

Title: The Underduckling: Hans Christian Andersen

Author(s): Alison Lurie

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[(essay date 2003) *In the following essay, Lurie explores the interplay between the narrative and thematic details of Andersen's fairy tales and various elements from his own personal history.*]

In "**The Ugly Duckling**"--which generations of readers have recognized as an allegory of Hans Christian Andersen's own life--the unattractive, awkward, lowborn hero becomes a swan without any effort on his part. That ending, more than anything else in the story, makes it a fantasy. Andersen began life as one of the most gawky and disadvantaged ducks that ever waddled out of a mud pond. But he transformed himself into a swan only partially, and by long and exhausting effort.

From his earliest years as the son of a dreamy, improvident cobbler and a half-illiterate washerwoman in a small Danish town, he was what would now be called a freak. He was tall and thin and clumsy; he seldom played with other children, and his greatest delight, he wrote later, "was in making clothes for my dolls."¹

Andersen's odd appearance was not just a childhood affliction. When he was in his sixties, a traveling companion described him as

... strange and bizarre in his movements and carriage. His arms and legs were long and thin and out of all proportion, his hands were broad and flat, and his feet of ... gigantic dimensions. ... His nose [was] so disproportionately large that it seemed to dominate his whole face.²

Andersen was aware that he looked peculiar; as his most recent biographer, Jackie Wullschlager, tells us, he described himself in a letter to Charles Dickens as "one who seemed to have fallen from the skies."³ He was suggesting that he was a kind of otherworldly phenomenon, part child, part fool, and part natural philosopher--what at the time was called a "mooncalf."

Andersen was never a fool, and only occasionally a philosopher, but in a sense he remained a child all his life, with a child's egotism and a child's intense and volatile emotions. In the language of today's psychology, he was acutely bipolar. He was often either wild with joy or in deep despair, wishing that he were dead. As he wrote at twenty-nine, "My pain is crushing when I suffer, but my joy when I'm happy is also inexpressible."⁴ He also had a child's naive but penetrating view of adult pretension and self-deception, like the little boy at the end of "**The Emperor's New Clothes**," who exclaims that the ruler has nothing on.

Also, like a child, Andersen saw everything in the world as alive and conscious. In his stories not only animals and birds, but also bugs and toys and flowers and even household objects have complex human personalities. In one of his tales a saucepan and a bunch of matches relate their life stories, and an earthenware pitcher proposes that they "have an intellectual entertainment."⁵ In another tale a "decent, respectable Old Street Lamp" who is about to be retired reflects on her life. She "felt very much as a superannuated ballet-dancer feels when she is dancing for the last time, and knows that tomorrow and ever after she will sit alone in her attic chamber, morning, noon, and night, unthought of and uncared for by the generous public."⁶

For Andersen, like his Street Lamp, public attention was essential. When he was thirteen, a troupe of traveling actors came to town, and Andersen somehow convinced the manager of the theater to give him a walk-on part. To his mind, he was the center of the production. "I was always the first there, put on the red silk costume, spoke my line and believed that the whole audience thought only of me," he wrote later.⁷

From an early age Andersen sought out those who could help him toward the fame he craved. He wrote letters to well-known people and called on them, begging them to listen to him sing and recite poems and stories. Anyone who has ever been in a play or published a book will recognize the type--the awkward, odd-looking, self-conscious, very young man or woman who hangs about after the show or the reading, demanding attention, insisting on reciting a speech for you, singing a song, or showing you their half-baked, over-iced poems and stories. It is often clear from the manner of these people that they are convinced they are geniuses, and are in fact doing you a favor.

The surprising thing is that once in a while someone like this is in fact a genius. This was the case with Hans Christian Andersen; but for a long time no one agreed with him. From childhood on he was convinced of his own remarkable gifts, but by the age of thirty he had failed as a singer, a dancer, and an actor. He had managed to make a thin sort of living by writing poetry and accounts of his travels in Denmark, Germany, and Italy; his sentimental novel, *Only a Fiddler*, about a poor Italian boy who achieves fame as a singer was praised by some critics. If his life had ended then, no one would have remembered him. But instead, almost by accident, he discovered his true calling as a teller of fairy stories for children.

Today, this is a legitimate occupation: successful children's writers are world famous and often very rich. But in Denmark in Andersen's day, children's literature was moralistic and drab, and fairy tales were published only by scholars.⁸ When Andersen wrote his first tales in 1835, he would probably have known the collections of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm in Germany, and their Danish follower, Matthias Winther, whose *Danish Folk Tales* had appeared in 1823.

Unlike the Grimms and Winther, however, Andersen did not just write down the stories he had heard as a child from his mother and grandmother; he went on to compose new tales of his own. And even when he retold an existing story, he made dramatic changes. In "**The Tinderbox**," for instance, the Princess marries the soldier at the end not because she loves him, but for practical reasons: her parents are dead, and "she liked [being queen] much better than living a prisoner in the copper palace."⁹

The heroes and heroines in the Grimms' tales and other traditional collections usually meet their reward on earth: they kill the giant, rescue the prince or princess, win a kingdom, and live happily ever after. By contrast, many of Andersen's stories end unhappily. In my collection of forty-eight of his best-known stories, twenty finish with a death, though sometimes the character who dies is

rewarded by eternal life. After Andersen's Little Match Girl perishes of the cold, for instance, the spirit of her grandmother carries her off to Paradise.

In a few of his best stories, however, Andersen provides a happy ending. Little Gerda, in "**The Snow Queen**," rescues Kai from the icy palace of the enchantress, where his heart has been frozen solid and he spends all day trying to fit sharp flat pieces of ice together in what Andersen calls "the ice-puzzle of reason." When Gerda, weeping, embraces him, the ice in his heart dissolves, and they fall into each other's arms.

Yet mutual romantic love is very rare in Andersen's tales. Again and again, his protagonists are rejected by those they court--and in this they share the unhappy experience of their author. All his life, Andersen continually fell in love with upperclass or titled persons, both male and female. Though he made many acquaintances, he had almost no romantic success: these people liked having him come to their houses, tell stories to their children, and sign books, but their attitude always remained one of friendly, slightly distant patronage. For years he tried, often in the most embarrassing manner, to get Edvard Collin, the handsome son of his first important patron in Copenhagen, to call him by the familiar pronoun "Du"; Edvard continued to refuse, remarking that though it was a trivial thing, he had "an innate dislike" of it, similar to the dislike a woman he knew felt for wrapping paper "so much that she was sick whenever she saw it. ... When someone whom I respect and like and have known a long time, asks me to say 'Du,' then this nasty and inexplicable feeling surfaces within me."¹⁰

Andersen never really recovered from this chilly rebuff, nor from the rejection he received from many other young, beautiful, and aristocratic people. Yet he continued setting his sights unreasonably high; sometimes it seems as if what he really wanted was a hopeless romantic love. Occasionally he altered facts to put a better spin on these events, declaring that he had never loved the person involved, or that circumstances, rather than their own feelings, had separated them. When he was twenty-five, he fell in love simultaneously with two siblings, Christian Voight and his sister Riborg, the children of a wealthy merchant. Riborg was already secretly engaged to a man her parents disapproved of, which may have been part of the attraction. After Riborg turned him down, he told friends that she didn't mean anything to him, but he later wrote to Edvard with a more romantic version of the story:

... last summer I met a rich, lovely, spirited girl who feels the same for me as I do for her ... certain circumstances made her marry a man who took her fortune.¹¹

The emphasis on wealth in this statement leaves rather a bad taste in the mouth, and suggests that Andersen may not have felt any more real passion for Riborg than she felt for him; "certain circumstances" was a euphemism for the fact that she was in love with the other man. When, toward the end of his life, Andersen did manage to establish a happy but short-lived sexual relationship, it was with a young man.

The heroes of Andersen's tales are no more successful romantically than he was, and often for the same reasons: they aspire to union with persons or objects of a higher social class. The cardboard dancer in "**The Steadfast Tin Soldier**" pays no attention to the protagonist, and in "**The Top and the Ball**," the Top's proposal of marriage is scorned by the Ball, "who was made of morocco leather, and fancied herself a very fashionable young lady."¹²

A recurrent theme in Andersen's tales is social snobbery and social ambition. Even inanimate objects feel it: the Darning-needle tries to pass herself off as a Sewing-needle, and the Buckwheat considers himself superior to all the other plants in the field. Andersen too was obsessed with the idea of rising in society. All his life he would seek out rich and titled people, the richer and more titled the better,

and he spent some of his happiest moments as the guest of royalty. He spent months traveling among small German kingdoms, staying with one royal family after another, and entertaining them and their children by telling stories. His friends back in Copenhagen did not always approve of this. When he wrote to Jonas Collin, boasting "that while he was ignored at home, Berlin high society gathered round him," Jonas was unimpressed. According to Andersen's current biographer, he wrote back saying "what an empty life, he didn't care to crawl about on the floor with the children of dukes, wasn't Andersen going to write anything?"¹³

One thing that makes Andersen's weaknesses and faults forgivable is that from his earliest years he was aware of them. "My nasty vanity sneaks in," he wrote to a friend from the awful boarding school to which he was sent at nineteen by well-meaning patrons who wanted him to receive a proper conventional education. "[T]here is a kind of unpleasant dreaminess in me, something restless and impulsive in my soul. ..."¹⁴

Andersen was also able to take a humorous attitude toward his own character. As he became more successful he developed a passion for travel, most often to warmer countries where he was already famous; and he indulged this passion constantly in spite of his continuing hypochondria and anxiety. When he was on the road, he was often seasick and consumed by fears of dogs and brigands; he had the obsessive idea that one of his fellow travelers might be crazy and planning to murder him. He recognized the irrationality of all this, though he could not overcome it. "Oh, how good I am at finding things to worry about," he once wrote in his diary.¹⁵

Jackie Wullschlager's extensive examination of this strange, deeply self-conscious writer and his work is a remarkable achievement: thoughtful, comprehensively researched, and wonderfully readable. Ms. Wullschlager spent many months in Denmark; she was able to read Andersen's tales and letters and journals in the original, and correct earlier translations. Her comments on the meaning of the stories, and their relation to his life, are often fascinating--and so is the impression her book gives of her own feelings about Andersen.

Biographers, who necessarily spend many years in the imaginary company of their subjects, usually end up even more devoted to them than they were at first. Yet Wullschlager's book sometimes gives the impression that as time went on she became more and more exasperated with Andersen. She portrays him as deeply annoying, vain, and egotistic, suffering from "wild imagination, inner rage, tormenting anxieties and hypochondria, insatiable ambition."¹⁶ But she also gives him credit for his charm, brilliance, originality, and--perhaps most striking of all to the reader who knows Andersen only through his works--his sophisticated self-knowledge.

As a writer, Wullschlager has some of Andersen's own down-to-earth originality and humor. When she describes Copenhagen as Andersen would have seen it for the first time at fourteen, when he left home to make his fortune, she remarks that the city "still had the layout of a fortress. ... Within, the buildings were forced upwards like asparagus and arranged like flowerpots on a ledge."¹⁷

Wullschlager attributes much of Andersen's insatiable ambition to the loneliness and persecution he suffered as an ugly, clumsy, effeminate child who was teased and bullied by other children and ashamed of his family. All his life he was painfully aware not only of his mother's drinking, but of the fact that his aunt kept a whorehouse and his uncle was in the local insane asylum. And though he gloried in the role of the poor boy who becomes rich and famous, he had a lifelong dread that these

shameful connections would resurface. In Denmark, where some of his history was known, and not all his books were praised by the critics, he seldom felt properly appreciated and safe. As he grew older he began to turn against his native land. From Paris, he wrote to a friend in Copenhagen, with characteristic exaggeration:

Here, in this big strange city, Europe's most famous and noble personalities fondly surround me, ... and at home boys sit spitting at my heart's dearest creation! ... The Danes are evil, cold, satanic--a people well suited to the wet, mouldy-green island ... my home has sent me a fever from its cold, wet forests, which the Danes gaze upon and believe they love; but I don't believe in love in the North, but in evil treachery.¹⁸

Though he became world famous in his lifetime, Andersen's ambition was never quite satisfied. In a sense it never could be. As his biographer says, "Even after he was famous and secure, his need for constant recognition and praise was pathological, and he craved admiration like a shot of an addictive drug."¹⁹ Andersen, of course, knew this about himself. "My name is gradually starting to shine, and that is the only thing I live for. ... I covet honour in the same way as a miser covets gold,"²⁰ he admitted in a letter.

Jackie Wullschlager praises Andersen because, she believes, "he gave voice ... to groups which had traditionally been mute and oppressed--children, the poor, those who did not fit social or sexual stereotypes."²¹ It is true that in some of Andersen's tales disadvantaged persons, animals, and objects receive attention and sympathy. But very often their one-down position is also their downfall. If they aspire to higher status, and especially to union with higher-status people, animals, or objects, they are usually disappointed. The Fir Tree dreams of glory as a Christmas tree, but when he achieves this it does not satisfy him. "It must be that something still greater, still more splendid, must happen--but what?"²² the Fir Tree muses; and he ends up dead on a rubbish heap.

It is true that Andersen's Ugly Duckling becomes a swan, and is welcomed by the other swans, but in his case heredity takes precedence over environment. As Andersen put it in his story, "It matters not to have been born in a duck-yard, if one has been hatched from a swan's egg."²³

Although Andersen wrote more than 150 tales, only a handful of them are usually reprinted in collections for children. There is a good reason for this: though some of his stories are brilliant and moving, most are sad, distressing, or even terrifying. As a child I was frightened and upset by many of them, especially those in which a little girl misbehaves and is horribly punished. The crime that seemed to cause the most awful result was vanity, and it was always little girls who met this fate, never little boys. In "**The Red Shoes**," for instance, Karen thinks of her new morocco-leather shoes even when she is in church, and as a result she is condemned to dance in them to exhaustion; she is only saved from death when she asks the local executioner to chop off her feet with his axe. Even worse in some ways was "**The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf**." In this tale a "proud and arrogant" child called Inger also comes to grief because of love of her new shoes. In order to keep them clean, she throws a loaf of bread into the mud for a stepping-stone. As a result of this wasteful but trivial act, Inger and her shoes sink down into the dark, muddy marsh, where she finds herself in a foul-smelling cave

filled with noisome toads and slimy snakes. Little Inger fell among all this horrid living filth; it was so icy cold that she shuddered from head to foot, and her limbs grew quite stiff. The loaf stuck fast to her feet and it drew her down. ...

Long years pass, and Inger only escapes from the toads and snakes after a good old woman, on her deathbed, remembers hearing Inger's story as a child and pities her.

I was also deeply disturbed by one of Andersen's most famous tales, "**The Little Mermaid**," in which the heroine gives up her voice and agrees that every step she takes will feel like walking on knives, so as to have the chance of attracting the love of a prince whom she first saw at his birthday party on board a ship. When he finds the Little Mermaid on the seashore, dressed only in her long green hair, he adopts her as a kind of pet. But, like the wellborn young men and women whom Andersen loved, he does not think of her as a romantic partner, and marries a princess. The mermaid dies of grief; but after death she is transfigured, and joins the spirits of the air who "fly invisibly through the dwellings of men, wherever there are children."

Though the Little Mermaid was presented as romantically admirable, I took her story as a warning against self-sacrificial and hopeless love. I did not realize that in this tale Andersen had foretold his own future. He would be rejected again and again by those he loved most, but unlike the Little Mermaid he never gave up his voice, and the best of the stories he told would survive for hundreds of years, "wherever there are children."

Notes

1. Hans Christian Andersen, *The Fairy Tale of My Life*, quoted in Wullschlager, *Hans Christian Andersen*, p. 20.
2. William Bloch, quoted in Wullschlager, *Hans Christian Andersen*, p. 7.
3. Wullschlager, *Hans Christian Andersen*, p. 4.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 135.
5. Andersen, *Fairy Tales and Legends*, p. 355.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 205.
7. *H. C. Andersen's Levnedsbog*, edited by H. Topsoe-Jensen, quoted in Wullschlager, *Hans Christian Andersen*, p. 29.
8. In eighteenth-century France, however, there had been a vogue among aristocratic women for elaborate fairy tales of the sort associated with Charles Perrault and Madame d'Aulnoy, the author of "Beauty and the Beast."
9. Andersen, *Fairy Tales and Legends*, p. 107.
10. Edvard Collin, quoted in Wullschlager, *Hans Christian Andersen*, p. 109.
11. Letter to Edvard Collin, quoted in Wullschlager, *Hans Christian Andersen*, p. 110.
12. Andersen, *Fairy Tales and Legends*, p. 69.

13. Ibid., pp. 273-74.
14. Wullschlager, *Hans Christian Andersen*, pp. 70-71.
15. Journal for May 4, 1841, quoted in Wullschlager, *Hans Christian Andersen*, p. 200.
16. Wullschlager, *Hans Christian Andersen*, p. 6.
17. Ibid., p. 34.
18. Ibid., p. 215.
19. Ibid., pp. 49-50.
20. Ibid., p. 179.
21. Ibid., p. 5.
22. Andersen, *Fairy Tales and Legends*, p. 116.
23. Ibid., p. 226.

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Hans Christian Andersen. (1844). It was lovely summer weather in the country, and the golden corn, the green oats, and the haystacks piled up in the meadows looked beautiful. The stork walking about on his long red legs chattered in the Egyptian language, which he had learnt from his mother. The corn-fields and meadows were surrounded by large forests, in the midst of which were deep pools. It was, indeed, delightful to walk about in the country. In a sunny spot stood a pleasant old farm-house close by a deep river, and from the house down to the water side grew great burdock leaves, so high, that under the tallest of them a little child could stand upright. The spot was as wild as the centre of a thick wood. Hans Kristian Andersen. Character Artist @ Epic Games. Oslo, Norway. hanska.artstation.com. Hans Kristian Andersen. Portfolio. Portfolio. Hans Kristian Andersen has disabled new messages. Go to conversation. What is this message about? Summary: Hans Christian Andersen's classic tales are filled with fantasy, folklore, and wonder. The Ugly Prince Duckling takes you and your family on a new adventure " on a new medium " playing Andersen himself. Meet the Princess. Day after day she gazes longingly out her window upon the fascinating Hans Christian Andersen's classic tales are filled with fantasy, folklore, and wonder. The Ugly Prince Duckling takes you and your family on a new adventure " on a new medium " playing Andersen himself. Meet the Princess. Day after day she gazes longingly out her window upon the fascinating world below her. On her 15th birthday, tired of her boring privileged life, she decides to leave the royal palace against her father's wishes in search of adventure. Hans Christian Andersen (/hɑːndɪˈændərsən/, Danish: [hɑːnˈd̥ʌ̃ˀnd̥ʌ̃ˀstjɑːn ɛːˈnɛsn̩] (listen); 2 April 1805 " 4 August 1875), in Denmark usually called H.C. Andersen, was a Danish author. Although a prolific writer of plays, travelogues, novels, and poems, he is best remembered for his fairy tales. Andersen's fairy tales, consisting of 156 stories across nine volumes and translated into more than 125 languages, have become culturally embedded in the West's collective consciousness, readily accessible to children... Written by Hans Christian Andersen, The Ugly Duckling was published for the first time in 1843 and has been printed in fairy tale collections ever since. By Hans Christian Andersen. It was delightful out in the country: it was summer, and the corn fields were golden, the oats were green, the hay had been put up in stacks in the green meadows, and the stork went about on his long red legs and chattered Egyptian, for this was the language he had learned from his mother.