

**WHISPERS IN THE WILLOWS: ECOCRITICAL ECHOES IN
L. M. MONTGOMERY'S *ANNE OF WINDY POPLARS***

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ABSTRACT:

This paper explores *Anne of Windy Poplars* by L.M. Montgomery through the lens of ecocriticism, examining the intricate relationship between human experience and the natural environment in early 20th-century Canadian literature. Canadian writing is often deeply rooted in the land, and Montgomery's novel is no exception which is imbued with vivid imagery, seasonal rhythms, and an intimate portrayal of Prince Edward Island's landscapes. While the novel is celebrated for its epistolary charm, character development, and community life, this study argues that it also offers a rich ecocritical narrative. Nature is not a passive backdrop but an active presence that influences identity, emotion, and belonging. Drawing on theoretical insights from eco critics such as Lawrence Buell, Cheryll Glotfelty, and Richard Kerridge, the paper situates nature as a transformative force in Anne Shirley's life. Detailed textual analysis reveals how natural elements such as gardens, winds, seasonal changes that mirror Anne's inner growth and serve as sources of solace, inspiration, and moral guidance. Montgomery's anthropomorphizing of nature and use of Romantic ecological sensibilities further deepen this connection. The novel also reflects how cultural practices, community rituals, and personal relationships are interwoven with the natural world, reinforcing Kate Rigby's assertion that ecological and cultural identities are mutually constitutive. By bringing together literary theory, ecological awareness, and cultural context, the study not only broadens the understanding of Montgomery's work but also demonstrates the value of ecocriticism in reading narratives that shape and reflect environmental consciousness. Ultimately, *Anne of Windy Poplars* emerges as a significant ecological text that invites readers to reimagine nature as a central force in shaping human experience, identity, and belonging.

Key-words: *Anne of Windy Poplars*; Ecocriticism; human experience; nature and belonging; Prince Edward landscapes.

INTRODUCTION :

Literature has always been a profound medium through which human beings explore their surroundings, memories and emotions. It reflects not only social and personal experiences but also captures the essence of landscapes, seasons and the subtle rhythms of the natural world. Through descriptions of changing weather, rural life or the quiet charm of trees and gardens, literature helps readers connect to a world that often exists outside urban consciousness. Canadian literature often reflects a deep connection to the land, shaped by vast landscapes, changing seasons and rural life. Writers from Canada frequently draw inspiration from native, portraying it as both beautiful and challenging. This close relationship with the environment is a hallmark of Canadian storytelling, where place and identity are closely intertwined. Canadian literature, with its rich tradition of nature writing and exploration of the human relationship with the environment, provides a fertile ground for ecocritical analysis.

Ecocriticism is an evolving literary approach that explores how texts represent nature, the environment and the human place within the ecological system. Emerging from growing global concerns about environmental decline, it considers literature not only as reflection of ecological values but also as a force that can shape environmental awareness. This perspective draws attention to how narratives construct or challenge dominant attitudes toward the natural world, interrogating issues like environmental justice, sustainability and the moral responsibilities of human beings. It emphasizes that

nature is not just a passive setting for human drama, but an active presence that demands ethical engagement. By bridging the gap between literature and ecological consciousness, ecocriticism offers a space to reconsider how stories, cultures and communities understand and interact with the world around them.

Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Windy Poplars* is published as *Anne of Windy Willows* in the United Kingdom, Australia and Japan. It is an epistolary novel. L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Windy Poplars* is a beloved classic of Canadian literature, cherished for its vivid portrayal of Prince Edward Island's natural beauty and its exploration of themes such as environment, community, and belonging. However, beneath its idyllic surface, the novel also contains a rich and complex exploration of the human relationship with the natural world. Montgomery's lyrical descriptions of seasons, gardens and landscapes reveal a deep sensitivity to nature's rhythms. The narrative invites readers to reflect on how nature is not merely a backdrop, but a quiet force that influences characters' inner lives and everyday choices.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Ecocriticism, which gained prominence in the late 20th century, is a critical approach that studies the representation of nature and the environment in literature, and how these portrayals intersect with human culture, ethics and ecological realities. It developed in response to increasing environmental awareness and draws from interdisciplinary fields such as environmental philosophy, science, and cultural studies. Scholars such as Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, Greg Garrard, Kate Soper, and Jonathan Bate have significantly contributed to the shaping of ecocritical theory. Glotfelty emphasized the role of literature in cultivating ecological consciousness, while Buell explored how narratives can influence ethical environmental thinking. Bate highlighted the relationship between Romanticism and environmental imagination, particularly in British literature. Eco critics argue that literature not only reflects the natural world but also participates in shaping how societies perceive and engage with it. Within this framework, *Anne of Windy Poplars* become valuable cultural expressions that depict the interdependence between human life and the natural landscape, revealing both harmony and subtle tensions in the relationship between people and place.

Anne of Windy Poplars by L.M. Montgomery has been widely appreciated for its lyrical language, character development, and portrayal of small-town life in early 20th-century Canada. The novel captures Anne Shirley's empathy, imagination, and her deep connection to the natural and social environments of Prince Edward Island. Some studies have touched on the novel's description of nature, but few have examined the ecocritical implications of Montgomery's work. Elizabeth Waterston's "Lucy Maud Montgomery: A Biography" provides a comprehensive overview of Montgomery's life and work, including her portrayal of nature. Irene Gammel's "Looking for *Anne of Green Gables*: The Story of L.M. Montgomery and Her Literary Classic" explores the cultural and historical context of Montgomery's work including its depiction of nature. While much research has examined Montgomery's narrative style, gender roles, and themes of community and education, there has been comparatively little analysis of *Anne of Windy Poplars* through an ecocritical lens. This oversight is notable, as the novel offers rich material for such a reading, particularly in its detailed depictions of nature, seasonal cycles, and the emotional and cultural significance of place within the everyday lives of its characters.

METHODOLOGY:

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to analyze L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Windy Poplars* through the lens of ecocriticism. This approach enables a nuanced exploration of literary criticism, ecocritical theory, and environmental studies. The research involves a detailed textual analysis of the novel to explore its representations of environmental sensibility, focusing on narrative descriptions, character interactions with nature, and thematic representations of landscape and seasonal change. The study also incorporates environmental contextualization by referencing relevant

ecological and cultural concepts that inform the novel's portrayal of rural life and natural settings. This framework allows for a deeper understanding of how Montgomery's writing reflects and responds to early 20th-century ecological awareness and attitudes toward the natural world.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK :

The theoretical framework of the current paper attempts to place *Anne of the Windy Poplars* through the lens of ecocritical dimensions well nurtured by her distinct literary style.

L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Windy Poplars* follows the delightful journey of Anne Shirley as she leaves her beloved Avonlea and settles into the quaint, old fashioned Windy Poplars in Summerside. The novel beautifully captures Anne's path to adulthood, showcasing her experience as a young woman. The story explores her relationships with friends and family, her growth as an individual and her preparation for marriage to her childhood friend, Gilbert Blythe. Throughout the novel, Anne shares her thoughts and feelings mostly in letters to her fiancé, Gilbert Blythe. Along the way, she encounters various challenges that teach her important lessons about life, love and self-discovery. Nature plays a vital role in helping Anne to navigate her struggle.

Lawrence Buell in his seminal work, "The Environmental Imagination", explores the role of nature in literature, emphasizing that nature is not merely a physical backdrop but an active force that shapes characters and narrative outcomes. His concept of "environmental imagination" highlights how literature portrays the environment as both a reflection of and a response to human experiences and actions. This idea is crucial when examining L.M. Montgomery's portrayal of nature in *Anne of Windy Poplars*. In the novel, nature is intricately woven into the fabric of the character's lives, particularly Anne's. The way the natural world influences Anne's identity, emotional growth and sense of belonging speaks to Buell's perspective that nature is a key force in shaping human experience.

Cheryll Glotfelty's *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, emphasizes the importance of "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment". (Glotfelty xx). Glotfelty believes that literature often illustrates the complex interactions between humans and nature, which is an idea central to *Anne of Windy Poplars*. The evocative landscape description of Prince Edward Island illustrates the depth of Anne's connection to her environment. The environment not just offers a background but is also an active presence in Anne's process of discovery and belonging. Buell's concept of environmental imagination with Glotfelty's characterization of ecocriticism works together to think critically about the ways it contributes to human identity and experience. This alignment between human-nature interconnectedness in *Anne of Windy Poplars* and ecocritical thought helps highlight the significance of nature as both a source of personal transformation and a reflection of cultural and emotional ties.

L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Windy Poplars*, set in the beautiful landscapes of Prince Edward Island in Canada, shows the deep impact of the natural world on the lives of each character. The novel illustrates the profound ways in which nature impacts people's physical and emotional well-being, with nature playing a pivotal role in shaping Anne's identity and inner peace. Montgomery's picturesque descriptions of the island's different landscapes portray the beauty and significance of nature. As Anne reflects, "Just as we entered the gate of the garden of Windy Poplars, I noticed a little clump of clover right by my path. Some impulse led me to stoop down and look at it. Would you believe it, Gilbert? There, right before my eyes, were three four-leafed clovers!" (*Anne of Windy Poplars* 5). Anne perceives nature as sentient that able to communicate fortune and meaning. This anthropomorphizing and spiritualizing of nature reflects a Romantic ecological sensibility, where natural elements are imbued with personal significance and emotional resonance.

The significance of nature in shaping emotional experiences is explored by eco critic Richard Kerridge. Kerridge opines, "In its most familiar meaning, nature is what the earth is and does without human intervention. This may include 'natural' human impulses as opposed to considered actions" ("Environmentalism and Ecocriticism" 974). He argues that nature in literature is not just a passive setting but an active participant in shaping characters' emotional journeys. By framing nature as an

interconnectedness of environment and emotional response, Kerridge provides a critical perspective that supports the ecocritical reading of Montgomery's novel, where the landscapes of Prince Edward Island are not just scenic but emotionally resonant Anne's growth and understanding of self. Nature becomes a mirror for Anne's personal growth, reinforcing Kerridge's claim that environmental settings are active participants in shaping a character's emotional journey.

Montgomery's use of nature imagery is a key element of the novel's ecocritical dimensions. The natural world is vividly described, with detailed depictions of the landscapes, flora and fauna of Prince Edward Island. The novel's title "Windy Poplars" is a representation of the natural world's power and beauty. "Windy Poplars is the name of my new home and I love it" (*Anne of Windy Poplars* 2). Anne's emotional attachment to her home is mediated through a natural image, showing a sense of place and belonging that is tied to environment. The novel uses symbolism to convey the significance of nature for human experience. The natural world is often depicted as a source of comfort, inspiration and guidance for the characters. Anne's connection to nature is a source of strength and solace for her.

I can be so alone up here when I want to be. You know its lovely to
be alone once in a while. The winds will be my friends. They'll wail
and sigh and croon around my tower... the white winds of winter...
the green winds of spring... the blue winds of summer ... the crimson
winds of autumn ... and the wild winds of all seasons (7)

Anne sees nature as her friends with voices, emphasizing a close and personal relationship with nature. Her awareness of seasonal change and emotional response to it aligns closely with ecocritical dimension of interconnectedness between the human self and the environment.

The changing seasons play a crucial role in reflecting the character's inner emotions and evolving experiences. The changing seasons exemplify Anne's shifting emotional states. "Only a few more weeks till spring...and a few more weeks then till summer...and holidays...and Green Gables... and golden sunlight on Avonlea meadows...and a gulf that will be silver at dawn and sapphire at noon and crimson at sunset" (47). This illustrates how nature is interwoven with memory, identity and longing. This relationship between human emotion and the natural world aligns with Ralph Waldo Emerson's view in his essay "Nature". He writes, "Nature always wears the colors of the Spirit" (13), suggesting that the external world reflects internal emotional states. Emerson's philosophy supports the interpretation of nature as a restorative and identity-shaping force, echoing how Anne sees the seasons as a marker of hope, memory and longing.

In *Anne of Windy Poplars*, the arrival of spring brings a momentary reprieve from the emotional heaviness Anne experiences at the dominated Elizabeth house. As Anne observes, "Things are better for little Elizabeth in spring. Some sunshine gets into even that grim old house and outwardly it is even beautiful because of the dancing shadows of tree tops" (53). The anthropomorphized "dancing shadows" and the rare presence of sunshine symbolize the transformative power of nature amidst an otherwise repressive domestic environment. Nature provides a seasonal redemption and a healing presence.

The theme of belongingness is a significant aspect in Anne Shirley's journey. As she navigates her role as a teacher and a young woman in the community, she grapples with finding her place and sense of belonging. After moving from Green Gables to Prince Edward Island, Anne's deep connection to Windy Poplars and its natural beauty provides her with a sense of belonging and roots. Anne's connection to nature is deeply tied to her sense of belongingness, reflecting the importance of environmental relationships in human experience. "I feel as if I belonged here ... The trees seem to be welcoming me back." (20). It reflects Anne's connection to nature and its significance for her sense of belongingness.

Anne's social connections with people like Aunt Kate, Aunt Chatty, Rebecca Dew and her students contribute to her sense of belonging and community. Anne describes her first impressions of Aunt Kate and Aunt Chatty with warmth and familiarity. "The widows came in. I liked them at once. Aunt Kate ... Marilla's type exactly: and Aunt Chatty ... very pretty once ... They are lovely ... soft and

big and brown.” (5). Anne finds them lovely with their gentle and comforting presence. Her affectionate observation of the widows reflects her openness to forming connections and establishing a sense of home, even in unfamiliar surroundings. Through her experiences, Anne develops a stronger sense of self and belonging, learning how to take up her place in the community. In Kate Rigby’s *Topographies of the Sacred*, “cultural identities and ecological imaginaries are mutually constitutive” (12), which highlights Montgomery’s view of place and belonging in Prince Edward Island.

In *Anne of Windy Poplars*, cultural practices are deeply interwoven in the everyday life and social structures of Summerside, shaping both community dynamics and individual identity. Cultural practices such as gardening, letter writing and matchmaking to storytelling, seasonal observances and familial duties weave a tapestry of tradition that reflects the values, tensions and aspirations of the townspeople. Anne’s involvement into these customs, such as her participation in tea rituals with Aunt Kate and Aunt Chatty, her mediation in romantic entanglements like those of Dovie Westcott and Jarvis Morrow and her nurturing relationship with Elizabeth Grayson, underscores how culture is performed through acts of care, memory, and shared history. Montgomery illustrates that cultural practices are not static relics but evolving expressions of identity and community, highlighting how they shape and are shaped by human emotion, place and change.

CONCLUSION:

Montgomery’s narrative underscores the significance of environmental awareness, implying that personal and social well-being is inseparable from one’s relationship with the natural world. The natural elements in the novel function not merely as a scenic backdrop but as a crucial presence that shapes Anne’s inner journey and challenges her notions of home and identity. Anne’s profound ecological awareness is manifested in her identification with the environment, through her harmonious relationship with the seasons, her reflections on nature as a healing force or her sense of belonging to windy poplars. The ecocritical dimension of the novel demonstrates a deep ecological sensibility. This ecocritical reading of *Anne of Windy Poplars* is not only a nostalgic tale of rural life but also a powerful narrative that foregrounds the interdependence between humans and their environment.

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