Imagination, Beauty, & Anne Shirley: Anne of Green Gables

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Biographer Peggy Sullivan recounts author Lucy Maud Montgomery’s struggles to publish her first novel: “She received so many rejections for Anne of Green Gables that for a time she put it away in a hatbox” (8). Sullivan goes on to explain, however, that Montgomery determinedly persevered. Generations of readers have been thankful that she did so ever since. The novel’s title character, Anne Shirley, is an embodiment of the female orphan archetype. In my work I have referred to stories that are woven from archetypal elements as “special stories,” and Anne of Green Gables is just such a story. When stories are special, they have the potential to be useful psychological tools for individuals. And when a reader uses mimetic imagination, which is “the capacity to enter into a fictional world and make it feel real” (Tatar 13), to interact with a special, archetypal story, wonderful opportunities for healing and growth are created. In particular, the orphan archetypal characteristics that Anne embodies are examples of how non-traditional types of power can support those who are seemingly the most powerless. Using imagination, meditation on beauty and nature, and a determined belief in the joy of living, the small orphaned girl is able overcome an early childhood full of abuse and neglect.

Anne is introduced to the reader as, “a child of about eleven, garbed in a very short, very tight, very ugly dress of yellowish gray wincey . . . Her face was
small, white and thin, also much freckled" (Montgomery 11). Montgomery goes on:

So far, the ordinary observer; an extraordinary observer might have seen that the chin was very pointed and pronounced; that the bug eyes were full of spirit and vivacity; that the mouth was sweet-lipped and expressive; that the forehead was broad and full; in short our discerning extraordinary observer might have concluded that no commonplace soul inhabited the body of this stray woman-child.

(11)

With the paragraph above Montgomery encourages her readers to use imagination to become “extraordinary observers” as they are welcomed into the special story. And if the reader’s facility with imagination is perhaps a little rusty, then Anne’s embodiment of the orphan archetype’s nuanced relationship to imagination can guide her or him. The fifth chapter of Montgomery’s 1908 novel begins with the following speech, delivered by the novel’s “stray woman-child.” It is only thirty pages into the story and the reader is already well acquainted with young Anne’s self-assured approach to life:

“Do you know,” said Anne confidentially, “I’ve made up my mind to enjoy this drive. It’s been my experience that you can nearly always enjoy things if you make up your mind firmly that you will. Of course, you must make it up firmly. I am not going to think about going back to the asylum while we’re having our drive. I’m just
going to think about the drive. Oh, look, there’s one little early wild rose out! Isn’t it lovely? Don’t you think it must be glad to be a rose?” (Montgomery 30)

Anne refuses to dwell upon future circumstances over which she has no control. Instead, she grounds herself firmly in the present, — “I’m just going to think about the drive” (Montgomery 30) — immerses herself in the beauty of the natural world around her, and engages her imagination. As Poet John O’Donohue states, “Perhaps, through awakening our hearts to beauty, we can all come to know more intimately what John Keats meant when he wrote: ‘I feel more and more every day, as my imagination strengthens, that I do not live in this world alone but in a thousand worlds’ (Letter, 18. Oct. 1818)” (O’Donohue 9). This small girl, who is wanted by no one and is in immediate danger of being returned to an overcrowded orphan asylum, knows that the psychological strength gained from meditating on the beauty of nature will sustain her soul regardless of the challenges she faces. Anne knows that her imagination helps her to live “in a thousand worlds,” of which the dreaded orphan asylum is only one.

In addition to using her imagination to engage creative visualization techniques, Anne is also able to imagine the possibility that there is a place for her in the world. In relating her history to Marilla Cuthbert, who is considering adopting her, young Anne explains that her mother “died of fever when I was three months old . . . And father died four days afterwards from fever, too” (Montgomery 32). The romantic little orphan goes on to say, with a sigh, of her
deceased mother, “I do wish she’d lived long enough for me to remember calling her mother” (Montgomery 32). From her parents’ death onward, Anne explains, she is dependent upon the charity of a series of not-so-charitable foster homes: “Father and mother had both come from places far away and it was well known they hadn’t any relatives living” (Montgomery 32). In response to being utterly unwanted — and with the use of her imagination — Anne is able to develop and maintain a sense of personal power that means she never feels victimized:

Anne sighed . . . “My life is a perfect graveyard of buried hopes. That’s a sentence I read in a book once, and I say it over to comfort myself whenever I’m disappointed in anything.”

“I don’t see where the comforting comes in myself,” said Marilla.

“Why, because it sounds so nice and romantic, just as if I were a heroine in a book.” (Montgomery 31)

Using her active mimetic imagination, young Anne is able to view herself as the star of her own story, which also means that there is a place for her in the world. In other words, she employs her ability to experiment with the world as if she belonged to it, despite the fact that all practical evidence seems to indicate that she does not. In some way this echoes Martín Prechtel’s ideas about what he calls the Big Story:
The secret oneness of the “Big Story” is in the overwhelming details of its diversity, where every little person, beast, wind and misery is a necessary part of a greater churning dream. (4)

Anne, using imagination, maintains faith that her trials and tribulations are all part of a grander tale, of which she is the heroine, and that she is, hence, “a necessary part of” (Prechtel 4) the world. Rather than feeling victimized — despite the fact that she most certainly is a victim — Anne is thus empowered and sees the world as holding open space for her. Each triumph over her life’s struggles results in the further tempering of Anne’s sense of personal power. In other words, Anne is aware that she has been a victim most of her young life, but she refuses to succumb to a defeatist, victim mentality. On the contrary, she allows the traumatic experiences of her life to temper and strengthen both her imagination and her will to be hopeful.

Anne herself is assuredly aware of how indispensable imagination is to her in combatting the hardships of life. Furthermore, Anne vividly illustrates Melanie Kimball’s contention that, “because orphans are without the natural protection of family, they must stand on their own to conquer their problems” (560). Additionally, as Paige Gray argues, Anne’s “imagination, in its ability to transmute the ordinary into something of beauty—to constantly romanticize and idealize the world, as well as her place within it—allows her to endure a traumatic childhood only intimated in the novel” (186). In describing one of her foster homes, Anne even says, “It was a very lonesome place. I’m sure I could
never have lived there if I hadn't had an imagination” (Montgomery 33). In other words, as Gray explains, “By implementing imagination as a vehicle of self-determination rather than of escape, Anne has the capability to envision transcendence over the domestic framework of the time while still participating in it” (173). Imagination will continue to be an important tool in Anne’s life as her story at Green Gables unfolds, but one important lesson Anne learns is that there can be such a thing as too much imagination.

On one occasion Anne relates how, while imagining she “was a Catholic—taking the veil to bury a broken heart in cloistered seclusion” she “forgot all about covering the pudding sauce” she was putting away. “I thought of it the next morning,” Anne tells her best friend Diana, “fancy if you can my extreme horror at finding a mouse drowned in that pudding sauce!” (Montgomery 98). With stories such as these, Gray notes, “Montgomery demonstrates how imagination works as a means for Anne’s self-actualization, yet she also shows the consequences of over-reliance. Situations in which she invokes too much imagination reduce Anne to an almost complete lack of agency” (189). This is an example of how the same trait can manifest as either a virtue or a vice. As Gray explains in describing Anne’s maturation process, “Montgomery exposes the fine line between imagination as a means of agency and imagination as a means of escapism or possible delusion” (190). By the time she is fourteen, after three years of the stability of a real home, Anne is
learning to temper her imagination with a grounded sense of perspective. The
teen-aged Anne tells Marilla about her intended summer plans:

I just feel tired of everything sensible and I’m going to let my
imagination run riot for the summer. Oh, you needn’t be alarmed,
Marilla. I’ll only let it run riot within reasonable limits. But I want to
have a real good jolly time this summer, for maybe it’s the last
summer I’ll be a little girl. (Montgomery 192)

Anne is actively imagining how she will grow up and is making time for play
along with her intensive studies for college entrance exams.

Montgomery’s work reveals how Anne’s wild imagination — which made
possible her very survival in early life — is mellowed with a sense of duty and
purpose in the security of a real home. Because that home includes adult
women who guide Anne’s growth, she is able to use her imagination as the basis
for achieving wholeness as an adult woman herself. As Susan Ang discusses in
The Widening World of Children’s Literature, there is a need, in childhood, for
balance between enclosure and freedom:

The child enclosed within walls may find its liberty restricted and its
development limited. Yet, while walls may appear to inhibit, they
may also be helpful in directing the child’s growth. (1)

The safety of a supportive and nurturing container allows Anne’s imagination to
“run wild within reasonable limits” (Montgomery 192). Although these
boundaries are initially set and enforced by Marilla, Anne eventually learns to
impose these healthy boundaries on herself. The women who influence Anne’s upbringing through weaving this safe enclosure for her include her teacher, Miss Stacy. Anne relates Miss Stacy’s advice:

It’s such a solemn thing to be fourteen, Marilla. Miss Stacy took all us girls who are in our teens down to the brook last Wednesday, and talked to us about it. She said we couldn’t be too careful what habits we formed and what ideals we acquired in our teens, because by the time we were twenty our characters would be developed and the foundation laid for our whole future life. And she said if the foundation is shaky we could never build anything.

(Montgomery 187)

As O’Donohue suggests, “This is one of the sacred duties of the imagination: Honorably to imagine self” (135). Imagining the future self is the first step in becoming that self, but when Anne’s story begins, the orphan has very little foundation for her imaginings. Marilla Cuthbert muses to herself while debating Anne’s future at Green Gables, that she seems “a nice, teachable little thing” (Montgomery 34). Just a few years later Marilla is heard telling her closest friend, Rachel Lynde, that Anne is “real steady and reliable now. I used to be afraid she’d never get over her feather-brained ways, but she has and I wouldn’t be afraid to trust her in anything now” (Montgomery 193). The adults in Anne’s life, Marilla in particular, have instilled in the young girl a grounded sense of duty, without which imagination leads only to the “feather-brained ways” to which
Marilla refers. The concluding paragraph of the novel illuminates the graceful and stable balance between imagination and reality that Anne now embodies as a young woman:

Anne’s horizons had closed in . . . but if the path set before her feet was to be narrow she knew that flowers of quiet happiness would bloom along it. The joys of sincere work and worthy aspirations and congenial friendship were to be hers; nothing could rob her of her birthright of fancy or her ideal world of dreams. And there was always the bend in the road! (Montgomery 240)

Anne, now a young woman, is an example of how archetypal qualities and characteristics not normally thought of as powerful, can support and nurture an individual who is battling seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

The archetypal characteristics of the orphaned girl-child stand for things that are often underrepresented and/or undervalued in our culture. Reading and sharing the female orphan archetype’s story in novels such as *Anne of Green Gables* is a good first step toward welcoming her nontraditional forms of power back into our culture’s consciousness. These powers include determined patience, stubborn survival, an avid curiosity about and passionate love of life — all fueled and supported by a creative and skillful mimetic imagination, a well-tended relationship with nature, and the ability to daydream. Further, the female orphan teaches us how to focus on our gratitude for what is positive, rather than to wallow in depression or sadness about what is decaying and
passing away; how to gracefully balance on the unpredictable currents of life, rather than futilely trying to control everything.
WORKS CITED


