

Yan Du

## Girlhood in Verses

### The Role of Poetry in Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Emily of New Moon* and Elizabeth Acevedo's *The Poet X*

*Abstract: Few creative protagonists in girls' coming-of-age fiction, especially those authored by women, have escaped the lure of poetry writing. And yet from introspective diarists to fervent letter-writers to passionate storytellers, what seems less visible in current scholarly conversation on girls' literature are discussions surrounding girls as aspiring poets. My article considers representations of poetry writing in two landmark texts by women, Emily of New Moon (1923) by Lucy Maud Montgomery and The Poet X (2018) by Elizabeth Acevedo, paying special attention to how poetry writing serves particular purposes for the characters as they search for means of self-representation and self-expression to resist practices that undermine their voice. Despite being published in significantly different time periods, Montgomery's and Acevedo's works cross paths in terms of how they represent the power of poetry writing for adolescent girl protagonists: poetry operates as a means of negotiating conflicted identities or subjectivities, reconstructing their own notions of time, and performing their bodies. Whilst this article attempts to sketch a tentative case for the usefulness of poetry in girls' texts then and now, it concludes with suggestions for future research that might shed more light on the continual appeal of poetry in narratives of girlhood.*

**Keywords:** children's poetry, women's poetry, verse novel, girls' Künstlerroman, girls' literature, girlhood, Montgomery, Acevedo

I stand here, and I think,  
if there is one thing I want to say,  
to Xiomara,  
it's that she is proof effervescent passion and love,  
transcend hate.

Words have the power,  
to open your chest,  
and pull your heart out,  
and carry it to the sky.  
[...]  
my emotions out,  
to form a pool,  
that becomes a sanctuary.  
(Oliver 7)

This poem is written by Lola, a reader of Elizabeth Acevedo's award-winning young adult (YA) novel, *The Poet X* (2018).<sup>1</sup> Lola's poem is published on Goodreads where *The Poet X* enjoys rave reviews from poetry lovers and YA enthusiasts alike. The Kirkus review, too, considers it "poignant and real, beautiful and intense" (Review [Kirkus]). Apart from mirroring the novel's popularity, Lola's poem reflects the novel's compelling theme – the diverse possibilities for self-expression that the verse form supports. Her response suggests that poetry unleashes the power of words, providing a channel to set free "effervescent passion" and to "open your chest, / and pull your heart out, / and carry it to the sky" (Oliver 7). Indeed, when the book was published, critics seldom failed to mention how Acevedo's novel recapitulates the attractiveness of poetry in adolescent fiction, especially works featuring coming-of-age girl protagonists. The Publishers Weekly comments on how Acevedo's verse "gives Xiomara's coming-of-age story an undeniable pull, its emotionally charged bluntness reflecting her determination and strength" (Review [Publishers]).

Although the appeal of Acevedo's work may seem like a contemporary phenomenon, it nevertheless points to how poetry has shaped girls' narratives for decades. Passionate girl poets have long populated the pages of fiction for and about girls, particularly those authored by women. In classic girls' books, authors typically endow girls with the ability to transform "the prosaic into the poetic" (Simons and Foster 161). Among them, L. M. Montgomery's *Emily of New Moon* (1923) stands out. As the first book in a critically acclaimed trilogy, the novel also offers a more detailed and compelling

portrayal of the heroine's relationship to poetry compared with the later instalments. Like Acevedo's novel, *Emily of New Moon* has garnered much attention from critics, its classic status affirmed by the praise it has received from women writers such as Jane Urquhart and Alice Munro, who credit their girlhood writing ambitions to the young Emily (Rae). To be sure, Acevedo's and Montgomery's works are produced in dissimilar literary traditions and social contexts: the former features a contemporary Dominican American teenager navigating her identity and growth in the New York City Harlem neighbourhood, while the latter centres on an orphan girl pursuing a career as a writer in a late Victorian and Edwardian family on Canadian Prince Edward Island. However, the two novels' unanimous emphasis on girlhood and poetry and the similar impact they have on female readership make them interesting parallel texts worthy of further study. Indeed, this article attempts to show that recognising the similarities between these texts despite their disparate publication contexts can reveal important connections between classic and contemporary narratives for and about girls. Examining Montgomery's work alongside Acevedo's allows me to highlight the shared functions of poetry writing or poetic discourse in women's narrative depictions of coming-of-age girlhood while also, when possible, pointing to smaller shades of differences between how the two authors represent these functions in their novels.

## Literature Review and Method

Despite ongoing research on girls' *Künstlerromane* over the past decades, poets, it would seem, have been hovering on the peripheries of children's literature scholarship that addresses female artistic development. Judith McMullen and Roberta Seelinger Trites are some of the foremost scholars to discuss poetry as a form of emotional outlet and a source of power for girl characters, highlighting their dependence on language as a form of self-expression and a crucial part of their interiorities (Trites 33; McMullen 203–204). Yet their analyses do not touch upon the specific qualities of poetry that influence fictional girls' development. Past research on *Emily of New Moon* mainly discusses the parallels between Emily's poetry writing and Montgomery's poetics, particularly how the author makes intimate connections between the Romantic lyric tradition to which she is much indebted and the heroine's exceptional poetic creativity.<sup>2</sup> Others link Emily to famed Victorian depictions of female poets. Elizabeth Rollins Epperly, for instance, compares Emily's writing

with that of Aurora Leigh, the eponymous heroine in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sprawling novel-poem ("The Struggle" 146). Often, though, scholars theorise Emily's flair for verses in relation to poetic traditions and poet figures, sparing less ink on how poetry functions in the novel as a form of writing that enables the girl's effective self-expression. This is a gap that my research aims to address.

Meanwhile, recent studies by Krystal Howard and Kelly Wissman bring forth several key YA texts with poet protagonists, while Karen Coats, in her *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Children's and Young Adult Literature* (2018), convincingly maps out the functions of poetry in children's linguistic and psychological maturation and illuminates the thematic importance of poetic discourse in youth narratives. However, these scholarly investigations are not exclusively centred upon the girl poet character. Importantly, *The Poet X* ticks almost all the boxes that these scholars have outlined in terms of poetry and its meaning for adolescent development in YA fiction. By featuring a girl poet, the text provides a further opportunity for interrogating the significances of poetry in texts about girls.

To examine how women authors portray poetry's functions in their writings for girls, this article draws from research on women's poetry. Feminist critics have long been concerned with how women negotiate their relationship with the poetic language. Ruth Parkin-Gounelas shrewdly notes that poetry "has been a more problematic genre for women, given the ancient association, reaching back to Homer, between male author(ity) and poetic utterance" (12). By highlighting the problem of gender, feminists can locate women's poetic traditions (Gill 31), which, despite being warped by tensions, uncover how women have long relied on poetic form for creative self-articulation and even for survival. Additionally, I refer to, where necessary, features of the lyric genre and the unique characteristics governing poetic forms. Although past studies of women's poetry and lyric poetry most often unpack the works of actual poets rather than fictional ones, I posit that by treating fictional representations as simulacrum of reality and fictional poems as mirrors of the real, the critic can tap into poet characters and their metafictional verse productions in ways that would normally be reserved for an analysis of actual poets. Moreover, my article differs from previous research in its cross-period perspective, focusing on the commonalities and continuities between earlier and present texts. In this way, my work attempts to initiate, albeit tentatively, a wider discussion about the continual appeal of poetry in girls' texts then and now.

## Montgomery alongside Acevedo

As I have suggested above, the status of *Emily of New Moon* and *The Poet X* as landmark works among female coming-of-age stories with poet protagonists can be gleaned from their overwhelming popularity among readers and critics. But a further reason for comparing these novels is the authors' recognition of how poetry writing serves specific purposes for the characters as they search for means of self-representation under conventions that undermine their voices as girls. As many scholars have noted, stories for girls often demonstrate the ambivalent interplay between the characters' desires for self-expression and the gender norms that curtail them (Simons and Foster 63). Even so, Montgomery and Acevedo, despite authoring their work at different points in history, suggest that poetry nevertheless provides a structure where girls' experiences and perspectives are enabled and narrated, regardless of the ambivalence and constraints surrounding their gendered selves.

A further affinity between the two novels is their shared autobiographical quality. Emily's journey of becoming a poet closely resembles Montgomery's own, which the author describes in detail in both her journals and her autobiographical sketch, *The Alpine Path: The Story of My Career* (originally published 1917). Similarly, Acevedo admits drawing from her high school journals while drafting *The Poet X*, not to mention the parallels between Xiomara's poetry slam experiences and her own (Vinopal). But while the comparable autobiographical elements further justify the value of placing Montgomery's and Acevedo's work alongside each other, the analyses in my article are mainly focused on representations of poetry, poet protagonists, and their poetry writing strategies within the texts, rather than on how girl characters and the poems they compose offer potential for addressing the authors' self-referential poetic practices. This is not to say that the meta-discussion offered by their autobiographical investment is not important. Rather, focusing narrowly on textual evidence permits me to outline, more carefully, the functions of poetry as a heuristic form in adolescent novels for and about girls.

## Mapping and Proclaiming Identity through the Poetic Medium

In *Emily of New Moon*, the young poet relies on lyric poetry to express her affinity with the landscapes and seasons. According to Werner Wolf, lyric poetry is characterised by its "emphasis on the individual perspective and/or the perception of the lyric agency rather than

on perceived objects" (71). In Emily's world, poetry enables her to harness the power of individual perspective and affirm a sense of self that aligns with the spirit of nature. For instance, when Emily composes her first line of poetry (then called a "description"), she offers a compelling personal perspective that allows her voice to come through: "the hill called to me and something in me called back to it" (Montgomery 8). As Mutlu Konuk Blasing notes, the "voice" refers to "an individuating emotional inflexion and rhythm, a voiceprint of the speaker" (5). Emily's short descriptive line is a heavily personal "voiceprint," carrying the unique emotional passion of the speaker and metaphorically shaping her understanding of her identity as nature's spiritual friend. In another poem, Emily positions herself as an exclusive witness of a blue flower. The flower's joyful posture overlaps with the speaker's happy voice:

Sweet little flower thy modest face  
Is ever lifted tords the sky.  
And a reflexshun of its face  
Is caught within thine own blue eye  
(Montgomery 129)

Although the speaker does not explicitly say "I," she plays the role of an observer and describes the quaint beauty of the flower through a personal lens and intimate address offered by the lyric medium. Indeed, her "emotional inflexion" is mirrored in – and made possible through – a portrayal of the flower's fascinating qualities. At the end of the poem, the speaker declares, "But the poor talent I possess / Shall laurel thee my flower of blue" (129), directly establishing her voice as that of a poet. Inhabiting the voice of a poet in this poem has a direct effect on how Emily sees herself. Later in her letters to her father, Emily declares, "I am going to be a poetess. I think we are a tallented crowd" (154). Her claim shows that her frequent forays into the lyric have allowed her to construct a voice that translates into an affirmation of her poet identity.

Unlike Emily, Xiomara in *The Poet X* initially faces more hurdles when it comes to establishing an identity because the discourses governing her self-perception are more complex. It is a dilemma typically faced by girls like Xiomara, whose racial and gender subjectivities are framed in contradictory ways (Griffin 29). Poetry, then, offers a form for organising these contesting aspects of identity. While Emily seeks to invent and affirm her identity, Xiomara uses poems to make sense of the many identity labels cast upon her. In

poems such as “Unhide-able,” Xiomara presents different perspectives of her “body-self.” As a girl with “a little too much body,” Xiomara receives different nicknames: her male classmates call her “a whale” while other girls call her “conceited. Ho. Thot. Fast” (Acevedo 5). The derogatory identity labels reflect racial politics that intersect with patriarchal notions of the black girl’s body. But by placing these labels alongside her self-assessment line by line, the speaker realises that she recognises her plump figure but does not see it as negative: “I am the baby fat that settled into D-cups and swinging hips.” By working through different labels, Xiomara concludes that she needs to turn her big body into a weapon rather than a passive object of other people’s gaze, as she explains, “which is why I let my knuckles talk for me.” Poetry’s condensed rhetoric is crucial for the teenager in exploring her sense of self among a plethora of identity categories that seem, at first, too confusing for the mind to process. The process of organising these identities transforms ideas into words, words into poems. Poetry scholars have encouraged us to “consider the poem itself as a journey whose process is of value because the process is integral to what the poem means” (Walpert 41). By resorting to verse, Acevedo foregrounds how poetic discourse allows girl characters to gather aspects of their identities into fragments and gradually recognise their significance through language.

Later in the novel, Xiomara eventually embraces her identity as a slam poet. As “an art of self-proclamation” (Somers-Willett 69), a central tenet of poetry slam is to compel the audience to listen to the poet’s version of who she is. This form is perfect for Xiomara, who craves to voice – and prove – her artist identity to those who deny it. Unlike Emily, Xiomara’s self-identification taps into the signifying and persuasive quality of poetry. In “Verses,” Xiomara has a huge conflict with Mami, her mother. The latter tries to forbid her daughter from writing poetry by burning the journal filled with her poems. The conflict soon escalates into verbal combat, with Mami trying to drum Bible scriptures into her daughter’s head and Xiomara flinging poetry back at her mother. The forceful rhythm and emphasis of Xiomara’s repetitive “I”s represent a vital rhetoric strategy of persuasion in poetic discourse. As Blasing discusses in her book on lyric poetry, the speaking “I” could be read as a persuasive self-inscription:

The discursive and material persuasions of a poem coincide in the speaking “I,” which we could call the signature of the poet, the crux of an existential and a graphic person. The signature is an “ethical”

institution, and a poet's signature, his "I," endorses the symbolic language with his personal, identifying inflection of the linguistic and formal codes. [...] The textual signature, then, links and separates the macro rhetoric of the "existential" person and the micro rhetoric of the textual code that is equally in play in lyric language. (Blasing 35)

The link between the poet's material existence and the textual code that signifies her is enabled, it seems, most effectively through poetic forms, especially in the following lines where the "I" ties the symbolic, linguistic act of signature to Xiomara's personal experience of proclaiming who she is:

"I'm where the X is marked,  
I arrived battle ready---"

[...]

I am the indication,  
I sign myself across the line."  
(Acevedo 306)

By stressing such self-signification, Xiomara succeeds in aligning her "existential" and "graphic" person. And because the lyric delivers the crux of the person and poet so powerfully, via the speaking "I," Xiomara can eventually find a way to retaliate against Mami's Bible verse attacks. Here, the conscious connection the heroine makes between her speaking "I" and the letter X is also noticeable. The X is not just any textual signifier – it echoes the first letter of Xiomara's name, making it a shorthand and a memorable *nom de plume* perfect for the physical act of self-proclamation. The X is simultaneously a symbol with considerable ideological importance and critical currency in Latina/o/x studies, representing a contested field of nonconformity that encompasses aspects of race, gender, and language (see, for instance, Rodríguez). Wielding the X as part of this self-signification process allows Xiomara to articulate all the aspects of her self that have been suppressed under Mami's iron rule – her linguistic, gender, and religious experiences as an Afro-Latina girl and poet.

### Interrupting Temporalities through Poetry

If poetry supports and signifies the heroines' subjectivities, it also permits them an added ounce of agency over their experiences as girls. Such agency manifests in terms of an active reconstruction of



time through acts of writing. Rachel Conrad observes that adults often construct time frames that children should follow in their day-to-day lives while also imposing temporal expectations of childhood and narratives surrounding it. Conrad argues that children often counter these expectations by “[asserting] their own value, perspectives, and capability by sorting time itself on the mutable canvas of their poem writing” (39–40). According to Audre Lorde, poetry is also the most economical of all the art forms for women due to its flexible requirements on time (399–400). Writing poetry, then, is one of the most convenient means of escaping adult temporalities and constructing alternative temporalities that reflect the girl poet’s priorities.

Emily’s acts of poetry composition are crucial to her efforts to make her own time in an environment that constrains her creativity. Her poetry writing often happens when she is supposed to conform to schedules set by her aunts or her teachers. But poetry often interrupts her participation in these schedules. In *Emily of New Moon*, poetry’s links with the “flash” convey the powerful creative experience that such forms of authorship offer. According to Emily, the flash ushers in “the wonderful moment when soul seemed to cast aside the bonds of flesh and spring upward to the stars” (Montgomery 80). The flash suggests an entirely different temporality from the kind of adult-initiated, linear time Emily is bound by. Experiencing the flash is thus a form of interruption and subsequent transcendence that permits her to “perceive time as fluid, where interruptions and irritations can make way for reflection and rapture” (Epperly, “Reading Time”).

Elsewhere in the novel, Montgomery also illustrates how poetry writing fosters interruptions characterised by a deviation from conventional structures of proper attention, helping the poet heroine exercise her version of time even without the aid of the flash. Emily often gets distracted when she is supposed to pay attention to sermons, housework, or parameters of the adult discipline. In one instance, Emily stops to write a flower poem on her way back to New Moon after finishing an errand for Aunt Elizabeth. The poem begins:

Buttercup, flower of the yellow dye,  
I see thy cheerful face  
Greeting and nodding everywhere  
Careless of time and place.  
(Montgomery 108)

By stopping to write a poem, she interrupts the linear temporal expectation that the errand stipulates – she must finish the errand and go straight home – and transfers her attention to the presentness

of her surroundings. Moreover, such “interruption exercises” support the heroine’s efforts of asserting her notion of time: by addressing the flower lyrically, Emily conveys her temporality as both present-oriented and constant. Jonathan Culler notes that the lyric is dominated by the present tense, which elevates “the present of enunciation,” addressing “persons, things, abstractions, calling them to do something, to respond, or just to hear” (286). At the beginning of the flower poem, Emily’s description of the buttercup moving in the moment that she sees it – “Greeting and nodding everywhere” – highlights the significance of her participation within the lyric present. Later, however, she notices the flower’s constant cheerfulness – “Careless of time and place” – thereby tapping into mythical notions of nature’s temporality as ongoing and eternal. Conrad argues that children’s temporal standpoints – which refer to how they perceive and create temporality through their identity as young people – can be the means of asserting agency (18). While many girls’ books describe the heroines’ poetic fantasies, Montgomery comments on the effect of poetry in encouraging acts of interruption that allow the girl protagonist to suspend herself from traditionally structured temporalities and fit her temporal standpoints within.

Apart from living under adult-imposed time, girl characters are also subjected to a gendered temporal thrust, which seems to be particularly pronounced in girls’ literature. In “Where to from Here? Emerging Conversations on Girls’ Literature and Girlhood” (2020), Dawn Sardella-Ayres and Ashley N. Reese observe how North American girls’ fiction typically ushers girls into the expected norms of womanhood. In Montgomery’s and Acevedo’s books, many temporal expectations imposed by adults onto the girls have to do with the fact that they *are* girls: Aunt Elizabeth scolds Emily for reading books on human anatomy, and Xiomara angers Mami because her period comes a little too early for her age. Both adults impose “the imperative of sexual innocence” (Kokkola 37) on the girls, measuring their behaviour against the prescribed notions of female sexual development. Additionally, the two novels’ endings inevitably point to the heroines’ actual or possible transition into either marriage or a stable relationship, another example of the gendered teleology commonly observed in narratives of female development. However, poems provide a formal structure for experimenting with time at a smaller level: at the level of stanzas or even lines. These smaller units of language often bring forth how the girls are represented as interrupting the temporal scripts of adults or asserting their own.

With a devout Catholic mother, teenage Xiomara in *The Poet X* must follow conventional strictures of time prescribed for her girl

body such as postponing sex until marriage. In the smaller units of each poem, the formal features of poetry give her room for interruptions and fragmentation. In "Clarification on Dating Rules," Xiomara employs enjambments to describe her mother's rules, creating frequent pauses that cut through the flow of a complete sentence:

But Mami's been telling me  
early as I can remember  
I can't have a boyfriend  
until I'm done with college.

And even then,  
she got strict rules  
on what kind of boy  
he better be.  
(Acevedo 90)

In the poem, each line represents a smaller unit which contains temporalities the speaker tries to contest: "early as I can remember" refers to a childhood past controlled by Mami's preaching, while "until I'm done with college" suggests a future time also already determined by gender expectations. Yet by organising these units through enjambments, Xiomara intentionally isolates the temporalities they represent, as if to expose their fragmental nature and prevent their complete utterance. Indeed, the sudden line breaks effectively mimic reluctance to finish the sentence and heighten the quickened interruptive action. As a key formal feature of poetry, the length of the lines, as well as where line breaks happen, has a great impact on how the temporal purposes of the poem are perceived. In entries such as "Holding a Poem in the Body," Xiomara purposefully switches to longer lines and less frequent enjambments: "I let the words shape themselves hard on my tongue. / I let my hands pretend to be punctuation marks / that slash, and point, and press in on each other" (79). Here, the layered consonants that lend greater friction to the sounds, as well as the syntax that stretches to fill up the blank spaces, all serve to demonstrate how poetry produces certain verbal and visual effects of elongation through specific rhythmic and syntactic strategies. By adopting these strategies, the protagonist succeeds in representing her painstaking efforts of stretching the time of pronouncing, shaping, and pressing her words, thereby conveying her desire to expand upon a normal temporal sequence. Conversely, in "Clarification on Dating Rules," the poem's short lines highlight the shape of discourse torn apart by breaks and pauses, reinforcing the acts of verbal and visual interruption. Organising language units strategically in her

poems enables Xiomara to resist unpleasant temporalities imposed by Mami and articulate her own temporal priorities.

### Articulating the Girl Body through Poetry's Performative Function

In *Emily of New Moon* and *The Poet X*, the girl poets habitually find themselves objects of attention. In girls' narratives, the heroines are constantly on stage, seen through "the process of masquerade, impersonation, and play" (Lerer 228), and perceived by "a set of representations that are themselves mediated through paradigms and quotations, allusions and stereotypes" (Williams 17). The aspect of performance that receives the most attention is their bodies. As entities that remain questionable and liminal, girls' bodies are fetishised on the one hand and controlled on the other. Whilst highly cognisant of girls' troubled relationship to their bodies, the authors of both novels grant their heroines a certain level of freedom to articulate their emerging sexuality via poetry's performative function.

Throughout the novel, Emily is rarely able to perform her physicality, which often falls back upon anxieties of her health or of her emerging sexuality. Despite such limitations, the young girl is able to draw attention to her body through poetry. One example is a spontaneous occasion where her aunts ask her which stocking patterns she would prefer. Emily replies to her aunts, "Jesus Thy blood and rightchusness / My beauty are, my glorious dress" (Montgomery 100). Emily's verse is an imitation of a hymn verse recited by a religious child she reads about in a book. The verse is originally part of a famous hymn used for worship. Hymns are a type of verse characterised by an inherent dramatic structure, encouraging believers to perform their bodies towards a gesture of praise. But here Emily deliberately adapts the performative function of hymns to a non-religious, domestic setting, harnessing the poetic and performative not to praise God but to talk about her own stocking preferences. The line "My beauty are, my glorious dress" in the original hymn emphasises not one's physical beauty but the metaphorical glory one gains from faith, but when it is adopted by Emily as an answer to a question about clothing, the line denotes a self-conscious performativity of one's attractive physical features. As a result, the verse form becomes a vehicle for a young girl's celebration of her looks. By appropriating the performative quality of hymns, Emily effectuates a revision and eventual subversion of the silenced body

structured in the hymnal tradition, turning it into a performance of the girl's speaking body.

While poetry gives Emily the chance to articulate a positive vision of her body, Xiomara demonstrates that the performative function of poems allows the speaker to resist others' interpretations of her body. Poems like "Cuero," for instance, illustrate the "shame and denial of female sexuality" as the black Latina body is "othered" and "policed" by patriarchal scripts all at the same time (Fernández-García 103). Poetry, however, provides "an embodied praxis" whereby Xiomara resists how others read her body (Zamora 6). Patricia Herrera, discussing Nuyorican poetry's performative format,<sup>3</sup> points out the ways in which resistance is actualised through the performing body (49), exemplified in "the textual-vocal-corporeal dynamic" (Noel xvi). Such a dynamic calls upon the embodied practices of the poet and transforms the purely textual praxis of poetic discourse into an embodied one. Even though readers only get to access the heroine's poems on the printed page, it is undeniable that her verses are meant to be read aloud, recited, and performed. By gradually seizing the chance to perform, Xiomara begins to achieve "the union of voice, identity, and the body" (Howard et al. 407).

Xiomara's rejection of how the church and her mother police her body, or of how men sexualise her body, initially happens in the textual format – she declares that "the more I bruise the page / the quicker something inside me heals" (Acevedo 283). But eventually, she starts reciting her poems out loud. At first, such performances are clandestine ventures, disguised as scripture recitations. Even so, Xiomara's private performances train her to use her body in ways that channel the tone of resistance in her words, as she writes:

I toss my head, and screw up my face,  
and grit my teeth, and smile, and make a fist,  
and every one of my limbs  
is an actor trying to take center stage.  
(Acevedo 79)

Movements such as gritting her teeth and making a fist are embodied, performative signs of resistance. By calling up her body parts into a performance, Xiomara represents her body as an instrument that unites the resisting power of both voice and action, rather than as a passive object of desire or discipline.

Although Xiomara's earlier poetry performances have no audience but herself, the destruction of her poem journal forces her to

publicly resist someone who tries to disclaim her writing and her body, and that resistance is made possible through performing her poems out loud. The interactive relationship between poet and audience inherent in each poetry performance event (especially in that of slam) means that there is a feedback loop drawing both parties into the process (Fischer-Lichte 47). The feedback loop provides a structure for resistance because it consists of the response-oriented speech and behaviour of audience and performer, fuelling opportunities for a dialogic and even combative verbal “battle.” The poem “Verses” epitomises such an interchange between Xiomara and Mami:

“I’m where the X is marked,  
I arrived battle ready---”

“Dios te salve, María,  
llena eres de gracia;”

“I am the indication,  
I sign myself across the line.”

“el Señor es contigo;  
bendita tú eres  
entre todas las mujeres,”  
(Acevedo 306)

This verse “battle” exposes the feedback loop by showing how Xiomara’s poetry is juxtaposed with, or even opposes, Mami’s. Mami’s verse is a classic Christian prayer, “The Hail Mary,”<sup>4</sup> which begins with praising Mary as the perfect embodiment of femininity. Mary’s grace and sinlessness are aspects of the female body that Mami wishes her daughter to emulate. But Xiomara responds by resisting this and upholding a version of a heroic female body, defined by the power to resist normative identity labels and to defend the inscription of one’s body onto one’s text, and vice versa: “I’m where the X is marked, / I arrived battle ready.” The textual symbol “X” accurately represents her non-normative Afro-Latina girl body, while the body gives material significance to the “X” through performative acts of verbalisation or gesturing. In this way, the adolescent girl performs her politicised girl body (represented by the X) and superimposes it on the type of body her Mami envisions for her (represented by the figure of the Virgin Mary). Indeed, throughout the rest of this poem, Xiomara’s and Mami’s words continue to overlap, creating “a cacophony of violent poems” (Acevedo 308). It is through this cacophony that resistance finds a material

manifestation, supported by the interaction that poetry performance provides. Acevedo's skilful representation of this mother-daughter confrontation makes a powerful comment on poetry's performative function to transform a silenced daughter into a fighting "Poet X."

## Conclusion

As children's authors and established poets, Montgomery and Acevedo are highly aware of poetry's crucial role in their narratives. In both novels, poetry writing is intertwined with a continual, albeit difficult, search for a coming-of-age girlhood identity and expression in hostile spheres. Poetry is portrayed as a heuristic vehicle for self-affirmation, interruption, and performative resistance. The lyrical medium that both heroines adopt offers a means of asserting their subjectivities as poets. The types of attention required in poetry composition validate acts of interruption to temporal expectations imposed upon the fictional girl poets, while the flexible units of poetic language provide a space for linguistically disrupting undesirable adult notions of time. In harnessing poetry's oral qualities, Montgomery and Acevedo indicate that verbalising their poems can grant girl characters performative agency when it comes to articulating their physicality or resisting others' interpretations of their bodies.

The helpful qualities of poetic discourse I have outlined in this article, however, only serve as a starting point for future scholarship. For example, it might also be worthwhile to examine a wider range of girls' texts published across different periods, contexts, and literary traditions, especially since the meaning of poetry and the types of poetry authorship exercised by female teenagers continue to evolve. The narrative function of the verse novel structure also proves a fecund field for further study, given that its open-ended form challenges the linear plot arrangements that have so often been associated with traditional girls' literature. A closer look at the pedagogical processes of a poet's education in books featuring girl poets might also reveal how aspects of gender impact portrayals of "influence, imitation, and writing" as key practices of poetry (Howard 233). Finally, Lola's poem response to Xiomara's story, cited at the beginning of the article, suggests possibilities for research that interrogates how girls respond to representations of poetry and poetry writing in the books they read. As avid readers and aspiring poets, girls' experiences with poetic language in and outside of fiction open windows for exploring the persistent appeal of verse in our shared understandings of girlhoods across time.

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## Slutnoter

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2 For instance, Margaret Steffler comments that Emily is an inheritor of Wordsworthian "spots of time" (90), while scholars such as Elizabeth Waterston points to Emily's connections with the Romantic lyrical tradition, especially through one of the clearest indicators of her poetic talent, "the flash" (119).

3 "Nuyorican" was originally a mixture of "New York and Puerto Rican," a term used to identify Puerto Ricans from New York City. To understand Nuyorican poetry, one must first understand the Nuyorican movement, which has been regarded as "a tradition of poets, writers, artists, and musicians whose work spoke to the social, political, and economic issues Puerto Ricans faced in New York City in the 1960s and 1970s" ("A Brief Guide"). Nuyorican poetry speaks to the Nuyorican experience and narrates a unique immigration history. In the 1970s, artists and poets gave poetry performances in salons, and the oral nature of Nuyorican poetry was established. The Nuyorican Poetry Café opened soon after, housing a multicultural community of artists and flourishing as a major hub for slam poetry movements.

4 The English version of the full prayer is as follows: "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen" ("The Hail Mary").

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