

EXTENDED ESSAY

SUBJECT: ENGLISH B

CATEGORY 3 - LITERATURE

Topic:

The portrayal of 18th century naval culture in the Aubrey-Maturin novels

Research Question:

How does Patrick O'Brian use symbolism in *Master and Commander* to portray eighteenth century naval culture?

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A) Introduction

In Patrick O'Brian's *Master and Commander*, Captain Jack Aubrey is a new captain on the British warship HMS *Sophie*, working with his close friend Stephen Maturin, the ship's new surgeon. While most of the novel focuses on the habits and routines of eighteenth-century life at sea, O'Brian transforms the novel from a simple historical account into a story capturing the social and psychological conditions that the people who live, and serve at sea on a ship experience with several literary devices, including symbolism.

The novel takes place in 1800 during the Napoleonic Wars. In this period, the sea was not just a combat theatre, but also a place where loyalty, power and survival were very important. For sailors, life at sea was filled with hardship. Sailors had to accept cramped conditions, disease, poor food, pay, and bad weather (Royal Museums Greenwich). Despite such difficulties, Royal Navy ships managed to function using strong discipline and strict schedules, developing a unique culture in the process, many of which are symbols in *Master and Commander*. Patrick O'Brian utilises these symbols to strengthen the language of the novel, and convey the naval culture to readers of a period more than 200 years ago.

This essay will analyse how O'Brian uses symbolism in *Master and Commander* to portray the sea, naval hierarchy and moral dilemmas to convey the unique naval culture of the eighteenth century. It will argue that O'Brian does more than just recreate history. Through the symbolism of characters and objects, he gives a greater understanding of the social forces that governed life aboard the *HMS Sophie*.

B) Symbolism

Symbolism is a literary device in which objects, characters or actions are used to convey deeper meanings than their literal definitions. Symbols help writers show vague thoughts, feelings or ideas indirectly. As explained by Hans-Georg Gadamer, a symbol “does not simply point toward a meaning, but rather allows that meaning to present itself” (Gadamer 34). By communicating ideas that would otherwise be too direct or simple, symbols add depth that can create deeper interpretations. This makes symbolism an essential part of the analysis of how a writer has used the work to convey a general meaning.

In historical fiction, symbols are often used to show how individuals are affected by the societies they live in. Symbols can be used to show how strict rules, customs, or expectations can have a great impact on a person's life. In the novel *Master and Commander*, such impacts are especially clear as naval military life is based on orders, ranks and centuries-old traditions. Author Patrick O'Brian uses objects, settings and characters as symbols to examine naval culture's various aspects, ranging from its rigid hierarchy to complex loyalties in the eighteenth century.

C) The Symbolism of Hierarchy, Isolation and Exclusion

During the Age of Sail, sailors on ships like *HMS Sophie* would often be at sea for weeks or months, and even years in some occasions (Royal Mint Museum). To maintain order during such prolonged periods of isolation, the Royal Navy relied on a highly structured hierarchy where everyone's role was clearly defined. These conditions symbolically reflect the harsh conditions of the sea, where obedience, endurance and loyalty are vital. Historian N.A.M. Rodger writes in *The Wooden World* that a warship was “a microcosm of society with a manifold division of ranks and ratings, of social class and status, of skills and profession” (Rodger 29). This system, which represents both the way life is organised on a ship and the mental walls that separate people within it, becomes an important part of the novel.

The Symbolism of Command and Distance – Captain Aubrey's Glass Bell

As soon as Captain Aubrey steps foot on *HMS Sophie*, O'Brian clearly shows how hierarchy affects people's minds. He feels cut off from the rest of the crew immediately after his promotion to Captain: “he realised the nature of this feeling. He was no longer one of ‘us’, he was one of ‘they’” (O'Brian 25), after which the author introduces the symbol of this transition “He had been surrounded with deference... it had surrounded him like a glass bell, quite shutting him off from the ship's company.” (O'Brian 25). This glass bell turns into a strong symbol of Aubrey's isolation as *Sophie's* captain. He is visible, but isolated from all other crew. Being a captain requires commanding with authority and respect, but also emotional detachment. The other crew members feel close to each other as they share the same conditions and difficulties unlike Captain Aubrey, who has a private room on the ship, contributing to his isolation. Yet, Aubrey thinks “It is the price that has to be paid” as he remembers how much he had wanted to be captain upon realising leadership requires authority and isolation. This was physically reinforced by naval custom on the quarterdeck, a space where the Captain walked alone to maintain a “necessary social distance” from his subordinates (Royal Museums Greenwich).

Captain Aubrey's isolation within the power of his own authority is directly supported by this depicted tradition.

Aubrey's isolation is not temporary, it is a defining part of his identity as a captain. He is the greatest authority in the HMS *Sophie's* crew, but he is also the loneliest person on the ship. Aubrey is a character that has been written as the complete opposite of the other characters that have similar ranks and are able to hold companionship; he is transparent yet untouchable, as understood by the crew on the other side of the social barrier being described as "mere phantasmata" (O'Brian 108), figures who are physically near him, but socially non-existent. His friendship with ship's surgeon, Stephen Maturin temporarily breaks this social barrier, offering him a connection that is not affected by hierarchy. This is seen when Maturin and Aubrey play music together, making the captain briefly feel like a part of the "us" again, a real man rather than a simple rank. Yet, this also reinforces the discussed symbol: the glass bell may go temporarily, but it always comes back again and encloses Aubrey in the strict discipline required by his position to command a warship.

Stephen Maturin, an Outsider to Naval Hierarchy

In the novel, *HMS Sophie's* surgeon Stephen Maturin serves as an outsider whose presence allows O'Brian to explore the meaning and consequences of naval hierarchy from an external perspective. Unlike the crew, Maturin is not a sailor but a physician and philosopher who comes aboard the ship through his friendship with Captain Aubrey. As Wayne Glausser argues, O'Brian gives Maturin "a consistent and historically well-grounded approach to natural philosophy" based on Enlightenment ideals of reasoning and scepticism rather than unquestioned obedience" (Glausser 70). Through Maturin's eyes, the reader experiences the strangeness of life at sea and its intense discipline. Frank M. Snyder points out that Maturin helps the reader to learn the rules of the Royal Navy, as his conversations with Aubrey "bristle with discovery and insight" (Snyder 128) regarding naval life.

The cultural gap between the sailors and Maturin is clearest when he first wakes up on *HMS Sophie*, evident from the fact that the events that are simple daily routine for sailors are overwhelming for him. The description of his initial thoughts, such as “the unnatural wailing” and “strange arbitrary intervals” of the ship are signs that these natural features feel like “pandemonium” (O’Brian 76). This establishes Maturin as an alien to the routine chaos of naval life, a system that is efficient to the crew yet unnatural to an outsider like Maturin. As a scientist who values individual reasoning over automatic compliance with rank, he views the hierarchy as a structure that shows the extent to which naval discipline is forced upon individuals. Naval hierarchy does not seem like a natural order to Maturin. It seems more like a system that changes people’s identities for a collective function.

Maturin has difficulties understanding the nautical language as he gets used to life on *HMS Sophie*. The surgeon is confused by midshipman Mowett’s explanation of the sails and rigging while touring the ship, saying “You could not explain this maze of ropes and wood and canvas without using sea terms... it would not be possible” (O’Brian 76). In this interaction, O’Brian clearly uses language as a symbol of exclusion. Jon Harold Brunvand finds this language barrier ironic, as Maturin is “a vastly learned man” capable of speaking multiple languages, but he “remains woefully ignorant of the customs and jargon of the sea” (Brunvand 152-153). For sailors, this unique language is a sign of connection that sets them apart from outsiders like Maturin. For the surgeon, the ship is foreign not only because of its the rules and customs, but also because of the language used to exclude strangers to naval hierarchy.

As Maturin is written as the outsider inside *HMS Sophie*, the reader is able to question whether the hierarchical system, no matter how important it is for survival, destroys individuality. While Aubrey thrives under this

system which paved his way to become captain, Maturin often thinks about the cost of this discipline, claiming man as part of “a movement or crowd” is “inhuman”, and that his only loyalty is to “private persons”. As pointed out by Snyder, O’Brian is interested in “human relationships intensified by the reduced dimensions of the small, close, shipboard society” (Snyder 131), a setting which makes interpersonal tensions unavoidable. Maturin’s criticism of harsh punishments is a way for O’Brian to express his disapproval with eighteenth-century naval culture’s practices. Through him, O’Brian expresses that authority, though vital to survive at sea, risks turning men into tools, rather than individuals. Thus, Maturin is not just a character, but also a symbol of the moral limits of the ship.

D) The Sea as a Symbolic Paradox

In *Master and Commander*, the sea is much more than a physical setting, it is the symbol of natural power defining eighteenth-century naval culture. For sailors, the sea was not only a workplace, but also a constant force that shaped their identities, determined their fates and tested their endurance against a natural environment they could never truly control. As described by Frank M. Snyder, an aspect of the series that dominates the reader’s attention is “the weather, in its many and varied moods” (Snyder 131). Because ships of this era were “completely dependent on the skilful harnessing of wind and tide,” the sea represents the ultimate authority that governed life in a warship. It was capable of granting calm or unleashing swift destruction without warning. Through detailed descriptions of the ocean and its different moods through lines like “the glassy surface of the heaving sea” (O’Brian 139), author O’Brian portrays the sea as a living presence that controls the psychological and moral situation of the crew.

The Sea as an Uncontrollable, Violent Force

O'Brian frequently presents the sea as a symbol of raw and uncontrollable power, representing the unpredictability of fate and life aboard a warship. During a heavy gale, he describes how "the seas mounted higher and higher: they were not the height of the great Atlantic rollers, but they were steeper, and in a way more wicked" (O'Brian 139). O'Brian's use of visual imagery in this passage turns the sea from just a setting to an adversary that attacks the ship's structure and the morale of the crew. Throughout the novel, the sea is a symbol of power that the sailors are subjected to which cannot be beaten, no matter their discipline and training. When the sea's natural force confronts the hierarchy of the navy, its system with orders and gunnery drills breaks down. This is supported by Rodger, who states that "even the best ships were at the mercy of wind and current" (Rodger 46) in this era. Thus, the sea symbolizes a challenge that does not depend on naval rank or skill. There is no way to beat the sea; the only meaningful objective is to try to survive.

The sea's symbolism of violence is amplified by the way it shows how little people can control and dominate nature's great force. For the sailors on HMS *Sophie*, the system of strict schedules and discipline has the function of protecting them from the dangers of the sea. However, the weaknesses of such a system are exposed when the sea refuses to accept these limits. O'Brian shows this breakdown while describing the ship's return to port with "her timbers all crazy and half the ship's company pumping for dear life" (O'Brian 66-67). According to this extract, the sea has weakened the ship's structure, and by extension, the naval system as a whole. The fact that the ship nearly collapsed despite the crew working "the livelong day... with never a pause" (O'Brian 67) proves even the most disciplined sailors are unable to overcome the force of the sea. In this extract, the identities of the crew are threatened, and their ability of cooperating together to keep the *Sophie* afloat is tested. The power of the sea shows naval culture, with all its discipline and order, is not based on dominating nature, but on submission and adapting to changing circumstances. Thus, the symbolises both nature's unpredictability, and the difficulty of facing the uncontrollable.

The Sea as a Source of Beauty and Calm

Despite its role as a violent force, the sea in *Master and Commander* also offers beauty and calm that greatly contrasts with the characters' lives on land. Before receiving command of the *Sophie*, Aubrey is described on land as "profoundly dissatisfied" despite the "velvet softness of the April night and the 'host of stars hanging so low almost to touch the palms'" (O'Brian 5). However, once he is at sea onboard the *Sophie*, the atmosphere's beauty becomes a source of relief for him. This shift is described with the sea having a "nacreous light" that gives the ship's topsails "the lustre of grey pears" (O'Brian 72). Previously, the ocean was a force that threatened the ship, but now it is a place of beauty where the "sound of the creaking blocks" and the "angle of the living deck" sends a "jet of happiness" through Aubrey's heart (O'Brian 72). For Aubrey, the calm sea thus symbolises hope and a sense of belonging that he could not find on land.

In this double symbolic role, the sea becomes the site where identities are both formed and challenged. When the sea is calm, it gives sailors time to rest and build connections with each other. For example, Aubrey and Maturin use the calm sea's isolation to play music together, an activity which gives the captain "tearing high spirits" (O'Brian 168) as both try to strengthen a friendship which would be impossible on land due to naval hierarchy demanding a distance between a captain and a surgeon. Still, the sea's captivating beauty never lets the sailors forget how dangerous it is, creating a contrast which brings out the tension at the heart of naval culture. The Crown's ideals of service, discipline and loyalty make sense when the sailors are in the sea that can both provide peace and destroy their ship. As Captain Aubrey states, "There is no telling, at sea" (O'Brian 187), emphasizing that what will happen next cannot be foreseen. O'Brian wrote the calm moments at sea to show the vulnerability and connection of the figures. Such moments stress that naval culture is in a setting that decides the crew's fate in the end. While Aubrey manages to succeed and find a purpose at a setting as unpredictable as the sea, the isolation constantly reminds him and the sailors of how fragile their safety truly

is. Overall, the sea is beautiful only temporarily. For everyone in the *Sophie*, it is still the great force that constantly controls their lives.

E) James Dillon: The Symbol of Divided Loyalty

In *Master and Commander*, O'Brian uses James Dillon as a symbol of the moral conflict within a Navy valuing hierarchy and loyalty to the Crown, even when an individual has different origins. Dillon's role as an Irish-Catholic officer who served under the British flag after the bloody Irish Rebellion of 1798 strengthens his symbolism of the conflict between duty and heritage. By including a figure divided between national identity and duty to an empire that oppressed his homeland, O'Brian shows the division of identity. Through Dillon's character, the author shows how naval discipline forces an officer to put his orders ahead of his own deeply held beliefs.

The inner conflict Dillon struggles with throughout the novel is most clearly portrayed during the *Sophie*'s pursuit of the American ship *John B. Christopher*, a vessel believed to be carrying members of the United Irishmen. The members of this organisation, who were hunted down and killed after the failed Irish rebellion, included Dillon in the past despite his service to the Crown. Thus, he tries "everything possible, short of downright mutiny or sinking the *Sophie*, to avoid the *John B. Christopher*" (O'Brian 223), especially as he knows Father Mangan, an Irish rebel leader is on board the American ship. As an effort, Dillon directly disobeys Captain Aubrey's orders and sets the *Sophie* on a new course, committing a major breach of naval hierarchy. As he has to betray one to save the other, Dillon cannot simultaneously be a British officer and an Irish patriot, capturing his desperateness. When he boards the *John B. Christopher* and recognises Mangan, Dillon conceals the rebel's presence, reporting that there was "no one of interest" aboard (O'Brian 223). While he protects his heritage, he realizes that "whatever course he took would be dishonourable, but he had never imagined that dishonour could be so painful" (O'Brian 224). This internal suffering is worsened when even

the Irish rebel he protects turns on him, as Mangan warns he will “denounce him if he did not turn a blind eye” (O’Brian 223). As a result, Dillon finds himself alienated from both sides, rejected by the Irish countrymen who share his origins while remaining an outsider to the Navy he serves. He is in the position of an emotional no-man’s-land in a system that has no place for divided figures. As Dr. Abhijeet Pawar observes, this isolation makes Dillon “the most challenging example of a man caught in the vice of conflicted loyalties”, where his “conscience and sense of honour” are constantly at risk (Pawar 4).

In contrast to Captain Aubrey, whose command depends on the clear structure of naval command, Dillon’s life is defined by uncertainties. The conflicts he has between duty and identity expose the Navy’s instability, hidden under a system of orders and hierarchy. O’Brian questions whether simultaneous loyalty to an empire and to heritage is possible with the fabrication of a figure like Dillon, and whether it is possible to be honourable in an organisation requiring obedience above conscience. Dr Abhijeet Pawar states that while Jack Aubrey’s reputation is “scarred with bad habits”, his position as “General Aubrey’s son” and popularity in high society contributes to his success in the Navy. Dillon, on the other hand, is at a disadvantage because of his political background with the United Irishmen, giving him a “reputation, somewhat undeserved, as being a potential, straight out rebel against the Crown”, which “blocks the advantages” his actions should have earned him (Pawar 4). This serves as proof that the Navy treats men unequally based not on their abilities, but on their backgrounds. No matter how heroic Dillon’s acts are, nothing can overcome the fact that he is Irish. In the end, Dillon shows that the Navy wants not just a good officer, but someone who is willing to completely forget their past heritage.

The climax of Dillon’s symbolic journey occurs with his death while capturing the enemy ship *Cacafuego*, mainly because the Navy values family ties more than the talent figures like Dillon possesses. To make up for his secret protection of a rebel leader who was against the Crown, Dillon gives up his life fighting, serving the

Crown. This lets him die as the perfect officer he could never truly become. Still, O'Brian suggests Dillon could find true honour only by sacrificing his life. As supported by Jamin Allen Casey, the "only way" for an officer without higher connections to overcome social barriers and be successful was by "incredible acts of bravery in the service of the king" (Casey 21). This meant Dillon's death was a symbolic necessity. The same system that forced him to choose sides ends up destroying him, as death is the only way Dillon could have escaped his split loyalty. His ending shows how a strict hierarchy has no place for a figure of divided sides.

Dillon's friendship with Stephen Maturin, another important Irishman in the novel, makes his symbolism of divided loyalties even stronger. Despite both men's Irish roots and ties to the failed rebellion, they respond to life in the Navy very differently. Maturin is a civilian with no naval training on HMS *Sophie*, giving him the ability to see how the navy works from outsider's point of view, and question its rules. According to Casey, Maturin is like "an independent contractor" who is "not subject to the same discipline" as all others are on the ship (Casey 74). Dillon, on the other hand, is trapped in the naval system and constantly has to live with the contradiction of being an Irish patriot fighting for a British king. As Maturin is a civilian who can criticise the system from the outside, and Dillon is someone getting crushed by it, both figures show different sides of the same conflict. By establishing such a relationship, O'Brian shows the Navy wants people to forget their past just to fit in.

Overall, Dillon symbolises the moral confusion of serving in the Navy with divided loyalties. He is a tragic figure who wants to serve both the Crown and Ireland as he tries to be honourable in a system that doesn't value his Irish background. As described by Casey, in the 1700s, "men in uniform were automatically accepted as respectable and honourable" (Casey 1). Dillon wears this uniform as a mask to hide his association with Ireland, and divided loyalty. By creating a figure like Dillon, O'Brian questions whether honour can exist in a system that makes people hide their identities. Casey's description suggests the way society thought of

officers was too simple, and did not account for one's inner political and moral struggles. Dillon's death while fighting for the Crown at *Cacafuego* is the tragic end of this moral conflict. This end shows that a person with divided loyalties in the Navy can only be at peace by giving up everything to the rigid system.

F) Conclusion

Master and Commander by Patrick O'Brian is an important novel due to its accuracy of representing eighteenth-century naval culture by using symbolism to describe sailors' way of life. The sea, the glass bell, and James Dillon are all symbols contributing to how the Royal Navy was both a military and morally complex organization. O'Brian uses these symbols to show that living in the Navy constantly involved trying to balance order against chaos, the sea's power against human control, and duty against personal identity.

Throughout the novel, naval culture's rigidity is represented by the hierarchy on the HMS *Sophie*, visible through Captain Aubrey's authority and Maturin's position of an outsider. This rigidity maintains order, but takes away from moral freedom as it is both a tool for survival, and a limit on the individual. Contrastingly, the sea is the symbol of the uncontrollable. It can be a destructive force that makes people question their view that they control nature, or it can be a source of beauty and calm. Ultimately, the sea is much greater than a setting, it defines naval culture as the spirit of naval life which shapes the individuals who serve in it.

Lastly, Dillon's division of loyalties between Ireland and the Navy show the price of trying to serve two loyalties simultaneously in the Navy. He symbolizes the conflict that arises when personal identity and duty to an organization are forced together. O'Brian symbolises objects, figures and the setting in the novel to illustrate that naval culture was based on more than just discipline and bravery. It was also about finding a balance between duty and individuality. Thus, *Master and Commander* shows that the struggle sailors like Dillon experience in the Navy when trying to balance loyalty with individuality is the same struggle that individuals have with society.

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