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# **From Unwanted to Essential**

*Imagination, Nature and Female Connection in L.M.  
Montgomery's Anne of Green Gables*

**B.A. Essay**

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**May 2016**

## **Abstract**

This thesis aims to explain the use of imagination, nature, need for human connection, and female independence in the character of Anne Shirley. She is the main character of one of children's literature most enduring novels, *Anne of Green Gables*. The novel's author, L.M. Montgomery created the character of Anne as a role model for young readers, mostly because the author herself did not grow up with any independent, female literary characters. As a result, Anne becomes the manifestation of the dreams that Montgomery did not manage to achieve in her own life. Anne is an orphan, yet she manages to escape that fact and earn a place with the Prince Edward Island community of Avonlea. Anne's adoption by the Cuthbert siblings leads to her forging real, human relationships, instead of relying on her imagination as she has done in her childhood. While Anne no longer has a need for her imagination as a way to escape her dark reality now that she belongs to a family, she still makes use of it. Mostly, it serves to strengthen her connection with nature. Anne is a representation of romanticism, so she stands out within the strictly practical 1900s society. However, Anne refuses to have her personality suppressed by behaving like everyone else. This ability of Anne's – to truly be herself, no matter what – ultimately serves as inspiration to the people closest to her. Anne manages to lure her adoptive parents, Matthew and Marilla, out of their repressed states by evoking their feelings of love. As she grows closer to them, they finally feel free to express their feelings and thus, live happier lives. Anne starts her life as an unwanted orphan – and a female one, at that – but by the novel's end, she has become essential to the Avonlea community.

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## 1. Introduction

For over a hundred years, readers have been charmed by Lucy Maud Montgomery's story about an orphan girl that is mistakenly sent to live on Prince Edward Island with the mature Cuthbert siblings. *Anne of Green Gables* first appeared in 1908 and has been continually in print since then. The story focuses on the young Anne Shirley, who ends up living with Matthew and Marilla Cuthbert. They had originally wanted to adopt a boy to help them with their farm but Anne manages to win them over with her easy charm and quick imagination. The novel then focuses on Anne's new life at Green Gables where she is finally free to be a child, as well as the positive influence that she has on the people of Avonlea. Whilst writing her novel, Montgomery utilized much of her own life as inspiration, most notably in the setting of the story and in the sense of not being wanted that Anne has to deal with throughout the entire novel. Although it is classified as a children's book, *Anne of Green Gables* deals with many mature themes, such as the grim life of orphans at the beginning of the twentieth century, the patriarchy that was integral to the society at that time, death, and finding a place to belong. Montgomery ventures daringly into all of these things but still makes sure to not execute it in the form of a sermon. The novel is full of optimism and positive sentiments, mostly expressed through Anne, and praises the importance of both education and creativity.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I will focus on the use of imagination in *Anne of Green Gables*. By delving into her sad past, it is clear to me that Anne uses her imagination as a means to escape from the world. She has faced so much disappointment during her life that her imagination becomes a way for her to create a safe haven. This is further emphasised when Anne's vivid imagination is compared with the limited imagination of her new friends in Avonlea, who have not had to do through Anne's hardships. After Anne first moves to Avonlea, she has to deal with being unwanted in two sentiments of the word: as an orphan and as a girl. This is something that she has in common with her author. In the thesis' second chapter, I aim to research the extensive use of nature in the novel, usually connected to the fact that it was written by a female author. Anne has a real appreciation of nature and in my eyes, she easily finds connection with natural things because she is so used to not connecting with people. Furthermore, I interpret Anne's romanticism as a will to protect the rural life of Canada during a time of great societal changes, yet at the same time, Anne represents the need for modernization. In the third chapter of this thesis, I explain the influences that Anne has had on the people of Avonlea and delve into the relationships she has with the novel's

other prominent characters. Anne opens Avonlea's inhabitants' minds up to new thoughts and experiences. The thesis's fourth and final chapter deals with female connection. Anne craves connection with women and the novel is rich in strong female characters. Anne achieves independence, a feat which Montgomery wished for herself to accomplish. This thesis thus aims to explain how Anne Shirley ultimately acts as L.M. Montgomery's manifestation of what it is like to live in a world where you are not wanted. Anne gets redemption through her repeated feminist values and subtle critique of the patriarchal society that she displays through her imagination; a feat which Montgomery hides under the shield of the label "children's literature."

## 2. Anne's Use of Imagination

One of Anne's most notable characteristics is her imagination, which she frequently uses as a means to escape from the world. Ever since losing her parents at just three-months old and until she moves to Green Gables at the age of eleven, Anne Shirley has lived a difficult life. As an orphan, she is not wanted anywhere and has to come to terms with being thought of as an annoyance. She is taken in by the Thomas family and lives with them until she turns eight, taking care of four younger children. Anne does not experience much warmth in the Thomas household, being repeatedly told by Mrs. Thomas that she does not know what to do with Anne. "You see, nobody wanted me even then. It seems to be my fate," Anne relates to Marilla when the latter asks her about her life before she came to Green Gables (Montgomery *Green Gables* 55). In order to get through her story, Anne tells it quickly and simply, in a manner that is very unlike her usual talkative way. When she tells Marilla of her time with the Hammond family, where she was treated like a free servant, the reason for Anne's vivid imagination becomes clear to the reader: it is a survival method. Anne has to be able to vent out her unhappy experiences, so as not to become overwhelmed by her bad memories. In an article written for *Children's Literature*, Paige Gray explores the theme of imagination as liberation in *Anne of Green Gables*.

As a poor, clever girl with no family and few options in early twentieth-century Canada, Anne's fantasies prior to her adoption by Marilla and Matthew serve as a means to mentally create safe havens and luminous spaces. (Gray 169)

A clear example of how Anne uses her imagination to help protect herself mentally, is when she tells Marilla of the day that she spent at the beach with the Thomas family. "I enjoyed every moment of that day, even if I had to look after the children all the time. I lived it over in happy dreams for years" (*Green Gables* 59). Anne is so starved for affection and beautiful things that one nice day satisfies her for years, yet she still had to work, taking care of the children because she is being exploited as a free servant. Anne has spent her life in unpleasant places that dearly need help from her imagination to seem bearable. It is not until she comes to Avonlea that she sees a place so lovely that Anne can let her mind rest. This happens when Matthew Cuthbert picks her up from the Avonlea train station and drives her to his home, Green Gables. On the way, they have to drive on a stretch of road lined with apple trees, commonly known as the Avenue (*Green Gables* 25). For Matthew, the Avenue is

“a kind of pretty place,” but its beauty moves Anne beyond words. ““It just satisfied me here’ – she put one hand on her breast” (*Green Gables* 26). It is thus clear that Anne can be completely satisfied in her connection with nature, because she has lacked human connection for so long. The natural world gives her solace and rejuvenates her when her suffering has become almost unbearable, like when she takes in the environment of Green Gables as a comfort for not being able to stay there (*Green Gables* 43).

Being an orphan at a time and place where more concern was placed on the welfare of horses than for the lives of women and children, Anne is guaranteed to have faced hardships far more suitable for a man three times her age. It is worth noting that concern for neglected children only became a matter of importance after the 1850s while laws regulating animal welfare were in effect by 1822 in Nova Scotia, as explained by Mary E. Doody Jones in her chapter on orphans in *The Annotated Anne of Green Gables* (Doody Jones “The Exceptional Orphan Anne” 423). Marilla and Matthew’s main purpose for adopting a boy from an orphanage is to have him work on the farm: a sort of cheap labor. Using children as employees was common practice in those days, as stated by John MacDougall in his book *Rural Life in Canada* that was published in 1913: “There are undoubtedly cases upon the farm where parents exploit their children’s labor for sake of the money return as really as do employers of child labor in factory or sweatshop” (127). The Cuthberts’ reasons for taking on an orphaned child are threefold. Neither of them has children of their own, Matthew is getting too old to be able to manage a whole farm by himself, and, in a rather xenophobic view expressed by Marilla, they would much rather have a Canadian born child instead of hiring one of the French boys in the neighbourhood (*Green Gables* 8). When Marilla tells the family friend Rachel Lynde of their plans, the latter becomes terrified. She starts recounting tragic stories of all the horrible things that adopted children have done to their new parents, including burning down houses and poisoning wells. When Mrs. Lynde reveals that the well-poisoner was a girl, Marilla is relieved. ““Well, we’re not getting a girl,’ said Marilla, as if poisoning wells were a purely feminine accomplishment and not to be dreaded in the case of a boy” (*Green Gables* 10). The view that a female’s weapon of choice is poison because it is duplicitous and surreptitious, has long been established. Poison can be used without having to face the person that is to be hurt and since most women lack the physical strength to fight with their bodies, this method has become inherently connected with femininity. Thus, Marilla has no fear that the orphan boy will do anything so deceitful as using poison. Interestingly though, during the course of the novel, there are two occurrences where it can

be said that Anne employs poisoning. As Margaret Anne Doody comments on the subject in her Introduction to *The Annotated Anne of Green Gables*: “Anne inadvertently intoxicates [her new friend] Diana by plying her with wine instead of cordial, and she ‘poisons’ her cake by flavoring it with liniment instead of vanilla. This disgusting dainty is then served to the minister and his wife” (22). By having the minister be the victim of one of Anne’s poisonings, her orphan status becomes more dangerous because she is an immigrant in the Avonlea society and can be seen as “attacking” the Christian values that are held so dear. After Marilla has dismissed Mrs. Lynde’s fear of orphan girls, the latter explicitly states that it was a boy that purposefully burned down the house of his adopted parents but interestingly, Marilla does not think that it warrants a comment (*Green Gables* 9). She has a huge amount of faith in the virtues of a boy that she has never met but the same does not apply to a female individual. Marilla later asks Matthew “[w]hat good would she be to us?” (*Green Gables* 40). Since Marilla cannot conceive what use Green Gables might have for a girl, she is adamant in sending her back. Matthew, in a typical patriarchal fashion, overrides Marilla’s authority but surprisingly, he uses his power to make the decision to let Anne stay. Anne clearly does not expect this kindness as she does not even believe that someone will pick her up from the train station when she first arrives to Avonlea. When Matthew is late, she starts using her imagination to make things easier to bear.

Given her experiences as an orphan and her familiarity with disappointment, she anticipates [Matthew’s] delay, but Anne is determined to transform the situation into an ideal and lovely experience, rather than one of despair. (Gray 169)

Even though it is not a very realistic option, Anne imagines how lovely it would be to spend the night in a nearby cherry tree (Montgomery *Green Gables* 17). It is also interesting to consider Montgomery’s choice in making Anne an orphan. Margaret Anne Doody has this to say on the subject: “Orphans do not have proper social identity, for this is supplied by family, especially the presence and name of the father. Orphans are not wanted, are superfluous, exciting and dangerous extras, ‘free radicals’ in the social body” (“Introduction” 11). This sentiment mimics the society’s feelings about women, as Doody goes on to explain. “To be a girl is to be imperfect, a poor substitute for the real thing and thus in some sense unwanted” (11). Anne is therefore unwanted in two senses of the sentiment: both as an orphan and as a girl. Faced with the bitterness and difficulty of life as an unwanted orphan, Anne escapes her reality by imagining a better world. In that world, Anne is often beautiful and rich, dressed in

lavish gowns and wearing jewels. Sometimes though, she is satisfied with the simple imagination of a friend: a girl her own age that she can talk to. Here, Montgomery brings up the importance of female friendship as will be discussed in more detail later in this thesis.

Anne knows that she has to live up to certain feminine ideals, as they are seen by society, but when those ideals seem oppressive, she can retreat into her own imagination. It is a world that is fully her own; where the normalcy of patriarchal thought cannot reach her. Anne's ideal world is stocked with feminine, heathen symbols, like dryads and fairies. Anne is very willing to share her imaginary utopia and frequently invites her friends to join her. In one instance, she starts a story club with her new Avonlea friends, including Diana Barry, Ruby Gillis, and Jane Andrews. Each girl has to produce one story a week but the other girls are not as accomplished writers as Anne is. They are never as successful in their imagination, mostly because they have never had the need for relying on it as a survival method. Montgomery uses this chance to let Anne once again reflect on the importance of female connection. "Ruby Gillis thinks of nothing but beaux," states Anne rather disapprovingly and disappointed that Ruby uses the all-female story club as a way to imagine what life is like with a man (*Green Gables* 286). Ruby is thus shunning Anne's ideal world of female connection which Anne thinks is a waste of imagination. Boys are not allowed in the story club at all, a fact which Paige Gray finds interesting. Her interpretation is that

[t]he club thus constructs a space solely for girls to find their proper voice, indicating that this construction can be done through girls revising the ancient legends and romantic stories that have inspired their imaginations – imaginative experimentation, revision, and invention grant the young girl freedom and a certain authority. (190)

Anne herself focuses on stories filled with strong, heroic, female characters with European medieval names like Cordelia and Geraldine (*Green Gables* 288). She is very fond of authors like Tennyson and his "Idylls of the King," even going so far as to try to re-enact the "Lancelot and Elaine" part of the poem with her female friends. Anne feels remorse for the fact that she is not born in the medieval fantasy world of Camelot, since that is a world that she tends to romanticise. When the girls are casting their play, Anne states that she would "love to be Elaine" and the other girls, lacking Anne's courage, convince her to take on the role (*Green Gables* 305). Despite Anne's love of distressed heroines, she has no desire to become a damsel in distress when the flat in which she is lying starts to fill with water. Even

though she becomes frightened when she realises that the flat will sink, the fear does not overpower her as is evident in the prayer that she says at that critical moment: “Dear God, please take the flat close to a pile [of the bridge] and I’ll do the rest” (*Green Gables* 310). Anne manages to cling to a pile of the bridge but has to be rescued from there by her nemesis, Gilbert. In the words of Paige Gray, “her inability to rescue herself leaves her ‘furious’” (173). Anne dreams of heroines that are rescued by valiant heroes but in reality, she is so independent that the possibility of being saved by a man is not as romantic as it is in her imagination. “She thus finds it more humiliating than gratifying to be rescued by Gilbert as she clings to a bridge pile” (Doody and Barry 460). In her introduction to *The Annotated Anne of Green Gables*, Margaret Anne Doody states that Anne “is truly a twentieth-century and not a nineteenth-century heroine in her consistent preference for self-nurture and suspicion of self-sacrifice” (28). Anne is ambitious, especially when it comes to her education, and refuses to be a placid little girl. This defiant spirit is further emphasised by Anne’s red hair since it is a symbol of the fire that burns within her soul and refuses to let Anne comply with the ladylike behavior that Avonlea has come to expect from its women (Doody “Introduction” 28-29). “Her temper matches her hair I guess” is Mrs. Lynde’s response to Anne’s outburst against her (*Green Gables* 92). No other character in the novel is described as having Anne’s hair color, making her stand out even further in the community. Paige Gray expresses this sentiment about Montgomery’s use of imagination: “The use of imagination in *Anne* signals a discontent with the system under which the narrative operates, therefore subtly inciting the need for a reevaluation of that governing system” (176). Gray’s sentiment can be seen as a reflection of Virginia Woolf’s opinions about women and writing.

[B]oth in life and in art the values of a woman are not the values of a man. Thus, when a woman comes to write a novel, she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values – to make serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial what to him is important. And for that, of course, she will be criticized; for the critic of the opposite sex will be genuinely puzzled and surprised by an attempt to alter the current scale of values, and will see in it [...] a view that is weak, or trivial, or sentimental, because it differs from his own. (Woolf 49)

Anne’s strong use of imagination might be interpreted as a purely sentimental display of the writing of a female author. However, Montgomery utilises the theme of imagination within

*Anne* in such a way that transcends simple sentimentality. Anne's imagination becomes her own defence mechanism that she greatly intertwines with her passion for nature.

### 3. Connection to Nature

Montgomery creates her own, distinctly feminine writing style, such as the one Virginia Woolf talks of, by placing great importance on her descriptions of nature. While writing on the geography of *Anne*, Wendy E. Barry notes that “Montgomery’s ability to evoke the landscape, flora, and fauna of her beloved home is one of the greatest strengths of her novels. [She] uses the raw material of her own childhood to create a landscape that has enchanted readers for generations” (“The Geography of *Anne of Green Gables*“ 415). Since Montgomery is drawing from her own childhood, a certain sentimentality is infused into the nature in the novel and Montgomery takes great care with which they are suffused. Her childhood is a time when the author was happy; before she had to concern herself with finances and marriage. Montgomery’s nature descriptions can be found in nearly every chapter of *Anne of Green Gables*, whether they are put forth by Anne, or simply an integral part of the narrative. They are often very decadent, and the ones made by Anne are specifically influenced by myths and fairy tale creatures, such as fairies, nymphs, and dryads. The thought of associating nature with the feminine is an old one, and is something that Montgomery pursued to change, like Margaret Doody states in her Introduction to the novel.

Woman is of the Earth, earthy. She is all dull, dead matter. Man is of the spirit, spiritual [...]. So runs our cultural story. It would be too much to expect any one woman writer to succeed in changing our collective mind. [However] all women who read *Anne* at a young age have within themselves a reassurance that they are spiritual and imaginative beings – but also that they do not have to achieve spirit and imagination by foregoing the dear Earth of their femaleness. (Doody Introduction 23-24)

The character of Anne Shirley is a clear model of how it is not necessary to reject Spirit in order to love Earth. Thus, through her thoughts and actions, she is breaking away from conventional gender expectations and uses her imagination as a way to achieve liberation from the strict pre-conceived ideas of what the society deems as an appropriate, feminine thought. Throughout the novel, the people that Anne encounters, find her to be a strange girl; the reason being that the isolated community of Prince Edward Island is not used to someone completely ignoring the societal norms. In his book *Canada and the Canadian Question*, Goldwin Smith tries to explain the island’s community thusly: “Prince Edward Island is a farming community with rich lands, almost cut off from the mainland in winter, insular in

character, keeping in the ancient paths, and well satisfied with itself” (48). Montgomery portrays the island in exactly this way, but realizes the need for the community’s modernization. Anne does not let herself be pressured into changing to better fit into the community, instead she uses her charms to make the people accept her. In one of Barry’s articles in *The Annotated Anne of Green Gables*, Barry delves into this subject.

At times this sense of tradition reveals itself as a resistance to change. For instance, Marilla keeps her household the way her mother and her mother before her kept it. Anne’s outlandish behavior, like putting flowers on her Sunday hat, upsets the order of Marilla’s life and world: the things that Anne does just aren’t done. (Barry “The Settlers of P.E.I.” 421)

Therefore, Anne is preparing the people for the societal changes that are to come in the next decades, when women had had enough of being silenced and sought independence for themselves. At the turn of the century, there was a crisis in rural areas of Canada, as illustrated by John MacDougall’s book *Rural Life in Canada*. People were increasingly leaving their farms and relocating to larger towns and cities, mostly for education and employment. “One of the most startling surprises given by the recent census [in 1909] was found in the lessened proportion of women in our country homes. The girls are even more dissatisfied with farm life than are the boys, and are leaving in larger numbers” (39). Montgomery, being a female rural Canadian, appears to have been very concerned with this and displayed her opinion, that rural communities need to be preserved, in *Anne of Green Gables* (Cormier 202). This sentiment of the need to protect rural life is heightened by the fact that the numerous gardens that Montgomery describes in her novels are all typical of Prince Edward Island. She does not include a single plant that she has not encountered in her habitat (Doody “Gardens and Plants 434). Montgomery’s descriptions of these gardens are beautiful and emphasize their importance to Anne. Emily Cardinali Cormier seems to be of the opinion that it is by romanticising the rural life, that it can be saved. As a support for this, Cormier points out how Anne reacts to her environment. “From her first moments at Green Gables, Anne shows a heightened awareness and appreciation for her natural surroundings” (203). Montgomery’s heroine is thus a manifestation of the romantic person that could transform Canada’s rural life. In fact, despite winning the Avery scholarship and thereby having guaranteed herself a place at Redmond University, Anne decides to stay in Avonlea. It could be construed that Anne finally adjusts to societal norms and gives up her unusual dreams of an academic career but Emily Cardinali Cormier interprets it differently:

I argue instead that it is a proactive step toward keeping rural Avonlea alive with academic pursuits. [...] Her choice in favor of intellectualism at the end of the novel is an act of defiance to some people in her rural community, but provides a template for other women to do the same, creating the possibility of a more stimulating environment for young women in rural Canada. (206)

Cormier's support for this theory lies in the fact that Anne is committed to continue pursuing her studies, while at home (Montgomery *Green Gables* 421).

Anne frequently gives human characteristics to plants, trees, and places, often imagining them as female because she craves female interaction. In her life, previously from living in Avonlea, Anne has adjusted herself to seek for connections with nature. She dearly loves beautiful landscapes and has created a tradition of naming them. In fact, one of Anne's first actions while sitting in the kitchen at Green Gables, is to think of a name for a potted geranium on the window sill. She explains this tendency to Marilla. "Oh, I like things to have handles even if they are only geraniums. It makes them seem more like people. How do you know but that it hurts a geranium's feelings just to be called a geranium and nothing else? Yes, I shall call it Bonny" (*Green Gables* 49). For Marilla, flowers are messy things but to Anne, they represent the natural beauty and freedom that she has not encountered elsewhere in her life. Throughout the novel, Anne continues to think of names of natural things that she encounters, despite her having made some friends. By making unhuman things anthropomorphic, Anne manages to incorporate them into her imaginary utopia. It is a place where everything is beautiful and sympathetic to her need for kinship. Montgomery does not only create names for inanimate objects, she also changes the names of real places to create a world where it is more natural for women to succeed. Montgomery herself attended Prince of Wales College in Charlottetown, but in the novel, it has been reappropriated as Queen's College (Doody Introduction 14). By feminizing the name, Montgomery has created a place that is empowering to women, and judging by the number of girls that she mentions in her chapter about Anne's winter at Queens, she has been successful.

#### 4. Better Lives through Human Connection

At the end of the novel, the reader realizes that Anne not only uses imagination to better her own life, but also to improve the lives of those around her. Anne “inspires others such as Marilla, Matthew, and Rachel Lynde to find freedom in their mental and emotional states by asserting her individual voice,” as Val Czerny states in her article on the wild consciousness of *Anne* (156). Mrs. Lynde senses the difference Anne has made on Matthew when she states that “[t]hat man is waking up after being asleep for over sixty years” (Montgomery *Green Gables* 277). Czerny interprets this as

Anne, in her desire to be listened to, awakens in Matthew a desire to listen, and a hunger for relationship and interconnectedness that has left him without sustenance for sixty years begins to awaken due to Anne’s presence. (159)

By continually talking to Matthew and updating him on everything that goes on in Avonlea, Anne has gotten him to participate again in the society from which he had withdrawn. The change in Matthew becomes extremely obvious when recalling what is written about him and his home at the beginning of the novel. “Green Gables was built at the furthest edge of his cleared land [...], barely visible from the main road along which all the other Avonlea houses were so sociably situated” (*Green Gables* 4). Matthew also starts out very wary of female individuals, especially little girls. His fear is clearly demonstrated when he first approaches Anne at the train station: “this stray woman-child of whom shy Matthew Cuthbert was so ludicrously afraid” (*Green Gables* 16). At the end of the novel, right before his death, Matthew tells Anne, “Well now, I’d rather have you than a dozen boys” (*Green Gables* 406). He then continues, expressing his newly-found feminist views that boys are not superior to girls. “Well now, I guess it wasn’t a boy that took the Avery scholarship, was it? It was a girl – my girl – my girl that I’m proud of” (*Green Gables* 406). This sweet moment finally relieves Anne of her life’s main worry; not being wanted because she is a girl. It is appropriate that Montgomery lets this happen as the novel is coming to an end, thus making it clear that Anne coming to terms with being female, has been the main concern. By finally getting her redemption, Anne is now free to chase her dreams, relieved of her burden. After Matthew has made his declaration, his purpose in the novel is over and thus, Montgomery has to let him die. This ensures that Anne becomes his inheritor, giving her a permanent home. Montgomery protects Anne’s right to Green Gables by not creating a male interloper that could demand it from her (Doody Introduction 20). Interestingly, before his death, Matthew

becomes the connector between the women of the novel. He makes sure that Anne and Marilla live together in harmony by making Marilla's, often harsh, upbringing methods milder. He displays real sensitivity, as when he gets Anne the dress of her dreams. Thus, he feeds Anne's need for beauty, while Marilla focuses on the practical side. However, Matthew does not become the focus of the story, but remains in a supporting role. As Margaret Anne Doody notes:

[He] does not go upstairs even in his own house, thus living literally on another level from the women, but functioning as their medium of connection. Matthew helps bring them together and make an harmonious narrative where there might otherwise be only friction and separation." (Introduction 27)

It is also important to note that Matthew is the one that makes the decision to let Anne stay at Green Gables, thus putting the novel's premise into action and changing the lives of him and his sister for the better. Matthew's intentions are very kind and he tells Marilla that "we might be some good to her," thus eschewing the societal norm of looking at children mainly as a work force (*Green Gables* 40). This kindness is the reason that he and Anne bond immediately; or in Anne's words, "He is so very sympathetic. He didn't mind how much I talked – he seemed to like it. I felt that he was a kindred spirit as soon as ever I saw him." (*Green Gables* 47) Matthew becomes the first genuine human (rather than an imagination) with whom Anne forges a connection.

Perhaps as a result of her own gender, Montgomery's female characters can never be accused of being one-dimensional; instead being fully formed and multi-faceted. Rachel Lynde, although a Liberal, is Montgomery's main tool in pointing out how conservative beliefs do not necessarily have a place anymore in the society. Montgomery does this with great humor, in order to conceal her irony so it does not offend her readers. As a counterpoint to Rachel Lynde, Montgomery employs the forward-thinking Miss Stacy, who greatly influences Anne.

[Miss Stacy] led her class to think and explore and discover for themselves and encouraged straying from the old beaten paths to a degree that shocked Mrs Lynde and the school trustees, who viewed all innovations on established methods rather dubiously. (*Green Gables* 351-352)

Mrs. Lynde is also of the opinion that higher education should not be available for women, as it fills their heads with nonsense (*Green Gables* 404). She has a rather cynical nature, with

her “we can’t have things perfect in this imperfect world” attitude, but Montgomery makes sure to let her have redeeming qualities (*Green Gables* 338). Montgomery discreetly alludes to the fact that Mrs. Lynde and Anne might be more similar than either of those characters suspects. “Anne is generally considered ‘crazy’ because she talks to the trees and flowers, but if we read more closely we find that she is not the first character in this novel to talk to flowers” (Doody “Gardens and Plants” 436). The other character, surprisingly, is Mrs. Rachel Lynde. After receiving the news that Marilla and Matthew intend to adopt an orphan child, Mrs. Lynde goes home in quite a state and speaks her feelings out loud. “So said Mrs Rachel to the wild rose bushes out of the fullness of her heart” (*Green Gables* 11). She has so many opinions on the matter that she has to share them with someone, even if that someone is simply a rose bush. When Anne does well on her entrance exams, Mrs. Lynde is forced to rethink her values. She tells Anne that she is a credit to her friends and that “we’re all proud of you” (*Green Gables* 367). This sentence implies that Mrs. Lynde might not be as conservative as she is originally portrayed; she just needed someone to prove that women could achieve success that equals those of men. Marilla does not share Mrs. Lynde’s opinions on female education because throughout the novel, she is very supportive of Anne’s academic ambitions. Mary E. Doody Jones explains that with the “Public Schools’ Act, 1877,” education beyond grade school level was finally available for women, since they were now faced with the possibility of becoming teachers (“Education on P.E.I.” 430). Miss Stacy comes to represent this new opportunity for women. “She is thus what Avonlea needs to prepare for the future without making too big a break with the past” (ibid. 433). However supportive Marilla is of Anne’s education, she is also concerned with Anne learning to be a proper housewife. Montgomery thereby makes it even clearer that Anne is a representation of the future, while Mrs. Lynde and Marilla represent the past and its values. Anne illustrates this difference perfectly while talking about female ministers.

[Rachel Lynde] said there might be female ministers in the States and she believed there was, but thank goodness we hadn’t got to that stage in Canada yet and she hoped we never would. But I don’t see why. I think women would make splendid ministers. (*Green Gables* 348-349)

Margaret Anne Doody has this to say about the character of Mrs. Lynde: “Rachel is an emblem of motherhood and female power, of femininity under the old law” (Introduction 26). By now, Mrs. Lynde’s conservative views have been established, but what evidence is there of her being an emblem of female power? To begin with, she has a very powerful and

demanding presence. On the novel's first page, it is settled that Mrs. Lynde keeps a close eye on everything that goes on in Avonlea and "that if she noticed anything out of place she would never rest until she had ferreted out the whys and wherefores thereof" (*Green Gables* 1). Mrs. Lynde is thus portrayed as Avonlea's chaperone and given power by the fact that no one dares to forgo good behavior in her presence. Secondly, she is not defined by her husband; instead, he is called "Rachel Lynde's husband" which implies that she is in charge of the Lynde household, making it a feminine domain (*Green Gables* 2).

Marilla is also depicted as very independent, although she occasionally yields to her brother's wishes. Like Mrs. Lynde, Marilla is not defined by a man and she even tells Matthew to stay out of Anne's upbringing. Marilla has never married and she refuses to allow Anne to call her Miss Marilla. The repeated referral to "miss" would be a constant reminder to Marilla of her marital status, which is something that she does not like to ponder on. Anne argues that it is disrespectful not to use the formal "miss" but by having Anne simply call her Marilla, the reader is led to sense a closeness between the two characters, even before their relationship is fully developed. Unlike Mrs. Lynde who thinks that everything that happens in Avonlea concerns herself, Marilla's domain is the interiors of Green Gables and she makes sure that the house reflects its master. Nothing is ever out of place and it is spotless, almost to a fault. This is also the case with Mrs. Lynde's home. As Gilbert and Gubar state in their ground-breaking work *The Madwoman in the Attic*, it was expected from women to be perfectly virtuous.

Of course, from the eighteenth century on, conduct books for ladies had proliferated, enjoining young girls to submissiveness, modesty, selflessness; reminding all women that they should be angelic. [...] social historians have fully explored its part in the creation of those "eternal feminine" virtues of modesty, gracefulness, purity, delicacy, civility, compliancy, reticence, chastity, affability, politeness [...]. (23)

At the novel's beginning, Marilla expects Anne to also be spotless and a perfect, little girl, adhering to the society's standards. "For a number of women in the later nineteenth century, such chores as patchwork seemed to reflect the abject, futile, repetitive nature of female work." (Doody "Homemade Artifacts" 439) This is a sentiment with which Anne seems to agree when she states "there's no scope for imagination in patchwork" (*Green Gables* 128). Instead, she prefers reading and making up stories. However, Mrs. Lynde is able to let her

imagination shine in her patchwork quilts, displaying a gap between the generations.

Margaret Anne Doody further comments on this divergence between the old and the young by stating Marilla's tastes to be "really the earlier Victorian tastes of the 1850s. [...] There is an undeniable attraction in solidity and dependability. The late-Victorian and Edwardian taste runs to that which is movable, fragile, expressive, bright, and transient" ("Food Preparation" 450). Anne is a perfect representation of the new tastes, valuing beauty over utility.

"Similarly, assertiveness, aggressiveness – all characteristics of a male life of 'significant action' – are 'monstrous' in women precisely because 'unfeminine' and therefore unsuited to a gentle life of 'contemplative purity'" (Gilbert and Gubar 28). Marilla is, at first, focused on reducing those masculine qualities of Anne's. Ironically, Marilla displays those "masculine" character traits herself, like when she tells Mrs. Lynde "When I make up my mind to do a thing it stays made up" (*Green Gables* 89). However, as their relationship develops, Marilla starts to appreciate Anne for who she is, and no longer makes unrealistic demands of her. Marilla also changes herself, due to Anne's influence. She becomes a warmer person and shows affection more readily.

The relationship between Anne and Marilla takes longer to develop than the connection between Anne and Matthew, but eventually proves to be even more rewarding. Margaret Anne Doody speculates that "Marilla recognizes deprivation because of her own, suppressed, knowledge of her personal deprivation" (Introduction 18). Anne's life story stirs up feelings of pity within the stern Marilla with the "starved, unloved life she had had – a life of drudgery and poverty and neglect" (*Green Gables* 58). Montgomery thus offers the reader hope because even though she appears dry and unsympathetic, there is some element within Marilla that suggests a spirit not unlike the one that Anne possesses. Montgomery is very smart in the way that she communicates this to the reader by scattering telling sentences throughout the novel. A couple of examples of this are when it is written that "[s]omething like a reluctant smile, rather rusty from long disuse, mellowed Marilla's grim expression," and after Anne kisses Marilla, the latter experiences "[...] that sudden sensation of startling sweetness" (*Green Gables* 33, 127). Sentences like these become more frequent as Marilla's affection for Anne grows. Marilla has remained unmarried, yet she does not need a man to wake her spirit. It only takes a small, lonely, orphaned girl to open Marilla's heart to the possibility of love and fulfilment. Eventually, it becomes clear that Anne and Marilla, however different from each other they may seem, are "kindred spirits." When Mrs. Lynde

insults Anne by commenting negatively on her appearance, Marilla is able to draw forth from her own memories a similar experience.

She had been a very small child when she had heard one aunt say of her to another, “What a pity she is such a dark, homely little thing.” Marilla was every day of fifty before the sting had gone out of that memory. (*Green Gables* 94).

By possessing this memory, Marilla is able to relate to Anne and the pair start to forge a real connection. In many ways, it is possible to find a parallel between the lives of Marilla and Anne. In the penultimate chapter, Marilla reveals that John Blythe, Gilbert’s father, used to be her beau but that they had a falling out over something trivial. Marilla was too late to forgive him, thereby losing out on romance in her life (*Green Gables* 415-416). Anne learns from Marilla’s mistake and eventually forgives Gilbert for the “carrot incident,” giving the pair a chance to develop a friendship. That friendship ultimately evolves into love in the later books.

## 5. Sisterhood and Female Independence

*Anne of Green Gables* is full of strong female characters. Anne, Marilla, Rachel Lynde, Miss Stacy, and Diana's aunt, Josephine Barry. Diana is not necessarily strong on her own but the way she loves Anne and values their friendship above all else makes her a good counterpart and support for Anne. She plays a big part in Anne shunning men in favour of a real, feminine connection. Anne does not dream of getting married. Throughout *Anne of Green Gables*, Montgomery repeatedly introduces the reader to unmarried women, most of whom are content in their spinsterhood. Anne seems to have an unusually modern view on the need for marriage as a result. The focus of Anne's imagination is connection to other females, the wish to form a real bond with someone that has the same feminine identity as she does. The most important quality that someone can have in the eyes of Anne is thus the quality of not be dependent on a man. As Cheri Register points out, "[t]his function is particularly crucial in children's literature" (qtd. in Eagleton 171). Montgomery seems to be aware of this need to show young women early on that they need not rely on men. She even lets Anne state that "Diana and I are thinking seriously of promising each other that we will never marry but be nice old maids and live together for ever" but as it turns out, Diana has some doubts about this and still fantasises about a traditional marriage (*Green Gables* 332).

In Diana, Anne has found the real-life manifestation of the friends that she has hitherto only met in her own mind. They perfectly complement each other: Diana's pragmatism manages to slightly ground Anne's flighty imagination while Anne helps Diana by challenging her and pushing her boundaries. Diana, with her jet-black hair and rosy cheeks, possesses classical beauty of the kind with which Anne has always been fascinated (*Green Gables* 81). Even Diana's name reveals a connection with an inherent femininity and as Doody explains, names are very important in *Anne of Green Gables*: "The novel alerts us throughout to the meaning of names, for Anne is so conscious of them," as has been previously pointed out (Introduction 28). Diana and Anne love each other dearly, and confirm their feelings multiple times in the novel. "'I love you devotedly, Anne,' said Diana staunchly, 'and I always will, you may be sure of that.' 'And I will always love thee Diana,' said Anne, solemnly extending her hand" (*Green Gables* 184). In her article concerning Montgomery, friendship, and sexuality, Laura M. Robinson delves into the way that Montgomery focuses on deeply loving female friendships.

[...] Montgomery represented herself as seeking out and deriving great sustenance from her female friendships. This emotional intensity, and the often flamboyant descriptions of the affections, both physical and emotional, emerged from a society that generally encouraged this style of female friendships. (171)

Montgomery herself was used to declaring passionate love for her female friends, in the same way that Anne and Diana do. However, in Canada between 1890 and 1930, there was a great shift in the ideologies of female friendships with lesbian women becoming more prominent in the society. Montgomery established herself as inherently heterosexual but expressed that she got her emotional sustenance from her female friends (Robinson 170). This view is echoed in the character of Anne. After her collision with Gilbert Blythe, Anne is of the opinion that friendship with boys is not worth pursuing. Instead, she devotes all her attention into deepening her bond with her female friends and derives great joy from the intimate bonds she manages to forge.

However, Montgomery is not successful in the creation of all the novel's characters. The characters that come closest to being simple and constructed with stereotypical aspects are Anne's school sisters, Jane Andrews, Ruby Gillis, and Josie Pye. It is possible to understand those characters as simply being created to highlight Anne's virtues. For example, Jane is very materialistic, Ruby thinks of nothing but boys and marriage, and Josie is the typical mean girl. Montgomery makes Anne's virtues much more obvious by placing Anne among those girls. Anne comes from humble beginnings so she is used to not focusing on material wealth, she knows that women's main goal in life does not have to be marriage, and her refusal to sink to Josie's level reveals her kindness. The most unsuccessful character is Josie because she never becomes fully realized. Her only purpose in the book is to act as a foil to the character of Anne. Josie is also the only person in the novel that does not have redeeming qualities. The materialistic Jane is, for example, a very honest person, and Ruby's joy for life is contagious. Josie is purely portrayed negatively.

Anne is the manifestation of Montgomery's dreams because Anne is allowed to, successfully, distance herself from the usual fate of the unwanted orphan, a feat that Montgomery herself failed to manage. Unlike Anne, Montgomery did not inherit any property and was therefore very concerned with finding herself a future home. Her solution was to get married and so she became engaged to a young minister by the name of Ewan

Macdonald. “The association with Ewan offered a new chance in life, and her engagement to him in the summer of 1906 relieved her anxieties about a future as a penniless old maid” (Doody Introduction 16). However, the marriage turned out to be an unhappy one, prompting Montgomery to insert content spinsters in her novels to deter other women from making her mistake. “In her journals of the time Maud’s private discussions of Ewan’s qualities are uncompromisingly cool” (Doody Introduction 16). Gilbert can thereby be seen as having been created as a manifestation of Montgomery’s dreams of a man who is her equal. Anne does not accept Gilbert as a possible husband out of need; she does it out of love. Anne even denies his proposal at first, because she has not yet realized her feelings towards him so it is not until she has completed school and become herself an independent person, well capable of providing for herself, that she accepts marriage. Montgomery does not want Anne to fall into the traps of the society’s conventions, like she herself did. Anne is also a representation of ambition, a trait that Montgomery highly valued. “Anne is an ardent scholar, with a love of knowledge for its own sake and a strong competitive streak. She competes successfully against Gilbert” (Doody Jones “Education on P.E.I.” 433). Montgomery does not allow Anne’s gender to minimize her ambition; in fact, she makes sure to mention that Gilbert has to immerse himself fully in his studies to keep up with Anne (*Green Gables* 340). This offered a refreshing role model for young, female readers at the beginning of the twentieth century, proving to them that ambition and a passion for knowledge is not something only reserved for boys. By reading books where the protagonist was an assertive girl with a thirst for knowledge, female readers were encouraged to nurture those qualities in themselves. Montgomery allows Anne to be the manifestation of her own ambitions, as Doody Jones remarks: “Unlike her author – or Gilbert – Anne does not have a break in her education [...], and she achieves everything a shade earlier in life than her author did” (“Education on P.E.I.” 433). Anne is not wavered on her path to seek education until she has achieved her goal of becoming a school teacher. Even then, she does not give up her ambitions; they are only put on hold while she helps Marilla. “Anne has been a model for several generations of women because she expresses the twentieth-century woman’s desire for education, for a fair salary, and for professional status” (Doody Jones “Education on P.E.I.” 434). Montgomery has then to such a degree created a role model for young women that she lacked while in her youth.

In many ways, *Anne*’s author disguised her societal judgement with the fact that she was writing a children’s book. “It is evident from the manuscript that Montgomery takes particular care with the use of the word ‘child,’” especially in the earlier sections of the novel

when Marilla has not yet accepted her (Doody Introduction 19). This intentional exclusion of the word is because Anne has not really been allowed to have a childhood up to that point and Montgomery wants the reader to be aware of that fact. It is not until Marilla has decided to allow Anne to stay at Green Gables, that the old woman starts thinking of Anne as a vulnerable child. Montgomery does not shy away from including the dark sides of life in her children's book, which is perhaps why *Anne* has been beloved by the readers for so many years. The novel's heroine is quite optimistic, but by including themes such as death and poverty, the author shows them to be an integral part of life. Anne has faced hardships but they do not consume her. After Matthew's death, Anne feels guilty for being able to enjoy life again and confides in the minister's wife, Mrs. Allan. She advises Anne that this guilty feeling is normal but that Matthew would have wanted Anne to feel happiness (*Green Gables* 412-413). Montgomery does not want to make the novel's moral too obvious, but by having Anne grow up in front of the readers' eyes, they ultimately learn the same lessons as Anne does. Montgomery has thus avoided the usual custom of putting a sermonizing moral formula into her novel and the lessons the novel offers are therefore more gratifying to the readers. Montgomery is in many ways a rebellious author, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar think is to be expected.

The woman writer – and we shall see women doing this over and over again – searches for a female model not because she wants dutifully to comply with male definitions of her “femininity” but because she must legitimize her own rebellious endeavours. (50)

For Montgomery, that female model is Anne because she is not defined by her family, since she has none. Anne is a fully formed person, free from a strict adherence to Victorian values; instead taking her cues from nature and literature. The theme of writing can be strongly felt in the *Anne* novels, especially in the third book, *Anne of the Island*, when Anne gets a story of hers published (Montgomery *Island* 293). It takes Anne a long time to develop her own voice as an author and she has a particular difficulty in parting with the haughty characters of her childhood. Throughout the first novel, Anne refers to literary works that she admires and knows by heart. Most of those works are by male authors, such as Walter Scott, Lord Byron, John Greenleaf Whittier, and of course Alfred, Lord Tennyson. In fact, many of the poems that Anne refers to are about the difficulties that Scottish immigrants faced when they arrived in Canada, mimicking Anne's own immigration to Avonlea. These poems are often very dramatic but when they are put in contrast with Anne's often humorous mishaps, they

become less formal. Anne tries her hand at writing her own stories where the noble characters suffer horribly but it is not until she puts the focus on things she knows, like nature and the people of Avonlea, that she becomes successful. Montgomery uses the development of Anne to work through her own issues of the difficulty of being a female author, the plight on which *The Madwoman in the Attic* reflects extensively.

Thus, the “anxiety of influence” that a male poet experiences is felt by a female poet as an even more primary “anxiety of authorship” – a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a “precursor” the act of writing will isolate or destroy her. (Gilbert and Gubar 48-49)

Montgomery’s own writing style is very distinctive and she makes sure to let Anne’s search for her own authorial voice, echo her own process of developing as an author.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that even though *Anne of Green Gables* is a children's novel, its author, L.M. Montgomery, did not treat it as such during its writing. She does not shy away from difficult subjects and lets her heroine, Anne Shirley, prove that it is possible for early twentieth century women to get redemption from the patriarchal society. Anne goes against the conventions by using her subtle feminist values and her distinct imagination to navigate through her new community. Ultimately, Montgomery's story is about an unwanted person finally finding her place in the world; a feat which Montgomery herself did not find easy. The novel is also a sentiment of how much one person can influence the life of another, as Anne does for Marilla and Matthew. By looking at the importance of imagination to create a safe haven and a better life, this thesis has drawn the conclusion that Anne would not have been able to survive without creativity. The focus of nature within the novel reveals a certain romanticism towards rural life, yet it also serves as a comment upon femininity. Anne's independence has served as an inspiration for multiple generations to not buckle under societal pressure, but rather encourages young people to search for their purpose and place. Lastly, the novel stresses the importance of mutually respectful friends. *Anne of Green Gables* still enjoys popularity; and rightly so. Anne teaches young readers to value honesty, friendship, and most importantly, imagination.

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