

Shape Shifting and Genre Bending in Lucy Larcom's *Childhood Songs*

After years of studying literature, I have not taken a single course which covers, or even mentions, Lucy Larcom. Nor any of her contemporaries: Celia Thaxter, Hannah Flagg Gould, and Sarah Piatt to name a few. As children's poetry was rapidly growing as a field in the nineteenth-century, so were the ranks of children's poets and poetesses; in twenty-first century America, there are simply too many to keep all of them in the literary canon. In the late nineteenth-century, poetry written for children held just as much sway in the public imagination as poems written for adults. Larcom and her poetry were a mainstay in nineteenth-century popular culture across all ages of readers. Larcom took advantage of this notoriety to work within the well-established confines and tropes of children's literature. By working so effectively within convention, her book of children's poems, *Childhood Songs*, contains a few striking but well-hidden moments in which conventions are broken, radically. These poems undercut and subvert generic conventions in ways which question power structures and the status quo. Larcom carefully and effectively cloaks her more radical poems in *Childhood Songs* within representative, archetypical children's poetry.

An Independent Voice in a Growing Field: Historical and Literary Background

Childhood Songs's breaks from genre are predicated on the circumstances under which it was published: historically, in literary circles, in the publishing world, and in Larcom's own life. A study of children's poetry published between 1800 and 1899 found that

[a]s the century progressed a wider selection of poems for children was available. The 1840's did indeed bring a transition period during which children were allowed to use some degree of imagination and to read for enjoyment. We also confirmed that the 1870's

was a period of major growth, and that more variety in reading was offered to children.
(Hendrickson, 75)

The original 1873 publication of *Childhood Songs* places it in the midst of this dramatic increase in variety in children's poetry. Despite this, however, there were still consistencies throughout the genre as a whole. Nature, for example, was a hugely popular theme in children's poetry. "Nineteenth-century children were often associated with nature.... When we consider that in 1850 a huge percentage of Americans were farm people, it is not surprising that a significant number of children's poems, like those intended for adults, focused on the natural world" (Kilcup, 9-10). Nineteenth-century poetry was indeed expanding in all different directions, but its generic conventions created a template from which these expansions could grow and explore.

As a result of this rapid and widespread expansion in children's poetry, many poets had the freedom and space to address difficult themes and timely social issues. A twenty-first century anthology of nineteenth-century American children's poetry has entire subsections devoted to poems about "Slavery and Freedom," "Politics and Social Reform," and "Death and Affliction" (Kilcup, xii-xiv). *Childhood Songs*, however, does not directly address these larger issues. Rather, *Childhood Songs* features the more stereotypical characteristics of nineteenth-century poetry: children, nature, and the intersection of the two. Everything about the book anticipates that this will be a book of *those* kinds of poems (about nature and children), starting with the frontispiece: an illustration of a mother cradling an infant with the caption "Prince Hal" (*Figure 1*). The focus on the infant sets the book up as a decidedly children's book. The illustration and caption also invoke an element of play, as



Figure 1

the poem “Prince Hal” is about a boy who is not royalty at all, but likes to make-believe he is so. The very cover of the book has gilded lettering, and illustrations of plants and flowers litter the copyright pages.

Compared to another book by Larcom, *An Idyl of Work* (Figure 2, at left), the cover of *Childhood Songs* looks noticeably different in style and purpose. The title of *An Idyl of Work* is only present on the spine, not the cover. The cover features only a small gilt illustration of a woman hunched over a chair. To contrast, *Childhood Songs* has the title emblazoned on the cover in large, inviting font, with designs surrounding the “C” in “Childhood.” *Childhood Songs* is an invitation to children, and if the design elements do not make that clear, the title certainly does. From either the illustrations or the cover, it is impossible to know for whom *An Idyl of Work* is written. For the first nineteen poems, almost half of the book, the poems only concern

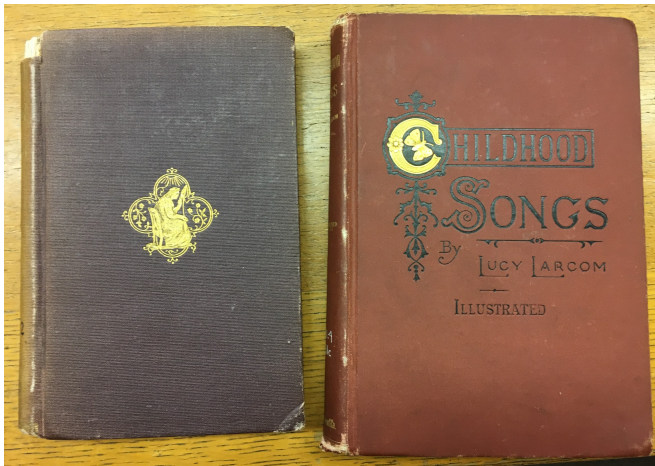


Figure 2

elements of nature, childhood, and child-like wonder. These physical elements firmly establish *Childhood Songs* as a generic work of lyrics for children that does not intend to venture into the rockier terrain of social concerns, and the first half of the book follows suit, confirming and continuing to set up a traditional book of gentle, natural children’s lyrics.

Childhood Songs follows these contemporary conventions consciously and in doing so, creates an impression of an innocent and playful book. As mentioned, the first nineteen poems of the work follow these conventions pretty typically: they are all poems about nature, children, or both. “In the Tree-Top” illustrates this best: a mother is outside with her children, the baby is rocking to sleep, “Mother she listens, and the sister is near, / Under the tree softly playing”

(Larcom, 41). This is an idyllic scene depicting the relationship of a mother to her children, as well as the relationship between the children and the outdoors. Almost every poem plays upon at least one of those elements. The poems “A Harebell,” “Sir Robin,” and “The Brown Thrush” all illustrate, by their very titles, the contemporary preoccupation with nature (*Figure 3*). The poems which seem to skirt these topics are about more abstract concepts, such as time, but still retain elements of wonder and nature such as in the poem “In Time’s Swing,” which describes time as one in the same as nature itself: “Father Time, your footsteps go, / Lightly as the falling snow” (19). The narrator then spends the rest of the poem talking about the flowers and plants Father Time walks past, managing to retain focus on the natural world.

Using this impression of palatability, Larcom writes radical poems which exist alongside and in conjunction with her more acceptable works. It is no accident that she experiments in her book of children’s poems as opposed to her other books for adults of verse or prose. M.V. Gregory writes that “children’s verse constitutes important evidence of a tradition of generic innovation and lyric experimentation by women writers, who use juvenile poetry to expand the formal potential of the lyric” (106). Based on *Childhood Songs*, Larcom was a rich contributor to, if not one of the founders of, this tradition. Reading *Childhood Songs* as a vehicle for experimentation lays bare the clever machinations that allow her breaks from genre to pass undetected.

In doing this work, Larcom not only experiments outside her own genre and the conventions of children’s poetry, but the conventions and expectations of the whole literary

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Figure 3

world at the time. In the late nineteenth century, children's verse was not only growing rapidly, it became mainstream. Even poems not explicitly written or meant for children, like Longfellow's "Paul Revere's Ride," were suited for children and often included in elementary school curriculums. *The Oxford Book of Children's Verse in America* asserts that "In the popular culture of the nineteenth century, to be a poet was to be childlike.... At no other time in the history of English and American poetry has the official poetry been so popular – or so suited to children" (Hall, xxxiv). Children's poetry was everywhere, not only in books explicitly marketed for and to children readers. By including subversive poems which are not that suited to children, Larcom breaks off from the entire contemporary genre of poetry itself, not just children's poetry.

Larcom experienced increasing renown and prestige in confluence with the rapid expansion in children's literature. This combination created an environment which encouraged more freedom in Larcom's writing. *Childhood Songs's* 1873 publication date also comes right in the midst of Larcom's significant rise in literary circles. "By 1880 [Larcom] was certainly established as a working writer with increasingly professional attitudes" (Marchalonis, 218). Larcom was a well-known writer, an editor for *Our Young Folks* magazine, and well-connected with the literary elite in Boston, particularly her mentor John Greenleaf Whittier (Marchalonis, 4-5). With renown came financial stability and security, allowing her the space and freedom to experiment a little more in their craft. Additionally, Larcom's personal history is rife with examples of her breaking boundaries and asserting independence. She spent almost a decade working in the Lowell Mills, a workplace that, while exploitative by today's standards, was remarkable in its time for giving women an opportunity for independence. Lowell "offered community and culture" and was, "generally, a step to something else" (Marchalonis, 26). In fact, the girls at Lowell mills had control of their own bank accounts, among the first women to

have such a degree of autonomy (Stewart). Post-Lowell Mills, Larcom continued living a life of independence by never marrying. “She praised marriage, home, and motherhood, but rejected them for herself” (Marchalonis, 19). Larcom’s own life has a certain tendency toward independence and convention-breaking. This drive for autonomy is reflected in her writing, and the mass expansion of children’s poetry alongside her rising fame provided a great means for her to assert her independence in her craft.

Two Case Studies in Breaking Genre: “Manitou’s Garden” and “What The Train Ran Over”

This focus on nature and childhood becomes all the more pronounced when it is broken in Poem 20, “Manitou’s Garden” (*Figure 4*). The genre which Larcom has so assiduously established during the first eighty pages of this book is thrust into question. The poem starts off following the established pattern of nature and children by introducing a young boy, “flaxen-haired Fred,” who is playing outside in a garden (85). Then, Larcom breaks from the established conventions of *Childhood Songs* with the mention of another child, “a Chippewa boy.” This is Larcom’s first and only

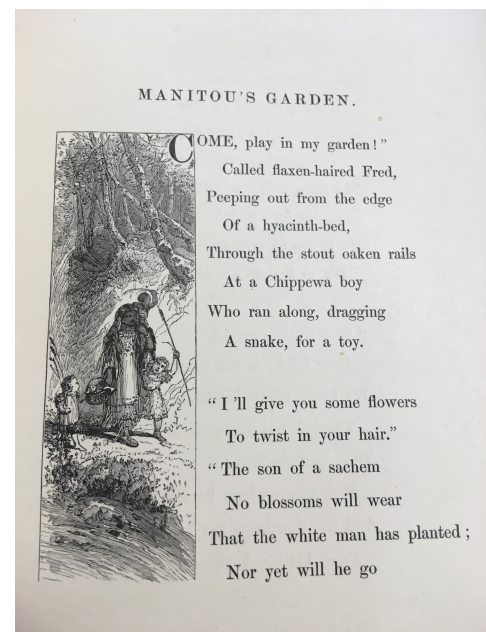


Figure 4

mention of Native populations in this whole book. It is, of course, not an uncommon theme in nineteenth-century American poetry: Longfellow and Whitman alike, both canonical nineteenth-century American poets, write about Native People in their works. But Larcom’s mention of this Chippewa boy is unique in its singularity. The otherwise homogeneous makeup of the characters and topics of this book is broken, and it is done so dramatically. Before this poem, the young

characters have been explicitly fair-haired and fair-skinned: both the poems “Prince Hal” and “At Queen Maude’s Banquet,” feature such children, Hal with “eyes of ocean blue” (25) and Maude “blue-eyed and dimpled” (29). In being named, these characters are granted continuity. Hal is seen again in the poem “Hal’s Birthday,” and both Hal and Maude are mentioned in the dedication of the book itself (*Figure 5*). Their names allow for them to be fully-fledged characters, rather than an ethnic stereotype or device. The Chippewa boy, in contrast with Maude, Hal, and Fred, does not have a name. He is not fair-haired or blue-eyed. Most importantly, however, is that the Chippewa boy is presented as everything Fred is not: he is wild and free while Fred is afraid of the outdoors and its creatures.

While merely existing at all as a character is a significant break in genre, the Chippewa boy does much more to achieve this end. This character raises complicated questions about race and ownership of the nature that has been such a focus of the book. The Chippewa boy denies Fred’s request to wear flowers from the garden. He gives a speech, saying,

The son of a sachem
 No blossoms will wear
 That the white man has planted ;
 Nor yet will he go
 Where roses and lilies
 Like pale captives grow. (85-86)

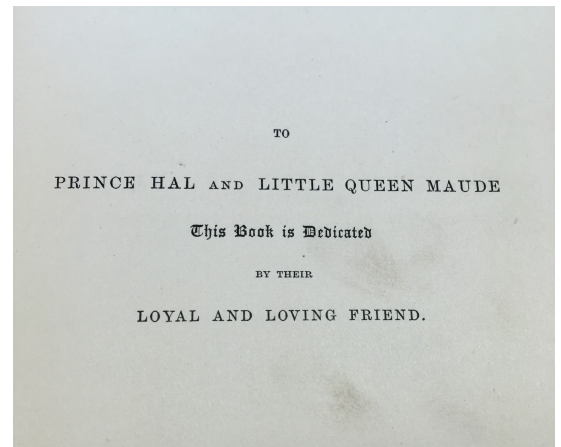


Figure 5

He then tells Fred, whom he calls “little pale-face,” all about the better flowers that can be found in Manitou’s garden (86). Manitou, among Algonquin tribes in North America, is a “the spiritual power inherent in the world generally;” manitous are often “personified as spirit-beings that interact with humans” (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). While the actual definition is specific to Algonquian-speaking peoples, not the Chippewa tribe, the word was often used by anthropologists in the nineteenth century “in their theories of animism, a religious system characteristic of many indigenous peoples” (*Britannica*). In this way, “manitou” becomes a transferable symbol of the beliefs of all Native Americans. In refusing flowers from “the white man” in favor of flowers from Manitou, the Chippewa boy asserts his own independence, as well as his seniority over Fred. This is emphasized too in how the Chippewa boy refers to himself: “the son of a sachem.” A “sachem” is a “supreme head or chief of some American Indian tribes” (*OED*, 1a). In using this language, the Chippewa boy is elevated and Fred is diminished. The Chippewa boy raises himself to the level of chief, playing make-believe in a similar way to how Hal plays make-believe and treats himself as a prince in the earlier poem “Prince Hal.” While the Chippewa boy is racialized stereotypically (he drags along “a snake, for a toy”), his role as a character in the poem is actually to subvert the dominant power structure that Fred, as a white boy, represents and upholds.

Such a radical idea could only get published if it were well-hidden – and this was. “Manitou’s Garden” breaks from the genre of this book and the conventions of the time very carefully. The focus is still, ostensibly, on children and nature. It is sandwiched between a poem depicting happy, wild gypsy children playing outside (“Gipsy Children’s Song”) and a poem from the point of view of a young girl talking to some ducks in a pond (“Dumpy Ducky”). With their focus on nature, children, and the intersection of the two, these poems are absolutely

representative of the earlier genre carefully established in *Childhood Songs*: they are so preoccupied with innocence and childhood they almost seem bland in comparison to the heated argument between the Chippewa boy and Fred. There is a clear cloaking of “Manitou’s Garden,” the comparatively provocative poem that praises the young, feisty Chippewa boy. “Manitou’s Garden” does not quite fit with the established genre of *Childhood Songs*, but these elements smooth over its radicalism, indicating that “Manitou’s Garden” consciously and intentionally breaks convention. The poem tries not to call attention to itself (after all, it still has the word “garden” in the title, ostensibly lining it up with the nature-focused poems preceding it), but the presence of the Chippewa boy and his criticisms of Fred are too striking to be ignored.

The preoccupation with nature in *Childhood Songs* assumes a nature that is a gift from a Christian God and children who are ostensibly white. In “Manitou’s Garden,” however, the Chippewa boy rejects a God-given part of nature (the flowers that the white man planted), instead favoring a piece of nature from his own god, Manitou. Larcom was a deeply Christian woman, having taught at Wheaton Seminary prior to writing this book (Marchalonis, 95). This non-Christian God, Manitou, differs from the Mother Nature Larcom references in her earlier poems; Manitou has specifically Native American connotations, and is being favored over both the more European conception of Mother Nature and the classic, Christian conception of a single God. Larcom establishes a hierarchy of nature and deities for the first time, and in this hierarchy, the Chippewa boy chooses Manitou. By bringing religion into this poem, it is clear that the stakes are high for Larcom. She grants the Chippewa boy the right to practice the religion of his people, and, moreover, allows him to prevail over Fred in the game the two boys play.

Fred’s fear and the Chippewa boy’s successes illustrate another major break from convention in “Manitou’s Garden.” Fred runs home in fear, too scared of “the snakes / and the

barking wolves, too” (87). The Chippewa boy derides him and continues playing on his own, whooping and fully enjoying the freedom of playing in Manitou’s garden and playing make-believe, pretending to be Manitou’s hunter. Larcom writes the Chippewa boy with the same qualities of freedom and innocence which she has been praising in white children for the first eighty pages of this book. In “In the Tree Top,” the feeling of peace within the family relies on the baby’s rocking in the tree: the combination of family and nature. In “Spring Whistles,” three boys tune their handmade whistles and match the sounds to the winds on the hills in March, the rains of April, and the birds of May (74-78). The idyllic picture Larcom paints of childhood and nature is predicated on a certain level of freedom, joy, and connectedness that one can find within nature. In the only poem with a native character, it is he, and not “flaxen-haired Fred,” who experiences this connection. By representing the only native child in the entire work with the same lens and traits and the white children who precede and proceed him, this Chippewa boy becomes representative of an entire race and class of people who are not so different, after all, to the white Americans featured in and reading this book of poems.

Larcom’s treatment of Native People works in tandem with nineteenth-century treatment of Native People in literature. Carolyn Sorisio writes that

The nineteenth century is fundamental to an understanding of the relationship between Native Americans and U.S. national identity because Native Americans are so intimately connected to the emerging nation’s representation of its status and history. Literature from the U. S. Renaissance [1876-1917] is commonly seen to legitimize the U.S. as a cultural power. (4)

The nation as a whole was preoccupied with the power dynamics between Native Americans and white United States citizens. Larcom’s interrogation of power and control between Fred and the

Chippewa boy is in direct conversation with this idea. However, Larcom's poem lands on the other side of the scale; many nineteenth-century poems featuring Native Americans places them at the lower end of the power structure. Kilcup's anthology of nineteenth-century American poetry features one of Larcom's contemporaries, poet Hannah Flagg Gould, and her poem "The Indian Boy With His Father's Bow." In this poem, an Indian boy goes to avenge his father's death, and succeeds. However, in doing so "[h]e flies to his death" (Kilcup, 320). This poem casts the Indian boy in a tragic light as well as a primitive one: he is so consumed by vengeance that he is unable to look out for himself, and in killing his father's murderer, the young boy gets killed himself. On the next page of the anthology, a poem by a seventeen-year old Robert Frost encourages sympathy toward the sachem featured in his poem *The Sachem of the Clouds*, who says, "Come, O come, with storm, come darkness! Speed my clouds on Winter's breath. / All my race is gone before me, all my race is low in death!" (Kilcup, 322). This work, too, treats Native people as a tragic race and backwards people against which white American readers can define themselves. While Larcom's treatment of the Chippewa boy works to present him as someone against which Fred is defined, the Chippewa boy is not a tragic case. He is confident, self-assured, and comes out on top: a radical change in and challenge to the common tropes in children's poetry at the time.

The only presence of a different racial group in *Childhood Songs* is the "gipsy" children in the aforementioned "Gipsy Children's Song," which directly precedes "Manitou's Garden." In "Gipsy Children's Song," Larcom writes from the perspective of the children. Similar to the Chippewa boy, they are the perfect image of childhood freedom and play.

Always at home with you, Sun! –

Mother, so high

Up in the sky,
Smiling out full on our fun, –
Paint us tan
Brown as you can! (84)

The children are certainly racialized and differentiated from children like Fred, Hal, and Maude, similar to the Chippewa boy in “Manitou’s Garden.” They don’t have names and they call attention to their own “tan” skin. However, the entire poem focuses on the “gipsy children’s” relationship with the sun and trees. They paint an idyllic picture of childhood in and amongst each other and nature. In this poem there are no other children in the work against which to compare the “gipsy children,” thereby avoiding the power dynamics between different races, which is the aspect of “Manitou’s Garden” that makes it so radical. “Gipsy Children’s Song” is not genre-breaking, despite its racialized elements. It is not the racialized aspects of “Manitou’s Garden” that make it so unconventional, but the ways in which the Chippewa boy questions and works against the white boy in the poem.

The next best example to use as a case study for Larcom’s breaks from genre comes a full eighty pages after “Manitou’s Garden.” This break from genre and the content are so violent that it feels shocking that this poem made it into this book of children’s poems at all. In the poem “What The Train Ran Over,” Larcom diverges from her established genre so drastically it feels as violent as the content within the poem itself:

When the train came shrieking down
Did you see what it ran over?
I saw heads of golden brown,
Little plump heads filled with clover.

Yes, I saw them, boys and girls,
 With no look or thought of flitting,
 Not a tremble in their curls ; –
 Where the track runs they were sitting. (165)

In the last stanza of this poem two pages later, Larcom implies that these children are not real; they are merely a symbol of the inevitable death that childhood faces as people age. She describes the same phenomenon of time passing and death approaching in other places in *Childhood Songs*. However she does so by personifying Father Time or using other, similarly gentle, methods. The violence of this first stanza of “What The Train Ran Over” is shocking and harrowing. The first stanza of the poem reads as though a cluster of young, curly-haired children *really* just got run over by a train, and that first impression is here to stay, despite her later, comparatively feeble attempts to explain her metaphor where the train represents the passage of time. After over one hundred pages of poems about the beauty and gentility of children and nature, this poem is striking in its gory detail.

This particularly shocking break from genre seems to have gone unnoticed by her contemporaries. A biographer of Larcom, Shirley Marchalonis, wrote in her 1989 book that “What The Train Ran Over” “illustrates the occasional lapses that occurred in her work, as if she had stopped listening to what she was saying... her contemporaries, however, were not disturbed by the grisly image; reviews and comments in letters were full of praise” (198). Marchalonis as a critic is not so positive, calling the poem “tasteless” (251). While only current critics like Marchalonis have noted the markedly different qualities in “What The Train Ran Over” in comparison to most of Larcom’s other poems, Marchalonis attributes this to a “lapse,” making it seem accidental, like it is a fault of Larcom’s that could have been avoided with one final edit.

The intentionality of this break in convention is, similar to “Manitou’s Garden,” evidenced in the careful work to mask the breaks with more palatable themes. The lack of attention contemporary critics paid to the violence in “What The Train Ran Over” stands as a testament to Larcom’s skill at maneuvering conventions to her benefit, allowing her to write and publish decidedly dark poetry in her book of children’s poems.

The violence in “What The Train Ran Over” is primarily cushioned by the ultimately very generic poems that surround it. This poem is followed by “Starlight,” a poem which writes about a mother and daughter sharing a tender conversation about stars. It is as much a showcase of Larcom’s versatility as it is a softening of the shock from

reading the sordid details of the train. Even the illustration for “Starlight” depicts a gentle and tender scene, representative of the general genre of this work: it is a young girl in her bed, looking up at the stars (*Figure 6*). The childlike wonder feels so intentional following the gore and death of the previous poem; it almost feels as though such a beautiful and gentle



Figure 6

image is offered to make up for the horror “What The Train Ran Over” inflicted upon its readers.

The girl in the illustration even fits the description of the children in the above excerpt of the train poem; she has a “plump head,” at least, it looks so according to the illustration. She is depicted with curly hair, sitting still and pensive. This reads as a deliberate call back to the children in the train poem just before this image, who sat on the tracks with “not a tremble in their curls.” The girl in the picture’s stillness and curly hair reflect the children who are brutally killed just a few pages before with disturbing accuracy. This deliberate, visual cue to the

innocent children described in the previous poem attempts to retroactively soften the blow of the grisly details in “What The Train Ran Over.”

More than anything, “What The Train Ran Over” is a thoughtful and visceral meditation on death and the passage of time: writing about these abstract and often terrifying concepts with this level of honesty is not common in a book of children’s poems, as demonstrated by this poem being the only one of its kind in the whole collection, and it being cleverly concealed at that. However, everyone, including (and perhaps especially) children, wonders about death. Larcom manages to write about this universal fear with the terror and honesty it deserves. More astonishingly, this poem manages to make its way to an audience of children who deserve these meditations on death just as much as adults, despite the reigning conventions of children’s poetry being decidedly tamer and less controversial. The inclusion of “What The Train Ran Over” makes a bold statement on what children’s literature can and ought to include.

“The Roadside Preacher,” which precedes “What The Train Ran Over,” initially seems to be along the same grisly lines: after all, it opens with death: “Dead is he – in a pauper’s bed, / The good old Larkin Moore?” (161). However, the majority of “The Roadside Preacher” focuses on the preacher’s life and refers to innocent children. Babies and little girls alike listen to the preacher. If anything, “The Roadside Preacher” is an effective method to introduce children to the concept of death, how someone who is so vibrant in life and seemingly immortal can disappear from the physical Earth. The balancing between the physical world and the heavenly plane is highlighted in the final stanza:

Dead? In thy right mind [Larkin Moore] dost sit
 Upon Life’s farther shore,
 Bathed in the Light that men of wit

With dazed eyes shrink before ;
 While, on a pauper's grave is writ,
 "Here slumbers Larkin Moore." (164)

In death, Moore didn't actually disappear. Rather, Moore exists on "Life's farther shore," although he also slumbers under a "pauper's grave." This measured meditation on death looks nothing like the shocking poem about a train's approach to a group of young children on the tracks that begins on the very next page. These two poems, with their vastly different approaches to death, speak to and against each other in loud and intentional ways.

These two case studies are the most representative of Larcom's methodology in breaking from genre: the both cleverly cushion her breaks from convention to seem conventional. However, these two poems are not all-inclusive examples of this method in either *Childhood Songs* or Larcom's body of work as a whole. However, it is important to remember that Larcom was extremely well-regarded and well-established in the literary elite in the late nineteenth century. *Our Young Folks*, the literary magazine of children's literature which Larcom edited, was a serious endeavor for which Larcom was almost solely responsible. "[S]he took her duties seriously enough to write to two editors, the venerable Lydia Marie Child and the active 'Grace Greenwood,' for advice" (Marchalonis, 174). Going too far off the beaten track would have been a risk. As a woman enjoying significant independence and autonomy, Larcom would have felt the risk acutely: losing her status and position at *Our Young Folks* for the sake of her desire to experiment would have been impractical and detrimental. And so, Larcom's moments of radicalism remain few in number and carefully cloaked behind the veneer of acceptability.

Of course, this veneer of acceptability is much more than a veneer: Larcom's poems were not only tolerated, they were well-loved. Juggling her status as a poetess, her position as an

editor for *Our Young Folks*, and her desire to experiment and explore her autonomy as a writer made for a rich life wherein she created many rich works. In the epigraph of *Childhood Songs*, Larcom writes,

“I, for one, would much rather,
Could I merit so sweet a thing,
Be the poet of little children
Than the laureate of a king.”

There is nothing childish or trite about writing children’s poetry, and Larcom makes sure that her readers know this from the outset. She writes children’s literature not because she is unable to write “poems for adults,” but because she wants to, not because her role as editor for *Our Young Folks* required it, but because she finds it a valuable endeavor and a “sweet thing.” *Childhood Songs* is no side project for Larcom, it is a passion project, it is her livelihood. The work she does in it is ambitious. *Childhood Songs* represents Larcom as a writer, and its complications and seemingly out of place poems are no accidents; they are testimonies to Larcom’s work ethic and cunning, her determination to have a voice of her own and make it heard within the confines of practicality and acceptability.

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