



## Role of Supernatural Elements in 'The Wild Swans' By Hans Christian Andersen: A Critical Analysis

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### Abstract

*Hans Christian Andersen is a very popular short story writer. His short stories have the themes of awe, magic, wonder, exaggeration and sorcery. Andersen's stories are best known as the fairy tales. The word 'Fairy' is associated with imagination which means something imaginary and includes the dues ex machina. The aim of the present paper is to find out the supernatural elements in the short story entitled 'The Wild Swans.' The story deals with a King, Queen, Princess, Prince, step-mother and witchery. It abounds in the use of supernatural elements and creates an atmosphere of the world remote from the real world. The significance of the supernatural elements used in the story is both negative and positive.*

### Introduction

Hans Christian Andersen (1805-1875), is a Danish writer who is best known as a writer of short stories and fairy tales. His short stories are based on the themes of magic, wonder, imagination, prediction, superstition, spell, prophecy, witchery, sorcery, charisma, curse, dues ex machina, wonder, supernatural elements, awe, etc. These all together constitute his short stories or the fairy tales. The word fairy itself explains that something imaginary that has super or magical power.

### The Wild Swans: Analysis

'The Wild Swans' encompasses the theme of imagination, magic and wonderland. It begins with the depiction of a royal King having eleven sons and one gorgeous and beautiful fourteen year old daughter named Eliza. "The eleven brothers were princes and went school with stars on their breasts and swords on their sides; they wrote on golden copy books with diamond pens." Anderson's exaggeration is striking, when he describes Eliza's picture book, as: "Eliza used to sit upon a little glass stool, and had a picture book which had cost half of a kingdom" (Sharma 140). To the misfortune of the children, the King marries another Queen. The new Queen has very bad temper with a lot of wickedness and callousness. All the

members of the court, including the eleven sons and Eliza get invited in the marriage ceremony where the Queen serves the eleven Princes and Eliza with sand-plates instead of the wedding cake. This exposes her ill and crafty nature and brutality towards the innocent children of her husband, the King. Soon, within a week, the Queen drives out Eliza and compels her to live with a poor peasant and his wife, similarly the eleven sons are directed to "leave the castle," (Andersen 133), as early as possible, posing it to be the order of the King. She emphasizes the direction as: "Fly out into the world and get your own living," additionally, to "Fly like great birds without a voice" (Andersen 133).

The exiled Eliza lives with the poor peasant and his wife for a short period, where "she would whisper to the roses, 'who is more beautiful than you ?' And the roses would shake their heads and say, 'Elise,' and similarly "the wind would rustle the leaves and say to the book, 'Who is more pious than you ? And the hymn book would answer, 'Elise'" (Sharma 141). This shows the beauty and the purity of the Princess. Meanwhile her brothers turned in to the eleven magnificent wild swans. The wild swans flew out of the palace windows far over the garden and into the forest. The



King remembers and misses his daughter a lot. The King decided reunite with by allowing his daughter to enter the castle on her fifteenth birthday. When the Queen comes to know this fact, her crooked mind begins to work against the arriving of the Princess because she knew that once the King sees her beautiful daughter, and he will never allow her remain away from him anymore and she will remain in the castle forever.

In the edition of L.R. Sharma, "The Wild Swans." Favourite Fairy Tales: Hans Christian Andersen, the name of the Princess occurs as Elise. The Queen plays a trick to keep the Princess away from his father. At the arrival of Elise in the castle, the Queen, out of jealousy, acts as a sorcerer, as the following:

She took three toads with her and kissed them and said to one, 'When Elise comes to the bath settle thou upon her head that she may become dull and sleepy like thee.' 'Settle thou upon her forehead,' said she to another, 'and let her become ugly like thee, so that her father may not know her again.' And 'Do thou place thyself upon her bosom,' whispered she to the third, 'that her heart may become evil, and a torment to herself.' She then put the toads into the clear water, which immediately turned green. (Sharma 141)

Further, the magical effect on the toads is presented when Eliza dips her head into the water and the toads stick to her head and bosom without her notice "and when she rose up three poppies were seen swimming on the water. Had not the animals be poisonous and kissed by a witch, they would have been changed into roses because they had rested on Elise's head and heart" (Sharma 142).

When the effect of the magic was found weak on Elise, the Queen "rubbed walnut juice all over the maiden's skin so that it became quite swarthy, smeared a nasty salve over her lovely face, and entangled her long thick hair, till it was impossible to recognize the beautiful Elise" (Sharma 142).

When Elise appears before the King, he refuses to accept her as her daughter, being black and ugly. The plot of the Queen was successful and the King's reaction was true to her expectation. "When her father saw her, he was shocked, and said she could not be his daughter" (Sharma 142). Abandoning the castle, the next day Eliza reaches to a beautiful forest, where she sees golden mist and rays, woods and sea, clear beautiful lake and golden sands. She also finds in the clear water that every leaf on the tree reflected into it and got mesmerized. Further, the magical effect is presented strongly as: "when Elise touched one of the branches hanging over her, bright insects fell down upon her like falling stars" (Sharma 142). She watches her reflection in the clean water, she finds her face to be so ugly that she gets frightened. Therefore she makes her mind to have a bath and clean her face. "So she took off her clothes, stepped into the fresh water and bathed herself, and in the whole world there was not a king's daughter more beautiful than she then appeared" (Sharma 143).

Elise kept on thinking about her brothers, and at the sun set, "the Swans feathers fell off, and beside her stood eleven handsome Princes, her brothers. She uttered a loud cry, for although they were very much changed, Elise knew and felt they must be her brothers and the Princes were very happy to their sister, now grown so tall and so beautiful!" (Sharma 145). They tell her that in the day they turn into the swans and in the nightfall, they say: ". . . we appear again in our human form" (Sharma 145).

To release her brothers from the effect, the Princess ponders and prays to God continuously. While going to sleep, Elise decides to dream for the remedy and in her dream "it appeared to her that she was flying up high in the air towards the castle of the fairy Morgana. The fairy came forward to meet her, radiant and beautiful, and yet she thought she looked like the old woman who had given her berries in the forest and told her of the Swans with golden crowns"



(Sharma 149). They had a conversation in which the fairy tells her the way she could release her brothers from the spell, but the method she told to her was very difficult. The fairy shows some stinging nettle sticks to Elise which were not of ordinary nature but had special powers. She further informs her that special nettle only grew either in the caves or in the graves of the churchyards. Later on, she directs Elise to pick and collect the nettles and crush them into yarn and weave the flax into eleven shirts with full sleeves and when she finds the eleven swans, to throw them on them. This act of her will definitely free her brothers from the magic spell that had turned them into the swans. The other condition is rather more difficult and the fairy says as: "But mark this: from the moment that you begin your work till it is completed, even should it occupy you for years, you must not speak a word. The first syllable that escapes your lips will fall like a dagger into the hearts of your brothers. On your tongue depend their lives" (Sharma 150).

Elise begins doing her task but the king, a very handsome man, was on a visit to the forest and finds Elise with a surprise, and mesmerized with her beauty offers her to live in the palace with all comforts. But, as she did not speak a single word because of the condition put by the fairy. He takes her to his palace. Afterwards, he declares to marry her and make her the queen of the land. She becomes the queen but did not abandon her task. She went to the graveyard in the nights and gathered the stinging nettles, but one night when she went to the churchyard, the Archbishop sees her and he takes her to be a witch, "who had, by her magic, won the hearts of the King" (Sharma 153).

Later on, the King was informed by the Archbishop that the Queen visited the graveyard every night, although the King did not believe this at first, he was made to follow her in the nights. Enraged, the King declares that the public would decide the punishment for her, and the public

"condemned her to be burnt." She was taken to the prison and was tortured with "shameful songs." During the whole period she completed ten shirts with long sleeves and now she was running short of the yarn. But fortunately some "little mice ran busily about and dragged the nettles to her feet wishing to help her; and a thrush perched on the iron bars of the window and sang all night as merrily as she could that she might not lose courage"(Sharma 154). But in the locker too, she continues with her task and weaves the eleventh shirt. She knew that the next morning is the day for the judgment. While Elise was taken from the locker, a huge crowd gathered and shouted insulting words. But in the cart, she continuous weaving of the eleventh shirt. The eleven swan brothers "came flying towards the cart, settled all around her, and flapped their wings. The crowd gave way in terror" (Sharma 155). This was taken to be the sign of her innocence.

But when she was about to leave the cart, she throws all the eleven shirts on the swans without uttering a word, and the swans turned into the eleven Princes, freed from the effect of the spell. The eleven Princes narrate the real story to the King establishing her innocence. Now Elise could also speak and says that she was not witch and she was innocence. At this revelation, the King understands the whole scene and the crowd turned into a procession filled with joy while returning to the palace. In this way the story ends with a happy note.

Thus we encounter so many situations where the magical element is introduced, and the supernatural power is at work. Hans Christian Andersen is, no doubt, an author with the great flight of imagination.

#### Reference

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