Bachelor thesis in English Literature

English (61-90), 30 credits

Gender Performativity and Compulsory Heterosexuality in L.M. Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables*

Independent Work in English, 15 credits

Halmstad. 2024-01-05
Elsa Nilenfors
Supervisor: Anna Fåhraeus
Abstract

This essay will demonstrate how the character Anne from *Anne of Green Gables* is open to multiple interpretations. I specifically look at the character Anne from the perspective of gender and queer theory. Anne can be read as someone who has both feminine and masculine traits. She is assigned female at birth and lives in the 19th century, in a society where gender norms and normative behavior were strictly defined. During the novel, Anne must learn how to become a “proper girl” by performing gender norms. Her difficulty with this, as well as her expression of desire for other women, allows for queer readings of her character.
# Table of Contents

1. Introduction ................................................................................................................. 4

2. Background .................................................................................................................... 4

3. Literature Review .......................................................................................................... 5

4. Theoretical Framework ................................................................................................. 8
   4.1 Queer Theory ............................................................................................................. 8
   4.2 Gender Performativity ............................................................................................... 9
   4.3 Compulsory Heterosexuality ..................................................................................... 10

5. Analysis .......................................................................................................................... 11
   5.1 Gender Performativity in Anne of Green Gables ..................................................... 11
   5.2 The Effects of Compulsory Heterosexuality ............................................................ 16
   5.3 Romantic friendship in Anne of Green Gables ......................................................... 19

6. Conclusion ....................................................................................................................... 22

7. Works Cited .................................................................................................................... 24
1. Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to examine the character Anne from *Anne of Green Gables* with a focus on gender and sexuality. It will cover discussions of Judith Butler’s gender performativity, Lois Tyson’s thoughts on good and bad girls and romantic friendships, and Adrienne Rich’s work on compulsory heterosexuality. In this essay, I will explain how the character Anne is open to multiple interpretations, including that she could be gender fluid and lesbian or bisexual. I will argue how the novel portrays the struggle of individuals to conform to societal norms and expectations. Such depictions allow for queer readings of an ostensibly heteronormative text like *Anne of Green Gables*.

2.0 Background

The author of *Anne of Green Gables*, Lucy Maud (L.M.) Montgomery was born in Clifton, Prince Edward Island, on November 30, 1874. Montgomery’s mother died when Montgomery was only 21 months old, and after her mother’s death Montgomery’s father left her with her mother’s parents. Montgomery found company in books, writing, nature, and her own imagination. Montgomery began going to a one-room school when she was six and completed her education there. In 1893-1894, she studied for a teacher’s license. However, when her grandfather died, in 1898, she returned home to take care of her grandmother. She stayed with her grandmother for the next thirteen years. During this time, Montgomery wrote her first novel, *Anne of Green Gables*, which she completed by 1905. However, the novel was initially rejected and set the story aside. She found the manuscript again in 1907, which made her decide to try again to send it to publishers. *Anne of Green Gables* was accepted this time by the Page Company of Boston and the book was published in 1908. The book was an immediate best-seller and it kickstarted her career as a novelist. The second book, *Anne of Avonlea* was published a year later, in 1909.
L.M. Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables* series consists of eight novels, with the first book being *Anne of Green Gables*. The first book follows the life of Anne Shirley, a young orphan girl who goes to live with the Cuthbert siblings, Marilla and Matthew, on their farm in Avonlea, Prince Edward Island. The siblings had requested a boy, but instead, they received Anne. Matthew quickly grows fond of Anne, but it takes longer for her to win over Marilla. Eventually, they decide to keep Anne even if she is a girl. The book follows Anne during her childhood, and the reader witnesses her journey in making friends, starting school, and navigating life with the Cuthbert siblings. Anne is a talkative, energetic girl who often ends up in trouble. During the course of the book, Anne makes several mistakes such as accidentally dyeing her hair green and accidentally making her friend drunk. By the end of the book, she has turned 16 and is now more mature.

### 3. Literature Review

According to the MLA database, there have been over 200 different articles published on *Anne of Green Gables* of which ninety have been peer-reviewed. Scholars have examined the novel in different ways, including how it has been translated into other languages, adaptations of the book, lesbian ideas, and feminist approaches. Importantly, in 1985, *The Selected Journals of L.M. Montgomery*, edited by Mary Rubio and Elizabeth Waterston, was published. The first volume consisted of a selection of Montgomery’s journals from 1889 to 1910. The unabridged journal revealed new insight into L.M. Montgomery’s life, and the dust jacket of the journal describes Montgomery as: “a teenage girl becoming complexly aware of her sexuality; a young writer developing as an artist; and a woman suffering from incipient instability” (L.M. Montgomery Online). This may have influenced why more articles about Anne and her identity and sexuality appeared. In this review, I will first look at articles that discuss gender and then focus more on the perspective offered by
lesbian criticism on how traditional gender and heterosexual views affected Montgomery’s construction of Anne in *Anne of Green Gables*.

Since 1980, scholarly work has taken two main critical approaches: feminist criticism and lesbian/queer criticism, both of which are relevant for this essay. One of the earlier articles published, about gender in *Anne of Green Gables*, is “Sexism Down on the Farm? Anne of Green Gables” (1986) by Janet Weiss-Town. Weiss-Town highlights that although Anne acts within a female framework, she has many character traits that stereotypically would be classified as unfeminine. Some of these unfeminine traits, according to Weiss-Town, are that Anne is aggressive and goes after the things she wants. For example, she breaks a slate over Gilbert’s head. Weiss-Town also describes Anne as independent and practical, which is stereotypically seen as a masculine trait.

Susan Drain's essay “Feminine Convention and Female Identity: The Persistent Challenge of Anne of Green Gables” (1992) also discusses gender identity. Drain highlights that Anne does the usual things differently than her female peers, but this does not mean she acts like the boys. Drain argues that Anne is indeed bolder and more practical than the other girls, but she does not move away from the zone assigned to little girls.

In subsequent years Montgomery scholars have further examined the novel from the perspectives of gender identity, female identity, female sexuality, female-female relations, and lesbianism. In “Have All of Our Women the Vagrant Heart?': Anne of Green Gables and Rural Womanhood in Flux” (2010), Emily Cormier explains that even though Anne and Marilla have different kinds of female identities, they are both based on and undermine heteronormative patterns. The author argues that by working on Marilla’s farm at the end of the novel, Anne provides a significant alternative to the heteropatriarchal farmstead that dominated country life during Montgomery’s time. Anne, according to Cormier, can be seen
as a feminist heroine at the end of the novel, as she undermines the idea that a woman can only achieve a rural home through marriage.

A more recent study, published in 2016, by Valerie Murrenus Pilmaier is “‘Kindred Spirits': Vulnerability as the Key to Transformative Female Relationships in L. M. Montgomery's Anne of Green Gables” in which Pilmaier discusses Anne and her relationships with other women. Pilmaier highlights Laura Robinson’s lesbian study of Anne, which demonstrates the importance Anne places on her relationship with girls/women, and how this is apparent throughout Montgomery’s series about Anne. Like Robinson, Pilmaier believes that it is actually Anne’s relationships with other women that are the most important relationships in her life. Pilmaier also examines Drain’s argument that Anne has a sincere desire to belong, and this means she will do everything to be accepted. Having said that, it can be argued that Anne’s desire to belong influences her gender identity.

The feminist and lesbian critics most relevant to this essay are Julia McQuillan, Julie Pfeiffer, and Laura Robinson. McQuillan and Pfeiffer’s article “Why Anne Makes Us Dizzy: Reading Anne of Green Gables from a Gender Perspective” (2001) will be used to look at Anne from a gender point of view. The authors claim that Anne lacks gender-specific characteristics, but that she nevertheless reinforces the social construction of gender. McQuillan and Pfeiffer believe that feminine girls can grow up and become unfeminine women, and that gender expression can and does change over time. The authors of the article explore how Anne masters how to be a girl. They point at the fact that Anne declares her need to be like other girls, yet this need to fit in only emphasizes that she is different. They also mention that the people around Anne, like Marilla, want to change Anne into a proper girl.

Robinson’s article “Bosom Friends: Lesbian Desire in L.M. Montgomery's Anne Books” (2004) will be used to examine at lesbian relationships in Anne of Green Gables. Robinson explains that from the outside it can be difficult to distinguish between
lesbian love and friendship. She then highlights opinions from lesbian feminist scholar Sheila Jeffreys regarding female relationships. Jeffreys claims that a woman can spend her whole life in love with another woman, without sexual contact, since sexual contact is not what makes someone a lesbian. However, a woman can have sexual encounters with another woman and still not call herself a lesbian. Jeffreys points out that there seems to be a need to label sexuality, which could be related to the constant threat to patriarchal domination. Robinson calls attention to how Anne and Diana´s relationship shows the inescapability of heterosexuality since even if they love each other, in the end, they cannot be together.

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 Queer Theory

The theoretical framework that will be used in this essay is that of feminist queer theory, particularly the seminal work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, and Adrienne Rich. In *Psychoanalysis and Literary Theory*, Matthew Martin summarizes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick´s definition of “queer” in the chapter “Psychoanalysis and Queer Theory.” Sedgwick describes the word queer as “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone´s gender, of anyone´s sexuality aren’t made (or can´t be made) to signify monolithically” (Martin 174). Will Stockton also discusses queer theory in *An Introduction to Queer Literary Studies* stating that “Queer theory asks us to consider that heterosexuality is neither a natural nor a universal form of sexuality; that sexual identity is a social construct rather than an essential feature of the self” (Stockton 3). This essay will use queer as an umbrella term for all non-cisgender identities and all non-heterosexual identities.
4.2 Gender Performativity

In the chapter titled “Critically Queer” in *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, Judith Butler describes gender as performative in that it is the result of a regulatory regime of gender differences where genders are separated and placed in a hierarchy through the cultural construction of among other things, taboos, and social constraints. Butler explains that “Gender performativity is not a matter of choosing which gender one will be today. Performativity is a matter of reiterating or repeating the norms by which one is constituted it is not a radical fabrication of gendered self” (Butler 22-23). Gender norms work by enforcing the embodiment of certain pre-existing cultural ideals of masculinity and femininity, ones that are almost always linked to the idealization of the heterosexual bond. Butler further states that “[…] naming of the “girl” is transitive, that is, initiates the process by which a certain “girling” is compelled, the term or, rather, its symbolic power, governs the formation of a corporeally enacted feminity that never fully approximates the norm” (23). In the article “Judith Butler: their philosophy of gender explained” (2022) Anna Szorenyi states that Butler challenges "essentialist" views of gender, which is the belief that femininity and masculinity are biologically given and that masculinity should be performed by male bodies and vice versa. Thus, Butler has challenged how current descriptions of masculinity and femininity are usually also perceived as values about the right way to do gender.

A concept Butler uses is gender "norms", which they use to describe the confusion that exists around what “should be” with what "is.” This confusion prevents people from seeing other potential ways of life as legitimate. In the video interview “Berkley Professor Explains Gender Theory”, Butler explains their theory of what distinction sex and gender. They argue that sex is often a category that infants are assigned and is important within medical and legal worlds. Gender on the other hand is a blend of family influence, cultural norms wishes, and desires, and this is something we have a say in. They claim that we
reproduce gender through repeated ways of speaking, but also through doing. We dress in certain ways and use particular body language, and through these repetitions, gender is reinforced until it seems inescapable. This can be observed in the novel *Anne of Green Gables*, where women were expected to wear dresses and behave passively. The character Anne does not always fit into the female gender norms and struggles to perform these norms.

4.3 Compulsory Heterosexuality

Adrienne Rich discusses compulsory heterosexuality in the essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1980). Rich states that just like motherhood, heterosexuality should be acknowledged and studied as a political institution by those who identify themselves as the precursors of a new social relationship between the sexes (Rich 17). In the essay, Rich lists different ways male power manifests itself and can enforce heterosexuality on women. Furthermore, Rich mentions that male power contributes to the cluster of forces within which a woman has been persuaded that sexual orientation toward men and marriage are inevitable. Another discussion in the essay is the theoretical assumption that “most women are innately heterosexual” (Rich 27). This assumption remains because lesbian existence has been written out of history. For example, it has been categorized as a disease, but it has also been examined as exceptional instead of intrinsic, as well as that for women, heterosexuality is not always a preference but instead something imposed on them (26-27).

Rich uses the terms lesbian existence and lesbian continuum in the essay. Lesbian existence is used to refer to both the historical existence of lesbians and our persisting creation of the meaning of that existence. According to Rich, the term lesbian continuum includes a range of women-identified experiences. This does not refer solely to the fact that a woman has had or deliberately desired genital sexual experience with another woman.
Lesbian existence includes both breaking a taboo and rejecting a compulsory way of life (27). According to Rich, exclusively heterosexuality has been enforced on women. Rich also believes that some women marry because it is necessary, and they feel they need to marry in order to remain respectable, to do what is expected of them as women, to survive economically, and/or they want to have children. Rich argues that the lie of compulsory female heterosexuality that exists today burdens not only feminist scholarship, but also every profession, curriculum, reference work, and relationship it addresses. It invents a sincere falseness and hysteria in the dialogue about heterosexuality. It keeps countless women psychologically trapped since they are not able to look away from the parameters of the acceptable. Rich states that in Western tradition the lie insists that women are inevitably attracted to men. It insists that primary love between a man and a woman is normal and that the heterosexual family is the basic social unit. This would mean if a woman did not connect her primary passion to a man, she would be sentenced to the punishment of outsiderhood (Rich 35). This is something that would affect a potential queer Anne. Even if Anne were to have romantic feelings for a girl, she would not be able to act on them, as it was insisted that primary love should be between a man and a woman.

5. Analysis

5.1 Gender Performativity in *Anne of Green Gables*

In this section, I discuss Anne from the perspective of gender performativity. Butler argues that gender is performative, and not biological, which according to Butler shows up in behavior such as when someone names a child, for example, as a girl; this will play a part in shaping the child into a girl. I argue that Anne’s gender performance is highly influenced by the people around her. She is desperate for love and feels a desire to please her family, and she might feel like she needs to learn how to perform proper girlhood to earn their
approval. Since Anne is an orphan, she probably fears that she will not be allowed to stay on the farm if she does not live up to Marilla’s expectations, and since Marilla wants a proper girl, maybe Anne thinks that is what she has to be to please the Cuthbert.

When Anne first arrives at Green Gables, Marilla asks Matthew: “Where is the boy?” (Montgomery 43). Marilla has a clear view of what a boy is for and what a girl is for, which means she only sees Anne as the wrong gender. Anne is not a boy, nor masculine enough to do the more masculine-coded chores. If Marilla was given a boy, he could help with the heavier chores, such as mopping the animals' hides. Since Marilla wanted someone to help Matthew with the heavier chores, Anne is of no use to her. A woman’s job was to take care of the household tasks, such as cleaning and cooking. Marilla is convinced she can do these chores herself. It is clear that when Montgomery wrote *Anne of Green Gables*, it was believed that a masculine body was required to do heavier chores. Anne may well have been able to do the same chores that a boy her age would have been able to do, but since she did not have a traditionally male body, it was not considered acceptable for her to do typical “male” chores.

Marilla becomes attached to Anne and thus thinks about keeping her, even though she is not a boy. However, Anne does not conform to the typical female gender identity either. A girl was expected to be well-behaved, patient, beautiful, and graceful. When Anne speaks ill of Mrs. Blewett, Marilla says: “A little girl like you should be ashamed of talking so about a lady and a stranger [. . .] Go back and sit down quietly and hold your tongue, and behave as a good girl should (Montgomery 77). Anne, who never had a real family, simply wants to belong somewhere, and she will do everything to attain that goal. Upon learning that she may stay with Marilla and Matthew, learning to behave like a "good girl" could significantly impact her gender performance. She even tells Marilla: “I´ll try to do and be anything you want me, if you´ll only keep me” (78). Anne may feel that she needs to
behave like a “girl good” in order to be accepted and remain with a family. In Critical Thinking Today, Tyson explains that: “[. . .] the main female characters are stereotyped as either “good girls” (gentle, submissive, virginal, angelic) or “bad girls” (violent, aggressive, worldly, monstrous). These characterizations imply that if a woman does not accept her patriarchal gender role, then the only role left her is that of a monster” (Tyson 89). This idea of “good girls” and “bad girls” is present in Anne of Green Gables. When Anne talks a lot and has tantrums, she shows signs of being a “bad girl”, something that the people around Anne do not appreciate. The norm in the book is to follow the traditional gender roles which meant a girl had to be quiet and submissive, like a “good girl.”

In the essay “A Good Little Girl” (2008), Jenny Rothman discusses how Anne’s behavior at the beginning of the book does not conform to societal expectations for girls. Rothman describes Anne as a talkative girl and someone who exhibits traits typically associated with boys. According to Rothman young Anne is: “a girl who has both masculine and feminine characteristics” (Rothman 3). However, it is important to remember that there is not only one way to be feminine, just as there is not only one way to be masculine. For example, Anne wants to be beautiful, which is seen as a feminine trait, but this does not erase her masculine qualities. Julia McQuillan and Julie Pfeiffer also address how Anne becomes more feminine over the course of the book. McQuillan and Pfeiffer point out that Anne often announces that she wants to be like the other girls, which shows that she is different from them. The other girls in the book behave calmly and cautiously, while Anne rarely does anything calmly and cautiously. She is not afraid to be seen and heard and often says exactly what she thinks.

Another important discussion is how the people around Anne, Marilla being one of them, try to change Anne into a proper girl. Marilla is one of the characters in the book who makes the most effort to change Anne into a more stereotypically feminine girl. One time
Marilla discovered that Anne had adorned her hat with roses and buttercups and she tells Anne: “All I want is that you should behave like other little girls and not make yourself ridiculous” (128). By wearing flowers on her hat, Anne stood out from the crowd, and not in a good way. This shows that Anne does not naturally behave as expected of a girl but must adapt in order to be seen as a traditional girl. Anne’s need to be like the other girls and her desire to please Marilla influences her choice to become more feminine.

Anne is aware of the fact that she does not behave like a proper girl should, and she tries to explain it to Diana:

There’s such a lot of different Annes in me. I sometimes think that is why I’m such a troublesome person. If I was just the one Anne it would be ever so much more comfortable, but then it wouldn’t be half so interesting.

(237).

This could indicate that Anne’s identity cannot be reducible to one thing and that she could be read as gender fluid, which means that she moves between different gender identities. In the course of the narrative, we see how Anne has traits that are typical for boys. Stereotypical male traits can include strength and courage, but they can also be aggression. Anne shows signs of aggression, but also strength and courage when Gilbert teases her about her hair color. She screams: “You mean, hateful boy!” (Montgomery 166) before she hits Gilbert in the head with her slate. Here it becomes clear that Anne is impulsive and acts before she thinks. The part of her that is aggressive acts out by hitting Gilbert, but she shows courage by standing up for herself. It was discouraged for girls to exhibit such traits at this time. As a girl, she would be expected to ignore Gilbert instead of causing a scene.

However, Anne is obsessed with her appearance, which is a stereotypical female characteristic. She often complains about her red hair and freckles, because she thinks it makes her ugly. She always asks for dresses with puff sleeves, just like the other girls. When
Matthew actually buys her a puff sleeve dress, she says: “It’s at times like this I’m sorry I’m not a model little girl; and I always resolve that I will be in the future. [...] Still, I really will make an extra effort after this” (Montgomery 293). She is not feminine as a girl should be; initially, she moves between different gendered behaviors. Ultimately, it becomes clear that her family and society’s expectations affect her gender identity. Anne wants to fit in with both her family and the other girls in the book. Therefore, she ultimately feels like she needs to make an effort to act like a proper girl.

Rothman mentions Anne’s thoughts about going from girl to woman, and how Anne decides to leave her non-feminine features in the past. On top of that, Rothman states that: “as a young woman Anne believes that she has to stick to the norm in order to be acknowledged as respectable by the general public” (15). Anne might choose to become more feminine, but it does not have to be because she is now an adult and can choose for herself, it is possible she still wants to fit in and follow the norm. Anne’s female identity is something she develops throughout the book, as she learns how to be seen as a proper woman, which was important during the late 19th century. It was not possible for a person who was assigned the gender female at birth to decide for themselves about their gender. Anne is assigned the gender female, which comes with a set of norms and expectations that are not innate but that she must learn. Ultimately, it becomes clear that Anne’s gender identity is affected by both her family and society. The first thing she hears upon arrival at the farm is that she is not good enough because she is a girl. She is told it is a boy they want, and when Anne exhibits male traits, they disapprove. Instead, they want her to act as a girl. Anne is then constantly expected to conform to societal expectations of how women should act. Every time she behaves in a way that is not considered appropriate for a woman, she is reprimanded and has to apologize.

Cormier states that both Anne and Marilla are based on and undermine heteronormative patterns. Marilla is a woman who is not married to anyone but lives with
Matthew, her brother. She also does not have any children of her own; instead, she and Matthew decide to adopt a child, Anne. When Matthew dies at the end of the book, it is Marilla and Anne who take care of the farm, without any men. By working on Marilla’s farm, Anne provides an alternative to the heteropatriarchal farmstead. It is Anne herself who helps on the farm, without a man, and at this point, Montgomery still has not given Anne a male partner, which means Anne is still single. Anne’s focus is on helping Marilla, and not on finding a husband. Anne and Marilla are two women who challenge the heteronormative by fending for themselves on the farm without any men. The book opens with the siblings rejecting Anne because they believe she would not be able to help with the farm work due to her gender. However, the story ends with Anne proving her worth by contributing to the farm work. This expectation for women to conform to certain social norms leads to the next section, which discusses the norm of being heterosexual.

5.2 The Effects of Compulsory Heterosexuality

In this section, I examine the role compulsory heterosexuality plays in shaping female identity in *Anne of Green Gables*. Rich states that women have been persuaded into believing that marriage with and sexual orientation toward men cannot be avoided. This section will also explore what Rich calls lesbian existence, which involves rejecting this compulsory way of life. I will look at the women in *Anne of Green Gables* and analyze how they both conform to and defy heteronormativity with a particular focus on Anne. I argue that reading Anne as heterosexual is not the only option, but that her sexuality can be open to multiple interpretations.

In the essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1980) Rich explains that the essay was written partly to question the removal of lesbian existence from much of scholarly feminist literature. Rich discusses “the lie of compulsory female
heterosexuality” (Rich 34) and states that this lie has many layers, one of which is the romantic, which claims that women are inevitably attracted to men. It also tries to convince women that primary love should occur between a man and a woman. When *Anne of Green Gables* was published in 1908, the norm was for a woman to be attracted to and marry a man. Despite this, scholars such as Robinson have argued that it is possible to argue that Anne has romantic feelings for women.

Although Anne herself might not understand exactly what her feelings towards women mean, she is aware that a woman should be married to a man. She has been convinced that she should be attracted to men, and it is men she and her friend Diana should marry. Even if Anne herself knows that she is a little different, she also knows that Diana is a proper girl and thus will follow the norm of marrying a man. It is something she worries about and talks to Marilla about it:

> It’s about Diana . . . I love Diana so, Marilla. I cannot ever live without her. But I know very well when we grow up that Diana will get married and go away and leave me. And oh, what shall I do? I hate her husband – I just hate him furiously. (177)

At this time, late 19th century, women were only allowed to enter into marriage with men, which means regardless of how much Anne and Diana love each other, they cannot be together in romantic union. Anne says she would not be jealous of Diana for having a husband, but rather that she would miss having Diana to herself. She will always have her feelings for Diana, which becomes clear when she mentions that she will hate Diana’s future husband. She mentions that she does not know what to do because she knows that Diana will never "belong" to her in the same way.

Anne can be open to multiple interpretations, and this becomes possible by looking at her relationships with other women. The most obvious romantic attraction is the
one she feels for Diana, but it can also be observed that Anne has developed some feelings towards her new teacher, when she tells Marilla: “I love Miss Stacey with my whole heart, Marilla. She is so ladylike and she has such a sweet voice” (Montgomery 277). When Anne talked about her former teacher, it was not in such an admiring way. Now, when she talks about Miss Stacey, it is not only to state that she is a good teacher; Anne also seems to admire her and is swayed by her influence to do better. Whether Miss Stacey is purely a role model for Anne or someone she has developed a crush on and wants to impress is hard to say. Anne also finds her new classmates at the end of the book interesting, and declares feelings that can be perceived as romantic:

I like the look of that girl with the brown eyes and the crimson waist. She looks vivid and red-rosy; there’s that pale fair one gazing out of the window. She has lovely hair, and looks as if she knew a thing or two about dreams. I’d like to know them both – know them well – well enough to walk with my arms about their waists and call them nicknames.

(402)

Anne is not simply stating that she wants to be friends with the girls, she seems to want something other than friendship. The way Anne talks about them is reminiscent of how one might talk about someone one has a romantic interest in and would like to have a romantic relationship with. She does not simply state she wants to be friends with the “brown-eyed girl”, she uses words like “fair” and “lovely” and by doing this she shows that she really admires their beauty. Anne also points out that she wants to have a close relationship with the girls, and mentions typical behaviors made in a romantic relationship, like giving each other nicknames and having one’s arm around someone’s waist. The way Anne describes and talks about women opens up the potential for reading same-sex desire in the novel.
5.3. Romantic friendship in *Anne of Green Gables*

In this section, I will examine the relationship between Anne and Diana with a focus on the term “romantic friendships.” Tyson highlights that “romantic friendship” occurred between women in the nineteenth century, but Tyson also states that “because the relationship occurred in a different historical period from our own, we can’t be certain exactly what it was that was being expressed” (Tyson 324). During the 19th century, many women may have felt desire for other women but been unable to openly express it, due to the restrictions placed on their sexuality, as explained by Tyson (324). I will use the opinions of other critics, such as Robinson´s discussion of romantic friendships, and Pilmaier´s opinion on Anne´s relationship with other women, to analyze the relationship between Anne and Diana as a romantic friendship and to explore what this entails for how Anne´s sexuality and identity may be interpreted.

An example of romantic friendship in the 19th century is when women exchanged letters to each other, in which they expressed passionate love. However, since these relationships occurred in a historical period different from the 21st century, one cannot necessarily interpret them through the lens of contemporary norms. It can be argued that Anne and Diana have a romantic friendship. Anne and Diana, upon being prohibited from meeting, resort to exchanging letters that are replete with intense emotions. When Anne writes to Diana, she starts the letter with: “My own darling Diana” (Montgomery 201) and ends the letter with: “Yours until death us do part” (201). Diana writes affectionate letters to Anne as well:

If you love me as I love you

Nothing but death can part us two.

(216)
For a modern reader, these letters may seem very romantic to be writing to a friend; they are more like letters one would write to someone one has romantic feelings for. Anne and Diana use words and expressions typical of lovers when writing to each other. If one had seen these letters without knowing that two girls wrote them, one would probably have thought a married couple wrote them, since the phrase “till death do us part” is often used in a wedding ceremony. Anne also uses the word "yours" when she writes to Diana, which is used when writing to someone one is close to, but it is also used in romantic relationships. It can be seen as belonging to one’s partner, in every way. This marital language gives the letters an unavoidable romantic tone.

In the article “Bosom Friends: Lesbian Desire in L.M. Montgomery’s Anne Books”, Robinson states that: “women in ‘romantic friendships’ were devoted to each other in ways that would now be regarded as erotically charged: they wrote love letters to each other; they pledged undying love; they spent their lifetimes ‘in love’ with each other, even when they married men” (Robinson 16). Further, Robinson points out that women can be in love with women all their lives without experiencing sexual contact, and just because a woman refrains from sexual contact with other women does not necessarily mean that she is heterosexual. Thus, even though Anne and Diana never experience anything so intimate as a kiss, they can still be in love with each other. They do express their love for each other:

‘Indeed I will’, sobbed Diana, ‘and I’ll never have another bosom friend – I don’t want to have. I couldn’t love anybody as I love you.’

‘Oh, Diana,’ cried Anne … ‘do you love me?’

‘Why, of course I do. Didn’t you know that?’

‘No,’ … ‘I thought you liked me of course, but I never hoped you loved me.

(196)
Diana does not even hesitate about the fact that she will always love Anne most of all, which means more than a future hypothetical husband. It is also clear that Anne has dreamed of hearing these words from Diana. They consistently demonstrate their love for one another, which allows for a queer presence in the novel.

Valerie Murrenus Pilmaier also discusses Anne’s relationship with other women. Pilmaier, following Laura Robinson, argues that the relationships Anne has with other girls are the most important relationships she has. Pilmaier elaborates that Anne finds in Diana, a friend who can be as vulnerable as herself, and who accepts her without hesitation. It is clear that Anne and Diana have something special, and it is arguable that their feelings do not need to be heterosexual.

Robinson and Pilmaier are not the only ones who have noticed Anne’s relationships with other women. In the newsletter “Bosom Friends: The Gay Anne of Green Gables Scandal”, Danika Ellis writes that *Anne of Green Gables* is a bit “gay”. Ellis refers to the term “romantic friendship” when she writes about Anne and Diana’s friendship, and even mentions that there is a Wikipedia page devoted to a “gay Anne”. However, Ellis reads Anne as bisexual and not as a lesbian, since Anne does not only have romantic feelings for girls. Ellis points out that while Anne may not have been written as bisexual, art changes over time and talks back to the readers. As mentioned before, *Anne of Green Gables* was written during the 19th century when being queer was not as acceptable as it is in some places today. We can now argue that the text opens up for queer readings with greater ease.

In recent years, there have even been adaptations of *Anne of Green Gables* in which Anne is not heterosexual and has a romantic relationship with Diana. An example of this is the 2022 graphic novel *Anne: An Adaptation of Anne of Green Gables (Sort of)* by Kathleen Gros. In this book, we follow Anne in a different time period, the 21st century, and it shows how her friendship with Diana develops into something more romantic. This shows that queer
readings of *Anne of Green Gables* have really resonated with readers. It is also possible to claim that just because Anne may have been written as heterosexual, Anne as queer is not considered impossible by 21-st century readers.

6.0 Conclusion

In this essay, I have looked at Montgomery’s construction of Anne in relation to gender identity and sexuality and argued that it is possible to read Anne as non-binary and queer. A longer study could consider all of the books in Montgomery’s series and examine how Anne’s gender identity and sexuality developed over the years. It would also be interesting to explore contemporary queer responses to Anne.

I have argued that it is possible to read Anne as a girl who feels pressure to change to fit in with society’s expectations. Since she was assigned female at birth, that is what she has to live up to, and thus she has to suppress her personality traits that are not considered feminine. When Anne’s adoptive family decides they want to keep Anne, it is a proper girl they want, someone who can behave as a girl should. Throughout the book, readers witness Anne’s struggle with societal expectations of femininity, including the pressure to remain calm and composed in all situations. She does become more feminine, which is a result of constantly being told that she needs to act more like a proper girl. Anne, who only wants to belong somewhere, will do anything to adapt to the needs of others, even if it means changing herself. Despite this, Anne is still not a traditional feminine girl at the end of the book, since she ends up working at the farm without a man. In this way, she fights some of the demands of how a feminine girl should be.

I have also argued that Anne could be read from different perspectives, where reading her as queer is one alternative. I have also argued that her sexuality was probably
influenced by the norm, which was for a man and a woman to marry. The relationship between Anne and Diana is comparable to the term "romantic friendship." Their relationship is similar to that of a married couple, and their relationship is very loving. Although a romantic relationship between them could not happen, they could still have feelings for each other. By expressing her feelings for Diana and other women, Anne rejects the compulsory way of life. L.M. Montgomery’s purpose may not have been to write Anne as queer, but readers can still read Anne as a person open to multiple interpretations.

In the end, perhaps the character Anne does not fit in exactly with the other girls in the book, but if the book was written today, it might have been easier to explain why Anne feels different. Today, it would be easier to write Anne as a girl who realizes that she is not a ciswoman or that she is not heterosexual. Although Anne may not have been written to challenge gender norms and heteronormativity, she can still be an important figure in the representation of queer characters.
7.0 Works Cited


Montgomery, L.M. *Anne of Green Gables*. Wordsworth Editions, 2018


