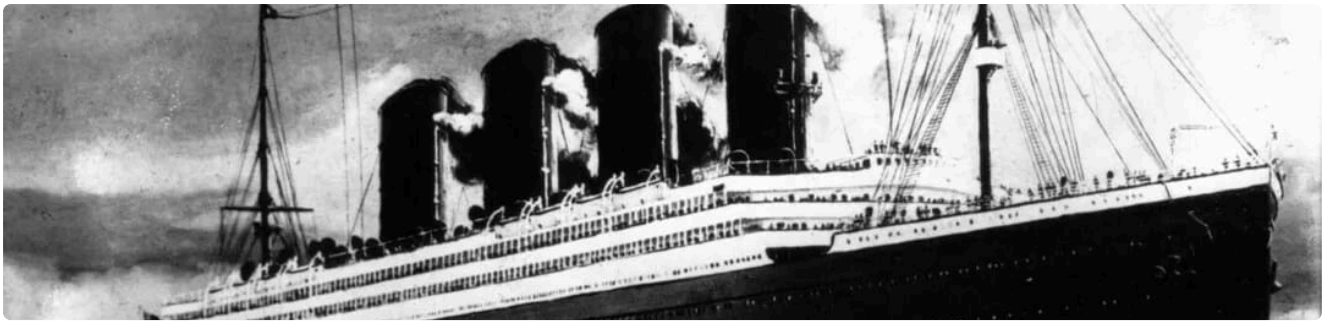
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Disaster and Progress in Cultural Representations of the Titanic

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This essay traces the cultural legacy of the Titanic disaster in 1912 in literature, art, cinema, and music.

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The history of transatlantic colonisation, exchange, and migration is often also the history of named ships: Columbus's *Santa María*; the Pilgrim Fathers' *Mayflower*; *La Amistad* standing in for countless slave ships that ploughed the sea routes between Africa, Europe and the Americas; ships that tell stories of exile,

and escape such as the *MS St Louis* which charted an ill-fated odyssey of Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany through the Caribbean in 1939, or the *HMT Empire Windrush*, which transported about 500 Jamaican immigrants to post-war Britain in 1948, creating the "Windrush generation."

Even among iconic ships like these, the Olympic-class Ocean liner *RMS Titanic* occupies a special place, engendering a degree of recognition across generations that few other famous ships can claim. *Titanic* was the largest ship of its time, hailed after its launch in Belfast for its advancements in speed and engineering, and, prematurely, declared "unsinkable". Yet after it left the port of Southampton on the 10th of April 1912, on its maiden trans-Atlantic voyage to New York, it only took five days for the ship to sink after a collision with an iceberg, causing the loss of 1500 lives.

Ever since this event, the story of *Titanic* has been retold in a range of different media and art forms. The name itself has entered vernacular language signifying a disaster on an epic scale. The universal and timeless qualities of the story are familiar enough from other mythic narratives: the opposition of human hubris and fallibility with nature and destiny, or the potential for heroism in the face of tragedy that surfaces in the anecdotes of men relinquishing their seats in the lifeboats to women and children, of the ship captain's calm and stoic demeanour, or in the possibly apocryphal playing of the Christian hymn "Nearer My God to Thee" by the ship's musicians as the boat was sinking.

Titanic has been perceived as signalling a break between the Victorian period and the 20th century. It is seen to symbolise an end to an age of hierarchies and certainties, and it prefigures the disasters and global conflicts in subsequent decades, as well as, eventually, the end of colonial empires. At the same time, the story can also be told as a parable of survival and progress, promising a new, egalitarian world emerging out of chaos and death.

As with other myths, the story has managed to elicit localised interpretations and responses, tapping into culturally and historically specific concerns, aspirations, and motivations. Unsurprisingly, the most prolific engagements can be found in the two countries directly affected by the disaster, the UK and the US. In some places, the effect was existential. In Southampton, where most of the crew originated, over 500 local homes lost at least one family member. In the first months after the event, grief and shock intermingled with anger over perceived incompetence and corporate greed and recklessness. Thomas Hardy's poem "The Convergence of the Twain" (1912) imagined the ship "in a solitude of the sea, deep from human vanity and the Pride of Life that planned her." Other prominent authors, including Joseph Conrad, George Bernard Shaw, and Virginia Woolf reflected on the disaster in essays, diaries, and letters, expressing outrage, disbelief, and dread.

In the United States, as historian Steven Biel documented in a formidable collection of *Titanic*-related texts and ephemera, the moral lessons of the *Titanic* became often associated in a racially inflected public discourse about the chivalry of the male Anglo-Saxon passengers whose innate bravery was contrasted with the alleged disorderly behaviour of other immigrant, non-white, travellers on board. Moreover, over the years, retellings of the story began to emphasise its potential for perseverance in the face of adversity, as in the 1938 *Titanic*-themed blues song "Down with the Old Canoe" [1] thatbut Jesus Christ can take you safely through; just obey his great command, know for sure you'll save the land, you'll never go down with that old canoe." In a similar vein, albeit shifting the focus from male chivalry to female emancipation, the arguably most famous American *Titanic* passenger became the survivor Margaret Brown (1867-1932), whose biography earned her the epithet as the "unsinkable Molly Brown" and formed the basis of a stage musical and film adaptation.

The first film adaptations of the *Titanic* story in fact emerged mere months after the actual sinking: in the US (*Saved From the Titanic*, starring real-life survivor, the actress Dorothy Gibson), Germany (*In Night and Ice*, directed by the Romanian Mime Misu) and France (*La Hantise*, directed by Louis Feuillade).



Advertisement for the 1912 film *Saved from the Titanic*

Source: IMDb

Equally quickly off the ground were some novelisations in countries including Sweden and Finland. As in the UK and US, prominent cultural figures in Continental Europe commented on the disaster, where the discourse often carried undertones of suspicion towards the growing influence of American modernity and popular culture and the threat posed by the new to the old world and its cultural traditions and values, but there was also an acknowledgment of the utopian promise that America offered. Thus, the *Titanic* found distinct, if sometimes camouflaged echoes in the literary works of Franz Kafka and Thomas Mann (and decades later Hans-Magnus Enzensberger), while being more explicitly addressed in the painting *The Sinking of the Titanic* (1912) by expressionist artist Max Beckmann.



The Sinking of the Titanic by Max Beckmann, 1912-1913

Source: Saint Louis Art Museum, bequest of Morton D. May

The *Titanic*'s transnational appeal was reinforced in *Atlantic* (1929), one of the first pan-European sound films, which was shot in three different language versions: English, French, and German. A very different approach was taken by the authorities in Nazi Germany during World War II in commissioning a *Titanic* film that was designed to stoke anti-British resentment. The end result in 1943 didn't quite achieve its brief. By the time of the film's completion, most German audiences had become only too aware of the parallels between the doomed fate of the *Titanic*'s passengers, and their own country's trajectory in the war.

In the 1950s, interest in the *Titanic* was reignited by Walter Lord's non-fiction bestseller *A Night To Remember* (1955), a factual account of the disaster and its aftermath that tried to disentangle myth from reality, and which was adapted into a British film version in 1958. By contrast, James Cameron's 1997 Hollywood blockbuster returned to the story's mythical qualities, and by adding star-crossed eternal love, survival, as well as female emancipation and personal reinvention, while also investing in the spectacular aspects of the narrative, he managed to provide a perfect formula to recalibrate the *Titanic* story for a new generation.

La Femme de chambre du Titanic (1997) by Spanish director Bigas Luna, in turn reimagined the story from the perspective of a worker who witnessed the departure of the famous ship, starting a life-long romantic fantasy about one of the ship's passengers.



Titanic by James Cameron, 1997

Source: IMDb



La camarera del Titanic by Bigas Luna, 1997

Source: IMDb

The 2000s saw a series of Italian animated films, where some of the ship's passengers are substituted by anthropomorphic animals. And in the Hollywood production *Titanic II* (2010) a newly launched successor of the old ship in the present faces the same destiny as the original ship, but now as a result of global warming.

Having passed the centenary anniversary of its sinking in 2012, *Titanic* continues to generate adaptations across national divides, and across a plethora of different media, from television and video games to musical compositions (classical, experimental, and popular) and novelisations that span genres such as romance, Science Fiction, and murder mysteries. Still navigating the depths of interpretations between representing disaster or progress, the ship's story has unmoored itself from the realities of its origins and has entered the open waters of true myth.

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NOTES

1 "Down with the Old Canoe," *Bluebird*, 25 January 1938 (B-7449).