

## The fairy-realm of Hans Christian Andersen

By Jacob Bøggild, professor

"Andersen was a visionary tale-teller, but his fairy-realm was malign." This gnomic and enigmatic statement is put forward at the end of an introduction by Harold Bloom to a collection of essays about Andersen's fairy tales by a number of scholars. He does not specify what the malignity consists in – which is why the statement is enigmatic. But he is correct in stating that Andersen's fairy tales make up a realm of their own. This realm is complex and unlike anything else in world literature.

Andersen first published his tales as "fairy-tales narrated for children". But later on he changed this for "fairy tales and stories". Some of his stories still contain elements that relate to – but seldom obey – the conventions of the fairy tale as a genre, others do not contain any such elements. But all the tales and stories still belong to the same realm. Andersen never wrote a tale without considering its place or position in his *oeuvre* of tales as a whole. A lot of his tales thus contain evident or more subtle allusions to other of his tales. In the case of the subtle references they might well have been lost in most translations.

Thus, it was an integral and important part of Andersen's poetics that his output of tales was a united whole and he was, as mentioned, very careful about the place or position of each one of them in this whole. For example he carefully arranged his last collection of tales so the tale "Auntie Toothache" (1872) was placed as the last one – and thus as the last one among his published tales – even though it was not the last one he wrote. In this way this tale is positioned as his literary testament or "famous last words". And it refers directly back to a scene or motif in the strange caprice which gave him his first serious breakthrough – a local one in Copenhagen, though – the imaginary travelogue *Journey on Foot* (1829)

That Andersen's tales constitute a whole was acknowledged by Andersen's first serious critic, Georg Brandes, in 1870: "The fairy tales form a whole, a cobweb radiating in manifold directions, which appears to say to the beholder what the spider says in Aladdin [a play by the Danish romantic writer Oehlenschläger]: 'Behold my delicate web, how the threads intertwine!'" This insight has been reformulated by a much later, but quite as perceptive critic, Klaus P. Mortensen, who has edited a recent collection of all of Andersen's works, in 2007: "Already from the time of his breakthrough in the 1830's, Andersen is light-years ahead of most of the literature of his time. His universe is not static, centred, but constantly expanding, escaping all centeredness. What is universal in him is at the end of the day not some kind of higher common denominator, but a perpetually sprouting profusion. And the fairy tale, in the widest sense of the term, is the genre of this profusion par excellence."

Brandes also identifies a very important aspect of Andersen's fairy-realm. He directs the attention to a work called *Aesthetic Investigations* in which the reader will be able to see "the whole order of aesthetic concepts, placed in opposition to each other with all their nuances, and arranged in order to form one big star – just like Andersen intended as regards his fairy tales".

Andersen's tales are indeed very often governed by the interaction of opposites, while the individual tale at the same time represents one pole in opposition to another or several other tales. But the apparently clear-cut oppositions are always relativized either in the individual tale itself or because of its position in the play of oppositions taking place in the wider context of the realm of the tales as a whole. Of course some of Andersen's characters are inherently good, while others, like The Snow Queen or the Ice Maiden, are evil. But what matters is never the simple relief of Good conquering Evil. This might well be one reason why Harold Bloom refers to this realm as "malign".

Brandes points to yet another central aspect of this realm: "While the fairy tales as a whole are always united by an idea, this whole can, as regards the form, be compared to the fantastic, decorative paintings in which peculiarly stylized plants, lively flowers, doves, peacocks and human forms intertwine in interchanging ways." He thus, just like Klaus P. Mortensen, indirectly point out that Andersen's tales constitute a whole which is composed in the mode of the arabesque: A mode of composition governed by a dynamic interplay of opposites which is never arrested but always on the move, always sprouting new constellations.

Another important aspect of Andersen's fairy tales is that little interest is taken in plot in the traditional sense. Rarely does he create any real suspense in his tales. The telling and the underlying tension between opposites are far more important than the immediate action which is related. A very good example is the denouement of "The Snow Queen", the greatest quest tale of Andersen's, his purest romance. When the little girl, Gerda, arrives at the palace of the demonic agent, the Snow Queen – she is absent! There is no final showdown and even if the little boy, Kay, is rescued, Evil is still at large somewhere out in the wide world. One can also think of "The Little Mermaid". In the Disney adaption there is a grand final showdown and the action obeys all the conventions of the folk tale proper. The heroine overcomes the obstacles she is faced with and conquers her antagonist – receiving help from several helpers in accomplishing this – and in the end she marries her prince in order to, one must presume, live happily ever after. In the case of Andersen's original tale none – absolutely none! – of this applies.

Thus, Andersen's tales are complex and unpredictable in themselves and as a unified whole, even if his characters are more flat than they are round. The complexity of Andersen's tales is not at all matched by any psychological complexity of his characters. The complexity of the tales rather pertains to the environment the characters are situated in. It is an unpredictable and often hostile environment which is governed by chance. Even if "The Snow Queen" is a tale about the power of love and innocence and, in being such a tale, a powerful Christian allegory, the environment is by no means governed by any divine plot or master scheme. In spite of the fact that Gerda has a goal, she roams aimlessly about for most of the story. Only when a couple of pigeons overhear her telling her story thus far to a little robber girl, does she find a direction to follow. The pigeons were the sole survivors when The Snow Queen flew closely over their nest and therefore they know where her castle is and can inform Gerda about it. In other words, they survived by pure chance. And it is pure chance that they overhear Gerda telling her story to the robber girl.

Andersen thus displays an acute sense of what philosophically is referred to as contingency – the state or situation which is the human condition in a modern world where no idea of a divine master scheme can be maintained and where the chance is the governing principle. This is one aspect which makes him a modern writer. Another is the true nature of his fairy-realm as it has been characterized above. It is very important that a house dedicated to and representing this realm reflects all of this, since it probably, in a manner of speaking, has so far been almost entirely lost in translation.