

GENDER STUDIES

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**GROWING UP AS A GIRL IN EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY  
CANADA (BASED ON LUCY MAUD MONTGOMERY'S  
*ANNE OF GREEN GABLES*)**

*Anne of Green Gables* is subcutaneous in us all.  
Margaret Atwood

Drawing legions of readers from all over the world, Lucy Maud Montgomery's writing has retained its popularity from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century up until the present day and age. Her "simple little tales" of girls growing up in rural Canada provided a unique glimpse into social realities of the time in addition to Maud's personal life and her own struggles. By examining her *Anne of Green Gables* series (1908-1942), this paper aims to highlight some culture-specific aspects of the female experience in Canada, as well as define other aspects which may turn out to be more transcendent and universal, shared by (and relatable for) women in different countries.

Born in 1874, Canadian writer Lucy Maud Montgomery found herself growing up in the small town of Cavendish on Prince Edward Island, characterized by breathtakingly picturesque scenery and tight-knit village communities. She was raised by her grandfather Alexander Marquis Macneill and grandmother Lucy Ann Woolner Macneill, and while there were many uncles and aunts and cousins in the family, L.M. Montgomery did experience her fair share of loneliness and abandonment. Her mother died when she was extremely young, and her father left soon thereafter to look for a better job and more lucrative career opportunities. In fact, it was Maud's relationship with her father that created the deepest sense of loss and the most powerful dream of togetherness. Years later she wrote, "I loved my father very very much. He was the most lovable man I ever knew" [6, p.16]. This longing for a real family, for love and understanding was something that she struggled with throughout her whole life.

Maud had a fierce determination to be happy, even as a child who had tasted tragedy young. She loved to laugh and be "merry" – one of her favorite words. She had a genius for finding the fun in every situation. When there was no company, she invented it – in the form of her imaginary friends, and in the natural beauty all around her. She was especially fond of trees, and gifted them with names and personalities. In her book *Looking for Anne of Green Gables*, Canadian scholar Irene Gammel notes, "Maud believed that literature should engage with the real world by transforming negative realities. Never should her reader's pleasure be spoiled by the fact that some of the cheeriest episodes in *Anne* were sparked by the darker side of life. Indeed, Maud's losses and disappointments fueled her imagination into high

gear, transforming bleakness into hope. That transformation, or the elevation of existence to a higher level, was part of what drove her writing” [2, p.40].

In the novel *Anne of Green Gables*, the main character – Anne Shirley – bears a lot of similarity to young Maud. Despite being an orphan, Anne strives to find beauty and joy in everything around her, which is evident from her exalted cry: “Don’t you feel as if you just loved the world on a morning like this? And I can hear the brook laughing all the way up here. Have you ever noticed what cheerful things brooks are? They’re always laughing. Even in winter-time I’ve heard them under the ice” [3, p.44].

Maud considered Cavendish the most beautiful place on earth, claiming, “I was very near to a kingdom of ideal beauty” [6, p.24]. Cavendish was used by L.M. Montgomery as the setting (Avonlea) for her novel *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) and its sequels. The Green Gables farmhouse (her girlhood home) is a tourist attraction, and Montgomery is buried nearby. While initially built by her relatives during the 1830s, the farm now functions as a museum and as a literary landmark. The building was refurbished to resemble Green Gables as depicted in Montgomery’s novels.

As Maud would later assert in her memoir *The Alpine Path*, there was never a time when she did not remember writing. However her life was not as simple as it may appear from the outside. When her grandmother got sick, Maud was forced to stay with her and take care of her if she wanted to keep her childhood home. Otherwise, her relatives threatened that they would take the house away from them. So Maud was stuck there – in Cavendish, at her sick grandmother’s bedside, for more than ten years. And she found refuge in her imagined world, which appeared to be more lively and real than the cold, harsh reality she was faced with.

The sense of belonging, the sense of community and acceptance were values deeply entrenched within the spirit of Prince Edward Island and ones that manifested themselves most vividly in *Anne of Green Gables*. An orphan from Nova Scotia, abandoned and neglected by everybody she had ever known, Anne arrives to Avonlea hoping to find a safe haven, a new family and a life full of joy. Anticipating her adoption by Matthew and Marilla Cuthbert, Anne exclaims: “Oh, it seems so wonderful that I’m going to live with you and belong to you. I’ve never belonged to anybody – not really” [3, p.18]. And it is all the more heartbreaking for her to learn that Marilla and Matthew were looking for a boy to help them around the house. Bitterly disappointed, Anne cries: “You don’t want me because I’m not a boy! <...> Nobody ever did want me” [3, p.33].

This theme of women and girls struggling to find their place in the world, feeling unwanted and abandoned by everybody, feeling like an incomplete human being just because of being a woman had become quite prominent in L.M. Montgomery’s works. And it’s something that Anne has to deal with very early on. Not only is she a girl who has to occupy space intended for a boy, but she is also an outsider, a cultural code-breaker, a creative individual who is markedly different in her way of thinking from the majority of people living in Avonlea. “Anne,” like Maud, wanted to be valued in spite of the fact she was a girl” [7, p.50].

Anne does find ways, however, to rejoice and to adapt and to enjoy nearly every aspect of her life in Avonlea. By highlighting the importance of friendship, literature, culture, school, various community activities in the life of a young girl, L.M. Montgomery asserts that there will always be something worth cherishing and something worth putting one’s mind toward. Anne organizes a Story Club with her friends, performs at concerts, and is generally portrayed

as a remarkable and hard-working student. Her ambition is partially fueled by her desire to upstage her school enemy Gilbert Blythe, however this academic rivalry is endowed with positive connotations and pushes Anne to achieve better results.

Friendship plays one of the central roles in the novel. Looking to connect with people who would understand her, Anne finds herself on the constant lookout for ‘kindred spirits’ – of which there are few, but it is exactly those treasured few people that play the biggest role in Anne’s development as an individual, as a friend and as a writer.

“Oh, if it were not for my dreams I would go crazy!” Maud noted in her journal on Saturday, February 20, 1904. “In them I can be as adventurous and ... triumphant as I wish, while the world around me is a prison to the body” [2, p.40-41]. By making Anne a daydreamer, Maud was drawing on her own daydreaming habits and alluding to the creative method that would fuel the novel.

Contrary to many popular sentimental novels of the time, the heroine’s life is not centered around romance. While she is fascinated by poetry and strives to create her own stories of love, life and death, marriage isn’t the end goal for the heroine. In fact, by rejecting the probability of marriage at the very beginning of the novel, Anne metaphorically “frees” herself from the confines of a typical sentimental novel and from there on out is free to do as she pleases. What’s especially valuable in L.M. Montgomery’s writing is her showing that a young girl’s life can be vibrant and joyful and challenging and full of all sorts of different experiences – filled with friendship, creativity, hobbies, adventures, and the like.

M.H. Rubio notes that Montgomery’s “story” extends beyond the impact of her books. In a 20<sup>th</sup>-century society still dominated by patriarchy, she was one of the forces convincing young women that they could have careers in many different professional fields (such as medicine and law), opening new vistas for them [7].

After winning a prestigious university scholarship, however, Anne decides to reject it and stay with Marilla at Green Gables instead. Seeing as her caretaker has grown old and weak after Matthew’s death, Anne realizes that Marilla needs her help now more than ever – and that she’s inevitably going to feel lonely in a big old house if Anne decides to leave. This has led to some critics calling the novel antifeminist, but I would argue that it’s ultimately about the woman’s ability to make her own choices – which, as we know, wasn’t really a common occurrence in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The fantasy of two women owning a home together and making their own decisions without men’s interference is something that L.M. Montgomery could never achieve in her own life and something that she dreamed about while caring for her grandmother.

Upon rejecting her scholarship, Anne goes on to work as a teacher at a local school, which was one of the very few career paths actually available to women. She thus becomes the primary breadwinner in the home and the only one with a stable income, which means she is able to provide for both Marilla and herself, and later – for the twins adopted by Marilla after the death of her distant relative. It is one of the many instances of L.M. Montgomery’s subtle play with gender norms and societal conventions: while her novels generally seem to uphold the status quo and promote traditional social values which were particularly important in a Victorian society (with most heroines eventually getting married and going on to have kids), for those who wish to bypass convention and stand out from the crowd she does provide subtle ways to do so.

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Some examples of L.M. Montgomery's "subtle but revolutionary feminism" (T. Berg) include but are not limited to:

1) Describing the possibility of becoming a mother without getting married and/or giving birth (e.g. Marilla Cuthbert adopting Anne from an orphanage, and later adopting twins Dora and Davey after their parents' death).

2) Promoting the importance of women receiving proper education and going on to make a living for themselves (e.g. Anne and her college friends working a full-time job as teachers).

3) Outlining the possibility for a woman to leave her job and pursue her dreams (e.g. Anne's colleague Katherine Brooke verbalizing her innermost struggles in *Anne of Windy Poplars*: "The truth is, I hate teaching ... and there's nothing else I can do. A school-teacher is simply a slave of time. <...> Anne, I want to travel. It's the one thing I've always longed for. <...> I want to see the Southern Cross and the Taj Mahal and the pillars of Karnak. I want to *know* ... not just *believe* ... that the world is round" [5]).

4) Depicting a fantasy of two (or multiple) women owning/renting a home together (as seen in the case of Anne and Marilla owning *Green Gables*, or Anne and her friends renting a house during their college years), which essentially means creating a safe female-only space. (This experience is most vibrantly described in *Anne of the Island*: "How those girls enjoyed putting their nest in order! As Phil said, it was almost as good as getting married. You had the fun of homemaking without the bother of a husband." [4])

In her novels, L.M. Montgomery aimed to provide reassurance and support for women who viewed self-fulfillment and professional growth as their priorities. This was particularly valuable in a world full of rigid social conventions and prejudices against women, and I believe it is safe to say this is one of the reasons that her books remain popular to this day.

When visiting Cavendish in 2019, Princess Takamado of Japan said that Canada and Japan are 'kindred spirits.' According to her, "The novels of Ms. Montgomery have managed to capture the imagination of so many people around the world and *Anne of Green Gables* has continued to give hope and encouragement to many." To honour the occasion, the princess celebrated the official opening of Montgomery Park and a new statue dedicated to L.M. Montgomery [1].

In conclusion, L.M. Montgomery's works continue to be powerful examples of "women's writing" in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Canada, providing encouragement and inspiration for girls and women all over the world. While *Anne of Green Gables* may appear to be a relatively traditional 'coming-of-age story,' the author's subtle play with gender norms and societal conventions allows her to introduce contemporary and progressive ideas directly related to women's emancipation, by delicately interweaving them into the fabric of the novel and sending subtle messages to those who are able (and willing) to decode them.

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