

George MacDonald's Personal Theology in *At the Back of the North Wind*

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Abstract

Personal belief systems have always influenced the creation of literary works; such theological principles worm their way into stories and depict the author's convictions. Nineteenth-century author George MacDonald's children's fantasy, *At the Back of the North Wind*, portrays the personal vision regarding faith, the afterlife and the figure of God. This paper explores the importance of George MacDonald's theology in *At the Back of the North Wind*, by situating MacDonald's work in its proper socio-historical context; defining the concept of fantasy as a means of spirituality; describing George MacDonald's life and faith and its influence on his literature, and by analyzing the influence of MacDonald's theology on *At the Back of the North Wind*.

Keywords: theology, nineteenth-century, George MacDonald, children's literature.

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0. Introduction

Humankind's concept of a higher being, or lack thereof, has always impacted the messages and lessons introduced via literary pieces. The written stories become ideal outlets to define the theology surrounding such concepts as well as portraying the tenets around which said theology is structured. Hence, encountering complex ideas of religious nature in literary works has never been uncommon. George MacDonald, as a writer, was more predisposed than most to introduce his personal theology into his books, intertwining moral messages and philosophies in his fantasy stories.

Theology is defined by *Cambridge Dictionary* as “a set of beliefs about a particular religion”. By and large, a religion settles into a common theology established by the whole body of believers; yet, in MacDonald's case, although leaning heavily towards Christianity, his theology had many elements that differed from the mainstream viewpoint of his era. Thus, George MacDonald's theology becomes a singularity to research and analyze, more so when considering the huge impact it had on the creation of his literary works and in the portrayal of fantasy elements. Therefore, this paper's main goal is to see how George MacDonald's theological ideology is expressed in one of his most renowned works of children's fantasy: *At the Back of the North Wind*.

Accordingly, this paper will first detail the historical, cultural and theological framework in which *At the Back of the North* was created, as nineteenth-century Victorian England was a period in which religion and literature were so tightly interlaced that we cannot approach one without considering the other. The fantasy genre, its definition and the role it plays in the Victorian literature, are also topics to be broached, because MacDonald was a pioneer when it came to introducing religious symbolism through fantastic elements in fiction. In addition to this, it is indispensable to look at some aspects of George MacDonald's life, and I will devote some pages to define his biography as well as religion, and the repercussion of both on his literature. Then, bearing this mind, I will explore the ideas belonging to George MacDonald's theology that we will encounter *At the Back of the North Wind*. I will analyze the two main characters and their roles within the bigger picture of the story, and also how the main theme of death is portrayed. Furthermore, I will identify the world inhabited by the protagonists along with the traits representing it and, ultimately, correlate every point with the issue of MacDonald's faith.

Throughout the essay, Modern Language Association (MLA) style will be used for quoting and referencing sources.

1. The Victorian Age: Contextualizing the Literature

In order to address the theological as well as mythological aspects in *At the Back of the North Wind*, it is essential to comprehend the sociocultural and religious context in which George MacDonald was raised. The culture, religious stance and literature of the nineteenth century Victorian Britain, especially that of the mid- and late-Victorian era, greatly influenced the author's life and, therefore, his tales, making the necessity for a basic knowledge of the era indispensable. Thus, I will devote the following pages to providing a general framework of society, religion and literature in the Victorian Age.

1.1. Victorian Society

When examining the society of Britain during the period 1850-1900, the timeframe in which George MacDonald wrote most of his literature, we may witness a sharp transformation from an agriculturally oriented country to an industrialized nation. The Industrial Revolution provided the framework for the fundamental economic and social changes that influenced the literary works of the time—the newfound middle-class's ascension and the worsening lifestyle of the working class, for instance, are ever-present aspects in *At the Back of the North Wind*.

The tremendous rise of the British population and the financial prosperity achieved through industrial development which led to the transition from rural life to city life turned Great Britain into “the world's financial center” (Ackerman 14). This prosperity also provided the chance to ordain compulsory education, economic as well as scientific advancement never seen in the past and, most prominently, the formation of a social class which would shake the foundations of British society. In words of Duffy:

The financial power gained by industrialists gave them [the middle class] political power and created a new class unknown in England before, a new class of capitalists, who demanded and attained with the Reform Bill of 1832, a middle-class democracy (29-30).

Thus, a third flourishing party was added in direct confrontation with the traditional old aristocratic class and the working class. However, the increasing wealth obtained by the Industrial Revolution was only one aspect of it. A less appealing side of the period resided in the escalation of desperate poverty, a lower class to which twenty out of every twenty-five Londoners belonged as per the data presented in Ackerman's dissertation (15-16). Unsanitary factory conditions, the uprooting undergone by farmers and the increasing employment of women and children under less than propitious conditions led to an economic fatalism suffered by the working class and reflected in the literature of writers such as Dickens or Kingsley (Duffy 29-30). Such appalling life conditions and cruel realities will be predominant issues in many literary works. George MacDonald's writings were no exception to this—the poor treatment of child workers and the working instability in the lower class are, for example, one of the glaring issues examined in *At the Back of the North Wind*, as can be clearly seen in the depiction of the day-to-day life of the tale's protagonist Diamond and his family.

The juxtaposition between these ever-devolving aspects of society led to a reconsideration of principles which profoundly affected the literature of the era. Respectability, to begin with, gained by not only money or ancestry but also adequate manners and refinement reshaped the notion of 'gentleman'. Ackerman states that this concept fostered the idea of following a model of behavior which would represent a superior education and morality no longer exclusive to aristocrats (22). Moreover, education, too, alongside the notion of the importance of family involvement in said education produced friction in Victorian society. Children's instruction, either educational or spiritual, became a responsibility borne by the family; providing children with the necessary attention that would aid them to become respectable members of society was a familial duty (Ackerman 31-32). This notion of the hands-on learning approach is not only heavily addressed in MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind* through the portrayal of Diamond and his parents, but also associated them with the spiritual weight and religious depth for which George MacDonald is renowned and which I will analyze further ahead in the present dissertation.

1.2. Victorian Religion

I have claimed the significance of education in the period, but what we need to consider when analyzing the Victorian society is that religious values were tightly intertwined with

every facet of their lifestyle, including studying. Consequently, the role of religion in the Victorian Age is viewed as one of the most influential aspects of life for most English families. Reading sessions of the Bible under family instruction, the spread of Evangelical beliefs and emphasis on concepts such as duty, morality and obedience are, among others, the pillars of religious mentality in the nineteenth century pointed out by Ackerman (33). George MacDonald is a clear representative of such a mentality: God's involvement even in the most mundane areas of life are recurring and poignant elements in his literature.

Nonetheless, the Victorian Age was not a time when religious beliefs developed in a homogeneous and stable way; actually, instability and diversification characterized nineteenth-century British culture. To begin with, despite strong theist convictions, Great Britain also underwent a period of skepticism where a more secular attitude found its way into the Victorian society. Duffy holds that the scientific and philosophical advancements of the era—heralded by the formulation of Darwin's *Origin of Species* and discoveries concerning the creation of Earth—caused discord among the believers (35). The materialistic side of society brought forth by Industrialization also added to the atmosphere of doubt. Uncertainty spread and intellectuals found themselves reevaluating the veracity of the facts they had believed in up until then. Learning that the conception of mankind and the universe might be explained by scientific means rather than by religious doctrine planted doubts in the traditional views of the world. As Duffy explains, the Victorian Age plunged into “a state of questioning, uncertainty between belief and unbelief in a supernatural reality, and between conflicting forms of faith” (31). This last “conflicting forms of faith” is one of the greatest turning points of religion in Britain.

Whereas intellectuals struggled with the idea of reconciling science with religion, others, mainly the common citizens, continued to let their lives be governed by strict rectitude and rules. The church still held sway over their day-to-day, and when disbelief emerged in the 1830's and 1840's, defensive counterarguments were brought up to fight it off (Duffy 33). However, the Christian Church faced an unprecedented critical spirit. Their teachings were not enough against the rational attitude that, although not sudden and unhurried in development since the eighteenth century, enforced a questioning outlook. Consequently, a new, adaptive faith emerged to fill in the spiritual gaps of the era. Duffy highlights the Romantic movement as one of them (33). For the Romantics such as Wordsworth, faith partly depended on experience and the devoted belief that the

spirit of God resided in the very essence of nature. From then on, natural beauty, the sublime and further instances of pantheism became the foundations of religious experience (Duffy 33). This duality between unwavering faith and critical questioning of religion became one of characteristics of the Victorian era, and MacDonald personified this attitude to some extent. While MacDonald never lost his faith, his works often portrayed a view of spirituality and religion which was seen as unorthodox by his contemporaries.

1.3. Victorian Literature and Children's Fantasy

Victorian literature, by and large, concerned itself with addressing major social concerns, such as the ones I have listed throughout this section, either political or religious. Therefore, literature became a tool to provide common people with enlightenment and inspiration. In stark contrast to the emphasis on aesthetics and universal experience in Romantic literature, the Victorians aimed at addressing the reading public by connecting their stories with the events of their age (Duffy 39). Thus, Duffy states, there was greater emphasis on moral messages, instructing the masses and reflecting the realities of their living conditions, as was the case with writers such as George Eliot and Charles Dickens. Not all literary works were, of course, didactic. We may find writers, Oscar Wilde being the most exemplar, who considered art not to be an instrument for moral didacticism and avoided educational aspects altogether (Duffy 39-40). Even so, the search for moral righteousness remained the central and most popular topic in literature in general.

Moreover, this didactic literature, coupled with the recently developed attitudes towards childhood and children's education, gave rise to the growth of children's fantasy, of which George MacDonald is a notable figure. Although fantasy as such was not considered a genre in the nineteenth-century—a point I will present in the next section—, MacDonald and his like-minded contemporaries contemplated the idea of the act of reading as a life-altering occupation which, in turn, shaped the experiences of childhood (George 13). Hence, Chan's statement that "fantasy writings of the nineteenth century were aimed at propagating an idealized childhood" (22). We may observe in MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind* the softer approach when dealing with controversial themes such as death, child workers and spiritual experiences so common of the Victorian culture and literature. By tackling social issues as well as religious concerns, MacDonald not only attempted to answer bothersome questions plaguing his

nation, but also provided a moderate, approachable view of childhood in the face of the big, philosophical inquiries of life.

2. Fantasy: the Beginnings of the Genre and Theological Teachings

Nowadays, the term of fantasy as a literary genre is defined by *Cambridge Dictionary* as “a story or type of literature that describes situations that are very different from real life, usually involving magic”. This definition, however, was not as clear-cut in MacDonald’s period. In the previous section, I have commented on how children’s fantasy was a flourishing literature, but what we need to keep in mind is that the concept of fantasy, as I have also remarked previously, was not quite as defined as today. For this reason, I will dedicate the following pages to listing the elements that made up the understanding of fantasy in the nineteenth century and how they correlate with the theological and mythological concepts present in MacDonald’s writings.

2.1. What Made Fantasy in Nineteenth Century

Prior to the nineteenth century, Chan notes, the concept of fantasy was still faithful to its Greek roots: ‘phantasia’, translated to English meaning “making visible” (5). Thus, anything that dealt with the unreal, the wishful or the impossible fell under the category of the fantastic. However, a renewed popularity of fairy-tales and interest in the ideas of the Romantic movement in the Victorian Age provided the writers with a new viewpoint for fantasy. That is, the fantastical world would not only be built upon impossibilities, but also an underlying sense of human truths and present issues (Chan 5-6).

This revision of the concept derives from the romantic spirit which, as Chan argues, “did facilitate a reassessment of the artistic values of fantasy” (6), while Duffy takes the argument one step further by explaining the importance of the Romantic Movement in the revival of folklore and its connection to fantasy (114). Imagination and individuality, together with the importance of cultural traditions, were among the ideas that the Romantics regarded highly and, thus, folklore and fairy tales became synonymous with that. The reverence towards the imaginary worlds and exaltations of a remote past was due to the Romantic belief that “imagination stands in some essential relation to truth and reality” (Duffy 114).

In the nineteenth century, George MacDonald and other contemporary authors latched onto these ideas. By providing detailed characterizations, more complex plots and narratives of greater length, these authors marked the beginning of what we know as fantasy in the present (Chan 7-8). However, the critics of the time would not consider their works as such, instead describing them as another form of traditional fairy tales. There is, however, a characteristic which is unique to the idea of fantasy of the Victorian Age: the exploration of real-life concepts such as human interests and societal values within the confines of fantasy.

2.2. Fantasy as a Means of Education and Spirituality

In contrast to modern times in which more often than not the genre is considered to be escapist literature where the manifestly unreal takes predominance, the nineteenth-century paid more attention to including moral teachings through the created imaginary world, and notably more so in children's fantasy (Chan 8). George MacDonald and his writings, among which we may find *At the Back of the North Wind*, are exemplary of this; there is a mix of fantastic elements and real world elements, which helps to highlight issues of social import and consequently allow an insertion of moral and religious messages.

The usage of children's fantasy, or fairy tales, with didactic purposes, although becoming an increasingly common movement by the mid-century, still had those who opposed it. At first, educators deemed that children's books should aim to the betterment of instilling Christian values. Thus, fantasy literature, which relied on 'false' worlds, as Chan remarks, were thought to be counterproductive in that regard (8-9). Figures such as Sarah Trimmer and Mrs. Sherwood, both renowned female writers of children's literature in the nineteenth century, relentlessly argued against fairy tales and fantasy as didactic devices (Chan 10). Orthodox educators and moralists who shared the same views claimed that this particular genre caused the moral and educational teachings to be diffused when mixed with fantastic elements. These elements were, therefore, a hindrance to what should be believed to be the main purpose of children's literature: convey a clear moral and religious message. In Chan's words: "In the world of evangelical texts, rewards and punishment were clearly stated. Sympathy towards children was scarce, while faithfulness, duty and obedience were the prime priorities" (10).

What was worse, the texts were seen to muddle the intended religious messages when in combination with the impossible fantastical parts, thus facilitating possible erroneous misinterpretations. Chan also adds that another reason for this antagonism was due to the belief that children would not be capable of differentiate between the fantastic narration and the real world (10). Ultimately, although these educators thought of fantasy as a passable form of entertainment, they also thought the possibility of misinterpretation and the indistinct religious messages made children's fantasy an unfit method of providing moralistic instruction for children.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, on the other hand, we find writers such as John Ruskin and MacDonald, who considered fairy tales and fantasy literature to be able to educate as much as to entertain. I have mentioned before how imagination was thought to be a means to develop the idea of the self, but another faculty of imagination for the fantasy writers, as Chan highlights, is that of contemplation (11). By providing children with emotional as well as intellectual stimuli, fairy tales were believed to be able to send a message. Hence, fantastical elements became an aid to captivate the reader while, at the same time, they would illustrate moral values (Chan 12).

In addition to this, another argument made in favor of fantasy as a means of education and spirituality was that “despite the impossibility of the incidents, the interest is always real and human” (Lang qtd. in Chan 12). That is, although the world presented in fantasy stories might have been beyond the realm of the possible, the moral values which created said world were still based on our own real life. The imparted morals and religious teachings, therefore, were as valid as any other for they should be universal values. *At the Back of the North Wind* embodies this mentality. MacDonald depicts the real world and the fantasy world living next to each other, in harmony rather than in opposites, and creates a theological and mythological framework which invites the reader to contemplation. He shows how fantastical elements could bring about a comparison that would highlight the ideal beauty, morals and virtues instead of diminishing them.

3. George MacDonald: The Man Behind the Book

To understand George MacDonald's stories is to understand the struggles and experiences he had to face in his own life. His family situation, his profound religious doubts and

relationships with other writers are all intrinsically connected to his writings; we can read echoes of his life in his books, and how deeply his life experiences shaped the ideals he attempted to convey through his writing. On account of this, I will dedicate the following pages to an overview of his biography and the facets of his life that were most prominent when creating *At the Back of the North Wind*.

3.1. Life, Profession and Family

George MacDonald was born in Scotland, in the year 1824, to George MacDonald senior and Helen MacKay. His identity as a Scotsman was important to him throughout his life. This love towards his homeland is shown in his stories by means of geographical descriptions—the coastline and high cliffs we find at the beginning of *At the Back of North Wind* being prime examples—and, more conspicuously, the reflection of his Scottish childhood (George 3). The relationship between MacDonald and his parents was also a considerable influence on his life; George argues that the loss of his adored mother at the age of eight translated into his stories in the depiction of numerous motherly female characters—a form of compensation for the maternal figure he lost in his childhood (3). Not only that, but also witnessing the death of his two brothers of the same disease that had afflicted his mother—tuberculosis—made loss and death major turning points in his life. For this reason, it is not surprising that these themes would be so present in his writings: the eternal question of what we may find beyond death and how to cope with the loss of a dear person are among the questions that MacDonald attempts to answer in *At the Back of the North Wind*.

On the other hand, MacDonald’s relationship with his father was a particular one. Although they never renounced each other, it became strained at times, mostly due to the son’s singular thoughts on religion and God. A financially stable and faithful follower of the Calvinist movement¹, George MacDonald senior provided his son with an extended education by making him attend grammar school and, later, the University of Aberdeen, where MacDonald acquired a Master’s degree in Chemistry and Physics in 1845 (George 4). It was around this time, too, when MacDonald met his wife-to-be, Louisa Powell, and his uncertainty regarding his religious faith began to grow. In 1848, he attended Highbury

¹ Calvinism is a branch of Protestantism created by John Calvin in the 16th century, which claims that all persons are born depraved due to the original sin, God’s predestination of His elect ones and limited atonement. (“Calvinism”).

Theological College to become a Congregational minister. Yet, he suffered from depression at the dismissal of his beliefs and was eventually discharged from the congregation “for unsound theology” (George 6).

Unemployed and with a meager income obtained by preaching, the MacDonald family, made up of the parents and eleven children, found themselves relying on the kindness of their close friends and family to survive (“Short Bio”). Living through periods of poverty and almost starvation provided MacDonald with a distinctive view on the matter, which he would reproduce in his work—as an example, in *At the Back of the North Wind* we find these views portrayed in Diamond and his parents’ living conditions. George further notes that MacDonald spent this period of time to consider different churches, but his personalized views of religion were never validated by any of them (10). Instead, he poured his opinions into writing, and began to pursue a career as a writer. It would not be until 1855, however, before his first book was published: *Within and Without*.

From here on, George MacDonald’s works gained attention in the high literary circles and he became one of the most prolific authors of the era (“Short Bio”). He wrote for children and adults alike, finishing over fifty works in the span of forty-seven years and published his last book, *Far Above Rubies*, in 1898. Meanwhile, he had to endure the death of four of his children due to tuberculosis—a disease which MacDonald would acerbically refer to as “family attendant” in his letters (George 4; “Short Bio”). These incidents would reiterate his faith and ideas concerning death and pushed him to write further on the topic of children’s death.

By the end of century, MacDonald’s mental and physical faculties began to dwindle until he stopped writing altogether. MacDonald struggled with tuberculosis and eczema, as well as the loss of his wife in 1904. He also began to suffer from memory problems and insomnia and depended on those around him to subsist (Duffy 27). George MacDonald finally died at the age of eighty-one in 1905.

3.2. Religion, Faith and Inspiration

Throughout this dissertation, I have stated several times that MacDonald’s viewpoint on religion greatly differed from the orthodox beliefs of the time, whether they were Calvinist or others. His struggles to combine the Calvinist views he was raised with and

his own inclination have always been the crux of his ideals. They significantly influenced his profession of choice, writings and outlook on life as we have seen previously. The question now is in which manners he strayed from the conventional thought and how it was introduced in his literary works. What we need to take into account first, therefore, is that George MacDonald's theology was personal, vague and heretical to many of his contemporaries (George 5). There are, however, four main aspects on which he based his faith: his ideas of God, justice, Christ's sacrifice and death.

The critical difference between Calvinistic theology and MacDonald's personal beliefs resided in the interpretation of God. Duffy points out how MacDonald rejected the image of a strict, unforgiving God, instead maintaining the vision of a fatherly being: a tender figure who celebrated love and mercy (37). He claimed God loved all His children, in which animals were included, a naturalistic view he adopted from the Romantics, Coleridge and Wordsworth among them, into his theology (Duffy 115). Thus, God, for MacDonald, took the role of a parent whose main concern, much like a father, was to guide and teach His children.

This reinterpretation, however, led to the rejection of many other Calvinistic doctrines—for one, the belief of Hell as the place of eternal punishment. After all, how could God be regarded as a loving father if He condemned His children to endless punishment? Thereby, an adjustment of the religious understanding of justice, punishment and redemption was in order. Inspired by Dante's literary work, MacDonald settled on the idea of a punishment derived from the union of justice and love (George 7). That is, he dismissed the idea of punishment without the chance of redemption afterwards and sought to relate punishment with atonement. It was God's duty to punish the wrongdoings of His children without condemning them, as a parent should, but they could atone and liberate from their sins if willing to do so. In the words of George: "In addition to the punishment of the guilty party, redress must be made to the wronged party. This is a fundamental and necessary step towards atonement and forgiveness" (6).

The version of justice and atonement depicted here goes in line with Calvinism, as well as Christianity and Judaism, though, as George points out, Calvinist and Christian theology disregard the chance of salvation (8). A sinner will always be predestined to be a sinner, and Hell an eternal place of suffering—a far cry from MacDonald's ideals. In *At the Back of the North Wind* these ideas take form. Characters such as the drunken cabman

and the Colemans, who dwelled in pettiness and avarice, suffered the consequences of their decision, yet were given a possibility for betterment in the end. No person is without salvation.

Another revision in MacDonald's theology, as a consequence of the previous two, was the necessity of reviewing "the doctrines of imputed righteousness and substitutionary atonement" (George 9). If we go by MacDonald's perspective of justice, it is the personal duty of the sinner to atone for their own wrongdoing, not that of others. Thus, Christ's sacrifice had to cease to be such, for it was not his obligation to suffer in place of humanity. Instead, MacDonald argued for Jesus as the perfect example to follow: not the savior in whom humans can rely on to wash off their sin, but the righteousness to aim for (George 9).

Lastly—but not less essential—, death became one of the major preoccupations for MacDonald. His close contact with death throughout his whole life—the loss of a mother, brothers and children—greatly marked his views and urged him to find solace in the religious concept of the afterlife. Duffy also highlights the influence of Novalis² in his views and writings: life becoming a stepping stone for death and death itself being a beginning as much as it is an ending, were concepts inherited from Novalis (18). *At the Back of the North Wind* demonstrates the core of his philosophies regarding death. The afterlife shown in the book is portrayed as a new adventure for Diamond, not a bitter end he will have to face alone.

3.3. Theology and Mythology in MacDonald's Fantasy

Having addressed the importance of a personal theology in MacDonald's life, a characteristic I cannot stress enough for its importance in his literature, the last remaining inquiry is how he incorporated those theological beliefs into his fantastical stories—especially his novel *At the Back of the North Wind*. The intention behind MacDonald's writing has always been that of preaching the truths he believed in. Chan's thesis highlights how his stories carried the weight of his personal theological ideals behind

² Novalis (1772–1801), also known as Friedrich Leopold Freiherr von Hardenberg, was a German poet. He belonged to the Romantic movement and much of his literature dealt with the longing for death, the loss of loved ones and more general questions such as the destiny of humankind. ("Novalis (1772–1801)").

them, but to do so he depended on two main devices: fantasy and the construction of a mythology (218-220).

Bleecker argues that realism, although in essence more relatable due to its pragmatism, was not enough to answer questions about the figure of God or the universe in MacDonald's life (164). Realistic, scientific answers failed to provide a spiritual connection with humans for MacDonald, and thus he set out to assert "a new kind of conviction and involvement; a new relationship to the cosmos; sometimes even a new mythology" (Hume, cited in Bleecker 165). This is where MacDonald created, developed and refined a mythology based on his theological beliefs.

By exploiting the imaginative nature of fantasy and adding a mythology revolving around God, humankind and the cosmos, he found the outlet to his theological teaching. He built his mythic stories primarily from Christianity and altered them to fit to his vision (Bleecker 165-166). In *At the Back of the North Wind*, MacDonald displayed this combination of mythology and theology by introducing mythic characters who would act in the name of God—the North Wind—utilizing a dreamscape as the means to understand both one's own soul and God, and presenting fairy-tale qualities such as talking animals to present his principles to the reader, among other things. Ultimately, Bleecker defines MacDonald's view of God as that of a being who has "a thousand appearances, but only one infinite reality behind them all" (164), and MacDonald's aim was to portray such thoughts using fantasy and mythology.

4. *At the Back of the North Wind*

I will begin the analysis with a very succinct summary of the story, in order to highlight how the main themes of the present dissertation are present in the novel. Published in 1871, *At the Back of the North Wind* narrates the adventures of sickly Diamond, the son of a coachman, and North Wind, a beautiful lady who embodies her namesake. The story takes place in the everyday Victorian London, where Diamond faces much personal unhappiness when meeting a miserable crossing-sweeper named Nanny, facing a rough time during his father's unemployment and dealing with a drunken, abusive cabman. He learns to navigate this world by helping those around him—Nanny, his parents and a baby brother—and taking over his father's job with the help of his fantastical friend North

Wind and a faithful horse after whom he was named. Later, a well-meaning gentleman, Mr. Raymond, tests Diamond's father to hire the family, Nanny and Diamond to work for him in the countryside. Ultimately, Diamond dies of an unnamed illness and goes to the mystical place at the back of the north wind.

As we may deduce, theological and mythological components will interlock in the depiction of the two main characters and their relationship in the story. Furthermore, the portrayal of death is also a main issue of the story, as well as the dichotomy between the real world Diamond inhabits and the fantastical world North Wind comes from.

4.1. The Savior and The Guide

The first instance of how MacDonald poured his views of the world, truth and faith into his books, is not found in the presentations of the themes, but in the characters. I believe MacDonald's characters are his ideals brought to life, the essence of his thoughts personified, and we can assert it by analyzing the two protagonists: Diamond and the North Wind.

4.1.1. God's Baby

Diamond is goodness distilled. In his childlike innocence, he spends most of the book aiding those in need, providing support when the situation requires it, and being exemplary on all accounts. He is, in short, the perfect child—an idealized view of childhood. I may also venture to say he is even presented as a Christ-like figure. In the mythological world MacDonald creates in *At the Back of the North Wind*, Diamond becomes the savior, the hero for those around him, who wields the weapons of goodwill and kind words much like Christ did in his time. He is eager to welcome a sickened Nanny into their midst after caring for her and ready to work for his family when his father falls ill. The narrator of the story also comments on these almost divine attributes of Diamond: "It seemed to me, somehow, as if little Diamond possessed the secret of life, and was himself what he was so ready to think the lowest living thing—an angel of God with something special to say or do" (314).

Moreover, the moniker "God's Baby", although used as pejorative term by other characters, may hint that Diamond was, indeed, touched by God. Before, we have seen MacDonald's idea of God represented through love, mercy and redemption. Diamond

manages to spread those qualities—and therefore the will of God—to the harsh, earthly world around him. He neither cares for nor dwells on the negative, regardless of how whether or not others see him as silly, and prefers to embrace love and virtue. He becomes an example to follow—much like MacDonald sees Christ—not only for the other characters he interacts with, but also for the reader. Another resemblance between the Christ-like Diamond and Jesus resides in the resemblance of their families. Both had a hardworking, honest man named Joseph as a father and a perfect and lovely, caring mother. Chan further adds to my argument by noticing that Diamond’s life closely imitates the religious figure’s: “a ‘humble son of a Joseph and Martha in London, acting like a little Christ among his fellow men until he grows ill and dies’” (248-249).

MacDonald establishes the similarities between Diamond and Christ to depict the former as a modern role of the savior in Victorian London. Therefore, MacDonald imbues Diamond with his theological views and presents him as the Christ-like child who carries on the dictates of God on Earth, while also finding spirituality under the caring guidance of North Wind.

4.1.2. North Wind

Incidentally, North Wind does, in fact, act like the spiritual side of Diamond’s worldliness. Duffy (176) and Bleecker (201) consider her to be similar to a fairy-tale godmother: a magical motherly being who provides the protagonist with wisdom and care. I am inclined to agree, yet I would also remark on her roles as the personification of a natural element and confidant to Diamond. North Wind is indisputably the bridge Diamond crosses between the mundane and the fantastical; she is a teacher, a mother and a guide on a spiritual level when instructing him with pearls of wisdom such as the importance of looking beyond appearances or the basic imperative of respectability. This mythological woman is also noted to guide children to death, or in this case the afterlife, by gently presenting the journey as a beginning rather than the end. In a word, we could declare that North Wind becomes the protecting spirit who looks after Diamond—except that this would reduce her character greatly.

North Wind extends her hand to whomever needs it, and whenever she is needed—protecting babies from wicked caretakers in the form of brusque gusts of wind or inspiring poets with soft breezes—, but she can also incarnate adversity: she becomes

the storm that sinks a ship in the sea, the natural world that is more wild than tame. I have mentioned before how MacDonald inherited the love for nature from the Romantics and this aspect of his ideology shows in the character of North Wind. She is a woman who embodies the natural power of the world and is a herald of Death; yet, unlike the case of the Romantics, the natural spirit in MacDonald's story shows obedience to an even greater being. "There are a great many things I don't understand more than you do," (328) North Wind tells Diamond, a statement which highlights her limits. She is incapable of reaching the country at her back, and does not have answers for some of the questions Diamond asks about her nature. Thus, she is carrying a will greater than her own which, in this case, would belong to God. North Wind is as much God's servant as Diamond is, only she belongs to the natural or spiritual plane rather than the earthly one. MacDonald created a mythical figure who would be adapted to the Christian theology by working her as part of it. As Chan states: "North Wind is contained within God; God is not merely *behind* nature, the personality of nature is a part of his personality" (202).

In the end, North Wind has as many forms as she has roles to play; she may present herself little larger than a fairy, or as a storm which could rake the land. Still, North Wind never loses her identity. Whereas Diamond is depicted as God's child, North Wind acts like "a face of God' in MacDonald's religious fantasy for children" (Chan 242).

4.2. Death and Suffering

Death and adversity haunted George MacDonald's life and writing. The idea of facing loss, the preoccupation of what comes after life and the motives for why we must suffer so are presented in many of his stories within the framework of MacDonald's unique theological beliefs. *At the Back of the North Wind* is no different in this regard, and Death and suffering are major themes. Yet, as we have seen before, MacDonald approached these delicate topics with a rather bittersweet outlook rather than a pessimist one.

When analyzing North Wind, I have expressed her role as the harbinger of adversity: the storm sinking ships and the one who will bring little Diamond to the country at her back. She is not, however, shown as something to be avoided or cold or cruel; instead, she is a mother and a friend, a beautiful woman on whom Diamond relies and seeks out by his own volition. Thus, she is someone to be accepted rather than despised, for North

Wind herself confides that, although she may look as if she bears ill will, that is far from the truth:

“People call me by dreadful names and think they know all about me. But they don’t. Sometimes they call me Bad Fortune, sometimes Evil Chance, sometimes Ruin; and they have another name for me which they think the most dreadful of all.” (315)

Here we may observe that she refuses to tell Diamond her last name—this being Death—but she also assures him by saying that those epithets are not necessarily true and are a result of people’s ignorance. This allows us to get a glimpse of MacDonald’s views on the topic. Duffy claims North Wind to be “sort of a Divine Messenger but she does the work of Death, Death that for MacDonald was not to be feared but sought” (180). That is, North Wind is portrayed as one of many facets of God—death and life are not presented as opposites, rather, death is another form of living and therefore not to be feared. The suffering brought by death (or in this situation North Wind), though painful, is ultimately for a greater good dictated by God. When North Wind sinks the ship, it allows for the reconciliation between two lovers; when she leaves Diamond alone in the streets of London, it is so he may learn to be brave. Her actions, I believe, are portrayed as deliberate pushes from God to achieve ideal versions of people. Death and suffering are means to an end, not the end itself. North Wind at the beginning of the story enlightens Diamond by saying “[people] are cold because they are not with the North Wind, but without it” (18) and this is the line that may encapsulate MacDonald’s mystical theology best: adversity and death are to be embraced and learnt from, not shunned.

Another instance where we may witness this spiritual version of Death is in the portrayal of the country at the back of North Wind. Diamond manages to visit the place once before his ultimate death, and when he returns there is a profound mystical change operating on him. He has been molded by the place, reborn and converted into “God’s Baby”. He has been, I may argue, not quite in Heaven for he is still part of the physical world, but in the transition between Earth and God’s domain. This argument is supported by Rosenberg, who describes the country at the back of North Wind as closer to “Eden, the Earthly Paradise, rather than Heaven” (53).

The mythical place at the back of the North Wind that Diamond visits the first time is described with no sun nor ice nor snow, streams cross the land and there are

flowers, bushes and trees which grow at will—almost an Edenic garden where life abounds. The rivers sing in Diamond’s mind, a song he will attempt to replicate in the form of poems and fairy tales in the real world, and the people there do understand each other rather than talk. The picture framed by Diamond’s descriptions presents a fantastic, idyllic country. Nonetheless, there is an underlying emptiness in his account: “Nothing went wrong at the back of the north wind. Neither was anything quite right, he thought. Only everything was going to be right some day” (106). This hints that the country at the back of North Wind is a transitory place before reaching the true destination; a spiritual baptism which will help to achieve the illumination that will provide him with the wisdom to walk the real world unscathed. By MacDonald’s theology Diamond visits but a representation, and only when he dies does he reach the true country at God’s side.

All things considered, MacDonald’s main preoccupation when addressing Death was to erase the fearsome connotations behind it and perceive it as an extension of life. To do so, he combined the mythical figure of North Wind and the peaceful country with his theological views to present Death as an approachable, lovely figure. Thus, the afterlife becomes the next step of life and “the real country at the back of the north wind, in MacDonald’s Christian teleology, the ultimate integration” (Rosenberg 59).

4.3. The Real World and the Dream World

The living, harsh world and the mythical, imaginative world created out of dreams and tales are constantly fluctuating in *At the Back of the North Wind*. Diamond responds to both by crossing between and blurring the lines that separates them. This emerging of two distinct worlds, however, raises the question whether Diamond’s journey with North Wind was nothing but a conjuration of his mind or a fantastical reality in the world MacDonald created. Did he really meet North Wind? Did he travel to the country at her back? Or was it all but a dream created by a sickened child? Diamond himself doubts the validity of his reality as much as the reader might; he constantly fluctuates between belief and disbelief, hesitant whenever the real, physical elements of the world take predominance over the fantastical ones. It is only towards the end when he questions North Wind on the matter. She answers as follows:

“You might have loved me in a dream, dreamily, and forgotten me when you woke, I daresay, but not loved me like a real being as you love me. Even then, I

don't think you could dream anything that hadn't something real like it somewhere." (329)

This quotation has two functions: first, to assure Diamond that she is, indeed, as real as she can be and, second, to state that dreams, regardless of their authenticity, may hold as much truth as reality itself. Bleecker writes that "introducing unreal occurrences and characters into the mundane world is to call the appearance of that world into question" (197). Consequently, I may argue that MacDonald considered the sleeping world to be the other half of the living world—representative of the spiritual realm in contrast with the material. Furthermore, if we take into account MacDonald's aforementioned assessments of imagination and fantasy, dreams and fairy tales function as outlets for God's messages. Thus, the dream world presented in *At the Back of the North Wind* becomes a spiritual and religious device to discover the hidden truths of the real world and the soul.

Each time Diamond journeys with North Wind, or dreams of angels, or listens to fairy tales, he is learning from them. MacDonald used the dream world in order to unearth "the secret which God has hidden there" (Reis, qtd. in Chan 226). In Diamond's case, the dream world functions as visions for lessons needed before his death. He learns of duty, bravery, the importance of the spiritual view in lieu of the material view and, predominantly, the essence of death—all constituents of the spiritual growth beckoning his ascent to the afterlife, God's realm. In other instances, the dream world acts as tests of faith and integrity. For instance, Nanny's dream of a house in the moon and a lady and an old man who ask her to take care of the house though they prohibit her to enter a room in which a bee box lies (MacDonald 263-279). Nanny does not heed their order, eventually breaking in and opening the box. As Chan (227) points out, the bee box might stand as an allegory of Pandora's Box, and when Nanny opens it she has failed, so to speak, the test of faith and honesty, thus being cast out of her own dream by the lady, who we discover later was North Wind.

The mystic dreams blend with theological beliefs in Diamond's reality. Rather than two separate entities, MacDonald portrays dream and reality as two aspects of the same world. Every time he visits the dreamy realm a new discovery of the world as a whole is made. Dreams, just like North Wind, become mythical teachers of nature and death, carrying out God's will.

4.4. Trust and Faith

When mystical religion is involved in a story, the themes of faith and trust are inevitably going to appear. Apart from the dream just mentioned, in *At the Back of the North Wind* one of the first lessons Diamond learns from North Wind is that of obedience and trust. In their first meeting, North Wind, who is the representation of the divine at work, chastises Diamond by telling him he should do as she asks: “You shall not be the worse for it—I promise you that. You will be much the better for it. Just you believe what I say, and do as I tell you” (14). Here, Diamond is subjected to follow the higher spiritual authority while learning to trust in her word and have faith that her dictates will bring no harm to him. I have previously commented that the endurance of loss and suffering being regarded as part of God’s greater plan was one of the main themes in MacDonald’s fantasy, but it is essential for one to have faith in order to make this happen: “This comes of not having faith enough in God, and shows how necessary this faith is, for when we lose it, we lose even the kindness which alone can soothe the suffering” (284).

Faith is what sustains those who suffer and face adversity. The unwavering, living faith in God and His will is the key component in MacDonald’s theology. It is through trusting in the mythical figure of North Wind, and therefore God, that Diamond manages to complete his journey despite the setbacks and incomprehensible world he witnesses (Duffy 178). On the other hand, when Nanny refuses to trust in North Wind, denying the spiritual implication of her dream, she disbelieves and therefore does not acquire any kind of enlightenment. Thus, she becomes condescending towards Diamond and his attitude, scoffing at the idea of a loving figure watching over them. Her own journey, unlike Diamond’s, has been halted.

The issue of trust is broached again when Diamond inquiries about the reality of his experiences. It is no evidence or cold facts that convince him of the possibility of the fantastic realm, but his faith in North Wind. In the face of doubt, it is faith that drives him forward. The readers themselves are tasked with trusting the story in order to believe that it is, in fact, real. It falls on the reader, too, Chan claims, to have faith in Diamond reaching the land at the back of North Wind in his final moments, for the end of the story never specifies whether he achieves doing so or not (251).

At the Back of the North Wind is a demonstration of MacDonald's theology, which relies on believing in a higher plane of existence so as to close the gap between ourselves and that plane. While Diamond is required to believe in North Wind, we, the readers, are required to believe as well. Therefore, the mythological children's fantasy becomes a test of faith for everyone, both characters and readers, requesting them to keep trusting in God's good will and His love towards humanity.

5. Conclusion

Overall, George MacDonald's personal theology greatly influenced the portrayal of the themes and characters in *At the Back of the North Wind*. The harsh Victorian lifestyle, the uncertain religious climate and the birth of fantasy literature as a didactic tool all contributed to the development of MacDonald's spirituality and approach to writing. He acquired a unique and far more gentle perspective regarding the nature of God, redemption and death as consequence of the struggles and doubts he faced throughout his life, and attempted to translate those notions into his stories.

At the Back of the North Wind becomes the representation of those ideas; the themes of death, the dream world and faith explored in this paper are ever-present in the book. Only, these otherwise somber topics are shown in a more gracious light—it is not fatalism or cynicism but unwavering faith in inherent goodness portrayed through good-natured protagonists that constitute the main theological premise of the story. The fantastical is pictured as essential as the real in order to understand the designs of the benevolent God, and by blending the two worlds into one MacDonald managed to create an entirely new universe that reflected his spiritual beliefs, which could then be conveyed to others.

In the final analysis, Diamond's story is not only just a simple children's story, but also a reassurance for those who, like MacDonald, suffered from crippling uncertainty. It encapsulates universal themes, such as mortality and suffering, viewed through a religious and spiritual prism. Hence, *At the Back of the North Wind* serves as a clear example of MacDonald's personal theology, defining his ideas concerning religious and social issues of his time.

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