

The Ultimate Rite of Passage: Death and Beyond in “The Golden Key” and *At the Back of the North Wind*

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They thought he was dead. I knew that he had gone to the back of the north wind.

Introuduction

“Once upon a time” and “they lived happily ever after” explicitly or implicitly frame a fairy tale and as such signal to readers that they are entering a world that is “rarely precisely fixed in time or space” (Harries 104). The Janus-faced fairy tale promises to tell of events that not only happened in the distant past but also to project into the infinite future. In reality, the passage of time, of course, leads inexorably towards death, but this is rarely mentioned in a traditional fairy tale; the majority of stories end when the goal is attained, the prize is won, the princess is wed. Where death *is* mentioned it is usually as a judgement for wrong-doing: when Bluebeard is killed by his wife’s brothers for his homicidal tendencies, when the Black Brothers in Ruskin’s “The King of the Golden River” (1850) are turned to stone for their avarice, when the cannibalistic old witch is lured into the oven by Gretel and burned to death, or when Snow White’s stepmother is forced to put on red-hot slippers and dance until she falls down dead. Occasionally, the good die and these are invariably “happy deaths,” which explicitly tell of the end to earthly suffering, the glory of God and the joy of heaven. Such fairy tales were much favoured by Hans Christian Andersen, as in “The Little Match Girl,” which tells of her wretched existence on earth and ends in her freezing to death—but with a smile on her lips because she is, the reader is assured, now with God and free from cold, hunger, and pain.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, however, the existence of a (non-fairyland) life after death was being questioned by many, resulting in some of the more religious writers attempting to rekindle the “hope, optimism and faith” that was being undermined by “uncertainty, agnosticism and doubt” (Davies 37). In this article I want to look at how MacDonald took advantage of the characteristics of the fairy tale in order to show that death is not an end to a better life, but rather the gateway to it, and to re-establish faith

in the existence of an afterlife, without, however, imbuing the tales with the blatant Christian messages that can so often be found in the tales of Andersen and the Grimm brothers. I will begin by explaining briefly the reason for the Victorians' crisis of faith and their fears about death. I will then suggest why I consider that the fairy-tale genre was chosen by MacDonald as a means of addressing death and immortality. Finally, I will analyse MacDonald's "The Golden Key" and *At the Back of the North Wind*, two of his most encouraging and inspiring texts, both of which offer the promise of a life after death to the disenchanted and doubting reader.

The Crisis of Faith

At the time when "The Golden Key" (1867) and *North Wind* (1871) were written, death was very much part of everyone's life, both young and old, and was one of the nineteenth century's major preoccupations. In the earlier part of the century the majority of Christians had no doubt that the sinful would "go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal" (Matthew 26:46). The certitude of a life after death was felt with less and less confidence, however, resulting in the increased popularity of spiritualism during the second half of the century. For some people faith was no longer enough, they now sought *proof* of an afterlife; they wanted actually to communicate with the departed souls, to be reassured that they, too, would continue in spirit after death and that they would ultimately be reunited with their loved ones. Despite growing reservations, however, even the poorest families continued to give the deceased a "good send off"; the outward signs of mourning—the elaborate funerals and the construction of enormous mausoleums (for those that could afford it)—concealed inner doubts that perhaps there was no life after death after all, and that for the dead, time did indeed stop.

In the seventeenth century, using the genealogy given in the Bible, Bishop Usher had pinpointed the date of the earth's creation as being 4004 BC. The confidence and certainty that such specificity gave people was shattered by Charles Lyell (1797–1875), who asserted that the earth had *not* been created on this date, or anywhere close to it. It had, in fact, been in existence for millions of years and humankind had inhabited it for only a relatively short and insignificant time-span. To make matters worse, Charles Darwin (1809–1882), claimed that humanity, as a species, was not necessarily progressing towards perfection, but rather could conceivably be lurching towards extinction; consequently, people not only had to come to terms with

the sheer vastness of time passed but also the possibility of a limited time coming.

Linked with the pre-occupation with death was that also of time. Most people by now had access to a time-piece and could therefore measure the passing of time. Time was much more visible, with all the mechanical contraptions necessary to plot its passing, but also, with the introduction of piecework, people's livelihood very often depended on their productivity within a time period—so originated the phrase “time is money,” as the Victorians indeed “felt the menace of time almost as much as the promise” (Buckley 70). Time, however, is not a simple concept and its definition has intrigued philosophers throughout the ages. One of the reasons why MacDonald, and many other Victorian writers, chose to write in the fairy-tale genre is because of its temporal possibilities.

Why Fairy Tales?

Despite the prevalent “crisis of faith” MacDonald maintained his religious beliefs throughout his life and used his writings as his pulpit, in order to assuage his readers' doubts with his own convictions. That he recognised the fear in people's hearts and their uncertainty about their future is clear:

The terror has returned and grows, lest there should be no Unseen Power, as his fathers believed, and his mother taught him, filling all things and *meaning* all things,—no Power with whom, in his last extremity, awaits him a final refuge. (*Orts* 60)

His fairy tales, in particular, reveal his own certitude in an afterlife and are written in an attempt to hearten his readers, both adult and child, offering them the hope of eventual salvation and a continuation of a life after death. He could indeed have followed the example of some of his predecessors and written realistic children's stories in which bad boys and girls died horrible deaths and the good, if they died, died well, but he chose, instead, the genre of the fairy tale for its temporal potentiality, its ritualism, its lack of historical context, and its magical possibilities.

Raymond Williams points out that every generation is dissatisfied with its own era and looks back longingly to an earlier, “happier” time. The Victorians, suffering as they did from profound anxiety in an ever-changing, uncertain world, continued with a tendency started during the Renaissance, to look back to the Middle Ages as a time of religious and social conviction. The traditional fairy tale, with its “once upon a time,” its references to castles and humble cottages, Kings and Queens, peasants and witches, Princes on

horses, and Princesses a-spinning, provides a connection to these “happier” times and, regardless of the plot of the fairy tale, satisfies a nostalgic yearning in the adult reader. Reading a fairy tale is like a universal recalling of an old memory: as Zipes points out, “the most telling or catchy tales were reprinted and reproduced in multiple forms and entered into cultural discursive practices in diverse ways so that they became almost ‘mythicized’ as natural stories, as second nature” (1). One of the reasons, therefore, that MacDonald, Jean Ingelow, Anne Thackeray, Mary de Morgan, and many others chose to write fairy tales was to lure the reader with promises of the happier past in order to confront the feared future. Despite the fairy tale being set in the supposed past, however, they are not actually being presented as historic tales. Instead, because they have no date assigned to them and no historic event or person is ever mentioned, this means that they *cannot* be placed in a specific period of time; they are, in fact, ahistoric. This is not a fairy tale’s only “timely” attribute, however; the writer is also, as MacDonald himself says, able to “invent a little world of his own, with its own laws” (“Fantastic Imagination” 6), one of these laws being that of temporality.

One of the reasons that the attribute of time is so useful to a fairy-tale writer is that there are so many types of time. First of all, as we all will have experienced, time has a subjective dimension, which distorts it and makes it personal. On the same day, in the same place, time seems to pass at variable rates: it passes too slowly for one person and too quickly for another. This different rate of time passing is a characteristic utilised by many fairy-tale writers; time for the protagonist in fairyland often passes far quicker than the time in the “real” world, so that what is perhaps a life-time within the fantasy world is merely the passing of seconds, hours or days in the “real” world. In addition, in fairyland time can actually pass at different rates and can even stop for some people, whilst continuing for others. When *Sleeping Beauty*, for instance, and all the inhabitants in the castle awake from their one-hundred year sleep, none of them has aged one iota; as far as they are concerned, there has been no lapse in time and the hand transfixed for a century continues its swing to box an ear, and the word half spoken is completed. For these people their own personal time, as opposed to the public/historic time outside of the walls of the castle, has stood still because nothing has changed and time has been held in abeyance until the spell was broken.

As well as time travelling at different rates, it also travels in different directions: linear and cyclic. Linear time travels along a straight axis from point to point, from the past (viewed with one’s memory) to the future

(viewed with vision). Within the concept of linear time, life starts with birth and ends with death. On the other hand, there is cyclic time, which is often associated with the natural world: birth, growth, decline and death followed by rebirth, and so on. If one considers human life to be part of cyclic time, then there is no beginning and no end, just an endless cycle in which death is merely a part and there is indeed life after death.

One final differentiation of time, which is especially important to this article, is that of liminal time. This is the time experienced outside of real time, during a time of transition from “one state of being to another or from one category of time to another” (Nuzum 210). It is the time of dreams and fantasy worlds and when someone, like Diamond, Mossy or Tangle, crosses the boundary from the real world into fairyland, they move from real time to liminal time. Of equal importance to this article, however, is the relevance of liminal time to death. Liminal time can either be considered to be the period between the fixed state of life and the fixed state of death (the period of the dying process, in other words) or the transition period from the “deathbed to the ‘bed’ that is the ‘grave’ being, therefore, the ‘intermediate state’ between the moment of death and the last judgement” (Wheeler 70).

In “The Golden Key” and *North Wind*, MacDonald utilises the multiple attributes of time—public and personal, linear and cyclic, real and luminal—but another reason, I argue, that MacDonald chose to write in the fairy-tale genre in order to explore the greatest predicament ever, is its inherent magic and symbolism. It is easier, I suggest, for a writer to use fantasy to explain the unexplainable, and symbols to represent a reality for which there are no words. MacDonald famously asserts that his aim is “not so much to convey a meaning as to wake a meaning” (“Fantastic Imagination” 7) and it is clear that in these two texts MacDonald is reassuring the discerning reader that death is a part of life rather than an end to it, and that there is hope of immortality, not only in the magical fairyland, but also in the real world.

The Journey to the Land from Whence the Shadows Fall

I consider that the title of the story, “The Golden Key,” offers an explanation to the meaning of the short story:¹ it refers to Jesus’s promise that he will give to us “the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 16:19), the door to it being death. Like his *Princess* books, the religious symbolism that underpins this story is multivalent; new meanings can be found at every reading. The rainbow, of course, is an important element, for it is a rainbow which initially lures Mossy into the forest, tempted as he is by stories of the

golden key that can be found at its end. This is no ordinary rainbow, however, for it has supernatural characteristics: it is not dependent upon the sun for its light but rather glows even brighter when the sun sets, and, in addition, “before the red stood a colour more gorgeous and mysterious still. It was a colour he had never seen before” (121). That this rainbow has religious connotations is further emphasised by the description of the forest as the sun is setting, with its tree trunks standing like red columns in the aisles of a cathedral; this surely is representative of the seventh angel: “a rainbow was upon his head, and his face was as it were the sun, and his feet as pillars of fire” (Revelations 10:1). The rainbow is revealed at the beginning (alpha) of the story—to lead the way to the golden key—and then at the end (omega) of the story—as the means to reach the final destination: “Jesus saith unto them, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (St. John 14:16).

There are symbols and images throughout the story that evoke thoughts of death: multiple references to the east, for instance, towards which the dead are traditionally buried so that on the day of resurrection they will arise facing the light: the forest, with its beckoning rainbow, lies to the east; Tangle and Mossy set off eastward in search of the key-hole; and Mossy stands with the Old Man of the Sea looking towards the east, where stands the foot of the rainbow. Baths similarly abound: in many cultures the deceased’s body is cleansed before going onto the next part of the journey. MacDonald’s use of numeric symbolism similarly emphasises the spiritual journey taking place: in this story he uses the number seven particularly, which has great religious significance, representing as it does spiritual completeness. Tangle, for instance, feels so rejuvenated from her bath at the Old Man of the Sea’s that after an hour she feels as if she has slept for seven days, and she stands watching the Old Man of the Fire for what seems like seven hours, but is in fact seven years. As well as the seven colours of the rainbow, there are seven columns in the underground cavern where Tangle waits patiently for seven years for Mossy to arrive.

The numeric and visual symbolism of spiritual perfection is repeated in the recurring theme of renewal and cleansing, by both water and fire. MacDonald gives great emphasis to the baths both Tangle and Mossy have: on Tangle’s arrival, the grandmother immerses her in a tank full of water and instructs the fish to cleanse her with their feathers; the Old Man of the Sea insists that both Mossy and Tangle must lie in a bath, after which Tangle feels “whole, and strong” (138); and Mossy gets out of his bath free from aches

and is no longer grey or wrinkled—he has been rejuvenated. Tangle is told to throw herself into the river that flows to the Old Man of the Fire, and although she feels as though the heat is scorching her to the bone, it does not sap her strength. After meeting the Old Man of the Fire, he touches her and she can then walk through the molten rocks without being affected, reminiscent of the purging fire into which the old Princess tells Curdie to thrust his hands, or of the burning bush that was revealed to Moses and was not consumed, or, indeed, of the Holy Spirit itself. God, according to MacDonald, is a “consuming fire,” but not one that physically consumes the flesh but rather one that consumes evil leaving purity; for “the consuming fire is . . . that which makes pure, that which is indeed Love, the creative energy of God” (*Unspoken Sermons* 30). One final symbol of spiritual regeneration is the serpent that the Old Man of the Fire tells Tangle to follow—in this story the serpent does not represent the more traditional connotation of deceit, but rather the ancient meaning of renewal, due to the shedding of its skin and the growing of a new one.

These acts of rejuvenation result in Tangle eventually growing as beautiful as the grandmother, who is as beautiful as she is *because* she is thousands of years old, and when Mossy is finally reunited with her, Tangle sees in him the Old Man of the Sea (the youngest but looks like an old man) *and* the Old Man of the Earth (older but looks like a youth) *and* the Old Man of the Fire (the oldest but looks like a child) *and* the boy/man she lost. By this point of their journey they recognise each other by the spiritual rather than the physical; indeed, since they met with the grandmother their earthly corporality has become less and less relevant: they can understand the language of the animals. After being in the Old Man of the Sea’s bath, their eyes emit enough light to see by; Mossy can walk Christ-like on water; Tangle hears the Old Man of the Earth, though not with her ears; she lives without breathing; and she does not burn in the intense heat in the domain of the Old Man of the Fire. Ultimately, they join the ethereal spirits inside the rainbow and proceed to the country of shadows; shadows, of course, having no substance whatever.

Although there is little doubt that the story is about death and the afterlife, it is not obvious when death actually occurs either for Mossy or Tangle. I consider that Mossy dies the night he first sleeps (a common euphemism for death) on a “mossy bed” (his grave) in the forest, and wakes the next morning to find the golden key just close by. It is only having found the key that Mossy crosses the boundary from linear to liminal time, for when he arrives at the grandmother’s hut, although he has no memory of this interim

time, he has in fact grown so much his clothes no longer fit him. The fact that Mossy continues to grow after his death shows that death is not the end, but just part of a continual process. Mossy's physical growth reflects his spiritual development towards perfection. Liminal time in "The Golden Key," then, is not just the magical time of fairyland, but also the time between death and the final destination of the "country whence the shadows fall" (138). Tangle, on the other hand, was a neglected and ill-used child and had been "put to bed early" (123), suggesting perhaps that she died young; she enters liminal time once she flees her (death)bed and runs into the forest, arriving at the grandmother's hut some three years later—reminiscent of Jesus's resurrection after three days. It is equally feasible that the time until Tangle reaches the hut is the dying process itself rather than post-mortem, and that actual death occurs once she reaches the grandmother's, for there she is dressed in "the finest linen garments" (126) (her shroud) and on the first night she sleeps in a "little arbour, cool and green, with a bed of purple heath growing in it" (128) (her grave). That both Mossy and Tangle sleep outside indicates that MacDonald considers death to be part of nature and God's earth is as sanctified as the dank, dark mausoleums favoured by many Victorians.

There is a marked similarity between the descriptions of the grandmother and the North Wind, leading to the conclusion that both fey women have analogous roles; one of the North Wind's guises is that of Death itself. Both women, for instance, are reputedly thousands of years old and yet look young and beautiful: the North Wind, when she is in the form of a woman, is a "mighty beauty" (16) and similarly the grandmother is "tall and strong"; Tangle has "never seen anything so beautiful" (125). Despite their great age they both do the bidding of a baby: the North Wind has been told by the East Wind that everything "is all managed by a baby" (60) and Tangle actually meets the oldest and wisest man of all, the Old Man of the Fire, who has the body of a young child. Also, neither woman has knowledge of the land beyond themselves: the grandmother "can never remember the name of that country" (131), the valley of shadows—surely "the valley of the shadow of death" (Psalms 23:4)—and the North Wind, although she is the portal through which Diamond passes, can never know the land that is behind her own back. I am not suggesting that the grandmother is necessarily Death itself but, like another of the North Wind's roles, she acts as a guide for the children in that liminal world of the afterlife to direct them to their final destination. This role is further reinforced, I believe, by her facilitating the transformation of the rather bizarre feathered flying fish into the lovely winged aëranth; she chooses

only those who have proved their worth and she enables them to realise the highest end of one condition and to proceed to their next level of perfection.

In “The Golden Key” MacDonald uses time to great effect in order to try and explain how time is, in fact, meaningless in this fairyland, this afterlife. The chronology of the story, for example, is quite illogical and cannot have happened in the real world where linear time prevails. We are told, first of all, about Mossy and how, having found the key, he sees a glimmer of what he takes to be the rainbow and follows it. This, we find out later, is in fact one of the strange flying fish that the grandmother has sent to fetch him. We are then told about Tangle, who lives near where the boy *had* lived—implying that her story comes *after* that of Mossy. She, as we know, arrives at the grandmother’s some three years later and it is on her first night that the grandmother sends one of the shining fish to get Mossy—so what Mossy perceives to be the next day cannot possibly be so. He arrives at the hut, still clutching the key, as if he had only just found it, but such a time has passed that he has outgrown his clothes. For these events to have occurred as described by MacDonald, time must have passed at completely different rates for the two children and Mossy must in fact have slept for the three years it took for Tangle to reach the grandmother’s hut. Mossy must have either outgrown his clothes during this sleep—although we are not told this by MacDonald—or during the time it took to arrive at the grandmother’s hut, which to Tangle was but one night later. It is not necessary to get too concerned about the how and when of the story, the whole point being that time does not progress at the same rate in this liminal world and is largely irrelevant and meaningless; only personal time seems to exist and one individual’s experience of the passing of time is very different to another’s.

The only thing that is common to everyone passing through this land is the destination. Meyerhoff suggests that for a mystic such as MacDonald “perfect reality is invariably envisaged as being beyond and outside time; hence, the ideal life can be achieved only through a liberation from time” (31). As I have shown, this story does not have a definite starting point, and equally, does not have a neat ending: Tangle and Mossy are still on their journey and the reader can only assume that they will eventually reach the “country whence the shadows fall”; indeed, MacDonald suggests that “by this time” they must have got there—but by whose “this time”? As we know, linear time bears no relation to liminal time and one second in the “real” world can be one thousand years in this fairyland; in addition every reader’s “this time” will be different—for some it will have happened years and years ago, for some it

is happening now, and for others it has not yet happened. So, I suggest, “this time” can only be Tangle’s and Mossy’s time; they will get wherever they are going when it is their time, just as the flying fish must wait their time before moving on to the next level of perfection.

In the real world the progress of linear time leads to aging and the loss of beauty. In fairyland—the afterlife—where liminal time prevails, time does not affect the physical body in the same way. Indeed the grandmother deems her great beauty to be testimony to her great age and she certainly “has no time to grow old” (125). To begin with, the two children certainly seem to physically age in a linear fashion, although they do so at an astonishing rate: they initially have aged by three years or so in what is to them just a few hours, and on their journey through the valley of shadows Mossy’s hair is grey and Tangle’s face is wrinkled in just one day. However, when the two are reunited again after their separate journeys, they are “younger and better, and stronger and wiser, than they had ever been before” (143). This description is, I suggest, of great significance, and reinforces MacDonald’s hypothesis that life and death are but a journey towards spiritual perfection, with the physical reflecting the state of the spirit rather than the mark of time.

Each individual’s journey is unique and personal; some of the journey can be shared but some of it must be travelled alone. The route is different for each person and there are different obstacles, but ultimately the goal is the same: not the traditional fairy-tale goal of the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, but rather becoming part of the rainbow itself, becoming one of the “beautiful beings of all ages” (44) climbing to “the country whence the shadows fall.”² The journeys of Tangle and Mossy are very different once they have been separated, and Tangle’s is far more of an ordeal than Mossy’s. Wolff suggests that this is the case because she is a woman; having the golden key—the phallus—gives Mossy the advantage over her. I, however, consider it to reflect MacDonald’s belief that everyone is at a different stage on their journey to perfection; Mossy is merely further forward and has to undergo fewer trials and tribulations.

For MacDonald “narrative neither begins nor ends, life neither begins nor ends” (McGillis 32) and this relatively short story offers the hope to its readers that the experience of linear time in the real world is only one very small part of the whole. That yearned-for country *is* attainable, MacDonald promises, because death is not an end to life, but, as the Old Man of the Sea asserts, “only more life” (142). Although, as MacDonald’s *Princess* books illustrate in more detail, everyone is at a different point on their journey to

ultimate salvation, he shows in “The Golden Key” that loved ones will be reunited and will recognise each other. The shadows that entice the children may have lost their corporeality but they are still recognisable as “lovers that [pass] linked arm in arm, sometimes father and son, sometimes brothers in loving contest, sometimes sisters entwined in gracefulest community of complex form” (132). This retention of relationships was important to the Victorians for a common fear, even for Christians, was that “they will not know or be known by their beloved ones; that they may have no memory of the life and beauty of the world they have left” (Greville MacDonald 402). MacDonald retained the belief that loved ones will be reunited after death until the end of his life, providing comfort to himself and his wife at a time of personal tragedy. In a letter to his wife, dated October 18, 1891, just one month before the predicted death of his beloved daughter Lily, he reminds her that “we must remember that we are only in a sort of passing vision here, and that the real life lies beyond us . . . Life is waiting us” and if Lily should die “how much sooner” would he and his wife “find her again” (Greville MacDonald 524). If the new life after death had no reference to the old after all, then, according to MacDonald, it would indeed be an end rather than a continuation of life.³

This fairy tale describes not so much what happened “once upon a time” but, rather, promises that *everyone*, not just the imaginary characters in the story but the readers also, will live “happily ever after,” beyond death into the everlasting.

The Journey to the Back of the North Wind

Although the full-length *At the Back of the North Wind* is very different than the short story “The Golden Key”—for it is very obviously set in Victorian London and contains far more reality than magic—the central theme of both is the same: that death is not an end of time but merely a gateway to a different place where linear time has no bearing. Without the North Wind character, the story would be merely charming and Diamond’s death considered a happy one, according to the standards of the day; the fact that he has gone to a “better place” is predicated by the smile on his white lips. But MacDonald wants to offer his readers far more of a reassurance than their faith—or lack of it—may give and so he introduces the North Wind into the story and transforms a children’s realistic book into a magical fairy tale.

Diamond, and consequently the reader, does not discover that the North Wind has other names such as Bad Fortune, Evil Chance, Ruin, and one

that she will not utter for people think it is “the most dreadful of all” (334), until almost the end of the book, by which time Diamond, and the reader once again, has come to love and trust her. Death, MacDonald is at great pains to explain, is not to be feared, although Diamond has great difficulty reconciling the North Wind’s obvious gentleness and kindness with her apparent cruelty in sinking ships and causing people to drown. Not only has North Wind many names, but also many guises: she can be as small as a flower fairy or as large as a giant; she can be a young girl or an “old woman that sweeps the cobwebs from the sky” (43); she can be a huge wolf, a scuttling spider, a weasel, a cat, a leopard, a jaguar or a tiger; she can be a tiny puff of wind that gives life to a toy windmill or a gale that brings death to many at sea. These changes are not prompted by the passing of time but rather by circumstance and need.

Time in the real world is, of course, linear and passes at a normal rate; it is only when Diamond is at the back of the North Wind that time passes at a different pace, and he is only transported by North Wind at night, when liminal time reigns. As with all fairylands visited by real people, Diamond has to pass through a boundary between reality and fantasy—in this case the boundary is significantly the North Wind herself⁴—and similarly liminal time replaces linear time. During his first visit he believes he has stayed there for one hundred years, but in fact it is only seven days (the number seven again), the seven days of his near fatal illness, when he hovers on the brink of death. This is the liminal time whilst Diamond drifts between life and death, although in this instance Diamond does recover.

We are told that this country at the back of the North Wind has been reported by other visitors: once by an Italian poet, Durante, and once by a peasant girl through a poem told by a shepherd. The poet claims that it is always the month of May and the girl, who, like Mossy, fell asleep in a wood but found herself at the back of the North Wind, says that it is “a land of light, withouten sun, or moon, or night” (109), without, in fact, any means of telling the time. In this land, then, it is eternally spring, the time of rebirth, and “the people there are so free and so just and so healthy” (108). Although there is nothing with which to measure the passing of time, yet time does pass for Diamond and he “*used* to climb the tree *every* day” (113—my italics). For Diamond, as for Tangle and Mossy, therefore, there is no correlation between the measurement of time in the “real” world and this world between life and death; time appears to stand still as there is no cyclic change to the landscape to indicate the passing of time, and yet each day—and how this is defined is not evident—Diamond repeats an action. He feels as if he has been there for

one hundred years and yet there is no indication as to why he does; he has certainly not aged accordingly. In both “The Golden Key” and *North Wind*, MacDonald is endeavouring to explain that time outside of the real world is just not the same and cannot be measured or experienced in the same way; it is God’s time and as such follows God’s rules.

During Diamond’s first visit to the back of the North Wind it is obvious that this is not the final destination for him but is, in fact, but a picture of it, a foretaste, and that the “real country” (death) at North Wind’s back “is ever so much more beautiful” (334). Although it is “a very good place,” he feels anxious about his mother and longs to go home. People may “look pleased” but they also look “a little sad . . . as if they were waiting to be gladder some day” (110-11). This sense of expectation is evident throughout the book, and it is always towards a better future that the reader is directed. Indeed, towards the end of the story, just before Diamond dies, North Wind takes him to revisit the places of his short past, a goodbye before his final visit to the real country at the back of the North Wind; although he has very many happy memories of these places, he realises that his previous feelings cannot be recaptured. The past, after all, is finished and the purpose in life—and death—is to improve towards perfection. For MacDonald, then, there is no turning back time: time may go fast or it may go slowly and it may even seem to stop, but it does move ever onwards and it is to the future that we must set our sights. North Wind herself tells Diamond that she always looks before her; to look back makes her grow quite blind and deaf, an indictment perhaps on those who prefer to look back to an imagined better past for their comfort, and are unaware of the promises of the future.

Erin Sheley suggests that it is necessary for Diamond to die young in order that his “eternal innocence is preserved through death” (340). I contend, however, that MacDonald makes it quite clear through his other works that everyone does not have to be at this same level of perfection in order to be accepted into the world beyond death; this final perfection is possible for everyone but each individual is at a different stage on the road to fulfilment; as North Wind says: “Everyone can’t be done to all the same. Everyone is not ready for the same thing” (44). Our time in the real world is a small part of the journey and death is merely a point of transition from this world to the next, where the individual, like Tangle and Mossy, continues to improve and to be perfected, perhaps through similar cycles of birth and death, until the final re-birth leads to the ultimate perfection.

The cyclic relationship between life and death is further illustrated

by the fairy tale that Mr. Raymond tells the children in the hospital. In “Little Daylight” the baby princess is cursed by a wicked fairy so that she is awake only during the night and sleeps during the day. In addition, she waxes and wanes along with the moon; each month, therefore, when the moon is full the Princess Daylight is full of vigour and energy and she is at her loveliest; with the waning of the moon, however, she loses her vitality so that on the night when the moon is at its thinnest she is “like one dead” (244) and sleeps with the “faintest, most pitiful smile” (245) upon her face; she therefore experiences a “happy death” on a monthly basis. As the moon slowly grows back to fullness, so too her vigour returns and each month this cycle of deterioration and rejuvenation is repeated.

MacDonald claims that he does not know whether there is very much to be understood in this fairy tale and that “every one has just to take what he can get” (“Fantastic Imagination” 237). I do not believe that MacDonald ever wrote anything for no reason at all, and that he is, in fact, attempting to explain how death is not final, but rather part of a continual cycle of decline and renaissance, until the final rebirth into everlasting perfection. The curse is finally broken when a prince kisses the Princess Daylight whilst she is at her most decrepit and she is consequently transformed back to her natural vital state. She sees the dawn for the very first time and in the rays of the sun rising, significantly, in the east “the first gleam of the morning was caught on her face: that face was bright as the never-ageing Dawn” (260), symbolising the final resurrection of the dead into life eternal. I do not suggest that in this story the Princess Daylight actually dies but, rather, that MacDonald is attempting to explain the role of death within everyone’s life.

Both “The Golden Key” and *North Wind* confirm Greville MacDonald’s contention that his father “more than any other teacher of his day, invited that hope in a personal immortality” (402). By utilising the different facets of time MacDonald actually shows its irrelevance and reassures his readers that they are not bound by time in this world or the next; it is the final destination—perhaps at the “country whence the shadows fall,” perhaps at the back of the North Wind—that is of paramount importance. George MacDonald continued to feel throughout his life “the good coming all the time” (“The Golden Key” 136) and this notion is endorsed by his writings from the very first to the very last; these words are in fact almost exactly the same as those he wrote in his earlier book *Phantasies* (1858), when Anodos is lying under a tree right at the end of the story and is heartened by the words the leaves seem to be whispering: “a great good is coming—is coming—is

coming to thee” (185). The “good” time, the “happy ever after” time, the better world everyone is yearning for *is* coming, and death is not an end but merely a continuation of life in a different physical and temporal state.

Endnotes

1. Some critics consider that the key represents different things, from Christ himself to male power—see Wolff and Raeper.
2. “Of all ages” can mean both that the beings have different ages or that they come from different historical ages, the latter signifying again that time after death has no meaning and that people from different periods will co-exist.
3. MacDonald emphasises the happy reunion waiting for all after death even more in *Lilith*: on waking the protagonist Vane realises that all the other dead people were not in fact gone and hence lost to him, but that he had to go after them and their “meeting might be thousands of years away, but at last—at last I should hold them!” (233).
4. “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

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