

Valancy Stirling's Pursuit of Freedom: A Liberal Feminist Reading of *The Blue Castle* (1926)

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 11 January 2026	This study examines Valancy Stirling's pursuit of freedom in L.M. Montgomery's <i>The Blue Castle</i> (1926) through the lens of John Stuart Mill's liberal feminist theory. The study aims to analyze how Valancy's transformation reflects the principles of individual liberty, equality of opportunity, and social utility, and to determine the extent to which her liberation embodies Mill's vision of women's emancipation. Employing a qualitative approach and feminist literary criticism, the study uses close reading and textual analysis to examine dialogues, narrative descriptions, monologues, and character interactions in the novel. The findings demonstrate that Valancy's journey from social and familial confinement to self-determination closely reflects Mill's liberal feminist principles. First, individual liberty is manifested through Valancy's rejection of fear, social conformity, and patriarchal control, enabling her to make independent decisions about her life. Second, equality of opportunity emerges through her meaningful work in the Gay household, where her abilities are recognized and her labor benefits others. Third, social utility is demonstrated through the positive effects of her liberation on Cissy Gay, Roaring Abel, Barney Snaith, and herself. Her voluntary marriage proposal to Barney further illustrates Mill's ideal of marriage as an equal partnership based on mutual respect, autonomy, and shared benefit. The study concludes that <i>The Blue Castle</i> presents female liberation not merely as personal escape but as an active process of self-determination that generates individual happiness, meaningful contribution, and social benefit. Valancy's transformation therefore provides a literary articulation of Mill's liberal feminist vision.
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1. Introduction

Literary texts have long played a crucial role in shaping and reflecting societal perceptions of gender and power. Within the Western literary canon, female characters have frequently been marginalized or confined to restrictive roles defined by purity, obedience, and domesticity (Tiwari Ray, 2024). Feminist literary critics have observed that women were often represented through rigid binaries—most notably as either idealized “angels” or transgressive “monsters”—a pattern perpetuated across centuries of male-written literature (Gilbert & Gubar, 2020). In the late 16th and 17th century, William Shakespeare—often regarded as the greatest English writer of all time—in particular, has written many female characters who fall into this category: Ophelia in *Hamlet* (1623), who gives up her own desires and obeys the men in her life, Desdemona in *Othello* (1622), who disobeys her father, then goes on to become a submissive, dutiful wife to her husband Othello, to name a couple. Such representations limited women’s intellectual, emotional, and moral complexity, reinforcing patriarchal ideologies that positioned women as subordinate to men (Mustanuri Jannah et al., 2025).

Feminist literary criticism emerged in response to these exclusions, by questioning the authority of the traditional literary canon and the male-centered narratives that dominated it, feminist critics sought to challenge these restrictive portrayals and to reexamine the ways in which literary texts either reinforce or resist patriarchal ideologies—and most importantly—to give voice to women’s experiences. Mary Wollstonecraft (2012), in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), one of the founding texts of feminism, wrote, “a revolution in female manners—time to restore to them their lost dignity—and make them, as a part of the human species, labor by reforming themselves to reform the world. Let women share the rights, and she will emulate the virtues of man; for she must grow more perfect when emancipated.” (p. 48). This is the very essence of early feminism—a call for emancipation, rights, and equal opportunities for women. Her ideas laid the philosophical groundwork for later feminist discourse by framing women’s liberation as both a personal and collective necessity.

Throughout the nineteenth century, feminist thought increasingly identified women’s subjugation as a systemic condition embedded in legal, economic, and cultural institutions. This understanding was later articulated by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (2011), where she described women as constructed as “the Other,” defined relationally rather than as autonomous subjects. Among earlier feminist philosophers, John Stuart Mill already identified how social and legal structures perpetuated gender inequality. Mill, a liberal utilitarian philosopher and politician in the Victorian era who called for women’s suffrage, published *The Subjection of Women* (1869), a cornerstone text in this evolving discourse. The seminal essay, which was much of his wife, Harriet Taylor Mill’s ideas as well as his own, argues that the subjugation of women, comparing it to slavery, is not only unjust but also harmful to the progress of society, and as such must be abolished (Narewski, 2024). He believes that women, if granted the same freedom and education as men, would contribute equally to the moral and intellectual advancement of society. Mill’s ideas emphasize that true liberation lies in allowing women to exercise their own autonomy—to think, choose, and live according to their own will, without external coercion. Denying women such liberty not only hinders their personal development but also denies society as a whole by shutting half of its intellectual potential.

Mill’s philosophy of liberal feminism centers on three interrelated principles: individual liberty, equality of opportunity, and social utility. First, he believes that every individual has the right to self-determination—to make life choices free from social or familial control. Second, he argues that equality between men and women in education and work would enable a merit-based society where talent and skill, not gender, determine success. Third, Mill

emphasizes that gender equality benefits not only women but also the collective good, since progress depends on the flourishing of all its members. These principles provide a critical framework for examining literary representations of women's autonomy and resistance to patriarchal norms.

This study applies Mill's liberal feminist theory to L.M. Montgomery's *The Blue Castle* (1926), one of her few novels written for an adult readership and a work that has received comparatively limited scholarly attention. Set in early twentieth-century Canada, *The Blue Castle* (1926) follows Valancy Stirling, a twenty-nine-year-old unmarried woman whose life is defined by familial oppression, social ridicule, and enforced obedience. Regarded as a failure due to her unmarried status, Valancy embodies cultural assumptions that equate a woman's worth with marital success and conformity (Joseph, 2025).

Valancy's transformation begins when she mistakenly believes she has only a year to live. This revelation prompts her to reject social expectations, pursue meaningful work, and enter marriage on her own terms. Her journey unfolds against a socio-cultural backdrop marked by tension between modernization and traditional morality. Although Canadian women gained federal suffrage in 1918, social expectations continued to prioritize domesticity and female respectability, particularly in small-town communities. As Montgomery herself noted, Canadian literature of the period was expected to be morally "clean," reinforcing conservative ideals (Galletly, 2012, p. 47). *The Blue Castle* (1926) challenged these conventions and was temporarily censored for its depiction of unwed motherhood and religious hypocrisy (Rubio, 2010), emphasizing just how radical its themes were for its time.

Despite its feminist implications, *The Blue Castle* (1926) has received relatively limited attention within feminist literary scholarship, particularly in relation to liberal feminist theory. Existing studies have examined its narrative form, engagement with nature, and gender themes, yet few have explicitly analyzed Valancy's character through the framework of Mill's liberal feminism. This gap is significant, as Valancy's pursuit of autonomy directly reflects Mill's arguments concerning freedom, equality, and the social consequences of women's emancipation.

This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by examining Valancy Stirling's journey as a literary articulation of John Stuart Mill's liberal feminist principles and as a critique of patriarchal constraints in early twentieth-century Canadian society. Specifically, this study analyzes how Valancy Stirling's journey in *The Blue Castle* (1926) demonstrates John Stuart Mill's liberal feminist ideas and their extent.

This study is significant in its effort to bridge an understanding between women's liberation through the lens of L.M. Montgomery's *The Blue Castle* (1926) with early feminist philosophy. Although L.M. Montgomery's other, more popular works, such as *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) series, have been extensively studied, *The Blue Castle* (1926)—one of her only adult novels—remains one of her writings that is comparatively underexplored, particularly in relation to feminist theory. By applying John Stuart Mill's liberal feminist framework, this research shows how ideas about freedom are reflected in narrative form and shows how literature can function as a feminist dialogue.

Furthermore, this research holds broader socio-cultural and contemporary significance in highlighting how the struggle for women's autonomy continues to resonate within present-day gender discourse (Bhat & Dhawan, 2025). Mill's argument that societies stagnate when half of their population is denied freedom remains relevant in an era when women still struggle with systemic inequality and social expectations that limit their choices. By revisiting *The Blue Castle* (1926)—a novel written nearly a century ago, yet significantly modern in its call for self-liberation—this study emphasizes the link between literature and social progress. It shows that the pursuit of equality and female agency are not merely historical issues but ongoing cultural conversations, reminding readers that the narratives of the past continue to offer insight into the unfinished work of gender equality today.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative approach within the scope of feminist literary criticism as its primary research method. As this study focuses on interpreting the feminist dimensions of Valancy Stirling in *The Blue Castle* (1926), qualitative research is the most appropriate approach. It is because qualitative research allows for an in-depth interpretive engagement with texts (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Qualitative analyses not only show the good and bad aspects of texts, but also interconnect them with reality by revealing social practices, representations, assumptions, and stories for people to make sense of their lives (Brennen, 2017). Through this approach, the meaning of the literature is examined to interpret Valancy Stirling's efforts to express her independence and gain freedom, and the broader socio-cultural forces that prevented her (SONG et al., 2024).

This study combines the qualitative method with textual analysis, which involves a detailed examination of the novel's language, imagery, and character portrayal to interpret underlying feminist meanings (Mir et al., 2025). Feminist literary criticism is inherently interpretive. Unlike other criticisms, which require avoiding subjectivity, the feminist critic must include the subjectivity of their perspective in the interpretation so the readers can evaluate the findings while taking it into account (Tyson, 2015).

This research applies John Stuart Mill's liberal feminist theory as the interpretive framework, focusing on three fundamental principles: individual liberty, equality of opportunity, and social utility. These concepts form the analytical lens through which the Valancy Stirling's journey is examined. By analyzing Valancy Stirling's defiance of patriarchal constraints through Mill's framework, this study explores how Montgomery's novel dramatizes the tension between personal freedom and social conformity. The qualitative textual approach is therefore not only a method of reading but also a means of revealing how arguments about gender equality are represented in literary form.

This research utilizes two types of data: primary data and secondary data. The primary data source is L.M. Montgomery's *The Blue Castle* (1926), printed by Sourcebooks Fire in 2011. The novel is the central text for analysis. It is chosen for its unique portrayal of female emancipation within early twentieth-century Canadian society and its thematic compatibility with Mill's liberal feminism. All quotations, narrative descriptions, and character interactions drawn directly from the novel constitute the primary data.

The secondary data include scholarly books, journal articles, and essays focusing on feminist theory, literary criticism, and Montgomery studies (Sathya, 2025). These sources provide theoretical support and contextual grounding for the analysis. Key references, such as *The Subjection of Women* (1869) by John Stuart Mill, are important for their credibility and relevance to the liberal feminist discourse. Together, the primary and secondary data allow the study to balance textual interpretation with theoretical applications.

This study focuses on the central character, Valancy Stirling, through the framework of John Stuart Mill's liberal feminist theory. This analysis is limited to the text of *The Blue Castle* (1926), consisting of dialogues, narrative, descriptions, and quotes, among others. It concentrates on Valancy's development from a woman forced by gender norms to a woman pursuing her own wants and happiness, specifically rejecting traditional gender roles and the patriarchal structure of her family. As the study is constrained to *The Blue Castle* (1926), it is not representative of the larger socio-cultural context within which it was written, because it is only a single work of fiction. This research does not give a biographical background of L.M. Montgomery's life, and, although it may be referenced to some extent, this study does not delve deep into 20th-century Canada, but rather operates on the knowledge of the society explicitly depicted in the novel. Lastly, this study focuses on the liberal feminist framework and does not explore other feminist theories, such as radical, cultural, or Marxist feminism.

This narrowed focus of the research has the goal to establish a detailed liberal feminist reading and the extent of it contained within the fictional settings of *The Blue Castle* (1926).

The information relevant to this research is gathered through an analytical procedure suited to qualitative research (Alegre Brítez, 2022). The novel *The Blue Castle* (1926) is read multiple times to gain both narrative familiarity and thematic insight. The first reading focuses on understanding the plot and character development, while subsequent readings concentrate on identifying passages related to gender, patriarchy, and freedom. During close reading, relevant textual excerpts such as dialogues, narrative descriptions, and monologues that align with the objective of the study are annotated. Instances such as moments of Valancy's defiance, work, and relationships are documented for detailed analysis. Relevant academic journals, books, and scholarly essays are collected through databases such as JSTOR, Taylor & Francis Online, and L.M. Montgomery Studies to support the primary data. The gathered textual and theoretical materials are organized into three categories reflecting Mill's principles, including Individual Liberty, Equality of Opportunity, and Social Utility, treated as a data set to facilitate structured analysis and consistent interpretation.

After collecting the appropriate data using the technique of close reading, a thorough analysis will be conducted. The data is analyzed using qualitative textual analysis, guided by the conceptual framework of John Stuart Mill's liberal feminism. The analysis proceeded in several stages (Murugan et al., 2026).

Textual evidence is categorized into recurring themes corresponding to Mill's three principles (Mill, 2023). Categorization focused on how Valancy's choices, emotions, and relationships express or challenge social expectations of women. This stage also identified narrative devices—such as dialogue, symbolism, and irony—that reinforce the novel's critique of gender norms.

Each identified theme is analyzed through the interpreted components of Mill's liberal feminist framework. Under Individual Liberty, the study examined Valancy's moral awakening and rejection of social conformity. Under Equality of Opportunity, it assessed her intellectual independence and pursuit of meaningful labor. Under Social Utility, it explored how Valancy's personal freedom contributes to collective happiness and moral integrity. These interpretations are supported by secondary sources discussing both Montgomery's literary vision and Mill's argument.

The final analytical stage synthesized all findings into an interpretive argument demonstrating that *The Blue Castle* (1926) exemplifies Mill's liberal feminist ideals. The conclusion highlights how Montgomery transforms philosophical abstraction into narrative form, presenting Valancy's personal liberation as both a moral and social act of resistance.

3. Results and Discussion

This chapter presents the findings and analysis of *The Blue Castle* (1926) by L.M. Montgomery through the lens of John Stuart Mill's liberal feminist theory, as argued in *The Subjection of Women* (1869). The discussion interprets how Montgomery's novel embodies Mill's principles of liberal feminism and how the interpreted concepts of individual liberty, equality of opportunity, and social utility are reflected in the characterization and narrative journey of Valancy Stirling, the novel's protagonist. By following Valancy's evolution, the analysis proceeds to explore the ways in which *The Blue Castle* (1926) critiques the social conditions that defined women's roles in early twentieth-century Canada.

The analysis in this chapter is organized to directly address the problem outlined in the Introduction. As such, this chapter focuses on the application of theory, examining Valancy Stirling's personal development and liberation in relation to Mill's fundamental arguments, with subsections corresponding to a stage in her journey. This article then collectively views these stages to illustrate how Valancy's journey reflects Mill's argument of the ideal female liberation and its essentiality to both personal fulfillment and social progress.

This chapter methodologically follows the analytic steps outlined in the Research Method chapter, using direct quotations from the novel as primary evidence and Mill's concepts for the interpretive framework. This chapter seeks to demonstrate that *The Blue Castle* (1926) is not merely a romantic story but a narrative that reflects important liberal feminist ideals. By following Valancy Stirling's journey, the chapter proves that the novel articulates a vision of female freedom rooted in self-autonomy, equality, competency, and happiness, which resonates with the positive impacts of liberal feminism.

3.1 Valancy Stirling's Initial Stage of Confinement as a Hindrance to Individual Liberty

At the beginning of *The Blue Castle* (1926), Valancy Stirling lives as a prisoner of convention in a system of social norms and familial pressures. This environment demands her conformity and punishes her individuality, leading to fear and shame becoming the organizing principle of Valancy's existence. In the novel, Valancy's confinement is presented as not maintained by physical force, but rather by the gendered expectations surrounding unmarried women. It is shown in the opening passage of the novel below.

One does not sleep well... when one is twenty-nine on the morrow, and unmarried, in a community... where the unmarried are simply those who have failed to get a man. (Montgomery, 1926, p. 1)

This single sentence above immediately positions Valancy as a woman whose worth is socially predetermined by cultural pressure; her value is not measured by character or intellect but by desirability. It reduces womanhood to marital success; failure to marry means a woman is socially deficient. This societal norm aligns with what Mill (1869) pointed out as the result of men specifically restricting women's education to center around complete submission to them as a form of virtue, something to strive for.

Valancy's situation, therefore, deviates from the norm. This conditioning automatically assumes Valancy has failed in achieving her womanly life goal of being married to a man and subsequently will never serve her natural purpose to be a wife and mother, disregarding her personal desires and ambitions. In the narrative that follows the data above, Valancy initially tries to dismiss the sting of spinsterhood – convincing herself that being an “old maid” might be preferable to marriage with men like her uncles, whom she disliked – her following admission reveals a deeper wound, presented in the data below.

Valancy did not mind so much being an old maid. After all, she thought, being an old maid couldn't possibly be as dreadful as being married to an Uncle Wellington or an Uncle Benjamin, or even an Uncle Herbert. What hurt her was that she had never had a chance to be anything but an old maid. No man had ever desired her. (Montgomery, 1926, p. 1)

This data shows the extent to which societal pressure and traditional gender roles affect Valancy. The thought of being unwanted by men pains her, despite not even desiring a conventional marriage. This internal tension between both her acceptance and shame exemplifies how her identity is shaped by traditional customs so deeply that it becomes embedded in Valancy's mind that an “old maid” is something she knows she should not be.

According to Mill (2015), a liberal feminist utilitarian philosopher and politician, it is impossible to know the true “nature” of women, as what has been accepted as their natural traits is something artificial that was forced upon them. As such, Valancy's lament of her unmarried state is a result of the society at large convincing her that to be desired by men is something valuable, rather than what is supposed to be part of her “nature” as a woman. Valancy internalized this valuation, thus constructing her identity through the patriarchal measure of female desirability.

Within the Stirling household, Valancy's confinement is reinforced through constant moral regulation. Her fear of emotional exposure is evident when she worries that her mother will interrogate her with "minute, persistent, mosquito-like questions" (Montgomery, 1926, p. 2). Mrs. Frederick's assertion that "it is not maidenly to think about men" (Montgomery, 1926, p. 2) exemplifies how female subjectivity itself is policed. Even solitude is denied, as Valancy is "never permitted to stay alone in her room for any other purpose," since wanting privacy is believed to signal "some sinister purpose" (Montgomery, 1926, pp. 3-4).

As a result of this confinement, Valancy retreats into her imagination. She is described as having "lived spiritually in the Blue Castle ever since she could remember" (Montgomery, 1926, p. 4), indicating that fantasy functions as her only domain of freedom. The depth of Valancy's confinement is most powerfully articulated through her persistent fear, which functions as the organizing principle of her life. Montgomery explicitly enumerates this condition in a sustained passage:

All her life she had been afraid of something, she thought bitterly. (Montgomery, 1926, p. 14)

"And I always will be – I know it – I can't help it. I don't know what it would be like not to be afraid of something." (Montgomery, 1926, p. 14)

Afraid of her mother's sulky fits – afraid of offending Uncle Benjamin – afraid of becoming a target for Aunt Wellington's contempt – afraid of Aunt Isabel's biting comments – afraid of Uncle James' disapproval – afraid of offending the whole clan's opinions and prejudices – afraid of not keeping up appearances – afraid to say what she really thought of anything – afraid of poverty in her old age. Fear – fear – fear – she could never escape from it. It bound her and enmeshed her like a spider's web of steel. (Montgomery, 1926, p. 14)

This passage foregrounds fear as a gendered mechanism of social control. Valancy's fears are not irrational but socially produced, rooted in economic insecurity and moral surveillance. Mill argues that women's apparent consent to oppression often results from precisely such conditions, where dependence makes resistance materially dangerous. Valancy's fear thus represents not weakness of character but the success of patriarchal discipline. These fears render individual liberty impossible. In Mill's terms, such fear-driven obedience exemplifies how women are conditioned to consent to their own subordination.

3.2 Valancy's Awakening and Self-Determination for Individual Liberty

Valancy's awakening begins tentatively, as seen when she corrects Uncle Benjamin's mockery by stating, "M-i-r-a-g-e is pronounced mirazh" (Montgomery, 1926, p. 26). Although she immediately regrets this act, it signals the emergence of resistance. Following this regret, however, Valancy's bravery is sparked yet again after she reads the first paragraph of the new John Foster book she acquired, a naturalist writer whose books Valancy adores. The data is presented below.

"Fear is the original sin," wrote John Foster. "Almost all the evil in the world has its origin in the fact that someone is afraid of something. It is a cold, slimy serpent coiling about you. It is horrible to live with fear; and it is of all things degrading." (Montgomery, 1926, p. 29)

After reading the passage shown in the above data, Valancy decides she will go to Dr. Trent—a practitioner unrelated to her clan—to inquire about her heart condition. From the previous section, it has been established that Valancy is restricted in a great deal in her life. This extends to even books. Valancy is not permitted to read novels, and John Foster's books are amongst the few she can read. As such, the fact that the passage above is enough to move

her shows that it is perhaps Valancy's very first encouragement to be brave in her life. This shows the extent of how sheltered and groomed her upbringing was for her to be so subdued.

Following her (mistaken) diagnosis, Valancy recognizes that fear—not obedience—has structured her life. Valancy articulates this transformation in an extended moment of self-realization:

She made a discovery that surprised her: she, who had been afraid of almost everything in life, was not afraid of death. It did not seem in the least terrible to her. And she need not now be afraid of anything else. Why had she been afraid of things? Because of life. Afraid of Uncle Benjamin because of the menace of poverty in old age. But now she would never be old – neglected – tolerated. Afraid of being an old maid all her life. But now she would not be an old maid very long. Afraid of offending her mother and her clan because she had to live with and among them and couldn't live peaceably if she didn't give in to them. But now she hadn't. Valancy felt a curious freedom. (Montgomery, 1926, p. 43)

From the data, Valancy found the root of her fears. A fear that is consistent with women from her social standing and life circumstances, yet now, knowing that she will not have to subjugate herself as a cost of living, she is freed from her fear. Although from a surface reading, Valancy's diagnosis seems like the key to her liberation, this analysis argues that it was John Foster's words that saved her from a life of misery. For if she had never read the first passage: "Fear is the original sin" (Montgomery, 1926, p. 29), Valancy would never have gained the courage to see Dr. Trent in the first place, and thus would not get the diagnosis that further erases her fear.

Without her fear, Valancy seizes power over herself for the first time in her life. In a recent study, Sun Jai Kim argues that Valancy weaponizes her insensibility and emotional detachment towards her family members to resist the oppression that she is subjected to (Kim, 2024). This analysis agrees with the finding, reflecting again on Mill's (1869) idea that it is impossible to fully understand the nature of an individual, men and women, as both have been raised, and are part of a society. Indeed, it is then difficult to argue whether Valancy's rebellion has always been part of her nature, or if it was born in spite of it, adding to her society and upbringing. However, what Valancy, a woman free of her fear, is capable of is much easier to see.

What follows Valancy's self-liberation from her confinement is nothing short of "unnatural" for a woman. She ignores her mother, verbally challenges her clan, and behaves in a way that is "queer" (Montgomery, 1926, p. 55). The response of the Stirling clan—Valancy's main oppressors—speaks volumes about their inability to see a liberated woman as a natural part of society. The following data encompasses the reception of Valancy's liberated actions:

Not for words would any of the Stirlings have said out and out at first that Valancy had gone mildly insane or even that her mind was slightly deranged. (Montgomery, 1926, p. 53)

"She's gone dippy, in my opinion," growled Uncle Benjamin. "If not, she ought to be spanked. Yes, spanked." (Montgomery, 1926, p. 67)

Valancy had always been a disappointment to her. Now she was a disgrace. (Montgomery, 1926, p. 68)

The data shows that other characters perceive that the role Valancy has been subjected to is the only purpose she could fulfill, and that she is not capable of even being anything else. Valancy's contradiction of this assumption, therefore, breaks the societal perception of her. In relation to this fact, Mill (1869) argues that limiting what a particular group of people is allowed to do based on a general presumption is an unjust exertion of authority that negatively impacts both the individuals and society as a whole. The limitations placed upon

Valancy based on her gender and her “family tradition that she was delicate” (Montgomery, 1926, p. 12) degrade her life experiences (as is evident throughout this analysis thus far) and concurrently deprive the positive contributions she can provide from her liberation and equality. The following section will further elaborate on this.

3.3 Valancy's Awakening and Self-Determination for Individual Liberty

Valancy's decision to leave her family and care for Cecilia Gay marks her transition from coerced domesticity to meaningful labor. Previously, she was subjected to purposeless tasks, as “idleness was a cardinal sin in the Stirling household” (Montgomery, 1926, p. 19), despite the household's lack of need for her labor. This reflects Mill's critique of patriarchal labor structures that control women's time under the guise of moral discipline.

In the Gay household, Valancy's work acquires value and purpose. She cleans genuinely neglected spaces and cooks meals that are appreciated, with Abel remarking that she “got a flavor into things” (Montgomery, 1926, p. 97). The impact of this labor is further captured in a sustained description of Cissy's response:

Cissy loved the cleanness and neatness. She had kept it so, too, until her strength failed. She was very pitifully happy because she had Valancy with her. It had been so terrible – long, lonely days and nights with no companionship save those dreadful old women who came to work... She clung to Valancy like a child. (Montgomery, 1926, p. 98)

This passage demonstrates the social utility of Valancy's liberation. Her labor improves both material conditions and emotional well-being, validating Mill's claim that denying women equal access to work deprives society of essential contributions. Valancy's fulfillment and usefulness coexist, disproving the patriarchal assumption that women's happiness is incompatible with productivity. These outcomes exemplify the social utility Mill identifies as a primary justification for women's emancipation.

Valancy's labor also generates personal fulfillment. Unlike her previous resentment toward enforced housework, she now works willingly and productively. Her happiness and usefulness demonstrate Mill's assertion that denying women opportunities deprives society of valuable contributions.

3.4 The Equality and Social Utility of Valancy's Labor and Marriage

After Cissy's inevitable death, Valancy is at a crossroads. The Stirling clan is able to spin the story to make Valancy seem like a virtuous, selfless woman who aided Cissy on her last borrowed time on earth and demands Valancy's return. This is, evidently, still an attempt to control Valancy's agency over herself for the sake of conforming to societal expectations of their social status. Meanwhile, Valancy has other plans. Instead of relegating herself back into the confines of her old life, Valancy yet again takes control of her individual liberty and makes a decision that subverts all acceptable feminine virtues: by proposing a marriage to the notorious Barney Snaith.

Valancy, the old maid, the spinster, the “plain” and “insignificant-looking” (Montgomery, 1926, p. 13) Stirling, is proposing to a man whom society has equally cast out, the “reputed jail-breaker, infidel, forger, and defaulter” (Montgomery, 1926, p. 121). Contrary to before her self-liberation, in which she could only have “a certain pitiful, shamed, little hope that Romance would come her way yet” (Montgomery, 1926, p. 1), this liberated woman is now actively pursuing the thing she has been denied fearlessly. Her proposal comes about after he saved her from some rowdy men at a dance in Chidley Corners, forced to sit in his car that had run out of gas in the quiet night, where Valancy realizes that she is, in fact, in love with Barney Snaith. In *Sex and the Revisionist Fairy Tale* (2021), Catherine Clark closely reads *The Blue Castle* (2021) in comparison to its popular contemporary fairy tales, namely the

English translations of *Charles Perrault* and the *Brothers Grimm*. Clark found that the number three—often significant in fairy tales—is also present in the novel: the symbolic mirror appears three times, and Valancy’s decision to live for herself post her diagnosis happens at three o’clock (2021). This analysis has further found that the moment Valancy realizes her love for Barney is the third time that she feels happiness; the first time is when she arrives to help Cissy, the second time is when she is able to spend her days as she desires in the Gay household, and finding love is her third. The data is provided below.

Valancy was perfectly happy. (Montgomery, 1926, p. 123)

She knew quite well now that she loved Barney. Yesterday she had been all her own. Now she was this man’s. (Montgomery, 1926, p. 123)

She loved him without any reservations. Everything in her went out wholly to him. She had no wish to stifle or disown her love. (Montgomery, 1926, pp. 123-124)

She was no longer unimportant, little old maid Valancy Stirling. She was a woman, full of love and therefore rich and significant – justified to herself. Life was no longer empty and futile, and death could cheat her of nothing. Love had cast out her last fear. (Montgomery, 1926, p. 124)

From the data above, Valancy’s realization of her love for Barney fulfills what has always been her ultimate desire—to love. Previously, it has been established that Valancy does not lament the fact that she is unmarried because she wants a man; her sadness stems from the expectation that she should have a man and that, naturally, she should desire it. At this point in her progression, however, she has realized wholly by her own will that she loves someone, and thus wants to be “this man’s”. Her perception of her own self-worth is not because of Barney’s treatments or actions towards her, but because she has found this feeling that has evaded her all her life. In having felt this emotion—love—Valancy now considers herself “rich and significant—justified to herself.” Love, of which she has discovered all by her own and that she does not wish to “stifle or disown”, is what pushes her to propose the marriage to Barney. Valancy is taking control of her emotions and her life, in an act of pure self-authority.

Love here functions not as dependency but as affirmation of self-worth. This framing aligns with Mill’s insistence that equality in marriage must be grounded in mutual respect rather than economic or moral coercion. Valancy explicitly resists performative marital norms, stating, “Let’s forget we are married and talk as if we weren’t” (Montgomery, 1926, p. 149). Barney’s acceptance of this boundary establishes a relationship based on reciprocity rather than authority, embodying Mill’s vision of marriage as a partnership between equals rather than a master-slave relationship.

Valancy performs household labor by choice, while Barney supports her intellectual growth by introducing her to nature and knowledge. Together, they experience mutual benefit: Valancy is “happy—gloriously and entirely so” (Montgomery, 1926, p. 167), while Barney becomes more emotionally open and “laughed a great deal oftener than he used to” (Montgomery, 1926, p. 188). Their marriage exemplifies Mill’s ideal partnership: both parties contribute voluntarily, respect each other’s autonomy, and benefit mutually. Valancy gains intellectual expansion and freedom, while Barney gains companionship and emotional fulfillment.

3.5 The Extent of Valancy’s Feminist Liberation and Happiness

This final section is where this analysis reflects back on Valancy’s journey and examines the extent to which her final state aligns with John Stuart Mill’s ideal vision of female liberation. To better contextualize Valancy’s transformation, it is imperative to look back on

the desire that fueled her first step to emancipate herself. The following data presents Valancy's desires.

"I don't envy Jennie the man," thought Valancy sincerely – Clayton Markley was not one of her many ideals – "but I do envy her the house. It's such a nice young house. Oh, if I could only have a house of my own – ever so poor, so tiny – but my own!" (Montgomery, 1926, p. 22)

"I'm going to be honest with myself anyhow," she thought savagely. "Uncle Benjamin's riddles hurt me because they are true. I do want to be married. I want a house of my own – I want a husband of my own – I want sweet, little fat babies of my own – " (Montgomery, 1926, p. 27)

The data shows that Valancy's wishes are modest and reflect what other women her age in her society already have. Women are often forced into marriage because there is no other choice available for them—a practice of Hobson's choice—the illusion of free will by giving the options of "that or none" (Mill, 1869). For Valancy, who has never been proposed to, however, marriage is never a choice, and thus, she has none. This deprivation leads Valancy to daydream about having everything in her Blue Castle, her imaginary world. Valancy's real personality hidden under her mask of propriety directly affirms Mill's claim that the stereotypical "nature" of women is artificial, something that society molded into them since birth. Valancy is outwardly obedient, satisfying the gendered and societal expectations put on her, and is inwardly sarcastic, witty, and smart—qualities which are not associated with a woman's "nature." After casting out her fear, in direct opposition to her nature, Valancy rebelled against her oppressors, granting herself individual liberty.

With her newfound self-liberation, Valancy sets out to live on her own terms and finds work as a caretaker for Cissy Gay. This is made possible by Valancy's courage and the opportunity Roaring Abel afforded her. This fact directly reflects Mill's (1869) idea that the emancipation of men requires the support of men to be realized. Valancy, who was always thought to be delicate and prone to sickness all her life, proved to be capable of doing diligent labor in the Gay household. The opportunities denied to women are often what they are most capable of (Mill, 1869). Valancy, denied freedom and meaningful labor, has demonstrated to be exceptional at it.

Mill (1869) believes that emancipated women would likely still choose to be married rather than not, but in one where they are of the same standing as their husbands. Valancy demonstrates this belief by proposing a marriage to Barney, not because of societal pressure or because she has no other choice, but because she wants to. She is fulfilling her desire and wields her rights to free choice proudly, defying gender expectations in the process. Her eventual marriage to Barney is an appropriate example of what Mill envisioned to be an ideal marriage. Both wife and husband contribute positively to the arrangement; there is no imbalance where one significantly has more power over the other; both enjoy each other's company and erect healthy boundaries when it is necessary; both encourage the other to be better versions of themselves; and most importantly, both parties are equal and mutually respect and trust each other. Each of these factors contributes to a healthy partnership that grants women liberation in a marriage, which Mill advocates.

Valancy's individual liberty, meaningful labor from gained opportunity, and equal marriage of her own volition, all contribute positively not only to herself personally, but to the people around her, highlighting the social utility of her liberation. Mill (1869) appeals for the emancipation of women largely based on his utilitarian belief that laws that govern mankind should be those that bring the most benefit to the greatest number of people. The positive outcomes of Valancy's freedom directly support this belief. Valancy is able to be a dear friend and caretaker of Cissy in her time of need; she aids Roaring Abel in managing his unkempt house to make it fit for living; she helps Barney to have a cleaner appearance, taking better care of himself; and her cooking has been highly praised by the people who have tasted

it. Without her liberation, there would have been one less useful member of society and one more unhappy, subjected woman.

4. Conclusion

John Stuart Mill's liberal feminist idea, written in *The Subjection of Women* (1869), is almost perfectly reflected in Valancy Stirling's journey to freedom in L.M. Montgomery's *The Blue Castle* (1926). From his condemnation of the artificial "nature" of women, to suggesting equal opportunity for women's labor, to his view of the ideal and equal marriage, and finally, his belief that women's emancipation will lead to a better, more beneficial, and just society, all of which are mirrored in Valancy's actions in *The Blue Castle* (1926). These findings demonstrate that her freedom is lived, practiced, and socially impactful, closely aligning with Mill's belief that women's emancipation enables both personal happiness and societal benefit.

Valancy's situation at the beginning of the novel shows the artificial nature imposed on women. Years of fear, ridicule, and meaningless domestic work render her passive and constrained, mirroring Mill's critique that patriarchal norms produce submissive women by conditioning, not by nature. However, once she discards her fear, Valancy begins exercising true liberty: she speaks honestly, chooses her own path, and rejects the oppressive norms that have governed her life.

The analysis reveals that meaningful labor is substantial in Valancy's transformation. At the Gay household, her caregiving work is valued, needed, and purposeful—unlike the performative, restrictive domestic tasks forced upon her by the Stirling clan. Her labor improves the lives of others, showing not only her capability but the profound social loss produced when women are prevented from contributing meaningfully. Likewise, Valancy's freedom in marriage embodies Mill's ideal of an equal partnership and the importance of it in women's personal lives. Her proposal to Barney Snaith is an act of agency that defies the gender norms of her community. Their marriage is built on equality, mutual respect, and shared contribution rather than dominance or economic dependency.

These two forms of freedom—in labor and in marriage—culminate in the creation of Valancy's own space: the Blue Castle on Mistawis Island. Throughout the novel, the Blue Castle first exists as a private fantasy, a mental refuge where she imagines the autonomy she has been denied. By the end of the narrative, the symbolic "castle" becomes a lived reality: a physical home she co-builds with Barney, free from surveillance, judgment, and the oppressive social expectations of Deerwood. In the context of this research, the Blue Castle symbolizes not escapism, but the material result of female liberation—the space a woman can inhabit only when she is free to work, free to choose her partner, and free to exist according to her own desires.

Although Valancy's liberation is made possible by the conveniences of fiction, it nonetheless exposes how deeply women's lives are shaped by social constraints and how urgently such constraints must be questioned, and furthermore, it illustrates the potential of Mill's feminist vision when translated into narrative form.

Finally, this study emphasizes the importance of reflecting on early feminist fiction like *The Blue Castle* (1926) in contemporary feminist discourse. Valancy's story reminds readers that true gender equality requires more than legal progress—it requires freedom in the everyday structures of life: the right to fulfilling work, the right to equitable love, and the right to build a space of one's own. These freedoms, taken together, form the foundations of women's autonomy and remain central to achieving genuine equality in the present day.

For further analysis and understanding of *The Blue Castle* (1926) and more L.M. Montgomery studies, it is highly suggested that readers visit L.M. Montgomery Online, which holds an archive of information for all L.M. Montgomery-related scholarships. On the issue of feminism and gender in particular, the book *L.M. Montgomery and Gender* (Pike & Robinson, 2021) contains a multitude of thoroughly researched articles that have immensely added to the findings of this study. For further understanding of John Stuart Mill's philosophy, readers

should read *On Liberty* (Mill, 2018) and *Utilitarianism* (Mill, 2015), both books and ideas for which Mill is more known.

In the context of following up on this study, further analysis focusing on the socio-cultural background of early twentieth-century Canada will be beneficial in accurately positioning where the themes of liberal feminism in this literature fit in the broader, real-life society at large. A consideration of L.M. Montgomery's personal life at the time of this novel's conception may also further broaden readers' understanding of her decision to write *The Blue Castle* (1926).

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Nur Wulan: Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources.

Statement of the use of AI

During the preparation of this work, the authors used AI-assisted technology exclusively for language editing and improvement of readability. The authors carefully reviewed and edited all AI-generated suggestions and accept full responsibility for the content of this publication. AI tools were not used for data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, or the generation of scientific conclusions.

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