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Abstract
Asserts that Lewis and MacDonald wrote books not for children but for the childlike in all. Distinguishes between childish and childlike, using examples from the Chronicles of Narnia and MacDonald. Such characters provide links to the childlike within adult readers. Previously appeared as “George MacDonald, C.S. Lewis, and the Childlike.

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The Childlike in George MacDonald and C. S. Lewis

Don King

It is a curious fact that two writers who are frequently identified with children's literature, George MacDonald and C. S. Lewis, go out of their ways to claim that they did not write their stories primarily for children. Lewis, reviewing some of the books he read in his childhood, says that "I never met The Wind in the Willows or the Bantable books till I was in my late twenties, and I do not think I have enjoyed them any the less on that account. I am almost inclined to set it up as a canon that a children's story which is enjoyed only by children is a bad children's story. The good ones last" (Of Other Worlds, p. 24). He also notes that "it certainly is my opinion that a book worth reading only in childhood is not worth reading even then" (38). MacDonald, commenting on those who try to find specific meanings in fairy-tales, claims that "children are not likely to trouble you about meaning. They find what they are capable of finding, and more would be too much. For my part, I do not write for children, but for the childlike, whether of five, or fifty, or seventy-five" (The Gifts of the Child Christ, p. 25). In effect, both Lewis and MacDonald argue that it is the childlike attitude, not age, that marks his readers; at the same time, however, neither ever clearly states what childlike means. The focus of this study, then, is two-fold. First, I want to describe what I believe are the childlike attitudes of their readers. Second, I will attempt to explore the relationship between childlike readers and the fictional characters, especially the children, within each writer's stories.

In order to discover the attributes of the childlike audience, we must begin by answering the following: "What does each writer mean by childlike?" For MacDonald, the answer to this question was a life-long quest. That is, although he intuitively understood what childlike meant to him, he never successfully described this condition. Even in his most direct assaults on this question, he remains imprecise. For example, he often deals with the idea of the childlike in his sermons; yet even there his explanations are less than definitive. A case in point is his commentary on Mark 9:33-37 and Matthew 18:1-5, passages that recount an argument Jesus' disciples have over who will be the greatest in the kingdom of God. Christ uses their argument by calling a child to Himself and saying: "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all, and servant of all" (Mark 9:35), and "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3-4). The Lord's paradoxical answer is not lost on MacDonald: "[Jesus told his disciples] they could not enter into the kingdom save by becoming little children—by humbling themselves. For the idea of ruling was excluded where childlikeness was the one essential quality" (Creation in Christ, p. 30).

However, beyond this clear linking of humility with childlikeness, MacDonald's other attempts to define the childlike are puzzling. He claims that "the childlike is the divine" (30), and that "to receive a child in the name of Jesus is to receive Jesus; to receive Jesus is to receive God; therefore, to receive the child is to receive God Himself" (32). Later MacDonald attempts to explain the relationship between childlikeness and God: "To receive a child in the name of God is to receive God Himself. How to receive Him? As alone He can be received—by knowing Him as He is. To know Him is to have Him in us" (32). To understand what the childlike means, he tells us to look within. Thoughtful readers find it difficult to accept such circular reasoning. Even though we may intuitively understand what he means when he says that "to exist...is to be a child of God; and to know it, to feel it, is to rejoice evermore" (The Gifts of the Child Christ, p. 19), we want to know more precisely what childlike means.

Thus far we have established that humility is an attribute MacDonald associates with the childlike. If we explore what he means by this, we will see that he ties humility directly to selflessness: "To be rid of self is to have the heart bare to God and to the neighbour—to have all life ours, and possess all things. I see, in my mind’s eye, the little children clambering up to sit on the throne with Jesus" (19). The humility of a childlike personality is also characterized by unpretentiousness: "He who will be a man, and will not be a child, must—he cannot help himself—become a little man, that is, a dwarf. He will, however, need no consolation, for he is sure to think himself a very large creature indeed" (28). As one critic has noted: "The self of the ego MacDonald sees as the source of evil; 'the one principle,' he declares, 'is—’I am my own'” (Manlove, p. 60).

How does MacDonald's emphasis on the childlike characteristic of humility relate to his appeal to the childlike reader? Does he expect us to approach his stories with submissiveness and reverence? I hardly think so; he was not a man so vain as to think himself very special. Perhaps if we substitute the word "innocence" for "humility" we can draw nearer to grasping the appeal his stories make upon the childlike
reader. That is, his tales speak to us on a level that does not immediately raise our "adult" objections to the improbable. His stories ask us to leave open for the moment that this or that thing could happen, regardless of how loudly our adult voices, nurtured by realism and the scientific method, speak against such an idea. However, the kind of innocence MacDonald assumes of his audience is not to be confused with gullibility; he is not addressing readers who lack discernment. Instead, his targets are those who are willing, dare I say, "exercise a willing suspension of disbelief."

Although I could at this point posit what I believe are the other elements of the childlike in MacDonald, I think a better approach will be to turn to Lewis's comments on the childlike. Since Lewis was by trade a literary critic, we can expect to find more discussion about the childlike in Lewis' writings than in MacDonald's. Additionally, because MacDonald's influence upon Lewis was overwhelming, we should not be surprised that he appeals to the same kind of audience as his "master": "I have never concealed the fact that I regarded him [MacDonald] as my master; indeed I fancy I have never written a book in which I did not quote from him" (MacDonald, An Anthology, p. 20).

In a number of different essays Lewis discusses his ideas about writing for children. In one he declares: "I put in [my children's stories] what I would have liked to read when I was a child, and I still like reading now that I am in my fifties" (Of Other Worlds, p. 22). Elsewhere he says he writes "'for children' only in the sense that I excluded what I thought they would not like or understand; not in the sense of writing what I intended to be below adult attention" (38). In still another essay he says that the best children's writers "work with the common, universally human, ground they share with the children, and indeed with countless adults" (41). Perhaps the most interesting point he makes is that children do not need to be patronized: "The child as reader is neither to be patronized nor idolized: we talk to him as man to man" (33). This kind of no nonsense approach to communicating with children does not spare his childlike readers scenes of "death, violence, wounds, adventure, heroism and cowardice, good and evil" (31). To do less than this, Lewis claims, is "to give children a false impression and feed them on escapism" (31).

What comes through clearly in these comments is Lewis' insistence that he "speaks to the adult, the child, and the child within the adult. He speaks to everyone, except to those ossified grown-ups who have stifled the child within" (Walsh, p. 157). More importantly, Lewis indirectly suggests in these essays other characteristics of the childlike reader besides innocence. The first of these is a sense of awe. In the essay "On Stories," Lewis reflects on how stories like Oedipus Rex, The Man Who Would Be King, and The Hobbit produce such an effect upon him: "Such stories produce ... a feeling of awe, coupled with a certain sort of bewilderment such as one often feels in looking at a complex pattern of lines that pass over and under one another" (Of Other Worlds, p. 15). Another way of saying this is that the child within, our childlike self, enables us to see, even momentarily, that there is more to life than the physical reality about us. Such knowledge is both terrifying and refreshing; terrifying in the sense that we are left to ponder the possibility of unperceived dimensions of life, and yet refreshing because we are exposed to the unexpected flash of hope that the banality of our own world is not all there is.

As a part of the childlike reader's sense of awe, Lewis includes the enthusiastic delight in surprise. In the essay mentioned above, he notes that no story can be fully enjoyed on an initial reading. Instead, we have to get past our curiosities about plot, theme, and character until "we are at leisure to savour the real beauties." Children, he goes on, "understand this well when they ask for the same story over and over again, in the same words. They want to have again that "surprise" of discovering that what seemed Little-Red-Riding-Hood's grandmother is really the wolf" (18). The pleasure of the unexpected draws the childlike reader back time and again to a well-worn story because in such a story not everything is predictable and mundane. Could we really enter another world through the back of a wardrobe, fly on the back of a giant eagle, or converse with a talking raven? As we encounter such unlooked for experiences, our surprise and awe intensify even more.

In another essay, "On Three Ways of Writing for Children," Lewis suggests another aspect of the childlike reader's awe: limitless imagination. In defending his own love of fantasy Lewis ties this issue with how "the modern critical world uses 'adult' as a term of approval. It is hostile to what it calls 'nostalgia' and contemptuous of what it calls 'Peter Pantheism.' Hence a man who admits that dwarfs and giants and talking beasts and witches are still dear to him in his fifty-third year is now less likely to be praised for his perennial youth than scorned and pitied for arrested development" (25). The childlike reader is not offended by the seeming impossible; indeed, as I have already suggested, the childlike reader is delighted instead. Even Tolkien's description of the fairy-tale makes this point: "The magic of Faerie is not an end in itself, its virtue is in its operations; among these are the satisfaction of certain primordial human desires. One of these desires is to survey the depths of space and time. Another is ... to hold communion with other living things" (Tolkein, p. 13). The childlike reader's imagination can soar as far as the story can take it, and in some cases even beyond or back into the physical world somehow redeemed.

The sense of awe is also intimately linked to the third characteristic of the
childlike reader: a romantic yearning for something more. Corbin Scott Carnell, in his book, Bright Shadow of Reality: C. S. Lewis and the Feeling Intellect, concentrates exclusively on this notion as it runs through Lewis' work. Carnell uses the German word Sehnsucht to denote "an underlying sense of displacement or alienation from what is desired" (15). Clearly the childlike reader is attracted to MacDonald and Lewis because of his own longing for a deeper, more meaningful experience than is available in the daily march of time. Yet this longing is not to be viewed as morbid. Lewis makes this clear when he writes that a schoolboy who reads about enchanted woods does not then become depressed about his own world: "He does not despise real woods because he has read of enchanted woods: the reading makes all real woods a little enchanted. This is a special kind of longing ... . The boy reading the fairy-tale desires and is happy in the very fact of desiring" (Of Other Worlds, pp. 29-30). He argues elsewhere that "sense of longing is the central strength of MacDonald's myth-making: "[MacDonald's myths arouse] in us sensations we have never had before, never anticipated having, as though we had broken out of our normal mode of consciousness and 'possessed joys not promised to our birth.' It gets under our skin, hits us at a level deeper than our thoughts or even our passions, troubles oldest certainties till all questions are re-opened, and in general shocks us more fully awake than we are for most of our lives" (An Anthology, pp. 16-17).

Innocence, awe, and longing—all are basic elements of the childlike reader that are tapped by Lewis and MacDonald. These three attributes of the childlike reader are not all inclusive—good arguments can be made for justice, honesty, faith, earnestness, loyalty, discretion and so on—but I believe these three comprise the core of reader appeal. What also should be clear is the overlap and intrinsic relationship that each attribute has with the others; none exists in isolation. We combine with others and heights our pleasure as readers. The next focus of our study, therefore, concerns the relationship between the childlike reader and the youthful characters who appear in the stories of Lewis and MacDonald.

At the risk of appearing simplistic, it seems to me that the childlike reader generally encounters two basic kinds of youthful characters in the stories of Lewis and MacDonald. The first is the childish one who is characterized primarily by egocentricity. The childish character is overly concerned with himself and only relates to his surroundings in terms of self-aggrandizement. Others are important only because of what the childish character can get from them. Edmund Pevensie and Eustace Clarence Scrubb from Lewis' The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe and The Voyage of the Dawn Treader are memorable examples of childish characters. Both view the world as revolving about themselves, as Edmund's lust for power and traitorous behavior and Eustace's whining megalomania and greed illustrate. In Lilith MacDonald adds an ironic twist to the notion of the childish character, for at one point we encounter young, relatively uncorrupted children who become more childish as they grow older. As one character says: "If a Little One doesn't care, he grows greedy, and then lazy, and then big, and then stupid and then bad" (Phantastes and Lilith, p. 244).

In addition to egocentricity, other attributes of childishness are dishonesty, spite, pettiness, cruelty, and pseudo-sophistication. MacDonald comments in particular upon this last point: "For it must be confessed that there are children who are not childlike. One of the saddest and not least common sights in the world is the face of a child whose mind is so brimful of worldly wisdom that the human childishness has vanished from it" (Creation in Christ, pp. 29-30). Yet, interestingly, both Lewis and MacDonald take pains to move the childish character toward the childlike. Indeed the childish character plays a pivotal role in the great recurring theme of their stories—the search for redemption. Both writers frequently present "unwhole," childish characters who gradually mature into "whole," childlike characters.

In Lewis this pattern is seen in a number of children: Shasta and Aravis from The Horse and His Boy, Jill from The Silver Chair, and Digory and Polly from The Magician's Nephew. Again, however, Edmund and Eustace provide us with the best examples; both begin as thoroughly obnoxious, childish little creatures, mature into spiritually damnable children, and, after profound personal experiences with Asian that lead to self-realization, emerge as redeemed, "whole" creatures. Although each is blind to his unwhole nature at the beginning, each eventually sees the truth about himself and
Lucy's inability to recapture her intuitive relationship with nature foreshadows a failure of obedience the next day. When the children eventually find themselves lost, Lucy sees Aslan off in the distance. Unfortunately no one else can see Aslan. In fact, when Susan asks Lucy "where do you think you saw him," Lucy says: "Don't talk like a grown-up...I didn't think I said anything to you" (92). Lucy, however, (except, ironically, Edmund) refuses to believe her, and Lucy, instead of following Aslan on her own and what she knows to be the truth, goes along with the others, sad and depressed. Not surprisingly the group bumbles along that day and even endures an ambush before collapsing with fatigue in the evening. Once again Lucy wanders off into the forest, this time successfully communicating with the tree spirits; more importantly, she sees and talks with Aslan who firmly but gently points out her failure and commissions her to go convince them that he will lead them. Lucy does this in spite of the other's scorn and disbelief. That Aslan appears only to Lucy is significant because it underscores her humility and great capacity for faith. At the same time, her initial failure to obey Aslan reminds us of our own capacity for failure. However, Lucy's subsequent affirmation of Aslan and determination to do as he asks, brings us encouragement.

Her childlike nature peeks in The Voyage of the Dawn Treader. Several times in the story her childlikeness is emphasized. The first time we see this is when Eustace returns to his shipmates after his metamorphosis into a dragon. While the others hold back in fear, Lucy runs up to Eustace and discovers who he is; she even consoles him and "screwed up her courage to kiss the scaly face" (PC, p. 89). A second illustration occurs later. After Eustace's dream encounter with Aslan and re-transformation back into his human form, Edmund explains who Aslan is to Eustace and indicates Lucy's close relationship to Aslan: "He is the great Lion, the son of the Emperor over the Sea, who saved me and saved Narnia. We've all been him. Lucy sees him most often" (92). Lucy's childlikeness and close tie to Aslan is re-emphasized still later when he appears to her while she is reading a magic book and discovering spells that can give her great power. For instance, she reads of spells that can give her money,
knewledge, power, and advantage. She is tempted most by a spell that will "make beautiful her that uttereth beyond the lot of mortals" (129). As she begins to say the spell, Aslan appears in the text itself, and "he was growling and you could see most of his teeth. She became horribly afraid and turned over the page at once" (131).

When we last see her in this tale, her childlikeness is again highlighted as she speaks with Aslan for the final time. She asks him "Oh, Aslan... Will you tell us how to get into your country from our world?" (215). When she learns that she can never return, she says: "It isn't Narnia, you know... It's you. We shan't meet you there. And how can we live, never meeting you?" (215). Lucy has to be content with Aslan's promise that she will meet him in her own world under another name. The centrality of Lucy's childlike character in the first three Narnia books is significant. Indeed, even though Lewis employs an omniscient narrator, much of what we learn about Narnia comes to us as if through Lucy's eyes. Furthermore, she is the first one to enter Narnia; she is the one who sees Aslan most often; she is the one who longs most fiercely to remain in Narnia. Lucy's longing for and sensitivity to Aslan's guidance, her humility, her willingness to submit her own desires to a force higher than herself, mark her as an attractive childlike character.

In MacDonald's The Princess and the Goblin, we encounter another little girl, Irene, the childlike character I believe Lewis patterned Lucy after. I say this based both upon Lewis' afore mentioned salute to MacDonald and upon the obvious similarities between Lucy and Irene. Irene is also a childlike character who exercises innocence, awe, and longing. For instance, her first adventure occurs because she is bored by her toys on a rainy day and longs for something more. When left alone for a moment by her nurse, Irene opens a door to a stairway she has never seen before, and makes her way, after a long climb, to an unfamiliar room inhabited by a mysterious old woman who identifies herself as Irene's great-great-grandmother. During this meeting the old woman promises to be Irene's caretaker and does throughout the story, serving as a kind of fairy-godmother. When Irene returns to her own room, she, like Lucy, has a hard time convincing others of the reality of her experience.

In later visits to her grandmother, Irene's childlike character is further explored. When the next time she sees her grandmother, she tells Irene that she must endure a test: "But I must put you to one trial--not a very hard one, I hope. This night week you must come back to me. If you don't, I do not know when you may find me again, and you will soon want me very much" (The Princess and the Goblin, p. 80). Of course, the real test is to discover whether or not Irene believes in the old lady: "The only question is whether you will believe I am anywhere--whether you will believe I am anything but a dream" (86). This test of Irene's imagination and allegiance is very similar to Lucy's test of obedience regarding Aslan in Prince Caspian.

During the week that follows, Irene tries to maintain her belief although at times "she could not feel quite sure that she had not been dreaming" (95). Nonetheless, she determines to seek her out, and, when the week is up, Irene does make her way back to the old lady's room. Once there, the grandmother commends Irene and shows her various mysterious objects, including pigeons, burning roses, a bright mobile globe, a spinning wheel, and a fire-opal ring. Irene's childlike innocence is underlined here as she reaches out to touch the thread: "Oh! I do feel it!... But I can't see it" (107). The old lady explains the value of this invisible thread: "If ever you find yourself in any danger... you must take off your ring and put it under the pillow of you bed. Then you must lay your forefinger, the same that wore the ring, upon the thread, and follow the thread wherever it leads you" (107-108). Then she adds: "But remember, it may seem to you a very roundabout way indeed, and you must not doubt the thread" (108).

Irene's faithfulness to her grandmother and her childlike sense of awe and wonder regarding the old lady form the basis for much of the action in the story, especially when Irene meets Curdie, another childlike character. Curdie, a young miner, discovers a plot by underworld goblins against Irene and her father. Unfortunately, Curdie is captured and would have remained so had not Irene's grandmother intervened by means of the invisible thread. Irene is led by the thread directly to where Curdie is imprisoned; their encounter brings into focus the difference between her childlikeness and
Curdie's. Curious as to how she found him, Curdie asks for an explanation; to her comments about following a thread, Curdie says: "What nonsense the child talks! . . . I must follow her, though, and see that she comes to no harm" (144). Curdie's inability to "see" or "feel" the thread parallels closely the problem Lucy's brothers and sister have in *Prince Caspian*. Like them, Curdie is overly influenced by adult perceptions rather than by childlike instincts.

The contrast between Irene's and Curdie's childlike natures peaks when Irene takes him to see her grandmother. When Irene expresses frustration at Curdie's lack of belief, her grandmother says: "People must believe what they can, and those who believe more must not be hard upon those who believe less" (153). If Irene "sees" easily, Curdie does not. When she asks him what he sees, he says: "I see a small red apple." Curdie then adds: "I think you had better drop it, princess, and go down to the nursery, like a good girl!" (154-155). Curdie's pomposity here has an uncomfortable yet familiar adult ring to it, and prefigures a scene in Lewis' *The Last Battle* where a group of dwarves have the same problem: "that is, instead of seeing and enjoying a feast provided by Aslan in a stable, the dwarves "thought they were eating and drinking only the sorts of things you might find in a Stable. One said he was trying to eat hay and another said he had got a bit of an old turnip and a third said he found a raw cabbage leaf" (LB, p. 147). Like them, Curdie only sees with his adult eyes, not with childlike innocence and awe.

He remains unconvincing until his mother shares a mysterious incident from her early married life as a way of showing him that all is not always what it seems. Prefacing her story with "perhaps some people can see things other people can't see" (162), Curdie's mother relates how she was once saved from the goblins by what sounds like the grandmother's mobile globe and one of her pigeons. To the goblins, however, the grandmother's objects, especially the pigeon, appeared much different: "It looked to me just like a white pigeon. But whatever it was, when the cobs [goblins] caught sight of it coming straight down upon them, they took to their heels and scattered away across the mountain" (164). When Curdie reacts by saying that her story sounds strange, his mother responds with: "Yes, it was strange; but I can't help believing it, whether you do or not" (164).

Curdie's mother, like Irene, has the childlike ability to see, and her story does influence Curdie although it is only later, after Curdie has been wounded by the goblins, that he also regains his childlike eyes. As he lies in a bed unable to move so as to alert everyone of the goblin's forthcoming attack, he sees "a lady with white hair, carrying a silver box in her hand, enter the room. She came to his bed, he thought,

stroked his head and face with cool, soft hands, took the dressing from his leg, rubbed it with something that smelt like roses, and then waved her hands over him three times" (182). Still later, when he is trying to decide how to find Irene in order to protect her from the goblins, "something touched his hand. It was the slightest touch, and when he looked he could see nothing. Feeling and peering about in the grey of the dawn, his fingers came upon a tight thread" (188). He follows the thread that he cannot see and that he had earlier doubted, and is led to Irene's hiding place.

In Curdie MacDonald pictures the character who loses his childlike innocence and awe but who regains them. Earlier the grandmother assures Irene that Curdie will one day see the truth, although it will take some time: "You must give him time . . . and you must be content not to be believed for a while" (155). However, now that Curdie cannot see her because she "did not mean to show myself. Curdie is not yet able to believe something. Seeing is not believing--it is only seeing" (156). Here MacDonald underscores the idea that childlikeness is a quality of the soul or spirit, characterized by attributes unmeasurable by empirical methods. It is only when Curdie learns that truth may involve more than what can be seen and tested that he gains the insight truly to see and to understand. His is a pilgrimage that many of us are on.

Within the stories of Lewis and MacDonald we can find many childlike characters. From the *Chronicles of Narnia* such characters abound: Reepicheep, Mr. and Mrs. Beaver, Jewel, TiriIan, Dr. Cornelius, Caspian, Emeth, Hwin, Strawberry-Fledge, King Frank and Queen Helen and many others. In MacDonald's tales we find Phoebe from "The Gifts of the Child Christ," Diamond from *At the Back of the North Wind*, Mossy and Tangle from "The Golden Key," Mr. and Mrs. Raven, Lona, and the Little Ones from *Lilith*, and scores of others. Regardless the name, childlike characters evidence innocence, awe, and longing—all attributes linking them to childlike readers.

In conclusion, Lewis and MacDonald write for the child within the adult. Often they contrast childish characters and childish characters, perhaps in order to remind us that "there are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done'" (The Great Divorce, p. 72). In the childish characters we see our own capacities for conceit, cruelty, deceit, vanity, and egocentricity; on the other hand, in the childlike characters we see a more constructive side of ourselves—the abilities to sacrifice self, to wonder at life's mysteries, and to yearn for a world somehow cleaner, somehow more compelling than our own. Because of our vicarious experiences with the childlike characters we meet in Lewis and MacDonald, we may be able to ask with Lucy: "Will you tell us how to get into your country from our world?" cont. on p. 28