*Aisling Hoey
Dublin City University, Ireland
Drumlusty Carrickmacross Co. Monaghan
E-mail: aislinghoey@ymail.com

UNDER THE SEA: THE DEPICTION OF GENDER ROLES AND FEMININITY IN 'THE LITTLE MERMAID'[1]

Abstract

The literary genre of fairy tales is globally recognised. Fairy tales are ancient tales shared amongst generations, a memorable feature of childhood to many. Fairy tales carry a social message, a reflection of the cultural values and norms of society and constructing what we refer to as idealised gender roles. This article is interested in the representation of women in fairy tales, giving particular focus to various adaptions of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid". This article analyses Andersen's 1837 original along with Walt Disney's 1989 animated adaption and Louise O'Neill's 2018 reimagining *The Surface Breaks*. This article takes the two central female characters and focuses on how each text conforms to or resists hegemonic perspectives of femininity and gender roles. The article found that ideas surrounding gender roles and femininity have evolved over time, with earlier versions of the tale conforming to the tropes of the beauty ideal and O'Neill's contemporary tale encouraging audiences to resist hegemonic perspectives.

Keywords: Feminism, fairy-tale, Disney, Hans Christian Andersen, Louise O' Neill

Introduction

Embedded within Western society, fairy tales are a pivotal element of childhood. However, despite popular assumption, fairy tales are not specifically directed at a child audience, in fact quite the contrary (Altman and de Vos, 2001:1). A tradition dating back thousands of years, telling tales was a familiar pastime to many, storytelling to adults by adults (Zipes, 2007: 2). They are an expression of the values, norms and beliefs of the narrator's world (Zipes, 2007: 2). Between the lines of the tale, the narrative sets the communally accepted social boundaries which fulfil the "civilising aspirations of adults" (Bacchilega, 1997:5). This article will analyse "The Little Mermaid", the nineteenth century story by Hans Christian Andersen, focusing in particular on its construction of ideal gender roles. It will also analyse two adaptations of the story, Walt Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and Louise O'Neill's *The Surface Breaks* (2018) focusing on how the texts conform to or resist the techniques used to construct idealised gender roles. Each of the case studies follows a similar plotline and setting, but the attitudes of the characters are reflections of the cultural contexts at the time of their production. This article will look at the extent to which the representation of women has changed over time, from Andersen's original religious morals, to Disney's sexist patriarchal values and finally O'Neill's feminist perspective. It will argue that situating these three texts in an intercultural conversation with each other allows us to analyse evolving ideas about hegemonic gender roles.

Function of Fairy Tales

A fairy tale can be classified under the genre of the myth. A myth is any text that communicates a message to its audience: "the social concepts and attitudes determined by the history

*Aisling Hoey is a recent graduate of Dundalk Institute of Technology with a first-class honours in her BA. Her two subject areas are English and Politics. Her main research interests include Irish Literature, Cultural Studies and Feminism. She is currently studying a postgrad Professional Master of Education in Dublin City University to achieve a teacher education qualification.

[1] This article was previously submitted to Dundalk Institute of Technology in partial fulfilment of coursework.

and institutions of a society are communicated to society through myths" (Wright, 1977: 117). Therefore, fairy tales carry a social meaning, the characters in the narrative represent society: "social types acting out a drama of social order" (Wright, 1977: 118). The world presented in the tale is structured through binary oppositions, for example good vs evil or rich vs poor. The conflicts that occur between the characters are not individual confrontations but conflicts of social principals. The binaries are clear, depending on "simple and recognisable meanings which reinforce rather than challenge social understanding" (Wright, 1977: 118-9). Myths thus communicate social values, distinguishing between what is and what is not socially acceptable. While it is difficult to establish when exactly the first fairy tale originated, it is largely accepted that the tales are based upon ancient oral tales, stories that "came directly from common experiences and beliefs" (Zipes, 1999: 334). They were "didactic, moralistic and sexist" with a role or "basic function to instruct" (Zipes, 1988: 18).

Femininity in Fairy Tales

Of interest to this article is the use of binary oppositions in myths to promote ideal femininity. In its opposition of its two main female characters, the Little Mermaid and the Sea Witch, "The Little Mermaid" makes it clear to the reader which elements of femininity are valued such as docility, virtue, grace and which are criticized like curiosity, independence and passion. There are consistent representations of femininity found in a majority of fairy tales. For example, women's feet were fetishized and regarded as "a most exquisite expression of femininity" (Kawamura, 2016: 118). This is reflected in "Cinderella", in which her small foot and glass slipper were emphasised as a symbol of her femininity, highlighting her "inborn beauty, grace and morality" (Kawamura, 2016: 118).

Given the emphasis on the narrow conceptions of femininity promoted in fairy tales, it is not surprising that since the twentieth century, feminist groups have been the chief critics of the fairy tale genre, condemning tales as a source of sexism in society. Feminist writers have re-written classic stories, producing "non-sexist" versions for both adults and children, an interesting example of how an intercultural conversation can insert a contemporary perspective in a traditional text. A key concern of feminists is the construction of gender roles which strongly suggest chauvinistic values. The tales compose a "script" of how each gender should behave, establishing "positions to occupy" as male and female members of society (Parsons, 2004: 136). Fairy tales are produced through the dominant patriarchal discourse, the gender roles stemming from a male-oriented society. Society prepares women from a young age to serve the patriarchy, the focus of gender construction to "prepare young girls for romantic love and heterosexual practices" to ensure women are aware that their "value lies in men's desire for them" (Parsons, 2004: 136). Linda T. Parsons (2004) illustrates a clear binary opposition between male and female characters in fairy tales. She describes the typical female heroine as "weak, submissive, dependant and self-sacrificing" and places her in contrast to the "powerful active and dominant male" (Parsons, 2004: 137).

Fairy tales communicate a message that women must endure suffering before being rewarded with marriage. The sequence of intense distress, becoming beautiful and anticipated rescuing from a handsome prince is synonymous with classic fairy tales (Parsons, 2004:137). With marriage the "happily ever after" is achieved, there is nothing else to accomplish and so the tale ends (Lieberman, 1972:394). Marriage is the greatest accolade a woman could achieve and so is valued over her own personal character growth: "after marriage she ceases to be wooed, her consent is no longer sought, she derives her status from her husband, and her personal identity is snuffed out" (Lieberman, 1972:394). In her book, *Fairy tales, Myth and Psychoanalytic Theory, Feminism and Retelling the Tale* Veronica Schanoes speaks broadly on other classic fairy tale tropes such as the lack of positive mother-daughter relationships in tales such as Cinderella and Snow White.

The Ideal Woman

Fairy tales suggest to women that beauty is the key to their success, as beauty reaps rewards. In an analysis of over three hundred fairy tales, 94% of tales were found to refer to physical appearance (Lieberman, 1972: 383-386). The women in fairy tales are frequently described as attractive "beautiful, pretty, fair", this image of beauty is also linked to being "white, economically privileged and virtuous" (Sperry and Grauerholz, 2003: 722). Fairy tale princesses are also often

associated with long "tumbling tresses" of hair, heroines "long-haired but short-witted" (Warner, 1995:363). Blondeness is almost exclusively feminine, suggesting "sweetness, charm and youthfulness" (Warner, 1995:363). This ideal of fair and golden has formed a value system within the fairy tale genre that feeds into a feminine ideal of how a woman should look.

In contrast to the beautiful female is the powerful, evil, ugly protagonist. Feminist critics often comment on how a woman of power is portrayed in fairy tales, how it is implied that it is: "not natural for a woman to be active or powerful" (Parsons, 2004: 138). These women are described as monstrous and are almost always not human, characterized as "fairies, witches, trolls and ogresses" (Lieberman, 1972: 391). They are not the stereotypical woman, they are unmarried, childless, power hungry and this is viewed as "unwomanly" (Lieberman, 1972: 392). Their "extreme ugliness" is linked to their "female wickedness" and power cravings, for example the stepsisters in "Cinderella" or evil queen in "The Yellow Dwarf" (Lieberman, 1972: 392). Gilbert and Gubar describe how women were cast out by society for not conforming to the typical gender roles as "women are warned that if they do not behave like angels, they must be monsters" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979: 26). Lieberman suggests that this can communicate a bias in young readers against the strong powerful woman as these women are portrayed as unlovable or 'repulsive' (Lieberman, 1972:393). Schaones (2014) comments on the nature of evil female characters in relation to the representation of mother- daughter relationships in popular fairy tales. She mentions how there is a lack of positive mother-daughter relationships within popular fairy tales such as Cinderella, Snow White and Rapunzel with evil step-mothers and *The Little Mermaid*'s Ariel notably absent mother figure (Schaones, 2014: 16). Feminist writers such as Adrianne Rich wanted to transform the mother-daughter bond to a positive, breaking the 'taboo' of women against women (Schaones, 2014: 16).

Hans Christian Andersen "The Little Mermaid" (1837)

This section of the article will examine the ways in which "The Little Mermaid" by Hans Christian Andersen promotes ideals of feminine beauty as illustrated above. It will argue that the twentieth century Disney film adaptation reinforces these ideals reflecting a stereotypical over-sexualised female and heroic male. It will conclude by examining the feminist re-imagining by Louise O'Neill in order to see how the feminine ideal and stereotypical gender roles are challenged in the twenty-first century.

Hans Christian Andersen was a Danish author born in 1805. His body of work includes plays, poetry and novels but is best known now for his literary fairy tales (Lawrence, 2019: 1). His first published book featured just four tales among which include "The Princess and the Pea" and "Thumbelina" (Altmann and de Vos, 2001: 141). He eventually added more tales to the collection reaching a total of twenty-five and this was his most popular volume of work, appreciated by children and adults alike: "keeping in mind the fact that mother and father are often listening too, and they must have a little something for thought" (Altmann and de Vos, 2001: 141).

A distinctive feature of Andersen's tales was the omission of a happy ending. He strays away from the traditional "happy ever after" concept instead writing tales of "sorrow, misery and even tragedy in his tales, and even the more comforting endings have a sinister background" (de Mylius, 2006: 170). As a Danish Christian, it is suggested that Andersen was strongly influenced by religion. Pietism was a movement of the nineteenth century, its followers placing great emphasis on "the eternal" and believed that life is "a road to heaven for the faithful" (Altmann and de Vos, 2001: 143). Andersen's religious beliefs were reflected in his stories. He romanticised death, upheld good faith and praised "the beauty and goodness of God's creation" (Altmann and de Vos, 2001: 143).

"The Little Mermaid" follows the story of an unnamed sea princess as she discovers life above the surface. She saves and falls in love with a human prince and is willing to sacrifice her life as she knows it for his love and an immortal soul. She risks everything, her home, her family and even her own body, cutting off her tongue and trading her fish tail for human legs which only offer her silence and pain for the love of the prince: "I would place the happiness of my life. I would risk everything to win him" (Andersen, 1837: 17). Her love is unrequited and so the Little Mermaid dies, turning to foam and ascending to the "world of spirits of the air" where she can "through good deeds, create an immortal soul for yourself after three hundred years" (Andersen, 1837: 31).

"The Little Mermaid" ticks the boxes of a classic fairy tale- feminine ideals of behaviour and beauty, suffering and sacrifice but interestingly this tale is focused on religion and morals rather than romance and gender roles. The story is peppered with religious motifs, but the key message explores Christian morality, the belief that if one practises goodness and kindness in this life they shall be rewarded in heaven. In fact, this is a common theme in Anderson's stories: "compared with the Grimm tales, they have the virtues and defects of conscious literary art. To begin with they tend to be a parable rather than a myth" (Altmann and de Vos, 2001: 42). The Little Mermaid is not searching for love, her goal is to obtain an immortal soul. Her gateway to immortality is through the Prince and so she commits herself to him: "I would risk everything to win him and an immortal soul" (Andersen, 1837: 17).

The Little Mermaid's suffering is not for love but was instead an offering of self-sacrifice to achieve an eternal life. As the Prince was never in love with the Little Mermaid, "he loved her as you might love a good dear child, but to make her his queen did not cross his mind at all", it is difficult to refer to the tale as a love story (Andersen, 1837: 24). This is also reflected by the Little Mermaid's thoughts when she realises she cannot win over the prince. She is not upset that he does not love her, her heart only longs for "human happiness and an immortal soul" (Andersen, 1837: 25). Acts of sacrifice are instrumental to Christian faith and can be compared to the sacrifices made by the Little Mermaid. She approaches the Sea Witch to trade her fish tail for legs "two stumps to walk upon" (Andersen, 1837: 18). Her swap comes at a price as each step she takes "will feel as if you stepped on a sharp knife so your blood will flow" (Andersen, 1837:19). Along with this, she must give up "the best thing you possess", her beautiful singing voice. The Sea Witch honours the Little Mermaid's desires and "cuts off the tongue of the Little Mermaid", afterwards she must drink the blood of the Sea Witch, "a strong fiery drink", and the deal is done (Andersen, 1837: 20-21). These acts have religious connotations as bread and wine represents the sacrifice of the body and blood of Christ.

At the end of the story, her sisters arrive to shore without their "long beautiful hair" and present the Little Mermaid with one final option. They give her a knife to "plunge into the Prince's heart" so that his "warm blood" can turn her human legs back into a tail and she can return to the sea (Andersen, 1837:28). The good nature of the Little Mermaid is documented throughout the story and so she simply cannot commit to killing the prince. The Little Mermaid then finds herself rising "to the Daughters of the Air" a place one might compare to purgatory. She is now rewarded for her selflessness: "now you can through good deeds, create an immortal soul for yourself after three hundred years" (Andersen, 1837:31). Andersen is directing a clear moral message to his audience, emphasising the importance of living a peaceful and virtuous life, principles like those ascribed to Christianity. Romance is present in the tale through the Prince and his bride but their love is not central to the overall message and therefore is not emphasised.

Regardless of Andersen's prominent use of religious themes, he still plugs into the typical tropes of ideal feminine beauty as other classic fairy tales do. The Little Mermaid has "long flowing hair" and "her skin was as clear as opalescent as a rose petal" and eyes "as blue as the deepest sea" (Andersen, 1837: 2-18). Her body was perfect, a "luscious figure" with "graceful gait" (Andersen, 1837: 20). The Little Mermaid is illustrative of how good looks are tantamount to good behaviour. She is depicted as "quiet and thoughtful" with a talent for singing: "the most beautiful voice of anyone on the earth or in the sea" (Andersen, 1837: 16). She is not as meek as other female heroines, she is inquisitive about the human world and shows bravery by saving the Prince from the shipwreck. However, these characteristics are overshadowed by the fact she is rewarded for her kind nature and altruism not for her courage. Although the Little Mermaid's beauty and grace does not influence her fate, her looks are coherent to the ideal standards of beauty.

This feminine ideal is further characterized by the Sea Witch. She shows no feminine qualities in mind or body and so her character is powerful and beastly. She has a fuller figure as she lets the hideous fat water snakes "slither all over her large spongy breasts". She laughs "so loudly and so hideously" (Andersen, 1837: 17-18). She wants a personal gain for helping the little mermaid, silencing her by cutting off her tongue: "stick out your little tongue so I can cut it off in payment, and you shall have the potent drink" (Andersen, 1837: 18). Anderson gives no explanation as to how or why the Sea Witch is like this, but it could be suggested that she is an outcast. Her only interaction with others is when mermaids seek her help. Andersen's contrasting female characters are illustrative of feminine ideals of the nineteenth century. Even though the Little Mermaid and Sea Witch are not

directly pitted against one another, they subtly highlight the expectations and roles of women. A woman like the Little Mermaid who is thin, long-haired, pale with a quiet personality is romanticised, a role model. Alternatively, a woman like the sea witch who is obese, powerful and loud is feared and ostracised.

Walt Disney- The Little Mermaid (1989)

The second case study is Walt Disney's 1989 animated adaption of the same name *The Little Mermaid.* The film was hugely successful, grossing millions, winning two Academy Awards. *The Little Mermaid* joins a host of other fairy tale adaptions such as *Snow White, Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast* in what is known as the "Disney Princess Line"- a franchise of films and products marketed towards young girls (England *et al,* 2011: 555).

Disney films are notorious for their "happy ever after" endings. Filled with colour, music and nature Disney films are fuel for your wildest dreams: "a pristine never ever land in which children's fantasies come true, happiness reigns, and innocence is kept safe through the magic of pixie dust" (Giroux and Pollock, 2010:17). Like classic fairy tales, each of the Disney Princess films follows a similar structure: "a central female character, the princess and a male character which is romantically linked with the Princess" (England et al, 2011: 556). *The Little Mermaid* film strays away completely from any religious motifs focusing on the romantic love story between Ariel and Prince Eric. Disney had aimed to represent a new era of active women with a "need for individuality and the desire for independence from the constraints of society" through the characterisation of Ariel, but the movie was widely criticised for feeding the "core patriarchal family values on which the Disney studios based all their products" (Altmann and de Vos, 2001: 194). If we examine the film in detail, we can see the confusing "feminist" ideology reflected through the characters and final scene. The film supports patriarchal values and adheres to the repressing feminine ideals of the twentieth century.

In the beginning Ariel is a feisty, rebellious character, motivated by her curiosity about the human world. She is brave and inquisitive, exploring shipwrecks and escaping sharks. She dreams of life above the surface, a land where "bright young women" are "ready to stand" (Disney, 1989). This suggests that under the sea Ariel feels repressed, unable to fulfil her potential. The Kingdom in which Ariel lives is under strict patriarchal rule by her father: "as long as you live under my ocean, you'll obey my rules" (Disney, 1989). Her lust for life changes when she saves Eric from a shipwreck and she becomes fascinated with winning his heart. She is headstrong, but instead of her happiness stemming from adventure and self-discovery, it is now dependant on love and marriage. She is just sixteen years old and yet has committed herself to Eric from the moment she seen him. The ideal role for a woman is to be a wife and love is won by a simple kiss: "you've got to get ol' princey boy to fall in love with you. That is, he's got to kiss you" (Disney, 1989). The lack of opportunity for Ariel stresses the importance of marriage: "a telling cultural model for the values and choices presented to women in Disney's worldview" (Giroux and Pollock, 2010: 100).

Ideals of femininity are reflected through Ariel's suffering and sacrifices. She, like the original Little Mermaid, sacrifices her "most beautiful voice" and her fish tail for a pair of human legs (Disney, 1989). She has three days to win the Prince's love or she will be turned back into a mermaid and belong to Ursula. When Ariel questions how she can win the Prince's voice if she cannot speak, Ursula tells her that men prefer a quieter girl: "it's much preferred for ladies not to say a word" (Disney, 1989). Ursula implies that a woman should be seen and not heard: "you'll have your looks! Your pretty face! And don't underestimate the importance of body language" (Disney, 1989). This implies that women are only valued on their appearance and not for their own thoughts or voice.

Ariel who is good-hearted, innocent and beautiful is contrasted with the devious, vulgar and repulsive Ursula. She is white and has big blue eyes and long red hair that flows loosely below her waist. She is thin, her stomach is completely exposed attracting attention to her tiny shell bra which covers her chest. Ironically, the colours of Ariel's outfit "purple and green", are those used to represent the British Suffragettes, although this may be coincidental (Do Rozario, 2004: 49). Ursula is at the other end of the binary, the undesirable woman. She is referred to as "a demon" and "a monster" for her looks and her magic abilities. She craves power and targets Ariel throughout the film to gain power of the Kingdom. She appears masculine, she is deep voiced and full figured. She wears

heavy dramatic makeup, red lips and a black dress. She is not a stereotypical woman and is rejected by the mer-people.

The final scene confirms how feminine ideals are still at the forefront of fairy tales. Although Ariel is instrumental in fighting off Ursula, it is Eric who kills her with a phallic mast. He saves Ariel from becoming owned by Ursula. It is also significant to note that Ariel is only given the chance to live on shore with Eric after her father turns her into a human forever. Regardless of her completing her quest and fighting against evil, her fate is still reliant on a male. As the credits rise Ariel sings how she can now be "part of your world" having achieved her goal, her "wish to be part of the world of men" (Giroux and Pollock, 2010: 105).

The film reflects a patriarchal, social perspective on women. While both Ariel and Ursula can be classed as strong characters, they are still confined to stereotypical gender roles. Their strength is undermined by Eric who saves the day. The film uses similar techniques as Andersen to construct idealized gender roles, although Disney emphasises beauty, hyper-sexualising Ariel. This is reflective of the objectifying representation of women in the 1980s and the backlash against women's sexual liberation. The film reinforces the fairy tale female narrative of upholding beauty, suffering and sacrifice and finding fulfilment in marriage. Although Ariel is rebellious and active in her courtship to Eric, she is still inferior and dependant on him. The film demonises Ursula for refusing to conform to the conventional female role, for living independently and seeking power in a male dominated society. As Gilbert and Gubar note, Ursula was a "monster" and so she had to be contained (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979: 29). She is a threat that must be destroyed, as Eric does symbolically with a phallic mast.

Louise O'Neill-Breaking The Surface (2018)

The final case study is Louise O'Neill's *Breaking the Surface* (2018). O'Neill is an Irish writer, born in West Cork in 1985. She has published four novels along with freelance writing for numerous Irish national newspapers and magazines. Her writing is aimed particularly at young adults covering topics on pop culture, romance and feminism. In her essay "My Journey to Feminism", she explains when and how she became interested in feminism, saying that growing up she found herself "buying into the patriarchy" and "internalising all of that misogyny" (O'Neill, 2015). O'Neill felt that as a society, we uphold women to a "higher moral standard" and expect them to be "good girls" (O'Neill, 2015: 120). Through her writing she wanted to make a change to "open up a conversation about how we see and treat women" (O'Neill, 2015: 125). She envisions feminism as a world free of stereotypes: "where we are all free to be ourselves without recrimination for failing to conform to a certain idea of what masculinity or femininity represents" (O'Neill, 2015: 120). She is best known for the controversial *Asking for It* (2015), which challenged date rape culture and the brutal treatment of victims of sexual assault by the media and judicial systems. This novel placed O'Neill firmly at the fore of young Irish women writers challenging the patriarchy.

O'Neill was approached to rewrite "The Little Mermaid" by publishing group Scholastic. She called the tale "ripe for a feminist re-telling", as it was deeply problematic (McDonnell, 2018). She stressed the importance of reshaping the narrative, to show children they can "feel free to be who they truly are rather than trying to conform to some limiting idea of what femininity or masculinity should look like" (Whitehead, 2019). Her writing is part of a larger context of feminist re-tellings of fairy tales. In the 1970s, throughout the height of British Second Wave Feminism, Angela Carter published a series of feminist fairy tales in *The Bloody Chamber.* Like O'Neill, Carter's writing was based upon addressing representations of women: "contemplating the fate of good, powerless girls, the Red Riding Hoods and Sleeping Beauties of the world" (Sage, 1998: 54). She too was interested in challenging the messages in fairy tales, describing herself as in the "demythologising business" because myths and tales "are extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree" (Sage, 1998: 66).

The Surface Breaks follows the journey of mermaid Muirgen (or Gaia, as she prefers), from sea to the surface. Just like the original, she saves and falls in love with a rich human boy Oliver and sacrifices her home, body, and family to win his love. What differentiates O'Neill's tale from the past editions is her commentary on the mermaid's choices. The tale is a parody of the original, exposing the damaging messages to women communicated by fairy tales and highlighting the treatment of women in a patriarchal society. Muirgen finds her "happily ever after" not from finding love with a

man, instead by finding love for herself. The story documents her growth to becoming free, to understanding what it means to truly be a woman, fighting against the patriarchy.

From the first lines of O'Neill's novel, Muirgen is an inquisitive, headstrong yet trapped character. She asks questions about the human world, asking repeatedly "when will I be ready" to swim to surface only to be shut down by her grandmother "for her own good" (O'Neill, 2018: 1). We are told she has never been given the opportunity to express herself: "I have never been allowed to talk much", as her father "doesn't care for curious girls" (O'Neill, 2018:1). The sea is under rigorous patriarchal rule by the Sea King, whose misogynous values silence his daughters. The oppression of women is obvious when grandmother explains to Muirgen that it "does not do a woman good to ask too many questions" or "to want much either" (O'Neill, 2018: 6). Warhol and Herndl write how "women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view and to accept as normal a male system of values" (Warhol and Herndl, 2010: 618). O'Neill expresses the limitations that are set upon women, how there is no room for female opinion or expression. Muirgen explains that her father "will not stand for female insubordination" and that he "'cannot be denied" (O'Neill, 2018: 14-22).

O'Neill creates a binary of acceptable and unacceptable feminine ideals throughout the novel. If we examine Muirgen, we can see she conforms to the beauty ideal. She has long red hair and blue eyes, "the fairest of them all" (O'Neill, 2018: 4). As Muirgen's soon to be husband Zale explains, she was selected for marriage because her "beauty is unrivalled and therefore you are the correct choice for a man like me" (O'Neill, 2018:80). Muirgen detests Zale, who "makes my skin crawl", but she must accept her betrothed because she is a girl and should be married for alliance: "I shall be passed from one man to the next… and I will be expected to smile as the deal is done" (O'Neill, 2018: 64). Through Muirgen, O'Neill paints an image of how society expects women to look, but also highlights how society has taught women to behave. Women are taught to be quiet "because we were promised that we would be happy this way" (O'Neill, 2018: 288). They are told they do not need an education because our husbands would do our thinking for us" (O'Neill, 2018: 258). Women who are unable or refuse to conform to the hegemonic ideals of femininity are branded "fallen women", the outcasts "whose bodies were hatched misshapen, maids who did not adhere to the standards of beauty my father prefers, those who were sterile or barren" (O'Neill, 2018: 102). The Sea King is threatened by these women because they resist his control, disgusted at the suggestion that a woman like the Sea Witch, Ceto, could have more power than him: "surely you weren't suggesting that the old hag has abilities akin to my own?'" (O'Neill, 2018: 61).

Like Ursula, Ceto is representative of the unconforming woman. She is much larger in figure: "skin pale and so much of it-rolling into ruffs of flesh around her neck, spooling around her waist" (O'Neill, 2018: 112). She is feared because she is powerful, a negative connotation for a female: "being powerful is mainly associated with being unwomanly" (Zipes, 2012: 197). O'Neill confronts the use of patriarchal language to silence women and marginalize any dissenting voices. She deconstructs the label of "witch", which has traditionally been used for the undesirable female, describing it as "simply a term that men give to women who are not afraid of them, women who refuse to do as they are told" (O'Neill, 2018: 115). Ceto is a feminist woman, she is happy in her own skin, valuing her "own opinion over those of men" (O'Neill, 2018: 119). She calls out the patriarchy for its oppression of women, for placing labels on women and pushing "their desires" upon them (O'Neill, 2018:119). Women are outcast for being different or when they cannot fulfil their expected role of "mother or sirens and therefore of no use to anyone" (O'Neill, 2018: 120). This representation of the older female is noticeably different to Disney's where Ursula is evil and conniving from the start, using Ariel as a pawn to get to the throne. Instead, Ceto is a figure of female empowerment, paving her own path and living by her own rules.

O'Neill's mermaid follows tradition and undergoes a period of suffering and sacrifice to achieve what she believes is her romantic destiny. What is different is that she seems to be aware from the start that while her sacrifice may appear to be for love it is really for acceptance. Similar to Ariel, Muirgen gives up all that is familiar to her: "I have given up my family, my home, my identity. I have mutilated my body, carving it into something unrecognizable, just so he will find me beautiful. Not even beautiful but acceptable" (O'Neill, 2018: 274). This scene is one of the most important in the novel, as it emphasizes how women are valued by society, but also how society has taught women to value themselves. When Muirgen realises she must rely on her appearance, she realises the mistake

she has made. She has underestimated the power of her own voice and quickly learns that the attributes society values her on, are useless to her.

Muirgen sees Oliver as her saviour, her opportunity to live a happy life: "when he is in love with me, I will be safe" (O'Neill, 2018: 157). She begins to reflect on how oppressive her life was in the sea. She would frequently go hungry: "the denial of our appetites a sign of our goodness" and supress her sexual desires: "impure thoughts, my grandmother would have said, those are not for good girls" (O'Neill, 2018:159). She discovers what it is like to want affection after Oliver kisses her: "I did not know such ecstasy could exist for women" (O'Neill, 2018: 175). However, Muirgen soon realises that the human world is not all that different. She is still valued on her appearance: "such a perfect face and perfect body. You are so lucky" (O'Neill, 2018: 229). The men still objectify women: "girls' beauty will be determined by their opinions rather than objective fact, because they are men and a man's word is final" (O'Neill, 2018: 246). Oliver is not the heroic Prince Charming she expected but rather an emotionally unavailable, arrogant man. He praises her beauty and poise but is not in love with her. His rejection strengthens her, Muirgen realises she has been chasing an unattainable dream, hurting herself to "make the narrative of true love and destiny fit" (O'Neill, 2018: 250). She critiques the inequalities of men and women: "girls have been trained to laugh at boys' jokes rather than make any of their own" (O'Neill, 2018: 251). She acknowledges her mistake in giving up her voice as "if I cannot speak I suddenly realize that I can change nothing" (O'Neill, 2018: 208).

Although she has failed in finding love with Oliver, she has succeeded in finding love for herself. She realises that a woman's power does not lie in her beauty but instead comes from within. At a boat party, Oliver is seduced by Flora, who is actually Ceto in a human disguise. While she is beautiful, O'Neill emphasises Flora's other worthy qualities: "wit and her intelligence, her ability to challenge him, to make him laugh" (O'Neill, 2018: 279). Muirgen sees that the qualities she has been told to repress, her strong opinions, intelligence and humour should be admired. Muirgen shows her bravery when Rupert, Oliver's friend, tries to take advantage of her. He calls her a "tease" for rebuffing his advances as he forces himself on her (O'Neill, 2018: 261). She hears the voices of the Rusalka's in her head, encouraging her to push Rupert overboard into their arms, killing him.

Ceto shows her that she can be a woman and have power, that there is no shame in being different, in being free: "who are you free to be now" (O'Neill, 2018: 295). When the final storm brews, she exercises her newfound autonomy and speaks out against her father, the embodiment of the patriarchy and says how she wants to live truly: "to be whatever I want to be" (O'Neill, 2018: 309). Instead of using the knife her sisters have given her to kill Oliver she decides to use it on herself, transforming herself into a Rusalka, one of the "fallen women". She recognises her inner strength and encourages her sisters to "remember how powerful you are. Never allow anyone to take that away from you" (O'Neill, 2018: 308). Her final words condemn the patriarchy, as she explains she will "flay the skin from the bones of men like my father and eat them raw" and claims she "will have my vengeance" (O'Neill, 2018: 309).

O'Neill is communicating an empowering message to her audience through the feminist twists she inserts into the traditional fairy tale. She sends the message that girls do not need to live up to the constructed feminine ideal to find happiness. She stresses the inequalities that exist between both men and women and between women themselves. She critiques the unattainable beauty standards and illustrates that women can be powerful and happy outside of the beauty mould. The novel illustrates that ideals of femininity are still evident in contemporary society, but instead of being passively accepted they are challenged and present more than one type of woman. Like Angela Carter, O'Neill dismantles the traditional stereotypes communicated in popular fairy tales revealing the hidden inequalities they promoted.

Conclusion

The research above presents a comprehensive analysis of three versions of "The Little Mermaid", placing them in conversation with each other to reveal the evolving ideals of femininity they promote to their respective audiences. The aim of the research was to analyse the extent to which fairy tales reflect hegemonic gender roles, focusing on the representation of the ideal female. From the evidence above, we understand fairy tales play a key function in communicating messages about

socially appropriate behaviour. They create a binary, a contrast of social expectations in terms of looks, behaviours and fortune. They promote consistent standards of beauty, the pale, thin, long haired woman is always the most desired. This, along with a passive, obedient nature constitutes the perfect woman. She should be domesticated and want for nothing as her greatest achievement is found in marriage to a man. A particular pattern is noted amongst each of the women featured in fairy tales. The female protagonist always attains a specific standard of beauty and undergoes a period of immense suffering and sacrifice to attain happiness. It is also worth mentioning how fairy tales communicate largely negative female relationships with one another, specifically looking at unhealthy, evil maternal figures. This article aims to open conversations regarding women in fairy tales, discussing how female characters are represented in both past and present literature.

This article focused on two female protagonists of the text to analyse how it has represented the feminine ideal through its constructed gender roles. The original "The Little Mermaid" is focused on religious virtues, clearly echoing the Christian values of its author. Although his narrative is not centred on gender roles, the Little Mermaid is still the conventional feminine ideal. She is beautiful, fair and good natured. She is not motivated by male affection or rewarded with marriage but still suffers and makes sacrifices to achieve fulfilment. Disney reinvents the fairy tale to suit a contemporary audience but still reinforces the stereotypical fairy tale ideals. Although initially a rebellious, feisty, relatable teenager, Ariel still conforms to patriarchal values of looking pretty and winning the prince. She becomes consumed by a romance with Eric, convinced that he is her source of happiness. In both texts the mermaid is contrasted with a Sea Witch. Andersen's witch is not evil, as she is in Disney's adaption, but she is the opposite of what is expected of a female character as she is older, fuller figured and living alone. She is made an exemplar of what happens when women do not live as they should, refusing to conform to societal values. Such texts send a problematic message to their audiences, pigeonholing women into rigid beauty categories and limiting their aspirations. O'Neill's *Breaking the Surface* highlights these problematic issues by confronting the traditional conventions and challenging the roles of the characters. A self-proclaimed feminist O'Neill creates a female character with ambition and hunger for life, questioning the inequalities between men and women. She proves that the fairy tale "happily ever after" of marriage to a Prince Charming is not fulfilling, that male partnership does not equal happiness. Of the three protagonists, Muirgen is the only one to find true happiness and strength within herself. O'Neill's depiction of Muirgen's journey to self-awareness, as well as her more nuanced representation of the sea witch, effectively dismantles the taken-for-granted gender binary central to many fairy tales. By engaging in an intercultural conversation with this well-known and traditional tale, O'Neill facilitates its deconstruction and encourages contemporary readers to resist the hegemonic perspectives on femininity promoted in earlier versions. With this is mind, it could then be concluded that femininity has evolved over time. We are now beginning break down the walls of the idealised woman and normalise different shapes, sizes and statuses of women and in turn produces a much more positive and equal depiction of women its reader.

Works Cited

Altmann, A. E., de Vos, G. 2001. *Tales, Then and Now: More Folktales as Literary Fictions For Young Adults*. Colorado: Libraries Unlimited.
Anderson, C. H. 1837. *The Little Mermaid*. Denmark: C.A. Reitzel. Translated by R.L. Lawrence. Blackdown Publications:USA.
Bacchilega, C. 1997. *Postmodern Fairy Tales Gender and Narrative Strategies*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania.
De Mylius, J. 2006. ''Our time is the time of the fairy tale": Hans Christian Andersen between Traditional Craft and Literary Modernism'. In *Marvels&Tales,* 20, 2, 166-178.
Do Rozario, R. 2004. "The Princess and the Magic Kingdom: Beyond Nostalgia, the Function of the Disney Princess". In *Women's Studies in Communication,* 27, 1, 3, 4-59.
England et al. 2011. "Gender Role Portrayal and The Role of Disney Princesses". In *Sex Roles.* 64,7, 555-567.
Gilbert, S., Gubar, S. 1979. *The Madwoman in the Attic.* Yale University Press: New Haven.
Giroux, H.A. and Pollock, G. 2010. *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence.* Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc: United Kingdom.
Kawamura, Y. 2016. *Sneakers Fashion, Gender and Subculture.* Bloomsbury Publishing: London.
Lawrence, R. L. 2019. *The Little Mermaid: The Classic Danish Fairytale.* Blackdown Publications: USA.
Lieberman, M. 1972. "'Some Day My Prince Will Come': Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale". In *College English*, 34, 3, 383–395.
McDonnell, M. 2018. "Finding her voice- an interview with Louise O'Neill'. In *Cinders Magazine* [online] available: https://cindersmagazine.com/2018/05/11/finding-her-voice-an-interview-with-louise-oneill/ [accessed April 2020].
O'Neill, L. 2015. "My Journey to Feminism". In Pepe. V. *I Call Myself A Feminist: The View from Twenty-Five Women Under Thirty.* Hachette: United Kingdom.
O'Neill, L. 2018. *Breaking the Surface*. United Kingdom: Scholastic Ltd.
Parsons, T. 2004. "Ella Evolving: Cinderella Stories and the Construction of Gender Appropriate Behavior". In *Children's Literature in Education*. 35, 2, 135-154.
Sage, L. 1998. "Angela Carter: The Fairy Tale". In *Marvels & Tales.* 12, 1, 52-69.
Sperry and Grauerholz. 2003. "The Pervasiveness and Persistence of the Feminine Beauty Ideal in Children's Fairy Tales". In *Gender and Society*. 17, 5, 711-726.
Schanoes, V.L. 2014. *Fairy Tales, Myth, and Psychoanalytic Theory: Feminism and Retelling the Tale*. England: Ashgate Publishing.
The Little Mermaid. 1989. Directed by Ron Clements and John Musker. Burbank: Walt Disney Company.
Warhol and Herndl. 2010. *Feminisms an Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.
Warner, M. 1995. *From The Beast to the Blonde*. Great Britain: Vintage.
Whitehead, S. 2019. '"I wanted to highlight how dangerous it is for any woman to give up her voice": an interview with Louise O'Neill'. In *The F Word* [online] available: https://thefword.org.uk/2019/05/i-wanted-to-highlight-how-dangerous-it-is-for-any-woman-to-give-up-her-voice-an-interview-with-louise-oneill/ [accessed April 2020].
Wright, W. 1977. *Six Guns and Society A Structural Study of the Western.* University Press California: California.
Zipes, J, 2012. *Don't Bet on the Prince.* New York: Routledge.
Zipes, J. 1988. "The Changing Function of the Fairy Tale". In *The Lion and The Unicorn,* 12, 2, 7-31.
Zipes, J. 1999. "Breaking the Disney Spell" [online] available: https://jtbarbarese.camden.rutgers.edu/files/2013/05/Zipes_Breaking-the-Disney-Spell.pdf [accessed February 2020].
Zipes, J. 2006. "Critical Reflections about Hans Christian Andersen, the Failed Revolutionary". In *Marvels and Tales*, 20, 2, 224-237.
Zipes, J. 2007. *When Dreams Come True: Classical Fairy Tales and Their Tradition*. New York: Routledge.