The Foxes of Harrow Short Guide

The Foxes of Harrow by Frank Garvin Yerby

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Characters

The Yerby costume-fiction formula — first introduced in 1946 with The Foxes of Harrow — reappears in virtually all subsequent twenty-six novels.

As far as characterization is concerned, a handsome blonde or red-haired protagonist, usually an outcast by choice or circumstances, always figures as the Yerby hero or heroine. Of course, a villainous antagonist opposes this central figure. The third constant element in terms of characterization consists of the loyal companion, who understands and assists the protagonist.

A bevy of beauties, male or female, depending on the gender of the protagonist, possessing a variety of attributes, are in love with the protagonist. Plebian figures, usually blacks or poor whites, slaves or serfs, oppressed by society, complete the standard cast of characters.

Generally, Yerby wants a mutually cordial relationship between major and minor characters. Although his popularity stems from the manipulation of his plot and the treatment of subject matter of his costume novels in their settings, Yerby has created some very memorable and unique characters in his works. Most of these characters (major and minor) naturally follow his formulaic stipulations. Hugh Gloster sums up the qualities of a typical Yerby hero/heroine: The hero is usually bold, handsome, rakish, honorable, and willful. Then, in contrast is a frigid, respectable wife, or a torrid, anything but respectable, mistress.

In addition to the protagonist, other memorable characters populate Yerby's novels. They are drawn from a wide cross-section of the American ethnic population, thus giving the "meltingpot" concept a real literary meaning.

Most of these characters have fanciful names such as Fancy or Inch with dynamic and vigorous personalities. In the novels, whites generally are depicted as irresponsible, villainous, malicious people, while blacks are portrayed as "idealized victims of a savage White-dominated caste system."

While the blacks are idealized dreamers, strangers and serfs in the white man's world, their role is that of victim rather than partaker. An obvious exception to this is in Judas My Brother (1968), where a black chieftain of a Dahomean Empire is autocratic and malevolent. What Yerby here indicates is that a human being, regardless of color, can be either benevolent or wicked and even blacks in power have no guarantee of saintliness.

The characters in The Foxes of Harrow, The Vixens (1947), Floodtide (1950), A Woman Called Fancy (1951), and McKenzie's Hundred (1985) should be examined in the light of Yerby's own costume formula already defined above.

Yerby may be the "Prince of Pulpsters," interested in sexy romances, but most readers would agree that Stephen Fox is an omnipotent, omniscient figure. Judged by the formulaic pattern for a Yerby protagonist, Stephen Fox fits perfectly into his slot. He is diabolical, wild, deceitful, a ladies' man, a true manipulator of people. In fact, the critic Nathan Rothman describes him as a reincarnation, in one body, of Lucifer, D'Artagnan, Frank Merriwell, and Superman. This is quite a combination indeed. No wonder that Stephen Fox becomes the tycoon of New Orleans society. Such a cunning character can never lose. He had the best of everything — women, slaves, plantations — but in typical Yerby fashion these brought him no happiness.

Even the portrayals of ladies of Cre ole society, the quadroons, and the blacks, who play minor roles in the story, are just as alive as the leading characters. In The Foxes of Harrow, these minor figures are not cardboard stereotypes as some critics believe. Some are vital ladies, gentlemen, mistresses, monarchs of all they survey. Many of the blacks are people with dignity and honor. Usually black characters in American letters (and perhaps in American life) are traditionally condemned to play second fiddle, to do only menial tasks in accordance with their assigned role in life: domestics, laborers, handymen, or even carriers of water and perpetrators of foul deeds; in other words, what Fanon refers to as "the wretched of the earth." In The Foxes of Harrow and many of the other Yerby novels, Yerby tries to change the negative image of the American black.

Whether or not they suffer slavery or lynchings, the black characters' humanity is never sacrificed. Milton Hughes explains Yerby's philosophy in the delineation of black characters in his novels when he says that: "Yerby insists, rightly so, on presenting the Negro as an unusual person of stature and dignity, in some cases, despite the shackles of slavery. He is keen on giving the psychology behind the rejection of Black people."

The portraiture of the character Inch, Etienne's Negro servant, in The Foxes of Harrow is a clear example of Yerby's pro-black stance in characterization.

Inch is outstanding as a character and as a scholar-politician. Being bookoriented from the start, he learned to read by using Stephen Fox's library.

The autodidactic Inch became one of the leading Negro politicians of the Reconstruction Era despite the activities of such hate groups as the KKK. In the delineation of Inch in The Foxes of Harrow Yerby attempts to raise the position of the Negro who had traditionally occupied the lowest layer in the social strata but again he did not create a superman figure, in contrast to the white protagonist, Stephen Fox.

The aristocracy and dubious origin of the gentry stands in sharp contrast to the nobility of birth of several of the Negro slaves. At the same time, Yerby skillfully explodes the myth of the true nobility of Southern aristocracy: The values which created the rise of Stephen Fox from rags to riches are a direct criticism of the legend of Southern gentility. A dishonest gambler and entrepreneur, he marries into the Arcenaux family for position and power.

Thus he begets Etienne to establish a lineage, and in the fashion of a typical Yerby hero, seduces Desiree (a quadroon) and creates a very complex interrelationship between himself and his women, ultimately leading to his downfall.

In sharp contrast to his father, the white racist Etienne Fox appears in a very bad light. While Stephen still subscribes to the Southern ideas of the moral and mental inferiority of the Negro, he perceives the Negroes as human beings, even if they are slaves.

He is kind to them and is comparatively liberal in his political ideas. He is critical of Southern attitudes, including even the practice of slavery. But to sympathize with the slaves is one thing; to go against this cherished institution is another. For this reason, Stephen cannot contravene Southern law and manumit his slaves while he is still alive. He also shows a genuine concern and doubts whether premature freedom for Negroes will do them any good: "Perhaps it would be only the greatest unkindness to free the Negro — he would be helpless without a kindly, guiding hand." In contrast to his son, Stephen Fox is more of an enlightened gentleman and Southern slave owner.

Another set of contrasting characters in The Foxes of Harrow consists of Etienne and of Inch, the slave, who grew up together on Harrow. The contrast between these two is fully explored in The Vixens, a sequel to The Foxes of Harrow. Inch is of noble birth, being the son of La Belle Sauvage, an African princess sold into slavery. Her fighting spirit is inherited by her son, Inch, who also inherits his grandparents' love of freedom. Inch creates for himself the opportunity to study law at the University of Paris (perhaps the Sorbonne?) and his letters home to Harrow are far superior to those of Etienne, who is also away from Harrow, in France. Upon his return from Paris, Inch, having seen the benefits of personal freedom, yearns greatly to set himself free. He bitterly complains to Caleen that he cannot "belong to Etienne like his horse." He wants his freedom as an individual human being and to be responsible for his own destiny. Upon Caleen's death due to the yellow fever plague, Inch escapes to Boston. There he meets Frederick Douglass, Wendell Phillips, Theodore Parker, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Unfortunately, he is recaptured and taken back South as Etienne's slave. At the end of the Civil War, Inch becomes a very important politician and the Police Commissioner, assuming the name Cyrus M. Inchcliff. Yerby has reversed traditional roles, with subordinates becoming masters. True aristocracy thus reasserts itself. Even in death Etienne and Inch are contrasted — Inch dies as a true hero while Etienne dies ignominiously as president of one of the hated white supremacy groups.

The downfall of the protagonist and the glorification of the subordinate character have been described amongst scenes of lust and passion, scandal, and decadence. Immorality has helped to seal the fate of the Foxes. While Stephen Fox was flagrantly violating all laws of Southern ethics, and while Etienne even rapes Desiree, his father's former mistress, Cecilia Fox, Etienne's wife, conducts an affair at the hospital with her physician, Dr. Shane. Such a mixture of romance and serious historical drama make Yerby's readers yearn for more such soap opera-like episodes, and ensure continuing popular success.

There are not many woman protagonists in the novels. Most prominent are Fancy in A Woman Called Fancy and Rose Ann McKenzie, the first-class spy in McKenzie's Hundred. They both conform to the typical Yerby protagonist's formula.

Social Concerns/Themes

The Foxes of Harrow, like most of Yerby's novels, concerns itself with specific Southern social issues. Most prominent among these is the importance of social position, which, because of the influence of the aristocratic mentality, must be attained by the protagonist, regardless of personal cost, by fair means or foul. This particular aspect of Southern life takes its roots from the background of the Southern world, in which gentlemen's duels, gallant deeds and lovely ladies tend to predominate.

In addition, the decay of Southern social manorial patterns is strongly delineated. In this respect, Yerby is repudiating the notion of the Southern aristocracy, its so-called heroism, its ancestry, chivalry and its sterling character. Stephen Fox, the protagonist of The Foxes of Harrow personifies the hollow, unsavory character of the aristocrat of the South.

The Foxes of Harrow historically covers the years 1825 to 1865. The rakish Stephen Fox is a twenty-one-year-old illegitimate Irish immigrant to Philadelphia who treads the road from rags to riches and back to rags again when Harrow, his Southern plantation, falls on hard times. Naked ambition prompts him at the age of twenty-five to go South where he is befriended by Andre Le Blanc, a French Creole, and by other aristocrats. Fox's ambition is to join the ranks of the local aristocracy, thereby realizing his version of the American Dream. As an outsider, Fox holds no respect for Creole culture.

He disapproves of the Creole-black relationships, except in the context of slavery, which he fully exploits to make his fortune. Thus the confidence man/swindler begins his imperial designs. Through connivance and chicanery he marries Odalie Arceneaux, daughter of a Creole aristocrat and acquires two huge plantations replete with slaves. His ill-begotten gains give him entrance to the New Orleans aristocracy. At the peak of his fortune, he has become one of the wealthiest of the Southern plantation owners. However, his marriage proves disastrous and he must seek solace in the arms of Desiree, a New Orleans quadroon. Personal tragedy and unhappiness mar Fox's life and despite his huge wealth, happiness eludes him. His social acceptance has cost him dearly. Thus Yerby debunks the myth of the superiority of the Southern aristocracy.

Techniques

The Yerby technique follows the very accepted conventional tradition used by the most popular writers in American letters. Yerby's popularity can partially be explained by his manipulation of subject matter in which he explores the themes of everyday life seen from an historical and contemporary perspective. More importantly, he dwells on the sexual fantasies of most ordinary people and tries to captivate the essence of the concrete daily course of love with its romance and taboos.

Taking into consideration his avowed aim as a novelist in teaching and entertaining, Yerby succeeds in doing this by using parody and melodrama, satire and irony to bring forth his message.

In this way, Yerby illustrates the follies of humankind, to show man as a romantic being and to debunk social and spiritual institutions, and to condemn war. Yerby uses the picaresque or episodic tradition, as represented in Tom Jones (Fielding, 1749), Moll Flanders (Defoe, 1722), and Joseph Andrews (Fielding, 1742), which affords him the opportunity to rapidly shift both scenes and themes from one place to the other and from one historical epoch to another.

The portrayal of the picaro is also part of Yerby's technique, a mode specifically learned from the European model. The portrayal of the Yerby protagonist also follows a specific pattern and all the protagonists throughout the novels, from The Foxes of Harrow to McKenzie's Hundred, follow this pattern consistently. Yerby himself has said he wishes to undertake the writing of serious novels on serious themes. Whether this new trend will depart from the magic Yerby formula is still to be seen.

The protagonist is the chief link in the series of adventures in the plot, and part of the plot includes the corruption of a young person by a deceitful world in either a contemporary everyday setting or in an historical milieu. Part of the plot often touches on accepted values which the characters either accept or reject conditionally.

The ingredients of the popular Yerby hero are always connected with an individual of low birth and disreputable background, a protagonist who attempts to eke out a respectable living for himself through all sorts of dubious means: begging, deception or petty theft. The protagonists most often have suspicious views concerning romance, love and marriage; more specifically, they see love and marriage as sorts of snares, but use them as a ladder to climb to higher social standing.

Another technique Yerby employs is the idea of the antihero, a readily identifiable individual, usually a character with no social standing let loose upon respectable society. By fair or foul means, the individual wins a place for himself, influences events and manipulates people. This particular notion runs through all Yerby's novels, from the first to the latest. Interestingly, the concept of the hero in literature changes as the centuries go by. In Greek and Roman literature, the heroes were god men; in medieval

times men of God, in the Renaissance universal men, in the nineteenth-century gentlemen and in the twentieth century the hero has been reduced to the antihero.

Stephen Fox embodies all the characteristics of the modern antihero.

One interesting technique that Yerby employs in most of his novels is that of authorial commentary, or intrusions.

Often, where Yerby has very strong views on a particular point, he projects his loud thinking into the text and addresses the reader directly. He does this in the novels dealing with the South where he tries to debunk the cultural barrenness, widespread illiteracy, hollow aristocratic values, political corruption, slavery, and racism.

This love of commentary often leads to flamboyant rhetoric and bombastic style. The use of foreign words and phrases, italicized and capitalized letters abounds in Yerby's novels. This adds to the exotic flavor of the text.

Adaptations

Yerby's novels have been adapted for the screen with great popular success. The Foxes of Harrow, 1947 Fox Studios; The Golden Hawk, 1952 Columbia Pictures. Pride's Castle was adapted as a television presentation.

Literary Precedents

Yerby's The Foxes of Harrow is usually compared with Margaret Mitchell's best seller, Gone with the Wind (1936).

Both are historical Southern novels, using the Civil War as the background, and both have similar characterization and events. In terms of technique, both employ a touch of satire. Gone with the Wind has a Southern belle, Scarlett O'Hara, as protagonist, who. struggles to maintain the ancestral home against overwhelming odds after the defeat of the South. Of course, Yerby's protagonist in The Foxes of Harrow is an Irish immigrant of dubious character, obviously not a true aristocrat. Like Stephen Fox, Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler must struggle to overcome adversity in order to be accepted amongst aristocratic society. Both Fox and Butler are dishonest, alienated from society, although Fox's alienation stems from his plebian origins and Rhett Butler has been disinherited by his family in Charleston. But Rhett Butler rejects the aristocratic privileges which Stephen Fox craves. Both characters, however, are critical of Southern values and mores, and both tend to hold very unpopular political views. Although Rhett Butler reluctantly fights in the Civil War, Stephen Fox is against the secession of the South. At the end of the war, Butler leaves the South, while Stephen realizes that the old Southern aristocratic values and way of life are forever doomed.

Tyler Meredith, the protagonist of Yerby's Captain Rebel (1956), can also be compared with the figure of Rhett Butler. Both attended military academies, with Butler being booted out of West Point, and both accumulated their wealth as illegal blockade-runners.

Like Stephen Fox, Meredith becomes a liberal after the war and refuses to join a racist organization called the New Orleans' White Man's Protective Association. Instead, filled with remorse, he builds a school for black children in honor of a Negro slave, Fred Peters, whom he had injured years before.

Related Titles

The major themes and social concerns throughout Yerby's writing, from the early short stories to McKenzie's Hundred, deal with issues of romance and the warfare of the sexes, the Civil War and Reconstruction, racism, inferiority, slavery, religion (evil, man's relationship with God, man against himself), poor whites, and the decaying Southern aristocracy. Other themes include life in ancient Greece, free will versus fate, societal alienation, illegitimacy, and the problems of human beings irrespective of race, color or religion.

Racism and slave trade are recurring themes. Since The Foxes of Harrow is set in the era of the Civil War, Yerby mentions especially the massacre of Negroes at Fort Pillow, while further debunking the image of the fearless, heroic, Confederate fighter. However, it is the novel Floodtide that devoted itself to a full examination of this theme.

While in The Vixens, Yerby refers to the racist activities of the various hate groups of New Orleans, the KKK, the Knights of the White Camellia (a particularly cruel and powerful organization), who surface to perpetrate atrocities against the minority groups, in Floodtide, he deals concretely with the source of the slave trade in Africa and its attendant cruelties. A further ironic note in Floodtide concerns two black slaves arguing about their respective costs and the importance of their masters, until Brutus, another Negro, points out the folly of their attitude.

The protagonist of Floodtide, Guy Falks, is a notorious slave trader residing in Africa. He despises even the local chief and refuses to shake his hand because "in Mississippi, Sir, we don't shake hands with niggers." In the novel Benton's Row (1954), Yerby describes the pogrom against the Negro soldiers after the Civil War.

Other themes and social concerns include infidelity and Caribbean piracy in The Golden Hawk (1948) and in Pride's Castle (1949), railroad and labor problems in New York in the 1890s, Cuban revolution, pre-Civil War Georgia, secession politics, political corruption, typical Yerby romance and intrigue (complete with duels, illicit love and brutal assaults), and miscegenation (as in A Woman Called Fancy). Lynching concludes the list of Yerby themes. In The Serpent and the Staff (1958), a white mob attempts to lynch the black man Mose Johnson, when he performs a tracheotomy on a white child stricken with diphtheria. Unused to such medical procedures, the whites misunderstand Johnson's motives. Subsequently, black killings in the area proliferate.

Where all these related themes seem to meet is in the portrayal of Stephen Fox (in Foxes of Harrow) and Tom Benton (in Benton's Row, 1954). Benton's Row, set in nineteenth-century Louisiana, depicts the adventures of Tom Benton, who escapes a Texas posse. In typical Yerby fashion, the rakish Benton seduces and dispossesses the minister's wife, driving her husband to suicide.

He makes religion his business, fakes confession in public at the Protracted Meeting for the Salvation of Sinners, and is eventually accepted into respectable society through an act of mercy.

Like Stephen Fox, he becomes very wealthy, a plantation owner, gets away with murder, and conducts numerous illicit affairs. At a ripe old age, he dies, still amassing illegal wealth. His son, Wade Benton, an even more thorough rogue, succeeds him. Wade becomes the local leader of the Knights of the White Camellias. Thus Yerby depicts another opportunist, a ruthless, frivolous, immoral, dishonorable antihero, like Stephen Fox in The Foxes of Harrow.

Both men sire renegade, racist sons and both men end up lamenting their lot as alienated, unhappy outcasts.

Judas My Brother: The Story of the Thirteenth Disciple (1968) is one of the most significant works in the Yerby canon. It raises several themes and social issues connected with a very touchy subject, affecting man as a religious being, man as homo sapiens. It concerns the issue of religion in general and the doctrine of Christianity in particular. The theme here expounded is the origins of Christianity and Christian myths. According to one critic, these are the most important Yerby themes. In some ways, the novel also charts the course of Christianity and can then be seen as a documentary history of the religion. Scaap, touching on the controversial theme of the novel, believes that Yerby wrote Judas My Brother "in a rage; it is an attack upon blind faith, in some ways an indictment of Jesus, in some ways a justification of Judas."

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