

The Little Mermaid and Her Sisters

by Hans Christian Andersen *from The Little Mermaid*

This young mermaid is the youngest of five sisters. She has never seen the world above the sea, but she has heard many stories about the land of humans.

Nothing gave her so much pleasure as to hear about the world above the sea. She made her old grandmother tell her all she knew of the ships and of the towns, the people and the animals. To her it seemed most wonderful and beautiful to hear that the flowers of the land had fragrance, while those below the sea had none; that the trees of the forest were green; and that the fishes among the trees could sing so sweetly that it was a pleasure to listen to them. Her grandmother called the birds fishes, or the little mermaid would not have understood what was meant, for she had never seen birds.

“When you have reached your fifteenth year,” said the grandmother, “you will have permission to rise up out of the sea and sit on the rocks in the moonlight, while the great ships go sailing by. Then you will see both forests and towns.”

In the following year, one of the sisters would be fifteen, but as each was a year younger than the other, the youngest would have to wait five years before her turn came to rise up from the bottom of the ocean to see the earth as we do. However, each promised to tell the others what she saw on her first visit and what she thought was most beautiful. Their grandmother could not tell them enough—there were so many things about which they wanted to know.

None of them longed so much for her turn to come as the youngest—she who had the longest time to wait and who was so quiet and thoughtful. Many nights she stood by the open window, looking up through the dark blue water and watching the fish as they splashed about with their fins and tails. She could see the moon and stars shining faintly, but through the water they looked larger than they do to our eyes. When something like a black cloud passed between her and them, she knew that it was either a whale swimming over her head, or a ship full of human beings who never imagined that a pretty little mermaid was standing beneath them, holding out her white hands towards the keel of their ship.

At length the eldest was fifteen and was allowed to rise to the surface of the ocean.

When she returned she had hundreds of things to talk about. But the finest thing, she said, was to lie on a sand bank in the quiet moonlit sea, near the shore, gazing at the lights of the near-by town, that twinkled like hundreds of stars, and listening to the sounds of music, the noise of carriages, the voices of human beings, and the merry pealing of the bells in the church steeples. Because she could not go near all these wonderful things, she longed for them all the more.

Oh, how eagerly did the youngest sister listen to all these descriptions! And after wards, when she stood at the open window looking up through the dark-blue water, she thought of the great city, with all its bustle and noise, and even fancied she could hear the sound of the church bells down in the depths of the sea.

Questions

1. How were flowers different in the human world?
2. How were the fishes in the trees in the human world different than the fishes in the mermaid's world?
3. What was the difference in the way the little mermaid saw the moon and the stars and the way humans see them?
4. What do black clouds mean to humans, and what did they mean to the little mermaid?

Vocabulary List

Each of the vocabulary words below are used in the reading passage. As you read the passage, pay attention to context clues that suggest the word's meaning.

1. pleasure
2. fragrance
3. permission
4. keel
5. gazing
6. peeling
7. steeples
8. bustle
9. fancied
10. depths

Context Clues

Using context clues from the sentences in the passage, underline the correct meaning of the word in boldface.

- 1) "Nothing gave her so much **pleasure** as to hear about the world above the sea."
a. worry; concern b. money c. sadness d. enjoyment; thrill
- 2) "most wonderful and beautiful to hear that the flowers of the land had **fragrance**"
a. bright colors b. friends c. pleasant smell; perfume d. water
- 3) "you will have **permission** to rise up out of the sea"
a. approval b. a day or two c. long boats d. chances
- 4) "holding out her white hands towards the **keel** of their ship"
a. window b. deck c. bottom of a ship; hull d. sail
- 5) "lie on a sand bank in the quiet moonlit sea, near the shore, **gazing** at the lights of the near-by town"
a. stopping b. watching or looking c. waving d. aiming
- 6) "the merry **pealing** of the bells in the church steeples"
a. ringing b. dancing c. laughter d. falling
- 7) "the merry pealing of the bells in the church **steeples**"
a. schoolrooms b. graveyard c. stables d. towers or spires
- 8) "the great city, with all its **bustle** and noise"
a. food b. activity; action c. fashion or clothing d. citizens
- 9) "**fancied** she could hear the sound of the church bells down in the depths of the sea"
a. imagined; believed b. saw clearly c. explained d. forgot
- 10) "fancied she could hear the sound of the church bells down in the **depths** of the sea"
a. bottom; deepness b. waves c. beaches; sandy area d. beds