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Kate Seredy: A Person Worth Knowing

Life in Hungary

Who is this woman who has shared her heart with us in stories, stories of faith and courage, stories alive with light and beauty, graced with her own wonderful illustrations? Kate Seredy is a daughter of Hungary, a transplanted foster-child to America. Her roots are part of the land. She stands unafraid, facing the time to come when all men shall truly love each other and peace and contentment shall reign over all.

She begins long ago, in Budapest, just before the turn of this century, growing up there during the turbulent years before World War I. As with any person, she is the sum of her experiences, the product of her culture, her environment, and her tradition; and in these she has a very rich inheritance, indeed.

Hungary, then, was like an island in Europe, a land with a natural organic unity. Her history was long and troubled, her language unrelated to those of her neighbors, her social structure still greatly stratified, just emerging from medieval feudalism. The aristocracy and gentry were strongly prejudiced against industry and banking. They thought of themselves as the people of the land, and passionately wanted to remain that. As the leading groups in society, they were, until the war, essentially conservative, and the intellectuals who centered in rapidly growing Budapest, were ineffective. The story of the peasants was one of misery, social injustice, and emigration.[1, 2] Yet, despite the generally oppressive conditions, the Magyar peasant was proud, deeply religious, and intensely dedicated to freedom.[3, 4]

Kate Seredy's father was a well-known teacher. He was not just an ordinary teacher, but one of those especially gifted human beings whose contact with young people seems to deepen their awareness and bring each one a clearer picture of their worth and goal in life.[5] She remembers their

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[1] Emil Lengyel, *1,000 Years of Hungary*. New York: John Day Company, 1958, pp. 1-22, 164-186.

[2] Arthur J. May, *The Hapsburg Monarchy 1867-1914*. Harvard University Press, 1951, pp. 343-386, 439-449.

[3] Frances H. E. Palmer, *Austro-Hungarian Life in Town and Country*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1903, pp. 45-65.

[4] Joseph Domjan, *Hungarian Heroes and Legends*. Princeton, New Jersey: D. Van Nostrand, 1963.

[5] Kate Seredy, "'The White Stag,' An Immortal Legend," *Publishers Weekly*, 133 (June 18, 1938) 2355-2356.

simple home in Budapest as filled with books, music, and conversation, all of it the best, because there was no room for things that were not beautiful. Listening to the adult conversation, she absorbed a deep respect for good workmanship and for words.[6] To her father she pays homage as the source of her ideals, not just hers alone, but those of generations of others who grew up under his influence.

As a nine year old, a "pale skinny city child and being an only child, very much spoiled," she accompanied her father and an entourage of famous artists and scientists to the countryside where they were to study peasant art and life.[7] Although she paid as little attention to the object of the trip as she could, she came home full of deep unforgettable impressions.

> My mind was like a sensitive moving picture film, recording an incredible number of pictures . . . my impressions were meaningless . . . until passing years and new, conscious observations developed them . . .[8]

The Young Artist

She started to draw for children as soon as she was old enough to go to school and after high school went to The Academy of Art in Budapest. In the summer vacations she studied art in Italy, France, and Germany.[9] During this time she worked to learn to draw, to conquer the discipline of pure line and form, to know every bone and muscle in the human body, becoming an artist in whose drawings fresh beauty could be seen and old truths reborn. World War I then came crashing down.

For two years during the war she was a nurse in front-line hospitals until she herself became ill and spent months recovering her mind and spirit. These are years she chooses to forget because of her revulsion toward violence. Yet, they too taught her valuable lessons.

> . . . that it doesn't matter how tired you are in mind and body; as long as there is a job to be done, the job comes first. It has got to be done.[10]

When the war was over, she illustrated two children's books. She suspects they were acclaimed because she was her father's daughter, and the glory quite went to her head.

In 1922, Hungary was in political turmoil and economic crisis, not yet recovered from war and internal revolution. Miss Seredy, along with many other Hungarians, decided to come to America. Once in New York, she says that it took her only two weeks to see what "real" artists were doing and to realize how much she had to learn.[11] Her determination to succeed and her father's teachings gave her strength in the difficult times ahead. Alone in a new country, unable to speak the language, she supported herself with any kind of work, painting lampshades, stenciling greeting cards, and finally graduating to illustrating sheet music covers. In all her autobiographical notes, she minimizes what must have been lonely, trying years.

Then, from a chance meeting in 1926 with Willy Pogany, a fellow Hungarian, came a start—a letter of introduction to a publishing house leading to her first job as an illustrator for an educational book.[12] She was launched on her chosen career! Over the next nine years, she illustrated other peoples' books; first, textbooks, some fifteen; then, children's trade books. Of

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[6] Kate Seredy, "Newbery Medal Acceptance," *The Horn Book Magazine*, 14 (July, 1938) 226-229.
[7] Kate Seredy, "The Country of 'The Good Master,'" *Elementary English Review*, 13 (May, 1936) 167-168.
[8] *Ibid.*
[9] Kate Seredy, "Newbery Medal Acceptance."
[10] *Ibid.*
[11] Kate Seredy, "Newbery Medal Acceptance."
[12] Kate Seredy, "A Letter about Her Books and Her Life," *The Horn Book Magazine*, 11 (July-August, 1935) 230-235.

these, *Caddie Woodlawn*, by Carol Ryrie Brink, the Newbery Prize winner for 1935, and *With Harp and Lute*, by B. J. Thompson, have found a permanent place in children's book collections.

Miss Seredy often talked to the editors about her pictures, debating their relationship to the text and their proper role in the completed book. She came to the conclusion that "continuous direct contact with children" would give her answers to these questions.[13] So in 1933, she opened a bookstore known as "The Story Book House" in her home, an old Dutch colonial in Ridgewood, New Jersey. Though the ambitious project lasted but a year and was a financial disaster, she learned much from the children who came to buy and who stayed to discuss their feelings about the books. She became convinced that good pictures could sell *any* book and that children never fail to respond to beauty.[14]

The Turn to Writing

One momentous afternoon she visited Miss May Massee, children's editor of Viking House. Miss Massee's genius as an editor, according to Ruth Sawyer, was that of discovering "what each artist had to give to his work, and, having discovered this, how best he could use it, bring it to fulfillment."[15] To Kate Seredy, who delighted her, she said, "I like the way you tell a story. Go home and write a book about your childhood in Hungary."[16]

Miss Seredy did go home that cold February of 1935 and

> . . . because I had nothing else to do, started to write. I wrote until I was sure I had proven that I couldn't, then sent the crate full of longhand pages to the editor.[17]

By return mail, instead of the manuscript which she was expecting, she received a contract.[18] That manuscript, with only a few grammatical changes, enriched by her own illustrations, became *The Good Master*. It was a success overnight, and her new path was charted.

from *The Good Master*
(Viking Press)

Home for her at this time was an old barn of a place that practically sat on a river at the foot of a hill in the Ramapo Mountains of New Jersey. The ménage was completed by a collection of animals. Encouraged by the reception of *The Good Master*, Miss Seredy wrote her second book,

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[13] Kate Seredy, "The Experiment in Children's Bookselling," *The Publishers Weekly*, 125 (April 14, 1934) 1435-1437.
[14] *Ibid.*
[15] Ruth Sawyer, "To May Massee," *The Horn Book Magazine*, 43 (April, 1967) 229-231.
[16] Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft. (eds.), *The Junior Book of Authors*. Second edition, revised. New York: H. W. Wilson Co., 1951, pp. 270-271.
[17] Kunitz and Haycraft, *op. cit.*
[18] Kate Seredy, *The Horn Book Magazine*, 11.

Listening, now out of print. Although busy, life was far from smooth. All kinds of household disasters plagued her, from floods, to grass fires. Blanche Thompson, a good friend, described it as an adventurous saga that would have made a movie serial.[19]

The next year, in 1936, she proudly bought a one hundred acre farm in Hamilton, New York. Hamilton is a small town near the Hudson River not too far from New York City, but far enough though for the peace and solitude she craved. It was beautiful! The charming old house looked out from its knoll to rolling hills and broad meadows, complete with fruit trees and a peaceful river. At first she tried to farm it, but that proved "near-fatal."[20] She settled down to simply live in the house and "let the grass grow wild."[21] The days were never long enough for her. She furnished her home with pieces rescued from auction sales, attics, and cellars, which she then lovingly refinished. She played the piano, cared for her garden, made her own clothes, and did pottery. The heart of her house was her studio and there at her drawing board she worked. She sketched and resketched endlessly until she was satisfied with her finished drawing. There were always animals around her, wild creatures from her own fields, tame ones invited to share her nest, and ones not so tame that came uninvited.[22] Here she lived and worked for twenty years, writing and illustrating six books of her own and illustrating many books by others.

Miss Thompson found Kate Seredy hard to describe, like a changeling. She was delighted with her puckish humor, her blue eyes that somehow seemed black, her hands so long and slender.[23] Miss Seredy was small, her hair black and wavy, and she moved quickly and surely. One of the things she liked best was to chase hunters off her land. She considered them, along with tent caterpillars and authors who talk down to children, her personal enemies.[24]

After twenty years in her old house, she exchanged its atmosphere, charm, and all the innumerable problems big and small that insist upon intruding on the country-dweller, for "the comfort and functionalism of a . . . streamlined 'Pre-fab'" in the town of Hamilton.[25] During the last twelve years she has added four more books to that row bearing her name.

"Out of nowhere" sums up her attitude toward her career as a children's author.[26] She somehow still does not accept the fact that she has put words on paper and indeed "made" a book. It seems too overwhelming, this concept of being a writer. She claims she doesn't know how. The creative process of writing remains alien while that of drawing is as natural as her being. Initially each of her books began as a picture book. With these she feels secure, for she sees her craft as merely an extension of her hand. But all of the books, except for *Gypsy*, became also an extension of her mind. They were stories that had to be told, people that had to talk.[27] Some of them just seemed to pour out of that enormous unseen hidden self, and others had to be brought forward with effort.

Enduring books

The Good Master and *The White Stag* are for me her most enduring books. I

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[19] Blanche Jennings Thompson, "On Listening Hill," *Elementary English Review*, 15 (October, 1938) 217-220.
[20] Kunitz and Haycraft, *op. cit.*
[21] *Ibid.*
[22] Thompson, *op. cit.*
[23] *Ibid.*
[24] Kate Seredy, *The Horn Book Magazine*, 11.
[25] Kate Seredy, "Concerning Myself," *Newbery Medal Books: 1922-1955*, edited by Bertha Mahony Miller and Elinor Whitney Field. Boston: The Horn Book Incorporated, 1955, pp. 161-162.
[26] *Ibid.*
[27] *Ibid.*

feel *A Tree for Peter* has special value as a Christmas story; *Gypsy* as a satisfying picture story book focused on growth and

from *The White Stag*
(Viking Press)

birth. Her other seven have many merits to recommend them, but, for one reason or another, they do not achieve quite the same level of significance. Although all the books she has written are warm, attractive and worthy of attention, it is the first two above that most richly deserve the accolade of "classic." Each of these, in its own way, is everlasting.

Of all Miss Seredy's books, *The Good Master* is the most popular, and deservedly so. Children love it! It gives them warm feelings of security and the goodness of life and presents a world they can easily accept. It is the story of spoiled, motherless Cousin Kate from Budapest, who comes to live with her uncle, The Good Master, his wife and son, Jansci, on their farm on the Hungarian plain. It depicts Kate's growth towards a more complete human being. From early spring until deep winter, in the days before the first World War, Kate follows and participates in the cycle of farm life and in the meaningful holidays that punctuate its rhythm. She learns from her experiences and the people around her a new order of values.

Permeating the story and unifying it is the belief that life at its best is simple—its rewards, love, peace, and happiness can be gained by honest work close to the soil—and that man must surely be eternally grateful to God for these blessings. In this belief, the author reflects the basic tenets of the Magyar—absolute faith coupled with a not unemotional attachment to the land and its fruits.

Most frequently, it is the men who passionately enunciate these concerns. Pista, a humble shepherd affirms,

> The sky gives me sunshine and rain. The ground gives me food. The spring gives me water. The sheep give me shelter and clothes. The beautiful flowers, the animals, the birds, show me what to carve with my knife. Can money and schools give me better things?[28]

And later in the narrative he again contrasts the impotence of money with the richness gained by giving of oneself. The Good Master in his beautiful explanation of Easter as the holiday of joy, love, and giving, of new life and new hope, echoes this eternal triangle of man, soil, and God.[29] As Kate herself assumes more responsibility around the farm, and particularly when she decides to plant and to tend a flower garden, she too comes to understand the miracle of life and to be grateful to God for this gift. Until she has seen her jobs through and learned the importance of her physical contribution, she is unable to appreciate the emotional returns granted to those whose life is devoted to caring and nurturing growing things.

The Good Master offers more than a lesson. It is also real people, skillfully drawn, gentle humor, graphic pictures of a time and place now gone forever, drama and

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[28] Kate Seredy, *The Good Master*. New York: The Viking Press, 1937, pp. 76-77.
[29] *Ibid.*, p. 53.

excitement, plus an introduction to Hungarian folklore. Without doubt, Miss Seredy's stunning color portraits of Jansci and Kate that serve as a frontispiece help the reader initially to identify with the children. However, through the judicious use of telling incidents, the two children quickly stand on their own feet. Kate is first described as a delicate city cousin. Her introduction by the railroad guard nicely contrasts with the mental images Jansci has built up. The guard says,

> Here, take this—this imp, this unspeakable little devil—take her and welcome . . . I'd rather travel with a bag of screaming monkeys than her, anytime.[30]

The conflict of the book is set. Will The Good Master be able to tame her? How will he do it?

In the very first chapter, Kate, Jansci, Father (The Good Master), and the Hungarian plain itself are all established, partially through their own actions, and partially through what Miss Seredy as the omniscient narrator says about them. There is no introspection; what exists is open to any observer. Kate is like a chameleon. In these few pages she goes from just any kind of a little girl with plain black hair, a smudgy face, and skinny legs, to a bantam rooster tense and poised; to a miniature whirlwind; to a poor, sweet little kitten; to finally, a hellion, standing alone, bolt upright on the seat of the wagon, reins and whip in hand and grinning from ear to ear.[31] She might be plain but she certainly isn't a sissy. The boy readers accept her and the girls adore her!

In the simple existence on the farm, it is the incongruities of life that make for laughter and Miss Seredy lightens the story with touches of humor. For instance, Jansci, dreaming of rescuing the princess from a dragon, is knocked off his seat and back to reality by his sweet cow, and husky father angrily swings a broom as little Kate on the rafters above artfully and successfully dodges his swipes.

The book is liberally illustrated with graceful watercolor paintings tied perfectly to the text itself. They focus on the people or the horses, and background is rarely suggested. In shades of black and grey, with white used as an important color, it is the posture of the characters that gives them life. As one child said, "They look like they would keep on moving. They don't look frozen."[32] The pictures are simple, basically realistic, though at times they move toward the idealized concept. The lines are mainly curved and rhythmic, conveying roundness of form, and even in the midst of drama, softness. The folds of a dress, the attitude of a hand, or the sweep of a horse's back add movement and emphasis. Total placement of the paintings on the page varies considerably; some are framed in curves, some are round, triangular or square, but they all help the reader visualize the incidents and achieve immediacy.

Stylized designs are used as chapter headings and one-half and one-third page pictures are above them at the end and beginnings of the chapters. All these add richness and give the book much visual appeal. Repeated in the designs are the traditional symbols of peasant art.

Kate Seredy's knowledge and love of nature is highly developed in her style and use of imagery. "The air was drenched with their sweet, heady perfume," horses "glittering hoofs were made of diamonds," "The dark blue sky, cloudless, like an inverted blue bowl," are ways she invites the read-

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 20.
[31] *Ibid.* pp. 20-25.

[32] A taped small group discussion on Kate Seredy, fifth grade, Mrs. Barbara Fox, teacher, Boulevard School, Shaker Heights, Ohio, Spring, 1967.

er to visualize her scenes.[33, 34, 35] Most often, the response suggested is a concrete, visual one. One would expect that from a writer who was first an artist. She leaves no setting incomplete; each is filled in and often embroidered. Short sentences stud the paragraphs which present relatively simple structure, and dialogue makes up a very large part of the book. Sometimes the figure of speech is unique, strikingly suggestive, as "fields of ripening wheat which looked like lakes of flowing honey, waving and billowing in the wind"; sometimes it is a common one, such as the ferry boat owner who looked "as white as a sheet."[36, 37] Repetition of words and of key phrases is frequent. This establishes patterns which are pleasant.

> The sleigh bells were cheerful; without them there would have been utter silence. The lanterns were comforting; without them there would have been utter darkness.[38]

It is an easy book to read aloud and the total effect is natural.

Both from the pictures and from the words, costumes and countryside take on a life of their own. Give a reader crayons and he could color in Kate's dresses, or draw an interior floor plan of the farmhouse and furnish it with ease. The great Hungarian plain, in all its multitude of moods, and the villages it cradles, are recreated vividly.

Then, too, the relationship of The Good Master and the men who worked for him, the shepherds, and horse herders, the hired harvesters, is made quite clear. It is a relationship of dignity, not one of servitude. They admire each other and find pride in their respective roles. As was pointed out earlier, this was hardly the typical situation in Hungary during those years. *The Good Master,* like the famous Laura Ingalls Wilder series, sets before its readers a simpler time, when men could leave small patches of wheat uncut in their freshly hand-mowed fields, patches that sheltered a partridge nest.

The drama of the book is largely connected to the incidents built around the horses. This device presages the almost legendary role that horses were to have in several of Miss Seredy's later books. The horse had great historical and mythological importance to the Magyars.[39] In *The Good Master,* it is the horses that bring excitement and challenge, as in a horse race between Kate and Jansci, in their successful leading of a stampede, and in Jansci's thrilling riding-rescue of drowning Kate.

The Hungarian background

Woven skillfully through the book are four retellings of old legends, three Hungarian, one Turkish. The Turks besides being related to the Magyars had occupied Hungary for hundreds of years and left their mark upon the indigenous civilization. Although some critics might feel these tales impede the narrative flow, for me they add color and further illuminate the character of Hungarian life.

In recalling that first visit to the Hungarian plains when she was a little girl, Miss Seredy describes the peasants that she met as a people whose feet were firmly planted in the soil and whose hearts and minds were open to all good things in life. In *The Good Master,* all she did, in her own mind, was to give a frame to the picture that had been painted for her many

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[33] *Ibid.*, p. 92.
[34] *Ibid.*, p. 18.
[35] *Ibid.*, p. 23.
[36] *Ibid.*, p. 145.
[37] *Ibid.*, p. 140.
[38] *Ibid.*, p. 189.

[39] Lois Markey, "Kate Seredy's World," *Elementary English,* 29 (December, 1952) 451-457.

years before, and also, it seems to me, to echo some of her own reactions to situations.[40]

The White Stag, Miss Seredy's third manuscript, received the Newbery Award in 1937 as the most distinguished book for children published that year in America. This heroic legend, her father's favorite story, is an epic account of the travels and travails of the ancient Huns and Magyars as they followed the fabled White Stag from their hunting grounds in Asia to their destiny and future home on the Hungarian Plains.

In her telling, she gives homage to this brave band of men, and from the ringing prose and the powerful illustrations there shines forth a vision of unparalleled determination, pride, and faith.[41] As a retelling of a story that is the basis of a nation's heritage, it is excellent. The words are clear and strong and from the very beginning to the last line there is not an extra phrase. The integration of text and illustrations is remarkable. Almost every picture is sweeping, dramatic, and somehow bigger-than-life. This helps to convey the traditional atmosphere of wonder and excitement. The narrative leaps ahead, from episode to episode, unified by the goal and purpose of the migration.

Some have questioned the glorification of Attila, but Kate Seredy is not worried, nor are the children who read this book.[42] She knows that history takes up the thread of the story and justly condemns him and his later rapacious deeds. The children understand that adventure and glory are mixed with suffering and pain, and they take away an intense picture that emphasizes belief in God and man's enduring values.[43] In a book discussion, a ten year old summed it up by saying,

> Well, at the end, I sat down for five minutes and thought about the book. I put it altogether as one thing, and sort of measured out how much good they had and how much bad. I decided that for all the bad, they did have a good amount of good at the end when they came to the promised land. It was a great book.[44]

And the author herself says of it,

> I like to dream of the day when the light of faith (The White Stag)—will again outshine the flaming red light of intolerance . . . In this spirit I pass on the legend . . . to a new generation of children, not as a story to glorify war and conquest but as a great story of faith, courage, and belief in a guiding hand.[45]

This paper started with the question of the author's identity. It must now consider another question. What has been her contribution to the field of children's literature? When one looks at a room of Rubens in the Louvre, or at a gallery in New York City whose every wall is covered with Rothkos, one comes away with a total impression of a man and an artist. The same can be said for the experience of reading the eleven books published by Kate Seredy. The values that are brought out in *The Good Master* and *The White Stag* reappear in almost every one of her books. As she restates them, she deepens their meaning and extends their significance, though never quite as successfully as in her two classics.

The Good Man and the Good Life

For her, the good man and the good life are inextricably intertwined. Happiness in life must be earned, and along with the necessity of hard work, go faith

[40] Seredy, *The Publisher's Weekly*, 125.
[41] Kate Seredy, *The White Stag*. New York: The Viking Press, 1937, p. 8.
[42] Seredy, *Publishers Weekly*, 133.
[43] Mary Gould Davis, "*The White Stag*, Winner of the John Newbery Medal for 1937," *Library Journal*, 63 (June 15, 1936) 488-489.
[44] A taped small group discussion on Kate Seredy. Shaker Heights, Ohio, Spring, 1967.
[45] Seredy, *Publishers Weekly*, 133.

and hope. It is in a sense a double-sided image. As Father Matthias, the kindly old priest in *Philomena* says, "One must use both head and heart to make things come out right . . . one must make them work together like a team of horses."[46] Peter, in *A Tree for Peter,* works hard to keep

from *A Tree for Peter*
(Viking Press)

his garden and to plant his tree, waiting and hoping for the miracle to happen.

The miracle, or the dream, however, never is realized in Miss Seredy's works without cooperation and love; these are the essential ingredients. Success ultimately depends not on just an individual's heart and mind balancing each other, but on all the characters in her stories pulling together toward their goal. Love, as Papa, in *A Brand-New Uncle* explains, is not only important but necessary to everyone, for we all want to feel needed, and having a friend makes toting troubles easier.[47]

The concept of interdependence is expanded in *The Singing Tree* and *The Chestry Oak* to include all the people in the world working together for peace and brotherhood. Grigori, the capable sweet Russian prisoner that Jansci brings home to help, declares, "All same, Jansci . . . Li'l' Russian, li'l' German, li'l' Hungarian," all men were brothers.[48] With Nana, in *The Chestry Oak,* Miss Seredy seems to affirm that God has given men the means to conquer evil when they work together with a wall of prayers.[49]

from *The Chestry Oak*
(Viking Press)

[46] Kate Seredy, *Philomena.* New York: The Viking Press, 1955, p. 29.

[47] Kate Seredy, *A Brand-New Uncle.* New York: The Viking Press, 1961, p. 61.

[48] Kate Seredy, *The Singing Tree.* New York: The Viking Press, 1939, p. 218.

[49] Kate Seredy, *The Chestry Oak.* New York: The

The greatest evil for mankind in Kate Seredy's books, is undoubtedly war, "that stampede . . . the mad whirlwind that sucks in man . . . and spits out crippled wrecks."[50] In her view, the little people of the world do not make war. It is a terror forced on them. Again Grigori communicates this belief by stating that no *good* man can kill and laugh.[51] It is interesting that both Father in *The Singing Tree* and Michael in *The Chestry Oak* are emotionally unable to stand the horror of the slaughter, and both react by completely blacking out their overwhelming experiences. Miss Seredy's nursing experience in the first World War had made her a confirmed pacifist and demonstrated to her the senselessness of war.[52]

Looked at simply, she is an optimist, and her books confirm a positive world view. Gran, the central character in *The Open Gate*, believes that nothing bad ever happens without some good in it some place.[53] Nana, the stalwart nurse in *The Chestry Oak*, teaches Michael, the hero, that nothing fine and noble will ever perish as long as there are hearts to remember.[54] This optimism is tied to Miss Seredy's bond with the land, where there are always signs of renewal and hope. In *A Tree for Peter*, *The Chestry Oak*, and *The Singing Tree*, trees as objects in nature stand as true symbols of this affirmation of life and growth.

Opposing growth, besides the wickedness of war, is the crowded modern city. In all but one of the books, Miss Seredy sees the city as robbing man of his dignity, his initiative, his sense of values, his very identity. Farm and rural life alone hold a sense of permanency. There is no synthesis here. She does not, except in *The Tenement Tree*, see the vigor, excitement, and challenge of an urban way of life, nor does she see the limitations inherent in the world of the farmer. In *The Singing Tree* and in *The Open Gate*, this belief is so outspoken and romanticized as to raise questions for the modern reader. It is undoubedly valuable for today's children to understand the wonders and rewards of living close to nature, an experience which is denied to most of them. But it is equally valuable, and it seems to me, very important, for these children also to see the possibilities for achieving selfhood in their mechanized, computerized world. Courage and faith, the two lanterns Miss Seredy gives man to light the way into the future, can be as effective in the city as they are on the farm.

Ideas are not, however, usually what children are looking for in their books, and Miss Seredy is aware of this. "Teach?" she says. "I wasn't trying to. I was only telling stories."[55] Sometimes in *The Singing Tree*, *The Open Gate*, and even in *The Chestry Oak*, the teachings get in the way of the story. She seems to have some trouble in controlling her didactic impulse. The lessons are at times too pointed or a bit overdrawn. Their moral and religious overtones hint at preachiness. *A Tree for Peter*, *A Brand-New Uncle*, and *Philomena* are infused with an almost religious quality that comes precariously close to sentimentality.

Literary Qualities

Most often the story in Miss Seredy's books carries the reader along. Interest in the plot is achieved by the suspense built into it. The resolution is guessed at but

Junior Literary Guild and The Viking Press, 1948, p. 15.

[50] Seredy, *The Singing Tree*, p. 163.

[51] *Ibid.*, p. 203.

[52] Seredy, *The Horn Book Magazine*, 11.

[53] Kate Seredy, *The Open Gate*. New York: The Viking Press, 1943, p. 13.

[54] Seredy, *The Chestry Oak*, p. 64.

[55] Seredy, *Publishers Weekly*, 133.

from *The Singing Tree*
(Viking Press)

not known; the problem grows naturally. *The Chestry Oak* contains many compelling incidents. It is structurally divided into three: the life of its hero, Michael, in Hungary before World War II; his period of relative amnesia (resulting from emotional trauma); and his refuge and new life in America. Michael's wild ride on the stallion is unforgettable. However, the book is flawed by a lack of clarity in the middle section and its relation and transition to the final section, and also by a contrived ending.

Parading through Miss Seredy's books are memorable characters. Nana, in *The Chestry Oak*, the epitome of peasant womanhood, is amazing. She is immensely wise and loving. Her teaching and understanding symbolize the ideal mother, one who can help her child develop to his fullest potential, who in no way holds too tight to his developing personality, and who is ready to relinquish the bond when the time is ripe. *The Chestry Oak* is as rich in fine characterization as is *The Good Master*. Somehow for me, the family in *The Open Gate* is hard to believe, and the personalities of Mama and Papa in *A Brand-New Uncle* come a bit too close to studied types. Most frequently, though, Miss Seredy is swift and skillful in establishing characters that talk and act like real people and not like puppets. A child reader commented, "Some characters do things in the order of the plot but these seem to really have to think about it and decide."[56]

In reviewing Kate Seredy's style, it seems to me important to remember that English is her adopted language. Some of the greatest English writers have written in other than their native tongues. Joseph Conrad was acclaimed for his mastery, and today Vladimir Nabokov, thought by many to be the finest living author, is working in his third language. To conquer a second or a third language, to make it completely part of one, is without question a tremendous achievement. Hungarian is a Finnish-Ugrian language, not related to Indo-European tongues. It is considered particularly difficult for a Hungarian to make the very basic changes necessary for learning English.[57]

In light of this, it is especially noteworthy that Miss Seredy has developed such skill and such a fine sense of language. Her stories seem to tumble out, the rhythm of their words closely allied with their meaning, and the dialogue and descriptive passages balanced. Children are well aware of her ability.

> I like the way she makes you see the pictures even though there is no illustration on the page. You have the picture in your mind and you know what its like.[58]

And another,

"Her words are made into pictures even

[56] A taped small group discussion on Kate Seredy, spring, 1967.
[57] Lengyel, *op. cit.* p. 10.
[58] A taped small group discussion on Kate Seredy, spring, 1967.

though they are not descriptions."[59] Perhaps this is testimony to Miss Seredy's early training as an artist; certainly it underscores a sure understanding of the power of words.

Kate Seredy seems to be strongest in her handling of stories set against her native background. In *The Chestry Oak*, published in 1948, her stylistic talents are seen in their full maturity, rich and eloquent. For me there are many passages that are immensely impressive. A scene at the beginning, of Nana in the great Chestry Palace, is Seredy fiction at its best, creating a world of the imagination yet a world well-understood. As one child added, "I do like the way she puts a feeling on you. It's sort of like a spell!"[60]

from *Gypsy*
(Viking Press)

[59] A taped small group discussion on Kate Seredy, spring, 1967.
[60] A taped small group discussion on Kate Seredy, spring, 1967.

Gypsy, a picture story of a cat, for the youngest reader, is the most controlled and reserved of her books. She says that she spent three years whittling down the story to the brief captions that appear, and the honing is clearly evident.[61] *Gypsy* is a quiet book, to be read at quiet times, and its style is well suited to its story. In most of her other books this restraint and moderation is not so obvious or apparent.

Conclusion

It seems appropriate to end an appraisal of Miss Seredy with some thoughts on her illustrations. They give to children clear pictures of Hungary, of horses, of small animals, of honest, simple people. Only *Lazy Tinka* is printed in color; all the others are monochromatic.

from *Lazy Tinka*
(Viking Press)

> Even though they aren't in color, with the words, they fill the black and white sketches in and make them look colored,[62]

was the way one little girl explained her reaction to the illustrations. The pictures always extend and decorate the text and seem well-placed. They contribute so much meaning to the stories that it is hard to consider them separately without doing an injustice to her creative power.[63] The very

[61] Miller and Field, *op. cit.*
[62] A taped small group discussion on Kate Seredy, spring, 1967.
[63] Peggy M. Sutor, "Kate Seredy: A Bio-Bibliography," unpublished master's paper, Florida State University, 1955.

best of them, in *The White Stag*, *The Good Master*, and *The Chestry Oak*, are strong and very beautiful; those of the animals in *The Tenement Tree* and *Gypsy* are alive and design perfect. As a whole group, they are of distinguished quality!

May Hill Arbuthnot, one of the deans of children's literature, sends us to find books for boys and girls to balance the speed and confusion of our modern world; books that build strength and steadfastness in the child, develop his faith in the essential decency and nobility of life, and give him feelings for the wonder and goodness of the universe.[64] Kate Seredy's books do just this. She is a person worth knowing!

Bibliography

The Good Master, 1935, Ages 9-12. The story of the "gentling" of impish Cousin Kate on her uncle's farm in pre-World War I Hungary.

The White Stag, 1936, Ages 9-14. A retelling of the legend of the Huns and the Magyars and their dramatic migration to Hungary. Newbery Prize, 1937.

The Singing Tree, 1939, Ages 9-12. A continuation of *The Good Master*, taking the characters through the difficult years of World War I.

A Tree for Peter, 1941, Ages 8-10. Little lame Peter who lives in Shantytown finds hope and a better life through the help of a mysterious stranger. Appropriate for a Christmas list.

The Open Gate, 1943, Ages 9-12. How a city family takes an old farm and turns it into a successful rewarding venture, all without really meaning to.

The Chestry Oak, 1948, Ages 9-12. Michael, Prince of Chestry, grows up in Hungary during World War II, survives the devastation and finds a new life, complete with his beloved horses and a family in New England, U.S.A.

Gypsy, 1951, Ages 4-7. A picture story book of the birth, life, and motherhood of an ordinary looking cat named Gypsy.

Philomena, 1955, Ages 8-10. Before finding her long-lost aunt, orphaned Philomena has adventures and misadventures in old Budapest.

The Tenement Tree, 1959, Ages 5-8. Descriptions, mainly with pictures, of all the small animals that live in the countryside and of the beauty waiting to be discovered in the city.

A Brand-New Uncle, 1961, Ages 9-12. An older couple, seeking freedom from their multiple family relationships, are unable to resist the temptation of involvement with a lone, unloved boy.

Lazy Tinka, 1962, Ages 5-8. Told in folklore style, the story of a little peasant girl who had to learn to be a responsible member of her family.

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[64] May Hill Arbuthnot, *Children and Books*. Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company, as quoted in *The Horn Book Magazine*, 43 (April, 1967) 160.

British Pound Devaluation Reduces NCTE Tour Cost

The cost of the 46-day NCTE studytour in the British Isles (July 1-August 15, 1968), originally announced as $888, has been reduced to $843.

The international air fare New York/London/New York remains unchanged at $245. The saving in the cost in Britain is caused by the devaluation of the English pound.