***Anne of Green Gables***

***Chapter 3***

### ***Marilla Cuthbert is Surprised***

***Summary:***

* The chapter title takes place right away, once the girl walks into the house. As Matthew explains to Marilla why he didn't bring a boy home, the girl realizes she isn't wanted and bursts into tears.
* Marilla asks her name. She says she wants to be called Cordelia, but when pressed, reveals that her name is Anne Shirley.
* Dinner doesn't go very well. Anne can't eat because, she explains, she's "in the depths of despair." (3.26)
* Once Anne is in bed, Matthew asks Marilla if they can keep her, surprising Marilla a second time. She's still against the idea. Meanwhile, poor Anne cries herself to sleep.

***Synopsis:***

Unlike Matthew, Marilla does not shrink from voicing her surprise upon seeing a girl orphan, instead of a boy, at her front door. As the Cuthberts talk about Mrs. Spencer’s mistake, Anne realizes she is not wanted. She dramatically bursts into tears, crying, “Nobody ever did want me. I might have known it was all too beautiful to last.” Marilla and Matthew worriedly look at each other over the weeping child.

Marilla interrupts the girl’s outpouring to ask her name. Anne replies that she would like to be called Cordelia because she thinks the name elegant. Pressed to reveal her real name, she admits that it is Anne. She considers her name plain and unromantic, but likes the fact that her name is spelled with an “e,” which she feels makes it far more distinguished than if it were “Ann.” Marilla dismisses Anne’s musings about the spelling of her name with a quick “fiddlesticks.” Anne, focused on her situation at the Cuthberts, cannot eat supper and mournfully explains that she is “in the depths of despair.” She appeals to Marilla, asking if Marilla has ever been in the depths of despair. Marilla answers that she has not and cannot imagine what such a thing might feel like. After supper, Anne dons her skimpy orphanage nightgown and cries herself to sleep in the desolate spare room.

Downstairs, Marilla broaches the subject of how they will get rid of the unwanted girl. To her amazement, the usually passive Matthew voices an opinion, suggesting they might keep the child, who is so excited to stay at Green Gables and so sweet. When Marilla asks what good a girl would do on a farm, Matthew says, “We might be some good to her.”

***Critical Study:***

There is no hiding Marilla Cuthbert's dismay when she discovers the odd turn in events. Anne, discerning the predicament before her, falls into despair and fits of emotion: "'I might have known it was all too beautiful to last. I might have known nobody really did want me.'" Softening, Marilla asks the little orphan girl her name. Anne asks her to call her Cordelia because it is such a lovely name, which the stern Marilla refuses. At the very least, Marilla is asked to call the girl Anne spelled with an 'e.' After supper, which Anne barely nibbles on due to being in the "depths of despair," Marilla shows her to the east gable room, a bare and unadorned bedroom that gives the sensitive young girl "shivers." Marilla, washing the supper dishes, discusses the quandary with Matthew, who faintly intimates he would like to keep the little girl. Marilla archly rejects the notion of keeping young Anne Shirley, as the little orphan girl pines away in the east gable.

Anne displays her flair for dramatics and sentiment on learning she may well be sent back to the asylum. Her sense of despair is matched by the barren east gable room she is escorted to, with its bare floor and old-fashioned low-turned posts, as if her own sense of abandonment were reflected in the whitewashed walls. Anne's preoccupation with dress, fretting over the "skimpy" nightgown made for her by the asylum's matron, is in evidence. And there are hints of Marilla's stifled emotional life when she admits to the poor orphan girl that she cannot imagine what it feels like to be in the depths of despair.

***Critical Analysis:***

Marilla is shocked when she finds Matthew has brought home a little girl instead of a little boy. While Marilla and Matthew argue over how this mistake could have happened, the little girl realizes what is happening and begins to cry. Marilla tries to persuade the girl not to cry, and the girl’s effusive response causes Marilla to smile. Marilla asks the girl’s name. The girl first asks to be called Cordelia, a name she likes more than her own. When Marilla refuses, the girl says that her name is [Anne Shirley](https://www.gradesaver.com/anne-of-green-gables/study-guide/character-list#anne-shirley)—specifically, "Anne" spelled with an “E.” Marilla asks Anne how it came to pass that she was sent instead of a boy, and Anne reports that Mrs. Spencer had told the asylum that they wanted a girl around eleven years old. Marilla serves dinner, but Anne says that she is too upset to eat. Marilla decides to have Anne sleep in a bedroom in the east gable. Marilla leaves Anne in the room to change into her nightgown. Anne feels upset that the room is so bare in decoration. She changes into her nightgown and buries her face in the pillow on the bed. When Marilla comes to say goodnight, Anne protests that it is not a good night at all.

When Marilla goes back downstairs, she finds that Matthew is smoking, which he only does when he is perturbed. Marilla tells Matthew that, the next day, she will go confront Mrs. Spencer about the mix-up and send the girl back to the asylum. Matthew agrees reluctantly, saying that if they were to keep her, they “might be some good to her” (p. 38)—and, besides, she is very interesting to talk to. Marilla ends the conversation saying that the girl will not be staying, and they go to bed. Upstairs, Anne cries herself to sleep.

***Significance:***

When Matthew and Anne reach Green Gables, Marilla is as unwelcoming as Matthew had feared she would be. For her part Anne is horrified to realize once again she's arrived at a place where she's not welcome. Bursting into tears, she announces, "This is the most TRAGICAL thing that ever happened to me!" Marilla can't help smiling. She says, "We're not going to turn you out-of-doors tonight ... What's your name?"

Anne asks to be called Cordelia—"it's such a perfectly elegant name"—but confesses her real name is [Anne Shirley](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Anne-of-Green-Gables/character-analysis/#Anne_Shirley). (This is the first time her name appears in the book.) She begs Marilla, at least, to grant her the dignity of spelling her name with an E: "A-n-n-e looks so much more distinguished."

Anne is so miserable she can't eat much supper, although her grief doesn't make her any less talkative. Forlornly she follows Marilla up to the east gable room, which is bleak and bare. Marilla bids her an awkward goodnight and goes back downstairs. She's amazed to learn Matthew has warmed to Anne and wouldn't mind if she stayed at Green Gables, but Marilla refuses to change her mind. Anne is hardly the kind of girl she'd pick out of an orphanage: "There's something I don't understand about her."

"Frowning most resolutely," Marilla goes to bed. Upstairs Anne cries herself to sleep.

Marilla tells Matthew, "I don't like children who have so much to say ... There's something I don't understand about her." Anne upsets all Marilla's ideas of what a little girl should be. This reaction is partly because Anne is so talkative and what she says is so eccentric, but something else is bothering Marilla: Anne stands up robustly for the right to be emotional.

Clearly Matthew defers to Marilla in household matters. He may be in charge of the farm, but inside the house Marilla is the boss. Anne knows she'll have to obey if Marilla insists on sending her back to the orphanage, but she's clearly not afraid of the older woman. When Marilla says there's no need to cry, Anne flashes back, "Yes, there IS need!" Anne refuses to eat—"I'm in the depths of despair"—and when Marilla bids her goodnight, Anne retorts, "How can you call it a GOOD night when you know it must be the very worst night I've ever had?"

Anne's emotions make the reserved Marilla uncomfortable, but Anne's lack of deference is what Marilla doesn't understand. When she stands up for herself, Anne addresses Marilla as an equal—something even 60-year-old Matthew doesn't do. Marilla is unused to young people, but the reader senses she's even more unused to being defied.

***Summary and Analysis Part by Part:***

***Summary Part 1:***

When [Marilla](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/anne-of-green-gables/characters/marilla-cuthbert) sees that [Matthew](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/anne-of-green-gables/characters/matthew-cuthbert) has brought in a strange girl with [red hair](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/anne-of-green-gables/symbols/red-hair), she’s baffled. The girl listens silently as Marilla questions Matthew about the mix-up. Suddenly she drops her bag and springs toward them with clasped hands, crying, “You don’t want me because I’m not a boy! I might have expected it.” She flings herself down at the table and weeps. She adds that this is the most “tragical” thing that has ever happened to her.

***Analysis Part 1:***

The girl is used to feeling unwanted, but it’s especially devastating to be brought to what she thinks is home, only to face rejection on such grounds.

***Summary Part 2:***

Smiling a bit, [Marilla](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/anne-of-green-gables/characters/marilla-cuthbert) tells her that she can stay for tonight. She asks the girl’s name. At this, the girl asks if she could be called Cordelia, though she reluctantly admits that it’s not her real name—she’s really [Anne](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/anne-of-green-gables/characters/anne-shirley), which is sadly “unromantic.” Marilla retorts that Anne is a nice, sensible name. Anne agrees to give up being called “Cordelia” as long as Marilla makes sure to call her Anne instead of Ann—she thinks it looks much more distinguished.

***Analysis Part 2:***

Much as she imagines new names for places and other people, Anne even renames herself to something more “romantic”—another way of imagining herself into different circumstances. But if she must be just “Anne,” it’s important that other people know the correct spelling. Though Anne’s insistence on “Anne with an E” is one of her humorous trademarks, it’s also a way that she hangs onto ownership of her name in a world where she has little else.

***Summary Part 3:***

[Anne](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/anne-of-green-gables/characters/anne-shirley) doesn’t know how the mix-up at the orphanage happened. When [Mrs. Spencer](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/anne-of-green-gables/characters) came to get Lily Jones, the five-year-old she’s adopting, she was certain that the Cuthberts wanted a girl, too. [Marilla](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/anne-of-green-gables/characters/marilla-cuthbert) explains that a girl “would be of no use to us” on the farm. Anne quietly sits down with the Cuthberts for dinner but only pecks at her food, explaining that she’s “in the depths of despair.”

***Analysis Part 3:***

Marilla thinks of adopting a child in terms of that child’s usefulness to her and Matthew, not primarily in terms of providing love and a home, so there’s no room for Anne in her plans. Though Anne is no doubt devastated, she uses big words and ideas to help her cope with sadness.

***Summary Part 4:***

After dinner, [Anne](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/anne-of-green-gables/characters/anne-shirley) listlessly follows [Marilla](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/anne-of-green-gables/characters/marilla-cuthbert) up to the east gable room where she’ll sleep. The walls and floor are painfully bare, with an old-fashioned bed and plain mirror and basin. Anne quickly changes and dives under the covers, finding the room cold and uninviting. When Marilla returns for her candle, she picks up Anne’s discarded clothes and bids her goodnight. Anne retorts that it’s the worst night she’s ever had.

***Analysis Part 4:***

The bare coldness of the gable room reflects the cold reception Anne has received from Marilla; she isn’t wanted or expected here. This is another circumstance so extreme that Anne can’t simply imagine it away. When her imagination fails, she doesn’t shrink from telling the truth baldly and confronting Marilla about the pain she has caused.

***Summary Part 5:***

[Marilla](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/anne-of-green-gables/characters/marilla-cuthbert) returns to the kitchen, where she finds [Matthew](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/anne-of-green-gables/characters/matthew-cuthbert) thoughtfully smoking his pipe. She says she plans to see [Mrs. Spencer](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/anne-of-green-gables/characters) tomorrow and figure things out—Anne will need to be sent back to the orphanage. When Matthew is reluctant, Marilla asks what good Anne could be to them. “We might be some good to her,” Matthew says. He finds Anne interesting, and he figures he could hire a local boy to help him instead. Marilla thinks Anne talks too much. Unsettled, the two drift off to bed. Upstairs, Anne cries herself to sleep.

***Analysis Part 5:***

Marilla remains committed to her original plan, thinking of Anne in terms of what “good” she can be to the Cuthberts. She thinks of Anne mainly as a household asset, in other words, instead of as a person to be loved. Matthew’s mindset, on the other hand, has already changed—he thinks of how the Cuthberts can help Anne. If it’s farm help he needs, he’s willing to pay for it. Anne, he senses, deserves something better.