

1-1-1994

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Recommended Citation

Reis, Richard (1994) "The Ignorant/Stupid Narrator in Lilith," *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*: Vol. 13 , Article 3.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind/vol13/iss1/3>

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The Ignorant/Stupid Narrator in *Lilith*

Richard Reis

From various comments I've seen, it strikes me that many readers, however devoted to the works of George MacDonald, miss some of that author's excellences. MacDonald is often read for his religious thought alone, rather than as a literary artist of considerable sophistication. In the following essay I shall try to show how a fundamental concept of critical analysis can help in the appreciation of MacDonald, and specifically of *Lilith*. The technical term with which I am concerned is *point of view*.

This item of critical jargon refers to the perspective from which we see the events of the story—who the narrator is. First person (“Call *me* Ishmael”), or third person (“None of *them* knew the colour of the sky”). If a story is narrated in the third person, is the narrator “all seeing”? That is, are we told what happens to everybody, even experiences of different characters in different places at the same time? Or is the third-person narration limited to what is experienced by only one character? Does the third-person narrator report not only what the characters do and say, but also what they think and feel? Does the third-person narrator, in the manner of Thackeray, *comment* on his invented people and events, or leave such interpretation to the reader?

George MacDonald's *Lilith* is told in the first person by the tale's central character, Mr Vane. As with third-person narratives, there are distinctions to be made among those told in the first person. One is between the imagined character who tells the story and the author who invented that character. The two are not to be confused with one another, especially in their opinions. Another distinction involves whether the narrator is an important character as in *David Copperfield*, or a relatively peripheral one like Ishmael in *Moby-Dick*. (That is: Ishmael is important for his thoughts, but Ahab, Starbuck, Stubb, and others are crucial for their actions as well.)

Among first-person narrators, we may further distinguish among various degrees of wisdom and insight, which may change with the passage of time. Ishmael is only a foremast hand aboard the *Pequod*, but he is a thoughtful, even philosophical, man throughout. By contrast, David Copperfield is rather foolish at the outset of his narration, but wiser by the end. What of Mr Vane? **[end of page 24]**

First of all, we must note that Vane is not MacDonald's mouthpiece: if there is such a character it is Mr Raven, alias Adam. In a sense, *Lilith*

has two first-person narrators: the young, wealthy, unperceptive idler and his older, wiser self, looking back on his experiences and mistakes. Even the later narrator is somewhat deficient in wisdom and insight, but nowhere near the same fool as his younger self. Neither necessarily speaks for George MacDonald. I feel that the harshest critics of *Lilith*, R.L. Wolff and C.N. Manlove, tend to miss that point. Even C.S. Lewis, who admired MacDonald's works immensely, sometimes equates narrator with author.

The younger Mr Vane in *Lilith* is a little like the first-person narrators in classic detective fiction—the narrator of Poe's tales featuring the detective Dupin, Watson in the Sherlock Holmes tales, Hastings in the Poirot stories, or the somewhat brainier Archie Goodwin in the Nero Wolfe mysteries—well meaning but a bit dense, at least by comparison with the Great Detective's genius. Watson rarely has any idea of what's going on, sometimes even after Holmes patiently (if condescendingly) explains things. Mr Vane, likewise, repeatedly fails to understand what the wise Adam is talking about.

In detective fiction, the ignorant/stupid-narrator point of view produces the effect of keeping the reader mystified until the Great Detective explains everything at the end, astonishing us with his brilliance. In many of the finest mysteries, the clues are carefully planted in the text, well in advance of the solution's revelation, but the narrator doesn't perceive their meaning. When their significance is explained, we say to ourselves "Why didn't I notice that?" Sometimes the reader does spot a planted clue's significance, even though the narrator doesn't. That provides one of the great satisfactions of reading mystery fiction. I vividly remember "solving" for myself, at the age of fifteen or so, Agatha Christie's *The ABC Murders*, while Hastings was still in a fog and before Poirot's revelation.

Fantasy literature, however, isn't quite the same thing as detective fiction in the effects achieved through the ignorant-narrator device. For instance, consider the following incident from *Lilith* chapter 4. Adam, now in his manifestation as a raven, plunges his beak into the sod of Mr Vane's lawn, pulls out a worm and tosses it aloft, where it turns into a butterfly. "Tut! tut!" Vane exclaims; "you mistake, Mr Raven: worms are not the larvae of butterflies!" Vane's pedantic fatuity in criticizing Mr. Raven for a supposed error in entomology is amusing; even Dr. Watson would have observed that Mr. Raven has done something not mistaken but wondrous and miraculous, with a symbolic meaning to be deciphered. One can hear the good doctor [25] exclaim, "Good heavens, Holmes, what does it mean?" At least the humble Watson knows when to admit his ignorance; Vane lacks humility

as well as insight. To top it off, Vane now scolds Mr. Raven further: “No creature,” he carps, “should be allowed to forget . . . where it came from!” When Mr. Raven asks why, Vane compounds his Tory smugness by saying, “Because it will grow proud, and cease to recognize its superiors.” And the next sentence is a most significant one, because it is the voice not of the flagrantly ignorant young Vane, but of the older, wiser, retrospective Vane. Not in quotes, the next paragraph, a one-sentence “editorial comment,” reads as follows: “No man knows when he is making an idiot of himself.”

One might expound for pages upon the deft, even brilliant, artistry that MacDonald displays in his treatment of this incident. A large part of the effect is of downright comic irony, in the contrast between the young Vane’s conventional worldliness and caste-conscious Toryism, and the older Vane’s rueful realization that he had behaved with ridiculous stupidity. Another aspect of this incident’s overall effect is that the reader is warned, through the older Vane’s “voice,” to keep alert for further such entertaining blunders by this vain young fellow. (This is surely MacDonald’s intentional pun, not mine, but I’ll commit my own crime by observing that the point of view from which *Lilith* is narrated bears a rich vein of subtle, amusing effects.)

One might multiply instances endlessly, but I shall content myself here with just one more, from chapter 9, chosen because its effect is ironic but in this case not funny at all. By the time of this later chapter, Mr. Vane has begun to realize how silly he has been. He has, however, little understanding of what he should do to correct his deficient vision. We come to see that Vane should pay careful attention to the wise Adam/Raven’s often rather cryptic utterings, just as Watson, Hastings, or Goodwin should be more alert for the meaning of a clue, or should realize that it is a clue.

Vane, now somewhat humbler, asks Mr. Raven where he must go and what he must do to gain enlightenment about the Other World in which he finds himself. He pleads:

“at least direct me to some of my kind.”

“I do not know of any. The beings most like you are in that direction.”

He pointed with his beak. I could see nothing but the setting sun, which blinded me.

Soon Vane heads west, into decidedly unpleasant places inhabited by monstrous or defective creatures. **[26]**

In my opinion, this little incident is one of the cleverest artistic touches in all of *Lilith*. Vane utterly fails to see (he is blinded) that he

should go eastwards, *away from* the beings most like himself, if he wants enlightenment. But by this time, after what has happened so far, we should realize what Vane obviously cannot: that MacDonald is using the ignorant-narrator point of view as a challenge to his reader, challenging us to get the point which Vane misses. After all, a veteran reader of detective stories learns to keep his eyes peeled for the ignorant narrator's oversights. Readers of *Lilith* should do likewise.

At the end of *Lilith*, after "sleeping the sleep" and experiencing some rather vague and confusing dreams and visions in the Other World, Mr. Vane is back in this one. "I never dream now," he tells us.

It may be, notwithstanding, that, when most awake, I am only dreaming the more! But when I wake at last into that life which, as a mother her child, carries this life in its bosom, I shall know that I wake, and shall doubt no more. I wait; asleep or awake, I wait.

Many readers have found this ending unsatisfactory, even perverse. Vane apparently does nothing *but* wait, evidently for death into a new spiritual beginning. He seems to have no further ambition to fight the good fight in *this* world, as elsewhere MacDonald has said we must all do, to prepare ourselves for the next. Yet Vane is still a relatively young man, with (presumably) many years of this life still ahead of him.¹ Is this not a spiritual failure on Vane's part (*accidie*, or moral sloth, fourth of the seven deadly sins), and an artistic blunder on MacDonald's?

But again we should remember, as perhaps Wolff and Manlove do not, that the narrator of *Lilith* is not to be identified with its author. Indeed, unlike Vane, MacDonald was an old man when he wrote this fantasy work; he was tired out after seven decades of effort, poverty, illness, and the loss of loved ones. He had indeed fought the good fight in this world, and may be forgiven if no longer able to fight on with youthful vigour. Vane perhaps deserves no such forgiveness for his inert resignation—but Vane is not MacDonald. Still, this ending is emotionally frustrating. I cannot entirely explain away that feeling as resulting from *the reader's* putative failure to understand the ignorant-narrator device. I suggest rather that George MacDonald, just this once, lost sight of the distinction between his narrator and himself—an artistic error which, however, should not be allowed to result in condemning *all* of the splendid work in which it occurs. [27]

Note

1. There is, however, the possibility that at the end Mr. Vane **is** an old man: MacDonald tells us nothing either way about his age at this point in the story, and my impression that he is still young, though wiser, may be an unjustified assumption. John Docherty (pers. com.) has remarked to me, “It is not uncommon in stories of visits to other worlds for the protagonist to return and find himself an old man, and MacDonald seems to want this to exist as a disquieting possibility.” **[28]**