

# The Chinese Reception of “An Ethical Andersen”

Zhang Shengzhen

Professor, Jiangsu Normal University, Xuzhou

## Abstract

Children’s literature aims to be educational, and, as we are all well aware, it is also the subject of education in itself, as an academic discipline. All those classical works that transcending time and border continue to uphold noble morality or raise moral admonition. From the perspective of ethical literary criticism, it is argued that Andersen started the ethical tradition and the moral outlook the later generation inherited. The circulation and reception of Andersen in the world lies in its ethical values and its everlasting legacy for cultivating the spirit of both young and old.

## Introduction

Children’s literature originates inevitably from the advancement of the views in a society on democracy and children. Children’s literature reveals the national quality including the heritage and wisdom, which shows the universal and the most fundamental spiritual pursuit of humankind. Its genesis and development are closely related to the changing views on children.

From a worldwide view, some avant-garde thinkers and educators in the seventeenth century had formed more advanced views on children than those in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, even than their contemporaries, the Puritans. Jan Amos Comenius thought that the growth of children should be divided into several phases and that children’s psychology and their acceptance of literature should be highlighted. Rousseau, based on his natural philosophy and his human-centered thought, held that children should receive “natural education.” (Rousseau, 1978) In his opinion, children have the perfect potential of human beings; the true education must respect human nature, obey the perpetual laws of nature and train the children to advocate rationality, to think by themselves, in opposition to the church that imbued children with ideas. It is only after Rousseau that a children’s world is found and children’s distinctive spiritual needs are recognized. Rousseau’s idea

on children exerts great influence on and makes great contributions to the world of children's literature and its development.

Thanks to Rousseau's thought, children's literature in European countries bears apparent qualities of moral education. This situation lasts to the nineteenth century, distinguishing the French children's literature greatly from the fantastic English children's literature. The Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth century transforms the world economy and influences the development and appearance of the culture in Europe. French children's literature is greatly affected by the philosophers' thoughts on culture and social development in the age of reason and enlightenment. Meanwhile, the mutual communication with and influence from foreign children's literature allow it to form and strengthen its own tradition. In addition, children's literature in all countries, while each inheriting its own tradition, learns from each other.

#### **Ethical literary criticism: a new approach in reading Andersen**

“By the end of seventeenth century, childhood was conceived as a state of natural innocence, and therefore potentially corruptible, and the civilizing of children--a process of social indoctrination through anxiety-provoking effects and positive reinforcement--operated on all levels in manners, speech, sex, literature and play” (Levy & Mendlesohn, 2016, p. 17). Childhood is bestowed with stronger imitation ability and flexibility, which makes this phase even more vital in the cultivation of morality and ethical values. “The becoming of children makes the study of children's literature even more significant” (Xu & Jones, 2011, p. 3). The ethical function of literature is determined by literature itself. As a spiritual existence, literature from its initiative stage is used for the transformation and purifying of the souls. All those classical works that transcending time and border continue to uphold noble morality or raise moral admonition. Excellent literary works can help adolescents grow into persons with moral sense and socially acceptable behaviour. Children's literature can improve children's inherent abilities to observe, think and feel; it can develop their moral, intellectual and physical abilities; it can nurture, protect and develop their innate human kindness.

Ethical literary criticism, promulgated by Nie Zhenzhao offers a new approach to explore the ethical values of Andersen and the roots of its popularity in the world. Ethical

literary criticism defined as a “critical theory that approaches literary works and their authors from the perspective of ethics” (Nie, 2015, p. 84), has taken hold in both China and internationally. Ethical literary criticism refers to “an approach that reads, analyzes and interprets literature from an ethical perspective. It takes literary texts as its very object of analysis and aims to shed a new light on a variety of relationships depicted by literature such as man/woman and him/herself, humans and others, humans and nature, and humans and society, from an ethical perspective” (Baker & Shang, 2015, p. 14). Baker and Shang in the *TLS* article go on to summarize:

Specifically, ethical literary criticism embraces the following five aspects: (1) it investigates the moral values of writers’ and their historical backgrounds and the connections between writers own moral values and those ethical values projected in their creative output; (2) it investigates the relations between moral phenomena existing in a writer’s work and in reality, the moral inclinations, and the social and moral values of that work; (3) it examines the effects of that work’s moral values as exerted on readers and society, and readers’ evaluations of the moral thoughts of writers and their works; (4) it evaluates the influence of writers’ and their works’ moral inclinations on other contemporary writers and literature; and (5) it uncovers the moral features of writers and their works and aims to explore various issues concerning the relations between literature and society or literature and writer from an ethical perspective. (14)

This approach is important concerning the value of studying literature and reading literature intensely and carefully. I emphasize studying and analyzing the ethical decisions of the protagonists and those ethical values projected in literary writers’ creative outputs.

Nie uses a cluster of literary texts as examples to “address how characters at different phases of human development make ethical selections in due historical contexts to exhibit their moral enlightenments than human beings follow to advance their civilization” (Nie, 2014, p. 6). Nie offers a broad-reaching account of ethical literary criticism that may observe a literary text from an ethical stance. He sees literary ethics as critical paradigm in which a critic usually employs ethical theories and principles to address how a text responds to good and evil and many other issues of value and morality (Nie, 2014, pp. 98-99), highlighting moral responsibilities in literary criticism. Nie holds that “there is no literature that does not possess the function of ethic education” (Nie, 2014, p.

7). Any good literature will be received by both young and old, exploring human nature beyond any single dimension. In this sense, Andersen's works provide both literature entertainment and ethical illumination. During the process of ethical choice of the protagonists, ethical consciousness starts to emerge, the concept of good and evil gradually established. The role model and educational preaching of literature will become one of the most important ways to persuade children to practice the ethical way of living.

### **Ethical values of Andersen's works**

Reading Andersen from the approach of ethical literary criticism contributes to the understanding of Andersen's works and the ethical dimensions and decisions of fictional characters.

One typical ethical choice of the protagonist is their religious choice which constitutes a way to impart moral lessons and influence people's thought process and decision making which confirms the importance and relevance of the religious organization in the moral development of children. As is well known, religious tradition constitutes an important part of moral education in children's literature. Religious education begins earlier in Europe than in the other parts of the world, and it aims at morality cultivation, e.g. *Pilgrim's Progress* (2009), *Robinson Crusoe* (2012), and *The Little Mermaid* (2014). Ethical choice, that is the pursuit for "everlasting soul" of the Mermaid in 'The Little Mermaid,' by sacrificing her comfortable 300-year lifetime and giving up herself just reflects Andersen's ethical choices of life. "The daughters of the air do not have an immortal soul either, but they can earn one by their good deeds." One can enter a superior life only with this everlasting soul. "A good child who pleases his parents and deserves their love, God shortens our days of trial." God in 'The Little Match Girl' is the incarnation of an ideal persona and the symbol of truth, kindness and beauty, bearing a strong religious and humanistic quality. The description and the message are religious. "She rubbed another match against the wall. It became bright again, and in the glow, the old grandmother stood clear and shining, kind and lovely." In order to keep his grandmother, she lighted all the matches. "Grandmother had never been so grand and beautiful. She took the little girl in her arms, and both of them flew in brightness and joy above Earth, very, very high, and up

there was neither cold, not hunger, nor fear – they were with God.” The little match girl’s ethical choice is to follow the lead of God. “No one imagined what beautiful things she had been, and how happily she had gone with her old grandmother into the bright New Year.”

Ethical awareness and ethical choice of the hero reveals itself in *God Can Never Die* as well. “It was as if a veil lifted from his eyes and as if a heavy load fell from his heart when she spoke these words. He smiled for the first time in a long while, and thanked his dear, pious wife through which she had revived his belief in God and restored his trust. And in the room the sun shone even more friendly on the happy people’s faces; a gentle breeze caressed their smiling cheeks, and the birds sang even louder their heartfelt thanks to God.” In ‘The Snow Queen,’ Gerda with her love, courage and grit, after long-lasting efforts, saved her lover Kay and won her happiness temporarily. “Both of them have forgotten the icy, empty splendour of the snow queen’s palace as completely as if it were some bad dream. Grandmother sat in God’s good sunshine, reading to them from her bible: “Except ye become as little children, ye shall not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.” “Finally they understood the old hymn: where roses bloom so sweetly in the vale, there shall you find the Christ Child, without fail.” Only when a person keeps the innocence and good quality of a child she will be rewarded.

The true religious life does not mean self-alienation of one’s spiritual world but the nourishment of the great soul yearning for holiness. It is the restraints of the religious rationality on human beings in natural state that enable them to get rid of the primitive wildness and move towards civility, and then sublimate to a spiritual world. The self-improvement and self-salvation of human beings just reflect the power of divinity. As a humanist and romantics Andersen views the soul of man as incomparable. He holds that only by the pursuit of everlasting soul will man obtain long-lasting moral value and ethical illumination.

By the process of ethical choice, ‘The Little Mermaid’ reveals the ethical values of the work. The seriousness of being alive, the awareness of crisis, the fatalism and the struggle against it, the inevitable control and destruction of God and common people from destiny all become the deep cultural sub-consciousness, presenting the change of social values and morality in northern Europe. In ‘The Ice Maiden’ when Rudy and Babette finally experienced hardships and bitterness, Rudy exclaimed, “Earth can give me no more.

What a blessed life! What a blessed world this is! Our Lord is infinitely good!" But Rudy cannot escape the kiss of death. Babette says: "Why should he die when our day of happiness was so near? Dear God, make me understand; shed light into my heart! I cannot understand the ways of your almighty power and wisdom." She is questioning whether she has sinned or what is her future.

Andersen is well accepted for his ethics in the cultivation of children. 'What the Old Man Does is Always Right' contains abundant ethical values. An old couple whose life has been filled with love, trust, optimism and tolerance, observed the world with content and gratitude. "Always downhill, but always happy." They were hearing the whole story of the horse that had been traded first for a cow and finally for a sack of rotten apples. "Yes, it pays when the wife believes and admits that her husband is the wisest man in the world and that whatever he does is right." In 'The Ugly Duckling,' at the beginning, "it would be too sad to tell of all the hardships and wretchedness he had to endure during this cruel winter," but he did not lose courage and endured all the hardships and prayed for the best. "He felt quite glad that he had come through so much trouble and misfortune, for now he had a fuller understanding of his own good fortune and of beauty when he met with it." After all the bitterness and trials, he transformed and regained his chance. "Being born in a duck yard does not matter, if only you are hatched from a swan's egg." The ethical value is also vividly reflected in 'Little Claus and Big Claus,' in which trick is not viewed as immoral but a way of wisdom for survival. For 'The Steadfast Tin Soldier,' "steadfast" is the key word for the story. At the end, the soldier died for love "in the shape of a little tin heart." The heroine Thumbelina in "Thumbelina" is misplaced with a group of stupid, arrogant and evil people but with her virtues, optimism and confidence in the future, she is rewarded with happiness. Andersen nurses hope and optimism towards the world, though he keeps exploring human anxiety, sorrows and evils.

"Ethical literary criticism does not deny the value of aesthetic criticism but takes it as one of the important means of understanding literature for ethical aims. (...) Without any moral teaching, the aesthetics of literature would cease to exist .... Only by working together with morality can the aesthetic value of literature be fully realized." (Nie, 2015, p. 88; Ross, 2015, p. 10). Andersen's works play a particularly important role in the moralization of teenagers and the shaping of their values. Andersen's works cater to

children's psychological acceptance, guide them to travel in a fantastic and beautiful world, and gradually develop their minds and noble sentiments. The infinity and eternity of imagination in fairy tales challenged the adult society because generations of children entered the adult society with their beautiful perspective on life. There are often treasures or monsters in fairy tales, and people with different morality hold different attitudes to them, showing extreme contrasts between greed, evil, selfishness and selflessness, justice, nobleness. The latter's highlight of positive power is divided from the former's destruction of negative power with a clear line. Usually speaking, the latter defeats the former, evil characters are severely punished, and virtuous heroes live a wonderful life. When kindness finally defeats scum, these fairy tales also instills in children a noble morality while satisfying their appreciation. Through this "happy ending" form, literature has always guided children to endure their own trials, believe in kindness, hope for a better future, and thus establish their strong ethical beliefs.

Fairy tales "added layers of Christian morality or proverbial wisdom to enhance didactic value" (Lerer, 2008, p. 213). It helps children to cultivate a taste for nobility, choosing between good and evil. It will not conceal all those evils as well. Only in this way will children learn the morals and ethical values, observe their way of living by following the practice of ultimate good.

### **The reception of Andersen and its impact on Chinese children's literature**

Andersen finds in his fairy tales a way to describe his plain and innocent knowledge about the world and human beings. This plainness and innocence, plus the experience he gets with his lower social status and his passionate pursuit of art, gain him the ability to reach the universal feeling of human beings and the commonness of human nature. His works shine magnificently with the ethical values, transcending time and space with the vivid depiction of universal feelings and problems which humans face. His fairy tales thus become a richer spiritual world of the modern world. The circulation and reception of Andersen's work in China as well as the other parts of the world lie in its ethical values and its everlasting legacy for cultivating the spirit of both young and old.

Andersen is among those international writers whose works have been translated into Chinese. The translation and research of Andersen in China initiated from the May

Fourth movement (1919) in China, continues up until now with special efforts on his themes, styles and values. Among which, Ye Junjian's translation *Complete Works of Anderson's Fairy Tales* (2001) is still the most influential one. Andersen's work is becoming a treasure for both young and old in China with its tremendous influence. Li Hongye argues, "The notion of children's literature emerged after May Fourth movement and only after that children are recognized with independent existence. Under this background, the value of Andersen's fairy tales is acknowledged gradually" (Li, 2005, p. 27). Cao Wenxuan argues, "As one of the origins of Chinese children's literature, Andersen displays such deep impact on Chinese children's literature that reveals itself the hidden or overt characteristics. Andersen is a great debt of gratitude to Chinese children's literature" (Cao, 2005, p. 42). Wang Quangen put forth that "Andersen's popularity lies in his ideology and artistry, his wisdom and morality which agrees well with Chinese demand." (Wang, 2005, p. 1).

"All children's literature is predicated on the idea that children are different... The ambition is that the child should eventually receive a green card and full rights as a citizen in Adulthood. In the meantime, the child is a sometime resident of Neverland and Fairyland" (Kelen & Sundmark, 2013, p. 8). In China, children's literature is bestowed with multiple functions, especially an educational function, for children are viewed as the future and the hope of our future. Stronger children make nations stronger. This practical view is accompanied with transcendence, that is, the perfection or ultimate good of each being. Literature is a way to teach and to cultivate children to become qualified citizens. The inner value or potential of each individual should be awakened to its fullest.

Andersen's work inherits the historical tradition and highlights its close relationship with the social reality and cultural development. Admittedly, Andersen's work has its national colour; but more significantly, it shares the wit of all mankind for what is exchanged between nations. The humanitarian thought and educational nature in Andersen never change with the shift of time and space. The everlasting circulation of Andersen lies in its ethical values and its legacy to the world.



## References

- Andersen, H. C. (2014). *Hans Christian Andersen's Complete Fairy Tales*. (J. Hersholt, Trans.). San Diego: Canterbury Classics.
- Baker, W. & Shang, B. (2015, July 31). Fruitful Collaborations: Ethical Criticism in Chinese Academe. *Times Literary Supplement*, 14-15.
- Cao, W. (2005). The monument of Anderson for Chinese children's literature. *Journal of Hunan University of Science and Engineering*, vol. 26(3).
- Kelen, C. & Sundmark, B. (Eds.). (2013). *The Nation in Children's Literature*. New York: Routledge.
- Lerer, S. (2008). *Children's Literature: A Reader's History from Aesop to Harry Potter*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Levy, M. & Mendlesohn, F. (2016). *Children's Fantasy Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Li, H. (2005). *Chinese Interpretation of Andersen's Fairy Tales*. Beijing: He Ping Press.
- Nie, Z. (2014). *An Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*. Beijing: Peking University Press.
- Nie, Z. (2015). Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism. Special Issue of *Arcadia* 50.1 (2015), 83-101.
- Ross, C. (2015). A Conceptual Map of Ethical Literary Criticism: An Interview with Nie Zhenzhao. *Forum for World Literature Studies* 7.1 (2015), 7-14.
- Rousseau, J.-J. (1978). *Emile*. (L. Pingou, Trans.). Beijing: Commercial Press.
- Wang, Q. (Ed.). (2005). *Andersen Research in China for One Hundred Years*. Beijing: He Ping Press.
- Xu, L. & Jones, A. F. (2011). *The Discovery of the Child: The Problem of the Child in The Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*. Beijing: Peking University Press.
- Ye, J. (Trans.). (2001). *Complete Works of Anderson's Fairy Tales*. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House.