In the annals of childhood reading Hans Christian Andersen lurks, a latent wound. For many of us he provides the first whisper of pain that will not heal, of quests that fail, of desires that remain unsated. And yet his stories linger in the imagination, partly because they defy the words of comfort with which parents, teachers, and children’s books attempt to blot out the terrors of childhood: terrors of isolation, abandonment, extinction. Ursula K. Le Guin writes that she “hated” Andersen’s stories as a child, but “[t]hat didn’t stop me from reading them, and rereading them. Or from remembering them” (61). Similarly, Rosellen Brown asks herself “why ‘The Little Mermaid’ so fascinated me that I shuddered and read it again and again” (57), musing that “perhaps [she] was a simple child to believe the worst,” but she preferred the sad endings and couldn’t accept the “fake good cheer” Andersen occasionally offers (56). Others recall that when they were children Andersen’s most virulent females provided them with role models: Maria Flook identified with Inger’s “macabre sense of humor” in “The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf” (127). A. S. Byatt found something “secretly good, illicitly desirable, about the ice hills and glass barriers” of the Snow Queen’s palace (71), which came to signify for her the desirability and the pain of the artist’s quest for beauty.

These anecdotes by accomplished writers about their childhood reading belie the adult desire to mute or disguise the presence of pain in human experience by censoring or denying children access to depictions of it—adulteration, if
you will. Pain, together with sexuality and other conflicts usually identified as "adult" pervade Andersen's writings, one reason his stories are often abridged and altered. Stefan Sullivan assumes in his review of Tiina Nunnally's recent Andersen translation that "darkness" is, by definition, adult: the review, titled "Ugly Duckling Grows Up," opens with the comment that these tales should be marked with a parental advisory sticker (Sullivan). The Disney Corporation's appropriation of The Little Mermaid (1989) transmutes Andersen's bittersweet ichor into G-rated diet soda, with the ostensible goal of making it child-safe. Whose fears are actually being assuaged?

The truism that the "dark" or cynical aspects of Andersen's works are directed toward adults rather than to children and that children must be shielded from the representation of things that might make them afraid or sad deserves to be questioned. Dark and painful conflicts are not necessarily and definitively "adult"; Andersen's stories, which describe broadly human fears, wishes, and nightmares, should not be classified into sunny tales appropriate for children and dark tales for adults. For some child readers, Andersen's depictions of the pain of human existence have inspired new artistic achievement. As Alvin Schwartz has noted, children request "scary stories" and hand down their own folklore of fear orally from child to child (Marcus 46). Far from being "inappropriate" for children, Andersen's tales might actually offer children who need it relief from the hearty good cheer that pervades ordinary kiddie-lit(e) and falsifies their experience of the world.

In fact, adults writing for other adults are as likely to amend the pain of Andersen's stories as are children and writers for children; Disney's neutering of "The Little Mermaid" is no more sentimental or dishonest than many adult fairy-tale writers' attempts to debunk or deny the pain that Andersen's stories invoke. For example, Melissa Lee Shaw's "The Sea Hag" reconfigures "The Little Mermaid" as a tale in which the Sea Hag is a wronged mother, dispossessed by her power-hungry spouse; in this sisterhood-is-powerful version, the mermaid's desired union with her love is still a possibility at the end of the story, and the mother-Hag makes a glorious sacrifice for her beloved daughter. In contrast to those who wish the Mermaid to experience conventional happiness, Gwyneth Cravens recalls as a child reading Andersen's story and being both "troubled" and "satisfied and uplifted" by the story's conclusion: "What of its subtleties I could have articulated to myself back then I don't know, but some part of me readily absorbed them. Consciously I only knew that the tale somehow wanted to awaken me to the truth that there was more to my being than I thought, more possibilities than the ones that lay close at hand" (638). Andersen's sweet-sour narratives are often adulterated, simplifying his complex flavors, because adults repudiate his mode, in America at least, part of a general cultural tendency to avoid things that make us fearful when they cannot be
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contained easily in commodifiable packages such as horror movies or amusement park rides. Although the group of children who prefer Andersen straight may be small, the number who grow up to make their own contributions to art is significant and suggestive.

This essay surveys Andersen’s legacy—his influence upon other writers of fantasy in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first century. I’ve selected stories written since 1980 that engage with or expand upon Andersen’s themes without sacrificing the satiric and emotive edge that makes his work so memorable. As did many of his fellow Romantics, Andersen wrote about the relationships between the individual and the external world, often personified as Nature; about the individual’s vexed relationship to the social world; and about the response of the artist to the inevitable gaps and conflicts that arise between what is desired and what is. Employing a romantic irony that anticipates modernist and even postmodern experimentations with form and theme, Andersen shows how dark and light, sorrow and joy, pain and pleasure cannot be separated and are not necessarily opposed. At issue is the place of the “dark” in the realm of the imagination and of story, together with the ways in which writers for both adults and children wrestle with Andersen’s challenges to conventional wish fulfillment. Andersen’s Romantic-era concerns with Nature and subjectivity, with the conflict between the individual and society, and with the nature of art and the artist continue to be explored. These concerns themselves have evolved in response to environmentalist thought, to the women’s and other social justice movements, and to psychoanalysis and other theories of consciousness. These elements allow us to consider Andersen’s continuing relevance to both children and adults even in a world that changes as quickly as our own. Andersen’s true descendants do far more interesting work than rewriting endings or characters to make them conventionally satisfying; they do not recoil from pain, suffering, and betrayal; they do not offer simplistic resolutions. Rather, they explore the dark and allow it to speak. This survey shows that in the most interesting Andersen revisions the dark is as likely to emerge from children’s texts as it is from adults’, confuting assumptions that children’s texts must by definition depict a simpler, brighter, and happier world than the one we know exists. More interesting and resonant art is often created out of the darkness Andersen refuses to repudiate. This in turn has implications for how we interpret Andersen, children’s literature, and children’s roles in the world, a point I shall discuss at the end of this essay.

Ecocritical Andersen

Although many ecocritical children’s and adult books can be summarized simply as “be nice to Mother Nature,” Andersen’s heirs make humanity’s relationship with nature suitably complex and vexed, as did the Romantic Andersen himself.
NAOMI WOOD

Andersen's relentless personification of inanimate objects—tin soldiers, rubber balls, and fir trees—as well as his attribution of sentience to animals and birds—ducks, storks, and nightingales—multiplies exponentially the possibilities for pain in the universe. Harold Bloom has commented that this habit of personification is "one of Andersen's weirdest and greatest gifts . . . [T]here are no mere objects whatsoever." Not only do we weep for the Little Match Girl, but we might, in other iterations, also cringe at the fate of her matches. Rather than offering the comfort of endlessly supportive imaginary companions, Andersen's account of the thoughts and feelings of dolls, toys, and china trinkets provides instead opportunities to experience vicarious pain, frustrated desire, and death. An individual life may be summarized in the fate of the paper dancer who so unfortunately succumbs to the fire along with "The Steadfast Tin Soldier," or in the Fir Tree who cannot appreciate its one night of happiness until it is gone. Andersen's objects, like people, may wish to establish their meaningfulness in the grand scheme of things, but their efforts have only individual, microcosmic effects. The Steadfast Tin Soldier's residual heart shape may evoke poignant tears from the readers, but it is still swept away with the ashes, communicating his love only to the uncomprehending housemaid. Yet, by making a story about it, Andersen achieves another kind of immortality for his hapless creation, one that would not exist if the story were never told.

On the macrocosmic scale, Andersen's Nature is immense, timeless, and implacable. Any human attempt to comprehend Nature is inevitably hubristic and doomed to failure. The Snow Queen and the Ice Maiden, together with the Bog King, the Sea Hag, and all the other magnificent and deadly natural forces in Andersen's imagination might suggest that Nature exists only as a personification. However, in Andersen's tales Nature's might dwarfs the human creatures skittering over the surface of their world: Kai futilely assembles ice fragments in his attempt to reason eternity; Rudy succumbs to the Ice Maiden's deadly claim; the questing prince finds "The Garden of Eden" only to reenact the Fall. Andersen's vulnerable protagonists contradict the notion that Nature is particularly well disposed to the innocent and good. Even if Nature's beauty compels awe and desire, it does not necessarily nurture or satisfy. While Andersen's depiction of Nature's power might seem inimical to ecocritical sensitivity to the fragility of the biosphere, he does show that the consequences of actions, even if lightly or ignorantly begun, cannot necessarily be reversed. As his tale "The Garden of Eden" attests, Eden's pristine beauty, once compromised, can never be recaptured.

A story displaying a powerful sense of Nature as an alien power, Andersen's "The Snow Queen" has spawned picture books and retellings, movies, dramas, novels, and stories reframing its characters, imagery, and themes. The Snow Queen herself as disciplining mother, clad in fur and coldly beautiful, appears
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repeatedly in nineteenth- and twentieth-century fantasy from George MacDonald’s North Wind to C. S. Lewis’s White Witch and Philip Pullman’s Mrs. Coulter and Serafina Pekkala. Joan Vinge’s sprawling sci-fi novel *The Snow Queen* (1980) translates Andersen’s story into an ecocritical modality without sacrificing the original’s complexity, updating Andersen’s Romantic conflict between reason and emotion to reflect contemporary concerns. Drawing on “The Snow Queen’s” proto-environmentalist imagery, Vinge extends the reason/emotion binary to include oppositions between primitive and advanced social structures, natural process and technological manipulation, science and religion, and holds them in tension. Like Andersen and his contemporaries, Vinge employs “two important elements of Friedrich Schlegel’s concept of irony, the synthesis of antithetical elements—including the antithesis of blind creative instinct and artful purpose—and the ambivalent attitude of the subject toward the romantic object” (Immerwahr 672–73). Vinge herself has said that she wished to debunk second-wave feminist essentialism about the relationship between women and nature, recognizing that women—who are part of humanity, after all—are also ambivalently related to the earth for good and ill (“Conversation” 420).

In Vinge’s novel the primary world is divided into “Summer” and “Winter”; the Summer half is technologically unsophisticated, nonhierarchical, and naturally connected with “The Lady,” who is associated with the ocean and auspicious sea creatures called “mers.” The “Winter” half of the planet is in semipermanent freeze, urbanized and technologically dependent, and hierarchical. Winter relies for its technology on trade with “off-worlders,” members of an interstellar consortium called the Hegemony, which withholds from this world the knowledge of how technology works. The primary commodity off-worlders desire is an extract from the mers’ blood, which prolongs life and youth indefinitely if the extract is regularly taken. This extract can be obtained only through slaughter.

The Gerda figure, Moon, and the Kai figure, Sparks, are raised in the Summer portion of the planet; Sparks secretly hankers for technology, and Moon desires to become a Sybil, a seer who relays the Lady’s solutions and answers to people’s problems and questions. Such technologically unsophisticated environments are usually employed in anthropological science fiction to critique the industrial and commercial abuses in our own world. And since Sparks desires technology, we might expect an updating of Andersen’s story to be a fable about the evils of industrialism and the good of living in harmony with the environment. Elements of Vinge’s novel do reinforce that contrast. However, in a surprising twist, Vinge reveals, and Moon must learn, that the Lady, whom Moon has always understood to be the ocean goddess, is actually a super-computer that was built millennia previously by a lost civilization whose knowledge has never been completely recovered. The mers are revealed
to be sentient and immortal creatures that are genetically engineered to tend to
the computer, which houses priceless data accessible only through human
Sybils. Their ability to answer questions is derived from an engineered virus,
transmissible through DNA, which enables those who carry the virus to con-
nect to the computer and access its knowledge. In its emphasis on humans’ cre-
ative capacity, Vinge’s novel provides a radical alternative to conventional
notions of intelligent design.

Without oversimplifying the conflict into “good” and “evil” sides, then,
Vinge’s Snow Queen celebrates humanity’s sublime ability to invent and create
while she also depicts its greed, selfishness, and inability to accept others—even
other humans, much less other animals—as equal or as having any rights
to space, dignity, life. Affirming the benefits to humanity of widespread tech-
nological sophistication and education—the ability to heal, to reconstruct, to
connect—Vinge also allegorizes humans’ capacity for ruthless and ignorant
exploitation of natural resources for profit. Thus, the decision to commit atroc-
ity (even of animals) in the pursuit of immortal youth for a privileged few com-
promises while it sustains the basis of this civilization.

Combining Andersen’s microcosmic personifications with macrocosmic
considerations of human imaginative power and the moral responsibility
implicit in its exercise, Vinge illustrates that humanity’s capacity for reason and
imagination, for cupidity and for love, rather than being essentially opposed,
must be reconciled for the benefit not only of the species but of all life. At the
end of the novel, Sparks, in erotic thrall to the Snow Queen, slaughters the
increasingly endangered mers in a supposedly protected area. Although, like
Gerda, Moon does rescue her Kai, her triumph and his release is tainted for both
by the knowledge of his atrocity, of the perhaps irrevocable damage to which he
has contributed. The parallels with our own global environmental concerns
such as atomic power and the effects of greenhouse emissions are even more
pressing in 2006 than they were in 1980 when the novel was first published.
Humanity’s historic struggle to survive the unsympathetic and blind power of
natural process has inspired us to overcompensate for our nakedness and vul-
nerability by threatening the world’s balance, regardless of its effect on other
creatures or on the biosphere. If Nature—"red in tooth and claw" or otherwise—
is no longer our mother but a Frankenstein-esque product of our hubris, our
concept of the relationship must necessarily change. In Vinge’s novel we must
be the parents rather than the children of the world we have created; we must
tend and care for it rather than exploit it. While the necessity is clear, whether
the implicit tasks will be accomplished is ambiguous, given the hegemonic
structures so firmly in place against them. Thus, although Vinge’s book refer-
ences Andersen's idyllic ending to “The Snow Queen,” Vinge’s hopeful conclu-
sion is qualified by the equally Andersenian notions that pain and pyrrhic
triumph are as likely as the return to innocence, and that a simple return to childhood will not suffice to solve the problems presented by the text.  

Outsiders and Aliens in the Social Landscape

Bruised and broken innocence is, of course, another perennial Andersen subject; in many of his stories an uneasy outsider experiences the pain of a social world that will not or cannot accommodate him or her. A simple list of the most famous Andersen tales will suffice: “The Little Mermaid,” “The Steadfast Tin Soldier,” “The Ugly Duckling,” “The Nightingale,” “The Little Match Girl.” Another indication of adults’ unwillingness to accept alienation and disappointment as normal if not inevitable is evidenced by the many revisions and repudiations of this theme in updated versions of these tales.

For example, a common contemporary approach to “The Snow Queen” is to critique its gender politics, especially focusing on Gerda as a betrayed lover pursuing her beloved. Without much alteration except to become more physically explicit, the Snow Queen becomes a sex goddess with a taste for the kinky and loses some of the inhuman glamour she possesses when she embodies natural forces. Gerda’s character—as with the female characters of most Andersen rewrites—is updated to reflect contemporary women writers’ dislike for passive nineteenth-century ideality. Gerda’s character is innocently earthy in Patricia McKillip’s short story “The Snow Queen,” a companionable Bridget Jones type in Kelly Link’s “Travels with the Snow Queen,” and, a throwback, a domestic paragon in Eileen Kernaghan’s The Snow Queen. The Robber Girl, so vibrant and arresting that she almost leaps off the page in Andersen’s story, is often given a more central role. With the Robber Girl stealing the show, and sometimes Gerda’s heart, in most rewrites the reunion with Kai is anticlimactic, even pointless. Even Kernaghan’s Gerda succumbs to the Robber Girl’s charms as the conclusion implies that ties between the women will persist long after the ill-fated relationship with Kai has died its natural death. No version considers seeking and retrieving the faithless lover as an accomplishment or even as the center of the quest, which begins to exist on its own terms. Gerda’s abject love for Kai in the original story is generally portrayed as psychologically unhealthy, as in this interchange between Gerda and the Robber Girl in Patricia McKillip’s version: “‘Nobody is worth freezing for.’ ‘Kay is.’ ‘Is he? . . . God, woman. What Neanderthal age are you from?’” (370). And in Link’s “Travels with the Snow Queen” the narrator confesses, at her quest’s culmination, “Part of you would like to turn around and leave before the Snow Queen finds you, before Kay sees you. You are afraid that you will burst out crying or even worse, that he will know that you walked barefoot on broken glass across half the continent, just to find out why he left you” (116). Here, the insistent second-person narration implicates
the reader as it exploits the abjection of fairy-tale heroines for black humor. Link’s acrid, self-aware heroine knows that the person inspiring her quest is not worth her effort, but feels compelled to pursue the object anyway to its bitter end. Any rejected lover knows the feeling. Redemption, such as it is, comes from recognizing that even a pointless journey might be more about the process than its end. At the story’s conclusion, this Gerda is offered a job as travel representative for Snow Queen Tours, which offers “special discount[s] for older sisters, stepsisters, stepmothers, wicked witches, crones, hags, princesses who have kissed frogs without realizing what they were getting into, etc.” (103). Gerda accepts the job, praising the power of sisterhood and of tacky vinyl boots. In this, Link’s revision is similar to other, more or less conventional retellings of Andersen’s story, which share a focus on strong women, empowering female relationships, and a preference for travel over home. Faithful to the more consolatory structure of Andersen’s original tale, most of these versions rework what a happy ending looks like to reflect contemporary values and mores.5

A more oblique rendering of “The Snow Queen,” David Almond’s *Kit’s Wilderness* (1999), actually outstrips adult retellings in its exploration of the dark aspects of imagination, in part because the novel uses the story as a springboard rather than a template. In *Kit’s Wilderness* the protagonist Kit returns to his ancestral town, a mining town, and is drawn to a troubled teen named John Askew, another descendant of miners. They play a “game called Death” in a cave-den that is ornamented with atavistic references not only to their miner forebears but also to cave dwellers in the distant past. In the game, a player is randomly selected to “die,” whereupon he or she “abandons life,” embraces death in a ritual exchange with Askew, then falls to the ground. No one is allowed to disturb the “dead one” until he or she stirs voluntarily, lest, as John threatens, he or she be doomed to “waking death.” While some of the players only pretend that something “happens” during this game, Kit actually loses consciousness and on waking hears and dimly sees the “ancient pit children” who, his grandfather has told him, haunt the old mining shafts. The players are described by Kit’s friend Allie as a bunch of “wimps and jerks and thickos and no-hopers,” with John Askew “at the middle of them, hunkering and lurching like a caveman” (38). Together these children explore—Allie through her drama, Kit through his writing, and John through his drawing—the dark, atavistic lure of the earth, which links them through time and death to all the other children of the past, those who lived to become their parents or grandparents, those with their names who died in mining accidents, those who lived in caves before the beginning of mining during the Ice Age.

Although adults are understandably disturbed by the game and put an end to it when they discover it, Kit’s grandfather offers another understanding of the darkness, based on his lifelong experience of the mines: “[E]very [one] of us was
scared of it. As a lad I'd wake up trembling, knowing that as a Watson born in Stonygate I'd soon be following my ancestors into the pit . . . But there was more than just the fear . . . We were also driven to it. We understood our fate. There was the strangest joy in dropping down together into the darkness that we feared” (Almond 19). In this narrative about outsiders, the dark communicates the truths and pain of existence, connects the children with their heritage, and gives piquancy and depth to the joyous world of the sun. In contrast with adult retellings of “The Snow Queen” that promise outsiders their condition may be remedied with a good haircut, new clothes, or an understanding therapist, Almond’s novel acknowledges the need to embrace the shadow and befriend the other outsiders who know its power. Even Allie, the rowdy and brilliantly colorful aspiring actress, acquires depth from her friendship with apparent opposites in status and temperament. Of the Andersen rewrites discussed here, Kit’s Wilderness most successfully encapsulates Andersen’s acknowledgment of the pain of the outsider and the importance of the imagination to express, if not subdue, the darkness within. As Michael Levy notes, contemporary retellings of the Snow Queen outstrip even Andersen’s moral limits by depicting children who “dwell in more complex worlds . . . worlds where no moral decision is easy and the consequences of any choice are hard to foresee—worlds . . . which are much closer to those real children actually inhabit” (18). Not only do these versions refuse to adulterate Andersen, but they also confront Andersen’s sorrow more directly than do the versions by and for adults.

Consolations of the Imagination and Imaginary Consolation

A final theme in these retellings of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales is the lure and the danger of the imagination. Kit’s Wilderness may explore the dark appeal of the imagination, but the book ends by rehabilitating all the outsiders, incorporating them into the social order. Andersen was capable of imagining redemption, certainly, but many of his stories conclude that although the imagination may provide consolation, it is not to be relied upon. This bleaker view is evidenced even more in “The Shadow,” in which a good man is first separated from, then subjugated by, and finally condemned to death by his own shadow. Likewise, in “The Garden of Eden” and “The Marsh King’s Daughter,” attempts to attain paradise and sexual or aesthetic bliss result in self-annihilation.

Graham Greene posited that “every artist has a splinter of ice in his heart,” referencing not only the Snow Queen, but also other fairy tales about the perilous appeal of the cold (qtd. in Byatt 72). Something about that freezing reason, that aestheticizing move into the beautiful but chilly and possibly sterile realm of art, may safeguard the artist, but it may also extinguish the rest of her—in Byatt’s words, “choosing the perfection of the work, [and] rejecting . . . the
imposed biological cycle, blood, kiss, roses, birth, death, and the hungry generations” (83). In Andersen, Kai’s laborious intellectual efforts melt meaninglessly away and the Little Match Girl’s imaginative attempts to warm, feed, and love herself end with a cold blue body and a handful of burned-out matches.

At first glance, Joyce Carol Oates’s story “You, Little Match Girl” updates the Andersen formula in the same way her feminist contemporaries have done with versions of “The Snow Queen.” Substituting a confident, self-possessed, and successful woman for the Little Match Girl, Oates challenges us to see the original match girl nonetheless. An ambitious and talented girl, the protagonist flees the small Maine town in which she grew up and which encases the rest of her extended family. She repeats to herself that she can do anything as long as she remains alone: “If I love no one,” she tells herself, “I am free” (215). Scorning the notion of fate, she makes her own life as an internationally known “photo-journalist of the highest integrity and professional skill” (215). Deaths of her father and grandmother fail to deter her pursuit of her profession, but at last, “when her mother became gravely ill . . . she had no choice but to fly home” (216). The experience of returning home to be with her dying mother makes her realize that she does love, does grieve, and challenges her illusion that she is in control of her life. When winter storms threaten to delay her return to “her own life” as she has made it, she insists upon driving, alone, into what becomes a close and haunting connection with Andersen’s story.

As she flees the past and identity she has always scorned, the woman’s car spins out of control on the frozen, blizzard-swept country road. She is thrown out of herself: “She heard a cry—’No! No!’ A child’s hurt, incredulous voice. For it was so unfair” (219). Wrenched out of her adult competence and back into the yearning hurt and yawning need for love that she thought she had overcome, the woman wanders into a snowy landscape, bleeding, with only her father’s old, failing flashlight—an allusion to the matches. She is rescued by a local man whom she’d had a crush on as a teenager; he takes her to the hospital, they realize they’re in love; and she returns alone to her mother’s house to retrieve one more thing before she begins her new full life as a wife. But the replaying of the blizzard, the crash, and the repetition of the sentences “She heard a cry—’No! No!’ A child’s hurt, incredulous voice. For it was so unfair” (231) makes us realize, as she herself realizes, that she has only dreamed this plenitude. She asks, “I have dreamt my life—is that it?”(233) before the soft oblivion of hypothermia takes her, “mercifully.” As Andersen’s original story does, Oates here exposes the impulse to imagine as powerless to change the physical reality of bodies’ needs and the psychological reality of desires. Oates writes as a gloss on this story, but also on the project of fantasy making: “This story evokes what is for me the greatest possible horror, that our happiness is but an illusion, a dream generated by deprivation . . . Maybe our lives are no
more than a match girl’s flaring matches; we live so long as they burn, and then are gone. In the meantime, the solace of art” (233).

But what kind of a solace does art provide? This question is addressed in Kathryn Davis’s powerful The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf (1993). The novel relates the story of a Danish composer, Helle ten Brix, who writes operas based on Andersen’s stories. Helle bequeaths the narrator of the story, Francie Thorn, the task of finishing her final opera, derived from the story of Inger and her loaf. Francie’s tools are her own knowledge of music (she studied piano at Julliard before dropping out to become a single mother and waitress), a box of fragments of Helle’s life, and her knowledge that Helle listened to Mozart’s Don Giovanni constantly while working on the opera and envisioned “The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf” as a feminist heroine who spurns bread, the symbol of women’s oppression, joining the Bog Queen, with her daughters Retaliation, Grudge, and Unnamable, in allegorical triumph. Francie is not so certain that Helle’s revision necessarily liberates, especially in light of the way that the legacy “haunts” her as she struggles to come to terms with her role in a love triangle involving herself, Helle, and Francie’s married lover, Sam, whom Helle has murdered dramatically.

As Francie reviews Helle’s career and her revolutionary and beautiful operas, she confronts the inevitable fictionality of any recollection. Helle’s allegiance was never to history but always to art. What “really” happens is not as important as what the artist makes of it, the material contributing to aesthetic shapes defying history. As she struggles to solve the conundrum of how to end the opera, Francie meditates upon the essentially “monstrous nature of the artist” (365), which Helle embodied by dressing as her own operatic character Nightingale in her own final, disastrous birthday costume party. In Helle’s opera, rather than being the modest but transcendent natural artist that Andersen depicts, the Nightingale is a savage appropriator of anything that might contribute to his art. Demanding the wings, eyes, and beaks of other birds through the murderous offices of the Shrike, who impales unlucky victims on thorns, Nightingale becomes “a seething, spiny mass, beaks opening and closing, a ghastly hybrid combining the animate and inanimate, echinoderm and battle mace, the mindless sting, the malicious blow. His body is studded with eyes, dark and shining, vigilant, covetous” (353). The Nightingale’s single-minded pursuit of beauty costs others’ lives, his sanity, and his moral vision, turning him into a literal monster, but it does result in beautiful music. “It’s impossible not to notice that these accretions, however hideous, serve Nightingale’s ultimate purpose. His voice is becoming more and more beatific, unearthly, issuing from his many mouths like light itself, like a radiant halo of sound, higher and higher, as if he might actually contain within himself a holy relic” (353). Artistic egocentrism sacrifices both others and itself on the pyre of art.
In despair at the loss of her loves (both Sam and Helle) and her attempt to appease her own guilty feelings of culpability while trying to exorcise Helle’s ghost by finishing the opera, Francie decides to unite the artistic, sensual, selfish Inger and Don Giovanni in the bog, but cannot imagine how to conclude the opera without repeating Helle’s old motifs and her own failed attempts to avoid prescription. She reviews the endings of Helle’s previous operas, which parallel the movements of her own love triangle, and she repudiates them all: “No . . . we won’t break apart, disappear, gobble or kill, battle or marry, merge or die” (393).

Finally, smelling the warm odors rising from the bakery over which she has rented an apartment, she remembers that bread might not be a simple emblem of oppression. Might it not instead suggest a coming together of many options, the possibility of rising, lifting up out of the bog’s cloacal confinement to different choices—the choices that Helle, Sam, and Francie themselves did not make—to experience and to relinquish, to accept beauty’s end: “How had we ever come up with the idea of fidelity? . . . When had the animating spirit of a thing ever remained faithful to the form which contained it? The human voice, that most tragic of all instruments; the hopeful human voice singing, trying to hold a note forever” (396). In the dark aspiration of the artist’s quest, the pain of failure, extinction, is part of the finale. Like Andersen, Davis sees the relationship between art and reality, between subjectivity and relationship, as vexed and even murderous. The imagination is powerful and seductive, so much so that, as in “The Shadow,” it threatens to possess and devour its possessor.

Conclusion

In looking at these variations on Andersen’s classic tales, I have suggested that Andersen’s “darkness” relies as much upon the experience of childhood as it does on that of adulthood. Although adults often wish to erase and forget the abyss they feared as children, Andersen’s stories allow both children and adults to recognize the truth of pain that others seek to hide. Encountering and engaging with this pain, time after time, artists produce works of exceptional artistry and beauty that are both satisfying in their sorrow and troubling in the questions that they raise. They refuse to make art simpler than life. In doing so, they respect the work of the artist and of the reader. As readers, children are no more prone to fears of the dark than are adults, in spite of adults’ attempts to shield, explain away, and deny its power.

In a 2003 article Hollis Robbins uses Andersen’s “The Emperor’s New Clothes” as an occasion for demonstrating that the critic’s skill can dazzle even when the story seems simple and childlike. Scorning the conventional reading that we should focus upon the child’s innocent reaction to the emperor’s nudity as a demonstration of truth about perception and interpretation, Robbins chal-
challenges readers to recognize the social creation of meaning and affirms the reality of the invisible productions of the labor of the mind. Inviting readers to consider a greater variety of verbs that might be used to describe the process of criticism (such as “to rule, to weave, to minister, to parade, and to applaud” [661]), all of these suggesting the construction rather than the revelation of truth, Robbins notes that academic interpretation often involves weaving out of nothing more than words “a text(ile) that will distinguish between the worthy and the unworthy; [after which] only the highly qualified will ‘get it’” (662). I appreciate the audacity of this argument, but I wonder if she’s quite right about the child and its alleged innocence. After all, it is the adults in this story who cravenly fear the consequences of failing to see.

Before 2001 and the events following the attack on the World Trade Center, Robbins’s argument might seem merely playful, anti-intuitive, and provocative. Now, however, when the United States is spending $5 billion a month on a war in Iraq begun on the false assertion that Saddam Hussein and his regime presented a credible threat to the United States, when unqualified cronies are nominated to crucial government posts and fail to execute their duties, and when the crisis of global warming generates no political resolve to change our energy policies beyond the brandishing of rhetorical opposition, it seems important to posit that truth is not simply what the parties in power—or even half of the voters of a nation—agree it is. Truth might be more objective—and more important—to get right, not only in the childlike fashion Andersen celebrated in his famous story, but also in the area of reasoned public debate. Perhaps the truth of “The Emperor’s New Clothes” is not that the child’s truth is mercifully free of adult corruption, but that it recognizes the terrifying possibility that whatever words we may use to clothe our fears, the fabric cannot protect us from them.6

Andersen was an acute observer of social and sexual politics and, as a Romantic, mused on the relationship between humans and nature; moreover, many of his heirs continue to use his metaphors to comment upon human creativity and its effects, both good and ill, upon the people and the world around them. Ursula K. Le Guin has called Andersen “one of the great realists of literature” in part because of his “willingness to see and accept the consequences of an act or a failure to act” (61). In these times the consequences of fantasy, together with the world-making aspects of the assertions of power, are heightened and the stakes seem greater than ever.

Notes

1. Peter N. Stearns and Timothy Haggerty arrive at this conclusion in their study of the changing social response to fear in American child-rearing manuals and children’s literature between 1850 and 1950 (93–94). It would be interesting to see
what they make of the events of the last fifteen years, especially the rise of a “fear culture” surrounding debates about gun control (as delineated by Michael Moore’s documentary *Bowling for Columbine* [2002]) and 9/11/2001’s terrorist attack on the World Trade Center.

2. Detering; Bøggild.
3. For more discussion of this genealogy, see Wood.
4. The notion that problems can be solved with a return to childhood innocence is surely the most adulterated idea of all; children themselves don’t believe that childhood innocence is a solution to anything, and many are eager to shed such innocence.
5. Although I consider myself a feminist and often enjoy feminist revisions of traditional fairy tales, revisions that are content simply to reverse the heterosexism and female passivity of the original tales have begun to be clichéd and far too easy.
6. A similar point was made by Paul Krugman in his satiric editorial “Defending Imperial Nudity.”

**Works Cited**


THE UGLY DUCKLING’S LEGACY
