Feminine convention and female identity: The persistent challenge of *Anne of Green Gables*

Susan Drain

Résumé: *L.M. Montgomery propose des modèles de féminité de façon directe dans sa peinture des caractères et de façon indirecte par le recours à des métaphores.*

Surely no other novel of its period is as widely read today as Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* [1908] (Toronto: Ryerson, 1942). There are many reasons for this continuing popularity; among them must be the ambivalence of the novel's portrait of girlhood. The novel both conforms to and resists conventions; the resulting tensions, though seen somewhat differently at a distance of nearly a century, actually hold the novel together. As complex, as enfolding, and as domestic as the cotton warp quilts that Mrs. Lynde is knitting in the first chapter, the novel weaves intricate individual patterns on the standard feminine frame.

(Metaphors, as so often, are instructive here: the very term *warp*, the lengthwise threads which define the shape and size of a piece of weaving, carries with it the ambiguity of its less technical sense, the sense of distortion, of something twisted or "out of true". In the novel, as in the society it represents, as well as the society to which it still speaks, being female is to weave the individual weft through the social warp. The beauty and strength as well as the usefulness of those lives may still surprise those daughters and granddaughters who repudiate the traditional warp.)

Tracing how the novel's values work with and against the conventional is the essential preliminary to formulating a satisfactory definition of what is, in the novel's terms, essentially female. I say "in the novel's terms" deliberately; this differentiation and definition is, I contend, what readers do, as they respond more or less consciously to patterns in the novel and to the ways in which the novel interacts with patterns of expectations its readers bring. Whether or not its author intended, knew, or would recognize these patterns is irrelevant for my purposes; what is important is that the novel allows, even demands, exploration of the ideals and realities, both individual and social, of femininity and femaleness. Every young reader of the novel faces the developmental task of defining her female self in the contexts of her society; though the historical details have changed since the beginning of this century, the tensions and am-

bivalences implicit in the task remain recognizable and even reassuring to generations of readers.

Take, for example, the tensions in the handling of romantic love in *Anne*. Anne is only eleven at the beginning of the book, and to her, schoolroom gossip or "writing take-notices up on the wall about the boys and girls" is "the silliest ever" (139). Nevertheless, the theme has been introduced, even if light-heartedly. Any reader of romance, however, will immediately recognize that Anne's antipathy, her "icy contempt" (152), in fact, for Gilbert Blythe, is a common conventional prelude to true love. The theme is reintroduced from time to time, in Anne's determination not to acknowledge Gilbert's existence, at the same time as she strives to better him and to "keep ahead" of their class. However conventional the expected course of this true love, though, it is remarkable how evenly matched the characters are, both academically and morally. Neither has an advantage over the other. That is, though Gilbert had originally wronged Anne in taunting her, Anne in turn wrongs Gilbert by scorning his apology and offer of friendship, even after he has rescued her from a "watery grave" (286). Rivalry requires equality; romance does not, and it is rivalry, not romance, which gives interest to a story-line which, after Anne has outgrown her scrapes, would be in danger of becoming an unrelieved recital of Anne's successes. The potential romance of the relationship colours the rivalry between Anne and Gilbert; similarly the narrator's insistence on Anne's romantic immunity heightens the reader's tension:

> There was no silly sentiment in Anne's ideas concerning Gilbert. Boys were to her, when she thought about them at all, merely possible good comrades. (363)

Even when they are eventually reconciled, Anne says no more than that "we have decided that it will be much more sensible to be good friends in future" (396). This unromantic declaration protests too much: the novel manages both to thwart and to satisfy the reader who demands romance.

Just as the novel plays with rather than violates the romantic expectation, its handling of social conventions also repays sensitive attention. On the surface, the novel does not challenge conventional definitions or limitations. For example, Anne is not immune to the delights of fashion, and her preoccupation with the colour of her hair and the shape of her nose bears witness to the extent to which she has accepted a standard of female beauty from her romantic reading ("hair...of midnight darkness and...skin...a clear ivory pallor" (79)), which is much the standard of Avonlea prettiness – the "snap and colour...real showy" (318) which Mrs. Lynde admires. That is, Anne is both conventional in her wistful acknowledgement of the accepted definition, and unconventional in her individual appearance. It is reassuring to all ugly ducklings that Anne grows up to have her individual beauty acknowledged, but there is the bitterness of the anomaly here, reaffirming the conventional even as it acknowledges variation, isolating the individual in the public gaze.

The definition of gender roles is so inflexible as to resist even anomaly. Anne's arrival at Green Gables is an affront to the Cuthberts' expectations:

> We want a boy to help Matthew on the farm. A girl would be of no use to us. (33)

The best Matthew can suggest is that a girl could be "company" for Marilla. Eventually, of course, Anne is trained to the conventional standard, to be "a great help" to Marilla, able to make "hot biscuits...light and white enough to defy even Mrs. Rachel's criticism" (317). She is never a great help to Matthew, not even by milking the cows: her sex is apparently an insuperable impediment to her being anything to him but 'company.'

> 'If I had been the boy you sent for,' said Anne wistfully, 'I'd be able to help you so much more and spare you in a hundred ways.' (375-376)

Although kindred spirits find gender no barrier to their private relations, it remains an insuperable one in their public roles.

Anne's public self is restricted to a domestic sphere, but she does not deliberately reject that sphere nor chafe against its restrictions. Domesticity, however, is something that must be learned. Anne's "scrapes" show us her difficulties and her triumphs in learning these lessons: mixed-up bottles in the pantry, disastrous cake-baking, and tending to sick children. Incidents beyond the domestic sphere are rarely very active: Anne and Diana establish a playhouse among the birch trees; they scare themselves by imagining an haunted wood; they attend concerts and have a story club. When she does do something physically active or even risky, it is not something that she has herself initiated: walking the ridge-pole is a response to a dare, and ends in a tumble, not a triumph. Her near-drowning was an accident, the result of a leaky flat. This life-and-death episode, in fact, vividly illustrates tensions in the novel's portrait of Anne. She is set adrift, in the first place, because she is playing Elaine, the personification of female passivity and romantic hopelessness, but she demonstrates pluck, clear-headedness, and nimbleness:

> 'I prayed, Mrs. Allan, most earnestly...It was proper to pray, but I had to do my part by watching out and right well I knew it. I just said, "Dear God, please take the flat close to a pile and I'll do the rest," over and over again.' (285-286)

Her own resourcefulness, however, though necessary, is not sufficient to save her. God and Gilbert have to intervene.

For the most part, Anne does not so much do the unusual, as do the usual differently. Chiefly that difference consists of her being unlike her female peers, without being at all like the male. For example, all the schoolchildren loiter in the spruce woods over dinner hour, but though the girls manage to get back to the schoolroom on time, Anne returns late with the boys. She has

been more extreme than the girls, but she has not actually been boyish: she had not been climbing the trees like the boys, only "wandering...waist deep among the bracken, singing softly to herself" (146).

From the very beginning of the novel, Anne has been portrayed as different from, indeed, superior to, other girls, though they live within the same social roles. The first description of her concludes thus: "in short, our discerning extraordinary observer might have concluded that no commonplace soul inhabited the body of this stray woman-child of whom shy Matthew Cuthbert was so ludicrously afraid" (15). The narrator flatters the reader, by the implication that she is that "discerning extraordinary observer," into accepting without question from the beginning that Anne is an unusual girl. The reader's view is soon confirmed by Matthew:

> Women were bad enough in all conscience; but little girls were worse. He detested the way they had of sidling past him timidly, with sidewise glances, as if they expected him to gobble them up at a mouthful if they ventured to say a word. That was the Avonlea type of well-bred little girl. But this freckled witch was very different, and...he thought that he 'kind of liked her chatter.' (20)

Matthew's preference is echoed by Gilbert, who is struck by Anne's "big eyes that weren't like the eyes of any other girl in Avonlea school" (142), and by Miss Barry, who declares that she gets "tired of other girls – there is such a provoking and eternal sameness about them. Anne has many shades as a rainbow" (366). Even Mrs. Lynde concedes that "when Anne and [the other girls] are together, though she ain't half as handsome, she makes them look kind of common and overdone" (318).

Anne's uniqueness is a matter not only of "the effect produced by [her] slender white form and spiritual face" (348), but also of her personality. Surely Marilla is right to have misgivings: "Anne was such an odd girl. How would she get on with the other children?" (137). Although Anne does not fit Avonlea's or the reader's expectations of girlhood, the girls themselves are more accepting. They have room for her special talents, because, of course, they lack them. When Anne returns to school after her absence, she finds that "her imagination had been sorely missed in games, her voice in the singing, and her dramatic ability in the perusal aloud of books at dinner hour" (172). The girls show their appreciation of her in "feminine" and unoriginal ways: a cut-out flower for a desk decoration, and "effusion" painstakingly copied "on a piece of pale-pink paper," an old perfume bottle for slate water, and a "perfectly elegant new pattern of knit lace, *so* nice for trimming aprons" (172). These unimaginative, derivative expressions must be forgiven, however, for no one but Anne possesses any imagination. The Story Club is formed so that Anne can help Diana, and the others, cultivate their imaginative powers, but it is an uphill task: "I mostly always have to tell them what to write about, but that isn't hard for I've millions of ideas" (268).

Even when Anne is seen in a classic female nurturing role, nursing Minnie and May during a severe attack of croup, she is clearly superior to her peers. Neither Diana nor young Mary Joe exhibits anything like her competence, the "skill and presence of mind" (184) which earns her the approbation of the Spencervale doctor.

These examples confirm Anne's unusual status: she is bolder, more practical, more imaginative, and more decisive than her female peers, although she never sets foot outside the realm allotted to little girls. She is no tomboy. If Anne represents a desirable idea of the female, then that idea is defined only in differences: different not only from the masculine, but also from the conventional "feminine" as represented by the girls of Avonlea.

At the core of the novel, expressed in its very language, is a pervasive ambivalence about being female. To be a girl is to be a disappointment, not only because one is not the boy that society actively values, but because the reality of conventional girlhood in Avonlea is so pallid. Anne is distanced from that reality not only in all the ways just shown, but in the very terms used to identify her. Of course, the word "girl" is frequently neutral, merely distinguishing female from male children, but it is also frequently a term of depreciation.

Take, for example, the end of Chapter 16: "Diana is invited to tea," where Anne tries to explain to Mrs Barry that she had not intentionally "set Diana drunk." In two pages, Anne is referred to by her own name, and also as a "soul" (twice), a "girl" (twice), a "child" (three times, and once, as a "suppliant." "Soul" is a sympathetic term, used when Anne's feelings are to the forefront – "a very much distracted little soul" (166) and "'Poor little soul,' [Marilla] murmured" (168). "Child" is the only term (besides "suppliant") which is not qualified by "little;" it is the neutral term, though it takes colour from its context: Mrs. Barry's "such a child" (166) is negative, though unjust, whereas "the child's tear-stained face" (168) is sympathetic. Both examples of "girl," however, serve to diminish Anne. She herself uses it to humble herself before implacable Mrs. Barry: "Oh, Mrs. Barry, please forgive me....Just imagine if you were a poor little orphan girl" (166). But Mrs. Barry is not softened, and she dismisses Anne "coldly and cruelly: 'I don't think you are a fit little girl for Diana to associate with'" (167).

These variations are pervasive as well as subtle: when old Miss Barry ponders the influence Anne has on her, her use of "girl" and "child" reflects her improved opinion:

> I thought Marilla Cuthbert was an old fool when I heard she'd adopted a *girl* out of an orphan asylum...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. (302, emphasis added)

Miss Barry habitually refers to Anne as "you Anne-girl" (297), qualifying the generic with the individual. Similarly, in that first description of Anne (15) re-

ferred to above, the narrator, eager to portray Anne in a positive light, eschews the word "girl" in favour of the periphrasis "woman-child."

Significantly, it is only in the description of Anne's relation to Gilbert that Anne is explicitly described in a more stereotypical way than elsewhere. Before she actually meets Gilbert, she contradicts Diana's assertion that to be the "smartest girl in the school" (140) is "better than being good looking:"

> 'No, it isn't,' said Anne, *feminine to the core*. 'I'd rather be pretty than clever.' (140, emphasis added)

Similarly, when Anne comes to regret snubbing Gilbert, she does not admit it, save "deep down in her wayward, *feminine little heart*" (313, emphasis added). The reader is ruefully aware that Anne is fooling herself in the first case, and putting up a false front to fool others in the second. Thus, femininity, which seems ineradicably central ("core" and "heart"), is associated with insincerity. Here is the real danger of romance – the danger that the susceptible "feminine little heart" will betray even the self-possessed Anne.

The whole novel is shot through with this ambivalence, a reluctance to be identified with girlhood and an inability to step outside its confines. However, to reject the "feminine" and the "girlish" does not mean a repudiation of the "female." At the same time as to be a girl is less than desirable, the only real and strong characters in the book are the female ones. The men either do not really appear (like Thomas Lynde and Mr. Allan, both mere appendages of their wives) or are inadequate in various ways. The schoolteacher Mr. Phillips is unjust, inconsistent, sarcastic, and neglectful, except of Prissy Andrews for whom he has an unprofessional, and ridiculous, interest. Gilbert is too good to be true, a storybook hero, tall, "with curly brown hair, roguish hazel eyes, and a mouth twisted into a teasing smile" (141). Even Matthew, endearing as he is, is crippled by his extreme shyness.

Compared with the men, Marilla and Mrs. Lynde are strong, individual and vital. They have their weaknesses, but they are all of a piece, and undeniably real. Not all the women are so believable: Mrs. Allan and Miss Stacy, are, respectively, moral and intellectual ideals, but they exert a strong influence on those around them, and they have no male equivalents. Even the unpleasant Miss Barry has a snap and a humanity that Mr. Phillips, say, lacks.

Whether the generally unimpressive girls of Avonlea will in turn develop into such strong and interesting women as their elders is unclear. The organization of the Queen's class is a turning point for them all: Diana is prevented from further studies, "as her parents did not intend to send her to Queen's" (311). Jane and Ruby, like Anne, will study to be teachers. Here again, however, Anne is distinguished from her fellows. Whereas Ruby says "she will only teach for two years after she gets through, and then she intends to be married" (312), Anne looks forward to having a "worthy purpose" and a "noble profession" (311). Jane has another ambition; for her, teaching is neither a noble profession nor

a preliminary to marriage – it is a means of independence:

> 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. (312)

The standard by which the girls' ambitions are measured, obviously, is marriage, though the male students are going to be ministers and members of Parliament. Anne's own early visions of the future had also been defined in terms of the likelihood or unlikelihood of marriage: at age eleven, she foresees marriage for Diana, but not for herself (152), unless it is to a minister who might not mind a red-headed wife, "because he wouldn't be thinking of such worldly things" (230). Before the Queen's class is organized, Anne admits to no larger future than living "together forever" with Diana as "nice old maids" (306). Her model, after all, is Marilla, who has broken Avonlea's usual pattern of womanhood by not marrying, although she conforms to it in every way as housekeeper for her brother. Anne's ambitions begin to stir, however; when the chance is offered "to go to Queen's and pass for a teacher" (309), she confesses that "It's been the dream of my life – that is, for the last six months" (310). She even begins to imagine the impossible: "If I were a man I think I'd be a minister...I think women would make splendid ministers" (320).

Eventually Anne's ambitions outstrip those of her female friends, when she dreams of winning the Avery Scholarship and studying at Redmond, but there occurs at this point in the novel a kind of failure of nerve, as the conventional values appear to reassert themselves. Marilla turns out to be single not by choice but by a stubborn mistake. Mrs. Lynde is gloomy: she "says pride goes before a fall and she doesn't believe in the higher education of women at all; she says it unfits them for woman's true sphere" (374). Ultimately, Anne renounces her plans and makes her commitment to Green Gables, a commitment which coincides with the beginning of a new relationship with Gilbert. Though Anne's youthful inclination was that "it's much more romantic to end a story up with a funeral than wedding" (267), the close of her own story looks suspiciously conventional.

The tension remains, however. Anne claims to be "just as ambitious as ever," and to have changed only the object of her ambitions, but this is her public statement. The reader is convinced that her private ambitions are unchanged, that the "*little* college course all by [herself]" (392) which will occupy her evening is more than the substitute for fancywork that she claims. The relationship with Gilbert is to be established on a basis of equality and shared interest: they have been well-matched as rivals and promise the same as friends and fellow students at home.

In short, when Anne chooses to stay home, she is not dwindling into a girl; instead she is continuing to construct her own female identity and future. It is neither conventionally feminine, nor masculine. It has room for both in-

dividual ambition and a commitment to others: she will continue her scholarly pursuits and she will preserve Marilla's eyesight and her home at Green Gables. Her own metaphor of the bend in the road (190) helps the reader as well as Anne to resist premature closure.

Mrs. Lynde, of course, sees Anne's decision as final and is relieved: "You've got as much education now as a woman can be comfortable with" (392). Although this declaration suggests that "woman's true sphere" (374), as Mrs. Lynde sees it, is restrictingly enclosed and confined, the reader and Anne would do well to judge by Mrs Lynde's practice rather than by her words.

For Mrs. Lynde, from the first chapter to the last, is the most individual, fully realized character in the book. She combines an inexhaustible domestic energy with insatiable curiosity and decided views about the community in which she is an active participant (some would say busybody) and about the larger world, too. Even when she is apparently cloistered, sitting at home "knitting 'cotton warp' quilts" (2), she maintains a comprehensive overview and understanding of "everything that passe[s]...and...the whys and wherefores thereof" (1). For Mrs. Lynde, woman's true sphere includes national politics and an up-to-date knowledge of all the disasters that happen outside Avonlea. The very irony with which she is described is a recognition of the contradictions of which she seems unaware. Thus, for example, although she thinks it a "scandalous thing" (320) for women to be ministers, the reader has no doubt that Anne and Marilla are right, though one is sincere and the other sarcastic, about Mrs. Lynde's fitness for, and unsanctified usurpation of, the task:

> 'I'm sure Mrs. Lynde can pray every bit as well as Superintendent Bell and I've no doubt she could preach too with a little practice.'
>
> 'Yes, I believe she could,' said Marilla dryly. 'She does plenty of unofficial preaching as it is. Nobody has much of a chance to go wrong in Avonlea with Rachel to oversee them.' (320-321)

Though by no means a universally satisfactory pattern of womanhood, the example of Mrs. Lynde – forthright, kind, critical, contradictory Mrs. Lynde, whose opinions are narrow but her involvement wide – is the best guide Anne has to what it is to be a fully realized woman. That Anne will do better than Mrs. Lynde in reconciling the contradictions and the tensions is the expectation with which the reader closes the book, but that the contradictions and tensions will persist is a certainty that accompanies that expectation. Whether in 1908 or nearly a century later, female identity can be constructed only in a context in which both resistance and commitment are possible, in order to free the unfeminine female from the limitations of conventional expectation.

Susan Drain *is visiting Professor at the University of Toronto where she teaches children's literature and pursues research in Victorian writing for children.*