Lesley Willis

The Bogus Ugly Duckling: Anne Shirley Unmasked

Anne of Green Gables is unquestionably one of the best-known examples of Canadian children's fiction. But much of the book's appeal consists in its catering to a desire for wish-fulfilment and, on the part of the older reader, nostalgia for a sentimentally-envisioned past; and these desires are catered to largely through the use, or misuse, of myth and fairy tale, which are so distorted that only their pleasant associations remain.

The rags-to-riches theme which appears in so many tales is a feature of *Anne of Green Gables,* but we see precious little of Anne in rags. We are asked to believe in a Cinderella-like pathos for which there is small evidence. The stepmother figures, Mrs. Thomas and Mrs. Hammond, do not come into the story directly, and Marilla Cuthbert, well-meaning but severe, is not so much a mother figure of any kind as a representation of what Anne might be were it not for the saving grace of her imagination. This is clearly reflected in the east gable room, which, untenanted and under Marilla's management, is "of a rigidity not to be described in words". But when Anne has been there for some time, "the whole character of the room is altered"; the "icy white muslin frill" which Marilla put across the window is transformed into the "splendid filmy tissues of rainbow and moonshine" with which Anne's dreams have, apparently, tapestried the whole room.[1]

The more obvious references to fairy tales (and many of them are obvious indeed) tend to be on the "splendid filmy tissues of rainbow and moonshine" level. Particularly distressing, especially in a girl of almost fourteen, is Anne's comment on the Haunted Wood in autumn, its plants covered by leaves: "I think it was a little gray fairy with a rainbow scarf that came tiptoeing along the last moonlight night and did it" (Ch. 30). Mercifully, Miss Stacey and the progress of

adolescence eventually convince Anne that "it's nicer to think dea pretty thoughts and keep them in one's heart, like treasures" (Ch. 31

The habit of attributing human qualities to inanimate nature – ofte very appealing both to the sentimental adult and to the pre-adolescer child – is central to L.M. Montgomery's concept of the imagination an colours Anne's observations of nature. This can be extremely tiresom At eleven, it is pardonable enough to go around naming geraniums an so forth (the fairy tale element becomes pronounced when Anne cal the cherry tree outside her window the Snow Queen). But Anne' sentimentalities about flowers are hard to take even at that age – "d you think amethysts can be the souls of good violets?" (Ch. 13) – an still more at twelve – "Do you know what I think Mayflowers ar Marilla? I think they must be the souls of all the flowers that died las summer and this is their heaven" (Ch. 20). Not even the sobering realit of Matthew's death, when she is seventeen, can erase this extravagan conceit; "I hope he has roses ... in heaven. Perhaps the souls of all thos little white roses that he has loved so many summers were all there t meet him" (Ch. 37). Once L.M. Montgomery has got hold of a goo thing, she does not relinquish it easily.

At every point in her development Anne is to be found clutching c even kissing bunches of flowers. This is sometimes more revealing tha the author herself is aware:

> "Handsome is as handsome does," quoted Marilla.
> "I've had that said to me before, but I have my doubts about it," remarked sceptical Anne, sniffing at her narcissi (Ch. 10).

More deliberately, flowers are used to indicate Anne's innocence. "I'r to have a wreath of white roses on my hair", she tells Marilla when sh is discussing her costume for the part of, of all things, a fairy (Ch. 24 The heroine's innocence is frequently emphasised; on several occasion she is referred to as a maiden, or, worse still, a small maiden, in manner somewhat reminiscent of the poem which prefaces Lewi Carroll's *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, and which has, contrary t its author's intention, attracted comments of a ribald and derisive kinc

The sentimental evocation of innocence pinch-hits reasonably we for pathos, an effect which is heightened by oblique comparisons of th heroine to Ophelia. Anne makes her debut at the Avonlea Sunda School with a bunch of wild flowers in her hat; she is late for schoc

one momentous afternoon because she is at the far end of the grove, "singing softly to herself, with a wreath of rice lilies on her hair" (Ch. 15); and she actually floats down the stream, escaping drowning by only a hair's breadth, although, in a glorious potpourri of myths, Anne is supposed to be Elaine (the "lily maid") at this point. The only genuine element of pathos in the situation, Anne's orphan status, is of course exploited for all it is worth, and this works well when Matthew is wretched at the thought of her impending disappointment (Ch. 2) or when Josie Pye is making some patronising remark about orphans. But when Anne herself takes up the strain, one feels that the author has gone too far. "*You* would cry ... if you were an orphan and had come to a place that was going to be home and found that they didn't want you because you weren't a boy," she sobs to Marilla (Ch. 3). In her apologies to Mrs. Lynde and Miss Barry she successfully plays on being a "little orphan girl" (Chs. 10, 19), and after her disappointment over puffed sleeves she mutters, "I didn't suppose God would have time to bother about a little orphan girl's dress" (Ch. 11). Only in the context of the sentimentality of the whole book is it possible to sympathise with a heroine who has so little pride.

In case all these associations with myth and fairy tale should not suffice to lift Anne above the level of the ordinary girl, we are constantly reminded of her powers of enchantment (beneficent, of course). "Matthew Cuthbert, I believe that child has bewitched you!" says Marilla on Anne's first night at Green Gables (Ch. 3), and, not long afterwards, thinks "She'll be casting a spell over me, too" (Ch. 4). Allusions to magic are also useful in obviating Anne's defects of appearance, for, while she is represented as painfully conscious of them for much of the book, L.M. Montgomery manages, somewhat disingenuously, to argue them away as soon as they are mentioned; it is not so bad to be covered with freckles if one can be described as a "freckled witch of a girl" (Ch. 7).

Throughout *Anne of Green Gables,* in fact, the author writes of her heroine with an indulgence to which F.R. Leavis' criticism of George Eliot's portrait of Maggie, in *The Mill on the Floss,* might well be applied; "in George Eliot's presentment of Maggie there is an element of self-idealization. The criticism sharpens itself when we say that with the self-idealization there goes an element of self-pity. George Eliot's attitude to her own immaturity as represented by Maggie is the reverse

of a mature one."[2] (There is, of course, a substratum of autobiograpl in *Anne of Green Gables*). Matthew is conscious that "Anne had brighter face, and bigger, starrier eyes, and more delicate features th the others" (Ch. 25); her inferiority boils down to the purely exterr question of clothes. And at the other end of her career – at least in tl novel – the same kind of judgment is made, for, at Queen's, "Ste Maynard carried off the palm for beauty, *with a small but critic minority in favour of Anne Shirley*" (Ch. 35)[3]. But the technique praising with faint damns is employed most ingeniously in Mrs. Lynd appraisal of the fourteen-year-old Anne's appearance, for, whi apparently giving the preference to other girls, Mrs. Lynde is real setting her above them: "She's a real pretty girl got to be, though can't say I'm overly partial to that pale, big-eyed style myself. I lil more snap and colour, like Diana Barry has or Ruby Gillis. Ruby Gill looks are real showy. But somehow – I don't know how it is but wh Anne and them are together, though she ain't half as handsome, sl makes them look kind of common and overdone" – and, wait for it she is "something like them white June lilies she calls narciss alongside of the big, red peonies" (Ch. 30).

Hans Andersen's duckling is ugly to start with – indeed until tl very end of the tale – but L.M. Montgomery reminds the read constantly that Anne has lain in a swan's egg. And, whereas tl duckling is mistreated and lonely until the last page, Anne suffers r real hardships, after her initial pain and suspense, until Matthew's deat in the closing chapters of the novel. The imaginary friends of the pa are swiftly replaced by flesh-and-blood friends who, since they can s far violate realism as to forgive childhood's cardinal sin of oddity, ma well be expected to acknowledge, without resentment, their admiratio of and dependence on Anne's superior gifts. There is always tl exception of Josie Pye, of course – but she is universally despised. Tl heroine's original insecurity is allayed early in the book by h attainment of a new identity as Anne of Green Gables (she celebrat the moment of realisation by kissing her reflection affectionately in tl mirror). Every catastrophe is calculated to engage the reader's syn pathy and amusement and is followed by some incident that more tha compensates for the preceding disaster (her hair grows darker, fc example, after she has dyed it green and perforce had it cut). There barely time for an interval of suspense; every wish is gratified, not, as i

the approved fairy tale tradition, at the end of the story, but during the course of the book, so that there is a continual "onwards and upwards" drift; "Hills peeped o'er hill and Alps on Alp arose," as L.M. Montgomery cannot help (incorrectly) quoting (Ch. 31). At the end, where a reversal of fairy tale procedure seems intended, Anne is deprived of her reward; but even her surrender of the Avery scholarship (a matter of circumstance rather than choice, since so many obstacles are placed in the way of her leaving Avonlea) is compensated for by a convenient teaching position, Gilbert's friendship, and the ever-present prospect of "the bend in the road" (Ch. 38).

The use of myth and fairy tale in *Anne of Green Gables* is typified by the Snow Queen, as the cherry tree outside Anne's bedroom window is called; the tree is white and beautiful, but the association with Andersen's queen is reduced to banality, since her cruelty is entirely overlooked and lip-service only is paid to her coldness. Such distortions of myth and fairy tale sentimentalise not only Anne but her world, for this is life as it might be pleasant to suppose it; a life where the agreeable always outweighs the disagreeable, the good the bad, and where one can progress from good to better against a background of "frogs ... singing silverly sweet" (Ch. 20) and "Mayflowers ... peeping pinkly out" (Ch. 35). What L.M. Montgomery really wants is to engage for Anne the same kind of sympathy which might be given to a fairy-tale heroine, but without making her undergo the same trials; and, thanks largely to affective transference on the part of many readers, she succeeds to a quite remarkable degree. As Thackeray (who also draws on fairy tale traditions, but in order to satirise the real world) says at the end of *The Newcomes*, "anything you like happens in Fable-land.... Friendly reader! may you and the author meet there on some future day! He hopes so; as he yet keeps a lingering hold of your hand, and bids you farewell with a kind heart."

Footnotes

1. L.M. Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gables*, Chs. 3, 20. All quotations are taken from the McGraw-Hill Ryerson Canada edition of *The Novels of L.M. Montgomery* and subsequent references are incorporated in the text. Since so many editions of *Anne of Green Gables* are available, chapter references have been given throughout.
2. F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1948), p.42.
3. Italics mine.