

Horizons of expectation: fairy tale motifs and narrative patterns in the work of George MacDonald (1824-1905) and G.A. Henty (1832-1902)

In this article I aim to investigate the fairy tale motifs and narrative patterns in the work of George MacDonald (1824 – 1905) and G. A. Henty (1832 – 1902). The initial section will explain the overall focus of the study, giving some background information to provide a context within which to investigate this specific area. The second section will endeavour to identify the basic fairy tale narrative pattern and give examples of some frequently encountered fairy tale motifs. This section will narrow the focus to examine how these fairy tale elements are demonstrated in one work by Henty.

The two authors, George MacDonald and G.A. Henty both wrote their main body of work during the second half of the nineteenth century, against a background of social and political change and religious doubt and questioning.

MacDonald enjoyed wide recognition in his own lifetime as a novelist, poet, critic and translator, but is more likely to be recognised as the creator of two adult fantasies and as a writer of fairy tales. Most of George MacDonald's writing for children falls within the genre of fairy tale, although he did write three children's stories outside of this genre.

G.A. Henty was a journalist who returned to England after ? years of travel as a war correspondent and spent the latter part of his life writing adventure stories, usually considered to be for boys, but also read by girls. Henty's adventure stories can be seen to link directly to the imperialist political intent of the period, providing justification for the continuation of the British Empire.

Both authors were widely read in their own lifetime, and both published in different periodicals aimed at the child reader. They appear to come from opposite ends of the political and literary spectrum, yet demonstrate some common values when read closely. Their influence was widespread during their lifetimes and both authors have recently been reprinted in the United States.

Kimberley Reynolds has commented that

What is being read is deeply implicated in the kinds of values the child learns to hold about society (Reynolds).

By examining the values which in Henty appear to be predominantly the imperialistic and commercial ideology of traditional Victorian England and in MacDonald predominantly counter-cultural, it is possible not only to understand the texts more fully, but also to understand the society that produced them and which they in turn helped to produce.

George MacDonald overtly continues the fairy tale genre in a way that prompted Naomi Lewis to make her emphatic statement

In the whole range of invented English fairy tale there is no one to match his gift (Lewis).

whereas the extent of the contrast with Henty can best be illustrated by Hugh Walpole's comment in his essay on 'Reading for fun'. He wrote that children discovering the world of books

divide into two eternal divisions of mankind, Romanticists and Realists, Prosists and Poets, Businessmen and Dreamers. I fancy that all the children of my day who gloried in Henty were the realists and Hans Andersen (substitute George MacDonald) was for the others (Walpole).

I believe that Walpole's statement is too clear cut to be tenable, and that fairy tale narrative patterns and motifs are found in both authors.

In order to place the narrative patterns and motifs in context, it is helpful to present a brief overview of the history of the European fairy tale.

The fairy tale could be said to have begun initially with Charles Perrault in sixteenth century France. He turned the folk tale material into a literary form, often adding historically grounded detail that changed not only the style of the tale but also the potential range of meaning by targeting a particular audience.

Perrault (1628-1703) is the most well known of the French fairytale writers. His tales include Little Red Riding Hood, Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella and Puss in Boots.

In Germany, the Brothers Grimm, universally known names in the field of collection of folk and fairytales, began their work initially as part of their law studies. They studied the history of laws in order to understand the culture and society in which the laws originated. This, together with their interest in philology and literature, led them to begin their collection of tales. They collected many of their tales from a family with Huguenot ancestry. Consequently many tales had French origins, tales such as Little Red Cap and Ashiepattle.

The Brothers Grimm edited their material consistently and appeared to have clear aims in their work. Both Zipes (1999) and Luthi (1982) maintain that they worked towards the creation of the ideal type for a literary fairytale, based on two tales supplied to them by the artist Philip Otto Runge. These were The Juniper tree and The fisherman and his wife. Their readers were initially middle class, but later editions of the tales were more specifically aimed at children.

Under the Puritan and Utilitarian cultural code of the seventeenth century the English fairytale suffered a period of suppression. The influence of the Romantic Movement with its emphasis on the importance of the imagination came together with a reaction to the social changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution, to bring about a resurgence of the literary fairy tale. In other European countries, the genre had developed steadily, unimpeded by the political climate, even in times of upheaval. These tales paved the way for writers to revive the genre in England.

The early part of the nineteenth century brought translations of European tales and the Arabian Nights, but later writers used the genre to point out anomalies, injustices and absurdities in society and to create worlds in which things were different.

In the twentieth century and into the present day, the fairytale form continues to be used as a vehicle to communicate concerns, both social and political, that occupy contemporary authors.

Fairy tale narrative pattern and motifs

I turn now to the basic fairy tale narrative pattern and look at some motifs frequently found in the fairy tale. The basic pattern of events that go to make up a fairy tale are:

quest/journey struggle/test success/achievement triumph/homecoming

the last one in the form of an actual return or in the sense of coming to a home always sought but only found after the completion of the journey and struggle.

Motifs most frequently enter the fairy tale in two types, motifs of place and motifs of character. Examples of motifs of place range from an entire landscape, usually rural, expansive and including mountains; through woods and forests; down to castles, cottages and huts.

Motifs of character are found in princes, princesses, the wise woman/fairy godmother, witch or bad fairy, but also in the ordinary person, the woodcutter, the swineherd, the servant girl (who may or may not turn out to be as 'ordinary' as he or she appears), the youngest daughter or, the one I will use as a specific example in this article, the youngest or only son.

This character is one who shows compassion without the expectation of reward. He is one of those general personalities found in the fairy tale who restores order to life in the sense that he 'puts things right' by bringing about a just solution to problems, a solution in line with the belief of the ordinary person, the folk sense, that "the worthy succeed and the unworthy fail" (Rohrich 210), but the test of worth is based on action and attitude. In the fairy tale world, worthiness is not based on the same criteria as it is in the everyday world which judges by status and wealth, it is a world in which, as Maria Tatar (79) states, "compassion counts".

Because of this he is seen as a fool and a dreamer, he is categorised with disadvantaged groups and outsiders and consequently ridiculed and despised. Even if he is the youngest son of a king (usually the third son) he is treated as unable to take the same quest as his older brothers because of his perceived stupidity, for example, he might be silly enough to give away his last penny to a beggar on the road or save an animal instead of killing and eating it. Sometimes he is the only son of a poor family and sometimes he is an orphan, but it is his actions and attitudes that show his worth and set him apart whatever his parentage or family's position in the society within which he is placed.

Other motifs from within the fairy tale genre are, the faithful companion or friend, often found in the guise of an animal the hero has met with and rescued from cruelty, death or released from a spell, and the magical object or gift that enables the hero to accomplish tasks which would otherwise be impossible. Examples of these motifs can be found in The queen bee (Grimm) and The water of life (Grimm).

In order to look at the fairy tale narrative pattern and the youngest son motif I have chosen one of G. A. Henty's adventure stories. Within the constraints of this article it

is not possible to include an example from MacDonald's work, but as he wrote in the fairy tale genre his stories overtly contain the narrative pattern and some of the motifs cited above. By contrast, Henty's work does not immediately evoke the response of fairy tale narrative recognition from the reader. In the process of reassessing Henty's work, this approach aims to provoke further thought on the values carried in the text as it demonstrates the complex positioning of the imperialistic viewpoint in nineteenth century texts for children. For this reason I have chosen to focus on Henty in this instance.

Example from G.A. Henty

Henty's adventure story Captain Bayley's heir begins at Westminster School (Henty's old school) where the chief protagonist, Frank Norris, is shown practising his boxing skills in a serious fight between the 'skies' or local boys, and the scholars. The scholars, though hugely outnumbered are all "fighting like bricks", sustaining black eyes and bloody noses but never losing their courage.

Despite this heroism, the tide turns for Frank, a popular, competent, but not academic boy, when he is wrongly accused of stealing a ten-pound note. In fact he has been framed by his plotting cousin, who hopes to disgrace Frank and thus become Captain Bayley's sole heir.

Frank runs away to America, where he works at whatever comes his way before making his fortune in the Californian goldfields, as a result of selflessly nursing a sick old man after befriending the man's son. On his journey across America to California he encounters various adventures which test his character, including one in which he rescues and befriends a large and intelligent dog that helps him when he gets into other difficult situations.

He eventually returns to England, his name is cleared and he marries Alice, the girl who has waited for him, always believing him to be innocent.

The subplot is that the real heir is actually a crippled boy, the son of the Captain's runaway daughter, who had been taken in by a dustman's family in the event of her death, which occurred shortly after she collapsed on their doorstep. This boy is discovered as a result of another kindness done by Frank.

Though this may not immediately read much like a fairy tale, the same narrative pattern and motifs appear.

Frank Norris is an orphan. (Henty frequently made sure his heroes were without parents so that they could pursue their adventure independently.) He is rejected by society after his wrongful accusation and embarks on a journey to seek his fortune. He gains an animal friend when he rescues an injured dog and finds his fortune as a result of a compassionate act, which saves two lives. His homecoming is literal, his success assured and having married Alice, they live 'happily ever after'.

We find here the journey/quest to make his fortune, the struggle/test to prove himself able to make his way, success/achievement as a result of his openness and willingness to help, and his triumph/homecoming. His character is typical of the youngest/only son motif in his willingness to 'put himself out' to help without the expectation of reward.

There is one episode in the story which holds strong echoes of both Hans

Andersen's The Tinderbox and parallels an image in MacDonald's the Princess and Curdie, where Turk, Frank's dog is guarding the boxes carrying gold down to the town from the gold fields. Turk is described as guarding the boxes in a small room at a wayside resting place. The description of his position as guardian of the gold conjures up the same picture, except that he has one head not three, as that given in Andersen's tale and in MacDonald's image of Lina, Curdie's 'dog', guarding the crown in the palace at Gwyntystorm. Turk's rapid despatch of an intruder, bent on stealing the gold, shows his ferocity to be equal to that of either of his fairytale counterparts, and earned him a reputation that crossed the boundary of the ordinary into the realms of the marvellous. Not only do we have the narrative pattern of the fairytale but also the stereotypical characters. More parallels could be drawn from specific episodes in the story.

This is typical of the majority of Henty's adventure stories, there is a mixture of realism and the marvellous, the hero's journey is seen as a quest for fortune and usually there is a happy ending, in this case, two.

This clear link to the structure of folk and fairy tales could also account, in part, for Henty's popularity as this aspect of his stories can be 'seen to satisfy the same human and psychological needs as traditional tales' (Butts 74) although they are also pervaded by Victorian interests and ideologies.

Relevancy to overall focus of study

Both George MacDonald and G.A. Henty tap into a convention readily responded to by the reader. Henty's use of an 'ordinary' hero helps the reader to identify with his or her adventures and his use of the fairytale narrative pattern of
journey – struggle – success – homecoming.

He also links in to a structure that satisfies the reader's expectation of familiar patterns of danger and security, even when adjustment is needed to accommodate deviation within this basic pattern. In this way, both authors are able to use the narrative to 'embody values or personal vision' (Butts 74).

Henty made his educational purpose clear. His aim was to teach history and character.

MacDonald refutes such a clear-cut purpose by insisting his readers take what meaning they can from his stories and always leaving the reader to continue his stories, which tend to conclude to a beginning.

Both authors cross boundaries; they expand the reader's 'horizons of expectation' (Jauss, 1982). Henty does this by using the plot structure of one genre in the service of another. Whether knowingly or not, Henty conveys the

tone of positive hopefulness (that) belies the cynical view that cruelty and injustice are somehow more real than love and loyalty (Haughton 153).

whilst at the same time perpetuating and reinforcing the ideology that justified the continuation of the British Empire, the benefits of wealth creation and commercial enterprise with which his stories are so closely linked, without appearing to perceive

any discrepancy between the two.

George MacDonald knowingly used what was by the Victorian era seen as a children's genre, the fairy tale, to critique serious questions facing his society, and

to demonstrate that society as it existed was based on false and artificial values (Zipes 125).

His 'tone of positive hopefulness' takes the reader beyond the immediacy of an often forlorn hope for personal wealth and comfort (the reward of Henty heroes) to the hope for the whole community found in all true fairy tales.

G.A. Henty's work is being reprinted mainly for the homeschooling market in the US with the rationale that the project is worthwhile because of the values these stories convey to the reader.

George MacDonald's works have also been reprinted in the US within the last ten years and are frequently appropriated by a wide variety of interest groups ranging from evangelical Christians through Swedenborgians to any reader interested in fantasy writing, all of whom see his work in their own image, testimony in itself to the multivalent nature of his writing.

In the continued study of the apparent contrast between these writers, I hope to discover more about how they did reflect their period and in the process of doing so, how much they transcend their period.

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