

# **Hans Christian Andersen's Use of Anthropomorphism<sup>i</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

The topic of anthropomorphism in Hans Christian Andersen's tales has been discussed with students in classes in Danish Language and Literature at Sapienza, University of Rome (La Sapienza, Università di Roma) both for the purpose of the translation of his works and for understanding the meanings of the imagery in the studied works. Anthropomorphism is a common theme in many of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales. Andersen's symbolic use of nature, household objects, trinkets, toys and even birds, is an important theme in many of his works. He bestows human emotions on animate and inanimate objects, such as love and envy, often with an added touch of humour or irony.

Andersen conveys issues of often sombre or tragicomic content, sometimes through allegorical tales and myths, that although they are not necessarily easily translatable or culturally transferable, appeal universally to all generations and nationalities. Andersen's personification of animals also provides a subtle disguise for graver issues such as loss, and the struggle for freedom. The use of anthropomorphism and symbolism also allows younger readers access to complex and universal issues.

## **Introduction**

The topic of this paper arose from the teaching of Danish language and literature to students at Sapienza University of Rome. Using a number of Andersen's works, the specific use and meanings of anthropomorphic imagery was introduced and discussed; both as how this imagery could be translated and understood in Italian, and what they evoked through themes such as love, desire and freedom. These timeless themes were studied further with regard to their presence in modern media.

The symbolism of both animate beings and inanimate objects is used to express the beauty of nature and its creatures, with humour, irony, but also provides a subtle disguise for graver issues, allowing younger readers access to complex and universal issues, such as death, grief and loss. These issues of sombre or tragicomic content conveyed through allegories and myths, appeal universally to all generations and nationalities.

Giving human voices and personalities to animals or objects can win sympathy and convey a message in a way that ordinary human characters cannot, and allowing the reader to assume anthropomorphic qualities in his characters was something that Andersen truly mastered “[...] thus allowing the reader to supply his own magic. His stories are not always from some distant past but rather draw from the edges of our imagination in the recent and present.” (Ricardo, 2009) The use of birds in his fairy tales is significant in illustrating/portraying such themes as beauty and desire but also of freedom and overcoming challenges.

### **The roots of anthropomorphism in literature**

Results from the Oxford English Dictionary (2016) show that it was first in 1858 that the term ‘anthropomorphism’ was extended to animals through the published work of an English philosopher, George Henry Lewes (Wynne 2007 in Ishak 2011). Before then, anthropomorphism had only been associated with the human qualities of God and angels (ibid).

The earliest presence of talking animal characters were from the narration in *Aesop’s Fables*, (c 550 BC) and Bidpai’s *Panchatantra; The Five Principles* (c 200 BC). Probably the narrations of these two have left significant impact on the present talking animal stories. Talking animal stories are so extensive and profound that it became a genre on its own by the late 19th century, termed as ‘animal fantasy’ (Kutzer, 2000, as cited in Ishak, 2011). *Watership Down* (Richard Adams, 1972), *Alice in Wonderland* (Lewis Carroll, 1865), The tale of Peter Rabbit (Beatrix Potter, 1902), and the *Br’er Rabbit* stories of the southern United States are all examples, coincidentally all mentioned have a rabbit/hare for a protagonist or main character.

The Indian books *Panchatantra* and *The Jataka Tales* use anthropomorphised animals to illustrate various principles of life. Anthropomorphic animals are also used to make comments on human society from an outsider’s point of view. George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945) is a contemporary example of the use of animals in a didactic fable (Ishak, 2011).

### **The use of anthropomorphism in Andersen’s works**

One interesting classroom discussion focused on the analysis of symbolism and language used in “The Ugly Duckling” (“Den grimme Ælling”, 1843). Through research on the author, the students were able to draw clear parallels between the protagonist in the fairy tale and the author’s own life; a tall young ‘gangly’ boy feeling alien in his environment and with a desperate desire to find acceptance and appreciation.

Other comparisons to Andersen's life were found in the study of "The Marsh King's Daughter" ("Dyndkongens Datter", 1858). In a remark the author made of himself in a letter to a friend, he wrote that he felt like "an orange plant in a swamp" (Sanders, 2017, 91). The allusion to the tree trunk in "The Marsh King's Daughter" was discussed and how the roots of the plant are deeply embedded in the ground, figuratively representing his humble beginnings. However, like a plant, he constantly stretched out in search of sunlight, ie. for acceptance and recognition.

Apart from this analysis however, students were also able to read into the significance of the representation of all the different animal characters, anthropomorphised and symbolizing real-life human beings in a frenetic and hierarchical society. The students were able to analyze the broader symbolism and themes used in Andersen's works, which allegorically reflected societal and personal dilemmas of the era. On a more thorough evaluation of these themes, parallels were drawn to other literature. The themes of anthropomorphism and social stature which are highly popular in Andersen's fairy-tales, were recognized by some students in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (where interestingly the original edition included the sub-title 'A Fairy-Story' even though it was later removed).

One main use of anthropomorphism in Andersen's fairy tales seems to be that of veiling more serious and more poignant issues which humans, specifically adults, endure. In fact Guthrie's article on anthropomorphism explains the two main reasons why this theme is used. He says that one view, held by the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–76) among others, "is that it is done for an intellectual reason: in order to explain an unfamiliar and mysterious world by using the model that humans know best, namely themselves." (Guthrie, 2017) He goes on to say that the second explanation, given by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) is "that people anthropomorphize for an emotional reason: to make a hostile or indifferent world seem more familiar and therefore less threatening." (ibid.)

With the use of anthropomorphism, Andersen is able to change the perspective of not only his readers but the characters and 'people' themselves. To quote Grønbech: "Each time a new person is introduced in the fairy tales, there is a new perspective at play; the universe changes its appearance depending on who it is seen by." (Grønbech 1945, 38) He goes on to say that "we are stepping into a world where all the people are living beings [...] Thoughts and reasonings are decided by the people's surroundings." (ibid., 52-53)

As with all non-contemporary literature, a need to understand the language is paramount. Andersen is especially known for his stylistic and evocative language. Today the use of animal

anthropomorphism is widely used in literature, art, and film. Although mainly catered to a younger audience, the use of talking animals has proven extremely popular with readers of all ages. Regarding fairy tales in particular and as quoted by Bo Grønbech: “It’s a varied diversity of animals that perform in the fairy tale and what we hear about them is very different.” (Grønbech, 1945, 38)

Through this new perspective, we are drawn into Andersen’s magical world, where anything is possible. In fact to quote from Helweg, his “fantastic character, unharmonious and irregular, with all the unclear possibilities, could unfold and develop to any number of things, just as long as it wasn’t anything ordinary.” (Helweg, 1927, 47)

With the animation of everyday household objects, trinkets, toys and animals, especially birds, Andersen sheds light on more positive but sometimes also tragicomic themes such as beauty, love and vanity. Through his fairy tales, Andersen brought to life a plethora of inanimate objects and gave voice to a multitude of animate creatures. To quote from Jørgensen & van der Liet: “The actors can be adults, children, animals, plants, weather-related [...] and even things.” (Jørgensen & van der Liet, 2006, 46) Andersen “could find fairy tale associations from any sensation or experience.” (ibid., 48)

In fact, Maria Sabina Draga-Alexandru in her article “Contrastive Values in Hans Christian Andersen’s Fantastic Stories”, comments that “Real beauty is [...] hard to perceive and, when visible, it is fragile, as suggested by the rich world of animated objects that we can find in Andersen’s stories, and which allegorically express essentialized features of humankind.” (Draga-Alexandru, 1999). The animation of inanimate objects in Andersen’s fairy tales, or as Draga-Alexandru states, Animism, is “a way of interpreting the world characteristic not only of childhood as an age, but also of the childhood of mankind, therefore having a strong claim to mythical truth - is, with Andersen, even more pervasive than that.” (ibid) She describes this process as “a kind of inverted animism, in fact - is actually an allegorical schematization used for the sake of narrative demonstration.” (ibid)

Draga-Alexandru suggests that the anthropomorphic objects in Andersen’s fairy tales, “[...] such as toys or bibelots, are endowed with positive features, as the animistic logic of childhood would attribute to them, while human characters are usually corrupted.” (ibid)

She goes on to say that anthropomorphism immortalizes love beyond death “to an extent that a human would hardly be capable of.” Examples of this are in the “Steadfast Tin Soldier” (“Den Standhaftige Tinsoldat”, 1838), whose title character’s “heart [...] survives the fire”, or those of “The Shepherdess and the Chimney Sweep” (“Hyrdinden og Skorstensfejeren”, 1845), who also “loved each other until they fell down and broke to pieces”. (ibid)

However, she also states that anthropomorphism is not a condition. Examples of this are in “The Darning Needle” (“Stoppenaalen”, 1845) or the tale within the tale in “The Flying Trunk” (“Den Flyvende Kuffert”, 1839), with “mere inanimate objects that think and feel like humans [...]” W.H. Auden noticed, ‘Inanimate objects are not being treated anthropomorphically [...] on the contrary, human beings have been transmuted into inanimate objects in order that they may be judged without prejudice.’” (ibid.)

### **Inanimate objects, including toys**

Andersen’s ability to bring to life everyday objects, is evident in his famous fairy tales of things. Despite their simple functions, and that they are often found in seemingly quite simple settings, Andersen uses these inanimate objects to convey more profound messages, and by attributing them with human emotions, they become more sensitive and vulnerable. The reader is therefore brought into a new world but at the same time is able to relate to the protagonist’s situation.

A specific example of the use of personified objects in Andersen’s tales is in “The Bottleneck” (“Flaskehalsen”, 1857), whose protagonist watches the balloonist from its basket and does not want to speak too loudly about its story because it ‘can’t’. Later, it almost slides out of the hand of the man holding it out of pure joy of having returned home again. (Grønbech, 1945, 50-53). Other examples are the title characters in “The Two Maidens” (“To Jomfruer”, 1853), who become sweethearts with people of a similar profession (ibid., 56), the pair of scissors in “The Shirt Collar” (“Flipperne”, 1848), with her long stretched-out legs, like a true ballerina. (ibid., 51) and the darning needle who believes she is a sewing needle because she is so fine (ibid.).

In “The Money Pig” (“Pengegrisen”, 1854), the doll suggests that all the toys in the room play human beings and over tea the toys discuss their individual interests; the rocking horse talks about training and thoroughbreds, and the pram/gocart, which is not as pretty as the others, speaks about railways and steam power. (Grønbech, 1945, 55) In “The Steadfast Tin Soldier”, the soldier cannot understand if the heat he feels from the oven is due to the actual fire or his ‘burning’ love for the ballerina. (ibid., 53) Another example is in “The Sweethearts” (“Kjærestefolkene”, 1843); the top and the ball who are lying in the same drawer, and “ought therefore to be sweethearts, as the top can dance and the ball can jump” (ibid., 56).

## Nature

Nature is another element that has commonly been attributed with anthropomorphic qualities in literature, in particular, the wind, moon, sun and which can be observed for example in the poems of John Keats and Percy Shelley. Andersen's love of nature and natural elements is clear in many of his fairy tales.

Winter, in "The Story of the Year" ("Årets Historie", 1852) is personified as "the white form of King winter, his gaze fixed unswervingly toward the south". (Grønbech, 1945, 37) and when Spring finally comes, the forest still wears "its dress of brown-green buds." (ibid.). We are also introduced to the summer; "there on the rock in the warm sunshine, strengthened by the refreshing rain, sat Summer himself - a strong man with sturdy limbs and long, dripping hair", and his lovely wife. (ibid.)

## Animate beings - Animals

The most recurrent use of imagery is that of animals and especially birds. To quote Draga-Alexandru, "we have a rich range of animals, some of whom speak, [...] having the same right to be listened to as human beings: By this gesture, Andersen appears to challenge the superiority of the human biological species over the others." (Draga-Alexandru, 1999). Her examples in Andersen's fairy tales include the reindeer and the crow in "The Snow Queen" ("Snedronningen", 1844), the diversified animal world in "Thumbelina" ("Tommelise", 1834), and the title character in "The Nightingale" ("Nattergalen", 1843).

In "The Happy Family" ("Den Lykkelige Familie", 1847), our protagonists are two old snails from whose home in the dock leaf forest, the whole world can be seen. (Grønbech, 1945, 36) Despite being unaware of their age, they "could remember very clearly [...] that they had descended from a prominent foreign family, and they knew perfectly well that the whole forest had been planted just for them and their family." (Andersen, 1847). Classroom discussions of this tale postulated whether this was an expression of Andersen's own longings for a more noble background.

The tale celebrates the simple joys in life as the two old snails "led a quiet and happy life, and since they were childless they had adopted a little orphan snail, which they were bringing up as their own child." (ibid.) Father snail in particular is contented in his place in life "There can't be anything [...] that's any better than we have here. I have nothing in the world to wish for." Mother snail on the other hand is restless, especially for their adopted son, for whom she wishes a wife. The tale ends with the classic fair-tale ending of the whole family being "extremely happy, indeed they were." (ibid.)

### **The use of birds in Andersen's works**

The symbolic use of birds is an important theme, conveying the beauty of nature and its creatures, often with an added touch of humor. Andersen illustrates themes of love, loyalty, family values, freedom and the supernatural. In fact, research shows that birds in many cultures around the world are seen as a supernatural link between Heaven and Earth (Monarch 13, 2014). This is evident in H.C. Andersen's fairy tale *The Marsh King's Daughter*, with the storks flying to and from their Egyptian homeland, while the princess is kidnapped to the depths of the Marsh King's bog, and where her daughter Helga, enchanted by the stars, despite warnings, finds herself in another time, where reality seems like a mere illusion.

Andersen uses a variety of birds in his fairy tales, including hens, ducks, sparrows, storks, and a nightingale. In terms of symbolism, we can find that the nightingale represents love and longing (ibid.), as we find in Andersen's *The Nightingale*, and the sparrow represents hope, fertility, rebirth and resurrection. (ibid.) This we can find in *The Story of the Year* as the end of the tale brings us to the end of a year giving way to the start of a new one, hence back to the beginning of the tale again.

There is also the mythical phoenix in a short prose hymn called "The Phoenix Bird" ("Fugl Føniks", 1850). Here, as stated by The Hans Christian Andersen Centre "Andersen here locates the phoenix bird in the center of God's original creation." (The Hans Christian Andersen Centre Homepage, "Phoenix") He even likens the bird to poetry itself. In the same article, an extract from Johan de Mylius' *The Price of Transformation (Forvandlingens Pris, 2004)*, is commented on in which it is stated that the phoenix bird's "way of living, always lonely and unique, always traveling between death and birth in fire, makes it a figure that Andersen could make use of creating pictures of individuals in transforming destruction, like e.g. the little mermaid and the oak tree in *The Old Oak Tree's Last Dream*". (ibid)

Similarly, in "The Bird of Folklore" ("Folkesangens Fugl", 1864), the numerous birds sing in their own tongue. The sparrows chirp about "all the little things in street and lane, in nest and house; they know tales of the kitchen and the parlour. "We know that buried town," they say. "Every living soul there has cheep, cheep, cheep!" (Andersen, 1864). The black ravens and crows fly over the white snow screaming in their state of hunger. At last the wild swans "come and sing of the greatness and glory that still live in the thoughts and hearts of the men in the snow-covered slumber of the town." (ibid.)

Other examples include the wise raven, and the sparrows, whose conversation we hear in *The Story of the Year*. Family values are clearly also important as mother sparrow talks about her and her husband raising all her young ones. Here, although present, the roles of the human characters are not central to the story, and the tale's narrators are the birds. Here "[...] the sparrows become as important and independent people as the humans with whom they live, actually, even more important." (Grønbech, 1945, 37)

In "The Ugly Duckling", poor mother duck sits alone under the burdock leaves waiting for her eggs to hatch with no visitors, as the other ducks "would much rather swim in the moat than [...] gossip with her." (Andersen, 1843). She curses her ducklings' father in her desperation for the last egg to hatch: "They look exactly like their father, the wretch! He hasn't come to see me at all." (ibid.) In this tale, Andersen successfully portrays a personified hierarchical society in his description of the farmyard and to quote: "Here in the duck yard lives a whole society of different people [...] Animals of foreign heritage are considered to be among the most noble [...] A very important person [...] is the old duck of Spanish blood." (Grønbech, 1945, 39).

Probably one of the most famous illustrations of the anthropomorphism of birds in Andersen's fairy tales is in *The Nightingale*. Here we are presented with vivid themes such as love, vanity, pride and freedom. There are also clear opposites presented in this tale, such as the animate and inanimate, the real and artificial, and aesthetic and genuine internal beauty.

As mentioned by Kim, the unstable subjectivity of human beings has for a long time been reflected by the nonhuman. Kim states that "In order to reveal the contradictory nature of the human mind, ineffable in human terms, writers [...] frequently use animals or machines as the personified objects." (Kim, 2004).

As for many of the other themes in this tale, irony also plays an important role and there are numerous examples. We are first introduced to the Emperor as a lover of beautiful, rare and famous treasures. He only learns of the nightingale because the bird is praised in a worldwide famous book.

Also, due to the protagonist's pride and perhaps vanity, he favours an artificial bird over a real bird, simply because it is adorned with jewels and despite the fact that the nightingale's song has made a profound impression on the Emperor. In fact, the Emperor and all of his court become infatuated with the artificial bird and forget about the nightingale. However, the humans' curious desire for the nonhuman is only temporarily satisfied. As stated by Kim, "This seduction of a distorted image reflected in the personified machine, as Erik Davis implies, more than technology itself, "exploits the hidden laws of nature and human perception alike." (Kim, 2004)

Later, when the Nightingale sings for him, the Emperor's admiration, "which can be considered a form of love, manifests itself in his desire to own the bird." (Pospíšilová, 2015, 63). And again it is only when the bird proves its faithfulness and saves him from death, coincidentally also after the mechanical bird has broken, that the Emperor is reminded of the real bird and "[...] slowly begins to understand that he cannot own another living being and his love ceases to be possessive and selfish." (ibid).

There is however an uplifting ending, as despite the Emperor's vanity, he has, through dire circumstances, finally come to appreciate real beauty in an animate being. As a 'reward' for saving the Emperor, the nightingale is given his freedom and agrees to stay with the Emperor, believing, through his songs of good and evil, sorrow and joy, he can help him become a better person.

### **Storks**

Andersen's passion for birds is clearly evident in many of his works. In fact, Andersen had a particular passion for storks and to quote Grønbech, "Storks had a particular place in Andersen's heart, and he never became tired of telling stories about them." (Grønbech, 1945, 41) In the opening scene of "The Ugly Duckling", we are introduced to the stork, mincing about "on his red legs, clacking away in Egyptian, which was the language his mother had taught him." (Andersen, 1843)

In "The Marsh-King's Daughter", from the very start we read that "the storks tell many, many stories to their young ones" (Andersen, 1858) and that "the favorite colours of the storks were white trimmed with black, and long red stockings." (ibid.). We follow the intense dialogue between mother and father stork as the story unfolds in father stork's narrative: "'You make your story too long-winded,' the mother stork protested. 'My eggs are apt to catch cold. I can't bear such suspense at a time like this.'" (ibid.).

Again, the theme of love and family values is noted as mother stork is constantly concerned about her unhatched young and lamenting her woes to father stork, although inwardly she is proud of him. Classroom discussion of this questioned Andersen's possible reference in this tale, to his own family background, expressing longings for a more nurturing family of origin.

### **Other cultural and literary uses of bird symbolism**

Birds have many symbolic meanings, and signify different things around the world, coincidentally befitting Andersen's history as a world traveller. As mentioned earlier, in Andersen's fairy tales we

find that the title character in *The Nightingale* represents love and longing (Monarch 13, 2014), and the sparrow in *The Tale of the Year*, represents hope, fertility, rebirth and resurrection. Research also finds that in the Middle East and Asia, birds symbolize immortality. In East Indian mythology, birds represent departed souls. In Christian art, birds are often depicted as saved souls. Some birds appear across cultures as symbols of courage, strength, and fertility (ibid.).

Symbolism and more specifically bird symbolism enables more universal parallels to be drawn between the themes and motifs in his works, to those in other international literature. We can find examples in Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* (1847). In fact Whiteman discusses in her thesis that similar symbolism is present in Brontë's other novels *Shirley* (1853) and *Villette* (1849), which "contain their quota of bird references, the one having over sixty-five ornithological allusions, and the other over fifty-five bird images." (Whiteman, 1954) She also states that "birds almost always appear in landscape descriptions [...], and that [...] characterization is intensified in bird images, and that birds are used as a symbol of happiness-love-hope." (ibid.).

Emily Dickinson's poem, "Hope Is the Thing With Feathers" believed to have been written in 1861, also contains the use of symbolism through bird imagery. In an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale Robisch introduces "Hope" as "an abstract word meaning desire or trust." Hope is also described metaphorically as "having the characteristics of a 'bird,' a tangible, living creature." (Robisch, 1998). He also states that: "The word 'bird' is rich with connotation. Birds are often viewed as free and self-reliant, or as symbols of spirituality." (ibid.). Furthermore, he describes the bird in Dickinson's poem as courageous and persevering "for it continues to share its song under even the most difficult conditions. By describing 'hope' in terms of this bird, Dickinson creates a lovely image of the virtue of human desire." (ibid.).

Later in the late 19th century, Kate Chopin used birds as representatives of women and freedom, as stated in a thesis by Jenni Endén in 2010. In her thesis, Endén relates a number of themes to bird imagery such as defeat, escapism from social pressures and freedom, which are mirrored in Andersen's tales.

### **Andersen's influence in the modern world**

As previously mentioned, anthropomorphism and the symbolism of animate beings in literature is extensive. There are ancient texts such as Bidpai's *Panchatantra; The Five Principles*, the 'animal fantasy' genre and the didactic fable *Animal Farm* by George Orwell. Metaphorical symbolism can be found in classic texts such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Emily Dickinson's novel *Hope*.

Andersen's universal influence extends equally to the realm of modern media and his many works have been artistically exhibited around the world. There exist many adaptations of Andersen's works in film and animation as well as the adaptations of his darker-themed fairy tales into children's bedtime stories. Examples of films include Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and recently *Frozen* (2013), an adaptation of *The Snow Queen*. There is also the more recent film *Walk with Me*, released in 2016 (*De Standhaftige*), with allusions to Andersen's "The Steadfast Tin Soldier" and "The Tinderbox" ("Fyrtøjet", 1835).

### **Conclusion**

The use of Hans Christian Andersen's works in teaching Danish language and literature has shown great appreciation and understanding of the symbolism and imagery used, because of the universality of these themes. Many of the themes in Hans Christian Andersen's tales can be attributed to his own life and background. Through the use of anthropomorphism, Andersen presents universal themes, such as, love, faith, betrayal and loss. This is also important for younger readers, allowing them to accept and understand more complex issues through the sympathy or affection they feel for the personified protagonists. The adaptation of his works to modern fables, stories and even films, has also allowed readers to identify common themes, recognizable in society as similarly portrayed by other international authors. By personifying everyday objects and animals, Andersen has skillfully brought to life an enchanting world of natural beauty and mystery, while at the same time conveying important and, in some cases, rather sombre and poignant themes.

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<sup>i</sup> This essay has not been peer reviewed