

# **A Comparative Analysis of the Symbol of the Clothing in “The Emperor’s New Clothes” and “The Happy Man’s Shirt”**

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Renowned as critical landmarks in Western children’s literature, “The Emperor’s New Clothes” by Hans Christian Andersen and “The Happy Man’s Shirt,” an Italian fairy tale by Italo Calvino, feature profound lessons hidden beneath their seemingly simple storylines. Marked by vivid metaphors, symbolic clothing, and sharp societal critique, these narratives pack powerful moral messages into their brief, precise and interesting story. This paper seeks to compare and analyze the symbolic messages in both tales, focusing on how each story employs clothing as a medium to convey issues related to power and desire, materialism, ideological coercion and resistance against oppressive norms.

Initially, clothing serves as a symbol of vain authority and unsatisfied desire. In Andersen’s tale, portrayed as an individual indulging in self-indulgence, consistently found “sitting in his wardrobe”, the Emperor constantly pursues new, grandiose clothing in an attempt to demonstrate his power, wealth, and prestige, revealing his insatiable desire for the flattering compliments of gorgeous appearance (Andersen par.1). Supreme as he is, the Emperor is not content with his authority, constantly investing his time and resources in the acquisition of unnecessary external validation rather than addressing the truly crucial problems of the nation. His obsession with extravagant looks and the pursuit of adulation

manifests his irresponsibility and neglect for the genuine needs of his realm and subjects.

While with a noble royal status, the melancholy prince in “The Happy Man’s Shirt”, as the only son of the king, he can possess every conceivable luxury and get any girl he likes, whether it’s “the daughter of the most powerful king on earth” or “the poorest peasant girl,” surrounded by various delightful entertainments, but he is always unhappy and not satisfied with the status quo (Calvino,117).

Additionally, the “non-existence” of clothing embodies a potent critique and disdain for material wealth in both tales. As a daily manifestation of outward appearance in our life, clothing itself inherently harbors a profound implication of merely worldly possessions and the external insignificant material world beyond ourselves. However, the prominent characters in both narratives precisely go to great lengths, pay heavy prices, and endure tremendous hardships in pursuit of such unimportant things, only to discover that the object of their deepest yearnings and most fervent dreams does not exist, which is a kind of ironic paradox beautifully employed in both tales, underlining the profound revelation. The “non-existence” of the “new clothes” signifies the insignificance of the pleasing sounds of sycophantic flattery, power, and material wealth, laying bare the hollow essence of authority and the illusion of prestige. Meanwhile, the “non-existence” of the “shirt of happiness” suggests that no matter how much wealth the king and the prince possess, they will ultimately never be able to procure it and attain happiness, thereby trapping them in a vicious cycle of increasing unhappiness, since true happiness actually stems from inner contentment and peace rather than the outside, which is simultaneously reflected in the impoverished condition of the truly happy man in the story, indicating a schism and irrelevance between material wealth and intrinsic satisfaction.

Furthermore, the initial “existence” and final “disappearance” of “clothing” symbolize the struggle between the oppressive rule of the dominant class and the resistance of the new forces. From the perspective of the ruling class, the Emperor’s attempt to fabricate such clothing is aimed at seeking a more efficient means to govern the state more effectively, “not merely for the sake of the beauty of the new clothes, but centered on the ‘new clothes’ as a detector for competence and stupidity,” akin to a disguised ideological coercion (Zhan 55). The populace, on the other hand, does not simply comply with the Emperor and ministers’ playacting but chooses to accept this unreasonable authoritarian rule in silence under imposed consciousness control.

In the other story, should the shirt, spoken of by the wise man, truly have the magical power to bring happiness, wouldn’t the actions of the king and the prince to seek out this person and exchange shirts, regardless of whether happiness is the only treasure of the poor farmer, also be considered a form of plunder of the ruling class? The ordinary people are controlled under a “general politics of truth” as Michel Foucault interestingly defined in “Truth and Power”: “Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth...the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true” (Foucault 73). The truth that depends not on what is said but on who says it is the truth of the ruling class—the ideology, which utilizes its position to impose its ideas on the publics.

From the perspective of the new forces, in both stories, a young individual emerges to challenge the established “clothing” paradigm, representing a revolutionary force daring to oppose political hegemony and break the control of ideology. A child breaks the spell of the Emperor’s “new clothes” and shouts, “But the Emperor has nothing at all on!” (Anderson 31). An interesting insight is that “one factor that we must emphasize is that this is a political event” (Wang 100). Instead of simply saying that the child’s bravery, innocence, and honesty

allow him to see the reality and speak out the truth without hesitation, it's more profound to say that under the corrupt monarchical rule, there always exists a new force not restrained by social norms and political domination, serving as a powerful critique of the social tendency towards blind obedience and social norm constraints.

Similarly, in another story, a young man challenges the authority vested in the "shirt." The setting of his poor status shatters the possibility of deriving joy from material possessions, ending the king's forced pursuit of the happy man's shirt and giving him a crucial lesson on the essence of happiness. The result of his objectively refusal to meet the king's expectations symbolizes his resistance to kingly power and his liberation from material desires. These bold voices of defiance both come from young forces, one a "child" and the other a "youth," highlighting the potential of individuals to resist the ideological control of the upper classes and revealing the vibrant revolutionary forces in the face of their oppression and expectation.

In conclusion, Andersen's "The Emperor's New Clothes" and Calvino's "The Happy Man's Shirt" effectively employ clothing as a multifaceted symbol that unearths and critiques societal norms and structures. This analysis has shown how clothing serves as a potent critique of the obsession with unfulfilled desires, material wealth, and oppressive power, thus further symbolizing the constant struggle between dominant and resisting forces in society, emphasizing the transformative potential of individual resistance against ideological control.

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