George MacDonald, so far as the meaning of his fairy tales goes, prefers the mysterious to the overt. He says that the fairy tale has nothing to do with allegory, that it works musically and impressionistically, like a sonata, and can have as many meanings as there are readers. “Let fairytale of mine go for a firefly that now flashes, now is dark, but may flash again” (Dish 321). But if one can show there is a meaning in a story rather than reduce the story to it, the procedure of finding meanings may be justifiable. As a lover of Bunyan’s work, MacDonald can hardly be seen as antipathetic to allegory. Neither is he always as obscure or indefinite as his theory suggests. “The Castle: A Parable” (Adela Cathcart 1864) is quite clearly a Spenserian symbol of the mind, here usurped by fancy but finally re-dedicated to the holy imagination. His children’s fantasies, At the Back of the North Wind and the Princess books, seem more available to ordinary understanding and interpretation than, say, Phantastes. They are rather ultimately than immediately mysterious. The Wise Woman is largely a fable of active spiritual conscience, and shorter children’s fairy tales, such as “The Light Princess,” “Little Daylight,” “The Giant’s Heart” or “The Carasoyn” offer no obvious difficulty to understanding—indeed their constant wit and fairy-tale patterning seem to invite it.

Despite the seemingly baffling character of its imagery, “The Golden Key” is not beyond broad understanding. Its story line is clear, involving a journey across a wooded and then a rocky landscape towards a goal, “the country whence the shadows fall.” The children who start the quest become grey-haired adults who have passed through life. At the level of journeying the story is a Pilgrimage of the Life of Man, through this world to the next, belonging to an age-old tradition that takes in such writers as Langland, Deguillville, the unknown author of Everyman, Spenser and Bunyan. The two children, prepared and directed by a strange lady as they arrive in Fairyland, and sent through a darkening world in which they grow older and are then separated, are like Bunyan’s Christian being instructed at Interpreter’s House, journeying with and then being separated from Faithful (who goes a nearer way to heaven) and then travelling a difficult course to the Celestial City. MacDonald, consciously or unconsciously, has organised his material so that we know the heart of what is going on.
What I want to show here is that MacDonald has organised it, or made it clear, in other areas too—that in writing the story he included a golden key for its interpretation. In my earlier comments on the tale I have stopped at the mysteries as most commentators do. Closer examination has revealed a story very closely crafted and patterned, one whose symbols may be explained through its literary sources.

One of the problems for readers of the tale has been the different treatments of the children Mossy and Tangled. After sharing the journey with the boy Mossy, the girl Tangle appears to have to go by a longer and more painful route to complete it. So far there has seemed no reason for the privileging of Mossy. Robert Lee Wolff’s claim, that it is because he has the key, which Wolff equates [end of page 33] to the phallus, only heightens the issue of seeming sexual prejudice—which comes down to “MacDonald is saying that woman’s lot is suffering” (147). Replying to this, Cynthia Marshall argues that the tale is governed by the parable of the vineyard (Matt. 20, 1-16), whereby “the last shall be first and the first shall be last”; Tangle, not Mossy, is the chosen one. Tangle, Marshall argues, achieves the underground visions denied to Mossy: “visions that might be understood as the goal and purpose of the story.” (107). The rather strained character of this very interesting reading is a measure of the problems raised by the tale.

However, it has not been sufficiently observed, except by Kirstin Jeffrey,¹ that early in the story there is a whole series of quasi-moral contrasts made between the two children. We learn that Mossy lives with his great aunt, listens to stories and reads books, that his father before him found the golden key at the end of the rainbow in Fairyland, and that Mossy is so “keen-sighted” that, helped by the evening sun piercing the wood, he sees the rainbow, of which only the foot is visible, and runs off to reach it. Later he is able to see The Old Man of the Sea in his true form, as Tangle cannot. Tangle, by contrast, is reared by careless domestics in an untidy house, while her father is frequently away; and her guardians seem to know nothing of Fairyland (Jeffrey 73-74). Her reading, such as it is, is slow and undirected by any adult, and leaves her a random prey to her imagination (symbolised in the fairies’ images). Unlike Mossy, she has no motive for gazing at the forest, for nobody has told her of the golden key. She simply lies one evening contentedly gazing in its direction through a window obscured by ivy and other creeping plants; she is driven out of the house by lines exasperated by its disorder, and happens to run in the direction of the wood.

In the forest, Mossy is expected; the trees and bushes make way for
him. Tangle is trapped by a tree dropping its branches around her, and has to be magically released. When Tangle is taken to the cottage in the wood, the lady there asks her name and age and has her cleaned, tidied and dressed in new clothes. Then she gives her a strange fish to eat whose flesh makes her able to understand the language of the forest animals and insects, and makes her wait a day for the arrival of Mossy. When Mossy arrives, the lady addresses him by name, and when she sees he has the golden key from the end of the rainbow, serves him and tells him he must go on to find the keyhole for the key. No instruction, no corrective bath and no delay for him; and Tangle is told she should go with him on his journey. Both children, we were earlier told, live by the forest that fringes Fairyland, but it comes “close up to [Mossy’s] great aunt’s garden, and, indeed, sent some straggling trees into it.” If Fairyland is equivalent to the imagination, of which the rainbow may also be a symbol, then Mossy is more at home in it than Tangle. Indeed another and lower aspect of the imagination, the tangled worldly consciousness, may be said rather to have made its home in the chaotic and dirty house Tangle inhabits (Houses are commonly symbols of the mind in MacDonald’s work). Mossy leaves his home voluntarily, led by desire for the golden key: he goes out of his housed and conscious self into the wider imaginative unknown, whereas Tangle is more enclosed in herself and has to be driven out. We can venture a more formulaic opposition: Tangle begins in the human unconscious, whereas Mossy is poised on the verge of the divine imagination. And because Tangle is more involved (entangled) with this world, her journey towards Mossy’s goal must be less self-chosen, and more indirect. In fact, after death she must travel through the elements that make up the world: throughout the latter part of the story she goes through a mountain and into the bowls of the earth. Only by going further down into the mutable elements, from air (and æranth) down to water, earth and then fire, becoming more and more enclosed, can Tangle in the end travel upwards, to rise through the floor of the mystic chamber in the mountain, ready for the freedom of heaven. In parallel with that inverted journey, three successively older elemental powers are perceived as younger till the Old Man of the Fire matches the image of the child Christ; who weaves the patterns of the universe as the child plays endlessly with the strange balls. (Fire too, consuming fire, is used by MacDonald as a symbol of God and Christ. Looking back at “the marvellous Child” when she leaves him, Tangle sees him standing “alone in the midst of the glowing desert, beside a fountain of red flame that had burst forth at his feet.”) And in further reversal—of the image of the serpent that had
rebelled against God and seeks to drawn humans away from Him—a serpent leads Tangle back towards Him. In John 3.14, Christ himself is spoken of as a serpent⁴ When Tangle reaches the child, she reaches a point where her experience becomes sacred, and her journey out of the world changes to a journey towards heaven.

But we are to see the story not only as a pilgrimage through this world towards heaven, but also a journey inwards into the imagination⁵ to find its divine source. Entry into Fairyland or another world is a constant image in MacDonald’s work for going into the imagination, as in Phantastes, Lilith, and other short fairy tales such as “The Giant’s Heart,” “The Carasoyn” or “Cross Purposes.” The whole journey is a search for a source, “the country whence the shadows fall,” for a world that has sent its tokens even to the outer margins of the mind, the forest that rims Fairyland. As MacDonald puts it:

To give us the spiritual gift we desire, God may have to begin far back in our spirit in regions unknown to us, and do much work that we can be aware of only in the results; for our consciousness is to the extent of our being but as the flame of the volcano to the world-gulf whence it issues: in the gulf of our unknown being God works behind our consciousness (Unspoken. 255).⁶

In their different ways Mossy and Tangle traverse a landscape as much mental as physical, and they journey not only out from this world to a better one, but at the same time penetrate ever further inwards, to end inside the rainbow and the world to which it leads.

MacDonald also warns that:

If the dark portion of our being were the origin of our imaginations, we might well fear the apparition of such monsters as would be generated in the sickness of a decay which could never feel—only declare—a slow return towards primeval chaos. But the Maker is our Light (Dish 25).

This recalls the monstrous shapes—apes, carved heads, spider-legged chairs—with which the fairies try and fail to dislodge Tangle from her home. Tangle does [35] not respond to them, because such things do not inhabit her mind; but the approach of the Three Bears, of which she has just been reading in the fairy story, puts her to flight at once. In this way the condition of Tangle’s imagination is precisely analysed: though her mind is not open to the monstrous, and contains no tincture of the dark unconscious, it is still confused and subject to delusion. When Mossy arrives in Fairyland the trees and bushes there make way for him, as they do not for Tangle, for his imagination is at first
more pure, hers more tangled and obstructed (as by the ivy across her bedroom window). In this way one common puzzling aspect of the tale at least may be resolved, namely the different treatments of the two children. The fact that it is the girl rather than the boy who is chosen to have a harder time of it will still be a problem to some. To this one can only point out that Tangle is thereby given far more attention than Mossy, and seems rather more human. If it is argued that MacDonald would have high-lit all these points of contrast between the children more than he has, and not left them latent, it may be replied that that is precisely the point, for he wants his readers to acquire some of Mossy’s penetrating insight for themselves.

Now we should consider other baffling aspects of the tale, most of which involve its strange images—the Old Men of the Sea, Earth and Fire, the golden key, the rainbow, the landscape, the bizarre creatures, the journey itself. The Old Men come directly from *Odyssey IV*, where Menelaus meets the Old Man of the Sea, Proteus. He has to hold fast to Proteus as he changes shape, until tiring, he reveals himself in his true form and tells Menelaus the very roundabout route to follow on his journey home. When Tangle meets the Old Man of the Sea she cannot see him in his true form as “a strong kingly man of middle age” until he has passed her into the afterlife through his bath. Therefore she has painfully to follow a purgatorial descent via two further protean Old Men in forms still more discrepant with their names, until she arrives at the paradox of the infant who is the Oldest Man of all and a fire that is not of hell but of heaven. Like that of Menelaus, Tangle’s whole journey has been roundabout. But Mossy, who can immediately pierce through the Old Man of the Sea’s appearance to his different reality, is shown by him his way to reach “the country whence the shadows fall” without demur. Indeed, at the end, when Tangle meets him again, he looks to her like all three of the Old Men as well as himself, his nature contains them without his having to meet them all. He has become protean without losing himself.

What is the golden key? MacDonald had already written about a key at the end of the rainbow in his poem “The Golden Key”; there, however, it is found by a boy not in the world but in the love of his mother. He could have got it from the key that Mephistopheles gives the hero in Goethe’s *Faust II* before his descent to the Mothers in the abyss to steal the sacred tripod that will bring the gods to earth (Wolff, 145). But, so far as its application here is concerned, he seems more immediately to have been thinking of the Bible, where in the Gospels Christ says to Peter: thou art Peter; And upon this rock I will build my
church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 16.18-19). Mossy is so named because of his habit of sitting on a moss-covered stone. In the Bible, the rock is Peter’s faith, here as his early perception of Christ in his appearance as man. Peter is also given a divine vision of the cleanness of all creatures before God (Acts 10.11-33), and Mossy is given a vision of the people ascending to heaven in the rainbow. Peter is the only disciple to have walked on the water of the Sea of Galilee following Christ’s example (Matt. 14.24-33). When Mossy leaves the Old Man of the Sea he walks across the ocean, though unlike Peter he does not lose his faith during the wind and storm. It is quite possible that we are to see Mossy having more faith than Tangle, for he sees the rainbow’s end and the beautiful people ascending inside it, and he sees the true form of the Old Man of the Sea as Tangle does not. His faith in the unseen takes him by the nearer way to heaven. Meanwhile, so that she may enter heaven like Mossy, Tangle’s faith is being developed, as when she obeys the Old Man of the Earth’s direction to throw herself down a deep hole if she would find the Old Man of the Fire.

The key, then, represents faith and the promise of heaven. It is both the birthright that Mossy, like Esau (Gen. 25.33), once thought to sell, and the pearl of great price the merchant sold all he had to buy (Matt. 13.45-46). The rock may also be Christ himself, who is described as sustaining the Israelites in their exodus through a stony land: “They drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ” (I Cor. 10.4.) Most of Mossy’s and Tangle’s journey is over and through tunnels in a rock landscape, and at the end there are striking images of Tangle’s way through the rocky Earth, led by a serpent, and of Mossy’s entering a mountain by a series of slabs that consecutively fall to make a stairway into it. In this sense Mossy’s and Tangle’s journeys can together be seen as penetrating into the nature of Christ, until they find the rainbow ascent to heaven within a final cavern of stone. Throughout their direction is eastwards, towards the New Jerusalem and the sunrise of resurrection and eternity.

As for the rainbow, as God’s pledge to man to send no more floods (Gen. 9. 9-17), it is first a symbol of promise, here the promise of heaven, particularly as it contains people ascending towards that place: As Mossy just glimpses the rainbow from his cottage home near Fairyland it is possibly also an image of the many-coloured world through which we glimpse eternity. Like the world it overarches, it surrounds the story, one foot at the beginning, where Mossy finds the key, the other at the end, where he finds the lock in. the column of unknown colour.
Powerful colour images suggest this world—the air-fish “with feathers of all colours” that rescues Tangle from the tree, green and white in the lady’s world, the many-coloured sparks thrown off by the aeranth to guide Tangle through a tunnel, the “yellow gold and white silver and red copper trickling molten from the rocks” in the realm of the Old Man of the Fire. The last, when found, is playing with balls “of various sizes and colours” in the sequences of which there is meaning beyond Tangle’s understanding. Here perhaps we pass beyond the colours of mortality to the sacramental truths their patterns embody. Here, with her life over, Tangle at last realises that:

Everything she had seen, or learned from books; all that her grandmother had said or sung to her; all the talk of the beasts, birds and fishes; all that had happened to her on [37] her journey with Mossy, and since then in the heart of the earth with the old man and the older man—all was plain: she understood it all, and saw that everything meant the same thing, though she could not have put it into words again (139).

The stairway inside the eighth, strange-coloured column of the rainbow up which Mossy and Tangle finally ascend—“Stairs beside stairs wound up together and beautiful beings of all ages climbed along with them”—is a partial image of Jacob’s ladder, with redeemed souls ascending: “And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it” (Gen. 28.12). MacDonald had a passion for stairs, seeing life itself as an ascent of a stairway; he spoke of “our own secret stair up to the wider vision” (Greville M. 452). Also suggested here is the Song of Songs, with its picture of desire for the beloved, who is also God, “in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the stairs” (2.14).

“The Golden Key” like most of MacDonald’s work, is concerned with spiritual evolution. In a way this explains why rather more attention is given to Tangle than to Mossy, who is more of a yardstick, and whose way is relatively uncomplicated. But MacDonald felt that the whole of creation was caught up in a process of spiritual Darwinism, and that:

If I have myself gone through each of the typical forms of lower life on my way to the human—a supposition by antenatal history rendered probable—and therefore may have passed through any number of individual forms of life, I do not see why each of the lower animals should not as well pass upward through a succession of bettering embodiments. (Hope 200-0 l).11
MacDonald seems to regard the entire animal creation as in a continuous state of ascent towards and even beyond man. Therefore “The Golden Key” has other creatures than man caught up in the great spiritual current, often at levels the reader does not know—here the strange fish that crowd to the Old Man of the Sea’s submarine window to be taken out and sent to his daughter the lady of the forest, there to turn into bird-fish and then hope to be chosen to be boiled and eaten, so that they may evolve into äeranths. In Fairyland, evolution is not always according to single species, the soul being considered often too multiform and unsymmetrical in development for any one animal shape to represent it. Thus we have the fish with feathers and the heads of small owls, or the äeranth that is a little human form with large white wings, alongside an evolving, if morally mixed, animal kingdom of squirrels, bees and moles. For MacDonald: “If we believe in the progress of creation as hitherto manifested, also in the marvellous changes of form that take place in every individual of certain classes, why should there be any difficulty in hoping that old lives may appear in new forms?” (Hope 202).

The journey itself in the story is also suggestive, particularly in the already-noticed likeness to Bunyan’s The Pilgrim’s Progress, which occurs also at the level of specifics. Characters of different spiritual dispositions such as Mossy and Tangle may meet on the same way, as do Christian and Faithful. We may see the forest as analogous to the wide field over which Christian runs towards the Wicket Gate and the shining light as parallel to the “glimmer” Mossy sees. Then the tree that captures Tangle is a version of the Slough of Despond that entraps [38] Christian, and Tangle is made dirty from weeping there; while the air-fish that comes to free her is like Help who comes to help out Christian. The lady in the wood’s cottage doubles as the Wicket Gate and Interpreter’s House: both children are led there and told what they must do. Further, both are first given their names there: previously they were just “the boy” and “the girl,” just as Christian was only “The Man” until he left the City of Destruction. That is, they are for the first time truly selves. At the same time “the lady” gradually also becomes “Grandmother,” “the grandmother,” and then “her [Tangle’s] grandmother”: Tangle is more truly related to her than to her mortal family. Thereafter, as in Bunyan, the way is hard, and hard to keep to.

But here there is a difference too, for the obstacles to progress in “The Golden Key” are much more geographical than social. Christian keeps meeting personages who try to stop, detain or divert him from his onward path, whereas Mossy and Tangle pass over often difficult terrain, from precipices to tunnels, and from abysses to plunge down to an angry ocean to cross. Theirs
is much more a solitary and mystical journey than a moral one, and we never see either of them exposed to temptation. Bunyan’s Christian suffers continual spiritual strain and in every episode is under threat of losing everything, but desire alone conditions the inner lives of Mossy and Tangle. They are constantly looked after so that they may reach their goal. The essentially enclosed nature of their experience seems summed up at the end of their quest, inside a locked column within a locked mountain.

It seems now clear enough that while MacDonald looked to a mysterious working of his story at an unconscious level in the reader’s mind, he has himself organised it in such a way that, for those of a more intellectual cast who wish it, his mysteries need not remain closed to the understanding. Which is to say that while I believe that what I have described is indeed present in the story, it is not to be taken as the way the story works for all readers, or indeed the way it is primarily intended to work by its author. Presumably we should be grateful that the childlike reader MacDonald sought is unlikely to be found turning the pages of academic journals.

Works Cited
Notes

1. Jeffrey notices that Mossy has more prior knowledge of Fairyland, and association with it, than Tangle, and that he chooses to go while she is driven there. But this, Jeffrey argues, does not distinguish the children, it only means that “their paths had to differ, for each began at a different spot. The point of departure [...] not gender, decides the pattern” (65). I think there is rather more significant difference between the two than this, and that it emerges from consideration of more of the details, reading them symbolically rather than literally, and noticing their continual reference to mind and perception.

2. The contrast is heightened by the framing presence of two precipices, both with entrances halfway up, the one climbed by Tangle before she meets the Old Man of the Sea, and the other ascended by Mossy at the end of his journey.

3. Hein (268-9) points out that the first collection of MacDonald’s Unspoken Sermons, which came out in the same year as “The Golden Key,” contains the sermons “The Child in the Midst” and “The Consuming Fire,” likening God to both child and fire.

4. The image of the serpent that tunnels through the rock to lead Tangle out may well come from Goethe’s Märchen (1795) where the Green Snake goes outward from the cavern of the kings through the rock. MacDonald also seems to have used the images of snake and cavern in “The Light Princess,” though there as forces for evil. As for the egg from which the snake is hatched, MacDonald may be reusing the image of the rainbow’s egg used earlier by Mossy.

5. Mendelson (39 and n. 13) also makes this point about the imagination.

6. In much of MacDonald’s fantasy the story takes place during sleep or dream, or in a fairyland, all of which symbolise the imagination, the depths of which are found full of divine activity.

7. MacDonald derives this three-in-one image from the end of Charles Kingsley’s The Water-Babies (1863) where the three great fairies of the world, Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid, Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby and Mother Carey appear before Tom and Ellie in one mutating presence which finally blazes into its true identity. The scene of Mossy’s arrival after Tangle’s long wait for him is also very like that between Tom and Ellie. And there are other likenesses to The Water-Babies: Tom throwing himself down the hole in the sea floor to get to the Other-end-of-nowhere; Mother Carey sitting gazing into Peacepool “making things make themselves.” Much of this adds weight to the view of the three Old Men as variously concerned with governing this world. MacDonald uses The Water-Babies elsewhere in his work, particularly in At the Back of the North Wind, serialised in 1868-69.

8. When John Docherty asked Roger Lancelyn Green, editor of The Light Princess and Other Tales (Gollancz: 1961), about the pre-1865 date for the story “The Golden Key” given in his introduction, he replied that this was an error: he had accidentally used the date of publication of “The Golden Key” poem.

9. MacDonald may also be remembering Peter in Milton’s Lycidas (110-111):
“Two massy keys he bore, of metals twain, / (The golden opes, the iron shuts amain).” Anderson (87) cites *Comus,* (12-14): “Yet some there be that by due steps aspire / To lay their just hands on that golden key / That opes the palace of eternity”; though her argument that *Comus* was the pattern for “The Golden Key” is less persuasive.

10. In MacDonald’s essay “The Imagination: Its Functions and its Culture,” first published in 1867, he comments on Shelley’s image in *Adonais* of life as a transient “dome of many-coloured glass” beside eternity, and he may be recalling that image here.

11. This concept of evolution is of course seen throughout MacDonald’s fantasy, often accompanied by its opposite: spiritual devolution. Anderson (94-95) sees it as one of several features in the story indebted to Milton’s *Comus.*

12. The tree may also have been suggested by the emblem of the lustful man shut in an iron cage in Interpreter’s House in Bunyan.

13. For another account of MacDonald’s use of Bunyan, bringing in Part 2 of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* see Jeffrey. [41]