

# What the Weaver of Fairytales Dreamt

**According to the American dream researcher Patricia Garfield there is an intimate connection between H. C. Andersen's dreams and his famous fairytales.**

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**Dream research  
By Kim Skotte**

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H. C. Andersen's dreams were an important source of inspiration for his famous fairytales. So claims the American dream researcher Patricia Garfield. Thanks to a Danish girl friend's translations, the dream researcher has been able to read more than 100 dreams described in H. C. Andersen's diaries, and has found obvious parallels to the storyteller's world of fairytales

"Hans Christian Andersen had many seriously frightening dreams," says Garfield, who thinks the Danish writer processed his dreams, and his nightmares in particular, creatively in his work. For example, H. C. Andersen was terrified of dogs, and often dreamt scary dogs were chasing him. In his dreams they bit him and tore his clothes to shreds. In contrast, in H. C. Andersen's fairytales dogs are mostly friendly helpers to the hero of the story. "I realized he was using his dreams as a form of self-therapy," says Patricia Garfield. "By transforming the horrible dogs into friendly creatures." This is in spite of the fact that the three dogs in "The Tinderbox" by all measures could be said to be some seriously disturbing mega-pooches.

Patricia Garfield speaks. Her voice is as gentle as a breeze from a warm ocean. As if she is used to talking to people who hover somewhere between dream and waking. Discretely she calls me by my name. A hypnotic whispering. A wave of flower-filled perfume underscores the heavy dream-saturated atmosphere. If it wasn't so exciting, one could be tempted to close one's eyes and slip away and go along on a journey. To a H. C. Andersen dream, where the lanky and big-nosed writer, who yearned to be a dancer, once again is on the run from something dangerous. To be attacked and running away is the most common dream in the world, Garfield tells us, who has researched repeated dream themes across countries and cultures. The characteristics of the attacker vary from culture to culture. In India children have dreams of being attacked by vultures. In the USA, children have dreamt about sharks since the movie "Jaws." H. C. Andersen dreamt he was attacked by a huge bat trying to suffocate him. Hans Christian could have used a bit of help from the Japanese mythological monster, Baku, who lives by eating children's' nightmares.

## **12 Themes**

The dream researcher Garfield has, in "The Universal Dream Key," pinned down the 12 most common dream themes repeated everywhere in the world. These are the dreams which, in spite of regional and culturally determined variations, seem to have in their basic form a universal pattern for the dreams of all human beings. Among these are dreams

about being attacked or chased, dreams about falling, drowning, flying, swimming, dancing, the dream of being naked in public, and the dream of the well-known home, which suddenly reveals new rooms. Garfield recognizes a number of these universal dreams in H. C. Andersen's nightly shadow-life.

"It is not at all unusual that people have mostly negative dreams, but in the case of Hans Christian Andersen the excess is immense," says Garfield, who plowed through Andersen- biographies when she started re-reading the fairytales to try to connect them to the universe of dreams.

"Throughout his life, Andersen dreamt he was carrying a small child, a baby, on his shoulder or his arm, who then died and turned into a wet rag. That is a very unusual dream! Many people dream about children dying, but not about children turning into a wet rag. Given that he didn't have children of his own, it is easy enough to conclude that the dreams were not about his own children. For people who do creative work, a little child is often synonymous with a project the dreamer may be struggling with, nursing, trying to make grow. So maybe this repeated dream is about a troubled creative project. H. C. Andersen's fairytales became wildly popular, yet there was so much more he yearned to succeed in, such as singing and dancing and acting. He was a poet, and he wrote novels and plays, yet he had little success in those areas."

"Hans Christian Andersen had nightmares about being trapped. About not being able to get out. About facing execution. The classical dream themes line up. Dreams that in many cases came from his feeling of being trapped. By his own mind. By his life circumstances. By his limitations. Like the nightingale hampered by cords tied around its leg so that the courtiers could take it for walks without its flying away.

### **To Find and Lose One's Voice**

"I find a strong connection between his dream experiences and his fairytales. There is always suffering, and there is often a lot of coldness in both. Think of the little girl with the matchsticks. His people suffer in silence. The voice becomes very important. It was very important in Andersen's own life. He started out as a singer. He had a beautiful soprano voice and as a child he sang in rich people's homes. He was called "the nightingale," just like the Swedish singer Jenny Lind whom he loved so dearly. To find one's 'voice' as a writer is a common term. It could perhaps be said a bit bluntly that Hans Christian Andersen paid for his success as a fairytale writer with the shipwreck of his other talents. The main characters of "The Wild Swans" and "The Little Mermaid" must sacrifice their voices to have their dreams fulfilled. Andersen had many dreams about the throat, about getting something stuck in the throat, all kinds of problems. He also suffered horrifically from toothache. After he finally managed to have his teeth extracted, he dreamt that the maid threw his dentures out!"

H. C. Andersen did have some positive dreams as well. These dreams often took place in tropical settings with exotic Japanese or Moorish framework. Here we find "The Nightingale" again. Patricia Garfield recognizes in a story like "The Princess and The

Pea” a common dream theme: the dream of being so sensitive, that even the smallest of things are felt. It is in this universality, always recognized as an important ingredient to understanding Andersen’s popularity, that Patricia Garfield has found resonance with dreams from all over the world. H. C. Andersen’s lasting and widespread popularity is exceptional. If we are to believe Patricia Garfield this is not only due to his genius as a storyteller, but also due to the fact that his fairytales center around themes we recognize in our own lives—because we already have seen something similar in our dreams.

[kim.skotte@pol.dk](mailto:kim.skotte@pol.dk)

Caption under picture:

**Fairytales dreams.** H. C. Andersen often dreamt that he was on the run from something, that he had gotten something caught in his throat, or that he carried a child on his shoulder, the dream researcher, Patricia Garfield, tells us in her hypnotic whispering voice.

**Photo:** Miriam Dalsgaard.

Boxes:

### **Copenhagen Dreams**

The International Association for the Study of Dreams (ASD) was established in 1982 and is holding its 21<sup>st</sup> conference in Copenhagen June 18 – 22. The place is the School of Architecture on Holmen, where Olaf Gerlach Hansen is the host for dream experts from around the world meeting to share the latest developments in dream research and dream interpretation. Simultaneously, Copenhagen County has pronounced June 18 –22 official Dream Week. We will be following the conference and will have articles and interviews with some of the world’s leading authorities on dreams daily up to and including Tuesday.

### **Patricia Garfield**

The 69-year-old Garfield is one of the world’s leading dream experts and one of the founders of the Association for the Study of Dreams. She has a Ph.D. in clinical psychology and is the author of 9 books about dreams. The big best seller “Creative Dreaming” is published in many countries. The same is true for “The Universal Dream key” with the subtitle “The 12 Most Common Dream Themes,” which is published in Denmark by Aschehoug (2002).

Most recently Garfield has published two well-received books on dreams for children and young adults: “The Dream Book - A Young Person’s Guide to Understanding Dreams” and “Dream Catcher”, which is meant as part dream diary for the young reader. Patricia Garfield has herself kept a dream diary since she was 14 years old. Fifty-five years of dream journaling is perhaps the most comprehensive project of its kind.

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Culture section

English translation by Bente Licht Mirow