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### Saint to Spoiled Brat

Fairytales were written as a way to teach children proper behavior and social relationships. As fairytales are told and retold throughout time, changes in them are inevitable. The stories tend to adapt to modern ways of thinking and cultural norms. Generally speaking American society as a whole has taken a more feminist way of thinking, and so one would think that fairytales have as well. While this is true to an extent, many of the most popular fairytale adaptations are perpetuating the gender roles of the era these fairytales were written. Disney movies are the most recognized versions of fairytales in today's society. Almost every American child has watched these movies, and cherish them. These adaptations, while beautifully written and animated, are always oversimplified, and are often times the only versions of the story that children know. Take, for example, "The Little Mermaid", originally written by Hans Christian Andersen in 1837. In the fairytale, the mermaid tries to get a human to love her so she can gain a soul. In Disney's adaptation, the mermaid's only motive for becoming human was her obsessive love for the prince. The oversimplification is problematic here because it cheapens the struggle of the mermaid, and reinforces gender roles from which the original was trying to break free.

Andersen's original narrative can be seen as a critique of gender roles in society and a

woman's attempt to rise above them. The little mermaid is fascinated with life above the ocean. Even though she is royalty in her home world, a world of beauty and wonder, she still longs to be a part of human life, to live and interact equally with the humans. Her envy for humans is rooted in their immortal souls. Mermaids live longer than humans, but become nothing more than sea foam when they die. When humans die however, their bodies may turn to dust but their souls live on forever. The mermaid wants to experience the joys of this limitless eternity, and the only way for her to do that is to get a human to fall in love with and marry her. The storyline “affirms the longing to escape the boundaries of racial, cultural, and sexual identity even as it exposes the relationship between that desire and the lonely agony of the alienated outsider” (Zuk 167). By depicting the mermaid kingdom as superficial and ineffectual, Andersen communicates a distaste for the situation of women in the nineteenth century, while at the same time acknowledges that there is no real way to rise above it.

The little mermaid seems to be the only mermaid that is fascinated with the human world. She pushes the social constructs of her underwater society when she rescues a shipwrecked prince, and breaks free of them completely when she seeks out the sea witch. Sacrificing her tongue and going through immense pain during the transformation, she becomes human and tries to win the prince's heart. She fails. She did everything right: she gave up her home, her tail, her tongue for the prince, and yet he married someone else. This illustrates the futility of the nineteenth-century women's struggle. Try as hard as they might to overcome the rampant sexism of the time, there was no solution to it. They were socially and politically powerless against the

will of men.

Andersen does, however, give the mermaid hope of receiving a soul. By refusing to kill the prince to save her own life, the little mermaid shows an integrity that transcends her death. Instead of becoming sea foam, she becomes an air sprite. As a sprite, she has 300 years to do as much good in the world as possible, and if she has done enough, she will receive the soul she had wanted so badly. This ending is a kind of paradoxical reassurance to women that though they may not overcome society's gender roles in their lifetime, they may be able someday if they still conform to the motherly, nurturing stereotype.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, societal values were grouped into two separate categories: mind and body (Korsmeyer, 14). Values associated with the body, such as emotions, sexuality, and desire, were considered feminine, and those associated with the mind were considered masculine, and therefore more important. The most highly revered value of the time was rationale. According to Korsmeyer, men believed that it is what separated humans from animals. Women were, of course, not believed to have rationale, thus making them subhuman. Logically, if our society is more feminist than it was in the nineteenth century, it would seem like our fairytale adaptations would reflect these feminist values. However, even in 1989, these nineteenth-century values seem to still hold some truth.

Disney's 1989 movie, *The Little Mermaid*, takes this complex fairytale and simplifies it to the point of reinforcing and idealizing the stereotypes Andersen's fairytale is trying to criticize. At first, Disney's mermaid seems like a strong female protagonist. Ariel is fascinated by the

human world, not because she wants the immortal soul she lacks as a mermaid, but out of sheer curiosity and rebelliousness. Once she rescues prince Eric, however, she becomes obsessed with becoming a human so that she can be with him. She is defined by her need to be with prince, reinforcing the nineteenth-century ideal that a woman is nothing without a man and thus taking away her agency.

Unlike Andersen's fairytale, mermaids seem to be frightened of the human world, especially Ariel's father, Triton. Because of this, Triton, either personally or through Sebastian, is constantly trying to “protect” Ariel from the human world. When Triton destroys Eric's statue, as well as everything else in Ariel's grotto, Ariel rebels in the most extreme way she can: she goes to Ursula looking for some way to bring herself and Eric together. Ariel, only slightly reluctant, gives up her voice in exchange for legs. She spends the next 3 days waiting for Eric to kiss her, but is sabotaged by Ursula. Ultimately, Eric kills Ursula, Ariel gets her voice back, and they both get married.

Looking closer at the movie, Ariel's strength and independence are really an illusion. In Andersen's fairytale, the little mermaid's sisters and grandmother play an important role in the story. They encourage her fascination with the human world, and sacrifice their own hair to help her kill the prince. In Disney's version, there are only 2 significant female characters: Ariel and Ursula. Ariel's sisters are completely inconsequential to the story and she doesn't have a mother or grandmother, as far as the audience knows. Every supporting character is male, and she is

dependent on them. Ariel begins the movie with some agency: she rebels against her father, but whatever agency Ariel had left after falling for Eric is completely gone once she gets her legs. Ariel can't even swim to the surface herself, Sebastian and Flounder have to drag her to the surface before she drowns. From then on, Sebastian is the one to try to get Eric to kiss Ariel. Ariel makes no advances toward Eric, unless staring at him dreamily counts as advancement, she just kind of sits there for three days and waits for him to kiss her. She's not even allowed to solve her own problem: Ursula's curse. Eric has to kill the sea witch for her. She does absolutely nothing, and is essentially the victim of her own story.

Ursula is the only woman with real power in this movie, and all of her power is portrayed as negative:

“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 (Ingwersen 151).”

Her story arc shows the type of women that men think have power, and makes it clear that it is not ok for her to keep her power. Ursula is both rational and emotional, masculine and feminine. She tricks Ariel into being human in order to make Triton vulnerable and steal his power. The evil, smart woman usurped the power of the good and righteous king. The conclusion drawn from this is one of distrust for women leaders.

Disney's version of the fairytale rewrites the ending to be a definitively happy one—on

the surface— Ariel ends up happily married instead of dead. But by doing this, Disney has erased the complexity of the original fairytale. The quest for the immortal soul, for equality to men, is completely eliminated. By getting the guy in the end, Disney is showing society that girls want and need a man to be truly happy with their lives. They can't ever truly be independent, because they're less than men.

At the time “The Little Mermaid” was written, fairytales were meant to socialize children and begin confining them within gender roles. Hans Christian Andersen was a progressive writer in that he sought to challenge these gender roles with his fairytales. The oversimplification of this fairytale cheapens the struggle of the mermaid, and reinforces gender roles from which the original was trying to break free. While Disney's target audience would not understand the meaning behind the original ending of Andersen's “The Little Mermaid,” erasure of it completely changes the message of this fairytale. Now more than ever, the original message of “The Little Mermaid” would be accepted in society, so perhaps it is time to re-approach this tale.

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