



MORE THAN JUST FAIRY TALES

NEW APPROACHES TO THE
STORIES OF HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN

Edited by
Julie K. Allen



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PREVIEW**

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More Than Just Fairy Tales

New Approaches to the Stories of Hans Christian Andersen

Edited by Julie K. Allen



For Niels Ingwersen, whose storytelling gifts rivaled Andersen's own and whose legacy lives on in the hearts of the people who listened to him

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List of Works by Andersen

Listed in the order they are mentioned in this volume with common English translations of the Danish titles.

<i>Mit livs eventyr</i> (1855)	The Story of My Life
<i>Fyrtøjet</i> (1835)	The Tinder Box
<i>Lille Claus og store Claus</i> (1835)	Little Claus and Big Claus
<i>Prindsessen på ærten</i> (1835)	The Princess on the Pea
	The Princess and the Pea
<i>Den lille Idas blomster</i> (1835)	Little Ida's Flowers
<i>At være eller ikke være</i> (1857)	To Be or Not To Be
<i>Vanddråben</i> (1847)	The/A Drop of Water
<i>Den store Søslange</i> (1871)	The Great Sea Serpent
<i>Om Aartusinder</i> (1852)	In a Thousand Years' Time
	In a Thousand Years
	The Millennium
<i>Hvad den gamle Johanne fortalte</i> (1872)	What Old Johanne Told
<i>Hvad man kan hitte paa</i> (1869)	What People Do Think Up
<i>Skyggen</i> (1847)	The Shadow
<i>De vilde svaner</i> (1838)	The Wild Swans
<i>Snedronningen</i> (1845)	The Snow Queen
<i>Historien om en Moder</i> (1848)	The Story of a Mother
<i>Taarnvægteren Ole</i> (1859)	The Watchman of the Tower
	Ole the Tower-Keeper
<i>Hjertesorg</i> (1853)	Grief
	A Great Grief
	Heartache

Det gamle Huus (1847)	The Old House
Loppen og Professoren (1872)	The Professor and the Flea The Flea and the Professor
Kejserens nye Klæder (1837)	The Emperor's New Clothes
Den gamle Egetræs sidste Drøm (1857)	The Old Oak Tree's Last Dream The Last Dream of the Old Oak
Den flyvende Kuffert (1839)	The Flying Trunk
Pen og Blækhus (1859)	The Pen and the Inkwell Pen and Inkstand
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Dryaden (1868)	The Wood Nymph The Dryad
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Dødningen (1830)	The Dead Man
Svinedrengen (1842)	The Swineherd
Grantræet (1845)	The Fir Tree The Pine Tree
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Hyrdinen og skorsteensfeieren (1845)	The Shepherdess and the Chimney Sweep
Den gamle gadelygte (1847)	The Old Street Lamp
Gaaseurten (1838)	The Daisy
En Historie fra Klitterne (1860)	A Story from the Dunes A Story from the Sand Dunes
Hvad Vinden sagde om Valdemar Daae og hans Døtre (1859)	What the Wind Told About Valdemar Daae and His Daughters The Wind Tells of Valdemar Daae and His Daughters

<i>Kun en Spillemand</i> (1837)	Only a Fiddler
<i>En Comedie i det Grønne</i> (1840)	A Comedy in the Open Air
ABC-bogen (1858)	The A-B-C Book
Den grimme Ælling (1843)	The Ugly Duckling
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	The Metal Pig
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Foreword

While most Danish writers, artists, and scientists of the early 19th century, the era of the so-called Danish Golden Age, came from the Copenhagen upper middle class or from idyllic parsonages on the island of Zealand, Hans Christian Andersen (1805–75)—who knew and befriended most of the former—came from the dregs of society. His mother was an alcoholic washerwoman and his father an impoverished shoemaker. They lived in the provincial town of Odense on the island of Funen. Although Andersen himself never disguised his background, despite moving in bourgeois and aristocratic circles all over Europe for much of his adult life, he nevertheless grappled with a number of social challenges that contributed to both the many tensions and discordant elements to be found in his works as well as his numerous unsuccessful love affairs. These traumas left a definite trace in his writings, which is one of the reasons Andersen’s oeuvre—including his tales and stories—goes far beyond traditional children’s literature. By exploring how these social issues manifest themselves in Andersen’s tales, the present volume challenges the widespread misconception that Andersen’s works are primarily, let alone exclusively, for children and offers readers an array of models for recognizing the connections between many of Andersen’s tales and interpreting the deeper significance and contextual significance of these patterns.

Andersen’s own life story resembles a fairy tale in many ways, at least in terms of his unexpected rise to fame and fortune; indeed, he titled his first autobiography *Mit Livs Eventyr* (*The Fairy Tale of My Life*, 1855). In an 1833 letter, Andersen described himself as a “swamp plant,”¹ an accurate description of the poverty, alcoholism, and promiscuity that characterized his family background and social environment in childhood. However, the factual information Andersen gives about his parents and their background in his various autobiographies is very limited, and totally unfounded theories have been proposed, claiming that Andersen was either the child of a French immigrant or the illegitimate son of Prince Christian Frederik, later King Christian VIII. Even though the limited schooling he received in Odense did not teach him how to spell and write without errors, Andersen devoured any book he could get hold of, from the Danish classics to William Shakespeare, and learned whole passages and scenes by heart. In 1812, when Andersen was only seven, his parents took him to the local

1 In a letter to Henriette Wulff on February 16, 1833. *Breve fra Hans Christian Andersen*, vol. 1, edited by C. St. A. Bille and Nicolai Bøgh. Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1878, p. 114.

theater for the first time to see comic operas or singspiels and he already began dreaming of a theatrical career.

Andersen always had a strong sense of his own destiny, despite the obstacles in his path. Following his confirmation in the Lutheran church in 1819, various local prominent people who had taken an interest in the talented boy urged Andersen's mother to let him learn a trade. She wanted him apprenticed to a tailor, but he would have none of it. His fondness for the theater had steadily increased during these years—in 1818 when the Royal Theater visited Odense, he was given a walk-on part and a few lines to speak—and he was determined to become an actor in Copenhagen. In the end Andersen's mother gave in, but only after she had consulted a fortune-teller, who predicted that her son would become a great man and that Odense would one day be lit up in his honor. In response to his worried mother's exclamation, "Whatever will become of you there?" Andersen—according to his autobiography—confidently replied, "I shall become famous!"² On September 4, 1819, Andersen left Odense and two days later, after having traveled as a stowaway, arrived in the Danish capital.

Contrary to his own expectations, Andersen did not succeed in conquering the Danish stage either as an actor or as a playwright and was advised to return home. With characteristic stubbornness and against all odds, he embarked instead on a career as a poet, influenced by the *Weltschmerz* (world-weariness) and discordance found in the works of the immensely popular German writer Heinrich Heine. Andersen's poems turned him into a great local success. Throughout his life he continued to publish poetry—partly poems of ideas and partly poems written for various public and private occasions—and a similar *Zerissenheit* (fragmentation) can be found in a number of underrated novels and dramas he wrote in the 1830s and 1840s, works that in Andersen's own time made him famous but today unfortunately are familiar primarily to a small Danish audience.

It was not until after having returned from Italy on his first major journey abroad in 1833–34—all together Andersen traveled abroad thirty times and was thus one of the greatest travelers of his time—that he achieved his artistic as well as international commercial breakthrough. In Italy he had collected material for his partly autobiographical novel *Improvisatoren* (*The Improvisatore*, 1835). Simultaneously, he had started a new project, as he casually informed a friend in a letter written New Year's Day, 1835: "Now I shall begin to write some 'fairy tales for children.' I want to win the coming generations, you see."³ On May 8, 1835, a slim volume, *Eventyr, fortalte for Børn* (*Tales, Told for Children*) containing "Fyrtøiet" ("The Tinderbox"), "Lille Claus og store Claus" ("Little Claus and Big Claus"), "Prindsessen paa Ærten" ("The Princess on the Pea"), and "Den lille Idas Blomster" ("Little Ida's Flowers") was published. In the opinion of the critics, these tales were completely unsuitable for

2 *Mit Livs Eventyr*, 1, p. 27. All quotes from *Mit Livs Eventyr*, 1–2, are from *Samlede Skrifter*, 1, 2d ed. Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel, 1876.

3 *H. C. Andersens Brevveksling med Henriette Hanck*. 1830–1846. In: *Anderseniana*, 10, edited by Svend Larsen. Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1941–46,, p. 104.

children, because they were immoral and without pedagogical value. In addition, the style was condemned as being too colloquial.

The first three of the 156 tales and stories Andersen wrote were rather straightforwardly rewritten folk tales. Gradually, however, he developed his own unique universe with immensely artistic and philosophical complexity that to this day continues to challenge and fascinate scholars, as the present volume exemplifies. The first six collections of Andersen's fairy tales, from 1835 to 1841, were subtitled "Told for Children," which reveals Andersen's ingenious discovery that his tales had to be *told*. The tales themselves seem so simple, but the original manuscripts confirm Andersen's patient, meticulous efforts to find—or create, if necessary—the exact expressions that fit his intention in each tale. As a mature author, Andersen began to write texts of greater length and of a different, more realistic nature and thus the two collections of 1852–53 bear the title *Historier* (*Stories*). Andersen did not give up the fairy tale genre, however, and his last eleven volumes, from 1858 to 1872, are entitled *Eventyr og Historier* (*Fairy Tales and Stories*).

It is important to keep in mind that Andersen lived and wrote during two contrasting literary periods of the 19th century: romanticism and realism/naturalism. The clash between these two schools of philosophical thought and literary style constitute next to the social and linguistic components yet another significant and fascinating feature of his writing and is to a certain degree reflected in the two genres used by Andersen: the fairy tale and the short story. He was well aware of his position between two ideologies. Thus he was familiar with the radical theology of David Friedrich Strauss and Ludwig Feuerbach; he discusses and rejects the theories contained in Karl Marx' *Das kommunistische Manifest* (*The Communist Manifesto*, 1848) in his late novel *At være eller ikke være* (*To Be or Not to Be*, 1857), as posing an imminent danger to the romantic idealism he could not do without.

Nevertheless, Andersen was an admirer of modern technology—in the tale "Vanddraaben" ("A Drop of Water," 1848) he describes a microscope; in "Den store Søeslange" ("The Great Sea-Serpent," 1872) he writes about the telegraph cable under the Atlantic Ocean; he even ventures as far as fantasizing, in the science fiction story "Om Aartusinder" ("In a Thousand Years' Time," 1852), about a group of busy young Americans flying to Europe on the wings of steam with only eight days to spend, a remarkable anticipation of Jules Verne's novel, *Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingt jours* ("A Trip Around the World in Eighty Days," 1873). However, in instances where Andersen felt that progress would entail a victory of matter over spirit, he would adamantly hit the brakes. In such cases he would admonish his audience, as expressed in the story "Hvad den gamle Johanne fortalte" ("What Old Johanne Told," 1872): "Say the Lord's Prayer!"

At the same time, Andersen—the first proletarian of Danish literature—was well aware that the good *old* days were not necessarily the *good* old days. This is how the old woman in the tale—or perhaps rather short story—"Hvad man kan hitte paa" ("What People Do Think Up," 1869) reacts to the longing for the past of a young man who wishes to become a writer: "In the old days, wise old women were burned alive, and poets went around with hollow bellies and their elbows sticking out of their sleeves. The times are in fact good; they are the best

of all times! But you don't have the right way of looking at them. You don't use your ears, and"—and now we see Andersen's admonishing index finger wagging at us—"you're probably not saying the Lord's Prayer at night."⁴ Thus, it is all right for a writer to practice realism, but the metaphysical aspect must *not* be ignored.

It is precisely in the contrast between idealism und realism that we find yet another fundamental tension, a philosophical dualism, in Andersen. This is emphasized in the old woman's additional advice to the young man:

There are plenty of things to write and tell about, if only you know how. You can draw it out of the plants and the fruits of the earth, ladle it from running and still waters. But you must know how—know how to capture a sunbeam. Just try on my spectacles and put my ear trumpet to your ear, then pray to the Lord, and do stop thinking about yourself!

Here, once again, Andersen addresses the differences or occasional dichotomies between idealism and realism. In general, he fulfills in his writings both of the old woman's demands: he writes texts that can be assigned to romantic idealism, and texts that definitely belong to realism—though never to naturalism, defined as realism turned into a materialistic philosophy of life, according to such French writers as Émile Zola and such Danish writers as Jens Peter Jacobsen.

However, Andersen reaches artistic perfection when he explores *both* tendencies at once: either merging idealism and realism or letting idealism and naturalism clash in his texts; or when he positions himself in the magnetic field between two poles, exploiting the tension whether these are artistic or ideological poles. This is, for instance, the case with his masterpiece "Skyggen" ("The Shadow," 1847), which is indeed a major work in world literature. Here, as Andersen lets "a learned man from the cold countries" write about what is true, good, and beautiful, he articulates not only his own ideal of art but also, in a formula, the values of romanticism. However, the bitter irony of the story is that no one pays attention to these values, and people choose instead to follow the title character, the most demonic character in Danish nineteenth-century literature, a being without substance, whose successful undertakings illustrate how materialism and nihilism have replaced spirituality. Here, nothing is left of the romantic belief that the good-hearted person, such as Elise in "De vilde Svaner" ("The Wild Swans," 1838) or Gerda in "Sneedronningen" ("The Snow Queen," 1845), has nothing to fear from evil: all human efforts are in fact absurd and the learned man is executed!

This is also the main theme in another masterpiece "Historien om en Moder" ("The Story of a Mother," 1848), a tribute to maternal love but also a demonstration of the mercilessness of life. In her endeavors to find her child, whom Death has taken from her, the mother finally

⁴ All translations of the Danish original are from *Tales and Stories by Hans Christian Andersen*, translated and edited by Patricia L. Conroy and Sven H. Rossel. Seattle/London: University of Washington Press, 1980.

realizes that in spite of all her sacrifices she will be left empty-handed. The text concludes as follows:

And the mother wrung her hands, fell upon her knees, and prayed to the Lord, “Hear me not when I pray for what is not Thy will. Thy will is always best. Hear me not! Hear me not!” And she buried her face in her lap. And Death went with her child into the unknown land.

The reader is thereby confronted with life’s absurdity, while what the future will bring remains obscure. We are far from the bright and optimistic atmosphere that permeates Andersen’s first fairy tale, “The Tinderbox,” which ends with the soldier marrying the princess: “The wedding lasted a week, and the three dogs sat at the table and made eyes at everybody.” These texts exemplify how Andersen replaced not only the romantic tale with the realist short story but also the Biedermeier idyll with a modern questioning of traditional concepts.

All of the above artistic and philosophical aspects, including the dormant skepticism and awareness of the relativity of all values, add to the excitement one feels when reading one of Andersen’s tales or stories. They add a fascinating touch of modernity to his work. They also form the point of departure for the contributors to the present volume, whose analyses aim to demonstrate how nuanced and complex Andersen’s fairy tales are. Tom Lundskær-Nielsen discusses Andersen’s unique linguistic genius—his replacement of the frequently rather stilted language of romanticism with that of spoken, colloquial Danish—while Scott Mellor deals with Andersen as a social critic and commentator. In his discussion Mellor includes two of Andersen’s lesser-known tales, “Taarnvægteren Ole” (“The Watchman of the Tower,” 1859) and “Hjertesorg” (“Grief,” 1853), a text that Nate Kramer also takes up in his analysis of Andersen’s use of anthropomorphism. Kramer also throws light on other lesser-known texts such as “Det gamle Huus” (“The Old House,” 1847), “Loppen og Professoren” (“The Flea and the Professor,” 1873), both somewhat overlooked masterpieces that might more accurately be labeled short stories than traditional fairy tales.

Many of the texts discussed in this volume fall outside the canon of Andersen’s familiar tales and stories and offer readers a glimpse of Andersen’s darker side. While introducing readers to Andersen’s lesser-known masterpieces is a worthy end in itself, the essays in this volume also destabilize and correct the tendency toward smoothing out and oversimplifying Andersen’s well-known tales, many of which have unfortunately been published as so-called pedagogical retellings found in bookstores’ sections for children’s literature. Both the essay by Elettra Carbone on gender constructions in “Prindsessen på Ærten” (“The Princess on the Pea,” 1835) and “Kejserens nye Klæder” (“The Emperor’s New Clothes,” 1837) and Karin Sanders’ elucidation of Andersen’s implicit dialogue with thinkers as diverse as Søren Kierkegaard and Sigmund Freud in “The Shadow” make it clear that some of Andersen’s most popular and widely anthologized texts deal with serious issues and can still benefit from new critical approaches. In her readings of the poignant “The Story of Mother” to the ecstatic “Den gamle Egetræs sidste Drøm” (“The Old Oak Tree’s Last Dream,” 1858), Julie K.

Allen deals with the broad, indeed, universal question, often overlooked in earlier Andersen scholarship, of the role of religion and transcendence in Andersen's works, and Jakob Holm's discussion of the portrait and role of the artist in Andersen's tales "Den flyvende Kuffert" ("The Flying Trunk," 1839), "Pen og Blækhus" ("The Pen and the Inkwell," 1860), and "Flipperne" ("The Collar," 1847) illuminates another of Andersen's major thematic emphases. Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen's discussion of Andersen's depiction of the city focuses on the tale of "Dryaden" ("The Wood Nymph," 1868), a lesser-known but nevertheless seminal text that also attracts the attention of Marianne Stecher, who considers the theme of travel in light of Andersen's fascination with speed and modern technology. By contrast, Nete Schmidt explores how Andersen's tales of travel also relate to the theme of love, using the short story of "Ib og lille Christine" ("Ib and Little Christine," 1855) to set the stage of discussion that culminates in her analysis of the melancholy tale "Under Piletræet" ("Under the Willow Tree," 1853).

The volume concludes with an exploration of various visual representations of Andersen's work and life and their bearing on the reader's understanding of Andersen's tales. Melissa Lucas surveys and explicates the range of illustrations that have accompanied and contributed to the reader's experience of Andersen's tales, and Maren Johnson discusses two cinematic treatments of Andersen's biography from 2003 and 2005, the latter of which, the brilliant *Unge Andersen (Young Andersen)*, coincided with the bicentennial celebration of the writer's birth. The film received rather negative reviews from Danish critics for its lack of respect toward Andersen, but Johnson fortunately disagrees with this assessment, proving that an outside opinion can add a new and refreshing perspective to already established and generally accepted viewpoints.

The essays that make up the present volume constitute an informative survey of the many innovative approaches and perceptive analyses of today's international Andersen scholarship, drawing on the collective expertise and insights of both established and emerging Andersen teachers and scholars from across the United States and Great Britain. Given its breadth of topics and careful teasing out of meaning, it is a unique contribution to Andersen scholarship that is ideal for facilitating the teaching of Hans Christian Andersen's tales and stories at universities all over the world, as well as offering individual readers the chance to conduct a self-study course in Andersen's tales and stories. While not comprehensive in either its coverage of Andersen's tales or the range of methodological approaches to them, which would require many times the space, this volume conclusively establishes that Andersen's works remain relevant to modern readers and can continue to yield new insights nearly two centuries after their initial publication. In the words of the renowned ballad scholar Sigurd Bernhard Hustvedt, "Though the sheaves have been pretty carefully cleaned from the fields, the threshing is only well begun."⁵

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5 Quoted in Sven Hakon Rossel, *Den litterære vise i folketraditionen*. Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1971, p. 1.

Preface

Like a great many other children across the world, I grew up hearing and reading fairy tales, primarily those told by the Brothers Grimm, Charles Perrault, and Hans Christian Andersen. I loved the tales for the way they seemed to lift the curtain on the magical creatures and forces inhabiting the world around me, demonstrating the power of tables to produce food, boots to span impossible distances, animals to talk, and children to outsmart adults. At some point in my adolescence, I believed that I had outgrown fairy tales and so I set aside my well-loved collections of tales and stories. It wasn't until many years later that I returned to the tales that had played such a prominent role in my childhood, only to discover that their magic was still potent. In fact, rereading these fairy tales as an adult, a parent, and a scholar, I was amazed and delighted to discover that they not only retained the power to ignite my imagination and enthrall me, they were also thick with symbols, cultural clues, linguistic jokes, and meta-textual significance that posed a compelling intellectual challenge.

In connection with my collaboration with Professor Maria Tatar on *The Annotated Hans Christian Andersen* and my preparations for teaching a large undergraduate course on the tales of Hans Christian Andersen at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I had the opportunity to accept this challenge, immerse myself in the tales of Hans Christian Andersen, and explore the nuances of his literary style and cultural commentary in depth. I was amazed by the wealth of information and meaning within texts that are often dismissed as “just” fairy tales. Yet while a great deal of impressive and important scholarship has been published about Andersen and his works, it can be quite academic and may seem daunting to non-specialists. For this reason, I asked fellow scholars and teachers of Andersen's work from across the United States and Great Britain to collaborate with me on a collection of approaches to Andersen's tales and stories designed specifically for students and other people who happen to love his fairy tales.

The purpose of the book in your hands is, therefore, to enable readers of all ages and backgrounds to take a new, closer look at the tales and stories of Hans Christian Andersen. While Andersen's fairy tales have tremendous value as children's stories and as the basis of many beloved animated films, the essays in this book can help readers discover that fairy tales have much more to offer than just a lively plot, colorful characters, and magic. Andersen's tales and stories are linguistic, artistic, and literary masterpieces that deal with serious matters like sorrow, death, faith, love, and loss. They provide vivid insights into the world in which Andersen lived—the places he visited and people he knew, the social and religious

changes that European society underwent over the course of his life, and his own hopes and fears. In addition to being translated into more than a hundred languages and published around the world, Andersen's tales have inspired paintings, poetry, music, novels, and films. This book traces the cultural resonance of Andersen's work in a few of these areas, but it cannot—and is not meant to be—exhaustive. Instead, it is my hope that readers will come away from this book equipped with the desire and the skills to explore further on their own, to read Andersen's fairy tales with new eyes, and see how he lifts the curtain for us on both the fanciful and serious aspects of the world and human life.

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