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# A Relational Literary Geography of George MacDonald's *The Wise Woman*

John Pazdziora and James Thurgill

*The Wise Woman: A Parable* (1875) by George MacDonald (1824–1905) is a strange and extravagant fairy tale. MacDonald was near the height of his popularity when it was first serialized as “A Double Story” in *Good Things* from December 1874 to July 1875, with the publisher, the perennially debt-straddled Alexander Strahan (1833–1918), rushing to release it as a standalone volume almost immediately. Its story can be summarized easily: there once were two little girls. One was bad and the other worse. The princess, Rosamond, is prone to flights of temper and is cruel to small animals. The shepherdess, Agnes, is demure and well-behaved but cruelly conceited. The titular wise woman abducts them each and guides them through a series of increasingly complex magical ordeals meant to morally purify them.

For readers expecting the sweet melancholy of MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind* (1870) or the flamboyant whimsy of *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), *The Wise Woman* must have seemed something of a departure. Unlike the kindly nurturing mother figures of his previous works, the wise woman is a severe disciplinarian living on the edge of a fairy-tale kingdom, sternly dealing out fantastic judgements. An elaborate and difficult text, it is among the least studied of MacDonald's fairy tales. Much critical commentary has tacitly followed William Raeper (1987) in considering it as showcasing “the therapeutic quality of fairy-tales,” with the implication that it is a moral tale in fantasy guise (313).<sup>1</sup>

Arguably, it is this “therapeutic quality” to the text which invites spatial analysis. The didactic dimension of much children's literature, particularly fairy tales, necessitates a bringing together of actual-world and imagined spaces. Child readers and listeners encounter an intermingling of spatial zones through which they can make sense of the story within the context of their everyday lived geography. Within the imagined spaces of fairy tales, characters behave according to strict frameworks of reward and punishment in a rigidly deterministic moral universe. This universe is rooted in a collaborative geography created by, but not limited to, the book's author, its publishers, the child readers, and their parents, and is further contextualised by the specific cultural spaces in which the text is read. The collaborative nature of the literary text has been explored in the relational literary geography of Sheila Hones (2008, 2014), who asserts

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the novel as a coming together of multiple actants to form a unique “spatial event.” The collaboration that takes place in children’s literature, however, is further complicated in that it must form a dialogical space (Bakhtin, 1981) not only between so-called “real” and imagined geographies, but also between the divergent embodied spaces inhabited by children and adults. The fairy tale’s moral instruction is only effective if it enters the actual-world space of its child readers and influences how and why their bodies move as they do amongst a network of spatial agents.

The geography of children’s literature is thus intrinsically an attempt to cross spatial boundaries, enabling a collaboratively formed imagined world to develop alongside and affect the embodied experience of the actual-world. By taking a relational literary geographic approach in an examination of *The Wise Woman*, this paper demonstrates how the world of the author connects with and impacts on the lived space of the child reader. Working through each of the three spatial spheres set out by Hones (2014)—the intra-, inter-, and extra-textual—the paper will scrutinise the collaborative nature of MacDonald’s text and the specific spatial contexts in which it comes to “happen.”

### Relational Literary Geography

Geographers have been working with literary texts as a source of geographic information, inspiration, and theory for the last hundred years and have a history of engaging with children’s literature that predates the so-called “spatial turn” which later affected the thematic interests of the wider humanities. From at least the 1990s, geographers have been looking at the ways children’s literature could be used to better understand the connections between representation and experience. Existing geographical studies of literature (including those produced by geographers) have focused on a number of cultural-spatial dimensions in which such texts might be seen to operate, including classrooms (Dowd 1990); cultural communication (Squire, 1996); imaginative geography (Philo, 2003); lived geographies (Bavidge, 2006); morality (Valentine, 1996); maps and mapping (Pavlik, 2010; Cooper and Priestnall, 2011; Doherty, 2017); metafiction (Ridenpää, 2018); nostalgia and heritage (Kong & Tey, 1998); and region (Ridenpää, 2007). Literary critics and biographers have a long history of using geographical terms in their studies of literary texts (see, for example, Sharp, 1904). The use of geographical language in the examination of literary works within a literary studies

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tradition can be clearly observed in the recently developed subfield of spatial literary studies (see Tally, 2014a, 2014b, 2020). Children's literature scholars have given attention to the spaces and places which child readers and their books inhabit, for example examining "the sense of social self" through the geographical concepts of Gillian Rose and Edward Soja (Butler, 2006, 100ff), using landscape history to analyse the classic *topoi* of Western literature (Carroll, 2011), or looking at children's experiences of displacement and asylum (Wilkie-Stubbs, 2008). Tony Watkins (2006) has suggested new cultural geography offers a fruitful line of inquiry for children's culture research, while recent anthologies have explored maps and mapping (Goga & Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2017) and imaginative geographies (Hudson 2019) in books for children.

However, such ventures with literary topography perhaps too frequently use geography in a common-sense way, one that has arguably fallen short of capturing the nuance of concepts like place, space, and landscape which remain subject to continued scrutiny in academic geography. As Jane Suzanne Carroll (2011) has noted, despite geographers' ongoing interest in literary studies "many contemporary literary critics still overlook the work of geographers and landscape theorists" (2). Cooper and Priestnall (2011) discuss the need for literary critics to engage with cartographic theory further so as "to think more precisely about the synergies and tensions between textual and cartographic representations of geographical space" (250; cp. Thacker 2005). Of course, the value of a truly integrative, collaborative literary geography—one that uses the theory and methodology of both disciplines—is that it allows for a more precise spatial analysis of the literary text and a greater understanding of the ways in which texts act as spatial "happenings" (Hones, 2014), useful to both geographer and literary critic alike. As Jenny Bavidge (2006) has stated, an argument can be made for the "necessity of using the insights of geographers to analyse the representation of space and place in children's fiction" (320), a view that brings us closer to the aims and methods of what has been termed interdisciplinary literary geography.

While literary geography is an interdiscipline-combining theory and practice in human geography with that of literary studies, it remains a predominantly geographical way of thinking and working. Thus, theoretical trends and conceptual developments in human geography have significantly influenced the way literary geography is practiced. A major shift in geographic thinking over the last three decades has been a turn towards relationality, and with it non-representational and more-than-representational approaches to

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space, inclusive of those concerning and concerned with the production of literary texts. Such a shift responded to the ways in which previous structural and representational geographic analysis had been flawed by its rigidity, reflecting the way in which “ambiguity, uncertainty and instability always seem to haunt efforts to generate the certain and the definitive” (Smith, 2001, 131). Doreen Massey’s *For Space* (2005), for example, posits space to be open, continuously under production, formed from myriad interrelations that both occur temporally and geographically, from the molecular to the global (9). Massey (1991) argues that if social scientists agree that “people have multiple identities then the same point can be made in relation to places” (28). Understanding the mutability of space and place led geographers to consider the lived and embodied experiences of the world that people undergo in their daily lives, prompting an attentiveness to the ways in which such experiences operate in the production of space itself. David Harvey, whose *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989) played a significant role in the wider “spatial turn,” turned to relational understandings of space, and prompted readers to “recognize how those things and entities are constituted, sustained and ultimately dissolved in flows and how all entities are relationally defined with respect to others” (Harvey, 1996, 73).

In literary geography, the term “relational” is most commonly associated with the work of Sheila Hones. Incorporating the theoretical work of relational geography, particularly that of Massey, into her thinking, Hones (2008) shows the literary text, too, to be the product of a series of complex spatial (inter)relations, with multiple actants becoming “engaged across distance . . . bringing together a broad array of people, places, times, contexts, networks, and communities” (1301). Hones builds on this relational understanding of the collaborative way in which texts “happen” by highlighting the spatial and temporal intermingling of various agents both external to and included within the text, such as the reader, author, editor, and publisher, as well as the place where the text is read and to which it might refer (whether that place is imagined, re-imagined, or literal is of no concern). In doing so, Hones describes this temporally and spatially specific intermingling or “happening” of the text as a “spatial-event” (2008, 2014), one which occurs anew with each new reading of the text, and which is unique to every reader.

Hones (2014) describes this event as the co-production of three interconnected spatial spheres that form from the text-as-spatial-event, and in which the geographical “happening” of the literary work can be

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further examined. Firstly, the intra-textual, which describes the perceived fictional space of the literary work itself: “its locations, distances, and networks” (8). Secondly, the inter-textual space “that opens out from [the text] with every quotation [the author] includes and every literary reverberation the reader senses” (8). And thirdly, the extra-textual, “the sociospatial dimension of the collaboration of author, editor, publisher, critic, and reader without which reading (and thus text) could not happen” (8). As Anderson (2018) points out, Hones’ focus on texts as spatial events which emerge from collaboration “enables her to disrupt and undermine an ontological distinction between literary and non-literary spaces” (4). Through such an approach it becomes possible to examine how the extra-textual both informs and is informed by the inter- and intra-textual and is instrumental in the extending of literary space into places connected, approximate to, and even unassociated with the literary text itself (Thurgill, 2018, 2021).

The relational literary geography of the text-as-spatial-event has had a significant impact on the way scholars working in the area now understand the spatial workings of the text. Saunders and Anderson (2015) suggest that taking a relational approach to the analysis of texts “involves moving away from considering literature as “a priori” in the world, as some *thing* that exists without makers or is productive of universal meanings” (116). Relational approaches have been used to engage with a diverse set of literary case studies, from the postcard as a literature of nostalgia (Price, 2015) to the relational micro-fictions of a Chilean literary contest (Campos Medina, 2015). Saunders (2015) focuses on the relational dependency of texts and the material spaces in which they are produced via a discussion of Arnold Bennett and the physical spaces in which he wrote. Meanwhile, Anderson (2015) has concentrated on reconfiguring the “text-as-spatial-event” using the language of assemblage theory, emphasizing the network of spatial agents involved in the formation of the literary text. Elsewhere, relational literary geography has been taken up by David McLaughlin (2016a, 2016b, 2018) in his examinations of the extra-textual mappings created by readers of Arthur Conan Doyle’s *Sherlock Holmes* series. McLaughlin has examined Doyle’s stories to show that Holmes fans have used specific reading practices to extend the spaces of the text into actual-world geographies.<sup>2</sup> More recently, Thurgill’s development of the “spatial hinge” (2021) employs a relational approach to depart from the ontological divide between actual-world and literary spaces seen in existing

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geographical studies (after Hones, 2014), exposing the ways in which texts *add* to rather than demarcate space through their reading.

While critics have considered landscape and spatial features of MacDonald's works, no one has yet considered the relational geography of his texts (cf. Pridmore, 2000; Fink & Hein, 2004; Kegler, 2005; Manson, 2010; Gabelman, 2013; Creed, 2014; Pazdziora, 2020). Taking a relational approach to the examination of geography produced by *The Wise Woman*, the next section demonstrates the collaborative and interdependent relationship between the intra-, inter-, and extra-textual space of MacDonald's story.

### Relational Space and *The Wise Woman*

Curiously, MacDonald invites his readers to participate in a relational event at the end of *The Wise Woman*. The narrator, who has been a lively and active presence in the text since the first page, abruptly stops the story to explain that it is, in fact, unfinished:

And that is all my double story. How double it is, if you care to know, you must find out. If you think it is not finished—I never knew a story that was. I could tell you a great deal more concerning them all, but I have already told more than is good for those who read but with their foreheads, and enough for those whom it has made look a little solemn, and sigh as they close the book. (1875, 222)

The cryptic title "A Double Story" is described as a kind of riddle which the child reader must solve. As evidence, the narrator offers a doubled picture of the two kinds of reader. One he describes as reading "but with their foreheads": this is an internal description, identifying where in the reader's anatomy the reading takes place. The other reader, however, is described from without: they "look a little solemn, and sigh." The child reader is asked to imagine the action and ponder its cause. More than explanation, these descriptions actively engage the child reader in the two different kinds of reading. The first requires straightforward understanding of the metonymy of *forehead* for *mind* to recognize an overly cerebral reader looking for rational explanations. The second offers an image meant to puzzle and intrigue, causing an unspecified change in the actual-world space of the child reader "as they close the book."<sup>3</sup> The narrator, however, does not exclude either kind of reader, suggesting rather that they are both interacting with the same literary space in different ways. Thus, MacDonald invites his child readers to collaborate in creating the story.

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This indicates a potentially fruitful way of approaching space in *The Wise Woman*. The geography of the narrative takes shape through a series of interlocking reflective and relational spaces which continually offer new opportunities for how the event will unfold in the actual-world space of the child reader. Daniel Gabelman (2013), in one of the most extended critical treatments of the story, correctly observes that *The Wise Woman* situates itself both within the grotesque revelries of the carnivalesque and the (lived) experiences of maturation and aging. Echoing MacDonald's earlier work *Phantastes* (1858), Gabelman describes this experience in markedly spatial terms: "Finally escaping from the deathly prison of the self, [Rosamond] finds the ecstatic joy which is the nature of real love—and real life" (128). The movement from "prison" to "real life" implicitly draws from Plato's *Republic*, as the prisoner in the cave is dragged into the sunlight (7.515c5–16d); Gabelman is right to identify a strong Platonic tendency in MacDonald's thought (cf.156). Here the confined and limited space of the prison—the sense of being "Somebody"—is presented as less real than the escape into the world of the "nature" of things—of essences. Apparently predicating a binary distinction between truth and untruth, the insight that what is perceived in "τε ὁρατῶ" is authored in "τε νοητῶ" is presented in unambiguously positive terms, with the noetic, unembodied destination offered by the wise woman akin with fundamental goodness (7.517c).

Yet Gabelman writes elsewhere of the significance of twilight and of twilit spaces in MacDonald's fairy tales, associating the fairylands of MacDonald's children's stories with the pastoral *topos* of the green world (117-119; see Natov, 2006, 91ff). He further connects twilight with mirrors in MacDonald's work, again suggesting that the reflected image—the noetic beyond the physical—is for MacDonald more essentially true than the sensory (184–188). It is arguably within this third, liminal space where the double story of *The Wise Woman* occurs. Throughout the text, human and non-human spaces appear to intermingle and the perceived boundaries between nature and culture become threatened by human action: Rosamond's selfish behaviour brings hyenas and wolves after her, her laziness leads birds to attack the wise woman's cottage in the middle of the night, and her later attempts to flee from Agnes' family croft result in her being bitten by a sheepdog. These consequences work both to resolve the mistreatment of animals at the hands of Rosamond, as described by the narrator earlier in the text, and establish further connections between the literary world of the text and the extra-textual setting in which it is read. Furthermore, MacDonald's



inclusion of seemingly out-of-place creatures—hyenas and wolves—further blurs the line between an intra-textual landscape of fantasy and the recognizable traits of a referent northern European setting once inhabited by such animals. The (pre)historic presence of wolves and hyenas in the extra-textual space in which MacDonald wrote and possibly imagined the story taking place is an example of the collaborative role of space in the event of the text (Hones 2008, 2014).<sup>4</sup>

Such references to the flora and fauna of a potential referent landscape of northern Europe, past and present, offer recognisable connections to the extra-textual sphere: the horse chestnuts, cowslips, and hedgehogs described in the text can all be identified by or pointed out to child readers, extending the space of *The Wise Woman* into the lived geography of its audience. Further, the inclusion of domestic and wild animals once found in the landscape where the author (and presumably the child reader) lived shows a further commitment to the blurring of spatial boundaries and indicate the relational presence of a referent actual-world geography.

Arguably, *The Wise Woman* is “a double story” because it unfolds in both the imagined and the actual-world simultaneously. The text happens as a collaborative event with the child readers, inviting them to actively participate in imagining the spaces of the story while also indicating ways the story can influence their own lived experience. For instance, when Rosamond successfully completes her first ordeal by keeping the wise woman’s cottage clean, she discovers that a small door behind the clock opens into a magnificent palace.

She did not know what to make of it. Surely she had run all round the cottage, and certainly had seen nothing of this size near it! She forgot that she had also run round what she took for a hay-mow, a peat-stack, and several other things which looked of no consequence in the moonlight! (1875, 74–5)

The fantastic, literary space of the fairy tale—a cottage that unfurls into a palace—is interwoven with the extra-textual referents of a clock, a haystack, and a pile of peat-blocks. These referents are, moreover, offered as straightforward explanations for the fairytale marvel. The child readers are invited to feel a sense of superiority towards Rosamond—surely, they would have noticed a hay-mow and recognized it as an enchanted palace. The children are thus drawn into adjudication of the literary world while being offered the

possibility of imaginative play in their actual-world, finding their own fairy-tale palaces in haystacks or behind clocks.

Gabelman (2013) writes: “Fairyland is a questing realm that arouses a desire for a ‘home-centre’ in individuals—a harmonious relationship with the entirety of the cosmos” (172). He describes MacDonald’s portrayal of fairyland as unavoidably phenomenological, a cosmology of “the experience and responses” of the characters to the wonders and oddities they encounter as they pursue an enchanted quest (161).

Gabelman cheekily remarks, “No comprehensive account of the flora and fauna is possible, because human experience of this realm is necessarily limited and fragmented” (161). From the perspective of literary geography, however, this offers the possibility of MacDonald’s fairyland existing as an intrinsically fragmented space, incomplete in itself. The “home-centre” remains fluid and largely unrealized, the fairy-tale quest left incomplete or, where completed, its completion left unobserved by the child readers as the narrator deliberately obscures the view. This fragmented and incomplete space is constantly changing in response to the observations and perceptions of the human characters who enter it and is, as Massey (2005) suggests, “a simultaneity of stories-so-far” (9). This emphasizes the literary nature of the story, as the lessons of the text and even the text itself change through the child readers’ acts of reading.

### **An Intermingling of Space**

A playful experimentation marks the narration of *The Wise Woman*, engaging the reader in riddling games which they can approach with their foreheads or through some other sense. This becomes apparent almost immediately. After a brief fairytale opening—“There was a certain country where things used to go rather oddly” (1)—the narrative itself goes rather oddly, launching into a single sentence that spans three pages in the 1875 edition. It is worth examining this extraordinary passage in full. While it purports to be simple description, it interpenetrates all three spatial zones, moving from the intra-textual space of the story to subversive inter-textual engagement, which in turn disrupts the extra-textual space of the reader. The sentence begins:

In strict accordance with the peculiar nature of this country of uncertainties, it came to pass one day that, in the midst of a shower of rain that might well be called golden, seeing the sun, shining as it

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fell, turned all its drops into molten topazes, and every drop was good for a grain of golden corn, or a yellow cowslip, or a buttercup, or a dandelion at least,—while this splendid rain was falling, I say, with a musical patter upon the great leaves of the horse-chestnuts, which hung like Vandyke collars about the necks of the creamy, red-spotted blossoms, and on the leaves of the sycamores, looking as if they had blood in their veins, and on a multitude of flowers, of which some stood up and boldly held out their cups to catch their share, while others cowered down laughing under the soft patting blows of the heavy warm drops;— . . . . (1–2)

Interrupting the sentence for analysis (after more than one hundred fifty words): the narrator has defined the intra-textual space of this landscape as a “country of uncertainties,” characterized by lack of definiteness. The subsequent description, while lavish in its detail, gives little shape to the country, describing flowers and trees without any setting. Yet this floral and florid description of the intra-textual country serves to locate the country in an actual-world geography, further blurring any ontological division between intra- and extra-textual space: cowslip, buttercup, and dandelion are all temperate plants, helping evoke the vaguely northern European setting which seemingly unfolds throughout the story.

Here the intra-textual space appears to depend largely on landscapes which the child readers have seen or read about elsewhere. The precise floral referents lack wider setting, leaving the child reader to imagine woods, parks, or gardens based on their actual-world observations. Interestingly, however, the description locates itself more definitely within seasonal time: sycamores flower in late spring. There is thus another recognizable aspect to the geography of *The Wise Woman*, imbued with a quality of fecundity and variety, an apparent bursting forth of life in response to spring rain. As the story will soon narrate the birth of the princess Rosamond, this flowering spring landscape seems fitting for the fairytale beginning of MacDonald’s narrative.

The uncertainties, however, are hardly resolved, as the inter-textual sphere, too, complicates the intra-textual. The sentence continues:

. . . while this lovely rain was washing all the air clean from the motes, and the bad odours, and the poison-seeds that had escaped from their prisons during the long drought—while it fell, splashing,

and sparkling, with a hum, and a rush, and a soft clashing—but stop—I am stealing, I find, and not that only, but with clumsy hands spoiling what I steal:—

“O Rain, with your dull two-fold sound,

The clash hard-by, and the murmur all round;”

—there! take it, Mr. Coleridge;—while, as I was saying, the lovely little rivers whose fountains are the clouds, and which cut their own channels through the air, and make sweet noises rubbing against their banks as they hurry down and down, until at length they are pulled up on a sudden, with a musical splash, in the very heart of an odorous flower, that first gasps and then sighs up a blissful scent, or on the bald head of a stone that never says thank you;—. . . (2–3)

Another hundred sixty words, and the welter of literary allusions in this sentence has become apparent. This is not unusual for MacDonald, though he seldom trumpets the source as he does here. The poem in question is Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “An Ode to the Rain” (1802). MacDonald’s quotation of lines 15–16 is exact, suggesting he may have had a copy of the poem to hand and making the allusion more puzzling. Coleridge continues:

You know, if you know aught, that we,

Both night and day, but ill agree:

For days and months, and almost years,

Have limp’d on thro’ this vale of tears,

Since body of mine, and rainy weather,

Have liv’d on easy terms together. (1997, 295, lines 17–22)

“An Ode to Rain” is in fact a lament about the misery rain brings, with the speaker suffering from a chronic illness which causes acute discomfort in wet weather. Each stanza concludes with the refrain: “Do go, dear Rain! do go away!” MacDonald himself suffered from severe and immensely painful chronic lung disease, which almost killed him in late 1871 (MacDonald, 1924, 434). Especially if he was consulting the actual text of the poem, it seems unlikely that he would have overlooked its plain meaning. The allusion brings an unexpected tension to the description and further complicates the identification of a literary space emancipated from that of the extra-textual. There is, moreover, a negative aspect appearing in the intra-

textual sphere. There is mention of a “long drought,” with “bad odours” and “poison-seeds” revealing a more hostile aspect to an ostensibly idyllic scene.

The fragrance of MacDonald’s inclusion of Coleridge, together with the allusion’s seemingly cross-grained relation to his own text, invites another viewing of the various flowery descriptions as potential inter-texts. Significantly, a similar gathering of adjectives appears in Milton’s description of Adam and Eve’s nuptial bed in *Paradise Lost* IV. 689–775. The first couple retire to a “blissful bower” (IV. 690) walled in by “odorous” Acanthus shrubs (IV. 696) around the bed where Eve lies “More lovely than Pandora” (IV. 714). This association perhaps explains the oddly orgasmic description of the “odorous flower, that first gasps and then sighs up a blissful scent” (3), as well as the commingling of cheerful fertility with the threat of ruin. As Milton’s description of prelapsarian erotic passion subtly undercuts itself through its association with Pandora and the unboxing of evil, MacDonald’s text similarly destabilizes itself with its echo of *Paradise Lost*.

Several other possible allusions in this extraordinary sentence may resonate with Milton’s wider text. Fountains are an important geographic feature in Milton’s Eden, initially as a site of refreshment (IV. 229, 326, V. 126, 195, 203, et al.) but later the place where Satan in serpent’s guise hunts for Eve (IX.420ff). As with the association between Eve and Pandora, the beauty anticipates the later disaster. Furthermore, in the bower, the poet explains, “Love his golden shafts employs” (IV. 763). This phallic image also evokes God’s authority and majesty, such as the “golden scales” (IV. 997), “golden compasses” (VII. 225), and “golden altar” (IX.18), perhaps most notably the “golden chain” (II. 1005,1051) which suspends earth in the cosmos and the “golden sceptre” which becomes an iron rod to discipline fallen humanity (V. 886–7, cp. II. 327–8).

The complex pattern of allusion creates an unexpectedly ominous inter-text, with the threat of impending evil overshadowing the verdant beauty of the space described. It also suggests what MacDonald is attempting stylistically in this passage, and perhaps in the narration of *The Wise Woman* as a whole. MacDonald’s 1868 anthology of religious poetry, *England’s Antiphon*, presents Milton as a poetic exemplar. MacDonald declares: “A true poet may be at once known by the justice and force of the adjectives he uses, especially when he compounds them,—that is, makes one out of two” (210). He offers an array of examples from Milton’s “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity” (1629), including “speckled vanity; smouldering

clouds; hideous hum” and so on, suggesting that the effect creates “a succession of pictures set in the loveliest music for the utterance of grandest thoughts,” each phrase “almost a poem in itself” (210). It is easy enough to see MacDonald attempting a similar effect here, using epithets such as “molten topazes,” “musical patter,” “creamy, red-spotted blossoms,” “heavy warm drops,” “soft clashing,” and so on.

It is tempting to search for the “grandest thoughts” which MacDonald intends to convey. The movement into the extra-textual sphere, however, subverts such searching. The sentence concludes:

while the very sheep felt it blessing them, though it could never reach their skins through the depth of their long wool, and the veriest hedgehog—I mean the one with the longest spikes—came and spiked himself out to impale as many of the drops as he could;—while the rain was thus falling, and the leaves, and the flowers, and the sheep, and the cattle, and the hedgehog, were all busily receiving the golden rain, something happened. (3–4)

The grammatical kernel of the sentence—the event to which almost four hundred words have been dedicated, is simply that “something happened”—something which has nothing particular to do with anything that has gone before. Colin Manlove (2019), in his exposition of *The Wise Woman*, notes of this passage: “The description, which might well have been the prelude to the arrival of a god, or even of Christ himself, falls on its rhetorical face with this conclusion . . . With this, the whole idea of a world or an event that is more singular or important than another is by now denied” (93–4). Perhaps the description of the rain has all been a bluff, not building up to a grand moment but emphasising the importance of each individual flower and sheep. Or perhaps his suddenly vague non-event was not the point at all, nor even a distraction from the point, but rather a vibrant feature of the relational space which the event of reading the long sentence has been creating for and with the reader.

Here the extra-textual sphere comes to the fore. After such a long and elaborate build-up, the abrupt ending is funny. It plays on what educational psychologist Doris Bergen (2003), following Paul McGhee, has called “misexpectations”, the creation of humour through a predictable pattern or progression which ends in something incorrect or incongruous (20). The sudden incongruity provokes laughter. Child readers or listeners can thus feel a degree of superiority over the grown-up narrator: based on everything that went before, they understand that something more should have happened than that. The incongruity both

undercuts the narrator's authority in the text and instructs the child reader in a particular way of reading. From the elaborateness of the preceding details, the child intuits that more detail should be provided. The incongruous vacancy at the end of the sentence, however, allows them space to imagine what might have happened and how whatever it was relates to golden rain and spiky hedgehogs.

Perhaps MacDonald is also slyly tweaking grown-ups who have been reading the story aloud to children. Reading the sentence aloud is daunting, and for it to collapse so abruptly must surely have discomfited a few reading parents. Once the surprise of the initial read has ended, the simplicity of the bald statement that "something happened" offers the oral reader multiple and contrasting performative possibilities, which change the effect of the passage. The grown-up could, for instance, read the whole sentence with a slowly increasing tempo, before shouting "SOMETHING HAPPENED!" with great excitement. Alternatively, they could read it with precise fussiness, decisively concluding "something [pause] happened" as if that settled the matter. Other performative choices are of course possible, permitted by the vagueness of the misexpected ending. The diverse possibilities for performance help underscore the passage's silliness and enrich the child's enjoyment of the moment. In this way, too, the narrator cedes control over the text. The event of the story, how the readers experience it—where they find the laughs or whether they sigh a little—is projected to the extra-textual realm. The unexpected moral of the tale is not simply that the child reader should learn to behave like the princess in the story but that the child readers' own behaviour can influence how the story happens.

### Closing Comments

Regardless of whether it is applied to the examination of literary or actual-world geography, space is always a slippery term. Space is neither absolute nor singular in its make-up; it is both produced and experienced in multiple and complex ways by multiple and complex agents. Space is negotiated: it emerges through discourse, shared understandings and experiences, and through the challenging of its boundaries by agents operating within and without. Moving toward an understanding of the way texts function spatially, three distinct spatial spheres can be identified: the intra-textual, the inter-textual, and the extra-textual. Through a literary geographical analysis of *The Wise Woman*, each of these spatial "realms" has been shown to

interconnect with and affect the space of the other, indicating that the imagined world of the author connects with and impacts the lived space of the child reader. MacDonald's use of the inter-textual, his inclusion of Coleridge and allusion to the work of Milton, expand the space of the novel into a world outside of the pages of the text, promoting the reader to consider both social figures of the actual-world as well as to imagine the intra-textual geographies such figures have created elsewhere.

Any reading of space must consider its relational and collaborative formation. A relational literary geographic approach enables better understanding of the spatial workings of children's literature. Thinking relationally about the geography of children's literature allows for the connecting of the various actors involved in the production of the text, including the author, editor, publisher, and child and parent readers, further demonstrating the collaborative process through which the text emerges (Saunders, 2020). This relationality of the text does not begin and end with those involved in the reading but is inclusive of multiple factors from across the intra-, inter- and extra-textual space in which the text happens, such as cultural and geographic social norms and conventions, the physical landscape, folklore, oral traditions, morality, domestic and educational environments, and so on. In turn, the affective space of the text is extended, and its relational valences rendered visible via an event that takes place in and across space and time. Such a critical lens allows identification of the historio-geographically specific contexts of children's literature as well as the space(s) where it is read and produced, and the affective potential it has for child readers in their everyday engagements with the world.

### Endnotes

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1. For an overview of recent criticism on *The Wise Woman*, see Manlove (2019), pp. 81, 134.
  2. An earlier examination of the ways in which inter-textual and extra-textual spaces become connected through such reading practices can be found in Dydia Delyser's (2005) *Ramona Memories*, in which Delyser traces the ways in which literary tourism surrounding Helen Hunt Jackson's 1884 novel *Ramona* comes to permeate the social memory of Southern California, inflecting understandings of the extra-textual setting(s) of the novel.



3. The reference to closing “the book” in the serialized edition of the text (*Good Things*, 1875, July 3, 487) strongly indicates that the standalone volume was planned well before the serialization’s completion.
4. A discussion of the remains of a hyena den found in Kirkdale, Yorkshire, can be found in Robert H. Dott’s (1992) *Eustasy: The Historical Ups and Downs of a Major Geological Concept*.

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