

**“From Slavery to Brotherhood?: Power, Guilt, and Forgiveness in
Sutcliff's *Blood Feud*”**

by

Vivian Yenika-Agbaw

The Pennsylvania State University, University Park

I have argued elsewhere that while reading for pleasure is a worthy goal, postcolonial readings of texts excite me more (Yenika-Agbaw). First, this lens forces me to interrogate texts in a conscious manner, sifting through the layered textual features to arrive at a variety of meanings. Next, it provides me with a frame through which I can wrestle with narrative strategies authors use to manipulate power dynamics between and/or among characters in different fictional situations/settings, and to further understand how these play out through the sequencing of events that propel the plot forward. My interactions with Rosemary Sutcliff's *Blood Feud* (1976), one of her lesser-known novels, follow this interpretive pattern. I would say that I was quite intrigued with the story and its outcome, but one question lingers on: *Do friendship and slavery go together, and if so, what kind of power dynamics would exist between two friends, one of whom is a former slave master and the other his newly liberated slave?* This is the thrust of my presentation. My aim however is not to focus on the historical accuracy of the events depicted in this novel compared to those that occurred during the tenth century, the period when Sutcliff sets her story. I focus more on the moral implications insinuated by her constructions of the kind of cordial relationships that may have existed between these two unlikely fictional characters, and wonder out loud again, if Jestyn, the

protagonist and former slave ever has equal power in this relationship the way Sutcliff's narrative insinuates. It depends is my conclusion.

To briefly summarize the plot, *Blood Feud* is a story about a young man, Jestyn, an orphan and a cattle herder who is captured and sold into slavery to a Northman and Viking Breed. After Jestyn saves Thormod's life, they become friends and eventually blood brothers sworn to protect each other and to avenge the death of Thormod's father. This becomes Thormod's obsession as they travel the world together, fighting side by side in different wars against "common" enemies. However, Jestyn has misgivings about the endless feud that broils between Thormod, his former slave master and new blood brother, and Thormod's childhood friends who had killed Thormod's father in retaliation for the accidental death of their own father at the hands of this older man. The plot is even more engaging because of how the systems of power are constructed in the novel.

The story begins with Jestyn and ends with him giving readers the impression that he does have control over his fate. He is the narrator, so we see and hear (about) the events supposedly from his vantage point and this can be tricky. The narrative opens with Jestyn now happily married and living in Constantinople with his middle class bride, Alexia who has fallen on hard times. Readers encounter him reflecting on his life, contemplating what was real and unreal about all that he has experienced over the years. When he looks through the glass windowpanes he notices two images, one of reality and one of a distorted reality (1). He remarks:

In the window glass, too, I can see myself, as though I looked at another man sitting at the table with its litter of books and specimens and writing materials . . .

A big man, I suppose, lean and rangy and scarred as an old hound, with a mane of hair brindled grey and yellow. Jestyn the Englishman, so most men call me, though indeed I am but half Saxon and half of an older breed (1).

Sutcliff engages readers in this conversation of what is real/unreal, and through the idea of how fact and fiction can blend together to shape one's reality, in this case Jestyn's. Thus, while perceived as an Englishman and by default a "big man," he is acutely aware of his otherness as a "half and half," a reality that helps him to see things—he would like to believe—from multiple perspectives and not simply as an "Englishman" whom he does not really know how to be. Sutcliff's *Blood Feud* explores this otherness by consistently making Jestyn the Englishman a character of higher moral standing than the Viking Breed he socializes with, but at the same time subjecting his other half to physical degradation and consequently rendering him powerless throughout. He is perceived as powerful by his affiliation to the Saxons from his mother's side, whereas in reality he has little control over his fate and surroundings. He is redeemed only when he finally finds unconditional love from Alexia, a woman who once owned slaves herself. In her, Jestyn notices a different kind of reality and notions of freedom, for while she was a slave owner, unlike Thormod she maintained a benevolent attitude toward her slaves to whom she eventually grants total freedom unlike. It is in her company that he is able to appreciate his otherness and how it has worked for and against him at different points in his life. Therefore, while throughout his journey he has experienced pain because of who he is, he has also encountered people who make him realize there is more to life than violence and conquest; and that a place is mostly home primarily because of the people with whom one shares this space. Jestyn reflects in the opening chapter:

But I have learned, as Alexia, born and bred under these skies, has not had to learn, that Home is not Place but People. Kinships, the ties that we make as we go along. My ties are with her, here in this tall crumbling house in the Street of the Golden Mulberry Tree, in a shallow scooped-out grave in the Thracian hills, among the poor folk in the hospital where much of my work is done. I have no ties, no kinships in the land where I was a boy. I do remember, but without any longing to go back over the road (2).

The systems of power as evident in this novel begin with class and ethnicity and how these elements magnify otherness in society. Jestyn is an Englishman. Typically, given the imperialistic discourse of power, one would expect him to be “on top.” Though Sutcliff seems to push this from a moral stance in constructing a character that looks the other way to all the injustices that life throws in his direction, it is rare that we actually see him in a position of power. Not at his childhood home, not in the fields where he grazes the cows, nor during his numerous travels across Europe with Thormod do readers see this. Rather, he is acted upon by everyone (Paul).

We notice this first when he is rejected by a stepfather who would have liked to father his own biological son, next when he is enslaved by Thormod, and finally when he is forced into blood brotherhood by his former owner. In *Reading Otherways*, Lissa Paul draws attention to how power relationships play out in stories. She suggests that readers pay attention to how authors position characters in relation to one another in texts. In doing so, they would notice characters that are always “on top” and those that are not (16). Within this basic narrative strategy according to Paul are embedded ideologies of

power with those constructed “on top” typically wielding it. Such characters are usually positioned as members of a dominant class, race/ethnicity, and/or gender.

In *Blood Feud*, Sutcliff manipulates this discourse of power in complicated ways starting with her construction of Jestyn as an Englishman. Her protagonist is “under” for most of the novel partly because of his lowly status as a cattle herder and a former slave. But he is “on top” at a different level as the moral conscience of a supposedly barbaric society whose practice she seems to not condone. In this way, she constructs Thormod as a representative of that world, as visibly “on top” throughout. While he seems to have undeniable power he remains morally and emotionally “under” and dies without realizing the futility of his controlling and obsessive actions. He has the power to enslave and free Jestyn; but even while granting freedom to the young man, Thormod defines the terms of their friendship and blood brotherhood without a care as to how Jestyn feels. Thormod knows Jestyn to an extent, but he knows him in a way that “appropriates” (McGillis 225). He knows Jestyn would like to gain his freedom, so he gives it to him but ultimately entraps him by claiming him as a blood brother. This way Jestyn ceases to pose any threat to his well-being. Thus, their relationship though one of supposedly mutual respect remains one of power and of the imposition of one’s will over the other. Thormod’s problem becomes Jestyn’s, whereas there is never a situation when Thormod has to make the same level of sacrifice for Jestyn.

Jestyn is also silenced by extreme gratitude to his former slave master for granting him his physical freedom (though conditional), and consequently, he willingly accepts Thormod’s dominance. In so doing, he loses his voice in this brotherhood relationship. His loyalty is so deep that when he fails to avenge the deaths of Thormod and of

Thormod's father he is filled with remorse. He is so indebted to Thormod that he is unable to abandon him the way Alexia's slave does once granted his freedom. Sutcliff's narrative employs a double consciousness strategy, for while Jestyn is physically free he remains emotionally enslaved by Thormod and bound by the blood oath of brotherhood. Jestyn regains his freedom "totally" only after Thormod's death.

By not being able to carry through the oath of the blood feud because he can finally admit that it is senseless killing, he liberates himself from the "barbaric" practice that was typical of the period. He emerges as a morally superior Englishman thereafter and can now live a dignified life with a wife who loves him unconditionally. Unlike Thormod, who is blinded by power throughout the novel and lacks the capacity to forgive easily, Jestyn does not think much about forgiving those who have wronged him. As a matter of fact, he is able to do so because of his otherness, forgiving first his stepfather for mistreating him, Thormod for enslaving him, and finally Anders for killing his blood father. In this respect, Sutcliff constructs him as having more moral power than those who have wielded physical power over him. This ability to show compassion even to those who have wronged him in one way or the other surprises Anders, a man who has come to expect revenge from Jestyn as per the blood oath.

Sutcliff tells the story of an "other" who is "enslaved" and perhaps in so doing she privileges the universal themes of friendship, loyalty, and forgiveness, while downplaying the slave-master relationship. Her fictional society is socially stratified with characters understanding their place within the social stratum. In this society, to be acknowledged as someone's equal – in this case the equal of a former slave master – does not necessarily mean one has equal power. McGillis adds that

Knowing the elusiveness of that which we desire does not keep us from accepting substitutes for what we desire. So we desire an end to the colonial even as we perpetuate situations of dependence and inferiority. Even as we speak of postcoloniality, we initiate a knowingness that sets in process some renewal of the colonial situation (224).

In constructing Jestyn as a slave who easily forgives Thormod and is willing to make sacrifices for this man who had owned him, Sutcliff inadvertently communicates that while slavery is bad, there is no doubt that a former slave can become a dear friend to his master in war and peaceful times. Thus, she ignores the power dynamics evident in this kind of relationship—friendship borne out of slavery—and the uneasiness brought about by the haunting reality of this oppressive past.

According to John Stephens systems of power are interwoven in authors' writings, mainly in the way they use language to construct their characters, develop plot, themes, and settings. Embedded in this usage are implicit ideologies that shape the meanings authors communicate to their implied readers (Hollindale, Nodelman and Reimer, Stephens). Sutcliff's *Blood Feud* is no different. These systems of power are evident in her narrative patterns. Her characters while they appear simple on some level, as Thormod and Anders whose actions are driven and informed by violence and revenge typical of the tenth century period Sutcliff attempts to reconstruct, can be complicated, as Jestyn who starts off not being able to discern reality or perceived reality from distorted reality or illusion. He is humble and quietly accepts his lowly place in the scheme of things, but he observes his surrounding world closely and is able to see the futility in lots of things. Constructed throughout as voiceless, Sutcliff still allows him to tell the story,

only now from a vantage point as an adult who is filled with gratitude, having married a woman of breeding. He can now remember the sordid events/details of his past life for what they were/are and is appreciative of how they have informed his consciousness and contributed to creating the man and husband he is.

But memory can be tricky and this is reflected in the narrative voice, a clever technique Sutcliff employs to further complicate one's readings of the power dynamics among characters in this novel. In this way, there are moments when Jestyn comes across more as an unreliable narrator, for he is often unsure about what he sees/hears and/or of the interpretations of the events he witnesses. Sutcliff takes us from Jestyn's present home where he is now stable and has the luxury to reflect on his life, to the other homes he had passed through in his formative years as a child and an adolescent. From her narrative pattern one can infer that though he is considered and often referred to as an Englishman, his displacement from his mother's Anglo Saxon cultural roots and from the childhood home he vaguely remembers living in with his father, "a wandering smith out of the south-western horn of Britain, where the folk claim no kinship with the Saxon kind, but are of the older breed" (2), began a long time ago. It is not clear if the loss of his Anglo Saxon cultural ties very early in the novel in his journey to self-discovery might have contributed greatly to his humility as a character, or whether this is humility is more a result of his evolving understanding of the otherness his father, an "older breed," represents. The "Barbarians" owned this supposed Englishman for a long time and immersed him in their culture of violence, but he remains true to his humanity and once the opportunity presents itself he immediately rejects this "barbaric" culture, and embraces a "civilized" alternative.

Ironically, while I am compelled to read him as a character who is consistently “under” as per Lissa Paul’s framework, Sutcliff attempts to convince me as a reader to believe that he remains a morally better person than the “Barbarians” he encounters throughout his physical, psychological, and emotional journeys in the novel. In this way, she seems to insist that he is “on top,” for after all isn’t he an Englishman?

Works Cited

- Hollindale, Peter. “Ideology and the Children’s Book.” *Literature for Children: Contemporary Criticism*. Ed. Peter Hunt. London and New York: Routledge, 1992. 19-40.
- Nodelman, Perry and Marvis Reimer. *The Pleasures of Children’s Literature*. 3rd. ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2003.
- Paul, Lissa. *Reading Otherways*. Portland, Oregon: Calendar Islands, 1998.
- McGillis, Roderick. “ ‘And the Celt Knew the Indian’: Knowingness, Postcolonialism, Children’s Literature.” *Voices of the Other: Children’s Literature and the Postcolonial Context*. Ed. Roderick McGillis. New York: Garland, 2000. 223-35.
- Stephens, John. *Language and Ideology in Children’s Fiction*. London: Longman, 1992.
- Sutcliff, Rosemary. *Blood Feud*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976.
- Yenika-Agbaw, Vivian. “Taking Children’s Literature Seriously: Reading for Pleasure and Social Change.” *Language Arts*. 74.6 (1997): 446-453.