The Princess and the Goblin Short Guide

The Princess and the Goblin by George MacDonald

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Overview

Although George MacDonald wrote The Princess and the Goblin primarily for children, his fantasy continues to delight readers of all ages. It is the story of two young people who grow in maturity and spiritual development as they thwart the evil plans of goblins.

MacDonald's book contains the elements of good story telling—an exciting, well-paced plot and believable characters, who have human weaknesses as well as strengths.

The twentieth-century English poet, W. H. Auden, called MacDonald's technique "dream realism" and honored The Princess and the Goblin as "the only English children's book in the same class as the Alice books." Unquestionably MacDonald employed fantasy as a way of presenting the Christian spiritual concepts of faith and love. But MacDonald's marvelous story, with its fusion of fantasy and realism, is so original that it appeals to the imagination rather than to analytical faculties, letting the reader experience his spiritual message at a deep psychological level. These qualities led C. S. Lewis to observe that MacDonald's art is essentially the art of myth-making.

About the Author

One of his age's foremost novelists, George MacDonald produced a wide variety of writings, including poems, plays, reviews, essays, sermons, and translations. Today, however, he is remembered mainly as the father of modern fantasy, an acknowledged influence on such twentieth-century masters as J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. Many of his fantasy works were written for young readers.

MacDonald was born December 10, 1824 into a large Scottish agricultural family in Aberdeenshire. George, along with several of the family's eleven children, suffered from tuberculosis; his mother died of the disease when he was eight. In 1840 he entered the University of Aberdeen, where he studied chemistry and physics. His discovery of English romance and German mystical literature diverted his interest from the natural to the supernatural world.

Deciding that the ministry was his true vocation, he earned a seminary degree and, in 1851, was appointed to a Congregational Church near London. He married that same year. The central event of his life occurred shortly thereafter; his 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.

Although MacDonald still believed the ministry was his true calling, he turned his energies to writing in order to earn a living for his growing family. As a popular author he sought to satisfy two needs: the commercial need to attract a paying audience and his personal need to express himself as a minister of spiritual truth. At first MacDonald labored continually on the brink of real hardship, but gradually, he gained firmer financial footing, especially after the publication of his first novel in 1863.

Even though he never flourished financially, he shared the friendship of many of the leading writers of the day. Lewis Carroll rehearsed his then-unpublished Alice's Adventures in Wonderland on MacDonald's children. Despite the difficulties of popular writing, MacDonald never lost his desire to minister. He continued to promote what he considered religious truth directly in his written sermons or indirectly through tales such as The Princess and the Goblin.

Setting

The opening phrase, "There once was a Princess," places the action in a distant land, in the distant past. The country is ruled by a king and there are few signs of technology. The action takes place in and around (and even under) one of the king's great houses, which is situated halfway up the side of a mountain. In the lower regions of the great house live the princess, Irene, her nurse, Lootie, and the other servants. One day while exploring an apparently unoc cupied region of the house, Irene discovers a mysterious woman known as Grandmother, whose guidance and supernatural powers help Irene through her subsequent adventures. Irene is also assisted by Curdie, the son of a miner, who lives with his father and mother in a humble cottage farther up the mountain.

Underneath the mountain, in a subterranean kingdom, live the goblins.

They moved there generations earlier, and over the years have regressed from normal people into squat, misshapen beings with hard heads and soft feet.

Their domestic animals have also changed into exotic forms. By day the goblins remain below ground, nursing an ancient grievance against people; at night they emerge to do whatever mischief they can. Their plan for revenge is to kidnap Irene—by tunnelling from below into the great house—and marry her to Harelip, Prince of the Goblins.

Failing that, they plan to send a deadly flood through the mines. While working late in the mines one night, Curdie overhears part of their plans and takes action to thwart them.

Social Sensitivity

Because the story is a spiritual fantasy in a fairy tale setting, it contains almost no social commentary. MacDonald dramatizes the process of a young developing mind's quest for truth. Error and failure are attributed to universal human nature, not to the corrupting influence of social attitudes and institutions. For instance, no manifestation of organized religion (except for one unrevealing reference to a parson), appears in the story, even though it has a religious theme. The only bit of class snobbery expressed by Lootie is outweighed by the princess's attitude, which values virtue over social status.

One might expect that a book written during the Victorian era would reflect the period's predominantly patriarchal values and show men as leaders and women as subjects to be protected. However, the story is relatively free from sexist assumptions. Curdie's mother keeps house in the traditional fashion, but she is an active figure whose wisdom and guidance is largely responsible for Curdie's conversion. The heroine and the hero of the story share center stage.

Curdie may do the fighting in the climactic battle, but Irene undertakes the dangerous mission behind enemy lines.

Finally, and most importantly, the story's spiritual guide is a female. This alone marks The Princess and the Goblin as a work which avoids using traditional gender roles to explain the disposition of the world.

Literary Qualities

In The Princess and the Goblin MacDonald offers plausible characters with human emotions and motives. Princess Irene and Curdie both have unusual strength of character, yet they sometimes fall prey to temptations and human weaknesses. Irene panics in a stressful situation; Curdie lets loose with a cutting, hurtful remark. The evil goblins are memorable for their cunning and for their bizarre sense of family togetherness.

The plot of The Princess and the Goblin contains a large number of exciting incidents. There are preliminary skirmishes, suspenseful reconnaissance missions, and daring rescues, all building to a climactic battle near the end.

The story's narrative incidents are not only skillfully paced but also motivated by both internal and external conflicts.

The goblins' stratagems (external conflict) threaten the life of the princess and lead Curdie to thwart their plot. Charac ters also go through internal struggles as they commit acts of folly or heroism.

The fantasy elements may initially attract the reader's attention, but the characters and plot give The Princess and the Goblin its lasting value.

Themes and Characters

Princess Irene is a dynamic character, who matures as the story progresses.

During the course of the action she gradually, and at times painfully, learns that there is a supernatural reality beyond the observable world, a truer reality whose power is tapped by having faith in the unseen. In the first part of the story Irene struggles to convince herself that Grandmother actually exists and is concerned with the health of her soul. At first, Irene is frustrated because Lootie will not believe such a being exists, but later Irene herself begins to think the whole experience was only a dream. Midway through the story, Irene's faith wavers for the last time. One of the goblin's malformed creatures surprises Irene in her bedroom. Instead of going upstairs as Grandmother instructed, "her heart failed her" momentarily and she rushed foolishly outside where the goblins could catch her. Fortunately, Irene fights off the panic and returns to Grandmother, who pardons her because she has not done wrong "wilfully." Afterwards she seems perfectly assured of her faith and, in fact, soon takes on a dangerous mission. She follows an invisible thread, spun by Grandmother out of spiders' webs, into the bowels of the mountain to rescue Curdie, who had been captured by the goblins. Thus, Irene uses her faith to help another.

Curdie's guide through the goblin caves is an ordinary ball of string, collected for him by his mother. This real string fails Curdie and he is captured by the goblins. By means of the magical thread, a token of her trust in Grandmother, Irene finds Curdie's jail and leads him out to freedom. Afterwards, when Irene takes Curdie upstairs to visit Grandmother, he does not have the ability to see her. He sees only "a heap of musty straw" where Grandmother's splendid furniture is. "Curdie is not yet able to believe some things," says Grandmother in order to comfort Irene.

In many ways Curdie is a familiar hero.

Brave and resourceful, he cares for the welfare of others more than for his own safety. But he also has the unusual talent of making up songs to confound his enemy the goblins. As a natural poet, Curdie shows the value of an imaginative approach to life that relies on intuition as a guide through the maze of error and confusion. A valuable function of imagination is to keep the mind receptive to belief. Eventually, through tribulation and instruction, Curdie's faith develops to the point where he too can see Grandmother and use the invisible thread.

The goblins live underground, away from the light. They hate music and beings who are inventive. Their own minds are bent on revenge and domination. Paralleling the depravity of their minds, their bodies have become deformed. They are emblems of what becomes of people who have turned away from a spiritual life. However, their nasty wit, often exercised on each other, makes them interesting antagonists.

A compelling and mysterious figure, Grandmother is high above the sullen, earth-buried goblins. She demonstrates to people that there is a greater reality beyond the reality of

this world. She has existed for hundreds of years, can change her form, has a marvelous lamp which can shine through walls—all evidence of her otherworldly nature. She is not a witch, however. Instead, her character is Christ-like. Her role in the story is to guide Irene lovingly, step by careful step, into mature belief. Along the way Irene grows out of her selfcentered child's world and shows concern for others by shielding Lootie from the king's displeasure and rescuing Curdie. Grandmother also has the power to heal body and soul. She uses an ointment to heal a cut in Irene's finger. Her cleansing fire of roses is reserved for those who have attained some degree of spiritual enlightenment, and the silver bath she soaks Irene in after the bruising rescue mission gives Irene peace of mind as well as comfort of the body. Through these mystical powers, however, shines the essential quality of love. "I confess I have sometimes been afraid about my children," she remarks to Irene at one point.

Grandmother wants us to see past the murk of daily life into the truth of greater reality, the world of spirit and imagination.

Topics for Discussion

1. Lootie, the nurse, is responsible for taking care of Irene. Describe their relationship and explain why MacDonald included Lootie's character in the story.

2. In the big battle scene, the goblins almost capture Lootie rather than Irene, their intended victim. What is the significance of this?

3. Besides Lootie, the other adult female in the story is Curdie's mother.

Compare the function of Curdie's mother in the story to that of Lootie and Grandmother.

4. Though the goblins are ruthless, they are also clever and even witty. Why does MacDonald give them this combination of characteristics? Does their wittiness make them less forceful as villains?

5. Besides the goblins' wit, what other examples of humor are there in the story? Is such humor appropriate in a story that has a serious theme?

6. Very few, if any, truly horrifying incidents occur in the story, even though it has potentially scary material, such as night-stalking goblins. Did MacDonald fail to take full advantage of his material?

7. Irene and Curdie have two enemies: the goblins and their own inner weaknesses. Which of the two forces is their greatest enemy?

8. By chance Curdie lays his head against a thin section of a cave wall, allowing him to overhear the goblins' plans. Do coincidences like this one make the story less compelling? Are there too many coincidences in the plot?

Will readers accept a greater, lesser, or an equal amount of coincidence in a fantasy story, compared to a realistic story?

9. Discuss why Grandmother is called "Grandmother" and not "fairy godmother," which is what this type of character is often called in fairy tales.

10. Several times Irene wonders if her visits to Grandmother were all a dream.

While reading the story did you wonder whether the meetings were not simply dreams? Is this important to the story?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Survey the cast of characters in the story to determine which ones believe Grandmother exists, which do not, and the reasons for their belief or disbelief.

2. MacDonald's stories are difficult to classify. "What he does best," C. S. Lewis has observed, "is fantasy—fantasy that hovers between the allegorical and the mythopoeic." Look up definitions of the terms "fantasy," "myth," "allegory," and "fairy tale." Which best applies to The Princess and the Goblin?

3. The Princess and the Goblin has many of the same characters as its sequel, The Princess and Curdie, but the stories seem quite different in tone and emphasis. Compare the two, paying particular attention to the importance of the townspeople, the reduced importance of Irene, and the ending of The Princess and Curdie.

4. The Princess and the Goblin traces a character's development from a state of immaturity to a state of maturity. Identify and discuss the major steps or phases Irene and Curdie go through in this process. In Irene's case, how do her changes relate to the visits to Grandmother?

5. Grandmother lives in three rooms containing many marvelous objects— among them, a silver bath, a fire of roses, her crown, a magic lamp, and intelligent pigeons. What is the significance of each of the three rooms? Choose two or three of these magical objects and discuss their possible religious associations.

6. Both Grandmother in The Princess and the Goblin and Asian in C. S. Lewis's Narnia tales have characteristics similar to those of Christ. Compare Grandmother and Asian as Christ-figures.

7. According to a theory advanced by Sigmund Freud, the father of psychiatry, three entities make up a person's mind: the id, ego, and superego. Research Freud's theory in an encyclopedia and discuss how well the goblins, Irene, and the Grandmother represent these three mental aspects.

For Further Reference

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Related Titles

About ten years after the publication of The Princess and the Goblin, MacDonald wrote a sequel, The Princess and Curdie. In it Curdie journeys to a city to rescue Irene's father, the king, who is being slowly poisoned by treacherous counselors. Curdie fights the treasonous servants, the churlish townspeople, and an invading army. Irene's role in the action is perfunctory; she is merely a passive bystander. And because Grandmother's role is also much reduced, the story lacks the spiritual emphasis of the earlier work, focusing instead on social satire. In the portraits of the townspeople, we see a community whose social ties are determined by greed and envy. MacDonald relies less on his story to express his theme and often directly addresses the reader. Fortunately, the overt didacticism can be brilliant at times, as when the unfaithful are said to believe in nothing but their dinner, and must have that between their teeth to believe it. MacDonald's style and the vocabulary he uses ("circumfulgent," "homoeopathetically," "peculation") indicate that he intended this story for an adult audience.

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