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## Progressive Utopia

### Or, How to Grow Up Without Growing Up

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A solitary young girl is traveling—in an old stage coach on a dusty road, or an open buggy on a pretty street, or another buggy on a road “fringed with blooming wild cherry-trees and slim white birches.” Maybe she is in a railway carriage, or just on a footpath where “the air is fragrant with the scent of mountain flowers.”<sup>1</sup> The girl may be five or nine but is most likely eleven. She probably has remarkable eyes—“big blue eyes” (Pollyanna), “big eyes . . . full of spirit and vivacity” (Anne), “eyes like faith” that “glowed like two stars” (Rebecca). Her other physical characteristics are less imposing. She is “a small dark-haired person in a glossy buff calico dress” (Rebecca) or “a slender little girl in . . . red-checked gingham” (Pollyanna) or in “a very short, very tight, very ugly dress of yellowish gray wincey” (Anne). Perhaps she is just “a plain little piece of goods” in a black dress (Mary), or perhaps she is “wearing two frocks, one on top of the other” (Heidi). Whatever she is wearing, the people she is traveling towards will probably not approve of it.

Those people will be old, or they will act as if they are old. They will be stiff and unfriendly, very strict about themselves and others. They will have suffered greatly in the past, probably because of thwarted love, and they will be unmarried or widowed. They will probably have a strong sense of duty. And the child who is about to descend on them will transform their lives and make them happy.

This is the warmhearted world of the traditional novel for girls. While such novels are no longer written, many of the ones produced

decades ago are still widely read. The continuing popularity of these novels is surprising, given the great differences between ourselves and our grandparents; but even more surprising is their likeness to each other. Heidi, Anne of Green Gables, Pollyanna, Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, Mary of *The Secret Garden*—they live in widely separate countries, but their similarities outnumber their differences. They all live the same story, and they come to seem like variations of an ideal of female childhood that transcends national boundaries, and even the boundaries of time—for we still find the story enticing.

This is the story. The young girl, an orphan, arrives at her new home, which belongs to a relative, an aunt or a grandfather who has probably been living alone for a long time. Her sensible or faded clothing does not suit her character; she is a spontaneous and ebullient child, quite unaffected by her previous history of misfortune and deprivation. (Mary Lennox of *The Secret Garden* is an exception—her spontaneity and ebullience don't emerge until later in the novel.)

Luckily, our heroine's new home is a place of some physical comfort—a refuge from the deprivation she has suffered so far. There is enough food, and she will have a room of her own for the first time. The room is sparsely furnished, but it has a window. Through the window, she will see beautiful prospects of trees or flowers or mountains, and probably think of them as “delicious” (*Rebecca, Pollyanna*).

But as it turns out, the physical comfort of the new house is not matched by its emotional atmosphere. Its current inhabitants, who are old and solitary and unhappy, make it a bleak and sterile place. It is quite cut off from the beauty to be seen from its windows. There is little evidence of love, and there are many hard rules for a young child to learn.

Nevertheless, our heroine usually loves her new home. So she tries to love the people who live there, and to live by their rules. Sometimes she *does* love them, because she is too innocent to see how unlovable they are. Sometimes she finds them hard to love, but manages it anyway.

In fact, her almost magical qualities seem to triumph over every bad circumstance. She does not change much in the course of the events that follow—she manages somehow to age without becoming terribly different. But the wonderful qualities she starts with and

never loses have remarkable effects on other people, who change miraculously.

Bad ones become good ones; nasty people turn nice, uncharitable people give things away, potential divorcees decide to stay married. Or perhaps bad people are replaced by good ones; both the unsatisfactory minister and the unsatisfactory teacher Anne Shirley finds ensconced in Avonlea on her arrival are magically replaced by people she likes.

But most frequently, it turns out that the bad people were not really bad at all; while they have been soured by experience, they only need the presence of our remarkable heroine to rediscover their goodness. As Pollyanna tells an apparently nasty man, "I'm sure you're much nicer than you look," and he is, of course. Our heroine's major talent is the ability to restore the past—to return grown-ups to the happiness they felt in their youth. "That man is waking up after being asleep for over sixty years," says Rachel Lynde of Matthew Cuthbert.

Matthew is not the only grown-up awakened by the magic touch of youth; it happens to Aunt Jane and Aunt Miranda and Aunt Polly, to various friends and other people in the environs, to Heidi's grandfather, and so on. The process is carried to the extreme in *The Secret Garden*. Not only does the coming of spring and the resurrection of the garden change a desolate and decaying place into a lovely one; it also seems to cause human beings to spring up from nowhere, almost as if they had been hibernating. An apparently almost deserted house containing only a few unhappy people turns out to be a surprisingly populous one, and the people are all happy ones.

But despite, or perhaps because of, our heroine's magic ability to awaken dormant joyousness, this is a story without a plot. There is no suspense, no one action that gets more complicated as the novel progresses and is resolved at the end. In emotional terms, each episode merely repeats and amplifies the episodes preceding it; it causes an increase in the available amount of happiness, which gets larger as the novel gets longer.

In fact, there can be as many episodes as the novelist can think of, without much change to the texture or meaning of the whole. Entire chapters, like the one about Pollyanna's encounter with a minister in the woods, are quite separate from anything else that happens, and could easily be left out. Other chapters could be added,

and perhaps that is why so many of these novels have sequels. The important thing is that each episode ends with someone feeling better about himself and the world he lives in. The same thing happens again and again; if we are entertained, it is not because we want to find out what will happen, but because we know what will happen, and like it happening, and want it to keep on happening.

What each episode consists of is this: our child heroine shocks, and then delights, repressed or unhappy grown-ups with her childish spontaneity and lack of artifice. In acting "naturally," she makes them more natural, and brings an end to the artificial repression of their overcivilized values. She restores them to what they once were. This is made particularly obvious in *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*. Rebecca's Aunt Jane, who responds immediately to her, says, "I remember well enough how I felt at her age." Aunt Miranda, who is more rigid, and who never admits to the degree to which her contact with Rebecca has transformed her, says, "You was considerable of a fool at her age, Jane." Jane's answer reveals the heart of all these novels: "Yes I was, thank the Lord. I only wish I'd known how to take a little of my foolishness along with me, as some folks do, to brighten my declining years." Fortunately, she *has* brought it along, and Rebecca reveals it to her.

But there is some ambiguity about the "foolishness" of childhood. Our heroine does things that are meant to make us laugh. She dyes her hair green, or saves dinner rolls in her closet, or invites missionaries to dinner on the spur of the moment. Since she is too innocent to know what she ought not to do, her life is a series of comic disasters, in which her spontaneity and her ignorance of the ways of the world get her into trouble at the same time as they endear her to us. And while we are meant to find her actions delightful, we must also realize that spontaneity has its dangers.

Consequently, each time our heroine displays her innocence, she learns to be less innocent. As the grown-ups become more like children, the children become more like grown-ups. As the young Rebecca says to her friend Mr. Aladdin, "If you don't like me to grow old, why don't you grow young? Then we can meet at the halfway house and have nice times. Now that I think about it . . . that's just what you've been doing all along." In fact, that is what happens to the characters in all these novels. They start at opposite extremes, and gradually change until they are much like each other; old people find their sobriety balanced by joy, and young people

have their spontaneity balanced by discretion; the old rediscover the pleasures of imagination, and the young discover the virtues of common sense.

Finally, because our heroine is learning something important, she is tested. We must see that she can apply her magic gifts of healing to herself—that she can act on her own teachings. So the even tenor of her life, the continuing ebb and flow of not particularly significant events, is interrupted. Something serious happens, usually in the second last chapter.

Not always, however—Heidi confronts her problem earlier, in her imprisonment in Frankfurt, and Mary Lennox's problems end as the novel begins. But in these two novels, the story is not complete; their heroines do not grow old enough to complete it. There is no test at the end, for the test seems to signify the end of childhood, and Heidi and Mary remain triumphantly young, triumphantly magical. This is not to say that the myth expressed by all these novels is not complete in *Heidi* and *The Secret Garden*; it is. Other people in these novels *do* pass the test and manage either to retain their youthful spirits or to rediscover them.

For a heroine who gets older, the test is hard indeed. She becomes seriously ill; perhaps, even, unable to walk. Will she have the strength to heal herself as she healed others? Or perhaps a loved one dies. Will she be able to accept death and still be joyful? Or her glorious plans for the future are thwarted. Will she be able to accept it? She will, of course. She will feel what L. M. Montgomery in *Anne of Green Gables* calls "the cold, sanctifying touch" of sorrow, and be sanctified by it. All ends happily; happiness has progressed to its point of perfect ripeness.

That is the story. The question is, why is it so consistent? Why are these novels so similar to each other, and so satisfying in their consistencies?

To begin with, the setting of these novels, a house in a pleasant rural location, is important. Such a place offers the pleasures of nature without its wild savagery, and the pleasures of civilization without its urban constrictions. It is a place to relax in, something like paradise. Clearly nothing very unpleasant will happen here.

In fact, nothing unpleasant does happen. The classic novels for boys always start with their heroes leaving home, and describe their exciting confrontations with hardship and evil in wild, uncomfortable places, until they finally come home again. These novels for

girls start with their heroine's arrival at what is to be her home, *after* a series of unsettling adventures which are glossed over rather than described; once she gets home, she does nothing but grow up quietly. In boys' books, things start badly and get worse, almost until the very end. In these girls' books, things start well and get better, almost until the very end. The pleasure offered readers is something not usually considered desirable in fiction—lack of suspense, lack of excitement, lack of conflict; it is a pleasure we might associate more with our indulgence in utopian dreams than with our love of a good story.

But not quite; the place may be perfect, but the people who live there need working on. In fact, that is why these novels might best be called progressive utopias. They begin with a heroine's arrival at an almost perfect place; and after that, the heroine's action on the community makes it an even more perfect place. Sympathetic readers can partake in the creation of heaven on earth and be satisfied in realizing that heaven on earth is the world one already lives in—not a deserted island in the South Seas, not a lost corner of Africa, not the exciting past or the glorious future, but home. The growing happiness of the inhabitants of utopia is their growing understanding that home is in fact utopia.

The children who bring them to that satisfying awareness share some important characteristics. They are all girls, of course, and therefore ideally suited to the unexciting pleasures of home—or so these novels assume. And they are all orphans. Without parents (or in Rebecca's case, with only one parent) to guide them and restrain them, they have not been spoiled by grown-up attitudes—they are purely and essentially childlike. In fact, they are symbols of childhood and its virtues, pure manifestations of qualities that would be muddied in less detached children. These girls all transcend the specifics of their situations and develop almost mythic intensity. Their novelists adore them, and expect readers to adore them too. Rebecca is called "a little brown elf," and Anne "some wild divinity of the shadowy places." Such divinities clearly represent something of importance.

That thing is best expressed by the poet Wordsworth; as Kate Douglas Wiggin says in *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, "Blessed Wordsworth! How he makes us understand." What Wordsworth made the generations who followed him understand and take to heart is that childhood innocence is automatically sympathetic with

the healing beauties of nature, which are themselves divine, and which we become blind to in maturity. "Heaven lies about us in our infancy," and as children, we perceive "splendour in the grass . . . glory in the flower." Grown-ups usually can't do that. But Anne says, "If I really wanted to pray I'll tell you what I'd do. I'd go out into a great big field all alone, or I'd look up into the sky—up—up—up—into that lovely blue sky that looks as if there was no end to its blueness. And then I'd just *feel* a prayer." Heidi feels the same way about mountains: "everything seemed more beautiful than she had expected. . . . It was so lovely, Heidi stood with tears pouring down her cheeks, and thanked God for letting her come home again." Both Rebecca and Pollyanna escape restrictive houses into "delicious" landscapes, and in *The Secret Garden*, the most symbolic of these novels, God's "Magic" expresses itself best in natural landscapes. Colin says, "Sometimes since I've been in the garden I've looked up through the trees at the sky and I have had a strange feeling of being happy, as if something were pushing and drawing in my chest and making me breathe fast. Magic is always pushing and drawing and making things out of nothing. . . . The magic in the garden has made me stand up and know I'm going to be a man." In fact, spontaneous feelings are prayer, and Nature is God's cathedral; L. M. Montgomery tells us how "a glimpse of painted sunset sky shone like a great rose window at the end of a cathedral aisle."

Children, being unrepressed by societal values, are naturally responsive to the divine joys of Nature. As Wordsworth said, a child is the

. . . best Philosopher, who yet dost keep  
 Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind,  
 . . . . .  
     Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!  
     On whom these truths do rest,  
 Which we are toiling all our lives to find,  
 In darkness lost. . . .

Our orphans are all "seers blest." And because these novels give us, not the real world but an idealized one, all of them show the way to those older than themselves who are "in darkness lost."

They are lost in darkness because they feel a strong sense of "Duty"—a virtue Wordsworth called the "Stern Daughter of the Voice of God," and opposed to natural, childlike spontaneity, for it made him act against his own natural feelings. Wordsworth eventually got tired of "uncharted freedom" and "chance desires," and gave in to Duty; but as a poem by Rebecca suggests, that is not the case in these novels of child worship:

When Joy and Duty clash  
Let Duty go to smash.

Not that Duty isn't important. Children do grow up and have to face responsibility, and in any case, natural spontaneity is not always a virtue, despite our wistful admiration of it; it is self-centered and antisocial. In fact, the authors of these novels even pretend to dislike it. Rebecca, we are told, "never stopped to think, more's the pity," and we are expected to see that our heroines get into trouble whenever they don't stop to think. But we cannot really take that seriously, for it is their spontaneity that makes these girls adorable. While our heroines do look Duty in the face, their spirits are not quenched by it. They age without losing their childlike qualities, grow up without actually growing up; that is the heart of the appeal of these novels.

Even from the beginning, our heroine's spontaneous joy in living has not been destroyed by circumstances that ought to have destroyed it. Only Mary Lennox begins depressed, and she soon regains her happiness and her innocence. So does her friend Colin; apparently one *can* go home again. The other girls have suffered before the novels begin, but show no signs of it; the message is that bitter experience does *not* quench true childish joy. In fact, Anne and Rebecca, who do eventually grow up physically, never lose their childlike qualities. That is why they are tested—tested and found to be unresponsive to experience, terminally incapable of not being, as Pollyanna insists, "glad" no matter what. They are only slightly restrained by the women's bodies and lives they inhabit. The mature Rebecca is still a "bewildering being, who gave wings to thoughts that had only crept before; who brought color and grace and harmony into the dun brown texture of existence." And as Anne tells us, "I'm not a bit changed—not really. I'm only just pruned down and branched out. The real me—back here—is just the same."



They are still childlike divinities of the shadowy places, just as Mary and Heidi and Pollyanna are.

Contemporary feminists might well find these novels objectionable. Their central message is that a comfortable home is heaven and that the perfect divinities to occupy that home are women who act much like children. The utopia these novels progress towards is actually a regressive world of perfect childlike innocence. But despite our revised ideals both of childhood and femininity, many readers are not revolted. In growing up, or merely in allowing people who have grown up to become children again, our heroines perform a miracle that readers apparently would still like to believe in.

One of the ugly things the philosophy of the Romantic movement accomplished for us in its admiration of childlike qualities was the divorce of childhood from maturity. Until the early nineteenth century, children weren't thought to be much different from grown-ups; they certainly weren't thought to be better than grown-ups. But Blake and Wordsworth changed all that, and we still believe that children think differently, see differently, and feel differently from the way we do. While this conviction helps us immeasurably in our dealings with children, it does create problems. It separates us from our own past selves, and it makes children into strangers in our midst. Worst of all, it makes childhood, which inevitably passes, agonizingly enticing to us—somehow better than, richer than, realer than the maturity we are stuck with. It forces us into a fruitless nostalgia—a lust for something we simply cannot have anymore.

But in the wish-fulfillment world of the novels of progressive utopia, we can have it again. Childhood never really ends; the most childlike children never really grow up, and even terminally mature people can become childlike again. It is the secret desire of grown-ups to be children again that makes these novels so appealing to grown-ups, and it may be the secret desire of children to never grow up that makes these novels appealing to them. Apparently these desires transcend both place and time.

Furthermore, these desires are just one version of a central concern of children's literature, no matter where or when it was written—how to grow up, as one inevitably must, without losing the virtues and delights of childhood. This is the subject of *Harriet the Spy* and *Tom's Midnight Garden* and *The Little Prince* just as

much as it is the subject of *Treasure Island* and *Tom Sawyer* and *Swiss Family Robinson*. As long as we produce books especially for children because we are convinced that childhood is quite different from maturity, it may be the only thing a good children's book is ever about.

## Notes

1. The novels the solitary young girl travels in are, respectively, *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* by Kate Douglas Wiggin, *Pollyanna* by Eleanor H. Porter, *Anne of Green Gables* by L. M. Montgomery, *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, and *Heidi* by Johanna Spyri. The popularity of these books over the decades means that they have been available in many different editions. The translation of *Heidi* that I have used is by Eileen Hall (Penguin-Puffin, 1956).