Lucy Maude Montgomery and Anne of Green Gables: An Early Description of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder

Jessica Katz Edison, MD; and Christopher Clardy, MD

ABSTRACT

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) was added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, third edition, revised in 1987. Similar disorders had appeared earlier, and many consider the first description of ADHD to be a lecture in 1902 about children with an “abnormal defect in moral control” but normal intelligence. This definition of ADHD is more alarming than the current one. Anne Shirley, the protagonist of the novel Anne of Green Gables (written by Lucy Maude Montgomery and published in 1908), shares the hyperactive and inattentive qualities that fit the current definition of ADHD. She also lacks the menacing characteristics of the 1902 description. This indicates that ADHD, by its modern definition, was probably present in the early 1900s. Furthermore, the character of Anne Shirley shares many biographical similarities with her author, suggesting that Montgomery herself may have had ADHD. Thus, looking at literature from the past not only provides insight into the timeline of ADHD, but also into the thought process of an individual with ADHD. By viewing literary classics through a medical lens, we may gain insight into other diseases as well. [Pediatr Ann. 2017; 46(7):e270-e272.]

As Carl Sagan suggests, literature can give insight into a past time and place. By exploring literature based on real people, the reader can gain knowledge of their inner thoughts. Looking at this through a medical lens, literature can also be a source of disease pathology, and pathology that is unintentionally described in literature based on real life can give us insight into these diseases and may actually describe conditions before they appear in the medical literature. Anne Shirley, the protagonist of Anne of Green Gables (written by Lucy Maude Montgomery), can be seen as an early description of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

DISCUSSION

The term “attention-deficit disorder” first appeared in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, third edition (DSM-III) in 1980, and was changed to “attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder” in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, third edition, revised (DSM-III-R), published in 1987. Prior to that, there had been many reports describing hyperactive children in the medical literature. Many consider the first description to be Dr. George Still’s 1902 lecture “On
Some Abnormal Psychical Conditions in Children in which he described children with an “abnormal defect in moral control” but normal intelligence. However, Still’s description is much more alarming than the current definition of ADHD. The symptoms listed by Still listed are (1) passionateness, (2) spitefulness/cruelty, (3) jealousy, (4) lawlessness, (5) dishonesty, (6) wanton mischievousness/destructiveness, (7) shamelessness/immodesty, (8) sexual immorality, and (9) viciousness. The keynote of these qualities is self-gratification (ie, the immediate gratification of self without regard either to the good of others or to the larger and more remote good of self).

In addition to the negative connotations, the description can also be seen as more consistent with oppositional defiant disorder than ADHD. In contrast, Anne Shirley, the protagonist of Anne of Green Gables, does not show the cruelty or lack of morals described by Stills. She does, however, show both an impulsiveness and inattentiveness that is consistent with the current definition of ADHD. Furthermore, although Montgomery published Anne of Green Gables in 1908, 6 years after Still’s lecture, there are many similarities between Anne’s life and that of the author, indicating that she herself may have had the ADHD traits ascribed to Anne Shirley.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth edition (DSM-5) defines ADHD as “a persistent pattern of inattentiveness and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with functioning or development.” The young Anne Shirley’s impulsivity is one of her defining characteristics. In one memorable scene, Anne cracks her school slate over the head of her future husband Gilbert Blythe, because he made fun of her red hair (p. 202). Likewise, when she first meets her neighbor Rachel Lynde, she reacts with similar anger for Mrs. Lynde commenting on her red hair. Despite knowing that Mrs. Lynde is an elder that she should treat with respect, Anne goes into a tirade declaring “I hate you” and “How would you like to be told that you are fat and clumsy and probably hadn’t a spark of imagination in you? I don’t care if I do hurt your feelings by saying so! I hope I hurt them.” (p. 119).

Even more prominent than Anne’s impulsivity is her inattention. Her imagination distracts her constantly. In one monologue, Anne tells her best friend Diana about her trouble trying to cook. It includes forgetting to put flour in the cake because she was pretending that she was nursing Diana back to health from smallpox, forgetting to cover pudding sauce because she was imagining being a nun taking her vows, and then forgetting to tell her adoptive mother that a mouse had drowned in the sauce because she was imagining being a frost fairy (p. 226-227). Thus, Anne has both the hyperactivity and inattention found in ADHD.

Although there is mounting evidence that ADHD symptoms can persist into adulthood, the evidence also suggests that symptoms diminish as children enter adulthood. This is likewise true of Anne Shirley. Anne is bright and proves herself to be a top student, winning a scholarship to college. There are also direct comparisons when it comes in her cooking. The stories she tells to Diana above occur early in the book when Anne is age 11 years (p. 226-227). Later on in life, her cooking improves. At one point, Marilla, her adoptive mother, comments that she has “got on fairly well and made fewer mistakes than usual” (p. 294). This time, her only error was burning a pie, which is certainly an improvement from her previous cooking. By age 16 years she is capable of being a teacher and also running the house as Marilla is losing her eyesight (p. 548-549).

Even though Anne Shirley is a fictional character, there are parallels between Anne and the author, Lucy Maude Montgomery. Anne Shirley was an orphan. Montgomery’s mother died when she was age 21 months, and her grief-stricken father sent her to be raised by her maternal grandparents. Montgomery was enrolled at Dalhousie University, but when her grandfather died she left the university to care for her grandmother, who otherwise would have had to sell the family home. Likewise, Anne gives up a scholarship to a university to prevent Marilla from having to sell Green Gables after Matthew died (p. 548). Like Montgomery, Anne teaches and dreams of being a writer. It is possible that Montgomery not only based the facts of Anne’s life on her own but also her personality, including her ADHD. Certainly, the accuracy with which she describes a person with the diagnosis indicates that there were likely people with ADHD in the early 1900s as well as the late 1800s when Montgomery was growing up.

CONCLUSION
Looking at literary characters for developmental disorders can give a glance into the past and offer evidence that disorders were present well before their modern diagnoses. The character of Anne Shirley is an excellent example of this. She not only provides insight into the timeline of ADHD, but also into the thought process of a
REFERENCES