

# Satire, Realism, and Imagination in *Anne of Green Gables*

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It is interesting to speculate on what aspects of *Anne of Green Gables* have brought forth such a continually favourable response from so many people of varying ages and locales, with different degrees of literary sophistication. Certainly, this first novel by L. M. Montgomery put Prince Edward Island on the North American literary map.<sup>1</sup> Published by the Page Company in New York in 1908, the novel was an instant success: 10% royalties of the first six-month's worth of sales brought Montgomery \$1,730--no small figure then. By 1930 it had been translated into French, Dutch, Swedish, and Finnish and had sold well over a million copies. Conceived as an adolescent novel, *Anne of Green Gables* surprised its author by appealing to young and old alike. In her letters to Ephraim Weber, Montgomery notes that the *Bookman* listed *Anne* as one of the six best-sellers in ten different major cities. Also, she summarizes the substance of a number of some sixty initial reviews, fifty-five of which are favourable. She tells Mr. Weber that Bliss Carman wrote a "flattering epistle" about the novel, but the greatest honour was receiving a letter from one of North America's most famous authors, Mark Twain, who wrote her "that in *Anne* I had created 'the dearest, and most lovable child in fiction since the immortal Alice!'"<sup>2</sup>

One of the only negative reviews of *Anne* appeared in the *New York Times*. The reviewer stated that the novel had "A mawkish, tiresome impossible heroine, combining the sentimentality of an Alfred Austin with the vocabulary of a Bernard Shaw."<sup>3</sup> (It boggles the imagination to speculate on Shaw's response to any inference that he and Anne Shirley were at the same vocabulary level.) One thing is certain--had this reviewer been correct in his assessment of the novel, Montgomery would *not* have received such praise from Mark Twain. For in his own immensely popular novels of boyhood (*Tom Sawyer*, 1876; *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 1884,) Twain had directed devastating satire at any attitude or literary work which smacked of overblown romanticism or sentimentality. Furthermore, as Twain grew older, he had suffered a number of personal and financial tragedies and, whether because of these or because of a deepening philosophical disillusion-

ment with mankind in general, his pessimism evolved into despair and bitterness, as anyone who reads his *Autobiography* and later writings will note. It is not easy to envision him in 1908, just two years before his death at age 75, as a mellow and kindly doddering old gentleman who was in the habit of writing encouragement to unknown, aspiring authors--especially if they were writing sentimental fiction, a mode he particularly disliked. Whatever criticism may be directed at *Anne*, one cannot dismiss it as typical of the overblown romantic fiction which was churned out for the popular markets of the day, the genre in which the *New York Times* reviewer puts it.

Romanticism as a serious literary mode had been falling into critical disfavour in America since as early as 1860. Although there was a continuing flood of extremely sentimental popular literature well through the turn of the century, major literary figures such as Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, and Henry James were writing realistic novels which attempted to reflect the actual details of life in their times. Some of the serious writers who were contemporary with L. M. Montgomery were carrying literary realism to the extreme of naturalism; she mentions reading (and disliking) Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*.<sup>4</sup> It was in such a literary climate that Twain--arch-enemy of sentimentalism, one of literary romanticism's degenerate offshoots--singled out *Anne of Green Gables* as a novel worthy of praise.

Montgomery's publisher brought out Eleanor H. Porter's best-selling novel *Pollyanna* four years after *Anne of Green Gables*. On the surface, their heroines may appear comparable: both Anne and Pollyanna believe in the power of positive thinking. But *Pollyanna*, temporarily popular though it was, is an excellent example of a sentimental tear-jerker. The realism and genuine characterization in *Anne* become very apparent by comparison.

It is likely that Twain responded to Montgomery's novel partly because of its realism in presenting Anne and the psychological relationships between her and the external world. In addition, one can assume that an important factor in his response was his recognition of Montgomery's treatment of a socio-religious climate he knew well--small town Scotch-Presbyterianism. She, like he himself in both *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, had used hypocritical and distorted religious views and behaviour as the serious basis for comedy.

Both he and Montgomery shared the comic touch of the ironist. Very like Twain's hometown of Hannibal, L. M. Montgomery's hometown of Cavendish (fictionally depicted as Avonlea) was a small town inhabited by dignified and rigid Scotch-Presbyterians, upon whose character she maintained considerable perspective. She wrote Weber in March 1908 that she wondered if "religion has been a curse or a blessing to the world." In a delightful ironic sketch in the same letter, she describes

an old lady who is one of the sweetest creatures alive. She would not harm a fly and I have seen her weep bitterly over the sufferings of a wounded cat. But it puts her in a simple fury to

even hint that a merciful and loving God will hardly burn for all eternity the great majority of his creatures. I cannot understand this attitude on the part of so many. Nothing seems to enrage some people so much as any attempt to take away or mitigate their dearly beloved hell.<sup>5</sup>

Having grown up in a small Calvinistic town himself, Twain knew well the personality which has a contradictory split between natural kindness and religious sternness. Such characters he depicts well in Tom Sawyer's Aunt Polly and Huck's well-meaning tormentor, Miss Watson.

Both Montgomery and Twain had grown up with exposure to a distinctive variety of "Sunday school literature," a genre of 18th and 19th century writing which pretended to record the short life-history and sayings of child saints who lived perfect lives and died young, often after much suffering. Such literature, which had grown originally out of the Puritan concern for children's souls, was given *raison d'être* by the fact that infant mortality rates were so high. The Methodist and Sunday School movements of the 19th century prolonged the distribution of this type of children's literature, and the moralism present in it is also present in much of the secular fiction of the 19th century. It is reasonable to suspect that Twain's original impetus to create "bad" boys who steal and lie, but who are likeable in spite of their "sins" was the result of a childhood overdose of fictional "good" boys whom he found unpalatable. L. M. Montgomery comments that reading about little earthly saints convinced her that she could never be as good as they, so she might as well not try. Her own "favourite Sunday book . . . a thin little volume entitled *The Memoir of Anzonetta Peters*" obviously made quite an impression on her, but she says "I don't think that it had a good effect on me." However, she muses, "I shall never forget that book. It belonged to a type now vanished from the earth--fortunately--but much in vogue at that time. It was the biography of a child who at five years became converted, grew very ill soon afterward, lived a marvelously patient and saintly life for several years, and died, after great sufferings, at the age of ten." One of Anzonetta's characteristic trademarks was responding to any remark by quoting a verse of scripture or hymn stanza. Montgomery notes with some humour that she herself "dared not use verses and hymns in current conversation" for she "had a wholesome conviction that I should be laughed at."<sup>6</sup>

Such similarities in background may be responsible for the many ways in which Montgomery's and Twain's novels resemble each other. In each the central tension derives from the difference in perception between the adult and the child. The first character we meet in *Anne* is Mrs. Rachel Lynde, her house appropriately positioned where she can witness everything that goes on in the village. Montgomery presents her as the norm in the village, and Marilla is caught unwillingly in the middle trying to bring Rachel and Anne Shirley closer together in perception of acceptable behaviour. Anne, maturing, brings her own perspectives more in line with those of the village by the end of the novel, and Mrs. Lynde becomes less rigid. Likewise, Tom Sawyer and his Aunt Polly as well as Huck Finn and the Widow Douglas (and Miss Watson) have perspectives which are at odds with each other.

Montgomery emphasizes the imaginative nature of the child-vision, whereas Twain focuses on its innocence; but whichever the focus, the child and the adult view the world from very different vantage points.<sup>7</sup> And, it is from this discrepancy in viewpoint that the humour and the reality in each novel arise.

For instance, both authors show the adult vision of the world to be partly rooted in the Calvinistic Scotch-Presbyterian framework. Adults in all three novels are a relatively humourless bunch who take themselves and their lives very seriously. They distrust pleasure and frivolity, even if it is manifested in such harmless things as puffy sleeves and flowers on Sunday hats. The sparse, bare room which Anne enters at Green Gables reflects the no-frill nature of Marilla's personality, and Montgomery contrasts the icy-white of the room with Anne's perception of the glorious white of nature's blossoms outside.

At the beginning of *Anne*, Matthew is clearly the product of a repressive society: his personality is locked, inarticulate, within him. He is not afraid merely to express his opinions, he is afraid even to have them. During his four-year association with Anne, her spontaneity and love gradually draw him out, and his final fulfillment before his death comes in his being able to articulate his love for her in words. The simplicity of his words makes them even more touching: "Well now, I'd rather have you than a dozen boys, Anne . . . It was a girl--my girl--that I'm proud of" (p. 311).<sup>8</sup>

In *Tom Sawyer* it is Aunt Polly who gives Tom little indication, verbal or otherwise, that she truly values and loves him. Though she is an extremely kind person, the natural and the spontaneous are repressed in her. She does cruel things to Tom in the belief that he will be bettered by a little suffering; worse, she fails to express her love for him. Only when she believes him dead does she express the extent of her affection. Fortunately for him and their future relationship, Tom has the emotional satisfaction of seeing her weeping for him.

Twain and Montgomery criticize the way religion is practised at various points in their works. Anne remarks that "Some people are naturally good, you know, and others are not. I'm one of the others. Mrs. Lynde says I'm full of original sin." Later she tells Marilla "When I'm with Mrs. Lynde I feel desperately wicked and as if I wanted to go and do the very thing she tells me I oughtn't to do....Do you think it's because I'm really bad and unregenerate?" (p. 269) Fortunately, these spiritual worries don't oppress Anne's lively nature long. Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn--especially Huck--are not so fortunate: Huck labours under his conscience throughout the whole novel as he tries to reconcile the position of religious yet slave-holding adults with his own naive and supposedly 'wicked' view that being cruel to Negroes is wrong. Finally his "sound heart and deformed conscience" lead him to choose going to Hell as the result of freeing a slave above accepting the religious hypocrisy of adults.

Likewise, the matter of prayers gives Montgomery and Twain a source of more comedy. When scolded by Marilla for failure to say her

prayers, Anne replies, "Mrs. Thomas told me that God made my hair red *on purpose*, and I've never cared about Him since. And anyhow I'd always be too tired at night to bother saying prayers. People who have to look after twins can't be expected to say their prayers" (p.54). Anne's practical and childishly literal approach to prayer is reminiscent of Huck's: as he tells it, Miss Watson "told me to pray every day, and whatever I asked for I would get it. But it warn't so. I tried it. Once I got a fish-line, but no hooks. It warn't any good to me without hooks."

Some of the funniest incidents in both *Anne* and *Tom Sawyer* grow out of the adult conviction that a certain amount of suffering and humiliation in punishment is good for children. Anne's apology to Mrs. Lynde (p. 78) becomes unacceptable even though it is a very sincere apology because Anne enjoys delivering it. She becomes so caught up in doing it well with big words and dramatic gestures that she positively enjoys her own performance as one does an onerous task done well. Clearly it is not the act of apology, or the repentance it represents, but the suffering attendant upon it which is important. Likewise, had Aunt Polly realized the way in which Tom turned fence white-washing into a task full of positive enjoyment as well as profit, she would have been outraged rather than pleased at his cleverness and ingenuity. In each case humour comes through the reader's recognition that the adult position is slightly unreasonable; thus the situation becomes comic when the children outmaneuver the adults. There is delightful comic irony evoked by any such situation.

Thus, religion serves behind the scenes as a basis for humour: the religious background is the source of much of the tension in the novel, tension upon which the surface comedy can be built. It is the discrepancy between the outlandish behaviour of child heroines and heroes (Tom, Huck, Anne Shirley) and the acceptable norm in a quite small town (St. Petersburg and Avonlea) which creates the humour. Although childhood spontaneity can be repressed by many factors other than by distorted religiosity, in these three novels the adult perspective to a large extent results from a code of behaviour established by the literalism of small town and small-minded churchgoers.<sup>9</sup> Neither Twain nor Montgomery attack religion: they use distortions of it for comedy. But to dwell any longer on aspects of religious satire in *Anne* would be to distort the focus of Montgomery's work.

Both Montgomery and Twain, writing from mature perspectives, treat their respective communities and characters with humour and affection. Each had an eye for the incongruous, the comic dimension in human behaviour which results when adults and children alike take themselves too seriously and affect pompousness in language or action. Montgomery makes use of the difference between Anne's level of diction and her level of understanding: Anne's phrases, taken from her reading of sentimental fiction apparently, far exceed her level of maturation and understanding. Likewise, Tom Sawyer's imagination also is full of many undigested novels about pirates and robbers. *Huck Finn*, a much more complex work, uses a slightly converse situation. Huck's verbal abilities are moderate, but, naive as he may seem, his level of intuitive understanding is high. In each case, the reader is

aware of the ironic contrast between level of diction and level of comprehension, a contrast which achieves both humour and satire.

Both authors enjoy setting their characters in formal, ritualistic situations and then deflating the ritual with a grossly inappropriate but plausible event. Marilla's dignified meal for the stylish Mr. and Mrs. Chester Ross is devastated by Anne's horrified shriek that the pudding sauce being served is one from which she had removed a drowned mouse earlier in the day. Likewise, in Twain, people fall accidentally into graves during the most solemn moments, dogs howl in the middle of pompous funeral orations, interminable church services are disrupted by the yelps of unfortunate dogs who sit on pinching bugs, and so on.

Aside from *Anne's* comic and satiric elements, what has been responsible for its initial and continuing success? In spite of parallels between *Anne* and Twain's two novels of boyhood, Montgomery's work owes its success to elements distinctively its own: Anne is not a female Twain character. There are, in Anne, other areas which deserve comment: Montgomery's combination of realism and romanticism, her treatment of the imagination, and her perceptive dealing with the psychological needs of humans, both children and adults.

*Anne of Green Gables* is best considered as an example of literary realism, despite the fact that it contains such elements as haunted woods which are typical of romance. One of the realities which children can build up is a world of imaginative romance and dreams, and we must keep in mind that most of the highflown romance in *Anne* exists because Anne creates it in her mind. Her imagination takes over early in the book, and it is primarily from her point-of-view that we see much of Avonlea. She may be a pretentious little girl who has read too much without digesting it, but as such she represents a type of precocious adolescent who is familiar and realistic. Montgomery places her in a specific and realistic setting, and we finish the book with a good sense of what it was like to be a child living in a small Prince Edward Island town around 1900.

Anne Shirley uses the worst sentimental clichés when she talks. These serve a greater function than to create humour or to characterize her, however: through Anne's overly dramatic and flowery speech, Montgomery is able to satirize romance. Montgomery, writing of her own childhood, tells us that she was brought up with such "Literary pabulum" as *Godey's Lady's Book*, which she always "devoured ravenously, crying my eyes out in delicious woe over the agonies of heroines who were all superlatively good and beautiful."<sup>10</sup> Montgomery, who also spent a considerable amount of her own time doing hack writing for money, was obviously quite aware of the distinction between fresh and hackneyed expression. Anne's overripe diction is clearly intended to be comic, not only because it is inappropriate speech for a girl her age, but also because it is very trite and hackneyed in itself. Montgomery is clearly satirizing the popular literary taste for sentimental clichés just as Twain does in *Huck Finn* when he exposes us to the poetry of sweet little dead Emmeline Grangerford, poetry which outdoes the worst of the sentimental female

versifiers who were then popular. <sup>11</sup>

L. M. Montgomery was a highly disciplined and efficient writer who was, in some of her other novels, too aware of her reading public, and too willing to conform to their taste so as to sell. She turned out a great amount of material which she herself seems to consider "hack" work in her letters to Weber. The general tone of her letters to him indicates that she was quite gratified by the money which her pen brought, but she had no illusions that she was creating great literature in the stories and poetry which she ground out before and after *Anne* for the Sunday school magazines. She wrote him that she hoped her novels would sell so that she could quit the "Sunday School stuff": she had learned to cater to the public taste to satisfy publishers and as a financial necessity. When Weber complained that he did not like two things about *Anne of Green Gables*;, namely Anne's superlative success in school and Matthew's death, Montgomery replied that she didn't either, but that she felt they would be demanded by the reading public, the first as a reward because Anne had been a good girl, and the second to enforce a choice upon Anne. When the publishers asked her for an immediate sequel to the immensely successful *Anne*, Montgomery immediately churned one out, but observed that it lacked the spontaneity and freshness of the first Anne book.

Perhaps another of the factors which has made *Anne of Green Gables* so successful both with adults and children is Montgomery's treatment of the imagination. The term "imagination" was a prominent one in the 18th and 19th centuries. By the time Montgomery used the term, it had become quite ambiguous through application to many contexts. At its worst it had come to mean pure escapism; at its best, it was a faculty by which man ordered the world into a complex set of symbols, both verbal and spatial, and determined his own relationship to them. To have an imagination (then and now) designated an ability to create dimensions to one's internal landscape into which one could go, alone or with companions, to explore fully the meaning of being human; it was a place where one ordered sensory experience to give it meaning; where one came to terms with himself, determined his own identity, and emerged as a human being with a vision more profound.

The term "imagination" is one of the key words and concepts in *Anne of Green Gables*.. What, however, does Montgomery mean when she speaks of it?

Anne possesses imagination in both the worst and the best of senses. When we first meet her she retreats to imaginary worlds from an unhappy real world. But she also possesses an unique ability to take ordinary sensory data from the external landscape of Avonlea and arrange it within her own imagination into a fascinating world. Whereas Anne looks through a window and sees a world that is "wonderful" outside, Marilla looks through the same window at the same time and sees only a big tree that "blooms great, but the fruit . . . [is] small and wormy." Most people are very much influenced by the constructions which other people place on reality; a political orator, a popular singer, an evangelist--each can completely catch us up in his own perception of

reality. We can enter his imagination and see the world defined by his mood and by his particular arrangement of symbols. Some people perceive the world as a place of great struggle and probable defeat for them; external objects in their environment become threats. Other people regard the world as a challenge and a pleasure; the same factors which threatened the first group are a stimulus to the second. Anne Shirley possesses a perception of the world close to the second: readers love her for it.

The "imagination" has been much maligned by religion. Certainly we can see Marilla's distrust of it: "I don't believe in imagining things different from what they really are," she says; "When the Lord puts us in certain circumstances He doesn't mean for us to imagine them away" (p. 59). What Marilla's literal mind fails to discern is the difficulty of determining how things *really* are in reality. The external world does not exist for us until our senses gather data and our minds interpret it. Marilla might well reflect that a literal reading of the Bible tells us that one of the first requirements which God made of man after creation was that man use his imaginative faculty to name the animals which He had created.

Like Adam, Anne Shirley's first important act after coming to Avonlea is to rename the external world which she finds. "The Avenue," a stretch of blooming apple trees, is rechristened "the White Way of Delight;" and "Barry's Pond" becomes "The Lake of Shining Waters." The names she chooses show us the particular quality of her perception of reality. She takes the commonplace and makes it beautiful. Marilla and Matthew do not have enough literary sophistication to realize that the particular phrases which Anne chooses to externalize her vision are somewhat hackneyed--they are merely enchanted with the positive nature of the vision itself.

Anne's stay in Avonlea is a fascinating study of how one's imaginative perception of the world can in effect metamorphosize the actual structure of the world. One of the most exciting and satisfying aspects of the novel is Anne's transformation of an ordinary farm into a fairyland and of an inarticulate old bachelor and a cheerless old maid into people who can articulate their love.

Dour old Aunt Josephine Barry, in her selfish way, speaks for many readers when she summarizes her responses to Anne: "She makes me like her because she is interesting." Most humans are a little short on imagination and, like Aunt Josephine, enjoy being lifted out of commonplace lives by a free spirit like Anne.

I think that ultimately what readers respond to in *Anne* is not the momentary, amusing diversion of Anne's imaginative flights of fancy, but rather something far more powerful--the recognition that our perception of reality often becomes the blueprint for our lives. Our expectations can create our future. One excellent study of this phenomenon occurs in Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*. Whether evil ghosts exist at the beginning of the story we cannot be sure; in fact, we may doubt that they do. But certainly by the end of the story we can



see that the truth about their existence is irrelevant; the governess believes so positively in them that evil in fact is produced. As one James' critic put it: "Fear is like faith: it ultimately creates what at the first it only imagined."<sup>12</sup> Anne herself is aware of the importance of one's own perception of reality. She says "I read in a book once that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet, but I've never been able to believe it. I don't believe a rose *would* be as nice if it was called a thistle or a skunk cabbage"(p. 42).

That the vision of the individual imagination gave existence and shape to the external world was a tenet of literary romanticism; it is also, in the 1970's, an idea being explored by modern psychologists who have demonstrated, for instance, that a child who perceives himself as a failure is quite likely to become one, no matter how great his native abilities may be. But in 1908 when *Anne of Green Gables* appeared, such a doctrine ran counter to the sociological and biological determinism of the age. Other contemporary literary heroines of serious adult fiction had little or no ability to control the direction of their lives. Maggie, in Stephen Crane's *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* (1896), is doomed by her environment from the beginning; Dreiser's heroine in *Sister Carrie* (1900, 1912) is a "little soldier of fortune," buffeted by fate and forces totally beyond her control. In an intellectual climate where people were presented as helpless either because of their own biological make-up or because of the social atmosphere in which they lived, novels such as *Anne of Green Gables* suggested that one's imagination could influence the external world.

Today, children of the Anne Shirley age (11-15 in the novel) are beginning to test their wings outside the family. They can watch Anne manipulate her environment. When she first meets Marilla and Matthew they are most unpromising parents; all humanity in them seems to be repressed, and what is more, they don't want her because she is a girl. Yet, they are better than the alternative, and Anne determines to find warmth and human kindness in them. At first, her manipulations are obvious -- she tells Matthew and Marilla that she is an orphan that nobody ever loved and that she expects to be treated as badly by them as by everyone else. But her ability to control her environment is achieved by far more than such obvious manipulation: she presents herself as an interesting and impulsive child, one the Cuthberts need because she can furnish them with the psychological, emotional, and imaginative dimensions which are lacking in their own lives. And she does the same for us, the readers.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>She apparently put Canada on the map for at least one reviewer. In her letters to Wilfred Eggleston (*The Green Gables Letters*, ed. Eggleston, Ryerson, 1960, p. 72), L. M. Montgomery recounts with some amusement that reviewer's comment: "What most impresses an American is how these people of Canada *resemble ourselves*." "What," Montgomery muses, "did that poor man suppose we were like down here [sic]???"

<sup>2</sup>The figures in this paragraph are taken from *The Green Gables Letters*, pages 85, 100, 81, 71-72, and 80.

<sup>3</sup>*The Green Gables Letters*, p. 72.

<sup>4</sup>*Letters*, p. 47.

<sup>5</sup>*Letters*, p. 63.

<sup>6</sup>L. M. Montgomery, *The Alpine Path* (Fitzhenry and Whiteside, reprint of 1917 edition), p. 50.

<sup>7</sup>Twain uses the satiric vision to show that childhood innocence is forever irreconcilable with adult corruption. Montgomery, on the other hand, seems to indicate that it is through the child's imaginative reinterpretation of the world and ensuing reconstruction of reality that the adult vision can be rectified and revitalized.

<sup>8</sup>All page references to the text of *Anne of Green Gables* are to the 1968 McGraw-Hill paperback edition.

<sup>9</sup>Two years before she wrote *Anne*, Montgomery was complaining to Weber about the restrictive orthodoxy of Cavendish: "Yes, I teach a Sunday School class--but I don't like it much. They never dream of asking a question, much as I have tried to induce them to, and all their idea of 'studying' a lesson seems to be to learn the printed questions in the quarterlies off by heart. I never can get them to give an answer in their own words and I don't believe they ever get one scrap of real good out of the lesson. I have to follow the old traditional paths of thought & expression or I would get into hot water immediately. Cavendish is wholesomely (?) old-fashioned and orthodox" (p.46).

<sup>10</sup>*The Alpine Path*, p. 48.

<sup>11</sup>At her worst, Montgomery herself could--and did--write florid, sentimental prose and verse. It seems very likely that in her treatment of Anne's use of language, she is consciously evaluating and satirizing a style which she herself used.

<sup>12</sup>Harold Goddard, "A Pre-Freudian Reading of *The Turn of the Screw*," quoted in the Norton Critical Edition of *The Turn of the Screw*, p. 198.

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