratification of such martyrdom is a self-deluding smugness entailing a clouded, hypocritical view of social roles. But Advena is Canadian, with an honesty and independence which the author feels are typical. Advena endures so much and no more; the role of martyr is not to be accepted without a struggle. She does something about her frustrated love for the new young minister in town, and in the end, through Advena's initiative, she and her young minister are free to fall into one another's arms. The solution is rather pat, but the point is made that custom and manners are superficial and often false: the true values of kindness, faithfulness, and sincerity count in both men and women. Both sexes can be dominated by false values only to their own misfortune. Despite the moral tone, Duncan also makes the point that to achieve any kind of fulfilment in life, sincerity requires an independent spirit to accompany it. Although Duncan's theme here is political, the women she portrays are realistically part of the story. In Advena especially, we see one who is all that her society expected and admired, but who also has some of that freedom of thought balanced by native intelligence which the author herself displayed. Like Duncan, Advena manages to get what she truly wants and at the same time to get along within her society. It was the kind of compromise that had then to be made, but at least it involved much more than simple mindless compliance.

Materialistic values and illogical snobbery are also attacked in Duncan's other, and lesser, novels, which are not set in Canada. In *A Canadian Girl in London* (1908), Mary Trent's father, a Senator, has sent her with her brother Graham to become acquainted with London society, but they are glad to escape its hypocrisies to return to the more direct simplicity of Canada. But Mary's admiration for her wealthy self-made father and her handsome brother betrays, in its

acquiescence to them, her own sense of inferiority: she sees clearly but can act only directly.

This is the kind of situation which gave rise to the popularity of the Victorian belief that "the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world." For all her independent intelligence and tactful firmness, Mary's role is still that of an adjunct to the males in the family. The pioneer concept of the family working together to gain achievement still dominates the role of the woman. It is father who makes the decisions regarding the aims of the family — which are his own. Duncan's women are always conformist to a degree that allows them to fit within their society, but at the same time they are individuals with no time for false pretenses, conforming only within the limits of their sense of justice.

Not long after Duncan's books appeared, L. M. Montgomery published the first of her stories about Anne of Avonlea, *Anne of Green Gables*, (1908). An attractive, imaginative little girl, Anne learns to blend her independence with the conventionality of her time and place, and through necessity as much as through following her own wishes, she gains a career, she becomes a teacher, then a rather new and honourable profession open to women. Teachers in the public schools had formerly most often been men; women who taught had either been nuns or faded gentlewomen who provided a meagre education to those whose parents could afford to pay.

Much of the long popularity of *Anne of Green Gables* is due to her independent spirit, her confidence that she can accomplish something for herself. She is intelligent and better educated than previous generations of Canadian-born women had been. Her children, who appear in later stories, receive her encouragement in expanding their horizons. Women in Montgomery's books still belong to the rural society that dominates then, but they feel fortunate in comparison to preceding generations. Life is less difficult, and it offers many new chances; careers in nursing and secretarial work as well as teaching were then just opening up as fields of exciting opportunity for women.

In the early days of the present century, the west was just beginning to develop while the east had already gone through its pioneering stages. Ralph Connor recalled in his novels the Glengarry area and the Scottish pioneers among whom he grew up. He portrayed women as he had known them — vital to their society, though confined by their settlers' lives. The chief reason for the existence of women was the necessity for good wives and mothers, according to pioneer standards. In *Glengarry Schooldays* (1902) Connor described Mrs. Finch, his

most admired example of such womanliness, as “last to bed and first to stir”, with a “steadfast mind and unyielding purpose”:

Her husband regarded her with a curious mingling of reverence and defiance . . . but while he talked much about his authority, and made a great show of absolutism with his family, he was secretly conscious that another will than his had really kept things moving . . . withal her soft words and gentle ways, hers was a will like steel . . . Besides the law of order, there was . . . the law of work . . . To the mother fell all the rest. At the cooking and cleaning, and the making and the mending, all fine arts with her, she diligently toiled from long before dawn till after all the rest were abed. But besides these and other daily household chores there were, in their various seasons, the jam and jelly, the pumpkin and squash preserves, the butter-making and cheese-making, and more than all, the long, long work with the wool.

The laws of order and work that Connor mentions meant that each could accomplish what his or her talents suggested, in terms of their society. Where girls were concerned, creative and administrative talents were not only encouraged but were vital to the farm life most people followed, and to contemporary urban life.

Despite the unadmitted fact that both knew that she indeed ran the farm, Mrs. Finch was a good wife who, in her awareness of his need to appear absolute master, never argued with her husband. In quiet, devious ways, she arranged that injustices should not last long, and the family accepted this oblique kind of authority. When this ideal wife and mother became ill, no one related this to the physical exhaustion she must have felt, and no one was more surprised than her husband, lost without her. Mrs. Finch demonstrated the strength of character for which she was noted, and suffered in silence. This martyrdom illustrates the endurance which pioneer life demanded; when it turned out that she had “malignant cancer” for which nothing could be done, her early training served her well. Mrs. Finch was granted after her death the supreme accolade: “all her life . . . she lived for others.”

The other woman prominent in this story is Mrs. Murray, the minister’s wife, described as “fine and fair and saintly”, the inspiration of all. The influence of a good woman was acknowledged and appreciated in pre-Freudian novels, and women were well aware of this power which society granted them. They regarded it a duty to use it well, and this in turn encouraged a more selfless attitude.

There is indeed something almost frighteningly simple in the standards Connor portrays. Women were not expected to work outside the home in any capacity that interfered with their first duty, the household — but most lived the life of

Mrs. Finch, with plenty to occupy them. Certainly Connor grants to women ability, intelligence, charm, along with a kind of superiority to men. In his later novels, he attempts to fathom character more deeply, but society has changed, and although he recognizes this, he cannot cope with it.

Later, beginning with *Jalna* in 1927, came the stories of Mazo de la Roche, widely read outside this country but never considered great literature here, largely owing to the unrealistic settings and their author's soap-opera imagination. But her characters sometimes display the faults and virtues of real people. Meg is sweet but unyielding, in the manner of her contemporaries who still felt the need to be martyred by their convictions without ever examining them honestly. Old Adeline may be a dominating, rather irritating old woman, but she is true to her times. Such tyranny within the family was a woman's sole outlet if she had the qualities of leadership, and Gran had no special talents outside them: she merely liked to run things. Her own generation had considered her ambitions not only acceptable but necessary: the family must be united in the common cause. By virtue of her position as matriarch, she had a duty to perform which society felt was absolutely incumbent upon her. She was an exaggerated representation of the kind of woman considered "good" in the author's youth, and her portrait seems drawn partly in admiration and partly in irritation.

As the years pass in the *Jalna* stories, women make greater efforts to attain independence. Often as not, they suffer for it, or are shown to be ridiculous and not very bright. In the author's own society a woman was always faced with a choice: either a life of her own, or life with a husband as mother-homemaker, based on the pioneer concept updated to the disadvantage of women.

As society develops beyond the pioneer stage, women are considered as restricted by their own natures, although in practice the restriction is imposed by society itself. But the pioneer evaluation of women as individuals still lingers. Frederick Philip Grove shows sympathy for the overworked and downtrodden immigrant wives on the prairies, who work there much as they would have done in their homes in Europe. *Our Daily Bread* (1928) and *Fruits of the Earth* (1933), like his other prairie novels, reflect the west of the first decades of this century, still the time of the pioneers. In *Settlers of the Marsh* (1925), Mrs. Amundsen is a victim of the cruelty of her husband's harsh peasant attitude, and this in turn deeply wounds, psychologically, her daughter Ellen. This kind of loveless slavery disgusts Clara Vogel so much that she turns completely against everything that might have been good in farm life. Uneducated and untrained, Clara turns to her only alternative in the city, where easy virtue brings an

easy life. Ellen and Clara are both victims of their society: the only future offered to them is marriage and homemaking and child-rearing, and when they refuse this, little remains. Ellen earns her reward through patient suffering, while Clara did as she chose until caught by the nemesis of violent death.

Despite Grove's empathy with these women characters, the moral views of his time dictate what they may do, or be. In *The Master of the Mill* (1944), different times and circumstances are involved, and the women have differing roles. The three Mauds of the story are the three faces of Eve, granted characteristics which belong to individuals nevertheless. As R. E. Watters suggests in his "Introduction" to the 1961 edition, the three Mauds encompass "the trinity of mind, heart, and spirit", but it is notable that each can only symbolize one of these qualities. It is also notable that in *Maud Dolittle* we see a woman who is brilliant, with keen business ability along with a warm heart. Grove knew well that many women were indeed capable of more than housework, and in this novel he has a situation where such a woman fits in. But the society portrayed seems to share the views of Mazo de la Roche: these women either marry *or* have a career, and the only career is Maud Dolittle's as secretary.

Grove accurately reflects the times of which he wrote. In *Two Generations* (1946) he not only portrays the "generation gap" long before the phrase became trite, but he demonstrates his belief in the "new" woman, who wanted her own life as well as a husband and a home. Like the other Patterson children, Alice feels frustrated by her father's narrow attitude. She, too, is determined to leave the family farm, although her own ambition is subordinated to that of her brother Phil. Their almost incestuous love for one another is meant to show the shared ideas and beliefs of the younger generation who feel that there is more to life than physical labour. They are surprised at the support their mother provides, and come to realize that she, too, was once young and dream-filled. The most modern woman of them all is Nancy, their brother George's wife: she has struggled to become a dancer, and has no intention of giving up her hardwon opportunities. Grove allows Nancy to make everyone eventually happy: she bears George's son, the first grandchild, but continues to plan for her career. The opposite pole to Nancy and Alice is Cathleen, brother Henry's wife. Grove loses no opportunity to point out the stupidity and conformity which make her uninteresting to all, even to Henry.

No matter how dated the story's details, Grove positively supports the notion of women as individuals with talents and abilities to be encouraged. He is one of very few writers of his time to do so. Despite women having the vote and

being recognized as persons before the law, few novels, then or later, reflect any great change in their attitude to women, whose characters are usually portrayed as more restricted and less free than in real life they need be. Society in general was slow to adopt new ideas or to face realities, and fiction reflected the lag.

For instance, in Callaghan's *Such is My Beloved* (1934), the two prostitutes are convincing in terms of the novel's theme, but add nothing to the portrayal of women as they exist in this century; they are Eve in modern dress, man's downfall, leading him out of Paradise.

Callaghan sees the Christian virtue of self-negation as the woman's role. In *They Shall Inherit the Earth* (1935), Anna's lack of self-centredness may be the giving of spirit which man must learn in order to live in this world, but it also seems to be the old martyr-complex of women in different terms. Certainly it projects an ideal of which Ralph Connor would have approved.

More Joy in Heaven (1937) is deliberately a martyr story, with Kip Caley condemned by society because it cannot understand his Biblical sense of charity. But his mother and Julie are martyrs too, whose suffering is only intensified through association with Kip. Only the "bad" characters gladly suffer nothing.

In *The Loved and The Lost* (1951) Peggy Sanderson embodies another version of the martyr role. In her common sense, Sara Jeanette Duncan would be impatient with Peggy's lack of understanding of reality, although she would recognize the traces of Victorian gentility in Peggy's difficulties. No matter how high her intentions, Peggy suffers for flouting society's rules, since she does not recognize that society is still insistently conformist to outworn ideas. One can imagine a Mrs. Finch, for instance, finding a way to cope, even though it would be through an attitude which Peggy could not abide.

Generally, Callaghan's themes are seen through male characters who have a strength which raises them against the background of his flat style. The women tend to be paler, blending into this background. His more recent novels change somewhat in technique, but though the settings are contemporary, there is little difference in the characters of the women, despite the author's sympathy.

One of Hugh MacLennan's best portrayals of women is rather oddly, in his early novel, *Barometer Rising* (1941). Penny Wainwright is almost a complete metaphor of twentieth century womanhood: she is caught between the conflicting rules of the older generation of her father and his friends, and the newer freedom with its stress on individuality. She refuses to be a martyr, but acts to solve her difficulties. Penny's circumstances are not far removed from the present as far as her position in society is concerned. In MacLennan's later books, how-

ever, women tend to be merely types, with even less individuality and sense of purpose than Sara Jeannette Duncan's characters.

Not surprisingly, the most penetrating studies of women tend to be in novels written by women. Ethel Wilson portrays women sometimes tied by marriage, or by love alone, but still as individuals with some freedom of choice, often preoccupied with the search for a meaning to their lives. Margaret Laurence has much the same attitude. In *The Stone Angel* (1964), for example, she shows how one woman born out of her time remains strongly individualistic, reacting to the restrictions of her world. In the end, Hagar has been defeated by her turn-of-the-century small-town society as much as by the simple fact of age. For such as Hagar there was no place.

The push-and-pull of contemporary society and its effects on a sensitive, intelligent Canadian woman are perhaps best expressed in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* (1969). Marion McAlpin, the central character, leads the conventional life of the recent university graduate. Atwood herself is quoted on the book's jacket as stating that the novel is "about ordinary people who make the mistake of thinking they are ordinary", which sums up Marion's situation. She does all the expected things, even to being almost engaged to a young-man-on-the-make. But suddenly Marion cannot eat: unknowingly, but literally, she is fed up with conformity, and understands this only when she realizes that she herself is being eaten up by society. Symbolically, she frosts a cake as the image of a woman and serves it to her friends. They are appalled, so Marion happily finishes by eating it herself. The old martyr-complex had subtly pushed her into contemporary "nonconformist" conformity, but rather like Duncan's Advena, Marion is saved by a sturdy independence she had never suspected in herself. With none of Advena's social and moral commandments to guide her, Marion must find her own way, and it is difficult. She is involved in a war, not between the sexes at all, but of one kind of society against another. The "edible" woman is the loser, the contemporary martyr — unless, like Marion, she turns against the society that is nibbling away her individuality.

Like Susanna Moodie, Mrs. Finch, or Nancy or Alice Patterson, Marion realizes that femininity is only a part of her own unique person, and is not to be worn as a hair-shirt.