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## Goblinization

*A Reading of the Colonial Subject, Degeneration  
and Marginalisation in The Princess and the  
Goblin (1872) and The Princess and Curdie (1883)  
by George MacDonald (1824-1905)*

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**Abstract:**

George MacDonald's two longer fairy tales, *Princess and the Goblin* (1872) and *The Princess and Curdie* (1883) reflect key preoccupations of nineteenth century English society such as the Darwinian discussion, commercialism, wealth creation and materialism. My aim in this paper is to read *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie* as a reflection of the nineteenth century, essentially 'Victorian,' preoccupation with the colonized as 'other'. I approach this preoccupation through the arguments of similarity and difference as justification for imperial expansion.

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**Goblinization: a reading of the colonial subject, degeneration and marginalisation in The Princess and the Goblin (1872) and The Princess and Curdie (1883) by George MacDonald (1824-1905)**

During Queen Victoria's reign, 1837 – 1900, the British Empire was expanding at an unprecedented rate. Interest in the exotic locations of the colonies was fostered not only by imaginative fiction situated in such places but also by complex perceptions of the outworking of England's responsibilities towards colonial peoples. At the same time, societal changes within England and political upheaval in other parts of Europe gave rise to unease in the domestic situation which led to an awareness of responsibilities towards the marginalised underclass which paralleled the perception of responsibilities towards subject peoples.

In Victorian England, the perception of 'otherness' through both similarity and difference created a duality characteristic of the period, as the 'other', either in the exotic or the domestic context, became an object to be acted upon from a position of either perceived 'brotherhood' or as victim to be rescued from 'difference'. This was the historical context into which George MacDonald was writing. I will focus on the Victorian English perception of 'the other' as this perception impacts upon imperialistic expansion justified by both the similarity and the difference of the 'other'.

Geoffrey Galt Harpham notes that, the "centre of ethics [is] its concern for "the other"" (26). In Victorian England, this concern emanated from an Anglocentric position and although its apparent focus was on the external 'other', I aim to demonstrate that it was also an internal fear situated both in the domestic domain and within the individual. Whether the approach to the colonised 'other' was through similarity or difference, it produced the same outcome in terms of action. From the point of view of the colonised, this action would be mirrored as 'acted upon'.

MacDonald (1824-1905), writing from observations during his stay in Algeria North Africa in the winter of 1856 – 7, demonstrated an empathy with the colonised which reflected his position as an outsider in English society since he was Scottish, when he wrote,

"One cannot help wondering, when he sees the little, jerky, self-asserting, tight-laced Frenchman beside the stately, dignified, reserved, loose-robed Arab, how the former could ever assume and retain authority over the latter." (MacDonald, "An Invalid's Winter in Algeria" 146)

In this quotation from An Invalid's Winter in Algeria (1864), MacDonald's comments encapsulate two concepts that come together to form the predominant outlook of the English public toward the people and lands of the British Empire, for, as Gayatri Spivak states,

"it should not be possible to read nineteenth century British literature without remembering that imperialism ... was a crucial part of the representation of England to the English." (146)

Although MacDonald was, in Invalid's Winter, writing about the French occupation of Algeria, the two concepts formed a basis for the justification of the British Empire.

### **Similarity and Difference**

The first concept, that is, the similarity of other races to 'us', the European, rests in the argument of justification for empire from the position of similarity, as Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, wrote between 1748 and 1804,

“Upon the whole, every circumstance concurs in proving that mankind are not composed of species essentially different from each other; that, on the contrary there was originally but one species, ...”.(Eze 27)

From a literary point of view, the concept relates to Northrop Frye's positive hermeneutic, that is, an interpretative position with the emphasis on continuity and similarity with the 'other.' In his quotation above, MacDonald as the outsider is empathetically drawn to the Arab, the occupied, thus demonstrating his affirmation of a common humanity. The belief that 'we' (the civilized) could help 'them' (the uncivilized) to attain order and civilization is situated on the premise that what is accepted within the dominant discourse as good for 'us' is also good for humanity. Whether the accepted cultural norms and societal structures of Victorian England were 'civilized' or not is outside the discussion of this paper although MacDonald critiqued aspects of that society. In Kenneth Womack's discussion of ethical criticism, he observes that Emmanuel Levinas' moral philosophy, “highlights notions of responsibility” (107), that is, the recognition that a perception of sameness brings responsibility. Kenneth Womack notes that Levinas' work advocates, “a more universalized cognizance of otherness in the western philosophical tradition” (107). The implication of a 'more universalized cognizance of otherness' is that it would lead to a different outworking of the perception of sameness from that of 'the white man's burden' with its connotations of superiority as in a parent-child relationship.

The second concept, that of difference, rests in the need to bring what the coloniser regards as their own superior civilization to establish order and enlightenment to the other as 'different'. Stephen Prickett notes that the concept of 'civilization' carries a meaning of “an ideal order of human society involving the arts, learning, and manners.” (121) [and was used in France in the mid eighteenth century] with “connotations justifying colonial expansion and European linguistic hegemony.” (121). This assertion is again evidenced in the writing of Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon (1707-1788), (quoted in Eze), who wrote:

“Nothing can reflect greater honour in religion than the civilizing of these nations of barbarians, and laying the foundations of empire without employing any other arms but those of virtue and humanity.”  
(20)

Although this concept may have originated in France with a belief in “the evident superiority of la civilisation française,” (Prickett 121), Edward Said observes that French imperialism rarely had the same sense of imperial mission as that found in Britain (74).

The notion of superiority stemmed from a perception of difference, a need to squeeze the culture and lives of the ‘other’ into an English (or French) mould. By so doing, the changes brought about would, so the argument went, improve both the social and moral lives of the unenlightened nations, that is, those nations who were outside the European cultural norm. The background to this argument in England is situated in the rise of the evangelical movement with its twin objects of religious conversion and social improvement.

The argument for civilizing the unenlightened in Victorian England viewed the development of nations/races in terms of individual development and growth, from babyhood to adulthood. Thus not only were the colonised people regarded as ‘children’, incapable of ruling themselves but the nation as a whole was believed to be in an earlier stage of development than that of the English. It followed that as the analogy of the child was applied to a nation or race, then education and discipline were appropriate ways to approach relationship with them. The eighteenth century imperialists had a different approach. Although they were more overtly and single-mindedly interested in commercial and trade advantage, they generally accepted diversity and viewed local cultural traditions with an element of respect.<sup>1</sup> The adventure stories of the early nineteenth century often went beyond passive acceptance<sup>1</sup> of diversity. Many were influenced by the Rousseauian concept of the noble savage, that is, the purity of life lived in closer harmony with the natural world and driven by a desire for freedom from the encumbrances of Western European ‘civilization.’ An example of this type of story can be found in E. J. Trelawney’s Adventures of a Younger Son (1831). Trelawney wrote,

“The light is not less bright because unobscured by, what is falsely called, civilization, on these wild children of the desert” (46).

Despite the apparent acceptance of the negative elements of Western European civilization, and praise of the native freedom the hero finds in exotic locations, it is notable that the indigenous people are still represented as ‘children’, an implicit endorsement of the developing attitude of white superiority that became entrenched<sup>2</sup> within the second half of the nineteenth century (1850-1900).

David Lorenzo points out that activist policies use both similarities and differences for justifying imperialistic activity, the former in terms of the probable success and consequent benefit of such intervention to the people

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh Ridley discusses this position in his book *Images of Empire* see Hugh Ridley, Images of Imperial Rule (London: Croom Helm, 1983) 1-30.

<sup>2</sup> See Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, ed., Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader (Cambridge (Mass.) and Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

who experience intervention (35-37) and the latter in terms of the need for intervention as a 'rescuing' gesture. Hourihan comments on,

“the relative nature of terms such as ... 'civilized' and 'savage' as contingent upon the implied existence of “*innately* superior and inferior people.” (144).

In early twentieth century boys magazines, the morally degenerated 'other' became more specifically identified with other races. The resultant enmification helped to create the hostile conditions from which the Great War (1914 -18) erupted.<sup>3</sup> The perceived need for education and discipline as appropriate ways to approach relationship with the 'other' was also applied to Victorian domestic policy. The perception of the dominant authorities within society, that is, the ruling classes, was that the growing underclass of urban poor within nineteenth century cities was equally in need of socialization and education. The position of the poor in this context has been discussed at length in an article entitled Goblins, Morlocks, and weasels: classic fantasy and the Industrial Revolution by Jules Zanger. Both the colonised and the poor were viewed as 'child', and therefore in need of socialization in order to teach conformity to the norms of society. In MacDonald's 'Princess' books, the position of the goblins could be read as a reflection of the Victorian preoccupation with the position of the 'other' and therefore another instance of the social commentary embedded in MacDonald's writing.

### **The Princess and the Goblin (1872)**

The story of The Princess and the Goblin begins,

“There was once a little princess whose father was king over a great country full of mountains and valleys. His palace was built upon one of the mountains, and was very grand and beautiful. The princess, whose name was Irene, was born there, but she was sent soon after her birth ... to be brought up by country people in a large house, half castle, half farm house, on the side of another mountain, about halfway between its base and its peak.” (The Princess and the Goblin 10)

In the opening paragraph of the story, MacDonald sets up an opposition between 'the mountains and the valleys' and places his heroine at the middle point, halfway up a mountain. As a child, Irene herself is not fully socialized into the norms of palace life, but is located as 'in process' towards admittance to full palace life on the mountain top. The description of the landscape continues,

“These mountains were full of hollow places underneath, huge caverns and winding ways, some with water running through them, and some shining with all colours of the rainbow when a light was taken in. There would not have been much known about them, had there not been

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<sup>3</sup> This discussion was developed in a seminar led by Geoffrey Fox in relation to Boys Magazines and Comics. Conference, 'Children's Literature Comes of Age', Faculty of Education, Cambridge, 2004.

mines ... which had been dug to get at the ore of which the mountains were full.” (The Princess and the Goblin 10,11)

In this passage, MacDonald paints a picture of industrial activity and exploitation of the natural environment which in the sequel to The Princess and the Goblin, The Princess and Curdie, results in the greed for wealth that eventually leads to the destruction of the civilisation ‘above ground.’

In The Princess and the Goblin, the inhabitants of the inside of the mountain, are described as other, but are linked in terms of sameness,

“... in these subterranean caverns lived a strange race of beings, called by some ... goblins. There was a legend current in the country, that at one time they lived above ground, and were very like other people.”

(The Princess and the Goblin 11)

As soon as they are introduced, the goblins are linked with ‘other people’, that is with those people who have been implicitly established as ‘normal’ and ‘civilized’ and who live ‘above ground’ on the outside of the mountain. Their original ‘sameness’ is the foundation point for the fear associated with their degeneration into ‘difference’, a fear that was embodied by the physical and moral differences apparent in the goblins. The concept of degeneration centres on a regressive Darwinian model, that of downward evolution. In nineteenth century England, the fear was a personal as well as a national one, as the concept of degeneration can be applied on an individual as well as a collective level. The Princess and the Goblin (1872) includes an underclass, the goblins, that can be read as both ‘us’, that is cultural normativity, turning into the ‘other’ and the ‘other’ being part of ‘us’.

Although the goblins in The Princess and the Goblin had,

“at one time lived above ground, and were very like other people ... for some reason or other ... the king laid what they thought too severe taxes upon them, or had required observances they did not like, or had begun to treat them with more severity, in some way or other, and impose stricter laws; and the consequence was that they had all disappeared from the face of the country.” (The Princess and the Goblin 11)

What is not certain in this passage is whether the demands of the king were legitimate or not, leaving the alternative as to either they were or they were not, or, some were and some were not, open to interpretation. Leaving this question unanswered exonerates the goblins from taking all the responsibility for their degeneration, and invites an application of their situation to ‘reality’. In providing this invitation, MacDonald is fulfilling the role of the artist who,

“cutting through the blur of habit ... strives to come to terms with reality in a world that shrinks from reality” (Nussbaum 344).

The role of the artist is also to communicate that reality. One reading of this reality is to equate the goblins with both the ‘native’ as colonial subject and with the urban poor in the domestic context. In the case of the colonial subject, he or she was perceived to be lower down the evolutionary scale and not

progressing, judged from an assumed position of 'civilisation' and, in the case of the urban poor, was perceived as degenerating from the dominant norm. In both instances, responsibility for their perceived position as degenerative lies only partially with themselves, thus placing part of the responsibility on the 'king', the political master. Reading this text in terms of imperialist expansion and the marginalisation of the colonial subject serves to embed MacDonald in his historical context by uniting the analogy of the colonised subject with the urban poor as under classes that must be subdued, and the construction of both as child, who must be 'subdued' by means of education in order to socialize him or her into conformity with the dominant culture.

The story continues with further explanation of the position of the goblins,

“according to the legend, ... instead of going to some other country they had all taken refuge in the subterranean caverns .. and ... seldom showed themselves ... Those who had caught sight of any of them said that they had greatly altered in the course of generations; and no wonder, seeing they lived away from the sun, in cold and wet and dark places” (The Princess and the Goblin 11-13).

The implied choice to 'go to some other country' again unites the colonised and the poor in two ways. The first way is the potential for 'two-way' traffic to and from the colonies of the empire. This was realised in the nineteenth century not only in the transportation of criminals, many of whom were dubbed criminal as a result of actions taken because of their poverty, but also in the opportunity given for emigration later in the century. The second way can be seen as an illustration of the hierarchy of empire with England at the top and the 'dark places' of the empire at the bottom just as the 'dark places' of England's cities were at the bottom of the social scale and a the numbers of poor in these places a growing cause of fear amongst the “people who lived in the open-air-story above them” (MacDonald, The Princess and the Goblin 13). This description of the goblin's habitat equates with the miasmatic swamp image which became synonymous with the disease and moral degeneracy not only of the slum areas of England's larger cities, but also with some parts of the empire, notably 'the dark continent' of Africa. The sun in this instance could be seen as symbolic of enlightenment rather than as a literal image.

The 'alteration' in the goblins was also internal,

“as they grew in cunning, they grew in mischief, and their great delight was in every way to annoy people who lived in the open-air-story above them” (The Princess and the Goblin 13).

Thus the degeneration was both physical and moral and the reason lay partly in the driving out of the country and partly because,

“they so heartily cherished the ancestral grudge against those who occupied their former possessions ... that they sought every opportunity of tormenting them ...” (The Princess and the Goblin 13-14).

This mention of occupation leading to unrest was written fifteen years after the Indian rebellion and in the midst of constant colonial uprisings in the second half of the nineteenth century. Although MacDonald makes no overt mention of these events, they,

“excited passionate British emotion ... The possibility that Indians could ... expose their vulnerability summoned forth in the collective psyche violent and passionate emotions” (Wilson 217).

They also fed fears of internal ‘uprising’, initially roused during the period of the French Revolution (1789) and fuelled in the Victorian period by the awareness of the increasing numbers of urban poor and their growing desperation. Political unrest in Europe and the events surrounding the Paris Commune in 1871 brought the potential for such disruption close to home.

MacDonald explains that the goblins have become ‘other’ partly through choosing to degenerate from the people above ground, or at least, through choosing not to resist degeneration, but it was initially dominating human activity that pushed them underground where they became ‘goblinized’ as the downward regression continued unseen. Other examples of such downward regression in English literature can be found in the yahoos in Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels (1726) and the Doasyoulikes in Charles Kingsley’s The Water-Babies (1863).

In MacDonald’s story The Princess and the Goblin, the goblins become more hostile, hatch a plot to carry off Princess Irene and to flood the mine, drowning the miners. The plot is discovered by Curdie, the miner boy, who at this stage in his development was still, “of the upper world where the wind blew” (The Princess and Curdie 22). As often happens in MacDonald’s stories,<sup>4</sup> the perpetrators of evil suffer the consequences of their own actions. In this instance the goblins’ plot to drown the miners backfires and the water drowns the goblins. At this point the correlation between the goblins and the colonised and the poor breaks down as the goblins are being read as embodiments of the fear of degeneration and not as direct allegories. As they have degenerated physically and morally, they provide the antithesis to the hero, Curdie, and to the Victorian ideal of the hero. They illustrate the result of what happens not only to a degenerative society but also to individuals in the process of degeneration. As Gregory notes,

“every choice reflects the self we are or the self we are becoming,”  
(209)

just as Tom the water-baby’s soul,

“grew all prickly with naughty tempers, his body could not help growing prickly too ...” (185).

The theme of personal degeneration is continued in the sequel to The Princess and the Goblin, The Princess and Curdie (1883), in which MacDonald goes further in his warning about the corrupting influence of the

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<sup>4</sup>Other examples are *The Light Princess* (1864) and *The Princess and Curdie* (1883).

dominant preoccupation with commercialism and materialism in the domestic situation.

### **The Princess and Curdie (1883)**

The story depicts the corruption of the ruling classes in the personae of the king's palace officials who are slowly poisoning the king in order to seize power. The unscrupulous behaviour of the king's citizens for whom wealth creation and personal advantage have become paramount, are the cause of the destruction of their city and consequently their civilization. Their greed for gold and jewels literally 'under-mines' the city's foundations, causing it to collapse in on itself:

"One day at noon, when life was at its highest, the whole city fell with a roaring crash. ... All around spreads a wilderness of wild deer, and the very name of Gwyntystorm has ceased from the lips of men " (The Princess and Curdie 320).

Curdie's mission is to go to the city, where the Princess Irene now lives with her father the king, restore him to health, purge the palace of the corrupt officials and reinstate the king on his throne to govern the country. Before he can accomplish these tasks, Curdie must be prepared. In his third meeting with Irene's great-great-grandmother, the old Princess and a figure of supernatural spiritual wisdom and power, he is given two gifts, one is the help of a troupe of unlikely looking animals, the Uglies, and the other is the ability to tell what people are becoming by their hands. As the hero, Curdie himself must be prepared for his mission by undergoing a trial to purify his own hands and thus enable him to read the hands of others. The outcome of this gift provides the clearest exemplification of the concept that,

"every choice reflects the self we are or the self we are becoming" (209).

When Curdie grasps the paw of his main animal helper, he finds that she has the hand of a child which reflects her inner self. Conversely, when he took the hand of the court physician,

"he very nearly let (it) fall again, for what he held was not even a foot: it was the belly of a creeping thing" (The Princess and Curdie 192).

Within the city and the palace, those with human hands are to be trusted; those whose hands feel like the animal they are turning into enable Curdie to determine how they should be treated. Their hands demonstrate in physical reality their spiritual and moral state, just as the water-baby Tom's prickles reflect his inner state. The Princess explains,

"Since it is always what they *do*, whether in their minds or their bodies, that makes men go down to be less than men, that is, beasts, the change, always comes first in their hands – and first in the inside hands, to which the outside ones are but as gloves. They do not know it of course; for a beast does not know that he is a beast, and the nearer a man gets to being a beast the less he knows it" (The Princess and Curdie 98). (Emphasis in text)

This image of literal individual degeneration and the subsequent depiction of the unravelling of a corrupt society is a powerful critique of Victorian society. His adult novels contain characters that evidence moral degeneration, greed and materialism but they do not have the same impact as the animal-handed officials of this parabolic story.

MacDonald's message that moral degeneration leads to destruction of society aligns with that of the English author William Cobbett, writing in the earlier part of the nineteenth century, in his denunciation of, "the corruption of the commercial system" (92), and the Scot Thomas Carlyle who wrote on the decline of society in his Latter-Day Pamphlets (1850) as, "Days of endless calamity, disruption, dislocation, confusion worse confounded" (421). Throughout The Princess and Curdie, the emphasis for action is on individual character, but just as an individual cannot remain static, they will either be evolving or regressing, so a society or a nation cannot remain static. The Darwinian model of evolution or regression applies to the collective as well as to the individual condition. In the colonial context the representation of the other as savage, uncivilised and in need of 'rescue' and enlightenment implies the need for a continuing 'civilising' influence. This implication provided a rationale for continued dominance in the form of government over colonial territory with the justification that the colonised nation would sink back into barbarism if not controlled by the 'civilised' nation.

MacDonald's application of the Darwinian concept of evolution and regression to the individual can also be read as a reflection of the Victorian fear of personal degeneration, for, just as, "fictional regions generally contain imaginative depictions of the protagonist's inner reality," (Hein 61) so the Victorian perception of the 'other' in a colonial context is closely linked to the apprehension that the line between 'us' and the other is fine. MacDonald notes,

"how many, who seemed respectable people at home, become vulgar, self-indulgent, ruffianly, cruel even, in the wilder parts of the colonies! ... No perfection of mere civilization kills the savage in a man" (MacDonald, What's Mine's Mine 362).

This awareness of the proximity of atavistic potential, the constant possibility and potential ease with which the domestic subject abroad could 'go native', is epitomised by the character of Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness (1902). To take this potential atavism in the colonial context one step further is to recognise the other in 'us' as an internal reality, the "unconscious as "the discourse of the Other""<sup>5</sup> (Marshall 1212). In 1874, Christina Rossetti submitted a story to her publishers which was published under the title 'Speaking Likenesses' in which, she notes in a letter to her publisher,

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<sup>5</sup> Cynthia Marshall quoting Jaques Lacan, *Ecrits*, first published 1936.

“my small heroines perpetually encounter “speaking (literally speaking) likenesses” or embodiments or caricatures of themselves of their faults.” (332)

These embodiments include, ‘Hooks’, who, “was hung round with hooks like fishhooks” and “caught in everything he came near,” another, “bristled with prickly quills like a porcupine,” and a third, ‘Slime’ “was slimey and slipped through the hands.” (Rossetti 332). These children mistreat and terrify the child who meets them in the story and are completely insensitive to any pain they inflict, thus fear of the consequences of their behaviour and its inescapability is greater than any immediate physical discomfort. Rossetti’s disturbing story succeeds in foregrounding an undercurrent of fear of being overwhelmed by inner and outer ‘goblins’ and of becoming personally ‘goblinized.’ Frederic Jameson notes that, the “other is seen as a mirror image of the self” (118). The embodiments of the ‘other self’ in MacDonald, Kingsley and Rossetti depict that image as threatening on a societal and person level. Thus the fear of the ‘other’ that engenders a desire for dominance and enculturation of the unfamiliar other to make them like ‘us’ is partly a fear of the internal ‘other’, the subconscious mind.

### **Conclusion**

Dani Cavallaro observes that, “the other is the factor that enables the subject to build up a self-image.” (120) The British Empire was part of the self-image built up by the Victorian Englishman and was, as Spivak states, “a crucial part of the representation of England to the English” (146). This representation of imperialism was also reflected by the English gentleman’s desire for self-dominance, self-control and conformity to a pattern of behaviour promulgated by the dominant educative system of the time demonstrated by the English public school. If we accept Spivak’s statement that in nineteenth century England,

“imperialism ... was a crucial part of the representation of England to the English,” (39)

then the Darwinian model of perceived progression towards continued superiority or degeneration into inferiority illustrates two tendencies. The first is the tendency to reinforce the imperialistic intent of Victorian foreign policy on the grounds of both similarity and difference and carried with it the potential to ‘goblinize’ the colonial subject. The second is the tendency to increase the fears internal to the nation and the individual, that the mirror image of progression, that is, regression, would overwhelm the ‘people of the upper air’, and flood the ‘country’, both external and internal. In this reading of The Princes and the Goblin and The Princess and Curdie, I have suggested that MacDonald critiques his social and political context by using the idea of potential ‘goblinization,’ as a result of degeneration and marginalization, which can be applied in the colonial, domestic or individual sphere.

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