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The Construct of the Hero 1850–1900

“The history of heroes is the history of Youth”¹

THIS QUOTATION FROM BENJAMIN Disraeli’s *Coningsby* indicates the connection between the cultural view of the child and the cultural view of the hero through the construct of the adolescent boy in the nineteenth century. The youthful hero served to bridge the gap between the domestic scene and the “wide world.” In Victorian England (1837–1900), the “wide world” correlated with colonial interests, and “Heroes have their importance for the history of culture because they . . . provide a useful index of [an age’s] values.”² Also, in Walter Houghton’s discussion on hero-worship, he observes that hero-worship, “answered, or it promised to answer, some of the deepest needs and problems of the age.”³ Houghton’s discussion defines “the age” as 1830–70, but includes the last thirty years of the nineteenth century since they fell within the reign of Queen Victoria. His reference to, “the needs and problems of the age” relates to the uncertainty created by the rapid change induced by industrial development and its impact on the external environment, and the doubt engendered by new theological and scientific thinking in the internal, the spiritual and intellectual, environment. These upheavals have been appraised in chapter 2 on historical context. The loss of familiar

1. Disraeli, *Coningsby*, 99.
2. Burns and Reagan, *Concepts of the Hero*, 120.
3. Houghton, *Victorian Frame*, 310.

certainties in every area of life, including the loss of religious belief, led to a loss of confidence and a tendency to view the concept of “hero” as a source of “inspiration and escape.”⁴ The image of the hero held the Victorian imagination, acting as an example for emulation and as an inspirational ideal. The ambiguity of the concepts “inspiration” and “escape,” used together, reflects the paradoxes of the period and demonstrates that interweaving of fantasy and reality which prompted Disraeli to describe the period as one of “fairy tale.”

The renewed interest in medievalism preoccupying the Pre-Raphaelites produced art and literature that not only reinvented an idealized version of a past age, but also believed a version of it could be created in the present. As a protest against the perceived disintegration of contemporary society the concept of the ideal hero found expression in, for example, the reprinting of the Arthurian legends and other stories of warrior heroes such as Roland and Beowulf. The “traditional heroic values,” meaning in this context, those values found in the persona of the medieval knight, who represented “personal strength and achievement,” values which, as Burns and Reagan understatedly note, “imperfectly agreed with Christian values.”⁵ The movement away from the medieval warrior hero towards the concept of the Miles Christianus, the warrior-saint, unites the later medieval concept of devotion to Christ, found in the fictional account of Sir Gawain, with the earlier warrior, and points forward towards the humanist concept of the hero which emphasizes the public man who incorporates the classical virtue of service and domesticity into his persona. The addition of the characteristic of Christian devotion rather than the loss of warrior attributes indicates a change of focus in the hero, a greater spiritual awareness. The Victorians perceived such heroism in the person of, for example, General Gordon (1833–85).⁶

A fusion of the physical and the spiritual is a key to the hero figure in both Henty and MacDonald. Their work creates a complementary image of two emphases which reflect the preoccupation with colonial power and devotion to service which focused attention on social and spiritual improvement, and education. These two emphases, the one complementing the other, can be illustrated by the figure of an image in

4. *Ibid.*, 332.

5. Burns and Reagan, *Concepts of the Hero*, vii, 125.

6. For information on General Gordon see Waller, *Gordon of Khartoum*.

a mirror. The figure is one and the same but the aspect is different. For example, the classical and adventure hero (physical) is complemented by the fairy tale hero (the imagined/spiritual). These two images meet in the contextual construction of the “Victorian” hero who displays characteristics both physical and spiritual, and who, as an ideal, is in the realm of the imagined. The constructed hero occupies, “the space of fantasy in which cultural contradictions reside.”⁷ From “the space of fantasy,” the hero is positioned to occupy both physical and psychological spaces represented as exotic, domestic and internal landscapes.

Writing in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, Erasmus (1466–1536), constructed the hero figure incorporating both humanist and Christian, or “saintly,” characteristics. The consequent hero emerges as, “the unromantic private citizen,”⁸ concerned with the betterment of society in terms of social involvement. In contrast to the medieval concept of the warrior-hero, he appears anti-heroic, a peace-time hero condemning war as destructive to the public/domestic sphere of life. This “unromantic private citizen” is later resurrected in Thomas Carlyle’s “sincere man,” who is the hero as “everyman.” He is both human and ideal, both real and imagined.

This overview shows that the Victorians constructed their hero figure against a background of medievalism and classicism. Whilst emphasizing progress in terms of the role of the period in the evolution of society and human development in Darwinian language, the Victorians reach back to earlier ages, seeking inspiration to bring meaning to their contemporary situation. Whilst rejecting so many traditional beliefs and values, they clung to the concept of heroism as a source of stability and a focus for action, and published Augustus Comte’s *New Calendar of Great Men* (1892) as a values reference. In his article on the disappearing Victorian hero, George Levine includes discussion on the different views of Carlyle and John Stuart Mill. Levine concludes that although they are coming from opposite directions, Carlyle and Mill meet on the point of the importance of individual character and individual development,

... denying fashionable conventions, yet accepting the best authority. Such acceptance depends upon strong individual personality and deep feelings and desires. To get in touch with the better self, buried in Arnoldian manner in the midst of the ordinary

7. Marshall, *Psychoanalyzing*, 1212.

8. Burns and Reagan, *Concepts of the Hero*, 136.

and the banal, to achieve the Goethean ideal of self-development, self-culture, self-expression, one needs to be stronger than most. . . . Mill . . . seeks the strongest possible self. . . . But for Carlyle, too, the development of individuality, the unfolding of each person's intrinsic nature, seems to be the primary aim of life.⁹

I note here that “the best authority” is not defined by Levine in this passage, but the values implied by “best” in this context form another avenue of exploration and follow the pattern of those values implicit in the Victorian construct of the hero in a leadership role. Romance and folk tale convention produced an interweaving of narrative expectation which supported the hierarchical structure of society whilst potentially subverting it by a literary reflection of the upheavals and possible class mobility that characterized nineteenth-century England. Carlyle's theory that everyman can be a hero, translated into practice by Smilesian self-help, and was directly linked to imperialist intent by Smiles when he wrote, “the unflinching self-reliance and dormant heroism of the English race [was demonstrated in the response to the rebellion in India]. In that terrible trial, all proved almost equally great—women, civilians, and soldiers . . .”¹⁰ The emphasis on individualism points to another paradox in the construct of the hero, that of Smilesian “unflinching self-reliance” and the emphasis within the concept of the Arnoldian public school boy on the team player.

The Hero-Figure as Exemplar in G. A. Henty and George MacDonald

The hero, theorized by Thomas Carlyle, was a dominant influence on the nineteenth-century English mind-set but the constructs of the heroes he presented were drawn from wider, if mainly western, sources. His lecture series *On Heroes and Hero Worship* fuelled the propensity of the Victorians to focus their need for stability on both historical and contemporary figures whom they could elevate to ideals. It is as though the rationale for virtue written by Sir Philip Sidney in 1581 became the rationale for the Victorian emphasis on the efficacy of emulation, “For as the image of each action styrreth and instructeth the mind, so the loftie image of such worthies most inflameth the mind with the desire to be

9. Levine, *Not Like My Lancelot*, 59.

10. Smiles, *Self-Help*, 21.

worthy.”¹¹ This anticipated emulation, as much as his stated intention to teach history, was Henty’s motivation for writing his stories.

Henty’s two major purposes for his writing were stated in the prefaces to his books. Henty’s first purpose was to “interest the reader because of the characteristic English pluck and daring of its hero”¹² and the second was to interest his readers in history. I will focus on the first purpose in examining Henty’s construct of the Victorian hero. As is the case with other such general descriptive terms, the term “Victorian hero” is popularly understood to portray a character or concept. In the same way as the term “Victorian” is used to portray a number of undefined characteristics, the term “Victorian hero” is simplistic, but it is a starting point for discussion. Henty addresses his readers directly, as the following examples from *Condemned as a Nihilist* (1893), and *Sturdy and Strong* (1888) show. In the preface to *Condemned as a Nihilist* (1893) he writes, “There are few difficulties that cannot be surmounted by patience, resolution and pluck,”¹³ and in *Sturdy and Strong* (1888), “for success in life it is necessary not only to be earnest, steadfast, and true, but to have the faculty of turning every opportunity to the best advantage; . . . steadiness, perseverance, and determination to get on would assuredly have made their way in the long run. If similar qualities and similar determination are yours, you need not despair of similar success in life.”¹⁴ The heroes of these stories demonstrate such qualities. That Henty anticipated reader identification with his hero is supported by an article in *Answers*, Christmas Double Number, December 13th, 1902 in which he notes, “of course the hero must be British,” and he points out that his stories with non-English heroes had not sold as well as his other books.”¹⁵ “The ethically formative power of story” is discussed by Marshall Gregory, in an article in which he asserts that “identifying with characters in stories can exert a powerful influence on the quality and content of our own lives.”¹⁶

In the nineteenth century, the view that regarded emulation as beneficial accorded with the intellectual influence of positivist thought

11. Sidney, *Defence of Poesie*, 73.

12. Henty, *Young Colonists*, Preface.

13. Henty, *Condemned as a Nihilist* Preface.

14. Henty, *Sturdy and Strong*, 3, iv.

15. Henty, *Writing for Boys*, 105.

16. Gregory, *Ethical Criticism*, 206, 194.

and with Carlyle's emphasis on the hero as "great man." Henty assumes reader identification with a character and consciously endeavors to create a protagonist in his stories with whom his intended audience can identify. In this way Henty's emphasis on and encouragement of identification with the hero figure is embedded in his historical context and the need of Victorian society for hero figures. Maria Nikolajeva challenges the assumption that readers will identify with a character, usually the protagonist. Citing the "literary-didactic split", Nikolajeva argues that readers who reject "the fixed subject position imposed on them by the text," display a higher degree of literary competence than those who unquestioningly identify with the protagonist. Nikolajeva supplies instances where conclusive and singular identification of the protagonist may be open to question where, for example, "the text allows a variety of subject positions," or where a complex single character, displaying contradictory traits, requires the reader to empathise without the need to identify. The position of the reader in relation to both the narrator and the main character, or characters where there are "a variety of subject positions," is as observer. As a mature reader he is able to adopt a position that allows examination of the character rather than identification. Nikolajeva states that the reader's "subject position will thus be neither tied to [the character] nor to the narrator, but rather emerge from an active, dialogical response to what the narrator tells [the reader] and what [he] can infer [himself or herself]."¹⁷

In the majority of Henty's stories, the hero holds a prominent position within the text and demonstrates subjectivity and agency in that he is both acted on and he acts. In the initial chapters of those stories critiqued as "typically' Henty,"¹⁸ by, for example Guy Arnold (1980), Patrick Dunae (1975), Martin Green (1980), Marjorie Hourihan (1997), Robert Huttenback (1965), and Hugh Walpole (1926), the hero is constructed as subject by circumstances outside of his control but which place him in the position of agent, in which his own choice of action dictates his subsequent progress. This pattern fits both the adventure and the fairy tale hero. Henty indicates that he is also aiming to fill a

17. Nikolajeva, *The Identification Fallacy*, 2, 6.

18. "Typically Henty" in the sense that they demonstrate the formulaic structure of the orphaned (or apparently orphaned) hero who travels to an exotic location to meet adventure and make his fortune. Examples include *By Sheer Pluck* (1884), *For Name and Fame* (1886), and *Through the Sikh War* (1894).

gap by providing more adventure and less moralizing than, according to Bernard Davin, writing in 1932, “the earlier pioneers,” of adventure stories.¹⁹ In the Preface to *The Young Buglers* (1880) Henty writes, “I remember that, as a boy, I regarded any attempt to mix instruction with amusement as being as objectionable a practice as the administration of powder in jam; but I think this feeling arose from the fact that in those days books contained a very small share of amusement and a very large share of instruction.” He continues, “I have endeavoured to avoid this.”²⁰ Whilst Henty’s educative purpose was conscious and overt, he recognized that enjoyment was an important part of successful education.

Writing in the periodical *Boys of Our Empire* in praise of Henty just after his death, Robert Leighton²¹ states, “He was a teacher as well as an influence.”²² Despite their popularity, both Henty and MacDonald sought to avoid personal adulation. An article on Henty in *The Gem*, December 16, 1899, states, “No living writer of books for boys and girls is more widely popular. . . . His [Henty’s] sympathy with the young and earnest desire to inspire them with noble aims . . . is apparent in all he writes.”²³ MacDonald, faced with two adult autograph collectors following one of his lectures, also “firmly declined” to supply their request for the famous autograph.²⁴ That both authors refused to encourage a focus on themselves supports their construct of heroism that stems from behavior, and not perceived status.

George MacDonald was less explicit in his purpose to provide a protagonist for emulation, but everything he wrote depicted the journey of a person or persons towards maturity. Although MacDonald, “said nothing of *mission* nor of *message*,” his second son Ronald cites his awareness that “having been driven . . . to give up the professional pulpit, he was no less impelled than compelled to use unceasingly the new platform whence he had found his voice could carry so far.”²⁵ This educative

19. Davin, *School for Heroes*, 11–12.

20. Henty, *Young Buglers*, Preface.

21. Robert Leighton (1858–1934) was a prolific story writer and the father of Clare Leighton (1899–1989) wood engraver. I am indebted to Dr. Nicholas Hawkes for this information.

22. Leighton, *George Alfred Henty*, 224.

23. *A Favourite*, 209.

24. *George MacDonald*, 25.

25. MacDonald, *From a Northern*, 23, 33.

intention applied equally to his adult and to his children's writing. In MacDonald's work the emphasis is on moral and spiritual maturity. The development of a character towards "goodness" is described by Naomi Lewis as, "the shining power of innocence,"²⁶ and in a brief discussion of MacDonald's novels, C. S. Lewis noted, "One rare, and all but unique, merit these novels must be allowed. The 'good' characters are always the best and most convincing. His saints live; his villains are stagey."²⁷

I have already noted, from an educational point of view, MacDonald's philosophy was one of "leading forth and not stuffing in," a line of thought which derives from Romantic theories of the child. When MacDonald writes "Everyone, however, who feels the story, will read it after his own nature and development,"²⁸ he demonstrates a process towards maturation and the exercise of the developing imagination. Frye describes this process in his discussion on the movement of a child toward critiquing his own experience in his reading. Frye notes, "the child should not 'believe' the story he is told; he should not disbelieve it either, but send out imaginative roots into that mysterious world between the 'is' and the 'is not' which is where his own ultimate freedom lies."²⁹

In MacDonald's terms this process applies to, "the child of five or fifty or seventy-five,"³⁰ since the reader's process of maturation is leading toward the ultimate goal of childlikeness, or "childness," found in God. In his story *Gutta Percha Willie* (1873) MacDonald discusses the discovery approach to education through his account of Willie's learning style in chapter 2, acknowledging after his description of how Willie learnt to read, "Now I am not very sure how this would work with some boys and girls. . . . But it worked well in Willie's case, who was neither lazy nor idle."³¹ MacDonald indicates the need for a particular attitude within the individual before intellectual education can properly begin. In his published essay *The Fairy Tale in Education* (n.d.) Greville MacDonald expands on the need for a fundamentally imaginative attitude to the world since, he argues, imaginative hope and wonder are kept alive by

26. Lewis, *Children's Books*, 693.

27. Lewis, *George MacDonald*, 18.

28. MacDonald, *Fantastic Imagination*, 316.

29. Frye, *Secular Scripture*, 166.

30. MacDonald, *Fantastic Imagination*, 317.

31. MacDonald, *Gutta Percha Willie*, 7–8.

fairy tale in the face of educational systems which encourage, “the very antithesis of that spontaneity, . . . which, . . . finds expression in art for the hidden mystic life.”³² Greville’s emphasis on the priority of imaginative, moral and spiritual development reflects that of his father, George MacDonald, and echoes Samuel Coleridge’s appeal to the imaginative and spiritual.

Both Henty and MacDonald regarded experience as a better educator than study in the molding of character, a position noted by McGillis in a discussion of *The Princess and Curdie* (1883), “Curdie, like all of MacDonald’s protagonists, learns more through experience than through book learning.”³³ MacDonald’s story *The Wise Woman* (1875), critiqued by Reis as too overtly didactic, demonstrates the values towards which the protagonists may work, should they so choose, in order to become fit for emulation. *The Wise Woman* establishes MacDonald’s position on character formation, with the implication that his child readers (of any age) should aspire to the reformed Rosamond. For example MacDonald writes, “Nobody can be a real princess . . . until she is a princess over herself, that is, until, when she finds herself unwilling to do the thing that is right, she makes herself do it.”³⁴ According to Gerard Genette’s theoretical terms of narratorial position³⁵ MacDonald’s narrative commentary in *The Wise Woman* (1875) demonstrates the extradiegetic-heterodiegetic pattern of narration in his interpretation of the Wise Woman’s treatment of Rosamond and Agnes. Joanna Golden comments, “these interpretations are necessary because the hero needs them as a lesson for his development; he requires chastisement and guidance if he is to become a hero.”³⁶ MacDonald’s narratorial comments to the reader explain the element of choice open to both Rosamond and Agnes. *The Wise Woman* provides both chastisement and guidance. The choice as to whether the chastisement and guidance are accepted lies with Rosamond and Agnes, just as Carlyle and Smiles place the choice of progression toward heroic behaviour with the individual. By including such commentary as the quotation above on one of the characteristics of a real princess, MacDonald broadens his commentary to include the

32. MacDonald, *The Fairy Tale*, 7.

33. McGillis, *George MacDonald’s Princess Books*, 157.

34. MacDonald, *Wise Woman*, 109.

35. Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 248.

36. Golden, *Narrative Symbol*, 61.

reader. The comment is not only directly linked to Rosamond but in its use of the word “nobody” extends its range of application to “anybody,” to “everyman” or in this case, “everywoman.” It is applicable to Carlyle’s “dullest day drudge” who “longs . . . to do true and noble things.”³⁷

Henty frequently emphasizes the superiority of experience over study in the development of his hero’s character even when his hero makes use of his study to help him through a difficult situation. An example of this self-subversion has already been noted and is expanded in the passage from *Condemned as a Nihilist*. Whilst in solitary confinement in prison, “Godfrey did his best to keep up his spirits. He had learnt by heart at Shrewsbury the first two books of the Iliad, and these he daily repeated aloud, set himself equations to do, and solved them in his head, repeated dates in Greek history, and went through everything he could remember as having learned.”³⁸

The Henty hero begins his story from a morally advantaged position compared to Rosamond and Agnes in MacDonald’s *The Wise Woman*. His early upbringing always includes at least one parent or other significant adult who teaches him to “act right and straight and honourable . . . to be a good man and a gentleman.”³⁹ Both Henty and MacDonald consciously construct heroes from a Christian moral base, heroes who provide leadership within their social context from a moral perspective. I use the word moral here as defined by Geoffrey Galt Harpham as, “some rule that overrides the confusion of customs, habits, norms, some principle that legitimates action even in the absence of clear rules or unanimous consensus.” Harpham continues, “without morality, one could never be a hero, just a dissenter, a loner, and oddball.”⁴⁰ Harpham’s observation places the hero figure within his societal norm but also encompasses the Carlylean concept of the leader as set apart in his ability to act from a position of principle even when it is not in step with the prevailing behavior. The perceived innate superiority of the hero figure reflects the Victorian need for morally upright heroes to emulate. The time has come to discuss the influences that feed into the makeup of this hero.

37. Carlyle, *On Heroes*, 70.

38. Henty, *Condemned as a Nihilist*, 78.

39. Henty, *For Name and Fame*, 33.

40. Harpham, *Shadows of Ethics*, 259.