

The Emperor's New Clothes

Summary

The Emperor's New Clothes' tells, of course, of an emperor who cares about nothing except his clothes, and spends all his time in his dressing-room. One day, two con-men arrive in town, and tell the king that they are weavers who can weave clothes that possessed an unusual quality: they became invisible to anyone who was stupid or unfit for the job they did. Thinking this was a good way of telling wise men from fools, and sussing out who was fit for their job and who wasn't, the emperor paid the swindlers a lot of money to weave him some fine clothes.

The swindlers set up a loom and pretend to weave, but in reality their loom remains empty and they pocket all the silk they are sent. The emperor, wishing to see how his robes are coming along but fearing that he won't be able to see them (and thus reveal his own unfitness for the job of emperor), sends his cleverest and trustiest minister, who can't see the robes but keeps quiet about it. He returns to the emperor and tells him the robes are beautiful. The swindlers demand more gold and silk, but continue to weave on an empty loom. The emperor sends another of his advisers; like the first one, he can't see the cloth, but pretends he can.



The emperor then decides to go and see the clothes before they are completed, but he cannot see them either. Fearing *he* is either a fool or unfit to be emperor, he lies about it and declares them to be beautiful. When the clothes are ready, the swindlers ask the emperor to

remove his old clothes so they can fit him with his new ones – but of course they only pretend to put clothes on him. When the emperor parades through the streets wearing his new clothes (but in reality completely naked), none of the townspeople admit that they cannot see the clothes, for fear of being accused of being stupid or not fit for the job they do. But then one child exclaims that the emperor has nothing on, and the spell is broken: everyone else takes up the cry and the illusion of the emperor's new clothes is destroyed. But the emperor chooses to ignore the townspeople and continue his procession. This much constitutes a brief summary of the plot of Andersen's tale.

Although Andersen wrote the tale, 'The Emperor's New Clothes' has the ring of ancient authenticity about it. And with good reason: Andersen based 'The Emperor's New Clothes' on 'So ist der Lauf der Welt', a German translation of a medieval Spanish fairy tale from a 1335 collection, *El Conde Lucanor*. In the Spanish original, an inset tale titled 'Of that which happened to a King and three Impostors', the cloth-weavers tell the king that only a man's legitimate son will be able to see the cloth they weave; the cloth would be invisible to a father's illegitimate sons. Andersen's updating of the story, and altering of 'illegitimate' to 'stupid' or 'unfit for office', shows how fairy tales are constantly being updated and rewritten to reflect their changing social contexts.

Remarkably, though, the story's finale – when the child reveals the emptiness (indeed, non-existence) of the emperor's 'clothes' and breaks the 'spell' the con-artists have laid over the town – was only an afterthought, and initially the story ended with the emperor's new clothes still being admired by everyone, and the townspeople agreeing to keep up the pretence. Numerous reasons for Andersen's sudden change of heart have been proposed, including an autobiographical one from Andersen's childhood (a young Hans had been taken by his mother to see King Frederic VI of Denmark, and had cried out that that the king was no more than a man) and one inspired by Andersen's dislike of the snobbery found amongst members of the Danish bourgeoisie.

Does 'The Emperor's New Clothes' require any critical commentary or further analysis? Yes and no, we might say. Like the emperor's clothes, the story is transparent in its meaning; unlike the emperor's clothes, it *does* possess substance,

and it is the critic's job to examine what meaning may reside in that substance. For the child's shout at the end of the story transforms the tale into a satire with even more of a bite: it reveals how easily people can take up a pretence, but also, conversely, how easily they can be snapped out of such nonsense. It's the psychology of the 'mob' or the majority: nobody wants to be the lone voice crying in the wilderness, puncturing the bubble.

'The Emperor's New Clothes' continues to enjoy popularity as a fairy tale for children, and as an idiom and an allegory for political and cultural situations and positions (it has been used to describe the perceived emptiness of much modern literary and cultural theory, for instance). It has even inspired a new kind of logical fallacy, named 'the Courtier's Reply' by the biologist P. Z. Myers in a blog post of 2006, which refers to the attempt to discredit a critic's adverse analysis of something on the grounds that the critic lacks sufficient knowledge to make such objections. The story shows no signs of going away. Nor, in the current political climate, is it likely to any time soon.