



Contradiction Leads to a Miracle

A Rethinking of Hans Christian Anderson and His Fairy Tales

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Abstract

Hans Christian Anderson is the most renowned fairy tale masters throughout the history. His works have been translated into different languages and spread all over the world. This paper intends to discuss Anderson's works via a review of newly obtained literature relevant to his works. There is contradiction between Anderson's actual life and dreams; both the natural revelation of children's spirit and the profound expression of adults' thinking contrastively exist in his works; not only the casual style in folk writing but also the poetic creation of literature are simultaneously employed in his works. These three aspects are contradictory but also uniform as well in Anderson. It is just in this contradiction and unity that Andersen's works can be so splendid and simple, so bright and profound. Based on the above reason, the author points out that Anderson's success is by no means an accidental phenomenon and his works can not be interpreted in a narrow sense as just fairy tales only for children, they have a profound influence on the adult literature.

Keywords: Hans Christian Anderson, Contradiction, Fairy tales

1. Introduction

Hans Christian Anderson, a Danish poet, novelist, and an immortal storyteller, was Denmark's most famous figure. His name may not be familiar to some readers, but more than likely almost everyone has read some of his fantastic fairytales that have captured the hearts of many over the last two centuries. He wrote as many as 350 stories and his books are read all over the world. All of the stories Anderson wrote were with a great desire to make people laugh. He wrote because he didn't want children to have a sad childhood as he did. He also wanted to fill little girls and little boy's hearts full of joy and laughter. He always wrote with a sly humor. Through his writings, Anderson felt more self fulfilled. Even after his death Hans Christian Anderson is still remembered today. After he died people read his stories and loved them just like when he was alive.

2. A life full of Contradiction

Hans Christian Andersen's own life had some of the aspects of a fairy tale: he was born the son of a poor cobbler and he died a rich and famous man, celebrated around the world, the intimate of kings and queens. Although today Andersen is primarily known as a writer of stories for children, during his lifetime he was also celebrated for his other literary works, including six novels, five travel journals, three autobiographies, and numerous poems and plays. The modern image of Andersen (as portrayed in the sugary 1952 film *Hans Christian Andersen*, starring Danny Kaye) is of a simple, innocent, child-like spinner of tales, a character from one of his own stories. Letters and diaries by Andersen and his contemporaries, however, draw the picture of a very different man: a sharply intelligent, ambitious writer with a hardscrabble past, a love of high society, and a tortured soul. Likewise, Andersen's fairy tales, when read in the original Danish (or in good, unabridged translations), are far more sophisticated and multi-layered than the simple children's fables they've become in all too many translated editions, retellings, and media adaptations. The writer was no innocent naïf recounting fancies whispered by the fairies; he was a serious artist, a skillful literary craftsman, a shrewd observer of human nature and of the social scene of nineteenth century Denmark.

2.1 *A Childhood of Suffering and Dream*

Like the Ugly Duckling, born in a humble duck-yard yet destined to become a swan, Andersen was born the son of a poor cobbler in the city of Odense, where the family shared a single room and lived a hand-to-mouth existence. There was always food, but never quite enough; there were books on the shelf, but no money for grammar school. Andersen was sent to the Poor School instead, and expected to learn a trade.

When Andersen was 11, his father died, leaving the family more destitute than ever, and the boy was sent off to factory work, at which he lasted only a few days. In 1819, at the age of 14, he left home and Odense altogether, traveling alone to Copenhagen to make his fame and fortune. Determined to join the Royal Theater, he presented himself to the theater's director, who bluntly advised the uneducated youth to go home and learn a trade. Undaunted, the boy sought out a well-known critic, then the city's prima ballerina, both of whom turned the scruffy urchin out and told him to go home. Growing desperate, running out of money, Andersen pestered every luminary he could think of until he turned up on the doorstep of Giuseppe Siboni, director of the Royal Choir School. Weyse, an accomplished composer, happened to be dining with Siboni that day. He had risen from poverty himself, and he took pity on the boy. Weyse promptly raised a sum of money that enabled Andersen to rent a cheap room and to study with Siboni and others connected to the Royal Theater.

Tall and gawky, ill at ease with other children, the boy spent his time reading, dreaming, sewing costumes out of scraps for his puppet theater, and haunting the doorway of the city's theater when traveling players came to town. Odense, at that time, was a provincial city still rooted in its rural past, with a living tradition of Danish folklore and colorful folk pageantry. In *The True Story of My Life*, Andersen relates how he learned Danish folk tales in his youth from old women in the spinning room of the insane asylum where his grandmother worked. "They considered me a marvelous clever child," he recalls, "too clever to live long, and they rewarded my eloquence by telling me fairy tales and a world as rich as that of *The Thousand and One Nights* arose before me." The Arabian tales of *The Thousand and One Nights* also fired the boy's imagination, for this was one of the few precious books owned by Andersen's father.

Andersen began writing at an early age (an unusual preoccupation for a boy of his class), but his true ambition was to go on the stage as an actor, dancer, or singer. He memorized scenes from plays and poems and loved to declaim them to anyone who'd listen; he also possessed a fine singing voice (he was known as the Nightingale of Odense), and this talent in particular began to open doors for him. The boy received invitations to sing at dinner parties in rich men's houses, where his precociousness, combined with his shabby appearance, provoked as much amusement as admiration. This was Andersen's first taste of "superior" society (as it was called in those days of rigid class demarcation), a taste that he never lost as he subsequently climbed into Denmark's highest circles.

Thus began a new period in Andersen's life. By day he studied and loitered in the theater, rubbing shoulders with some of the most famous men and women of Denmark's Golden Age; by night he lived in a mean little room in one of the city's most squalid neighborhoods, often going without meals and spending what little money he had on books. As in Odense, the boy was called upon to sing and recite at distinguished dinner parties — and once again the smiles of his hosts were often at his own expense. The aid he received for the next three years was sporadic and precarious, never quite enough to keep hunger from the door, bestowed with a mixture of generosity and condescension that left lasting marks on Andersen's psyche. He practiced scenes from famous plays, he tried his hand at writing a tragedy, and he began to study dance at the Royal Theater's Ballet School. But by the age of 17, his voice had changed; his gawky physique had proven unsuited to ballet. He was dismissed from school, informed that he had no future on the stage.

Another youth than Hans Christian Andersen might have crumbled under this blow, but throughout his life he possessed a remarkable (even exasperating) degree of confidence and never lost faith in his worth, no matter how often he faced rejection. He would draw upon this experience years later when creating tales such as *The Little Mermaid*, in which the heroine submits to loss and pain in order to cross into another world — only to find she'll never be fully accepted, loved, or understood. Yet despite the hardships he endured, and the humiliations he suffered through, the young Andersen was thrilled to be on his way to a theatrical career... or so he thought.

2.2 *A Gentle Nightmare of Educational Experience*

Determined to find success in Denmark's theater but barred from a performance career, Andersen focused on his remaining talent: he'd become a writer of plays. He'd already submitted one play to the Royal Theater, which had promptly been turned down. Now the boy dashed off another play, this time an historical tragedy. It, too, was turned away. Yet the play had shown a glimmer of promise, and this brought him to the attention of Jonas Collin, a powerful court official and the financial director of the Royal Theater. Collin perceived what everyone else had perceived: the boy was badly handicapped by his lack of formal education. Collin, however, decided to do something to solve the problem of Andersen, arranging an educational fund to be paid by the King of Denmark.

Andersen was sent away to grammar school in the town of Slagelse, 57 miles from Copenhagen in the west of Zealand. He was six years older than his fellow students, far behind them in general education, and temperamentally unsuited for

long, dull days sitting in a classroom. Nonetheless he persevered, determined to prove himself worthy of Collin's interest, the King's patronage, and the faith of his small circle of supporters back in Copenhagen.

But life as a grammar student would prove to be especially difficult, even for a youth whose life had hardly been easy to this point. Andersen's headmaster was a pedagogue who could have stepped from the pages of a Dickens novel, fond of using ridicule, humiliation, and contempt to bully his students into learning. He was particularly vicious to dreamy young Andersen, determined to crush the boy's pride, conceit, and especially his high ambitions — and to teach him that his place in the world (due to his origins) must be a humble one. In particular, Andersen was strictly forbidden to indulge in any creative work such as creative writing — a deprivation that the boy, who'd been writing since he was small, found particularly hard.

For four years, Andersen endured this tyranny, suffered, worried that he was going mad, and wrote despairing letters home — which Jonas Collin calmly dismissed as adolescent self-pity. In 1826, at the age of 21, Andersen's emotions came to a boil; he defied his headmaster by writing a poem titled "The Dying Child".

Based on a common nineteenth century theme (in the days of high infant mortality rates), this poem was unusual in being told from the child's point of view, and it evoked a haunting sadness fueled by the author's own misery. Andersen's headmaster pronounced the poem rubbish (it became one of the most famous poems of the century) and heaped such abuse on Andersen that a young teacher became alarmed. The teacher spoke to Jonas Collin directly, and Collin swiftly pulled Andersen out of school. Andersen remained haunted by nightmares of his headmaster for the rest of his life.

2.3 A Sweet Bitter Social Circle

Andersen was now allowed to return to Copenhagen, where he lived in a small, clean attic room, studied with private tutors, and took his meals with the Collins and other prominent families, in rotation. His particular attachment to the Collin family solidified during this period and would become a steady source of both joy and pain in the years that followed. Jonas, he loved as a second father; the five Collins children were as dear to him as brothers and sisters; and the Collins, in turn, grew used to this odd young man sitting at their hearth. Much has been written by Andersen scholars about the complicated relationship he forged with the family, who were pillars of Danish society and moved in the highest court circles. Jonas Collin's support of Andersen was both generous and unwavering, and Collin's household provided the young man with the family and stability he craved. But although they opened their home to him, included him in family gatherings, and assisted him in countless ways, Andersen was never allowed to forget that he was not entirely one of them, for he was not a member of their class. Even in the days of his world-wide fame, when he was home with the Collins family he was still the cobbler's son from Odense. . . the Royal Theater's charity boy. . . the Little Match Girl with her nose pressed to the glass of a rich family's window.

Despite this bright beginning, the early years of his career were rocky ones — full of lows as well as highs and marred by unsympathetic reviews in the Danish press. It was not until his books and poems began to excite attention abroad, particularly in Germany, that critics started to take him seriously in his native land. This mixture of praise (from abroad) and censure (at home) was hurtful and confusing to Andersen, as were the intermingled messages of acceptance and rejection he received from his upper-class friends. He grew a protective armor of wit, but kept a tally of each hurt, each blow; and in later years, no praise was ever enough to balance the scorecard. He grew into a man with two distinct and conflicting sides to his nature. In his talents he was supremely confident, speaking candidly of his high ambitions and rhapsodizing over each success — which made him something of an oddity to his friends (and a figure of ridicule to his enemies) in a social milieu where displaying signs of personal ambition was frowned upon. Yet Andersen could also be sensitive, emotional, and hungry for approval to a debilitating degree. This made him, at times, an exasperating companion, but many found his friendship worth the trouble, for he was also capable of great warmth, humor, kindness, and moments of surprising wisdom.

3. Contradiction in the Style of his Works

3.1 Stories for Children, Ideas for Grown-up

While the majority of Andersen's tales can be enjoyed by children, the best of them are written for adults as well and lend themselves to varying interpretations according to the sophistication of the reader. Reading Andersen's prose after growing up with abridged and altered versions of his stories can be a surprising experience. Andersen wrote children's stories into which he carefully, skillfully embedded comedy, social critique, satire, and philosophy aimed at adult readers. Andersen pioneered this style, and many writers are indebted to him. "I seize on an idea for grown-ups," Andersen explained, "and then tell the story to the little ones while always remembering that Father and Mother often listen, and you must also give them something for their minds." His fairy tales can be read simply as magical adventures, but for the discerning reader they contain much more, bristling with characters drawn from Andersen's own life and from the many worlds he traveled through in his remarkable life's journey.

It's impossible today to fully understand the sensation these little stories caused, for nothing quite like them had ever been seen in Danish literature. The tales were revolutionary for several reasons. Across Europe, the field of children's fiction was still in its very early days and was still dominated by dull, pious stories intended to teach and inculcate moral values. Andersen's magical tales were rich as chocolate cake after a diet of wholesome gruel, and the narrative voice spoke familiarly, warmly, conspiratorially to children, rather than preaching to them from on high. Despite the Christian imagery recurrent in the tales (typical of nineteenth century fiction), these are remarkably earthy, anarchic, occasionally even amoral stories — comical, cynical, fatalistic by turns, rather than morally instructive. And unlike the folk tales collected by the Grimms, set in distant lands once upon a time, Andersen set his tales in Copenhagen and other familiar, contemporary settings, mixed fantastical descriptions with common ordinary ones, and invested everyday household objects (toys, dishes, etc.) with personalities and magic. Even the language of the stories was fresh and radical, as Jackie Wullschlager points out in *Hans Christian Andersen: The Life of a Storyteller*: "The raw and unpolished Danish of these first stories was so radical as to be considered vulgar at a time when literary convention demanded rigorous, high-flown sentiment of the sort practiced by the playwright Heiberg. Andersen, by contrast, was deliberately direct and informal."

Part of the problem was that Andersen spoke virtually no English, which led London society to view the writer as something of a simpleton. Also, his tales had been rendered into the English language by translators with limited literary skills, working from German texts, not the original Danish. Thus the versions of the tales that were best known to English readers (a problem that persists in some modern editions) were simpler, sweeter, less comic and ironic, than the ones that Andersen actually wrote.

This lack of sophistication in the English text caused Andersen to be labeled as a writer for children only, contrary to his broader reputation in the rest of Europe. His quiet, confused demeanor as he traveled through England (due to his inability to communicate) made the clever and witty Andersen appear as naive and child-like as his tales — and a myth was born, later portrayed on film by the actor Danny Kaye. Andersen himself railed against the notion of being viewed as a man who'd spent his life with children when he objected to the designs for a statue surrounding him with a circle of tykes. "I said loud and clear that I was dissatisfied . . . that my tales were just as much for older people as for children, who only understood the outer trappings and did not comprehend and take in the whole work until they were mature — that naiveté was only part of my tales, that humor was what really gave them their flavor."

Andersen carefully crafted the narration of his tales to evoke the power of oral storytelling, yet the narrative voice is a distinctive one, not the impersonal voice of most folk tales. He perfected his stories by reading them aloud within his social circle, and many a dinner party ended with children and adults alike clamoring for a story. As Andersen's fairy tales became known and loved, he found himself much in demand as a dinner guest, and he also began to receive requests to read his work in public. Though he hadn't been destined for an acting career, his youthful theatrical training served him well.

3.2 Stories of Tearful Joy

Andersen used to read his fairy tales in public. When people heard the story of the Little Girl with the Matches, they did not think of the author at all, but wept like a child, unconscious of everything around them; Adults are always reduced to tears by Andersen's tales — which are startling, fresh, and urgent in ways that we can only imagine, now that Andersen's stories have acquired the patina of age and familiarity. Nineteenth century readers were particularly affected by the way the tales gave voice to the powerless — the young, the poor, the very old — and imbued them with special strength, wisdom, and connection to the natural world (in opposition to the artifice of reason or the follies of society). In *Snow Queen*, Gerda, for instance, goes up against her rival (the rich, dazzling, coldly intellectual Snow Queen) armed only with her youth and compassion; in *The Emperor's New Clothes*, a child displays more wisdom than the King. We find this theme in traditional folk tales (the good-hearted peasant girl or boy whose kindness wins them riches or a crown), but Andersen gave such figures new life by placing them in contemporary settings, layering elements of sharp social critique into their stories.

Though Andersen's humor is indeed a salient characteristic of the tales (when they are well translated), what many readers remember most about Andersen's work is its overwhelming sadness. The Little Match Girl dies, the Little Mermaid is betrayed by her prince, the Fir Tree lies discarded after Christmas, sighing over past glories. Even tales that end happily — *The Snow Queen*, *The Ugly Duckling*, *Thumbelina*, *The Wild Swans* — are heart-wrenching in their depiction of anguish endured along the way. Many readers find reading Andersen's tales a particularly wrenching experience — and yet they read them over and over, both attracted to and disturbed by their unflinching depiction of pain.

The febrile clarity and propulsion [of the story] is accomplished at the expense of the reader's nerves. Especially taxing are the claims on the reader by both Kay and Gerda. Who has not, like Gerda, been exiled from the familiar comforts of one's world by the departure or defection of a beloved?

In Cassel (also part of Germany), he introduced himself to folklorist Jacob Grimm, then ran away mortified because Grimm had never heard of his stories. Wilhelm Grimm, who had read Andersen's tales, later sought him out in Copenhagen, and Anderson grew quite friendly with the Brothers Grimm and their Cassel circle of folklore enthusiasts.

4. Contradiction in Anderson's Love

Andersen himself was a physically awkward and homely man. "I shall have no success with my appearance," he once wrote, appraising himself with blunt honesty, "so I make use of whatever is available." And he was prone to harboring passions for people he could never have. Publicly, Andersen courted two women during his lifetime: the sister of a student friend, who soon became engaged to another, and the Swedish singer Jenny Lind, who could offer him only friendship. (He wrote his lovely tale *The Nightingale* for Jenny Lind.) Privately, he was more deeply obsessed with men: first with Edward Collins, then with a young theology student, and finally in, his later years, with a handsome young ballet dancer — the later of whom returned his interest, at least to some degree. This was an aspect of his life that was long ignored by Andersen scholars until Wullschlager explored its impact on the writer's work in *Hans Christian Andersen: The Life of a Storyteller*. Wullschlager notes that if Andersen had been alive today, his life — and thus his art — would have been very different.

Passion repressed is a very important theme found just below the surface of Andersen's fairy tales. We see this theme most clearly in *The Steadfast Tin Soldier*, written in 1838. The story is unusual among Andersen's early tales, both in its emphasis on sensual desire and in its ambiguities. Blind fate, not intention, determines all events. Moreover, the narrative questions the very decorum it praises. The tin soldier's passive acceptance of whatever happens to him, while exemplifying pietistic ideals of self-denial, also contributes to his doom. Were he to speak and act, the soldier might gain both life and love. Restrained, however, by inhibition and convention, he finds only tragedy and death. The tale is often read autobiographically, with the soldier viewed as symbolizing Andersen's feelings of inadequacy with women, his passive acceptance of bourgeois class attitudes, or his sense of alienation as an artist and an outsider, from full participation in everyday life.

And that would have been a great pity, for Andersen achieved something remarkable: he created tales that are read and loved and told anew by each new generation; that are still inspiring writers, artists, and dramatists to this day. The most prestigious award in children's books is called the Hans Christian Andersen Medal, and Andersen's influence can also be seen in fiction written for adults.

5. Conclusion

As a dramatist, Andersen failed almost absolutely. But many of his poems are still a part of living Danish literature, and his most enduring contributions, are fairy tales, his travel books and his autobiography. It is just in this contradiction and unity that Andersen's works can be so splendid and simple, so bright and profound. Does life imitate art? Does art imitate life? It is a question full of contradiction in Hans Christian Andersen's case, although he had made quite a name for himself. Contradiction leads to a miracle. In 1867, when he was 62 years old, Andersen returned to Odense. A choir sang, and the entire city was illuminated in his honor. "A star of fortune hangs above me," Andersen once wrote. "Thousands have deserved it more than I; often I cannot understand why this good should have been vouchsafed to me among so many thousands. But if the star should set, even while I am penning these lines, be it so; still I can say it has shone, and I have received a rich portion." Andersen, the ugly duckling, now became a swan, died in 1875, and his stories live on all over the world. Indeed, Europe, as well as the world, loves him forever. Anderson's success is by no means an accidental phenomenon and his works can not be interpreted in a narrow sense as just fairy tales only for children, they not only act as the children and adolescents' primers, but also have profound influence on the adult literature.

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