



Voyaging into Freedom: An Existential Interpretation of John Masefield's Salt-Water Poems & Ballads

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ARTICLE INFO

Received:

May 02, 2026

Revision Received:

May 16, 2026

Accepted:

June 02, 2026

Available Online:

June 21, 2026

Keywords:

Maritime, Existential
Choice, Quest, Facticity

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes John Masefield's (1902) collection of poems, *Salt-Water Pomes & Ballads* through an existential framework which goes beyond its basic interpretation of the sea as a natural environment and a location for maritime work. The sea is portrayed as a symbolic space through which we can examine the fundamental elements of human existence which include self-identity, personal desires and development of broader essential freedoms. The narrator exists through his continuous desire to see the ocean which creates a powerful need to explore existence through his own personal decisions which lead to his emotional satisfaction. He chooses to take on uncertain situations because he thinks that true happiness comes from experiencing life through challenging experiences. The sea embodies two opposing aspects and offers people existential choices while they must confront their most difficult contests. People must acquire ambition and will to overcome natural elements of wind, waves and storms because they want to fulfill their existential duty which requires them to make commitments to other people. Masefield's musical patterns and his powerful visual details and his basic elemental vocabulary create a strong philosophical connection which turns his sea poems and ballads into a reflective analysis of human decision making and personal identity and the search for meaningful existence.

1. Introduction

John Masefield (1877-1967) was an English poet writer and later a Poet Laureate. Among his best known works are the novels *The Midnight Folk*, *The Box of Delights*, and the poems "The Everlasting Mercy" and "Sea-Fever". He spent long spans of his life on ships voyaging on high seas observing not only rainbows on seas but 'nocturnal moonbows' as well. Therefore, it is natural that we find reflection of sea life and its existential interpretations in his literary oeuvre. "Sea Fever" is widely regarded as one of the most celebrated works in English poetry, admired for its lyrical rhythm, vivid imagery, and evocative portrayal of the sea. Masefield (1902) declares in the first verse of this poem, "I must down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky/ And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by" (Masefield, p.59) which immediately establishes the speaker's irresistible longing for the sea and sets the emotional tone of the entire work. Traditionally, literary studies have emphasized its aesthetic qualities, romantic idealization of maritime life, and the poet's personal connection with adventure and the natural world. The poem's musicality, repeated refrains, and sensory-rich language convey a profound sense of longing and emotional engagement with the maritime environment, as reflected in the vivid image of "the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking," (Masefield, p.59) which immerses the reader in the physical and emotional experience of seafaring. Researchers usually point out its nostalgia and autobiography elements, stressing the way the author conveys the beauty, unpredictability,

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and difficulties of the sea. However, while these views can help to reveal the literary essence of the poem, they do not address its philosophical meaning. Current literature pays much attention to the romantic or aesthetic side of the poem, ignoring its connection with basic issues of human existence, such as freedom, choice, and the quest for authenticity. When considering the poem from the perspective of existentialism, one can see that the speaker's strong desire to go back to the sea is not just his wanderlust or love for adventure but his deliberate attempt to seek freedom and fulfillment. The sea becomes a place of chance and challenge in which people face uncertainty and responsibility in order to live a fulfilled life, as the Masefield reacts in other words, "I must down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide/ Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied" (Masefield, p.59). To fill this gap in literary research, the current study of *Sea Fever* will be conducted using existential philosophy. This study is aimed at the examination of the ways imagery, elemental language, and rhythm used by Masefield reveal the existential desire of the narrator to live freely and independently from any external factors and social conventions and to follow his or her true nature. Thus, the sea in *Sea Fever* appears to be desirable and at the same time intimidating since, according to the existentialists, freedom involves not only desire but also willingness to take responsibilities and confront the difficulties of life.

2. Research Questions

1. How does the poem "Sea Fever" by John Masefield show the sea as a symbol which enables people to choose between their existence and their freedom?
2. Why does the speaker's desire to visit the sea show his search for an authentic existence which defines his being?
3. How do the poems describe existential hazards while urging human beings to achieve their freedom and venture into danger while pursuing their personal goals?

3. Review of Literature

Salt-Water Pomes & Ballads by John Masefield (1902) has been given a lot of critical attention for its poetic quality, rhythm, and imagery of the sea. Most of the existing literature on the poems seems to concentrate on it from a romantic and aesthetic point of view. One of the most important contributions to the literature on the poem is the analysis of the symbolic importance of "Sea Fever" by Shivakumar (2023) that transcends the mere admiration of the sea. The larger symbolic significance is also implied by the speaker's call for "a tall ship and a star to steer her by," in which the voyage gains more significance in terms of direction, guidance, and aspiration, rather than merely as travel. It is the purpose of this paper to show that there are different levels of meaning in the poem that can be analyzed philosophically.

In general, the critics have focused more on the stylistic features of the poem, such as the repetitive feature, primitive imagery, and rhythm of the poem that reflects the movement of the sea and its attraction. The poetic imagery such as "... the white clouds flying / And the flung spray and the blown spume and the sea-gulls crying" (p.60) is one of the features of the poem that has attracted the critics due to their rhythmic nature and beauty. These aspects of the poem have made the critics interpret the poem as a romantic poem that extols the freedom of life at sea. Although, these interpretations have helped in understanding the poem in terms of aesthetic aspects, they have so far not delved into the human issues involved in the poem.

Biographical criticism has also helped to contextualize this romantic interpretation of the poem. First of all, Babington Smith's (1978) definitive biography proves that Masefield himself spent his youth apprenticed under sail and hence the sense of desire for the ocean expressed in his early poetry was a product of personal experience, rather than mere poetic fancy. The idea that the poem should be interpreted through Masefield's own background is also supported by Drew's (1973) examination of Masefield's use of patriotic and pastoral themes in his poetry and Binding's (1998) critical reassessment, which suggests paying closer attention to the author's craftsmanship. The reference made by the speaker to "the gull's way and the whale's way" indicates not just the romantic desire, but also the knowledge about the maritime world gained by the person. Thus, both biographical and critical studies prove the importance of the fact that Masefield's personal experience has always been a factor affecting the interpretation of the poem. It becomes obvious from the analysis of such scholarly sources that this particular existential aspect of the poem has hardly been paid any attention to by critics interested in the craft.

Despite the above existing body of criticism, the philosophical aspect of *Sea Fever* has yet to be fully explored. Specifically, the poem has yet to be explored in relation to its existential themes of freedom, choice, and responsibility. As Sartre (1946) in his book *Existentialism is Humanism* explains Existential philosophy highlighting the fact that human existence is not simply determined by circumstances but by the choices that human beings make and the responsibility that they take for these choices. As the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy's overview of the movement summarizes, existentialists share the conviction that human beings are self-conscious and exist for themselves, which means they are free and responsible for who they are and what they do, even though this freedom is always exercised within, rather than apart from, the concrete conditions of a given situation (Aho, 2023).

Kierkegaard's (1985) in his book *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* while explain his idea of choice as a leap of faith that is both dangerous and significant, can be employed to gain a better understanding of the underlying motivation of the poem. Kierkegaard argues that "true existence is a leap of faith in which man chooses a course of action in the face of the danger of uncertainty" (Kierkegaard, p.1-2) The speaker's willingness to venture where "the wind's like a whetted knife" illustrates this embrace of uncertainty and risk, making Kierkegaard's concept especially relevant to the poem. In this manner, the speaker's fascination with the sea can be seen as a longing to take a leap of faith in order to live a life that is authentic for the speaker.

The theory of authentic existence by Heidegger provides yet another way of understanding the underlying motivation behind *Sea Fever*. According to Heidegger (1962), authentic existence is a matter of listening to one's call in life, as opposed to living in accordance with the expectations of others (p.311-313). In this regard, the departure of the speaker from the certainty of life on land can be viewed as rejection of inauthentic existence. Indeed, the sea becomes the place where authenticity prevails and the individual has to confront the truth of life and existence.

The explanation of the absurd by Albert Camus (1942) provides an additional, yet different, perspective on the existential issues of the poem. As stated in his book *The Myth of Sisyphus*, what makes life meaningful is not the escape from the indifference of the world but rather living within it with full awareness of that fact – something that corresponds with the speaker's unwillingness to be shielded from the dangers of the sea. This theme is further expanded upon in the book *Ethics of Ambiguity* by Beauvoir (1947), who emphasizes that being free can never happen in solitude since willing one's own freedom presupposes the freedom of others.

From a literary critical perspective, the approach of existentialism has been used in the process of analyzing the representation of human agency and quest for meaning within literary texts. As Earnshaw (2006) indicates, the application of existential literary criticism revolves around the examination of decision-making, freedom, and self-definition in literary and poetic works. Sartre's (1945) essays on literature make a similar point in arguing that the worth of any literary text depends upon the freedom it reveals to the reader and the invitation for commitment by engaging the reader's ability to make choices. The more recent study by Ong (2018) of the novel and existentialist philosophy shows the continuing relevance of this research direction for current literary criticism by looking into how narrative forms themselves might raise issues of authority, freedom, and self-knowledge, while the current study follows the same critical perspective of the latter research in examining lyric poetry, particularly *Sea Fever*. In this regard, it is possible to employ this type of criticism in the analysis of *Sea Fever* as a means of analyzing the poem as an existential text in which the sea is a choice rather than an ideal.

"*Sea Fever*" by John Masefield (1902) has been considered as a literary piece of work that praises the sea and adventure, along with the spirit of roaming. However, the studies conducted on the poem have been focused on the aspects of the poem which depict the romantic nature of the work and the poet's nostalgia towards sea and the rhythmical and visual and simple linguistic techniques used by the poet. These interpretations have emphasized on the literary beauty of the poem but failed to highlight its philosophical value. There should be further research on *Sea Fever* because people have not analyzed this poem through the existential and epistemic point of view. This research will attempt to bridge the gap in the literature and analyze the poem from the existential point of view. The study examines the poem through its symbolic representation of chances and obstacles which Masefield uses to show how people search for their freedom and self-actualization and personal identity. The existing research lacks to provide scholarly work which links the poem's images and rhythms and linguistic elements with existential theories. Therefore, the study intends to establish a new understanding of *Sea Fever* because it shows how people make choices and seek to live genuinely through their actions.

4. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The research employs qualitative research methods to examine John Masefield's (1902) *Salt-Water Poems & Ballads* through an existential lens requires qualitative literary analysis. It enables to conduct thorough studies of the meanings, symbols, and themes that exist in the poetry text. The research investigates how the poem presents its concepts about human freedom and individual choice and the quest for genuine existence without using quantitative data or scientific validation methods. The study employs close textual reading as its main research method to analyze *Salt-Water Poems & Ballads*. The poem undergoes detailed examination through which its visual elements and rhythmic patterns and word choices and structural components get evaluated. The analysis emphasizes how sea, wind, wave and movement patterns repeat throughout the work because these patterns show which emotional states and philosophical beliefs the speaker experiences. The poem's musical elements and rhythmic structure provide an analysis which demonstrates how the speaker experiences both restlessness and intense desire for liberation. The study uses close reading to demonstrate that the speaker's wish to return to the sea represents an essential human need for personal development through taking dangers which lead to self-actualization. The research study uses secondary sources together with textual analysis to create a foundation which establishes the main argument. The sources encompass books and journal articles and scholarly critiques which examine Masefield's poetry and existential philosophy plus

the themes of freedom and choice and authenticity and meaning. These poems and ballads serve as the main focus because existential concepts create a framework which demonstrates why the speaker acts and what the sea represents symbolically.

The study employs existential ideas as interpretive tools to shed light on the poem rather than attempting to force a strict philosophical framework on it. It demonstrates how Salt-Water Poems & Ballads portray the sea as a location that offers both opportunities and difficulties by fusing close reading with pertinent literary and philosophical scholarship. The methodology applied in this study highlights how the poem demonstrates how individuals have the need for freedom, handling of unexpected situations, and discovery of who they really are. The methodology selected by the researchers enables them to demonstrate their results in a manner that clearly and convincingly addresses the research questions.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1. The Call of the Sea: Existential Summons and the Refusal of the Ordinary

John Masefield (1902) in his book *Salt-Water Ballads*, a collection of his poetry, declares from the very first line of his famous poem "Sea Fever", which begins with an emphasis on "I must down to the seas again." The speaker responds to the concept of 'summons' in ways which are described by existential philosophers. According to Heidegger, "the summons" is something which comes from outside of normal life and forces an individual to respond to it in some way. It is not a call which is made by someone else but rather an appeal coming from one's own self that he/she has been living in-inauthentically and therefore is living according to what Heidegger calls the "they-self". The use of modal verbs like "must" instead of "want" or "wish" implies that the speaker's response is not a simple expression of his/her desire but rather an existential necessity. The repetition in every stanza is not simply a form of lyricism but a demonstration of the constant nature of "summons". In this sense, the poem's structure enacts its philosophy: just as Sartre insists that freedom is not a possession but a perpetual project, the speaker's repeated refrain performs the ongoing, unfinished nature of the existential decision.

5.2. The Sea as Situation: Facticity, Risk, and Thrownness

According to existential philosophy, freedom is never exercised in isolation from the circumstances; it always takes place against the backdrop of the person's facticity the set of bodily, historical, and circumstantial factors that the individual has not chosen but still must embrace. In the poem by Masefield, the sea serves as the example of the facticity it is unfeeling, dangerous, and completely indifferent to human desires, which is shown through the depiction of the "wheel's kick," the "wind's song," and the "grey mist on the sea's face." This indifference is additionally emphasized through the imagery of "the wind's like a whetted knife," because the sea challenges the speaker and provides him with difficulties and uncertainty rather than comfort, which makes his freedom truly existential one. The speaker does not see the sea as some romantic place full of benevolence; instead, he sees its dangers and at the same time chooses to face them. This idea is similar to Heidegger's notion of 'thrownness' (*Geworfenheit*): the understanding that one is always already thrown into the world which has not been made by the person and that true authenticity is embracing this thrownness. By being ready to accept "a wild call and a clear call that cannot be refused," the speaker expresses his acceptance of danger as an intrinsic part of any significant decision-making process. In contrast to the aimless wandering of ordinary life, the journey by sea involves expertise, alertness, and responsibility, and "a quiet sleep and a sweet dream" can only be won "at the end of the long trick."

5.3. Solitude and Intersubjectivity: The Limits of Isolated Freedom

Although, existentialism is usually associated with loneliness in this poem, there is more to it when one analyzes the poem carefully. While it is true that the narrator desires freedom, he does not desire loneliness, since he wants both the sea and the sky. What is more, he even asks for "a tall ship and a star to steer her by" which suggests direction, purpose, and the existence of other people like sailors. It is also noteworthy that the narrator desires "a merry yarn from a laughing fellow-rover" in the second stanza. This means that in order to be alive, one does not have to cut himself off from others. This point is in harmony with the philosophy of Beauvoir, which asserts that freedom cannot be separated from the freedom of others, and real choice cannot ignore the world of intersubjectivity and turn to pure solipsism. In other words, the freedom of this man is not the freedom of the hermit but the freedom of the voluntary companion, who chooses both his community and the risks he runs as an existential choice.

5.4. Christmas Eve at Sea

In another poem, "Christmas Eve At Sea" in this collection of poetry, John Masefield (1902) gives life and participation to the natural elements in the process of the birth of Christ as if nature was part of the holy act. In the lines, "The angels called from deep to deep," it is implied that the message comes across the whole universe and shows the universal importance of the birth of Christ. The sky itself is depicted with the use of personification, which makes it look like the shining sky is happy and excited

with the happening spiritual event. He relates that oceans to the very existential questioning and believes that blue waters are a greater part of the world created by God and through angels, we get the message to explore seas for our grater benefits.

5.5. Repetition, Rhythm, and the Temporality of Authentic Existence

The rolling rhythm and meter of the anapestic of the poem, renowned for its musical quality, could be seen as a depiction of existential temporality. For Heidegger, authenticity means having an existential temporality wherein one does not just passively wait for the future but resolutely projects himself towards it despite the importance of the past to him. The waves created by the rolling rhythm of Masfield's poem moving forward and retreating, only to move forward once more depict such temporality wherein anticipation and return are constantly happening. It is shown through the constant process from "the running tide" to "the hope of a quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's over." Each stanza starts with the same imperative statement about the poet's need ("I must down to the seas again") but finishes with another representation of fulfillment, implying that genuine life is circular, not linear: the individual does not find resolution to its need for liberty one and for all but repeats the cycle of decision-making at every new turn, each time gaining some wisdom from the last journey. This pattern of recurrence with difference represents the existentialist assertion that identity is an ongoing process rather than an immutable essence.

5.6. A Wanderer's Song

John Masfield, one of England's great poets of the sea, in another of his famous poem, "A Wanderer's Song" captures pure wanderlust in these lines. The "wind" and "fire" are internal forces, restlessness and burning urgency rather than literal weather, showing how deeply the yearning for movement has taken root in the speaker's body "heart" and "heels" suggesting it drives both feeling and action. As he expresses his enthusiasm and yearning, "A wind's in the heart o' me, a fire's in my heels/ I am tired of brick and stone and rumbling wagon wheels" (p.61). The second line rejects the fixed, mechanical world of cities: "brick and stone" evokes the rigid architecture of urban life, while "rumbling wagon wheels" suggests noisy, grinding industrial or commercial routine—the opposite of free travel. Masfield, who ran away to sea as a young man before turning to poetry, wrote about this tension between confinement and freedom, civilization and the open world. His verses rolling rhythm and colloquial "o' me" give it a folk-song quality, fitting since Masfield frequently draws on ballad traditions to voice ordinary wanderers' longing for oceans to find more choices and freedom other than settled, industrial life.

Further, Masfield (1902) expresses his yearning for oceanic life as following, "I hunger for the sea's edge, the limits of the land/ Where the wild old Atlantic is shouting on the sand" (p.61). These lines continue the wanderer's yearning, but sharpen its focus from the road to the sea, the place Masfield loved most. It shows a very strong indication of the speaker's desire to experience the sea as the place for both adventures and self-discovery. Specifically, these lines illustrate the speaker's desire to leave the boundaries set by the common reality. "Sea's edge" can be interpreted as a symbol of the boundary of the known and unknown realms, whereas "the limits of the land" are associated with the limitations of society. The realm beyond the limit includes the entire wide Atlantic Ocean that "is shouting on the sand". The image of the shouting of the Atlantic Ocean reveals its vigorous and free voice, which invites the speaker to break the boundaries and become free. Sea is seen as the symbol of existential freedom, where the individual is able to develop their true identity through choice and risk. Hence, Masfield represents the sea as the place of liberation of the individual from the boundaries of social reality.

6. Conclusion

Having spent his youth as a sailor, Masfield is generally portrays the sea as a symbol of liberation, danger, and raw natural power, and his poetry reflects that lifelong pull toward the restless, wild horizon beyond land's edge. All of dimensions of these poems, make the call that interrupts the inauthenticity of routine, the facticity of the risk involved in the sea that is accepted rather than run away from, the balancing act of solitude and companionship, and the cycle of time that governs the rhythmic pattern of the verses point towards a poem that is philosophically much more profound than its simplistic image of celebrating maritime nostalgia. Through these poems, Masfield (1902) does not just present a wistful sailor yearning to sail freely on the sea, but presents an existential being who constitutes his freedom through choices made at the risk of existence.

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