

ICON OF THE MONTH

For nearly a century, the wreck of the *Titanic* has exerted a horrible fascination. It seems to be an object lesson – but of what? Of the cruelty of Nature, or the vanity of thinking we can conquer her? Of the frailty of human power? Or the folly of tempting fate?

The ancient Greeks would have forecast disaster as soon as the owners of the *Titanic* – at the time, the largest and most opulent liner in the world – declared her ‘virtually unsinkable’. It would be difficult to invent a more perfect demonstration of *nemesis* than the fate that befell her, four days into her maiden voyage. Three years in the building and fitting and she sank in less than three hours, smashed by nothing more complex than a vast block of ice.

The pride that came before that fall was characteristic of an age that still believed wholeheartedly in progress. As it had reason to: in less than 20 years, human ingenuity had delivered the motor car, the aeroplane, the wireless and the moving picture in a quickening stream of life-enhancing inventions. But the sweet dream of modernism was about to turn unimaginably sour. The loss of the *Titanic* was only a foretaste of what was to come.

The story has other resonances. Any ocean-going liner is a microcosm of human society, with its different strata physically separated on upper and lower decks. Inevitably, such a disaster has apocalyptic overtones, laying bare the vice, and the virtue, that are usually hidden by manners.

Looking back, we applaud the old-

world chivalry that saved women and children first, but deplore the privilege that reserved most of the seats in the lifeboats for first- and second-class passengers. We honour the captain, who went down with his ship, but despise the president of the White Star Line, who did not.

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legal) shortage of lifeboats confronts us with the uncomfortable question: Would I have fought to survive, or let someone else live instead of me?

The fact that in the event not half but two-thirds of those on board were left to perish is a shaming reminder that selfishness is the human norm.

The *Titanic* has also a more specific symbolism. In 1912, Britain was

already in chronic decline – and denial – and as the century wore on, the glorious giant that went down while her band played on became an irresistible metaphor for the nation’s fate and the way we met it. Rearranging the deckchairs has since become a cliché for self-deceiving futility.

But perhaps what makes the story of the *Titanic* so compelling is an enigma that lies at the heart of our post-religious culture. In Greek mythology, the Titans were the old order, the government of the world by brute force, before the gods who supplanted them imposed a new, moral order.

But subsequently Nietzsche, Darwin, Freud and others seemed to have found that the universe was governed by Titans after all: those of chance and necessity and appetite challenged only by human will. Was the sinking of the *Titanic*, then, the effect of merely Titanic forces – an event without any moral cause or meaning? Or did it bear witness to some transcendent law?

Within the decade, two much greater disasters were to overtake humankind. The First World War, which cost 10 million lives, was unquestionably the result of monstrous human pride; but what of the epidemic of Spanish influenza which broke out in 1918 and killed 20 million? Are such things in any sense a working-out of a moral law, or just proof that ‘shit happens’?

Either way – since today we are no less arrogant and no less vulnerable than they were – the fate of the *Titanic* is not a good omen. **Huw Spanner**