

Transgressive Subjectivity: A Foucauldian Interpretation of *The Little Mermaid*

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In Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales, power struggle constitutes the deep layer of the plotlines in the stories, among which *The Little Mermaid* is a typical example. The space in the fairytale can be divided into the three regions: the sea, land and sky, which exhibit three different modes of power structure. The sea space, as a female space, embodies rich power-control mechanism, highlighting the tension between supreme power and heterotopia. The land space, as a male space, shows absolute male control and domination. While the sky space, as a liminal space, exhibits the little mermaid's spiritual endeavor of breaking through the binary gender mode and redefinition of the notion of "Immortal Soul".

To be more specific, the power structure in the sea space is a combination of the traditional pattern, characterized by the visible and even exaggerated exhibition of materialized icon, and modern disciplinary regulation through invisible control. In the traditional pattern, Andersen uses material objects, including the body, to portray the mechanism of power structure, in which materiality is one of the peculiar features signifying different power layers. Seen from the perspective of Foucauldian notion of materialized nature of body, the mermaid's body is materialized as a target been controlled, trained and regulated by power. The control is reinforced by the materialization of other power icons too. For example, the grandmother is characterized as "a very wise woman, and exceedingly proud of her high birth; on that account she wore twelve oysters on her tail; while others, also of high rank, were only allowed to wear six." (Andersen 1) She is so fond of the little mermaid that "the old lady ordered eight great oysters to attach themselves to the tail of the princess to show her high rank." (Andersen 5)

Also, modern mechanism of power control can be found in the sea space where the power of the grandmother is extended from body control to the invisible regulation over the activities of the mermaids. The power transfers the exterior negativity into the internal affirmation among the little mermaids by allocating the spaces of the garden to them as well as regulating their behavioral conducts in the sea, including the timing arrangement when they can rise up out of the sea only after they reach the age of fifteen. The marine decorative feature in the gardens of the other six mermaids is in conformity of the power mechanism under the sea, while the marble statue in the little mermaid's garden is highly symbolic of her inconsistency with the grandmother's domination.

Yet, the sea space is much more complicated than expected. It is not a unitary power structure, but one featured by the binary tension between the supreme power symbolized by the grandmother and the heterotopia symbolized by the sea witch. As a deconstructive or reversed space, the space of the sea witch serves as a marginalized yet highly confrontational one against the marine power of the grandmother. When the little mermaid enters the region, she found many victims among the vicious polyps whose "branches were long slimy arms, with fingers like flexible worms, moving limb after limb from the root to the top." (Andersen 12) Among the victims, there lays "even a little mermaid, whom they had caught and stangled, and this seems the most shocking of all to the little princess." (Andersen 12) As a hostile entity, the space of the sea witch is the heterotopia in the power structure of the grandmother. While functionally speaking, the space of the sea witch reinforces, while challenging, the power of the grandmother and there exists a conflictual balance between them.

When examining the notion of "Immortal Soul" the little mermaid longs for in the binary oppositional power structure in the sea space, we may divide it into two parts: the Subject, which refers to the Self of the mermaid related to her personal independent consciousness; and the Object, which refers to objectified target of her desire. The idealistic version of her "Immortal Soul" should be the union of the two parts, yet, the little mermaid cannot find the union in both of the spaces. In the space of the grandmother, her Self as the mermaid is confirmed and highlighted via material coding, yet her Object is absent, which can only be temporarily replaced by the marble statue in her garden. In the space of the sea witch, the little mermaid obtains the chance to win the love of the prince, the target of her desire; yet, her Self is taken away as her voice, the essential symbols of her Self, is lost.

In other words, her subjectivity remains incomplete in both of the spaces under the sea. Yet, the binary mode of the sea space itself designed by Andersen serves as a crack in the power structure and makes the little mermaid's escape possible.

The land space of the prince is rather unitary, which is a typical male hegemonic one. The little mermaid's escape from the sea to the land, examined from Foucault's notion of transgression, is, rather, a reinforcement of the male power of the land. The goal of her transgression is to search for "Immortal Soul", which can be regarded as a totality which consists of the Subject and Object. According to Foucault, transgression is not only a destructive negation of the boundary, it is a reconstruction of it through their mutual interaction. It is depicted as a spiral escalation in which transgression and boundary are mutually inclusive and mutual progressive. The little mermaid's transgression only proves the prince's male power as she is kept marginalized and her passion for love is ignored by the prince.

Yet, the requirements and restrictions in the sea and land spaces on the little mermaid, which are negative in nature, serve as the positive force nurturing her "Immortal Soul" on the contrary. It is through the revelation of the restrictions on the little mermaid's subjectivity in the sea and land spaces that the hidden resistant power is exhibited.

In the third space of the sky, the little mermaid has transcended the traditional definition of female body in the binary mode and endows the new subjectivity with substantial femininity. The process of her transgression has eliminated the certainty levied upon by definite gender rules and begun the search for infinite possibility in subjectivity construction.

Through the second transgression from the land to the sky, Andersen has shown the original notion of "Immortal Soul" held by grandmother is rather a constructed non-essential entity. The third space of the sky in *The Little Mermaid* is a negation of the stationary binary boundary of gender control and functions as a "third space" highlighting dynamic nature of the boundary, which shapes a new notion of subjectivity for the little mermaid.

The dynamic nature depicted by Andersen is in line with the body image of the little mermaid, which occupies a relational position around which other objects are connected, forming a Foucauldian power structure featuring "power is relations." (Foucault 410) The place of the body can be anywhere without definite position. Like a floating bubble, it is dynamically indefinite. In this power structure, there exist two statuses for the body: the bound body, which is under regulation of power, knowledge and morality and the transgressive body, which is a dynamic entity open for reconstruction. The symbol of bubble is a clear icon of the little mermaid's transgressive body, in which her Subject is intermingled with her Object, i.e., the subjectivity of the little mermaid is not dependent upon exterior objects and turns to be self-sufficient. As Andersen has illustrated, "I have not . . . allowed the mermaid's acquiring of an immortal soul to depend upon an alien creature, upon the love of a human being.... I have permitted my mermaid to follow a more natural, more divine path." (Conroy 250-251) It does not only symbolize freedom from gender control of the body, but also embodies infinite possibility of transgression in this third space where there will be no boundary which may restrict and confine the subjectivity of the little mermaid. According to Foucault, as a spiral escalation, transgression itself challenges the "boundary effect". The little mermaid's femininity achieved during

transgression is an exhibition of the constructive process of a new “Immortal Soul” free from the constraints of the boundary.

The third space of the sky Andersen has created is free from material constraints and spiritual dependence. It is an “unknown beautiful region” (Andersen 10) created by the little mermaid herself, which not only includes the material and spiritual aspects in the previous two spaces, but also transcends them and unifies the Subject and Object, keeping the boundary dynamically blurred. It both deconstructs and reconstructs the first two spaces with an open vision. It is the second transgression that exhibits the little mermaid’s transcendental spiritual value, which constitutes the aesthetic essence of the fairytale.

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