

The soul paradox between The Little Mermaid and The Fisherman and His Soul

Xiaomeng Zhou

Yangtze University School of Foreign Languages, jingzhou 434000, China
Email: 3344780443@qq.com

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Abstract

By comparing Hans Christian Andersen's The Little Mermaid and Oscar Wilde's The Fisherman and His Soul, this paper focuses on the completely different value orientation carried by the concept of "soul" and reveals how Wilde subverts the sanctity of the soul through three strategies. First, turning the soul object into a disposable obstacle, in contrast to Andersen's subjective pursuit of the soul. Secondly, make the soul bear the evil of the world, and compare the sacredness and purity of the soul in Andersen's version. Thirdly, the necessity of soul redemption is denied by the death of soul, so as to rewrite Andersen's ethical logic of exchanging good deeds for souls. Through the core adaptation of anatomy, we can get a glimpse of the subversive will of aestheticism literature to the moral order in the 19th century.

Keywords

The Little Mmermaid; The Fisherman and His Soul; Soul; Aestheticism

1. Introduction

Oscar Wilde is one of the greatest British writer and artist in the 19th century, who is famous for his plays, poems, fairy tales and novels. Although Wilde has only nine fairy tales in his life, he can be at the top of fairy tales with the brothers Grimm and Andersen. He completely got rid of the dependence on the previous folk stories and boldly started the self-creation of literati with the creative idea of "art for art's sake". Among them, The Fisherman and His Soul is an adaptation of Andersen's The Little Mermaid, even a reverse writing to some extent, which adds the role of the soul and tells the complicated contradictions and entanglements among fishermen, souls and mermaid. In The Little Mermaid, the soul is regarded as the end of redemption, and the little mermaid will not hesitate to sacrifice her voice and identity, but also pursue the immortal soul. However, Wilde is deeply rooted in his unique aesthetic thought, social critical position and reflection on the hypocrisy of Victorian morality. In The Fisherman and His Soul, this narrative logic is completely reversed, and the

soul is turned into an objectified appendage and a seductive medium.

2. Paradox of value between the subject and the other

In *The Little Mermaid*, Andersen systematically constructs the sacred attribute of the soul and shapes it as a subjective goal that must be actively and difficultly obtained, which is closely dependent on the Christian narrative of redemption. The soul is endowed with supreme value, which has become the core pursuit of the meaning of the little mermaid's life and the only way to obtain eternal redemption. The little mermaid's pursuit of the soul is always reflected in an active determination, even at all costs. She is willing to give up her identity as a sea princess, leave her family and endure great pain, and she is willing to risk turning into a bubble and trade with the sea witch with her most precious voice in exchange for the opportunity to acquire human form and pursue her soul. This series of behaviors clearly shows that the soul in her mind is the ultimate goal beyond all worldly pleasures, status and even physical pain. The process of obtaining the soul itself is a journey of redemption that requires the participation of a great subject's will. In the story, the prince is just the medium for the little mermaid to redeem her soul. She fell in love with the prince, and the deeper motivation was that she believed that by getting the prince's true love and combining with it, she could share his soul. Marriage is endowed with sacred significance here, and it is a ceremony of soul transmission and redemption. Therefore, the root of the little mermaid's pain is not only the loss of the prince's love, but also the possibility of losing her soul through this love. Finally, her chance to get the soul is also directly related to her selfless love and sacrifice spirit, which further binds the acquisition of the soul to the sublimation of the moral subject. Through the active, painful and sacrificial pursuit of the little mermaid, Andersen firmly established the soul as the highest goal to realize the meaning of individual life, and it was the only subjective pursuit to transcend short-lived existence and obtain eternal redemption. In Andersen's view, the soul is a sacred certificate of redemption that must be strived for, and its value is far higher than any secular happiness or the existence of the body itself.

In Wilde's *The Fisherman and His Soul*, the soul completely loses its sacredness and redemptive value as portrayed in Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*, being systematically reduced to a disposable, even tradable 'other' that ultimately becomes a mere appendage of carnal desire. The core strategy of this subjectivity degradation lies in Wilde's construction of a narrative logic that thoroughly objectifies and commodifies the soul. From the outset, the soul is framed as a functional obstacle rather than a spiritual relic, since the fisherman's sole impediment to uniting with the mermaid is his own soul. This positioning inherently suggests the soul's secondary status relative to bodily desire. Set against the backdrop of Victorian Britain's rapid social development, where some enthusiastically pursued aestheticism and heroic endeavors while others descended into vulgarity and materialism, the soul's devaluation is

further articulated through the merchant's mockery: "Of what use is a man's soul to us? It is not worth a clipped piece of silver." (Wilde 2017:52) By giving voice to this critique through the merchant, a figure emblematic of mainstream societal consciousness, Wilde directly relegates the soul to the lowest echelon of economic exchange. The witch's instruction to the fisherman to slice off his shadow with a knife under the full moon resembles a quasi-barbaric physical procedure, concretizing the abstract soul into an entity that can be excised and separated like a bodily appendage. This act of severance objectifies the soul entirely, reducing it to the status of a disposable organ and thereby intensifying its objectification. Such treatment utterly dissolves the metaphysical aura Andersen had conferred upon the soul, reducing it to a quantifiable, bodily appendage. The existence state of the stripped soul further strengthens its characteristics as an appendage. It is depicted as an independent 'other' that persistently attempts to return to its original body. Yet when the soul returns bearing temptations of wisdom and wealth, the fisherman repeatedly rejects these offerings. Whatever the soul brings, knowledge or riches, the fisherman deems inferior to love. Both the soul itself and the gifts it carries are treated as negotiable commodities that can be refused to preserve existing physical pleasures.

In the view of aestheticists, "mais s'empêcher de mourir, ce n'est pas vivre." (Not allowing oneself to die is not the same as living) (Gautier 2005:25), and "If one cannot experience transcendent beauty beyond utility in life, the soul becomes merely a vessel for utilitarianism" (Jiang Yusi 2024:58). Ultimately, the fisherman chooses death over being seduced by his soul to commit evil acts, marking the complete collapse of the soul's value. Within the fisherman's value system, his love for the mermaid holds absolute priority, with the soul reduced entirely to a tool serving this end. When it no longer fulfills this purpose, or even becomes an obstacle, it transforms into a useless burden, disposable and negotiable. Through this series of plots, Wilde reduced the soul from the immortal core in the traditional concept to an accessory that can be disposed of at will, and an other that can be easily sacrificed in the love transaction.

3. The paradox between sacred symbols and evil containers

In Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*, a progressive narrative strategy anchors the soul as a sacred symbol with exclusive value. After the little mermaid rises to the surface to save the prince, her grandmother emphasizes that humans possess immortal souls capable of ascending to "beautiful, unknown regions that we shall never see" after death (Andersen 2008:171), whereas marine creatures merely dissolve into foam. This biological contrast endows the soul with transcendence beyond existential limitations, establishing its species-based hierarchical advantage and metaphysical superiority. The soul becomes not only a unique marker of human identity but also the sole gateway to higher dimensions of existence.

Secondly, the design of the way to obtain the soul strengthens its moral admittance

nature. When the little mermaid exchanged human legs for the sea witch to fall in love with the prince and share her soul, the witch demanded the most precious voice in exchange, and warned that she would suffer from sharp pain when walking. These costs are not simple magic contracts, but are brought into the narrative framework of Christian suffering. “For Andersen suffering is the badge of spiritual superiority, and his downtrodden protagonists emerge triumphant by enduring seemingly endless humiliations.” (Tatar 2002:302) Lost voice symbolizes the abandonment of secular communication ability, and physical pain corresponds to the purification ceremony in the tradition of asceticism, transforming physical sacrifice into a necessary sacrament for soul acquisition. It conveys the Christian message of eternal salvation through suffering and sacrifice, with a strong color of moral admonition and religious comfort.

In the end, the salvation efficiency of the soul is deeply bound to ethical practice. The little mermaid gives up the chance to kill the prince on her wedding night, and her self-sacrifice triggers the intervention of the elves, “through good deeds, you too can earn an immortal soul in three hundred years.” (Andersen 2008:181) The manifesto reveals the core mechanism of the sanctity of the soul. It cannot be obtained through biological inheritance or emotional attachment, but only through the moral accumulation of 300 years of good deeds can it activate the redemption function. In fact, whether the soul promised by the angel and the human soul originally pursued by the little mermaid are homogeneous has not been clarified from beginning to end. The text deliberately maintains the fuzziness of the metaphysical attribute of the soul, and this narrative blank just consolidates the symbolic authority of the soul. When the soul becomes the ultimate goal that must be exchanged through continuous moral practice, its sacredness has been divorced from the entity definition and upgraded to the absolute idea of controlling the value order.

In *The Fisherman and His Soul*, after the fisherman sent his soul away, the soul lured the fisherman to welcome him back three times. The first two times lured fishermen with the mirror of wisdom and the ring of wealth respectively, but no matter how long the soul talked, the fishermen were unmoved. It was not until the third time that the soul just began to describe the scene of barefoot girls dancing that the fisherman thought that the little mermaid had no feet and promised to accept the soul again to watch the girls dance together. On the way ashore, the fisherman was lured by his soul and did many bad things, and finally came to his senses. The mirror reflects the alienation of reason, the ring of wealth involves the corrosion of material desires, while the dancing girl exposes her inner desires. Wilde deliberately chose these images. On the one hand, the soul was proved to carry earthly evil, which directly subverted the sanctity and purity of its tradition. On the other hand, the soul's three active temptations reveal its essence as a medium of human depravity. The travel of soul has become the collection journey of the dark side of human nature. It is not so much that the soul pollutes human beings as that the soul has become the

concrete carrier of human evil. At this time, the soul has gone beyond the divine symbol of matter in Andersen's works and transformed into a medium to induce human greed. Every time it returns, it boasts that it knows the true meaning of the world, but it continues to convey the values that symbolize evil. The contrast between this declaration and actual behavior proves that the soul is not the source of salvation but the conductor of evil. This has also become Wilde's praise that "It is man's soul that Christ is always looking for. He calls it 'God's Kingdom', and finds it in everyone.....That is because one only realises one's soul by getting rid of all alienpassions, all acquired culture, and all external possessions be they good orevil." (Wilde 2018:39)

4. The paradox of soul redemption and soulless love

The love narrative constructed by Andersen is essentially a utilitarian channel for soul salvation. When the mermaid's grandmother explained the rules of soul acquisition to the little mermaid, she explicitly set human love as a necessary intermediary condition for soul acquisition. She emphasizes that only through the wholehearted love of human beings can the ultimate goal of soul sharing be achieved. The motivation of the little mermaid to seek legs from the sea witch is expressed as fighting for the love of the prince to obtain an immortal soul. At this time, the love object prince is simplified as a simple soul carrier, and its personal characteristics are always blurred in the narrative. And from beginning to end, the love of the prince and the pursuit of the soul are always confused, and no clear distinction is made. In the process of taking medicine, the physical pain suffered by the small mermaid highlights the cost attribute of redemption. The sharp pain of each step and the permanent damage of the lost voice constitute the materialized sacrifice of the media function of love. It is worth noting that the prince's emotional response to the little mermaid is always absent. In the story, he regards her as a dumb orphan rather than a lover. This one-way emotional flow further strengthens the prince's instrumental attributes.

Even in the seemingly unsuccessful ending, Andersen still strengthens the position of the soul as the ultimate goal of redemption. On the wedding night, when the little mermaid gave up the opportunity to assassinate the prince and return to the ocean, her self-sacrifice triggered the intervention of the elves, formally changing the redemption mechanism from love dependence to moral practice. This turning point is crucial. It first confirms that the acquisition of the soul is the ultimate and only salvation of the little mermaid. Secondly, it shows that redemption is difficult and long, but it is possible after all. Love can't achieve the goal directly, but the little mermaid's persistence and kindness have won her the qualification to fight for her soul and a new way.

Therefore, Andersen's entire narrative construction places the soul firmly at the apex of the salvation system. Whether it is the initial love for the prince, or the ulti-

mate commitment to self-sacrifice and good deeds, it points to the same ultimate goal, that is, to obtain an immortal soul and achieve eternal life and spiritual sublimation. Love is an important way and test, but the soul itself is the final answer to the irreplaceable salvation subject and the meaning of life that the little mermaid pursues at all costs.

In the ending of *The Fisherman and His Soul*, Wilde completely negates the value of the soul and establishes a soulless love centered on the physical senses as its destructive substitute. This kind of substitution is not a gentle replacement, but a double negation of the value of the soul, which finally declares the ultimate legitimacy of this soulless love. First of all, Wilde directly denied the necessity of the existence of soul. The existence of mermaid itself is a challenge to the immortal concept of Christian soul. Grandma Mermaid said that mermaids live longer than humans, but they have no soul. This establishes a concept of immortality under the system of marine mythology, completely bypassing the soul, the core medium of Christian redemption. The existence of the mermaid proves that immortality and happiness can exist independently from the soul, which fundamentally shakes the indispensable sacred position of the soul.

Secondly, the story more profoundly negates the salvation value of the soul. In the two years that the fisherman waited for the mermaid to respond, the soul continued to lure the fisherman with evil and good, and no response was received. Finally, when the fisherman held the dead mermaid's body and waited for death, the soul wailed and asked him to flee to a safe place. The fisherman ignored it and chanted "love is better than wisdom, and more precious than riches, and fairer than the feet of the daughters of men." (Wilde 2017:81) This is not only a rejection of the soul, but also a denial of all the values represented by the soul. The fisherman's behavior shows that pure love is more primitive, stronger and more valuable than the soul, and becomes the ultimate meaning carrier beyond the soul and death. In the face of love, the soul is not only useless, and even the need to be resolutely rejected interference.

Finally, the legitimacy of this soulless love was dramatically disproved by the priest's refusal to be buried. The priest thinks that the fisherman "who for love's sake forsook God" (Wilde 2017:82) should be cursed with the mermaid. However, this behavior just certifies the purity of fisherman's love from the opposite side. The love between fisherman and mermaid is regarded as impure because it is completely divorced from the soul redemption framework recognized by the church and because of its pure pagan color. Death is not a punishment at this moment, but the final coronation of this love. His combination with the mermaid reached eternity in death, completely bypassing the path of soul redemption.

Therefore, the core essence of Wilde's adaptation of *The Little Mermaid* is that the sacred status of soul salvation is completely replaced by the love of physical senses. Through the double negation of the necessity of soul and the value of salvation,

Wilde completed a radical reversal of life values. The fisherman's story declares the right to self-determination of life out of the traditional theological framework. Love, especially its physical and sensory dimensions, is elevated to the highest value of existence and the ultimate meaning of self-sufficiency, while the soul is completely abandoned as a redundant or even harmful obstacle.

5. Conclusion

The core difference between the two works lies in the positioning and acquisition logic of the soul. Andersen demanded the salvation of the soul through the instrumentalization of love and moral labor, while Wilde proved that the soul was a burden that hindered the true emotion. As Jack Zipes points out: "and Andersen offer a pseudocriticism of real social conditions to guarantee that children of all classes will mind their manners and preserve the status quo—all to the advantage of those who control the dominant discourse" (Jack Zipes, 2012:105), while Osacar Wilde is "truly 'classical' fairy-tale writers……who used the fairy tale as a radical mirror to reflect what was wrong with the general discourse on manners, mores, and norms in society, and they commented on this by altering the specific discourse on civilization in the fairy-tale genre". This opposition embodies and promotes the change of the function of fairy tales. Andersen's text continues the tradition of moral education, while Wilde's text turns to the criticism of the existing value order.

The core disagreement between Andersen and Wilde on the value of soul finally points to the profound experiment and internal dilemma of aestheticism in exploring the path of redemption in the 19th century. The paradigm of soulless love redemption constructed by Wilde through *The Fisherman and His Soul* is essentially a radical departure from the traditional theological redemption framework. He completely transferred the right of redemption to the individual and anchored it in the current path of aesthetic passion, which reflected the core proposition of aestheticism in pursuing the art of life and replacing religion with beauty. However, this scheme also exposes the insurmountable paradox of aestheticism redemption. Although stripping the soul liberates the body and the senses, it also pulls away from the social connection and historical depth of human beings, so that salvation is suspended on the instantaneous aesthetic ecstasy. The final death of the fisherman, while giving the tragic legitimacy of soulless love, also implies the vulnerability of pure sensory love in the face of time erosion and death, and the permanence of its commitment is facing severe challenges. This internal tension reveals the key limitation of aestheticism's redemption path, that is, over-reliance on aesthetic self-discipline may alienate the ethical dimension and social foundation required for redemption. Therefore, Wilde's experiment is not only a negation of Andersen's soul salvation, but also a rehearsal exploration of how to reconstruct the meaning of life after the collapse of transcendental value. Its value is not to provide a perfect answer, but to ask questions sharply with a paradoxical ending. It points out that the

exploration of redemption for future generations needs to seek a more solid meaning between aesthetic autonomy and ethical care, between individual ultimate experience and human common value.

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