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Distorted and Misrepresented: The Fate of *Anne of Green Gables* in Slovakia

Abstract

This paper deals with *Anne of Green Gables*, a novel by the most translated and most popular Canadian author in Slovakia, Lucy Maud Montgomery. Besides commenting on the undying popularity of books about Anne Shirley, it focuses on the historical-social context in which the first translation of *Anne of Green Gables* appeared and on how ideology affected the book. As most references to religion, God and Christianity were deleted by the hand of the communist censor, there are significant differences in interpretation of the original and the translation.

Résumé

Le présent article porte sur *Anne... la maison aux pignons verts*, un roman écrit par l'auteure canadienne la plus traduite et la plus connue en Slovaquie, Lucy Maud Montgomery. En plus de fournir un commentaire sur la popularité jamais démentie des livres sur Anne Shirley, nous nous concentrons sur le contexte historique et social dans lequel est parue la première traduction d'*Anne... la maison aux pignons verts*, tout en examinant comment le texte a été affecté par l'idéologie. La plupart des références à la religion, à Dieu et au christianisme ayant été supprimées par la censure communiste, nous constatons des différences considérables entre les possibilités d'interprétation du texte original et de la traduction.

Lucy Maud Montgomery is, according to the number of translations and the frequency of their publication, undoubtedly the most translated and most popular Canadian author in Slovakia (cf. Javorčíková 55). Although in Canada she is also known for her poetry and non-fiction books, in Slovakia Montgomery is recognized first and foremost as the author of her series of invigorating, unforgettable novels about Anne Shirley, the mischievous and talkative girl orphan adopted by the Cuthberts of Green Gables. Slovak publishers, particularly Mladé letá, the largest children's book publisher with the longest-lasting tradition¹ on the Slovak book market, have published, besides others, the whole Anne series, including *Anne of Green Gables*, *Anne of Avonlea*, *Anne of the Island*, *Anne's House of Dreams*, *Rainbow Valley*, *Anne of Windy Poplars*, *Anne of Ingleside*, and *Rilla of Ingleside*, as well as two novels in which Anne Shirley appears only as an episodic character: *Chronicles of Avonlea* and *Further Chronicles of Avonlea*.

1) Mladé letá was founded in 1950 as a specialized publisher of children's books by Slovak authors.



The first Anne Shirley novel, *Anne of Green Gables*, was translated by Jozef Šimo and published in 1959.² Eleven more editions have followed over the next five decades (the latest one dates from 2011) as the book has enjoyed immense popularity with Slovak readers. While the first edition totalled only 8,240 copies, the following two numbered more than 20,000 copies each (see Kormúth 213).³ Alongside *Anne of Green Gables*, in 1969 Mladé letá also published *Anne of Avonlea* and *Anne of the Island*. It is of interest to note that all the other books by L. M. Montgomery that are available in the Slovak language did not get published until the 1990s. We can assume that Mladé letá's decision to publish the remaining books about the popular redhead, as well as other books by Lucy Maud Montgomery (e.g. *The Story Girl*, *The Golden Road*, *Against the Odds*, *Across the Miles*, *After Many Days*, etc.), was motivated by positive sales expectations. At that time the Slovak book market, like other market segments, was getting increasingly dominated by market rules and economic efficiency and as the first three Anne Shirley books had been selling well for more than three decades, Mladé letá probably counted on good sales for the other books too. It is possible – although we have no data to confirm this – that there was an increase in the sales expectations for *Anne of Green Gables* in the mid-1990s as Slovak Television had introduced Kevin Sullivan's TV adaptation of the book to Slovak viewers in 1993, and there is a general rule that screen or TV adaptations of literary texts “boost book sales considerably” (Oldham). However, in the same breath it must be said that the post-1989 period has in general seen a substantial reduction in print runs of books as many of the mass editions before 1989 were unjustified marketwise. As a result, although there have been seven print runs of *Anne of Green Gables* since 1989, the total number of copies published in the post-Velvet Revolution period has not exceeded 46,500.⁴

Although Montgomery's delightful and unpredictable Anne was in recent years surpassed in popularity among Slovak young readers by Harry Potter and the vampires of the *Twilight* saga, according to Marta Jankajová, the long-standing managing editor of Mladé letá, *Anne of Green Gables* is still selling well (qtd. in Kopcsayová). Anne's undying popularity with Slovak girls is also confirmed by Ester Krahulcová, a librarian at the Regional Library of Karol Kmeťka in Nitra (qtd. in “Deti čítajú...”). Another fact that attests to the book's success with Slovak readers is that *Anne of Green Gables* is still topping popularity surveys in Slovakia. In an April 2010 online survey conducted by the *smeŽeny* magazine, a weekly supplement to a major Slovak daily, *Anne of Green Gables* was voted by most respondents as the book of their youth (Gašparcová). The same novel placed fourth in a national survey on books, the Slovak version of the BBC Big Read, carried out by Slovak Television in 2010, whose goal was to raise public awareness of reading and find the nation's Best-Loved Book. Montgom-

- 2) Jana Javorčíková writes in “Kanadská literatúra v slovenskom preklade na začiatku nového millennia [Canadian Literature in Slovak Translation at the Beginning of a New Millennium]” that the 1st edition was published in 1969 (55), yet I found two earlier editions: one from 1959 and another one from 1964.
- 3) The first editions of *Anne of Avonlea* and *Anne of the Island* totalled 30,000 copies each in 1969 (see Kormúth 213). To put things in perspective, the first print run of Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* numbered 10,000 copies in 1959 and the second edition, released in 1963, was 30,000 copies (see Kormúth 155).
- 4) Data kindly provided by Mladé letá.

ery's *Anne of Green Gables* was defeated in popularity only by one foreign book, Antoine de Saint Exupéry's *Little Prince* ("Zoznam naj 100 kníh").⁵

Despite its popularity with readers, *Anne of Green Gables* has gone largely unnoticed by Slovak literary reviewers in the fifty years since its first publication. It is therefore almost impossible to determine the source of the book's popularity. In the first reviews of 1959, reviewers celebrate the arrival of a new kind of girls' novel, bereft of moralizing and sentimentalism, "so typical of the period in which it was written and of female authors in general" ("Tom Sawyer..." 10). Anne Shirley is compared to Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer, a boy gifted with a vivid imagination, which often leads him to many adventures (see "Tom Sawyer..." 10; Grmela). Like Tom, Anne uses her imagination to create her own world and transform even the most ordinary aspects of daily life into wonderful pieces of poetry ("Nové knihy pre..." 4).

As the budding socialist regime of the 1950s supported, at least on the surface, the emancipation of women, the early reviewers extol Anne's virtues that were compatible with the idealized images of women as communist enthusiasts, conscious citizens and mothers optimistically looking into the future. They praise the sense of responsibility with which Anne fulfils her school and home duties and the unrelenting enthusiasm and dedication she shows in training for a teaching career ("Nové knihy pre..." 4). The socialist regime encouraged women to get involved in public and political structures and to enter into working engagements outside their private spheres. Anne's determination to become a teacher was thus in full accordance with the socialist society's requirements. In addition, Anne's job choice conformed to the traditionally accepted concept of a woman as a care-giver, which the regime adopted as part and parcel of its ideology. Although encouraged to work, women were mostly relegated to poorly paid jobs in education, health care, retail or administration. Anne Shirley, "the heroine who faces life with boldness, ready to win always new victories" ("Nové knihy pre..." 4), is thus not unlike "the new Soviet woman" whom emancipation offered an opportunity to realize herself and to be economically independent and free in her decisions (cf. Oravcová).

Although *Anne of Green Gables* is not an overtly feminist work, as traditionally female roles are maintained, the rebellious Anne Shirley is also praised and appropriated by contemporary Slovak feminists. Jana Juráňová values her unconventional and independent spirit. In her opinion, Anne is "a girl who is herself and can assert her emotions, opinions, attitudes and ideas of love in an extremely conventional environment" ("Anna zo Zeleného domu"). Juráňová says that every woman sometime finds herself in a period of life, especially in her childhood or in her teens, when her body, soul, mind or reason may not correspond with conventions. Thus Anne of Green Gables represents a positive role model for girls and young women ("Anna zo Zeleného domu").

With the lapse of time, it is difficult to ascertain what motivated Mladé letá to publish *Anne of Green Gables* in the late 1950s. However, it may be assumed that the book's publication was part of a larger endeavour to make the greatest works of the world's classics available to Slovak readers (cf. Gazdík 130). It was a result of a socio-political 'thaw' that set in after the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in February 1956, where Nikita Khrushchev had revealed the crimes of Joseph Stalin and denounced his personality cult and

5) For comparison, in Britain *Anne of Green Gables* placed forty-first (see The Big Read: Top 100).



dictatorship. In response to these events, the Congress of Czechoslovak Writers, held only two months later, called for the abolition of censorship and the parting of ways with dogmatic totalitarianism (Paštéková et al. 26). While until then translators had focused on texts that were ideologically relevant and compliant with the Soviet model of literature, towards the end of the 1950s, as Mária Kusá writes, they strove to restore the continuity with the years immediately following the Second World War as well as with the literary traditions at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries (56). In consequence, the late 1950s witnessed the publication of numerous Slovak translations of hitherto unpublished authors (Kusá 56).

Despite the fact that from the perspective of the time period in question there were certain rather dramatic shifts in publishing practice, the political 'thaw' had its limits. The choice of authors to be translated continued to be governed by political preferences. Critics foregrounded the socio-political aspects of literary works and underscored the service function of literature (Gazdík 132). Literature had no point beyond aiding class struggle and disseminating socialist values. Therefore, some ideas were considered undesirable and did not get through the censor's filter. As a rule, any mention of God and religion was suppressed. In some cases these anti-religious efforts led to paraphrasing books rather than translating them. A famous example is the 1955 Slovak translation of *Robinson Crusoe*, or rather of what remained of the book after Soviet author Kornei Chukovsky had, "with the precision of a surgeon", omitted from the original all references to God or religious values regardless of how inherent they were to the novel (Gazdík 130). *Anne of Green Gables* suffered a similar fate although the censor's intervention was to a lesser extent than in the former case.

The end of the 1950s, when the novel first appeared, was marked by the intensification of atheist propaganda on the part of the communist authorities (Paštéková et al. 31). Although communist party rule had through social and political pressure coerced people into parting with the church and not raising their children in the spirit of religion since the coup d'état of 1948, towards the end of the 1950s it started persecuting priests and believers for any activities of religious character. In this political situation, it was unthinkable to publish a book that had often been interpreted as a girl's journey from paganism to Christianity (cf. Sorfleet). So that *Anne of Green Gables* would not catch the censor's eye, all mention of religion had to be removed. It is not known who made all the changes to the novel, whether it was the translator Jozef Šimo or the editor, yet some of them were not made very skilfully. For example, when Anne talks to Marilla about Mrs. Allan, the reverend's wife, who is to become one of her best friends:

English original:

Mrs. Allan has a lovely smile; she has such exquisite dimples in her cheeks. I wish I had dimples in my cheeks, Marilla. I'm not half so skinny as I was when I came here, but I have no dimples yet. If I had perhaps I could influence people for good. Mrs. Allan said we ought always to try to influence other people for good. She talked so nice about everything. I never knew before that religion was such a cheerful thing. I always thought it was kind of melancholy, but Mrs. Allan's isn't, and I'd like to be a Christian if I could be one like her. I wouldn't want to be one like Mr. Superintendant Bell. (Montgomery 170)

Slovak translation:

Pani Allanová sa pôvabne usmieva a v lícach sa jej pritom tvoria nádherné jamôčky. I ja by som rada mala jamky na lícach, Marilla. Už nie som ani zďaleka taká kostnatá, ako keď som sem prišla, ale jamky sa mi ešte vždy neukazujú. Keby som ich mala, možno by som dobre vplývala na ľudí. Pani Allanová nám povedala, že sa treba vždy snažiť v dobrom vplývať na ľudí. Tak pekne o všetkom rozpráva. Nechcela by som byť taká, ako je riaditeľ nedeľnej školy pán Bell. (Montgomeryová 174)

Back translation:

Mrs. Allan has a lovely smile; she has such exquisite dimples in her cheeks. I wish I had dimples in my cheeks, Marilla. I'm not half so skinny as I was when I came here, but I have no dimples yet. If I had perhaps I could influence people for good. Mrs. Allan said we ought always to try to influence other people for good. She talked so nice about everything. I wouldn't want to be like Mr. Superintendent Bell.

The solution is so inelegant that it probably can hardly be attributed to the translator. It rather suggests that the sentences were crossed out by an editor's (read: a censor's) red ink.

Other textual interventions include either replacements of words such as "religion", "religious" or "Christian" with more neutral ones or omissions of certain sentences. When Anne flavours a cake with anodyne liniment, she pleads with Marilla to "have a spark of Christian pity" and not to tell her that she must go down and wash the dishes after this (Montgomery 175-176). However, in Slovak she begs Marilla to have "aspoň trochu úprimného súcitu" (back translated: "at least a bit of sincere pity") (Montgomeryová 179). Similarly, when Anne complains that she feels "desperately wicked" in the presence of Mrs. Lynde, Marilla and Matthew's neighbor, as Mrs. Lynde makes her feel like going and doing "the very thing" she tells her she "oughtn't to do", Marilla takes Mrs. Lynde's side and says, "Rachel is a good Christian woman and she means well" (Montgomery 252). In Slovak, on the other hand, Marilla praises her as "dobrá duša" (back translated: "a good soul") (Montgomeryová 254). At another time, Anne is caught reading Ben Hur in class and her teacher takes the book away. Marilla rebukes her for taking "storybooks" to school, saying that when she was a girl, she was not "so much as allowed to look at a novel". Anne, as usual, jumps to the book's defence: "Oh, how can you call Ben Hur a novel when it's really such a religious book?" (Montgomery 241). In Slovak, Anne protests, "Ach, ako môžete nazvať Ben Hura románom, keď je to taká vážna kniha?" (back translated: "Oh, how can you call Ben Hur a novel when it's really such a serious book?" (Montgomeryová 244). In addition to these changes at word level, some sentences were dropped. For example, while the English original ends with Anne whispering softly, "God's in heaven, all's right with the world" (Montgomery 309), this sentence is missing from the Slovak translation (see Montgomeryová 310).

In the context of these changes, the decision to preserve Chapter 7 almost intact comes as a surprise. "Annu vychovávajú" (back translated: "Anne is Educated"), as the chapter is titled in Slovak, or "Anne Says Her Prayers", speaks of Marilla beginning a program of moral and social education for Anne. Her new foster mother rebukes her for leaving her clothes all over the floor and failing to say prayers before bed. Anne has never said prayers before, so she does not know how to pray, but she is willing to learn despite her distaste for God. She shows



willingness to learn because she wants to please Marilla. As can be seen, the whole chapter deals with religious education and explicit references to God are numerous. Therefore, if the same approach as in the remaining chapters had been applied here, the chapter would have been omitted. The censor, however, did not go so far. The reason might have been that in the absence of other references to God elsewhere in the novel the chapter can presumably be interpreted in terms of the near-heathen Anne's defiance against religious indoctrination, which was prohibited by the communist authorities. Naturally, this is a hypothesis rather than an established fact.

All these 'adjustments' to Montgomery's novel distort the original text in ways that are beyond the boundaries of permissibility and rob the reader of the enjoyment of one dimension of this multi-layered novel. Despite this, Mladé letá has not revised or had the text re-translated since 1989 and is still – knowingly or unknowingly – reprinting this censored version of *Anne of Green Gables*. A new translation or a complete revision of the book would of course require some extra costs, but if the publisher marketed it as the first unabridged and uncensored edition of Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*, it would, given the book's undying popularity in Slovakia, certainly bring them profit. Slovak readers, who belong among the most ardent fans of Anne Shirley, would definitely deserve to learn her true face.

Note

All translations from Slovak sources are mine (L.O).

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