

# Mermaids

ECL 305: Literature and the Environment

Spring 2025. Professor Pressman

Day 13: Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* (1837)

# ADMIN

- At MIDTERM:
- Blogs— some of you are way under the count for blog completion at midterm. Please see me if you have questions. Remember- intros do NOT count towards your total.
- -remember late posts DO NOT count (after Sunday at midnight)

# Peer Review

**A strong thesis has 3 parts:** the What, Where/How, and the Why (a.k.a “So What?”)

**1) What** do you see?: This is your insight

**2) Where** do you see it? **How** is it being done?: This is where you use specific elements from the work to support your insight

**3) Why** is this relevant? **So What?**: This is where you explain *why* your insight is relevant, where you make an argument about *what* the work is saying/doing with and through your insight. This is where you push your insight to larger conclusions about the work as a whole.

# Example thesis statements

1) In *Undine*, by Froqué, the contrast of soulless elemental beings and soul-bearing humans is used to critique the destructive desire for domination that humans hold over nature. The elemental characters' effortless harmony with the natural world is illustrated in the line "we are merry, without having aught to grieve us" (Penguin, 105). This suggests that emotional detachment and spiritual absence enable coexistence with nature, while human consciousness, driven by control and fear of the unknown, disrupts that balance. The story ultimately suggests that the human obsession with controlling what cannot be controlled, such as nature, leads to disharmony and also to personal and collective ruin.

# Example thesis statements

2) Undine's speech to Huldbrand lays the ground for the idea that all beings aspire to have and desire a divine soul under the notion that moral advancement is dependent on Christian faith, setting the narrative that these "soulless" beings may be joyful, but they are incomplete.

# Discussion

- What surprised you in reading the actual text?
- What do you want to discuss?

# From your blogs- the underworld other

- JESMOND: While reading Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*, what stood out to me in this tale is just how different the underwater world is compared to the terrestrial world. Since the underwater world remains largely unexplored, we can only make of its supposed beauty through what we *think* lies below. That the depths of the ocean hides a world that is completely alien to the land above....In the beginning, the narrator reminds us that the ocean is "so deep ... that no rope can fathom it; and many church steeples need be piled upon the other to reach from the bottom to the surface." (108) Just *how* deep is the ocean, and *how much* of it have we not explored?
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# From your blogs- depicting other

- NELLIE: Andersen wrote about what he can only imagine it would be like to look into our world from such an unimaginable viewpoint. Somehow, he still managed to integrate Western Christianity into a fairy tale about a young woman who lived separate from all things “worldly”. This proves that, as much as we try to understand the incomprehensible, and walk in the shoes of or (swim in the tails) of others, our own learned perspectives will often prevail.

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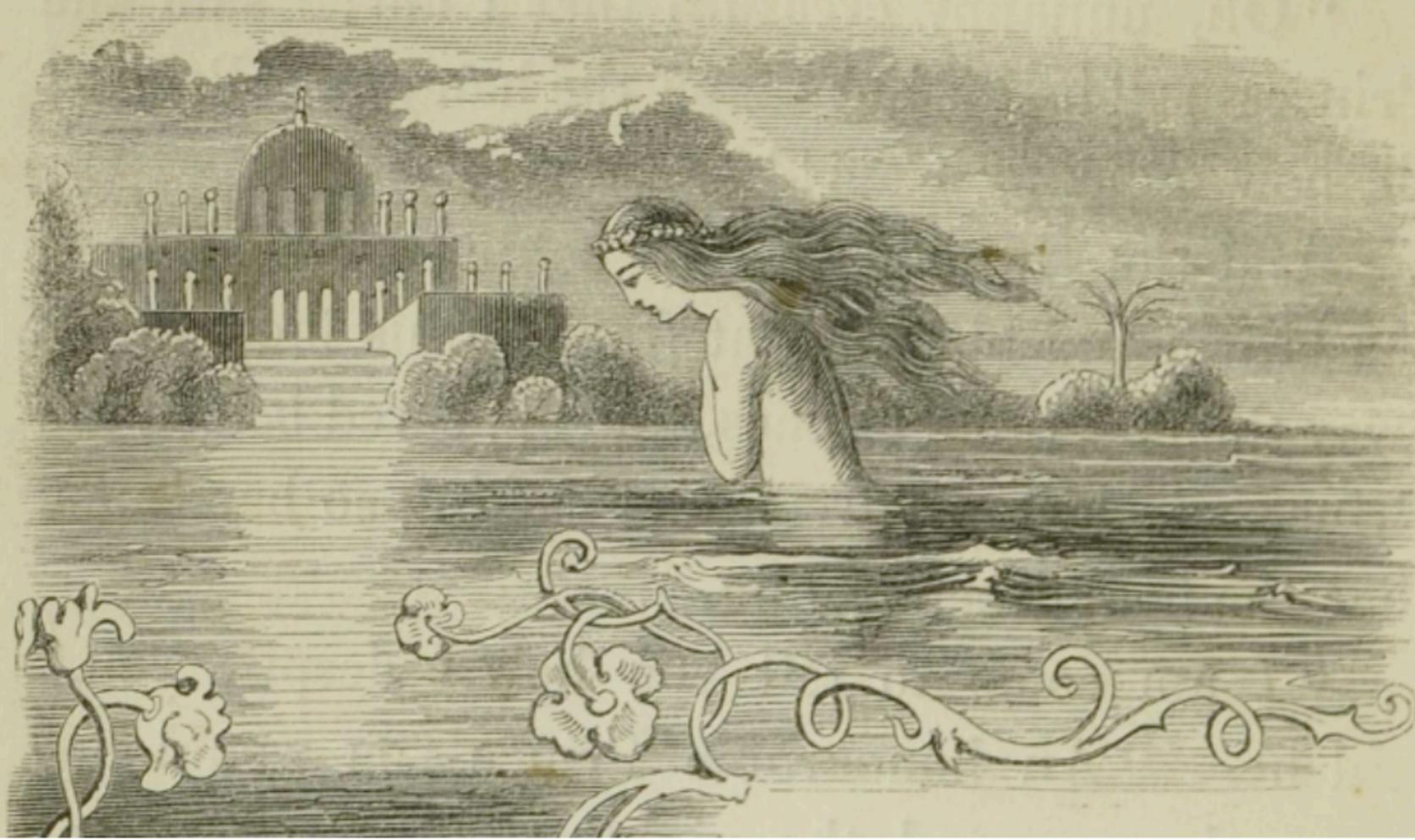
# From your blogs- boundaries and borders

- ALYSSA: In Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* is built in a world full of boundaries—between sea and land, voice and vision, loss and desire— is built. The story of the mermaid carries emotional power that lies not only in its romance but in its fixation on its land crossings. From the opening description of the ocean floor being “as clear as the purest crystal. But it is very deep—so deep...no rope could fathom it” (108), Andersen establishes a paradox that moves the story; transparency does not mean it's accessible. If a boundary is visible, it doesn't always need to be crossed. The mermaid's world glitters with boundaries, thresholds that she can see but cannot touch, like amber windows, marble steps, and water so clear it hides nothing yet conceals everything.

# From your blogs- sacrifice for.....

- GAVIN: In Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*, the sea witch's caution shows how the journey of the mermaid is all about sacrifice and the price that comes with longing to be part of another world...life requires sacrifices of our past and present to inherent what we desire most for our future. .. Last, **this story is not just about receiving what we want most, but it is about learning how to deal with the decisions we make.**
- ASHLEY: The little mermaid wants to enter the human world to be with her prince, **but more than that, she would give up everything for one human day "to have the hope of sharing in the joys of the heavenly world."** Andersen escalates the message we learn from Undine by reiterating the ascent to heaven: "a soul... that rises up through the clear pure air to the bright stars above! Like as we rise out of the water to look at the haunts of men, so do they rise to the unknown and favoured regions" (118).

## THE LITTLE MERMAID.



**A Danish Story-book (1846)** featured illustrations by Count Franz Graf von Pocci, a German writer, illustrator, puppeteer and courtier.



Illustration by Mabel Lucie Attwell from [Hans Andersen's Fairy Stories \(1901\)](#).



• Walter Crane, 1870



• Bilibine, 1937

# Victorian Mermaids



Edward Burne-Jones,  
*Depths of the Sea* (1887)



• John William Waterhouse 1900



Fredric Leighton, *The Fisherman and the Syren* (1858)

# Victorian Mermaids



John Waterhouse, *Hylas and the Nymphs*



Howard Pyle. *The Mermaid* (1910)



John Waterhouse, *The Siren* (1900)

# Charles Darwin (1809-1882)

- The theory: animals more suited to their environment survive longer and have more young. Evolution occurred by a process he called 'Natural Selection'. Darwin struggled with the idea; it contradicted his Christian world view.
- 1859: publishes theory
- Wracked by doubt
- Doesn't defend his theory; others do
- 1869: *Origin of Species* a bestseller worldwide and went into multiple editions.
- 1871: *Descent of Man*
- Dies a recluse, ill and unsure

[From the JOURNAL of the PROCEEDINGS OF THE LINNEAN SOCIETY for  
August 1858.]

On the Tendency of Species to form Varieties; and on the Perpetuation of Varieties and Species by Natural Means of Selection. By CHARLES DARWIN, Esq., F.R.S., F.L.S., & F.G.S., and ALFRED WALLACE, Esq. Communicated by Sir CHARLES LYELL, F.R.S., F.L.S., and J. D. HOOKER, Esq., M.D., V.P.R.S., F.L.S., &c.

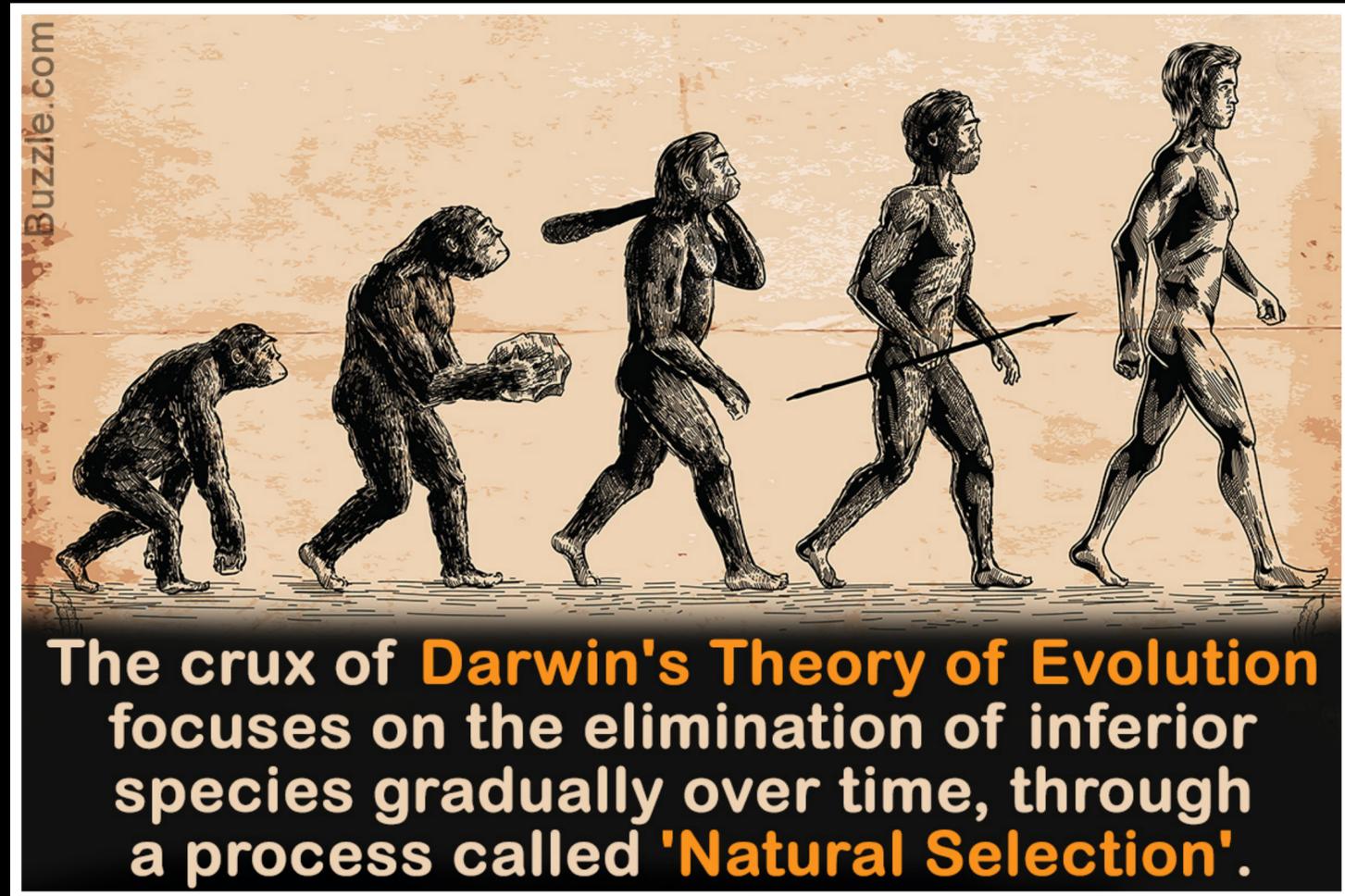
[Read July 1st, 1858.]

London, June 30th, 1858.

MY DEAR SIR,—The accompanying papers, which we have the

# Darwin's Theory of Evolution

- Animals more suited to their environment survive longer and have more young. Evolution occurred by a process he called 'Natural Selection'. Darwin struggled with the idea; it contradicted his Christian world view.
- rhetorical, not scientific, opposition to “creationism”
- His ideas supported those of Herbert Spencer and intervened in debates around Europe



# Impact of a theory

# Survival of the fittest

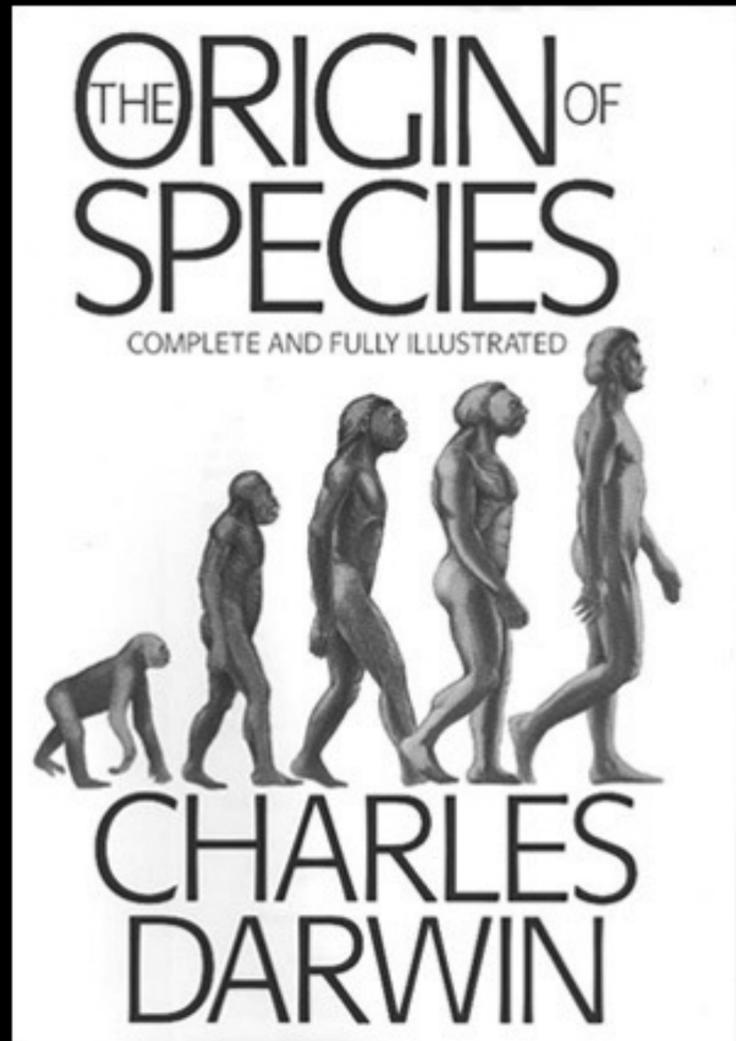
- Social Darwinism

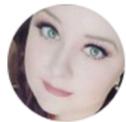


- Darwin's *The Origin of the Species* (1859) inspired many political, moral, racist adaptations and applications



# Primitivism & Racism





Satisha King @Darkat218 · Jul 13, 2019



How I feel about the new little mermaid [#NotMyAriel](#) [#NotMyMermaid](#)  
[#notmylittlemermaid](#)



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49



Ghost of Disney Past @KinglyFirefly · Jul 16, 2019



If you're anti-white, you're racist. And no, I don't want you to be part of my world. [#NotMyAriel](#) [#NotMyMermaid](#)



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# 'Racist fish' spray-painted on Denmark's Little Mermaid

WORLD | DENMARK | ⌚ Friday 3 July 2020, 1:10pm



*The 'Little Mermaid' statue was created as a tribute to storyteller Hans Christian Andersen  
Credit: The 'Little Mermaid' statue was created as a tribute to storyteller Hans Christian Andersen*

# Discussion questions

- Why does it matter that this story is for children?
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# From your blogs

- MELISSA: In Hans Christian Anderson's fairy tale *The Little Mermaid* there are multiple references of pain below and above the water. This story is clearly meant to be shared with children and like most fairy tales there is a concurrent of morality and coming of age allegory, in when and how pain is felt for this young mermaid....With the pair both having royal obligations, not listening to their the parent/family is more than a private rebellion it is a political rebellion with larger implications for their court and country. One must be obedient to the greater good. Making the lesson of the tale about how one will only experience pain when betraying your familial obligation, is not only a way to prove parents know best but to covertly imply it is against nature to do so.

# From your blogs- pain as lesson

- MORGAN: The text says “The little mermaid drank the sharp and burning potion, and it seemed as if a two edged sword was run through her delicate frame. She fainted away, and remained apparently lifeless”. This description makes it clear that becoming human isn’t a beautiful or effortless process. Andersen turns what could have been a peaceful fairy tale moment into a scary and painful experience. ...The mermaid’s transformation is both a personal act of courage as well as a reflection on our world that sometimes values beauty and obedience over self expression. ..Her pain is the price of consciousness, desire and soil.

**Take aways?**