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## Teaching George MacDonald's Myths

Rolland Hein

I teach *Phantastes*, *Lilith*, *The Golden Key* and *The Princess and Curdie* in my upper division courses in mythology and mythopoeia. My students respond very positively.

Placing MacDonald's work within the genre of myth enables them to receive it on a different level from courses which undertake simply to survey a body of literature for the purpose of students achieving an intellectual mastery of its nature and development. I stress the distinctiveness of this genre, contrasting it with fantasy in that its narratives assume a transcendent reality—a supernatural world of divine powers—whose activities profoundly affect human kind. Myths that appeal to the hearers' own belief system impact them on a level quite other than the intellectual alone. MacDonald's strength lies in his ability to write narratives which make the Christian system of belief profoundly appealing.

The appeal is not simply to the intellect. MacDonald makes the point graphically in chapter 8 of *Lilith* when Mr Raven tells Vane's father: "The only door out is the door in," directing him to: "The world of your heart." The Raven asks pointedly, "did anything ever become yours, except by getting into that world?" All myth is calculated to penetrate into this more intimate and personal world, a world that stands in strong contrast to one that is shaped by the reason alone.

I have occasionally asked students for their personal responses to various works. Here are two responses to MacDonald's. One student wrote:

George MacDonald's art, and indeed his greatness, in my mind lies not in his use of the English language but in his masterful ability with imagery. From fairy tale to adult novel to fantasy thriller, MacDonald follows the similar course of creating an image, presenting that image to the reader, and then asking the reader on a personal level to take the image to heart and mine its depths. Not every image holds the same meaning for each reader, nor does every image demand consideration by every reader. Lilith's clenched fist might reach just as deep into the soul as Irene's delicate guiding thread in *The Princess and the Goblin*. MacDonald seems to speak openly about the power of imagery, both physical and as portrayed in the mind's eye through a book,

in the following quote from *Phantastes*: “All that man sees has to do with man. [...] No shining belt or gleaming moon, no red and green glory in a self-encircling twin-star, but has a relation with the hidden things of a man’s soul, and, it may be, with the secret history of his body as well.” That quote speaks directly to both the spiritual, “man’s soul,” and the introspective, “secret history of his body,” aspects of imagery at work. Those readers who allow the deeper aspects of MacDonald’s writings to penetrate to the core will discover not only holiness, but a clearer image of themselves as they read, [. . .] Imagery remains MacDonald’s modest, yet potent, tool that reaches the human spirit through the quiet flipping of pages. **[end of page 31]**

Another student made a similar point. He commends MacDonald for conveying to him both wisdom and beauty, and remarks that when he thinks of MacDonald’s works, he does not think in terms of abstractions:

[...] I do not think of wisdom first, I think of the kind woman in the woods who helped Mossy and Tangle, and of the sweet Princess Irene’s great-great-great grandmother, who lived with white doves in a tower, and of the wise woman herself, who was such a strange, beautiful mix of being tender and being stern. And likewise with beauty—before the abstraction I think of the many lovely images of beauty with which MacDonald is filled.

These statements attest to the nature and strength of MacDonald’s talent. His imagery seems to spring naturally from his deepest convictions—free of any air of force or strain. His optimistic confidence in the nature of the supernatural (it’s so good it has to be true,” he was fond of saying) invests his imagery with an appeal to some of the deepest of human instincts. The vertical energy and impact of his work causes it to stand in strong contrast to the stories of those writers whose ends are entirely horizontal, composing imagery to serve a realist vision, or one that is merely fantastic. Students need to understand the context in which his myths must be placed and the approach which the genre demands in order to receive their impact. **[32]**