H. C. Andersen, Literature, and Ethics: New Perspectives on Old Stories

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Abstract We all know H. C. Andersen as the writer of wonderful and enchanting stories. Many people have also pointed to H. C. Andersen as a writer that touches on ethical issues, such as the critique of hypocrisy and blind allegiance to authority in *The Emperor's New Clothes* (*Kejserens nye Klæder*). In this article, we want to pick up on this last point and argue that ethical reflection is an integrated part of many of H. C. Andersen's stories, and that this reflection often takes a form that is directed at moral education and development. This article has two major parts. In the first, we open with an argument for the role of literature in moral development, and then move on to argue for the special status of H. C. Andersen's stories within this field. In the second part, we present new readings of three well-known fairy tales, *The Shepherdess and the Chimney-Sweep* (*Hyrdinden og Skorstensfejeren*), *The Swineherd* (*Svinedrengen*), and *The Little Match Girl* (*Den lille Pige med Svovlstikkerne*) with the aim of showing how reading these stories from an ethical perspective opens up new dimensions of H. C. Andersen's magic work.
Key words H.C. Andersen; ethics; moral development
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Introduction

We all know H. C. Andersen as the writer of wonderful and enchanting stories. Many people have also pointed to H. C. Andersen as a writer who touches on ethical issues, such as the critique of hypocrisy and blind allegiance to authority in *The Emperor's New Clothes* (*Kejserens nye Klæder*). In this article, we want to pick up on this last point and argue that ethical reflection is an integrated part of many of H. C. Andersen's stories, and that this reflection often takes a form that is directed at moral education and development. This article has two major parts. In the first, we open with an argument for the role of literature in moral development, and then move on to argue for the special status of H. C. Andersen's stories within this field. In the second part, we present new readings of three well-known fairy tales, *The Shepherdess and the Chimney-Sweep* (*Hyrdinden og Skorstensfejeren*), *The Swineherd* (*Svinedrengen*), and *The Little Match Girl* (*Den lille Pige med Svovlstikkerne*) with the aim of showing how reading these stories from an ethical perspective opens up new dimensions of H. C. Andersen's magic work.

Literature and Moral Development

Central to our readings of H. C. Andersen's stories are the ideas that literature offers us a particular form of knowledge, and that engaging in literature can further moral development. It is a standing discussion in philosophy whether and how literature may play a part in the ethical development of a person, and one way to approach this is to look at the ancient Greek discussion about this issue. In *The Republic*, Plato argues that we should be very aware of how literature may make us believe in things that are not true and may seduce us by waking our emotions and desires — which according to Plato belong to that part of humans not susceptible to moderation or reasonable arguments. As far as Plato is concerned, literary art is harmful, both for epistemological and moral reasons, because it distorts our perception and knowledge of reality, and because it speaks to the lowest and most uncontrollable part of us. "For that reason," he writes, "we must put a stop to such stories, lest they produce in the youth a strong inclination to do bad things" (Plato 391e-392).

The criticism of the moral potential of literature is thus almost as old as Western thinking itself, but the defence of literature quickly followed; it was put forward

by Plato's own student Aristotle.

Aristotle also thinks that literature appeals to our emotions, but he disagrees with Plato's view that moral development demands the suppression of our emotional lives. According to Aristotle, emotions are neither good nor bad, instead, for a person to be good or virtuous is for that person to be able to feel and display emotions in accordance with reason. The task of moral education is therefore to enable us to feel the appropriate degree of emotion in various situations, i.e., "to have these feelings at the right times on the right grounds towards the right people for the right motive and in the right way" (Aristotle, *Ethics* II.vi 1106b).

It is precisely because Aristotle places such importance on the education of our emotions that he thinks literature can have an important role in our moral formation. When we read literature, we engage emotionally with the book. We identify ourselves not just with the situation of the characters, but also with their emotions and reactions. We empathise with them, and through that we learn something about how other people might live, how they might feel and react to life and other people, and we come to reflect on how they succeed or fail to succeed in doing this in the best possible manner. We find most of the central elements of his argument for this potential of literature in his well-known definition of tragedy as "a representation [*mimêsis*] of an action of a superior kind — grand and complete in itself — […] effecting, through pity and fear, the purification [*katharsis*] of such emotions" (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1449b21-29). By engaging our emotions, literature familiarises us with these emotions and leads us through a process of purification that opens for their possible refinement. In this way, literature may help us develop an emotional life that allows for a fine-tuned understanding of the situations we encounter and a sensible and appropriate emotional response on our part.

This leads us to Aristotle's second argument for the ethical significance of literature: that literature is an art form that resembles the shape of our lives. According to Aristotle, the central element of literature is the "representation of action and life" (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1450a16-20), because it mirrors features of the way we are engaged in life as acting and living creatures, for example that life is temporally structured. There is always-already an established past against which we must make our decisions, and any decision and subsequent action reaches towards the future, towards the goal we wish to realise. This structure, where decisions and actions can only be understood if seen in connection with a person's past and future, recurs in the narratives of literature which also expand in time, and for this reason, literature is such an apt medium for an investigation of our lives with action. Furthermore, literature is not restricted to the simply copying of lives and actions as they have al-

ready unfolded; on the contrary, literature is concerned with how our lives could unfold, the possibilities available in life and action. One might even argue that it offers us an exploratorium of life.

In contemporary moral philosophy, many philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum and Cora Diamond continue to work with Aristotle's idea of the potential of literature in connection to ethical education. These thinkers take it that literature might offer us a special kind of knowledge. Not factual knowledge, but knowledge about all the different ways in which human life may develop and the many ways humans may experience life. Literature speaks about us and offers us knowledge about "what it is like" to be human, and this means, in Martha Nussbaum's words, that "our interest in literature becomes […] cognitive, an interest in finding out (by seeing and feeling and otherwise perceiving) what possibilities (and tragic impossibilities possibilities) life offers to us, what hopes and fears for ourselves it underwrites or subverts" ("Perceptive Equilibrium" 244). This knowledge of "what it is like" is often called knowledge by acquaintance, and we can see this as a development of Aristotle's idea that literature presents the possibilities of human life.[1]

Thinkers such as Nussbaum and Diamond argue that literature not only offers us morally relevant knowledge, but also ways to cultivate morally important capacities. They hold that literature can play a role in our moral cultivation by exercising and developing ethically relevant skills and abilities, such as capacities for perceptual attention, for dealing with our emotions, for imagination as well as abilities of moral understanding and reflection. One set of abilities that is important for moral understanding concerns attention; abilities to discern what is ethically relevant in a situation and to do so in a nuanced way. Thus, Nussbaum has argued that in moral life, we should give "a certain type of priority to the perception of particular people and situations, rather than to abstract rules" (*Love's Knowledge* ix). Developing such fine-tuned attention does however also involve developing the abilities of empathic understanding with other people. As an example, Cora Diamond has discussed the way that Wordsworth's poem 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' awakens our empathy, thereby showing us how in relation to others we need "a capacity to respond with deep sympathy to the feelings of other people" (298). Fiction can stimulate and further our capacities for interpersonal understanding "by presenting characters and their situations so vividly and unignorably as virtually to compel the reader to "feel" what it would be to be such a character in such a situation—no small achievement, and one of no small moral significance" (Cohen 491), as Ted Cohen remarks.

Another morally important ability is imagination, because it allows us to in-

1 See also e.g. Palmer, Currie and Carroll.

vestigate how different decisions and actions would affect the people involved in a possible decision. If you want to help a friend, who is in trouble, it is better if you first, taking into account your knowledge about your friend, use your imagination to consider whether this help would be perceived as welcome or as condescending. As K.E. Løgstrup notes, “in order to become clear about what will best serve the other person we must use imagination quite as must as calculation” (Løgstrup 119). Engagement with literature offers us a possibility for cultivating and refining the imagination that conditions our understanding and interaction with others, because it mirrors another aspect of our lives, namely that human experience is always connected to a certain perspective. Even people who are in the exact same situation will perceive it very differently all according to their individual backgrounds, knowledge, and position in life — it is one thing to be a little girl accused of shoplifting and quite another to be an older woman who witnesses it, although it is the same situation to a certain extent. Literature makes it possible for us to experience these changes in perspective, and in doing this, literature offers us the opportunity to imaginatively put ourselves in the place of the other.

In reading literature, we seek to discern what is morally relevant in the situations described, we participate in reflections on the characters’ actions and reactions, we feel and react emotionally to them, and we are constantly imagining how a situation might turn out. By engaging and refining such abilities, literature may play a role in moral education.

H. C. Andersen and Ethics

We have argued that literature gives us the possibility to see and to experience the world from another viewpoint. During the actual process of reading we open ourselves up to another way of perceiving the world; a way which we may reject, accept, or wonder about afterwards, but while we are in that particular literary universe, we are “an Other.” Literature and the reading of it thus gives us (or may give us) knowledge and experiences which then become a part of our moral understanding. That is why literature is morally important. Not because it should teach us certain ethical values or principles, but because it shows us the variety of values which appears in our lives, the many ways in which we may succeed — or fail to succeed — as humans, the radically different life situations and perspectives which form our choices and actions, and because the involvement with good literature develops our ethical sensibility and understanding.

This is particularly interesting in connection with a writer such as H. C. Andersen. He is read, not only by adults, but also by and to children — as opposed

to most other literary superstars. Because he is so loved by children, the ethical and formative aspect of his stories has a huge potential impact. One of the first reviews of Andersen's fairy-tales in fact mirrors Plato's worries about the possible corrupting influence of literature, stating that "nobody will be able to claim that the child's sense of propriety will be improved by reading about a princess who rides in her sleep on the back of a dog to a soldier who kisses her."[1] In contrast, we will argue for the ethically illuminating nature of Andersen's stories. In many of these, the reader is placed in a position where she may or perhaps has to relate to particular ethical problems within the story; for instance, it is difficult to read about the little match girl without being drawn in and reacting emotionally to the suffering involved in and the injustice of her situation and the indifference and maybe even cruelty of the people around her. In other stories such as *The Shepherdess and the Chimney Sweep*, Andersen shows us how an individual's specific character may limit the possibilities and potentials that she is able to realise in her life — as it happens when the shepherdess lingers on the brink of the big, wide world and returns to the smaller, but safer reality that she knows. In this manner, the stories become a part of our own development, and this happens to both the grown-up reader and the child that listens to the stories.

We would like to mention some anecdotal examples showing that Andersen's stories can have this impact. In August 2016, a conference with the title *Hans Christian Andersen's Values in Modern Education* was held in connection with the H. C. Andersen Festivals in Odense, and a number of Danish and Chinese scholars and students participated. One student claimed that Andersen had "shaped my values," and Tao Xiping, Honorary President of UNESCO in the Asian-Pacific Region, argued that the Dane was a "designer of the soul." Those are grand words, but they also beg the question: what is it then that Andersen's stories might teach us?

In an ethical investigation of literature, there are two possible strategies. First, to treat the literary text as a writer's intentional contribution to an ethical debate with a clear theme and coherent arguments. This is not the strategy that we will pursue; instead, we wish to see the texts as a presentation of various ethically important aspects of life and various possible ethical positions and conflicts which challenge our ethical assumptions, and which add to our ethical thinking exactly because of their literary form.

In the following, we will therefore not speculate about Andersen's own ethical standpoint — it may very well be that "Andersen completely lacks a view of life" (Kierkegaard 32), a well-integrated philosophy of life, as the Danish philosopher

1 Quoted from Grønbech, 90.

Søren Kierkegaard famously claimed.[1] Also, we will not argue that Andersen's stories are ethical *per se*, but rather argue that what they do is allowing the reader to investigate and reflect on ethical problems — and that is much more important. Neither do we think that the stories present us with readymade moral answers or positions, but rather that they challenge readers to work through ethical issues for themselves. We here disagree with Bengt Holbek, who talks of the message in the story *The Wild Swans* "that innocent goodness triumphs over evil" and remarks that "In Andersen's universe, the qualities of good and evil have become absolute" (231). Rather, we think that Andersen is less an advocate of a specific moral position in his stories, such as for example sentimentalism, and that he deals more in possibilities than in absolutes, showing or inviting us to engage in different moral worldviews. We thus read the fairy tales in line with Bo Grønbech, who notes that they are "not harmless and innocent reading. If you know how to read, they will leave your soul disturbed" (131).

In the following we will therefore investigate what ethical dimensions and situations we are presented with in three of his stories and explore the ethical positions or questions which we find in *The Little Match Girl*, *The Swine Herd* and *The Shepherdess and the Chimney-Sweep*, while keeping in mind that the best stories do not moralise or impute an ethical position on the reader. Instead, they demand that you, however briefly, *respond*. The ethical H. C. Andersen is the one who ends a story like *The Gardener and the Noble Family* with the appeal: "Now you may think about it!" It is in this interaction with the text that reader, literature and ethics come together in the best possible manner. The following is not concerned with Andersen's ethics, but with how we can discuss the ethical potential of literature through Andersen's stories.

The Little Match Girl

Most of us know about literature that has an ethical dimension. A literature which does not merely have an aesthetic purpose, but which is also oriented towards life and which tries to engage its reader in its subject matter. This does not mean that this literature is political or moralising, only that it relates to something, for instance its age or the relationship between parents and children, and that it strives to make its reader do the same. Andersen's *The Little Match Girl* is a prime example of a literary text with such an ethical aspect.

1 The sentence is translated from Danish, "Andersen aldeles mangler Livs-Anskuelse." Kierkegaard makes this claim in his biting review of Andersen's *Only a Fiddler* (*Kun en Spillemand*, 1837), published in Danish with Kierkegaard's personal papers.

We all know the story. The girl is poor, freezing and hungry, she strikes the matches, experiences a warmth of sorts, and dies — and only a reader with a heart of stone could remain unmoved and indifferent. “No sentimental phrases mar this story,” as Grønbech notes, it is “remarkable for its soberness” (115). Yet the ending of the story is open to interpretation.

Let us, however, begin with the opening lines that establish the girl’s situation and the tone of the story with remarkable pace and economy. It is a cold, dark, and snow-filled evening. It is also New Year’s Eve, an evening of joy for most people, but not for the girl who is poor, bareheaded and barefoot. Her extremely exposed position is illustrated as society in the shape of two carriages rattles by, and a boy steals one of her slippers since he might be able to use it one day. This boy actually has the privilege of being able to imagine a (better) future which the little match girl obviously cannot. As a matter of fact, she cannot even appreciate “her long fair hair, which hung in pretty curls over her neck,” because she has far more important things to worry about such as hunger. Andersen knew pretty well that future prospects and good looks do not count for much when your stomach is empty.

It does not look too good for the girl because nobody wants to buy her matches, and returning home is not a solution for her since only more cold and a beating await her there. So, she sits herself in a corner and strikes the first match, and immediately it seems to her that she is sitting next to a great iron stove. The second match discloses a sumptuous dinner on the other side of the wall, and the third match puts her beneath “the most beautiful Christmas tree.” Together these three vignettes expose a bottomless gulf between the girl’s reality and her dreams — dreams which happen to be real for others, because as Andersen points out, the girl had *seen* a wondrous Christmas tree “at the rich merchant’s home.” If the reader did not already feel a bit uneasy about the slightly accusing and indicting formulations in the beginning of the story about how no one had bought anything from her or given her anything, then surely the description of the materialism and excesses of Christmas makes for an uncomfortable reading. The story might easily have ended here, because the girl’s sufferings and the social, economic and material inequalities have been made clear, and the reader will most probably be more generous the next time she sees a match girl or a beggar on the streets. The story, however, has another layer that is important for an ethical reading, namely the religious.

When the girl sees a shooting star, she remembers her old grandmother who seems to personify the ideal Christian faith. The grandmother is friendly, shining, kind and lovely, and in order to keep her with her the girl strikes all the matches at once. Immediately afterwards the girl and her grandmother ascend with exultation

to the heavens where there is no cold, hunger or fear. And the story might also have ended here, even if this ending would probably have left us with a slightly different impression, as the ascension suggests that the little match girl has her just rewards in Paradise. If that is true, then the rest of us, the ones who are comfortably off, do not have to worry about the social injustices, or be weighed down by the responsibility of knowing about them. In other words, if the story stops here, the readers are in a sense off the hook: They have the possibility of not relating emotionally to the wretched poverty described.

However, Andersen has given the story about the little match girl an open ending; a quivering ending which leaves it up to the reader herself to judge how the girl's death must ultimately be interpreted and understood. Here are the final, concluding lines:

> But in the corner, leaning against the wall, sat the little girl with red cheeks and smiling mouth, frozen to death on the last evening of the old year. The New Year's sun rose upon a little pathetic figure. The child sat there, stiff and cold, holding the matches, of which one bundle was almost burned.
>
> "She wanted to warm herself," the people said. No one imagined what beautiful things she had seen, and how happily she had gone with her old grandmother into the bright New Year.

The ascension scene suggests that this *is* a happy ending. The girl is in a better place now — as the saying goes — and death is not an ending, but a beginning of a new and better life. And you may notice the words "bright" and "beautiful" which obviously define this new life with grandmother; "bright" is thus repeated three times in the final three paragraphs, and it is underlined that there is no cold, hunger or fear with God. Simultaneously, however, the final paragraphs present a condemnation and a head-on criticism of a society where no one takes care of the poorest, and where little girls die of frost and cold. The story thus juxtaposes "poverty and privilege" as Perri Klass points out (Klass). What good does it do that the little match girl has "seen" something beautiful in her moment of death when the reality is that she has died on the doorstep of society, the text asks, but it does not answer. These paragraphs also involve an implied criticism of the mainly passive compassion of the bourgeoisie which reveals itself in the remark "She wanted to warm herself!" where the response focuses on the burned matches — and not on the reasons behind the girl's death. Still, the interpretation is up to the reader herself, the story merely calls for the form of "deep sympathy" described by Diamond, and in this manner

Andersen's story has a potential for change; regardless of whether it makes its reader think, understand, feel or act, it has brought about a reaction.

To sum up, *The Little Match Girl* has an ethical potential because it establishes a situation, a fictive universe in which the reader experiences a world which might be fundamentally different from her own, but which nevertheless contains a common humanity that she must react to. We are not arguing that the reader is put on trial in the story, as she is certainly free to follow Andersen's Christian assumption that the girl is at a better place at the end of the story, but as a reader she is definitely summoned to take a stand. The story demands a reaction.

The Swineherd

Another thing that happens if you read Andersen's stories ethically is that it sometimes throws new light on the old stories. Let us take a look at *The Swineherd* which most people remember as having something to do with a prince who disguises himself as a swineherd, and a princess who is silly and materialistic. But that is not the whole story. It begins with a prince who is "rather bold" and asks for the Emperor's daughter, even though he is poor. This tells us that he is an ambitious young man, and the fact that hundreds of princesses would have said "yes" probably also tells us that he is very good-looking as well. However, this particular princess is not interested, and she dismisses his courtship and his presents. Now, the story could have ended here. But as it says "it was not so easy to discourage" the prince, and as ethical readers we have to consider what that means. Does it mean that the prince, as so many other masculine heroes, fights for what he wants? Or is it a problem that he pursues the princess after she has rejected him? Is he entitled to get the woman he wants? Does "no" actually mean "yes"?

In the main part of the story, the prince disguises himself, and through an elaborate plan he lures the princess into giving him several kisses. But the kissing is discovered by the Emperor, and he reacts rather strongly as the following quote shows:

> "Such naughtiness!" he said when he saw them kissing, and he boxed their ears with his slipper just as the swineherd was taking his eighty-sixth kiss.
>
> "Be off with you!" the Emperor said in a rage. And both the Princess and the swineherd were turned out of his empire. And there she stood crying. The swineherd scolded [skændede], and the rain came down in torrents.

So, they are thrown out of the empire, and the princess is crying but the prince scolds. Something important gets lost in translation here because the Danish word

"skænde" actually means both to *scold* and *to dishonour or to violate.* And this is exactly what the prince does: he violates the princess, he dishonours her through his plan, and then he even says: "I have only contempt for you!" But the ethical question here is whether the prince in any way is in a position where he can morally condemn her? Who has actually acted in bad faith in this story? An ethical reading would certainly point to *the prince* who takes the road of payback and tries to revenge himself because the princess has rejected his offer of marriage. He consciously destroys her life because she did not want him. A revenge which under no circumstances reflects her offence.

So, why do we not feel bad about the princess at the end of the story? Probably because she is not a very likeable character. Our first impression of her is negative; she refuses the precious gifts of the prince, the rose and the nightingale, and because of that she strikes most readers as stupid, uneducated, materialistic and shallow. Her taste is very simple; she prefers a pussy-cat to a nightingale, she can only play the piano with one finger, and she thinks it is very interesting to know what other people are having for dinner. However, having a simple taste does not make her a bad person, and the fact that most of us do not feel sorry for her ending up completely alone and dishonoured probably says more about us than about her. From this perspective, Andersen's story might just be revealing our own self-righteous bigotry.

Still, the princess undoubtedly shows poor judgement when she is persuaded to buy the kettle and the rattle for secret kisses, but she is hardly the first young person who has been indiscreet in the endeavour to gain something. But has she really deserved what she gets? Is it really true what the prince claims, namely that the princess has been "properly punished"? The central question, which an ethical reading of *The Swineherd* leads us to, is whether we should point the moral finger at the victim or the victimiser. Who is ethically in the wrong in this story? We do not get a straightforward answer to this question, but, as Nussbaum would argue, Andersen certainly reveals to us knowledge of the tragic possibilities of life and an experience of how it may be to be outcasted because of some minor transgressions. At a time when the unwanted posting of nudes online, so-called revenge porn, is a potential risk in many young people's lives, the story about a girl who loses everything because a boy cannot accept her rejection of him, is surprisingly relevant. If we can understand and emotionally engage with the situation of the princess at the end, ostracised, victimised, and utterly alone, then we might realise that it is never acceptable to harass or destroy other people just because they do not want you. And neither is acceptable to despise or wash one's hands of a young person who has made a mistake. *That* is the ethical message lying underneath *The Swineherd*, and the story

thus provides us with knowledge of what it would be like to lose everything through a moment of indiscretion.

The Shepherdess and the Chimney-Sweep

Finally, we will turn our attention to *The Shepherdess and the Chimney-Sweep*. A traditional reading of this story will regard the shepherdess as someone who fails, as someone who does not quite rise to the occasion. But as was the case with *The Swineherd*, an ethical reading of the story offers a different perspective which provides a more nuanced portrait of the shepherdess — and of what constitutes a happy life.

But we will begin somewhere else, namely with the photo *Untitled Film Still #21* by Cindy Sherman. The motif is that of the insecure, young woman, and in the photo, she seems anxious, off balance, unsettled by her first encounter with the big city. She expresses a dis-attunement and an almost existential despair which, in our opinion, perfectly illustrates the shepherdess' feelings at the moment when she reaches the rooftop. It is this particular expression that we have to keep in mind when we judge her actions in the story.

The shepherdess is offered the world when she reaches the top of the chimney. But how did she end up there in the first place? Well, she only decides to run into the big, wide world because she does not want to be forced to marry General Headquarters-Hindquarters etcetera. This is not a positive choice. It is a negative one. And the young couple know this. The chimney-sweep even looks her straight in the face and asks her, not once, but twice, if she "really" is brave enough to go through this escape which shows little faith in her determination. When he asks her a second time, she looks into the stove and answers: "It looks very black in there" — and still she follows him. It is obvious that she does not have great expectations of the life that awaits at the end of the chimney, but she fancies a life as the general's wife, in the dark chest, even less. This possibility is claustrophobic and does not leave a lot of room for the shepherdess as an *individual*. It does not offer her a *room of her own*, so to speak.

Still, when the shepherdess finally reaches the top of the chimney, and the big, wide world stretches out before her, we as readers expect her to be happy. After all, freedom and opportunities await her. The problem is that the proportions are too big for her and "her little head." She cannot handle all these possibilities, and she cries: "This is too much […] I can't bear it. The wide world is too big." As readers, we might shake our heads in disbelief at this, but that might just show how we fail to appreciate her view of life. We may enjoy the possibilities and freedom of a life

under the starry skies, but she clearly does not. She feels like the young woman in Sherman's photo. Anxious and in despair.

The shepherdess is not brave. She is not courageous. She is not interested in the big adventure. She has no grand ambitions to pursue. That does not mean that she is indifferent or easily satisfied, but merely that she is very average and human. She does not want to be locked up in the chest, but she does not want to live among the rooftops either, because that world is too big and challenging for her. She does not want to marry somebody she fears, but she would like to marry somebody she has a lot in common with. She may be a bit high-strung, and she is not always nice to her chimney-sweep, but these are her short-comings and her choices, and she does have her reasons which we must respect. Isn't it perfectly ok that the shepherdess learns from her mistakes and acts accordingly? Is it not acceptable that any young girl makes a choice about education or residence, and then grows wiser and realises that that choice and the consequences that followed did not make her happy? Of course, it is — even if her choices are different from the choices we would have made. If we consider who the shepherdess is, her reasons do not have to seem incomprehensible to us.

An ethical reading of the story would thus underline that our judgement of other people's lives and choices must begin with a willingness to understand the basis for these choices — and not with our own values and norms. And it would also show that a good and happy life must be in attunement with your dreams and abilities. Not all of us make great and courageous decisions, Andersen tells us. Actually, like the shepherdess most of us make timid and worried decisions, and sometimes even against a background of negativity and self-doubt, but these choices shouldn't be disregarded. It is significant that within the story, the journey to the rooftops is not a failure or a disaster because the shepherdess actually realizes who or what she is *through* that journey. She recognizes that she has made a mistake; that this life is not what she thought it would be. She really does not want the great wide open, but rather the security and the cosiness of well-known and well-defined surroundings. In other words, she finds her identity and right place in life through the story's home-away-home structure, and the end *is* a happy end. The shepherdess is never married to General Headquarters-hindquarters etcetera, and she remains together with her chimney-sweep, and "they kept on loving each other until the day they broke."

So, in our ethical reading, *The Shepherdess and the Chimney-Sweep* ultimately asks its readers to enter the worldview of the shepherdess through the use of their imagination and come to understand that her hopes for a good life may be quite different from theirs. Such imaginative understanding may help us to acquire a little

more understanding of the life choices that people make — however wrong or petty or unambitious they may seem at first glance. In other words, Andersen's story offers us the opportunity to improve our capacity for moral discernment.

The Ethical Potential of Andersen's Stories

Andersen's fairy tales may have been intended for children — but Andersen had the hope that grown-ups would listen in as well. "I get an idea for grown-ups," Andersen says about his own work, "and then tell my tale to the little ones, while remembering that Mother and Father will be listening and must have something to think about" (Spink 66).[1] What we have aimed to show is that listening in may be rewarding, not because Andersen provides us with ready-made ethical answers, but because of the questions and experiences that he makes available for us. In this way, we take Andersen's stories to be arch examples of ethical literature in the sense developed in the first part of the article because they present the lives, the experiences, perspectives, ethical challenges and dilemmas of human beings and invite us to emotionally and imaginatively engage in these experiences and challenges. Andersen thus offers us, children as well as grown-ups, an opportunity for moral development and for a widening of our moral understanding. Furthermore, even if Andersen's stories are shaped by their times, we also hope that we have been able to illustrate how they deal with universal ethical themes that can be tied to challenges facing people today — something which makes Andersen very much our contemporary.

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1 The quote is from a letter from Andersen to the Danish poet B.S. Ingemann, see also Grønbech, 91-2.

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