

# Young Girls on the Move in Charlotte Smith's Didactic Miscellany Collections\*

## Muchachas en movimiento en las misceláneas didácticas de Charlotte Smith

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**Abstract:** This paper analyses the didactic miscellany collections for young female readers by the English writer Charlotte Smith. In these texts, through dialogues and conversations, the young protagonists are seen to learn from their daily experiences of walking in the natural world. Smith's reformist ideology is also present in the miscellanies, with remarkable examples of girls on the move in another sense, in that some of the young female protagonists appear to be escaping from distressing family and financial circumstances in search of better life opportunities.

**Keywords:** Charlotte Smith; literature for children and young adults; eighteenth century; education; mobility.

**Summary:** Introduction. Literature for Children and Young Adults. Charlotte Smith's Didactic Miscellany Collections for Young Girls. Walking and Rambling. Escaping from Distressing Circumstances. Conclusion.

**Resumen:** El principal objetivo de este trabajo es analizar las misceláneas didácticas que la autora inglesa Charlotte Smith escribió para jóvenes lectoras. En estos textos, mediante diálogos y conversaciones, las jóvenes protagonistas aprenden de sus experiencias en el medio natural en sus paseos diarios. La ideología reformista de Smith también aparece en estas misceláneas, con interesantes ejemplos de muchachas en movimiento desde otro punto de vista, ya que las protagonistas de algunos de ellos aparecen huyendo de un entorno de dificultades familiares y económicas, en busca de mejores oportunidades vitales.

**Palabras clave:** Charlotte Smith; literatura infantil y juvenil; siglo XVIII; educación; movilidad.

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**Sumario:** Introducción. Literatura infantil y juvenil. Las misceláneas didácticas de Charlotte Smith. Caminar y pasear. Huyendo de un entorno de dificultades. Conclusión.

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## INTRODUCTION

In *Rural Walks, in Dialogues. Intended for the Use of Young Persons* (1795), one of the texts by Charlotte Smith to be discussed in this article, the female instructor tells her young pupils: “You both look fatigued, and nothing will help to recover you so soon as the fresh air, perfumed, as it is this morning, by multitudes of flowers” (71). Thus, the reader is provided with a clear expression of the importance of open-air activities for a healthy life, and hence for a better instruction. Smith’s aims were manifestly inspired by various influential eighteenth-century philosophers, among them John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who in their educational agendas had both stressed the importance of physical and mental harmony. However, their discussions were focused on men alone, and it was Mary Wollstonecraft who would respond to this in her pioneering essay *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792, arguing that women should also strengthen their bodies as well as their minds in order to achieve integral improvements in their condition. Charlotte Smith, together with many other reformist women, endorsed Wollstonecraft’s egalitarian agenda, focusing mainly on the need for proper women’s education, but also drawing on the idea that physical exercise and fresh air were beneficial elements in their advancement.

Apart from its evident physical and emotional benefits, walking has traditionally been connected to the activity of the mind. In the eighteenth century in particular, walking was used for instructional purposes, Rousseau being one of the main proponents of this educational practice. Under his influence, many writers would go on to advocate physical movement for children and young people, particularly walks, in order to learn from the natural world around them. Smith followed this trend in her texts for young readers, and during their daily walks the protagonists and their tutor encounter an object, a creature, a person, an event or idea of interest; that is, they experience something new and in the subsequent conversation the girls ask questions, which are answered by means of examples or short narratives. Smith was a political and social reformist and she usually exploited her writings to convey her ideas. These miscellanies

in particular, which involve the presence of a young heroine, provide remarkable instances of girls on the move, with the female protagonists often depicted as escaping distressing family situations or financial circumstances in search of better life opportunities. During the period in which Smith published her books for young readers, Britain was undergoing an acute social, political and economic crisis. Being among the weaker members of society, this situation affected women more seriously, and the author denounced it in her texts. In order to improve the condition of women's lives, education was considered a key factor and Smith reproduced this belief not only in her didactic miscellanies, but also in the rest of her works. She was thus in line with other women writers of the period, who turned their interest to this issue. Most of them, like Smith, addressed this topic in their fictional writings; however, there were other relevant writers who published influential conduct books, treatises and essays on the matter, such as Hester Chapone in *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind, Addressed to a Lady* (1773), Mary Wollstonecraft in *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) and Hannah More in *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799).

## 1. LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS

Literature for children and young adults has traditionally been a neglected genre among literary critics and scholars, despite the fact that some of the most notable bestsellers throughout the history of literature have indeed been such works (Lerer 7). However, from the 1970s, and particularly over the last two decades, interest in children's literature has grown dramatically, both in teaching and research, with a proliferation of courses and scholarly work (Grenby and Reynolds 3). The increasing influence of fields of study such as family and motherhood history, women writers, the canon, book history, and material culture, among others, has been a determining factor here (Lerer 9; Hilton and Sheffrin 17). Similarly, the so-called cultural turn has allowed scholars of the history of education and childhood to synthesise issues involving class, gender, religion, sociability, literature, artefacts and pedagogies, providing a fresh approach to this field of study (Hilton and Sheffrin 1).

Historians of this literary genre have considered the eighteenth century to be a crucial period, in that it was during this period that literature for children and young adults acquired the status of an independent branch

in print culture (Grenby, *The Child*; Manuel). Grenby explains this development as a consequence of interconnected factors: “enterprising entrepreneurs, talented authors and illustrators, and technological innovations, but also shifting cultural constructions of childhood, demographic changes, and socio-economic transformations” (*The Child* 1). Protestantism also played a significant role in the origin of the genre, placing great emphasis on the learning of the Holy Scriptures by all members of the community, including the youngest ones. Moreover, Protestant writers now began to produce texts on religious and moral issues for younger readers. The involvement of Puritans was also crucial; predestination formed a part of their religious beliefs, and spiritual education was seen as indispensable for redemption. Moreover, they saw children and teenagers as the succeeding generation of family members and religious congregants, and this notion was articulated in texts which offered models and examples to imitate, such as James Janeway’s popular *A Token for Children* (1672) which, as its subtitle states, is about the “Joyful Deaths of Several Young Children.” Besides, Janeway’s text is significant for the foundation of modern children’s literature in terms of his “insistence that a work of imaginative literature can be as important to a child’s future as any exclusively didactic or devotional text” (Grenby, *Children* 4). Similarly, at the end of his life, John Bunyan, the author of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), itself very popular among young readers, would also write *A Book for Boys and Girls; or, Country Rhymes for Children* (1686), a collection of poems in which he tried to combine instruction and entertainment (Murray).

However, it would not be until the 1740s with John Newberry, also known as the father of children’s literature, that the genre became an established and vibrant branch of the print trade (Grenby, *Little* x). Newberry put into practice Lockean theories about mental development and playful education in his numerous publications, including one of the most popular children’s books in the English language, *The History of Little Goody Two-Shoes* (1765), and the first periodical for children, *Lilliputian Magazine* (1751–52).

The Industrial Revolution was also a decisive factor in the development of English society during the second half of the eighteenth century, through which the values of the middle classes and the emerging bourgeoisie gained momentum. Books for children and young adults, with a new discourse based on pedagogical dialogue and conversation, constituted one of the most prevalent means for the circulation of these

values, promoting as they did merit, talent and hard work, rather than privilege, class and birth (Kramnick 205–06; O'Malley 2–3). The mass entrance of women into the literary market during this period was also noteworthy here, in that many of these female authors chose to work in this genre, including Sarah Trimmer, Mary Wollstonecraft, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Dorothy Kilner, Maria Edgeworth and Charlotte Smith, among others (Pearson 14). Hence, in this period a remarkable core of consumers and readers of literature for children and young adults emerged, and with such an ample audience the genre was firmly established as having cultural and economic value. In fact, not only was this genre read by the youngest members of the society, but also by the adults. Consequently, it came to be one of the most influential agents of consensus-building and of the enhancement of English national identity (Grenby, *The Child* 92).

## 2. CHARLOTTE SMITH'S DIDACTIC MISCELLANY COLLECTIONS FOR YOUNG GIRLS

In a letter to her editor, Thomas Cadell Jr., in 1794, Charlotte Smith (1749–1806), née Turner, explained her project for the publication of a book for children and adolescents as follows: “So well am I convinced, that deceptive as this work may be, any work of the kind is so much wanted that it cannot fail of success” (Stanton 156). She thus acknowledged the status that literature for children and young adults had acquired in Britain by the end of the eighteenth century, as well as the potential profitability of the proposal. In the preface to *Rural Walks*, her first book for this audience, Smith admitted that despite the large number of “excellent books” currently available in this genre, something was still missing, particularly for young girls between the ages of twelve and thirteen (iv). After her first venture, she decided to continue publishing other texts for this specific age group. In these texts for young girls walking and rambling were instrumental, as their titles clearly illustrate: *Rural Walks, in Dialogues. Intended for the Use of Young Persons* (1795); *Rambles Farther: A Continuation of Rural Walks, in Dialogues. Intended for the Use of Young Persons* (1796); and *Minor Morals, Interspersed with Sketches of Natural History, Historical Anecdotes, and Original Stories* (1798).<sup>1</sup> Smith wrote two other books for children: *Conversations*,

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<sup>1</sup> References to these texts will be abbreviated hereon in: *Rural Walks* (RW), *Rambles Farther* (RF) and *Minor Morals* (MM).

*Introducing Poetry. Chiefly on Subjects of Natural History for the Use of Children and Young Persons* (1804) and *A Natural History of Birds. Intended Chiefly for Young Persons* (1807), which were not specifically addressed to girls (Wadewitz 98).

Aside from the many other texts that she wrote, Smith's decision to address young readers was a means of distancing herself for a while from social and political issues, since her novels on such topics had given rise to controversy and negative reviews, and also to alleviate her constant financial pressures. Smith belonged to Francophile radical circles, in which writers including Wollstonecraft, Helen Maria Williams, Mary Hays and William Godwin believed that political reforms were needed in England and who supported Republican ideals (Craciun 139). Hence, they were harshly criticised for such beliefs by conservative factions.<sup>2</sup> Among her other publications are a considerable number of novels: *Emmeline; or, The Orphan of the Castle* (1788), *Ethelinde; or, The Recluse of the Lake* (1789), *Celestina* (1791), *Desmond* (1792), *The Old Manor House* (1793), *The Wanderings of Warwick* (1794), *The Banished Man* (1794), *Montalbert* (1795), *Marchmont* (1796) and *The Young Philosopher* (1798); as well as books of poetry: *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784), *The Emigrants* (1793), *Beachy Head and Other Poems* (1807).

Smith's texts for young girls are didactic miscellany collections, a genre that dominated the literary market in the late eighteenth century (Porter 34). She developed a framework for these texts, in which various young girls are educated at home by an adult woman, usually their mother or a close relative, such as an aunt, by means of the technique of dialogues and conversations. In *Rural Walks* and *Rambles Farther*, Mrs. Woodfield is in charge of the education of her two daughters and her niece, who are all twelve or thirteen years old; similarly, in *Minor Morals*, Mrs. Belmour is the instructor of her four nieces, who are seven, nine, eleven and twelve. The young girls and their tutor, who, as is typically the case, is an idealised feminine figure (Trumpener 573), walk in the countryside, observing and commenting on everything around them. This pedagogical approach

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<sup>2</sup> Opponents of Smith and other politically-engaged writers of radical circles called them Jacobins for their sympathies towards the French Revolution; these critics tended to write for periodicals such as the *Anti-Jacobin Weekly* (1797–98) and the *Anti-Jacobin Review* (1798–1821) (Wallace, *Revolutionary* 16). Women writers in particular received the severest criticism; they were called “unsex'd females” in a poem written in 1798 by the clergyman Richard Powhele, the implication being that proper women would not address political issues in their writing (Stafford 4).

allows for discussion on many issues, but particularly on nature and botany—habitual topics with Smith, as the girls have the chance of experiencing the natural world first-hand (Dolan, *Seeing* 109). Each girl has her own personality and her own reactions to what is observed and also to the lessons of the tutor, and this makes the conversation more dynamic and more attractive for the reader. So, the depiction of these walks allows the author to develop three aspects: a central female teacher figure, experiential learning through dialogue and an episodic narrative structure (Dolan, *Seeing* 167).

The centrality of dialogue or conversation is underlined in the title of the collections and by the use of this term for the chapters in the books. Moreover, the pivotal place given to the dialogic device is related to the unprecedented status that conversation as a concept and as a practice had acquired in eighteenth-century England, a period regarded as the “age of conversation,” this deriving largely from the importance of sociability and the public sphere among the bourgeoisie and the middle classes more broadly (Halsey and Slinn ix–xi). Besides, conversation was not just a pleasing or entertaining practice, but had to be instructive, and participants would also be conscious that the didactic goal was an inherent part of conversing. This is particularly the case in the family setting, in which the whole family would typically be involved in a conversation, with children accustomed to participating from an early age. Thus, the youngest members of the family acquired new knowledge and developed their critical thinking (Cohen, “A Proper” 104; Cohen, “The Pedagogy” 448). Additionally, being one of the predominant social practices, family conversation allowed children to learn and practice their abilities and skills for future gatherings and events (Cohen, “Familiar” 103; Cohen, “The Pedagogy” 450). Indeed, conversation itself is a topic addressed in *Rural Walks*, when Mrs. Woodfield discusses with her young pupils the right type of conversation, which, it is said, has to deal with matters and terms that every participant can understand and handle, otherwise it is just a way of showing off, or a “love of fame” (85). Mrs. Woodfield also dismisses those who like gossiping and speaking about such uninteresting topics as ailments, remedies and physicians, or how to mend your economy (*RW* 86–87).

Dialogues and conversations became very popular pedagogical tools, particularly after the publication of Rousseau's ground breaking text, *Émile, ou De l'éducation* (1762). As is the case with Rousseau, in Smith's texts conversations are often elicited during the daily walks of the

protagonists, by means of what is known as experiential learning. The girls and their tutor learn from different elements of nature, events and incidents that they experience, mainly through their senses.<sup>3</sup> For instance, in Dialogue VIII of *Minor Morals*, Mrs. Belmour refers to this practice at the end of the chapter, when they have to return home:

But we must now hasten home, my children, though I have not exhausted half the subjects that offer themselves in a walk so various as this. We will therefore take another occasion to visit the park; and to give more variety to our inquiries, we will go to it by another road. (132)

As for the uses of different senses for their learning, Mrs. Woodfield's description of a plant in Dialogue II of *Rural Walks* is illustrative: “[it] is of the same species of plant as that beautiful Daphné Cneorum, or garland Daphné, which we all knelt to smell to, when we saw it in Mr. Bridport's garden” (45).

In the sections of the miscellaneous texts analysed here, the following pattern is seen repeatedly: first is the encounter with a new element of information, one which is unfamiliar to the girls and who ask their tutor about it; she then responds by providing them with an explanation, so that her pupils can reflect and learn from the experience. This pattern is quite conventional, but in the case of Smith, herself a poet, she often incorporates poems related to the topic under discussion. However, this is not the mere interspersing of poems in a prose text, a customary practice in this period, but an approach in which poetry “replays and amplifies the scenery already in prose” (Porter 33). Moreover, as Adrienne Wadewitz observes, experiencing and reflecting is not enough for Smith, and young girls need a sort of literary aid, this usually taking the form of a poem (99–100).

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<sup>3</sup> References to the senses as the source of knowledge were ubiquitous in the eighteenth century. In this vein, Rousseau and Locke in particular might be mentioned. The former, speaking about the education of Emile, claimed that “Since everything that enters into the human understanding comes through the senses, the first reason of man is a reason of the senses. On this the intellectual reason is based. Our first masters of philosophy are our feet, our hands and our eyes” (Rousseau 64). Similarly, Locke maintained that “[t]his great source of most of the ideas we have, depending wholly upon our senses, and derived by them to the understanding” (Locke 323). The experiential approach in education has proved fruitful over the years, particularly in the twentieth century, with the theories of John Dewey that emphasise the development of human potentialities through experience (Ozar).



### 3. WALKING AND RAMBLING

In the final decades of the eighteenth century, walking became a popular practice among the British (Wallace, *Walking*; Jarvis), including women (Rogers), to the extent that it was “the Romantic activity par excellence” (Horrocks 19). We recall Jane Austen’s heroines going for walks and travelling to various locations as visitors or tourists.<sup>4</sup> Several factors played a part here, including improved communications and trade, the transformations of cultivated landscapes, and two further issues which are both very significant for the present study: “the drive to open up the country to the spirit of rational inquiry” and the “change in attitudes to ‘wild nature’” (Jarvis 17). Indeed, in her monograph on the history of walking, Rebecca Solnit underlines the connection between walking and thinking:

The rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking, and the passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts. . . . Walking can also be imagined as a visual activity, every walk a tour leisurely enough both to see and think over the sights, to assimilate the new into the known. Perhaps this is where walking’s peculiar utility for thinkers comes from. (5–6)

Wollstonecraft in particular illustrated these notions about walking in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in which she argued against “mistaken notions of beauty,” which prevented women achieving “their own subsistence” and doing the “exertions that are requisite to strengthen the mind” (141). In Smith’s miscellanies, walking is also related to the activity of the mind, in that it is a didactic strategy which permits the author to introduce a great many instructional components and particularly natural elements into her texts. In the eighteenth century, science and the natural world became increasingly acceptable topics for women’s reading and instruction, and intellectuals of the period, such as Wollstonecraft and Maria Edgeworth, among others, endorsed this assumption (Pearson 65). In fact, Grenby has observed that a remarkable 58% of books inscribed by girls were found to be about science and natural history (*The Child* 57); he

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Bryan Kozlowski, who has studied Jane Austen’s “diet,” that is, her tips for health and happiness in the Regency period, notes that according to the contents of her novels she advises daily workouts in the form of walks, as well as a taste for nature by getting outside and breathing fresh air (n. pag.).

also provides instances of gift-books on botany with dedications to girls, such as the following dedication in the book *Fables of Flora*, from a brother to a sister: the book, it is written, is “the testimonial of the esteem he entertains for her attainments in Botanical science. As a Florist, her cultivated and refined taste will enable her to relish and appreciate the beauties of this exquisite production” (174). Nevertheless, the study of nature, and particularly of botany, caused anxiety among more conservative moralists of the late eighteenth century, not least because it was assumed that girls, while scrutinising the reproductive parts of flowers and plants, would naturally wish to examine the sexual organs of human beings too (George 1) and thus to indulge in indecorous behaviour.

Smith, as we have noted, was particularly interested in botany, and she focused on the natural world in her texts for younger readers from the very outset, describing the plan for her first book for children to her editor in the following terms: “[it] shall give an opportunity of discoursing on Landscape on the simple parts of botany, and natural history, with short stories of suppositious persons” (Stanton 130–01). Her purpose was to create a text which was both interesting and moral (131), hence Smith, in the voice of Mrs. Woodfield, would reject those women who simply wanted to make a display of their supposed knowledge (*RW* 85) by using scientific jargon, something, she argued, that girls should avoid in society (Pearson 67).

Interestingly, one of the young protagonists in *Rural Walks* and *Rambles Farther*, Henrietta, is constantly walking around the garden and asking about the names and characteristics of different plants and flowers: “She will certainly be a botanist!” (*RW* 85), says her mother. Similarly, in *Minor Morals*, one of the girls, Mary, enjoys cultivating plants. Consequently, there are entire dialogues or sections in these texts devoted to the natural world, especially to botany. In Dialogue V of *Rural Walks*, entitled “The Lily in the Valley,” Mrs. Woodfield and the girls go on a walk in their garden, conversing about various types of flowers, and at the end of the walk her daughter Elizabeth recites some verses by James Thomson’s *The Seasons*, which provides a catalogue of flowers, and which serves as a literary corollary (*RW* 73) of the knowledge acquired during their walk. Similarly, the girls and their mentor subsequently observe different types of trees during their walk, and at this point Mrs. Woodfield recites a poem by William Cowper on “these majestic plants, with their attributes” (*RW* 88).

The girls and their tutor also meet a variety of people during their daily walks. On one occasion they see some boys playing with a nest, an event that triggers a conversation about how animals are habitually abused by people. Smith's concern about animal cruelty captures changing attitudes towards animals during the eighteenth century, thanks to the culture of sensibility and, particularly in the Romantic period, due in part also to the idealisation of nature in contrast to civilised society (Perkins 7). Animals were no longer seen as disgusting or dangerous and people began to study them, as Smith herself did; in a letter, she writes that she was reading a book on "the Elements of natural History . . . , extremely useful in regard to Quadrupeds, Birds, Reptiles, & Insects" (Stanton 684). She would go on to use this knowledge in her texts for younger readers, the girls and their mentors speaking about diverse birds, including the nightingale (a favourite among the romantics), insects, such as glow-worms, silk-worms and butterflies, dormice, horses, turtles, sharks, and whales.

Animals even received empathetic and compassionate allusions by Romantic writers, including poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge and Byron (Perkins 180). Moreover, this concern about the welfare of animals needed to be implemented in education, and consequently to be addressed and taught from childhood (5); children show a particular propensity to be cruel towards them, as Smith's scene about birds' nests illustrates. As a means of teaching this lesson, Mrs. Woodfield tells the children to put themselves "in the place of whatever creature [they] are to injure or oppress" and to ask themselves "How should I like to be treated thus?" (*RW* 59). Regarding those animals that human beings need and use in their daily lives, she considers that there is nothing criminal in killing them, "but to prolong their tortures is highly so, or wantonly to destroy any living creatures that are innoxious" (60). However, Mrs. Woodfield observes with sadness that: "disposition to cruelty . . . is said to be inherent in human nature, and which I have sometimes thought really is so, however degrading the idea may be" (55). The young girls mention the need to punish those who behave badly towards animals, including coachmen, who whip horses "with impunity," as there is no law against this kind of behaviour, suggesting that there should be some form of regulation. Other violent activities, such as hunting, are also censured in Smith's texts. In one of the dialogues she describes a scene in which a hare is chased and caught by five or six beagles, and the reaction of one of the girls is revealing: "Henrietta shrieked with terror, when she heard the cries of the helpless animal, as the dogs seized it" (*RW* 151).

Most importantly, Smith habitually associates female experiences with botanical study, stressing its power to soften and heal any painful circumstance; indeed, this can also be seen in her poems, especially *Elegiac Sonnets*, and in some of her novels, *The Young Philosopher*, for instance (George 125–26). In *Rural Walks* in particular, Mrs. Woodfield recommends to her daughters and niece that they enjoy rural life and find amusement in those splendid places that they see while out walking, since being lower middle-class girls, “from the narrowness of your fortunes, [you] will probably pass your whole lives in the country” (43–44). In fact, the main plot that frames both *Rural Walks* and *Rambles Farther* revolves around this topic. Mrs. Woodfield’s niece, Caroline, has lost her mother and, since her father is a military man stationed far away, she has to undergo an important change in her lifestyle. Having previously lived very comfortably in London, she is suddenly forced to move to the countryside, to live with her aunt and cousins in a much more austere environment. The reader observes how Caroline initially does not accept this change or her new circumstances, but also how Mrs. Woodfield’s instruction finally bears fruit and the girl comes to appreciate her life in the countryside and the advantages it offers. Among the numerous examples used by the tutor here to instruct her niece and her daughters—and hence Smith’s female readers—she alludes to expensive flowers sold in the large cities. She considers that “by creating artificial wants, they destroy the enjoyment of natural pleasures,” as “taste for the genuine beauties of nature, is at all times, and in all seasons and situations, a source of the purest and most innocent delight” (*RW* 24). Moreover, the curative properties of fresh air, and particularly of places for bathing, are explicitly mentioned:

Anxiety for a brother she loved, with other domestic uneasiness, had at length so far affected Mrs. Woodfield’s health, that it became absolutely necessary for her to follow the advice of a medical friend, and to go for a few weeks to the sea.<sup>5</sup> (*RW* 132)

Walking and rambling are also significant in Smith’s texts in another sense, since the girls and their female instructor visit impoverished farmers during their walks. This was an expanding social responsibility for middle-

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<sup>5</sup> This affiliation with the natural world from a female perspective, as a means of avoiding or at least diminishing some of the distressful norms for women—these imposed mainly by a patriarchal society—has led Smith to be considered “the grandmother of Ecofeminism” or “a proto-ecofeminist” (Horn n. pag.).

class and upper-middle class women, with the aim of helping those in need (Fletcher 228–29). As Harrison notes, poverty, the poor, and the Poor Laws, were all at the centre of the debate in the last decade of the eighteenth century regarding not only political and economic areas, but also educational reforms (15). War on the continent, poor harvests, land enclosure and higher degrees of commercialisation all caused high prices, rural unemployment, food shortages, plus social and political tension and discontent (Harrison 15; Horrocks 17).

Smith depicts various poor families in her texts in order to criticise the social structures which had caused such suffering, and to educate her young readers about the need for political reforms and government assistance for its humblest citizens (Dolan, *Seeing* 17), introducing in this way the youngest members of the nation to political action (Wadewitz 106). From the very beginning, in Dialogue I in *Rural Walks*, there is a telling instance of a visit to a family of farmers living nearby. The young protagonists of this text witness the impoverished parents and their numerous children in a “cottage, of which the mud walls were in many places falling down, the thatch broken, and the windows darkened by paper and rags, that were stuffed between the broken panes” (15). In the subsequent conversation between Mrs. Woodfield and her pupils, she explains to them, echoing Locke, that “No person is too young to be taught to think” (18), and thus there is nothing better to think about than real experiences, such as the scene they have just seen. Subsequently, Mrs. Woodfield raises the pertinent question for her young companions to consider: “Which would give you the most pleasure; to be able to relieve the wretched family we have just seen, or to go to the ball which is to be held . . . in W \_\_\_?” (18).

#### 4. ESCAPING FROM DISTRESSING CIRCUMSTANCES

The aforementioned economic crisis was also among the elements which led to the presence of another important issue in Smith's miscellanies. Indeed, one of her central objectives was to alert young girls to the unpredictability of life in general, and particularly for them, since as a consequence of a reversal of fortunes their comfortable lives, and hence their future expectations, were not assured. In her texts, she frequently identifies the dependence on men as one of the main sources of women's distress, and also the need to escape it:

How often does the luxury, the folly, or the misfortunes of parents leave destitute and helpless young women exposed to insult, too often to infamy; for those who cannot bear poverty will escape from it, however ruinous the means by which they escape. (*RW* 45)

By means of the lessons of their adult female teacher, the young girls learn emotional resilience and economic resourcefulness (Dolan, “Collaborative” 116) as a means of confronting these terrible potential circumstances. This is particularly so in the case of Caroline, Mrs. Woodfield’s niece in *Rural Walks* and *Rambles Farther*. Smith herself had suffered misfortunes of this type throughout her life, from the moment her husband squandered all their money and deserted her and their children. Indeed, she began writing after her divorce in order to provide for her large family. The fact that she had to write out of necessity led her to affirm that she “loved novels no more than a grocer does figs” (Fletcher 1). Smith often mentioned her difficulties in the prefaces to her works and used the plots and subplots of her narratives to develop this idea (Copeland 47–49). There are numerous examples of short narratives in the collections examined here which illustrate this type of distressful situation: the story of Miss Harley in Dialogue VI and the story of Fanny Bennison in Dialogue VIII of *Rural Walks*; the stories of Flora Maccarryl in Dialogue II, Lydia Meadows in Dialogue VI, Sophy in Dialogue IX, Ann Willows in Dialogue X in *Rambles Farther*; and the story of Eliza and Emma in Dialogue III of *Minor Morals*.

Smith also employs disquieting stylistic devices to enhance the emotional instability and oppression of the young women. This is particularly so when she uses Gothic imagery, including motifs such as dark chambers, labyrinths, monsters and ghosts. As June Cummins notes, the young female protagonists in books of this type undergo various moments of transition, including menarche, marriage and childbirth, marked by some kind of loss of control, which is metaphorically represented by the Gothic atmosphere. A significant instance of this can be found in the short narrative in Dialogue XII of *Rural Walks*, in which the two female protagonists, a mother and her daughter, are left in a wholly helpless situation as a consequence of the financial miscalculations of the men in the family. This is emphasised by means of Gothic imagery at the point when they have to leave their home and take shelter in a ruined and gloomy dwelling, a “Gothic edifice,” which is said to be haunted by supernatural beings (*RW* 187–89). The menacing atmosphere in which the

young protagonist is immersed reminds the reader of the Gothic romances: "The wind howled round the desolate mansion, and every now and then the door, towards which her looks were so fearfully directed, scrooped on its hinges, and she fancied she saw the lock turn" (*RW* 194).

Similarly, the story of Lydia Meadows in Dialogue VI of *Rambles Farther* depicts a girl who, when her grandmother dies, is left as a "helpless and destitute orphan" (108) and has to leave her home and live in London, friendless and penniless. The description of the terrible circumstances she must endure in the poorest area of the capital are similar to those described by Dickens several decades later, including descriptions of wretched characters and various threatening gangs:

The lodging occupied by her new master consisted of three wretched rooms in an alley, where hunger and contention added to the horrors of a confinement worse than a prison. The man, an Italian who could speak little or no English, could hardly earn a scanty subsistence by his business . . . . His temper was fierce, vindictive, and unfeeling; and his brutality to his two apprentices could only be exceeded by that which his wife exercised towards himself. She was an English woman, who, believing she had done him a very great honour in marrying him, and having a spirit more violent than his own, not only returned his ill humour with interest, but often made him petition for armistice; and so dreadful were these scenes to Lydia, who had never had an idea of such people or such conduct, that if she could have endured the famine and squalid wretchedness she was condemned to live in, the extreme terror with which these quarrels impressed her would alone have determined her to escape at every hazard from such an insupportable condition of life. (*RF* 119–20)

Both these girls, as well as other young protagonists featuring in the short narratives interspersed throughout the collections, had to move home and escape under duress, not on account of their own wrongdoing, but due to unexpected adverse circumstances. Moreover, Smith includes in her texts other characters who have also been forced to abandon their home escaping violence and death. Remarkably, in Dialogue III of *Rural Walks*, the girls and their tutor come across a French priest during their daily walk, a man who has found asylum in England after the destruction of religious houses in France (49–51). The same issue is addressed in *Rambles Farther*, in the Dialogue "Eulalie," which includes the story of the Marquis de Cideville, who had to leave France with his wife after the beginning of the

Terror in 1793.<sup>6</sup> Having arrived in England they have a baby, but the mother dies; Mrs. Woodfield and her niece are moved by such sad circumstances and decide to take care of the young child and “to provide for this poor little victim of misfortune” (*RF* 246).

Moreover, even though these short stories most frequently serve as examples of women’s self-improvement, with a happy ending and the heroines having overcome all adverse circumstances, Smith expresses through the voice of Mrs. Woodfield certain gloomy assertions about the future of some unfortunate girls: “helpless children of adversity, very indigent and destitute young women, whom so many calamities await, and who at best have not always the means of living by honest industry, however industriously they may be disposed” (*RF* 135).

## CONCLUSIONS

After this brief analysis of Smith’s books for young girls, it can be concluded that she sought to promote not only the exercising of women’s minds by means of dialogues and conversation, but also the exercising of their bodies. She championed the theory that women should strengthen their bodies, instead of being confined to the home by fashionable notions of frailty and sensibility imposed on them since girlhood. Besides, her ideas about movement, and about walking and rambling in particular, referred mainly to the didactic benefits of encountering new topics for discussion. Conversation was a very popular and extended educational tool in books for children and adolescents, especially with women writers. However, Smith personalises her texts by means of her own assumptions about young girls’ instruction. First, she insists on the pedagogical value of the natural world for women: “[it] is particularly adapted to women; is soothing to their minds, and refines their taste, while it prevents them from suffering from that want of motive to go into the air, and from yielding to that torpid ignorance which hurts alike the body and the mind” (*MM* 27). Second, she incorporates numerous exemplary short narratives with juvenile heroines similar to her supposed readers, who are left alone and have to escape and move on, yet thanks to useful instruction received at

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<sup>6</sup> The presence of forced migrants was habitual in the writings of this period, due to the arrival of French émigrés to England. Smith was a direct witness of such events, in that she lived near the south coast of England, and devoted her poem *The Emigrants* (1793) to the issue (Horrocks 68–78).



home, and indeed as a consequence of their merit, talent and hard work, are able to overcome their dire situations and unpromising prospects.

Education is crucial for improving the future of young girls; but sometimes it is not enough. Social consciousness and responsibility, together with compassion and sympathy, are also decisive here, in that decent people are usually seen to intervene and help these poor girls, while the government and other institutions seem to look the other way. Ultimately, however, this sort of progressive agenda was counterbalanced by a far more moderate discourse, in that in many of her texts Smith also included the inevitable matrimonial outcome for young women. Indeed, one of the young protagonists of *Rural Walks* and *Rambles Farther*, Caroline, after receiving the appropriate forms of instruction by her aunt, is ready for adulthood and gets married at the end of the book.

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