**4. Old Age as a Central Theme in *The Princess and the Goblin* and *Howl’s Moving Castle***

The representation of age in fairy tales is a significant literary device. Authors such as George MacDonald parallel old age with wisdom and knowledge, whereas contemporary authors such as Diane Wynne Jones chooses to challenge classic concepts paired with old age to explore new character dynamics and dimensions. Both of these authors use a range of characters to explore the different approaches to old age, and to explore the differences between physical age, magical age, and mental age. Though MacDonald is the subtler of the two authors, in his novel *The Princess and the Goblin* he uses characters of varying ages and environments to view old age to varying degrees. He specifically uses the grandmother Irene’s shifting physical form to play on the preconceptions of her elderly appearance, and in turn giving him more freedom with her character. Jones uses similar methods in her novel *Howl’s Moving Castle*, however she diverts more deeply from popular convention and takes her young female protagonist Sophie and sets her into an elderly body, whereby she is able to take former fairy tale expectations and replace them with interest and curiosity. It’s curious to note both authors using fairy tales as their medium of dialogue, but taking steps away from normal conventions of old age to investigate characterization in new dimensions of storytelling.

When MacDonald first published *The Princess and the Goblin* in 1872 he certainly saw the importance of adhering to the set fairy tale parameters, however through textual evidence it is apparent he made small deviations to expand and deepen his characters and their environment. As Jones published *Howl’s Moving Castle* nearly a century later she was afforded much more freedom in her explorations of the genre, as she displays with Sophie. Given that there is such a significant difference of years between MacDonald and Jones it is important to realize that Jones would have had more freedom and inspiration, socially and culturally, to play with common fairy tale conventions than MacDonald given the social climate of his time and less examples of success. Therefore, it is appropriate to compare these two novels on equal ground in terms of their representations of old age and their effect on their respective stories.

MacDonald uses old age in *The Princess and the Goblin* on the basic layer to express knowledge, wisdom, and experience. This is shown through multiple descriptions and introductions of his characters, princess Irene’s father a prime example. He is described having features that “make him look like an eagle” with “a long dark bearded, streaked with silvery lines.” (76) MacDonald is using the king in the traditional sense of old age. He includes this description as a background and comparison for the grandmother because the king is on the middle layer of the environment and holds as a constant. Later, this thought is further explored on the under layer of the environment in an exchange between Helfer and his goblin father, MacDonald reinforces the idea of old age being coupled with knowledge and experience when the younger says “I never knew so much before!” and the father replies “your knowledge is not universal quite yet… you were only fifty last month.” (55) Where MacDonald is using fifty as a mark for age and wisdom in the readers mind. However, on an upper layer of the world, MacDonald challenges this perspective of old age with his description of the grandmother. At first she is introduced, playing into the reader’s expectations of an old lady explaining explicitly “the old lady who sat spinning … the princess could tell that was an old lady.” However, the MacDonald uses the narrator to guide the reader into questioning the validity of the princess’ perception along with her, questioning “that is not much like an old lady – is it? Ah! But [her hair] was as white as snow.” MacDonald uses this sort of description to give the reader the feeling that they are coming to these conclusions along with Irene. Also contrasting the expectations of old age and wisdom with her youthful features; “although her face was smooth, her eyes looked wise… she must be old.” MacDonald does this to signify a change, modifying our preconceptions of the grandmother. Finally, ending this passage with “[she] did think her very old indeed - quite fifty… but she was rather older than that.” (14) Implying that there are deeper levels to the grandmother than we come to expect from traditional fairy tales and using the mark fifty to underline her great age.

Another traditional motif in fairy tales is the notion of the secretly evil old crone, such as in *Sleeping Beauty*, however MacDonald uses Irene and the grandmothers old age to break this preconception. On the princess’ second encounter with the grandmother she asks her “ great great grandmother” why she was unable to find her before to which the grandmother replies “[Irene] is hardly old enough to understand.” (84) For MacDonald age and understanding have a direct relationship and having Irene stress the amount of “great[s]” in the grandmother’s title exemplifies her old age implying greater knowledge. On that note, MacDonald does something interesting when Irene is asking the grandmother a question, further down in the passage, and “think[s] to be very polite [addressing her] with so many greats.” Here, MacDonald has set up our image of such great age with knowledge and wisdom but the grandmother replies “I am not quite so great as that… call me grandmother, that will do.” (86) In this exchange the grandmother plays on the expectations created by MacDonald and grows our curiosity of her character. In this way MacDonald is able to keep us from settling on preconceptions for the grandmother and playing on the built notions of old age. This thought is furthered at the end of this passage when Irene is about to go to bed with the grandmother and is asked if she minds sleeping “such an old woman?” After Irene says no, the grandmother stresses “But I am very old.” But Irene asks if she is afraid to sleep with her because she “ [is] very young.” (88) Traditional fairy tales ask the reader to expect negative situations from old ladies but MacDonald is putting Irene in these positions to prove to the reader it is unnecessary to read *The Princess and the Goblin* with any presumptions. He uses old age in a way to convince the audience to read with an open, unfiltered mind.

Finally, the grandmother changes her appearance, no longer old, but with “her face that of a woman of three and twenty.” (109) This transformation is attributed by the grandmother “feel[ing] so young [that] evening.” And prompts Irene to ask “why do you call yourself so old?” This physical transformation and conversation with Irene leads up to the fundamental representation of MacDonald’s attitude towards old age in fairy tales and is a central theme in the book. MacDonald encapsulates this through the following passage from the grandmother: “...it is so silly of people to fancy that old age means crookedness and witheredness and feebleness and sticks and spectacles and rheumatism and forgetfulness! It is so silly! Old age has nothing whatever to do with all that. The right old age means strength and beauty and mirth and courage and clear eyes and strong painless limbs.” (118)

Here it is important to make the distinction in these stories between mental age, magical age, and physical age. Old age is not simply represented by either author in a single dimension but is toyed with in multiple. MacDonald uses the grandmother’s mental and magical age as a constant while changing her physical appearance to represent her in different ways. Jones uses old age in a similar fashion by immediately changing Sophie from the body of a young female to an old woman. In this way Jones gives her the physical age, with all its restrictions, of an old woman, and the mental age of a young woman. Jones does this because now she is able to forgo Sophie all of the typical consequences and reactions that a young female protagonist would cause.

In the beginning Sophie is portrayed as a young girl that feels she had turn “into an old woman or a semi-invalid.” (20) So her mental age holds her back from pursuing anything that she truly desires, however once the witch of the waste turns her into an old woman, her inner feelings become a physical manifestation and a sort of “disguise” (261) for her. This liberates her from any social conventions that hold back girls of her previous physical age and allow her to pursuit her fortune. Jones uses Sophie’s old age as a central device for motivating her interests. Jones takes Sophie’s old age as a disregard for any past fears, underlining her newfound freedom, showing this either when she frees the dog stating “The way I am now, it's scarcely worth worrying about,” (35) or when she enters the castle, no longer afraid because “Wizard Howl is not likely to take [her] soul… he only takes the young girls.” Jones uses old age to exempt Sophie from normal social conventions; “It was odd. As a girl, Sophie would have shrivelled with embarrassment at the way she was behaving. As an old woman, she did not mind what she did or said. She found that a great relief.” (66) Jones also affords Sophie the ability to criticize Howl as if he were many years younger than him even though mentally she is ten years younger; she is afforded authority and respect. As the novel continues Sophie has her insecurities and difficulties surface and her old age isn’t completely to blame, when “[Sophie] stumped into the bathroom and stared at her withered old face in the mirrors… Even young and fresh, she did not think her face compared particularly well with Miss Angorian's.” (247) So Jones gives Sophie her way out of the hat shop and into a new life but creates a more complex turn of events. This also provides an interesting perspective on the fairy tale love story because Sophie needs to overcome her self-conscience issues as well as the spell, Jones implying throughout the story that they are the same. Sophie’s old age most of all brings new perspective to many aspects of her life, from her unfounded fears to her connotations of Fanny, finding that “being old gave [Sophie] an entirely new view of Fanny. She was a lady who was still young and pretty, and she had found the hat shop as boring as Sophie did… Then she had suddenly been afraid she was just like Sophie: old with no reason, and nothing to show for it.” (271)

Another way that Jones uses old age is with the Witch of the Waste and Mrs. Pentstemmon. They are a contrast of each other, Mrs. Pentstemmon accepting old age graciously and living lavishly, Sophie thinking, “she was the finest and most frightening lady she had ever seen.” (163) Not trying to hid her years, but to show them while she was still living, guilty of pride, the Witch of the Waste being the converse, putting all of her power into retaining her youth, and guilty of vanity. Jones using both characters as complimentary figures to Sophie for examples of negative symbols of old age.

Both Jones and MacDonald break conventional fairy tale modes to allow their characters to overlook storybook social conventions and reader expectations. This is especially true of the grandmother figure in *The Princess and the Goblin* and Sophie in *Howls Moving Castle* in which old age proves as a device for the characters to circumvent traditional fairy tale expectations and allow them to explore new areas of the genre. This is also complimented by the author’s use of the minor characters age to reflect or contrast the actions and decisions of the characters. Jones used old age as a central theme and device to drive her story with Sophie and play on fairy tales, where MacDonald used old age more subtly, however both used it cleverly, to create wonderful new dimensions to their novels.

References:

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