

# **The Ugly Ducking, Hans Christian Andersen**

## **A Story of Transformation**

### **Introduction**

*The Ugly Duckling* is a small story that offers universal hope to the disenfranchised. Here, a misfit, rejected by family and society, makes the microcosmic journey of all who seek self-actualization. To better understand the significance of the transformation, from ugly to beautiful, it is important to view the themes against the backdrop of Andersen's life.

### **Andersen's Life Influences**

Hans Christian Andersen was clearly a product of the nineteenth century, a period of broad-sweeping changes in both world and national views, when tenets of biology, eugenics, and race became subjects of public discourse. He was born into poverty in 1805 in the old provincial Danish town of Odense. The son of a cobbler who loved books and taught himself and his son to read, Andersen grew up hearing his father say that he (the father) was of aristocratic origin. Andersen's mother worked as a washerwoman. Though uneducated and superstitious, she introduced Andersen to folklore.

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He was also greatly influenced by his grandmother, a grounds person at Odense Hospital, a local workhouse. Andersen spent a great deal of time there "listening to elderly, female inmates who repeated old stories and the traditional folk tales of Denmark." These made a deep and lasting impression.



At age eleven, Andersen's life was seriously disrupted when his father died, and the family became even more destitute. He was forced to go to work. For a short time, he apprenticed to a weaver and a tailor, and also worked at a tobacco factory. At the age of fourteen, he fled to Copenhagen to find his future success in becoming associated with the Royal Theater.

One of the directors of the Royal Theater, an influential government official, provided Andersen the means to be educated and eventually gain admission to Copenhagen University. These educational experiences broadened Andersen's perspective and put him in touch with the dramatic social changes of his day. Throughout the western world, the bourgeois class was establishing itself and replacing feudal systems. It might be said that later

in life, Andersen became living proof of the social mobility made possible by the bourgeois democracy.

After his school years, Anderson began writing in earnest. Having broken with his family and social class but not yet a member of the moneyed class, Andersen understood that he could realize his potential and gain greater social standing only through the world of art, the only outlet the times provided. But the fight for survival continued, and the bitterness about being a supplicant, dependent on the good will of others, emerged. This duality drove Anderson to constantly work at proving his value—at demonstrating he was destined to belong to the socially elite.

Throughout his life, from his own perspective and despite his fame as a writer, Andersen was the dominated subject within the dominant social circles. He never felt himself fully accepted by any group. He lived as an outsider, a loner, unable to enjoy the deep attachments and obvious social identification that a wife and family would have bestowed.

Andersen's literary fame grew rapidly from the mid-1830s when his novels became widely accepted in Germany. However, from 1839 onwards, it was his fairy tales that earned him acclaim until his death in 1875. Imbedded in the straightforward narrative easily understood by children, are subtler and deeper meanings to which adults respond. It is to these symbols and meanings that are now applied to *The Ugly Duckling*.

## Symbolic Analysis of *The Ugly Duckling*

From the very first paragraph, story symbols evoking multiple meanings are plentiful. The opening paragraph describing the long golden days of summer, sweet air, tall corn and freshly-cut hay leads the



reader to a pastoral/earth setting, a time of fullness and ripening, a time of maturation after quickening.

But beyond the open sunlight lie the shaded deeps (cool lakes of the unconscious where new life can be born). Near the lake shore, storks (symbols of fertility and birth) wade. Birds (symbols of freedom that fly with new hopes and dreams of the future) chatter overhead.

Even manmade objects like the old mansion surrounded by a moat are contained and defined by the watery unconscious. Along the stone walls of the mansion, “huge burdock plants with leaves as big as platters grow thick and tall. Beneath their leaves it was like a secret room.” (It is interesting to note that burdock leaves are usually heart-shaped near the bottom of the plant and egg-shaped at the top.) In this womb-like place, recreating the ancient mysteries, the mother duck waits for her eggs to hatch, each egg enfolding its own primeval, cosmic universe.

After the ducklings begin hatching, “the mother let them look as much as they liked, for green is good for the eyes.” (Through the connection with the green, fertile earth, all living things are made



whole, and life is supported.)

The mother duck must still sit on the nest to hatch the last and largest egg. An older duck (crone/elder/shaman) cautions the mother duck that the egg could be a turkey egg (note the quality of Trickster), clearly inferior in the animal hierarchy. The mother duck was encouraged to make sure that the product of this larger egg could swim (navigate the world emotionally).

When the Ugly Duckling hatched, he (advisedly a “he” in this case) was gray, not a golden yellow like the other ducklings. This gray duckling was suspect, “in the gray zone,” not fully accepted, but not yet rejected, while the yellow ducklings, the color of sun and summer and life, were perceived as the “real ducklings.”

After a swim in the moat (a journey of initiation), the mother duck cautions the ducklings to beware of the “mean old cat” living the barnyard. The cat represents the feminine aspects of the personality, the unexplored unconscious. It is interesting to note that after the ducklings had proven themselves by *performing* in the moat (masculine activity), they were now being cautioned to pay attention to the feminine principle, the aspect of *being*. They could even find the feminine to be dangerous.

The exhortation to pay attention to appearances is primary. The mother duck equates her self-worth to the perceived value that others place on her “well-bred ducklings” and, commensurately, on her success as a mother. She instructs them to keep their toes “turned out properly” (be outward turning and explore).



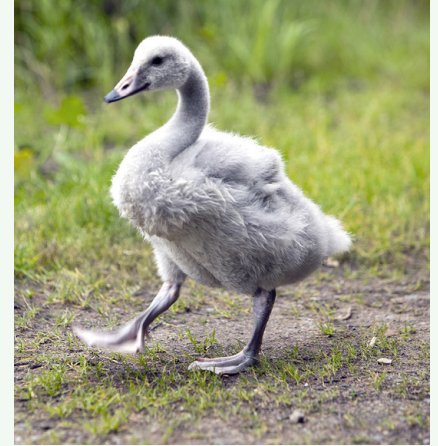
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of her and treat her with respect.” (The ducklings were to be presented to their new tribe.)

Red is the color of blood, of kinship and, in some cultures, of initiation. More directly, in the Chinese culture, red is the color of good fortune and abundance. (By honoring the duck of greater social standing, honor and riches might also be conferred on the mother duck and her ducklings.)

It was the old duck who commented on what a nice family the mother duckling had, but notably excluded the Ugly Duckling from this evaluation. She even went so far as to say “too bad you can’t start over again with him.” (Abundance will not come to the Ugly Duckling in his current form.)

On that first day, the barnyard animals’ abuse of the Ugly Duckling began. (The barnyard can be



Particularly evocative is her social instruction to bow to the respected older female duck who is of Chinese heritage (ancient wisdom). She is also addressed as “Your Grace,” a designation of nobility. The mother duck notes that the older duck has a bit of red cloth on her leg so that everyone would “take notice

equated to the town square, the gathering place of the lower classes where justice was dispensed.) Though the cat never made an appearance, the chickens and ducklings shouted that “The cat should grab you,” an indication that they wanted some supernatural force to intervene in the destruction/transformation of the Ugly Duckling.

Early one morning (at the beginning of his quest), the Ugly Duckling ran away. Almost immediately, he encountered animals in the wild and assumed they would run/fly away because he was so ugly. His mental map impelling his actions had to be tested in the wild (the subconscious) to gain the truth of his own inner map. Thus, he began a hero’s journey, with a hero’s task of encountering and overcoming his demons.



He first met wild birds who flew away. (His hopes, his dreams had changed.) Next, he met wild ducks who thought him strange and, curiously, said that he could remain in the marsh as long as he didn’t marry into their family. (This is the psychological distancing device used to guard and protect the status quo and keep the tribe intact.)

One morning, he met a pair of young, wild geese who invited him to join them on their side of the marsh. They acknowledged his ugliness (differences), but were willing to include him in their community. (Through younger, less stultified beings, the order of the status quo begins to weaken, and messages from the unconscious arise. Hints are given to what is possible.)

Unfortunately, just as the clues are evidenced, a hunter shoots the wild geese as they fly from the rushes. (So, too, are many new ideas aggressively gunned down when they land in the sights of the guns of established thinking and tried-and-true systems like the proverbial old-boys’ network.)

When a huge dog, “its eyes gleaming horribly,” came upon the Ugly Duckling and pushed its big nose right into the duckling’s face before walking on, the Ugly Duckling decided to leave the swamp.



(In ancient Babylon, the goddess of Fate is represented by a dog, and often, gods accompanying traveling goddesses took the forms of dogs. The dog is a sign of protection and power.) It is interesting that the dog’s appearance precipitated the Ugly Duckling’s hurrying out of relatively known safety to the truly unknown.

Having left the marsh (the world between solid land and watery depths), the Ugly Duckling came to a “sad-looking little farmhouse” which housed an old woman, a cat, and a hen. Not seeing well, the old woman thought that the duckling was a hen and put him on a nest in hope of his laying eggs. (Many will not see who we



really are.) After a period of time, “the duckling sat in the corner feeling very, very sad. (His feelings began to match the sad environment.) Thoughts of fresh air and sunshine came to his mind, and he was filled with an extraordinary longing to swim” (to return to his true nature).

When he mentioned this to the hen and cat, they were scornful. They encouraged him to be grateful for “a warm room and pleasant company.” But the Ugly Duckling left the sure comforts of the poor farmhouse (where he would have been safe but unrealized), and set out on his own path. (The hero Ugly Duckling could not be seduced from his quest.) He came to a beautiful pond (an enclosed pool of emotional content, where he could explore his identity.) He tried swimming near the other ducks, but they turned away. (The journey to self-realization is a solitary one.)

Winter (the period of frozen time and inward space, the dark night of the soul) was coming. A raven (the prophetic bird of death) squawked. (The hero was about to go through the transformative death to self.) One evening, he saw a flock of swans fly overhead, and though he did not know what they were, he called out to them and felt strangely excited. (His intuition and his instincts were waking up, and he was beginning to know himself differently.) His own voice was so loud and so shrill, it frightened him. (He was afraid of embracing this new voice/identity that was emerging.)

Then the Ugly Duckling dived to the bottom of the pond (the unconscious) and “when he came up again, he was even more excited than before.” (He was willing to engage deeply for only a moment, but a moment was enough to fire his imagination and keep him alive during the upcoming wintry trial. It gave him a hint to his most secret, and his truest identity.)

Winter came. “The duckling had to swim round and round in the water to keep it from freezing right up. But every night the pool where he swam grew smaller and smaller.” (Self-actualization is not gained through a mental process. Though our minds go “round and round,” transformation happens only when the circuitous thoughts get smaller and smaller, as we tire of the mind’s game and let it stop.) “At

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last he froze fast into the pond.” (We surrender to our fate, the outward, seemingly constricting construct arising from our deepest unconscious.)

A peasant (someone of the land) found the duckling, “broke up the ice with his wooden clog” (a strong, sturdy shoe indicating that the



duckling was headed in a new direction) and carried the little duckling home to his wife (the feminine principle accessed fully only when we allow ourselves to be carried along).

The peasant’s children who wanted to play with him made the Ugly Duckling “afraid they might

hurt him and he fluttered away.” (Though not necessarily malignant, we tend to be afraid of the primal, previously-unknown forces that present themselves, and flee from them emotionally lest we be harmed.) The duckling flew into the milk (the substance of creation), butter (a source of richness and abundance), and flour (a distillation of earth energy).

Finally, he darted out of the open door (means of escape from our darkest parts) and “lay exhausted in the new-fallen snow.” (Having courage to face his inner genius—just as frightening as facing his outer demons—the duckling comes to the neutral place of inner stasis where deep mystery allows transformation to happen.) He drags himself to the reeds at the edge of the frozen pond (suspended between two worlds where his mind no longer works) and survives the winter.



When spring came (the time of rebirth, renewal and igniting of the light), the duckling “woke to find the sky bright and the larks (harbingers of new life) singing.” He found that his wings were stronger and carried him swiftly away. (He objectified this new-found strength, not yet realizing it was an awakened part of him.)

The duckling found himself in a large garden (a place of spiritual growth and healing, renewal of energy and focus) where “apple trees blossomed (death and rebirth, the fruit of the Tree of Life) and sweet-smelling lilacs (rich, perfumed, sensory conveyors of new life and tantalizing possibilities) dangle their long branches over the waters of a lake.” (Larger than his former pond, the Ugly Duckling now claims a larger space for himself.)

“Right ahead of him, out of the leafy shadows, came three beautiful white swans.” (Emerging from the dark of the mysterious unconscious into the light of day, the duckling sees his desire embodied.) He felt a strange sadness (mourning and letting go of the hero’s journey space) and determined to be with them “even though they will peck me to death because I am so ugly.” Though he feared personal harm and rejection (as he was living in his old paradigm), he preferred death to winter’s isolation or a return to his former life. (Once transformation is embraced, there is no turning back.)

When the duckling bowed his head to the water, he saw his reflection (the outward manifestation of the inner transformation that had taken place in the darkness of his solitary winter.) For the first time, he was finally able to see himself for who he truly had become. “It did not matter that he was born in a duck’s nest. He was hatched from a swan’s egg!”



This time, the duckling did not go ‘round and ‘round in his head in a fruitless mental exercise.

Instead, “the three lovely swans circled round and round and stroked him gently with their beaks.” (He made the transition from his head to his opened heart. For this, he was rewarded.)

“Some little children (reflections of his newly-found positive ego, and he was not afraid of them as he had been of the peasant’s children) came into the garden (the protected space) and threw bits of bread (the foundational nourishment of life. Note that three ingredients that previously he had fled from in fear—milk, butter and flour—now, through the fires of his transformation, had become bread, something that could sustain him.) The outer response (to his inward self-acceptance) came from the smallest child. “Look! A new swan! The new one is the prettiest one of all.”

The old swans (those who had made a similar journey) bowed their heads in agreement. (Instead of his bowing his head to the old barnyard duck, these elegant creatures were now bowing to him.) “This made the duckling feel quite shy, and he tucked his head under his wing. (Initially, we are not always comfortable with the changes that transformation brings and sometimes hide out.)



“His heart filled with joy, and he ruffled his feathers and raised his slender neck, for he had never dreamed of so much happiness when he was an ugly duckling.” Having once been bitten in the neck by the chickens, and receiving the necessary wound that initiated his quest, the duckling now stretches his elegant neck and claims his new swan self-identity. This hero’s journey ends.)

## Autobiographical Parallels to Andersen’s Life

Andersen fled from his home to escape poverty and social status. Though born in the slums, Andersen always believed himself to be misplaced, an unacknowledged aristocrat, a beautiful swan. He suffered at the hands of the “barnyard animals,” those lesser childhood beings who wounded him with their taunts about his appearance and his mannerisms. Though the trappings changed and he was later given patronage by a wealthy family, Andersen was always out to prove to others (and to remind himself) that he really had the right, despite his poor birth circumstances, to “live in the large garden” of his life. He always wanted “the little people” to exclaim at his talent and honor him for his aristocratic spirit.

Little mention is made of Andersen’s mother in his many biographical sketches, though his father and grandmother play prominently. In this tale, the mother duckling is resigned to his oddness and gives the duckling a brief chance to fit into the family. But she quickly aligns with public opinion when family and neighbors turn against the Ugly Duckling. Though not explicitly stated, one wonders how much of this treatment is autobiographical. Andersen’s family and friends could not have been happy to have been



so deliberately left behind in poverty. The tale even describes the Ugly Duckling's family as "cruel."

The poultry-yard scene is interesting. Clearly, the mother duck sees herself and her family as more distinguished than the chickens, roosters, and geese, but not as distinguished as the elder China duck. Andersen shows his bias here for hierarchy—the titled, the pedigreed—status he obviously lacks. He doesn't condemn his former social class, but sought identification with the power establishment. He was not particularly interested in changing the system, but in changing himself to fit into the system. This is further evidenced in the instructions that the mother duck gives before the first barnyard foray when she tells her ducklings that the world is a place of squabbling and snapping. She implies that it is necessary to accept the world the way it is. The goal is not to try to change the world, but to hurry past any frays that are encountered and survive by looking good.

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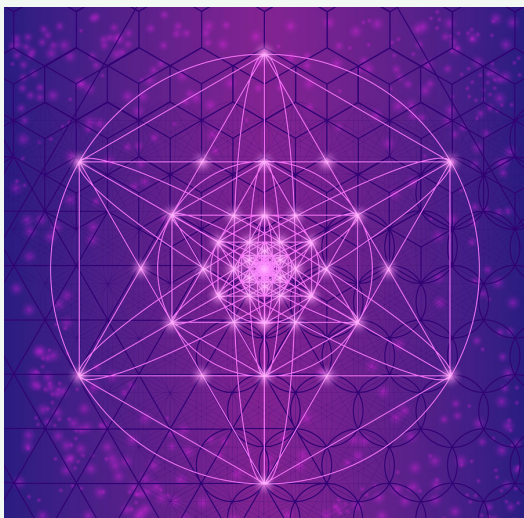
Going out into the world and meeting with other creatures who rejected the Ugly Duckling, who tried to use him or who offered him help. have probable parallels to Andersen's international travels. In seeking out the literati of his time, Andersen seemed to be seeking out "those of his own kind." He did not return to his birth home, but, instead, searched for outward validation of self-worth.

Like the Ugly Duckling, Andersen was slow to see himself as a member of the company of swans. The ending of *The Ugly Duckling* is like Anderson's cry for the world's accreditation. He wants endless confirmation that despite his poor beginnings, he had become a true swan—and not just a beautiful swan—but the best of them all.

The story of *The Ugly Duckling* viewed from the perspective of Andersen's life is a tale of one who achieved his dream, but who then spent a lifetime trying to believe it.

## **Alchemical Transformation Themes in *The Ugly Duckling***

The number three is frequently repeated in the story. The duckling left the protection of the marsh on the third day. Three dwelled in the small farmhouse (old woman, cat and hen.) The duckling flew in panic from three household ingredients (milk, butter, and flour). Some character identification can be made with the Maiden/Mother/Crone, the Triple Goddess archetype, as the reader watches the duckling from hatching to maturity.



After the winter, the Ugly Duckling was surrounded by three swans. His transformation occurred in the third season. Three is the number of completion, of perfection, the number of integrated divinity.

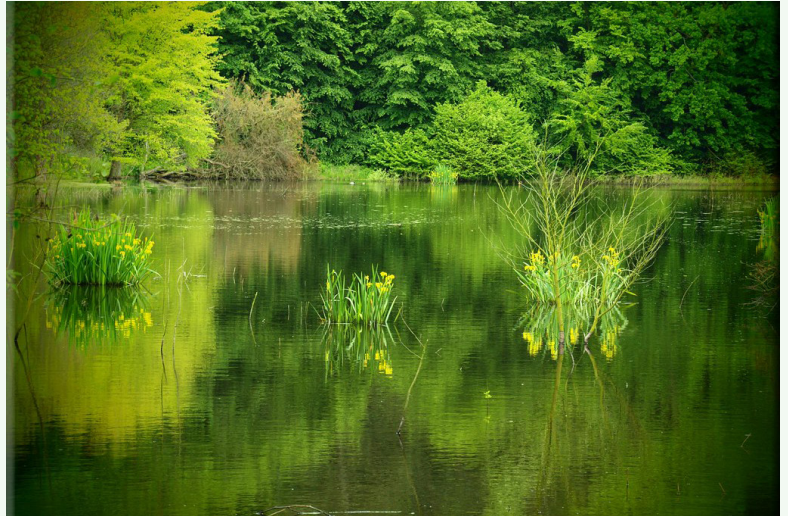
Three also mirrors the death-resurrection cycle found in many religions and traditions. It is also embodied in the three alchemical phases of transformation where the crude *prima*



*material* is transformed into gold, the three-fold alchemical process progressing from the *egredo*, the Latin word for the blackness of the material when subjected to fire through the *albedo*, the white substance becoming silver when washed, to the *rubedo* (the red) which through further heating turns into gold.

Applied to self-transformation, the *egredo* signifies the first clear awareness of the unconscious, when things begin to look remote and vague as through moonlight. Since the feminine rules the moon, this black time—the dark of the moon—indicates receptivity towards the unconscious. Coming to terms with the inner shadow, is the hard work of an alchemical transformation, eventually leading to the *albedo* the first transformation. Simple heating changes the *albedo* to the *rubedo*, ruled by the sun and heralding a new state of consciousness.

In *The Ugly Duckling*, the *egredo* is the period during the darkness of the marsh and the subsequent “walkabout” of experience. The *albedo* is the time of frozen white winter, and the *rubedo* is the rush of blood, the emergence of sun in the return of spring, the season of self-realization and transformation.



## Conclusion

*The Ugly Duckling* is a tale for everyone, a tale for those who wish to dive deeply into the realm of the unconscious—a story of transformation, of liberation, of rebirth. Written by a man caught between two worlds, two times, it reveals valuable insights for this time, this history, where divisions are so evident.

Life *is* the hero's journey—the path towards self-realization. It's critical to stop blaming mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, or life in general for personal difficulties. If change is called for, make it. Transformation is, after all, all about willingness and choice. Learn from the Ugly Duckling's journey how to begin your own alchemical process and, through hard work, discover the inner gold waiting to be revealed.

## Note

*This is a significantly shortened article edited from the original researched and written for a Storytelling Certification course. It was later published in the annual Children's Folklore Review, Volume 26, 2003-2004. Follow this [link](#) to read the full article.*