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Essay accompanying creative short story, "Oannes"

Final project for ECL 305 Literature and the Environment: Mermaids (Spring 2023)

Professor Pressman

For my final assignment, I wrote a short story inspired by the numerous readings we explored this semester, which primarily focused on environmental ethics and the human-nature relationship. My story, "Finding Oannes," was mainly inspired by the following quote from William Cronon's "The Trouble with the Wilderness," a text that critically examines the concept of wilderness and its implications for our culture's relationship with the nonhuman world. "we mistake ourselves when we suppose that wilderness can solve our culture's problematic relationships with the nonhuman world, for wilderness is no small part of the problem." The idea of "the wild" being a man-made concept really opened my eyes to the bleak reality that everything humanity touches MUST produce some sort of monetary value. This realization has deeply impacted my understanding of our role in the world, and I came to the conclusion that we, as human beings, have become an invasive species. It made me question the value we place on nature and the extent to which we exploit it for our own gain.

This realization didn't shatter my world or anything like that; I still enjoy camping and hiking with friends. There is still plenty of pleasure to be had in these types of activities, and by no means am I suggesting we should abandon our attachments to the concept of nature - but one thing needs to be made clear: human order does not belong in the natural world. The concept of 'the wild' and its implications have been a recurring theme throughout the semester, and I've grappled with articulating my insights accurately. This struggle continues, but 'Finding Oannes' has provided a fantastic platform for me to delve deeper into this complex and thought-provoking topic.

Thank you all for such a wonderful semester!

In "Finding *Oannes*," I investigate human ambition, exploration, myth, truth, and the effects of these endeavors on nature. The story begins with a detailed description of a world where human civilization has reached a point of stasis on land, with all available resources methodically mapped out and used. This creates the conditions for the formation of a desire for adventure and wonder, prompting humanity to look to the undiscovered depths of the ocean. On this last frontier, the spirit of exploration still appears to be alive. The story also delves into the ethical implications of human exploration and the potential consequences for the natural world.

The majestic vessel Oannes is central to the plot, depicted as a marvel of ivory and gold that represents human intellect and the peak of marine exploration. The protagonist, Captain Jonathan Glanton, exemplifies the spirit of discovery and intellectual quest, similar to legendary heroes such as Einstein and Galileo. Glanton's thorough research and documentation of the ocean's contents illustrate the pursuit of knowledge and the desire to discover hidden truths

about our planet. His character also serves as a reflection of the human ambition and curiosity that drives our exploration of the natural world.

I made an attempt to make the narrator untrustworthy because he is too enamored with the ship and its captain to realize how their exploitation of the sea could be detrimental. Making the ship out of ivory and gold was intended to reflect both the beauty of seeking an understanding of the natural world and the aggressive attitude with which we shape the natural world to work in ways we can comprehend and profit from. The Captain's name, John Glanton, is a reference to the same-named infamous person from the old American West - best known for his merciless exploits as a scalp hunter during battles in the American West, representing a darker side of human desire and conquest.

The story takes a poignant turn when the protagonist discovers Oannes, fifteen years after its departure, sunken on the ocean floor. This finding, combined with the tragic destiny of a mermaid crushed beneath the ship, provides a compelling metaphor for the repercussions of human ambition. The mermaid, once a symbol of mythological wonder, now represents the neglected and shattered portions of nature that we ignore in our never-ending search for knowledge and advancement.

The image of the mermaid trapped beneath Oannes provokes a mixture of awe and grief, emphasizing the fragile balance between human enterprise and its unintended effects on the natural world. The author's undersea picture delivers a profound contemplation on the beauty and sorrow that come with our pursuit of enlightenment.

The narrative's complexity is found in its investigation of human ambition and its consequences on nature and in its depiction of the interaction of myth and reality. The mermaid, a mythological creature, becomes a palpable emblem of the hidden costs of exploration, encouraging readers to consider the impact of their actions on the environment. To summarize, "Finding Oannes" is a thought-provoking investigation of human ambition, exploration, myth, reality, and their effects on nature. The story goes into the depths of human curiosity and the drive for knowledge, pitted against the potential consequences of our persistent pursuit of discovery. The terrible fate of the mermaid beneath Oannes serves as a devastating metaphor for the natural qualities that we neglect and destroy on our voyage of exploration. Finally, the story encourages readers to explore the difficult balance between human advancement and environmental stewardship, demanding a deeper examination of the ethical consequences of our acts in the pursuit of enlightenment.

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