

# Anne of Green Gables. Female portraits of childhoods in the Lucy Maud Montgomery's coming-of-age novels

## Anna dai capelli rossi. Ritratti di infanzie al femminile nei romanzi di formazione di Lucy Maud Montgomery

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DOUBLE BLIND PEER REVIEW

# ABSTRACT

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Children's literature is represented by stories of brave orphans who had faced difficult and unfortunate lives with determination. For Anne Shirley, a little girl without a family, the same path occurs: the search for, construction and rebirth of the family are the main themes around which Lucy Maud Montgomery's coming-of-age novels are based (Moretti, 1986; Morgenstern, 1994; Meek, Watson, 2003; Papini, Fioretti, Spignoli, 2007; Bernardi, 2011; Cambi, 2011; Calabrese, 2013; Trisciuzzi, 2014). Being part of a family, feeling 'at home' (Beseghi, 1995; Cantatore, 2013, 2015; Vitta, 2008; Trisciuzzi, 2018; Zago, Callegari, Campagnaro, 2019), appears to be the highest need and the centre of the plot itself, a story full of poetry, dreams, desires and joy that the little girl conveys to those around her, inside the pages of the novel, and to those who read her adventures, outside the book. Anne firmly assumes her role as a resilient orphan girl on a quest for a family nest (Trisciuzzi, 2018), a role she assumes and holds tightly in several books. Anne is an orphan girl who victoriously fights the orphan stereotype (Faeti, 2010, 2013). If her female colleagues are whiny or sad or perpetually in a state of crisis, she is an absolute vitalist. Anne savours every moment of existence, using all her senses and faculties to participate fully in this world and to derive joy, substance, light and colour from it. The female figures in Montgomery's novels, while representing the female condition of the time, make an original journey of growth through an innovative educational experience that reaches the present day.

### KEYWORDS

**Children's literature, Family history, Orphanhood, Coming-of-age novel, Anne of Green Gables, Lucy Maud Montgomery. Letteratura per l'infanzia, Storia della famiglia, Orfanezza, Romanzo di formazione, Anna dai capelli rossi, Lucy Maud Montgomery.**

Tra la fine dell'Ottocento e l'inizio del Novecento, la letteratura per l'infanzia è rappresentata da storie di orfane ed orfani coraggiosi che avevano affrontato con determinazione vite difficili e sfortunate senza esserne sopraffatti. Per Anne Shirley, bambina senza famiglia, avviene lo stesso percorso: la ricerca, la costruzione e la rinascita del nucleo familiare sono i temi principali intorno ai quali si basano i romanzi di formazione (Moretti, 1986; Morgenstern, 1994; Meek, Watson, 2003; Papini, Fioretti, Spignoli, 2007; Bernardi, 2011; Cambi, 2011; Calabrese, 2013; Trisciuzzi, 2014) di Lucy Maud Montgomery.

Far parte di una famiglia, sentirsi "a casa" (Beseghi, 1995; Cantatore, 2013, 2015; Vitta, 2008; Trisciuzzi, 2018; Zago, Callegari, Campagnaro, 2019), appare come la massima esigenza e centro della trama stessa, una storia ricca di poesia, di sogni, di desideri e gioia che la bambina trasmette a chi la circonda sia tra le pagine del romanzo, sia a chi legge le sue avventure, fuori dal libro. Anne assume saldamente il suo ruolo di bambina orfana e resiliente alla ricerca di un nido familiare (Trisciuzzi, 2018), un ruolo che assume e tiene ben stretto in vari libri. Anne è un'orfana che combatte vittoriosamente proprio lo stereotipo dell'orfanello (Faeti, 2010, 2013). Se le protagoniste dei romanzi a lei contemporanei sono piagnucolose o tristi o perennemente in crisi, lei è una vitalista assoluta. Anna assapora ogni momento dell'esistenza, utilizzando tutti i sensi e le sue facoltà per partecipare appieno al mondo, tentando di ricavarne gioia, sostanza, luci e colori. Infatti, le figure femminili dei romanzi della Montgomery, pur rappresentando la condizione femminile dell'epoca, compiono un originale percorso di crescita attraverso un innovativo viaggio di formazione che arriva fino ad oggi.

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## 1. The search, creation and rebirth of the family

Then a whisper blossoms from your sleep  
How can I climb  
The alpine path, so hard, so impervious,  
That leads to sublime summits;  
How can I reach the distant goal  
Of true and honoured fame,  
And write on its shining parchment,  
A humble woman's name  
(Montgomery, 2017, p. 10).

When she was still a child, Lucy Maud Montgomery cut out a passage of a poem entitled *To the Fringed Gentian* from a magazine of the time and pasted it on the corner of the small folder in which she wrote her letters and school essays. That poem, she says, represented the basic concept on which her every aim and ambition rested (Ibid.).

Indeed, the alpine path is a metaphor describing the path that, from a very young age, Lucy took to become a writer, a hard and steep path, a goal that seemed out of reach.

She states: "I have written before about the episodes and places that characterised my childhood, as they had a great influence on the development of my literary talent. A different environment could have given my gift a different slant. Had it not been for the years I spent in Cavendish *Anne of Green Gables* would never have been written. When people ask me «When did you start writing?» I say «I wish I could remember». I can't remember a time when I didn't write or when I didn't have the specific intention of becoming a writer. Writing has always been my central purpose around which all the efforts, hope and ambition of my life have been focused" (Montgomery, 2017, p. 69).

It was 1908 when the Canadian writer Lucy Maud Montgomery wrote the first novel *Anne of Green Gables*, the first in a saga of books dedicated to the stories of the orphan Anne Shirley, published from 1908 to 1939, including *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), *Anne of Avonlea* (1909), *Anne of the Island* (1915), *Anne of Windy Poplars* (1936), *Anne's house of dreams* (1917), *Anne of Ingleside* (1939), *Rainbow valley* (1919), *Rilla of Ingleside* (1921).

First published in 1908, "the book really stands as testimony to earlier literary history. [...] Anne always seems the object of others' eyes, always the focus of attention, whether it be on the first day of her new school or on the rooftop, walking along on a dare" (Lerer, 2008, p. 235).

Several 19th-century novels tell stories of orphans who had bravely faced miserable and unfortunate lives without giving in to them but finding great resilience, partly thanks to a chance encounter with generous adult presences – Vitali for Rémi (*Nobody's boy*, novel by Hector Malot) – or equally in need of affection – the Alpe's uncle, Heidi's grandfather (*Heidi*, novel by Johanna Spyri). For Anne, a child without a family, the same process takes place. The search for, creation and rebirth of the family unit are the main themes around which Lucy Maud Montgomery's coming-of-age novels<sup>1</sup> are based. Belonging to someone, being part of a family, appears as the utmost necessity and the centre of the plot itself, a story full of poetry, dreams, desires and joy that the little girl communicates to those around her between the pages of the novel, in the plot of the story, to those who read her adventures.

In relation to this Faeti states that

the Nineteenth century, with the feuilletons, the appendix novels, had been full of crying orphans, there had been endless boarding schools, very long dormitories with thousands of crying little girls, and ferocious headmistresses, and sadistic headmistresses' husbands, with brutal cooks and disgusting food and wardrobe attendants careful to choose rough clothes, to propagate horrendous sheets. [...] One could be sure that a character drawn from such a tortuous, abundant and well-known genealogy could only come across as boring, repetitive, cloying, useless. But Anne, or Anna as she wanted to be called, firmly assumes her role, and holds on to it in several books, even seeming capable of turning the doubts raised by her first appearance against those who formulated them. Anna is an orphan girl who victoriously fights the very stereotype of the orphan girl. If her colleagues, if her companions in misfortune or in the ward are weepy or sad or perpetually in crisis, she is an absolute vitalist who savours every moment of existence and uses sight, hearing, smell to be part of a world that she intends to squeeze out of it for joy, flavours, light, substance<sup>2</sup> (Faeti, 2013, pp. 402-403).

1 On the *coming-of-age novel*: "Bildungsroman wird er heißen dürfen, ersten und vorzüglich wegen seines Stoffs, weil er des Helden Bildung in ihrem Anfang und Fortgang bis zu einer gewissen Stufe der Vollendung darstellt; zweitens aber auch, weil er gerade durch diese Darstellung des Lesers Bildung, im weitem Umfange als jede andere Art des Romans, fördert" (Morgenstern K. (1819). Über das Wesen des Bildungsromans. Vortrag. In R. Selbmann (1994). *Der deutsche Bildungsroman. 2., überarbeitete und erweiterte Auflage*. Stuttgart: Metzler Verlag, p. 19).

2 Translated by the Author.

The desire for a home, for a family, strongly comes out from the very beginning, in the first pages of the novel. Says the young protagonist: "I like the idea of 'going home'. I don't remember ever having one, and to think that 'I'm going home' gives me that pleasant aching feeling again. Oh, it feels so good here!" (Montgomery, 2018, p. 31). Francesca Borruso states in this regard: "The children's literature for girls and young middle-class girls, in fact, differs from that reserved for boys and is endowed with its own thematic specificity, often steeped in Victorian morality, conditioned by religious ideology, precepts and education. It is no coincidence that the plots of the stories often take place within the domestic walls, both because that is the space reserved for the female world, and because it is the place of domestic intimacy in which the family memory, the fulcrum of bourgeois identity, takes shape and depth. The educational imagery conveyed by girl-child literature confines women to the private sphere, assigns them the ideal of 'motherly love' and the virtues of obedience to family authority, fidelity, meekness, silence, gentleness, self-denial and sacrifice"<sup>3</sup> (2019, pp. 63-64).

If the classics of the 19th century, as mentioned above, remind us that women's places par excellence are interiors (Beseghi, 1995; Cantatore, 2013, 2015; Vitta, 2008; Trisciuzzi, 2018; Borruso, 2019; Zago, Callegari, Campagnaro, 2019), Anne shows us, although in her own small way, new perspectives and new horizons, both inside and outside the home. The domestic ambience, so much wanted and desired by the girl, though cold and bare, is overturned by the protagonist's lively and optimistic vision. It is precisely that gaze, intelligent and other than what the Cuthberts had originally intended: one more like theirs, used not to dreaming, not to imagination, but practical and simple. From "The white road of delights" via "The lake of shining waters", Anne sees and feels her surroundings in a very deep way, spreading her love to those around her: "the garden and the orchard and the stream and the trees and the whole world around. Don't you feel a boundless love for the world on mornings like this? From up here I can even hear the stream gurgling. Have you ever noticed how cheerful streams are? They always seem to be laughing. Even in winter you can hear them under the ice. I'm glad there's a creek near Green Gables" (Montgomery, 2018, p. 45).

Like most quality children's literature, Anne's story mirrors the society contemporary to the novel, being rooted in the reality of the early 20th century. Montgomery always carried a notebook with her in which she jotted down ideas for plots, events, characters, and descriptions as they came to mind. In the spring of 1904, she was going through a notebook looking for some ideas for a serial story she wanted to write for a Sunday School newspaper. She found a note faded out, written many years earlier: "An elderly couple applies to an orphanage for a child. By mistake a little girl is sent to them" (Montgomery, 2017, p. 95). Thinking it might be a good starting point, Montgomery began writing by sketching out chapters and choosing a name for her heroine. Anne's character began to evolve in such a way that it soon seemed real to her and took "possession of the writer" to an unusual degree. "She called me" (Ibid., p. 96), Montgomery states. Lucy Maud Montgomery's novels and her Anne, like her other protagonists, draw on her life, her memories, and the world around her. The dominant *topoi* that mainly emerge in her novels are the abandoned childhood, the loss of one or both parents or the reconstruction of family unity, the feelings of children and their relationship of love and hatred towards adults, are taken up in part by the same feelings felt or the same experiences experienced by the author during her childhood. Finally, the theme of the natural environment, education in beauty and the salvific relationship with Mother Nature, through the descriptions of Prince Edward Island, appear throughout the various novels.

The female figures, the little girls born from Montgomery's pen, follow a path of growth, a formative journey in which they become not only protagonists of their own changes, but also depict the female condition of the era, sometimes anticipating the times. Beseghi states: "The 19th century fixed unforgettable emblems of little girls through literature, opened interesting glimpses into the subterranean history of little girls, suggested metaphors capable of delving into a meticulous and complex observation of their world. From the lower to the higher social classes, figures of little girls stand out in nineteenth-century fiction, able to give us portraits of childhood linked to a historical context rendered with extreme effectiveness"<sup>4</sup> (2001, p. 48). As already mentioned, the biographical component should not be forgotten, indeed Montgomery was an orphan alone in the world. In addition, the writer consciously chooses to narrate her heroines as orphans. The protagonists of her novels<sup>5</sup> are also girls whose lives are not as adventurous as those of other male protagonists of novels contemporary to her. Their vicissitudes are confined to the small rural villages in which they are raised, and their orphanhood has different characteristics to those of male orphans. The female orphans are not hungry or cold, or living on hardship, but they are dressed, certainly not too well so as not to feed their vanity, but they are clean and physically groomed. The novels do not start with a departure to an adventure or an unknown place but with an arrival at a new home.

*Anne of Green Gables* is a depiction of that kind of cliché. Female protagonists like Anne do not face ferocious

3 Translated by the Author.

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5 In addition to Anne, protagonist of the series about the life of Anne Shirley of Green Gables, we remember Emily Byrd Starr, heroine of the series *Emily of the New Moon*.

beasts but foster mothers or spinster aunts. They don't face the dangers of the jungle – like Mowgli (Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*) – or walk the roads of France – like R mi –, but they cross *white roads of delights*, skirt *shining lakes* or traverse safe woods making them dark and gloomy, like the fear derived from crossing them, through fantasy and imagination.

The village community becomes like a second family for the protagonist. In fact, the novels are almost always set in and around the small town of Avonlea. The community and its citizens are fully described as the novels unfold.

The island of Prince Edward becomes the community-family that stands apart from the rest of the world. A place on which Montgomery places a strong focus by designating it the land of her heart. Being an island makes this sense of separateness even more definable, becoming fully part of the fairytale thanks to the *topos* that represents it. The island, her being separate and *other* than what is outside her, becomes the world to grow up in, to belong to: home.

## 2. Before Green Gables

More than one hundred years after the publication of the first novel about Anne Shirley, the book *Before Green Gables*, translated in Italy as *Sorridi, piccola Anna dai capelli rossi* (Wilson, 2010), has been published in England. The author is the Canadian Budge Wilson who, already a writer of numerous children's and young adult novels, thanks to the agreement of Lucy Maud Montgomery's descendants, was given the opportunity to re-explore Anne's life. *Before Green Gables*, set in the second half of the 19th century, is the prequel to the *Anne of Green Gables* series, which tells the story of little Anne Shirley before she arrives in Avonlea and begins her new life with Marilla and Matthew Cuthbert.

Anne was born in Bolingbroke in Nova Scotia to Bertha and Walter Shirley, two high school teachers who, after only three months, both die of an infectious disease. Having no other relatives, the child lives her early childhood in the care of the Shirleys' housekeeper and her family: Bert, her alcoholic and abusive husband, and their three children, by whom she will never be considered an integral part of the family. The only presence closer to the child and her feelings is the figure of Eliza, the couple's eldest daughter, who, however, leaves the family to leave with her husband to move to England. After Bert's death, the little girl is entrusted to the Hammond family, where she stays for a few years, taking care of the family's eight children most of the time. When Mr Hammond also dies, Anne is sent to an orphanage, where she stays for a few months before being finally adopted by Marilla and Matthew Cuthbert, with whom she finally finds a home and a family. The story ends exactly where the first volume of Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* series starts.

Wilson's story does not stray very far from what Anne, in the first volume, talks about herself:

I turned eleven in March. [...] And I was born in Bolingbroke, Nova Scotia. My father's name was Walter Shirley and he taught at Bolingbroke High School. My mother's name was Bertha Shirley. Don't you think Walter and Bertha are lovely names? I am happy that my parents had lovely names. [...] Anyway, my mother also taught school, but she stopped when she married my father. Taking care of a husband was already a big responsibility. Mrs Thomas told me that they were two kids, dirt poor. They lived in a tiny yellow house in Bolingbroke. I have never seen that little house, but I have imagined it a thousand times. There was honeysuckle on the sill of the living room window, and then lilacs in front of the garden and lilies of the valley just beyond the gate. And muslin curtains on the windows. Muslin curtains always give a certain tone to houses. That's where I was born. Mrs Thomas says I was the ugliest baby she had ever seen, small and skinny, with two big eyes, but that my mother thought I was beautiful. I would say that a mother's judgement is more valuable than that of a poor woman who had only come to clean up, wouldn't you say? Anyway, I'm glad to know that she liked me, if I had disappointed her, I would have been sad... because she didn't live very long after that. She died of a fever when I was only three months old. I wish she had lived long enough for me to remember calling her 'mum' at least once. It's a sweet thing to be able to say 'mum', isn't it? My father died four days later, of the same fever. So, I was left as an orphan and no one knew what to do with me, Mrs Thomas told me. You see, even then no one wanted me. It's just my fate" (Montgomery, 2018, pp. 52-53). The story continues, "Finally Mrs Thomas said she would take me with her, even though she was poor, and her husband was a drunkard. She gave me milk with a teaspoon. Do you happen to know whether babies who are breastfed in this way are usually better than those who are breastfed normally? Because every time I messed something up Mrs Thomas wondered, how could I be such a bad baby, since she had breastfed me with her own hands. It sounded a bit like a reproach. [...] I lived with them until I was eight years old. Then Mr Thomas was hit by a train and died, and his mother offered to take Mrs Thomas and the children in, but she did not want to take me too. So, it was Mrs Thomas's turn not to know what to do with me. At that point Mrs Hammond arrived. [...] So I went to live with her down by the river, in a clearing full of cut logs. It was a very lonely place. If I couldn't use my imagination, I would certainly never have been able to live there. Mr Hammond had a small sawmill and Mrs Hammond had eight children. I like children enough, but having twins three times in a row is just too much.

I also said this to Mrs Hammond when the last two arrived. [...] I lived in Mrs Hammond's house for more than two years, then Mr Hammond died, and she decided she had had enough of being a housewife. She divided the children among relatives and went to the United States. And I ended up at the orphanage in Hopeton. [...] By the time Mrs Spencer arrived, I had already been there four months (Ibid., pp. 54-55),

and she directed Anne to Marilla and Matthew Cuthbert.

### 3. From novel to screen. The World Masterpiece Theater

From Budge Wilson's novel, the Japanese anime *Smile Little Anne*, produced in 2009 by Nippon Animation, was subsequently made. Like this TV series was inspired by the prequel created by Wilson, the 1979 TV series *Anne of Green Gables* was inspired by Montgomery's novels. The lyrics of the Japanese TV series' Italian theme song are still sung today:

Redheaded Anna goes  
flies and goes like a swallow  
But she has no nest  
She has neither a mother nor a father.

Redheaded Anna has  
two grams of happiness  
locked inside her soul  
and wants to smile at the world.

How wonderful on the swing  
going lightly up and down  
and so many close friends  
united all around me.

Redheaded Anna has  
a hat on her twenty-three  
and two crystal-clear eyes  
and a lot of Freckles.

From Matthew and Marilla she will have  
a house where she will sleep  
and at her breast she will have a doll  
to talk and laugh with<sup>6</sup>.

Both TV series are part of the *World Masterpiece Theatre* project (Trisciuzzi, 2013) sponsored in the first year by Toei Doga and later by Nippon Animation.

The space for the imagination – words often repeated by Anne – and its free expression, giving voice to the fantasy it can create, is a reminder that Montgomery leaves us more than a hundred years after the novels were published.

In children's literature, Lucy Maud Montgomery's novels are still classics that cross the whole of the 20th century, and it is significant that from this character, new transpositions with Anne as the protagonist have been proposed again, even recently.

6 The theme song *Anna dai capelli rossi* is written and composed by Albertelli & Tempera, sung by 'Gli Amici di Anna', Record company: Fonit Cetra, 1980. "Anna dai capelli rossi va/vola e va come una rondine/però un nido non ce l'ha/non ha una mamma né un papà./Anna dai capelli rossi ha/due grammi di felicità/chiusi dentro all'anima/e al mondo vuol sorridere./Che meraviglia sull'altalena/che va leggera su e giù/e tanti amici stretti stretti/uniti tutti intorno a me./Anna dai capelli rossi ha/un cappello sulle ventitré/e due occhi limpidi/e un mare di lentiggini./Da Matteo e da Marilla avrà/una casa dove dormirà/e al petto avrà una bambola/con cui parlare e ridere" (Translated by the Author).

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