

Nanny's Dream
in *At the Back of the North Wind*
—Her Imaginary Experience in the World of the Moon—

Mariko Takahashi

Introduction

At the Back of the North Wind (1871), written by George MacDonald (1824-1905), is one of the greatest children's books of nineteenth-century Britain. The story is about a boy named Diamond and his adventures with the North Wind who can go back and forth between the real world and the world after death. In the last scene, Diamond dies and it is assumed that he goes to the world at the back of the north wind.

'Nanny's Dream' is an episode within this novel. Nanny is Diamond's friend and an orphan, and is hospitalized because of a severe illness. Nanny meets a lady in the hospital who wears clothes and accessories with specific symbolism, which links to the image of immortality. Her ring allows Nanny to proceed with her adventure into the other world in her dream. In this world, there is a house between the light and darkness, which are connected to life, death, and rebirth. Through this house, she reaches the world after rebirth. Nanny, who steps into the moon as a vessel, meets a different lady and her servant. Nanny is unconsciously moving toward a further world. However, Nanny opens the lady's important box containing bees that she is not allowed to open. She is inappropriate for the world of the moon and has to return to the real world where she wakes up.

At the end of the novel, the North Wind talks with Diamond and says, "I was the lady that sat at the window of the moon" (289). So, it can be

assumed that what Nanny dreams about is related to the North Wind and the world behind her.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the symbols in Nanny's dream and examine how her dream helps the readers understand the world at the back of the north wind from another point of view. In this paper, Chapter 1 analyzes the role of the lady Nanny sees in the hospital to examine what role the lady plays. Chapter 2 analyzes the symbols of the light and darkness. Chapter 3 examines the symbols in the world of the moon.

Chapter 1 The Role of the Lady in the Hospital

A high-class charitable lady visits the hospital to encourage the children. Nanny is not nervous, even though the lady does not explain who she is. She has very bright and characteristic attire. By analyzing these items, it helps the readers understand how she affects Nanny's dream by her clothes and accessories. From the attire of the lady, this lady portrays Nanny's ideal image of a beautiful woman and she guides people to the other world they visit after death as the North Wind. There is a similarity with the conversation between Diamond and the North Wind because he is not frightened of her as she also appears as a gentle female.

Nanny works as a crossing-sweeper on the streets in London. Living in an unsanitary slum leads to her hospitalization. In addition, the narrator expresses her unfortunate upbringing with words like "poor Nanny" (241). In other words, Nanny was a character, who was represented as a child of the lower class and was also deprived of education.

Their differences can be compared by looking at the lady's appearance and Nanny's. Nanny usually wears rags as she cannot afford decent clothes and used to be very dirty.

The lady knows that children do not like “dull colours” (241) because they hope for a bright future, hence they prefer vivid colours. Accordingly, she dresses vividly for the children so that they can be positively influenced.

The attire of the lady is a beautiful blue and gold dress, a silk shawl, and blue gloves, with a red ruby ring. According to *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery* (DSI), the social status or position of the person can be indicated by clothes and accessories (DSI 132). Hence, the lady belongs to the middle or upper class from her elegant appearance.

From the viewpoint of colours, blue signifies “heaven” (DSI 107), and Michael Ferber mentions that gold signifies “immortality” for it does not rust (Ferber 72-3). Thus, the combination of blue and gold can allude to the after-death. The lady is the North Wind herself clothed in the symbols of the after-death.

The colour of her shawl is “just like redness dipped in milk, and all worked over with flowers of the same colour” (241). Silk is a luxury for the upper class. The white of milk represents “purity” from the connection to infants (Ferber 290). Red signifies the “human body” and “blood” in Christianity. Also, it means “purification” and “resurrection” (DSI 383). Therefore, the combination of these colours can be associated with immortality of the souls and spiritual rebirth.

The flower’s name on her shawl is not mentioned. Flowers have various meanings. In Christianity, flowers signify the result of a good virtue, especially an act of charity (DSI 254).

In addition, the lady wears blue gloves. Gloves mean “mystery” and “protection” (DSI 216). The lady is hiding her identity to Nanny for she wants to guide Nanny to the other world.

The following action between Nanny and the lady can be seen as follows:

I [Nanny] was tempted to stroke it [the lady's gloved hand]. I thought she wouldn't be angry, for everybody that comes to the hospital is kind. It's only in the streets they ain't kind. But she drew her hand away, and I almost cried, for I thought I had been rude. Instead of that, however, it was only that she didn't like giving me her glove to stroke, for she drew it off, and then laid her hand where it was before. I wasn't sure, but I ventured to put out my ugly hand. And I stroked it again, and then she stroked mine, there was a ring on her finger, and looked down to see what it was like. And she drew it off, and put it upon one of my fingers. (241-242)

J.C. Cooper mentions that approaching people with bare hands indicates a welcome, showing that they are not opponents. Putting one's hand on the other persons' means no harm is intended. Taking off the gloves signifies "good faith" and "respect" (Cooper 184). The lady shows such an attitude even towards a child. She is equal to everyone, regardless of age, social status, and appearance. Therefore, Nanny's action is understood as not being a rude gesture and the lady reacts politely. The lady has no evil or violent connotation, so Nanny regards her as a harmless character.

Red rubies represent "light" and "happiness" as well as "courage" and "peace" (DSI 537). Rings represent "continuity of life" (DSI 386). The ring is a ticket to the other world. The ticket allows Nanny to go on an adventure of the world after death. When Nanny begins to pull the ring off her finger, the lady says, "Wear it all night, if you like. Only you must take care of it. I can't give it you, for someone gave it to me; but you may keep it till tomorrow" (242). The lady wants to show Nanny the world hidden in this ring for her to experience. Therefore, the lady plays a role of telling Nanny what she could

gain and what she can see in this dream while she is wearing this ring.

As a result of the analysis of the lady's clothes and the colours, the lady is the North Wind related to the world after death. By wearing the bright colours, the lady shows she does not want to frighten the children. It can also suggest her kindness by trying to divert them from their fear of death. The lady has two sides; her lively physical appearance and an embodiment of immortality. Using her red ruby ring, Nanny can enter the other world in her dream.

Chapter 2 Two Places: the Light and Darkness

To continue studying Nanny's dream, this chapter analyzes various situations before Nanny visits the moon.

After gazing at the ring on her finger, she begins to dream which later affects her way of thinking. Nanny sees "the great red sunset, with streaks of green and gold between, standing looking at me." The sunset shines upon "the end of the long street near where Grannie lives." The light does not shine directly on her "wretched street." There is a clear contrast; one is a world where the sun lights up, and the other is a world without light. Dwelling in a dark place will lead to her aversion. "I was dressed in rags as I used to be, and I had great holes in my shoes, at which the nasty mud came through to my feet." Although Nanny did not care before, she cannot stand this situation now. She says that it is "horrid" (242). She is embarrassed with her every day life especially after her encounter with the beautiful lady. A change in her way of thinking starts affecting her. She feels envious of the place where the light shines.

The cold wind blows Nanny to the front of the houses. The "cold wind" signifies "death" and "regeneration" (DSI 107, 501), hence pushing

Nanny to a point of death. She found herself somewhere at the west end. The direction “west” indicates “death” as well (DSI 497). Diamond suggests that the North Wind guides Nanny to this place. Consequently, it also suggests that Nanny experiences pseudo death. A house symbolizes a “shelter” and “security.” It also means the “human body” especially the “female” or the “maternal body” (DSI 263-4). “[T]he front of one of the houses was open, and not only the front door, but the back door as well, so that I could see right through the house – .” Doors “lead from one state of being to the next.” The scenery that Nanny sees through the house is “a garden place with green grass and the moon shining upon it!” (243) The moon is not visible from the front of the house. The house is located in the centre with the front section dark and the back section bright with moonlight. These two different places contrast starkly, one which is the light and the other which is the darkness. The light is linked to “hope,” and symbolizes “purity” and “evolution” (DSI 394), as well as “spiritual life.” On the other hand, the darkness is linked to “vice,” “death,” “ignorance,” and “hopelessness” (Ferber 232). It seems that the place where the moon casts light upon is a place where Nanny can visit following her death. The light and darkness can be connected to life and death respectively, and Nanny is led to the world after death. Therefore, her passing through this house can be associated as her rebirth because the house can be regarded as a mother’s womb and Nanny can be seen as an unborn baby who is protected in the mother’s womb. She is protected and is prepared to be reborn in the world after death.

She feels happy suffused with the moonlight through the house as follows:

...I came into the moonlight, I began to feel better. Well, I lay down upon the grass in the moonlight without thinking how I

was to get out again. Somehow the moon suited me exactly.
(243)

The light is considered as a spiritual energy and purifies Nanny. She has never seen anything like this garden before, which is filled with calmness. She is free of her worries and feels relief. This garden removes Nanny's suffering.

The following situation of the moon and clouds is similar to that of life and death. Clouds appear, but for a while the moon shines brightly. Eventually, the clouds cover the moon. The clouds signify "death" and the moonlight can signify "life" as contrasted with the moon and the clouds, so the clouds covering the moon portray Nanny's pseudo death. They obscure everything. It seems that light can be seen as life and the shadows are regarded as death. These clouds which appear are portraying her pseudo death experience. However, although the moon is covered by the clouds, the moon is shining behind the clouds. Therefore, Nanny's life does not completely leave her and her will to stay alive remains strong.

After becoming dark, a dog starts barking outside the house. In Christianity, a dog signifies the "devil" and a "predictor of death." Nanny finds and enters a "summer-house" after the dog threatens her. As mentioned before, the house can be interpreted as a space to be reborn, hence this house is a place to protect Nanny and for her to be reborn.

"[T]he moon was beginning to shine again – but only through one of the panes – and that one was just the colour of the ruby" (245). The brightness of the moon portrays Nanny's energy of life and reveals Nanny's will to live.

The moon is described as if it wrapped the summer-house beautifully, and also as if it is a moving house itself. This moon can be considered as a

vessel to carry someone to a different world. It signifies an “abode of those who had been good on earth” (DSI 326). In the real world, Nanny becomes “a good child” after being hospitalized so she is also a righteous person who can enter the moon.

When Nanny turns from the window and opens the door, the moon is described as follows:

the moon itself, as big as a little house, and as round as a ball, shining like yellow silver. It stood on the grass – down on the very grass: I could see nothing else for the brightness. (245)

From the viewpoint of colours, yellow and silver signify “purity,” “innocence,” and “peace” (DSI 512). The light of the two colours is stronger than anything else and it carries the image of heaven as well.

As mentioned above, Nanny experiences the world of light and darkness. The scene of the moon and clouds conveys a fight between life and death and depicts Nanny’s weakened physical condition. The dog is an alarm for Nanny, and the house protects her. Nanny has a chance to choose. One is death, and the other is life. Therefore, Nanny experiences death and rebirth through the house.

Chapter 3 Nanny in the World of the Moon

Through the light and darkness, Nanny is led to the world after death and steps into the moon. This chapter focuses on events after Nanny enters the moon and analyzes the world of the moon to examine what the world is like.

A little old man appears from the moon door to take Nanny to see the

lady he serves. Inside the moon, she sees “a pretty little house, with blue windows, white curtains” (246). Since blue signifies heaven as mentioned in the first chapter and the windows symbolize “an eye as the gateway to the soul or the spirit” (DSI 502), they are connected to the gateway to the world after death. The curtains signify “veil of future” (DSI 124), so it can be interpreted as unknown and hidden future events.

Nanny sees the lady sitting at the window as described below.

At one of the windows sat a beautiful lady, with her head leaning on her hand, looking out. She seemed rather sad, and I was sorry for her, and stood staring at her. (246)

This lady is also beautiful, as well as the lady who appeared in the first chapter. Though a striking difference between them is evident; the former is unimpressionable and unmoving, and the latter is vivid and lively. A similar description of this unmoving lady can be seen when Diamond visited the world at the back of the north wind. He had to pass through the North Wind who was sitting and never moved. Thus, Nanny is also travelling to the next destination unintentionally.

There are steps and stairs in the moon, which signify “descending, ascending and transcending,” and “they connect to hell, earth, and heaven” (DSI 442). The scenery Nanny sees from the window is the previous garden with the dog. The moon is shifting and plays the role as a vessel mentioned before, and it is obvious that it is crossing through the different layers of invisible boundaries.

There are many windows that she has not seen and does not know “anything about” (248). These windows allude to the connection to the world after Nanny changes because Nanny cannot foresee the world after death.

The lady possesses a box of bees which is the embodiment of the moon itself. Generally, bees symbolize the “order” and “immortality.” The bees also have an ability to go between the real world and the world of the spirit (Cooper 112). Colin Manlove mentions that the bees may be “the light of the moon” (Manlove 170). Bees are essential to create a world where people are able to live, and are the power and energy for this moon vessel.

The lady stays in this room as follows:

The lady had never moved. She sat with her forehead leaning on her hand, gazing out of the little window, hung like the rest with white cloudy curtains. Her face was very beautiful, and very white, and very still, and her hand was as white as the forehead that leaned on it. I did not see her whole face – only the side of it, for she never moved to turn it full upon me, or even to look at me. (250)

Although the lady seems to be ignoring Nanny, she may be testing Nanny to see whether it is appropriate for her to stay there or not.

When Nanny finds a small room with the box of bees, she becomes curious because the bees are very noisy. She cannot ignore the noise and gives in to her curiosity. She opens the box, and unintentionally releases three bees. The number “three” signifies “immortality” and “(re)birth-life-death” (Cooper 172).

The lady reacts for the first time. The lady sitting still was an important factor to connect her to the situation when she was with Diamond. By moving, the lady is forcefully ending Nanny’s adventure. The lady becomes angry with Nanny and says, “You must go home again—you won’t do for us.” Her words convey that Nanny is not good enough to continue on. The man says to the lady, “Shall I throw her out of the door, my lady?” and

she answers, “No” (251), and continues as follows:

She’s not quite bad enough for that. I don’t think there’s much harm in her; only she’ll never do for us. She would make dreadful mischief up here. She’s only fit for the mud. It’s a great pity. I am sorry for her. (251)

The lady denies Nanny because she cannot keep her promise. Such a person cannot continue to stay in the moon and travel to the next destination.

Although the lady is angry, she does not want to hurt Nanny because Nanny is not a bad person and she just cannot control her curiosity. This scene where Nanny opens the box is based on “Pandora’s Box” of Greek Mythology. The basic story of Pandora is this: Pandora was created out of clay on the orders of Zeus. She was given gifts by many Gods and Goddesses. Pandora was sent as a gift with a box of evil and was told never to open it. However, Pandora could not overcome her curiosity and opened the box, and then evil such as sin, misery, sickness, pain, poverty, crime, and bad fate, were released. Only hope remained (*Works and Days* ll.90).

Pandora and Nanny were given specific orders not to open the box. However, they were desperately curious to know what was inside. Their desire to fulfill their need to know leads to regret and others have to pay for their mistake. In the case of Pandora, evil was released from the box and spread throughout the human world. In comparison, by breaking her promise, Nanny committed the sin of opening the box.

The lady says, “Nanny, you have got me into trouble. You have been letting out my bees, which it is all I can do to manage. You have forced me to burn them. It is a great loss, and there will be a storm” (251). After that, the clouds gather and it starts to thunder. In the Greek Mythology, the

storm or thunder is regarded as Zeus's anger, which hints to the lady's anger for the bees are a significant source of power for the moon. The lady has to catch and burn the bees to prevent them from escaping to the outside world. Fire plays a role to "purify," hence, burning the three bees is an act of purification. By purifying life, death, and (re)birth, everything resets to the beginning.

Even though she could not stay in the world of the moon, Nanny still has a chance to go there when she needs in the future. Nanny returns to the real world along with another chance to learn more. Diamond suggests that if Nanny did not open the box, the moon would have carried her to the back of the north wind (252).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the world at the back of the north wind is a place where people will be able to visit after death. After passing through life, then death, a person can be reborn after death. Nanny's dream portrays this adventure and the importance of experiencing her life cycle. The trinity of life, death, and rebirth in her dream becomes an important element of existence itself. By experiencing these changes, Nanny experiences the principles of life. She starts to change, and through her dream her rebirth to the real world as a new person is rewarding. Her living standard improves and her outlook of life becomes more positive. This rebirth will influence future choices and open up different gateways. MacDonald wants the readers to imagine themselves as Nanny and to feel her change personally. By doing so the readers might not fear death as much. He wants them to focus on a bright and adventurous future.

Works Cited

- MacDonald, George. *At the Back of the North Wind*. Ed. Roderick McGillis and John Pennington. London: Brandview Editions, 2011.
- Cooper, J. C. *Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1987.
- Ferber, Michael. *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Hesiod. *Works and Days*. Trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White. London: Acheron Press, 2018.
- MacDonald, George. *The Complete Fairy Tales*. Ed. U. C. Knoepflmacher. London: Penguin Classics, 1999.
- . *Nanny's Dream*. London: Penguin Classics, 1999. 165-176.
- Manlove, Colin. "A Reading of *At the Back of the North Wind*." *North Wind* 27 (2008): 51-78.
- Vries, Ad de. *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery*. London: North-Holland, 1974.
- Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford University Press, 2004. <<http://www.oxforddnb.com>> (accessed 1st October, 2018)