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Playing House: Role-playing hospitality in children's literature

What do the various failures and successes of children role-playing hospitality in *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), and *Little Women* (1868-9) reveal about their respective cultures and their own conceptions of belonging and identity?

The question of hospitality and belonging is a pertinent area of study within the context of children's literature because of the uncertainty and gaps between the protagonists' goals and the outcomes of attempted adulthood. Children's literature presents not only what the protagonist does but also the consequences of matching or failing to match expected social behaviors. "Sex-role socialization" is a social model that relies on parents, teachers, and community members to teach the behaviors and values aligning with gender roles (McQuillan and Pfeiffer, 20). The heroines of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868-9), and L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) similarly learn from others and test their knowledge of the roles of hostess and guest against their own experiences of their world. Alice represents the precarious position of a guest who bears her own ideas of how the host world should run. Anne plays both guest and host as she becomes part of the community. And the March sisters—Jo especially—enact hospitality as essential to identity.

ALICE: WHEN WHO'S IN CHARGE CHANGES WHO YOU ARE

Judith Still breaks hospitality into four quadrants governing interaction: reciprocity vs. non-reciprocity and peer vs. stranger (14). Entering into Wonderland without a previous understanding of its rules, Alice represents the most unstable configuration of a guest, a stranger without hope of returning the act or generosity she has received. For how could she welcome the creatures of Wonderland into a world of schoolhouse discipline? Alice is entirely uncertain of how to return to her world, let alone provide for others with a child's resources and authority. She remains at the mercy of each new circumstance and creature she encounters, and therefore, cannot understand this system of hospitality she receives well enough to reciprocate it. Because

of this, Alice's time in Wonderland provokes a crisis of authority, which translates into a crisis of identity.

Alice attempts to reinforce reality without authority

Another author might have turned this vulnerability into a morality tale, following Alice through polite exchanges and concluding that manners will pull a child through any situation. Instead, as Donald Rackin observes, Alice's attempts to align Wonderland with her Victorian "secure conventions and self-assured regulations" (392) are doomed from the start. If Elsie Leach proposes Alice as a reaction against didacticism through empathy (91), then Rackin furthers the premise, proposing a "destruction of the fabric of our so-called logical, orderly, and coherent approach to the world" (393). Alice's identity is rooted in foundational aspects such as size, primary-school knowledge of the world, and common sense. Wonderland does not respect these boundaries, and as a guest, Alice must fight off the attacks of Wonderland's chaos.

The Mad Tea party presents perhaps the most obvious example of Alice's odd position as a guest in Wonderland. Talking with the Cheshire-Cat, Alice learns of the Mad Hatter and the March Hare (Carroll, 67). Her first response is to reason the mad couple out of their madness. "I've seen hatters before," she asserts (69), and "perhaps, as this is May, it won't be raving mad—at least not so mad as it was in March" (69). She will go on to attempt imposing order on the scene, just as she attempts to reduce the madness of her hosts through a shaky sort of logic. In hoping to adjust the identities of her hosts, she breaks the role of guest, one who gratefully receives.

To the frantic cry, "No room!" (72) Alice replies, "There's *plenty* of room!" (72) while sitting at the table's head(!). This presumption disrupts the company's plans because time has stopped, and the group needs each spot to rotate and maintain tea in accordance with the time (77). Wonderland runs by its own rules; Alice has simply refused to work out or even allow for the existence of alternate rules before taking the highest position. However, the tea party's most important facet is how out of touch with Wonderland's reality Alice remains despite the helpful explanations provided by the Cheshire-Cat and Mad Hatter.

Alice asserts authority by shaping reality

In the final moments of her time in Wonderland, Alice seizes power from the impenetrable proceedings of the Queen's court. As Rackin observes, Alice's declaration that the soldiers are "nothing but a pack of cards!" (Carroll, 129) is a final, assertive rejection of Wonderland and its odd hostility (Rackin, 414). Rejecting the role of a well-behaved guest, Alice sends *herself* back into her own world. Robert Polhemus rightly concludes that in *Alice*, "the child [finds] cosmic liberation from the tyranny of adulthood with its pride, pretentiousness, and incessant moralizing" (598). The confusing and inconsistent rules of Wonderland might reasonably seem, after all, like the whims of London's adults and their rules for children.

While *Alice* might be an effective ward against adult moralizing, the story does submit an odd concluding thought. Alice's sister concludes the story with a dream of her own, one featuring Alice, grown and amazing future generations with her tale (Carroll, 132). Compared to the picturesque scene of children gathered around a mother, Alice's harrowing stumbles through Wonderland seem unrecognizable. As a guest in Alice's dream, the sister has completely replaced the hostile experience with something tame—and so proved the danger and power inherent to a stranger's position upon entering into another's space.

ANNE: HIGH STAKES MISTAKES AND THE SECRET RULES THEY BREAK

Unlike Alice, whose societal identity is challenged, Anne Shirley steadily builds her identity from an inconvenient guest to her closing speech: "God's in his heaven, and all is right with the world" (Montgomery, 427). She transitions from guest to host and adjusts her dream position from that of the honored but untouchable guest to a family member, sharing the burdens and responsibilities of the community.

Anne searches for belonging as an unconscious threat

On first arriving, Anne believes she has found a "really truly home" (27), but the Cuthberts do not intend to keep her. Anne qualifies as less than a proper guest but more than a farmhand. As Mrs. Lynde observes, the presence of only one type of cake and crabapple preserves at the tea

Marilla sets out implies "the expected company could not be any *particular* company" (6, emphasis added). Anne's adoption belongs to a historical influx of children brought into Canada as labor, (Reimer, 333). Between 1868 and 1925, an estimated "eighty thousand British children, most under the age of fourteen, were relocated to Canada" (333). On Prince Edward Island, an orphanage was not established until 1907, and rural families adopted orphans from both England and other areas of Canada (Doody, 425). Adoption demands vulnerability and trust on both sides; so when Marilla clarifies that she prefers a "native born" (Montgomery, 8) to a foreign child, she acknowledges how the orphan poses a threat to the values of her home. Because of the perceived threat of her presence, the stakes of performing appropriately at Green Gables are higher for Anne than the average houseguest. Marilla tells Anne she might stay "if [she] will try to be a good little girl and show [herself] grateful" (75). *Good* and *girl* are both integral parts of Anne's situation. The training Marilla proposes falls into "sex-role socialization" with Marilla as the model.

While perhaps unaware of the threat that she represents to the home—and the town's—culture, Anne fails to meet the standards for polite guests. First, Anne's femininity demands a change in Marilla's plans. Anne cannot be "put up" on the kitchen chamber couch like the expected orphan boy, but "the spare room was out of the question for such a stray waif" (37).

The concept of the spare room seems to represent the social status and belonging that Anne craves so dearly. As Doody explains, farmhouse spare rooms similar to Green Gables' were "typically one of [the home's] grandest apartments, with expensive and gloomy furnishings" (70, n. 4). The gloom and social weight of the spare room appeal to Anne, especially as one drawn to both drama and social acceptance.

Later, Anne begs Marilla to allow Diana to set her hat in the spare room as a mark of proper reception. Diana should be allowed to lay claim to a space in the Cuthberts' home, and the spare room is a way of both showing and declaring honor. Diana is deemed a worthy guest, and Anne can play the keeper of abundance by drawing attention to the spare room's very existence.. In a journal entry from 1910, Montgomery remembers her own "avid desire" to stay

in the spare room at her grandparents' home where she was raised; although, her wish was never granted (qtd. in Doody, 70 n.4). Clearly, Anne's preoccupation with the spare room is an inherited trait.

Instead of the spare room, Marilla places Anne in the east gable room, a space boasting "a rigidity not to be described in words" (Montgomery, 38). As Doody observes, Marilla's sparse decorations—a Jubilee picture of Queen Victoria and a portrait of Christ—represent not only Church and State but also her respect for fixed powers (449). Marilla's decorations welcome Anne under the watchful gaze of authority. They do not tolerate change let alone the natural chaos of a child such as Anne. As she establishes herself, transitioning from guest to member of the household, Anne will decorate the room with tokens from nature, valuing the organic, temporary beauty of the twigs and blossoms she brings into the home.

Secondly, Marilla observes Anne's lack of appetite "as if it were a serious shortcoming" (36). Failing to accept the offering of a host is considered impolite in many cultures, and Avonlea's is no exception. Moroccan author Ben Jalloun writes of a friend that, "If you're not hungry then you don't care for me anymore" (qtd. in Still, 93). Often, the offer of food, like the invitation into someone's home, holds an unconscious transference wherein it is also an offering of self. To reject a meal is to pass judgment on its maker and their home. Additionally, Marilla might have been concerned for the health of this odd, skinny child, who does not eat but talks a mile a minute.

Finally, Anne does not engage in the subdued and factual small talk that terrifies Matthew. Upon meeting him, Anne breaks into a lengthy monologue and then falls into a lengthier silence (18), completely eschewing the polite frame of conversation. Instead of efficiently answering Marilla's questions about her history, Anne asks her if she might "tell [Marilla] what I *imagine* about myself" (54). While, "Traditionally guests who are strangers tell their story" (Still, 94), Marilla is not interested in fantastic tales but only the facts. Anne's desire to be called Cordelia, eccentric names for local landmarks, and impassioned speeches do not fit Avonlea's role of polite little girl.

Marilla's dismissal of Anne's imaginative offerings align with Marilla's goals for Anne—which, at this point, end with Anne's practical value. Hospitality here is an economic transaction. As she says to Matthew, "It'd be more to the point if you could say [Anne] was a useful little thing," (67).

However, Marilla's expectations of Anne still exemplify a best-case scenario for a child of the time. Girls have long been expected to take on the adult work of keeping house—or more accurately, keeping homes together. Claudia Nelson examines the phenomenon of Victorian era girls called upon to take up the roles of women in the workforce as well as in the home, examining the role of the "girl as woman"(103). From her sunny disposition to her quick mind and ravenous curiosity, Anne's behavior is exceptional coming from an orphanage, (Moody, 426). The genuine care and generous upbringing the Cuthberts provide Anne also goes beyond the typical experience of an adopted orphan in that era. However, Anne's past still features a grim line of caretakers, including Mrs. Hammond, who exploits Anne for the care of eight children (Montgomery, 56). Before Green Gables, Anne's picture of home and belonging is defined primarily by absence: absence of care and respect in inverse proportion to the scope of her responsibilities in the home. She turns instead to the prestige of the honored guest, symbolized by the spare room.

Anne earns her honor as a guest and host

The symbol of the spare room holds such weight to Anne, that she presents the Spare Room Argument "with the air of producing the last shot in her locker" (Montgomery, 207) in convincing Marilla to allow her to attend a concert with Diana: "Think of the honour of your little Anne being put in the spare-room bed" (207). The spare room of a home such as Green Gables already implies a level of formality and recognition coveted by the girl who wants nothing more than to be wanted. The honor of staying in the spare room at the Barrys'—a family possessing the means and status to keep Diana in a fur cap and music lessons—carries a greater weight.

After the concert, the girls return to the spare room, and Anne proposes a race to the bed. If Anne had adhered to the social guidelines for a polite guest, she and Diana might have discovered an unexpected guest without much fuss and readjusted their plans accordingly. Instead, the pair take a running leap onto the imperious and wealthy Aunt Josephine.Anne's position in the house has been overthrown! The girls are relegated to the relative indignity of sleeping with Minnie May of whom Diana complains, "you can't think how she kicks" (214). Anne is demoted from honored guest but accepted as a member of the family, sharing the kicks along with the closeness.

In October, Marilla allows Anne to have Diana over for tea, and Anne rejoices: "No fear of my forgetting to put the tea to draw when I have company." (168). The act of playing host makes Anne feel that she can, in a moment, shed her childish mishaps and become her ideal of an elegant lady. The negotiation that follows about what to serve represents tension between Anne the clumsy child and Anne the poised hostess. Anne's requests include the best Green Gables has to offer: the rosebud tea-set, the spare room for Diana's hat, and tea in the parlor (168). Marilla counters with a set-up more fitting for a child's play-date: the "old brown" tea-set, leftover raspberry cordial, and the justification that "the sitting-room will do for you and your company" (168). Even as Anne steps into her first time as hostess, Marilla checks fantasies of pomp, trading them for a sensible and more familiar arrangement.

"Unnatural solemnity" (169) describes the lived experience of Anne's ideal tea. Both girls engage in stiff small talk; Anne asks Diana about her family and crops "as if she had not seen Mrs. Barry picking apples that morning in excellent health and spirits" (169). The girls act and speak as if reading off a script. However, Anne proves the more dedicated actor, insisting Diana stay for tea despite feeling ill because Anne "never heard of company going home without tea" (175). Tea has become Anne's opportunity to play out her dream, welcoming others into an established home, extending the hospitality she has received from the Cuthberts. A mistake—switching Marilla's currant wine for the innocent cordial–incites Mrs. Barry's wrath but leaves Anne confused. Marilla, the adult model, interprets the incident according to the

culture's norms; while Anne made the mistake of serving wine, Diana should not have drunk so much, and even further, Marilla deems Diana's greed worthy of punishment (177).

The heart of this scene lies in the unfamiliarity. Anne understands the outline of how tea works but not the "why". Failure highlights the expectations of tea upheld in Avonlea: who belongs, what sort of dishware they deserve, and how they should behave. As McQuillan and Pfeiffer point out, "Anne forces us to see that becoming a woman is a difficult, discouraging, if essential, task" (23). In the case of the spoiled tea, Anne negotiates her place in the household with Marilla and tries on her ideal, only to find that she still has much to learn about the adult world.

THE MARCH GIRLS: UNITY OF PURPOSE, UNITY OF PERSON

Little Women finds the March girls hosting their own first event as an experiment: a lunch prepared without the help of Marmee or Hannah. Sarah Elbert concludes about the affair that "Marmee has proven to the girls that domestic work is real work" (201). The "proof" arrives in spite of Jo's overzealous attempts at cooking corned beef, potatoes, asparagus, lobster, salad, blanc-mange and strawberries (Alcott, 95). The results of Jo's efforts are burnt bread, lumpy blanc-mange, asparagus somehow mushy *and* tough, and salted strawberries (97). Unlike Anne's attempts at a stilted script, however, the March girls understand the expectations surrounding a lunch hosted for the community. Conversation among the group remains light-hearted, and the group laughs together over the failure rather than taking Diana's escape route or sticking to stilted discussion. Of course, the mixed company of adults and adolescents eliminates the air of mystery Anne and Diana bestow on tea.

The March girls host with many hands but a single mind

In fact, an awareness of the expectations of social rules surrounding guests presents a hiccup in the sisters' quests toward personal improvement. Alcott writes that "despair seized them, when…Miss Crocker appeared, and said she'd come to dinner" (97). The March girls dislike the "thin, yellow spinster", but they are taught to "be kind to her, simply because she was old and

poor, and had few friends" (97). Despite this, the girls call her "Croaker", and their distaste reveals something significant about the status of such a woman in their community, the balance between what "Christian charity" demands and the girls' true feelings. On Still's matrix of hospitality, Miss Crocker's status falls at the intersection of non-reciprocal and somewhere between peer and stranger. She is unlikely to be able to return the favor of hosting the March family, and her feminine singleness and poverty place her below Mr. Lawrence and Laurie but above a woman of her position from out of town. Aside from tolerating Miss Crocker, the March girls must also manage Crocker's Rachel Lynde-like penchant for gossip. Her presence at the lunch adds subtle pressure to uphold the family name—lest word of the odd luncheon make the rounds. As the company struggles to eat the spoiled meal, Jo's tears suddenly turn to laughter, and while Miss Crocker looks forward to spreading the word, the reader understands the account will bear a softened retelling.

Following the incident, Marmee spells out the lesson to be learned, prompting the response from Jo, "We'll work like bees, and love it too" (99). While this reply rather smacks the reader across the face with its virtue, the significant feature lies in the girls' ability to fail with empathy intact from Marmee, the narrator, and the reader. (To be fair, a case can be made about the entwinement of those first two perspectives at least.) As T.D. MacLulich remarks, "The March sisters are the first 'naughty' children allowed to survive and prosper in American Children's literature" (338). From this important "first", the heroines try out their own role as hostesses while making judgment calls about who qualifies as a welcome guest rather than an obligation.

Welcoming others is often a collective work, especially in the March family. For example, Jo's first meeting with Laurie in the Lawrence house begins with conversation shouted through a window, carries on in a tornado of tidying and pillow-plumping, and ends in Jo returning to the room loaded with gifts from the other March women.

Sharing the burden of care draws the family together and establishes compassionate outreach as part of their family identity, such that Jo can enter this grand home unchaperoned and yet tolerate "no nonsense" in sprucing up the place (46). Furthermore, after Laurie admits he

often watches the family through a window, Jo promises to "never draw that curtain any more" (46) and even extends an invitation to join the family. Beth might sing, Amy dance, Meg and Jo put on a theatrical performance, and Marmee, with the most obscure role, could "do [Laurie] heaps of good" (46). Each member is intertwined in Jo's externalized hospitality.

Jo March becomes Mother Bhaer

While all four March girls participate in some way in caring for Laurie, Jo takes the lead and provides our primary model of the four for successfully developing an identity in the context of hospitality. Jo's love for others is active, mirroring her boundless wells of energy. In the final test of the girls' identities—reconciling personal growth with married life, Jo turns down Laurie's proposal. Instead, she marries Professor Bhaer, who is "rather stout with brown hair tumbled all over his head" (263). In comparison with the much younger Laurie, Jo's choice has confused generations of readers. Some critics read Jo's marriage as embracing a "father substitute" to avoid recognizing sexual identity (Foster and Simmons, 104). However, it might be noted that Bhaer matches Jo's values, particularly her exuberant generosity and cooperative domesticity. He participates in the weekly shopping, "distorting his pockets with the knobby bundles" (Alcott, 366). Where Laurie "cannot even direct the maids to plump his pillows properly" (210), Bhaer gladly takes part in the work necessary to keep a home. Therefore, it makes sense that Jo's mature self seeks out a partner rather than a prodigy in caring for others and building a home, a key part of her identity as modeled by Marmee. Together, the Bhaers run a boys' school, becoming an extended model of hospitality to the students and their families.

Jo's welcome is vast, not only including the family but expanding to the world. Grown, married, and matured, Jo Bhaer recalls her "castle" of dreams with Amy "in a maternal way of all mankind" (379). As Elbert writes, Jo has "accepted maternal responsibility for the whole world" (216), and in so doing, exemplifies an impossible hospitality the philosopher Derrida calls "the Law of Hospitality". In this theoretical state, the host offers unconditional and indiscriminate welcome of the other (Still, 14). As Mother Bhaer, Jo embodies for the briefest moment, an impossible combination of openness, compassion, and action. Of course, the

practical model of the boy's school will involve a reciprocal transaction, money in exchange for care.

ALL IS ~~RIGHT~~ RIPE FOR DISCUSSION WITH THE WORLD

The end of *Little Women* leaves Jo at a bend in the road just as Montgomery leaves Anne and Carroll, Alice. In establishing their identities as hosts, Jo and Anne become more secure in themselves and their communities while Alice's time as a guest in Wonderland challenges her to act outside of the conventions that rule her life and enhances the disconnect between Alice's experiences and society's perceptions. The societal view of children from *Alice's* publication in 1865 in England to *Anne's* in 1908 changes dramatically. However, studying hospitality through the female experience remains pertinent because, as Judith Still observes, women are "the material ground of hospitality" (122), responsible for much of the physical and emotional labor required to welcome others into the home. Alice, Anne, and Jo continue to serve as models for children and adults alike, inviting comparison and critical thought about the way modern women and girls interact with the roles of guest and host in identity formation.

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