

Abstract of Doctoral Dissertation

George MacDonald's Shadow:  
Spiritual Progress in the Fairy Tales

Graduate School of Humanities and Sciences  
Tokyo Woman's Christian University

Shizuha IMANISHI

The Object, the Theme, and the Task of the Dissertation

Over the course of about forty years, George MacDonald created works which can be placed in the process of the development of Christian literature and of the birth of a genre, fantasy. Nowadays, his works are called both fairy tale and fantasy and they are appropriate in a sense. In fact, however, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word, fantasy, was not used for a literary genre until the twentieth century. Moreover, MacDonald himself wished to write the work like Märchen, which he thought the English word fairy tale could be applied to that German word. In order to take the fact around the literary terminology into account, but also to stay close the author's own perceptions, this dissertation uses the word fairy tale for his works.

In his life time, the criticism on MacDonald's fairy tales was

not always favorable. On occasion, his works were considered as “a riddle,” “a wild phantasmagoria of nonsense,” and “obscure.”

Focusing on the Christian elements, however, the prior researchers such as Rolland Hein and Colin Manlove have deciphered such enigmatic aspects of MacDonald’s works. In relation to the Christian elements, some researchers including Hein, have analyzed protagonists’ inner development in MacDonald’s fairy tales which are in the form of bildungsroman by using phrases “spiritual progress” or “spiritual growth.”

MacDonald refers to a fairy tale in his essay which is titled “The Fantastic Imagination.” He suggests that we can invent laws which relate physical thing in the invented world such as a fairy tale but the laws that pertain to morality, “the laws of the spirit,” should not be distorted even in the invented world. So far, these expressions “spiritual progress” and “spiritual growth” have been used in the analyses of particular protagonists in particular novels. However, just as “the laws of spirit” are kept in every works he wrote, in fact, spiritual progress is involved in all of his fairy tales.

One key word that supports the fact that spiritual progress, which has not been regarded as a consistent theme in all of his fairy tales, is described in various ways in each of his works is shadow. The shadow which impressively appears for the first time in MacDonald’s first fairy tale, *Phantastes: A Faerie Romance for Men and Women* (1858), represents the protagonist’s self, problems of desire, self-centeredness, and conceit. Although the shadow

which relates these elements is not necessarily described in every works, it does not mean that the works are unrelated to problems of the self. Given the fact that all of his works involve problems of the self, we can trace the trajectory of the theme of spiritual progress using the depiction of the shadow as a starting point. This dissertation treats MacDonald's fairy tales which were published from the 1850s to the 1890s chronologically in each chapter and focuses on the shadow, examining how the spiritual progress that has been analyzed in specific works was in fact pivotal in the fairy tales he wrote over a period of nearly four decades.

#### Chapter 1: Subjective Evil: The Narrator's Shadow in *Phantastes*

Dealing with MacDonald's first fairy tale, *Phantastes*, Chapter 1 explores the foundation of the idea about the shadow and how we can find spiritual progress as the theme in this novel. Based on the fact that the symbolism of the shadow can be traced back to a wide range of philosophies, myths and literature, the chapter analyzes that the shadow functions as the self in this novel and that it is closely related to desire. By focusing on the protagonist's self-centered behavior and acquisition of the self-sacrificial spirit, as well as the description of death and resurrection, the fact that greedy self-centeredness is spiritual immaturity and self-sacrificing spirit is spiritual maturity is examined. It is also pointed out that MacDonald's statement in his

sermon, *Unspoken Sermons* (1867), that the self should be sacrificed and not be the regent of actions is one of the things that supports this analysis.

In addition to these analyses, this chapter refers to death as a transition from self-centeredness to self-sacrifice in this novel and its importance in his works. Throughout this chapter, the dissertation first sheds light on the relationship between the shadow, greed, and self-centeredness, as well as the relationship between death, self-sacrifice, and spiritual maturity, which provide clues for analyzing works after *Phantastes*. Also, in common with MacDonald's last fairy tale, *Lilith: A Romance* (1895), it is touched upon self-centeredness as evilness which is subjectively described by the protagonist who is also the narrator.

## Chapter 2: The Pursuit of the Matured Spirit in the Short Stories

MacDonald's short stories which are published in the 1860s are examined in the following chapter, focusing on how ideas about the self and death as presented in *Phantastes* are carried forward in them. As for "The Golden Key" with its portrayal of life as journey, death is indicated as something that leads to a new life, not as the end of life. This is in line with the description in the previous work. In addition to this, the fact that bathing, which is equated with death in this short story, has a purifying effect means that death has a similar utility in MacDonald's works. This

justifies the analysis in the previous chapter, which points out that death is related to spiritual maturity.

The description of self-sacrifice, which can be regarded as an essence of spiritual maturity, are more clearly shown in “The Golden Key” and “The Light Princess.” The analyses of these stories suggest that in the works of the 1860s, the focus is more on the meaning of death and self-sacrificial spirit than on the element of spiritual immaturity, such as self-centeredness and conceit, which the shadow represents in *Phantastes*. As for the shadow as a keyword of this dissertation, although almost no shadow as the self appears in the stories of this period, this chapter refers to the fact that human shadows and goblins are treated as identical beings in “The Shadow.”

### Chapter 3: Death and Evil in MacDonald’s Fairy Tales for Children

Chapter 3 examines MacDonald’s three fairy tales for children in the 1870s: *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871), *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), and *The Wise Woman* (1875). First, the fact that the representation of death in *At the Back of the North Wind* which has deepened since his first fairy tale is discussed. Through the analyses of the personification of death as a beautiful and gentle mentor, North Wind and of the place called the back of the north wind, it is shown that death is associated not as the end of life and misfortune, but with spiritual maturity unrelated to self-

centeredness. In addition, the relation between the change of the protagonist's perspective and his spiritual phase is discussed as a notable point.

Then, this chapter also explores the goblins appear as self-centered and conceited beings in *The Princess and the Goblin*. Based on the relationship between human shadows and goblins represented in "The Shadow," it is pointed that the goblins, the only evil characters in the novel, represent the spiritual immature side of human beings and that such element is increasingly portrayed as the independent characters, not like the protagonist's shadow. Furthermore, as for the self-related problems concerning spiritual immaturity, it is examined through *The Wise Woman*. In addition to this, what is noteworthy in the works of this period is that, unlike the earlier works, there is little description of self-sacrifice.

#### Chapter 4: Loss of Goodness in *The Princess and Curdie*

Chapter 4 analyses the loss of goodness and the evilness of the self as the degeneration in the sequel of *The Princess and the Goblin, The Princess and Curdie* (1882). The focus is on the fact that self-centeredness, desire, and conceit, which have been expressed through the medium of the shadow and the goblins in the previous works, are directly described through human beings themselves, in terms of commerce and self-interest. The novel is

unique in that the evil nature is compared to that of animals, and spiritual immaturity is linked to degeneration. It is discussed that self-centeredness is clearly shown in this work as spiritual degeneration that is the opposite of progress.

Unlike other works, *The Princess and Curdie* without the description of death, the adult characters with the evil nature never convert and they represent the loss of goodness. The cause of this loss seems to be the obsession with gaining wealth through commerce and self-interest that degrades and distorts human beings. This chapter points out that the shadow, which functions as the unconscious self in *Phantastes*, transitions to the conscious self in *The Princess and Curdie*, thus describing the human being as the self itself.

#### Chapter 5: Death as a Metamorphosis of Spirit in *Lilith*

The final chapter of this dissertation explores the evil self and death as major themes in MacDonald's last fairy tale, *Lilith*. The analyses of both the mythological based character, Lilith and the protagonist's greedy self and their attitude to place the self at the center of their behavior, reveal that the problem of the self in this novel is linked to the concept of sin.

As for the enigmatic character, the Shadow, it is indicated that unlike the shadow which haunts the protagonist in *Phantastes*, the Shadow appears as the independent characters.

The fact that the Shadow does not need its owner, while affecting Lilith's desire who has an evil self, is a change in the depiction of the shadow as a symbol in MacDonald's works.

This chapter also discusses death which is treated as sleep which Lilith and the protagonist must accept. Although death has been one of the themes and an element which needs to reach spiritual maturity in the previous works, in this novel, it also serves as salvation. Considering the depiction of letting go of self-centeredness, greed, and conceit, which are elements of spiritual immaturity, and accepting death as the only way to reach a mature spirit, it is deciphered death is a metamorphosis of spirit, and this process is an aspect of spiritual progress.

## Conclusion

These five chapters elucidate that while spiritual progress is the theme which functions as a single axis, the elements that define the concept are gradually changing. In the early stages, self-sacrifice served as a measure of spiritual maturity, but its portrayal gradually has weakened. With this, the problem of the self, which can be perceived as spiritual immaturity, came to be gradually emphasized and, as it neared its final stage of the fairy tales, seemed to have gained in specificity.

This dissertation considers spiritual progress as one of the major themes throughout MacDonald's fairy tales, and by shedding



light on the trajectory of this theme, it connects each work with its own characteristics with a single thread. This study not only highlights the spiritual immaturity and maturity contained in the term spiritual progress, but also reveals that all of his fairy tales weave together a kind of tapestry that represents “The laws of the spirit” he tried to keep in his fairy tales.

Along with spiritual progress, it is also held up the shadow as a key word through the dissertation. The elements that make up the shadow which is associated with the problems of the self are portrayed in most of MacDonald’s fairy tales, even if the shadow does not appear in some of the works. In addition, the shadow has a symbolic meaning for him as well. For example, it should be noted that some problems haunted his life like an actual shadow: religious conflicts, illness, and death. Even though writing the novels never brought him enough income, he continued to work on writing. It is, as it were, nothing more than his shadow, his self. Nevertheless, the shadow is a proof that he had a perception of light which made him willing to accept and overcome the problems he was facing.