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Connections

Dombey and Grandson: Parallels Between *At the Back of the North Wind* and *Dombey and Son*

Robert Trexler

Charles Dickens published *Dombey and Son* in 1848—nearly 20 years before MacDonald began *At the Back of the North Wind*. The premise of my paper is that MacDonald consciously borrowed major themes and plot points from Dickens when writing his later book. I will give two examples of similarities which seem to me beyond mere coincidence: 1) both novels feature a sickly young boy who listens to water to come to terms with his imminent death, a major theme in each book, and 2) both novels include a wealthy man in the shipping business who employs a man who loves his daughter, but is lost at sea and presumably drowns. The wealthy man goes bankrupt and the young man miraculously survives his shipwreck and marries the girl.

Plot Summary of *Dombey and Son*

Dickens' novel concerns Paul Dombey, the wealthy owner of the shipping company of the book's title, whose dream is to have a son to continue his business. The book begins when his son is born, and Dombey's wife dies shortly after giving birth. The child, also named Paul, is weak and often ill, and does not socialize normally with others; adults call him "old fashioned" (210). He is intensely fond of his elder sister, Florence, who is deliberately neglected by her father as irrelevant and a distraction. Paul is sent away to Brighton for his health, where he and Florence lodge near the sea. However, Paul's health declines even further and he finally dies, only six years old. Dombey pushes his daughter away from him after the death of his son, while she futilely tries to earn his love. In the meantime, Walter, who works for Dombey and Son, is sent off to work in Barbados through the manipulations of the firm's manager, who sees him as a potential rival through his association with Florence.

Walter Gay's boat is reported lost and he is presumed drowned. After the manager of Dombey and Son dies, it is discovered that he had been running the firm far beyond its means. Meanwhile, Walter reappears, having been saved by a passing ship after floating adrift with two other sailors on some wreckage. After some time, he and Florence are reunited and they marry prior to sailing for China. Before Florence and Walter depart, Walter

writes a letter to her father, pleading for him to be reconciled towards them both. In a chapter entitled “Retribution,” *Dombey and Son* goes bankrupt. Dombey spends his days sunk in gloom, seeing no one and thinking only of his daughter. However, one day Florence returns to the house with her son, who she named Paul, and is lovingly reunited with her father.

Dombey and Son is Dickens’ first serious, controlled, self-conscious novel where he had a clear unifying idea of the whole novel from the start. There is virtually no imaginative play simply for its own sake. Dickens wants to connect with individuals, their problems, concerns, and questions—and the question in *Dombey and Son* is the problem of belief, a spiritual problem. Dickens explores the conflict between the heart, which he considers as needing belief, and the world—and he does so within the relation of a child and a parent.

Dickens shows that one way to reach belief involves the imagination. *Dombey and Son* is an attempt to work out a belief that can enable the characters to face death. Thus it shows two alternative ways of dealing with death: 1) Dombey’s way, embodied by pride, and 2) Paul and his older sister Florence’s way, the way of the heart. At one point Dombey tells Paul that “money can do anything . . . even keep off death.” Little Paul then asks, “Why didn’t money save me my Mama?” (111).

Comparisons between “Little Paul” and “Little Diamond”

Paul is like Diamond in *At the Back of the North Wind* in that they are both unusual children—Paul is considered “old-fashioned,” which is to say that he was mature past his young years in a precocious way. Diamond is unusual in a different way—he is mature beyond his young years because he is “God’s baby” (187), which is to say, simple-minded, or, as some may consider him, stupid. But MacDonald later makes the point that Diamond is actually a genius.

There is a striking parallel scene between Chapter 8 in *Dombey and Son* and Chapter 13 in *At the Back of the North Wind*: in both cases, the sickly child is at the ocean shore—Paul with his older sister Florence and Diamond with his mother. They are taken to the seaside because sea breezes were considered therapeutic. In each book there is a discussion about the water “speaking” to the child. At the end of the Dickens chapter there is this exchange:

Another time, in the same place [the beach of the ocean], he fell asleep, and slept quietly for a long time. Awaking suddenly, he listened, started up, and sat listening. Florence asked him what he thought he heard.

“I want to know what it says,” he answered, looking steadily in her face. “The sea, Floy, what is it that it keeps on saying?”

She told him that it was only the noise of the rolling waves.
 “Yes, yes,” he said. “But I know that they are always saying something. Always the same thing. What place is over there?”

He rose up, looking eagerly at the horizon.

She told him that there was another country opposite, but he said he didn’t mean that: he meant farther away—farther away!

Very often afterwards, in the midst of their talk, he would break off, to try to understand what it was that the waves were always saying; and would rise up in his couch to look towards that invisible region, far away. (128-29)

Dickens uses the image of the sea which lies beyond this world, just as belief lies beyond reason. When Paul is at the ocean with his sister Florence and tries to understand what the waves are saying, he is trying to understand the meaning of death. By accepting death he learns to have a higher vision.

At the end of Chapter 13 (“The Seaside”) in the *At the Back of the North Wind* there is the following interaction between Diamond and his mother:

Diamond became aware that his mother had stopped reading.

“Why don’t you do on, mother dear?” he asked.

“It’s such nonsense!” said his mother. “I believe it would go on forever.”

“That’s just what it did,” said Diamond.

“What did?” she asked.

“Why, the river. That’s almost the very tune it used to sing.”

His mother was frightened, for she thought the fever was coming on again. So she did not contradict him.

“Who made that poem?” asked Diamond.

“I don’t know,” she answered. “Some silly woman for her children, I suppose—and then thought it good enough to print.”

“She must have been at the back of the north wind some time or other, anyhow,” said Diamond. “She couldn’t have got a hold of it anywhere else. That’s just how it went.” And he began to chant bits of it here and there; but his mother said nothing for fear of making him, worse and she was very glad indeed when she saw her brother-in-law jogging along in his little cart. They lifted Diamond in, and got up themselves, and away they went, “home away, home away, home away,” as Diamond said. But he soon grew quiet, and before they reached Sandwich he was fast asleep and dreaming of the country at the back of the north

wind. (143-44)

Whereas Paul is striving to hear “what it was the waves were saying” and gazing “toward that invisible region, far away,” Diamond has heard the song of the river as described in the poem his mother reads to him. It is the same as the song he heard at the back of the north wind.

In Chapter 7, North Wind tells Diamond as she creates a storm which causes a ship wreck that she is

always hearing . . . the sound of a far-off song. I do not exactly know where it is, or what it means; and I don't hear much of it, only the odour of it music as it were, flitting across the great billows of the ocean outside this air in which I make such a storm; but what I do hear is quite enough to make me able to bear the cry from the drowning ship. So it would you if you could hear it. (76-77)

The theme of the water's musical “voice” and song comes up repeatedly in *At the Back of the North Wind*, just as the reference to the ocean waves is repeated in *Dombey and Son*. In chapter 10, MacDonald as narrator says that Diamond insists that the river

did not sing tunes in people's ears, it sung tunes in their heads, in proof of which I may mention that, in the troubles which followed, Diamond was often heard singing; and when asked what he was singing, would answer, “One of the tunes the river at the back of the north wind sung.” (116)

By the end of the book, readers know that Diamond has gone to the place which Dickens calls “the invisible region” and in plain terms, both young boys meet with an early death. As Mr. Raymond says at the end of *At the Back of the North Wind*, upon seeing the lifeless body of Diamond:

I walked up the winding stair, and entered his room. A lovely figure, as white and almost as clear as alabaster, was lying on the bed. I saw at once how it was. They thought he was dead. I knew that he had gone to the back of the north wind. (378)

In *Dombey and Son*, Dickens repeats his image of the waves that speak to the same mystery of death in a chapter titled “New Voices in the Waves.” By this time, Paul has died and Dickens comments on those who are “deaf to the waves that are hoarse with repetition of their mystery, and blind to the dust that is piled upon the shore, and to the white arms that are beckoning, in the moonlight, to the invisible country far away” (637). Dickens' words remind me of a description in Chapter 7, where North Wind with her white arms beckons to Diamond in the moonlight:

The next night Diamond was seated by his open window, with his head on his hand, rather tired, but so eagerly waiting for the promised visit that he was afraid he could not sleep. But he

started suddenly, and found that he had been already asleep. He rose, and looking out of the window saw something white against his beech-tree. It was North Wind. She was holding by one hand to a top branch. Her hair and her garments went floating away behind her over the tree, whose top was swaying about while the others were still.

“Are you ready, Diamond?” she asked.

“Yes,” answered Diamond, “quite ready.”

In a moment she was at the window, and her arms came in and took him. (367)

The Return of the Shipwrecked Lovers

In Chapter 12 of *At the Back of the North Wind* we learn that Miss Coleman, Diamond’s next-door neighbor and the daughter of his father’s employer in the shipping business, has a sweetheart, Mr. Evans, who is on board the ship sunk by North Wind. Moreover, the sunken ship belonged to her father and the ruin of the ship was the ruin of the family fortune. MacDonald comments:

It is a hard thing for a rich man to grow poor; but it is an awful thing for him to grow dishonest, and some kinds of speculation lead a man deep into dishonesty before he thinks about what he is about. Poverty will not make a man worthless—he may be worth a great deal more when he is poor than he was when he was rich; but dishonesty goes very far indeed to make a man of no value—a thing to be thrown out in a dust-hole of the creation, like a bit of broken basin, or a dirty rag. So North Wind had to look after Mr. Coleman, and try to make an honest man of him. So she sank the ship which was his last venture, and he was what himself and his wife and world called ruined. (129)

This is the same as *Dombey*, whose firm goes bankrupt.

In chapter 9 we discover that not everyone was drown in the shipwreck caused by North Wind. Diamond asks,

“Did you sink the ship, then?”

“Yes”

“And drown everybody?”

“Not quite. One boat got away with six or seven men in it.”

“How could the boat swim when the ship couldn’t?”

“Of course I had trouble with it. I had to contrive a bit, and manage the waves a little. When they’re once thoroughly waked up, I have a good deal of trouble with them sometimes. They’re

apt to get stupid with tumbling over each other's heads. That's when they're fairly at it. However, the boat got to a desert island before noon next day." (99)

We discover "what good" came of North Wind obeying orders in Chapter 26 when Diamond discovers that the customer in his father's cab that he is driving is

Mr. Evans, to whom Miss Coleman was to have been married, and Diamond has seen him several times with her in the garden. I have said that he had not behaved very well to Miss Coleman. He had put off their marriage more than once in a cowardly fashion, merely because he was ashamed to marry upon a small income, and live in a humble way. When a man thinks of what people will say in such a case, he may love, but his love is but a poor affair. Mr. Coleman took him into the firm as a junior partner, and it was in a measure through his influence that he entered upon those speculations which ruined him. So his love has not been a blessing. The ship which North Wind has sunk was their last venture, and Mr. Evans had gone out with it in the hope of turning its cargo to the best advantage. He was one of the single boat-load which managed to reach a desert island, and he had gone through a great many hardships and sufferings since then. But he was not past being taught, and his troubles had done him no end of good, for they had made him doubt himself, and begin to think, so that he had come to see that he had been foolish as well as wicked. (246-47)

Except for the further interference of North Wind, Mr. Evans and Miss Coleman might not have been reunited. But when they are, it is implied that they will enter a marriage that is much happier because of his suffering. MacDonald writes that Mr. Evans "had come back a more humble man, and longing to ask Miss Coleman to forgive him" (247). And it is apparent that she does forgive him because when they finally meet "Miss Coleman put[s] her arms around him and kisse[s] him" (249). MacDonald uses a similar plot device in his novel *Guild Court: A London Story* (1868) when an unworthy suitor goes to sea and finally becomes worthy of the woman he loves.

Like Miss Coleman and Mr. Evans in *At the Back of the North Wind*, the romantic couple in *Dombey and Son*, Florence Dombey and Walter Gay, experience nearly the same circumstances. Walter Gay in *Dombey and Son* is the employee of the rich man, Paul Dombey, Sr., whose ship (like Mr. Coleman's) sunk, causing them to lose their wealth. Miraculously, both Mr. Gay and Mr. Evans survive their respective shipwrecks to return and marry their employer's daughter (Florence/Miss Coleman). The fathers in the novels

(Paul Dombey, Sr. and Mr. Coleman) both needed to learn not to be greedy and Dickens brings this conclusion to his story. MacDonald does not say so explicitly, but the idea is suggested in Chapter 12 when the narrator says of Mr. Coleman “Let us hope that he lived to retrieve his honesty” (130).

The original serialized version of *Dombey and Son* ends with these words: “The voices in the waves speak low to him of Florence—and their ceaseless murmuring to her of love, eternal and illimitable, extending still, beyond the sea, beyond the sky, to the invisible country far away.”

Works Cited

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