

An Empire Drowning

British Imperialism and the Sea in Literature

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Abstract

This essay argues that when the British Empire came into power during the colonial era, its own thirst for expansive power is what led to its fear of the ocean and the “untamed” world. To address this, the essay examines a variety of literary sources, including the Bible, Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*, and Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*. Focusing primarily on the fear of untamable nature, the essay emphasizes how these texts construct the sea as a liminal space that escapes order. The essay states that Britain did not simply have a fear of the ocean *despite* its power, but more accurately, its power is what caused its fear.

A country looking to fulfill its manifest destiny can only do so by traveling across the seas in ships that carry men and ammunition to far off shores. Towards this end in the 16th century England under King Henry VIII began building the greatest naval power in the world and utilized this to build and protect its empire and trade routes. Currently, the website for the Royal Navy states, “We are an island nation and sea has always been a vital factor. It is the means of people arriving from overseas, a barrier to invaders, a highway for trade and the basis for a once-global empire” (Royal Navy). However, the sea would always be a formidable opponent, representing all the fears that come with such massive amounts of power. Fears of revolt and revolution, of the uncontrollable, of becoming lost or stranded, of deep dark unknowns. Colonial and Post-colonial British literature is bedecked with fearsome imagery surrounding the dreadful sea, casting it as an enemy both tangible and metaphorical. It has been reasoned that Britain’s taking to the sea negates this fear but I argue that it is not despite Britain’s massive naval forces and sizeable empire, but due to it, that the ocean has always been viewed as something to be feared. This is evident in the literature coming out of England throughout the many centuries of its reign.

The fear of the ocean that arose in British literature stemmed from the fear of conflict that comes with ruling a large empire. The fear of a fall from grace haunts every superpower and as Britain gained power they felt the ever encroaching threat of the end of their reign. This was coupled with the imperialistic fear of the untamable, someone or something that cannot be brought under control. The ocean in particular posed a great threat to the idea of Empire. It was the largest surface on the planet, and the British could not control or sculpt it like the pruned and pebbled gardens of their Victorian estates, which Alain Corbin, author of *Lure of the Sea: The Discovery of the Seaside in the Western World*, calls "the synthesis of the tame and the wild" (Corbin 6). He goes on to say that, "by contrast, it was impossible to subdue the ocean, which could not be tamed in any way..." (Corbin 6). Corbin also asserts that, "this realm of the unfinished, a vibrating, vague extension of chaos, symbolized the disorder that preceded civilization" (Corbin 2). To them the ocean was a threat to their power, something they could not conquer, a symbol of their ineffectiveness against nature, the un-colonized foe that they could not bring under their control.

In their efforts to control all the lands of the Earth, England controlled many trade routes across the seas, dominating natives and creating hierarchies. The English people felt they were superior to all those they subjugated. While many Britons supported the imperial project, whether out of a sense of divine right, moral obligation, or corporate greed, there were also those that opposed the colonial tradition as immoral and inhumane. Virginia Woolf, along with most of the Bloomsbury Group, was among these dissenters. In many of her novels and essays Woolf discusses her views toward colonialism and the British Imperial mindset. These views can be seen strikingly in her novel *The Waves*, published in 1931, which follows the lives of six men and women growing up in England during the height of imperialism.

Woolf's character Louis is an Australian emigrant to England and was treated as a second class citizen despite his family's wealth and social standing. Through the story of Louis' life, Woolf demonstrates the desire of someone that has been made to feel inferior to dominate over someone else that is yet more inferior than himself. Louis is a prime example of this as he always thought himself to be inferior and an outsider due to his accent. When he is an adult he builds a large international financial network that perpetuates the British Empire's control across the world.

Louis is responding to his own subjugation as a child by inflicting oppression on others. He becomes obsessed with rendering the world to order and controlling that order. When he is young he looks for this order in poetry, but his love of words is corrupted by his desire for power. This desire is shown when Louis says things such as, "I will reduce you to order." (Woolf, 95) Using the term "reduce" makes Louis seem like the aggressor bringing his opponent down from an unorderly position. Louis uses his commercial empire to stroke his insecure ego. He says, "The globe is strung with our lines. I am immensely respectable. All the young ladies in the office acknowledge my entrance" (Woolf, 146; Phillips). Louis was persecuted as a foreigner and now seeks prove himself to those to whom he was subjugated by building a financial empire and becoming "immensely respectable".

Control was the essence of the British Empire, with their power reaching far across the globe. So it was no wonder that those against their rule sought refuge outside their sphere of influence, such as the ocean. Pirates worked on the open seas, where the authority of the law could not govern them. No country could claim ownership or rule over them and they skirted the rules of the civilized. They represented the untamable man, set alongside the untamable sea. Robert Louis Stevenson set pirates in a state of liminality, both outside of society and lurking within it, outside the norm but close enough to strike fear into the hearts of readers.

The association made between liminality and fear comes from humanity's need to categorize and label things in order to identify and acknowledge something as friend or foe. The fear then stems from the anxiety of not being able to determine the status or location of something, the inability to name or tame it. Daniel Heller-Roazen describes the pirate in *The Enemy of All: Piracy and the Law of Nation* as "Barbaric but not a barbarian" (Heller Roazen 19). In other words, the pirate is both deviated from society but not foreign or excluded from it. The Pirate is both within and without, a concept frightening in its liminality. Unlike Woolf's Louis who is a foreign sovereign brought into England's civilized society, pirates have left the comforts of the civilization to sail the dark and deadly seas.

While many traditions, such as those found in Native American and Pacific Island cultures, find spirituality in nature, especially in water, Europeans have long held an innate fear of it in its unspoiled form. It is perhaps due to the differences between the imperial nature of European countries versus the non-

dominating societies that they preyed through which this difference can be seen. Those societies that did not fear a loss of control had no need to fear the sea until conquerors from Europe arrived. Water's physical presence and force, against which "civilization" battles, poses a threat both tangible and theoretical to what the Europeans deem to be progress. Pirates chose this place of watery chaos over the controlled and civilized British colonies and are to be feared for this deviation. Like the ocean the pirates cannot be controlled or tamed or conquered. Also, much as the ocean once flooded the Earth, piracy swells in the hearts of men and takes them from the civilized.

Stevenson follows this fear of the omnipresence of piracy even further when he depicts the treacherous qualities that define a pirate even in the gentlemanly characters. For example, the Squire says at one point of pirates, "Money!...What were these villains after but money? What do they care for but money?" (Stevenson 45). He dismisses the pirates as nothing but greedy gold seekers, but then, when he hears about the treasure himself exclaims, "I'll have that treasure if I have to search a year," revealing himself to be just as greedy and treasure hungry as the pirates he admonishes. This reversal relates to Rodney Giblett's study on bogs and water when he discusses the psychology of the water's surface. He starts by stating that "water...serves as a reflecting screen...it sends back images of men, of things..." This is indicative of the nature of Stevenson's text in that it shows how the worst in the pirates is mirrored in the best of men.

However, Giblett goes on to argue that water in fact, "is not a surface of reflection but of absorption...it is always a matter of self-seduction." If Stevenson's text is looked at in this way, the good men are seduced by the treasure and absorbed into pirate culture. The British Empire is a pirate ship in the sense that it loots and plunders foreign lands in order to bring back the resources and money it wins abroad. England steers its marauding ship over the seas and into the bays and coves of islands, killing and pillaging the natives and setting up its own system, furthering the Empire to bring the riches back to England. In this way the ocean and the pirates that float upon it are feared because they reflect the worst side of the Empire.

However, it was not only what lurked on the waters that seemed monstrous, but the waters themselves. In many works the ocean becomes a physical bodily threat; not to the Empire as a whole, but to the individual. The force and noise of the ocean is written about as the driving sense of fear in the individual. In

Treasure Island, the young protagonist, Jim, has nightmares in which the one-legged terror of John Silver that come to him only on "stormy nights, when the wind shook the four corners of the house, and the surf roared along the cove" (Stevenson 14). The presence of frightening noises illustrates the world in which the pirates reside, one of fear and attack. The roaring and shaking of the storm are assaults on Jim's senses that mirror the assault in his dreams. The roar of the sea pursues him up the coast as the one legged man pursues him over obstacles in his dream. The unstoppable force of both the wind and waves mirror the terror of an unbeatable foe.

Similarly, in Tim Winton's novel, *Breath*, another young protagonist Pikelet lays in bed listening as the "distant waves pummeled the shore," feeling "the rumble in my skull" and fearing that "whole slabs of the district had been lost to the sea... all chewed off like so much cake" (Winton, 11). The imagery of the sea swallowing the coast is reminiscent of Jim's fear of the ocean pursuing him up onto land. This is furthered by the imagery of cake and its connotations of domesticity, or home, being taken into the sea. It must be noted that Pikelet comes from a line of settlers to New Zealand, not the Maori natives, and therefore his fear is descended from the ancient fear of the water brought with the English settlers, along with their fear of what was lurking in the Bush. This becomes ever more present when compared to *The Waves* when it looks at one girl's experience with the ocean that is undeniably similar to Winton's portrayal of Pikelet. Both novels include scenes in which their characters dream or daydream about drowning in the ocean. In *Breath*, Pikelet's feverish dream is racked with imagery of violence and war. He is "plummeting like a projectile" and slams repeatedly into the reef. Winton writes, "while my lungs turn to sponge and the ocean inside me flickers with cruel light" (Winton 122). He can feel himself being absorbed and taken by the ocean into the ocean.

The extent to which this mirrors Rhoda's envisioning of her death by drowning in the ocean almost seems uncanny. She is looking out at the ocean from a cliff in Spain and says, "The sea will drum in my ears...Rolling me over, the waves will shoulder me under. Everything falls in a tremendous shower, dissolving me" (Woolf 151). While Rhoda's imagery is much less violent than the battle of Pikelet's dream, she too is forcibly absorbed or dissolved and turned into the ocean. Pikelet has a fear of being taken by the sea while Rhoda has a much more welcoming sense of being brought into the sea. This suggests a very real fear of the ocean destroying and taking you into it, however Rhoda feels that she would be content in this as she is suicidal.

The fear of losing one's self and being overcome and absorbed is also present in Seamus Heaney's poetry of the Irish bogs. Britain had invaded and colonized Ireland under Henry VII, committing genocide and establishing large plantations on the land. Soon, tensions rose between the Irish Catholic natives and the British Protestant settlers. Many rebellions were attempted by the Irish. With famine, disease, and poverty on the rise, the conditions of the Irish grew increasingly desperate as time went by. Problems reached a high point in 1845 when the nation was struck by the potato famine that crippled the economy and left many to starve. The population dropped by nearly three million in the following five years. The remaining Irish had an urgent sense of nationalism and began demanding more rights from their British oppressors. These feelings led to the formation of the Irish Republican Army which would be the leading force behind the rebellions to come.

The literature coming out of Ireland at the time also tended to be very patriotic and glorified the work of Irish resistance. Heaney began writing much later but incorporated many of the themes of the literature of the time, incorporating and repurposing the myth of Mother Ireland. Much of Heaney's poetry is concerned with the bog land of the Irish countryside. This dark, seeping world became a symbolic battleground in which Heaney could work out the complexity of the political unrest taking hold of the Irish mindset. The bogs make up about 1/6 of the Irish island and are therefore an important part of the community's cultural heritage (Abbot). Heaney began to see the bogs as emblems of Irish Catholic culture, a symbol of preservation, and "an answering Irish myth" (Gardiner 63). In 1969 he discovered the work of P.V. Glob and the Iron Age bodies that were being dug up in Danish bogs (Foley). Using the images of these ancient bodies, Heaney wrote about and to them in order to connect the violence of the Troubles with this ancient mythicised race of bog people.

"Bog Queen" has several stanzas in which the woman's body is made into bog, much as Pikelett and Rhoda are absorbed into the sea. He writes, "the seeps of winter/ digested me,/ the illiterate roots/ pondered and died/ in the cavings/ of my stomach and socket." (Heaney 10-15). The corpse is literally eaten by the bog and turned into the creature that floats to the surface seeking revenge at the end of the poem, a monster coming from the deep and the dark.

The bogs also posed a dilemma similar to that of the pirates, one of liminality. Rodney Giblett discusses this fear of the liminal in his work on the Irish

wetlands. He states, "if not in transition, many wetlands are 'physically halfway between the water and the land...bogs are a different kind of halfway world, neither water nor land but a part of both," (Giblett 3). Like the pirates stuck in a halfway point between criminal and civilian, thief and purveyor, bogs are stuck between land and water. The bogs also held the threat of the monstrous. Seamus Heaney writes of the dead buried in the bogs, and the imagery he uses connotes fear and anxiety. His poem "Bog Queen" opens, "I lay waiting/" (Heaney 1). Beginning his poem in this way elicits a feeling of anticipation in the reader. What is waiting? And for whom? The bog becomes a threat here, lying in wait, the dead in its belly ruminating over the crimes of killers and thieves.

The fear the British felt of the ocean likely evolved from the Biblical fear of being swallowed by the sea, combined with the notion that God meant humans to cover the Earth and spread civilization to the unknowing heathen. England is and was a Christian (Anglican) nation, and its people would have been taught the bible from childhood. Genesis 6:17 states, "And, behold, I, even I, do bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh, wherein [is] the breath of life, from under heaven; [and] everything that [is] in the earth shall die." (OpenBible). God flooded the Earth and destroyed mankind for its sins. The oceans stand as a constant reminder of this holy wrath, with dark abysmal depths that swallow men. Biblically inspired texts also picked up on this theme of a powerful and deadly ocean. Milton's "Paradise Lost" paints the sea thusly "Under yon boiling ocean, wrapped in chains," (Milton 38). The sea struggles under ill-wrought control and strains to be free, at which point it will flood the Earth.

For a long time, argues Corbin, the sea was seen as "an instrument of punishment and in its actual configuration was the remnant of the disaster." He suggests that the sea was left to remind us of God's power and to keep us in fear of similar retribution for our transgressions. He continues, "Its roaring, its moaning, its sudden bursts of anger were perceived as so many reminders of the sins of the first humans, doomed to be engulfed by the waves." (Corbin 2). Pikelet also illustrates this fear when, as he looks out upon a sizeable wave, he imagines himself, "right in the path of the oncoming sets and I'd be buried in whitewater," (Winton 49). The use of the word "buried" alludes to death by drowning, the sea becoming his casket, consuming his corpse as the earth would.

The constant associations with death and the impossibility of taming the ocean joined to cast fear into the hearts of the Englishmen who sought so desperately to sail into unknown lands, and it was this fear that bled into many a travel story and into adventures filled with monsters and magic. Many critics have looked at liminal spaces, such as the sea, as the setting for tales of monsters and madness. Alain Corbin writes that "the chaotic ocean, that unruly dark side of the world which was an abode of monsters stirred up by diabolical powers, emerges as one of the persistent figures of madness..." (Corbin 7). The primordial chaos of the ocean as a place defying Creation and civilization gives rise to the presence of monsters, things outside of culture and society, the inhuman and beastly.

The ocean acted as the setting for many a tale too horrible and supernatural to happen on land, such as Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" written in 1797 and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* from 1818. Both stories take place on a frozen ocean, a place of liminal existence frozen in time. The idea of the frozen wasteland opened up the possibilities of monsters and magic thriving in the primordial world, a world not under British control. Mary Shelley's mad doctor is chased by his monster into the arctic, and that is the setting in which the storyteller resides (Shelley). Such a tale of scientific monstrosity and horror could not exist in the real world; it therefore has to be taken out into the frozen expanse. This part of the novel is also explained in the preface to the actual story: a part of the book both within and without, not truly a part of the story but integral to it. Coleridge also uses the motif of the frozen ocean to frame his tale of terror. He writes of ghosts and monsters and a man driven mad. He describes the frozen setting thusly, "The ice was here, the ice was there,/ The ice was all around:/ It cracked and growled, and roared and howled,/ Like noises in a swound!" (Coleridge 59-62). The fearsome frozen sea brought the setting of horror and inescapability in its icy and unmoving nature. The mariner is literally surrounded and assaulted by the frozen sea.

Much like the bogs which were said to "defy Empire", the frozen Arctic, "simultaneously fluid and solid, turbulent and rigid... posed unique problems for oppositional 'ideologies of land and sea'... [that] were fundamental to the ability of capitalist models of global power to eclipse 'a host of other visions of maritime space.'" (Giblett 20, Craciun 694). These two places of the in-between were troublesome to the British imperialists who believed they were sent by God to conquer the untamed world. Craciun says, "The Frozen Ocean was imagined to threaten not only the global reach of Britain's commercial flows but

even the nation's physical and moral existence." (Craciun 695). The idea that they could not conquer the ice contrasted with the ideals of the Empire and therefore made anxious those who believed they had to expand across the globe.

The song "Britannia Rules the Waves" is an explicit example of England exerting their dominance over the world through their use of naval power and "ruling" the ocean. The chorus of the poem reads, "Rule, Britannia, rule the waves;/ Britons never will be slaves." This is an obvious ode to Britain's control of the sea and their command over others. The ode begins with, "When Britain first, at Heaven's command,/ Arose from out the azure main," stating that Britain is guided and compelled by a divine compulsion to go forth into the ocean. The "azure main" refers to the sea, as Britain had the strongest naval power in the world. The ode continues to say, "The nations, not so blest as thee,/ Must in their turns to tyrants fall;" which became an important notion during the World Wars as England fought the tyrannical powers taking over Europe. However, this is ironic as Britain became a tyrannical force in their colonies, forcing labor and slavery. Therefore, Britain itself becomes the tyrants referred to in the song.

The poem then says, "To thee belongs the rural reign;/ Thy cities shall with commerce shine;/ All thine shall be the subject main,/ And every shore it circles thine." (Thomson). This section is the most telling as it clearly states the basis of the Imperial mindset. The song imposes that England owns the "rural reign", meaning the colonies, and the "subject main", again alluding to the seas, along with "every shore it circles". The ode also cites commerce as the source of Britain's power and influence. This ode was later put to music and is now the song most often identified with English identity. It has been used to represent the nation and empire since its production to the present day.

However, though the sea fostered the empire's control of the islands and continents of the Atlantic and Pacific, it also held the threat of enemy incursion. Just as British forces came on ships and marched on the beaches of foreign shores, the local peoples could turn on their British rulers and bring ruin upon their shores. Woolf addresses this fear in her interludes between the chapters in *The Waves*. These italicized portions anthropomorphize the ocean, describing it in terms of foreign, probably Indian, invaders.

Woolf writes, "The waves drummed on the shore, like turbaned warriors, like turbaned men with poisoned assegais who, whirling their arms on high, advance upon the feeding flocks, the white sheep." (Woolf 53) The "turbaned men" allude to India and the "assegais" Africa. These sections symbolize the conflicts between England and the natives of the lands they colonized. (Rodal) The "white sheep" are described as the English people by Louis and the foreigners "advance upon" them (Phillips). Much like the symbolic waves, the conflict and warring will never stop.

The italicized sections become more soldierly as Woolf writes, "Spray rose like the tossing of lances and assegais over the riders' heads... the sea... beat like a drum that raises a regiment of plumed and turbaned soldiers." (Woolf 108) These depictions allude to the local servicemen that were stationed with Imperial armies and wore traditional headgear and used their own weapons. These men are rushing onto the shores of their own foreign lands and waging war with the British forces. The italicized sections also allude to the unending influence of the Empire as they end with "The waves broke upon the shore." (Woolf, 220) This ending indicates the success of insurgent forces in the colonies across the sea.

Britain needed the sea and its trade routes in order to maintain control over their empire and yet Raban's chronology indicates that the first two centuries of British naval imperialism elicited only a few narratives regarding the sea itself. The works produced portrayed the ocean as "merely a space to be traversed. With some exceptions, such as works depicting tempests at sea, it was not until the eighteenth century that the sea itself was written about as a complex figure in British literature. It began to be depicted as a space giving rise to "romance, gothic terror, reflection, the sublime, a natural counter to industrialized Europe, or a space of ontological abyss" (Deloughrey 59). Due to the complicated and diverse nature of the oceans, an expansive range of stories were written to recreate the ocean as a tool of empirical expansion.

Though fear still existed, Europeans, especially wealthy Britons, began to use the sea as a means of purification. Somewhat like God's purification of the Earth through the flood, the British used the refining qualities of the sea to cleanse their "spirits". Often they would vacation at the seaside to rid themselves of city air and worries. The fear that the ocean created, they claimed, would ease them of their anxieties. Corbin writes of how the people began to be "frightened by excessive frailness and pallor," and would go to the

shore to tan and get the fresh air that "the working classes enjoyed thanks to their labour," (Corbin 61). Even Woolf's characters in *The Waves* spent their summers as children at the shore. Her characters often see the ocean as more than a means of self-reflection and cleansing, however. As they are children of Empire, they see it as a means of expansion and control over the world.

Regardless of their attempts to rebrand the ocean as a helpful cleansing proponent to the empire, the British still feared its vast and myriad threats. Just as easily as it carried the British ships to the foreign shores, it could carry destruction and ruin back. The anxieties that came from ruling over 25% of the Earth's landmasses at the Empire's height became manifest in the ocean. The swelling, surging waves that pounded upon the shores in a relentless and unceasing pattern mirrored the never-ending resistance of the people subjugated by the British Empire. An empire so large stretches its resources too thin and risks losing control. A ship can only stay aloft in a storm when it battens down the hatches; with sails full and billowing it capsizes. Eventually the empire stretched its sails too wide, trying to catch too much wind to steer its ships and was overtaken by the waves.

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