

Death is Better than Life:

The Ideal in George MacDonald's Fairy Tales

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I. Introduction

Beginning with *Phantastes: A Faerie Romance for Men and Women* (1858), George MacDonald wrote many fantasy novels and published the last one, *Lilith*, in 1895. Only these two works are regarded as fantasy novels for adults. Although his first fantasy novel, *Phantastes*, which describes symbolically the idea of the self and death, had sold poorly, he continued to write fantasy fiction. It is because he believed that fantasy fiction has the strength to convey spiritual truth. In particular, we can say that *Phantastes* and *Lilith* most express his religious belief. Colin Manlove comments on both works as follows:

In *Phantastes* and *Lilith* there is a further pairing, but with different patterns. Not for nothing do they come at the beginning and end of MacDonald's creative life, for in a sense *Phantastes* deals with the Christian First Things, and *Lilith* with the Last. (179)

Manlove regards the protagonist in *Phantastes*, Anodos, as a creator whose "power to breath motion into [...] the white lady", and *Lilith* gives "an image of the Last Days" and represents the protagonist, Vane's journey "with the others towards the New Jerusalem and the mount of God" (180). Although the theme of death which is the key in *Phantastes* is also inherited in *Lilith*,

each work can be investigated from a different point of view such as forbidden acts, the resurrection and relief. Therefore it is worth comparing the two stories as “a diptych conveying the span of Christian history” (Manlove 180). However, we must draw attention to the other stories which were written between them, because a period of about forty years separates MacDonald’s writing of *Phantastes* and *Lilith*.

Almost all the fairy tales he wrote during these forty years are considered as children’s literature. Some of them, such as “The Light Princess” and “The Giant’s Heart”, which are contained in *Dealing with the Fairies* (1867), have different aspects from *Phantastes* and *Lilith*. One of the features of his children’s literature is young protagonists and wordplay, such as the term “light” in “The Light Princess” means “no heavy” and “no serious”, and his fantasy novels for adults do not have such features. While protagonists, Mossy and Tangle, are children, death as a means to obtain true life is also depicted in “The Golden Key”. This story is often regarded as children’s literature which is filled with new images such as “the air-fish” and “the spiral staircase within the rainbow”, and shows what he believes life and death are supposed to be about. That peculiar view of life and death also informs the foundations of *Phantastes* and *Lilith*. It may therefore be useful to compare *Phantastes* and “The Golden Key” in order to understand MacDonald’s development before he wrote *Lilith*.

This paper attempts to highlight MacDonald’s version of the relationship between life and death. *Phantastes* and *Lilith* are indispensable in analyzing MacDonald’s works, so it is necessary to explore the progress up to *Lilith* from *Phantastes* as a departure. Although “The Golden Key” is a short story, it promotes self-sacrifice as a kind of spiritual maturity which is idealized by MacDonald, and discusses the meaning of death. Exploring his first fantasy novel, *Phantastes*, I will first clarify what he tried to express about the notions

of the self and the spirit by taking fantasy as a means of expression. The focus will then move on to “The Golden Key”, which describes death as leading to true life. Finally, by using examples from his letters or sermons, we will elucidate how the descriptions about the self, self-sacrifice and death in his works are related to his own experiences and beliefs. Overall, to identify the transitional process of MacDonald’s ideas in this regard on the way toward *Lilith*.

II. Escape from the Shadow as the Self, and the Acquisition of Spiritual Maturity

Because the exploration of the theme of death informs MacDonald’s fantasy novels, it might be worth paying attention to his conception of spiritual maturity. Depictions of the self and spiritual maturity are repeatedly found in his works. It seems to emphasize that spiritually maturing indicates a crucial step to reach ideal death.

Let us then focus attention on *Phantastes*, which most clearly expresses the relationship between the self and spiritual maturity. This story begins the day after the main protagonist, Anodos’s twenty-first birthday. What he thinks about is his own legal rights gained by having reached that age, and Rolland Hein regards Anodos as “a young man who desires material and physical things” (*Harmony Within* 81). When Anodos is about to find his late father’s private papers on his father’s desk, he suddenly meets “a tiny woman-form” (3). With this encounter, his journey to Fairy Land¹ begins. On the way, he carves a woman from the marble inside a rocky cave, and his magical power of song release her, and this scene reminds us of Pygmalion. However, as soon as she emerges from the marble wall, she gets away from him for an unexplained reason. After that, pursuing this “white lady” becomes the aim of his journey, and his attachment to her is related to the matter of the self (45).

Despite being warned that the Oak, the Elm and the Breech are trustable

and the Ash and the Alder are danger, Anodos falls into the Maid of Alder's trap because he cannot control his desire to seek the "white lady." At this point, he is already self-centeredness, which has an influence on his behavior. After escaping from the clutches of the Maid of Alder, he stays overnight at the house of the woman he met in the forest. This woman and her daughter believe in the magical power of Fairy Land and the mysterious phenomena which happens there. In contrast with them, her husband has a voice which "disenchant[s] it [Fairy Land] out of the realm of the ideal into that of the actual" (52), and the son does not believe in spiritual things. This woman's husband and son scorn spiritual things, are described as people who do not believe physical things.

After leaving this family, Anodos makes two mistakes again despite receiving warnings. One of them is that he approaches the house of the ogre in spite of "a vague misgiving" which "crossed" his "mind" (59). The second is that he opens the door of the back room in the ogre's house because he had felt that "still the irresistible desire which had made me enter the building urged me" (60). As a result of ignoring the ogre's advice that it is better not to open the door, he is caught by the "Shadow", which makes beautiful things into ordinary things and takes control over desire. For instance, in the forest, Anodos meets a "little Maiden" holding a small globe which vibrates accompanied by "a faint sweet sound" (68). When his shadow enwraps the Maiden, he lays hold of her globe because his "desire to know about the globe [...] grew irresistible" (68). Gradually he gets used to the existence of the "Shadow": he thinks that "In a land like this, with so many illusions everywhere, I need his [the Shadow] aid to disenchant the things around me" (66) and that the Shadow shows him the true nature of things. After he is caught by the "Shadow", his behavior becomes self-centered. Considering these facts, it seems reasonable to suppose that the "Shadow" symbolizes the "self". Interest-

ingly, the “Shadow” plays an important role in MacDonald’s later novels, including *Lilith*. The description of the “Shadow” as the self-centeredness signifies that MacDonald thinks the selfishness are threats to a sound mind.

MacDonald’s idea about the self is expressed in the story Anodos reads in the marvelous library of the palace, too. Anodos spends almost all his time reading some books during his stay, and one of them is retold by him. In the story, the hero, Cosmo von Wehrstahl, who is a student at the University of Prague, acquires a magical mirror. He falls in love with a beautiful woman who appears in the reflected room. Gradually, observing her becomes a central aspect of his life: he cannot repress his desire to meet her, and tries to make use of a magical ability of “his books of magic” (106). He feels, “If I do her wrong, let love be my excuse” (160) and takes her out of the mirror into the real world.

However, the lady replies, “Cosmo, if thou lovest me, set me free, even from thyself, break the mirror” (108) when he begs her for love. Her reaction to him clearly shows a denial of love coming from his egocentric self. After trying to break the mirror, Cosmo loses consciousness. Discovering the loss of the mirror, he tries to look for it and break it to free her. The achievement of her freedom becomes his primary purpose, and it means his self is being relented. Eventually, he succeeds in releasing her but he pays with his life. What the story shows is the necessity to abandon self-centeredness, and Cosmo’s identity overlaps with Anodos’s.

Anodos finds the statue of the white lady in the vast hall of the palace where there is an innumerable assembly of marble statues. Although his magical song awakens her again, she leaves him because he flings his arms around her in defiance of the law of the place. When he goes down the hole in the ground he found on the way to chasing her, he encounters ill-natured goblins. They say “You shan’t have her; you shan’t have her; he! he! he! She’s for a

better man; she's for a better man [...]" (131). Following is a part of the song which Anodos sings as a response to them:

If a nobler waits for thee,
I will weep aside;
It is well that thou should'st be,
Of the nobler, bride. (132)

This song shows signs of a change in his spirit. However, Anodos is still haunted by the Shadow even after he is united with two brothers whose father is king and kills three giants who have been terrorizing the country.

Anodos conceives himself to be equal to Sir Galahad, for he is hailed as the only survivor who has defeated the giants. Then, he encounters knight who looks exactly like himself and is locked up in a dreary square tower by the knight. One day, he hears a beautiful singing voice from outside the tower and tries to open the door. He sees a familiar face, then notices the singer is the woman whose globe he had shattered. Anodos apologizes for what he did, but she never gets angry with him or gives him forgiveness because she takes great pleasure in relieving someone. His encounter with her changes him, and he feels as follows: "Between her and me, there was a great gulf. She was uplifted, by sorrow and well-doing, into a region I could hardly hope ever to enter" (183). Anodos's view means that the woman symbolizes the ideal spirit he should reach. Knowing shame and humility, he loses the Shadow as the self. The following passage can be regarded as evidence of the spiritual maturity he has gained:

I learned that he that will be a hero, will barely be a man; that he that will be nothing but a doer of his work, is sure of his manhood. In nothing

was my ideal lowered, or dimmed, or grown less precious; [...] Another self seemed to arise, like a white spirit from a dead man, from the dumb and trampled self of the past. Doubtless, this self must again die and be buried, and again, from its tomb, spring a winged child; but of this my history as yet bears not the record. Self will come to life even in the slaying of self; [...]. (183)

This Anodos's sense of the self is none other than MacDonald's own idea of the self. Moreover, the idea of a denial and subsequent regeneration of the self can also be seen in "The Golden Key." MacDonald's idea that the self should be denied is often indicated in his many works, but we shall return to the relationship between this idea and his works later.

Anodos is reunited with the Knight who previously saved him from the Maid of Alder's trap. This Knight who has a noble appearance is the one whom Anodos's white lady loves, and he becomes the Knight's squire. They come across the religious ritual by chance, in which they witness human sacrifices. Anodos cannot acquiesce in this institutionalized evil ritual and steps forward to the platform to rip out "a great wooden image" from the throne, which the image, which symbolizes absolute authority, was sitting. After struggling with a brute like a wolf who emerges from the hole of the throne where the image was, he dies while strangling the brute.

Hein comments on his death: "Anodos is slain in his noble attempt to battle the vicious powers of a religious ritualism" (*Harmony Within* 70). As Hein says, this scene demonstrates the criticism of ritualism by MacDonald who supports sacramentalism. Although William Gray analyzes Anodos's death as "a suggestion of suicide" (23), it may be nearer the truth to say that it is the expression of self-sacrifice. Anodos's death is not mere death, but the result of an attempt to expose the error of institutionalized religion and absolute au-

thority. In other words, Anodos fulfills the self by death as a spirit of service, and his spirit that lost its selfishness can be regarded as matured one.

His death in Fairy Land, however, is not a real one, and he revives in the real world. He looks back on his journey of twenty-one days as if it was twenty-one years. Based on these facts, we can consider that Anodos, who has been spiritually immature, is reborn as a matured spirit by experiencing death and finding self-sacrifice as a spiritual truth. Moreover, his self-sacrificial death and revival not only suggests this ideal spirit, but also his identification with Jesus Christ.

As shown in this story, MacDonald assumes the self-sacrificial mind is the ideal of the matured spirit. For that reason, the idea that self-centeredness trying to satisfy one's desire is destructive to the spirit produces the Shadow as one character. Additionally, MacDonald believes that we need to reach this matured spirit, and the experience of death is necessary for it. In most cases, death is associated with sorrow and the end of something. In MacDonald's story, however, death is a pleasant state to the soul, which even means the beginning of life, and it becomes the main inspiration for *Lilith* by being associated with relief.

III. Death Leading to Life

The short story "The Golden Key" is included in *Dealing with the Fairies*, which was published in 1867, and its completeness as a story in which MacDonald's thoughts on life and death were expressed is admirable even though it is a short story. It also takes place in Fairyland as in *Phantastes*, and it depicts the journey as life, and self-sacrificial spirit and the hereafter as relief through the protagonists Mossy and Tangle's experiences. Therefore, we can find both the themes that are inherited from *Phantastes* and a harbinger of *Lilith* in this story.

The passage of time is not only one of the features but also the reason why we assume Mossy and Tangle's journey represents life. When Tangle, who flees into the forest after being terrified by fairy's trick, arrives at the beautiful lady's cottage, she converses with the lady:

"[...] How old are you?"

"Ten," answered Tangle.

"You don't look like it," said the lady. [...]

"You don't know that it is three years since you ran away from bears. You are thirteen and more now."

Tangle could only stare. She felt quite sure it was true. (*Complete* 125)

As can be seen from this depiction, the time passes faster than in the real world in Fairyland, and Tangle, who strayed in Fairyland in her childhood, reaches puberty in a flush. At this cottage, she encounters Mossy, who goes to the forest to find the golden key inside the rainbow and arrives after Tangle. As is the case with Tangle, Mossy is described as a young man in this scene, though he is a boy at the beginning of the story. With the advice of the lady, they set out on a journey together. We also can see from the following quotation that Mossy and Tangle get older and older during their journey: "How long they were in crossing this plain I [the narrator] cannot tell; but before night Mossy's hair was streaked with grey, and Tangle had got wrinkles on her forehead" (*Complete* 133).

On the way to their destination, "the country whence the shadows fall," Mossy and Tangle lose each other. However, she recalls the words the lady said and keeps going forward without being afraid. She visits the Old Man of the Sea and takes some rest by having a bath with his encouragement. After taking leave of the Old Man of the Sea, she visits the Old Man of the Earth

who looks like a beautiful youth. She asks the way to “the country whence the shadows fall” but he tells the way to the Old Man of the Fire instead because he does not know it. Knowing the direction he shows is a vertical hole, she reacts as follows: “She turned and looked him full in the face—stood so for a whole minute, as she thought: it was a whole year” (*Complete* 138). This scene also shows that the passage of time in Fairyland is different from that of the real world. Of course, the same thing also happens to Mossy, and he gets older through his journey enough to look older than the Old Man of the Sea. In this Fairyland, progressing on the journey means time passing, and it also means getting older.

As well as the passage of time, we can say that having a bath is also symbolically described in this story. Tangle has a bath at the lady’s cottage and the Old Man of the Sea’s cave, and it makes her grow happier and relieves her of the fatigue of her long journey. Presumably, having a bath functions as a kind of purification. Similarly, Mossy finds himself being rejuvenated after he has the bath at the Old Man of the Sea’s cave. Then, the Old Man of the Sea says to him, “You have tasted of death now”, and he answers, “It is better than life” (*Complete* 142). It indicates that Mossy has experienced “death”, even though there is no scene depicting him dying. Let us here pay attention to Hein’s comment on MacDonald’s belief about the insight into the spiritual world:

He was convinced that the world any person inhabits is that person’s mind turned inside out; that is, a person sees the world according to his personality and background. Each person sees it differently; only the person who has achieved a certain level of sensibility sees its spiritual realities. (*George* 135, emphasis mine)

Hein perceptively points out that we need some process to reach the spiritual

world. Probably, in MacDonald's story, death represents the process, and plays the roles of purgation and progress of the spirit in this scene.

Finally, Mossy finds a keyhole that fits the golden key and reunites with Tangle, who has been waiting for his arrival for seven years. They go up the spiral staircase within the rainbow which leads to "the country whence the shadows fall" (144). Considering that their destination is a place that can be reached after death, the country means the afterworld. Moreover, ascending the spiral staircase that continues up to the sky means that they are in the process of being relieved.

Unlike *Phantastes*, it is not described how Mossy and Tangle's spirits mature through the experiences of the journey and death. However, we can see MacDonald's ideal spirit common to *Phantastes* from the description of the "air-fish." This imaginary animal helps Mossy and Tangle, who are wandering in the woods, and leads them to the lady's cottage. When they arrive, the air-fish willingly swims to the pot, which is full of boiling water, to be eaten by them. The lady tells Tangle, who hesitates to eat fish:

"In Fairyland," resumed the lady, as they sat down to the table, "the ambition of the animals is to be eaten by the people; for that is their highest end in that condition. But they are not therefore destroyed. Out of that pot comes something more than the dead fish, you will see." (*Complete* 127)

Curiously enough, as the lady says, a creature like an angel is born from the same pot after the air-fish has been eaten. Considering these facts, what MacDonald is expressing here is the importance of the self-sacrificial spirit, and that death leads to life. As is the case with *Phantastes*, self-sacrifice is what our spirits are supposed to achieve, and "The Golden Key" shows that death is a relief that leads us to the genuine world.

IV. The Origin of MacDonald's Stories

Thus far, we have considered the relationship between the self and the matured spirit, and the meaning of death, which are depicted in *Phantastes* and "The Golden Key." The idea presented in the work may not be related to the experience or thought of its writer in some cases. However, in the case of MacDonald, it seems to have much to do with his own ideas and principles. In this chapter, we shall examine how the theme of his works relates to his own belief through his experiences, letters and sermons.

His mother's death is indispensable in thinking about his life and beliefs and may be said to be the origin of his beliefs and works. Not only his mother's death, but also many relatives' deaths haunted his life. MacDonald married Louisa Powell on March 8, 1851, and their first child, a daughter, Lilia Scott, was born the next year. In 1853, his brother Alexander died in April, and his second child Mary Josephine was born in July. For the following five years until 1858, births and deaths in his family followed in quick succession. These include the deaths of his father and brother. Many of his relatives, including his daughters and his son, died of tuberculosis. Furthermore, he himself had also suffered from illness throughout his lifetime. His life, blessed with many children but also blighted by the death of many people at the same time, seems to be the cycle of life and death itself.

MacDonald wrote as follows in a letter addressed to his father in August 1855:

Give my love to them all — especially Bella [his half sister]. I fear I shall have no better news of her. But, dear father and mother [his stepmother], death is only the outward form of birth. Surely it is no terrible thing that she should go to Alec [his brother]. (*Expression* 99)

As can be seen, for him, death does not mean the end of life but rather means birth. For MacDonald, who was surrounded by birth and death in real life, it may be a natural flow to have come to the idea that death leads to life. Such an idea would not only be described in his first fantasy novel, *Phantastes*, but would become the fundamental theme of his later works.

However, what he showed through the story is not only that death leads to life but also that we can reach true life after death. Furthermore, he implies that we must acquire a matured spirit in order to reach the true life. As we have seen in the previous chapters, the matured spirit is related to self-sacrifice. The self-sacrifice he emphasized means to devote the self to others and self-denial. This sort of belief about the self is repeatedly spoken of in his *Unspoken Sermons*, published in 1867:

The self is given to us that we may sacrifice it: it is ours, that we, like Christ, may have somewhat to offer [...] we must refuse, abandon, deny self altogether as a ruling, or determining, or originating element in us. It is to be no longer the regent of our action. (*Unspoken* 210)

It can be said that the behavior of people dominated by the self in this way is a threat to the ideal spirit, which is fully demonstrated through the figure of Anodos in *Phantastes*.

As in *Phantastes*, the existence of the self is often personified as a shadow in MacDonald's stories. For this reason, the following quotation will offer a clue: "[...] self is but the shadow of life. When it is taken for life itself, and set as the man's center, it becomes a live death in the man [...]" (*Unspoken* 174). I cannot say for certain, but his idea about the shadow might be related to the Bible. However, it is interestingly note that we can also find a similar idea in Hans Christian Andersen's short story, "The Shadow" (1847). In the story, the

shadow is personified and the hero is ruled by the shadow. Andersen's tales have begun to be translated into English in 1846 and MacDonald has read his tales to children. Though we can only speculate, MacDonald might have been influenced by Andersen's story.

Furthermore, we can infer the origin of the idea about "The Golden Key." Like Andersen, the Brothers Grimm were also writers MacDonald admired. The Brothers Grimm also wrote a short story titled "The Golden Key" in 1815. In this story, a boy finds the golden key and also tries to find the keyhole. At the end of the story, he finds a box with an appropriate keyhole, but the contents of the box are not explicitly stated. Interestingly enough, we can also find the description of the golden key in John Milton's masque, *Comus* (1634). In this, the golden key "opes the Palace of Eternity" (14). Perhaps this may have gained ideas from the description of "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" in the New Testament, Matthew 16.19 (15). Considering these facts, we can assume that MacDonald derived the idea of the golden key from some sources which related with the Bible and that the golden key symbolizes the keys of heaven.

As seen from these facts, MacDonald's works heavily reflect his own experiences and beliefs. Of course, depending on the writer, it is not always the case. However, in the case of MacDonald, it can be said that what can be read from his works is consistent with ideas about the nature of death and the role of the self as expressed in his letters and sermons.

V. Conclusion

We have considered how fantasy fiction indicates MacDonald's intentions. It is already clear in his first novel, *Phantastes*, that he tries to convey ideas about the self and spirit in a relationship with God through the story. Regarding the theme of death and regeneration, this can be seen in *Phantastes*, but

the idea that death leads to new life is more clearly depicted in subsequent works including “The Golden Key” and *Lilith*.

It can be said that *Phantastes* and “The Golden Key” are consistent in the denial of self-centeredness and the importance of self-sacrificing spirit. Furthermore, when considering these two works, it becomes clear that the notion of the self is related to the matter of death and life, because, for MacDonald, life dominated by the self is different from life in a more real sense. Regarding the depiction of self-sacrifice, we can see that the true life that MacDonald imagines indicates the state of release from selfish desire. The process necessary for reaching it is to attain a matured spirit and to experience death. Spiritual maturity is none other than acquiring a self-sacrificial spirit, and the necessity of death means that there is true life in the world after death; that is, in heaven there is life that is not dominated by the self. William Raeper comments on MacDonald’s theme of death as follows: “Though death is a theme central to Victorian literature, MacDonald does not treat it as a problem, but rather as the aim of all existence. Death is what gives meaning to life” (146). In addition, his thought that death leads to life is linked to relief, which is the foundation of his last fantasy novel *Lilith*.

This investigation has revealed that such ideas can be read not only from his works but also in his letters and sermons. With this in mind, clarifying the matters of death, sin and relief depicted in *Lilith* will also reveal MacDonald’s religious position for these matters.

Notes

- ¹ MacDonald used “Fairy Land” for *Phantastes* and “Fairyland” for “The Golden Key”. I write in accordance with the original text.

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キーワード

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