

The Morning After A Night to Remember:

The Lesson of the Titanic

BREE HOSKIN

© 2006-2007 by Florida Atlantic Comparative Studies. All rights reserved.

This article sets out to explore how and why the Titanic has been represented as a cultural watershed – an event that caused society to wake up to the dangers of its modern environment. It plays into the notion of catastrophe and representation by exploring how the endurance of the unsinkable myth in dramatic representations has affected the Titanic's status as not only a warning, but also a lesson, for the twentieth and early twenty-first century. A comparison between representations produced during the 1950s and in the wake of 11 September 2001 reveals similarities between the lessons garnered, thus giving the Titanic's meanings an historically transcendental significance. Both use the Titanic to stress the dangers of complacency and hubris, the need for vigilance in security measures and, most importantly, the importance of nurturing personal relationships.

Titanic survivor John 'Jack' B. Thayer's 1940 account of the disaster, *The Sinking of the Titanic*, treated the sinking as the end of a peaceful and dreamlike epoch of modern complacency and the beginning of an uneasy and alert global consciousness:

There was peace, and the world had an even tenor of its ways. True enough, from time to time there were events – catastrophes – like the Johnstown flood, the San Francisco earthquake, or floods of China – which stirred the sleeping world, but not enough to wake it from its slumber. It seems to me that the disaster that was about to occur was the event, which not only made the world rub its eyes and awake, but woke it with a start, keeping it moving at a rapidly accelerating pace ever since, with less peace, satisfaction and happiness...to my mind, the world of today awoke April 15, 1912.

That Thayer took the Titanic to signify the end of a world found resonance even at the end of the twentieth century, when in 1998 Peggy Noonan used the Titanic as a metaphor for articulating an anxiety and unease that she sensed was bubbling under the deceptively calm and innocuous veneer of wealth, abundance and technology over New York – a city she called the 'psychological centre' of American modernity:

Something's up. And deep down, where the body meets the soul, we are fearful. We fear, down so deep it hasn't risen to the point of articulation, that with all our comforts and amusements...we wonder if what we really have is...a first class stateroom on the Titanic. Everything's wonderful, but a world is ending and we sense it. (There Is No Time)

Noonan's use of the Titanic as a metaphorical warning against placing social confidence in the safekeeping of American progressive modernity, which, by the late twentieth century, had shifted from the power of the machine to the power of commerce, again found articulation three years later in Noonan's attempt to understand the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on New York's World Trade Centre – an architectural structure that symbolised this power of American commerce:

If it has to be compared, yesterday to most of us in New York, it was Titanic. It was the end of the assumptions that ease and plenty will continue forever, that we rich folk will be kept safe by our wealth and luck; it was the end of a culture of indifference to our nation's safety. Those Twin Towers, those hard and steely symbols of the towering city, were the ship that God himself couldn't sink. (September 11 73)

While Noonan's 2001 version of the unsinkable ship was New York's World Trade Centre, the 1950s version could be seen to be the atomic bomb. The atom bomb was certainly something in which American faith had been placed. While American President Harry S. Truman had declared it 'the greatest thing in history', (LaFeber 26), it was during the 1950s that, according to Steven Biel, "the atomic establishment was telling the public about the sunny side of the atom" (167). However, the perpetuation of the 'unsinkable myth' in such Titanic themed texts as American author Walter Lord's 1955 bestseller *A Night to Remember*, Roy Baker's 1958 British film adaptation of Lord's book and a 1959 episode of John Newland's American television series *One Step Beyond* implicitly indicate reservations about placing absolute confidence in technological advancement, using the Titanic both as a warning against modern complacency and as a lesson for the atomic age. The purpose of this article is to explore how the endurance of the unsinkable myth in the collective public consciousness and dramatic representations has affected the Titanic's status as not only an iconic warning, but also a lesson, for the twentieth and early twenty-first century; how the Titanic is continually given a culturally relevant meaning at times when the otherwise technologically and economically abundant modern world is compromised by crisis. Indeed, the fact that the Titanic's collision with the iceberg was a random accident often plays little part in how the sinking is interpreted in social commentaries and dramatic representations. As such, visual and literary texts that represent the Titanic as the unsinkable ship that sank frequently use this irony as a metaphor the dangers of technological progress, corporate greed and modern ignorance. Moreover, the fact that the Titanic has frequently been represented as a cultural watershed has given its meanings a historically transcendental significance. A comparison between representations produced during the 1950s and in the wake of 11 September reveals similarities between the lessons garnered. Both use the Titanic to stress the ever-present threat of

catastrophe and the dangers of complacency and hubris, the need for vigilance in security measures, and most importantly, the importance of nurturing personal relationships.

Noonan's 2001 article notes that the majority of stories that were exchanged between individuals on the day of the terrorist attacks told of how everyone seemed to be doing something 'innocent' when the attacks began. They were preparing breakfast, getting their children ready for school, or buying a coffee before work. Such stories about unassuming morning rituals can be seen as supporting the modernist lesson that Noonan garners from the attacks, of an America that she hopes will wake up from its everyday indifference towards its own modern conditions to its grim realities. The sharing of these stories is what Noonan quotes Tom Wolfe as calling "information compulsion: everyone talking about where they'd been, what they'd seen" (September 11 72). 'Information compulsion' in Noonan's text acts as a collective and unifying process by which narratives, emotions and therefore meanings – following Stuart Hall's definition of the system of representation – are exchanged between members of a culture (25). Lord's 1955 account of the last few hours of the Titanic, *A Night to Remember* – which took advantage of the willingness of survivors to recount their personal experiences – similarly describes how many passengers were doing something innocent in the moments before the ship hit the iceberg. Chief night baker Walter Belford was making rolls for the following day; Jack Thayer had just called good night to his parents; Mr. and Mrs. Henry B. Harris sat in their cabin playing double canfield; Lawrence Beesley lay in his second class cabin reading. Many other passengers were sleeping, some woken by the collision. Marguerite Frolicher woke up with a "start," Lady Duff Gordon with a "jolt" (15). After the collision, "Mrs. Ryerson pondered what to do. Mr. Ryerson was having his first good sleep since the start of the trip, and she hated to wake him...she decided to let him sleep" (21). All had faith in the ship on which they sailed. After all, as Lord's narrative stressed, "the ship was unsinkable, everybody said so" (22). Lord even titled an entire chapter, "God Himself Could Not Sink This Ship" (138). However, after the collision, these people who were engaging in their mundane night-time rituals would soon find that their confidence in the safety of the unsinkable ship was shattered. As in Noonan's article, Lord found in the process of information compulsion a wider historical significance, that "the Titanic more than any single event marks the end of the old days, and the beginning of a new, uneasy era' in which 'nobody believed in the unsinkable ship" (96). This view is condensed in the narrative to something as simple as the "dancing motion of the mattress" that "pleasantly lulled" Beesley suddenly coming to a stop (22).

Here, the symbolism of the night seems especially significant, as Lord uses the night as a picturesque backdrop for the narrative, opening with a description of the lookout's view of the starlit April sky:

High in the crow's nest of the new White Star Liner Titanic, lookout Frederick Fleet peered into the dazzling night. It was calm, clear and bitterly cold. There was no moon, but the cloudless sky blazed with stars. The Atlantic was like polished glass; people later said that they had never seen it so smooth. (13)

The opening of Lord's text appears to provide the visual context for this dream like sense of peace and security, of a ship full of people under the illusion that they were safe on the "unsinkable ship." In turn, Lord's book can be seen as echoing a literary tradition that used the trope of night time symbolically. For example, William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* plays on the imagery of the night in order to highlight the idea of illusion and imagination. Hippolyta sees in the "story of the night" that, for the Athenian lovers, "all their minds transfigured so together,/More witnesseth than fancy's images,/And grows to something of great constancy;/But howsoever, strange and admirable" (5.1.24-29). However, just as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* hints at the dark and deathly undertones of the dream like illusion when Hermia, upon waking in the woods, imagines a "crawling serpent" in her breast (2.2.152) and when Demetrius talks of killing Lysander (2.1.190), Lord's *A Night to Remember* also achieves a dark and deathly undertone to the peaceful night time imagery through the dramatic irony that the unsinkable ship will sink.

Interestingly, after the sinking, when the dream like night has lapsed into a nightmarish scenario, Jack Thayer likens the cries for help from the struggling swimmers to "the high-pitched hum of locusts on a midsummer night in the woods" (104). Furthermore, the resonance of the night exists alongside equally vivid and symbolically significant imagery of the sea and the iceberg. In the shift from a dream to a nightmare scenario, the sea, at first as smooth as glass, "surged in" and "sloshed along the corridors" until eventually the "glassy sea" was "littered with crates, deck chairs, planking, pilasters and cork-like rubbish" (51). The iceberg, at first small – "about the size of two tables put together" – drew nearer until it "towered wet and glistening far above the forecastle deck" (101). Nature thus forms an all-powerful setting in which the unsinkable ship is rendered powerless. Survivor Elizabeth Shutes, watching the shooting stars from her lifeboat, thought to herself "how insignificant the Titanic's rockets must have looked, competing against nature" (107).

In turn, such imagery finds parallels in a Romantic literary tradition, particularly in the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Mary Shelley. Coleridge merges the night, the sea, ice and death in his 1798 poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, in which the Mariner tells a guest at a wedding how his sinful act of killing an innocent albatross, which violated the sacred bonds of nature, brings vengeance upon the crew of his ship. This pattern of sin and punishment is thematically similar to the interpretation of the Titanic disaster as a divine and natural retribution for the hubristic act of building an unsinkable ship. As Lord's text emphasizes, "scores of ministers preached that the Titanic was a heaven-sent lesson to awaken people from their complacency, to punish them for top-heavy faith in material progress" (101). The Mariner's voyage begins "merrily" until a storm drives the ship to a land of ice that is "mast-high" and "as green as emerald": "The ice was here, the

ice was there,/The ice was all around:/It cracked and growled, and roared and howled,/Like noises in a swound!"

(Coleridge 736). The albatross appears when night time comes: "In mist or cloud, on mast or shroud,/It perches for vespers nine;/Whiles all the night, through fog-smoke white,/Glimmered the white Moon-shine" (736). After the Mariner shoots the albatross, the dead bird is hung around his neck and the ship is adrift on a sea of "slimy things." Dying of thirst, the men are visited by a spectre, the "Night-mare Life-in Death." Left on a ship of dead men, the Mariner is released when, looking at the slimy "water-snakes," he blesses them for their weird beauty. The albatross falls from his neck, but for his crime he is condemned to wander the earth "like night," preaching worship for all living creatures.

However, Mary Shelley's character Robert Walton in *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus*, written between 1816 and 1817, is confident as he sets out on the ice-floes on his chartered ship: "I am going to unexplored regions, to 'the land of mist and snow'; but I shall kill no albatross, therefore do not be alarmed for my safety" (11). Indeed, Shelley's casting of Romantic and Gothic views of ice and darkness into deathly nightmare images also contains symbolic and thematic links to Lord's text. As Walton listens to the tale of Victor Frankenstein, the fugitive he has taken aboard, similarities become apparent between Frankenstein's reckless act of creating life and Walton's ambitions of discovery. As Francis Spufford notes, "both men are devotees of what has been called 'Promethean science' - the period's heady sense that the powers of nature might be appropriated for humanity, as the titan Prometheus stole the fire of the gods" (59). It is important to note how Richard Howells has drawn similarities between the myth of Prometheus and the popular understanding of the Titanic in terms of hubris and nemesis. The pack-ice in *Frankenstein* provides the setting for the battle between Frankenstein and his monster. Frankenstein's punishment is death – his own as well as those of his relatives and best friend. His monster, like the Titanic, self-destructs in a dark and icy oceanic environment. As for Walton, a mutiny among his crew as they are "surrounded by mountains of ice, still in imminent danger," drives him to abandon his reckless ambitions and turn his ship around (149).

Moreover, the shift from night to day is another important trope in *A Night to Remember* in that it acts as an analogy for a dawning modern awareness:

The sun was just edging over the horizon, and the ice sparkled in its first long rays. The bergs looked dazzling white, pink, mauve, deep blue, depending on how the rays hit them and how the shadows fell. The sea was now bright blue...Near the horizon a thin, pale crescent moon appeared. 'A new moon!' fireman Fred Barrett shouted. (131)

The 'new moon' seems to symbolize Lord's proclamation that "a new age was dawning," when modern society would become more cautious and self-reflexive, when "never again would men fling a ship into an ice field heedless of warning, putting their whole trust in a few-thousand tons of steel and rivets" (96, 93). Indeed, in the philosophical context of John Locke's 1709 *'An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,'* daylight is used figuratively for clarity, consciousness and

enlightenment: "God has set some things in broad Day-light; as he has given us some certain knowledge" (333). In the more psychologically aware morning of 15 April, Lord describes how "the sun caught the bright red-and-white stripes of the pole from the Titanic's barber shop, as it bobbed in the empty sea" (148). Thus, just as the morning provided a context for Noonan's claim that the World Trade Centre attacks signalled a societal wake up call, the daylight in Lord's text symbolizes awareness, modern clarity and the lifting of illusions. Significantly, Lord's narrative ends with the analogy between literal sleeping and waking and sudden modern awareness. The final character to be depicted is Thayer, who falls asleep as the rescue ship Carpathia heads for the "wildly excited" New York City. As Thayer sleeps on the morning of 15 April, the world – as Thayer had described in his 1940 text, *The Sinking of the Titanic* – "woke up."

In 1956, British film producer for the Rank Organization William MacQuitty took an option for the film rights to Lord's book. Directed by Roy Baker, *A Night to Remember* premiered at the Odeon, Leicester Square, on 3 July 1958. Baker's film seems to suggest that a blissful ignorance of, and complacency towards, impending danger and a false confidence in the safety of the unsinkable ship were largely responsible for causing the disaster, and the film uses the backdrop of the peaceful Atlantic night in order to illustrate this point. That is, Baker's film pays particular attention to ignored ice warnings and the oblivious wireless operator Evans sleeping on a nearby ship called the Californian. As Jeffrey Richards observes, "this was a film in which close-ups were sparingly used...as if to emphasize the collective rather than the individual nature of the experience" (60-61). Poignantly, then, the film employs the close-up three times to reveal an ice warning that has been ignored by wireless operator Jack Phillips (Kenneth Griffith) and the earphones of the wireless operator of the Californian through which the S.O.S. messages from the Titanic come through unheard. The camera directly zooms in on the earphones after the power has been shut off and they are silenced. Ignorance of the impending danger is also emphasized through a close-up of J. Bruce Ismay (Frank Lawton) sleeping soundly in his first class suite, Mrs. Lucas (Honor Blackman) putting her children to bed and Second Officer Charles Herbert Lightoller (Kenneth More) retiring for the night. There is also a close-up of a rocking horse, a symbol of innocence that is about to be lost. The explicit societal belief in the "unsinkable ship" is also emphasized. The 1958 British theatrical trailer for *A Night to Remember* described the film as the depiction of an event in which "2,208 happy, confident people sped across a flat, calm sea on a ship everyone knew was unsinkable. Absolutely unsinkable. The ship was called the Titanic." The film itself contains no less than three references to the supposed unsinkability of the Titanic. The first comes just after the opening credits. Lightoller and his wife Sylvia (Jane Downs) sit in a train carriage joking about an advertisement for Vinolia Otto Toilet Soap for the use of first class passengers on the Titanic. Another passenger is offended, objecting, "let those who wish to belittle their country's achievements do so in private. Every Britisher is proud of the unsinkable Titanic." When Sylvia reveals that her husband is in fact going to join the Titanic as her Second Officer, the passenger apologises and declares the ship "the symbol of man's final victory over nature and the elements." When the ship's architect Thomas Andrews (Michael Goodliffe) demonstrates

to Captain Smith (Laurence Naismith) the certainty that the ship will sink in an hour and a half, a shocked Smith declares, "she can't sink. She's unsinkable!" The third unsinkable reference occurs as the passengers are being ordered to put on their lifejackets. One woman protests, "everyone knows this ship can't sink!"

It is Lightoller who recognizes the symbolic brevity of the disaster as the end of an era of modern confidence and complacency when he converses with Colonel Archibald Gracie (James Dyrenforth) as they wait to be rescued on the morning of 15 April:

Lightoller: I've been at sea since I was a boy...I've even been shipwrecked before. I know what the sea can do. But this is different.

Gracie: Because we hit an iceberg?

Lightoller: No. Because we were so sure. Because even though it's happened, it's still unbelievable. I don't think I'll ever feel sure again. About anything.

In the light of day, the rocking horse – a symbol of innocence – is seen floating as debris in the Atlantic Ocean. However, just as Spufford interprets Shelley's *Frankenstein* as "not so much rebutting the claims of Promethean science as pursuing its consequences," both Lord's text and Baker's film are not so much critical of the complacency of 1912 as they are concerned with its consequences (Spufford 60). In fact, the end-of-an-era perspective of both texts can be seen as exacerbating nostalgia for this sense of lost, albeit fragile, peace and security. In Lord's 1986 'sequel,' *The Night Lives On: New Thoughts, Theories and Revelations About the Titanic*, regret was expressed for this loss of social confidence and peace, that "the Titanic has come to stand for a world of tranquillity and civility that we have somehow lost...Today life is hectic...in contrast, 1912 looks awfully good – a happier world." Lord goes on to describe this sense of historical discontinuity in terms of technological disaster itself, suggesting that "compared to the implication of a nuclear confrontation, the figures of souls lost in a shipwreck – any shipwreck – seem almost quaint" (19, 13). As a review of *A Night to Remember* in *Time* declared soon after the book was released, "this air age, when death comes too swiftly for heroism or with no survivors to record it, can still turn with wonder to an age before yesterday when a thousand deaths at sea seemed the very worst the world must suffer" (qtd. in Biel 158). Thus, the Titanic possessed a contemporary cultural resonance for the atomic age. Indeed, Dilys Powell's review of Baker's film in the *Sunday Times* on 6 July 1958 indicates that the film's end-of-an-era perspective was deeply wedded to contemporary insecurities and uncertainties about the modern world:

Perhaps it is good for one to be forced to recall the Titanic...of all the horrors conferred on us by the age of speed and comfort the most appalling to me is still the sinking of R.M.S. Titanic...No doubt this is irrational. I ought to be shrinking much more from the thought of Belsen or Hiroshima...No use: the story of the Titanic still has an effect which none of the tortures or massacres of the past twenty years can equal...The odious distinction belongs to the end of an age. Other aspects, too, of the story, are part of an end: the dissolution of a kind of confidence, a kind of optimism, the end of

absolute faith in absolute safety. Perhaps my father and mother...were vaguely conscious that the ground beneath their feet was no longer as solid as they had fancied. Perhaps this first intimation of insecurity it was which made, and still makes, the sinking of the Titanic so terrible to me and my contemporaries. At any rate after two world wars one is inclined, looking back at the night of April 14, 1912, to take it as a savage warning bell (qtd. in Richards 86-87).

Powell's review reveals an acute modern awareness and apprehension existing in the technologically progressive 1950s, just as it existed at the end of the twentieth century when in 1998 Noonan used the Titanic as a metaphor for social belief in the triumph of modernization and the paradoxical anxiety about modernization's own downfall.

The Titanic, then, was represented both later in 2001 and in 1958 as the lesson, and not just the "savage warning bell," of modernity. Noonan's 2001 lesson from the terrorist attacks was the need for a channelling of this modern wake up call into an increased vigilance in security measures, that "we must admit that we have ignored the obvious, face the terrible things that can happen, decide to protect ourselves with everything from an enhanced intelligence system to a broad and sturdy civil-defence system" (September 11 73). Noonan had already recognized this lesson in 1998 when she declared the necessity to "press for more from our foreign intelligence and our defence systems, and press local, state, and federal leaders to become more serious about civil defence and emergency management" (There Is No Time). Noonan also garnered a personal lesson from a rising modern awareness – to 'take the time' to cultivate personal relationships:

The other thing we must do is the most important. I once talked to a man who had a friend who'd done something that took his breath away...She searched the orphanages of South America and took the child who was in the most trouble...and in time the little girl grew and became strong, became in fact the kind of person who could and did help others...So be good. Do good...Pray. Unceasingly. Take the time.

Similarly, the fact that society in the 1950s seemed to already be acutely aware of the destructive possibilities of its own modern conditions suggests that what was at stake in *A Night to Remember* was not so much the need for modern awareness itself, but rather what to do with this modern awareness. Certainly, the film's end credits, presented against a sun-lit ocean, are preoccupied with the lesson gained from the sinking:

But this is not the end of the story – for their sacrifice was not in vain. Today there are enough lifeboats for all, increasing radio vigil and, in the North Atlantic, the International Ice Patrol guards the sea-lanes making them safe for the peoples of the world.

However, the message of *A Night to Remember* can be read not only as being the need for security measures against technological disasters. Indeed, MacQuitty, in an interview given for Ray Johnson's 1993 documentary *The Making of A Night to Remember*, saw in the sinking a more personal lesson to be gained:

There were eighty-five survivors alive when I made the film, and I corresponded or saw fifty of them, and all these people had this extraordinary calm attitude to life. They were, I wouldn't say resigned, but they were happy to accept life as it was and not ask for miracles. I was very affected by this because this of course is what I got from the original sinking. I got an attitude to life that you have to make the most of what you get...its very important. The last thing you want is to be put down saying that 'you did so want to be nice to Suzie' and it's too late. And 'too late' are the saddest words in any language.

Thus, *A Night to Remember* can be seen as taking a lesson from the past in order to create a personal and collective future – that, with the modern awareness that the Titanic helped realize, time is precious. Indeed, as the 1956 *Time* review of Lord's book suggests, time was at a premium during the atomic age when "death comes too swiftly."

As such, the film is particularly sensitive to time, lost time and personal relationships. That is, in the two hours and forty minutes it took for the ship to sink, the film portrays how various passengers and crew members behaved as they 'woke up' to the fact that they were suddenly living on borrowed time. The film depicts the Sunday night of 14 April before the collision with glimpses into the night-time rituals of some of the passengers and crew. Baker Charles Joughin (George Rose) finishes work in the kitchen; waiters clear tables in the first class dining room; Lightoller goes to bed; Ismay sleeps peacefully, Mrs. Lucas tucks her children in. Dr. William O'Loughlin (Joseph Tomelty) articulates the personal lesson of the disaster when he tellingly advises Andrews to put "people first, things second." On the bridge, First Officer Murdoch (Richard Leech) glances at the clock – it is 11:30. The silence that accompanies these images is suddenly broken when the lookout spots the iceberg. A waiter glances up to see glasses rattling. Water bursts into the boiler room. Lightoller turns on his bed lamp and gets out of bed. Harold Bride (David McCallum) tells Phillips that he "can't sleep with this racket going on," and offers to help in the wireless room. Andrews inspects the damage and informs the captain of the ship's fate: "She's going to sink, captain." When Smith asks how long the Titanic will last, Andrews calculates, "as far as I can see, she made fourteen feet of water in the first ten minutes after the collision...she should live another hour and a half." Andrews checks the time on his pocket watch as Smith exits. This scene establishes Andrews as a man who is uniquely attuned to the nuances of time. He later tells Mr. Robert Lucas (John Merivale) that "the ship has about an hour to live. A little more if some of the upper bulkheads hold, but not much more." After the collision, an awareness of time and a sense of urgency become increasingly apparent. Lightoller urges the crew to hurry with the boats, telling them that they have had "time

enough." When Bride informs Smith that the Carpathia is fifty-eight miles away, making all possible speed and should be reaching them in four hours, Smith slowly repeats "four hours" with a look of grim resignation. He orders for the distress rockets to be fired every five minutes from the port side. As the crew prepares for the sinking, all over the ship the stewards rouse the passengers. Lightoller tells a crew member that "the water's up to E deck. There's not much time left." A crew member tells a colleague to "get up top, quick!" Husbands say goodbye to their wives. Mr. Lucas says goodbye to his sleeping son. The captain receives an update from Phillips about the Carpathia's whereabouts: "She's making seventeen knots and should be with us about 3:30." Smith replies, "that'll be too late." He asks Phillips to tell the Carpathia to hurry. Time on the Carpathia also becomes a prominent concern. With the clock in the background reading 1:50, wireless operator Harold Cottam (Alec McCowen) informs Captain Arthur Rostron (Anthony Bushell) that the Titanic's engine room is flooded and her captain wants to know how long they will be. Rostron glances at the clock and says to Cottam, "tell them another two hours." Back on the Titanic, Andrews awaits his fate alone in the first class smoking room, standing in front of a painting called *The Approach to the New World*. The clock below the painting reads 2:20. He again checks the time on his pocket watch as an ashtray smashes to the floor. On the Californian, the officers notice that the big steamer they had seen from a distance firing rockets has now gone. They tell Captain Stanley Lord (Russell Napier) and inform him that the time is now 2:45. The time reads 3:50 as the Carpathia nears the vicinity of the wreck site.

Lord's *A Night to Remember* is also remarkable for its concern with omen, premonition and forewarning. Edith Evans recalls how a fortune-teller had once told her to "beware of the water," William T. Stead was "nagged by a dream about somebody throwing cats out of a top-storey window," and Charles Hays had "prophesied just a few hours earlier that the time would soon come for the greatest and most appalling of all disasters at sea" (84). Indeed, the foreword to Lord's text outlined the narrative of a book written in 1898 by Morgan Robertson entitled *Futility*, in which an unsinkable ship called the *Titan* hits an iceberg and sinks on a cold April night. This ominous precursor to the narrative seems to suggest the idea that the disaster was in some way inevitable. As John Wilson Foster suggests, this notion that the Titanic was a victim of foreseeable fate can be seen as placing the disaster within some sort of cosmic order, that is, a focus on prediction and foresight serves to combat against the randomness of the sinking, in turn imbibing the unsinkable myth of hubris and nemesis with an even stronger significance:

Observers and commentators...retrospectively saw the collision and sinking as having been scripted before they happened: hence the instant and perpetual use (to this day) of the epithet 'ill-fated' to describe Titanic...But quite soon the...assumption abroad was that the Titanic tragedy had been waiting to happen, not just in physical but also in metaphysical terms. Everyone knows now, and knew then, of the claims of unsinkability supposedly made on behalf of Titanic; very early, those claims were regarded as amounting to...hubris, the Greek notion of overweening pride which is an element in the downfall of the Greek tragic hero and in his tragic fate. It suggests the prior existence of some force of

cosmic judgment which the hero offends and arouses; his end, if not his beginning, is already written once hubris is committed. And so, it was widely believed, it was with Titanic, the fate of which was foregone and deserved. (38)

Foster pays attention to 1912 reports of premonitions, including one reported in the 25 April 1912 edition of the *Daily Sketch* which described how a lady under the alias Mrs. A. had a vision of a “four-funnelled steam ship in collision with a mountain of ice” on 3 April. “The name of the vessel appeared as Tintac,” the article reported. When Mrs. A. was asked why she had not made her vision publicly known, she had replied that “the general public mind was not ready to accept these visions as genuine previous to them becoming facts.” What Mrs. A.’s statement alludes to is the notion that 1912 was a period in which blind arrogance in modern technological achievement caused the public to be impervious to warning signs. However, Mrs. A. did articulate the hope that “both railway accidents, shipwrecks, etc., can be reduced to a minimum when people are willing to accept the warnings given” (qtd. in Bryceson 129-130).

In turn, it is the interest in premonition in the context of the atomic age – with its fear of lurking disaster and relative caution against placing complete confidence in advanced technology – that gave an added dimension to the use of the Titanic in the 1950s as both a warning and a lesson for the modern world. Unlike the acute and very real modern apprehension that existed under a veneer of relative economic abundance and technological advancement during the 1950s, modern foresight in the seemingly confident and oblivious year of 1912 is represented as existing only as unheeded premonition and nightmare. The focus on ignored warnings, both real and supernatural, in the build up to the disaster in both Lord and Baker’s texts seems to imply the hope that 1950s society, unlike 1912 society, will heed and, in the words of Mrs. A., be “willing to accept,” the warning signs, regardless of the form in which they present themselves. Indeed, an interest in premonition and other supernatural phenomena characterized television programming during the late 1950s and 1960s. The 1959 American television series *One Step Beyond*, directed by John Newland, promoted a belief in the supernatural and preceded the popular 1960s television series *The Twilight Zone*, which dealt with similar themes. The second episode of *One Step Beyond* was entitled ‘Night of April 14th,’ and told of supposedly true stories of premonitions people had before the sinking of the Titanic. Originally aired on 20 January 1959 the episode begins with Newland reciting a passage from Robertson’s *Futility* and goes on to tell the story of Grace Montgomery (Barbara Lord), who dreams of an icy drowning at sea only to discover that her fiancé, Eric Farley (Patrick Macnee), has booked passage on the Titanic for their honeymoon. Grace’s mother (Isobel Elsom) is excited for the couple and recites a newspaper article describing how the Titanic “is writing a new and glamorous chapter in man’s conquest of the sea. By virtue of her five watertight compartments, she’s been hailed in marine engineering circles as the unsinkable ship.” This scene highlights the hubris that causes Grace’s family to ignore her warnings, with Grace’s mother dismissing her nightmares by reasoning, “besides, that

ship couldn't be the Titanic. The Titanic can't sink. Everyone knows that!" Nonetheless, Grace is adamant that the ship in her nightmares is the Titanic: "I saw a lifeboat tossing in the water. There were letters on the side of it. Clearly I saw the word Titanic on the side of it. I did, I did!" Eventually, Farley subdues his fiancé and she agrees to sail on the Titanic. However, Grace is not the only person to have premonitions of disaster. On the boat deck, a man in a tuxedo tells his companion that he had imagined "a terrible grinding sound, as though the ship had suddenly struck some immovable object." His companion jovially reasons that it was probably his imagination, or, "more likely indigestion." The man in the tuxedo replies, "oh, I'm alright physically, it's just, for the first time in my life, I'm afraid...You know, if I weren't a hard-headed realist I think I'd call on my minister." According to the show's narrator, "there were others far away who felt dark premonitions of disaster as the mighty ship raced through the Atlantic night." One of these others was a Methodist minister in Winnipeg, Canada, who tells his colleague Miss Parsons (Marjorie Eaton) that he would like the congregation to sing a particular hymn, one that he "simply knows we must sing tonight." Miss Parsons picks up the hymnbook and recites the hymn: "Here Father while we pray for thee/For those in peril on the sea." The same hymn is being sung on the Titanic, and it is at this point that Newland narrates that "at precisely the same time in New York City, still a thousand miles away, a magazine illustrator named Harry Teller (John Craven) felt a weird compulsion." He tells his wife, "I don't know how it happened. I was, I don't know, helpless. Something seemed to be guiding my hand. I can't explain it." He then sits still and wide-eyed in front of his drawing. "Your hands are like ice," his wife remarks. "The water in the drawing was cold. Icy cold," he replies. Both stare at what he has drawn – a large, four-funnelled liner sinking into the ocean. Back on the Titanic, Grace again has trouble sleeping, and when the ship hits the iceberg, Farley urges her to "remember what the captain said tonight – the ship that nothing in the world could sink." When it becomes apparent that the Titanic is going to sink, Farley apologises to Grace for not heeding her warnings: "If you ever have another bad dream, I'll listen to you. Every word." Like Lord's and Baker's texts, *One Step Beyond* can be seen as using the Titanic as a modern lesson for the 1950s – to pay attention to warning signs and to exercise caution when believing in unsinkable ships.

At the very moment that the hijacked planes collided with the towers on 11 September 2001, James Cameron, director of the 1997 film *Titanic*, and a film crew were hundreds of miles away at the bottom of the North Atlantic, exploring and filming the wreck of the Titanic. Cameron was working on a film project which would later be adapted into a book titled *Ghosts of the Abyss: A Journey Into the Heart of the Titanic*. However, when Cameron emerged from the ocean, it was an emergence, in his own words, "into a changed world" (11). Cameron subsequently doubted the importance of his work:

Here we were, poking through the wreckage of the defining disaster of the early twentieth century, while the defining disaster of a new century had just taken place. At first, our passionate study of the Titanic wreck seemed suddenly pointless and trivial. (11)

Cameron was allowing the events of 11 September to affect his reading of the meanings of the Titanic disaster. This perspective proved detrimental to his attempt to come to terms with the attacks: "Our sense of isolation was intensified because we were stuck out in the middle of the North Atlantic...away from the unthinkable tragedy that had occurred at home – and away from our family and friends" (11). It was thus difficult to grasp an understanding of the event, because the attacks presented themselves as overwhelmingly arbitrary. However, Cameron eventually came to terms with the attacks due to a change of perspective, by instead allowing the Titanic disaster to affect his reading of the meanings of 11 September, and thus he was able to grasp the significance of a disaster which would otherwise be overwhelming:

It became a way for us to talk about tragedy and loss, and about the shock and numbness caused by events that seemed out of all human proportion. The Titanic was a 'safe' tragedy from another century, and we used it to focus our emotions. It helped us come to terms with what was happening in our world now – and perhaps that is ultimately the reason for our collective fascination with the Titanic. The disaster has always been the quintessential story of loss, of coming to terms with death, of heroism and cowardice, and the full spectrum of human response before, during, and after a crisis. As such, it will always be with us as one of the great lessons of history. (11)

Titanic is thus able to act as a blueprint for shaping understandings of the modern world and modern identity through representation when that modern world and identity is compromised by crisis. Geoffrey Hill's 1958 poem *Ode on the Loss of the Titanic* articulates this idea that the Titanic symbolized a modern warning and lesson not just for 1912, but for succeeding generations that were to experience the paradoxical mix of anxiety and optimism within a milieu characterized by increasing wealth and technology:

Thriving against facades the ignorant sea

Souses our public baths, statues, waste ground:

Archaic earth-shaker, fresh enemy

('The tables of exchange being overturned');

Drowns Babel in upheaval and display;

Unswerving, as were the admired multitudes

Silenced from time to time under its sway.

By all means let us appease the terse gods (50).

The “facades” against which Hill’s “ignorant sea” thrives are both literal and symbolic – both the Titanic itself and the societal belief in progressive modernity. Indeed, as Hill himself once wrote, “was not the Titanic disaster partly the result of rhetoric? A sinkable ship was called ‘Unsinkable’; and the realists and practical men, who are always the blindest dreamers of this world, were swamped by a slogan” (qtd. in Foster, *The Titanic Reader* 308). Jeremy Hawthorn sees in this idea, as well as in the poem’s use of “our” and “us,” an historically transcendental thematic resonance, that *Ode on the Loss of the Titanic* “shows a major poet defamiliarizing an event...and opening up its significance for the present, for perhaps all presents” (137). For, with the Tower of Babel, the Titanic, the atomic bomb and the World Trade Centre, there will always be, in both mind and matter, variations on the unsinkable ship.

Works Cited

Biel, Steven. *Down With the Old Canoe: A Cultural History of the Titanic Disaster*. London and New York: Norton, 1996.

Bryceson, Dave, ed. *The Titanic Disaster: As Reported in the British National Press April-July 1912*. Somerset: Stephens, 1997.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” *British Literature 1780-1830*. Eds. Anne K. Mellor and Richard E. Matlack. Fort Worth: Harcourt, 1996. 734-743.

Foster, John Wilson. “The Titanic Disaster: Stead, Ships and the Supernatural.” *The Titanic in Myth and Memory: Representations in Visual and Literary Culture*. Eds. Tim Bergfelder and Sarah Street. London: Tauris, 2004. 35-43.

Foster, John Wilson, ed. *The Titanic Reader*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999.

Ghosts of the Abyss. Dir. James Cameron. Walt Disney Pictures, 2003.

Hall, Stuart. *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997.

Hawthorn, Jeremy. *Cunning Passages: new historicism, cultural materialism, and Marxism in the contemporary literary debate*. London: St. Martin’s, 1996.

Hill, Geoffrey. “Ode on the Loss of the Titanic.” *Geoffrey Hill: Collected Poems*. London: Deutsch, 1986. 50.

Howells, Richard. *The Myth of the Titanic*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: Macmillan, 1999.

LaFeber, Walter. *America, Russia and the Cold War*. 8th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997.

Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Ed. A.S. Pringle-Pattison. Oxford: Clarendon, 1928.

Lord, Walter. *The Night Lives On: New Thoughts, Theories and Revelations About the Titanic*. Middlesex: Viking, 1986.

---. *A Night to Remember*. 10th ed. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981.

Lynch, Don and Ken Marschall. *Ghosts of the Abyss: A Journey Into the Heart of the Titanic*. London and Canada: Hodder & Stoughton/Madison, 2003.

The Making of A Night to Remember. Dir. Ray Johnson. Ray Johnson Productions, 1993)

A Night to Remember. Dir. Roy Baker. William MacQuitty and Rank Film Organization, 1958).

Noonan, Peggy. "September 11, 2001 and the Titanic Disaster." *The Titanic Commutator* 25:154 (2001), 72-73.

Noonan, Peggy. "There Is No Time, There Will Be Time." *Forbes ASAP* 30 Nov. 1998. [PeggyNoonan.com](http://www.peggynoonan.com). 2000-2002.

Accessed 12 Apr. 2003 <<http://www.peggynoonan.com/article.php?article=67>>.

One Step Beyond. Dir. John Newland. ABC Films, 1959).

Richards, Jeffrey. *A Night to Remember: The Definitive Titanic Film*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2003.

Shakespeare, William. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Ed. R.A. Foakes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus*. Ed. J. Paul Hunter. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996.

Spufford, Francis. *I May Be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination*. London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1996.

Thayer, John B. *The Sinking of the Titanic*. 1940. *MovieGlimpse*. 2001. Accessed 24 Feb. 2003

<<http://www.movieglimpse.com/movies/titanic.htm>>.