

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1. Background of the Research

Since the early 20th century, women's values have always been tightly tied to their appearance, as it was supported by the use of media as a cultural mechanism to construct beauty standards. Beauty standards are a set of expectations related to physical appearance that serve as one of the instruments of women's oppression (Craig, 2024). In early 20th-century Canadian culture, restrictive beauty standards, including having fewer freckles, pale skin, and a bourgeois sense of fashion, became the measurement to define femininity. They evolve over generations and across cultures, which continues to generate new trends for women to this day. This phenomenon of beauty ideals has been commodified, turning women into objects for others. Eventually, physical attractiveness is the primary determinant of women's values in societies of both 20th-century and contemporary eras.

Society stereotypes women based on their outward appearance, marginalizing those who do not fit in. Physically attractive women often receive more favorable opinions and assumptions about their personalities. On the other hand, people tend to associate an unattractive woman with negative connotations. This societal categorization changes women's self-perception and the way they perceive femininity. In some domains, such as the workplace, beauty is a part of a job requirement, which makes women strive for beauty only to be accepted. It proves that physical attractiveness provides some women with privileges in certain societal contexts. Women are trapped in a system called the beauty myth that exploits their physical attractiveness and enforces their conformity.

The beauty myth refers to constructed ideologies that are created by humans to determine women's value in society. It continues to evolve to maintain the power structure where women belong to subordination. According to Naomi Wolf (1990, p. 10), the beauty myth serves as a political weapon in the form of standards against women and has existed for a long time. She identifies the beauty myth operating between six domains, which are work, culture, religion, sex, hunger, and violence. They serve as systemic tools that are mostly influenced by male dominance to keep women's positions lower. As a result, many women were affected and felt insecure about themselves just because they did not comply with what society expected.

In the context of the beauty myth, culture is one of the primary domains where ideals of beauty are produced and propagated through social and media influences. For instance, magazines give women instructions on certain beauty practices. Wolf (1990, p. 58) explains that cultural forces generate typical standards of attractiveness that eventually convince women to rely on them. This idea merely existed in men's culture, where women are perceived as objects. It means that women are never considered participants who have the right to define their identity. The existence of culture and its forces has ensured that the beauty standards remain beneficial to men and harmful to women. Moreover, the beauty myth continues to be discussed nowadays, particularly within a feminist discourse, since it supports women's oppression with evolving mechanisms.

The idea of the beauty myth is vastly represented through literary works. It is closely related to the issue of women, as mentioned by Pristiana & Koiri (2021). This issue is cleverly carried and crafted by Lucy Maud Montgomery as one of the feminist literary writers. Derived from Andrea McKenzie and Jane Ledwell (2017, p. 3),

Montgomery is a Canadian female author who was born in Clifton, Prince Edward Island, in 1874. During her childhood, there was a North-West Rebellion in which her father served. She lived with her grandparents, uncles, and aunts, which made her live surrounded by adults from a very young age. Eventually, little Montgomery was isolated and found writing as her way to release her imagination.

Montgomery is recognized for her ability in writing, as she also loved to read from an early age. Her first writing experience was during her school life, as she started to write poems. Later, at the age of 15, Montgomery published her first poem in a local newspaper. As a teenager, she spent her time pursuing literature studies at Dalhousie University in Halifax from 1895 to 1896 (Julianti, 2023). However, due to the death of her grandmother, she returned to her hometown and married a Presbyterian minister in 1911. According to Julianti, Montgomery has published 20 novels, more than 500 short stories, and a collection of poetry throughout her life. She became recognized for being the first Canadian woman to be elected to the Literary and Artistic Institute of France following her publications.

Her first published novel would be *Anne of Green Gables*, which was written in 1905. Originally, it is a part of the Anne series that contains six other books that were published in different years. Over the years, the books became very adored by young audiences and were even categorized as an 'overall bestseller' by 1947. According to the information taken from [lmmontgomery.ca](http://lmmontgomery.ca), her books were initially rejected by several publishers until they were accepted by the Page Company of Boston in 1907 and later published in 1908. The novel gained immediate success five months after being released, as it was sold for over 19,000 copies. Since its publication, the book has sold over 50 million copies worldwide, which determines her success.

L.M. Montgomery's most recognized book, *Anne of Green Gables*, is a classic work that covers the themes of girlhood and adolescence. Throughout the narrative, the readers are drawn through the life of an orphan young lady named Anne Shirley. Anne is an 11-year-old girl who is depicted as a free soul who has a great love for nature, imagination, and beauty. It begins with her being mistakenly sent to two old siblings who lived on a farm called Green Gables. The two of them, Marilla and Matthew Cuthbert, were never expecting a girl to be adopted from the asylum. Set in a fictional town known as Avonlea, the story delves into Anne's journey in adapting to the cultural standards of Avonlea. Ultimately, the book illustrates Anne's struggle and inevitable problems as she attempts to express herself in accordance with societal expectations.

The cultural forces regarding physical appearance are really significant in shaping Anne's understanding of beauty as a woman's priority. Since the very beginning of her arrival in the town, she has faced questionable judgments both publicly and domestically due to her appearance. Obviously, being different from the beauty standards makes Anne keep thinking about changing to always fit into them. Throughout the narrative, she often caught herself stating her longing for a fashionable gown to be accepted. Moreover, her endless imagination of the ideal beauty is often derived from the literature that she reads. It influences her thinking on how a graceful woman is depicted in the media. This shows how the beauty myth rooted in Avonlea has affected her self-perception.

Anne's self-perception led to the condition of conformity as she gradually thought of the idea of fitting in. Conformity is defined as the act of altering one's attitudes merely to match the group's composition (Bernheim & Exley, 2015). In *Anne of Green Gables*, Anne disregards her physical traits and desires puffed sleeves in her gown due to the ideal depiction of a proper girlhood. She is expected to act in a ladylike way merely to be

perceived similarly to the other girls. This demonstrates how cultural standards are tightly tied to Anne's change of self-perception. Additionally, it shows how the beauty myth operates as a mechanism that excludes women's existential freedom.

At the end of the story, Anne begins to change her behavior to be wiser and adjust to cultural standards. She managed to prove them wrong by always being true to herself, even though it goes against societal expectations. Resistance can be understood as a condition where individuals challenge certain norms and perform the opposites of the social expectations (Lovela, 2019). Instead of conforming to the standards that were made to limit them, women can create new ways to identify themselves. In the novel, Anne shows her resistance by working hard on her intellectual achievement to be perceived as valuable. This situation highlights her resistance against the beauty myth as she changes her life path and prioritizes her education more than her outward appearance.

The novel highlights the beauty myth and its tools that oppressed women during early 20th-century Canadian society. This framework remains a concerning social issue today as the mechanism has moved to the digital spheres. Women are pressured globally through the advancement of digital platforms. While the book focused on local interactions, every individual from different regions nowadays has the free will to evaluate women they do not personally know. Additionally, with the rise of digital labor, women spend hours faking their appearance with diet, surgery, and hundreds of different beauty filters. Thus, this study investigates the early 20th-century Canadian society in *Anne of Green Gables*, revealing women's struggle against the beauty myth that continues to resonate in today's culture.

## 1.2. Identification of the Problem

Restrictive cultural standards adopted in Avonlea, a small town depicted in *Anne of Green Gables*, mainly reflect the situation in early 20th-century Canada. It mirrors a period where women's values were determined by their appearance, which required them to conform to beauty standards. These mechanisms, including social and media influences, enable the beauty myth to operate. Given this context, cultural standards prevent Anne from realizing her value and encourage her to conform. However, at the end of the story, she attempts to resist the beauty myth by changing her perspective on beauty. Thus, Anne's journey from conforming to resisting reveals how cultural standards gradually restrict Anne's ability to express her existential freedom.

## 1.3. The Review of Previous Studies

To provide a solid data foundation for this study, an examination of previous studies regarding the issues of the beauty myth and women's existence is essential. The following works help build a deeper understanding of the beauty myth and existentialist implications in different literary works.

The first relevant study is written by Raginee Mahanta (2022), entitled "Tracing Affinities between the 'Nature-Nurture' Continuum: An Ecofeminist Reading of L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*." This study analyzes the same object as this research, which is *Anne of Green Gables* by L.M. Montgomery. It reflects on the connection between the main character, Anne Shirley, and nature. Moreover, the researcher delves into how nature has indirectly influenced her personality to be a confident young lady. The article uses ecofeminism theory to focus on Anne's experiences with nature, which eventually built her characterization. Nature is depicted

as a place of imaginary pleasure and is linked to women's aspects of nurturing and giving. The relationship of women and nature is highlighted in the article as it seeks to study the indirect nurture of Anne and Green Gables. Additionally, this research is relevant since it provides an understanding of Anne's character as a girl with an imaginative mind.

The second study, which studied the same book, is "An Analysis of Agent's Otherness Existence in *Anne of Green Gables*" by Siyou Zhang and Peijun Yu (2016). The researchers analyze Anne's psychological condition using the Unconscious theory by Sigmund Freud. According to them, following Freud's theory, unconsciousness might affect an individual's behaviour as their desires are suppressed by sensibility. However, they focus on using the developed theory of the unconscious done by Jacques Lacan in 1901-1981 and combine it with Saussure's theory of language structure. The study uncovers the structure and motivation of Anne Shirley's unconsciousness. Specifically, it focuses on exposing Anne's otherness, which is depicted by her personality. Anne is found to be imaginative, likes nominating, and garrulous. Moreover, the authors also state the relevance to L.M. Montgomery, the novel writer, as they find similarity between her and Anne Shirley. This study is relevant to the current research since it identifies Anne's otherness characteristics.

The third study, "Anne Shirley's Character Development and Its Causes as Seen in *Anne of Green Gables* by Lucy Maud Montgomery," is written by Fatimah Salsabila Az-Zahra and Nur Saktiningrum (2019). The study mainly discusses Anne Shirley's character development by using the objective approach of M.H. Abrams. It becomes a suitable theory to analyze a work on its own, which means seeing *Anne of Green Gables* solely on its intrinsic elements. Moreover, it applies Griffith's theory of character development to understand the distinct types of characters. Both theories helped the

authors to analyze Anne's character, characterization, and character development. It also examines the factors that cause her development throughout the storyline. Overall, it provides an analysis of Anne's characterization, which is beneficial to the presented thesis.

The fourth relevant study is "Redefining Beauty Standard in Laksmi Pamuntjak's *The Question of Red*" by Yulia Eka Pristiana and Much. Koiri (2021). This research analyzes mainly the issue of beauty standards. The problem addressed in this study is regarding women's value in society, as perceived by their physical traits. It highlights beauty standards as outstanding in a patriarchal society, as seen in the book entitled *The Question of Red*. The approach used throughout the analysis is feminist criticism to identify how the character redefines beauty. Therefore, this research exposes the beauty standard in a patriarchal society, which is different from the main character's appearance. The authors conclude that the beauty standard is a catastrophe that violates women's right to live. Thus, this paper helps provide the idea of beauty standards being resisted by the female character.

The fifth project is "The Views of Whiteness as the Standard of Beauty in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*" by Amalia Herwinda Agustini (2024). The author of this study is focused on analyzing Pecola Breedlove as the main character who views whiteness as the beauty standard. It also explains Toni Morrison's historical and social conditions that might influence the literary work. To examine the objective of the research, the author uses Lucien Goldmann's theory of genetic structuralism by comparing the mental structure of society, particularly regarding the beauty standard. However, the result points out how Morrison desires to spread the idea that whiteness is

not the beauty ideal. Overall, this study shows the issue of beauty standards, which is relevant to be analyzed.

The sixth paper, written by Ellen Valencia H et al. (2024), is entitled “Beauty Standard Portrayed in *The Princess Who Wasn't* by Templeton Moss.” The focus of this study is to analyze the beauty standard that regulates specific qualifications, specifically focused on appearances. The object of this research is a picture book called *The Princess Who Wasn't* by Templeton Moss. The story illustrates a girl named Kathy who is considered to be the most beautiful in the kingdom. She is offered to be a princess due to her magnificent beauty that stole the villagers’ hearts. There are some beauty standards depicted as the ideal princess requirements: nice hair, flawless skin, and shiny jewelry. It uses Naomi Wolf’s theory of The Beauty Myth to examine the significance of those standards on an individual’s self-perception and body image. Overall, the article discusses how the depiction of the beauty myth in the picture book is divided into three aspects, which are culture, work, and hunger. It is beneficial to the presented paper as it gives an understanding of how the beauty myth operates in certain domains.

The seventh previous study is “The Impacts of the Beauty Myth on the Existential Freedom of Pecola in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*” by Ratna Asmarani (2016). The study analyzes the destructive impacts of the beauty myth on the existential freedom of Pecola. The researcher examines Toni Morrison’s work entitled *The Bluest Eye* with the theory of Beauty Myths and supported by the concept of existentialism. Those theories help prove how beauty standards may affect human existence on many levels. Generally, beauty norms are constructed by social and historical moments, as stated in the article. Besides having a slim body, women need to be White (or “Whittish”) to get the perfect beauty image. It reflects Pecola’s desire to be as beautiful as the white child actress,

Shirley Temple. She pursued the life of a valuable person who is driven by the need to fit into the beauty standards. Overall, the research results in various impacts faced by Pecola as she experienced limited existential freedom on the physical, consciousness, and social life levels. It provides an understanding of The Beauty Myth and Existentialist Feminism theories, which shows the significance of one's response to the beauty standards.

The eighth research is a thesis entitled "Simone de Beauvoir's Existentialist Feminism in James Clavell's *Shogun*" by M. As'yari (2025). The focus of this study is to analyze the portrayal of patriarchal culture in 17th-century Japan, where women struggled to resist. It applies Beauvoir's concepts of Otherness and Immanence vs Transcendence to examine women's ways of resisting objectification. Throughout the analysis, women in the novel are found to have experienced certain forms of objectification, such as physical, cultural, social, and existential. They are bound by the rules regulated by men, which limit their control over their bodies, choices, and the meaning of life. This study is beneficial to analyze the issue of conformity to patriarchal norms and the acts of resistance against them.

The ninth research is also an article conducted by Yollanda Aprila Nirwana and Ruly Indra Darmawan (2024) with the title "Deconstructing 'The Other': Female Resistance in *Great Expectations* Through Simone de Beauvoir's Lens." This research focuses on examining the forms of resistance and subordination that happen in *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. Throughout the narrative, it is found that some female characters lose their subjectivity due to subordination and social expectations. By utilizing Beauvoir's idea of subordination and women's existence, this study results in three main points of women's resistance, which are women's intellect, being themselves,

and concretizing themselves. It is pivotal to analyze the condition of conformity and resistance against the social expectations.

The relevant studies provided above contribute to understanding the social issue, especially in *Anne of Green Gables* by L.M. Montgomery. Many of them have discussed women's position in society across various social phenomena, including the beauty myth. The present paper contributes to the understanding of the beauty myth and women's ability to go beyond the restrictions. Additionally, the sociological background of early 20th-century Canada serves as the crucial context behind the issue.

#### 1.4. Research Questions

To examine the topic of this research, it will focus on answering these two questions:

1. How does the beauty myth operate in *Anne of Green Gables* as referred to in early 20th-century Canada?
2. How does Anne Shirley's conformity and resistance to the beauty myth reflect women's struggle to achieve existential freedom in *Anne of Green Gables*?

#### 1.5. The Scope of the Research

The present paper is restricted to the primary text, *Anne of Green Gables*, and relevant supporting sources that are linked to the issue of beauty standards and existential freedom. Alongside it, the Beauty Myth theory by Naomi Wolf (1990) and Simone de Beauvoir's *Existentialist Feminism* (1949) are employed as the secondary sources for the study to understand the problems. It will not extend to a broader analysis as it solely frames culture as one of the domains of the beauty myth depicted in the book and the

individual transformation experienced by Anne Shirley. The concepts of immanence and transcendence are also examined through the novel as they reflect Anne's response to the beauty myth. Overall, this research aims to offer an insight into the feminist literary discussions by examining the portrayal of the beauty myth and women's struggles in literature.

### **1.6. The Objective of the Research**

By looking at the research questions found in the paper, the objectives of this study include:

1. To analyze the textual depictions of the beauty myth, which operates through social and media influences, as perceived in early 20th-century Canada.
2. To examine the impacts of the beauty myth through Anne's struggle in achieving her existential freedom by focusing on her conformity and resistance.

