

The Sea – How Do We See It?

How do we see the ocean? To different people and in different epochs, the ocean may carry different meanings.

Those who did geography at school should know that two-thirds of our planet is covered by water. The ocean, separating one continent from another, is often regarded by mankind as a barrier. Before ships were invented, human activities were mostly confined to the coastline, though good swimmers could go farther offshore. So men on different continents were geographically divided by the sea, and men on a small island would seem very secluded. Yet English metaphysical poet John Donne (1572-1631) took a different view. He draws a comparison between men and islands in his *Meditation XVII*:

No man is an island, entire of itself;
every man is a piece of the continent,
a part of the main.

According to Donne, mankind is interconnected and no man is isolated from another. We are all interdependent and do not exist on our own. Donne's idea is best illustrated when we put it into the context of *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), a novel by Daniel Defoe (1660-1731). Under Defoe's pen, even the shipwrecked castaway, Robinson Crusoe, manages to find a soul mate, Friday, on a nameless island. Crusoe helps Friday to escape from the hands of native cannibals and teaches him English. In return, Friday keeps Crusoe company and comforts him in his lonely days. It is friendship that bonds the two together. Expanding Donne's idea, we see that as long as we reach out, we shall be able to make the acquaintance of many "Fridays". Taken from Defoe's work, the term "man Friday" or "girl Friday" has now become a synonym for "helper" or "companion".

In many cultures, especially those that thrive on fishing, the ocean is a symbol of mercilessness. On windless days, the sea is peaceful and calm. But when the weather is stormy, the sea becomes a gluttonous demon that devours seafarers and their vessels without a trace. The remains of wrecked ships will sink to the bottom of its stomach and become underwater treasures. The

wrath of the sea may claim countless lives and destroy everything along the shore. Because of its vastness, the ocean makes men all the more insignificant, and maybe even helpless. Yet the boundless sea may not be as unconquerable as it seems. This is the belief that Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) held when he wrote *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952). Growing old makes us weak, but it can never shake our iron will. The old fisherman, Santiago, by virtue of his unfaltering determination, fights against nature and prevails in his struggle with a giant marlin caught at sea. It is his courage and perseverance that the author eulogises. Though what Santiago brings onshore in the end is nothing but the large fish bone left by the sharks that shared his catch, he has indeed triumphed over hardship and danger, represented by the sea that shows no mercy.

Because of its unfathomable depth, the ocean is also considered a symbol of mystery. Deep down, the bottom of the sea is sheer darkness, an unknown horizon to mankind. Nowadays, with more advanced technology, the scope of scientists' exploration has broadened, and submarine expeditions reach the floor of the ocean. But obviously, when French writer Jules Verne (1828-1905) released his popular fiction *Vingt Mille Lieues Sous Les Mers* (*Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea*) in 1870, the world under water was still a mystery to all. Though there had been early forms of underwater vessels, modern seagoing submarines were not yet a reality. With his rich imagination, Verne conceived a submarine story that we would call science fiction today. His work tells of the adventures of Captain Nemo and his submarine "Nautilus". Initially mistakenly believed by most people to be a giant narwhal, "Nautilus" turns out to be a huge electrically-powered metal vessel that sparkles in water. Verne's portrayal is almost prophetic of the more sophisticated submarines that later came into existence.

Over time, our perception of the sea has somewhat changed. Different continents are now connected by various forms of transport and the barriers that once existed because of the ocean have hence been removed. The underwater world is now more open to us as a result of high-tech explorations, and no longer a complete mystery. That said, the sea remains a merciless force of Mother Nature, capable of causing calamitous damage to mankind. Fortunately, with more precise alert systems, such damage can be kept to a minimum.



A giant marlin