

Original Paper

A Narrative Analysis of Fairy Tales—*At the Back of the North Wind*

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Abstract

George MacDonald's fairy tales were very popular during the Victorian era, which was attributed to the unique narrative techniques he created. This paper mainly takes the fairy tale—At the Back of the North Wind as the research object and explores the literary and artistic beauty and moral and ethical value of At the Back of the North Wind from following three aspects: the classification of fairy tale texts, the choice of narrative perspective, and the meaning and value of fairy tales. As a devout Christian, George MacDonald not only created a supernatural fantasy setting but also incorporated a series of Christian ideas, making the fairy tale stories interweave between reality and fantasy and presenting a literary narrative structure that is both real and fantasy. MacDonald also combined his own values and ingeniously from the narrator to convey his real ideological care, bringing readers a new reading experience.

Keywords

George MacDonald, Fairy tale narrative, Narrator, Believe in fairy tales

1. Introduction

Zhu Ziqiang believes: "The 'fantasy' in fairy tales or the fantasy world is a kind of life spirit, a transcendence and liberation of the inherent real life." (Note 1) We can find that fairy tales, as a kind of dual characteristic of inherent credibility and dreamlike imagination, can endow readers with an intangible and tangible magical power, and expand the readers' imagination space through experiences in the fairy tale world. Under the enlightenment and education of factors such as magic, mystery or strangeness, it can correct and make up for the creator's dissatisfaction with the real world. Believe in the power of fairy tales and transform the life wisdom and life philosophy learned in the dream world into a catalyst for changing reality. Fantasy is a natural activity of human beings, and so is fairy tales. *At the Back of the North Wind* is just George MacDonald's construction of things that do not exist in the real

world - “the Back of the North Wind”- through imagination, and endows them with “inner authenticity”. After the protagonist Diamond’s experience in the fantasy journey, although ordinary people are indifferent to the things around them in the real life, he can understand the things happening around him more clearly and gain higher cognitive ability and clear vision.

2. A Fairy Tale VS A Fantasy Novel - A Vague Text

George MacDonald’s *At the Back of the North Wind* has long been regarded as a representative work of British fairy tales in the Victorian era. The most significant difference between fairy tales and realistic literary works lies in whether supernatural fantasy elements appear in the text, such as magical spells, treasures, fairies, elves, wizards and other fairy tale characters, as well as magical realms like Neverland. Undoubtedly, the book *At the Back of the North Wind* conforms to the stylistic features of fairy tales. The North Wind, originally a natural phenomenon, appears in the story as a personified fairy. In this novel, the North Wind is a beautiful lady with powerful magic. She can freely soar through the sky and change her appearance at will: when the breeze blows, she is like a little elf, and when the wind is strong, she becomes a towering giant; in front of the kind Diamond, she is a beautiful and charming woman, but in front of the evil nurse, she turns into a fierce and cruel gray wolf. And the back of the North Wind is an even more magical place. To reach there, one must first come to the northernmost tip of the earth, which is Mrs. North Wind’s home. Mrs. North Wind sits in front of a crack in an ice ridge in her home, and by passing through her body, one can reach the back area of the North Wind. With the discovery of the “elf-like image of the North Wind” and the existence of this magical realm “the Back of the North Wind”, there is no doubt that *At the Back of the North Wind* can be regarded as a fairy tale.

However, in contemporary Western academia, there has been a huge controversy over whether *At the Back of the North Wind* should be classified as a fairy tale or a fantasy novel. The crux of the debate lies in whether “Mrs. North Wind” and “the Back of the North Wind” are products of Diamond’s dreams or actually exist in the reality depicted in the text. Most scholars agree that *At the Back of the North Wind* should be regarded as a fairy tale because the supernatural and fantastical elements reflected in the characters, scenes, and events in the text are traceable. However, it should be emphasized that “Mrs. North Wind” and “the Back of the North Wind” not only appear in Diamond’s fantasies but are also closely related to his daily life. For instance, when Diamond and Mrs. North Wind were wandering over London, they saw a little girl named Nanny who was being blown about by the cold winter wind. Out of sympathy for Nanny, Diamond asked the North Wind to put him down on the ground from the sky and spent the night with the little girl in the cold wind. A week later, when Diamond accompanied his father to have the horse’s hooves nailed, he met this girl named Nanny on the street, and they became good friends from then on. Another example is that one night, while traveling with Mrs. North Wind, Diamond witnessed Mrs. North Wind capsizing a cruise ship. The next day, Mr. Coleman’s family received the news that the cruise ship carrying their goods had sunk due to a storm, and it was precisely the ship that Mrs. North Wind had capsized. Whether it is the little girl Nanny or the cruise ship carrying Mr.

Coleman's goods, they are all real in the world depicted in the text, and Diamond met Nanny and witnessed the shipwreck with the help of Mrs. North Wind. This fully demonstrates that Mrs. North Wind could not merely be a figment of Diamond's imagination. However, many scholars have put forward different opinions. For instance, Professor Zipes believes that this work cannot be called a fairy tale, nor even a fantasy novel; it can only be regarded as an ordinary novel (Note 2). Because the key elements that are supposed to be the characteristics of a fairy tale, "North Wind" and "the Back of the North Wind", do not actually exist in the world depicted in the text; they are merely fictional products of Diamond's dreams. We can indeed find supporting clues in the text: first of all, all the events described in *At the Back of the North Wind* occur after Diamond goes to bed and falls asleep, and the Mrs. North Wind also clearly tells Diamond that he must first go to bed; if he doesn't sleep, he can't be taken away. This is a rule that children must follow. Besides, there are many details in the text that hint to the readers that "North Wind" and "the Back of the North Wind" are merely products of Diamond's dreams or hallucinations. For example, no matter where Diamond travels with the North Wind and what magical events he experiences, when he wakes up the next morning, he always finds himself lying in bed. Diamond's parents also do not believe that Diamond has met the North Wind because they have never seen him leave the attic at night. And when Diamond traveled to the back of the North Wind, according to the accounts of other characters in the text, he was actually in a coma for several days and nights due to a serious illness, lying in bed all the time, and his mother was always by his side without leaving. From this, it can be seen that whether *At the Back of the North Wind* is described as a fairy tale, a novel, or a fantasy novel is all one-sided. Because from the definitions of fairy tales and fantasy novels, it can be said to be both a fairy tale and a novel. This "self-contradiction" in the content of the text makes *At the Back of the North Wind* itself even more ambiguous, but this is precisely the outstanding feature of this novel.

3. Double Narrator or Re-teller - Unreliable Narrator

Booth mentioned in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* that "the reliability of a narrator can be evaluated by the norms of the work (i.e., the norms of the implied author). A narrator whose speech and behavior conform to these norms is a reliable narrator; otherwise, he or she is an unreliable narrator (Note 3)." This view indicates that the distinction between reliable and unreliable narration is based on the norms of the implied author. "Implied author" is an important concept proposed by Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961). The "real author" is someone outside the creative process, while the "implied author" is this person entering the creative process and advancing the story in a certain stance and manner. Taking the normative behavior of the implied author as the criterion for judging unreliable narration helps us discover the basic characteristics of a work as an artistic whole and the distance between the dominant stance and the narrator. The heterodiegetic narrator outside the story is often the spokesperson of the implied author and has no distance from the implied author, thus being reliable; but the homodiegetic narrator within the story, as a character, often has varying degrees of distance from the work norms

created by the implied author, and the narration often shows unreliability. Therefore, the exploration of unreliable narration mainly focuses on the first-person narration (Note 4). Whether a narrator is reliable lies in whether he or she can provide the reader with correct and precise discourse. In George MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind*, an internal focalization narrative perspective is adopted, with a character "I" in the text serving as the narrator. Generally, the first-person narrator "I" is the eyewitness of the events told in the text, but in *At the Back of the North Wind*, the narrator "I" is merely a re-teller of the events experienced by Diamond. Near the end of the novel, the author reveals that "I" is a neighbor of Mr. Raymond. After the Diamond family was taken in by Raymond, "I" happened to meet Diamond and became good friends with him. After gaining Diamond's trust, Diamond told "I" his story with Mrs. North Wind and his experiences behind the North Wind, and then "I" retold the story to the readers as the narrator.

Under normal circumstances, the first-person narrator of a text can ensure the authenticity and reliability of the events they recount. However, in the *At the Back of the North Wind*, the narrator cannot guarantee the reliability of their account, which is the fundamental reason why the textual attributes of *At the Back of the North Wind* appear ambiguous. Booth once classified the narrators of texts into "reliable narrators" and "unreliable narrators" in his "Rhetoric of Fiction". The "I" in *At the Back of the North Wind* clearly belongs to the category of "unreliable narrators" because "I" lacks the ability to tell the readers the truth. Only Diamond, the direct participant of the events, knows the truth. "I" merely retold the story as told by Diamond. Therefore, as the narrator, "I" cannot assure the readers of the authenticity or accuracy of the content being narrated, nor can "I" clarify to the readers whether "Mrs. North Wind" and "The Back of the North Wind" are fictional or real experiences of Diamond. In fact, if the narrator of this text were changed from "I" to Diamond, even if the first-person narrative style were maintained, *At the Back of the North Wind* would undoubtedly be a fairy tale. Because if Diamond were to personally recount the events she experienced, it would be reliable and trustworthy, and readers would naturally believe that "Mrs. North Wind" and "The the Back of the North Wind" are real.

So, why did George MacDonald choose the unreliable narrator "I" to tell the story of Diamond and Mrs. North Wind to the readers? The answer, of course, is belief. MacDonald believed in Diamond's account and the existence of the fairy-tale world, and used the narrator "I" as a mediator to convey his views and attitudes towards the fantastical plot of the fairy tale. In many details of *At the Back of the North Wind*, MacDonald explicitly reminds the readers that the narration of "I" is unreliable. For instance, when talking about Diamond's experience at the back of the North Wind, MacDonald deliberately has "I" make it clear: "I HAVE now come to the most difficult part of my story. And why? Because I do not know enough about it (Note 5)." And why should I not know as much about this part as about any other part? For of course I could know nothing about the story except Diamond had told it; and why should not Diamond tell about the country at the back of the north wind, as well as about his adventures in getting there? Because, when he came back, he had forgotten a great deal, and what he did remember was very hard to tell (Note 6). This actually makes "me" actively emphasize to the readers my role as a narrator,

telling them that “I” actually don’t know the truth of the matter either. “I” am only responsible for retelling the story that Diamond told to you. Whether you choose to believe it or doubt it, that choice is left to the readers. Precisely because the narrator cannot prove that his account is completely true and reliable, readers, in the process of interpreting the text, actually have greater autonomy and can decide for themselves whether to believe the narrator’s account based on their own will. This means that it is actually the readers of the text who can make the final judgment on the textual attribution of *At the Back of the North Wind*: if the readers believe that there was indeed a fairy called “Mrs. North Wind” who once traveled with Diamond and took him to a magical paradise called *At the Back of the North Wind*, then *At the Back of the North Wind* is an outstanding fairy tale; conversely, if the readers think that “The North Wind” and “The North Wind’s Daughter” are just images and experiences imagined by Diamond in his dreams, then “The North Wind’s Daughter” can only be an ordinary fantasy realistic novel.

George MacDonald chose an unreliable narrator for *At the Back of the North Wind*, having “I” tell Diamond’s story. At the same time, he conveyed his fundamental attitude towards fairy tales: that is, to believe in them. Adrian Guise once said, In *At the Back of the North Wind*, there are two worlds: one is the “real world”, and the other is the “fairy tale world”. The world where “I” and Diamond are located belongs to the real world, while Diamond, the “Mrs. North Wind” and “the Back of the North Wind” belong to the fairy tale world. Although “I” am the moral narrator of the text, “I” am also the listener of the stories that Diamond tells about the fairy tale world. So the narrator “I” is actually like the reader, who can choose to believe what Diamond tells, to believe in the existence of the fairy tale world, or to consider everything Diamond says as his sharing of dreams and have nothing to do with the fairy tale world. But MacDonald’s spokesperson “I” chose to firmly believe in Diamond and the existence of the fairy tale world, because fairy tales are the dreams of every child, every angel belongs to this dreamlike world, and Diamond is even the child of God! At the beginning of *At the Back of the North Wind*, “I” emphasized that even what the historian Herodotus said might not be as reliable as what Diamond told. Because Diamond is a little boy who has been to the back of the North Wind. At the end of the story, when everyone thought Diamond was dead because of his pale and cold body, “I” once again emphasized that “I” knew he had gone to the back of the North Wind. The reason why “I” chose to believe in the existence of the fairy tale world is not because “I” could prove that the “Mrs. North Wind” and “the Back of the North Wind” really exist, but because “I” was willing to believe in their existence unconditionally from an emotional perspective. In fact, the attitude of “I” is exactly what MacDonald wanted to convey to the readers, especially the child readers, that is, no matter whether there is evidence of the real existence of the fairy tale world in real life, no matter how big the gap and difference between the real world and the fairy tale world is, we should unconditionally believe in the existence of the fairy tale world, and believe in the existence of the lovely characters, noble virtues and beautiful emotions in the fairy tale world. This is precisely the intention of MacDonald to convey through the unreliable narrator “I” the attitude of firmly believing in fairy tales. In *At the Back of the North Wind*, MacDonald used the character of Diamond to explain to us the practical significance and spiritual value of believing in fairy tales.

4. Fantasy World Defeat the Real World - Believe in the Power of Fairy Tales

The fantasy world constructed by George MacDonald is a fantasy world right beside each of us, one that has no boundary with our daily life and no temporal disjunction. The story of Diamond in *At the Back of the North Wind* takes place in Victorian London, in the dilapidated hayloft, which you can see as long as you walk in. In his fantasy world, the unnoticed lower-class people can be chosen by God and become “God’s children”. The feature of fairy tales is to enter a strange or magical world. For those who want to embark on a strange adventure in the fantasy kingdom, they need a childlike heart, that is, the purity of human nature. MacDonald did not spend more effort on building this fantasy world, but used the most delicate and simple writing style to build a dreamlike sanctuary for the protagonist’s real life, thus bringing the distance between the reader and the author closer and evoking a deeper resonance. Whether Diamond’s journey with Mrs. North Wind in his dream is real or not is less important than the fact that under the guidance of Mrs. North Wind, Diamond truly achieved moral and emotional growth.

(1) Believe in Truth, Goodness and Beauty

The imagination of the fairy tale provides nourishment for the reality, making us believe in the beauty of the fairy tale. Diamond is a naive child, because of its unique temperament is chosen by Mrs. North wind, to become her partner in London. Diamond’s mind is very simple, but he has a crystal clear heart. Although he did not like the cold north wind blowing into the house, but when Mrs. North Wind said that the hole in his bed was used to see the window outside, he still tore off the kraft paper that his mother had attached to the hole to keep out the cold and let the north wind blow in. He put his head under the covers and began a conversation with Mrs. North wind. Mrs. North Wind said that the name “Diamond” is funny, and he is not convinced, saying that his name is “cute”. Simple Diamond knowledge is limited, there is no “diamond” corresponding to the exact concept of semantic, in his eyes, diamond is extremely precious, because it is the stable of the loyal horse, is the family’s livelihood depends on, and has nothing to do with the gem wealth in the eyes of the secular. Diamond was awed by the incomparable beauty of Mrs. North Wind and was more than willing to follow her out. Although the North Wind warns him not to blindly chase her beauty, Diamond insists that Mrs. North Wind is beautiful and kind, and will not become ugly, let alone do bad things. In order to follow Mrs. north wind, Diamond ran into the yard in his robe on a dark and cold night, only to find that the North wind was not waiting for him. Frustrated, he cried for a moment, but then he became very brave.

The next time he saw Mrs. North Wind was on a starlit night, when Diamond hid in his long hair and followed her through the sky, watching her sweep across the city of London. In Mrs. North wind’s black hair Diamond saw a little girl in tattered clothes, dragging a large broom, being blown to left and right sides. He begged Mrs. North Wind to be kinder, but he was refused, so he insisted on helping the poor girl. Ignoring the danger of getting lost at night, he wanted to take her home first, but finding that he could do nothing to help, he felt frustrated and just wanted to cry. Diamond stood in stark contrast to a girl of her age who was precocious for living on the streets. The other lacked the nature of his willingness to believe, and he seemed simple and naive to the little girl: he told the little girl about Mrs. North Wind,

but she did not believe a word, thinking that he was talking nonsense or that there was something wrong with him. The next time he saw the girl, the little Diamond fell off his horse and hurried to give her his only penny. Diamond had not seen the little girl sweep the street for many days and was very worried. He ran to the slum where she lived, and found that the girl was seriously ill, and quickly asked Mr. Raymond, a kind gentleman, to send her to the hospital for treatment, and took her to his home after discharge. Although the little girl never believed him and made fun of his stupidity, Diamond never got angry and loved her like a sister, teaching her to read, take care of the baby, do housework, finally turn a “rough and dirty and dirty” girl into a gentle and elegant girl.

(2) The Pursuit of Truth, Goodness and Beauty

The virtues of the fairy tale world give children the strength to follow their hearts bravely. The kind Diamond is very puzzled by the behavior of Mrs. North wind. He did not understand that Mrs. North Wind, who seemed to him the most generous, motherly, and kindest, should be tending to him while sinking a ship. He could not bear to see the ship sinking and the people crying, so he let Mrs. north wind put him in a church. Diamond later achieved his wish, passing through the body of the North Wind, to the back of the North Wind, to experience the calm and content life there. It was an unimaginably wonderful place, with no wind, no sun, but full of sunshine. If you miss someone, just climb up a tree and see what the loved one is doing. Diamond saw from the tree that his mother was crying because she missed him, so he longed to go home and let Mrs. north wind take him back to his mother. The family had just suffered a tragic change: their father’s employer had gone bankrupt, leaving them destituted and homeless. Seeing his parents’ sadness, Diamond’s heart was also clouded, but after going to the back of the north wind, he warned himself to fight against misfortune, never give in, and was convinced that no hardship could overwhelm him. He suddenly grew up and matured a lot, and bravely shouldered the burden of taking care of the family with his childish shoulders. He helped his mother take care of his little brother and made the baby laugh; He was an “early bird” when his father was seriously ill and bedridden, and drove a carriage to work in the cold to supplement the family, bringing endless comfort to his parents.

(3) Practicing Truth, Goodness and Beauty

The appeal of the fairy tale world helps children practice virtue in real life. Diamond spent his days with coarse coachmen, hated their dirty words and rude jokes, and tried to avoid being tainted and affected. Diamond is just like a natural flower, with its kind nature to reflect the moral depravity of London and the adult world, showing its innocence and charm. There was always such a sweet smile on his quiet face that before long the coachmen were too ashamed to speak dirty words in his presence, and they swallowed before they could speak. Diamond’s diamond-like brilliance, his inner elegance and purity won the admiration and love of the coachmen, who were eager to stay with this angelic child and competed to drive with him. Diamond influenced and changed their words and deeds with his kindness and innocence. He is like an angel sent by God to relieve people’s pain and bring warmth to those around him. The neighbor was an alcoholic coachman, who drank himself drunk all day, and when he entered the house,

he quarreled with his wife, or beat and scolded his children. Diamond woke up one night to the sound of crying next door and decided to see what he could be done. Seeing a sad and desolate scene that most people would try to forget, Diamond took the crying baby on his lap like an angel, showed him the light in the yard, smiled and sang to him, and talked to him when he was tired, until the baby fell soundly asleep. After sober up the driver saw the pale little Diamond, trance thought it was a little angel without wings came to the home, and regretted his evil deeds. He apologized to his wife and did not set foot in the pub again for a week.

(4) Return to Truth, Goodness and Beauty

The fulfillment of the fairy world implies the calling of the same frequency soul in the real world. Diamond will never forget the beautiful scene at the back of the north wind, where the river sings songs often appear in his dreams at night, but the lyrics can never be remembered, leaving only a beautiful picture, the soul of the remaining song, let Diamond wake up refreshed, calm and energetic all day. As soon as he held the baby on his lap, song after song would come out of his mouth, making the baby giggle, and the little Diamond would sing the songs and forget them, as if the baby had made him up the song. Mr Raymond, a wise man, believes Mr Diamond is a genius, though many also think he is a fool. The vast nature at the back of the north wind gave Diamond insight into the truth of life and made him gain extraordinary wisdom. The more depressed his parents' faces became, the more Diamond sang. He was like a lark, with a sweet smile on his face even though life was hard, and he was really a child of God. Diamond not only brings happiness to the people around him with his behavior, but also brings infinite comfort to people with his extraordinary look and appearance. When he worked for Mr. Raymond, his pale face and blond hair, set against a blue suit, looked like "a graceful flower fairy"; Mrs. Raymond often rang her bell to call him in, just to look at his lovely quiet face and his blue eyes. His little face grew pale, and at last he went to the back of the north wind. In his children's fantasy novels, George MacDonald shows something as pure and beautiful as heaven - the innocence of the child: a nature without much rational thought, without restrictions, determined and fearless to believe, to love, to follow.

5. Conclusion

In fact, the fairy tale world is not far away from us, because each of us can make the real world as beautiful as the fairy tale world through our own efforts, no matter when and where, each of us should learn from the small diamond of *At the Back of the North Wind*, but also believe in fairy tales. I believe that every reader who sees this fairy tale will also be moved by the power of faith on the little diamond, and consciously or unconsciously put the moral ideals conveyed in the fairy tale into the practice of daily life, which is of great benefit to the growth and progress of each of us.

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Notes

- Note 1. Zhu Ziqiang. *Chinese Children's Literature and the Process of Modernization* [M]. Hangzhou: Zhejiang Children's Publishing House, 2000: 410.
- Note 2. Zipes, Jack. *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales: The Western Fairy Tale Tradition from Medieval to Modern*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000. 309.
- Note 3. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 1961, p. 158-59.
- Note 4. Shen Dan: *Western Narratology: Classics and Post-Classics*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2010, p. 82-83.
- Note 5. George MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, translated by Ren Rongrong, Shenyang: Chunfeng Literature and Art Publishing House, 2004, p. 103.
- Note 6. George MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, translated by Ren Rongrong, Shenyang: Chunfeng Literature and Art Publishing House, 2004, p. 103.