Dear Dr. McKetta:

Attached is Essay 1.2. The idea of the essay is to explain how "The Emperor's New Clothes" forces readers to question (1) what is a true belief (especially one propagated by a political authority), and (2) how do we know?

After the first draft, I revised the essay to improve the writing, the use of quotations, and the overall argument. My goal was to stay focused on the text itself (and my response to it) and not use outside sources, except for the epigraph (to frame the essay at the beginning and end). In Essay 2 and Essay 3, I may bring in those outside sources, as needed, possibly to show the debate on the two main points (knowledge, and political legitimacy).

If I had another opportunity to revise the draft, I would continue to try to sharpen the points I try to make. Part of my struggle in writing and revising this piece was trying to tackle the two big observations I make (knowledge and political legitimacy), while still giving the text a fair reading.

I look forward to your comments about my essay and welcome any suggestion for improvements.

Best regards,

Student

Student

Essay 1.2

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Political Illegitimacy in "The Emperor's New Clothes": The Evidence of Our Senses

> The Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command.
>
> George Orwell, *1984* (84)

A simple though preposterous story, Hans Christian Andersen's "The Emperor's New Clothes" illustrates the dual problem of political illegitimacy and knowledge. The tale can be summarized easily enough. Two swindlers arrive in town and trick the Emperor into believing they can weave a magic cloth. The fabric, they argue, would become invisible to those who were either incompetent or unfit for their governmental offices. Fearing that they will be therefore considered incompetent, ministers (and then the Emperor himself, then later all the townspeople) engage in a consecutive stream of self-delusion and herd mentality, each claiming that he can, indeed, see the magnificent fabric. Only at the end, during the Emperor's parade, does a small child blurt the obvious truth that the

Emperor has no clothes at all, after which all the townspeople admit the truth among themselves. By the end of the story, with an eye especially toward governmental authorities, Andersen subtly compels readers to ask themselves: what is a true belief, and how do we know?

Andersen tells his readers the fatal flaw that sets into motion this chain of events. It is the Emperor's vanity: "Many years ago there lived an Emperor who cared so much about beautiful new clothes that he spent all his money on dressing stylishly" (5). This vanity, Andersen tells us, causes the Emperor to forsake care in any other activity. He abrogates at least some of his duties (like taking an interest in his soldiers) in order to focus on how he looks. For the Emperor, it is his *appearance* that matters most of all. His appearance becomes an end in itself. Throughout history, authorities (political and otherwise) often adorn their rule with ceremonies, pomp, and royal raiment (like the Emperor's clothes) to provide an aura — a fiction — of legitimacy. These fictions attempt to justify or form a basis for the authority's rule. While the Emperor's clothing in Andersen's story could simply represent personal vanity, a deeper reading of the fixation of the Emperor on his clothing (and, therefore, appearances) could also describe the attempt by political authorities to dress their rule in a garb of legitimacy, an attempt which, at the end of this story, ultimately fails with the simple insight of a child.

Early on, Andersen uses a number of illustrations to describe the making of this untruth. He effectively uses the idea of weaving, not only in describing the construction of the imaginary royal raiment, but also as a metaphor for the lies that are woven by the swindlers. They pretend to work, using looms to weave the imaginary cloth, their farcical motions mimicking the construction of something

real. The "swindlers" become "weavers," (6) sewing and assembling together a larger and larger tapestry of lies. Curiously, the Emperor at this point in the story does seem to experience some doubt — but not about the reasonableness of his conclusion concerning the legitimacy of the magic cloth: "he felt quite confident on that score" (6). Instead, his anxiety is about the competence of administrators in their posts. His conceit prevents self-doubt about both his conclusions and the garment, which lead later to the embarrassment of his garments being revealed as fictitious at the end of the story. Doubt, it would seem, plays a critical role in asking whether something is true or false. It is a role that the Emperor fails to grasp.

Here the interplay of perception, belief, doubt, and knowledge become apparent in the narrative. Unlike other fairy tales, there is no use of the supernatural in "The Emperor's New Clothes." Instead the story remains firmly rooted in a plausible fictional world, with perception (or lack of it) determining belief and providing material for the tension in the story. The only example of magic (the garments) in the story is shown to be a total fraud by swindlers. Readers are able to see that the garments cannot reveal the truth the swindlers claim. In the passage previously cited, Andersen illustrates the essential importance of doubt (do we know it is true?) and justification (by what means do we know it is true?) in the question of determining when belief can sufficiently be called "knowledge." The Emperor, we observe, holds a belief that is neither justified nor true. Andersen uses this centrality of knowledge (and how it is obtained) in a crucial way. The swindlers suggest to the Emperor that the magic clothes will tell him who is unfit for their posts. Simply put, if an administrator cannot see the fabric, he is unfit.

Andersen cleverly inverts the epistemological burden of proof: it is the evidence of *absence* (*not* seeing the imaginary cloth), rather than the absence of *evidence* (not seeing cloth that *does not exist*), that will provide proof of an administrator's incompetence. *Not-seeing* allows one to confirm the existence of something, rather than *seeing*.

At this point in the story, Andersen illustrates the use of sensory observation to form belief and then shows how an untrue belief moves through society. The townspeople become willing participants in the social construction of the hoax: "Everyone in town had heard about the cloth's mysterious power, and they were all eager to discover the incompetence or stupidity of their neighbors" (6). By denying the evidence of their own senses, the townspeople become willing participants in the swindle: the promise of a magic cloth tempts the townspeople with an easy shortcut to knowledge about their neighbors. Rather than seeing leading to believing, the magic garments suggest that believing (or knowing) can lead to seeing. This part of the tale sets up the story for the later, final realizations: there is no shortcut to knowledge, and seeing evidence for legitimacy causes us to believe a political authority is legitimate (and not the other way around). In the end, denying the obvious evidence of the senses, particularly with regard to political authorities and their legitimacy, can lead to dramatic social embarrassment or worse.

In the penultimate scene, Andersen again uses the metaphor of weaving to extend the description of the swindlers building their incredible tapestry of untruth. A reader might also notice how Andersen has now ably brought along not only the townspeople into the story, but also the readers themselves. The readers too

imagine every step the swindlers take, with Andersen planting the seed of imagination in their minds. As the story unfolds, readers follow right along with it, visualizing the swindlers with their outstretched arms, pretending to hand the Emperor each of the garments, with the garments being "light as spiderwebs" (10). Andersen repeatedly uses the phrase "as if" (in translation) to bring the fictional into reality ("each stretched out an arm *as if* holding something up") (emphasis added, 10) within the narrative. Using "as if," Andersen compares an unseen fiction to a seen reality and gives life to the entirely imaginative weaving and final product of the weaver-swindlers. The preening of the Emperor in front of the mirror cements in readers' minds the reality that the Emperor finally believes his own self-delusion.

In the final scene, the Emperor marches in the big parade, his chamberlains following close behind with the imaginary train. The townspeople cheer the Emperor for his garments having a "perfect fit" and "lovely train" (13), validating each other's false belief. Finally, a small child exclaims the truth the no one else had the courage to say: "he isn't wearing anything at all!" (13). Only at this point do the townspeople whisper the truth among themselves as their belief in the magic garments completely unravels. Curiously, even with the outbursts of the crowd, the Emperor carries on and proceeds to finish the parade anyway. Readers are left to wonder about the next chapter in the story.

Is it a happy ending? At the very least, the ending may leave readers unsatisfied and with many unanswered questions. The townspeople now know that "the Emperor has no clothes" — no legitimate political authority. But the townspeople are now left without the fiction of his royal garments that they had

before. They have knowledge that cannot be unlearned. But are they entirely blameless in this story? What role (and culpability) did they play in creating the fiction of the invisible royal garments? The townspeople, as Andersen aptly illustrates, *willingly* choose to lie to themselves, their own families, and their neighbors about what they can see (or not see) in the magic cloth. With the townspeople's petty self-interests and enthusiasm to lie, Andersen's story warns readers about unjustified beliefs that are enforced by groupthink.

Lastly, what happens now? Do the townspeople continue as subjects of the Emperor, perhaps becoming consenting accomplices to illegitimate authority (possibly with new fictions created — a new pantomime of power — that the townspeople will believe)? Perhaps they instead become revolutionaries, dissatisfied with political authority that defies their senses and reason. As an alternative, maybe they seek political legitimacy through some kind of a democratic movement based on consent. Or maybe they resign themselves to some kind of philosophical anarchism, believing that all political authority is essentially based on fictions that they may (or may not) be able to change, but which they can avoid validating by not rejecting, as Orwell warns, the evidence of their own senses.

Works Cited

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Orwell, George. *1984*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1992. Print.