Fairytales have captured the minds of children, and have presented to them over and over about what happily ever is, and whom we are supposed to be in order to achieve a fairytale ending. In the United States, the perceived formula for a happy ending lies in the patriarchal ideologies embedded in the media, which show young women who they should be in order to be happy. For example, Disney films portray traditional patriarchal values, such as submission and domestication, as what makes a young woman stand out, so that she can marry the prince, and live happily ever after. Disney represents these ideologies as beneficial to young women not only through marriage, but by making it appear as if marrying the prince, and conforming to patriarchy helps them escape a life they do not wish to live. For example, in Disney’s The Little Mermaid, Ariel embarks on exciting adventures to obtain knowledge, so that she can feel disconnected from her current reality. But when she finds a man, she feels he’s the answer to her dreams of escape, and ends up conforming to patriarchy. This ending to The Little Mermaid reveals the intended message of conformity to patriarchal ideologies in order to live happily ever after. Walt Disney’s The Little Mermaid embodies several patriarchal ideologies and fears despite its liberal mask, and imposes them on to young females.

At first glance, Walt Disney’s The Little Mermaid appears to adopt a more liberal theme, and considering the time period it was released, it is not a coincidence. The Little Mermaid was released in 1989, and proceeded feminist movements. Disney’s producers knew they had to produce a film that would not only appeal to new generations in order to make money, but to also subliminally reinforce patriarchal values.
Authors O’Brien and Colby of “The Happiest Place on Earth: A Textual and Contextual Analysis of Walt Disney’s Cinderella and The Little Mermaid” described the patriarchal messages in movies well by stating, “New films merely have updated presentations to make traditional values seem more relevant to new generations” (O’Brien and Colby 156). It turns out that The Little Mermaid did just that; it was a clever mixture of rebellion to appeal to the modern youth, and ends with the notion that conformity will ultimately lead to happiness. Patriarchy in The Little Mermaid may be masked, but it is there. For example, O’Brien and Colby reference the mask on patriarchy in The Little Mermaid and state “While The Little Mermaid illustrates Disney’s corporate response to some changes in the social and cultural context, in which it produced and initially received, this representative Disney film still affirms traditional, conservative gender identities” (O’Brien and Colby 157). In essence, all of the characters happily maintain traditional gender roles, supporting the message that patriarchy is desirable. Furthermore, The Little Mermaid encourages the post-feminist trend, in which women embrace youthful rebellion, but fall under patriarchy when they meet a man, so that they may be married off (O’Brien and Colby 170). This was, essentially, the entire plot of The Little Mermaid. For example, Ariel had the desire to become more knowledgeable and independent until she meets Prince Eric. Before Prince Eric, and during her rebellion, even her sisters “work as agents of patriarchy” (O’Brien and Colby 173) by questioning her attempts at being free and knowledgeable (O’Brien and Colby 173). O’Brien and Colby continue to recognize this underlying message and have stated, “She rebels against the constraints of the patriarchal system until she falls in love with Prince Eric. Once in love she returns to a more traditional female role” (O’Brien and Colby 170-171). Conforming to patriarchy in order to secure a marriage sends the message that in order to have true love, you have to conform to patriarchy.

One of the patriarchal ideologies that Ariel of The Little Mermaid must conform to is limited independence. Something to point out is that women all over the world have been legally incapable of belonging to themselves as a result of this strong patriarchal value. Therefore, it is no surprise that the male
producers not only had that belief, but also wanted to impose it onto young women in the United States who now have the choice to be independent. Because of this ability, Disney’s producers have the characters sing and dance around, but the message is still there; a woman does not belong to herself, and therefore cannot make her own decisions. For example, in *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel could only be with Eric if she wasn’t a mermaid, and the only person who could give her this wish was her father. Her father’s decision to turn her into a human, so that she can marry Eric was symbolic for his consent of their marriage. This consent is a representation of Ariel’s father as the decision maker in her life, which promotes the idea that a woman does not have the independence to make her own decisions. Another scene from *The Little Mermaid* goes as far as to represent Ariel’s independence as a negative thing, by making the chaos that takes place in the film a result of Ariel making her own decisions. For example, when she attempts to follow her dreams against her father’s, or patriarchy’s wishes, by making the independent decision to leave her home, everything is a disaster. Only when she has the consent of her father (patriarchy) to go on land, is everything at peace. An example of this message affecting real children comes from Lena Lee, Author of “Marry the Prince or stay with the family-that is the question: A perspective of young Korean immigrant girls on Disney marriages in the United States” whom questions a young Korean immigrant girl, Joona, on her feelings about Triton’s control of Ariel. Joona relates the story to herself, and gives an example of when her father treated her similarly. Joona then states, “But he’s my dad so he can do that” (Lee 42). This is significant because it gives a real life example of the mentality children adopt under patriarchal conditions, which are reinforced by the media, such as, *The Little Mermaid*, which makes it seem okay. Leland G. Spencer, author of "Performing Transgender Identity in The Little Mermaid: From Andersen to Disney", also notes this phenomena in her interpretation of *The Little Mermaid*, when she states, “The film is problematic because it teaches girls that a romantic relationship with a man is more important than a woman’s independence or freedom of speech” (Spencer 119). As a result, it is not difficult to come to the conclusion that when young women and
children are repeatedly exposed to other women and children conforming to patriarchy, they believe it is normal, and how they must behave.

To make patriarchy more influential, producers make women who are powerful, thus resisting patriarchy, as the antagonist. This is seen in *The Little Mermaid*, where powerful females, such as Ursula, are illustrated to be viewed negatively. This message insists that a woman must not have any position in power, and that it is better for everyone this way. For example, the antagonist in *The Little Mermaid* is Ursula, and is not so coincidentally the only female in the film portrayed with power. While Ursula’s manipulative plans add to her evil portrayal, her actions, however, aren’t the only things that symbolize the negativity associated with powerful females. The illustrations and symbols that surround Ursula do too. For example, a powerful woman is always symbolized as being a castrating female, and therefore so is Ursula. Lauren Dundes, Author of "The Trident and the Fork: Disney’s ‘The Little Mermaid’ as a Male Construction of an Electral Fantasy" points out the castration symbols that surround Ursula and states, ‘To visit Ursula, Ariel must enter through the toothy jaws of a gigantic mouth” (Dundes 125). This is a clear representation of Ursula’s depiction as a castrating female, which is due to her power. The castrating characteristics attached to females in power is significant in order to recognize the fact that it isn’t about which man is in power, as long as it isn’t a female. A female in power symbolizes not only a threat to a man’s power, but to their manhood. That is why Ursula is portrayed as a castrating female; if a woman is in a position of power, she has robbed men of their manhood. Since patriarchy is inherently sexist, it is clear that the reason that men feel castrated if a female is in power is because they believe that women are inherently below them, and therefore view superiority (power) and males as one. Another example is once Ursula achieves power, Triton is symbolically castrated in the film. Dundes explains the scene in her own words as, “He then hands over the trident, the symbol of his power, whereupon he immediately shrinks into a shriveled shadow of himself” (Dundes 124). Triton’s loss of his phallic symbol of power literally leads to a physical dehumanization of himself, which symbolizes
his castration. Basically, a female in power is bad in patriarchy’s eyes, and as a result, is portrayed as a bad person, so that young females are deterred from a desire to be powerful.

Patriarchy in *The Little Mermaid* goes on to present a submissive female as the better female. For example, Ariel is the female lead that submits to patriarchy, and is also portrayed as the most attractive, and most liked. This is shown in the film during her intended recital with her sisters where she is the focal point of the song (Clements, 1989), and is meant to be presented in a glorified manner. Ariel is symbolically the better female as well, which is represented through illustration. For example, since Ariel is a mermaid, Dundes interprets this characteristic and states, “the mermaid has no vagina, with or without teeth, she is no threat” (Dundes 125). Apparently, a non-castrating female, or female who doesn’t seek power, is inherently less of a threat to patriarchy. This is because a woman would have no choice but to conform, since she is not in power. Furthermore, when Ariel becomes human, and spends time with Eric on land, she represents the benefits that come with being the better female, or submissive. An example of her submissiveness is not being able to speak. Like the old adage goes, women and children should be seen, not heard, which is why Ariel had to lose her voice to win Eric’s love. Ariel’s endeavor to win over Eric’s love had to be done voiceless, and needed to utilize stereotypical feminine charms. Since it is a patriarchal film, it works! This supports the idea that being submissive will be beneficial to young women by representing submissive women as loved, and that it will win them a man, which patriarchy also represents as the path to happiness.

Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* is another influential fairytale in the media that has a sure-fire formula of success for patriarchy, and making money. It not only influences young minds to believe in patriarchal values, but it also makes it seem fun, and beneficial! It may seem malicious to play on the insecurities of young women, and show them that if they conform to patriarchy they will meet a man who will save them from their lives, but it is happening. It promotes an unrealistic expectation that a man will lead to happiness. If you consider the men who promote it, however, they are obviously also the men who believe in these
patriarchal ideologies. This is why patriarchal producers create films, such as, *The Little Mermaid*, which embody and promote patriarchal ideologies in order to influence vulnerable minds.

Works Cited


