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DEPARTAMENT DE FILOLOGIA ANGLESA I DE GERMANÍSTICA

**“Imagining Better than Remembering”: How Netflix’s  
*Anne with an E* Rewrote Montgomery’s Classic for  
Modern Audiences**

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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Grau d’Estudis Anglesos

May 2023

**Statement of Intellectual Honesty**

**Your name: Aina Sallent Fortes**

**Title of Assignment: “Imagining Better than Remembering”: How Netflix’s Anne with an E Rewrote Montgomery’s Classic for Modern Audiences**

I declare that this is a totally original piece of work; all secondary sources have been correctly cited. I also understand that plagiarism is an unacceptable practice which will lead to the automatic failing of this assignment.

Signature and date:

 12/06/2023

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## Abstract

Modern adaptations of classic novels into films and series have become the stage for expressions of new or updated ideologies. Writers add historically accurate content to a story written in another era to highlight the unspoken sociopolitical injustices of the time. Often, these changes resonate with modern audiences and encourage debates to question and evaluate the legitimacy and appropriateness of these changes. This is the case with Netflix adaptations because the corporation does not rely on advertising to ensure its income and can make more polarising content at minor risks. Hence, their more political and controversial creations. Current audiences are introduced to a close study of historical events and contribute to their analysis on social media. The audience becomes critical, examining past issues through a modern lens, promoting a deeper understanding of current affairs of the Western world. The films prompt intense online debates on an international level.

For these reasons, which I will develop in this paper, and to add to the conversation, I looked into the Netflix adaptation of the 1908 novel by Lucy Maud Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gables*. The resulting *Anne with an E* is a politically charged rewriting of the Canadian classic that improved the original story while keeping the essence of the characters and the major plot points intact. Anne's story now includes a Mi'kmaq family separated by the government's effort to force aboriginal children into residential schools. This storyline, touching on identity loss, cultural erasure, systemic violence and even genocide of First Nations people, is undoubtedly a bold choice for a series that is aimed at a somewhat young audience. Insight into this facet of Canadian history is long overdue, and literary, film and media studies must reflect that.

**Keywords:** *Anne of Green Gables*, *Anne with an E*, film adaptation, modern rewriting, Canadian Residential School System, First Nations, intersectionality

## **0. Introduction: Rewriting *Anne of Green Gables***

“It’s not what the world holds for you. It’s what you bring to it” (Sullivan): this statement is so appropriate for Anne Shirley that hundreds of online sites attribute it to L.M. Montgomery despite belonging to the director Kevin Sullivan. It was put in the *Anne of Green Gables* film of 1985, however, and it is ideal to describe how Montgomery’s creation would be a unique gift to the world. The stories of *Anne of Green Gables* have survived their author and become a world of their own which continues to inspire people one generation after another. Anne Shirley, the protagonist of this Canadian classic, is the prime example of a character with so much “scope for the imagination” (Montgomery 12) that it is no wonder she has had several rewritings. What made her and her adventures so enthralling in the early 20th century still holds up for 21st-century audiences. She embodies the purest attributes of childhood and brings them into adulthood to become a most unusually kind-hearted, high-spirited, daring, and inspiring young woman. Mark Twain said of Anne that she “[i]s the dearest most moving and delightful child since the immortal Alice” (McIntosh et al.) and her character is inspired by Carroll’s, but also by Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868).

This youthful redhead, and the many other characters in the eight-book saga published by Lucy Maud Montgomery between 1908 and 1921, are a source of wonder for screenwriters and audiences. Hence the recurring adaptations into film and series versions over the years, as Fouache points out: “[a]dapting Canada’s most popular book ever yet another time is definitely a challenge, especially when all Anne lovers keep a fond memory of its most successful adaptation so far, Kevin Sullivan’s 1985 miniseries starring Megan Follows as Anne” (Fouache). But before that, there was first the 1919 silent film, which moved the story to New England and infuriated Montgomery with its

“crass, blatant Yankeeism” (Hammill 667) such as the scene featuring Anne with a shotgun. Then came the 1934 version, directed by George Nicholls, which also failed to please the author, who said it was an improvement but still not what she had written the book to be (Hammill 668). Hammill argues that Anne was lacking in that she appeared less Canadian and less of a feminist than in the books. Third came *Anne of Windy Poplars* (1940), which was a sequel to the second adaptation directed by Jack Hively. The anime *Akage no An: Green Gables e no Michi* was released in 2010, though it had been created in 1979 by Isao Takahata, and it brought Anne to a whole other demographic. This animated series is one of four made with the character in them, but there are thirteen live-action series created between the 1950s and modern day (Fouache), and the latest one, *Anne with an E* (2017–2019), is the subject of this paper. This one is the most dissident from the source texts and therefore worth examining through a sociological lens to evaluate its contribution to the franchise and the viewer experience.

*Anne with an E* is a joint production of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and Netflix<sup>1</sup>, created by Moira Walley-Beckett, among other writers, show-runners and producers (Fouache), and it is worth studying as a piece of work that rewrites a Canadian classic for a contemporary audience. It is categorised as an episodic drama that involves many fresh storylines that round out the source material, making it much deeper in meaning and richer in subtext. As a distinctly post-modern adaptation, it centres Anne’s outcast role in society to tell the stories of people around her whose voices were underrepresented or outright silenced in the time of Montgomery. The creators knew that they were targeting this story to a new generation, one that demands

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<sup>1</sup> The world-wide leading media streaming service.



realistic fiction with more politics than ever before, one that understands and can handle a psychologically complex reading of previously straightforward characters.

Therefore, the Anne of this series, and her family, friends and acquaintances, have more profound background stories and a great deal more character development. As Walley-Beckett puts it: “Anne’s issues are contemporary issues: feminism, prejudice, bullying and a desire to belong. The stakes are high and her emotional journey is tumultuous. I’m thrilled to delve deeply into this resonant story, push the boundaries and give it new life” (Goldberg). This adaptation has been in the spotlight since it ended in 2019, and scholars have generally taken it as a successful modernisation of turn-of-the-century fiction. It arguably did succeed in taking a beloved character and giving it the kinds of storylines that satisfy the activist-minded twenty-first-century viewers and educate the youngest among them. The ethnic diversity introduced in the series has created a remarkably relevant, refreshing and enlightening narrative. This paper focuses on the First Nations characters and the damage done to them by the Canadian residential school system in a streamlined retelling of the historical facts.

### **1. The most significant changes in *Anne with an E***

The creators of *Anne with an E* have introduced a controversially large number of new themes, characters and scenarios into the content of Montgomery’s saga:

Diversity and acceptance of difference are major themes in this adaptation. The series aims high and wide, covering gender equality, sexual orientation, racism and wealth disparity. The series remains set in the late 1800s, making its new storylines perhaps too progressive for strict historical accuracy, but they work nevertheless, and serve as reminder that current struggles for equality are not unique to our generation. Despite Anne’s perpetual quest to ensure her life is as “romantic” as possible, the series echoes the books in avoiding the trope of romantic love being portrayed as more worthy than friendship or familial love. (Pearson)

Through a brief review of the most noticeable changes, the direction of the rewriting should be analysed. First, one of the main characters, the quiet but caring Matthew

Cuthbert, survives a heart attack that would have killed him at the end of the first book. His death would have forced Anne to return to Green Gables and support Marilla by teaching at Avonlea. However, in its three seasons, the updated series only comprehends Anne's coming of age until she goes off to Queen's College to pursue higher education instead of continuing on until she becomes an educator. Therefore, in the new context, Matthew's heart attack is a traumatic experience for the family, but his death is unnecessary as a plot device for the resolution of Anne's career, and the loveable character recovers. Arguably, this decision permits the girl to forge her own path regardless of her family's situation, a subtly more empowering circumstance for Anne, who is unique and self-assured but tends to sacrifice herself for the people she loves.

The reason for this heart attack is financial ruin in both versions of the story. And in the new one, this device is used to introduce a further plot in which the Cuthberts take on two boarders to cover their expenses after a setback and they nearly manage to swindle most of the townspeople into bankruptcy by promoting a non-existent mining enterprise in their lands, out of their funds. Such a thrilling subplot might seem out of character for a tale of bucolic small-town endeavours, but it is a valuable detonator for significant character-building, especially for Marilla Cuthbert. She gets the depth that women casted as caretakers tend to lack when she shows signs of physical attraction towards one of the boarders. The representation of matronly figures as callous, grim, and asexual can be a dehumanising trope for older women to be subjected to time and again, but also an unwelcome stereotype for the asexual community.

Another major change in the story is the alteration of the ending - the students leaving for Queens' college - with the change that Diana gets to go with Anne, and they are both ecstatic about becoming roommates. In the book, Diana's parents (aristocratic

English colonists) want their daughter to go to finishing school and marry well, so they prevent her from going to college. This struggle is shown in the series, where her father exclaims: “It’s not your future, it’s ours! If I’d had a son it would be different, but we did not. It then follows without a question that you are obliged to marry well!” (“The Better Feelings of My Heart”). But Diana is braver, stronger and more rebellious than they expect her to be, and she wins them over with the help of her aunt, Anne, the teacher Miss Stacy, and Marilla. The latter has a conversation with Mrs Barry and convinces her that holding Diana back would essentially cause an irreparable breach between them. Diana also has a romantic plot line with the Cuthbert helping hand, Jerry, who is from an Acadian (French-Canadian) family and has a lower social standing than the other white characters, therefore imbuing the story with an emotional exposé of anti-classist arguments.

The details of Anne’s love story also change in the Netflix adaptation: Gilbert was never so openly her prospective suitor. In the book, the two are even more competitive, a funny, albeit aggressive rivalry that lasts until the narrative is about to reach its end: they get tied for first place in their Entrance exam grades. After Matthew's death, in a selfless act of altruism, Gilbert forfeits his place teaching at Avonlea’s school so that Anne may take the position she needs (Montgomery). Anne and Gilbert's love for each other will only be confirmed in the books to come, leading up to a fruitful marriage and many happy adventures. The updated Gilbert is also much more worldly, and his family situation is greatly altered by the modern writers; his father passes away from illness, and unable to take care of the farm alone, the boy decides to go work on a ship to see the world. While on the island of Trinidad and Tobago, a local, one of his colleagues and friends, shows him around. Gilbert and Sebastian, or “Bash”, create a very strong bond and the Caribbean man moves into the farm with his wife, helping

Gilbert with the farm work and creating a charming, unconventional family (the historical unlikelihood of this is clearly forgiven by the writers' intent to create a racially positive narrative).

In all fairness, there is little doubt that the Walley-Beckett adaptation is far from traditional. Aunt Jo, relative of the Barrys, gets a queer rewriting when a new character is introduced to be in Anne's kindred spirits club: Cole is a gentle young man struggling to fit in because the rest of the children can sense that his masculinity is not the same as the other boys'. He suggests to Anne that he is not interested in girls the same way they are, and she becomes very supportive of him. He suffers a great deal but defies all expectations with a rewarding happy ending: he goes to live with Aunt Jo in the city and gets to study art - he is a fine sculptor - and help Anne in her quest to find out her biological parents' history. That being said, there are a lot more of these changes that add touching and powerful moments to the narrative, full of subversive ideas. So many and so subtle, in fact, that one could write a whole other paper on them, and for that reason, we will stop here and focus on the most fundamentally innovative of the changes: the introduction of an Indian residential school.

## **2. Canada's Dark Secret: what L. M. Montgomery never mentioned**

### **2.1. The silence around the Canadian residential school system**

The residential school system has been dubbed, and not unreasonably, 'Canada's dark secret'. The perceived moral character of Canadians and their government, in current political and popular commentary, has been heavily influenced by the nation's neighbour, the US, because most of its dark past is not a secret. By comparison, Canada seems to boast a spotless resumé in progressive ideas and inclusivity, but that is not entirely true. Not only does the nation have a dark past, one that involves the forced

relocation and internment of First Nations peoples but it cannot be said that racism is not an issue in the current political and social climates either. To further understand where this misconception of a 'good' Canada floating far above the US one must look at the prejudices and stereotypes that have been built on historical foundations but not necessarily on fact.

The Southern States of America have earned their infamy in today's politics through a consistent lack of apologising for what the Confederacy did and the centuries of sustained slavery and disregard for African-American lives. Of course, the Northern States do not get away unscathed either despite fighting the war on the other side. US Americans, in general, are scorned in the rest of the world for their lack of self-awareness and their incredibly insular and self-centred education system that only teaches national history through a muddy, inaccurate lens, which overlooks international history and geography altogether. One needs only to browse anglophone social media interactions for a while before being exposed to videos, anecdotal posts and long rants ridiculing the general United States public for their ignorance. That adds to the much more concrete consequences of American imperialism that manifested themselves not in colonisation but rather in wars and military interventions.

The federal government has participated in many wars since the catastrophic ending of the Second World War, none of which were on national grounds. It has garnered a reputation for brutal interventionism in many other countries and regions that started with the declaration of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823: "as a principle in which the rights and interests of the United States are involved, that the American continents, by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers" (Monroe). This attempt at controlling the rest of the American continent

through mostly commerce control and regime subversion, though disguised as an attempt to stop European colonisation efforts, was perceived negatively by many Southern American nations and has left Central and South America with centuries-old consequences to recover from.

In spite of the ongoing conversations about apologies, atonement and retribution, Canada is rarely mentioned in the American context, as is Australia in the global one (where the native peoples have also suffered similar crimes), and one wonders how these two nations have been excluded from the narrative. The Canadian people's reputation is now one of quiet, kind, distant neighbours of the most virally controversial country in the world. Therefore, a reductionist, black-and-white judgement of the character of the people and institutions in Canada benefits from the contrast. It follows that Canada's reputation is one of non-racism and progressive politics. With recent events in the Black Lives Matter movement, and the issues of the Trump presidency, Canadians seemed to be pointing and frowning, or even, smiling; one radio programme of the station *The 180*, part of the CBC, hosted the writer Luke Savage in 2016 who reported on the fact that Canadians were feeling "pretty smug about themselves lately" (*Savage Maple Washing*), regarding their socio-political status quo:

Sure, we don't have our own Donald Trump...but what about our, you know, actual and obvious problems? The incidents of quotidian racism in the United States we constantly hear about certainly aren't unknown to Canada. So, as much as it might be fun to respond to every international outrage with that latest viral picture of Justin Trudeau in a yoga pose, I believe it's time we ended the practice of maple-washing once and for all. (*Savage Maple Washing*)

The writer also has an extensive paper on the issue of Maple-washing: the ingenious name given to the Canadian tendency to whitewash history, excluding the government from criticism for events like their participation in the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Also on the list of commonly forgotten Canadian racial offences are the many immigration laws, policies and attempts to exclude Asian migrants from freely entering the borders or the internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War following events like the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Canada does suffer from institutional racism, so why is the media so quiet about it? Why, in the history lessons European children have to attend, and in the several English and American history courses that students take in universities like ours here in Barcelona, is the reality of the Residential Schools System so rarely examined? It is particularly troubling when the segregation of white and First Nations people is still a problem in Canada. Young Canadians doing a semester abroad here<sup>2</sup> have enlightened me to the truth of the situation: the reserves made for the displaced communities are run-down, exploited for their tax-free alcohol and tobacco, and generally not the comfortable living spaces that they could be if the indigenous peoples had their lands back. It should be acknowledged that this is still so problematic but one rarely hears about it outside of the affected regions. The reason for this perceived Canadian exceptionalism is complex, but one might start by looking into Savage's "Accounting for Histories: 150 Years of Canadian Maple Washing":

Indeed, in the face of deepening economic and cultural integration with the United States, Canadians have clung ever more fiercely to their national symbols. Even as they increasingly consume the same TV, music and mass culture as their neighbours, the official iconography of an egalitarian, multicultural Canada remains a comforting marker of difference — one that virtually the country's entire cultural edifice has gradually evolved to project, mythologize and reproduce.

This is probably the single greatest catalyst for Canadian exceptionalism as a narrative, and a tendency that continuously reinforces itself through every contrast, real or imagined, it is able to draw. (Savage *Accounting for Histories*)

Thus, to avoid repetition and to refocus this analysis back on the reality, rather than the idea of it being buried, we must conclude that the reputation earned by the Canadian

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<sup>2</sup> Personal interview of Levi John Penner, 23, from Langley (Vancouver); Molly Sladden, 21, from Kamloops (Montreal); and Jasmine Boucley, 21, from Quebec. Conducted April 2023.

government of being a quiet, progressive and inclusive nation has succeeded beyond its expectations, silencing the kinds of stories that *Anne with an E* has resurrected.

The truth regarding the “over 130 residential schools” that “operated in Canada between 1831 and 1996” (Miller) is a deeply troubling one. These schools were supposed to be agents of assimilation since the colonists believed they could use the Aboriginal population as labour, but they failed miserably:

The schools taught Aboriginal children that their Aboriginal domestic practices posed a threat to their physical, social, and spiritual survival; these lessons were reinforced through health education. The students were taught that in order to live a long healthy life, they must welcome cultural alienation. [...] Instead of taking care of the children in their care, the residential schools put them in danger as they were exposed to diseases, underfed, abused, and overworked. The schools’ major objective was to “re/form Aboriginal bodies,” and they achieved this goal. However, rather than the strong, healthy bodies that would be used for agricultural and domestic labor, the schools produced weaker bodies that brought death and disease to their homes. Residential schools failed as agents of assimilation. (Hughes and Edward)

These institutions were a massified form of abuse, from emotional to physical and even sexual. Accounts of the trauma that they inflicted are numerous and incredibly consistent, even as the number of surviving victims is reduced over time, as they age. Their stories matter, of course, and they must be amplified by all those who have the power to do so. The literature on the matter is extensive: research has been conducted to prove that the schools were insidious, violent places of cultural and identity erasure. Moreover, their claim to promote assimilation was not supported by the white communities in which the schools were inscribed: “not all the residents wanted Indian kids living in their communities. The students were exposed to numerous disturbing incidents that were meant to ‘belittle and demean their worth as Indians’”(Hughes and Edward).

## **2.2. The representation of residential schools in *Anne with an E***

As previously stated, the third season of the Netflix series begins with several brand-new plotlines. The most dissident from the source material is the introduction of a family of the Mi’kmaq tribe (one of the Algonquian First Nations populating the



northeast of the continent). The family consists of a couple, who craft wooden hockey sticks, and their two children. The father, Aluk, and daughter come into contact with Anne through the exchanges they do with her classmates. Anne is immediately interested in the strangers and approaches them to ask if she may visit them to have a conversation about their customs. The Mi'kmaq girl, Ka'kwet, functions as a bridge between her culture and Anne, speaking English fluently enough to communicate with and teach her about the structure of the community, the roles of her family members in it, and some of their language. The girls bond quickly: "It's funny how people are so quick to point out differences when there are so many ways we're all alike" ("A Secret Which I Desired to Divine").

Unfortunately, things turn sour very rapidly. In episode 3, "What can stop the determined heart", the Barrys inform Anne's friend and her family that a residential school has been opened in Halifax. This is inspired by the only school that had been opened in the Maritimes (the name given to three of Canada's Atlantic provinces, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick), where the government had assumed no more were needed: the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School. The townspeople push the family to send Ka'kwet to this school, so she has more chances of success in the mixed community they live in with a more European education. Anne thinks her friend will benefit from going to school, ignorant of the reality of this institution. At the train station, when they find out her father cannot accompany Ka'kwet to the school, the family is shocked. The connection between them and the government official says: "The government knows best. They take children all the time." ("What Can Stop the Determined Heart"). The wording here is purposely foreshadowing what will happen.

Anne soon finds out that Ka'kwet is unhappy at the school and cannot freely return to her family. The viewer gets insight into the repression of the indigenous tribes'

languages, faiths, and individual or communal identities through a WASP or Eurocentric cultural enforcement. In these schools, the children suffer all kinds of abuse, and though the series attempts to keep the dark reality from bringing the plot down too harshly, the physical and emotional duress the Ka'kwet and the other students are under is clear. There is no open sexual harassment, for example, but the children are repeatedly slapped, shown to be depressed or incarcerated. The Mi'kmaq girl eventually escapes with an elaborate plan, enduring all kinds of pain in her journey, but successfully avoiding the armed men chasing after her (the system in place to deal with "runaways"). The overall tone of the series is, inevitably, one of emotionally engaging critiques of the system which attacks the personal and communal integrity of these minorities.

Ka'kwet arrives home to her family with her grey, impersonal robe all muddy, her hair cropped short and irregularly — one that was previously very beautiful and tied to her identity, over which she bonded with Anne — and she begins to sob uncontrollably. After a few days, the viewer gets an insight into her trauma and the lasting consequences it has on her mental health. She lashes out at another child, trying to push him to speak in English, insulting him by repeating words that have been said to her: "They told me I'm worthless, stupid!" ("A Dense and Frightful Darkness"). Her mother calms her down, telling her she is home and safe. It is clear that these effects are common repercussions of the interment in students' psyches (Hughes and Edward 11).

Later the white men that are looking for Ka'kwet, whom they call Hannah, storm the village, saying that she must return and her mother does not have a choice or say in the matter. They also move to take other children with them: "Lots of kids here. It's like a nest. We should grab more" ("A Dense and Frightful Darkness"). The dehumanisation is so blatant and institutionally sanctioned that they become violent: Aluk suffers a bullet injury from the fight and receives help from Anne's family. This

turn of the narrative is certainly heroic, and frightening, but it prioritises the idea that white Canadians are a part of the system and that, unless they act in drastic ways to dismantle it, they are to blame for what will become a weapon of genocide. For that reason, it aligns with recent ideas of what a nation's admission of guilt and proactive reparations should look like in postcolonial states. The reparations conversation has been ongoing and social justice groups and human rights activists have sought to both unearth the past and give power to the voices of the survivors.

When Anne and Matthew go searching for Ka'kwet at the school, they show great compassion, finding common ground readily: Anne is an orphan, separated from her family by painful turns of fate, Matthew recalls the time he had to go in search of Anne when he thought it was too late and she had returned to the orphanage. Even the uptight Marilla understands the gravity of the situation, and how unfair it is. At the doors of the school, however, the group is met with denial: the priest that directs the school has the power of the government and law enforcement on his side. The family is threatened with more violence, arrest and even with the life of their daughter: "We will kill the Indian, but we will save the child" ("A Dense and Frightful Darkness"). Since the series was cancelled three seasons in, to the disappointment of its followers, we never find out what happened after that, and whether the Mi'kmaq family was ever reunited.

The creator's views on the matter are far from indifferent, on the contrary, she advocates for Indigenous rights on her platforms including Instagram:

Today is National Day for Truth and Reconciliation (and Orange Shirt Day) in Canada. Let us stop and spend time today to honor and mourn the thousands of children who suffered and died in Canada's residential schools. Children who were forcibly taken from their family and stripped of their identity; name, language, and culture. It is overwhelming to imagine the terror and confusion these children endured. And so many did not survive.

[...]For those of you who love #annewithane and have wondered what might have happened to Ka'kwet... I hope you better understand now, today, that there are no

happy endings and that radical empathy for First Nations is how we can help.  
(Walley-Beckett)

This is what she wrote regarding the celebration of the Orange Shirt Day which officially “has become an important opportunity to open up dialogue on anti-racism and anti-bullying. This day is meant to also encourage deeper reflection, learning and public dialogue on the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.” (“National Day for Truth and Reconciliation - Province of British Columbia”). Many Canadians use the opportunity to fight the silence surrounding these old crimes against humanity and concerning the fate of her character, Walley-Beckett sends out a plea of understanding the thousands of children whose futures were stolen, together with their present situations, the warmth of their families and their centenary traditions. *The Canadian Encyclopedia* provides this quotation from a survivor:

There was a death every month on the girls’ side and some of the boys went also. We were always taken to see the girls who had died. The Sisters invariably had them dressed in light blue and they always looked so peaceful and angelic. We were led to believe that their souls had gone to heaven, and this would somehow lessen the grief and sadness we felt in the loss of one of our little schoolmates. (Miller)

The deaths of the children are seen to be a regular occurrence, an inevitable one, considering the strained physical labour and poor conditions they were kept in, especially through punitive acts of violence from the religious authorities in charge.

Valuable insight into what happened in these schools has been transformed into many documents, but the way the public is most likely to receive them is through documentaries and cinematic forms of media. There is something to be said about the democratisation of academia through the use of cinema and online content creation. As stated in the introduction, the Internet has provided not just access to endless entertainment, but also to legitimately researched work that inspires ideological debate. The offer of documentary films on the subject is plentiful, varied, and available from reliable sources: *We Were Children* and *Muffins for Granny*, for example, have received

critical acclaim for their unadulterated stories aimed towards educating people on these issues (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada).

### **3. Renewing Anne's legacy: reception of the adaptation and conclusions**

#### **3.1. Adaptations and a new format of reviews**

New theses<sup>3</sup> being published are increasingly centring the film adaptation and rewriting of literary classics. The cinematic adaptations of these canonical works bring the past into the present through more amiable formats that allow young adults to engage with the content (which is what one might call “wordier”) with greater pleasure. Another locus for essays on the subject of literature, in the up-and-coming genre of the video essay, is YouTube, where the reimaginings of classic tales are dissected outside of the academic circles in various ways. From Disney cartoons to novels that became Broadway Musicals turned into Hollywood productions, the critique and comparison of these works is available for free, online, in varying degrees of formality. This Master's thesis by Emilie Naomi DeFazio reports on the “multimodality of these texts”, pointing out that the videos “take the genre conventions of the written essay and portray it on-screen, using video, audio, and narrative evidence”, she mentions how “creators work within the genre to approach any subject they please” and “are often their own researchers, writers, videographers, and editors and put hours of work into what they compose” (DeFazio 33).

As a virtual example of this, creator Mina Le compares the often-ranked versions of Netflix adaptations of Jane Austen's *Persuasion* and *Emma* in “Netflix's *Persuasion* was a flop and no one was surprised”. Despite the informality of the title,

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the alumna Aida Díaz Lozano wrote about “Becoming Women: The Different Representations of Womanhood in Greta Gerwig's Film Adaptation of Alcott's *Little Women*” as recently as January 2023, and, further back in 2017, Ariadna Moreno i Lorente wrote ““They Called me Matilda, and I Came to be Known as Matilda’ A Study of the Concept of Identity in Lloyd Jones’ *Mr. Pip* and Andrew Adamson’s Film Adaptation”.

which is meant to be humorous and draw young people in, her thesis is clear, researched, and backed up with many clips that exemplify her arguments. Like the idea that Netflix's *Persuasion* had unsuccessfully tried to update Anne Elliot in the style of the comedic series *Fleabag* (2016-2019) and the novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (Ottessa Moshfegh, 2018), among others, and that the character had not withstood the update. Seemingly, modern Anne Elliot did not earn the same upgrade as our Anne Shirley, instead becoming someone she never was, a “sad and self-aware” dissociative feminist (Le). Mina Le informally cites her sources in the description of the video with links, the standard practice of many video essayists. The benefits of this trend are evident: a rise in the number of readers enjoying these canonical works. As for *Anne with an E*, university students have already explored it, focusing mostly on feminism, specific characters like Diana<sup>4</sup> or the evolution of the adaptations until the present moment<sup>5</sup>.

### 3.2. Criticisms of the series

The criticism the series has raised since its release has been quite heterogeneous. Informal reviewers online had one main point: “Walley-Beckett takes a different route: she explores classic Anne escapades, but makes them feel moody and bleak” (Robinson) and that this was a disservice to the story. One YouTuber argued that if the writers wanted to modernise the plot they could have rewritten it to be a twenty-first-century tale (You Can't Unwatch It). That, of course, is a genuinely interesting idea, but it disregards the fact that the issues the series has introduced into the plot were true to the time *Anne of Green Gables* was written. The main complaint is that *Anne with an E* is charged with new storylines that make the final product tragic,

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<sup>4</sup> “Diana Barry 2.0. Reimagine the Bosom Friend in Anne with an E and Its Fandom”

<sup>5</sup> “From Anne of Green Gables to Anne with an E: the avatars of a Canadian heroine”

full of problems and themes that are too harrowing. However, the writer for *Vanity Fair* goes too far, calling Anne “deranged” for behaviours that, at least in my experience with ADHD and autism, sound a lot like neurodivergence (e.g. her daydreaming and ranting); and saying that she has PTSD (Robinson) as though that was a novelty and not something that an orphan in the late 1800s would be susceptible to.

The consensus is that the source material, as well as the previous adaptations, were far lighter, enjoyed with an easy heart. That notwithstanding, I argue that the series maintained the sense of whimsy and adoration for life through Anne’s character. She values her “bosom friend” (Montgomery 57) more than anything, still appreciates nature and literature in her everyday life, and brings warmth into her family’s life that can barely be put into words. That love is returned to her when Matthew and Marilla help her discover more about her parents as she had always wanted: “[y]ou gave me my wish. My birthday wish. My lifetime wish” (“The Better Feelings of My Heart”). Anne is exceedingly grateful to discover that her mother was a red-headed teacher like her, and her father loved them both very much, and the ending of the series is truly uplifting.

Despite the criticisms of the adaptation’s sombre tone, it is also praised for its realism and often balanced nature:

Yet in many ways, her arrival adds to the new Avonlea’s darkness. Amybeth McNulty, who portrays Anne, is younger and more innocent than Megan Follows, who portrayed the title character in Kevin Sullivan’s *Anne of Green Gables*. Thus, her devastation at being turned away from the Cuthberts is much more heart-wrenching. [...] Amybeth McNulty’s Anne falls to her knees in front of Marilla and Matthew, sobbing and lamenting. The display is melodramatic, but drives home the harsh realism of Anne’s life. She’s seen as useless, more trouble than she’s worth. [...] Amybeth McNulty’s Anne is blisteringly intelligent, but lacking in emotional maturity. Due to her age, she can’t process Matthew and Marilla’s initial refusal effectively. [...] *Anne With an E* provides an unforgettable portrait of what being an orphan truly looked like. (M, Stephanie)

As for the author of this paper, I must disagree with the negative reviews, or at least with the idea that the deepening of the plot and exploration of darker subject matter

make the work any less effective. The arts editor of the Daily Utah Chronicle even agrees that improved upon the source material:

This take on the classic is outstanding. The original novel itself, in true narrative form, focuses primarily on Anne and her experiences. The show draws more on all the other characters alongside a series of issues that are important to think about in consideration of the time period — racism, feminism, education, foster care, beauty standards, sexual harassment, LGBTQ+ rights, censorship, classism and grief. [...] The reason this show is so successful is its ability to not only bring the original story to life but to add to it in a truly authentic way. That's why you and everyone you know need to binge this show. (Jayswal)

Mainly, what seems to be the case here, is that the audience's expectations were limited by their perception and opinions of the previous adaptations like Sullivan's. It is unsurprising, however, to see the direction Netflix approved of, if one considers their previous work, as opposed to the pre-existing films and series based on the novels. Film adaptations of *Anne of Green Gables* that kept the tone intact already do exist, and creating yet another one would have been less of a contribution. Not just that, it has been argued that Montgomery's work was not as light-hearted as we perceive it to be, outside of *Anne of Green Gables*:

In fact, the supposedly 'idyllic and innocent' vision which the passionate battles over Montgomery's legacy seek to protect is itself a popular cultural invention, a 'spin-off' rather than part of Montgomery's published texts. Her novels are not uniformly sunny, and her heroines have to rely on their imaginations to escape from painful experiences of bereavement, unjust and cruel adults, disappointment, poverty, and loneliness. (Hammill 668)

Those who defend that the author would have disagreed with the changes made in 2019 should also consider that L. M. Montgomery wrote much more than just this saga and that she was, as most people are, complex and capable of creating different types of heroines and stories.

That being said, it is true that while it is challenging to keep some things light and carefree, it is also uniquely important: the innocent and whimsical have a place in the world, and help us beyond the years of childhood. In that sense, the criticism is understandable. The tendency towards media filled with horror and trauma could be a



source of worry. One might look into how value is attributed to sorrow and suffering, or take a feminist approach to the idea that the feminisation of fairy tales, nature and poetry (among Anne's interests) has resulted in their devaluation through a patriarchal lens. Perhaps, Netflix's tendency to take a heart-warming classic and rewrite it with a higher intensity is a sign of the times, a reminder of how capitalist and patriarchal standards affect the products we consume, and what we now require to be entertained. Light subjects, matters that have little to do with pain and suffering, are also worthy of academic investigation. But the main issue here is that the alienation of the researchers that are shaping the future of academics is disheartening, as cultural analysts have already started to point out:

Slaughter and Leslie (1997; 2001; compare Hackett, 1990; Ylijoki, 2003) speak about *academic capitalism* in which market-like behaviour and the principle of performativity become crucial, and this will transform, reposition, and regulate the activities of researchers. This process increases the power of management and diminishes the autonomy of professional academics (Parker and Jary, 1995). [...] Research and knowledge production in social science and the humanities are bound not only to the respective national structures, policies, and scientific institutions but also to language and specific empirical worlds. (Paasi 773)

If one is unable to connect with their inner (idealist) child, they might struggle to produce original work, instead reproducing others', alienated from their own passions. Anne showed us this, through her weaponising of journalism to help those who were not given a voice by the socio-economic systems that sustained racism and misogyny.

### **3.3 Conclusions**

To conclude, the depths that the series has introduced to Anne's world have added so much value that one cannot help but see the benefits. As for what the writers included in the Netflix and CBC version, I found the changes thoroughly enjoyable, despite my sincere appreciation of the source material. What is more, I applauded all of the causes that they made Anne fight for and recognised her from the beginning as a

kindred spirit. The character, despite her flaws, is incredibly relatable to young girls with a passion for art, nature, and life itself. I understood Anne very deeply when she wondered if she would ever be happy, like many who are prone to intense emotion and deep concern for others. I cried when she cried and laughed when she did, which, above all, seems like a sign of compelling writing.

This series is a testament to the capabilities of a young girl, becoming a young woman: she champions marginalised groups and renders them powerful too. Most of all, *Anne with an E* is a monument to the pragmatic side of idealism. Anne is that idealist child, a dreamer through and through, and yet she is a force to be reckoned with, changing the world one person at a time. Such a strong character in an eleven-year-old is rather unusual in nineteenth-century literature, but maybe the original had all the potential to become this very manifestation. In that sense, Anne was “ahead by a century” (The Tragically Hip), as the theme song of the series claims. One can only hope that the rewriting of this classic tale has achieved what the TRC has been attempting for decades: to make the issues of the Canadian First Nations people seen, and heard. To give voice to those who have been denied it through storytelling and to inspire change. The updated Anne is a journalist, channelling her feminine rage and egalitarian beliefs towards her cause; using school paper to communicate to her town that the First Nations, women and black people deserve equal rights. She generates change through protest, affirmative action, and on an individual level by being present and passionate. What is worth further research is the silencing of Canadian First Nations stories, the hegemonic acceptance of Maple-Washing, and the remaining distance between the white and aboriginal communities in Canada. With that, I hope to have made the reader a kindred spirit, and I close this chapter of my academic trajectory with a light heart full of wonder.

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