“We All Need Some Kind of Fairy Tale”: Reading H.C. Andersen and L.M. Montgomery in Tumultuous Times

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In this essay, we offer a personal perspective as Ukrainian scholars on how H.C. Andersen’s “The Snow Queen” and L.M. Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables* can be read and interpreted in times of war. As we turn to our favourite stories for respite, we explore the universality of their themes, images, and motifs along with their potential to generate new meanings.

“I named that cherry-tree outside my bedroom

window this morning. I called it Snow Queen because

it was so white. Of course, it won’t always be in

blossom, but one can imagine that it is, can’t one?”

—L.M. Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gables*

When thinking about the functions that fairy tales perform in our lives today, one’s mind may immediately jump toward the obvious: conveying moral, social, and/or historical lessons via allegorical narratives; reflecting the distinctiveness of different cultures; and reinforcing universal truths, problems, and values to which people all over the world can relate. Born thousands of years ago, ancient fairy tale creators, such as L.M. Montgomery’s Emily Byrd Starr, would have “sat in the circle around the fires of the tribe and enchanted [their] listeners.”[1] Such communal storytelling practices, which date back as far as the dawn of human language and communication, created—and still create—an intimate psychological bond between listeners and speakers, while also contributing to the preservation, further development, and proliferation of stories.

Writing this essay from the war-torn, anguish-filled vortex that is our country right now, we have been thinking about the aspects of fairy tales that may be called therapeutic in their effect on readers and/or listeners: namely, their power to grant us respite from hardship and suffering in our daily lives and to reinforce the importance of creative imagination as a tool to combat despair. Thrown into a situation that is characterized by increased volatility and uncertainty, we have been turning to familiar stories for comfort—sharing and discussing them with our students, learning to accept and understand each other’s complex emotions, and seeking similarities between fictional characters’ quests and our own. Narrating problematic experiences can help individuals work through their emotions and reinscribe traumatic memories so as to diminish their negative impact on the psyche.

2 For us, we have felt that even more vividly as we try to continue with our work as literary scholars in the middle of a full-scale war.

In Ukraine, Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales have enjoyed ongoing popularity since the early 2000s. While most adult readers would remember "The Snow Queen" as presented to them in a heavily abridged Soviet version, with all of the religious symbols and connotations meticulously edited out, new translations made during Ukraine's independence3 signified a return to the author's original intent and a desire to create more accurate Ukrainian translations. Perhaps the best-known Ukrainian edition of "The Snow Queen" is the version published in 2000 by publishing house "A-ba-ba-ha-la-ma-ha." It was translated by Oksana Ivanenko and illustrated by award-winning artist Vladyslav Yerko.4 The book was an immediate success; in fact, Yerko's illustrations became so popular that publishers in many different countries expressed an interest in producing reprints of this edition. In the following years, "The Snow Queen" with Yerko's illustrations came out in the US, Hungary, Poland, the UK, Norway, Greece, South Korea, Brazil, and China (among others). Even today, Andersen's story does not seem to have diminished in popularity among Ukrainian readers. Most recently, it was adapted to be an interactive iPad book5—where readers could look into the hobgoblin's distorting mirror, control the snowstorm by blowing on the screen, and even warm up Kay through the touch of their hands.

In light of recent events, however, Andersen's metaphors have acquired new meanings for us here in Ukraine—meanings that hit perhaps a little too close to home. Thinking about the demonic mirror that distorts everything it happens to reflect, we cannot help but think about how confusing, manipulative, and downright untrue the representations of Ukraine and Ukrainians appear in Russian media.6 It is not by chance that the Russia-Ukraine war has often been referred to as the "war of narratives" or "information war"7 in various media outlets. For it is Russian propaganda (and the overwhelming readiness of the Russian audience to trust the narratives broadcast via state-controlled media) that has largely fuelled the blind, ignorant anger and violence inflicted by Russian soldiers upon our motherland. In this context, we are reminded of the passage in "The Snow Queen" describing the effects of a mirror that makes everything look appalling, regardless of how beautiful it may be:

> Every good and pretty thing reflected in [this mirror] shrank away to almost nothing. … The most beautiful landscapes reflected in it looked like boiled spinach, and the best people became hideous, or else they were upside down and had no bodies. … The demon thought this immensely amusing. If a good thought passed through any one's mind, it turned to a grin in the mirror, and this caused real delight to the demon.8

The fact that the most absurd stories about Ukraine and Ukrainians can be crafted and disseminated so easily, with no requirement to display any kind of proof and with no regard for possible contradictions between these stories, contributes to a narrative space where "nothing is true and everything is possible";9 hence, the hobgoblins can reign supreme in this wicked realm, lurching in the narrative cobweb created by their never-ending distortion, deception, and doom.

Of course, we wish we never had the opportunity to read Andersen and Montgomery through the lens of war. But as we were rereading *Anne of Green Gables* in preparation for the 2022 L.M. Montgomery Institute's international conference, we realized that Anne, too, has a tendency to turn to books and stories in times of personal hardship. Looking at her reflection in Mrs. Thomas's bookcase, Anne treats its glass door as a portal into a land unknown—into a long-lost world of hope and dream, "a wonderful place, all flowers and sunshine and fairies."10 In this world, ideas and stories are just as powerful as actions undertaken in the real world. And as she attaches fairy tale images, metaphors, and motifs to her everyday happenings, Anne begins to create a reality of her own—one infused with the anticipation (and active creation) of something magical, romantic, and

divinely beautiful.

Perhaps one of the most vivid images in *Anne of Green Gables* is the image of a blossoming cherry tree, promptly christened by Anne "the Snow Queen" at the beginning of the novel. This name may be viewed both as an allusion and a metaphor that creates a connection between "a cherry-tree in full bloom outside of her window" and the fantasy character Snow Queen from Andersen's fairy tale of the same name. What prompts such a connection? First is the colour—white or "snow-white."[11] Second are the shape and the lightness of cherry blossoms, which are similar in their appearance to snowflakes or to Snow Queen's dazzling attire. Third is beauty, as the Snow Queen outside Anne's window prompts her to marvel at the tree's loveliness and charm (similarly to Andersen's Snow Queen who enchants Kay with her beauty upon her very first appearance). Montgomery's style—here and elsewhere—is characterized by reimagining well-known literary characters, symbols, plots, and ideas, turning them upside down, and endowing them with new meanings. So it is no wonder the Snow Queen in *Anne of Green Gables* appears markedly different from the image originally created by the Danish Andersen. In the original fairy tale, the Snow Queen symbolizes absolute evil and cold. She is based on the Scandinavian myth about the Ice Maiden, which has in turn been derived from the image of *Skaði* (pronounced "Ska-dee" or "Ska-thee")—the heroine of Scandinavian folklore and mythology, the ice giant, the patron saint of hunters and travellers. Reading Skaði as a winter huntress, we can trace the origins of this Old Norse myth in two of Andersen's fairy tales: "The Snow Queen" (1844) and "The Ice Maiden" (1861). At the heart of both versions is the "frosty kiss" motif—the kiss of an icy lady who makes a boy's heart freeze and thereby becomes able to capture him.

While Andersen was criticized quite heavily by his contemporaries for his whimsical, lively style that was closer to oral narrative than to the orderly discourse of "literature" (Christian Molbech, who was one of the most influential literary critics in Denmark at the time, famously complained about Andersen's failing to capture the epic tone of proper folktales and his "light, careless play with form"[12]), we believe this is one of the characteristics that has given longevity to his work, making it sound and feel modern and natural to the present day. By using what seemed to be the language of children in his stories, he could sidestep established literary forms and stylistic conventions and develop his own version of the fairy tale genre—a version that combined "tragedy, comedy, naïve simplicity, and humor" through "the lyrical note, the childlike narrative and the language describing nature." Staying true to the "childlike" seems extremely important to Andersen—for it was in childhood that he was always able to find material for his stories: "He elevated childhood to a place of prime importance, not by being cute (Andersen may be sentimental at times, but he is *not* cute), or by being unserious, but to get to something essential—something uncorrupted by academic prescriptions, intellectual sophistication, fashion, class, or wealth. He called this essential element 'innocence.'"[13]

Maintaining Andersen's spirit in her portrayal of Anne's "childlikeness" and "innocence" (which we here interpret as open-mindedness, creativity, and freshness of perception and judgment), Montgomery builds upon his imagery to embed it into the fictional world of Anne. In her interpretation, the Snow Queen is portrayed as something warm and kind, dear to Anne's heart, and precious to her imagination. It is the embodiment of divine beauty and of life in full bloom. The image of the Snow Queen, reimagined and reinterpreted by Anne, is a reflection of the girl's capability to bring reality closer to her dream world—"her other world,"[14] as Montgomery would have it, one she can always carry with her and retreat into as she needs and pleases. Thus, the image of stone-cold beauty is transformed and turned upside down—turned into its utter opposite, as it comes to symbolize the beauty of nature and the vibrancy of life. For Anne, her favourite cherry tree is alive: The girl does not just marvel at its beauty but converses with it and trusts it with her innermost hopes and dreams.

As Anne grows up, the Snow Queen stays beside her as an important symbol of home. At the end of the novel, the girl returns home as an adult—but she has not forgotten about her dear Snow Queen. Greeting her favourite

tree like an old friend—"Oh, Diana, it's so good to be back again. It's so good to see those pointed firs coming out against the pink sky—and that white orchard and the old Snow Queen"15 —Anne relives her connection with Green Gables once again, reinforcing the location's meaning as her true home. We believe that Snow Queen the cherry tree may also be viewed as a symbol of a fairy tale in general. It is a vivid, highly concentrated embodiment of all the stories that are dear to Anne's heart—stories that have given her comfort, joy, solace, and inspiration throughout various stages of her life.

In 1927, L.M. Montgomery wrote, "[w]e all need some kind of fairy tale else we cannot live. What a strange belief that old persistent belief in the land of faery was. It is found everywhere in some guise and lasted for thousands of years—nay, lasts yet in some lands."16 Perhaps the most important takeaway for us here is that by rereading and rediscovering old fairy tales, we can once again tap into the boundless reserves of hope—just as if we were children and could fly on the "wings of imagination"17 whenever and wherever we pleased. For it is only hope that can help us stay sane in these chaotic, turbulent times; and it is hope that will help us survive, and continue to choose survival, in spite of the darkness getting thicker around us.

About the authors: Olga Nikolenko is a Doctor of Philology, Professor, and Chair of World Literature Department at Poltava V.G. Korolenko National Pedagogical University (Ukraine). She has authored more than 350 publications, including monographs, articles in Ukrainian scientific journals, and conference proceedings. Along with a team of co-authors, she has also created a series of World Literature textbooks for secondary schools, which are now used all over Ukraine.

Kateryna Nikolenko is a Ph.D. candidate with the Ivan Franko National University of Lviv (Ukraine). Her thesis focuses on the feminine discourse within L.M. Montgomery's novels, viewed through the lenses of cognitive narratology, ecocriticism, and feminist literary studies.

- 1 Montgomery, *EQ* 8.
- 2 As argued by Tilmann Habermas in *Emotion and Narrative: Perspectives in Autobiographical Storytelling*.
- 3 Ukraine became independent when the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991.
- 4 Among other achievements, Yerko was nominated for Hans Christian Andersen award in 2020. His nomination dossier can be found here: https://www.ibby.org/archive-storage/12_HCAA_Dossiers/2020_Illus/Dossie….
- 5 You can watch a news segment demonstrating the iPad version here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aOzXvprArqM.
- 6 Among the plethora of derogatory terms employed by Russian propaganda pundits to humiliate and vilify Ukrainians, the most popular ones are "Neo-Nazis," "killers," and "torturers"—when the opposite is true, for it is nothing but suffering, death, and destruction that the Russian troops have brought to our cities and villages.
- 7 See Ellwood, "Narratives, Propaganda and 'Smart' Power"; Perez and Nair, "Information Warfare"; and Wieder and Gautheret, "The Second World War."
- 8 Andersen, *Stories*.
- 9 Here, we are referencing the title of Peter Pomerantsev's book *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia* (PublicAffairs, 2014).
- 10 Montgomery, *AGG* 81–82.
- 11 Montgomery, *AGG* 49, 42, 109.
- 12 Molbech, quoted in J. Andersen, *A New Life* 313.

- 13 Frank and Frank, “On Translating” 157; emphasis in original.
- 14 Montgomery, *AGG* 331.
- 15 Montgomery, *AGG* 401.
- 16 Montgomery, *SJ* 3 (31 Dec. 1927): 362.
- 17 Montgomery, *AGG* 46.

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