

# The Process of Spiritual Evolution and Purification -- A Thematic Analysis of *Phantastes: A Faerie Romance for Men and Women*

Jiaxin Liu

School of Critical Studies, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, British

**Email address:**

[nuagela@163.com](mailto:nuagela@163.com)

**To cite this article:**

Jiaxin Liu. The Process of Spiritual evolution and Purification -- A Thematic Analysis of *Phantastes: A Faerie Romance for Men and Women*. *International Journal of Literature and Arts*. Vol. 11, No. 5, 2023, pp. 215-219. doi: 10.11648/j.ijla.20231105.11

**Received:** April 14, 2023; **Accepted:** August 28, 2023; **Published:** September 13, 2023

---

**Abstract:** "Phantastes: A Faerie Romance for Men and Women", was one of the most famous works written by George MacDonald. Many scholars doubted whether it had a consistent theme. In fact, by looking at the story structure of the novel, we find that, in the design of the plot, the author consciously compared it with the Bible, such as Adam committing original sin for self-love, David maintaining social order against Goliath, and Jesus resurrecting after dying for human sacrifice. They were used to show that one man should abandon his love for himself and for society and rise to the love of God. In "Phantastes: A Faerie Romance for Men and Women", MacDonald explored the love for individuals in the violation of the prohibition, explored the love for others in the maintenance of secular order, then thought human should pursue the love of God in the negation of the material individual secular. MacDonald was a priest and thought the theology should train people to be a perfect children of God, MacDonald agreed with Calvin's Predestination theory that, it was God who sought man, not man who sought God on his own initiative. Suffering in adversity was also a way for people to understand and deepen their faith. He combined the pastor's pastoral and the writer's writing, and expressed his views on how to seek God in his works. Therefore, this novel, not only is regarded as a fantasy novel from literature, also expresses the process of personal spiritual Purification from religion.

**Keywords:** MacDonald, Phantastes, Spiritual Purification

---

## 1. Introduction

As a famous romantic writer in the 19th to 20th centuries, George MacDonald left us many excellent literary works. Among them, *Phantastes: A Faerie Romance for Men and Women* (1858) is considered one of his best works. Due to its lack of coherent storyline, different parts are relatively independent, some scholars believe that its themes are messy: "Phantastes is not a novel in the accepted sense. It is a novel without a plot." [11] it is "remarkably unstructured" and "rather incoherent". [12] However, if we carefully study it, we will find that the author has made a careful design when he conceived and wrote, and behind many metaphors runs through a consistent theme, that is, the process of purification of personal soul. Through the exploration and negation and sublimation of individual love and group love, the author draws the conclusion that the final love should be the love of God, the source and destination of love beyond both, and only

the pursuit of god can achieve eternal life. From the Calvinist religious consciousness that MacDonald strongly believes in and his consistent attention to the theme of salvation of the soul, we can also support the understanding of the core theme of his novels: a spiritual journey about how can a person be saved. In terms of writing techniques, the story draws lessons from the human origin, David's war against Goliath, Jesus' sacrifice for mankind and other plots from Bible, making them correspond one by one, and expressing the ultimate trend and destination of people's minds from the perspective of human history and evolutionary history. Driven by curiosity and conceit, human beings commit their original sin, fight for secular interests, and then return to the most meaningful and valuable pursuit of life, that is, the pursuit of God. The purpose of the novel was to "carry the reader with Anodos on an elevated spiritual pilgrimage, along a path of imaginative development, out of a rationalism-dominated perspective". [2]

## 2. The Plots of the Novel Were Set by Analogy with the Biblical Story

### 2.1. To Explore the Love for Individuals in the Violation of the Prohibition

For example, the process of shadow generation was caused by curiosity about the external world and personal conceit. The view of human beings towards the external world tends to expand from their own. Behaviors initially tend to occur in things closely related to their own emotional desires. The satisfaction of individual desires is often an important driving force for human. Anodos, Adam and Eve all intended to explore on their own will, but the warnings they faced with and the subsequent reactions were similar. After entering the Fairy Land, Anodos was ignorant at first, and remained curious and frank. Later, he met an old lady in a forest clearing. There was a door in the room of the hut. His strong curiosity made him want to know what was beyond it [7]. But he was warned by one woman, "You had better not open that door." [7] But in Anodos' mind, "The prohibition, however, only increased my desire to see", The strong sense of self determination prevented Anodos from resisting the curiosity in his heart to open the hole that has been hidden to explore the unknown secret, and he did not care about its possible negative impact on himself and did not think it must be true. Because of exploration he found "a black shadow, the size of a man". [7] It was the shadow of Anodos, and would be inseparable from him for a long time. Adam and Eve, the ancestors of mankind, who were prepared to explore the secrets of the wisdom tree and face the warning of God at first time: "you shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die." [4] But Eve Adam did not care about. Eve, seduced by the snake, disobeyed God's command, "she took of its fruit and eat; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and ate." [4] Human beings disobeyed God's order because they wanted to show their role of self-determination from their arrogance. Anodos was curious about self determination and did not take into account the good intentions of the old lady.

The consequences of violating the prohibition were very serious. Anodos found that the shadow had a huge negative effect, which could make the place covered by it barren, "my shadow had lain. The very outline of it could be traced in the withered lifeless grass, and the scorched and shrivelled flowers which stood there, dead, and hopeless of any resurrection." [7] It indicated the intuitive negative effect of people's inner desire. With shadows, people would be affected and become conceited, arrogant and vain, "Anodos' shadow [...] represent four vices that keep the self in a permanent state of disenchantment. The vices of fear, greed, lust, and pride." [13] The shadow changed with different moods of Anodos. Finally, in the communication with the crystal ball girl, Anodos realized that one should be a person of "despising and degrading myself", "then first I knew the delight of being lowly", "it is better, a thousand-fold, for a proud man to fall and be humbled, than to hold up his head in his pride and

fancied innocence." [7] When the soul was sublimated, the shadow disappears.

### 2.2. To Explore the Love for Others in the Maintenance of Secular Order

When people live in the world, it is inevitable to communicate with people around them, and it is very necessary to maintain a certain social order. But why do people want to participate in secular affairs? What is the limit? MacDonald expressed his view by the story of the struggle with the three giants.

The battle against the three giants was very similar to the battle between David and Goliath in the Old Testament in the theme, content, process and plots of the story.

From the theme, they all talk about individuals being arranged by fate to save the country and people from being violated and enslaved; From the perspective of the process, they all talk about the times when the story happened: because the enemy is strong, no one dares to come forward to fight against a giant with huge appearance and super strength. The story process has many similarities. The heroes are all pre-selected by God, and one is reflected through the magic mirror of a wise woman. When Cosmos came to a tower, he met two brothers who were forging swords. Although it was the first time they met each other, they said: "We have been expecting you for some days", [7] "a lonely woman of wisdom", They turned to "a lonely woman of wisdom" for help in fighting against the three giants. She said they needed a helper, "I will show him to you in a glass, and, when he comes, you will know him at once. [...] at the feet of the dame lay a young man, yourself." [7]

One day the prophet Samuel received a command from God, "I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons." [4] then Samuel went there and selected several of Jesse's sons one by one, until David appeared, God said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one." [4] David did not escape from their fate either, but met the challenges actively and accepted, "the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward." [4] The process of dueling with giants is full of miracles. Neither of them had specific experience of fighting with the enemy before. Anodos was just a wandering youth, "I am ashamed of my white hands", David was just a shepherd, and he is just a young man of literature and art who has the talent of music and has nothing to do with military struggle, "I tried to repay them with song; and many were the tears they both shed over my ballads and dirges." [7] All of them looked weak. They don't have the usual weapons to fight with the enemy, "I began to make for myself a shirt of steel plates and rings." [7] In order to fight with the enemy, they did not rely on the usual armor to protect themselves, but relied on the flexibility of their bodies, "nimbleness of motion, certainty of eye, and ready response of hand", [7] In this way, in the actual battle, there are defenseless people fighting with people who are armed to the teeth. The key to victory is to find out the weakness of the enemy's tight armor, that is, the connection where the armor cannot be protected, "I, at the same time, kept

equal watch upon those joints of his armour, through some one of which I hoped to reach his life.” [7] In the fight against Goliath, David also used the string to throw stones and hit the giant's armor seams to kill him, “took out a stone, slung it, and stuck the Philistine on his forehead.” [4] The result of the battle was to defeat the enemy and realize the destiny's arrangement for him. After success, individuals enjoyed the love of people, but also gradually got bored, and then was eager for God's blessing. Anodos released the prisoners and received warm feedback from the people, “to see them crowding round me with thanks”, [7] The king took his weapon “joined with theirs in a trophy”, “dubbed me knight with his own old hand.” [7] Many women “make my stay there as pleasant to me as possible”. But gradually, they were not interested in people's praise and women's love, “somewhat weary of uninterrupted pleasure, and nowise strengthened thereby, either in body or mind.” [7] David gained great fame after he defeated the giants, making him king later. Because he betrayed God's admonition and married another wife Bathsheba, he committed adultery. The disaster arose in his family and he was chased by his son Absalom. He realized his mistake and confessed to God to seek God's blessing.

This storyline design shows MacDonald's view of reservations. He agreed with the Calvinist theory that the world had its own arrangements from God in the secular society, and individuals should actively respond to it. Just because the earthly life was short and it was only a guest trip, we should not despise it and escape it. We should not improve the situation in which the people in the times and regions we are in are the people of God. We should actively exercise our mind in life, make ourselves mature, accept challenges and fulfill our mission. As a stranger, Anodos met the invitation of the two princes to fight with the three giants. He regarded this struggle as a mission. Although he might lose his life, he did not need to escape. Instead, he actively prepared, forged weapons, trained skills of fighting, and strove for good results. The story also mentioned another view of the Calvinist school, that is, one should not to indulge in secular pleasures, and be detached from secular pursuits of power, fame and lust. Therefore, it is timely to stay away from people's compliments and material preferential treatment.

### ***2.3. To Pursue the Love of God in the Negation of the Material Individual Secular***

The true love should go beyond maintaining the individual to get the love of others, so that the race can be multiplied, and the maintenance of normal social order shows a regular peace and harmony, but it should lead people to pursue the truth, that is, after death, to ascend to heaven and get an eternal life, only by this individuals and groups are saved. True love is the pursuit of pure faith for eternal life, is the love of God.

Anodos' sacrifice to uphold the orthodox faith was similar to Jesus' crucifixion to spread the true gospel to the public. They all fought for their beliefs, dared to question popular customs, dared to challenge the views that people think are justified, dared to express their unique views, dared to show their views with actions and fought against bad beliefs. In the

end, although they lost their lives temporarily, they welcomed the resurrection and gained an eternal life.

Anodos came to a place where many people were sacrificing. They had uniform dress and performed specific etiquette, “Along each of the two longer sides of the interior, were ranged three ranks of men, in white robes, standing silent and solemn, each with a sword by his side”, [7] other place “was filled with a company of men and women and children, in holiday attire.” [7] This was the same with the sacrificial system that the Jews had formed in the era of Jesus. The holy place was Jerusalem. There was a set of sacrificial rites recognized by the Pharisees, that was, the knowledgeable people were also confused by them because of their conformity, such as the knights who were respected by Anodos as their masters also join the sacrificial team, “his noble countenance was full of reverence and awe [...] it was the really grand accompaniments that overcame him [...] bowed his spirit to the belief.” [7] Jesus was concerned with John the Baptist, who was respected by Jesus and still followed the old rites. Cosmos and Jesus had their own unique judgments about the ritual beliefs that had been popular for many years and were used to and accepted by people. Anodos observed and analyzed that, “there was evil here”, he did not be misled by this superficial phenomenon. He was firmly confident that even if he dies, he would reveal his true faith, “I felt quite indifferent as to my own fate; not feeling, after the late events of my history, that I was at all worth taking care of.” [7] Jesus found that some Jews were fascinated by the beliefs left over from the past tradition, which were distorted and interpreted by the scribes and Pharisees, and were unwilling to be changed. Jesus warned them that they would encounter disaster, “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sideon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.” [4] Anodos pushed the puppet to smash the altar, and found that the sacrifice led to the abyss of death. There was a big hole under the altar and a huge beast that would eat people, “a great hole in the throne, like the hollow of a decayed tree, going down apparently a great way”. There was also “a great brute, like a wolf”. [7] Jesus rebuked the scribes and Pharisees for liking the external beautiful costumes, performing in front of people, paying attention to the form of the law, and forgetting its internal real requirements, they “have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith”, [4] “you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.” [4] They all died for revealing the shortcomings of the old faith. Cosmos was killed by wild animal believers, and Jesus was killed by people who believed in the old faith. People worshiped them after their deaths. After deaths, they revived and returned to real life to confirm their physical existence. Anodos saw the shadow reflected on the living people, “the shadow that fell from me, lay only where his beams fell not. I danced for joy”, [7] “hastened home. My sisters received me with unspeakable joy”, From the fact that it retained the memory of the fairy kingdom and still had the memory of sisters in reality, it showed that the soul and body returned from the fairy

kingdom belong to the same person. Jesus rose from the dead with the scars of his crucifixion. To dispel Thomas' suspicion that Jesus was just a soul, Jesus asked Thomas to touch the nail marks on his side where he was suffering, "put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. do not doubt but believe." [4] The disciples never forgot all their relatives and showed up to Mary Magdalene and his rules.

Anodos felt that he should tell the world his feelings after his resurrection so that they could return to God. "I have a strange feeling sometimes, that I am a ghost, sent into the world to minister to my fellow men, or, rather, to repair the wrongs I have already done." [7] Jesus confirmed to people that he could rise from the dead and he could obtain eternal life. People heard the gospel, which was about going beyond death to eternal life. The spread of the gospel indicates that more individual or groups will learn the truth and pursue the kingdom of heaven.

To experience death and rebirth is not a tragedy, but a good thing. From this, we have a deeper understanding of evil. Although death is the end of physical life, it can start a better spiritual journey of eternal life. "MacDonald took advantages of the characteristics of the fairy tale in order to show that death is not an end to a better life, but rather the gateway to it, and re-establish faith in the existence of an after-life." [9]

### 3. To Combine the Functions of Missionary and Writer

#### 3.1. *MacDonald Was a Priest with His Own Unique Ideas*

MacDonald had a different view from the general public and the mainstream church on the relationship between human and God and how to obtain salvation. At the time when MacDonald lived, the religious reform advocated by Martin Luther and Calvin had been completed in Western Europe, and ideas different from Roman Catholicism had occupied an important position in parts of Germany, Switzerland, northern Europe and other places. However, in Britain, although it experienced the religious reform from top to bottom, the credo and liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church were still widely retained in the society. MacDonald disagreed with some aspects. In some respects, MacDonald disapproved.

As for how people could be saved, the mainstream Church of England generally believed that people should be obtained through good moral performance, remarkable achievements for society, and penance. Because God was just and strict, the promise of God's kingdom could only be obtained if certain conditions were met. But MacDonald disagreed. He believed that God created the world so that people would eventually be saved. The relationship between God and man was not a relationship between the adjudicator and the punished, but a relationship between son and father, an internal relationship that can be directly communicated by faith.

From the point of MacDonald, although man was created by God in his own image, man still had various weaknesses

and deficiencies, which would lead people to go astray or do wrong in the secular world, would regard the present as the final thing, would be unable to resist the temptation of the outside world and give up the pursuit of the highest things. To avoid these situations, individual must believe in God, obey God, and become perfect children of God. "MacDonald is helping his readers on the way to their salvation. He is trying to help them become perfect children of God." [14]

The right way to obtain God's salvation was to trust God, to do what God wants, just as Jesus did what God wants, and the obedience and conversion of the soul was more important than the external work. One of the manifestations of obedience to God was to follow God's Word, that was, to read the Bible directly, to understand the Bible, and to arrange one's activities according to the instructions of the Bible.

#### 3.2. *MacDonald Were Deeply Influenced by the Calvinist School of Protestantism*

MacDonald was obviously influenced by the Calvinist school of Protestantism on how to seek God to approach God. It is God who seeks man, not man who seeks God on his own initiative.

Everyone is also assigned a destiny by God. This destiny is subject to God's entire creation plan, and part of the results do not mean the best choice for specific individuals. For example, fighting with three giants sacrificed the lives of two princes, and there were no people on the ship who were saved from behind the north wind from the eyes of little Diamond, but everyone had to accept their own destiny and actively face it, Meet its own arrangements, but each arrangement is subject to God's highest good. MacDonald mentioned his perception of good and evil, what we call evil, is the only and best shape, which, for the person and his condition at the time, could be assumed by the best good. Evil is not an entity, it is also a positive force to promote social development.

Suffering in adversity is also a way for people to understand and deepen their faith. MacDonald mentioned: We must be saved from ourselves by very unpleasant things. Even if God gives a helping hand to people to let them approach him rather than take the initiative to know God through personal perception or ministry, secondly, people are inspired by God when they are suffering and desperate rather than constantly deepening their understanding of God when they are in good times. In the fantasy story, when Anodos was attacked by the ash tree, it was the beech tree and the knight who saved him. When Cosmos meets the three giants, his personal size, height, skills, equipment and other aspects are at a disadvantage. When he can win in battle, he gets the wisdom from God; When dueling with the tree spirit, he faced criticism from others and lack of ability, but he finally killed the tree spirit and got the gift of resurrection after death. "these experiences are granted through grace rather than his own merit. It is a significant part of MacDonald's scheme of things that despair provokes the granting of grace, as it does here." [1] How to obtain the possibility of eternal

life is to realize that we should start from love itself, not by virtue of personal achievements or impeccable virtue, but by virtue of our understanding of God.

### 3.3. *He Spread His Beliefs Through Literature*

In the Victorian era from the 19th century to the 20th century, exploring how to save became the theme that many writers intended to express in their novels, and MacDonald was no exception, "Theology has to help the reader on his way to a perfect relation with God. It must not be confined within an academic ivory tower. Theological writings must have relevance for the Christian reader." [14]

Missionaries are necessary to remind people how to find the right path through heaven in an atmosphere surrounded by worldly life. "The depravity of the human heart, the inevitability of sin and the impossibility of avoiding eternal punishment except by belief in the Atonement were what children's books must teach." [15] MacDonald, as a priest and writer, combined the two functions in his works. "MacDonald's protagonists demonstrate the power of God to transform those who will learn from and follow Christ." [3] For example, in the book of *At the Back of North Wind*, he depicted the image of a small diamond who is honest, kind-hearted and hardworking. Although he is short of material resources, he has a noble spiritual quality. The small diamond began to have a bad understanding of God's exclusion of some people from salvation, but after reflection, he realized that "his thoughts and his ways higher than our thoughts and our ways." [6] "two different north winds were all "the kindest, goodest, best me in the world." [5] So as he fully trust God. Those who pursue good virtue should have the possibility of being saved by God." The person has died nourishing the God in him [...] the god now invests all his being, by infusing into his veins a new and higher life." [10]

## 4. Conclusion

Based on the fact that *Phantastes* has obviously imitated the theme plot of the Bible story in many stories, from the love of individuals and others to the love of transcendental spirit, "although love or longing takes many forms, it is ultimately love which draws beings ever onward toward the source of this great energy, which is God." [1] In addition, behind the story, it expresses the specific views of the Calvinist School on scheduled salvation and earthly living standards, and MacDonald's identity as a pastor scholar. He insisted, "if theology helps to remove obstacles then it has its value. It is then a help on the way to becoming a true Christian and a true child of God". [14] I personally agree with Nick Page: "Phantastes is a Bildungsroman, a story of personal

development." [8]

## References

- [1] Adrian Gunther. (1993). The Structure of George MacDonald's *Phantastes*. *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*. Vol. 12, Article 3, 43-59.
- [2] Burt, Michael. (2016). *Phantastes and the Development of the Imagination*. *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*. Vol. 35, Article 32, 80-90.
- [3] Dearborn, Kerry. (1988). *Baptized Imagination*. Ashgate Publishing Company Pub. 118.
- [4] Holy Bible, (2000). New Revised Standard.
- [5] MacDonald, George. (2015). *At the Back of the North Wind*. Createspace Independent Pub. 66.
- [6] MacDonald, George. (2017). "Justice", in *Unspoken Sermons*. Createspace Independent Pub. 63-64.
- [7] MacDonald, George. (1994). *Phantastes: A Faerie Romance for Men and Women*. Johannesen Printing & Publishing.
- [8] Nick Page (ed). (2008). *George MacDonald: Phantastes: Special Annotated Edition*. London, Colorado, and Hyderabad: Paternoster. 15.
- [9] Pemberton, Marilyn. (2008). The Ultimate Rite of Passage: Death and Beyond in "The Golden Key" and *At the Back of the North Wind*. *North Wind: A journal of George MacDonald studies*. Vol. 27, Article 3, 35.
- [10] Persyn, Catherine. (2001). "And All About the Courtly Stable/Bright-Harnessed Angles Sit": Eschatological Elements in *At the Back of the North Wind*. *North Wind: A journal of George MacDonald Studies*. Vol. 20, Article 1, 25.
- [11] Raeper, William. (1987). *George MacDonald*. Tring: Lion. 145.
- [12] Reis, Richard. (1972). *George MacDonald*. New York: Twayne. 89.
- [13] Roukema, Aren. (2012). The Shadow of Anodos: Alchemical Symbolism in *Phantastes*. *North Wind: A journal of George MacDonald studies*. Vol. 31, Article 5, 54.
- [14] Thomas Gerold. (2004). Theology for the Sake of God's Children: Observations on George MacDonald's Theology in his *Unspoken Sermons*. *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*. Vol. 23, Article 2, 13-20.
- [15] Watkins, Gwen. (1988). A Theologian's Dealings with the Fairies. *North Wind: A journal of George MacDonald studies*. Vol. 7, Article 1, 5.