The Symbolism of the Ship in Ship of Theseus

**Introduction**

*Ship of Theseus*, written by the fictional author V.M. Straka is a surprisingly sophisticated text, considering that it is only one of several dimensions of the whole work, *S.* by Doug Dorst and J.J. Abrams. *Ship of Theseus* explores various themes and readers can easily regard it as a work of its own. The novel tells the tale of S., a man who seeks to rediscover himself after suddenly waking up in a completely amnesiac state. Throughout the novel there is a recurring motif almost as mysterious as S.’s past: a ship that he somehow finds himself on for the majority of the story. This ship, characterized by several surreal features, becomes an integral part of the novel, becoming a driving motif throughout the story. Understanding the meaning behind this ship is key to deciphering the meaning within *Ship of Theseus*.

What does the ship in *Ship of Theseus* symbolize, and what purpose does it serve throughout the novel? The answer to this question is multi-faceted. A full understanding of this symbol—a complete and holistic picture of this ship requires an analysis of every aspect of the vessel, or, its analytic dimensions. A look at ships and sea outside of *Ship of Theseus* can offer a sense of their general symbolism in culture and literature that can then be applied to the ship in question. The particular ship within *Ship of Theseus*, with its unique and surreal features, offers another avenue of analysis, involving a careful examination of its physical state, its crew, its rooms, its cargo, and its relationship to S. Taken together, these aspects offer a variety of conclusions: The Ship in *Ship of Theseus* comes to symbolize life, the problem of identity, and the theme of duty over desire and functions as a commentary on these ideas.

**Ships in General as an Allegory for Life**

It is impossible to examine the significance of the ship without looking at the environment through which it travels: the sea. As Kobylinski states, “The symbolism of the boat may […] be understood in the light of universal symbol of water” (13). *Ship of Theseus* tends to focus mostly on the ship itself, but in order to understand what the ship means, we must look at the sea. The sea has always held an important place in the consciousness of humanity. “Somewhere deep within the core of the human soul there is a beat that matches the rhythm of the sea” (Stow, 11). In early recorded history the sea’s “far horizons must have seemed another world, mysterious and boundlessly challenging” (Stow, 10). While we have developed a more sophisticated understanding of the sea over time, its symbolism of general ambiguity has remained constant.

The sea has often functioned as a symbol in literature. Homer’s *The Odyssey* is a work typically associated with its connection to the sea. It recounts Greek hero Odysseus’ journey home to Ithaca through the Mediterranean Sea. Throughout his sea voyage, which takes ten years, he has numerous experiences that take him through several different aspects of life, such as happiness, loss, and resilience. As a result of these experiences, he develops profoundly at sea, and is eventually able to come home and claim Ithaca’s throne as his own. Odysseus personifies the individual who has truly lived, experiencing all of life’s gifts and challenges. In Odysseus’ case, the sea acts as a sort of ambiguous, unkind environment. Odysseus, the individual, is faced with the inevitable task of making his way through it. In this way, the sea comes to represent life.

In some of Joseph Conrad’s works the sea and its navigation function as an integral symbol. In his autobiography, *The Mirror of the Sea*, Conrad touches upon the symbolism of the sea. He recognizes it as a hostile environment, one that has “never been friendly to man. At most it has been the accomplice of human restlessness” (ch. 35). He further recognizes the challenges it presents to mankind in stating that “The sea…has no generosity. No display of manly qualities…has ever been known to touch its irresponsible consciousness of power” (ch. 36). Conrad’s remarks suggest the volatility and danger of the sea. Likening Conrad’s portrayal of the sea to life in general allows us to draw several parallels, including challenge and unpredictability. In this sense it can come to represent life.

The ship is essentially man’s attempt to brave the hostilities of the sea. It represents an attempt at tackling an untamed beast. This is an audacious attempt. In Mentz’s analysis of John Milton’s *Lycidas*, he sees “the ship as hubristic technology, its rigging no match for the alien world of the sea” (Mentz, 1003). This fact only serves to highlight the significance of attempting such a feat. For one to have the incentive to take on such an audacious task, there must be a good reason for doing so, suggesting that nautical voyages can come to represent some sort of profound, existential change within oneself. When looking at “the sea as wilderness, as a place without paths or distinctive marks” (Mack, 72) the ship becomes the sole means of creating any sort of direction in an environment void of any. The ship becomes a symbol for man’s attempt to create meaning for himself in a world completely void of it. It is an allegory for life.

**Our Ship as an Allegory for Life**

The ship in *Ship of Theseus*’s physical makeup comes to portray it as an allegory for life. Our ship undergoes extensive renovation over a period of time, but also undergoes a process of degeneration. As S. discovers on the island of Nowhere, “Some of the [ship’s] changes are felicitous; many more are not, each one seeming to widen the gap between what was intended and what turned out to be” (291). By the end of its lifespan “it has become the mad assemblage of misfit masts and decks and hatches and portholes… A horrible thing.” (291). The human condition offers certain parallels. Humans grow older and more decrepit and, physiologically (as a result of cell division and similar processes), are not the same person that they were earlier in their life. Here, the ship becomes an allegory for life.

The ship’s cargo, the crates, come to comment on life. The crates are all different. The crates in the warehouse are described as being “different sizes, shapes, shades, and ages” (281), indicating that they could represent humanity. The crates are stored on the “grey island that looks to be the very definition of Nowhere” (278). This might suggest that these crates represent humans who lack identity. The fact that they are moved from the ship to this warehouse would suggest that their lives are driven by external factors, or fate, which indicates an absence of freedom of choice. This would suggest that humans that lack identity are doomed to being driven by fate, as opposed to freedom of choice. In this way, the crates come to provide a commentary on life.

**Our Ship as a Representation of the Problem of Identity**

Our ship also comes to represent the problem of identity. The ship’s physical makeup helps support this. In S.’s first encounter with the ship, it is “in a state midway between decrepitude and tiny renovation…” (290), suggesting that it has undergone a certain degree of repair over time. This is confirmed with S.’s discovery of the ship’s initial form in the cabin on the mountain in the land the narrator describes as “the very definition of Nowhere” (278). As S. discovers, the ship was once “a harmonious whole, a shipwright’s realization of a xebec that would fly across the main and leave sailors aboard other vessels dumbstruck with envy” (290), yet it had undergone consistent renovations throughout its existence. This transformation recalls the philosophical question of Theseus’ Paradox.

The Ship of Theseus is a philosophical question raised in Ancient Greece. In his writings about Theseus, Plutarch brought to light the philosophical debate regarding the state of Theseus’ ship at the end of its journey in comparison with its state at the beginning:

The ship wherein Theseus and the youth of Athens returned had thirty oars, and was preserved by the Athenians down even to the time of Demetrius Phalereus, for they took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their place, insomuch that this ship became a standing example among the philosophers, for the logical question of things that grow; one side holding that the ship remained the same, and the other contending that it was not the same. (Plutarch)

Is the Ship of Theseus the same after having several of its components replaced by newer ones? The paradox of Theseus’ Ship is the archetypal example of one of the “most interesting problems in all of philosophy, namely the problem of identity” (Yanofsky). The fact that our ship experienced continual renovation and the name of the novel suggest that our ship is a manifestation of Theseus’s ship. In this way, it comes to symbolize the problem of identity.

Our ship can also rise, be resurrected; It inexplicably rises from states of non-existence, and comes to be. After witnessing its destruction via waterspout S. later finds it “patched and floating, somehow, in much too short a time” (200). Later, he finds it completely and utterly destroyed on the banks of the Territory, only to discover, on the outskirts of the Witnter City, “floating amid all the ice…a familiar ship” in its most unoriginal form yet (395). This suggests its resilience. It is important to note the difference between repair and resurrection. While both suggest resilience, resurrection is the ultimate form of resilience; there is no greater deficit to overcome than non-existence. The ship becomes a symbol of one’s resilience in discovering their identity throughout the course of their life. In this way, the ship is a commentary about the nature of identity in our lives.

**Our Ship as a Representation of the Duty over Desire**

The three rooms on board, S.’s cabin, the navigation room, and the storage room with paper and ink hold significance, all, in some way, come to represent or comment on the theme of duty over desire. The first room we are introduced to is S.’s cabin, where S. spends the majority of his time. This room’s most unique feature is its inability to accurately record S.’s transcriptions into the wood on its walls. On numerous occasions S. attempts to carve words into the wood in his cabin only to see that “the words on the wall are not the words he thought he wrote” (207). This suggests the room’s stark opposition to writing, a means through which individuals typically express themselves. In this sense it is averse to self-expression, suggesting the irrelevance of the individual’s desire to express themselves. It comes to symbolize a repression of desire.

The navigation room also symbolizes the theme of duty over desire. This room is best characterized by its drastic change in utility. In the beginning, before S. had a duty to fulfill and the ship had a direction to follow, it was not being utilized at all. Clearly a room meant for navigation (an old sextant and map are present), “if any acts of navigation are being performed on this ship, they are not occurring in this room” (43). Later, however, when S. has a clear duty to carry out and the ship has a clearer direction, the navigation room is no longer in a state of disuse. Rather, it is serving its intended purpose. When S. finds Maelstrom studying the charts, which “must not be as mildewed as the ones he saw before, because [S.] can discern the boundaries between water and land” (270). This would suggest that the room only becomes relevant when needed. When called upon, it serves its purpose, but when it’s not needed it becomes a surplus, pointless room. Because it can only be identified as a room that serves its purpose when called upon, the room represents a submission to duty over desire.

The final room, the writing room, provides a commentary on the submission to duty by representing a sense of hope in the search for identity. This room is characterized by the “fragments of stories…some sailor has poured out, has given up, has spent of himself” (295). It is a room in which the crewmembers can express themselves, something that they cannot do elsewhere. It is also the only place on board where S. is able to accurately translate his thoughts into writing; “And here, unlike his cabin, here he feels no division between his mind and his hand…” (296). The writing room represents self-expression. The room is unique, for it represents the opposite of the vessel’s general adversity towards self-expression. This would suggest the ever-present existence of hope in finding eventual happiness in life.

This room is a sign of hope. Initially, “The door will not open” (295) and Maelstrom reacts to finding S. inside writing: “*Ah, hell, it dint ness t’go li’ this”* (297). This room was meant to be inaccessible to S., the only member of the ship on board (besides Maelstrom) who has the ability to express himself vocally. The fact that S.’s lips were sewn together right after being caught suggests that the room is only meant to be accessed by crewmembers—people who have given up their identity in exchange for a purpose in life. The room serves to symbolize the presence—or possibility of—self-expression in a place seemingly void of any. It shows that there is still hope for salvation, even if one has completely submitted themselves to a meaningless duty, suggesting that this room comments on the nature of the individual’s submission to duty over desire.

The ship’s crew also symbolizes and comments on the complete submission to duty over desire. Perhaps the most striking feature of the ship’s average crewmember is the “thin, dark threads crisscrossing his lips and ending in a tiny knot at one corner” (34). Consequently, he loses the ability to speak and is only able to communicate through a “thin-bored wooden whistle on [a] lanyard around [his] neck” (40). The crew’s inability to communicate verbally indicates the inability of self-expression; they are defined solely by their actions which, in their case, ultimately just involves “sailing the ship” (39). While there are other ways in which one can express themselves, the crew shows no signs of such behavior; as S. notices, “There is no evidence of drinking, music, dancing any of the sorts of pastimes one expects to encounter in a cohort of sailors confined on the waves” (45). They do not even have names. They are cogs in the machine, defined only by their monotonous and repetitive duty in keeping the ship afloat and moving. In many ways the crew comes to represent the complete submission to duty over desire.

If the crew’s inability to verbally express themselves represents a submission to duty, then how do we explain Maelstrom, the only member of the crew who can speak? While seemingly contradictory, the fact that he can speak actually makes him the epitome of the crew’s symbolic representation. There are two reasons for this. First, the fact that he was once a sewn-mouth sailor, as seen through “the ghastly pattern of pinpoint scars that encircle his mouth” (38), suggests that he has gone through this submission to duty. Second, his rhetoric is predominately centered on giving orders or, in other words, fulfilling his duty as the crew’s leader rather than self-expression. Maelstrom is so submitted to his duty that even given the ability to speak, he expresses nothing beyond his duty to navigate the ship. He epitomizes the crew’s symbolic representation.

The crew’s general decrepitude provides insight on the submission to duty over desire. In general, their description throughout the novel remains relatively grim. Rather than displaying enthusiasm or pride in their work, they “trudge from task to task, grim and oxlike” (28). Physically they are also negatively portrayed as “sleepy [and] bat-eared” and “rangy [and] deathly pale” (50). Another sailor “under normal circumstances, would probably be thought beautiful and set girls’ hearts aflutter,” (54), suggesting that his current circumstances rob him of his positive physical qualities. The crew on this ship also lacks several qualities that one would expect of sailors under normal circumstances. At night “There is no evidence of drinking, music, dancing any of the sorts of pastimes one expects to encounter in a cohort of sailors confined on the waves” (45). The general sense of unhappiness, or a lack of positivity, that while the submission to duty may be desirable, it is not a decision based on one’s pursuit of happiness. Rather, it suggests man’s pursuit of the security of contentment. Committing oneself to a sense of duty fills the void created by an inherent lack of meaning in life, but does not necessarily ensure happiness. In this sense the crew becomes a commentary on the submission to duty over desire.

The fact that this submission of the crew is completely voluntary also portrays the crew as a commentary on the submission to duty over desire. The boy rescued from the ghost ship converts to a traditional crewmember of the ship. The young man slowly took to the life of a regular crewmember, but remained sewn-less for the entirety of S.’s venture on B——. In the end, “…the young man sews his mouth shut to the din of the crew urging him on, stich after stitch” (216). Maelstrom confirms his full membership to the crew when he announces, “*Y’ part o’ th’ tradition, now, son. Part o’ th’ tradition*”. This voluntary conversion suggests that one’s complete submission to duty over desire is a personal decision rather than an acceptance forced by external factors or people. In this way it is a commentary on the submission to duty over desire.

**Conclusion**

The ship in *Ship* *of Theseus* is a complicated symbol comprised of several components, but generally we can come to three conclusions: the ship—and everything it is comprised of—represents and comments on life, the problem of identity, and the submission to duty over desire. The general symbolism of ships and the sea along with our ship’s physical makeup portray our ship as an allegory for life, while the crates provide a commentary on life. Through the ship’s physical manifestation of the Theseus’ Paradox it comes to symbolize the problem of identity. Through its tendency to resurrect it provides a commentary on the problem of identity. Finally, through its rooms and crew, the ship also comes to symbolize the tendency to submit oneself to duty in the attempt to find meaning in life at the expense of expressing and fulfilling one’s desire. The ship and its crew portray this fate as generally undesirable and unrewarding while the writing room demonstrates that this desire is still present and not unobtainable, thus providing a commentary on the phenomenon.

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