



A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON THE FAIRY TALES OF HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN WITH RESPECT TO CHARLES PERRAULT, OSCAR WILDE AND C. S. LEWIS

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ABSTRACT

Fairy tales have always been a part of a happy childhood-reading routine in the life of every human being. In this regard, myriads of legendary fairy tale writers who belong to diverse domains of language have contributed to the turf of fairy tales. Charles Perrault, Grimm Brothers and Hans Christian Andersen are considered to be the pioneers of the early tradition of fairy tales. The paper is a meek attempt in comparing and bringing out the similarities in the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen and three other writers. The aim of the paper is to offer insight into the identical elements of myth in fairy tales and fantasy fictions which are passed down to generations after generations of fairy tale writers. The article compares one fairy tale each of Andersen, to similar tales written by three other authors, and these authors are chosen on the perspective that they belong to the early, middle and modern age of fairy tale writing respectively. The choice of the comparative authors is however irrespective of their nationalities. The mainstay of the paper is thus to hold Andersen as a unique storyteller, universal and ubiquitous in his themes, thereby making him a quintessential model figure to look upon to for ages to come.

KEYWORDS: Andersen— Fairy tales— Similarity— Myth— Perrault— Wilde— Lewis.

INTRODUCTION

The legendary Danish fairy tale writer Hans Christian Andersen was born in Odense, Demark, in 1805. Born and brought up in a lower-middle-class family, Andersen was not much educated. Andersen, however, became a protuberant figure with his publication of a collection of fairy tales for children. He was remembered for his unique identity of drawing his pictures on his own to serve as illustrations for his tales. Andersen is considered as one of the early pioneers in the art of writing fairy tales. Some of the famous fairy tales of Andersen include: *The Little Mermaid*, *The Snow Queen*, *The Ugly Duckling* and *Thumbelina*.

The present paper aims to compare the similarities of Andersen's fairy tales to each of three other prominent fairy tale writers of different nationalities— Charles Perrault, Oscar Wilde and C.S. Lewis. The paper thus takes up a three dimensional comparative study of Danish literature against French, Irish and British literature. Comparative studies in literature usually have a dual foci— to accumulate the ideologies of the native language with the foreign language, and to infuse and reproduce the culture and tradition of the foreign literature into the host literature as precisely expressed by Zepetnek:

In principle, the discipline of Comparative Literature is *in toto* a method in the study of literature in at least two ways. First, Comparative Literature means the knowledge of more than one national language and literature...and second, Comparative Literature has an ideology of inclusion of the Other, be that a marginal literature in its several meanings of marginality, a genre, various text types, etc...Comparative



Literature has intrinsically a content and form which facilitate the cross-cultural and interdisciplinary study of literature... (13)

With the afore-mentioned note on comparative literature, the paper proceeds into comparing three fairy tales of Andersen with those of Perrault, Wilde and C. S. Lewis. The three dimensional comparison is accomplished by fetching out the correspondences in the fairy tales of the above-mentioned giants in the following fashion: Andersen's *The Wild Swans* versus Perrault's *Cinderella*; Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* versus Oscar Wilde's *The Fisherman and His Soul*; and Andersen's *The Snow Queen* versus C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*.

Charles Perrault, the French legendary fairy tale writer was born on 12th January 1628. Perrault is considered as one of the supreme insignia in the art of writing fairy tales and he is also one of the most distinguished harbingers in this resort. Perrault is celebrated by children for his astoundingly striking tales like *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella* and *Little Red Riding Hood*. Among his cosmic stretch of tales, *Cinderella*—one of his most famous tales—is chosen as a comparative parameter to Andersen's tale *The Wild Swans*.

The Wild Swans and *Cinderella* are very analogous by many means. In an extended sense, *The Wild Swans* can be perceived as a sequel to *Cinderella*. In both the tales, the heroine has a widowed father who takes a stepmother. As a customary happenstance, the stepmother turns out to be cruel and detests the step-daughter as she is very beautiful:

We all recall the cruel stepmother in fairy tales. That archetype is often a necessary element in a fairy tale so that the heroine/hero can become a person of character and power. Stories of heroes and heroines often begin with a wound or loss or injustice and end with heroic acts of restoration and gift-bestowing love... (17)

The fathers in both the fairy tales are quite reckless at the plight of their poor daughters being beleaguered by their stepmothers. In *The Wild Swans* the king is all too set to be certain of the allegations of the wicked queen on his innocent daughter. In *Cinderella* the scenario shifts to a quandary where the father does not even know how unscrupulously his step wife treats his daughter. The fathers of the heroines from the two plays thus lack concern for their daughters on account of taking new wives.

The heroines from both the tales are thrown into doing hard graft while their stepmothers relish with glee. In *The Wild Swans* the evil queen sends off the daughter to be brought up in a peasant's house, while she wanders unrestricted in royalty. She also curses and turns the eleven sons into wild swans. While the wicked queen easily curses, it is the poor girl who has to sew wild nettles into eleven sweaters for her brothers, in order to shift the curse. The same scenario happens in *Cinderella*, where Cinderella is forced to do the house chores whereas her stepmother and stepsisters go to the Prince's ball ceremony.

The two tales are also similar in that both constitute the apparition of the fairy godmother. When Cinderella is left behind by her cruel stepmother, the fairy godmother appears and helps her go to the Prince's ball. The same is the case in *The Wild Swans*. When Elise weeps for her brothers and their fate, it is her fairy godmother who instructs Elise how to shift the curse of the evil queen and save her brothers. Thus in both tales, innocence and diligence leads to liberation of the daughters from the clutches of the stepmothers by the supernatural intervention of the fairy godmother.

Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* also bears scrupulous similarity to Oscar Wilde's *The Fisherman and His Soul*. Oscar Wilde, the great Irish maestro of fairy tales, was born on 16th October 1884. Oscar Wilde is known for his entertaining short stories and tales like *The Selfish Giant*, *The Happy Prince*, and *The Fisherman and His Soul*. *The Fisherman and His Soul* is Wilde's most fascinating tale that very closely serves as a parody to Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*.

Critics often marvel at the high similarities of the tales of Andersen and Wilde. The tale *The Fisherman and His Soul* is also comparable to Andersen's tale *The Shadow*; similarly Oscar Wilde's version of *The Nightingale and The Rose* is very much similar to Andersen's of *The Nightingale*: "One of the major sources that is actually attested as having been used by both Andersen and Wilde is the novel 'Undine' by Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué. Andersen used it as a direct inspiration for his own tale—there is evidence for it in his letter to a friend" (Wullschläger 165).

The tales *The Little Mermaid* and *The Fisherman and His Soul* both involve around the same theme of sacrificing one's life on pursuit of love. In Andersen's tale it is the heroine who makes the sacrifice whereas in Wilde's tale it is the hero who does the same. In both tales, the heroine is a mermaid. Both the tales encompass the supernatural persona— the sea witch. In both the tales, the love between the male and the female protagonists demands a sacrifice of the soul.

In *The Little Mermaid* the protagonist sacrifices everything except her physical presence— which is also stripped of her when her soul vanishes into a foam of bubbles. Similarly, in *The Fisherman and His Soul*, the fisherman sacrifices his soul, for his lady love is a mermaid who does not have one; when the fisherman becomes tempted by his 'sacrificed soul' he not only loses his soul forever, but also loses his ladylove. It is also notable that both the tales end in a note of sadness— heartbroken yet yearning— with pangs of an unsuccessful love owing to self-folly.

Clive Staples Lewis, commonly known as C. S. Lewis is a British writer of the modern age, most famous for his seminal play *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*. The play itself was made into a film series after which it achieved zeniths for the writer. *The Chronicles of Narnia* bears so many similarities to Andersen's longest fairy tale *The Snow Queen*, a tale in seven parts. In fact critics often perceive *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* as one that was inspired by Andersen's tale.

The White Witch in *Narnia* is a modern burlesque of Andersen's *Snow Queen*. The plots are very similar too. The young boy Kay becomes disorderly in Andersen's tale and is captured by the Snow Queen and is taken to her Ice Palace; similarly Edmund, a boy who becomes boisterous is captured by the White Witch to her Snow Castle in Lewis's story. The country in both the fairy tales are filled in snow gradually as the story progresses, indicating an impending threat on account of the witches. The young boys who are captured in both the tales are carried by their captors in their respective carriages. Brown rightly acknowledges the opinion of Colin Manlove in his pointing out the similarity of the witches from the tales of Andersen and Lewis: "Colin Manlove has suggested that Lewis's White Witch comes 'straight out of the page of Hans Andersen,' a reference to Andersen's story 'The Snow Queen.' Kay, the main character in that fable, is, like Edmund, a good boy gone bad" (Brown 64).

The intervention of talking animals serves as a means of rescue in both the cases. The animals help the cohorts of the hero/heroine who is captured by the witch. In case of *Narnia*, it is Aslan— the ferocious lion— that helps the brothers and sisters of Edmund; while in *The Snow Queen* it is the Lapp Reindeer (as it hails from Lapland) who helps Gerda find Kay. In both the tales, it is sacrificial love that breaks the evil curse. In *Narnia*, the lion Aslan sacrifices his own life in order to save Edmund. In Andersen's tale, little Gerda sacrifices her own family and runs off to find Kay, and it is her tears of love that melt away the evil pieces of glass in Kay's heart.

Therefore it becomes evident that Andersen stands fixed as a beacon of light to any fairy tale writer. Andersen's characters and themes stand as of universal import and his parameters of storytelling can be applied and compared to any fairy tale writer from the early ages to the modern and contemporary era. Thus the paper presents a comparative study of Andersen's fairy tales to that of Perrault, Oscar Wilde and C. S. Lewis. Andersen's supernatural characters like the witch, the stepmothers and even talking animals form a strong base of literary creativity for upcoming writers for children: "Andersen makes use of supernatural elements with the greatest prudence, and all the more so because he makes himself independent of the contents of the ancient folk-tales and legends" (Rubow). Therefore the paper posits that Andersen is one of the most non-redundant sources of fairy tales, for now and for aeons to come.

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