



# A Brief Probe into the Indispensability of Water in Literature and Philosophy

Yunxin Xie<sup>(✉)</sup>

School of Humane Studies, Zhujiang College, South China Agricultural University,  
Guangzhou 510925, China  
juvenilerhymester@foxmail.com

**Abstract.** Throughout the ages, water has played an indispensable role in literature and philosophy. Countless written works focus on water, or use images of water as mediums of expression. “From time immemorial many fine things have been said and sung of the sea. And the days have been, when sailors were considered veritable mermen.”. This article aims to uncover the correlation between literature, philosophy and water. How does water fascinate us? How does it prevail as imagery? What does it bring to our pieces? The reasons why water never fails to fascinate people are divided into three parts as follows. First, from an aspect of bioanalysis, water can give us a feeling as if we were still in our mother’s belly, for that a striking likeness between the sea and the human womb’s environment has been found. Secondly, since human beings spend their first 10 months in water, we are born with a natural complex about water though rejected from awareness; As a result, we may be sentimentally attached to water. Hence we link our mentality with its relevant traits; Thirdly, water has raised the sense of belonging in us. Writers tend to express their religious yearning for alliance with the outer world because that sense may be the stem of religious feelings inside of us.

**Keywords:** Water · Literature · Philosophy

## 1 Introduction

Imageries play an essential part in literary and philosophical creation because there are rare instances when simple language itself succeeds in expressing authors’ true feelings. Confucius once said: “Language does not give the fullness of the concept in our mind.” (Confucius) “Moreover, language cannot express our thought completely, so we need to utilize specific images [1].” Amongst those imageries, water appears to be the one which is widely used in poems and prose, regardless of the limit of time or space. “Numberless songs hail ‘the seven seas’” [2]. In ancient times, “Chinese traditional poets tended to symbolize time as water, expressing their yearning and pity for the swift passage of time” [3]. To be brief, the tenderness, openness, fluidity, violence and unpredictability of water may shed light on both ancient and modern writers, providing them with a different way in literary and philosophy creation.

## 2 The Regressive Undertow for Mammals

From the aspect of bioanalysis, there exists a theory Sandór Ferenczi first raised in his bioanalytical *Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality*, “the thalassic regressive undertow” [4]. By that, he meant the sea could be proved as the original living place of ours for its likeness to inner environment of human wombs. Through analyzing how the mammalian fetus gestates in amniotic fluid, Ferenczi discovered the saline solution in which humans spend the very first of their months, “can be understood in phylogenetic terms as the need to find an ersatz for the sea” [2]. The major point in Ferenczi’s assumption is based on the theory that at a certain point in evolutionary history, a disastrous draining of the ancient oceans had happened, forcing several aquatic species out of the seawater environment “to strike out on a path that would culminate in species that form an amnion for their young” [2]. In this way, amniotic fluid can be seen as an “introjected sea”, a substitute to the seawater environment we’ve long been a part of. As an evolutionary anthropologist, Loren Eiseley pointed out how calcium, mainly from the coral reefs, has made its journey to the human bones; It was so immense a journey for those marine elements like gold, oil and balsam to travel from oceans to our body. “The sea, with its gold, oil, and balsam, has made its way to the human endo- and epidermis” [5].

In addition, Ferenczi also studied the frequency in which the amnion executes contraction to its fetus inside. Take the baby chick in an egg as an example, the contractions begin at one of the very edges of an egg and then progress to the opposite side, rocking the fetus inside back and forth in a rhythmic fashion. “These movements increase up to the eighth day of incubation and then decrease. in the same way as the volume of amniotic fluid” [4]. Slower but similar to the frequency in which sea waves flood and ebb on the shore every day. Ferenczi thus claimed that if this phenomenon of rhythmic rocking had not been used to exhibit analogy with the surging of sea, he’d be surprised because “Though in the last analysis, this is more than merely a figure of speech” [4].

In naturalists’ opinion, water is the origin of mammalian life and the proof of their vitality as mammals are made from water and dependent on it. They hold that “The earth of flesh and bone would be nothing without water” [6]. Only dead bodies would become dry and dehydrated. In addition, nearly all mammals have fixed body temperature, “If not of cold-blooded amphibians—comes the warmth that is essential to life” [6]. And this stability of temperature may come from moisture, to be precise, “The seeds of all things having a moist nature, water being the natural principle of moist things” [6].

Yet the same theory seems to apply to philosophy. Thales, known as a Neptunist philosopher, believed the whole world and its habitants are made out of water. “Even in antiquity, people could only conjecture the grounds for this belief: was it because all animals and plants need water, or because the seeds of everything are moist” [7]. Thales also claimed that the only way for Homunculus, “the spiritual seed of humanity” [2], to acquire a body is to throw himself in the vast Aegean. He will seek his soul container in the sea and therefore experience a whole process of speciation, “in order there to assume and pass through all the myriad forms of organic life, to evolve through eons of time in the direction of a still remote humanity” [2].

### 3 The Happy Surrender

Based on the aforementioned part, Sandor Ferenczi held that amnion fluid represents an “introjected and ideal sea” of ours. Then such natural born fascination toward water is exerted on us, deeply rooted in subconsciousness. “‘Let ourselves be cradled’ would be the cry of all incipient vertebrate life” [4]. So, maybe all of the species are driven by this natural call of returning, in pursuit of a satisfying sense of belonging it gives us.

*Yet it also respects a certain necessary passivity: “I drowned the will to move myself,” writes Lingis, remembering the powerful surges that shunted him this way and that [2].*

As it is, when cradled in water’s embrace, rhythmic caresses had relieved Lingis from external disturbance, then made him happily give up his autonomy.

*The human body—in this case my own body, floating on its back in Balos Bay—seems itself to be that swaying skiff as it drifts weightless in the sea. Although it is no more than a personal experience, one that anyone might have, the passivity of this cradling seems to me to be philosophically important [2].*

Like a “weightless swaying skiff” [2]. Water always sustains Krell’s body with open arms, which later renders him completely passive, getting him into a state of peace and unbinding.

Due to this passivity, such philosophical sentiments may be generated back toward water. Now water has surpassed its seeming image, then becomes a reflection of the author’s mentality. Thales once said the first time he came to think about “thinking”, the first word that emerged in his mind is water. (Thales) In Greek myths, even deities can be influenced by the flow of mental activities, yet caught in an “undertow of profound dejection.” Hence the tears of Kronos is referred to the “bitter brine” [2].

The same goes to Walt Whitman’s “*Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*”. The author also associated his self-recognition with the utter passivity of being afloat on water.

*I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution,*

*I too had receiv’d identity by my body,*

*That I was I knew was of my body, and what I should be I knew I should be of my body [8].*

Through this, Whitman discussed the philosophical meaning of being adrift. In his description, floating on water inspired him of many ideas. “As though the best of life were floating, being afloat, being a ‘float forever held in solution’” [2].

Due to the solid connection between water and human sentiments, water has prevailed as imagery in the field of literature and philosophy.

Philosophically, Schelling described the fluidity of sea as a “Platonic matter”, something that adheres to an obscure and uncertain law and always sticks to its fleeting nature [9].

Yet the same watery trait has been well reflected in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*. All the elements: no matter the steady flooding of the waves on the coastline, the lapping sound of those waves, the passage of days, the orbiting around the sun during the changing seasons, or “the slow dripping of the drops of time on and in Woolf’s cavernous characters,” [2] every bit of them exhibits a “stalactitic temporality”, like a stalactite slowly drips its drops on the ground in a remote cave [2].

Similarly, ancient Chinese traditional poets also compared the fluidity of water with the temporality of time. “They use water as a symbol to describe time as something

fleeting, thus expressing their sincere yearning and pity for the swift passage of time” [3].

Besides the fluidity, a famous Chinese thinker Lao Tzu also reflected on the openness and tenderness of water. By analyzing watery traits, he thereby explained in his namesake ‘Lao Tzu’ that “Tao” includes peace, inactivity and maintaining of a calm mind. As a result, “People will comprehend and realize ‘Tao’ better by dissecting the characteristic and connotation of ‘water’” [10].

## 4 Water, Full of Gods

In the previous part, we’ve discussed the utter passivity to which water has subjected us. Yet this passivity might give rise to a certain kind of religious feeling. In Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud expressed his disapprobation to religion, while his friend Romain Rolland strongly opposed his attitude by saying that Freud had ignored the source of religious feeling. Freud described this source as “a feeling—an ‘oceanic’ feeling” that nearly every of us has experienced [11]. Furthermore, in this book, Romain also claimed that even with dogmas and liturgies of institutionalized religions disappearing, people can still call themselves religious “on the basis of this oceanic feeling alone” [11].

According to the aforementioned part, Ferenczi had proved that the water would arouse a sense of belonging in us. Then it is no wonder why this sort of oceanic feeling will also connect us with the world, as if the world was the amniotic fluid we live in. Thus, the religious feeling with the world is. There’s intriguing supporting evidence that when studying the oceanic feeling, what had occurred to Freud was a historical novel named Hannibal. Hannibal, the protagonist, said that “One cannot fall out of the world.” In Freud’s understanding, Hannibal’s affirmation showed “a feeling of indissoluble confederation, of belongingness to the totality of the outside world,” Then, Freud again added that he could not deny that the majority of us were possessed of this “oceanic feeling” which perfectly represented the watery trait of openness [2]. All in all, this again solved the mystery that writers love to use water as imagery to express their yearning for an alliance with the world.

On the other hand, since water often brings us misfortune, it is closely related to negativity, like fear and death. Science has proved that “each period of earth and life histories, as manifested in the stratum, ends in catastrophe, be it a Neptunist or Vulcanist one.” This means floods had eliminated many generations of species on earth [2].

In *Rapture*, Lingis called the unknown nature of the seawater “libido”, and yet “the libido is connected in some mysterious way with death—therefore with anxiety and fear” [12]. Additionally, “the general impression given by Edwin John Pratt’s poetry, in particular his early poetry, is that he uses imageries of water to emphasize its hostile and antagonistic nature” [13].

According to Freud, religion is based on fear. What was one of Freud’s famous contentions is that he thought “believers often regress to the condition of a helpless child who is afraid of the forces of nature”. This phenomenon “has a significant role to play in the etiology of religious belief”, causing believers’ automatic seek for love of a father who might exempt them from misfortune [14].

In this case, water can succeed in taking the form of an unconscious wish for a heavenly father, making us see it more religiously. In Whitman's *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*, the author expressed his longing and tranquility, somehow religious, to water, to passivity, to death. "Walt Whitman's 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking' is a poem of the sea. And what the sea whispers to the young poet is 'that low and delicious word, death'" [2]. It is obvious no being can be everlasting, and there's nothing they can do. Toward death, every of them is utterly passive. "Every being must obey the imperious summons that says, 'Go back where you came from'" [2].

## 5 Conclusion

The multitude of factors mentioned above contributes to the indispensability of water in literature and philosophy. From the perspective of bioanalysis, water was proved to be the former site in which humans lived by Ferenczi, thus giving them caresses they feel in wombs. In the aspect of psychoanalysis, due to those caresses water give to human, it renders them utterly passive. Then authors' sentimental and philosophical feelings are aroused. In the last part, due to the sense of belonging or fear water has exerted on them, writers tend to express their religious yearning for an alliance with the outer world or return. Nowadays, water is still a prevalent imagery used in written works, helping the authors for better expression of their mentality.

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