



Too Good to Be True: The Fall of the Ideal Youth, from *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* to *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*

—Naomi Lesley

In 1904, G. Stanley Hall published *Adolescence*, a massive, two-volume study of adolescent psychology that would prove to be enormously influential and would help to set the tone for how adolescence would be discussed in psychology, literature, and popular culture for over a century. Hall established adolescence as a time of “natural” emotional turmoil and, consequently, of danger. Looking back, many contemporary scholars of sociology and literature see Hall’s fearful picture of the dangers of adolescence as a construction meant to justify adult control (see Baxter; Offer and Offer; Lesko; Males; Graff). Kent Baxter notes that Hall offers hope as well as fear in his construction of two kinds of youth: “the squeaky-clean ‘ideal’ adolescent, who is controlled and controllable, and will enable the human race to attain a type of moral perfection,” and the “‘real’ adolescent (as much a construction as the ideal) who represents a kind

of cultural anxiety of the physical and sexual threat the adolescent can become if left to his or her own devices” (12). As a result of Hall’s “normalization” of a tumultuous adolescence, however, the controllable, “squeaky-clean” adolescent was viewed with increasing suspicion by the middle of the twentieth century and was suspected of harbouring latent psychopathology (see Offer and Offer). Within half a century of Hall’s publication, the qualities of ideal and dangerous adolescents flip: ideal adolescents actually behave in a disturbed fashion, while seemingly well-adjusted youth are understood to be courting danger later in life.

A comparison of seemingly ideal characters in adolescent novels from two periods—the first decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first—helps to illuminate how and why these desires and fears for youth shift. In Kate Douglas

Wiggin's 1903 novel *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, Rebecca represents the ideal youth common before Hall's publication and the subsequent spread of anxiety about the psychological health of adolescents. Ann Brashares's *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* and its sequels, published from 2001 to 2007, reflect a distinct change in thinking, given the books' focus on a potentially ideal teen, Bridget, who is undermined and written off as too good to be truly authentic. In these examples, it is not only apparent that the conception of the ideal shifts, but it is also evident that the "squeaky-clean" ideal adolescents are in fact the ones who are less controllable and more dangerous to the existing social order. Both texts contain "real" adolescents who represent more *potentially* disruptive qualities of youth, but it is these lesser, more mundane characters who create much less havoc than Rebecca and Bridget manage to do in spite of their shining promise.

Many texts would have served to illuminate the changes in perceptions of ideal youth. I have chosen Wiggin's and Brashares's texts because, in addition to featuring comparably irrepressible female characters, they achieved enough notable success and popularity in their respective time periods to indicate that the main characters have resonated with a wide reading audience.¹ Furthermore, both authors participated in contemporary cultural conversations about the roles, problems, and progress of youth, Wiggin as

an educator and Brashares as a popular author. The texts by both authors incorporate and respond to popularized "expert" fears and assumptions about youth. In each case, I examine the literary work or works against a background of texts by the medical, psychological, and sociological professionals that helped to shape the public's images of "real" adolescents of the given period. In turn, the literary texts both incorporate those assumptions and question them by offering popular images of equally but differently disruptive "ideal" adolescents.

In this paper, I trace the ways that scientific and literary writers attempt to cast the irrepressible ideal adolescent under suspicion and bring her under control. I focus on four commonly discussed concerns about adolescents: adult-adolescent boundaries, mental health, innocence, and socio-economic status. Gender is an equally important concern in the construction of adolescence, and to this end, I compare two examples of girlhood and note the ways in which assumptions about, and fears for, adolescence change along with issues surrounding femininity. As Baxter notes, however, influential early theorists of adolescence tended to skate over gender issues in order to emphasize the universality of adolescence (62). While this gender-invisible construction is certainly erroneous, it is the image and not the reality that I am concerned with, and so I have chosen to focus on how the ideal in certain time

periods is constructed (or destroyed) in a way that is intended to be “universally” relevant. I therefore draw on gender concerns only where they seem to contribute to the “universal” image of a given time period.

The Turn of the Twentieth Century: *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*

The Romantic child evangelist, orphaned and poor, who rescues crabby adults from their sterile lives and rises to success on the basis of splendid innate gifts is a well-recognized literary type in texts of the early twentieth century. Characters such as Elnora and Freckles in Gene Stratton-Porter’s *Girl of the Limberlost* and *Freckles*, Anne Shirley in L. M. Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables* and its sequels, Polly in Louisa May Alcott’s *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, and the plucky protagonists in the books of Horatio Alger all share specific positive qualities. They are nearly all destitute and initially forsaken to emphasize their rise above their difficult surroundings. They are gifted with intelligence, ambition, honesty, and disarming social skills that allow them to win the hearts of intractable adults and defuse the envy of peers. Moreover, despite their often loveless early lives, they demonstrate little upheaval or crisis in moving from one life stage to the next. Critics such as Perry Nodelman, Anne Scott MacLeod, Rob Hardy, and Fred Erisman have explored why the Romantic child was such a popular image for the rejuvenation of anxious and disillusioned adult readers of this period, discussing some of the problems inherent in letting these characters keep their innocence and childlike spontaneity into adulthood. I am interested in these characters, not as children but as models of adolescence in an era when notions of the conflict-ridden adolescent were being



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constructed. The Romantic ideal provides a useful point of contrast for later models.

One salient element of the Romantic model is that while adults might be concerned about adolescents at risk, the energy of innocent youth can also save an adult world at risk. The primary danger is that this innocence and its accompanying energy might be lost or corrupted, a prospect that worried medical and psychological experts of the period. Hall, for example, exhorts adults to protect adolescents from precocity and degradation, but he is not introducing a new worry. The physician John Harvey Kellogg, who was well known for his advocacy of a healthful and pure vegetarian diet, had already publicized his concern that wanton living ruined the health and energy of men of all ages and had found a receptive audience in a variety of men including William Howard Taft and George Bernard Shaw. Preserving the innocence of young men was of primary concern, however, since they might yet be saved for a purer and healthier adulthood. Kellogg's 1885 treatise *Man, the Masterpiece* warns that the fragile adolescent male mind can easily be lured into vice and decay. Just as the novelists cheerfully suggest that poor protagonists can rise above their station, however, so Kellogg and Hall seem confident that adolescents can rise above sexual temptations. Kellogg praises the "boy whose instincts are pure" and who "will flee from the first suggestion of obscenity or vileness" (88). Hall, known

for his belief in evolutionary recapitulation, expresses the conviction that adolescents represent humanity's hope for "progression to a more permanent form" (vii). While both writers are justifiably dubious about how many young people are able to maintain their protective moral purity, they also uphold the vision of a well-raised, superior, and resilient adolescent as the best hope for society's future.

Speaking with the authority of scientific medical experts, Kellogg and Hall pit the "ideal" adolescent against the "real," corruptible one; in contrast, novelist and essayist Robert Louis Stevenson encourages his readers to believe in the ideal as the more common variety. As a popular literary figure, Stevenson helped to popularize some of the tropes and images upon which Wiggin would later draw in her novel, and he wrote *A Child's Garden of Verses*, a collection that Wiggin might well have used as a teacher in a "garten" of children. In an early essay, "Crabbed Age and Youth," Stevenson reflects upon the criticism levelled at youth, a stage he had left only recently after a period of conflict with the elders in his own strict family.² He insists that the errors and follies of youth are both benign and entirely consistent with a future healthy adulthood: "By managing its own work and following its own inspiration, youth is doing the best it can to endow the leisure of age. A full, busy youth is your only prelude to a self-contained and independent age" (20). The possible flaw of "following its own

inspiration” is reconceived as the adult strength of independence. In fact, in Stevenson’s conception, there is very little real difference between adolescence and adulthood: each should be defined by industry, independence, and a rich inner life. As for the moral dangers faced by young people who follow their own inspiration, Stevenson claims that “this mobility is a special talent entrusted to his [or her] care; a sort of indestructible virginity; a magic armour” (22). Stevenson gives all youth the moral superiority and pure protection that Kellogg and Hall attribute only to a special few, yet they all share a vision of what makes an adolescent successful. All three wish for youth to improve upon adulthood by combining childhood innocence and pliability, and adult capacities.

Similar concerns and hopes are reflected in the adventures of Wiggin’s protagonist Rebecca. In order to relieve her overburdened mother of a child, Rebecca is sent to live with her maiden aunts, who will give her an education. She struggles against their strict mores but distinguishes herself academically, winning the support of her teachers and of the successful, handsome Adam Ladd. By the end, she is able to provide a better home for her mother and her siblings, as Aunt Miranda recognizes Rebecca’s potential on her deathbed and bequeaths the Brick House to her. Rebecca is the ideal youth who can triumph over all adversity and recreate the adult world as a better place than she found it. She has

unconquerable innocence, amounting almost to Stevenson’s “indestructible virginity”; even after her high school graduation, her eyes are described as “those of a child; there was no knowledge of the world in their shining depths, no experience of men or women, no passion or comprehension of it” (269). Nevertheless, both Wiggin and Stevenson demonstrate an awareness that dominant medical and cultural discourses suspect the indestructibility of youthful purity. Stevenson implicitly addresses his essay to the elderly cranks whose views he assumes are dominant, whereas Wiggin incorporates a similarly elderly and cantankerous character, Aunt Miranda, who must be won over to the views of Romantic idealism. The common fears popularized by medical professionals could not be easily dismissed. In order for Rebecca, as a character, to have appealed to a wide variety of readers (and *Rebecca*, as a novel, certainly did), she must have demonstrated qualities that would be valued by a wide sector of adult society and not only by idealists like Stevenson. Thus, it is worthwhile to note what the adult characters in the novel agree on with respect to Rebecca. Despite adult disagreements over her value and potential, she is constructed as evading adolescent “phases” and moodiness. For all observers, her adult maturation is connected to class and cultural change, rather than to character development.

Wiggin sets up a contrast between progressive

attitudes, like those of Stevenson, and more protective ones, like those of Hall and Kellogg. Rebecca flourishes under the nurturing mentorship of Adam Ladd and Miss Maxwell, but she must also win over the anxious aunts, who view it as their duty to put Rebecca “on the right track” (25). Rigid Aunt Miranda does not accept Rebecca as an archetypal model youth for most of the novel, as Rebecca’s bouts of inspiration frequently lead to unfortunate results that include ruined dresses and blocked-up wells. Stevenson might have seen these creative mishaps as an endowment for an interesting old age, but Aunt Miranda merely sees them as evidence of dangerous and careless tendencies, signs of degenerate heredity from her shiftless “Miss-Nancy father” (76). Part of the goal of the novel is to demonstrate Miranda’s growing acceptance of Rebecca; while at first she believes that Rebecca’s dull, conventional sister Hannah is the ideal youth, she slowly acknowledges that Rebecca’s inherent fire and drive give her the potential to save her family farm from ruin (208). Even before Miranda’s conversion, however, she actually shares certain beliefs about adolescence with the more progressive adults in the community, eventually enabling all to agree that Rebecca will succeed as an adult.

One of these shared assumptions is that the behaviours and habits of childhood and adolescence are intimately related to and predictive of success in adulthood. Miranda never dismisses Rebecca’s

errors as a “phase.” When Rebecca is caught wearing her best dress without permission, compounding the mistake by leaving the door unlocked, Miranda indicates that Rebecca’s repentance is unimportant. To her, Rebecca’s actions do not signal youthful indiscretion but “craftiness and underhandedness” (75). While neither the narrator nor the sympathetic Aunt Jane agrees with this view of the situation, the narrator immediately uses logic similar to Aunt Miranda’s in order to interpret Rebecca’s actions in a positive light. Rebecca is sent to her room in disgrace and buries the withered rose she has been wearing as a symbol of the death of her earlier happiness and triumph. In recounting this moment, the narrator observes: “Nothing could show more clearly the kind of child she was than the fact that she instantly perceived the symbolism of the rose. . . . It was a child’s poetic instinct, with a dawning hint of woman’s sentiment in it” (78). To both the narrator and Aunt Miranda, Rebecca is already—and permanently—a “certain kind of child,” although they may disagree on what kind. Furthermore, like Miranda, the narrator identifies childish behaviours as predictive, rather than as experimental phases; the two merely interpret the omens differently.

This construction of adolescent character as being intimately related to adult character is also reflected in the sense that adolescents occupy the same society, the same culture, as adults do, and not a separate



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subculture. Rebecca's story revolves around her education at local schools, and in this respect she might be expected to occupy a separate world. In fact, later mid-century commentators such as Margaret Mead (*From the South Seas*) and August B. Hollingshead critique the institution of the school, believing that it keeps adolescents sequestered from adult society and occupied with inessential, time-killing tasks. In *Rebecca*, however, the project of schooling is essential to the community and is inseparable from future adult responsibilities. When Rebecca and her peers leave the town of Riverboro to attend high school in the neighbouring town of Wareham, the adults of both towns remain highly invested in and knowledgeable about the world of the high school. The ladies of the town gossip about the winners of the high school essay contest, as interested in the results as the students are. The contest, of course, has been designed especially by Rebecca's mentor Adam Ladd as a way for her to win money to help her family's financial situation; in this manner, her academic efforts directly enable her to function as an earning adult.

In fact, most of the adults in the novel view adolescent development as central to the life of the adult community, rather than as a sheltered and sequestered stage. Rebecca participates equally in youth activities and in adult society. At home in Riverboro, she is expected to care for her aunts and to represent her family at missionary meetings attended largely by the adults in town. In Wareham, Miss Maxwell and Adam Ladd cultivate Rebecca's company, and she is more often seen with these adults than she is with her peers. Conversely, the life of the high school is very important to the town of Wareham, as Miss Maxwell notes: "The folk in Cambridge often gloated on the spectacle of

Longfellow and Lowell arm-in-arm. The little school world of Wareham palpitates with excitement when it sees the senior and junior editors of the *Pilot* walking together” (217). Thus, there is no indication, as there is in the later work of Mead and Hollingshead, that success in school might not correspond to success in the adult world or that adolescents are being removed intentionally from the “real” life of the adult community.

This image of adolescent integration and educational relevance is part of the construction of an ideal situated in the nostalgic past. *Rebecca* is set in the 1870s and recalls Wiggin’s rural youth and education, not the increasingly industrialized, urban, age-graded school system in place by the time of the book’s publication in 1903. In fact, historians Joseph Kett and Jane A. Hunter both suggest that the school’s role in sequestering adolescents from adulthood was already a contested topic in the 1870s. Kett observes that the purpose of prolonged education, especially for middle-class or upwardly mobile families, was to provide a protected space, a self-sustained world “in which prolonged immaturity could sustain itself” (210). A high school education was becoming more and more essential for middle-class adolescents (and for poor adolescents who wished to rise to the middle class). Nevertheless, the comforting vision of Rebecca remaining at the centre of community life is not merely a product of nostalgia but also a mechanism to

resolve the conflicts inherent in letting Rebecca rise in class *and* remain relevant enough to the adult world to rescue it.

In some ways, the project of schooling is extremely salient to the adult world, partly because Rebecca, like other ideal protagonists of the period, is poor. Being poor or of lower class is not intuitively an idealized quality, but it seems to be a necessary one for this early-twentieth-century ideal as it was shaped by progressive philosophies. Concerned about waves of new immigrants flooding into American cities, many progressive reformers and educators urged the establishment of common high schools as a means of unifying a culture they perceived to be fragmented (Kaestle 102). Progressives argued that keeping young immigrants out of the workforce for a time would eventually help urban poverty, as they could advance through education; at the same time, they would be Americanized, thus strengthening the future of the democracy (Berube 1). Thus, progressive educators believed deeply in the power of school to improve the lives of both the individual adolescent and the future of the nation. Wiggin, a teacher in poor urban kindergartens, certainly shared the belief that providing children with health and opportunity would result in a successful adulthood (Wiggin, *Children’s Rights* 11). Erisman notes that Wiggin was also influenced by the transcendental doctrine of compensation, which states that hardships in youth

will build self-reliance and strength for a healthy adulthood; thus, hard-working, disadvantaged young people would actually have an advantage when they reach adulthood (240).

This concern over the ability of poor immigrant youth to rise in class and be absorbed into American culture partly obscures or negates the issue of whether they can move from an adolescent mindset to an adult one, but the feared crisis appears to be cultural rather than psychological. Thus, it is not surprising that archetypal ideal youth like Rebecca should be poor and despised but emotionally and morally indestructible. Rebecca faces a collection of setbacks that would almost certainly qualify later heroines for corrective psychological therapy. In her early years, she is largely unappreciated and unloved, first by her mother, who prefers her duller older sister, and then by her maiden aunts, who do not want her either. She is also disadvantaged within the town's social hierarchy. Although her relation to her aunts gives her some prestige in the town, she is known to be the daughter of Lorenzo de Medici Randall, who is commonly felt to be feckless trash: "She was an everlasting reminder of her foolish, worthless father, whose handsome face and engaging manner had so deceived Aurelia, and perhaps, if the facts were known, others besides Aurelia. The Randalls were aliens" (53). Not only is Rebecca encumbered with poor heredity and a bad name, she is also considered to be a stranger,

an "alien." Although Rebecca and both her parents are American-born, she occupies the position of a racialized, unchristian, and possibly foreign outsider: she is called "black as an Injun" (17), thought to be of Spanish descent (17), and compared to a "heathen" (26). Finally, Rebecca must contend with crushing poverty. One reason she is sent to live with her aunts is to relieve the household of one child too many. Under normal circumstances, the lack of family love, the town's initial prejudice, and the struggle to find opportunities without money might result in Rebecca's having fewer resources and options as an adult.

Instead, the opposite is true. Rebecca functions as literary proof of the soundness of progressive philosophies, as she melds smoothly into both adulthood and middle-class American culture. In Riverboro, she is swiftly Americanized and Christianized. When she is inspired by a school recitation day, it is her drawing of the American flag and the lady Columbia that prompt the "wit and talent" of all the other students. When she is given the chance to accompany the hymn and to lead the prayer for visiting missionaries, she is inspired to devotion and is mistaken by the missionaries for a "pillar of the church" (157). When she graduates, she is paraded on a flower-strewn hay cart "not unlike a throne," looking like "a young Muse or Sibyl; the flowery hayrack, with its freight of blooming girlhood, might have been painted as an allegorical picture of 'The

Morning of Life'" (243). As she enters her adult life, she is whitened and Europeanized, a classical "Muse or Sibyl" rather than an "Injun" or a dark Spaniard.

As for her poverty, the reader is encouraged to believe that she succeeds because of it and not in spite of it. Miss Maxwell, the wise teacher, argues: "So far I don't regret one burden that Rebecca has borne or one sorrow that she has shared. Necessity has only made her brave; poverty has only made her daring and self-reliant" (216). Despite Adam Ladd's lingering unhappiness from his own poor childhood, he does not argue this point. Moreover, the narrator consistently places Rebecca in contrast to middle-class foils—the dull Emma Jane and the coquettish Huldah—rather than highlight her similarity to the poor and shiftless Simpson family. In fact, the Simpsons are Riverboro's equivalent to the Randall family, with a shiftless father and an excess of children requiring town charity, just as Rebecca's family does. The Simpsons do not use their poverty as a spur to self-reliance, however, and the Simpson children attend school only "when not more pleasantly engaged" (62). The Simpsons are therefore featured only as opportunities for Rebecca to demonstrate her charitable spirit and are otherwise written out of the text. While the Simpson children might represent threatening "real" youths, the ideal Rebecca is, surprisingly, represented as a spirited alternative to the enervated and complacent middle class rather

than as a safe alternative to a slovenly and criminally bent lower class. Thus, while she does represent a kind of threat to be neutralized, she is in many ways constructed as much more sprightly, independent, and dangerously irrepressible than she might be, considering her background.

By the end, Rebecca would seem to have fulfilled the conditions for being an ideal youth. She improves her own status, does credit to her town, and transitions to adult responsibilities without internal crisis or rebellion. Her youthful promise seems bound to ensure adult success. The reader is never permitted to learn the form of this adult success, however, as the novel ends with Rebecca gazing dreamily into a future "hidden in beautiful mists" (275). Her future remains a source of contention for the adults in the novel; her friends the Cobbs want her to be a doctor or a lecturer, Miss Maxwell wants her to have a career as a writer or a musician, Adam Ladd wants to see her married well (presumably to him), and Miranda will accept any occupation that will help her pay off the family's mortgage. In many ways, this debate over Rebecca's future echoes early-twentieth-century debates over appropriate futures for educated female adolescents, as graduates negotiated conflicting pressures to return to domestic life, to contribute to literary and cultural spheres, and to improve their families' economic opportunities (Kett 138; Graff 189; Hunter 260, 370, 392–93). Given that Wiggin exempts Rebecca from

these difficult choices, she is able to avoid alienating any of the adult camps. Because of this elision, however, no one camp wins the contest to determine her future; she is able to remain a universally ideal youth only because the narrator generously hides her aspirations in mist, protecting them from a critical adult view.

Baxter argues that adolescence (and its success or failure) is defined by its adult endpoint (11). If so, then Rebecca eludes adult control. While the threat of her alien quality and her class has been neutralized, as an individual she remains uncontrolled and (because of the novel's ending) uncontrollable. The same qualities that make her ideal—her boundless natural talent, her resilient innocence, and her energy—also make adult control and intervention seem unnecessary. Adults can nurture and bring out the qualities that are already present, but readers are encouraged to resent Miranda's more laboured efforts at rehabilitation. Rebecca's adolescence reflects a view of development in which she is a flower or a tree that maintains its essential identity throughout different life stages. The mid-century view that adolescence adheres to natural scientific laws of biological development requires more adult intervention and simultaneously changes the construction of an ideal passage to adulthood. Kett argues that the construction of adolescence as a "natural" biological and psychological process promoted middle-class behaviours and education

for all youth (243). Despite Rebecca's high school education and gentility, hers is not a universal adolescence based either on biological changes or on standardized expectations. The narrator makes a point of practically denying her passage through puberty, and she cannot take her education for granted; in fact, she sails above her dull, middle-class peers in part because of her difference from them. However, after Hall popularizes the idea of a biologically based, evolutionary struggle to mature, all adolescents, including gifted ones, are believed to go through a period of conflict with society.

Fragile Strength: *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*

The assumption of adolescent turmoil was commonly supported by psychologists in the years following Hall's publication of *Adolescence*. In *Childhood and Society*, published in 1950, Erik H. Erikson suggests that adolescence is defined by the desire to separate one's own opinions from parental and adult influences, a process that often requires conflict. Edgar Z. Friedenberg, publishing *The Vanishing Adolescent* in 1959, specifically defines adolescence as a necessary conflict between the individual and society (12). Although he argues that adolescents who soothe adults are the ones singled out for leadership, he also warns that these young people lack integrity and self-knowledge, in contrast to those who show more conflict but also more inner strength



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(11). Even mid-century historians and sociologists who acknowledge that a conflict-ridden adolescence is a social construction still betray the assumption that successful youth will challenge degraded adult values. Anthropologist Margaret Mead famously suggests that American adolescent turmoil results from too much choice and too little clarity in social roles; however, she also expresses worry that the anxiety resulting from this confusion produces conformity (*And Keep* 87). In *Elmstown's Youth*, Hollingshead similarly finds that society fails to provide adequately defined guidelines for the passage from youth to adulthood. Nevertheless, he also describes extensively the ways in which the youth of Elmstown absorb the class-based assumptions of their parents and implies disapproval of the prejudices being replicated.

All of these authors strive to improve their adult readers' opinions of "typical" adolescents, thus taking for granted their readers' fear and desire for control. With their recurring concerns over conformity and the perpetuation of unsavoury adult values, however, they also seem ambivalent about whether adults ought to succeed in socializing adolescents. According to these writers, the "real" adolescent is actually quite controllable and open to adult influence, but the rebellious adolescent of the popular imagination might actually be more desirable. Notably, "normal" adolescents are portrayed as wracked by insecurity; thus, they take over the burden of fear from adults and internalize it. Mid-century psychological and sociological experts acknowledge that such insecurity tends to make adolescents more pliable, but they also evince a nostalgic and rueful desire for the wild, impetuous, less controllable youth of popular stereotype.³

Some of these shifts continue in more recent sociological and

psychological writing. For example, psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett reviews Hall's legacy, arguing that Hall accurately captured adolescents' angst while overstating their intractable rebelliousness. Sociologist Nancy Lesko, in contrast, depicts adolescents as being similar to colonized subjects; like Mead and Hollingshead in an earlier era, she rejects the notion that adolescents are inevitably insecure and immature, and seems to wish that adolescents really were rebellious enough to overturn an adult social order that perpetuates racist, classist, and sexist values (34, 127). Similarly, literary productions, as Roberta Seelinger Trites observes, tend to reinforce an unequal social order by setting up a narrative mechanism for young characters (and more importantly, young readers) to *internalize* a sense of self-control and an acceptance of capitalist institutions. *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* provides one example of this process; middle-class young people like Bridget must be taught to discover and fear their inner traumas in order to control the threat they pose to social mores.

While *Rebecca* focuses on a single ideal adolescent, Brashares's *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* and its popular sequels offer an array of "real" teens who all fail to achieve the status of an ideal. The books follow four girls, each of whom embodies a set of problems relevant to a "typical" teenager, and narrates how they maintain their friendships through four summers spent away from each other. Each girl

clears a psychological hurdle with the aid and support of her sister-friends and is flawed enough to be "real": Carmen is needy and prone to destructive anger, Tibby is distrustful and withdrawn, Lena is guarded and almost pathologically shy, and Bridget is impulsive and, in contrast to Carmen, a bit *too* independent. Bridget's "realness" takes a while to surface, however. To characters in the books who know her casually, she appears to be the ideal teen; even to the reader, allowed a privileged deeper knowledge, she is portrayed as having outstanding promise and energy. Like Rebecca, Bridget is talented, courageous, and original, and therefore she is threatening to the status quo. Unlike her predecessor, however, Bridget is not invincibly innocent and trusting. In these books, sex and psychological conflict are used to implant an internal control over the irrepressible idealism of youth.

Like Rebecca, Bridget stands out for her talent, charm, and energy. She is physically attractive without being vain, a gifted soccer player, socially fearless, and friendly. Also like Rebecca, she is an enthusiastic proponent of institutional values, avowing her love of pep talks at soccer camp. However, unlike Rebecca the Muse, Bridget is coded from the beginning as volatile and dangerous. Her friends describe her as an "Amazon" (*Sisterhood* 16), an independent warrior who poses a threat to male society and who is ultimately conquered by it. Bridget herself, the

narrator tells us, “had too much energy . . . and a fair amount of raw, undisciplined talent. At almost every point in her life, she needed one simple, unified goal to keep her going forward fast. Otherwise there was the possibility of going backward, where she did not want to go” (*Sisterhood* 130). Rebecca’s energy is never “too much,” nor is her talent “raw”; with such qualifiers, however, the reader is meant to develop a few reservations about Bridget. Her gifts are from the first identified as threatening and out of control rather than as promising. Even her efforts to achieve specific goals are not to be read as evidence of discipline and self-control; instead, the narrator hints that her movement into the future is her way of repressing a dark past.

A few best-selling books published around the same time as the *Sisterhood* novels lay the groundwork for the narrator’s fear of Bridget’s seeming perfection. First, Mary Pipher’s 1994 book *Reviving Ophelia*, with its telling and fearful subtitle, *Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, popularized the notion that girls “los[e] themselves” as they enter puberty and bury their confident, authentic selves under tormented false fronts in an effort to become ideal females (20). Brashares also responds to a widely discussed concern about girl bullying (McInally 188), brought to public attention by two parenting manuals. In her 2002 book *Queen Bees and Wannabees*, Rosalind Wiseman writes that “everyone knows” girls experience a drop

in self-esteem when they reach adolescence, no matter how well they appear to be adjusting (10). In *Odd Girl Out*, published the same year, Rachel Simmons offers to expose the “dark, dirty secrets” (4) of psychological cruelty that lie behind seemingly innocent and positive friendships between girls. She dissects the dangers of appearing to be gifted and perfect; in a chapter entitled “She’s All That,” Simmons suggests that, for adolescent girls, being recognized as an ideal teen leads to social disaster, bullying, and isolation. The appearance of popularity and success, she suggests, often hides inner insecurity and loneliness. Worse, the process of achieving that success causes the popular girl to lie, cheat, steal, and ultimately “become disconnected from herself” (174).

In these manuals, the fear expressed is not that out-of-control urchins will run amok and challenge adult values. Wiseman and Simmons assume that girls are more likely to strive for an ideal image than boys are and argue that girls are socialized to be eager to please, compliant, and successful. They suggest a new fear, however, one that is roused by the prospect of so many good teenaged girls: according to them, since a conflict-free adolescence is not only impossible but unhealthy, as established by mid-century commentators like Erikson, anxious parents should watch their successful teenaged daughters closely for signs of secret damage. In contrast to the youth of earlier periods, these problem teens do not threaten

adult society; even the girls who lie and cheat are contained in a closed world, primarily harming each other and themselves.


Bridget, however, demonstrates that a confident, successful girl might be more threatening to adults than to her peers. Her first action upon arriving at soccer camp is to head for a swim without considering whether she is “supposed to” or not. Later that evening, with similar insouciance, she decides to sleep outdoors and invites her bunk mates to join her (*Sisterhood* 33). Bridget’s confidence does not spark resentment or suspicion in the other girls, and she is unmotivated by the desire to impress or to please them. Sleeping on the beach does not even appear to be against any rules and garners no negative consequences. There is apparently no problem with Bridget’s behaviour or attitude, except that her calm assumption of control, of wanting the “whole sky” instead of a “crack” (33), translates to other areas of life.

In the first scrimmage of the camp season, Bridget takes control of the field, outshining the other players. In response, her coach repeatedly orders her to pass. Both Bridget and the rest of the team signal their frustration with the coach’s decision by repeatedly passing the ball back to Bridget (*Sisterhood* 131). Not only do the other girls not punish Bridget for shining, but they aid her in asserting her own judgment over that of the coach. It is Molly, the coach, who


repeatedly tries to control Bridget by benching her and by forcing her to play unfamiliar positions (194). Her reaction is strikingly different from that of Rebecca’s teacher when Rebecca dominates recitation day with her drawing and her inspired performance. In that situation, Rebecca’s outpouring is encouraged and is assumed to kindle similar energy in the other children.

Bridget’s standout talent is not, as Wiseman and Simmons might argue, a threat to her peers; when she becomes depressed, they fail, too. Rather, her assertion and confidence are a threat to the authority of her coach. While Bridget does obey Molly’s orders, this is not enough to defuse the threat she poses. Good behaviour is insufficient until Bridget’s youthful exuberance has been properly curbed and she has internalized the “Ophelia syndrome” of tentative fragility. The mechanism for this process might logically be Bridget’s conflict with authority. She is affected by Molly’s attempts to control her in the field; in the final game, when Molly at last gives her permission to let loose, Bridget “just stood there. She’d been stuck on defense. Stuck in the goal. Screamed at when she dribbled the ball more than two yards. ‘I don’t know if I remember how,’ she said” (241). The narrator pays little attention to this reaction, however, instead focusing on the “natural” consequences of Bridget’s youthful impulsivity and sexuality.

Each contest with Molly is eclipsed and seemingly explained by Bridget’s aggressive pursuit of Eric, an



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attractive, college-age soccer coach. Her behaviour with Eric clearly puts her in the wrong, since it contravenes the rules of the camp and jeopardizes both his job and her sexual innocence. It is also used to cast her ambiguous energy on the soccer field into a clearly negative light. In the first scrimmage, Bridget is merely showing off to catch Eric's attention (never mind that she is talented enough to attract college scouts at age fifteen). In the last game, she fails to shine, not because Molly has broken her down but because she has been emotionally damaged after losing her virginity. Sex and the "natural" consequences of Bridget's enthusiasm accomplish what open conflict cannot: they make her aware of her own fragility and transform her from a superficially ideal youth to an authentically troubled (and therefore stronger) one.

Bridget's crash is ostensibly a psychological necessity of character development. In a "Conversation with Ann Brashares" published at the end of this novel, Brashares confesses that she "sent Bridget in. Her journey toward knowledge had to start with self-knowledge. . . . She is forced to suffer the wounds in the center of herself" (9). The implication is that self-knowledge and completion must involve wounds, not merely struggles. Furthermore, Bridget's main struggle is assumed to be internal and not external. While harmonious ideal youth like Rebecca contend with the outside world, Bridget must tackle her own weakness; any confrontation with social forces is therefore implied to be an act of running from herself.

Bridget's pursuit of Eric poses a threat to the soccer camp and to him, since he risks losing his job and his self-respect if he defiles the innocence of a fifteen-year-old girl. Ultimately,

however, this threat is redirected at Bridget herself. The moment she loses her virginity ought to be when the social structures and Eric's job are most in jeopardy. Instead, his assertion of adult responsibility puts her in the subordinate position, as the conversation between them shows: "I was wrong. I take responsibility." Bridget's response: "'It was my choice to come.' How dare he take her power?" (*Sisterhood* 224). As a result, she is pushed backward into infantile helplessness. After she loses both her virginity—her sexual control—and her social control over the situation, Bridget loses control of everything else. She spends days huddled in her bed without eating. Instead of maintaining her Amazonian independence and courage, she discovers a "need . . . as big as the stars" (265) that, it turns out, is not the need of a young adult for a sexual partner and supportive companion, but the need of a motherless child for her parent. Bridget's foray into adult sexuality halts her forward motion, so that "painful things—old, supposed-to-be-forgotten things—had caught up with her" (*Second Summer* 71). A misguided sexual experiment somehow returns Bridget to her traumatic memories of discovering her mother's body, forcing her to admit to herself that she is neither an independent, invincible Amazon nor an adult.

Bridget's collapse is implied to be a "natural" consequence of her orphanhood and her breaking of age barriers. These barriers and consequences are

in part, of course, socially constructed. Rebecca, a fatherless waif who suffers a lack of maternal love, is allowed to proceed uninhibited by psychological demons. She is aided in her progress by her romantically interested and considerably older male mentor, Adam Ladd. Of course, Rebecca maintains her sexual innocence, whereas Bridget does not. Eric nevertheless focuses not on the sex itself but on their age difference as the primary problem with their relationship, and Bridget herself thinks that she was "too young for what she had done with him" (*Sisterhood* 264). In the fourth book, when Bridget is in college, Brashares permits them sexual contact without penalties. In contrast, Rebecca and Adam's relationship does not break taboos of age difference. For them, the taboo is sexual desire, regardless of age; even as Rebecca graduates and becomes marriageable, Adam is relieved by her continued innocence.

Bridget's experience with Eric is thus shaped less by inflexible attitudes toward certain behaviours (sex is acceptable in some contexts, but not in others) and more by inflexible expectations of ideal development. Unlike Rebecca, Bridget cannot renew anyone's youth if that means breaking an age barrier, and she cannot be truly admirable until she loses the transcendent qualities that made her similar to Rebecca. To this end, she suffers a year-long depression, identifies herself as a "self-protective . . . girl without a mother," and

loses the “dauntless, daring soul she used to be” (*Girls in Pants* 108). Her rash, impulsive sexual behaviour is self-destructive and wrecks her confidence; however, since it destroys what Brashares terms in her “Conversation” at the end of this novel a “false idea of herself” (6), it is a boon, allowing her an ideal healthy development while taking away her “false” image. From the point of view of observers like Wiseman and Simmons, Bridget has been like a bomb waiting to go off; something was sure to destroy her image of being “all that.”

It is unsurprising that sexual precociousness would taint Bridget’s status as an ideal youth, given widespread fear of adolescent sexuality. What is surprising is that her sexual innocence becomes conflated with her self-deception—she loses both at the same time—and so her innocence becomes a liability. Bridget’s sexual weakness and her subsequent internal ability to police herself are ultimately helpful in negotiating the world that critics imagine adolescents to inhabit.

Although Wiseman and Simmons describe a self-contained school world in which girls claw each other over petty issues, they also imply that this world is abandoned by adult support and that girls must learn to navigate it alone. Contemporary scholars, from a variety of disciplines, echo this concern. Sociologist Mike A. Males and historian Harvey Graff both claim that the state withdraws

funds to support unworthy, out-of-control youth, and then blames them for problematic behaviours (Males 6; Graff 328). Similarly, critic and theorist Henry Giroux argues that adolescents are expected to shoulder responsibilities that adults have abandoned and then are criticized when they adopt adult behaviours: “What is changing, if not disappearing, are productive social bonds between adults and children” (19). This rhetoric is a sharp contrast from the situation romantically evoked in Rebecca’s rural idyll, where progressively minded adults invest in her future and foster close mentorships. Graff argues that adolescence has become briefer and more constrained by a homogenized set of expectations, but he nevertheless states that the common myth of adolescence is that it is becoming longer and more diverse, in part because the number of potential adult choices appears increasingly stressful (334). Graff notes that this perception of increasing complexity is a myth, however, given that girls and boys in Rebecca’s era faced an equally confusing set of possibilities. The fear that adolescents must figure out these new challenges without adult guidance shapes the qualities that ideal teens like Bridget must develop, however; these ideal teens must reassure anxious adults that they have the strength to survive despite the abdication of authority figures.


Like Rebecca, Bridget lives in a world that puts her in contact with adults; she lives at home with her

father during the school year, and in the summers she mingles with older counsellors at soccer camp, cleans her grandmother's attic, and interns at an archaeology site where she works alongside professionals in the field. These spaces are ostensibly governed by specific expectations of age-appropriate behaviours. In practice, however, the boundaries are blurred and confusing. At soccer camp, when Bridget suggests sneaking out to the club where the older coaches spend time, her bunk mate immediately notes that it would be against the camp rules. In fact, however, the coaches are aware that the girls are there and wave to them (*Sisterhood* 121–22). In Turkey, at the dig, Bridget observes a difference in social rules from her life at college when a professor offers her a beer: “Bridget hesitated, and Karina seemed to read her expression. ‘There’s no drinking age here, as far as I know’” (*Forever in Blue* 82). Both are aware that they would be crossing a boundary that they may cross with clear conscience in Turkey; nevertheless, an uneasy hesitation reveals the awareness of a boundary under the surface.


This breaking of unspoken expectations occurs most dramatically at home in the fourth book, *Forever in Blue*. Bridget describes her time at home as “low-impact living” (36); rather than take up space, personalize her room, or do laundry, she keeps her dirty clothes in bags and puts nothing on the shelves. Although it is not explicitly stated, the narrator's enumeration of all the things she does not do evokes

the reader's expectations of what a teenager home from college ought to do in the parental home. In Bridget's home, roles are reversed without spoken acknowledgement. It is Bridget and not her father who takes responsibility for her brother Perry, who has become depressed, taken to his room, and dropped out of community college. When she confronts their father about the situation, he resists by performing small fatherly duties that draw attention from his neglect of larger ones: “[Perry] didn't quit. He took some time off. ‘Is that what he said?’ . . . ‘You should eat if you want me to drop you on my way to school,’ he said quietly. He was always eager to drop her places” (60). Although her father subtly points out that he is driving her around and cooking her breakfast, Bridget attempts to get him to occupy his parental role fully. In hounding him, she steps over the boundary and breaks the unspoken expectations of what parents give and what children take: “She didn't want to eat. . . . She felt that if she ate, she'd be acceding to him, to this life in the underworld, and she wasn't willing to do it” (61). By denying her daughterly role as the one who acknowledges her father's wisdom and appreciates his nurturing cooking, Bridget is also pointing out her father's failure of responsibility. She consistently brings ambiguities to the surface in situations where adults have already allowed the lines to blur.

Consequently, if Bridget's psychological task is to discover her own fragility, her social task is to learn, not



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merely to rejuvenate adults as Rebecca does, but actually to do the jobs that adults are not doing. Most importantly, she must take the parental role in her own family and protect other families from the consequences of mistakes made by other irresponsible adults. In this task, Bridget's innocence would be a hindrance. As the events of this fourth book demonstrate, innocence in adults becomes wilful ignorance and carelessness.

In the fourth book, Bridget meets Peter, an older version of herself. He has energy and enthusiasm, social grace, and outstanding success at a young age, as well as the kind of sunny optimism that looks like resilience in Rebecca and like denial in Bridget. Peter is not sexually innocent—he has a wife and two children—but he is emotionally so, since he has not discovered his inner frailty as Bridget has. He is therefore dangerous, just as Bridget was in the first novel. He has even more potential to destroy social structures, however; when he initiates an affair with Bridget, he threatens the health of his marriage and family, the code of the workplace, and the (unspoken in Turkey but still powerful) boundary between adults and adolescents. Having regained some of her own ebullience, Bridget is brutally reminded of her own shortcomings and warned of her carelessness when Peter's family shows up to surprise him. Once again, she feels a responsibility that he, as the adult, does not: "‘I feel like we dodged a bullet,’ he said. . . . No, they hadn't. They hadn't dodged a bullet. The bullet had dodged them. . . . She suddenly felt sad for him. He would do this same thing again. At some other place with some other misguided girl. He was already looking forward, shaking off the past" (278–79). The roles are again blurred; Peter is described as an impulsive creature of the present, without the insight to control

himself or to avoid repeating mistakes. In a way, Peter's innocence is the kind of "magic armour" that Stevenson describes, protecting him against deep wounds or change. Bridget's loss of innocence in the first book is a more useful armour in a society that asks her to negotiate unspoken boundaries and to take on tasks that run counter to expressed expectations.

Bridget's dangerous sexuality and loss of innocence paradoxically become ideal qualities, since they signal their eventual opposites, self-control and internal responsibility. Once Bridget is reminded of her dangerous drives, she is able to turn her energy and audacity to good use. She takes Perry for a bike ride and buys him a pet rabbit, inwardly making plans to get him on antidepressants. She drags her father and Perry out of their rooms and pushes them to participate in making a family dinner together. She spends her adrenaline cleaning and airing the house, and instructs her family how to behave politely for Eric's visit. Once she has internalized the necessary boundaries, she can openly challenge age and power relationships that before she threatened covertly.

Sexual precociousness is punished in the first book, tainting Bridget's status as an ideal youth. The later books nevertheless reveal ambivalence about teen sexuality. Just as Bridget's ostensible fragility and trauma mask adult anxiety about a failure to provide clear boundaries and guidance, so the attention given to her dangerously aggressive sexuality also hints at

an underlying concern that adolescents are coming of age in a world in which they must be taught to manage rather than to deny their sexuality. Although Giroux argues that the concept of innocence is primarily used as a way for adults to control the still-innocent or to deny responsibility for the fallen (21–22), this political use of innocence also suggests that its loss is a necessary evil. Since sexuality is equated with a loss of control, innocent youth are untriggered and unpredictable. Once the expected damage has occurred, they can learn self-control and, more importantly, can police the boundaries that adults have abandoned.

One glaring difference between images of the ideal adolescent before and after Hall is this shift in the definition of innocence from sexual to psychological; at the same time, the fears surrounding innocence shift from worries about "soiled" or "lost" innocence to concerns about unchecked innocence. This alteration is not the only one, however. Each of the four adolescent concerns traced throughout this paper—loss of innocence, the navigation of adult relationships, the maintenance of mental health, and the production of a classed and raced subject—changes between the *Rebecca* era and the *Sisterhood* era, often in related ways. Just as the loss of psychological innocence becomes more desirable for Bridget than for Rebecca, so, too, the mental disturbance and instability that this loss is expected to bring becomes necessary to

achieve an ideal integrity. The shifts are not only due to differences in the construction of the inner workings of youth, however. The ideal adolescent also transcends a different social world. For Bridget, the boundary between adolescents and adults becomes more socially insisted upon even as it remains permeable. In contrast, issues of class and ethnic assimilation fade in importance. Wiggin's novel points to the problems of integrating lower-class immigrants with a mixture of fear and hope, and reinforces the importance of a nostalgic, white, rural American dream. Conversely, Brashares's novels foreground a universalized, classless model in which the characters' diversity of financial status and race affect neither their college-bound, middle-class prospects nor the primacy of their psychological developmental tasks. The question is not whether Rebecca is somehow "freer" and less encumbered by medical constraints than Bridget is; both are constructions that mirror some form of adult desire for control, whether of unruly ethnic youth or of inappropriately authoritative ones.

The point is rather that the image of successful adolescence—the aspirational (or cautionary) stereotype—changes in response to the codification of the developmental model.

Despite their considerable differences, however, it is worth returning to the similar functions that these characters serve as images of ideal adolescents. Hall and subsequent medical professionals construct uncontrolled "real" adolescents in such a way as to require adult intervention, but even images of "ideal" young people become unruly when they are translated into fictional characters like Rebecca and Bridget. Given the problems inherent in the adult worlds evoked in both novels, this tendency to evade control ends up being part of their potential, promising constructive reform rather than threat. In the case of both characters, the means for their success comes not through outward rebellion but through the performance of virtues, talents, and enthusiasms. It is not the "real" youth but the "ideal" ones who undermine adult mores in these novels.

Notes

¹ In her autobiography, *My Garden of Memory*, Kate Douglas Wiggin describes some of the success of *Rebecca*. Groups of girls formed Rebecca societies devoted to imitating their heroine's favourite activities of reciting, acting, and writing (396). Moreover, Rob Hardy traces the heroine's intense appeal for male readers. Brashares's books were best-sellers and were used as the basis for two films.

² Richard Boyle conjectures that this essay represented one of

Stevenson's many attempts to reconcile his father to his choice of profession.

³ An analysis of a mid-century novel is outside the scope of this article. An excellent example, however, is John Knowles's *A Separate Peace*, in which the tormented Gene literally replaces the Rebecca-like golden Finny as the more viable type of ideal adolescent.

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