

All Legs and Fins: Teenage Mermaids Navigating Adolescence on Land and at Sea

It is no secret that mermaids hold some fascination for many young and adolescent girls, and that in turn, many mermaid stories are stories of undergoing a life-altering transformation, establishing identity, and discovering womanhood. In this paper, an excerpt from a larger ongoing research project, I am examining stories of adolescent human girls who become mermaids and mermaid girls who grow legs in order to elucidate the feminine symbolism of water and the mythological associations between women and water in contemporary children's and young adult literature such as Sarah Porter's *Lost Voices* series and the Australian children's programs *H2O: Just Add Water* and *Mako: Island of Secrets*. Of particular interest to my study is the power of water as a transformative agent and creative element and how the adolescent girls of modern mermaid stories experience it, and I will be exploring the essential role water plays in the feminine journey as imagined in the stories of mermaid girls with a particular emphasis on girlhood, identity, and transformation.

Mythologist Mircea Eliade states "immersion in water symbolizes a return to the pre-formal, a total regeneration, a new birth. . . . and emerging from the water is a repetition of the act of creation in which form was first expressed." This is an indispensable theme in the tales of mermaid girls, which usually begin with the transformations of human girls into mermaids or with mermaid girls being gifted with legs and subsequently explores how these girls adapt to their new lives after they have been reborn into new, alien bodies. After her transformation, the mermaid heroine must come to terms with a new body and new abilities heretofore unknown or inaccessible to her. The mermaids' journeys also often involve a heroine becoming part of a community in which she finds strength, encouragement, and sisterhood; developing a sense of responsibility for her aquatic ecosystem; struggling to find and control her voice so that she may choose her own destiny, and above all, accepting herself fully and embracing her life both as a mermaid and as a woman.