

George MacDonald's Imaginative Writings and their Impact on the Fantasy Works of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis

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Introduction

George MacDonald (1824-1905) is a Scottish preacher and writer, whose imaginative works shaped the fantasy novel as a modern literary genre, and influenced such writers as J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973) and C. S. Lewis (1898-1963). He is best known for his fantasy books, *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) and its sequel *The Princess and Curdie* (1883). Inspired by these works that are set in the imaginary kingdom, Tolkien wrote *The Hobbit* (1937), in which he partly borrowed the image of the "classic goblin" as depicted by MacDonald (*Tolkien On Fairy-Stories* 250).

This essay explores the potent mythopoetic images and traditional fairy-tale notions and motifs found in MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie*, in order to examine the elements of fairy-tales and fantasy as art that had an impact on Tolkien and Lewis's fiction.

I Creating a New Model for Literary Fairy Tales

I 1 Socio-Cultural Role of Literary Fairy Tales: Setting Standards for Socialization and Civilization

Originated in Italy, the establishment of the fairy tale as a literary genre was given momentum by Charles Perrault (1628-1703), French writer and storyteller, and later, the Grimms, Jacob (1785-1863) and Wilhelm (1786-1859), German philologists and folklorist. Unlike Perrault who had the distinctive notions of *civilité* between the heroes and the heroines (Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* 39-40), the Brothers Grimm paid more homage to the original folktale (Zipes, *The Brothers Grimm* 103-04). Nevertheless, they also domesticated the young woman to make her worthy of a king, stressing the virtues of self-denial, obedience, and industriousness, all the major qualities of the middle-class Protestant ethic and patriarchalism set the standards of civilization (Zipes, *The Brothers Grimm* 140-42 & 103-04).

I 2 Fairy Tale as Subverting Traditional Socialization and Civilization

In her book *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Rosemary Jackson categorizes literary narratives into the marvellous, mimetic and fantastic (26-37). She affirms that the world of fairy story belongs to "marvellous narrative" and that it is "a form which discourages reader participation," representing "events that are distanced well into the past," thus making "the reader merely a receiver of events" (33). Although Jackson draws the distinctions between fairy tales and fantastic narratives, Jack Zipes argues that fairy tale has the close connections to "the mode of fantastic" and the fairy tale discourse could "subvert traditional socialization" as the German romantics did "dissolve reader expectations" by "transforming familiar topoi and motifs into mysterious, symbolic landscapes" that "lured readers to question the former secure worlds of conservative fairy tales and the real world of their surroundings" (Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* 106).

The fairy-tale discourse underwent a profound change, primarily in Victorian England; George MacDonald and several other writers are the ones who used the fairy tale as a radical mirror to reflect what was wrong with the general discourse on manners, mores, and norms in society (Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* 104-05). In his book *George MacDonald* (1987), William Raeper observes that the strength of MacDonald's works is that he "allowed children to think for themselves" while reading his tales, and at the same time "fed them symbols which would help them to master their inner experiences" (313).

I 3 MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin*

In *The Princess and the Goblin*, MacDonald creates an imaginative world where the heroine is allowed to be her own agent and curious and brave. It seems that the whole story is under the spell of Irene the princess's great-great-grandmother, who dwells at the top of the house. The heroine needs to be curious and courageous as a "true princess" (9; ch. 2). "Her curiosity" overcomes "her fear" and she opens the door very gently and peeps in (11; ch. 3). The top of the house constitutes the cosmology including the silver moon. Irene is led to the tower and given "a small ring and a ball of thread" by her grandmother, who tells Irene to "follow the thread laid on the rings wherever it leads her" (82-84; ch. 15). The ring turns out to be that of Irene's mother's. Now that Irene has got the power of the ring of her dead mother together with the ball of thread woven by her grandmother, she is "as brave as could be expected of a princess of her age" (9; ch. 2) and saves Curdie, Peter's son and a miner boy, who attempts to discover the goblins' conspiracy (67-68; ch. 12), but he is caught in the cavern by the goblins (92-99; ch. 18).

II Creating Fairy Tales that Invite Children's Imaginative Participation

II 1 Reconstructing Mythopoetic Forms and Motifs

MacDonald thinks highly of the value of mythopoeic forms and motifs and in *The Princess and the Goblin*, there are motifs from Greek mythology, from the stories of Persephone and Ariadne, and classic fairy-tales. He adopts familiar images of mythopoeic forms and motifs as well as fairy tale conventions, and transforms them aligned with his own stories, appealing to the readership (Warner xxv). His works readily “invite an imaginative participation in the meaning of his stories” (Raeper 313).

II 2 Tolkien’s Indebtedness to MacDonald’s Works: Goblins in *The Hobbit*

Tolkien’s indebtedness to MacDonald the idea of goblins in *The Princess and the Goblin* is obvious in many ways, but the distinction between goblins is apparent, as well. Like MacDonald’s goblins, they are cruel, wicked, and bad-hearted and they can tunnel and mine and have a special grudge against Thorin’s people because of the ancient war (57-63; ch. 4). More importantly, MacDonald’s goblins were originally humans and “very like other people” but had “taken refuge in the subterranean caverns” (6; ch. 1). Tolkien’s goblins, who devour “horses and ponies and donkeys” (57-59; ch. 4), are more monstrous and perilous than those goblins in *The Princess and the Goblin*. Tolkien’s borrowings seem very flexible. Thus, more features of the goblins as a foe of elves, dwarves, and men are stressed in *The Hobbit*.

III Fairy Tales that are Instrumental in helping Children to Expand their Inner World

III 1 The Kernel of MacDonald’s Fairy Tale: The Musical Effect of an Aeolian Harp

In *The Princess and Goblin*, Irene is given a song from her grandmother: “[S]he could distinguish every word; but of the sense she had only a feeling—no understanding” (124; ch. 22). MacDonald believes that fairy tales should have an unconsciously musical effect upon the reader (McGillis, “Explanatory Notes” 354).

In the chapter 8 of *The Princess and Curdie*, Irene’s grandmother (she is also called the princess) began to sing and her wheel spun an accompaniment to her song, and the music of the wheel was like “the music of an Aeolian harp blown upon by the wind that bloweth where it listeth” (216-17). As *The Princess and the Goblin* unfolds repeatedly the musical effect that cannot be grasped, the exchange between Irene’s grandmother and Curdie in the scene of *The Princess and Curdie*, shows, in a nutshell, MacDonald’s notion of what the fairy tale should be.

III 2 Lion as Allegorical Meaning in C. S. Lewis’s Work: Lewis’s Indebtedness to MacDonald

In the fantasy *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950) in the series of *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-56), Lewis sets Aslan the lion, the ruler of Narnia, at the top of the hierarchy in that world. Aslan stands for the ruler, who plays a role of the scapegoat in the world of Narnia. As Irene’s grandmother rules the world of *The Princess and the Goblin* by MacDonald, here in Lewis’s work the lion leads the world of Narnia. Aslan comes back to Narnia in order to fight back the White Witch, who has conquered the land and made it eternally in winter. The lion symbolically stands against the evil power of the witch. Thus, the lion has a profound allegorical meaning that forms the core of the whole story.

Conclusion

This essay explored the mythopoeic and traditional fairy-tale notions, forms, and motifs, found in MacDonald’s *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie*, in order to examine the elements of fairy-tales and fantasy as art that had an impact on Tolkien and Lewis’s fiction.

MacDonald’s imaginative works allowed children to think of by themselves and fed them with symbols that could be instrumental in helping them in the future experiences. He did transform conventional symbols that have allegorical meanings in the stories, which he calls the musical effect. MacDonald influenced the two modern writers, Tolkien and Lewis, to create more liberating fairy tales and fantasy works, who also make use of symbols that contain allegorical implications.

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