

Heroines of Avonlea: A Study of Female Character Arcs in L. M. Montgomery's Fiction

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Abstract

This paper explores the evolving trajectories of female characters in L. M. Montgomery's Anne of Green Gables series, examining how the author crafts multidimensional representations of women within the pastoral landscape of Prince Edward Island. Often regarded as nostalgic children's literature, the Anne series in fact presents a sophisticated and progressive vision of female development across a spectrum of ages, social roles, and historical moments. Through a close reading of key characters such as Anne Shirley, Marilla Cuthbert, Diana Barry, and Rilla Blythe; this study examines how Montgomery navigates the tensions between tradition and transformation, domesticity and ambition, conformity and individuality. While Montgomery's narratives are situated in rural and seemingly conservative communities, her female characters consistently challenge the limitations imposed by gendered expectations. Anne's imaginative independence and pursuit of education, Marilla's emotional evolution from stoicism to empathy, Diana's quiet but dignified embodiment of traditional femininity, and Rilla's wartime growth into leadership and responsibility all illustrate diverse models of womanhood. These characters reveal Montgomery's engagement with questions of identity, agency, and societal change. The paper argues that Montgomery's fiction, though not visibly radical, participates in a subtle form of feminist discourse. Her work foregrounds the emotional and intellectual inner lives of women and girls, female relationships, and portrays personal growth as a continuous and multifaceted process. Thereby, Montgomery not only reflects the changing roles of women in early 20th-century Canadian society but also anticipates themes central to feminist literary criticism. By centering female perspectives within a domestic and pastoral literary tradition, the Anne series emerges as a quietly rebellious body of work that redefines the contours of feminine experience in literature.

Keywords: Womanhood, Feminist Literary Criticism, Gender Roles, Female Agency, Bildungsroman, Intergenerational relationships, Proto-feminism, Avonlea.

INTRODUCTION

L. M. Montgomery's Anne of Green Gables series is widely beloved for its idyllic setting, lyrical prose, and memorable protagonist, Anne Shirley. The books have long been celebrated as nostalgic tributes to rural life on Prince Edward Island, infused with a sense of innocence, natural beauty, and the charm of a bygone era. Yet, beneath this pastoral layer lies a rich and deeper exploration of gender, identity, and the evolving social expectations placed upon women. Montgomery, often underestimated in literary criticism for her focus on domestic spaces and youthful protagonists, constructs a deeply layered narrative that interrogates what it means to grow up female in a world governed by patriarchal norms.

This paper argues that Anne of Green Gables and its sequels go beyond simple coming-of-age stories; they chart a deliberate and thoughtful progression of female identity, agency, and self-definition. Through characters such as Anne Shirley, Marilla Cuthbert, Diana Barry, and Rilla Blythe, Montgomery crafts an elaborate network of female experiences that reflect the societal pressures of the late 19th and early 20th centuries while also proposing refined, often quiet, forms of resistance and reinvention.

Anne Shirley, the heart of the series, is not merely a intelligent child with a vivid imagination, she is a literary figure who challenges expectations from the moment she arrives at Green Gables. Orphaned and displaced, Anne does not passively accept the role society has carved out for girls of her class and situation. Instead, she reclaims space through her words, dreams, and intellect. Her desire for education, her refusal to be silenced, and her imaginative engagement with the world signal a departure from traditional gender roles. She is a new kind of heroine, one who does not need to shed her eccentricities to be accepted, but instead is embraced precisely because of her individuality and emotional richness. Over the course of the series, Anne matures, but she never fully conforms; she adapts without erasing the core aspects of her personality that make her distinctive. Montgomery provides a model of womanhood that harmonizes domestic responsibility with intellectual ambition and emotional vitality.

Anne's growth is mirrored and complicated by the figure of Marilla Cuthbert, whose role in the narrative often receives less attention but is no less significant. Marilla begins as a stern, no-nonsense spinster who embodies the values of duty, order, and self-sacrifice. Yet, her character arc is one of profound, although understated, transformation. Through her relationship with Anne, Marilla gradually confronts her own emotional repression and learns to express care and tenderness, qualities she had long subdued in favour of societal expectations of female stoicism. Her evolution is a quiet rebellion against the idea that emotional expression is a weakness. Marilla ultimately becomes a deeply empathetic and wise figure, proof that growth is not exclusive to the young, and that change is always possible, even within the most deep-rooted frameworks.

In contrast, Diana Barry initially appears to represent the traditional feminine ideal. She is loyal, sweet, and eager to fulfil the roles expected of her, wife, mother, homemaker. Yet Montgomery does not present Diana as a foil to Anne, nor does she depict domesticity as inherently limiting. Instead, Diana's character affirms that traditional roles, when chosen freely, can be sources of joy and fulfillment. Her presence in the series serves to broaden the definition of womanhood, reminding readers that feminism does not demand uniformity in women's paths but rather freedom of choice and respect for all expressions of female identity.

The character of Rilla Blythe, the protagonist of *Rilla of Ingleside*, demonstrates Montgomery's mature engagement with themes of war, loss, and female responsibility. Rilla, Anne's youngest daughter, begins as a vain and carefree teenager, uninterested in politics or service. However, the outbreak of World War I propel her into adult responsibilities, she raises a war orphan, manages household burdens, and supports her community while grappling with personal grief. Rilla's transformation is perhaps the most dramatic of all Montgomery's heroines, and her arc embodies the emerging roles women were forced to inhabit during national crisis. Through Rilla, Montgomery confronts the limitations of pre-war femininity and articulates a vision of young womanhood defined by resilience, adaptability, and emotional strength.

Montgomery's female characters do not exist in isolation; their growth is nurtured through intergenerational relationships, female mentorship, and communal bonds. *Avonlea* is sustained as much by the emotional labour of women as by any economic or patriarchal structure. Women like Miss Stacy, Rachel Lynde, and Susan Baker contribute to a network of influence, wisdom, and care that shapes the

younger generation. These women offer alternatives to romantic fulfillment as the sole measure of a woman's value and underscore the importance of female solidarity. Subsequently, L. M. Montgomery's Anne of Green Gables series offers more than comforting nostalgia, it presents a complex and evolving narrative of female identity. Through richly drawn characters and their intersecting arcs, Montgomery maps out a world in which women of different temperaments and life choices find dignity, voice, and purpose. The series becomes a quiet but powerful assertion of proto-feminist ideals, couched in the familiar rhythms of domestic life but always reaching toward broader horizons of freedom and self-realization.

1. The Formation of Identity: Anne Shirley as a New Heroine

Anne Shirley's arrival at Green Gables marks the inception of a profound narrative of female self-discovery. Orphaned, displaced, and mistakenly adopted, Anne is immediately positioned as an outsider both literally and metaphorically. Her red hair, fanciful imagination, and irrepressible talkativeness sharply contrast with the orderly, predictable world of Avonlea. Yet it is precisely her difference that becomes the engine of transformation not just for herself, but for the entire community. From the outset, Montgomery constructs Anne as a heroine who challenges and transcends the passive, submissive feminine ideals of her time, offering readers a vibrant, self-directed, and emotionally rich model of girlhood.

Anne's formation of identity is rooted in her imagination. In a society that prizes pragmatism and modesty, particularly in women, Anne's ability to create alternative realities is a radical act. Her imaginary friends, romanticized names for local landmarks, and elaborate daydreams serve not as escapism but as tools for agency and survival. Montgomery uses this imaginative space to resist the social containment of female ambition. Instead of learning to suppress her creativity in favour of conformity, Anne gradually learns to refine it, channelling her passion into writing, teaching, and building relationships. Her dreams do not disappear with maturity; rather, they evolve alongside her growing sense of responsibility. This marks a significant departure from the typical "taming" arc seen in earlier literary heroines, where spirited girls were often subdued into domestic roles as a condition of their narrative closure.

Education plays a crucial role in Anne's journey toward selfhood. Her academic ambition, her competitive drive with Gilbert Blythe, her scholarship to Queen's, and her later aspirations to teach and write, reflect Montgomery's own values and life experiences. At a time when women's access to higher education was expanding but still socially contested, Anne's intellectual pursuits were quietly radical. Montgomery frames learning not merely as a path to social mobility but as a vital component of Anne's inner life. Knowledge and imagination go hand in hand; they are not in conflict but mutually reinforcing. Anne's intellectual independence, far from detracting from her femininity, enhances it, contributing to a broader redefinition of womanhood as intellectually and emotionally capacious.

Moreover, Anne's character complicates the dichotomy often drawn between domestic life and personal ambition. As the series progresses, Anne does eventually marry Gilbert and raise a family, yet her identity is never reduced to these roles. Montgomery is careful to depict Anne's marriage as a partnership based on mutual respect, and her motherhood as an extension, not an erasure, of her imaginative and ethical sensibilities. Her earlier restlessness and desire for beauty are not negated by adult responsibility but transformed into the emotional texture of family life. Anne remains curious, poetic, and idealistic even as she matures, thereby demonstrating a form of womanhood that is holistic rather than diverged. What distinguishes Anne from other heroines of her time is not rebellion but integration. She does not reject societal expectations outright, but she reshapes them according to her own values and temperament. Montgomery resists the figure of the "fallen" or "tragic" woman common in Victorian and Edwardian

fiction and instead offers a heroine who harmonizes different aspects of the self. Montgomery carves out a new space for female identity, one that affirms intellectual growth, emotional expression, and domestic fulfillment as equally valid and potentially coexistent. Anne's success is not in conforming, but in cultivating a life true to her inner world within the structure of her society.

Importantly, Anne's journey is marked by a persistent tension between individuality and belonging. Her desire to be loved and accepted is deeply human, yet she never sacrifices her core identity to achieve this. She finds belonging not by suppressing her imagination, but by offering it to others, enriching her community with beauty, empathy, and vision. This dynamic speaks to a proto-feminist character: women need not choose between selfhood and connection, between intellect and emotion. Through Anne, Montgomery insists that these binaries are false and limiting. Anne Shirley emerges as a heroine who redefines what it means to grow up female. She is not rebellious in the conventional sense, but she is radically self-possessed. Her arc from orphan to educator, wife, and mother is not a tale of submission but one of creative adaptation and internal coherence. In giving us a protagonist who is as imaginative as she is responsible, as idealistic as she is pragmatic, Montgomery proposes an early 20th-century vision of womanhood that anticipates the feminist revaluations of later decades. Anne is, in every sense, a new kind of literary heroine one whose formation of identity continues to resonate with readers across generations.

2. Marilla Cuthbert: Duty, Emotion, and Unspoken Transformation

Marilla Cuthbert, Anne Shirley's adoptive guardian, is one of the most quietly compelling characters in *Anne of Green Gables*. At first glance, she appears to be a artifact of Victorian sensibility stoic, disciplined, and emotionally reserved. A woman who never married, Marilla lives with her brother Matthew on the family farm in Avonlea, maintaining the household with diligence and propriety. She initially intends to adopt a boy to help with farm labour, but Anne's unexpected arrival introduces a transformative presence into her life. Though Marilla seems at first to function as a stern foil to Anne's enthusiasm, her character arc reveals a powerful and poignant evolution. Through her subtle transformation, Montgomery offers a profound commentary on emotional resilience, the elasticity of identity in later life, and the undervalued emotional labour of older women.

At the beginning of the novel, Marilla embodies a kind of emotional austerity that aligns with conventional Victorian ideals of womanhood, self-sacrificing, dutiful, and restrained. She believes in order, obedience, and economy, and she disapproves of unimportance or sentimentality, especially in girls. Her suspicion of Anne's imagination and dramatic temperament reflects the cultural pressure on women to contain their emotions and conform to rigid gender norms. In this respect, Marilla is not only a character but a symbol of the older moral order, one that privileges decorum over self-expression and control over curiosity.

However, Anne's presence in Marilla's life becomes the catalyst for change. Unlike many transformations in literature that occur through crisis or external upheaval, Marilla's development is slow, steady, and primarily emotional. Her affection for Anne is never effusive or overt, yet it grows steadily, evidenced through small gestures, softened judgments, and quiet sacrifices. She begins to accept Anne's imaginative world, even if she cannot fully inhabit it. More importantly, she starts to express her care in ways that challenge her own discomfort with vulnerability. For example, her decision to keep Anne after initially deciding to return her to the orphanage is the first significant act of emotional courage we see from Marilla. It signals a shift from a life governed by practicality to one that makes space for love and unpredictability. Marilla's transformation also signals Montgomery's interest in depicting adult and particularly female growth. In a literary landscape where emotional development is often reserved for youth, Marilla's quiet evolution is radical. She does not experience a complete reversal of personality, but she becomes more

open, more expressive, and more willing to adapt. Her softening does not indicate weakness, but rather a widening of perspective. As Anne grows, so does Marilla not only as a guardian but as a woman re-learning how to feel. This mutual development between guardian and child creates a relationship rooted in intergenerational reciprocity, offering a powerful counter-narrative to the idea that aging brings emotional rigidity. Montgomery also uses Marilla to interrogate the emotional consequences of lives shaped by sacrifice. Having never married or pursued a life beyond Green Gables; Marilla's past suggests a lifetime of emotional containment. She is a product of a society that offered women limited options, especially if they chose to remain unmarried. Her occasional flashes of regret, such as her brief mention of a lost love, hint at the emotional costs of her choices. Montgomery resists framing Marilla as tragic or embittered. Instead, she offers a more compassionate portrayal of a woman whose life takes on new meaning through caregiving not as a duty, but as a form of personal redemption and late-blooming emotional vitality.

What makes Marilla's arc particularly compelling is that it never loses touch with realism. She does not become effusive or dramatically altered; her personality retains its foundation of practicality and restraint. But within those constraints, a rich emotional life is revealed. She learns to listen more, to judge less, and to express affection through action. Her grief over Matthew's death, her concern for Anne's future, and her willingness to let go all exemplify a kind of emotional courage that is often overlooked in literary portrayals of older women. In many ways, Marilla serves as a counterbalance to Anne, not by opposition, but by complementarity. Where Anne is imaginative and impulsive, Marilla is grounded and steady. Their relationship is not one of simple contrast, but of mutual transformation. Marilla helps anchor Anne, offering structure and moral clarity, while Anne opens up spaces of emotional renewal for Marilla. This dynamic allows Montgomery to explore a fuller spectrum of womanhood, one that honours duty and discipline while celebrating emotional vulnerability and adaptability. Ultimately, Marilla Cuthbert stands as one of Montgomery's most subtly radical creations. Her journey illustrates that emotional development does not end with youth, and that love especially in its quietest forms can be a lifelong unfolding. She is a woman who grows without fanfare, and in doing so, exemplifies a form of feminine strength that is both enduring and transformative. Through Marilla, Montgomery expands the possibilities of female character arcs, making space for maturity and the liberating power of connection across generations.

3. Diana Barry and the Ideal of Conventional Femininity

Diana Barry, Anne Shirley's closest childhood friend, occupies a distinctive place in *Anne of Green Gables* as a representation of traditional femininity. Unlike Anne's imaginative and often rebellious spirit, Diana embodies many of the qualities that Victorian and Edwardian society valued in young women: beauty, domesticity, loyalty, and a gentle disposition. She is the "good girl" archetype, someone who adheres to social expectations and embraces a conventional life path centered on family and community. Yet, despite the apparent simplicity of her role, Diana's character offers important insights into the varied ways femininity is lived and valued in Montgomery's world. Far from being a one-dimensional foil to Anne, Diana represents a legitimate and emotionally rich model of womanhood, one that underscores the legitimacy of choice in defining female identity.

At first glance, Diana's life trajectory appears less dynamic compared to Anne's expansive and often turbulent journey. Diana grows up to marry Gilbert Blythe, becoming a devoted wife and mother, a traditional role that Montgomery treats with respect and affection. She does not pursue higher education or a career, nor does she aspire to break free from the domestic sphere. This might seem to place her on a lower rung of female fulfillment in a modern feminist reading, which often valorises professional ambition and personal independence. However, Montgomery carefully avoids framing Diana's domestic life as a

limitation or failure. Instead, her happiness and sense of purpose within the family and community are portrayed as equally meaningful and valuable. Diana's steadfast loyalty and deep friendship with Anne serve as one of the emotional cores of the series. Through their enduring bond, Montgomery illustrates how different expressions of femininity can coexist and enrich each other. Diana admires Anne's creativity and boldness but remains firmly rooted in her own identity and values. Their relationship is a powerful example of female solidarity, one that transcends difference rather than being weakened by it. Diana's steady presence provides emotional grounding for Anne's flights of fancy, while Anne's imaginative spirit opens Diana's world to new possibilities of thought and feeling. This dynamic suggests that femininity is not monolithic but multifaceted, inclusive of both the imaginative and the conventional.

Furthermore, Diana's friendship with Anne highlights the significance of emotional intimacy between women. Their relationship is characterized by deep trust, shared secrets, and mutual support, providing a model of female companionship that contrasts with the often competitive or hierarchical depictions of women in literature of the period. This friendship enriches both characters and suggests that interpersonal connections are vital to female empowerment and self-understanding. Through Diana and Anne, Montgomery affirms the value of diverse female relationships, emphasizing that these bonds contribute as much to identity formation as individual achievement.

In inference, Diana Barry's role in the Anne of Green Gables series extends beyond that of a conventional foil. She represents a vital dimension of femininity grounded in loyalty, domesticity, and emotional depth. Montgomery's portrayal honours Diana's choices and affirms the legitimacy of a traditional female path without diminishing its complexity or significance. Diana's contentment with domestic life challenges narrow definitions of success and demonstrates the richness of varied female experiences. By including Diana alongside Anne, Montgomery crafts a multifaceted and inclusive vision of womanhood, one that respects difference, celebrates choice, and honours the full spectrum of female identity.

4. Rilla Blythe: Coming of Age During Crisis

In *Rilla of Ingleside*, L. M. Montgomery shifts her focus from the idyllic, pastoral world of Prince Edward Island to the broader and more harrowing realities of a nation at war. Through Anne Shirley's youngest daughter, Rilla Blythe, Montgomery offers a vivid and exploration of female transformation amid crisis. Unlike her imaginative and ambitious mother, Rilla begins her journey as a carefree and somewhat playful teenager, largely indifferent to politics, education, or the looming global conflict. However, the outbreak of World War I compels her and her entire generation into premature adulthood, reshaping her identity through experiences of loss, responsibility, and resilience. Rilla's character arc serves as a powerful testament to the strength and adaptability of young women confronting unique challenges, illustrating how traditional notions of femininity are expanded and redefined in wartime.

At the novel's outset, Rilla embodies youthful innocence and detachment. She is preoccupied with social events, fashion, and her personal desires, reflecting the concerns of many adolescents, especially young women, in relatively sheltered environments. Her disinterest in serious affairs and limited sense of obligation mirror a world untouched by war's harsh realities. Montgomery's portrayal is empathetic rather than judgmental; she acknowledges Rilla's initial immaturity as authentic and necessary, setting the stage for a dramatic evolution. This beginning emphasizes that transformation is not innate but forged through experience especially through the crucible of crisis. The outbreak of World War I marks a pivotal turning point in Rilla's life and in the narrative itself. As men from Avonlea and across Canada enlist and depart for the front, the home front assumes new significance. Rilla, who had been distanced from political or social responsibility, is suddenly called upon to contribute to the war effort. The changes are both external

and internal: rationing, community fundraising, nursing wounded soldiers, and coping with anxiety about loved ones. Through these experiences, Rilla gives way to a profound sense of duty and empathy. Montgomery meticulously charts this maturation process, illustrating how the demands of war accelerate emotional growth and reconfigure identity.

Rilla's journey is particularly notable for how it foregrounds the emotional labour that women perform during wartime. The losses she endures the absence and eventual death of close family members are devastating. Yet her response is marked by resilience rather than despair. Her capacity to endure grief while maintaining hope and supporting others reveals a formidable inner strength. Montgomery highlights this emotional endurance as a form of leadership, one that is often overlooked in traditional war narratives focused on battlefield heroics. Rilla's story underscores that wartime heroism is not solely masculine or martial but includes the courage to sustain life and community in the face of suffering.

Importantly, Rilla of Ingleside moves Montgomery's exploration of femininity beyond pastoral idealism into the complexities of modern womanhood. The idyllic landscapes of Prince Edward Island provide a backdrop, but the narrative's focus on war highlights themes of loss, change, and societal transformation. Rilla's story exemplifies how traditional female roles like daughter, sister, caregiver are reimagined in light of national and global upheaval. This progression signals Montgomery's evolving feminist consciousness, which embraces both the continuity of domestic values and the necessity of public engagement and political awareness. In this way, Rilla becomes a representative figure for the young women of her time those who stepped into new roles during the war, whose lives were irrevocably altered by conflict, and who helped redefine womanhood in the early 20th century. Montgomery honours their contributions by centering Rilla's narrative, depicting her not simply as a victim of circumstance but as an active agent of change. Her maturation is a narrative of empowerment forged through adversity, demonstrating that femininity encompasses adaptability, endurance, and leadership under pressure. Rilla Blythe's character arc in Rilla of Ingleside offers a compelling portrayal of female growth shaped by historical crisis. Montgomery moves beyond the pastoral innocence of her earlier novels to confront the realities of war, loss, and social transformation. Through Rilla's journey from carefree youth to responsible womanhood, the novel affirms the resilience and complexity of female experience. It acknowledges the diverse forms of heroism: emotional, domestic, and public that women embody. In doing so, Montgomery presents a vision of womanhood that is dynamic, multifaceted, and profoundly relevant, illustrating how heroines can emerge not only from pastoral settings but also from the challenges of a world at war.

Conclusion

L. M. Montgomery's Anne of Green Gables series transcends its popular reputation as a nostalgic celebration of pastoral life to offer a rich, complex exploration of female character development and identity formation. Through the varied journeys of her heroines, Anne Shirley, Marilla Cuthbert, Diana Barry, and Rilla Blythe, Montgomery presents a multifaceted vision of womanhood that challenges reductive or simplistic interpretations of her work as mere sentimental fiction. Instead, the series engages deeply with questions of autonomy, agency, and the evolving nature of female experience within the restrictions and possibilities of early 20th-century rural society. By portraying these women's lives with emotional depth, Montgomery anticipates many of the concerns and themes that would come to define later feminist literature, establishing her work as a significant site for understanding the construction of gender and identity.

At the heart of Montgomery's fiction is a reimagining of rural femininity as dynamic and evolving rather

than fixed or predetermined. Each of her female characters embarks on a distinctive trajectory of growth that reflects both societal expectations and individual aspirations. Anne Shirley's imaginative spirit and intellectual ambition challenge the limitations imposed on women of her time, suggesting that self-expression and education are essential components of female fulfillment. Marilla Cuthbert's quiet emotional transformation reveals the possibilities for personal growth and resilience even within traditional roles. Diana Barry's contentment with domesticity reaffirms the legitimacy of conventional paths while also honouring the emotional richness inherent in these choices. Finally, Rilla Blythe's wartime maturation embodies the expanding roles women assumed in public and political spheres, illustrating adaptability and strength under extraordinary circumstances.

Montgomery's portrayal of these varied female experiences highlights an important feminist principle: there is no singular or "correct" way to be a woman. Instead, womanhood is presented as a spectrum encompassing intellectual ambition, domestic devotion, emotional endurance, and social engagement. This pluralism challenges early 20th-century gender norms that often sought to confine women within narrowly defined roles. By giving voice to different expressions of femininity, whether the rebellious, the dutiful, the traditional, or the transformative, Montgomery affirms the diversity and legitimacy of women's choices. Her characters collectively embody a proto-feminist vision that values autonomy, self-awareness, and the right to define one's own path. Central to this vision is the series' emphasis on female relationships and community. Montgomery portrays the bonds between women as foundational to personal development and social stability. Mentorship, friendship, and intergenerational support from the emotional core of Avonlea, underscoring the importance of solidarity in a world where women's formal power was limited. These relationships offer spaces for growth, reassurance, and resistance against societal pressures, highlighting the communal nature of female identity. Montgomery's recognition of these networks anticipates feminist critiques of individualism by emphasizing relationality and collective strength as key aspects of womanhood.

In summary, L. M. Montgomery's Anne of Green Gables series offers a powerful and enduring exploration of female character arcs that both reflect and challenge the social realities of her era. Through her richly drawn heroines and the communities they inhabit, Montgomery envisions womanhood as a complex, evolving process shaped by imagination, resilience, and relationships. Her work extends beyond pastoral nostalgia to engage with themes of autonomy, solidarity, and the legitimacy of diverse female experiences anticipating feminist literary concerns that would emerge more fully in later decades. This portrayal invites readers to reconsider the possibilities of female identity and recognize the enduring relevance of Montgomery's vision in conversations about gender, agency, and community.

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