

Deciphering Spaces: The Mermaid & The Soul

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The mermaid has been a resilient figure for centuries. Archetypally the mermaid form has re-occurred taking on the identity as the damsel in distress as seen in Disney's film *The Little Mermaid*, adapted from the original text version by Hans Christian Andersen. The lore surrounding the mermaid presents the mermaid as a half human, half fish creature that is alluring yet dangerous; beautiful yet uncanny; familiar yet foreign. All in all whichever form an author, artist, or whoever presents the mermaid in, this particular figure remains an enigma of enchantment.

Working extensively with Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid", scholars such as Jack Zipes has considered the text within a feminist theoretical perspective, where the little mermaid is examined as a subjective figure to male domination. Zipes has considered the representations of Andersen's female protagonists as misogynistic and aligns such depictions with the ideology of the writer. Pil Dahlerup's essay "Splash! Six Views of The Little Mermaid" presents several approaches applied to the text. One of which has been a psychoanalytical approach that applies Freud's theory of the Oedipal complex to the little mermaid, and Jungian theory whereby the little mermaid is recognized as a projection of Andersen's anima.¹ For my study, I examined the text through a psychoanalytical and biographical approach.

To begin, Andersen's tale is an adaptation of Fredriech de la Motte's Foque's *Undine*. Fredriech's *Undine* that draws upon Paracelsus' treatise, whereby the nature spirits (one is an undine) may resemble a human in every way except for the possession of a soul², echoing the early Christian accounts (around 600AD) concerning the mermaid's desire to gain an immortal soul. The Christian priests of the time decided that the mermaid's were capable of gaining a soul, but only through the marrying of a Christian. Embedded in the mermaid's quest for the soul is a patriarchal consciousness³ that seeks to disempower the mermaid figure.

Andersen's protagonist (the little mermaid) embarks on a quest to gain the love of the prince while gaining a soul in the process. Furthermore, Andersen's protagonist does not gain the love of the prince and does not successfully gain a soul, though it is implied she may gain a soul after three hundred years of servitude. Andersen's tale does not necessarily focus on the protagonist's relationship with the prince in so much as it focuses on her suffering.

¹ Pil Dahlerup. "SPLASH!: SIX VIEWS OF "THE LITTLE MERMAID"" *Scandinavian Studies* 62.4 (1990): 408-412

² Barbra Fass, "The Little Mermaid and the Artist's Quest for a Soul," *Comparative Literature Studies* 9.3 (1972): 292

³ Gilbert 54

Andersen's didactic spiritual message that permeates throughout the text appears to serve as a distraction from the text's true purpose, which I will demonstrate by going through the three elemental spaces Andersen's protagonist moves through: water, land, and air.

Water:

The text's point of view focuses on the perspective of the mermaid through third person narration. Customarily, texts that include the mermaid figure are often from the perspective of an individual watching the mermaid. Andersen's tale, however, places the reader in close proximity to the little mermaid by utilizing a narrator that allows the reader access to her interiority. Functioning within mermaid-lore is the idea that a mermaid lures sailors down to the depths of the sea through enchanting voices. The mermaid voice is meant to evoke a sense of pleasure; however, Andersen's tale does away with the provocative element where he connects the voice to nature. Such is the case in the following, "The men could not understand the mermaid's songs; they thought it was the wind that was singing."⁴ Contextually, this statement is part of a passage that relies heavily on the lore of mermaids. The passage notes the five sisters of the little mermaid would swim before a ship during a storm to console the frantic sailors, telling them of the sea's beauty. However, during these storms the men are only able to interpret their words as being part of the wind. Moving forward, the narrator uses the word singing instead of howling in conjunction with wind. By using the term singing, there is a sense of placidity that persists despite a turbulent moment. The mermaid's contribution of peace and the attribution of their voice to nature creates a semi-ethereal quality to the otherwise seductive/provocative notion of a mermaid. Andersen's mermaids, though partially built upon pre-existing lore, possess a quality that is unique and inventive. At the moment it is premature to claim the mermaids are semi-ethereal creatures, however I Andersen associates femininity with water by turning the sea into a matriarchal space⁵ and does so again within the final third of the text. The matriarchal element lies in Andersen's stylistic choice to primarily focus on female characters in the sea. The lacking male presence suggests the social order of Andersen's underwater realm is dominated by femininity. These feminine associations to spaces that possess or present spiritual/ethereal elements could possibly suggest a reason as to why the mermaid remains an enigmatic yet enchanting figure. Nevertheless, I will reveal the significance of this in a moment.

Land:

I will first provide a quick synopsis of the little mermaid's transformation. In order to gain access to the human world, the little mermaid must be magically transformed. Andersen's protagonist seeks the assistance of the sea witch, where she receives a potion that will turn her into a human. In exchange for the potion, the little mermaid willingly sacrifices her voice. While on land she remains mute and must express herself through her body.

⁴ Hans Christian Andersen, "The Little Mermaid," *Hans Christian Andersen: The Complete Fairy Tales and Stories*, (New York: Anchor, 1983), 61

⁵ Pil Dahlerup, "SPLASH!: SIX VIEWS OF "THE LITTLE MERMAID", " *Scandinavian Studies* 62.4 (1990): 406

The focus is placed on the protagonist's body. The emphasized detail of the mermaid's physical transformation that Andersen utilizes suggests land is symbolic of a corporeal space and one where the possibility of the protagonist's sexuality becomes actualized. In order to win the prince's love, Andersen's mermaid is told by the sea witch to accentuate her physical attributes, whereby the little mermaid should "speak with her graceful walk and her lovely eyes."⁶ Andersen has sexualized the protagonist's body and illustrates the basis of communication on land as one of physical expression. In her mermaid form, the little mermaid possesses an ethereal voice, which is connected to nature and resides in a space that is contextually connected to nature. However, her pure and ethereal embodiment is incomprehensible to humans as demonstrated earlier. What is understood, however, is physical expression, which can be connected to the expression of one's sexuality. Degradation has taken place for the little mermaid. The once innocent and semi-ethereal creature is transformed into an empty vessel due to the compromising of her voice, deprived of her innocence (her voice) in order to obtain both her lover and a soul.

The little mermaid's "metaphorical castration"⁷ meaning the removal of her tongue has been put forward by Pauline Tam, who perceives it as preventative measure to prevent the woman of the sea from successfully seducing men again, which practically puts an end to the two-thousand-year campaign against female intellectual or sexual expression.⁸ Another scholar by the name of Krista Gilbert interprets the silencing of the protagonist as the silencing of the mermaid's symbolic possibilities, meaning the wild, dark, seductive, and demonic associations to the mermaid archetype are no longer relative.⁹ Interestingly, mermaid lore has characterized the figure's voice as threatening; yet, Andersen's representation of the mermaid voice is anything but. As demonstrated earlier, the mermaids within the text do not possess voices that allure men to their death because it conjures audible pleasure; rather, the mermaids possess voices that disregard their archetypal potential by having the sound of the voice be synonymous with nature. Andersen's intentions, concerning the mermaid figure, appear to retract from adding to the lore of the mermaid, but rather appears to disregard the lore in a pursuit to create a tale that exists beyond the lore of the mermaid figure. This move is notable in the final third of Andersen's text, where the element of air takes on a spiritual connotation and transforms the heroine of the text for the final time.

Air:

Andersen concludes the tale with the transformation of the little mermaid into a daughter of air after she enacts the role of a martyr by willingly sacrificing her life to save the

⁶ Hans Christian Andersen, "The Little Mermaid," *Hans Christian Andersen: The Complete Fairy Tales and Stories*, (New York: Anchor, 1983), 69

⁷ Pauline Po Chun Tam, "Silence and Voice in Literary Representations of the Mermaid in World Literature," *Dissertation* (2012): 175

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Krista Lauren Gilbert, *The Mermaid Archetype*. Diss, (Pacifica Graduate Institute, 2006. Ann Arbor: UMI Microform), 8

prince. In this section, the religiosity of the text is evident in that the daughters of air are in a quasi-purgatory state. These spiritual beings must work to gain an immortal soul and be with God. It is in this religious development that the spiritual aspect of air of "The Little Mermaid" gets interesting. The stipulations of the little mermaid's trial goes as follows, "if we find a good child, who makes his parents happy and deserves their love, we smile and God takes a year away from the time of our trial. But if there is a naughty and mean child . . . we cry; and for every tear we shed, God adds a day to the three hundred years we already must serve."¹⁰ The withholding of the little mermaid's soul in conjunction with her continued role as a selfless server figure creates confusion for the reader, forcing one to question Andersen's intentions?

It is possible to interpret this action as being one part of a religious representation, but the manifestation of the religious/spiritual ideology falls short. For example, Andersen's tale could have utilized his protagonist to illustrate the sufferings one bears on earth will be redeemed in heaven, which is plausible if one were to reference the following: "Sing, O heavens, and be joyful, O earth! And break forth into singing, O mountains! For the Lord hath comforted His people, and will have mercy upon His afflicted".¹¹ Andersen's didactic ending textually leaves the little mermaid in an indeterminate position, but allows the reader to be the agent of change whereby the little mermaid may obtain a soul. The words printed on the page will always remain, meaning the little mermaid will forever be crystallized in her deprivation. The denial of the little mermaid's soul suggests a possible inaudibility on the part of the mermaid figure, whereby I mean Andersen has hollowed out his protagonist and instead of filling her with new imaginative attributes that build off of mermaid lore myth, silences and simplifies her to a fictitious persona.

Returning momentarily to the first third of tale, as mentioned before water is presented as a feminine space as well as air, which is exemplified through the daughters of air. Though the daughters of air are spiritual beings and lack sexuality and gender, their title suggests air is a feminine space. Further, if we return to the connection concerning the ethereal quality of the mermaid voice, Andersen's mermaids are inherently supplied with the spiritual or ethereal essence the beings of the air are made of. This otherwise overlooked detail suggests Andersen strategically planned for his mermaid to be a more or less spiritual creature.

If we consider the soul within a religious context, it is an immaterial substance. Knowing that land is representative of a corporeal space and air is a spiritual space, what might be said about the elemental connection of air and water? At the moment, I do not have an answer, but can state Andersen's deliberate unfolding of the text is to create a distinction between the divine and non-divine, the soul and the body.

Returning to the little mermaid's denied soul, it appears that Andersen allows his mermaid to undergo her trial in order to reinforce the obtainment of a soul is not inextricably connected to man, but this reason does not appear to be enough because it

¹⁰ Hans Christian Andersen, "The Little Mermaid," *Hans Christian Andersen: The Complete Fairy Tales and Stories*, (New York: Anchor, 1983), 71

¹¹ "Isaiah," *King James Bible*, (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible, 1973) 49:13

does not answer the *why* fully. Andersen possesses the authorial power to give the little mermaid a soul, while making the distinction between the divine and non-divine. So, why does Andersen withhold a soul from the mermaid? I will present one plausible answer by relying on a diary entry from Andersen, a critique from Jack Zipes and Andersen's contemporary Søren Kierkegaard.

As discussed earlier, Andersen's tale is a re-imaging of Foqué's *Undine*. Maria Tatar's *The Annotated Hans Christian Andersen* provides a diary entry written February 11, 1837 from Andersen where he discusses "The Little Mermaid" as presented in the following:

I have not . . . let the mermaid's acquisition of an immortal soul depend on an alien creature, upon the love of a human being. I'm sure that would be wrong! It would depend rather a lot of chance, wouldn't it? I won't accept that sort of thing in this world. I have permitted my mermaid to follow a more natural, divine path.¹²

The crux of the tale lies in the protagonist's attempt to gain a soul. The romantic element within the story becomes a tool to progress the plot for the little mermaid's advancement towards her true desire, an immortal soul. The divine path that Andersen sets out for his mermaid is evident, but as mentioned above falls short by denying her a soul and the element of chance is connected to the agency Andersen bestows on to the reader.

Interestingly, Andersen's letter appears to take on an adamant position in deciding the mermaid's fate, where the mermaid becomes more than an imaginative concept but takes on an identity independent of her lore. The use of "my" illustrates an emotional attachment Andersen possesses towards his protagonist. Had Andersen said something like "I have permitted the mermaid in my tale" or "I have permitted the mermaid," then the emotional attachment Andersen has invested in his protagonist would not exist. Furthermore, the "my" is a term of ownership, which could be used to substantiate a claim asserting Andersen's patriarchal dominance upon the woman of the sea; however, this possessive term is recognizably Andersen's attempt to free the mermaid figure from the constraints of male ownership. Though contradictory to the final third of the tale, Andersen clearly desires for the little mermaid to be freed from the hardships that comes with a human life, especially the pain attributed to unrequited love. This ownership exemplified through "my" is Andersen's personal connection to the little mermaid. The personal connection is perhaps, as I intended to explain further, attributed to the little mermaid being a partial embodiment of Andersen. If Andersen were to reflect himself through the mermaid, then rightfully he would have been invested.

Furthermore, the distaste attributed to the mermaid loving a human being or "alien creature" suggests a personal cynicism towards the loving relationships. This notion can be examined further through Jack Zipes. In Jack Zipes' work "*Hans Christian Andersen: The Misunderstood Storyteller*," he regards Andersen as being "an emotional cripple who failed to satisfy his desires and needs in intimate relationships of any kind. There is also a

¹² H.C. Andersen and Maria Tatar, "The Little Mermaid," *The Annotated Hans Christian Andersen*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), 120

certain fear of sexual and erotic arousal that he apparently tried to tame in his tales.”¹³ A connection between Andersen and his protagonist is made transparent through the protagonist’s relationship with the prince. Zipes characterizes, harshly, Andersen as being emotionally unbalanced stemming from unfulfilling relationships. Similarly, the little mermaid is emotionally deprived from developing an intimate relationship with the prince, due to his marrying of another woman. Both of her desires, gaining love and a soul, never come into fruition throughout the text.

We can go further and identify, as Zipes phrases it, the crippling Andersen suffered manifesting itself through the protagonist’s physical crippling. During the little mermaid’s silencing, the sea witch warns the little mermaid that while in a human form it will feel as though she was “walking on knives so sharp her blood would flow”.¹⁴ The use of cripple implies the occurrence of a deprivation, whereby Andersen’s crippling, according to Zipes, is a deprivation of emotional fulfillment. In turn, the emotional deprivation felt by Andersen is subconsciously projected onto the page by crippling the little mermaid. To note, the little mermaid has not been physically crippled. In light of Zipes comment, Andersen and his protagonist experience an internalized crippling that does not manifest itself externally. If we return to the sea witch’s warning, the little mermaid is perceived as a graceful young woman. We as readers recognized she is crippled by the narrator’s explication of it. Andersen has purposefully handicapped the protagonist, a decision that appears necessary for the development of his religious moral; however, the biographical connection suggests otherwise, allowing Andersen to utilize a religious style to express his own pain.

Lastly, Zipes particular assertion forces one to reconsider the mermaid’s silencing in an entirely different light. We can see Zipes assertion of Andersen “taming” sexuality in his tale through the protagonist’s silencing. The moment occurs when the little mermaid agrees to the sea witch’s conditions, where she states, “that voice you will have to give to me Stick out your little tongue and let me cut it off in payment . . . She was mute, she could neither speak nor sing”.¹⁵ As mentioned before, this moment of silencing has been regarded by scholars as an act of female disempowerment whereby Andersen is projecting onto the page misogynistic views; nevertheless, in light of Zipes assertion one can interpret the silencing as Andersen’s attempt to silence his own anxieties by utilizing his protagonist. In this way, the little mermaid becomes the vehicle whereby Andersen performs an act of flagellation, figuratively, upon himself.

Transitioning to Andersen’s contemporary Søren Kierkegaard, Kierkegaard recognized a similarity that persisted between Andersen and his characters when reviewing Andersen’s novel *Only a Fiddler*. Kierkegaard develops an argument concerning the necessary elements of a novel, where he asserts two reasons as to why an author would focus on their hero’s loss, sacrificing the needed unity and artistry to portray a conceivable conception of life to his or her reader. Of the two he mentions, I intend on focusing on the

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Hans Christian Andersen, "The Little Mermaid," *Hans Christian Andersen: The Complete Fairy Tales and Stories*, (New York: Anchor, 1983), 68

¹⁵ Ibid., 69

second: "Or it can be brought about by this, at the very first awakening of reflection one does not look outward but instantaneously into oneself and in one's so-called contemplation of the world merely carries through accurately one's own suffering"¹⁶. Kierkegaard is describing a ego driven behavior, whereby the individual's conception of the world is emanated solely through the writer's reflection of how *he or she fits* within the world, and from there develops an understanding *of* the world. Andersen's fictitious world is endowed with pain and suffering, which readers recognize through the little mermaid. As I have been building the relationship that exists between Andersen and his protagonist, there is an indication that Andersen recognizes the dissatisfactory aspects of his own life. There is the apparent denial of intimate relationships, the distaste towards love, and finally the fear and anxieties attached to the recognition of one's sexuality. Andersen's mermaid reflects the suffering he may have experienced due to the said reasons above. We, therefore, may conclude, tentatively, "The Little Mermaid" is in fact own "Andersen's so-called contemplation of the world [which] merely carries through accurately his own suffering."¹⁷

When we sympathize with the little mermaid, it is not the character we are intended to sympathize with; rather we are to sympathize with the suffering soul of Hans Christian Andersen. Though Andersen's protagonist functions as a vehicle to navigate his own reality, I wish to understand the particular significance of Andersen's mermaid separate from the artist. This Fall I intend on understanding the elemental connection Andersen has developed between Air and Water in order to understand the significance of the mermaid figure within the text, meaning I will shift away from the protagonist (the little mermaid) and focus predominately on her sisters and grandmother. The reason being that the little mermaid appears to be nothing more than an embodiment of Andersen. I wish to understand the unique characterization of the mermaid sisters within Andersen's text, considering they never elevate into spiritual beings. I will further examine texts from the 19th century onward to see if this semi-ethereal quality Andersen attributes to the mermaid persists with other writers, and to ultimately discover the means of enchantment the mermaid figure evokes from the pages she is written upon.

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