**The Maritime Horror Fiction of William Hope Hodgson - Archetypes and Nuance**

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The Sea represents many things, but one recurring subject is horror. Whether it is Ulysses driven insane by the song of the sirens as he is lashed to the main mast of his ship; *Umibouzu*,[[1]](#endnote-2) the sinister giant black figure that haunted Japanese fishermen and sailors; Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, with its depictions of living death and doom; the shipwrecked mariners contemplating cannibalism and ‘otherness’ in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*[[2]](#endnote-3) or Peter Benchley's *Jaws*, the sea has long been both source and setting for horror.

In this year alone, we have seen Godzilla return to the big screen from the depths of the Pacific Ocean, leaving devastation, metaphors and tsunamis in his wake,[[3]](#endnote-4) and all the while Great Cthulhu continues to sleep in the mathematically impossible city of R’lyeh at the bottom of the sea,[[4]](#endnote-5) until the day he surfaces once and for all and brings us to our doom – perhaps with a loud BLOOP as he rises…[[5]](#endnote-6)

This then is what I term ‘Maritime Horror’ a sub-genre which both maligns and celebrates the sea as horror or backdrop to horror. As I have mentioned, maritime horror already has a substantial canon and this will no doubt continue to grow for the sea continues to fascinate and frighten us in equal measure. However, this paper’s aim is to make a case for the pre-eminence of one writer in particular, William Hope Hodgson.

There are many reasons why we should revive interest in this author. As a pioneer of cosmic horror, as his novel *The House on the Borderlands* demonstrates, Hodgson’s influence was admitted by HP Lovecraft himself[[6]](#endnote-7) and so, through him, modern horror owes a great debt. He was and is one of many writers and artists whose death in World War One threatens their total obscurity. Perhaps then, in the centenary of this war, we should renew our interest in both him and other authors whose lives and careers ended far too soon on the Western Front.

Yet what is most significant about Hodgson, beyond his having written a great deal of maritime horror fiction, was that he was himself a former mariner, first becoming a sailor at age 14 before becoming disillusioned with life at sea and starting a career as a physical trainer and then an author after his 25th birthday.[[7]](#endnote-8) Prior to this, he had formal training as an apprentice and then a third mate while also developing an interest in naval photography.

Nonetheless, his passion for the sea was dimmed considerably by what he described as “a comfortless, weariful, and thankless life” while he himself was a volatile, even at times unpleasant individual, who encountered mixed fortunes throughout his life.[[8]](#endnote-9) For Hodgson, conflating his experiences with horror and the foreboding unknown took very little effort. Yet I would argue that this also gives Hodgson an insight and authority in regards to his subject matter that other authors lacked – for he really did obey the maxim that you should write about what you know.

Hodgson wrote many examples of Maritime Horror and nautical fiction - over fifty - but given the scope of this paper, we will look at three as way of an introduction. The first example of this approach, combining the realism of first-hand experience with the uncanny, was *The Voice in the Night*,[[9]](#endnote-10) first published in 1907 and, coincidentally, used as the basis for the lurid, subliminally sexual Japanese castaway horror film *Matango* in 1963.[[10]](#endnote-11) (Like Godzilla, a production by the Toho studios, who also made *Ringu* in 1998, yet another horror film with nautical roots.)

Here a mariner recounts how his ship, “becalmed in the Northern Pacific” was approached in the middle of the night by a strange figure in a rowing boat. The stranger refuses to be seen and instead pleads for food while, ominously, wishing to keep his distance from the narrator’s boat. Eventually, the ship sends food over to the rowing boat via a boathook and a float, and the stranger then recounts his tale.

It transpires that he and his fiancée were shipwrecked on a strange island riddled with fungus which infects and then eventually takes over its hosts. It has an unusual allure that compels its victims to eat or desire it, much like the fate that befalls the *lotophagi* in *The Odyssey,* victims of another corrupting force, spiritual as well as physical, and also encountered on an island in a seafaring narrative.[[11]](#endnote-12) The fiancée eats some of the fungus and becomes infected while the stranger is contaminated while fighting off what is left of another host, which tries to attack him. Realising they are infected, they decide to quarantine themselves, eating only whatever untainted food they can find. It is implied that the infection has nonetheless almost completely consumed the fiancée and that the stranger is trying to keep what remains of her alive until such time that he too completely succumbs. Finally, the narrator catches a glimpse of the stranger rowing away in the early dawn light and is horrified to see his deformed fungoid form. No longer able to empathise with the stranger – a final tragedy and horror in the story – the narrator refers to him instead as “...the thing” as he heads towards his inevitable doom.

 Here Hodgson combines three separate strands. On the one hand, he dwells upon body horror and the corruption of the flesh. This is a disruptive, invasive force not just on the body but on social norms of the day – the fiancée, expected by contemporary convention to remain chaste and pure, is the first to give into a depraved appetite for the fungus and is subsequently made to “promise on her knees” never to do it again, she herself admitting that “the desire for it had come suddenly, and that, until the moment of desire, she had experienced nothing towards it but the most extreme repulsion.” This conservative narrative of fallen woman laid low by lust (whether it be for fungus or other more primal desires) is subverted, however, by the stranger’s own subsequent downfall, where he is “immediately filled with an inhuman desire. I turned and seized a mass of the fungus. Then more and — more. I was insatiable.”

 Hodgson also alludes to the maritime connections between the sea and leprosy – like the fungus, a contagious disease which corrupts and rots the flesh. It is worth noting that six years before *The Voice in the Night* was published, the United States government founded a leprosarium on the island of Culion, where all lepers were to be quarantined and isolated.[[12]](#endnote-13) The sea, in fact, was a common way of separating society from the leprous ‘other’, the 1866 founding of the Moloka’i leper colony near Hawaii – still very much in use by 1907 - being yet another real life example of the Pacific ocean used to create a separation between the uninfected and the leprous, as well as the natives of the islands and the new ruling class of white settlers.[[13]](#endnote-14) This in turn harked back to even older traditions, such as the ritualised sequestration of lepers during the Middle Ages[[14]](#endnote-15), and where a common literary device was to have a sinful or impious character afflicted with leprosy as both punishment and means of salvation through the acceptance of divine authority.[[15]](#endnote-16) It is worth noting here that the stranger mentions God on a regular basis, either calling upon him to reward the narrator and his ship for its charity, or throwing himself and his fiancée onto the mercy of the divine - “God would do with us what was His will”, as the stranger says, perhaps with added poignancy given the plight that befalls both him and his fiancée.

The third strand, however, is the nautical element of the story. The stranger and his fiancée were abandoned on their demasted ship (the ominously named ‘*Albatross*’) by the crew and were forced to make an improvised raft which carries them not to salvation but their doom. It is implied that their lack of knowledge of the sea is partly the cause of their plight, though this is subverted at the end of the story by the narrator noting that the stranger was now almost indistinguishable from his grey rowing boat - “my eyes searched a moment vainly for the conjunction of hand and oar.” By the end of the story, the stranger had, ironically, begun to learn the skills that he lacked at the start of the story, though this was now far too late for either him or his fiancée. Hodgson also implies that the original sin is not the couple giving into the ‘forbidden fruit’ of the fungus but their crew abandoning them and the duty of mariners to support one another in what is, after all, an environment that requires collaboration. Again, it is only belatedly that this duty is fulfilled by the narrator’s own ship, and it is too late. Here, we see the conventions and structures of seafaring life decayed and corrupted, like the bodies of the couple.

Instead, the stranger is transformed by his exposure to the sea, like a sailor, but is also undone by it, and doomed to become part of its dark mythology, something that emerges from its outer reaches and serves as a reminder of humanity’s inability to master it and, ultimately, nature. In many ways, then, *The Voice in the Night* is a nautical ghost story, with the added horror of the stranger being not quite dead yet - nor quite anything else.

The next example this paper will look at is *The Ghost Pirates*,[[16]](#endnote-17) a novel published in 1909. Here, via a narrative from the one surviving crew member, we discover how a merchant ship, the *Mortzestus* (literally ‘The Tide of Death’ in Latin) is slowly assailed by an ever growing number of bizarre other-worldly events. Eventually these reach a crescendo and the survivor, Jessop, recounts how the ship is shrouded in mist and then overwhelmed by “strange men” who, “...in the half-light… looked unreal and impossible” like “the inhabitants of some fantastic dream-world”. With the exception of Jessop, the entirety of the crew are then butchered by the ‘ghost pirates’, whose true nature is never established, or go down on the *Mortzestus* as it is sunk. Finally, it is revealed that the narrative is in fact Jessop recounting the tale to the master and officers of the ship (the *Sangier* - which shares its name with an Indonesian island destroyed by a volcano in 1892[[17]](#endnote-18)) that had rescued him. These witnesses - as Jessop notes tartly - will not be able to recount what truly happened as it is too bizarre to be believed. The story then ends with a coda by the *Sangier’s* Third Mate (Hodgson’s highest rank as a seaman) who provides an account of the attack from his perspective and also vouches for Jessop’s claims, suggesting that the officers will report what happened regardless.

This is the key point of the story, as the final assault by the mysterious attackers is secondary to the looming dread that develops over the novel, and the complete inability of the *Mortzestus’* officers to react appropriately to it. Indeed, the real threat in the novel is precisely the refusal of the autocratic captain and his mates to take the threat seriously, which implies that Hodgson’s real monster in this case is the paralysis and inertia that results from flawed command structures, particularly those on-board ships. Even the ship’s Second Mate is marginalised and ignored, “for the Old Man and the First Mate chaffed him unmercifully about his ‘bogy’.” Rather than challenge their response, he falls back into line and is as dogmatic and authoritarian as they throughout much of the story. As a former seamen, Hodgson must have known that a ship required a functioning command structure in order to function, yet throughout *The Ghost Pirates* the command structure on the ship not only regularly ignores the reports of bizarre phenomena but castigates those who make them, with the First Mate going so far as to threaten violence, even though this sows dissent amongst the crew:

“I’ll knock the face off the first man that comes a step further aft!” he shouted, shaking the pin in my face. “I’ll show yer who’s master here! What the hell do yer mean by this? Get forrard into yer kennel!”

This verges on the comical after a while, as we are reminded of the old horror movie trope of the local sheriff or chief of police refusing to recognise the threat until it is too late. The current vogue for zombie narratives also dwells heavily on decayed human relations and hierarchies, not to mention widespread stupidity, as being more of a threat to the survivors than the undead menace itself.[[18]](#endnote-19) Indeed, even when the ‘Old Man’ and the ship’s mates begin to take the threat seriously, they refuse to abandon their high handed approach, ordering witnesses to be silent and ensuring their authority is unquestioned, even as a far greater threat takes hold.

This contrasted with accepted best practice for real ships’ captains and officers of the era, who were expected to govern, as it were, with consent and mutual benefit in mind.[[19]](#endnote-20) A combination of aloofness, trusting in the competence of one’s subordinates, and being able to manage without alienating seamen below deck was seen as key to maintaining the routines and structure of a functioning ship. Sailors, for their part, were willing to accept discipline and hierarchy without complaint,[[20]](#endnote-21) seeing them as key to their survival, being more inclined instead to complain about proper procedure not being followed, so Hodgson’s depiction of the inept, harmful power dynamics on-board the *Mortzestus* was quite deliberate. As a former sailor, he would have known that such a toxic environment would have had potentially disastrous consequences, even if the supernatural had not become part of the equation.

Even Jessop himself is bound by this rigidly flawed command structure, shouting down another sailor for speaking out of turn, even though he is the voice of reason in this case:

“Why won’t the men do something?” he began. “They ought to damn well make the Old man put us into port! They ought -”

“For goodness sake, shut up, you little fool!” I said. “What’s the good of talking a lot of damned rot like that? You’ll be getting yourself into trouble.”

As Hodgson implies, this inability to think outside of rank and social order dooms the ship. Jessop’s claim that his rescuers will not report the truth suggests both a fatalism and cynicism that underlies the reason why the *Mortzestus* was doomed. His dismissal of the *Sangier’s* crew being taken seriously as witnesses because they will be seen as “beastly, drunken brutes of common sailors” and so “no one will think of taking anything they said, as anything more than a damned cuffer” suggests both a poisonous class politics and Jessop’s final act of resigned despair. “Maybe some of the experts will talk rot about rivets and defective plates and so forth” he concludes caustically. When the captain and the mates put their names and reputations to a testimony more honest than that which Jessop expects, they belie this rot, but at the same time, this restoration of proper order has come too late for the *Mortzestus* and its crew. Like *A Voice In The Dark*, the ‘good ship’ only turns up in the wake of the calamity. The system had failed.

Published eight years after Hodgson finally left the sea behind him, it is easy to see *The Ghost Pirates* as a personal catharsis, where old resentments and disappointments were given voice in the form of a horror narrative. Yet how accurate was this picture of life at sea? Hodgson’s time as a sailor, between 1891 and 1899, was not necessarily a physically uncomfortable one. By their nature, merchant ships often had to rely on diverse crews, which grew even more diverse as attrition through disease and accidents necessitated recruiting from local ports - the British merchant fleet in particular was well known for its diversity.[[21]](#endnote-22) Conversely, a shared aim - at its crudest, survival and being paid at the end of the voyage - ensured a surprising sense of communal solidarity, while issues with language were resolved by the widespread use of English amongst sailors, as well as pidgin dialects and a formal multilingualism that was more common below deck than above, to the extent of some captains having and needing ready access to on-board interpreters.[[22]](#endnote-23)

While disease and malnutrition were still problematic, life at sea was also still surprisingly healthy. From the mid-18th century, conditions and diets on Royal Navy ships were much improved,[[23]](#endnote-24) to the extent that Florence Nightingale would later call for naval hygiene practices, like cleaning one’s clothes on a regular basis, to be adopted by the army.[[24]](#endnote-25) These practises filtered through to the merchant navy, and by Hodgson’s time as a sailor - the 1890s onwards - ships cooks were trained by local County Councils back on the British mainland[[25]](#endnote-26) while conditions for merchant sailors were much improved by better sanitation at ports, food preservation techniques and on-board cooking facilities.[[26]](#endnote-27) Captains and medical officers were also held liable for the maintenance of public and personal health and cleanliness[[27]](#endnote-28) and at times conditions on-board ships were superior to those on dry land.

To understand, then, why *The Ghost Pirates* has such a provocative depiction of life at sea, we must look at Hodgson’s own history and by extension the history of sailing during his career as a sailor. Indeed, Hodgson’s time at sea - as said, between 1891 and 1899 - ran parallel to serious conflict between a resurgent trade union movement such as the Seamen’s Union and the ship-owners’ representative body, the Shipping Federation.

Starting from the mid-1880s onwards, a new, altogether more militant phase in trade unionism took hold in a wide range of industries, including Shipping. This ‘new unionism’ called for both wider inclusion of members, including semi and unskilled labour, while at the same time being more confrontational and unwilling to compromise.[[28]](#endnote-29) The Seamen’s Union, for example, began demanding in 1890 (a year before Hodgson first became a sailor) that not only that all employment of sailors should take place at shipping company offices, rather than informally and on-ship, but that all employees should be obliged to join the union in the first place.[[29]](#endnote-30)

Ranged against them was the Shipping Federation, which both represented the shipping companies and was funded by them.[[30]](#endnote-31) It advocated ‘free labour’ instead of the new unionism, where union membership was not required and labour could be employed (or indeed dismissed) on a casual basis.[[31]](#endnote-32) Here employment was controlled via a ticket system where seamen were allowed to work only if they promised to carry on with their duties regardless of union activity on-board a ship.[[32]](#endnote-33) A far less organised and more atomised workforce was, therefore, the Shipping Federation’s ideal, and it seems personified, with bitter satirical intent, in the form of the *Mortzestus* with its lack of solidarity below deck and a disproportionate balance of power above it.

While public sentiment originally favoured the Seamen’s union, the Shipping Federation not only had more funds at its disposal, but also widespread support from the popular press, which swung the public away from the trade unionists. This reached the extent of an archbishop and other ‘respectable’ members of society volunteering as replacement dockers during a particularly fierce strike in Australia.[[33]](#endnote-34) Violent conflict and strike breaking became the norm during this time, alongside the widespread use of scab labour.[[34]](#endnote-35) Attacked on two fronts and lacking the resources to contest strikes to the full extent required, the unions were defeated after the 1891 Cardiff Dock Strike[[35]](#endnote-36) and a relative ceasefire existed between sailors and employers until 1907, eight years after Hodgson had left his life as a seafarer behind.

Tellingly, the Shipping Federation also prevailed by effective divide and rule tactics, which were especially effective in the closed, isolated environment of ocean-going ships, and where replacement labour was easily obtained from foreign ports.[[36]](#endnote-37) Long established organisations representing ship officers were not only tolerated but even encouraged by ship-owners, as long as they stayed neutral in the conflict between the newer unions and the ship-owners.[[37]](#endnote-38) More traditional trade unionists, who resented the rise of New Unionism and feared its socialism, were also convinced to support the employers versus the new unions.[[38]](#endnote-39) In other words, a division between and among those both above and below deck was deliberately fostered, which did not bode well for the necessary cohesion on-board the ships Hodgson served upon.

With this in mind, it is easy to understand why Hodgson developed his lifelong interest in physical culture, wrestling and boxing after witnessing violence at the hands of a first mate (significant if we remember how the first mate in *The Ghost Pirates* is portrayed), and indeed why he actively encouraged his subordinates to do likewise, despite this being a “sacrifice of much that makes life bearable on board,”[[39]](#endnote-40) which is to say, those few moments of free time a sailor was able to have every day. That Hodgson quit his career even after being promoted to third mate and winning a Royal Humane Society medal for rescuing a fellow seafarer from shark-infested waters in 1897 says a great deal. Dissatisfaction with conditions on-board had called time on a promising career, and it is reasonable to assume that this was less to do with the demands of the job, given his success as a sailor, as the on-board disunity sown in the wake of contemporaneous industrial conflicts.

One reading of the text, then, is as a critique and satire of the sea and its institutions. There is no redemption for the *Mortzestus*; only its destruction, and with it a rejection of 8 years of Hodgson’s life and everything it represented. What gives it its power, however, is the detail and understanding of maritime organisation (albeit defective) and the depiction of ordinary sailors’ lives, dialects and daily duties. Hodgson presents us with a realist depiction of a ship and then uses the fantastic to demonstrate its dysfunction and inability to survive in the face of the unknown and the sea itself. Tellingly, it was not the Royal Navy that Hodgson joined at the start of World War One, where one might surmise he was most suited given his training, but the British Army.

The final text we will examine in this paper is *The Haunted Jarvee*,[[40]](#endnote-41) published posthumously in 1929, and featuring Hodgson’s supernatural investigator, Thomas Carnacki. In this story he is called upon by a friend, a captain of the titular sail ship, who reports what could best be described as a haunting, with the ship followed by four ‘shadows’, and subject to regular storms and what appears to be violent poltergeist activity, which even claims the lives of some of the *Jarvee’s* crew. Using his combination of occult knowledge and modern science (such as the ‘electric pentagram’, an array of vacuum tubes arranged in the shape of a star, which creates a ward around whomsoever sits in its centre), Carnacki investigates the matter and concludes that the ship is subject to “attractive vibrations,” which is to say, it seems particularly vulnerable to supernatural predation.

While the rest of the crew is confined to below deck, Carnacki, the captain and the ship’s three mates either initiate or bear witness to a combination of ritual magic and scientific experiment, where the four shadows are finally manifested as “great” and oscillating “vague mounds”, before the ship itself is almost destroyed in another storm, presumably initiated by these otherworldly things. In a rare defeat, Carnacki is forced to end the experiment, and the *Jarvee* itself is fatally holed, with both Carnacki and the crew forced to abandon ship after a few days. All are rescued, however, and the *Jarvee* is allowed to sink to the bottom of the ocean where “she had better remain for ever.”

Yet if the *Jarvee* is a defeat for Carnacki, it is an even greater defeat for the maritime way of life embodied by the veteran captain and his old fashioned sailing ship. The story is full of technical details that reflect Hodgson’s own first-hand experience, like references to barques, squalls, poop decks and the unusual nature of the ship’s crew: “For every other man in the ship was newly signed on, including the mates which was in itself a significant fact.”

The Captain, meanwhile, is implied to be both highly competent and experienced, as shown by his great concern about the declining reputation of his ship, and how he tries to keep as many of his men out of harm’s way as possible. He is a contrast both to the negligent seamen who abandoned the stranger and his fiancée in *The Voice in the Night* and the rampant discord of the *Mortzestus*, yet his points of reference no longer apply to this situation:

He seemed always to know but when it came to putting his knowledge into words it was as if he found that the reality melted out of it. He would end up usually by saying that you saw things and then he would wave his hands vaguely, but further than that he never seemed able to pass on the knowledge of something strange which he had noticed about the ship, except odd outside details.

The Captain is afraid and out of his depth - lacking the stability granted by the familiar and the world he has become accustomed to in his career as a seaman. Instead, he increasingly loses his nerve, his warning Carnacki that his experiments are “playin' with 'ell” (though he himself has no answers) and finally his begging for the final rubric to be called to a halt when the ship is put at risk - “My God, mister, stop it!” - suggest someone who is no longer in control and is instead relegated to a frightened bystander.

Hodgson does not, however, portray the Captain as either a fool or antagonist. He is simply someone who finds themselves in an utterly alien context that they are ill-equipped to deal with, a recurring theme in much of Hodgson’s maritime horror, such as his *Sargasso Sea* series.[[41]](#endnote-42) Instead, Hodgson is exploring how the limits of our experience challenge and threaten us in the face of the unknown. We are reminded of how Hodgson’s contemporary HG Wells reflected the uncertainties and fragility of the present in the face of both the alien and the future in his science fiction,[[42]](#endnote-43) and where the optimism and progress of the 19th century collided with both the *fin de siècle* and its crisis of confidence in progress, leading up to the First World War and a scepticism towards both society and science that accompanies us to this day.[[43]](#endnote-44) On the other hand, Hodgson’s work also veers into the realm of cosmic horror, where all human endeavour is rendered meaningless in the face of a greater, more primal reality, and an all-powerful, hideous yet perversely sublime horror.[[44]](#endnote-45) As Carnacki himself says at the conclusion of the story, “The vast *unknown* it is vain to speculate upon in a brief chatter like this.”

Despite this, Hodgson quite deliberately makes Carnacki both the one character who understands the true nature of the situation (to a degree), and who directly confronts it, as one might expect from a protagonist. His ritual reveals the true abstract nature of the threat that faces the *Jarvee* and helps bring about its resolution, albeit in the form of the ship being sunk rather than it being exorcised. It is Carnacki the outsider and man with both esoteric knowledge and understanding of modern science who prevails, whereas the seamen, who are meant to be in their element, are unable to deal with the threat that faces them. In this sense, and as with *The Ghost* Pirates, Hodgson was once again critiquing the maritime lifestyle; with its antiquated sails, the *Jarvee* represents a worn out and anachronistic order unable to survive the unknown and the new. Here Hodgson was looking back at his own experiences in disappointment and frustration, manifested as they are by the seasoned yet aged and overwhelmed Captain, still living in the past and unable to affect necessary change without outside help. It was one of many obituaries, sometimes nostalgic in their detail, often bitter in their subtext, which Hodgson wrote for his career as a sailor.

In conclusion then, and as these examples demonstrate, Hodgson was a prolific writer of maritime horror, but also one who recognised the essential ambivalence of the sea and the day-to-day lives of men who worked on it. It is this juxtaposition of mundanity and credibility alongside the horrific and aberrant that gives his work both its power and its authority. It also provided Hodgson himself a means to express his alienation from and even horror towards the sea; here his life’s dream ended and he was only too glad to see it die at the tip of his pen.

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