

# Mermaids



ECL 305: Literature and the Environment

Fall 2025. Professor Pressman

Day 11: *Undine*

# ADMIN

- reminder— BLOGS and attendance
- Peer review (Thursday Peer review of thesis statement for Essay 1- bring print out of thesis to class)

- Remember, as you write:
  - Thesis— What you see & Why it matters (the debatable claim)
  - Body paragraphs: close readings that support your claim and develop its implications. **Explication**
  - Avoid generalizations and summary.

# ADMIN

- Grades for Discovery (and blogs and all writing):
- **A=** Post contains a **focused thesis** or question and **close reading** of a passage,
- **B=** Post contains a close reading of content but no focused question or thesis
- **C=** Post contains no analysis of text (no close reading), just summary and undirected ideas
- **D=**Post contains little substantive thinking as content

# Essay 1 Brainstorming thesis

- WHAT + HOW = insight about the text/object
- SO WHAT? Why does this insight and interpretation matter (to our thinking about Lit and the Environment, concepts of “human”, etc.)

# 18th-19th C: Romanticism & Capitalism & Merfolk

- 18th-19th C: industrialization, capitalism, emergence of middle class
- Darwin- evolution and Science (with a capital S)
- Global Empire, colonization
- Slavery & January 1, 1863: Emancipation Proclamation (U.S.)
- 1872: Yellowstone becomes first National Park in U.S.

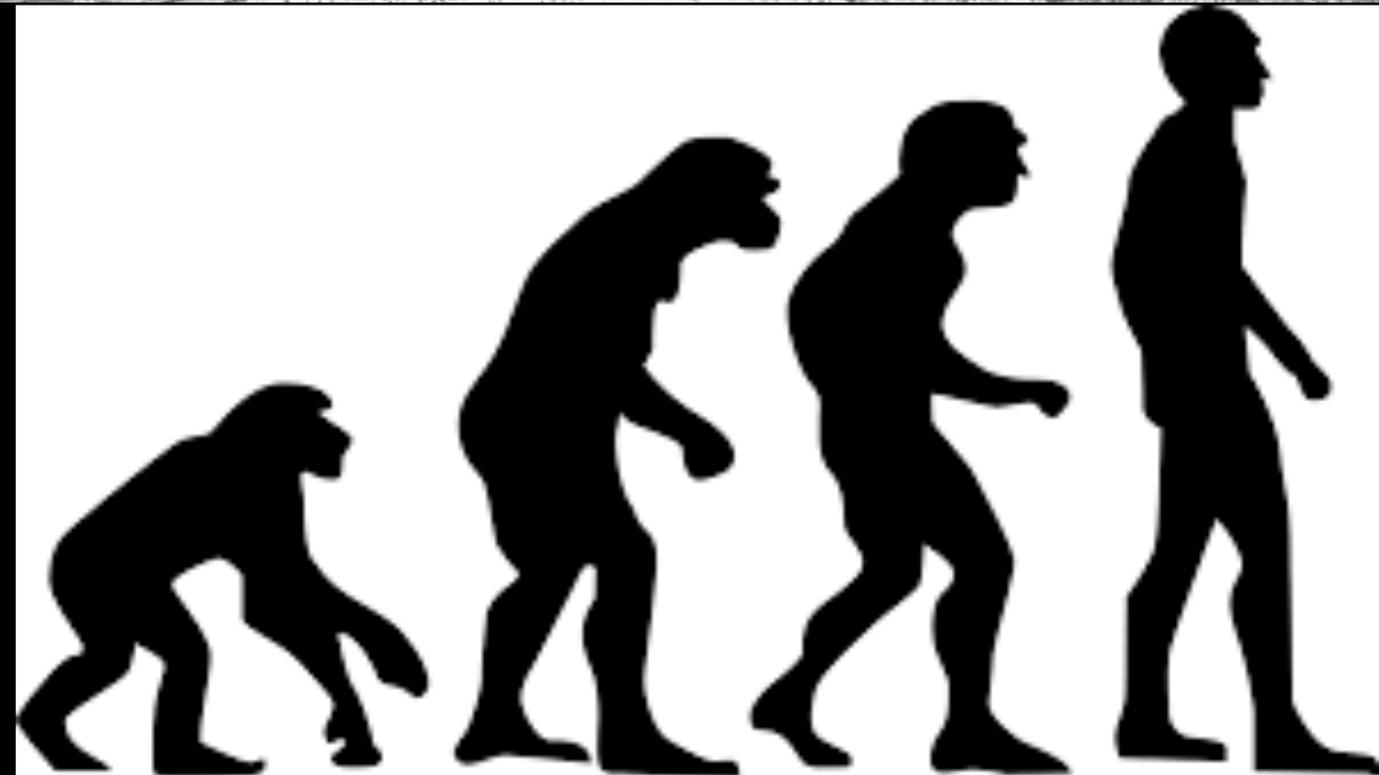
2 distinct phases of 19<sup>th</sup> C Western understanding of merpeople:

- 1) 1800-1822—commoners and philosophers wedded to Enlightenment notions of science and wonder
- 2) 1822-45—Western audiences were primed to believe in mermaids and tritons. The press was key in this cultural craftsmanship (Vaughn Scribner, *Merpeople* 126)

# The Victorian Age (19th C)

## Science & Technology

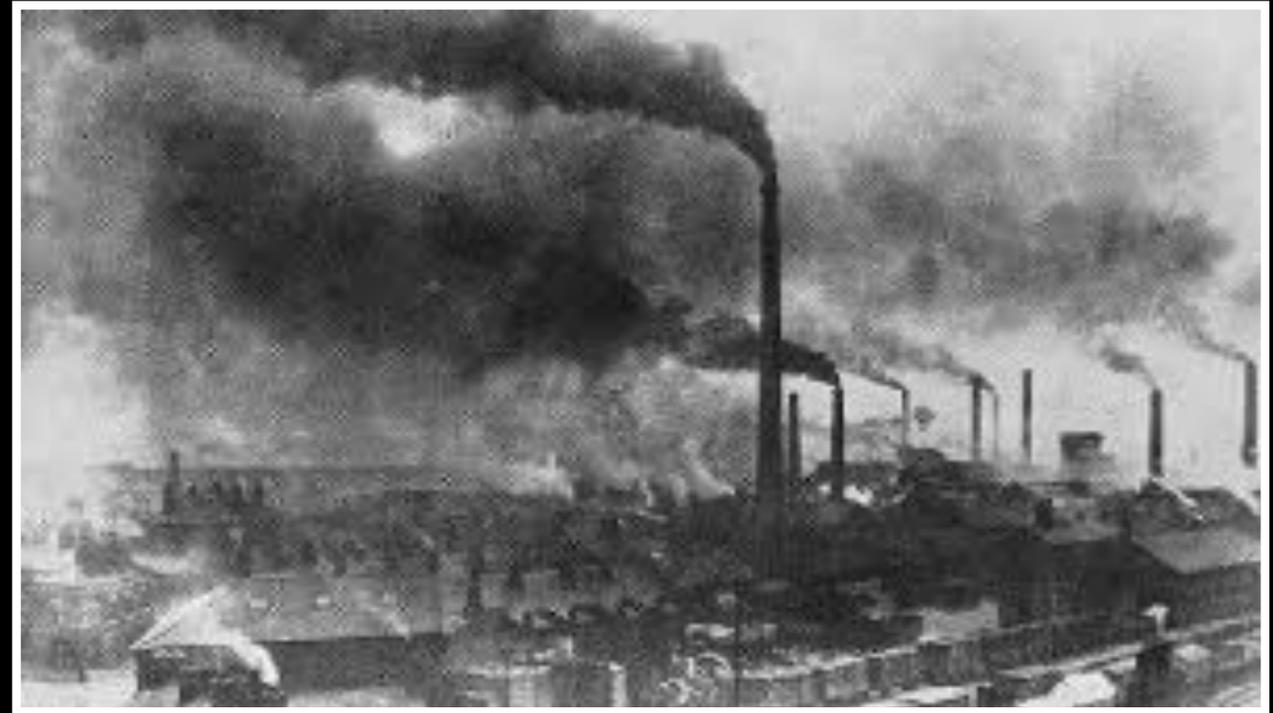
- Darwinism
- Navy
- Trains (steam engine)
- Gas street lights (1816)
- Agriculture: threshing machine
- Books and paper (woodpulp)
- Photography
- The Bicycle
- Phonograph (1877)





# Urbanization

- Growth of cities, slums, segregation based on class
- Lack of urban infrastructure: polluted water, typhus, smog
- Labor conditions: child labor (as young as 5, worked in mines, factories, chimneys, mills, etc.)
- Death rate in city was twice that of country



# Romanticism — new view of the ocean



Caspar Friedrich, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818)



 *Fishermen upon a Lee-Shore, in Squally Weather*. Credit: Southampton City Art Gallery

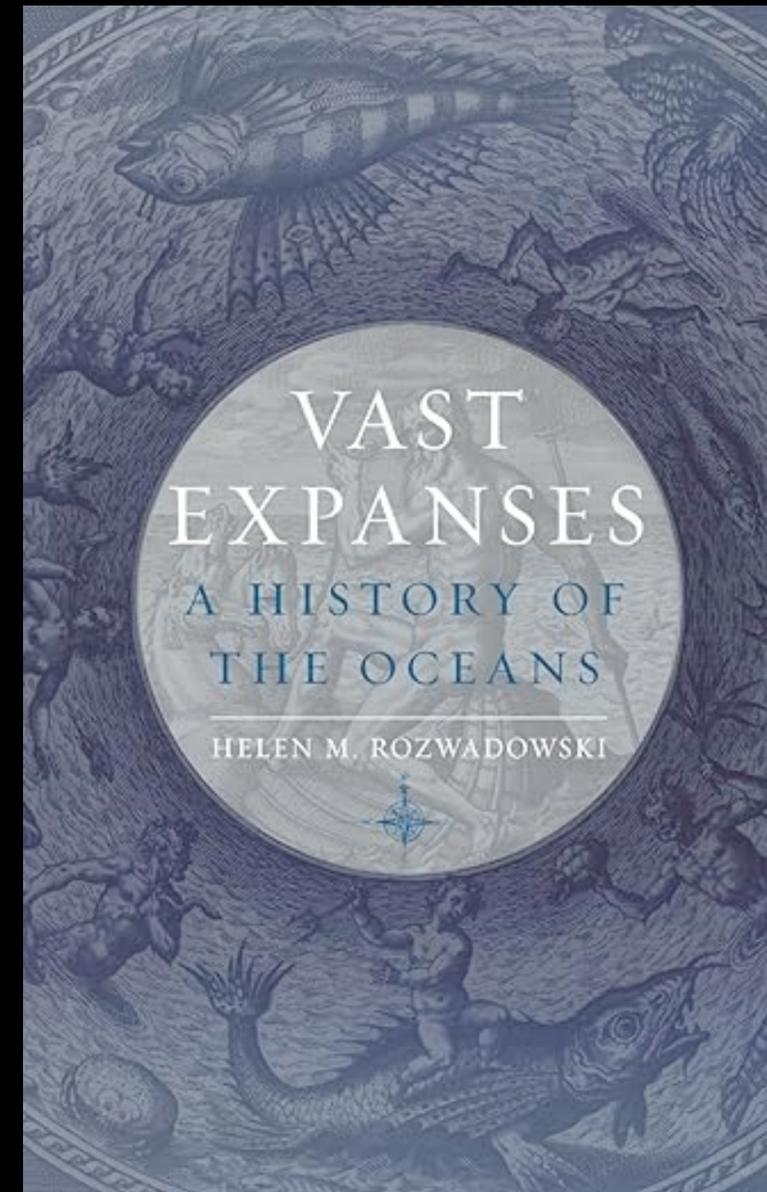
**JMW Turner**

# Changing views of the Ocean

18th- 19th C: “Before its cultural discovery, the seashore was associated with cannibals, mutineers, and shipwreck victims.”

“Romantic artists turned to the shore as an ideal place for reflection, where the correspondence between marine and psychological depths might lead to self-knowledge.” (114)

—Helen M. Rozwadowski, *Vast Expanses: A History of the Oceans* (Reaktion Books, 2018)



# UNDINE: Discussion

- Main points from the reading?
- What do you want to discuss?



Chauncey Bradley Ives, *Undine Rising from the Waters*, ca. 1880–1882.  
Yale University Art Gallery.



John William Waterhouse -  
*Undine* (1872)



Arthur Rackham - *Undine* (1909)

# From your blogs- the soul= superiority

- JENNA: The most important theme of this story is the question of the “soul.” Whether one has a soul or not becomes the standard that decides who can be considered human.
- BOMIN: In the end, I thought this story challenges the traditional Christian idea that a soul is a permanent blessing given by divine grace. In *Undine*, the soul becomes conditional, it must be sustained by loyalty and love, not by God alone. This makes the story less about salvation and more about the instability of human existence.
- SIERRA: *Undine*’s speech to Huldbrand lays the ground for the idea that all beings aspire to have and desire a divine soul, under the notion that moral advancement is dependent on Christian faith.
- MELISSA: In the story of *Undine* there is an undercurrent of belief that humans have superiority over natural elements, based on the assertion that only humans have a soul, unlike nature.

# From your blogs- thesis

- **ASHLEY:** Even though her world is rich with beauty and “far superior to that of other human beings” Undine leaves it behind in search for a soul and an afterlife. She searches for a way to eternity, calling it an “awake to a purer life.” The recurring story of intermarriage is an attempt to sway humanity into a feeling of superiority.

# UNDINE: Discussion

- How is this about the Environment or Natural world?

# From your blogs- nature

- BRYAN: During the section where Undine talks about other spirits like herself, she says, “that there are beings in the elements which almost appear like mortals, and which rarely allow themselves to become visible to your race,” tells how nature—like Undine herself—is often only partially visible and understood. Showing how **humanity is already, even around this time, separating themselves from nature** in a way that didn’t necessarily break their bond. But in a way that lessened their understanding/outlook.
- KAILA: Undine begins her confession by stating her lack of a human soul, “Hence we have also no soul,” demonstrating that elemental beings are naturally separate, but nature itself does not possess them. They are guided by the elemental spirit. There is no definitive ‘bible’ for the elemental way to live; there are no ‘rights’ or ‘wrongs’. They do not have the consciousness to feel guilt or judgment. Undine’s element of water is the giver of her life...**This story of Undines demonstrates the human imbalance and tension within the relationship to the environment. When humans reject what they cannot control, this leads to destruction.** Froqué considers whether humans can live meaningfully with a soul while still honoring and remaining in harmony with the natural world.

# Friedrich de la Mott Fouque, *Undine* (1811)

Begins with an “old worthy fisherman” gathering his nets (5) and a knight lost in the forest, a “forest of extraordinary wildness”

“This mischievous Undine” is the fisherman’s adopted daughter (9)

Undine has no soul; you get a soul by through the “most intimate union of love”= *The Little Mermaid*.

“We and our like in the other elements, vanish into dust, and pass away, body and spirit, so not that a vestige of us remains behind; and when you mortals hereafter awake to a purer life, we remain with the sand and the sparks and the wind and the waves. Hence we also have no souls” (105).

# Take-aways & Questions?