

HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSON'S *THE LITTLE MERMAID* AND THE  
REPRESSED ELEMENTAL ANIMA

RUNNING HEAD: LITTLE MERMAID, ELEMENTAL ANIMA

David Johnston

## HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSON'S *THE LITTLE MERMAID* AND THE REPPRESSED ELEMENTAL ANIMA

### Introduction

According to the wisdom of Marie Louise von Franz (1973), a Jungian depth-psychological study of fairy tales begins with the initial exposition of all the characters. One examines the quality, number and role of characters for what is missing in order to bring archetypal completeness. In this tale, it is the Sea-King and his six daughters including the Little Mermaid. There is also the king's mother, who is described as being a woman of great wisdom. There is no queen and the king is widowed. They all live in a beautiful palace far out in the ocean, where it is very deep, as mermen and mermaids, and have fishes' tails.

This story comes directly from the imagination of Hans Christian Anderson and is not based on oral folk tales that are normally the basis of written Fairy Tales. Nor does the story involve heroic motifs and the triumph of the inferior son or daughter, where most of the action often begins in the Royal Palace and usually takes place on the earth. Here, the cast of characters and description of the initial situation takes place in the sea, which is, symbolically considered, the realm of the collective unconscious. Moreover, given the fact that everybody has fishes' tails, from the point of view of consciousness, the characters depicted are all driven by unconscious instinctual impulses, including the Little Mermaid.

There are eight characters described at the beginning of the tale, the king, his mother, the Little Mermaid and her five sisters. Symbolically, the queen is

missing, although the king's mother is described as very wise and as having brought the children up well, and the total number of characters amount to eight, a double four, suggesting wholeness. The king's mother relates to the quality of ageless feminine wisdom that is imparted to the king. Yet, when the Little Mermaid looks down into the water from above under the moonlight, she saw her grandmother sitting on top of the castle, wearing a silver crown, suggesting the undersea realm is, in fact, matriarchal and therefore archaic and conservative. Given her knowledge of the upper world, there is a suggestion that she actually lived and ruled there as queen prior to the natural elemental matriarchal values she represents fall into the unconscious.

She is, moreover, not the Queen of the sea, who would connect the King to all his subjects and the undersea environment in a timely dynamic way and render the kingdom fertile. The missing queen therefore points to the deficiency of the ruling elemental Eros and relatedness, even at the level of the unconscious, let alone consciousness. With the king's mother, the number of characters involved is eight, a totality, and yet the ruling elemental Eros and feeling values that would be actively carried by the queen are missing qualities in the unconscious. This is not just an idle statement, as there is typically a metamorphosis of the archetypal powers of the unconscious prior to their reaching consciousness, as, indeed, is exemplified by the Little Mermaid. To become conscious requires mutual collaboration between the conscious ego and the unconscious.

Defective Conscious Attitude and the Seductive Lure of Unconsciousness

The situation depicted, therefore, indicates considerable unconsciousness, which always implies a defective conscious attitude. Although this unquestionably directly reflects Anderson's personal neurosis, as it is his story and not based on a folk tale, it may also relate to the defective neurotic consciousness of the times, mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century Denmark. The old matriarchal consciousness that has sunk to the bottom of the sea, now unconscious, has lost its natural ruling Eros and feeling values in that the sea-Queen is dead. But she did give birth to six beautiful princesses, five interested in the status quo and extraverted activities such as gathering objects from the wrecks of the vessels, and the most beautiful of them all, the Little Mermaid, described as thoughtful and introverted. The Little Mermaid's sisters not only find their sea-home more pleasant and beautiful than land, they sang sweetly to sailors of the delights to be found in the depths of the sea and that they should not fear drowning. Thus, they lure people to a sweet relatively painless state of unconsciousness, as is the case when taking a drug. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that they offer a sharp knife, a sacrificial token from the sea-witch, to the Little Mermaid, suggesting that she kill the prince. They have become, in other words, her agents, instruments of unconsciousness and psychological death. The beautiful virtues of the Little Mermaid and her aspiration for consciousness and humanization lie in direct opposition to these values and are aspiring to be in the service of life.

Although fairy tales are usually written *'in tempus illud,'* in *that* time, or *'Once Upon a Time,'* notions that emphasize archetypal timelessness they, in fact, are

ideally studied in relation to time and place, and their relativity to location and historical development. Given the personal nature of the Anderson's story of *The Little Mermaid*, this is doubly true. What is relevant is the fact that Denmark at the time the fairy tale was written was a Christian country, with conscious Lutheran Christian attitudes and values in the context of the development of reason and industrialization, and the natural matriarchal and elemental psyche, depicted by all the royal figures living in the sea, had, since long, fallen into the unconscious. This continues to be a psychological problem for the Western psyche in general, and individually, especially for men. Collectively, there is presently a vital perversion of the natural anima that is routed in the animal soul, which writhes and manipulates her stuff in song, dance and stage throughout the Western world, in the likes of Britney Spears, Madonna, Lady Gaga and other less beguiling mimics. Otherwise, as far as individuals are concerned, in the West, especially northern countries, influences on women to shun the natural feminine mind, are great, while very few men, indeed, are consciously aware of their elemental anima (Emma Jung, 1974).

A formerly ruling collective consciousness of elemental value, the King, had fallen into the unconscious, along with his mother, the Great Mother, the embodiment of feminine wisdom and great matriarch. Her 12 oyster attachments indicate her deeply feminine nature and relatedness to the cosmic Mother, along with its burden of suffering and pain, however unconscious from the point of view of consciousness. Also, five daughters suggest that the feeling and Eros

function both in its positive nature as the Little Mermaid, and the shadow, the Little Mermaid's sisters, who prefer to stay mermaids and lure sailors to their death, than become human and conscious. Their voices which are described as sweet, actually sound like howling wind to sailors; in other words to the conscious mind, the sound is dangerous and potentially destructive, while, from the point of view of the unconscious, it is the lure of death and the sweetness of unconsciousness.

#### The Underwater Realm and the Light of Nature

The under-sea Castle, its beautiful garden of the finest flame-blue sand with flaming red and dark blue flowers, and golden fruit, the ballroom with transparent crystal ceiling and colossal shells with a blue fire that lined the hall, and the surrounding blue radiance are together symbols of the Self or elemental wholeness. They clearly indicate that archetypal intelligence, what alchemists refer to as the light of nature, can be discovered here by intrepid seekers who risks exploring the unconscious for the sake of knowledge. Of all the characters discovered there, however, only one, the Little Mermaid, aspires to gain an immortal soul and be humanized, or integrated into human consciousness. As events transpire, she is drawn to the prince where this possibility plays itself out, although it is not fulfilled.

She and her sisters each have a plot in the garden to work as they please. One formed her section of the garden in the shape of a whale, the other as a little mermaid, implying their fascination with the sea and creatures of the sea, in other

words the realm of the unconscious. In contrast, the Little Mermaid designed her garden to be round like the sun, with red flowers reminiscent of the sunset, showing her pre-occupation with and aspiration for the upper-world and the light of consciousness.

What initially motivates the Little Mermaid is a white statue of a handsome youth that resembles the prince that had fallen into the sea, or the unconscious. As youth the statue would suggest the instinct for renewal, even though it is found in the unconscious. Specifically, since it looks like the prince, it is related to the new unfolding collective consciousness and life. After saving the prince, the Little Mermaid plants a rose-colored willow tree in her garden beside the statue, symbolizing her bitterness and grief, her deep sorrow, at not being able to live on the earth in company with the prince. She has lost all joy of life and becomes sorrowful.

Aborted Coming of Age, the Sea-witch and the Upper World of Consciousness  
When the Little Mermaid comes of age she is given eight [8] oyster attachments for her tail by her grandmother. Eight or double four [4] oyster attachments indicates her connection to the feminine Self of wholeness. The attachments cause pain, indicating her deeply feminine and loving nature, and burden of suffering. Oysters are related to the goddess, in the Greek pantheon, specifically Aphrodite.

The problem is that when the Little Mermaid lives deep in the bottom of the sea her suffering is virtually instinctual and unconscious. After she emerges from the sea and forms legs by drinking the sea-witch's brew, she suffers more consciously, as her feet bleed painfully with each step she takes. Her suffering is that of Eros and feeling at a natural and elemental level, especially when such values are rejected by the collective mind at large, and not understood by the prince, the unfolding new consciousness, who treats her as a loving women companion, but not a potential wife.

As far as consciousness is concerned the only figures initially depicted are the prince and the young woman, who saves him when he was apparently washed up on the beach. She is described as beautiful, with eyes that are true and pure. There is eventually mention of the prince's Royal parents, but never of them as king and queen, devaluing these archetypal phenomena, with the suggestion that the defective collective conscious attitude involves a lack of instinctive guidance and direction along with Eros and feeling values that are given little consideration. It is a kingdom, in other words, out of touch with the elemental and natural order of the psyche. The marriage of the prince and princess suggest potential renewal, especially given that the princess comes from an adjoining kingdom, and that she is educated in a temple, with an education fit for someone who will be queen during a time when Christianity is the dominant religious force and embodiment of high values. In fact, at the time of the tale to

this day, Lutheran Christianity is the state religion in Denmark, whose head is the monarch.

The king is symbolic of the ruling consciousness and the prince of the unfolding new consciousness. Being on friendly terms with the prince means the Little Mermaid is related to the unfolding new ruling consciousness. However, when she is humanized, she loses her voice, i.e. her identity and ability to express herself according to who she truly is. At fifteen her identity is precisely what is developmentally required to be consolidated, and the tale indicates that, from the point of view of consciousness, it simply does not transpire; rather it is aborted. This is the cost of being able to live in the upper world and relate to the prince. More specifically, the Little Mermaid's tongue is the price exacted by the sea-witch for her request to take on a human form.

The sea-witch lives in a house of the bones of dead ship-wrecked humans with ugly and threatening surroundings, indicating her spirit of regression, unconsciousness and death and the nature of the evil force she actually serves. The Little Mermaid is altogether too innocent and without guile to be able to counteract the sorceress' intentions, which were clearly to destroy the Little Mermaid and her virtues. The unmet need for integration of the qualities of her shadow-sisters, the wisdom of the grandmother and the meaning and significance of the underwater kingdom and its sterility as embodied by the Sea-King is evident in her innocence.

In fact, in the tale, the Little Mermaid does not witness anybody wearing a crown, symbolizing sovereignty, power and royal authority, in the upper world at all. There is no evidence of her meeting the prince's royal parents; indeed there is no mention of a king or a queen, but only the prince's parents or royal parents. With the underwater realm it is quite different and when she is in the upper world and on the earth, there is a strong regressive pull back. Once, for instance, when she is with her sorrowful sisters, who had emerged from the water, she sees her grandmother and father, the Sea-King above the water's surface wearing his crown. They hold out their hands to her in yearning, as if to assert, along with her sisters, a powerful regressive pull to unconsciousness. Later she vaguely sees her grandmother through the clear water on a moonlit night, wearing a silver crown, sitting on top of the underwater castle. Her sisters also appear, wringing their hands in grief at the loss of their sister, the Little Mermaid, again indicating a powerful regressive pull.

Although the sisters need the Little Mermaid, and, by cutting their hair, they are willing to sacrifice their femininity to the witch in order to save her, she also needs them. They have, for instance, a much more enterprising nature than the introverted Little Mermaid, and find delight in all the marvelous objects they discover on the wrecks of the sunken ships. It is as if to say the underwater realm, that of the unconscious, contains extraverted and lunar values, including those of the elemental psyche that the upper-world could benefit from integrating to consciousness. It is virtually impossible for the Little Mermaid by herself to

bring all this up to the upper-world suggesting the consciousness of the upper world is doomed to remain unchanged. In fact, in that the queen is dead, there is missing ruling Eros and feeling values in the unconscious, which would provide the necessary glue to potentially bring all the Royal Family that is living in the sea to consciousness. Psychologically, it actually rather requires the perseverance of the prince to intentionally and heroically descend into the depth of the sea, the deep collective unconscious, in order to bring these values to consciousness and connect them with Eros and feeling.

The Prince, the Princess, the Little Mermaid and Unfolding Consciousness  
The Little Mermaid is, in fact, related to the princess who marries the prince, as they even resemble each other closely, and just after the former saves the prince, she appears. The fact that the Little Mermaid saves him from drowning in a turbulent sea, suggests turbulent emotions that the natural and elemental anima is able to master. From the point of view of consciousness she is the one who saves the prince, meaning his natural elemental mind pulls him together during an emotionally difficult time. In terms of serendipity, however, when she begins to surface and then gazes lovingly at the prince, there is a terrible storm. This suggests that, from the point of view of the prince's consciousness, the archetype of the elemental anima is constellated and the Little Mermaid is lovingly drawn to the prince. But he is unconscious of this archetypal attraction and risks the danger of losing consciousness due to the attending turbulent emotions, perhaps to the point of experiencing a psychosis.

One could argue that the Little Mermaid is therefore the prince's elemental anima, as a mermaid, still instinctually unconscious and living in the unconscious sea. From another point of view, she could also be the princess' unconscious shadow. The fact that the Little Mermaid needs to save the prince from drowning indicates the precariousness of the prince's consciousness that could succumb to the forces of the emotional unconscious, the tumultuous sea, when he is faced with the need to assimilate values held by the elemental anima. The Little Mermaid would represent the archetypal elemental anima that wants to gain an immortal soul, which means to become conscious and humanized. Inasmuch as she is, in fact, being humanized the prince is consciously assimilating this anima and the princess is recognizing her elemental shadow. In fact, the prince is very drawn to the Little Mermaid and, when she stays with him, he loves her as a beautiful but innocent young woman. He loves his anima as a new developing aspect of his life, although as an innocent young woman without any of the sensuality or shadow qualities embodied by her sisters.

The stringent condition for the Little Mermaid taking on human form was that if she didn't marry the prince, she would disintegrate into the foam of the waves. In the upper-world, she retains is her beautiful shape, graceful movement, and expressive eyes, but her essential identity and ability to express herself through her beautiful voice, the most beautiful on earth or in the sea, is denied her. Although the particular elemental intelligence represented by the Little Mermaid can surface, its inability to express itself means the prince or unfolding

consciousness cannot become truly conscious of the need for this beautiful quality of elemental being to be assimilated into consciousness. One could say, therefore, that while the Little Mermaid as princess suffers from not being able to express her identity and the upper-world prince's identity suffers from not being related to the elemental anima. She, accordingly, cannot enter the prince's chamber for a more intimate relationship, but sleeps on a velvet cushion at the door.

The prince does, however, appreciate her goodness and loving heart, and has her dressed in beautiful silk and muslin robes as an indication of his accepting her high value. Although she can't sing, she proves that she is the most beautiful dancer, one might say beautiful to behold, but not to touch or sensually embrace. The other dancers and singers are female slaves, suggesting the inferior status of elemental feminine values, which are enslaved by the ruling Christian consciousness. The prince later has the Little Mermaid dressed as a [male] page, implying both her inferior status and the fact that her essential elemental feminine and royal nature is also denied. The deficiency of both the ruling Protestant Christian consciousness as well as the unfolding new consciousness, embodied by the prince, is consequently underscored. In fact, nineteenth century Denmark had and still has a state religion of Lutheran denomination headed by the ruling monarch. Denmark had a relatively high rate of literacy at that time, along with a fast rate of growth in technology and new ideas. What suffered in those conditions is relatedness to the elemental psyche.

The Little Mermaid's humanity, however, is expressed in that she throws the knife given to her by her sisters in order to kill the prince, into the sea, which at the spot it enters, turns red. She acts humanely despite the fact that by this act she believes that, although she desires immortality, she will disappear from existence. On her part this is a sacrificial act, although her solution means the knife and its symbolic values have fallen into the unconscious as well. Although the knife can be used to kill, alchemically, it is also an instrument of separation and discrimination, which enhances consciousness, in this case potentially of the elemental feminine psyche. The red spot in the sea suggests the knife could have been used to discern Eros. One can imagine that the Little Mermaid could have given the knife to the prince and a very different symbolic truth would have been able to unfold. In this retelling of the story, he could have used it to discern the instinctual values embodied by the Little Mermaid and integrated them into consciousness, although it may still have meant her sacrificial participation and potential demise.

In antiquity, the king marries the land and the people through the queen. The more she is related to Eros and the earth, that is the psychic being or heart-Self, the more these values will be realized in life. But, in this tale, as far as the Little Mermaid's participation is concerned, all this lies in the realm of possibility, as there is still great unconsciousness and dissociation. In point of fact, the Little Mermaid sees the prince and his bride in a tent with a crimson curtain. This color symbolizes the light of love in the physical and vital [life] worlds. Were this

consciously discerned and instinctively related to, which is not the case here, the new consciousness and Eros values would be healthy and promote wholeness. There is, in fact, no evidence that the prince is consciously aware of his elemental princess anima, or, alternatively, the princess is not aware of her elemental princess shadow. When the prince is with the Little Mermaid, she has no voice, and could therefore not express her true self, and the princess never meets her at all.

#### The Original Ending and New Endings

In the original ending of the tale, the Little Mermaid dissolves into the foam of the sea as foreordained. Apparently Hans Christian Anderson added the last part on his editor's request. There, she takes on a transparent and beautiful form and gains an ethereal melodious voice, joining the beings of the air with the potential to gain an immortal soul. The original ending strikes me as being more appropriate, as it suggests that the potential for consciousness of the Little Mermaid no longer exists at that time in history, given the fact that the prince or unfolding new consciousness does not fully recognize her value. It is, moreover, a tragic ending and therefore could induce a catharsis in the reader and, ultimately, contribute to inducing a lifting of the repression and relationship with the elemental anima.

In the new ending, the Little Mermaid becomes a being of the air, the realm of ideas, thoughts and ideals, which has nothing whatsoever to do with the elemental and natural anima. The story *lysis* is now concerned, rather, with the

need for the Little Mermaid as a being of the air to win an immortal soul in 300 years by performing good deeds. Numerologically, three hundred [300] refers to elevation of the number three [3], which means process and insight, again placing the Little Mermaid's development in the realm of ideas, thoughts and ideals. The new ending is also concerned with the virtue of good children, who can shorten her required time to gain an immortal soul by their good behavior as the bad behavior of children can lengthen it. It is undoubtedly a sop to the Christian morality and the growth of mental reason and technology of the time, which actually represses the elemental psyche and instinctual Eros of the Sea-Kingdom. In fact, the Little Mermaid is always depicted as too unconscious and one-sided in her sweetness and goodness in such a way that conforms to the Protestant Christian consciousness. This implies that when the prince becomes king the new ruling consciousness will potentially include positive thoughts and Christian ideals. All this is related to the fact that his actual bride, who is described as pure, true and beautiful, is educated in a Christian temple.

Now that she is in the air realm, neither the prince nor the princess is aware of her existence at all and where she is. After the Little Mermaid disappears, she sees the prince and his beautiful bride, the princess, sorrowfully gazing at the pearly foam, as if they knew she had disappeared into the waves. An unconscious elemental princess anima is moody, dependent, charming, flirtatious, seductive, insincere, manipulative, and self-serving. Likewise an unconscious princess shadow is insincere, seductive, manipulative and self-

serving, despite high ideals, good thoughts and a beautiful persona. Since Anderson, according to reports, was severely neurotic the story no doubt reflects his neurotic disassociated elemental anima, as well as the dissociation and defective conscious attitude and values of his times.

The contemporary Western psyche with its anti-religious and anti-spiritual attitudes and belief in secular reason along with all its psychotropic medications is the end result of a psyche with repressed natural instincts. In fact, a shocking statistic indicates that today the rate of diagnosed mental disorders in four major categories of mental illness, - anxiety disorders, mood disorders, impulse control disorders, and substance abuse, - amount to some 26% of the population in the United States in any given year, with a quarter of these being serious (Rick Weiss, 2005). This statistic does not specifically include personality disorders, which amount to an astounding 15-19 % of the American population, although there may be considerable overlap (Greg Lester, 2005).

\*\*\*\*

The under-sea royal court and Little Mermaid that, from the point of view of consciousness, represent a neurotic and dissociated elemental consciousness and anima, are the center of the story, and are more of a concern to Anderson than the prince and his bride. As she is generally unconscious and instinctive, consciousness cannot access her genuine qualities and purity of being. Indeed, this elemental anima is disassociated from the prince, as the unfolding ruling consciousness, and princess, the unfolding ruling Eros and feeling values, who

marries him. As a model Lutheran Christian of her time, the princess embodies virtuous qualities, although she is instinctually unrelated. She would therefore likely have a virtuous and beautiful persona, with a repressed elemental shadow that would assert itself negatively as indicated in the previous paragraph.

REFERENCES

Emma Jung (1974). *The anima as an elemental being*. In Anima and animus. Zurich: Spring Publications. pp. 45-94 passim.

Greg Lester, PhD, (2005). Personality disorders in social work and health care. Course Workbook. Cross Country Education. p. 9.

Marie-Louise von Franz (1973). Interpretation of Fairy Tales. Zurich: Spring Publications. pp. 26-32 passim.

Rick Weiss. *Study: U.S. Leads in mental illness, lags in treatment*. The washinton post. June 07, 2005.