



The longevity dividend through inanimate objects in the tales of Hans Christian Andersen

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It is unfortunate that the tales of Hans Christian Andersen (1805–1875) seem to have been relegated in modern times almost solely to the rubric of children’s literature. Most collections available in book stores focus on those best known as fairy tales for children, a relatively small selection of his 212 tales https://andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/register/esamling_e.html. Although fairy tales for children have a hugely important place in our understanding of the human psyche and can prepare children for the complexities of life, as eloquently described by the psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim [1], the tales of Andersen represent a very different form of literature. Indeed, he dropped the qualifier ‘for children’ from the titles of his collections of tales at a very early stage of his literary career in 1841.

Widely and enthusiastically read across the world by adults in the nineteenth century, for modern readers they still represent an extraordinary treasure trove of highly original, humorous and wise insights into life and human nature. Taking the mantle of the fairy tale as a starting point, Andersen diverged from the great collectors of folk fairy tales such as the Grimm brothers and Charles Perrault in writing original works of fiction rather than updating existing folklore. Now regarded as a key originator of fantasy literature, his stories are remarkably modern in upturning conventions, and include modern innovations such as undersea telegraph wires (*In a Thousand Years*), diving bells and world fairs (*The Dryad*), aeronautical balloons (*The Bottle Neck*) and trains (*The Ice Maiden*), as well as often reflecting the reality in life that virtue is not always recognised or rewarded. Their character is marked by irony, gentle humour, a straight-faced

attitude to the fantastical elements, wisdom and a healthy dose of paradox, and have been identified as ideal material for exploring medical humanities and narrative medicine [2].

A particularly fascinating aspect of Andersen’s work is how the protagonists in the tales belong to an unprecedentedly large range of forms, not just humans but also mythical beings, plants, animals, insects and birds, and most intriguingly, inanimate objects, such as darning needle (*The Darning Needle*), a shirt collar (*The Shirt Collar*), and a money box (*The Money Box*). This latter grouping provides a unique portal to perceptive insights into the meaning of ageing, and in particular into what is the meaning of later life after the period generally considered to be the productive working life. It is increasingly recognised that geriatricians need to develop a greater sense of how our mission must align more closely with the priorities of older people, and in particular to value the richness and significance of our gain in life span, the longevity dividend [3].

Common to these tales is the sense of re-evaluating positively the possibilities of life at age-sensitive transitions, and in particular parallels to retirement. This is seen when each of the objects have been apparently removed from the economy from which they were intended: the positive outcomes provide a potent rejoinder to the failure model of ageing [4]. A central aspect of the refreshing of value for the objects involves their engagement with the past, specifically, with the past as memory, paralleling the power of the life course review in making sense of life, as described by Robert N Butler [5]. The ultimate value of the objects hinges on the degree of “self-knowledge” they are able to achieve through the course of the narratives of memory, in effect generating the pathway to self-actualisation and authenticity at the pinnacle of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.

In *The Old Street Lamp* (1847), an old street lamp is reaching the last night of his working life, and the tale catches not only the anxiety at this life transition, but also

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the process of attaining the transcendent possibilities of later life. An effervescently anthropomorphic range of characters—a herring head, a rotting piece of wood, and a glow worm—assemble to critique and undermine his role, analogous to the ageist discourse on later life so prevalent in society. However, through the intercession of the personalities of a shooting star, the wind and a drop of water, the lamp senses a range of possibilities for his future life. The watchman who had maintained him was also being pensioned off, and is granted the old lamp which he brings home to his wife. The final scenes portray not only active but adapted ageing of the triad, but the opportunities for synergy that older people can bring together by drawing on not only shared experiences but ongoing future dreams and aspirations.

A different perspective on ageing is found in *The Old Grave-Stone* (1852), centring on an apparently neglected tombstone in a garden. The exposition of its history relies on the importance of older people as a repository of culture, memory and intergenerational transfer. The old man in the house brings the story to life arising from his memory as a child of the funerals of the old couple, and vitality and energy of their life force. This key transmission is then replicated by the child in the room who is captivated by the change in a stone that had always appeared to him “so dull and flat, but which lay there now like a great leaf out of a book of history”, and through him “the obliterated inscription on the old, weather-beaten grave-stone goes forth to future generations in clear, golden characters.”

Among the very many other possible tales illustrative of the richness and complexity of later life, *The Old House* (1847) shines a light on the richness of ageing, both of the old house and the old man who lived in it, through the eyes of a young boy. It is also a potent rebuttal of popular misperceptions of loneliness among older people [6]. Although those outside considered the old man to be lonely, it is clear from the tale that he was living an enriched internal life.

A key attraction of exploring ageing in these tales is the intertwining of metaphor, memory and in particular

materiality [4]. There is an added resonance and depth from the very real sensation of antiquity and ageing in the objects that amplifies the anthropomorphic allegory—we gain an almost haptic sense as we read and reflect of the eroded gravestone, the worn but functional lamp, and lustrous, but worn house standing out from its new neighbours.

If geriatricians and trainees can allow themselves to escape from the notion of Hans Christian Andersen as purely a writer of children’s tales and embrace his work as the product of a sophisticated, witty and wise modern author, they will discover a treasure trove of material to better understand the longevity dividend.

Declarations

Conflict of interest I declare no conflict of interest.

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