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My Hero

Method and Text

A KEY TO THE construct of the hero figure in the nineteenth century lies in the realms of both the real and the imagined. The image as an ideal represents a combination of both these aspects of the figure. I begin my investigation of the construct of the image of the hero with an analysis of story and character in terms of the ideological implications of genre.

Method

G. A. Henty and George MacDonald are cited as writing not only in different but in opposing genres, that is, historical/realism as opposed to fantasy/fairy tale. The extent of this perceived difference can be gauged from Hugh Walpole's comment in 1926, on writing for children, "... children divide into the two eternal divisions of mankind, ... Romantics and Realists, Prosists ... and Poets, Business Men and Dreamers, Travellers and Stay-at-Homes, Exiles and Prosperous Citizens. ... I fancy that all the children of my day who gloried in Henty were Realists and Hans Andersen was for the others."¹ Walpole makes clear that his reference to Andersen is representative of fairy tale writers or retellers. The continued critique in terms of opposition is evident in John Stephens' statement that the distinction between realism and fantasy

1. Walpole, *Reading*, 17–18.

is “the single most important generic distinction in children’s fiction.”² These quotations demonstrate the enduring nature of the perceived gulf between writing critiqued as realism and writing critiqued as fantasy or fairy tale. My intention is to interrogate this oppositional categorization with reference to the work of Henty and MacDonald and to demonstrate the mixing of genre apparent in the narrative structures of their writing. I examine this narrative structure from the position of generic conventions previously determined by critics so that I may investigate the structure as a vehicle to convey ideology and values. Critical opinion from F. J. Harvey Darton (1932)³ through Guy Arnold (1980), Humphrey Carpenter and Mari Pritchard (1984)⁴ to William Potter (2000)⁵, categorizes Henty’s writing as historical adventure story within the broader genre of realism. Critics contributing to works on the history of children’s literature such as those cited above have drawn on previous histories thereby perpetuating the stereotypical criticism of Henty’s work, using the same texts as examples. The exception to this predominant critique is Dennis Butts (1992), who notes the aspects of romance in Henty’s stories.

The most critiqued stories in MacDonald’s writing for children are those categorized as fantasy and fairy tale, for example *At the Back of the North Wind*, *The Golden Key*, *The Wise Woman*, *The Princess and the Goblin*, and *The Princess and Curdie*. Specialist studies such as *The Bright Face of Danger: An Exploration of the Adventure Story* by Margery Fisher, and *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* by Jack Zipes, have furthered the categorical generic distinctions between Henty and MacDonald.

It therefore appears that the genres represented by Henty and MacDonald are so different that readers are expected by the critic to approach them with differing expectations based upon their knowledge of the conventions of the two broad categorizations of realism and fantasy. The assumption that Henty is a realistic children’s writer because of his historical approach and his description of specific battles, causes the reader to focus on this aspect of the text rather than on the narrative structure to be found in the progress of the hero through this realistic landscape. MacDonald’s writing for children, critiqued as fantasy and

2. Stephens, *Language and Ideology*, 7.

3. Darton, *Children’s Books in England*, 302–3.

4. Carpenter and Pritchard, *The Oxford Companion*, 244–47.

5. Potter, *The Boy’s Guide*, 19.

fairy tale, challenges conventional categorization. For example, in the instances where fantasy and realism intertwine, such as *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871), critiqued predominantly as fantasy, and *A Rough Shaking* (1891), in which the critical emphasis is on realism. Walpole noted the preference for realism in the active, out-going child, a stereotypical perception of the male reader and aligning with the assumed audience of Henty. The “dreamers . . . and stay-at-homes”⁶ who read fairy tales are aligned with the stereotypical perception of the female reader. Appealing to a more passive audience who live in the world of the imagination, the fairy tale is seen to appear less threatening to the status quo. Yet the way in which the author structures the narrative in order to present reality to the reader carries ideological implications. The apparent lack of political threat from the fairy tale resulted in its use as a vehicle for societal critique, a precedent set in seventeenth-century France with the development of the literary fairy tale. The way the text interweaves with the dominant or subordinate discourse and draws on familiar narrative patterns to enhance the process of what Louis Althusser has described as interpellation,⁷ that is, the drawing-in of the reader to the ideological position of the text, is therefore significant.

Whilst “every use of language carries freight, a freight of what I am calling ‘values’ and others might call ‘ideology,’”⁸ the writing of Henty and MacDonald was intended to carry value-laden “freight.” They wrote with the intention of not only engaging the attention of young readers, none of whom were divided in their preference for enjoyable stories, but with the stated objective of educating the reader. Henty began the majority of his stories with a short preface in which he stated his intention “to mix instruction with amusement,”⁹ specifying which part of the story was historical “fact” and which part fiction. He also encouraged emulation of the hero with a view to success in life, success in this instance majoring on character development and work ethic. The influence of this intent on contemporary decisions to reprint the work of Henty and MacDonald is primary. In the preface to *The Boy’s Guide to the Historical Adventures of G. A. Henty*, Schmitt notes, “the rich legacy

6. Walpole, *Reading*, 17.

7. Althusser, *On Ideology*, 308.

8. Booth, *Are Narrative Choices*, 65.

9. Henty, *Young Buglers*, Preface.

which Mr Henty left to the boys of the world.”¹⁰ The author of this book spells out this “rich legacy” in terms of how the Henty hero behaves and the need for such role models in the context of contemporary children’s literature. Johannesen Printing and Publishing, who reprint the work of George MacDonald, also emphasize the ethical benefits of reading MacDonald. His books are advertised as, “Century-old literature that transcends time, culture and history . . . stimulating higher, nobler & purer thinking.”¹¹ George MacDonald’s son Greville wrote of his father that his “message was all in his books,”¹² but MacDonald’s “message” is neither so clearly defined nor always so explicit as is Henty’s. MacDonald’s essay on the fantastic imagination and his recorded response to a direct question as to the meaning of his work; “You may make of it what you like. If you see anything in it, take it and I am glad you have it; but I wrote it for the tale,”¹³ suggests a less didactic intent but his emphasis on the spiritual development of his protagonists signifies his moral intent.

In the European variation of ethical criticism found in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, the emphasis is on responses to alterity. This emphasis is particularly significant in the case of Henty, whose portrayal of the British imperialistic response to, and interpretation of, responsibility towards colonized peoples continues to be influential beyond the time in which he wrote. Recognizing the importance of context to the production of the texts and to the construct of the hero figure within them, I endeavor to, “isolate and categorize the various social factors which meet and interact . . . and finally to explain those interactions.”¹⁴ The ideological interests running through the text may have been so interpellated into the society out of which the text was written, that they were not recognized or questioned. In the case of Henty, this acceptance is demonstrable. MacDonald’s writing falls into the literature described by Louis Montrose as both promoting and containing subversion.¹⁵ MacDonald promotes subversion in that his stories critique his society whilst at the same time being contained by that society. This view is part of the larger debate as to whether societal norms can be subverted at

10. Schmitt, *Preface to the Boy’s Guide*, 12.

11. Johannesen, *Johannesen Printing and Publishing*, website.

12. MacDonald, *George MacDonald*, 2.

13. MacDonald, *Fantastic Imagination*, 318.

14. McGann, *The Text, the Poem*, 295.

15. Montrose, *New Historicisms*, 402.

all, given the constraints of historical circumstance under which any individual writer lives. I argue that both Henty and MacDonald have “a potential for power of subversion”¹⁶ that does transcend their immediate historical context.

Clarence Walhout argues that the extent to which an author recognizes and addresses issues he sees as problematic within his own society determines his value beyond his own age.¹⁷ This view needs explanation and definition. Questions such as: value to whom? in what context? and from which or whose perspective? The influence of both authors is currently reaching beyond their own time period into the twenty-first century. Some cultural values which were recognized and critiqued by MacDonald were equally part of the fabric of Henty’s cultural context but are not questioned in his work. Other issues are critiqued by Henty and not by MacDonald. It could therefore be argued that the “value,” to use Walhout’s term, or influence of Henty’s and MacDonald’s work beyond their own time is due to the same issues not being recognized in the present (twenty-first century) promotional context, whilst there is a recognition of other, stated, “values” contained in their work, which are deemed worthy of promotion. Examples of these values include courage, truthfulness, and generosity. MacDonald also addresses socially radical issues in the domestic context and often, “turned the world upside down and inside out to demonstrate that society as it existed was based on false and artificial values.”¹⁸ Society “as it existed” and exists does not, for example, always recognise truthfulness and generosity as praiseworthy in a world where financial profit was and is often the paramount criteria of success. George Levine points out that literature written within the historical Victorian period (1837–1901) could critique society whilst still participating in it and that resistance to the dominant discourse can be absorbed into society in ways that appear supportive rather than subversive.¹⁹ The construct of the hero, as it appears in Henty and MacDonald, can be mapped to the discourses of these writers’ cultural context which in turn integrates their contribution into its own construction.

16. Brannigan, *New Historicism*, 6.

17. Walhout, and Ryken, ed. *Contemporary Literary Theory*, 76.

18. Zipes, *When Dreams*, 125.

19. Levine, *Victorian Studies*, 133–34.

Despite the colonial implications of the nineteenth-century English authorial position, with which MacDonald, although a Scot, was conversant, I have made the decision not to investigate the writing of Henty and MacDonald from a postcolonial theoretical viewpoint since it could be argued that because both authors were writing during a time of rapid imperial expansion, they were active participants in the construction of the empire and colonies rather than postcolonial critical commentators. I have applied the theories of postcolonial critics to my argument where it is appropriate and particularly in chapter 6 in which the ideology of the hero is examined in relation to “the other.”

Text

The work of Henty and MacDonald is extensive. Henty published approximately²⁰ eighty boys’ stories as well as five novels for adults, collections of short stories and documentary reports on historical events. MacDonald published three volumes of sermons and two of poetry as well as fantasy, fairy tales, and twenty-nine novels. I have chosen texts that typify the narrative techniques and ideological positioning of both authors. The texts chosen for discussion from the work of Henty and MacDonald represent the hero figure in different cultures, circumstances, and time periods (both actual and mythical) which emphasise aspects of his or her character. Taken together, these characteristics build the composite, identifiable persona, the ideal character of the hero figure.

G. A. Henty (1832–1902)

I have chosen to analyze seven texts published between 1871 and 1906 (posthumous publication) from G. A. Henty’s approximately eighty stories. These texts are chosen as representative of his work. They include events ranging historically between AD 70 and 1899. The hero figures also demonstrate Henty’s inclusion of the black hero, the female hero and the flawed hero which has been overlooked by critics to date in their focus on the male, Caucasian boy.

Out on the Pampas (1871), Henty’s first published text for children, is a pioneer story based on the adventures of one family rather than on a particular historical event. This text differs from the majority of

20. The complexities of Henty bibliography has been expertly documented in, Newbolt, *G. A. Henty*.

Henty's work in that it does not include a major historical battle and does not refer to known historical figures. The foremost characters are four children, two boys and two girls, Charley, Hubert, Maud, and Ethel. Although the eldest boy is represented as the primary agent of action, the other three make their contribution as individuals, displaying heroic characteristics when confronted by life-threatening situations, setting a precedent for active female characters which Henty followed in subsequent writing. In 1891 Henty returned to the pioneer story with the New Zealand based *Maori and Settler*. The historical focus in *Maori and Settler* is on the Hwa uprising (1870) and, unusually in the Henty story, the boy hero, Wilfred, remains in the land of his adventure. Although these two texts do not receive such close analysis as others, I refer to them to demonstrate points discussed.

By Sheer Pluck (1884) exemplifies significant consistent characteristics of the Henty hero and is an instance of Henty's use of his own experience since the story draws on his work as newspaper correspondent for *The Evening Standard*, covering the first Ashanti war and the march to Coomassie in 1873.

The setting for *The Young Buglers* (1880) is the Peninsular War of 1810 and includes the classic Henty motifs of the hero's loss of parents and of fortune, and his subsequent journey to regain the latter. In this text, Henty's two young male protagonists, Tom and Peter Scudamore, display characteristics that establish the core construct of his hero figure. *The Young Buglers* includes a major black character who could arguably be presented as the real hero of the story, initiating discussion on Henty's representation of race.

For the Temple (1888) covers events leading up to the siege of Jerusalem by the Romans (AD 70). The exploits of the Jewish hero John raise questions about strategies of resistance employed by an oppressed people. Henty's depiction of a guerrilla fighter as the hero interrogates the nature of individual heroism.

I have chosen to analyze the story *Captain Bayley's Heir* (1889) in my discussion of genre because this text demonstrates the combination of genre in Henty's work. The protagonist of this story, Frank Norris, is fatherless, and, wrongly accused of theft, flees the country to find his fortune. Frank's narrative includes a sub-plot in which, through Frank's compassionate behavior before he leaves England, Captain Bayley's true heir is found.

The plot of *Rujub the Juggler* (1892), set in India during the Sepoy uprising (1856), hinges on the gift of second sight. The hero of *Rujub the Juggler*, Ralph Bathurst, differs from the critiqued stereotype in that he is paralyzed by fear at the sound of any loud noise including gunfire. This fear affects the way Henty portrays his hero and initiates discussion within the narrative on the nature of courage.

In *The Tiger of Mysore* (1896) Henty traces the eighteenth-century war with Tippoo Saib and includes discussion on mixed race marriage and again features second sight as integral to the story. This text demonstrates the pivotal importance of the English boy's Indian friend Surajah.

The action of *A Soldier's Daughter*, published posthumously in 1906, takes place on the unsettled border of northern India in 1860. The female protagonist, Nita, is an exceptionally strong example of Henty's inclusion of a girl in the role of hero. His female hero is discussed from the point of view of gender related to the characteristics of the male hero. I refer to many texts not included as primary in this section, where illustrative examples are needed to substantiate points within the context of the argument. Such texts include *Condemned as a Nihilist* (1893), *For Name and Fame* (1886), *A Jacobite Exile* (1894), *Sturdy and Strong* (1888), *True to the Old Flag* (1885), and *The Young Franc-Tireurs* (1875).

George MacDonald (1824–1905)

From the eight publications by George MacDonald that are regarded as written for a child audience I have chosen six texts. They range in publication date from 1867 to 1891 and include fairy tales, fantasy, parable, and realism. These twenty-five years saw MacDonald's highest literary output and include his editorship of the periodicals *Good Words for the Young* and *Good Things for the Young of All Ages* (1869–73).

In the first text, *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871), MacDonald blends fantasy and realism into a full length story that includes descriptions of social conditions in Victorian London. His main protagonist is a male, feminized, idealized Romantic child.

The focus of the discussion on *Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood* (1871), my second text, is the construct of the male hero which is mapped to the investigation into the nineteenth-century construct of the hero.

MacDonald's longer fairy tales, *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), *The Wise Woman* (1874), and *The Princess and Curdie* (1883)

demonstrate reality, “viewed through the fine gauze of MacDonald’s imagination.”²¹ These texts encourage the reader to look at the world MacDonald creates in such a way as to understand their own world differently. Whereas much of Henty’s work can be viewed as expansive adventures in the geographical context of English imperialism, MacDonald’s work focuses on situations in Britain or Europe, either in actuality or in an imaginative reconstruction. MacDonald’s writing for children chronicles the educative process on a spiritual level. The narrator’s voice frequently comments on aspects of character that contribute towards the construction of an ideal. In *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie*, this heroic construct is equally applicable to both the male and female heroes, a less usual application at a time when the male hero was the focus of an idealized heroic construct, and one which demonstrates MacDonald’s high view of the feminine elements of character. His strong female child characters often appear in positions of leadership and equality with the male hero.

In *A Rough Shaking* (1891), superficially a realistic text, the blurring of the real and the marvellous focuses on the main male character who displays the same feminine idealized male child characteristics as does Diamond in *At the Back of the North Wind*, whilst also displaying the masculine physical courage which comes to the fore in Henty’s work. With its improbable fairy tale ending, *A Rough Shaking* raises questions about the boundaries between realism, fantasy, and fairy tale and bridges the gap referred to by Walpole in 1926 as, “the eternal division,” and John Stephens writing in 1992 termed the “polarization” of these genres. I draw other texts by MacDonald into the discussion as they are needed in order to exemplify particular points.

I have already noted that one particularity of the writing of these authors lies in the construction of an essential hero, whose attributes, if combined, exemplify both the physical and the spiritual ideal of their time in one identity. Both Henty and MacDonald incorporate values from the same sources, filtered in ways that both reflect and construct their present, and influence their future societal context. These values are personified in the hero figure in their work. By analyzing the chosen texts, read in relation to historical context and focusing on genre, it is possible to see this set of values and their ideology reflected through the lens of the hero figure.

21. Blanch, *My Personal Debt*.

Both writers are located in time and place using biographical material drawn from existing sources. In order to establish Henty and MacDonald within the milieu of the period 1850–1900, I begin with an overview of three specific areas. The first area is the political landscape in England, both domestic and foreign. The intellectual, social, and religious challenges facing English society are included. In the second area, since the focus of the investigation is Henty and MacDonald’s writing for children, I examine the progression towards the Victorian construct of the child, since it is inextricably linked to the third area, which is the dominant English nineteenth-century construct of the hero. The term Victorian is used literally to mean the years during which Queen Victoria reigned (1837–1901). The second half of this period (1850–1900) coincides with the years during which the majority of the texts analyzed were written and published. I have used the personal pronoun “he” to refer to the hero figure in most instances since it indicates the continuing prevalence of associated masculinity.