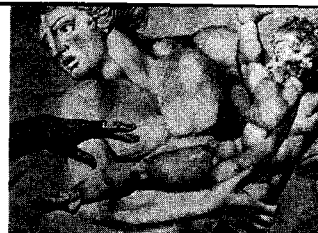


Darkness in the Novels of Michael Bedard



Joanne Findon

Résumé: Joanne Findon étudie la manière dont Michael Bedard présente les forces du mal dans ses oeuvres, particulièrement dans son roman *A Darker Magic* et sa suite, *Painted Devil*. Fondant son analyse sur l'examen des sources de l'auteur, de sa technique narrative et de ses intentions énoncées dans les entrevues qu'il a accordées, elle situe la manifestation la plus radicale du mal dans le "désir d'étouffer la volonté et l'individualité de l'autre". A l'opposé et en contrepartie, l'amitié constitue "la lumière du monde".

Summary: This articles explores the way in which Bedard treats forces of darkness and evil in his novels, particularly in *A Darker Magic* and its sequel *Painted Devil*. Building her arguments out of textual analysis, personal interviews with Bedard, and a study of the works which have influenced him, Findon locates Bedard's "darkest dark" in the desire to extinguish the will and the individuality of another person. Against this, human friendship constitutes the "light of the world."

In the last few years Michael Bedard has emerged as an important new writer of fiction for children. His novels are challenging, multi-layered works which deal with a number of difficult themes in a sophisticated manner. His first novel, *A Darker Magic*, the Governor General's Award-winning *Redwork*, and his most recent book, *Painted Devil*, all serve up plenty of suspense and drama to the young reader. Yet they are also complex, poetic narratives which resonate in the mind long after the last page is turned, and which offer access to a world of deeper meaning.

One of the most intriguing aspects of Bedard's work is his richly textured representation of evil. In fact, Bedard prefers to speak of "darkness" — a term which expands his symbolic range considerably and allows him to deploy a series of double-edged images throughout his novels. Darkness in Bedard's work is as much related to dreams and the imagination — and thus to ambiguity — as it is to moral evil. For Bedard the world of shadows is a continuum of lesser and greater degrees of darkness, from the vague menace of the woods or a child's "dreadful wish" that her mother's pregnancy had never been, to the threats and intimidation of bullies or the manipulation of the weak by the strong. The "darkest dark" in Bedard's continuum is the desire to extinguish the will and individuality of another person.

Unlike the evil in many other modern fantasy novels, the darkness in Bedard's books is never vanquished once and for all. Instead it creeps back, assuming new and more alluring forms in different times and places. Moreover, his characters are acutely aware that the darkness *will* return, and that their own success in banishing it is at best provisional. Partly as a result of this strategy, Bedard's work lacks the didacticism often found in other popular fantasies for young

people, such as the Narnia Chronicles of C.S. Lewis. Bedard seems uninterested in creating new worlds for his characters to inhabit, or in deploying them as allegorical figures. Instead, he situates them in our own world, with all of its positive and negative possibilities.

In fact, although Bedard has been characterized as a writer of fantasy, he is uneasy with this label. Many fans of *A Darker Magic*, often categorized as “dark fantasy,” were disappointed with his next book *Redwork*, which is much more concerned with intergenerational relationships than with the supernatural. Bedard is careful to point out that his work has been influenced as much by poets such as Blake, Coleridge and Emily Dickinson as by fantasy writers. And the fantasists he does list among his influences are George MacDonald and Alan Garner, writers whose works are poetic and often highly ambiguous.¹ Bedard does not see his work as part of the modern “fantasy tradition” — at least as this has been defined by Lewis, Tolkien, Le Guin, and others — and balks at the restrictions that such a label places on a writer. While allowing that elements of fantasy are present in all of his works, Bedard seems happiest writing in the space that defies definition, where poetic images have free play. All of his novels explore the fragility of the boundaries between dream and reality, death and life, dark and light, past and present, and what Bedard calls “rigidity” and “tenderness,”² and refuse to draw the borders between these clearly for the reader.

This study will consider in detail the representation of darkness in Bedard’s first novel, *A Darker Magic*, and in its complex sequel *Painted Devil*. In the process, it will seek to illuminate Bedard’s distinct vision of life as a creative interplay between light and dark, fraught with both joy and pain — a view that owes much to the works of both William Blake and Emily Dickinson. The meaning in Bedard’s work arises from an interplay of images which are allusive and multivalent rather than explicit. In the novels examined here, he employs a complex web of double-edged images to suggest the many shades of darkness in the world.

Bedard claims that he strives to make his prose “mean in the way a poem means.”³ He sees his work as deeply influenced by Emily Dickinson’s poetry, with its attention to extremes and to what lies hidden beneath the surfaces of things. His use of double-edged images recalls Dickinson’s preoccupation with the “duality of experience,”⁴ in which contrary states of mind seem inextricably bound to each other.⁵ The recurrent theme of another reality hidden behind a veneer or mask of what is “normal” is also clearly reminiscent of Dickinson’s verse. Bedard signals these connections through the use of epigrams in his books; *A Darker Magic* opens with Dickinson’s poem “Presentiment is that long shadow on the lawn,” while “On my volcano grows the grass” begins *Painted Devil*.⁶ Both of these brief poems capture the sense of the hidden about to be revealed, of something unusual and unnerving about to occur.

At the same time, William Blake also presides over much of Bedard’s work. This is most apparent in *Redwork*, where the main character’s mother is writing a thesis on the development of Blake’s ideas between the *Songs of Innocence* and

Songs of Experience. She spends most of the novel in a “Blake haze,” but at one point looks up from her book to say

“... it seems to me that *The Book of Thel* occupies a profoundly important place in the development of Blake’s thought. You see, Blake believed that the only way of attaining the realm of higher innocence was to pass through the world of experience, to endure what on the surface looked like death in order to gain a higher life. The great tragedy of Thel is that out of fear she is unable to bring herself to act, to go down into the grave of experience, knowing, as Blake says, ‘’tis given thee to enter / And to return; fear nothing.’ As a result, Thel becomes the symbol for all who fail out of fear to bring the life within them, whatever form that life may take, to fruition, and instead flee back like Thel to the unborn world.” (R 164-65)⁷

This passage certainly articulates the philosophical underpinning of *Redwork*, but the theme of a descent into the “death” of experience is also crucial to *A Darker Magic* and *Painted Devil*. While Blake is not mentioned explicitly in either book, each one explores the dangerous passages through darkness that human beings must undertake.

In *A Darker Magic*, darkness is centred in an external force embodied in the magician Professor Mephisto and his modern human incarnation, Scott Renshaw. *Painted Devil* is concerned with a subsequent manifestation of this same malevolent force; but also embedded in this narrative is a multi-layered exploration of the more mundane shadows that lurk in all human hearts. In this respect, *Painted Devil* is reminiscent of *Redwork*, with its complex examination of the fragile bridges between fear and trust, and its concern with the *ordinary* wrongs that people do to one another. In *Painted Devil* Bedard examines the full range of “greys” between darkness and light, all the possibilities of hurt and misunderstanding that lie between the extinguishing of self on the one hand, and the creative interaction of individuals on the other.

In *A Darker Magic*, Emily Endicott’s summer tasks of coping with three uproarious younger siblings are overshadowed when her teacher, Miss Potts, finds an old handbill for a magic show that she attended when she was a child fifty years before. The magician, one Professor Mephisto, made a powerful impression on Miss Potts at the time, and when she realizes that this year August 8th falls on a Saturday just as it did in 1936, she fears a return of the evil force. Emily’s father and his historical society are renovating the old Caledon Depot, where the original magic show was held, and it becomes increasingly clear to Emily and Miss Potts that it is this railway depot that harbours the darkness. Complicating matters is a strange new boy named Scott Renshaw, who exerts a mysterious hold on another student, Craig Chandler.

The point of view alternates between Emily, Miss Potts, and Craig, each one providing a different perspective on the workings of the darkness that Scott embodies, until the rivetting climax unites all three characters in the magic show. Miss Potts’s memory of the original show forms a separate narrative interspersed throughout the story. These alternating viewpoints allow Bedard to weave together a series of distinct yet related perspectives on the nature of the dark force that threatens the characters.

The novel begins with Emily struggling to recall a dream. Much of the first chapter is lighthearted and tongue-in-cheek, sketching Emily's rambunctious family with warmth and humour. But the chapter ends with a chilling image from Emily's dream, a memory of herself "perched on the brink of an icy abyss" where she hears the warning voice of her teacher Miss Potts (*DM* 7). This remembered dream fragment is the first of many hints of menace in the novel. The passage not only establishes the crucial link between Emily and Miss Potts, but also points to the significant role that dreams will play in the story. Indeed, the fragility of the boundary between waking and dreaming is one of the dominant motifs in the novel. Dreams can be wonderful, even illuminating; they can also be nightmares so frightening that the dreamer becomes paralyzed both in the dream world and in waking life. Emily, Miss Potts and Craig are all troubled by dark dreams in which either Scott Renshaw or his alter-ego the Magician appear or speak, warning or tormenting them and seeking to influence their behaviour. Craig gives us the first glimpse of the dangerous world of illusion that Scott represents. On his first visit to Scott's apartment, Craig catches sight of his own reflection in a mirror:

And then an incredible thing happened. It was as if the image rippled suddenly, like a piece of painted scenery in a play. And when it settled again he found himself staring at a totally different room. It was barren and devastated. Hunks of plaster dangled from the wall, leaving the lathing gaping through like bone. The walls were covered in crayon scrawl.

He swung around. Scott was standing in the doorway, buttoning his shirt, and staring at him. The room was as it had been before. (*DM* 19-20)

This is a powerful image of the illusion that lies at the heart of darkness in this book. The devastation Craig glimpses in the mirror symbolizes the spiritual devastation that Scott seeks to inflict on his victims. It unmasks the threat of death that hides beneath the magic and wonder that both Scott and his alter-ego the Magician use to lure and control the unwary.

Indeed, Professor Mephisto openly questions the boundary between reality and illusion. In one of the interleaved descriptions of the magic show, he asks the children, "Reality and illusion . . . which is which? Could it be, dear children, that life and death themselves are no more than illusions?" (*DM* 164) Of course, he wants his victims to believe that such distinctions are trivial. Yet failing to discern the difference results in entrapment and death.

This power to create illusion is the source of Miss Potts' dread of Professor Mephisto. When she recounts to Emily the events of the Children's Show, she pinpoints the cause of her fear:

... now and then it seemed to me that something flared briefly in those hooded eyes. I can only call it a hunger. And for an instant the magic would fail, the smile falter, and in its place I sensed the unbridled fury of a wild beast about to spring. And then it would be gone, and again there would be only the wonder. (*DM* 55)

This cloak of wonder masking a fury underneath is reminiscent of Dickinson's image of the grassy hill beneath which seethes the molten rock of a volcano. While such an image of hidden power can carry either positive or negative force, Bedard here deploys it to highlight the manipulative qualities of darkness. It is

precisely his ability to generate wonder that gives the Magician such power. He is a tremendously alluring figure, and as the embodiment of evil he is unlike the ugly monsters of many fairy tales. His appearance is strange, but not repellent. He is, instead, more akin to the fallen angel Lucifer, the beautiful Prince of Lies.

Bedard has said that in creating Professor Mephisto, he studied material about cult leader Jim Jones and the type of rhetoric he used to bind his followers to him.⁸ Within the context of Bedard's depiction of evil in the novel, this is not surprising. The greatest wrong, in Bedard's view, is to seek to control another person. The Magician's "hunger" is for the type of enslavement which overpowers the self and creates from individuals one homogeneous mass of mindless followers.⁹ The connections between this and many modern religious cults is clear.

It is certainly the verbal magic that draws children into the Magician's spell. In describing Professor Mephisto's voice, Miss Potts tells Emily

We sat there spellbound as it flowed and eddied about the room, transforming all it touched.... There was the overwhelming feeling of having long been lost and finally found one's way home.... He gathered us to him as a mother hen gathers her brood beneath her wing, and we were one. (*DM* 54)

Such power is dangerous indeed, for it is darkness masquerading as light, and Miss Potts escapes being caught in the Professor's net only because she senses the beast underneath. The other children who are less perceptive pay with their lives. *The feeling of oneness which is so alluring is actually a loss of individual will.* Significantly, the image of the mother hen sheltering her chicks is one used by Jesus in Matthew 23:37 when he says,

'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.'

The fact that the Magician's voice conjures up this image used in a very different context by Christ — the antithesis of Lucifer himself — is a chilling reminder of how effectively darkness can be masked beneath robes of light. It also suggests Professor Mephisto's connection with Satan, a link that becomes explicit in *Painted Devil*.

Aside from this confusion between dark and light, Miss Potts's account of the Children's Show also introduces other double-edged images: the roses, with their beauty and their thorns; the recurring, mysterious sound of applause or the beating of birds' wings which is sometimes harmless, sometimes menacing; and the children in the audience, whose charming innocence makes them vulnerable to becoming lifeless dolls in the Magician's hands. Bedard weaves these images throughout the narrative to suggest the ways in which darkness and light are inseparably connected.

Emily's fears are centred on the abandoned depot where her father is working on the renovations for the railway museum. Miss Potts suggests that the depot is a place "where darkness once passed, setting its stamp indelibly upon that spot, casting its long shadow down through time" (105). This introduces another recurrent motif in Bedard's novels: that of old places and objects as both

repositories of memory and vehicles of the dark. The depot is a harbour for the Magician's power, a place where time has stood still and the magic show of the past can be revived. Once again, there are two sides to the coin: through its annihilation of the boundaries between past and present, an old building can bring comfort and draw forth memory; but in doing so it can also provide a channel through which the darkness of the past can flow into the present.

The only way to defeat the power of Professor Mephisto or his alter-ego Scott Renshaw is to resist his spell and refuse to obey his orders. This is not easy, and even Emily almost succumbs to his powers of delusion. In the climactic scene, as the Children's Show is reenacted once again in the railway depot, Emily finds herself sitting on the floor with Craig Chandler. When Craig rises from the crowd as a volunteer for the deadly trick "The Decollation of John the Baptist," Emily cries out and interrupts the show. The Magician turns his attention on her, causing her memory of the present to fade and assuming the form and voice of her mother. Under the control of this deadly illusion, Emily is almost lost:

Emily ... felt herself being lifted effortlessly up onto the bed. That perfume her mother was wearing. Very strong. What was it? Roses, yes, roses.

'I feel funny. Cold,' she said.
'It's the fever, love.' (DM 167)

Although Emily senses that the reassuring words of this "mother" are artificial, she is powerless to act; the mother's eyes, "Cold, piercing eyes, pinning her to the bed like a butterfly to a board" (167) hold her down. It is only the intervention of Miss Potts that shatters the Magician's spell.

But Professor Mephisto has only lost the battle, not the war. Both Emily and Miss Potts know this:

'He will be back, won't he?'

'Yes,' said Miss Potts 'I believe he will be back.... All we can do is wait, and watch, and trust that when the night draws near again, there will be someone left who remembers the last time, and is ready for him.'

'Someone like me,' said Emily.... (DM 175-76)

Craig's last frightening visit to Scott's empty apartment, when the illusion of the inhabited room and Scott's mocking voice begin to take shape again (177-83), only serves to underline the tenuousness of the victory of light over dark.

Significantly, it is the alliance of Emily and Miss Potts, forged across the often insuperable barriers of age, attitude and the teacher/pupil relationship, which enables them to thwart the Magician. The kind of friendship that Emily and Miss Potts share is what constitutes, for Bedard, the "light" in the world. It is these tenuous, risky, easily shattered connections between individuals which "bring people to bloom"¹⁰ and which enable them to push against the darkness around them.

When is the dark
just the dark ... and
when does it be-
come something
weighty and men-
acing, something to
be feared?

Painted Devil takes place 28 years after *A Darker Magic*, when August 8th is due to fall once again on a Saturday. A now-grown Emily Endicott returns to Caledon to try to stop the Magician's return. The main character in this story is her niece Alice, who is the same age Emily was when the adventure with Miss Potts marked her life forever. Now Alice and Emily must work together to turn back the powerful force of evil that threatens them both.

Despite their beauty,
the roses with their
cruel thorns and their
suffocating scent warn
of the danger and
decay that this beauty
can conceal.

Painted Devil explores darkness and light in even more complex and intricate ways. Here, darkness is not simply the evil, external force of Professor Mephisto, now embodied in a Devil puppet. It is also painted in various shades of grey in everything from Alice's guilt over her resentment of her mother's pregnancy to the difficulty and danger of that pregnancy; from her little sister Lela's fascination with a fairy tale witch to the eccentric librarian's unhealthy obsession with one old set of puppets; from the eerie unease of the empty crib already set up in Alice's old room to the menacing black birds in the wallpaper. And hovering over the whole book is the image of the womb as a place of

darkness and unknown potential, a place of dangerous possibilities like the dim woods of fairy tales or the dusty shadows of the old library. Where does imagination end and real threat begin? Where does human frailty give way to actual wickedness? When is the dark just the dark — the absence of the sun's light — and when does it become something weighty and menacing, something to be feared? In journeying through *Painted Devil*, the reader negotiates a forest of symbols that suggest much yet provide few definitive answers to such questions.

The novel begins with Alice watching her younger sister playing with her dolls in the back yard. As she watches Lela, she recalls the day she came home to find her pregnant mother lying white and bleeding in the living room. Alice's father rushed her to the hospital, where tests revealed that the pregnancy would be a difficult one. For Alice, that day marked a point when "a sudden fragility ... entered into their lives" (PD 5). Here, Bedard suggests the tenuousness of the boundary between life and death, a theme that will emerge again and again in the novel. At the same time, as Alice's thoughts return to Lela feeding her dolls, the fragility of another boundary — that between reality and illusion — is also emphasized. Since Alice has moved into Lela's room to make way for the coming baby, she has found it increasingly difficult to believe in the lifelessness of dolls. Lela's dolls constitute an important subtext in the story, and recall the doll-like passivity of the children at the magic show in *A Darker Magic*. This point is driven home in Alice's frightening dream of herself as a doll who can neither speak nor act on her own (159), a scene which powerfully reinforces the double-edged imagery of dolls as both charming childhood playthings and

symbols of mindless passivity.

The first chapter closes with Alice's contemplation of the woods that separate her home from the old library where she works:

The damp smell of leaf mold and growing things rolling off them would normally have intoxicated her, but now she found it strangely unsettling. It seemed as though they lay under enchantment, like the magic woods in one of Lela's fairy tales. (PD 8)

In both natural and imaginative terms, the woods embody both life and death simultaneously. They can be magical and full of wonder, like the idyllic, sun-dappled forest in the library's mural which depicts a woman reading to a group of children (80). On the other hand, they can be places of confusion and peril, where Lela can get lost in the middle of the day (102-06). And as the liminal space which connects Alice's house and the library, the woods foreshadow the dangerous passages — both physical and psychological — that Alice and Emily must make in the course of the story.

The rest of the novel weaves together a whole series of other double-edged images, many of them linking this book with *A Darker Magic*. One of the most important of these is the roses. Haunted by what happened in the depot all those years ago, Emily is particularly susceptible to all that roses represent. She sees and smells roses everywhere, from the housing project that now stands on the site of the old depot, to the stained glass dome in the library where the dark leading seems to "sprout thorns" and the "random shards of color to cluster into lush, elaborate blooms" (67). Despite their beauty, the roses with their cruel thorns and their suffocating scent warn of the danger and decay that this beauty can conceal.¹¹

Fairy tales form an important subtext in *Painted Devil*. Lela is obsessed with fairy tales, even the frightening ones. Her favourite book is one inherited from Aunt Emily, an illustrated book called *A Wonder Book of Tales for Boys and Girls*. The most powerful picture — and the one which presides over the whole novel — depicts the witch peering out of her window at Hansel and Gretel. For Alice, this drawing touches "the nerve of terror at the very heart of the story" (24). This picture captures the tension between fear and wonder which is the essence of fairy tales, and which infuses the whole of *Painted Devil*.

As in *A Darker Magic*, old buildings and objects play an important role. In *Painted Devil* there are two such places: the upper bedroom that Alice shares with Lela, and the library, which has become the repository for the items saved from the old Caledon Railway Depot's museum. This collection includes a handbill for the 1936 Children's Show and the knife used in the "Decollation of John the Baptist." The library has inherited along with these objects something of the external, malevolent force resident in the depot. It is not so much the past itself which makes the library menacing, but the darker imprints of that past which find the building a suitable vehicle. Alice senses this when she stays after closing time with the peculiar new librarian, Mr. Dwyer.

Here, truly, was a place out of time. The two of them suddenly seemed pitifully small and insignificant standing there. Beneath a flimsy shroud of dust, something stirred. As she stood within its spell, Alice had the sudden unsettling feeling that anything might happen here. (PD 29)

At this stage in the story, the library is very much like the womb of Alice's mother: not yet a place of life or death, but a place that harbours both possibilities. Eventually, the library takes on aspects of the witch's house and all of the danger that it represents.

Alice and Lela's bedroom is also a place of shadows. Here, the twilight of the imagination reigns. This is the one room in the house that has not been redecorated, and as such is another "place out of time" as well as an intimate space where fairy tales are told and dolls seem to listen to them. There is a sense of magic and wonder here; yet the darker elements in the room, such as the strange birds on the old wallpaper, suggest deeper shadows and call to mind the mother's dangerous pregnancy. Like the library, this room is also womb-like, a place of unknown potentialities.

Fairy tales, the secret lives of dolls, and the dangers of the womb form the backdrop for the book's central drama of the puppet show. It is in the puppets, and especially in the antique Punch-and-Judy set that Mr. Dwyer finds in the library, that the real darkness of the book takes shape. But here again, Bedard's representation

The collision of dark and light in *Painted Devil* is manifested, in part, in a collision of rigidity and tenderness.

of the dark is many-layered. Once Alice has agreed to help Mr. Dwyer resurrect the Saturday morning puppet shows in the library, the script of a Punch-and-Judy show begins to appear at intervals between chapters. In the first scene Punch offers to mind the baby while Judy prepares dinner, but bangs the baby's head on the floor and throws him out the window when he cries. In the second scene, several chapters later, Punch kills Judy when she rages at him for murdering the baby. Both of these scenes are shockingly violent to the modern reader, despite Punch's amusing banter and his apparent innocence of all wrong intention. Juxtaposed as they are with chapters in which the

dangerous pregnancy of Alice's mother features prominently, Punch's domestic violence is doubly disturbing.

As the novel progresses, however, the reader's initial impression of Punch is modified in light of the greater evil he must encounter at the climax of the play: the Devil himself. Alice begins to sense a deep malevolence in the antique Devil puppet. The themes of imagination and illusion collide with the theme of the nature of evil as the puppet comes to life in Mr. Dwyer's unsuspecting hands:

He slid his hand inside the limp black cloth. A tremor ran through the puppet, as if it had been suddenly roused from sleep. It slowly raised its head and looked at Alice. She felt it fix her with its wicked red eyes, and a chill ran through her. It bobbed its head in silent greeting, and the leering smile seemed to widen a little, as though the lifeless wood in fact were flesh. The image of the witch in the *Wonder Book* flashed through her mind. (PD 53)

Punch's misdemeanours pale before the death and despair that the Devil represents. Mr. Dwyer's comment that the puppet set came from a New England dealer named Renshaw alerts readers familiar with *A Darker Magic* that this puppet is indeed another vehicle for the power of Professor Mephisto.

The Devil puppet and his role in the Punch-and-Judy show — particularly in light of the two different versions of the play which figure here — are crucial to Bedard's depiction of darkness. Within the context of the play itself, Punch's valuation as "good" or "evil" depends on how rigid a standard of "moral virtue" is applied. If one views Punch's actions as totally reprehensible, then the written version which ends with him being carried off by the Devil shows him getting his just reward. In such an interpretation, the Devil (while not "good" in himself) is an agent of divine justice. However, the traditional, oral versions of the play end differently, with Punch triumphing over the Devil and driving him away or even killing him. This ending betrays the roots of the Punch shows among the working poor of nineteenth-century cities; for them, Punch was the "champion of the oppressed" (52). Outrageous and childlike, Punch was the trickster figure who, "in flouting authority . . . was a symbol of their own struggle for liberty" (101).

One of the important binary pairs in Bedard's thought — along with life-death, and dark-light — is rigidity-tenderness.¹² What Bedard means by "rigidity" is a fixed way of operating and of viewing the world, a "black and white" approach which fails to allow for ambiguity. It implies a resistance to compromise, a defensiveness against the world outside oneself, and fixed ideas of right and wrong. In fact, Bedard's concept of rigidity has much in common with Blake's idea of repressive Reason as embodied in the demiurge Urizen.¹³ "Tenderness," on the other hand, is an openness to the imagination, to change, and to sympathetic exchanges with others; it is the quality most evident in children. This tenderness is fragile, like a candle-flame easily blown out, and it must be guarded and nurtured. It brings with it both the ability to see clearly (as Lela sees immediately that the Devil puppet is "bad") and a dangerous vulnerability (as Lela is vulnerable to being lured into the woods by the Magician's illusions).

The collision of dark and light in *Painted Devil* is manifested, in part, in a collision of rigidity and tenderness. Mr. Dwyer has come under the sway of Professor Mephisto and his dark force through the Devil puppet. This particular puppet is old, "much older than the rest of the set" (53); it seems to Alice to be "possessed of some dark, almost elemental life that had survived the centuries, smiling its unwavering wicked smile while people grew old and withered around it" (153). Like the written text of the play that accompanies it, the puppet is rigid and fixed. As Mr. Dwyer is seduced by its power, he becomes obsessed with using this *written* version of the play, which has the Devil carrying Punch off at the end. Alice, on the other hand, is very uncomfortable with this ending; the more she rehearses her role as Punch, the more she comes to understand that Punch is "not really wicked" but "simply impetuous. Like a child, he did not think things through.... He did not deserve damnation" (128).

These conflicting views have tangible results. As Mr. Dwyer allows himself to be possessed by the devilish force, he becomes even more solitary than usual, living "like an addict" with "a haunted look about him, a sheen of madness in the sunken eyes" which take on "the glassy vacancy of one of Lela's dolls" (184). Ultimately, Mr. Dwyer allows the puppet's power to possess him completely,

and goes so far as to powder and paint his face in its likeness (203). In contrast, Alice chooses to believe Aunt Emily's bizarre tale about Miss Potts and the Children's Show, and forms an alliance with her, determining to help her destroy the Devil puppet. Through their willingness to trust each other (again, despite the barriers of age, attitude and experience), they are empowered to act creatively and aggressively against the dark force that threatens them.

This type of alliance with another individual lies at the heart of all Bedard's books. Indeed, in both *A Darker Magic* and *Painted Devil* Emily survives *only* because of the intervention of another. Such an alliance signifies for Bedard the state in which life can be lived most fully. But even this openness to others and to the realm of the imagination — this admitting of "tenderness" — is double-edged, as Alice realizes after she decides to believe Emily's story:

Something had opened [a] crack, had let the darkness whistle in, as the wind had whistled through the car window while Aunt Emily told her incredible tale. Could such things possibly be? No, the voice of reason screamed inside her. But another part of her — the part that sank beneath the spell of the *Wonder Book* as readily as Lela, that looked in the window of the little cottage and saw the withered face of the witch take shape among the shadows, the part that had lain in bed that night and wished the dreadful wish that the baby were never born — that part heard the light fall of footsteps behind her now and turned yet again to stare nervously down the empty street. (PD 133)

An openness to the imagination brings with it both wonder and terror, and both a heightened awareness of and vulnerability to the illusion and fear that the darkness brings. Moreover, the imagination can be twisted by malevolent forces. As Emily admits, imagination is the Magician's most powerful weapon: "He creeps into your imagination and twists it all in knots. He makes you see things that aren't there" (194).

This ability of the darkness to possess and delude is highlighted forcefully in the climactic scene when Emily and Alice venture to the library at midnight to destroy the Devil puppet. Once inside, Emily's sense of the dark force is so overwhelming that she cannot bear to bring Alice inside with her. Proceeding alone, she hears again the Magician's seductive voice. She steps from one world into another, just as she did that long-ago night at the depot. Fighting the Magician's spell, she struggles to bring the knife down on the head of the Devil puppet. But the illusions of the malevolent force distract her, and she thinks she sees blood glistening on the puppet's painted lips:

She reached out an incredulous finger to touch them. It came away red. A chill, reaming darkness spiraled up inside her.

Look at me. I said, look at me, girl.

The voice was no longer soothing, but cold, bloodless.... She could do nothing but obey. (PD 198-99)

This delusion is followed by a vision of her father, now long dead, superimposed on Mr. Dwyer. Both illusions are calculated to shatter Emily's will and bring it under the Magician's control. Only through Alice's intervention is the spell broken and the Devil puppet destroyed.

The novel ends with both the birth of the baby and the successful performance

of the Punch-and-Judy show — this time with a new Devil puppet and the traditional ending of Punch's victory over the Devil. For the moment, life triumphs over death and the hidden secrets of the womb emerge into the light. The conjunction of these two events draws the web of double-edged images together in an ending that is powerful and emotionally resonant.

Both *A Darker Magic* and *Painted Devil* suggest the inadequacy of rigid codes of "good" and "evil." Bedard's richly-textured representation of darkness in these novels suggests that human beings are not made for rigidity or closure, for clear choices and "happily-ever-afters." Humans are made for struggle, but through an openness fuelled by the imagination, creative alliance and exchange is possible. In this respect, Bedard's work recalls Blake's radical critique of traditional moral categories, his view of the imagination as life-giving energy, and his concept of good and evil as contrary but ultimately interdependent forces.¹⁴ However, Bedard is quick to point out that his depiction of darkness should not be confused with Jungian concepts of the Shadow as something to be embraced as a guide into the subconscious.¹⁵ In his view, the dark side of the self is something to be challenged rather than embraced.

Like Blake, Bedard sees the struggle with darkness as an essential experience, especially crucial in the passage between childhood and adulthood. When confronted with the terror of adult life, the innocent child wants to turn and flee, to block out the wonder and ambiguity that accompanies that terror. But by confronting the shadows the child can pass through them into a state of "higher innocence," where imagination holds the contrary forces of light and dark in a creative tension.¹⁶ Only by enduring this elemental struggle can one emerge into wholeness.

Bedard's most overt articulation of the double-edged nature of life comes at the end of *Painted Devil* when Emily, watching the puppet show, falls under its benign spell and reflects: "Fear and wonder, joy and pain. How closely bound they were. Without the one the other could not be. It was a truth at times too hard to bear. One laid the wonder by to still the fear" (222). Emily's thought here recalls both Blake's contraries and Dickinson's "duality of experience." She recognizes that the danger lies in refusing to see the shadows and the ambiguity all around us. Such denial results in misunderstanding and harsh judgments, and can lead to entrapment and death. The trick is to hold on to the wonder while confronting the fear.

Not every young reader will grasp the deeper meanings embedded in Bedard's narratives. Yet the complex interplay of images in these two books suggests fresh ways of approaching familiar problems, and especially those connected with the many shades of darkness in the world. *A Darker Magic* and *Painted Devil* are challenging novels, but in awakening the imagination they may at least point out a path through the forest.

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NOTES

- 1 Bedard mentions especially MacDonald's novels *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, as well as his fairy tale *The Golden Key*. Among Alan Garner's works, Bedard lists *The Owl Service*, *Red Shift*, *Elidor*, and *The Stone Book* as those which he particularly admires.
- 2 These terms will be discussed in greater detail below.
- 3 Michael Bedard, personal interview, 15 Feb., 1994.
- 4 The phrase is Albert Gelpi's in *Emily Dickinson: The Mind of the Poet*, 104.
- 5 Examples of poems which speak of this duality are "A Tooth upon Our Peace," "Must be a Woe," "I lived on Dread," and "If all the griefs I am to have," poems 459, 571, 770, and 1726 in Thomas H. Johnson's *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*.
- 6 The full text of the first poem reads:

Presentiment — is that long shadow — on the lawn —
Indicative that suns go down —
The notice to the startled grass
That Darkness — is about to pass —

The second reads:

On my volcano grows the grass
A meditative spot —
An acre for a Bird to choose
Would be the General thought —

How red the Fire rocks below —
How insecure the sod —
Did I disclose
Would populate with awe my solitude.

- 7 Bedard's three novels will be cited throughout as follows: *A Darker Magic (DM)*; *Redwork (R)*; *Painted Devil (PD)*.
- 8 Unpublished lecture given at the first "Storymakers" conference at George Brown College, July 1989.
- 9 In this respect Bedard's Magician is somewhat reminiscent of Blake's Urizen, whose desire for uniformity and stringent moral codes leads to tyranny. In *The Four Zoas* Urizen describes his ideal Utopia:

Compell the poor to live upon a Crust of bread, by soft mild arts....
Say he smiles if you hear him sigh. If pale, say he is ruddy.
Preach temperance: say he is overgorg'd & drowns his wit
In strong drink, tho' you know that bread & water are all
He can afford. Flatter his wife, pity his children, till we can
Reduce all to our will, as spaniels are taught with art. (viii, 117, 125-29)

See Frye's discussion of Urizen and tyranny in *Fearful Symmetry*, 219-23.

- 10 This is Bedard's phrase.
- 11 The rose has a long history as an ambivalent symbol; it is sufficient to note here that Bedard may be influenced by Blake's use of the rose, particularly in the brief but suggestive poem "The Sick Rose."
- 12 Michael Bedard, personal interview, 27 July, 1994.
- 13 As Paley puts it in *Energy and the Imagination* (67), Blake's Urizen is "the repressive Reason Blake sees behind all orthodoxies which promulgate 'One King, one God, one Law' (*Urizen* E 71)." Urizen is also a symbol of old age, associated with death and deserts, and the enemy of love and the imagination; See Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 209-10. Blake's satire *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Keynes, 148-60) also rails against the orthodox Christian notions of Good and Evil.
- 14 In Blake's poem *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* the narrator, Blake's "devil" persona, declares: "Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence" (Keynes, 149). Blake eventually modified his earlier vision of Reason and Energy as opposing forces when he realized that the two were intimately bound together in the human soul, and that life was a constant internal struggle between the two. For a lucid account of Blake's thought on these issues see Frye's

- discussion in *Fearful Symmetry*, 55-84.
- 15 The idea of the Shadow as guide within the context of modern fantasy literature is elaborated by Ursula Le Guin in her essay "The Child and the Shadow," reprinted in *The Language of the Night*, 54-67.
 - 16 Michael Bedard, personal interview, 15 Feb., 1994. Bedard elaborates on this in an unpublished lecture entitled "Fear and Wonder."

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