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“The Path of Love” and “The Path of the Cave” in Selected Works of Hans Christian Andersen

ABSTRACT

In the article, the author discusses the “path of love” and “the path of the cave,” using selected works by Hans Christian Andersen. The Danish fairy tale writer masterfully shows how heroes anchored in a sensual world go a long way to find a world that escapes rational cognition. Most of his characters can easily be described as dynamic, because they change under the influence of powerful experiences. Those who attach more importance to beauty closed in a form devoid of deeper content are condemned. Andersen’s fairy tales have two audiences, children and adults. The former will understand the anecdote and the latter will see the metaphor. The works of the fairy tale writer show autobiographical threads, including his attitude to the Christian religion, in which the triad of truth, good, and beauty turns out to be extremely important.

KEYWORDS: Plato, beauty, love, truth, good, faith, idea

STRESZCZENIE

„Droga miłości” i „droga jaskini” w wybranych utworach Hansa Christiana Andersena

W artykule autor omawia „drogę miłości” oraz „drogę jaskini”, posługując się wybranymi dziełami Hansa Christiana Andersena. Duński baśniopisarz w mistrzowski sposób ukazuje, jak bohaterowie zakotwiczeni w świecie zmysłowym przebywają długą drogę, by odnaleźć świat, który wymyka się racjonalnemu poznaniu. Większość jego bohaterów śmiało można określić mianem dynamicznych, ponieważ pod wpływem silnych doświadczeń się zmieniają. W sposób dosadny szydzi z tych, którzy większą wagę przywiązują do piękna zamkniętego w formie pozbawionej głębszej treści. Baśnie Andersena mają podwójnego adresata, są nim zarówno dzieci, jak i dorośli. Ci pierwsi zrozumieją anegdotę, natomiast ostatni – zauważą głębsze przesłanie. W dziełach baśniopisarza można dostrzec wątki autobiograficzne, m.in. jego

stosunek do religii chrześcijańskiej, w której niezmiernie istotna okazuje się triada prawdy, dobra i piękna.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: Platon, piękno, miłość, prawda, dobro, wiara, idea

Ideas in Plato's philosophy are proper objects of knowledge because they are eternal and immutable, so they exist in contrast to things that become. According to the Greek philosopher, it is not material good, but ideal good that stands at the top of the hierarchy of ideas (Tatarkiewicz, 2007, pp. 96–97, 109). Władysław Stróżewski, drawing on Joachim Ritter's research, lists six basic meanings of the idea:

1. external appearance
2. structure or condition
3. content of cognition
4. the concept itself
5. species or genus, and
6. objective reality. (Tendera & Rubiś, 2016, p. 34)

The idea of Good and Beautiful is the measure of all things. As a source of principles for everyday life, ethics, and practical philosophy, it organizes the world. Its cardinal quality is indivisibility. Hence, a philosopher can be defined as someone who can make the multitude and changeability of the sensual world assume a single, permanent form (Ritter, 1910, p. 228–326; Stróżewski, 1992, p. 31).

Making the distinction between sensual and intellectual cognition, Plato assumed that we are able to grasp eternal ideas with our mind. He also listed such absolute personal and community values as Truth, Good, and Beauty (Żuk, 2016, p. 103) and considered the last one to be a form of Good. Beauty derives from mathematical and geometric proportions that surprise, delight, and awe. However, "true" Beauty belongs within the sphere of ontological transcendentalism because it is timeless, which means that it does not arise or perish. In Plato's axiology, the idea of Good is at the top of the order of beings. Good is the highest virtue, the goal of people who seek truth and knowledge (Tuszyńska-Maciejewska, 1999, p. 125).

According to the philosopher's concept, a human being can achieve the triad, in other words—Truth, Goodness, and Beauty—in two ways: by "the path of love" or "the path of the cave." In contrast to the difficult and troublesome "path of the cave," the former seems to be light and pleasant. In Plato's *Symposium*, Diotima states that the "path of love" begins when we appreciate sensual beauty (Plato, 385–370 BCE/2008 [210a–e]). It originates from a love that a person feels for the object of their desire,

their beloved. The “path of love” is natural for a human being because it is based on an innate drive for what is beautiful. It leads to the idea of Beauty and is a time of trials from which, according to Plato, a young man “tried by many tests, like gold in the refiner’s fire” must come out “victorious and without stain” (Plato, c. 375 BCE/2008 [503a]). However, a person cannot ascend higher if he/she is still focused on the beauty of the human body and is not open to the beauty of laws, attitudes, or deeds, and—in the final stage—to Beauty for Beauty Itself. The “path of love” is a challenge even for the most perfect of individuals, because everyone initially desires only bodily beauty (Tandera, 2010, p. 23).

In turn, the “path of the cave” is divided into three stages: turning from the sensible to the intelligible, abandoning pre-conceptions, and finally reaching the Truth. The allegory of the cave is a metaphorical image of people in the earthly world and the ideas that govern them. Liberation from the chains symbolizing worldly things can occur thanks to someone who has seen the sun outside the cave. One man, who has been “enlightened,” must return back into the cave to attempt to “drag up the captives” out of the dark (Plato, c. 375 BCE/2008 [514a]). This process requires thought understood as an internal dialogue of the soul with itself. Thanks to dialectical discourse, the soul overcomes the invisible bonds of habits and customs, and then ascends to transcendence. Exiting the cave is an arduous task because it is closely associated with the suffering experienced by someone who abandons everything concerning the material world (Plato, c. 375 BCE/2008 [515c–517a]). However, not everyone receives this grace, because wisdom is a gift from the gods and does not depend on human will. Departure from the cave is therefore done by means of compulsion (Stróżewski, 1992, p. 106).

Hans Christian Andersen was familiar with the Platonic triad, as evidenced by his works, where he emphasized that it is not external beauty that matters, but internal. There are many examples illustrating this idea, including *The Brave Tin Soldier* (1838), *The Ugly Duckling* (1844), and *The Teapot* (1864). In the axiological world of Andersen, we can observe dualism in character construction. As Ewa Ogłóza put it, they can be characterized by “egotism, self-interest, egocentricity, narrow horizons, and a poor ability to understand on the one hand—and altruism, a child-like, primal quality, naivety, openness, and sensitivity, on the other” (2014, p. 257). According to Klaus P. Mortensen, in the works of the Danish fairy tale writer, “physical space is a sign of internal, psychological space, a space of consciousness—the space of the soul. Resurrecting to another existence means transformation into a different, true self” (2006, pp. 30–31). The metamorphoses of Andersen’s characters are often associated with the search for the Platonic idea of Good, as exemplified by fairy

tales such as *Beauty of Form and Beauty of Mind* (1860) or *The Red Shoes* (1845). In the former story, we are dealing with “the path of love,” while in the latter it is “the path of the cave.” Each of them leads the heroes to one goal: Light.

Alfred, a character from *Beauty of Form and Beauty of Mind*, was completely immersed in the material world and neglected spiritual values. Blindly in love with Kæla, he treated her like a work of art. He admired her appearance, which we can see when “he caught sight of a pair of dark-blue eyes” (Andersen, 1860/1872, p. 297) and when he compares her to a water nymph: “she might have passed for the beautiful maid of the fountain” (Andersen, 1860/1872, p. 298). Also, in order to highlight her beauty, he let out cries of delight, an example being the exclamation, “How beautiful she was!” (Andersen, 1860/1872, p. 298). Alfred idealized his beloved,¹ as the following quote testifies:

The daughter sighed very gently; and how much there may be in a sigh, or attributed to it! The young man attributed a great deal of meaning to this sigh. Those deep-blue eyes, which had been lit up this evening in honor of him, must conceal treasures, treasures of heart and mind, richer than all the glories of Rome; and so when he left the party that night, he had lost it completely to the young lady. (Andersen, 1860/1872, p. 298)

The narrator speaks ironically about the sculptor being fascinated by the body and mocks his tendency to exaggerate every gesture of the woman. Alfred attributes tremendous value to trivial things, e.g., putting the heroine’s eyes on a par with treasures and the center of Christian Europe. It is clear from the quoted passage that Alfred then identified the beauty of the body with the beauty of the soul, because for him her appearance concealed the treasures of the spirit and heart.

What turns out to be of crucial importance is the question, what is beauty as a value in art (after all, the main character is an artist)? Saint Thomas Aquinas distinguished two definitions. According to the first (objective) definition, beauty is based on perfection, proportion, and splendor, while with the other (subjective) definition it is closely linked with looking at something with pleasure (Dernes-Sarnowska, 1996, p. 194). Overall, this is aesthetic beauty, while the hero strives for transcendental beauty, which designates “spiritual beings, deprived of all potentialities such as angels or God Himself, His Perfect Beauty” (Duchliński, 2016, p. 258).

1 As is well known, the Danish writer lived and worked in the era of Romanticism, when women were treated like deities. It should be noted that Alfred is a typical romantic: he adores the object of his affection, while ignoring the sexual aspect. See also: Wasylewski, S. (1921). *On Romantic Love*. Lviv. p. XX.

Blinded by her external beauty, the man saw no shortcomings in the education or manners of either woman. The narrator points out that, firstly, Kæla’s mother is stupid (although the appearance of his betrothed fully compensated for it); secondly, her daughter had not mastered the art of conversation, and when “she would talk, she could only now and then let fall a word in the same melodious voice”; and thirdly, she turns out to be lazy:

She was really beautiful; but some said she was rather dull, and slept late of a morning. “She has been accustomed to that,” her mother said. “She is a beauty, and they are always easily tired. She does sleep rather late; but that makes her eyes so clear.” (Andersen, 1860/1872, p. 299)

Moreover, the artist, bewitched by Kæla’s charm, downplayed the thoughtlessness of his future mother-in-law. For example, when he painted a volcanic eruption, she commented on the artistic fiction with childish naivety:

“What, did you see it throw up white fire?” (Andersen, 1860/1872, p. 299). For a moment, Alfred’s respect for Kæla’s mamma underwent a sudden shock and lessened considerably, but, dazzled by the light which surrounded Kæla, he soon found it quite natural that the old lady should have no eye for color. After all, it was of very little consequence, for Kæla’s mother had the best of all possessions: Kæla herself. (Andersen, 1860/1872, p. 299)

Form absorbed Alfred so much that he forgot about content. Art, in general, is the only field

in which an artist can “log” human emotions and thus transmit them to other people. The artist’s task and goal is to do so in an exceptional, unique way, which distinguishes art (a work of art) from other human activities (creations). (Sosnowski, 2011, p. 13)

Therefore, a work of art should delight the audience as well as convey important metaphysical content. A sculptor who is fooled by external beauty does not create a work of art, but an object that entertains people—like a doll. It is not without significance that the narrator compares the married couples’ apartment with a doll house. Everything inside it is new and richly decorated, but it lacks “life.” Both Kæla and the world in which Alfred lives, blindly believing in the power of form, are a delusion. The hero, commenting on the subject of art, remarks

how, in the scale of creation, inanimate matter was inferior to animate nature; the plant above the mineral, the animal above the plant, and man

above them all ... how the beauty of the mind could be displayed in the outward form, and that it was the sculptor's task to seize upon that beauty of expression, and produce it in his works. (Andersen, 1860/1872, p. 300)

However, a question arises: what is the 'greatest' in a human being? Is it the physical form, if Alfred raves about Kæla's attractiveness? One could say, using the narrator's words, that "the magic of form had enchanted him; he had looked at the casket without caring to inquire what it contained" (Andersen, 1860/1872, p. 300).

The next step on the "path of love" leading to the truth is the realization that sensible beauty has nothing to do with the beauty of the soul. The narrator, using the metaphor of a casket, which eventually wears out, illustrates what happens to the beauty of a created (contingent) being, which (in contrast to the absolute being) is transient, fragile, and lost (Duchliński, 2016, p. 258):

The casket may be injured, the gilding may fall off, and then the purchaser regrets his bargain. In a large party it is very disagreeable to find a button giving way, with no studs at hand to fall back upon; but it is worse still in a large company to be conscious that your wife and mother-in-law are talking nonsense, and that you cannot depend upon yourself to produce a little ready wit to carry off the stupidity of the whole affair. (Andersen, 1860/1872, pp. 300–301)

At the party, at which everyone was undoubtedly elegantly dressed, the artist noticed the intellectual deficits and the lack of good manners of both his mother-in-law and beloved. It was only then that his eyes opened to what lies under the bodily shell and that he noticed the spiritual beauty of Sophy, which was eclipsed by her plain appearance.

The discrepancy between appearance and behavior is best seen in the following passage:

Sophy was not, pretty. She was, however, quite free from any physical deformity, although Kæla used to say she was a little crooked; ... She was a very sensible girl Her appearance created a new atmosphere in the doll's house, and air was really required, they all owned that. (Andersen, 1860/1872, p. 301)

Sophy, in contrast to Kæla's dazzling beauty, possessed inner (moral and spiritual) virtue. Unlike her friend, she was interested in art, she was able to manage the house herself, she was loyal (she cared for Kæla when she got sick). In short, she commanded admiration and respect, not with her appearance, but with her disposition.

Alfred reached the principle of Good when he married Sophy and understood that it is not form that determines the beauty of an artwork, but its content. According to his mother-in-law, the sculptor’s behavior was self-contradictory, because her daughter was truly beautiful, while Sophy was simply ugly. Freeing himself from the bondage of worldly perceptions and habits best reflects his understanding of his mistakes. He concluded that he had previously fallen in love with a dead thing that he personified. After seeing the truth, he realized what was really important in life, namely, having a soulmate with whom you can talk about everything and who you can rely on. It is worth quoting the sculptor’s words on love and art:

You came, Sophy, not in the glory of outward beauty, though you are even fairer than is necessary. The chief thing still remains. You came to teach the sculptor that his work is but dust and clay only, an outward form made of a material that decays, and that what we should seek to obtain is the ethereal essence of mind and spirit. Poor Kæla! our life was but as a meeting by the way-side; in yonder world, where we shall know each other from a union of mind, we shall be but mere acquaintances. (Andersen, 1860/1872, p. 302)

The quoted passage clearly indicates that Alfred, thanks to love, had reached the ideal of Beauty and Good. One could easily go so far as to say that he abandoned material goods in order to enjoy the eternal, universal Idea, of which Kæla was only a shadow.

The “path of love,” therefore, as Diotima stated in Plato’s *Symposium*, is indeed pleasant. It is a gentle passage from the material to the spiritual world. Another way to reach the highest idea is the “path of the cave” that Karen—a character from the fairy tale *The Red Shoes*—had to follow.

The prisoners in Plato’s cave only see reflections of the real world. Karen, a dainty pretty girl adopted by an old lady, was also trapped in the illusory world of things. The main character exhibits a lot of negative traits, such as self-admiration (while staring at her reflection, she heard the mirror say, “You are more than pretty—you are beautiful”; Andersen, 1845/1872, p. 345), abject materialism (the purchase of red shoes to feel like a princess), and insensitivity (she didn’t look after her benefactor when she fell ill). The color of the shoes connotes sin (van Gennep, 2006, p. 82), so wearing them at the Confirmation ceremony meant violating the social prohibition and disrespecting the holy place. According to Katarzyna Miller and Tatiana Cichocka, red shoes are customarily interpreted as a symbol of “earthly needs, corporeality, and joy that distracted man from thinking about God” (Miller & Cichocka, 2008, p. 87). This claim proves to be correct, because instead of focusing on the religious rite, Karen was only thinking about the shoes:

It was only of these that she thought when the clergyman laid his hand upon her head and spoke of the holy baptism, of the covenant with God, and told her that she was now to be a grown-up Christian. The organ pealed forth solemnly, and the sweet children's voices mingled with that of their old leader; but Karen thought only of her red shoes. (Andersen, 1845/1872, p. 346)

At her First Communion, the red shoes were also the center of attention, more than than receiving Christ:

And all the people inside looked at Karen's red shoes, and all the figures gazed at them; when Karen knelt before the altar and put the golden goblet to her mouth, she thought only of the red shoes. It seemed to her as though they were swimming about in the goblet, and she forgot to sing the psalm, forgot to say the "Lord's Prayer." (Andersen, 1845/1872, pp. 347–348)

This means that Karen went to church for mundane reasons, not for prayer, but to satisfy her vanity. She wanted people to admire her. The girl's behavior reveals basic human sins and flaws resulting from her attachment to material life—more specifically, pride, vanity, disobedience, ingratitude, and materialism.

The next stage begins with the punishment for her sins. Mircea Eliade, for example, mentions that suffering has salvific properties which worked best for the girl's situation (Eliade, 1998, p. 107). God, through an angel-messenger, condemns the heroine to eternal dance:

"Dance you shall," said he, "dance in your red shoes till you are pale and cold, till your skin shrivels up and you are a skeleton! Dance you shall, from door to door, and where proud and wicked children live you shall knock, so that they may hear you and fear you! Dance you shall, dance—!" (Andersen, 1845/1872, p. 348)

In any case, Karen had to suffer a lot before she learned the essence of faith. She experienced physical pain—"The shoes bore her away over thorns and stumps till she was all torn and bleeding"—and spiritual pain, because she could not go to church, although she gravely wanted to.

The torments that the girl had to go through made the earthly things lose their meaning and the spiritual things grow stronger. It was only when she decided to work in exchange for food and shelter at the pastor's home, look after the children and listen to the Bible diligently, that she understood the meaning of life. Her behavior betrays humility because material things and the fruits of human labor are shifted into the background (Andrzejuk, 2000, p. 45). For example, when the children were talking

about costumes and decorations, Karen shook her head, making it clear to them that no good would come of them. Her unpleasant experience caused by her attachment to material values prompted her to reflect and to change her attitude towards God:

Here she sat down with her hymn-book, and as she was reading it with a pious mind, the wind carried the notes of the organ over to her from the church, and in tears she lifted up her face and said: “O God! help me!” (Andersen, 1845/1872, p. 349)

The culmination of the “path of the cave” is the scene when the heroine sees a golden star. The angel “touched the ceiling, which rose up very high, and where he had touched it there shone a golden star” because “the church itself had come to the poor girl in her narrow room” (Andersen, 1845/1872, p. 349), so the laws of physics ceased to have any meaning.² She received what is needed to leave the cave, and which not everyone experiences: grace. The joining of the soul with the ideal of Good is illustrated by the following quote:

The bright warm sunshine streamed through the window into the pew where Karen sat, and her heart became so filled with it, so filled with peace and joy, that it broke. Her soul flew on the sunbeams to Heaven. (Andersen, 1845/1872, p. 349)

In other words, Karen, having suffered her tribulations, abandoned the bonds that tied her to her body and ascended to transcendence.

To sum up, in the beginning both Alfred and Karen lived at the level of the earthly world. They had habits that separated them from the idea of Good. The sculptor saw nothing but form, and the girl stared at her red shoes, i.e., material things. They both learned that external beauty is illusory. Alfred saw the inner emptiness of the idealized Kæla. In turn, Karen experienced bodily pain in order to finally focus on her soul. The main characters reached one goal, which was the idea of Good. It is worth mentioning that Sophy, being a Christian, said that “in a future state, ... everything beautiful develops itself, and is raised to a higher state of existence” (Andersen, 1860/1872, p. 302). And so Karen soared to heights when her soul reached God.

2 In general, flight or ascent usually involves the soul’s meeting with God. For example, Zofia Wyskiel emphasizes that “death is the flight of the soul from the constraints of the body, the flight of the eagles—it is embracing the Heavenly Father.” Wyskiel, Z. (1954–1955). *On death*. Retrieved January 16, 2020 from http://www.duchprawdy.com/s_medarda_zofia_wyskiel_o_smierci.htm

In conclusion, learning about the idea of Good is natural and begins in the sensory world. Beauty is close to a human being, both bodily (the preference for physical beauty is hardly noteworthy) and intellectually (the human soul intuitively seeks beauty). Timaeus aptly conveys Plato's axiology as follows: "the world is the fairest of creations and he [the maker of the universe] is the best of causes" (Plato, c. 360 BCE/2008 [29a]).

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