

Todorov's Five Stages of Narrative in The Little Mermaid Folktale

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Abstrak – Penelitian ini menganalisis cerita rakyat berjudul *The Little Mermaid* karya Hans Christian Andersen menggunakan lima tahap naratif menurut Todorov: keseimbangan (equilibrium), gangguan (disruption), pengenalan masalah (recognition), perbaikan (repair), dan keseimbangan baru (new equilibrium). Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menjelaskan bagaimana struktur naratif tersebut berkontribusi terhadap pengembangan tema, perkembangan karakter, dan nilai-nilai moral dalam cerita. Data dikumpulkan dari teks asli cerita rakyat tersebut dan dianalisis secara kualitatif melalui analisis isi berdasarkan kerangka naratif Todorov. Analisis ini berfokus pada identifikasi peristiwa penting, tindakan karakter, dan transisi alur cerita, yang kemudian diklasifikasikan ke dalam lima tahap naratif Todorov. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa cerita rakyat ini mengikuti kelima tahap tersebut, dimulai dari kehidupan putri duyung yang damai di bawah laut dan berlanjut melalui konflik, pengorbanan, serta transformasi spiritual. Penelitian ini juga menunjukkan bahwa putri duyung berkembang dari seorang putri yang penuh rasa ingin tahu menjadi karakter yang rela berkorban dan lebih mengutamakan kasih sayang daripada kepentingan pribadi. Selain itu, cerita ini mencerminkan nilai-nilai moral seperti pengorbanan, cinta tanpa syarat, dan pertumbuhan spiritual. Secara keseluruhan, penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa teori Todorov dapat membantu menjelaskan bagaimana cerita rakyat membangun makna dan terus menyampaikan nilai-nilai etika dan budaya dari generasi ke generasi.

Kata Kunci: Cerita Rakyat, Naratif, Moral Storytelling, Teori Todorov, *The Little Mermaid*

Abstract - This study analyses Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* using Todorov's five stages of narrative: equilibrium, disruption, recognition, repair, and new equilibrium. The research aims to explain how the narrative structure contributes to the development of themes, character growth, and moral values in the story. Data were collected from the original folktale text and analysed qualitatively through content analysis based on Todorov's narrative framework. The analysis focused on identifying key events, character actions, and plot transitions, which were then classified according to Todorov's five narrative stages. The findings show that the folktale follows all five stages, beginning with the mermaid's peaceful life under the sea and continuing through conflict, sacrifice, and spiritual transformation. The study also shows that the mermaid evolves from a curious young princess into a selfless character who prioritizes compassion over personal happiness. In addition, the story reflects moral values related to sacrifice, unconditional love, and spiritual growth. Overall, this study shows that Todorov's theory can help explain how folktales construct meaning and continue to communicate ethical and cultural values across generations.

Keywords: Folktale, Narrative, Moral Lessons. *The Little Mermaid*, Todorov Theory

INTRODUCTION

Fairy tales and folktales that remain popular in society have a unique appeal and endure across generations. Folktales are not only forms of entertainment but also serve as cultural texts that reflect social values, beliefs, and collective experiences (Zipes, 2012; Dundes, 1980). Through folktales, communities preserve cultural knowledge and shape moral understanding (Bascom, 1965; Danandjaja, 2007). From a cultural perspective, folktales are important for transmitting values, norms, and traditions from one generation to another. They often reflect how a community sees the world and encode ethical and philosophical lessons (Bascom, 1965; Danandjaja, 2007). In addition, folktales can contain knowledge about the environment and social life, influencing how communities interact with nature (Berkes, 2012; Nakashima et al., 2018). In education, folktales are valuable for improving language skills, stimulating critical thinking, and supporting character development (Hendratno, 2017; Isbell et al., 2004). Storytelling encourages imagination and emotional



intelligence while fostering an inclusive classroom environment (Pulimeno et al., 2020; Nicolopoulou, 2010). Moreover, in a narratological perspective, narratives are structured and can be analysed systematically. Narrative studies examine how stories are organized, including plot, characters, and events (Genette, 1980; Bal, 1997). One widely used framework is Todorov's theory, which divides narratives into five stages: equilibrium, disruption, recognition, repair, and new equilibrium (Todorov, 1971). This approach has been applied to both literary and film studies to understand story structures (Herman, 2009; Fludernik, 2009). Dundes (1980) and Bascom (1965) emphasize that folktales function not only as entertainment but also as carriers of cultural and moral values. However, these approaches tend to focus more on what folktales do in society than on how meaning is actually constructed within the story itself. Because of that, a structural approach is still needed to see how the story develops step by step and produces meaning through its narrative flow.

Several studies have applied Todorov's framework to literary and film works (Agustina et al., 2022; Lestari et al., 2023; Wahyuningtyas & Wirajaya, 2024). These studies show how narrative stages reveal character development, plot progression, and meaning within the text. One of the most well-known fairy tales is *The Little Mermaid* by Hans Christian Andersen. The story explores themes of love, sacrifice, identity, and transformation that remain meaningful across cultures (Warner, 2014). Its symbolic elements allow for various interpretations, from moral lessons to psychological and philosophical readings (Bacchilega, 2013; Tatar, 2017). Although previous studies have explored folktales, moral education, and narrative structures, most research focuses either on the educational functions of folktales or on modern literary and cinematic narratives (Hendratno, 2017; Isbell et al., 2004; Bascom, 1965; Dundes, 1980; Danandjaja, 2007). Studies applying Todorov's framework generally analyze films, short stories, or contemporary texts rather than classical fairy tales in their original literary form (Agustina et al., 2022; Lestari et al., 2023; Wahyuningtyas & Wirajaya, 2024). Therefore, research specifically examining Hans Christian Andersen's original version of *The Little Mermaid* through Todorov's five-stage narrative structure remains limited. This study contributes to narratology by demonstrating how Todorov's framework can be used to analyze character transformation, moral conflict, and thematic development in a classical folktale. This study addresses this gap by analyzing the narrative structure of *The Little Mermaid* based on Todorov's theory. By focusing on the original folktale, this research aims to provide a clear understanding of its narrative stages and contribute to the study of folktales and narratology. This study also demonstrates the relevance of Todorov's framework for analyzing classical fairy tales in contemporary literary research.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design using content analysis. Qualitative research is appropriate for literary studies because it enables in-depth interpretation of narrative elements, character development, and thematic meanings within a text. The study applies Todorov's narrative theory, which divides narrative progression into five stages: equilibrium, disruption, recognition, repair, and new equilibrium (Todorov, 1971). This framework was selected because it emphasizes the transformation of narrative conditions through stages of balance and disruption, making it suitable for analyzing folktales that highlight conflict, sacrifice, and resolution. Compared to Propp's morphological approach, which focuses primarily on character roles, Todorov's theory provides a clearer structure for examining narrative development from conflict to resolution. This narrative framework has been widely applied in literary and film studies to analyze story structures (Lestari et al., 2023). Data collection was conducted through close reading and textual analysis of the selected folktale. The researcher identified key narrative events, character actions, dialogue, and plot transitions that contribute to the story's development. These narrative elements were then coded and categorized according to Todorov's five narrative stages. The categorization process involved three steps. First, the researcher identified segments of the text that indicate shifts in narrative conditions. Second, these segments were classified based on Todorov's framework. Third, the researcher interpreted how each stage contributes to character development, moral lessons, and thematic meaning (Perdana, 2025).

In practice, each stage was identified based on clear changes in the story. Disruption appears when the normal condition of the mermaid's life is disturbed by an important event. Recognition is marked when the character becomes aware of the consequences of her actions, especially after making a deal with the sea witch. Repair refers to the stage where she tries to deal with the situation that has already changed, while new equilibrium marks the story's final condition, whether it returns to balance or shifts into a new form. To enhance reliability and reduce subjective interpretation, the researcher repeatedly read the folktale to ensure a consistent understanding of its narrative structure. The findings were also compared with previous studies that apply Todorov's theory to strengthen analytical validity. In addition, a peer discussion was held to ensure consistency in interpreting the data. This study focuses exclusively on Andersen's original folktale and excludes adaptations in film or other media. This limitation is intended to maintain analytical consistency and ensure that the analysis remains faithful to the original narrative structure.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The researcher finds that Todorov's five stages of narrative apply to *the folktale The Little Mermaid* by Hans Christian Andersen. The analysis confirms that *The Little Mermaid* follows Todorov's five-stage progression. More importantly, the stages do not merely organize events; they gradually reposition the protagonist from a curious observer to a morally accountable agent.

Table 1. Todorov's Stages and the Development of Moral Agency

Stage	Key narrative condition	Contribution to moral agency
Equilibrium	A protected life in the underwater kingdom, accompanied by curiosity about the human world.	Establishes an apparently stable order while revealing an unresolved desire that makes the balance internally fragile.
Disruption	The mermaid surfaces, rescues the prince, and becomes emotionally attached to the human world.	Transforms curiosity into commitment and creates a conflict between inherited identity and chosen desire.
Recognition	The bargain with the sea which makes the costs of transformation explicit: loss of voice, irreversible change, and possible death.	Introduces awareness of consequences and exposes the ethical cost of pursuing desire.
Repair	After the prince chooses another woman, the mermaid is offered survival through killing him, but she rejects the knife.	Converts repair from self-preservation into a deliberate moral choice grounded in compassion.
New equilibrium	The mermaid does not return to her former life or gain romantic fulfilment; she enters a new spiritual condition.	Frames resolution as moral and spiritual transformation rather than restoration of the original order.

1. Equilibrium

The equilibrium stage depicts the mermaid's peaceful and harmonious life under the sea before conflict emerges. The underwater kingdom is represented as a beautiful and stable environment that shapes the protagonist's early identity and emotional condition. From the folktale, the equilibrium stage can be seen in the following:

"Far out of the sea, the water is as blue as cornflower petals and as clear as the purest glass. Yet it's very deep—deeper than the reach of any anchor rope. You'd have to stack a lot of steeples on top of each other to reach from the bottom to the surface. And down at the bottom is where the sea folk live." (Page 1, Paragraph 1)

"Outside the palace lay a large garden with trees that were fiery red and navy blue. The fruit shone like gold and the flowers looked like burning flames, their stems and leaves forever flickering..." (Page 1, Paragraph 5)

"Each princess had her own little garden plot where she could dig and plant just as she wished..." (Page 3, Paragraph 1)

The equilibrium stage establishes emotional stability and introduces the underwater kingdom as a symbol of harmony, innocence, and protection. However, the mermaid's curiosity about the human world indicates that the equilibrium is psychologically unstable from the beginning. This hidden desire becomes the foundation of future conflict and reflects a universal theme of identity exploration and personal transformation.

2. Disruption

The disruption stage begins when the mermaid turns fifteen and is finally allowed to visit the surface of the sea. During this moment, she encounters a prince whose ship is destroyed by a storm. She rescues the prince, and this event changes the direction of her life.

From the folktale, the disruption stage can be identified through the following quotations:

"Then finally her birthday came, and at last she was fifteen." (Page 7, Paragraph 3)

"My, how handsome the young Prince looked! He shook everyone's hand, laughing and smiling as music rang out in the gorgeous night". (Page 9, Paragraph 1)

"He would have drowned if the little mermaid hadn't reached him" (Page 10, Paragraph 1)

“Often in the morning and evening she would swim up to where she’d left the Prince... but she never saw the Prince, and so she would turn home sadder than ever” (Page 11, Paragraph 1)

“But soon she started thinking about the upper world. She couldn’t forget the handsome Prince, “ (Page 15, Paragraph 2)

“She had to swim through the middle of the deadly whirlpools to reach the region of the sea witch, “(Page 15, Paragraph 3)

The disruption stage is significant because it marks the beginning of the mermaid’s internal conflict between her underwater identity and her desire to become human. The mermaid begins to struggle between her identity as a sea creature and her desire to become human. Her decision to save the prince symbolizes emotional transformation and introduces the central theme of sacrifice. Saving the prince changes the direction of her life and begins her emotional transformation. The disruption also reflects the tension between individual desire and social boundaries, as the mermaid challenges the limitations imposed by her family and the underwater world. This conflict also shows how the mermaid challenges the rules and limitations of her underwater world in order to follow her personal desires.

3. Recognition

Recognition occurs when the mermaid realizes the consequences of becoming human after making an agreement with the sea witch. From the folktale, the recognition stage can be identified through the following quotations:

“But remember,” said the witch, “once you have a human shape, you can never be a mermaid again! (Page 18, Paragraph 4)

“Ah, but you must pay me too,” said the witch. “And it’s no small thing I ask! You have the most beautiful voice of anyone at the bottom of the sea—...” (Page 18, Paragraph 6)

“Alas, thought the little mermaid, he doesn’t realize that I was the one who saved his life! And then I saw her the beautiful girl he loves more than me!...” (Page 21, Paragraph 4)

At this stage, the mermaid realizes that becoming human comes with serious consequences and painful sacrifice. Giving up her voice can also be interpreted as losing part of her identity and freedom of expression. This recognition stage also strengthens the story’s moral dimension, as the protagonist becomes aware that love and desire are inseparable from suffering and responsibility. This stage also highlights the emotional cost of love and ambition in the story.

4. Repair

The repair stage occurs when the mermaid attempts to resolve the conflict after realizing that the prince will marry another woman. From the folktale, the repair stage can be identified through the following quotations:

“She knew that this was the last night she would see the young man for whom she’d left her home and family, for whom she’d given her beautiful voice and for whom she’d suffered torment every day.”(Page 25, Paragraph 3)

“We traded our hair to the Sea Witch for her help, so that you wouldn’t die!” they called out. “She’s given us a knife”. (Page 24, Paragraph 2)

“The knife trembled as the mermaid held it and then she flung it far into the waves.” (Page 24, Paragraph 3)

The repair stage demonstrates the climax of the mermaid’s moral development. Although she is given the opportunity to save herself by killing the prince, she ultimately refuses because of her compassion and unconditional love. This decision represents her transformation in character, from someone driven by desire into someone guided by compassion and selflessness. Her change does not happen suddenly in this stage alone, but can actually be traced from earlier stages, especially in recognition and repair, where her emotional struggle becomes more visible.

5. New Equilibrium

The new equilibrium stage appears after the main conflict is resolved. Although the mermaid does not achieve romantic fulfillment, she experiences spiritual transformation.

From the folktale, the new equilibrium stage can be identified through the following quotations:

"The sun was rising from the sea. Its rays fell gentle and warm upon the deathly cold sea foam but the little mermaid didn't feel dead" (Page 24, Paragraph 4)

"... You've tried with all your heart to do the same thing we do, and your suffering and patience has raised you to our realm and made you a sylph. And now, by doing good deeds for three hundred years"

The new equilibrium does not return the mermaid to her original life under the sea. Instead, it presents a new spiritual condition that reflects her personal and moral transformation. Her transformation into a daughter of the air can be understood as a spiritual reward for her sacrifice and sincerity. Unlike many traditional fairy tales that end with marriage and happiness, this story ends with spiritual growth rather than romantic fulfillment. Similar to previous Todorov-based studies on films and folktales (Lestari et al., 2023; Wahyuningtyas & Wirajaya, 2024), this study demonstrates that narrative stages play an important role in revealing character transformation and thematic progression. However, unlike many modern narratives that restore social harmony through romantic success, **The Little Mermaid** presents a spiritual form of equilibrium centered on sacrifice and moral transcendence. This finding also shows how Andersen's folktale differs from many narratives discussed in previous narratological studies, particularly in its emphasis on sacrifice and spiritual growth rather than a happy romantic ending. Instead of focusing on romantic closure, the story ends with a more symbolic resolution, in which meaning is built through sacrifice and personal transformation.

CONCLUSION

Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* clearly reflects Todorov's five stages of narrative, beginning with equilibrium and ending with a transformed new equilibrium. The story shows how narrative progression contributes not only to plot development but also to character transformation and moral meaning. Throughout the story, the mermaid develops from a curious and innocent character into someone who is willing to sacrifice her own happiness for others. Through this transformation, the folktale conveys moral lessons about sacrifice, identity, suffering, and spiritual growth. This study shows that Todorov's narrative theory can effectively explain the structure and thematic development of classical folktales. The findings also suggest that narrative stages help readers understand deeper emotional and moral meanings within literary texts. However, this study focuses only on Andersen's original folktale and employs a single narratological framework. Future studies may compare different adaptations of *The Little Mermaid* or draw on other narrative theories, such as Propp's morphology or Genette's narrative discourse, to offer broader interpretations of the story.

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