

THE SEA AND THE NAUTICAL FOLKLORE IN LITERATURE

Anna Mitkova, Rosa Uzunova

*Technical University – Varna, Faculty of Marine Sciences and Ecology
9010, 1Studentska Str., Varna, Bulgaria, Email: bastnaan@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT

The image of the sea and its impact on the human mind. Primary and secondary image of the sea and vast waters in literature. Superstitions and folklore coming as a result of this impact.

Key words: sea, folklore, psyche, impact, literature, psychology

“Facile credo, plures esse Naturas invisibles quam visibles in rerum universitate”

“I readily believe there to be more invisible natures than visible ones in the universe of things” Thomas Burnet

The imagery of seas and water frequently appears in an overwhelming manner in literature, ocean lore and the very everyday talk of people whose professions involve one way or another contact with seas and water.

How much and what do we know about sea? And in this respect how we react to the unknown or little known?

What is our first feeling and association when sea is mentioned? Are there any allusions emerging when we refer to vast waters and seas?

How do we picture sea when we hear someone else talking about it?

As I have already mentioned previously in a very brief paper on nautical folklore, sea has always been a very provocative and challenging image along with its multiple notions lying beneath. There are various threads that can be picked to try to track the impact of this image on the human mind, imagination and psyche. If I try to summarize and give a short overview on the occurring image of seas I will mention three basic directions- literature, folklore including religion and superstitions and human psyche. These three aspects are actually very closely related and at moments intertwining. And yet each of them if seriously studied and researched would prove to be a large volume of information. Literature on one side comprising novels, stories and poems and even religious texts, on the other hand- verbal lore again including stories, beliefs and superstitions and on a third side a study on the human psyche and the way it deals with all sea images, associations, allusions that are often made and the impact and respective feelings born as a result of this impact.

Literature

Literature is a voluminous area to be explored and abundant of images related to sea conveying so many and various messages concerning seas and waters focusing on their specific place in human mind and life.

We could start a list of works that are seriously preoccupied with the image, influence and power of sea in the context of the human universe.

The first that comes to my mind is the novel *Moby Dick* by H. Melville. It tells us about a deadly struggle between a man and a creature of the sea as the latter has its so typical characteristics- strength, power that is difficult to fight and immense size that is impossible to conquer. These are the adventures of the wandering sailor Ishmael, and his voyage on the whaleship *Pequod*, commanded by Captain Ahab. Ishmael soon learns that Ahab seeks one specific whale: Moby Dick, a ferocious, enigmatic white whale. In a previous encounter, the whale destroyed

Ahab's boat and bit off his leg. Ahab intends to take revenge. Melville uses symbolism and metaphor in the novel to make his various explorations. The book dwells on insecurity that is still a contemporary theme when it comes to nature and non-human beings and the belief that these beings understand and act like humans. It directly employs the image of the ocean and all the symbolism and allusions it renders makes it a typical exponent of a book largely deploying the relation between the sea power and human psyche. As an antagonist Moby Dick appears at the very end of the novel but he is considered to be a symbol of a number of things, among them God, nature, fate, the ocean, and the very universe itself. The obsession of Captain Ahab and his inner struggle and the final encounter with the whale very clearly reveal some aspects of the impact that the above mentioned symbols have on human psyche. We see a story about human response to the fears of the objective and physical laws that govern life that has been portrayed in a symbolic way, metaphors alluding the reflection of all objective universal entities in human mind and the way one copes with them. Here Captain Ahab- the protagonist is in a way a tragic hero, he represents all struggles and the path to be walked in dealing with Universe and all that is not human but largely rules human existence.

Another title to be mentioned of a work highly praised is *The Rime of the ancient Mariner* by S.T. Coleridge. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* relates the events experienced by a mariner who has returned from a long sea voyage. The Mariner's tale begins with his ship departing on its journey. Despite initial good fortune, the ship is driven south off course by a storm and eventually reaches Antarctica. A bird called an albatross (symbolizing the Christian soul) appears and leads them out of the Antarctic, but, even as the albatross is praised by the ship's crew, the Mariner shoots the bird ("with my cross-bow / I shot the albatross"). The crew is angry with the Mariner, believing the albatross brought the south wind that led them out of the Antarctic. Later on the crime arouses the wrath of spirits who then pursue the ship "from the land of mist and snow"; the south wind that had initially led them from the land of ice now sends the ship into uncharted waters, where it is becalmed.

Day after day, day after day,
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;
As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean.
Water, water, every where,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, every where,
Nor any drop to drink.

Here, however, the sailors change their minds and blame the Mariner for the torment of their thirst. In anger, the crew forces the Mariner to wear the dead albatross about his neck, perhaps to illustrate the burden he must suffer from killing it, or perhaps as a sign of regret ("Ah! Well a-day! What evil looks / Had I from old and young! / Instead of the cross, the albatross / About my neck was hung"). Eventually, in an eerie passage, the ship encounters a ghostly vessel. On board are Death (a skeleton) and the "Night-mare Life-in-Death" (a deathly-pale woman), who are playing dice for the souls of the crew. With a roll of the dice, Death wins the lives of the crew members and Life-in-Death the life of the Mariner, a prize she considers more valuable. Her name is a clue as to the Mariner's fate; he will endure a fate worse than death as punishment for his killing of the albatross.

One by one, all of the crew members die, but the Mariner lives on, seeing for seven days and nights the curse in the eyes of the crew's corpses. Eventually, the Mariner's curse is lifted when he sees sea creatures swimming in the water. Despite his cursing them as "slimy things" earlier in the poem ("Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs / upon the slimy sea"), he suddenly sees their true beauty and blesses them ("a spring of love gush'd from my heart and I bless'd them unaware");

suddenly, as he manages to pray, the albatross falls from his neck and his guilt is partially expiated. The bodies of the crew, possessed by good spirits, rise again and steer the ship back home, where it sinks in a whirlpool, leaving only the Mariner behind. A hermit on the mainland had seen the approaching ship and had come to meet it with a pilot and the pilot's boy in a boat. As penance for shooting the albatross, the Mariner, driven by guilt, is forced to wander the earth, tell his story, and teach a lesson to those he meets:

He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.

After relating the story, the Mariner leaves, and the Wedding Guest returns home, and wakes the next morning "a sadder and a wiser man".

There are suggestions that the poem may also have been inspired by the legends of the Wandering Jew, who was forced to wander the earth until Judgement Day for taunting Jesus on the day of the Crucifixion, and of the Flying Dutchman. However compared to the other works that have been mentioned so far it has been very closely woven to the ocean lore and folklore and it ostensibly focuses on the most relevant notions regarding the human relation and response to the sea. It contains basic recurring themes as far as human - sea relation goes. The poem on the surface explores violation of nature and its resulting psychological effects on the Mariner, who interprets the fates of his crew to be a direct result of his having shot down an albatross. This can be translated as the mechanism of initial loss or lack of morality, collision of utmost extremities and opposites leading to curse and subsequent revenge which has its final settlement in maintaining the balance. Metaphors used in this poem relate very much to the original 17th and earlier ocean lore comprising stories and legends giving very basic and in a way literal depiction of all that human psyche experiences with its touch to the sea, vast waters, abyssal depths and uncontrollable nature elements.

Clearly with passing of years, with evolving of society and respectively culture the way the sea and its effect on human beings appear in literature changes and undergoes its own evolution. And yet the enigmatic charm of nautical folklore and the specific way it interprets the place of the human among the nature elements and vice versa – the place of the elements in the human mind remain unique. Its symbolism and metaphors and typical plot patterns convey messages that can be contemplated as a kind of the basis on which further exploration and philosophical aspects can be built with the development of the human ways and self-knowing.

Hemingway is another author who has created a very prominent background image of the sea in his works (The Old Man and the Sea and the idea of man struggling versus nature). That tendency can be tracked in Virginia Woolf's novel of high modernism *To the Lighthouse* though indirectly- where the plot is secondary to philosophical exploration. Thoughts and observations are a predominant part of it with very little action. Its first part – the Window is set in the Ramsays' summer home and the family prepares to visit the lighthouse. Around this event revolves a lot of exploration of the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsey as well as of personality and thoughts, questions and observations of other characters introduced in the chapter. Throughout the chapter the background is the ocean, the isle and the lighthouse on it. Somehow this imagery supplements very adequately all the psychological implications and observations and conveys a sense of solitude, silence, deep introspection and self-exploration. The moods of the main characters are in perfect harmony with the setting.

Let us also mention E.A. Poe and his *Maelstrom* with a very elemental and overwhelming presence of the ocean, B. Stoker's *Dracula* and the powerful and beautiful vision of the waters of

the Black Sea in Mina's deeply connected with Dracula mind. Images of waters, their colour and depth and smell and of winds as companions of seas have a fragmentary participation in the setting which in no way does make its effect underrated in the overall picture.

Going further to the Bible water is just such a fruitful image with great depth and many implications behind it. Referring to my previous paper I would like to mention once more that Bible introduces sea and waters as part of universal events, symbols telling about a realm on a higher level over the physical world. The origins, the chaos, the beginning depicted as waters, and the Spirit of God that moved over the face of the waters in Genesis accounts a scene back in time, or most probably back in the spiritual evolution, at the very, very beginning of our consciousness, our mind and therefrom our physical world - an implication of the very original state and meaning of life. The sea appears in the final book of The Apocalypse 4:7, but it is as if sea of glass, before the throne of God. And definitely this sea has a different reading of its meaning and presents different state of the course of life, when we already speak of the end of all things, the final balance, but on a very general, higher level. What is truly impressive is 21:1 where we are informed that at the new beginning of a new world "...and the sea was no more." What should this mean? This is a matter open to interpretation, according to different expectations of people, but it unquestionably closes the circle of the creation, the evolution of man's world, thrown to pass the hard way of experience and maturing, the voyage from a universal and personal point of view. At the end when the cycle is completed sea is no more. It has played its designated role.

Psychology demands very close and extensive research. Much can be derived from various literature works as well as from verbal lore, legends and superstitions.

Psychology. A few points to make:

Conscious and subconscious impact of sea on human psyche. How does a man feel at sea, surrounded by water whenever their eyes reach? Is it like meeting the infinity? The depth of the sea- the abyss of the sea, its elemental and beyond control power, its changing colours. The colour varies as the mood changes. Vastness and depth are dimensions of sea and psychological dimensions as well.

Storms at sea. Raging power of waves and winds. Winds are companions of the sea. Allusions- sea rage- unpredictability, vicissitudes of life. The relation sea- human is the closest encounter correlated to the human - universe relation.

Contradicting feelings of both fear and consolation. You feel lost and found. Reconciliation between everyday self and inner self related to the nature. As they always oppose in real life which to a certain extent is connected with fear of the new and the unknown, unexplored spaces. Sea strongly represents the unknown, the depths of the unexplored universe.

Subjectiveness of interpretation. Changing context of interpretation of the sea. Characteristics of sea also correlates with a strong and very explicit portrayal of some very essential and basic human states- loneliness, confusion, desperation, remoteness, isolation.

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