

1-1-2021

More Than a Fairy Tale: The Gendered Experience of Child Abuse in George MacDonald's *The Day Boy and the Night Girl*

Kyla An Foley

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

Recommended Citation

Foley, Kyla An (2021) "More Than a Fairy Tale: The Gendered Experience of Child Abuse in George MacDonald's *The Day Boy and the Night Girl*," *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*: Vol. 40, Article 34.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind/vol40/iss1/34>

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

MacDonald Scholar in the Making

More Than a Fairy Tale: The Gendered Experience of Child Abuse in George MacDonald's *The Day Boy and the Night Girl*

This is an occasional feature to North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies. In this section the journal highlights students at the undergraduate level who are writing criticism on George MacDonald. The future of MacDonald studies depends, to a large degree, on younger scholars interested in MacDonald.

Kyla An Foley

Over the course of his life, MacDonald published countless fairy tales that he deemed were not written for “children, but for the childlike, whether of five, or fifty, or seventy-five” (317). These tales wrestled with social problems, political issues, and questions of faith. Perhaps the most common, and most overlooked, social problem MacDonald addressed in his fairy tales is child abuse. In the *The Day Boy and Night Girl*, MacDonald mixes Victorian Era gender roles and child abuse, providing an ample canvas for examining child abuse through the lens of gender. Child abuse is never gender-neutral; in fact, both the perpetrator and victim’s genders and societal stereotypes play key roles in making the experience of child abuse.

2 *More Than a Fairy Tale*

MacDonald's initial tales, like *Phantastes* and *The Princess and the Goblin*, ring with whimsy, mysticism, and happy endings while his later tales take a dark turn. *The Day Boy and the Night Girl*, published in 1880, is the last fairy tale MacDonald wrote (Marshall 57). Along with his other later tales, like *Lilith* and *The Princess and Curdie*, *The Day Boy and the Night Girl* contains a seemingly hopeless emphasis on evil, wickedness, and despair which reflects MacDonald's loss of hope at the end of his life (Greville MacDonald 409). *The Day Boy and the Night Girl* describes how the witch Watho abuses Photogen and Nycteris, two children whom she steals from their mothers at birth. Watho locks Nycteris in an underground chamber, prohibits her from interacting with light save for a small alabaster lamp hanging from the ceiling, and refuses to educate her. Contrastingly, Watho bathes Photogen in sunlight, prohibits him from knowing any darkness other than the underside of his eyelids, and showers him with knowledge and pleasure. The tale concludes with both Photogen and Nycteris escaping their prisons and murdering Watho (George MacDonald). In concluding the tale with a murder, MacDonald takes a more despondent social perspective compared to the platonic, romantic view of his early tales in which evil is a knotted rope that will eventually untwist itself.

Even then, it is impossible to totally discern MacDonald's purpose in his tales. MacDonald refused to explain the rationale or meaning behind his fairy tales to protect the imaginations of his readers (Overkamp 58). We also cannot mistake MacDonald's fairy tales, whether from the earlier or later parts of his life, for complete allegories. Rather, MacDonald mixes allegorical elements with whimsy and symbolism, all with the dual purpose of providing poignant social commentary and illuminating various

3 *More Than a Fairy Tale*

religious or social truths to all sorts of people (Marshall 58). The switch in MacDonald's perspective of evil, though, and his emphasis on Photogen and Nycteris's disorientation after discovering their abuse, lead some literary analysts to see *The Day Boy and the Night Girl* as a critique of Plato's Allegory of the Cave (Montag). However, resigning the tale as merely a critique of Plato misses a key element of its complexity: social problems, and more specifically, child abuse. Literary analysts' fixation on the cadence, beauty, or structure of language often causes them to miss the social problems implicit in fairy tales such as MacDonald's. The predicaments of Photogen and Nycteris do not happen by mere coincidence but are deliberate acts of abuse on Watho's part.

Child abuse perpetrators, both men and women, control every aspect of children's lives, maintain their innocence, deny them normal life experience, and hide their origins or identities, all of which MacDonald depicts in *The Day Boy and the Night Girl* (Montag). First, Watho manipulates Photogen and Nycteris's lives through controlling their exposure to light. Second, Watho secludes the children from one another and prohibits them from interacting with much of the castle. Photogen only interacts with Fargu, the hunter, and Watho; Nycteris only knows Falca, the servant, and Watho. Neither Photogen nor Nycteris are aware of anything beyond their respective confines. Third, Watho denies Photogen and Nycteris normal life experience by prohibiting them from knowing both darkness and light. Without a proper day/night balance, it is likely that Photogen and Nycteris would experience irregular circadian rhythms, underfunctioning immune and cardiovascular systems, and high stress levels (Geddes). Fourth, and finally, Watho never tells Photogen or Nycteris the truth of how they arrived at the castle. Photogen and Nycteris

4 *More Than a Fairy Tale*

never know that Watho coerced their mothers, abducted them, and mistreated them for her own satisfaction. While there are similarities between Watho's abuse of Photogen and Nycteris, ultimately her choice to imprison Nycteris to a tomb and bathe Photogen in sunlight rests on the two children's genders.

MacDonald pushes gender stereotypes to their extremes in *The Day Boy and the Night Girl* to comment on gender roles in the Victorian Era (which persist today) and provide an illustration of gendered child abuse. The Victorian Era (1830-1901) was the first period in which society began to discuss gender. As the socio-political climate shifted, gender roles fell under evaluation. By the 1870s, "tensions about gender roles had come to a head," and an open discourse on gender roles took off; it is no surprise authors such as MacDonald used their writing to comment on gender roles (Parker 18). MacDonald's treatment of Photogen as aggressive, boisterous, and competitive reflects society's pressures for men; men are to be leaders, assertive, and bold. Likewise, MacDonald depicts Nycteris as sensitive, weak, and dumb; women are to be "seen and not heard," in need of protection, and removed from the public sphere. MacDonald exposes gender stereotypes in their rawest form to draw attention to their incongruencies. However, MacDonald ultimately reinforces the same gender stereotypes through Photogen and Nycteris's marriage at the novel's end. Child abuse amplifies these existing gender stereotypes and role strains (Moulding, "Becoming," 41). Watho sequesters Nycteris to a tomb, not out of her own fancy, but in a deliberate reinforcement of female gender stereotypes. Watho's decision to abuse Photogen and Nycteris differently is based solely on their genders. Existing child abuse research is gender neutral, save for that focused on

5 More Than a Fairy Tale

male perpetrated heterosexual sexual abuse (Hallet et al.). To approach the conversation on child abuse in gender neutral language minimizes children's experiences and ignores a key part their identities. Future discourse regarding child abuse and how to combat it needs to consider both the children's and perpetrators' genders, as well as normative assumptions about the roles of men and women (Turton 7). Similarly, existing scholarship examining gender during the Victorian Era focuses on women but dismisses the male experience (Parker 2).

Like with Photogen and Nycteris, MacDonald's portrayal of Watho also breaks down and reinforces gender stereotypes and current child abuse research. Watho represents the antithesis of a proper Victorian lady, through her aggressive thirst for knowledge and manipulation of children; she exists as a sort of combination between mad scientist and evil stepmother (Montag). It is significant that MacDonald chose for Watho to be a woman because "real women don't abuse," and we often think of child abuse perpetrators as men (Turton 9). While the majority of perpetrators are men, women also abuse children and abuse by women often persists longer than that by men. Child abuse is largely domestic, meaning it happens in the home by someone children know, likely the father or mother. Many people, and current child abuse research, write off abuse by women as "motherly instinct" (Turton 10). Because mothers fulfill the role of caregiver and nurturer, children can easily blend abuse with what a mother is supposed to do. For example, MacDonald writes of Nycteris: "She was not unhappy. She knew nothing of the world except the tomb in which she dwelt, and had some pleasure in everything she did" (George MacDonald 84). Photogen and Nycteris never think to question

6 *More Than a Fairy Tale*

Watho's goodness; she was simply all the children knew, and thus was normal.

In *The Day Boy and the Night Girl*, unlike all of his other fairy tales, MacDonald does not depict darkness as evil; rather, night functions more like shadow. As opposed to complete darkness, shadow connotes depth, substance, and mystery. MacDonald draws on *cognitio vesperanti*, a theological tradition that holds darkness as twisted light, and that he used in some of his later sermons, to describe Watho's abuse of Nycteris (Marshall 71). MacDonald's use of *cognitio vesperanti* maintains that darkness is not evil compared to light; MacDonald makes no value judgement as to whether Photogen or Nycteris are more valuable based on the abuse they suffered. The evil in *The Day Boy and the Night Girl* lies with Watho, not Nycteris. Nevertheless, MacDonald writes that Watho locked Nycteris in an underground tomb, void of light save a small alabaster lamp that hung in the corner. Watho taught Nycteris some music, but forbade her from learning to read, though Falca snuck Nycteris books and taught her the alphabet. Because of her lack of exposure to light, Nycteris's skin grew pale, her bones fragile, and her eyes round like a bat's. In traditional Victorian literature and society, darkness meant ignorance, timidity, and weakness, mirroring gendered stereotypes for women, as well as something being internal or concealed (Montag). Also, female child abuse typically consists of the perpetrator controlling children's bodies, imposing domestic responsibilities, and presenting conflicting expectations regarding achievement. Some perpetrators refuse to educate female children, as Watho did, and some over-emphasize achievement to the point where achievement becomes equated with human worth (Moulding, "Damned," 312). Female children's experiences with

7 More Than a Fairy Tale

abuse are more likely than men's to be downplayed or dismissed. Most existing research about the female experience of child abuse focuses on sexual abuse, though women are more likely to report emotional abuse than men. Regarding their experience of child abuse, women tend to experience internalized feelings of self-blame and depression, and express apparent shame, like how darkness both conceals and makes itself known (Moulding, "Becoming," 41).

Where Nycteris is sensitive, pale, and hidden, Photogen is impervious, bright, and loud. Watho bathes Photogen in sunlight and removes all darkness from his life except in sleep. As a baby, Watho laid Photogen naked in the sun so that he would absorb its rays, making his muscles strong and elastic. Photogen never knew danger, "he was the merriest of creatures, always laughing, always loving, for a moment raging," and he saw every moment "from a sovereign height of courage" (George MacDonald 84, 88). Light, in Victorian literature and society, suggested freedom, energy, and strength, reflecting male gender stereotypes (Montag). Men were expected to be aggressive, powerful, and masculine leaders who let nothing stand in their way. Thus, male children who are abused often experience being forced to play sports, excessive emphasis on achievement, and focus on their physical bodies and size (Moulding, "Becoming," 44). For example, Photogen is a hunter, bent on killing the most fearsome lion and proving his physical superiority. Contrary to women's experience, men tend to express externalized feelings of anger and hostility while denying shame. Regarding child abuse, men tend to react with physical aggression. Also, men who have been abused are more likely than women to take advantage of others out of anger (Moulding, "Becoming," 47). Photogen's prolonged exposure to

8 *More Than a Fairy Tale*

light manipulates his retinal ganglion cells and suprachiasmatic nucleus, the brain area known as the body's clock, heightening his alertness and accelerating his circadian rhythm (Beute et al.). Watho's abuse of Photogen, and Nycteris, not only changed the way their minds worked, but reinforced gender stereotypes.

Castles, magic, and witches "exist only in fantasy, but women who abuse infants can be anywhere, ... even right upstairs in the nursery" (Montag). While MacDonald wrote fairy tales, he made relevant social commentary, illuminated religious truths, and played to the imagination. His last short story, *The Day Boy and the Night Girl*, is no exception. The tale overlays Victorian Era gender stereotypes, that persist today, and child abuse, illustrating that child abuse is never gender neutral and more than just a fairy tale.

Works Cited

- Beute, Femke, and Yvonne A.W. de Kort. "The natural context of wellbeing: Ecological momentary assessment of the influence of nature and daylight on affect and stress for individuals with depression levels varying from none to clinical." *Health & Place*, vol. 49, 2018, pp. 7-18, doi: 10.1016/j.healthplace.2017.11.005.
- Geddes, Linda. "Living Daylight." *New Scientist*, vol. 242, no. 3232, 2019, pp. 34-38, doi: 10.1016/s0262-4079(19)30984-4.
- Hallet, Sophie, Kat Deerfield, and Kirsty Hudson. "The Same but Different? Exploring the Links between Gender, Trauma, Sexual

9 *More Than a Fairy Tale*

Exploitation and Harmful Sexual Behaviors.” *Child Abuse Review*, vol. 28, no. 6, 2019, pp. 442-454, doi: 10.1002/car.2591.

MacDonald, George. “The History of Photogen and Nycteris: A Day and Night Märchen.” *Stephen Archer and Other Tales*, Johannesen, 1994, pp. 79-123.

—. “The Fantastic Imagination.” *A Dish of Orts*. 1893. Johannesen, 1996, pp. 313-22.

MacDonald, Greville. *George MacDonald and his Wife*. Johannesen, 1998.

Marshall, Cynthia. “Allegory, Orthodoxy, Ambivalence: MacDonald’s “The Day Boy and the Night Girl.” *Children’s Literature: Annual of the Children’s Literature Association and the Modern Language Association Division on Children’s Literature*, vol. 16, 1988, pp. 57-75.

Montag, Linda. “Subversion and Recuperation of Gender Roles in George MacDonald’s “The Day Boy and the Night Girl.” *The Looking Glass: New Perspectives on Children’s Books*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2003.

Moulding, Nicole. “‘Becoming a better man’: Narrating masculinities after childhood emotional abuse.” *Affilia: Journal of Women & Social Work*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2018, pp. 39-55, doi: 10.1177/0886109917729665.

—. “Damned if you do, damned if you don’t: Conflicted femininities in women’s narratives of childhood emotional abuse.” *Affilia: Journal of Women & Social Work*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2017, pp. 308-326, doi: 10.1177/0886109917701913.

Overkamp, Jennifer. “George MacDonald and the Divine Imagination.” *Truth, Fantasy, and Paradox: The*

Fairy Tales of George MacDonald, G.K. Chesterton, and C.S.

Lewis, Jennifer R. Overkamp, 2015, pp. 47-117.

Parker, Christopher. "Introduction." *Gender Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Literature*, edited by Christopher Parker, Ashgate Publishing Co., 1995, pp. 167-195.

Turton, Jackie. *Child Abuse, Gender, and Society*. Routledge, 2008.

Contributor Note

Kyla Foley is an undergraduate student at Indiana Wesleyan University, where she studies social work, Spanish, and honors humanities. She is a joint member of John Wesley Honors College and Luther Lee Scholars Program. In 2020, she received the New Directions Award from Taylor University for stretching Inkling's scholarship to new disciplines through her research on child abuse in George MacDonald's *The Light Princess*.

Kyla worked on MacDonald with Dr. Lori Goss-Reaves, a Professor of Social Work at Indiana Wesleyan University and the Director of Field Placement. Prior to teaching Professor Goss-Reaves worked as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker serving families in the areas of child welfare, juvenile justice, intellectual disabilities, and school based services. Dr. Goss-Reaves is passionate about the welfare of vulnerable children and serves on the Child Protection Team, Prevent Child Abuse Council, and the United Way Board.