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‘A Sort of a Fairy Tale’: Narrative and Genre in George MacDonald’s *Little Daylight*

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George MacDonald’s tale *Little Daylight* first appeared as Chapter 28 of his longer story *At the Back of the North Wind* (1870). It has subsequently been reprinted in other collections of fairy tales and has more recently been retold in a picture book in which the narrative is equally in the verbal and written text.¹

I will begin this article with an introduction to place it within the wider context of *ABNW* before examining the structure, motifs and characterisation within the tale *Little Daylight* with references to episodes within *ABNW*. In the final section I will draw together analysis and comment made in order to identify genres represented in the tale.

Placement within *At the Back of the North Wind*

The scene for *Little Daylight* is set at the close of chapter 27 of *At the Back of the North Wind* where the author as narrator takes over from the internal narrator, Mr. Raymond, and provides a brief gloss on Mr. Raymond’s story told to children in the Children’s Hospital. I will assume some reader familiarity with *ABNW* and the main human character Diamond. Nanny, a crossing sweeper and a friend of Diamond is recovering from her illness. Diamond had enlisted the help of Mr. Raymond in order to get her into the hospital, thereby saving her life.

In two sentences towards the end of chapter 27, MacDonald sums up part of his essay on fairy tale from *A Dish of Orts* when he writes

“I don’t quite know how much there was in it (i.e. the tale *Little Daylight*) to be understood, for in such a story everyone has just to take

what he can get” (MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*).

Adrian Gunther (Gunther) points out that the above comment, followed by the observation

“they (i.e. the children) all listened with apparent satisfaction, and certainly with great attention” (MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, 257)

indicates that the story’s impact will be on the subconscious and on the imagination rather than on the intellect, like the poem Diamond’s mother read to him in chapter 13 of *ABNW* when they were on the beach and Diamond himself was recovering from illness. The rhymes he subsequently made to soothe his baby brother operate on this imaginative and subconscious rather than intellectual level, though these rhymes are concerned with rhythm in a musical sense rather than in a verbal sense. Both of these narratorial comments apply to the wider context of *Little Daylight*, that is to *ABNW*, as well as to the tale itself. In his introduction to the tale, the external narrator steps outside of the text as he makes the intertextual comment drawing the reader’s attention to the inspiration of “*The Sleeping Beauty*” as a possible source for the central idea of Mr. Raymond’s story. By referring to “*The Sleeping Beauty*” the external narrator indicates the genre ‘fairy tale’ to the listener, creating an expectation that what s/he is about to hear will follow the traditional fairy tale narrative pattern. The external narrator also infers the expectation of change in oral storytelling when he writes

“for a good storyteller tries to make his stories better every time he tells them” (MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, 257).

He embeds the idea of the genre ‘fairy tale’ in the mind of the listener/reader, despite the earlier comment by Mr. Raymond that he will tell “a sort of a fairy one” (MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, 250) in response to the request for a fairy tale, which, incidentally, came from a little boy. The request for a true story came from a little girl. These responses in themselves indicate an inversion of the expected gender stereotypical preference in answer to the question “What sort of story shall it be?” Mr. Raymond’s reply “I suppose, as there is a difference, I may choose” (MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*) implies an acceptance of the difference between a true story and a fairy tale, though the phrase ‘as there is a difference’ plants a doubt as to whether that difference might not be as clear or as obvious as the requester assumed. The reader/listener expectation from any genre is culturally learned and therefore it is more difficult for her to categorise a narrative when the expected generic pattern is subverted.

Summary of the tale *Little Daylight*

The Princess Daylight is born to a king and queen who live in a palace with a wood on one side of it. Seven good fairies and one wicked fairy attend her christening. When the fairies confer their gifts, two out of the seven good fairies are ‘kept in reserve’ until after the wicked fairy had done her bit, in order to “undo as much as they might” (282).

The wicked fairy’s curse was that the Little Daylight shall sleep all day and her physical and emotional state shall wax and wane with the moon. The best that the two remaining good fairies could do to mitigate the curse was to enable her to wake all night and provide a condition to the curse, that it should only last “until a prince comes who shall kiss her without knowing it” (282).

The royal household adjusted its routine accordingly. The Princess Daylight sought solitude in the wood where she grew ever more beautiful as the moon waxed and as the moon waned so did her beauty.

A prince, dressed as a peasant and fleeing insurrection in his own kingdom, finds himself at the cottage of one of the good fairies. Lost in the wood at night, he discovers Daylight dancing in an open glade. With a little help from the good fairy, and from the wicked fairy, though she thought she was hindering their meeting, the prince finds Daylight again when the moon is at its weakest. She appears old and ill. The prince kisses her out of compassion for her desperate condition as he tries to ease her suffering, thinking she is about to die. He does not of course know who she is.

The story ends as dawn breaks over the wood and Daylight watches the sun rise for the first time. The spell is broken.

The Wood

Having raised the listeners’ expectation of a fairy tale, the narrator begins the story by setting the scene.

“On one side of every palace there must be a wood” (MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, 278).

The first sentence provides two expected fairy tale motifs, the palace and the wood, the one “open to the sun and wind,” the other “growing wilder and wilder, until some wild beasts did what they liked in it” (MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, 278).

The opposition between palace and wood is the first in a series of oppositions which are interwoven throughout the story. These oppositions are indicative of Roland Barthes symbolic code in which he states that oppositions mark out the province of antithesis. In Barthes statement that meaning can be articulated by representing its difference, the plight of Daylight as cursed never to see the sun is delineated against the description of her appearance, which is always described in terms of sunshine, blue sky and summer, in which the daylight hours are longer.

In Northrop Frye’s discussion of fictional mode he states that the typical setting for romance is a forest. Though Daylight’s wood is consistently referred to as a ‘wood,’ the description of its extent and inhabitants satisfy the requirements of a forest, such as wildness, the unknown (fairies), wild beasts and ultimately, the unexplored, “nobody had ever yet got to the end of it” (MacDonald, 1992 #366, 278).

Whilst it is clearly stated that this narrative is a fairy tale, Frye’s explanation of the combining of fictional forms, one meaning of which can refer to genres, has been demonstrated at the beginning of a narrative viewed as a fairy tale by both editors and critics,² though the author paved the way for this flexibility by referring to the story as “a sort of a fairy one” (MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, 258). In the mixing of genre, the tale reflects in a minor way the major combination of fantasy and realism in *ABNW* of which it is a part.

The reference to Barthes symbolic code in connection with binary opposition invites a symbolic meaning for the wood, which, described as “trim and nice” near the palace and getting progressively wilder and uncomprehended the further from civilization it stretches is interpreted by Gunther as representing the subconscious mind which Daylight explores more deeply as she grows older and as her physical and emotional conditions change.

‘A Sort of a Fairy Tale’: Narrative and Genre in George MacDonald’s *Little Daylight* • Rachel Johnson

At the beginning of the tale, the attention given to the wood indicates its prominence as the scene of action. As a fairy tale motif, the wood or forest is an essential part of the background. The emphasis given to it in the opening paragraph of the tale reinforces the self-conscious inclusion of the expected motifs of a fairy tale.

Daylight “made her appearance” (279)

The birth of Little Daylight is announced against a background of a description of the elements

“when the wind and the sun were out together”

“. . . she made her appearance from somewhere” (MacDonald, 1992 #366, 279).

The statement that “she made her appearance from somewhere” equates her looks and character with the sun and the wind and establishes the basis for her elemental, mysterious presence in the wood later in the story. The “bright eyes” and “lively ways” associated with her name, Daylight, and implying daylight as her natural element provide the second opposition, that of day and night or light and darkness. The contrast between her looks and her enforced place of waking existence prepares the listener for the same startling discrepancy as she dances in the moonlight at night and, in her weakened state at the waning of the moon, when her hair remained “the sunniest” and her eyes a “heavenly blue, brilliant . . . as the sky of a June day” giving her an “unnatural appearance” (MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind, 284/5).

The Fairies

The fairies are introduced through their connection with the wood and as part of the natural world, linking them to Daylight’s elemental character. They live in trees “one, a hollow oak; another, a birch tree . . .” (279). By characterising them as elementally connected to their environment the narrator has deviated from the fairy tale convention in two ways. The first is by placing them in the history of the country

“fairies live so much longer than we, that they can have business with a good many generations of human mortals” (MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind, 279)

and the second is by drawing into the story the image of the dryad from Greek mythology. The inclusion of a mythical element is another example of the “the co-existence between several generic modes” (Jameson). The image of the dryad is usually associated with youth, so the depiction of them as ageless not only links them to the youthfulness of Daylight, but with the ageless

wise woman of, for example MacDonald’s tales *The Golden Key*, *The Wise Woman*, *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie*. It also sets up the third opposition, that of youth and age, in preparation for the contrast between Daylight’s condition and appearance at the waxing and waning of the moon.

“The more beautiful she was in the full moon, the more withered and worn did she become as the moon waned . . . she looked, . . . Like an old woman exhausted with suffering” (MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind).

The wicked fairy is only referred to in terms of age and is defined by mud and swamp, parts of the natural world associated in the Victorian mind with ill-health and disease.³ The remote, unexplored place where she lived and the description of mud and swamp also equates with those parts of the British Empire associated with disease, ignorance and spiritual darkness.

The Christening

The occasion of the christening, the invitations and who is forgotten are described in a similar way to the same event in MacDonald’s *Light Princess* (1867). The fairy tale convention of the christening and giving of gifts by fairies is foregrounded by the narrator’s commentary on narrative expectation when he says

“In all history we find that fairies give their remarkable gifts to prince or princess, . . . , always at the christening” (MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind, 260)

followed by the fourth opposition, that of goodness and wickedness as he continues

“wicked fairies choose the same time to do unkind things” (260).

The narrator’s commentary continues as he introduces a brief theology of suffering into the tale.

“But I never knew of any interference on the part of a wicked fairy that did not turn out a good thing in the end” (260).

He immediately lightens the allusion by giving *Sleeping Beauty*, from which *Little Daylight* is stated to be derived, as a proven example of such interference and its benefit, that is, that Sleeping Beauty was spared the “plague of young men” and woke up “when the right prince kissed her” (260).

The narrator concludes

“For my part I cannot help wishing a good many girls would sleep until just the same fate overtook them. It would be happier for them, and more agreeable for their friends” (260).

This of course is debatable, not only in terms of the maturation process, male dominance and female independence, but also if the original Grimm’s version of *Sleeping Beauty* is considered as the point of departure, but that is another discussion.

In the context of *Little Daylight*, the brief interpellation of theology echoes an earlier, fuller discussion in chapters six and seven of *ABNW* as North Wind takes Diamond out in a storm. Her task is to sink a ship. After several pages of discussion between Diamond and North Wind as Diamond attempts to reconcile his firm belief in the goodness of North Wind with her mission to sink a ship with people on board. North Wind herself tries to explain how she hears “the sound of a far off song .. it tells me that all is right; that it is coming to swallow up all cries” (MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind). In the last chapter of *Phantastes*, MacDonald’s first adult fantasy published in 1858, he writes “What we call evil, is only the best shape, which, for the person and his condition at the time, could be assumed by the best good” (MacDonald, Phantastes). A biblical example of this line of thought can be found in Genesis 45:5, the story of Joseph.

Commentaries on MacDonald’s theology⁴ discuss his theology of suffering in depth but in the present context of fairy tale it is an unexpected departure from generic convention.

The spell placed upon Daylight, despite the best efforts of the two good fairies ‘kept in reserve,’ meant that she would not know what daylight was, would fall asleep as soon as the sun appeared and, though awake at night, would wax and wane with the moon. The rearrangement of the household to accommodate this pattern is glossed over, except for the effect of the waning moon on the princess.

“She was wan and withered like the poorest, sickliest child you might come upon in the streets of a great city in the arms of a homeless mother” (MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind).

This is the condition of Nanny when Diamond found her ill and before she was brought to the children’s hospital. The wider context of the fairy tale is thus foregrounded against the immediate realism of Diamond’s London as presented in *ABNW*.

“And thus things went on until she was nearly seventeen years of age” (MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind).

Seventeen was the age at which the Light Princess discovered water just as Daylight discovered the element ‘moonlight.’ The Light Princess swam in the lake, Daylight dance in the moonlight. In this way, both gained independence and freedom. Gunther writes

“the active agent in his (MacDonald’s) fairy tales is almost always female” (Gunther).

She contrasts Daylight with the passive heroine of traditional tales, particularly *Sleeping Beauty*. Her view ignores both the high proportion of traditional fairy tale heroines who are the propelling force of the tale and the unavoidable fact that Daylight still has to await her prince before she can be freed from the spell which binds her to an unbalanced life in which the sun does not feature. She can only experience the reflection of the source of light and enjoy the moon.

Enter the Prince

It is as Daylight is reaching “the zenith of her loveliness” (MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind 293) as the moon was “nearer the full” that the prince discovers her. One paragraph explains how the prince came to be deep in the wood. This paragraph reads like a potted version of a boys adventure story and includes political rebellion, violence, flight, disguise and hardship of the kind that toughens the prince and brings out the essential ‘decency’ and thoughtfulness of his character. The only unexpected trait is his passivity. His action is portrayed in terms of lack of choice. He was “compelled to flee for his life” (286). He did not abandon his peasant disguise because “he had no other clothes to put on and . . . very little money” (286). He told no-one he was a prince

“For he felt a prince ought to be able to get on like other people” (287)

and he had set out on his quest through necessity. MacDonald continues to parody the fairy tale narrative when he says of the prince

“He had read of princes setting out upon adventure; and here he was in similar case, only without having had a choice in the matter” (287).

The prince is following a passive destiny, but that destiny is still that of the fairy tale figure the youngest or only son, and the outcome will depend upon an act of spontaneous compassion.

From the point of the prince’s appearance, the expected fairy tale motifs gather around him. Though he does not realise it, he receives supernatural help from the good fairy and from her gifts, which he has with him just when they are needed. These gifts are the

tinder box and a small bottle of cordial, both gifts that resonate with former fairy tale appearances. The hospitality of the good fairy reinforces her parallels with the wise women already cited from MacDonald’s tales. The food she gives him and the rest he has in her cottage have an extra-ordinary restorative effect, just as the food and rest offered by the wise woman in *The Wise Woman*, *The Golden Key* and *The Princess and the Goblin* restores Rosamund, Tangle and Irene.

At the point when the prince first sees her, Daylight is living in her own house deep in the wood. As she grew older, she had retreated further into the darker, wilder parts of the wood until she settled at the edge of an open glade

“for here the full moon shone free and glorious” (266).

The prince had “wandered and wandered, and got nowhere” (268) before he reached this open glade. ‘Somewhere’ is defined in the prince’s terms as anywhere not in the wood, so anywhere still in the wood he felt to be nowhere. The paradox is that he reached the only place where he needed to be to fulfil his destiny. In her retreat into the wood, Daylight, still described in terms of the sun and the summer sky, was, in the process of maturation, taming the unknown, taking her daylight character into the dark unexplored recesses of the wood, even while she waned with the moon. When the prince first observed her dancing and singing in the glade, she appeared to him as “some strange being of the wood” (269), an elemental creature rather than a human.

Daylight’s dance graphically illustrates Nikolajeva’s concept of children’s fiction as “a symbolic depiction of a maturation process” (Nikolajeva) in its cyclical motion and its continual movement from the circular to the linear as Daylight progresses towards the completion of her character as she approaches adulthood. She is of course unaware of this significance. Her dance is inspired by the fullness of the moon and “the exuberance of her delight” (274). Fairy tale, romance and myth, the three genres that ‘co-exist,’ to use Jameson’s term, in this story, all exist in mythical time, emphasising the importance of the cycles of nature. In this story the cyclical nature of the phases of the moon are, at the point of the prince’s entry, intersected by the linearity of his story up to the point of his meeting with Daylight. At this point of intersection he breaks into and joins her to complete the transformation of both their realities which is characteristic of both romance and fairy tale.

“The very thing she was trying to prevent” (278)

When the bad fairy realised the prince had “seen Daylight,”

“she contrived by her deceitful spells, that the next night the prince could not by any endeavour find his way to the glade” (MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*).

But; and here the narrator breaks into the story to reinforce the theological commentary he had inserted earlier,

“But it is all of no consequence, for what they (the wicked fairies) do never succeeds; nay, in the end it brings about the very thing they are trying to prevent . . . from the beginning of the world they have really helped instead of thwarting the good fairies” (MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*).

The princess, “dancing like an embodied sunbeam,” had already taken control of what might have been a relationship

“for, however much she might desire to be set free, she was dreadfully afraid of the wrong prince” (MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*).

By preventing the prince from finding Daylight again until she was in her ‘waned’ condition, the wicked fairy ruled out any possibility of the spell being broken because she had ruled out compassion, not having any herself. As Maria Tatar writes, in fairy tales “compassion counts” (Tatar) and, true to the compassionate act performed by the youngest or only son in traditional fairy tales, the prince kisses the princess when she appears old and ill, purely out of compassion and without knowing that in doing this act, he is fulfilling his destiny and freeing Daylight from the spell.

The seven days and nights when the prince is wandering in the wood equates within the fairy tale narrative structure with the struggle or test, which continues until his treatment of the supposedly old and sick woman is clear. Searching for the princess, whom he has only seen “at the zenith of her loveliness,” his behaviour toward the person he finds at the foot of a great birch tree is entirely disinterested. It is at this point that the two gifts from the good fairy are needed; the tinderbox to light a fire and the cordial which revived the princess sufficiently for her to open her eyes and look at the prince. It is worth noting that this is the second time the princess has been found at the foot of a birch tree. One of the good fairies lived in a birch tree and may have been aiding the princess more than she realised.

The prince’s compassionate kiss completes the fairy tale cycle of quest, test, success, by freeing the princess. The final expectation in a fairy tale narrative is that of success, or homecoming, which in this case

does not happen. As with so many of MacDonald’s stories, there is no conclusive ending. Cohan and Shires point out that the opening and closing of a story mark events paradigmatically (Cohan), that is, the initial event is replaced or transformed by the closing event. Though *Little Daylight* follows this pattern, it departs from the expected ‘happy ever after’ ending and finishes with the prince and princess still in the wood facing “the first gleam of morning” (281). As Gunther states,

“the ending is the beginning, a new stage in the process, a new birth” (Gunther).

This takes us back into the host story, *ABNW*, which ends with what appears to be the death of Diamond. The narrator, Mr. Raymond, articulates one of MacDonald’s key ideas when he says

“they thought he was dead. I knew he had gone to the back of the North Wind.”
(MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*)

Indicating that the dimension at the back of the north wind was more real, and reaching it was a movement into more life.

Conclusion

In this brief examination of the tale I have demonstrated how the fairy tale pattern of journey, test, success, interwoven with the romance pattern of destiny, providence, ethical opposition and transformation, encompasses the progress of the prince and Daylight within and without their expected fairy tale roles. The “reliance on antecedents for parodic effects” (Knoepflmacher) is so overt as to prepare the listener for the subversion of narrative and character and the oppositions found in setting, character, characteristics, time, and ethics.

The children in the hospital “were delighted” (282) with the story. Ending with the expectation that daily life in the world of the palace with its consequent responsibilities and practicalities would resume, Diamond and Mr. Raymond are lead back into the practicalities of their responsibility for the recovering Nanny.

The tale *Little Daylight* is a turning point in *ABNW* as the lives of Diamond’s family, Nanny and Mr. Raymond, hitherto touching only occasionally, become inextricably linked. Romance and fairy tale leak into the realistic aspects of *ABNW*, transforming “ordinary reality” (Jameson).

¹ Anthea and Duntze Bell, Dorothee (illustrator), ed., *Little Daylight by George MacDonald* (London: North South Books, 1987).

² See for example Sadler’s *Gifts of the Child Christ* and Gunther’s article referenced in the bibliography.

³ See information on damp, sanitation and swamp miasmas in A.N. Wilson, *The Victorians* (London: Arrow Books, 2003).

⁴ For example Hein, Raeper, Phillips.

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