Gender construction and nature in l.m. montgomery’s anne of green gables

There is much debate amongst literary critics over L. M. Montgomery’s Anne of Green Gables. The arguments stem from the whether or not it should be defined as a feminist novel and what the narrative really implies about women. L. M. Montgomery disassociated herself from the feminist movement, yet she believed that women should have the right to vote (Montgomery and Cecily, 27). Her seemingly contrasting views and opinions have led to a diverse cacophony of works from both ends of the spectrum. Although there may be subtle hints of pervasive femininity in Anne, older girls are generally the ones who recognize it. Montgomery wrote Anne of Green Gables as a “ girl’s novel,” depicting women as behaving in a prescribed way and embodying certain characteristics. By doing this, Montgomery affirms gender difference but not inequality (Montgomery and Cecily, 26). Anne of Green Gables reveals the early 20th Century assumptions about the role of females in society and, in doing so, presents the limited number of choices available to them. Anne’s imagination is what makes her special and unique, even though her romantic thoughts and pictures are distinctly feminine (Berg, 127). However, she must learn to repress her imagination as she gets older. If the character of Anne were an adult, readers would have considered her a frivolous scatterbrain (Weiss-Town, 15). By writing her as a child, Montgomery could get away with Anne saying and doing things that would not be appropriate for a proper woman. During Montgomery’s time, children were respected, sometimes even envied, because when they grew up they had to behave a certain way. Anne’s imagination is a source of both good and evil in her life. Montgomery describes it as a “ good imagination gone wrong” (Berg, 126). For example, one night Marilla forces Anne to walk through the forest that Anne has

named the “ Haunted Woods” to get something from Mrs. Barrie. Anne is terrified on her short journey because of all the ghosts she believes live in the forest. When she returns home to Marilla, she tells her that she’ll be content with “ common place names after this” (Berg, 126). In this episode, Anne learns about the dangers of her imagination and the consequences it can have, scaring herself half to death with her own made-up names and stories. Anne again proves that she has learned to suppress her imagination when her teacher asks her to stop reading a book and she obeys. The book “ was one Ruby Gillis had leant me,” she explains to Marilla, “ and Marilla, it was so fascinating and creepy, it just curdled the blood in my veins. But Miss Stacy said it was a very silly unwholesome book, and she asked me not to read any more of it or any like it” (Berg, 126). In the early 20th Century, Gothic novels was not considered appropriate for girls to read, because people believed that it could greatly alter their grasp of reality. These kinds of books would be considered especially dangerous for girls with vivid imaginations, like Anne. It was mainly girls who read (and still read) Anne of Green Gables, so the novel served as a sort of cautionary tale where they could learn from Anne’s mistakes alongside her (Carol, 10). Although Montgomery portrays Anne as a rambunctious child with a bad temper and a wild imagination, she also embodies many of the stereotypical feminine characteristics of a late 19th Century girl (Weiss-Town, 14). Anne’s sorrows are not caused by her chafing against womanhood, rather, they are the sorrows of womankind; the loss of a loved one, loneliness and not belonging, separation from loved-ones, etc. (Carol, 10). Although there have been critics who say that Anne belongs in a “ boy book”, male protagonists of this time were usually seeking autonomy, separation and freedom from restraint.

Anne, however, desperately wants to belong: “ You see,” she tells Matthew on their ride to Green Gables from the train station, “ I’ve never had a real home since I can remember.” When Anne sees Green Gables for the first time she finally feels a sense of belonging (Berg, 125). Anne is also desperate to find kindred spirits when she comes to Prince Edward Island, and says that she always wanted to have a bosom friend. One of Anne’s main concerns is beauty. She abhors her red hair and freckles, lashing out at anyone who points them out. “ I’d rather be pretty than clever,” Anne admits to Diana (Montgomery and Cecily, 152). After Anne receives a compliment on her nose, she asks Marilla what she thinks of it. Marilla thinks she has quite a lovely nose, but she does not want Anne to be a vain girl, so she does not tell her so. Throughout the novel, Marilla makes it clear that she does not want Anne to be so preoccupied with beauty (Montgomery and Cecily, 151). Although Matthew and Marilla are somber and were brought up in a strict, “ joyless” home, they eventually soften towards Anne, allowing her the freedom to become a “ New Woman.” Marilla places a high value on woman’s education, saying that it is important that “ a girl be fitted to earn her own living whether she has to or not” (Montgomery and Cecily, 31). This presents a contrast to Diana’s mother, who believes that education is wasted on women. While Marilla pushes Anne to succeed academically, Matthew is much better than his sister at expressing his love. He dotes on Anne, buying her fashionable clothes, specifically, a dress with “ puffed sleeves.” Montgomery switches the stereotypical gender roles here, with Marilla as the more masculine head of the household, having the final say on matters and not being as good at expressing her feelings, while Matthew is quiet, submissive, and emotional. Anne brings both Marilla and Matthew out of

their comfort zones, though. Later in the novel, Matthew stands up to Marilla more often, mostly for Anne's sake, and Marilla becomes more lenient as well. Anne's imagination and outspoken personality serves to amuse others, even when she is tormenting herself. When Anne becomes upset about the prospect of Dianna Barrie getting married one day, Marilla tries to hold her laughter in, but can't, and she collapses in a chair, laughing at Anne's childlike anxiety. Matthew cannot recall when he has ever heard Marilla laughing like that before (Montgomery and Cecily, 162). In another instance, Anne takes Marilla's hand and " something warm and pleasant well[s] up in Marilla's heart at the touch of that thin little hand in her own- a throb of the maternity she [has] missed, perhaps. Its' very unaccustomed tenderness and sweetness [scares] her" (Montgomery and Cecily, 126). In this way, Anne is almost setting the people in her life back into their stereotypical gender roles. Similarly, the adults around her are trying to squeeze Anne into the mold of a young lady by repressing her imagination. When she first comes to Green Gables and is desperate to stay, Anne says " I'll try and be anything you want if only you'll keep me" (Montgomery and Cecily, 97). As the novel goes on, Anne suppresses her imagination more and more in order for her to have a place in society. This social standing is something Anne has to earn, rather than inherit. At the hotel concert, the community applauds Anne for subscribing to society and reciting someone else's poem, instead of her own. It has been Marilla's task to modify Anne's speaking tone, which she does successfully. Before Anne goes off to Queen's College, Marilla gives her a dress, not one of the plain ones she usually makes, but a beautiful green one. " Anne put it on one evening for Matthew and Marilla's benefit, and recited " The Maiden's Vow" for them in the kitchen" (Montgomery and

Cecily, 304). Anne becomes fashionable, reciting someone else's words for the benefit of Matthew and Marilla, and is doing so in the kitchen, which is a very domestic place. She has basically become " the angel in the household." Marilla remembers what Anne used to be like and it brings tears to her eyes. Marilla says " I just couldn't help thinking of the little girl you used to be, Anne. And I was wishing you could have stayed a little girl, even with all your queer ways. You're grown up now and you're going away; and you look so tall and stylish and so-so-different altogether in that dress- as if you didn't belong in Avonlea at all- and I just get lonesome thinking it all over" (Montgomery and Cecily, 304). Anne replies " I'm not changed- not really. I'm only just pruned down and branched out..." (Montgomery and Cecily, 304). The words " pruned and branched out" sound very artificial. They imply that Anne has learned to repress her real self and stop going wild. Perhaps Marilla realizes this and is a little bit saddened by it. She wishes for the old, younger Anne who had not yet learned how to bow down to the rules of society, although it is Marilla, Rachel Lynde and the other women of the community who put immensely strong pressure on Anne to conform to their own ideals and view of womanhood in a dominantly female community (Weiss-Town, 13). In Avonlea, women's values are cherished more than men's values (Berg, 127.)Anne has been taught how to be a good wife and mother ever since she was little, working in homes, looking after children at the age of 11. In fact, she is able to save Minnie May's life because of this knowledge. Anne does not make any ultimate choices about her life in this book, but in subsequent books Anne's journey eventually takes her to marriage and motherhood, but not literary fame as she had once hoped. Anne postpones her domestic " fate" for a while, experiencing

life as a “ New Woman.” Anne is a New Woman in many ways; getting a higher education, wearing divided skirts, biking around unchaperoned, etc, but she is still mired in tradition. Although Anne wins a prize for her schoolwork, it is the English prize, a subject traditionally associated with women. Gilbert takes all the other prizes, like those in math and science. After Anne marries, her life becomes rather dull in comparison to the exciting surprises of her childhood. Although Anne actually does receive a good education, especially for a girl, Mary Wollstonecraft believes that because Anne becomes an “ ideal” woman at the end of the book, it means that she actually never stops being a child (Weiss-Town, 12). The lives of women in Anne of Green Gables revolve around breakfast, lunch and dinner, intricate relations between neighbours, mother and sons, mothers and daughters, growing up, raising children, etc. (Carol, 11). All of these elements are very domestic. The chapter titles themselves show the prominence of stereotypical female domestication and religion (Carol, 11). “ Anne Says her Prayers”, “ Anne’s Bringing-up is Begun”, “ Anne’s Impressions of Sunday School”, ” A Tempest in the School Teapot”, “ Diana is invited to tea with tragic results”, “ Anne is Invited out to Tea”, “ Miss. Stacy and her Pupils set up a Concert”, “ Matthew Insists on Puffed-sleeves”, “ The Hotel Concert”, etc. (Montgomery and Cecily, 15). Just by looking at the chapter titles, it becomes clear that tea parties and concerts, traditionally feminine pastimes, are a big part of Anne’s life. Marilla tells Anne she can have Diana over for tea while she is at the Aid Society meeting, Anne is overjoyed. She exclaims; “ It will seem so nice and grown-uppish” (Montgomery and Cecily, 163). “ Oh, Marilla, it’s a wonderful sensation just to think of it!” (Montgomery and Cecily, 164). She asks to use toe rosebud spray tea set, but Marilla refuses.

Anne’s excitement over a tea party and being “ grown-uppish” show that she is slowly conforming to society; it does not matter whether she inherently likes tea parties or likes them because all other girls her age do. While Marilla at the meeting, Anne’s main responsibility is to get supper for Matthew and Jerry (Montgomery and Cecily, 163). Overall, although Anne does not make any ultimate decisions about her life in this novel, Montgomery still portrays the stereotypical feminine lifestyle that girls in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries were expected to have. Anne starts out as a little, “ ugly”, misbehaved, imaginative orphan girl; but Marilla, Matthew, and the other women of Avonlea transform her into a traditional, model woman. She learns to restrain her imagination, she is “ pruned and branched out,” and is able to save Marilla from having to sell Green Gables, her childhood home. Anne of Green Gables sets up separate worlds for men and women, portraying the woman’s world as much more interesting (Berg, 127). The 1896 Halifax Herald said “ only remarkable and highly motivated women such as [Montgomery] had any business venturing beyond motherhood” (Montgomery and Cecily, 32). This shows the dominant view of the time. Montgomery agreed with the paper, saying women should not have any career other than wife and mother, unless they could accomplish their work without interrupting these responsibilities (Montgomery and Cecily, 26). Although Anne is too young to make any definite decisions by the end of this novel, she lays the foundation for her eventual domestic life. Works Cited:

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