

**The Elephant in the Fishbowl: Comparative
Character Analysis of H.C. Andersen's the Little
Mermaid and Chris Colfer's the Sea Foam Spirit from
*The Land of Stories: The Wishing Spell***

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This thesis consists of a comparative character analysis of parallel characters that illustrates the problematic nature of the rewriting of the Little Mermaid as the Sea Foam Spirit in Chris Colfer's *The Land of Stories: The Wishing Spell* (2012). I examine what kind of motivations Hans Christian Andersen's original titular protagonist in *The Little Mermaid* (1837) is considered to have in academic discourse that affects her agency. I emphasize the role of spirituality in her character and discuss how secularization of her character in rewritings has contributed to repetitions of similar rewritings, that in turn increase criticism on the character. Additionally, I examine the Sea Foam Spirit's character in comparison to other beloved fairy tale characters in *The Wishing Spell*. I argue Colfer participates in feminist tradition of revisionary fairy tales, as traditional fairy tale heroines are central characters in the novel.

Key words: comparative character analysis, Hans Christian Andersen, The Little Mermaid, fairy tale rewriting, Chris Colfer.

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1 Introduction

Character analysis has been an integral area of interest for literary studies, as how characters of different backgrounds and genders are portrayed in literature have historically been reiterations on how sets of people have been approached in non-fictional societal contexts. Literary representations have a power to extend possibilities of readers who feel seen as well as enforce a status quo by obstructing imagined possibilities. How we understand and view characters and what messages we choose to gather from our interpretations of them matter. Additionally, the cultural understanding and how rewritings and adaptations of a character change the way we approach them matters – they shape what stories remain to circulate in the literary world and what messages these stories convey to us and the following generations.

Author Chris Colfer connected deeply to fairy tales as a child and imagined adventures he wanted to experience with the characters he loved so much, which eventually sparked a dream of writing a novel of kids doing just that (Lodge 2012). In his 2012 novel *The Land of Stories: The Wishing Spell* Colfer tells a story of 12-year-old twins Alex and Bailey Conner who are gifted a magical story book ‘The Land of Stories’ from their grandmother on their birthday. Through the book the twins are transported into another dimension where all the fairy tale characters from familiar stories are real. With their help the kids go on a journey to find items to complete a Wishing Spell so they may return home back to their own world. The Wishing Spell acts as a plot device that allows a wide ensemble of well-known fairy tale characters to appear in the story. Time has passed between the events of their fairy tales and the lives these characters currently live in the Land of Stories. Consequently, Colfer has reworked the characters into his novel and continued their character arcs.

In this thesis I investigate two parallel characters which are the titular protagonist from Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale *The Little Mermaid* ([1837] 2019) and the Sea Foam Spirit in Chris Colfer’s *The Land of Stories: The Wishing Spell* (2012). The character of the Sea Foam Spirit in Colfer’s novel is a continuation rewriting of Andersen’s the Little Mermaid. I approach Colfer’s novel as a feminist rewriting due to the nature of the continuation rewritings of several female fairy tale characters within it. I inspect themes of agency and spirituality that academics have discussed about Andersen’s story and character and compare how these appear in Colfer’s Sea Foam Spirit. Additionally, I investigate how the Sea Foam

Spirit's continued character arc differs in comparison to other fairy tale characters in the novel.

The title of this thesis is meant to reflect the issues that a harshly distinct character rewriting can cause when it accompanies other significantly differing rewritings. 'The elephant in the fishbowl' here refers to the problematic nature of the Sea Foam Spirit's character in comparison to the other rewritten heroines: it stands out yet has not been addressed. The 'fishbowl' is thematically appropriate to the topic of mermaids and refers to the constricted nature of the rewriting. In this thesis I discuss this problem through prior academic discourse on the character of the Little Mermaid and compare it to the rewritten parallel character of the Sea Foam Spirit. In section '2 Connecting the Past to the Present' I briefly discuss the relevance of both authors Hans Christian Andersen and Chris Colfer to give some context to their works, as well as explore how the theoretical background used in this thesis connects to the topic. Then, in section '3 Rewritten Character Reviewed Through Past and in Presence' I discuss the characters in comparison to one another through the themes of agency and spirituality to observe the differences of depth these characters possess. Additionally, in this section I compare the Sea Foam Spirit to other female fairy tale characters Colfer has rewritten in his novel through their continued character arcs to discuss the differences there. Finally, in section '4 Repetitions Shifting the Interpretation' I further discuss and summarize the findings of my analysis and their relevance.

2 Connecting the Past to the Present

This thesis contributes to a critical feminist discussion of fairy tales as well as rewritings of them. The research material consists of two primary sources: Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* (henceforth referred to as *M* in references) and Chris Colfer's *The Land of Stories: The Wishing Spell* (henceforth referred to as *Wishing* in references) – the first of the six-volume work – as it introduces to the series a wide ensemble of established fairy tale characters. As the series progresses, more focus is put on Colfer's original characters. The Sea Foam Spirit is not a very prominent character even in the first novel; at the time of writing this thesis, she is not even mentioned in a list of the characters in the Wikipedia article on the series. Regardless, it remains reasonable to compare how the character is introduced and how her continued arc differs from those of the other fairy tale characters. To accomplish this, I analyze how the Sea Foam Spirit is introduced to the twin main characters and how they approach her, as they have encountered many other fairy tale characters prior to the interaction. Then I discuss how the Sea Foam Spirit fits into prior academic discourse on critical feminist readings of *The Little Mermaid*. Additionally, I compare and discuss how the character differs from Colfer's rewriting of a selection of other female fairytale characters in the novel.

2.1 Authors H. C. Andersen and Chris Colfer

The Danish author Hans Christian Andersen has been immortalized in literary canon as the prominent author of popular fairy tales beloved around the world. His literary efforts did not confine solely to fairy tales; genres like travel literature and poetry also benefited from the ever-present rich imagery in his writing (Screech 2023, 129-130). *The Little Mermaid* is culturally so significant that over 70 years later a statue of the same name was commissioned from Edvard Eriksen and unveiled in Copenhagen 1913, where it remains a popular tourist attraction to this day. The story has since been reworked many times onto more recent media forms, the most widely recognized instance being the Disney musical-animation film adaptation in 1989 of the same name. This romanticized and secularized version is arguably more widely known in contemporary society than its original exemplar.

Andersen's work has been a subject of long-standing academic discourse on the nature of representation of his female heroines. In the case of the Little Mermaid, Vigen Guroian

mentions not only critic Roger Sale objecting to both the religious content and demeanour of womanhood, but also literary scholar Jack Zipes' dismissal of the heroine's religious inclination for the sake of author-centred socio-psychological reading (1998, 71-72). Guroian notes that the opinions of these two renowned critics were shared by many others (ibid.). And yet, the tale continues to be reworked into contemporary popular media, perhaps the latest being the 2023 directorial work by Rob Marshall for Disney's live action remake of the animated film. What most of these reworks have in common is that often they have dropped the religious contents of the tale. This might be a testament that critics such as Sale and Zipes echoed the opinions of the public, or an indicator of contemporary societies', and therefore the literary field's, secularization.

Chris Colfer initially gained a space in the public eye through his acting career in *Glee*, an American television series that plummeted the cast to global stardom through its unpredictable success. During the height of the sensation, Colfer started to work on his children's fantasy book series *The Land of Stories*. He provides a more contemporary take on many fairy tale heroines, laced with twists of realistic and psychological perspectives, courtesy of his own experiences with fame (Carpenter, 2012).

Colfer included a significant ensemble of popular fairy tale characters in his Land of Stories series, often developing these characters to appear with more depth than what people attribute with their original versions – possibly due to the general public's first and foremost familiarity with Disney versions. Moreover, in Colfer's works, female characters are presented as rulers and active agents more than male characters that are often minor characters with some exceptions. For these reasons, I consider Colfer's work to belong to a tradition of feminist rewriting, even though such intention has not been explicitly mentioned.

2.2 Feminist approach to fairy tales

It is well-founded to read fairy tales through a critical feminist lens as they are such a significant part of children's literature genre that kids are inevitably exposed to. Jun-Min Kuo argues that it should be the goal of both educators and parents to identify and educate children on the themes and stereotypes that fairy tales portray, so they do not take on such biases (2006). Closely related to the theme of this thesis are not only the concept of feminist readings but also feminist reworks of fairy tales. Aldona Zańko notes that "revisionary fairy tales", a genre reflective of Jack Zipe's awareness that the messages carried on by fairy tales are not timeless or universal but a product reminiscent of their contemporary social codes, gained popularity through "postmodernism and the second wave of feminism" in 1970's (2025). Through rewriting of a story or a character, valuable aspects of the original can be transformed to fit a more contemporary context and speak for its current social codes.

For instance, Zańko investigated three different feminist retellings with a shared goal to transform the mermaid's ending to a happier one than in Andersen's original fairy tale, as representatives for differences on waves of feminism from the 1980's to late 90's. In Jane Yolen's *The Undine*, published in 1982, the quest for immortal soul is replaced by an innate desire to serve a seducing prince until the mermaid realizes her mistake and joins her sisters in the female realm of the sea in emancipation, which highlights the oppressive dynamic between the sexes and celebrates sisterhood as was in line with the second wave of feminism. Published only one year later, Jane Gardam's *The Pangs of Love* acts as a sequel to Andersen's story where the original mermaid's younger sister with a disdain for love due to witnessing her sister's fate, ends up infatuated to the same prince herself; once he refuses to make a sacrifice of his own to be with her, she sobers up and chooses to dedicate herself to freeing other women. It is implied she eventually finds a happy match in her own realm – thus echoing the end of the second wave and anticipating the intersectional nature of third wave feminism with a note of class differences. Emma Donoghue wrote, in her short story "The Tale of the Voice" published in 1997, of a human woman from a fishing village that seeks a better life through a rich merchant man. In her effort to entice him she gives up her voice to enhance her beauty. Eventually she denounces the silent decorative role expected of a higher-class woman, and through hardships returns to her village to her prior occupation, rediscovers her voice and enters a marriage with a local man, therefore echoing the individuality and intersectional spirit of "the feminist thought of the 1990's". Zańko's research identifies the

multifaceted nature of feminism and asserts how feminist revisions may differ from one another in the aspects “reclaimed and new meanings are delivered within” (2025) the story yet sharing the same goal.

Sumarsono et al. examined female sacrifices through motives of gender, agency and transformation in their comparative feminist analysis of *Princess Mandalika* and *The Little Mermaid* (2025). They explored how female agency played a role in these stories and the nature of the sacrifices and what they reveal about the different patriarchal traditions of Eastern and Western cultures (Sumarsono et al. 2025). Lee alleges that the true centre of the fairy tale lies instead in female sexuality and agrees with Roger Sale’s opinions as reported by Guroian (1998, 71) that the desire for soul refers to sexual acts that Andersen purposefully concealed (Lee 2018). Even so, each of these readings used for the sources on this thesis of *The Little Mermaid* discuss agency that leads to self-actualization that the story portrays.

While the aforementioned sources offer the framework for my thesis and discuss agency, they do not go into definitions of agency. Adelin Costin Dumitru offers one in his article on the gender-sensitivity of ‘the capability approach’ published in *Public Reason*, a journal of political and moral philosophy. Dumitru relies on Amartya Sen’s theory to itemize that agency comes down to a person’s freedom to act and achieve in search of their goals or values. To gain an understanding of person’s agency one then needs observation of their “aims, objectives, allegiances and the person’s conception of the good” (Sen 1985, 204) in Dumitru (2018, 94). Therefore, in this thesis when I discuss agency, it is in attempt to understand what that agency is rooted in.

3 Rewritten Character Reviewed Through Past and in Presence

The analysis section of this thesis is divided into two subsections. In the former part, I analyze and compare Andersen's Little Mermaid (henceforth Mermaid) and Colfer's Sea Foam Spirit (henceforth Spirit) and discuss relevant feminist readings alongside the findings of the comparisons. Once the analysis between the parallel characters is finished, in the latter part I discuss how the continued arc of the Spirit differs from that of the selected characters in *The Wishing Spell*. That is to say, the analysis section consists of comparative analysis of feminist readings of *The Little Mermaid*, and comparative analysis of Colfer's feminist rewritings of fairy tale characters in his novel. The Land of Stories refers to Colfer's fictional geographical continent where the different fairy tale kingdoms and other areas, such as the Mermaid Bay, exist that the characters of that dimension inhabit. *The Wishing Spell* refers to Colfer's first novel of *The Land of Stories* series, but without the italics it refers to a magic spell after which the novel is named.

3.1 The Sea Foam Spirit and the Little Mermaid

I have divided the comparative analysis between Andersen's Mermaid and Colfer's Spirit here into two subsections that examine recurring topics in academic discussions of the Mermaid: Agency and Inner Motivation and Spirituality. This division helps to separate these themes as distinct parts of the characterization and takes into consideration that they are often discussed separately. For the benefit of better understanding of the context of the comparative analysis of these characters, I proceed to summarize the plot of Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*. Underseas live the sea folk, and the protagonist of the story is the youngest daughter of the Sea King, whose mother rules the kingdom. Each of the daughters get to visit the 'upper world' on the surface once they turn fifteen. Out of her sisters, the Mermaid is the most intrigued of the upper world. Whereas the sisters create their underwater gardens in the shape of mermaids or whales and plant them with different flowers, the Mermaid's garden is round and consists of only red flowers, as to appear like the Sun does from underwater. The only thing in her garden alongside these red flowers is a sunken marble statue of a beautiful human boy. She intently listens and wants to learn more than anyone can tell her about the upper world and finally gets to visit the surface as she turns fifteen. Among all the other wonderful things, her attention is captured by a beautiful prince on a ship, whose life she then saves as a storm destroys the ship. She brings his unconscious body to a shore of a temple and

watches as he is discovered. Afterwards she becomes even more desperate to explore the upper world and learns from her grandmother that humans have immortal souls and live in eternity after they die, unlike soulless mermaids who simply turn into sea foam once they die. The Mermaid learns that she may only acquire an immortal soul if a human loves her more than his family and they wed in holy matrimony. She then agrees for a Sea Witch to make her a potion that splits her mermaid tail into human legs and pays for it with her voice, knowing that if the prince marries anyone other than her, she dies and turns into sea foam. The transformation or the outcome is not without a fault as each step she takes feels like walking on knives. The prince grows to love the mermaid deeply although not romantically and instead marries the girl that discovered him unconscious on the shore of the temple, believing she saved his life. The Mermaid's sisters sell their beautiful hair to the Sea Witch to save her and tell her to stab the prince with the blade they bring her, so she may become a mermaid once again and live. Rather than kill the prince the Mermaid chooses to die herself and leaps into the sea as the dawning sun turns her into sea foam. Except she does not die; instead, she transforms into a sylph and learns from them that while a mermaid does not have a soul and cannot gain one on her own, the sylphs can earn an immortal soul after doing good deeds for 300 years.

3.1.1 Agency and Inner Motivation

The first mention of the Mermaid in Colfer's novel sets in place when the main characters Alex and Conner are in a classroom where their teacher discusses lessons in fairy tales, and she wonders "if people would learn from the Little Mermaid's heartbreak when she dies at the end of her story" (*Wishing* 13). This utterance implies the lesson of the Mermaid's story, at least according to the teacher, to be solely about chasing after romantic love, and thus the failure to attain it being the only aspect worth of discussion. This sentiment is later reinforced as the twins finally meet the Spirit, whose appearance now consists of "a cluster of sea foam" (*Wishing* 341). They need her saber for the Wishing Spell, although the kids have not yet realized what the clue refers to. She summarizes her tale to make the twins understand the connection and is met with Conner's appalled reaction over her efforts 'for a *guy*', after which she tells the children: "Perhaps that is the lesson of my story" (*Wishing* 343). This piece of dialogue from the Spirit herself flattens the characterization in comparison to Andersen's original story. It reduces her agency and inner motivation to revolve solely around the romantic interest.

There is a plethora of different readings of *The Little Mermaid*. Frequent point of discussion is the Mermaid's primary object quickly becoming to win the love of the prince (Zanko 2025; Lee 18; Sumarsono et al. 2025). Lee speculates this quest is rooted in the Mermaid's true pursuit to realize her sexual identity, which, according to him, is not possible with her hybrid body that ends in fishtail. Lee therefore asserts the need to transform her body to that of a human is necessary to become a sexual being as she "desires to control her own sexuality" (2018). Zańko suggests the prince rather represents a yearning for upward mobility in societal hierarchy: depicted as her origin under the sea versus the human world (2025). Sumarsono et al. note that the Mermaid "takes control of her destiny" and her willingness to take risks and suffer "for a new life opportunity reflects her emotional strength and determination" (2025, 2597), even if the need to do so reflects patriarchal expectations.

In Andersen's fairy tale several passages illustrate the Mermaid cares about more than just the love she feels for the prince: she falls in love with humankind and wants to explore the world that opens with more possibilities (*M* 27). As she learns that humans even have an immortal soul that mer-people lack, she becomes even more determined in her exasperation with her current life state (*M* 28). Not only does she yearn for the prince, but she also envies his immortality and wishes to join him in humanity so that she, too, could live after death.

3.1.2 Spirituality

Even if at times overlooked in academic readings, the religious undertones remain a recurring theme of Andersen's tale, as mentioned in the prior section. Unlike some other academics, Guroian chose to compose his reading to center religion and read the tale as a Christian allegory (1998, 72). He interpreted the Mermaid's round shaped garden of red flowers, described to resemble a sun (*M* 12), not as symbols of repressed desire for sex and love (Lee, 2018), but with a connotation to eternity (1998, 74). He persuades this theory with description of the tale's ending where the Mermaid leaps overboard as the sun rises which is supposed to seal her fate and turn her body into dead sea foam. The sun, however, proceeds to warm her as she discovers another transformation and raises her arms "towards God's sun" (*M* 47) and cries her first tears.

Although the Spirit seems to confirm her motivation for her journey to be merely about romantic love, which implies the character has been completely secularized, nods to religious affect – specifically Christianity – remain present in *The Wishing Spell*. The chapter where the Spirit is introduced begins with Conner suspecting the twins have died and gone to heaven and ‘a christening’ of Cinderella’s baby takes place at the end of the novel. The fact that religious vocabulary still appears in the novel, not only on a lexical level of utterances by the twins, but also in fantastical setting of the Land of Stories, makes Colfer’s choice to remove religious motivations from the Mermaid’s characterization peculiar. Even more so as the Fairy Godmother, who is a powerful entity with tremendous magical powers, is endlessly motivated by doing good deeds for people, one might wonder how come Colfer did not rework the religious concepts of immortal soul in *The Little Mermaid* to a fantasy genre equivalent that would fit his story.

Nevertheless, it is interesting that despite the many near death experiences the twins have gone through, the single instance where either one of them experiences disorientation and wonders about their whereabouts in existential manner takes place exactly in the chapter ‘The Mermaid’s Message’ that introduces the Spirit:

Conner was positive he was dead. The fall into the ocean must have killed him because, wherever he was, he had never been so relaxed. He felt like he was somewhere in the glorious state between being asleep and being awake, a place he knew very well. His eyes were closed, and he was lying down on the softest surface he had ever laid on in his entire life.

The air was cool and refreshing. It smelled a little salty, but he was sure he was only imagining that because the last thing he had seen was the ocean. He opened his eyes a tiny bit and saw his sister lying next to him. She must have died, too, but she seemed so peaceful that he didn’t worry about her. He couldn’t have worried about anything if he’d tried. He felt so wonderful that, wherever he was, all he could feel was enjoyment. *We must be in heaven*, he thought.

Conner opened his eyes wider. His vision was a little blurry, but he could see so many colorful objects moving in all different directions above him. They looked human the more his eyes adjusted. *They must be angels*, he told himself, and went back to sleep. (*Wishing* 338-339)

The placement of such religious content in narration must not be coincidental. The twins have lost their father in a car accident just a year before the events of the novel take place (*Wishing* 30); therefore, a possibility for religious themes to arise has been established, as wondering about what happens after death could be kid’s normal reaction to grief. Even though Colfer

does not entertain same religious invitations as Andersen, he acknowledges this aspect of the Mermaid's character. Under the Sea Foam Spirit's care, the twins are safe and looked after; the atmosphere is likened to heaven and her mermaids described as angelic. One might even interpret the chapter name 'The Mermaid's Message' as a tribute to the spiritual aspect of the fairy tale when considered together with how the chapter begins.

Even outside of the religious undertones in Andersen's tale, it is evident in both the original story and Colfer's subsequent character that the Mermaid is a good person. Her love for the prince is so strong she rather sacrifices herself than him, even if it means her own eternal destruction. She chooses to die rather than to take a life; she stays good until her very end, and it is this act that raises her to become a sylph, who can earn an immortal soul through three hundred years of good deeds (*M* 47). Good deeds are what the Spirit does in the novel. Prior to the interaction with the kids, she has helped a man to complete the Wishing Spell by lending him her sisters' saber. She has instructed her mermaids to help the kids after they have plummeted to the depths of the ocean. Even beyond instructing the kids to find the saber they need for the spell to return them home, the Spirit warns them about a threat closing in on them. Her love for humanity and inclination to do right by them is present in both stories.

An interesting detail is that Colfer chose to name his character the Sea Foam Spirit, even though the word 'sylph' or 'daughters of air' appear in Andersen's tale. This might imply the Spirit did not go through the elevation (that parallels a resurrection) in the Land of Stories. It is, however, confirmed that she did not exactly die, as she mentions her "spirit lives on" (*Wishing* 342). Given that she instructs "her mermaids", a hierarchical dynamic is implied. She also seems to inhabit supernatural powers of some kind, as she mentions awareness of all things that take place or are felt around a body of water that "the average entity doesn't [know]" (*Wishing* 342). Not only that, but she also supplies the kids with magical seashells that offer them powerful protection. Colfer therefore seems to have traded the Mermaid's immortal soul in exchange for magic powers and vague ruling position to the Spirit.

3.2 The Sea Foam Spirit and juxtaposition to Land of Stories characters

As Colfer includes a wide ensemble of fairy tale characters in his novel, it is reasonable to inspect how he has reworked some of them along with the Mermaid. This extends a better understanding of his retellings of these characterizations. I have chosen three other examples based on their similarities to the Mermaid: Cinderella, Queen Red Riding Hood and the Evil Queen. Additionally, I mention the Sleeping Beauty to contrast her character with Queen Red Riding Hood. In these sections I refer to the Spirit and the Mermaid almost synonymously, as the Spirit's past character arc is supposedly the same.

3.2.1 Cinderella

I have chosen Cinderella as one of the characters compared with the Spirit is because the original Cinderella tale has kindled a fair share of criticism on the heroine's passivity even outside of academic discourse. It is even mentioned several times in *The Wishing Spell*. At the beginning of the book, when the kids are still in their own world, there are scenes where their teacher discusses fairy tales in school. The kids have a homework assignment where they write an essay and present to their class on what a fairy tale of their pick is supposed to be a lesson for. Alex discusses the Cinderella story with the following introduction: "Many people have had issues with 'Cinderella', saying it has anti-feminist elements" (*Wishing* 45). Then she goes on to argue the story is not as much "about a man saving a woman" as it is about the importance of inner happiness and staying a good person (*ibid.*). This sounds quite similar to what Guroian understands to be the strength of the Mermaid's character: "[this is] what makes her final decision to spare his life at what she believes will be the cost of her own life such a powerful lesson of love and forgiveness" (1998, 84). The mermaid has experienced a brief existence of human life and even though it was filled with pain and devastation of heartbreak with no reward she sought – be it the immortal soul or romantic love – she refuses to let it turn her bitter or vindictive.

If Cinderella and the Mermaid are so similar by their nature, and yet they are viewed so differently, then one could argue that by this account Cinderella's virtue seems to be that she was always content with what she had and merely happened to get lucky with marrying a prince. Same sentiment seems to be reinforced when the kids meet Cinderella and hear her own perspective on her story. She emphasized that she does not consider life to have simple

solutions, as new problems always arise when older ones are solved; life in the public eye and winning the acceptance of the kingdom had been her next struggle (*Wishing* 190).

Undoubtedly this sentiment has its wisdom, but I find it slightly disappointing that the Mermaid's efforts to go after a better life have been overlooked because she was unsuccessful; even more so because Colfer has abandoned her reward to start the pursuit of an immortal soul of the original story and reduced her story to a cautionary tale of heartbreak, as was mentioned in the lesson passage of *The Wishing Spell* (13).

3.2.2 Queen Red Riding Hood and the Sleeping Beauty

Red Riding Hood is an interesting character, because she was just a young girl in her original story, so a continuation rewriting had immense creative freedom. In the Land of Stories, she became an elected queen for an independent small kingdom after the townspeople grew wearisome trying to get help to deal with their wolf problem and ended up building surrounding big walls instead. As it turns out, the grandmother is the de facto ruler, but the townspeople felt Red Riding Hood symbolized their struggles the best (*Wishing* 98-99). I find her character especially topical for this thesis as she has an unrequited love arc, as did the Spirit. Consumed by her infatuation, Red is committed to her cause to gain the love a man who already loves another girl, and this among some of her other characteristics makes her a comedy relief character in the story. In several passages she is depicted as a desperate girl who tries too hard, for the man will never see her that way. In stark contrast to Red is another monarch: the Sleeping Beauty. She married the prince that awoke her from the curse and proceeded to dedicate her every waking moment to restore her kingdom's state and be a just ruler to her people. She leads the kingdom's affairs and has even promised to not rest until the lingering effects of the sleeping curse have been eradicated. The twins leave her kingdom after receiving help from her and it is noted how the fairy tale focused on the prince's bravery but neglected to mention Sleeping Beauty's own bravery and strength (*Wishing* 295-296).

The difference between Red and the Mermaid is that Queen Red Riding Hood is somewhat of an antagonistic character. She has done bad things that hurt several people in attempts to get rid of her romantic competition, whereas the Mermaid only ever caused suffering for herself and therefore her family. In the end Red accepts she will never win the love of the man she has wanted the most in her life and her character starts an immediate shift to a more tolerable and mature outlook. In a light-hearted way it is even suggested she might take interest in her

kingdom, to which she refers as ‘a queendom’ once; overcoming an unrequited crush might have pushed her to begin unearthing patriarchal structures in language. The overall arc in the first novel could be interpreted as a direct response to the criticism of *The Little Mermaid* discussed previously.

3.2.3 Evil Queen

The Evil Queen has perhaps gone through the most rewriting in Colfer’s novel. Once a shallow villain whose most prominent characteristic is her vanity, in the Land of Stories she has a backstory and past that enlightens the reasons behind her actions. The entire novel begins with Snow White on her way to see her jailed stepmother with pleads to understand what made her the way she is. Throughout the novel it is revealed that her true goal has been to help the love of her life, who an evil Enchantress – the very same that cursed the Sleeping Beauty – entrapped into the magic mirror. Consequently, her vanity is explained by endless beautification treatments in attempts to preserve her appearances so that the love of her life would still recognize her even as he loses his personhood over time. This is presented as romantic, and the twins think everyone should be told immediately. Alex especially feels that the Queen is not at fault over the things she has done; after all, she did fiendish acts only because her heart had been turned to stone to relieve her heartache (*Wishing* 377). An expectation lingers that it is possible to change the public opinion of her because she had reasons for her actions.

I find it intriguing that the Spirit is met with a disturbed reaction that she went through all that trouble for love, but with a villain, same motivations are treated with respect and empathy. A difference is, once again, that the Spirit’s romantic love was unrequited. It seems like creating depth to characters with a redemption arc (as both in the cases of the Evil Queen and Queen Red Riding Hood) takes precedence over maintaining a well-rounded character that has been persistently moral but has spiritual motivations. Additionally, how the narratives treat these different women may by implication carry the association that a woman’s worth is tied to romantic success; both Red and the Spirit are seen as less than other female characters who are in a committed relationship. Even a villainous antagonist such as the Evil Queen are elevated as a likeable character once she is proven to both have loved and been loved.

4 Conclusion: Repetitions Shifting the Interpretation

As previously stated, I consider Colfer's rewritings to adhere to feminist tradition of fairy tale revisions. Admittedly, it might be justified to view them as solely contemporary, but I argue the contents of the story to have consistent narration that seeks to uplift the feminine voices. This is exemplified in Conner's reaction to learning the Spirit's backstory that I discussed in subsection '3.1.1. Agency and Inner Motivation'. It is perhaps not inconsequential to suggest Colfer's own voice might partially be heard through Conner to promote to his young audience an outlook on life that de-centers romantic objectives, should they develop to threaten one's priorities. Furthermore, this understanding could be supported with recollection of the lesson Colfer placed on the Mermaid through the character of the elementary school teacher. Overall, Colfer's attempt at rewriting the fairy tale characters to have increased agency rooted in stronger psychological perspective still echoes the normalized idea in Western culture that women are inclined to prioritize romantic love as the first priority, a point expressed also by Sumarsono et al. (2025, 2596). Yet it should be noted about Colfer's novel that there are rare exceptions to this such as the Sleeping Beauty and possibly Queen Red Riding Hood in the sequels.

Altogether, I argue that the critics that refuse to consider the religious motivations in the character of the Little Mermaid undeniably then flatten her character and story to a single narrative. As a result, a creation of a tradition where rewritings of the character drop the religious aspects and reinforce their criticisms – therefore repeating in discourse the exact things that were found disagreeable in the first place. Notably, an example of this in the context of the novel is the reduction of her story to a cautionary tale of heartbreak. I argue that this is reflective of societal norms in contemporary society where spiritual motivations are perhaps not deemed an appropriate topic of conversation in children's literature. This then affects the way we approach *The Little Mermaid* and the analysis of the character, which in turn affects the repetitions created in rewritings.

In Colfer's novel, the Spirit does not have dialogue that would let the reader know anything about her future or what she aspires to do or be. She is implied to be a vague ruler of the seas due to a hierarchal position over "her mermaids" expressed in her speech to the twins, but that is solely information on the present moment. Not only her past but also her future has been diminished to serve a simplified character arc. Conversely, the other monarch characters talk not only of their current responsibilities but also future aspirations and have relationships not

limited to their subordinates. In comparison to these other characters the Spirit simply falls flat, even though her exemplar the Mermaid is more multifaceted and therefore offers opportunities for such analyses.

Andersen's intentions with the fairy tale *The Little Mermaid* in the nineteenth century Denmark were inevitably different than the ideas that Colfer seeks to bring into the literary world of contemporary North America with his fantasy book series. This unavoidable rift occurs not only due to the genre shift from fairy tales, which often consist of moral teachings or guidance, to novels that by nature differ remarkably in the ways they are used to discuss the world. Admittedly the religious uniformity of a European country in the nineteenth century and how one was expected to adhere to those social codes in writing differs greatly from the increasingly secularized social codes of the twenty-first century United States of America. While it is commendable that Colfer has managed to reintroduce fairy tales to children and put effort into rewriting their social codes to fit into contemporary culture, the treatment of the Mermaid remains unbalanced.

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