

Human and Non-Human Beings: Ecological Discourses in European Fairy Tales

Wen-Hui Chang 

ABSTRACT

From childhood, we have heard many fairy tales that are fascinating and imaginative to attract children. The impact of fairy tales on kids' lives includes making their lives colorful, expanding their horizons to the world, and even having the meaning of moral education. Behind almost every European fairy tale, there seems to be a deep connection between nature and human beings, beings that have not only played a substantial role in our perception of environmental writing but also transferred to modern movies, novels, and children's literature. Forest, the origin of enigma and mystery, plays a significant role in European fairy tales. Throughout the folktales, mythology, and Medieval Romance literature, the enchanted forests represent the places of the unknown, the cradle of uncertainty and danger. Another essential role of natural writing in European fairy tales is the ocean and the lake. As in many cultures, the ocean is the beginning of life, the place where it brings prosperity. As for in the literature, the ocean is often represented as human emotions, love, pity, calm, or greed. Therefore, are the ecological representations related to fairy tales real or imaginary? Can the characters in these tales be reflected in the text or images and compared to typical figures related to ecology? This paper intends to analyze European fairy tales from an ecological perspective. By comparing the tales' natural elements and non-human beings' plots, an attempt is made to summarize the ecological prototypes of European fairy tales.

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Department of Applied Linguistics
and Language Studies, Chung Yuan
Christian University, Taiwan.

*Corresponding Author:
e-mail: vivianne@cycu.edu.tw

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1. INTRODUCTION

A fairy tale is a short story typically written for children, featuring magic, enchantments, and mythical, fanciful, or imaginary beings or characters, such as elves, goblins, trolls, wizards, and dragons. Fairy tales belong to traditional folklore genres, and many were passed down from storyteller to storyteller before being recorded in books. Since there are no rules that define fairy tales, if a story takes place in a magical land, it is very likely to be a fairy tale. Therefore, they are categorized by their elements, types, or motifs.

"The Little Red Riding Hood," adapted in various and numerous modern readings, videos, and so on, can be dated back to the 17th century, and the best-known versions were recorded by Perrault (2009) and the Brothers Grimm, with the former's version considered to be the oldest version. "The Little Red Riding Hood" was known as "Le Petit Chaperon Rouge" in 17th-century French folklore. It was also printed in the collections *Tales and Stories of the Past with Morals* and *Tales of Mother Goose* in 1697 by Charles Perrault. The story describes Little Red Riding Hood following her mother's instruction to visit her grandmother. However, her mother does not warn the girl of the possible dangers she would face. The poor girl is, therefore, eaten by the wolf in the end. After hundreds of years, the Brothers Grimm revised the old version of the tale. The story "Rotkäppchen" was included in the first edition of their collection *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* (Grimms' Fairy Tales; Grimm & Grimm, 1812). The Brothers Grimm's version differed from Perrault's in that by the end of the story, the girl and her grandmother are still alive. With the help of a brave woodsman, the girl and her grandmother are saved, and the wolf is killed in the end. Later, the fairy tale is adapted into *Red and the City*, a contemporary children's



picture book, by the famous writer and illustrator Marie Viogt. The story is about Red going to the city alone and bringing a cake for her grandmother. Owing to her hunger, Red can't help but eat the cake. As a result, she roams the city to find a new gift for her grandmother but is swallowed up in the city by an overwhelming variety of choices. Red must find her own path and discover what matters most.

"Beauty and the Beast" is another well-known fairy tale that everyone must have read in their childhood. It is about a brave and beautiful girl, Belle, who must live with the Beast in a castle if only to save her father. As time goes by, Belle finds out that the beast is not as real a monster as she had thought and starts falling in love with him. The moral of the story is that "a person's beauty comes from his or her heart, not his or her appearance." Disney's movie adaptation of *Beauty and the Beast* starts with an old beggar woman who offers the prince a rose in exchange for shelter. However, disgusted by the woman's appearance, the prince turns her down. After the prince refuses to let her in, the woman reveals that she is a witch, and she transforms the prince into a horrible beast and casts a spell on his castle and servants. The rose she offered him is revealed to be an enchanted rose that will bloom until his 21st birthday. The witch tells the prince that the spell will be broken only when he is able to love another person and have that person love him back before the last petal on the rose falls; otherwise, he will remain a beast for life. As time goes by, Belle and the Beast grow closer; he gives her access to a library where she can read all of the books she wants, saves her from the wolves, and even shares a romantic dance with her. The Beast lets Belle use a magic mirror to see her father, whereupon she discovers that he's lost in the woods. Seeing her worried, the Beast decides to let Belle leave the castle to save her father. During the fight, the Beast dies in Belle's arms, and she tearfully reveals her love for him. The curse is finally broken; the Beast is revived, and all his servants return to their human forms.

The original version of "The Little Mermaid"¹ has inspired readers around the world with the courage and kindness with which the tale's heroine pursues love. However, the original version does not have a happy ending for each character: the little mermaid loses her life, the family of the little mermaid loses their most cherished treasure, and the prince and his wife also feel sad about the disappearance of the little mermaid. The Disney version of *The Little Mermaid* is very close to the contemporary idea of independent women. She has her own ideas and dares to put them into practice. She is also lucky enough to have a group of friends to help her at critical moments. At the end of the story, she is blessed by everyone and marries the prince. The Disney version seems to compensate for the regret and failure in the original version. In modern times, mermaids in both East and West are far from the arrogant and animalistic nature of the original form and tend to be kind and beautiful. Perhaps they also symbolize human aspirations: despite the sadness and elusiveness of love and beauty, human beings continue to seek and approach them. Compared with the arrogant beauty of Western mermaids, the kind-hearted Oriental mermen are indifferent in character and ambiguous in appearance and gender. The ecological discourses conveyed by the abovementioned fairy tales somehow differ. This study seeks to analyze fairy tales from an ecological perspective and present a dialogue between human and non-human beings while examining the relationship between nature and man in different versions through an ecological inquiry into the issue of existence.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A fairy tale is a kind of story that belongs to the genre of folktale. Such stories usually consist of magic, enchantment, and mythical or fanciful beings. Although called fairy tales, they do not always feature fairies. Sometimes we find fairies in them, but we can also encounter witches, queens, goblins, elves, dwarves, giants, princes, dragons, talking animals, ogres, princesses, talking mirrors, etc. The way these stories end, the so-called "fairy-tale ending," is usually distinguished by unusual happiness for the protagonists. Fairy tales usually do not contain more than superficial references to religion and actual places, people, and events. They take place "once upon a time" rather than in actual times.

"The Water of Life," a German fairy tale collected by the Brothers Grimm and included in their second volume of *Grimms' Fairy Tales* (Grimm & Grimm, 1812), deals with the relatable nature of how water plays a vital role in life and death. From the point of view of Christianity, we may assume that it is a kind of spiritual water that can bring one to life again. The tale is so lucid and simple that it almost defies analysis. Situation, speech, and action blend in one flowing narrative. A king is dying and can only be restored to health by drinking some of the titular water of life that comes from a land far away. The story clearly shows that the so-called water not only gives life but is also the origin of life. Water is the symbol of life, purity, and hope, common values that unite us and that we should take into account much more. Aware of the value of the water of life, the dying king reluctantly gives his sons, one after the other, permission to seek this cure. Now, we can learn the moralistic lesson that arrogance itself is a

¹Mermaid (n.d.). In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved from <https://zh.wikipedia.org/zh-tw/%E4%BA%BA%E9%AD%9A>.

trap, and in this story, the ravines are symbolic of the hard pride of the two older brothers, which keeps them from progressing. The two older brothers answer the dwarf's question rudely, making him send them up a ravine. The water of life can only be obtained by those who are true, kind, and good-hearted. Before the story's end, the youngest brother is tested by the good dwarf, falls in love with a princess in an enchanted castle, tames two lions, saves the kingdoms of three kings, survives the treachery of his brothers, and finally finds happiness. The story highlights the true essence of the water of life, of human consciousness: our relationship with water is profound and enriching. A principal common to all of the stories is the contemplation of water as an element intrinsically linked to life and union with the world. Thus, water is used to describe the creation, destruction, purification, and regeneration. The main symbols in the story speak for themselves. The wand and the two small loaves of bread that admit the prince into the castle become, magically, the sword and the loaf by which he saves the three kingdoms.

In Jackie Morris' rendition of "East of the Sun, West of the Moon," a fairy tale from [Asbjørnsen and Moe's \(1844\)](#) second volume of *Norwegian Folktales* (), the elements of the natural setting converge in the cold northlands, featuring a young girl and a polar bear. The tale also includes a white bear knocking on the window and a girl on the back of the wind, flying in search of the imaginary, non-existent place "East of the Sun, West of the Moon." It is a perfect tale for cold and snowy nights, and here, the wind plays the role of a spiritual guide to the heroine when she is helpless. The story is about a girl who follows a white bear because she wants to see the world. Later, she follows a cursed prince to a place that lies at "the east of the sun and the west of the moon." It is about leaving home and homesickness and the tough choices on the road, which are nevertheless part of life. The story is Jack Morris's retelling of the classic fairy tale of the same name. The story has two parts: the first is a simple fairy tale reminiscent of "Beauty and the Beast," and the second is reminiscent of "Cupid and Psyche." The story also deals with the theme of betrayal and bravery when the bear warns the youngest daughter not to talk to her mother alone. She breaks his trust and talks secretly with her mother, who tries consistently to have a mother-daughter conversation, thereby resulting in the very obstacle she encounters. Much of the action takes place with the girl riding on the back of one of the winds in her search for her beloved, who resides *east of the sun and west of the moon*, to free him from his enchantment. She is brave enough to confidently respond to the call of the wind—of adventure—as, in actuality, she already embarked on an adventurous life the moment she agreed to marry the bear. In the end, she is able to free her handsome prince, who initially takes the form of a bear.

Another fairy tale full of elements of nature, particularly the forest, is "The Twelve Brothers," which was collected by the Brothers Grimm and included in Andrew Lang's *The Red Fairy Book*. The whole story takes place in the forest, which is a place of refuge and rest where deep symbolic meanings can be found. It is a place where man is stripped bare of his pretenses and posturing, revealing him to be powerless in the face of nature's overwhelming forces. We can understand the power of the forest through the story of the twelve sons who hide in the forest until a new baby is born. To escape their father's cruel betrayal, the brothers seek refuge in the forest, which is naturally rich enough to provide them with food and shelter. Since the forest represents being lost, exploration, potential dangers, and other mysteries, it has always been linked to the subconscious, which is also a frequent motif in this story. When the brothers move to an enchanted cottage, the forest provides them with food as they hunt animals. The forest therefore represents strangeness, danger, freedom, and at the same time, a kind of salvation for those who know how to seek refuge in it.

The lakes, an important source of food and water in many cultures, symbolize mystery and temptation, as their surroundings can be foggy, and the life underneath their placid surface is often obscured and not fully known. In "The Honest Woodcutter" from *Aesop's Fables* ([Aesop, 2018](#)), we can see the lakes representing the temptation of desires and also the false expectations they give rise to, implying their obscurity and unknowability. Moreover, in "The Enchanted Lake" from the *Irish Folktales*, we see that people's attitudes toward lakes can be somewhat negative:

In the west of Ireland, there was a lake in which many young men had drowned. Their bodies were never found. People naturally wondered at this, and the lake came to have a bad reputation. Many dreadful stories were told about the lake. Some said that on a dark night, its waters appeared like fire. Others would speak of horrid forms which were seen to glide over it. ([Glassie, 1997](#))

This perspective of lakes can be traced back to the 5th and 6th centuries in Welsh mythology, from which the Lady of the Lake originates, a fairy-like enchantress who is mysterious and vile. When lakes, seas, and oceans are mentioned, we think of non-human beings, such as mermaids, a compound of the Old English mere (sea), and maid (a girl or young woman), the equivalent term in Old English is "merewif." They are conventionally depicted as beautiful, with long flowing hair. According to the

mermaid of Greek mythology (especially in *The Odyssey*) was originally conceived to be half-bird, half-woman, the image gradually shifting to that of a fish-tailed woman called the siren. This kind of shift possibly started as early as the Hellenistic Period but is clearly evident in the mermaid-like depictions of “sirens” in later Christian bestiaries. Some attributes of Homer’s sirens include the luring of sailors, which ultimately causes their deaths. The siren’s beautiful song also became attached to the mermaid. The mermaid is mostly used to symbolize misfortune. In Warsaw, the capital of Poland, the mermaid is a local symbol and patron saint of the city. Since the 16th century, the mermaid has appeared on the coat of arms of Warsaw, and many images related to the mermaid can be seen in the city. There is a statue of a mermaid in Warsaw’s Old Town Square. The Japanese ningyo (人魚, literally “human-fish”) has been glossed as a being that is usually part human female and part fish, but the notable dictionary *Kōjien* modified the definition to part human without distinction in terms of gender. There is also the legend of Yaobikuni in Japan, a woman who gains miraculous longevity after eating the meat of a mermaid. Therefore, in Japan, the mermaid symbolizes longevity.

3. NATURE: THE FOREST

Fairy tales exist in every culture in the world and are associated with the elements of nature, such as the sea, forest, flowers, winds, earth, fire, rivers, etc. The reason why these elements of nature are used in almost all fairy tales is due to these stories’ representation of the unknown, where anything can happen. That is to say, nature is the most inevitable, unavoidable, and inescapable part of the world. It is outside of the daily experience of man and is both a magical realm and a place of danger. It is a place of freedom and wildness where normal rules no longer apply. Strange events can take place in forests and seas, amid winds and flowers, and they can serve as a catalyst for the hero or heroine’s transformation after overcoming various difficulties and finding his or her way back home. These elements of nature may also represent the things that we fear the most. For example, while the forest can represent a hiding place where we can take refuge, it is also a place full of mystery, where the imagination runs riot. The forest is therefore one of the most common fairy tale settings. It is located beyond the safety and familiarity of the town or village.

The symbolism of the forest can be found in many sources in both traditional and modern literature. In myths, folktales, and medieval romances, the enchanted forest² represents the unknown, the cradle of uncertainty and danger. The Foloi oak forest in southwestern Greece is considered by the ancient Greeks to be the realm of centaurs and dryads, mysterious creatures from their mythology. As we can see in numerous stories in the *Grimms’ Fairy Tales*, the forest is an unknown place where mysterious forces lurk. In “The Twelve Brothers,” the cottage the brothers flee to is located deep in the forest and is enchanted. Moreover, in the Brothers Grimm’s “The Three Little Men in the Wood,” curses and wishes are often deeply connected to the forest:

The maiden looked for strawberries outside, but as she found none, she went angrily home. And when she opened her mouth and was about to tell her mother what had happened to her in the wood, with every word she said, a toad sprang out of her mouth so that everyone was seized with horror of her. (Grimm & Grimm, 1812)

In other tales, such as “Rapunzel,” “Cinderella,” “Little Snow White,” etc., we also find representations of the forest as a place of magic and the paranormal. Beneath the mysteries and the enigma of the forest lurk jeopardy and wickedness. In “Rapunzel” and “Little Snow White” specifically, although the vileness may not necessarily originate from the forest itself, we can assume that in the past, people viewed the forest as a place of the unknown that may conceal potential dangers. For instance, in “Little Snow White” from the *Grimms’ Fairy Tales*:

But now the poor child was all alone in the great forest and so terrified that she looked at all the leaves on the trees and did not know what to do. Then she began to run over sharp stones and through thorns, and the wild beasts ran past her but did her no harm. (Grimm & Grimm, 1812)

Other examples are “The Little Red Riding Hood” and “The Wolf and the Seven Young Kids,” where the Wolf serves as a metaphor for the danger people might encounter in the forest, as we glean from the dialogue:

²Enchanted Forest (n.d.). In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved from https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enchanted_forest.

So she called all seven to her and said, dear children, I have to go into the forest; be on your guard against the wolf. If he comes in, he will devour you all-skin, hair, and everything. The wretch often disguises himself, but you will know him at once by his rough voice and his black feet. (Grimm & Grimm, 1812)

The representation of flowers is quite enchanting in “The Twelve Brothers.” After reuniting with her twelve brothers, the sister picks twelve lilies from a cottage’s garden out of ignorance, and as a result, all her brothers transform into crows. This shows that human beings are very much related and have a close connection to nature, as the brothers’ lives are contained in the flowers, and they transform into animals. This indicates the idea that one should not try to destroy and waste nature, as the flowers bloom with their own purpose. For breaking nature’s unspoken rules, the sister must undergo the difficult task of restoring her brothers to their normal human forms again. Moreover, the story celebrates the girl’s power from her birth and to her ultimate vow of silence, as she holds the power of life and death over her brothers. Yet she does not simply wield that power for her own benefit but instead does so sacrificially. We see this being represented by the Star on her forehead. It is a sign of greatness and inner grace.

Drawing from traditional literature, works of modern fantasy often figure the forest as a place of mystery and danger. In the *Harry Potter* book series, the “Forbidden Forest,” also known as the Dark Forest, borders the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry grounds. This forest is home to mysterious creatures that hold many secrets, representing the dark and dangerous side of the school. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the forest is the very place where all the magical sequences take place, representing a mystical space of which people have little understanding. In the novel series *Warriors*, the forest is also the place where all the adventures, wars, and dramas of the Clans of wild cats unfold. These similarities indicate that European fairy tales continue to play a consequential and influential role in modern literature.

4. NON-HUMAN BEINGS: WOLF AND BEAST

Among the representative non-human characters in fairy tales, the wolf is one of the most frequent villains. When Little Red Riding Hood, in Perrault’s version, obeys the wolf to take her clothes off and get into bed with him, she is eaten in the end. However, in the Brothers Grimm’s version, there is no obvious description of the girl undressing. The girl simply approaches the wolf and gets eaten. Compared with these two versions, the wolf is not a real character in the modern version. Red is almost swallowed up by the novelty of the city and forgets her way to her grandmother’s house. In Perrault’s version, the grandmother and the girl are both eaten by the hungry wolf. By contrast, in the Brothers Grimm’s version, there is a huntsman who shows up in the end. Using a pair of scissors, the huntsman cuts open the stomach of the sleeping wolf, saving the grandmother and the girl. Together, they fill the wolf’s belly with stones. When the wolf wakes up and tries to run away, the stones are too heavy for him to escape, and finally, he dies. At the end of the story, another wolf appears and talks to the girl. This time, the girl is more vigilant than before. She arrives at her grandmother’s house earlier than the wolf. The girl and grandmother make a plan to drown the wolf. For the girl, she is extremely happy because no one can harm her again. However, *Red and the City* are totally different from the two versions above. In the end, Red defeats the excitement of the city, which nearly makes her lose her way, and arrives at her grandmother’s house. Red and her grandmother eat the delicious cake and talk about the wonderful things they can do in the big city.

In Chinese culture, wolves are also seen as notorious animals. According to Chinese idioms, such as “狼狽為奸” (lang bei wei jian, or two people are working together to do something dishonest) and “狼子野心” (lang zi ye xin, or a person is greedy, cruel, and full of wild ambitions), wolves symbolize cunning and ferocity. However, when people get to know more about wolves, they realize their pack mentality or team spirit. Wolves are found in packs and rely on each other for survival. Nowadays, people and many companies have started to learn and imitate the spirit of wolves. In general Western culture, wolves are respected animals, and their spirit is widely circulated among people. It not only symbolizes the meaning of teamwork but also symbolizes the spirit of the guard. The wolves do not leave their partners, and they assist each other in hunting. If some of the wolves get lost, the leader of the pack never leaves them. It howls to call back the missing members. In addition, the hunting style of wolves is considered to be strategic. They perform their duties and complete their hunt in the most efficient way, and people respect them until now. In many movies or novels, there is a common image of wolves. Wolves always howl to the moon. Actually, wolves practice elaborate social interactions, and howling is an important form of interaction. First, wolves howl for their lost companions; through howling, they are able to contact and find each other. The other function of howling is to encourage

each other. Wolves howl before their hunt. However, the connection between the moon and the howling of wolves is just man's romantic illusion. In fact, wolves are nocturnal animals, so people usually see them howling in moonlight.

Non-human beings play a significant part in fairy tales. Throughout numerous stories, the use of magic, spells, curses, and witchcraft repeatedly turn characters into ugly beasts, noisy frogs, etc. The reason behind this recurrent motif can arguably be viewed from three different perspectives. In the past, when science was not as common and accepted as it is now, people often turned to magic and witchcraft for answers in the face of the unknown, the unexplainable, and the mysterious, as we see in such stories as "The Snow Queen," "The White Snake," "Sleeping Beauty," etc. In "The Snow Queen" from *Hans Andersen's Fairy Tales*³ (1845), we see that the entire story is permeated by an intense atmosphere of magic and witchcraft, containing events that are difficult for people to believe, hence the presence of magic. As we see in one part of the story:

When one of these tiny atoms flew into a person's eye, it stuck there unknown to him, and from that moment, he saw everything through a distorted medium or could see only the worst side of what he looked at, for even the smallest fragment retained the same power which had belonged to the whole mirror. Some few persons even got a fragment of the looking-glass in their hearts, and this was very terrible, for their hearts became cold like a lump of ice. A few of the pieces were so large that they could be used as window panes; it would have been a sad thing to look at our friends through them. Other pieces were made into spectacles; this was dreadful for those who wore them, for they could see nothing either rightly or justly. At all this, the wicked demon laughed till his sides shook. (Andersen, 1845)

The second perspective involves the use of magic and curses as admonition for people, warning them to be righteous, good-hearted, and charitable because good things tend to favor good people and instructing them to refuse greediness, immorality, and dishonesty because retribution always awaits such unethical actions. We observe this perspective at work in "The Fisherman and His Wife," "The Three Little Men in the Wood," "Little Snow White," "The Honest Woodcutter," "The Six Swans," etc. At the end of "Little Snow White," the Queen is punished by death for her heinous behavior:

Then the wicked woman uttered a curse, and was so wretched, so utterly wretched that she knew not what to do. At first she would not go to the wedding at all, but she had no peace, and had to go to see the young queen. But iron slippers had already been put upon the fire, and they were brought in with tongs, and set before her. Then she was forced to put on the red-hot shoes, and dance until she dropped down dead. (Grimm & Grimm, 1812)

In "Beauty and the Beast," to our surprise, the Beast in either the original story or the Disney version is not like a beast to Belle at all. Every time he talks to her, he is gentle and polite, just like a gentleman. Even though Belle always turns him down when he asks her to marry him, he remains calm and bids good night at the end of each day. However, if there is anything different between these two versions, it is that the Beast in the movie version looks more like a human being, as he walks on two feet most of the time. The movie also emphasizes the intelligence of the Beast, which Belle has in common with him. Most people consider the three versions of the story to be distinct from each other. The main reason why the plots and characters differ slightly is the way the authors reinterpret the tale each time, valuing one way of thinking over another and completing the story based on his or her artistic beliefs. For instance, the original story does not mention the witch, the reason why the prince becomes a beast, and the rose, which makes the story a bit unacceptable for some readers. However, in the movie version, all the plot strands are explained. It contains some new sub-plots that the audiences have never seen before, which gives the tale a sense of completion. Therefore, the interconnectedness and the inseparable relationship between human life and nature can be seen in the analysis above. "Human life itself is the most wonderful fairy tale," says a beautiful quote from Hans Christian Andersen, implying the inextricable link between human and non-human beings. It is not that atrocious and dreadful for a person to have a profound fantasy in a fairy tale. Fairy tales can also not be taken as simply an escape from reality because they spring from the very world we live in. In summary, the often fantastic

³"The Little Mermaid" ("Den lille havfrue") is a literary fairy tale by the Danish Hans Christian Andersen. The story tells of the journey of a young mermaid who is willing to give up her life—which could be as long as 300 years as a mermaid under the sea—for a chance to become a real human and pursue her love. It was written in 1836 and was first published by C.A. Reitzel in Copenhagen in Andersen's first collection, *Fairy Tales Told for Children*. Refer to: Andersen (1845). *Hans Andersen's fairy tales*. Puffin Books.

non-human beings in fairy tales serve to thermalize and reveal the link between the human and the non-human.

5. NATURE AND NON-HUMAN BEINGS: THE OCEAN AND MERMAIDS

Another essential natural habitat found in the European fairy tale is the ocean or the lake. In general, water holds various meanings and symbolism. As in many cultures, the ocean is the source of life. In literature, the ocean often represents human emotions, such as love, pity, calm, greed, etc. In “The Little Mermaid” from *Hans Andersen’s Fairy Tales*, the love of the Little Mermaid for The Prince involves a struggle between fear and affection:

All that could be reached in the sea they seized upon, and held fast, so that it never escaped from their clutches. The little mermaid was so alarmed at what she saw, that she stood still, and her heart beat with fear, and she was very nearly turning back; but she thought of the prince, and of the human soul for which she longed, and her courage returned. She fastened her long flowing hair round her head, so that the polypi might not seize hold of it. (Andersen, 1845)

Moreover, we also see the despair and sorrow the Little Mermaid feels when the Prince decides to marry the Princess from a neighboring kingdom. However, unable to shed a tear, the Little Mermaid shows her selflessness by putting the other’s interest before hers and her joy at the Prince’s moment of recognition:

“It was you,” said the prince, “who saved my life when I lay dead on the beach,” and he folded his blushing bride in his arms. “Oh, I am too happy,” said he to the little mermaid; “my fondest hopes are all fulfilled. You will rejoice at my happiness; for your devotion to me is great and sincere.” (Andersen, 1845)

Moreover, in the original version, the mermaid must have been at least 15 years old to be allowed to see the human world. The underwater kingdom, the Sea King, and the Sea Witch show us the perspective of the ocean people, which is deep, full of life and unknown mysteries.⁴ In “The Fisherman and His Wife” from the *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*, we also see human emotions, such as mercy, fear, and greed:

Then said he, wife, now that you are pope, be satisfied, you cannot become anything greater now. I will consider about that, said the woman. Thereupon they both went to bed, but she was not satisfied, and greediness let her have no sleep, for she was continually thinking what there was left for her to be. The man slept well and soundly, for he had run about a great deal during the day. But the woman could not fall asleep at all, and flung herself from one side to the other the whole night through, thinking always what more was left for her to be, but unable to call to mind anything else. (Grimm & Grimm, 1812)

Another perspective to look at is the might and the changeability of the ocean, as exemplified by the fish in “The Fisherman and His Wife,” with its ability to make wishes come true, which, like a double-edged sword, however, are just as easy to take away. Here, we see how the ocean is viewed as a powerful force of nature that people should fear and respect.

In Greek legends, mermaids enter the ocean from rivers and have the ability to make waves. Legend has it that King Alexander III of Macedon had a strong relationship with his half-sister. In 323 BC, Alexander the Great, who was under 33 years old, died of illness in Babylon. His sister turned into a mermaid and wandered the Aegean Sea. Upon encountering a ship sailing in the sea, she surfaced and asked, “Is King Alexander still alive?” The wrong answer made her furious, and she would turn into a banshee, her hair becoming serpents, and she would set off a storm. By contrast, the image of the Polish Mermaid is quite benign and heroic. According to Polish folklore, a girl who was being chased by invaders during the war threw herself into the river and turned into a mermaid. Years later, Warsaw fell again, and the mermaid resurfaced, defeated the invaders with swords and shields, and died heroically

⁴In the Disney version, the Sea Witch has ambitions of occupying the underwater world, and she sends her subordinates to stare at Ariel and lure her into the trap of her own desire to become a human being. The original version does not have these elements. The Disney version features only Ariel’s loss of voice in an exchange for human legs, and not the pain that cuts like a knife when she walks on them.

in battle. This mermaid was cast as a statue holding a sword and shield, erected on the Vistula River in 1938 when Warsaw faced the threat of fascist Germany. In Warsaw, the mermaid is a local symbol and also the city's patron saint. Since the 16th century, the mermaid has appeared on the coat of arms of Warsaw, and many things related to the mermaid can be seen in the city. There is a statue of a mermaid in Warsaw's Old Town Square. As for the mermaid in German myth, legend, and poetry, Lorelei, a beautiful mermaid, is often mentioned. On the banks of the Rhine, she confuses passing boatmen with her beautiful appearance and mournful singing. In the eyes of Westerners, although mermaids are harmful sea monsters, they are mysterious elves in the water and natural stunners who fascinate men. They are an occasion for both fascination and fear. They have men and women, and their daily pursuits are just to go to the countryside, sit on the shore and comb their long blond or green hair, play the harp, and sing. They sometimes turn into birds, and they forget their feather coats on the beach, and the mortals who pick them up can force mermaids to marry them. There are many European legends about humans who marry mermaids. The stories are quite similar. A man hides a mermaid's comb or mirror, and the mermaid must then live with him, but when she finds the lost item, she leaves her husband and goes back to the sea. The mermaids of the Mediterranean coast have a more tragic inflexion. The ancestors of the mermaids win a bet with Venus, the goddess of love and beauty. According to their agreement, Venus must now give all their descendants, the mermaids, extraordinary beauty. However, Venus is unable to tolerate the appearance of other creatures whose beauty is comparable to hers, so she refuses to give the mermaids love. Therefore, pursuing love and failing to obtain it in an infinite cycle become the intertwined tragic fate of all mermaids. Andersen's "The Daughter of the Sea" is based on this tragic premise. A mermaid falls in love with a mortal prince, who, however, loves someone else. The mermaid fails in her pursuit of love and sacrifices herself instead to save her beloved's life. This motif reconfigures the image of the European mermaid. Charm and death are no longer closely related to their image; instead, their tragic loves and sadness become the focus, winning the reader's sympathy.

China's *Taiping Guangji*⁵ also records the existence of mermaids: Some sea mermaids can be found in the East China Sea. The big ones are five or six feet long and look like humans, with eyebrows, eyes, noses, hands, and heads. All of them are beautiful women. Their flesh is as white as jade, without scales and with fine hair of light and soft colors, one or two inches long. Their hair is tied in a ponytail, one or two feet long. They are no different from anyone, and they don't hurt anyone. Before the Tang Dynasty, the common definition of a "mermaid" (merman) in ancient China was that of a strange fish in the sea, characterized by "crying" and the ability to "produce pearls." However, in the Song Dynasty, the mermaid is not only suddenly gendered but is also figured as a sexual tool. In the Qing Dynasty, the mermaid is described as a strange fish in the novel *Nanyue Notes*⁶: "When there are strong winds and rain, there are sea monsters whose faces are red, and they travel around on fish. Those who ride fish are also fish, so they are called mermen. Mermen are males. Those who get their females have sex with them. They can't speak, but can laugh. After a long time, they can wear clothes and eat grains. The female mermaid has human hair, but it is short, curly, and reddish in color, so you know she is a fish."

In Japan, the mermaid is a symbol of mystery and is imbued with different characteristics in many different legends. The Japanese ningyo (人魚, literally "human-fish") is a being that is usually part human female and part fish. However, the notable dictionary *Kōjien* modified the definition to part human, without gender distinction. The legend of Yaobikuni in Japan tells of how this woman achieves miraculous longevity after eating the meat of a mermaid. Therefore, the mermaid symbolizes longevity in Japan. The 13th-century *Anthology of Ancient and Modern Writings*⁷ describes the mermaid as follows: "The head is like that of an ape, and it has teeth as thin as those of fish. It has red flesh pleats like a cockscomb, and the lower body is in the shape of a fish." In the 18th century, the mermaid was portrayed as follows: "Its face is extremely ugly, it is a monster like an orangutan, with sharp teeth like piranhas and sharp claws, and the lower body is covered with golden scales."⁸ Moreover, in Japanese stories, humans are often able to catch live mermaids. The earliest record of this is in 617 AD. The most influential of such incidents, in that countless people witnessed it, thereby causing a sensation, was the one that occurred during the Edo period. In the ancient book of the 12th year of Kansei (AD

⁵In Chinese《太平廣記》, sometimes translated as the *Extensive Records of the Taiping Era*, or *Extensive Records of the Taiping Xinguo Period*, is a collection of stories compiled in the early Song dynasty. Refer to: Mermaid (n.d.). In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved from <https://zh.wikipedia.org/zh-tw/%E4%BA%BA%E9%AD%9A>.

⁶In Chinese《南越筆記》, is a work written by Li Tiaoyuan of the Qing Dynasty in China. The content is to record the things in Guangdong at that time. Each volume has a theme, such as Guangdong's astronomy, geography, economic products, cultural society customs, flowers, birds, fish and insects. Refer to: Mermaid (n.d.). In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved from <https://zh.wikipedia.org/zh-tw/%E4%BA%BA%E9%AD%9A>.

⁷In Chinese《古今著聞集》, is a Kamakura-period collection of setsuwa. It was compiled by Tachibana Narisue (橘成季) and completed in 1254. Refer to: The Kokon Chomonjū (n.d.). In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved September 1, 2024, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kokon_Chomonj%C5%AB.

⁸Refer to: Mermaid (n.d.). In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved from <https://zh.wikipedia.org/zh-tw/%E4%BA%BA%E9%AD%9A>.

1800), a fisherman catches a strange fish about three feet long in Haihama, near Nishibori Hirano Town, Osaka. Its body and the sound it makes are like those of a human child. Another feature of Japanese fish is that their meat is delicious and can give whoever eats them a longer life. It is said that a fisherman named Takahashi caught a mermaid. He went home and cooked it and invited the whole village to eat it. Everyone felt disgusted and dared not eat it. Only his daughter was curious enough to eat it. After everyone in the village dies, she remains young forever, living for 800 years.

6. CONCLUSION

After examining the interrelations between the natural environment and non-human beings in fairy tales, we arrive at the following three insights into the dialogue and linkages presented in these tales. First, the natural environment in these stories represents how people viewed the world at the time, as we observe the roles natural environments play in such stories. In the past, the forest was often regarded as a place of mystery with potential risks and dangers; the ocean was seen in terms of human emotions and as a mighty force of nature demanding our respect; and the lake was a mystical place of temptations with its foggy surroundings. Second, people often turned to their surroundings and imagination to interpret events they were unable to explain at the time. In addition to the environment playing an essential role in clarifying unexplainable incidents, the belief of non-human beings can also be viewed as a means of dealing with the inexplicable. Lastly, telling these stories can be seen as people's way of expressing their views of the world or their attempts to explain the unknown. Whether the role of environment or non-human beings shows us people's perspectives of the world or their attempts to explain the unexplainable, the stories that contain them may have been real stories passed down through the ages, modified stories, or completely made-up stories.

People always say that children have plenty of imagination. Why are they so creative? One answer is the fairy tales they read in their storybooks. With these stories, children live in a world teeming with fantasy and imagination. These stories light up their lives and instruct them in the sweetness and bitterness of life. In childhood, one must have read fairy tales and storybooks. Fairy tales are stories or anecdotes spread around villages or made-up stories passed on throughout the years, many of which illustrate the innate goodness or wickedness of the world. Fairy tales are formative in shaping children's imagination. However, behind almost every European fairy tale, there seems to be a deep connection between the natural world and non-natural ones, which not only plays a substantial role in our perceptions of nature but also influences our modern movies, novels, and children's literature. Fairy tales, which teach the moral values of life and the difference between good and bad, are full of images of nature: earth, water, wind, fire, ice, forest, flowers, animals, birds, light, the moon, etc. This shows us one unique and extraordinary feature of the human race: the ability to portray and pass on stories and communicate across the limits of nature and humans, even time and space.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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