

# The ugly duckling

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## Key ideas

Identity. Change. Social relations. Meaning of life.

## Background: Philosophy and literacy

It can be hard to use very well-known stories as stimuli for philosophical inquiries because both facilitator and students will come to the inquiry with fixed prior opinions of what the story is about. The same challenge confronts literary interpretation in school settings. This is especially the case for stories with the status of “cultural icons” such as is the case with Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Ugly Duckling”. The manual below is designed to evade this problem by suggesting a focus on non-standard themes and activities.

The manual draws on ideas offered by workshop participants in the 2018 SOPHIA Network Meeting with the theme Children’s Literature, Critical Literacy and Philosophy with Children.

## Stimulus

Read H.C. Andersen’s fairy tale: The Ugly Duckling

(Available here: [http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheUglyDuckling\\_e.html](http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheUglyDuckling_e.html))

## Task questions for entire story

- Is the duckling the same in the beginning of the story as in the end?
- Is the duckling the hero of the story?
- Is the duckling a praiseworthy creature?

And then, re-read the passage about the scene in the house ending with “Believe me, I tell you this for your own good. I say unpleasant truths, but that’s the only way you can know who your friends are. Be sure now that you lay some eggs. See to it that you learn to purr or to make sparks about the cat and the hen in the house.”

## Task questions for the scene in the house

- Is the hen telling the truth?
- Would this part of the story be different if retold from the point of view of the cat?

## Additional activities

- Have the students act out (a part of) the story wearing masks to play the different characters
- Let the students re-write the fairy tale in other genres (for instance, in that of a sitcom, a horror movie or a “duck tabloid”)
- You can also re-tell the story (or part of it) accompanied by pictures that go against the usual illustration (for instance, choose a picture of a scary or truly ugly duck and a very cute cat)

Ask the same key questions as above.