



Hans Christian Andersen.
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Andersen, Hans Christian (1805-1875)

by Dag Heede

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Danish fairy tale writer Hans Christian Andersen was probably bisexual in orientation, if not necessarily so in action. He fell in love with both men and women, though he may well have remained a virgin. His emotional attachments often display a triangular structure involving both sexes. Queer readings of his life and work are needed, especially since his sexuality remains a controversial topic.

"The Ugly Duckling"

Andersen fictionalized his biography as a wonderful fairy tale, even naming his autobiography *The Fairy Tale of My Life* (1947). There is indeed something miraculous about the transformation of a poverty-stricken child into a world-renowned writer.

The son of a poor shoemaker and an illiterate laundry woman, Andersen was born on April 2, 1805. His childhood was marked by poverty and little education. The eccentric boy left his native Odense on the island of Funen to arrive penniless in Copenhagen at the age of fourteen. In spite of his odd looks and behavior, he possessed a singular charm. He managed to win the hearts of leading bourgeois families, who sponsored his education.

Andersen graduated from the gymnasium (i.e., high school) in 1828, after several painful years of scholarly discipline, and published his first novel shortly afterwards in 1829. This breakthrough was followed by other novels, travel books, dramas, autobiographies, and poetry, which quickly established him as a leading Danish man of letters. In 1837, he began writing the fairy tales that won him international fame and access to the royal houses and cultural elites of Europe.

After 1831, Andersen embarked on a series of trips that took him to all over Europe, making him the most worldly of Danish writers. He never visited America, but he conquered England, staying with Charles Dickens, who found the effeminate, fussy, self-centered, and hypochondriacal bachelor a tiresome guest.

Andersen's Work

Andersen's novels are traditional romantic works celebrating religion and nature and displaying a deep faith in God. His fairy tales contain a double edged humor and a constant play between childish naiveté and adult, almost diabolical irony, a feature now considered typically Danish.

Many of the fairy tales may be read as queer allegories, and some are clearly autobiographical. For instance, "The Little Mermaid" was written after a crisis Andersen suffered in 1836 at the marriage of Edvard Collin, who may have been the love of Andersen's life but who refused to play the part of his romantic soulmate. Andersen's novel, *O.T.*, depicting an intimate male friendship, is also influenced by this unrequited love.

Andersen's Sexuality

Although Andersen typically conducted one-sided infatuations with young men, he did experience a more

reciprocal romantic friendship with the Hereditary Grand Duke of Weimar, Carl-Alexander von Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach, whom he met in 1844. In his later years, Andersen was infatuated with the young ballet dancer, Harald Scharff.

Andersen died on August 4, 1875. It was not until 1893 that his sexuality was publicly discussed, when a newspaper hinted that he may have been a homosexual. In 1901, an article in Magnus Hirschfeld's *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen* also discussed him as a homosexual.

Actually, Andersen may never have had sexual relations with anyone. The famous crosses, placed in his diaries, suggest that he was an ardent masturbator, who meticulously recorded this act, as he recorded everything else in his life.

His half-hearted attempts at marriage have made Andersen scholars portray him as an unhappy heterosexual. They explain away his passionate love letters to men as customs of his time, and describe his affection towards male friends as exaggerated, but unthreatening.

The debate on Andersen's sexuality continues. Jackie Wullschlager's recent biography, which documents Andersen's love for both men and women, caused a scandal in Denmark, where the sexuality of the national poet is a controversial topic. It will, without a doubt, be a subject of discussion in the celebration of the bicentennial of his birth in 2005.

Regardless of Andersen's own sexuality, "The Ugly Duckling," "The Little Mermaid," and other tales of impossible and fatal loves have functioned as powerful allegories for queer people of all kinds.

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