

The Journey to Death: Elemental Imagery in the Works of George MacDonald

By Kaitlin Downing

Introduction

It is no exaggeration to say that George MacDonald dealt with a lot of death in his lifetime. As Glenn Edward Sadler explains in “Defining Death as ‘More Life’: Unpublished Letters by George MacDonald”:

As a writer and father of eleven children (plus two adopted), MacDonald had frequently to face death in his own family. Having lost his own mother when he was eight years old (and later other family members), MacDonald underwent repeated tests on his belief in personal immortality. Such a major loss came for him in the 1870’s, when, at the height of his fame, MacDonald and his wife had to endure the struggling death of their second daughter, Mary Josephine.¹

In addition to Mary, three more of MacDonald’s children died during his lifetime: Lilia, Caroline, and Maurice. Consequently, the topic of death appears quite frequently in MacDonald’s various novels and short stories; as Sadler states, “. . . the topic of death cannot be avoided; it is both of literary and biographical importance in understanding his life and works.”²

George MacDonald was certainly not alone in the emphasis on death in his works – death, especially child death, was a common topic in writing during the Victorian period – but as Melody Green points out, MacDonald writes about death in a way that counteracts Victorian society’s obsession with death.³ As Laurence Lerner states in *Angels and Absences: Child Deaths in the Nineteenth Century*, “The child deathbed is what literary historians call a topos – a widely

Kaitlin Downing began research for this paper during the summer of 2013 and completed the first version for her Victorian Fantasy class that fall. The project grew out of her fascination with the various ways books for children portray difficult topics, such as death. She continued work on the paper the following semester, and this final version was submitted and presented as her final project for the University Honors Program. Kaitlin graduated from Kansas State University in May 2014 with a Bachelor’s degree in English and continues to attend Kansas State University as she works for a Master’s degree in English, focusing on children’s literature.

¹ Glenn Edward Sadler, “Defining Death as ‘More Life’: Unpublished Letters by George Mac Donald,” *North Wind* 3 (1984): 5.

² Ibid.

³ Melody Green, “Death and Nonsense in the Poetry of MacDonald’s *At the Back of the North Wind* and Lewis Carroll’s *Alice Books*,” *North Wind* 30 (2011): 39.

used theme, accompanied with a more or less fixed set of details. Once a topos has established itself, it recurs from author to author with remarkably little change and literary history, if conscientiously done, can therefore grow very repetitive.”⁴ Most Victorian writers focused on “glorified deathbed scenes, eulogies, and memorial poems” like those found in the works of Alfred Lord Tennyson, Christina Rossetti, and Charles Dickens.⁵ These works focus on the pain surrounding the loss of the child and attempt to console the mourners. Lerner says, “They all urge the parents not to weep because the dead child is now an angel, has left behind a happy memory, and will through its death have a beneficial effect on the survivors.”⁶ In contrast, MacDonald’s works tend to portray death in a much more positive manner, straying away from the sadness surrounding a death and instead focusing on journeys of elemental purification in which the characters are cleansed of their flaws and transition into their next stage of life.

Background

In his personal life, George MacDonald coped with death in much the same way as the people around him. In a letter of comfort to his wife about the imminent death of their daughter Lilia, he says, “But we must remember that we are only in a sort of passing vision here, and that the real life lies beyond us. If Lily goes now, how much the sooner you and I may find her again! Life is waiting us. We have to awake – or die – which you will – to reach it.”⁷ In *George MacDonald and His Wife*, MacDonald’s son Greville recounts the scene of Lilia’s funeral: “Her father could hardly leave the grave. He came back twice after all others had left, and it was with difficulty he was at last led away.”⁸ These quotations both show that like most people in his situation, the death of his child weighed heavily on him, but he found comfort in his religious beliefs. As he said of his son Maurice’s death, “It is a sore affliction, but though cast down we are not destroyed. Jesus rose again glorious, and to that I cleave fast.”⁹ These beliefs fall directly in line with those of the other writers of the time – the deaths were heartbreaking, but bearable because of the hope for the next life.

⁴ Lawrence Lerner, *Angels and Absences: Child Deaths in the Nineteenth Century* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1997), 129.

⁵ Green, “Death and Nonsense,” 39.

⁶ Lerner, *Angels and Absences*, 42.

⁷ Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1924), 524.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 526.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 498.

In addition to religion, another strong influence on George MacDonald's personal beliefs and writing was his fascination with science, especially chemistry. MacDonald studied chemistry at King's College in Aberdeen and hoped to continue his work in Germany and become a doctor, but he was not financially able to do so. He instead turned to writing to make a living.¹⁰ However, he lectured on chemistry later in his life. Greville MacDonald writes:

I would give much to have some record of my father's lectures on Natural Philosophy and Chemistry. His delight in turning yet again into the paths of his Aberdeen days must have been great, for we remember the assurance to his father...that he could at least make a good chemist. His talks about the rigid Law of atoms, their unascertainable minuteness yet indivisibility and unalterable ratios...such thoughts coursing through his brain would have found choice words for their utterance. He...would find innumerable instances of physical law tallying with metaphysical, of chemical affinities with spiritual affections...My father's sense and understanding of ethical Evolution is implied throughout his writings, and must have discovered itself in quite early days long before he knew anything of the *Descent of Man* or *Origin of Species*.¹¹

The field of chemistry was undergoing a lot of growth during the 1840s, when MacDonald was a student, especially with the push to further incorporate the study of chemistry into the study of medicine.¹² MacDonald would have understood quite a bit about modern chemistry (like the law of atoms, as Greville MacDonald explains), but it seems that at least for the purposes of his fantasy literature, MacDonald focused mainly on older, alchemical imagery. By fusing his knowledge of chemistry and alchemy with his religious beliefs, MacDonald creates stories that focus on "the journey to the land of the dead" for the characters, which generally involve a purifying by one or more of the classical elements: water, earth, fire, or air.¹³ In alchemical tradition, "the active alchemical agent [water, earth, fire, or air] was as much an agent of death and putrefaction as it was of life and vegetation. The alchemical world view was a dynamic one, evoking a great cyclical interchange of matter that involved life,

¹⁰ William Raeper, *George MacDonald* (Oxford: Lion Books, 1988), 54 – 5.

¹¹ Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife*, 216 – 17.

¹² Gerrylynn K. Roberts, "The Establishment of the Royal College of Chemistry: An Investigation of the Social Context of Early-Victorian Chemistry," *Historical Studies in Physical Sciences* 7 (1976): 449.

¹³ Jill P. May, "Symbolic Journeys toward Death: George MacDonald and Howard Pyle as Fantasists," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 1986 *Proceedings* (1986): 129.

death, and continual rebirth or resurrection.”¹⁴ Lyndy Abraham explains that many great writers made use of alchemical imagery, including Shakespeare, Jonson, Donne, Milton, and Dryden. She expounds, “The satiric reference to alchemy in the work of such writers as Thomas Nashe, Ben Jonson and John Donne is well known. But alchemical metaphor was used to express deep philosophical and spiritual truths as frequently as it was used as a subject for satire and comedy.”¹⁵ While many scholars have studied MacDonald’s works, none have explicitly studied the alchemical imagery so prominent in his fantasy; this essay attempts to address this gap in the conversation. The purifying journeys in MacDonald’s works fall into the category of expressing “deep philosophical and spiritual truths” in the way they act as metaphors for the experiences and hardships of life, as well as build on MacDonald’s religious belief that death is not an end but a transition into more life. Not all of the characters physically die in the stories they appear in, but their purifying journeys still represent the death of their old ways and a transition into a better state of being. The next sections of this essay will analyze how MacDonald uses each element, as portrayed in “The Light Princess,” “The Golden Key,” *The Princess and the Goblin*, and *At the Back of the North Wind*.

Purification through Water

Water is the main element used in MacDonald’s “The Light Princess”; in this story, the princess is cursed with a lack of gravity, and it is only through her experiences with water that she is able to grow as a person and maintain any kind of normality. Much like the classic Sleeping Beauty story, the princess is cursed by the king’s evil sister Princess Makemnoit, who is angry because she has not been invited to the princess’s christening. The text says:

When they were all gathered about the font, she contrived to get next to it, and throw something into the water; after which she maintained a very respectful demeanor till the water was applied to the child’s face. But at that moment she turned round in her place three times, and muttered the following words, loud enough for those beside her to hear:
*“Light of spirit, by my charms,
Light of body, every part,
Never weary human arms –*

¹⁴ Betty Jo Teeter Dobbs, *Alchemical Death and Resurrection* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Libraries, 1990), 13.

¹⁵ Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), xv.

*Only crush thy parents' heart!"*¹⁶

This curse essentially deprives the child of her gravity, meaning that she has no weight to keep her on the ground. Consequently, the princess constantly floats away and sometimes has to hold stones if she wants to stay on the ground. MacDonald further plays with the meaning of the word "light" in the story with the queen's worry that the princess might be "light-minded," because she cannot seem to take any matter seriously and laughs at everything.¹⁷ The lake on the palace grounds, however, seems to make all of the troubles better for as long as the princess is in the water: "The palace was built on the shores of the loveliest lake in the world; and the princess loved this lake more than father or mother. The root of the preference no doubt, although the princess did not recognize it as such, was, that the moment she got into it, she recovered the natural right of which she had been so wickedly deprived – namely, gravity."¹⁸ When she is in the water, the princess behaves better, and her laugh is more real. It is the water that allows the princess to fall in love during her nightly swims with the prince. When the prince sacrifices himself to save the lake from being drained by Princess Makemnoit, the princess realizes that she does not want him to die and saves him from drowning. When he finally revives, "The princess burst into a passion of tears, and *fell* on the floor. There she lay for an hour, and her tears never ceased. All the pent-up crying of her life was spent now."¹⁹ Although the princess does not die in her story, the element of water allows her to go on a figurative journey to better or purify herself – the water helps her regain her lost gravity, both physically and emotionally. She experiences the death of her light-mindedness, which is physically manifested in her new ability to stay on the ground.

"The Golden Key" is another work by MacDonald that makes heavy use of the element of water, with the main characters Mossy and Tangle experiencing water as a death and transition into the next state of being. Throughout the story, Mossy and Tangle search for the lock that matches the golden key that Mossy has found. They travel together for a time and agree that they must find the source of the beautiful shadows they see everywhere. Before they can continue, however, they are separated and have to finish their journeys alone. In Tangle's journey, she comes across the Old Man of the Sea, who tells her to get in the bath until he calls for her:

¹⁶ George MacDonald, "The Light Princess," in *The Complete Fairy Tales*, ed. U.C. Knoepfelmacher (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 16 – 17.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁹ MacDonald, "The Light Princess," 51.

No sooner was she undressed and lying in the bath, than she began to feel as if the water were sinking into her, and she were receiving all the good of sleep without undergoing its forgetfulness. She felt the good coming all the time. And she grew happier and more hopeful than she had been since she lost Mossy...After an hour, as she thought, she heard his voice call her, and rose out of the bath. All the fatigue and aching of her long journey had vanished. She was as whole, and strong, and well as if she had slept for seven days.²⁰

After that, Tangle continues her journey and realizes that she has not had to breathe since her bath. The story does not explicitly state at this point what the lack of breathing means, but it is implied that Tangle might have actually died. Mossy has a very similar experience in a different part of the story. After he gets out of the bath, he has the following conversation with the Old Man of the Sea: “‘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.’”²¹ This conversation shows that both Mossy and Tangle experience death while in the bath, which allowed them to be purified and transition smoothly into the rest of their travels. Unlike contemporary writers, MacDonald clearly does not linger on the scene of death in this story, but moves right along with Mossy and Tangle’s journey. Tangle later experiences purification through earth and fire, but the scenes are very short compared to the bath scenes, and therefore will not be mentioned later in the essay.

In both of these stories, water in the alchemical tradition can be thought of in terms of baptism in the Christian tradition, reinforcing MacDonald’s belief in baptism as a purifying transition. The definition for “bath” in Abraham’s *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery* states, “The bath, submersion, drowning, and baptism are synonymous, and symbolize the breaking down and cleansing of the old outmoded state of being, leading to the birth of the rejuvenated, illuminated man.”²² It is interesting to note that the princess’s troubles in “The Light Princess” stem from her aunt’s interruption during the baptism. It is only through her experience with water later in her life that the princess is made whole; saving the prince from drowning is like the completion of her baptism. Mossy’s and Tangle’s baths in “The Golden Key” follow the alchemical definition more literally: they each take a bath and are in turn transformed into a new, rejuvenated state. While the inclusion of water and baptism might say many things about

²⁰ George MacDonald, “The Golden Key,” in *The Complete Fairy Tales*, ed. U.C. Knoepfelmacher (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 136.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 142.

²² Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, 18.

MacDonald's religious beliefs, one of the most important concepts conveyed is that both baptism and death are steps into a higher state of being.

Purification through Earth

The element of earth is key for Princess Irene in *The Princess and the Goblin*, because her experience travelling through the mountain represents the death of her doubt and the strengthening of her faith in her grandmother. Irene has a grandmother who no one else can see, and even Irene struggles to believe that she is real. One night the grandmother gives Irene a ring with a long, thin thread of silk fastened to the end. The thread is too fine to be seen, but Irene can feel it. Her grandmother explains the purpose of the ring: "If ever you find yourself in any danger – such, for example, as you were in this evening – you must take off your ring, and put it under the pillow of your bed. Then you must lay your forefinger, the same that wore the ring, upon the thread, and follow the thread wherever it leads you."²³ Later on in the story, Irene wakes up to scary noises in her room and does just what her grandmother told her to do with the ring. She faithfully follows the thread into the mountain nearby, but becomes discouraged when the thread leads to a dead end. Eventually she realizes that she can move some stones, and as she does so is able to hear her friend Curdie, who is also trapped in the mountain. By following her thread, both children are able to get out of the mountain safely (a great feat, as there are also dangerous goblins all around) and back home. Although Princess Irene does not physically die, her terrifying experience in the mountain teaches her that she can always believe in and trust her grandmother; she experiences the death of her doubts and the strengthening of her faith.

The element of earth in *The Princess and the Goblin* can be said to represent either a labyrinth or the grave, indicative of MacDonald's belief about the strengthening hardships of life. The dark tunnels of the mountain resemble the alchemical idea of the labyrinth, which alchemists use "in a symbolic way to designate a place of confusion, geographical or mental, which has to be negotiated with great care in order to avoid becoming lost without thread or clue."²⁴ Princess Irene's journey through the tunnels is somewhat like a geographical labyrinth for her. She has to learn to deal with the challenges she comes across and rely on the thread to eventually lead her back to safety. Her physical journey can be seen as symbolic of everyday life, in which (in MacDonald's view) people have to rely on their faith to overcome the hardships and trials they experience. Furthermore, the element of earth is representative of burial or the grave. Burial obviously implies

²³ George MacDonald, *The Princess and the Goblin* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1926), 130 – 31.

²⁴ Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, 113.

death, but according to Abraham, alchemy emphasizes that “the vessel which is the tomb of death is also the womb of new life, of generation.”²⁵ Under the definition of the word “generation,” she explains, “At the death of the body or bodies, the seed or soul flies to the top of the vessel while the blackened body below is washed and cleansed of its impurities.”²⁶ Princess Irene’s time in the mountain is similar to the process described in these definitions, because her doubts stay in the earth and she comes out a stronger person. Both of these interpretations of the element of earth relate to MacDonald’s belief that faith can strengthen people and help them rise above challenges.

Purification through Fire

Princess Irene sees the purifying power of fire in *The Princess and the Goblin*, although her grandmother tells her that she is not ready for it yet. The fire scene in this story takes place right before the grandmother gives her the ring. Irene has just been frightened by a strange creature, which resulted in her running out of the house and getting her dress dirty. She comes to tell her grandmother about her experience, but gets upset when the mud from her dress gets on her grandmother’s beautiful dress. The grandmother tells her not to worry, and then, as the text explains, “stooped to the fire, and taking from it, by the stalk in her fingers, one of the burning roses, passed it once and again and a third time over the front of her dress; and when Irene looked, not a single stain was to be discovered.”²⁷ Irene subsequently asks her grandmother to clean her with the flaming rose as well, to which her grandmother replies, “No, it is too hot for you yet.”²⁸ This reply suggests that the flaming rose has the power to purify Irene, but purifying her in this way would kill her, and Irene is not ready for death. The grandmother is able to use the flaming rose to literally clean herself because she is in a more advanced stage of her existence; it is not dangerous for her.

MacDonald’s use of fire in *The Princess and the Goblin* falls perfectly in line with the alchemical concept of fire as the main purifying agent, and it can relate to the Christian idea of baptism by fire. As Polish alchemist Michael Sendivogius states, “Fire is the purest, and most worthy Element of all, full of unctuous corrosiveness adhering to it, penetrating, digesting, corroding, and wonderfully adhering”²⁹ Abraham further explains, “By undergoing the fire of the furnace the metal (or soul of man) experiences suffering and mortification

²⁵ Ibid., 90.

²⁶ Ibid., 85.

²⁷ MacDonald, *The Princess and the Goblin*, 124.

²⁸ Ibid., 125.

²⁹ Quoted in Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, 76.

yet at the same time is cleansed of its impurities and corruption.”³⁰ Irene’s grandmother uses fire to cleanse herself, but Irene is not ready for the power of purification through fire. Other, less intense elements are more suited to her needs for the time being. Water, as the more common and slightly lesser form of purification, is better for Irene and MacDonald’s other child characters at this stage of their existence. The young characters will likely not experience purification through fire until they have had years of growth and experience. As John the Baptist explains in the New Testament, “I indeed baptize you with water; unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire.”³¹ MacDonald’s use of fire in this section of the novel illustrates his belief that purification is a continual journey in which greater progression is always possible.

Purification through Air

In *At the Back of the North Wind*, Diamond experiences purification through the element of air at the hands of his friend, the North Wind. Throughout the novel, North Wind visits Diamond at night and sometimes takes him with her as she completes various tasks. Sometimes her job requires her to do seemingly evil tasks, like sinking a ship, but Diamond accepts her explanation that she knows it is the right thing to do because of the music she can hear from the place at her back (the back of the north wind). Diamond asks her to take him there someday. To get to the place, Diamond has to walk through North Wind:

Diamond walked towards her instantly. When he reached her knees, he put out his hand to lay it on her, but nothing was there save an intense cold. He walked on. Then all grew white about him; and the cold stung him like fire. He walked on still, groping through the whiteness. It thickened about him. At last, it got into his heart, and he lost all sense...It was when he reached North Wind’s heart that he fainted and fell. But as he fell, he rolled over the threshold, and it was thus that Diamond got to the back of the north wind.³²

In this place, Diamond experiences calm and beautiful music from the river. When he comes back, he wakes up to find out that he has been terribly ill; going to the back of the north wind has been both a purification and a near-death experience for him. The memory of the music from the river strengthens

³⁰ Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, 82.

³¹ Matthew 3:11 (King James Version).

³² George MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, ed. Roderick McGillis and John Pennington (Peterborough, Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 2011), 121 – 22.

Diamond for the rest of his life – he is always kind to those around him and never fears, because he has been at the back of the north wind. At the end of the story, the North Wind takes Diamond to the back of the north wind permanently. The final scene is as close as MacDonald comes to writing a death-bed scene like those of his contemporaries. The story’s narrator recounts, “I walked up the winding stair, and entered his room. A lovely figure, as white and almost as clear as alabaster, was lying on the bed. I saw at once how it was. They thought he was dead. I knew that he had gone to the back of the north wind.”³³ The North Wind – or air – purifies and strengthens Diamond throughout his short life, and then acts as his transition into the next life.

MacDonald strays from purely alchemical ideas in his use of air in *At the Back of the North Wind*, focusing more on North Wind as a character than an element. Nevertheless, he uses the element to effectively tell the story and impart his religious beliefs about death and the afterlife. Lisa Hermine Makman claims that North Wind acts as a “boundary between realms,” the physical barrier between Earth and the place at the back of the north wind, as well as Diamond’s surrogate mother in the novel.³⁴ She says, “Just as Diamond’s biological mother brought him into the world, this surrogate brings him out of it. Diamond’s passage through North Wind is a reversal of birth, a sort of death.”³⁵ Going to the back of the north wind represents a physical death for Diamond, but a spiritual rebirth and transition. North Wind is also reminiscent of one of the main purposes behind representing alchemy symbolically, as explained by Dobbs: “Thus any symbolic representation of alchemical work of achieving the philosopher’s stone may also be read as instructions for finding Christ, for achieving personal salvation, and the salvation of the world.”³⁶ Dobbs refers to the Old Testament in her definition of the philosopher’s stone, citing Psalm 118, which discusses “the stone that the builders rejected but that later became the essential cornerstone” of Christianity, and Isaiah’s prophecy that Christ would be a “sanctuary for those who sanctified him but ‘a stone of stumbling’ for others.”³⁷ With this in mind, the North Wind might be thought of as a spiritual being working to bring Diamond to Christ, both as an element and as a character. Diamond’s mother brings Diamond into the world physically and raises him, and then North Wind acts as another mother figure to raise him spiritually and bring him into the next life. She helps him symbolically find Christ and achieve personal salvation, and Diamond in turn uses his experiences at the back of the

³³ Ibid., 298.

³⁴ Lisa Hermine Makman, “Child’s Work is Child’s Play: The Value of George MacDonald’s *Diamond*,” *children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 24.3 (1999): 120.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Dobbs, *Alchemical Death and Resurrection*, 12.

³⁷ Ibid.

North Wind to influence other characters to find salvation. MacDonald's characterization of air in this novel demonstrates a belief that eternal progress and purification comes through Christ.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that George MacDonald's works of fantasy were informed by his personal experiences with child death. He certainly had the capacity to write about the topic in the same way as his contemporaries and continue the literary topos discussed by Lerner, but instead he combined his beliefs and interests to write about life and death in a unique way. In his novels and stories, he blends his religious belief in life after death with the chemical and alchemical idea of using elements to transform or purify an object or substance into a new state. By focusing on his characters' life journeys and experiences with the elements of water, earth, fire, and air, MacDonald removes the focus from the pain and feeling of loss surrounding a death. Alternatively, the main point of all of his stories is that each character grows through his or her experience with a certain element. Not all of the characters physically die in their stories, like the princess from "The Light Princess" and Princess Irene in *The Princess and the Goblin*, but all of them are made better because of their experiences, which can be compared to hardships and learning experiences in everyday life. The deaths of the characters that do die – Mossy, Tangle, and Diamond – are not sad because death is merely a transition into a better place. MacDonald's works clearly show his belief that death is not an end, but a continuation of the journey of life.

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