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# J.R.R. Tolkien and George MacDonald

## **Abstract**

Traces moral, religious, and creative parallels between MacDonald and Tolkien. Finds that Christianity gives Tolkien's work "a firm structure and objectivity" as opposed to the "fervent but rather formless spirituality" due to MacDonald's romanticism.

## **Additional Keywords**

MacDonald, George—Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien; MacDonald, George—Moral and religious aspects; MacDonald, George—Theory of fantasy; Sub-creation in George MacDonald; Sub-creation in J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Influence of George MacDonald; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Religious and moral aspects; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Theory of fantasy



# J.R.R. TOLKIEN AND GEORGE MACDONALD



PAUL B. KOEGER

George MacDonald (1824-1905) was a Scottish writer of fantasy whose tales have been attracting attention in recent years as landmarks in this literary genre. Although very poor he managed to attend King's College at Aberdeen for a year or two after 1840, and later briefly became a Congregational minister until his Calvinist flock found him heretical. He seems to have shocked them with nebulous views formed by his reading of the early German romanticists, especially Novalis, the pen name of G. F. von Hardenberg. Thereafter he led a hand to mouth existence, supported by a miscellaneous career as itinerant preacher, lecturer, tutor, and writer of many sorts of short stories and novels, some being fantasies, others not.

Just when he became known to the Inklings is hard to say. Tolkien mentioned him and several of his tales by name in his lecture "On Fairy-Stories" delivered at St. Andrews University in 1938, and may well have been acquainted with his work a number of years earlier. And C. S. Lewis was moved by enthusiasm to publish in 1946 an anthology of MacDonald's short fantasies, prefaced by a critical appreciation of them.\*

Any comparison between MacDonald and Tolkien as theorists about the function of fantasy had best begin with a reminder of what Tolkien called in his lecture the doctrine of "sub-creation," though MacDonald gave the topic no such name. Behind this doctrine stands Tolkien's belief that God, the supreme Maker of our world, gave to mankind whom he created in his own image a power of the imagination to invent secondary worlds resembling the primary world in which men live out their everyday lives.

Both the primary world and man's gift to sub-create others derived from it were damaged by his Fall in Eden, but mercifully the gift was not abolished. Man today is left with a desire to escape from the world's defects, such as "hunger, thirst, poverty, pain, sorrow, injustice, death" through his ability to imagine other, better worlds and lives (p. 65). In them he can see his workaday world fresh and new, restored from the drabness with which his tired vision has invested it. And he can console himself with fairy tales in which all sorrows come at last to happy endings. If he is a Christian he can find consolation in the greatest of all happy endings, the Resurrection of Christ and the resulting salvation of the human race.

One of MacDonald's closest approximations to these ideas comes in *Phantastes*, his major work of fantasy. Looking into a magical mirror bought in an old shop, Cosmo sees his bare, ugly room transformed into beauty: "All its commonness has disappeared. The mirror has lifted it out of the region of fact into the realm of art... Art rescues nature from the weary and sated regard of our senses, and the degrading injustice of our anxious every-day life, and, appealing to the imagination which dwells apart, reveals Nature in some degree as she really is, and as she represents herself to the eye of the child, whose every-day

life...meets the true import of the wonder-teeming world around him" (p. 94).

Tolkien's idea of 'recovery,' the regaining of a clear view of things "freed from the dark blur of triteness," is here. What is missing is the religious foundation of divine creation and the Fall, on which his view of man's sub-creation rests. This is not to say that MacDonald was not a Christian. In some sense he obviously was, as appears in its most orthodox form in *The Gift of the Christ Child*. Less explicitly, Christianity is likewise inherent in *The Golden Key*, which Tolkien praised as a story "of power and beauty" concerning the Supernatural (p. 26). This latter tale is indeed one of MacDonald's masterpieces, short but shapely, recounting the lives of a man and a woman from childhood until death, and after death describing their ascent up the rainbow into a higher realm, of whose shining reality all forms on earth are but shadows. But the fact is that in the score or so of his tales to which I have had access the religious doctrine is seldom specifically Christian, and where one would expect it to be so, a kind of blurred pantheism quite foreign to Tolkien's Catholicism takes its place.

It is important to stress, however, that Tolkien and MacDonald see almost eye to eye on questions of morality. Both look upon selfishness as the worst of vices, humility and self-sacrifice as the best of virtues. In the lecture "On Fairy-Stories" Tolkien names 'possessiveness,' the lust to appropriate all things to ourselves, as the reason why the world grows trite and dull to us. 'Recovery' consists in letting them go "free and wild" so that we see them as what they are, "dangerous and potent" (pp. 57-59). And of course throughout his histories of Middle-earth Tolkien inveighs against the thirst for possession which he associates with the Ruling Ring and with Sauron, as with Morgoth's claim of kingship over the whole world in the First Age.

Similarly the evils of selfishness and the means necessary to cure it are the central themes of *The Wise Woman*, *The Light Princess* and other stories by MacDonald. *Phantastes*, especially, treats them in a striking and original way. In the ogre's house in Fairy Land, Anados, disregarding all warnings to avoid the place, is fastened upon by a black shadow of himself, which represents the darker side of his nature and which he cannot shake off. It is a destructive shape, withering the grass and flowers wherever it falls, inspiring in him "loathing and distrust" of his friends, hideously changing the appearance of everybody he approaches, and also his own appearance as seen by them. In this way it isolates Anados from all those around him. Finally it corrupts him into feeling proud of its power "to disenchant the things around me" and to reveal their true ugliness. He resolves "not to see beauty where there is none," although his own eyes are at fault and the beauty does truly exist (pp. 65-67). Here MacDonald deals with a condition not fully considered by Tolkien: the power of evil within a man to take away his ability to sub-create imaginary worlds which refresh and rectify his perceptions of the primary world, and to replace them instead with perceptions of it as more hideous than it actually is. Since Anados makes every effort in the rest of the tale to rid himself of this shadow, and succeeds in the end only by an act of heroic

\*This anthology is now out of print, but Lewis' essay is available as an Introduction to the edition of *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1964. All my references to Tolkien's lecture "On Fairy-Stories" are to the edition appearing in *Tree and Leaf*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1965.

self-sacrifice which kills him, this struggle against self becomes the major plot of the story.

How should life be lived, then, according to MacDonald? As selfishness is worst, love is best. Typical of the many 'wise women' who abound in his stories the one in Phantastes abuses Anados to "love and love and love" the white lady he is pursuing. "Love is a power that cannot but be for good" (p. 179). But with it must go action. "Go, my son, and do something worth doing," another wise one advises him. And Sir Percival, on whom Anados learns to model himself, reflects that, there being much wrong in the land of Faerie where they are, "a man must better what he can" (p. 169). If he will consider fame and success of little value and be content to be defeated through no fault of his own, while going to work with all his mind and will, he will achieve his proper tasks. All the foregoing, though not couched in specifically religious terms, says what any Christian would say, including Tolkien.

One of the functions of sub-creation, as Tolkien sees it, is to mend the estrangement between men and all other living creatures caused by mankind's Fall. For this separation men, knowing themselves responsible, feel a guilt which they try to expiate by inventing secondary worlds wherein they and other living beings can converse with perfect understanding. This is a legitimate form of 'escape' from the shades of our self-made prison house (p. 66). And that is why fairy-stories are full of such converse. As one example Tolkien cites MacDonald's The Giant's Heart, in which two children manage to find and capture a wicked giant's hidden heart through active scheming with some friendly birds and spiders.

But an even more telling case of communion between man and other creatures is the adventure of Anados in Fairy Land with walking, speaking trees, male and female (Phantastes, pp. 33-40), who inevitably recall Tolkien's Ents, or Old Man Willow. Some species of these trees, such as the Ash and the Alder, are hostile to Anados, whereas the Oak and the Beech protect him. One Ash in particular tries to kill him, while a female Beech saves his life. Bending her branches down to cover his body, she falls in love with him. There is a prophecy in the forest that at some future day trees may become human, and on this she builds her dreams even while she weeps for her present hopeless case. Out of her frustration MacDonald contrives a beautifully tender tragedy of longing, not unlike the sorrow of the Ents for their lost Entwines. It seems quite unlikely that Tolkien, who loved all trees, borrowed any of his ideas about them from MacDonald, but the two writers were evidently thinking along the same lines.

Tolkien said in his lecture that "Death is the theme that most inspired George MacDonald" (p. 68). And C.S. Lewis' critical essay about his work found Phantastes permeated by "a certain quality of death, good Death" (p. 11). Beyond question MacDonald dwelt often upon this event, without horror and even without regret, thinking the veil between life and death very thin. In The Gift of the Christ Child all problems are solved by the birth of a stillborn baby, who has returned to God to get "more life," as its father says. The dying of the sick little hero in At the Back of the North Wind gives no cause for lament. And the same is true when the two chief characters ascend the rainbow to the land of reality in The Golden Key.

MacDonald describes in detail the experience of death in Phantastes' dream: "The hot fever of life had gone by and I breathed the clear mountain-air of the land of Death. I had never dreamed of such blessedness." His passions were gone but "those essential mysteries of the spirit which had given them all their glory" lived on more gloriously than ever. As he lay in the grave "the whole earth, and each of her many births, was as a body to me...I seemed to feel the great heart of the mother beating into mine, and feeding me with her own life... I rose into a single large primrose which grew by the edge of the grave... I felt that I could manifest myself in the primrose... I arose, I reached the cloud; and throwing myself upon it, floated with it in sight of the sinking sun..." (pp. 178-80).

As if to justify and give authority to this total im-

mersion of the self in nature MacDonald quotes at the head of the next chapter a sentence from Novalis: "Our life is no dream; but it ought to become one, and perhaps will." Enigmatic as this all is, it lacks one great essential clarity which a Christian like Tolkien would require--that the goal of death is a union of the soul with a personal God, not with the impersonal forces of the psycho-physical world He has created. This theistic view lies at the foundation of such short stories by Tolkien as Leaf by Niggle and Imram, among others. And it underlies, too, the whole mythology worked out in his histories of Middle-earth as created and watched over by Eru Iluvatar, to whom return in the end all the intelligent races fashioned by him to people it.

Consequently Christianity gives to Tolkien's work a firm structure and an objectivity which contrasts with the fervent but rather formless subjectivity which MacDonald's romanticism inflicts on many of his tales, especially the longer ones.

## MYTHOPOEIC CORE READING LIST

Mythlore frequently publishes articles that presuppose the reader is already familiar with the works they discuss. This is natural, given the special nature of Mythlore. In order to assist some readers, the following is what might be considered a "core" mythopoeic reading list, containing the most well known and discussed works. Due to the many editions printed, only the title and original date of publication are given. Good reading!

J.R.R. TOLKIEN

The Hobbit (1937); "Leaf by Niggle" (1945); "On Fairy-Stories" (1945); The Lord of the Rings: Vol. 1, The Fellowship of the Ring (1954); Vol. II, The Two Towers (1954); Vol. III, The Return of the King (1955); The Silmarillion (1977); Unfinished Tales (1980).

C.S. LEWIS

Out of the Silent Planet (1938); Perelandra (1943); That Hideous Strength (1945); The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (1950); Prince Caspian (1951); The Voyage of the Dawn Treader (1952); The Silver Chair (1953); The Horse and His Boy (1954); The Magician's Nephew (1955); The Last Battle (1956); Till We Have Faces (1956).

CHARLES WILLIAMS

War in Heaven (1930); Many Dimensions (1931); The Place of the Lion (1931); The Greater Trumps (1932); Shadows of Ecstasy (1933); Descent into Hell (1937); All Hallow's Eve (1945); Taliessin through Logres (1938) and The Region of the Summer Stars (1944) (printed together in 1954).

## Promotion Manager

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