Shipwrecked
Morrison, James

Published by University of Michigan Press

Morrison, James.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/31026
Chapter 10

Shipwreck and the Selling of Paradise

The argument of this book has been that poets and writers use the shipwreck scenario to explore human nature, examine identity, and pursue the possibilities of transformation. The relationship between shipwreck and transformation manifests itself in various ways. For Odysseus, shipwrecks are an obstacle to regaining his former status; for those in The Tempest, shipwrecks present the opportunity to seize power or transform society; for Crusoe, the shipwreck sets the stage for a religious conversion. We have also seen how shipwrecks may lead to freedom for Ariel, Caliban, and Friday. Foe makes clear the survivor’s need to control the shipwreck tale. Yet for all the variety, we have also seen common features in almost every story: storm, despair, divine intervention, rebirth imagery, ignorance and exploration, and the struggle to reestablish civilization and avoid the descent into savagery.

People have voyaged across the open sea for at least forty thousand years. As long as there have been sea journeys, there have been mishaps—and undoubtedly stories told about those misadventures. Historical shipwrecks are surveyed in several books, such as The Mammoth Book of Storms, Shipwrecks, and Sea Disasters and The Tragic History of the Sea. Other well-known historical shipwrecks include those of the sixteenth-century Spanish explorer Núñez Cabeza

1. Diamond (1997) 41 argues that for modern humans to cross from Asia to Australia—even with lower sea levels—they would have had to cross open water of at least fifty miles: “The occupation of Australia/New Guinea [forty to fifty thousand years ago] is momentous in that it demanded watercraft and provides by far the earliest evidence of their use in history.” These early sailors would have had to cross the southern end of the Wallace Line, which is marked by a deep sea trench between Bali and Lombok in present-day Indonesia. Wade (2007) considers whether these voyagers were predominantly a single group.
de Vaca, the story of the lost Gloucester swordfish boat as reconstructed by Junger in *The Perfect Storm*, and the wrecks of the *Titanic* and the *Indianapolis*—to say nothing of recent discoveries made by underwater archaeologists that take us all the way back to the second millennium BCE.²

Literary shipwrecks follow a pattern at odds with actual shipwrecks. In historical shipwrecks, it frequently happens that (a) most or all of the travelers die (as in *The Perfect Storm*), (b) the survivors are saved on the sea, or (c) they make it to shore and are received hospitably by the inhabitants and conveyed to their destination.³ Unlike literary works, it is unusual for actual shipwreck survivors to endure an extended, isolated existence—too often, shipwrecks take place in northern climes where cold, hunger, and injury lead to a quick end. Literary versions are generally set in tropical regions where survival is more credible.⁴ A second feature of actual shipwrecks is that the chain of command from aboard the ship is often maintained. The captain of a vessel retains his authority even on a deserted beach. In contrast, epics, novels, and dramatic treatments often seek to question—if not overthrow—the previous chain of command. Third, actual accounts often focus on the coming of the storm and the conditions that led to the shipwreck, while literary treatments tend to focus on the aftermath once survivors have reached shore.

While this book’s focus has been fictional shipwrecks, we have encountered works that reflect historical shipwrecks in which initiative has been essential for survival, sanity, and any possibility of escape. The survivor must call on a resilience never needed before. In actual practice, survivors may become listless and depressed, unable to summon sufficient energy to adapt to many daunting challenges. Also, considerable bravery is required for someone (like Odysseus or Chuck Noland) who has experienced shipwreck—a near-death experience at sea—to go out alone in an improvised craft and once again face the sea in order to return home.

---


³ For example, Lawrence (2004) 49 reports that when the *Proserpine* was wrecked in the mouth of the Elbe in 1799, “the inhabitants of the village received the strangers with great kindness, and did everything in their power to alleviate their sufferings”; but “the next day, the islanders, unable to resist the temptation of plunder, took to their boats, and made off to the ship, which they ransacked, and carried off all the arms, stores, and provisions of every kind” (54).

⁴ For the desperate situation of cold weather strandings, see the account of a Saint Lawrence River wreck in Lawrence (2004) 59–61.
Our exploration of the historical context of the *Odyssey*, *The Tempest*, and *Robinson Crusoe* has revealed how specific triggers (the Bermuda shipwreck, the marooning of Selkirk) may have stimulated the production of new shipwreck tales. The broader “spirit” of the times—Greek colonization in the eighth century BCE, “New World” voyages, philosophical inquiry, innovative technology, politics in the postcolonial world—also have had a powerful effect on how these stories are reinterpreted. For example, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Locke contemplated “man in a state of nature”; Rousseau argued that humans outside of society avoided corruption; Hobbes implies that once there are two (or more) individuals, conflict inevitably ensues, resulting in “a war of all against all.” The ideas of such political philosophers may well have influenced Defoe and later shipwreck storytellers. In the postcolonial world, there is a great impulse to rewrite the narratives of Homer, Shakespeare, and Defoe as a way of exploring slavery, European colonialism, and political independence. Also, in the last 150 years, technological advances—and science fiction writers—have translated the shipwreck scenario to wrecks on other planets.

The manner in which Homer, Shakespeare, and Defoe have provided models raises complex issues about allusion, adaptation, and competition. How does Homer’s *Odyssey* serve as a model (or foil) for Sophocles’ *Philoctetes* or Luke’s tale of Saint Paul? Does every group shipwreck necessarily recall Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*: *First on Mars* or *Lost* may explicitly recall *Robinson Crusoe* or *Lord of the Flies*, but it is often difficult to claim deliberate imitation when an archetypal situation is presented. Chapter 8 demonstrates that within the novel *Foe*, characters engage in fierce competition as storytellers of shipwreck tales, with a parallel contest “outside” the novel between Defoe and Coetzee.

In this final chapter, before considering the fascination of shipwreck narratives, I would like to raise a contemporary issue, namely, the use of the shipwreck scenario for marketing purposes. Beyond novels, drama, film, and television, another modern appearance of the shipwreck scenario is commercial, what we might call the “selling of paradise.” The name of the Castaways Guest House in Walcott’s play *Pantomime* captures this impulse, for the Caribbean island of Tobago today actually markets itself as Crusoe’s island. As the advertisement reads,

---

5. For a fascinating study of how Melville’s *Moby Dick* grew out of a historical shipwreck, see Philbrick (2000).
Where Robinson Crusoe would have stayed, if he'd had the choice . . . he surely wouldn’t have minded the swimming pool on the terrace either.6

There are also Prospero’s Magic Cave and the restaurant Caliban’s on Bermuda; you may follow the adventures of Odysseus on a Mediterranean tour; South Pacific islands promise a “Pacific paradise” at the most out-of-the-way, isolated place on earth.

In the context of global travel and ecotourism, the shipwreck scenario is activated to attract tourists to these islands. Promotional materials will typically show a deserted beach; if habitation is revealed, it may consist of

6. Copy by Bernhard Grödeloff from the site http://www.caribbean-sun.com/ (this advertisement is no longer posted). There are also Castaways’ Beach Resort in Dominica (Caribbean) and the Odysseus Hotel in Folegandros, an island in the Greek Aegean; Gozo near Malta in the Mediterranean is called “Calypso’s Island”; Crusoe’s Retreat Coral Coast is found in Fiji (South Pacific). S. Jones (2007) notes that as the Polynesians spread across the Pacific, their isolation protected them from contact with disease, yet they became extraordinarily vulnerable to Western infection. The European “discovery of paradise” in the South Pacific resulted almost immediately in ravaging the island population (and in the twentieth century, the islands’ remoteness even led to their selection as testing sites for atomic weapons).
hut-like structures. The most significant omission is that the local people have been photoshopped out of the picture, or if locals are on hand, they are serving visitors drinks with a smile. The implication is that the island is yours—you are monarch of all you survey. The absence of other people does not suggest isolation and the risk of boredom, insanity, or starvation; rather, in today’s marketing, islands without inhabitants offer an escape from the nine-to-five world of work and a chance to reinvent yourself through snorkeling, island dancing, parasailing, and exotic rum drinks. The promotional pitch suggests an odd paradox, promoting the romantic idea of a simple life (a reaction against the materialism and excessive consumption in the modern world), while still promising coddling and luxury.

The claim that islands offer a transformational experience does contain a seed of truth. Although I realize this stretches the meaning of the term shipwreck a bit, it has been argued, from an evolutionary perspective, that plants, animals, and birds isolated on islands evolve into new species due to this protected environment. The most famous example is that of Darwin’s finches on the different islands of the Galapagos. Recent work in biology has demonstrated how ancient birds in southeast Asia spread thousands of miles across the Pacific to the islands of Fiji and Hawaii. It appears that the descendants of these birds—subsequently isolated on remote islands—have evolved into new species, often at a rapid rate. I would not suggest that human fascination with shipwreck and new identities has an evolutionary basis, but when the time scale is altered, arrival in a new environment and subsequent existence in relative isolation may well lead to transformation and a new identity for the species itself. Shipwrecks evoke contemplation of a new sort of existence, for the island becomes a “new world,” where someone may create society anew or adopt a new identity.

An important perspective is also found in Walcott’s criticism of the idea of islands as a sort of paradise. By introducing Golden Age motifs in pivotal scenes of Omeros (1990), Walcott confirms the powerful impulse to idealize

---


8. Filardi and Moyle (2005) remark on oceanic islands’ “isolation and the potential for rapid differentiation” (216). Biologists speak of the “island rule” that stipulates that species on an island grow or shrink in physical size in order to survive; with few nutrients, animals become smaller (Homo floresiensis?); without predators, they may become quite large (such as the Komodo dragon). Kurt Vonnegut’s novel Galapagos (1985) does a remarkable job imagining precisely this sort of transformation for human survivors isolated on the Galapagos. Quammen (1996) 54–55 quotes Charles Lyell: “It seems to me that many species have been created, as it were expressly for each island since they were disconnected and isolated in the sea.”
islands in the Caribbean. He draws on both land and sea paradieses to recall earlier pristine eras, including that of Adam and Eve. Of course, anyone can call an island “paradise,” but the reality may be quite different. In fact, Walcott sets up a counterargument and demonstrates that his island of Saint Lucia is, in many respects, not paradise. The characters in Omeros do not live the life of the gods: they are mortal; suffering is pervasive. As Walcott puts it, “affliction is one theme of this work, this fiction” (28). The leg wound of Philoctetes is traced to his slave ancestors (19); Helen leaves Achille; Plunkett loses his wife to cancer. The island’s past demonstrates that if there ever had been an idyllic past, corruption and suffering have now set in.

Walcott resists this commercial vision in the speech he gave in accepting the 1992 Nobel Prize in Literature. While acknowledging the popular conception, he distinguishes between the marketable mirage (“what is the earthly paradise for our visitors”) and the reality for those who live there.

So many people say they “love the Caribbean,” meaning that someday they plan to return for a visit but could never live there, the usual benign insult of the traveler, the tourist. The Caribbean is not an idyll, not to its natives.

In order to see Ithaca again, Odysseus rejects immortality promised by Calypso; in analogous fashion, Walcott’s Omeros repudiates the idea of an island utopia. As the narrator says at one point, “Only the dead can endure it in paradise” (63). By focusing on the lives of the islanders—fishermen, waitresses, taxi drivers, pig farmers—in Omeros and elsewhere in his work, Walcott overturns the utopian vision of the Caribbean. In tracing four thousand years of shipwreck tales in this book, my ambi-
tion has been to convey to a broad audience the excitement of individual works as well as the dialogue between later and earlier works. A final challenge, however, is to explain the modern resonance of the stories of Homer, Shakespeare, and Defoe. The archetypal scene of a shipwrecked survivor confronting the elements remains a compelling situation that resonates today for a variety of reasons. I will mention three.

First, this book has traced out part of a literary tradition that establishes the link between shipwreck, identity, and transformation. We have seen how Homer, Shakespeare, and Defoe have connected arrival by shipwreck with the assumption of new roles. Indeed, one of the most fascinating features of the shipwreck scenario is the potential to start over, to begin a new life, to reinvent oneself. Crusoe the castaway has come to represent the possibility of a new life.

A second reason for shipwreck tales’ contemporary relevance is an impulse to explore human nature in what amounts to a kind of controlled experiment with limited space, time, resources, and interacting figures. One way to analyze human nature is to strip a situation down to bare essentials and see what happens. Shipwrecked survivors not only find themselves in reduced circumstances with respect to food and livelihood; there are interactions between individuals who may not know one another and are forced to coexist or perish. Part of our fascination arises from contemplating survivors’ responses as they seek to reestablish their lives and social relationships.¹²

A third possible explanation for the perennial fascination for shipwreck stories is aesthetic. There is something about the ocean, the tide, the rhythm of the waves, and the isolation of a lonely beach that evokes a powerful reaction that has inspired writers, dramatists, and artists.¹³ The idea of “man in a state of nature” has captivated great authors and thinkers, beginning with Sophocles in his play Philoctetes. But a person may be isolated in a variety

---

¹² The premise of BBC’s Desert Island Discs is that someone must choose music that is essential for an isolated existence like that of Crusoe. In a 1942 survey, University of Chicago students were asked who they would most like to be stranded with on a desert island. Their answer was Madeleine Carroll (famous from Hitchcock’s The 39 Steps). When she was asked who she would like to be shipwrecked with, Carroll answered, “A good gynecologist!”

¹³ Palm trees are part of the isolated beach scene. In her essay “On Beauty and Being Just,” Scarry (1999) considers the palm tree as an example of beauty (16) and notes the special effects of sun and shadow: “The signature of a palm is its striped light. Palm leaves stripe the light. The dyadic alternations of leaf and air make the frond shimmer and move, even when it stays still, and if there is an actual breeze, then the stripings whip around without ever losing their perfect alignment across the full sequence” (34). A subliminal effect of such trees seems to be an accentuation of wind, light, and movement.
of ways: in a desert, on a mountaintop, deep in a forest or jungle. The shipwreck scenario on a seagirt island is somehow different.

The lonely beach suggests a sense of renewal and starting over. Each day, the tide comes in and washes the sand clean: each morning begins fresh. Such a scene is continually revived by the elements of sea, tide, wind, and waves—indeed, the rhythm of waves may be heard as a replication of the human heartbeat, the meter of all human existence. Walcott speaks of the sense in which the Caribbean resembles Eden; the islander lives like Adam in a new world.

I can still remember the tremendous elation I had at eighteen just standing on a little hill somewhere and looking around at the sea and the sky and the town, knowing that nobody had really written about this. It was exhilarating to know that I was privileged to be the first one to put down the name of a certain town, or fisherman, or road—a privilege very few writers ever have. . . The fact is, the beauty is overwhelming, it really is. It’s not a used beauty, there are no houses there; it’s not a known beauty, and so the privilege of just looking at these places and seeing their totally uncorrupted existence remains an Adamic experience. Looking across at the mountains, or walking on a beach that is really deserted on an early morning, you can’t avoid the feeling that this is a new world.14

Isolated land, surrounded by water, evokes a new world of possibility.

In Walcott’s Omeros, the sea itself appears to have a redemptive power, a capacity to wash away the suffering of the past and cleanse the crimes and pain of history. Achille thinks

of the stitched, sutured wound that Philoctete was given by the sea, but how the sea could heal the wound. (242)

If anything has the power to redeem the people of Saint Lucia, it is the sea, due partly to amnesia.

The ocean had no memory of the wanderings of Gilgamesh,

or whose sword severed whose head in the *Iliad*.  
*It was an epic where every line was erased*

*yet freshly written in the sheets of exploding surf*  
in that blind violence with which *one crest replaced another* with a trench and that heart-heaving sough  

begun in Guinea to fountain exhaustion here,  
however one read it, not as our defeat or our victory; *it drenched every survivor*  

*with blessing*. It never altered its metre  
to suit the age, a wide page without metaphors.  
Our last resort as much as yours, Omeros.  

(295–96, my italics)

The ocean has no memory of ancient epic.15 Each epic line of the ocean—that is, the crest of one wave replacing another—is “erased // yet freshly written.” Like lines of verse, the ocean drives wave after wave upon the island’s beach, offering a baptism of sorts: to the characters in *Omeros*, it offers renewal; to each survivor, blessing (as claimed in the passage just quoted).16

The ocean is a dangerous, uncontrollable force, yet it also functions as a source of renewal. Emerging from the sea constitutes a cleansing, a kind of baptism, that leads to a new outlook on future possibilities. In literature—and perhaps in life—the sea’s lack of predictability promotes the contemplation of multiple resolutions. Each morning, the tide washes the beach of what was there yesterday. Each wave cleanses and removes, but it also deposits driftwood, seaweed, supplies (as in *Robinson Crusoe* or *Cast Away*), and even survivors themselves. In speaking about the importance of wind and surf, Walcott contemplates “images of erasure.”

To me there are always images of erasure in the Caribbean—in the surf which continually wipes the sand clear, in the fact that those

---

15. Elsewhere, Walcott refers to the “white, amnesiac Atlantic” (61).
16. To the narrator of *Omeros*, the sea offers inspiration. In encountering the spirit of the poet Homer—*Omeros* in Modern Greek—the narrator says that “your voice in that sea” has allowed him to become “the freshest of all your readers” (283). D’Aguiar (1992–93) 74 argues that “for Walcott the Caribbean artist is closer to Adam than Christ; an analogy circumscribed by the poet’s view of the Caribbean as a ‘New World’ situation”; cf. Collier (1993) 91.
huge clouds change so quickly. There is a continual sense of motion in the Caribbean.\(^\text{17}\)

Each new day is announced by the clean slate of a washed beach, suggesting the possibility of redefinition. Walcott speaks of “the Caribbean Sea, whose smell is the smell of refreshing possibility as well as survival.”\(^\text{18}\) The image of waves breaking on a beach is inextricably associated with erasing the past and its complement: a new beginning. As Walcott says, “the surf which continually wipes the sand clean” makes possible the “Adamic” experience in the Caribbean. Each day, the cycle of renewal starts again. In Greece, Bermuda, Tobago, Saint Lucia, and the islands of the South Pacific, an island beach evokes both the danger of the sea—the threat of shipwreck—and the promise of a new day bringing infinite possibilities.

\(^{17}\) Walcott in Hirsch (1986) 214. Walcott (1997) 237 also comments, “The Caribbean writer wakes up every morning to a sense of complete erasure. There is no continuity. There is nothing to look at to confirm time.”

\(^{18}\) Walcott (1993a) 264.