

What 'The Little Mermaid' Really Teaches About Unrequited Love

Ah, unrequited love! It's the bane of any young daydreamer.

The Little Mermaid is a great story that teaches how to deal with such sorrowful heartbreak: accept reality and abandon selfish schemes.

Perhaps you're thinking: "Wait. That's not what happens in the Disney movie!"

In remembering *The Little Mermaid* from our childhood and anticipating Disney's release of a new version, perhaps it's time to revisit the original Hans Christian Andersen story.

Response to Unrequited Love

Unlike Disney's Ariel, who gleefully collects a treasure-trove of human artifacts with her fish-friend Flounder, Andersen's Little Mermaid cares for only one artifact: a statue of a handsome young prince. On her first adventure to the surface of the ocean, she sees him as a young man on a boat in a terrible storm.

After the Little Mermaid saves the prince from drowning, she shyly disappears from his sight before he awakens on the beach. Unbeknownst to the mermaid, he falls in love with the young maiden who finds him there.

Thus begins her adventure with unrequited love.

Smitten with the prince, the Little Mermaid visits the sorceress. She agrees to help the mermaid turn into a human who could meet and marry the prince. There's one condition: if he marries another, then the mermaid will die that night.

Even after she is successful in befriending the prince, he

still marries the maiden.

The Little Mermaid's five sisters appear the night of the prince's wedding. With their lovely locks cut and sold to the sorceress, they present the Little Mermaid with a magic knife to kill the prince and release herself from the consequences of her own unfortunate bargain.

She enters the wedding tent with knife in hand. But she cannot bring herself to kill him because she recognizes their mutual love.

Instead she accepts her fate to die. She tosses the knife back into the ocean and returns to the water expecting to turn to sea foam.

She unexpectedly finds herself among the children of the air. Her good deed of sparing the prince granted her the gift of an immortal soul – which mermaids typically do not have. For the first 300 years as an immortal spirit, she will accompany the children of the air in bringing pleasant weather and doing other good things for human beings on earth.

In Disney's version, Ursula uses her magic to appear as a beautiful human princess and entrap Prince Eric in a love curse. Eventually Ursula's disguise is revealed. She escapes, kidnapping Ariel with her. Eric plays an important role in the demise of Ursula. Then, the marriage between himself and Ariel begins a perfect happily ever after ending.

Disney's Little Mermaid story revolves around Ariel's possessive desire for Prince Eric and how others *must* conform to her will. In the Disney version, unrequited love is an impediment to individual happiness.

The Sorceress: Consuming Self-Love

We don't necessarily need to look at the Disney version to see this contrast. Andersen's story provides it through the character of the sorceress and the description of her cave lair.

The sorceress decorates her home with the skeletal remains of drowned human beings. She surrounds herself with relics of destruction – and her business profits by enticing others to harm themselves.

The sorceress takes the Little Mermaid's voice by cutting off her tongue and giving her a draught to drink when she arrives on land. And the mermaid's new feet will bleed as she walks. Embedded in this deal is a perverted sense of self-sacrifice. The Little Mermaid is willing to sacrifice herself in almost any way, as long as her *own* will is accomplished. She is not actually sacrificing herself for the prince, but she is sacrificing to her narcissistic will.

But at the fateful night of the prince's wedding to the young maiden, the mermaid forfeits her utilitarian love.

This is real character development.

She now stands in striking contrast to her antagonist, the sorceress, who revels in her destruction of others – just like the Little Mermaid herself when she was tempted to destroy the prince.

Andersen makes the crux of his tale rest upon sacrificial love: thwarting one's own will for the good of others.

The Little Mermaid's temptation to take revenge on the prince momentarily turns her from the beautiful and innocent creature to resemble the ugly sorceress. But her choice of self-sacrifice transforms her into an immortal soul dedicated to doing good.

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