

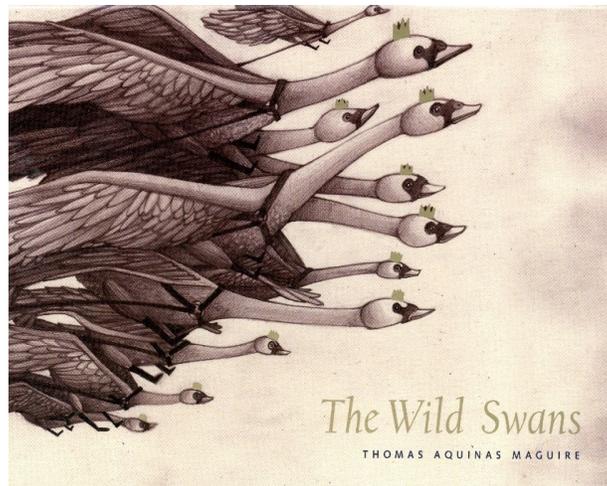
An Analysis of *The Wild Swans*; Andersen-Maguire Edition

It is difficult to outgrow the love of fairy tales. Remembering and revisiting old childhood stories such as *Cinderella* and *The Little Mermaid* are often times still pleasurable despite the passing of many years and increasing of age. Perhaps the stories retell of times past in life that were more joyful and simple than adulthood. In any case, Hans Christian Andersen's story *The Wild Swans* is captivating to adult and child minds alike. And when coupled with Thomas Aquinas Maguire's illustrations, the fairy tale comes to life in the mind beyond what could be accomplished by words alone.

The Andersen-Maguire edition of *The Wild Swans* was published in 2008 and has two parts. The first part is a pamphlet containing the fifteen page written story *The Wild Swans* by Hans Christian Andersen.



The second piece and additional part to the manuscript written by Andersen is an accordion-styled collection of illustrations by Maguire that matches the written story in the pamphlet. In other words, as the story is read, one can look to the illustrations that go along with the words and see the story unfold in drawing after drawing. In total, there are eighty-four scenes drawn in a variation of charcoal pencils ranging in levels of darkness. Together, the two parts lay in a hallowed box with a hard-cover flap, fashioned to make a lid for the container. On the cover is a drawing of eleven swan princes, each with a crown of gold; the only other color used in the making of the illustrations beyond the assortment of whites and blacks.

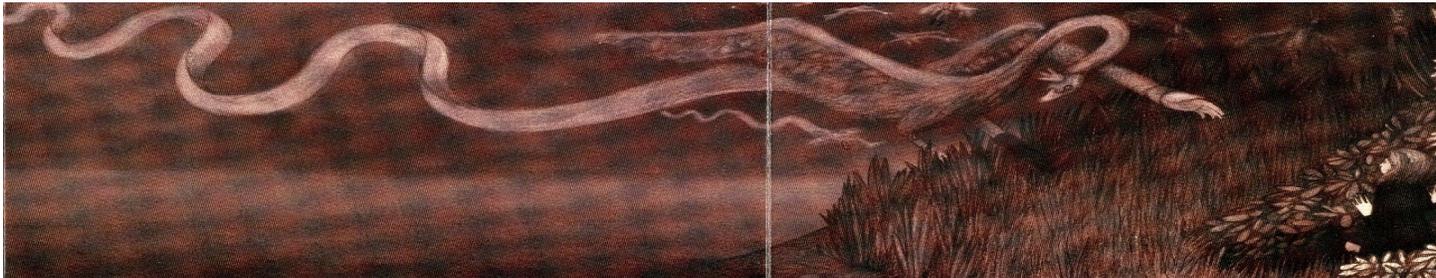


The entire package is a decorated work of art and is so pleasing to the eye that it practically begs one to take it down off the bookshelf and explore its contents. And the beholding of the materials is very much like peeking into Pandora's box: impossible to put up until the secrets have been fully uncovered.

The story of *The Wild Swans* goes like this: there were once eleven sons and one daughter (Elisa) of a widowed king. The king soon marries an evil woman who has dark, magical powers which she uses to turn the princes into swans and send Elisa away to a cottage far away from her home, the palace. However, when Elisa turns fifteen and is strikingly beautiful, her father sends for her, finally discovering that he has a desire to know his daughter (how Elisa is so willing to drop her life in an instant to respond to the beckoning call of a father who has practically forsaken her for her entire tween life is a mystery to me. I at least would have made him sweat it out for a few days so that he might reflect on some of his past actions and misogynistic attitude in that he expects I have been waiting for him to save me from my isolation for all the years of my banishment). Anyhow, Elisa travels back to the palace where her evil stepmother awaits her arrival. Before Elisa goes to see her father, she decides to take a bath. The stepmother determines that the best way to force Elisa out of the palace for good is to make her utterly revolting to her father and therefore plants three toads in the bathtub with Elisa that should make her ugly and mean. However, the dark magic fails miserably when Elisa's superior goodness and beauty trumps the darkness and turns the toads into beautiful flowers (a testament to girls everywhere: kindness and beauty can beat any evil power in the universe. Including homework. And cheating boyfriends.). But the stepmother does not stop at failure. She persists and accomplishes her task to make Elisa ugly by pouring ink all over her body, messing up her hair, and rubbing foul smelling perfume over her skin. Elisa's father is horrified at the sight of her and sends her away immediately. Elisa goes into the forest, washes away her ugly mask, and runs into an old lady named Morgana who gives her some food and tells her that she saw eleven swans wearing crowns nearby. Elisa finds the swans which turn back into princes at night and together they make the plan to go back to the princes' homeland which is a two day journey across the sea. After a terrifying trip, the reunited family makes it to the land and into the cave where the brothers live. That night, a dream comes to Elisa in which Morgana tells her that it is possible to break the curse by remaining silent and fashioning each brother a sweater from painful nettles outside the cave. Directly after the dream,

Elisa sets to work and finishes one whole sweater before the cave is raided by a young king who “saves” her and takes her back with him to the palace to make her his queen. She loves him and continues to work from inside the kingdom. At about this time, the Archbishop believes that she is a witch who has cast a love spell on the king. He warns the prince about his beliefs but the ignorant youth takes no heed of the advice. Unfortunately, Elisa’s supply of nettles dwindles as she nears the end of her task and she is forced to travel each night through a pack of witches to get more in order to resume her practice. The Archbishop and king discover her and finally arrest her as a witch when she has just one sweater left to go. All night in the prison and while she is on the wagon going to her death by fire she works, nearly finishing. She throws up the eleven sweaters and her brothers swoop into them and turn back into princes. The youngest brother gets the half-finished sweater and is left with wings. Elisa is finally done with her silence and the king learns of his terrible mistake. Elisa is regarded as a saint, the Archbishop is chastised, and there is a huge celebration (there’s nothing like a party to make the whole I-was-almost-killed-by-my-true-love-but-saved-myself-at-the-last-second-only-to-run-back-into-his-untrusting-arms thing all okay). Plot summary aside, there are many important discoveries to be made from the story and illustrations which will now be detailed in full for the rest of this incredibly intriguing analysis.

The first impact of the story-illustration combination stems from the inclusion of the drawings which make the fairy tale anything but childlike. Instead, the pictures draw in the adult reader in an appeal to the darkness that every grown post-adolescent comes to know just by living life. The mood created is dramatically different from the one many would ordain a fairy tale, but it is a perfect presentation of Andersen’s story. A desperation, an anger, and a sorrow are evoked in many ways. To begin with, many of the drawings exhibit eerie depictions such as the ones shown below.

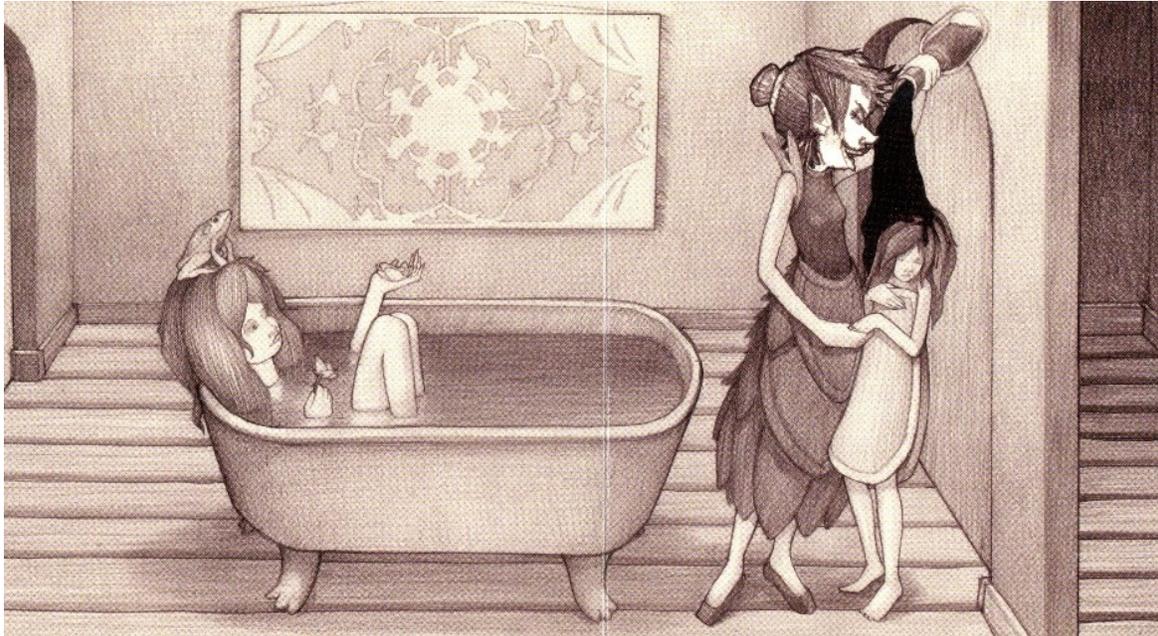


Rather than choosing to portray a more innocent picture of the events within the story, Maguire instead relayed the story through a layer of creepy abstraction. The first drawing shows a magical aspect that does magnitudes to show the magic in the transformation of the eleven princes. However, the extended hand, which vaguely resembles *The Creation of Adam* by Michelangelo, shows a desperation in the princes that is absent in the text. There is a certain horror that bubbles up upon the viewing of the drawing. The inability of the princes to control their lives and bodies is made evident and the blackness in the drawing rounds out the emotions with a resounding darkness. The second drawing invokes a similar, terrific incredulity and also adds an effect that would otherwise be lost to the reader. Sometimes, it is easy to read and not fully digest the material's contents, whether it be from laziness, missing detail in the writing, or lack of creativity on the reader's part. This, however, is made impossible by Maguire's addition to Andersen's story. Maguire deliberately depicts the witches for the reader as monsters with beady eyes and gaping mouths filled with knife-like teeth. They seem to be emerging from the curtain of Elisa's hair, as though coming from some hidden part of her. This seems to suggest that Maguire took something in Andersen's story to mean that, in the process of rescuing her brothers, it is easy to regard Elisa as a perfect soul. But it must be remembered that Elisa too is a part of the human race which is broken with sin and tainted in blackness (as Andersen so liked to remind his audience in some of his other stories). In summary, Maguire's illustrations exhibit a dark creativity that sets a mood of despair.

Aside from the material being creepy in its nature, the pencil drawings do the most to set the mood. Maguire's decision to deprive the world of its color adds to the story rather than takes away. First, it is very much like a dream in that there are no bright colors or memorable sensory cues. Like a scene that occurs in sleep, it is the content that matters. The thing about the unconscious is that it can either be a dream or a nightmare, and Maguire creates both in his many panels. On one hand, the reader sees a beautiful church with twelve towers while on the next page a monster may appear in all its horror, seemingly real enough to pounce from the page with claws out. Secondly, the pencil drawings form a distinct style that adds to the above mentioned mood. In the nightmarish scenes, the pencil lines are harsh and biting. Everything looks particularly harmful and terrifying. The contrast between the lights and darks works perfectly to capture the peculiarity of the moment. Then, in the more beautiful scenes, the pencil lines work in fluidity like water and sustain a softness and innocence. There is less of a stark contrast between the lights and darks. Everything feels safe and peaceful. Ultimately, without Maguire's addition to Andersen's story, the deep emotions that are drawn up out of the reader would be lost and the reading of the story would not impact the audience as much as it could when paired with the black and white scenes.

As mentioned before, Maguire had a set opinion of Andersen's story. Obviously, his vision included a seriousness that seems strange for a fairy tale. Now it must be analyzed-- what did Andersen have in mind during his writing of *The Wild Swans*? Was it ridiculous for Maguire to take such an approach to the story or were his intentions well-guided? Well, it is hard to say for sure. However, it can be argued that such an interpretation may actually be backed up with some literary evidence. Before delving into the potential deeper meanings behind *The Wild Swan* and how Maguire's illustrations incorporate them in his illustrations, it is first beneficial to describe some common motifs Andersen took advantage of. He uses the evil stepmother motif when the widowed king marries a dark sorceress who tortures her new children to get her way, and the fairy godmother character through the old lady in the woods who also guides Elisa through her troubles.

Beginning with the evil stepmother, it turns out that there is actually some psychological proof that such a thing exists in real life. This phenomenon is called the Cinderella Effect and states that stepparents prefer their own biological children to the unrelated children. This does not mean that stepparents go around killing off the innocent offspring of their newly wedded spouse, but only suggests that in many cases the relationship formed between new parent and child are fueled by other motives rather than love. This so called Cinderella Effect is a common motif used in fairy tales and is most definitely employed in *The Wild Swans*.



Morgana, on the other hand, can be seen as the true maternal figure and, arguably, is a fairy godmother character. The text does not explicitly state that Morgana is the “fairy godmother” of Elisa, but it is evident that in a literary sense this is exactly the title afforded to her. A fairy godmother in figurative language is a person, generally of an older, wiser, and other-worldly descent, that guides the younger, less experienced character to maturity. In *The Wild Swans*, Morgana is an old woman who provides berries to Elisa and helps her find her brother. In this way, she is a helpful caretaker. In addition, she comes to Elisa in a dream and tells her how to turn the princes back into humans for good. In summary, she guides Elisa to a better future and adulthood. Maguire must have picked up on this literary role, as he drew Morgana as an orb-like figure with wings.



Why go through the trouble of explaining these two motifs? Because it proves that Andersen either unknowingly or willingly incorporated elements into his fairy tale that makes it deeper than what originally meets the eye.

Now for the final analysis: apart from a few commonly employed motifs, did Andersen incorporate additional deeper figures and events in his story to make it something more than meets the eye? The reader ultimately gets to decide but let the following be influential. There is evidence that *The Wild Swans* could really be a story discussing the Reformation of Catholic Church. Where does this wild, unsupported accusation come from? Directly from the text. To start off with, the very first sentence in *The Wild Swans* states that there were eleven sons and one daughter. What catches the mind is the number eleven. Why eleven? In total, the king has twelve children...yes, gold star for those who immediately thought of the twelve disciples, Jesus's twelve followers from the Bible. Continuing on, the twelve children live peacefully under the love and affection of their benevolent father, the king of the land. In history, kings in Europe often times chose their country's religion and, in France and later on in England, the ruler was the head of the church. In this case, it is not too much of a stretch to agree with this past precedent and regard the benevolent king as an embodiment of the uncorrupted Church (capitalized to signify universality). Everything is good in the world and harmony rules...until the evil stepmother saunters into the picture with static hair aflame and hell fires blossoming up behind her like red geysers (maybe not that dramatic but the image works all the same). In this allegory, she would represent the evil that corrupts the incorruptible church. She uses the magic to turn the princes (followers of God) into swans and sends Elisa away by turning her father against her. In other words, the evil has turned the Church to darkness which has expelled its true followers. The father's ignorance to the darkness of his new wife suggests that the Church has allowed evil to seep in without wanting to realize it. In this way, the Church is still innately good, only tainted. When Elisa goes into the forest away from the corrupted church for good, her real journey begins as a follower of the true Church: to create a

new, blameless church and bring with her the followers of the faith. And the fairy godmother appears. It is not too far-fetched to say that Morgana could represent God. She is the guide of Elisa's intentions to restore her real faith. And she is the fairy GODmother. Maguire's drawing of Morgana is also very much like the sun, the center of the universe and an object that represents total power and dominance due to its massive size and integral role in daily life.



Soon, she finds her brothers and they reunite as a family body (the body of the Church). Here begins the special attention of the youngest brother. First, he stays with Elisa with his head in her lap like a lamb while the other brothers fly in a circle overhead. This image of a sacrificial lamb draws parallels with him to Jesus, the savior of sinners. As an archetypal Jesus figure, the young brother must be some sort of sacrifice for the betterment of his people. This comes later but more parallels occur when he puts the branches of ripe berries in Elisa's cage, shades her with his wings, and leads her to the cave, hoping that she will, "dream well". All of this exhibits the love of Christ (he fed the hungry, was a defender of the weak, and leader to the blind). So Elisa is in her cave with her mission to save her brothers from their fate so they can be joined together forever as a family unit. Her mission is to work with the sharp, thorny nettles to fashion sweaters for her brothers and remain silent through her pain and labor. And now we come to something very weird in that it differs from traditional archetypal literature: a second Jesus figure! She is different, however, from her brother. While his mission is to sacrifice himself for her, the embodiment of the people, her mission is to save him, the religion. She now represents the Reformation of the Church. Why does Elisa represent a Jesus figure? The thorns are a big clue. She must work through her own bodily pain to restore the purity of religion. And Jesus wore a crown of thorns on the cross. Something truly extraordinary occurs at this point: the younger brother comes to Elisa and cries on her hands, taking away her pain; again, something very Christ-like and also perhaps a statement to readers that those who sacrifice for religion are ultimately healed. But then Elisa is

taken by a new king! In actuality, this is perfect! She now has a new Church to which she can bring her family. She is given the opportunity to restore her faith. But the evil Archbishop stands in her way and accuses her of being a witch. This is very telling: it recalls a time when people of power in the Catholic Church abused their superiority by taking advantage of its people. The clergy embezzled, indulged in excessive indulgences, married when they were not supposed to, and so on. The new king almost falls for the Archbishop's evil ways when he arrests Elisa for being a witch. But Elisa has finished with her remedy and turns her brothers back into humans (with the exception of the arms of the younger brother. He instead has wings, symbolizing the dual nature of Jesus (man and God)) so that the body of the Church and the new king can be reunited and expel the evil, incorrect figure from the kingdom. Elisa has saved the Church from corruption (by the new Church being removed from the first one and the expelling the Archbishop) and restored her faith family by turning her brothers back into people. Her sainthood and the Archbishop suggest that the Christianity in question is Catholicism. All in all, the parallels in *The Wild Swans* provide enough evidence to suggest that Andersen may have been writing about the Reformation.

There is no way of knowing whether Andersen designed his story to model the Reformation or if Maguire knew about this analysis when he sketched his illustrations. However, there is a lot to be said in that the mood captured by Maguire perfectly describes the seriousness of the allegory and that Andersen references Christianity in some of his other stories. In any case, the Andersen-Maguire edition of *The Wild Swans* is a truly beautiful, insightful work of art that deserves the time and thoughts of a multitude of observers. It should not be made to sit on a dusty shelf but be examined by both adults and children as well as appreciated for its creativity and intrigue.



"Selected Motifs in Hans Christian Andersen's Fairy Tales." *Selected Motifs in Hans Christian Andersen's Fairy Tales*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Oct.

2014. http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/forskning/motiver/motiv_e.html

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