

The Family, The School, and The Community in a Rural Area: From Montgomery's Novel to the Mills' Picture Book – A Secondary Publication

Maria Victoria Guadamillas Gómez*

Department of Modern Languages, University of Castilla-La Mancha (UCLM), Castilla-La Mancha, Spain

*Corresponding author: Maria Victoria Guadamillas Gómez, victoria.guadamillas@uclm.es

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Abstract: This paper explores the intertextuality between *The Rag Coat* (1991) and *Anne of the Green Gables* (1908). Both literary works are contextualized in the North American rural community, and their main characters are girls in their early adolescence who have tenacious personality traits. The rural communities where these works are set, far from being an intimidating motif, make these protagonists show their determination to overcome what might be expected from them in these settings. Both sociohistorical contexts create rural micro-bubbles that, as it is studied, are composed of the family, the school, or the neighborhood. Furthermore, some other common themes are observed in both works such as children's work, or nature's personification. It does not seem to be a coincidence that Mills illustrated one of the editions of *Anne of the Green Gables* in 1989. However, the studies that have put both works in connection are practically non-existent. Thus, this paper tries to approach both authors and the possible autobiographical features in their works. Later, it inquires into some coincidences between both female protagonists as well as into the importance that family, neighbors, school, and nature acquire in the rural contexts where they are set.

Keywords: Daily life; Family education; Picture book; Rural life; School; Youth literature

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1. Introduction

Canadian Lucy Maud Montgomery was born on Prince Edward Island in 1874, and her mother passed away when the author was still very young. She was raised by her grandparents in the town of Cavendish and began writing at a very early age ^[1]. In 1908, her novel *Anne of Green Gables* was published, and in subsequent years, the author released seven sequels to this work. On the other hand, Lauren Mills, the author of the album *The Rag Coat* ^[2], is an American illustrator and author also linked to sculpture and painting. Mills illustrated one of the versions of *Anne of Green Gables* in 1989, which was published by Godine ^[3]. The creator has received numerous awards and recognitions, including those for the illustrations in the album at hand, as well as for various exhibitions she has participated in, such as the one held at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington in 1995, titled "Brave Little Girls." This exhibition included illustrations of her contributions to

Anne of Green Gables, *The Rag Coat*, and other works like *Tatterhood and the Hobgoblins*. For both authors, their personal experiences in the natural environment and their childhood or youth seem to have been the main source of inspiration for their works. As mentioned, Montgomery's mother's early death led to her childhood and youth being spent in a remote location on Prince Edward Island, and she turned this setting into the backdrop for her early books ^[1]. Regarding Mills, she admits that she did not grow up in the Appalachians like the little Minna, the protagonist of her work, but she did spend every summer with her grandparents in Virginia, and she aspired to live surrounded by nature and animals, a dream that would come true years later. Similarly, the author acknowledges having a certain relationship with the feelings of rejection that Minna will experience due to her clothing and its handmade nature ^[4].

2. Previous studies on the works and their context

Mills' album presents a simple plot that does not provide excessive details about when the events take place. However, both the references in the text and the illustrations to professions or the weather allow us to contextualize it; for example, the profession of the protagonist's father and his early death, or the references to typical fabrics of the Appalachians. This leads us to a socio-historical context in which problems associated with health appear, including high mortality, environmental issues, and those of an economic nature or with a high social impact stemming from the mining industry, which, far from bringing wealth to the region described, the Appalachians, were a sign of its impoverishment. The publication of the work occurred in the 1990s when activists like Julia Bonds were raising awareness about the problems that this mining industry was causing in the area. Thus, in this illustrated album, we find a young protagonist, Minna, who cannot attend school because she does not have a warm coat. The modesty of the home in which she lives and the recent death of her father will also force her to stay longer in the family house. However, things change when a group of neighborhood mothers starts collaborating on sewing tasks with Minna's mother and they make a coat for the girl from old scraps from other garments made for the children in the neighborhood. This will enable the protagonist to attend the local school, where, despite having the opportunity to showcase her abilities and talent, she will not escape the teasing of her classmates.

Most references to Mills' work can be found in interviews and information that the author herself shares on her website with her readers. There are also some articles or chapters that have studied this album or referred to it focusing on different aspects: the themes it deals with ^[5], its practical introduction into the school curriculum ^[6,7], or the narrative techniques or motifs it employs ^[8]. Focusing on the theme, Osborn referred to this as a literary work aimed at a young adult audience, as it contains more complex illustrations, longer texts, and meanings that go beyond what a more childish audience might discern ^[9]. Specifically, it characterizes it as an album with resonant themes and various interpretive levels. However, as mentioned, most of the literature or studies that have attempted to approach this album have done so for the value of its illustrations; thus, Black and Erickson focused on its potential to teach curriculum content and artistic language to students aged between eight and eleven ^[10]. In this sense, it should be specified that the author uses watercolors to illustrate the work, and the chosen tones and style contribute to reflecting the rural poverty in which the protagonists move with a high level of realism.

Regarding Montgomery's work, previous studies on it are much more extensive. If attention is paid to its socio-historical context and its characters, mention must be made of MacLeod's work ^[11], which addresses the portrayal of American childhood in children's literature of the 19th and 20th centuries. Some interesting aspects within this publication point to a much lower presence of boys than girls in rural environments in works of this period, which, according to the author, partially corresponds to the reality of the time. Another characteristic feature in children's literature of this moment is the age of the protagonists. In this sense, MacLeod asserted that both the gender and age of these protagonists are related to the custom of many girls to write down their

memoirs or diaries before becoming adults, something that occurred not only in the higher social strata but also in the rural middle class, to which *Anne of Green Gables* would belong, which could justify this rural female predominance in works of this period ^[11]. Similarly, it is curious that the girls who are the protagonists, far from opting for a passive role, take on numerous tasks at home or outside it, and that in many of the stories of the period to which we refer, these young women enjoy many activities that boys also appreciate, such as climbing trees, fishing, or playing freely in the natural environment ^[11], something that also coincides with the portrayal of the protagonist of this work.

In relation to the above, numerous works have focused on the construction of the main character and the gender stereotypes that Anne contributes to overcoming ^[12,13]. Specifically, Bertzfield analyzed the innate characteristics of the protagonist (empathy, emotionality, etc.) and how these, instead of being ruined by initially adverse family circumstances, are strengthened by the young woman's will to overcome them ^[14]. For her part, Bernroth focuses on the protagonist from a feminist perspective ^[13]: she analyzes Montgomery's first three "Annes," concluding with how happiness and well-being can finally be achieved by this young woman, even though she does not fit the expected female stereotypes in her context or certain social patterns. Likewise, this study highlights that the numerous female protagonists presented in Montgomery's works do not always have to opt for a unique or restricted social role exclusively in the academic, domestic, or rural seclusion sphere, but in many cases, these girls or women combine different roles, take on household tasks, work in the field, or take charge of their own education at the same time, something that MacLeod also pointed out and that happens equally in the album we are studying ^[11].

Similarly, some works have focused on the portrayal of masculinities in early 20th-century American literature. In this case, the work of Frank stood out, which addresses the complexity of masculinities in the study of family roles in this period, as when studying diaries, letters, or documents from this era, a single model of fatherhood does not appear ^[15]. According to Frank, there was a common devotion from both mothers and fathers to family life, and although some father figures played more introspective roles and were somewhat removed from it, many others strived to reconcile with the conflicts inherent in these gender stereotypes, showing affection and harmony within the family environment and actively participating in the education of both their sons and daughters ^[15].

Regarding the natural environment and its description in the referred period, some studies such as that of MacLulich have addressed the duality presented by this element ^[16], which is constituted as "an oppressive vital nature within a small rural community." Other works have explored more exclusively the role of nature in Montgomery's work ^[17,18]. Norwood pointed out that, except for some precedents, it was not until the early years of the 19th century that American female writers began to give voice to the beauties of the natural landscape in their works ^[19]. Specifically, Barry referred to the author as a great portrayer of the landscape, flora, and fauna of the environment ^[17]. Dawson focused on how she reflects the Canadian attitude towards the natural world ^[18]. In this sense, he recalls how the landscape becomes a source of admiration and inspiration, but also of resentment, and he connects it with a tendency typical of Canadian literature and with the influences that the author has from some romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Byron, or Keats.

Other topics that have been studied include the concepts of individuality and collectivity ^[20], the analysis and literary responses to the work ^[21], or aspects related to its narrative characteristics ^[8]. Regarding the first point, Drain asserted that the individual is less important than the collective or community, a fact that will be further discussed in this article through the theme of the neighborhood ^[20]. Specifically, it emphasizes that belonging to "Green Gables" necessarily means being part of the village of Avonlea and its community; however, this relationship of belonging does not imply subordination but rather independence and certain tension with the rest of the subjects and objects (animate or not) that are part of that community. In relation

to Reimer’s book ^[21], it gathers a large number of critical responses to the work that refer to themes such as sexism, the role of nature, or the description of interiors. On the other hand, Frever’s work focuses on the narrative style and highlights the metatextuality of the work, paying attention to Anne’s task as a narrator and responsible for telling Avonlea and also the readers what happens in the novel; that is, “the story within the story, the story within life, and life within the story” ^[8]. This coincides with what is also observed in the album *The Rag Coat*, where Minna takes on the role of narrator not only of her own story but also of the stories of the scraps that make up her outfit.

As emphasized, if anything is returned to us by previous studies on Mills’ album and Montgomery’s novel, it is that both cases have female protagonists with personalities that fit with difficulty into expected gender stereotypes. Thus, this article compares common themes in these works separated by almost ninety years. In a more particular way, the role of father figures, the neighborhood, or the school is studied, and other facts related to the adversity of the weather or the personification of nature in the American rural environment of the early 20th century are explored and how these are reflected in a very similar way in an album from the end of the same century.

3. Themes in the Rural Environment

3.1. Father figure

Exploring the similarities and differences between both works regarding the family structure reveals that Minna, the protagonist of the album, does have a biological father, although his death occurs in the early pages, while Anne is adopted by the Cuthbert siblings to help them on their farm. However, Matthew Cuthbert assumes the role of father to Anne throughout the novel. Regardless of the biological or adoptive nature of the father figures and the period in which they will perform these functions in each work, both protagonists share certain characteristics, showing, for example, considerable affection and warmth. This affection could be more typical of maternal figures in a rural environment where fathers are entirely dedicated to work and their occupations; however, it coincides with the conclusions of Frank’s study on masculinities in this period ^[15]. Similarly, both fathers (Minna’s father and Mr. Cuthbert) present a certain weakness in health and are described through illustrations (see **Figures 1 and 2**) and texts as somewhat languid and contemplative.

Regarding the representation of Minna’s father and the connections with Matthew, three illustrations from the album are referenced. In the first one, he appears in a carriage (see **Figure 3**), just like Mr. Cuthbert when he goes to pick up Anne from the station (Montgomery, 1989, p.19).



Figure 1. Minna’s father ^[2]



Figure 2. Mr. Cuthbert ^[3]



Figure 3. Family in the carriage ^[2]

The second image in the album shows the father wrapped in a blanket and looking out the window, certainly introspective and showing certain limitations due to his health problems; subsequently, the text confirms that he suffers from silicosis (“miner’s cough”) contracted from his work as a miner, preventing him from contributing to the family’s livelihood: “Papa got silicosis and couldn’t work much”^[2]. Similarly, it is known that Matthew, described as somewhat apathetic and sickly, needs help on the farm when Marilla tells her neighbor, Mrs. Rachel, that they are going to adopt. Additionally, his health problems are described: “He’s getting old, he’s sixty already... and has heart trouble”^[3]. As for the third image of Minna’s father in the album, we again see a representation of an affectionate father holding the girl between his legs and talking to her about the need to go to school to learn. In this sense, in Montgomery’s work, we see how Matthew acts as a mediator between Marilla and Anne so that the former allows her to attend school events or meetings with friends^[3].

However, the health weakness of both protagonists concludes differently in each case: Minna’s father’s will lead to his premature death, while Matthew dies almost at the end of the first “Anne” book. Regarding how the news of the adoptive or biological father’s death is received by each protagonist and how his figure remains in memory, similarities in both works were observed. Minna always remembers the affection and paternal advice and temporarily gives up her aspirations to attend school to help her mother with household chores; and Anne Shirley experiences deep sorrow for her father’s death and decides to help her adoptive mother, Marilla, sustain the farm. In general, numerous equivalences can be observed in the familial role that both father figures adopt, both for their tender and kind character and in their concern for actively contributing to the education of their daughters. Additionally, the temporal distance between the two works does not imply a very differentiated construction of masculinities in them.

3.2. The neighborhood

In both works, the neighborhood plays a fundamental role. Neighbors help each other, accompany each other, and even unnecessarily interfere in each other’s lives and stories within their communities. Mills’ work provides some examples that find correspondence in Montgomery’s novel. The first of these can be observed in Minna’s family when they are returning home from church. At this point, the author already indicated that the cart they are traveling in belongs to Jeremy Miller, and possibly, the family borrows it to make that journey. Later it was learned that Miller is a neighbor of the family because the woman who helps Minna’s mother weave is his wife. In this first part of the narration, the importance of support among neighbors or close people is already emphasized, not only because of the mentioned fact – the borrowed cart – but also by the words spoken by Minna’s father: “People just need other people, nothing else”^[2]. Similarly, an example of the importance of neighbors in their visit after Minna’s father’s death can also be seen: the narration of many neighbors dressed in black showing up at the small home bringing food. This fact may relate to how common mortality was among men working in the mines in this context, the poverty of the area, and the need to seek support from those closest. In Montgomery’s novel, Mrs. Rachel also appears at the time of Matthew’s death, although this event occurs later and may certainly be expected considering her close connection to Avonlea^[3].

Another theme worth highlighting in Mills’ album is the collaboration of the neighborhood women to knit a coat so that Minna can go to school. This motif, besides being a result of the author’s own experiences is similarly depicted in *Anne of Green Gables*. In this case, Anne is going to perform in a school play, and Matthew wants to buy her a new dress. Dresses and clothing serve the function of socially positioning the girls. Mark’s study referred to how the colors of clothes are related to other themes such as belonging and identity^[22], which was observed in both *Anne of Green Gables* and *The Rag Coat*. After some turmoil, Matthew asks for help from Mrs. Rachel, who gladly contributes to making the dress the young girl’s Christmas gift.

Along with this, it is essential to note that, ultimately, both Minna's neighbors and Mrs. Rachel in the Avonlea community facilitate or promote the protagonists' ability to receive proper education: in the first case, by providing something as simple as a coat without which she could not attend classes; and in Anne's case, among other examples, with the role given to neighbor Rachel as a corrector of her inappropriate behaviors or as an interlocutor in the different achievements she obtains.

Delving a bit further into the figure of Rachel Lynde and her role as a neighbor in Montgomery's novel, many other interesting traits emerge that do not appear in the album under consideration but are indeed examples of the community's function in the rural environment. In addition to her willingness to collaborate, she shows a certain interference in others' lives, wanting to know everything that happens on the Cuthbert farm and feeling entitled to opine on every event; for example, at the beginning, when she notices Matthew's departure and immediately goes to Green Gables. Here, Rachel is described as peeking out the window, watching Matthew walk down the hill, a scene representative of the fact that nothing could happen in that place without Mrs. Lynde knowing. Another example occurs when she gives her opinion on whether the siblings should adopt a girl or when she scolds the girl for her appearance. This coincides with the somewhat oppressive atmosphere created in small rural communities, according to MacLulich ^[16], but it also introduces a new aspect: ridicule. In relation to this point, we observe how this fierce criticism often comes from neighbors or classmates, and the girls in these works cannot escape it due to their appearance or clothing.

Although the neighborhood is very important in both works due to the rural context in which they unfold, the climatic conditions or the income level of the respective families make the community even more indispensable in Mills' album ^[2], as without the help of the mothers, Minna would not have been able to attend school. Put another way, both families have needs, and their lives unfold in rural communities; however, the mining environment of the 1990s in which the album is set is poorer than the farm where Anne grew up in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

3.3. Rural schooling and the thirst for knowledge

Other common traits observed in the protagonists of the album and Montgomery's novel are the need for education and self-improvement as girls in the rural environment. Both girls and their families show a strong willingness to learn and attend school. For example, it is observed that Minna's father, before his death, emphasizes to the girl the importance of attending school. Similarly, Marilla is clear that she wants to give Anne the opportunity to educate herself, although this education begins with memorizing schedules and attending church/Sunday school. However, both Minna and Anne seem not to have the appropriate attire for school: the protagonist of the album lacks a coat, and Anne's dresses upon arrival from the orphanage seem somewhat tight and ragged for Sunday Mass.

Regarding the images and texts that the album and the novel use to refer to the school context, numerous parallels can be found. In the album, Minna is depicted at her desk, quite focused on her work and raising her hand, while a boy at the back desk pulls her red braid and other young people whisper behind her back. This is shown in **Figure 4**.

In the novel, Anne is also described with her red braids and a somewhat humbler appearance compared to her classmates, which prompts mockery from some of them; such as Gilbert, who pulls the girl's braid

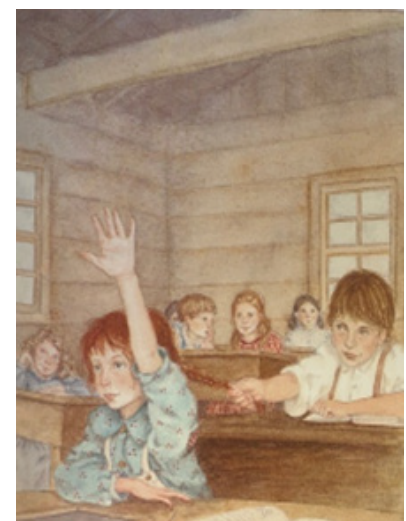


Figure 4. Incident at school in *The Rag Coat* ^[2]

and says, “Carrots! Carrots!” However, in response to this mockery, Anne’s reaction is much more aggressive than Minna’s, breaking the slate over her classmate’s head and being reprimanded by her teacher for it. Both protagonists, after enduring ridicule, do not wish to return to school. However, it is evident how their personal resilience and the support of their families and the community will lead both of them back to class.

Regarding the questioning and reasoning abilities of the young girls, there were clear equivalences. In Minna’s case, it can be emphasized that Miss Campbell tells her that intelligent people are those who question everything. In Anne’s case, the novel recounts how Marilla comments to the young girl that Miss Stacy has noticed her for her ability and wants to prepare her for the entrance exam to “Queen’s Academy,” where she can train to become a teacher. Both Anne and Minna also stand out for their imagination.

Thus, numerous similarities are observed: the difficulties that a rural and poor context may pose for a girl to receive higher education, the mockery at school for what is perceived as different, and the demonstrated capacity that both girls possess even coming from unfavorable environments. At this point, it should not be forgotten that Anne was adopted at almost eleven years old and that, previously, she had little education in the orphanage; nor that Minna had to take care of her younger brother and work at home to help her mother after her father’s death. Finally, it is interesting to note that both of them, in addition to their thirst for knowledge and education, have a great ability to care for young children (Anne did so in the orphanage and boasts about it, and Minna with Clemmie) and to help in the household. This fact is not in conflict with the reading habits or aspirations outside the home of these girls ^[13]. However, the above, in addition to relating to the socio-historical context of each work, may have to do with the family expectations of having a boy rather than a girl in both narratives: in Minna’s case, so that she could have worked and supported the family after her father’s death; and in Anne’s case, when the Cuthberts expressly request through Mrs. Spencer from the orphanage to send them “a boy” who can help with the farm work for Matthew. Nevertheless, regardless of their gender, they collaborate with various responsibilities both at home and outside of it and, in a way, break the traditional or expected role.

3.4. Nature, climate, and landscape

Both works take place in North America. Specifically, *The Rag Coat* is set in the Appalachian Mountains, which extend from Newfoundland in Canada to Connecticut; in the case of Montgomery’s novel, the location is Prince Edward Island in Canada. In both the album and the novel, duality in the role of nature was found: on the one hand, it is a source of admiration, superiority, connection, and purity, and on the other hand, it becomes a reflection of an oppressive atmosphere typical of a small rural community. It was shown how Anne is a child captivated by the natural landscape of Avonlea from her arrival. This coincides with the studies of Barry or Dawson ^[17,18], which referred to the author’s ability to evoke a natural landscape as a source of inspiration and admiration in her novels. Similarly, in both works, it was observed that the protagonists, despite being “within” the freedom that could imply that natural landscape, make short displacements, and everything is reduced to school, the countryside, and home. In relation to the above, it could be argued that life in nature sometimes ceases to be a reflection of freedom and takes the form of a large “outdoor” community, becoming a macro-home with which the protagonists establish an intimate connection, both to express their greatest joys and to share their most bitter moments. A macro-home from which it is difficult to leave, as Anne experiences before deciding whether she finally leaves for Carmody and considering if she would be able to return frequently to Green Gables: “Nothing can be worse than leaving Green Gables” ^[3].

It should also be noted that nature is conceived in a more pessimistic way in Mills’ album than in Montgomery’s novel. This issue has to do both with the depicted climatology and the sentimental attachment to it, evoking the watercolor illustrations of the album with a certain sadness and melancholy. It is also possible

that this greater negativity is a result of the represented era: those impoverished mining communities we referred to at the beginning. Here, it is observed that the weather is cold and adverse throughout the album, not only in the first illustration where heavy snowfall is depicted and Minna's family is bundled up in the cart but also in other images where stoves appear in the home and, of course, in the fundamental motif of the work: the absence of a coat, which, due to this adverse climate, does not allow the protagonist to attend school. The above contrasts with that more optimistic landscape and a source of inspiration in which Anne moves, capable of personifying in her rural environment all her positive emotions, her gratification at feeling welcomed, or her fervent imagination.

Finally, it is necessary to highlight another example of the parallelism and intertextuality between the album and the illustrated version of the novel that Mills created in the 1990s. This refers to the image of the carriage that appears on the first page of the album, as we have already mentioned. This image perfectly resembles the one included on pages 158 and 159 of "*Anne of Green Gables*," as seen in **Figure 5**.



Figure 5. Carriage in *Anne of Green Gables* ^[3]

However, the difference arises again in the reason for the journey and in the positivity or negativity conveyed by the accompanying text. In the novel, the children are traveling to the debating club, and Anne, as the narrator, is absorbed in everything she sees despite both landscapes being covered in snow. This contrasts with the family affection that Minna receives, wrapped in Mr. Miller's carriage while it snows, and the way she, as the narrator, tells the reader that her father works in the mines and loves the colorful blanket they wrap themselves in precisely because of its vivid colors. This vibrancy contrasts with the darkness of the mines and the color of the coal in the mining landscape they inhabit: "Papa loved his blanket because it had all the colors of the day, something he could barely see" ^[2]. Given the above, it can be concluded that, despite the duality offered by nature in both works, it is a source of sadness and conceived in a more negative light in the album than in the novel, a fact that may relate to the context and the sources of livelihood that nature provides in each of the works.

4. Conclusions

Despite being published almost ninety years apart, significant thematic innovations regarding the construction of female characters, and the importance of family, neighborhood, and school context in rural environments do

not seem to be appreciated, with a clear influence of Montgomery's novel on *The Rag Coat* album. Focusing on the roles played within the home by both protagonists or those of the father figures, it can be argued that *Anne of Green Gables*, being much older than the album, may present a greater overcoming of stereotypes, as exemplified by the work of the protagonist or of Marilla (her adoptive mother) on the farm; while sewing is the only means of livelihood for the female protagonists in the album. As mentioned, this can also be related to the more impoverished mining context referred to in Mills' work. The duality presented by the neighborhood is common in both works; however, it is more explicit in Montgomery's novel, as studied. In both rural communities, its role implies two meanings: interference in daily life and unconditional mutual support. Regarding the weather and nature, numerous coincidences have also been found, although the mining landscape in the album conveys greater negativity than the colorful farm of Avonlea.

Overall, it can be affirmed that Mills, the illustrator of the 1989 edition of *Anne of Green Gables*, seems to draw numerous motifs from it, being able to turn it into an album and bring it into the context of the 1990s. This fact creates a more hostile atmosphere and a poorer context. However, both in the novel and in the album, these girls close to adolescence share numerous characteristics and are willing to overcome certain stereotypes (MacLeod, 1995) and to be masters of their destinies.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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