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THE DARKNESS BETWEEN THE WAVES: THALASSOPHOBIA AND MYTHOLOGICAL IMAGERY IN WESTERN PAINTING

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ABSTRACT

The present study explores thalassophobia, a pervasive and often irrational fear of vast and deep bodies of water, through its visual depiction in Western painting inspired by mythology. Rather than treating it merely as a clinical condition, the study proposes a novel theoretical framework for examining thalassophobia as a culturally embedded psychological motif. This interdisciplinary approach integrates analytical psychology, evolutionary theory, mythological studies, and art history, thereby offering a comprehensive understanding of its multifaceted nature. The study draws on Carl Jung's theory of the collective unconscious and archetypal symbolism, positioning water as a space of transformation and projection. The sea is represented as embodying both allure and danger, chaos and depth. The research focuses on mythological depictions of Perseus and Andromeda by Titian, Veronese, and Lemoyne, together with Homeric interpretations by Böcklin, Waterhouse, and Draper. It employs descriptive analysis, in which formal elements such as composition, perspective, symbolism, and the dynamics between figures are examined. In these works, the sea is depicted as a threshold between opposites, such as the known and the unknown, the rational and the instinctual. The persistent imagery of monstrous sea creatures, sirens, and submersion suggests a culturally shared anxiety, and this latent fear reveals broader existential concerns about the limits of human control and knowledge. The study treats thalassophobia as a recurring visual and psychological motif that links ancient mythological archetypes with persistent emotional themes in Western art.

Keywords: Thalassophobia, Mythology, Western Painting, Sea Painting

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Introduction

Thalassophobia is defined as an intense fear of large and/or deep bodies of water such as oceans, seas and lakes. The etymology of the term goes back to its Greek origins with 'phobia' meaning 'fear' and 'thalasso' meaning 'sea'. It is notable that thalassophobia has no specific entry in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the widely accepted psychiatric diagnostic manual. Instead, it is categorized under the broader umbrella of 'specific phobias', along with other similar fears such as arachnophobia and ophthalmophobia. It is important to note that thalassophobia should not be confused with aquaphobia, which is a much more general fear of water, including activities such as showering, bathing and even drinking water (Jarrett, 2022).

The relationship between humankind and the world's oceans is a complex and tangled one. An expanding corpus of literature has identified a correlation between human interactions with water and subjective feelings of restoration and happiness. This notion has been termed "blue space", a concept which encompasses a range of predominantly aquatic environments. Such environments include rivers, lakes, coastal areas and oceans. The notion of "blue mind", in contrast, signifies the inherent human fascination with the ocean and its influence on overall well-being, along with its documented health benefits. However, it is important to acknowledge that humans are air-breathing mammals and primarily rely on vision for finding food and avoiding danger. Consequently, the fear of the sea can be considered as equally significant as the fear of the dark (nyctophobia). Despite its common usage, thalassophobia is frequently employed to signify a fear of deep water. It should be noted that there is no recognised distinction between fear of the sea and specifically fear of deep water, i.e. "batitalassophobia", in the psychological literature. Nevertheless, it is paramount to contemplate the defining characteristics of the deep sea, namely its profundity and obscurity, which underscore the pervasive sense of mystery and disquiet that shrouds the deep ocean, akin to the common expression, "darkest depths of fear". The attraction to, desire for, or mere absence of fear in relation to the deep sea is not irrational, but rather is rooted in primordial instinct. It has been suggested that when confronted with phenomena extending beyond the limits of our evolutionary history, imagination often assumes a dominant role; this is especially true in circumstances where empirical evidence from scientific research is lacking. (Bajwa et al., 2014; Foley & Kistemann, 2015; Jamieson et al., 2021, p. 798; Kiell, 2016; Nichols, 2014; Pan et al., 2018).

Thalassophobia, otherwise known as the fear of the sea, is frequently explained through the lens of evolutionary psychology as a adaptive response to ancestral threats, including drowning and the presence of aquatic predators. Nevertheless, this perspective is met with a degree of scepticism on account of its speculative character and the paucity of empirical corroboration, particularly in light of the symbolic intricacy often associated with such trepidations. Alternatively, psychodynamic theories interpret thalassophobia as a reflection of unconscious conflicts expressed through symbolic internalisations (Barrett & Broesch, 2012). Freud's psychoanalytic model posits that phobias emerge from displaced repressed drives or trauma. The sea is a metaphor for a return to the maternal womb or repressed emotion, embodying psychic instability – both alluring and terrifying – reflecting a pre-subjective state. Freud's concept of the uncanny (das Unheimliche) is characterised by the simultaneous evocation of familiarity and alienation in the sea, compelling confrontation with repressed aspects of the self (Freud, 1955). In Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, Carl Gustav Jung outlines his theories of archetypes and the collective unconscious, identifying water as the most potent symbol of the unconscious mind. The notion of the shadow, which he explores in dialogue with Freud, encompasses repressed anger, fear, and instinctual drives. Even though these darker aspects are pushed down by conscious awareness, they reappear in symbolic imagery. Consequently, sea monsters found in various cultures can be seen as embodiments of the human shadow—archetypal projections closely linked to thalassophobia (Jamieson et al., 2021, p. 798; Jung, 1969).

Jacques Lacan interprets fear as stemming from the encounter with the Real, which he defines as that which resists symbolisation and defies language. The ocean's vastness is a pertinent example of this phenomenon, serving as a metaphor for the subject's confrontation with its fragmentation and finitude. Thalassophobia is indicative of both personal anxiety and structural trauma, both of which are rooted in the impossibility of full self-coherence. The sea's depths are metaphorically represented by the abyss of the self, thereby fostering existential unease (Lacan, 1991). Evolutionary accounts suggest an innate biological predisposition to fear deep water (Öhman & Mineka, 2001) but often overlook how this fear is symbolically elaborated in art and myth. Psychoanalytic interpretations instead offer a fuller framework for understanding

the recurring use of sea imagery in narratives of fear, transformation, and death. Moreover, as Jamieson et al. (2021) argue, phobias such as thalassophobia cannot be reduced to survival mechanisms but must be seen as cultural constructions shaped by imagination, narrative, and myth. From a psychoanalytic standpoint, thalassophobia is not just a basic, instinctive reaction to potentially dangerous surroundings; it is a deeply significant experience that marks the subject's confrontation with their unconscious, the symbolic order, and their sense of inner wholeness. As Freud, Jung, and Lacan have all stressed, the terror inspired by the sea is as much about internal depths as it is about external threats, a notion supported by the persistent portrayal of the sea in art and literature as a realm of mystery, horror, and the sublime.

The presence of monsters of the deep sea constitutes a recurring theme within both ancient and modern mythologies, particularly prevalent in the contexts of maritime communities. For instance, Chrybdis, Scylla and Hydra (Greek), Leviathan (Hebrew), Jormungandr and Kraken (Norse) are some of the legendary sea monsters of ancient cultures. The pervasive tradition of sea monster mythology continues to this day, with numerous other characters populating contemporary popular culture. These include fictional monsters like Champ, Chessie, the Loch Ness Monster, Morgawr, Ogopogo and Clover, Cthulhu, Godzilla, Giganto, Koizilla and Megalodon. Indeed, the notion that the deep waters are home to 'monsters' has gained such cultural traction that it has become the focus of empirical research by psychologists, comparative mythologists, psychiatrists and neuroscientists seeking to ascertain its underlying causes (Harrington & Hackett, 2018; Jamieson et al., 2021; Kaplan, 2000).

In Western art, the sea transcends its role as a natural landscape to function as a cultural, psychological, and mythological symbol. Since the Greco-Roman period, it has provided a dramatic backdrop for the stories of gods, heroes, and supernatural beings. Examples include the fall of Icarus, the rescue of Arion, and mythological scenes such as Hero and Leandros and Halcyone and Ceyx, along with recurring sea motifs. The sea environment symbolizes opposites such as consciousness and subconsciousness, order and chaos, the known and the unknown. In this iconographic context, the sea emerges as an attractive archetypal and psychological symbol. The study interprets thalassophobia not only as a clinical anxiety but also as a collective psychological motif shaped by mythology and expressed through visual arts.

The theme of the sea is examined in this study through the perspective of historical compositions and mythological creatures, which draw inspiration from mythological narratives. In such literary works, where figurative and narrative structures are predominant, the sea is represented not merely as a geographical location, but also as a symbolic and psychological space. Conversely, the motif of the sea has been a recurring subject in the tradition of landscape painting in Western art, with depictions of storms, coastlines, and sea voyages exemplifying the grandeur and menace of nature. However, the present study is constrained to mythological scenes that incorporate narrative and figurative elements, excluding landscape depictions of the sea.

This study employs a descriptive analysis to examine the symbolic and visual functions of the sea in Western painting, focusing on mythological depictions such as Perseus and Andromeda by Titian, Veronese, and Lemoyne, and Homeric interpretations by Böcklin, Waterhouse, and Draper. The analyzed works are listed chronologically according to the years of their production.

Meaning of Mythology

According to the classical Greek term "mythos", the notion of myth was initially conceptualised as a "word" in the sense of a definitive and authoritative expression of truth. In contradistinction to logos, a form of rhetoric characterised by rational argumentation as espoused by the Sophists, mythos does not rely on logical proof or abstraction. Rather, it is a form of absolute affirmation of reality, engaging directly with the concrete and experiential rather than the speculative or analytical. It functions as a decree of veracyl events and the essential reality of things without appealing to external validation. In its conventional and authoritative form, the distinction of myth lies in its assertion of truth through narrative, as distinguished from the rational discourse of logic. The strength of myth lies in its performative quality; it is a word imbued with power, not merely descriptive but creative and sustaining. The fundamental nature of myth is that of a sacred narrative, which pertains to the actions of deities, spirits, and other supernatural beings. These narratives are embedded within a polytheistic and polydaemonistic worldview, where the divine and human realms are not distinctly separated, but rather characterised by a gradation of complexity (Baumgartner et al., 1974, p. 195; Smith et al., 2025).

Consequently, mythic thinking perceives a continuum between the activities of the divine and human

realms, where the actions of deities function not merely as explanations for human experience, but also as models. In contrast to modern conceptions of myth as mere fiction or allegory, archaic societies regarded it as factual, believing it to be a true record of events that continue to exert influence. Myths are regarded as providing both the ontological foundations and normative guidance for society, and are viewed as eternally relevant truths rather than temporally bound occurrences. Myth, then, is posited not merely as a reflective study of existence but as a dynamic agent that actively shapes and sustains existence. This mythological dynamism bestows upon life its renewal, stability and affirmation of both the cosmic and the social order. A defining feature of the mythological tradition is its transcendence of historical time. Mythic events are situated either in a primordial past (in illo tempore) or projected into an eschatological future, thereby establishing the temporal boundaries of all that exists (Baumgartner et al., 1974, p. 195; Smith et al., 2025).

However, through the ritual reenactment of these events, they are rendered present and operative within ordinary time. Ritual, therefore, functions as the conduit through which myth actualises its formative potential, thereby establishing a link between human action and sacred origins. Furthermore, the legitimacy of ritual is substantiated by myth, which anchors it in a primordial and sacred origin. The hieros logos, defined as the sacred word or narrative recited during ritual, serves a dual function; it both evokes the original event and participates in its power. Consequently, it serves to affirm the efficacy and sanctity of the ritual, thereby endowing it with the capacity to maintain the cosmic and social order. In conclusion, the traditional concept of myth functions as a sacred and authoritative narrative that expresses and enacts ontological truth (Baumgartner et al., 1974, p. 195; Smith et al., 2025; Townsend, 1972, p. 192).

Myth and symbol are posited as foundational elements in the construction of human meaning. In his seminal work, "Symbolism and Myth", Richard Koehl contends that myth is not merely the irrational belief systems of archaic societies, but also cultural structures that persist in the contemporary world through symbolic discourses and rituals. Utilising the theoretical frameworks of Cassirer and Langer, Koehl contends that myths do not operate on the premise of truth claims, but rather on the basis of a "sense of appropriateness" and emotional gratification. The recurrent nature of actions in quotidian life – such as the narration of fantastical tales to children or the observance of Christmas rituals – facilitates the establishment of an unconscious connection with collective symbols. Over time, these symbols transform into a mythic structure and become the sustainer of the social order. Koehl emphasises that myth is produced not only at the narrative level but also through linguistic forms and everyday symbolic acts (Koehl, 1966).

Thalassophobia and Art

Thalassophobia, defined as the fear of the sea, has emerged as an enduring theme within the domain of artistic expression. This phenomenon has been particularly salient in the realm of artists who utilise naturalistic subjects, human fears, and the exploration of the unknown. It is a well-documented phenomenon that the sea and the ocean have long been a source of inspiration for artists, evoking a complex array of emotions ranging from fear to fascination. Such phobias have the potential to create meaningful thematic motifs within artistic expression. One such theme that is frequently observed in artworks expressing thalassophobia is the depiction of the depths of the sea, characterised by murky water and turbulent, choppy waves. The employment of underwater imagery in such contexts represents an established artistic technique, operating as a metaphorical representation of the unknown or a symbolic embodiment of fear.

In the oeuvre of Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890–1937), the sea is employed not solely as an element of nature, but concurrently as an emblem of both the unknown and human vulnerability. Within Lovecraft's conceptualisation of horror, particularly as articulated in his employment of the term "cosmic horror", the terror evoked by the profound mysteries of the universe stands as an indispensable element. The sea, with its depth and inexplorability, serves as a natural environment that reflects and embodies Lovecraft's fear of the unseen. Thalassophobia, is a prominent feature in some of Lovecraft's most renowned works. The Call of Cthulhu (1928) is a particularly salient example of this, in which the fear of the sea is depicted with great intensity. The eponymous creature, Cthulhu, is an example of an entity that inhabits the depths of the ocean, existing in a state of slumber that defies human comprehension. The narrative unfolds on an island in the Pacific Ocean, where the protagonists encounter supernatural beings (Castilho, 2024).

The fact that Cthulhu's sunken city, R'lyeh, is located at the bottom of the ocean emphasizes the unknowability and terror of the sea. The concept of the unknown and the infinite nature of the sea is further accentuated by the notion of eternity, which is embodied by the entity known as Cthulhu. The sea is an

environment characterised by its lack of clearly defined boundaries and its profound depths. Lovecraft's narrative conveys the sense of helplessness that humans experience when confronted with this vast and enigmatic entity. A further recurrent theme in Lovecraft's oeuvre is the insignificance of humankind in the universe. The vastness of the oceans and the ancient beings that slumber in their depths evoke a sense of powerlessness in man, and his characters often succumb to madness after encounters with sea creatures. This phenomenon underscores the profound and often destructive impact that the unknown and the beings inhabiting the depths of the ocean exert on human psychology (Castilho, 2024).

One notable example is the Cthulhu Mythos, a recurring motif seen in artwork worldwide. This mythos conveys the concept of enigmatic beings slumbering in the deep sea and has left a lasting impact on popular culture. Lovecraft portrays the sea not only as a natural element but also as an emblematic symbol of humanity's fear of the unknown. The mysterious creatures that reside within the ocean depths symbolize the unknown that stretches beyond human comprehension. By tapping into thalassophobia, the fear of the sea, Lovecraft's work stands as a powerful representation of the terrifying nature of the ocean in art (Castilho, 2024; Harrington & Hackett, 2018; Lowell, 2004).

It is evident that the motif of isolation and loneliness is frequently depicted through the medium of the sea. The sea has been employed as a metaphor to symbolize human feelings of loneliness and isolation. The ocean is often depicted as an area that evokes feelings of helplessness and disorientation in the face of the power of nature. It is further theorised that thalassophobia, or the fear of the sea, can be employed as a medium for the articulation of subconscious anxieties within artistic creations. The vast expanse of the ocean can be seen as a metaphor for the depths and complexity of the subconscious realm. In works inspired by thalassophobia, artists frequently accentuate the unseen depths of the water, the peril of losing one's way, or the sensation of being overwhelmed by the vastness of the sea. This aesthetic, characterised by a simultaneous sense of threat and fascination, is a notable feature of thalassophobia-inspired works. Noteworthy examples of art that reinforce thalassophobia can be found in depictions combining mythological fears with the unknowability of the sea. Notably, depictions of sirens, kraken, sea monsters and other such unknown giant creatures have been identified as significant representations of the fear of the sea in art.

Analyzing the Works with Descriptive Analysis Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design and relies on iconographic and iconological methods of analysis. The works examined were selected from Western paintings that depict mythological narratives capable of evoking the theme of thalassophobia, and that specifically convey fear, threat, the unknown, or liminal situations related to the sea. The data set comprises works by six artists (Titian, Veronese, Lemoyne, Böcklin, Waterhouse, and Draper). These artists were chosen through purposive sampling because they created paintings in which the sea and mythological stories play a central role, that feature clearly articulated figurative compositions, and that use the sea as a symbolic boundary between consciousness and the unconscious, order and chaos, human and monsters, or the known and the unknown. During the analysis, an iconographic reading was first carried out, describing composition, spatial organization, figure placement, light, color, and symbols; this was then followed by an iconological interpretation that explored the mythological framework and deeper layers of symbolic meaning. The scope of the study is restricted to narrative mythological scenes within Western painting; seascapes that depict the sea without narrative content, as well as other media such as sculpture, engraving, and contemporary digital art, are excluded.

Tiziano Vecellio (1490–1576)

Of all the surviving myths, Perseus and Andromeda is perhaps the most dramatic. Andromeda is portrayed as being bound to a rock as a sacrifice to appease the sea monster sent by Neptune to retaliate for the harm inflicted upon her mother by the claim that she and Andromeda were more beautiful than the Nereids. The narrative ends in a highly theatrical way with the rescue of Andromeda by the hero Perseus. This myth is referenced multiple times in Book 4 of Ovid's Metamorphoses, specifically at lines 663, 685, 706, and 724, reflecting its narrative and thematic significance within the broader context of the work. The power and dizzying descent of the hero is juxtaposed with her passive fragility, creating a striking visual contrast. As one of the High Renaissance artist Tiziano's proficiency as a painter of nude women is shown in his depiction of Andromeda's body. Andromeda is depicted from the front, her unclothed figure providing a striking visual contrast to the lightly armoured figure of Perseus. Significantly, Tiziano made several

noteworthy modifications to the composition during the painting process, including the initial placement of Andromeda's figure on the right side of the composition (Newall & Deprez, 2021, p. 3; Ovid, 1922; Rearick, 1996, pp. 44–47; Vecellio, 1554).

Tiziano's depiction of Perseus and Andromeda is a noteworthy illustration of the ominous, formidable and perplexing nature of the sea, according to the Book 4 of Ovid's Metamorphoses at line 706:

"That instant, spurning with his feet the ground, the youth rose upwards to a cloudy height; and when the shadow of the hero marked the surface of the sea, the monster sought vainly to vent his fury on the shade. As the swift bird of Jove, when he beholds a basking serpent in an open field, exposing to the sun its mottled back, and seizes on its tail; lest it shall turn to strike with venomed fang, he fixes fast his grasping talons in the scaly neck; so did the winged youth, in rapid flight through yielding elements, press down on the great monster's back, and thrust his sword, sheer to the hilt, in its right shoulder – loud its frightful torture sounded over the waves.—So fought the hero-son of Inachus."(Ovid, 1922).

The vastness of the sea, Andromeda's helplessness, the approaching sea monster and the fact that salvation comes only from the air can activate the fundamental fears associated with thalassophobia. A close analysis of the work reveals that the sea is depicted not only as a natural environment, but also as a concrete source of fear and danger within the context of thalassophobia. Through the medium of art, Tiziano offers a profound narrative that reflects the deepest psychological dimensions of thalassophobia.



Figure 1. Tiziano Vecellio, Perseus and Andromeda, 1554-6, oil on canvas, 183.3 x 199.3 cm, The Wallace Collection, London.

Paolo Veronese (1528–1588)

In his 1584 artwork titled "Perseus and Andromeda," featured at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Rennes, Paolo Veronese engages with the mythological theme that was earlier explored by Titian (Tiziano Vecellio). Analyzing the work, it can be observed that Veronese emulates Titian's compositional structure, situating Andromeda chained to a rock on the right, while Perseus approaches from the left to confront the monster. As noted by W. R. Rearick in "The Art of Veronese", the background presents a captivating maritime cityscape, featuring imaginative architectural designs reminiscent of Venice. Veronese's technical mastery is evident in the use of chiaroscuro and dramatic foreshortening, which organise the scene into a circular composition where dynamic diagonals converge around the central figures. The depiction of Andromeda's body, rendered with a high level of detail and characterised by the interplay of light and shadow, resonates with the hues of Perseus' attire and the surrounding sunset. This visual connection symbolically links the figures and foreshadows the hero's triumph. The monster, an imaginative creation by Veronese, is portrayed as both monstrous and vulnerable, showing signs of surprise in response to the aerial attack. In alignment

with the aesthetic ideals of the Renaissance and Mannerism, Veronese, akin to Titian and Vasari, juxtaposes the idealised beauty of Andromeda with the grotesque monstrosity of the monster. While the painting may be interpreted through the lens of Christian, alchemical, or symbolic readings, it is ultimately representative of a Mannerist fascination with mythological spectacle and visual seduction, prioritising imaginative play over didactic intent (Cheney, 2004, p. 215; Rearick & Pignatti, 1989, p. 171).

Veronese's Perseus and Andromeda represents more than merely a depiction of a mythological scene of salvation; it is also an expression of the existential fear of the sea, otherwise known as thalassophobia. Andromeda's entrapment in a chained position on the rocks overlooking the sea symbolises the confining nature of the border between land and sea, which is perceived as menacing. This configuration serves as a metaphorical depiction of the vulnerability of the human form when confronted with the boundless and unruly nature of the sea. The monster's emergence from the sea and its subsequent attack symbolises the unknown depths of fear. The incorporation of imaginary Venetian architecture in the background, along with Veronese's dramatic use of light, serves to elicit both psychological and aesthetic tension in the viewer. This artistic composition serves as a visual manifestation of primordial fears concerning the sea, employing mythological representations characteristic of the Renaissance period.



Figure 2. Paolo Veronese, Perseus and Andromeda, 1584, oil on canvas, 260 x 211 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rennes.

François Lemoyne (1688–1737)

François Lemoyne's painting is an example of a narrative that had been previously depicted by major Italian Renaissance painters. The artist's clear source of inspiration was Paolo Veronese's painting in Rennes, which was part of the French Royal collection during the eighteenth century and is currently housed in the Musée des Beaux-Arts. The general composition and the primary distribution of colours are both derived from Veronese's original work. Within this established framework, Lemoyne adapted the postures of the figures. Alternatively, Titian's painting in the Wallace Collection, which was part of the Orléans collection at the Palais Royal in Paris during the eighteenth century, may have served as a less direct source of inspiration. It is noteworthy that the subject and the model were selected by Lemoyne himself, underscoring the autonomy in artistic decision-making during this period. The painting was exhibited at the open-air exhibition on Place Dauphine in Paris in 1723, shortly after its completion. It was acquired at the exhibition by François Berger, who became the painter's most prominent patron and collector. It is hypothesised that Lemoyne selected the Venetian model to compete with the renowned Venetian painters. The artist's distinctive style, characterised by the use of clearly visible brushstrokes, bears a notable similarity to the

works of the Venetian masters. The pastel-like quality of the colours is indicative of the prevailing aesthetic sensibilities of the 1720s in France (Lemoyne, 1723).

Lemoyne's rendition of the mythological scene featuring Perseus and Andromeda is characterised by its adherence to the Rococo aesthetic tradition, employing a meticulous attention to detail in its depiction of the sea, which serves as a conduit for the articulation of profound existential dread. When evaluated from the perspective of thalassophobia, the work's narrative transcends the conventional themes of heroism and salvation, underscoring the vulnerability of humanity in the face of natural forces and the trepidation that accompanies the unknown. The vast sea, which forms the backdrop of the painting, is portrayed as a menacing and enigmatic domain. The sea monster, as the physical manifestation of these fears, serves as a visual representation of the dangers lurking in the depths. Andromeda, chained fastened to the rock formation, is symbolic of both physical and psychological restraint; in contrast the figure of Perseus is emblematic of the individual's endeavour to confront and prevail over their fears in the face of such threats. Drawing upon a rich tradition of mythological narrative, the artist has created a visual language that explores the human condition in the context of natural elements. The sea, in its infinite and all-consuming capacity, is a recurring motif, and the work addresses themes of fear and powerlessness, offering a poignant reflection on the thalassophobic experience.



Figure 3. François Lemoyne, Perseus and Andromeda, 1723, oil on canvas, 183 x 149,7 cm, The Wallace Collection, London.

Arnold Böcklin (1827–1901)

It is evident that Symbolist artist Arnold Böcklin's training as a landscape painter has informed his unusual interpretation of an episode from the ancient Greek epic Odyssey by Homer in book IX (in Latin, Ulysses). This myth is referenced multiple times in Book 9 of Homer's Odyssey, specifically at line 536 reflecting its narrative and thematic significance within the broader context of the work:

"So he spoke in prayer, and the dark-haired god heard him. But the Cyclops lifted on high again a far greater stone, and swung and hurled it, putting into the throw measureless strength. He cast it a little behind the dark-prowed ship, and barely missed the end of the steering-oar. And the sea surged beneath the stone as it fell, and the wave bore the ship onward and drove it to the shore."(Homer, 1919a).

Depicted within a landscape setting populated by Cyclops, one-eyed, malevolent giants, this theatrical scene portrays the fleeing hero Odysseus taunting the Cyclops Polyphemus, who, enraged, hurls a boulder in his direction after vociferously demanding his return to the shore. Arnold Böcklin's work is notable for its emphasis on the bizarre, grotesque and even absurd elements that are characteristic of such narratives, thereby

evoking a pre-classical world characterised by violence and sensuality. The artist's meticulous naturalistic observations form the basis for a plausible setting (Böcklin, 1896; Homer, 1919a; Thomaidis et al., 2021, p. 143).

Böcklin's Odysseus and Polyphemus is replete with elements that underscore the eerie, unrulely, and enigmatic nature of the ocean. The threatening nature of the sea is clearly visible. Rather than being depicted as a tranquil and predictable route, the sea is portrayed as a bleak and enigmatic realm. The vulnerability of Odysseus and his men is highlighted by the insignificance of their vessel in the face of the formidable forces of nature. The depiction of Polyphemus serves to underscore the dual nature of the sea's threat, both physical and psychological. The anxiety of being marooned at sea is a recurring theme in the painting. Böcklin has adroitly amalgamated these elements to create a scene that can be directly associated with thalassophobia. When observing the painting, the viewer is able to sense the perils of the deep waters, the challenges of escape, the sense of powerlessness in the face of nature and melancholy. Thus, Böcklin's depiction of Odysseus and Polyphemus can be said to transcend the confines of pure mythology and is regarded as a noteworthy artistic accomplishment that captures the universal anxieties surrounding the sea. In addition to his residence far out at sea, Polyphemus has a number of associations with the ocean. Most evidently, he is the offspring of Poseidon and the sea nymph Thoosa, and the curse that afflicts him compels the sea-god to pursue Odysseus with such unbridled fury. Polyphemus can thus be regarded as a monstrous extension of the sea's chaotic force, endowed with form and situated at its extremities. A further noteworthy detail is that Polyphemus, in contrast to his fellow Cyclopes, inhabits a cave in proximity to the sea rather than the inland peaks. This choice of domicile is significant, as it demonstrates a profound connection with the sea that is arguably absent in other Cyclopes. The proximity to the water is likely the reason why Odysseus and his men initially approach Polyphemus. As recorded in the Homeric epic, Polyphemus is blinded by a heated olive-wood stake, his own club. Following the mention of the club as the instrument of punishment by Odysseus, the alien nature of the club is overcome through its assimilation within the protagonist's cultural framework. It is noted that the club bears a resemblance to "the mast of a pitch-black ship," evocative of the vessel employed by Odysseus in his voyage from Troy (Bellum, 2009, p. 43; Dartar & Kaplanoğlu, 2020, pp. 392–393; Giannopoulou, 2006, p. 20).



Figure 4. Arnold Böcklin, Odysseus and Polyphemus, 1896, oil and tempera on panel, 66 x 150 cm, Museum of Fine Art Boston, Boston.

John William Waterhouse (1849–1917)

This painting portrays a moment in the Odyssey, the renowned account of the voyages of the Greek protagonist Odysseus as recounted by the poet Homer. This myth is referenced multiple times in Book 12 of Homer's Odyssey, specifically at lines 36-153-165 and 192 reflecting its narrative and thematic significance within the broader context of the work. Within this episode, the mythological Sirens entice unsuspecting mariners towards a fatal encounter with perilous rocks through the enchanting power of their music. In response, Odysseus, determined to witness the Sirens' song, instructed his crew to secure him to a mast and block their ears, ensuring their safe passage. Waterhouse's depiction of the Sirens as hybrid creatures, combining the body of a bird with the head of a beautiful woman, was a surprising innovation for Victorian audiences, who were more accustomed to seeing these mythic creatures depicted as comely mermaid-like nymphs. Waterhouse derived the motif for the Sirens from an ancient Greek vase, which he studied at the

British Museum. In the context of Victorian art and literature, the grotesque depictions of sirens were often overlooked. Waterhouse was an exception to this tendency, remaining faithful to the classical texts in his depiction of Ulysses and the Sirens. His work focuses on the archaeological detailing of the boat and the costume of the sailors rather than on the sirens' seductive qualities (Cooper, 2009, p. 193; Homer, 1919b; Waterhouse, 1891).

Upon its initial display at the Royal Academy in London in 1891, Ulysses and the Sirens received acclaim from the majority of contemporary art critics. MH Spielmann, in his contribution to the Magazine of Art, characterised it as 'a very startling triumph … a very carnival of colour, mosaicked and balanced with a skill more consummate than even the talented artist was credited with … The quality of the painting is … a considerable advance upon all his antecedent work'. It is interesting to note that, at the time of Sir Hubert von Herkomer's purchase of this picture for the National Gallery of Victoria, in June 1891, Ulysses was only the second work by Waterhouse to be acquired by a public gallery (Waterhouse, 1891).

Waterhouse's Ulysses and the Sirens is a seminal piece in its depiction of the thalassophobia in art. The Odysseus' fear and thus his preparation for the sirens has described in the Book 12 of Homer's Odyssey at line 153:

"Then verily I spoke among my comrades, grieved at heart: `Friends, since it is not right that one or two alone should know the oracles that Circe, the beautiful goddess, told me, therefore will I tell them, in order that knowing them we may either die or, shunning death and fate, escape. First she bade us avoid the voice of the wondrous Sirens, and their flowery meadow. Me alone she bade to listen to their voice; but do ye bind me with grievous bonds, that I may abide fast where I am, upright in the step of the mast, and let the ropes be made fast at the ends to the mast itself; and if I implore and bid you to loose me, then do ye tie me fast with yet more bonds." (Homer, 1919b).

Waterhouse's depiction of the well-known siren scene, as recounted in Homer's Odyssey, portrays the sea not merely as a geographical entity, but also as a mystical element that symbolises the unknown, the threatening nature and the human condition of helplessness in the face of it. In the composition, Odysseus is depicted as being firmly bound to the mast, his attention fixed intently on the sirens' alluring melody, while his crew endeavours to evade this peril by plugging their ears with wax. The ship's tossing in the waves and the sirens' aggressive behaviour demonstrate that the sea represents a dual threat: physical and psychological. By portraying the sirens as predatory entities emerging from the rocks, Waterhouse metamorphoses the sea into a force that entices one in and enforces submission.

The passive posture of Odysseus, tied to the mast, serves to emphasise the helplessness and defenselessness of man in the face of the sea. The ship and its crew are depicted as vulnerable in the presence of the gigantic and enigmatic power of nature, with the sirens' allure symbolising the unknown and the perils of the sea. The sea is depicted as both a physical space and a mystical dimension that evokes one's inner fears. Waterhouse's painting is a noteworthy artistic expression that highlights the perilous and alluring nature of the sea, offering a profound visual interpretation of thalassophobia.



Figure 5. John William Waterhouse, Ulysses and the Sirens, 1891, oil on canvas, 100.6 x 202 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

Following his election as an Academician, Waterhouse presented The Mermaid to the Royal Academy. From the 1880s, Waterhouse exhibited a series of works inspired by Greek mythology and literary figures at the Royal Academy and the New Gallery. It is a commonly held view that the artist was inspired to paint The Mermaid by Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poem The Mermaid (1830). Waterhouse's depiction of mermaids is notable for its melancholic and enigmatic portrayal, a departure from the traditional image of sirens. The work accentuates the mermaid's sense of isolation and yearning for the human realm. Rather than portraying the mermaid as a tempting siren luring sailors to their doom, the artist depicts her as an introverted and melancholic being sitting in a cove and singing whilst combing her hair. The pearls in the oyster shell positioned in close proximity to the mermaid are believed by some to be the tears of deceased sailors, thus infusing the scene with a sense of melancholic nostalgia. In its assessment of the Royal Academy's exhibition in 1901, the Art Journal noted that the work reflected the artist's "sad and mournful" mood and that the depiction of the mermaid symbolized a deep longing for unfulfilled human desires. The incessant auditory motif depicted in the painting is often interpreted as a metaphorical depiction of turbulent human spirit and universal yearning for tranquility (Arts, 1901, p. 182; Cooper, 2009, pp. 193–194; Tennyson & Johnson, 1891, p. 20; Waterhouse, 1900).

When analysed through the prism of thalassophobia, Waterhouse's Mermaid reveals an enigmatic and unsettling portrayal of the sea. The mermaid figure in the artwork is depicted as being trapped between the sea and the human realm, a motif often seen in traditional mythology. This lends further credence to the notion that the sea, with its vast and enigmatic nature, serves as the wellspring of thalassophobia, a fear of the unknown intricately interwoven with the allure and threat of the sea. The mermaid's solitary and melancholic posture instils a sense of unease about the unseen beings that may inhabit the depths. The mermaid's secluded rock dwelling represents an additional salient element in the context of merfolk mythology, contributing to the eerie atmosphere of the setting. This location, while serving as a boundary against the vast and enigmatic sea, also fosters a sense of entrapment, thereby contributing to the pervasive atmosphere of dread. The sea is presented as a space from which there is no escape, a concept that is the main trigger of thalassophobia.

The notion that shells adorned with pearls are the tears of deceased sailors underscores the sea's association with death. Consequently, the sea is depicted as both a physical menace and a mystical and tragic entity. This lends further credence to one of the fundamental tenets of thalassophobia, namely, that the sea is a perilous and unkind environment. While the mermaid does not present an overtly threatening scene, her depiction, interpreted from a thalassophobic perspective, instils a sense of foreboding and dread that can be attributed to the supernatural, mysterious and inescapable nature of the sea.



Figure 6. John William Waterhouse, A Mermaid, 1900, oil on canvas, 96.5 x 66.6 cm, Royal Academy of Arts, London.

Herbert James Draper (1863–1920)

Herbert James Draper's 1909 dated painting Odysseus and the Sirens (1863–1920) is now in the Ferens Art Gallery. The artist elected to depict a classical subject in which women are portrayed as perilous entities; this choice is emblematic of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. A similar Homeric episode was also depicted by John William Waterhouse in 1891, and this work is currently on display at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, Australia. In contrast to the depiction of the Sirens by Draper, in which the female figures are depicted as hybrid creatures with the attributes of both bird and human, Waterhouse's Sirens are fully clothed and depicted as half-woman, half-bird hybrid creatures. Draper's interpretation, in contrast, features the Sirens in transparent clothing, with particular emphasis on the female figure's bust, while another depiction portrays the buttocks in a graphic manner. The depiction of the third female figure's wet flesh is commendable, but the inclusion of a mermaidtail strays from the strictures of the Homeric references. Conversely, the depiction of Odysseus, observed by both scantily clad and underage women, is portrayed as stern and virtuous as he gazes skyward. The depiction of muscular rowers subtly alludes to homoeroticism. The perpetual feminine, in all of its manifestations, whether as the innocent Madonna, in the sense of a picture or statue of the Virgin Mary, or as the depraved temptress, was one of the main themes of the Pre-Raphaelite movement (Salcman, 2006, p. 423).

The relationship between the sea and the siren figure is of great importance in painting. In the context of ancient Greek mythology, sirens are depicted as entities that entice sailors and lure their vessels to the rocks. Draper's work demonstrates that the siren's allure, far from being merely a physical threat to the sea, is in fact a psychological one, thereby emphasising the dualistic nature of the siren's appeal. While the siren's aesthetic appeal is undeniable, it serves a symbolic function as a warning emblem, drawing parallels with the deadly threat it represents in the mythological context. By accentuating the allure of the siren, which is both captivating and perilous, it evokes a sense of apprehension for the viewer who confronts the immensity of the sea. The colour and composition of the sea also contain elements that can be associated with thalassophobia. Draper employs the undulating movement of the waves and the profound, foreboding tones of the sea to evoke a sense of immersion in an unruly and boundless body of water. The siren figure, situated against the expanse of the sea in the background, serves to evoke concerns pertaining to diving or plunging into the unknown. The potential for peril beneath the waves, as depicted by sirens and other undersea entities, serves to stimulate the viewer's imagination and amplify their apprehension.

The depiction of loneliness and helplessness in the scene serves to reinforce the psychological impact

of the sea, thereby contributing to the experience of thalassophobia. The sea is depicted as a place of entrapment rather than salvation. The siren's allure, as depicted, renders escape for any sailor under its spell highly improbable. Draper's strategic positioning of the siren at the core of the scene accentuates the siren's allure, yet its pervasive nature, coupled with its inscrutability, engenders a profound sense of dread. The viewer may also experience a sense of insignificance and helplessness in the presence of the sea's vastness and seemingly infinite horizons, a fear that forms the basis of thalassophobia.



Figure 7. Herbert James Draper, Odysseus and Sirens, 1909, oil on canvas, 177 x 213,5 cm, Ferens Art Gallery, Kingston upon Hull.

Conclusion

The exploration of thalassophobia in the context of Western painting influenced by mythology has revealed the lasting psychological and symbolic significance of the sea in visual culture. Rather than perceiving the sea as a neutral setting for heroic or romantic narratives, the analysis presented here reinterprets it as a dynamic and frequently menacing presence, an agent of fear, enigma, and transformation. The water, in its archetypal manifestation, has been observed to be associated with disorientation, loss of agency, and confrontation with the unknown, as evidenced by the selected works. Yet these associations, while dominant, are not exhaustive; the sea does not always kill, nor is it solely a symbol of destruction. These representations are not merely incidental but deliberate visual strategies that tap into universal human fears and cultural memories. The mythological framework utilised by these painters, drawing upon tales such as Perseus and Andromeda in the Greco-Roman tradition or sirens and monsters in the Homeric context, serves to externalise the psychic tensions between human desire for control and the overwhelming forces of nature.

The figure of Andromeda, for instance, is a potent symbol of the vulnerability of the human body when confronted with the forces of chaos. The sirens, on the other hand, represent the seductive danger of surrendering to instinct, while the monstrous beings, whether Lovecraftian or classical in origin, personify the psychological terror of the unknown and the unseen. These motifs, it can be argued, function not merely as narrative devices but as symbolic constructs that articulate primal fears embedded in the collective unconscious. Furthermore, the recurrence of these images over several centuries – from the Renaissance to the Romantic and Symbolist periods – indicates a persistent engagement with thalassophobia as both an individual and cultural phenomenon. The sea, as depicted in these artistic works, serves not only as a metaphor for death but also as a symbol that disrupts established boundaries, thereby challenging conventional distinctions between domains such as life and death, sanity and madness, self and other. This boundary-blurring quality of the sea reinforces its role as a symbolic site of existential reflection.

This study contributes to a more profound understanding of how fear – in this case, thalassophobia – is encoded within visual language and mythological narrative. The study posits that the ocean's role in art history is not merely aesthetic or thematic, but is also profoundly psychological and philosophical. By

examining the sea not only as a motif but also as a metaphor, we unveil an enduring axis of meaning that resonates with the fundamental human condition: our profound sense of wonder before the vastness of the cosmos, our trepidation in the face of the unknown, and our inextinguible need to narrate and aestheticise that which we fear.

Future enquiry may be directed towards the expansion of these findings through the analysis of thalassophobic themes within other artistic mediums such as film, virtual reality and literature, in which immersive technologies and contemporary anxieties perpetuate ongoing transformation in the manner in which the abyss is experienced.

Declarations

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DALGALARIN ARASINDAKİ KARANLIK: BATI RESİM SANATINDA TALASSOFOBİ VE MİTOLOJİK İMAJ

Can Çobanoğlu

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, geniş ve derin su kütlelerine karşı yaygın ve sıklıkla irrasyonel bir korku olarak tanımlanan talasofobi fenomenini, Batı mitolojisinden esinlenen resimlerdeki görsel tasvirleri aracılığıyla incelemektedir. Bu araştırma, talasofobiyi yalnızca klinik bir durum olarak kavramlaştırmak yerine, kültürel olarak yerleşik bir psikolojik motif olarak incelemek için yeni bir teorik çerçeve önermektedir. Bu disiplinlerarası yaklaşım, analitik psikoloji, evrim teorisi, mitoloji çalışmaları ve sanat tarihini bir araya getirerek, talasofobinin çok yönlü doğasını kapsamlı bir şekilde anlamayı sağlar. Çalışma, Carl Jung'un kolektif bilinçaltı ve arketipik sembolizm teorisinden yararlanarak, suyu bir dönüşüm ve yansıma alanı olarak konumlandırmaktadır. Deniz hem cazibe hem de tehlike, kaos ve derinlik barındıran bir unsur olarak temsil edilmektedir. Bu araştırmanın odak noktası, Titian, Veronese ve Lemoyne'nin Perseus ve Andromeda'yı mitolojik olarak tasvir eden eserle ile Böcklin, Waterhouse ve Draper'ın Homeros'un eserlerini yorumlayan resimlerin incelenmesidir. Araştırma, kompozisyon, perspektif, sembolizm ve karakter dinamikleri gibi biçimsel unsurların analiz edildiği betimsel bir analiz kullanmaktadır. Bu eserlerde deniz, bilinen ve bilinmeyen, rasyonel ve içgüdüsel gibi zıtlıklar arasındaki bir eşik olarak tasvir edilmektedir. Canavar deniz yaratıkları, sirenler ve suya batma gibi ısrarcı imgeler, kültürel olarak paylaşılan bir kaygının varlığını düşündürmektedir. Bu gizli korkunun, insan kontrolü ve bilgisinin sınırları hakkında daha geniş varoluşsal endişeleri ortaya çıkardığı gösterilmiştir. Çalışma, talassofobiyi, antik mitolojik arketipleri Batı sanatındaki ısrarcı duygusal temalarla bağlayan tekrarlayan görsel ve psikolojik bir motif olarak incelemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Talassofobi, Mitoloji, Batı Resim Sanatı, Deniz Resimleri