

The Charlotte Mary Yonge Fellowship

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From Realism to Reserve: Undergraduate Essays on Charlotte Mary Yonge's The Heir of Redclyffe

The Rise and Fall of *The Heir of Redclyffe*

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Upon hearing that a student is going to read a Victorian novel for an English class, most students today turn to popular websites like CliffNotes and SparkNotes. When in search of a summary of a novel by Charlotte Yonge titled *The Heir of Redclyffe* one would be surprised to find nothing on those websites. As the search continues a video titled "The Best Victorian Novel You've Never Heard Of: The Heir of Redclyffe - Charlotte M. Yonge" comes up. The video describes how the creator had stumbled upon Yonge's work when reading a biography of Barbara Pym that stated that Charlotte Yonge was Pym's favorite novelist. This video raises the question: why is this book so unheard of now, despite Yonge's apparent popularity in her era until the early to mid-twentieth century? We see other authors like Dickens that are still read and studied, yet Yonge, who was just as popular, does not hold the same status as a household name. To track the rise and fall of *The Heir of Redclyffe* requires a dive into the culture and history of Yonge's time and a comparison to what we value in a novel today. In the words of Gavin Budge, "to put it brutally, if Yonge's novels are of a standard to which it is worth devoting much critical attention, then a convincing answer has to be found to the question of why her work isn't better known." (Budge 27) This essay will trace the history and culture that made Yonge popular and argue that she lost popularity because of a cultural shift to today's society.

The Heir of Redclyffe is a domestic realism novel with religious tones that follows the lives of an upper class Victorian family. The family, the Edmonstones, and their cousin, Philip Morville, suddenly have their lives changed when a distant cousin, Sir Guy Morville, loses his grandfather and has to live with the Edmonstones. Guy is the heir of Redclyffe but is only seventeen so Mr. Edmonstone becomes his guardian and maintains his duties for him. Love is wound through the story as Guy falls for one of the Edmonstone daughters, Amy, and Philip falls for another, Laura. This novel was part of the domestic realism genre that was so popular during the time. Though the story is simple, "the contrast between Yonge's position in her own day as a highly successful and well-regarded author and her marginal position in modern critical understanding of Victorian literature poses a challenge for any extended critical study of her work, that of explaining the eclipse of Yonge's critical reputation during the twentieth century" (Budge 27). This standard Victorian novel skyrocketed to popularity

only to fall back to earth a century later. Therefore, it is not the story itself, but the circumstances that led to its rise and fall that deserve primary focus.

Aside from the content of the novel, *The Heir of Redclyffe* was also popular because of its structure. *The Heir of Redclyffe* seems especially long to us at 786 pages, but it is standard to the time. We read novels in one book but during the Victorian era it was common to separate the story into three volumes. These three volumes could be rented and read by three different people at the same time, allowing for more exposure than if one person is renting the long novel. This extra exposure further helped the novel grow in popularity. Yonge and other authors could also publish their works as serials. These serials broke the work up into sections like volumes but had the added benefit that they could be published in magazines or periodicals to reach a broader audience. The length was beneficial in its time but as we shift to single volume novels 786 pages is too daunting to be easily enjoyed in one volume.

Domestic realism was one of the most popular genres of the Victorian era as industrialization made wealth possible for the poor. Prior to industrialization you were stuck in the class that you were born into, but industrialization made social mobility possible. Industrialization also made book production cheaper and increased literacy. Books become more accessible for the common person. "The Heir of Redclyffe won instant popularity, not only with girls in the schoolroom, but with grown men, scholars, artists, and men of the world" (Cruse 50). Yonge's novels were adored by all. Her stories of the upper class were relatable to the rich and inspirational to the lower and middle classes. She could write for all but in other works, such as her magazine *The Monthly Packet*, she targeted young, female, British, Anglican readers. Yonge's flexibility as an author helped her rise in popularity as her name was present on magazines, true stories, historical works, and fiction novels. As a writer for the church under the Oxford Movement, Yonge sought to influence her readers with subtle religious references and characters that embody her idea of perfection. Yonge was part of the Oxford Movement which called for a return to the traditional Catholic ideals within the Anglican Church. The members of the Oxford Movement shared the prevailing traditional view that women were meant to be the homemakers and caregivers with no suffrage or power while men were the breadwinners and heads of the house.

The characters in the *Heir of Redclyffe* tend to follow the standards for what a proper man and woman of the time should be: women must be beautiful, obedient and pure of the evils of the world like politics, while men had to be strong, intelligent, brave and authoritative. This characterization follows Yonge's own beliefs and the beliefs of most of her readers. To further this view Yonge writes one character, Charles Edmonstone, as the disabled brother to Laura, Amy, and Charlotte. Charles serves his purpose as the voice of reason throughout the novel but he does not fit Yonge's usual male characterization. By writing Charles as disabled she shows that it is undesirable to fit outside of the perfect male standard. Charles is not physically strong and relies on his family and doctors, because of this he does not find love like Guy and Philip. Readers often seek out characters that are heroic and embody what they want to see in people. For the Victorian era that was often a brave gentleman. "Yonge reconfigures medieval chivalry for the Victorian domestic world" (Perkin 76). Guy Morville

is written to be the perfect gentleman that every woman hopes to find and every man hopes to become. He is the knight in shining armor that always saves the day, speaks the truth and has unwavering morals. Although it could be argued that Guy may not be perfect because he dies in the end, it is his death that proves his greatness. He died because he went out of his way to aid Philip when he was sick in Spain. While helping nurse Philip back to health he catches the illness and does not survive. He leaves his estate to Philip, giving him the wealth that he had always sought after to make himself eligible as a husband to Laura. It is his sacrificial death that turns things around for Philip as he gets the wealth, love and realization of his wrong doings. Guy's death is what flips the novel, making Philip the main character and the heir of Redclyffe.

Today, few people have heard of Charlotte Yonge, even those within English academics and avid Victorian novel readers. Though she was very popular, she is now widely unheard of. So, why did this novel, and Charlotte Yonge as a whole, drop off the map?

Yonge wrote with the intention of teaching and spreading her religious views, so her characters reflect that. Characters like Sir Guy Morville, who risks his reputation to help with a sisterhood charity then ensures the donation is made on his deathbed, are written as upstanding moral examples (Woods). The charity is an Anglican sisterhood: "Anglican Sisterhoods were established in the context of the controversial Oxford Movement and endorsed by Tractarians" (Woods 152). Yonge, as a Tractarian, was a supporter of such sisterhoods, but to many mainstream Anglicans, they were too much like Roman Catholicism, which was despised and feared by the heavily Protestant population of England. So, Yonge writing Guy as helping to establish a sisterhood strongly identifies him with the Tractarian movement. While this characterization won popularity in Yonge's era, we have moved to a more secular society that is less interested in, and often avoids, religiously backed books.

While Livia Arndal Woods only viewed the characterization as religiously inspired, Susan Colón argues that *The Heir* is a parable and compares it to the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. "Yonge's choice of an ending—and readers' hostile and uncomprehending reactions to it—becomes intelligible when we view the novel as a parable" (Colón 32). The problematic ending that Colón refers to was Yonge's decision to continue the book after one of the main characters, Sir Guy Morville, dies. The ending feels poorly written and awkward. When viewed through the lens of a parable the decision to continue the book to prove that Philip improves morally makes sense. It is far less exciting but makes it comparable to the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. The Pharisee places himself on a moral high ground that he does not deserve, while the publican admits to his sins and asks for forgiveness. In the end, the publican is more morally right because he admits to his faults while the Pharisee only perceives himself as perfect. To make the comparison Yonge writes Philip as having a false sense of moral perfection while Guy's views are critical of his mistakes, especially his anger (Colón). This religious view would be highly sought after in the more religious periods of the past but it is now viewed as dated. Today our inspiration is found in progressive stories of feminism and social justice. As we look back at Victorian authors it is often those writing about social issues and progressive ideas that are studied in classrooms. Typical stories like *The Heir of Redclyffe* are often looked over as classroom material because it lacks in the inspiration that we seek today.

The study of English literature is continuously expanding, but we run into an issue as there are a finite number of Victorian authors to study. The big names like Dickens have been so overly analyzed that scholars have to turn away from the predominately white male authors. This has brought more female and minority literature to the academic scene. During the 1970's a feminist movement brought forward female authors that wrote about topics that feminists felt passionate about and wanted to promote like strong, independent women. Novels such as *Zoe: The History of Two Lives* by Geraldine Jewsbury grew in popularity. In a 1974 review of Jewsbury's work by Meredith Cary, she states that "Jewsbury was quite deliberately countering the usual female "solution" of a demure evanescence into love and marriage." Jewsbury's female characters found passion and independence in fields like needlework while characters stuck in marriage and privileged domesticity felt cursed. Jewsbury's characters did not need love to be happy while Yonge's characters fervently chase that life of privileged domesticity. Yonge did not write about these feminist ideas so her work was overlooked. It is only recently that we have learned about the popularity of Yonge and her most popular novel, *The Heir of Redclyffe*. Yonge is again beginning to receive the recognition that she deserves. Though the content is not as exciting or inspiring to us as today's novels, there is much to be learned of the skill and thought that went into *The Heir of Redclyffe*.

The Heir of Redclyffe is truly an anomaly. It was equally, if not more, popular than other writers of the time, though it is unheard of today. The structure, Victorian morals, and religion of the time made it so widely known during its era, and beyond. The cultural shift to a more secular and progressive society is a main cause for the loss in popularity of this novel. *The Heir of Redclyffe* was written with the intention of religiously inspiring people to convert to a more Catholic style of Christianity. As a far more secular society we are not attracted to this style of writing. Today, we are attracted to inspiration writing that focuses on progressive ideas, the opposite intentions of Yonge's preference to return to a more traditional form of religion. This simple novel seems insignificant, but as such a popular story this novel had to be inspirational to other young authors. For example, Barbara Pym, a previously mentioned author in the 1950s, named Yonge as her favorite author. Aside from her work, Yonge will have a lasting impact on literature as she mentored many young authors. Yonge's work affected more than her time, her influence was prominent for at least one hundred years and is now making a comeback.

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