



## **Edge of the Sea: Littoral Psychology and Environmental Conflict in Tim Winton's *Shallows***

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### **Abstract:**

*Shallows* by Tim Winton portrays the fictional coastal town of Angelus in Western Australia, where the community's identity is deeply rooted in a long-standing whaling tradition that shapes its cultural memory and social fabric. The study examines the psychological and cultural relationship among characters such as Queenie Cookson, Cleve Cookson, Daniel Coupar, and Nathaniel Coupar. In the town of Angelus, the collective mindset of its people reflects a deep-seated attachment to whaling, a practice that has been woven into the fabric of their everyday lives. Contingent on the town's whaling history has deeply ingrained the practice in its community. Nonetheless, the anti-whaling group Cachalot & Company presents a moral and ecological challenge to this tradition. An intensive text analysis of the novel reveals the tension between economic survival and environmental ethics. The study shows how the characters navigate their maritime cultural identity amid shifting ecological awareness and cultural transformation.

**Keywords:** Blue Humanities, Environmental ethics, Whaling culture, Coastal identity, Ecological consciousness, Australian literature.

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Blue Humanities is a transdisciplinary field that examines how water interacts with human life, shaping cultural memory, economic practices, and social identities across time and space. In recent years, the field of Blue Humanities has emerged as a significant interdisciplinary inquiry that examines the cultural, ecological, and historical relationships between human societies and the ocean. Moving beyond the traditionally land-centred perspective of the environmental humanities, Blue Humanities foregrounds seas, oceans, and coastal environments as dynamic spaces. The ocean is therefore understood not merely as a physical landscape but as a site where human histories, labour systems, ecological consciousness, and cultural imagination intersect. In particular, coastal communities often develop complex psychological and cultural ties with the marine environment, as their livelihoods, traditions, and collective identities are deeply influenced by maritime practices such as fishing, navigation, and whaling.

Timothy John Winton, born in 4th August, 1960 is an Australian novelist. Winton's work is deeply rooted in the coastal landscape and environment of Western Australia. Winton's literary works are widely recognised for their distinctive themes and story connections to place. Much of this inspiration comes from the coastal landscapes of Western Australia, particularly the sea. In his writing, the ocean represents both mystery and tranquillity, shaping the emotional and cultural life of his characters. Influenced by the coastal environment around him, Winton frequently incorporates both land and sea as central elements in his novels. In addition to his literary contributions, he is actively engaged in environmental advocacy in Australia, and he is a well-known supporter of marine conservation. Through his sea-centred narratives, Winton also seeks to highlight the importance of protecting the natural environment.

*Shallows*, the second novel by Tim Winton, interweaves past and present in the story of Angelus, a fictional coastal town in Western Australia that later reappears in several of Winton's works. The novel portrays a community whose identity has been shaped by the

whaling trade for a long time. Once prosperous, Angelus now represents one of the last surviving centres of Australia's whaling activity. Set in 1978, the narrative unfolds at a time when growing public concern over the mass killing of whales brings anti-whaling activists to the town. Their protests jeopardize the community's economic stability, intensifying conflicts that unfold both on land and at sea. These conflicts occur as the residents simultaneously prepare to celebrate the town's 150th anniversary.

The novel explores themes of isolation, despair, ideological conflict, and the clash between economic necessity and moral responsibility. It also depicts the character's psychological connection with water and its non-human creatures alongside their personal lives. For instance, Queenie and Cleeve, at the end of the novel, wait for the whales to appear, as they used to watch during their childhood days, "I don't want to miss anything. They might come while we're gone and they could move on and we'll lose them (Shallows 286)." Long-standing resentments and unfulfilled dreams haunt the town's inhabitants, shaping their relationships and choices.

At the centre of the story, it is Queenie Coupar, the final descendant of a prominent whaling family whose lineage dates back to the 1830s and the brutal origins of the trade. Defying her family's legacy, Queenie joins the anti-whaling movement. Her decision creates a deep rift between her and her husband, Cleve, only eighteen months after their marriage. As Queenie becomes increasingly involved in risky protest actions, Cleve struggles with loneliness and turns to alcohol. During this time, he reads the journals of Nathaniel Coupar, an early ancestor whose writings reveal the historical foundations of the family's involvement in whaling.

The study critically engages with the central concerns of *Shallows* by Tim Winton, situating its key themes within the broader conceptual framework that underpins this research.

The phrase 'Edge of the Sea' refers to the littoral zone where land and ocean meet, symbolising the geographical and psychological boundary that shapes the life of the fictional coastal town of Angelus. Living at this coastal edge, the inhabitants develop a deep cultural and emotional attachment to the sea through generations of whaling practices that sustain their livelihood and collective identity. The study emphasises how the coastal environment influences the mindset, memories, and cultural consciousness of the community. At the same time, "Environmental Conflict" highlights the tension that emerges when traditional whaling culture confronts the growing ecological awareness represented by anti-whaling activism. Thus, the title reflects the novel's exploration of the complex relationship between coastal identity, environmental ethics, and the changing moral attitudes toward marine life.

According to Steve Mentz, "The blue humanities comprises a current of scholarly and artistic discourses that foreground human relationships with water in all its forms (Mentz 17)." Mentz highlights the importance of examining the cultural, ecological, and psychological connections between human societies and aquatic environments. Within this framework, oceans and coastal landscapes are understood not merely as geographical settings but as dynamic spaces that shape economic practices, cultural memory, and collective identities.

Winton's *Shallows* is a narrative about living in a coloured setting and the town that became a flawed site for environmental politics in the twentieth century. The character Des Pustling in the novel is portrayed as a coloniser who buys most of the land to gain control of the town. Regardless of the money, he does it for the pride. *Shallows* is situated in a unique littoral setting. The town of Angelus, founded by the marooned American whalers one hundred and fifty years earlier, was located between the sea and land, and the people who managed to live there had a mere existence on the coast. On the other hand, Queenie Cookson, the protagonist of this novel, comes from a whaling family. She didn't want to follow the legacy passed down from her family, and it could be seen right from the start of the story, as Winton

puts, “The whales are still here, Poppa (15)”, which foreshadows her admiration toward the whales right from her childhood.

Daniel Coupar, grandfather of Queenie, often denoted as “Poppa” or an “old man”, mostly spends his time alone in the changing town, and the characterisation of the old man encapsulates the psychological theme of loneliness, “God A’mighty, what’s wrong, old man? What *is* it? He sat out on the veranda again and saw the hill and heard the whales from far below, and his body ached as it did with changes of season (19).”

The pseudo-mayor of the town, Angelus, “Benjamin Pustling of Surrey found Angelus, Western Australia, and made it his task to prosper and to own (10).” He has plundered the land and abused its people. After Benjamin’s demise, his son, Des Pustling, the novel’s antagonist, takes it up for his father’s call to “build and create (159).” Des Pustling remembers the time when his father passed on his ideologies to him, as the author posits, “Keep an eye on this land, Desmond, his father had said (158).” Self-centred and shady, Pustling’s development drives the town far away from the shoreline, butchering the time-honoured analogy between site and ocean, which had prolonged the town of Angelus.

The conceptualisation of littoral psychology in *Shallows* aids in explaining how it influences the coastal entity and the moral lives of the people. By living in the zone of oceanic space, characters exist at a symbolic edge between the shore and sea, culture, tradition, and change. Queenie, living her love life with Cleeve Cookson, was pretty engaging and almost had no trouble or differences with him. She had taken a turn when coming to the idea of saving the whales from going extinct due to the whaling in Angelus. She encountered the Cachalot & Company, who came to Angelus to make the change. When Queenie develops an interest in this activist group, learns more, and wants to join the community, Cleve refuses, and says, “It’s a lot of jobs to those blokes with a family to feed (63).” This mentality of Cleve depicts the

town's economy after the Great Depression in 1932, and it is now 1978, yet the town still struggles with it. Cleve's utterance to Queenie indicates the view of life in Angelus. He does not want Queenie to get involved in this activist group because he thinks that it will not bring a change where the people of this town plausibly rely on whaling. When Cleve asks Queenie to take this matter up with the MP of the town to bring the change, she replies, "Do you know what MP stands for in Angelus? Mate-of-Pustling. There's no time to change everything from the top down. The whales are dying out, being exterminated and you know it's a fact (63)." The contrasting ideas and notions of the couple trigger the scene in a gripping manner. Non-human creatures in *Shallows*, especially whales, are dying out due to the hunting, which should be stopped. Queenie's choice of joining the Cachalot & Company drifts her from Cleve in life.

Foregrounding the preservation of nature and requisites of human and non-human species, the activists, incorporating the anti-whaling protest community, Cachalot & Company, represent that people should see themselves as a part of an expanded sense of self. Marks and Fleurier, leading members of the Cachalot & Company, reflect the sense of deep ecologists, where Marks certainly fulfils the role:

But with the situation so desperate for whales, you have to intervene on their behalf. You have to redress the balance. Man has been interrupting a long time. That's what this Paris Bay thing is all about. Redressing previous interruptions with more interruptions. Man, I want my children to grow up to the whales; I want them to know their place. An ocean without whales is like a wilderness without trees (152).

Like Marks, Georges Fleurier is also a deep eco-centrist;

The whales have become my life. They are the most emerging creatures alive. They have intelligence, wit, compassion. There is much that is mystical about the whale. One day, if we keep them alive long enough, we will discover it, and perhaps learn

something about ourselves. They are almost magic, the friendly giants of our childhood dreams. Think of the things the whale has seen, the civilisations coming and going (156).

Queenie, a girl descended from a whaling family, does not want to follow in their footsteps. Marks and Fleurier, with a story intertwined connection with nature and non-human creatures, share a common trait, known as maritime ethics. She gains knowledge about the whales and their behavioural patterns from Marks and Fleurier's research and through their notes written in their scrapbooks. "Whales don't operate their best in shallow water (151)." Marks explains the strandings of whales on the shore, where they often lead to a mass suicide, he says,

If a pod leader, for instance, gets into trouble, there's almost a certain stranding of the pod. They will follow him anywhere. Hundreds of them, sometimes, on the beach. You can tow them right out to sea again and they'll go right back in. They just throw themselves up and die. Unless you can kill the leader. Lately, it looks as though the only way to save the stranded whales is to kill some. If you kill the leader and stop the distress signal, you have a fair chance of towing the others out and having them re-grouping and moving on, with a new leader maybe (151).

Diving deep into the narratives of Winton, the readers are in a position to grapple with the essence of the whales' living and how they operate, in a certain way. Even though scientists could not find the reasons for the whales being hale and healthy getting stranded on the shore, it is still a mystery. Linking this to Werner Herzog's 2007 documentary "Encounters at the End of the World" famously features a *nihilist* Adélie penguin that abandons its colony to walk alone into the deathly, icy interior of Antarctica, it shows that the penguin leaves its colony from food, survival, and safety. In close relation to this documentary, whales, at times, are

without any discrepancies or disorientations in their mind also get stranded on the shore. It is often interpreted as a symbol of existential rebellion, curiosity, or, as described by scientists, a rare case of neurological disorientation. Dr. Ainley explains, “even if he caught him and brought him back to the colony, he would immediately head right back for the mountains. But why? (Herzog 00:01:27-40).” Tantamount to the nihilist penguin, even if humans put back the stranded whale in the ocean, it will return to the shallows.

In *Shallows*, the notion of whale strandings can be closely interpreted as a psychological metaphor for the characters and also the littoral psychology framework, which reflects the emotional but social disorientation and detachment experienced by the people who live in the town of Angelus. Whales stranded on the shore are lost and separated from their natural environment. Queenie Cookson, joining the Cachalot & Company, favours her psychological state with whales stranding because she feels alienated within her own community. For instance, there is a scene where she decides to move from her house into the wilderness, “She hauled the big bag onto her shoulder and went out the door and downstairs into the twilight (69),” leaving Cleve alone in the house, “Hey, what about me? he called lamely, standing in the doorway as she disappeared into the grey, trafficless street. The house creaked about him; he refused to believe (69).” This separation from Queenie made Cleve push toward alcoholism and loneliness. Cleve, cut off from his own emotional environment, was struggling amidst the loyalty to the town’s whaling tradition and his love for Queenie. His psychological state depicts the chaotic, stagnated, and loss of path.

The entire community of the town is affected by the experiences of a form of collective stranding. Whilst speaking of collective stranding, the character Daniel Coupar, the grandfather of Queenie, can also be a prime example of stranding. His loneliness reflects the helpless vulnerability of a stranded whale. He represents the ageing generation unable to adapt to the shifting moral landscape. However, he spends much of his time in solitude, detached from the

changing town and from Queenie and Cleve, and he seeks solitude in water and by waiting for the whales, as Winton puts it, “Then rain fell without bounds as the sky fell in. Daniel Coupar heard the cries of the whales piercing the deluge impossibly.... Daniel Coupar lay shrouded in water (289).”

In addition to this context, critics often point out how Winton subsumes real-life environmental confrontations into the narrative fabric of the novel. One such interpretation is offered by John P Turner, who remarks that Winton builds the dramatic dynamics of the novel around several evident incidents linked with the anti-whaling protests. Turner explains:

Winton bases the superplot of his novel on three of the most dramatic episodes in the confrontation, the failure of Greenpeace’s small boat engines, causing the whalers to win the first day’s confrontation, the near-miraculous appearance of dolphins in usually shark-infested water, and the firing of a harpoon gun dangerously close to the anti-whaler (Turner 80).

Tim Winton is not the first writer to choose whaling as their subject matter. Other writers have written about it either. One such writer is Philip Hoare, a British writer, filmmaker, and curator. His profound work, *Leviathan or the Whale*, was published in 2008, and portrays the whale’s dynamic life and their way of living. Similarly, Winton features the characteristics of whales living and their mechanical way of life. Besides, Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, a great epic of whaling in the pursuit of the nineteenth century, the whale becomes the object of human obsession and conquest. In contrast to the former, in *Shallows*, the whale becomes a casualty, which lays bare the moral crisis of the whaling community. *Moby-Dick* and *Shallows* bring light to the psychological struggle between humans and the sea. For instance, in the former, Captain Ahab’s obsession with killing the whale that attacked him leads to insanity and destruction. In contrast, in the latter, characters like Queenie and Cleve undergo

emotional and ethical conundrums about whaling. Thus, while *Moby-Dick* portrays the whale as a symbol of human obsession and the struggle to conquer nature, *Shallows* reinterprets the whale within a modern ecological framework, where the suffering of whales reflects the littoral psychology and environmental moral crisis of the whaling community.

It is apparent that through the writings of Winton's *Shallows*, the readers could acknowledge the human psyche and their disposition in the town of Angelus. Queenie's pregnancy towards the end of the novel, bearing the next generation of Coupar's, contains a kind of hope. By reuniting with Cleve, she seems to have achieved the ultimate law of love. Winton finishes the novel by describing their reunion on a positive note,

Over the smacking rain, Cleve and Queenie Cookson heard the cries of the whales and were suddenly awake. They lay still for some time, paralyzed by joy and disbelief, hearing the sounds come closer every moment as though nearly with them.

'They've come,' Queenie whispered.

'Yes.' Cleeve hugged her (290).

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