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

The Nature of Tractarianism in *The Heir of Redclyffe* : The English Romantic period's influence on Tractarianism and the natural world in Charlotte Yonge's *The Heir of Redclyffe*

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Charlotte Yonge was one of the most celebrated writers of the Victorian era. She was much more than a writer though. She was a missionary, Sunday school teacher, editor, and nature enthusiast. These influences often made their way into her novels, *The Heir of Redclyffe* being no exception. Through her childhood influences of Tractarianism and enthusiasm for nature, Yonge connects English Romantic characteristics like spirituality and vivid descriptions of nature, such as flowers, landscapes and celestial bodies, to Christianity and morality.

Yonge was a nature enthusiast before she became a woman of Tractarian faith. These two characteristics influenced each other, leading her to connect them in *The Heir of Redclyffe*. Charlotte Yonge grew up in Otterbourne, United Kingdom, where she first began cultivating her appreciation of nature. Reflecting on her childhood, Yonge recalled that she "Was not at all devoutly minded...I think I had a little sense of love and breathing devotion when I was by myself out of doors among the daffodils, or under a pink-blossomed double crab" (Coleridge 96.) While Yonge was initially interested in nature as a child, she quickly became consumed by her Tractarian faith, which influenced her perception of nature and imbued it with religious meaning. In 1835 Charlotte Yonge was introduced to John Keble, one of the founders of the Oxford Movement. Yonge would look back on this early acquaintance with Keble as what "formed the great *conscious* influence of her life" (Coleridge 120.) One such influence was Keble's poetry in *The Christian Year* and *Lectures on Poetry*, characterized by coded religious mentions and regulated spiritual overflow. These collections influenced Yonge to include such characteristics of Tractarian Reserve in her novels (Mason 5). While Keble's ideas influenced Yonge's religious ideology and work, some of his ideas were influenced by Wordsworth and the English Romanticism movement that was spreading across the literature and art world in Britain.

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William Wordsworth was a composer, poet, and writer who was the founder of the English Romantic period. Through Wordsworth's influence over Tractarianism, many of his ideas were implemented into the movement. This influence would go on to become a prevalent motif throughout *The Heir of Redclyffe*. English Romanticism was characterized by a "...preference for the natural and picturesque, a dedication to feeling as opposed to reason, aestheticism, and organicism..." (Bright 386.) Keble openly admitted to drawing heavy inspiration from this era, often these same characteristics would appear in Keble's writing. As one scholar stated "Keble openly acknowledged the indebtedness of his thought and poetry to Wordsworth..." (Bright.) Because of this influence on Keble, who was the closest member of the Oxford Movement to Yonge, the characteristics that defined Romanticism came to become one of the biggest influencers on the development of *The Heir of Redclyffe*.

One of the defining features of Romanticism was the inclusion of supernatural elements, often through the inclusion of spirits. This characteristic is found throughout *The Heir of Redclyffe*, and serves as an analogy to Guy's Christ-like elevation to a higher spiritual existence. Emma Mason describes Tractarian poetry, much like Romantic poetry, as having an "effect on the believing reader, underlying the supernatural..." (2.) Supernatural elements within Romantic poetry were used to show a "...spontaneous overflow of spiritual feeling" (Mason 2,) this same usage was adopted into *The Heir of Redclyffe*, as after Guy's death he is still felt throughout the book as a spirit. When describing Guy's funeral, Yonge writes "by the floating curling white clouds of vapour rising in strange shrouded shadowy forms, like spirit mourners, from the narrow ravines round the grave-yard, and the snowy mountains shining in the morning light against the sky" (419.) This passage combines two of the most important characteristics of the Romantic period: Spirits and descriptions of nature in relation to the supernatural. Historian Christopher Snook saw this intermingling of concepts as so important to the Oxford Movement as to claim "This conception of the natural world as sign and symbol of the supernatural was central to the Tractarian aesthetic" (29.) Guy is the religious authority in *The Heir of Redclyffe*, so when he dies, the natural world, which according to Tractarian thought is connected to heaven, expressed an "overflow of spiritual feeling" by manifesting "spirit mourners." The influence the English Romantic era had on the Oxford movement played a significant role in the creation of this scene, which in turn works to build Guy into a Christ-like figure, as his religion transcends his humanity, bringing him new life.

Yonge's inclusion of nature not only occurs on a macro-scale, with long, detailed descriptions of massive swaths of landscape or mountain ranges, but on the micro level too. Although the most obvious interpretation of the camellia is as a symbol for Guy, whose death was caused by Philip just as the camellia's destruction was, it can also be understood as a metaphor for Amy. Through the description and connection between Amy and camellias, Yonge uses nature, specifically flowers, to show purity, thus deepening the connection between descriptions of nature and religious motifs. Amy Edmonstone, the second youngest daughter of the Edmonstones is first revealed to the reader early in the book, where, when she is coming inside from the garden, is described as "...a tall camellia; the laughing face, and the light, shining curls of the bearer peeping through the dark green leaves." (Yonge

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2.) White Camellias, like the one in the passage, have long been representations of faithfulness, purity, and refinement (Flower.) Amy takes on these characteristics as she is intertwined with the Camellia. By associating Amy with Camellias and their symbolism, Yonge paints Amy in a superior moral light, thereby connecting flowers and, to a larger extent, nature to orthodox Christian values.

Some readers may claim that the connection between religion and nature may be entirely an assumption by the reader. The chief support for this viewpoint is that Christianity, placing humans above all else on Earth, disregarded the importance of nature. One historian described this disregard as "...once man had been a part of nature; now he became her exploiter" (Attfield 370.) This ideal was widespread at the height of the Industrial Revolution, as society was benefitting from mass industrialization and the exploitation of the natural world. This viewpoint ignores the religious and cultural context that influenced Yonge's *The Heir of Redclyffe*. Historically, Christianity never appreciated the importance of nature, as the belief places man above all else on Earth. While this indifference towards nature was popular amongst the masses, Charlotte Yonge's influences didn't follow traditional Christian dogma. Growing up under the effect of Keble and Wordsworth directly led Yonge to heavily associate an appreciation of nature to holiness. During a conversation about Byron's poetry between Sir Guy and Philip, Guy explains "there is danger in listening to a man who is sure to misunderstand the voice of nature, - danger, lest by filling our ears with the wrong voice we should close them to the true one, I should think there was a great chance if being led to stop short at the material beauty, or worse to link human passions with the glories of nature, and so distort, defile profane them" (Yonge 352.) Nature can never be understood by mere men, and those that attempt are trying to speak for God, which Yonge sees as a desecration of nature and an affront to God. Guy, who is not only the main character of the story, but also the principal device through which Yonge shares her religious beliefs, ties the glory of God to the beauty of nature, and explicitly says that if man were to take credit for the work of nature it would "profane them," which implies the religious importance of nature to his beliefs. Charlotte Yonge made the conscious effort to include her belief that nature was a sign of God, rather than the connection being accidental.

Yonge uses detailed descriptions of the sun to represent a higher moral discipline and self-restraint. Throughout the novel Sir Guy struggles to keep his "Morville temper" under control, often biting his lip or going on long walks to ease himself down. This internal conflict eventually comes to a head when, after receiving news that Philip has thrown his marriage to Amy into jeopardy, sets out to do harm to Philip. On his way, however, Guy takes notice of the sunset, Yonge writes

"The sun was setting opposite to him, in a flood of gold,- a ruddy ball, surrounded with its pomp of clouds, on the dazzling sweep of horizon. That sight recalled him not only to himself, but to his true and better self; the good angel so close to him for the twenty years of his life, had been driven aloof but for a moment, and now, either that, or still higher and holier power, made the setting sun bring to his mind, almost to his ear, the words,- Let not the sun go down upon your wrath, Neither give place to the devil." (197)

Appreciating the magnificence of the sun, Guy is able to calm himself. Not only does the sunlight remind Guy for his love of Christ, but the sun itself has its own divinity to it, as it "neither gives place

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to the devil," which was quoted from the Bible (Ephesians 4.26-27.) Guy was able to overcome the greatest challenge his anger has offered through this appreciation of the sun and its religious undertones. Through this example, Yonge creates the message that through an appreciation and encouragement for finding joy and solace in nature, one can cultivate an unassailable moral temperament, as Sir Guy had done.

Charlotte Yonge was an avid supporter of the Oxford Movement; while writing, she followed the doctrine of reserve and ensured that moral messages were always found throughout her novels. Without these hidden messages, her novels would lack what made them so popular in the Victorian period and what makes them so enjoyable today. Because of the English Romantic influence on Tractarianism, and its subsequent influence on Yonge, she implemented motifs of religion and the supernatural through the appreciation of nature on both a macro and microscopic level. *The Heir of Redclyffe* managed to capture the ideas of the time period, becoming a cultural phenomenon. Without these influences, Yonge would not have crafted a novel that embodies ideas and morals which make it not only accessible today, but a time capsule of the era she lived through.

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