ABSTRACT

Receiving "The True Name":
Reading *Lilith* as a Mystical Dream-Vision

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George MacDonald's penultimate novel, *Lilith*, has puzzled readers and
critics alike with its strange symbolism and seemingly chaotic dreams. One's
comprehension of the novel ultimately hinges upon the right interpretation of
dreams. Those who ignore or gloss over the dream sequence as a mere plot
device completely miss the point of the novel, while those who view the chaotic
nature of the dreams as a weakness of the plot fail to recognize not only the
intentionality of the chaos, but also the structure the dreams provide for
understanding the unitive heart of the novel. Reading *Lilith* as a mystical dream-
vision not only provides the reader an historical context with which to interpret
the text, but also maintains the hope clearly evident in the novel's conclusion by
recognizing the true anagogical sense and purpose of the dreams.
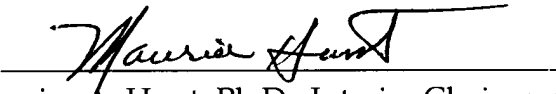
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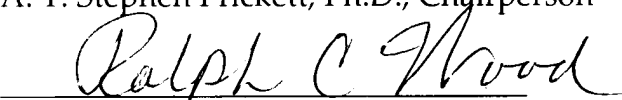
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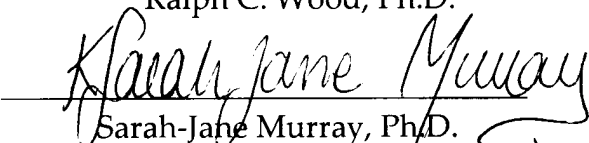Approved by the Department of English

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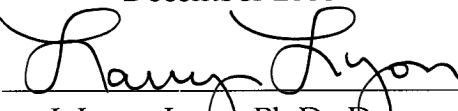
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my parents, whose tremendous example of faith and endurance has taught me to have and be no less. Thank you for your willingness to serve the Lord, no matter the cost.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

For many, writing is an act of discovery. Fiction writers often speak of the

fluidity of the writing process as though it mirrors the uncertainty of life, saying

that they never quite know what the characters will do or who they will be until

they are written. And then there are those few who speak of having *received* a

story or set of ideas as though it were inspired or given in a revelation. The

validity of such a claim obviously cannot be ascertained, though it is safe to

assume that if such a thing does indeed take place, its occurrence is not an

everyday thing; it is a special, unique happening. Greville MacDonald, son of

writer George MacDonald, suggests that his father's penultimate work, *Lilith*, is

the result of such an occasion, saying that its writing was "a mandate direct from

God."[1]

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[1]Greville gives evidence for this by noting the wordy nature of *Lilith*'s first draft: "Its first writing is unlike anything else he ever did. It runs from page to page, with few breaks into new paragraphs, with little punctuation, with scarcely a word altered, and in a handwriting freer perhaps than most of his, yet with the same beautiful legibility. The mandate thus embodied in symbolic forms, over which he did not ponder, he then gave it a more correct array: he rewrote it, allowing the typewriter its help, but adding his usual and profuse pen-emendations." In Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife* (1924; New York: Johnson, 1971) 548. (Hereafter cited as *GMW*.)

Lilith underwent several revisions over the span of five years before MacDonald felt it was worthy of publication in 1895. The book came close to never being published because MacDonald's wife was so "troubled by the book's strange imagery," but she finally agreed to its being published when Greville proclaimed it to be "The Revelation of St. George."[2] Unfortunately, most of the book's first readers tended to agree with Louisa, as one reviewer, who labeled it a "strange and complicated allegory," said "it is not less than grievous to find the sweet bells jangled, and the imagination, once lofty and penetrating, declined to the incoherent and grotesque."[3] Another reviewer commented that it "lead[s] the hero and the reader [on] a wild-goose chase from the Here into the Nowhere. . . ."[4] After over one hundred years of publication, *Lilith* continues to elicit confused criticism and, at best, muddled praise. Even those critics who appreciate the novel and the force of its symbolism do so only with hesitation; Rolland Hein, for example, acknowledges the "vivid characters [. . .] and vivid sense of place," but goes on to point out "the weaknesses that remain to disappoint," and in particular, "the weight of idea that is not integrated with the symbolism."[5] And yet, despite its overwhelmingly incongruous reception, critics and readers cannot

[2]*GMW* 548.

[3]*The Athenaeum* 106 (9 Nov. 1895): 639, cited in "Lilith Centenary Reviews," *Seven* 12 (1995): 19.

[4]*The Critic* 28.727 (25 Jan. 1896): 58, cited in "Lilith Centenary Reviews," 20.

[5]Rolland Hein, *The Harmony Within*, Rev. ed. (Chicago: Cornerstone Press, 1999) 146–47.

seem to ignore the mythopoeic force of the novel: "The story seizes your attention, ignites your imagination, holds your interest. It is profound and moving, haunted with shadowy figures, filled with bright, mocking faces, illuminated with flashes of stark and terrible and thrilling imaginative force."[6]

So where does the confusion lie? If the novel's imaginative force is strong enough to compel attention, then a failure remains, either in the text or in the reader's comprehension. Most critics seem unsettled by the strange symbolism, either completely ignoring or else pointing to the chaotic nature of the dream sequence as evidence for *Lilith*'s ultimate failure as a mythic romance. This study will argue that those who ignore or gloss over the dream sequence as a mere plot device completely miss the point of the novel, while those who view the chaotic nature of the dreams as a weakness of the plot fail to recognize not only the intentionality of the chaos, but also the structure that the dreams provide for understanding the novel as a whole. One's comprehension of and appreciation for the novel hinges upon the right interpretation of the dreams.[7] A close

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[6]Lin Carter, introduction, *Lilith*, by George MacDonald (New York: Ballantine Books, 1969) viii.

[7]In the wake of Freudian and Jungian criticism, it must be noted that this "interpretation of dreams" does not intentionally draw anything from the wells of psychoanalysis or Jungian oneiromancy, though much of the modern understanding of dreams is, whether for good or ill, indebted to both Freud and Jung. Robert Lee Wolff's overtly Freudian reading of *Lilith* as a novel of utter despair is a perfect example of a blatant *mis*interpretation of dreams as they appear in the novel. (See Robert Lee Wolff, *The Golden Key* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961] 332.) The Jungian understanding of the psyche as being comprised of the equilibrium of various opposing sensory inputs and energies suggests that it is the chaos of the unconscious that finds its

analysis of the dream sequence will reveal its affinities with the traditional, medieval narrative form, the dream-vision. Of course, mere similarities in texts matter little in signifying meaning, but *Lilith*'s likeness to medieval dream-visions is no coincidence. George MacDonald was highly influenced by a group of German Medievalists and was one of the early Victorian enthusiasts for English medieval writers. Even apart from reading *Lilith* as a traditional dream-vision, the dreams indicate a refining process in which chaos is melted away to reveal Vane's vision of what he understood to be the heart of God. This ultimate revelation of God's heart demonstrates the essential characteristic of what Evelyn Underhill has called "the mystic way." These two qualities of the dreams—the mystical experience and the structure of the dream-vision—combine to provide the reader with the ultimate key for reading and understanding *Lilith*.

But does it really make a difference in one's understanding of *Lilith* if it is read as a mystical dream-vision as opposed to a simple, fantastical romance? Does one need to refer to medieval mysticism to understand the power and nature of evil that catalyzes the plot? The short answer is yes. After all, it was MacDonald who suggested the various levels of meaning hidden within a text! Reading *Lilith* as a mystical dream-vision not only provides the reader an

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expression in dreams. This distinction may be useful in discerning MacDonald's different perspective on the nature of dreams, but in any case, I will argue that MacDonald's dream sequence in *Lilith* does not owe its explanation as to source or interpretation to "the chaos of the unconscious."

historical context with which to interpret the text, but it also maintains the hope

clearly evident in the novel's conclusion by recognizing the true anagogical sense

and purpose of the dreams.

Medieval and Mystical

Scholars frequently mention in passing either the medieval or mystical

qualities of MacDonald's writing, but relatively little critical attention has been

paid to the depth that these characteristics add to his work. The first to mention

these qualities as belonging together was MacDonald's most celebrated admirer,

C. S. Lewis, who, after reading MacDonald's first adult fantasy novel, *Phantastes*,

said:

> The woodland journeyings in that story, the ghostly enemies, the
> ladies both good and evil, were close enough to my habitual
> imagery to lure me on without the perception of change. It is as if I
> were carried sleeping across the frontier, or as if I had died in the
> old country and could never remember how I came alive in the
> new. For in one sense the new country was exactly like the old. I
> met there all that had already charmed me in Malory, Spenser,
> Morris and Yeats. But in another sense all was changed. I did not
> yet know (and I was long in learning) the name of the new quality,
> the bright shadow, that rested on the travels of Anodos. I do now.
> It was Holiness. For the first time the song of the sirens sounded
> like the voice of my mother or my nurse. Here was old wives'
> tales; there was nothing to be proud of in enjoying them. It was
> though the voice which had called to me from the world's end were
> now speaking at my side.[8]

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[8]C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (Austin: Harcourt, 1955) 179–80.

Reading MacDonald was, in a sense, for Lewis, like reading the old medieval

classics. MacDonald's stories exhibited that same enchanting quality as the

works of Malory and Spenser—only that they were also redeemed by a kind of

"Holiness." While we will return later to examine not only the similarities

between *Lilith* and the medieval classics, but also the direct influence of medieval

texts on MacDonald's writing of *Lilith*, it will be helpful to spend some time

examining this "new quality" of MacDonald's writing that Lewis has called "the

bright shadow" or "Holiness." Yet Lewis is certainly not the only critic to

recognize this particular feature of MacDonald's writing. G. K. Chesterton says:

> In his particular type of literary work [MacDonald] did indeed
> realize the apparent paradox of a St. Francis of Aberdeen, seeing
> the same sort of halo round every flower and bird. It is not the
> same thing as any poet's appreciation of the beauty of the flower or
> bird. A heathen can feel that and remain heathen, or in other
> words remain sad. It is a certain special sense of significance,
> which the tradition that most values it calls sacramental.[9]

This quality of "Holiness" or sacramental significance is often equated

with what Stephen Prickett acknowledges to be the "mystical insights"[10] evident

in *Lilith*. But what is meant by "mystical"? The terms "mysticism" and

"mystical" are used relatively frequently and with varying degrees of meaning,

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[9]G. K. Chesterton, introduction, *GMW*, 14.

[10]Stephen Prickett, *Victorian Fantasy*, Rev. ed., (Waco, TX: Baylor UP, 2005) 192.

so it is important to distinguish exactly what one means in calling MacDonald's

writing "mystical."

CHAPTER TWO

MacDonald's Mysticism

"The word [mysticism] is so wide in its meaning, so exhaustless in its

associations, that often it has lost clear and definite outline."[1] The term is

sometimes used in a derogatory sense and with a note of contempt, as one of the

definitions of "mysticism" listed in the Oxford English Dictionary implies:

"Religious belief that is characterized by vague, obscure, or confused spirituality;

a belief system based on the assumption of occult forces, mysterious

supernatural agencies, etc."[2] Conversely, in its most common sense, *mystical* is

understood to be synonymous with "spiritual" or "other-worldly," and it is this

sense that both Lewis and Chesterton, along with other critics,[3] acknowledge as

an integral part of MacDonald's writing. Understood in this sense, however,

MacDonald's mystical qualities are not readily distinguished from those that

define it as fantasy literature, as a genre that lingers on the threshold of two

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[1]Jacomina Korteling, *Mysticism in Blake and Wordsworth* (New York: Haskell House, 1966) 1.

[2]"Mysticism," *OED Online*, 2nd ed., Oxford University Press. 1 Oct. 2006 <http://dictionary.oed.com>.

[3]Richard Reis and Michael Mendelson are two exceptions; both have briefly explored MacDonald's "proper mysticism." See Richard H. Reis, *George MacDonald* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1972), 38–40; and Michael Mendelson, "George MacDonald's *Lilith* and the Conventions of Ascent," *Studies in Scottish Literature* 20 (1985): 197–218.

worlds and expresses truths merely suggested in this world but realized in that other.

The Fantastic vs. The Mystical

Though the word "fantasy" has been used in English since the Middle Ages, its meaning dramatically changed—or rather, expanded—at the beginning of the nineteenth century. For many years, "fantasy" and "imagination" were almost inextricably linked, but at the start of the Victorian period, the role of the imagination began to be understood as something distinct from that of fantasy. While Coleridge's definition of the imagination as "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM"[4] was relatively controversial in the Victorian mind, his sentiment reveals the Romantic tendency to elevate the imagination to the level of the divine. For MacDonald, fantasy and the imagination remained intertwined; fantasy was the shadow of the imagination, an image clearly expressed by Stephen Prickett in his study on the counter-cultural movement of Victorian fantasy, when he says, "Imagination and fantasy forever turn about each other in the Victorian mind, light and dark."[5] MacDonald acknowledged the great power of the imagination to allow man to

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[4]Coleridge, qtd. in Stephen Prickett, *Victorian Fantasy*, Rev. ed., (Waco, TX: Baylor UP, 2005) 9.

[5]Prickett, 11.

participate in the act of creation. MacDonald's idea of "sub-creation," the essential quality or purpose of the imagination, is always intended to remind man, not of the creation, but the Creator. For MacDonald, the imagination cannot create *ex nihilo* as God does, but instead, creates out of the good that God has instilled in the mind and His own creation. In this way, MacDonald distinguishes himself from the English Romantics that he otherwise revered; MacDonald did not see the imagination as something that puts man on the same level as God, but always acknowledged it as a gift from God.

While the actual words were undergoing an evolution of sorts, there was another phenomenon developing in conjunction with it—that of the fantasy novel. Prickett suggests that those first writers in the tradition "deliberately [. . .] tried to extend and enrich ways of perceiving 'reality' by a variety of nonrealistic techniques that included nonsense, dreams, [. . .] and the creation of other worlds. [. . .] As they struggle to do justice to the richness and complexity of their worlds they shade off imperceptibly into fantasy."[6] MacDonald is generally agreed to be the "father of fantasy literature," and the genre certainly reveals him at his best. Though he was not the first writer to deal with the realm of the fantastic, critics often suggest that he is perhaps the greatest fantasy writer of the

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[6]Prickett, 3.

Victorian period (some say of any period) and certainly that his works are the

first in which "something like a fully balanced artistic theory emerges."[7]

Fantasy literature, in its creation of new and other worlds, forces the

reader to find a new language for the new kind of experiences it elicits. The

literature preserves and enhances this world by pointing to another. By these

other worlds, "we have been able to hold a mirror to the shadowy and more

mysterious sides of our own, and see reflected in a glass darkly mysteries not

otherwise to be seen at all."[8] This numinous quality of fantasy literature

perpetuates the synonymous use of "mystical" and "fantastic." While the two

terms are certainly related, it is important to note that fantasy does not fully

encompass MacDonald's mysticism. In order to understand it more fully, we

must examine mysticism in its proper sense.

The "True Name"

In his sermon, "The New Name," MacDonald evaluates the role of

mysticism in the Book of Revelation:

> I use the word *mysticism* as representing a certain mode of
> embodying truth, common, in various degrees, to almost all, if not
> all, the writers of the New Testament. The attempt to define it
> thoroughly would require an essay. I will hazard but one

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[7]Prickett, 12.

[8]Prickett, 3.

suggestion towards it: A mystical mind is one which, having perceived that the highest expression of which the truth admits, lies in the symbolism of nature and the human customs that result from human necessities, prosecutes thought about truth so embodied by dealing with the symbols themselves after logical forms. This is the highest mode of conveying the deepest truth [. . .] .

For, seeing the mystical energy of a holy mind here speaks of God as giving something, we must understand that the essential thing, and not any of its accidents or imitations, is intended. [. . .]

The true name is one which expresses the character, the nature, the being, the *meaning* of the person who bears it. It is the man's own symbol,—his soul's picture, in a word,—the sign which belongs to him and to no one else.[9]

I quote at length here to illustrate the depth of MacDonald's view of mysticism. MacDonald describes mysticism as the embodying of a truth given by God as an "essential thing" or "true name." This name is given, as MacDonald goes on to say, "to him that overcometh [. . .] when he has overcome."[10] This carefully delineated system or process of mysticism is evident in *Lilith* on a variety of levels.

First, if we take Greville's claim to be true that his father wrote *Lilith* in response to a "mandate direct from God," then we can see the novel as a certain embodiment of revealed truth. While the credibility of Greville's biography of his father is often questioned, the evidence for this particular claim supports Greville's assertion. Of course, it is important to note that while *Lilith* underwent

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[9]George MacDonald, "The New Name," *Unspoken Sermons I, II, III* (Whitehorn, CA: Johannesen, 2004) 67–71.

[10]"The New Name," 73.

several drafts, the actual writing of the first draft illustrates the possibility of

inspired writing. The first draft "runs from page to page, with few breaks into

new paragraphs, with little punctuation, with scarcely a word altered, and in a

handwriting freer perhaps than most of his, yet with the same beautiful

legibility."[11] If we acknowledge this premise, the final, published version, then,

is the "essential thing" that bears the "true name [. . .] which expresses the

character, the nature, the being, the *meaning*" of that truth revealed to

MacDonald. This is, admittedly, a somewhat contrived example of the

mysticism within *Lilith*, and yet it serves to illustrate the simple structure of

MacDonald's mystical system.

There is, however, a more compelling example within the text that mirrors

MacDonald's use and understanding of mysticism in his sermon. When Vane

first enters the region of the seven dimensions, the raven asks him who he is, but

Vane is unable to respond:

> I became at once aware that I could give him no notion of who I
> was. [. . .] Then I understood that I did not know myself, did not
> know what I was, had no grounds on which to determine that I was
> one and not another. As for the name I went by in my own world, I
> had forgotten it, and did not care to recall it, for it meant
> nothing [. . .] .[12]

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[11]*GMW*, 548.

[12]George MacDonald, *Lilith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 14.

Twice in this other region, Vane is unable to give an answer to those who ask him to identify himself; Mara later tells him that no person knows his real name until it has "settled at last."[13] Knowing MacDonald's understanding of mysticism helps to reveal the meaning behind Vane's inability to recall his own name. He does not know who he is—the "essential thing" of himself—and so he is unable to decipher his true name. But, rather than embark on a quest to "find himself" in the typical romantic fashion, Vane must learn what it is to overcome, and only in overcoming will he be given his true name and full embodiment of self. We will return later to examine how this process is concluded in the final dream sequence, but for now these textual clues serve to illustrate MacDonald's deep interest in and familiarity with mysticism in its proper sense, that is, what Evelyn Underhill has called "the mystic way."[14]

"The Mystic Way"

luce intellettüal, piena d'amore;
    amor di vero ben, pien di letizia;
    letizia che transcende ogni dolzore.
[. . . . .]

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[13]*Lilith* 74.

[14]Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (1910; New York: Meridian Books, 1957) 167.

> Lume è lassù, che visible face
> > lo Creatore a quella creatura
> > che solo in lui vedere ha la sua pace[15]

In her authoritative study, Evelyn Underhill sets out to distinguish the characteristics of mysticism as it spans all the religious traditions and thereby to define the spiritual process of the so-called Mystic Way. "Mysticism, then," begins Underhill, "is not an opinion: it is not a philosophy. [. . .] On the one hand it is not merely the power of contemplating Eternity: on the other, it is not to be identified with any kind of religious queerness. It is the name of that organic process which involves the perfect consummation of the Love of God." [16] True mysticism is not a theory, but a way of life and entirely transcendental and spiritual. Another defining characteristic of this "organic process" is that its purpose and aim is Love. Walter Hilton, a fourteenth-century mystic, eloquently

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[15]Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, XXX: 40–42, 100–02. Dante celebrates here his entrance into the Empyrean: the dwelling-place of God and the blessed; and the ultimate source of light. Mark Musa, in his translation of *Paradiso* has noted that "the nature of the Empyrean is based on the workings of trinity: light (vision of the intellect), then love (action of the will, which follows seeing), and finally ecstasy (the joy that comes from the fulfillment of vision and love)" (358). Dante's use of *luce*, *amore*, and *letizia* beautifully describes the aim of "the mystic way," which is expressed in lines 100–102 above. (See *Paradiso*, trans. by Mark Musa [New York: Penguin, 1986].) Musa's translations of these lines reads as follows:

> light of the intellect, light full of love,
> > love of the true good, full of ecstasy
> > ecstasy that transcends the sweetest joy.
> [. . . . .]
> There is a light above whose glory makes
> > Creator visible to his creations
> > whose only peace is in beholding Him

[16]Underhill, 81.

describes this characteristic in a letter written to a new believer: "For love is properly a complete union of the lover and the beloved—one flesh; so God and a soul become, as it were, one in spirit."[17] This guidance of the heart towards love leads us to another characteristic of true mysticism: it involves a definite psychological experience. Yet true mysticism is not motivated by any selfish, subjective desires. The mystic is motivated by pure love and not by the hope of delight. "By one of the many paradoxes of the spiritual life, he obtains satisfaction because he does not see it; completes his personality because he gives it up. [. . .] Only with the annihilation of selfhood comes the fulfillment of love."[18] This ultimate irony is key to a faithful understanding of both the organic process of mysticism and the heart of MacDonald's *Lilith.*

Before anyone can sleep in the house of Adam and Eve, he must literally be ready to lay down his life. This "annihilation of selfhood" is made most vivid when Vane takes Lilith to see Mara in the House of Sorrow and Lilith must come face to face with her sinfulness. Vane witnesses as Lilith is made to see both who she is and who God created her to be:

> Gradually my soul grew aware of an invisible darkness, a
> something more terrible than aught had yet made itself felt. A

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[17]Walter Hilton, "Letters to a Layman: On the Mixed Life," *Toward a Perfect Love: The Spiritual Counsel of Walter Hilton*, trans. David Lyle Jeffrey (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2001) 22.

[18]Underhill, 92–3.

> horrible Nothingness, a Negation positive infolded her; the border
> of its being that was yet no being, touched me, and for one ghastly
> instant I seemed alone with Death Absolute! It was not the absence
> of everything I felt, but the presence of Nothing. The princess
> dashed herself from the settle to the floor with an exceeding great
> and bitter cry. It was the recoil of Being from Annihilation.[19]

This process of annihilation enables the eventual and ultimate fulfillment of love.

Underhill calls the process to this consummation "the mystic way" and dedicates half of her study to explicating the five stages of the mystical experience:

1. Awakening or Conversion

2. Self-knowledge or Purgation

3. Illumination

4. Surrender or the Dark Night

5. Union

The first stage is typically an abrupt or unexpected experience accompanied by intense emotions of joy, while the second stage, that of purgation, is a painful state of discipline and mortification. Illumination follows and "brings a certain apprehension of the Absolute, a sense of the Divine Presence: but not true union with it."[20] The "Dark Night of the Soul," as St. John of the Cross called it, is the

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[19]*Lilith*, 203–04.

[20]Underhill, 169.

most terrible of experiences for the mystic. There the final and complete

purification of the self occurs and prepares the mystic for union with the

Absolute Life, the true goal of the mystical progression.[21]

Underhill uses these stages to explain the commonalities among those

with a "mystic personality," while MacDonald explains the mystical process in

stages as something necessary for all individuals to develop fully.[22] In his essay,

"A Sketch of Individual Development,"[23] MacDonald traces the stages of one's

consciousness from birth to the final desired stage: "Oneness with God."[24]

MacDonald argues that until this union is complete, no man can experience true

life. Readers of *Lilith* will find remarkable similarities between Mr. Vane's

individual development in the novel and the stages of consciousness laid out in

this essay. It becomes very clear that the novel itself is a working out of this

process; Mr. Vane progresses throughout the story along the path of the mystic.

From this perspective, MacDonald's writing does not merely have a *mystical*

quality, it embodies the true mystic way.

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[21]See Underhill, 167–175.

[22]This is not to say that *every* individual proceeds through *every* stage; plenty of people abandon the process, both willingly and unknowingly, but neither do those individuals experience the ultimate ecstatic "Oneness with God."

[23]I am indebted to Richard Reis for pointing to this essay as evidence for MacDonald's mysticism. (Reis 39.)

[24]George MacDonald, "A Sketch of Individual Development," *The Imagination and Other Essays* (Boston: D. Lothrop Company, 1883) 74.

It is perhaps useful and certainly necessary to note that while MacDonald's mystical system unquestionably favors and corresponds with Underhill's widely accepted classification, it does not draw directly from it.[25] So whence does MacDonald's mystical knowledge come? His essays, sermons, and stories reveal a close familiarity with such mystics as Emmanuel Swedenborg and Jacob Boehme.[26] Both of these mystics influenced other writers as well, including William Blake, Samuel T. Coleridge, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, all of whom also shaped MacDonald's philosophy and theology. But perhaps the most significant influence on MacDonald by these two mystics—Boehme in particular—came through the German poet, Friedrich von Hardenberg, commonly called Novalis.

Novalis and Mysticism

MacDonald's relationship with Novalis and other German Romantics is often a topic of scholarly research. Stephen Prickett dedicates a chapter to the study of the Germanic influences on two particular works of MacDonald's:

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[25]Underhill did not publish her study until six years after MacDonald's death in 1911.

[26]Both of these writers are also discussed in Underhill's study as authors who embody "the mystic way." In the sermon previously mentioned, "The New Name," MacDonald compares the mysticism of Swedenborg to that found in the Book of Revelation. Several scholars have pointed to Jacob Boehme as the source of MacDonald's realm of seven dimensions. See Deirdre Hayward, "George MacDonald and Jacob Boehme: *Lilith* and the Seven-fold Pattern of Existence" *Seven* 16 (1999) 54–72.

Phantastes and *Lilith*.[27] These two pioneering works in fantasy literature bookend

the rest of MacDonald's writing, providing a fascinating source of study for the

development of MacDonald's philosophy, theology, and literary style. While the

Germanic influence is evident in both pieces of literature, the more mature and

sophisticated *Lilith* reveals a more subtle integration of German Romantic

thought than *Phantastes*, the *faerie romance* modeled on German Märchen—folk,

or fairy stories. At its onset, *Phantastes* includes a lengthy passage from Novalis

about the nature of fairy stories, which can be translated as follows:

> One can imagine stories without rational cohesion and yet filled
> with associations, like dreams, and poems that are merely lovely
> sounding, full of beautiful words, but also without rational sense
> and connections—with, at the most, individual verses which are
> intelligible, like fragments of the most varied things. [. . .]
>   A fairy-story is like a vision without rational connections, a
> harmonious whole of miraculous things and events—as, for
> example, a musical fantasia, the harmonic sequence of an Aeolion
> harp, indeed Nature itself.
>   In a genuine fairy-story, everything must be miraculous,
> mysterious, and interrelated; everything must be alive, each in its
> own way. The whole of Nature must be wondrously blended with
> the whole world of the Spirit. In fairy-story the time of anarchy,
> lawlessness, freedom, the natural state of Nature makes itself felt in
> the world. . . . The world of fairy-story is that world which is
> opposed throughout to the world of rational truth, and precisely
> for that reason it is so thoroughly an analogue to it, as Chaos is an
> analogue to the finished Creation.[28]

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[27]Prickett, 173–203.

[28]Novalis quoted in George MacDonald's *Phantastes*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 3.
Prickett is careful to note that while it appears that Novalis contradicts himself in the first and
third paragraphs, MacDonald's source for this quotation *misquotes* the original. Novalis had
originally written that "everything must be miraculous, mysterious, and *incoherent*

While this statement certainly provides a background for MacDonald's understanding of the purpose and nature of fairy tales, it also serves at least two other purposes. First, it reveals Novalis's high regard for Boehme's philosophy; Boehme argued that "the spiritual world is hidden within the visible elementary world, and acts through the latter. . . . It shapes itself in all things according to the nature and quality of each thing."[29] Boehme's conviction that spiritual truths are veiled, and yet revealed in the natural world, is central to both Novalis and MacDonald. We see this manifested in *Lilith* by the strange juxtaposition of the "other" world—the region of the seven dimensions—with our own. In the beginning of the novel, the hero, Mr. Vane, enters this other world by way of a mirror that he stumbles onto in his attic. The other world, which occupies the same space as our own, becomes, as Novalis suggests, an analogue to the world of rational truth and thus literally holds a mirror up to this world. The symbolic significance is obvious. It conveys truths evident in the strangeness of that other world that cannot be articulated in a mere realism about the natural world. Prickett aptly states this argument, saying "the work of art, in this case *Lilith*

(*unzusammenhängend*)." While this certainly changes the meaning, it does not alter MacDonald's understanding of Novalis or his use of the *mis*quotation. See Prickett, *Victorian Fantasy*, 175–76.

[29]Boehme quoted in Reis, 38.

itself, reveals to us our own world in a new light."[30] In MacDonald's terms, the other world is the "true name" of this world.

Secondly, Novalis's quote allows the reader to see the mystical system incorporated not only in the plot and style or quality of MacDonald's writing, but also in the very structure of the story itself. In both *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, the structural tension between coherence and incoherence underlies the need for a mystical revelation. By re-examining the "finished Creation," Mr. Vane moves from Chaos, where his name swirls about on his forehead,[31] to an expectant calm, where he awaits the fulfillment of his dream.[32] Novalis's quotation reveals both a foundation in Boehme's mystical philosophy and its permeation of MacDonald's writing, and while not fully exposing the extent of Novalis's influence on MacDonald's mysticism.

Early in his career, MacDonald, having discovered the intensely visionary and spiritual poetry of Novalis, endeavored to translate Novalis's *Hymns to the Night* and *Spiritual Songs* into English. When he finished, he printed several copies and gave them to friends as Christmas gifts in 1851.[33] While his friends

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[30]Prickett, 181.

[31]*Lilith*, 74.

[32]*Lilith*, 251.

[33]*GMW*, 159.

greatly appreciated these poems, MacDonald's interest in Novalis and other

German writers was not as popular with members of the Arundel congregation,

whom MacDonald served as pastor. The elders of the Arundel Congregational

Church charged MacDonald with being "tainted" by German theology and

eventually forced him to resign the pulpit in 1853. Despite this devastating

disappointment, MacDonald's interest in the German Romantics and

philosophers never subsided. Many of MacDonald's "childlike" stories[34] draw

from writers such as Novalis, Fouqué, Jean Paul Richter, Schleiermacher, Goethe,

Schiller, Hoffman, and Heine. While all of these writers exercised a considerable

influence on MacDonald, Novalis's unique and reverent sense of mysticism

served to redeem, for MacDonald, the German romantic quest and elevated it

from the secular to the sacred.

Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* serves as a representative work,

illustrative of the way in which Novalis transcends German Romanticism to

enter the realm of mysticism. This strange autobiographical amalgamation of

fairy tale, novel, and poem tells a tale of a hero searching for a mysterious Blue

Flower that becomes the symbolic image for his true love. The novel artfully

embodies Novalis's ideal of the fairy tale in its irrational connections and bizarre

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[34]MacDonald was careful to note that his books are not "children's literature." In his essay, "The Fantastic Imagination," he says: "For my part, I do not write for children, but for the childlike, whether of five, or fifty, or seventy-five." Printed in: David Sandner, *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004) 64–69.

twists of plot. And yet, a certain ineffable quality pervades the work, and both

the hero and the reader are left with a quiet sense of calm and expectation.

Heinrich, after experiencing a sort of beatific vision, awakens to a new

understanding of life.

> Nothing remained but a quiet heartfelt longing and a melancholy echo in his very innermost soul. The wild pangs of loneliness, the bitter pain of an unutterable loss, the dark and devastating emptiness, the earthly powerlessness—these had fled, and the pilgrim saw himself again in a full and meaningful world. Voice and speech awoke to life again within him, and everything now appeared much more familiar and prophetic than formerly, so that death appeared to him like a higher revelation of life, and he viewed his own rapidly passing existence with a serene childlike emotion.[35]

Heinrich's newfound understanding of the world permeates every aspect of his

being. His argument that he now understands his home "fully since leaving it

and seeing many other regions"[36] lies at the heart of both fantasy literature and

the mystical experience. Fantasy literature, as previously argued, is literature

that lingers on the threshold of two worlds, expressing truths merely suggested

in this world but realized in that other. It forces the reader to reexamine his own

world and allows him to see it in a new light. The mystical experience similarly

leaves the mystic with a vision or understanding of that which is to come and

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[35]Novalis, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, trans. by Palmer Hilty, (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1962) 156.

[36]*Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, 162.

thus encourages him to see his present circumstances or surroundings in light of his vision.

Mr. Raven echoes this argument in *Lilith* when Mr. Vane first enters the realm of seven dimensions, saying "But if you understood any world besides your own, you would understand your own much better."[37] The Raven attempts to impart this knowledge to Mr. Vane, but the effort falls on deaf ears; it is "enigma treading on enigma." When asked to explain the nearest way home, Mr. Raven replies:

> I cannot; you and I use the same words with different meanings. We are often unable to tell people what they *need* to know, because they *want* to know something else, and would therefore only misunderstand what we said. Home is ever so far away in the palm of your hand, and how to get there it is of no use to tell you. But you will get there; you must get there; you have to get there. Everybody who is not at home, has to go home. You thought you were at home where I found you: if that had been your home, you could not have left it. Nobody can leave home. And nobody ever was or ever will be at home without having gone there.[38]

MacDonald obviously adds another dimension to the argument. While Vane understands his house in this world to be his home, Mr. Raven makes it clear that it is not his true home and that Vane must somehow find his way to it. So here, we see that not only do other worlds help us to understand our own much

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[37]*Lilith* 25.

[38]*Lilith*, 45.

better, but they are to point us beyond our world to our true home. In both

Heinrich von Ofterdingen and *Lilith*, this knowledge or understanding only comes

after a mystical experience or vision.

Heinrich's mentor, Sylvester, expresses this new mystical knowledge in

terms of the language of nature, saying "every new leaf, every unusual flower is

some kind of secret passing forth and turning into a quiet voiceless plant because

it is too full of love and joy to move around and utter words."[39] This sentiment

also finds voice in *Lilith* through Mr. Raven as he describes flowers as prayers

that are reflections of the thoughts of the "great Thinker."[40] As Mr. Vane looks

around, he notices the difference of each flower for the first time—"the shadow

of the prayer in it."[41] While this comes close to a seemingly sinful sentimentalism

for Nature, the flower does just as creation is intended to do; it turns Vane's heart

to the Creator: "a great awe came over me to think of the heart listening to the

flower."[42] Again, this confession illustrates the purpose of "the mystic way." It

is not intended to leave the reader with a mere suggestion of the world to come;

a mystical experience ought to instill a greater desire for ultimate union with the

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[39]*Heinrich van Ofterdingen*, 163.

[40]*Lilith*, 26.

[41]*Lilith*, 26.

[42]*Lilith*, 26.

Giver of the vision. For both Novalis and MacDonald, all of creation "waits and groans"[43] with this desire, which explains why both authors understand Nature to be the mystical expression of God's truths.

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[43]See Romans 8:19–21.

CHAPTER THREE

MacDonald's Medievalism

Novalis and Medievalism

While Novalis's mysticism certainly appealed to MacDonald, there is

another aspect of his writing and philosophy that both attracted and inspired

MacDonald—a love for the medieval. Alongside quotations from various

German Romantics, several medieval authors, including Malory and Spenser,

found their way into the epigraphs of MacDonald's *Phantastes*. While these

references alone do not prove a love for the medieval, they do at the very least

betray MacDonald's familiarity with medieval works. Novalis was a self-

ascribed medievalist, dedicated to defending the virtue of the Middle Ages.

Among the German and English Romantics there was a great revival in

medievalism as people were beginning to view the ordered and coherent

worldview of the Middle Ages, not as superstitious, but as "the product of a

society closer to nature" and a symbol "of an ordered and meaningful, basically

fatherly, cosmos." [1] The new romanticism revered the medieval period as a time

of heroic achievement and conviction. Medievalism enabled authors to recreate

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[1]Alice Chandler, *A Dream of Order: The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth-Century English Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970) 7, 10.

the forgotten past and enabled readers to imagine a world other than their own.

Perhaps more significantly, the Romantics' revival of medievalism reveals a

certain condemnation of Enlightenment rationalism. Novalis, in particular, had a

dream that Christendom would "rise from the ashes of rationalism" and return

to what he deemed to be the core of medieval society: its Christian unity.[2] The

following passage is an excerpt from Novalis's defense of the Middle Ages, *Die*

Christenheit oder Europa:

> Those were fine, magnificent times when Europe was a Christian
> country, when one Christendom inhabited this civilized continent
> and one common interest linked the most distant provinces of this
> vast spiritual empire.—Dispensing with great secular possessions,
> *one* sovereign governed and united great political forces.—
> Immediately under him was an enormous guild, open to all, which
> carried out his commands and eagerly strove to consolidate his
> beneficent power. Every member of this society was everywhere
> honoured; and if the common people sought from him comfort or
> help, protection or advice, . . . he in turn gained protection, respect
> and audience from his superiors. . . . Mankind could serenely go
> about its daily business on earth, for these holy men safeguarded
> the future, forgave every sin and obliterated and transfigured life's
> discolorations. They were the experienced pilots on the vast
> uncharted seas, in whose care mankind could disparage all storms
> and count on safely reaching the shores of its true home. . . . Peace
> emanated from them.[3]

Novalis's idealization of the hierarchical medieval society implies a

condemnation of the individualistic emphasis at work in modern European

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[2]Chandler, 128–29.

[3]Novalis, quoted in Chandler, 127–28.

cultures. The unity of "every member of this society" reveals an ultimate respect

for authority—a quality much admired by Novalis. Modern rationalism, for

Novalis, is the result of rebellion against the Ultimate Authority. MacDonald

draws upon this same tension in both the catalyst and resolution of *Lilith*.

Mr. Vane, who ignores the Raven's directive to submit and sleep, and

thereby refuses to acknowledge the authority over him, becomes trapped in this

enigmatic other world. Being the rationalist that he is, Mr. Vane is troubled by

questions he cannot answer and cries out in protest that he "did not come here to

be asked riddles," to which Mr. Raven replies:

> No, but you came, and found the riddles waiting for you! Indeed
> you are yourself the only riddle. What you call riddles are truths,
> and seem riddles because you are not true. [. . .] And you *must*
> answer the riddles! They will go on asking themselves until you
> understand yourself. The universe is a riddle trying to get out, and
> you are holding your door hard against it.[4]

In this dialogue, we find MacDonald's own condemnation of modern

rationalism. A refusal to recognize rightful authority is, in a sense, a failure to

understand oneself and one's place in society. MacDonald does not oppose

reason; after all, there *are* answers to life's riddles, but the answers come only in

submission to authority, thereby receiving knowledge and understanding of

oneself.

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[4]*Lilith*, 45.

In attempting to renew the medieval spirit, Novalis hoped to restore the rich tradition of Christian faith, its unity, making it truly catholic. His high regard for ultimate order in society may seem complicated by his veneration of disorder and incoherence in the structure of fairy tales, but it actually maintains a remarkable consistency in thought. Just as Novalis claimed that the world of the fairy-story is an analogue to the world of rational truth and chaos, in the same way, an analogue to the finished creation,[5] so medieval society stands in stark contrast to the modern rationalistic society. Novalis understood this delicate distinction, hoping to present his age with a new way of understanding the intended order and unity of society. MacDonald, in his reverence for order and truth, recognized this distinctive quality of Novalis's writing and philosophy.

To ask whether MacDonald's love for the medieval came before or after his introduction to Novalis is an impossible question. What is clear, however, is that Novalis's unique coupling of medievalism and mysticism engendered a similar union of the two qualities in MacDonald's philosophy and writing. Both MacDonald and Novalis seem to equate the aims of medievalism and mysticism: complete unity. The goal of medievalism, at least for Novalis, is a restored individuality (in the truest sense of the word) among all believers. This

[5]See Novalis's idea of this contrasting correspondence in the quotation above, page 19. (qtd. in George MacDonald, *Phantastes*, [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000] 3.)

individuality, this "quality of being indivisible or inseparable,"[6] serves as an

apology for those within and outside the faith. The goal of mysticism, as we

have seen from Underhill and MacDonald, is ultimately union or "Oneness with

God."[7]

Medieval Quality & Influence

Before looking at the specific medieval influences on MacDonald, we must

return briefly to the medieval *quality* of writing that C. S. Lewis recognized while

reading *Phantastes*: "For in one sense the new country was exactly like the old. I

met there all that had already charmed me in Malory, Spenser, Morris and

Yeats."[8] MacDonald's stories, though completely different in content, seemed to

capture the same sense of interest as the Arthurian cycles and the *Faerie Queene*

for Lewis, which, coming from someone with a scholarly devotion to Malory and

Spenser, must be considered high praise. What is it about MacDonald's writing

that reminded Lewis of these quintessentially medieval stories? And beyond

that, what fostered this quality in MacDonald to begin with?

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[6]"Individuality," *OED Online*, 2nd ed., Oxford University Press. 1 Oct. 2006 <http://dictionary.oed.com>.

[7]George MacDonald, "A Sketch of Individual Development," *The Imagination and Other Essays* (Boston: D. Lothrop Company, 1883) 74.

[8]C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (Austin: Harcourt, 1955) 179.

The obvious answer lies in the method of medievalism previously

discussed. Modern medievalism attempts to recreate the forgotten past by

drawing upon images and ideas of medieval society in order to push readers to

envision a world completely other than their own. MacDonald's fantasy novels

reconstruct this same distant world that upholds the ideals of medieval society.

The castles, queens, and knights that lurk in these fantasies whisper of a time

gone by; they profess values of loyalty, obedience, and courtly love—values

integral to medieval society that seem to have been long forgotten.

There is, however, a more subtle reason for confirming the medieval

quality in MacDonald's writing. The spiritual climate of medieval society was

essentially, in deed totally community oriented. This reality was due in part to a

dependency on others for practical needs. Manorialism, the economical system

in which serfs labored and lived in manors owned by a governing lord, was

built upon the joint needs of both peasants and lords. But this communal

orientation was not merely practical; David Lyle Jeffrey calls

> the medieval civic ideal of 'common profit,' celebrated by John
> Gower, William Langland, and other writers in Wyclif's day [. . .]
> an application of principles contained in 1 John 4 and 1 Corinthians
> 13 to both the body of Christ and the 'body politic.' It was an ideal
> sincerely believed in, as few ideals are today.[9]

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[9]David Lyle Jeffrey, ed. and trans., *English Spirituality in the Age of Wyclif* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1988) 3.

This ideal implies what Jeffrey has called the underlying "law of love," which served as the binding force of nearly every relationship in the medieval social order. Sin, therefore, resulted from a perversion of love, harming not only the individual, but society as a whole.[10] This social ideal of love was so integral to society that "any betrayal of the ideal was experienced as a palpable loss of harmony and integrity by the whole community."[11] The political and religious upheaval occurring in the wake of the Great Schism in 1378 severely damaged religious confidence, and yet it did not eradicate the devout worship of the faithful. The church remained "the center of life, even for a person who was not particularly spiritual."[12]

The turmoil prompted a spiritual renewal of sorts that developed into three different traditions: the mystical, the monastic, and "the mixed."[13] The historical development of Christian mysticism is rooted in this first tradition of medieval spirituality. Richard Rolle, whose writings instigated the mystical movement, spoke of an "inner and utter communion with God, an inexpressible

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[10]This concept is illustrated most vividly in Dante's *Inferno*, where the severity of punishment for each sin is directly correlated to the weight of its damage to others.

[11]Jeffrey, 4.

[12]Jeffrey, 11.

[13]For a complete discussion on these three traditions, see Jeffrey, 13–47.

'foretaste of eternal sweetness.'"[14] Richard Rolle's *The Fire of Love*, the anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing*, and Julian of Norwich's *Showings*, or *Revelations of Divine Love* are a few of the exemplary writings from (or belonging to) this mystical tradition. Walter Hilton reacted against some of the more charismatic mystics by dedicating his life and writing to reviving the monastic tradition. His *The Ladder of Perfection* emphasized "growth through humility."[15] The last tradition, the "mixed life," was an attempt to encourage laypersons to be more active and thoughtful in considering and carrying out their faith. Both Wyclif and Chaucer encouraged lay Christians to take up "the spiritual life" even though they had no clerical calling. In all three traditions, the clear impulse is a desire for unity not only within the body of Christ, but also between society and God. The spiritual renewal, in a sense, hoped to restore the ideal of true community.[16]

There is no need to stretch the applicability of this ideal to fit the quality of MacDonald's writing. The social nature of sin in *Lilith* illustrates both the value of a unified community and the significance of true *caritas*. Lilith's egregious

[14]Jeffrey, 16.

[15]Jeffrey, 25.

[16]This emphasis on the Late Middle Ages is not intended to ignore the rich tradition of the Early and High Middle Ages or its importance in the development of medieval thought. Rather these particular selections are highlighted because they are more representative of the literature with which we *know* MacDonald was familiar. Later, in our examination of *England's Antiphon*, MacDonald's collection of literary criticism on English religious poetry, we will see specific examples of literature with which MacDonald was acquainted.

pride and selfishness eliminates any hope for true community in Bulika as her

love of self ultimately prevents any cultivation of love in the citizens of her city.

Her command that there be no children destroys the life of the community and

perverts the intended nature of the relationship between husband and wife.

Community is restored only once Lilith has denied her self and accepted true

caritas—the burning, consuming "fire of love."[17]

MacDonald's writings clearly exhibit both a faithful representation of the

spiritual climate of medieval society and an appeal to the common methods of

medievalism. It is no surprise, then, that C. S. Lewis would recognize a certain

medieval quality in MacDonald. Having acknowledged this quality, how can

examining the cultivation of this feature in MacDonald's writing and thinking

help the reader better to understand *Lilith*?

While searching for the source or origin of an idea may seem futile,[18] it

serves a valuable purpose in providing the reader with an historical context with

which to understand the text. Lewis explicates this point in acknowledging the

interdependence of medieval texts: "If criticism cannot do without the clear

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[17]Richard Rolle, "The Amending of Life" in Jeffrey, 85.

[18]J. R. R. Tolkien, a sometime admirer of George MacDonald, believed inquiry into origins to be futile. See his lecture on Dasent's "soup" metaphor in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, ed. C. S. Lewis (London: Oxford University Press, 1947). For a different perspective, see C. S. Lewis's comments on *Quellenforschung* in his introduction to *George MacDonald: An Anthology* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1946) 20.

separation of one work from another and the clear unity of the individual author with the individual text, then criticism of medieval literature is impossible."[19] *Lilith* is obviously not a medieval text, but its dependence upon medieval ideas, literary types, and structure forces us to analyze it in light of these influences in order to fully appreciate its value.

England's Antiphon

As previously mentioned, MacDonald harbored a great love for the medieval mind of which he said: "In the grandest of all thinkings, the great men of this time showed a grandeur of thought worthy of their surpassing excellence in other noblest fields of human labour. They thought greatly because they aspired greatly."[20] This quotation comes from MacDonald's book of literary criticism, *England's Antiphon*, which traces the development of religious poetry in England's literary history. While this treasury of literary analysis has received little critical attention from MacDonald scholars, it is of utmost importance in understanding MacDonald's literary philosophy. MacDonald dedicates this collection to the writers from whom he has quoted, for, as he says,

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[19]C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 22.

[20]George MacDonald, *England's Antiphon* (1868; Whitehorn, CA: Johannesen Publishing, 1996), 71.

> we must not forget that, although the individual song springs from the heart of the individual, the song of a country is not merely cumulative: it is vital in its growth, and therefore composed of historically dependent members. No man could sing as he has sung, had not others sung before him. Deep answereth unto deep, face to face, praise to praise. To the sound of the trumpet the harp returns its own vibrating response—alike, but how different! The religious song of the country, I say again, is a growth, rooted deep in all its story.[21]

For MacDonald, each new writer is not merely antiphonally responding to those who have preceded him, he is singing a song composed in part by those who have inspired its very beginning.

Though the collection spans the thirteenth century up to the decade of its publication, including analyses of works by George Herbert, Chaucer, Spenser, William Langland, several anonymous poets of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Donne, and Milton, the analysis here will focus mainly on the poetry of the fourteenth century. The work as a whole reveals MacDonald's insatiable reading habits and is his single greatest contribution to critical scholarship. *England's Antiphon* is worthy of much more critical attention than it has received—from both the MacDonald scholar and the student of religious poetry. The breadth of MacDonald's reading is matched only by the depth of his insightful criticism. Admittedly, however, MacDonald pays more attention to

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[21]*England's Antiphon*, 3.

the essence or spirit of the poetry than to its form or structure;[22] but in doing so,

he hopes the examples of poetry will "not only present themselves to the reader's

understanding, but commend themselves to his imagination and judgment."[23]

The purpose of *our* studying this volume is to determine not only which works

MacDonald highlighted, but also to learn *what* and *how* he thought about them.

MacDonald praises the earliest religious poetry for its simplicity,

tenderness, and devotion. His particular selections bear witness to the life and

heart of a people who were living in the midst "of wars and rumors of wars."[24]

Their poetry offers a sharp contrast to modernity, one MacDonald recognizes

and offers to the reader: "Perhaps we may find in them a sign or two that in

cultivating our intellect we have in some measure neglected our heart."[25] If

MacDonald errs in his analysis, he does so by attempting to justify the simplicity

of their minds and attributing a humble devotion to the whole of the society.

MacDonald selects several poems extolling obedience, the virtue he deemed

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[22]This same critique is often made of MacDonald's fiction and poetry. C. S. Lewis says: "If we define Literature as an art whose medium is words, then certainly MacDonald has no place in its first rank—[. . .] There are indeed passages [. . .] where the wisdom and the holiness that are in him triumph over and burn away the baser elements in his style." (C. S. Lewis, introduction, *George MacDonald: An Anthology*, 14.)

[23]*England's Antiphon*, 4.

[24]Matt. 24:6, Mark 13:7.

[25]*England's Antiphon*, 7.

most necessary to a love of and faith in God.[26] His emphasis on obedience is

evident throughout his essays, sermons,[27] and even in his novels. In *Lilith*, Mr.

Raven tells Vane that he cannot do any good for anyone until he has slept in the

sexton's cottage. That is, unless Vane consents to and obeys Mr. Raven's

(somewhat alarming) charge, he can be of no use to those he seeks to help. C. S.

Lewis has also noted this quality of MacDonald, claiming that "he addresses the

will: the demand for 'something to be neither more nor less nor other than *done*'

is incessant."

The shift in the poetry of the thirteenth century to the fourteenth century

is largely one of tone. The shift in tone can be attributed partly to questions over

the authority of the Church and her offices and also to a renewed spiritualism.

The Miracle Plays, which are the first examples given for this time, may appear

to the modern reader as being somewhat "grotesque, childish, absurd, and even

irreverent"[28] in comparison to the devotional poetry of the thirteenth century, but

they would have had no such effect on their first audience. The Miracle Plays

were short dramatic representations of various biblical stories intended to

instruct the mostly illiterate audience about the stories of Christianity. Following

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[26]See Lewis, *Anthology*, 18.

[27]See especially "The Last Farthing" and "Righteousness" in *Unspoken Sermons*.

[28]*England's Antiphon*, 22.

the plays, the rest of the poems included from this century are of the utmost

significance for our understanding of the influences at work in MacDonald's

Lilith.

Chaucer, who is not generally regarded as a spiritual writer, actually

displays a great desire "for a renewal of spiritual values in obedience to

scriptural authority."[29] Jeffrey regards Chaucer as an example of the third

tradition within the medieval spiritual renewal, "the mixed life." MacDonald

includes two of Chaucer's poems, "Gentilesse" and "Balade de Bon Conseil," of

which he says:

> let me now gather two rich blossoms of utterance, presenting an
> embodiment of religious duty and aspiration, after a very practical
> fashion. I refer to two short lyrics, little noted, although full of
> wisdom and truth. They must be accepted as the conclusions of as
> large a knowledge of life in diversified mode as ever fell to the lot
> of man.[30]

The interest in his selection of these poems is not as much in the actual poems or

in his criticism of them as it is in the fact that he knew them. Chaucer's works

were, of course, more readily accessible than most, but as MacDonald

mentioned, these poems were not well known at the time. MacDonald's

familiarity with these two lyrics reveals once again his insatiety in reading and

[29]Jeffrey, 42.

[30]*England's Antiphon*, 41.

suggests a fair assumption that MacDonald would have also been familiar with

Chaucer's other works, such as *Canterbury Tales* and *Book of the Duchess*, which, as

we shall see later, is a significant example of the literary type, the dream-vision.

William Langland's *The Vision of William Concerning Piers Plowman* is also

included in the *Antiphon*, although MacDonald is hesitant to praise it, for he

"[did] not find much poetry in it."[31] He does, however, praise (what he calls) a

more poetic imitation of the *Vision* by an unknown author. Scholars today refer

to the *three* texts as three different versions of the same *Piers the Plowman*.

MacDonald's difficulty in dealing with this "poem of great influence" is not

surprising for a couple of reasons. First of all, the text was, for political reasons,

intentionally vague, "written to disclose and conceal at the same time."[32]

Because of the subversive nature of the work, Langland disguised much of the

meaning in obscure references and analogies that are not always easy to

understand. The difficult dialect and alliteration of the language also helps to

complicate a thorough comprehension. While the relative obscurity of the poem

is once again worth noting, it is Langland's distinctive use of dreams in the text

that makes MacDonald's selection of him interesting.

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[31]*England's Antiphon*, 30.

[32]Jeffrey, 371.

The work itself is a series of "marvelous dreams"[33] that were given to the narrator who then interprets their meaning for the reader. Essentially, the text is a dream-vision because Langland's narrator is telling of a vision received in a dream; however, I would suggest paying special heed to the nature of the dream and vision as they appear in the text. The use of the dream here is present really only to serve a narrative function; he indirectly instructs the reader by telling of the instruction he received in the dreams. Furthermore, by masking his instruction in the strange analogies of dreams, Langland is able to voice his subversive attacks. The dream itself has no transformative value for the narrator or the reader in Langland's *Piers the Plowman*. This important distinction concerning the nature and function of the dream within the text is made all the clearer in light of the next work included in the *Antiphon*, another fourteenth-century dream-vision, *Pearl*.[34]

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[33]William Langland, "Piers the Plowman," in Jeffrey, 372.

[34] *Pearl* is one of the four works included in the Cotton Nero manuscript that also contains *Patience*, *Cleanness*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The author (or authors as it well may be) of the manuscript is unknown, although the distinctive Northwest Midland dialect has led scholars to deduce its origin to be either Cheshire or Lancashire. The manuscript itself is significant for a number of reasons. First of all, it is one of the only early literary manuscripts containing illustrations, but more significantly, it is the only surviving text of any of these poems.

The Pearl

It is important to note here the significance of MacDonald's criticism of

Pearl, not just for the purposes of this paper, but also for the areas of

scholarship—of both MacDonald and medieval literature—that it incites.   While

MacDonald's analysis of the poem glosses over several key aspects (as we shall

see), his interpretation of some of the textual elements within the poem leads to

what some modern readers may deem to be several errors in literary and

historical judgment. In spite of those "errors," and perhaps because of them,

MacDonald's criticism of *Pearl* is one of the most significant contributions of the

collection. We know from *England's Antiphon* that MacDonald learned of and

obtained access to the manuscript from the Early English Text Society.[35]

Frederick James Furnivall founded the society in 1864 in order "to bring the mass

of unprinted Early English literature within the reach of students and to provide

sound texts from which the New English Dictionary (subsequently the Oxford

English Dictionary) could quote."[36] The society's first publication was *Early*

English Alliterative Poems from MS Cotton Nero A x, edited by Richard Morris, and

published in 1864. *Pearl* received little critical attention until Israel Gollancz's

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[35]*England's Antiphon*, 34.

[36]*The Early English Text Society*, EETS, 10 Oct 2006 <http://www.eets.org.uk>.

translation was published in 1891,[37] so MacDonald's published criticism of *Pearl*

in *England's Antiphon* in 1868 is a matter of great significance not only for its

information about the poem's influence on MacDonald, but also for the singular

position it holds in early English textual criticism, as MacDonald's analysis of

Pearl really is the first of its kind. Before examining MacDonald's *Pearl* reading,

it may be useful to take a brief look at the poem and its meaning.

    Pearl, a poem belonging to the "alliterative revival," tells of a Dreamer's

vision of paradise. The Dreamer, who was grieving the loss of his "priy perle

withouten spotte,"[38] is filled at once with wonder when, in a dream or vision, he

"passes over" into the realm of complete "adubbement"[39] and sees the

surroundings of his vision. The poet's remarkable ability to create emotionally

intensive responses lies in his visual re-creations. Casey Finch goes so far as to

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[37]Paul F. Reichardt, "Sir Israel Gollancz and the Editorial History of the Pearl Manuscript," *Papers on Language and Literature: A Journal for Scholars and Critics of Language and Literature* 31.2 (1995): 145–63.

[38]This line is repeated in some fashion in the last line of each stanza in the first section of *Pearl*, (12, 24, 36, 48, 60). Scholars have spent a considerable amount of time debating over the relationship between the "lost pearl" and the Dreamer, with some arguing for a father/daughter relationship and others find support for a lover/beloved. Regardless of the relationship, the pain felt over its loss was intense, which only heightened the feeling of joy in hoping to recover what once was lost. All lines quoted from *Pearl* are from Casey Finch, trans., *The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).

[39]*Pearl* (72, 84, 96, 108, 120).

say that "there is nothing in English literature quite like the *Pearl* poet's sense of

the potentially miraculous nature of the *visual*."[40]

The images *are* indeed stunning. The Dreamer's first glimpse of the Pearl

Maiden (the same maiden whose loss on earth he had grieved) on the opposite

side of the riverbank caused him to be transfixed, unable to speak. There is also

the vivid image of Christ's bright, flowing wound as the river's source in the

New Jerusalem. The Dreamer's gaze at these things "partakes of a moment

when the veil of fallen consciousness has been temporarily lifted;"[41] but before he

experiences complete, ecstatic union, the vision is cut abruptly short, and the

Dreamer awakes.

The power of the *Pearl* poem is due in part to the simultaneous

development of the reader and Dreamer in understanding, thus heightening the

reader's emotional response. The reader can rejoice in the midst of the wonder of

paradise, therefore, and exult in the hope of true communion with Christ

through his bright, flowing wound. When the Dreamer turns his focus from

Christ, "the Prince," to the Pearl Maiden, the reader can sense a jarring loss about

to take place, and yet the poignancy of such a loss is not diminished.

[40]Finch, introduction, *Pearl*, 6.

[41]Finch, introduction, *Pearl*, 37.

MacDonald's analogy that begins his explication of *Pearl* aptly illustrates this

same paradoxical tension:

> The former poems named of Pierce Ploughman are the cry of John
> the Baptist in the English wilderness; this [*Pearl*] is the longing of
> Hannah at home, having left her little son in the temple. The latter
> *seems* a poorer matter; but it is an easier thing to utter grand words
> of just condemnation, than, in the silence of the chamber, or with
> the well-known household-life around, forcing upon the
> consciousness only the law of things seen, to regard with
> steadfastness the blank left by a beloved form, and believe in the
> unseen, the marvellous, the eternal.[42]

In this selection about *Pearl*, MacDonald likens the tender grief of *Pearl*'s

Dreamer to that of Hannah after she has left Samuel at the temple. MacDonald

praises the *Pearl*-poet for his ability to effectively articulate the silence and forced

consciousness of grief. MacDonald's own familiarity with loss and grief perhaps

heightens his attachment to *Pearl*, as he suggests that this necessity for resigned

hope in the face of grief is the heart of the poem. One is reminded of

MacDonald's own devastating loss of his eldest daughter, Lily, which may have

led to his inspired writing of the first draft of *Lilith*. While MacDonald had not

yet experienced the loss of so close a child at the time of his writing *England's*

Antiphon, it is fair to assume that MacDonald would have recalled this moving

narrative of a father's loss of his daughter following his own loss of Lily and his

subsequent writing of *Lilith*.

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[42]*England's Antiphon*, 34.

In his analysis of *Pearl*, MacDonald argues that Hannah's loss is no less real simply because she knew she would have to leave Samuel at the temple. In her silent grief, she must force consciousness upon herself. And yet, both this passage of MacDonald's criticism and *Pearl* conclude with a note of ultimate hope and fulfillment. Here, we see the positive move to imagine and to believe in the promise of things yet to come. The Dreamer in *Pearl* is transformed by his vision; he no longer grieves in the negative sense for what was taken *from* him. His grief now is for the loss of the communion that his act of sinning denied and implies a hope for the eventual consummation of the intended union. MacDonald's short criticism of *Pearl* helps the reader of both *Lilith* and *Pearl* understand the integral role of pain in loss and its function within the larger dream-vision. This criticism made MacDonald's readers aware of this otherwise unknown text and offered a helpful tool in deciphering its meaning and import.

MacDonald's reading of early English literature, and specifically the dream-visions, *Piers Plowman* and *Pearl*, has provided us with an historical context with which to read and understand *Lilith*. As MacDonald argued in his introduction to *England's Antiphon*, each individual writer's contribution to literature is largely dependent on previous contributions. "No man could sing as he has sung," MacDonald says, "had not others sung before him."[43]

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[43]*England's Antiphon*, 3.

MacDonald's "songs," therefore, are a resounding response to those songs he has

heard before. In examining the particularly medieval quality and influences on

MacDonald, we can better understand his response and, as MacDonald makes

clear in *England's Antiphon*, "its relation, namely, to the source whence it sprung,

which alone can secure its right reception by the heart of the hearer."[44]

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[44]*England's Antiphon*, 4.

CHAPTER FOUR

"The Dreams That Came"

Now that we have examined both MacDonald's mysticism and his

medievalism, we may begin to look at how these traditions of thought and

experience are at work in his penultimate work, *Lilith*. While these two elements

or qualities are certainly present throughout the whole of *Lilith*, as we have seen

in our previous analyses, we will notice them converge in the last portion of

Vane's journey in the region of the seven dimensions. Much of this concluding

part of *Lilith* consists of Vane's lengthy sequence of dreams. There is a tendency

among readers and critics either to ignore the dreams or to view them as

unintelligible and thus as an ultimate weakness in the narrative. However, in

our analysis of these dreams, we shall find this dream sequence to be an essential

element of the plot and its meaning.

To begin with, we must distinguish between the dream-like quality of the

fantasy as a whole and the actual dreams that Vane has upon his submission to

sleep. The strangeness or otherworldliness of *Lilith* is characteristic of most

fantasy literature. While Vane's adventure in that other world is fantastic and

dream-like, it is important to emphasize here that his whole adventure was not a

dream. The events, though unfamiliar to this world, obey the laws of that world.

For MacDonald, this consistency in the laws was an essential element of the work

of the imagination; if an author were to forget or break one of his own created

laws, the story itself would break down. "To be able to live a moment in an

imagined world," MacDonald argues, "we must see the laws of its existence

obeyed. Those broken, we fall out of it. The imagination in us, whose exercise is

essential to the most temporary submission to the imagination of another,

immediately, with the disappearance of Law, ceases to act."[1] So we must

understand that even the strangeness of this other world is ordered and

intentional.

The final dream sequence, then, must be viewed as separate from the

fantastical nature of the rest of the story. Of course, because dreams bridge the

conscious and unconscious, they tend to carry this same sense of the

otherworldly, but the dreams in *Lilith* are something other than mere oddities;

they perform a specific function and have a special nature to them. In order to

understand the purpose of dreams in *Lilith*, we must examine the paradoxical

connection that MacDonald makes between dreams and death. Throughout the

novel, Mr. Raven tells Vane that it is only by dying that one can truly live, a

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[1]George MacDonald, "The Fantastic Imagination," *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Sandner (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004) 65.

fundamental element of the Christian life.[2] Mr. Raven's invitation to Vane to

sleep in his house mirrors Christ's call to salvation. Mr. Raven tells Vane, "sleep

is too fine a thing ever to be earned; it must be given and accepted, for it is a

necessity. [. . .] If you would have the rest of this house, you must not trouble

yourself about waking. You must go to sleep heartily altogether and outright."[3]

Sleep, therefore, is a metaphor for death, which becomes a sort of reversed

sacrament in which the outward expression is not a mere symbolic

representation of an inner spiritual event, but an actual expression and

transformation of a spiritual event. This celebration of death in *Lilith* has led

Stephen Prickett to coin the categorization of the novel as a "*Todsroman*," or

"death romance."[4] Sleep and death are not the end of things, but rather their

beginning.[5] Dreams, then, are analogous with this sleep and only come after

submission to it. For many of the book's readers, this strange symbolism is

unsettling, yet for MacDonald, it is an expression of "the spiritual reality of

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[2]Because this claim is the central demand of the novel, it would be preposterous to assert that *Lilith* is not a Christian novel, as Fernando Soto argued in his lecture given at Baylor University's conference "George MacDonald and His Children: The Development of Fantasy Literature" held on the centenary of MacDonald's death, September 16–19, 2005.

[3]*Lilith*, 31.

[4]Stephen Prickett, *Victorian Fantasy*, Rev. ed., (Waco, TX: Baylor UP, 2005) 200.

[5]One is reminded of T. S. Eliot's line from "East Coker" in the *Four Quartets*: "In my beginning is my end."

man's absolute dependence on God."[6] J. R. R. Tolkien, in his essay, "On Fairy

Stories," remarked that "death is the theme that most inspired George

MacDonald."[7] His celebration of death is born, not out of a naivety about its

devastation and earthly finality, but out of a keen awareness and familiarity with

it. MacDonald saw no reason to fear death because he had hope in the greater

good that results from death. Tolkien expresses this ironic celebration in a term

he has called *Eucatastrophe*:

> The *eucatastrophic* tale is the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest
> function. [. . .] In its fairy tale—or otherworld—setting, it is a
> sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It
> does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure:
> the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it
> denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final
> defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy,
> Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.[8]

Furthermore, we must note that Vane's dreams differ in one significant

aspect from dreams as they are commonly viewed. Vane initially rejects Mr.

Raven's invitation to sleep/die because he fears death as unconscious

nothingness, but as we shall see, his dreams (that come in his submission to

death) are clearly lucid and reflect a state of growing consciousness. Before we

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[6]Prickett, 201.

[7]J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," *The Monsters and the Critics* (London: HarperCollins, 2006) 153.

[8]Tolkien, 153.

examine the nature of the concluding dream sequence, it will be useful to look at the specific function of the dreams.

The Dream-Vision

As a theme or presence in literature, dreams are as old and varied as literature itself and are used in a range of capacities: as a catalyst to move the plot along; as apocalyptic writing, a report of "visions, ecstases, divine or angelic visitations, and deathbed ravishments into Heaven";[9] and finally as a literary type, the dream-vision, which is a combination of apocalypse and dream narrative with roots in medieval philosophy and literature. The narrative function of the dream is both simple and powerful. In primitive and Classical narrative literatures, the dream event often depicts enigmatic communication with the gods and serves solely to advance the storyline.[10] Scripture also makes use of this technique in the dreams of the wife of Pilate,[11] Pharaoh,[12]

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[9]J. Stephen Russell, *The English Dream Vision: Anatomy of a Form* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1988) 39.

[10]One clear example of this is in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, when Gilgamesh tells his mother of his dream in which he encounters a fallen star that turns out to be his brother. The meaning of the dream is clear enough to the reader because he has also read of the gods' displeasure with Gilgamesh's wildness and their intent to send him a companion to tame him; however, Gilgamesh is unable to decipher its meaning and must ask his goddess mother to interpret it.

[11]Matt. 27:19

[12]Gen. 41:1–24.

Nebuchadnezzar,[13] and the patriarchs Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph.[14] However,

dreams in the Bible tend to be less ambiguous for the dreamer. J. Stephen Russell

attributes this tendency in the Old Testament to the belief that God would not

"treat His people so contemptuously as to speak to them in riddles."[15] Jacob's

dream, one with a more notable impact on the literary tradition, clearly

illustrates this distinction:

> He had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants. . . . Behold I am with you and will keep you wherever you go . . . for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it."[16]

Even though the dream is strange and symbolic,[17] Jacob is not excluded from

understanding its meaning. He awakes and knows something he could not

grasp before. There are many other examples in ancient and modern literature of

dream-as-narrative events, and while this use of the dream is certainly important

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[13]Dan. 2:31–36; 4:9–24.

[14]Gen. 20–41.

[15]Russell, 30.

[16]Gen. 28:12–16.

[17]The ladder in the dream has become an important symbol in dream narratives and also in later medieval mystical writings, such as Walter Hilton's *The Ladder of Perfection*.

as a function of the narrative, it also helps define one of the essential elements of

the dream-vision.

The use of dreams in revelatory literature, however, is classified as a

separate literary genre, the apocalypse. The term is a Greek word used in the

first line of the book of Revelation, "The *apokalypsis* of Jesus Christ," which means

"revelation, disclosure." According to Paul D. Hanson, this is the first attested

use of the word in reference to a literary work, which "bears both historical and

formal significance: historical inasmuch as the book of Revelation has exercised

considerable influence on the Western understanding of the genre; formal

inasmuch as the book exhibits nearly all of the principal characteristics of this

genre."[18] Apocalyptic writings are two-dimensional, dealing with both the

historical succession of time and its eventual end, and with the connection of

heaven and earth. This second dimension suggests something otherworldly as a

divine secret is unveiled to the seer. Rather than being a mere convention for

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[18]Paul D. Hanson, "Apocalypses and Apocalypticism: The Genre" *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 279. The study of the Book of Revelation as an apocalypse, and therefore a form of literature, is wide and varied. For an overview of the biblical perspective, see articles "Apocalypse" and "Revelation" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*; "The Revelation of John" in *An Introduction to the New Testament*; "The Apocalypse" in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*; and "Apocalyptic, Apocalypticism" in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*. For research from the literary perspective, see Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, *The Literary Guide to the Bible*; Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III, *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*; and Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*.

prophets of doom, the apocalypse has a rich literary tradition that flowers in the medieval period.[19]

Revelations of Divine Love, a work we referred to as an example of the mystical tradition of the fourteenth century, is the record of a vision shown to Julian of Norwich "through God's goodness."[20] It begins: "I asked for three graces of God's gift. The first was vivid perception of Christ's Passion, the second was bodily sickness and the third was for God to give me three wounds [. . .] , the wound of contrition, the wound of compassion and the wound of an earnest longing for God."[21] The eschatological concerns of the visionary, combined with the nature and presumed source of the vision, help to categorize Julian's *Revelations* as a type of apocalyptic writing.

It is important to note that though Julian's writing belongs to the mystical tradition that we have previously discussed, one must be careful not to equate apocalypticism with mysticism. In literary and theological tradition, there is a definite distinction between an apocalypse and the mystical experience. The difference is largely one of context, but practically, the receiver of a revelation

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[19]Such examples include Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*, Hugh of St. Victor's *The Mystical Ark of Noah*, Bernard of Clairvaux's *On the Song of Songs*, and Anselm of Havelberg's *Dialogues*.

[20]Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. Elizabeth Spearing (New York: Penguin, 1998) 3.

[21]Julian of Norwich, 3–4.

does not necessarily have to be prepared to receive it, while the mystical

experience usually occurs after preparation for it by a willful submission. "If an

apocalypse occurs in a larger work at all, this larger work is typically 'factual,' a

history or chronicle or spiritual biography. The visionary is never depicted as

distressed or anxious; in fact, he is always represented as worthy, pure, and

totally free from worldly cares."[22]

Before moving on to the form of the dream-vision, it is important to stress

the somewhat obvious distinction between the dream as narrative event and the

apocalypse. Dreams as narrative events function as an element of the plot, and

its meaning, whether ambiguous or clear, applies only to the dreamer. In

apocalypses, the vision message is universal. The form of the dream-vision takes

the simplicity of the dream event and the didactic nature of the apocalypse to

occupy "a space between [the dream event and apocalypse], a space within

which readers can never be sure whether the words they read are God's or those

of one who has dreams."[23] The actual structure of the dream-vision (contrary to

a defining characteristic of "structure") is somewhat fluid. Several critics cite

Cicero's *Dream of Scipio* as the first and definitive example of a dream-vision in

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[22]Russell, 39. But note, although the seer of Revelation is not distressed when he is "in the Spirit on the Lord's day" (Rev. 1:10), he nonetheless encounters stressful, anxious moments in certain subsequent visions (Rev. 5:4).

[23]Russell, 49.

which the narrator relates a story of the dreamer falling asleep in the beginning,

dreaming a vision, and waking in the end.[24] As we progress from this work of

classical antiquity to those of the later Middle Ages, we see not only a growing

awareness of the power of dreams within literature, but also an increasing level

of importance given to dreams themselves.

Augustine, whose writing and theology was immensely influential

throughout the Middle Ages, "faced the full poignancy of fallen man's

knowledge of God: since body and soul are inextricably linked, the soul can only

use enigmatic body images."[25] Augustine makes a careful distinction between

visions and dreams, in which the soul reflects over memories of earlier

phantasmata that are products of the imagination and are not grounded in

reality.[26] For Augustine, the *visio intellectualis*, or intellectual vision, is opposed to

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[24] In this sense, *Lilith* is *not* a typical dream-vision because it does not follow this particular pattern. Several critics have made a case for the whole of the novel being a dream since Vane questions his consciousness throughout the novel, which would help to classify *Lilith* as a traditional dream-vision in the same sense as Cicero's *Dream of Scipio*. Still more critics have questioned whether Vane actually wakes up at the close of the novel. Roderick McGillis has suggested that MacDonald intentionally left the conclusion vague. Though it is admittedly a presumption, I believe Vane does wake, though his level of consciousness is noticeably altered from his previous waking states. However, even if the whole of *Lilith* is not a dream (which I do not believe it to be), there is still some precedence for categorizing *Lilith* as an example of the dream-vision. Dante's *Divine Comedy*, though it does not follow the established pattern of a dream-vision, is often labeled as such because of the visionary nature of the entire work. *Lilith* follows this same pattern.

[25]Alison M. Peden, "Macrobius and Medieval Dream Literature" *Medium Aevum* 64 (1985): 59.

[26] Augustine, like many early theologians, did not have a high a view of the imagination and saw the unrealistic products of the imagination as low and of no value. However, his

the *visio corporalis*, or bodily sight, and the *visio spiritalis*, that which is a product

of the imagination and causes dreams.   After Augustine, we move to the highly

influential taxonomy developed by Macrobius in his *Commentary on the Dream of

Scipio*.²⁷ Macrobius, in claiming that Scipio's dream held great significance and

meaning, developed a classification of dreams in which he "distinguished

dreams which were credible (*probabilis somnia*) from those without import. To

the former belong the *somnium* (enigmatic dream), *visio* (prophecy) and *oraculum*

(the messages of revered men or gods). To the latter belong the *insomnium*

(nightmare) and *visium* (apparition)."²⁸ Macrobius's taxonomy becomes very

important for not only the advances it makes in understanding dream literature,

but also for the influence it had on medieval thought and writing. Chaucer

mentions Macrobius several times throughout his works in the *Book of the

Duchess*, the Nonnes Preest's Tale, and in the *Parlement of Foules*.²⁹ While both

Macrobius's and Augustine's classifications are important elements in grasping

the medieval understanding of dreams and visions, we have no evidence of

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understanding of allegory and the different levels of meaning found in reading Scripture reveal more affinities with MacDonald's suggestion for reading both Scripture and fantastical literature. See Augustine's *De Genesi ad Litteram* and *De Trinitate*.

²⁷Ambrosius Aurelius Theodosius Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. William Harris Stahl (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952).

²⁸Peden, 60.

²⁹Peden, 68.

MacDonald's awareness of or influence by them, except perhaps indirectly through his reading of Chaucer. However, even apart from these classifications, we can see a flowering of the dream-vision, particularly in the later Middle Ages, when writers began to make full use of this developing genre. Many of the greatest examples of the dream-vision come from this period, including among others, *Pearl* and *Piers Plowman*, with which we know MacDonald was familiar from our examination of *England's Antiphon*.

In both works of literature, the dream functions not only as a plot catalyst, but also in a sort of revelatory fashion. It should be recalled, however, that the nature of the dreams differ from one another. In *Piers Plowman*, the dreamer was not transformed by his visions; instead he used the dreams as a didactic tool for the reader. There is no interior spiritual journey, but rather, "a rambling search for faithful proclamation and application."[30] The Dreamer in *Pearl*, however, makes quite a different use of his vision. The occasion for his dream serves as a catalyst for the plot, but the vision he receives in his dream not only transforms the Dreamer, it provides a similar opportunity of transformation for the reader. The vision is ultimately cut short and the Dreamer wakes up before receiving a complete, ecstatic revelation. The moving visionary experience in *Pearl*

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[30]David Lyle Jeffrey, ed. and trans., *English Spirituality in the Age of Wyclif* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1988) 371.

illustrates the mysterious poignancy of the dream-vision in which the dreamer

receives a glimpse of the glorious world to come, but wakes up before entering

into the mystery of it. In this sense, the dream-vision mirrors the mystical

experience whose ultimate goal is communion with God.

With *Pearl* as a model of the particularly medieval dream-vision, a

representation we know MacDonald was familiar with and influenced by, we see

how the various qualities of influences in MacDonald's writing—medieval and

mystical—converge in the form of the dream-vision. While a dream-vision may

relate a mystical experience, it does not necessarily have to do so, as we see in

Piers Plowman. The mystical encounter is, by nature, an interior experience that

does not merely suggest the world to come, it instills a greater desire for ultimate

union with the Giver of the vision. In both *Pearl* and *Lilith*, we see the elements

and characteristics of the dream-vision as a form adopting the aim or purpose of

the medieval mystical tradition.

Vane's Mystical Dreams

The close ties between the dream-vision and the mystical tradition help to

elucidate both the meaning of Vane's dreams and how his final dream-vision

functions in the narrative as a whole. Just as the dream-vision draws from both

the form of the dream as narrative event and of the apocalypse, Vane's dreams

have both a narrative and visionary function. For example, in the series of

dreams that Vane has once he has surrendered to sleep, the first few function to

explain the process of sleeping and waking. Yet, even here, there is a hint of

meaning beyond a mere plot device:

> I grew aware of my existence, aware also of the profound, the
> infinite cold. I was intensely blessed—more blessed, I know, than
> my heart, imagining, can now recall. [. . .] How convey the delight
> of that frozen, yet conscious sleep! [. . .] Then the dreams began to
> arrive—and came crowding. [. . .] I was Adam, waiting for God to
> breathe into my nostrils the breath of life—I was not Adam, but a
> child in the bosom of a mother white with radiant whiteness [. . .]
> For centuries I dreamed—or was it chiliads? or only one long
> night?—But why ask? for time had nothing to do with me; I was in
> the land of thought—farther in, higher up than the seven
> dimensions, the ten senses: I think I was where I am—in the heart
> of God.[31]

The dreams continue in cycles. At times, he dreams he is awake, and at others,

he is fully conscious of being asleep. His lucid dreams are characteristic of the

dream-as-narrative event because they illustrate the journey he goes through in

order to fully sleep and subsequently, to fully wake. Notice, however, the

language used in Vane's description of his dreams; it is more typical of a mystical

vision than of a dream. The seemingly disconnected flow is much like a dream,

but the content is that of someone experiencing a union with God.[32]

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[31]*Lilith*, 230–231.

[32]The phrase "farther in, higher up" is later adopted in C. S. Lewis's *The Last Battle*—a cry
repeated by the unicorn as everyone enters and is welcomed into the new world, an interesting

MacDonald's reference to the seven dimensions and ten senses is similar to Jacob

Boehme's classification of seven dimensions as a realm that represents complete

knowledge and awareness, something achieved only at the height of the mystical

experience. Note, however, that Vane uses a term of stasis: "I think I was where I

am—in the heart of God." Certainly strange things happen in dreams, but his

varied use of tense suggests something other than an incoherent, passing thought

on the heart of God. Vane's dream is no mere act of narration; it is the occasion

for Truth to be fully disclosed and understood.

The enlightening nature of Vane's dreams suggests both a revelation and

the culmination of a mystical experience. Essential to both of these forms is an

understanding of their source, which is necessarily divine in origin. After Vane's

final waking, he attributes his dreams presumably to God:

> Man dreams and desires; God broods and wills and quickens.
> When a man dreams his own dream, he is the sport of his dream;
> when Another gives it him, that Other is able to fulfil it.
> I have never again sought the mirror. The hand sent me back: I will
> not go out again by that door! 'All the days of my appointed time
> will I wait till my change come.'[33]

Vane trusts that his dream was given to him by Another, and that in some day to

come, he will be utterly transformed. His dream must be understood as the

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use of this phrase as a metaphor for entering Paradise, where one finally experiences ultimate
communion with God.

[33]*Lilith*, 251.

culmination of a mystical experience, and not as an apocalyptic revelation, since

a revelation is not intended to be exclusive to the visionary, while the mystic

vision is usually only fully understood by the one who experienced it. An

additional condition for this experience is what Russell has called

> the psychic emptiness of the visionary, [. . .] emphasized in mystical
> tracts such as The Cloud of Unknowing, and its history as a
> requirement for mystical experience is long and distinguished: only
> a vessel empty of earthly concerns can accept the indwelling of the
> Divine Presence. And the emptiness must be a conscious
> emptiness, a simplicity of heart and an abstinence of mind:
> visionaries may occasionally be tranced or even on the point of
> death, but never asleep.[34]

Vane meets almost every condition for the mystical experience. By submitting to

sleep, he is consciously empty and can "accept the indwelling of the Divine

Presence"—something we know has occurred since he was and is "in the heart of

God." While Vane is not in a trance, he is at the point of death, by way of

submission to it. In *Lilith*, sleep and death are inextricably intertwined, so unless

one sleeps, he cannot die. This is, of course, the point in which Vane's experience

diverges from the traditional mystic vision; he is asleep; this vision is then

arguably a dream, or is so called in the narrative. Nonetheless, Vane's sleep is

clearly not an unconscious state. What he feared (and rejected) earlier in favor of

an active quest—suggesting his fear of sleep as nothingness—turns into a true

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[34]Russell, 39–40.

spiritual quest whose end is union with God and whose abrupt closure, though a

jarring loss, is not disconnected from the present world to which he is returned,

only to live with a penitent longing to return to the even more wakeful, higher

world of God.

Traditionally, the mystic experience is similar to a dream-like state, yet

clearly not a dream. It is, however, a type of fantastic journey because it is

concerned with that promised world to come. The visionary often receives

glimpses—either of the world to come or of a truth revealed. But the vision

always stops short of grasping the end of the vision and instills a deep yearning

for the promise yet to be fulfilled. As we have seen from our analysis of "the

mystic way," the virtually individualistic, eschatological experience for the

visionary is the ultimate aim of the mystical tradition. One of the most poignant

passages in the novel describes the abrupt end of Vane's dream:

> My heart beating with hope and desire, I held faster the hand of my
> Lona, and we began to climb; but soon we let each other go, to use
> hands as well as feet in the toilsome ascent of the huge stones. At
> length we drew near the cloud, which hung down the steps like the
> borders of a garment, passed through the fringe, and entered the
> deep folds. A hand, warm and strong, laid hold of mine, and drew
> me to a little door with a golden lock. The door opened; the hand
> let mine go, and pushed me gently through. I turned quickly, and
> saw the board of a large book in the act of closing behind me. I
> stood alone in my library.[35]

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[35]*Lilith*, 250.

The reader may assume that Vane wakes up, though Vane never explicitly says so. In fact, he questions whether or not he is "still in the chamber of death—asleep and dreaming." He says, "If that waking was itself but a dream, surely it was a dream of better waking yet to come."[36] Like the Dreamer in *Pearl*, Vane's experience within the dream was never consummated, it too was "a vision of a vision." Because the experience was via the narrative instrumentality of a dream, it cannot be considered, in an unqualified way, a mystical experience; however, while certainly fantastical, the dream also belongs to a realm other than mere fantasy. The dreams at the end of the novel appear, not only to further the plot and bring the novel to a close, but particularly to give evidence of Vane's understanding and insight revealed through these dream-visions. One is tempted to ask whether MacDonald's use of dreams as a narrative instrument is not, in fact, his own (perhaps popular) way of referring to what, in more religious language, would be called a beatific vision.

When these dreams are read as mere dreams and elements of a plot, they remain enigmatic—a quality shunned in medieval oneiromancy because it was believed God would not purposefully confuse His creatures. Put another way, a dream given by God is meant to be understood. This purposefulness in no way denies the strangeness of the dreams—they are, in narrative fact, dreams—but

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[36]*Lilith*, 251.

because they occupy a functional space somewhere between a mystical dream

event and a divinely-inspired revelation, these dream-visions are intended to

instill a yearning for the world yet to come and to foster an understanding

between the dreamer and the Giver of dreams.

MacDonald's familiarity with and stated influence from both the medieval

and mystical traditions must be taken into consideration when attempting to

understand MacDonald's writing and overall vision. Because MacDonald has

put such a great emphasis on the power of dreams and mystical visions

throughout his writings, the reader can assume that Vane's dreams in *Lilith* are

intended to suggest that same capacity for a deeper and higher meaning.

We must now take one last look at MacDonald's sermon, "The New

Name," where he elaborates his view of mysticism as a process of receiving one's

"true name." This name is given to "to him that overcometh [. . .] when he has

overcome."[37] MacDonald goes further in his sermon to say that this man who

has overcome receives "the secret of the new name,"[38] which is given to man, as

MacDonald says, "in a chamber in God himself."[39] So Vane, who remains "in the

heart of God," must be understood to have received his "true name." Vane's

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[37]George MacDonald, "The New Name," *Unspoken Sermons I, II, III* (1867; Whitehorn, CA: Johannesen, 2004) 73.

[38]"The New Name," 74.

[39]"The New Name," 74.

dreams, then, are a "certain mode of embodying truth,"[40] the same definition that

MacDonald gives for his whole system of mysticism.

Mere similarities between *Lilith* and medieval or mystical qualities are not

enough to justify a reading of *Lilith* as a mystical dream-vision. However, in

analyzing MacDonald's highly developed system of mysticism and his own

cultivated interests in medieval literature and philosophy, we see not mere

affinities, but clear and professed influences from both medieval and mystical

writings at work in MacDonald's own writing, and particularly in *Lilith*.

Reading *Lilith* as a mystical dream-vision not only provides the reader an

historical context with which to interpret the text, but it also maintains the hope

clearly evident in the novel's conclusion by recognizing the true anagogical sense

and purpose of the dreams. Because Vane's dreams are imbued with the

mystical quality of vision, his ultimate hope is not dashed, but is rather expectant

of the day when the fantastical difference between this world and that other

promised to come is no longer distinguishable. Vane, just as the dreamer in

Pearl, has come agonizingly close to ultimate union or "Oneness with God," but

ultimately, must return to this world, where he says "All the days of my

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[40]"The New Name," 67.

appointed time will I wait till my change come."[41] Vane's final words poignantly

describe the hope with which he waits:

> Strange dim memories, which will not abide identification,
> often, through misty windows of the past, look out upon me in the
> broad daylight, but I never dream now. It may be,
> notwithstanding, that, when most awake, I am only dreaming the
> more! But when I wake at last into that life which, as a mother her
> child, carries this life in its bosom, I shall know that I wake, and
> shall doubt no more.
> I wait; asleep or awake, I wait.
> Novalis says, "Our life is no dream, but it should and will
> perhaps become one."[42]

MacDonald's use of the dream-vision provides a structure for his

ultimately mystical representation of what every Christian is called to do—to be

in this world, yet fully aware and hopeful of that other world to come. Vane's

progression along "the mystic way" reaches its height in this final dream

sequence, in which Vane "enters the heart of God," an experience like unto the

Beatific Vision in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In understanding not only the function,

but also nature of these dreams, we are invited to share in the same secret that

has been revealed to Vane in receiving his "true name." These dreams, though

strange, have truth at their heart, and instill hope—for both Vane and the

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[41]*Lilith*, 251.

[42]*Lilith*, 252.

reader—for the day when our lives become dreams and are drawn up into the

presence of God.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

> I cannot [answer your question]; you and I use the same words
> with different meanings. We are often unable to tell people what
> they *need* to know, because they *want* to know something else, and
> would therefore only misunderstand what we said. Home is ever
> so far away in the palm of your hand, and how to get there it is of
> no use to tell you. But you will get there; you must get there; you
> have to get there. Everybody who is not at home, has to go home.
> You thought you were at home where I found you: if that had been
> your home, you could not have left it. Nobody can leave home.
> And nobody ever was or ever will be at home without having gone
> there.[1]

When we first encountered this commentary by Mr. Raven, Vane was a

helpless wanderer begging for answers. When we read *Lilith* as a mystical

dream-vision, we are forced to return and reread this passage in light of the

knowledge Vane receives in his visionary dreams. At the conclusion of the

novel, we find Vane right where he began, in the library. And yet, everything

has changed—nothing is the same. Some critics read the conclusion in the

library as the fulfillment of the Romantic quest for truth and wisdom, and while

this reading certainly is valid, it does not acknowledge the fullness of Vane's

development. If the conclusion in the library is the fulfillment of the Romantic

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[1]*Lilith*, 45.

quest, then there would have been no need for Vane to leave the library in the first place; there would have been no change in Vane's character.

However, the novel seems to suggest something different. If Vane did not need to leave his house, if the answers had always been there with him in his library, then all Vane needed to do to find truth and wisdom was to look into himself. But this inward-focused journey is not what the novel is about. *Lilith* stresses the importance of the denial of self. Again and again throughout the text, Vane is told in many different ways that he must lose his self-hood in order to become his true self. In submitting to sleep and death, Vane gives up his self, and in his dreams, as we have seen, he is given his "true name" and becomes his true self. The Vane we meet in the beginning of the novel is not the same man we see "waiting for his change to come" in the end. Vane, the restless wanderer, has finally come to rest "in the heart of God."[2]

So how are we to read this passage cited above in light of Vane's newfound understanding and his resigned patience? Has Vane finally come home? Essentially, the answer is no, but we can also understand from the final dream sequence that Vane has been given a glimpse of his true home–even if it is only of the front door. So while Vane is not in his true home, he, through his mystical dream-vision, has come to understand his true self and has been

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[2]*Lilith*, 231.

instilled with a greater longing for his true home. It seems Vane has literally

come full circle as he ends where he begins, and yet there is a subtle difference in

his demeanor and character. Vane begins and ends the novel alone in his library,

and yet the individualistic nature he possesses at the start of his journey no

longer characterizes him at its end. In his final dream, Vane walks hand in hand

with Lona as they approach what he has described as "the heart of God." While

Vane subsequently wakes and is cut off from ultimate communion, he says he

still feels the presence of Lona and, presumably, the rest of his company.[3]

Just as this dream sequence encourages the reader to go back and reread

elements of the text in light of the visionary dreams, the conclusion also helps to

clarify some of the novel's ambiguities. When we read Vane's concluding

dream-vision as the culmination of a mystical experience, we can see the

preceding events in the narrative as steps in the "mystic way." Doing so,

however, raises some interesting questions about MacDonald's Christology.[4]

MacDonald's theology has always been a matter of great concern and

debate, especially in light of his controversial dismissal from the pulpit in

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[3] *Lilith*, 251.

[4] While outside the full scope of this paper, it will be both interesting and useful to briefly address some of the questions raised by this way of reading *Lilith*. However, this examination does necessarily leave out some significant elements of MacDonald's theology. This is however an area of research that needs more attention and arises out of this particular reading. Fully examining MacDonald's theology or even Christology and how it plays out in his literature would require an entire other thesis!

Arundel. The congregation was troubled by several elements of MacDonald's

theology, including his belief in the temporality of Hell, of which there is plenty

of evidence in *Lilith*. In the novel, Mr. Raven and his wife, who are also Adam

and Eve, assert that every created being—even the great "Shadow," or Satan—

will one day be redeemed, a belief which leads readers to label MacDonald as a

Universalist. The *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* defines Universalism

as the doctrine "that hell is in essence purgative and therefore temporary."[5] A

Universalist theology is rooted in the teaching of Old Testament prophets that

claimed "God's purpose covered not only the Jewish race," but other nations as

well. MacDonald's Universalism, like that of his mentor, F. D. Maurice, is of a

different brand than the Unitarian Universalism, which tends to concede that

there are many paths to God, none of which are better than another. Maurice and

MacDonald hoped in a different kind of universal salvation; for both men, pain

and suffering were essential elements in redemption and they looked to Christ as

an exemplum of suffering. They did not deny that sin must be "bought with a

price," but there is a question as to what role they believed Christ to play in this

salvation. In *Lilith*, there is no outright mention of Christ, though there are

grounds to argue that Mr. Raven, as Adam and the sexton, or harrower of souls,

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[5]*Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed., eds. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 1415.

is also the embodiment of the Second Adam, or Christ. Either way, whether the

mention of Christ is absent or metaphorical, the submission to death required in

Lilith is an effort to follow the example given by Christ for all. If this is the case,

then Christ's role in salvation is, for MacDonald, merely secondary; He is to

serve as an exemplar of the faith. But if MacDonald's Christology appears

obvious in reading *Lilith*, it does not remain so in reading his sermons and

essays. Above all else, MacDonald believed in the sovereignty of God, and he

never denied the saving power of Christ's suffering. Yet he maintained a hope in

the complete power of God's love to draw every being unto Him. It is unclear,

even in his sermons, whether MacDonald fully subscribed to the belief that all

men would really be redeemed or that he sincerely hoped in its possibility.

As we have seen, reading *Lilith* as a mystical dream-vision not only helps

to clarify and open new ways of understanding the text, but it also brings to light

new areas of research applicable not only in MacDonald studies, but also in

broader areas of medievalism, mysticism, and dream-vision narratives. This

classification of *Lilith* suggests a new taxonomy in both mystical and dream-

vision literatures that needs to be explored. In addition, this reading of *Lilith* as a

mystical dream-vision can serve as an interpretative guide for reading and

understanding other similar fantasy literature. Concerning MacDonald

scholarship, a particularly communal aspect evident in *Lilith* suggests the

possibility of a similar occurrence in other literary works of MacDonald's. But

perhaps most significantly, this study has brought to light the need to examine

MacDonald's literary criticism both independently of his fiction and as a tool in

understanding his fictional works.

It is perhaps important to conclude by acknowledging MacDonald's own

assertion that any *good* piece of literature necessarily has various levels of

meaning hidden within it. MacDonald never offered explanations for his own

work, nor did he exclude any possibilities of meaning. Rather, he said, some

interpretations are *truer* than others.[6] While this analysis is not *the* true way of

reading and understanding *Lilith*, it does offer a *way* of reading the text true to

MacDonald's own philosophy and historical influences. Reading *Lilith* as a

mystical dream-vision not only maintains the eschatalogical sense and purpose

of Vane's dreams, it also reveals MacDonald's way of embodying Truth under

the veil of fantasy and dreams.

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[6]George MacDonald, "The Fantastic Imagination," *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Sandner (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004) 67.

APPENDIX

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