

CHAPTER NINE

“MY RED HAIR IS A CURSE”: GROWING UP RED-HEADED WITH *ANNE OF GREEN GABLES*

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Anne Shirley stands up abruptly. Her bright red hair is in two braids as her face becomes bright red, flushed in anger. Her rage is palpable. Shouting ‘HOW DARE YOU?’, she reaches over, grabs a chalkboard slate, and smashes it over the head of young Gilbert Blythe. As a young red-head, I’ve never before so viscerally connected with a character. Anne had been taunted by the cute boy at school, culminating with him pulling one of her braids and calling her ‘carrots’. Unsurprisingly and deservedly, Anne was the one who was punished (though Gilbert did protest and try to explain his actions). Her teacher forced her to write that she had a bad temper one-hundred times on the chalkboard. As she leaves school that day, her bosom friend Diana begs her to forgive Gilbert. But Anne has no intention of doing so: ‘I shall never forgive Gilbert Blythe. An iron has entered my soul Diana; my mind is made up. My red hair is a curse’ (Sullivan, 1985).

While the story is told in *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) written by Lucy Maud Montgomery, I saw it in the 1985 film version directed and produced by Kevin Sullivan for the CBC in Canada (and later aired on Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) in the United States). I’m not sure when I first saw it. After all, I was only three the first time it aired. But certainly, by the time I was a pre-teen, I was well familiar with it, and even able to quote it already. While a voracious reader, I did not read the novel until much later because I loved the movies too much. The movies provided so much visual content, and Megan Follows would be the only person that could ever be Anne to me. The stunning views of Prince Edward Island, the plethora of beautiful flowers, the lush green fields where Matthew worked—this was a landscape and a world foreign to this young Oklahoman who knew windswept red dirt roads well. Further, Anne’s luscious red hair mirrored mine so well

that I felt an immediate kinship. I frequently wore my hair in braids, and even, after a disastrous incident with a comb that got stuck in the act of 'curling' my hair, I cut my own bangs. In the end, my mishap resulted in having bangs that matched hers later in the film. In Anne, I saw a kindred spirit.

While I could relate to Anne, I always felt different from my peers because of my red hair. Even my birth story contributes to this thinking. When I was born, on a full moon no less, the nurses took time during their record-breaking weekend helping with births to give me a bath immediately—all the better to see my red hair, despite my mother's claims that I was blonde. I was the only red-head in my immediate family, and the old joke about being the mailman's daughter would have actually worked in this situation as he was a proud ginger. I grew up knowing my hair was special and made me distinct, but in school no one wanted to be different; blending in was key to surviving those difficult years. Looking back, I do not believe I was picked on tremendously for my hair (I did get called carrots a few times for sure), but it did not take much teasing as a child to internalise the feelings of angst and torment that came with being different.

Anne Shirley was someone who felt her red hair was a real burden to her, that she could never actually be beautiful with that colour of hair, even when she had the most wonderful puffy-sleeved dresses. Here, I found a companion, someone who understood the deep-seated pain of being a red-head. While adults often told me how wonderful and unique my red hair was, I knew it separated me and made me a target in elementary and middle school. Importantly, Anne knew it, too. She would seethe when anyone brought up her hair. As Juliet McMaster so eloquently states, 'Her red hair is her Achilles' heel, her Waterloo, her fatal flaw, her touch of nature that "makes the whole world kin"' (2002, 58). When Anne broke the slate over Gilbert's head in anger after his insults, I lived every moment with her (and again and again). My whole life I've imagined breaking a slate over someone's head who made me feel inferior by denigrating my bright hair. In this essay, I examine my own conflicted feelings about my hair, and how, like Anne, as an adult I've grown to embrace its uniqueness. Simultaneously, I connect my own mixed feelings about my hair to the history and understanding of red hair, and its problematic historical perceptions in Western culture. Red hair is distinct, and in the end powerful. It may contribute to my (and Anne's) hot temper, but it also makes us recognisable, and most importantly, I would argue that it enhances our lived experience and our character.

Growing up in the late 1980s and 1990s in the United States, I had a number of red-headed female characters from whom to choose. The easiest

character to embrace would have been Amelia Bedelia—not only did she have red hair, but in second grade my name in Spanish class was Amelia. The series of books featuring Amelia Bedelia were written by Peggy Parish and first published in the 1960s. While they were cute books, the character, while well-meaning, was a bit of a mess. She took everything literally, which resulted in numerous misunderstandings at her work as a maid for a wealthy family. I had big aspirations and dreams; Amelia’s ineptness frustrated me, and my schoolmates would call me her name just to upset me. As an ambitious eight-year-old, I wanted to be anything but a clumsy maid, so Amelia Bedelia would not do.

Madeline was closer to my interest. Ludwig Bemelmans wrote *Madeline* in 1939, which was succeeded by several other books featuring the same character. The iconic opening of each book in the series set the tone: ‘In an old house in Paris / That was covered in vines / Lived twelve little girls / In two straight lines’ (Bemelmans, 2019, 1). Madeline, at seven, was the smallest of the girls and the only red-head of the group. Up to any challenge, Madeline was both the bravest of the group and the troublemaker. A fun and quirky film based on the series came out in 1998, but I was much too old for that at the time. I may have been Madeline for Halloween (as I worked my way through the popular red-head canon of characters), but she would not work as my inspiration either, in larger part because she never grew older than a child.

Another cartoon red-head, perhaps more well-known and more visible than Madeline, was Ariel of Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* (1989) loosely based on Hans Christian Andersen’s story of the same name. Ariel’s hair was a perfect red, not so much natural but matching the crayon colour red. The teenage Ariel wanted to discover the entire world beyond the sea and to fall in love with a prince. After making a deal with the evil sea witch, Ursula, Ariel exchanged her voice for legs so she could fall in love with her destined Prince. Being a mermaid had stifled her true desires: she was meant to be free on open land. Ariel was youthful and appealing, with a brilliant singing voice. I spent days in my family’s temporary above-ground pool singing her songs and splashing around, pretending to be a mermaid. Ariel, though, was not just a fantasy, but a character in a problematic Disney film who is willing to give up everything to be with a Prince who doesn’t seem to have much personality at all. I could pretend to be a mermaid and be around her in the pool, but it was clear she was not a real person, rather she was and would always be an animation. I would pretend to be her, but I didn’t want to be her.

Then there was Pippi. In 1988, *The New Adventures of Pippi Longstocking* film was released, and I loved it. Astrid Lindgren brought the character to

life in 1945, in a book titled after her. Annakin's 1988 *Pippi* exhibited many of the traits that Lindgren had attributed to Pippi: playful, positive, funny, wild, carefree, independent, and more. The new theme song perhaps described her best:

Pippi Longstocking is coming into your world
A freckle-faced red haired girl, you outta know
She'll throw your life into a whirl (Annakin, 1988).

But more than anything else, Pippi is recognised by her hair. Bright orangey-red, Pippi's two braids stand out from her head, slightly curved like bicycle handles. Filled with ridiculous but catchy songs, the movie succeeds because of its slapstick humor, whimsy, a talking horse, and a prankster monkey. I was the target demographic for this film and I completely responded to Pippi's resilience and positive attitude.

With that said, I *hated* her hair. Surprisingly, her gravity-defying hair went unmentioned during the film. It was only during the theme song that they acknowledged her signature red locks. Her hair colour never bothered me, but the braids were appalling. Why did they stick out? What was the point? They may have made her eccentric but they also made her entirely unrelatable for me. I could suspend reality for a number of things, including that she was the daughter of a cannibal queen and an orphan with super strength and extreme jumping abilities, but that hair was not just over-the-top and insane; it opened up a door for insults to me in real life. I've always liked my red hair and I've always liked my hair in braids, those were never the problem. But because red hair made me different, and children thrive on using differences as jumping off point for making fun of each other, any time I wore braids of any kind I would immediately be taunted with the nickname Pippi. My hair became a sensitive issue for me, and heightened my insecurities, and Pippi became the most infuriating insult that could be thrown at me. Again, it was not because I didn't like the character or the person but because her hair was out of control, wacky, and childish—and her name was used to associate me with these characteristics.

Anne may have hated her hair colour but it was never styled ridiculously. In a classic disappointment, she failed to successfully dye her red hair dark brown/black, instead ending up with a greenish mess. I succeeded in dyeing my hair brown, but it washed out in less than a week. Anne's frustration with her hair was something I saw in myself. Jacky Colliss Harvey has called this the Red-head Dilemma: 'We want to shake off the pejorative associations of being red, but we don't want to give up our so-called rare colour advantage, the thing that makes us stand out, that sees us exchange the red-head look in public, that means we feel special, rare, unique' (2015,

217). Red-heads want it both ways—seeking out the attention but avoiding the negative connotations.

After all, red-heads have had a tough go of it. Since ancient times, red-heads have been separated and distinguished from society. Today, less than 2% of the population has red hair and there are constant rumours that red-heads will one day disappear (Hooten 2014). Because red-heads were so often the odd person out, they often found themselves blamed for anything and everything. From slaves to witches to tempresses, red-heads have a storied past that is worth examining, so that we can begin to break down the stereotypical view of red-heads.

The various colours of red hair should be a pretty obvious clue that not all red-heads are the same, but even more than that, red-heads differ along the lines of gender. Marion Roach, in her important study focused on exploring the sexual nature of red hair, elaborates: 'After the [gender] divide, the red-haired woman evolved from being merely evil to being highly sexualized while the red-haired man's development got arrested soon after something in his presence poisoned the well for all red-haired men. Red-haired men simply do not make us feel the way we do when we are in the presence of red-haired women' (2005, 26-27). While red-headed children get teased, after going through puberty red-headed women suddenly become exotic, erotic and desirable.

In fact, Roach traces the way that red hair has been linked ever so closely with sexuality, particularly for women. Beginning with Lilith, who some claim to be the first woman, before Eve, she traces the idea that red hair is associated with a darkness, even evil. She explains:

We are meant to be able to identify her and live within the bookends of that fear, remembering at all times that women should not refuse to lie beneath men and that men should not pick someone whom might.

Even with all the power of her history behind her, however, in order to be remembered, Lilith needs to be recognized, rendered unforgettably. And she was—as a redhead (Roach, 2005, 24).

Lilith was the first she-demon, and her identity filtered throughout time in different myths and narratives. Associated with druids and witches, her mysteriousness and problematic nature were inextricably linked to the colour of her hair. 'While Lilith was evil through her powers of seduction, it was those powers that also gave her a highly sexualized identity, even at the height of her ancient ability to provoke fear' (Roach, 2005, 34-5). Lilith established the dual identity so often associated with red heads: evil or something to fear or hate, as well as sexually appealing.

Another important figure who has also frequently been depicted as red-headed is the Christian figure of Mary Magdalene. While unrelated to how she is depicted in the Bible, her red hair has become part of her cultural mythology. As Harvey asserts, 'It reflects the fact that the version of Mary Magdalene that the Western church has always found more fascinating is that of a reformed prostitute, a penitent whore, and culturally, for centuries, red hair in women has been linked with carnality and with prostitution' (2015, 11). This idea persists as red-heads are still often associated with promiscuity. To see this, one only has to think of Jessica Rabbit, the women of pre-Raphaelite paintings, Ginger of TV's *Gilligan's Island*, *Batman's* Poison Ivy, Julia Roberts's Vivian in *Pretty Woman*, even Daphne in *Scooby Doo*. Even if not explicitly lascivious, red-headed characters are frequently sexually assertive or curious characters, or the objects of male desire, like Mary Jane in *Spiderman*, various Molly Ringwald characters in the 1980s, Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson) in *The X-Files*, Grace (Debra Messing) in *Will and Grace*, and even the particularly unique character of Olive, played by Emma Stone in *Easy A* (2010).

The red-headed Olive is a high school student, not exactly popular but also pretty, smart, and a reliable good student. After a rumour about her losing her virginity goes viral throughout the school, her popularity skyrockets. But it isn't just name recognition or recognisability, she is almost immediately branded a slut. Inspired by Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), in the film Olive wears a prominent A on her clothing. Further, she perpetuates the rumour by pretending to go out on dates with 'loser' high school boys and agreeing to allow more rumours to be spread about her promiscuity. While none of these stories are at all true, Olive's promiscuity is easily believed and, as the only prominent red-head in the film, her hair colour certainly seems to reaffirm the connection between red hair and promiscuity.

In *Anne of Green Gables*, Anne is a child and, unsurprisingly, exhibits child-like behaviour. She is naïve and curious about the world, and completely consumed by whatever task is at hand: reading a poem or studying for exams for example. Interestingly, the only character who sees her as a viable romantic partner began his relationship with Anne by mocking her hair. Her classmate Gilbert's fascination with, and later crush on, Anne is a significant plot in the novel. Eventually, he will earn her friendship, and later her heart, but it is worth noting that their early interactions involve him making easy jokes about her bright red hair. Gilbert's irksome childish behaviours are often intended flirtatiously, though Anne sees them as humiliating and often reacts with anger or ignores them completely. It is not until the end of the novel or movie, as Anne moves from a youthful girl to a more mature

woman, that the potential for a real romantic relationship exists. It is easy to read the book or watch the film and desire for Anne and Gilbert to be in a relationship, yet, in Anne’s focus on her family and her studies, Anne does not for allow it to happen. The viewer’s wishes are denied by the character’s priorities, and the author’s choices. Her romantic life is not be addressed until the sequels.

While young Anne is not intended to be sexual, it is hard to not see Gilbert responding to the uniqueness of her hair colour and different look than her brunette and blonde friends. While Olive and Jessica Rabbit’s identities are immediately linked to their red hair *and* their sexuality, Gilbert is the one who begins to make those connections for Anne. Sensuality is an intense identity to quickly be assigned to red-headed women. But of course, that is not the only stereotype associated with red-heads. Perhaps the most common stereotype concerning red-heads is their temper—thought to be particularly volatile, long-lasting, and nasty. Tracing this stereotype back to the Vikings with Scottish roots, Erin La Rosa sees Rufus the Red (William II, who ruled England from 1087-1100) as helping establish the link between anger and red hair as he brandished both traits in spades (2017, 19-20). Red, of course, is the colour of blood—power, pain, life, and death all swept up in one bold colour (St Clair, 2017, 138-41). Perhaps more obviously, red is the colour of fire and fiery is a word often used to describe red-heads. Not only that, but the pale skin that often accompanies red hair often tends to blush, or even more dramatically turn various shades of red all over the face, neck, and chest when upset or angry.

Yet, there might actually be see scientific proof behind red-heads’ alleged quickness to anger. The gene that causes red hair also contributes to adrenaline production. It is believed that red-heads not only produce more adrenaline, but that they have better and quicker access to it. As Harvey writes, ‘they fire up more rapidly than others’ (2015, 166). I certainly have had moments when my temper has gotten the best of me. My face flushes as I literally feel the anger burning my face. Like most children, I had my share of temper tantrums and bursts of anger. As I’ve grown up, I’ve learned to better control my anger but sadly, cannot control the bright red that colours my face. I’m certainly no good at disguising my emotions and, as one can imagine, I’m a terrible poker player. While I cannot be sure that I am angrier just because of my hair colour, it is clear that my anger shows visibly on my skin because of my red hair. Perhaps the rumour that red-heads have intense bouts of anger is not just a stereotype. It is also possible that red-heads do not have more anger than other people, but instead that they show anger more visibly.

Anger is not the only characteristic attributed to red-heads, but the previously mentioned pale skin and freckles are a few of the distinguishing features that accompany red hair. In 1995, Jonathan Rees was the first to identify the specific chromosome responsible for red hair (Harvey, 2015, 5 and Rees et al, 1995, 328-330). Red-heads have a mutation in their MC1R gene, which causes them to produce pheomelanin instead of melanin. This protein causes not just red hair, but can also be responsible for pale skin and freckles; significantly, this protein naturally occurs in people of colour all over the world (La Rosa, 2017, 40). Indeed, it is remarkable, but red-heads are actually significantly different from the rest of the public. Red-heads can make more vitamin D in their bodies, compensating for their inability to absorb it directly from the sun. Red-heads smell different to others, sense cold and heat more keenly, and require more anaesthesia to be sedated. Perhaps most uniquely, red-headed women feel less pain (when it comes to the sting of a needle), *and* pain medicine works better on red-headed women than on anyone else (La Rosa, 2017, 50).

But, what actually counts as red hair? The hardest hair colour to fake, red hair has been variously described. Prominently, and as noted, 'carrots' is the greatest insulting description of her hair that Anne Shirley could possibly imagine or receive. In a memorable scene in the movie (and the book), Anne is forced to apologise to the gossip Rachel Lynde, who had the audacity to describe her hair as carrots and Anne responded with heated derisory remarks (undoubtedly caused by those fiery locks). With typical dramatic flair, Anne gets on her knees, saying, 'I am wicked and am ungrateful and I deserve to be cast out. What you said was true: I am skinny and I'm ugly and my hair is red. What I said about you too was true, too, only I shouldn't have said it' (Sullivan, 1985). While not the best apology, Rachel laughs and forgives her, while providing her with great hope: 'Don't worry about your hair—I knew a girl once who had hair every bit as red as yours, but when she grew up it darkened into a real handsome auburn' (Sullivan, 1985).

For many young women who were frustrated by the intensity of their red hair, aging into auburn hair was the dream. Auburn, and later Titian-coloured, became the preferred terms for red-headed women in the Victorian age (Harvey, 2015, 134). Imbued with class and dignity, these terms allude to a more mature hair colour, blessed by the hand of a great artist. Carrot-coloured hair was for young, reckless children, so appropriately, Anne aspired to have her hair 'darken' into a grander, adult, and hopefully more beautiful variation of red hair. By the end of the film, when Anne is with her friends, they try to assuage her insecurity by describing her hair as

auburn, claiming it is both darker and close to blonde. Based on her small smile and glowing face, Anne appreciated the comments greatly.

Victorians fetishised hair to such a large extent that it could be mounted in mourning jewellery and carried around by beloved family members after one's death. McMaster explores the ideas wrapped up in hair, saying ‘It sometimes seems, though, that for all the power implicit in these women's tresses, the women themselves are not all that powerful. The power seems to work *through* the hair, rather than the agency of the woman’ (2002, 65). In dyeing her hair, Anne seeks to rid her hair of its power, of its stereotypes, of all of its negative associations. Upon seeing that her hair has turned an unsightly green and not the desired raven-black hair of her bosom friend, Diana, Anne is devastated, so much so that her adoptive mother Marilla finds it impossible to punish her. Anne believed it was worth being a little wicked to get rid of red hair, and promised herself that she would be good and make up for it later. But upon seeing her sad green hair, she is forced to come to terms with her red hair and its integral connection to her identity. Indeed, McMaster expands, ‘In *doing* something about her hair, even though the act was not an immediate success, she has learned to claim her own appearance and her own identity, and to be proud of both’ (2002, 67).

And isn't that often the point of most coming-of-age stories? The protagonist must find and define her own identity while she navigates the rough waters of growing up. In particular, Anne struggled as an orphan who never knew her parents, or even the circumstances surrounding her early life. Her young years were spent struggling in various homes, where she didn't get to be a child, rather she was a maid, servant, and babysitter. When she landed at Green Gables, Anne was searching for a family—and finally found one. Only then could she really reflect upon herself and figure out who she would grow up to be.

My childhood was vastly different to Anne's challenging youth. I grew up with two parents, a delightful younger sister, beloved dogs, and never struggled to survive. I did have asthma, which, along with my red hair, distinguished me from the rest of the students in my class. While my problems were undoubtedly minor, the frustration of feeling different from your peers is no small issue when you are a child. I will be forever grateful for watching Anne on screen and seeing her anger and frustration play out. She did not handle each situation perfectly; she lashed out with venom when needed. But over the course of the film, she grew into her hair. She may not come to fully embrace it, but she manages to make peace with her carrot-coloured hair. Unsurprisingly, I have also come to an understanding about my red hair. As it goes white, I keep it dyed red (and occasionally and

playfully dye parts of it pink or blue). Whenever I meet someone new, I always instruct them to look for my red hair, as it is my defining feature.

Yet, it is only the defining feature of my outside appearance. It (and the gene that causes it) may make me quick to rage, smell a bit different, and need more anaesthesia, but it is still *just* my hair. It took me a long time to embrace who I really am as a professor, writer, researcher and dog mom. Seeing Anne handle her situation, moving beyond her looks to become a smart and dedicated young woman helped me be able to do the same. Despite all the growing up I've done (and I think Anne would support me on this), I will still give anyone an evil stare down when they call my hair 'carrots'.

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