

Traces of the Past

German Romantic Influence on MacDonald, Lewis,
Tolkien, and L'Engle

Presented by Suzanne Stem

For masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice.

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

A Literary Genealogy

German Romantic Movement (1790-1832)



George MacDonald (1824-1905)



C.S. Lewis & J.R.R. Tolkien (1898-1963 & 1892-1973)



Madeleine L'Engle (1918-2007)

German Romanticism

One of the finest flowers of creative romanticism was the fairy tale. The fairy tale appealed to the romantics because it entered the realm of the fanciful, the imaginative, and the supernatural – which to them was the realm of genuine truth.

Three Major Attributes of German Romanticism

1. Infinite longing for a nameless object or place
2. Mysterious forests (particularly at night)
3. Presence of the supernatural

Infinite Longing

*The very soul of romanticism was infinite
longing without goal, limit, or object.*

Blankenagel

Infinite Longing - MacDonald

About the middle of the plain they sat down to rest in the heart of a heap of shadows. After sitting for a while, each, looking up, saw the other in tears: they were each longing after the country whence the shadows fell.

The Golden Key

Infinite Longing - Lewis

Where sky and water meet,
Where the waves grow sweet,
Doubt not, Reepicheep,
To find all you seek,
There is the utter east.

The Voyage of the Dawn Treader

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Infinite Longing – Tolkien

I would that I might with minstrels sing
And stir the unseen with a throbbing string.
I would be with the mariners of the deep
That cut their slender planks on mountains steep
And voyage upon a vague and wandering quest,
For some have passed beyond the fabled West.

“Mythopoeia”
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Infinite Longing – L'Engle

We are all strangers in a strange land, longing for home, but not quite knowing what or where home is. We glimpse it sometimes in our dreams, or as we turn a corner, and suddenly there is a strange, sweet familiarity that vanishes almost as soon as it comes...

The Rock That is Higher: Story as Truth

Mysterious Forests (& Night)

Theirs was a predilection for the mysterious forest, solitude, stillness, for night which stimulates the imagination, for moonlight which fills man with longing, for clouds which journey afar like dreams, and for twilight which effaces sharp outlines and gives rise to vagueness of mood.

Mysterious Forests (& Night) – MacDonald

The moment the sun began to sink among the spikes and saw-edges, with a kind of sudden flap at his heart a fear inexplicable laid hold of the youth.

For the sun was rushing up behind her... Nycteris gave a cry, covered her face with her hands, and pressed her eyelids close. Then she blindly reached out her arms to Photogen, crying, 'Oh, I am so frightened! What is this? It must be death! I don't wish to die yet.'

The History of Photogen and Nycteris

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Mysterious Forests (& Night) – Lewis

- The Western Woods of Narnia
- The Wood Between the Worlds
- The Purple Woods of Malacandra

Mysterious Forests (& Night) – Tolkien

He [Merry] led the way in under the huge branches of the trees. Old beyond guessing, they seemed. Great trailing beards of lichen hung from them, blowing and swaying in the breeze. Out of the shadows the hobbits peeped, gazing back down the slope: little furtive figures that in the dim light looked like elf-children in the deeps of time peering out of the Wild Wood in wonder at their first Dawn.”

Mysterious Forests (& Night) – L'Engle

a primordial forest;

a giant bed of kelp swaying to submarine currents;

a primeval forest of ancient trees with rough, silver bark;

underwater trees with silver-gold-green foliage which
undulated regularly, rhythmically

A Wind in the Door

Presence of the Supernatural

It represented the fulfillment of romantic longing; here the romantic spirit was untrammelled and magically creative, since in this realm the laws of experience, of time, place and causality have no validity.

Presence of the Supernatural - MacDonald

I had been looking at rather than into the mirror, when suddenly I became aware that it reflected neither the chamber nor my own person. I have an impression of having seen the wall melt away... I took another step forward to see him [the raven] better, stumbled over something – doubtless the frame of the mirror – and stood nose to beak with the bird: I was in the open air, on a houseless heath.

Lilith

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Presence of the Supernatural - Lewis

Out of the trees wild people stepped forth, Fauns and Satyrs and Dwarfs. Out of the river rose the river god with his Naiad daughters. And all these and all the beasts and birds in their different voices, low or high or thick or clear, replied:

‘Hail, Aslan. We hear and obey. We are awake. We love. We think. We speak. We know’.

The Magician's Nephew

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Presence of the Supernatural - Tolkien

- Wizards
- Necromancers
- Magic Rings
- Runes
- Bottled Starlight
- Black Riders

Presence of the Supernatural – L'Engle

The ocean.

Rain.

A rainbow, glittering with rain.

Snow, falling in great white blossoms to disappear as it touched the sea.

And then the snow turns to stars, stars in the daytime, drenched in sunlight, becoming sunlight.

And the sunlight was the swirling movement of a galaxy.

And the ocean caught the light and was part of the galaxy.

And the stars of the galaxies lifted butterfly wings and flew together, dancing.

A Ring of Endless Light

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Final Thought

All the great poets are mythopoeic, are symbolists whose practice must be understood in terms of their attempt to give a total mythic interpretation of the world to which the poet holds the key.

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