

## **Palimpsests of Green Gables: Intertextuality, Identity, and Ideology in *Anne with an E***

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**Abstract:** L. M. Montgomery's novel, *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), since its publication has been frequently adapted into diverse media forms – silent film, miniseries, musicals and Japanese Anime – each version shaped by the cultural and historical moment of its production, bringing into play the concerns about fidelity, dilution, and transformation. For the purpose of this paper, I intend to critically examine the cultural osmosis and also the specific impulses and ideologies that have shaped the 2017 Netflix series *Anne with an E*, an adaptation of *Anne of Green Gables*. I argue that the series is not merely an imitation but a radical reimagining that weaves contemporary concerns—especially feminism, trauma, racial and personal identities, inclusivity, and indigenous concerns—into a classic narrative. By framing adaptation as both a dialogic and intertextual process, this study interrogates how *Anne with an E* reconfigures the bucolic, white-settler past of the original novel. The paper will contextualise the tone, ideological underpinnings, and the cultural context of the Netflix adaptation, and examine the extrapolations and amplifications of the thematic content, such as LGBTQIA+ themes and the erasure of indigenous identities, which were either missing or understated in the original novel. Using Linda Hutcheon's concept of Palimpsestic Doubleness and her arguments on adaptation as a product as well as process, Julie Sanders's insights from her book *Adaptation and Acculturation*, and Deborah Cartmell's three broad categories of adaptation: (i) transposition (ii) commentary (iii) analogue, the paper will critically examine the revisitation of *Anne of Green Gables* by situating it within the wider discourse of Adaptation Studies.

**Keywords:** Radical Reimagining; Fidelity; Dilution, Transformation; Feminism; Trauma; Racial Identities; Indigenous Concerns

L. M. Montgomery's novel, *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), since its publication has been frequently adapted into diverse media forms – silent film, miniseries, musicals and Japanese Anime – with spatial, temporal, and cultural context bearing an imprint on each version of its production. The cultural and historical ethos embedded in adaptation raises concerns about fidelity, dilution, and transformation. Under the rubric of Adaptation Studies, this paper will focus on CBC and Netflix original series, *Anne with an E* (2017-19), produced by Northwood Entertainment and created by Moira Walley-Beckett. The paper will take the novel as the starting point to examine the tone, characterization, and ideological underpinnings of the Netflix adaptation, and look into the extrapolations and amplification of the thematic content and its representation, either missing or understated in the novel.

According to Linda Hutcheon, “Adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication” (7), and “with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise” (5). Instead of a parasitical feeding upon the source material, an adaptation is “an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works” (Hutcheon 8). This “transcoding” (Hutcheon 8) implies a shift of medium (for example, a song to a musical) or a change of genre (for example, a play to a film) or a retelling in terms of changing the context or point of view.

As adaptation is both a “product and a process of creation and reception,” Hutcheon tries to theorise adaptation as a formal entity and its “experiential” nature (Preface xvi). The early works in the field of Adaptation Studies focused on measuring fidelity to the source text, and the creative potential of adaptations was under scrutiny. By viewing adaptations as potentially “vulgar” or “inferior” versions of literature, films were seen as a less serious art form compared to the written word (Leitch 2003). George Bluestone, in his seminal work *Novels into Film* (1957), argued that film is inherently limited in its ability to capture the complexity of literature because it relies more on action and spectacle, whereas the written word is steeped in reflection, subtlety, and depth. For some, as Robert Stam points out, the “axiomatic superiority” of literature is undeniable considering the fact that it preceded adaptation but he argued against this hierarchy as it stemmed from prejudices like

‘seniority’ (older arts are better), ‘iconophobia (a suspicion and devaluation of the visual) and ‘logophilia’ (valorization of the word as sacred) (Stam 58).

Robert Stam, Kamilla Elliott, Deborah Cartmell, Imelde Whelehan, Julie Sanders, and Thomas Leitch have added newer dimensions to the critical terrain of Adaptation Studies, though vestiges of fidelity criticism still remain in reviewing practices, especially of films adapted from classic texts (Hutcheon xxvi). The contemporary concerns oscillate between previous texts and their adaptations, but also shift among older and newer media, cultures, technologies, theories, and corporate models.

Hutcheon’s approach extends beyond fidelity criticism, as she considers adaptation to be “creative and an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging” (9). She calls it “its own palimpsestic thing (Hutcheon 9) because of its intertextual engagement with the adapted work. From the lens of audience or consumers’ reception, adaptation is a form of intertextuality: we experience adaptations (as adaptations) as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation (Hutcheon 8). The term palimpsest usually refers to a manuscript (often written on papyrus or parchment in ancient times) on which more than one text has been written, with the earlier writing partially erased but its traces still discernible. Hutcheon uses the term palimpsestuous to explain the difference in the critical reception of adaptation in relation to the “unknowing” (unfamiliar to the original work) audience, for whom an adaptation is not an adapted work, but an independent creation and “knowing” audiences familiar with the source text (Hutcheon 120–122). She considers that “for unknowing audiences, adaptations have a way of upending sacrosanct elements like priority and originality” (Hutcheon 122).

Robert Stam emphasises the unavoidable, embedded intertextuality when readers or audiences are familiar with the adapted text. Using Bakhtinian concept of dialogism, Stam considers the source text and the adaptation to be in an ongoing dialogue with each other in terms of experience and comparison (Stam 64). Hence, instead of simple reproduction, it is a challenge to interpret, recreate, and retell the adapted text in the visual, aural, and gestural complexity of cinematic form. The creative

transposition relies not only on genre and medium demands, but also on “the temperament and talent of the adapter—and his or her individual intertexts through which are filtered the materials being adapted” (Hutcheon 84), for example the introduction of non-diegetic elements, such as background music or a narrator's voice-over exist outside the story's internal world, and are not perceived by the characters.

The translation from novel to television series exemplifies *intersemiotic transposition* – a shift from one sign system into another – a written narrative to audiovisual storytelling. Such adaptation foregrounds the medium-specific qualities of television, which have the potential to delve into broader explorations of character psychology, social/cultural critique, and historical trauma. Stam's “grammar of transformation” further clarifies that adaptations operate through selection, amplification, and extrapolation (Stam 68), shaped by style, ideology, and production constraints. Hence, the source text moves beyond the realm of a “single, fixed, recognizable story” and assumes the characteristics of an “ongoing, unstable, open-ended “multitext (Hutcheon 24). Additionally, the material, public, and economic drives in the contexts of creation and reception of an adaptation work in tandem with cultural, personal, and aesthetic factors prompting an adaptation, which explains that the transposed story can be radically interpreted, ideologically and literally, depending on shifts in a story's spatial or temporal context (Hutcheon 28).

The latter approaches in the field of adaptation engage with, and frequently foreground, the perceived medium-specificities of the source and target media. As one of the major figures of the *trans-textual turn* in film studies, Stam deals with the issue of medium specificity in the process of film adaptation and focuses on “the source novel hypotext's being transformed by a complex series of operations: selection, amplification, concretization, actualization, critique, extrapolation” (Stam 68). Applying the medium specificity thesis to a Netflix drama series running into different seasons calls for a specific set of amplification tools, tweaking / expansion of the existing storylines, new corporate models of auteurship etc.

**Ideological Transformations: Indigenous Identity, Feminism, Racism, Sexuality, and Trauma**

*Anne with an E* was created by Moira Walley-Beckett, who also served as an executive producer and the show's head writer. The other executive producers included Miranda de Pencier. As opposed to truncation or condensation of plot lines, narration or narrow characterization owing to the time constraint of a film adaptation with a running time that varies between 120-180 minutes, the multi-season series furnishes a broader scope for imagination, and is well-equipped to develop well-rounded characters and to introduce new ones, to add to the existing message of the source text, and to introduce social themes, either missing or slightly hinted in the original work. Despite the tranquil, pastoral, and idyllic setting of the island village of Avonlea, the series uses it to address socially and politically contentious issues of the times. Such revision enhances the contemporary relevance of its plot by foregrounding concerns around social justice, human rights, gender parity and even sexuality. Stam argues, “Adaptations, then, can take an activist stance toward their source novels, inserting them into a much broader intertextual dialogism” (64).

Bolter and Grusin’s concept of remediation underscores how new media (Netflix in the context of this paper) position themselves as correctives to prior formats—seeking to fulfil promises left unaddressed by earlier media (Bolter and Grusin 60). Through episodic storytelling in the Netflix adaptation, Montgomery’s bildungsroman is transformed into a series encompassing a wide array of societal concerns, including racism, homophobia, bullying, and female sexuality.

Montgomery’s Anne Shirley is a young, idiosyncratic, compassionate, empathetic, and deeply imaginative orphan girl who is adopted by the Cuthbert siblings – Mathew and Marilla. The book traces her journey as she navigates through different challenges while settling into the Avonlea community. In the book, she is depicted as a child of about eleven, garbed in a very short, very tight, very ugly dress of yellowish-grey wincey, with two braids of very thick, decidedly red hair. Her face was small, white and thin, also much freckled; her mouth was large, and so were her eyes, which looked green in some lights and moods and grey in others (Montgomery 13).

Walley-Beckett’s zeroing in on Amybeth McNulty as Anne Shirley in the lead role almost cemented her image as the real Anne, Montgomery's creation, for global audiences. Her physical

attributes are largely represented accurately through the persona of Amybeth McNulty in the Netflix adaptation. Due to imposed child care activities and later mistreatment at the orphanage, Anne becomes a victim of systemic neglect that manifests itself through her overtly reactive responses in the form of temper tantrums, insecurities, fears, social withdrawal etc. In contradistinction to the late nineteenth-century Canadian society, when mental health issues were swept under the carpet or were not dealt with exigency, as is evident from the understated response to Anne's mental condition in the novel, the onscreen disturbing and graphic representation of Anne's psychological wounds fosters a deeper audience engagement surrounding medical discourses around mental and emotional well-being. It is likely that the social stigmatisation concerning the discourse of mental health prevented Montgomery's active engagement with such issues, as the novel did not encapsulate the magnitude of the underlying traumatic condition of Anne. However, the Netflix series moves back and forth with Anne recalling the bullying she underwent at the hands of older girls in the orphanage. These themes turn the adapted text into a 'multilaminar' work, as Walley-Beckett opines, "They just never talked about it. Anne was abused, and she was traumatised. For me, that material has always been timeless, but timeless and topical. And sadly, we are still discussing so many of these topics today — prejudice against people who come from away and bullying and gender rights. These topics are alive and well" (Mullinger "Why the World Needs *Anne with an E*").

Pierre Janet was an early psychologist who developed a therapeutic and systematic approach to traumatized patients. He viewed trauma as a psychopathological issue – a memory disorder whereby traumatized individuals struggled with "unassimilated fixed ideas" that manifested as unbidden memories, nightmares, and behavioral reenactments, a core concept of modern PTSD. In the series, the multimodality through the interplay of moving images, still shots, text, sounds and other diegetic and non-diegetic elements adds to the emotional depth and deeper insights into the inner consciousness of the characters. The dimly-lit cinematography shots (especially the close-ups that bring out the emotional turmoil of Anne), sombre landscape, menacing soundtrack, and portentous background noises of the children that Anne had to tend to – all led to Anne's emotional

meltdowns and frequent burnouts. The memories of the harrowing time at Mrs Hammond, where Anne was kept as a child caretaker, keep flashing past Anne over and over again. Later, her experience at the orphanage is even more traumatic as the older girls constantly taunt her, scare her with a dead mouse and eventually throw it at her, leaving her crying, sending devastating shockwaves through her body and mind. However, Montgomery depicts childhood abuse in a subtle and restrained manner, which did not draw much attention from the readers, and such representation was probably in sync with the cultural sensibilities of the era.

Anne's escaping into her imaginative world is her defence mechanism against the harsh reality of the real world. During her time in the orphanage, she gives herself an imagined, more romantic and elegant name, Cordelia, instead of a plain name, Anne, so she could survive the bullying, taunts, and hostile treatment meted out to her. Anne renames the local "Avenue" as the "White Way of Delight" and Barry's Pond to the "Lake of Shining Waters" to give them the romantic significance she feels they deserve. Later, Anne and her friend Diana built a small make-shift playhouse in the woods and named it "Idlewild". Anne reflects: "When I don't like the name of a place or a person, I always imagine a new one and always think of them so (Montgomery 17). These imaginative strategies serve as protective measures against systemic neglect and abuse. Though the core elements remain the same, the series darkens these episodes, emphasising their psychological repercussions through graphic representations of emotional scars.

The novel describes Anne's misadventures and silly mistakes as part of her identity, but the series often gives these episodes a darker, more grim twist. When Marilla's most prized possession – an amethyst brooch which was an old-fashioned oval, containing a braid of her mother's hair is misplaced, Marilla makes a statement showing her displeasure with Anne's irresponsible behaviour: "Slyness and untruthfulness— that's what she has displayed. I declare I feel worse about that than about the brooch" (Montgomery 36). However, the series portrays this incident as a serious question mark on Anne's integrity and identity. The allegation leaves her heartbroken, and she runs away from Green Gables before Marilla realises her fault, brings her back, but reconciliation is a long-drawn-

out process. Hence, the series reinforces and reshapes her identity as a strong-willed yet vulnerable young girl.

The Netflix adaptation highlights the feminist concerns and discovers the feminist subtext in an explicit manner, for example, Marilla is invited to join a “Progressive Mother’s Sewing Circle,” in which the local Avonlea women discuss the importance of opportunities, autonomy, and education for their daughters. However, these deliberations seem more superficial and apparent than real and concrete, as these women are swayed by recent shifts in gender roles, with greater emphasis on independence and education, yet they lack a nuanced understanding of freedom, autonomy, and, broadly, the core ideas behind feminism. Their skewed conception of a progressive outlook is indirectly challenged by the newly appointed school teacher, Miss Stacey.

The character of Miss Stacey is introduced as a foil to the docile, submissive gender roles expected of women in the Avonlea community. Marilla’s neighbour, Rachel Lynde, a nitpicking lady, uses low remarks and pejorative terms like ‘old maid,’ ‘spinster’ to refer to the unmarried status or ‘inexperienced’ status (i.e., not having children) of single women. The school teacher, Miss Stacey, is pivotal in understanding the broader resistance of the Avonlea community to embracing progressive ideas. Her non-conformist style—wearing trousers and no corset, taking a lift from a man, and riding a bicycle—is perceived as a threat to the community’s established norms and values, yet her engagement with the pupils and practical pedagogical methods eventually wins people’s favour. Rachel Lynde raises many an eyebrow at the non-ladylike behaviour of Miss Stacey, before coming to terms with her unconventional approach.

In the series, Anne is quite vocal about her agency and subjectivity, and wears it on her sleeve many times when she makes statements about empowering herself through writing and education, and about not being subservient to her future life partner. Such a feminist interpretation of Anne’s character lies, more or less, dormant in the novel.

### **Erasure of Indigenous Ways of Living**

As Julie Sanders opines that Adaptation often provides a commentary on a source text and offers “a revised point of view from the ‘original,’ adding hypothetical motivation, or voicing the silenced and marginalized” (Sanders 18-19), the series introduces the residential School system – a dark chapter of Canadian history. Such layering adds emotional resonance and historical accuracy to the representation of indigenous tribes.

The Residential School System was started in order to integrate the indigenous children into mainstream society and remained operational from the 17th century until the late 1990s. As a key aspect of colonialism, the residential schools were an ideological mechanism to acculturate the native tribes to the values, beliefs, and language of the colonizers, and in the process erase their rich cultures, religious traditions, unique identities, shared legacy, connection with the land, and to homogenize them by developing a policy of "aggressive civilization" (Jones “The Intergenerational Legacy of Indian Residential Schools”) in the church-run, federally-funded industrial schools, later called residential schools. The coercive and manipulative ways of the Indian agents were used to send hundreds of native children to the Boarding schools, which resulted in long-term detrimental effects and intergenerational trauma among the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities. On September 1, 2020, the Government of Canada announced the designation of the Residential School System as a national historic event under the National Program of Historical Commemoration. In 2022, Pope Francis came to Canada to apologise for the “evil” that had been committed at the institutions.

The Government of Canada has acknowledged this as a tragic and traumatic event in the shared history of Canada and is now working with Indigenous peoples and communities who attended these schools to raise awareness about the buried stories (literally and metaphorically). “The efforts of residential school survivors to tell their stories and to seek justice have been a crucial catalyst in the growing public recognition of the harm and effects of residential schools” (“Residential schools in Canada”). The historic, intergenerational, and collective oppression of Indigenous People continues to this day in the form of land disputes, over-incarceration, lack of housing, child apprehension, systemic poverty, marginalization and violence against Indigenous women, girls, and

LGBTQIA+ peoples, and other critical issues which neither began nor ended with residential schools (Hanson “The Residential School System”).

The Netflix series introduces the character of Ka'kwet, who belongs to the Mi'kmaq tribe living on the outskirts of Avonlea. Anne finds a kindred spirit in her, but it is ironic that Ka'kwet, which translates into English as a ‘starfish,’ is tested in the most brutal manner for her resilience, a hallmark of a starfish. When the news of a residential school in Halifax reaches Avonlea, Ka'kwet, much against her parents' genuine concerns, is thrilled by the idea of attending school, as Anne paints a rosy picture of the possibilities for growth and learning. Much against the wishes of her parents, who fear the loss of heritage from a white education, Ka'kwet is allowed to go. However, the results are disastrous and traumatic for Ka'kwet as she encounters physical abuse and ethnocide in a residential school. She is forbidden from speaking her native language, forbidden to leave, and is required to learn English and practice Christianity in an effort to “kill the Indian, but save the child.”

She briefly manages to escape the institution but is captured and brought back. When she returns, her mother feels unsettled due to the psychological trauma experienced by Ka'kwet, especially when she has an outburst at her younger sibling, calling him a "stupid Indian" and telling him to speak English. Ka'kwet's escape from school is temporary, as government officials soon raid the Mi'kmaq camp and forcibly bring her back to the residential school. Though her parents and Anne and Matthew try to get her out, the series stops short of providing any resolution to Ka'kwet's story, leaving the audience in a state of limbo.

This thematic expansion aligns with Julie Sanders’s assertion that adaptations can offer commentary by amplifying marginalised voices. The depiction of Ka’kwet’s sorrowful story of physical abuse, as well as her emotional alienation from her family, lends contemporary relevance, depth, and historical accuracy absent from the novel.

Marilla’s subtle racist intent is discernible in the early pages of the novel as she is sceptical of keeping “stupid, half-grown little French boys” as househelp and is averse to accepting anyone different from her, as she wants to keep a native Canadian, and not a boy from England or the States.

However, the Netflix series, goes further in its attempt to foreground the prevalent racism and classism in the late nineteenth century Prince Edward Island in Canada, as it provides a social critique and commentary on the same by introducing the character of *Sebastian* (Bash), a black, hailing from the Caribbean Islands whom Gilbert Blythe, (a classmate and friend of Anne) befriends when he is working on a ship and is eventually brought to Avonlea as Blythe's extended family and partner on the farm. Blythe considers Bash and Mary as his family, regardless of their skin colour. Mary is a resident of the Bog, a slum area in Charlottetown. She works in the laundry service with her friends, Constance and Jocelyn, and many other black women. Bash's friendship with Gilbert and his role in the community expose both solidarity and prejudice, while Mary's exclusion highlights structural barriers faced by working-class Black women. However, the community's initial resistance against accepting Mary, despite her baking talent and good-heartedness, reaches a culmination when Mary is on her deathbed and the community organises a warm get-together to bid adieu. This episode adds an element of corrective redress for the racism prevalent in the novel.

The conflicted ideological positioning in race relations manifests itself through Bash and his relationship with his mother, whose servile attitude towards the white family she works for, and her hostile treatment of her son hints at the deep-seated internalisation of the inferior status by the Blacks. Her husband was lynched as he was an ambitious man who tried to assert his agency and autonomy by desiring to start his own business and buy his own land. The series offers a powerful social commentary on the internalized racism, social ostracization, and resilience needed to overcome the barriers of race and class.

The series also challenges heteronormative frameworks by exploring queer identities. Series creator Moira Walley-Beckett, in an interview with *IndieWire*, *discussed* adding depth and density to the character of Aunt Josephine. Walley-Beckett takes up the cue to develop the character of Aunt Jo from the book and adds a layer of her lesbian relationship with Aunt Gertrude – her best friend and kindred spirit. In the book, as Walley-Beckett points out, “she’s a spinster and she’s just a bit of a curmudgeon ... coming to the Barrys for a month and she’s grieving,’ that’s why I decided to justify

why she's there: Who is she grieving?" (Mullinger "Why the World Needs *Anne with an E*"). Beyond her exterior hard-to-get, unapologetic, and fastidious persona, Aunt Josephine is imbued with more humane qualities especially in the depiction of warmth and affection for Anne and Cole—a homosexual classmate of Anne who is ruthlessly plagued by his peer group for being 'different' from other boys. However, Aunt Josephine Barry's sheltering of Anne and Cole also raises pertinent questions about the issues of class. Whereas Aunt Barry's affluent position allows her the privilege to hide her homosexual orientation under the cloak of wealth and even renders it immaterial, Cole does not come from a privileged section of society. Without Aunt Josephine's intervention and decision to take him under her wing, his story could have had a tragic ending. Hence, the series's bolder and more sensitive take on the issues of different sexual orientations brings to the forefront issues of class privilege, familial support, and societal prejudice, raising critical concerns about belongingness, displacement, alienation, and safety.

### **Conclusion**

The above analysis highlights the adaptation of the classic novel *Anne of Green Gables* into the Netflix series *Anne with an E* and examines it as a palimpsestic text, meaning that the traces of the source text coexist with the contemporaneity of the multimodal adaptation through its ideological underpinnings and new thematic layers. The series shapeshifts Montgomery's classic into an intertextual dialogic text which foregrounds modern concerns around mental health, feminist interpretation, racist themes, indigenous trauma, and homosexual identities—while retaining the coming-of-age story of Anne, whose strength, resilience, and imagination are the hallmarks of the source text.

By using the insights of various scholars like Hutcheon, Stam, Sanders, and others, this paper contextualises *Anne with an E* within the wider discourse of Adaptation Studies. By transcending the limited scope of fidelity criticism, the study delves deeper into examining adaptation as creative interpretation and retelling of the classic text, thereby emphasising the reimagination as a site of critical discourse and as a fertile ground for negotiation and contestation between the source text and

its revisionist cinematic representation. By doing so, the paper examines the Netflix multi-season series as a space for cultural critique, historical excavation, and reflection, as well as a palimpsestic narrative in which repetition moves beyond slavish imitation to foster new possibilities of meaning-making.

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