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# The Magic Makes all the Difference: George MacDonald's Fairy Tales a Child's-Eye View

Rachel Johnson

## Introduction

So much has been written about the fairy tales of George MacDonald, their meaning<sup>1</sup>, their possible meaning<sup>2</sup>, how they differ from the moral tale prevalent in the nineteenth century<sup>3</sup>, but, as often happens with stories whose implied audience is the child, no-one asks the children.

I have two young friends patient enough not only to read some of MacDonald's tales, but also to talk to me about their reading. I chose the aspect of values conveyed in the fairy tales and gave these children, let's call them Lizzie and David, two suggested areas to think about while they were reading. They related to good and bad characters and right and wrong behaviour. These suggestions served to focus our thoughts, particularly at the beginning of the discussion.

The general question of the use of fairy tales as a tool for moral education has been addressed in depth elsewhere<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, after a brief introduction explaining the sense in which I have used the term 'values', the children's responses will be the central content of this paper. I will conclude with a short analysis of their responses.

One of the characteristics of traditional fairytales is their ability to hold attention because they address what Bettelheim calls "the eternal questions," for example,

"What is the world really like? How am I to live my life in it?" (Bettelheim).

These traditional tales hold what Rosemary Haughton describes as 'folk sense,' meaning a sense of "what matters, what is lasting" and which "survives the conditioning of civilization. This is the sense in which I have used the term core values and it is these core values that Lizzie, David and I discussed. Linda Hall emphasises the "intrinsic value" of fairy tales to engender thought on moral issues such as the deceptiveness of appearances and the danger of judging

people according to superficial considerations. (e.g. *Beauty and the Beast*).

Both Haughton<sup>5</sup> and Zipes<sup>6</sup> use the term counter cultural in their respective discussions of traditional and literary fairytales. They refer to tales that show a value structure that opposes the accepted norm within which society operates. Literary tales such as MacDonald's may do this in order to critique the society within which they are written, but they also tap into the same strand of 'folk sense', of 'what matters' that gives the traditional tales that "magic and irreducibility." (Hall)

So what did the children say? First of all, a quotation from C.S. Lewis:

"A child is always thinking about those details in a story which a grown-up regards as indifferent."

## Lizzie

Lizzie was seven years old when she was first introduced to George MacDonald's writing. A miniature, unabridged copy of *The Light Princess* with illustrations by Arthur Hughes, is an attractive proposition to a young, avid reader. It was not long before the question "What else did he write?" was asked.

*The Light Princess and other stories* was her next encounter with MacDonald, an obvious volume to follow the single story, especially as it began with her now familiar favourite. And so to the longer fairy tales, *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie*.

It was during a lengthy conversation with Lizzie, that we came to rest on *The Princess and the Goblin*. The conversation developed from a discussion about how good and bad values are shown and can be recognised in fairy tales, traditional, literary and contemporary.

I offered her this story with the proviso that if she really did not enjoy reading it she should stop. Lizzie

was eight years old at the time. She not only enjoyed reading the story but discussed it in the following way:

Lizzie began by pointing out that the story had two sides,

“a real side and a magical side”

and went on to say that the mine in the story was

“like a wall separating the magical from the possible”.

Lizzie brought in examples of these two sides, starting with the house on the mountainside. She thought this “could have been true,” but the castle side was more magical. She cited more examples from among the characters in the story, separating the Grandmother and the Goblins, “more fairytale like,” from the Nurse and the King, “more real.” Lizzie positioned the Princess somewhere in between as if she had a foot in both camps, as indeed, she had. She didn't mention the soldiers or Curdie at this point, but using her system, the soldiers would have fallen into the ‘real’ side, and Curdie in between like the Princess, but more ‘real’. This became clear as the discussion progressed.

Lizzie then began to talk more about the characters. She began with the Princess and the Grandmother, who she saw as good characters. She made this assessment by looking at their attitude to and behaviour towards other people. Curdie and the Nurse she thought were not quite so clear-cut. “Basically they were good” was Lizzie's assessment, but she pointed out areas where they lacked the ‘goodness’ of the Princess and the Grandmother. That both of them disbelieved the Princess's account of the Grandmother was Lizzie's main point. She emphasised that Curdie was prepared to believe in the Grandmother when he saw her, and said she had thought about “how I would be in his position.”

On the other hand, Lizzie said

“The Nurse never believed in the Grandmother and she was not at all prepared to be aware there might be a Grandmother.”

In other words, the nurse's closedness contrasted with Curdie's preparedness to consider the possibility.

Lizzie did not think there was enough about the King to decide whether he was a good or a bad character, and went straight on to the Goblins, who she saw as “clear cut bad characters.” Again the criteria she used was their behaviour towards other people. She said,

“they were not even nice to each other.”

She also thought the goblin animals were bad and backed this up by saying that she thought they had deliberately caused Curdie to be lost by moving his pickaxe in the mine, to which his guiding thread was tied. I questioned this view, and asked her if she thought they might have just been playing, found it and moved it in the course of their game, but Lizzie still thought it was a deliberate (successful) attempt to lose him. Lizzie thought the mixture of the two sides, that is “the real” and “the fairytale like” was “really good.” She also said

“the magic needs to make all the difference to a story to be acceptable in a story.”

Lizzie thought the character that most showed both “the real side” and “the magical side” was the Grandmother. She thought the Grandmother

“could have fitted into a family, but the inside of her was not quite real, it could be a bit frightening.”

Lizzie also thought that the story

“still made you feel it was a fairytale—like you were reading one, because he (MacDonald) had the side if things that makes you think.”

Lizzie's approach to text *The Princess and the Goblin* was systematic. She noted the two sides to the story; the magical and the real, before moving on to examine the characters. She had already initiated her own criteria by which to assess the ‘goodness’ or ‘badness’ of the characters she met, by focusing on their attitude and behaviour toward other characters, human or otherwise.

This quickly led her into grey areas, in which characters were more rounded, unlike most characters in traditional tales and presented elements of both good and bad in their behaviour. Lizzie singled out Curdie in particular as being “basically good” but specified his disbelief in the Grandmother's existence as his main problem. Lizzie recognised the Grandmother as the most magical character, wholly good. In doing so, Lizzie had tapped into the larger than life significance of this character, who is part of a long tradition of ‘wise women/fairy godmothers’ who, it has been suggested, originate in the Sophia, or wisdom figure of ancient literature<sup>7</sup>. Particularly perceptive was Lizzie's comment that she “could be a bit frightening,” that goodness was not necessarily a comfortable sensation when encountered by either the Princess or Curdie, particularly Curdie, who was only “on the way to being good.”<sup>8</sup> Lizzie also recognised that Curdie's behaviour

toward the Princess was not entirely accepting and trusting. He could not yet accept her word in the face of his own as yet limited perceptions. This observation again emphasised Lizzie's benchmark of goodness, as being measured by how a character behaved toward those in need of protection or help without regard to her own interest.

Lizzie's last point, that "it was a fairy tale . . . because (it) makes you think" is significant in that it shows that Lizzie had perceived the fairy tale to be something more than just an entertaining story but one in which "*more is meant than meets the ear*,"<sup>9</sup> and in which there is more to be discovered if the reader or listener is open to what has been described as "a fruitful state of unease" (Lyons), a state in which s/he is more likely to accept, in Lizzie's terms, "being made to think."

### **David**

David had not read any MacDonald prior to his introduction to *The Light Princess and other Fairy Tales*. We discussed the stories in a way that ranged over all of them with particular emphasis on the behaviour of the characters. David often cross-referenced his observations to other reading. As a voracious and thoughtful reader with a preference for fantasy literature this broadened and enriched our discussion, which opened on *The Light Princess*. David was 12 years old at the time of our discussion.

David's first observation was that the story was less stereotyped than traditional tales, that the characters were less clear cut and simple and that "it was more like a real life scenario." David developed this by picking out particular elements in the plot and separating them from the characters, who were, on the surface, he thought, traditional fairy tale characters. He cited King, Queen, Princess, Bad Fairy and Prince. David picked out the situation of the two parents' concern over the problems posed by their child as being the sort of basic idea encountered in "real life." David observed that the characters were "more rounded," that "good and bad were still the same" (as in traditional tales), but that the Princess had faults, whereas in traditional tales a Princess figure equals 'good'.

David thought the Bad Fairy had reasons for being bad, such as her rejection by her family. He believed that MacDonald wanted to get a message across, but did it in a less simple, more subtle way than in traditional tales. At this point in the discussion we moved further into the story and the possible messages that it contained.

David's perception was that these were focused on the Princess and the Prince. He saw the Princess as "untouched by sadness and sorrow" until her meeting with the Prince, which was "a meeting with reality."

David thought this story contained more suspense than the traditional tales in that it might not have had a happy ending, the Prince almost drowned, it was "almost too late and could have gone either way." David thought this suspense added interest. He thought that the message of the story was that

"sacrifices have to be made. Though good wins, it is at a price."

David wondered if the Prince was a sort of Christ figure in his willingness to die for someone else. He emphasised that the Prince really was willing to die, as he could not have known that he would be saved just as he was about to drown.

David thought that this tale showed a maturation of the fairy tale concept as it "included another dimension with more real and believable detail." This is the same observation made earlier by Lizzie on her reading of *The Princess and the Goblin*. He also thought that though there was a moral, it was not overt in that the reader's mind was "channelled but not forced into picking the moral up." He commented that the story could be read at a variety of levels, the reader taking from it whatever s/he was able to. This perception fits exactly MacDonald's own expressed intention in his writing of fairy tales.

'Everyone, however, who feels the story, will read its meaning after his own nature and development . . .'<sup>10</sup>

We briefly discussed the humour in this story, which David saw as expressing another of the story's levels. He thought the three Doctors were caricatures of how those people who look at a problem from only one viewpoint can be unaware of what may be involved as a consequence of their suggestions. The caricature here is of a blindness brought on by tunnel vision, "lacking any kind of common sense," as David put it.

David thought that in more modern tales, by which he meant those more recent than the traditional tales, characters were rarely stereotyped as wholly good or bad. In his experience, he thought that though the characters may have "changed position" and no longer personified a value as they did in traditional tales, the same values came through the story in the sense that good was still portrayed as good and bad as bad. He believed that it did not matter which character demonstrated these traits. David pointed out that

"beauty could still be evil"

and that

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“good is to be recognised even when coming from unusual sources”

and vice versa. This is a key point that is developed again later in the discussion.

David thought that stories that focused on actions meant that characters were

“not judged on first impressions,”

also that characters' attitudes and how they dealt with mistakes, was more indicative of what they were like. He believed stories where

“actions are the essence”

were

“more realistic and you could relate to them.”

As an example of this, he cited the role of the King and the Prince in a traditional fairy tale, where the King, as father to the Princess, awaits the Prince who will win her hand. In *The Light Princess*, he saw these roles as the same, but taken further in the Prince's willingness to sacrifice himself to save the Princess's life. It was this 'taking further' in MacDonald's story that brought in the additional element of redemption, where a character can change, or be changed. David thought this option to choose to change was important.

The discussion with David was wide-ranging. David again used behaviour toward other characters, even those who were not wholly good, as the criterion for deciding who was good, or rather, in a tale in which most characters had elements of both good and bad, who had more 'good' characteristics than others.

David emphasised the choice and effort involved in making 'right' decisions. This is an aspect in which this tale differs from the traditional tale in which the good character appears to make the right decision effortlessly, though it is still a choice, even if the character has no idea what s/he stands to gain or lose by that choice. The difference in effort made also came across in his emphasis on the price paid by the Prince in *The Light Princess*. Potentially he could have lost his life and the sacrificial act was conscious and painful. David drew examples from other stories he had read and voiced the concept of good being expressed in action explicitly when he referred to “character swaps,” that is where traditionally good or bad characters performed actions that did not traditionally go with their persona. He gave the example of “good giants or bad children.” In pointing out that despite these swaps, the values that came through were still the same, that as long as good was still portrayed as good and bad as bad, this swap was not a problem. In observing this,

David exemplified Rohrich's statement when he wrote about 'motifs of rectification', or universal ideas of what is right, Rohrich points out the problems which may arise—“if you turn them upside down or change their meaning, you have chaos.” This would happen if the hero is shown “performing actions of destruction rather than creation or solution” (Rohrich).

David's firm belief that “actions are the essence” was confirmed by the reaction of Lizzie in her equally firm insistence that the criterion for distinguishing between good and bad values lay in how the characters treated others and not in who they were. They also emphasised the importance of not calling good actions and attitudes bad and vice versa, as they perceived the danger of “confusion leading to chaos,” that could result from such distortion.

Both children used the same criteria to decide which character was good and which bad within a tale. As Winston<sup>11</sup> points out, the children's own moral values would inform the meaning of the text which they examined, but they also included in the discussion their own observations and experience of what was important and what made a difference to them. The children consistently reinforced the observation that “compassion counts” (Tatar) and that how the characters treated one another is “what matters” (Haughton). So the core values, the sense of “what matters, what is lasting and which survives the conditioning of civilization” (Haughton) are, as understood by Lizzie and David, vested in the actions and attitudes of the characters. I believe this indicates that their sense of “what matters” follows a deeper stream of values than those found in the contemporary socio-historic setting, though some contemporary ideologies are inevitably absorbed into this deeper stream.

I would like to end with a short piece by another young reader which captures the essence of MacDonald's appeal to the perennial child. It is a reminder that however much we may study and analyse the tales, the children for whom they were written should have the last word.

*The Princes and the Goblin* – by George MacDonald, written by Tom, aged 7 years

“I enjoyed this book because I thought Irena had lots of Adventures. Her Grandmother was very interesting, George MacDonald is a very good writer in the way he uses his imagination. The characters are fantastic. The best bit was when Irena went into her Grandmother's bedroom. I had to keep Reading because you had to know what was going to happen next.”

(Tom's spelling)

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For example William Raeper, ed., The Gold Thread (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1990)..
- <sup>2</sup> For example Robert Lee Wolf, The Golden Key: A Study of the Fiction of George Macdonald (New Haven: Yale UP, 1961)..
- <sup>3</sup> For example Gillian Avery, "George Macdonald and the Victorian Fairytale," The Gold Thread, ed. William Raeper (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1990)..
- <sup>4</sup> For example Bruno Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales (London: Penguin, 1991).
- <sup>5</sup> Rosemary Haughton, Tales from Eternity: The World of Fairy and the Spiritual Search (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1973)..
- <sup>6</sup> Jack Zipes, Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilisation (New York: Routledge, 1991).
- <sup>7</sup> For further exploration of this see Dierdre Hayward, "The Mystical Sophia: More on the Great Grandmother in the Princess Books," North Wind. Journal of the George MacDonald Society.13 (1994).
- <sup>8</sup> in MacDonald, George. The Princess and Curdie. London: Chatto and Windus, 1883.
- <sup>9</sup> Title page of MacDonald, George. Dealings With The Fairies. London: Alexander Strahan, 1867.
- <sup>10</sup> MacDonald, George. "The Fantastic Imagination." A Dish of Orts. London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., 1890. Whitethorn, CA: Johannesen, 1996. 351.
- <sup>11</sup> Joe Winston, Drama, Narrative and Moral Education: Exploring Traditional Tales in the Primary Years (London: Falmer Press, 1998).

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