

The Charlotte Mary Yonge Fellowship

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

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# Unseen Realities in Victorian Realism

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Those living during the Victorian Era had lives constrained by structure, and whether that be regarding societally determined gender roles or class divisions, this constraint affected almost every aspect of life. There were standards to follow for every personal life choice distinguishable from the next. While there still were insecurities and uncertainties like physical disasters, warfare, economic upsets, the social sector of life remained mostly predetermined. The social realm constructs predictable variables—who you are going to marry, where you are going to live, what kind of job you have—that heavily influence one's life course, and nineteenth century literature was no exception to this fact. Literature of the time attempted to detail stories illustrating the livelihood and humanity of the era, inevitably capturing the society's structure and monotony. The Victorian era's niche fondness of such writing created the genre we now know as realism—a faithful representation of reality in art. Realist literature's focus on everyday life shifted any focus left on fantasy, different worlds, or alternate social expectations toward a reinforcement of the mundanity that they already knew. Realist fiction quickly became the most popular genre among readers of the time, limiting this society to a life of little suspense, both in their own lives and the ones they read about. Therefore, it was only through the idea of open time, or many *possible* futures that this society experienced uncertainty.

Open time introduces the idea of a different way of living, one that is attainable, free-form, and most importantly, in the hands of the person lucky enough to decide for *themselves* what to do. Victorian authors took this liberty of open time into their writing and artfully manipulated their stories to possess a nuanced sense of structure by posing different potential endings. This plot construction had all of the necessary elements to please readers expecting the common and realistic approach to storytelling, however, concealed in its narrative hid the source of interest in realism: the reserved literary device of foreshadowing ("Foreshadowing"). Interestingly, one of the most popular realist novels of the era, Charlotte Mary Yonge's *The Heir of Redclyffe*, utilizes this device in an extremely niche sense. Yonge does not offer multiple situations for the reader to follow; she foreshadows one ending, Guy's death, in relation to both the classic *Sintram and His Companions* and the Bible to free her readers of this suffocating realism and prove that their reality *can* deviate from the norm.

To briefly summarize, Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's 1814 novel *Sintram and His Companions* presents a unique and complex portrayal of Death and Sin as characters and concepts while following the protagonist named Sintram throughout his life. The plot revolves around Sintram's struggle in his sustained battle between his parents' opposing influences consisting of a powerful knight and a devout nun. With a mother of solitary prayer, and a father who preaches the necessity of violence and destruction, Sintram inevitably aligns his morals with that of a faithful, chivalrous friend ("Creepy Christmas"). Nevertheless, Fouqué's captures this plot in a distinctly dark tone, giving Sintram the constant company of the characters Death and Sin that pollute his thoughts and repeatedly challenge his character (Fouqué).

The presence of *Sintram and His Companions* provides a nuanced component in *The Heir of Redclyffe* that goes beyond the structure of literature and socially constructed lifestyles of the time. Reading the novel, one familiar with *Sintram* will note the protagonist's famous companions, Death and Sin. Yonge specifically inserts Sintram's story and effortlessly relates the tale to Guy in order to hint at his tragic and unforeseen death. In *The Heir*, Yonge first connects Guy's character to Sintram in an objective sense; Guy simply loves the story to the extent that he would read it while "all those strange emotions began to flit over his face, and at last he cried over it so much, that he was obliged to fly out of the room" (Yonge 54). Guy's transparent infatuation for *Sintram* reveals the simple yet potent connection between the two in *The Heir*, ultimately illuminating their shared characteristics. Critics might argue that Yonge's insertion and allusion to *Sintram* only acts as a plot device, a small connection to a work known by few modern scholars. However, such a nuanced and repeated reference to *Sintram* presents the reader with a sense of structure; Guy and Sintram have similarities beyond coincidence, whose stories inevitably align.

After Yonge introduces this relationship between Sintram and Guy in the novel, one can notice the characters are additionally similar in their allegorical companions, Death and Sin. The manner in which these characters connect on both external and internal levels suggests a deeper bond that aligns their stories—establishing the fact that Guy's story reflects *Sintram*. By foreshadowing *The Heir's* plot, Yonge represents the restrictions of realism by forming a specific conclusion for her novel. In the Victorian Era, many people had a similar sense of knowledge regarding their future, whether that be who they would marry, or the job that they would acquire. In Yonge's introduction of *Sintram*, she writes about both her and Fouqué's philosophy of man: everyone must defy man's two companions, Death and Sin, through "external temptation and hereditary inclination" to reach salvation (Yonge *Sintram* 1). Both Yonge and Fouqué create a subtle allegory in their texts, identifying every situation with a sense of struggle and external temptation. It is in Sintram's explicit relationship with Death that one can identify a sense of darkness in Fouqué's writing, as well as Sintram's connection to death and its inevitability.

This identifiable solemn relationship with Death applies to Guy in a similar sense as well. In fact, Yonge utilizes Guy's relationship with Sintram by overlapping their similar narrative of ancestral and familial struggles. Whether it is between Sintram and his sinful father, or Guy and his family's known sinful characteristics, both characters remain constantly tied to this dark attribute of

themselves. In this case, readers become familiar with the fact that their beloved protagonist, Guy, has an undeniable, fatal future—quite unlike the long and affluent lives that healthy and wealthy young men like him typically experience. The unusual, atypical relationship Guy has with death leaves readers with a sense of unease: a feeling that they knew little of in their own structure of Victorian society. In acknowledging Guy as a character both young and affluent, Yonge deliberately inserts his death as a reversal of traditionalism—to halt the reader's forward motion through the novel and consider that life *can* prove to disobey society's expectations. However, Yonge did not restrict her use of foreshadowing to the reference of Sintram. The known sacrifice of Jesus Christ in the Bible also surfaces throughout the novel to serve as a source of implication of Guy's death. By doing so, Yonge exposes her readers to the unexpected reversal that forces them to reconsider the structure that realism enforces.

As a follower of the Oxford Movement, Yonge was devoted to the Church, and grew increasingly attached to religion throughout her life both through her writing for the Church as well as her relationship with the leader of the Oxford Movement, John Keble. With such influences, Yonge's writing inevitably reflected her experiences and understandings, particularly her religious beliefs. For example, the Bible preaches the exemplary nature of Christ, his actions, as well as his true and nurturing personality. Yonge then develops Guy's character with similar Christ-like traits. These can be seen in comparison to Christ's concern for those in need enacted through curing leprosy and blindness (Mark 1:40-45) or feeding the hungry (Matthew 15:14-35). Similar to Jesus, Guy too cares for people in need when he asks for the Redclyffe property to build a school, when he is adamant for his niece's education, or when he heals Philip abroad. These philanthropic actions throughout *The Heir* provide an easy path to compare the two, through which Yonge creates a sense of *structured*—rather than *open*—time; she creates potential for Guy's character to pursue a course similar to Jesus. This path leads Guy directly to the fateful outcome of Christ that is ubiquitously known as the sacrifice for man's sins—his death.

Guy's similarities to Christ may not be obvious, but to modern readers, knowledge and understanding of Guy's character is most clearly communicated through his actions. Therefore, it is through Guy's explicit actions that readers can understand this connection to Christ. When Guy finally reaches his last few moments, his sacrificial death comes through in his biblical language: Yonge describes that "the sun was rising, and the light streamed in at the open window, and over the bed; but it was another dawn than ours' that he beheld, as his most beautiful of all smiles beamed over his face, and [Guy] said, 'Glory in the Highest I—peace—good will'—A struggle for breath gave an instant's look of pain ; then he whispered so that she could but just hear— 'The last prayer' (Yonge 414). Finally, Guy dies in an unmistakably similar and epic death to Christ in the Bible, with moments addressing the 'Highest' divine and accenting his peace and good will. Yonge not only creatively foreshadows the idea of Guy's fatal end in a nuanced connection to Jesus, but the fact that the narrative follows Yonge's forecast—considering Guy's well off and likeable character—is still an incredible shock to most readers, a shock that Yonge deliberately crafts to preach allegorical themes.

Matthew Rowlinson remarks in his analysis of Victorian literary theory that authors utilized foreshadowing, among other literary devices, to serve as a "veil of allegory" for their stories (Rowlinson). Critics might argue that Yonge's foreshadowing of Guy's death through various biblical allusions simply follows the framework she and other authors adhered to during the time: organizing a path and then reflecting it faithfully. With the dominance of realism, though, others note that the presence of such literary devices plays no part in the era's novels, and serves only as a coincidental reference. In either case, Yonge develops her novel in a fashion quite unique to others utilizing foreshadowing. While she writes in accordance with realism regarding her developed structure and poise, Yonge exploits her writing's conformity with the genre to comment on the suffocating reality that the period created for many people. *The Heir* followed Guy's character in his life as a wealthy boy, highlighting his genuineness and love in his actions. Yonge spares no effort in foreshadowing his unfortunate death across the entire novel, in order to convey one message: reality *can* prove to be ambiguous and deviant. Guy's death represents this defiance of order in life, one that Yonge yearned for her readers to acknowledge.

Such a concept of freeform individuality was quite original for her readers, accenting the necessity of her hidden statement that people can, in fact, craft their own lives. In spite of Samuel Smiles's motivational book *Self Help*, those living in the nineteenth century had little access to resources—or mere expectations—to climb the ladder of success compared to the modern-day. It was not until one immersed themselves in literary, fictitious worlds that one could imagine their own potential. With strategies like foreshadowing, Yonge purposefully corrupts the status quo in order to combat her readers' sense of rigidity regarding their social, emotional, or physical position in life. In employing such an understated manner of writing, Yonge weaves together the more nuanced, separate stories of conflicted Sintram and generous Jesus Christ into the primary plot of *The Heir*. As a result, Yonge follows her fellow author and role model, Fouqué, in preaching the necessity to resist the constraints of society by taking into consideration the *potential* that every character—every person—possesses.

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