

Disciplinary Power, Confession, and Normalizing Judgment in *Anne with an E*

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ABSTRACT

Care institutions for vulnerable children rarely present themselves as instruments of control, yet how they evaluate, correct, and normalize children remains underexplored in scholarship on the Netflix series *Anne with an E* (2017–2019). This qualitative descriptive study applies Foucauldian media analysis to six scenes from Season 1, Episodes 1–3, in which orphaned Anne Shirley's placement with the Cuthbert family of Green Gables is read as a site of disciplinary power rather than a benevolent arrangement. Scenes were selected according to three Foucauldian categories: evaluation of the child's body or conduct (disciplinary power); confession, examination, or surveillance regulating the child's place (confession and surveillance of conduct); and dialogue or action marking the child as deviant from a social norm (normalizing judgment of the marginal subject). The analysis shows that Anne's body is evaluated according to a gendered specification of usefulness established before her arrival; that her place in the household depends on examination and confession, particularly when Marilla declares she "can't trust one word" from Anne's mouth following the loss of a brooch; and that her orphan status marks her as a deviation from Avonlea's norm, subjecting her to judgment from adults and peers. This study extends Foucauldian media analysis to a historical drama centered on rural domestic life, showing how discipline, confession, and normalization operate within household and community settings and persist beneath ostensibly benevolent child welfare narratives.

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1. Introduction

Modern institutions charged with the care of the vulnerable rarely announce themselves as instruments of control. Michel Foucault's account of power in modern societies begins precisely from this observation: power in the modern period operates less through open coercion than through discipline, examination, and the productive shaping of bodies and conduct (Foucault, 1978). Historical scholarship on nineteenth-century child welfare indicates that children within foster and orphanage systems were routinely assessed for their capacity to contribute labor, and that decisions about where and with whom a child would live were frequently shaped by that assessment rather than by kinship alone; the widespread nineteenth-century practice of "placing out," in which urban orphan asylums sent children to rural households to work in agricultural or

domestic labor, illustrates this dynamic directly (Hacsi, 1997; Holt, 1992). The Netflix series *Anne with an E* (2017–2019) dramatizes a fictionalized version of this arrangement: the Cuthbert siblings of *Green Gables* request an orphan specifically to perform farm labor, and the protagonist, Anne Shirley, arrives only through a miscommunication, immediately exposing her to evaluation, correction, and the threat of removal. It should be emphasized that *Anne with an E* is not treated here as a historical document but as a contemporary cultural artifact that stages and reworks these historical arrangements for a twenty-first-century audience; the analysis that follows accordingly reads the household depicted in the series as a fictional representation of disciplinary relations, informed by but not equivalent to the historical placing-out system described above, rather than as direct evidence of how any specific historical foster placement actually operated.

Read through Foucault's account of disciplinary power, this premise positions the orphaned child not simply as an object of exploitation in the classical economic sense, but as a body to be rendered "docile," that is, a body that may be "subjected, used, transformed and improved" through specific techniques of training, observation, and correction (Foucault, 1995). This framing differs from, though it does not wholly exclude, an economic reading of the same events. Where an economic or Marxist reading emphasizes the extraction of labor value a Foucauldian reading attends instead to the mechanisms through which the child's body and conduct are made visible, assessed, and corrected: the Cuthbert household's specific request for a boy suited to farm labor as one instance of a more general institutional logic in which a child's body is evaluated against a specification of usefulness before she is ever encountered as a particular person, the demand for confession when trust is broken, and the social marking of the child as deviant from the community's norm (Van Doore, 2016).

Literary and cinematic works have long served as sites where such mechanisms of power become visible to readers and viewers, since narrative form allows the ordinarily diffuse and invisible operations of discipline to be rendered as discrete, legible scenes (Latham, 2024). Don Latham's Foucauldian reading of Lois Lowry's *The Giver* demonstrates that a young-adult narrative centered on an adolescent protagonist can function as "a narrative embodiment of the social philosophy of Michel Foucault," offering readers a lesson in how power relations operate within any disciplined community. *Anne with an E*, though set in a very different historical and generic register, offers a comparable opportunity: its protagonist is repeatedly subjected to evaluation, confession, and normalizing judgment by the household and the community that receive her.

Previous scholarship on *Anne with an E* has approached the series primarily through feminist, psychosocial, and economic lenses. Bilqis (2023) reads the series through Marxist feminism, emphasizing women's exploitation and unequal access to education and workplace rights. Rahma (2023) examines how patriarchal culture in the series restricts women's autonomy. Gierszewska (2019) analyzes the series' therapeutic potential for adolescent readers processing trauma related to abuse, rejection, and bullying. Beyond the series itself, Elizabeth Crain's (2016) dissertation on the orphan figure in children's literature, which includes *Anne of Green Gables* among its central texts, reads the fictional orphan through psychoanalytic and postcolonial concepts of "the other" rather than through Foucauldian categories of discipline and normalization. These studies collectively demonstrate sustained scholarly interest in the series' and its literary tradition's treatment of gender, trauma, and marginal identity .but the existing

scholarship identified in this study does not appear to apply Foucault's account of disciplinary power, confession, and normalizing judgment to the series' foster care arrangementth.

Further afield Pembecioğlu & Çomak (2023) examine the series' overlap with historical and social realities more broadly, while Helmie & Salsabila (2024) analyze the protagonist's speech patterns through Lakoff's theory of women's language, treating dialogue as sociolinguistic evidence in a manner methodologically similar to the present study's reliance on scene-level dialogue.

This constitutes the research gap addressed by the present study. While Latham (2004) demonstrates the productivity of a Foucauldian reading for a young-adult dystopian novel, and Crain (2016) demonstrates sustained scholarly attention to the orphan figure across children's literature including *Anne of Green Gables*, no existing study reads the foster system dramatized in *Anne with an E* through Foucault's specific analytical vocabulary of docile bodies, confession, and normalizing judgment. The novelty of this study lies in applying that vocabulary to a contemporary historical drama centered on domestic rather than institutional space, showing that disciplinary power operates as pervasively within a small rural household as within the more obviously disciplinary settings, such as prisons and schools, that occupy the center of Foucault's own analysis (Disney, 2015).

The choice of a Foucauldian framework for this study follows from the specific questions it investigates rather than from a claim that Foucauldian theory supersedes Marxist analysis. Where a Marxist reading would primarily trace how Anne's labor is extracted for the economic benefit of the Cuthbert household, this study is concerned with a related but distinct question: how Anne's body and conduct are evaluated, examined, and judged as normal or deviant by multiple actors, Marilla, the schoolteacher, the Progressive Mothers, and Anne's own peers, none of whom holds power over her singularly or completely. Foucault's vocabulary of disciplinary power, confession, and normalizing judgment is used here because it is well suited to describing this diffuse pattern of evaluation across several actors and settings; Marxist criticism retains its own explanatory strength for questions of economic extraction and class relations that fall outside the scope of the present analysis.

Accordingly, this study addresses three research questions: (1) How is Anne's body evaluated and trained for usefulness within the Cuthbert household? (2) How do confession and examination operate as mechanisms regulating her continued place in the household? (3) How does normalizing judgment, exercised both by adult institutions and by her peers, mark her as a deviation from Avonlea's social norm? These three questions correspond directly to the three Foucauldian categories used to code the data in Table 1 and structure the presentation of findings in Section 3: disciplinary power and the production of the useful body (RQ1), confession and the surveillance of conduct (RQ2), and normalizing judgment of the marginal subject (RQ3). The significance of this study is twofold. Theoretically, it extends Foucauldian literary criticism, more commonly applied to institutional or dystopian settings, to a contemporary historical drama centered on rural domestic life. Practically, it contributes to critical media literacy by encouraging viewers to attend to the disciplinary mechanisms, rather than only the emotional register, of ostensibly benevolent child welfare narratives.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design grounded in textual and audiovisual analysis. Rather than testing a hypothesis through numerical measurement, the study systematically describes how selected scenes in *Anne with an E* construct disciplinary power, confession, and normalizing judgment, interpreting these constructions through Foucault's theory of power (Goldman et al., 2020; Gapur et al., 2024; Gapur & Pujiono, 2018; Gapur & Taulia, 2023).

The primary data consist of six scenes drawn from Season 1, Episodes 1 to 3 of *Anne with an E* ("Your Will Shall Decide Your Destiny," "I Am No Bird, and No Net Ensnarcs Me," and "But What Is So Headstrong as Youth?"). These episodes were selected because they contain the series' central scenes of the child's bodily evaluation, her exposure to confession and examination, and her marginal reception within Avonlea's social hierarchy (Rahma, 2023). The secondary data consist of Foucault's own primary texts and peer-reviewed scholarship applying Foucauldian theory to literary and cinematic narratives, particularly narratives centered on children and adolescents.

The corpus was narrowed to these three episodes through a two-stage screening process. First, the full first season of *Anne with an E* was reviewed to identify episodes containing scenes of foster placement, evaluation, or normalization; this review indicated that the opening arc of the season, comprising the household's request for a child, Anne's arrival, the crisis threatening her return, and her early reception within the Avonlea community, is concentrated within the first three episodes, while later episodes of the season shift toward narrative concerns, such as Anne's friendship with Diana and her academic rivalry with Gilbert, that fall outside the scope of the present research questions. Second, within these three episodes, individual scenes were screened against the three criteria listed below, and where more than one scene satisfied the same criterion, the scene offering the clearest and most direct textual evidence was retained, in order to avoid redundancy while preserving representation of each analytical category. This procedure yielded the six scenes summarized in Table 1, which are judged sufficient to address the three research questions because they jointly span the complete narrative arc of Anne's initial placement, from the household's original specification of the child it sought, through the crisis that tests her continued belonging, to her reception within the wider community.

Data collection was conducted through purposive sampling of scenes meeting at least one of the following criteria: (a) evaluation of the child's body or conduct in terms of its usefulness or correctness; (b) an instance of confession, examination, or surveillance regulating the child's continued place in the household; (c) dialogue or narrative action marking the child as deviant from a social norm (Hardstaff, 2019). Each qualifying scene was logged with its episode number, timestamp, and a brief descriptive note.

Data were analyzed thematically, coding each selected scene against three Foucauldian analytical categories: (1) disciplinary power and the production of the useful body, (2) confession and the surveillance of conduct, and (3) normalizing judgment of the marginal subject. The coding results are summarized in a thematic matrix (Table 1).

Trustworthiness was addressed through theoretical triangulation, cross-checking each interpretation against Foucault's primary texts and secondary Foucauldian literary scholarship, and through reflexive attention to alternative readings, including economic and feminist readings, before settling on the Foucauldian interpretation presented.

Table 1. Thematic Coding Matrix of Selected Scenes

No.	Episode	Scene (brief)	Foucauldian Category
1	S1E1	Marilla and Matthew's original request for a boy specified for farm labor	Disciplinary power / docile bodies
2	S1E1	Anne's flashback depicting labor performed for the Hammond family	Disciplinary power / docile bodies
3	S1E1	Marilla's demand for confession and decision to send Anne back after the brooch is lost	Confession and surveillance
4	S1E2	Anne's expressed fear of being sent back at any moment	Confession and surveillance (internalized)
5	S1E3	The "Progressive Mothers" discussion contrasted with Anne's marginal social position	Normalizing judgment

3. Result and discussion

Six scenes across three episodes of Season 1 were identified as directly relevant to the study's three analytical categories. These scenes are presented below, organized by category, with the corresponding visual evidence and analysis integrated according to the combined Result and Discussion format of this journal.

3.1 Disciplinary Power and the Production of the Useful Body

The series establishes, from its opening minutes, that Anne's body is received into the household as an object of evaluation rather than as a child to be welcomed unconditionally.

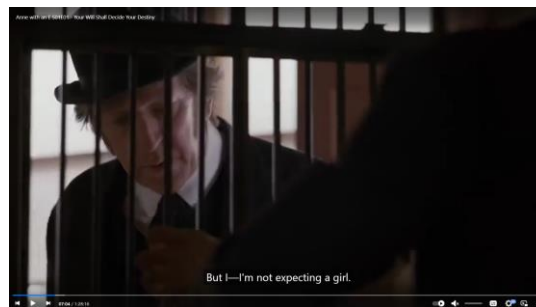


Figure 1. Episode: S1E1, "Your Will Shall Decide Your Destiny"

Timestamp: 07:00 – 10:00

Figure 1. Matthew's initial encounter with Anne at the train station, revealing the asylum's miscommunication.

Dialogue: "But i-i'm not expecting a girl."

(Source: Anne with an E, Season 1, Episode 1)

Matthew's confusion at the station registers a mismatch between the body the household specified and the body it received. In Foucault's account, disciplinary institutions operate through precise specifications of the bodies they require, training and distributing individuals according to the "correct training" the institution demands (Foucault, 1977). The Cuthberts' original request for a boy functions as exactly this kind

of specification: a body suited to a particular set of tasks, requested in advance of and independent of the particular child who might occupy it.



Figure 2. Episode: S1E1, "Your Will Shall Decide Your Destiny"

Timestamp: 21:00 – 25:00

Figure 2. Marilla's rejection of Anne at Green Gables, insisting the household needs a boy for farm labor.

Dialogue: "Well, she shouldn't be here. You should never have brought her home"

(Source: Anne with an E, Season 1, Episode 1)

Marilla's rejection of Anne upon arrival extends this logic of specification into active evaluation. Anne's body is assessed against the household's requirement and found wanting, not because of any fault in her conduct but because her body does not match the docile, useful form the household anticipated. This scene illustrates what Foucault terms the "means of correct training," through which institutions sort and evaluate individuals according to their fit with a required norm of usefulness (Foucault, 1995).

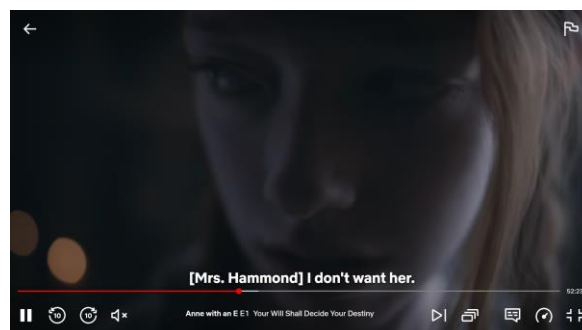


Figure 3. Episode: S1E1, "Your Will Shall Decide Your Destiny"

Timestamp: 36:00 – 39:00

Figure 3. Anne's flashback to her labor for the Hammond family, recounted on her first night at Green Gables.

Dialogue: "I don't want her"

(Source: Anne with an E, Season 1, Episode 1)

Anne's flashback to her prior placement with the Hammond family shows that this pattern of bodily evaluation is not unique to the Cuthbert household but is diffused across the wider system of child placement she has already experienced. This diffusion is significant for a Foucauldian reading: rather than locating disciplinary power in a single sovereign authority, Foucault emphasizes that modern power is "capillary," exercised in countless ordinary sites, including individual households, rather than concentrated in one visible institution (Foucault, 1995). Anne's repeated circulation among households

evaluating her usefulness demonstrates precisely this diffuse, everyday operation of disciplinary evaluation.

This diffuse operation of disciplinary evaluation is consistent with findings on institutional child placement more broadly. Disney (2017) ethnographic study of Russian disability orphanages similarly reveals institutions as enmeshed in "biopolitical processes of power and control" that extend well beyond their stated caregiving function, while Lovaas (2016) demonstrates that documentation and file-keeping practices within foster systems encourage children to monitor and surveil themselves, a dynamic this study identifies in Anne's own repeated experience of evaluation across households.

3.2 Confession and the Surveillance of Conduct

Beyond the initial evaluation of her body, Anne's continued place in the household depends on her submission to examination and, when suspicion arises, confession.

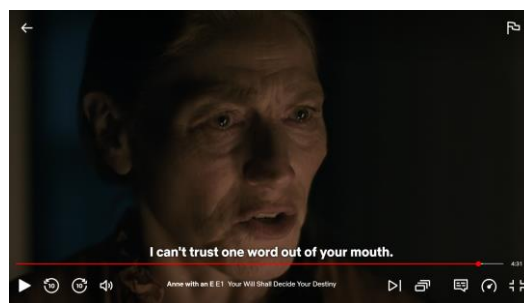


Figure 4. Episode: S1E1, "Your Will Shall Decide Your Destiny"

Timestamp: 1:22:00 – 1:25:00

Figure 4. Marilla's decision to send Anne back to the orphan asylum, illustrating the conditional nature of foster acceptance.

Dialogue: I can't trust one word out of your mouth. Tomorrow, you will go at first light"
(Source: Anne with an E, Season 1, Episode 1)

This scene offers the clearest instance of Foucauldian confession within the sampled data. Foucault argues that Western societies since the medieval period have relied on confession as "one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth," a mechanism through which an individual is compelled to speak the truth of their own conduct under the authority of another (Foucault, 1978). Marilla's accusation does not simply punish a suspected theft; it demands that Anne produce a truthful account of herself, and Anne's continued place in the household is made conditional on the success or failure of that confession. Marilla's declaration that she "can't trust one word" out of Anne's mouth frames trust itself, rather than labor, as the currency on which Anne's belonging depends, an emphasis entirely consistent with Foucault's account of confession as a technology through which conduct, not merely output, is regulated.

The confessional dynamic identified here is not unique to fictional or nineteenth-century settings. (Besley, 2005) demonstrates that Foucauldian technologies of truth-telling continue to operate within contemporary schools, positioning students as their own confessors, while Fejes (2011) shows how reflective practices in professional training similarly function as confession by another name, requiring individuals to produce a truthful account of themselves under institutional authority. Marilla's demand that Anne account for her own trustworthiness thus exemplifies a technology of power with clear continuities into present-day institutional life.

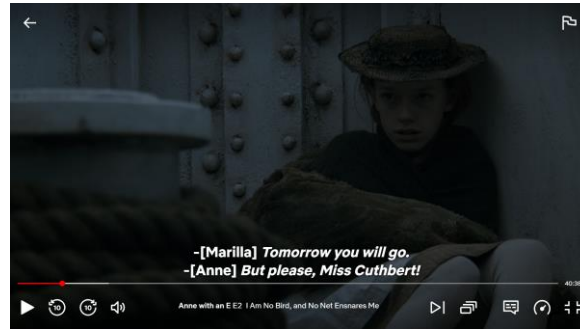


Figure 5. Episode: S1E2, " I Am No Bird, and No Net Ensnares Me"

Timestamp: 03:00 – 05:00

Figure 5. Anne expresses her fear of being sent away at any moment.

Dialogue: "Flashback: Tomorrow you will go. But please, Miss Cuthbert "

(Source: Anne with an E, Season 1, Episode 2)

Anne's continued preoccupation with the threat of removal, carried into the following episode, demonstrates the internalization of surveillance that Foucault identifies as the defining achievement of disciplinary power. Where the panoptic model of surveillance does not require constant, active observation to be effective, since the subject who knows she might be watched or judged begins to regulate her own conduct accordingly, Anne's fear operates in precisely this way: she has internalized the household's evaluative gaze to the point that she anticipates and dreads its judgment even in its absence. This is disciplinary power in its most efficient form, no longer requiring an external enforcer because the subject has become her own supervisor (Berens & Nelson, 2015).

3.3 Normalizing Judgment of the Marginal Subject

Beyond the household itself, the wider community of Avonlea exercises what Foucault terms normalizing judgment, marking Anne's status as an orphan as a deviation from an implicit social norm.



Figure 6. Episode: S1E2, " I Am No Bird, and No Net Ensnares Me"

Timestamp: 33:00 – 37:00

Figure 6. The "Progressive Mothers" discussion contrasted with Anne's marginal position among Avonlea's established families.

Dialogue: "You're a little orphan You lived in a trash can "

(Source: Anne with an E, Season 2, Episode 1)

The Avonlea mothers' discussion of respectable conduct, set against the schoolyard taunt directed at Anne, together illustrate how normalizing judgment operates at every level of the community, from adult institutions to peer relations among children. Foucault observes that disciplinary power, in its final and most pervasive form, comes to link "the punitive and the abnormal," so that what is policed is no longer the illegal act alone but any departure from the norm, an anomaly that "haunted the school, the court, the asylum" and, this study suggests, the schoolyard and the parlor as well (Foucault, 1995). Anne's status as an orphan, regardless of her actual conduct, marks her as anomalous within Avonlea's social order, and the taunt she receives from a peer demonstrates that this normalizing judgment does not require formal institutional authority to be exercised; it circulates through ordinary social interaction as readily as through official channels (Rosen, 2025).

This pattern of normalizing judgment against vulnerable children is well documented beyond the fictional setting of Avonlea. Cronin (2019) argues that the state's growing interest in "looked after children" has historically been driven by their construction as social problems requiring correction rather than by attention to their expressed needs, while Davies et al. (2023) apply Foucauldian concepts of power, knowledge, and resistance to show how child protection systems can produce powerlessness and exclusion even as they claim to protect. Heron & Gibson (2025) similarly find that intervention methods applied to vulnerable children in secure care often proceed with little transparency about their purpose, echoing the opacity Anne experiences in how her own conduct is judged.

Taken together, these six scenes trace a coherent progression in the operation of power within Anne with an E: from the initial specification and evaluation of Anne's body as a potentially useful instrument (3.1), through the demand that she produce a truthful account of herself under threat of removal, and her subsequent internalization of that demand as a standing anxiety (3.2), to the community's ongoing marking of her orphan status as a deviation from the social norm (3.3) (Gayapersad et al., 2019). This progression supports the study's central argument: that beneath its coming-of-age narrative surface, Anne with an E dramatizes the diffuse, everyday operation of disciplinary power, in which the orphaned child's body, conduct, and social identity are continuously evaluated, examined, and judged against norms she has had no part in setting.

This normalizing judgment operates alongside two further mechanisms Foucault identifies as central to disciplinary power: hierarchical observation and the examination. Hierarchical observation refers to the arrangement of a social space so that conduct becomes visible to those positioned to judge it, while the examination combines this visibility with the power to classify and rank individuals according to a norm. The schoolroom setting of Figure 6 functions as precisely this kind of examining apparatus: it is a space explicitly organized to render each child's conduct, dress, and manner visible to teachers and classmates alike, and it is within this space, rather than in a private or informal setting, that Anne's status as an orphan is publicly named and used to rank her below her peers. The Progressive Mothers' parallel discussion of respectable conduct performs an analogous function among adults, translating the schoolroom's hierarchical visibility into the register of town gossip and reputation. Read together, these two scenes suggest that Avonlea as a whole functions as an examining community, one in which the household's private evaluation of Anne examined in section 3.1 is echoed and amplified by public, communal mechanisms of the same disciplinary kind.

These findings extend Crain's (2016) reading of the orphan figure in children's literature, including Anne of Green Gables, as a figure of "otherness," by specifying the mechanisms through which that otherness is actively produced and maintained rather than treating it as an inherent narrative trait. They likewise extend Latham's (2004) demonstration that a young-adult narrative can function as a legible embodiment of Foucauldian power relations, showing that this function is not confined to explicitly dystopian settings but can operate equally within the more familiar, sentimentalized genre of the historical family drama.

4. Conclusion

This study examined how Anne with an E represents the foster placement of an orphaned child through the operation of disciplinary power, focusing on six scenes drawn from the first three episodes of the series. In response to the three research questions posed in the Introduction, the findings show that Anne's body is initially evaluated for its usefulness according to a specification the Cuthbert household set in advance of her arrival (RQ1); that her continued place in the household depends on her submission to examination and confession, most visibly in the scene following the loss of Marilla's brooch (RQ2); and that her status as an orphan subjects her to normalizing judgment from both adult figures and her peers within the household and the wider Avonlea community (RQ3). These findings support the study's central argument that the series dramatizes power as a diffuse, everyday force operating through evaluation, confession, and normalization rather than through a single, centralized act of control.

Theoretically, this study extends Foucauldian media analysis, more commonly applied to explicitly institutional or dystopian settings, to a contemporary historical drama centered on rural domestic life, demonstrating that the mechanisms Foucault identifies in prisons, schools, and clinics can be productively traced within the smaller and more intimate space of a household and its surrounding community. Practically, the study contributes to critical media literacy by encouraging viewers to attend to the disciplinary mechanisms, evaluation, confession, and normalization, that operate beneath the sentimental surface of child welfare narratives.

This study recommends that future research extend the present analysis beyond the first three episodes of Season 1, particularly to Anne's own developing resistance to normalizing judgment later in the series, and to the arc involving Ka'kwet and the residential school system introduced in Season 2, which raises closely related but analytically distinct questions about the disciplinary and biopolitical dimensions of colonial education.

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