

## **Europeans and the marine realm: A blue ecocritical perspective on Hergé's *The Secret of the Unicorn* and *Red Rackham's Treasure***

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**Abstract:** This study examines the portrayal of oceanic spaces as a part of the holistic nature in Hergé's texts *The Secret of the Unicorn* and *Red Rackham's Treasure* from his graphic series *The Adventures of Tintin*. It aims to analyse the interactions between European characters of the texts and the oceans as a holistic part of nature, exploring how these interactions reflect broader colonial attitudes and environmental perspectives. It traces the unfolding of the early depictions of the marine realm from its early representations in the narratives as a hostile and wild force to later narratives showcasing attempts at human mastery over the blue space of the Earth. The paper adopts the theories of blue ecocriticism as propounded by Sidney I. Dobrin to critically analyse the texts and focus on the historical trajectories of European colonial inclination towards the marine environment. The paper explores Tintin's initial encounters with the treacherous blue spaces as presented in the texts as a symbolic resistance to colonial ambitions. It then continues to examine the select texts to exemplify the narratives of conquest and technological domination of the oceanic realms. The analysis reveals the tension between the human drive for exploration and conquest and growing awareness of ecological responsibilities. It also critiques anthropocentric and exploitative standpoint towards the marine environment prevalent in colonial enterprises. This blue ecocritical reading from Eurocentric perspective of the select texts from the series reflects critically on how colonial narratives shape the interactions of the colonizers with that of the natural world, and how these interactions influence their perception as a superior species over the non-humans within the marine realm.

**Keywords:** oceanic spaces, blue ecocriticism, exploitation, domination, anthropocentrism

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## Introduction

Belgian cartoonist Georges Remi, known popularly by his pen name as Hergé created *The Adventures of Tintin*, a graphic series of twenty-four books. Tintin and his faithful dog Snowy first appeared on the pages of a weekly supplement called *Le Petit Vingtième (The Little Twentieth)* dated 10 January, 1929 with “The Adventures of Tintin in The Land of the Soviets”. During the war years, the adventures were published in another newspaper *Le Soir (The Evening)*. In the series, Tintin, the young reporter, is portrayed as a globetrotter, solving mysteries, uncovering conspiracies, and battling the antagonists of the texts. Even though some plots are set in fictional places, the series is holistically set against the real-world events and broader locations, and offers a window into the historical and cultural contexts of the twentieth century. It was initially published in French and has been translated in several languages.

The first select text for this paper *The Secret of the Unicorn* is the eleventh book of the graphic series, first published during the World War II. The story follows Tintin, Snowy, and Captain Haddock as they uncover a riddle left by Haddock’s ancestor, Sir Francis Haddock, which eventually leads to their search for a treasure of the pirate Red Rackham in the twelfth book of the series. Hergé uses the literary technique of analepsis as Captain Haddock narrates the 17<sup>th</sup> century backstory of the Sir Francis Haddock, ‘Commander of the Vessel Unicorn’ (Hergé 1943, 14) and his violent confrontation with the pirate Red Rackham within the oceanic space to Tintin. In the present times, in order to decode the riddle, the trio must find the three identical models of Sir Francis’s ship, the Unicorn, to uncover the centuries old secret and treasure while evading dangerous combatants. The second select text for the paper is the twelfth book of the series i.e., *Red Rackham’s Treasure* which is a continuation of the story from the previous book. Here, the trio embark on a treasure hunt following the clues uncovered from the riddle left by Sir Francis Haddock. Professor Calculus joins them uninvited with his shark shaped submarine invention. In the course of locating the treasure, Tintin find the uncharted island with evidence of Sir Francis Haddock’s presence in the island in 1676. Following the clues from the island, Tintin uses the professor’s submarine to locate the ship wreck, but finds no treasure. Eventually, they find the treasure not in oceanic space but in the Marlinspike Hall of Belgium.

### **Theoretical framework**

The paper employs the critical theory of ecocriticism particularly focusing on blue ecocriticism as propounded by Sidney I. Dobrin to understand how the human drive of European colonial mind set takes control over the oceanic realm. This critical lens aids to understand the interactions between the humans and the natural world of the blue oceans. The fundamental principle underlying ecocriticism is the interconnectedness of humans and nature. It focuses on the intricate and inseparable relationship between all living entities and their natural environments. This school of thought emphasizes on the interdependence of all life forms, suggesting that our understanding of literature, art, human behaviour, and culture cannot be separated from the nature and ecological systems. Cheryll Glotfelty, who is the acknowledged founder of the school in the USA along with Harold Fromm co-edited *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996). In this book she has defined ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment...It is an earth-centered approach” (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996, xviii) and an intersection between the environment, culture and society believing that “human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it”. She further asserts that “Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman”. She further argues that ecocriticism “expands the notion of the world to include the entire ecosphere”. (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996, xix)

The concept of blue ecocriticism transgresses the traditional land-based approaches of ecocriticism and examines the representations of ocean and cultural imaginaries. Since ecocriticism is an “earth-centred” approach, oceanic spaces are already included in it as oceans are very much part of the planet. It also talks about the different positions such as the ethical, critical, cultural, and political that emerge from oceanic or aquatic frames of mind. Dobrin argues that the ocean is unpredictable, strange, alien, and a wild place. He calls the ocean as the “rarest of jewels”. He argues that humans have a desire to own the oceans but not as a means of global ecology but as a possession of the humans and their political cartographies.

The cultural understanding of possession prohibits the humans to think of ocean outside of anthropomorphic land-based logics. The

author argues that the oceanic thinking is too bound by land-based ideologies and values. (Dobrin 2021, 2-3). While further defining the concept, Dobrin asserts that “Blue ecocriticism synthesizes solutions that include ecocompositional, ecofeminist, social judicial, natural historical, environmental justice, environmental philosophy, and indigenous perspectives to such possible objective. It promotes oceanic awareness in two ways: first Blue Ecocriticism works disciplinary to make ecocriticism aware of its own oceanic deficiencies and the implications of those deficiencies of the discipline, as well as the potential for overcoming them. Second, it works to create an awareness of a more global awareness of oceanic matters, specifically with cultural imaginaries in mind” (Dobrin 2021, 9).

Blue ecocriticism considers both the ways in which ocean is represented as global systems of cultural imaginaries and as local environment. The author further states that blue ecocriticism is a fluid space negotiator between and among the human and posthuman. He acknowledges the fact that there is no place in the Earth which still remains untouched by human influence and no human action that leads to such influence is removed from politics and ideology (Dobrin 2021, 11-14). Exploring the select texts through the lens of blue ecocriticism offers significant insights into the ways Hergé represents oceanic spaces and human interactions with them. The oceans are the contested site in the texts where the legacy of European colonialism and the human desire to conquer and possess the natural world are brought to the forefront. To explore these dynamics, the following methodology will be employed to analyse the select texts.

### **Methodology**

The paper adopts qualitative research methodology, utilizing the theoretical lens of blue ecocriticism to analyse Hergé’s *The Secret of the Unicorn* and *Red Rackham’s Treasure*. The analysis will focus on the representation of the oceanic spaces in the texts and the interaction between humans and marine environments. This approach will involve a close textual reading of the texts, and examine how the graphic narratives reflect the European colonial mind set and anthropocentric views of the ocean. It will focus on the depictions of the oceans and the interactions between human and non-humans of the blue realm. The paper aims to contribute to a broader understanding of the oceanic awareness in literature by answering these research questions- How does Hergé portray oceanic spaces in the texts and reflect the European

colonial mindset and its broader implications on the cultural and political dimensions of the human-oceans relationships? In what ways do the narratives of Tintin and Haddock's treasure hunt challenge or reinforce anthropocentric views within the marine realm?

### **Analysis**

In the first few texts of the graphic series, the portrayal of the oceanic environment emerges not only as a minor backdrop of the narratives but as a daunting symbolic entity that makes the young reporter's adventures more threatening. It represents a formidable symbolic force that amplifies and heightens the otherwise threats and perils thrust upon by the antagonists for the young reporter during his adventurous journeys. Tintin's initial encounter with these marine spaces in *Tintin in the Congo* heralds the threats that lie ahead of him within these space. In this encounter with the blue realm, Tintin narrowly escapes a frightful fate from the jaws of a shark while rescuing his beloved pet, Snowy from the oceanic space with just his shoe as a collateral damage (Hergé 1946, 15). In *Cigars of the Pharaoh*, the primal dangers of the sharks and waves faced by Tintin in the sea are symbolic of the untamed and unpredictable nature of the ocean (Hergé 1934, 12). Later in *The Crab with the Golden Claws*, the sea serves as a prison for Tintin where he is being held captive aboard by the criminals in a ship sailing in the blue ocean (Hergé 1941, 12). With the course of the narratives in the series, the ocean's symbolism further deepens, representing the unknown. This becomes further evident in *The Shooting Star* where Tintin and his companions' audacious quest to recover an extraterrestrial matter, a meteorite which have fallen from the sky, goes in vain as the object is lost into the fathomless marine depths, leaving behind only a small fraction of their original prize (Hergé 1942, 60).

These early encounters of the marine realm have time and again proved to be perilous for Tintin reflecting both the physical and metaphorical challenges posed by the oceanic space. Tintin's early encounters with the deep blue waters depicts his near death experiences in the oceanic space. It serves as a reminder of its wild, untamed, and treacherous nature. The visuals of oceans in the early adventures of the graphic narratives with the rolling waves, sharks, treacherous storms and hostile sailors can be interpreted as a visual metaphor of imminent dangers for Tintin. In other words, the oceanic space becomes a symbolic embodiment of resistance and aversion to

Tintin's superior and imperial orientation. This defeat of the Europeans in their quest emblemizes the marine realm's unyielding power to subvert the grandest of human and imperial ambitions. Throughout these episodes, the marine spaces emerge as a symbol of resistance to imperial attitudes; a power that cannot be subjugated. It serves as a recurring motif that embodies beauty and threats and the intricacies of responsibly engaging with the natural marine environment.

However, these oceanic narratives change in the select texts from the graphic series. In *The Secret of the Unicorn*, it is revealed from the narration of Captain Haddock that his ancestor Sir Francis Haddock survived from the perished Unicorn as he escaped to the uncharted island after his violent confrontation with the pirate Red Rackham in the year 1676 (Hergé 1943, 26). It becomes an allegorical moment solidifying colonial narratives of dominating unfamiliar oceanic spaces. In *Red Rackham's Treasure*, when Tintin, captain Haddock and their companions reach the same island in the twentieth century i.e., three centuries later from the episode of Sir Francis Haddock, they find that the pedigree of those parrots speaking the European tongue (Hergé 1944, 29). Sir Haddock's act of teaching European language to the island's native parrot population is symbolic as it inscribes the first European imprint of mastery over the isolated oceanic space. From the perspective of oceanic imperialism, this particular episode vividly portrays the archetypal colonial script of heroically escaping the savaged world of pirate ruled space and proceeding to rapidly establish an anthropocentric dominance over the newfound ecosystem. It represents the extension of imperial tongues into uncharted regions, overwriting pre-existing ecological and indigenous codes with European linguistic supremacy. It mirrors how indigenous communities were forced to adopt colonial languages, dismantling their organic relationships with their local environments. These are linguistically 'civilized' parrots who maintain their lingual knowledge for many generations. It highlights how the imposition of colonial systems fundamentally reshapes lived realities even within the non-human species. The island parrots' tongues are colonised. It becomes embedded into the island's bio-cultural memory, persisting even long after Sir Francis's human presence. This dynamic evokes the lingering, indelible imprints of maritime imperial interventions into tradition marine ecosystems worldwide.

From the blue ecocritical position, the teaching of the parrots by Sir Francis Haddock serves as a metaphor for the colonial oceanic impulse

to imprint anthropocentric order and rational systems of meaning onto the perceived oceanic chaos and ecological alterity. The birds' acquisition of human language literally is made to transgress their natural communicative practices to European frameworks of linguistic intelligibility. This also coincides with Huggan and Tiffin's notion of zoocriticism where they argue that western intellectual history is set in civilisation which is forged against the wild, savage, and animalistic (Huggan and Tiffin 2010, 134). The island is savage, wild, and animalistic and the European tongues of the parrots mark civilisation and intellect. The parrots in the remote island in the vast oceanic space portrays that not only the non-human species of the land but even the most isolated island biotope cannot escape the European colonial ecological conquest and its zeal for rational anthropocentric control. Anthropocentrism places humans at the centre of one's worldview, valuing non-human life primarily for its utility to human beings; and postcolonial ecocritical theory also argues that anthropocentrism and Eurocentric dominance are concomitant. (Huggan and Tiffin 2010, 5)

The episode from the year 1676 and Sir Haddock is a European having colonial ideologies which were already at its peak during that time. His action of teaching of the parrots to speak is an act of asserting human control and imprinting human characteristics onto another species. This can be seen as a metaphor for the broader project of colonialism which often sought to reshape and reform the landscapes and the very lives of human and non-humans of colonised territories according to European ideals and practices. From the postcolonial and blue ecocritical standpoint, the ability of the parrots to speak human language even after Sir Haddock's intervention is a symbol of invasive and lasting impacts of colonial actions on the ecological systems of the oceanic space. The parrots of the island as observed in the text, are devoid of their natural bird calls but continue to mimic the sounds and words of their long-gone human teacher. It can be read as a critique of how Eurocentrism has altered their very nature and the way they interact with their environment. These parrots are the testament to the deep and irreversible changes brought about by colonial encounters. This enduring impact calls into question the ethics of European dominion over the nature and challenges us to think critically about the relationships it forges with other species.

In another episode of domination and exploitation of the oceanic space in the text *Red Rackham's Treasure* Tintin and his companions while hunting for the treasure in the blue realm are attacked by sharks

from all around. The sharks emerge as an allegory for the perceived savagery and hostility of aquatic nature itself (Hergé 1944, 32). The recurring images of sharks menacing Tintin during his oceanic adventures serves as a powerful symbol of the untamed, primordial "otherness" that the marine realm represents to the European colonial psyche. It is an uncivilised and wild space from the European eyes which is to be confronted, subdued, and rationally dominated through western technological superiority in order to tame it. The captain Haddock who is portrayed as a hot headed person takes his gun and starts shooting the sharks. Out of it, one shark appears to have a metal fin. It is revealed in the graphics that it is actually a submarine invented by Professor Calculus (Hergé 1944, 32). Tintin and his companions' encounters with these creatures, both real and mechanical, play a significant role in highlight themes of human conquest over nature and the resilience required to doing so. Through a postcolonial blue ecocritical lens, these interactions can be read as both a critique and a reflection of historical attitudes towards maritime exploration and exploitation. The invention of the shark shaped submarine adds a layer of human ingenuity to the real sharks posing dangers and challenges to the European characters that are on a quest for a treasure. It is European technology that transforms the symbolic terror of the ocean into a tool for exploration. This transformation is emblematic of the way human beings historically have sought to master natural forces and bend them to their will.

Tintin uses the submarine to track down the wreckage of the Unicorn. In the process, the submarine gets trapped in the seaweed (Hergé 1944, 36-37). The subsequent rescue by Captain Haddock and the team symbolizes a moment of human vulnerability and resilience. The successful freeing of the submarine and the continuation of their mission under the sea underscore a broader narrative of persistence in the face of adversity which is a common theme in colonial and postcolonial narratives. Tintin's refusal to give up on the treasure hunt, even when faced with seemingly insurmountable odds, reflects a quintessentially human drive to explore, understand, and ultimately control the unknown.

Later, while diving under the blue realm, Tintin's victory over the real shark achieved through the clever use of a bottle of old alcohol from the shipwreck, further illustrates the theme of conquest. By incapacitating the shark in its own environment, Tintin not only ensures his safety but also asserts human dominance over a symbol of



untamed ocean's unpredictability and danger. This act can be interpreted as a metaphor for the colonial impulse to subdue and control the natural world.

### **Conclusion**

Herge's *The Secret of the Unicorn* and *Red Rackham's Treasure* open up a broader dialogue about human's relationship with the oceanic space of nature. This interdisciplinary approach bridges literary analysis, ecocriticism, and sociological critique to address the fundamental questions about the roles of human in the Anthropocene era. Tintin's early encounters with the oceanic space is met with danger and near-death experiences. It symbolized the untamed and resistant nature of marine spaces to colonial ambitions. However, there is a shift towards narratives of conquest and domination in the eleventh and twelfth books of the graphic series epitomized by Sir Francis Haddock's linguistic colonization of the island parrots and Tintin and his companions' technologically aided exploration of the deep sea. Their later oceanic adventures particularly those involving shark-shaped submarine and the quest for treasure underwater exemplify the European drive to explore, understand, and ultimately control the unknown. Those episodes mirror the historical attitudes of maritime exploration and exploitation, where human ingenuity and persistence are celebrated as means to overcome natural obstacles. From a blue ecocritical perspective, these narratives encourage a reflection on the ethical dimensions of human interaction with the ocean. The field of blue ecocriticism critiques the anthropocentric and exploitative attitudes towards the marine environments seen in many colonial enterprises. It calls for a more respectful and sustainable relationship of the humans with that of the blue space of the planet. Tintin's heroic adventures that emphasize on overcoming natural challenges within the marine space can be critiqued for glorifying the conquest over natural space of the planet. Tintin's conquest under the blue water is seen as a triumph of bravery and colonialization. In answering the research questions, it is evident that Hergé portrays oceanic spaces in the select texts as rich and untamed spaces. The narratives also serve as a reflection of the broader cultural and political dimensions of the human-ocean relationship which reinforce Eurocentric and anthropocentric outlook over the marine realm. The concept of blue ecocriticism provides a critique of the persistent imprints of European colonialism on the oceanic space as enacted and reinforced by Tintin

and his companions. The oceans become a space to be conquered and controlled by European ingenuity and perseverance.

To conclude, a deeper analysis of texts *The Secret of the Unicorn* and *Red Rackham's Treasure* reveals the complexities of European colonial mind set and its impact on the oceanic space of the natural world. The lens of blue ecocriticism, as applied in the select texts, provides a valuable framework for understanding the ways in which literature can both reflect and critique human interactions with the marine realm.

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