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The Little Mermaid: The Transformation that Comes with Time

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Abstract

This thesis is the result of the question, “What did ‘The Little Mermaid’ say about gender roles when it was first published, and what do two of its future adaptations add to that discussion?” It was born out of a curiosity on how fairy tales change with time, altered by the values and taboos of the societies that created them. In order to answer this question, I have selected three versions of ‘The Little Mermaid’ to discuss: the original Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale, the Disney cartoon, and the Northern Ballet production. First, each version was summarized. Then, in order to better understand the social and cultural context of each version, I researched the countries and time periods that these versions found themselves in. Then, I discussed gender roles in each setting. Finally, I related the topic of gender roles in each time setting to its respective version, thus concluding how the view on women’s roles has changed over the course of two centuries. The general conclusions are that stories and societies are very tightly linked, constantly influencing and reflecting each other. By extension, ‘The Little Mermaid’ has changed numerous times since its initial publication. Its more spiritual elements were removed and its more graphic details were diluted, but its core premise has remained the same. Despite obvious differences separating these three versions, they all depict what the time period considered to be strong female qualities. The first portrayed the protagonist as a strong-willed creature who seeks spiritual ascent and achieves it through love and sacrifice. The second casts the mermaid into a hopeless romantic who sacrifices everything for the man she loves, and is rewarded with his love. The third stars a fusion of its predecessors, with a heroine who falls in love with a prince and endures constant, unyielding pain in order to be with him, and it is this love that gives her the strength to kill the sea god and ascend to the heavens, encapsulating both physical and emotional fortitude.
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Introduction

For as long as they have existed within the pages of storybooks, mermaids have been a subject of fascination, awe, and terror. For children—especially little girls—they are beautiful women with long, flowing hair who sing with angelic voices and swim with the grace of swans. For those who are interested in mythology, legends, and cryptids, mermaids are interesting topics of conversation, an occasion to exchange theories and go over ideas. For those who are familiar with mermaids’ darker reputation, these tailed women are the very symbol of deadly temptation: they seduce you with their beautiful faces and haunting melodies, intending to drag you into a watery grave. In some particularly gruesome legends, mermaids are vicious predators who eat the men that they drown. Some believe that mermaids are the vengeful, deformed ghosts of women who were tossed overboard in the days where having a woman on a ship was considered bad luck. As with nearly all things, mermaids can be considered either good or evil; there have been narrations depicting them as either one or the other. For some, they are associated with shipwrecks, storms, floods, and drowning. For others, mermaids are benevolent creatures who fall in love with humans and offer them aid in perilous times. Lucian of Samosata, a Syrian satirist and rhetorician, wrote ‘On the Syrian Goddess’ in the second century. Among the descriptions of worship, rituals, and gods, Lucian wrote, “I have seen the semblance of Derceto in Phoenicia, and a wonderful sight it is; one half is a woman, but the part which extends from the thighs to the feet ends in a fish's tail.” (Attridge, Oden p. 54). This quote relates to another root of the mermaid myth: according to The customs and lore of modern Greece, ereids are the
fifty daughters of Nereus and Doris (Rod, Ellis, Stott). Sisters to Nerite, the only male child of Nereus and Doris, they were often depicted as friendly and helpful to sailors.

With so much creative potential surrounding mermaids, fueled by the Greek myths and sailor’s tales that first brought them into being, stories slowly began to develop. One of the earliest narratives originates from Assyria, c. 1000 BC. Atargatis, the mother of Assyrian queen Semiramis, was a goddess who fell in love with a mortal shepherd. She killed him in the process. Ashamed and distraught, she leaped into the lake in an attempt to turn into a fish. But because of her great beauty, the water only changed her halfway (Matthews, John and Caitlin, p. 43). In ‘Arabian Nights’, the ‘mermaids’ were anatomically identical to land-bound mortals, with the exception of their ability to breathe underwater. In Ancient China, mermaids were depicted as sea creatures whose tears transformed into priceless pearls, but whose song could put all those who heard it into a coma.

Throughout the ages, mermaid tales have prospered. They have appeared in innumerable paintings, books, operas, and comic books. A mermaid can either be the innocent maiden, the wicked temptress, the flesh-eating monster, or the metaphorical cross between human and animal. Perhaps the most famous of these stories is ‘The Little Mermaid’. Most people, especially those born in and after 1989, immediately think of Disney’s animated film starring Jodi Benson as the titular character. But the fairy tale that it was based on, written by Hans Christian Andersen, is one of the most well-known stories regarding mermaids. Indeed, it can be considered the first real story about mermaids because it took the mermaid out of mythology and legend, and then introduced it to the fairy tale format.

This thesis will analyze not only the original fairy tale, but also the Disney film and a ballet version of the story. Besides the skin-deep changes that come with time and transferring a
story to a different medium, this thesis will focus on the changes that were made to the main character and what these alterations say about how society has changed, as have our standards for heroines.
Chapter One

‘The Little Mermaid’, first published in 1836 in Denmark and republished in a larger collection of stories thirteen years later, is a story of love, spirituality, and virtue. It became massively popular in Denmark. Its fame only spread with time, spawning different versions as the story reached foreign lands and mingled with different cultures. However, the version written by Andersen goes as follows (the original text was republished by Harper Collins Publishers in February of 2018):

A young, nameless mermaid is growing tired of her life under the sea. However, she is constantly entertained by stories of the human world, told to her by her older sisters and grandmother. (“When you have reached your fifteenth year,” said the grand-mother, “you will have permission to rise up out of the sea, to sit on the rocks in the moonlight, while the great ships are sailing by; and then you will see both forests and towns.”) She is particularly interested in the concept of humans possessing immortal souls. Unlike humans, mermaids simply dissolve into sea foam upon death. (“So I shall die,” said the little mermaid, “and as the foam of the sea I shall be driven about never again to hear the music of the waves, or to see the pretty flowers nor the red sun. Is there anything I can do to win an immortal soul?”) Because a mermaid can only be permitted to visit the human world once she reaches the age of fifteen, the little mermaid grows excited. When she is finally allowed to visit the human world, she witnesses a shipwreck and saves a man—the famous prince—from drowning and leaves him on the beach. Longing for both him and an immortal soul, the little mermaid visits the sea witch, who grants requests for payment. The sea witch offers the little mermaid a deal: the mermaid
will be given human legs and three days to win the prince’s heart. The payment is her voice, which is hinted to be seductive enough to lead men to their doom. If the little mermaid succeeds in getting the prince to love her without the use of magic by the time the third day ends, then she will remain a human and obtain an immortal soul. However, if she fails, the little mermaid will turn to sea foam and cease to exist altogether.

Thus, the deal is struck. The little mermaid’s voice is taken—which in this version amounts to the witch cutting out the mermaid’s tongue—and her tail becomes a pair of human legs. She soon finds the prince who, struck by her beauty, brings her back to his palace. There he takes care of her, but her inability to talk and ignorance of the human world leads him to see her as a younger sister rather than a romantic partner. The little mermaid, on the other hand, falls even deeper in love with him and is heartbroken when he chooses to marry another woman. Thus, when the third day dawns, the little mermaid goes to look at the sea one last time before dying. There, she is greeted by her sisters, who offer her both a knife and a loophole. They tell her that if she stabs the prince and lets his blood drip on her feet, then she will change back into a mermaid and return to the sea. However, the little mermaid can’t bring herself to kill the man that she loves, all the while knowing that he doesn’t love her back. She jumps into the water, ready to be turned into sea foam.

However, instead of turning into water, she becomes air. The little mermaid wakes up to find herself in the presence of the Daughters of Air, earthbound spirits who travel the world helping others and performing good deeds. They tell her that her selfless act of love caught their attention, and that if she wants she can join them. Like they once were, she is offered the deal to work with them for three centuries, doing good for the world and helping those in need. Once her three hundred years of goodwill end, she will be rewarded with what she
has truly longed for all this time: an immortal soul. The little mermaid of course accepts, and becomes the newest Daughter of Air.

The memories that are recorded and passed down through the generations help us understand the actions of our forefathers. Stories function in a similar way. After all, we create them as well as read or hear them. Thus, they reflect the world that they were created in, and the people that read them. This also means that, because there are so many people with diverse experiences and opinions, a story can have as many meanings and interpretations as seats in a theater. In the words of Marni Gillard, “We need to look hard at the stories we create and wrestle with them. Retell and retell them, and work with them like clay. It is in the retelling and the returning that they give us their wisdom.” Fairy tales, which have been reformed thousands of times as they spread through time and geography, work into this quote. For example, ‘Snow White’ can be seen as an elaborate criticism of the importance we give to beauty. Nanae Takenaka interprets ‘Snow White’ in such a way in her article, describing the fairy tale’s narrative as ‘expressive of the drive towards self-realization of the idea of absolute beauty’ (Takenaka, p. 497). Likewise, ‘The Pied Piper’ speaks of the importance of ‘paying the piper’, or honoring one’s debts (Andersen, p. 164).

But beyond their ‘messages’, stories—including fairy tales—are very much the products of their environment. In his writing workshop “Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting,” Robert McKee described stories as the ‘currency of human contact’. By this he means that stories, when written effectively and thoughtfully, communicate ideas, sentiments, and philosophies in a way that no other mode of disclosure can. This is true in many respects. Authors grew up in certain conditions with unique experiences, all of which reveal themselves in the story, be it in a literal or metaphorical fashion. Even if a story may be
incorrect about certain realistic elements, it can still be seen as a way of understanding how the author perceived the world, misconceptions and all. Keeping that in mind, what can we infer about ‘The Little Mermaid’? What does it say about Hans Christian Andersen’s views on gender roles? Where did he stand in regards to female protagonists? After all, many of his stories featured heroines: “Thumbelina”, “The Little Mermaid”, “The Snow Queen”, and “The Princess and The Pea”, simply to name a few. Of course, this is fairly common for fairy tales. Other fairy tales presenting female protagonists include “Goldilocks and the Three Bears”, “Cinderella”, and “The Frog Princess”. Cristina Bacchilega describes women’s relationship with fairy tales, along with other issues, in her book Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies. In regards to the relationship between women and fairy tales, she states the following (among other things): “As for girls and women, in particular, the fairy tale’s magic has assumed the contradictory form of being both a spiritual enclave supported by old wives’ wisdom and an exquisitely glittery kingdom.” (Bacchilega, p. 6).

One can make the argument that, given the time period, “The Little Mermaid” couldn’t be expected to have a strong, independent female character that lives up to our standards. After all, the little mermaid remains unnamed and dies because of her doomed love for the prince. They can further back up their criticism by noting how the mermaid is rendered silent by having the sea witch cut out her tongue. Thus, her love for the prince has indirectly robbed her of her voice, either handicapping or mutilating her depending on the perspective. It could be seen as a subtle way of enforcing one or two insultingly demeaning mindset for women, even for those times: that either love handicaps people, or that women must suffer in silence (or simply be silent) in order to win a man’s love. Furthermore, people can claim that the story is encouraging people (especially young women) to change themselves in order to be with someone
they ‘love’. This feeds into the romantic comedy trope of a woman who is ‘ugly’ (usually portrayed with bad hair, glasses, and/or plus-sized clothing) transforming herself in order to win her man’s heart. Examples of this can be found in films such as Grease, The Breakfast Club, The Princess Diaries, and She’s All That. “Cinderella” is also the go-to example for this idea. After all, the story depicts a girl forced to serve her step-family and is only pulled out of the situation by divine/magical intervention. True, she is already beautiful, and it is because of her beauty that her stepfamily is cruel to her. But later, her beauty is also her salvation. Through the prince’s love and devotion to her, Cinderella is granted a life of luxury. This story has received several criticisms from both men and women. Women complain that the female protagonist does nothing but sweep floors and cook meals until she is lucky enough to find a rich husband. Men, on the other hand, claim that the story paints the prince as an emotionally-infantile individual who only falls in love with our heroine after she gets a magical make-over.

However, simply writing “The Little Mermaid” off as the story of a love-struck waif falling for someone unattainable, and being punished for it, would be both incorrect and unfair. Before this thesis will delve into the story’s historical background, it is important to outline why these criticisms of the original fairy tale are misguided. For example, there is an article entitled “The Little Mermaid: Not as Sexist as You Thought it Was”, written by Eliana Dockterman and Laura Stampler. Structured like an interview, the two journalists discuss the underlying theme of feminism being worked into the story. They do this, for instance, by defending her choice to surrender her voice with the following line of logic: “she is a 16-year-old girl. As a former 16-year-old girl, we don’t always make the greatest of choices in times of crushing.” Furthermore, they point out that, in the Disney movie, “But really, didn’t Ariel fall in love with the human world before she even knew who Eric was? She has always dreamed of
being a “part of your world,” which I’m worried she’ll find disappointing considering my dad definitely still reprimanded me (even though I had legs).”

But what can be said about the aforementioned criticisms towards the original text?

To begin with, none of the characters are named—not the titular character, not the prince, not the Mer-king. Ergo, it is less about robbing a female character of her identity and more about writing in a purposefully vague style that was common in fairy tales. For example, the Pied Piper is never referred to any other name other than the title of his story and, originally, ‘das rattenfanger’, which translates from German to mean ‘the rat catcher’. Another example is the entire cast of “Rumpelstiltskin” with the exception of the titular character, whose name is quintessential to the story. This is because, in the infancy of fairy tales, characters were not often seen as individuals whom we could identify with. Rather, they were archetypes who were familiar enough to us that we did not need a name to conjure them up in our heads. The origin of fairy tales is a little difficult to pinpoint. Stories imbued with morals and archetypes, flavored with magic and mysticism, have always existed as long as there have been people. Fairy tales, however, are set apart from the rest not only because of their cast of creatures (dragons, gnomes, dwarfs, princes, princesses, goblins, witches, and so on), but because of their typically European origin and compressed length. The term was first coined in the seventeenth century by Madame d'Aulnoy, who wrote fairy tales during her life.

The idea that the little mermaid is doomed by her love for the prince is also inaccurate. Yes, it cannot be denied that if she hadn’t fallen for the prince, then she would have still been alive. But the narrative explicitly tells us that it is because of her love for the prince that she sacrifices herself and is therefore rewarded by becoming a Daughter of Air. The text describes
the compassionate spirits telling her, “You, poor little mermaid, have tried with your whole heart to do as we are doing; you have suffered and endured and raised yourself to the spirit-world by your good deeds.” This is a mentality born of Christianity, wherein one must suffer in order to achieve spiritual and moral ascent. In the beginning, she sought the prince’s love with a fixed goal in mind; but by the end, she has completely forgotten her objective and puts his happiness and well-being before hers. The fact that she is fifteen years old factors into this: both back then and now, fifteen and sixteen were considered ages of ripening maturity. Thus, this can be seen as the transition from a naive child to a mature, loving woman who is expected to endure and suffer. She transforms both physically and emotionally. It is through love that she can evolve into a higher state of being. Lori Yamato said it best in her article when she described the ending: “As a fairly traditional story, “The Little Mermaid” naturally has a narrative momentum that drives toward the ending of the text. But given that this is a story that is greatly concerned with the end of the mermaid’s life and that sees what happens to her at the moment of death as the ultimate test of the success of her conversion to ensouled humanity, this ending takes on added significance.” (Yamato). She then digs into the significance behind the little mermaid’s form. Yamato describes how the texts views physical embodiment with the following statement: “By using a paradoxical body that never escapes a simultaneity of wholeness and mutilation, normality and abnormality, human and Other, Andersen’s story moves beyond being a mere morality tale about the transcendent soul. This disruptive body’s inability to settle into a normative shape, even in death, goes so far as to ask whether the notion of humanity itself—that supposed fusion of body and soul—holds water.” (Yamato). This is not only a unique way of seeing the relationship between body and soul, but also connects the way the little mermaid’s form never settles down with how humanity as a whole keeps shifting. This draws one to the
conclusion that, despite only having appeared human, the little mermaid could be seen as a symbol of humanity’s constant struggle to better itself—be it physically or spiritually—in order to ascent to a higher state of being.

Finally, there is the idea that the little mermaid has mutilated herself in order to be with the prince, and sacrificed her voice (both literally and metaphorically) to be with him. Firstly, these limitations make sense for the plot. If she were to simply tell the prince that she is the one who saved him from drowning, then the story would end happily on the same page as that declaration. Such a simple and clean-cut ending, with no real conflict or character development, would not have held much water—not then, nor now. It would have been a short, happy little story that did nothing to really stand out. In addition, such a finale would have failed to deliver the message that Andersen wished to impart upon the reader. That lesson being, in my opinion, that you do not need legs or skin to be considered a self-aware, complex being. The little mermaid, as well as the rest of her kind, does not have an immortal soul despite having an extended lifespan. Only humans have souls. And yet, several non-human characters act with great sympathy and compassion for others. The little mermaid prefers to drown rather than to kill the prince, an action that would have saved her from death and reverted her form to its natural state. Her sisters also behave in a very selfless and loving manner, cutting off their hair in exchange for a knife: a way out for the little mermaid. In the end the little mermaid, despite not having been human, is given the chance to obtain an immortal soul. In this way, despite the form that she started with, she has risen.

This would imply that being a mermaid is less valuable than being a human. After all, humans are the only creatures in this text to possess immortal souls, making them unique. But I would like to point out that, while Adam and Eve lost their immortality after being banished
from the Garden of Eden. Thus, we can consider humans and mermaids to be more similar than we originally thought: there was a point where they were both immortal—or, at the very least, destined to live very long lives—and they are both capable of self-awareness, courage, love, and sacrifice. Furthermore, the text describes the little mermaid and her family as very human-like, behaving much like regular maidens and grandmothers and expressing emotions that we identify with. If Andersen had changed their species but kept their ways of being intact, then no one would have looked at them twice. They are not portrayed as ‘different’ in anything except physicality and longevity. Ergo, I would like to offer the interpretation that having a soul depends not on species or race, but one’s actions and purity of heart. This correlates with a Christian viewpoint, where it is believed that “we are all equal in the eyes of God.” (John 13:16).

Giving the little mermaid legs also makes sense because, not only does it help her live on land and blend in with its populace, but it brings her a little closer to being human, and to having a soul. In order to have a soul as humans do, she must be as humans are.

Many of these changes and details can be seen as metaphors relevant to Andersen’s own life. In his autobiographical work, True Story of My Life, the writer describes his walk on earth. Some of the details concerning his life can be easily applied to the little mermaid’s plight and conflict. For example, he describes his childhood in a mournful tone. He grew up in ‘a small mean room’, and how his father provided a meager living for the family as a shoemaker. The little mermaid’s desire to obtain something seemingly unattainable can be seen as a metaphor to Andersen’s desire to enter a higher social rank that promised a life where he could flourish. The little mermaid’s suffering every time she takes a step can be seen as a warped reflection of Andersen’s own fights to strive, going against life’s challenges and the poor class that he was born into. In addition, the little mermaid’s innocent and silent behavior on land brings to mind
descriptions of Andersen himself when he was a child. While these are mere speculations, they are drawn from facts of the author’s life. There is the chance that they are wrong; however, the chance of them being right is present as well. This is especially true when one considers the time and place in which he published the story.

    Denmark had, from the Middle Ages to the 17th century, been put through a disadvantage by both the law and religion. This was particularly true for women. In the thirteenth century, Danish law decreed that with the exception of widows, women were placed under the guardianship of their husbands. The Civil Code of 1683 decreed that all unmarried women, regardless of age, were to be considered minors under the guardianship of their closest male relatives. Only widows were of legal majority because they had been married. This code stayed in practice until 1857, where unmarried women were given legal majority. There were two major women’s movements in Denmark; the first transpired from 1870 to 1920, while the second occurred from 1970 to 1985. This led to the revision of the Danish constitution in 1915 and, in honor of the movement’s prominent figure Tagea Brandt, the establishment of Travel Scholarship for women.

    “The Little Mermaid” was published in 1836, before most of these social reformations took place. Despite all this, Andersen does not paint the titular character as a ‘lesser being’ than the prince or her father, who are the only two prominent males. In fact, one can easily make the argument that ‘The Little Mermaid’ is predominantly a woman’s story.

    The little mermaid herself is arguably a stronger heroine than may initially be believed. It is her motivation to acquire a human soul that drives the story along. This implies that she is subhuman—which, in the context of the story, she is. But what is this saying about women in general? Is it saying that women are less human than men, and can only reach their level through
penance and endurance? Some will no doubt see it that way. Others would interpret as a female empowerment message in disguise. It could be implying that women are stronger than men, being able to handle copious amounts of pain without ever breaking down or giving up. Unfortunately, for the longest time women were considered inferior to men: they were expected to live under the thumbs of the men in their families. They did not have the same rights, were denied education, and were treated as children until they married. When Hans Christian Andersen wrote ‘The Little Mermaid’, things were only starting to shift in that regard. Thus, it is not unusual for people to have interpreted the story that way, and it is entirely possible that their perspective outlived them. The more empowering way of viewing this idea is also valid. It ties into their former status as ‘lesser’ humans who could not vocalize their woes. They learned to ‘suffer in silence’, and thereby grew stronger by learning to handle life’s hardships with very little support.

Another important detail to remember in regards to the little mermaid is how central her wish is to the narrative. Without her desire, there is no story at all. Her journey is made more compelling when we watch her lose her voice and her tail—two of the traits that defined her—in order to further that goal, or die trying. We feel her pain as she walks, her pining love as she falls for the prince, and her anguish when the prince chooses another to be his bride. Because the reader is never separated from the little mermaid, they grow emotionally attached to her and are thus more invested in her fate. This alone is enough to separate her from other, ‘weak’ heroines that cannot make readers care about them. Furthermore, as was stated before, the little mermaid goes through an emotional arc that defies expectations. Instead of marrying the prince and living happily ever after, the little mermaid matures enough to put his well-being before hers. In many ways, this is possible because it shows that she has mentally and emotionally grown,
transitioning from a naive child to a caring woman. This, in allegiance with the idea that adolescence was a time to mature and grow into adulthood, shows her grow stronger as both a character and a woman. In the end, she is rewarded not with the love of the prince, but with the chance to win a soul by continuing to do good deeds. Whether or not this is a reward depends on the reader. Given the serene tone in the original text, however, we can assume that Hans Christian Andersen fully intended this to be a happy and just ending. Another interesting detail to note is that the rest of the cast is predominantly female and none of them are wicked.

With the exception of the prince, who the mermaid falls in love with, all of her decisions are rooted from her relationships with other women—including herself. The little mermaid’s father, who is only mentioned in passing, is the widowed Mer-King who rules the seas. In regards to power, he is technically on a higher level than she. However, he does not make so much as an appearance in the story. Rather, the little mermaid’s closest ties are to her dowager grandmother and her many older sisters, who have all risen to the surface and told her stories of what they saw there. This is a common trope in folklore, wherein gender separation is typical and young women turn to older women for guidance and support. This story is no exception. The little mermaid is more defined by her relations to the women in her life; they play a much larger role in her life than her father does, although she respects him enough to obey his law that no mermaid can see land until her fifteenth year. All the same, it is her relationship with her sisters and grandma that help her grow into an innocent maiden with a good heart and an inquisitive mind. More importantly, it is through her female relatives that the little mermaid learns of the existence of an immortal soul, and thus yearns to obtain one. Even her brief interaction with the sea witch is significant because it gives her both the means and the limit to reach her goal. On one hand, she lacks a voice, endures horrific pain with every step she takes, and will die if she
fails to win the prince’s heart within three days. But on the other hand, this transformation gives her something that no other mermaid, not even her older female relatives, has ever dreamed of owning: legs, and the chance to walk among humans. Later on, the little mermaid is offered salvation by other women. When she believes that she will die soon due to failing her mission, the little mermaid spots her sisters swimming towards her. They offer her a blade. In some versions, the sea witch gave it to them; in others, it was the sea king. On both occasions, they had to pay for it with their hair—a symbol of beauty, virility, seduction, and physical strength. They offer their youngest sister the chance to abandon the deal, kill the prince, and revert to her original mermaid form. Even though the little mermaid can’t bring herself to do it, their offer—and what they had to sacrifice for it—highlights how much they love their sister and want to help her survive. Later, when the little mermaid is saved by the Daughters of Air, she is once again aided by and in the company of other women. The earthbound spirits reward her for her selfless act by promising her a soul in due time. It should also be noted that these spirits are called the Daughters of Air, which is an exclusively female term. This indicates, intentionally or not, that women may be more capable of self-sacrifice and selflessness than men are. While one cannot claim to know Andersen’s intention, as everyone who personally knew him is long-since dead, one can speculate that the author greatly respected women, viewing them as kind, generous individuals capable of incredible feats of love and sacrifice. Never are they prizes to be won or gorgeous bodies to drool over. No matter how briefly they appear, the women in this story (as well as others in Andersen’s collection) display compelling character and moral transparency. Even the sea witch, whose title would indicate some form of malevolence, does nothing more than what she promised to do: give the little mermaid legs and three days, taking her client’s voice/tongue as payment. While gruesome, it is an accord that both parties gave their consent to.
This contrasts the Disney film, wherein Ursula has ulterior motives from the beginning and actively sabotages Ariel’s attempts to win Prince Eric’s heart, escalating with Ursula’s theft of King Poseidon’s trident and failed usurping of the throne. This will be expanded upon in the following chapter.

The only two men in this story are the prince and the Mer-king. While neither is depicted as wicked or evil, they are given less attention than their female costars. Some could even see them as callous and uncaring towards the little mermaid’s potential death. However, this is once again born from looking at the story in a superficial manner. The prince may be excused for not helping the little mermaid because of his ignorance of the situation. He knows not that the woman he found on the shoreline, naked and mute, is actually a mermaid. He does not know that she was the one who saved him from drowning during the storm that caused his ship to crash. Nor can he imagine that she agreed to die unless he returns her love in three days’ time. All he knows is that the girl he found is entirely vulnerable, in need of someone to care for her. Had he known what was at stake, he may have made different decisions. Hans Christian Andersen never paints the prince as stupid, arrogant, or cruel. He is simply uninformed and acts accordingly.

Even though he does not return the little mermaid’s feelings, he still cares for her in a platonic way, much like a young man would feel about his younger sister. In this way, he fits the ‘prince’ archetype that he has been fitted into. He is good, principled, and hopelessly romantic, as are many other princes in varied fairy tales. Examples include “Cinderella”, “Snow White”, and “The Princess and the Frog”. The Mer-king, on the other hand, fits into the role of ‘egalitarian king’ that is harder to come across. Usually, kings in fairy tales are only just directly before they die; those that stay in power for extended periods of time are either cruel, idiotic, or—worse—both. The Mer-king is neither. This is what makes him so fascinating. He plays a similar role to
the witch because, like her, he gives in exchange for payment that is personal in nature. In this
manner, he shows to be less caring than the little mermaid’s sisters, and appears to treat all of his
daughters the same way as anyone else: if they want something, they must pay for it and face the
consequences. He does not forbid them from doing it (unless it is in direct conflict with his laws)
nor does he offer them the easy way out. In this way, the Mer-king can be described as a ‘good’
king because of his strong principles.

Overall, Hans Christian Andersen’s story is far more powerful and emotional than one
would initially think. We can infer many things from it, such as the various branches of love,
pain that comes with change, and the reward of goodwill. Hans Christian Andersen also provides
a surprisingly modern belief that women are not only strong on their own, but also draw strength
from each other. He portrays the men as either strict and unbending or caring yet misguided, all
the while never writing them off as ‘bad guys’. Furthermore, he can arguably be found saying
that there is no real ‘villain’ regardless of gender, but an assortment of characters that play a role
in events taking place. He created a compelling protagonist whose desire drives the story
forward, and who matures as a person along her journey to the point of ascending to Heaven.
1989 marked the beginning of the Disney Renaissance, a decade in which Walt Disney Studios (nowadays referred to as simply ‘Disney’) began to make critically acclaimed and financially successful films after a financial decline in the seventies and eighties. Just as the studio based their films on well-known stories and fairy tales during the time of its founder, Walter Elias Disney (1901-1966), the Disney Renaissance consisted of films that had roots in popular fairy tales. This resurgence in critical and box office fields all but solidified the studio’s position, offering it more stability and success than it had seen in past eras. *Disney Culture* describes that transitional moment, as well as the studio movements that occurred behind it, in a concise and clear manner: “in 1984, Michael Eisner took over as chief executive officer and marshaled a new corporate turn. Eisner revamped management structure, expanded product lines, and oversaw new Disney franchises and features. Profit jumped from $97 million net to $700 million net between 1984 and 1989. Eisner oversaw the ‘Disney Renaissance’ of 1989 to 1999, a decade-long period of movie hits including *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *The Lion King* (1994) that combined fresh characters with classic Disney animation.” (Willis, p.20). This long line of box office dominance allowed Disney to explore ideas that did not fit into the ‘fairy tale’ archetype, such as ‘The Hunchback of Notre Dame’ (1996), ‘Pocahontas’ (1995), and ‘Tarzan’ (1999). This made sense, as Disney Studios did not begin by tackling fairy tales, but brief cartoons. Once again referring to *Disney Culture*, the introduction states that the studio “released its first sound cartoon film, Steamboat Willie, starring Mickey Mouse, in 1928.” It goes on to explain the characters that first put Disney into the spotlight: “Thanks to the
characters Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck and the Silly Symphonies series, Disney emerged as a dominant force of entertainment in the 1930s.” (Willis p.2). Thus, in this period of resurgence, the studio decided to be a bit more daring. The film that marked the genesis of the Disney Renaissance is one of the most famous adaptations of Hans Christian Andersen’s book, and is the way many people today are first introduced to it: Disney’s 1989 animated musical romance ‘The Little Mermaid’, directed by Ron Clements and John Musker. Starring Jodi Benson as the titular character and containing music composed by Alan Menken, it was Disney’s 28th animated feature film. Because of its immense popularity and status as a childhood favorite for many, its place in this comparison was all but assured. First, there will be a short but detailed synopsis of the movie itself. Then, there will be comparisons drawn between the film and the fairy tale that it was based on—especially in regards to the titular character. Finally, as with the original text, background information will be provided. America in the 1980s will be discussed, focusing on gender roles in particular, as well as Disney Studio’s history leading up to 1989. From there, this thesis will analyze how gender roles had changed during the time between the book and the film, and how women were being portrayed in media by the 1980s. This chapter’s conclusion will be a final declaration as to where Disney’s beloved cartoon stands in those regards, based not only on the film’s portrayal of women and its comparison to the book, but also the social and economic circumstances around it.

The film does not specify when, or exactly where, the story takes place. There is no text crawl, nor a spoken word about the date or location. The film is also devoid of iconic landmarks. However, the placement of ships, the presence of a monarchy, and the wardrobe (such as Ariel’s pink and white gown) indicates that ‘The Little Mermaid’ occurs in Europe during the 19th century at the latest. Beneath the foamy ocean waves, a sixteen-year-old mermaid princess
named Ariel, who is one of the many daughters of King Triton, is dissatisfied with her life and wishes to explore land. Often forgetting (or outright ignoring) her father’s orders and sneaking out of the palace, Ariel spends her days poking around a ship graveyard, retrieving items she finds without the knowledge of their names or usage. She has two non-mermaid friends: Scuttle, a squawking seagull who feeds her inaccurate information about the objects she collects, and Flounder, a yellow and blue tropical fish. She is also on good relations with Sebastian, a small crab that acts as her father’s little yes-man (although their relationship is initially colder and more distant).

Despite contact between the sea and land being forbidden, Ariel regularly goes to the surface to watch humans from afar. One night, she spies Prince Eric on a ship and immediately falls in love with him. A storm suddenly and viciously appears, destroying the ship and nearly causing the prince to drown. However, Ariel saves him and leaves him ashore, but not before singing of how she wishes to be ‘part of [his] world’. This display of romance attracts the attention of the sea-witch Ursula. Having been banished from the kingdom and lusting for power, Ursula decides to use Ariel’s infatuation in order to usurp King Triton.

She does not have to wait long to take action. Sebastian, horrified by Ariel’s love for a human, attempts to corral her into behaving (especially before her father finds out) by singing about the beauty and wonderment of her current home. However, this lively and colorful display fails, and he accidentally reveals the truth to the king in a fit of desperation. Triton, angered, catches Ariel playfully flirting with a statue of Prince Eric: the latest addition to her collection (“Why Eric, run away with you? [Giggles] This is all so sudden!”). This, coupled with the news that she saved and is in love with a ‘spineless, savage, harpooning fish-eater’, causes Triton to snap and destroy Ariel’s collection of human artifacts. He leaves, remorseful of what he was
forced to do, with Flounder and a guilt-ridden Sebastian tagging close behind. Now at her lowest point, Ariel easily falls prey to Ursula’s honeyed lies. Ariel agrees to the deal: using her voice as payment, she will be given human legs and three days’ time to get Prince Eric to fall for her and give her true love’s kiss. However, unknown to her, Ursula sabotages their deal first by interrupting Ariel and Eric’s would-be kiss, and then by bewitching Eric and changing her appearance.

However, just as it seems that all is lost, Ariel and her friends interrupt the wedding between a disguised Ursula and a still-hypnotized Eric. But before the two star-crossed lovers can kiss, the third and final sunset transpires, changing Ariel back into a mermaid. Ursula, ecstatic by this stroke of good luck, drags Ariel back into the water. Triton confronts Ursula, demanding that she let Ariel go, but the contract that Ariel signed is inviolable. Left with no other choice, Triton sacrifices himself, turning into one of the many shriveled creatures that paid the price for working with Ursula. The sea witch claims the crown and trident, but is soon killed by Eric via a broken mast to the stomach.

In the aftermath, Triton finally sees Ariel’s love for Eric and restores her legs, allowing his daughter to marry the prince. The two live happily ever after.

The very basic premise of the story remains the same: a young mermaid, fascinated with the world above, falls in love with a prince and strikes a deal with a sea-witch in order to win his heart and become human. However, there are many differences as well.

When one converts a story from one form of art to another, changes must be made. This is unavoidable. The 1989 Disney film cannot stop and explain everything to the audience, nor can it go into great detail as a book can. After all, a film has a set running time, and visual language is the go-to factor to cinema. Aside from the more obvious alterations, like allowing...
scenes to play out rather than verbally explaining them (such as showing Prince Eric’s affection for Ariel grow rather than have him tell her as he does in the book), there are more clear-cut ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’ (more on this later). There is also the insertion of songs, which is very common in Disney films. The characters are named in order to make it easier for the audience to identify them, and music is added to set the mood for the scenery. The presentations differ between book and film.

With regards to plot, as mentioned above, the basics remain the same. But as they say, the devil is in the details. The spiritual element that defines the book is removed entirely from the film, making romantic love the primary driving force of the story. Such is to be expected, as the Christian theme that is woven into the original narrative was tailored to the mindset of the time. Because Christianity was the faith of over half the population during the 19th century, it makes sense that Christian values were woven into the consumed fiction of the time. Hans Christian Andersen’s ‘The Little Mermaid’ is no exception to this. While one can read this story without considering religious allegories, one very easily can apply them to the narrative. One can compare the little mermaid’s desire to see the surface to Eve eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge, even though the former was allowed to while the latter was not. The results are similar: by feeding into their desire to grow beyond their pre-assigned position, both women were cast out into unfamiliar terrain and made to suffer. The two women were also given a chance at redemption, so to speak. The little mermaid, by refusing to kill the prince, is rewarded for her selflessness by being given the chance to ascend into the kingdom of God. Eve’s redemption came in the form of child-bearing; and many Christians during the Middle Ages believed that women inherited Eve’s sin, and the only way for them to be purged of said sin was by having children. Beyond the allegories, one can view the story as possessing Christian beliefs,
such as the importance of love and sacrifice, the divine reward that comes after death, and the
importance of overcoming pain in the name of grace.

While compelling to a Dutch audience in the 19th century, this type of religious tale
would not have been as well-received in 1980s America. While the majority of American
citizens identify as Christian (although the intensity of their faith varies), they were also going
through a period of change in the decades after the war. It was a time to let go of antiquated
ideologies in favor of newer and more modern mentalities. This, coupled with the fact that fairy
tales had since been ‘softened’ in order to be more appropriate to children, makes it easy to
understand why the religious undertones of the original story were removed.

By extension, the Daughters of Air are deleted from the narrative with nary a mention.
The laws of the sea are slightly different: in the book, a mermaid can only see the surface when
she reaches her fifteenth year; but in the film, it appears that any and all contact between the sea
and land are forbidden, no matter the age of those involved. The book is also more graphic—but
not explicitly so—than the film, and is likely to be more impressionable on younger
listeners/readers. This is not surprising, as A. Waller Hastings points out: “Much Disneyfication,
at least in the era of Walt himself, was evidently conscious; the filmmaker admitted that he
sought out simple stories and simplified them further to create "nice" children's films”
(Hastings). In the book, the mermaid ‘loses her voice’ when the sea-witch cuts out her tongue,
and the process of gaining and using human legs is described as being horrendously painful, as
though she were being cut open and forced to walk on knives. In the G-rated film, these gorier
elements have been toned down. Ariel’s voice, represented as a glowing orb about the size of a
billiard ball, is literally pulled out of her throat and secured into Ursula’s seashell necklace.
Furthermore, even though we see Ariel’s tail being split into human legs, this shows to be
troubling, but not painful: as she has never owned legs, she cannot swim with them. This, coupled with her loss of underwater breathing, makes her friends swoop in and pull her to the surface before she can drown. Later, when Ariel awakens and discovers her new feet, she expresses nothing but childlike giddiness and initial clumsiness.

The relationship that develops between the mermaid and prince also varies from book to film. In the original text, the prince comes to care for the little mermaid and sees both her outer and inner beauty, but his love for her remains platonic and he instead falls in love with another woman. In the film, as to be expected, Prince Eric falls in love with Ariel despite her mysterious identity (although he does at least learn her name when Sebastian whispers it to him) and her muteness. The only time where his affections are stolen by someone else is through magical foul play. Another minor difference is that the prince never learns of the little mermaid’s true identity, even at the end; while Prince Eric sees Ariel in her true form just before the film’s climax. In the book, the climax is quieter and driven more by character motivation and emotion rather than action.

The film’s climax is bigger and louder (as to be expected from a cinematic high point) and focuses more on the battle between the two lovers and Ursula, who has become nearly god-like in power. This once again feeds into the criticism found in Hastings’ article, wherein he describes a critic’s harsh opinion on Disney in general: “Disney falsifies life by pretending that everything is so sweet, so saccharine, so without any conflict except the obvious conflict of violence.” (Hastings). While I find his criticism to be a bit harsh, I do have to acknowledge that all Disney villains are defeated in a big, climatic battle. While there is generally nothing wrong with such a finale, as climaxes are meant to be the most intense part of a narrative, it does get tiresome to see it in ever Disney film. I am of the opinion that, while some stories made such a
battle unavoidable because of the villain’s complete lack of moral ambiguity, it would be nice to see a change every once in a while. I do not personally think that every single children’s story needs to have a sympathetic villain that can be talked out of their evil plot, because real life is not like that: sometimes, people are too far gone to be reached, and no amount of compassion and reason can reach them. There are those who would go so far as to say that some of these real-life ‘villains’, such as gangsters, murderers, and rapists, deserve nothing but the worst punishment. But this is not always the case; sometimes, a bit of empathy and discussion can go a long way. I feel that it would only be fair to show children that both ‘villains’ exist, and that there are many different ways of dealing with them. This also applies to Disney villains. But I also must acknowledge that Disney follows the same logic as any movie-making studio: “If it makes money, don’t change it.”

Finally, the most obvious difference between the two versions is their endings: one ends with the promise of heavenly ascent, while the other concludes in a more conventional and happy way: Ariel and the prince, with Triton’s blessing, get married and live happily ever after. Hastings has something to say about the dissimilar endings as well: “Her willingness to sacrifice the happiness she has pursued through excruciating pain and very real dangers provides a second chance at immorality. Even though the romantic/erotic narrative is frustrated, the "higher" narrative of moral progress remains a possibility—is, in fact, enhanced by the mermaid's refusal to destroy another life. Andersen, too, has been accused of saccharine sentimentality, as this synopsis of the fairy tale's Christian moral may suggest. But the Disney version accentuates the most sentimental and romantic aspects of the story at the expense of its moral and psychological complexity.”
The characters diverge between the two versions. The differences between the supporting cast are obvious, which is why I will focus on the two tailed leads. The little mermaid is the emotional core of the story: since the tale is told through her point of view, we feel as she does and are fully invested in what happens to her.

Ariel, besides being a year older than her literary counterpart, is arguably more similar to a teenager than the original: she forgets important events, disobeys and bickers with her father, keeps secrets from him, and sneaks out of her home. She can also be seen as vapider than her counterpart. While the original little mermaid wants to acquire a human soul, and falls in love with the prince after witnessing his kind and gentle nature, Ariel falls in love with Eric at first glance and sacrifices everything to be with him despite her not knowing anything about him. Roberta Trites puts it best when with the following phrase: “Andersen's mermaid quests for a soul, but Disney's mermaid, Ariel, quests for a mate.” (Trites). However, one can make the argument that, as a teenager, it is normal for Ariel to be impulsive and believe that she and Eric, her first love, are meant to be. It rings true to many, and is more relatable to the modern adolescent than her literary counterpart.

Their appearances also differ: the little mermaid, along with the rest of the cast, is generally nondescript. She is said to have fair skin, great beauty, and long flowing hair. As a mermaid, she also carries flowers and oysters upon turning fifteen. However, we do not know whether she is skinny or curvy, tall or short, or whether she has any distinguishing marks. Nor are we made privy to her hair or eye color, or the specific contours of her face. Because Disney’s cartoon is a visual medium, there are no secrets regarding Ariel’s appearance (both in the water and on dry land). She is a very slender and fair-skinned young woman with a seashell bra, big blue eyes, and long, flowing red hair. When she is a mermaid, her tail is deep green and the
flippers are a lighter shade, matching the almost frilly border where her fish half and human half meet. As a human, she sports both formal and casual dresses.

When characters are changed so radically, it is only natural that their motives must change as well to avoid narrative backlash. As mentioned earlier, the spiritual element is entirely absent in the Disney cartoon. Thus, the two mermaids have different motives despite them being carried out in similar ways. Both mermaids strike a deal with a sea-witch, trading their voices for gain legs and three days, with a prince’s love to serve as their goal. However, the reasons why they do this are dissimilar: in Hans Christian Andersen’s book, the little mermaid covets an immortal soul, a privilege granted only to humans. In the 1989 Disney film, Ariel falls in love with Prince Eric and strikes the deal in a desperate attempt to be with him. One is rooted in spiritual ascent while the other is stemming from romantic sentiment: both motives are fitting with their setting, the time periods in which the stories were conceived, and the audiences they were appealing towards. The sea kings have different motivations: to be more specific, one has a motive while the other does not. The Sea-King is portrayed as an absent, but all-powerful being whose rule over the ocean is unquestionable; yet he has no motive of which to speak (outside of ruling his aquatic domain). King Triton, on the other hand, balances his duty as a monarch with his paternal obligations. While not as present in his daughters’ lives as he could be, he is shown to love and care about them. His motivation is to keep Ariel safe: at first, he does this by applying ‘tough love’, destroying her collection as a means to sever her ties to the human world, seeing her feelings for a human as both insane (his response to Ariel’s “Daddy, I love him!” is “Have you lost your senses completely?”) and dangerous. Later, he tries again to keep his youngest child safe by willingly taking her place as a shriveled, mangled creature (the consequence of failing to succeed in her bargain with Ursula). By the end of the movie, Triton
puts his daughter’s happiness first by changing her back into a human, allowing her to be with Eric. His motivation—his love for his daughter and desire to keep her safe—is the driving force of his arc. Finally, the sea-witches work in a similar vein: one has motivation while the other does not. In the original text, the sea-witch does what the little mermaid asks of her, all the while keeping her informed of what will happen should this mission fail. This is her first and only appearance in the story. During that time, she keeps her focus on the little mermaid and never shares any personal information: we know nothing of her past, her wants, or her fears. She keeps, some might say, a professional distance. While it is not impossible to suspect that the sea-witch may have dreams, and simply keeps them hidden, the text does not give any indication that she wants anything more out of life. Ursula is the complete opposite: not only does she go on a diatribe about her sorry state in her first appearance, complaining about how she was banished from the palace and is ‘starving’ (even though she is portrayed as obese), but she openly expresses her resentment for Triton and her desire for his trident (the symbol of his power). In one scene, we learn all that is essential to her character motivation. This motive is shown to be all-encompassing for her: everything she does is driven by her plan to become the new ruler of the sea, to the point that she is willing to play dirty in order to reach her goal. The supporting cast in both versions, while radically different (they are portrayed in dissimilar tones, as unalike species, and perform unconnected roles as support), have the same motivations: to help the person closest to them. In the book, the little mermaid’s sisters and grandmother act as her guides and teachers; furthermore, her sisters act out of love when they believe she is about to die. In the film, both sets of side characters (Flounder, Scuttle, and Sebastian on Ariel’s side; the twin eels on Ursula’s) do what they can to help. The main difference between these sets, beside one being ‘good’ and the other ‘evil’, is that Ariel’s friends help her because they want to while the eels
serve Ursula. While it is implied that the sea-witch cares about them (she openly mourns them after killing them by accident with the trident), it is made quite clear that their dynamic is more akin to that of a mistress and her servants.

The endings are the most significant divergences. It is the first difference that people think of, and it changes the way they see the story as a result. In the original text, the little mermaid is spared death and is welcomed by the Daughters of Air, earthbound spirits who perform good deeds all over the world. They tell the little mermaid that, as a reward for her act of selfless love, she will be given the chance to earn an immortal soul by joining them for the next three centuries. The little mermaid agrees, and the story ends. The film is different in that Triton, finally realizing that Ariel truly loves Eric—and that Eric, in turn, loves her—changes his daughter back into a human permanently and gives them his blessing. The two get married and sail off on a large boat, waving goodbye to Ariel’s friends and family. In a sense, one can say that both endings can be seen as ‘happy’ because both heroines get what they want. The paths they must take in order to reach their happiness, however, are different.

Now that the two versions have been carefully examined and compared, with the help of a few scholastic authors, it is time to examine the circumstances in which the beloved Disney cartoon came into being. First, this thesis shall cover the state of 1980s America, in general but detailed terms as to paint a clear picture of the era without straying too far from the fairy tale at hand. Then, after discussing the process that turned Disney from a meager animation hub to a corporate superpower, this thesis shall theorize what the company is saying about gender roles with this specific film.

The eighties are fondly remembered today, and are frequently subjected to nostalgia trips, in regards to cinema, fashion, music, and so on. Our fondness for the eighties has manifested
itself in several blockbusters and critically acclaimed shows that take place during that time, such as the remake of Stephen King’s *IT* (2017) to *Stranger Things* (2016 – still going). But what do we find when we look deeper? We see a decade that is memorable and progressive, but not flawless. The 80s arrived in a less-than-ideal time. Following the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s, the Vietnam War and the Cold War (which only officially ended in 1991), there was also the Iran hostage crisis and a brief recession to deal with. All of these events, combined with the bitterness the American citizens held towards their last president, George H. W. Bush, turned the hopeful idealism of the past into a political and social conservatism. However, as Tracy Iron-Georges points out in *The Eighties of America*, it was a ‘pivotal time’ (Iron-Georges, ix). The introduction reads, among other things, the following: “American had a renewed sense of confidence after the chaos of the 1960s and 1970s, but many people found themselves shut out of the new prosperity.” (Iron-Georges, ix). This time period was later marked by many for its consumerism and materialism, in part due to it seeing countless blockbuster films and the rise of cable TV. The eighties hosted dozens of essential events that were both hopeful and horrid, such as John Lennon’s murder on December 8th, 1980, or Sally Ride becoming the first American woman in space on July 18th of 1983. Interestingly, the 1980s also hosted an interesting discovery in gender gaps. In this time period, a trending pattern differentiating the votes between men and women became known. Thus, political parties began to adopt strategies for the express purpose of gaining female votes. Before the eighties, women voted—albeit in fewer numbers than men—in a nearly identical fashion to their male counterparts. *The Eighties in America*, the book where I found this tidbit, describes how the change first started in 1980. In that year, there was a noticeable split between male and female voters: specifically, the women had cast more Democratic votes than men had. This split became known as ‘the gender gap’. *The Eighties in
America describes the gap as such: “the gap was consistent and often had an impact on election outcomes during the decade. As women’s political participation increased and their voting rates became comparable to men’s, a gender gap in party identification emerged. Women identified with the Democratic Party, while men shifted their allegiance with the Republican Party.” (Iron-Georges p. 403). Women generally felt closer to the Democrats, agreeing with their more liberal views. This was evidence of second-wave feminism in America, which had begun in the sixties and was thriving by the eighties. While the wave before it had focused on women’s rights to vote and own property, the second wave tackled a much wider range of issues. Namely, they focused on reproductive rights, sexuality, family, and the workplace, as well as marital rape and domestic abuse. With this new social wave on the rise, it is only natural that the media at the time reflected it by beginning to portray women in more progressive ways.

Taking all of this into account, it is no surprise that Disney was slowly but surely beginning to star more proactive females in their films. As with all entertainers, they had to adapt, reflecting the people that they were seeking to interest. Thus, they had to cater to the increasingly popular idea that women should be portrayed as characters rather than trophies or objects of desires. While it was still very rare to have a heroine in their films, Disney began to give their female character more personality; some of said personalities could arguably have been tailored to fit the expectations of second-wave feminists. The mindset of having women possess agency and character development grew in media as it did in society, to the point that Disney created what is considered to be its most feminist film: Frozen, released in 2013. It is considered feminist because, not only is ‘true love’ defined as coming from a sister rather than a handsome prince, but it also goes against the fairy tale trope of marriage after only a few encounters. But if Frozen reflects Disney’s desire to break the mold and establish a new type of
fairy tale in 2013, what was *The Little Mermaid* trying to do in 1989? In order to answer this question, Disney’s past leading up to *The Little Mermaid* must be explained.

The company that would come to define countless childhoods started with a teenage Walter Disney’s forays into animation in the 1910s. According to *Disney Culture*, Disney’s earliest creations included *Tommy Tucker’s Tooth* (1922) and short animations for Little Red Riding Hood and Cinderella. But these shorts, while good, did not supply Disney with the necessary profits. Thus, a twenty-one year-old Disney, bankrupt, relocated to Hollywood. There, he set up the Disney Brothers Studio alongside his brother Roy. Together, they made a few small films that were both live-action and animated, but these shorts did not start raking in a profit until Mickey Mouse made his first grand appearance. From there spawned the beginning of Disney’s legacy. As mentioned earlier, it was his cast of funny cartoon characters and child-friendly symphonies that put Disney on the map. His adaptations of fairy tales cemented his staying power.

There is a formula that everyone in the entertainment business knows: if it keeps making money, continue on the path—but change it sufficiently to prevent the audience from getting bored. That is why, in the following decade that would become known as the Golden age of animation, Disney Studios began to focus on adapting much of what had brought them success: family-friendly productions.

*Disney Culture* describes the technique behind the studio’s success in a very precise manner: “The immense success of Disney came down to a range of factors: shrewd marketing, technical excellence, musicality and comedy, and emotional impact. Disney connected with ideas surrounding childhood, the rise of television and cinema, the growth of consumer culture, and a national predilection for nostalgia and utopianism.” (Wills, p. 18).
Where does ‘The Little Mermaid’ factor in all this? After all, Walt Disney died in 1966, twenty-three years before the musical romance was made. And yet, the company continued to treasure his values and techniques, keeping it alive even though he no longer was. With each passing decade, Disney became more and more rooted in American culture. It became a staple in childhood, not simply for America but for many other countries. Teaching children morals that any parent would agree with (good conquers over evil, work hard, and true love), becoming “a trusted extension of the family.” (Wills p.106). This genius-level skill, coupled by the consumer culture that rapidly grew during the eighties, meant that Disney, too, wanted to make bigger and better films to further accumulate more wealth. Thus, the Disney Renaissance was born with The Little Mermaid. The film represents all that made (and kept) Disney Studios successful: a cartoon that children will love as it teaches them parent-approved values via catchy tunes, all the while being tied to a European fairy tale that had survived the test of time.

But what of the gender roles presented in The Little Mermaid?

As mentioned earlier, the eighties were a time where women were beginning to be portrayed as characters, even if they were not always given the starring role. Second-wave feminism was on the rise, protesting that women could choose for herself whether or not to have a child or get married. A woman, they said, should be allowed to express her sexuality because women, like men, have sex drives and should not be made to feel ashamed of it. Disney, ever the expert on giving the public what it wants, presented America (and later, the world) with Princess Ariel, a beautiful young girl who rebels against her predestined situation. She is a creature of water who wants to walk on land. She wants to break free of her father’s dominion and be with the man she dreams of. She ‘wants more’, and she isn’t afraid to say or sing it. Even when she is
rendered silent, she is still a bubbly and expressive protagonist who manages to win the prince’s heart. In the end, she gets her happily ever after.

In other words, she is exactly the sort of female character that women would want children to be exposed to. She is lighthearted enough for young children to watch without their parents worrying; and yet, her desire for more is sung harmoniously in a tune that will follow those children (especially girls) into adolescence: the awkward bridge between childhood and young adulthood. Like Ariel, many teenagers rebel or sneak past their overbearing parents. They also make impulsive choices and let their emotions dictate their movements. And yet, ‘The Little Mermaid’ teaches them that if they follow their heart, they too will get what they wanted in the long run. The film further instills a sense of rebellion in young girls, telling them that they do not need to stay in a position that they are dissatisfied with. Because it is told in such a careful way, making it obvious to an adult but flies right over a child’s head, the film’s message remains with said child even when they don’t fully understand what it is. The film predicates the young female who follows her heart, breaking the rules established by men in the process, and coming out kicking. That is why it reached out to so many back in 1989, and continues to do so to this day.
Chapter Three

As time passes, stories are changed and altered. This is done for many reasons that vary from case to case. Some variations are made to better suit more modern audiences. For example, Disney remade one of its most famous animated films, *Cinderella* (1950) in 2015, adding details to the story and changing the aesthetic from animated to live-action. Another reason to alter a story is to test whether or not a different version works as well. Even in school, creative writing assignments sometimes entail making ‘fractured fairy tales’, or classic fairy tales that are have one, fundamental turnover added to them.

In the case of fairy tales, however, alterations are often made not only due to the passage of time but to the new cultures that they meet. For instance, Little Red Riding Hood is known as ‘Lon Po Po’ in China, and she is one of three little sisters who are tasked with visiting their grandmother. Fairy tales can also be changed to have morals that parents wish to impart upon their children, or different morals that the original authors intended. Once again turning to ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ as an example, it was primarily used as a cautionary tale to warn children against talking to strangers and, indeed, divulging too much precious information without knowing the other person’s true intentions. In some cases, the narrative was changed to make it a story about sexual predators.

It is also natural to assume that changes would be made to stories—fairy tales or otherwise—when they are transferred from one medium to another. For instance, plays that are adapted from other source materials (such as novels or real-life events) may add songs or emphasize on exposition in order to keep everyone in the audience on the same page.
Sometimes, cost dictates change: because animation is a costly and arduous process, one may be forced to cut corners by keeping scenes short and the narrative focused. As mention in Chapter Two, the narrative may have to be simplified and details may have to be removed in order to make a book fit the classic running time of a two-to-three-hour film. Fairy tales may be the exception to this rule, as they are usually simple enough to fit the running time of a feature-length movie. What is usually changed, however, is the grimmer and more visceral details. For example, the original ending to ‘Snow White’ included the evil queen attending Snow White’s marriage to the prince, only to be forced to dance in red-hot iron shoes until she dropped dead. Because ‘Snow White’ is widely considered a children’s story, with a few adult-rated exceptions, this ending is rarely utilized when adapting the story.

Transferring a story from one medium to another can also yield results that feel both unique and faithful to the source material. Because the way the story is told is different, certain aspects are altered; but enough may be kept in the final product. The major difference may simply be the way the story is told. That is certainly the case with the third and final version of ‘The Little Mermaid’ that will be covered in this thesis. Made public in late 2017 is the Northern Ballet adaptation, with David Nixon acting as the director, choreographer, and costume designer.

In order to better understand this adaptation, this chapter will first describe the history and techniques of ballet, in order to better describe which style was utilized in the play. Then, after a summary of the ballet’s plot and a brief comparison between it and its predecessors, special attention will be given to the protagonist. Finally, in order to better understand the gender roles shown in this narrative, there will be a concise but detailed description of major events during the 2010s, and how the public has evolved from the audiences of the story’s previous versions. In order to enrich and strengthen the points made in this chapter, scholarly sources will
be used to cover the topics of ballet, historical and social events of the 2010s, and feminism in that same era. Some of these sources will include Judith Bennahum’s *The Lure of Perfection: Fashion and Ballet, 1780-1830* and Marcia B. Siegel’s *Mirrors and Scrims: The Life and Afterlife of Ballet* will be used to discuss ballet. Then, as the chapter progresses, the Northern Ballet’s version of ‘The Little Mermaid’ will be described with information found on their official website. Finally, the description of America in the 2010s (including gender roles and feminism) will be supported by Carl L. Bankston’s *Great Events from History: Modern Scandals 1904-2008*, the shared work of D.S. Lewis and Wendy Slater: *The 2014 Annual Register: World Events 2013*, and Andrea Nye’s *Feminism and modern philosophy: an introduction*, among others.

The history of ballet began in 16th century Italy. The term ‘ballet’ derives from the Italian word ‘ballare’ which means ‘to dance’. According to “A Brief History of Ballet”, it is thanks to an arranged marriage among the high class that brought ballet overseas. He states that “when Catherine de Medici of Italy married the French King Henry II, she introduced early dance styles into court life in France.” (Atlanta Ballet). Initially, dancing was as much about appearance as it was about movement: the performers had to wear masks and multiple-layered costumes, as well as heavy ornaments and headdresses. As is to be expected, such restrictive and ornate attire limited what the dancers could do onstage. Thus, dancing was mostly comprised of small hops, slides, curtsies, promenades, and gentle turns. Even the shoes worn during these recitals had small heels and were very dissimilar to their modern-day counterparts.

The official terminology vocabulary in ballet was gradually ingrained into French over the next century, and according to *Atlanta Ballet*, King Louis XIV performed many dances of the time along with his peers. He would then hire professional ballet dancers to take his place once
he and his fellow nobles grew tired. Judith Bennahum supports this in the first chapter of her
aforementioned work: “The Baroque period began with the era of Louis XIV’s reign (1661-
1715) and extended beyond his death to the French Revolution in 1789. The period evokes
images of great opulence, panoply, and sensuousness in which fashion and ballet followed a
carefully coded vocabulary.” (p. 9). During its evolution, ballet changed in instruments as well.
Elevated stages were established in order to allow increasingly large crowds to admire the
opulent shows, which had also grown in scale.

The article goes on to say the following: “From Italian roots, ballets in France and Russia
developed their own stylistic character.” He goes on to inform us that by 1850, Russia had
become a leading center of the world of dance, and as time progressed, certain techniques and
theatrical illusions were recognized as fashionable and therefore mimicked. Dancing on one’s toe
came into being during the early 19th century, as well as the idea of women performing in
white/pale gowns with bell-like skirts that ended at their calves. This style of dance was reserved
for women, and this led to the creation of a Romantic character: a nymph-like beauty whose
grace and “pristine goodness” would inevitably and undoubtedly triumph over evil. Mirrors and
Scrims further elaborate on Russian ballet classics: “These works undergo constant change—
from redesigned costumes, rearranged sequences, and choreographed numbers, to shifting
interpretations of characters and plots, to the routine addition of new material from year to year.
The audience has no trouble recognizing these revised editions as Swan Lake or The
Nutcracker.” (p. 13).

Unlike certain art forms, which remain in the countries they were conceived in, Russian
ballet spread in the early twentieth century through the Russian theater producer Serge
Diaghilev. He brought together some of Russia’s most talented dancers, choreographers, singers,
and designers to form the Ballet Russes. According to Nedgivin, the group toured Russia and America, presenting a plethora of ballets. In America, ballet grew popular in the 1930s. At the same type, several members of the Ballet Russes left their troupe in order to settle in the United States. One of them was George Balanchine, who officially established ballet in America by founding the New York Ballet. Another key figure was Adolph Bolm, who became the first director of San Francisco Ballet School.

Ballet is arguably the most graceful form of dance. It has been known as the foundation of all dances because it teaches the eloquence and physical discipline that all dancers must master in order to succeed. According to sources such as the website Health Fitness Revolution, ballet offers both physical and mental benefits by alleviating stress, improving flexibility and tone, and increasing strength.

There are four main types of ballet. The order in which they were conceived are as follows: Classical, Romantic, Neoclassical, and Contemporary. Classical ballet has sub-types to it, defined by their geographical locations, such as English, Russian, and French Ballet. According to the Brooklyn Melodies Music Center, Classical ballet became defined in the 1920s by the technique and training program put together by a diverse group of dancers. This became known as the Royal Academy of Dance Method, and it was comprised of various types and elements of classical ballet blended together. Romantic ballet, emerging in the 19th century, saw the technical development of having dancers balance their weight on their toes, which is known as ‘pointe work’. Romantic ballet is also distinctive as it introduced the ballet attire that we are all familiar with, and expresses a focus on the female dancer. Neoclassical ballet, which is one of the more modern forms of this dance, is the most ‘diverse’ branch of this dance thus far. It is tied to no particular dance or costume, nor are the dances obligated to follow a plot or structure. This
series of endless possibilities sometimes leads to a shift away from the more traditional grace associated with ballet in favor of a more athletic type. Finally, Contemporary ballet combines elements of Classical ballet with more modern techniques such as jazz. This leads to experimentation in performances and the chance for dancers to act in plots. Similar to the Neoclassical style, Contemporary ballet calls for greater feats of athleticism and attention to tempo. The dance is further characterized by dancing on bare feet, relying less on en pointe.

It is my personal opinion that the branch of ballet used in the Northern Ballet production is the final and most modern one: Contemporary. As mentioned above, it calls for great feats, combines classical elements with contemporary ones, and breeds acting in complex plots. After watching several recordings of the Northern Ballet’s ‘The Little Mermaid’, I have come to this conclusion because of the various styles and wide range of movements that were used not only for visual flair, but to tell the story.

When the story is set underwater, there is a Celtic tune comprised of soft horns and harp. Likewise, the dancers, in glittering attire and bright face-paint of blue, pink, and green, move in swaying and graceful movements with plenty of arm movements and slowed tempos to give the impression that they are, indeed, underwater. The cool lighting, backgrounds, and jellyfish being carried around backstage complete the illusion. During the underwater portion of the setting, the actors are also made to ‘swim’ via suspension cords that give us the impression that they are indeed moving in midair (or, in this case, in the water).

Likewise, when the narrative takes the protagonist on dry land, the backgrounds and costumes change, with the color scheme adopting earthlier tones. The only thing that remains blue is the little mermaid herself, whose blue gowns never allow us—or her—to forget that she is not a creature of land, and is only there for a short amount of time. The dances, too, change:
instead of the graceful, gentle swaying of the mer-people below, the performances in the second portion of the story are wild and energetic, full of strong movements and confident strides. The only exception to this is, again, the protagonist. There are a couple of instances in which she dances, both alone and in company. Like the original fairy tale, walking on her new feet causes indescribable anguish. Dancing appears to have the same effect. While she collapses in agony, flopping around in erratic, fish-like movements when alone, the little mermaid restrains herself in the company of others, refusing to reveal how much pain she is enduring.

But what is the story? How has it changed from the original narrative and, likewise, what has remained the same in the nearly two centuries separating the tales? The following summary comes from the Norther Ballet’s official website in order to offer as accurate a description as possible.

Divided into three parts (Act I, Act II, and Epilogue), the story is as follows:

Act I opens with the underwater realm awakening. Much like the underwater realm in Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale, the sea is ruled by a sea-god. Here, he is named Lyr. Marilla, his youngest daughter, is introduced when she sings an exquisite song to the audience. Two of her older sisters swim to the surface to collect trinkets, but Marilla is too young to join them. Instead, she plays with her seahorse companion Dillion and wonders about the world above. When her sisters return, they bring many treasures; one is a locket that contains the photograph of a dashing young man. Enamored with the youth, Marilla decides to go to the surface in search of him despite Dillion’s protests. She soon finds him, Prince Adair, and watches him from afar as he celebrates the day’s catch aboard a ship, along with the crew. Fearing for Marilla’s safety, Lyr summons a powerful storm that splits the ship in two. Adair
would have drowned if Marilla hadn’t rescued him, leaving him on the shore and singing her beautiful song as she returns to the ocean.

However, her good deed is not met with anything but sorrow. Marilla watches, mournfully, as a group of women walk along the beach with their priestess instructors. One very pretty woman, Dana, spots Adair and wakes him up. The prince sees Dana and immediately assumes that she is the one who saved his life. He thanks her, taken by her.

Back in the ocean, Lyr scolds Marilla for her actions, telling her that she belongs in the ocean when Marilla protests that she loves Adair. But when her pleas grow in scale and in desperation, Lyr finally relents and gives his youngest daughter a potion. He tells her to drink it when she is near land, and goes on to explain that doing so will give her a human life—at a terrible price. She will be rendered mute, and while she will move more gracefully than any other woman, each step will feel as though she is walking on knives. Marilla obeys her father, and becomes a human.

Meanwhile, Prince Adair is led back to the shore by lingering memories of a dream-like encounter. There, he comes across Marilla. Unable to communicate with the childlike and exotic woman, he brings her home after she faints.

Act II takes place sometime later, with Marilla now living with Adair and his family. Unable to truly communicate and suffering anguish with every move, she nevertheless feels at peace when in the prince’s presence. Adair himself finds himself drawn to her despite still being ignorant of the fact that she was the one who rescued him. His opinion of her varies from a sweet child to an extraordinary woman.

Adair, Marilla, and Queen Brina attend a gathering celebrating the summer’s catch. It is a festival filled with food and dance. Marilla watches, amazed by the dancing, until she finds
herself in the middle of it. At first, she moves cautiously; but then she dances in a graceful manner that draws all eyes to her. She does not notice at first, guided by her memories of the sea. Adair, entranced, walks up to Marilla and places a kiss on her forehead. This causes Marilla to dream of dancing with the prince, but that dream ends when Brina announces Adair’s upcoming marriage.

Adair, still driven to the water’s edge by the dream of the stranger, he encounters Marilla. He tells her that he loves the person who saved him from drowning, and who had a beautiful singing voice. Realizing that she lost her singing voice, she breaks down into tears once the prince departs. Her sisters and Dillion arrive to comfort her, to no avail. Unable to bear seeing their youngest sister so crushed, the elder mermaids go to Lyr. He gives them a knife and tells them that if Marilla can kill Adair and let his blood drip onto her feet, then the effects of the potion will fade and she will revert to her mermaid form. As payment for the knife, Lyr takes his daughters’ hair.

Adair and Dana marry, and begin to dance on a ship alongside many invited guests. Marilla, of course, does not celebrate and instead stands aside from the crowd. However, she soon spots her sisters, their hair cut short and their hands cradling a knife. They tell her the deal that Lyr offered. At first, Marilla agrees, approaching Adair with the blade in hand. However, when her gaze falls upon his face, her heart swells with love and she leaves him be. Furious, Lyr calls on a second storm, turning the ship and triggering chaos. Marilla throws the knife at Lyr, right in the heart of the storm. The sea calms, but not before sweeping the little mermaid in its embrace.
The Epilogue opens with the waters swirling around Marilla, who is singing joyfully with her newfound voice. She then disappears into the water. Dillion watches as the little mermaid’s soul ascends.

The Northern Ballet’s ‘The Little Mermaid’ inherited many traits from the version in different art forms I have discussed in the previous chapters of this dissertation. Like the original text, the mermaid has loving older sisters that trade their hair for a knife (but are far fewer in this version), a strict, godlike in power father, and feels anguish with every step she takes. Contrary-wise, like the 1989 cartoon, the play has an animal sidekick, songs added to the narrative, and a climactic battle towards the end wherein the foe is vanquished. Also like the Disney version, the little mermaid is drawn more to the prince rather than the idea of obtaining a human soul. However, like the original text, it ends with the little mermaid dying and her soul ascending (although the Daughters of Air are excluded). This version of the story is clearly recognizable as ‘The Little Mermaid’, while still having enough of its own identity to stand out. Its distinction is partially thanks to its presentation, which has to use entirely different means that its predecessors. Instead of printing words onto paper or animating drawings, this production had to train dozens of dancers, create costumes and backgrounds that further the narrative as much as dialogue could, and music that must both aid the dancers and establish mood.

But what of the little mermaid herself? Like the ballet, the protagonist is a fusion of the previous incarnations that this thesis has focused on. Just as Ariel did, Marilla has a name and an animal companion, falls in love at first sight with the prince, and tells her father this to his face. However, she also shares several traits with the original Hans Christian Andersen story. Like the mermaid swimming in those pages, Marilla has a strong relationship with her older sisters and, upon falling in love with the prince, endures continued agony in order to be near him. Like her
literary counterpart, Marilla is also given the chance to transform back into a mermaid by murdering the prince, and like in the book, she cannot bring herself to do it. In the end, like her literary counterpart, Marilla passes on and her soul ascends.

Marilla share certain traits with both of her predecessors, or possesses characteristics that reflect both. All three mermaids, besides following the same basic plot, have beautiful singing voices, are fascinated by humans, and are lovely to look upon. They are all curious about the world above, and behave in an innocent, childlike fashion once introduced to such a strange, dry new world. She can arguably be considered a touch stubborn, once again embodying both of her predecessors. Like the original little mermaid, she initially obeys the law that underage mermaids can’t go on land. But like Ariel, Marilla soon disobeys this law.

There is, however, one trait that only Marilla possesses. Unlike the original story, wherein the conflict towards the end was more internal than external, and dissimilar to the 1989 cartoon, where Prince Eric finished off the sea witch by impaling her with the broken end of a sunken ship, it is Marilla who deals with the threat. She is the one who throws the knife intended for Adair at a raging Lyr, even as his storm threatens to sink the ship and drown everybody aboard it. Instead of enduring a great, emotional struggle at the end (although she already dealt with one during her time on land, by knowing that the prince loved and married someone else), or watching as her prince kills the monster, it is Marilla who saves the day. Of the three version that this thesis has covered, she is the only one to fight the seemingly unbeatable threat and saving everyone around her.

What does this say, consequently, about the society that made this story, and whom this story was made for?
Much has changed from the late 1980s, and this applies even more from the 19th century to now. Everything from relations between countries to technology to laws have shifted, with people teaching their children diverse values from those taught in Hans Christian Andersen’s days. Each nation has changed in its own unique way, depending on the way its history has led up to its present. America, too, has faced multiple issues that has changed its visage. Presidents have changed, laws and social structures have been altered, and natural and economical disasters forced American citizens into heinous struggles. *Great Events from History* illustrates one of these examples by describing the Recession of 2008: “Led by a complex web of actions that included a drive to maximize profits and an abandonment of prudence and responsibility, major financial institutions in the United States began to fail. By September, 2008, excessive risk-taking, inadequate cash reserves, excessive debt levels, and the subprime mortgage crisis led to financial collapse. The dire financial condition, coupled with an economic recession in the United States, forced U.S. government interventions that, by November 24, totaled $7.7 trillion in bailouts for these financial institutions.” (Bankston, Carl p. 1175).

One would assume that, because only thirty years have passed from one ‘Little Mermaid’ adaptation to another, they would be received by very similar audiences. In some respects, this is true; but in others, it is not. Many events have occurred in the 21st century alone, setting it apart from the late eighties. Some of these occurrences include September 11th, 2001, the Iraq War (lasting from March 20th, 2003 to December 18th, 2011), at least two major hurricanes (Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and Hurricane Sandy in 2012), and the 2013 revelation by Edward Snowden that the US government had been digitally spying not only on foreign lands, but its own populace. *The 2014 Annual Register: World Events 2013* states that, by doing this, Snowden
embarrassed “the Obama administration abroad, and provoking a heated debate at home on the balance that ought to be struck between security and liberty” (Lewis, Slater).

With heightened technology, it is easier to catch someone red-handed. Everything is recorded, whether by our own hand (via social media and our relationships with others) or by other means (via surveillance cameras and our everyday movements). For many reasons, this can be a good thing: lies are more likely to be revealed, crimes are easier to solve, and it is simpler to consult hacked accounts rather than rely on multiple witnesses that may have ulterior motives. Great Events from History state multiple cases in which falsehoods have been revealed. Some include:

- January 28, 2000, John Spano Is Sentenced for Fraudulent Purchase of Ice Hockey Team (Bankston, Carl p. 901).


This extensive network of revelation has made us, in my opinion, more cynical as people. We have learned that things are not always what they appear to be, and are thus encouraged to dig deeper than ever before. This reflects our relationship with stories, no matter the format that they come in or the time in which they were originally written. Because we have been given the tools to better understand the world around us, especially its darker elements, we want more
mature narratives that only encourage our digging. By that account, it seems only natural to deepen and update a fairy tale wherein the main character disguises herself and discovers that the world above—the world that she coveted—is not the one she may have originally been expecting.

Another chain of events that has shaped America has been its succession of presidents. George W. Bush (2001-2009) declared a global ‘war on terrorism’ and authorized the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, leading to the 492,000 deaths in total. The goal, according to *A War on Terror: Afghanistan and After*, was to “develop the ‘benign imperium’, a stable world comprising a liberty polity in an essentially free market, modeled on the US system.” (Rogers, p. 55).

His successor, Barack Obama, was considered a breath of fresh air by comparison. He had run, according to *The Obama Presidency: Promise and Performance*, a “brilliant and mesmerizing campaign, one that promised change.” (Crotty, p. 5). For the most part, he is thought to have done a decent job. But many consider his greatest accomplishment to be his massive improvement on American health insurance. However, because of the resistance, political issues, and problems that arose at the proposal, with even Obama’s advisers telling him to drop the project, Obama “would undergo a transformation of sorts.” (Crotty, p. 20). The Obama Presidency further states that this event changed Obama “from the progressive and inspirational leader of a political movement to a less certain, more tentative and ultimately highly flexible proponent of issues and approaches.” (Crotty, p. 20).

Finally, there is the current president: Donald Trump, elected in 2016. He has been criticized multiple times, from certain comments that he made public (such as proudly announcing that he would build a wall on the Texas-Mexico border to keep immigrants from
entering) to several actions, such as ending the Clean Power Plan and selling weapons to Saudi Arabia. According to *Chaos in the Liberal Order: The Trump Presidency and International Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, Trump “portrayed America’s alliances as burdens rather than assets and threatened to reduce or downgrade America’s security commitments.” (Thompson, p. 152). And yet, despite his problematic presidency, he found success in the midterm elections. He has also called women insulting and derogatory names, such as ‘dog’, ‘pig’, and ‘disgusting animal’, which may have encouraged women to rise up in a movement that will be brought up shortly. After all, if the president can get away with calling women such awful names, who’s to say that other men in lower stations will not do the same?

During the 21st century, in all of its turmoil, social issues continue to brew. As has happened in the past, injustice triggered the need in people to protest, to call the system out for failing them and striving to improve life for themselves and for others. While not all of these protests succeeded, they still help voice concerns and make these problems known.

Within the outcries for equal rights is feminism’s latest wave: the fourth, to be exact. According to *The Feminist Fourth Wave*, fourth-wave feminism, arising in 2012 thanks to social media, focuses on justice for female victims of sexual harassment and violence (Chamberlain). It is a form of feminism that thrives online, utilizing sources such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Tumblr, usually for the purpose of challenging misogyny and gender inequality.

This wave rose, it seems, from the ashes of American female satisfaction. Even though American women today are given the same rights as men, from the right to an education to the right to own property to the right to reproduce/abort on her own terms, many remain unconvinced of gender equality. Of course, most can agree that a single opinion cannot be shared by every living person. For example, while people can generally agree that rape is a violation on
another human being that must be punished, there are always those who might blame the victim (be it male or female) by saying that they provoked their attacker in some sneaky way. However, American fourth-wave feminists are not saying that some men cling to old-school gender roles that dictate that men should be the breadwinners and a woman’s place is in the kitchen. Rather, they are declaring that misogyny is still rampant and has simply found subtler ways to manifest itself. In the introduction of the book *Sexism in America: Alive, Well, and Ruining Our Future*, Barbara Berg describes the conversations among the women at a party and how they shook her: “Why were these women, with so much going for them, slipping into roles rather than deciding upon them? Were these women a skewed example? Or were they representative of the general population?” (Berg, p. xiii). She goes on to describe her speaking to a New Jersey lawyer named Alexi, who was criticized for returning to work earlier than expected after giving birth. While this is considerably less severe than the stark inequality that women had to endure just a century prior, including being barred from voting and being less likely to be employed, it still demonstrates the double-standards that can still be found in modern society. “‘They made me feel as though I was doing something unnatural by coming back to work. It was awful,’ Alexi told me. ‘And I became aware of a difference in the way I was being treated. Then I looked around and saw something I’d never noticed before: all the partners are men, except one, and she’s not married.’” (Berg, p. xiv).

This bifurcation in behavior when it comes to genders is supported in *Feminism and Modern Philosophy*, where the first chapter (*The virtues of misogyny*) begins with the following quotation: “Feminine traits are called weaknesses. People joke about them; fools ridicule them; but reasonable people see very well that those traits are just the tools for the management of men, and for the use of men for female designs.” (Immanuel Kant, Anthropology, p. 217). This
statement, while harsh, has some truth in it. Even though men are now encouraged to be more open about their feelings, and media has portrayed male protagonists as less aggressively masculine than in the past, it is still a developing phase. While many would agree that there is nothing wrong with a man crying, and that being more open about one’s sentiments is a healthier way to live one’s life—not to mention strengthen one’s relations and trust in others—there are still those who look down on such behaviors. Likewise, the trend of ‘girly girls’ is slowly dying out. Girls are taught to be decisive and sure of themselves, and that they can do so much more with their lives than simply getting married and having children. However, as positive as this philosophy is, it can also lead to girls being more ‘feminine’ by nature being considered ‘weaker’ and ‘less compelling’ than girls who have assumed tougher and more masculine attitudes. An extension of this can be found in the book *Gun Women: Firearms and Feminism in Contemporary America*. In the introduction, it is stated what will be required in order to document women who self-identify as feminists, use firearms, or do only one of the two. The exact requirements are as follows: “This will mean challenging some conventional ideas about women’s capacity for taking instruments of power into their own hands, ideas with which feminists and anti-feminists have often been equally comfortable. It will mean shattering some stereotypes and reevaluating some truths about female weakness, fear, vulnerability, and non-aggressiveness. And it may just mean that men will have to alter the way they look at themselves as well as women.” (Strange, Oyster, p. 7). This bold concept of women becoming more comfortable around firearms further highlights how they are taking on more ‘masculine’ traits in order to be seen as strong. While it is logical that people of a certain type would be willing/able to wield weapons, and that some (regardless of gender) are too skittish and frightened to use them, it still goes to show that women are becoming more masculine. Whether this is due to
more accepting attitudes towards gender allowing them to behave this way, or born from a sense of necessary change in order to be considered more equal to men is entirely up to debate.

All of these sources, and the passionate words flowing within them, have led me to the conclusion that fourth-wave feminists are aware that, technically speaking, they are equal to men. They are permitted to go to the same schools, divorce, hold properties, have jobs, and many other activities meant to give one an enriched and satisfying life. But what fourth-wave feminists are also aware that, despite these multiple and expansive progressions in gender roles and equal rights, there is still a bias to be found. They know that people tend to still put women into certain categories by expecting them to behave in certain ways, including not owning firearms as it contrasts the classic image of an innocent, non-violent maiden. As shown in this chapter, twenty-first century America has not been an easy place to live in. Between economic instability, terrorism, and social injustice, the people find themselves forced to protest and fight in order to salvage what they have. In the case of the feminists, they strive to snub out the misogyny that they still see behind the equality laws. While content with possessing equal rights, they covet the avoidance of prejudice based on their gender when they proceed to utilize these equal rights. After all, how can one be happy with one’s position if there are few who recognize it? Thus, they seek to change that, and they spread word of their desire for all the Web to hear.

That, I believe, has influenced female characters conceived (or, in some cinematic cases, rebooted) in the 21st century. Women are depicted as strong, capable, and independent: those that were once submissive to men are now fighting alongside them, and the new characters are made powerful in their own way from the start. Strength in women is portrayed in many ways: they may be tattooed, gun-wielding vixens who swear and smoke alongside men, or they can be
seemingly demur ladies who use seduction and slyness to wrap men around their pinkies. There are just as many female characters who are somewhere in between, but undoubtedly strong.

For example, in the 2012 film *Snow White and the Huntsman*, both the protagonist and the villain are strong women: Snow White, traditionally considered a ‘weak’ female figure who constantly requires rescue from men (first the huntsman, then the dwarfs, and finally the prince), is now a strong, capable young woman who rallies an army against the evil queen. Likewise, the evil queen is able to seduce her way into becoming a monarch before slaying the king and staying in power for years to come.

Another example is the protagonist of the young adult trilogy *The Hunger Games* (both the books and the films, both of which began and ended in the 21st century). Unlike the previous example, this is an entirely original piece that required no ‘rebooting’ or ‘remaking’. Katniss Everdeen is a young archer/hunter who is thrust into the brutal annual Hunger Games. In the arena, she relies on both her skills as a hunter and the public’s infatuation with her ‘love story’ with another contestant to stay alive.

Other examples include the female cast from the popular television show *Game of Thrones*, who are all strong and distinct characters despite some having small roles.

In a setting such as this, it is only natural that the Northern Ballet portrayed ‘The Little Mermaid’s titular character as they did. Marilla is strong in both conventional and non-conventional ways when it comes to women. On one hand, her great love for Prince Adair can be seen as a strength because it is the driving force behind her actions. It is because of this great love that she disobeys her father, whose portrayal here is the most menacing and powerful yet. Marilla’s feelings for the prince once again give her strength when she is suffering silently for who knows how long, and it steers her back on the correct path when she momentarily
considered making good on her sisters’ offer. On the other hand, Marilla is less conventional in the way that she kills Lyr, striking him down with the knife even though, from what the audience can assume, she has never so much as held a weapon before. She kills the threat to everyone, at the cost of her own life.

I further believe this is why the spiritual element was once again toned down. Keeping the original ending intact may have removed some of the empowerment that Marilla had accumulated throughout the play. Until that point, her love and her actions were the force by which the plot moved. Thus, having a finale in which she agrees to serve humanity with other earth-bound spirits would have undermined the strength of her character. She would have gone from the girl who gave up everything for love, and who slayed the destructive sea-god, to another Daughter of Air, bound to spiritual servitude for centuries to come.

Of course, I cannot claim to know what the ballet’s writers had in mind. All I can do is make educated guesses based on the social circumstances permeating America in this time period. At the very least, mine is a possibility; a shot in the dark.
Conclusion

In conclusion, stories and society form an ouroboros. Stories describe, praise, criticize, and guide society through narration, character development, metaphor, and simile. They have been described as ‘lies that tell the truth’ because, even though the details may be fabricated, the essence of the story rings no less verily. Similarly, society dictates a story’s foundation. It can determine its conception, purpose, and execution; and as society changes, the story must be altered as well. As we have seen, a tale about a mermaid wanting to be like humans can take different forms depending on the audience. It can either be a tale preaching the purity of a soul, a romantic musical, or a story about a woman who is strong in both conventional and unconventional ways. The first ever version of ‘The Little Mermaid’ is a tale about spiritual purity, born from true love, that transcends race and is rewarded with salvation. The well-known Disney film is a story about true love conquering all, including location and restrictions. The final version produced and performed by the Northern Ballet is a story about falling in love, learning to adapt in an unfamiliar world, and sacrifice that comes with great love and spiritual/emotional maturity. They all portray the little mermaid as a strong character, as it is her will and desire that drives the entire narrative. The only real difference in that regard is how that strength, desire, and will are portrayed. In the first version, the little mermaid wants to obtain a human soul and pays the price to get it. In the Disney version, she is motivated by love and is willing to take every risk necessary to be with her prince. The final version is a combination of the two, having the mermaid fall in love with the prince and spiritually ascend by the end, defeating the dangerous sea-god in the process. All of these versions, as well as the others that could not find a place in this thesis, were all made for different audiences for different time
periods, with very different intentions in mind. As a result, despite being rooted in the same idea, they all branch out in diverse ways. As different as they are, however, they combine to show the progression of the story, society, and how one feeds into the other. Because of the changes in regards to gender roles and equal rights, as well as the dissolution of religion in later versions, ‘The Little Mermaid’ changes radically from version to version. Its versions are numerous and varied, with each one having something different to say. It shares this truth with many other tales, namely fairy tales that have followed us through the ages and continue to develop as time passes and they reach new countries. They are all timeless, all the while being uniquely-written time capsules of the world that made them.
Works Cited


