



LOUISE O'NEILL'S THE SURFACE BREAKS AS AN ALLEGORY FOR CONTEMPORARY AESTHETIC PRESSURES

[Étapes de traitement de l'article]

Date de soumission : 28-06-2025 / Date de retour d'instruction : 04-07-2025 / Date de publication : 15-07-2025

Djili SOURA

Université Joseph Ki-Zerbo (Burkina Faso) / Université de Limoges (France)

ORCID: 0009-0008-9606-0097

✉ djilsoura@gmail.com

&

Moussa KAMBIRE

Université Joseph Ki-Zerbo (Burkina Faso)

ORCID: 0009-0005-9626-7555

✉ moussa.kambire@gmail.com

Abstract: This study examines the narrative strategies and the feminist politics of O'Neill's rewriting of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" in *The Surface Breaks* (2018). While previous research has addressed the novel's feminist message, highlighting O'Neill's reclamation of demonised and silenced female characters, little attention has been paid to the text's narrative techniques and thematic engagement with twenty-first-century postfeminist culture. Drawing on postfeminist theories of neo-patriarchal power and Gérard Genette's theory of intertextuality, this study explores how O'Neill reimagines Andersen's fairy tale to critique contemporary beauty discourses. The findings of this study reveal that the portrayal of the Sea King and the mermaids positions *The Surface Breaks* as an allegory for postfeminist aesthetic pressures, exposing how neoliberal ideologies repackage self-surveillance as empowerment and condition women into perpetual competition.

Keywords: fairy tale, rewriting, beauty ideology, postfeminism, *The Surface Breaks*, Louise O'Neill.

THE SURFACE BREAKS DE LOUISE O'NEILL, UNE ALLEGORIE DES PRESSIONS ESTHÉTIQUES CONTEMPORAINES

Résumé : Cette étude analyse les stratégies narratives et la politique féministe de la réécriture de « La Petite Sirène » de Hans Christian Andersen par Louise O'Neill dans *The Surface Breaks* (2018). Si des études antérieures se sont penchées sur la portée féministe du roman, en soulignant notamment la réhabilitation de figures féminines longtemps diabolisées ou réduites au silence, peu d'attention a été accordée aux techniques narratives du texte et à sa manière d'aborder la culture postféministe du XXI^e siècle. En s'appuyant sur la théorie postféministe du pouvoir néo-patriarcal ainsi que sur la théorie d'intertextualité de Gérard Genette, cette étude explore la manière dont O'Neill réinvente le conte d'Andersen pour critiquer le discours contemporain sur la beauté féminine. Il en ressort que la représentation du Roi des mers et celle des sirènes dans *The Surface Breaks* constituent une allégorie des

injonctions esthétiques postféministes. L'œuvre met en lumière la manière dont les idéologies néolibérales transforment la surveillance de soi en un simulacre d'émancipation et conditionne les femmes à une compétition perpétuelle.

Mots clés : conte de fée, réécriture, idéologie de beauté, postféministe, *The Surface Breaks*, Louise O'Neill.

Introduction

Dating back to the seventeenth century with pioneering collections such as Giambattista Basile's *Pentamerone* (1634) and Charles Perrault's *Tales of Mother Goose* (1697), fairy tale is a literary genre that typically features fantastical elements, magical transformations, and moral lessons that are often carried by the adventures of archetypal characters such as princes, princesses, witches, and mythical creatures (Bonet, 2022, p. 42). The Danish Hans Christian Andersen, in early nineteenth century, contributed to the popularity of the genre with his worldwide popular story "The Little Mermaid." Written in 1837, along with many other stories compiled in *Fairy Tales of Hans Christian Andersen* (2010), "The Little Mermaid" follows the story of a young mermaid who longs to leave her sea world to gain a human soul and the love of a human prince. Driven by this desire, she sacrifices her voice to a sea witch in exchange for legs, enduring pain and the risk of death if she fails to get herself loved by the prince. Unlike later optimistic versions, Andersen's tale is characterised by melancholy culminating in the mermaid's self-sacrifice and transformation—not into a bride but into a "daughter of the air" (Andersen, 2010, p. 585) rewarded for her virtue and suffering with the hope of eventually obtaining immortal soul.

Central to Western cultures, the fairy tale genre is reputed to play a significant role in passing down social norms and patriarchal ideology (Hoey, 2020, p. 19; Zipes, 2002, p. 11). Through its traditional emphasis on good versus evil and reward versus punishment, fairy tale reinforces conventional moral codes and gender roles, portraying obedient, selfless, and passive heroines as examples of ideal womanhood and rewarding them with marriage or social elevation while punishing characters who behave otherwise. This is why one can understand Jack Zipes when he states that fairy tales are "powerful transmitters of romantic myths which encourage women to internalise only aspirations deemed appropriate to our real sexual functions within a patriarchy" (Zipes, 2002, p. 11). Fairy tales do not merely entertain. They educate and discipline, shaping gendered expectations from an early age.

As transmitters of patriarchal myths, fairy tales have been the object of feminist revisions since the 1970s, with prominent figures such as Anne Sexton in *Transformations* (1971), Angela Carta in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979), and Sullivan Deidre in *Tangleweed and Brine* (2017). In their writings, these revisionists disrupt the patriarchal assumptions in traditional tales like those by Perrault and the Grimm brothers by giving voice to silenced female characters, challenging the glorification of passive femininity, and highlighting themes of autonomy, desire, and resistance (AlGhamdi, 2024, p. 33; Bonet, 2022, p. 44; Gonzalez, 1999, p. 13; Karip, 2016, p. 66; Priyanka, 2019, p. 1068).

Published in 2018 and marketed as a retelling of Andersen's "The Little Mermaid," *The Surface Breaks* by the Irish author Louise O'Neill falls into this category of revisionary writing, aiming to, as O'Neill admits in her afterwards to the novel, "reclaim the little mermaid" by reimagining her not as "passive or a victim" but "brave," "loyal," and "wild with yearning and longing" (O'Neill, 2018, p. 361–362). Like the original tale, O'Neill's novel follows a young mermaid—here renamed Muirgen (or Gaia, as she prefers)—who dreams of escaping her oppressive underwater world in pursuit of freedom and love. Like O'Neill's previous works, particularly *Only Ever Yours* and *Asking for It*, which have been the object of scholarly



discussions and claimed as critiques of sexual violence (Dillon, 2017, p. 28; O'Brien, 2023, p. 54) and bodily autonomy in contemporary society (Braun, 2018, p. 71; Elices, 2016, p. 77; Muraveva, 2018, p. 134; Sánchez Moll, 2018, p. 38), *The Surface Breaks* has drawn the attention of scholarly critics.

The critic Aisling Hoey, for instance, explores representations of women in “The Little Mermaid” and its various adaptations, particularly the Disney film and O’Neill’s novel, and claims that fairy tales’ portrayal of gender roles and femininity have evolved over time. According to Hoey, O’Neill’s tale is “a parody of the original” because it exposes “the damaging messages to women communicated by fairy tales and highlight[s] the treatment of women in a patriarchal society” (Hoey, 2020, p. 23). In disrupting the conventional narrative structure, “Muirgen finds her ‘happily ever after’ not from finding love with a man, but instead by finding love for herself” (Hoey, 2020, p. 23–24). One cannot but agree with Hoey that this revision of the tale sends to audiences the “empowering message” that “girls do not need to live up to the constructed feminine ideal to find happiness” (Hoey, 2020, p. 25). However, O’Neill’s reimagining of the tale occurs in a century where societal pressures on women to seek marriage as the end goal of life is now part of a broad neo-patriarchal ideology, which, as we learn from postfeminist critics like Rosalind Gill, Angela McRobbie, Naomi Wolf, Susan Faludi, Diane Negra, or Stephen Genz, insidiously yet effectively imposes new and more oppressive constraints on women by framing self-surveillance and bodily torture as markers of empowerment (Gill, 2007, p. 149; McRobbie, 2009, p. 27; Wolf, 2002, p. 16; Faludi, 1991, p. 91; Negra, 2009, p. 21; Genz, 2010, p. 98). Hoey’s analysis, though having the merit of highlighting the reclaiming of the Sea Witch as an inspirational figure of “female empowerment, paving her own path and living by her own rules” (Hoey, 2020, p. 24), does not tell us enough about the novel’s dialogue with the complexity of women’s oppression in O’Neill’s twenty-first-century context. Therefore, one is prompted to ask how O’Neill’s version of the tale speaks to its contemporary audience.

Kinga Matuszko comes close to filling in this gap. In a recent article, Matuszko claims that *The Surface Breaks*, despite its apparent aim to expose gendered violence and to critique patriarchal structures, ultimately conveys “a pseudo-feminist” stance, the term he uses to refer to what Rosalind Gill, Angela McRobbie, Naomi Wolf, Susan Faludi, Diane Negra, or Stephen Genz would simply call “postfeminism” (Gill, 2007, p. 149; McRobbie, 2009, p. 27; Wolf, 2002, p. 16; Faludi, 1991, p. 91; Negra, 2009, p. 21; Genz, 2010, p. 98). That is, all those neoliberal capitalist discourses that appear to adopt feminist ideas and attitudes but do not contribute to promoting true gender equality and instead become marketing and oppressive tools. According to Matuszko, O’Neill portrays men as aggressive, controlling, or abusive and women as perpetual victims. This portrayal, as he argues, reduces complex dynamics of oppression to caricature:

The creations of the worlds presented – as clearly negative places inhabited by patriarchal societies in which women are dominated and suffer physical and mental violence – and the recipe for changing reality suggested ... are simplified visions, trivializing the discussed issues and presenting them in a caricatural way.

(Matuszko, 2024, p.

312)

Matuszko’s analysis clearly situates *The Surface Breaks* in its contemporary context. However, it suggests that the novel fails to engage in a meaningful dialogue with feminist discourses of gender equality and instead reinforces binary opposition between sexes. This claim is also formulated by Jennifer Mooney, who goes even as far as to claim that “O’Neill’s works might

promote gendered conflict and provided distorted constructions of male domination and female subjugation" (Mooney, 2023, p. 12). As Djili Soura and André Kaboré argued, O'Neill's childhood encounter with Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* led her to adopt the dystopian mode in her representation of women (Soura and Kaboré, 2025, p. 369), a mode characterised by pessimism, as it usually relies on "regimes defined by extreme coercion, inequality, imprisonment, and slavery" to explore systemic issues (Claeys, 2017, p. 5). This dystopian style, far from downplaying the feminist politics of O'Neill's narratives, offers an effective framework to shock readers to consciousness, as it starkly exposes the subtlety and cruelty of women's oppression in contemporary society. While the aim of this study is not to examine the dystopian impulse in O'Neill's rewriting of "The Little Mermaid," it seems, nevertheless, reasonable to ask whether the postfeminist context in which O'Neill rewrites "The Little Mermaid" does not impose such a mode of writing that appears as "trivializing the discussed issues and presenting them in a caricatural way" (Matuszko, 2024, p. 312).

Put simply, is the emphatic depiction of women as helpless victims and men as aggressors not a deliberate narrative strategy in service of O'Neill's feminist politics? Hoey and Matuszko have had the merit of analysing *The Surface Breaks* as a rewriting of Andersen's "The Little Mermaid," highlighting her feminist rehabilitation of female characters in the same manner as her predecessors and contemporaries Angela Carter, Anne Sexton or Sullivan Deidre. However, the question of how *The Surface Breaks* might be in dialogue with the oppressive ideologies of its twenty-first-century context remains largely overlooked by Hoey and insufficiently addressed by Matuszko.

This study aims to address that issue. It seeks to answer the following question: How does O'Neill rewrite "The Little Mermaid," and Why is this rewriting important in the twenty-first century? As critics of postfeminism have argued, after the second wave feminist movement, women's oppression is increasingly being renewed through a new regime of femininity orchestrated by a neoliberal capitalist logic that imposes new constraints on women under the guise of freedom, choice, and empowerment (Gill, 2007, p. 154; Negra, 2009, p. 21; Taylor, 2012, p. 2; Wolf, 2002, p. 16; McRobbie, 2009, p. 27). According to Naomi Wolf, Rosalind Gill, and Mona Chollet, contemporary popular media narratives, through their representation of women, increasingly repackage women's oppression in the guise of empowerment, enjoining women to regulate their appearance to conform to unattainable beauty standards (Wolf, 2002, p. 12; Gill, 2007, p. 149; Chollet, 2015, p. 2). Wolf describes this as "the beauty myth," a pervasive ideology wherein freedom is framed as the power to choose, yet such choices are heavily constrained by market-driven, patriarchal norms that position beauty and eternal youth as a woman's primary value (Wolf, 2002, p. 12). Similarly, Gill argues that postfeminist media culture operates through a "sensibility" that combines the rhetoric of empowerment with intense pressures to conform to normative standards of beauty, sexuality, and consumerism – what she calls "a disciplinary regime of femininity" (Gill, 2007, p. 149–150).

Drawing on these feminist theories, this study examines O'Neill's artistic ingenuity in the reimagining of "The Little Mermaid" and analyses the politics behind this textual transformation. The analysis of O'Neill's creativity draws on Gérard Genette's concept of "quantitative transformation," which involves the expansion or contraction of a given narrative element: events, characters, scenes, or descriptive passages (Genette, 1982, p. 253–260). It argues how O'Neill's reconfiguration of the Sea Kingdom, from the Sea King to the mermaids and their relationships, establishes *The Surface Breaks* as an allegory of the oppressive beauty ideology circulating in contemporary media culture.

1. The Sea King as a Metaphor for the Aesthetic Regime of Femininity



In *The Surface Breaks*, O'Neill reconfigures the father-daughter relationship between the Sea King and the sea princesses, turning it into an eloquent allegory of the subtle injunction of women to self-regulate and seek unattainable beauty standards that postfeminist critics like Naomi Wolf, Rosalind Gill, and Mona Chollet lament about contemporary media culture (Wolf, 2002, p. 12; Gill, 2007, p. 149; Chollet, 2015, p. 2). In the original tale, the relationships between the Sea King and the princesses are not portrayed in detail. Apart from the brief introductory description, such as "The Sea King had been a widower for many years, and his aged mother kept house for him" (Andersen, 2010, p. 555), Andersen hardly mentions the nature of his relationship with his daughters. O'Neill's critique of the contemporary beauty culture starts with an expansive reconfiguration of the Sea King. As in the original tale, the Sea King in *The Surface Breaks* appears as a widower whose household is taken care of by his stepmother (here named Thalassa). However, unlike Andersen's version, O'Neill's Sea King is portrayed as a tyrant who subjects his female population to high feminine standards, ranging from looking pleasing, being obedient, and above all, looking beautiful: "'All I've ever asked from you is that you look pretty,' my father says, 'and you smile when asked to. Is that so hard? Is it? Why must you all be so useless?'" (O'Neill, 2018, p. 191). As can be observed in this scolding, the Sea King embodies a toxic paternal authority that conflates love with domination and aesthetic control. He not only "disciplines his daughters to remain silent" (Matuszko, 2024, p. 304) but also reduces their value to their appearance and compliance, policing their bodies and behaviours in ways that reflect the beauty norms imposed on women by the fashion and beauty discourses in contemporary media narratives.

The Sea King is "a personification of patriarchy" (Matuszko, 2024, p. 304), not just in the broad sense that "he disciplines his daughters to remain silent, uses violence to subjugate them, and arranges their marriages with much older admirers" (Matuszko, 2024, p. 304), but also, and more eloquently, in the sense that he represents contemporary media culture and its oppressive beauty ideology. By rewriting the Sea King from her implied fatherly presence in Andersen's tale into a fearsome, oppressive King who forces his female subjects to self-beautify, O'Neill bridges the gap between the fairy tale tradition and the aesthetic imperatives of postfeminist media culture, critiquing the internalised and institutionalised pressures placed on women to conform to narrow and unattainable beauty standards.

The reconfiguration of the Sea Kingdom as a "negative place" (Matuszko, 2024, p. 312) ruled by such a horrifying misogynist, far from "trivializing" (Matuszko, 2024, p. 312) the issue of women's oppression or presenting it "in a caricatural way" (Matuszko, 2024, p. 312) is in fact central to the novel's dialogue with contemporary audiences about the psychological and systemic violence embedded in beauty discourses. The horrification of the Sea King as a tyrant obsessed with female beauty and obedience and the emphasis on the mermaids as helpless victims of this rule serve as a narrative strategy to shock readers into awareness about the insidiousness of these aesthetic norms. That is, how they disguise subjugation into aspiration, how young women are misled to believe that their worth resides in their desirability. Therefore, by reimagining the Sea World as a grotesque and tyrannical place, O'Neill uses allegory to expose how deeply entrenched yet often normalised these beauty norms remain in contemporary culture.

This critique of the oppressive beauty ideology in contemporary fashion and beauty industry is enhanced by a semantic transformation of the Sea Kingdom's education of females, a textual manipulation similar to what Genette calls "transmotivation" (Genette, 1982, p. 324). Transmotivation, in Genette's theory of intersexuality, refers to the semantic transformation that consists in "the substitution of a motive, the practice of assigning to an event "a cause differing from that given by the hypotext" (Genette, 1982, p. 324). In Andersen's tale, the upbringing of the sea princesses is carried out by the King's mother and aims to make the

mermaids love their identity and their belonging to the kingdom: "Let us be happy" (Andersen, 2010, p. 570), said the old lady, "and dart and spring about during the three hundred years that we have to live, which is really quite long enough; after that we can rest ourselves all the better" (Andersen, 2010, p. 570). The King's mother endeavours to inculcate in the mermaids a sense of self-acceptance and contentment with their predetermined fate, urging them to find joy in their limited lifespan and their sea-bound identity. This narrative detail reinforces Hoey's claim that Andersen's tale promotes religious morality (Hoey, 2020, p. 21), where happiness is achieved through resignation, obedience, and the internalisation of suffering as virtue.

In O'Neill's novel, however, the mermaids' education by Thalassa is motivated not by spiritual values of existential acceptance but rather by the desire to cultivate a sense of beauty-consciousness and self-surveillance, as can be observed in Muirgen's recollection of their childhood education in the royal court:

We have been told since we were mer-children that extra weight is revolting. There have been mer-men who gained in stature as they aged, but the men were not born to please the eye, as we were. Maids have been told that being slim is as important as being beautiful, as necessary as being obedient, as desirable as remaining quiet. We must stay thin or we will die sad and alone, spin-maids of the kingdom, cast to the Outerlands because we are a drain on the palace resources. Such maids are neither mothers nor sirens and therefore are of no use to anyone.

(O'Neill, 2018, p. 76)

By replacing the moral and spiritual motivations of Andersen's tale with a new focus on bodily control and aesthetic perfection, O'Neill operates an ingenious "transmotivation" (Genette, 1982, p. 324) of the mermaids' education in Andersen's tale, which plays a significant role in what could be called, in Genette's terminology, the "proximization" of Andersen's tale (Genette, 1982, p. 304). "Proximization," in Genette's theory, refers to the textual transformation through which "the hypertext transposes the diegesis of its hypotext to bring it up to date and closer to its own audience (in temporal, geographical, or social terms)" (Genette, 1982, p. 304). O'Neill achieves this textual updating through the reimagining of the mermaids' education, as she reorients the narrative towards the critique of beauty ideology in contemporary society. In doing so, she exposes how young girls are indoctrinated from early age through media narratives to internalise oppressive beauty standards under the guise of empowerment. This narrative shift reflects real-world mechanisms through which beauty culture perpetuates its hold on women.

The neoliberal market-driven discourses of the fashion and beauty industry organise a societal vision of the woman as an object whose purpose is to please males' gaze and sexual desires. In postfeminist media culture, this objectification takes a subtle and invisible form that Gill explains as follows:

Where once sexualized representations of women in the media presented them as passive, mute objects of assumed male gaze, today, sexualization works differently in many domains. Women are not straightforwardly objectified but are portrayed as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so. Nowhere is this clearer than in advertising, which has responded to feminist critiques by constructing a new figure to sell to young



women: the sexually autonomous heterosexual young woman who plays with her sexual power and is forever up for it.

(Gill, 2007, p. 151)

The illusion of choice and empowerment masks a more insidious form of control, one that repackages objectification as self-expression and discipline as freedom. Through the “transmotivation” of female education in Andersen’s tale, O’Neill creates an eloquent and disturbing epitome of this postfeminist objectification of women. Her reimagined sea world becomes an allegorical space that captures the contradictory messages imposed on contemporary women. Thus, *The Surface Breaks* critiques not only traditional authority but also its modern incarnations, making visible the continuity of gendered oppression behind the language of liberation.

The beauty ideology pits women against one another. As Naomi Wolf claims, “the beauty myth is always actually prescribing behavior and not appearance. Competition between women has been made part of the myth so that women will be divided from one another” (Wolf, 2002, p. 14). Beauty ideology functions not only to define how women should look but also to dictate how they should act, encouraging competition, insecurity, and isolation rather than self-confidence and solidarity. O’Neill’s version of “The Little Mermaid” also challenges this competitive atmosphere imposed on women by beauty ideology. This critique is conveyed by the reconfiguration of the relationships between the sea princesses.

2. The Mermaids as a Critique of Contemporary Female Competition

In Andersen’s tale, the relationships between the mermaids are marked by harmony and sisterly love: “in the evening hours, the five sisters would twine their arms round each other, and rise to the surface, in a row” (Andersen, 2010, p. 561). This portrayal is significant about the politics behind Andersen’s tale, which, as critics claim, is underpinned by religious morality. As Aisling Hoey observes, “the story is peppered with religious motifs” and “the key message explores Christian morality, the belief that if one practises goodness and kindness in this life, they shall be rewarded in heaven” (Hoey, 2020, p. 21). The harmony and sisterly connections that characterise the mermaids’ lives can thus be interpreted as a reflection of Christian virtues such as compassion, selflessness, and familial love.

O’Neill’s version of the tale not only reframes the Sea King as a symbol of patriarchal authority and women’s alienation but also transforms Andersen’s portrayal of harmonious sisterhood into one marked by internalised competition. Unlike Andersen’s original sea princesses, O’Neill’s mermaids are always either arguing over a male partner, debating about who has the curliest hair, who wears more pearls, or fighting over combs:

“That’s my comb.” “It’s not, Talia, your comb is black.” “I have a black comb and a coral comb, and you’re using my coral comb. Give it to me right now.” “Not everything belongs to you. It’s my comb.” “Give it back,” Talia says now, wrestling the comb out of Cosima’s hands with a triumphant ha.

(O’Neill, 2018, pp. 5–6)

This rewriting of sisterhood into competition is significant. It serves as a narrative strategy for O’Neill to demonstrate how beauty norms foster envy, distrust, and antagonism among women. By replacing, or substituting, in Genette’s terminology, Andersen’s image of supportive, loving sisters with depictions of petty disputes over appearance and status symbols, O’Neill underscores the psychological toll of a culture that teaches women to perceive one another as threats rather than sisters.

Upon examining the reflection of the beauty magazines' discourses in the dystopian world of *Only Ever Yours*, Ekaterina Muraveva concludes that "O'Neill debunks the mythical and utopian world of the beauty industry discourse and presents its dystopian side. She seems to share Baudrillard's view that such 'simulacra ... have no referent or ground in any 'reality' except their own'" (Muraveva, 2018, p. 134). O'Neill takes this deconstruction of the fashion and beauty discourse into the fairy-tale frame of *The Surface Breaks*. If in *Only Ever Yours*, she exposes the artificiality of the beauty norms, in *The Surface Breaks*, O'Neill points to and dramatises their potential to pit women against one another. Her innovative introduction of constant arguments as a characteristic of the mermaids' daily lives is highly significant here, as it dramatises the internalisation of competition and the erosion of female solidarity under the pressures of a commodified and hierarchical beauty culture.

The combs, which are part of O'Neill's ingenious narrative extension of the mermaids' characterisation in the original tale, are symbolically rich in this perspective. They function not merely as grooming items but as contested markers of beauty, status, and individual identity within a culture that defines women's worth in the restrictive terms of physical appearance. Their symbolic function resides in the way they embody the commodification of femininity – objects that should signal self-care or aesthetic pleasure become sources of conflict, jealousy, and possession. By making these trivial objects the centre of the tension between the sisters, O'Neill illustrates how deeply internalised beauty norms distort interpersonal dynamics among women. The combs thus stand as micro-symbols of the broader beauty ideology that Naomi Wolf identifies in contemporary media narratives.

Conclusion

The Surface Breaks by Louise O'Neill offers a feminist revision of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid," as it transforms Andersen's tale into an allegory of the aesthetic and ideological pressures placed on women in postfeminist, neoliberal culture. Through narrative strategies identified by Gérard Genette, particularly "transmotivation" and "proximization," O'Neill reimagines Andersen's tale as a critique of contemporary beauty culture. On the one hand, the sea king is turned into a symbolic figure of the disciplinary regime of femininity that critics of postfeminism lament about contemporary media culture. On the other hand, the mermaids are portrayed as trapped in a perpetual rivalry and self-surveillance to achieve the honour of being the most beautiful and desirable in their society. Through this narrative shift, O'Neill effectively critiques how market-driven ideologies of beauty continue to shape, limit, and pit women against one another. Her reconfiguration of Andersen's mermaids' sisterhood into competition and his Sea King's fatherly presence into aesthetic tyranny underscores how patriarchal ideologies have not disappeared but rather adapted, becoming more insidious under the guise of personal choice, self-care, and empowerment.

This allegorical framework, while it clearly presents men in extreme dominant positions and women in extreme victimhood, does not hinder the feminist politics of the novel, as some critics suggest. Rather, it urges readers to engage more critically with the discourses of female empowerment of the fashion and beauty industry, as it starkly exposes it as a culture that pushes women in perpetual self-surveillance, self-improvement, and competition. Ultimately, O'Neill's version of "The Little Mermaid" illustrates the power of feminist intertextuality to confront and revise the enduring myths embedded in classical fairy tales. O'Neill's rewriting is important not only as a reclamation of a silenced female voice, as Hoey has had the merit to highlight about the Sea Witch, but also as a contemporary cultural critique that encourages readers to interrogate the norms governing femininity today. Far from being a simplistic or caricatured narrative, *The Surface Breaks* engages critically with the complex, evolving nature of patriarchal oppression in the twenty-first century and, thus, asserts the ongoing role of



literature in feminist resistance. In *The Surface Breaks*, the fairy tale framework of “The Little Mermaid” becomes a site of resistance, revealing how fairy-tale tropes can be employed to interrogate contemporary structures of oppression and to empower readers to envision new narratives of autonomy.

Bibliography

ALGHAMDI Kholoud. 2024. “Angela Carter and Recreating Femininity in *The Bloody Chamber*: A Semiotic Analysis”. *World Journal of English Language*, N°14, Vol. 4, p. 300–305. (Online), accessed on 20 February 2025.

ANDERSEN Hans. Christian. 2010. *Fairy Tales of Hans Christian Andersen*, Floating Press, Auckland.

BONET Diana Rodríguez. 2022. “Feminist Rewritings of Fairy Tales in Ireland: A Case Study of Deirdre Sullivan”. *Études Irlandaises*, Vol 47, N°2, p. 41–55. (Online), accessed on 18 July 2024.

BRAUN Heather. 2018. “Invisibility and (Dis)embodiment in Louise O’Neill’s *Only Ever Yours*”. In R. Harde & L. Kokkola (Eds.), *The Embodied Child: Readings in Children’s Literature and Culture*, pp. 70–82, Taylor & Francis, New York.

CHOLLET Mona. 2015. *Beauté fatale : les nouveaux visages d’une aliénation féminine*. La Découverte, Paris.

CLAEYS Gregory. 2017. *Dystopia: A Natural History*. Oxford University Press, London.

DILLON Jade. 2017. “The Politics of the Female Body in Louise O’Neill’s *Asking For It*”. *Sibéal, Invisible lines*, N° 2, p. 20–30.

ELICES Juan. F. 2016. “Othering Women in Contemporary Irish Dystopia: The Case of Louise O’Neill’s *Only Ever Yours*”. *Nordic Irish Studies*, Vol 15, N°1, p. 73–86.

FALUDI Susan. 1991. *Backlash The Undeclared War Against American Women*. Three Rivers Press, New York.

GENETTE Gérard. 1982. *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Edition du seuil, Paris.

GENZ Stéphane. 2010. “Singled Out: Postfeminism’s ‘New Woman’ and the Dilemma of Having It All”. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol 43, N°1, p. 97–119. (Online), accessed on 15 February 2025.

GILL Rosalind. 2007. “Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of Sensibility”. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol 10, N°2, p. 147–166.

GONZALEZ Matilde Martin. 1999. “Fairy Tales Revisited and Transformed: Anne Sexton’s Critique of Social(ized) Femininity”. *REDEN Revista Española de Estudios Norteamericanos*, N° 17.

HOEY Aisling. 2020. “Under the Sea: The Depiction of Gender Roles and Femininity in ‘The Little Mermaid’”. *Messages, Sages and Ages*, Vol 7, N°1.

KARIP Özge. 2016. *The Subversion of Fairy tale Motifs in Fay Weldon’s The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*. Namik Kemal University, Tekirdağ.

MATUSZKO Kinga. 2024. “Clever girls are never much appreciated” – a pseudo-feminist attempt to (re)define the role of women in fairy tales retellings based on the example of *The*

Surface Breaks by Louise O'Neill and *Beasts and Beauty: Dangerous Tales* by Soman Chainani". *Tematy i Konteksty*, Vol 19, N° 14, p. 298–315. (Online), accessed on 12 April 2025.

MCROBBIE Angela. 2009. *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social change*. Sage Publications, Los Angeles.

MOONEY Jennifer. 2023. *Feminist Discourse in Irish Literature: Gender and Power in Louise O'Neill's Young Adult Fiction*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, New York.

MURAVEVA Ekaterina. 2018. "Beauty Magazines' Discourse in the Dystopian World of Louise O'Neill's *Only Ever Yours*". *Estudios Irlandeses*, Vol 13, N° 2, p. 120–137. (Online), accessed on 7 October 2029.

NEGRA Diane. 2009. *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism*. Routledge, London.

O'BRIEN Eugene. 2023. "Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Female Subjective Dialectics in the Work of Paul Howard, Louise O'Neill and Naoise Dolan". *Review of Irish Studies in Europe*, Vol 6, N°1, p. 41–64. (Online), accessed on 12 March 2025.

O'NEILL Louise. 2018. *The Surface Breaks*. Scholastic, London.

PRIYANKA, P. 2019. "Feminist Re-writing in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*". *IJELS: International Journal of English, Literature and Social Science*, Vol 4, N°4, p.1065–1068. (Online), accessed 12 April 2024.

SÁNCHEZ Moll Christian. 2018. *Feminist Dystopia and Young Adult Fiction: A Critical Analysis of Louise O'Neill's Only Ever Yours*. University of the Balearic Islands, Dublin.

SOURA Djili and KABORE André. 2025. "Resistance or Capitulation? The Dystopian Mode in Louise O'Neill's Representation of Women". *Revue Fulbright-Afrique*, Vol 1, N° 1, p. 339–373.

TAYLOR Anthea. 2012. *Single Women in Popular Culture: The Limits of Postfeminism*. Palgrave Macmillan, London.

WOLF Naomi. 2002. *Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*. Harper Collins e-Books, New York.

ZIPES Jack. 2002. *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*. University of Kentucky, Lexington.