

Water, a Symbol of Sanctity: An Interpretation of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid"

¹J. Marteena & ²Dr. M. P. Devika

¹ (Research Scholar, Department of English & Foreign Languages, SRM University, India)

² (Assistant Professor (Sr.G), Department of English & Foreign Languages, SRM University, India)

Abstract: "Neo-pagan believers insist that water taken straight from the Earth has a mysterious quality of sanctity" (Pagdi) This paper aims to analyze the importance of water in literature stressing on the aspect of water as a symbol of sanctity. Water is an inevitable source for numerous literary creations and various literary devices. Bharathiyar's Cauvery, Spencer's Thames and Ramanujan's Vaigai are still flowing rivers in the field of literature. The images of water in human life play as prominent and recurrent role as an alphabet in language. Water proves to be life itself; it reflects the human life through its ebb and flows. The Little Mermaid by 'Hans Christian Andersen' serves as a perfect aid towards realising this. Generally the word 'Sea' means water, the giver of life and livelihood and at times, the taker of life too. In fact, it is said that there are certain places where we experience the 'spirit' of water. It is believed that this experience helps make contact with the influential forces of the cosmos, a reflection of which idea can be seen in the little mermaid's attempt to connect with the forces in the sea.

Keywords: Water in Literature, Sanctity, Psychoanalytic, Allegory, Ecology, Religion

I. Introduction

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The tale of 'The Little Mermaid' reveals the sanctity of water in two ways. Firstly, it stands proof for the fact that water cleanses, washes away impurities and pollutants, makes an object look as good as new and wipes away any signs of previous defilement. Here the defilement happens on account of the mermaid's first contact with humankind. It happens on page 4 where,

"The little mermaid swam close to the cabin windows; and now and then, as the waves lifted her up, she could look in through clear glass window-panes, and see a number of well-dressed people within. Among them was a young prince, the most beautiful of all, with large black eyes; he was sixteen years of age, and his birthday was being kept with much rejoicing." (Andersen, 4)

The mermaid's love at first sight is not unique but rather common in literature yet here in this story the purity of her love washes away her connection with the marine world wiping away her past memories of it.

Secondly, the tale makes evident the capacity that water has to make things holy and clean. Here, the little mermaid's intense love for the prince makes her return to water as foam; which is for her, a point of no return. She has the chance to stab the prince but she refuses to do that. She does so knowing well the consequences of her action. And this is disclosed at the end of the tale:

"She bent down and kissed his fair brow, then looked at the sky on which the rosy dawn grew brighter and brighter; then she glanced at the sharp knife, and again fixed her eyes on the prince, who whispered the name of his bride in his dreams. She was in his thoughts, and the knife trembled in the hand of the little mermaid; then she flung it far away from her into the waves the water turned red where it fell, and the drops that spurted up looked like blood. She cast one more lingering, half-fainting glance at the prince, and then threw herself from the ship into the sea, and thought her body was dissolving into foam." (Andersen, 13)

Thus the mermaid sacrifices herself in order to save the life of the prince. By doing so however, she becomes free from earthly attachments. The water therefore awards the little mermaid with the gifts of holiness and cleanliness.

One can also witness a Biblical parallel here. The prince's rejection of the mermaid is similar to the human being's rejection of Jesus Christ. People admired and experienced Jesus Christ's miracles, but failed to understand the love and sacrifice of Christ. In the same manner, the prince admired the beauty and dance of the mermaid but failed to understand the nature of her love and sacrifice. In Christianity, baptism is performed using water to symbolize the cleansing the natural man of his mortal impurities. In the Bible, Saint Paul, declares that "baptism secures purification from sins, the putting off of the sinful body of the flesh, mortification of sin, renewal of life, regeneration, the power of the Holy Spirit, rebirth of the soul and sanctity of life." (St. Paul. 3.15)

Water as a symbol of sanctity is exemplified in all the religions where water is represented as a sacred element. The portrayal of water as a symbol of sanctity is not restricted to the spiritual world, but is also manifest in the mermaid's world. In the mermaid's world, water is considered as a traditional symbol of respect and sanctity. In fact, the Queen mermaid is exceedingly proud of her mermaid form as well as of the purity of the sea water in which she resides. Andersen's usage of visual imageries of the sea world and personification of water as a human proclaims the prosperity and indispensability of the sea water.

This paper also explores the parallelism between the various worlds by making an attempt to analyze the tale from a psycho-analytical perspective. Christine Moorhouse's article discusses Freud's concept of the Id, the Ego, and the Super Ego in Disney's the Little Mermaid's movie. She says that it is only when we go deep into the water that we understand more about water and its' diverse characteristics likewise it is only when we analyse the situation and the behaviour of the person involved in it, that we understand the person's character better.

According to Freud, the Id is the source of all psychic energy, making it the primary component of personality. The Id is with us from birth to death and is responsible for us attaining our basic human needs and desires. The little mermaid's Id motivates her to fulfill her desire to be with the prince, so she refuses to accept the witch's warning which was as follows:

"...for when once your shape has become like a human being, you can no more be a mermaid. You will never return through the water to your sisters, or to your father's palace again; and if you do not win the love of the prince, so that he is willing to forget his father and mother for your sake, and to love you with his whole soul, and allow the priest to join your hands that you may be man and wife, then you will never have an immortal soul. The first morning after he marries another your heart will break, and you will become foam on the crest of the waves."(Andersen, 9)

The little mermaid reveals her Id through her interactions with the human prince. She wants nothing more than to be with him and ignores all that has been taught to her about the dangers of interactions with the humans and what is expected of her from her father. She doesn't take any of that into consideration. All she knows is that she wants to be with the prince and enjoy his charming presence and bask in his love.

The Ego starts to emerge as we experience things in life. The self image of a person is also called Ego. It differs from person to person. Psychologically the Ego starts out only being concerned with making the Id happy. Ego starts when the basic desire or need is fulfilled. However the Ego is the part of our personality which contains our practicality. In this story, the Ego reveals itself when the little mermaid tells her father that she loves the prince. Her Id wants her be with the prince and the Ego sees that the king is not going to let this happen, so it steps in, trying to manipulate the king either by shocking him with outbursts of love or trying to get him to consider his daughter's happiness by using the Id and ultimately attaining what the Id wants. The Ego drive exists because of Id.

The third aspect of Freud's analytical theory is the Super Ego. The Super Ego develops later in childhood and is only concerned with what is 'right' and 'wrong'. It decides the individual's character. In this tale the Super Ego steps into the interaction when the little mermaid is trying to justify her actions concerning the humans by saying that he would have died if she had not saved him. It makes it clear that she was saving a life, which was indeed the right thing to do, even though ultimately it was a selfish move, since the only reason she saved him was in order to be with him. Initially she appears selfish, however, when she sacrifices her mermaid form she proves to be a pure soul. The Super Ego only cares about whether it was the right thing to do. If it were a human being, this argument would not have been valid because the rules that have been framed are only relevant in the context of interactions between mermaid people and humans. The psychological state of the mermaid's mind shows not only the connection between the humans and mermaids, but also reveals the connection between the land and the sea. In this context it is relevant to add that it is unfortunate that though human beings admire nature we fail to respect or conserve it.

The image of water is present at the beginning and end of the Little Mermaid's lifecycle. She attempts to attain the sacred through the secular – in this case through the natural element, water. To the mermaid's family the water is a beneficent life-giver, the nurturing mother-river. It also acts as an intimate part of their life and is not referred to merely as a wise and generous mother, but also as a goddess complete with unpredictable whims and tantrums. In the mermaid's world water has to be propitiated with ritual, prayer, respect, fear and becomes a symbol of sanctity. The wealth of the sea world is revealed in the description of the mermaid's grandmother and her pride in her adequate yet splendid life. Further evidence can be seen in the introduction part where the Anderson, the author, describes the crystal clear water and the enormous growth of fishes and plants. He even adds a glowing portrayal of the castle of the Sea King, "the walls are built of coral, and the long, Gothic windows are of the clearest amber. The roof is formed of shells that open and close as the water flows over them. Their appearance is very beautiful, for in each lies a glittering pearl, which would be fit for the diadem of a queen." (Andersen, 2)

The consequence of the mermaid's self exile from the sea lays bare a painful transformation which clearly contrasts the mermaid's happy and adequate life in the sea and her torturous life on land. Towards the end of the tale the mermaid sacrifices her life and its comforts when she decides not to kill the prince, in spite of the painful awareness that she cannot resume her existence as a mermaid.

The story of the little mermaid can also be seen as an allegory of the Life of Christ where the mermaid figure is akin to the Christ figure which denotes the supreme self-sacrifice thus making her one with Christ- a holy, pure and universal character. To prove his true love towards human beings, Christ sacrificed everything in his life, including his life. Similarly to show her pure love the little mermaid sacrificed her form, voice, family, sea world and finally her life too.

II. Conclusion

Hans Christian Andersen writes this tale in a celestial tone with a tinge of spirituality which adds up to expose water as a symbol of sanctity in literature. A study of his portrayal of the mermaid's emotions and behaviors from a psychoanalytical perspective illustrates that water reveals its sanctity if one cares to explore below the surface just as an individual's purity can be understood by analyzing his behavior. Water is sometimes the setting and other times the material used by the author, which makes transparent the role of water in literature.

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