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Staying True to You:

Finding the Feminist in *Anne of Green Gables*,
Anne of Avonlea and *Anne of the Island* by L. M.
Montgomery

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Abstract

Anne Shirley, the girl and young woman made famous around the world by L. M. Montgomery in the early twentieth century, has been a companion and role model for countless young women. In this essay, my aim is to analyze the first three books about Anne, *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), *Anne of Avonlea* (1909) and *Anne of the Island* (1915), to see in what way it can be said that Montgomery wrote these novels as a feminist coming-of-age novel, a female Bildungsroman. I have identified four sections, in which I explore different aspects of feminism and the way they are represented in the text. I have found the novels to be feminist in many ways, the main focus being on the way in which Montgomery has used a subtle kind of feminism to show readers that rather than adapting to fit into the world, the world should change to fit you.

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Introduction

Anne of Green Gables by L. M. Montgomery was first published in 1908 and to this day remains one of the most popular books for young readers (Åhmansson; Lindgren; Blackford; Rubio; Trimmingham Jack). The novel, and its seven sequels, portray the life of an orphan girl who is adopted by an elderly sister and brother, even though they had originally sent for a boy from the orphanage. Anne Shirley, the orphan in question, has charmed readers since her arrival in Avonlea with her vivid imagination, her creative use of language, her propensity for getting into trouble and her constant ambition to better herself and strive for greatness. At the time of the novel's publication girls and young women in Canada were very much subjected to rigid and confining strictures on how to behave and look (Moran 51). The prime object in raising a girl was that she be a good girl, pious, decorative and an accomplished housekeeper. However, as the reader gets to know Anne Shirley, it is obvious that she does not easily conform to these ideals, nor does she apparently want to, and it is perhaps for this very reason that this headstrong girl, who lets her imagination play such a big part in her life, has been a major influence for many girls and young women for over a century now.

Strong female role models are important for a girl growing up to become a woman, but up until 30-40 years ago the male was the prevalent study object in literary criticism. With the start of the feminist literary criticism movement came the study of literary works featuring female protagonists, among them *Anne of Green Gables*. Although the novels about Anne Shirley were first published in the early twentieth century, there has been recurring interest in her ever since, both within the academic field and popular culture field. There have been multiple movies made about Anne; musicals have been put up; TV miniseries and movies have been produced as well as a Japanese anime version and several cartoon remakes. In 2017, Netflix aired a new series, *Anne with an "e"*, with a third season coming up presently. The centennial anniversary of the publication of *Anne of Green Gables* in 2008 brought much new attention and research, often with focus on the impact the novel and some of its sequels may have had on their readers.

Montgomery wrote altogether eight novels about Anne, and another three where Anne plays a lesser part. For this essay I have focused on the first three in the series as these follow the heroine from childhood, through adolescence to early adulthood. In *Anne of Green Gables* Anne first comes to Prince Edward Island as a girl of eleven and the readers follow her through the next five years, as she becomes an integral part of the society she lives in and the lives of her adoptive parents, Marilla and Matthew Cuthbert. She excels in school and

goes on to attend Queen's Academy, a teachers' college. In *Anne of Avonlea* (1909) Anne puts off any further education after Matthew has died and Marilla risks losing her eyesight. She makes use of her teacher training and works as a teacher in Avonlea. Finally, in *Anne of the Island* (1915), Anne is free to pursue her dream of a university degree by going to Redmond College in Kingsport.

I aim to study the three first novels in the Anne-series together, as a coming-of-age novel. As I find ample evidence that these first three books about Anne Shirley in Avonlea and away at college challenge the traditional gender stereotypes of the time, I will argue that the studied novels can be read jointly as a feminist coming-of-age novel and show how Montgomery has written Anne Shirley in a way that positions her as an important feminist role model. There has been much research done on *Anne of Green Gables*, but I have not found any research that follows Anne all the way through finishing her education. As Anne's education is an important part of what I consider to be feminist with the Anne-series, I aim to fill the research gap by examining these three novels together.

When reading works of literature from a feminist point of view, the focus is often on finding the obvious difference in how women are depicted in relation to men and what gender role stereotypes are presented in the text. A useful definition of feminism for this essay has been Temma F. Berg's: "If we define feminism as belief in a woman's power to change the world that threatens to confine her, then Anne Shirley and the books that tell her story convey a subtle but revolutionary feminism which has empowered generations of young girls" (128). This is what I aim to show to the readers of this essay.

One question I aim to answer is how Anne conforms to the ideals of femininity present in early twentieth-century Canada and in what ways she does not. Another question is what instances of gender role stereotypes can be found in the texts and how Montgomery treats them. I will divide the discussion into four parts, dealing with four different aspects of being a feminist role model by challenging gender role stereotypes. The first part will deal with how it is perfectly possible to be happy although you do not conform to the prevalent ideals. The second part of my discussion will describe how a strong society of women can be used as a feminist way of gaining more control in life and society. The third part will focus on how domestic work is presented in the text. As the home has been the sphere of the woman it has also traditionally been valued as less important but I will argue that giving value to the domestic is also a feminist standpoint. Finally, I will shed light on how Montgomery shows

her readers that a woman does not have to choose between intellectual pursuits, the domestic world or a love of beautiful things.

Staying True to You – Ideals and Not Meeting Them

The period between childhood and early adulthood is an important period in regard to what role models are available, which is one of the main reasons why role models who challenge the stereotypes are vital during this time in a person's life. As Eve Kornfeld and Susan Jackson put it “[b]y observing and imitating, adolescents try to forge a sense of self, usually by integrating aspects of the culture to which they are exposed” (69). Starting in the nineteenth century, female readers became the major part of the reading public after authors like Louisa May Alcott started writing books for women, about women and by women, as Kornfeld and Jackson point out. They claim that this is the time period when the female Bildungsroman came to be a prevalent fictive form, following the earlier traditional Bildungsroman featuring a male protagonist (69). Although *Anne of Green Gables* was written slightly later, Kornfeld and Jackson refer to the novel as one of the female Bildungsromans of the time, which I concur with. *Anne of Green Gables* is set in the late Victorian era, even though it was published in the Edwardian era. This was, as previously mentioned, a time when girls and women were subjected to rigorous demands on how to act and look. A woman was supposed to be concerned mainly with the private sphere, taking care of the home and the children. The major goal for a girl, when growing up, was that she should become an accomplished homemaker so that she could attract a husband and start her life as a wife and mother.

In many ways, *Anne of Green Gables* and its two first sequels are not apparently feminist at first glance. Indeed, literary scholar Perry Nodelman even went so far as to say that “*Anne of Green Gables* is one of the most definitely sexist books I know of” (qtd. in Weiss-Townsend 109). I do not agree with this; rather I argue with Berg that “[t]he power of *Anne of Green Gables* may indeed come as a result of the subtle pervasiveness of its feminism” (125). Rereading the books as an adult, Berg realized that while she had read and loved *Anne of Green Gables* as a child she had missed the feminist message. As an adult she could see it clearly, although she found it to be written in a subtle way. This subtle way of writing feminism into the folds of the novels is what has been my main find as well. Instead of the requested boy, the young orphan girl, Anne Shirley, comes to Avonlea, and we then follow her struggle to fit in while still remaining herself and coming to terms with the

sometimes suffocating ideals of femininity. She gives much thought to how good life would be if only she were pretty. She dreams about beautiful dresses with puffed sleeves and tries very hard to be a good cook. Despite this, I believe the main feminist angle is the subtle way Montgomery lets the reader know that conforming to these ideals is not as important as you would think. She also shows us that it is not Anne who changes to fit Avonlea, but rather Avonlea that changes when Anne shows them another way, much in line with Berg's thoughts on feminism.

Christiana R. Salah has also recognized that "the ideal of the domestic goddess was no laughing matter in the Victorian era" (193), and she claims that the importance of Montgomery's writing lies in how she treats Anne's failure to become the ideal woman, the Angel in the House. "No matter how hard Anne tries, she is incapable of conforming to her era's feminine ideal – and, far more unusually, the narrative likes her that way" (194). When it is apparent that Anne does not easily meet the ideals, it is of no great consequence, as Montgomery writes it. Rather it is suggested to the reader that it is the ideal that is unimportant. Marilla, Matthew and the rest of Avonlea come to love her in spite of her failures. Susan Drain also suggests that some books about orphans, like *Anne of Green Gables*, show how an orphan coming to a new place is not only changed, but also changes the place she comes to. Drain claims that in the novel that "both the stranger and the community are changed by their contact with each other. Adoption, in short, means adaptation" (119). This is very clear to me and in line with Berg's thoughts. Anne is also very successful, in all three books, in reaching the goals she sets up for herself in regards to education and having her writing published, which is a way of showing the readers that other measures of success are available than the traditional ones.

Judy Simon points out the fact that in the late Victorian and the Edwardian era, there were still many books for girls that reflected very orthodox ideas about what a girl should be and act like, but according to Simon, readers of this time were also "exposed to memorable characters who chafed against authority and deviated from the prescribed path for their gender" (146). Typical "tomboy" characters like Jo March, from Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1869), were introduced to the readers. These girls rebelled against the ideas that they should be submissive, gentle women whose sole purpose was to be decorative. They wanted to do what their brothers or cousins or other men of their age could do. I argue that Anne Shirley is not a typical tomboy in the same way that, for example, Jo March is. Anne does not rebel in the explicit way of wanting to be a boy. She still places value in traditionally female

things like clothing and cooking, or rather aspires to fit in with the other girls in respect to these things. What Anne does, however, is challenging the gender norms by firmly stating that she can do both. She can long for dresses with puffed sleeves and aspire to be able to cook for family and friends. But at the same time she does not even stop to think about aspiring for prominence in her studies, seeing nothing wrong or different about her ambitions of being top of her class and winning scholarships. Considering that women had only had access to higher education for a generation or two in the time when the first books about Anne were published, according to Gunilla Lindgren (27), I think that the kind of confidence and ease with which she assumes her place at the top of the class is just the kind of quiet strength that has been so important as a behavior for young girls to model.

Even though Anne never quite conforms to the image of the ideal Victorian woman, Montgomery does present examples of girls who manage to meet the ideal. For example, Anne's bosom friend, Dianna Barry, is certainly much more of an example of the stereotypical feminine ideal with her good looks, pretty clothes and cooking and homemaking skills. Yet it is Anne who is presented as fun and interesting. In *Anne of Green Gables*, Anne's classmate and perfect little girl Minnie Andrews is upheld as an ideal and rejected:

‘I’ll try to be a model pupil’, agreed Anne dolefully. ‘There won’t be much fun in it, I expect. Mr Phillips said Minnie Andrews was a model student and there isn’t a spark of imagination or life in her. She is just dull and poky and never seems to have a good time [...]’
(114)

Another example of how perfection is rejected, is how the narrative treats Davy and Dora, the young twins that Marilla adopts in *Anne of Avonlea*. Davy, a boy with mischievous qualities very similar to Anne's, is given much attention and becomes one of Anne's favorites. His sister Dora, on the other hand, is a perfect little lady in all instances, but she is also depicted as rather dull and lifeless. I would not go so far as to say that Montgomery shuns all that is stereotypically female, but she certainly gives all the fun to those who are not. I argue that even with the case of Davy being given a much greater part in the novels and in Anne's affection than Dora, it is not his gender that brings him prominence, rather that he does many of the things that Anne herself did when first coming to Avonlea. Anne, now older, can see the things she did wrong as a child, but still maintains that life is more interesting when you live it like Davy and she does.

One of the problems of writing a coming-of-age story with a female protagonist in the early twentieth century, according to Gunilla Åhmansson, lay in the fact that there were few desirable choices for the ending of the story. As she puts it, “[i]n a quest plot which

featured a female hero in search of “Bildung” any ending which would mean self-realization as an individual would eventually be subordinate to the marriage solution” (73). Despite this being a very real problem for Montgomery, I claim that one of the things that would appeal to a female reader is that Montgomery actually pays very little attention to the marriage solution in these three first books about Anne. Certainly, Anne admits her love for Gilbert Blythe by the end of *Anne of the Island* and they marry in a later sequel. However, Anne and Gilbert have a relationship based on mutual respect and Gilbert many times puts her wellbeing before his. One example of this is in *Anne of Green Gables*, when he gives up his teaching position in Avonlea so that Anne may take it up instead (Montgomery 251). Anne also receives several marriage proposals from other men. In *Anne of the Island* she has a long relationship with the perfect man, Roy Gardner. He is rich, handsome and perfectly pleasant. However, when he finally proposes Anne turns him down, realizing that she does not love him. After refusing Roy, Anne reflects: “It was her hour of humiliation and self-contempt and shame... And yet, underneath it all, was a queer sense of recovered freedom”. She tells her friend Philippa (Phil): “I want someone who *belongs* in my life. He doesn’t” (226). Anne’s refusal might have been quite remarkable to many early readers, but it is a good way of showing an independent female role model who marries because she wants to, not because it is expected of her. Reasonably, it is fairly obvious when reading the books that Gilbert is Anne’s true love and there never seems to be any real risk that she would have accepted Roy’s proposal.

The way Montgomery depicts the many spinsters in the three first books in the Anne-series is also a way of showing “different” female role models. Kornfeld and Jackson point out that “by the late nineteenth-century, about ten percent of all American women were spinsters; in the Northeast the percentage may have been twice as high” (72). In the light of this they place great importance on the many spinsters depicted in the female Bildungsromans of the late nineteenth century and the way these spinsters were portrayed. Rather than being depicted, as was the case in American culture in general, as: “bitter, disillusioned, or unfulfilled” (72), the spinsters portrayed in these female Bildungsromans were often major influences in the lives of the heroines. They were also a big part of the societies they lived in as well as mentally and financially independent. In line with this, I believe Montgomery has contributed greatly to the wellbeing of spinsters by presenting spinsterhood the way she does. In *Anne of Avonlea* she introduces Miss Lavendar Lewis, a middle-aged woman living in the dreamy Echo Lodge, alone but for the company of her female servant and friend Charlotta. Miss Lavendar was in her youth in love with a man, but after a misunderstanding they parted

ways. She then made the conscious decision not to fall in love again and now leads a happy life in solitude. In *Anne of Green Gables* Anne also meets her friend Diana Barry's aunt Miss Josephine Barry, a wealthy spinster who lives her life in perfect happiness, being able to manage her own life. Anne almost immediately recognizes a kindred spirit in Miss Barry and they maintain a strong bond throughout Miss Barry's life. In *Anne of the Island*, when Miss Barry dies she leaves a sum of money to Anne, which enables her to finish college without having to postpone her graduation by having to work to acquire sufficient funding (135).

Miss Stacy, Anne's teacher in *Anne of Green Gables*, is also an important role model for Anne and for the readers of the novel. She is another example of the happy spinster who has given her love and attention to her pupils instead of to children of her own. Her importance also lies in the fact that she showed the young reader a possible occupation, whereas the other spinsters mentioned do not have a career in the same way. Being a teacher was one of the few occupations available to young women who did not marry in this time, and showing both Miss Stacy and Anne in this occupation would have set a good example for young women aspiring to a career. Not all spinsters would have had the luxury of living a life in wealth like Miss Josephine Barry.

In *Anne of the Island* Anne meets the spinsters Miss Patty and her niece Miss Maria, when she and her friends rent their house, Patty's Place, for the two last years of college. Miss Patty and Miss Maria let out their house because they have decided to travel to Europe. As a challenge to the gender stereotypes of the time I think all four of these examples of happy spinsterhood could have been influential in lessening the fear a young woman might have felt at the concept of not being able to find a man willing to marry her. Again Montgomery scrutinizes the ideal and shows the reader that even though she might not get married there is ample chance of happiness. She also brings up the fact that age must not be a hinder to living, as the misses Patty and Maria prove by going to Europe in their seventies and fifties, respectively.

Of course, when discussing spinsters from a feminist, gender-challenging perspective it would be neglectful not to mention Marilla. However, the stereotype-challenging aspect of Marilla, I believe, is not her spinsterhood, but rather how she is portrayed as a woman with stereotypical manly traits. The way both Marilla and Matthew Cuthbert are depicted by Montgomery challenges the stereotypes of traditionally male and female traits. Marilla is a no-nonsense, strict, rather harsh woman. She wears her hair tightly pulled back, fastened with two pins and prefers dresses without frills. Showing tenderness and affection is hard for her

and it is not until the end of *Anne of Green Gables* that she grudgingly admits to Anne that: “I love you as dear as if you were my own flesh and blood and you’ve been my joy and comfort ever since you came to Green Gables” (244). Matthew on the other hand, is much more of a feminine character. He has long flowing hair, is shy and gentle and is the nurturing mother figure that Anne has been missing all her life. In *Anne of Green Gables* it is Matthew who is instantly charmed by this “interesting little thing” and says to Marilla about Anne that, “I kind of think she’s one of the sort you can do anything with if you only get her to love you” (45). Matthew is also the one who persuades Marilla to let Anne have the dresses with the puffed sleeves she so intently longs for. Kornfeld and Jackson argue that the portrayal of men like Matthew in this way is actually a sign of contempt for the “traditional masculine qualities” (74). I disagree with this, since the gender stereotype-challenging aspects of Matthew’s and Marilla’s personalities are more important by showing readers that both a “feminine” man and “masculine” woman are possible. The way Montgomery treats the relationships between Anne and Matthew and Marilla, respectively, indicates that she wished to emphasize the importance of both to Anne, and which person that catered to which need was of secondary importance. I strongly feel that playing with traditional stereotypes in this way is a good way to loosen the constraints placed on women and men alike. If there are only stereotypical representations then it is presumably much easier to feel different.

Angela E. Hubler has done research on how a sample of teenage girls in America in the twenty-first century responded to several classic children’s books, *Anne of Green Gables* being one of them. One of the girls in the study said about Anne:

[E]ven though all these bad things happen to her – she’s always gettin’ herself into trouble – she kept being the way she was...They realized at the end, you know, how she had talked, how she really annoyed’em at the beginning with all her big words... but they saw at the end that she hadn’t really changed. They were the ones that had changed and had gotten used to her and I just thought that was neat that she would, you know, stay the same. (274)

This quote sums up much of the feminist message to young girls and women in *Anne of Green Gables*, and its two first sequels. If you persist in being true to yourself, the world might realize that it is not you that must change, but rather it might be time to revise the ideals.

Girl Power - the Value of Strong Female Relationships

When growing up, finding out who you are and where you belong in the world are amongst the most important, and hardest, things to do. Susan Drain claims that “[f]inding one’s rightful place in the social fabric is part of the challenge of growing up, and as such, it is an important focus of many books for and about children” (119). This is certainly the case in *Anne of Green Gables*. When Anne comes to Prince Edward Island and to the community of Avonlea, it is to a society that is made up of predominately strong women. At least, those are the ones who seem to play major roles in Anne’s life. Berg goes so far as to suggest that “[i]n many ways Avonlea seems to be a town of Amazons” (127). This strong matriarchal society of Avonlea is, I believe, another feminist point made by Montgomery. The way Montgomery has set up a society of strong women is especially compelling when considering that real women in this time usually had to defer to the opinions and wishes of men. In Avonlea, the matriarchal society consists of women like Marilla Cuthbert, who is certainly the one in charge in the Green Gables household, and Marilla’s long time friend, Mrs. Rachel Lynde, who clearly is a more prominent figure than her husband. Indeed, we learn about Mr. Lynde in *Anne of Green Gables* that “Avonlea people called him ‘Rachel Lynde’s husband’” (8). Given that, even today, it would be considered more common for Rachel to be known as Mrs. Thomas Lynde than Mrs. Rachel Lynde, this has to have some implications as to who wears the proverbial pants in that household. Other important women include the minister’s wife, Mrs. Allan, Anne’s teacher Miss Stacy and Diana’s mother Mrs. Barry. Besides the older women, there are many young women throughout the three books, whom Anne forms close bonds with.

As previously discussed, Kornfeld and Jackson bring up the concept of the “female Bildungsroman” as a name for coming-of-age stories featuring a female protagonist and her path from childhood through adolescence to adulthood. In their analysis of *Anne of Green Gables* and other nineteenth-century and twentieth-century novels by female writers with female protagonists, they pinpoint how one aspect of the female Bildungsroman is that it often depicts a matriarchal society, a kind of “feminine utopia”. The authors of these novels “assumed a power of womanhood not usually found in contemporary American society, and used it as a structure in which a girl could learn to survive, by assimilating the proper values” (70). This is in line with what Montgomery does by crafting Avonlea as a society where women play a major role and Anne becomes an integral part. When doing this Montgomery

gives hope to young female readers by showing them a world where women have more power than was common, thereby giving these readers something to aspire to and aim to achieve.

Valerie Murrenus Pilmaier argues that it is obvious that Anne takes great pains in gaining the acceptance and approval of the women surrounding her. She claims that if there are proper values that one can learn, there must be a community within which these values can be practiced. In order to thrive within such a community there is a necessity to “cultivate relationships with other people” and it is obvious that Avonlea is a community in which “the important relationships are actually those between Anne and the other women” (150). This is in line with my thoughts on Anne and the bonds she has with other women in all three novels, from the strong women of Avonlea in *Anne of Green Gables* to her girlfriends at Queen’s Academy and at Redmond College. Anne thrives because she has the support and love of these women; they are her backbone and constant support. As Murrenus Pilmaier states “the notion of the primacy of women’s relationships as a locus of intimacy and as necessary to female emotional health has its roots in feminist theory” even going so far as to say that “women do not simply enjoy relationships with other women, but need them in order to survive” (150). I believe that it is reasonable to say that Anne draws on the many female relationships that she has through the novels, and achieves happiness and success through them. Kornfeld and Jackson say of the books about Anne Shirley that an “emphasis on the “bonds of womanhood” permeated the novels” (71). Coming to Avonlea as an orphan, never having belonged anywhere, it is vital that Anne gains the favor of both the older women and the younger. It is symptomatic of this that one of the first things she accomplishes in *Anne of Green Gables* is securing Diana Barry as her “bosom friend”. Anne tells Marilla: “A bosom friend – an intimate friend, you know – a really kindred spirit to whom I can confide my inmost soul. I’ve dreamed of meeting her all my life” (53). Most of her success in life in the three books also comes from the relationships she has with other women.

Considering the time the books were written in I agree with Kornfeld and Jackson that this “power of womanhood” was not at all as common then, as it would seem to be today, and therefore challenged the stereotypical society and the distribution of power. As a forerunner to a term like “Girl power”, that was first coined 1960s and made widely popular in the 1990s, it could be argued that Avonlea’s kind of matriarchal society served as an inspiration for women wanting more power than they had. The natural way in which women, both young and old, take place in society and not just in the sphere of the home is important for young female readers. The way Montgomery shows the reader that happiness can be

achieved by strong female relationships is also a way of showing that women are strong together and can achieve goals together that would not be possible without these relationships. Kornfeld and Jackson claim that the matriarchal culture of these female Bildungsromans would have given girls access to the “freedom of development they would not have found in a male world” (74). I agree with this and also feel the importance of this matriarchal utopia to later readers, where the possibilities were and are greater.

Murrenus Pilmaier suggests that it is necessary for Anne’s survival that she manages to appease the other women in Avonlea, focusing on the ruin that would follow should she not manage this. I feel that this is not a real threat as Montgomery has written it, however. Admittedly, the very real threat to Anne when coming to Avonlea is that she would be sent back to the orphanage if she did not manage to gain the acceptance of Marilla. However, whenever Anne makes an initial botch up of the relationships with the other women she always gets a second chance. As an example of this, the first meeting between Anne and Rachel Lynde ends horribly. Mrs. Lynde hurts Anne by speaking of her lack of good looks as if she were not there to hear it and Anne replies by insulting Mrs. Lynde back. This was not at all the way a girl was supposed to behave and Marilla is appalled, forcing Anne to apologize to Mrs. Lynde. When Anne does apologize, she does it so well that she charms Mrs. Lynde and brings her forever to Anne’s side.

Similarly, the first time Anne meets Miss Josephine Barry she accidentally jumps on the sleeping Miss Barry’s bed in the middle of the night. In the light of day, however, Anne and Miss Barry recognize each other as kindred spirits and embark upon a life-long friendship. The value of these two examples from Montgomery, I believe, is that she gives young women the courage to own up to their mistakes. When something goes wrong initially, Anne always manages to correct the mistakes by being honest and placing blame where blame is due. The interesting thing is that it is seldom only Anne that is to blame when things go wrong, and Montgomery never lets Anne take full blame, as even the adults in question readily accept their part in the mishaps.

Children of the early twentieth century, no matter their gender, were not normally given the freedom of speech that Anne enjoys (Rubio 69) and even if all children were required to behave well it was considered something extraordinary when a girl misbehaved. In the classic novel *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë, that was published 60 years before *Anne of Green Gables*, this is illustrated by the schoolmaster, Mr. Brocklehurst: “‘No sight so sad as that of a naughty child’, he began, ‘especially a naughty little girl’” (32). The way

Anne gains the respect of her elders ought to have been an inspiration to the readers, learning that if one owns up to one's mistakes good things can happen. Showing that a girl can misbehave and own up to it is again Montgomery's subtle way of challenging gender roles; not only boys can misbehave and children in general should stand up for themselves.

In the early twentieth-century Canada, the economic power normally lay with the men. A common way of acknowledging this in fiction was that the authors often wrote in a "male benefactor who distinctly improves the situation" (Kornfeld and Jackson 71) often avoiding the issue of having to admit that the power was usually with the man by leaving them absent. The fathers in books like Margaret Sidney's *Five Little Peppers* (1881) or Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1869), for example, are dead or away at war and only make an appearance after it has been made clear that the women could cope perfectly well without them, according to Kornfeld and Jackson. This is not the case in the novels I am discussing here. Certainly, Anne's father is dead and Matthew dies in the end of *Anne of Green Gables*, but even when Matthew is alive he is not the one in charge. Even though nominally he does have the economic power in the family, he squanders all the Cuthbert's money by placing it in a bank that goes bankrupt, thus leaving Marilla to sort things out after he passes away. There is, as mentioned above, a benefactor that helps Anne finish her college degree, but Montgomery has made this benefactor a woman, namely Miss Josephine Barry, the wealthy spinster aunt of Dianna Barry. It is also Marilla who pays for Anne's earlier education. So in her novel, Montgomery truly gives women characters even the economic power that women typically lacked in real life.

Upgrading the Value of the Domestic

When discussing the domestic sphere in the early twentieth century there was sometimes a feeling that the domestic was somehow less important, since it was the domain of women. Maintaining a home and household was not considered as important as an academic career or a profession. Perhaps this early lack of importance came from the fact that it was women who were in charge of the domestic world. I suggest that what Montgomery managed so well in her novels is giving value to the domestic aspects of life, even as she is pointing out the benefits of education. Even though Anne challenges the traditional gender norms, Montgomery has still left much value in the domestic. In that way, I argue, she gives strength to those women who believe strongly in equal rights for women, but also enjoy the domestic part of life.

According to Monika Hilder, who has studied the way domesticity is presented in *Anne of Green Gables*, Anne both “articulates woman’s “rightful sphere” as mistress of the hearth, maternal keeper of kith and kin within the “narrow” parameters of the home” and is “socialized into appropriately feminine housekeeping skills”. On the other hand “Anne’s socialization occurs alongside strong encouragement for her ambitious academic and literary goals” (211). Hilder mentions the debate within academic research about the Anne-series as to whether female domesticity should be seen as either “patriarchal repression or female liberation” (212). She points out that whereas domesticity would have been a very natural part of life to the writers of Montgomery’s day, today we tend to have a more either/or view of domesticity and “some critics rigidly value domesticity as a lesser form of labour” (213). I believe that, both to contemporary and modern readers, the way that domesticity and academic ambition exist simultaneously are an important message. Kornfeld and Jackson state that the major part of the reading public in the nineteenth century was made up of women and claim that the genre “commonly known as domestic fiction” (69) was immensely popular to these female readers because it depicted life that they could relate to, within the home. Even though it is apparent to a modern reader that life in Avonlea is very different from what most modern readers encounter on a daily basis, the nurturing aspect of Anne’s interest in domesticity is something many could relate to. The way Anne takes pride in taking care of her friends and her family is also something many might aspire to. Instances of this vary from when Anne without hesitation postpones going to Redmond College in order to stay at home and help Marilla on the farm when her eyesight is in peril, the way she is the confidante of Miss Lavendar and helps her find her long lost love, and the way she sits with her dying friend, Ruby Gillis, helping her find peace before meeting her maker. Cooking is also an example of how Anne uses domestic skills to please others; the instances in which we find Anne cooking are almost always when she wants to impress someone, whether it is Mrs. Allan or Diana. She might not initially be a homemaker, but when she has learnt to cook she enjoys treating friends and family to things that taste good and make them happy. The feminist importance of Anne’s nurturing domestic side lies in that Montgomery shows us that nurturing can be a choice that gives something back to the giver, rather than something that should be forced on all women.

In that respect it is interesting that it is Matthew who shows Anne that nurturing and selflessness can be a way of life and that she learns from his ways and assimilates them into her own. As Hilder puts it “Matthew’s domesticity is kindred to Anne’s sentiments because

he values aesthetics and imagination” (220). Matthew also values Anne for her imagination and flowery language, something Marilla finds hard to do initially. By nurturing Anne’s innate qualities, both the emotional and academic ones, he shows Anne that she can be whatever she wants. By writing Matthew and Marilla the way she did, Montgomery shows the readers that there is a need for all kinds of people, and that the traits traditionally applied to men and women respectively might well be switched round. Most importantly in this regard, she shows us that the nurturing aspect of the domestic is vital. I agree with Hilder in that Anne’s wellbeing in the early days in Avonlea would not have been possible without Matthew’s nurturing. When Marilla questions in *Anne of Green Gables* why they should keep the girl orphan by asking “[w]hat good would she be to us?” Matthew calmly answers “[w]e might be some good to her” (30).

Hilder concludes by stating that not only might *Anne of Green Gables* be read as a story of female empowerment but, moreover, one of human empowerment (223). I concur; throughout the books there are recurring instances of the power of relationships and nurturing. Nearly everything good that happens to Anne is because of her ability to find kindred spirits in the people she meets. Her relationships with Diana, Miss Stacy, Mrs. Allan, Gilbert Blythe, Miss Lavendar, Miss Barry and the girls in Kingsport all have huge impact on her wellbeing. It is apparent to the readers, I argue, that Anne gets what she wants because she is so well liked by so many.

I do feel that Montgomery has written the books in a way to suggest that there is a choice in becoming a wife and mother. Anne chooses to admit her love for Gilbert and chooses to reject her other suitors in *Anne of the Island*. As Weiss-Townsend points out, Anne is not caught up in the romantic adoration that has been a common way for girls to react to the men they love. Rather she has romantic admiration for Gilbert and uses her admiration for him to compete on equal terms academically (111). In the same novel, Anne’s college friend Phil chooses to become a minister’s wife. Phil is a mathematical genius and top of her class. She comes from wealth, is beautiful and has multiple suitors; she has only to decide whom to marry. She could have chosen an easier life for herself, but I believe Montgomery sends a message with her choice. Phil falls in love with a man who wants to be a minister and realizes that the brain that she uses for mathematics might just as easily be used for homemaking saying “don’t you think that the brains that enable me to win a mathematical scholarship will also enable me to learn cooking just as well?” (172). In this way, Montgomery shows that it is not only those women who cannot do anything else that choose the domestic. It would have

been easy to write Anne and the other strong intellectual girls as completely shunning domestic work. But Montgomery shows the readers that even Phil, who clearly excels in her education, still values the domestic aspect of being able to be a good minister's wife when she marries. For many girls growing up I think it is good to see that the domestic is something you can take pride in even if it is not your primary interest. Of course, the ideal for a feminist would be that men and women take equal parts in housework, but for those of us who actually like housework it is good to have that represented in fiction as well.

Head, Heart and More – It Does Not Have to Be a Choice

Today, education is often an obvious choice for women in societies where this is possible. Most women in the society I live in would never even think of having to choose between education and domestic life, neither between enjoying beautiful, frivolous things or pursuing an intellectual goal. However, as Åhmansson points out, as late as the 1970s there was still a feeling that education was just something women did before they became wives and mothers (115). We have come further today, but there is still reason to consider the value of Anne's education as a feminist statement, especially in regards to its impact in the time closer to the novels' publication.

In the early twentieth century, there was still a strong debate surrounding women's right to education and the effects education would have on the women. Among other things it was claimed that if a woman was educated she lost her femininity, became unwomanly and unfit to be a wife and mother (Åhmansson 118). Birgitta Berglund outlines how the women that did receive further education were thought to risk destroying their "youthful bloom and undermine their health" (4). Berglund goes on to state that the belief was that "[t]hose 'strong-minded' women who did succeed without any apparent ill-effects, on the other hand, must have been very masculine to start with, or they had turned themselves into some kind of half-men in the process" (4). As a challenge to this stereotypical image of the female student in the early twentieth century, this is an important feminist point as well. Anne never loses herself; she still enjoys beautiful clothes, female friendship and good health, as well as the domestic comforts of Patty's Place and Avonlea. Again, Montgomery subtly shows the reader that it is not Anne who must change to fit into college life. An interesting aspect is that it is actually Gilbert who undermines his health by studying so hard in his final year at Redmond that he almost succumbs to typhoid fever. Again, Montgomery turns the table on stereotypes.

Even though Anne's wish for education is never considered as anything but normal to those closest to her, it is obvious that people in Avonlea question her choice. Mrs. Lynde, Mrs. Barry and several others question what good could come out of her education. However, Montgomery once again subtly disregards these comments by placing them in the mouths of people who are known to be narrow-minded. The people who mean anything to Anne, like Matthew, Marilla and Gilbert, for example, never regard Anne's education as anything but a certainty. Reading about how Anne thrives in her educational efforts would have been very important as a gender-challenging role model; women can and should have an education, as Anne does. Gunilla Lindgren also points out that in the time when the Anne series was published only the lucky few had the chance to be "directly involved in academic studies, and few people could realize the impact that higher education would eventually have on society and women's position" (11). It is important to recognize the impact it would have on girls reading about Anne, giving them a glimpse of what college life could be like. Since there was skepticism as to whether a young woman should strive both for an education and motherhood, for example, I think it would have been a feminist statement from Montgomery to create Anne the way she did. Anne never loses sight of the importance of the dualities in life. Education is important, but so are the nurturing domestic aspects and the love of imagination and beautiful things. Anne chooses to shift between academic ambition and domestic life seamlessly. For example, when Matthew dies at the end of *Anne of Green Gables* and Marilla's eyesight is in peril, Anne stays home in Avonlea instead of continuing on her academic path. However, she is very clear in that it is a choice, not something that is forced upon her. I also believe she puts great value in being able to care for Marilla, somehow reimbursing Marilla for not returning Anne to the orphanage. "She had looked her duty courageously in the face and found it a friend – as duty ever is when we meet it frankly" (248). Anne tells Marilla that she is not giving up her academic ambitions by stating, "I'm just as ambitious as ever. Only, I've changed the object of my ambitions" (249). As another example, Anne is frequently asked to recite poetry or speak at different events and even though great value is placed on the intellectual achievement Montgomery many times describes what Anne is wearing.

Mary Jeanette Moran has also studied the duality that women suffered in the choice between being a feminine, nurturing, good girl or pursuing intellectual goals. She refers to the poem *The Angel in the House* (1858) written by Coventry Patmore, in which woman is described as morally superior but inferior to men in most other ways. Moran suggests "one of

the messages of *Anne of Green Gables* is that young women should no longer find it necessary to choose between the pursuit of individual achievement and the responsibility of maintaining relationships, for a carefully trained mind enables one to behave ethically towards others as well as oneself” (62). This goes in line with the aforementioned idea of the importance of relationships. All through her college years Montgomery shows us that equally important to Anne’s education are the strong relationships to Stella, Philippa and Priscilla, the girls she shares Patty’s Place with. When Montgomery writes of all the fun Anne has, the pretty dresses she wears, the balls she goes to, but also highlights the successful academic pursuits of the girls, she is making an important point to young female readers. You do not have to choose; you can have fun, enjoy beautiful things and still be an avid student. Lindgren refers to the dichotomy of heart and head; men were seen to be mainly ruled by the head and women by the heart (136). However Montgomery and other writers of college fiction challenged this view in the early twentieth century, according to Lindgren. This false dichotomy is a good summing up of how Anne and other young women students challenged the stereotypes once again; head and heart and much more is possible for women. Writing about Anne’s education the way Montgomery did has surely inspired many young women to pursue an academic path, never fearing that they would have to change to fit the academic world, rather the academic world would have to change to accommodate them.

Conclusion

Having analyzed *Anne of Green Gables*, *Anne of Avonlea* and *Anne of the Island* from a feminist perspective I believe it is possible to say that L. M. Montgomery has written a heroine that has managed to be gently feminist in a way that still has relevance today. Firstly, she shows the reader that ideals exist but it is more often the ideals that are faulty than the women who do not conform to them. Being true to yourself might actually lead to the environment adapting to you, rather than you having to change to fit its demands. Secondly, Montgomery shows us that a concept such as girl power existed in writing before it was a reality, which I believe served as an inspiration to the readers of the time. Building and maintaining strong relationships with other women empowers a woman and helps her take greater place in society. Thirdly, Montgomery gives value to the domestic aspects of life that were often the major part of women’s life in the early twentieth century. By showing that the domestic was a valuable arena, she grants power to the women who as yet had no other option than domestic life. Finally, by showing Anne as a strong, highly intelligent girl Montgomery

lets her be a feminist role model for those wanting more than the domestic. Even so, she lays no blame on those women who choose marriage and children, but rather points out that these desires are not mutually exclusive. Neither does it have to be a choice between being beautiful or having a sharp wit.

Anne comes to Avonlea, and rather than Anne changing to fit the people of Avonlea, it is the world of Avonlea that changes in reaction to Anne. It is this, and the choice of rather universal aspects of coming-of-age, that have made the first three books about Anne Shirley into an early feminist Bildungsroman. Montgomery has given readers many different aspects of childhood and adulthood that have combined to show that imaginativeness, nurturing care, intelligence, beauty and a sense of duty all combine to make Anne Shirley into a feminist role model for many generations past and many to come. As a final note, I believe it would be interesting to analyze the rest of the books in the Anne-series to see how Montgomery writes about Anne's life as a wife and mother from a feminist perspective.

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