

Light and Shadows in Stories by Hans Christian Andersen: Ethical Perspectives on the Fairytales

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Abstract My paper is about Hans Christian Andersen and his Fairytales. I want to discuss some ethical aspects of the fairytales and Andersen as a writer of ethical tales. In my paper I am going to analyze stories or tales as *The Little Mermaid*, *The Little Matchstick Girl*, *The Piggy Bank* and *Thumbelina* — all by Hans Christian Andersen — to point out how Andersen's work and art are dealing with both existential and ethical questions. Hans Christian Andersen (1805-75) lived in a time where European cultures were changing into modern forms and Andersen registers that changing as a kind of tension between light and darkness or between light and shadows in an existential way. Andersen depicted in a way the ethical choices of modernity and he did that in stories reflecting both social circumstances and a great hope for upcoming humanism.

Key words Hans Christian Andersen's fairytales; social experiences; hunger and imagination; existential and ethical questions

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Introduction

I want to discuss some ethical aspects of the fairytales and Andersen as a writer of tales. In my paper I am going to comment some of Andersen's stories or tales as

*The Little Mermaid, The Little Matchstick Girl, Thumbelina and The Piggy Bank*¹ to point out how Andersen's work and art are dealing with both existential and ethical questions. Andersen (1805-75) lived in a time where European culture changed into more modern forms and Andersen registers that changing as a kind of tension between light and darkness or between light and shadows in an existential way. Andersen depicted in a way the ethical choices of modernity.

The Danish philosopher K.E. Løgstrup says in *Den etiske fordring* [The Ethical Claims] (1956/1961) that every person lives in covenant with ethical claims. Literature and narrative are ways in which values and choices can be made clear to the individual. Hans Christian Andersen's stories always contain values and choices between values. In that sense, Andersen's stories are always ethical literature.

Several Voices

Allow me to quote the opening lines of the fairytale "The Tinder-Box" and I quote from the edition of the fairytales in *Andersen*:

A soldier came marching along the highway: left, right! left, right! He had his knapsack on his back and a sword at his side, for he had been out fighting a war, and now he was on his way home. (Andersen 49)

That's exactly how a soldier moves of course — left right, left right, one two, one two. That is a child's logic. It can obviously only be a soldier when he marches left right, left right. What do soldiers do? Well, they fight wars, and after that they long to return home. The child mind can easily understand that, and in that way the story was clear. Something had to happen, something strange, for here was a soldier ready for the unexpected: one two, one two!

And things certainly start to happen. He is offered a tinder-box, an Aladdin's lamp, that can turn all his wishes into reality. He suffers trials and tribulations, but all finally goes well. He gains the princess and half the kingdom, even though the dogs brutally heave the old king and queen from their throne. They are the soldier's future in-laws, after all! It also costs the old witch her life — the soldier cuts off her head. We accept all of this in a fairytale by Hans Christian Andersen, for we are precisely in a fairytale, where the rules, morals and ethics are those of the narrative and not those of social life.

Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales create a fantastic room or space that one

¹ All the Hans Christian Andersen quotations during this article are cited from the Klaus P. Mortensen collection of Andersen's works. All quotations are translated by John Irons.

is invited to inhabit. In these “rooms” everything is basically so very simple, because everything has its own logic. In “The Snow Queen,” the snow queen at one point offers the boy Kay “the entire world and a pair of new skates” (Andersen 327). The expression “the entire world” is quite abstract, but a pair of new skates is immediately understandable to the child in us. What child wouldn’t like to have a pair of new skates? And even despite the fact one has just been given the whole world — for what can one really do with that?

The distinctive thing about Hans Christian Andersen’s writing is that there are always several voices in the fairytales. Narration takes place at several levels at the same time, thereby involving several narrative voices (Bøggild; Binding; Frandsen, “The Insoluble Conflict of Transformation”). Andersen tells his stories for children, but at the same time he tells profound stories about life, death, love, pain and human conditions. He tells of ethics and morals, about what is dangerous and seductive. Andersen, for example, is fascinated with all that is modern, that thrusts itself on his own age. The steam machine and electromagnetism become the two great “machines” of the new world, one in which the mass production of goods and communication over long distances pave the way for the new.

Andersen registered the new, was enthusiastic but frightened at the same time to see how the old norms and old, solid culture were being undermined and were disintegrating. This ambivalence is everywhere in Andersen, who himself had to break out of straitened circumstances to gain high social status through his art and his genius. There is an ambivalence in experiences that make him a mould-breaker both socially and as an artist. He has to develop a new genre in order to express himself. This he does in his fairytales and stories (Thomsen).

It is interesting to see how, in his early works, Andersen is bound by such traditional genres as, for example, the classical folk-tale. But in 1835, he breaks out and publishes *Eventyr, fortalte for Børn* [Fairy Tales Told for Children]. This marked the birth of a completely new, worldwide literary genre! (de Mylius)

The German cultural scientist Walter Benjamin has said that the folk-tale belongs to the people and not to an individual artist. The folk-tale contains a common experience, it passes from mouth to mouth, is adapted and altered in the course of time. The *Kunstmärchen*, the novel and the novella, on the other hand, belong to a single personality, that of a writer and his or her ability to transmute experiences into artistic form. Hans Christian Andersen takes the common genres, such as the folk-tale, as his point of departure, but makes them personal and lends them his own artistic expression. This enables his stories and fairytales to include the deep experiences, pains, sorrows, humiliation, social climbing, love and loss of love of the poor

man, the child and the little man in society (Benjamin).

In his fairytales, then, Andersen is capable of speaking with many voices and thus to many different realities: that of the child, the dreams of the young person, the voice of those in love, the experiences of the adult, the retrospective gaze of the old person.

Andersen for Children?

The distinctive feature of Andersen's narrative art, then is his ability to tell a story with several voices at the same time. This is what produces an artistic and ethical conversation in the fairytale. The child always has one of the voices in Andersen. The vulnerable, timid and lonely child is given a voice. Not necessarily an actual, physical child, rather the child and vulnerability still existing in a grown-up person. When Andersen called his first tales from 1835 "Fairy Tales, Told for Children," he did not mean that they were only intended for children. He is in fact quoting from the baptismal ritual as used in the Lutheran-Evangelical Church, which cites the gospel of Mark: "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not [...] Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein" (*The Bible*, Mark 10, 13-16).

The fairytale is a conversation with the lonely, abandoned child that is to become visible and come alive once more in the garb of fantasy.

Andersen's oeuvre is full of pleasurable examples of the magic that arises when well-known objects or phenomena are transposed into new semantic contexts. They are often amusing, but at the same time contain grotesque aspects and strong representations of anxiety or fear. Andersen's so-called "thing-fairytales," in which he allows objects or animals to assume human attitudes, values, relationships, morality and ethics give language and form to what is stunted or crippled. Andersen writes never or very seldom directly about traumas or traumatic experiences. On the other hand, always present in his stories and fairytales is an element of ambiguity that includes that which is highly sinister — *das Unheimliche* — emotions that are homeless or ice-bound. There are shadows and ominous reverse sides, or perhaps invisible aspects of a matter on which no light is shed.

Let us take a couple of quotations from the apparently innocent but also grotesque fairy tale "The Piggy Bank" from 1854. Here everything is at stake in a kind of psychoanalytical *dance macabre*:

The drawer of the dresser was ajar and there a large doll could be seen — she was rather old and her neck had been repaired — she gazed out and said: 'Let's

pretend we are humans — that’s always something!’ and then what a commotion there was, even the paintings turned round on the walls — they showed their reverse side, though not to be contrary. (Andersen, vol. II, 114)

There are reverse sides and repressions that are let loose in this thing-fairy tale, where lust and desire and suppression are portrayed in a grotesque-amusing tale about the toys in the children’s nursery. Note that everything takes place at night, when the children of the bourgeoisie have been laid in bed in order to sleep, that the toys assume a different life: The Other, the reality of night and darkness start to “play at being humans.” It is not the children who are portrayed here as being traumatised or locked in repressions. It is, on the contrary, the representatives of the adults’ cultural systems, hierarchies, power, that play the night-time games and give life to that which threatens the child’s innocence and open mind. The piggy bank is a kind of master or maybe even a super-ego in the fairy tale. It is said of him that he was well aware that he could buy everything with what he had in his stomach.

Toys play at being humans. The toys enact power, sexuality, violations, as when “The walking cane stood there and was proud of his ferrule and silver knob — he was both well-heeled and well-topped; two embroidered cushions lay on the sofa, they were attractive but dim-witted —.”

By using the nursery and portraying the rigid life of the adults via the grotesque acting of the toys, Andersen indirectly portrays how the child with its open fantasy is on the way to losing its mental integrity and to being pulled into an almost psychotic life as a citizen and adult where things, money, power and hierarchy have a deadening effect.

They all sat and watched, and were asked to crack, bang and rattle as they felt inclined. But the riding whip said that he never cracked for old folks, only for those who were not yet engaged. ‘I’ll go bang for anything!’ the banger said. [...] The play itself wasn’t much good, but it was well performed, all the actors put their painted side forward, they could only be seen from one side, not the reverse, and all of them acted splendidly, coming way out past the footlights — their wires were too long, but that made them all the more conspicuous. The doll was so entranced that her repairs worked loose, and the piggy bank was so entranced too in his own way that he decided to do something for one of them, put him in his will as the one who would lie in an open grave with him when the time came.’ (Andersen, vol. II 115)

The acting scene is not only full of irony. It tips over into the grotesque. It creates alienation and “*Unheimlichkeit*.” The repressions become embodied and allow themselves to be enacted here in the children’s nursery, where the toys represent all that threatens the children and their integrity as human beings (Müller-Wille).

There are a host of strange occurrences in Andersen’s tales. The characters are non-characters although they represent characters in the form of things, toys, animals, etc. These “characters,” these representations, are given a free rein with the form and framework of the fairytale. But many of them are characterised as lacking something. They are odd, strange, weird and thus not, as it were, part of the community to which they so violently wish to belong. The tin soldier, the main character in ‘The Steadfast Tin Soldier’ is such a character who lacks something. There was not enough tin, so he was made with only one leg. For that reason he is odd and different from the other twenty-four in the box. He falls in love with the ballerina, who is made of paper and who he believes has the same handicap or some lack as he does himself. He believes that she only has one leg like himself, but that is only because the other leg is hidden from view. The fellowship he longs for, love with her, is prevented, except for the fact that both of them perish in the flames of the same tiled stove. During the story he is sent on a journey. The soldier, whose life as a tin soldier is traumatised by a physical lack and also a lack of awareness, falls from the upper-class window down into the gutter. He is sent on a trip in the gutter, through mire and mud, he is besmirched and pursued by rats in the darkness. Swallowed by a fish, but actually returns to the room from where he once came. Although only to see himself consumed by the flames.

Andersen’s figures sometimes have a destiny. An inner desire or a destiny. It can be grotesque as in “The Piggy Bank,” but it can also unfold as in the case of the ugly duckling which is mobbed and mishandled, but which ends up as a beautiful swan in “The Ugly Duckling” from 1843. He is exposed to much trial and tribulation, but his inner destiny finally triumphs. The artist, in this case, gains access to a community among white swans — and it is the children by the lake that pay homage to the new arrival.

A Quest for Humanity

The story of “The Little Mermaid” from 1837 contains an even stronger duality of desire and prevention and therefore an even stronger and deeper ethical challenge. The little mermaid is born into a happy life in the world of the sea-folk. She can live for 300 years without cares and worries. That is how things are for the sea-folk and the sisters. But the little mermaid, the youngest and most beautiful of the sea-king’s

daughters, wants something else and something more. She longs for something she herself only half understands but which becomes clearer to her when she is allowed to observe the world of humans. She wants to become a human being! The human life she catches a glimpse of above the water is both beautiful and stormy. It contains contrasts. It is not only happy like that of the sea-folk. It contains suffering and death, but it also contains the redeeming possibilities of love. She wishes to have a soul like humans.

The path to what is human is hard and full of suffering. It is the demon of the sea, the sea-witch, who can give her the first prerequisites for becoming a human being. But the price is terrible. The mermaid has to give up her voice, which is the loveliest siren voice of the sea, she must abandon forever her unconcerned life on the sea-bed. Her lovely fish-tail must be converted into a pair of legs, and whenever she walks on them she will feel eternal pain. The course of human life is beset with pain. On the other hand, she will have the possibility of acquiring a soul like humans have. This means that God will be able to recognise her and take her up to Himself when she dies after the short time humans have on this earth. But it also costs a lot to be part of a human community. For a soul to be able to pass into her she must first be loved so much and so strongly by another human that this person, a man, will allow the priest to declare eternal fidelity between the two of them.

She pays the price, comes up to the earth, but the prince does not view her as a person of equal worth whom he is prepared to love and marry. She is an outsider! She has paid everything to gain what she will never be able to gain. She loses everything in her desire to become a human being in a human community — loses both her possibility to become a full human being and to return to be a mermaid. Only grace, God's saving grace is left!

“The Little Mermaid” has to do with the desire for humanity and the price that has to be paid for becoming or being a human. This is an issue that is no less topical today. Are we prepared to invest what is necessary for being a real human being? Are we prepared to give up an idyll or security and apparent happiness in order to become truly human? The fairytale has to do with the enormous power of love between human beings, but in particular with love as the destiny that makes us human.

The Goose and the Hunger

Hans Christian Andersen's moving story of “The Little Matchstick Girl” from 1846 depicts, as is well known, the unhappy fate and death of the small, poor girl on New Year's Eve in a way that calls for compassion and maybe even anger at the conditions under which she has to live and die. Fortunately, as we may perhaps feel, the

Lord God takes her to his home in heaven out of grace and love. It is a story about the social motif, the merciful God, a grandmother's love and compassion. But it is also a story about what one could call the fantasies of starvation and cold, for in the most extreme moments of life the light of delusion is lit:

Another one was struck, it burnt, it gleamed, and how the gleam fell on the wall, it became quite transparent, like gauze: she was looking straight into a living room where the table was covered with a dazzling white cloth, with fine porcelain, and there the roast goose stood steaming, stuffed full of prunes and apples! and what was even more marvellous — the goose leapt from the dish, waddled across the floor with knife and fork in its back; straight over to the poor girl it came — then the match went out and all she could see was the thick, cold wall. (Andersen, vol. I 436)

The wall becomes transparent, it becomes like gauze or a veil that creates transparency to the other side, so the idea of another world not only opens up but becomes concrete. In this other world there is not only food, warmth, light and beauty but also strange occurrences, such as a roast goose that can waddle off with a knife and fork in its back. Here we have two victims that meet, the one frozen-cold outside and the slaughtered goose inside meet in a distraught moment before everything is all over. The whole scene rests, in terms of narrative, on the awareness of an imminent loss. The light is brief and the scene is switched off in the next instant. Nothing that is happy lasts, and Andersen repeatedly portrays the gauze, the thin membrane between life-fulfilment and loss.

In this story of the matchstick girl, Andersen employs the same technique as in his so-called thing-fairytales, where tin soldiers, paving maidens, red shoes, teapots, balls, tops, etc. are given the ability to act and to formulate attitudes or points of view in thought or speech (Bøggild). The goose admittedly does not say anything. It just waddles. The girl and the goose, however, are both victims. The one is frozen-cold and on the point of starvation, while the other has been slaughtered, roasted and pierced by knife and fork. Andersen's mastery consists in the linguistic construction of the duality of suffering and enjoyment, fear and fascination, attraction and repulsion, gain and loss. The language is rhythmic with its alliterations — stood steaming, stuffed full of prunes..., for example — and Andersen invites his listeners into his language that is full of sensual images such as 'fine porcelain' and a stuffing of "prunes and apples." But every happiness situation is nearly always accompanied in Andersen by the possibility of loss. This also applies, as we have seen, in "The

Little Matchstick Girl.”

Andersen is an ethnographer of the senses! He registers, senses, comments on and describes unceasingly both that which is close and that which is far off. His collected works are thus both a seismographic and astonishing musical score of the possibilities for sense perceptions in 19th century Denmark and Europe. Andersen saw, sensed and committed to paper! He collected the pleasures and sublime moments of life in the same way as he collected sublime poetic moment in his rich art. Alongside such lovely pleasurable moments, however, there were also disappointments and black holes — the positive moments sometimes gave way and were suppressed by discontent, shadows and fear. Situations of happiness are coupled with possible loss in his writing. The fear of being insufficient, of not being able to hold onto the good life is always present. Of being unmasked as the proletarian who does not belong in finer circles. A bog-plant with roots in the mud and constantly searching for the light without being able to reach it — to name just one metaphor that Andersen used about himself. That is why Andersen notes and registers in artistic fashion the taste of the good life! He knows it can be lost within a second. But in the artistic form, in the depiction, the sublime experience, the lovely sound, the taste gains eternal life. What is lost is retained for ever in art.

Food, Hunger and Imagination

Food is one of the moments of sublime pleasure that Andersen often cultivates. The writer maintained a conversation with food over the years and its potential was exploited in his art and his diaries. The gastronomic element, however, is often connected to illness and anxiety.

As differing writers as the cultural historian Peter Riismøller and the Norwegian psychiatrist and writer Finn Skårderud have, from widely differing perspectives and intentions, described the helpless language of hunger and deficiency. In *Sultegrænsen* (The Hunger Borderline) from 1971 described the importance hunger and the awareness of the terrifying nearness of the hunger borderline in Denmark had in the period right up to and even including the first decades of the 20th century (Riismøller, Skårderud). Riismøller shows how the culture of survival developed in an eternal struggle against hunger that was on one's doorstep the moment anything went wrong. Riismøller describes how the animals went amok when, after a long winter indoors with dry straw as fodder they were at last let loose into fields of green, juicy clover. They go berserk, eat themselves blind and half-crazed. Riismøller shows that people in straitened circumstances — he refers to them as the forms of affliction — such people, whose growth or lack of same was typified all

life long by malnutrition and who died far too early, also went berserk in momentary gluttony and self-indulgence in slaughtering binges and sheer sensuality.

The Norwegian psychiatrist Finn Skårderud, in books such as *Sultekunstnerne: Kultur, krop og kontrol* (Hunger artists: Culture, body and control) from 1991 and *Uro: En rejse i det moderne selv* (Restlessness: A journey into the modern self) from 1998, describes how behind such modern phenomena as anorexia and bulimia it is possible in principle to trace a long line back in European cultural history, one that deals with the staging and cultivation of the body, food, hunger, renunciation and suffering. The body, Skårderud says, is often for religious or ritual purposes, exposed to the suffering of hunger, so that the culture in question can express its total control through the individual body, the single individual. For that reason, food and its consumption often — and in various culture-historical periods — has been staged in a duality of strict sinfulness and a hedonistic enjoyment of purgation and puritanism. Food, menus, food consumption, diet become an instrument and the subject of a duality of the utmost voluptuousness and the utmost anxiety. Food and the enjoyment of the delights of the well-stocked table are portrayed in art as sources of this dangerously seductive fantasy. Food becomes fascinating show dishes, and in renunciation lies the self-evidence of control (Frandsen, “Hunger and Plenty”).

Andersen never directly starved as a child. But his childhood in a poor quarter of Odense was partly typified by a moderation that was acutely necessary, and partly, at the charity school, by an environment where there were children marked by hunger and lack.

As a shoemaker outside the guild, Andersen’s small family in Munkemøllestræde definitely did not have access to the rich man’s table, let alone habits. When his father died in 1816, with Hans then eleven years old, this meant a further serious shove in the direction of a social underworld for the sensitive boy. Anxiety must have towered over him with its long, ugly shadows.

Despite this, young Hans Christian occasionally feasted at the rich man’s table — though mostly with his eyes. For he sometimes visited the houses of the wealthy in the rich part of Odense when there were festive occasions, and he sometimes took to singing for those present. This could give him a few pennies — perhaps even a few mouthfuls? The fine menus, the well-stocked tables were however — and in the literal sense of the term — merely show dishes for the boy. As in a theatre, as in a peepshow where illusions of the fairytale were enacted! Look, don’t touch! Look, but this is not real reality! These upper-class homes with their well-stocked tables were not his world. He was an outsider! He was allowed to look, observe, maybe even fantasise, but not be one of the diners. Perhaps that scenario is present in the

writer:

The fine food and the fine tables as fascinating show dishes that acquire their own life when played and replayed for the imagination. This gives one practise at describing and fantasising. Andersen never forgot the shadows. The mould-breaker knew his own limitations and remembered his background — but in language the show dishes could unfold and expand. (Frandsen, “Hans Christian Andersen in his Own Age”)

Andersen saw children in his own age suffering under the social conditions that prevailed. He saw children be exposed to terrible things and experiences. He himself was forced to attend executions, and also had to visit his mentally ill maternal grandfather at the asylum where the patients were kept locked up. Andersen registered all of this. He never forgot the wounds and the traumas. His answer to them was to work with the imagination, with love and mercy. In the world of fantasy and fairytale he found an outlet, not as a kind of flight, never as flight, but as a way of confronting the unbearable. Secondly, he had a profound trust in a God who was not a determinative God but the principle of goodness and love in the world. God’s greatest gift of grace to him was his imagination and his ability to translate social experiences, traumatic experiences and mental wounds into poetic expression. That is why his stories are not just nice, entertaining stories for children. They are often violent, insistent, sinister stories about the unacknowledged demons of human life.

To Where the Swallow Flies

“Thumbelina” (1835) is a strange story, which on one hand has a simple plot, but which also contains many symbolic meanings. In the opening passage it says: “There was once a woman who so much wanted to have a teeny-weeny child, but she had no idea where she was to get one from” (Andersen, vol. I 111). She goes to an old witch, who takes her quite literally, for she does indeed get a ‘teeny-weeny child’, a girl that is only one inch tall — the top joint of a thumb.

Thumbelina is stolen, taken away from her mother by an ugly, nasty, large, wet toad mother. She must prepare herself for a life in the mud, in darkness. But the swallow, the beautiful bird, now becomes her redemption, saving her from the threatening trauma having to spend the rest of her life in winter and underground darkness. At a symbolic level, the swallow, who is redeemed by Thumbelina’s love, is a messenger or disciple, who takes her from the cold North to the eternal warmth of the South. It lifts her up and carries her over forests, lakes, and the snow-clad

mountain tops that separate north from south. In Hans Christian Andersen's writing, migratory birds such as the swallow, the nightingale and the stork often have symbolic roles as mediators between south and north. And in many instances in Andersen's oeuvre, he praises the South — Italy, Portugal and Spain — as countries and regions that contain a glimpse of eternity and memories of Paradise.

The swallow and Thumbelina fly to the South, where she is united with the people — the elves or flower-angels — to which she not only belongs but whose queen she is destined to become. The flower's angel first decides, however, that the name Thumbelina, which is cold and technical, is to be replaced by the name Maja. In Greek mythology "Maia" is the name of the beautiful nymph that is married to the god Zeus and the mother of Hermes, who among other things was the god of travelling and human movement. In Roman mythology, "Maja" is the goddess of spring — just think of the month of May — and thus for the return of plants and warmth.

It is a story about travelling across the water, the land, under the ground and in the air. But "Thumbelina" is also a symbol-laden story from Andersen's fertile imagination. Thumbelina is too small for this world, is saved and gains her true format as the Maja of the spirit and nature in the Garden of Paradise, or the eternal summer.

Hans Christian Andersen was himself a traveller. He travelled through Europe time and time again and also travelled inside Denmark. In terms of literature too he was a traveller. His works, and in particular his fairytales, often contain the journey, the change or the transformation. His main characters are nearly always on their way from one situation to another, or from one state to another. They are on their way out into the world or crossing inner or outer boundaries. They are in motion and often driven by a searching, a longing or a destiny. 'Thumbelina' is travelling. And "The Little Mermaid," "The Ugly Duckling," "The Steadfast Tin Soldier," "The Travelling Companion," "The Story of a Mother," "The Snow Queen" are all, in their separate ways, stories about necessary journeys. The shadows are in stagnation. Stagnation is traumatic. To become a human being, you must transform. To become a human being, you must act ethical and ethical means to transform shadows and stagnation into lights and where the good God's light are shining. So to live is to travel towards the light. Hans Christian Andersen viewed himself as a swamp plant that had its roots deep in mud and sin, but that, with its stem and leaves, constantly strove upwards towards the life-giving light and the sun's rays. "Thumbelina" is a story that unfolds in the artistic strivings of the swamp plant. "Thumbelina" describes — and is — a journey towards the light and the light is on the ethical side of

human living.

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