

Visual Wonders vs Novelist's Perspectives in *Anne of Green Gables*

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Abstract:

Most of the Film makers use literature as their medium of source. Many Films are mainly based on Novels. However, each of them use different ways to narrate similar stories. Umpteen numbers of literary masterpieces are represented through films. Quite often, people like to compare the novel with the film that tells the same story, and many people are inclined to agree with the opinion that films could defeat the novels in telling the story. This paper situates Lucy Maud Montgomery's Novel *Anne of Green Gables* in the context of Film Adaptation by tracing the ways in which the Director Sullivan is different from the author. It explores the shifting role of a popular text to an entirely different medium. It focuses on how screened images function and affect the audiences rather than the readers of a book. It highlights how the visual wonders of the blockbuster hits and engages the audience through evoking emotions towards characters. Moreover, this paper conceives the idea that the differences between novels and films and how these two forms of media will never create the same effects on presenting stories.

Key Words: Situates, Film Adaptation, Tracing, Screened images, Visual wonders,

Blockbuster

**"It is a miracle of harmony, of the adaptation of the free inner life
to the outward necessity of things"**

- John Crowe Ransom

This quote is relevant to the adaptation of a literary genre. A pre-existing work, often literary or theatrical, has been made into a film. Commercial properties such as musical theatre, best-selling fiction and non-fiction, comic books, and so on, are also regularly adapted for the cinema. Adaptations of well-known literary and theatrical texts were common in the silent era (silent cinema; costume drama; epic film; history film) and have been a staple of virtually all National Cinemas through the twentieth and twenty first centuries.

A Film Adaptation is the transfer of a written literary source to another genre of medium such as Film, Stage Play, TV Shows etc. A common factor in film adaptation is the usage of the novel as the basis of a feature film. It is very common for popular stories from the pages of their ancestral books and shared with audiences via new mediums like theatre and film. Nowadays, books have become miniscule and movies and TV shows rule the arena. The film adaptation of a book will spread the author's ideas even further to greater heights.

Lucy Maud Montgomery's story of an orphan girl who finds a home on Prince Edward Island with Matthew and Marilla Cuthbert was an instant success when it was first published in 1908. *Anne of Green Gables* tells the story of an adolescent and her gradual maturation into a young woman. In effect, Montgomery writes a Bildungsroman: a novel of maturation. Montgomery's Anne develops into a young woman who identifies not only with Matthew and Marilla, but also with all the other kindred spirits of the town, Avonlea. As the novel progresses, Anne becomes part of the very same community that at one time did not want to embrace a little orphan girl. In Kevin Sullivan's *Anne of Green Gables*, a 1985 Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) miniseries, the focus is not strictly on the formation of Anne from girl to young woman, but rather on Anne's overly romantic notions about her vision of love. Sullivan's commentary adaptation exaggerates the roles of Alfred Lord Tennyson's poetic works and Gilbert Blythe's role of suitor to fulfill Anne's desire to have romance in her life. As a result,

Montgomery's story of Anne as a Bildungsroman transforms to the screen as Sullivan's romantic comedy.

During Montgomery's life, two Anne films were produced. She did not enjoy the first film adaptation *Anne of Green Gables* because it lacked the atmosphere of Prince Edward Island and was too reflective of the United States. Montgomery found the 1934 film adaptation also entitled *Anne of Green Gables* as an improvement. Surprisingly, this film took many liberties with the plot as well as characters. To date, there have been seven films and television adaptations of *Anne of Green Gables*. One of the most recent and most popular is Kevin Sullivan's 1985 adaptation of *Anne of Green Gables*.

When Kevin Sullivan bought the film rights, he soon realized the difficult task of adapting a famous Canadian Novel. The pressures of remaining faithful to the original text were paramount because of the large Canadian fan base. The adaptation developed into a miniseries that broadcasted on CBS. Sullivan's miniseries mirrored Montgomery's approach of writing Anne: Montgomery wrote Anne in short, episodic, often comic stories, which Sullivan captures in the miniseries. However, Sullivan and co-writer, Joe Wisenfield decided on making key changes for the adaptation to create a newer, slightly altered version of Anne.

Sullivan viewed the adaptation process as creating "independent works of art that are inspired by the source novels yet are distinct from them in their technical aspects and appeal to audiences" (Hersey 132). As producer and director, he remained quite faithful to the plot, characters, dialogue, and comic situations but he also wanted to share his own perception of Anne. Sullivan's vision is a precocious girl who is extremely eager to be one of the romantic heroines whom she has so long read and dreamed. In effect, his approach created a romanticized version of Anne. Fortunately for Sullivan, Canadian audiences as well as International ones enjoyed his version of Anne.

When Sullivan first began the adaptation process of *Anne of Green Gables*, he thought only of adapting the first of Montgomery's books. After much critical and mass success, Sullivan decided to adapt *Anne of Avonlea* in 1987. *Anne of Avonlea* (Canada and VHS version) or *Anne of Green Gables -- The Sequel* (USA version) strays even further from the Anne series by combining three books into one film. In 2000, Sullivan began the task of filming another Anne

miniseries entitled *Anne of Green Gables -- The Continuing Story*. In his analogy adaptation, Anne explores her strength and dedication in New York City as well as the battlefields of Europe during World War I. Sullivan's drastic and unrecognizable third film is purely from his own imagination. After viewing Sullivan's three film versions, the most faithful to Montgomery's creation is *Anne of Green Gables*.

Though Sullivan remained quite faithful to the original, he did implement certain creative licenses such as Anne's recitations of Alfred Lord Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott". At the beginning of the adaptation, Anne is shown walking through a forest reciting Tennyson. Anne's memorization of Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" confirms how important the work is to her. Tennyson is not an addition to the film. In Montgomery's *Anne* series, Tennyson's quotations abound in plenty. Montgomery included the Tennyson references as homage to her favorite poet. Sullivan uses the Tennysonian allusions, and then exaggerates the role of the work to create a specific effect in the film. This effect was a larger role of Tennyson's work so that Sullivan could pursue his idea of a more romantic Anne. The story of Lancelot and Elaine heavily influences the adaptation of *Anne*. The tale of unrequited love becomes one of Anne's most prevalent thoughts in the films.

In Montgomery's novel, "The Lady of Shalott" is only mentioned right before Anne's reenactment of the lily maid:

It was Anne's idea that they dramatize Elaine. They had studied Tennyson's poem in school...They had analyzed and parsed it and torn it to pieces in general until it was a wonder there was any meaning at all left in it for them, but at least the fair lily maid and Lancelot and Guinevere and King Arthur had become very real people to them. (Montgomery 221)

The exploration of Gilbert's role as a leading man and Anne's struggle to acknowledge her feelings underscores Sullivan's goal of depicting this story as a film much closer to a romantic comedy than a *Bildungsroman*. K. L. Poe argues of Gilbert's role in the books to that of

the film: "Had Montgomery wanted to have the romance be the focus of her series, she most likely would have called it Anne and Gilbert, not Anne of Green Gables" (149). In the novel, the word 'romance' appears often, but it usually alludes to nature or experiences such as drowning. Anne often states that she is not comfortable with a romantic liaison. Anne does not view any particular Avonlea man as a potential beau. In the film, however, the young woman is very much aware of Gilbert's romantic interest in her and she seems to take delight at dismissing him. At every opportunity, Anne purposely ignores Gilbert. One of the first scenes of her immersion in Avonlea Society is at the picnic. Diana, Anne's bosom friend, mentions Gilbert and his status at the school: "Don't you think Gilbert's handsome ... He's sixteen, but he is in our class" (Anne of Green Gables). After Anne beats Gilbert in the three-legged race, he winks at the new girl. Sullivan's almost immediate introduction of Gilbert in the picnic scene points to the importance of his role in Anne's life. Anne remarks of Gilbert: "He is handsome, but I think he is awful bold to wink at a strange girl" (Anne of Green Gables). For viewers, Gilbert's introduction immediately creates a romantic atmosphere in Avonlea.

Contrary to the film, Gilbert is not introduced so quickly in the novel. The young man is introduced in late September as a student who has been gone for three years, helping his father (Montgomery 111). In the novel, Diana remarks on Gilbert's appeal: " 'He's awfully handsome, Anne. And he teases the girls something terrible. He just torments our lives out.' Diana's voice indicated that she rather liked having her life tormented out than not" (Montgomery 109). Anne is not as convinced as Diana is of Gilbert's charm. When Gilbert tries to get Anne's attention by calling her "carrots," Anne loses her self-control and hits Gilbert over the head with her slate (Montgomery 111-112). Gilbert apologizes soon afterwards, but Anne refuses to forgive him.

The film faithfully recreates this scene, but also accentuates the significance of his words to her. In the film, the scene ends with Marilla finding Anne in her bedroom, in the "depths of despair," her hair dyed a grotesque green (Anne of Green Gables). Anne tells Marilla: "I can't face him again. Gilbert Blythe had no right to call me carrots" (Anne of Green Gables). Sullivan connects these two events in a cause and effect relationship to show the impact of Gilbert's words on Anne. Gilbert's taunt has penetrated Anne's vanity, and she quickly rectifies the situation by dying her hair. In the novel, Gilbert's taunt is completely separate, happening months before, from Anne's purchasing of the black dye from the peddler. Sullivan's Anne is dictated by

Gilbert's opinion of her. Anne relies so heavily on his perception that she will even change her appearance, behavior, and academic standing to impress him.

Throughout the film, Anne is compelled to complete certain tasks because of Gilbert. One such scene is when she accepts a dare at Moody Spurgeon's house at the end of the year party. After Josie Pye walks the picket fence, and jumps happily into Gilbert's arms, Anne makes an aside to Diana about a girl who could walk the ridgepole of a roof. Josie dares her classmate to this formidable task, but Anne only accepts after Gilbert's comment: "It's a little risky, don't you think, Anne?" (*Anne of Green Gables*). Anne walks the ridgepole of the roof, but soon loses her balance and falls off the roof. Gilbert lifts her from the ground and offers the hobbling girl a ride home.

Though Anne seems not to recognize her own feelings for Gilbert and believes she maintains control, the audience is aware of the power struggle occurring between them. In the novel, Anne always compares herself to Gilbert, but only in academics. Anne never wants to surrender her position of being the best student at school. Of course, this phenomenon eventually does happen, but it only makes Anne work harder. She does not let Gilbert dictate her perception of herself outside the schoolhouse. This situation is quite contrary to what Sullivan has created in his version of Anne. Anne is very much preoccupied with Gilbert's feelings and how she may possibly manipulate them. In a scene not present in the novel, Anne attends a Christmas ball, and gloats to Diana how much control she has over Gilbert: "Gilbert Blythe would stand on his head if I asked him to" (*Anne of Green Gables*). When Diana dares Anne to go up to him, Anne quickly realizes she cannot make him talk to her much less prop himself upside down. Gilbert ignores her and interacts only with Diana. When questioned later about his behavior, Gilbert tells Anne: "And I knew exactly what you were thinking, Anne Shirley -- you and Diana Barry" (*Anne of Green Gables*).

In the novel, after Gilbert saves Anne, their social interactions remain minimal. However in Sullivan's adaptation, after Gilbert saves Anne, the potential love interest bolsters his confidence and begins to pursue her again. While Anne is walking home from the general store with her abundance of packages, Gilbert on his horse and carriage comes upon her, ensuring her a much more pleasant ride home than walking. Anne hesitantly accepts, unsure of the change of the power hierarchy inherent to their relationship. As Anne is much friendlier than expected,

Gilbert admits his reasons for bringing her home. He confesses he had previously been at the general store and knew she might need a ride.

When Anne arrives home from this jaunt with Gilbert, Marilla is waiting to scold her for being exceedingly friendly with Gilbert in the carriage. Anne tries to explain, but after Marilla's coaxing, the child realizes that she is not ready to have a beau. Sullivan's creation of this scene depicts Anne's sacrificing love so that she may still be viewed as a little girl in her caretaker's eyes. Anne struggles to balance her younger, hard-headed self with the mature and more compromising self which she is becoming.

At the end of the novel, Anne learns through word of mouth that Gilbert has resigned his teaching position in Avonlea so that Anne may have it. When Anne sees her benefactor, she thanks him. They both agree to be friends. Anne tells Marilla of their meeting: "[W]e have decided that it will be much more sensible to be good friends in future" (Montgomery 307). The focus of Anne's and Gilbert's conversation is the word 'friends.' In Sullivan's film, they meet in the field and their exchange is romantic. Gilbert tells of his sacrifice -- he resigns as Avonlea school teacher so that she may have the position. Once again, Gilbert places Anne's needs before his own thus showing his devotion to her happiness. Both recognize the significance of the sacrifice. This in turn creates not only a friendship, but the beginning of a love affair. At the conclusion of their conversation, Gilbert caresses Anne's cheek and calls her "carrots" and Anne responds by smiling up at him (*Anne of Green Gables*). He then places his arm around her and they walk into the sunset.

One of the possible reasons why Sullivan may have approached this adaptation as a romance is because he believed he was only to direct and produce one film of the Anne series. Sullivan's prioritized Anne and Gilbert as a couple at the end of the film to assure the audience of their eventual fate as husband and wife. If Sullivan had ended such as Montgomery did, it would have been anti-climatic. Also by focusing on the romance aspect of the story, a fan base of women living vicariously through Anne's love story grew. Many young girls growing up knowing this film have wished to be Anne and not the Anne of the story, but Anne played by Megan Follows. Not only have girls wanted to be Follows playing Anne, but they have also wanted to be caressed by Gilbert, played by the handsome Jonathan Crombie. Thus, this film is not just watched because it is a retelling of a classic, but also because of the attractiveness of the

leading actress and actor and the chemistry they created. For readers turned into film fans, no longer is Anne simply admired as a model of the Bildungsroman for her growth and maturity into womanhood, but more her developing role as a romantic heroine in a comedy.

Sullivan's commentary emphasizes the elements of Montgomery's work that had only been ever suggested. By exaggerating elements such as Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" and Gilbert Blythe's role of suitor, Sullivan retells Montgomery's text and changes the emphasis from a Bildungsroman to a romance. Hersey comments on Sullivan's adaptation: "Sullivan's approach may horrify fans who are deeply loyal to Montgomery's novels, yet many film theorists agree that the best adaptations function as acts of criticism rather than as faithful illustrations of their sources" (133). Sullivan did not attempt to make a faithful adaptation of Montgomery's work. He succeeds in his adaptation because he created a film dependent on his vision of Anne.

I conclude that it's better to watch a film adaptation from a new viewpoint through the eyes of the director rather than the original perception of the story.

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