Splash!
Six Views of “The Little Mermaid”

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In the spring semester of 1988 I taught Danish literature in the Department of Scandinavian Studies, at Berkeley. In a graduate seminar, different ways of reading Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid” were discussed. Niels and Faith Ingwersen happened to come by, and that was the beginning of the Splash project.

A Structuralist Approach
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Structuralism, as the term suggests, is concerned with structures and, more particularly, with examining the general laws by which they work. It also tends to reduce individual phenomena to mere instances of such laws. Structuralism contains a belief that the individual units of any system have meaning only by virtue of their relation to one another. The relation between the various items of a story may be ones of parallelism, oppositions, inversion, equivalence, and so on; and as long as the structure of internal relations remains intact, the individual units are replaceable. The method is analytical, not evaluative. Structuralism is a calculated affront to common sense, since it refuses the obvious meaning of the story and seeks instead to isolate certain deep structures within it. Even though the particular contents of the text are replaceable, there is still a sense in which one can say that the contents of the narrative are its structure. This is equivalent to claiming that the narrative is in a way about itself: its subject is that of its own internal relations, its own modes of making sense.

The founder of modern structural linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure, viewed language as a system of signs that was to be studied at a given point in time—rather than diachronically, in its historical development. The relation between the whole sign and what it refers to is therefore also arbitrary. Each sign in the system has meaning only by virtue of its difference from the others.
The modern structural analysis of narrative, the science of narratology, began with the work on myth by Claude Levi-Strauss, who viewed apparently different myths as variations on a number of basic themes. Although Vladimir Propp had in 1928 reduced all folk tales to seven spheres of action and thirty-one fixed elements of functions, A. J. Greimas was able to abstract his account even further by the concept of an “actant,” which is neither a specific narrative event nor a character, but a structural unit. Not only does structuralism think everything through again, this time as language, but it thinks everything through again as though language were its very subject matter.

Structuralism has led to the creation of some simple interpretive models that are part of a descriptive method, and in the following I will apply these models to “The Little Mermaid.”

The Little Mermaid

The text features a sequence of events experienced by the little mermaid. In order to carry out her wishes to become 1. a human being, 2. to marry the prince, and 3. to achieve immortality, certain preconditions have to be satisfied. The mermaid’s will to achieve her goals is uniform throughout the story, but her will is not enough; she needs help from the witch to realize them. The price for this help is high; she has to suffer a lot of pain and the loss of her beautiful voice. When it becomes clear to the mermaid that the prince is not going to marry her (and hereby give her an immortal soul), she decides not to save herself by taking the life of the prince. Through self-sacrifice there is the possibility of her achieving immortality within the next 300 years.

The Actantial Model

The actantial model shows a static picture, a chart of the project and its conditions. It does not inform the reader how the enterprise progresses. If the subject is a prince and the object a princess he wants to marry, he is the receiver regardless of the success of his project. Just as the king is the sender, even though he might not give the princess to the prince. As above mentioned, the mermaid has three wishes, and it is therefore necessary to apply three actantial models.

1. The subject is the mermaid; she wants to become human (object). Her helper is the sea witch, the opponents her mermaid body. The sender is the witch, and the receiver is the mermaid.

2. The subject is the mermaid; she wants to marry the prince (object). She has no helper, and the loss of her voice is her opponent. The sender is the prince, and the mermaid the receiver.

3. The mermaid is the subject, immortality the object. Her own good deeds are her helpers. The prince’s marrying the princess is her opponent. God is the sender, and the mermaid is the receiver.

Through the three models one can see that the mermaid within her own environment is able by her actions to obtain help to carry out her project. In the human world she is at first passive and remains without a helper. It is only when she decides to act (not to kill the prince) that she is helped to achieve her goal of immortality.

The Contract Model

In the contract model the progress of the story is described. The contract can be informal and consist, for example, of a congenial acceptance, of the norms of a certain milieu, family, village, or nation. The model shows that the principal character—the mermaid—at the beginning is in a contract relationship, which she breaks. She goes against her family and the rules set by nature. By breaking the contract, she is ostracized from the community and is moved to a world with other rules. The mermaid is not able to achieve her goal of physical and spiritual love in this new world, but by killing the prince, she will be able to reestablish the contract with her family. However, she does not choose to do so; instead, she decides to take her own life. She thereby obtains the status of a martyr; she is then moved to a third world, that of the daughters of the air.

From the beginning of the story such a development has been hinted at. The mermaid comes from a world where the sea king is merely a figurehead. The sea witch has the real power. She represents raw power, know-how of a frightening character, and she is old, ugly, and destructive. The mermaid is far too good to return to the sea witch’s world. She is young, beautiful, brave, modest, faithful, active, and—above all—different. The prince is also young and handsome, but he is self-centered, egoistic, and passive. He is not worthy of the mermaid.

The S-model

The following represents the binary oppositions that form the basic dualism in the beginning of the story.

**Universal Order**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Order in the Sea</th>
<th>Order in the Land</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mortality</td>
<td>Immortality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower world</td>
<td>Higher world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of ability to cry</td>
<td>Ability to cry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mer-people</td>
<td>Human beings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature</td>
<td>Culture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Order in the Sea**

- Mortality
- Lower world
- Lack of ability to cry
- Mer-people
- Nature

**Order in the Land**

- Immortality
- Higher world
- Ability to cry
- Human beings
- Culture
The movement between the binary oppositions in the text can be illustrated as follows:

*Life in the Sea World, Life in the Land World*

The following represents the binary oppositions that form the basic dualism at the end of the story.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Universal Order</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Order of the Humans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innate immortality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fragrance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No demands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masculinity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The movement between the binary oppositions can be illustrated as follows:

*Life of Humans Immortal Life Life of the Air Spirits*

The model asserts that a movement between two conditions always takes place in two phases. First one movement that removes or negates the first condition, hereafter a movement that establishes another condition.

Conclusion

Structuralism is very goal-directed; it takes a direct approach to unveil the central meaning and structure of a text.

In the actantial model the enterprise of the mermaid is pointed out and the forces working for her and against her are clarified. The contract model highlights the process of the story from the beginning to the very end. The S-model focuses on the two possible conditions the story relates to and tells about: mortality versus immortality. We have moved from a cause of events of a more or less manifold character to some hidden law that can be captured in simple models. The argument can therefore be made that this story has a world view that is based on binary oppositions.

Notes

1. This is how I interpret fish tails versus legs.
2. The line is broken because the mermaid does not succeed in achieving human life.
3. The line is broken because we do not know within the framework of the story whether or not the mermaid achieves immortality.

A Psychoanalytic Approach

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A TRADITIONAL psychoanalytic approach to a literary text employs the tenets of classical psychoanalysis, developed by Freud and further elaborated on, and modified by, his followers. One of the more significant aspects of Freudian theory and that which has come under greatest critique from post-Freudian feminist psychoanalytic theory is Freud's notion of the Oedipal complex. The main objection to Freud's theories on female psychosexual development, which are outlined in his three essays "Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes" (1925), “Female Sexuality” (1931), and “Femininity” (1933), revolves around Freud's insistence that women are born physically castrated. According to Freud, the little girl blames the mother for her own castration and turns to the father as the person who can provide her with the phallus she is lacking. Unable to gain access to the father because of the incest taboo, Freud maintains that the female desire for the phallus is transformed into the desire for a baby, preferably a boy. This Oedipal crisis is suppressed during the period of latency and reemerges at puberty, when the Oedipal desire resurfaces and is displaced from the father onto other male figures. Post-Freudian object theorists such as Nancy Chodorow would maintain that it is not only the Oedipal but also the pre-Oedipal conflicts that re-emerge at prepuberty and adolescence and that the adolescent girl, more so than the boy, must struggle with greater issues of separation from the pre-Oedipal mother. Using a psychoanalytic framework, one might interpret "Den lille Havfrue" as an attempt on the part of the mermaid to work through the Oedipal conflict characteristic of the adolescent phase.

The mermaid's desire to leave the female dominated mer-world is already anticipated in her garden, which has as its center a male statue resembling the prince. The desire of the little mermaid to leave the mer-world, the world of the pre-Oedipal mother, dominates the initial part of the story. On her fifteenth birthday, she, like her sisters, travels to see the human world. While the journey to the higher world satisfies the
curiosity of her older sisters, the little mermaid returns with an intense desire for the prince and the human patriarchal world. From her grandmother she learns that human beings have immortal souls and that a mermaid can acquire one by marrying a human. She then travels to the sea witch in order to seek her assistance in acquiring a human form. She willingly sacrifices her voice to the sea witch for the magic potion. The cutting out of the mermaid’s tongue and her simultaneous loss of language can be interpreted as a form of castration. Her acceptance of her own castration is in Freudian terms the prerequisite for the phallic desire that she directs toward the prince. In a Lacanian sense this castration, or lack of language, is what will prevent her from participating in the symbolic order. Thus the mermaid, who had been characterized as being whole and possessing a beautiful voice in the matriarchal mer-world, enters the patriarchal human world severely disabled. One might venture to say that H. C. Andersen’s tale thus thematizes the suppression of female and maternal subjectivity in the patriarchal order. In Freudian terms the girl blames the mother for her own castration. It is of note here that H. C. Andersen uses a negative female figure, the sea witch, as castrator, thereby reinforcing the negative image of woman as aggressor. One might say that the sea witch represents the ambivalent mother, who on the one hand wishes to promote her daughter’s separation, but on the other desires to keep her close. For, while the sea witch “helps” the little mermaid in her quest to be human, it is the very nature of her assistance that in fact prevents the success of the mermaid’s quest. Without language she cannot be her own effective agent in the symbolic order. It is also significant that it is the sea witch who ultimately provides the mermaid with the dagger to kill the prince, an act which would enable her to return to the pre-Oedipal realm of the mother. Thus, both her encounters with the sea witch, in effect, prevent the mermaid from successfully working through the Oedipal crisis: the first by crippling her abilities to succeed in the human order owing to her loss of language and the second by providing her with a resolution that would return her to the mer-world, a place to which the mermaid herself has had an ambivalent response. One might say that the mermaid’s refusal to kill the prince reflects her desire to separate from the maternal realm and work through the Oedipal crisis, for it seems she would rather die than return to the mer-world. By refusing to kill the prince and by directing the dagger toward the sea, the mermaid sacrifices the matriarchal order to the patriarchal one. The Oedipal desire of the mermaid is thereby sustained in the “daughters of the air” episode by being displaced onto patriarchal religion. It is interesting to note that Freud himself sees religious needs as representing the desire for the protective father. In _Civilization and Its Discontents_ (1930), Freud writes, “The derivation of religious needs from the infant’s helplessness and the longing for the father aroused by it seems to me incontrovertible” (20). This is also supported by Madelon Sprengnether in her recent book _The Spectral Mother_ (1990), in which she writes, “The theme of human helplessness forms a bridge to Freud’s understanding of religion as an expression of the desire for paternal protection” (115).

A Freudian analysis of this type reveals the privileged position of patriarchal presence inherent in Freud’s theories. However a feminist analysis of the story might emphasize that the little mermaid has grown up motherless and that, as the youngest of the sisters, has experienced the shortest bond with the mother. While the story indicates that the grandmother serves as a mother substitute, the loss incurred by the mermaid of her biological mother could be an indication of early psychic wounding, which her subsequent quest attempts to heal.

While Freudian and post-Freudian theories are by far the more commonly employed modes of psychoanalytic interpretation, there are certain elements in the text that might make a Jungian approach more compelling. What first comes to mind in this regard is the contrastive importance of religion in Freudian and Jungian thought. Freud relegates religion to the sphere of feeling, as opposed to the realm of science, a realm that Freud privileges. While Freud acknowledges some type of religious sentiment, he does not see it as an organic part of the human psyche. In contrast to Freudian psychoanalysis, Jungian analytical psychology privileges spirituality and its expression in religious sentiment. Jung sees the spiritual as primary, an organic part of the psyche. Thus, one of the reasons a Jungian approach might work more effectively with “Den lille Havfrue” is its ability to incorporate better the text’s spiritual aspects.

Jungian psychology focuses on the concept of a whole psyche composed of various archetypes. Although every individual human psyche possesses the same archetypes, different archetypes may be prominent at different times. According to Jung, the psyche also possesses feminine and masculine elements:

Jung hypothesized a psychic structure that corresponds to the different chromosomal makeup of men and women: a predominantly feminine conscious personality in a woman, masculine in a man, together with a predominantly, masculine or feminine component, respectively, in the unconscious... Each is needed to complement the other, and therefore, is insufficient alone... For a man or woman to achieve wholeness, it is essential that each develop both the feminine and masculine sides of his or her personality. (Mattoon 83-84)

The balancing of the masculine and feminine within one’s psyche is seen as part of the individuation process. This integration of all psychic aspects results in a wholeness the eventual expression of which is often reflected in the realm of spirituality. Using a Jungian interpretation, Eigel Nyborg interprets “Den lille Havfrue” as a depiction of the prince’s individuation
little mermaid representing his unconscious feminine element (his anima). Although Nyborg sees the prince as the protagonist of the tale, one could argue that the mermaid is the central character and that the story relates her attempt at individuation, with the prince representing her animus. Such an interpretation would reveal the mermaid’s failed attempt at individuation. What thwarts her effort at wholeness is her repression and eventual annihilation of the feminine in an attempt to integrate the masculine.

The sea world in which the little mermaid lives has the following qualities: it is female dominated (there is almost entire absence of males); it is a world of death for humans; and its creatures (the mer-folk) tend to appear and be active at night. The sea, death, and night in Jungian terms are seen as female symbols. In this seemingly peaceful and contented world, the little mermaid, is, however, unhappy. She longs to ascend to the human world. Jungian psychology often interprets the subject’s desire for another as the subject’s projection of his/her anima/animus. For example, the male subject projects his anima onto the female object, whereas the female subject projects her animus onto the male object. This projection often represents the subject’s desire “for all that one is, consciously—but may be, unconsciously” (Singer 205). She yearns for the prince and the sun, which in Jungian terms is a traditionally male symbol. Indeed, her garden is even shaped like the sun, composed of red flowers (which are reminiscent of little suns) and a statue of a boy, which the prince happens to resemble. In Jungian terms, the strength of her desire for the prince is characteristic of the projection of the animus onto a male figure: “Therefore animus and anima... are experienced primarily in a projected form in relationships between the sexes with a special quality of strength that transcends nearly all other human feelings” (Singer 205). The integration of masculine and feminine elements in the psyche is a quest for unity and wholeness. The fact that the prince and the little mermaid share the same birthday further emphasizes the possibility that the prince and the little mermaid may be considered two unintegrated aspects of self. The steps necessary to obtain the prince are, however, those that require the repression of the little mermaid’s own identity, for, by drinking the witch’s potion, she loses both her mermaid form and her voice. In the penultimate scene, the little mermaid throws the dagger into the sea, which turns red where the blade touches it. With this gesture the little mermaid is symbolically killing the feminine (the sea) with a phallic object (the dagger), representative of the masculine. A further indication that the feminine archetype in this case is overshadowed and destroyed by the masculine is the fact that the sunbeams bring death to the little mermaid: “den lille Havfrue lagde sine hvide Arme paa Reelingen og saa mod Østen efter Morgenrøden, den første Solstraale, vidste hun, vilde døbe hende” [105] (the little mermaid leaned her white arms on the railing and looked eastward toward the red dawn; the first ray of sunlight, she knew, would kill her). Thus the little mermaid’s attempt at individuation fails. The wholeness and spirituality that result from psychic integration thus remain that which she still desires in the “daughters of the air” episode.

Whether one takes a Freudian or Jungian approach to this text, what seems to be at stake is the thwarted efforts of the female figure to develop and participate fully in a patriarchal order. While Nyborg takes a psychobiographical approach, viewing the prince as representing aspects of H. C. Andersen’s own development, one could argue that Andersen’s identification is instead with the little mermaid. Much like Freud, Andersen seems highly invested in projecting his own fear of castration, or disempowerment, onto the female figure of the mermaid. Her castration (loss of tongue, voice, and art) might represent Andersen’s own fear of losing his ability to express himself as an artist. Finally, the mermaid, in her persistent attempt to transcend her own origins and gain access to another world, might well reflect H. C. Andersen’s own entrapment in the position of outsider.

Works Consulted


**A Folktales/Disney Approach**

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Any student of folklore will point to the importance of “the test” in the magic tale. Heroine or hero, according to the epic expectations invoked by the genre, must inevitably pass one or a series of tests to eliminate the lacks in her or his life and to earn the reward of living happily ever after with the sexual partner encountered on that “quest for fulfillment.”

In the magic tale, the protagonists may initially fail the tests posed, but they ultimately prove their mettle. Hans Christian Andersen’s texts are strongly indebted, of course, to the folktale (and, in this case, to the magic tale), but the poetic narrative examined in this context, to a large degree, also echoes the undeserved sense of deprivation and utter isolation
commonly experienced by the protagonists of the ballad. In that genre, in stark contrast to the magic tale, the passing of a test does not guarantee that those who have demonstrated their honor or moral integrity will be rewarded. Although the textual universe of the magic tale is just, the world of the ballad discloses the often gross unfairness of life. The fate of the knight in “Elverskud” or of the courageous young hero of “Germand Gladensvend” comes to mind, for those two pass grueling tests with flying colors, only to be cruelly destroyed.

Against this background of genre, the most important tests that the little mermaid must pass shall be examined employing models proffered by folkloristic narratology. It is tempting and easy to find scores of tests, but only the most striking ones will be discussed here. For clarity’s sake, they are numbered.

1. The little mermaid, unlike her sisters, is not satisfied with distant glimpses of what lies above her own element. She continues to strive—as foreshadowed in the garden imagery—for transcendence. This striving is evident in her saving the shipwrecked prince from drowning, for she thereby rejects the seductive and destructive nature that should be hers as a mermaid.

2. When the little mermaid realizes that she has to make a sacrifice in order to become a human being in body, she willingly does so: she gives up her tantalizing voice to gain shapely human legs in place of a tail.

It should be noted, in the two instances mentioned above, that our heroine is miserably failing her nature as a mermaid, but splendidly passing her tests as someone attempting to transcend her present level of existence.

3. Now that the little mermaid has acquired those human features that will enable her to pass as a human being, she sets out to take what seems to be the final test, the securing of the prince’s love, which will grant her an immortal soul. But, being mute, she, who in her former element was the foremost singer in the whole world of land and of sea, cannot express her feelings of love and longing, and her exquisite looks and expressive dancing turn her into a mere pet for the prince. When the prince falls in love with and weds the princess, whom he believes has saved him, the little mermaid seems to have failed in her quest. During the wedding feast, she expresses all her sorrow over that realization through her body—beauty is born from pain—as she dances her “dance of death.” That certainty of an inevitably tragic destiny echoes the grim recognition of human bondage voiced in the ballads.

4. But another test is in store for our heroine. During the wedding night on the ship, the young woman—she can hardly be called “little” or “mermaid” anymore—naturally feels deserted, jealous, and completely alone. She is, however, given a chance to return to her former level of existence—on the condition that she take the life of the prince by stabbing him. The “mermaid” could then live on. But such a life would seem to be for a very short span of years for one who has come to love immortality and who has sought it in vain. The same might be true of a life lived with the prince, although she does not realize it. The fact that she throws the knife into the water and, thus, sacrifices herself may suggest that she passes her final test as a mortal, because she possesses a love for the prince that, in its selflessness, is beyond any love he can feel for her, but it should be added that her sacrificial act may also reflect a spiritual being’s refusal to return to a lower existence, a life that would now amount to nothingness for her. Whether she turns to foam or joins her sisters is actually immaterial, for both would be forms of extinction.

When she passes that third and final test and achieves the transcendence for which she has, knowingly and unknowingly, been striving, Thanatos replaces eros, but within the textual universe, it is more correct to say that eros eliminates or conquers over thanatos. Like the hero or heroine in the magic tale, she has gained all she ever wanted—in the terms of a spirituality that is unknown to the magic tale.

In a magic tale, the conquering protagonist ends up with the ideal partner, half the kingdom, and quite often with treasures galore; however, in Andersen’s text the reward is purely spiritual. In some magic tales maturation is a major theme, but it is achieved for the sake of this world only; in Andersen’s tale the protagonist also learns what is the real goal of her quest, and her reward lies in transcendence. By sacrificing herself, she has again rejected a soulless life, and as she assumes spirit form, she regains her voice and can finally express her love of the heavenly, just as she has acquired the independence to achieve it (see Matthew 10.30 and 16.25–26).

She, a would-be soul formerly imprisoned in a physical body, is about to pass her ultimate test and to earn the reward of an eternal spiritual existence. Such a yearning for the spiritual seems foreign to Scandinavian magic tales but was often and ardently expressed in Andersen’s works. There, one can rise like a diaphanous sea mist before the warming rays of the sun, only to disappear in its warmth.

Disney’s Text

The mermaid’s tale as that of a soul’s longing for transcendence is completely ignored by the Disney version. The movie is nevertheless truer to the folk tale struggle between good and evil than Andersen’s tale is. Andersen’s sea was nearly a matriarchy (there was a queen mother, a king, and many princesses)—but Disney’s shows only the negative side of feminine rule and the positive side of masculine rule. The evil sea witch who has demanded for her help the sacrifice of the mermaid’s voice proves to be the princess whom the prince falls in love with. She is intent on usurping power both on land and in sea. Her true troll nature is exposed and her power over the prince broken when the mermaid receives back her voice—and thus the true love of the prince. They will live happily ever after—as
any mortal couple. With the destruction of the sea witch, the beings of the sea can also live happily ever after—under their proper ruler, “the king.”

Disney’s neat folktale ending is satisfying, but its change in emphasis from the strength of good to the strength of evil in female power is troubling, even though the substitution of mortal love, eros, for spiritual love, agape, is familiar from profane ideas of happiness, both ancient and modern. The public seems to prefer lovers to saints—and Disney assumes it prefers a definite patriarchy to the ambiguities of a matriarchy.

A Synopsis

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This is not so much a story about unrequited love as it is about death and our ingenious subterfuges in trying to deny its existence and escape from it.

On the immediate level of the fairy tale and moral fable we seem indeed to be offered a moving love story, but with complications. There is that puzzling ending, for one: when the grief-stricken Mermaid is “saved” by the air spirits, she is rewarded for her “striving” with a prize, we are left to surmise, that is even nobler than human love: the promise of an immortal life. This gives the love story an unusual turn. For if the immortal life promised to the Mermaid is a better bargain than the love she has been striving to “win,” the logic of the story is turned on its head. Instead of being a tale of a human love that prevails through selfless suffering and striving, it becomes a tale in which such love is denied and sublimated to a “higher” dimension, removed from the tainted realm of the human. Read this way, “The Little Mermaid” may well be a tale that does not celebrate human love but renounces it.

This unusual turn ought not take us by complete surprise. In fact, it seems to be anticipated by a certain, hidden logic in the tale, a logic that generates persistent and troubling ambiguities and dislocations, beginning on page one. We have the sense, for example, that more than one story is being told, that the narrator seems wholly unaware of this, and that he keeps telling his story “as if” it were a tale of love, while his subtext, which does not keep compromising, contradicting, and even resisting the story he tells “in the lines.” A closer reading seems to confirm this curious “split logic” in the tale. From the beginning, the Mermaid is presented as a young woman of unusual sensitivity and longing. After she meets and falls in love with the Prince, she is also presented “in the lines” as a selfless and devoted young woman willing to suffer any sacrifice for the sake of her beloved. The narrator also and quite clearly means to convince us that her affections and faith are being callously exploited by a narcissistic prince.

The subtext, however, proceeds along a different path. Beneath the rhetoric that supports her selfless devotion, there is a cooler and subtutorial “quest” afoot, subtly revealed in her early infatuation with the statue: her passion for it is not just a soft and romantic dream (if that at all) of a prince of flesh and blood, a sexual and changeable being who will reciprocate feelings of deep affection, but a cooler “passion” for a bloodless image cut in marble, fixed in substance and form. The Mermaid, at this subtextual level, does not want to realize herself in the mutuality of human love, the meeting of two hearts, which includes sexuality, but wants to “contain” and control those energies, rise “above” them. At this level, which looks suspiciously like the domain of the repressed, the Mermaid’s “love story” begins with the “denial” of a crucial constituent in the love between the woman and the man: sexuality and the spontaneous flow of emotion. The more precise motive for the Mermaid’s “quest” for the Prince’s affections is therefore to sublimate human love, bring it under control, and make it serve a “higher” purpose. “Her” purpose. The perspective emerging is troublesome.

A subset of this motive is presently revealed in the story. In an early conversation with her grandmother, the Mermaid admits that her deepest longing is not for a prince of flesh and blood, not even for a splendid wedding, nor indeed for a love that extends itself to another, but for—immortality. This startling disclosure, although unacknowledged “in the lines,” reveals the deepest and most troubling motive for her quest: it is not love, not the affirmation of another or of life, but fear. An abiding fear of death. The narrator predictably fails to acknowledge or see through this somber motive in his heroine. Instead, and as if in collusion with her, he assists the Mermaid in taking practical advantage of something the Grandmother tells her: if a Mermaid can “make” a human being love her well enough, he may give her an immortal soul. It is with the business version of this suggestion in mind that she now proceeds to strike a bargain with the sea witch. She submits to this horrible mutilation, which also is the symbolic and radical denial of her own identity, for reasons that now stand revealed as entirely selfish and from a motive that is purely solipsistic and negative, that is, fear of death. Judged by her zeal in trying to secure immortality for herself and for herself alone, this fear must be consuming.
Nevertheless, the narrator keeps up the fiction, in the lines and through his baffling, but predictable, conclusion that his is indeed a tale of love; that a self-serving quest for an immortality that is inspired by fear leads to “spirituality”; and that the “striving” that animates this quest is nobler than the emotions of human love and is its own reward. We, on the other hand, perceive that the story is not about love or “spirituality” at all, but about their renunciation, accomplished through a camouflaged denial of death, one so well sublimated that it is hidden even from the narrator himself. The more precise implications of this logic of repressive sublimation in the story would require considerably more space. It has its roots in the bind of a “double Eros,” and Christian ideology in particular.

Note

1 My approach uses Lacan’s idea of a “subtext” and draws on a variety of post-Freudian sources, including Ricoeur’s hermeneutics, Rank’s essays on the death instinct, Brown’s analysis of sublimation, and the Marxist notion that literature often is informed by a hidden ideology.

“The Little Mermaid” Deconstructed

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At first sight the narrative level of the story is well defined: the Mermaid wants the Prince and eternal life. Further examination shows that these projects do not at all work. The Mermaid “does not want” the Prince. She hides and keeps silent every time she has the chance to reveal herself and to talk; for example, she “lagde So-Skum paa sit Haar og sit Bryst, saa at ingen kunde se hendes lille Ansigt” [94] (placed sea foam on her hair and her breast so that no one could see her little face). The loss of her tongue, a crucial condition at one level of the story, does not count at all at another level, because the Mermaid did not use her ability to speak when she still had it:

Nu vidste hun, hvor han boede, og der kom hun mange Aften og Nat paa Vandet, hun svømmede meget nærmere Land, end nogen af de andre havde vovet, ja hun gik helt op i den smalle Canal, under den prestige Marmot-Alkan, der kastede en lang Skygge hen over Vandet. Her set hun og saa paa den unge Prinds, der troede, han var ganske ene i det klare Maaneskin. (95)

(Note she knew where he lived, and she came there many an evening and night on the water, she swam much closer to land than any of the others had dared; yes, she went all the way up into the narrow canal and under the splendid marble balcony, which threw its long shadow out across the water. There she sat looking at the young Prince, who believed that he was quite alone in the clear moonlight.)

The Mermaid, in fact, does not want eternal life either. She gives up fighting for it and for marriage at the first opportunity. This is her reaction when she sees her rival:

Den lille Havfruestod begjærlig efter at seehendes Skjønhed, og hun maatte erkjende den, en yndigere Skikkelse havde hun aldrig set. Huden var saa fin og skier, og bag de lange mørke Øjenbaar smilte et Par sorteblaae tropeaste Øine! (103)

(The little Mermaid longed to see her beauty, and she had to admit it; she had never seen a lovelier figure. Her skin was so fine and translucent, and behind her long dark lashes smiled a pair of faithful, dark-blue eyes)

When the Prince tells the Mermaid that he will marry the Princess, “den lille Havfrue kyssede hans Haand, og hun syntes alt at føle sit Hjerte briste” [104] (the little Mermaid kissed his hand, and already she felt as if her heart were breaking). The confusion in the project (her quest) is thus the confusion of a protagonist both wanting and not wanting her object.
The warring forces at this level are within a character torn between her will to achieve her goal and her masochistic, romantic, and Christian passivity.

Confusion of Theme

Interpreters have stressed the dualism of the story (life versus death, and so on). But at the level of theme the story is not dualistic, it is “symbolic.” Andersen—through the grandmother—himself gives the clue to the symbolic system, “ligesom vi dykke op af Havet og see Meneskenes Lande, saaledes dykke de op til ubekjendte delig:” Steder, dem vi aldrig faae at see” [96] (just as we rise up from the ocean and see the lands of human beings, so they rise up to lovely, unknown places, those we never get to see). Seaside versus land corresponds to land versus heaven. Thus the Mermaid’s longing for the Prince is not longing for a prince, but “the symbol” of a longing for eternity.

Confusion concerning the theme of the story mainly reflects the reader’s conflict in handling a symbolic way of thinking and the author’s conflict in the strategy of symbolizing. The warring forces of signification at the level of theme are thus a conflict of rhetoric. The symbol (love story), which should point to something else, has grown so interesting in itself that it blocks its function of transference. This blockage in the symbol’s system of transference can be noticed on several levels. One problem is the double position assumed by the human side of the story: Mermaid is to Prince as Cornflower to Purple Flower. This conception of the male seed as symbol of the human soul is the main symbolic effect introduced in terms that could not possibly refer to a male god. The sun, which is compared to a flower and radiates life and love and light, is associated, if with anything, with female sexuality: “I Blikstille kunde man eone Solen, den syntes en Purpur-Blomst, fra hvis Bæger det hele Lys udstrommede” [88] (In sea calm one could glimpse the sun; it seemed like a purple flower, from the chalice of which all light streamed forth). Only at the end of the story does the sun have some phallic aspects and become connected to the Christian God. In the rest of the story the sun has female connotations, positive connotations, in contrast to which the witch appears as a negative parallel. But whether the upper level of the story, the top of the hierarchy, is male or female, it is turned upside down, because the lowest state of the hierarchy is the most highly valued. This is evident in the color blue, which is the color of the sea. Apart from a very few cases of negative connotations—“Blaat, som Svovl-Lue” (89); “den blaae Lynstraale” [91] (blue as sulphurous flames; the blue lightening flash)—blue has highly positive connotations. One such is, for example, in the very opening paragraph of the story: “Langt ude i Havet er Vandet saa blaat, som Bladene paa den deiligste Kornblomst, og saa klart, som det reneste Glas” [88; italics added] (Far out at sea the water is as blue as the petals of the loveliest cornflower and as clear as the purest glass).

The lowest step thus is, at the same time, the highest step. This confusion is further stressed by the fact that step four (1. sea, 2. land, 3. land, 4. heaven) has the color of step one:

*Ov er det Hele dernede laae et forunderligt bluoat Skjær, man skulde snære troe, at man stod hmit oppe i Laften og kun saae Himmel over og undersig, end at man var paa Havets Bund.* (88)

(Across everything down there lay an astonishing shade of blue; one would more likely believe that one stood high up in the air and saw only the sky above and below than that one was at the bottom of the sea.)

The beginning state thus coincides with the final state: my beginning is my end. The whole story thus is stopped at its very opening. Add to this the fact that other parts of the seaside coincide with the heavenly side, primarily the situation of a daughter being common to both, and the development of the theme is blocked further. Indeed these are warring forces.

Complexity of Communication

Andersen, we know, told his story to children and left open some symbolic levels for grown-up listeners. Within the text, too, there are special communicative conditions from narrator to narratee (the implied reader). Certainly there is a main structure: a human narrator tells his story (I call
the narrator “him”) of a mermaid to a human narratee. Thus, as a rule, narrator and narratee are different from the protagonist:

In the opening paragraph of the story, the Mermaid visits the sea witch, she bears with her the point of view of a mermaid to a human narratee. Thus, as a rule, the narrator takes his time to play: when the point of view is the mermaid’s, the whole thing is turned upside down; “here” becomes the sea, “there” becomes the land: “jeg [the Mermaid] skal, holde af den Verden deroven” [91; italics added] (I shall love that world up there). Some metaphorical opposites belong to this playful shift in perspective: from a seaside point of view birds are comparable to fish—“og de Fisk, som der svaammede Fiskene ind til dem, ligesom hos os Svalerne flyve ind” [88] (then the fish swam in to them, just as with us the swallows fly in).

The main structure of communication, however, is clearly demonstrated that the milieu and thus the merfolk’s, the whole thing is turned upside down; “here” becomes the sea, and “there” becomes the land: “jeg [the Mermaid] skal, holde af den Verden deroven” [91; italics added] (I shall love that world up there). Some metaphorical opposites belong to this playful shift in perspective: from a seaside point of view birds are comparable to fish—“og de Fisk, som der svaammede Fiskene ind til dem, ligesom hos os Svalerne flyve ind” [88] (then the fish swam in to them, just as with us the swallows fly in).

The main structure of communication, however, is clearly demonstrated that the milieu and thus the problems of the protagonist are not those of narrator and narratee.

The main structure is, however, broken several times and with shifting implications. Sometimes narrator and narratee “identify” with the merfolk and take their point of view, for example, in this description of the castle in the sea: “man kunde se alle de utallige Fiske, store og smaae, som svaammede henimod Glasmuren” [97; italics added] (one could see all the innumerable fish, large and small, that swam toward the glass wall). When the Mermaid visits the sea witch, she bears with her the point of view of narrator and narratee: “saa mau maatte blive angest o. det vilde blive et skrækkeligt Veir!” [93] (Oh! She would have liked to shake off all this elegance; Oh, it was going to be terrible weather). The correspondences thus demonstrate the warring forces of distance and identification towards the story told.

But there are warring forces inside the narrative elements. In some paragraphs the difference is not between narrator/narratee versus the Mermaid, but narrator versus narratee/Mermaid. This happens in paragraphs in which the narratee—like the Mermaid—is evidently a “child.” The similars of the opening paragraph of the story display the universe of a child;

The main mood of the story is one of “melancholy,” that is, a sad, sympathetic identification with the unhappiness of the protagonist. The main technique in establishing this mood is the use of the word “little.”
such connotations as the “unhappy,” “longing,” and “pitiable”: “de tznkte vist ikke paa, at en deilig lille Havfrue stod nedenfor og rakte sine hvide Hænder op imod Kjølen” (89); “Du stakkels lille Havfrue” (106) (certainly they did not imagine that a lovely little mermaid stood down below and stretched her white hands up toward the keel; You poor little mermaid).

The melancholic mood is established, too, by the narrator’s way of argumentation. Quite often, through very slight suggestions, he shifts from rational logic to masochistic or passive logic. In the following lines, the narrator makes the protagonist a passive sufferer: “men ud til hende smilte han ikke, han vidste jo ikke heller, at hun havde reddet ham” [94] (but toward her he did not smile; of course, neither did he know that she had saved him). A rational argument would place the responsibility on the Mermaid herself; he did not smile at her because she had hidden herself and told him nothing concerning his salvation. Here is another example: “Prinsen spurgte, hvem hun var, og hvoreder hun var kommet her, og hun saae mildt og dog saa bedøvet paa ham med sine markeblaae Øyne, tale kunde hun jo ikke” [100 f.] (The Prince asked who she was and how she had come here, and she looked at him so mildly and yet so sorrowfully with her dark-blue eyes, [for] she could not, of course, speak). The rational, unsentimental comment would be that since she could not speak and did not try to express herself by gestures or mimicry, he never knew her story. The optimistic setting of the very same conditions could be that although she could not speak, her sparkling eyes, her expressive dance, and her gesticulating arms told him more than words could about herself and her love.

A melancholy, sentimental mood is dominant. It is suspended only in the section in which the Prince refuses the love of the Mermaid. In these lines narrator and narratee suddenly identify with the Prince: “ved hver Bevægelse blev hendes Deilighed endnu mere synlig, og hendes Øyne talte dybere til Hjertet, end Slavindernes Sang” [101; italics added] (with each movement her loveliness became even more apparent, and to the heart her eyes spoke more deeply than the song of slave women). But apart from this very slight turn in the narrative point of view the narrator in the lines of rejection is rather withdrawn. What happens on the scale of communication in the following sentences of denial?

Prinsen sagde, at hun skulde allelidel vmre hos ham, og hun fik Lov at sove udenfor hans Dør paa en Høiels Pude. (101)

“Jo, du w mig kjærest,” sagde Prinsen, “. . . du ligner en ung Pige, jeg engang saae.” (102)

Dog for Dog blev hun Prinsen kjævere, han holdt ahende, som man kan holde af et godt, kjært Bam, men at gjøre hende til sin Dronning, faldt ham sel ikke ind. (102)

(The Prince said that she would always be with him, and she had permission to sleep outside his door on a velvet pillow.

“Of course you are most dear to me,” said the Prince, “you resemble a young girl I once saw.”

Day by day she became dearer to the Prince; he cared for her as one can care about a good, dear child, but to make her his queen never even occurred to him.)

These examples use the arguments of psychological sadism, the two of them with no comments. The logic of sadism is broken only if the narrator reckons on a grown-up narratee who is able to discern it. To a child this cruel logic would properly not be discovered. If this is so, these lines (and example three explicitly) hurt not only the Mermaid, but the childlike narratee, who is rejected just as is the childlike in the Mermaid (“som man kan holde af et godt, kjært Barn, men . . . ”). These lines reveal an aggressive attitude toward the Mermaid and the child narratee on the part of the Prince and the narrator. Warring forces between a sadistic rejection of, and a sentimental identification with, the protagonist imbue the narrative scheme.

Complexity of Rhetoric

On the level of rhetoric “The Little Mermaid” is very complex. In this article I can only touch on the main rhetoric figure, the simile. The simile of “The Little Mermaid” at the microlevel is a question of style. The simile is simply the dominating figure, which is quite evident from the first lines of the story:

Langt ude i Havet er Vandet saa blaaet, som Bladene paa den deligste Kornblomst og saa klart, som det reneste Glas, men det er meget dybt, dybere end noget Ankertoug naaer, mange Kirketaarne maatte stilles over paa hinanden, for at række fra Bunden op over Vandet. (88; emphasis added)

(Far out in the ocean the water is as blue as the petals of the loveliest cornflower and as clear as the purest glass, but it is very deep, deeper than any anchor line reaches; many church towers would have to be placed on top of one another to reach from the bottom up above the water.)

The simile is a way of “thinking” for the protagonist and the Prince; their concept of compatibility is based on the principle of similarity: “rosenrunde Blomster, som lignede Solen der høi oppe” (88); “han lignede Marmorstatten nede i hendes lille Have” (93); “Jo, du er mig kjærest,” sagde Prinsen ’. . . du ligner en ung Pige jeg engang saae” [102] (rosy red
flowers that resembled the sun high up there”; “he resembled the marble statue down in her little garden”; “Of course you are the dearest to me,” said the Prince “...you resemble a young girl I once saw”). At the macrolevel, the simile is Hans Christian Andersen’s own way of understanding. The whole story is one great simile, the story of the Mermaid being only a symbol of something to which she, as symbol, is similar.

The warring forces at this level are the complex system of the symbolized forces that the mermaid symbol sets into motion. The crucial point is the very choice of the mermaid symbol. In universal tradition mermaids are sex symbols. Hans Christian Andersen’s Mermaid is the opposite. She is an innocent child trying to enter into the state of sexuality. Andersen, thus, breaks down the traditional mermaid symbol and, ultimately, his own symbolization of her. His choice of a mermaid symbol has misled some critics (for example, Eigil Nyborg) to take the Mermaid as a sex symbol, which she definitely is not. The Mermaid symbolizes the “a-sexual being” trying to become sexual and to transform her sexual situation to a spiritual situation.

The Mermaid also symbolizes the “human being.” Andersen breaks through the symbolizing tradition when he has a female represent the general.

But of course the Mermaid could represent a “female being.” Her transformation from child to woman would represent the conditions in male societies for female sexuality. Her change from having a tail to possessing legs may symbolize a shift in erogenetic zones, the legs representing the vagina (the splitting of her tail being the symbol of her new position: she has to learn to spread her legs). Her loss of a tongue may be the symbolic displacement of clitorectomy.

Since in the story of the Mermaid her loss of a tongue may be interpreted as a symbolic castration, the tale itself—as pointed out by Sabrina Soracco—could be about an unsuccessful transference from the state of the imaginary to the state of the symbolic. If this symbolic process is accepted, one might ask whether such a process could ever enter the conscious or unconscious mind of Hans Christian Andersen. Or is such a symbolic interpretation only that of later feminist readings?

The Mermaid may symbolize the “male being.” Of course she may represent Andersen himself, since her low social status, her longing for acceptance, her loss of voice during puberty, her unrequited love—all have a biographic character.

On the level of sexual symbols she may even represent the penis, or male sexuality. Her sad condition, her ending up in nothing but foam, may be the symbol of unreproduced male sexuality.

There are possibly even more elements symbolized. For the present the broad symbolic power of the Mermaid figure could be summed up in the following way:

The “warring forces” in the Mermaid symbol are 1. the difference between the symbolized elements and 2. the difference between the symbol and the symbolized, as the symbol in each case represents the opposite of its cultural code. This is the real deconstruction of the story and the most courageous part of Hans Christian Andersen’s technique.

Conclusion

The deconstruction of “The Little Mermaid” reveals numerous breaks in the firm structure hitherto claimed to be the main technique of the story. These breaks in every case open up to more complex levels of signification. In a few cases the breaks are those of aesthetic coherence (the ending of the story), but in most cases they are stimulating intellectual challenges.

Note

1 All translations were made specifically—and quite literally—for this section of “Splash!”

Works Consulted


