



# Kindred Spirits and Haunted Pasts: Childhood Trauma and Resilience in *Anne with an E*

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the nuanced portrayal of childhood trauma and resilience in the Canadian television series *Anne with an E* (2017–2019), a reimagining of L.M. Montgomery's classic *Anne of Green Gables*. Moving beyond the romanticized orphan trope of the original narrative, the series showcases Anne Shirley-Cuthbert's traumatic past, which is full of abandonment, abuse, and social alienation. The show traces her journey towards healing through imagination, found family, and community. Using the lens of psychoanalytic literary theory, particularly the works of Sigmund Freud, D.W. Winnicott, and Julia Kristeva, this study analyzes how Anne's inner world operates as both a site of repression and creative resistance.

The paper focuses on the mechanisms Anne employs to survive her trauma, particularly her vivid imagination, her dissociative tendencies, and the construction of alternate realities. The analysis draws on Winnicott's concept of the "transitional object" and Kristeva's notion of "abjection" to break down the show's depiction of healing, emotional attachment, and belonging. The paper argues that *Anne with an E* offers a trauma-informed and psychologically rich representation of childhood resilience. By centering the emotional and imaginative life of a young girl who reclaims her identity through connection and storytelling, the series challenges dominant narratives of childhood innocence and highlights the transformative power of empathy, memory, and imagination in the aftermath of trauma.

**Keywords:** Childhood Trauma, Psychoanalytic Theory, Resilience, Imagination, Abjection, Transitional Object, Identity Formation, Trauma Narrative

## I. INTRODUCTION

Modern interpretations tend to reinterpret traditional literature using contemporary psychological and social perspectives. *Anne with an E* (2017–2019), the Canadian reinterpretation of L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*, diverges from the original's idealized orphan story to chart the rich psychological interior of its protagonist, Anne Shirley-Cuthbert. The series puts on center stage Anne's histories of abandonment, abuse, and social isolation, presenting her imagination as a vibrant, not flights-of-fancy, survival skill born of trauma.

This article explores how *Anne with an E* represents childhood trauma and resilience through a psychoanalytic perspective, referencing the writings of Freud, Winnicott, and Kristeva. Anne's dissociation, fantasized narration, and emotional instability are read as reflections of repression, transitional adaptive strategies, and the negotiation of abjection. Her inner life is both a sanctuary and a battleground — a site where trauma is negotiated and identity is repeatedly reconstructed.

Through Anne's psychological depth and development, the series presents a trauma-informed storytelling that subverts idealized visions of childhood. Ultimately, *Anne with an E* puts major emphasis on the transformative potential of empathy, memory, and imagination to heal. It joins larger discussions on resilience, emotional complexity, and maturation in the aftermath of trauma.

## II. DISSOCIATION AND SURVIVAL

In *Anne with an E*, Anne Shirley-Cuthbert's fantasy life is not just a major personality characteristic but an essential survival psychological mechanism. Her highly developed fantasies, romanticized stories about herself, and pretend playmates act as a protective screen between her private emotional world and an unfriendly outside world. These strategies demonstrate what psychoanalytic theory refers to as dissociative coping — a defense mechanism through which individuals disengage from traumatic events when they cannot be worked through or confronted directly.

In Freudian terms, Anne's imagination is a theatre for repressed desires and unresolved tensions. Her constant reworking of reality by fantasy is evidence of the psychic struggle between the pleasure principle and the reality principle, where imagination is a substitute for the emotional safety and validation which she has been deprived of (Freud 148). Freud's theory of wish-fulfillment reflects Anne's desire for belonging, beauty, and mastery in the world where she has known extreme powerlessness.

D.W. Winnicott's "transitional object" is also specifically applicable here. Anne's deployment of imaginary and symbolic objects — whether it is a title for a window reflection or an imaginary friend — is a transitional space between her abusive past and the emergence of her present self. These spaces of transition provide a safe area in which she explores emotional attachment and identity formation within a controlled realm.

Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection also more deeply informs this reading. As a socially excluded child, Anne's status as an orphan makes her symbolically "other" in the conservative world of Avonlea. Her imagination enables her to recover from this abjection. She acts as the heroine of her own narrative, frequently fantasizing about her beginnings in a manner which turns shame into poetic value. In this sense, fantasy becomes an act of creative resistance. It serves as an assertion of self-worth against systemic devaluation.

Judith Herman emphasizes that trauma survivors often retreat into inner worlds when faced with overwhelming stressors, and that storytelling and meaning-making are crucial to recovery (Herman 1). Anne's sustained inner life functions in precisely this way — not just as escapism but as a scaffold for rebuilding her shattered self.

So, Anne's fantasy mind is not an escapist one but is actually immensely functional. It serves both as shield and a sword. It protects her from crushing emotional anguish while creating a psychological space in which she can survive, expand, and eventually start to recover. Through dissociation and fantasy, Anne not only survives her trauma but learns to take back control, crafting a new self that is emotionally resilient and intensely empathetic.

### III. FOUND FAMILY, EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT, AND HEALING

Anne's imagination protects her from her internal trauma, but it is with emotional connection and found family that she starts to reclaim and reorganize her sense of self in the outside world at large. *Anne with an E* strongly focuses on relational healing — demonstrating how real emotional relationships, care, and acceptance from others facilitate Anne to slowly transition from a place of psychological fragmentation to one of wholeness.

In psychoanalytic language, the early trauma of neglect and abandonment can profoundly intervene in the building of a settled self. The early life experience of Anne of being in the orphanages and abusive foster care has left Anne with profound self-doubt about her own value and overarching fear of being rejected. As Anne arrives in Green Gables, she is not immediately safe with or accepting of Marilla and Matthew. Rather, her early behavior is characterized by emotional instability, anxious attachment, and hyper-vigilance — typical symptoms of complex trauma in children.

D.W. Winnicott's "good enough" caregiver theory comes into play here. Through their unobtrusive steadiness and changing emotional availability, Marilla and Matthew start to provide Anne with a sense of reliable care. These attachments work as reparative attachments, gradually permitting Anne to incorporate the notion that she deserves to be loved. Matthew's unconditional acceptance and Marilla's gradual emotional warming are significant turning points for Anne's journey towards healing. They offer a secure environment where Anne is able to start integrating her traumatic history into a coherent narrative of her own self (Winnicott 10).

Julia Kristeva's abjection theory can also be recalled here. Anne, who is first set up as the abject other — socially ostracized as an orphan, the red-haired, ugly, "strange" girl — is able to transcend this position of symbolic exclusion through emotional connection (*Powers of Horror* 4). As she establishes friendships (most notably with her classmates Diana and Cole) and finds her niche in the Avonlea community, Anne shifts from abject to accepted. These attachments don't wipe away her past but instead provide her with the situation where she is able to redefine it.

The concept of "found family" becomes essential in redefining Anne's identity. Unlike biological family — something she has been repeatedly denied, her chosen family at Green Gables is built through mutual recognition, empathy, and enduring emotional investment. Through these bonds, Anne gains not only security but also a mirror through which she can see herself as lovable, resilient, and capable of growth.

In conclusion, *Anne with an E* portrays healing not as a return to innocence, but as a slow, relational process of reclaiming agency, identity, and emotional safety. Through attachment, belonging, and the creation of a found family, Anne progresses from survival towards resilience, demonstrating the deep human need for connection.

### IV. RESISTING THE IDEALIZED CHILD NARRATIVE

In *Anne with an E*, the figure of the orphan is neither romanticized nor softened. Instead, the series foregrounds Anne Shirley-Cuthbert as a complex subject shaped by trauma, rage, and abuse. Her characterization disrupts the conventional literary image of the "ideal child", one that is innocent, obedient, and emotionally legible. Instead it replaces it with one that is unruly, defiant, and

deeply scarred. Through the lens of Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, Anne's status as an orphan renders her both socially and symbolically "othered," a reminder of what polite society seeks to repress: the chaos, instability, and pain of unwanted children.

Kristeva defines the abject as "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (*Powers of Horror* 4). Anne's presence in *Avonlea* disturbs the fragile social order; she is loud, expressive, prone to emotional extremes, and speaks of death and violence with unnerving ease. In the first episode, when Anne arrives at Green Gables and Marilla learns she is not the expected boy, Anne overhears the disappointment and declares, "You don't want me because I'm not a boy. Nobody ever wants me." (*Anne with an E*, S1E1) Her statement reflects both acute self-awareness and internalized abjection — she sees herself as inherently unlovable.

Another key scene that underscores Anne's abject position is when she has a traumatic flashback to the abusive household where she was forced to care for younger children and treated as less than human. The visual language — dark lighting, frantic editing, and Anne's curled-up posture emphasizes her psychological fragmentation. As Cathy Caruth suggests, trauma is "not locatable in the simple violent or original event," but rather in the way it "is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known." (Caruth 4) These moments of intrusive memory are not isolated; Anne's past continues to erupt into her present, rendering her body and voice unreliable in the eyes of others.

Yet, the show refuses to sanitize Anne's complexity. Her anger is not villainized, and her sensitivity is not mocked. Instead, it becomes clear that her "unruliness" is a product of chronic neglect and emotional starvation. As Elisabeth Young-Bruehl argues, "the child must be allowed a wide range of emotion and experience in order to develop as a person." (Young-Bruehl 39) *Anne with an E* invites viewers to witness the long-term effects of abandonment, while also challenging them to embrace a broader, more inclusive model of childhood — one that allows for rage, grief, and contradiction.

In resisting the idealized child narrative, the series creates a space where the orphan is not simply redeemed through love, but is first seen and heard in all her disordered, abject pain. This narrative shift underscores a trauma-informed ethics of storytelling, one that neither romanticizes nor erases suffering, but confronts it with radical empathy.

## V. CONCLUSION

*Anne with an E* offers a powerful reframing of the orphan narrative through a deeply psychological and trauma-informed lens. By moving beyond the romanticized depictions of childhood and innocence found in earlier adaptations of *Anne of Green Gables*, the series foregrounds Anne Shirley-Cuthbert as a complex, emotionally layered protagonist shaped by abandonment, abuse, and chronic social exclusion. Through the psychoanalytic insights of Freud, Winnicott, Kristeva, and Judith Herman, the paper has examined how Anne's imagination and dissociation serve as both defensive and creative strategies for survival. Her inner world — marked by rich fantasy, narrative reimaginings, and symbolic objects — emerges not as a space of mere escapism, but as a crucible for identity formation and emotional endurance. These mechanisms underscore the idea that trauma does not just haunt the past but is continually negotiated in the present through symbolic and relational acts of resistance and reclamation.

Furthermore, Anne's gradual integration into a chosen family and community reflects the slow, nonlinear process of healing through attachment, empathy, and emotional recognition. Her journey from symbolic abjection to social acceptance illustrates how trauma may fracture identity, but does not foreclose the possibility of wholeness. The show resists flattening Anne into a figure of passive suffering or innocence; instead, it validates her anger, contradictions, and need for recognition as essential aspects of her humanity. In doing so, *Anne with an E* radically redefines what it means to portray childhood on screen — not as an untouched realm of purity, but as a battleground of emotional survival and eventual resilience. Ultimately, the series affirms that the path toward recovery is paved not by forgetting, but by remembering differently — through story, connection, and the courage to imagine a life beyond one's pain.

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