

1-1-1999

Some Linguistic Moves in the Carroll-MacDonald “Literary Game”

Fernando Soto

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind>

Recommended Citation

Soto, Fernando (1999) "Some Linguistic Moves in the Carroll-MacDonald “Literary Game”," *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*: Vol. 18 , Article 5.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind/vol18/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Digital Commons @ St. Norbert College. It has been accepted for inclusion in North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ St. Norbert College. For more information, please contact sarah.titus@snc.edu.

Some Linguistic Moves in the Carroll-MacDonald “Literary Game”

Fernando Soto

The Red Queen shook her head. “You may call it ‘nonsense’ if you like,” she said, “but I’ve heard nonsense, compared with which that would be as sensible as a dictionary!”

(Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking-Glass)

“Your words are strange, madam!” I rejoined. “But I have heard it said that some words, because they mean more, appear to mean less!”

(George MacDonald, Lilith)

In *The Literary Products of the Lewis Carroll - George MacDonald Friendship*, John Docherty presents a great number of direct and indirect references and connections which suggest that a “literary game” was being played between these two authors. With one of these great storytellers frequently visiting the other, *and* telling stories to the latter’s family, it was almost inevitable that such a “game” should develop. The present paper looks at an interesting and complex example of the linguistic knowledge or “rules” underlying the game played by these two Victorian writers.

The example to be dealt with is the strange connections both Carroll and MacDonald make regarding “cats,” “hearths” and “fires.” In the “Pig and Pepper” chapter of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Carroll introduces the (Cheshire) cat with the following description: “The door led right into a large kitchen [. . .] The Duchess was sitting on a three-legged stool in the middle, nursing a baby; the cook was leaning over the fire [. . .] The only two creatures in the kitchen that did *not* sneeze, were the cook and a large cat, which was lying on the hearth” (52-53).

This information clearly does not fit Tenniel’s illustration of the scene. There the hearth is empty and abandoned on the right-hand side of the picture and the **[end of page 45]** **[Note: image not available]** cook is standing beside a new kitchen-range on the left. This range appears to have had a low platform specially constructed for it, which is only very slightly larger than the dimensions of the range. So there is no need for the cook

to lean over the fire (i.e. stove) and no room for the cat on the platform. What is most strange of all is that the cat is lying right against the platform, almost touching the hottest part of the grossly overheated stove. Carroll very closely supervised Tenniel's drawings (Hancher 27-28) and would have instructed him to introduce these details. Why has this neat modern cooking-range—clearly not yet mastered by the cook—replaced the open hearth of the narrative, and how is it possible for a cat to lie so close to an overheated stove?

The whole "Pig and Pepper" chapter is missing from Carroll's first version of the story: *Alice's Adventures Under-Ground*. However, Roger Lancelyn Green (*Wonderland* 57n), is certain that "Pig and Pepper" existed as a separate story before it was adapted as a chapter for *Wonderland*, and Docherty adduces evidence which tends to support Green's view (167). That would place its creation during a period when Carroll was paying frequent visits to the MacDonalds, and he is likely to have told this initial version of "Pig and Pepper" to them.

Evidence that this was probably the case appears in MacDonald's "Cross Purposes," first published at Christmas 1862. Most readers of *Wonderland* probably disregard the discrepancies between Tenniel's illustration and Carroll's description of the Duchess's kitchen, regarding the latter as part of a characteristically Carrollian nonsense episode. But "Cross Purposes" also has an Alice-cat-hearth-fire episode, and this is can seem even more "nonsensical" than Carroll's.

MacDonald's hero Richard, journeying through underground passages with Alice, comes to a large, hot stone overhead blocking their passage and tries to move it. "Go down you brutes!" growled a voice above, quivering with anger. "You'll upset my pot and my cat, and my temper, too, if you push that way. Go down!" (116). Richard desists from pushing when he hears the voice—which, we learn, comes from a "little crooked old man"—and tries gentle knocks and pleading. But when these are of no avail he is obliged to tip up the hearthstone—and pot, fire, cat and temper are indeed upset. Yet, strangely, only the consequences of the last two upsets are described.

The cat "frightened Alice dreadfully as she rushed past her, showing nothing but her green lamping eyes" (116). She must have been on the hot hearthstone because that was all Richard overturned. And she must have been a very sound sleeper not to be awakened by Richard's first push which alerted the "little crooked old man," nor by Richard's knocking and pleading to be

let out, nor yet by the old man's growling. Even if the cat was not awakened by any of these [46] occurrences, one would still expect that a nimble creature like a cat would have scurried and avoided falling into the hole as the hearthstone was violently upset.

The reason for Carroll and MacDonald both introducing a cat in very similar circumstances is probably that a "cat" in the dialects of some regions of Victorian England was, among other things, not only a feline but also a type of common fuel:

CAT . . . 14. A ball made by mixing coal and clay together, used as fuel.

N.Cy.¹ Nhb. I well remember sitting opposite Molly in the kitchen, watching the red glow of the burning 'cats' in the whitewashed fireplace. *Tynedale Stud* (1896) iv (Wright 1.538)

With this definition, the above descriptions by Carroll and MacDonald of the two "cats" make better sense. In addition, some other details in the descriptions of both "cats" also take on some interesting meanings.

Carroll's cat would obviously be impervious to pepper and unperturbed by the great heat of the stove. In "Cross Purposes," the cat/fuel definition may help explain why it was only the cat that was oblivious to the loud noises. The ambiguity between the two meanings—feline and fuel—may explain why neither Alice nor Richard were burned during their escape from beneath the hearth. This ambiguity may also explain why the hearthstone, pot and puss are mentioned as the hearth is upset, whereas the fire is not. The only allusion here to the fire—a very important and dangerous thing to account for when overturning a hearthstone from beneath—appears to be the reference to the cat's "green lamping eyes." Given the composition of a fuel cat, according to the dictionary definition above, it would be likely to spurt green flames at times. Certainly its eyes could not be reflecting light when it was falling head-first into a dark hole. The fuel definition may also explain why, after the frightening and perhaps painful fall the cat has endured, "she" promptly takes up her place on the hearth once again when Richard sets it back in place.

It seems, then, that the cats in both Carroll's and MacDonald's story are—at one level—fuel-cats, although concurrently they remain felines: creatures in dreams and fairy tales have no problems whatsoever in being more than one thing at the same time. But why should MacDonald (literally) undermine and then overthrow Carroll's cat and hearth imagery? A reason begins to become evident as we examine other details.

The literary game in these episodes does not stop at the dialectal definition of “cat.” Carroll and MacDonald continue to make even more indirect, obscure and creative linguistic “moves.” Both episodes under question involve a “man,” apparently in striking contrast to the strange creatures the protagonists have [47] encountered earlier on in their respective adventures. Immediately before entering the Duchess’ kitchen, Carroll’s Alice had encountered a Footman (which/whom she labelled a “Frog-Footman”). MacDonald’s hero and heroine have met the “crooked old man.” For Carroll, the following definition proves important in the framing of his narrative:

FOOT, . . . II *dial* uses. 1. sb. in comb. . . . (35) **-man**, . . .
(b) a metal stand for holding a kettle or dish before the fire.
(Wright 2.446)

It is this definition which helps to explain why Carroll makes sure to tell the reader that it is “a dish or kettle”—an earthenware kettle, not a metal one!—that breaks while the “footman” is outside the kitchen with Alice:

“There’s no sort of use in knocking,” said the Footman, “and that for two reasons. First, because I’m on the same side of the door as you are: secondly, because they’re making such a noise inside, no one could possibly hear you.” And certainly there was a most extraordinary noise going on within—a constant howling and sneezing, and every now and then a great crash, as if a dish or kettle had been broken to pieces. (51)

Without a “footman” to hold the dish or kettle over the fire it is not surprising that some of this crockery would break due to the intense heat.

The new kitchen range depicted by Tenniel should not need a footman of this type, so it/he has been moved outside. But because of the cook’s incompetence in handling the new range, the footman feels he will be called in “on and off, for days and days” (52). The new range is probably not designed to burn Cheshire cats, made from the local clays and coal-waste; hence the clouds of smoke and the cook’s inability to control the temperature. This is one explanation for her anger, and suggests why she is aiming plates or dishes in frustration at the footman and why he/it is not surprised:

At this moment the door of the house opened, and a large plate came skimming out, straight at the Footman’s head: it just grazed his nose, and broke to pieces against one of the trees behind him.

“—or the next day, maybe,” the Footman continued in the

same tone, exactly as if nothing had happened. (51-52)

Thus it appears that Carroll knew his dialects and made his “linguistic move” accordingly. However, the Scottish MacDonald was not to be outdone in this regard by his Cheshire friend. There is much more to explore in the “Cross Purposes” episode, but let us first look at how in *The Princess and the Goblin* he uses another obscure definition to respond to his friend’s “kitchen” narrative: [48]

CAT . . . 6. A small stand formed of three pieces of wood or iron, crossing and uniting in the centre, used to place toast, &c. on before the fire. (Wright 1.583)

With this definition in mind, as well as of the definition of a cat as fuel, the reader may begin to understand what frightened Irene as she waited sleepily for her tea:

I fancy Lootie was longer in returning than she had intended; for when Irene, who had been lost in thought, looked up, she saw it was nearly dark, and at the same moment caught sight of a pair of eyes, bright with a green light, glowering at her through the open window. The next instant, something leaped into the room. It was like a cat, with legs as long as a horse’s, Irene said, but its body no bigger and its legs no thicker than those of a cat. (75)

The first part of this description provides enough information to make a connection with the other cat used by MacDonald in “Cross Purposes.” The eyes “bright with a green light,” which Irene, on the edge of sleep, thinks are outside the room, seem likely to be flames from a fuel cat on the hearth reflected in the glass of the window. Then what seems to happen is that Irene’s mind, in its dreamy state, fastens on to the idea of “cat,” and she animates the other sort of “cat” which is on the hearth—the toast-stand.

Much later that evening, Irene finds herself safe in her grandmother’s chair in her grandmother’s room in front of another fire. She recalls the scene which had been so frightening when she was tired and over-excited, but she will never again be frightened by fancies of that type:

her grandmother left her, shutting the door behind her. The child sat gazing, now at the rose fire, now at the starry walls, now at the silver light; and a great quietness grew in her heart. If all the long-legged cats in the world had come rushing at her then, she would not have been afraid of them for a moment. (82)

Given all of this information provided by MacDonald, it is not hard to surmise that he used the other definition of “cat” (a metal toast-stand) in order to respond to Carroll’s “Footman.”

Whereas more than one thing seems to be a “cat” in the above episode of *The Princess and the Goblin*, the “old man” in “Cross Purposes” seems to be more than one thing. One of the things that he may be is a door. When Richard and Alice make their escape from beneath the hearthstone, Richard tells the old man “I wish you had turned the door to us instead of the hearthstone” (116). This statement implies that it was up to the “old man” to rearrange some parts of the house at will. But how could this be possible? It appears that some of the “magic” the “old man” is here assumed to possess may derive from the meanings [49] which the word “man-” held in the terminology used in mining. Just previous to pushing the hearthstone, Richard and Alice had been following “steps [that] led them right into the rock” (116). Such steps in a mine might be expected to lead to a door, and such a door is termed a “man-door”:

MAN . . . (8) **-door**, coal-mining term: a door placed in a stopping just sufficiently large to allow a man to pass through.
(Wright 4.25)

Thus it becomes probable that it is in this sense that Richard refers to the “little crooked old man” turning the door toward them. A linguistic parallel with Carroll’s “Pig and Pepper” is not immediately apparent here, although other parallels are obvious enough, such as the way knocking is ineffectual as a means of gaining access to both rooms.

The second meaning for the “old man” here is a “footman.” Carroll’s “footman” doubles as both the hearth-stand type of footman and the type that turns the door to visitors. But as MacDonald’s old man is apparently unwilling to become a man-door there is no door for him to open. He is, however, the hearth-stand type of footman. This becomes evident after Richard has replaced the hearthstone and the cat is back in “her” place on it. (That Richard—a boy—with relatively little exertion, is able first to overturn the hot stone, then easily to set it back into its original place should have made readers aware that things are not always what they seem in this house). The old man puts “a chair for one [Alice] at one side of the hearth, and for the other [Richard] at the other side” and then sits himself down “between them” (117). Many old fireplaces can still be seen with fixed seats or a place for chairs on either side of the hearth. But no [hu]man could sit himself between them.

MacDonald then promptly introduces other meanings of “cat” and “man.” His next response to Carroll’s “cat” and “(Foot)man” is to pile the one on top of the other—to make a cat-a-mountain out of a man-hill. The old man is a hunchback and: “The cat got upon his hump and then set up her own” (117). This cat/hump is apparently the primitive fire-back for the hearth. The unexpected correlation comes about because a dialect word for a hump is a hud (Wright 3.265), and a “cat’s hud” is a dialect term for “a large stone serving as the back to a fire on a cottage hearth” (Wright 1.535). MacDonald has precariously balanced the fuel on the hearth-stand and the fire-back on the fuel!

MacDonald does not stop the “language game” here but “goes on to make the cat with its hump sitting on the man’s hump assume the dimensions and the appearance of a mountain. Alice and Richard:

wanted to hold each other’s hand behind the dwarfs back. But the moment their hands began to approach, the back of the cat began to grow long, and its hump to [50] grow high; and, in a moment more, Richard found himself crawling wearily up a steep hill, whose ridge rose against the stars. (117)

Another definition of “man” is relevant here:

MAN, . . . sb.² Lakel. Cum. Yks. . . . A conical pillar of stones erected on the top of a mountain; the mountain top itself.

Lakel. 1 Cum. The maen or man, the great pile of stones built by the ordnance surveyors to mark the highest point lying furthest to the north-east, LINTON, *Lizzie Lorton* (1867) . . . xxx; Roond Scawfell Man theer hung, as midneet black, a clood, RICHARDSON Taft (1871). (Wright 4.27)

By placing the cat’s hump on top of the man’s hump between Alice and Richard, MacDonald starts with “a wall that would let through no moonshine” (the allusion is, of course, to the “wall”—another man!—between Pyramus and Thisbe in the mechanicals’ play in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*). The “wall” grows into “a steep hill” and then into a “cat-a-mountain.” Richard is totally logical in musing that: “This must be some trick of that wretched old man. Either this mountain is a cat or it is not.” He tests the “mountain” with his knife and the cat vanishes with a shriek (117). So it was indeed a trick of that “man,” albeit a metafictional linguistic one.

The old man remains seated, “staring at the blank fireplace, without ever turning round, pretending to know nothing of what had taken place”

(117). The fireplace is now blank, except for the [foot]man himself, because both the cat/fuel and the “cat’s hud” fire-back have disappeared.

With this concealed imagery of an absurdly top-heavy pile of items associated with a hearth, MacDonald may be implying that he felt Carroll was too fond of piling one multiple meaning upon another, with no regard for balance and stability, and had done so in the first version of “Pig and Pepper.” As MacDonald describes the whole pile as a “cat-a-mountain” he may also be playing with various meanings of this term:

CATAMOUNT, CATAMOUNTAIN, or CAT O’

MOUNTAIN, subs. (American). A shrew, [c.f., CATAMARAN and Beaumont and Fletcher’s use of the word for a wild man from the mountains, itself a transferred sense of catamount = a leopard or panther. (Farmer 2.52)

It may be, therefore, that the word seemed to MacDonald an apt summation of his imagery by suggesting a shrewish old man, a large feline, and a mountain to go along with the “man” as “the top of a mountain.”

We can now return to the “Pig and Pepper” chapter of *Wonderland*, published three years after “Cross Purposes.” Carroll retains the open hearth in [51] his narrative, apparently because he still wants to parody MacDonald’s old woman leaning over her fire in chapter 19 of *Phantastes* (Docherty 169-71), as he is likely to have done in the extempore first version of “Pig and Pepper” told to the MacDonalds before “Cross Purposes” was written. But he responds to MacDonald’s implication in “Cross Purposes” of a grossly unbalanced piling-up of images by having Tenniel introduce a neat new kitchen range to replace the old-fashioned fire, with its accompanying footman, (and presumable also a fire-back). The cook, however, retains at her feet a spare block of the type of fuel she has always used. The blank fireplace at the back of the kitchen in Tenniel’s picture would seem to allude to the end of the episode in “Cross Purposes” where Richard has scattered the pile of hearth objects by his knife attack on the “cat,” leaving the “blank fireplace.”

Carroll introduces other critical responses to “Cross Purposes” into *Wonderland*. A few are listed by Knoepfelmacher (349nn), who assumes they represent MacDonald parodying *Wonderland*, even though, as noted, that was published three years after “Cross Purposes.” It is not impossible, however, that some of the other parallels between the stories may represent MacDonald commenting upon what he had heard from Carroll of his early plans for writing down an expanded version of the story of “Alice’s Adventures” which he had told to Alice Liddell and her sisters.

That Carroll and MacDonald were playing a very complex literary game has been shown conclusively by Docherty. Such “games” normally have exact rules, even if these rules metamorphose over time. The present paper has afforded a glimpse of some of them, but most have yet to be worked out. I have here argued for a set of particular readings, but the most important aspect of the paper is the method used to derive these readings. One must not only take into account the works themselves (individually and as groups), but the milieu surrounding these famous books, the linguistic background and interests of both Carroll and MacDonald. The fact that Carroll was born in Cheshire and MacDonald in Scotland becomes very important. Given their backgrounds and interests, it becomes apparent that both men are hiding great amounts of meaning by infusing their “English” narratives with dialect words with which they grew up, had an ear for, or studied. These, dialects when mixed with regular English became their common literary language, while their works became a set of records showing the creative heights reached in their semi-private parlance and “literary game.” It is this Carroll/MacDonald type of English that we must study if we are to understand what both these great writers meant to say to each other and to the world. [52]

Works Cited

- Carroll Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*. Ed by Roger Lancelyn Green. Oxford: World's Classics-Oxford UP, 1998.
- Docherty, John. *The Literary Products of the Lewis Carroll - George MacDonald Friendship*. 2nd Ed. Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1997.
- Farmer, John S. *Slang and its Analogues*. 1890. Ed by W. E. Henley as *A Dictionary of Slang*. Ware, Herts.: Wordsworth. 1987.
- Hancher, Michael. *The Tenniel Illustrations to the "Alice Books."* Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1985.
- MacDonald, George. “Cross Purposes.” *The Complete Fairy Tales*. Ed by U. C. Knoepfmacher. New York: Penguin Classics-Penguin, 1999, 103-119.
- . *The Princess and the Goblin and The Princess and Curdie*. Ed. by Roderick McGillis. Oxford: World's Classics-Oxford UP, 1990.
- Wright Joseph. *The English Dialect Dictionary*. London, 1898-1905. [53]