

Death and Nonsense in the Poetry of George MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind* and Lewis Carroll's *Alice Books*

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In *The Literary Products of the George MacDonald-Lewis Carroll Friendship*, John Docherty explains not only that MacDonald and Carroll were friends for more than 40 years, but also that they explored some of the same ideas in their texts. In "Some Linguistic Moves in the Carroll-MacDonald 'Literary Game,'" Fernando Soto takes this even further by arguing that these two writers played linguistic games with each other, based on their understanding of the Scottish and Cheshire dialects. Meanwhile, R. B. Shaberman argues that the fairy tales of MacDonald and Carroll share "certain common elements of symbolism and association" (22). While these scholars focus on issues relating to faith, linguistics, Romanticism, and issues in the authors' individual lives, another common element between the children's fantasies of Carroll and MacDonald is their use of nonsense poetry to explore the concept of death. While Carroll's *Alice* books employ nonsense to lead readers to laugh at death, MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind* presents a familiarity with death as the starting point for the ability to create and understand nonsense.

In *Nonsense Literature for Children*, Celia Catlett Anderson and Marilyn Fain Apseloff argue that nonsense is far from being a set of words with no meaning. Instead, they explain, it is a use of language that "heightens rather than destroys meaning" (5). According to Anderson and Apseloff, this is done in many different ways, including playing with multiple meanings of a word, creating relationships between things that do not naturally connect, exaggerating ideas or events to an extreme, taking figurative language as literal, and using logic in places it does not belong. In creating nonsense poetry that takes death lightly, MacDonald and Carroll do not destroy the meaning of death, but require their readers to think differently about it, thus offering a challenge to the predominant attitudes about death within their own culture.

According to Michael Wheeler, in *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology*, the Victorians highly ritualized death, fixating on it until it attained a cult-like status. This can be seen not only in common Victorian behaviors surrounding death, such as wearing specific clothes to signify to others that one is in mourning, but can also be seen in much of the fiction from that time (25). Writers as diverse as Charles

Dickens, Alfred Lord Tennyson and Christina Rossetti gloried in deathbed scenes, eulogies, and memorial poems. In their association of death with nonsense, however, MacDonald and Carroll appear to be rejecting their society's obsession.

While both authors approach death through nonsense, providing what may have been a much-needed laugh at the time, they do this in very different ways. Docherty points out that quite a few American scholars have considered the Alice books to be deconstructionist, attacking the values of Carroll's era (1). Certainly one of the ways Carroll deconstructs the value of his culture in the Alice books is by mocking Victorian ideas about death. MacDonald, on the other hand, appears at first to be more traditional in approach: in *At the Back of the North Wind*, the child Diamond's first exposure to death also gives him the ability to create, recognize, and enjoy nonsense poetry. Through the poetry that Diamond reads and creates, the reader, in turn, is presented with a progression of images and ideas about death that are linked to nonsense poetry in order to relieve some of the fear that is associated with it.

The fact that these specific texts are the ones in which the two writers choose to challenge their culture's attitude toward death is significant because not only were the two authors friends, but these texts were published around the same time. *Alice in Wonderland* first saw publication in 1865, while *At the Back of the North Wind* began as a serial for a children's magazine just two years later. The series ran for two years and was finally published in book form in 1871, just before the second Alice book, *Through the Looking Glass* (1872). Docherty points out that without MacDonald's encouragement, the Alice books would never have been published, going as far as to claim that because these two discussed their work, these three stories affected each other. The Alice books and *At the Back of the North Wind* share some striking similarities in their presentation of death and nonsense poetry, and exploring them together may well enrich one's understanding of each.

Both *At the Back of the North Wind* and the Alice books begin with a child from a recognizable Victorian social class doing things that would be typical of a child from that class. *At the Back of the North Wind* begins with a description of Diamond's life as the son of a coachman living in what was essentially a hayloft. This home is so poorly constructed that the winter wind enters Diamond's bed through a hole in the wall. The child's plight is similar to that of many children born into a lower class in England at that time. But while Diamond faces all of the potential consequences of sleeping in severe weather, Carroll's middle-class Alice begins her story facing nothing more serious than boredom. While Diamond struggles to keep out the cold, Alice wonders if it would be worth the effort to play with flowers. The two children are opposites in almost every way: Diamond is a boy, Alice is a girl. Diamond

is lower class, Alice is middle class. Diamond's story begins in the dead of winter, Alice's begins in the heat of summer. Diamond does not learn to read until halfway through his story; Alice begins her adventures knowing how to read and with her own formed opinion about what makes a good book. These two do, however, share a few things. Their lives seem very average when the reader first meets them. There is no nonsense involved—only questions of survival or boredom. Then both leave the world they know and, for a time, travel to a fantasy world, which introduces each to experiences that they had never met before, but to the possibilities of nonsense. This is done, however, in very different ways.

Throughout the history of children's fantasy, children have left the world they know and entered a fantasy realm in a variety of methods, including opening portal doors, finding magical objects, stumbling into magical situations, even by playing games that become more real than the children imagined. It is, therefore, significant that both Diamond and Alice enter their other worlds by following someone else. Both are led there by a person who, if one were to rely strictly on the laws of science, should not exist. North Wind plays a much more important role in Diamond's adventures than does the White Rabbit in Alice's, but both are significant.

In *At the Back of the North Wind*, death plays an important role long before the first nonsense poem is presented. Death, in this book, is closely connected to the character North Wind. She calls herself a friend of the child Diamond, but warns him that he, like most people, does not understand her real identity:

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, and sometimes Ruin; and they have another name for me which they think the most dreadful of all. (357)

That name the reader is left to guess. But by the end of the story, it becomes clear that there is only one possibility: her other name is Death. She tells Diamond about the land at her back but she cannot travel there herself because it is the place people go when they die. North Wind has never seen it because Death cannot die. She is, however, an unconventional grim reaper: when Diamond first asks to go the land at her back, she is troubled by his request. Eventually, however, she decides to give him what could be called a "preview." But Diamond learns that in order to sample this wonderful place, he must walk through North Wind herself. He must walk through Death: "What do you want me to do next, dear North Wind," said Diamond, wishing to show his love by being obedient.

"What do you want to do yourself?"

"I want to go into the country at your back."

"Then you must go through me."

"I don't know what you mean."

"I mean just what I say. You must walk on as if I were an open door, and go right through me."

"But that will hurt you."

"Not in the least. It will hurt you, though." (103)

Diamond's entrance to another world involves, ultimately, a close encounter with death.

Alice, on the other hand, is led into her fantasy world by following a white rabbit down a hole. All of the adventures in the first book supposedly take place underground. This could be considered a symbol of death, because of the practice of burying people after they die. But this is not the only connection that suggests Alice's adventures begin, at least symbolically, in a brush with death. After crawling into the hole after the rabbit, Alice finds herself falling a great distance. Such a fall would, under normal circumstances, have been the end of her. In fact, during this fall the first death-related joke occurs in *Alice in Wonderland*:

"Well!" Thought Alice to herself, "after such a fall as this, I shall think nothing of tumbling down stairs! How brave they'll all think me at home! Why, I wouldn't say anything about it, even if I fell off the top of the house!" (which was very likely true). (27)

At this point, the narrator points out the joke to the reader while maintaining a certain level of subtlety. He draws the reader's attention to Alice's thoughts, but he does not spell out the fact that Alice would not say anything about falling from a roof because she would, most likely, be dead. Not only is Alice unaware that falling off the roof would most likely kill her, but it does not occur to her that a fall as great as the one that she is currently experiencing should be fatal. Neither Diamond nor Alice realizes that they have, at the very beginning of their adventures, faced death.

After their initial encounter with death while entering their fantasy worlds, both Diamond and Alice are changed by new experiences. Diamond's change is most notable after his return. When he walks back through North Wind in order to return home, she exclaims: "'How very alive you are!'" (112). He then falls asleep in her arms but wakes up in bed, with his mother weeping beside him. She tells him that he has been very ill, and when he says that he has been to the land at the North Wind's back, she replies, "'I thought you were dead'" (118). Diamond undergoes a long period of convalescence, after which the narrator occasionally inserts comments about how his experience at the North Wind's back changed him. Because of his visit he was always good, was never frightened, and was often very quiet. He has gained a new ability to recognize when others are miserable, and knows how

to alleviate misery (think of the drunken cabman). He protects the innocent (think of Nanny). In short, because of his adventures at the North Wind's back, Diamond has become the perfect little boy of the same variety as *Little Lord Fauntelroy*. This is not the only change in Diamond, however. Less obvious, but equally important, the boy has learned from his encounter with death how to enjoy and create stories and poems. He listens with delight to the fairy tales Mr. Raymond tells, and begins to make up his own nonsense verse.

The nonsense poetry that Diamond creates occurs in the second half of *At the Back of the North Wind*. The first poem, however, that the reader encounters is actually a passage from the poem "Kilmeny" by the Scottish poet James Hogg. The narrator quotes a short passage from this poem in an attempt to explain the land at the North Wind's back to the reader. "Kilmeny" is an old Scottish folktale about a girl who disappeared one night and reappears seven years later with stories of having been kidnapped by the fairies and taken to their land. It is "a land where sin had never been" and "a land of love and a land of light" (115). The first poem that appears in *At the Back of the North Wind* describes to the reader that Diamond has gone to a place that reflects the Victorian ideal of life-after-death. Like the narrator of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* who discusses but does not announce the possibility of death in Alice's fall, the narrator of *At the Back of the North Wind* does not announce that Diamond is in heaven. Instead, he drops hints and leaves the reader to work it out.

The next poem, which is the first poem that Diamond makes up himself, does not occur until after the child has returned to his own world. This first poem is called "nonsense" by the narrator immediately before Diamond begins to tell it to a baby, but he also claims that the baby, who was actually too young to understand language, "got all the good in the world out of it" (157). Nonsense, according to the narrator, is good for a person. Diamond's poem begins:

Baby's a-sleeping
Wake up baby
For all the swallows
Are the merriest fellows
And have the yellowest children . . . (157)

At this point, Diamond begins the nonsense by connecting two ideas that don't logically go together, as though they did. Why should the baby wake up? Because birds of a particular type are "the merriest fellows" (157)? Nonsense often plays with multiple meanings of one word or phrase. This is part of the linguistic game that, according to Jean-Jacques Lecercle in *Philosophy of Nonsense*, nonsense literature plays. When an adjective ending in "-est" is used to describe something, two different things could

be happening. The denotation of the adjective is superlative; something that is the “merriest” should, literally, be happier than anything else. But the same adjective is often used to describe an extreme: calling someone “the merriest fellow” might just mean that he is usually quite happy. The next line, however, focuses the use of the adjectival suffix: it is harder to read “yellowest” in the same dual sense as “merriest.” From here, the poem continues to work in that space between the two uses of “-est,” while at the same time creating relationships between concepts that really do not have relationships, and giving qualities to things that do not have those qualities. Birds snore; babies are shiny. In connecting babies, mothers, and sheep, this poem clearly reflects romantic ideas about children and innocence, but it reaches a point at which sound becomes more important than sense:

Wake up baby
Hark to the gushing
Hark to the rushing
Where the sheep are the wooliest
And the lambs the unruliest. (158)

What Diamond learned from his experience with Death is to celebrate life. But it is only after his experience of death that he can express this sort of joy in the form of nonsense.

Alice, on the other hand, encounters poetry shortly after she enters Wonderland. The first poem that occurs on her adventures is one that she made up:

How doth the little crocodile
Improve his shining tail,
And pour the waters of the Nile
On every golden scale!
How cheerfully he seems to grin,
How neatly spreads his claws,
And welcomes little fishes in,
With gently smiling jaws! (38)

While Diamond’s first foray into creating poetry is a deliberate celebration of life, the first poem Alice creates is about death. Diamond’s creation is a deliberate one, but Alice’s is accidental: she tries to quote Isaac Watts’s “How Doth the Little Busy Bee,” but what comes out of her mouth is strikingly different. This poem juxtaposes images of friendliness such as “he seems to grin” and “welcomes little fishes in” with the harsh reality of what the poem is about. Where Diamond enjoys his first creative experience, Alice is bothered by hers and begins to cry. She is not concerned that her poem uses images of comfort and friendliness to talk about one creature bringing about the death of others, but she is upset because she knows that she has changed. Diamond is unaware of any change he has undergone; Alice is

only too sharply aware. The Alice who creates this nonsense poetry is quite different from the Alice who likes to show others what she has learned. Even as she wonders if she has not somehow turned into another child, it never occurs to her that what may have changed her is an encounter with death itself—after falling an impossibly long distance without getting in the least bit hurt, death has itself become nonsense. Nonsense and death become closely connected in both Wonderland and Looking-glass land, being the focus of many of the poems Alice hears or makes up.

In both *At the Back of the North Wind* and the Alice books, a large number of the nonsense poems are revisions or parodies of older poems. Diamond's poem that begins

Baby baby babbling
your father's gone a cabbing
to catch a shilling for its pence
to make the baby babbling dance (164)

is a revision of a nursery rhyme that has been told in many different forms, one of which is

Bye, baby bunting
Your father's gone a-hunting
To catch a little rabbit skin
To wrap a baby bunting in.

Diamond's poem, however, goes on to play with the meaning of the word *diamond*, meaning both the boy and the stone, before ending much the same as the earlier poem he told this baby. While declaring such as "old Diamond's a duck" and that swallows (the same birds that appeared in an earlier poem, which suggests that there may be a pun developing, based in the name of the bird) bake cakes, this poem also serves a purpose. Just as the poems that Carroll parodies in his nonsense work are often instructional, some of Diamond's poetry appears to be so, as well. This particular poem explains to baby the roles of each family member. Father makes the money, mother watches her "lambs," baby is the "funniest" and Diamond is his "nurse" (165). Again, this poem is about life, but the narrator claims that Diamond was only trying to remember "what he had heard the river sing at the back of the north wind" (165). Like Alice's crocodile poem, Diamond's creations begin in memory. In his case, however, this poem is part memory of nursery rhyme, part memory of his brush with death.

While the poems that Diamond creates are full of joy, other poems he encounters are not so cheerful. After he has learned to read, he stumbles across a poem that begins with three familiar words from another nursery rhyme: "Little Boy Blue" (193). This poem begins with darker words than those that Diamond himself creates: "Little Boy Blue lost his way in a wood" (193). This image of being lost in the woods evokes a motif from fairy

tales and folklore, as well as the beginning of Dante's *Inferno*. Generally, bad things happen when someone has lost their way in a wood. The next line, however, presents a different tone: "sing apples and cherries, roses and honey" which is used to rhyme with the fourth line "it's all so jolly and funny" (193). While being lost in a wood is not a good thing, Little Boy Blue ignores this and begins to call animals to himself just because he realizes that he can. Eventually, a large number of creatures follow him, and he stops. At this point, the animals begin to ask why he called them, but he has no answer. Realizing that he is lost and that he has been followed not only by birds and butterflies but also by snakes and rats and bats, he reacts with fear: "Little Boy Blue was afraid of his life" (197). In this case, the poem itself is not playing with meaning or sound, but it is a sensible poem about a creator of nonsense. Creating his own nonsense gives Little Boy Blue the strength to overcome the snake who tries to prevent him from returning home. After killing this creature, Boy Blue "set his foot on his head," a scene that is reminiscent of Genesis 3:15, in which the serpent is told that he would "bruise the heel" of Eve's offspring, while that same offspring would "bruise thy head" (KJV). This passage has been read as a prophecy of the coming of Christ, who, according to Paul, defeated death itself. Therefore, the poem that Diamond reads about Little Boy Blue can be viewed as a poem about defeating death. In this case, the boy who sings his own nonsense while lost in a wood is the one who is able to defeat death. The story of Diamond and the story of Little Boy Blue complement each other. Diamond's ability to enjoy nonsense comes from his understanding of death; Little Boy Blue's ability to defeat death stems from his ability to enjoy nonsense.

None of the death-poems in either of the Alice books take death this seriously. Instead, many of them associate death with nonsense in the same manner as "How Doth the Little Crocodile." Examples include "The Mouse's Tail," and "Tis' the Voice of the Lobster." In each of these, the thread of death shapes the humor, whether it be the ridiculousness of a mouse being put on trial for its life, or a lobster discussing how well-cooked he is.

"The Walrus and the Carpenter" is a poem based on absurd situations. Unlike most of the other poems in Alice books, it is not a parody of anyone else's work. It begins:

The sun was shining on the sea,
Shining with all his might:
He did his very best to make
The billows smooth and bright— (159)

The nonsense elements of this poem can hardly include the personification of the sun, simply because personification is not uncommon in many types of poetry. The primary strangeness of the poem is first manifested in the last two lines of the first stanza: "And this was odd, because it was/ the middle of the

night” (159). This whimsical, lighthearted introduction sets the tone for the story about a hungry Walrus, a hungry carpenter, and a bunch of very foolish young clams, who, like Diamond, set out on an adventure with dangerous characters. Unlike Diamond, they get eaten for dinner.

The humor of this poem is only partly in the tragic tale of young oysters who meet the fate of all oysters when they encounter hungry humans at dinner-time. The humor can also be found in the moral that Alice tries to draw from the silly story. While the moral poems that Alice learned before entering Wonderland lose any pedagogical value as she recreates them, Alice here tries to find a lesson in a poem that does not have one. In her search for a moral, Alice looks first for a protagonist, because the lesson in a story is often closely connected with the behavior of such a character. First she chooses the Walrus because she thought he had compassion on the young, naive and eaten oysters. When Tweedledee sets out to show her that the Walrus shouldn’t be her favorite, he neither points out the obvious crime, nor does he refer to the text. Instead, he adds nonessential information not found in the poem itself. But Alice cannot find her moral in the walrus, the carpenter, or even the young oysters themselves. In fact, the nonsensical tone of the poem would have been lost if, at any point, Alice had attempted to view the oysters as characters that mattered. This suggests that the attitude about death that Carroll’s nonsense presents is a flippant one, saying that death does not matter in the first place.

While both MacDonald and Carroll present a connection between death and nonsense, MacDonald’s poems in *At the Back of the North Wind* change as the story progresses toward Diamond’s ultimate death, or, as the narrator assures us, his permanent journey to the land at North Wind’s back. One poem near the end of the text begins, like many of MacDonald’s and Carroll’s poems do, with an earlier poem: the story of Little Bo Peep. This poem brings in the nonsense in the original about following and losing tails, but it ends in a very different manner:

Never weep, Bo Peep, though you lose your sheep,
And do not know where to find them;
‘Tis after the sun the mothers have run,
And there are their lambs behind them. (348)

Many metaphors about death involve images of going west or following the sunset; this image is evoked in this poem. Bo Peep is offered comfort in the idea that her sheep are doing exactly what sheep are supposed to do and have always done. They are following their mothers into the sunset; they are following all the sheep that came before them into death. This is the natural progression of “life, “and, most importantly, these sheep will not be alone. These sheep will not cease to exist, but will be in a different place with the ones that they love most. In this case, the nonsense of the original nursery

rhyme gives way to what could be seen as a typical Victorian moral about death.

MacDonald's nonsense poems in *North Wind* show a progression. Beginning in celebrations of life that came into being through the experience of death, they then suggest that nonsense helps give one the strength to defeat death. Finally, however, they end in an acceptance that death does happen, but nothing to be feared. Because death has been defeated, because it teaches one to enjoy life, it is something that can finally be accepted.

Carroll's poems, on the other hand, show no such progression. The poems about death occur in various contexts, including mock battles in which no one gets hurt. This includes the battle between Tweedledum and Tweedledee, as well as the poem "Jabberwocky," which at first appears to tell the story of the hunting of a ferocious beast. Since the reader leaves the poem with little understanding of what exactly a Jabberwocky is, there is no sense of death in the poem—only of victory and joy. The mock battle leads to mock heroics, which then lead to mock praises: "Come to my arms, my beamish boy! / O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!" (Carroll 132). These words, of course, are the kind of nonsense words that Anderson and Apseoff describe as words for which the sound is more important than the meaning (43). In fact, the whole poem "Jabberwocky," which is apparently about a young man who slays a monster with his "vorpal sword" is told in such words (132). The meaning of words is replaced with sound: the words sound right in each place, so they must "be" right. This is less because of the words themselves, however, and more because these meaningless words are carefully placed together within a tightly-controlled syntax. In *Philosophy of Nonsense*, Lecercle explains that nonsense, while breaking rules of logic and meaning, tends to adhere to the rules of syntax (51). It is these rules that give the poem about the Jabberwock meaning. It is these rules that give much of nonsense its meaning.

Like "Jabberwocky," the episode of the Lion and the Unicorn is also a mock battle, and, like many of the poems in *At the Back of the North Wind*, it is based on an older nursery rhyme. Just as Diamond asks his mother if the Little Boy Blue in the poem he read is the same one who was supposed to blow his horn when the sheep were in the corn, this rhyme includes a reminder for the reader about who these nursery-rhyme characters are. In *Through the Looking Glass*, the poem is taken quite literally:

The Lion and the Unicorn were fighting for the crown:
The Lion beat the unicorn all round the town.
Some gave them white bread, some gave them brown:
Some gave them plum-cake and drummed them out of town.
(198)

This is viewed as a necessary series of events: the kings and queens who are

present have white and brown bread ready for a pause in the battle. This time the unicorn wins, but for just a moment the story takes on a sinister tone when the king comments: “You shouldn’t have run him through with your horn, you know” (200). While this hints at the darkness of death and responsibility, the Unicorn removes all seriousness by quickly responding “It didn’t hurt him” (200). While being “run through” would certainly hurt anyone, the lion is not hurt. Once again, death in this story has no meaning: it does not hurt. Everyone, then, participates in what appears to be to them a familiar ritual involving brown and white bread followed by plum-cake and a nice drum march out of town (200–201). The Lion who had been pierced by the unicorn’s horn remains not only uninjured, but is still on speaking terms with the Unicorn.

MacDonald and Carroll ultimately use nonsense poetry to remove the sting of death, but one of Carroll’s poems brings his work very close to the celebration of life that Diamond engages in after his journey at the back of the north wind. This is the poem “Father William.” This poem retells “The Old Man’s Comforts and How he Gained Them,” a moral poem by Robert Southey that was originally about death, and turns it into a Diamond-esque celebration of life. The original poem presents a conversation involving a young man who turns to to an elder for guidance. Not only is the old man gives the typical responses one would expect from a picture of a wise old man given the chance to guide a younger man, while completely ignoring the impertinence of the young man who calls him “old” and bluntly points out all the negative aspects of his age. The second to last stanza seems rather particularly rude:

“You are old, Father William,” the young man cried,
 “And Life must be hastening away;
 “You are cheerful, and love to converse upon death,
 Now tell me the reason I pray” (qtd. in De La Mare
 31)

While Carroll and MacDonald have associated humor and death throughout the works here discussed, in this poem, the combining of the two is anything but funny or refreshing. It may be solemn, or it might be considered morbid and moralistic. Instead of turning a serious poem about how to live into a comic poem about death, Carroll’s treatment of this particular poem takes a serious poem about how to die and turns it into a comic poem about how to live. Southey’s Father William lives the type of life that causes him to look forward to a reward after death, but Carroll’s gets what he can out of life by doing nonsensical things. He stands on his head, does somersaults, balances eels on his nose, and eats geese whole. His answers are as nonsensical as the young man’s questions, and in the final stanza he gives the answer that Southey’s poem needed:

“I have answered three questions, and that is enough,”
 Said his Father. “Don’t give yourself airs!
 Do you think I can listen all day to such stuff?
 Be off, or I’ll kick you down-stairs!” (Carroll 45)

This Father William, like Diamond, enjoys life and nonsense in the face of death.

Ultimately, one of the themes of both *At the Back of the North Wind* and the Alice books is death. While both deal with it differently, death is connected with nonsense in a manner that removes the fear and terror. MacDonald’s poetry suggests that an understanding of our own mortality is what gives us the ability to enjoy nonsense, while Carroll rejects all sentimentality. For Carroll, death itself is a part of the joke: death, and the hushed respect that it is treated with in poems such as “The Old Man’s Comforts,” are part of what he asks his readers to laugh at.

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