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**The Heart of the Ocean and Shipwreck Epiphany: Blue Humanities and the Thing Theory in the Titanic**

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**Vipraja Rao**

Independent Researcher (Masters from University of Delhi, India)

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**Abstract:**

James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997) has long invited Marxist readings that emphasize class struggle, yet the film also offers fertile ground for the emerging discourse of the Blue Humanities. Central to this perspective is Steve Mentz's notion of the shipwreck as an ethical provocation, where catastrophe unsettles human assumptions of control over the sea. This essay contrasts the scientific materialism of figures like Brock Lovett who view the ocean as an economic resource to be exploited with the transformation of Rose into an oceanic humanist, who comes to see water as an agent rather than a backdrop. Through Bill Brown's Thing Theory, the *Heart of the Ocean* shifts meaning: from an object of capitalist exchange when owned by Cal, to a thing of memory and rebellion when circulating between Jack and Rose, and finally a ritual sacrifice when returned to the sea. An analysis of the Heart of the Ocean's circulation reflects Rose's transformation from an uninterested aesthete to an active Blue Humanist. By placing Rose's final gesture within the long tradition of maritime offerings, the essay argues that *Titanic* dramatizes the limits of scientific mastery and reframes the ocean's agency as central to humanistic inquiry in the Naufragocene.

**Keywords:** Blue Humanities, Shipwreck, Thing Theory, Naufragocene**Introduction:**

James Cameron's *Titanic* has been under the knife of Marxist critics ever since it was released; the ship itself is portrayed as a microcosm of capitalism where privilege decides comfort, mobility and even survival. The contrast between Caledon with his inherited wealth's entitlement and the precariously vital hard-working Jack sets the former as a villain to any layman, but Rose's character was scavenged by theorists. Her actions of taking the diamond from her fiancé, appropriating Jack's artistic labour, and ultimately surviving as he perished make her appear entitled. Her long life and final dismissal of the salvage crew's effort, discarding the diamond for private sentiment, reaffirm her role as a figure of privilege, masking itself as romance. While this lens explains the class differences in

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the narrative, it erases the effect of the tragedy itself on the psyche of the characters. Viewed solely with the Marxist ideology in mind, Rose remains the same before and after the shipwreck, which flattens the impact. Steve Mentz calls shipwrecks potent ethical provocations on the human relationship with nature; the film has a pattern of immersion and relinquishment, and an analysis of the same situates the sinking as a point of transformation in the perception of the ocean from an exploitable passive to an active component with agency. The diamond Heart of the Ocean does not have a fixed meaning but a relational one in circulation. The name itself is anthropocentric, as it personifies the ocean by suggesting that it has a heart that belongs to humans.

Rose begins as an aesthete approaching the world through beauty and sensations, so the Atlantic for her is a scenic background due to her social status. She is in closer proximity to the scientific thinkers or conquerors of the ocean like Captain Edward Smith and her fiancé Caledon Hockley, who claimed that God himself would not be able to sink the ship. When she is stressed, she tries to use the sea as an escape route by considering suicide; it can be said that the ocean is elevated to the status of a medium of escape but she still does not ascribe any agency to it. The Heart of the Ocean at this time starts holding some symbolism for her rather than just being an expensive piece of jewelry. According to Bill Brown's Thing theory an object is defined by its material value and instrumental capacity but becomes a thing when it exceeds or resists this role, containing memory and effect unrelated to its function and price.

The theory has evolved from Heidegger's object/thing distinction. According to this distinction, an object is an object till it serves our purpose. An object becomes a thing the moment it fails to serve its common function. This is because when an object breaks down, it assumes new ways owing to our suspension of habit associated with it. Thus, a thing is seen more in the light of subject-object relation. (Sandhu 2321)

When Caledon buys the diamond, it is an object that symbolises wealth and authority to him but to Rose it is a thing meaning ownership and bondage. Her act of wearing it while Jack sketches her nude body is her first decisive step of asserting her independence. So the Heart of the Ocean now is a thing holding illegitimate memory and social rebellion. This continues when she leaves the diamond along with the sketch as a souvenir of defiance to confront her fiancé with the evidence of her disloyalty. Later Caledon follows them in imparting new connotations by making it a material signifier of crime by sneaking it into Jack's coat and accusing him of stealing it. In these moments of disruption it becomes apparent that meaning exists in a flux, and one is forced to look through the multiple layers of symbolisms to decipher it.

When it is considered lost, its materiality fades into anonymity but due to the disappearance it acquires a new meaning by becoming a relic of the collective loss associated

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with the Titanic. For the people it signified the vanished world of pre-war aristocracy as the World War began merely two years after the event, the hubris of technological mastery that disregarded nature and the tragic fate of those who perished without a trace. When the salvage crew in the film later discovers the wreckage, the jewel plays with meanings again. To Brock Lovett and his team, the Heart of the Ocean is not a relic heavy with the weight of culture but an acquisition target, an economic opportunity estimated at nearly half a billion dollars or in short an object. When Rose hears about it after eighty-four years, her response to its impressive history and valuation is calling it a "dreadful, heavy thing" (*Titanic* 00:17:29). Their high-tech excavation gear, sonar images, and mechanical arms echo the Titanic's original faith in engineering mastery reflects their mariene scientist outlook.

The ocean is not mystical or powerful for them but a repository of recoverable wealth that has to be overpowered by techniques perfected on land to earn money. Lovett can be seen as an extension of the same epistemology, viewing the sea as a thing that can be mined, measured, and navigated. Rose, in stark contrast, presents herself as someone who has come to occupy a different order of knowledge that the Blue Humanities can articulate. She acknowledges the sea as an active force that shapes and restrains human aspiration rather than as a background. The Titanic's sinking served as a blow to her vantage point forcing her to face the possibility that the ocean might not be a breathing human being but it does have the power to alter their fates. Her position can be termed Naufragocene as termed by Steve Mentz, an era of shipwrecked awareness imposed by the sea that is not particular to the twentieth century but has been contemplated by many before, this inclusion of sociology, psychology and literature in the study of oceans along with geography, chemistry and physics can be called a "Second discovery" (Gillis)

This can explain the film's most controversial act, when she secretly drops the Heart of the Ocean back into the Atlantic and her gesture provokes outrage in the audience which is in general a part of the scientific discourse due to its material consequences. The Heart of the Ocean is valued at nearly half a billion dollars, a sum that if gifted to her granddaughter or shared with the salvage crew would have transformed their lives. The sheer opportunity cost of her action paints her as a villain who feels entitled enough to keep her teenage love's sentimentality above collective benefit especially after having a family. Her action is intended to both honour Jack whose grave is the Ocean but also return what belongs to the ocean like a ritual to avoid such a tragedy for the future generation. It is questionable still that she decided to do so on her whim without consulting others and it is certain that she acts on individual thoughts while soothing her conscience with the idea of collective fortune. Steve Mentz has faced similar criticism for including all citizens in his statements about ocean conservation because not everyone shares these concerns equally.

Yet, there is also a problem with Mentz's conclusion here and it is in the universalised "we" that he uses to frame his closing remarks. This "we" who must prepare

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to be submerged does not take into account the fact that there is *not* a universal human subject insofar as climate change is concerned. (Adkins)

Rose's act is legible only within her alternative school of thought, the diamond has ceased to be a commodity but has instead as a sacrificial thing, this is possible for someone who does not see the sea as a resource but counts it as discourse. She aligns herself with a long cultural tradition of maritime offerings like Agamemnon sacrificed Iphigenia to secure safe passage for the Greeks, his intention was not to kill his daughter but save the hundreds going to war. The decision cannot be expected to be agreed by the group that does not subscribe to the hydrohumanist gaze hence Clytemnestra took her revenge and Rose still suffers but it must be acknowledged as a strong possibility that Rose's sacrifice is a symbolic necessity and a recognition that the sea as the ultimate arbiter. She entrusts the weight of the unsaid part of the story where she kept the diamond with her and the lie of omissions when she did not react to the crew's conversation about it.

Blue humanities scholarship tends to oscillate between rigorous materiality and attention to detail and more expansive or poetic ideas. For literary writers and scholars, the ocean seems especially attractive because of its metaphorical vastness. The great waters represent a principle of narrative fecundity that Salman Rushdie has described as the "sea of stories." The ocean, in Rushdie's formulation, constructs an allegory for literary history and literary culture on a global, connected scale. (Mentz 3)

She is no longer the aesthete who once treated the Atlantic as a backdrop but a subject who has relinquished terrestrial bias. Her journey, both literal and symbolic, is from land to sea, from possession to relinquishment, from objecthood to thinghood, from commodity logic to sacrificial tradition. By ending her narrative with the diamond's descent, she closes the circle of its circulation, binding it to the sea not as an object of wealth but as a permanent thing. James Cameron's *Titanic* is not only a cinematic spectacle but a foundational text for the emerging field of Blue Humanities that counts the sea not only as a science subject but also as a humanities concern. The Atlantic in this film is never merely backdrop; it is a narrative agent whose indifferent power exposes the fragility of human sentimentality. Rose becomes the crucial interpretive figure who bridges scientific and humanistic epistemologies. The metaphorical richness of the sea lies in its ambiguity; its shifting tides, infinite horizons, and hidden depths lend themselves to philosophical, psychoanalytic, and poststructuralist readings. The ocean thus exceeds geography to become a medium of imagination itself. (Gonsalvis 450)

The deleted scene in which Rose allows Lovett to briefly hold the diamond before throwing it into the ocean is especially revealing. Had Cameron retained this moment, the symbolic polarity of the narrative would have been blurred as it would be utopian to expect the crew not to stop Rose from fulfilling her wish and it would not be "a classic tragedy"

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(Parsa 210). A reconciliation of these two ideas would have been confusing and an obviation of an objective correlative of the plot. Ultimately, *Titanic* shows the expansive scope of Blue Humanities by illustrating how oceanic presence permeates genres far beyond explicit maritime literature by showing that the sea is not merely geography but an epistemic force, reshaping memory, value, and ethical frameworks. Rose, as narrator and survivor, embodies this transformation, reminding us that shipwrecks do not simply destroy but also compel new philosophical perceptions.

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