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# Andersen vs. Schaffert

## *Mermaids as a Symbol for Experience's Relationship to Gender*

*Krista Butts*

Timothy Schaffert's "The Mermaid in the Tree" eloquently and solemnly retells the classic Hans Christian Andersen fairytale of "The Little Mermaid." While the retelling has many surprising twists, there is also an underlying social commentary about gendered expectations and society's impact on the outcome of youth's journey into adulthood. Schaffert's retelling showcases the futility of maturation in a more modern world which is devoid of the fairytale enchantment. The females in both the original tale and retelling showcase the loss of innocence that comes with women gaining experience in the midst of society's unjust judgements, but in Schaffert's tale, Desiree gains power in her understanding of her surroundings. Furthermore, the male character, Axel, conveys the difference in societal expectations concerning gender roles as he juxtaposes Andersen's little mermaid by paralleling their experiences with self-image, worship of romantic interests, loss of self, and overall character development and transformation.

The female experiences in both the original tale and the retelling showcase the troubles that come with maturing in the midst of society's slanted judgements, but the spectators at the Mermaid Parade in Schaffert's retelling truly capture this. Desiree is placed in Rothgutt's Asylum for Misspent Youth from a young age for "taking candy from a baby" (Schaffert 172). The

“troubled” girls from the Asylum are allowed to attend the Parade only if they transport the dead mermaids, who have washed up on Mudpuddle Beach, causing the spectators to see the girls as corrupt. In the midst of gaining life experience and being confronted with death, the girls are unfairly judged, and this is representative of how society can misjudge females’ journey into maturation.

A group of nuns illustrate this societal judgement by protesting against the Mermaid Parade. Nuns, of course, are a social and religious symbol for everlasting purity in the service of God. These nuns specifically hail from the convent of the Sisterhood of Poseidon’s Daughters, which is reminiscent of Andersen’s little mermaid and her sisterhood. Thus, the nuns protesting are symbolic of preserving innocence similar to the little mermaid’s sisters when they try to help her become a mermaid again, the most innocent version of herself, after she has lived as a human. In order to preserve innocence, these nuns throw rotten tomatoes at the girls from Rothgutt’s rather than at the dead mermaids. This showcases that the Asylum girls are seen as tarnished, while the mermaids are seen as innocent victims. Women in fairytales—and, oftentimes, in past and present society—are expected to be pure but are also ostracized for it. The Mermaid Parade is a bleak representation of long-standing gendered expectations in society. The mermaids represent degraded innocence and the Asylum girls represent judged growth.

Furthermore, Desiree understands society’s unjust ways, and uses her connection to the mermaid she transports to understand herself and her journey from innocence to experience. Schaffert writes, “Desiree breathed against the glass of the bowl then wiped away the fog with the lace shawl she wore across her naked shoulders, polishing away smears on the glass. She named her mermaid after herself” (175). While Desiree does not see the mermaid at face value, she instead has an intimate connection with her; Desiree feels she is looking through the glass at herself because she too is on display. Desiree’s connection to the mermaid illustrates her understanding of society’s discriminating views on women’s development.

Moreover, the need for Andersen’s little mermaid to relate with humanity, who has taken her power, represents the perpetuated gendered expectation of females’ innocence and their struggle to transition into womanhood. For example, Andersen writes, “[She] again fixed her eyes on the Prince, who murmured in his dreams the name of his bride—she alone was in his thoughts. The knife quivered in the mermaid’s hand—but then she flung it far out into

the waves" (231). In this passage, the mermaid could return to her innocent life as a mermaid if she kills the Prince, but she realizes the Prince and his bride are meant to be together, and she is an outsider. Andersen specifically says the knife quivers in the "mermaid's" hand, and in this he labels her as not human, and essentially below a human. Thus, she cannot mature as she wants to or deserves to. Her experience as a human destroyed her purity as a mermaid; however, she does not let it further destroy her by taking away the happiness of others.

Even though it is unfair that the little mermaid sacrifices herself for the Prince and his bride, there is a strong social commentary in how she learns from her human experience and takes control of her final choice, even if it will not lead back to her original mermaid life she longs for. She has been thrust into experience and is tarnished by the humans' disposal of her. Ultimately, in her struggle to adapt in the midst of this, she exercises some autonomy by making the moral choice of choosing empathy even when the human world refused to show her any throughout her journey and left her powerless.

While Andersen's little mermaid shows empathy for the Prince and his bride, Desiree similarly shows empathy to the dead mermaid in the Parade. Andersen captures the loss of innocence in how the mermaid desperately tries to become as human as possible throughout the tale, yet she ultimately realizes she has simultaneously lost herself because of it. Schaffert captures loss of innocence in how Desiree identifies with the mermaid, whose innocence was stripped by society's desire to preserve her decaying body. Humans in Andersen's tale remain pure—or perhaps ignorant—while mermaids in Schaffert's tale represent females' transition into womanhood being tarnished by the cruel judgement of society. However, in Andersen's tale the little mermaid, who longs to be human, does not get a chance to understand why her situation is unjust. Schaffert articulates how females understand what the little mermaid could not about transitioning into experience.

Schaffert captures the difference in transitioning to adulthood in how the boys and girls grow up in extremely different settings due to society's perceptions of gender. For example, Desiree's observations of Axel's attendance and experiences at the Starkwhip Academy of Breathtakingly Exceptional Young Men comment on how gender is treated differently during adolescence. The Academy appears like a paradise and shelters Axel with other boys; conversely, females are secluded in an asylum. Axel's

relationships with Desiree and his classmates demonstrate that he is not necessarily innocent, but he is not branded by his experiences, while Desiree was sent to the Asylum as an infant for a crime unworthy of the punishment. Despite their comparable innocence, their punishment, or lack thereof, demonstrates society's treatment of gender.

To further juxtapose society's gender bias, Schaffert paints Axel as the little mermaid's symbolic counterpart through their differing views of self-image concerning nakedness. The first time Axel appears to Desiree, he seems to be an ethereal deity, like a mermaid. Schaffert writes, "Desiree on the other side of the barbed wire fence that separated the public beach from the private had whistled into her cupped fists to trill out a melodic birdcall. Immodestly he'd stepped to the fence still naked, running his fingers through his sweaty blond locks" (176–77). Desiree does not judge Axel as he flaunts his nakedness; he knows it is immodest but does not care. He is mermaid-like because of how exotic he seems to Desiree, but he is different from the little mermaid because, as a boy, he is not judged for his nakedness.

In contrast, when the little mermaid first meets the Prince after becoming human, her self-image is painted with shame at her nakedness. Andersen writes, "[The Prince] stared at her with coal-black eyes, so that she cast down her own—and saw that her fishes tail had gone and she had the sweetest little white legs that any young girl could wish for; but she was quite naked and so she wrapped herself in her long flowing hair" (227). The little mermaid notices her nakedness and covers herself because she feels embarrassed. Also, Andersen specifically states that the Prince looks at her with "coal-black eyes" which seem judgmental because he shows a lack of emotion. His black eyes could also be indicative of him seeing her as something tarnished or impure. The little mermaid feels embarrassed by her newfound nakedness because of the judgment from the Prince.

With the setting differences related to gender in the midst of growing up, objects of worship are also painted differently because of their gender. Rapunzel, the mermaid Axel falls in love with, winds up a statue-like being that he lovingly worships, but ultimately becomes a hanging corpse, which serves as a reminder of losing innocence to experience. Rapunzel's statue-like being appears as such: "Her body had decayed quickly, plucked apart by the carrion that found her exotic flesh a delicacy . . . [leaving her a] mermaid's skeleton . . . among the many nooses that still lined the branch" (172–73). Rapunzel is immortalized in a decrepit way, and this lack of respectful

immortalization comes from the transformation in Axel's infatuation of Rapunzel to his worship of his own personal maturation; and in this, he disregards his beloved Rapunzel. Axel's treatment of Rapunzel reflects society's views on the value of women's experience.

The treatment of Rapunzel's statuesque figure compares to the statue of the Prince and provides a cautionary example of how society differentially treats gender. Furthermore, Axel worships, then ultimately disregards, Rapunzel. This contrasts to the little mermaid's respectful worship of the Prince's impermeable and solid statue. Andersen details the little mermaid's fascination with the Prince's statue, "It was the statue of a handsome boy, hewn from the clear white stone and come down to the bottom of the sea from a wreck. Beside the statue she planted a rose-red weeping willow, which grew splendidly and let its fresh foliage droop over the statue right down to the sandy blue" (217). The Prince's statue of "clear white stone" represents something strong and pure. Also, the little mermaid surrounds his statue with beautiful plants to symbolize something blossoming and thriving. She has an innocent love and respect for him through her worship. Both Rapunzel's and the Prince's statues are representative of society painting how gender should be respected.

Society, in addition to disrespecting women, determines what is considered beautiful. Axel's "beauty" is lost as he loses pieces of his physical and emotional being. He permanently inks Rapunzel onto his skin and "the tattooist wrote *cruel destiny* in a fluttering banner beneath the mermaid" (Schaffert 191). The banner in the tattoo suggests that both Rapunzel and Axel will have cruel fates, as evident when Axel literally skins his tattoo and offers to sell it to the casino boss in order to obtain medicine for Rapunzel. Axel offers another piece of himself by promising the child he will conceive with Rapunzel to the casino boss. He barter these pieces of himself to save Rapunzel from the casino boss, but eventually sacrifices her for his own maturation.

The deal Axel made with the casino boss is similar to the little mermaid's deal with the sea witch, which juxtaposes their experiences entering maturation and losing pieces of themselves. For example, the sea witch tells the mermaid, "Once you've got human shape, you can never become a mermaid again. You can never go down through the water to your sisters and your father's palace; and if you don't win the Prince's love, so he forgets father and mother for you and always has you in his thoughts and lets the

priest join your hands together to be man and wife, then you won't get an immortal soul" (Andersen 226). By sacrificing her tail, the little mermaid also sacrifices the beauty of her innocence, which shapes her entire existence and journey into maturity while retrieving the Prince's love, which differs from Axel because he already has Rapunzel's love. The little mermaid not only loses her tail but also endures the loss of her tongue, the pain of walking, and her ultimate sacrifice for a Prince who will never love her. Perhaps, Schaffert depicts Axel as similar to the little mermaid to show how constructed gender roles are reversed in his tale because Axel originally sacrifices himself for the woman he loves, but he reverts to his societal gender role by later sacrificing Rapunzel for his own gain.

Axel's sacrifice of Rapunzel results in servitude to others, which contributes to his character transformation, much like how Andersen's little mermaid's choice to spare the Prince and his bride results in servitude. However, in return for choosing Rapunzel's deadly fate, Axel must serve others for the rest of his life so she can rightfully live on in spirit. To explain this, Rapunzel says, "It wasn't that he changed his mind, Desiree . . . but that he thought he could somehow keep *my* soul alive if *he* lived" (Schaffert 195). Axel is living in pain while serving others to right his mistakes, which provides some form of justice for females and allows them to live in peace. Ultimately, Axel returns to Starkwhip Academy, no longer a student, to serve his former classmates and professors. He is not recognized because he has totally transformed due to his experience and, therefore, is ostracized. Axel's servitude, as a result of his decisions, goes against society's determination of gender roles.

The little mermaid's servitude is similar to Axel's but is degrading because she did not hurt others and is forced to suffer for her choices. She serves the Prince, while in great pain, to win his love. While failing to win his love but still exercising morality, she must continue to serve other humans in order to have a chance at an immortal soul—to essentially rest in peace. The daughters of the air explain, "You, poor little mermaid, have striven . . . with all your heart; you have suffered and endured" (Andersen 232). Despite choosing not to kill the Prince, the little mermaid is still punished because of his lack of love for her. In the end, both she and Axel have to suffer, but his punishment is just while hers is not.

While Axel and the little mermaid's situations are similar, they differ in social narrative because Schaffert showcases the unjust gender roles and

expectations which fairytales and society perpetuate. Schaffert flips these gender roles and places Axel in servitude as a consequence of his actions, but the Prince receives no punishment. While serving others at the Academy, Axel reflects on his injustice towards Rapunzel: “He’d press his fingers hard against his tender throat, and he’d swallow, approximating the strangled breaths Rapunzel must have struggled for in her final minutes of life.” (Schaffert 197). In this, Schaffert compares Axel to the Prince and equates the Prince as the one who ultimately kills the little mermaid by choosing his bride instead.

Despite Axel choosing Rapunzel over Desiree, Desiree gains her womanhood and power over him, reflective of the little mermaid’s powerless experience with the Prince. In the beginning of their relationship, Desiree hoped that Axel would propose to her, which would get her out of the Asylum and into a normal life, but Axel does not take this seriously. Instead, he falls in love with Rapunzel, breaking Desiree’s heart because she knows she is his second choice. Eventually, Axel marries Desiree and “whenever she felt her husband might be drifting away for good . . . she would simply hold out this bone so small, and she would ruin him and she would bring him back” (Schaffert 199). In this passage, Desiree is able to have power over Axel using the bone of his unborn child with Rapunzel, which reminds him of his past mistakes. In Andersen’s tale, the little mermaid never gains power over the Prince. After all, “a mermaid has no immortal soul and can never have one unless she wins the love of a mortal. Eternity for her, depends on a power outside her” (Andersen 232). This showcases the little mermaid never had any true autonomy, despite making the right decision in the end. Desiree’s power is the opposite of the Prince’s power over the little mermaid, which allows Desiree to be in command of her own maturation.

Overall, Schaffert brilliantly executes his retelling of “The Little Mermaid” by daring to have the male character struggle to navigate maturation, while commenting on how the little mermaid’s experience is unjust. In her journey from childhood innocence to womanhood, Desiree gains power because she understands the cruelty of society. Because Desiree resides in the Asylum, she is considered tainted for past mistakes. This judgement can be seen by the nuns who try to preserve the innocence of youth, similar to the little mermaid’s sisters. Desiree recognizes this judgment and can relate to the dead mermaid she transports because she sees herself in the mermaid; the little mermaid similarly empathizes with the humanity she wishes to join



but is excluded from. Schaffert highlights this societal bias towards gender in comparing how boys and girls are treated when they attend the Academy and the Asylum respectively.

Furthermore, Schaffert expounds on the societal differences by providing a juxtaposition between Axel and the little mermaid. Their roles are compared through their perceptions of self-image, worship of their romantic interests, loss of their beauty for those they love, and consequences of servitude. This juxtaposition is adjusted to compare Axel's and the Prince's role in the deaths of Rapunzel and the little mermaid. Ultimately, Desiree gains power over Axel, while the little mermaid sacrifices her power for the Prince. Schaffert's retelling overturns the gendered expectations in both fairytales and society by showcasing the loss of innocence for women gaining experience.

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