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## N&Q

### The Worm as Metaphor in *Lilith*

Fernando Soto

**W**orms play a prominent role in MacDonald's *Lilith*, particularly near the beginning of the book. It will be through an analysis of MacDonald's use of the term "worms," as a metaphor for an undeveloped individual, that I believe the reader may begin to get a good grasp of some of the "lessons" in the book. By concentrating on the symbolic worm aspects of Vane, Mr. Raven, and The Little Ones, it is hoped readers will come to better understand some of the metamorphic aspects of MacDonald's last great novel, *Lilith*.

From the beginning of Vane's strange relationship with Mr. Raven there is an emphasis on the topic of worms. Right before Vane crosses the looking-glass threshold, into the land of the seven dimensions, he spies in the mirror (which he interprets as a picture) the raven. As soon as Vane sees the raven, he claims that this bird "seemed looking for worms" (193). There is a high probability, since the raven led Vane to cross into this other world, that the raven is in fact looking for Vane. Hence, if the raven is looking for worms, it may not be accidental that he finds Vane.

During their first conversation, a bewildered Vane's question is answered by Mr. Raven, who informs Vane that he cannot easily go back to his house because came from a "door out" as opposed to a "door in":

"How *did* I get here?" I said – apparently aloud, for the question was immediately answered.

"You came through the door," replied an odd, rather harsh voice...."

"I did not come through any door," I rejoined.

"I saw you come through it – saw you with my own ancient eyes!" asserted the raven, positively but not disrespectfully.

"I never saw any door!" I persisted.

"Of course not!" he returned; "all the doors you had yet seen – and you haven't seen many – were doors in; here you came upon a door out!" (193-194)

This idea of the difference between doors "in" and "out" gives additional impetus to Vane's possible identity as a worm. (It may be recalled that the exchange about doors takes place right before Mr. Raven proceeds to question Vane directly regarding his identity, further hinting at Vane's possible wormy status.)

On their second meeting, which somewhat reflects their original introduction, Vane sees Mr. Raven approaching him from across the lawn. Here worms and their capacity to go “in” and “out” are again at the forefront of the conversation. Once again, Vane refers to worms as he greets him, leading to the following exchange:

“Fine weather for the for the worms, Mr. Raven!”

“Yes,” he answered, in the rather croaky voice I had learned to know,

“the ground will be nice for them to get out and in!” (200)

It becomes clear that the “worms” here are metaphors, as Mr. Raven outline what the “worms” he is considering resemble: a hairy elephant, a deinotherium and a dry-bog serpent with a mane (200). And, what these “worms,” along with Vane, have in common is that they all experience trouble getting “in” and “out” of their particular “bogs.”

Mr. Raven is much more experienced than Vane about the metamorphosis from worm to butterfly. When discussing the possibility of two objects (a worm and Vane?) existing in the same place at the same moment, Mr. Raven claims that this is not only true but also quite common. This leads to the following exchange, beginning with Vane’s incredulous, and ignorant comment:

“You a librarian, and talk such rubbish!” I cried. “Plainly you did not read many of the books in your charge!”

“Oh, yes! I went through all in your library – at the time, and came out at the other side not much the wiser. I was a bookworm then, but when I came to know it, I woke among the butterflies.” (36)

Hence, unlike Vane, Mr. Raven is well aware of his origins as a “worm.”

Related to the difficulties with the two different types of “doors” (“in” and “out”) is the theme of the worms’ origins. The problem of origins becomes apparent when Mr. Raven digs up and “releases” a red worm into the air. This action is criticized by Vane, which criticism is followed up by Mr. Raven’s question “Where *do* the worms come from?”. This question leads to the following exchange, by Vane answering him:

“Why from the earth, as you have just seen!” I answered.

“Yes, last!” He replied. “But they can’t have come from it first – for that will never go back to it!” he added looking up. (201)

Mr. Raven gives some further information as Vane continues criticizing his actions:

“You see what comes of making creatures forget their origin!” I cried with some warmth.

“It is well, surely, if it be to rise higher and grow larger!” he returned. (201)

The only other spot in *Lilith* where there is a discussion about origins in this vein is in chapter XIII, “The Little Ones”. Here Vane begins by questioning Lona in a tone very reminiscent of Mr. Raven:

“Where do the babies come from first?”

“From the wood – always. There is no other place they can come from.”

She knew where they came from last, and thought nothing else was to be known about their advent. (241)

Thus, the Little Ones, just like the red worm, are discussed in terms of their true origins, not where they emerge from last. And, given the children’s origin, they, like the red worms, must face their imminent metamorphosis, by rising higher and growing larger. This growth, as Vane finds out, cannot be done in a haphazard manner—the children must rise higher and grow larger in a very controlled, careful manner.

The above three examples are merely signs of a much larger project of metamorphic shifts MacDonald envisions in his last great book, *Lilith*. Through his use of the ancient symbols of the worm (larvae) and butterfly MacDonald may be attempting to guide his readers through their own metamorphic changes, from an ignorant and proud worm, to a much more developed being, the butterfly.

#### Works Cited

MacDonald, George. *Phantastes* and *Lilith*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964. 183-420.