

## Imagination & The Female Orphan Archetype in L. M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*

By Claire Benjamin (Marylhurst University)

I refer to stories woven from archetypal elements as “special stories.” It is useful to identify this special type of story as one that has the potential to act as an important psychological tool for individuals. Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* is just such a narrative. The story's archetypal nature lies in the title character Anne Shirley's embodiment of the female orphan archetype. Anne engages with the world through a facility with archetypal qualities and powers that are often underrepresented and/or undervalued in our Western, capitalist, patriarchal culture. Anne's special story shows how non-traditional types of power can support those who appear to be the most powerless. The female orphan archetype's non-traditional powers include an avid curiosity about and passionate love of life, a determined belief in the inherent goodness of life, a well-tended relationship with nature, and an optimistic yet functional belief in possibility — all fueled and supported by a creative and skillful imagination, which is the focus of this paper.

At the beginning of the story, Anne is introduced to readers 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). This description tells the reader that Anne is awkwardly dressed and is perhaps malnourished and undersized — an impoverished, orphaned, little fe-

## 2 | Benjamin: Imagination and the Female Orphan Archetype

male waif who is among the most powerless of creatures in a Western capitalist, patriarchal culture. However, despite the fact that societal odds are against young Anne and there seems to be no logical basis for her to feel good about herself, she has somehow developed a self-assured, confident approach to life. For example, she is well aware that her dress is ill-fitting and ugly: "This morning when I left the asylum I felt so ashamed because I had to wear this horrid old wincey dress" (Montgomery 13). She refuses to let the dress spoil her day: "I just went to work and imagined that I had on the most beautiful pale blue silk dress . . . I felt cheered up right away and enjoyed my trip to the Island with all my might" (13). Here Anne demonstrates the female orphan archetype's ability to use imagination to spark the fire of self-confidence. The little girl imagines her shame away and therefore frees up her concentration to focus on enjoying her trip with all her might.

It is also through her imaginings that Anne draws strength from nature and the world around her. "It's been my experience that you can nearly always enjoy things if you make up your mind firmly that you will," Anne explains. "Of course, you must make it up *firmly* . . . 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 is at risk of being returned to the crowded orphan asylum from which she thought she had escaped forever. She refuses, however, to dwell upon future circumstances over which she has no control. Rather than wallow in self-pity or submit to depression over matters,

Anne matter-of-factly grounds herself in the present and immerses herself in the beauty of the natural world around her by engaging her imagination. The quote above shows that Anne appreciates not only the beauty of the wild rose, but also further enhances her visualization skills by imagining what it might feel like to be a rose. This small girl, wanted by no one and in immediate danger of being sent back to an unloving orphan asylum, has experienced and knows that the psychological strength gained from meditating on the beauty of nature will sustain her soul regardless of the challenges she faces. Anne realizes that her imagination, as Keats reports, helps her to live “in a thousand worlds,” (Letter, 18. Oct. 1818) 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. Just as she can imagine what it must feel like to be a rose, so too she can imagine the world as *if* she belonged to it, despite the fact that all material evidence seems to indicate that she does not. When Anne finds out that she is not the expected orphan boy, and she is faced with returning to the orphan asylum, she explains her philosophy to Marilla: “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 . . . because it sounds so nice and romantic, just as if I were a heroine in a book” (Montgomery 31). This approach allows Anne to maintain faith that her trials and tribulations are all part of a grander tale, of which she is the heroine. Rather than feel vic-

#### 4 | Benjamin: Imagination and the Female Orphan Archetype

timized — despite the fact that she most certainly is a victim — Anne is thus empowered and sees the world as making a place and space for her.

Marilla and her brother Matthew eventually decide to adopt Anne despite the fact that she is not the little boy they originally requested. As Anne's story at Green Gables unfolds, imagination continues to be an important force in her life. One important lesson she learns, however, 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, as author Paige Gray notes, Montgomery demonstrates how “situations in which she invokes too much imagination reduce Anne to an almost complete lack of agency” and that this exposes “the fine line between imagination as a means of agency and imagination as a means of escapism or possible delusion” (Gray 189-190). By the time she is fourteen, and after three years of the stability of a real home, Anne learns to temper her imagination with a grounded sense of perspective. The young teen explains, “I’m going to let my imagination run riot for the summer,” but goes on to reassure Marilla that, “I’ll only let it run riot within reasonable limits” (Montgomery 192). Anne makes time for play along with her intensive studies for college entrance exams because she knows that the time she spends engaging

her imagination is just as important as the time she spends pouring over her books. The concluding paragraph of the novel illuminates this graceful and stable balance between imagination and reality that Anne now embodies:

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 . . . 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)

As a young woman, Anne is an example of how archetypal qualities and characteristics not normally thought of as powerful, can support and nurture an individual who battles against seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Although the wild daydreams of her youth have been tempered with time and experience, imagination continues to support her goal of self-realization.

Anne's journey — the female orphan archetype's journey — is about unpacking and engaging with under-appreciated qualities such as curiosity, joyful unrestricted enthusiasm for life and the future, and the self-confidence and self-reliance of one who believes in possibility over resignation to that which is probable. A healthy and balanced imagination fuels all of these traits. *Anne of Green Gables*, as a special story, explores how these valuable archetypal traits, traditionally associated with childhood, continue to carry value as Anne and readers grow older. When allowed to mature, the skill set of the female orphan archetype supports an adult capable of cheerfully and gracefully balancing on the unpredictable currents of life, rather than futilely trying to control them.

## 6 | Benjamin: Imagination and the Female Orphan Archetype

Reading and sharing the female orphan archetype's story in novels such as *Anne of Green Gables* can serve as a solid first step toward welcoming nontraditional forms of power back into our collective culture consciousness.

### WORKS CITED

Gray, Paige. "Bloom in the Moonshine: Imagination as Liberation in *Anne of Green Gables*." *Children's Literature*, 42 (2014): 169-196. Print.

Keats, John. *Selected Letters*. Ed. Robert Gittings. Oxford: Oxford U P, 2002.

Montgomery, Lucy Maud. *Anne of Green Gables*. New York: Gramercy Books, 1985. Print.