

Mermaids, Snow Queens, and Changing Perceptions of H. C. Andersen

In this paper I will trace The Walt Disney Company's portrayal of Hans Christian Andersen between the 1930s and the 2010s, arguing that Disney made conscious efforts to keep up with changing perspectives on Andersen's sexuality.

Though today we remember only his fairy tales, in the nineteenth century Hans Christian Andersen was equally famous as a novelist, a playwright, and an inveterate chronicler of his own life. Besides several travel narratives, he wrote three autobiographies, and as his title *The Fairy Tale of My Life* indicates, Andersen envisioned his own biography as a fairy tale: he rose from a childhood in provincial Denmark to become one of the most famous writers in Europe. That view of Andersen's biography remained dominant for most of the twentieth century. Yet more recent biographers depict a far different Andersen, a man who, as Jack Zipes puts it, "never escaped his impoverished childhood but carried it with him throughout his life and fought his demons through his works."

Among those "demons" was Andersen's sexuality, which defies any simplistic categorization. Critical views of Andersen's sexuality depend on the context of the critic. Andersen's contemporary Søren Kierkegaard thought his sexual confusion a source of literary weakness. In the growing homophobic climate of the 1870s, Andersen's friend and biographer Edvard Collin destroyed letters that might have intimated homosexual relationships, and some 20th-century biographers simply denied Andersen's sexuality. Writing at the end of the century, Jackie Wullschlager makes a direct case for Andersen as a homosexual, while Jens Andersen, a few years later, refuses a single label in favor of a more fluid and nuanced perspective.

Alongside these critical views runs a trajectory of portrayals of Andersen in popular culture, none more famous than Disney's *The Little Mermaid* and *Frozen* (based on Andersen's "The Snow Queen.") Only slightly less famous is Disney's 1930s collaboration with Samuel Goldwyn on a biopic about Andersen. This paper addresses those three depictions of Andersen's life, arguing that each updates its view of Andersen in keeping with public acceptance of multiple sexualities.