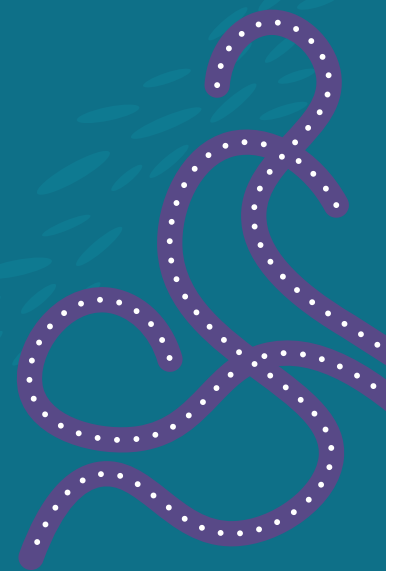




DISNEY'S *The* **LITTLE**
Mermaid

STUDY GUIDE | 8–12TH GRADE



COLORADO SPRINGS
Fine Arts Center
at COLORADO COLLEGE

SYNOPSIS

Disney's The Little Mermaid is based on the famed Hans Christian Anderson fairytale and Disney's beloved animated movie. The stage musical adaptation follows the journey of the charismatic, passionate, and often headstrong young mermaid, Ariel. She is the youngest daughter of King Triton. While she lives and sings within this mystical underwater kingdom, Ariel yearns to leave this life behind, and live on land. Her infatuation is peaked when she saves and falls in love with the handsome and human, Prince Eric. Against her father's wishes, she decides to pursue Eric, and makes a dangerous bargain with the devious Sea Witch, Ursula. Ariel, with the aid of her friends Flounder, Scuttle and Sebastian, must race against the clock to gain Eric's love, or risk the wrath of Ursula.

Ariel – a bright-eyed and curious teenage mermaid who dreams of being human. She's rebellious in her pursuits of the world above the sea and garnering the love of Prince Eric, much to the dismay of her father, King Triton.

Prince Eric – the charming and sensitive human who has captured Ariel's heart. Like Ariel, Eric is also stubborn, postponing his own marriage in search of his own desires, and the mermaid that has piqued his interest.

Grimsby – Prince Eric's prim and proper guardian. A stern caretaker, Grimsby loves Eric as his own son. He watches over him carefully, constantly pushing the young prince toward marriage, and ultimately preparing him for life as a King.

Sebastian – King Triton's Caribbean crab court advisor and choirmaster. Sebastian is undeniably meticulous and dramatic, especially as he's placed in charge of protecting Ariel.

King Triton – King of the Sea and the widowed father to seven teenage mermaids. He struggles to balance his royal responsibilities, navigating parental challenges, protecting his kingdom from the dangers of humans, all the while keeping Ursula at bay.

Ursula – the glamorous and manipulative Sea Witch. She uses her cunning and extensive knowledge of magic to get control Triton's throne and kingdom.

Flounder – Ariel's sweet and sensitive best-fish-friend. Flounder hides an innocent crush on the young mermaid, but remains the best companion through all her adventures, under the sea and on land.

Scuttle – a seagull and an enthusiastic, eccentric expert on the human world. Scuttle's knowledge may be inconsistent and slightly misinformed, but his infectious energy and chatty demeanor makes him an asset to his ocean-dwelling friends.

The underwater world of *The Little Mermaid* is also brought to life through a host of sea creatures and animals. Including Ariel's mersisters: Aquata, Andrina, Arista, Atina, Adella, and Allana. There's even Ursula's electric eel lackey's Flotsam and Jetsom. The humans have their fair share of characters. Especially the French frenzied Chef Louis, who sets his eyes on the delectable Sebastian.

ORIGINAL AUTHOR: HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN

Author Hans Christian Andersen was born in 1805 in Denmark. He was a member of the lower class, with both parents maintaining occupations of the poor. Striving to fight against social status, he pursued a career in the arts. Andersen took an interest in theatre, dance, and literature. To further his education, he trained as an actor in Copenhagen, Denmark at the Royal Theatre. It was here that he became acquainted with director, Jonas Collin. Collin noted Hans' ambition and helped him continue his studies at the University of Copenhagen. Andersen was very candid about his experiences at university. He was widely ostracized by classmates, ridiculed for his social status and behavior, and was the object of the school's challenging headmaster. Despite these obstacles, Hans went on to graduate and follow his career as an author. He experimented with writing poetry, novels, and some plays. It wasn't long before he settled into children's fairytales. He is credited with creating favorites such as: *The Emperor's New Clothes*, *The Princess and the Pea*, and *The Ugly Duckling*. And it was in 1836 that he finally penned the classic, *The Little Mermaid*, and was published in 1837. Andersen was a natural storyteller and is heralded for being so adept at crafting his tales from the perspective of a child. Referencing his own experiences labeled as an outcast, his characters were able battle adversity, find their own beauty as the tales reached their iconic happy endings. Hans Christian Andersen, after constructing an extensive collection of folklore and literature, died in August of 1875.

MUSIC: ALAN MENKEN

Alan Menken is regarded as one of the most influential and legendary composers for stage and screen. Hailing from New Rochelle, New York, he has written classics that span well over three decades. Some may not know him by name, but it's impossible to miss his work. He has left his mark on live theatre with masterpieces like *Little Shop of Horrors*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Sister Act* and *Newsies*. Menken is honored as a Disney Legend for his marvelous contributions to Disney films including *Aladdin*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *Pocahontas*, and *Tangled*. He's even provided in blockbuster films like *Captain America—The First Avenger*, and *Rocky V*. Alan Menken has a slew of accomplishments, infamous projects, countless awards, and the privilege of earning more Oscars than any living person. His work on *The Little Mermaid* began with the 1989 animated film—his first opportunity with film underscore—and crossing over to the 2008 Broadway musical.

LYRICISTS: HOWARD ASHMAN AND GLENN SLATER

Lyricists are artists who write the lyrics for songs. Composers and musicians are responsible for crafting the music, while the lyricist is tasked with providing the spoken words. Howard Ashman was a longtime contributor to Disney films. He was a close friend of Alan Menken, and both worked together on multiple musicals and films. Glenn Slater is also a prolific lyricist, writing for projects like *Tangled*, *School of Rock*, and *Sister Act*. Ashman's connections to *The Little Mermaid* also date back to the original animated movie, as he served as both a writer and producer.

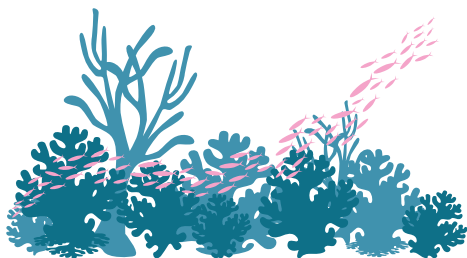
BOOK WRITER: DOUG WRIGHT

The book writer oversees creating the plot of our story. They develop the structure and scenes which the musical will follow. Doug Wright is an acclaimed actor, director, playwright, book writer and librettist. A graduate of both Yale University and New York University, Wright is a staple in the American Theatre. As a playwright he has created *I Am My Own Wife* and *Good Night Oscar*. His skills in musical book writing include *Grey Gardens*, *Hands on a Hardbody*, and *War Paint*. His talents have earned him several awards such as the Lucille Lortel, Drama League Award and Pulitzer Prize. Wright has also been nominated for several Tony Awards, Drama Desk Awards, and a Golden Globe Award.

HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN ORIGINAL “THE LITTLE MERMAID” AND ADAPTATIONS

Hans Christian Andersen often utilized popular folklore and mythology from a variety of cultures, coupled with his own imagination to pen his fairytales. Andersen’s stories had elements of triumph, but were also weaved with darker, unhappy themes. The Little Mermaid received some inspiration from German writer, Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué’s “Undine”. And like “Undine”, it follows the tale of a water spirit who desires to marry a human. Andersen’s Little Mermaid resides under the sea in her father’s kingdom. She witnesses a shipwreck, and saves the life of a young human prince, falling in love in the process. Desperate to marry him, she bargains with a Sea Witch, who cuts out her tongue in exchange for a pair of legs. The mermaid must gain the prince’s love, or she will perish. Despite the mermaid’s attempts and sacrifice, the prince marries another woman. The Sea Witch urges the mermaid to stab the prince, bathe in his blood, seek revenge and spare her life. But unable to commit the act, she sacrifices herself, diving into the ocean and dissolves into seafoam.

The Little Mermaid is forever immortalized. Near Andersen’s home, sits a statue of a mermaid overlooking the Copenhagen harbor. The story has been translated and published in over 150 languages. It has been adapted into multiple films, sequels, a live television performance, series and genres including read-alongs, sing-alongs, anime, and horror. Notably, it received a resurgence in 2023 with the live-action movie starring Halle Bailey as the titular character. The staged musical, began in 2007, receiving changes and rewrites, before officially making its debut on Broadway in 2008. It has received multiple national tours, a shortened version intended for children, and is produced at multiple schools, universities, and regional theatres annually. It also inspired another the Caribbean-set Broadway musical, *Once on this Island*.



MERMAIDS

Mermaids and Mermen were labeled as fascinating creatures, with roots dating back to Greek and Roman mythologies. These Merfolk were depicted as having the body of a human, with tail of a fish. Most folklore described mermaids as Sirens, enchanting singers that would lure young sailors to shipwreck and ultimately their deaths. Other fables, detail mermaids making life on land, and marrying human men. Their reputations and stories have grown for centuries. Even explorers like John Smith and Christopher Columbus have claimed to see mermaids in their voyages.

AN UNDERWATER STORY IN MUSICAL THEATRE

Witnessing a play on stage, is like watching a television show or movie. We follow a host of characters, facing challenges and opposition on route to their goals and desires. In musical theatre, that remains the same. But those within the story utilize song and dance to propel the action forward. Their emotions, thoughts and actions are not only contained within dialogue and text. But they create an immersive world of the story. Staged musicals, like *The Little Mermaid*, can implement popular songs of the past 30 years that help us attach to the story. That, along with costumes, lights, sound effects and other spectacular technical aspects develop an engaging and enigmatic experience.

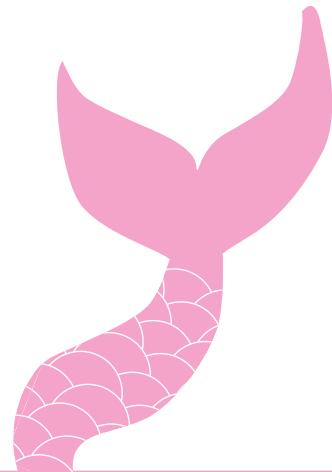
THEMES FOUND IN THE LITTLE MERMAID

Themes are the important topics and messages we follow throughout a story. These ideas and experiences can influence all the characters. *The Little Mermaid* incorporates many themes.

Societal Norms – It begins with a young mermaid, Ariel, as she matures and understands the world around her. King Triton, her father, is very strict and harbors resentment toward humans, and forbids anyone from approaching the surface. Ariel takes steps towards breaking down those societal norms, even if it requires breaking her father’s rules.

Unconditional Love and Relationships – There are many relationships beyond the romantic. We witness the love story between Eric and Ariel. But there are also parental bonds such as King Triton with Ariel, and Grimsby to Prince Eric. Friendships are also an important factor for *The Little Mermaid*. How far would one’s friends go for them, despite the opposition? Sebastian, Flounder, Scuttle, even King Triton himself and have unlimited love, and differ in how that love displayed.

Sacrifice – Throughout this story, we see multiple characters state their desires. Ariel makes a dangerous agreement with the Sea Witch, Ursula, to get what she wants most. Eric seeks adventure and finding his own true love. Triton desires peace and for his daughters the merfolk. Ursula intends to take over the kingdom. But at what cost? Each character sacrifices the tangible, artificial and even calling into question their own morals. Are these sacrifices worth the potential consequences?



PRE-PERFORMANCE QUESTIONS

- How many adaptations of *The Little Mermaid* are you familiar with? Which do you cite as your ‘favorite’?
- Where is a place that you’ve yet to explore? What would you give up just to experience it?
- *The Little Mermaid* involves a lot of characters making sacrifices. Is there anything you can imagine sacrificing your most precious attribute for? What circumstances would make the exchange worth it?
- Have you ever believed that ‘breaking the rules’ was justified? Why?
- How do you anticipate this show creating an immersive experience under the sea?

POST-PERFORMANCE QUESTIONS

- How did you enjoy the technical aspects of the performance? Did you feel like you were truly under the sea?
- Which character(s) do you most relate with? Why?
- Do you understand and/or sympathize with each characters’ choices and sacrifices? Why or why not?
- In addition to mermaids, what are some sea creatures and animals do you wish were involved in this story?
- Have some of your views and values been changed? Do you still believe the things you value, are worth sacrificing for?



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Alan Menken

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