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A Whole New Perspective: Disability in the Works of Hans Christian Andersen

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ABSTRACT

Hans Christian Andersen's life has been forgotten and misrepresented. Labeled as a narcissist and a child, Andersen never received the recognition he deserved. In his life, the aristocracy discredited him, and in the wake of his death, academics misunderstood him. As a man crushed by an oppressive class system, Andersen used his fairy tales to explore his dark reality. Through his portrayal of disability, Andersen chronicled what it felt like to be a member of the lower class. By connecting his social limitations to physical and mental impairments, Andersen's fairy tales became a form of therapy where he explored his expectations for reality.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Without a formal introduction or a warning, a tall, awkward man demanded to see one of the Brothers Grimm. When he arrived in the company of Jacob Grimm, the unknown man exclaimed, “I come to you... without letters of introduction, because I hope that my name is not wholly unknown to you” (Wullschlager 239). When the man stated his name, Jacob Grimm confessed, “I do not remember to have heard this name” (239). The man, Hans Christian Andersen, did not accept this answer, “You must know me. There has been published in Denmark a collection... which is dedicated to you, and there in it, is at least one story of mine” (239). When Jacob continued to deny hearing of him, Hans Christian Andersen humbly left.

This episode is one of many that shows Andersen struggling to find recognition. While he is known now, the writer spent his life trying to break into the ranks of men like the Brothers Grimm, only to be locked out. In his search for fame, people labeled him as childish, egotistical, imitative, and nervous; those around him never understood him. He spent his life as a nomad, reaching for unobtainable goals and pushing away those who tried to get close to him. While his fairy tales are remembered, the man behind them has slowly faded out of public memory. Andersen’s fairy tales have been retold and changed, with remnants of him taken out. But littered in his original tales are Andersen’s fears and anxieties. Andersen’s writings were inspired by his life and the stories his grandmother told him. He dedicated himself to writing stories that would elevate him to a new station. But when he finally achieved fame, it was not what he thought it would be. Even though members of the upper class accepted his stories, they did not accept him.

Those above him viewed Andersen as an eccentric, manic child reaching for something he could never fully grasp.

Despite his inability to rise to the upper class, Andersen tried to paint his life as a fairy tale. He wanted others to view him as the modest son of a cobbler who was able to rise above his station. This image, however, couldn't be farther from the truth. Andersen never found a place in society. But no matter how false this image is, it affects how Andersen is seen today. His drive to be accepted by the upper class causes scholars to label Andersen as a narcissist who greedily tried to climb the social ladder—a large misunderstanding. Andersen was merely a man oppressed by the class structure in Denmark, leading him to develop manic and depressive behaviors. All Andersen ever wanted was acceptance, and he never found it.

Andersen's fairy tales act as a window to view his hopes and frustrations. In a time before therapy, Andersen's fairy tales allowed him to cope with the social oppression he faced. He used his characters to visualize his internal struggles and frustrations. Disability became Andersen's way to describe what it felt like to be a member of the lower class. By describing many of his autobiographical characters as having a physical impairment, Andersen acknowledged the limitations poverty placed on him. What this thesis hopes to show is that Andersen used disability in his fairy tales to give a physical front to the internal struggles he faced, connecting his social oppression to physical impairments. While Andersen himself showed many signs of mental disorders, this thesis will not try to diagnose him. Instead, it will try to show how Andersen coped with his social oppression by writing characters with physical and mental impairments.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Overview of Literature Review

Before addressing how Hans Christian Andersen used fairy tales to cope with his social oppression, it is vital to establish what a disability is and how fairy tales are a fitting way to explore it. Although disability has not been formally studied regarding Andersen or many of his fairy tales, its prevalence in both is striking. Modern and past descriptions of Andersen's conditions mark him as odd and volatile. Those who saw him during his life described him as "nearly six feet high, but very loosely put together, large jointed, angular, and ungainly in his movements" (Taylor). In addition, when writing of Andersen's mental state, current folktale scholar Jack Zipes writes, "The strain he [Hans Christian Andersen] placed himself under to produce was so great that he often succumbed to bouts of hypochondria, melancholy, and depression. His nerves became like volatile wires, frayed and tattered" (1). Despite such descriptions of Andersen, people have rarely discussed Andersen in terms of disability or focused on its presence in his literature. Researchers have also rarely linked Andersen's external state and writing to the social oppression he faced, leaving a gap in the scholarship surrounding him.

This gap in research could be due to Andersen convincing himself and the public that his life was a fairytale—a public image that is still present today. As stated by Zipes, "The public image of Hans Christian Andersen still prevalent is one fed by lies.... biographers... have associated him with the ugly duckling and sketched his life as the poor, gifted son of a cobbler who transformed... into a successful writer through... innate talents" (2). Andersen himself said,

“My life is a beautiful fairy tale, rich and glorious” (3). While seeing his life as a fairy tale might have been a coping method for Andersen, it is not an accurate way to see him. It glorifies, if not justifies, the hardships he endured. Rather, viewing Andersen in terms of the social, physical, and mental challenges he experienced offers a more complex view of Andersen and what shaped him and his work. This thesis will argue that through the characters of his fairy tales, Andersen gives an image to the social hardships he faced. While some characters bring light to the conditions Andersen experienced, others give a face to how it felt to come from a low social class. No matter where the inspiration came from for a character’s disability, writing the impairment into existence gave Andersen an outlet to cope with his social oppression.

To locate this analysis in the field of disability studies and justify studying Andersen’s fairy tales through such a lens, this analysis will begin with an overview of disability studies followed by evidence that fairy tales are a fitting way for writers to explore their inner struggles. To establish a foundation in disability studies, there will be a discussion of the effects of normalcy. After rooting this thesis in the field of disability studies, a connection between a writer’s condition and their writing will be made, specifically writing in the genre of fairy tales. After such a connection is made the thesis will move to an analysis of selected works by Hans Christian Andersen.

Before transitioning to the analysis outlined above, it is necessary to explain why I have chosen the terms and research that I have. As someone who does not identify as a member of the disability community, I have selected works from the most prominent figures in the field. From their writing, I have adopted their terms and definitions. Each term and author is used in hopes of sparking a respectful discussion of how disability shaped Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tales.

Because there is finite space in this review, some notable terms and people have been omitted.

What has been selected, however, establishes a solid foundation to build an analysis.

The Effects of Normal

To begin, it is important to explore how disability and class relate. Before such a connection is made, one must understand what makes those with a disability socially different from those without one. While most people know that those with a disability have been labeled as different from able-bodied individuals for hundreds of years and ostracized because of it, the foundational causes of the separation are less known. Academic Lennard Davis argues that the deep-rooted idea of normalcy separates disabled individuals from those who are able-bodied. While most people might not realize it, “each of us endeavors to be normal...we consider what the average person does, thinks, earns, or consumes... there is probably no area of contemporary life in which some idea of a norm, mean, or average has not been calculated” (Davis 1). While the idea of normal seems as though it is ingrained in society—something people have always strived towards—it is a recent invention. It was not until the 1840s that the word normal came to mean “conforming to, not... different from... standard, regular, [or] usual” (2). Around this time, statisticians created the concepts of “norm” and “average” (3). With the rise of the concept of average, the idea of an “average man” emerged, and eventually, the average became the ideal (3). Anyone seen as an outlier was labeled as lesser. A famous statistician from the time, Adolphe Quetelet claimed, “Deviations more or less great from the mean have constituted... ugliness in body as well as vice in morals and a state of sickness” (3). Quetelet’s views show that

as the idea of a normal body emerged, so did the idea of an abnormal body or deviant body (6).

A deviant body then became an undesirable body (6).

Once it became accepted that there was a normal body, the disabled body became targeted by the eugenics movement (2). Davis writes, “Once people allowed that there were norms and ranks in human physiology, then the idea that we might want to... decrease birth defects, did not seem so farfetched” (6). Disability was reduced to a defect, a characteristic that was undesirable for the general population and one that should be eliminated. With this mindset, the people of the eugenics movement grouped undesirable traits (6). Unrelated traits became connected. According to Davis, “Criminals, the poor, and people with disabilities might be mentioned in the same breath” (6). One of the prominent figures in the eugenics movement, Karl Pearson, defined an unfit individual as being “the habitual criminal, the professional tramp, the tuberculous, the insane, the mentally defective, the alcoholic,” and “the diseased from birth or from excess” (6). When reflecting on this early list of human deviations, it becomes clear that the list combines disabilities with other human variations (6-7). People in different social groups became labeled as abnormal, just like those with disabilities.

Often entire groups of people would become associated with a general deficiency. For example, it was common for feeble-mindedness to be connected to a particular group of people (7). At the time, the “term included low intelligence, mental illness, and even ‘pauperism,’ since low income was equated with ‘relative inefficiency’” (7). Entire ethnic groups would be generalized as infested with feeble-mindedness and pauperism (7). Davis writes, “The association between what we would now call disability and criminal activity, mental incompetence, sexual license, and so on established a legacy that people with disabilities are still having trouble living down” (7). People who looked different became associated with negative traits. Classifications

such as disability, race, sexuality, and class became interconnected (Goodley 637). Using the example of gender, academic Dan Goodley argues:

Historically... disability and femininity have been coupled, as mad, bad and ill women's bodies are categorized through conditions such as premenstrual tension, [and] hysteria.... At the same time... men's criminality is distinguished as bad rather than mad... separating amorality from an essential diagnosis. Disability is constructed through direct recourse to these gendered norms and sexist practices. (637)

With little justification, women became seen as inherently hysterical and mad. Femininity and disability became connected and used to undermine women's agency. This example shows that even if they seem unrelated, the systems of oppression overlap to enforce ableist norms (637).

There is a precedent of majority groups using disability to disempower a minority group. Ultimately disability is tied to minority bodies. As said by Goodley, "Ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and pan-national identities converge around the problems of disability as a consequence of attempts to maintain... ableist normativity" (637). To disempower those in a minority and uphold normative culture, able-bodied individuals connect minority bodies to disabilities. For "ableist, heteronormative, adult, white European and North American, high-income nation's values" to be upheld, "disabled people, women, children, queer, people of colour, and poor people" are cornered into the same space of Otherness (637). What then happens is that "disability marks different bodies in different and relational ways" so that "systems of ableism come into contact with racialized bodies, queer bodies, classed bodies, gendered bodies, bodies that already have been touched by other (and perhaps multiple) systems

of oppression” (637). While different forms of oppression seem unrelated, they connect in ways that are often overlooked.

In relation to Hans Christian Andersen, his low-class status led him to be a classed body. Because Andersen was labeled as low class, he spent his life being seen as a child. Born in Denmark on April 2, 1805, Andersen felt the weight of Denmark’s highly elitist class system (Zipes 3). With his father being a journeyman shoemaker and his mother a servant, Andersen belonged to the lowest social class (3-4). Because of his background, it was unlikely that he would achieve literary fame. During Andersen’s time, talent was solely held by those in a high social class. Although he was born during a time when individualism began to challenge the traditional prejudices of classism, Andersen still felt the pressures of the old system as he established himself as a writer (16). Despite finding a way to slide through a gap that was beginning to emerge in the upper class, Andersen was never truly accepted as a member of the high society. In his social isolation, Andersen wrote fairy tales to highlight the pressures his social class placed on him.

The Psychological Uses of Fairy Tales

Now that class and disability are shown to relate, how do disability studies and fairy tales connect? In recent years psychologists have begun to see the psychological consequences of the genre. When discussing the psychological impact of fairy tales, there is no better place to begin than Bruno Bettelheim’s 1975 book *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. Bettelheim wrote the book to explain “why... children—normal and abnormal alike, and all levels of intelligence—find folk fairy tales more satisfying than all other children’s

stories” (Bettelheim 6). After trying to understand why fairy tales achieved such success with children, Bettelheim realized that fairy tales “start where the child really is in his psychological and emotional being. They speak about his severe pressures in a way that the child unconsciously understands, and... offer examples of both temporary and permanent solutions to pressing difficulties” (6). To overcome the psychological problems of growing up (unconscious problems), children must recognize what is going on with their conscious self so they can cope with what is simultaneously occurring in their unconscious (7). Bettelheim writes that children gain this understanding by “spinning out daydreams—ruminating, rearranging, and fantasizing about suitable story elements in response to unconscious pressures” (7). By doing this, children fit “unconscious content into conscious fantasies, which then enable[s] him to deal with that content” (7). Bettelheim argues, “It is here that fairy tales have unequalled value, because they offer new dimensions to the child’s imagination which would be impossible for him to explore on his own” (7). Ultimately, fairy tales offer children a structure on which they can base their daydreams to guide them through their life (7).

Years after Bettelheim published his book, psychologist and University of Massachusetts Professor Sheldon Cashdan wrote of the lasting impact fairy tales had on college students. In the first chapter of his academic book, *The Witch Must Die: How Fairy Tales Shape Our Lives*, Cashdan discusses this impact. While teaching a course titled “The Psychology of Fantasy and Folklore,” Cashdan encouraged students to explore how fairy tales affected the psychological development of children (Cashdan 1). As he led class discussions, Cashdan “was struck by how impassioned students would become when we talked about the stories” (1). When he taught the class, “the atmosphere was different from that of other courses... Everyone had a favorite tale from childhood that struck an emotional chord” (1). Cashdan’s experience shows that fairy tales

extend beyond childhood years; they remain relevant into one's adulthood. Even though the students in Cashdan's class were transforming into adults, the stories from their childhood remained meaningful because they played an integral part in developing their psyche.

Fairy tales have such a profound impact on people of all ages that psychologists have begun to use them as therapy. Russian psychology professor Igor V. Vachkov wrote an article in 2016 locating the practice as a type of therapy. In the article, Vachkov explains that no matter where the fairy tales come from for therapy sessions—whether they are created by the therapist, written by a client, or selected from previous work—the fairy tales used serve towards two major symbolic tasks: the task of a mirror and the task of the crystal (Vachkov 386). The first task, the task of a mirror, Vachkov writes, occurs when “a fairy tale can help the client (child or adult) see themselves, meet with themselves, and thus develop self-awareness and provide an opportunity to harmonize their personal space” (386). The next task, the task of the crystal, occurs when “a fairy tale offers a new way of seeing other people and the world around, and, therefore, building new, more constructive relationships with people and the world” (386). Vachkov goes on to note that when “resolving the task of the mirror and the task of a crystal... the fairy tale forms their [a client's] ability to become a creator of their own inner and outer world. Namely this ability determines the human being's subjectivity” (386). Ultimately fairy tales help clients understand what shapes their perceptions of themselves and the world around them, reaffirming the scholarship of Bettelheim and Cashdan.

With the understanding that fairy tales act as an outlet for people to explore their expectations of reality, it becomes significant that Andersen wrote fairy tales. Living a life of social oppression, Andersen had no place to turn to other than his writing; fairy tales became his only outlet. When he felt life's highs and lows, he turned to fairy tales to express his views of

himself and the world. As Andersen spun stories of mermaids, farm animals, and royalty, he was exploring who he was. Underneath Andersen's fantastical characters lie his feelings and perceptions of himself. Writing fairy tales became Andersen's way of gaining awareness of himself and those around him; they became a form of self-exploration, ultimately becoming therapeutic.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Since Andersen wrote his fairy tales in Danish, the following analysis relies on an English translation of Andersen's works. Accepted among scholars as a close translation of Andersen's fairy tales, Erik Christian Haugaard's translation of Andersen's works was selected for this thesis. Although a translation rarely captures every element of an original story, Haugaard's translation captures the overall themes of each fairy tale and tries to capture every nuance possible. While this thesis may use direct quotes at times, the words that are selected have appeared in various translations of the work.

The fairy tales selected for this thesis have been chosen due to their popularity and the themes they highlight. To show Andersen's mental progression through his career, the fairy tales are discussed in order of publication. While other popular stories have been omitted from this thesis, it is merely due to the finite space available. If other scholars pursue this topic in the future, they can analyze many other stories from the lens of disability and social oppression.

Chapter 4

Introduction to Analysis

As outlined before, class and disability are entwined in the works of Andersen. Andersen used his fairy tales to express his frustrations with his class status. Andersen's low social class made it difficult for him to achieve the literary fame he dreamt of. Andersen had to overcome many social obstacles to become an author, and even when he did achieve fame, he was nervous his past social standing would come back to haunt him. Biographer Elias Bredsdorff wrote:

Andersen's... mother was a pathological liar, his grandfather insane, his mother ended by becoming an alcoholic, his aunt ran a brothel in Copenhagen, and for years he was aware that somewhere a half-sister existed who might suddenly turn up and embarrass him in his new milieu—a thought that haunted his life and dreams. (Zipes 4)

No matter how hard he tried, Andersen could never escape his ties to the lower class. Even when he succeeded as a writer, he did so by writing fairy tales. He spent his life as an outsider dreaming of finding his way into the higher class, but even when he got close, he could never truly become one of them.

In his fairy tales, Andersen often attacked the greed and pride of the aristocracy, celebrating the chosen lower-class individuals able to rise above their station (66). His fairy tales show him working through the inequalities he faced. When comparing Andersen's fairy tales to his rise to fame, there seems to be a connection between Andersen's mental state and the content of his fairy tales. While Andersen began his career hopeful that his fairy tales would lift him above his station, as he got older his expectations waned; Andersen no longer hoped to be

accepted into the higher class, he merely hoped to achieve peace.

Chapter 5

“The Princess and The Pea:” Dreaming of Royalty

When Andersen wrote “The Princess and the Pea,” he received his first taste of fame. Although he began to draw attention to himself in 1830, it was not until 1835 that Andersen received a breakthrough (Zipes 13). Once this breakthrough occurred, it seemed as though Andersen was on track to enter the higher ranks. Within three years, Andersen became financially secure; King Fredrich VI of Denmark granted him a poet’s pension (13). In the same year, Andersen was recognized by the Danish royalty as “one of the Kingdom’s finest artists” (13). In these years, it seemed that Andersen was seamlessly rising above his station. What Andersen did not realize, however, was that although his work was accepted by the upper class, he was not. While his drive and eagerness to please allowed him to achieve literary fame, it made him the target of brutal criticism (13). Despite his literary fame, the upper class never took him seriously. Georg Brandes, a famous Danish critic wrote, “Indeed, he did become a great man. But he did not become a man. There was not the slightest glimmer of manliness in the soul of this child, son of the common people” (13). Even as Andersen tried to rise ranks, he did not become equal. His background and manners led others to view him as a child.

Published in 1835, “The Princess and the Pea” vocalizes Andersen’s inner desires to be accepted by the nobility. The story follows a princess who rises above her station. After a prince searches with no avail for a “real princess” (Haugaard 20), he returns home, sad that he did not find a companion. While he did meet princesses, he did not meet a real princess. One night, however, a girl trudges to his castle in the rain claiming to be a real princess. Before the prince can accept her as his bride, his mother demands to test her. Preparing for the princess’s test, the queen places a pea on a bed and then puts twenty mattresses and twenty quilts over the single

pea. When the girl wakes up in the morning bruised, the queen and prince know she is a real princess. They claim that only a real princess could be sensitive enough to feel the pea under the mattresses. The story ends with the prince marrying the princess.

Written at a high point in Andersen's life, "The Princess and the Pea" reaffirms Andersen's hope that one can overcome their background. Although the princess suffers for an entire night, she is accepted wholeheartedly by the prince and the queen after she endures a night of temporary pain. She is never asked about her background or made to feel unwelcome after passing the queen's test. Instead, her sensitivity proves she belongs among the noble ranks. Her sensitivity is a trait Andersen shares, but where Andersen is reduced to the status of a child because of his sensitivity and background, the princess is rewarded for it. Through the princess's sensitivity, Andersen connects physical disability to a trait he was mocked over. The princess allows the writer to express the pain his sensitivity caused him; the princess becomes a window to see Andersen through. Yet, because the story was written at a high point in Andersen's life, he shows sensitivity as an impairment one can overcome. Rather than sensitivity being a trait that makes the princess childish, Andersen shows it as the key to the princess's transition into the higher class.

While some scholars see the story as poking fun at the extent royalty went to keep their bloodlines pure (Zipes 35), it also seems to be an internal fantasy that Andersen explores. As established previously, fairy tales allow people to bridge reality and create expectations for their life. In "The Princess and the Pea," Andersen hopes for an easy transition into royalty, one where an outsider is accepted into a higher-class status and their previous social standing is forgotten. But as Andersen established himself more, he lost this optimism. Spiraling towards darker

realities Andersen made his characters settle for less promising outcomes and suffer immense pain.

Chapter 6

“The Little Mermaid:” Needing Love

Although Andersen published “The Little Mermaid” two years after “The Princess and the Pea,” he returns to a past part of his life in the story. In many ways, the little mermaid reflects Andersen’s teenage years. In the little mermaid’s rise to the surface, Andersen describes his rise to fame. The story chronicles a young mermaid who dreams of seeing the water’s surface but is not allowed to until she turns fifteen. After years of waiting, the little mermaid swims to the surface where she sees a ship with a beautiful prince on it. When a storm begins, the ship is torn to pieces, and the prince is forced underwater. The little mermaid saves the prince and places him on a beach where a girl finds him and calls for help. After ensuring that the prince is alive, the little mermaid returns to the sea. From her grandmother, the little mermaid learns that humans have immortal souls and that the only way for a mermaid to gain an immortal soul is to have a human fall in love with them. Wanting an immortal soul and knowing that a human would not fall in love with her with a tail, the little mermaid journeys to a sea witch to ask for legs. The sea witch says she can fulfill the little mermaid’s request but warns the little mermaid that gaining legs would prevent her from ever seeing her family again and that every step would feel like walking on swords.

Despite these side effects, the little mermaid agrees and gives the witch her tongue as payment: losing her voice. Although the prince finds the little mermaid and takes her in, he never falls in love with her; he loves her as he would a little child. Instead, he marries a princess from another town. As the little mermaid dances at the prince’s wedding, she realizes she will die the

next day because the prince did not fall in love with her. Suddenly, the little mermaid's sisters surface from the water telling her that they sold their hair to the sea witch to save her; if the little mermaid kills the prince, she can return to the sea. The little mermaid cannot bring herself to kill the prince, however, and she becomes sea foam. But as sea foam, the little mermaid becomes a member of the daughters of the air and can obtain an immortal soul in three hundred years. In the meantime, the little mermaid floats from home to home, looking after the inhabitants.

As mentioned previously, Andersen represents himself through the little mermaid. Like the little mermaid, Andersen saw a different side of society when he was nearly fifteen years old. In the fall of 1819, Andersen's mother allowed him to leave his hometown of Odense to pursue a career as an artist (Zipes 5). With his mother's permission, Andersen moved to Copenhagen where he was unprepared for the obstacles he faced. In addition to the political turmoil raging in the city, Andersen did not anticipate the limits his social class would put on him. At the time, it was almost impossible for a member of a low socioeconomic class to rise above their station and achieve the type of fame Andersen was pursuing. When Andersen entered Copenhagen, fame was dependent on manners, breeding, formal schooling, and networking, not genius (5).

But no matter how hard achieving fame seemed, Andersen never gave up. Lacking grace, Andersen tried to gain philanthropic gifts from Copenhagen's higher society by performing, but often he would leave embarrassed (6). Eventually, his determination gained the support of a few gentlemen who sent him to ballet school, and he received small roles in the Royal Theatre (6). Knowing Andersen needed more schooling to be a writer or performer, the board of directors gave him a scholarship to go to school in Slagelse (6). Despite being seventeen when he entered school, he was placed in classes with eleven-year-olds (6). Andersen never found a place in the

school. Although he tried to fit in, Andersen made few friends, argued with the headmaster, and never perfected his spelling or grammar (7).

It was not just the school where Andersen did not fit, however; Andersen never found a place in Copenhagen either. Although a director on the board of the Royal Theatre, Jonas Collin, adopted Andersen into his family, Andersen never felt accepted by Collin's high-society family or by anyone in Denmark's high society (6). Because of Andersen's writing, members of the elite society associated with him, but they never recognized him as a member of their society. Beginning in 1831, Andersen traveled outside of Denmark (8). In his travels, Andersen became a nomad. He would rent hotel rooms and stay with prominent members of society, never settling down in one place. When reading Andersen's travel diaries, it becomes apparent that he felt more at home outside of Denmark than he did in it (9). Like the little mermaid, Andersen spent his life as a drifter rarely making close friendships.

Through the little mermaid, Andersen shows an outsider who wants love but never finds it. No matter how hard the little mermaid tries, her prince never accepts her. Although the little mermaid achieves an immortal soul, her deepest wish, she does so in isolation. Refusing to return to her family and rejected by the prince, the little mermaid is reduced to an outsider. To gain an immortal soul the little mermaid suffers immense pain, heartbreak, and rejection. The suffering the little mermaid faces on the surface mirrors the suffering Andersen faced in Copenhagen. Like the little mermaid, Andersen left his family, faced rejection, and wandered from place to place. Through her, Andersen shows the pain he experienced. When the little mermaid agrees to leave her family, she is sentenced to live with physical impairments: she has no voice and every step feels as though she is stepping on knives. Through her impairments, Andersen shows how hard it

was living in Copenhagen. Like the little mermaid, every step Andersen took forward came with pain and he felt as though he had no voice.

Despite all the little mermaid sacrifices throughout the story, it seems worth it in the end. Through her self-sacrifice and suffering, the little mermaid gains an immortal soul. While some scholars such as Jack Zipes view Andersen's depiction of the little mermaid's self-sacrifice as the writer defending the upper class's expectations for the lower class (37), it overlooks the fact that Andersen was a victim of the classism they claim he defends. Like the little mermaid, if Andersen wanted to rise above his class, he had to submit to the expectations of the upper class; he had no choice but to defend the ideologies in the story. Instead of defending these expectations, Andersen submits to them. Through the little mermaid's impairments, Andersen shows the pain his submission caused him.

Chapter 7

“The Snow Queen:” Wanting Friendship

Told in 1844, Andersen’s longest fairy tale, “The Snow Queen,” depicts a little girl who will do anything to save her best friend. The story begins when the devil constructs a mirror that reflects every object (even the most beautiful) as ugly. Thinking it to be a fun joke, the devil and his comrades take the mirror to Heaven to use against God and the angels. But as the devil flies closer to Heaven, the mirror shakes violently, causing the devil to drop it. The mirror then shatters into millions of shards. While some shards fall to the ground, others blow in the wind. The story then switches its focus to a pair of best friends, Kai (in other works spelled Kay) and Gerda. The two live close together in the poor part of a city, where they tend to a small garden. One Spring, shards of the devil’s mirror strike Kai’s eyes and heart; his heart becomes ice, and he sees everything as hideous. He begins to destroy the things he once saw as beautiful and torment those he loves.

One day, the Snow Queen, a mystical figure who controls the ice and snow, comes and takes Kai away, giving him two kisses: one to make the cold less bitter and one to erase the memories of Gerda and his grandmother—if she would give him another kiss he would die. When Kai never returns home, most people assume he drowned in a nearby river. Gerda also believes this until the swallows and the sunshine tell her they do not believe Kai died. Gerda then embarks on a journey to find him. Gerda’s innocence causes those around her to help her. After encountering a sorcerer, talking flowers, talking crows, a prince and princess, a little robber girl, a talking reindeer, and two people from the North, Gerda finally finds Kai. She finds him sitting

alone in the cold, empty halls of the Snow Queen's palace, working on a puzzle. Before the Snow Queen left Kai to go to the warmer countries, she told him if he could spell the word eternity with pieces of ice he could be his own master. Finding him in this state, Gerda runs to him, hugging him tightly with tears in her eyes. When Gerda's tears fall on Kai's heart, the ice melts, causing him to cry, washing the shards of glass out of his eyes. Happy to see the reunion of Kai and Gerda, the shards of glass dance around them, and when the shards grow tired they drop to the ground spelling the word eternity. When the pair returns home, older than when they left, the grandmother reads them the Bible verse, "Whoever shall not receive the Kingdom of Heaven as a little child shall not enter therein" (Haugaard 262), ending the story.

"The Snow Queen" was written in the winter of 1844 when Andersen was experiencing a high point (Wullschlager 242). Throughout his life, Andersen's moods swung on a pendulum: he was either extremely happy or extremely sad. At the time, Andersen was enjoying his nomadic life. He had just returned to Copenhagen from a year-long trip, where he received abundant amounts of attention in Denmark and abroad (242). Andersen was also emotionally alive in two long-distance relationships, an uncommon occurrence in his life (242). Thinking that fairy tales gave him a voice and that he had an enthusiastic audience waiting to read his next story, Andersen wrote, "The Snow Queen" in December (242). While most of Andersen's fairy tales were laboriously penned, he wrote, "The Snow Queen" in five days (243). Manic at times, the story reads as though it is a fever dream. As stated by critic Naomi Lewis, "The Snow Queen," is told at "the pace of inspiration rather than worked-out thought" (243). Through the many pages of the story, Andersen uses nonsensical elements and plotlines to explore his emotional volatility.

Through Kai, Andersen represented his mental struggles. Often described as anxious, paranoid, and unhappy, Andersen went through his life feeling extremely high highs and extremely low lows. When shards of the devil's mirror pierce Kai, Kai has a depressive episode like those Andersen experienced. Kai loses the ability to see beauty and his heart becomes ice. From these physical impairments, Kai develops Andersen's numbness and steps into a path of isolation. Like Andersen, Kai distances himself from the people who love him, loses the ability to find joy, and becomes isolated. After ice pierces Kai's heart, the Snow Queen takes him into her company. Although the Snow Queen lifts Kai out of poverty and makes him numb to the cold, she only does so when his heart turns to ice and he sees everything as ugly. The Snow Queen comes to represent the coldness of the aristocracy; she makes Kai feel the same way that the upper class made Andersen feel. Even when the Snow Queen brings Kai into her palace, she keeps him isolated and continues to assert power over him—he never becomes her equal. Although Kai rose to a new station, he had to leave everything valuable behind. Through the character of Kai, Andersen expressed the mental toll that came with his rise to fame, and in the Snow Queen, Andersen located the cause of his pain: the aristocracy.

The puzzle the Snow Queen forces Kai to solve represents how Andersen could never break into the upper class. Like the Snow Queen, the aristocracy in Andersen's life teased him with the false hope that he could control his destiny. Andersen thought the upper class would accept him if he wrote enough fairy tales and sacrificed enough of his dignity—but this never proved true. No matter how much Andersen gave, the aristocracy continued to take; it began to feel as though Andersen was struggling to solve an impossible puzzle. Through Kai, Andersen shows the isolation and coldness his rise to fame caused him. Like Kai, Andersen felt as though he was stuck in a cold, isolated state, trying to do the impossible. Kai seems to be Andersen

admitting his climb to fame was impossible and depressing. Through the story, Andersen explored how he could leave the bitter hands of the aristocracy. Because Andersen wrote this tale during a high point in his life, he shows Kai breaking free from the aristocracy. Likely reflecting the hope he had for the relationships in his life, Andersen shows a close friend saving Kai.

Gerda's love and dedication to Kai breaks the trance he was in and frees him from the control of the Snow Queen. At the end of the story, Andersen locates Gerda's child-like innocence as the reason she saves Kai, a quality the two retain at the end of the tale. While some scholars view the story as a commentary on one's transition from childhood to adolescence (245), it also seems to be a commentary on the class system. Throughout Andersen's life and the fairy tales previously discussed, higher-class individuals described those in a lower social class as childlike. Seen through this lens, Gerda and Kai's innocence at the end of the story seems as though Andersen is championing the lower class, associating himself with it. By having Kai and Gerda reunite at the end, Andersen chooses friendship over upward mobility.

Chapter 8

“The Little Match Girl:” Wanting Peace

Told one year later in 1845, “The Little Match Girl” chronicles Andersen losing hope that the upper class would ever give the people of the lower class what they need. Rather than hoping to gain any relationship in his life, Andersen seems to settle for peace, understanding that he will never be accepted by those around him. Only after the little match girl is tormented by visions of a better life can she overcome her poverty. In the story, the little match girl walks barefoot in the snow fearful of returning home to her father after selling no matches. As she walks home, slowly succumbing to the cold, she gains the courage to light three matches for warmth. With every match, she sees visions of what she does not have—warmth, food, and a welcoming home to return to. Her visions come in the form of an iron stove, a roasted goose, and a Christmas tree. As the little match girl tries to embrace the figments of her imagination, her matches burn out, and she is left isolated in the snow. After lighting the three matches, she sees a shooting star; she remembers that her grandmother said a shooting star meant someone was dying. Thinking of her grandmother, the little match girl lights the fourth match and suddenly the figure of her grandmother appears. Not wanting to lose her grandmother, the little match girl lights her remaining matches. When the matches burn out, her grandmother grabs her and they both fly up to God. The next morning, the little match girl’s corpse is found and the people lament that she died warming herself. Before the story ends, Andersen notes that no one knows the visions she saw or the heights she reached.

Andersen wrote “The Little Match Girl” when he was in a depressive state. In October of 1844, after parting with one of his many love interests, Andersen left Copenhagen and traveled to the Glorup Manor in Ørbæk, Denmark (Wullschlager 257). While there, Andersen took daily

walks through the woods where he began to feel old and restless (257). In November of the same year, he traveled to the Gravensteen Castle where he continued to wallow in his negative feelings (256). In his almanac, Andersen complained that he was unhappy and ill (258). As he did at the Glorup Manor, Andersen continued to take daily walks alone in the woods (258). During one of his walks in November, Andersen found inspiration in the frigid air and returned to his room where he wrote “The Little Match Girl.” Through the tale, Andersen expressed his frustrations with his current condition and explored the tragedies of his childhood. About the story, academic Jackie Wullschlager wrote, “It was written when he [Andersen] was cocooned and dissatisfied in dull, aristocratic luxury... With the story he returned to his childhood as the impoverished outsider” (258). “The Little Match Girl” mirrors Andersen's childhood memories and illustrates his current frustrations. The grandmother in the story reflects Andersen’s grandmother, and the little match girl mirrors the experiences of his mother (258). Growing up, Andersen’s mother would tell him stories about begging in the cold streets, afraid to return home penniless (258). While disheartened with his condition, Andersen navigated his childhood traumas by writing a story about a social outsider who is left to die.

Younger than the other characters, the little match girl fails to materialize the visions she sees. While she reaches her grandmother, she does so in death. Unlike the other characters, Andersen shows the little match girl returning to her family. Instead of receiving something new, the little match girl receives someone from her past. In finding something from her past, the little match girl finds peace, something Andersen himself hoped for. After spending years being criticized, rejected, and isolated, Andersen used this fairy tale to accept that he would never rise above his station. Through this fairy tale, Andersen expressed hopes of returning to his past, regretting the path life took him

In addition to wishing he could return to the past, Andersen criticizes those above him. Once the little match girl is found dead on the street, the people merely cry out that she froze to death; they only care about the little match girl when she is dead. When she was selling matches no one bought any, and when she was dying on the street there was no one to help her. Although her visions were simple ones—family, food, and warmth—Andersen claimed no one saw them. Because of her station, no one would grant the little match girl the things she needed. By making the match girl's dreams hallucinations, Andersen shows how unobtainable his own dreams were. In the little match girl's death, Andersen highlighted the greed of the upper class and relented that he would never receive peace through their goodwill. In the little match girl's death, Andersen finally understood that he will never be accepted by the upper class.

Chapter 9

Conclusion

By looking at Andersen's fairy tales through the lens of disability, one sees them as more than fantastical stories. At the heart of every tale lie remnants of the author. Andersen's early poverty haunted him throughout his life and influenced his writing; his hopes and fears manifested in every story. While Andersen thought his writing would allow him to break into the upper ranks, it never did. He lived his life as a nomad, wandering from place to place, with few friends and no place to call home. Fairy tales were Andersen's only outlet. When he felt depressed, elated, content, or anxious he turned to the pages of his notebook; paper listened when no one else would. Stories of mermaids and princesses allowed Andersen to tell the world how he felt. With every fairy tale, Andersen felt less invisible.

As a man crushed by Denmark's class system, Andersen's fairy tales express his discontent with the social oppression he faced. No matter how many stories he told or awards he won, Andersen was seen as an outsider. Although the writer rose above his poverty, he never entered the ranks of the upper class; he spent his life lingering in social purgatory. To show the physical and mental pain his social oppression caused, Andersen describes his characters as having physical and mental impairments. While some of Andersen's characters overcome the hardships that come with their physical and mental disabilities, others do not. The older Andersen got, he became less optimistic that he would rise above his station. As Andersen's optimism faded, he began to sentence his characters to darker outcomes. While the princess in "The Princess and the Pea" becomes royalty, the little match girl freezes to death.

Andersen's stories and characters become representations of himself. Through them, the writer explored what confined him in the present and what awaited him in the future. Writing

characters with disabilities allowed Andersen to express what it felt like to live as a member of the lower class. By voicing what it felt like to be trapped, discouraged, and disempowered by an oppressive class system, Andersen engaged in a form of therapy. While his stories were pure entertainment for his readers, they were an outlet for the writer. By bruising the princess in “The Princess and the Pea,” taking the little mermaid’s voice, freezing the heart of Kai, and killing the little match girl, Andersen showed how he viewed himself and his chances of rising above his station. While Andersen was hopeful at the beginning of his career, his views slowly became bleaker and bleaker. Writing became the only way Andersen could express what it felt like to live in an oppressive class system, but he could not do it in the open; Andersen had to hide his feelings behind fantastical images. Fairy tales became the only way he could explore his feelings.

But why does Andersen matter? He matters because his fairy tales are being retold with much of their meaning lost. Because Andersen is preserved in a false light, his fairy tales have been adopted, reworked, and diluted. Disney has retold many of his stories, falsely giving them a happy ending. But why should Andersen’s fairy tales have a happily ever after if he did not? Andersen used his stories to speak of his oppression. If his stories are haphazardly given a happy ending, Andersen’s social oppression is forgotten and his only outlet taken away. He becomes another oppressed writer lost to history, mislabeled, and misunderstood. Only when Andersen’s fairy tales are seen as a form of self-expression do they become stories of oppression. Disability then becomes more than just an aesthetic feature or a sign of good or evil, it becomes an expression of what it is like to live under an oppressive class system.

When viewing the fairy tales through Andersen’s oppression, the fairy tale genre regains its purpose. Fairy tales are written to reflect an author or a society, not to give an unrealistic happy ending. If remnants of Andersen and Denmark’s society are taken out, the stories reflect

neither the writer nor the society; the stories only reflect what consumers want to buy. Fairy tales begin to lose the darkness that made them an outlet for an author and slowly enter into the land of kitsch. As fairy tales become commercialized and usurped from the hands of authors, the fairy tale genre strays from its purpose. Fairy tales arose to tell of real anxieties and struggles, not to spark warm feelings in the heart's readers.

Looking at Andersen through a lens of oppression returns power to the fairy tale genre and opens paths for other fairy tale writers to be explored. Disability becomes more than an aesthetic choice; it becomes Andersen's way of coping with his class status. Once Andersen's fairy tales are seen as an extension of himself and his only version of therapy, he becomes more than a narcissistic writer who only wanted fame. It becomes clear Andersen was a man who only wanted a basic thing in life—a place to belong—and never found it.

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- Mentor high school students to prepare them for higher education
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