

The Social Implications of Being a Fairy Tale's Mermaid

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“But a mermaid has no tears, therefore she suffers so much more.”

Hans Christian Andersen, *The Little Mermaid*

Through time, fairy tales have been passed down through generations and have combined “human and non-human protagonists with elements of wonder and the supernatural” (qtd. in Greenhill and Matrix 1). In *The Lure* (2015), a Polish horror musical directed by Agnieszka Smoczyńska, we witness a modern and darker take on mermaid fairy tales, specifically *The Little Mermaid* by Hans Christian Andersen. This film portrays two mermaid sisters, Golden (Michalina Olszańska) and Silver (Marta Mazurek), who are taken in by a trio of individuals (Kinga Preis, Jakub Gierszal, and Andrzej Konopka) working at a nighttime dance club as a band. There, the sisters are made to perform with the group every night until they become their own act. The story follows the girls and how they get by in the human world, with one adapting to her new life and wishing to bear human legs, despite its consequences, while the other actively rejects this new way of life and only stays for her sister. The film itself touches on many themes such as innocence, violence, sexual exploitation, love, lust, femininity, changing for others, power dynamics, and many more.

Many modern takes on fairy tales follow what Greenhill and Matrix refer to as the “Disney Paratext” for fairy tale storytelling, as stated in their book *Fairy Tale Films* (2010). In this paratext, the creators are unconcerned with the fidelity of the source text because they have the motive of reinforcing and reflecting patriarchal and capitalist American family values. (Greenhill and Matrix 7). Along with promoting a conservative ideology where “political apathy and acceptance of the status quo,” (qtd. in Greenhill and Matrix 7) are the norm. However, for *The Lure*, we can find much fidelity to the tragic story of *The Little*

Mermaid by H.C Andersen, although with a much more modern and feminine take on its development. It's not lighthearted nor beautiful as its Disney counterpart, but messy and with a disheartening ending. Some factors taken directly from the source text include the conditions for being granted human legs and anatomy, which included losing her voice and being condemned to turning into seafoam if the man she loves ends up marrying someone else. However, the mermaid is warned that the latter may only be prevented if she eats him before sunrise.

This essay will address the film's last scene, where these warnings are fulfilled. However, some context is necessary. From the beginning, Silver is in awe of the human world while trying her best to fit in. Very quickly, she falls for the bass player of the band that took her and her sister in. After the bassist expresses that he will always see her as a fish, she becomes infatuated with the desire of becoming human enough for him to love her back. Despite Triton (a sea creature who lives above ground and was played by Marcin Kowalczyk) and Golden's warnings, she still gives up her mermaid tail and voice to be able to have human anatomy for a man. But as Triton expressed, if the man she loved married another woman, and she did not eat him before sunrise, she would become seafoam.

Around thirty minutes into the film, Silver has an encounter with an older woman, resembling the sea witch of the original story. The woman lures her in with a cigarette and asks, "You want to have a pussy, huh?" (*The Lure* 30:45). After a few puffs, she continues, "You know it'll make you lose your voice?" (*The Lure* 31:01). The foreshadowing in the second question refers to the act of smoking, but most of all, to her desire of having a human woman's body and the consequences it will have. The whole scene is letting the viewer know who our "little mermaid" will be and her destiny.

Throughout the film, we witness Silver go on with her wish of completely assimilating into the human world through any means possible, all to be with the man she

loved. Sadly, he falls in love with another woman, they marry, and by daybreak Silver must eat the bassist to survive. Throughout the beginning of the wedding scenes, we see an innocent Silver saddened by the reality of having to eat the man she loves to survive. Both Triton and Golden warn her in different sequences that she must do it, but at both times she only demonstrates deep concern and love for the bassist. In the time stamp 1:23, we get a medium close-up of Silver at night, next to the wedding boat, dipping her human legs in the water, reminiscing about her past life, and reflecting on what she had to do. With crutches, she gets up and we get a close-up of her and Golden. The latter only says the words “eat him” in a calm manner but almost as a plea, but Silver only kisses her lips and walks off. The viewer could interpret this as the Kiss of Judas, considering how Silver still showed no intention of killing the young man. At another time stamp, 1:24, the lighting is beginning to portray dawn; we see two medium-long shots of Silver looking at the boat and working up the courage to find the bassist. One cut later, the young man is on the boat, looking at the early morning view, Silver walks up to him, and with all the love that consumes her, she only embraces him. They start swaying, then turn and there is a close-up of her face close to his neck, the bait is in, but even with her fish teeth out, there is still no real intention of killing the love of her life. In this scene we also get a close-up of Golden looking at her intensely, whale-like sounds are heard, and one can assume that they are communicating, yet no text is shown on the screen. The viewer can only imagine how Golden is still trying to convince Silver of murdering him. The sounds, the close-up of Silver near the man’s neck, and her sister’s expression help build the tension. As Silver is about to bite him, her expression softens. They turn once more, sunlight hits her face, and she is gone. Her love for a man who never treated her like a being with feelings overcomes her desire to live and she sacrifices herself for his happiness. The bassist on the other hand is disgusted once he sees he’s covered in sea foam. This could be a take on how women are expected to sacrifice their well-being in

relationships that do not serve them, only because they still care for their partner, yet the men do not understand the depth of said sacrifice.

At that moment, we see a fast sequence of shots showing how Golden kills the bassist in a fit of rage and grief, doing what her sister could not bring herself to do and avenging her. The camera follows Golden as she runs off into the water, not escaping any possible punishment but a life she never truly desired. The scene ends with individual close-ups of the three people who, one way or another, led to everything that had happened. The singer is baffled, confused, and concerned; the drummer processing what he has witnessed, and the bassist dying.

The film's tragic, devastating, and disheartening ending stands true to fairy tale folklore. In the end, the viewer finds themselves rooting for the death of the bassist, a second chance at life for Silver, yet ends up disappointed with how it all turns out. However heart-rending the film turned out to be, especially the defining scene mentioned above, "the tale also echoes a social reality" (qtd. in Greenhill and Matrix 7), as Zipes suggests fairy tales do. *The Lure* is an excellent portrayal of how young women are treated in the entertainment industry, what society expects from them sexually and socially in terms that favor their male partners, and the innocence of a first-time young lover. Although not relevant to the ending scene discussed, the movie also criticizes the cis-heteronormative system and its effects on how feminine presenting people see themselves and how they are pressured into being or acting.

To conclude, *The Lure* is an exceptional example of how the fairy tale genre may be transferred into a film.

References

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