

The Hans Christian Andersen House of Fairytales

Notes on values, motifs and modern themes in the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen

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Jacob Bøggild has produced a note on the fairy-realm of Hans Christian Andersen. The present note seeks to add to his perspective by presenting a combination of motifs, themes and values, encompassing Andersen's motifs as well as modern, social values, in order to grasp the experience of the modern reader when faced with the works of Hans Christian Andersen.

These themes are described below in a highly condensed form, as so-called 'points of value'.

The Mould Breaker

Hans Christian Andersen saw himself as a marsh plant; deeply rooted in mire and mud, constantly extending towards the sunlight. In this present age, millions of people are confronted with the imperative to move – culturally, socially – in order to make a life for themselves. Today, at the dawn of the 21st century, breaking a pattern of heritage is the modern condition, worldwide. Innovation, flexibility and mobility are in demand in high-income countries. In order to fulfill this ideal, one must depart from traditions and from social and cultural circumstances. The ideal presupposes the ability to break moulds. To Hans Christian Andersen, breaking a life form or mould was an equally pain- and fruitful process. He had to 'invent' an entirely novel genre; his fairy tales and stories take their point of departure in tradition, yet they also break free of tradition in many ways. A number of Andersen's fairy tales feature the mould breaker in ways that echo the modern category of experience. "The Ugly Duckling" is the archetypal mould breaker, while the story of "The Little Mermaid" provides nuance and existential-spiritual drama to the transformative experience. In order to become herself, the mermaid must first lose herself, mirroring the fundamental circumstance of millions of people today.

Seeking Identity

The mould-breaking, restless Hans Christian Andersen never settled down, neither socially nor artistically. His fairy tales never settled in a main matrix or form, just as he himself never found a single, stable identity – except that of the artist. His work, especially the fairy tales, contains the openness of the search for identity that marks the modern condition. One of the pillars of 21st century youth culture – in the West and in cultures under Western influence, at least – is identity search as an ongoing process. Many of Andersen's fairy tales depict transformation and its costs; "The Sweethearts; or, The Top and the Ball", "The Shadow" and "The Galoshes of Fortune" are variants on the theme.

Other stories that describe the struggle of the 'misplaced' to find their true purpose include

“Thumbelina”, “The Ugly Duckling”, and “Clumsy Hans”, all of which relate the possibilities of another, inner self.

The Restless Traveler

Examples of the necessity of travel are found in “The Snow Queen”, “The Ice Maiden”, “The Story of a Mother”, “The Traveling Companion” and “The Flying Trunk”. In these stories, protagonists must in travel order to realize their purpose and identity. To Hans Christian Andersen, life was the journey no one could decline to take; traveling from the imaginary realms of childhood through adulthood and old age towards Death’s gate, through which the journey would continue in the Kingdom of God. To travel *is* to live, according to Andersen, life *is* a journey. Mankind in the 21st century knows this to be true, albeit in a stricter, more categorical sense: either as the journey up the career ladder, across borders as fugitives, or as tourists, traversing the globe in giant strides.

Imagination and the Unexpected

The fairy tales and stories of Hans Christian Andersen open up fantastical spaces where much can be imagined and lived differently. The Money Pig, The Shepherdess and the Chimney-Sweep, The Nightingale, Anty Toothache, Clumsy Hans and the great Picturebook without Pictures are stories that extend canvases of imaginative power in the minds of their readers or listeners. Today, the ability to wonder, to imagine, is in demand like never before.

Recognition and Narcissism

Hans Christian Andersen spent his whole life – not least his life as an artist – seeking the recognition he never felt himself sure of, even as he became a celebrated writer. The desire to be validated through the gaze of the other exists in most of his fairy tales, with “The Steadfast Tin Soldier” perhaps treating this desire in most direct terms. Today, psychologists and scholars ascribe desire for recognition to the modern formation of self, calling it affirmative mirroring of the self or ‘secondary narcissism’. These central features of modern identity have to do with presence, visibility, performance and find their parallels in the large numbers of inner mirrors in Andersen’s tales, one of them being “The Snow Queen”, where inner and outer self-images must be aligned.

Objects and Magic

In the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen, animals and objects – a darned needle, a ball –, may appear such as they are: as animals, objects. At the same time, they may be endowed with human emotions, motives and values. Andersen’s fairy-realm foreshadowed the fixation on objects in modern attitudes, even if Asian traditions of storytelling for centuries have operated with a concept of animated objects – something Asian readers of Andersen immediately recognize.

Irony and Humor

The fairy tales are fantastically witty, not least because of Andersen’s ingenious play on words; turns of phrase and sayings are often taken literally: a child’s experience of the world is given faithful expression in “The Snow Queen” when Kay is offered “the whole world and a new pair of skates” and there is no mistaking time and place in the following opening lines: “The Emperor of

China is a Chinaman, as you most likely know, and everyone around him is a Chinaman too". In "The Ugly Duckling", a hen wants to know if the duckling lays eggs - if not, whatever could its purpose be? Irony figures in Andersen's work as a literal take on the functionality of objects. Irony and humor are worldwide phenomena, but subtleties are sometimes lost in translation. Hans Christian Andersen's literary body of work is aided in this respect by his paper cuttings, collages and other material output, as these illustrations often convey the same turns of phrase and mind articulated in his written work.