

Beasts and Monsters in MacDonald's Fantasy Stories

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Animals and animalistic beings are some of the most characteristic elements of MacDonald's fantastic secondary worlds, and are probably remembered by every reader because of their bizarre, enigmatic qualities. They include the feathered fishes in "The Golden Key," grotesque monsters in *The Princess and Curdie*, and especially the rich fauna in *Lilith*: a raven, wolves, cats, leopards; a moon-horse, a vampire, a giant leech, dwarf elephants and a worm which becomes red-hot.

How did MacDonald arrive at such bizarre ideas as that of the feathered fish which swim through the air and willingly snuggle down into the cooking pot, or a human being who falls apart into animal forms? Without doubt, MacDonald possessed what is called a "lively imagination." Faced with these creatures, do we have to remain satisfied with shoulder-shrugging incomprehension?

MacDonald, as is well-known, believed in the divine origin of the Imagination (see e.g. Manlove, *Fantasy* 65). But it must also have been clear to him that if God is the source of poetic inspiration He makes use of earthly channels. Our day-dreams, like our dreams, work on images which stem from our world of experience: not only events of daily life, but also, for example, motifs which others have previously created. Fantasy is always inter- as well as trans-textual.

Animals have always played a prominent role in daily experience and in literary tradition, and this is no cause for wonder when we reflect how animals and people lived together in the past. In so-called primitive cultures, totemic thinking is widespread, as is the belief in a secret identity of man and animal. We find gods in animal form both in the religion of ancient Egypt and in contemporary Hinduism. Antique myths are full of animal forms and monsters: Zeus's appearance as bull and swan; fabulous beings like the centaur; Apollo's sun steeds (see e.g. Maag, 7-18 and Ackermann, 48-64) The biblical heritage also is rich: think of Leviathan and the visions of the Apocalypse. Given the general ambivalence of mythical creatures, it is not surprising that the Christian Middle Ages typologically related the real animal **[end of page 4]** world to spiritual concepts, for instance conceiving such different animals as "the lion, pelican, lamb and fish symbols of Christ (c.f.

Lurker). Our rapid survey of fantastic animals in our cultural heritage is not concluded. We should at least recall the monsters in the Teutonic sagas of fee gods and heroes, the myriads of animals in European *Zaubermärchen* and the world-wide distribution of stories in which anthropomorphic animals play the main roles (c.f. Grimm). A special form, the animal fable, was beloved in antiquity and in the Middle Ages and not only withstood the onslaught of rationalism, but actually flourished in the glare of the Enlightenment, apparently because the most important characteristics of these non-mimetic animal creations are their mystery and ambiguity.

Alongside the animals of myth and literature are the real animals. In every society and epoch these assume particular functions and significance. The Victorian age in this respect prepares for the modern age. We can hardly summarize the attitude of the Victorians to animals without the word “alienation.” MacDonald’s own life is symptomatic: he grew up in the county where animal and man lived in close proximity; the main part of his life, however, was spent in towns, where animals are foreign bodies. At the beginning of his life, horses were the only means of transport, later they were displaced by the railways for longer journeys, and then the motor car started on its victorious progress.

Townspeople in the nineteenth century developed a nostalgic view of nature. The animal (and for that matter the child) became a symbol of unalienated existence, a living demonstration of a higher innocence and of the nearness of the creature to the divine. Parallel to this the concept of animal protection developed. A pioneering law for animal protection was passed in 1822, and two years later the first society to protect animals was founded. This soon enjoyed royal endorsement and the sonorous name, Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

On the other hand (and this too is a sign of alienation) animals became the object of scientific interest. On the continent, zoological gardens had existed since the middle of the eighteenth century; but the conception that a zoo in the first instance had to be an instrument of scientific research was first held by the Zoological Society of London, which in 1828, two years after it was founded, built the famous London Zoo.

It is well known that natural science in the nineteenth century threw people into a deep spiritual crisis. Zoology and palaeontology destroyed the picture of a wisely ordered creation where the different forms of [5] existence—stone, plant, animal and man—presented an ordered hierarchy which included supernatural beings and ended with God. The new

unprejudiced view showed the animal kingdom as a realm where the basic principle is “eat or be eaten,” where the loss of an individual creature, indeed of entire genera, counts for nothing. In the middle of the century Tennyson, author of the familiar quotation: “Nature red in tooth and claw,” expressed this recognition in *In Memoriam*. Nine years later, Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* threw the Victorians into new, even worse, despair. MacDonald did not remain untouched by the theory of evolution, but whereas his friend Charles Kingsley was seriously concerned to harmonize modern science with Christian ethics, MacDonald stepped aside into a romantic inwardness and treated the discoveries of science as at best irrelevant, at worst harmful to human spiritual and moral well-being (Manlove, *Gold Thread* 140-62).

According to everything we are able to establish from the sparse indications of his biographers, MacDonald’s relationship to animals appears to have been more emotional than rational. For example, the assertion of his congregation at Arundel, that he believed that animals possess a soul and could go to heaven (see e.g. Raeper 90), has never been disproved. It is told of the twenty-year-old MacDonald that he felt such antipathy towards a certain black tom-cat that he refused to enter any room that it occupied (Raeper, 52). We shall see how he integrated his feelings about animals, as well as the western tradition of presenting animals in fantasy, in his works.

Only a few of MacDonald’s secondary worlds are peopled with animals to any appreciable extent. “The Giant’s Heart” (1863), “The Golden Key (1867), *The Princess and Curdie* (1882), and the fantasy novel *Lilith* (1895) have proved especially rewarding. I shall concentrate on these texts, but compare them with other fairy tales of MacDonald and his contemporaries. In this way, specific themes arise of themselves.

Nature red in tooth and claw

“The Giant’s Heart” is probably the first of MacDonald’s fairy tales for children. In a sense it is also the least original, for on the one hand it uses abundant traditional fairy-tale motifs and on the other it has some resemblance to early Victorian moralistic fairy tales. One way in which this is evident is in MacDonald’s use of animals. As in traditional fairy tales, an easy communication exists between the children and the animals they encounter. His theme of the animal as helper is also traditional (see e.g. [6] Woeller, 146-61). Nevertheless, interesting differences are to be found in the way he elaborates the relationship between the protagonists and their helpers. In the traditional fairy tale, this relationship is determined by a significant

lessening of the gap in the natural order between humans and animals: the animal becomes the partner and helper because the hero disregards his higher position and is sufficiently caring to help apparently “lower” helpless creatures, or at least to refrain from killing them. In “The Giant’s Heart” there is a remnant of that theme: the children rescue a spider which has fallen into the water. But it is virtually cancelled out because of the reversal of normal size relationships: the children have found themselves in Giantland, where even tiny animals like birds and insects are larger than themselves. Thereby the usual power relationships are reversed and correspond to those between children and adults.

The children are dependent upon the animals’ good-will, and at first they try to gain this through politeness and flattery. Later, with the spiders, the situation is somewhat different, for these are indebted to the children, Nevertheless, this does not mean that they become sympathetic creatures: they are described as “huge greedy spiders, catching huge silly flies, and devouring them” (86). Their greediness is like that of the giant, whose destruction is what this fairy tale is about, and even like that of the fat greedy children whom the giant eats. “Eat or be eaten” is the story’s central theme: even in this fairy-tale world, the natural law is that of “nature red in tooth and claw.” The protestation of the spider: “I eat nothing but what is mischievous or useless” (87), could also come from the giant. The moral cloak cannot obscure the brutal reality. The crocodile and the Walrus, whom MacDonald’s friend Lewis Carroll introduced a little later, are hardly more hypocritical: the former “welcomes little fishes in / With gently smiling jaws” (38); the latter sheds great tears of compassion, while consuming the oysters, who innocently followed him (233-36). Carroll addressed Tennyson’s dilemma protected by his supposed “nonsense,” this solution of cynicism disguised as humour, however, was not open to his friend MacDonald.¹

Sacred pets and tame dwarf elephants

MacDonald finds another way to harmonize this recognition of universal appetite with belief in God’s goodness, In his theodicy, suffering appears as a test or as spiritual training, and death is without terror because it is merely a second birth into a higher form of existence. The wondrous feathered fishes [7] in “The Golden Key” consistently long for nothing so much as to end up in the grandmother’s cooking pot. “In fairyland,” we learn from the lady:

“the ambition of the animals is to be eaten by the people:

for that is their highest end in that condition. But they are not therefore destroyed. Out of that pot comes something more than the dead fish, you will see.” (186-87)

The grandmother in “The Golden Key” is just one example of those famous maternal figures of MacDonald who offer protection and spiritual guidance to the heroes and heroines. As well as a spinning-wheel and a cooking fire, domestic animals are also typically associated with these figures: the old woman in “The Carasoy” keeps a hen; Irene of the *Princess* books keeps pigeons. It is hardly a coincidence that in each case they are feathered creatures. From time immemorial, wings have been attributes of the divine, and of divine messengers. The grandmothers’ birds function as faithfully devoted servants and messengers who connect their mistress with the outside world, while she remains withdrawn within herself. In all these instances the animals also provide food. There is a suggestion of cannibalism in “The Golden Key,” (after all, the feathered fish have superior understanding and thus approach to the human); in the other stories, this motif is weakened since the characters eat only the birds’ eggs, which are separated from the animal’s body and contain only potential life.

From another point of view also, the feathered fishes are typical examples of MacDonald’s fantasy creatures. Hybrids are nothing exceptional in the tradition of fabulous beasts, but this fantastic creation of MacDonald’s is original and indeed bizarre. His detailed description induces a powerfully sensual pleasure, a “sense of wonder”:

It was a curious creature, made like a fish, but covered, instead of scales, with feathers of all colours, sparkling like those of a humming-bird. It had fins, not wings, and swam through the air as a fish does through the water. Its head was like the head of a small owl. (179)

This description of the wondrous mysterious being possesses a life of its own, resistant to symbolic interpretations, which cannot exhaust its meaning. One can almost imagine MacDonald first having the image come to him and then seeking to establish its significance.² It is possible to discover this significance, but the reader has to reckon with several levels of meaning. Echoes of the traditional Christian symbolism of the fish are clearly distinguishable: the fish symbolizes not only Christ’s sufferings but also the [8] Eucharist (see e.g. Lurker, *Biblischer Bilder* 99-101). Beyond this, MacDonald has placed a clear allegorical level of meaning, in order to express his favourite thought; that death is not the end, but the beginning of

a new life on a higher plane of existence. The transformation of the fish into an aëranth, “a lovely little creature in human shape, with large white wings” (186) has obvious parallels with the transformation of worms into butterflies which Mr Raven accomplishes in *Lilith* (17 and 46); and this, moreover, is but a slight variation of an analogy popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries linking the hatching of a butterfly with the freeing of the soul through death (see e.g. Lurker, *Symbolik* 632).

Another type of harmonious companionship between humans and animals is found with the Little Ones and their tame miniature animals in *Lilith*. Here we are not dealing with an elaborate allegory, although (as in probably everything with MacDonald) this image of creatures living in harmony and paradisaical innocence does hold a level of religious significance. The disturbing aspects of the biological food-chain are simply ignored here: the Little Ones are nourished by fruits: “apples and pears and figs and mesples and peaches,” and most of the animals mentioned are herbivores. The children live out of doors, naked and without the accessories of civilisation. Like birds, they sleep in nests in the trees. As innocent natural creatures, they develop close bonds of friendship with the other innocent natural creatures, the animals of the woods, seeking out those that in their size suit their own stature:

They had already . . . in exploring the forest, made acquaintance with the animals in it, and with most of them personally [W]ith loving, playful approaches [they] had soon made more than friends of most of them, from the first addressing horse or elephant as Brother or Sister Elephant, Brother or Sister Horse, until before long they had an individual name for each. (174)

What we see here is clearly a version of the wider romantic Victorian myth (or, better, “dream”) mentioned above, of the nearness to the divine of innocent natural creatures. That the Little Ones intentionally conscript their four-legged brothers and sisters for their wars against the giants and Lilith, does not, of course, quite tally with the image of innocent creatures. Yet even this paradox (in a richly paradoxical book) is probably intended: in a fallen world there is no long-term possibility of paradisaical harmony; even the Little Ones have to defend themselves. [9]

Eerie and non-eerie monsters

Great great grandmother Irene, with her pigeons in the secret attic, is without doubt a central image in both *Princess* books; an image radiating

wisdom, love and harmony. The counter-image is the goblins with their animals, representing irrational impulsiveness, hate and disharmony. In *The Princess and the Goblin*, the goblins' grotesque creatures appear only in three short episodes, and beyond their iconic significance they do not appear to have any proper function. For this fable they are insignificant, but they become all the more important in the sequel, *The Princess and Curdie*.

As household animals of the goblins, the "Uglies" (as they are later called) came into existence through the same negative evolutionary process that produced their masters. Although they are the product, of a natural development, their appearance is unnatural: these grotesque hybrid creatures are beyond all laws of proportion and all notions of classification: Thus language cannot describe them. They have something of every animal, but in no case does this constitute a whole. Their forms symbolize disharmony, caprice and chaos, a negation of the divine order: "the various parts of their bodies assuming, in an apparently arbitrary and self-willed manner, the most abnormal developments" (72). The sounds they emit are only *ex negativo* describable: in other words, not at all:

for the noises they made . . . could be described neither as grunts nor squeaks nor roars nor howls nor barks nor yells nor screams nor croaks nor hisses nor mews nor shrieks, but only as something like all of them mingled in one horrible dissonance.
(71)

Once again, MacDonald has adapted a traditional theme in a highly original way. Monsters of classical mythology are frequently hybrid creatures. The goblins' creatures are nothing like the usual monsters, such as dragons, harpies or minotaurs; and they are even less like the real monsters of the past, the dinosaurs, already known at this time.³ They are evidently the product of the author's quite individual and markedly pictorial fancy. Although spectacular, they play a rather marginal role in *The Princess and the Goblin*. Their appearance contributes to the overall ominous and threatening mood. Later they give Curdie the opportunity to demonstrate his heroic qualities. His struggle with a "horrid creature," however, is not dramatically described, and the lad needs nothing more than a pocket-knife to render the monster harmless (133). [10]

What is more significant is that one of the creatures strikes such terror into the princess that in her panic she runs out of the castle instead of going to her grandmother. The adventure turns out to be harmless, which leads one to conclude that the grandmother secretly engineered it in order to

educate the girl. In this connection, McGillis points to the great significance MacDonald attributed to fear in the context of religious awakening: only when we have recognised the threat of evil in all its horror are we open to the comforting certainty of divine protection (see McGillis's end notes, 351).

The episode also fits in with the concepts of depth psychology, which have been around for a long time. Like their masters, the goblins' animals can be interpreted as representatives of the Freudian "Id" or the Jungian "unconscious," whose terrifying aspect we have to learn to confront (see e.g. Wolff, 166 and Tanner, 52).⁴

In *The Princess and the Goblin*, we usually see the monsters as an undifferentiated horde. In the sequel, *The Princess and Curdie*, the monsters have lost their horror, at least in relation to the "good" side. Now, however, MacDonald takes one creature and places it at the hero's side as companion, protector, servant, friend and warrior. Lina is "a horrible mass of incongruities," with a short body, elephantine legs, an extremely long and fat tail and a polar-bear/snake head with teeth like icicles (222). Forty-nine further monsters are drawn over to the "good" side by Lina, this monstrous dog-substitute, through her sheer physical strength, and they remain on standby so as to engage to great effect in the battles at the end.

Of all MacDonald's non-mimetic works, *The Princess and Curdie* approaches nearest to the general form of the classic fantasy story, dealing as it does with an apocalyptic battle between good and evil. Evidently MacDonald was convinced (at least in this phase of his life), that moral degeneration, when it has reached a certain stage, is no longer reformable. It has to be extinguished root and branch. In this context, the monsters take on a function and significance difficult to relate to the former ones. In the first book, as the domestic animals of the goblins, they were products of degeneration and representatives of the un-natural. MacDonald now indicates that in reality they were people whose failings somehow have given them ugly bodies. "I believe," says Curdie to the Princess, "from what your grandmother told me, that Lina is a woman, and that she was naughty, but is now growing good" (277-78).⁵ Whether we are to imagine this process in Lina as the countering of bodily degeneration by moral regeneration, or rather as a kind of transmigration of the soul, remains unclear. Manifestly the [11] discrepancy is between outer appearance and inner qualities, and in this Lina becomes a symbol for the basic paradox of the book. Grandmother Irene (Gk "peace") and those who follow her appear gentle and peaceful, but are not afraid to use drastic force. Whoever wants to conquer cannot be fastidious

Curdie's instinct for hunting is on the one hand reprimanded, but on the other hand it is quite convenient for the grandmother. When the boy, full of repentance after shooting the pigeon, wants to burn his weapons, she restrains him:

“No, no, Curdie. Keep them, and practice with them every day, and grow a good shot. There are plenty of bad things that want killing.” (191)

In the decisive battle, even her gentle pigeons turn into effective fighting-machines, something which transports the narrator with undisguised enthusiasm:

Down swooped the birds upon the invaders; right in the face of man and horse they flew with swift-beating wings, blinding eyes and confounding brain So mingled the feathered multitude in the grim game of war. It was a storm in which the wind was birds, and the sea men. (334)

With his account of a battle between good and evil powers, MacDonald opens himself to the same criticism as other authors who in their descriptions of battle all too enthusiastically side with one of the parties, thereby coming under suspicion of glorying in power or of indulging sadistic impulses. MacDonald's revaluation of the monsters can be seen as symptomatic. When he uses them for the “good” party he as it were assigns himself to their side. He joins with the grotesque offspring of his fantasy because his fantasy has itself become monstrous: chapters 26 and 27 are one great orgy of revenge.⁶ It is characteristic that after the work is finished MacDonald does not know what to do with his avengers or with the king's evil counsellors whom the Ugliers bear away (to execution?), and both simply disappear:

Like hounds they [the Ugliers] rushed from the city, their burdens howling and raving. What became of them I have never heard. (338)

Subsequently, when MacDonald again describes monsters, he returns to his original negative image. In *Lilith*, Vane crosses a region that he calls the “bad burrow.” There the earth is convulsed in waves and brings forth monsters that strongly remind us of the Ugliers in *The Princess and Curdie*.⁷ They likewise are “hideous creatures, no two alike”; amongst them a motley-feathered snake [12] and a worm with its head “as big as that of a polar bear and much resembling it, with a white mane to its red neck.” Vane sometimes takes them for offspring of his fantasy, yet they are real “evil things” which are only prevented by “the moonlight from devouring him” (49).

This scene recalls the already-mentioned scene in *The Princess and the Goblin* where the princess is frightened by a monster. Yet the allegorical meaning is much clearer here. *Lilith* generally lends itself more readily to allegorical explanations than do the *Princess* books. If *Lilith* is a modern *Pilgrim's Progress*, a journey of the self to God, then the monsters symbolize the despair which threatens the protagonist when he finds himself alone in the waste land in the moonlight: "Then first I knew what an awful thing it was to be awake in the universe: I *was*, and could not help it!" (48). Vane is not in himself able to resist this despair: "without the divine light source, which shows a certain wondering pity in her gaze" (48), he would very quickly have become "the centre of a writhing heap of hideousness" (49).

At the end of the book, after the unmaking of Lilith's power, Vane finds the monster-hollow overflowing. The monsters are no longer dangerous for him, although they are not dead. Through the clear water he can calmly observe them and affirm their ugliness. His commentary invites an allegorical interpretation:

Not one of them moved as we passed. But they were not dead.
So long as exist men and women of unwholesome mind, that
lake will still be peopled with loathsomeness. (256)

"Unwholesome" carries the meaning of "morally degenerate" as well as "unhealthy." This suggests a somewhat different interpretation of the monsters. Now they appear more as the embodiment of general moral weaknesses, perhaps in particular the human instinctive nature, which, to MacDonald as Victorian moralist, is suspect. Vane only once suggests that some of the monsters possess a certain beauty, but throughout the story they continue to arouse fear and disgust. The horror that they release is beneficial, because it causes us to see how much we need divine protection. MacDonald cannot see the necessity to accept and integrate the negative animalistic side of the self, wholly contrary to his exemplar S.T. Coleridge, whose *Ancient Mariner*, in a similar situation, suddenly recognised the beauty of the "slimy things" and spontaneously blessed them, whereby a spiritual process of salvation was initiated (see particularly lines 123-26, 238-39 and 282-91).

[13]

The beast within

With the exception of the monsters in *The Princess and the Goblin* and in *Lilith*, we have so far only come to know the animals in MacDonald's menagerie in their function as helpers, whether as free collaborators or

as companions and servants. Only seldom do animals appear as enemies of the protagonist. Curdie and Lina are attacked by birds on their way to Gwyntystorm (the reason is unclear) (234); Vane, while journeying is threatened by wolves and hunted by cats, although it becomes apparent that this was to his advantage (166-67).

In all these cases the animal is a strange beast, fundamentally different from the human. MacDonald, however, has another cluster of motifs, which do not rest on superiority, but suggest a hidden partial identity of human and animal. At its centre lies the metaphor of “the beast within the human.” This is the expression of a widespread conception in western thought that the human being is a hybrid of “spirit” and “nature,” with a body grounded in the animal kingdom, but striving in the spirit towards divine heights.

This dualism is almost everywhere present in literature, yet perhaps never as clear as in the late-Victorian age. It appeared then as if one were able to keep “the beast within” in check through a rigid system of “decorum and morals.” But an increasing awareness of the (now notorious) Victorian double morality, along with the Darwinian message of the animal origin of man, created widespread despair at the possibility of an enduring suppression of the instincts.⁸

Two images of folk-superstition in particular presented themselves as means to express the anxieties produced by these tensions: the werewolf and the vampire. MacDonald took up both. The fact that in every case he relates these to female figures points to a misogyny fed by unconscious fears (cf Raeper, 367). It seems likely, though, that he shared this obsession with many of his contemporaries. Evidence of the feminine being associated with threatening animalism can be found everywhere in the literature and art of the period (cf. Dijkstra, esp. ch. 9).

The sexual component of the werewolf theme is especially clear in MacDonald’s short gothic story “The Gray Wolf” (1871), which, without any religious or allegorical scaffolding, gives shape to primal fears. The young man who happens upon the werewolf girl in her lonely bothy is fascinated by her: [14]

Meantime the youth could not take his eyes off the young woman, so that at length he found himself fascinated, or rather bewitched. She kept her eyes for the most part veiled with the lovelist eyelids fringed with darkest lashes, and he gazed entranced; for the red glow of the little oil-lamp covered all the

strangeness of her complexion. But as soon as he met a stolen glance out of those eyes unveiled, his soul shuddered within him. Lovely face and craving eyes alternated fascination and repulsion. (299)

The young man soon finds it necessary to struggle for his life with this captivating stranger, now in wolf form, The girl evidently suffers during her fits of animality, which she appears powerless to control. A possibility of redemption is not broached. The young man's final glimpse of her is: standing on the edge of the cliff wringing her hands. One solitary wail crossed the space between them. She made no attempt to follow him (303). When MacDonald next depicts a female figure who can present herself in wolf-form, the sexual significance of the image has disappeared without trace. In *At the Back of the North Wind*, Diamond's companion suddenly appears to his horror as a giant female wolf. She does not eat small children, as Diamond fears, but needed this form to scare a drunken nursemaid. Only in such a way, she explains, can she show the woman the right way back to her neglected duties:

“I had to make myself look like a bad thing before she could see me. If I had put on any other shape than a wolf's she would not have seen me, for that is what is growing to be her own shape inside of her.” (37)

Here for the first time we meet the moral use of the “beast within” metaphor which later in *The Princess and Curdie* occupies such a prominent position. Meanwhile it appears again in “The Day Boy and the Night Girl,” although under different conditions. Right at the beginning of the story it is said of the witch: “Her name was Watho, and she had a wolf in her mind.” What is meant by this is hinted at in the following sentence: “She cared for nothing in itself—only for knowing it. She was not naturally cruel, but the wolf had made her cruel” (241). The wolf metaphorically stands for a sort of sickness of the mind, which (as we know) MacDonald saw as the malaise of his time; the Faustian thirst for knowledge for its own sake, or for the sake of the power that knowledge brings. The death of the witch in wolf shape through the [15] young hunter's (phallic) arrow just allows the sexual component to shine through here, but otherwise it is successfully suppressed. The wolf in Watho is not a symbol of the animal nature in the human being (the instincts, or specifically sexuality), but stands for the cold unfeeling intellect.

In *The Princess and the Goblin*, the image of the “beast within” is dwelt on extensively. The great-grandmother, Irene, bestows upon Curdie

the ability to recognize the hidden animal in people through their handshake. This, of course, is to be recognized as a concrete allegorical image of the intuitive faculty to comprehend the character of another human being. Yet Irene complicates matters by elaborating a reversed theory of evolution as she explains her gift:

“Have you ever heard what some philosophers say—that men were all animals once?”

“No ma’am.” . . .

“It is of no consequence. But there is another thing that is of the greatest consequence—this: that all men, if they do not take care, go down the hill to the animals’ country; that many men are actually, all their lives, going to be beasts. People knew it once, but it is long since they forgot it.” (219-20)

At first glance, this appears to be similar to Kingsley’s theory of moral degeneration developed in his account of the Doasyoulikes; but whereas Kingsley takes Darwin’s theory seriously, and consequently has the development of humanity over a long time-span in view, MacDonald is primarily interested in the individual, and merely uses the idea metaphorically. Irene’s mentioning that her theory was once common knowledge could be a side-swipe of MacDonald’s against a naive belief in evolutionary progress, or even an allusion to the animal fable, which isolates human characteristics and projects them onto animals. These two possible interpretations are not mutually exclusive. The latter is more prominent in the scene where Curdie tests the hands of the King’s servants:

He grasped the hand of each in succession and found two ox-hoofs, three-pig-hoofs, one concerning which he could not be sure whether it was the hoof of a donkey or a pony, and one dog’s paw. (264)

In principle, this is but an elaboration of the world-wide habit of calling our fellow men donkeys, camels, foxes, pigs, geese or dogs to insult them.

MacDonald discards this interpretation of the motif, too, when he returns to the theme. The protagonist in *Lilith* is surprised that Mr Raven [16] appears to him sometimes as a man and at other times as a bird, and he receives the following explanation:

Upon occasion . . . it is more convenient to put one’s bird-self in front. Everyone, as you ought to know, has a beast-self—and a bird-self, and a stupid fish-self, ay, and a creeping serpent-self too—which it takes a deal of crushing to kill! In truth he has

also a tree-self and a crystal-self, and I don't know how many selves more—all to get into harmony. You can tell what sort a man is by his creature that comes oftenest to the front. (28)

This too is metaphorically meant, but is far less conventional and less clear. In what “beast-self” or “tree-self” consist is neither revealed nor explained. It is also remarkable that there are now several such “selves” and that they are to be harmonized—except, of course, those tendencies which are worth “crushing.” As in many other passages, MacDonald here seems to take up Jungian ideas, but certainly with a major difference. Whereas Jung also looks at the integration of the negative “evil” aspects of the self as the task of the individuation process, MacDonald is not able to free himself from Victorian puritan morality: evil is not to be integrated but destroyed.

In *Lilith*, MacDonald takes up the theme of shape-changing again, even more strongly than before. As in *At the Back of the North Wind*, the metamorphosing figures are not human beings appearing in animal form, but derive from a private myth composed of fragments of traditional myths. Thus they appear, seemingly at will, sometimes in animal fashion, sometimes in human form: Adam as a raven, Mara as a white leopardess, Lilith mostly as a spotted leopardess.

If we see the spiritual education and renewal of the protagonist as the key theme of *Lilith*, then the constant changes of the other characters are merely subsidiary. Yet they are not insignificant in contributing towards a mysterious atmosphere, and therefore adding multi-layered riddles to the story. The transformations of the female characters in particular call up strong contradictory emotions and associations.

Mr Raven, on the other hand, possesses less power of fascination. He preaches like a schoolmaster with his vendor's tray of paradoxical sayings, even when, in his raven shape, he performs metaphysical tricks with worms. Although he appears sinister on his first appearance in the story he in fact bears no trace of the sinister ambivalence which the raven displays in most mythologies. [17]

The animal forms of the female characters are more fascinating. Interestingly, MacDonald makes relatively little use of the tradition which gives Lilith the form of a vampire. The way she practices her blood-sucking activity in human form emphasises the sexual aspects of the activity (the white leech which she speaks of initially never appears). This aspect of Lilith, who is the embodiment of evil, is also present when she takes the form of cat or leopardess. The association of the cat with a negative picture of

femininity is widespread in Teutonic culture. In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, also, the leopard appears at the outset as an allegory of lust. That cats frequently served in art at the turn of the century as symbols of female sexuality has been impressively shown by Dijkstra (291-94). MacDonald seems to have reacted strongly to cats and connected their nature to femininity.⁹

Through Lilith's many forms (she appears as cold corpse, diabolical cat, lustful vampire, power-hungry princess, and as a fighting, child-murdering leopardess), MacDonald has consolidated evil's many-faceted power of fascination in haunting images. Yet the relative clarity of this symbolism is severely disrupted through the fact that Mara too, who stands on this side of the "good," takes on the shape of a leopardess from time to time. Vane, and with him the reader (since the story is presented from Vane's point of view), becomes quite confused by this, as do the Little Ones. Here too, as with a similar dilemma in *The Princess and Curdie*, it seems that MacDonald wanted to show that the good side also has to be able to fight, and that it is thus not easy to distinguish between good and evil people. Whoever finds this too simplistic or too banal should look for a psychological explanation MacDonald must have been both repelled and fascinated by ugliness, as well as by that mixture of elegance and cruelty which we find in the feline nature. It is also possible that it was only in these codified images that he was able to recognise and bear the undeniable existence of evil, and its role as the source of lust both in himself and in everyone else.

This is not only a private problem of MacDonald's. The fact is that the animal in myth and literature, indeed in the whole cultural history of mankind, repeatedly appears ambivalent. It is not only MacDonald who finds it difficult to come to terms with the beast in (and beside) the human being. And, like MacDonald, we are still seeking an answer to that famous question which Blake posed to the Tiger, who embodies the connection of the beautiful with the terrible: "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" (42).¹⁰ **[18]**

Notes

1. The central position of the theme "eat or be eaten" in the *Alice* books has frequently been pointed out. See e.g. Nicholson (37-55),
2. Other researchers have also pointed out this general characteristic of MacDonald's literary creations. See e.g. Manlove (*Fantasy* 77).
3. On the influence of dinosaur discoveries on the thinking of the Victorians, see Prickett (79-84).
4. On psychological interpretation of monsters in general see Ackermann.
5. Shortly before, on the way to Gwyntystorm, Curdie still holds to the old

theory: “Doubtless she [Lina] had been a goblins’ creature” (234). What kind of “naughtiness” it could have been which had given her such a grotesque body, the author leaves to the imagination of the reader.

6. Consider the headings to these chapters: “Revenge” and “More Revenge.” Even if we do not accept Wolff’s conclusion that *The Princess and Curdie* shows MacDonald “in an apocalyptic mood” (176), yet the tone of sadistic delight in this chapter cannot be denied. The vague similarity of the scene with the expulsion of the suitors from Odysseus’s home can hardly be adduced for its justification. And even there the description of the terrible revenge is not exactly uplifting reading. In any case, artistic value is determined not by the motif as such but rather by the way it is developed. On the comparison with Odysseus see Sigman (187) and McGillis’s end note to p. 307 of *The Princess and Curdie*.

7. Raeper cites, as a further source of inspiration, Dante’s eighth circle of hell (369).

8. The most famous literary fantasies of the age draw their strength from this dualistic tension: Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886); Kipling’s *Jungle Book* (1894); Wells’ *Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896); Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897); Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899).

9. Raeper notes MacDonald’s “constant association of women with predatory cat-like creatures” (201).

10. While observing Lilith, Vane poses a similar question, and he too does not know the answer:

Could, such beauty as I saw, and such wickedness as I suspected, exist in the same person? If they could, how was it possible? Unable to answer the former question I must let the latter wait! (133). [19]

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