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Understanding the Self through Recognition and Mortality: MacDonald's Portrayals of Identity in his Fairy Tales for Children

Carla Elizabeth Whytock

The Victorian period, often heralded as the golden age of children's literature, saw both a break and a continuation with the traditions of the fairy tale genre, with many authors choosing this platform to question and subvert social and literary expectations (Honic, *Breaking the Angelic Image* 1; Zipes, *Art of Subversion* 97). George MacDonald (1824-1905), a prolific Scottish theologian, whose unspoken sermons, essays, novels, fantasies and children's fairy tales deliberately engage with such issues as gender, mortality, class, poverty and morality, was one such author (Ellison 92). This paper seeks to critically examine how George MacDonald creates a space to question our understanding of identity and mortality by portraying the notion of a "self" in terms of fixed "character" and mutable physical appearance in his fairy tales for children.

An exploration of character portrayal within MacDonald's fairy tales quickly unearths two kinds of character-appearance relation: first, a static relationship, when the character's appearance remains the same, and the second, kinetic, when the character's appearance alters significantly within the course of the tale. Examples of static character appearance are the most numerous—anywhere from the majority of primary characters such as Curdie and Irene from *The Princess and the Goblin*, and Diamond from *At the Back of the North Wind*, to supporting characters such as the king and queen of "The Light Princess" and the London characters found in *North Wind*. The kinetic type is most concretely portrayed in what Marion Lohead terms "MacDonald's queen-goddess-mother figures" (2). Included within this type are the North Wind, in *At the Back of the North Wind*, the Wise Woman, in "The Wise Woman," and Princess Irene the elder, also known as Great-Grandmother, who appears in both *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie*, both of which titles could as easily refer to Great Grandmother as to her namesake, the young Princess Irene. In addition to the wise women, MacDonald also portrays characters such as Watho, the antagonist witch from "Photogen and Nycteris," and Lina from

The Princess and the Curdie as possessing evolving or changing appearances. These portrayals allowed MacDonald to create a space between a character's inner self and outer body—a space to question preconceived ideas regarding identity and mortality. This paper groups characters according to their appearance within the tales, not as a rigid system or as an end in itself, but rather as a useful framing device for further consideration of identity characters whose physical forms alter throughout the course of the tale. As these different character-body interactions are observed, a marked separation between character and body emerges.

Rather than defining the self, this separation leads to more questions. If there is an aspect of the self other than the body portrayed through MacDonald's characters, several questions emerge about the nature of each of these aspects and their relationship with each other. A natural starting place is found in the question of their interdependence. The possibility of a body without an interior self seems inconceivable to MacDonald, even to the point where, in contrast to his contemporaries who wrote animal characters without souls in keeping with religious thinking at the time, he was reprimanded for entertaining the possibility of eternal life for animals in addition to possible salvation for "the heathen" (MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, "Life"; Reis, 24). The same holds true for the body, because, during the lives presented in his tales, even the most ethereal characters' selves are shown to require physical form, as in the case of North Wind. Even the Shadows, from the work of the same name, who ought to be defined by absence, are seen to have some sort of form by King Ralph. Moreover, MacDonald's personal fascination with death and the afterlife, which also emerges in his works for children with the death of various antagonists and of such characters as Diamond, Princess Irene, and Curdie, adds to the complexity of this relationship between self and body (Knoepfmacher, *Ventures*, xi). The representation of life after death allows MacDonald to explore a self separate from its previous physical form, while he also pauses at the border between life and death. Unlike many of his predecessors, MacDonald does not limit himself to the death of the antagonist at the happily-ever-after ending of each tale. Instead, he includes the deaths of protagonists and antagonists alike, which he moreover extends to a portrayal of the near dying of characters such as Little Daylight, the North Wind, the prince from *The Light Princess*, Ralph Rinkelmann, the king from the Curdie books, and a host of other characters.

It now remains to explore the relationship between the two aspects of self. Instances of altering appearance and stable interior character present

a challenge to an understanding of a unified essential self and body. If one aspect of the self (inner or outer) can experience growth or change while the other remains unchanged, as indicated by each discrepancy and kinetic example, space is formed between the two (at least partially unrelated) entities. What is the nature of this space? Can only the body alter? Or can this more mysterious version of self alter as well? And does change in one result in any change to the other? The most easily observable changes are the changes in the description of the body. In addition to magical self alterations of body such as Great Grandmother and the North Wind, MacDonald's other protagonists also age, physically alter due to spells, a life changing event such as serious illness, or a change in nature. Moreover, characters, most often throughout the progression of the tale, are able to change their inner selves or natures, like Great Grandmother, who ties the change of the self loosely to the body. She explains to Curdie in *The Princess and Curdie* as follows: "Since it is always what they do, whether in their minds or their bodies, that makes men go down to be less than men, that is, beasts, the change always comes first in their hands—and first of all in the inside hands, to which the outside ones are but as the gloves" (MacDonald, Ch. 8); Great Grandmother here confirms that the body affects the inner self. The greatly discussed evil townspeople and king's court of the same book continue to illustrate this reaction as their evil physical deeds affect their hidden inner self.

The entirety of the *Wise Woman, or A Double Story* concerns itself with the alteration of the inner self, both of Rosamund and Agnes, as the Wise Woman takes it upon herself to help these two wayward children towards goodness with varying degrees of success. The journey of the two protagonists illustrates the manner in which the body can affect the self, and the inverse of this relationship—how the condition of the self impacts the condition of the body. The reader watches Rosamund, whose appearance is rapidly being spoiled by the rot of her inner nature at the beginning, transform to something almost unrecognizable by the end of her inner reformation. Agnes, on the other hand, is so self-satisfied with her own actions and appearance that something begins to rot within her. When confronted by this inner ugliness, unlike Rosamund, Agnes is unable to put that self behind her and work towards something better, as Rosamund learns to do by the end of the tale. As a result, Rosamund grows outwardly more beautiful, while Agnes deviates in the opposite direction.

The character of Lina in *The Princess and Curdie* is the ultimate example of the cause and effect relationship between the inner self and outer

body. She demonstrates both the self affecting the body and the actions of the body affecting the self. Lina's actions cause her to become "less than men," a transformation that started inwardly but eventually turns her outer appearance into the frightening monster with icicle teeth found in *The Princess and Curdie* (MacDonald, Ch. 8). The reader is led to believe that she has begun to undergo a transformation of the inner self, for when Curdie touches her hand with his fire hands, he finds the soft hand of a child. This changing back and forth leaves the reader (and protagonists) with hope that not everything is in a fixed state - there is hope for those who desire it. This idea recalls the catalyst of MacDonald's abandonment of Calvinism; predestination was one of his greatest issues with Calvinism.

Considering these different character portrayals, MacDonald subtly crafted characters whose relationship with and to their bodies strongly implies the existence of a self in addition to a physical form within his fairy tales for children. The developing complexity from static to kinetic character-appearance portrayals demands the possibility of this binary self, while MacDonald's other works reinforce not only the theoretical possibility, but its presence within his works.

Jack Zipes observed that MacDonald and his contemporaries used the fairy tale genre as a "radical mirror to reflect what was wrong with the general discourse" (*Art of Subversion* 100). In a similar manner, this paper aims to scrutinize this theory of an imperishable character paired with a perishable form against the interactions found in the tales; how does one then recognize or get to know anyone, if the physical alters? If the characters are more than their physical bodies, this will manifest itself in the presence, possibility, and expectation of recognition between characters despite altering physical realities.

The Test of Recognition

While yoking understanding of self with recognition of others provides an excellent test of my theory, it must be noted that it is a pairing owed to MacDonald himself. Like many other issues explored in his work, the importance of self-realization through recognition of and by others is highlighted by his interest in death. Death was a subject continuously on MacDonald's mind, found in virtually all his writing, and it serves to compound his views on recognition. When responding to questions about physical resurrection after death, he simultaneously confirmed his belief of a self more than its body or form as referred to here, and emphasized the

importance of recognition:

It is enough that we shall possess forms capable of revealing ourselves and of bringing us into contact with God's other works; forms in which the idea, so blurred and broken in these, shall be carried out—remaining so like, that friends shall doubt not a moment of the identity, becoming so unlike, that the tears of recognition shall be all for the joy of the gain and the gratitude of the loss.

(MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, “The Resurrection”, n.pag.)

MacDonald here, as he so often does in his nonfiction works, goes beyond the meaning of his imaginary interlocutor and highlights what he believes to be the true heart of the matter.

Physical resurrection is not the issue for MacDonald. What matters is that the post-resurrection forms will reveal the self and put it into relation with both the divine and creation. The similarity between that form and the “broken, blurred” ones of the present life will be only for the sake of recognition and joy. MacDonald continues to clarify the importance of this recognition further, as he denies completely an afterlife devoid of recognition by others or unawareness of one's past:

Such a shadowy resumption of life I should count unworthy of the name of resurrection. Then indeed would the grave be victorious, not alone over the body, not alone over all which made the life of this world precious and by which we arose towards the divine – but so far victorious over the soul that henceforth it should be blind and deaf to what in virtue of the loveliest memories would have added a new song to the praises of the Father, a new glow to the love that had wanted but that to make it perfect. (MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, “The Resurrection”, n.pag.)

MacDonald here emphasizes precisely the importance of this recognition I am trying to convey. Not only is recognition more important than physical resurrection, but it is actually a necessary component of life. It would not be resurrection without a more complete sense of recognition: more complete than what can be hoped for in this life or, for the sake of the focus of this paper, found within the mortal characters created in the tales. Recognition (of both others and memories of the self) is a component of completed perfection. While this passage, and numerous others found in MacDonald's non-fiction, it remains to be seen if the preacher without a pulpit made this belief manifest in his fairy tales for children (Reis 24). The tying of recognition to perfection is demonstrated within the tales as characters gain

a greater sense of recognition of others as they undergo a purifying journey of loss and gain, with examples such as that of Curdie in *The Princess and Curdie*, discussed below. MacDonald also maintains that there is a life after the grave where some essential aspect of the self, which in this quotation he terms the “soul,” remain despite either the lack or the presence of the body. The claim of an imperishable inner self, or, at least, a self wholly independent of an outer body or form, is tested by searching for the recognition, as demanded by MacDonald’s theology, to be also mirrored in his fiction. Is recognition possible—and expected—between characters despite a complete change in their forms? If it is possible, and any given character can be expected to know another on such a level that they are recognizable despite all physical evidence to the contrary, this lends credence to the existence of a separate inner self as one that is able to know and be known outside the material world of the fairy tale.

Most exchanges concerning recognition portrayed in the tales involve an interaction between a kinetic character and a static character due to their respective natures; the static character either succeeds or fails to recognize the kinetic character, while the kinetic character is always able to recognize the static character. The most frank dialogue about recognition and knowledge between two characters is found in *The Princess and Curdie*, after Curdie has made Great Grandmother’s acquaintance upon multiple occasions and in her many different shapes, as examined in the previous chapter. When a character undergoes as many physical transformations as Great Grandmother does from old crone, to wicked witch, beautiful maiden, and housemaid to recall only a few confusion and a lack of recognition could be reasonably expected. In MacDonald’s tales, however, the difference lies in the presence of expectation in addition to confusion in such scenes; while confused, the protagonist is expected to know the character, despite the complete alteration of the physical. Despite failures along the way, she/he must learn to recognize people and things despite their appearance, not because of it, whether it is given to them by magical help, as with Curdie’s rose hands given by Great Grandmother, or learned throughout the course of an arduous journey, as Mossy and Tangle discover in “The Golden Key.” For example, a dialogue about recognition takes place in *The Princess and Curdie*, while Curdie and his father are lost underneath the mountain, with their miner’s lamps about to die. The two men see a brilliant green light, which they walk towards, until it turns into a face whose eyes Curdie recognizes:

‘I see you know me, Curdie,’ said a voice. ‘If your eyes are you,

ma'am, then I know you,' said Curdie. 'But I never saw your face before.' 'Yes, you have seen it, Curdie,' said the voice. And with that, the darkness of its complexion melted away, and down the face dawned out the form that belonged to it . . . She looked about five-and-twenty years old. And for the difference, Curdie knew somehow or other, he could not have told how, that the face before him was that of the old princess, Irene's great-great-grandmother. (MacDonald, *The Princess and Curdie*, Ch.6)

Great Grandmother identifies Curdie's new knowledge before Curdie is aware of it himself. Despite two appearance changes in one short scene, Curdie is now able to recognize Great Grandmother. The ending of this quotation indicates a growing knowledge even from the beginning of the scene; Curdie progresses from a vague familiarity with the light to knowing Great Grandmother despite empirical evidence to the contrary. He also is aware of what he does not know; he knows that he knows her, but not how he knows it. He has come a long way in humility and awareness from the boy who previously thought (just a few chapters ago) that sight and knowledge were synonymous – that having seen the princess once, he would know her next time (MacDonald, Ch. 3). Apparently, Curdie is aware of his capacity for confusion, because he then asks for her real name, the better to identify her properly. The dialogue continues, with Great Grandmother saying, "I could give you twenty names to call me, Curdie, and not one of them would be a false one. What does it matter how many names if the person is one?", to which Curdie responds, demonstrating his desire for a deeper knowledge, "Ah! But it is not names only, ma'am. Look at what you were like last night, and what I see you now!" (Ch. 6). Curdie acknowledges the truth of her claiming multiple names, but refuses to be satisfied with a hermeneutic discussion on nomenclature. Instead, he draws a parallel from her changing names to her changing forms; the heart of this dialogue is Curdie's desire to know more of Great-Grandmother than just her name or shape. The dialogue then continues with Grandmother drawing an allegory from shapes being to the person much as clothes are to the body, as referenced previously (Ch. 7). Grandmother's allegory and Curdie's responding question highlight a key aspect of the relationship between altering physical shapes and "truth" for kinetic characters such as Great-Grandmother. Not only can each different shape convey a truth about "that which is inside," a thousand different physical portrayals would still fail to convey the entire truth; it is in this incompleteness that imperfect knowledge of one another lies.

Rather than stopping there, however, Great Grandmother continues the conversation with the following unsolicited warning:

‘But there is a point I must not let you mistake about. It is one thing the shape I choose to put on, and quite another the shape that foolish talk and nursery tale may please to put upon me. Also, it is one thing what you or your father may think about me, and quite another what a foolish or bad man may see in me. For instance, if a thief were to come in here just now, he would think he saw a demon of the mine, all in green flames, come to protect her treasure, and would run like a hunted goat. I should be all the same, but his evil eyes would see me as I was not.’

‘I think I understand,’ said Curdie. (Ch. 7)

This warning by Grandmother contains something crucial to understanding the relationship of recognition and character. The “childlands” MacDonald created allows the space to hold an absolute of identity and character projection in tension—a possibility enabled by the genre of fairy tale (Knoepfmacher, n.pag.; McGillis, “Queering the Fairy Tale,” 97). One character can “be all the same,” while another character views that same first character through the lens of him or herself in a demonstration of projection. Both the viewer and the viewed can contribute to this transaction of knowledge. Grandmother simultaneously is as she is, is seen as a demon by a thief, and is able to be recognized in a shape conveying some true aspect of her character as seen by Curdie. MacDonald has created a world where the appearance of a thing does not alter its being but reflects some truth of its nature, and simultaneously the perceived appearance of the thing might say everything about the viewer and nothing of the viewed—the thief truly seeing a demon, while Grandmother remains as she is. One does not negate the possibility of the other; there is still the element of recognition. Curdie is able to definitively recognize her as being the same person he met before despite perceiving an alternate shape. The source of this knowledge and manner of gaining it proves to be more elusive, but the presence of recognition cannot be denied. Perception of Great Grandmother can be called into question, but not Great-Grandmother herself. This passage concretely asserts that shapes may alter and be exchanged, but something within remains the same, as demonstrated by the kinetic character examples.

Curdie is far from true understanding of the sort desired for him by the Princess. At this point in the story, Curdie is even unaware of the extent he does not know, as evidenced by his desire for certainty:

‘But if you want me to know you again, ma’am, for certain sure,’ said Curdie, ‘could you not give me some sign, or tell me something about you that never changes – or some other way to know you, or thing to know you by?’

‘No, Curdie; that would be to keep you from knowing me.’ (Ch. 7)

This vocalized and blatant mistrust of the physical is something new to the narrative; not only do the external signs not convey understanding, but they can actually keep the protagonist from true knowledge. Appearances are not wholly deceptive, but are dangerous in that they can leave the protagonist satisfied with a more shallow knowledge instead of striving for more and greater knowledge. Great Grandmother elaborates as follows on precisely why this knowledge alone cannot be satisfactory:

‘You must know me in quite another way from that. It would not be the least use to you or me either if I were to make you know me in that way. It would be but to know the sign of Me – not to know me myself. It would be no better than if I were to take this emerald out of my crown and give it to you to take home with you, and you were to call it me, and talk to it as if it heard and saw and loved you. Much good would that do you, Curdie! No; you must do what you can to know me, and if you do, you will. You shall see me again in very different circumstances from these, and I will tell you so much, it may be in a very different shape.’ (Ch. 7)

Great Grandmother does not deny that recognition of the physical involves a type of knowing. The knowledge of the physical would not help Curdie or Great Grandmother in their journey throughout *The Princess and Curdie*. Her example of an idolatrized crown illustrates the necessity of true knowledge; the crown presents a useless and completely cold substitute for the Grandmother who knows, loves and helps Curdie. Great Grandmother then continues to explain that knowledge is something that can be earned through commitment, work and desire. If Curdie does what he “can to know [her]”, he will know her. This is not something that comes easily or naturally to all. Curdie’s struggles to recognize Great Grandmother throughout the narrative are a stark contrast to Irene’s childlike faith allows Great Grandmother to appear to her from the beginning. The above passage provides hope for such as Curdie who have encountered Great Grandmother for the first time with blinding scepticism; he, too, can learn to know Great Grandmother.

Much like *The Princess and Curdie*, *At the Back of the North Wind* illustrates instances of recognition between the protagonist and a kinetic

character in the form of a wise, benevolent maternal person. Little Diamond is constantly rebuked for not recognizing North Wind through all her transformations. These reprimands range from teasing to serious, all most lovingly delivered. Veiled even within the playful teasing, however, is a restatement of the hope provided by Great Grandmother to Curdie above; namely that recognition is something to achieve. The protagonists are expected to grow in knowledge and understanding throughout the progression of their journey in the novel.

The country *At the Back of the North Wind* is a place where people do not have to speak to one another to communicate, but, as Diamond says, ““They only look at each other, and understand everything”” (Ch. 10). After Diamond’s journey to the back of the North Wind, he is able to recognize the North Wind on his own, as she transforms from something like a bumble bee, to a spider, weasel, cat, leopard, jaguar, and tiger in dizzying succession before turning to the form of a tall lady that Diamond encountered first and liked best. In Diamond’s case, the character must go through a journey of experience and suffering before arriving at true knowledge. For Diamond, the suffering he experiences is first empathetic; he feels pain on behalf of his father’s employers, and for the worry of his family upon losing their livelihood. He is also exposed to cruelty as his family moves to London, and Diamond takes on the role of cab-driver. His ultimate suffering, an illness which eventually results in his death, is also the suffering that finally brings him to true knowledge via a journey to the country *At The Back of the North Wind*. Diamond’s journey to the back of the North Wind is the narrator’s justification for any superhuman characteristics on the part of Diamond—first his goodness, then his bravery, even his ability to drive the coach—so it is entirely reasonable to understand it as the source of Diamond’s newfound ability to recognize North Wind despite her various reincarnations.

Much like Diamond, Ralph Rinkelmann of “The Shadows” learns only to recognize his subjects, the shadows, after a serious illness. Ralph is unaware of the shadows until his recovery, when he begins to notice such changing beings that he cannot make out their nature. It is only once his eyes are opened that he can discern them properly. Ralph questions the nature of the Shadows, in a dialogue that ends up questioning much more than the magical Shadows themselves:

‘It is only in the twilight of the fire, or when one man or woman is alone with a single candle, or when any number of people are all feeling the same thing at once, making them one, that we show

ourselves, and the truth of things.’

‘Can that be true that loves the night?’ said the king.

‘The darkness is the nurse of light,’ answered the Shadow.

‘Can that be true which mocks at forms?’ said the king.

‘Truth rides abroad in shapeless storms,’ answered the Shadow. (“The Shadows”, n.pag.)

This last comment of the Shadow encapsulates the answer to the test of recognition. If truth is to be found in and despite “shapeless storms” and shape-changing characters, then what can be made of the demand for recognition between one character and another, despite the change in character appearance between one or both characters, as illustrated by the above examples? At the very least, readers can see this demand for recognition and knowledge in addition to physical recognition, as made explicit in the *Princess and Curdie, At the Back of the North Wind* and “The Golden Key” that the earlier theory proposed is confirmed; characters are not only separate from their bodies in some fundamental way, but they are also able to know one another, and to be known. Additionally, recalling MacDonald’s philosophical and religious perspective only serves to reinforce the portrayal of a self separate and ultimately independent of its form.

Identity and Mortality

MacDonald considered mortality to be a large component of his own identity, as well as within his theology, as evidenced by death’s frequent appearance in his works for children. The primary interest in death within the tales lies as the end of one—if not both—of the character components that has been discussed; death means the end of life—at least life in the physical body. The second interest is found in the common experience that each character undergoes, even if occurring offstage of the narrative. Depictions of death within the tales also provides the opportunity of additional support to the proposed theory of character; if the texts indicate that some part of the character continues to exist after the death of the body, then the character has proved to be more than just its physical manifestation and some degree of separation, if only posthumously, is demonstrated.

Recalling back briefly to MacDonald’s biographical context, the fairy tales were written by a man who had already had a number of close, personal experiences with death which, much like his faith, had heavily impacted his writing, a fact noted by his readers. “From him I tasted Death — good death . . .”, wrote C. S Lewis upon reading *Phantastes* (Lewis,

George MacDonald xxxiii). The constant proximity to death meant that MacDonald provides written insight into his philosophic and religious beliefs about the issue throughout his life in the form of letters, sermons, and fiction. From MacDonald's collected writings, three points on death quickly and consistently emerge.

Firstly, one gathers that death is inevitable physically, as evidenced by MacDonald's experience of the deaths of his parents, wife, and children. Secondly, MacDonald portrays this inevitable mortality as something good, if only the limited mortal mind-set can achieve perspective. In his 1864 work "A Hidden Life," MacDonald wrote: "I think, my both, death hath two sides to it—/ One sunny and one dark; as this round earth / Is every Day half sunny and half dark. / We on the dark side call the mystery death; / They on the other, looking down in light, / Wait the glad birth, with other tears than ours" ("A Hidden Life" n.pag.). Those who have yet to experience the other side must see it as death, separation, and a source of tearful grief. Those who have experienced it have a more complete perspective; they are able see through the "light" past the dark side to the joyful reunion and life beyond. MacDonald returned to this idea over and over, in his essays, sermons, and fiction.

This last line leads to the third idea repeated in MacDonald's writings; death is not just an ending, it is a beginning; death is not death to all, but a rebirth into a life different than the one experienced presently. The surety of this birth was found in his faith. MacDonald maintained that God continues to be a benevolent father, who having given children to their earthly parents, would not take them away for something worse than their earthly life but rather to something better which those left behind would later join. Death is almost always spoken of in the same breath as more life by MacDonald, as further evidenced in his tales in the examples discussed below. For MacDonald, death is not an ending, but rather a moment of transition and a doorway into a new life.

Death in the Tales

With this philosophical context of MacDonald's portrayals of death briefly explored, it remains to unearth the portrayals of character death within MacDonald's fairy tales. *At the Back of the North Wind* ends with little Diamond, one of MacDonald's most famous protagonists, dying an early death. This is not even remotely the only presentation of mortality within the tales; rather the presence of death is a constant and ongoing theme within

MacDonald's work. There is the near genocide at the end of *The Princess and Curdie* with the death of the kingdom of Gwyntystorm, the corpse-like appearance of the North Wind and Little Daylight, and the unsavoury end of various antagonists such as Makemnoit and Watho. These examples are found in addition to such numerous usages of death as a descriptor, including "pale as death," "cold as death," "still as death" and "quiet as death."

Rather than examine all examples of death within the tales, a few specific cases have been chosen to stand for the rest. Diamond's death provides an excellent beginning as the only example of a protagonist dying as a child within the tale. It also provides the only look into life found in and after death as demonstrated by Diamond's trips to the back of the North Wind. "The Golden Key," although shorter than the previous works, is an excellent last example with its various dialogues between characters about the nature of aging and death.

Life in Death At the Back of the North Wind

At The Back of the North Wind stands apart amidst all of MacDonald's other fairy tales for children for the fact that its protagonist dies at the conclusion of the tale. The death of Diamond dominates the conversation about death within the novel, but before the actual event, MacDonald explores the subject in a number of ways. Richard Reis considered death to be perhaps the catalyst for the creation of *North Wind*, writing that "perhaps the most remarkable thing about *At The Back of the North Wind* is that MacDonald is trying, in fact, to justify death, that most inscrutable of the ways of God, to children" (Reis 81). Indeed, the entire plot centres around Diamond's struggle with illness, presented as a journey in the borderland between life and death (Knoepflmacher, *Ventures* 249). Each encounter with North Wind, often the result of a headache, fever or chill, leaves Diamond altered.

From the beginning, Diamond's encounters with the North Wind appear to be a study in contrast. On the one hand, Diamond views the North Wind as beautiful and good; she is constantly compared to a mother figure (Ch 1, 2). On the other hand, at a purely physical level, North Wind appears to injure Diamond, and when considering his end, it would seem he is injured to death. Her touch is compared first to "a long whistling spear of cold [which] . . . struck his naked little chest" (Ch. 1). This progresses with comparisons to other weapons such as a knife, before the reader is told that the "cold of her bosom . . . had pierced Diamond's bones (Ch.11).

Chapter 5 brings the next brush with death, this time at the hands of the North Wind. Instead of the beautiful woman or the laughing girl with the chilling embrace, North Wind is now pictured as a destroyer to rival any antagonist in MacDonald's tales, sinking a ship carrying men and women who will drown. The cruelty of this image is not allowed to resonate long, however. The resulting dialogue between North Wind and Diamond reveals that North Wind does not enjoy this aspect of her work but that it must be done. Not only does North Wind not enjoy being the vessel of destruction, but it eventually unfolds that this is not always cruelty, but kindness in the greater order of things. Neither the reader nor Diamond are ever left to wonder about the inherent goodness of North Wind, but instead are reminded of it in each interaction. Knoepfmacher observes that "only gradually does it become apparent that MacDonald wants us to accept the North Wind as a kinder version of the Mother Goddess: the deaths she brings about are presumably placed in the service of a recuperative order" (18). North Wind, as a wolf, scares the wicked nursemaid to save the child, and sinks the ship so that she may carry the people who drown "away to—to—to—well, the back of the North Wind" (Ch. 5). Even the very moment of their passing is accompanied by a heavenly psalm, which "swallow[s] up all their fear and pain too, and set[s] them singing it themselves with the rest" (Ch.7). None of these actions are portrayed without reason; it is not for cruelty's sake, but for something greater. In the case of the ship's passengers, the greater appears to be a higher existence of joy without pain after death. What this higher existence looks like is described when Diamond visits that same country in his later illness.

Diamond's journey to the back of the North Wind is preceded by descriptions of his developing illness including his headache, fever, and fatigue. North Wind also does not fare well throughout the journey to her back, as she cannot accompany Diamond behind herself. Instead, she grows sickly before fading away. Knoepfmacher notes that the cadaverous appearance of North Wind coupled with this fading, and Diamond's resulting dismay, carry "morbid associations . . . for the tubercular writer who wrestled with the illness that killed his mother, siblings and children" (245). With North Wind so faint, Diamond must make his way alone to the country at the back of the North Wind, just as each character must die alone. Instead of experiencing true death at this point like most who have entered that country, however, Diamond walks through the icy fire and faints, falling into the country at the last.

Having finally reached the country at the back of the North Wind, MacDonald spends surprisingly little time describing it. The country at the Back of the North Wind is one of the only glimpses MacDonald provides for his speculations about the afterlife. Diamond's "fragments of recollections" serve as a mere taste to be experienced in fullness after death (Ch. 10). People of this country do not need to talk with one another, because they have exceeded earthly knowledge of each other (Ch. 10). An element of this afterlife is to know and be known.

The remainder of the novel is shaped by Diamond's journey to the borderland between life and death (Knoepfmacher 249). Diamond is now better, more obedient and wiser in his innocence than before. This improved Diamond is repeatedly called an angel, God's baby, or God's messenger (MacDonald, Ch. 18). The reader is also led to expect his eventual death, not only from this prolonged sickness, but also directly told by the narrator himself (Ch. 38). The question is no longer whether Diamond will die—this much is already ensured. What remains is how Diamond will act in light of this foreknowledge of the experience after death to come. Not only the reader is aware of this inevitability, however, but Diamond himself is ready to leave. He takes one final trip with North Wind and recollects with her his past near-death experience travelling to the country at her back, where his heart nearly turned to ice. When North Wind asks if he could go through again, he responds that it would be worth it, "if it was only to get another peep of the country at your back" (Ch. 37). It turns out, however, that Diamond has never truly been to the back of the North Wind, and she gently rebukes him. Diamond responds humbly, questioning his mistake, and asks: "'Haven't I, North Wind? Oh! I'm so sorry! I thought I had. What did I see then?'" to which North Wind responds that he had seen, 'Only a picture of it. The real country at my real back is ever so much more beautiful than that. You shall see it one day—perhaps before very long' (Ch. 37). What Diamond saw in his illness was only the palest taste, echoing MacDonald's Romantic impression of life as a dream of greater, more real things to come. North Wind is also gently telling Diamond that his time is coming soon. The next chapter sees Diamond, paler still, asked by the narrator if he wasn't afraid. Far from fear, he actually enquires as to why he ought to be afraid, before saying, no, he is not afraid, merely cold and sleepy. This is the last living glimpse of Diamond the reader is given.

Remarkably, little detail is given of Diamond's death. The death itself takes place off page, and his little body is discovered after the fact, lying

on the floor as if asleep (Ch. 38). Lohead observes that it is due to his very nature and actions that Diamond dies: “Diamond’s death is inevitable, like the departure of Kilmeny in Hogg’s poem: this world ‘wasna her hame, and she couldna remain’. Diamond, too, is of the company of the holy innocents” (22). Knoepfmacher assents to the same, but says that this departure to the next life could only occur after his work is accomplished (268).

The most striking part of Diamond’s death is not the deathbed or the grave, but rather, how the narrator questions the reality of his death saying, “They thought he was dead. I knew he had gone to the back of the north wind” (MacDonald, Ch. 38). While Diamond’s loved ones *think* he has died, the narrator *knows* otherwise. This is not the ending for Diamond, but rather his first glimpse of the beautiful country at the back of the north wind. *North Wind* therefore provides the clearest example of death as an escape into something better, which Lohead argues is the “theme of much of George MacDonald’s fantasy. The way may be through the death of the body, a good death leading to the eternal life” (105).

From beginning to end, *At the Back of the North Wind* clearly indicates a life found after undergoing a physical death. This is affirmed and reaffirmed by the narrator, by the North Wind, and by Diamond himself. From the death of the ship’s passengers for their greater good to Diamond’s journey into the real country at the back of the North Wind, death is not the end of life, but instead a gateway to more life. Not only does *North Wind* insist on life after death, but it paints a picture of what it may look like. As seen above, this picture is limited by the capacity of its viewer. After his first visit, Diamond has yet to die so he could not fully experience its beauty. It is only upon death, when he is unable to return and describe the journey to the narrator that Diamond is able to travel to the country at the back of the North Wind permanently. Further, *North Wind* demonstrates the transformative power of death, as seen in the altered Diamond who returns briefly from his glimpse at the North Wind’s back, remarked on by his parents, Mr. Raymond, Nanny, and the narrator.

Aging and the Nature of Death in “The Golden Key”

It remains now to briefly observe representations of death in one of MacDonald’s most famous fairy tales for children, “The Golden Key.” While *At the Back of the North Wind* has the greatest portrayal of life after death, and the Princess books detail the relationship of humanity and dying, “The Golden Key” provides a direct philosophical dialogue about the nature of

death itself, and in many ways provides confirmation of the theories proposed earlier.

One interesting relationship examined repeatedly in “The Golden Key” is between aging and dying. Aging is a continuous issue in the text, portrayed in two ways. Firstly, the protagonists experience aging at a rapid rate, as exemplified by Tangle’s mistaking years for mere hours or days, first as she wanders lost in the woods, then during her encounters with the Old Men. Mossy also ages into a weary old man as he wanders lost, looking for Tangle and the keyhole, before meeting the Old Man of the Sea. The second portrayal of age is found in the characters who are apparently even older than Mossy or Tangle: Grandmother, the Old Man of the Sea, the Old Man of the Earth, and the Old Man of Fire. Despite their age, they appear as young, beautiful, and strong. In reference to Tangle’s question, Grandmother says that she appears young because she has had no time to grow old. Grandmother is “too busy for that. It is very idle to grow old” (MacDonald, “The Golden Key” n.pag.). It must be remembered that the “old” she refers to is Tangle’s understanding of age, not aging itself. Grandmother is stronger, wiser, and more beautiful for the length of time she has lived; she denies the necessity of the weakening Tangle expects, not the value of age. Robert Lee Wolff argues in *The Golden Key* (his study of George MacDonald with the same title) that this aging is instrumental to understanding MacDonald’s portrayals of death (145-146). For MacDonald, he argues, the life that occurs after death is not a mere continuation of the present life, or a repetition of what has already been experienced. Instead, this life is something more than can be anticipated and completely other than our expectations, and is vividly portrayed in the series of Old Men that Mossy and Tangle both encounter. Wolff writes that

[m]oreover, since death, as the Old Man of the Sea declares, is simply more life, MacDonald subtly makes it a mirror-image of life rather than a mere repetition. The further one goes in life the older one gets; after death, the process is the other way, at least with regard to the climactic progression from one of the Old Men to the next.
(146)

This “mirror-image” is not restricted to the Old Men, but instead is also seen in Grandmother as noted above, but also seen in Mossy and Tangle themselves, most particularly in the quotation that Wolff is referencing. They start the tale as children, but through their quest for the land from whence the shadows fall age rapidly into an old man and woman with gray hair, wrinkles,

and a body full of aches. They end the tale, however, “younger and better, and stronger and wiser, than they had ever been before” (MacDonald, “The Golden Key” n.pag.). The transitional moment occurs for them both during their separate encounters with the Old Man of the Sea, who provides them with a transforming bath. Tangle experiences the bath as both a restorative for her age and aches, but it also endows her with the ability to see the Old Man of the Sea as he truly is as a grand and majestic man. Mossy, gifted with the golden key, is able to recognize the Old Man of the Sea from the beginning, but also undergoes the same bath, which takes away his pain and appearance of age. The Old Man commands Mossy, saying,

‘Get up and look at yourself in the water.’

He rose and looked at himself in the water, and there was not a gray hair on his head or a wrinkle on his skin.

‘You have tasted of death now,’ said the old man. ‘Is it good?’

‘It is good,’ said Mossy. ‘It is better than life.’

‘No,’ said the old man: ‘it is only more life.’ (MacDonald, “The Golden Key” n.pag.)

Now that first Tangle, then Mossy, have experienced death and been resurrected by baptism in this bath, they are able to experience “more life.” It is, as Wolff argues, not more of the same, but instead more in the same way that the real country *At The Back of the North Wind* is more than the mere picture seen by Diamond in his first visit. Living long, instead of causing wrinkles and pain, now leads to strength, beauty, and wisdom, as also demonstrated by Great-Grandmother in the Princess books.

Other instances of note include the death of Tangle’s mother, which allows for the creation of such circumstances that send her lost into the woods following her magical fish, a loss which reminds the reader of the loss of Irene’s mother in *The Princess and the Goblin*. The fish itself also provides an interesting counterpoint to the beast-natures of Gwyntystorm. By allowing its fish body to die and be eaten only to rise out of the pot in the lovely human form of the aeranth, it fulfils the “highest end” of an animal in fairyland, and demonstrates the reverse of the citizens in *The Princess and Curdie* (MacDonald, “The Golden Key,” n.pag.). Richard Reis notes this small instance illustrates both the necessity of death before more life in this “fish sacrament” eaten by Grandmother and Tangle (80).

Concluding Character Existence and Mortality

Character identity as composed of a self beyond the body begins

to form from the separation of inner and outer self as observed above. The relationship between stable and kinetic characters types as exemplified in *The Princess and Curdie* and *At the Back of the North Wind* provides a foundation for a portrayal of identity found in the character despite complete physical alteration. The incorporeal self, too, was observed to be capable of change as a result of the character's actions, but overall presents a continuity of recognizable character despite these changes. The existence of characters with kinetic appearances, in addition to their relationships with the different protagonists, established explicitly not only an inner self separated from their outer body, but an inner self able to be known by others. It became clear throughout the course of this study that MacDonald created characters that portrayed identity as composed of an inner self and outer body. This was accomplished by the presence of both stable and kinetic character appearance, the expectation of recognition despite alteration to the physical body, and the presentation of mortality as a means to eternal life.

Exploring character mortality provides the final insight into MacDonald's portrayal of character identity. If death is not complete death, but rather, as MacDonald insists through the voice of the Old Man of the Sea, Great Grandmother, and North Wind, more life, the necessary continuity of character confirms a self beyond the body. Not only this, but the examples discussed above reflect MacDonald's ideas about what that future existence means for the self and its relationship with others.

MacDonald's portrayals of character expose an understanding of identity that simultaneously assimilates permanence and hope. The fairy tale genre asks its readers to suspend their disbelief and enter freely into a world where things are not as they seem. George MacDonald, through his fairy tales, demands the same suspension. His fairy tales highlight and emphasize questions about the accepted relationships to the divine, the world, and human mortality, and to our understanding of identity.

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