

Tides of Memory: Reading Riders to the Sea and The Old Man and the Sea through the Blue Humanities

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Abstract—This article looks at J. M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* and Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* from a Blue Humanities perspective. It says that these two stories are "blue" literature that thinks about the ocean in a way that is similar to what people are saying about the ocean today. The article uses ideas from scholars like Steve Mentz, Philip Steinberg and Stacy Alaimo to see how the sea is shown as a living thing that can act on its own in these stories. It also looks at how the ocean affects who people are and how they remember things.

The article talks about how men and women deal with loss in ways in Synge's story. It looks at how being alone on the ocean makes people think about their place in the world in Hemingway's story. The article says that both stories have a way of thinking about the ocean and our place in it. By looking at these stories through the Blue Humanities we can understand them better and see how they fit into bigger conversations about people and the ocean. The Blue Humanities helps us see that J. M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* and Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* are not important literature, but also part of a bigger discussion, about how people interact with the ocean.

Index Terms—Blue Humanities, Oceanic Memory, Ecocriticism, Ecological Consciousness, Human–Ocean Relations

I. Introduction: The Blue Turn in Literary Studies

The emergence of the Blue Humanities—or what scholar Steve Mentz has called the "blue cultural studies" movement—represents one of the most generative reorientations in contemporary literary and cultural criticism. Departing from the predominantly terrestrial preoccupations of ecocriticism's first wave, the Blue Humanities foregrounds the ocean as a dynamic, agential, and epistemologically productive space, attending to the ways in which maritime environments shape human consciousness, cultural memory, and narrative form. As Mentz argues in *Shipwreck Modernity: Ecologies of Globalization, 1550–1719*, "the sea is not a stable platform but a volatile, transformative environment that destabilizes the categories through which modernity organizes itself" (3). This recognition—that the ocean is not merely a backdrop to human drama but an active participant in it—opens fresh interpretive horizons for texts long regarded as canonical works of modernist tragedy and existential fiction.

J. M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* (1904) and Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) stand as two of the most enduring works in Anglophone literature to make the sea their central dramaturgy. Both texts have generated substantial critical commentary: Synge's play has been read through the lenses of Irish nationalism, mythology, and gender; Hemingway's novella has attracted biographical, existentialist, and stylistic analyses. Yet neither text has been systematically examined through the theoretical apparatus of the

Blue Humanities, a lacuna this article seeks to address. By reading both works through the critical vocabularies of oceanic criticism, thalassology, and what Philip Steinberg terms "the social construction of the ocean" (Steinberg 25), this article demonstrates that Synge and Hemingway do not merely write about the sea—they think with it, constructing through marine encounter a complex epistemology of loss, endurance, and posthuman relationality.

The article is organized into five sections. Following this introduction, Section II establishes the theoretical framework of the Blue Humanities and its relevance to literary analysis. Section III examines *Riders to the Sea*, focusing on the sea as agential force, the feminization of coastal mourning, and the thalassic construction of Irish identity. Section IV turns to *The Old Man and the Sea*, analyzing the oceanic phenomenology of Santiago's combat, the sea's grammatical and figurative gender, and the novella's ecological implications. Section V draws the two texts into comparative dialogue, highlighting shared themes of memory, dissolution, and the nonhuman sublime. A brief conclusion reflects on the broader significance of oceanic reading for the study of modern literature.

II. Blue Humanities: An Ecological and Cultural Framework

The Blue Humanities, as a critical practice, draws upon several converging intellectual traditions: ecocriticism's concern with the relationship between literature and environment, posthumanism's challenge to anthropocentric hierarchies, and the "oceanic turn" in geography and cultural studies. Philip Steinberg's *The Social Construction of the Ocean* (2001) laid important groundwork by demonstrating that the sea is not a natural given but a culturally produced space, invested with different meanings across different historical and geopolitical formations. Steinberg writes that the ocean has been constructed alternately as a "void to be crossed," a "resource to be exploited," and a "place of freedom outside the territorial logic of the state" (Steinberg 26). These constructions are not merely abstract; they structure the imaginative and affective dimensions of maritime literature.

Steve Mentz has been the most prolific theorist of literary Blue Humanities, developing the concept of the "blue humanities" as a mode of reading that embraces the sea's disorienting, de-centering energies. In his essay "Toward a Blue Cultural Studies," Mentz argues that oceanic environments challenge the "green" assumptions of mainstream ecocriticism—its implicit preference for stable, terrestrial ecosystems—and demand a different critical vocabulary, one attuned to flux, instability, and saltwater corrosion (Mentz, "Toward" 997). The sea, in Mentz's framework, is a space of "shipwreck"—not as disaster but as epistemological condition, a perpetual state of ungroundedness that nevertheless produces new forms of knowledge and solidarity.

Stacy Alaimo's concept of "transcorporeality" offers a further theoretical resource. In *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, Alaimo argues that the boundaries between the human body and its environment are porous and permeable, that environmental substances flow through and transform bodily selfhood (Alaimo 2). Applied to maritime literature, transcorporeality suggests that characters who live and labor at sea are not simply agents who encounter the ocean as an external obstacle; they are beings whose very physiology, cognition, and emotional life are shaped by brine, current, and weather. Both Synge's *Maurya* and Hemingway's *Santiago* demonstrate this transcorporeal constitution in ways that a Blue Humanities framework can illuminate with particular precision.

Additionally, the framework of thalassology—defined by Michael Pearson as "the study of seas and oceans, their interactions with people and peoples, their roles in cultural and political history" (Pearson 361)—enables a culturally grounded oceanic analysis that attends to the specific historical and geographic contexts in which maritime literature is produced. The Aran Islands of Synge's imagination and the Gulf Stream of Hemingway's Cuban coast are not interchangeable oceans; they are geographically and culturally specific marine environments, each with its own history of human dependence, exploitation, and symbolization. A thalassological approach insists on this specificity while remaining alert to the transnational and universalizing dimensions of oceanic experience.

III. Riders to the Sea: Mourning, Agency, and the Gendered Shore

Synge's *Riders to the Sea* is set on an island off the west coast of Ireland—modeled on the Aran Islands, which Synge visited between 1898 and 1902—and dramatizes the destruction of a single family by the relentless demands of the sea. The play's action is compressed into a single, catastrophic day: Maurya, an aged widow, loses her last son, Bartley, to the sea, having already lost her husband and five other sons to the same waters. The sea in this play is not a symbolic convenience but the play's governing ontological reality, the force that structures time, identity, and the very possibility of futurity.

From the Blue Humanities perspective, perhaps the most striking feature of Synge's sea is its unambiguous agency. The ocean in *Riders to the Sea* is not passive background; it is a character—or rather, a nonhuman force with something like intentionality. Maurya's famous final speech enacts this recognition: "They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me" (Synge 24). The construction is notable: the sea is grammatically positioned as an agent capable of doing things to human beings, not simply a space through which humans move. This linguistic attribution of agency to the ocean anticipates what Blue Humanities scholars would call the sea's "lively materiality" (Bennett 2)—its capacity to act, to harm, and, paradoxically, to grant a terrible form of release.

Maurya's relationship with the sea is also, crucially, a relationship with memory. The ocean in Synge's play is a mnemonic space, a repository of the dead. When Maurya attempts to bless Bartley before he departs, she is struck dumb by a vision: she sees not only Bartley on his bay horse but also the ghost of his drowned brother Michael on a grey pony behind him, riding the same fatal path toward the sea. The vision collapses past and present, the living and the dead, in a manner that the sea itself seems to authorize. As Synge's stage direction indicates: "Maurya has gone over to the other side of the fire. . . . She speaks very slowly" (Synge 18). The sea, by absorbing the bodies of her sons, has transformed Maurya's domestic space into a site of perpetual oceanic haunting. The shore, in this reading, is not the boundary between land and sea but the permeable membrane where the dead continue to arrive.

The gendered dimension of this oceanic mourning deserves careful attention. In Synge's Ireland, and on the Aran Islands specifically, the division of labor was sharply maritime: men went to sea; women remained on shore, spinning, weaving, waiting, and lamenting. This gendered spatial arrangement means that Maurya's experience of the sea is essentially mediated—she knows the ocean through the bodies it returns and the bodies it does not return. Nora and Cathleen's anxious examination of the bundle of clothes in the opening scene—trying to determine from a shirt and stocking whether the drowned body found at Donegal belongs to their brother Michael—enacts this mediation literally. The women read the sea through its textile traces, through the material residue it deposits on the shore.

This reading practice has a striking parallel with what Stacy Alaimo calls "transcorporeal" knowledge: the recognition that environmental forces make themselves known through the body's material encounters with what the sea has touched, held, and transformed. The women in *Riders to the Sea* are, in this sense, oceanic readers—they interpret the sea's agency through material objects, and their knowledge of the ocean is inseparable from their knowledge of loss. As Nora tells Cathleen: "The young priest is after saying we should put our trust in God, and she won't hear a word from him" (Synge 6). The sea, for Maurya, has replaced theological certainty; it is the ultimate arbiter of life and death, a force more reliable in its destructiveness than any providential narrative.

The play's engagement with Irish cultural identity further enriches this Blue Humanities reading. The Aran Islands, where Synge set his imaginative compass, were experienced by the Irish Literary Revival as a space of authentic Gaelic culture, uncorrupted by modernity and English colonialism. But Synge's play complicates this romantic idealization by showing the sea not as a guarantor of cultural authenticity but as a force of cultural annihilation. The island community in *Riders to the Sea* is being steadily depopulated by the ocean, its male members drowned one by one, its future foreclosed. From a thalassological perspective, this

represents what Mentz would call the sea's "de-centering" of human community—its insistence on being a force that human cultures must accommodate rather than a resource they can command.

Synge's dramatic language enacts this oceanic de-centering at the level of form. The play's keening—the traditional Irish practice of mourning through collective wailing—is itself a kind of sonic tidal wave, a vocal performance of grief that mirrors the rhythmic, repetitive force of the sea. When the women of the island arrive to keen over Bartley's body at the play's conclusion, their voices become, in effect, the sea's voice, transformed into human sound. Maurya's final lines—"No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied" (Synge 26)—represent not resignation but a form of tragic oceanic wisdom: the recognition that human life, like the sea itself, is constituted by impermanence, and that this impermanence is not a deficiency to be overcome but a condition to be endured.

IV. The Old Man and the Sea: Phenomenology, Gender, and Ecological Ethics

Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* narrates three days in the life of Santiago, an aging Cuban fisherman who sails alone into the Gulf Stream and hooks an enormous marlin, only to see it devoured by sharks on his return journey. The text is deeply invested in the ocean as a phenomenological space—a space that shapes perception, consciousness, and selfhood in ways that resist straightforward symbolism. From a Blue Humanities perspective, the novella constitutes one of the most sustained meditations in American literature on what it means to live in intimate, daily, and ultimately fatal relation with the sea.

The ocean's grammatical gender in the novella is a site of significant ideological complexity. Hemingway explicitly distinguishes between Santiago's feminizing of the sea and the younger fishermen's masculinizing of it:

He always thought of the sea as *la mar* which is what people call her in Spanish when they love her. Sometimes those who love her say bad things of her but they are always said as though she were a woman. Some of the younger fishermen, those who used buoys as floats for their lines and had motorboats, bought when the shark livers had brought much money, spoke of her as *el mar* which is masculine. They spoke of her as a contestant or a place or even an enemy. (Hemingway 29-30)

This passage is often read as a contrast between traditional and modern fishing cultures. But from the perspective of the Blue Humanities, it encodes a deeper epistemological opposition between two ways of relating to the nonhuman ocean. Santiago's feminization of the sea—his designation of it as *la mar*—is not simply a sentimental archaism; it is a form of what Stacy Alaimo would call "trans-corporeal ethics," an acknowledgment of the sea's irreducible alterity and agency, a refusal to reduce the ocean to mere resource or

obstacle. The younger fishermen's use of *el mar*, by contrast, belongs to the logic of what Mentz calls the "blue Anthropocene"—the instrumentalization of ocean space for maximum economic extraction (Mentz, "Blue Humanities" 153).

Santiago's phenomenological engagement with the sea is distinguished by its intimacy and its mutuality. He does not experience the ocean as a hostile environment to be conquered but as a living partner in a complex, often painful form of labor. His relationship with the marlin is the most dramatic expression of this mutuality: as the struggle extends over three days, Santiago begins to identify with the fish, to see in its strength and beauty a mirror of his own best self. "I do not understand these things," he thinks, "but it is good that we do not have to try to kill the sun or the moon or the stars. It is good that we do not have to try" (Hemingway 75). The marlin, the sharks, the stars, the current—all are elements of an oceanic world that Santiago inhabits rather than merely uses, a world to which he belongs as much as he commands.

This sense of belonging is rendered with particular vividness in Santiago's extended meditation on the sea's creatures. His sympathy extends not only to the marlin but to the tiny birds that rest on his line, to the Portuguese man-of-war he admires and curses, to the flying fish whose escapes he watches with pleasure. This broad sympathy constitutes what we might call, following Blue Humanities principles, an "oceanic ethics of care"—an ethical orientation grounded not in abstract principles but in the daily, embodied, sensory experience of living with the sea and its nonhuman inhabitants. As Santiago reflects: "Most people are heartless about turtles because a turtle's heart will beat for hours after he has been cut up and butchered. But the old man thought, I have such a heart too" (Hemingway 37).

The question of ecological loss in the novella is one that Blue Humanities criticism is uniquely positioned to address. The marlin that Santiago catches is, by the novel's end, a skeleton—stripped by sharks to bare bone. Critics have long read this ending in existentialist terms, as a meditation on heroic defeat and the preservation of dignity in the face of inevitable failure. But from an ecological perspective, the scene carries a different resonance: it enacts, in miniature, the logic of the Anthropocene—the extraction of a magnificent creature from its natural habitat, leading to its destruction, while the human protagonist returns to shore exhausted and empty-handed. Hemingway does not moralize this ecology; he presents it with the same flat, observational clarity that characterizes his style throughout. Yet the effect is devastating: "He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish" (Hemingway 9).

Memory and time operate in the novella in ways that parallel, though differ from, their operations in Synge. For Santiago, the sea is associated primarily with an idealized past—a heroic, youthful self whose physical

strength and competitive spirit are now only accessible through dream and reverie. His recurring dream of the lions on the African beach is an oceanic memory in this sense: the beach is the threshold of the sea, and the lions' play upon it evokes a younger self who once stood between the terrestrial and the marine, at home in both. As Hemingway writes: "He only dreamed of places now and of the lions on the beach. They played like young cats in the dusk and he loved them as he loved the boy. He never dreamed about the boy" (Hemingway 25). The sea, in this framework, is both the space of Santiago's greatest achievement and the medium through which his decline becomes legible.

The novella's prose style is itself shaped by oceanic rhythm. Hemingway's famously spare, paratactic sentences—"He was tired now and he breathed hard and fast. He could feel the fish now moving strongly and steadily through the water" (Hemingway 60)—enact at the level of syntax the quality of sustained, rhythmic effort that characterizes Santiago's battle with the marlin. The sentences push forward like waves, each one adding incremental pressure, building toward exhaustion. This formal correspondence between marine environment and literary style is precisely what a Blue Humanities reading can reveal: the sea's rhythmic materiality is not merely described but performed in the texture of Hemingway's prose.

V. Comparative Thalassology: Memory, Dissolution, and the Nonhuman Sublime

Reading *Riders to the Sea* and *The Old Man and the Sea* in comparative thalassological perspective reveals a set of structural and thematic homologies that transcend their very different cultural and historical contexts. Both texts figure the sea as an agent of loss that simultaneously constitutes identity; both construct maritime labor as a form of existential vocation inseparable from mortal risk; and both explore the ocean as a mnemonic environment—a space in which the past persists in ways that complicate straightforward temporal progression.

The figure of the survivor who endures after the sea has taken everything is central to both texts. Maurya, at the conclusion of *Riders to the Sea*, is stripped of every male member of her family; what remains to her is the bare fact of survival and the capacity for lamentation. Santiago, at the conclusion of *The Old Man and the Sea*, returns to shore with nothing but the marlin's skeleton and his own depleted body; what remains to him is sleep and the dream of lions. In both cases, the sea's agency is not merely destructive but revelatory: it strips away everything contingent—social role, familial relationship, physical capacity—to reveal a residual human essence defined by its capacity to endure. This is what the Blue Humanities would identify as the ocean's "de-centering" function: by confronting human beings with its power, the sea recalibrates the human at a more minimal, more elemental level.

The treatment of the body in each text is equally significant. In *Riders to the Sea*, the bodies of the drowned are simultaneously material evidence—they wash up on shores, are identified by the clothes they wear—and spectral presences that haunt the living. Michael's ghost, riding behind Bartley in Maurya's vision, exemplifies

the way in which the sea refuses to dispose cleanly of its victims; it returns them as both physical matter and immaterial memory. In *The Old Man and the Sea*, Santiago's body is a continuous register of oceanic encounter: his hands are cut by the line, his back is strained by the fish's pull, his eyes are burned by the sun's glare off the water. As Hemingway writes: "His left hand had always been a traitor and would not do what he called on it to do and he did not trust it" (Hemingway 60). The sea has written itself into Santiago's flesh; his body is the archive of his oceanic history.

This transcorporeal dimension of both texts connects them to a broader concern in the Blue Humanities with what Alaimo calls "the traffic in toxins, nutrients, and other substances across bodily and environmental boundaries" (Alaimo 2). Both Maurya and Santiago are beings whose interiority has been shaped, and in different ways violated, by their sustained exposure to the sea. Their identities cannot be understood independently of their oceanic environments; they are, in a posthumanist sense, assemblages of human and marine materialities. The Blue Humanities framework makes this visible in a way that more anthropocentric reading practices cannot.

The question of the nonhuman sublime—the aesthetic and emotional response to natural forces that exceed human comprehension and control—is another point of productive comparison. Burke's formulation of the sublime as "whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger" (Burke 36) finds its marine application in both texts. Maurya's confrontation with the sea is sublime in precisely this sense: the ocean's capacity to take life exceeds her ability to comprehend or to resist it, and this excess generates the specific affective mixture of terror and awe that Burke associates with sublimity. Santiago's battle with the marlin is similarly structured: "He is a great fish and I must convince him, he thought. I must never let him learn his strength" (Hemingway 63). The fish, as an extension of the ocean's nonhuman power, is the vehicle of a sublime encounter that tests and transforms Santiago's selfhood.

There is, however, an important difference in the two texts' orientations toward the nonhuman. Synge's play, shaped by the collective tragedy of an Irish island community, figures the nonhuman sublime primarily as catastrophe—as a force that destroys human community without providing compensatory insight. Hemingway's novella, shaped by the existentialist individualism of mid-twentieth-century American culture, figures the nonhuman sublime more ambivalently, as a space in which the individual can achieve a form of heroic self-definition through combat with nonhuman forces. This difference reflects not only different cultural contexts but different modes of ecological relationship: Synge's community is defined by its collective vulnerability to the sea; Hemingway's protagonist is defined by his individual mastery of oceanic skills, even as that mastery is ultimately defeated.

A Blue Humanities reading of both texts also illuminates their shared concern with what we might call oceanic temporality—the sea's radically different relationship to time compared to terrestrial existence. For Maurya, the sea operates in a kind of eternal present tense: it has always been taking, and it will always continue to take. Her final speech enacts this temporal collapse: "Michael has a clean burial in the far north, by the grace of the Almighty God. Bartley will have a fine coffin out of the white boards, and a deep grave surely. What more can we want than that?" (Synge 25). The sea's time is not historical but cyclical, repetitive, indifferent to the progressive temporality of human history. For Santiago, similarly, the ocean represents a temporal order that predates human presence and will outlast it: "He was very tired now and he knew the night would come soon and he tried to think of other things" (Hemingway 80). Both characters are, in different ways, learning to inhabit oceanic time—a form of temporality that the Blue Humanities identifies as one of the sea's most profound challenges to anthropocentric worldviews.

VI. Conclusion: The Sea as Critical Method

The Blue Humanities framework, as this article has sought to demonstrate, does not merely add another interpretive layer to *Riders to the Sea* and *The Old Man and the Sea*; it fundamentally reframes what these texts are doing and why they continue to matter. When we read Synge's play and Hemingway's novella through the critical vocabularies of oceanic agency, transcorporeality, thalassology, and the nonhuman sublime, we discover that they are not simply great works of literature that happen to use the sea as setting or symbol. They are, rather, sophisticated engagements with the sea as a mode of existence, a form of knowledge, and a site of ethical challenge.

Maurya's oceanic wisdom—"No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied" (Synge 26)—and Santiago's—"A man can be destroyed but not defeated" (Hemingway 103)—are not simply expressions of individual character. They are formulations of a specifically maritime epistemology, a way of knowing the world that has been forged in sustained, mortal encounter with the sea. This epistemology is one that the Blue Humanities takes seriously as a contribution to our collective thinking about the relationship between human beings and the nonhuman environments that sustain and destroy them.

In an era of accelerating climate change, ocean acidification, and rising sea levels, the sea is no longer merely a metaphor for human finitude; it is a literal threat to human civilization. The Blue Humanities invites us to read literary texts that grapple with oceanic power not as mere aesthetic exercises but as cultural resources for thinking about our relationship to an ocean that is, once again, demonstrating its capacity to overwhelm human intentions and infrastructures. Synge and Hemingway, writing at different moments of the twentieth century, were already engaged in this thinking. By reading them through the Blue Humanities, we honor not only their literary achievement but the depth of their oceanic imagination—and its continuing relevance to the world we now inhabit.

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