
Spirited Singles: Re-reading Femininity in Anne of Green Gables

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Lucy Maud Montgomery's classic novel, *Anne of Green Gables*, has captured the hearts and imagination of Japanese readers for over half a century, and its appeal endures to this day. This paper explores how the text can be used as a teaching resource to facilitate critical readings of gender issues, and three single female characters are presented as examples of Montgomery's strong, female-centered world. The author posits that the novel offers many interesting teaching possibilities for a gender classroom—such as the Cuthberts' unconventional family structure, the subversion of gender roles seen in Marilla and Matthew's parenting responsibilities; and the dissimilar valuing of boy/girl children in adoption practices—and advocates for further research on interdisciplinary textual analyses of classic children's and young adults' literature.

ルーシー・モード・モンゴメリの『赤毛のアン』は、日本の読者の心と想像力を半世紀にわたって掴み、その魅力は現在でも健全だ。本稿は、このテキストがジェンダー問題の批評的読解を促す教材として使えること、すなわち三人の独身女性の登場人物たちがモンゴメリの強力な女性中心の世界を示す例として提示されていることを論じるものである。筆者は、この小説がジェンダーを教える授業の可能性——たとえば、カスバート家の型にはまらない家族構成、マリラとマシューの子育てにおけるジェンダー逆転、養子に際しての男／女の価値不均衡——をしめすだけでなく、児童文学や青少年向け文学の古典を学際的に精読するためのリサーチを奨励するきっかけとなることを願うものである。

Key Words: Gender, Singleness, Canadian Studies, Literature

Introduction

Growing up in Prince Edward Island, Canada, it is impossible to sidestep the omnipresent influence of Lucy Maud Montgomery's literary legacy and her most celebrated novel, *Anne of Green Gables* (1908).

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As children, we read the *Anne* series in English classes and sang songs in choir from Canada's longest-running stage production, *Anne of Green Gables—the Musical*; as young adults we drove cars with Anne's face emblazoned on the provincial license plates and took summer jobs in a tourist industry thriving on lobster suppers, Celtic ceilidhs, and *Anne* tourism—the last of the three geared with particular enthusiasm at visitors from Japan.

Anne of Green Gables—known as *Akage no An* to Japanese readers—was first introduced in Japan

in 1952 (translated by Hanako Muraoka), along with other children's literature such as Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* series, as part of an effort to "give hope to young readers in Japan as they rebuilt their devastated nation" (Kajihara, 1999, p. 434). The spirited nature of Montgomery's protagonist has inspired generations of Japanese readers since its introduction, and "*Anne of Green Gables* has been perennially popular among both children and adults. It has never been out of print, nor have its sequels; and new editions for children and adults are set to be published" (Akamatsu, 1999, p. 205).

As a gender scholar, I never imagined that I would become reacquainted with—or interested in—the classic novel of my youth. And yet, as an Islander teaching in Japan, I have found myself continuously urged to incorporate the book in my syllabi. This year, in a twist of fate, I was assigned a North American Literature course and decided to re-read Montgomery's first novel: to my delight and surprise, *Anne of Green Gables* proved to be the perfect text for my class—a classic piece of Canadiana as well as an ideal resource for teaching gender topics.

***Anne of Green Gables* as a Gender Studies Resource**

Anne of Green Gables is the story of an eleven-year-old orphan child named Anne Shirley, who gets adopted by an aging duo named Marilla and Matthew Cuthbert. The Cuthberts own and manage a farm called Green Gables in the fictional town of Avonlea, Prince Edward Island, and decide to adopt an orphan boy to help Matthew with the physical labor required on the farm. Much to their surprise, a mistake is made while procuring the child from Nova Scotia, as the orphanage had been told they wanted a girl instead. While Marilla initially considers correcting the mistake and replacing Anne with an orphan boy, she decides to keep her when she learns of the child's difficult past and sees the girl's heart set on a future at Green Gables; furthermore, Matthew is enchanted by the girl from the moment he meets her—a rare happenstance for this perpetually shy farmer—and he plays advocate for the tribulation-prone Anne

throughout the novel. In this way, it is set up early on that Matthew will be the nurturing parent and Marilla the disciplinarian—a reversal of conventional gender roles in which women are expected to be caretakers and men figures of authority.

Even more significantly, Anne's new guardians are not a married couple. Marilla and Matthew are, in actuality, sister and brother, and neither of them has ever married. The two of them function as partners in the running of the farm and farmhouse, and seem quite content in their companionable living arrangement. As Virokannas (2011), in her thesis on "The Complex Anne-Grrrl: A Third Wave Feminist Re-reading of *Anne of Green Gables*," argues:

Marilla and Matthew's relationship as siblings makes them in some ways more equal than a married couple.... [Marilla] can be seen as economically independent, not dependent on her brother's charity or in need of a husband. Moreover, being a capable woman with a strong will she can easily be seen as the dominating figure in the Green Gables household instead of the shy, quiet, withdrawn Matthew.... The Cuthberts' family structure, made up of siblings as adoptive parents, not husband and wife and the adopted child, lacks 'the dualistic family values of hierarchy and coercive authoritarian control' and is resistant to the patriarchal 'essential family form' i.e. the heterosexual, two-parent family, which is 'in conflict with feminist values.' (p. 20-22)

As we can see, the general premise of the novel offers many interesting teaching possibilities for a gender classroom: unconventional family structure; subversion of gender roles; gender socialization; and dissimilar valuing of boy/girl children. There are various ways that this text—and other children's literature classics such as *Little Women*, *Pippi Longstocking*, or *The Secret Garden*—could be utilized as a resource for critical reading in gender studies courses, and I propose that *Anne of Green Gables* has particular value in the way it positions and esteems the role of women in the running of the community, and in the way they "support, direct, and serve Anne

as models throughout her life” (Berg, 1992, p. 160). In particular, I will focus on three single female characters from the book who play significant parts in Anne’s moral, educational, and cultural upbringing: Marilla Cuthbert, Muriel Stacy, and Josephine Barry.

Miss Marilla Cuthbert

Marilla was a tall, thin woman, with angles and without curves; her dark hair showed some gray streaks and was always twisted up in a hard little knot behind with two wire hairpins stuck aggressively through it. She looked like a woman of narrow experience and rigid conscience, which she was; but there was a saving something about her mouth which, if it had been ever so slightly developed, might have been considered indicative of a sense of humour. (Montgomery, 1942, p. 5)

Marilla Cuthbert is, certainly, the most important female role model as Anne’s adoptive mother and guardian. Although she often comes across as stern, particularly in the earlier parts of the novel, there is little doubt that she falls quickly under Anne’s spell and grows deeply proud and fond of her young protégé—not that she will often tell her so, however. We see evidence of this in her conversation with Matthew, after Anne’s successful oration at the school concert:

“Well now, I guess our Anne did as well as any of them,” said Matthew proudly.

“Yes, she did,” admitted Marilla. “She’s a bright child, Matthew. And she looked real nice, too. I’ve been kind of opposed to this concert scheme, but I suppose there’s no real harm in it after all. Anyhow, I was proud of Anne tonight, although I’m not going to tell her so.”

“Well now, I was proud of her and I did tell her so ‘fore she went upstairs,” said Matthew. (Montgomery, 1942, p. 217)

Marilla’s strict deportment, nevertheless, is not emblematic of a lack of caring or concern for her ward. In fact, Virokannas presents Marilla’s style of parenting as feminist as she calls upon women in the community for guidance and advice in mothering

Anne, a style of child rearing that welcomes “othermothers” (p. 22). Interestingly, other Avonlea women—such as Mrs. Lynde, Mrs. Allan, and Mrs. Barry—offer suggestions for mothering Anne, which Marilla adopts or ignores as she sees fit, but it is never implied that Marilla, as an unmarried woman, is less than capable of parenting Anne. As single mothers are frequently marginalized in society, this distinction seems noteworthy. Other examples of Marilla’s feminist parenting are seen in her continued participation in activities she did prior to the adoption—evidence of a life of her own beyond the newly-acquired role of mother—and in her (and Matthew’s) dedication to Anne’s education:

“When Matthew and I took you to bring up we resolved we would do the best we could for you and give you a good education. I believe in a girl being fitted to earn her own living whether she ever has to or not. You’ll always have a home at green gables as long as Matthew and I are here, but nobody knows what is going to happen in this uncertain world, and it’s just as well to be prepared.” (p. 258)

As a guardian, respected community leader, and independent woman, Marilla provides an excellent example to Anne of what she can accomplish as a strong—and single—woman. Most importantly, she is able to provide Anne with what she wanted most in life—a home and a family.

Miss Muriel Stacy

She led her class to think and explore and discover for themselves and encouraged straying from the old beaten paths to a degree that quite shocked Mrs. Lynde and the school trustees, who viewed all innovations on established methods rather dubiously. (Montgomery, 1942, p. 269)

Miss Stacy is another significant single woman in Anne’s world. Although she is described as young and ladylike, her unmarried status seems to be of little concern to the community, and she is able to teach and inspire her students without any matchmaking interference from the Avonlea townspeople. Like

Marilla, Muriel Stacy is aware of the value and importance of education—for her female students as well as the males—and decides to create and run an advanced study course for Avonlea students planning to continue with their studies at Queen's Academy. Anne and six of her classmates join the "Queen's Class," but her best friend, Diana, is denied this experience as "her parents did not intend to send her to Queen's" (Montgomery, 1942, p. 259). The Barry family's decision to not enroll Diana in the course underscores the progressive view of the Cuthberts, as it would have been common in the early 1900's for young Prince Edward Island women to be directed towards marriage and domestic responsibilities rather than education or career training. However, as single women themselves, Marilla Cuthbert and Muriel Stacy would certainly recognize the value in acquiring a teaching certification.

The text itself can be exploited to draw out further commentary on feminist issues such as women and education or work. Anne's questions and comments on the world around her offer us interesting viewpoints on gender (in)equality, and give instructors various ways into teaching points for a gender class. Take, for instance, the following excerpt where Anne describes to Marilla her classmates' motivations for joining the Queen's Class:

Jane and Ruby are just going to study to be teachers. That is the height of their ambition. Ruby says she will only teach for two years after she gets through, and then she intends to be married. Jane says she will devote her whole life to teaching, and never, never marry, because you are paid a salary for teaching, but a husband won't pay you anything, and growls if you ask for a share in the egg and butter money. (Montgomery, 1942, p. 244)

Thanks to Miss Stacy's thorough guidance and support, Anne passes the entrance exam at the top of the list. Muriel Stacy's influence on Anne's development as a scholar and as a young woman is profound—she helps her harness her remarkable imagination and sets her on a path that leads to her own successful teaching career.

Miss Josephine Barry

Miss Barry was a rather selfish old lady, if the truth must be told, and had never cared much for anybody but herself. She valued people only as they were of service to her or amused her. Anne had amused her, and consequently stood high in the old lady's good graces.... "I thought Marilla Cuthbert was an old fool when I heard she'd adopted a girl out of an orphan asylum," she said to herself, "but I guess she didn't make much of a mistake after all. If I'd a child like Anne in the house all the time I'd be a better and happier woman." (Montgomery, 1942, p. 251)

The final strong, single woman that deserves consideration is Josephine Barry, the unmarried, elderly great-aunt of Anne's best friend, Diana Barry. While the reader's first impression of "Aunt Josephine" is one of a cantankerous old woman, it is quickly revealed that Miss Barry is another of Anne's "kindred spirits." Not only does she act as a cultural mentor to Anne and Diana when the girls visit her in Charlottetown—offering a glimpse into a world beyond that of rural Avonlea—Miss Barry eventually becomes Anne's benefactor when she leaves her one thousand dollars in her will (in the third novel, *Anne of the Island*). This inheritance makes it possible for Anne to continue her studies at Redmond College, acquiring the advanced training that would offer a young woman a career and financial independence.

Josephine Barry, although depicted as somewhat selfish and difficult, is not seen as pitiable or lacking as an unmarried woman—in fact, no accounting of her singleness is given in the novel. As it happens, within the *Anne of Green Gables* series, single female characters are seen in abundance, and rather than being portrayed as "cautionary tales" for young readers, their lives are presented as very satisfactory. Moreover, many *Anne* scholars note that the central relationships in most of the Anne stories are largely those between women, not between men and women, the more conventional heteronormative narrative that female readers tend to encounter (see Berg, 1992; Gay, 1992; and, Rothwell, 1999). As Gubar (2001, p. 53-54) writes:

Numerous critics have noticed how insistently Montgomery stresses the importance of female community in her novels. Carol Gay, Gabriella Åhmansson, K. L. Poe, Eve Kornfeld, and Susan Jackson all note Montgomery's habit of setting up "matriarchal utopia[s]" in place of more traditional family configurations (Åhmansson 142). Offering, in Phillipa's words, "the fun of homemaking without the bother of a husband," havens like Patty's Place fleetingly fulfill Anne's childhood fantasy that she and her friend Diana "will never marry but be nice old maids and live together forever" (*Anne of the Island* 117), and the cheerful aunts, merry widows, and charming spinsters who inhabit Anne's world serve as role models for other young women interested in the allure of unmarried life (*Green Gables* 315-16).

Thus, Miss Barry's role as a cultural mentor and benefactor plays a significant role in Anne Shirley's life, and the reader is given yet another positive example of female singleness in Aunt Josephine Barry.

Concluding Thoughts

In this paper, I have presented a different "lens" through which we can read the classic Canadian novel, *Anne of Green Gables*. As this book holds great appeal to a Japanese readership, I would argue that it would be a welcome addition to many of our classroom settings in Japan. It is my hope that this type of study may open up possibilities for other educators interested in exploiting texts for critical readings of gender issues to pursue a re-visiting of other texts, too. Together, we may find that there are unlimited resources available to us that will helpfully bridge literary studies, gender studies, language studies, and many other fields of research.

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