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A MERMAID'S TALE: THE ARCHETYPAL AND PARTICULAR IN HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN'S STORY

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A Mermaid's Tale: The Archetypal and Particular in Hans Christian Andersen's Story

Folklore and fairytale scholars do not include the works of Hans Christian Andersen in their studies, and this is appropriately the case, since the aim of such scholars is to discover the normative attributes of the various folklore genres. Andersen never claimed, as did Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, to be a collector of oral tales; only about twelve of the 156 tales published in his lifetime were even based on actual folktales, and most of these are among his earliest tales (Bredsdorff, _Andersen_ 313). Moreover, Anderson did not limit himself to the fairytale genre, but also worked in fable and other story genres, freely recreating his perceptions and experience through the folkloristic and literary matter that he absorbed through his childhood and education. In short, he was a creative writer, and his highly individual tales offer folklorists little aid in discovering the typical characteristics of the genre with which they are classed, the fairytale.

It is perhaps this atypicality in Andersen that draws a literary critic like myself to him, for in my writing and teaching I'm generally in the business of interpreting individual works. Of course, such interpretation is impossible without an understanding of symbolic and generic norms. This

paper is an exploration of Andersen's particularized transformations of an oral folk form, the fairytale, and of a mythical being, the mermaid, in "The Little Mermaid." My thesis is a paradoxical one: while I believe that the universal suggestiveness of the mermaid as well as the near-universal appeal of the fairytale form contribute to the enduring popularity of Andersen's tale, theese archetypal elements made possible the successful expression of The author's romantic sensibility, and hence the originality of his tale.

I. What Is a Mermaid?

The features of the mermaid, like any enduring supernatural type, might at first seem to form a distinct set of characteristics: she is near-mortal and lives underwater, but comes to the surface from time to time; she has a scaly tale, and often blue eyes and blonde hair; she is usually seen sitting on rocks, ledges, and reefs, but sometimes swimming off-shore; she holds a comb and a mirror, or sometimes a magical object (usually a cap, veil, or shawl); she is frequently capable of self-transformation; and she is fond of singing and dancing (the latter, obviously, in the transformed-to-human state) (Beck; Benwell and Waugh). Myths about her include her desire for a soul, her powers of prophecy and wish-granting, her vengeance when thwarted, and her sojourns with mortal men when her magical object is taken. (These sojourns, however, are <u>always</u> temporary, as the mermaid inevitably retrieves her magical object and returns to sea). Lore of the mermaid is similar to that of seal-folk, most commonly recounted in Scandinavia and the parts of the British Isles where the Norse landed in the Early Christian Era and

Middle Ages. Among Western Celts and Scandinavians a variety of beliefs connected seals with humans--as fallen angels condemned to live in the sea but capable of assuming human shape on land; as humans under a spell; as the souls of those who have drowned at sea; as humans that have sinned, and as the descendents of humans who committed suicide at sea (Benwell and Waugh; Craigie 231).

This outline of mermaids and seal-folk suggests, at first blush, a relatively consistent and relatively local lore, but a deeper look indicates that the mermaid's geneology (to speak metaphorically) is far more extensive. By virtue of their common element, merfolk and seal-folk are surely related to all water deities and spirits and, if we take this broader perspective, we see that the hugely protean nature of waterfolk is the result of the shifting matrix of archetypal concerns. Five thousand years ago, the Babylonians worshipped the fish-tailed god Ea/Oannes (sometimes shown as human with a fish cloak instead of fish-tailed); myths of fish-tailed gods and water-dragons with prophetic and self-transformative powers are part of Indian, Chinese, and Japanese culture. In India, the lesser water nymphs and fairies have some of the characteristics of the more modern mermaid--respectively, a love singing and dancing and a tendency to lure and seduce men. Other mythological figures, like Poseidon and the sirens, were not originally associated with water or piscan anatomy (the sirens were originally birds).

The mermaid, then, in whom many believed up through the eighteenth century, is a scaled-down descendent of these powerful ancient water dieties, a being midway between the supernatural and the human. By the mid-nineteenth

century, coinciding with the writing of Andersen's romantic tale, she became literally deformed and shrunken, as fakes, often manufactured with monkey's torsos (apparently the Japanese were expert in their production), graced the circus and sideshow tents.

II. The Common Element

In the midst of these myriad water-spirit myths, among their countless different features, the interpretive mind experiences a degree of strain. Folklorists like Benwell and Waugh try to trace the mermaid to her source, but are honest enough not to insist that, given all information, the geneaology and history of the mermaid could be traced in full. And this does indeed seem unlikely. On the other hand, given such abundant and protean myths, can anything useful be inferred about the archetypal influences behind them?

All of these mythical beings have two common attributes: 1) they are associated with water, and 2) the dieties or creatures are entirely, partially, or capable of becoming (temporarily) human. Thus, first, the myths are all expressions of our intimate human connection with water. In nearly all origin myths, creation comes from water, and many cultures have specific rituals and beliefs about the healing properities of water (Morvan). Such lore certainly arises from the practical awareness, pellucid to the most primitive mind, that water is absolutely vital to survival. Furthermore, though, our physiological attunement to our environment attracts us unconsciously to water, of which we are largely constituted; and yet the most

primitive human cannot but perceive the vast difference between an apparently unshaped sea and his compact and particularized body. This combined sense of affinity and extreme divergence constitutes the psychic ambivalence toward water which becomes symbolically projected in deities and water beings who by turns heal, help, and tempt us to our doom.

Jung asserts that in dreams water is the most common symbol for the unconscious and, if I understand him, his reasoning connects psychology with physiology: "water is earthy and tangible, it is also the fluid of the instinct-driven body . .. The unconscious is the psyche that reaches down from the daylight of mentally and morally lucid consciousness into the nervous system that for ages has been known as the "sympathetic." This does not govern perception and muscular activity like the cerebrospinal system, and thus control the environment; but, though functioning without sense organs, it maintains the balance of life and, through the mysterious paths of sympathetic excitation, not only gives us knowledge of the innermost life of other beings but also has an inner effect upon them" (19-21). While water might often symbolize the unconscious, Jung's logic suggests that this is only so because of the isomorphism between the psyche and the body, whose fluidity connects it inherently to the natural world. Mermaids and water dieties, those beings who are imagistic incarnations of a portion of water's meaning to us, symbolize various aspects of our feeling for this element.

If this is true of water in general, the sea has special qualities: "Dwellers by the sea cannot fail to be impressed by the sight of its ceaseless ebb and flow, and are apt, on the principles of that rude philosophy of sympathy and resemblance which here engages our attention, to

trace a subtle relation, a secret harmony, between its tides and the life of man, of animals, and of plants" (Frazer 59). The sea is dynamic, unlike the land and most inland waters, dictating with its ebb and flow, its own seeming life, the life of man. In Scandinavian mythology the waves themselves are associated with divinity, their motion like creatures in the human imagination. For inhabitants of seafaring cultures, every instinctive feeling about water is exaggerated, while perhaps some others are added. The dynamic connection with life and death; a source of food and transportation; an emblem of possibility as well as alienation from family and friends . . . figured alternately in the femme fatale, the helpful prophetess, the soulless other.

In addition to their association with water, mermaids and water-spirits, either half-human or self-transforming beings, encapsulate archetypal concerns in their mixed nature. The transformation of animals into humans and vice versa is a ubiquitous feature of the European fairytale, and generally represents the tendency of this genre to create an idealized whole by binding the human and natural worlds to one another (Luthi, _Fairytale_). Hedwig von Beit additionally suggests that transformation represents a mythic/holistic mode of primitive consciousness that was still to some degree prevalent during the development of the European fairytale in the Middle Ages. But even in fairytales, the fact that transformation is associated specifically with curses and enchantment, rather than existing as a pervasive feature of reality, marks a reduced belief in the power of magic since primitive times and, correspondingly, a relative shift of attention to the profane world (von Beit 61-62).

Lore of merfolk and seal-folk frequently includes powers of transformation, and in this such stories bear witness to the psychic _recognition_ that man and animal are part of a larger whole and, paradoxically but not illogically, the psychic _need_ to knit the two into a more cohesive whole than the evidence of our senses actually suggests. Merfolk, indeed, being half-human, need not be capable of transformation to express this unconscious knowledge and desire. In their connection with the sea specifically they indicate our ambivalence toward the flux of life of which we are temporary manifestations and into which every grain of our physical and mental distinctness must inevitably disperse.

III. Anderson´s Mermaid

Anderson´s mermaid came to life in 1837, at the time when folk beliefs of this kind were on the wane, and it is thus not surprising that she lacks many, even most, of the characteristics of her mythological sea-sisters. She is not a siren, prophetess or tempter; she has no special powers, including (woe betide her) powers of self-transformation. She is depicted mostly in negative terms, for while she is not human she is defined by her desire to be so. She is therefore other and apart from the world to which she "naturally" belongs as well as the world of humans. But the specific character of her otherness identifies her not, like the traditional mermaid, with the nonhuman mysteries of the universe, but paradoxically with human needs and desires. The story traces an important stage in her development, from child to maiden, and while she is morally good and innocent, her initiation into adulthood is

marked by thoughtfulness and suffering, as she becomes progressively aware of the depths of her desires and the difficulty of fulfilling them. By contrast, the other characters are one-dimensional types standard in the genre; ironically, it is the mermaid's atypicality, her relative complexity of character, that marks her as the locus of humanity in the story.

All of this indicates that Andersen's mermaid is manifestly a symbol, not a creature in whose substantive reality the writer wishes us to believe. Since she is so unlike the mermaids of myth, it seems reasonable to ask why Andersen chose to make her a mermaid than some other kind of creature. The most obvious answer is that the desire for an immortal soul, the theme that comes to predominate in Andersen's tale, is a theme of medieval Scandinavian mermaid lore with which Andersen was acquainted. The entire motif of the mermaid's desire for a soul suggested itself as promising material because, at the same time he believed in the immortality of the human soul, Andersen was infused with romantic notions, and saw in this story the opportunity to dramatize human striving toward a spiritual ideal.

Folk belief and folk traditions were all vitally alive in Odense at the turn of the nineteenth century and, although Andersen's father, a poor cobbler, was a freethinker and man of some education, his mother was superstitious and nearly illiterate, as were her acquaintances. When, at the age of fourteen, Andersen left Odense to seek his fame in the Danish Royal Theatre, a mission requiring him to take a boat between the islands of Funen and Zealand, his mother consoled herself that he would fly back to Odense as soon as he saw the water. He didn't. Though Andersen's biographer doesn't explain the mother's thinking, Craigie relates tales of river men who take to

themselves one child a year; one such reportedly inhabited the waters in Odense.

Danish ballads tell tales of merfolk (male and female) of varying character, and with these Andersen was no doubt acquainted. "Agnes [Agnete] and the Merman" was the basis of Andersen's verse drama Agnete, written in 1835, two years before "The Little Mermaid." This ballad tells of a human woman who willingly goes off with a merman, living with him for over eight years and bearing him seven sons. One day, she hears the churchbells and asks her spouse for permission to go up to the church, which he grants. She then refuses to return, and when the merman asks her to think of her children, especially the baby, she reponds: "I think not of the grown ones, nor yet of the small/Of the baby in the cradle I'll think least of all" (Olrik 116). So much for family values when the immortal soul is at stake. The ballad from which this derives, originally Slavic, portrayed nature (in the person of the merman) as a treacherous wooer, but through its adaptations to German and then to Danish it underwent a marked shift in values, ultimately invoking sympathy for the merman's sorrow and loss. Thus, the history of this single ballad encapsulates the ambivalence humans collectively feel about the sea and the symbols associated with it.

Like "Agnes and the Merman," "The Mermaid's Spaeing [Prophesying]" Christianizes an earlier folk story, but does in such a way that evokes sympathy for the mermaid. Held captive by a king, the mermaid is granted her freedom by the queen after foretelling her future, which includes the prophecy that the queen will die in childbirth with her third son. But as the mermaid swims away, she tells the queen not to weep, for "The gates of

Heaven stand open for thee" (Olrik 113). These portraits of merfolk in the Danish ballad are a far cry from the type of the mermaid promoted by the Christian church and the bestiaries, which emphasize the mermaid's negative characteristics and interpret her as--guess what--a symbol of the sins of the flesh. These two ballads seem remarkably humanistic and romantic for products of the Middle Ages, and both the ambiguity of their values and their humanism are characterstics of Andersen's story. Though other Danish ballads show merfolk of devious and dangerous character, there are no traces of this type in Andersen's mermaid.

In addition to the folk beliefs and traditions that, in effect, *were* Andersen's environment from an early age, he was influenced by (and drawn to) literary romanticism from an early age, chiefly Danish and German. Bernhard Severin Ingemann, described as the Danish Sir Walter Scott, was a friend and mentor of Andersen, as well as a clear influence on his novels and poetry; Ingemann wrote a story of merfolk at one point, unfortunately not available in English translation. Likewise, Andersen scholars point to Friedrich, Baron de la Motte Fouqué's *Undine, or the Water-Spirit*, as a source for Andersen's tale. Motte Fouqué's story serves as a thematic influence on Andersen, but the sensibility of this tale about a water-spirit who desires an immortal soul is quite different. Undine, the changling child of a poor fisherman and his wife, is wild and impetuous, though also delightful and innocent. She marries the knight Huldbrand who wanders into the forest, and who eventually returns home to his castle with her; gradually, Huldbrand falls out of love with her, replacing her with princess Bertalda, who is in fact the actual daughter of the fisherfolk. Undine returns to her watery element, but is

unwittingly released when a stone is removed from a fountain, and Huldbrand ends up drowning in her embrace, though Undine does not intend his death. The woods are full of frightening, shape-changing and evil spirits, most particularly Undine's uncle, and thus nature, represented in the person of Undine, the other spirits, and the landscape is a place of starkly contrasting values--at once innocent and pure (Undine and the promontory where the fisherman lives), evil, unpredictable, and antithetical to man (the woods and its spirits). The demonic aspect of nature and the prevalent elements of chivalric romance in this story are alien to Andersen's tale, from which the traces of such a distinctively German romanticism is absent.

Andersen's own life led him to the perception that otherness is an integral part of human existence, rather than belonging to beings different in kind. He is known as Denmark's first proletarian writer and, although he received encouragement and support for his interests from a variety of sources from his childhood onward, the difficulty of his progress was a constant reminder of the difference between who he was and who he wanted to be. He didn't begin serious schooling until he was almost twenty; the other boys in the class were half his age. He was a gangly boy who wore patched and ill-fitting clothes, with an unusual combination of personality traits; though naive, sensitive, and vain (from a young age, he constantly performed for people, at his own initiative), he was essentially good-natured and caring towards others. As a child, he didn't play with other children, but his poor parents were devoted to him.

It is easy to see how folk tradition, literary education, and biography influenced Andersen's portrayal of the mermaid and the themes of his story.

Her inwardness, isolation, and longing for a life and way of being other than her own derive from Andersen's own life. In short, her psychology is, in many respects, his psychology. The fascination with the supernatural and with folk culture that constitutes a key element in literary romanticism suggested the suitability of using an otherworld figure to express symbolically human concerns, and Motte Fouque's philosophical preoccupation with merging matter and spirit leaves its stamp on Andersen's tale. The vitality of the mermaid specifically as a symbol, and the humanistic feel for her suffering, derive from Danish folklore and ballad, and are features whose resonance Andersen develops and exploits in his story.

IV. Paradigmatic Features of the Fairytale

We have already seen that, much as the mermaid herself may change from one incarnation to another, she retains--through her half-human, half-animal form, and through her association with water--an archetypal suggestiveness, simultaneously representing our conflicting perceptions that we both reside in and remain divided from nature or the larger flux of life. As with this symbol, the fairytale form can be subject to much innovation, but is not infinitely malleable.

The fairytale, while a pervasive genre, is not universal, but cognitive research suggests that its underlying texture, narrative, is. Narrative is comprised of a causally related temporal sequence of events, and usually involves a human agent or agents. Narrativity (narrative thinking) is both a primary mode of cognition, our fundamental means of getting by in the world,

and the base line from which all story genres arise. Northrop Frye has said that the pull of narrative is toward ritual, and thus toward unconscious repetition. Narrative does display event-centeredness, and tends toward greater and greater inclusiveness, whereas patterns of imagery, according to Frye, "are oracular in origin, and derive from the epiphanic moment" (in Bate 606). Riddles, folktales, and other such forms merge the oracular and narrative impulses, weaving together temporal and atemporal patterns of significance to form the cognitive/structural basis of literary art. Hence all fictional narrative takes our primary mode of cognition as its formal basis; fairytale, with its structural and causal simplicity, is closer to our elementary thinking than modern literary narrative.

Scholars have also noticed similarities in the content of fairytales and that of ritual, particularly in those aspects associated with magic, including hard, bright, shiny objects, often metals or glass, to which magical properties are attributed (Luthi). Thus it seems that fairytale has roots in primitive beliefs and ritual patterns. Though simple as a fictional form, it is clearly not as simple as those forms which preceded it. Moreover, the attitude toward the magical and supernatural in fairytale, combined with a realistic portrait of humankind (Luthi 150), marks it as a genre embodying the residual beliefs of primitive peoples alongside a developing consciousness of individualism and human agency--marks it, in short, as a product of the Middle Ages (von Beit). Though certainly a form bearing the signs of its cultural moment, it is possible that much of the enduring appeal of the fairytale rests on its ability to accommodate two somewhat conflicting worldviews to one another in a structure not far removed

from elementary narrative thinking.

What does Andersen retain of this genre in his tale? In its "pure" form, the fairytale tends, as Luthi says, "toward the clear, unambiguous, the extreme, and the distinct" (Fairytale 15). As an oral form, it is predictable, and listeners tend to be conservative in their preference for predictability. This prefence for predictability, which licenses the teller with freedom to develop narrative kernels while keeping the main story line intact, is consistent with the genre´s basic optimism and tendency toward extremes. Specifically, the fairytale features depthlessness, one-dimensionality, a tendency to isolate, a predilection for metallic and mineral transpositions, sublimation, and an abstract style. It is abstract and spiritual, defining castles and cities and even human beauty in terms of sharp materials and metals; it is notable for its lack of description, particularly naturalistic description.

In structure, fairytale also aims for simplicity and clarity. Openings and closings are formulaic, serving the teller as announcements of the parameters of his tale. It procedes through repetition and variation--if a task is to be performed a given number of times, each task is related as a discrete narrative segment without being related thematically, causally, or logically (much like many a freshman composition) backward or forward to the similar episodes. Fairytale heros and heroines are always human, and their capacity for setting goals and performing actions is realistic, that is, consistent with actual human abilities. They require helpers, and often these are animals.

V. Andersen´s Internalization of the Fairytale

Any story, even if only being adapted from oral to written form, must surely meet with some modifications sheerly to accomodate the shift in medium. Even tales like Andersen´s which were written to be read aloud should not strive to approximate an oral form, and Andersen, who from an early age performed snippets of Danish and German plays as well as his own compositions for any available audience, understood the difference. Furthermore, since his tales were not, in fact, adaptations, Andersen felt even freer to cultivate literariness of his work.

In fact, the distinctive feature of Andersen´s tales, identifying him as a major writer in Denmark, is his adoption of a simple, colloquial, yet flexible language to stories containing some subtlety of meaning. Meant to be read aloud by adults to children (although some tales, including "The Little Mermaid," were not really intended for children), Andersen´s tales are childlike in their simplicity, naivete, and humor at the same time that they often concern adult themes and modern ambiguities.

Andersen, who came to writing after his failed attempts at acting (and dancing and singing), did not set out to make his fame as a writer of tales, much less as a children´s writer. When he began writing tales in his mid-thirties, he had already spent about ten years writing plays, poetry, and novels, and his immediate goal was probably to make a little extra money during the Christmas season--an appropriate goal, since he really did need money. In his ambitiously literary works, Andersen was drawn to the

preoccupations of romanticism and to sophisticated literary forms. He was given to obsessive retelling of his own life, and critics claim that his novels and plays especially suffer from weaknesses in plotting; one commentator says the novels read like bad Scott (as the Cookie Monster says when he thinks someone may have stepped on his cookie at the disco, "That too terrible to think about"!). All of this together suggests that the structural simplicity of folktales, in conjunction with the distance that comes from not staking one's fame on the present writing project, served as a felicitous constraint on and framework for the writer's romantic themes and emotional nature. Whatever liberties Andersen took with fairytale and fable, their basic structures were rudimentary to him and, in remaining faithful to a few basic elements of structure and style, he successfully controlled his tendency toward excess.

In keeping with his romantic proclivities, Anderson major divergence from the generic norm is a shift from external to internal action. The mermaid's isolation, initiation into suffering, and potential spirituality are the main focus of "The Little Mermaid," although much of this is conveyed through description rather than an abstract account of the mermaid's feelings. Actions themselves, like seeking the help of the sea witch and drinking her potion, are apparently ineffectual as steps in the fulfillment of a long-term goal. But this is, in fact, only apparently the case, since the mermaid does not know throughout much of the story what her goal actually is. Causality, then, is complex and ambiguous in this story, consistent with the modern sensibility behind it.

The fairytale has been described variously as concerned with a movement

from a lack to its liquidation, from disequilibrium to equilibrium, and from need to fulfillment of need (Propp, Dundes, and Luthi, respectively, in Fairytale). The framing tensions are those of lack-to-remedy, and the conclusions of fairytales focus on rewards and elevations in rank and power. Such a definition does not distinguish fairytales appreciably from other narrative genres, though the fairytale enacts this movement with clarity and economy, usually introducing the characters and situation in a brief sentence or two. Typically, the fairytale carries out the logic of returning to equilibrium by placing the hero on the road and requiring him to perform tasks that help him achieve his goal. He usually does not return home; however, one dimensional character that he is, he feels no longing or loss for his home or for those associated with it.

In marked contrast to the generic norm, Anderson relies heavily on description, beginning the tale with two paragraphs describing the depth of the sea and the sea king's castle rather than a exposition of the basic situation. This is a beautiful place, where "the water is as blue as the petals of the loveliest cornflower and as clear as the purest glass," where fish take the place of birds and the roof of the sea king's castle opens and closes to the motions of the water (Conroy and Rossel 34). Anderson is here concerned with establishing mood through a concrete realization of place, and he does so not simply as a lyrical exercise. Retrospectively, such passages contribute to the reader/listener's experience of loss, for it is this home that the mermaid will leave behind. Unlike the paradigmatic fairytale, which focuses on the rewards attendant on the successful completion of tasks, Andersen's story is preoccupied with the psychic and emotional costs of

individual growth.

Andersen's leisurely method of establishing situation continues in the ensuing paragraphs. The third paragraph introduces the mermaid and her family, and makes it clear that the little mermaid is the main character. But there is so far no drama or tension. After two further paragraphs of description, Andersen elaborates on the little mermaid's character as he contrasts her garden with her sisters' gardens: "the youngest made hers perfectly round like the sun and had only flowers that shone red as the sun itself. She was a strange child, quiet and pensive, and while the other sisters decorated their gardens with all kinds of odd things they had taken from wrecked ships, the only thing she would allow in hers, besides the rosy-red flowers that looked like the sun on high, was a beautiful marble statue. It was of a handsome boy carved out of pure white stone that in a shipwreck had been sunk to the bottom of the sea" (35). With this passage six paragraphs into the story, Andersen clearly establishes the mermaid's otherness. Unlike her sisters (and, incidentally, the heroine of the recent Disney film), she is not interested in forks, broken crockery, and beads, the paraphernalia and trinkets of human life, but in the condition of being human, depicted symbolically in the statue, an idealized image of a young man. Unlike the traditional fairytale heroine, she is not actually human but yearns to be so, and Andersen's association of the human sphere with direct sunlight implies that the mermaid, fascinated with the sun and its light, aspires to the spiritual condition of humankind. As Bredsdorff points out, the human world matters in this story only because of its significance to the mermaid (Andersen 314). Put another way, it is the mermaid who makes us think

about what it means to be human; her deep aspirations to the human condition combined with the sympathy the author elicits for her alone (that is, the human connection Andersen invites between the mermaid and reader/listener) determine the symbolic rather than supernatural nature of her mermaidness. She is other--both ideal as a form of being that links the human back to the purity and innocence of nature, and incomplete because of her innocence and inexperience. She is therefore akin to the romantic conceptions of the child and the noble savage. Yet because the mermaid, ten years old at the beginning of the tale, does not consciously grasp her desires or, much less, their significance, she remains temporarily a pensive dreamer in the underwater kingdom.

Waiting, therefore, is a central aspect of this creature's development, and in the first part of the tale she waits primarily for her fifteenth birthday, the day when, like each of her sisters before her, she will be able to visit the surface. When she does finally visit the surface, she saves the prince during a violent storm, then watches from the sea as a young girl from a nearby convent (coincidentally the princess he later marries) leans over the awakening prince. In spite of this dramatic episode, Andersen makes it plain that the real action is interior--for what happens next? The mermaid returns to her home at the bottom of the sea, her sense of longing for the human world increased and given concrete shape by her attachment to the prince. When she tells her sisters of her feelings for him, they lead her to his castle. Now watching combines with waiting as the mermaid, behind rocks and amidst sea foam, is gradually initiated into the meaning of mature desire, the longing for an object that seems forever remote.

Though the Disney film as well as, perhaps, many twentieth century adaptations and "translations" of this story make the prince the final locus of the mermaid's desire, he is not so in Andersen's original tale. Finally the mermaid, spurred on by her growing love of humans, asks her grandmother whether human beings ever die. The grandmother explains that humans have an immortal soul, and that "they rise up to unknown, beautiful places which we shall never see" (45). Hearing this, the mermaid can no longer be content living her three hundred years in the sea, preoccupied with the prince and the wish to "possess, like him, an immortal soul" (46), and it is at this point she seeks the help of the sea witch. It is not until nearly halfway through the story, then, that she understands in full the objects she desires and can therefore work actively toward a goal.

The ambiguity of her desires, the emphasis on thoughtfulness and longing (conveyed partially through direct statement, but largely through concrete description), and the generally static nature of this tale stand in direct contrast to several paradigmatic elements of fairytale--its one-dimensional depiction of acting, not thinking, characters; it tendency to establish lack, and thus goal, immediately; and, consistent with these first two points, its logical, economical working-out of plot toward a successful attainment of the desired goal. But though "The Little Mermaid" appears static in comparison to the paradigmatic fairytale, it is not without its action; stated abstractly, this action is the gradual realization of desires whose fulfillment is vital to a complete sense of self. The ambiguities of this story are hardly the result of poor planning on the writer's part, for Andersen adds developmental and psychological dimension to the basically

realistic depiction of the fairytale heroine/hero. Though the fairytale typically isolates both individuals and situations, it does not typically dwell on the experience of being alone, or lonely, or different, of being an unfulfilled outsider; in addition to "The Little Mermaid," several of Andersen's other best known stories, including "The Ugly Duckling" and "The Little Match Girl," are centrally concerned with this condition. In this shift of emphasis from external to internal action, and thus to the experience of isolation or aloneness, Andersen demonstrates that he was not simply enamoured of the trappings of romanticism but fully possessed of a romantic sensibility.

Just as the tale is realistic in its portrayal of the mermaid's initiation into longing and desire, it is consistent in its subtle emphasis on the inevitability of loss and suffering. When the mermaid says, "Oh, if only I were fifteen! . . . I know that I shall love the world up there and the human beings who live and dwell in it," the naive words are tinged with a delicate irony, for every adult knows that what the mermaid looks forward to as fulfillment will in fact bring an increase in desire (39). Like any child, she doesn't understand the nature of desire, nor does she understand that everything has its costs. She must suffer the loss of her voice, traded to the sea witch for the magic potion that gives her legs; after this, she must suffer the pain of walking and dancing on legs she was never meant to have. She misses her family and the sea. When she is living in the prince's castle, she goes down in the evening and sits on the steps leading into the sea, dipping her legs on the water, assuaging both physical and mental pain.

If the typical fairytale ends with an unequivocal increase in rank and

power, "The Little Mermaid" tempers such optimism with ambiguity and a sense of potentiality more in keeping with the entire tone of the story than with the fairytale paradigm. After refusing to kill the prince on his wedding night, a method contrived by the witch at the bidding of her sisters in the hope of returning her to the undersea world, she plunges into the sea, turning to sea foam, but then rises up unexpectedly to meet the daughters of the air. These beings lack immortal souls but can attain them through three hundred years of good deeds. Given her basic goodness, it seems certain that the mermaid will acquire an immortal soul, but this is still different than actually having one at the end of the story (and, on one level, it can with justice be said that her innate goodness hasn´t done her much good). Still and all, the magical powers of the witch are put in their place, as her instructions about how the mermaid can save herself are clearly subordinated to a greater supernatural force.

At this point (if not before) the fairytale purist would say that such a story deviates so far from the generic norm that to inspect it as fairytale is a useless exercise, and this view has much legitimacy. But though the shift from external to internal action, related to major cultural shift in sensibility, is a profound one, many stylistic features of fairytale are retained. Changed as it is, the basic pattern of lack-to-liquidation remains, just as elements of the fabulous and magical combine within a basically realistic perspective. The character constellation and patterns of repetition and variation, too, are recognizable as those of fairytale. In short, the consistent features of the tale offer a familiar framework for Anderson´s audience, providing just the degree of cognitive--that is, formal

and thematic--consistency to enable listeners/readers to accept his variations.

The story is exemplary in its character constellation: a father, a grandmother, six daughters, a witch, a prince, and a princess. Typical of the fairytale´s tendency to make a hero or heroine of the unpromising stepchild or youngest child, the little mermaid is the youngest daughter. Anderson surely intuited the universal tendency, even stronger in children, who every day experience their littleness, than in adults, to sympathize with one who has so much to live up to and so little experience. That the sea king is widowed, and that the good grandmother and witch contrast with one another, are all staples of the genre. Yet if we look more closely at the grandmother and witch, they do not really present us with a good-evil dichotomy. The witch fulfills her part of the bargain, even giving the mermaid a second chance when the sisters come to plead for her life. Little would you know it from watching the Disney film, but she never attempts to double-cross the mermaid, and although she and the creatures surrounding her are grotesque, she is not really evil. Likewise, the prince, whose delusion about who has saved him is never corrected (he thinks it is the princess he marries), is a morally ambiguous character, who makes of the the dumb, transformed mermaid a kind of favorite pet; acknowledging her loyalty and devotion, he nonetheless remains adamant in seeking the young woman he mistakenly assumes has saved his life.

Both in providing a paradigmatic family constellation and in complicating it, Anderson balances the appeal of his story in a way appropriate to the range of his audience. If the child particularly trusts

the familiar appeal of this constellation and the attendant separation of moral qualities, the adult may appreciate the ambiguities of character and the vision of reality they suggest.

Likewise, Andersen employs repeated and varied actions, presenting them in isolation from one another, to fulfill paradigmatic expectations. This is most notable early in the tale, when each sister has her first opportunity to visit the surface on her fifteenth birthday. Andersen presents the visits sequentially, relating the varied observations of the several sisters, staying true to fairytale structure by isolating each episode from the others. But just as Andersen complicates the character constellations of fairytale with moral ambiguities, he shifts the emphasis of repeated action away from its traditional function of moving the narrative toward its final goal and subsumes it under the overriding concern for the little mermaid's growing preoccupation with the human world. What is important in each of these episodes is what the sister _sees_, not what she _does_, for each of the five brings back a new perspective on the world above the water, and each of these pictures feeds the little mermaid's imagination and longing. It is also perhaps also possible that the familiar pattern of repeated action gives the _effect_ of greater forward movement in the story than is actually the case at this point, before the mermaid has any clearly focused notion of her own desires. This is to speculate that the active pattern of fairytale nicely counterbalances the potential passivity and stasis of an interior story.

I have tried to suggest some of the ways in which an archetypal image and a near-universal narrative genre act together as a filter and framework for an writer's individual sensibility in the creation of an enduring story.

Given his emotional and highly expressive nature, Andersen was a writer who had much to gain from expressing his ideas in ascetic folkloristic genres. Andersen was fortunate that the romantic resurgence of interest in folk culture, giving impetus to the publication and rapid translation of the Brothers Grimm, coincided historically with his writing life, for his talents were particularly suited to reworking both the content and forms of folklore (Dollerup).

As a meditation on what makes a story last, this paper is necessarily incomplete, for I don't think it is possible to determine such a thing. Obviously, not ever aspect of Andersen's story has endured, or survived in all the tale's various incarnations. The mermaid's desire for immortality, for example, has no place in the Disney film; while many of us do not share Andersen's Christian beliefs, the elimination of spiritual concerns from the tale greatly reduces its imaginative, and therefore human, scope. But in fact, every enduring theme--the nature of human desire, the inevitability of loss and suffering--is peeled away, like a dessicated rind,in this most recent version of the story, in which Disney once more makes fairytale meet the norms of its predominant genre, Consumer Romance (Eidsvik in Haase 198). Bearing in mind Frye's remark that value judgments are just items in the history of taste--though Frye himself might have revised this statement in the era of poststructuralism--I have to hope that Andersen's tale, remarkably suggestive for a work in such a spare genre, is not in the near future overshadowed by the simplifications of commercial culture. There is nothing wrong with such films--as long as other cultural artifacts, like Andersen's tale, reflect, for children and adults, the experience that life is

meaningful, and that its meaning sometimes comes in hard ways.

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