

# The Moral Dilemmas of the Hero Thiodolf in William Morris's *The House of Wolfings*

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## Introduction

William Morris (1834-96)'s *The House of the Wolfings* (1888) is a story about the life of the Gothic tribes and their first meeting with the Romans in war. Even though Morris's literary books written in his later years have been referenced as forerunners of modern fantasy, little attention has been paid to them. Morris's stories, set in remote places and distant past, are called romances rather than novels, distinguishing them from the writing of his literary contemporaries. His romance *The House of the Wolfings* tells of Thiodolf, an alien warrior of the House of Wolfings, who leads a war against the Romans. His loyalties are divided between his divine lover and the House.

This essay explores *The House of the Wolfings* in terms of the style, language use, and narrative of Morris's romances in order to analyze the effects of his selecting romances for his creation of the tale of the past, and the effective use of the traditional style of romances made in the portrayal of the hero's life-and-death dilemmas between his loyalty to the kindred and desire for personal survival will be examined.

## I Morris's Selection of the Romance Style and its Effects

### I 1. Effective Description of the Hall-Sun, the Holy Lamp of Wolfing Hall and the Maiden

To depict the ancient community, Morris insists on using the genre and style of literary romances that originated in medieval times. The life of the folk is inseparable from the "Roof of Wolfings," a great hall "framed of the goodliest trees of the wild-wood" (5; ch. 1) that "their forefathers built" (29-30; ch. 4). At the heart of that great hall as well as the romance itself lies the Hall-Sun, the holy lamp kept burning above the dais. In the formulaic narrative style of romance, the portrayal of the holy lamp in Morris's story is elaborate and exquisite, for the Hall-Sun is the signifying object of the story. The name of the lamp is given to the maiden that is its caretaker. Like the holy lamp plays an important role in integrating the folk of the Wolfings, Hall-Sun, the daughter of Thiodolf and his divine lover Wood-Sun, plays a prophetic role and leads the folk in time of danger.

### I 2. The Effect of a Geographical Style

Morris adheres to the traditional style of romance, a genre of stories set in the distant past dealing with chivalry and heroes. As C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) points out in his 1969 essay "William Morris," this style was criticized as antiquated and his language labelled as artificial (219-20). Nevertheless, Lewis praises its simplicity and contends that Morris's stories "have geography"; that is, Morris gives a reader the "lie of the land" (221):

So wended the Markmen between wood and stream on either side of Mirkwood-water, till now at last the night grew deep and the moons set, and it was hard on midnight, and they had kindled many torches to light them on either side of the water. (*The House of the Wolfings* 49; ch. 20)

This style is often used in romances and fairy-tales to evoke a vivid image with striking contrasts. In his introduction to Morris's *The Wood beyond the World* (1894), Tom Shippey observes that the archaic style is there to explicitly evoke a particular age; that is, the tales are "sharpened by what Tolkien called 'the elvish hone of antiquity' and that Morris aimed at the effects of romance and fairy-tale narratives because he wanted to "reproduce for others the sensations which saga (ones like the Norse *Eddas*) and romance had aroused in him including "cultural solidity" (x-xi).

## II The Style of Romance that Presents the Ideal Ancient Community

### II 1. The Ancient Germanic *Gens* as a Living Model of the Future

Concerning Morris's literary work and society, John Goode argues that Morris conceives the ancient community of the Germanic *gens* as a living model for the future (263). The style of romance is used to present the social structure of this ancient society as an alternative to the ideal of the Roman notion of city. According to Goode, Lewis H. Morgan, in his book *Ancient Society* (1877), suggests that the world of the Germanic tribes could represent the model for the future that Morris as a socialist would support (Goode 263-64; Morgan 552). Goode contends that Morgan's judgment offers a precise rationale of Morris's Romances, stating that the individual consciousness has to be seen in the context of a situation in which it has mastery over the society which mediates its relationship with others, and that only such a mind can be a determinant in direct forms of action (264). In *The House of the Wolfings*, the process of achieving individuality is seen as realizable within the social structure (Goode 265). The tale is devoted to establishing a social world in which freedom means integration; the people are united with the 'objective' conditions of their existence (Goode 265).

### II 2. The Style that Differentiates the Folk of the Goths from Invading Romans

According to the Goode essay, in *The House of the Wolfings*, the salient feature of the hero's "individual consciousness of his social existence" is closely "linked with other men in the struggle against nature and hostile forces" (262). Thiodolf, on the eve of leading the folk in the battle against the Romans, goes into the woods to meditate, being quite content with his life in the dale and finds no deviation in his individual from the community he belongs to (105; ch. 17). In the chapter 29, the different attitudes towards the battle of the Goths and the Romans

are described. Goode observes that for the Goths, the battle is a campaign for the community's integrity as their own individual being (263). On the contrary, the descriptions of the Romans are very different from the Wolfings. The severest criticism of them is that they have "forgotten kindred, and have none, nor do they heed whom they wed, and great is the confusion amongst them" (45; ch. 6). In the style of romance, Morris makes a sharp contrast between the attitudes of Goths and the Romans to represent the differences between their social systems that illuminate the difference in nature in each. The description of the Romans is rendered in prose narrative and never conducted in a poetic conversational style. When the Goth warriors or war-dukes address their folk, however, their poetic style with its rhyming effect seems fit to present their remarks. Morris foregrounds a sense of integrity in the community of the Wolfings by aligning it with the style of romance.

### **III The Romance Hero Thiodolf's Moral Dilemma**

#### **III 1. Thiodolf's Love for his Kindred and for his Divine Lover Wood-Sun**

As his love for Wood-Sun causes conflicts within his heart, Thiodolf himself is divided between loyalty to his kindred and his desire for life. More significantly, the dwarf-wrought Hauberk armour plays an important role in the tale as "a symbol of personal relationships which isolate the self from the community" (Goode 266). Even though he realizes that the hauberk "is for the ransom of a man and the ruin of a folk" (111; ch. 17), Thiodolf does wear it in battle against the Romans, and brings the disaster to him and the kindred. The warrior met Wood-Sun in the woods, that is, outside the community, relaxing his integration into his society. It seems that Thiodolf achieves greater selfhood in the woods, but it turns out that this is reversed as he recognizes that for his communal 'self' could be lost if he lives for his divine lover. The hero's encounter with Wood-Sun results in isolating him from his kindred and community, with whom he identifies himself. Thus his encounter with the divine being inevitably estranges him from his community and, in the end, from the "condition of his existence" (Goode 268).

#### **III 2. Thiodolf's Daughter Hall-Sun and Hope for the Future of the Community**

It is Thiodolf's daughter Hall-Sun who realizes something is wrong with her father and takes him by the hand to go to the wood-lawn to see Wood-Sun (163; ch. 26). Hall-Sun is determined to arrange a family reunion to persuade her mother to let her father die for his kindred (165; ch. 26). Hall-Sun's poetic words would sound resolute and bitter to Wood-Sun, but they give hope for the future to the kindred of the Wolfings. Thiodolf finally regains his identity as a kinsman in his society (170; ch. 26). As Goode points out, in her dramatic role, Hall-Sun is aware of an integration that extends beyond the *gen* as it is (269). It is Hall-Sun who has the greatest potential to create a bright future for the folk of the Wolfings.

### **Conclusion**

This essay explored William Morris's romance *The House of the Wolfings* in terms of the style, language use, and narrative of romances, in order to clarify the effects of his uses of romances creating the tale of the past.

Morris persisted in the use of the rather formulaic style of romances when he tried to depict the ancient community. His aim was to utilize the effects of marked contrasts. At the heart of the tale is situated the holy artifact of the Hall-Sun. The sustained detail of the portrayal of the holy lamp marks the Hall-Sun as the central signifying object in the story. Furthermore, the holy lamp which plays an important role in integrating the folk of the Wolfings in worship shares its name with Thiodolf's daughter. Resonating with the same exquisite detail, Hall-Sun's speeches are presented in rhymed verses and her words of wisdom have the effect of enhancing the integration of the community as well as echoing the divinity that is innate with her birth.

Morris foregrounds a sense of integrity in the community of the Wolfings by aligning it with the style of romance. The description of the ideal ancient community of Germanic *gens* is also stylistically linked to romance. Moreover, the moral dilemma of the hero conflicted between his love for his kindred and his lover is represented as conversational dialogue in rhymes. It is the warrior's longing for Wood-Sun that isolates him from the community. In an integrated society individual existence cannot be conceived as separate from the kindred. Recognizing this, Hall-Sun takes her father to arrange the family reunion to persuade her mother to let her father die for his kindred and restore the community's cohesion. The use of mixed style of prose and verse in the fixed form of the romance is thus formally apt to present Morris's model of an integrated society.

### **Works Cited**

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