

Hans Christian Andersen – for Children or Adults?

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In almost every child's bookshelf all over the world, one may find a volume or two of fairy tales. In this case, it is of little importance to children by whom they have been written, as long as they live up to their expectations. However, fairy tales do not only attract young readers. How come that age seems to be irrelevant when it comes to fairy tales – or: are they really suitable for all age groups?

When I was a child, all that I expected from a story was that it was on the one hand read to me by someone I liked and, on the other hand, that I could understand it. The latter does not have anything to do with whether you have already been in a particular situation or not. However, what is essential is that the way the fairy tale is told makes the plot easy to follow and the characters act in such a manner that one can internalise their behaviour. Fairy tales, of course, do meet these requirements, and I was no exception to recognise this.

Education

In a fairy tale, the events are mostly described and told by an omniscient narrator who lays down the plot and is at the same time able to convey the protagonists' thoughts to the readership. It is by this that the reader can follow the protagonists' thoughts or gets to understand their emotions. In "The Ugly Duckling", the readers learn about its thoughts and desperation but they also see their cause. The exclusion and discrimination by the other ducks are mercilessly presented so that the readers can indirectly experience the duckling's agony. One is drawn into the story and put into the place of the discriminated duckling that, in the end, turns out to be a swan! When I was little, I always pitied the duckling because it was excluded from its family who should have protected it instead of sacrificing it in order to restore peace and quiet. A lot of children will do the same and ultimately wonder why the other hens act in such a mean and nasty way. However, the next day, they will exactly do the same thing in kindergarten or primary school. They will exclude someone from playing with them because their parents have a low opinion of this particular child's family; they will tease somebody because he does not wear the latest trainers or because she has a stammer. In a way, children can be merciless when it comes to being outspoken. Mostly, they do not yet possess a kind of conscience that tells them what they should rather keep to themselves.

Therefore, I wonder whether fairy tales just like "The Ugly Duckling" should be read to children. On the one hand, they might sensitize them and think carefully about their deportment towards others. On the other hand, the fairy tale's full meaning may be lost to children and therefore, there is no use in reading it to them. If one cannot or does not understand the underlying theme, how should a fairy tale then encourage decent behaviour or help develop a conscience? In this case, I would tend to say that fairy tales are written for adults because they have certainly, in more than one way, experienced exactly the same things some protagonists' have. Consequently, they can identify with them. By reading fairy tales, they are encouraged to rethink their actions or to recollect how they have been treated and get an objective view on a certain issue. As they gradually take into account the fairy tales' message, they will slowly realize which pattern of behaviour was or is wrong. Accordingly, they can change their behaviour and therefore learn from the tale.

Nevertheless, one might ask whether educative stories like "The Ugly Duckling" should exclusively be directed towards adults. Admittedly, they can change their behaviour consciously but on the other hand, predominantly children need this sort of education. They need to be told about norms and values and, what is even more important, they have to learn what happens if they do not respect these rules. However, they should not experience this first-hand but they should slowly be guided towards the exemplary effects. If the good wins, they will soon try to adopt "good" and repudiate morally unjustified behaviour, even if they do so subconsciously. A story, or a fairy tale is ideal for this purpose because it is an efficient and easily understandable way of storytelling.

Additionally, fairy tales do not represent reality but what things could be like in a fictive environment. Because of that, almost all sorts of behaviour, events etc. can be gone through and nobody will feel directly offended. Fairy tales may be directed towards anyone but they do not put a finger on a single person. Or, to put it in other words: "We should be able to put a finger on a person's sin without putting a finger on the person." Fairy tales completely meet this demand.

Violence

Another important aspect that has to be taken into consideration with Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales is violence. I certainly do not want to claim that Andersen's stories are overly violent, although they sometimes contain a fair amount of fights. In "The Tinderbox", a soldier coming home from war encounters an old witch who asks him to retrieve a tinderbox from a tree for her. The tinderbox

is guarded by fiercely looking dogs. However, as he succeeds in getting the witch's tinderbox and a fair amount of money for him himself, he is driven by curiosity as to why exactly the witch wanted to have this old box. As she refuses to tell him her motives, the soldier decapitates her. At the end of the story, he is sentenced to death but can escape hanging by means of violence again. Although not all children are faint-hearted, this story illustrates very well how much violence a fairy tale can contain. I do not intend to criticise Andersen for this since he describes the world as it is. There is indeed a lot of violence that endangers mankind and the example stated in "The Tinderbox" is certainly not exaggerated. However, although adults may be used to the "daily dose of violence", most children are not. Therefore, stories that are exclusively written for them do not represent reality but a modified or sometimes even totally different universe. Accordingly, I may call "The Tinderbox" an example of a fairy tale that, to my mind, should not be addressed to children.

The Fantastic

Whereas some fairy tales are set in our "rational" world, for example "Little Claus and Big Claus", others take place in fictional worlds, for example "The Little Mermaid". The fantastic elements of fairy tales are often deprived of their mystique by adults. They are either too rational, or too educated or, at times, even too arrogant to feel addressed by these stories. "Fantasy" and stories about talking flowers, creatures in the sea or thinking toys are often dismissed by adults with a derogatory gesture. A lot of adults consider these topics to be "too childish" for them, regardless of the underlying theme or their deeper sense. Many expect a "real story" to show the real world, just like they view it. However, children need a totally different approach. They are attracted by a fantastic world where they are free to make their own decisions. A lot of children make up a world of their own where adults will no longer tell them what to do. This is a kind of first struggle to obtain autonomy. However, at the same time as fairy tales are set in this "magical" world, they also show that our common norms and values also apply to these "worlds of their own". As most adults would not even consider creating their own world just like that, with talking flowers and fairies, this is one of the strongest arguments why Andersen's fairy tales must be aimed at young readers.

The Cultural Background

Ever since the early ages, fairy tales and myths have been at the heart of our cultures and, although this may not be evident at first sight, they have since then

also conveyed an image or characteristics of a particular culture. According to the time they were written in, they reflect society, cultural changes or some aspects that render each culture unique. In "The Swineherd", the reader is given an insight into the conditions of ownership that still existed in the 19th century in countries all across Europe and which could especially be recognised in northern Germany and Denmark at that time. Coming from the northern German area, I dare to say that the events and the background portrayed in "The Swineherd" perfectly match reality, as we know from history and what else has been passed on to us. Furthermore, the atmosphere created meets what I perceive as a predominantly "northern" atmosphere which still exists today. Although a lot of people may consider northerners as cold and unsociable, it is nevertheless this allegedly "cold" mentality that distinguishes Spanish from Northern, German or Danish people – who are not stand-offish at all. Fairy tales help to understand cultural differences. If you happen to go to a country where you think you are treated in a hostile manner but about which you have learnt that people get on with each other just the same, you do not take this "coldness" as a personal offence. Instead, you accept it and, ultimately, get used to it.

Fairy tales may be a diplomatic approach to presenting countries, but is this really their purpose? It may not have been Hans Christian Andersen's original intention to act as an ambassador but nowadays, unbiased "tales" of people can contribute a lot to mutual understanding between peoples. As well as they do reflect a certain culture, they can help to forge links between nations. The readers become more and more interested in what is happening in the fairy tale and, at the same time, they gradually become hooked on its background, history, underlying theme etc. Therefore, the conciliatory effect of fairy tales may be of great use to make children more tolerant and arouse their curiosity about other cultures. As they are yet relatively free of prejudice, fairy tales might do the trick and encourage a young audience to develop cultural awareness and openness towards "foreign" things. "The Nightingale" depicts China as a great country, rich in beauty and, though the tale starts off differently, in emotions, which is proved at the end.

However, grown-up readers might be attracted by the second cultural feature of fairy tales. In addition to mirroring cultural aspects and differences, fairy tales are also largely influenced by the time or epoch they were written in. They therefore also create an image of a particular period of time. The protagonist in "The Tinderbox" is a soldier coming home from war. Though there will always be speculations on how far the events at that time influenced Andersen's writing, the adult reader might detect the impact of the German-Danish war – from which the

soldier might be just returning – and a violent undertone. Glowering, ugly dogs, a witch, a soldier and a threatening execution do not meet the “they lived happily ever after” – expectations of a fairy tale. Nevertheless, they most probably describe the predominant atmosphere at a time when the threat of war was omnipresent.

Mere Entertainment

At the time when Hans Christian Andersen lived, children had a totally different lifestyle from what we know nowadays. They played outside in the green or in the living room. Especially in winter time, they were concentrated in the house and, naturally, it was hard to keep them occupied. And so they asked their mothers, grandmothers, nursemaids or the housekeepers to tell them stories that, at best, started of with “once upon a time” and ended in “and they lived happily ever after”. Although tales had always been handed down, fairy tales like the ones Andersen wrote were a change to the stories invented or just told by whoever happened to look after the children. Children did not have a lot of variety of things to do, so they were probably the audience that most needed new, entertaining and preferably beautifully written stories. “The Princess on the Pea” is a good example of an entertaining story that lives up to the expectations of any child. It boasts a prince and a princess and, to provide the audience with a happy ending, a marriage. Adults did not have too much time on their hands back then so such entertaining stories were mainly made up for children.

Taking Children Seriously

In “Little Ida’s Flowers”, Little Ida asks Hans Christian Andersen, embodied by a young student, why her flowers look so faded. The young student, who can tell stories and cut out pictures, gives her answers. Instead of treating her like a child, he “puts absurd fancies” into Little Ida’s head, telling her about dancing flowers and consoling her. The Little Mermaid¹ is also taken seriously by her grandmother. Although she is the youngest of the sisters, she is not teased or looked down on, instead her grandmother tries to comfort her and satisfy her curiosity. In these two examples, children are accepted as full individuals by the others. They are not treated as inferiors because of their younger age, but they are respected. This aspect also carries two different messages. Firstly, it might be telling adults to treat children equally. Just like the mermaid, children also have a right to know and to

¹ The Little Mermaid being the main protagonist in “The Little Mermaid” by Hans Christian Andersen.

enquire about things that they are interested in. They should not be mocked for their naivety or curiosity. On the contrary, grown-ups should support and safely guide them through childhood. In these fairy tales, children may discover ways of exemplary behaviour. A lot of children feel that they are not taken seriously by adults because of their age or childish ignorance. By reading about children who are treated as equals, they might learn about their own value and their right to be treated respectfully, irrespective of their age. These children's self esteem might be boosted. They will therefore become stronger and, later on, just individuals who have learnt that they, in turn, will have to treat children right as well.

Conclusion

It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to determine whether fairy tales in general are aimed at adult or young readers. Of course, nobody would think of reading out a rather violent fairy tale to young children of whom they know that they cannot stand its content. However, this can be generally said about stories. Whether they are suitable for children or not does not only depend on the story or tale itself, but also on the children. If they are faint-hearted and not as strong as others of their age, one considers more thoroughly whether this story is appropriate or not. It just largely depends on the type of audience whether this particular tale could be aimed at the listeners or not.

Fairy tales with an underlying educative message can be suited for both, adults as well as children. Although mainly children will need a sort of education or guideline, adults will either feel reassured in their doing or they will even feel guided when they are in doubt about how to act. Of course, this requires a certain will to change and an openness towards other alternative behaviour - with the grown-ups. Children are not yet as firm in their beliefs as adults and are therefore easier to influence and guide. The instructive purpose of a fairy tale can only be fulfilled if the reader wants to perceive and internalise it.

However, one should never forget the entertaining elements that fairy tales are also comprised of. They are easy readable and, consequently, accessible to anyone. Essentially, children profit the most from this. The practical intent of a fairy tale is to entertain a young audience with a short story which can be effortlessly followed. Whereas adults are offered a greater variety of entertainment with less free time to spend, children do not have time-consuming chores and their leisure activities are limited due to their age. This was obviously also the case in Andersen's times. Fairy tales were a welcomed change, especially on dark winter evenings when you could not play outside as you liked. Then, children were also

given the possibility to escape into a world of their own. They were free to do as they pleased; fairies and sorcerers would live there and they would encounter talking flowers and animals. Shortly: these fictional worlds were paradise to children who sometimes did not have a lot more else than their dreams in poverty-stricken times.

All in all, I come to the conclusion that the fairy tales by Hans Christian Andersen are suited for both grown-up and young readers. Adults who have kept their curiosity and the will to know as well as the openness to go beyond the obvious or accept moral instruction will enjoy Andersen's fairy tales as much as children. Admittedly, a fairy tale like "The Tinderbox" may not be suitable for every child, whereas the value of "The Princess on the Pea" for both adults and children – apart from entertainment purposes - might be debatable. However, one has to bear in mind that Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales principally reflect society. Due to this, Andersen's fairy tales as a whole are suitable for adults and children, both being members of society.