



Everything Ends Up in the Rubbish

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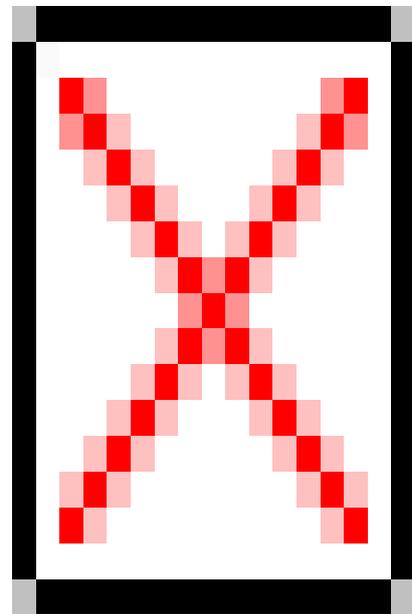
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Neil Philip on Hans Christian Andersen's unhappy endings

The conventional view that all fairy tales end 'happily ever after' doesn't hold true even for traditional tales: there are, for instance, 'Cinderella' stories with unhappy endings. In the case of the Danish master of the literary fairy tale, Hans Christian Andersen, many of his tales end bleakly. The last line of his last tale 'Auntie Toothache' is, 'Everything ends up in the rubbish.'

Where do Andersen's persistent themes of grief, shame, and disillusion come from?

To say that H. C. Andersen was not happy in his skin understates the extent of his inner misery, which is shown throughout his diaries, but sanitised in his self-serving autobiography, 'The Fairy Tale of My Life'. It is in his fairy tales that Andersen tells the true story of his inner life.



If Andersen had read 'A Divine Looking-Glass' by the Muggletonian prophet John Reeve, he would have had great fellow-feeling with the exclamation, 'O that I had never been born, or that I had been a toad, or any other created being, but a man.' Andersen had imagined himself as a toad, a duckling, and every kind of inanimate object from a darning needle to a teapot. And almost all these self-incarnations are infused with melancholy: like the Steadfast Tin Soldier, whose paint is worn away, 'whether from the hardships of his journey or the bitterness of his grief, no one could tell.'

Anyone who has stood in the tiny one-room apartment where he lived with his parents, which was also his father's cobbler's workshop, understands the extreme and desperate poverty of Andersen's upbringing. Images of his pauper childhood flicker through the opening scenes of his jagged masterpiece 'The Snow Queen'. The horror of his washerwoman mother's alcoholism sears through the little-known story 'She Was No Good', in which he depicts her

standing knee-deep in the freezing river for hours, sustained only by swigs from her bottle. 'It's the washerwoman,' the mayor says. 'Drunk again! She's no good. It's a shame for that lad of hers. I feel sorry for him—his mother is no good.'

Andersen certainly felt that 'shame' keenly. He was also bitterly ashamed of his half-sister Karen Marie, who worked as a Copenhagen prostitute, distancing himself from her by calling her 'my mother's daughter'. He took his revenge in his most merciless story, **'The Red Shoes'**, in which a girl named Karen is punished for her sinful delight in her new shoes by being made to dance till she begs for her feet to be cut off.

Andersen was merciless to himself too, to his vanity, his ridiculous hyper-sensitivity. In the story where he imagines himself as a snail, the snail says, 'I spit at the world. It's no good!' And the last paragraph is simply, 'Shall we read this story all over again? It'll never be different.'

But there is more to Andersen's story than poverty and social shame. Something deeply-hidden and corrosive, something that demands to be both expressed and concealed, in a way for which the indirect, allusive symbolism of the fairy tale is perfectly designed.

In 1835 Andersen published an adult novel, **'The Improvisatore'**, a thinly-disguised Bildungsroman set in Italy. He said of it, 'Every single character is taken from real life, each one, not a single one is made up. I know and have known them all.'

This declaration takes a sinister turn when one reads the book, especially the second chapter. In this, the young Antonio is lured by painter Federigo into a dark cave, in which they become lost. Federigo praises him and gives him money and cakes, then threatens to beat him when he is frightened. 'Then he [?] kissed me vehemently, called me his dear little Antonio.' In the midst of a passionate clasp, Antonio finds the string which will enable the pair to escape from the cave.

The next passage is the key one. 'I quite forgot all that had happened; but my mother could not forget it, when she had heard it, and would not again consent that Federigo should take me out with him.'

It's fairly clear that Antonio, and therefore Andersen, was molested as a small child. Alison Prince in her biography **'Hans Christian Andersen: The Fan Dancer'**, identifies the culprit as the schoolteacher Fedder Carstens, 'both for the similarity of the name and for the fact that the affectionate schoolmaster disappeared so abruptly from Odense when Andersen had been in his care for a few months, apparently never to teach again.'

Other biographers completely ignore this troubling episode in **'The Improvisatore'**, but I agree with Prince that it is one of the keys to understanding Andersen's conflicted sexuality and neurotic personality.

Immediately after writing **'The Improvisatore'**, Andersen wrote his first fairy tales, as if putting this childhood experience down on paper, even in a guarded way, had freed his imagination. He wrote to Henriette Wulff, 'I have also written some fairy tales for children, and Ørsted says that **'The Improvisatore'** will make me famous, the fairy tales will make me immortal.'

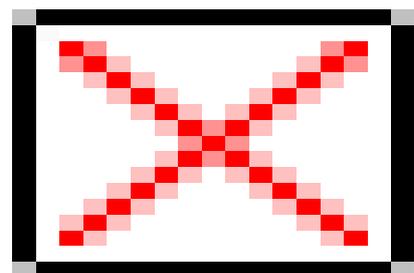
One of the fairy tales that would come to make Anderson immortal is **'The Ugly Duckling'**, in which the unhappy title character turns out to have been a majestic swan all along. The moral is, 'It's no wonder you don't feel at home in the farmyard, if you've been hatched from a swan's egg.' **'The Bell'** concerns a 'king's son' and a 'poor boy' who separately search for a mystical bell in the forest. Despite their different paths, they achieve transcendence at the same moment.

Both of these tales play with a childhood fantasy of Andersen's. He told his earliest friend, at Fedder Carsten's school, that he was 'a changed child of high birth.'

Two Danish authors, Jens Jørgensen and Rolf Dorset, have argued that in Hans Christian Andersen's case this was literally true, and that he was the illegitimate son of Crown Prince Christian Frederik and Countess Elise Ahlefeldt-Laurvig, whose affair started in 1804. This isn't quite as barmy as it sounds. Farming out aristocratic by-blows to poor couples

was common in Denmark, Elise Ahlefeldt-Laurvig's father Count Ahlefeldt left 99 illegitimate children in Langeland alone. Hans Christian's father was a servant on the Ahlefeldt estate; his mother a servant with a family with close links to Broholm Castle, where Elise's baby was rumoured to have been born.

Throughout his life Andersen benefitted from significant financial and other support from royal funds and noble patrons, at a time when there was very little social mobility. In his earliest unpublished autobiography, **'Levnedsbog'**, Andersen describes how, when Crown Prince Christian Frederik moved to Odense Castle in 1816, he was often taken by his mother to play with Prince Frits, his putative half-brother. And even stranger than that the misfit child of an alcoholic washerwoman should be chosen as a prince's playmate, when the vain social-climbing Andersen rewrote his autobiography for publication, he omitted all mention of this. Yet he and Frits were close. When Frits was king, he treated Andersen like an old friend, loving to hear him tell fairy tales, and asking him, 'How can you think up all these things? How does it all come to you? Have you got it all inside your head?' When Frits died, Andersen was the only non-family member allowed to visit the king's body in its coffin.



Andersen was plunged into a year of gloom at the death of Frits's father King Christian VIII. His closest confidant Henriette Wulff wrote to him, 'You have discovered that you are that prince's child we talked about the other day, and you are feeling it too much! But I wish you wouldn't, because if you were descended from all the world's kings, I could not be any more fond of you.'

'You are that prince's child?' Could it be true? It seems Hans Christian Andersen himself came to believe it. His diary entry for 3 January 1875, the last year of his life, contains a bone-dry joke. Noting how many letters he has received, he writes, 'One has my name and address: King Christian the Ninth.'

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Hans Christian Andersen

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