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"If You Call Me Grandmother, That Will Do"

Abstract

Studies an enigmatic character in MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin*, the old woman in the tower. Notes some of the explanations offered for whom she represents, and discusses her function as embodying the reconciliation of opposites.

Additional Keywords

MacDonald, George—Characters—"Grandmother"; MacDonald, George. *The Princess and the Goblin*

"IF YOU CALL ME GRANDMOTHER, THAT WILL DO"

RODERICK MCGILLIS

The most fascinating character in George MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin* is the old lady who lives in a tower. Who is she? Colin Manlove does not speculate although he suggests her pigeons "could be symbols of the Holy Ghost." Robert Lee Wolff's contribution is that MacDonald envisaged a "Mother-God" in his fiction. Tony Tanner and Richard Reis accept the superego theory. Nancy-Lou Patterson discusses the grandmother as Jung's Mother archetype. Louis MacNeice, in keeping with his suggestion that writers of parable have a "strong spiritual, or indeed mystic, element", more willingly accepts the ambiguity of "MacDonald's extraordinary supernatural females." They are, he says, "neither goddesses nor angels nor enchantresses nor fairies but something of all four."¹ Who is she? Is this even a legitimate question? The answers cannot avoid reducing the grandmother to a concept. However, MacNeice appears to ask a different question: what does she do? He answers: she works for good. This is a beginning, but only that. It does little to illuminate the grandmother and her function in the structure of the book. What is the nature of "good works"? Why does she work for good? Answers to these questions direct us to allegory: her good works are spiritual intervention; she intervenes as an agent of the divine, of God. How do we avoid allegory? Yet clearly the question - who is she? - is fair. Any answer must first take us to the book.

Many things are clear, if conflicting. The great grandmother is related to the Princess Irene; indeed they have the same name. The fact that she spins suggests that the grandmother has something to do with fate and possibly death. But she also cleans and heals. Irene finds her after a bewildering experience exploring a strange region of the house that is full of doors. Before meeting her grandmother, Irene must climb a very narrow stairway on her hands and knees. She loses herself to find her namesake behind a door. Allusions to Christ as the door (John 10: 7-9), and as the narrow way (Matthew 7:14; John 14:6) exist. MacDonald also echoes Christ's words in Matthew 10:39. A further allusion to Christ occurs on Irene's second visit to the tower when her grandmother washes her feet. Stronger evidence, however, suggests the Virgin Mary: the grandmother's pigeons, her relation to the moon, her tower, her spinning, her roses, her blue dress, her jeweled circular hair-clasp. But other suggestions confound these allusions. The grandmother tells Irene that she is her "great-grandmother". Irene calls her "a beautiful mother of grandmothers", "great-great-great-great-grandmother", and simply "grandmother". This confusion disappears if we accept Irene's enthusiasm as an example of MacDonald's sensitivity to a child's feelings and reactions. But MacDonald does not allow us the satisfaction of such an explanation. Instead he hints that the grandmother may be the spirit of Irene's mother who died shortly after Irene's birth. Irene receives a ring, a fire-opal, from her grandmother, but when she returns to her nursery she cannot remember who gave it to her. She asks her nurse, Lootie, who replies, "I think it must have been your mother gave it you." Irene's father, the King, verifies this. He also goes up the old stair to visit the grandmother.

What are we to do with all this information? And there is more. The grandmother is old yet young, she is

poor yet rich. She first wears a black dress with white lace, then a pale blue dress, and finally a white dress. Her hair is like water. Her flowers are like fire. She is surrounded by silver. Her hair is silver, then gold. Her living quarters and her manner are also odd. The grandmother lives in a tower approached by three stairways. When Irene first discovers the stairs and climbs them she finds herself "in a little square place, with three doors, two opposite each other, and one opposite the top of the stairs." Before seeing her grandmother, Irene hears a curious sound "like the hum of a very happy bee that had found a rich well of honey in some globular flower." The sound signals a revelation. But more to the point here are the three doors. The number three pops up several times in the book reminding us of dialectic; two opposites when reconciled produce a third entity either in fact or by implication. For example, raw nature combines with human nature to make the King's garden, and male and female combine to produce a child. The reconciliation of age and youth, poverty and riches in the grandmother results in a new concept of old age, a glad day of "strength and beauty and mirth and courage and clear eyes and strong painless limbs," and a new concept of wealth as selflessness, life itself. This principal of reconciliation is clearest in the grandmother's three rooms.

Two doors face each other across the landing. One is the door to the grandmother's workroom which contains hardly any furniture, "no carpet on the floor - no table anywhere - nothing but the spinning wheel and the chair beside it." The opposite door leads to the grandmother's bedroom. It sharply contrasts with the austere workroom. It is large and dome-shaped. It contains the moon-like lamp, an oval bed, the fire roses glowing "between the heads and wings of two cherubs of shining silver." The walls of this room are blue, "spangled all over with what looked like stars of silver." The most powerful item, however, is the "large oval tub of silver", a kind of cosmic bath in which the grandmother places Irene after she has rescued Curdie from the goblin mines. This bedroom represents the noumenal, and the workroom logically represents the phenomenal. The two rooms are opposites. What brings them together is the middle room. When the grandmother opens the door to this room Irene sees "the blue sky first, and then the roofs of the house, with a multitude of the loveliest pigeons, mostly white, but of all colours ..." This is a room that isn't a room; it connects the noumenal and the phenomenal, sky and house. The birds are both earthly and spiritual. They provide food and they are beautiful. They reconcile opposites: work and rest. Their work is their rest.

Everything about the grandmother we have seen so far suggests that she embodies the reconciliation of opposites. She reconciles paradox. Irene's experience of the grandmother enables her to navigate the goblin's caves; Curdie's experience of the grandmother enables him to defeat the goblins. The goblin/human conflict ends. The grandmother also helps reconcile social opposites, Curdie and his family with Irene and her family. This unifying function is also evident in the grandmother's treatment of Irene. Clearly she acts as Irene's teacher, and from this point of view she can be compared to many of MacDonald's mentor characters, especially Hugh Sutherland in Book Two of *David Elginbrod* (1864). Her mode of teaching is, at first,

strange. She intentionally confuses Irene. When Irene first meets her, she learns that her grandmother's name is also Irene, and that the grandmother has allowed Irene to have her name. Irene thanks the lady, but the lady replies: "A name is one of those things one can give away and keep all the same." Then she tells Irene who she is, Irene's "father's mother's father's mother." This confuses Irene, but the grandmother says she expected Irene would not understand. This same use of paradox and riddle is evident when the grandmother presents Irene with the ball of finely spun spider's thread. She first throws into the fire and then places it in her cabinet. Irene exclaims:

"I thought you had spun it for me."
 "So I did, my child. And you've got it."
 "No, it's burnt in the fire!"

.....
 "Have I done anything to vex you, grandmother?"
 said Irene pitifully.

"No, my darling. But you must understand that no one ever gives anything to another properly and really without keeping it. That ball is yours."

"But what use can I make of it, if it lies in your cabinet?"

"That is what I will explain to you. It would be of no use to you - it wouldn't be yours at all if it did not lie in my cabinet."

Strange explanation! And yet MacDonald is serious. Only by grappling with this kind of problem can Irene learn to think independently. This teaching is antithetical to that of the McChoacumchild school. It asks for both faith and intellectual struggle, faith in the grandmother's goodness and intellectual struggle to reconcile the paradoxes. Irene will grow to understand her grandmother's meaning that our imaginations are useless unless tied to an ideal, a vision; that a unity of mind is necessary for fulfillment.

This brings us to the final paradox reconciled by the grandmother: dream and reality. The grandmother, shut away in her tower, appears to offer little that is practical for the reader. She suggests fairy tale escape. Positivists would see little value in offering her seriously as a "true" character to children. Fairy godmothers do not exist; nor do mystic balls of thread that help us out of danger. The grandmother is closer to dream than to reality. Dreams may tell us something about our neuroses, but they are of little practical use unless we can either explain them away, or find moral truths in them to help us program our lives. Irene can neither explain her grandmother away, nor extract moral truths from her cryptic remarks. Neither can we if we wish to remain faithful to the spirit of the book.

For much of the book Irene worries that her grandmother is a dream, and MacDonald hints that Irene's worries have foundation. After her father's first visit Irene concludes that her grandmother is a dream although she "often and often wishes that her huge great grandmother had not been a dream." Her next visit to the grandmother follows the accident with the old brooch when Irene cuts herself. Her sleep that night is troubled with dreams. Finally she searches for her grandmother "not quite sure that she was not dreaming." She finds her grandmother who heals Irene's hand and ties a handkerchief around the wound. Irene falls asleep on the old lady's lap and wakes in her own bed. How did she get there? Presumably she never left it. But in the morning the handkerchief is gone, the swelling has disappeared and the pin prick has vanished. What are we to make of this? But the suggestion of dream is even stronger after Irene's next visit to her grandmother. This time the grandmother tells Irene of her worries that Irene had all but made up her mind that her grandmother was a dream "and no real great-grandmother." Clearly the grandmother thinks of herself as a reality and we are not asked to disbelieve her. Again Irene falls asleep in her grandmother's arms. MacDonald then writes: "How long she slept, I do not know. When she came to herself she was sitting in her own high chair at the nursery table, with her doll's house before her." Again, how did she get there? Even the ring she had received from her grandmother turns out to have been in her possession for years. By now we remember what Lottie whispered to the other servants, that "the princess was not in her right

mind," and we conclude that the grandmother is merely a figment of Irene's overactive imagination. After all, the grandmother tells Irene that she has been in the tower only as long as Irene has lived in the house. She is Irene's conception of her missing mother, a private creation Irene desperately wishes to share, but can't. This is why Curdie cannot see the grandmother when Irene takes him to the tower.

But there is the fact of the healed wound; there is the pigeon that lands on Irene's head in Chapter 10; there is the thread that enables Irene to invert convention and rescue Curdie; there is Mrs. Peterson's experience with the goblins; and there is Curdie's strange experience while delirious. Hearing goblins breaking into the King's house, Curdie who has been wounded in the leg tries to get out of bed. But he is dreaming and his repeated efforts to rise are futile. MacDonald clearly states: "in fact he was not awake, only dreaming that he was." His despair mounts until

there came, as he thought, a hand upon the lock of his door. It opened, and, looking up he saw 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.

He falls deeper into sleep and later wakes to find himself healthy again. When MacDonald says that Curdie was "only dreaming" he was awake we must take care about reading this too literally. The awakened condition, in MacDonald as in Blake, is the condition of cleansed perception. Irene is awake; she sees her grandmother. Lottie is not awake; she cannot see or believe in the grandmother. Curdie is on his way to this awakened condition, but as yet he has not reached it. So he dreams, but we remember: "Our life is no dream, but it should and will perhaps become one." The grandmother is both dream and reality, nature and supernature. She reconciles the two.

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 Cont'd from page 4

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- <sup>4</sup>Paul H. Kocher, *Master of Middle-Earth* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972), p. 183
- <sup>5</sup>Jung, *The Basic Writings*, p. 312
- <sup>6</sup>J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977), p. 60
- <sup>7</sup>J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers* (New York, Ballantine Books, 1965), p. 423
- <sup>8</sup>Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* p. 73
- <sup>9</sup>Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* p. 15
- <sup>10</sup>Jung, *The Basic Writings* p. 312
- <sup>11</sup>Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* p. 61
- <sup>12</sup>J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York, Ballantine Books, 1965) p. 473
- <sup>13</sup>Tolkien, *The Two Towers* p. 425
- <sup>14</sup>Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* p. 85
- <sup>15</sup>Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* p. 462
- <sup>16</sup>Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* p. 461
- <sup>17</sup>Tolkien, *The Two Towers* pp. 422-423
- <sup>18</sup>Marie-Louise von Franz, *Man and His Symbols* p. 178