

The Lost Mother?
Overfishing and the Discourse of Gender in Morrissey's *Sylvanus Now*

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*What bard now to strike
The rock of elegy
For the sea, the lost mother?
(The harp is flown
Carved ship-with-mariners
A museum stone.)
Skua, whale, herring
Litter a rotted shoreline.*

Cover mouth till the bell is struck.

*Our veins run still
With salt and questing of ocean,
Eyes to unlock horizon,
New lucencies, new landfalls.
Poets of machine and atom
A last bird at a tidemark
Announces the death of the sea.ⁱ*

The creation story told in Genesis is just one example of the construction of the ocean as a “space that is almost universally represented as female.”ⁱⁱ In it, the deep exists prior to any other element of creation: heaven and earth rise out of it, and before it gives birth to anything, the Spirit of God—the same spirit that according to the Christian tradition will later fill the womb of the Virgin Mary—moves over it. In a subsequent verse, God creates “great whales, and every living creature that moveth, which the waters brought forth after their kind.”ⁱⁱⁱ Such fecundity and femininity is given to the ocean by other religions—the Inuit religion and syncretistic Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Brazilian religions such as Yoruba and Candomblé.^{iv} This religious conception of the ocean as female is furthered by science, which has also come to the conclusion that life on earth originated in and then rose out of the ocean, the first and ultimate saltwater womb.

The ocean's bounty has, for millennia, provided humans with “a larder, a living space, and the possibility of riches...its scale in time and space...even for experienced mariners, appeared all out of proportion to that of familiar worlds ashore...seafarers and landlubbers alike could not help but regard the sea as inscrutable, threatening, and eternal.”^v This conception, what historian W. Jeffrey Bolster calls “the myth of the timeless ocean” extends to literature. Writers including Thoreau, Melville, Dickens, and T.S. Eliot have all contributed to the “sense of the ocean's immortality, the idea that it rolled on before human life existed, and that it will roll on changelessly thereafter...the

fundamentally flawed assumption that the ocean...has always existed outside of history.”^{vi}

We now know that nothing can be further from the truth. The ocean rolled on for millennia, and, while documentation of the depletion of its great fisheries exist from as early as the 14th Century,^{vii} fishing continued to expand, until, “in the blink of a twentieth-century eye, the tables were turned. The sea appeared fragile and vulnerable...Overfishing, destruction of marine habitats, shipborne biological invasions, oil spills, and other similar disasters cast the time-honored phrase “men against the sea” in a new light.”^{viii} While the environmental crisis in the oceans is rightfully understood as a political and ecological problem, Bolster argues that it has been “rarely understood in light of history.” It has been understood even less in light of literature, perhaps because of the deep-rooted literary discourse of the eternal sea. The studies of the past and of human creativity are essential for understanding the ocean’s plight and how to solve it. The sensibilities of historians and literary scholars are needed to involve “richly contextualized and subtle...perspectives...in discussions about future management of ocean resources.”^{ix} Literary scholars can “read” an environmental problem—in this case overfishing in the Northwest Atlantic—by contextualizing the problem and the texts that have emerged from it. By identifying and unpacking the meaning and emotion in both the human and the non-human elements of the ecological story at hand, literary scholars can use the literary arts to help others understand and feel the real consequences of ecological, and therefore economic, ruin and poverty.

Enter Donna Morrissey. Raised in an outpost on Newfoundland’s northwest coast called The Beaches, she is uniquely equipped to provide a literary treatment of the rise of industrial fishing in Newfoundland and the collapse of the cod fishery. This is the subject of her third novel, *Sylvanus Now* (2005), the winner of the Thomas Head Raddall Atlantic Fiction Prize. It is the perfect novel to demonstrate how literary scholarship can be used to further understand and offer perspective on marine environmental issues. Morrissey says of her novel “you’ve got lots of facts and figures to read about the collapse of the fishery, but largely the human face of the problem has been ignored. A lot of people say this book gives a face to those who where so profoundly affected by the collapse.”^x

The facts and figures on the ocean’s crisis, and, in fact, the crisis itself, can be seen to stem from “a century of vigorous fact-finding by scientists along with managers’ reliance on numbers divorced from context, and politician’s satisfaction with exceedingly short-term solutions.”^{xi} The collapse of the Newfoundland cod-fishery, the subject of *Sylvanus Now*, has become “the classic case of the failure of conventional science-based fisheries management.”^{xii} A thorough dissection of the political and scientific decisions precipitating the collapse would take volumes. What is important to understand is that this was “the nightmare that shook the world out of its complacent assumption that the sea’s resources were renewable and being managed in an enlightened manner.”^{xiii}

Gross inaccuracy and systematic errors in stock assessments meant that the resulting scientific uncertainty could be used by politicians to leverage higher catch limits^{xiv}. The establishment of the Canadian Exclusive Economic Zone—which extended

200 miles offshore and included much of the Grand Banks—eliminated foreign factory vessels from Canadian waters, but replaced it with expanded domestic fishing capacity funded largely by public sources—a sequence of events that also happened in the United States during the same period.^{xv} Scientific uncertainty was only exacerbated by the fact that with Canada’s acquisition of its new fishing zone, it acquired areas for which there was no credible data. Commercial catch per unit effort data was used to fill in the gaps, leading to dangerous assumptions about the health of the cod stocks.^{xvi} The result was a moratorium on fishing Northern cod in Canadian waters. The moratorium has been largely ongoing since 1992—putting forty thousand people across five provinces out of work in what has been called “the biggest layoff in history”.^{xvii}

This is not to say that blame in the collapse of the cod fishery rests squarely on any one party. Too many mistakes have been made by too many parties for that to be the case. However, hindsight illuminates the chorus of “dissident voices prophesying disaster that were ignored by the bureaucratic machine that was Canada’s Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO), and by its elite and secretive bunch of scientists responsible for assessing stocks^{xviii}.” The inshore fishermen in Morrissey’s novel constitute just a few of those voices, who are hushed by government representatives telling them in radio broadcasts “[n]ow, my boys, a bit too soon to be calling it overfishing” and “[s]it back, my boys, for as vast as the sky is the ocean, and more plentiful than the stars are her fish.”^{xix}

Overfishing is a process that progresses over time—often centuries—to reach catastrophic proportions. Morrissey’s novel illuminates a ten-year period forty years prior to the final collapse and resulting cod moratorium: the 1950’s and 60’s in a fictional outport called Cooney Arm. *Sylvanus Now* is an ecological elegy about tradition in the face of modernity. Critic Anne Marie Todkill notes:

In today’s self-reflective Newfoundland, the technologic transformation and ruin of the cod fishery is both the stuff of living memory and the subject of museums...[Morrissey’s fishermen] cling to the shore within rowing distance of their inshore fishing grounds, while trawlers and factory-boats loom on the horizon...Like George Eliot in the Industrial Age, Morrissey reconstructs a period just slightly earlier than her own time, a history that directly illuminates the present. If there is nostalgia here, there is also the hard proof of hindsight.^{xx}

Morrissey’s novel, through its depiction of the fishery’s downward spiral, elegizes, without romance, the

Small, once-isolated communities scattered around the coast adjacent to the fishing grounds. The dominant pattern of small-scale, seasonal domestic commodity production in fishing is rooted in a robust folk culture of egalitarian social relations and ideology...outport culture persisted for more than 300 years, surviving substantial changes in fishing technologies, the larger political and economic contexts, and natural

fluctuations in the cod stocks”^{xxi}

Not only does *Sylvanus Now* provide an exacting, elegiac portrait of a way of life and a fishery in transition, it is also completely fraught with imagery of gender and femininity, often as connected with the fishery. Morrissey genders her ocean female, and lends an air of intimacy to her title character Sylvanus Now’s interactions with the ocean. This technique allows Morrissey to unite her feminized ocean with the novel’s female protagonist, Sylvanus’ wife, Adelaide, who struggles through three difficult and unsuccessful pregnancies to have a healthy child. By showing the parallels between a large, scientifically and politically complicated problem like overfishing and the very intimate struggle to bear a healthy child, Morrissey has turned a complex and contentious environmental problem into a deeply human issue very easily felt and understood. By providing a reading of the novel and its scientific and historical context, in which this gender imagery is also pervasive, one is able to draw, through literary scholarship, the parallels necessary to cast daunting environmental problems in a deeply personal light. By providing the tools necessary to bring these environmental problems like overfishing *home*, literary scholarship proves its importance to understanding and creating empathy for marine environmental problems. In the case at hand, the pervasive feminizing of the ocean is especially wrenching given the progressive and systematic overfishing that has occurred throughout history on a fishery that could, for centuries, truthfully have been called a mother to, or provider for, millions of people.

The widely acknowledged productivity of the waters surrounding Newfoundland has its roots in the oceanography of the region. Two separate water masses; the cold, nutrient-laden Labrador Current, and the warm, salty Gulf Stream, meet and mix over the shallow Grand Banks, creating fog and high levels of primary productivity. In addition, upwelling, “a circulation pattern in which deep, cold, usually nutrient-laden water moves toward the surface” occurs in the area.^{xxii} This inherent productivity creates an important spawning ground and supports the entire food web—including halibut, haddock, ocean perch, pollock, flounders, capelin, and many other species.^{xxiii}

In the late fifteenth century, as Europe was beginning its age of global ocean exploration, Newfoundland was discovered. While there exists a Viking settlement at L’Anse aux Meadows, the credit for exposing the wildly productive Grand Banks to large-scale European attention rests with John Cabot^{xxiv}. While Cabot’s logbook has not survived, accounts that he gave upon his return do. One of these accounts, which was recorded by the Milanese ambassador to England in a report of the voyages to the Duke of Milan says:

They assert that the sea there is swarming with fish, which can be taken not only with the net, but in baskets let down with a stone...I have heard this Messer Zoane (Cabot) state so much. These same English...say that they could bring so many fish that this kingdom would have no further need of Iceland, from which place there comes a very great quantity of the fish called stockfish.^{xxv}

Other accounts, like those by Cabot the younger, recount that cod “stayed the passage of...ships,” and eventually, England took notice, and joined the annual spring race to the fishing banks with the Bretons, Normans, and Basques, drying their fish on the shores of Newfoundland and asserting their claim to it, eventually establishing year-round settlements.^{xxvi} However, the fishers from southern Europe, with their large supplies of salt, were able to salt their fish at sea—giving them the option to fish full-time. Such was the productivity that in 1719, Pierre de Charlevoix wrote:



Figure 1 Salting fish. From Dictionnaire de toutes les espèces de pêches. Paris : H. Agasse, an IV [1795/96?]

What is called the great bank of Newfoundland, is properly a mountain, hid under water...you find on it a prodigious quantity of shell-fish, with several other sorts of fishes of all sizes, most part of which serve for the common nourishment of the cod, the number of which seems to equal that of the grains of sand which cover this bank. For more than two centuries since, there have been loaded with them from two to three hundred ships annually, notwithstanding the diminution is not perceivable...These...are true mines, which are the more valuable, and require much less expence than those of Peru and Mexico.^{xxvii}

This euphoric passage is now highly ironic. The healthy, profitable ecosystem depicted by Charlevoix—originally dominated by predatory finfish like cod—has undergone a profound regime change. Now, invertebrates like crab, lobster, and prawns dominate Newfoundland’s fishery—an ecological change that has also occurred in the Gulf of Maine and Northern Europe. In Newfoundland’s case, the fisheries for high-value invertebrates such as snow crab, shrimp, and lobster, raised the total value in fisheries from \$170 million Canadian in 1991 (right before the cod collapsed) to \$515 million in 2003.^{xxviii} The question now is how long will this last?

In the case of the cod fishery, once the veritable goldmine on the Grand Banks had been discovered, depletion followed quickly, although not quite to moratorium levels. The crew of Captain Bartholomew Gosnold, an early explorer of New England, noted changes in the Newfoundland fishery as early as 1602, with one John Breerton writing that

In five or six heures...[the fishing party]...had pestered our ship so with Cod fish, that we threw numbers of them over-board again...the place where we tooke these Cods...were in but seven faddome water, and within less than a league of the shore: where, in Newfound-land they fish in fortie or fiftie fadome water, and farre off.^{xxix}

Callum Roberts, author of *The Unnatural History of the Sea*, uses historical accounts of the abundance and diversity of marine wildlife to illuminate the past: helping

to “reveal the magnitude of subsequent declines...[and] provide us with benchmarks against which we can compare the condition of today’s seas”...Roberts argues that these benchmarks can help to counteract “the phenomenon of shifting environmental baselines, whereby each generation comes to view the environment into which it was born as natural, or normal.”^{xxx} At the turn of the 19th century, the baseline had shifted so much that “people engaged in the fisheries on the Atlantic coast had no clear recollection of former conditions of excessive abundance or of sharp declines in the reward for fishing effort. Supplies of older fishes had already declined.”^{xxxi} The effects of the shifting baseline can be seen from declines in fish populations and biodiversity to climate change: gradual changes go unnoticed until it is too late.

According to Roberts, the historical record the world over suggests that current problems like overfishing and fishing down food webs did not happen overnight. Rather, they reached their present catastrophic levels over a long period of time, as a result of the compounding of the effects of history. According to Jeremy Jackson of Scripps Institution of Oceanography, “humans have been disturbing marine ecosystems since they first learned how to fish, [thus] our time periods need to begin well before the human occupation or European colonization of a coastal region”^{xxxii}. *Sylvanus Now* falls neatly into what Jackson calls the global period, which “involves more intense and geographically pervasive exploitation of coastal, shelf, and oceanic fisheries integrated into global patterns of resource consumption, with more frequent exhaustion and substitution of fisheries”^{xxxiii}. In the case of Northern cod, a 500-year population reconstruction by Memorial University of Newfoundland’s George Rose, based on catch records, cod biology, and climate data taken from tree rings, estimated an ecosystem carrying capacity of cod at 7 million metric tons in 1505. His study found that in 1992 when the moratorium took effect, the population was down to 22,000 metric tons, or one-third of one percent of the original population.^{xxxiv}

The transition in Newfoundland to a crustacean-dominated ecosystem as a result of cod overfishing can be considered an example of a trophic cascade; where the removal one level of the food chain (often predators) prompts changes in the relative populations of other species.^{xxxv} University of British Columbia’s Daniel Pauly also describes a related phenomenon called fishing down food webs: a process whereby the top marine predators are fished out first, with humans subsequently turning their attention to the former prey of these lost predators. Fishing down food webs “implies development of alternative fisheries targeting jellyfish and other zooplankton (particularly krill) for direct human consumption and as feed for farmed fish”^{xxxvi}.

The latent productivity documented on the Grand Banks only serves to bring forward the idea of a productive ecosystem as a womb-like, even female, entity. The human degradation of such an ecosystem problematizes this idea of ecological femininity. In this case, it is not only the ecosystem that can be characterized as fertile, feminine, or even maternal. *Gadus morhua*, the Atlantic cod, is a strikingly fecund fish. In a study sampling cod in Newfoundland’s Trinity Bay, Pinhorn et al. (1984) found that large, repeat-spawning cod can spawn between 1.6 and 3.2 million eggs. While only a tiny fraction of these eggs will survive to recruit into the adult population, with cod attaining

ages of 15 years undisturbed, the potential for the larger females to contribute to the biomass is substantial.^{xxxvii}

Such fecundity was also apparent to Rudyard Kipling, author of *Captains Courageous* (1897), a novel dealing with the Grand Banks schooner fishery. In *Something of Myself*, he addressed the entrance into a film contract for *Captains Courageous*, and linked cod to femininity, saying:

At the end of the sitting my Daemon led me to ask if it were proposed to introduce much 'sex appeal' into the great work. 'Why certainly,' said he. Now a happily married lady cod-fish lays about three million eggs at one confinement. I told him as much. He said: 'Is that so?' And went on about 'ideals'...^{xxxviii}

Clearly then, by virtue of its oceanographic characteristics, the waters off of Newfoundland, including the Grand Banks, with its originally giant populations of cod, can be characterized as an enormously fertile mother, or provider, to millions of people throughout history. In addition to its biological and ecological fecundity, the Grand Banks, especially in the wake of the collapse of the cod fishery, have been found to contain four oil fields: the White Rose, Terra Nova, Hibernia, and Hebron/Ben Nevis oil fields, which are now being exploited by a variety of major oil companies.^{xxxix} Says Morrissey, "I got to tour an oil rig while researching for the sequel...there's another instance of literally sucking the Mother dry with no thought for the environmental catastrophe."^{xl}

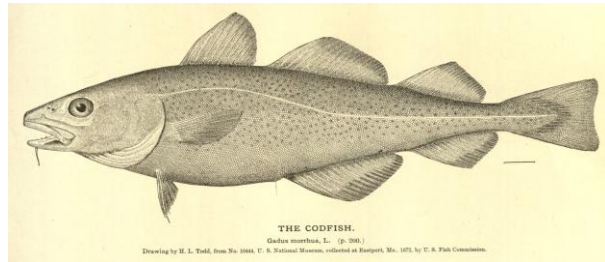


Figure 2 The Codfish. From George Brown Goode. The fisheries and fishery industries of the United States. Washington : G.P.O., 1884-1887.

In conversation, Morrissey speaks of the ocean as the mother. In her novel, the ocean as a feminine entity becomes a character in its own right. The opening chapter of *Sylvanus Now* gives readers a brief portrait of a character who deeply respects the ocean. Sylvanus, alone in his motor-skiff, is jigging for cod. He hooks what feels to his seasoned hands to be a forty-pounder and, upon bringing his fish

Half out of the water...[sees] its belly creamy as milk and swollen with roe. A mother-fish...Reverently, he unhooked the jigger...and watched...as she dove back into the deep, the sack of roe in her belly unscathed...The ocean's bounty, she was, and woe to he who desecrated the mother's womb.^{xli}

Immediately, both the cod and the ocean are gendered female and described as mother figures—characterizations based in the biology, ecology, and history described above—that will continue throughout the novel. The term mother-fish, according to sociologist

Barbara Neis, is a term commonly applied in Newfoundland to large, old female fish fishermen feel are better left in the ocean to breed^{xlii}.

Through Sylvanus' release of the large female cod, Morrissey observes that while the cod is the "ocean's bounty", such a bounty is best reserved for fishermen like Sylvanus who have a deep respect for the ocean and the fish they take from it. In the passage quoted previously, in which Sylvanus releases the large female cod, Morrissey both upholds Sylvanus as a model and makes a moral judgment on those who would "desecrate the mother's womb." The use of the word desecration likens the act of indiscriminate overfishing to rape, a comparison that will also run through the remainder of the novel.

The respect with which Sylvanus approaches the ocean is an essential part of his character: according to Morrissey, "the ocean was his everything...his god."^{xliii} Sylvanus explains to his wife, Adelaide that "[b]obbing on the water in a good stiff breeze, feeling everything big and strong about me—that's what I likes. Drowns foolishness when you sits on something as deep and strong as the sea."^{xliv} While it is clear that Sylvanus feels entirely comfortable on the ocean, "listening to [her] murmurings as she lap[s] about his boat like a coddling old mother"^{xlv} he also literally cannot afford foolishness in interacting with her. One windy night on his way home from his brothers' fire pit, he mutters "Bejesus I'm not riding your back, this night, hussy"...as the wind delivered a slather of spit from the sea against his face."^{xlvi} Here, the ocean that was so recently a "coddling old mother" is characterized as a spiteful hussy.

Throughout the novel, the ocean is presented in the full range of womanhood, not just motherhood. Sylvanus' wife Adelaide "hated the water...how all night long it shifted and moaned like some old crone hagged in sleep,"^{xlvii} and on that particular night, Sylvanus agreed, for "here [the ocean] was roiling like the hag upon the shore, the froth of her fury gnashing like teeth just a few feet from [their] window."^{xlviii}

While the ocean most certainly is a feminine provider and often a motherly presence in the novel, it is not the human element, and is also described using less friendly tropes associated with other kinds of women; hussy and crone among them. One evening, Sylvanus is caught in a gale, and his boat is nearly broken up on the same rocks that had claimed his father and brother years before; with Sylvanus' mother watching from the headland. This time, Sylvanus' own wife, Adelaide, is watching. The experience causes Sylvanus,

For the first that he could remember, [to] hate...this jealous bitch of a sea mother who would snatch babies from a land mother's breasts and hide them in the massive rolls of her own...She tore at the shoreline and the moaning of her dead tucked into her bosom, forever fitful in their slumbers, forever rolling upon different shores, seeking the beach upon which they were spawned, and heralded by a wind endowed with the cries of their grieving loved one.^{xlix}

Here, even as Morrissey gives her feminized ocean the complexity and depth it deserves; calling it a “jealous bitch”, she still refers to it as a “sea mother.” Human women and human mothers, like the ocean, are multifaceted, and can be many things: providing, punishing, ruthless, merciful, nurturing or harsh. Despite the fact that the characterization of the ocean as benevolent provider and victim of exploitation is dominant in Morrissey’s novel, she does not deny the ocean its full range of motion...or emotion. Morrissey shows the frightening side of the ocean in Sylvanus’ family history and in passages like the one referenced above for a reason. Even as humanity methodically strips the ocean of the life within it, countless lives have been lost at sea either as a result of accident, weather, human error or complacency. Perhaps this loss of human life at sea can be seen as a form of revenge, but this argument is simplistic. In the passage above, Morrissey turns the female-gendered ocean and her nourishing breast into a ‘jealous bitch.’ Morrissey uses this passage as a clear reference not only to the ocean’s demand for respect but to the state of the fishery in the novel.

The fishery depicted in *Sylvanus Now* is varied in terms of the techniques and gear used. It is a largely inshore fishery, dependent on the inshore migration of cod following prey species such as capelin (*Mallotus villosus*).ⁱ The period following World War II, the fishery shifted from a “household fishery based on saltfish” to “offshore fishing trawlers and centralized frozen-fish processing plants.”ⁱⁱ The rise of quick-freezing techniques—first pioneered by Clarence Birdseye in the 1930s—created the ability to market fresh fish further away from the ocean. People became more adventurous with their cooking, and, after Newfoundland joined Canada in 1949, the federal and provincial governments made loans and loan guarantees available to frozen-fish companies, private fishing companies, and individual fishermen for upgrading plants, gear, and vessels. The impacts of such expansion, coupled with the rise of the foreign factory fleet, meant that while total landings increased 500 per cent in the Newfoundland and Labrador area between 1955-58 and 1961-64, the inshore fishery caught a progressively smaller share.ⁱⁱⁱ

During the course of *Sylvanus Now*, the cod stop migrating inshore in any appreciable numbers, and the fishermen move further offshore in search of them—repeating the phenomenon observed by Gosnold in the early 1600’s. As Morrissey says,

Sylvanus is an inshore fisherman. At that time the inshoremen were forced to go midshore, after the fish that were no longer coming inshore. They weren’t used to that, or comfortable with it. I can remember people saying that when you did that, the ocean no longer felt like your friend. It’s really important to see that threat up closeⁱⁱⁱⁱ.

The pathos of the situation is heightened by Morrissey’s feminizing of the ocean, which she describes as “rocking [Sylvanus] upon her breasts, fanning his face whilst he straddled her belly, plumbing her depths, her hips swaying to her heaving and ebbing beneath him, her bodice spreading so far out that it was impossible to see where water and sky separated.”^{liv} Sylvanus in the above passage is the smiling master of his world and his woman, an image turned dramatically on its head by the end of the novel.

While Morrissey’s novel accurately shows the inshore fishermen using cod traps, handlines, long-lines, and gill-nets, the advent of new vessels such as the long-liner and new, non-biodegradable fibers such as nylon and monofilament for net-making, created not only further diversification, but, in the case of gear such as gill-nets, more destruction.^{lv} Previously made of natural fibers, which rot over time, gill nets are “flat nets suspended vertically in the water with weights on the bottom and floats on top [which catch fish] by their gills when they try to pass through the monofilament netting:” essentially they are a wall in the water.^{lvi} Such nets are hazardous because once broken free, they continue to fish, wasting their catch in a cycle of floating, catching, sinking under the weight of their catch and floating and catching again after this catch is rotten or eaten away in a process called ghost fishing. Despite its illegality, fishers simply disposed of their used gill nets overboard—a practice unwittingly encouraged by the Canadian government’s subsidies and handouts of such gear. One recent study of North Atlantic deep-sea fishing found that 5,800 to 8,700 kilometers (3,600 to 5,400 miles) of gill net are in contact with the sea bottom. Every year, some 1,250 kilometers (780 miles) of this gear is lost or thrown overboard and left to fish undetected.^{lvii}

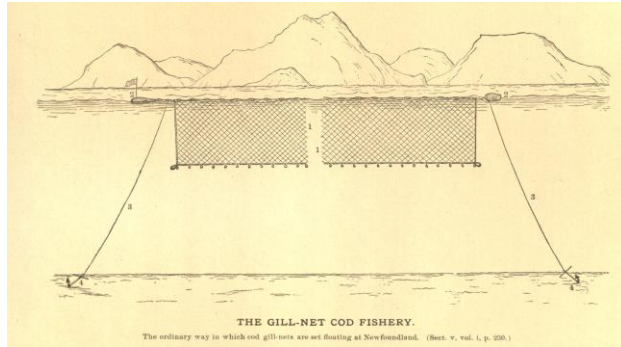


Figure 3 The Gill-Net Cod Fishery. From George Brown Goode. *The fisheries and fishery industries of the United States.* Washington : G.P.O., 1884-1887.

In the novel, a major bone of contention between Sylvanus and his brothers Manny and Jake is the use of these gill nets. Sylvanus’s utter distaste for such gear is evident when he tells his brother Manny “[g]ill nets! You mean ghost nets...Old man, I wouldn’t put something that dirty out in the water.”^{lviii} In fact, there is a long-standing ban on gill nets in the Newfoundland town of Petty Harbour, which recognized their destructive potential in the late 1940’s.^{lix}

Yet another major change to the Newfoundland cod fishery was the arrival of factory trawlers from the former Soviet Union, Poland, Spain, Germany, Norway, Japan, Iceland, and even Cuba, to name just some nations engaged in this type of fishery. The first of these vessels was the *Fairtry*, built in Aberdeen, Scotland in 1953.^{lx} These vessels are capable of processing and freezing their catch on board, and then shipping them to the home country on transport vessels, allowing the factory ships to stay on the fishing grounds for as long as six months.^{lxi} Previously, winter fishing in the Northwest Atlantic was less possible due to ice and severe storms. Such efficiency destroys the traditional yearly cycle whereby “fishermen hunted the cod during the spring and summer, and the stock wintered in deep waters unmolested.”^{lxii}

By 1974, the Eastern and Western European factory fleet on the Grand Banks numbered over 1000 vessels, taking over 2 million metric tons of fish: three times the Canadian catch and ten times the New England catch. According to Roberts, “they had

scant regard for the niceties of fishing, sucking fish from the sea irrespective of whether they were juvenile or adult, and regardless of whether or not they were spawning. A dead fish was a dead fish. This was industrial fishing on a monumental scale”^{lxiii}.

At this point in history, coastal states maintained a territorial sea of three miles. The seaward extension of coastal states into the 12-mile territorial sea and 200-mile exclusive economic zones that resulted from the 1973 convening of the third U.N. Conference on the Law of the Sea and subsequent 1982 U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea had not yet occurred.^{lxiv} When the 200-mile EEZ’s *were* declared, the foreign overcapacity and overfishing was replaced by domestic overcapacity and overfishing: from 1977 to 1982, the New England trawler fleet virtually doubled in size, while employment in the Atlantic Canadian fishing industry rose from fourteen thousand people to thirty-three thousand in 1980.^{lxv}

Prior to the declaration of exclusive economic zones and subsequent manifest destiny-like domestic expansion, factory vessels were able to go far enough inshore that a fisherman like Sylvanus with his hand-built, open boat and one or two-cylinder engine would be able to witness the hauling back of one of the gargantuan nets used by these trawlers. In fact, Sylvanus does witness a factory trawler hauling back. He is horrified, for

Within minutes [his] boat was encompassed by the fish now drifting on their backs...Sylvanus clutche[s] his side sickeningly as he [takes] in the spread of creamy white pods now floating before him. Mother-fish. Thousands of them. A great speckled gull...jabb[ed] at [one’s] belly, weakening it, rupturing it, till the mother’s roe trickled out like spilt milk...[H]e sat back, bobbing in his little wooden boat upon the giant expanse of blue ocean...He thought of the mother-fish he’d saved from his jiggers over the years, and her sacs of roe, and he drew his eyes back to the frenzy of the gulls jabbing her belly, spilling her...unlived life, into the sea, and he weakened, seeing in the mother’s fate his own.^{lxvi}

In this description, the desecration of the ocean’s womb by the factory trawler is evidenced by the wanton waste of fertile female cod— simultaneously referencing not only the imagery of rape and introducing the idea of weakness and wasted potential for life *and* holding Sylvanus up as an example of a steward, or husband, of the ocean.

While the marital sense of the word comes to mind immediately, to husband also means to cultivate or to “manage as a good householder and steward.”^{lxvii} These meanings are particularly relevant given the context of *Sylvanus Now*. Sylvanus envisions the connection between fishing and farming consistently with this definition, thinking to himself “what kind of fool can’t figure we’re farmers, not hunters; that we don’t search out and destroy the spawning grounds, that we wait for the fish to be done with their seeding, and then they comes to us for harvesting?”^{lxviii}

In Sylvanus' mind, the systematic vacuuming of the spawning grounds by the factory ships, aided as they are with fish finders and other such instrumentation, is a savage and indiscriminate form of hunting, whereas taking only what bites on a jigger is more akin to subsistence farming. Thus, Sylvanus seems to be aligned with the figure of the individual farmer as steward of the environment espoused by writers from William Wordsworth to Wendell Berry. He is "a fisherman portrayed as sensually in his dory as Gerard Manley Hopkins portrayed Harry Ploughman in his field."^{lxix} This is no accident. In an interview with her Canadian publisher, Penguin Books, Morrissey says that she named her protagonist Sylvanus for "a Roman god, keeper of the forest. In the world of *Sylvanus Now* he replaces Poseidon as the keeper of the ocean."^{lxx}

What about the other meaning of husband? It is clear, as this paper will argue, that Sylvanus' devoted husbandry of the ocean is related to his role as a devoted husband. His wife, Adelaide, holds as much power and resonance in the narrative of gender and overfishing as do the ocean and the fish. In many ways, Sylvanus and Adelaide are a mismatched couple: she relished school and reveres education as a means of escape from outport life, while he completed the bare minimum of schooling, eagerly looking forward to the day that he can completely devote himself to fishing. Sylvanus courts Adelaide eagerly. Adelaide, looking for an escape from her many younger siblings and perpetually pregnant mother, responds, and accepts Sylvanus' proposal. Thus begins the marriage between the utterly devoted Sylvanus and the skittish Adelaide. The care and deliberation with which Sylvanus approaches his relationship to Adelaide, "bend[ing] himself to loving her," becomes both an extension of the way Sylvanus conceptualizes and treats the ocean, and extends to Morrissey's treatment of their intimate relationship, which is described with remarkable sensitivity and, usually, reticence.

The most significant of Adelaide's roles in the novel is as a potential mother. She seems unable to bear a healthy child. Her first child is stillborn in a caul, with her second and third dying shortly after birth. Throughout the novel, Morrissey likens Adelaide's seeming inability to give birth to a healthy child to the inability of the ocean to bring forth fish. Interestingly, in the novel's one instance of a detailed lovemaking scene, Morrissey describes Adelaide's need to feel something alive inside her:

She lay back, motionless, as might've the bride of Adam before her first breath of life, for lo, she must've been dead...it felt as if life was being stirred once more within her...But life—to feel life again, even if it were his. And greedily she raised her haunches for more...she strove harder and harder to reach it, hating his coming release, hating his shriveling and dying within her as had so much else.^{lxxi}

Adelaide's need to feel life in her womb recalls Morrissey's treatment of the ocean as a feminine entity, and unites Sylvanus' human wife with his oceanic mistress; a parallel most evident in the novel's latter portion, when the situation of the fishery becomes increasingly dire. Morrissey describes one particular season's late start and in particular Sylvanus' "first day on the water, and he near trembled from the want of it. Yet it was the mother's nervousness that took his mind...He near wept. No wonder she was

tossing and fretting beneath him. No wonder she was reluctant to yield to his jiggers.^{»lxxii} Here, Sylvanus' desire for the ocean is akin to his desire for his wife. His solitary fishing, normally an intimate act, seems an imposition on his partner, the ocean, which tosses and frets under his boat, as would a woman uncomfortable with her sexual partner and the action taking place. In this passage, fishing becomes a violent sexual act, akin to rape, and Sylvanus' normally old-fashioned and innocuous jiggers become unmistakably phallic.

Conditions do not improve, and day after day, Sylvanus jigs, "scared that [it's] all he'd be doing till the day's end, standing and jigging with his hooks trailing uselessly through empty waters... Where the hell were the gulls? Christ, and he gave a short laugh. Of course there would be no gulls. Why would they beg breakfast from empty waters?"^{»lxxiii} This passage simultaneously highlights the duality of Sylvanus's plight—as a fisherman in empty waters and as a man frustrated in his desire for a child. The clearly phallic "hooks trailing uselessly" suggest impotence on two fronts: the voicelessness of the small-scale traditional fishermen Sylvanus represents, whose livelihood—and by extension manhood—is systematically being stripped from them; and his inability to console Adelaide or provide a remedy for her condition.

With both of the women in Sylvanus Now's life ailing and infertile: his beloved Adelaide and the ocean from which he takes his livelihood, it becomes clear that these two female characters are somewhat interchangeable. Adelaide—a woman struggling to have a child—clearly mirrors of the state of the ocean and the cod population struggling to sustain itself. It is highly significant then, when Sylvanus begins to catch fish again that he thinks:

The mother was back...She changed habits sometimes, [but]...one thing he ought to be sure of by now was that the mother would be forever fertile, and the salty taste of her depths would forever dampen his lips. He checked his thoughts, thinking of Addie...as though he had uttered her name out loud, he lowered his head with the shame of wanting her.^{lxxiv}

In Sylvanus's mind, Adelaide and the ocean are, arguably, one and the same—perhaps by virtue of the fact that as wife and ocean, they are the two most important and desired female figures in his life—but more likely because of the fact that their natural rhythms are inextricably bound.

Shortly after the return of the fish later in the season, Sylvanus notices that the size of the fish is decreasing, and, with his deep understanding of the fish and the ocean, knows that

What's happening with the haddock will happen with the cod...it's already starting with the smaller fish and shorter seasons...What's happening on top of the water is a sure measure of what's happening beneath...With the mother's immeasurable depths and complexities, a fish once lost can never be found.^{»lxxv}

Scientific fact verifies Sylvanus's intuition. At the end of the twentieth century—nearly fifty years after Morrissey's novel is set, but very close to the time of its writing, studies have noted that fish are breeding younger than observed previously, with one study finding a decrease in the age of cod sexual maturity from 6.3 years in 1959 to 2.3 years in 1979, amounting to a 40% to 55% reduction in maturation age.^{lxxvi} Decreases in maturation age are usually associated with a “compensatory response to lowered population size.”^{lxxvii} O'Brien (1999) notes that the problem with this strategy is that

Fish are spawning at smaller length and lower weight, such that the contribution to the spawning stock biomass is less than expected, given the number of spawners...Reduced adult survival will select for earlier maturation and increased reproductive effort (Gadgil and Bossert, 1970; Reznick, 1990). Earlier maturation is possibly the response of a stressed population in an environment that is more variable than when the stock is at a higher abundance (Garrod and Horwood, 1984; Rochet, 1998).^{lxxviii}

Ultimately, the small population will become less productive: the early-maturing fish will produce fewer and less viable eggs per individual, contributing less to the biomass as described above. This phenomenon, called the Allee effect, has been cited as a contributing factor to the extinction of the passenger pigeon: once the most abundant species of bird on earth.^{lxxix} Sylvanus, fishing in the late 1950's is noticing the declines that would become the catastrophic decimation documented and explained above.

By the end of the novel, Sylvanus's frustration—born of hand-jigging for tiny fish—causes Adelaide to take advantage of the government's giveaways of gill-nets: a program of which her own father, Leam, has taken advantage, for “they took away his schooner and his flakes, and they're letting all them foreign boats in here, robbing us. The gill-net's all he got left....[otherwise] he'll be nothing more than a hangashore.”^{lxxx} Despite his previously noted objections to such gear, Sylvanus gives in to the pressures of his wife, and takes the gill net she gives him. The final pages of the novel depict Sylvanus,

Loath to disturb the mother's quiet on such a morning...boat slipping quietly across the arm...the mother stirred beneath him...He turned instead to the bulk of netting filling his bow, and started lifting the lead line that would anchor it...With a good ten, twenty feet of netting bundled into his arms, he turned awkwardly portside. Taking a long look at the mother, he heaved it overboard and stood back, a lesser god than yesterday.^{lxxx}

The gendering of the ocean is extremely poignant in this passage. With the seemingly simple act of heaving a net overboard, Sylvanus's relationship to the mother ocean changes dramatically. When formerly, he was a stubbornly protective husband, at the very end of the novel, after heaving the gill net overboard, Sylvanus's relationship to the ocean becomes more akin to that of a still-respectful yet exploitative son. Appropriately, Morrissey entitles the chapter in which this shift occurs “A Lesser God”.

It is highly significant that after *Sylvanus* begins using a gill-net, Adelaide—in the novel’s epilogue—finally gives birth to a healthy baby girl—Sylvia Now. With this event—the clear resolution to one of the central tensions in the novel, Adelaide finally becomes a fully-fledged mother. The infant Sylvia is frail—“all scrawny and wrinkled and red and encrusted with what appeared to be fish gurry”—echoing the frailty of the fish given birth by the weakened mother ocean. Yet she is alive and healthy: at once a sign of hope for the immediate future, and a member of the generation that will complete the desecration of the mother fishery and consequently lament its loss.

The lessons of *Sylvanus Now* and Newfoundland are relevant worldwide but are particularly relevant to the U.S. Twenty-one stocks in the New England region alone, including cod on Georges Bank and in the Gulf of Maine, are considered by NOAA to be overfished.^{lxxxii} Just recently, the Secretary of Commerce agreed to consider raising limits on the most restricted species of groundfish in New England: Georges Bank cod among them^{lxxxiii}. The marine ecosystems in New England and in Newfoundland are intimately related in terms of ecology and history, and, as has been shown above, have been subjected to similar ecological effects of overfishing and similar legislative trajectories of claiming marine territory, exclusion of foreign vessels, and expanding domestic capacity. Since fish swim regardless of national boundaries, reading the science and environmental history of the Newfoundland cod fishery through the literary lens of a novel like *Sylvanus Now*, can contribute to our long-term understanding of our own fisheries in human and ecological terms. Studying the stories of ecological depletion as portrayed through the literary arts allows us to feel its consequences, and to own them: helping develop empathy with both the humans most greatly affected and with the non-human animals and environments with which we all interact.

Sylvanus Now is both lament and requiem, not only for the fish, but for the way of life of those who fished. It does not romanticize, but rather portrays a fishery roughly forty years prior to its writing, and, marked by hindsight, elegizes it. While facts, figures, and policy suggestions abound, there is a noticeable dearth of literary fiction that addresses the collapse of the cod fishery. As this paper has shown, Morrissey frames this issue within a multifaceted discourse on gender and motherhood, not only as it pertains to *Sylvanus*’ wife, Adelaide, but to the fish and the ocean. This grounding of the gender discourse in scientific fact and history, coupled with the problematic connotations of rape, impotence, and loss of life at sea introduced by doing so makes overfishing the wrenching, visceral, and personal issue that every environmental catastrophe should be.

In the case of *Sylvanus Now*, literary study has brought overfishing *home*, helping us understand that the collapse of a fishery is as intimate a crisis as a couple’s struggle to have a healthy child. By showcasing the humanity and intimacy of ecological problems, literary scholars can frame these problems in such a way that people are moved to care, and to act, out of empathy and in support; as they might be by a problem in their own family or in that of a close friend or neighbor. As the opportunities for marine environmental history abound, so do the opportunities for literary scholars to aid in overturning “the myth of the timeless ocean” informed by the relevant science, culture, and environmental history; unlocking lessons for a new human relationship to the marine

environment. This relationship is not the once emblematic “man against the sea”, but an equally powerful emblem, problematized by our need to exploit the ocean’s resources, both living and non-living. This new emblem is best described by the Victorian poet Algernon Charles Swinburne of “the great sweet mother, / Mother and lover of men, the sea.”^{lxxxiv}

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- ^v Bolster, W. Jeffrey “Opportunities in Marine Environmental History,” *Environmental History* 11 (3)(2006): 567-597. 567
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- ^{xiv} Clover, *The End of the Line*, 111, Finlayson and McCay, “Crossing the threshold” 311,
- ^{xv} Finlayson and McCay, “Crossing the threshold” 320, and Young, Oran R. “The Political Economy of Fish: The Fishery Conservation and Management Act of 1976. *Ocean Development and International Law*. 10 (1982), 199-273.
- ^{xvi} Clover, *The End of the Line*” 112
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- ^{xix} Morrissey, Donna. *Sylvanus Now: A Novel* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005) 202, 122
- ^{xx} Todkill, Anne Marie (2007) “Landscapes and Interiors: A Map of Glass, Sylvanus Now” *The Women’s Review of Books* 24:1 28- 28
- ^{xxi} Finlayson and McCay, “Crossing the threshold”
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- ^{xxiv} Roberts, *The Unnatural History of the Sea*. 32
- ^{xxv} De Soncino's letter to the Duke of Milan, 18 December, 1497. Quoted in J.A. Williamson (1962) *The Cabot Voyages and Bristol Discovery under Henry VII*. Hakluyt Society, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. Also in Roberts, *The Unnatural History of the Sea*. 33
- ^{xxvi} Roberts, *The Unnatural History of the Sea*. 34, Pope, Peter E. *Fish into Wine: The Newfoundland Plantation in the Seventeenth Century*. (Chapel Hill, NC. University of North Carolina Press. 2004) 15
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- ^{xxviii} Roberts, *The Unnatural History of the Sea* 330, 213
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- ^{xlii} Neis, Barbara. "Fishers' Ecological Knowledge and Stock Assessment in Newfoundland" *Newfoundland Studies* 8 (1992) 155-178
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- ^{xliv} Morrissey, *Sylvanus Now*, 66
- ^{xlv} Morrissey, *Sylvanus Now*, 130
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- ^{xlvii} Morrissey, *Sylvanus Now*, 26

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