On “The Little Mermaid”

In the year of 1837 the Danish author Hans Christian Andersen, most commonly known as H.C. Andersen, wrote a story about a mermaid simply called “The Little Mermaid”. As the title of the tale reveals, it is about a young mermaid who also happens to be a princes and her journey to fulfill her dream to be loved by a human prince and ultimately acquire a soul along with the immortality that the soul brings. It was written as a children’s story, but it’s moral is quite mature despite being aimed at being read by or to children. As the story is read, it is evident how much emphasis Andersen puts on the importance of faith and that the final result and reward of a life lead with well-practiced faith and good-doing is the eternal life of the soul.

“The Little Mermaid” was first published in a collection of stories called *Eventyr, fortalte for Born* (in Danish) or *Fairy tales told to Children* (in English). The Museum *H.C. Andersen House* acquired the manuscript of “The Little Mermaid” was found in an antique store in Saint-German-en-Laye in France. It is thought that Andersen donated these manuscripts to the painter Anton Melbye, who was married to a French woman. The woman re-married a French major and moved back to France supposedly taking the manuscripts with her. In 1992 a very professional robbery was made at the museum where the manuscripts were kept. Among the things that were stolen was the manuscript of the story of “The Little Mermaid”. None of the stolen objects have yet been retrieved.

This is just one of many stories by Andersen that are known worldwide. “The Princess and the Pea”, “Thumbelina”, “The Emperor’s New Clothes”, “The Little Match Girl”, and “The Ugly Duckling” have become classic children’s tales all over the world. The sad thing is that these stories have been republished so many times and rewritten and adapted by various different authors that the credits to Andersen are often forgotten. These newer versions usually alter the story to a large extent making it harder for the reader to identify the tale as Andersen original. Many modern generations grew up watching Disney’s film version never knowing that the story originally belongs to Andersen, but rather believing that it is made by Walt Disney.

Andersen seems to always have had the adults and especially parents in mind when writings for children: “I get an idea for grown-ups and them tell my tale to little ones, while remembering that Mother and Father will be listening and must have something to think about”.

“The Little Mermaid” is a lovely story of the merpeople that live under the sea “Most of what I have written is a reflection of myself. Every character is from life. I know and have known them all”. In regard to the “Little Mermaid”, it is Andersen himself that represents the Little Mermaid and Louise Collin, Jonas Collins daughter, is mirrored in the tale as the Prince. Andersen had shown romantic feelings toward her and she had dismissed him, as she was in love with somebody else. Andersen characteristic and spiritual thinking were certainly in accordance with the little mermaid’s main objective in the tale.

H. C. Andersen’s story of the Little Mermaid has a folktale elements, while Disney movie is a fairy tale!

H. C. Andersen’s story “The Little Mermaid” can be read as a creation myth and a metaphor for woman’s condition in patriarchal society. According to psychoanalytic concepts – the myth is about a construction of female subjectivity through a series of separations of splits: a) birth; b) growths-up ; c) desire and d) death. Birth and death are read as representing real separations, growing up is read in a symbolic castration of tongue and voice, while desire is read as structure around lack.It can be argued that by simplifying and externalizing internal complex conflicts in the Andersen story, Disney’s version reduces the myth to a fairy tale and reproduces the ideology of romantic love.

Pay attention to what mermaids are! In the story, the Little Mermaid belongs to the category of “in-betweens” ((non)human, (im)mortal, (ir)rational beings) who rises to the level of getting eternal soul. Outside this context, THE MERMAID is a well-known mythic creature and a very peculiar one. Her ambiguous nature is also suggested by her history. She is, in fact, a medieval hybrid between a mermaid and a siren. The MERMAIDS are half-fish, half-humans whose origin dates back to Sumerian, Babylonian gods. *The Sirens* are Greek mythical anthropomorphic birds who feature in Homer’s Odyssey. Their alluring music enticed sailors to come close to their island, only to be shipwrecked on the island’s cliffs and devoured by the Sirens… Or, do mermaids live in the ocean for real but their existence is kept secret? Have you seen any documentary on this topic? Are they circus attraction like bearded women? Does this influence our interpretation of the story?

Task

1. Please, read the story:

H.C. Andersen, “The Little Mermaid”, Internet izvor: [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org)

and watch the following (animated) movies:

Musker, J., Ashman, H, *The Little Mermaid*, 1989, Walt Disney Pictures.

Gutierrez, A., Molloy, R., *The Little Mermaid,* 2018, AMC Theatres.

2. Please, think about the stories, implications of all those adaptations and answer the following questions:

a) Have you read the original Andersen’s story when you were small? What was your reachon to it?

b) How would today’s children react to it? Would it be “difficult” to understand? How can a nursery teacher help them?

c) Which film adaptation is better for you? Explain your choice.

d) Which story suits best today’s cultural moment (the modern world in 21st century)?