

Sea Fiction as World Literature

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Abstract: *This paper comprehensively examines sea fiction as world literature from the theoretical perspectives of Franco Moretti and David Damrosch by exploring how it qualifies as world literature through the lens of their theories, highlighting the genre's global circulation, evolution and representation of both universal and local experiences. The research begins with a comparative analysis of Damrosch's and Moretti's approaches to world literature, as the former's focus on the transnational circulation of literature provides a foundation for understanding how sea fiction has transcended cultural boundaries, while the latter's emphasis on the diffusion and transformation of literary forms illuminates the genre's evolution and global reach. The paper explores sea fiction's manifestation as a global genre, employing Moretti's concept of distant reading to analyse large-scale trends. In addition, the study investigates the influence of sea fiction on postcolonial and postmodern rewritings, demonstrating how the genre's main themes and narratives have been adapted and reframed in contemporary world literature. The translations and global circulation of classical sea fiction are examined as critical factors that have facilitated their evolution from national and regional narratives into integral components of the world literature system. In conclusion, sea fiction is presented as a microcosm of the broader world literature system. Its interplay with world literature and global genres offers a rich field for future literary studies. The findings of this research paper underscore the enduring relevance of sea fiction in the literary field and its significant role in fostering a mutual literary journey transcending cultural and geographical boundaries.*

Keywords: *world literature; sea fiction; global genre; circulation; translation;*

Introduction

As a concept, world literature has become increasingly prominent in literary studies. Defined by David Damrosch as “all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language” (Damrosch 4), it encompasses an expansive corpus of texts that traverse national and cultural boundaries. Franco Moretti, however, approaches world literature from a different perspective, focusing more on the diffusion and evolution of literary forms (Moretti 58-59). Their views, though distinct, provide complementary frameworks to explore sea fiction within the context of world literature.

Damrosch's definition of world literature emphasises the transnational circulation of literary works, as in its view, a text becomes world literature when it travels beyond the confines of its cultural origin and engages readers from various cultural backgrounds. Such a perspective allows for an inclusive understanding of world literature encompassing multiple literary works, irrespective of genre or form. This perspective readily applies to sea fiction, which inherently explores themes of travel, interactions with other cultures, and the negotiation of identities amidst foreign environments.

Moretti, conversely, views world literature from the point of view of genre diffusion, evolution and transformation of literary forms across cultures. His *distant reading* methodology, which studies large-scale literary trends, allows for a broader understanding of the genre's global evolution, tracing the circulation and transformation of literary forms across different cultures. His perspective offers a way to understand how sea fiction, as a genre, has evolved and adapted in various cultural contexts. For instance, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), though grounded in European sea fiction, integrates the author's Polish and French literary influences, thus reflecting the diffusion and transformation of the sea fiction genre.

Moretti's concept of "foreign form, local material" is crucial in understanding sea fiction from (semi-)peripheral cultures. For example, Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008) uses the form of sea narrative to explore India's local historical and cultural contexts. His novel, portraying the opium trade across the Indian Ocean and its exploration of colonialism, caste system, and gender dynamics, demonstrates how a foreign literary form can be employed to articulate local experiences:

The walls of Ghazipur's opium factory were partially obscured by mango and jackfruit trees but the British flag that flew on top of it was just visible above the foliage, as was the steeple of the church in which the factory's overseers prayed. At the factory's ghat on the Ganga, a one-masted pateli barge could be seen, flying the pennant of the English East India Company. It had brought in a shipment of chalan opium, from one of the Company's outlying sub-agencies, and was being unloaded by a long line of coolies. Ma, said Kabutri, looking up at her mother, where is that boat going? It was Kabutri's question that triggered Deeti's vision: her eyes suddenly conjured up a picture of an immense ship with two tall masts. Suspended from the masts were great sails of a dazzling shade of white. The prow of the ship tapered into a figurehead with a long bill, like a stork or a heron. There was a man in the background, standing near the bow, and although she could not see him clearly, she had a sense of a distinctive and unfamiliar presence. (Ghosh 5)

In the present discussion about sea fiction as world literature, Moretti's approach shows us that it is not even “an object, it's a problem, and a problem that asks for a new critical method” (Moretti 55). He argues that world literature should be a new way of studying literature as a border-crossing phenomenon on a much larger scale than before. As such, Moretti is interested in genres and the spread of these genres throughout the world (Thomsen 16). By using his method of *distant reading*, he identified configurations standard to academic development in several different cultures. He uses these pieces of evidence “to reflect on the relationship between markets and forms” (Moretti 58) to uncover what he terms “*laws of literary evolution*” (58). The first such law he discussed in his essay “Conjectures on World Literature” (2000) is this: “When a culture starts moving towards the modern novel, it's *always* a compromise between foreign form and local material” (60).

This brings us back to Damrosch and his *glocalism*, combining global patterns and local themes. It also brings us back to the core of our argument in this article: popular fiction, especially sea fiction, is, in some instances, more world literature than *hypercanonical* literature. The more standardised the literary form or genre, the easier it circulates among other nations. Therefore, it may be concluded that if a text/author/literature no longer aims to be faithful to a specific situation and no longer seeks to restrict its form to a uniquely human experience shaped by a particular culture or milieu, if it casts off the aura of canonised modernist art (Benjamin 24), it means that when it comes to literary form, it becomes more cosmopolitan, a form of world literature.

As Moretti's theory indicates, when a new genre adapts to a new literary environment, it is always a “compromise between the foreign and the local” (164), between cosmopolitan and vernacular. In this case, the maritime novel offers a very particular characteristic, that of having a preliminary model. This text is entirely original, denser, and more systematic than any diary kept by land travellers. Sailors must always maintain a written record of their experiences at sea. The sea novel and all the seafarers' stories recounted as accurate logbook entries are never far from each other.

The sea novel represents a genre most likely based on a reasonably stable readership, raising questions about its reception. This form of literature was not intended for a scholarly audience, even though the vocabulary is often inaccessible to ordinary readers. In many cases, such as Eugène Sue, Alexandre Dumas, Frederic Marryat, and Joseph Conrad, these texts first appeared as instalments in newspapers of their time. Then, the genre became popular. Today, the sea novel gets re-edited for young readers, often assimilating it into an adventure novel. It is categorised as a kind of literature for readers interested in adventures rather than research and genre poetics.

The Evolution of Sea Fiction as a Global Genre

Sea fiction, also known as nautical fiction, is a literary genre that captures the imagination with tales of adventure, exploration, survival, and the profound relationship between humans and the sea. It encompasses many narratives, from epic stories of naval warfare to introspective accounts of seafaring life. The sea emerges as a character, a vast and insurmountable force that shapes the characters' destinies.

Sea fiction's universal appeal and thematic consistency make it a compelling candidate for world literature. Amitav Ghosh points out in his essay *The Global Reservation: Notes Towards an Ethnography of International English* (Ghosh 32) that the sea represents global commons. This space belongs to everyone and no one. It is a space where cultural, national, and racial identities blur, and the human struggle against nature becomes a shared experience.

According to Robert Foulke, nautical fiction is based on a series of literary paradigms, thus investing the voyage at sea with a symbolic value. The most important of these paradigms is “the anatomy of society, in which the small world of the ship serves as a microcosm of civilization as a whole” (Foulke 11). The second literary paradigm frequently connects the sea voyage with the hero's initiation, who journeys from childhood or adolescence to adulthood, thus drawing the parallel between the movement of a ship and the course of human life. Though only partially, Odysseus can serve as a model here, being forced to face a series of trials at sea before being allowed to reach the end of his voyage. Foulke calls these fictions *maritime Bildungsroman*, and they are based on the fact that a sea voyage offers a complete set of possible tests such as storms, fires, crashes, collisions, falling from a height or overboard, diseases, starvation, drowning – all of which represent risks that may endanger human life or cause death.

Foulke also identifies two archetypal stages of initiation: the descent (drowning) on the one hand and the immobilisation (silence due to a calm sea) on the other (12). Two already classic works of American nautical literature, *Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville (1851) and *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) by Ernest Hemingway, focus on the third literary paradigm mentioned by Foulke, namely the hunt for a big fish. This effort can turn into a romantic adventure or, as in the famous case of Captain Ahab, a tragic self-annihilation. (10-11) Interestingly, Foulke mentions the significance of shipwrecks (12) shortly, although they function as a fourth literary paradigm brought about by the fiction of the sea voyage.

Going back in time and to Homer's epic work, it might be noticed that the ancient work takes the construction of the sea as an unpredictable, dangerous, and fundamentally anti-human space for granted. This notion is even more essential for Christian iconography, as the Bible represents it. The

Book of Genesis presents the sea as a chaotic matter antithetical to human life, to which both the story of creation and the subsequent punishment of humanity through the Great Flood give strength and expressiveness.

Just by taking a glance at the oldest and most influential texts in Western literature, one can notice that they have already introduced two archetypal literary motifs in connection with the sea and the oceans; thus, John Peck argued that “in a sea story, the symbolic and literal repeatedly overlap” (Peck 14). On the one hand, the sea serves as a metaphor for chaos; on the other hand, travelling by sea is an allegory for man’s journey through life. The second variant is mainly associated with Homer’s *Odyssey*, whose protagonist, unleashing the wrath of the sea god Poseidon, is forced to wander for ten years before he can return home to the island of Ithaca.

Foulke explains the *Odyssey*’s relentless power to attract Western literary imagination by engaging in universal themes, such as “anxiety about the threat of unexpected hazards afloat and danger ashore in unknown places, the conflict between the need for discipline and the temptation to escape it, the fusion of immediate physical experience with imagination and fantasy, and the linkage between geographical discovery and self-discovery” (Foulke 64).

Peck, who also draws attention to the importance of the Greek epic for the development and the tradition of nautical fiction, emphasises the fact that this is a fundamental story about returning home (*nostos*) – and, therefore, about returning to society and living safely – which is another literary archetype (Peck 12).

Luís Vaz de Camões’ *The Lusiads* (*Os Lusíadas*, 1572) is a cornerstone in this exploration. This epic’s greatness and universality are reached because it encapsulates the era’s spirit of discovery and adventure. This epic poem, often compared to Virgil’s *The Aeneid* (*Aeneis*, 29-19 BC), by interweaving Vasco da Gama’s historical voyages around the Cape of Good Hope with mythical narratives and Christian views, not only celebrates the Portuguese discoveries but also sets the framework for later maritime narratives. It embodies Moretti’s concept of the evolution of literary forms, transitioning from national epics to a component of world literature, illustrating the genre’s growth beyond its cultural origins.

Suppose the recurrence of sea voyages and the use of maritime vocabulary in Shakespeare’s plays already reflected the gradual growth of English naval hegemony. In that case, Defoe’s novel *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) takes a decisive step in this process. Crusoe’s sea voyages, and later those of *Captain Singleton* (1720), are set in a globalised economic context: Robinson ends up shipwrecked on an island on his way to Guinea, where he wants to buy enslaved people for his plantations in Brazil, but even his most difficult years as a shipwrecked man do not prevent him from embarking on other profitable journeys once he is saved.

Peck concludes that Robinson Crusoe is tireless, constantly looking to move, and his personality seems to reflect new energy coming from the trade expansion, broadening the horizon of knowledge and the emergence of new development opportunities in the early eighteenth century (16). Although the novel is based on traditional metaphorical processes in which the sea is perceived as a chaotic environment and as a punishing element, it conveys the idea that life's challenges at sea can be prevented with the help of rational planning. The critic considers it "is a decisive move, [...] setting the course for all subsequent British sea fiction" (19). Human hegemony over the ocean also suggested in *Robinson Crusoe*, is questionable in the works of these poets: human domination stops where the boundless, endless, and sublime ocean begins. Unsurprisingly, as Corbin argued, the social transformation of those who went on sea voyages is evident in nineteenth-century literature. According to Peck, Jane Austen is the one who sets the tone for future representations of sailors with her unerring eye for societal trends (22).

Although these differences are significant, Austen is not credited with being a nineteenth-century nautical fiction writer. If such a title could be handed over to a single author, it would probably be Frederick Marryat, who, after serving as captain in the British Royal Navy - where, among other things, he invented a signalling system based on maritime flags - began writing highly successful novels. In particular, his book *Mr. Midshipman Easy* (1836) gained popularity because it projects a hero to the readers' taste: Jack Easy is a sympathetic, moral character, proving throughout the narrative that he is an excellent naval officer and a brave Englishman. Given the fact that "any sea story [...] is always likely to involve issues of national identity, power and commerce" (13), Jack Easy's maritime success is a reaffirmation of the values on which the British Empire is said to be based. Such an imperialist reading of nautical fiction, with the British Empire dominating the seas and oceans, was widespread in Victorian nautical fiction, as Raban argued: "For the sea was hallowed as the province of Nature – it was the elemental reality" (18).

At the end of the nineteenth century, the writer who succeeded in giving birth to some of the best nautical fiction in British literature by interpreting the long British maritime tradition was paradoxically a prose writer who was not a native English speaker. Some critics say, "Conrad is, without question, the greatest of all writers of sea fiction" (Tanner xvii). Having a long career on board ships, Conrad knew how to describe the seas with astonishing precision and vivacity: "It is a place where people live; not a vacancy, or a symbol, or apostrophized Ocean, or even *the ocean* – but a named and measured stretch of sea with its own distinct face" (Raban 20).

However, it would be unfair to deny that Conrad's maritime space has a symbolic function in addition to the precise topography he realises. When he wrote his novels, the British Empire was at its peak and steadily declining. At

the same time, Conrad wrote, “at the end of an era, at a point when maritime activity is losing its central position in the economic order and national imagination” (Peck 166). Both issues are reflected in how Conrad mirrors the sea in his prose. This metaphor is also the title of his collection of autobiographical essays – *The Mirror of the Sea* (1906) – but it is also a suitable metaphor for his writing in general. Not only do his characters travelling by sea end their adventures visibly destroyed and corrupted or do not reach their ports of destination, but in his masterpiece *Heart of Darkness* (1899/1902), the voyage on board a ship (even if it takes place on a river and not on the sea), draws a parallel with a terrible process of psychological and colonial disintegration. For Peck, the impact of Conrad’s prose on later nautical fiction cannot be understated:

It can be argued that the tests in *Heart of Darkness* are so extreme, and the failure to cope with these challenges so clear, that by the end the whole project of maritime fiction has been undermined. There is a disintegration of confidence in the maritime trading mission of Britain, and when this disappears there is no longer any point in writing a sea story. It is, indeed, hard to see what maritime fiction can do after *Heart of Darkness*. (Peck 166-167)

Similarly, Raban adds that “writing about the sea in the twentieth century needed some fresh understanding, some shift of knowledge or sensibility, to liberate it from the nineteenth-century masterpieces to which it is in thrall” (30). We must add that, except for Conrad, the best nineteenth-century nautical fiction writers come from America: James Fenimore Cooper, Edgar Allan Poe, Richard Henry Dana, and Herman Melville.

Even though nautical fiction has so far lost its privileged position in the nineteenth century, it seems that many twenty-century writers have managed to meet the challenges created by their predecessors. Authors of modernist masterpieces, for example, have focused on exploring marine imagery in new contexts: James Joyce returns to Antiquity and turns *Odyssey* into *Ulysses*. At the same time, Virginia Woolf favours the inner journey over the physical voyage in her novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Nevertheless, in the stories created after the two world wars, “the sea is, above all else, cruel; its coldness and turbulence reflect the universal derangement of a world at war” (Raban 30).

Another fairly popular version of twentieth-century nautical fiction is offered by C.S. Forester and later by Patrick O’Brian. The former became known for his series of novels centred on Horatio Hornblower. At the same time, the latter published several stories appreciated by the wide readership, having Captain Jack Aubrey of the British Royal Navy as the central hero.

Interestingly, the plots of these novels in both series are set in the heyday of the British Navy, namely during the Napoleonic Wars, which matches the reading taste of contemporary audiences.

The years between the publication of the novel *Roderick Random* by Smollett (1748) and *The Pilot* (1824) by James Fenimore Cooper represent a period of vibrant innovation in fiction, but especially in the evolution of the novel. Western European writers initiated some of the primary forms in the genre's history during this period. These poetics included the existentialist novel, the mannerist novel, the domestic novel, the didactic novel, and the sentimental novel. The picaresque story flourished on the continent. In France, it acquired a form called *le roman gai*, the picaresque freeing the novel of manners from any restrictions, thus obtaining a state of libertine fiction. Fiction centred on ghosts, and the Gothic novel overshadowed the Enlightenment, whose moral and epistemological principles were transformed into action in the philosophical story. In 1814, with *Waverley*, Walter Scott invented a type of historical fiction that would push the novel into a significant role in shaping modern cultural nationalism in nineteenth-century Europe and America.

Similarly, the world's oceans remained a frontier of modernity during this period. Between 1748 and 1824, the Pacific Ocean was systematically explored in expeditions commanded by Anson and Bougainville, La Pérouse, Cook, and Vancouver, among others. These explorations provided insights into the South Pacific and its inhabitants and accurate nautical charts. Cook went a long way in demystifying the idea that the South Pole was a large southern continent conducive to living. The invention and dissemination of Harrison's chronometer allowed the calculation of longitude at sea, and the discovery of the cure for scurvy were just a few other essential aspects of the maritime field of this period.

As the maritime book trade grew, professionals eagerly awaited news of such innovations and readers. Philip Edwards spoke of the whole of the eighteenth century when he observed that, along with the professional public of maritime literature, “there were not enough scientists, navigators, entrepreneurs, and politicians to buy books in the quantities that would keep publishers in funds. It was the general public who made voyage-narratives so profitable to publish” (8). Along with the narratives of historical explorers, the public also read accounts of shipwrecks, ranging from records regarding *HMS Wager* from Anson's expedition to the Pacific (1740-1744) and others belonging to some of its survivors, including John Bulkeley and John Cummins, Alexander Campbell, Isaac Morris, and John Byron, to Owen Chase's account of the disaster that struck the whaler *Essex* in 1819. Readers bought books that were historically recounting ordinary voyages written by passengers, such as *Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon* (1755) by Henry Fielding or the book by the naturalist Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, *Voyage à l'Isle de*

France (1773). The public was also looking for collections that included summaries of famous sea voyages that had taken place throughout history, such as Tobias Smollett's *Compendium of Authentic and Entertaining Voyages* (1756), *Histoire générale des voyages* (1746-1759) by Prévost, and *Histoire des naufrages* (1788-1789) by Jean Louis Hubert Simon Desperthes.

Considering the fervent interest in sea literature from 1748 to 1824, it would have been expected for the novelists of the time to continue to expand the number of stories fictionalising sea adventures. However, the nautical picaresque has been abandoned – at least, this is the conclusion that can be drawn from the books published in those times. In any case, James Fenimore Cooper noted that nautical fiction died out after Smollett when he also demonstrated how he renewed the genre in a preface to *The Red Rover* (1827).

They emphasised that the absence of maritime activities as the main subject of adventure plots does not mean claiming that the naval world had disappeared entirely from the pages of the novels. Sailors and sea voyages occasionally appeared in books written between 1748 and 1824. The maritime world acted as a reservoir for multiple character types. In Fanny Burney's *Evelina*, for example, the pranks of the terrible and brutal Captain Mirven enliven society. The British Navy is populated by two social types of characters in Jane Austen's novels, represented by Charles Austen and Francis Austen.

Between 1748 and 1824, the sea voyage continued to be used as a plot convention to prevent encounters between characters. This use of the marine world dates back to Antiquity when sea journeys could connect episodes and bring emissaries from distant and sometimes conflicting worlds into contact. In classical Romanticism, this contact was seen as dangerous and chaotic. The sea was described as vicious and controlled by forces that diverted the character from his goal. Mermaids and nymphs play such a role in the *Odyssey*, and the pirates of Heliodorus of Emesa appear to hinder the sea voyage from its intended route. Both stories inspired other writers when they were translated during the early modern period.

Beyond the eighteenth-century maritime picaresque, the world contained reminiscences of the chaotic encounters precipitated by romantic voyages at sea. In novels published later in the century, however, the oceans and seas facilitated more organised narrative and social interactions, even when they retained the possibility of a fatal shipwreck. In those years, a trip across the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, as well as the Indian Ocean, meant making a connection between different worlds. Françoise de Graffigny's *Lettres d'une péruvienne* (1747) begins integrating a captive Inca princess into a French aristocratic society during an ocean crossing when the princess herself conquers a French aristocrat. In Frances Brooke's *The History of Emily Montague* (1769), also considered the first Canadian novel, the love between Canadian colonialist Emily Montague and English Colonel Rivers crosses the

Atlantic. Nearly fifty years later, in Scott's book *The Pirate* (1821), a lady belonging to the rural society and a pirate suspected of being a reformist meet along the Scottish coast.

Such trans-oceanic connections carry out cultural exchanges, even when they stimulate novels' plots in England and France. In *The History of Emily Montague*, the sale of letters across the Atlantic Ocean provides an excellent opportunity for delays, misunderstandings, and poor communication. Still, it also lays the groundwork for the emotional ties of a civil society created on a scale reported to the British Empire. In Scott's *The Pirate*, however, the energy draws the character to his birthplace, and Cleveland is redeemed through love. He puts his ultra-nationalistic ship in the service of the British Admiralty.

A problem related to the maritime picaresque for the work done by the novel for the benefit of culture in these years involves the *ethos* of the sailor in his profession. In addition to imagining modern nations, critics have shown how the novel throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries helped lay the groundwork for a new set of dominant values by mixing the importance of virtue and character of the middle class with aristocratic values such as status in society and the blood of an aristocrat. In constructing this cultural myth, the court plot plays an important role. Nevertheless, the sailor's job of wandering the seas and oceans is problematic for a happy ending to the court intrigue. In addition, the value of the craft has an unstable relationship with virtue and has nothing to do with birth, as it is a work-based *ethos*. In some respects, the connection between art and skilled labour makes this value attractive to the middle class. At the same time, the work ethic of the middle class is hostile to the aristocracy, which is generally a static social class. From this perspective, the craft, if taken into account, would remove the novel from its ability to force an alliance between aristocracy and bourgeoisie, which critics have argued as one of the novel's cultural roles in the second half of the eighteenth century. However, the work ethic is a way to reconcile the values of the middle class with those of the working class. This potential may help explain the renewal of nautical fiction in the mid-nineteenth century when the role of the aristocracy on the stage of world history diminished, and the novel transformed, supported by the relationship between the hegemonic middle classes and the lower classes, who wanted access to rights and middle-class privileges.

After this seventy-five-year hiatus, the maritime novel was reinvented by James Fenimore Cooper through *The Pilot*, which was published in January 1824. Depicting John Paul Jones' exploits, who plundered the coasts of Scotland during the American Revolution, *The Pilot* was quickly and enthusiastically received in the transatlantic literary field. Despite the novel praising the American Revolution, British readers were among Cooper's

greatest admirers, and Cooper's publisher was concerned about how he should protect his book from British piracy. A four-volume French version of the story *The Pilot* first appeared in 1824, being reprinted in 1824, 1825, 1826, 1827-1829, and later on. *Der Lootse* appeared in German in 1824. The novel was first published in Italian in 1828-1829, in Swedish in 1831, in Spanish in 1832, in Dutch in 1835, and in Portuguese in 1838. After *The Pilot*, Cooper wrote *The Red Rover* (1827), depicting the British hunt for a charming rebellious pirate in the middle of the ocean in the mid-18th century. Cooper only put nautical fiction on the map of influential narrative genres with these two transatlantic bestsellers.

Over the next ten years, Cooper's poetics were borrowed and adapted by writers in Britain, France, and the United States. They have turned an innovation into a well-established international practice - the travel novel. Thomas Philbrick observes: "By 1831, the sea novel was well underway in England; Marryat had published *Frank Mildmay* in 1829 and *The King's Own* in 1830, Michael Scott had begun serial publication of *Tom Cringle's Log* in 1829, and William Neale's *Cavendish* appeared in 1831" (84). Captain Marryat conceived a series of nautical stories targeting a younger public, a form of sea fiction that has survived until now. In France, Eugène Sue, better known for inventing the urban mystery novel *Les Mystères de Paris*, published some short stories such as *Kernok le pirate* (1830) and *El Gitano ou Les contrebandiers espagnols* (1830), followed by the long-running novels *Atar-Gull* (1831), *La Salamandre* (1832) and *La Vigie de Koat-Vën* (1833). Contemporaries have recognised that these narratives crossed national borders and formed a unified genre, which had several names in its day: nautical story, maritime novel, nautical novel, naval novel, sea fiction, and maritime fiction, but the term consecrated by Cohen in her *The Novel and the Sea*, is that of sea novel.

After the European consecration of nautical fiction, the genre returned across the Atlantic to the widespread practice of American authors between 1830 and 1840. In the years following the establishment of nautical fiction as a recognised literary genre, novels with high literary ambitions took their poetics as their point of departure. Although nautical fiction had begun to lose the prestige of novelty around 1850, the authors of adventure novels continued to include nautical fiction in its various forms throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. Rudyard Kipling, Robert Louis Stevenson, Jack London, and Rafael Sabatini have all written compelling examples of this literary genre.

The prestige and influence of nautical fiction made it one of its era's most prominent transatlantic literary forms. Critics have discussed individual genre masterpieces, such as Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Hugo's *Les Travailleurs de la Mer* (1866). Still, the immediate generic horizon of these works is at most mentioned in passing. At most, these literary masterpieces can

be framed, sometimes strangely, within the narrative forms of the nineteenth century, known as the century that perfected historical realism.

With the disappearance of the craft, the sailor lost his cultural prestige. Nautical literature, although known for many universal masterpieces even in the twentieth century and despite being considered by some to be the last author of authentic maritime literature, seems to be celebrating art that is lost in its glorious historical past. Many writers relied on the fact that the revival of the art of sailing was still solid in the collective memory, and so did *Treasure Island* (1883) by Robert Louis Stevenson, *Captain Courageous* (1897) by Rudyard Kipling, Erskine Childers' *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903) or Jack London's *The Sea-Wolf* (1904) explore the maritime universe in search of forgotten or omitted frontiers in this craft. However, for authors interested in the dynamic boundaries of modernism, nautical fiction was a form that had already lost its functions.

This dangerous moment they were proved to be an opportune moment. As the sailing era came to an end, Herman Melville and Joseph Conrad reshaped fiction based on sea adventures to dramatise skilled jobs in other marginal areas that, same as the maritime world, were unpleasant, unknown, and risky but which were qualitatively different - situated at the level of the human language and psyche, rather than at the level of the physical world. With such a modernist turn, Melville and Conrad, each in their own way, structured art and thought as incomplete boundaries of modernity, and exploring them was a new task for the writer. So, the adventurous author came to replace the enterprising sailor.

However, many authors of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries believe that the true art of seafaring still exists in the collective memory and that the recycling of old themes addressed by the great authors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries responds to a great extent to the postmodernist current and the contemporary cultural context. Recent works of maritime fiction replicate not only traditional themes but also manipulate the boundaries between real and fictive, thus responding to the processes of industrialisation and globalisation and broader themes such as alienation, separation, migration, or exile in a post-war-traumatized world in which the nostalgia of the painful past appears at an individual, but also national level.

This becomes evident in many of the genre's seminal works. For instance, in Conrad's *Lord Jim*, the protagonist's struggle with guilt and redemption is set against the backdrop of the sea, offering a poignant exploration of human frailty. Similarly, Melville's *Moby-Dick* uses the sea voyage as a metaphor for life's journey, full of trials, tribulations, and existential questions. In *The Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway tells the story of an old fisherman's relentless struggle with a marlin. It is a tale about human

endurance and a universal narrative that resonates with readers across different cultures.

For instance, the works of the French-Mauritian author J. M. G. Le Clézio and Chilean writer Luis Sepúlveda offer additional examples. Le Clézio's *Desert* interweaves narratives of the sea and desert, incorporating elements of Berber culture and history. At the same time, Sepúlveda's *The Old Man Who Read Love Stories* uses the backdrop of the Amazon rainforest to craft a narrative that intersects with the sea fiction genre.

The breadth and depth of influence of classical sea novels in world literature is significant, traversing linguistic, geographical, and cultural barriers. This is primarily attributed to their widespread translations and global circulation, allowing their narratives to resonate with diverse audiences. Melville's *Moby-Dick* represents a quintessential example of this phenomenon. Its intricate exploration of whaling and human obsession has been translated into numerous languages and circulated globally, captivating readers across different lifestyles. The novel's profound influence is evident in Sepúlveda's *Mundo del Fin del Mundo* (1994). The Chilean author proposes an eco-narrative novel, which is based mainly on a critical discourse that deals with the conflicts that arise between the defenders of the environment and its attackers, between indigenous elements and the Other, between the financial interests of transnational companies and the local communities trying to protect their natural resources. Its central theme is represented by the conflict between environmental organisations and some external factors seeking to attack marine wildlife in the Southern Circle:

However, the ecological deterioration, the daily murder of the planet, is not only limited to the slaughter of whales or elephants. An irrational vision of science and progress legitimises the crimes, and it seems that the only heritage of the human race is madness. Let us go back to the whales. What is the purpose of killing them? To satisfy the gastronomic tedium of a handful of wealthy, tacky people? The importance of whales in the cosmetics industry is a thing of the past. What is invested in obtaining one litre of whale blubber is the same amount that, invested in promoting the production of vegetable blubber in a poor country, would yield twenty litres of similar oil. Moreover, to think that there are still voices of so-called modernism that find a platform in European newspapers to disqualify nature protection measures as “ecocriticism” and try to elevate the discourse of the fool who burns his house for warmth to the category of a new ethic. “I despise what I do not know” is the motto of curious philosophers of destruction. (Sepúlveda 77-78)

Like most of Sepúlveda's novels, this novel is defined by abundant autobiographical infusions, featuring travelogue characteristics, detective novel and Bildungsroman traits. The text has a narrator named Ismaél, who brings Melville's Ishmael to mind. The novel ends with an *Epilogue* that briefly recounts the protagonist's return to Hamburg. On the plane, he notices a boy reading Moby Dick very carefully, as he had done years before, indicating to the reader that the story is not over.

In turn, the story in *Mundo del Fin del Mundo* points out that while Captain Ahab's exploits in *Moby-Dick* might incite adventures at sea as the teenage protagonist's first sea voyage does, there is nothing heroic about the second sea voyage, its purpose being to stop whaling. The environmental tragedy produced by the Japanese ship's two-meter-diameter suction tube is incompatible with Ahab's metaphysical problems and even with the adventure itself. Nowadays, the adventurous hero of the past cannot survive, for his paradigm has become a severe threat to a deteriorating ecosystem. So Sepúlveda's novel betrays the essential elements of the literary genre to which it belongs. As a result, his heroes end up being anti-heroes in reality, young or old losers, marginalised or self-marginalised from the group in power. Failures in which, however, nostalgia is not to be found, for they have been transformed into vectors for certain functions beneficial to the future of humanity.

The influence of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*, both revolving around sea voyages, extends similarly. Translated and disseminated worldwide, these works have shaped the perspectives of numerous postcolonial authors, including Chinua Achebe and V.S. Naipaul. These authors critically engage with and recontextualise Conrad's portrayal of colonialism, reflecting a dynamic interplay between different epochs and literary traditions.

Equally impactful is Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. Its themes of endurance and resilience in the face of overwhelming odds have resonated with readers worldwide, as evidenced by its widespread translations and distribution. Its relevance is mirrored in Gabriel García Márquez's *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor (Relato de un naufrago, 1955)*, which explores human tenacity amid the relentless challenges posed at sea. Similarly, Akira Yoshimura's *Shipwrecks (Hasen, 1982)* introduces the reader to survival strategies in a non-Western setting, expanding sea fiction's thematic and geographical scope. It underscores the genre's ability to articulate universal human concerns, an essential aspect of world literature that Damrosch delineates.

Margaret Cohen's work, particularly *The Novel and the Sea*, underscores sea fiction's global reach and influence, qualifying it as world literature. Cohen's exploration of the sea novel as a genre reveals its evolution

across time and cultural contexts, highlighting its widespread circulation and adaptation.

In nautical fiction, the sea represents a transnational space where diverse cultures intersect, mirroring the transnational nature of world literature. This genre, therefore, serves as a conduit for intercultural dialogue and exchange. This feature aligns with Damrosch's definition of world literature as works that "circulate beyond their culture of origin" (Damrosch 4). Cohen also emphasises the universality of themes within sea novels, such as explorations, adventures, the battle of humans with nature, and survival at sea, which are universally resonant regardless of cultural or geographical boundaries. This universal thematic resonance underscores the sea novel's status as world literature.

Building on Moretti's theory of genres as global forms, Cohen's work illuminates the sea novel as a global genre. In *The Literary Channel*, she investigates the transmission and transformation of literary forms across different cultural channels. This perspective applies to the worldwide circulation and adaptation of the sea novel.

Moreover, as she explores it in her article *Traveling Genres*, Cohen's concept of the travelling genre is particularly relevant to understanding sea fiction as a global genre. This concept underscores the transformative nature of genres as they travel across different cultural contexts. For instance, sea fiction in the Latin American tradition may incorporate elements of magical realism, a distinctive feature of the region's literary tradition. Furthermore, her analysis of the *Chronotopes of the Sea* underscores the adaptability of sea fiction to different cultural and temporal contexts. She proposes that the sea, as a literary space, presents endless possibilities for narrative exploration, underlining the genre's capacity for global circulation and transformation.

To summarise, Margaret Cohen's works provide a compelling framework for understanding sea fiction as both world literature and a global genre. Her analysis underscores the genre's widespread circulation, engagement with universal themes and motifs, and adaptability to diverse cultural contexts. Moretti's approach advocates for the understanding of literature in its broadest sense, considering the vast networks of literary production and circulation that exceed national borders. This view allows us to explore how sea fiction has permeated the global literary landscape. Moreover, his approach encourages us to consider the structural patterns within sea fiction. Furthermore, despite the cultural and temporal differences among works, we find shared themes, motifs and narrative structures. While much of the sea fiction canon is dominated by British and American literature authors, a closer look reveals a rich tapestry of sea narratives from the Global South and other (semi-)peripheral literary regions. These narratives not only expand

the thematic range of the genre but also add depth to our understanding of world literature as a whole.

Overall, the translations and global circulation of these classical sea novels have facilitated their evolution from regional narratives into integral components of world literature. Their influence on postcolonial and postmodern rewritings and reinterpretations of sea fiction underscores their enduring relevance and the dynamic, ever-evolving nature of world literature. These novels demonstrate the adaptability of sea fiction and its ability to incorporate local narratives within a global genre. The result is a body of work that enriches world literature by providing diverse perspectives and contributing to the universal themes that define the genre.

By considering these (semi-)peripheral sea novels, we move beyond the Western canon that often dominates discussions of world literature. These works illuminate the genre's capacity to transcend geographical and cultural boundaries, further substantiating sea fiction's place within the world literature system.

Conclusions

The exploration of sea fiction through the lens of world literature, drawing from Franco Moretti's and David Damrosch's theoretical perspectives, has provided illuminating insights into the genre's role in the global literary landscape. While these perspectives offer distinct interpretations, they underscore the genre's broad reach and dynamic evolution.

When applied to sea fiction, both theories illuminate different aspects of the genre's contribution to world literature. Moretti's approach allows us to consider sea fiction's universal themes and narrative structures, underlining the genre's broad appeal. In contrast, Damrosch's theory encourages examining how sea fiction is interpreted and understood within various cultural frameworks. Their differing approaches and perspectives are not contradictory but rather complementary. They offer a more comprehensive understanding of how sea fiction qualifies as world literature, emphasising its thematic consistency and global reception.

The genre's impact on postcolonial and postmodern rewritings of sea narratives underlines its long-lasting relevance and capacity to inspire and inform contemporary narratives. These adaptations and reinterpretations demonstrate the genre's versatility and continued ability to engage readers uniquely. While sea fiction has been examined as a global genre, it retains the capacity for deeply personal narratives. This dual nature embodies the global and the local interplay, the universal and the individual, that defines world literature.

In conclusion, sea fiction qualifies as world literature in Damroschian and Morettian senses. Its global circulation, the evolution of form, and

depiction of global and local experiences make it a microcosm of the broader world literary system. Its timeless appeal and the adaptability of its narratives highlight the genre's significant contribution to world literature.

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