

Maddie || **Kate** || **Madeline** || **Katherine**

Kate: Welcome back to Once Upon a Red Flag: Where we dish the juicy details on the fairy tales we grew up with that maybe aren't as glamorous as we thought.

Maddie: We just want to welcome back all of our loyal scholars. And to those who are new here, welcome! As always, I'm your host, Maddie-

Kate: And I'm your host, Kate! We have two stories on the docket today. This week, it's all about Andersen.

Maddie: That's right. As always, we have each read one fairytale from the same author, do some outside research, and now we're going to talk about how absolutely-

Kate: Absurdly-

Maddie: And undeniably problematic it is!

Kate: To be honest, Andersen might be the best fit yet. Did you know his fairy tales include themes like manipulation, persecution, and death by hypothermia?

Maddie: I know, right? He had issues for sure, but it doesn't excuse his stories traumatizing our youth. Hans Christian Andersen was a Danish author with some major trauma.

Kate: Over his lifetime, he wrote over 150 fairy tales including popular ones like "The Little Mermaid" and "Thumbelina." His stories continue to reach children and families in modern adaptations, for example through Walt Disney Studios.

Maddie: You know, as soon as he hit his elementary school years, Andersen was bullied for his tall figure, his personality, just about any insecurity young kids pick up on to stay relevant.

Kate: No because I read a blog from this author, Mari Ness, about Andersen's backstory that said he was really poor growing up, too. Dude was really going through it.

Maddie: Although he was bullied and had a really bad childhood, do we really think it excuses the fact he's one of the red flag authors we're covering today?

Kate: No victim complex excuses the stuff I read. I chose "The Little Match Girl" for my tale, and let me tell you, it was something. The tale starts with a young beggar girl walking along a cold winter street with no shoes on her feet and an abusive father at home.

Maddie: OK- already traumatic.

Kate: I know. She is supposed to be selling matches to support her family, but she gets too cold, and she lights them to keep warm instead. She starts to hallucinate things she wishes she had, like a hot dinner and warm stove, and a big Christmas tree..

Maddie: This sounds so tragic!

Kate: Just wait.. and eventually, she hallucinates her dead grandmother coming to collect her right before she dies from hypothermia in the freezing cold, all alone.

Maddie: Yeah, that's ridiculously heavy. Do you think having the little girl die at the end is a good message to be telling kids?

Kate: Well, I have my own opinions on that. I think Andersen justifies the little girl's death by making the reader understand that she would be happier because she had such a terrible life.

Maddie: That's so interesting, I wouldn't have ever thought of it like that. You know, I think it's time we introduce our first guest.

Kate: YES! I reached out to her on insta, and we have SO MUCH in common!

Maddie: Please welcome to the podcast, Katherine! She is most famous for her match-stick scholarly reports which have earned her first listed in the title of many famous fairytale articles.

Katherine: It's great to see you all in person.

Kate: Thank you so much for joining us!

Maddie: So Katherine, can you tell us a little more about how Andersen's life affected his writing of "The Little Match Girl?"

Katherine: Sure! So first, let's unpack some of the overarching details that defined Andersen's childhood.

Kate: Sounds good.

Katherine: Every fairy-tale scholar knows that Andersen was bullied growing up, and this heavily inspired his work. But more catered to The Little Match Girl, he was also very poor as a child. Novelist and editor Jane Yolen reminds us in her article, "From Andersen On: Fairy Tales Tell Our Lives," that Andersen grew up in an incredibly tiny house with financially and mentally unstable parents.

Maddie: Can't believe I'm saying this, but poor Andersen. I guess it checks out though.

Kate: That definitely connects right to the living conditions of the girl in his story.

Katherine: Exactly. There's another very important connection: Andersen's Christianity. The fact that he believed in an afterlife in heaven would justify his explanation of the little girl's death. Because she had such a terrible life, she would have been happier where she could have all of the things she wanted. Her life was not serving her, so Andersen turned to heaven to give her what she wanted.

Kate: Maddie and I were just talking about this! I didn't make the connection to his own belief system, though. Do you think

it's an appropriate message to give to children listening to the story, though?

Maddie: Yeah, it seems really dark, and honestly justifying death doesn't sound like a positive moral for young people.

Katherine: You could look at it that way, or you could think about how we feel when we listen to the tale. How do you view the main heroine? Do you think, 'oh yeah, she deserved to die?'

Kate: What?? No! Honestly I feel really bad for her.

Maddie: Same! I never thought she deserved it when I heard the story.

Katherine: Exactly. Andersen wants you to connect with the match girl and feel bad for her situation. He's a smart writer, and he does this by heightening the pathos of the tale. He describes his character with beautiful curly hair, which makes her innocent and beautiful, and then also includes the fact that she has no shoes on her feet. He wants the reader to recognize, through descriptive imagery, that she's done nothing wrong before he gives you the hard truth.

Kate: Now that I think about it, he really succeeded.

Katherine: So now that we feel connected to the little girl and want her to ultimately be happy, Andersen breaks out the big guns and describes her smiling as she passes away.

Maddie: Oh my gosh, that's so sad! Why didn't you tell me about this before, Kate?

Katherine: It really is, Maddie. He also has to include the fact that people walking by saw her on the street after she died and didn't really think twice.

Maddie: That's even sadder!

Katherine: But maybe the tale is trying to get us to be grateful. Think about it, as Kate Bernheimer questions in her

response to the tale, I quote, "How many times have I turned myself cold, and not helped someone in need," end quote. The harsh reality of the story forces the listener to be grateful for what they have, and have sympathy for those who have less. Maybe, they'll even be empowered to go out and do something about it. Really, in my opinion, the tale is trying to get us to take action and think more about less privileged lives in our own communities.

Kate: Wow, Katherine, you're right. This is a really great insight. I can't think of a better way to wrap up our conversation.

Maddie: Thank you so much again Katherine for joining us.

Katherine: Of course. Spreading awareness about Andersen, flaws and all, helps us to understand how his tales impact us.

Kate: That was a really great point at the end. Maybe we need to shift our mindsets a little and try to think about Andersen's questionable morals in a different light.

Maddie: I was literally just about to say. I think that the story I specifically studied really is a tell-all on the impact Andersen's stories have had on us whether we realize it or not.

Kate: Huh? What do you mean?

Maddie: I mean, like, think about it. As kids, we read all these fantasy stories and hear all the folklore when we're super impressionable. It's that time in our lives when we hear something, take it at face value, and let it shape our core personality.

Kate: And given that these fairytales serve to provide us with explicit morals...

Maddie: Bingo. For good or for bad, these stories have crazy repercussions. Take the story I read, the Ugly Duckling, for example.

Kate: Okay, give me the low down.

Maddie: I mean, it starts out with an ugly duckling being bullied by his peers for something superficial as his looks. Then he's bullied by the farm animals...then bullied by the kids...

Kate: I'm sensing a theme?

Maddie: Your intuition is next level. The mockery gets so bad, the ugly duckling had enough, deciding to kill himself by going up to the swans and thinking they'd slit his throat for daring to show his ugly face. He bowed his head down to die, saw his transformed swan-like reflection in the water, and the story ended with him finally accepted by a group of like-minded peers.

Kate: Wait, hold up. Did I, like, traumatically repress that part? How come I don't remember the suicide attempt at all?

Maddie: You wouldn't be the first. This lady I met in the library while I was researching, Amy, BTW super sweet woman I literally adore her,

Kate: No cause makes sense.

Maddie: Yeah, anyway. She had a kids toy that told fairytales, that stuff was fully not included.

Kate: Okay, first off, Amy sounds like such a good fairy tale researcher name, we should get her on the podcast.

Maddie: Agreed. And second off?

Kate: Well, that kind of makes sense. Not only was that more... umm... Interesting, part omitted, but it's just like you said. The tale was told through a kids toy, for kids.

Maddie: I know, right? I think we've had enough personal chats, though. And although she's no Amy, I think the next person we're bringing to the podcast is gonna have some amazing insights.

Kate: Please welcome, Ugly Duck Connoisseur Madeline. She is well known for her research in connecting real life with fairytales. Most recently, she won the award for "best duck nap," am I reading that right?

Maddie: No it's duck yap.

Kate: Oh, okay. "Best duck Yap" in the regional championships, and has recently been nominated for internationals. Madeline, welcome to the show.

Madeline: So happy to be here, truly.

Maddie: You never give your vocal chords a rest, huh? What's your secret?

Madeline: Finding something you're passionate about. I swear, I could write a three-thousand word research essay on all this, but I'd hate to bore you, so a discussion will do just fine.

Maddie: You got us there.

Kate: We're sure you're an excellent writer, but the viewers listening to us while driving probably wouldn't appreciate having to stare at text.

Madeline: Hey, I hear you, and the listeners. So, what questions do you have for me?

Kate: Well Maddie and I were just talking about how fairy tales impact us as kids, before we even realize it. Does any of that have some connection with the Ugly Duckling in particular?

Madeline: Totally. In society, we all have this sort of collective hive mind in terms of how we view the others in our lives. Not only do we tend to persecute these people, but we do so as a whole. There's no one person to blame here, and a lot of it is because of how we were raised by the same folktales.

Maddie: Damn, while you're at it, might as well tell us we're destroying the planet and creating the economic crisis.

Kate: I mean that part is also true-

Maddie: Shh! Let me live in my delusion, or simply change the subject back. Madeline, you were saying?

Madeline: I mean, your side commentary does have a lot of truth to it. Being together, being able to make mistakes and have it affirmed by others, it makes what we do seem "right", so to speak.

Kate: It's something you can brush off just because everyone else is doing it.

Maddie: Mob mentality.

Madeline: Exactly. If we translate this idea to the ugly duckling, it shows that we're no better than all those animals and kids that bullied the ugly duckling. Perhaps it's not intentional, but we are a product of our circumstances and youth, and that's what Andersen books will get you.

Kate: Yeesh. Could this get any worse?

Maddie: Well, Madeline, remember when we first met at one of your conference talks, and I kept getting mistaken as you?

Madeline: Oh right! Security informed me of it about half-way in, and it led to quite the fun interaction.

Kate: Seriously? I mean, no offence, but you two look nothing alike.

Maddie: Agreed, but regardless. People were so focused on this copycat duo idea, irrelevant as it was, that it took away from the talk itself.

Madeline: Correct. It's similar to walking on eggshells. You are so focused on the problems of the tale itself, the disturbing ideas like suicide, that you forget to consider the subtle

influences, the smaller details that may not go as well noticed, but have the same big impact.

Kate: How does that kind of stuff translate to the ugly duckling specifically? Especially with the real life topics you often discuss such as ableism in fairytales?

Maddie: There was this cultural critic, Leduc, right? They said a ton of stuff about how, quote, "the happy ending always involves a body that does exactly what it's supposed to do all of the time."

Kate: And in that case, the body is supposed to be beautiful. And in the real world, the body is supposed to be without disability. In both cases, the individual who is "othered" will be mocked and harassed-

Maddie: -until they earn love or take on a new form. Perceptions of disabilities versus actual incapacabilities, right?

Madeline: You two really did your research! Leduc is definitely someone to keep an eye out for. They criticize this idea of a "charity model" where the audience inherently pities the ugly duckling, and in turn who he represents as a disabled community.

Maddie: And it's the young children that ingrain these messages into their core values.

Kate: This stupid idea that the perceptions of disabilities defined by literal fairy tales are always applicable and should encourage bullying.

Madeline: Call the idea stupid, but it's proven to at least work in practice. Andersen loves to feature stories of transformation or change, where the character finally finds love because instead of their bullies shifting perspectives, it is the victim that undergoes a shift.

Maddie: We were talking about Andersen's edgy backstory before this. I assume the two coincide.

Madeline: And there-in lies his inspiration. Do you think Anderse was accepted by his peers when he was a lanky awkward boy, or when he was a celebrated world-renowned author?

Kate: The latter, obviously.

Madeline: Mhm. Sure his projection helped Andersen with his trauma in the short run, but the long-term impacts are undeniable. Society has formed this idea of normalcy, and are determined to follow it to a T. Those who are deemed "not viable" are instead encouraged to be bullied into trying to change themselves just to fit into this mold.

Maddie: A mold shaped solely by societal beliefs.

Madeline: Exactly.

Kate: This is crazy deep. Who knew red flags for one meant red flags for all? I think I'm actually going to try to make an effort to recognize these patterns more cognizantly.

Madeline: I look forward to seeing that.

Maddie: Madeline, thank you so much for being here.

Madeline: Thank you for having me. It's not often I get to do these sorts of things.

Kate: We know you have a meeting after this, so we'll let you go now. We really appreciate the knowledge you have for both us and our scholars.

Madeline: Toodaloo!

Kate: Wow, we've had some really great discussions today. Our guests were on point.

Maddie: Totally, it's crazy to see how picture books and short dialogues have such a huge impact on all these crazy important issues today.

Kate: It's not just limited to written stories, you know. In my research I came across a short film Disney adaptation of "The Little Match Girl", so I gave it a watch and-

Maddie: No way! I also watched a short film version of "The Ugly Duckling!"

Kate: Wait, that's crazy! The short film I watched was dialogue free, and-

Maddie: NO WAY!!! So was mine!

Kate: Oh OK, so we definitely have to unpack this now.

Maddie: For sure. Did the Disney short film stay true to Andersen's themes and messages from your original tale?

Kate: I'd say it did. I would even argue that the messages are more clear in animation form.

Maddie: How so?

Kate: Well, the plot is almost exactly the same, minus a few heavy details from the original tale like the abusive father.

Maddie: So Disney *did* lighten it up a little but.

Kate: There is no background on the little girl's home life, no. So that part of Andersen's personal connection is lost, but the short film makes up for it in religious motifs and imagery. Andersen's original tale was already chalked-full of vivid imagery, and Disney brought it to life. A really great design element was the color choice. The animators only used color for the lit match, and through that, the scenes of her hallucination states. I think this is directly trying to convey the color, and therefore life and happiness, she experiences in heaven.

Maddie: So you're really honing in on the artistic choices Disney made to tell the story of "The Little Match Girl," when there's no dialogue to back it up?

Kate: Right. My logic is that color as a symbol is usually tied to life. Think flowers in bloom, rosy cheeks, etcetera.

Maddie: Right, like green grass in the spring?

Kate: Exactly! So the incredibly smart use of color in just the visions coming from the lit match suggests life and happiness, but in her case, a twisted perception of death. Color in this film kind of makes up for the lack of speaking to tell the story blatantly. And the themes we discussed are still there. Belief in heaven is as clear a motif as the original tale. The little girl's grandmother is literally portrayed as an angel ghost that picks up the soul of the little girl after she dies and carries her through a wall into heaven.

Maddie: I can totally picture this. Sounds like a very clear nod to Andersen's religious motivations. I'll have to give it a watch. Is it as sad as the original tale?

Kate: I will say I may have shed a tear. When you see the match girl depicted in such a cute, sad, innocent way instead of just picturing what Andersen describes in your head, the reality of the story becomes more real.

Maddie: Ugh, I swear I need a tissue just thinking about it. Good thing on our website, you can see the short film for yourself. We encourage all our scholars to do so. Anywho, let's think about it. Does this tale connect back to our discussion with Katherine. Disney makes the tale a reality by animating and releasing it years after the original tale was published. And the message for children is still the same: have empathy for those who have less than you.

Kate: You took the words right out of my mouth. What about your short film? Were any details warped from the depressing Andersen classic?

Maddie: Amazing segue, so natural too. But since you've mentioned it, I do want to talk about how my short film subverted expectations.

Kate: Ooh, let me guess! The duckling is accepted immediately even before he's a swan?

Maddie: Better, he never becomes a swan!

Kate: Better?!

Maddie: Okay, let me rephrase that. BUT REGARDLESS. The entirety of my film's tale takes place in a short passing of time, rather than the extended period from Andersen's original tale.

Kate: So the duckling never actually grew up. Then was he just automatically loved because of some other reason?

Maddie: Not exactly. Without any dialogue, the mocking facial expressions and attitude of the ducks show that the ugly duckling isn't welcomed because of his looks.

Kate: But Maddie, the films we watch are supposed to be at least somewhat familiar with the original tale. How does the duckling get his happy ending?

Maddie: It is kind of sad, but in my short film, "The Little Stranger", the ugly duckling has a wonderful mind, likely representative of the fact that beauty comes from within. He uses his wit and intelligence to save the ducks from a predator.

Kate: And that's, to quote you, "kind of sad" because...?

Maddie: It's once again this reiteration that when you're ugly, or even just outside of the norm like Madeline brought up, you're doomed to be miserable and bullied unless you prove yourself.

Kate: Like how in the original tale, the ugly duckling became a beautiful swan and suddenly, everyone adored him.

Maddie: And in this short film, no dialogue is even needed to convey this same idea: if you can't prove yourself with looks, prove yourself with anything you are able to offer. Bleed

yourself dry of everything you can give and just maybe you can find yourself loved by others.

Kate: That's... horrible.

Maddie: But it's undeniably the truth. If we want to see change in our world, we have to learn from tales like these. We can't let the morals excuse our actions, but instead have them serve as cautionary memos that starting with love is what fosters a true community.

Kate: And in avoiding our mob instincts to ostracize others, we can give them the platforms to use their inner beauty to stand out in the best ways rather than using it to fit in.

Maddie: Exactly!

Kate: Well, today was all about Andersen, and we sure covered a lot.

Maddie: I think this topic has bled me dry of my critical thinking capabilities. From justifying death in "The Little Match Girl" to unescapable societal standards from "The Ugly Duckling," we've had our fair share of absurd morals brought to you by none other than the Absurd Andersen himself. I should trademark that!

Kate: You should! But, at the same time, our amazing guests helped us think outside of the box.

Maddie: No doubt. It's so interesting how those who spend so much time dedicating themselves to their tales can offer such unique insights that we wouldn't have thought of.

Kate: Think we should ditch podcasting and become critical tale experts ourselves?

Maddie: I think our loyal fans need us too much, right guys? Instead of getting absorbed by the disheartening lessons and tragic endings Andersen has shoved in our faces, we've shown in

our podcast that his writing can help us self actualize how we fit into stories.

Kate: We are pretty awesome like that, huh.

Maddie: And similarly, our guests today had their own intuition to share as well.

Kate: Like through "The Little Match Girl," Katherine encouraged us to think about the value of empathy, and to recognize and be thankful for our own privileges while giving to those in need.

Maddie: And Madeline reminded us of the dangers of "normalcy" and how our society punishes those who do not fit into that mold. Our conversation today made me want to be more conscious of this mindset so we can all start the shift away from it, you know?

Kate: I do! So while there's really no escaping Andersen's twisted way of teaching us lessons, we can twist the way we absorb them.

Maddie: And we see this happening in modern adaptations constantly, like the short films we both watched.

Kate: I think that about wraps it up. Thank you so much to our scholars for tuning in today.

Maddie: If you haven't heard last week's episode, go check it out!

Kate: We 'got down with Grimm' and talked about the horrors of step family members.

Maddie: Make sure to tune in again next time for our one year anniversary special: Theatre and Therapy. Careful the tales you read: children will listen!!

Kate: Ugh, I'm so excited. I swear, I'm such a theatre nerd.

Maddie: As always, we've been your hosts, Kate and Maddie. Don't get too attached, and thank you guys for listening!