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Recombination: Narrative and Genre in George MacDonald's *A Rough Shaking*.**

In this paper my aim is to demonstrate that, romance realism and fairy tale may all be present in one narrative, are not exclusive and need not be viewed as oppositional.

Despite its inclusion of poverty, homelessness, cruelty, neglect, violence and rejection, George MacDonald's novel *A Rough Shaking (RS)*, published 1890, is viewed by his biographers (for example Roland Hein) and critics (for example William Raeper) as a children's text. In contemporary terms, *RS* could be described as a 'crossover' novel.

The title is both literal and symbolic and applies to an earthquake, described in chapter three and to the subsequent adventures of Clare who loses his parents in the disaster. Beginning with the proleptic introduction of Clare Skymer as a retired gentleman living in England, the narrative traces his life from early childhood to the "end of his boyhood" (*A Rough Shaking* 11) 382. The first chapter foregrounds his extraordinary rapport with animals, a significant thread that runs through the story.

*(Story summary on sheet)*

## **George MacDonald**

Commenting on MacDonald's novels, G.K. Chesterton wrote "The fairy tale was the inside of the ordinary story and not the outside." (11) Given that MacDonald wrote twenty seven adult novels as well as two children's and two 'crossover' novels<sup>1</sup>, all viewed as realistic, this is a bold statement and reinforces the argument for genre boundary erasure found in Maria Nikolajeva's *From Mythic to Linear*. Colin Manlove comments that

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<sup>1</sup> George MacDonald, *Gutta Percha Willie: The Working Genius* (London: Henry S. King, 1873), George MacDonald, *Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood* (London: Strahan and Co., 1871). George MacDonald, *A Rough Shaking* (Whitethorn, CA: Johannesen, 1991), George MacDonald, *Sir Gibbie* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1879).

MacDonald's fairy tales "explore relations between fairyland and the 'real' world of everyday existence" (55). This comment is equally applicable if inverted to 'his realistic stories explore relations between the real world of everyday existence and fairyland'. MacDonald's stories viewed as realistic exhibit "a different reflection of reality" (Nikolajeva 264), a reflection that Stuart Blanch describes as the world "viewed through the fine gauze of MacDonald's imagination". (Blanch)

## **Introduction**

In terms of content, the portrayal of realistic hardship in nineteenth century rural England, places *A Rough Shaking* in Northrop Frye's category of mimetic text, with the hero or protagonist as 'everyman', the ordinary person, in this case, a boy. But Clare is anything but ordinary. His character is a pivotal point, swinging the text out of the mimetic and into the non-mimetic, the genre of romance and fairy tale. Throughout, the story is laced with moral and religious commentary and Clare is presented as the ideal Romantic child, spiritually aware, other worldly, incorruptible and full of goodness to the extent that he is often misunderstood and regarded as simple in the same way that Diamond in *At the Back of the North Wind* is regarded. He is representative of the character of the 'holy fool', whose redemptive qualities have the potential to transfigure those around him.

Fredric Jameson states that there was the "projection of a model of co-existence between generic mode" in genre theory (110) whilst Leland Ryken, writes "Every literary genre has its distinctive features and conventions. Readers and interpreters need to come to a given text with the right expectation. If they do, they will see more than they would otherwise see, and they would avoid misreadings." (145) However, if their expectations are fixed on what they have decided is the correct genre of the text studied, conversely they are likely to see less than they would otherwise see and, if not misread, then only read in one dimension. Ryken's statement evidences Maria Nikolajeva's comment that conventional generic distinction does not allow the mixture of fantasy and realism (48) and corroborates Johns Stephen's view that these two genres represent "the single most important generic distinction in children's literature." (241).

### **Romance, Realism, Fairy tale**

Northrop Frye's discusses the way in which adverse criticism of a novel can sometimes be due to a misunderstanding of the genre(s) represented within it. He sums up his discussion by pointing out the rarity of "exclusive concentration" on one alone (312).

MacDonald's *A Rough Shaking* can be divided into five distinct phases in which the story of Clare Skymer's early life unfolds and which demonstrate "the salvational logic of romance narrative" (Jameson 132). Each disaster develops Clare's character and spiritual awareness as he progresses toward the ultimate transformation of the reality through which he moves. Jameson emphasises that the transformation of ordinary, everyday, reality found in romance does not substitute an ideal realm for that reality. Rather it shows the effect of the hero's inner world on his outer world. Campbell uses the term 'transfiguration' for this progression (29).

The first phase of Clare's life runs from the loss of his parents to the beginning of his first period of homelessness. After the narrator's proleptic introduction to Clare the man, the narrative begins with just sufficient information about Clare's parents for the reader to understand his loss when the earthquake leaves him an orphan, or so it seems at the time. Nikolajeva notes "the mythic, non-mimetic approach to literature makes parents superfluous", (23) disassociating this approach from realism. The opening of *A Rough Shaking* moves through the non-mimetic characteristic of loss of parents towards what becomes the marvellous journey, which is, as Frye writes in his discussion of the romantic mode, "of all fictions, ....the one formula that is never exhausted (57).

Clare's second set of parents provide the care and security he needs as a very young child and prepare him for the next phase of his life. In discussing MacDonald's adult fantasy *Phantastes* (1858), subtitled *A Faerie Romance*, Rolland Hein writes "the adventures he (the protagonist) has are peculiarly adapted for his spiritual growth" (62). Clare's journey reflects this view of providence as his experience becomes progressively more demanding.

During the second phase of his life disaster follows disaster. This section of the story is the most detailed. Though the timescale is unspecified, it is measured in months rather than years, as implied by the occasional reference to time (for example chapter 35, 202) and the state of the weather (for example chapter 52, 295). The distance covered during Clare's literal journey is equally unspecified as the emphasis is on moral and spiritual distance covered through experience (adventure). The impression given is that the distance covered in Clare's inner life is vast. There are however, indicators of physical space which tie the narrative into the real world. One of these indicators is the appearance of Nimrod, the enraged bull. Nimrod's escape and return are accomplished in a short space of time, denoting the geographical proximity of the farm from which Clare initially ran away. Reminders of the reality of locality such as this episode, place the narrative within a recognisably English rural landscape. Depiction of the harshness of the poverty Clare and his companions endure during this second phase of Clare's life reaches its climax in the graphic description of the ravages of rats in the derelict property in where they have made their home. The realistic episodes involving authority figures such as the policeman and the magistrate are predominantly negative, though there is a glimmer of compassion for the plight of the children from the policeman who "had children of his own" (MacDonald, A Rough Shaking 208). Apart from this ray of humanity, the antagonism, suspicion and cruelty of such figures is reminiscent of Oliver Twist's experience. Clare's experience is lifted out of the unmitigated misery of such realism by the appearance of animal friends just as the hero in a fairy tale is helped in extremity. The animal friend Clare acquires during this phase is Abdiel the dog, who rescues the children from the problem of rats and provides Clare with comfort and hope.

Jameson comments that nineteenth century romance indicated a "reaction against social conditions" (146), a comment that takes the understanding of the narrative beyond realism towards romance and also demonstrates the use of romance and fairy tale as a vehicle to expose social injustice and exploitation in order to instigate change. MacDonald's other works for children

exposed unacceptable social conditions as did Kingsley's *The Water Babies* (1863)<sup>2</sup>.

The third phase of Clare's life is the short respite he experiences whilst working with an animal caravan. One of the three prominent animal helpers, Nimrod the bull, inadvertently opens this opportunity to Clare, providing him with a period free from hunger and enabling him to encounter his third animal friend the puma, who rescues him from the violence of Glum Gunn the co-owner of the caravan.

Apart from the early years of his life, the greatest stability is found during the fourth phase of Clare's journey, when he is taken in by Miss Tempest, an elderly lady who discovers him, with Abdiel, asleep on the grass opposite her house. Recognising his innate trustworthiness, she employs him and is rewarded not only by his service but also by his apprehension of burglars who attempt to break into the house. This is one of the episodes which grounds the narrative in reality as the burglars turn out to be Tommy, the boy with whom he had initially run away from the farm, and his previous enemy from the town in the second phase of Clare's life. The geographical area covered in his literal journey is once again shown to be small.

Clare reaches the fifth and final phase of his journey from child to youth through the actions of his enemies who unwittingly ensure the transformation of his former reality which Jameson cites as a characteristic of romantic fiction. (110). This episode is an example of the explanation given by MacDonald in one of his fairy tales for the ultimate and consistent failure of all spells cast by bad fairies at christenings, as expected in the fairy tale narrative. "But it is all of no consequence, for what they do never succeeds; nay, in the end it brings about the very thing they are trying to prevent." ("Little Daylight" 300). It also provides an illustration of Chesterton's comment that all MacDonald's stories are fairy tales on the 'inside' (11) The transformation of Clare's reality lies in the finding of his father, the fulfilment of his quest, the 'success' or 'homecoming' that indicates the conclusion of the fairy tale narrative structure. Cohan and Shires state that in a romance, the opening and closing of a story mark the events paradigmatically, that is, the initial event (in this case loss of

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<sup>2</sup> See Jack Zipes, Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilisation (New York: Routledge, 1991). p.103.

parents) is replaced by the closing event (discovery that Clare's father is still alive) (66).

Joanna Golden refers to the order of events in the fairy tale as "chronological with a forward movement" (124). She cites Propp's reference to the fairy tale plot, which, after the introduction of an initial situation and character moves forward by means of villainy or lack. (126). This two pronged movement is evident in the progress of Clare and can be mapped in the following way:

Lack – Clare loses both sets of parents

Villainy – the 'black aunt' takes his sister but rejects him

Lack – Clare is now without a home or protection

Villainy – the farmer's wife forces his departure

Lack – Clare lacks all basic necessities

Villainy – Clare's enemies betray him to the authorities

Lack - Clare again lacks all basic necessities

Villainy – violence drives Clare from the work and security of the animal caravan

Lack – Clare again lacks all basic necessities

Villainy – Having found a home with Miss Tempest, Clare is kidnapped by his enemies

Lack – Clare loses his animal friend Abdiel and his identity. His position is serious and potentially life threatening

Restoration – Clare's true identity is restored, his place in society is secure and he is able to restore the fortunes of one of his former companions (the baby, see *A Rough Shaking*, 224.).

The above narrative progression follows the expected hero pattern in a fairy tale narrative which is, according to Golden, event-action-purpose and destiny. Clare's journey demonstrates this pattern, with the difference that his purpose was to find "something" that "was waiting for him somewhere" (MacDonald, *A Rough Shaking*) and was commensurate with his destiny, which was to be reunited with his father. Stephens and McCallum provide a comment on the heroic career which is relevant to Clare's position. They note that a shift in the pattern of the hero's progress arose from Franciscan affective piety in which

romantic heroes resembling the Christ figure, as Clare does, became less 'heroic' in the classical sense and elicited some pity. (92). Mieke Bal clarifies this comment by making the distinction between the active, successful hero and the hero-victim. (132). In *A Rough Shaking*, Clare, as the hero-victim also becomes the active successful hero, fulfilling both fairy tale and romantic expectations.

The timescale and spatial locality discussed in the context of realism may be vague in that context, but it is specific enough to take Clare through boyhood with the initial adventures and difficulties curtailed in order to preserve his life and to enable him to reach the end of his boyhood through a series of marvellous coincidences which occur at pivotal points in the story. These incidents occur when Clare has, to use MacDonaldian terminology, 'reached the end of himself', just as they occur when a fairy tale hero sits down and wonders what to do next (for example Grimm's *The Three Feathers*<sup>3</sup>).

In the context of fiction viewed as realistic, Pat Pinsent states that excessive coincidences are not the artistic flaws some critics take them to be, but part of the restoration of the initial order (103). Reading the coincidences in Clare's life as instances of "the restoration of the initial order" is an example of the need to read against the expected genre. This is the order Rohrich refers to in the fairy tale context as the rectifying principle<sup>4</sup> in which as Clare tells his father "everything will come right one day."<sup>5</sup> (MacDonald, *A Rough Shaking* 378).

## Conclusion

If the romantic narrative shows the progression of the hero through destiny, providence, ethical opposition and ultimate transformation as Jameson states (142), and fairy tale narrative progresses through quest, struggle and success, moving forward via lack and villainy as Golden proposes, then *A Rough Shaking* is closer to romance and fairy tale than it is to realistic fiction. Though the realistic setting, drawn from MacDonald's direct experience of an

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<sup>3</sup> Jacob Ludwig Carl (1785-1863) Grimm and Wilhelm Carl (1786-1859) Grimm, *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales with an Introduction by Padraic Colum* (London: Routledge, 1975).

<sup>4</sup> For more information on the principle of rectification see Lutz Rohrich, *Folktales and Reality*, trans. Peter Tokofsky (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. also Anodos' 'great good is coming to you Anodos' in George MacDonald, *Phantastes* (Whitethorn: Johannesen, 1994).

earthquake in northern Italy in 1887 and the depiction of poverty in nineteenth century rural England are realistic, this narrative evidences the characteristics of romance and is a fairy tale on the 'inside'. (Chesterton 11)

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## ***A Rough Shaking* (1893) by George MacDonald**

### **Summary of the story**

#### **Phase 1**

Apparently orphaned at the age of three after his mother is killed and his father lost in an earthquake, Clare is rescued by an English couple and cared for as if he were their own son. As he grows older, his unusual character, goodness and ability to befriend animals set him apart from his peers. His taming of the temperamental and unpredictable bull Nimrod is a key episode in this phase of his life.

After his adoptive parents' death, a distant relative, 'the black aunt', takes away his younger sister but rejects him, refusing him a home. A local farmer, the owner of Nimrod, takes him in but the farmer's wife resents Clare and makes his life miserable. Clare runs away, accompanied by a younger boy, also an unwanted orphan.

#### **Phase 2**

As an outsider in society, Clare experiences the underside of life. In addition to the homelessness and hunger his attempts to find work result in suspicion and exploitation. During this bleak phase, he encounters a horse and a dog which provide acceptance and comfort and he rescues an abandoned baby. At no point does Clare lose his hope, integrity, honesty or unworldly goodness. Eventually his younger companions are taken to the workhouse, leaving him only with Abdiel, the intelligent, if scruffy, mongrel dog.

#### **Phase 3**

At this point in the story, Nimrod the bull reappears, enraged by his pursuers. Clare calms him and as a result is taken in by the owner of a travelling caravan of wild animals who recognises his usefulness. During this short

period, Clare befriends one of the animal exhibits, a puma, which later helps him to escape the violence of the co-owner of the caravan, who, jealous of his rapport with the animals and resentful of his supernatural goodness, attacks him.

Clare and Abdiel return to the homeless, hungry, unemployed life they had left.

#### **Phase 4**

Just as their situation reaches desperation, an elderly lady, Miss Temple, takes them in. Clare is employed by her until she decides he is old enough to be 'placed' in a job 'with prospects'. He becomes the junior clerk in a bank, where his discovery and threatened exposure of a dishonest character earns him another enemy. This character joins forces with his old enemy from the animal caravan, which has come into the seaside town where Clare now lives. They are joined by two crew members from a gunboat moored in the harbour. After a visit to the caravan to see his old friend the puma, Clare is kidnapped and taken to the gunboat.

#### **Phase 5**

On discovery, he is treated as a stowaway until he is taken to the captain, who, after questioning him realises that Clare is his long lost son. And here Clare's boyhood ends, as he "set himself to be a sailor."