Under the Pages: An Analysis of *The Little Mermaid*

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At five years old, most children would have watched the majority of the classical Disney princess movies. Little girls could recite their favorite princess in a heartbeat, along with their trusty sidekick. Many children knew the songs by heart or could hear "bibbidi bobbidi boo" and know exactly what it would mean, and what movie it was from. In English speaking countries, and beyond, Disney is everywhere, from yogurt cups to clothing items. However, I wasn't like the other little girls.

I was introduced to Disney at the age of five but did not gain an appreciation for it until I was around the age of ten. While I loved the idea of princesses, castles, and daring sword fights, I never saw the appeal of an Ariel backpack or a Belle pencil set. To me, the craze was overrated. I say this now, as someone who finds Disney as a go-to movie when having a rough day, or if I need a pick-me-up. At the time I never understood the hype over this pink-filled world, but I've grown to love the characters and the stories.

The Little Mermaid was one of the last movies I had on my watch list. I remember being enamored by the music but relating to the young princess and her lack of freedom. I understood her story well. It wasn't until recently that I opened Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*, and despite the obvious lack of music and a somewhat miserable ending, I found that I loved, and connected to the story far more. In this essay, I will analyze both Disney and Andersen's version of *The Little Mermaid and* discuss how the story envelops a theme of young girls maturing into women. The differences and similarities in how that theme is portrayed will be compared, and I will discuss the realistic and unrealistic expectations of the two tales.

Since 1989, *The Little Mermaid* has captured the attention of many little boys and girls, illustrating the classic story in a child- friendly approach. It is only now that I appreciate the intricacies of love and maturity both tales depict. The pair idealize the path of a young girl

growing up to be a strong woman, most often through sacrifice and understanding, whether of themselves, or the understanding received from another. The ability for *The Little Mermaid* to embody a progressive thought such as a woman's understanding of self, have allowed the stories to take off dramatically. Both versions have an analogous theme regarding love, and how love is used to symbolize a girl's maturity. They are differentiated however, on how this love develops the two different young girls into women. Hans Christian Andersen's telling explains the importance of love over desire, whereas Walt Disney Studios employs the use of love in a general context. This resulted in Disney being capable of constructing an entire empire around the fictional character. Comparing the two, however, Disney's interpretation of the narrative has gained greater popularity over the original narrative, which can be attributed to a major difference between the two. Andersen's story represents realism, and the realist side of love and dreams. It doesn't shy away from death and loss. Disney prefers to portray the quixotic interpretations of the same theme. Disney is the "happy lie", where Andersen is the "sad truth".

Since I can first remember, I, along many other little girls have known and desired very specific ideas. True love and the concept of marriage has been drilled into us from a young age by mothers and grandmothers, intentionally or not. Often, the notion of finding this "true love" is an object of fiction, rather than truth. The idea is developed even further when this "true love" is symbolized to last through all of eternity, rather than time on earth. This is an idea that can be exemplified in Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* and using the analysis of both Andersen's tale and Roberta Trites's journal: *Disney's sub/version of Andersen's The Little Mermaid.*

The mermaids' initial and most prominent desire is to gain an eternal soul. While she does fall in love with the prince, her first desire has always been a soul, which is most clear when she asks, "Is there nothing I can do to win an eternal soul?" (Andersen 88). Further on, the sea witch understands the mermaid's desires, however, it is to be noted that the witch specifically states her fascination to obtain human legs was to "marry [him] and get an immortal soul" (Andersen 90). Here it begins to become clear that the mermaid equates "soul" and "love" (Trites). This is an example of her adolescent mindset, as she considers happiness with love for infinity paramount over happiness during a worldly lifespan (Trites).

The original Little Mermaid matures into a grown woman once she realizes that the prince's love is not the only way to gain an eternal soul (Trites). When given the opportunity to

once again join her sisters as a daughter of the sea, she refuses, and throws the knife intended to kill the prince away and accepts her deadly fate (Andersen 100). This indicates that she would much rather leave the earth and leave behind the knowledge and yearning of an eternal soul than to live knowing she will fail her ultimate mission. As she dies, the daughters of air gave her the opportunity to earn an eternal soul by performing good deeds for children. Her cry is an implication that her emotional pain and suffering have ended (Trites). From the story, the little mermaid is able to mature into a grown woman when she understands that she does not need anyone else to help or their actions to obtain what she wants. It took nearly taking away her two greatest desires, the love for the prince and the covet of an eternal soul for her to understand.

Every father wants their daughters to remain "daddy's little girl" forever. We see every day how society portrays the father as overprotective, and it is often in comedic reference when formal father-daughter pictures are posed with the former clasping some sort of weapon. This relationship is also portrayed in pop culture and can be easily assessed and analyzed. Early in Disney's adaptation of *The Little Mermaid,* Ariel is noticeably absent during her performance. When later reprimanded, her behavior is labeled as "careless and reckless" (*The Little Mermaid)*. However, Triton is not as angry as one would anticipate him to be. His discipline extends as far as a soft, verbal reprimand. It is only when the truth of her whereabouts on the surface is revealed that Triton's entire demeanor changes. Triton vacates his throne, and Ariel backs away as her father moves closer, a sign of uneasiness (Davies). Triton emphasizes the fact that she is "[my] youngest daughter" (*The Little Mermaid*), by using a lower tone of voice (Davies), a cue which by seriousness is accentuated. Ariel attempts to dissuade her fathers' youthful imagery to her, reminding him that she is "sixteen years old- [I'm] not a child anymore" (*The Little Mermaid*). This has the opposite intended reaction, as Triton's tone of voice lowers even further, and his brows are furrowed deeply in irritation, anger, and annoyance (Davies). This relates to how Ariel is viewed by her father. In respect to the entire scene of the movie, Ariel is portrayed as young and naive. Her father only views her as a young child, and his reaction after the revelation of her whereabouts proves his narrow-minded perspective. And essentially, his opinion is not far out. Ariel's rebellions and outbursts are of a young teenager who disregards the possible consequences and imminent danger. This is a huge contrast to the conclusion of the film.

As Ariel drifts off with her lover, there are key times where Ariel is noticeably grown-up, and Triton begins to realize this. Ariel's first words to her father as he attempts to stop Ursula is "Daddy, I'm sorry" (*The Little Mermaid*). Her apology is sincere, a significant contrast to the indifferent reaction before. Following that, Ariel begs Eric to leave (*The Little Mermaid*). By asking this, she is taking responsibility for her actions. Essentially, she is stating that he should not be harmed because of the choices she made previously. After the battle while the sun rises and all is calm once more, Ariel is seen watching Eric longingly on the beach. A noticeable action that further supports her growing up, is that she does not beg her father to join Eric. She watches, and it is in understanding that perhaps she is not meant for that world. Triton comprehends that her love for Eric is not only superficial but true.

Triton asks, "She really does love him, doesn't she?" (*The Little Mermaid*) to Sebastian, but it is almost in resignation. His tone is soft and easy, and it can be inferred that he is accepting that his daughter has grown up. Every creative mind will think differently about a topic. One might see an epic tragedy, while another may find it to be a love story. Similarly, *The Little Mermaid* has been interpreted differently by Disney, and Anderson. Many things, of course, stay the same. Both Disney's version and the original Andersen tale emphasizes the lack of a mother figure. In both, it can be suggested that this lack resulted in the difficult path of maturing into a woman, as the young mermaids have very little female guidance, other than their sisters. However, Andersen's narrative introduces a grandmother figure, therefore there is a female adult guiding figure for the young mermaid.

The grandmother does play a role in *The Little Mermaid*, as she initially informs the young mermaid about eternal souls as well as how to obtain one (Andersen 88). The little mermaids' desire for a soul is fueled even further by her grandmother's caution. The grandmother asks the little mermaid to "be content" (Andersen 88), and that love between a human and a mermaid "can never be" (Andersen 88). Disney does introduce a more involved father figure, but as seen from the previous analyzation, Triton is not quick to anger or discipline, rather only during the possibility of human contact is Triton disciplinary. This indicates Triton's laid-back attitude, and how Ariel's defiance and young-adolescent mentality can stem directly from the lack of punishment, guidance and discipline.

Both stories allow for the little mermaid to grow, and only in the face of losing something do they realize it is important for them. Ariel was close to losing her father, and the man she loves to Ursula. It was only after she faced these unimaginable consequences that she begins to understand how her choices brought her to the moment she was in. Therefore, she emphasized her maturity by willingly remaining in the sea, rather than beg her father to let her go. We see her sitting on a rock near the finale of the film, gazing longingly at the prince, but remaining in the ocean. Likewise, the little mermaid from Andersen's story understands her actions and desires led her to the point she was in, and rather than taking the life of a man who had no control regarding the little mermaids' future, she chooses to die herself and take responsibility for her actions. The key difference between the two stories is that Andersen's mermaid gained maturity after she understood love over desire, whereas Disney plays maturity to be caused by the love she gained (Trites).

If asked what people prefer, the book or the movie, most literary enthusiasts will side with the book. Therefore, the question that is raised asks why these movie adaptations become so popular. Many children do not understand that Disney's *The Little Mermaid* plays its ideas off Andersen's story. Moviemakers are primarily concerned with selling their franchise, and with nine million VHS tapes sold during the debut, and eighty-four million in sales during the cinematic release, Disney accomplished that goal (Bonner 5). Kayleigh Bonner discusses how Disney's management ensured the life of *The Little Mermaid* in her journal *Flipping Your Fins Can Get You Far: How the Walt Disney Company Has Ensured the Longativity of* The Little Mermaid *Through Franchise Management.* Bonner discusses how Disney took Thomas Austin's idea of satellite texts, wherein extensively planned *The Little Mermaid* products and consumer possibilities help preserve the film and create a memorable presence (Bronner 5). These satellite texts escort potential viewers to the franchise. Not only that, but satellite texts have the ability to regain previous fans, ensnare a larger following, and ensuring it is near impossible to separate themselves from "Disney Commodities" (Bonner 5).

Despite Disney understanding the likelihood of sequels gaining far less than the original, *The Little Mermaid* is one of a few movies given the honor to three film titles in a single franchise. This allowed character development for Ariel's sisters, creating even more engaging characters for the audience. Furthermore, this allowed for fanfiction to grow, further increasing

the franchise (Bonner 6). Television commissioned for Disney allowed for access into more media types. This cross-media idea also paved the way for further Disney Classics. Interestingly, contradictions were fairly common between Television and the films, however, this proved beneficial, allowing followers of both mediums to decide their preferred narrative. Not only that but younger viewers who missed the initial issuing of *The Little Mermaid* would be guided back towards the original film (Bonner 6). Therefore, fans from all generations could be affiliated with the franchise. Besides it being made into an immense franchise, *The Little Mermaid* cannot credit all of its success to clever marketing.

There is an immense difference between Andersen's original tale and Disney's interpretation of *The Little Mermaid.* An element that has not been addressed in the previous analyzations of the classical tale is the presence of realism in Andersen's narrative, whereas Disney encourages unrealistic themes. Disney's use of these unrealistic expectations creates a film for younger children that is inviting and entrancing, however, it doesn't expose the actions of the real world. While both stories do have a fable main character, as well as the presence of magic, the themes themselves, are in conflict. Andersen's storyline follows what is expected in modern-day life, being that not all stories have a happy ending. The classical Disney movie will end in fanfare and joy that the man got the woman, and everyone is happy, other than the evil antagonist. While this may be pleasing to viewers, this is also extremely unrealistic.

As Calista Lopez states in her article *On Learning all the Wrong Romantic Lessons from Disney Films,* Disney creates impractical, and for children, harmful ideas about love. This version of perfection teaches children that the blank paper version of a nuclear family and love is ideal and that any other variations such as divorce and remarriage as a blemish on love (Lopez). Children can be taught from a young age the "perfect" family and create the flawed idea that once love is found, there will always be "happily ever after".

Andersen plays off a more realistic ending. The mermaid does not kill her love in anger or resentment, and it describes a love that can never be. Andersen also allows for the understanding that love isn't effortless. Disney describes love as a man saving the girl and sweeping them off their feet in a time of great need (Lopez). Andersen emphasizes the struggle the little mermaid underwent in order to win the love of the prince, saying that "every step you take will be like treading on a sharp knife which draws blood" (Andersen 91). It is understood

that the little mermaid had to suffer in order to try and win the love she coveted, and therefore spent a great deal of effort in her attempts. The realistic and unrealistic expectations between Disney and Andersen is a large factor in Disney's story selling so well and allows it to be loved for generations.

The Little Mermaid has been a story that has been re-watched, re-told, and loved around the world by young children for years, and it is beyond a doubt that it will continue this path. Disney has provided a wonderful story for young children, and Andersen encourages older youth to analyze and discuss other children's literature in greater depth. Both versions of the beloved tale create a detailed story of a young girl maturing into a woman and use different elements in support of the protagonist's development.

The Little Mermaid introduced a time where Disney employed drastic and inventive tactics in order for the film to be loved by young children everywhere, and have youth return to it time and time again. Disney's profit-centered mindset allowed for changes in the narrative in order to appeal to a larger audience, and to appeal to the younger generation especially. However, this does create a barrier between Disney and Andersen in the way they portray love in either a realistic or unrealistic aspect. *The Little Mermaid* has a clear theme of young girls maturing into women, and it is for that very reason that the story has been loved and cherished by young women and girls for decades.

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