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The Children's Voices: George MacDonald's Fairy Tales, A Child's-Eye View

Rachel Johnson

[NB Rachel Johnson regrets that she is unable to provide page references for quotations]

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

My aim in this article is to take one aspect of MacDonald's tales, that of the values they convey and investigate how these values are perceived by the child reader. The general question of the use of fairy tales as a tool for moral education has been addressed in depth elsewhere. Therefore, following the introduction and central to the article are discussions with two particular children subsequent to their reading a selection of MacDonald's fairy tales. The article concludes with a brief analysis of the children's responses.

1. Introduction—"Core values"

One of the characteristics of traditional fairy tales, and of some literary tales that have become classics, is their ability to hold attention because they address what Bettelheim calls "the eternal questions." He expresses these as: "What is the world really like? How am I to live my life in it? How can I truly be myself?"

Haughton has termed this "folk sense," meaning a sense of "what matters, what is lasting" and which "survives the conditioning of civilization." Winston makes another distinction, between moral values and moral rules. He believes in not only the possibility, but the importance of exploring the issue of shared moral values, that is, the "folk sense": the sense of what matters and "survives the conditioning of civilization," through stories. This is the sense in which I have used the term "values" in this article, hence the title of this section "core values." These are the values the children discussed during the interviews.

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). She goes on to say: “There is a magic lent by the great antiquity of these tales, a strangeness and irreducibility that defies modern or current pieties.” This could equally apply to seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth or twentieth century “pieties” and brings us back to the issue of core values, “folk sense.” What matters, what is lasting and which “survives the conditioning of civilization?”

McGlathery writes: “Though as a mirror of their [the tales] times is one aspect of study, they also tell about our common humanity [...].”

Recent criticism has tended to emphasise the “mirror of their times” aspect of fairy tales, and therefore the need for revision to suit another time, that is, the reviser’s perception of their particular contemporary society and culture.

In this **[end of page 3]** article my aim is to concentrate on the “common humanity” aspect of the tales, which Lyons describes as putting “the mind of the thoughtful reader (or listener) into a fruitful state of unease” as they “ponder the lessons of these tales.”

Both Haughton and Zipes (*Fairy*) use the term “counter cultural” in their respective discussions of traditional and literary fairy tales. They refer to tales that show a value structure that opposes the accepted norm within which society operates. More recent tales 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.”

In the area of moral education, there are two opposing schools of thought. The first is represented by Kohlberg, who believed in the existence of rational, universal laws explaining human development and behaviour. He saw these as valid for every culture and as based on the principles of welfare and justice. Kohlberg believed that the highest stage of moral development is reached when a person can appreciate and apply “universal ethical principles.” Winston defines these principles as “those which any person would agree to if s/he could look at a situation impartially.” The problem states itself in this sentence. It is not possible for any person to “look at a situation impartially” as their own position is from within a particular time and place. Hence the need for the modification found in the second school of thought, represented by Gilligan, who sees a moral universe in which the male concept of morality is constituted by obligations and rights as well as by the demands of fairness and impartiality, whilst the female concept sees moral requirements “as emerging from particular needs within the context of particular relationships.” Gilligan defines this as “an ethic of care.” Gilligan’s adherents concluded that as narrative is a key way we attempt to organise and make sense of experience, “moral life can be broached through the narrative

mode of thought” (Winston). In other, words, through the continual recounting of stories, moral decisions can be made in the light of experience. Values are seen as shifting and unstable.

These two schools of thought can therefore be expressed as overall rules versus personal/relational values which change according to the situation. It is possible that these need not be as oppositional as they first appear. The second can flow from the structure found in the first and the first be guided by the second in order to make decisions on the innumerable grey areas of moral life encountered on a daily basis.

Zipes (*When Dreams*), citing a selection of nineteenth century tales as counter cultural, describes George MacDonald as “turning the world upside down and inside out to demonstrate the false values of society.” He is referring in particular to the story, “The Light Princess.” This is one of the stories discussed below with the older of the two children. This story demonstrates another “core value,” or upside down value, which is, the capacity for sacrifice. Rohrich writes “heroes must always give of themselves [...] superficial sacrifice is not acceptable.”

The values used as examples are all vested in action and are centred around the protagonist’s attitude toward other people, animals or the wider natural world. [4] So the core values, the sense of “what matters, what is lasting and which survives the conditioning of civilization” (Houghton) are vested in the actions and attitudes of the characters. The importance of this came out in the children’s responses to the tales they were given to read and discuss..

2. “A child is always thinking about those details in a story which a grown-up regards as indifferent.” (Lewis). Lizzie—”The magic makes all the difference.”

Lizzie was seven years old when she was first introduced to George MacDonald’s writing and at the time of the interview was 8 years and 9 months old.

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 dropped into my ear.

The Johannesen reprint of *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, ranging over several

stories by different authors or no one in particular (traditional fairy tales), that we came to rest on *The Princess and the Goblin*. Her introduction to this story was a borrowed, unabridged copy offered 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 was also happy to discuss it, with the following result. Any actual words used by Lizzie are in quotation marks. Occasionally I have inserted a brief explanatory word or phrase of my own in brackets.

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.”

She 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 fairy tale 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 the point that Curdie was prepared to **[5]** 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, her closeness 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 criterion 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, 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.

The text is open to more than one interpretation at this point, another example of the story being, as Lizzie said “more like a real story at the same time as being fairy tale like.” Lizzie thought the mixture of the two sides, that is “the real” and “the fairy tale like,” was “really good.” She also said “the magic needs to make all the difference to a story to be acceptable in a story.”

She thought the character that most showed both “the real side” and “the magical side” was the Grandmother. Lizzie thought the Grandmother “could have fitted into a family, but the inside of her was not quite real, it could be a bit frightening.”

At this point I asked her if she thought the Grandmother was a bit like Aslan when he was described as “not safe.” She agreed it was “a bit the same.”

Lizzie thought that the George MacDonald story “still made you feel it was a fairy tale—like you were reading one, because he had the side if things that makes you think.”

This conversation developed from a discussion about how good and bad values are shown and can be recognised in fairy tales, traditional, literary and contemporary. Lizzie’s approach to the text of *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 [6] 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. 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 “on the way to being good.” When he first met Irene’s Great-Grandmother it had this effect, “Curdie shook. It was getting rather awful.” 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, or, in Rohrich’s terms “worthiness” measured by how a character behaved toward those in need of protection or help without regard to her or his 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” (*Dealings* epigraph), and in which there is more to be discovered if the reader or listener is prepared to be put into what has been described as “a fruitful state of unease” (Lyons), a state in which she or he is most likely to be receptive enough to, as Regan quotes from Iser, “reflect on prevailing and cultural norms.”

3. David—“actions are the essence”

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 and 7 months old at the time of the 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” without any other character traits. David thought the Bad Fairy had reasons for being bad, such as her rejection by her family, though the implication

in the story is that she would not have been unwelcome had she not been intrinsically bad. David believed that MacDonald still wanted to get a message across, but did it in a less simple, more subtle way. [7]

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. David 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 she or he was able to.

This perception fits exactly MacDonald's own expressed intention in his writing of fairy tales in "The Fantastic Imagination": "Everyone, however, who feels the story, will read its meaning after his own nature and development."

David mentioned again the parallels between the fairy tale element and the real life element and thought that these parallels too could be as deep and as complex in their number and meaning as the reader was capable of perceiving them to be. The recognition of parallels was only limited by the reader's knowledge of both fairy tales and real life, and the complexity of meaning only limited by the reader's ability to perceive meaning. This would also be largely dependent on previous knowledge, understanding and experience.

We briefly discussed the humour in this story, which David saw as expressing another of the story's levels. He thought the two Doctors/Scientists were caricatures of how those who look at a problem from only one viewpoint can be unaware of what may be involved as a consequence of their suggestions.

He pointed out that the King was “led along by science,” despite the inhuman treatment the Princess would have received if the Doctor’s suggestions were carried out. The caricature here is of a blindness brought on by tunnel vision, “lacking any kind of common sense,” as David put it.

The second story discussed was “The Giant’s Heart.” I had asked David to read this story particularly as it has been heavily criticised as cruel, sadistic and as having priggish child characters. A brief and accessible reference to this story can be found in *The Oxford Companion to Children’s Literature* under the entry for George MacDonald. David was coming to the story unaware of this history with the intention of discussing it in the light of good and/or bad characters [8] encountered; how good and/or bad behaviour was manifested: why and how David had made these assessments.

He thought that compared to traditional tales, the values seen in the characters’ behaviour were not so clear-cut. He observed that all the characters showed some weakness and that it was important to accept that everyone had weaknesses. He commented that the children, usually seen as “good” characters in traditional tales, showed this stereotyping as being “loosened” in that they showed malice and anger in their dealings with the Giant and some of the other characters. David saw the Giant’s wife as being the “nicest character” because she was the “most helpful.”

I asked David what he thought of the other boys who had been captured by the Giant. He replied that in contrast to traditional tales, “being a child doesn’t always constitute goodness, and there is still the need to make choices.” He observed that in the case of the two central child characters, “the right thing doesn’t always come to them, there is effort involved and decisions involved.” And that “even the skylark (as a helpful animal/bird friend a traditionally “good” character) needed to learn things and was not perfect.”

David said, “traditional tales don’t have a conversion factor” and explained this further by saying that there “the bad characters remain bad and are thoroughly bad and the good characters do not have bad elements in them. The bad characters never change, and their actions never bring about good.” I brought in the term “redeemable” into the conversation here, which seemed to me to sum up the situation he had described.

David thought that in more modern tales (that is, more recent than the traditional tales) characters were rarely stereotyped as wholly good or bad, but that there were some “character swaps,” for example “good giants or bad children.” In his experience, he thought that though the characters may have changed position and no longer personified a value, the values came through the

story in the sense that good was still portrayed as good and bad as bad, regardless of the character through whom this was expressed. This is a key point that is developed again later in the discussion. David observed that in the more recent tales he had read, there was a “suspicion of ugly ignorant people” which he thought showed prejudice and was therefore bad.

Before turning to the other two stories on the sheet, we branched off into a brief discussion about the first two volumes of Philip Pullman’s trilogy *His Dark Materials*. I suggested that the subtleties found in Pullman’s value shifts in relation to traditional characters could be confusing even to a sophisticated reader. David took this further. He thought they “could be dangerous if you forgot they were fiction, that is, a parallel universe, where things will be different.” David thought the reader had to “be aware of analogy and focus on the core of the plot, which was the fight by the weaker side for good, even though the odds are against them.” He pointed out that “beauty could still be evil” (we found a comparison here with the White Witch in C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*) and that “good is to be recognised even when coming from unusual [9] sources” and vice versa. I believe this diversion took the discussion onto a deeper level, particularly as it fed into the discussion that followed.

In the light of what had gone before, David commented that the story of “Little Daylight” was the closest of the MacDonald stories he had read to traditional tales. He thought this was shown in that the characters were “the nearest to a return to a fairy tale stereotype, the character of the Prince in particular was all that a reader would expect a fairy tale Prince to be.” In other words, he was a good character with no apparent flaws.

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.”

David thought that all in all the consequences of characters’ actions had been the same as the consequences of characters’ actions in traditional fairy tales. 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,” these roles were the same, but were 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, as the Light Princess was. 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 pointed out the difference in the characters he encountered in MacDonald’s tales and those in traditional tales straight away, in noting that they were more “rounded.” The development of the characters to present an individual rather than a character type he felt to be an important difference.

David emphasised the element of choice as to how a character reacted to a situation in his reading of “The Giant’s Heart.” Though child characters are usually seen as good, David observed that it was not simply being a child that made the character good, but the choices they made as to how they behaved. In this tale, the boys faced the choice of being greedy, therefore getting fat and being eaten by the giant, or of exercising restraint and therefore escaping. This brought in the further aspect of how a character behaves, not only towards others, but also toward himself, thus extending the “ethic of care” (Gilligan) to further one’s own interests as well as the interests of 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 she or he stands to gain or lose by that choice. The difference in effort made also came across in his emphasis on the **[10]** price paid by the Prince in “The Light Princess.” Potentially he could have lost his life and the sacrificial act was conscious and painful. In his reading of “The Light Princess,” David commented that the story could be read at many levels, an observation which echoes not only MacDonald’s own view of the universal relevance of fairy tales to all ages, but also Rohrich’s quotation from Wilhelm Grimm, that “the, folktale is like a well whose depth we do not know, but from which everyone draws according to his or her need.” Luthi points out that any single interpretation will impoverish the tale and “miss the essence.” quite apart from destroying the overall effect which militates against such hard and fast interpretation, limiting meanings rather than expanding them.

David drew examples from other stories 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. As noted, he gave the example of “good

giants or bad children.” He pointed 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, the swap was not a problem. David thus exemplified Rohrich’s statement when he wrote of “motifs of rectification” that, “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). It was following this line of thought that David was able to point out that the Giant’s wife in “The Giant’s Heart” was “the nicest” character because she was the most helpful in trying to save the children.

David also brought in a point that not only showed the importance of the core value of compassion, but also an ideological stance on people who are different from oneself when he accused tales that show “a suspicion of ugly ignorant people” of encouraging prejudice. David accepted that clear-cut values vested in the personae of the characters were “perhaps” needed at an earlier age to establish initial values of good and bad, but qualified this in his speculation that the stereotyping of characters may contribute to racism and prejudice.

David’s location of values in action and attitude opened up the possibility of redemption to the characters. His emphasis on the importance of the element of choice, “the option to choose to change,” within this process could be seen to place a different interpretation on the term “liberating fairy tales” for both the characters and the reader, giving the reader the hope described by Zipes (*When Dreams*) that he may be able to “fight the terror” and act to change his situation. This also incorporates what Zipes sees as of major importance in the purpose of the fairy tale, namely the disruption of cultural, civilizing norms, in favour of upside-down values.

4. Conclusion

David’s firm belief that “actions are the essence” was confirmed by the reaction of Lizzie and other children with whom these aspects were discussed in the context of traditional tales in their equally firm insistence that the criterion for [11] 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—in the form of described by Rohrich as “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, that is: how the character behaved toward other characters and the natural world. As Winston 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. Though they had an expectancy built upon knowledge of traditional tales that certain characters would be good and others bad, they always based their evaluation upon the characters' behaviour towards other characters and the natural world around them, regardless of the character's actual persona. The children consistently reinforced Tatar's observation that "compassion counts" and that how the characters treated one another on this basis is "what matters" (Haughton). Even taking into account the different levels of understanding the children brought to the tales, it was the characters' behaviour that remained the consistent factor in the children's evaluation of the tales.

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 Geoge 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. Tire characters are fantastic. The best bit was when Irena went into her Grandmothrs bedroom. I had to keep Reading because you had to knw what was going to happen next (*Tom's spelling*).

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