

From Social Disintegration to Moral Renewal: Interpreting At the Back of the North Wind from Carlyle's Moral Critique of Modernity

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ABSTRACT

At the Back of the North Wind, a representative work by Scottish writer George MacDonald, intertwines fantasy and reality to depict Diamond's coming-of-age journey. By analyzing this novel, this paper shows how it reflects the class divisions, moral decline, and spiritual redemption in Victorian industrial society and also explores the relationship between individual moral awakening and social revival. This thesis argues that MacDonald's novel resonates with Carlyle's Social Idea while presenting a different perspective on heroism. The thinking of "heroism in the ordinary" is different from Carlyle's cult of heroes, showing the hope and potential of individual power in Victorian society. This analysis contributes to understanding the role of children's fantasy literature in 19th-century British social change and offers new insights into the study of children's literature.

KEYWORDS

George MacDonald; At the back of the north wind; Moral critique

1 Introduction

MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871) was first serialized in *Good Words for the Young* under his own editorship, from October 1868 to November 1870. It tells of the boy Diamond's life as a cabman's son in a poor area of mid-Victorian London, and of his meetings and adventures with a lady called North Wind. Generally well received by the public, it has hardly been out of print since. *At the Back of the North Wind* is MacDonald's only fantasy set mainly in this world. Diamond's story nearly all happens either in Victorian London or in other parts of the world where North Wind takes him. In the adventure mingling of order and disorder, structured city life and rough nature, Diamond reaped personal growth and, with his kindness and sincerity, slowly promoted social change in industrialized Britain.

Rather than treating Carlyle as a systematic theorist, the analysis approaches his writings as a form of nineteenth-century moral critique that reflects deep anxieties about the spiritual and social consequences of industrial modernity. In *Past and Present* (1843), social critic Thomas Carlyle pointed out that industrialized society, despite its unprecedented material achievements, had led to the impoverishment of the human spiritual world and the decline of moral standards. Against this background, George MacDonald, in *At the Back of the North Wind*, through the interaction between Diamond and the north wind, constructs a space that blends elements of realism and fantasy, and explores the crisis, morality and spiritual salvation in the industrial society in a gentler and fantastical way. As the cornerstone of children's fantasy literature, fantasy is not merely a means of escaping reality, but a way to explore social and moral issues. This unique creative concept has profoundly influenced modern fantasy literature, inspiring writers such as C. S. Lewis.^[1] Using Carlyle's social criticism as a theoretical framework, this paper will explore how *At the Back of the North Wind* responds to the British social crisis in 19th century in the form of fantasy literature, and understands the role of inner ethical awakening and the power of individual emotions on social change.

2 Diagnosing social ills: victorian realities and carlyle's critique

As the Industrial Revolution accelerated in nineteenth-century Britain, intellectuals like Thomas Carlyle emerged as moral critics of a society increasingly marked by exploitation and inequality. Carlyle's social philosophy, though not a systematic theory, offered a powerful moral indictment of industrial capitalism—denouncing its degradation of human labor, its neglect of the poor, and its spiritual barrenness. Of particular concern was the plight of the working class, including the growing visibility of child labor as a symptom of deeper social decay. His reflections on labor, moral authority, and the erosion of communal bonds provide a compelling lens through which to examine the harsh realities facing children and families in Victorian society.

3 Victorian social injustice and child labour

The 19th century was the peak of the second industrial revolution in Britain. Industries such as textiles, coal, iron and steel developed rapidly, with machines replacing manual labour and productivity increasing dramatically. At the same time, the traditional handicraft industry was gradually replaced by large-scale factories. With the proliferation of factories and mines, the demand for cheap labour rose sharply, leading to the proliferation of child labour, which is also clearly reflected in the novel. According to the statistics of Professor Hopkins, the total number of all male and female child laborers under the age of 15 was 660,000 in 1851, of which those who worked with their parents and siblings in temporary jobs, such as agriculture, handicraft workshops, and miscellaneous jobs accounted for about one-half of the total number. In traditional agriculture and manual workshops, the age at which child laborers start working is usually around 7 or 8 years old; in the textile industry and mines, the age at which children start working is usually between 6 or 7 years old, and sometimes even between 4 or 5 years old.^[2]

It was not until the mid-19th century that a series of acts restricting child labour were gradually passed in Britain (e.g., the 1833 Factories Act). The Industrial Revolution also brought about rapid urbanization. As large numbers of people from the countryside poured into the cities in search of work, urban expansion far outpaced the ability to build infrastructure, leading to the formation of slums with poor conditions, minimal sanitation, frequent outbreaks of diseases such as cholera and typhoid fever. The distribution of urban space reflected class differences, and the segregation of the rich from the slums further exacerbated social inequality and increased social stratification.

4 Carlyle's moral critique of industrial modernity

Amid these societal transformations, Victorian intellectuals engaged in profound reflections on the changes surrounding them. Carlyle noted that the term "society" was becoming increasingly detached from its original meaning,^[3] prompting him to redefine it and guide public perception. Like his contemporaries such as George Eliot and Muller, Carlyle infused "society" with ethical and spiritual dimensions rather than treating it as a neutral descriptive concept.

His theory of the Social Idea mainly focused on how to sustain society. The thinking of the human society at that time could be broadly divided into two schools. One focused on natural and even organic social relations, believing that society was sustained by loyalty, filial piety and duty; the other saw society as a group of individuals constituted to achieve personal goals, arguing that society was based on the marketplace, and that social relations were sustained by individual interests.^[4] Carlyle critiqued the latter, arguing that a society based on individual interests is inherently contrary to the notion of "society" and ultimately leads to its fragmentation. He advocated for a model grounded in ethical and spiritual cohesion, treating society as an interconnected whole rather than a mere aggregation of individuals, emphasizing the importance of the relationship between the members of society^[5]. Carlyle argued for a spiritual and moral foundation in governance and social structure. Also, he declared critique of democracy and capitalism.^[6] He contrasted the medieval monastic system, which he idealized for its sense of duty and order, with the disorder and greed of industrial capitalism.

For Carlyle, a just society required moral leadership, where the ruling class bore the responsibility of guiding and uplifting the working class, much like a family structure. He proposed that society should be guided by heroes—individuals with exceptional moral and intellectual qualities—rather than elected officials or aristocrats by birthright. "If the noblest be not elected, the most ignoble will; there is no medium possible"^[7] (P100). The heroic leadership is one of the key aspects of his social idea, and we will make an interpretation about it in part three.

5 Voices of resistance: social critique and heroism in *At the back of the north wind*

Carlyle's critique of social disintegration did not end with diagnosis. His moral thinking, embedded within his broader social vision, called for a spiritual renewal grounded in work, duty, and heroism. In *At the Back of the North Wind*, George MacDonald offers a literary counterpart to this vision while different in heroism. Through symbolic characters and narrative structures, the novel resonates with Carlyle's concerns while considering the possibility of resistance and ethical restoration within a child-centered, fantastical world.

6 Critiquing injustice: converging perspectives of Carlyle and MacDonald

Diamond's name itself critiques materialism and capitalism. While readers associate diamonds with precious gemstones, for Diamond, the name simply refers to his family's horse, "Old Diamond" —the boy is named after his family's horse. "To know a man's name is not always to know the man's self."^[8] (P1) Diamond's close bond with the horse strengthens his connection to nature, providing solace and security that surpass familial ties. This symbolic relationship blurs the boundary between human and animal, reinforcing the novel's critique of industrialization's alienation from nature. Despite his emotional comfort, the health problems associated with the poor living conditions cannot be ignored. Diamond's room allowed the north wind to "take advantage of it like a cat after a mouse"^[8] (P5), and the poor living conditions symbolizes his family's low socioeconomic status. Additionally, Victorian urban poverty was marked by unsanitary conditions, frequent disease outbreaks, and limited medical access, a hardship MacDonald personally experienced with his family's tuberculosis struggles^[9]. Following Diamond's second encounter with the North Wind, the narrative engages directly with childhood illness and mortality, positioning his deteriorating health as central to the story. His first journey to the back of the North Wind is precipitated by severe illness.

In spite of his frailty, Diamond assumes financial responsibility for his family when his father, a cabman, falls ill. This occupation firmly situates the family within the working class, dependent on manual labor for survival. While Carlyle idealized labor as a means of self-actualization^[7] (P178), MacDonald presents it as an alienating force under capitalism. When Diamond later drives his father's cab, he embodies Victorian ideals of diligence and integrity, ensuring fair wages while maintaining courtesy and perseverance. His deep affection for his younger sibling reflects the Victorian emphasis on family duty.

Carlyle frequently invoked "home" as a metaphor for society, advocating for a family-like social structure to counter industrialization's fragmentation. Industrialization and urbanization intensified labor alienation, separating work from domestic life, making the home a psychological refuge. Carlyle sought to bridge this divide by fostering communal bonds reminiscent of familial relationships. This vision is echoed in the story, where Diamond's innocence and kindness unite rough-mannered cabmen, fostering a sense of moral and emotional cohesion. "After a short time, the foul language was embarrassed to come out of people's mouths whenever Diamond was in the neighbourhood. This one would elbow that one, reminding him that the boy would hear him when he was nearby, and the foul language would be swallowed back when it reached his lips. When they spoke to him properly, he always answered properly, sometimes so beautifully that it greatly helped to make them change their opinion of him."^[8] (P134) His presence influences their behavior, compelling them to moderate their language and attitudes, reinforcing Carlyle's belief that society should cultivate familial solidarity beyond economic exchange.

Although Carlyle highlighted communal interdependence, he focused more on the inter-class dynamics. He urged the industrial elite to govern responsibly, for cash payments not to be the only relationship between people: "Love cannot be acquired by cash payments; and without love, people cannot live together",^[9] (P272) and advocated the introduction of medieval responsibility and goodwill into modern society. MacDonald, similarly, illustrates cross-class interaction through Diamond's relationship with Mr. Raymond, a wealthy businessman who recognizes Diamond's potential and sponsors his literacy education. This act fits in with the Victorian moral ideal that adults, especially the wealthy, should take moral responsibility to care for and promote the well-being and growth of children from all segments of society.^[10] Diamond's moral influence extends beyond personal transformation, inspiring those around him, including Mr. Raymond, demonstrating that working-class virtues transcend class barriers and catalyze social progress. As a moral compass, Diamond embodies an ethical force that surpasses material wealth and social status, reinforcing MacDonald's vision of social cohesion through compassion and moral integrity.

7 Reimagining heroism: the ordinary versus the elite

"Man cannot live in isolation. We come together as a whole, or pursue a common good, or endure a common sorrow, like living nerves in the same body."^[8] (P272) The bonds that hold society together are, firstly, the necessities of human survival, and secondly, the emotional feeling of human beings for each other, i.e. love. Moreover, this love is a bond of faith. MacDonald also conveys the importance of faith through the mouth of Diamond: "The pain that comes from seeing our beloved ones suffer sometimes makes us angry with them and makes them suffer twice as much. This situation comes out of a lack of faith in God, and it is clear how important this faith is, for once we lose it, we lose even the only goodness that can soothe the pain."^[7] (P223) But "faith" here refers exclusively to Christian faith, as opposed to the more abstract "faith" that Carlyle stressed.

In his view, the industrial age needs to become an age of faith again, or it “will continue in confusion, bitterness and insanity, and will surely lead to a wild and suicidal dissolution”.^[8] (P250) In his book *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, Carlyle repeatedly stresses the need to worship “heroes” because “faith” is loyalty to spiritual heroes, and loyalty, “as the life-sustaining breath of society”, is originally derived from the worship of heroes.^[11] Carlyle emphasized the necessity of heroic leadership to guide society through crises. However, considering the limitations of the times, the slippage of morality and faith at that time, and his celebration of heroism, ingenuity, and noble virtues throughout the book, Carlyle is not so much talking about heroes as he is talking about the spirit embodied by heroes, and the individual should have a heroic mind.

Though Diamond is not a typical hero in the traditional sense, but his kindness, selflessness and purity demonstrate a kind of moral heroism. The ending of the novel with Diamond’s death in real life which is in the form of going to the back of the north wind, however, seems to deviate from the traditional notion that fairy tales always end happily, with the young innocent protagonist triumphing and receiving great reward in this life. It does not mean that “heroism” has failed. As a devout Christian, MacDonald’s work often deals with spiritual redemption that transcends reality. For example, in his story *The Princess and the Goblin*, princess Irene’s great-grandmother embodies profound wisdom, and she provides the princess with an invisible golden thread to find the right direction in the dark.^[12] This thread serves as a symbolic representation of faith’s guidance, illustrating that genuine belief, though unseen, can lead to ultimate redemption. From this perspective, the death of Diamond is not a denial of the function of individual ethical awakening in the society, but an emphasis on transcending the secular revolution and pursuing spiritual renewal. If the death of Diamond is seen as a transition from the material world to the spiritual world, MacDonald instead expresses a kind of spiritual salvation that transcends the secular reality. This heroism in the ordinary is different from Carlyle’s fanatical worship of heroes, and shows the hope and potential of individual strength in Victorian society.

8 Toward renewal: north wind as a sign of moral and social rebirth

Carlyle criticizes the spiritual emptiness and social injustice brought about by industrial society, and argues that society needs to undergo a drastic revolution in order to be revived. In contrast, MacDonald revealed another possibility for social change and moral rebirth through the adventure between the north wind and Diamond.

The North Wind has its folkloric roots. In Celtic mythology, Aos Sí (the wind god) is found throughout the invisible world that coexists with the human world, embodying endless change.^[13] In the novel, the North Wind is able to change forms at will: she is both a beautiful and wise woman and a raging wind; capable of destroying as well as creating new life. She is not only symbolizes nature’s counter-attack to industrialization, the disintegration of the old order, but also represents a moral and spiritual guidance with wisdom.^[14] Diamond’s early journey with the North Wind involves a shipwreck, and when Diamond fears that it is unnecessarily cruel, she doesn’t give a concrete answers but encourages him to keep the faith and understand the justice that may be embedded in it, even in the face of destruction. The adventure of following the North Wind gives Diamond a Keatsian Negative Capability; he cannot clearly understand why the North Wind creates storms, just as human beings cannot fully understand the mysteries of the spiritual world. He must learn to accept the unknown and trust the judgement of the North Wind rather than seek rational answers to all questions. This acceptance of uncertainty gives Diamond an insight that transcends reality and makes him a symbol of moral purity in 19th-century London society.

As North Wind leads him on a journey through reality and dreams, Diamond gains wisdom beyond his personal experience. “By alternating the episodes with North Wind and Diamond’s family life, MacDonald is suggesting that the one is not necessarily more exciting or momentous than the other, and that the wonderful is interwoven with the fabric of this world.”^[15] North Wind’s challenging approach to education has Diamond travelling alone through unguarded corridors, confronting him with fear and admonishing him, “You must learn to be brave. If you don’t feel brave, you won’t know what bravery is.”^[16] (P52). This approach is in line with Carlyle’s emphasis on cultivating morality, that is, individuals must develop character in the face of hardship, rather than relying on external material conditions. However, unlike Carlyle’s heroic vision, MacDonald targets the role of the ordinary individual in moral leadership. This difference reveals the different paths envisioned for social change in the late nineteenth century—from the Carlylean radical reform to the gentle transformation based on faith and compassion envisioned by MacDonald.

9 Conclusion

In general, Carlyle believed that the revival of society depended primarily on the moral and religious renewal of the individual. The ruling class was to become "noble" heroes, leading the rest to have a social revolution. However, his vision of heroic leadership and total revolution had obvious limitations and did not fully take into account the awakening of working-class self-consciousness and the evolution of democracy. Unlike Carlyle, who looked to heroic external revolution, MacDonald placed more emphasis on inner ethical awakening and the power of individual emotions, responding to similar social contradictions in a gentle and fantastical way. Instead of resorting to the destructive power of violent revolution, he shows another possibility of social change through his depiction of moral growth and spiritual redemption. The story is not only a re-writing of Carlyle's partial ideas, but also provides a new literary path for Victorian social criticism.

MacDonald's recognition of the horizon of expectation goes with morality and humanity which can totally override class barriers, eradicating poverty, ignorance and the depravities of life. MacDonald has given some hope in demonstrating that this is to some extent as possible, but complete social change was in the future, and still is, for the divide between rich and poor continues to exist in the twenty first century in the United Kingdom, despite the Welfare State. Where MacDonald gives the reader the possibility of vision is in the final line of the text: "They thought he was dead. I knew that he had gone to the back of the north wind."^[8] (P292) The country of the imagination is where Diamond now lives, in a state which can be no other than bliss. What the adult narrator and the reader have is this experience translated into reality by Diamond and potentially to be continued in the ways in which individuals can transpose such through their own imaginative processes. As the omniscient narrator affirms, the back of the North Wind does exist, and certainly is not nonsense.

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