The Golden Key Short Guide

The Golden Key by George MacDonald

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Overview

In "The Golden Key," MacDonald has created an imaginative world through which two adolescents—Mossy, the hero, and Tangle, the heroine—must undertake a special quest. They journey through Fairyland in search of the lock worked by a mysterious golden key they have found. The physical laws governing Fairyland differ from those that control the ordinary world. For instance, several years of ordinary time are required to complete events that take only a short time in Fairyland. In Fairyland the rainbow has a stationary endpoint that doesn't shift with the vantage point of the observer, as earth laws of optics require. "Things that look real in this country," says the narrator, "look very thin indeed in Fairyland, while some of the things that here cannot stand for a moment, will not move there." Trees can move, as Tangle discovers when one grabs her, and the owl-faced flying fish which serves as a guide for the wanderers is a unique creature by any standard. Humans can understand the language of animals, as when Tangle overhears a quarrel "in which the mole told the squirrel that the tail was the best part of him, and the squirrel called the mole spade fists." "The writer may, if he pleases, invent a little world of his own, with its own laws," wrote MacDonald in his essay "The Fantastic Imagination."

In MacDonald's view, however, fantasy literature should have a strong connection to the real world; it should tell people something useful about themselves, instruct or inspire them, and help them through life. In his essay, MacDonald described the two elements of fantasy: "In physical things a man may invent; in moral things he must obey—and take their laws with him into his invented world as well." Fortunately, these "moral things" are not preached clumsily. The peculiar power of "The Golden Key" is derived from MacDonald's ability to appeal directly to the imagination. MacDonald wrote that "the best way" to read fantasy "is not to bring the forces of our intellect upon it, but to be still and let it work upon that part of us for whose sake it exists."

About the Author

Respecte d as one of the foremost novelists of his time, George MacDonald also wrote prolifically in a number of other genres: poetry, reviews, essays, plays, sermons, and translations. Today, however, he is honored principally as the father of modern fantasy, an acknowledged influence on such twentieth-century masters as J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. A good portion of his fantasy literature was written for young readers.

MacDonald was born December 10, 1824, into a Scottish agricultural family in Aberdeenshire, one of eleven children, and one of several MacDonalds who suffered from tuberculosis. His mother died from the disease when he was eight. In 1840 he entered the University of Aberdeen, studying chemistry and physics, but financial difficulties delayed his studies, and he did not receive his degree until 1845. In between, his discovery of English romance and German mystical literature (said to have occurred while he catalogued the library of a mansion) led his interest away from study of the natural world to study of the supernatural world. Believing that the ministry was his true vocation, he earned a seminary degree and was appointed to a Congregational Church near London in 1851. He married that same year. The central event of his life occurred shortly thereafter: the congregation forced him out of the ministry because of his supposedly unorthodox theology. His chief heresy lay in a lenient attitude towards unbelievers and heathens, who, he thought, were not necessarily damned to eternal punishment in hell.

MacDonald still believed the ministry was his true calling, but he also had to earn a living for his growing family. Thus began his career as a writer. For him, writing satisfied two needs: attracting a paying audience, and expressing himself as a minister. On the brink of hardship before the publication of his first novel in 1863, MacDonald gradually established himself, and although he never became wealthy, he did share the friendship of many of the leading writers of his day. Among his close friends was Lewis Carroll, who rehearsed the thenunpublished Alice in Wonderland story on MacDonald's children. Despite his dedication to writing, MacDonald never lost his will to minister; whenever his schedule allowed, he expressed religious ideas in written form—directly in sermons or indirectly through fables like "The Golden Key." He died September 18, 1905, in Ashtead, Surrey, England.

Setting

The story begins in the normal world, in the households of Mossy and Tangle, who live on the border of Fairyland. The story ends with the pair climbing up the rainbow, moving into yet another world beyond earth's ken. In between, on a journey that takes a lifetime, they traverse Fairyland. They meet in a cottage in the woods and are set on their quest by Grandmother; they cross a strange valley, where they see the shadows of wondrous forms but not the forms which cast the shadows; becoming separated, they take different paths to the anteroom at the foot of the rain bow, where they meet again. On her way Tangle meets various guides who direct her through a succession of rocky passages, including one that leads into the bowels of the earth. Mossy completes his journey to the anteroom by walking eastward on the surface of the sea. For Mossy and Tangle, Fairyland serves as a Middle Earth, a conceivable world which mediates between the familiar life of the mundane world and unknowable life of the spiritual world.

Social Sensitivity

As the narrator of the story avows, the "good" creatures of Fairyland "will always help" the wanderer "far more than the evil ones will be able to hurt him."

Although the story has a religious Christian meaning, MacDonald's symbolic method is used to avoid overt sermonizing. Even more importantly, because the symbolism is suggestive rather than implicit, the story does not push any single narrow religious doctrine (in fact, neither God nor Church is mentioned).

Spirituality is presented undogmatically.

Literary Qualities

Symbolism is perhaps the most noticeable literary feature of "The Golden Key."

The symbols often embody layers of meaning, such as the golden key, which may stand for the imaginative faculty, or steadfast faith and love, or the inquisitive mind, or the willingness to follow leaders. Any or all of these could be "keys" which help people unlock the mysteries of life. The dominant symbol in the book is that of the journey or quest. As Mossy and Tangle seek the land at the top of the rainbow, they overcome physical obstacles that represent hindrances to their spiritual growth. The outer journey reflects their interior progress.

Other symbols in the work—the rainbow, fire, water, doorways, light and darkness—are all controlled by the central importance of the quest.

Themes and Characters

"The Golden Key" is a story about transitions, about closing the gaps between callowness and maturity, ignorance and understanding, and between lower and higher levels of spiritual attainment. The story suggests the qualities one must have to make the transition successfully: goodness or purity of heart, experience, concern for others, willingness to be guided, an active intuitive or imaginative faculty, determination, and, above all, the desire to evolve spiritually.

For Mossy and Tangle, the desire for the unseen higher level is first aroused by the appearance of the golden key. They desire to see the place into which the key would admit them. Later, the wondrous shadows in the valley similarly arouse their desire; they long to see the land "whence the shadows fall," so that they can see (and perhaps live among) the forms which cast the shadows.

Adolescence marks a period of transition between childhood and adulthood, and MacDonald uses the paradoxical nature of adolescence to support his theme of transition or spiritual development. To grow into maturity one must meet challenges, confront moral dilemmas, and make difficult decisions, yet experience alone does not effect true growth unless it is accompanied by childlike innocence, simple goodness, and an active imagination that evokes a vision of the higher world. Mossy's strength is his imagination. At the outset he is presented as an introspective child, who spends many hours alone reading and who is stirred by his aunt's stories about Fairyland. He is the bearer of the golden key, a symbol of the imagination. Tangle moves in an arduous but progressive fashion, and she apparently requires more guides to help her along the way.

Grandmother—wise, ancient in years but beautifully young in appearance— sets the pair on their quest, and both receive guidance from The Old Man of the Sea. Grandmother and The Old Man of the Sea share a strange "air-fish" between them that represents in fantastic form the theme of spiritual maturation. This creature begins as an ugly sea creature and then evolves into the owlfaced fish that Grandmother uses as a messenger. The creature's mission ends with it voluntarily flying into a pot of boiling water to be cooked and eaten. It reemerges, however, as a little angel "in human shape, with large white wings."

Tangle meets the weirdest and wisest guide of all—The Old Man' of the Fireafter riding a river down into the heart of the earth. In form this guide is a "little naked child," but he is "very, very old."

This contrast between the traveller and her guide supports the theme of the story. Poised between childhood and adulthood, Tangle embodies the aspiration toward spiritual maturity; The Old Man of the Fire has achieved maturity, which, ironically, turns out to be a perfect fusion of childlike innocence and experience.

Topics for Discussion

1. When Mossy hears about the golden key, his first response is that he could sell it for money. Why would this act have been a big mistake? What is the author suggesting about material possessions?

2. Mossy is told that his father, apparently now dead, had also found the key. What do you suppose the father used the key for?

3. When she first arrives at Grandmother's cottage, Tangle's appearance and habits reflect her name: she is "untidy." Why does MacDonald give her this characteristic initially?

4. Grandmother, who is young and beautiful despite being "thousands of years old," wears a green gown and goes barefoot. Discuss the possibility that she is a personification of nature, a hint at what nature can teach us about the life of the spirit.

5. The fish's sacrifice of self has a beneficial effect on Tangle: she can understand the language of animals. What other examples of selflessness or concern for others do you find in the story?

6. Grandmother tells Mossy, "you must look for the keyhole. That is your work." She also says she has her own work to do. If the tale is about growing spiritually, what is the place of "work" in this process? In this context "work" may mean "keeping steadfastly to the business of daily life."

7. Throughout the adventure, Mossy and Tangle seldom meet life-threatening situations, and indeed no major villains appear. Does the story suffer without a villain?

8. Many of the lines spoken by Mossy and Tangle are questions, not statements. What effect does this have on the story?

9. Part way through their journey, Mossy and Tangle, by then much older, become separated. Discuss the possibility that this separation means that one of them will die. If so, which one is ready for death?

10. Water figures prominently in the developing themes. Early in the story, Tangle takes a bath at Grandmother's cottage. At what other points does Tangle encounter water, and what benefit does she derive from these experiences? Is there any connection between the use of dreams and the use of water?

11. The reader never sees Mossy and Tangle's arrival in heaven, only their journey toward heaven. Why does MacDonald not describe his vision of what heaven is like?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. MacDonald has written that a fantasy writer may invent a world controlled by different physical laws than those which control the real world. Show how Illustration by Arthur Hughes for The Complete Fairy Stories by George MacDonald. Franklin Watts: New York (1961).

the physical laws of Fairyland differ from earth's physical laws.

2. Think of three or four definitions of the word "key" (refer to a dictionary if you wish). Then write an essay, showing how each definition helps explain the meaning of the story.

3. All of the guides in the story are in some ways young and in other ways very old. Survey these characters, showing in what way each combines youth and age.

Then discuss why MacDonald invented characters who fuse these two seemingly opposite qualities.

4. In "The Golden Key" characters often dream or go into dreamlike states.

Survey these instances, with a view towards showing why dreams are appropriate for a story that celebrates the power of the imagination.

5. Research dreams in an encyclopedia or in a psychology textbook, then explain what insights people learn from dreaming.

6. The stories of MacDonald are difficult to classify. "What he does best," C. S. Lewis observed, "is fantasy—fantasy that hovers between the allegorical and the mythopoeic." Look up definitions of the terms "fantasy," "myth," "allegory," and "fairy tale" to see which best applies to "The Golden Key."

7. Read At the Back of the North Wind, another (considerably longer) story by MacDonald. Like "The Golden Key," this other story also explores the nature of death. Compare "The Golden Key" and At the Back of the North Wind for theme and technique. In technique, for example, the latter story has many more realistic elements, such as views of squalid London streets.

For Further Reference

Donoghue, Denis. "The Golden Key."

The New York Review of Books (December 21, 1967): 34-36. Donoghue offers thought-provoking, though speculative, discussions on MacDonald's use of metaphor, nature, and adolescence.

Hein, Rolland. The Harmony Within: The Spiritual Vision of George MacDonald.

Grand Rapids, MI: Christian University Press, n.d. Hein discusses "The Golden Key" at the end of chapter 7.

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Lewis, C. S. "Preface." In George MacDonald: An Anthology. New York: Macmillan, 1947. Lewis characterizes the type of fantasy MacDonald wrote.

MacDonald, Greville. George MacDonald and His Wife. New York: Dial Press, 1924. This is the standard edition of MacDonald's life and letters.

Manlove, C. N. Modern Fantasy: Five Studies. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975. Manlove discusses symbolism in "The Golden Key" and shows how the arousal of a desire for heaven is the active ingredient in MacDonald's fantasy.

Reis, H. Richard. George MacDonald.

New York: Twayne, 1972. The book contains some of the best commentary on "The Golden Key" available, though one must assemble the commentary by looking in several different sections of the book. Reis shows how the story expresses the theme of "spiritual education" by means of several "analogies."

Wolff, Robert Lee. The Golden Key: A Study of the Fiction of George MacDonald. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961. This book contains a substantial interpretation of the "The Golden Key," partly but not wholly based on Freudian assumptions.

Related Titles

"The Golden Key" is most like MacDonald's two long fantasy tales for adults, Phantastes and Lilith However, MacDonald did write numerous other stories for young readers. The most notable of these are At the Back of the North Wind, in which the North Wind takes a boy for rides to teach him about life beyond death, "The Light Princess," in which a girl loses her gravity until a wandering prince breaks the spell and gives her back her weight, and the Curdie books (The Princess and the Goblin and The Princess and Curdie), in which a miner's son receives supernatural aid as he protects the Princess from goblins and her father from disloyal servants.

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