


Essay

The Lightness of the Sexual Being: A Short Reflection on Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid"

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Abstract: Hans Christian Andersen's tale, "The Little Mermaid," has been adored by both children and parents for decades. The tale shows an astonishingly different quality to Andersen's early genre of fairy tales, which allows the reader to sense his keenness on the meaning of human sexuality. The author used the short narrative form, becoming more conservative, cautious, and concise in his ideological compromise between religiosity and human nature. "The Little Mermaid" is a tale that draws the reader in about "universal preoccupations" of femininity, self-concept, and self-actualization. Andersen's intentions and the authenticity of this tale should not be overlooked.

Keywords: Hans Christian Andersen; fairy tales; genre; human sexuality; The Little Mermaid

1. Introduction

The fairy tale is a literary genre with a lesson for readers. Hans Christian Andersen, the well-known Danish writer, took this seriously in his own work. His tales were inspired by various life events and his readings took place in Denmark and Western Europe; some stories were translated into several different languages from the original and had a positive impact on many generations [1]. Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" is one of the tales that has had substantial popularity in Western Europe and North America. As such, it is the tale most readers hear as children, especially since mermaids can appear in anyone's imagination. Andersen experimented with his psychological fantasy in the fairy-realm by questioning many of the sea creature norms in Greek myths and Northern European tales. The protagonist in "The Little Mermaid" represents the 'existential-self,' who goes through a transformative experience, i.e., from being a mermaid to being "invisible."

2. Discussion

Stories about supernatural sea creatures originate from the earliest human traditions. In Greek myths, sirens (the daughters of the river god) emote beautiful songs that lure sailors to their deaths by drowning at sea. Even in the "old" Danish sea, Andersen portrays the beauty of the undersea: "... [where] the waters are as blue as the petals of the cornflower and as clear as glass, there, where no anchor can reach the bottom, live the mer-people" [1] (p. 57). In later fairy tales and literary works, mermaids or water nymphs express mankind's sexual desires yet are depicted as demonic figures. In one Scottish fairytale, "The Merman's Wife", a mermaid brings sexual temptation to the male protagonist by living with him for a period before she heartlessly runs away in the end [2]. La Motte Fouqué's story "Undine" depicts how the eponymous water nymph sexually attracts the protagonist and marries him [3]. For a while, they are happy, but she mercilessly kills him; he could not resist the temptation of another woman. "Undine" illustrates the tradition of both retaliation and repentance in a sexually-charged story that ends in disaster.

Mermaids and water nymphs are central figures that shape the storylines, which imply immorality, and most importantly, sexuality. In pre-Christian folklore motifs, beliefs, and ideology, female sea

creatures are earthy, erotic, and embody pure sexual pleasure. They represent the classic ‘femme fatale,’ or the aggressive feminine seducer, thereby constituting moral sin to mankind [4]. “Generalized” beauty that is integral to femininity is also portrayed in Anderson’s tale: “They were six lovely mermaids; the youngest was the most beautiful. Her complexion was as fine as the petal of a rose . . . ” [1] (p. 57). As Nørregaard Frandsen notes for his readers, the motifs and modern themes of feminine beauty are exquisitely shown through Andersen’s eyes [5]. The story opens with a male vision [6], depicting mermaids as works of art.

Hans Christian Andersen uses the mermaid motif to tell a different story. In “The Little Mermaid”, he focuses on Christian ideas of immortality and self-sacrifice. Because of this fixation, some scholars consider the tale to be one about morality. The depiction of the mermaid as prioritizing a soul has been interpreted as Andersen’s main goal. Nevertheless, there is an important issue in accepting the premise that he intended to purify the story to illustrate human morality. His use of the mermaid myth places female sexuality at the core of the tale, rendering “The Little Mermaid” as being about female sexuality. However, it could also be seen as a saga of the sexual sea creature that Andersen superficially desexualizes.

Likewise, it can be argued that Andersen might have wanted to realize his dream of immortality. Yet, if that were the case, he could have elaborated his Christian ideas more realistically, rather than exploring them in a fairy-tale format [7]. Andersen explores two concepts: sexual inclination and the ability to find a soul. In doing so, he deliberately complicates the situation by discussing sexuality in the context of an asexual situation. The protagonist dives into sexuality while sublimating her love. The main purpose of broaching “The Little Mermaid” is to analyze the manner in which Andersen manipulates the message he attempts to convey.

The tale introduces us to how the mermaid lives in her world and how beautiful a “mer-person” is: “Her complexion was as fine as the petal of a rose and her eyes as blue as the deepest lake, but just like everyone else down there, she has no feet; her body ended in a fishtail” [1] (p. 57). In portraying how the mermaid blossoms into a beautiful woman, Andersen proclaims the protagonist’s startling beauty as an integral part of her being. The author elaborates on how she demonstrates her sexual impulses:

[She] wanted for nothing beyond the rose-red flowers, that were like the sun high above, except a beautiful marble statue of a human being, a handsome boy, carved out of clear stone because a sinking ship had submerged to the bottom of the sea. He had no fish tale, but he looked just like her . . . [She] planted a lovely violet/rose-red weeping willow beside the statue, and it grew and hung with its fresh branches over and down toward the sandy bottom, where the shadow lay violet and moved with the branches, so it looked as if the treetop and its roots played at kissing each other. [1] (p. 58)

Although the quote reads like a simple depiction of her garden, Andersen describes the garden—red flowers, a marble statue, and kissing—and envisions the mermaid’s repressed desires for love and sex. It is generally known that red symbolizes the “creative spirit of love” or a “long-standing desire for love.” Furthermore, red flowers—particularly the rose—represent feminine sexuality in their resemblance to a woman’s genitals during sexual excitement [8]. The marble statue of a boy leads the heroine to become “fixated upon the ‘human world’”, per Massengale [9]. The use of a kiss as a metaphor connotes human intimacy, which implies love. These three images represent the heroine’s “sexual instinct that [is] predominantly autoerotic”, as Freud might have viewed it as well [10]. In expanding on these figurative elements, Andersen illustrates that the mermaid has strong sexual desires, while the non-human protagonist similarly craves engagement in human sexuality.

The mermaid’s dual existence as both human and fish reveals eroticism. She is a supernatural sea creature who is able to view the human world. The upper part of her body makes her rise up in the sea and attract others. The heroine is gifted with a voice that others think beautiful: “Such lovely voices are never heard up on Earth; and the little mermaid sang the most beautifully of them all” [1] (p. 67).

The lower part of her body, on the other hand, prevents her from living in the human world. Her fishtail differentiates her from human beings and makes her part of the matriarchal society of the

sea world: “The sea world in which the little mermaid lives [is] female dominated (there is an 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” [11]. Water is thought to symbolize motherly love, feminine sexuality, and women’s nourishment. According to Zipes, life in the sea is an asset to the mermaid [7] (p. 227)—it allows her to float in different directions and also empowers her to save her dear prince. Andersen clearly plays with the water metaphor to portray the heroine as completely enthralling.

Andersen values the attributes of a mermaid’s body, which have been reinforced by male authority [6] (p. 134). The tension between the devalued portion of her body as opposed to the beautiful and feminine part (of an erotic sea creature) highlights how sexuality is an underlying desire in all human beings. When she turns fifteen, she has the chance to leave the ocean and save a shipwrecked prince. She falls in love with him and tenderly kisses him while he is unconscious, but she is still a fish without genitals. She wants an immortal soul, which is equated to a sexual awakening that will also create a woman with human anatomy. As her grandmother witnesses the desires becoming stronger, she tries to dissuade her, but also notes that sexuality is at the core of attaining a soul:

[The mermaid sighs and asks,] “Can’t I do anything to win an immortal soul?” “No,” said the old mer-woman. “Only if a man should fall so much in love with you that you were dearer to him than his mother and father; and he cared so much for you that all his thoughts were of his love for you; and he let a priest take his right hand and put it in yours, while he promised to be eternally true to you, then his soul would flow into your body and you would be able to partake of human happiness. He can give you a soul and yet keep his own” [1] (p. 66)

The mer-woman prioritizes the sexual activity of human beings while using “soul” metaphorically. Human sexuality is depicted as the means to obtaining a soul. Following this logic, the line, “his soul flows into your body” denotes the consummation between a husband and wife. Andersen conceals the actual need for sex within the context of marital courtship, and depicts the manner in which the mermaid’s underlying need for a human soul is tied to her sexuality.

Consequently, her desire to attain an immortal soul makes her think of marrying the shipwrecked prince. As such, she realizes that her sexuality is necessary to becoming human. The mermaid asks for help with the transformation from the Sea Witch, who is an extremely convincing id figure, in accordance with Freud’s psychoanalytic theory: she agrees to help, but demands that the mermaid relinquish her voice. The Witch continues, “Your beautiful body, your graceful walk, and your lovely eyes [will allow you] to capture a human heart” [1] (p. 69). Her words imply that female sexuality must be deliberate to be deeply felt. This statement also implies that it is not a soul the mermaid desires, but sexuality. Without the appropriate anatomy, she is incapable of intercourse. Her quest for a soul can be interpreted as a quest for sexual organs. The mermaid’s grandmother’s words suggest that all human beings are incomplete without expressing their sexuality. The heroine desires to control her own sexuality, just as *The Mermaid Wife* and *Undine* do in their own stories.

Thus, the mermaid makes great efforts to seduce the prince. After she transforms herself into a beautiful woman, the Prince finds her naked [1] (p. 70). The heroine works her way into the Prince’s favor, and as the Sea Witch predicts, the mermaid’s astounding beauty delights him: she becomes the most important person to him: “The prince declared that [the mermaid] should never leave him, and she was given permission to sleep in front of his door on a velvet pillow” [1] (p. 71). She represents feminine sexuality and tries to stimulate both the Prince’s sexual and romantic urges.

Despite her efforts, the Prince does not view her as a sexual object; rather, when finding her naked and vulnerable, it elicits his need to protect the heroine. He, of course, likes her, but has “no thought of making her his queen” [1] (p. 71). The mermaid’s seductive body does not wholly arouse the Prince, and instead, he represses his desires [1] (p. 71). It could be interpreted that the Prince is having an internal conflict in which he cannot protect her while simultaneously feeling sexual desire [12]. He must consciously desexualize her to resolve the issue.

The protagonist’s human body is “transformative,” [1] (p. 70) so that the prince finds her “being naked covered with her long hair” [5] as enthralling. This sexual repression can also be interpreted in

the context of Jungian psychoanalysis. The mermaid is perceived as *the anima*, one of Jung's archetypes, to whom the Prince feels attracted. The Prince's words to the heroine support this theory: "Yes, you are the dearest to me . . . [you] have the kindest heart of them all. You are devoted to me and you look like a young girl I once saw" [1] (p. 72). The mermaid reminds the Prince of his feminine side, which coincides with Jung's characterization of the archetype. To the Prince, she is derived from his encounter with a young girl. According to Jung, this feminine side is defined as the "other side," and makes the Prince think improperly [13]. As a result, the Prince "tends to distort rather than reveal the nature of an actual woman with whom he comes into contact", per Cox's analysis [13] (p. 145). Although the Prince does not know the heroine is a mermaid, she is a demonic figure whom he cannot marry. This storyline is similar to the fictional creature Mélisande, in the 19th century French fairy tale, "Pelléas and Mélisande", [14] whose prince was attracted by her beauty without knowing she was a sea creature.

Jung characterizes this notion as *the animus* [13] (p. 146). The mermaid is willing to give herself wholeheartedly to the Prince: "I carried him across the sea to the forest where the temple stood . . . [I] am with him and see him every day. I will take care of him, love him, and devote my life to him" [1] (p. 72). The Prince, as Dahlerup considers, "represents body and soul" [11] (p. 156), in which the heroine revels. He is obviously everything to the mermaid, as the Prince took Mélisande and cared for her in the French tale. The water motif [5] (p. 45) and the modern theme of male infatuation with feminine beauty still exist: sexual awakening has a central role, as the Prince shares his romantic feelings from memory.

Still, the Prince and the heroine are "two unintegrated aspects of self", her quest for a soul becoming only a vain hope, according to Soracco [11] (p. 148). The prince finally meets the woman whom he believes saved his life. The mermaid's repression of self-identity, as her grandmother and the Sea Witch predict, receives no reward: "You shall have your wish, for it will bring you misery, little princess" [1] (p. 68). Therefore, she struggles over whether to murder the Prince for her own sake. Eventually, she decides not to deprive her beloved of his life and instead throws herself into the ocean. She becomes one of the daughters of the air, who must forfeit three hundred years for saving souls. Due to her efforts, the mermaid devotes herself to seeking something greater.

Andersen's spiritual reward for the heroine led to the popular fallacy of "The Little Mermaid" being solely a moral tale. The story questions the reader's sense of a stable identity—while the author holds up a mirror, so they will ponder the existential dilemma of shaping one's sense of self and human sexuality. To the contrary, the tale is a story that ardently describes the hidden desire of feminine sexuality. Andersen purposefully conceals this notion within the Christian context of a soul, since the issue of sexuality may not be appropriate for younger audiences. At the same time, his own "sexual awakening" might have prevented him from explicitly addressing feminine sexuality. However, how he portrays this seductive sea creature allows him to achieve two goals: he expresses his thoughts on sexuality, while his tale is seen as purely spiritual in essence. As Özgenalp argues, fairy tales are not necessarily meant to yield a socially-valued lesson; rather, the stories, including "The Little Mermaid," deliver a message of how we all pass through a series of meaningful (but painful) stages of human development that continue shaping who we are.

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