JOANNA ELLEN WOOD: A SILENCED FEMALE AUTHOR IN ENGLISH CANADIAN FICTION

Natalia Rodríguez Nieto
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

Abstract

At the intersection between New Woman studies and motherhood studies, critical approaches to female literature can offer a renewed perspective that fosters the revitalization of silenced authors and works. When applied within the framework of nineteenth-century Canadian literature in English, new readings of dismissed writers and works from this intersectional critical perspective offer the chance of voicing their innovations and achievements. Although praised in her time, the attention paid to Joanna Ellen Wood and her novel *The Untempered Wind* (1894) within the Canadian literary framework has been ambivalent. The present analysis of her literary career and her novel demonstrate both deserve a place within Canadian literature still to be recovered.

Keywords: (English) Canadian Literature, Nineteenth-Century Women Literature, Joanna Ellen Wood, *The Untempered Wind*, New Woman & Motherhood Studies.

JOANNA ELLEN WOOD: UNA AUTORA SILENCIADA EN LA FICCIÓN INGLESA CANADIENSE

Resumen

En la intersección entre los estudios de la Nueva Mujer y los estudios de la maternidad, acercamientos críticos al análisis literario ofrecen una nueva perspectiva sobre la literatura escrita por mujeres que, a su vez, fomentaría la revitalización de autoras y obras silenciadas hasta la fecha. Como enfoque innovador en el ámbito de la literatura canadiense en general y específicamente en el área de la literatura decimonónica, este acercamiento ofrece la posibilidad de revitalizar autoras y obras que han desaparecido del canon literario, a pesar de su relevancia en la época. Este es el caso de la autora Joanna Ellen Wood y su novela *The Untempered Wind* (1894) las cuales, a pesar de la aceptación por parte de la crítica en su época, han sido borradas de los discursos literarios canadienses como significativas. El presente análisis demuestra que, tanto la autora como la novela, merecen un lugar dentro de la expresión literaria de Canadá.

Palabras clave: literatura canadiense (anglófona), literatura decimonónica de mujeres, Joanna Ellen Wood, *The Untempered Wind*, estudios de la nueva mujer y de la maternidad.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2025.91.09
Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses, 91; octubre 2025, pp. 161-175; ISSN: e-2530-8335

1. INTRODUCTION

The critical space opened by New Woman studies and motherhood studies offers the chance to develop new readings and interpretations of frequently misunderstood and, consequently, dismissed nineteenth-century writers and works. The choices of New Woman writers both in their creative lives as well as regarding their fictional characters can be approached from a different perspective that may foster the revitalization of their figures and works as significant, original and even pioneering as in the case of Joanna Ellen Wood and her contribution to the Canadian novel in English with her groundbreaking work *The Untempered Wind* (1894).

Although later re-appropriated and re-signified, the term New Woman was originally employed as a denigrating label to describe those female writers and fictional heroines who deviated from the traditional concept of "the angel in the house" and who were actually considered "the devil in the house" (Podnieks 2023, 27). Also called "the Odd Woman, the Wild Woman, and the Superfluous Woman" (Ardis 1990, 1), she was fearsome for deviating from traditional womanliness roles of wife and mother and thus representing a threat against patriarchy to such an extent that "she was accused of instigating the second fall of man" (Ardis 1990, 1). As Podnieks explains, female writers of the time developed two types of fiction that, although different, are connected through the depiction of revolutionary women. Whereas the so-called sensation fiction usually depicts "scandalous plots of adultery, crime, and intrigue," the feminist focus of New Woman fiction entails broader critiques and wider claims on women's identities (2023, 28). Despite the contemporary contestation of the term New Woman, of the literature to support its derogatory scope and their influence on society and culture by feminist critics who managed to counterbalance their authority, some writers and works vanished along the way.

Mainly developed and applied in the British cultural framework, other literatures under the influence of British colonialism show similar patterns of misinterpretation and dismissal of *fin-de-siècle* contributions by women writers. Within the context of Canadian literature in English, women in the nineteenth-century were also becoming emancipated writers who managed to earn a living as such and shaped differing female protagonists that challenged traditional female roles and claimed for new visions of female identities either following the tradition of sensation fiction or opening groundbreaking spaces in New Woman's fiction. According to Lorraine McMullen, "the figure of woman as strong and competent is central to the Canadian tradition" (1977, 134). Her idea that a distinctive model of female identity of "woman as hero, rather than "heroine"" (1977, 134), who distanced from old patriarchal archetypes of femaleness, evolved in Canadian literature from early stages is key to understand the figures and works of female writers before the twentieth century.

Taking anthologization as proof of Canada's disregard concerning nineteenth-century female authors, Wood's case is revealing. Mainly rescued from oblivion in critical works focusing on women writers as in the case of Carrie Macmillan's chapter "Joanna E. Wood: Incendiary Women" included in the groundbreaking critical work *Silenced Sextet* (1992), the attention paid to Wood and her works in

anthologies, literary histories and critical works with broader perspectives has been ambivalent, to say the least. Very few focus on her figure and writings, or even mention them, with the notable exceptions of Desmond Pacey's *Creative Writing in Canada; a Short History of English-Canadian Literature* published in 1964, where she is aligned with currently renowned authors like William Kirby, Gilbert Parker or Sara Jeannette Duncan, together with Vernon Blair Rhodenizer's 1965 edition of *Canadian Literature in English* where both Wood and *The Untempered Wind* are included. Ignored in some well-known literary histories and anthologies such as *ECW's Biographical Guide to Canadian Novelists* (1980), as well as in William Toye's edition of *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* (1983), she appears again in the 1990's version of the volume on *Canadian Writers 1890-1920 of the Dictionary of Literary Biography.* Later compilations such as *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English* in both its 2010 and 2019 editions seem to insist on this neglect. It is necessary to turn to critical works specifically focusing on women's writing to find interesting data as the fact that Joanna Ellen Wood was "ranked with Charles G.D. Roberts and Gilbert Parker as one of the three major novelists of the day" during the 19th century (McMullen 1990, 56).

Wood's case is paradigmatic regarding the underestimation of *fin-de-siècle* female literature because of reasons such as colonialism and the frontier mentality of Canada, together with gender biases. According to MacMillan, facts such as the nineteenth-century trend to underestimate Canadian literature in favor of British and/or US literatures, the absence of Canadian literature from academic curricula, the decreasing interest in sensation fiction of later literary traditions such as modernism, together with the unequal quality of Wood's latest works also played an important role in the oblivion of her figure and works (MacMillan 1992, 170). Such forgetfulness and subsequent neglect seem not to have been thoroughly investigated, and mended, if necessary, since Carole Gerson's comment on the fact that "even in the anthologies dealing specifically with the nineteenth century, there has been almost no effort to reconstruct the period and recover its lost women authors" (McMullen 1990, 62). The most recent mention to Wood I have been able to find is in one of Mandy Treagus' thorough analyses of Sara Jeannette Duncan's *A Daughter of Today* (1894) published in 2014 which approaches Duncan's work precisely from the perspective of New Woman studies.

2. JOANNA ELLEN WOOD

As a New Woman herself, Joanna E. Wood deviated from Patmore's model of the angel in the house as exposed in his now questioned poem of the same title. Unmarried and childless, she was a devoted writer and, thus, a clear paradigm of a boundary-crossing New Woman who changed her Scottish birthplace for USA and Canada, where she resided most of her life. Confident not only of women's role as contributors to literature in general but specially to Canadian literature, her participation in Canada's artistic expression as writer and commentator demonstrates she believed in Canada as valid literary realm, just as her approach to the issue of

Canada as relevant artistic source in some of her works as her novel *Judith Moore; or, Fashioning a Pipe* (1898) (MacMillan 1992, 185). Her commitment to literature might have influenced her decision to remain unmarried and childless which, in turn, together with the decline in esteem of her works, seem to have provoked the collapse of her health during her last years for "the frustrations and tensions of being a single woman seriously pursuing a career in a world where the vast majority of women still married and had families, may well have been factors" (MacMillan 1992, 196). MacMillan's words resonate in Podnieks idea on the problematization of motherhood and, by extension, womanhood for New Women divided between "women who remain with their children at home against those who seek independence and creative, professional, and intellectual fulfillment outside of wifehood, parenting, and domesticity" (Podnieks 202, 3).

As a New Woman writer at the end of the nineteenth century, Wood's career attests the ambivalence of a socio-cultural framework increasingly open to new possibilities for women yet attached to old mores. Facts such as Wood's aspiration to be a woman writer even from an early age, her diverse and extensive contribution to letters including articles, short stories, and novels, as well as the prizes for her writings might be considered as proofs of a certain openness in North American society regarding women as writers. The dark side being, for instance, that there are very scarce data on Wood's early Canadian years; that she had to use pen names to hide her real identity, like "Jean D'Arc" which has been attributed to her perhaps signaling her feeling of heroism as writer; or that the prizes she won had to be "sent in to the credit of two male friends" (qtd. in Dyer 1994, xiv). This bipolarity clearly speaks for a culture in crisis very frequently represented through the "improper" version of femaleness New Women like Wood epitomized and who, just like her, had to develop a literary career trapped in between tolerance for new female roles and the necessity to hide female identity. But in Wood's case there is another factor to be taken into consideration. She contributed to and worked for both Canadian *and* US publications and editors so that her role as writer also had a transcultural scope that might have influenced the consideration of her figure and works on behalf of literary criticism. By crossing national boundaries, she became another alternating voice whose achievements seem to have been lost in the liminal space of a no man's land where many other writers such as Frances Brooke, Mary Ann Shadd Cary, or Sui Sin Far have also vanished.

While in Canada, Wood experimented regionalism since her family moved to a farm in a small Ontario town, Queenston Heights. In fact, Wood is claimed to be one of the earliest writers in employing a realistic and critical perspective regarding Canadian regionalism as well as "important to the development of feminist themes in Canadian literature" (MacMillan 1992, 200). As in the case of other New Women writers within the British literary framework, perhaps such realistic approach influenced the consideration of her works. As Ann Ardis explains, realism was one of the tools employed in the underestimation of the *fin-de-siècle* women's contributions to the novel genre since it was considered to involve a detriment to aestheticism. By being realistic, or even *too* realistic, their novels were said to distance from traditional concepts of literary value as those inscribed in the aesthetic features

a work was supposed to hold. Paradoxically, whereas "literary texts were evaluated in the 1880s and early 1890s as "agents of cultural formation," [and] not as works of art whose formal complexity was to be admired" (Ardis 1990, 29), realistic accounts in novels by women *and* on women which functioned as "agents of cultural formation" were dismissed because of an apparent lack of "formal complexity." Certainly, the realism these writers and their works proposed also influenced their discredit since they involved new configurations in fictional representation closer to naturalism as well as the fictionalization of new topics that had had no place in literature until then. Tired of the heated debate on New Woman's novels, some critics derided it *and* them so that by "moving literature from the center to the margin of culture, they relegated the New Woman novel to the margin of that margin" (Ardis 1990, 29). The ambivalent estimation of Wood's works moving from appraisal at her time to current oblivion seem to demonstrate that Wood's novels have gone through a similar process of dismissal.

Moreover, Wood's critical perspective on Canadian society may have also influenced this neglect. The transcultural nature of her life offered her an extraordinary critical standpoint from which to move away from the traditional romanticization of Canada's regionalism. For her, the Canadian small town epitomized in the fictional Jamestown of *The Untempered Wind* was not idyllic at all, and much less for women who dared to contravene its puritan mores as the protagonist, Myron Holder, does. Finally, it could be said that her figure and novels raised feminist issues for which the Canadian society of the time was not yet prepared and that it could have affected the consideration of her contributions. But this is not true. Her works were very successful at her time, so there must be another reason for these feminist messages to have vanished along the way. The introduction and maintenance of certain absences in mainstream literary discourses in Canada as anthologization proves may well serve as explanation, together with the sensational literary trends most of Wood's works followed. "The reaction against romance and sentimentality ushered in by the Canadian modernists" (MacMillan 1992, 170) brought the rejection of writers and works ascribed to those literary modes as formulaic and predictable to such an extent that later generations could, and can, only access them by doing an intense archaeological work into the literary past.

It can be concluded that the disappearance of Wood and her writings from Canada's literary canon lies more on the perpetuation of her dismissal on behalf of mainstream literary discourses than on the consideration received at her time and, of course, on the works she wrote. The success of her first short story "Unto the Third Generation," the printing and reprinting of *The Untempered Wind* in both the United States and Canada, together with the fact that the publishing rights of her 1898 novel *Judith Moore; or, Fashioning a Pipe* are said to be among the highest of her time are clear paradigms. Furthermore, Joanna Ellen Wood can be considered one of the first complete literary figures of Canadian literature in a modern sense for her literary success brought a financial success and independence that allowed her to live out of writing and enjoy a cosmopolitan literary life. By becoming a professional writer, she had the chance of traveling to the main literary circles of the time such as London, Paris, Boston, or New York, becoming one of the first women of her time to

do so, together with Sara Jeannette Duncan. Both pioneering women writers indeed. Interestingly enough, during one of these travels Wood met the Pre-Raphaelite poet Alergnon Charles Swinburne whose writings had been criticized for their focus on corporality, sensuality and sexuality. In consonance with her positioning as a New Woman writer, she wrote a revealing comment praising his innovative poetry and questioning the puritan literary framework that rejected it since, for her, "the anaemic art which affects to despise the body is essentially false and worm-eaten" (qtd. in MacMillan 1992, 199). These words clearly disclose her idea about the significance of a literature that challenges established conventions and this is precisely what seems to be the focus of her works.

3. *THE UNTEMPERED WIND* (1894)

First published in New York and reissued three times in the US, it was not until 1898 that *The Untempered Wind* saw a Canadian edition. Likewise, the impact her work had on both sides of the border fluctuated from appraisal to disavowal. Whereas US magazines and newspapers labeled it as "the strongest and best American novel of the year" (qtd. in Dyer 1994, xiv), and a masterpiece which proved its author's literary skills comparable to those of renowned writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, George Eliot, or even Charlotte Brontë, Canadian reviews were more ambivalent. From comments disdaining the excessive social pressure on the protagonist and the novel's critical perspective on Canadian regionalism, to others affirming that *The Untempered Wind* was "perhaps without a peer among Canadian novels" (MacMillan 1992, 180-1). Curiously advancing MacMillan's idea on the Canadian inclination to underrate Canadian works in favor of those from the United States or Britain, Wood raised this Canadian paradox in a letter to William Kirby when objecting to the distain her novel received precisely from a Canadian newspaper which was the "one to render a Canadian work into pieces" (qtd. in Dyer 1994, xvi). It is certainly shocking that while American critics concluded that her novel deserved a place within the North American literary canon of the nineteenth century, it has almost completely vanished from Canada's mainstream literary discourses of the time and elsewhere.

Through the story of a female protagonist who is an unmarried mother that refuses to reveal the identity of the father within the backdrop of a Canadian small town, *The Untempered Wind* raises crucial questions regarding women at the end of the nineteenth century and offers a critical viewpoint on Canadian society. "She was Myron Holder -a mother, but not a wife" (Wood 1994, 6), states the narrator in Chapter I. A woman who "in obedience to no law but the voice of nature" loses herself in a man and is seen by society as an epitome of shame (Wood 1994, 6). By including a protagonist like her, Wood's text can be said to participate in the challenge New Woman novels shaped by re-imagining "worlds quite different from the bourgeois patriarchy in which unmarried women are deemed odd and superfluous" side character[s]" (Ardis 1990, 3).

Myron is not at all marginal but central in the novel, the axis around which the rest of characters gravitate in direct contradiction with contemporary

patriarchal society. She is both the center of the novel as well as her own center as her determination in keeping the father's name secret and enduring the rejection of Canada's regional society show. Defined by others as an incomplete woman, as a sinful symbol of a half-made womanliness that abides by means of maternity but deviates as a non-wife, she represents what at the time was considered a "fallen woman", a woman who distances from the traditional archetype of the "angel in the house" and embodies what Lynn Pycket calls "the improper feminine" (1992, 1). She is a New Woman and as such stands for a female transgressor, which is a novelty within the Canadian literary framework of the time (MacMillan 1992, 172). In this way, *The Untempered Wind* ultimately performs a challenge in the representation of femininity in fiction and especially in the nineteenth-century Canadian novel.

But the implications of her divergence from society go beyond motherhood without wifehood. First of all, maternity outside the wedlock implies sexuality without marriage, a certainly deviant behavior for a woman in a *fin-de-siècle* Canadian small town; besides, instead of looking for possible ways of being reinstated into public favor, Myron keeps the baby who incarnates her sin and refuses to marry another man different from the father; finally, she performs a final outrageous gesture in the eyes of mainstream society by keeping the sinful secret of the father's name.

As an unmarried mother, Myron's approach to maternity can be defined as "non-normative" since, by being a single mother by choice, she "counter[s] and correct[s] as well as destabilize[s] and disrupt[s] normative motherhood" (Podniecks 2023, 2). Destabilization and disruption also performed through the unintentional exertion of maternity and as the lack of maternal instinct; Myron's motherhood is the product of chance, not of a pondered decision of a married couple. In fact, "no maternal love warmed her heart towards her child" at the beginning (Wood 1994, 18), but in time "her adoration of her child waxed stronger and stronger" (Wood 1994, 25). She *learns* to love her baby, an outrageous behavior for a woman expected to be an unconditionally loving mother. Little by little, she embraces him as well as their shared fallen condition and calls him "My" because "he belongs to none of you; he is mine –my own baby–my own child–My–My!" (Wood 1994, 253). In doing so, the protagonist of Wood's novel seems to participate in Adrienne Rich's questioning on motherhood as a patriarchal institution –differing from motherhood as a biological act– by suggesting the possibility of a different maternity, that is, mothering as a strategy of resistance that moves the maternal away from the centrality of wifehood as premise for it to happen. As the narrative voice asserts in the text, maternity and marriage need to be linked: "to be present and assisting at the coming of a life or the passing of a soul was the highest excitement and most precious pleasure these women knew; [...] only after many years of wifehood" (Wood 1994, 167).

The heated debate during Wood's times in Canada on the issue of pregnancy outside marriage seems to support Rich's idea of motherhood as an institution. In order to protect that institution, authorities of the time discussed the topic raising it to the level of State affair as the participation of the Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, demonstrates. The situation of women being seduced by men, getting pregnant without being married, and very frequently being disowned divided Canadian society of the time right before the publication of *The Untempered Wind*.

Such division is certainly significant since it exposes the bipolarity of Canada regarding female questions, but also because it supports Wood's depiction of Canadian regionalism in her novel. From those, mainly liberals, who supported the introduction of laws that criminalized this male behavior to those, mainly puritans, who objected since it would imply "'rewarding the woman who comes forward and confesses that she did commit this sin'" (qtd. in Dyer 1994, VII-VIII), it was a vital topic for Canadians at the turn of the century. The word *sin* in the previous quotation deserves some attention. Having sexual encounters outside marriage was considered a sin, not a crime. Terminology is not trivial since it proves the influence religion had on political issues affecting the lives of women as well as unveils the difficulty Canadian society and its politicians had to differentiate between sin and crime, between a religious offense and an offense against society. But why was this topic so crucial? Precisely because womanliness was a state affair. Some of the participants in the debate affirmed that female "chastity, morality and decency" needed to be protected by the state since outrage against women's virtue was indeed considered a "'a crime against society'" for as keepers of domesticity they were the defenders of "'the pure Christian home [which] is[was] the only safe foundation for the free and enlightened State'" (qtd. in Dyer 1994, VIII). As custodians, women were thus expected to perpetuate that State by means of maternity. "What is Home Without a Mother?" reads an inscription above the door or Mr. And Mrs. White in the novel (Wood 1994, 123). Domesticity, marriage, and motherhood, and as a consequence heterosexuality and femininity seemed to be gathered under the umbrella of the State, or in other words, all seemed to be institutions society wanted, or needed, to protect perhaps in order to maintain that "identifiable sexual hierarchy" patriarchy was –and is– using Rich's words (Rich 1986, XXIV).

In addition, Myron's performance of maternity implies a deviant sexual behavior for the time. Getting pregnant without being married involves having free sexual relationships outside the restraints of wifehood and, perhaps, exclusively led by passion and without any maternal instinct whatsoever. In doing so, a character like Myron's is performing a re-appropriation of the female body insofar as she uses hers freely, unbound, unattached to social mores. She can be said to embody "the necessity for women, whoever they are, to decide how their bodies shall be used, to have or not to have children, to be sexual and maternal as they choose" (Rich 1986, xxii). And this is precisely what she performs in the novel; she decides to be sexual and maternal outside the boundaries of marriage so that she exerts the "power of women to choose how and when we will use our sexuality and our procreative capacities" (Rich 1986, xxiii). But, according to the text and in connection with the heated debate previously mentioned, her decision seems to be more a product of male influence rather than a self-conscious decision. Her explanation of how the father of the baby induces her is certainly revealing for he persuades her by affirming that it is not "the *saying* of marriage vows" what matters, but "the keeping of them that made[makes] the marriage" (Wood 1994, 188-9); that is to say, it is not the social construct of marriage but the commitment of the lovers what creates the real bond. Of course, he neither marries nor keeps his vows but his false promise makes Myron fall for it and even maintain it because her vows are "true and binding" and she will never be

false to them (Wood 1994, 189). In spite of the seduction, in the end it is her choice; she chooses to believe him, to give herself to him freely, to follow her sexual instincts and allow passion to lead her actions; what is more, she finally chooses to keep the symbol of their sinful encounter, the "child of shame" (Wood 1994, 173). It can be thus said that she chooses herself, with all her contradictions and the consequences within the backdrop of Canadian society at the end of nineteenth century.

Before reuniting with the child's biological father at the end of the novel, Myron remains sexless and unmarried even when having the chance not to. She even declines a marriage proposal from another of the few outsider characters of the novel, Homer Wilson, who, more compelled by compassion and social justice than romantic love, offers her the chance to reinstate herself and the baby in the eyes of society. "I will protect you; (...), I will make you happy; (...), I will compel them to respect you," he affirms (Wood 1994, 190). Buy why would a woman in such a hard and complex situation say no to an apparently kind marriage? Because she has a plan. Her intention is giving her child his real name, that of the real father which can only happen through marriage to him; as she explains: "I went against the world's ways, and I suppose it's only right now to expect the world to be against me. No one can help me but *him*" (Wood 1994, 192). Once again, enduring society's rejection as well as refusing to take the easier path of a convenience marriage are Myron's free choices.

Similarly, the election of a female protagonist like her is Wood's choice as a New Woman writer to "replace "the pure woman," the Victorian angel in the house, with a heroine who either is sexually active outside of marriage or abstains from sex for political rather than moral reasons" (Ardis 1990, 3). In this way, *The Untempered Wind* is ultimately challenging "the 'natural' inevitability of the marriage plot" at first (Ardis 1990, 3). Inevitability that is finally embraced when Myron leaves the Canadian small town of Jamestown after the death of her child to be a nurse in a quarantine station where a doctor turns out to be –somehow magically– her son's biological father. While working there, she gets cholera and dies, but right before dying they get married, their vows are renewed and she finally achieves what she had been seeking for so long: giving her son his real identity back, that of Henry Willis, like his father. In this way, her determination and strength are rewarded and her somehow insane stubbornness is finally compensated.

The fact that the novel's closure apparently must go through the sensational ending of marriage to find a convenient resolution might seem paradoxical given the challenging protagonist, but it rather reflects the crossroads at which pioneering women writers were at the end of the nineteenth century. The centrality of female characters and, moreover, of daring women characters within a literary background not yet prepared for such challenging content resulted in creative decisions that, notwithstanding the shock for the modern reader, responded to the literary problematic of fitting exceptional literary content into a traditional literary framework. In choosing woman-centeredness, using Rich's words, exceptionality and an apparently customary ending for her fiction, Wood is performing a renegotiation of traditional literary boundaries just as many other New Woman writers did. Despite seemingly formulaic, the novel's closure also breaks with established literary patrons

for it involves both marriage *and* death, contrarily to most exemplifying endings that included marriage as symbol of final rightfulness *or* death as reforming tool. A groundbreaking fictional decision, to such an extent that *The Untempered Wind* seems to be one of the only Canadian novels of the time to combine the two options. By means of its closure as well as of its female protagonist, the novel renegotiates "the relationships between women and men, women and society, sexuality and marriage, and gender and labor" (Dyer 1994, xxiii), and becomes a novel "that displaces the idealization of heterosexual love, a novel that figures life in a world where people are not constrained" which is "a revolutionary act" indeed (Ardis 1990, 133).

"Myron Holder was an outsider" states the narrator in Chapter IX (93). As an exceptional woman and differing mother, she certainly is, although not exclusively. Myron is British. Unlike her Canadian neighbors who are "descendants of some half-dozen families, the original settlers of the country" that even bear "a strange resemblance to one another" (Wood 1994, 93), she comes from a recently settled British family and, as such, she is not considered one of the chosen, a builder of a society in the make as Canada's. Quite the contrary, they are seen as aliens, as newly transplanted members into a community "subjected to the same mental influences, the same conditions of life, the same climate, the same religion" (Wood 1994, 93). Whereas the inhabitants of Jamestown represent uniformity, Myron and her family stand for difference. Difference that is symbolically portrayed through the character of Myron's father, Jed Holder, as the only inhabitant of Jamestown able to appreciate the English sparrows flying over the village in contrast to the Canadian farmers for whom they are a plague that needs governmental intervention, perhaps suggesting a similar message for new settlers in Canadian soil. Equally symbolic is the lantern Myron keeps from her mother as one of the very few traces of the family's past. Having "lighted her mother's happy footsteps along Kentish lanes" (Wood 1994, 58), it sadly lights Myron's despair and loneliness as emigrant *and* woman, that is, as a culturally transplanted member and deviant representation of womanliness. But perhaps the most significant sign of her difference is her accent; despite the time spent in Canada, Myron keeps a British accent that voices her difference. In this way, her divergence from the people of Jamestown is not only visible physically but audible.

Myron's Britishness also functions as reminder of a colonial past Jamestown people want to forget. Just as they refuse to acknowledge her cultural background as part of their own, they also despise the character of little Bing White who happens to be a handicapped boy with the habit of collecting relics from past wars that took place on Jamestown's soil. Considered an "unfortunate" that needs to be "kept out of sight as far as possible" (Wood 1994, 94), he is thought to be an "idiot" which, according to the dissenting narrative voice, is "far from the truth" (Wood 1994, 96). "Bullets, broken bayonets, portions of old-fashioned guns, military buttons, and Indian arrow heads of flint" are some of the objects nature stubbornly returns and little Bing treasures (Wood 1994, 96), all of them traces of an uncomfortable heritage the new settlers prefer not to see. Bing's fascination with blood also connects with the connotations of war, subjection, and death these objects hold. By rejecting him, Jamestown's people are also intentionally leaving aside the colonial ancestors they want to break ties with. Surprisingly, the only reference to ethnic communities other

than the white inhabitants of Jamestown are those Indian arrow heads so that the so-acclaimed multicultural essence of Canada seems a fallacy in the novel, perhaps signaling another inconvenient but crucial cultural paradox of Canadian society.

Unlike many New Woman novels of the time that "figure women supporting other women's "monstrous" ambitions to be something –anything– besides wives and mothers" (Ardis 1990, 134), *The Untempered Wind* portrays a very different picture. Myron's deviation from accepted womanliness is criticized, rejected, and punished especially by the rest of women of Jamestown, those who consider themselves true representatives of righteous womanhood. As custodians of femininity, they are all wives and mothers who protect their domestic universes and preserve the religious morale of the town. They are the angels in the house, although evil against unconventional members of their sisterhood. Unable to empathize, none of them make efforts to understand Myron's situation, let alone take pity on her or support her, but quite the opposite; their double-standard morality only allows them to provide superficial assistance that actually makes her life miserable.

The clearest paradigm of these women is Mrs. Deans, "distinctly a leader in Jamestown society" (Wood 1994, 29). From her pedestal, she feels compelled to assist the so-called bound girls of the town as Myron; if giving them a job that involves the hardest tasks of the farm for a miserable wage, can be considered aid. In consonance with her neighbors, "that this 'help' consisted in being allowed to do the hardest work under the most intolerable circumstances for very meagre pay, they did not stop to consider" (29). Likewise, she also seems oblivious of their shared female condition for "woman and mother as Mrs. Deans was, she was never moved by their peculiar needs" (29). Curiously enough, she is conscious of her femininity and its implications in a patriarchal society since, when talking to her husband, she claims the following: "I suppose you'd like me to enslave myself to death (...) Well, if that's what's on your mind, just relieve your feelings of it right away –for be a salve to no man I won't" (Wood 1994, 102). Paradoxically, whereas she claims she will never be a slave of men, she enslaves other women who have perpetrated an apparently sinful act such as having a baby out of the wedlock. In doing so, she functions as tool of the patriarchal society she claims to fight against. Like her neighbors, Mrs. Deans considers this assistance a Christian duty but mistreats these women due to the conviction that they represent evil so that redemption is simply impossible for them, thus revealing the strong influence religion has on her and the community. A very revelatory episode regarding the double religious morality of the town is the death of Myron's grandmother. Whereas according to the narrator "it was customary for five or six to go and stay overnight in the house where death was" (Wood 1994, 171), they leave her alone with the dead body and her baby in their isolated cottage. Only Homer Wilson helps her and cries out: "What beasts these women are to leave you alone!" (172).

Myron's endurance of such a suffocating social environment also has religious connotations. Her strength against these women's offenses and her determination in not revealing her child's father's name, turn her into a kind of messianic figure. Besides Homer Wilson, the only character who is able to grasp the sanctity of her attitude is precisely a church minister, Philip Hardman, whose presence gives some

relief to Myron until forced to leave the town. As the narrator explains, he seems to be the only one to realize that: "this woman was [has been] sent to bear the griefs of this village, even as One long since –the Carpenter's son– had borne the griefs of the world" (Wood 1994, 266). Misunderstood by her neighbors and indirectly pleading for comprehension and compassion much like a Christ-figure, she seems the bearer of all the community's sins but also of a lesson for "a message she should have" (Wood 1994, 266). And indeed, she does. Transplanted into a small Canadian community, her presence should function as illuminating symbol for her fellow neighbors of their hypocritical religious practices, but it does not. Blind and self-righteous, they cannot see. In this sense, the significance of Myron's character is broader because a critical depiction of the religious hypocrisy of a Canadian small town is developed through her.

Mrs. Deans and Myron Holder are just two characters of the female universe *The Untempered Wind* depicts. The presence of women dominates over that of men, just as Mrs. Deans overshadows her husband who, according to the narrator, "had sat under his wife's ministry" (Wood 1994, 26). The token participation of men in the text speaks for a woman-centeredness that is brought to a different level; it is a novel inhabited not only by a female protagonist but by women whose power is evident, although from within their domestic realms. Nevertheless, there is no sisterhood in Jamestown; it is a divided female universe. This is precisely one of the main themes the text raises in which the narrative voice plays a crucial role. By maintaining a detached position through the narratorial strategy of irony, the narrator functions as a backdrop where the inconsistencies of the hypocritical society of a Canadian small town can be unveiled. As Mandy Treagus comments in relation to Sara Jeannette Duncan's *A Daughter of Today* (1894), irony helps create "distance between the narrator and the perspective of the characters" (Treagus 2014, 159), opening a liminal space where some character's ideas and attitudes can be questioned. In the case of Wood's novel, it is these women's contradictory behavior towards their fellow sisters which contrasts with the comments by the narrative voice on the necessity of a common sisterhood for women's causes to advance. In this way, whereas for these women Myron represents vice in opposition to their incarnation of virtue, comments by the narrator offer the opposite reading: Myron's determination and strength make her virtuous while their behavior grazes immorality, so that their embodiment of the image of the angel in the house vanishes. If "irony always has a victim" (Treagus 2014, 159), they are the narrator's victims and not Myron because she is already *their* victim. Interestingly, Myron's victimization is also brought into question; her acceptance of these women's rejection seems rather excessive and so it is claimed in the text: "it is perhaps true that martyrdom is a form of beatitude; but, if compulsory, it rarely has a spiritualizing effect" (Wood 1994, 36).

Interpellating Myron's fellow women, the narrative voice begs them to "think of it, you holy women," to realize there is no point in abusing another woman for they are equal since "with her you share, despite yourselves, a common womanhood" (Wood 1994, 185). But such consciousness seems not to take roots among the women of Jamestown even after Myron's departure. Progress seems to sprout all over with new factories and workmen here and there, but not in these women's understanding of a

shared sisterhood to which the narrator rises up and claims that a "woman is more nearly an allied to woman than man to man" and also that "each woman is linked to her sister women by the indissoluble bond of common pain" (Wood 1994, 295). These other women, mainly embodied by Mrs. Deans, as well as their contrast with Myron and the narrative voice raise fundamental questions for New Women during Wood's times. On one hand, Mrs. Deans inability to see what she is inflicting on her comrades suggests the importance of transcending the patriarchal system, of developing an awareness of its tentacles that foster, for instance, a bondage like hers with her husband. On the other hand, the dangers of a divided womanhood are evident in the fictional resolution of a woman vilified by her comrades who finally loses her baby and dies. In order to rise above such enslaving framework, the novel clearly proposes a common sisterhood as necessary strategy of resistance and tool for change.

4. CONCLUSION

Reading the *The Untempered Wind* from the new critical space New Woman and motherhood studies propose demonstrates it is an original, provocative, and inquiring novel that deserves, at least, closer attention. By means of woman-centeredness, the text aims at renegotiating the representation of femininity through the non-normative maternity, free sexuality, rejection of unwanted wifehood, and cultural challenge the protagonist embodies. Moreover, her position of cultural transplanted member of British origins raises crucial questions about the influence of religion on Canadian society as well as on Canada's colonial paradoxes. Myron Holder is an outsider, an alien, the other, although the critical perspective offered through the narratorial voice tells otherwise. Thanks to its ironic approach to the novel's female cosmos, there is an interesting shift of positions by which the possibility of a woman like Myron being the *I*, the centre, of herself, of a small Canadian town, of Canadian society, and maybe society in general, is suggested.

Equally daring is Joanna Ellen Wood's figure within the Canadian literary framework of the nineteenth century. She was a New Woman author who left female constrictions of the time aside to pursue a literary career and participate in the advancement of Canadian literature in English. She was a modern literary figure whose contributions like *The Untempered Wind* offered a realistic perspective on Canadian society and raised fundamental feminist questions. As paradigm of her literary career, the novel analyzed here is said to entail "one of the most vivid representations of small-town Canada in nineteenth-century fiction" and connects Wood's early accomplishment to later fundamental novels within Canadian literature like Margaret Laurence's 1947 novel, *The Diviners* (MacMillan 1992,175).

All in all, it seems clear that renewed critical approaches as the one offered from the intersectional perspective of New Woman and motherhood studies open a new array of possibilities to revisit literary figures and contributions lost within mainstream literary discourses. Just as many other female writers and their works, the close reading of Wood's *The Untempered Wind* demonstrates that both the text and

its author need to be revisited so that her figure and contributions find a balanced place within Canadian literary tradition.

Reviews sent to the authors: 25/03/2025
Revised paper accepted for publication: 11/07/2025

WORKS CITED

Ardis, Ann L. 1990. *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism*. Rutgers UP.

Bennett, Donna, & Russell Brown. 2010. *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English.* Oxford UP.

Bennett, Donna, & Russell Brown. 2019. *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English.* Oxford UP.

Dyer, Klay. 1994. "Introduction." In *The Untempered Wind by Joanna Ellen Wood*. Tecumseh P.

Gerson, Carole. "Anthologies and the Canon of Early Canadian Women Writers." In *Re(dis)covering Our Foremothers,* ed, Lorraine McMullen. U of Ottawa P.

MacMillan, Carrie. 1992. "Joanna E. Wood: Incendiary Women" In *Silenced Sextet: Six Nineteeth-Century Canadian Women Novelists*. McGill-Queen's UP.

McMullen, Lorraine. 1977. "Images of Women in Canadian Literature: Woman as Hero." *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture, and Social Justice* 2(2) (Part 2): 134-142.

McMullen, Lorraine, ed. 1990. *Re(dis)covering Our Foremothers.* U of Ottawa P.

New, William H. 1990. *Canadian Writers: 1890-1920.* Gale Research.

Pacey, Desmond. 1964. *Creative Writing in Canada; a Short History of English Canadian Literature*. The Ryerson P.

Podnieks, Elizabeth. 2023. *Maternal Modernism: Narrating New Mothers*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Pyckett, Lyn. 1992. *The Improper Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing*. Routledge.

Rich, Adrienne. 1986. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. Norton.

Rhodenizer, Vernon Blair, ed. 1965. *Canadian Literature in English.* Quality P.

Tonkin, Maggie, & Mandy Treagus. 2014. *Changing the Victorian Subject.* U of Adelaide P.

Toye, William, ed. 1983. *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature.* Oxford UP.

Treagus, Mandy. 2014. *Empire Girls: The Colonial Heroine Comes of Age*. U of Adelaide P.

Woodcock, George. 1980. *ECW's Biographical Guide to Canadian Novelists*. ECW P.

Wood, Joanna Ellen. 1994. *The Untempered Wind*. Tecumseh P.