It is not an overstatement to say that George MacDonald is the grandfather of contemporary high fantasy literature. However, if we were to survey most students and general readers of fantasy, we would find few people today familiar with this important literary and cultural figure. If he is remembered at all, it is usually for his children’s literature. Yet, during his own time, he became widely known and well respected as a writer of novels, poetry, sermons, fantasies, children’s stories, and fairy tales. With his friend Lewis Carroll, he was one of the best mythmakers of the late nineteenth century. His works were bestsellers, enjoying popularity with the reading public and securing the critical attention of reviewers. His novels sold well in both Great Britain and America, his poetry earned him a consideration for the position of poet laureate in England after the death of Lord Tennyson, and he was widely regarded as a Christian sage. He maintained close friendships with John Ruskin and Charles Dodgson, and such figures as Lord Tennyson, Charles Kingsley, F. D. Maurice, R. W. Gilder, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Samuel Clemens, and H. W. Longfellow considered him an artistic peer, encouraging and praising his literary accomplishments. His many works inspired the likes of G. K. Chesterton, W. H. Auden, and T. S. Eliot, and his fantasies and Christian imagination laid the foundation for the fantasy works of the famous Inklings, namely C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams.¹ Just as MacDonald influenced others, the German and English Romantics influenced him, and in this presentation I examine the influence of Coleridge’s cognitive theory on George MacDonald’s theological view of the redemptive imagination, illustrating this

¹ Reis, *George MacDonald*, 17-18; Wilson, “Quest for ‘The Truth,’” 141
relationship with an analysis of how MacDonald explores the imaginative and spiritual dynamics of metafictional reading in his classic fantasy novel *Phantastes* (1858).

The Life of a Victorian Mythmaker

MacDonald’s mother died of tuberculosis when he was only eight years old, and this disease would take many of his other family members, including four of his own children. He was indeed familiar with heartache and grief, and in no way was he naïve concerning the harsh realities of pain, suffering, and loss. Even as he lost his mother early in his life, he developed a very close and loving relationship with his father, and it was this relationship, characterized by love, affection, and stern discipline, that helped reshape MacDonald’s view of God from the predominantly stern and angry hyper-Calvinistic God to a more moderate and scriptural understanding of God as not only holy, righteous, and just, but also merciful, gracious, and loving. Moreover, he would eventually come to reject the Calvinist doctrines of limited atonement, total depravity, and unconditional election, and he would develop his own modified Christian theology, working from various Romantic influences, which he later expressed in his sermons, novels, and fantasies.\(^2\)

After attending Old Town Grammar School, MacDonald entered Aberdeen University in 1840 to study science, focusing on chemistry and natural philosophy. He intended to be a physician, but financial constraints kept him from pursuing a medical course of study. In 1842 he temporarily left his studies and worked during the summer months in a castle in the northern part of Scotland, cataloguing books in a library. He encountered many books that helped shape his mind and spark his creative imagination. In particular, MacDonald was drawn to the English

Romantics, especially Coleridge’s poetry, theology, and musings on the distinctions between the primary and secondary imagination and the fancy found in *Biographia Literaria*. Moreover, the writings of the German mystics and Jena Romantics had a profound effect on his literary imagination, thus expanding his scientific focus into considerations of philosophy, metaphysics, theology, and spirituality. He returned to university in 1843 to continue his scientific study. At this time, he struggled with various religious questions and doubts, and he began writing poetry in the tradition of the Romantics, namely Lord Byron. MacDonald graduated in 1845 with a master’s degree in chemistry and natural philosophy, and he began a short career as a private tutor in southwest London.  

Contrary to what some readers and scholars may suggest, fantasy literature is not necessarily anti-science, and MacDonald himself did not see science, properly understood, as antithetical to theology and religious faith. Rather, he saw both as important ways of knowing, and he considered the combination of these epistemologies as a productive way to discover a broader and more accurate understanding of reality. Moreover, his understanding of science, physical principles, and laws of nature inform the imaginative descriptions of his fantasy worlds.

During this time MacDonald continued to contemplate various religious questions. He took a deep interest in German Romanticism and fairytales, and he was very much taken with E.T.W. Hoffmann and Novalis, two highly influential German Romantic writers and philosophers who shaped his views of narrative and the imagination. Later, he would continue to draw from the German and English Romantics to temper the hyper-Calvinism of his youth and seminary training to synthesize a moderate Christian theology that was not quite as conservative as Knox Calvinism but also that did not fall into German High Criticism or theological liberalism. By 1847 he

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3 Hein, *The Harmony Within*, 5; Reis, *George MacDonald*, 21-23.

4 For a discussion of MacDonald’s medical and biochemical knowledge and its relationship to his fantasy literature, see Broome, “The Scientific Basis of George MacDonald’s Dream-Frame.”
decided to enter divinity school with the intention of becoming a minister. In 1848 he attended Highbury College in London, a Congregationalist divinity school.\textsuperscript{5}

In 1851 he married Louisa Powell and became the pastor of Trinity Congregational Church in Arundel, West Sussex. During this pastorship, he gradually revised some of his earlier theological positions, coming to view God as the Father of all humans, a joyous Creator of a beautiful world who delights in his creation, a creation he intended humans to enjoy. MacDonald believed that God was behind all events, not only the good and the beautiful but also the trials and hardships of life, using them to bring ultimate good to all his children and to bring glory to himself. MacDonald continued to revise and develop his theology, and this caused major conflicts within his church. The congregation reduced his salary in an attempt force him out; however, he was not afraid of poverty and willingly accepted the lower pay if it were God’s will. However, in 1853 he did finally leave the church so as to keep it from splitting.\textsuperscript{6} He pursued lecturing, sermon writing, and teaching to support his ever growing family, and eventually he turned to writing novels, fantasy literature, and children’s tales, viewing literary expression as his ultimate pulpit through which to share his personal theological perspectives.

More Than Mere Escapism

Many Victorian readers viewed fantasy literature as too imaginative and fanciful to have much legitimate use value. Fantasy literature was often dismissed as mere escapism, fiction that encourages unnecessary dreaming about otherworldly realities that can lead to an unhealthy ignoring of real-world duties and responsibilities. Some people feared that readers would behave

\textsuperscript{5} Hein, The Harmony Within, 7; Reis, George MacDonald, 23.

\textsuperscript{6} Hein, The Harmony Within, 9-12.
like the main characters in fantasy and fairy tales, escaping into the fairy realm in search of unfruitful imaginative pleasures, excitement, and joy. Such escapism, some believed, diminished the rational mind, unduly focused the mind on that which was unreal and fanciful, and encouraged an unhealthy disengagement from reality.

MacDonald was aware of such negative escapist criticisms of fantasy, and he purposely wrote fiction that emphasized the transformation of self, in both the main character and, by extension, the reader. Indeed, *Phantastes* presents readers with a young man named Anodos who escapes the real and enters a fantastical fairy realm, drawing readers into his many misadventures as he treks seemingly aimlessly through Fairy Land. However, MacDonald’s emphasis is not on mere escapism but, rather, upon transformation of self and returning to the real. The going out is necessarily accompanied by a coming back, and the process of going out transforms the main character such that he can make a difference in his life and real world upon his return. Similarly, readers are to be transformed through imaginative reading, and upon closing the book at the end, they are to take what they have learned and apply it to their own lives and world. Reading a MacDonald fantasy is not mere escapism. If read attentively, the reader’s imagination should be engaged in such a way that the heart, mind, and moral sensibility are transformed, and the reader should not see the real world in quite the same way.

John Pridmore notes that the transformative effects of MacDonald’s literature result from the open-ended nature of the novels’ endings. The closing of a MacDonald narrative is actually a renewed opening for the reader to blur the boundaries between the fictional and the real and to bring transformation to the real. As such, Pridmore labels MacDonald’s fantasy writings “transfiguring fantasy,” stories in which the reader takes the various lessons learned by the
protagonist and other characters in the story and applies them to his/her own life, thus continuing the story, leading, hopefully, to various manifestations of transformation in the real.\(^7\)

The transformative nature of MacDonald’s fiction depends heavily upon the relationship between the imagination and truth. He wrote fantasy not merely to provide readers an imaginative escape into the unreal but, rather, to use literary escape as a creative method to quicken the minds of readers to consider truth. Heather Ward argues that for MacDonald, “imagination was a means of perceiving and expressing realities of the world and of human experience within it, rather than an escape into non-reality. . . . [F]antasy was a means of engaging with truth, with ‘the facts of life,’ through symbolic story, rather than the creation of alternative realities.”\(^8\) Indeed, MacDonald created fantastical realities, but they were less alternate realities than transformed reality. That is, he was not an overt subcreator as was Lord Dunsany or J. R. R. Tolkien, creating complex universes with their own rich mythologies, intricate histories, and complex socio-political structures. Rather, MacDonald transformed everyday reality with fairytale elements and invented natural laws, and the stories taking place within these fantasy realms become more overtly symbolic, an exploration of truth and moral principle that is to be engaged imaginatively, analyzed rationally, and then applied to our real world.

Metafiction and Mythopoeic Spiritual Renewal

The predominant moral principle that Anodos must learn in his adventures through the surrealistic Fairy Land is the meaning of true love. As a young man, he fully understands and impulsively embraces lust, but his selfish desires blind him to the deeper truths of selfless, self-

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\(^7\) Pridmore, “George MacDonald’s Transfiguring Fantasy,” 49.

\(^8\) Ward, “Earth’s Crammed with Heaven,” 25.
sacrificial love, and it is this idealized, agape love that he must learn in order to return to his real world, restored, renewed, and equipped to bring transformation to his Victorian reality. He encounters many opportunities to learn this lesson, but he repeatedly fails, often to the frustration of readers watching him commit the same mistakes over and over. However, through metafictional devices, MacDonald brings Anodos finally to the desired truth, and offers readers imaginative cues as to what we are to learn as well—Anodos represents the readers, and he becomes a metafictional element signaling what the real, flesh-and-blood readers are to take away from their own imaginative journey into Fairy Land.

This larger lesson of love’s true nature is marvelously illustrated in the Cosmo narrative that Anodos reads in the mysterious library he finds in the middle of Fairy Land. This book is basically a metafictional retelling of Anodos’s own adventures in the fairy world and his encounter with the marble lady. Metafiction is the magic of this library. For Anodos, the artifice in the book is so convincing that it is as if he becomes the main character, Cosmo: “Of course, while I read it, I was Cosmo, and his history was mine. Yet, all the time, I seemed to have a kind of double consciousness, and the story a double meaning.”9 We as readers are suddenly more keenly aware of the nature of fiction and narrative, for we are reading a character who is reading a book in which his own consciousness becomes infused with the fictional consciousness of the character in the book. In this episode, MacDonald draws attention to the narrative quality of narrative itself, further underscoring his larger project: reading good narratives should excite our imaginations to so fully identify with the characters and actions that we imaginatively become those characters and learn the larger lessons experienced by them. As Anodos is to be transformed by the Cosmo narrative, we, too, are to be transformed by reading Anodos’s story.

9 MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 84.
The Cosmo narrative recounts the story of a man falling in love with a woman who he can only see, mysteriously, through a mirror, through the frame of beautiful artifice. This is very much Anodos’s own dilemma: like Pygmalion, he has fallen in love with a woman of artifice (the marble lady) and is desperately seeking how to love her and to be with her. However, Anodos does not seem to realize that the very mistakes Cosmo commits are his own. Cosmo is seeking to capture, to grasp, to possess the beautiful woman in the mirror, and he is unwilling to sacrifice his own desires in order to set her free. He fears the loss of his object of love, and he is still clinging to his own selfish desires. Because she is trapped in the mirror, he has control over her and can determine when he satisfies his desires to see her, to hold her in his gaze. If he breaks the mirror to set her free, he loses that control over her. His love is not yet pure, it is not yet sacrificial, and this causes the painful sorrow in her heart, for she realizes he does not yet truly love her.

Eventually, Cosmo decides to break the mirror, and the blast from the broken spell knocks him unconscious. When he awakens, he is heart-broken to discover both the mirror and the woman are missing, and he strives to get both back, to repossess them as objects of desire. The story ends with Cosmo finally sacrificing his own life in order to free the woman, and as they are reunited, they profess their love, but he tragically dies from the wounds he sustained in setting her free. This story is the picture of self-sacrificial love, for Cosmo risks and pays with his life to free her. Similarly, Anodos must die to himself to free himself and to return to the real world. This is the spiritual maturity he must attain, and the rest of the novel traces further adventures in Fairy Land where he finally apprehends sacrificial love and acts upon it.

\[\text{Ibid., 99-104.}\]
Conclusion: The Significance of Mythopoeic Reading

For MacDonald, the ultimate purpose of writing his fantasy novel was to share such eternal truths with readers. Even though he was forced out of his church, he was still very much a preacher at heart, and if he could not reach people with the truth of God’s love, the moral law, and scriptural insight through the pulpit, then he hoped to do so through writing mythopoeic fantasy literature. Reading becomes the cognitive mechanism by which MacDonald hoped to ignite the sacramental imagination and to open the minds of his audience to eternal truths creatively expressed through mythopoeic fantasy. According to Chris Brawley, MacDonald considered the imagination to be the primary cognitive faculty that processed religious truth and revealed the sacramental nature of reality:

For MacDonald, the imagination is regarded as the faculty which “images” or makes a likeness of something. It is that faculty which most closely resembles the activity of God, for just as God is the primary creator, creating the universe through his power, so the artist imitates this creative act in the formation of the secondary worlds created. Agreeing with Coleridge’s distinction between the imagination as offering new versions of old truths, and the fancy as merely inventiveness, MacDonald was an important figure in furthering the function of the imagination as a vehicle to apprehend the sacramental nature of the world.11

For MacDonald and like-minded fantasy writers, the imagination is the key to mythopoeic understandings of the universe. In this view, the material world contains objects that when perceived properly through the imagination, can provide glimpses of God’s mind, of eternal truths. The world is sacramental in that it points to the sacred, and the imagination, according to

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MacDonald, is the primary faculty for comprehending these sacraments in nature. Since naturalistic and materialistic assumptions blinded the Victorian modern mind to sacramental nature, imaginative fantasy literature, MacDonald hoped, would enliven, indeed resurrect, the latent and languishing redemptive imagination and tune readers into perceiving and contemplating mythopoeic truth. As Brawley notes, “[H]ere is the defining characteristic of mythopoeia, that of a sense of wonder which may be awakened so that the divine element present in the world is recovered.”

In other words, the reading of mythopoeic fantasy is not a waste of time, energy, or effort, as the Victorian utilitarian mindset of MacDonald’s age argued. Rather, the comfort experienced, far from being a vain and useless experience, is a reasonable outworking of this transformative reading process. Mythopoeic narrative enacts a kind of death and burial of self and then resurrection of imagination to new life or new spiritual awareness. As C. S. Lewis noted, MacDonald’s novel baptized his imagination, putting it through a figurative death, burial, and resurrection. MacDonald intended this transformative, redemptive process for his own Victorian world, but it has a direct application to our world as well, for as Monika Hilder concludes, MacDonald’s mythopoeic literature captures and restores “our sense of identity, meaning, and transcendent truth. As he addressed the nineteenth-century spiritual vacuum, so his mythic education continues to speak to the current sense of existential crisis by inviting readers inside an experience of the transcendent as well as stimulating an imaginative response, and so challenging postmodern sensibilities with the sense that all of life is, … , ‘suffused with the spiritual.’”

12 Ibid., 94. See also Waddle, “George MacDonald and the Homiletics of Religious Imagination.”
13 Lewis, introduction, xi.
14 Hilder, George MacDonald’s Education into Mythic Wonder,” 180.
Bibliography


