STRIKING SIMILARITIES:

A comparison of the
Italian film *Il Postino* (*The Postman*)
and the Spanish film *Mar adentro* (*The Sea Inside*)

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Brenda McCullough

Sometimes there are movies that do more than just tell a story; sometimes they make a character come to life in such a way that the audience is profoundly moved. In this thesis I have compared and explored two movies that truly impacted my view on life. *Il Postino* and *Mar adentro* were films that I had never heard of until two wonderful college professors introduced me to their tragic but wonderful stories.

One, *Il Postino*, tells of a poor, Italian man who befriends a poet and wins a woman’s heart with poetic words. The other, *Mar adentro*, tells of a quadriplegic, Spanish man that fights for 30 years to end a life he no longer wants nor needs. Both speak of pain, love, loss and poetic justice in their own ways.

In this thesis my intention is to point out the similarities in the films and to share their stories and characters. The ideas behind these films are ones that anyone could relate to just as easily as they could dismiss them. These are two distinctly different tales with very striking similarities.
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I understand that my thesis will become part of the collection of Oregon State University. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request. I also affirm that the work represented in this thesis is my own work.

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Mercedes Lynn Iseri, author
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"Quiero hacer el camino sin que el itinerario esté marcado y previsto de antemano. No quiero ser rebaño. Soy marinero, y en la mar, como en la vida, no están marcados los senderos."\(^1\)

Ramón Sampedro, 1996.

"I want to travel unplanned on the path that is not marked. I don't want to be a sheep in a herd. I am a sailor and in the sea, as in life, the way is not always mapped out."

Ramon Sampedro, 1996.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Italian film Il Postino (The Postman) and the Spanish film Mar adentro (The Sea Inside) are two movies that I believe are not solely films, but works of art that will live on in the minds of all their viewers. Even though these films were created in different countries and in different eras and tell very different stories, there exist, in my opinion, striking similarities between the two. In this thesis I will identify and explore four of these similarities.

Firstly, both films are adaptations from books. Although the book that inspired the film Il Postino, Antonio Skarmeta's 1985 Ardiente paciencia (Burning Patience), is a work of fiction, it was motivated by true events from the life of Chile's infamous, Nobel Prize winning poet, Pablo Neruda, at his home in Isla Negra, Chile. In Mar adentro the actual events of the life of a quadriplegic, Ramon Sampedro, are described through poetry and personal letters taken

\(^1\) Ramon Sampedro. El buscador (Samaritana), Cartas desde el infierno, p. 104. Translated by M. Iseri.
from his book *Cartas desde el infierno (Letters from Hell)*, the inspiration behind
director Alejandro Amenábar's brilliant, cinematic creation.

Secondly, both leading men are dead. The Italian actor Massimo Troisi,
who played Mario Ruoppolo (the postman) in *Il Postino*, died just before the film
was completed and never saw the finished project; oddly enough, his character
was also killed off in the film. Similarly, Ramon Sampedro, the man on whom
the film *Mar adentro* was based, died from potassium cyanide poison that he
drank in an assisted suicide in order to die with dignity after fighting with the
Spanish government for most of his life.

Thirdly, both films reveal connections to poetry. Ramon Sampedro, the
real man on whom the film *Mar adentro* was based, was a poet and an activist
who fought for 30 years against his government. He was inspired by Pablo
Neruda and even had Neruda's picture in his bedroom. The character of Mario
Ruoppolo in *Il Postino* was an aspiring poet who reached out to the character of
Neruda to help him understand poetry and women. Poetry was used by all
three of these men as a way to express things that could not just be said. As
Mario states in this line from the film, "Poetry does not belong to those who
write it, but rather to those that need it."  

Fourthly, each film uses images, sounds and meanings of the sea as
setting for the film and as inspiration for both leading characters. In *Il Postino*
the action takes place on the Italian island of Salina. Naturally, the people of
the island work at sea to earn their living, making the ocean a significant yet

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mundane aspect of their lives. Mario, not wanting to be a fisherman like his father, instead becomes a postman to escape the relentless smell of fish on his hands. He feels that the island is not an ocean paradise or even a quaint place to live, but rather an isolated prison from which there is no escape. *Mar adentro* was filmed in the northern Spanish region of Galicia where Ramon Sampedro was born and lived most of his adult life as a quadriplegic. He traveled the world as a merchant marine only to have his one true love, the sea, take it all away from him at the age of 25. Therefore, the ocean gave him life and adventure but also took those dreams away and left him alone inside his own prison: his body.

This paper will begin with a brief synopsis of each film. It will then explore the abovementioned similarities in depth. Finally, it will conclude with my thoughts about these films and their stories.

**II. THE FILMS**

The films *Il Postino* and *Mar adentro* are important because they are the basis for this thesis, but they also bring the stories to life and give the audience a living image that depicts the story on which it is based. Without the films, the stories would only be in the imagination of the readers, but with them, the less imaginative viewers get to suffer and smile along with the characters. Following is my synopsis of each film, supported by reviews and comments from critics around the globe.
Il Postino—The Postman (1994)

Il Postino is a romantic tragedy that deals with a quiet, lonely postman and his relationship with poetry and a woman. This film is based on a book originally entitled Ardiente paciencia (Burning Patience) that was later released as El cartero de Neruda (Neruda’s Postman) by Antonio Skarmeta.

The movie follows a poor, awkward man named Mario Ruoppolo throughout his seduction of the local barmaid, Beatrice. Tired of the smell of fish on his hands or the seasickness that comes with fishing, Mario decides that he needs a different profession. Being one of the few literate people on the island, he takes a job with the post office delivering mail to only one customer, the infamous Chilean poet, Pablo Neruda, who is spending his exile from his home country in a remote villa in Salina. Mario, knowing nothing of Neruda, except that he seems to be surrounded by beautiful women and receives many letters from them as well, takes the job with the hope of befriending the poet. Through this friendship, Mario hopes that Neruda will help him woo Beatrice.

At first, Neruda does not realize why Mario asks questions about poetry and women and how he can use poetry to attract women. It is also strange to Neruda that Mario lingers after delivering the mail, almost as if waiting for Neruda to offer his help. Frank Wilkins clarifies this in his 1994 review of the film: "Pablo is at first put off by Mario’s questions about poetry but becomes intrigued by his honesty and sincerity. The two develop an honest and symbiotic relationship as Mario learns the power of poetry on women and Pablo is
reminded that he mustn't get caught up in his own celebrity."³ During Mario's attempt to court Beatrice, he uses Neruda's poems about his own wife to get her to notice him, as he does not have his own poetry.

Finally, after a few weeks of waiting for Neruda to spontaneously offer Mario a seductive poem for Beatrice, he asks Neruda to help him become a poet so that he can capture Beatrice's heart and make her fall in love with him. Neruda, not knowing how to teach someone to write, instead teaches Mario about metaphors and about finding the beauty in the world. As NY Times writer, Janet Maslin states in her 1995 review of the film: "Touched by the younger man's guilelessness, the writer is moved to show Mario that life on the island doesn't need the services of a visiting poet. It already has a poetry of its own."⁴ This proves to be a difficult task for Mario because all he sees when he looks around him is a prison surrounded by water, a place where no one understands him.

However, with the help of Neruda and his poems, Mario wins Beatrice's heart and Neruda was the best man in their nuptials as he had promised. Although their wedding day is joyous, it is also saddened by the news that Neruda and his wife will be returning to Chile since their exile is over. As one relationship begins, another must end with Neruda's goodbyes. Mario truly believes that they will see each other again. However, that is not the case. With Neruda gone Mario feels incomplete. After the passage of time, however, Mario realizes that he has all he needs in life: a wife, a little Pablito on the way

and poetry: Frank Wilkins explains in his 1994 review of the film: "The Chilean government finally lifts Pablo’s exile and he abruptly deserts the island leaving Mario feeling somewhat abandoned and betrayed. Mario later understands that he has become a fulfilled man. He now recognizes the world around him . . ."5 With this newfound wonder about the island, Mario can finally create his own poetry.

Mario decides to make Neruda an audio-poem using the sounds of the island because once Neruda had asked him to pick something beautiful about the island and all Mario could say was "Beatrice". Now, with time and his own growth, Mario sees the poetry in the world around him and realizes how the island, once thought of as a prison, is now seen as something magnificent. Therefore, Mario takes Neruda's recorder and captures the sounds of the island: the nets, the waves, the wind, Pabilto's heartbeat--everything that Mario believes is poetically beautiful about his home, his country, his island, his life.

Sadly, Neruda does return to the island years later, yet too late to see his friend again. Before Pablito is born, Mario is asked to attend a communist rally and read a poem that he had personally written about and for Neruda. However, at this rally Mario is killed by police during a disruption. On his audio-poem to Neruda, we hear the finals sounds of his life.

This film ends with Neruda walking along the shoreline that gave him such inspiration but that now only brings sadness and guilt over his friend’s

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death. The final images as Neruda walks on are of a beautiful, sapphire ocean accompanied by the sounds of Mario’s last living moments.

The film was nominated for five Academy awards in 1995 including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Original Score (which it won), Best Screenplay based on previously published media and Best Leading Actor-Massimo Troisi. Troisi was one of only four actors nominated for an Oscar after death. 6


This emotional and tragic film is a depiction of the true story of Ramon Sampedro, a Galician merchant sailor who, lost in thought and not noticing that the tide was going out, jumped into the ocean and broke his neck when he hit the ocean floor. At only 25 years of age, he became a quadriplegic and spent the next 30 years in bed, fighting with the Spanish government for his right to die with dignity, for his right to assisted suicide. ”Since that day I have been a living head on a dead body.”7 writes Ramon in the prologue to his book Cartas desde el infierno, which paints a grim picture of a man who once was so full of life.

The film begins in the last remaining months of his life when he is trying desperately to end his life in his own way, while the Spanish government keeps telling him that euthanasia has always been illegal. At this time in his life, Ramon meets two women who change his life, Julia, a lawyer with an incurable

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7 R. Sampedro. Cartas desde el infierno, p.11. Translated by M. Iseri.
disease, who helps Ramon with his fight to die, and Rosa, a blue-collar country girl, who just wants to be his friend and help him fight to live.

With the help of Julia, Ramon publishes his poems and letters in a book entitled *Cartas desde el infierno (Letter from Hell)*. They soon fall in love with each other and with the idea of dying together. They make a pact that once the book is published, she will bring him the first copy and on that day, they will commit suicide together and escape their mutual hell. However, upon discovering these plans, Julia’s husband convinces her that with his love and help she should fight for her life. Being afraid to die and of what death would mean, she decides to live. Thus, she sends the first copy of the book to Ramon with an apologetic letter that reveals her plans.

A few months later, Rosa expresses her desire to help him die because once during a TV interview she heard Ramon say, "... the person that really loves me, will be the one that helps me die." Therefore, so that no one would be suspicious, Ramon decides to take a trip to Boiro to see the ocean and breathe different air, but he is really going there with Rosa to kill himself. Upon arriving in Boiro, Rosa, who has been waiting at their hotel, helps him into a room with a magnificent view of the ocean. The sea is so immense that it makes one feel as if on an island. With the setting sun, Ramon declares it time to move on.

On January 13, 1998, Rosa pours Ramon’s last drink, potassium cyanide and water. She puts the glass next to him with a straw so that he can

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drink it himself and really commit suicide. At the foot of the bed, there is a
camera to capture Ramon's death, so that the world and the Spanish
government may see his death. Ramon drinks his homegrown poison and
starts his path to death and his escape from his personal Hell. During his
death, there is a flashback to his accident and the moment, he believes, he
should have died.

After his death, the scene changes to a view of the ocean and Julia, in a
chair, blankly looking out at the sea. Gene, a friend of both Ramon and her,
hands her a card that Ramon wrote to her to say his goodbyes. Unfortunately,
because of her disease, she has memory loss and, confused, asks Gene 'Ramon
who?' Gene, dumbfounded that Julia, once so in love with Ramon, does not
even remember him, is speechless. So affected by this, Gene leaves Julia and
returns to the beach to play with her daughter and live.

Consequently, in these last scenes the audience sees the double-edged
sword that is for many the ultimate life decision: live or die. For one it is the
fires of hell and the recapture of a freedom taken, yet for another, the
consequences of life without a memory. As Hollywood Reporter movie reviewer,
Ray Bennett, states in his 2004 review of the film: "The film should be viewed
as a voice for euthanasia, and it is. However, it also makes a case for those still
living and shows us that love, not dying, could be the greatest test of all."9

Similarly, the scene at the end with the child playing on the beach
reveals the cycle of life, that with the ending of one life, another starts. This

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quote from the director of *Mar adentro*, Alejandro Amenábar, says a lot about the life cycle: "*My intuition tells me that after death there is nothing, just like before birth, nothing.*"10 The film makes this quote a reality when Ramon dies and a weight is lifted from the room and all that is left is peace and quiet.

This film won the 2004 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, the 2004 Golden Globe for Best Foreign Language Film, and 14 Goya Awards (Spanish Oscars) including Best Film, Best Director, Best Lead Actor, Best Lead Actress, Best Supporting Actor, Best Supporting Actress and Best Original Screenplay.11

### III. THE BOOKS

The books, *Ardiente paciencia* and *Cartas desde el infierno* inspired the abovementioned films, therefore, their accompaniment in this thesis are paramount in explaining the stories behind the films. Following are summaries of the two books to help the reader better understand the film topics.

*Ardiente paciencia* by Antonio Skarmeta

*Ardiente paciencia* was first released in 1985, after Chilean writer Antonio Skarmeta struggled with making time for his own writing for fourteen years as he worked as a reporter for a newspaper. It was then translated into English and re-released as *The Postman (Il Postino)* in 1987 and re-released

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again as *The Postman (Il Postino)* in 1993 with a photo of the leading characters from the film on the cover.

According to the writer's prologue of the novel, Skarmeta was working at a newspaper during the day and attempting to write his own novel during the evenings. One day his director told him that he needed some time away from the city, and that he was to go to the beach and as his assignment he was to interview Pablo Neruda at his home in Isla Negra about his many female conquests. Neruda, then a married man and always a gentleman, declined the request for an interview about his past lovers. Subsequently, taking a different tactic, Skarmeta asked Neruda to write a prologue for Skarmeta's as yet unwritten book. Neruda's response is quoted in Skarmeta's words from the prologue of this novel:

"With a kindness that the baseness of my objectives did not deserve, he [Neruda] told me that his great love was his current wife, Matilde Urrutia, and that he felt neither enthusiasm nor interest in stirring up that 'pale past,' and with an irony that was well deserved by my audacity in asking him for a prologue to a book that did not yet exist, he said, delicately showing me the door, 'with great pleasure, when you write it'."  

After this encounter with the poet, Skarmeta decided to stay at Isla Negra for a while to finish his novel and possibly to be inspired by the people and the

atmosphere around him. He states in the prologue just how he came about creating the story of 'The Postman': "... I decided to prowl around the house of the poet and, while I was at it, to stalk those who were also prowling. That was how I met the characters of this novel."¹³ Skarmeta also states that the characters of the book, Mario Jimenez and Beatriz Gonzalez are both real people of whom he put into his story. As he states in this quote: "Beatriz Gonzalez, with whom I lunched several times during her visits to the courtrooms of Santiago, wanted me to relate the history of Mario 'no matter how long it might take or how much I might invent.' Thus excused by her, I committed both faults."¹⁴ However, the idea of the characters being real people is not mentioned in any of the reviews that I read, perhaps Skarmeta was very inspired when creating his characters, either based on real people or not.

The characters and story of the novel and the film are basically similar. However, there are a few major differences that distinctly separate the novel from the film. For example, the novel is set in Isla Negra, Chile in the late 60's and early 70's, whereas the film is set in Salina, Italy in the 50's. Also, Mario Jimenez, the main character of the novel, is a seventeen-year-old Chilean boy and Beatriz Gonzalez is a sixteen-year-old temptress in a miniskirt with an overbearing mother, unlike the film where Mario Ruoppolo is a thirty-something Italian man and Beatrice Russo is a late twenty-something, voluptuous niece of a bar owner.

However, the main difference that distinguishes the novel from the film is the ending. As I have already mentioned, at the end of the film Mario is killed at a communist demonstration and never gets to see his beloved Neruda again. In the novel, on the other hand, Neruda leaves for a few visits with his friend and Chilean presidential candidate, Salvador Allende, but he always returns to his home in Isla Negra. Upon Neruda's final return home, the news of President Allende's assassination had spread like wildfire across the country and with the Coup d'etat of Augusto Pinochet, the small town of Isla Negra was quickly filled with soldiers. Needless to say, the home of Neruda, where the poet who was once a presidential candidate himself and close friend of Allende lay dying of cancer, was surrounded by soldiers.

During the last minutes of the film, Mario risks his life to sneak into Neruda's home for one last conversation with his dying friend. As Skarmeta writes, those last moments between comrades are different from those that Mario would have imagined. Mario believed that Neruda was an incredible man whose poetry was world-renowned and to see him dying tore at Mario's heartstrings, for he truly loved the poet. This quote from the last pages of the book explains those moments:

"Mario dug his hands under the bard's arms and lifted him up until they were standing side by side. He held him so tightly, for fear he might pass out, that he could feel through his own skin the path the chills took that shook the sick poet's body. Like one stumbling man,
they reached the window. And as he was spreading
apart the thick blue curtains, Mario did not want to look
at what he could already see reflected in the poet’s
eyes: the red, moving light of the siren intermittently
slapping his cheek. . . . [Neruda] ’Tell me a nice
metaphor so I can die peacefully, son’. [Mario] ’I can’t
think of any metaphors, poet’ . . . Mario hugged the poet
from behind, and lifting his hands to cover his
hallucinating eyes, said ’Don’t die, poet’.”¹⁵

A few days after Neruda’s death, Mario is awakened before dawn by men
knocking on his door. He is asked to come with them to answer some routine
questions and not to worry; “he’ll be home soon enough”. Earlier in the novel,
Mario had written a poem about his son and had sent it in to a magazine
entitled La Quinta Rueda (The Fifth Wheel). He had hopes of winning first prize
and a large sum of money. The last lines of the book demolish that dream, as
he follows the men into their car. The following are the last lines: "As Mario
got into the car, he managed to hear the announcer report that troops had
occupied the Quimantú publishing house and had halted the production of
various subversive magazines, including Nosotros los Chilenos, Paloma and La
Quinta Rueda."¹⁶ With those final words, the story is concluded and the reader
is left to wonder what becomes of Mario and his poetry. In his 1996 New York
Review of Books article, Michael Wood says this about the book’s ending:

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¹⁵ A. Skarmeta. <em>Ardiente paciencia</em>, p. 110, 113.
"Mario, the postman, is taken in for questioning because of his association with the Communist poet, and assured so unctuously that he'll be home again soon that we know he'll never make it back alive. The book ends with a dark epilogue in which Mario's very name is forgotten." ¹⁷ It is in this epilogue that Skarmeta gives the reader a little more explanation whether the characters are real people or not.

The epilogue tells of a conversation between Skarmeta and an old friend, who also happened to be one of the editors of La Quinta Rueda and, since the Coup, had been living in Mexico. Skarmeta asks him if he remembers the poem that would have won the prize and had been published the year of the Coup, secretly hoping it was Mario's. The editor does remember which poem, but it was not Mario's and, in fact, the editor does not even remember that poem or the author.

Cartas desde el infierno by Ramon Sampedro

Mar adentro is an interpretation of the life of Ramon Sampedro and his fight to die with dignity. The inspiration for this film can be found in Sampedro's book Cartas desde el infierno (Letters from Hell). He wrote this book during his 30-year fight against the Spanish government about his right to choose death over life and to give humanity and a voice to his companions in their own personal Hell, either physical or mental or both.

Ramon Sampedro was born in Port of Sound, Galicia, Spain in January 1943. At 19 years old, he left his hometown to seek worldly adventures on the sea as a merchant sailor. He visited many ports around the world and met many women along the way.

One day, when he was just 25, his universe changed with an accident that forced this world-traveling sailor never again to leave his bed. He was at the beach with his girlfriend, nervous about meeting her parents and asking their permission to take her hand, when he decided to dive into a shallow pool just as the tide was leaving. Ramon relives that experience in this quote from his book: "Without knowing how, I was jumping into the water. I did not jump voluntarily. While I was flying through the air, I realized that the tide was going out and taking all the water with it. There was no solution. In life, one can never go back."18. He had broken his neck and, now, his life of travel and his freedom were stolen by the sea. He was a quadriplegic.

During the next 30 years, Ramon lived with his parents in Galicia, where he wrote his now renowned book of poetry and letters entitled Cartas desde el infierno (Letter from Hell). The film’s director wrote a prologue to the book that was re-released with the film: "Through more than 20 years of reflection, lectures, conversations and writings, Ramon decided to publish' Cartas desde el infierno' with a very specific point in mind: to give value to his individuality and

his liberty."\textsuperscript{19} Ramon wanted his book to be a testimony to his life and his fight.

After the death of his mother, who looked after Ramon for most of his life, his sister-in-law, Manuela, assumed the day-to-day duty of caring for him until he left to seek his death. The last entry in Ramon’s book is his hand-written suicide note, which was later typed for better legibility. It starts with this line to his family: "Dear family, When you read this letter, I hope that I will be sleeping for always. Also, I hope that you understand that this was something that I had wanted for many years . . ."\textsuperscript{20} With those final words, the life of a man whom many loved and whom many did not understand was over, not exactly how he had wanted, but nonetheless finished.

\textit{Mar adentro} director Alejandro Amenábar summarizes the use of this book as inspiration for the film in his prologue (added to the later edition, after the film was released): "This book [Cartas desde el infierno] is not, in the traditional sense, the literary or dramatic base to the film. In reality, it is much more than that. It’s the intellectual and poetic complement; it’s the philosophical pillar that gives strength and sense to our later work [on the film]."\textsuperscript{21} This book and this film do complement each other and without one, the other would not make sense and vice versa.

\textsuperscript{19} R. Sampedro. Cartas desde el infierno, p.7. Translated by M. Iseri.
\textsuperscript{20} R. Sampedro. Cartas desde el infierno, Ramon’s suicide note, p.295. Translated by M. Iseri.
\textsuperscript{21} R. Sampedro. Cartas desde el infierno, p. 7. Translated by M. Iseri.
IV. THE DEATHS

Another striking aspect of each film was that of "death," either as depicted in the film or that of a leading actor. The deaths of the two men, Massimo Troisi and Ramon Sampedro, are significant because their lives and deaths help tell the stories of the abovementioned films. They are, as in the case of Sampedro, literally and figuratively part of these films. Therefore, it would make sense that the reader or audience would need some background in order to truly understand the stories. Following are more details about the two leading men and their deaths.

Massimo Troisi

Massimo Troisi (pronounced Troy-EE-zee) was born in a small town near Naples in February of 1953. In his late teens he was inspired by Italian poet Pier Paolo Pasolini to write poetry and theatre plays. His mother died unexpectedly early in his childhood. According to an article from the online encyclopedia Wikipedia.com, it is believed that the stress of growing up too fast and frequent illnesses as a young child led to his later heart problems.

Troisi was notified of a serious heart condition before he began filming *Il Postino*. However, he felt that making this film was significant and he understood the consequences. As this quote from the Internet Movie Database confirms: "Troisi gave his life to make 'Il Postino'. He was aware of his heart condition and was told that he needed treatment, but he believed that the

making of this film was more important.".\textsuperscript{24} Most sources indicate that he died from a heart attack just hours after he finished filming \textit{Il Postino}. This quote from Wikipedia gives more details: "Troisi, who was only 41 years old, died in 1994 of a massive heart attack in his sister's house in Ostia (Rome) just twelve hours after the main filming of 'Il Postino' had finished. It was reported that he postponed surgery to complete the film.".\textsuperscript{25} Indeed, he did give his life for this film, a sentiment that will not soon be forgotten among his fans.

During an interview, the film's director, Michael Radford, had this to say about the life and death of his friend and co-worker:

"There is a burning spirit of love in the movie,' said director Radford on a recent visit to San Francisco. 'But it was a nightmare to make it. That's because Massimo, our star, was ill throughout. He had a heart condition from childhood. He knew he was going to die, that he was weakening, and yet he wanted to make 'The Postman' because he wanted somehow to get to the heart of something about Neruda and his poetry. He felt the film was going to be a chance for him to express something about love and life, a message or a feeling he wanted to bring to the world. Finally we wrapped on a Friday before he was to get his heart transplant the next Monday. But he died on Saturday of heart failure.

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You can expect a person's death, but when it really happens, it is devastating to those who love him. All of Italy mourned, 10,000 people showed up at his funeral—their wonderful comedian was gone,' said Radford, his voice breaking slightly."²⁶

Unfortunately, for Italy and the rest of the world, there would be no more laughter brought on by this comedic actor. His work was over and as an earlier quote states, an entire county mourned and will continue to mourn his fateful death.

Troisi wrote, directed and starred in many of his own pieces during his 15-year acting career. Very popular in Italy and even referred to as the "Steve Martin of Italy"²⁷, America never knew this comedic actor until his starring role in the internationally acclaimed *Il Postino: The Postman* (1994). Although, by then it was too late, as he had already died and would never know the praise that the film and his acting had received.

*Ramon Sampedro*

According to the film, Sampedro was the first Spanish person to ask the courts to grant him the right to assisted suicide or euthanasia. Because he could not move his body below his neck, he could not commit suicide by himself. Therefore, he asked the government of Spain to change the laws so that he could die with dignity. The Spanish government was very strict with its


decision that Ramon did not have a disease, insisting that he could have a normal life, full of vitality and love because, according to a quadriplegic priest in the film, "life is a gift."

However, Ramon believed that life was not an obligation, but instead a privilege that he no longer wanted. As Rod Usher states in his 1998 Time Magazine article only days after Ramon’s death: "Ramon does not have an incurable disease. He is incurably sad. For him, life has more bite than death. Like he said in a poem that he wrote many years ago, 'The dream has become a nightmare'."28 He spent 30 years trying to explain to his government that the dream of a life had become a nightmare in which the only escape was death. As Ramon expresses in his last book entry, which happens to be his suicide note, "Life has value as long as we value ourselves; when that is no longer possible, it is better to end it than continue without meaning. The choice must be an act of personal freedom, and it must be easier to find help when we need it. This is also a way of showing love!"29 With the help of some loving friends, Ramon got his wish.

On January 13, 1998 in a hotel in Boiro, Spain, with the help of one of those loving friends, Ramon Sampedro drank a glass of potassium cyanide and ended his life. The anonymous friend videotaped his suicide so that the world, the church and, most importantly, the Spanish government could see that he did not die with dignity, as he wanted, but rather suffered like an animal.

Seven years after his death, after the statue of limitations had run out,

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29 R. Sampedro. *Cartas desde el infierno*, Ramon’s suicide note, p.298. Translated by M. Iseri.
his friend, Ramona Maneiro, came forward to say that she was the anonymous friend who helped him die. She explains her reasoning: "I did it for love"\textsuperscript{30}.

The many quotes from this book were needed to explain who Ramon Sampedro was and why he longed for death with such passion. Oddly enough, he did not believe in Heaven or life after death, therefore he thought death would bring him freedom; freedom from his own personal Hell. This line from his poem entitled \textit{¿Por qué morir? (Why die?)} explains his thoughts quite well, ". . . \textit{we have earned Heaven, because we have spent all of our life in Hell.}"\textsuperscript{31} With the word Hell, he means the prison that is his body with an outside world that won't listen to him and an inside world, himself, that won't let anyone in to listen.

\section*{V. THE POETRY}

Poetry, especially that of Pablo Neruda, has a significant role in the two films. The use of poetry in these stories creates something different from any other aspect of the films or books. The poetry of poets Pablo Neruda and Ramon Sampedro tell the read-between-the-lines version of what is really happening in these stories. Sometimes words or feelings on their own are not enough, but when they are put together and expressed poetically the meaning is clearer and the reader/audience gets insights into the character or author's mind or heart. The following is an overview of the poetry used and described in both films.

\textsuperscript{31} R. Sampedro. \textit{Cartas desde el infierno}, p.88. Translated by M. Iseri.
Il Postino

Before the credits at the end of the film, a short, untitled poem by Neruda is displayed on the screen. It begins with:

"And it was at that age . . . Poetry arrived
in search of me. I don't know, I don't know where
it came from, from winter or a river.

... 
there I was without a face
and it touched me."\(^{32}\)

Pablo Neruda is known for his love poems and, according to many studies and the prologue of *Ardiente paciencia*, he was believed to be a man who knew the way to a woman's heart. As stated on the jacket cover of the English translated version of his book *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*, "This book, originally published as 'Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperado' in Chile in 1924, appeared when Neruda was just 19. He later said about the subject, 'love poems sprouted out from me everywhere'."\(^{33}\) Therefore, it makes sense that in *Il Postino*, Mario would seek out his poetic help while attempting to woo Beatrice Russo.

Mario does not know a lot about poetry before the arrival of Neruda to his island. However, when he sees Neruda on the newsreel at the cinema, surrounded by women, he knows there is something special about the poet.

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Once Mario has the job of being Neruda's personal mailman, he notices that
most of the poet's mail is from women. With that information, upon meeting
Beatrice, Mario knows Neruda is the one who can help him win her heart.

Mario is barely literate, so writing his own poetry is a daunting task.
Therefore, at first he uses Neruda's poetry to caress Beatrice with words, since
he cannot yet touch her with his hands. The film and the book allude to the
idea that Mario wrote his own poetry, however, it is never shared with the
audience. At the end, when Mario is killed, he has a chance to read his poem
about Neruda entitled *Canto a Pablo Neruda* (*A Song for Pablo Neruda*) at a
communist demonstration, but he never makes it to the stage and his words of
love to the poet are lost among the chaos of the riot.

However, as I have stated in my synopsis of the film, at the end Neruda
does eventually get to hear Mario's audio-poem. This quote from Instar.com,
an online review, explains Mario's intentions:

"He [Mario] has never achieved anything in life that
could give him notoriety or recognition. The knowledge
of this creates the desire to do something new, maybe
useless, but nevertheless straight from the heart, a
poetic gesture done with enthusiasm. He records all the
sounds of life on the island. His intention is to remind
Neruda of their existence, to let him know that they are
still here, alive and well. He discovers a new sense of
meaning and of care for his homeland which gives him
the desire to write, to create."\footnote{The Postman (Il Postino)—Synopsis. 2007. www.Instar.com/literature/postino/.
34 P. Neruda, Ode a la mar. www.pierdelune.com/neruda5.htm. See appendix C for entire poem.}

The following excerpt of Neruda's poem *Ode a la mar (Ode to the sea)* depicts a place very similar to Mario's island:

"Oh mar, así te llamas,   Oh Sea, this is your name,
oh camarada océano,   oh comrade ocean,
no pierdas tiempo y agua,  don't waste time and water,
no te sacudas tanto,   getting so upset,
ayúdanos,   help us instead,
somos los pequeñitos  we are meager
pescadores,   fishermen,
los hombres de la orilla,  men from the shore,
tenemos frío y hambre  who are hungry and cold
eres nuestro enemigo,  and you are our enemy,
no golpees tan fuerte,  don't beat so hard,
no grites de ese modo,  don't shout so loud,
abre tu caja verde  open your green coffers
y déjamnos a todos  and give us everything
en las manos  in our hands.
tu regalo de plata:  your gift of silver:
el pez de cada día.  the fish of everyday."\footnote{P. Neruda, Ode a la mar. www.pierdelune.com/neruda5.htm. See appendix C for entire poem.}
With *Mar adentro*, the poetry connection has more to do with the book and the real Ramon Sampedro than it does with the movie. However, during the film Sampedro the character is writing his book entitled *Cartas desde el infierno* in which he wrote many poems and letters.

In his book, *Cartas desde el infierno*, Ramon Sampedro wrote many poems and letters to his friends and family. Unlike Neruda, whose poems are usually about love and the worship of the female form, Ramon’s poems are about death and the reasons why he wants to die. He does write a few love poems, ironically about the sea, as exemplified in this excerpt from his poem entitled *Amada mar (Beloved Sea)*:

> "Yo me dejo querer como un vanidoso amante por tus tiernas caricias. Quisiera penetrar en ti para adorarte eternamente, mi seductora amante, la mar."

>(I am left wanting like a conceited lover by your tender caresses. I want you to understand that I will adore you for eternity, my seductive lover, the sea.)

Even the few poems Sampedro wrote about love and being in love always include some reference to death. In his poem entitled *Ensueños (Daydreams)* he writes about desire and fulfilling that desire, yet also longing for death as shown here in the first and last lines of that poem:

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36 Ramon Sampedro, *Amada mar*. See appendix D for entire poem. Translated by M. Iseri
"Mar adentro, mar adentro,
y en la ingravidez del fondo,
donde se cumplen los sueños,
se juntan dos voluntades
para cumplir un deseo.

Pero me despierto siempre
y siempre quiero estar muerto
para seguir con mi boca
enredada en sus cabellos

However, Sampedro was inspired not only by Neruda’s poetry but also by
his passion for politics and his need to revolt against what he perceived as
wrong. Sampedro took inspiration from Neruda during his fight with the
Spanish government. This excerpt from Neruda’s *Oda a la solidaridad (Ode to
Solidarity)* is an example of the fight in him:

"¿Y allí qué hicieron?
¿Sabes?
¿Estás de acuerdo?
¿Quiénes?
Algo pasa y es tu culpa
Pero tú no sabrás
Ahora

"And what did they accomplish there?
Do you know?
Do you agree with it?
Who?
Something happens and it's your fault.
But you won't be aware of it.
I am warning you.

The poetry of these two films speaks to the audience and tells them of the real suffering of these characters. It also shows the audience the character's feelings in a way in which prose falls short.

**VI. THE SEA**

Finally, the role of the sea in each film is vital to really understanding the characters, the stories and the ideas behind the films. The following is the depiction of the sea in all its forms.

The sea as provider and thief

Both stories are set in coastal towns: *Il Postino* in the Italian island of Salina and *Mar adentro* in the northwestern Spanish region of Galicia. In these towns, most people earn their living either by being a fisherman, like Mario's father or as a merchant sailor, as Ramon was before his accident.

We can see examples of this coastal life in the beginning of *Il Postino* when we see Mario in his bedroom overlooking the ocean and the fisherman working below. In addition, when he speaks with his father about the life of a fisherman and how Mario doesn't believe it is his destiny. In addition, at the end of the film, while Pablo Neruda is walking along the shore, the music in the

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background is the audio-poem that Mario made for him with the sounds of Salina, like the nets the fisherman use, the waves, etc. Mario made this poem so Pablo would never forget the sounds of a town that adored him and the thoughts of a man that worshiped him.

Equally, in *Mar adentro* the leading character, Ramon, worked at sea before he broke his neck in a swimming accident. He has flashbacks to that fateful moment when the sea took his independence and a life he loved. In his mind’s eye, he saw a portrait of a life he no longer possessed. This quote from Ramon’s book paints an eerie picture of his accident, "*They say, sometimes when someone knows they are about to die, their life runs through their mind like a movie in fast forward showing them everything they know and everything they have done. I was a merchant sailor and the first pictures I saw were my memories of the ports I had visited.*" In the film, these images of his lost life as a sailor are presented to the audience as happy photos that show his life pre-accident.

Therefore, in those examples, the sea is part of the everyday life of the people and depicts life in a coastal town. In addition, in *Il Postino* we see that through Mario’s eyes, the sea is the sustenance of the people and nothing else, except maybe a moat in which the island would be a castle and Mario a prisoner. However, in *Mar adentro* we see that the sea is something that Ramon viewed as a vehicle on which he traveled the world, yet it had stolen his liberty; for him the sea does not give, it only takes away: like a thief.

Nevertheless, he loves it anyway because it was, is and always will be a large part of his life.

The sea as life and death

Another similarity that struck me was that both films begin and end with significant images of the sea. In *Il Postino*, one sees Mario in his bedroom watching the fisherman working in the sea and, later, realizing that in that moment he is dreaming of an escape from his island prison. This scene tells us about the everyday life of the island and what the sea represents to the people: life.

The film ends when Pablo Neruda returns to the island to learn that Mario was killed during a communist demonstration where he hoped to read his poem dedicated to Neruda. Pablo, feeling guilty about Mario's death, takes a walk along the shoreline and marvels at the beauty of the island and the sea. He thinks about Mario while the audience listens to the audio-poem that Mario made for Neruda with the sounds of an island that was his home and his prison.

This film begins with a scene of the sea as a giver of life and ends with another view of the sea that is saddened with Mario's death. It shows us how life is like the tide: it comes and goes.

In addition, there are many scenes of the island from the sea. This idea is important because in the film when Mario finds out that Beatrice is pregnant, he wants to flee to Chile because no one understands him on the
island. This quote from Ramon explains a little about how he has felt the last 28 years: "The 23rd day of August 1968, I fractured my neck while diving at the beach when I smacked my head into the bottom of the sea. One could say that I am the talking ghost of a dead man."\textsuperscript{40}. I believe the island has become Mario's prison, just as Ramon's quadriplegic body has become his prison in \textit{Mar adentro}.

Equally, with \textit{Mar adentro}, the film begins with a beautiful day at the beach and a man walking along the shore, but we only briefly see his feet and his shadow, as the camera moves to Ramon's window and his view of the mountains on a stormy, rainy day. Later we find out that Ramon has specifically asked to be in this room because it does not have a view of the sea.

Hence, in the first few moments there is a transition from a sunny, walking-on-the-beach-day to a stormy, rainy, not-walking-ever-again lifetime. These beginning scenes show us how different the lives of these two men are: one walks on the beach and enjoys a beautiful day and the other never leaves his bed, his room, his mind. "\textit{I consider a quadriplegic to be a chronically dead person that resides in Hell.}"\textsuperscript{41}, states Ramon during an interview about his life. However, later in the film we find out that the man walking on the beach was Ramon on the day he broke his neck and we realize how one's life can change.

At the end of the film, Ramon and friend are in a hotel overlooking a breathtaking view of the sea with an immaculate sunset so that while he is dying he can remember that view. Next, while he is dying, we see a flashback

\textsuperscript{40} R. Sampedro. \textit{Cartas desde el infierno}, p.11. Translated by M. Iseri
\textsuperscript{41} R. Sampedro. \textit{Cartas desde el infierno}, p.11. Translated by M. Iseri
to the moment of the accident when Ramon believes he should have died and how this time he visualizes himself dying then and not 30 years later in a hotel having drunk a glass of cyanide. Even though the sea stole his adventures, his freedom and, he believed, his life, it was also the source of those adventures and how he earned a living. Therefore, it was very appropriate that he wanted to spend eternity with the one thing that made him feel alive: the sea.

**VII. CONCLUSION**

I viewed these two films during my last term at the university. *Mar adentro* was presented in a Spanish conversation class and *Il Postino* was presented in a Spanish literature class while we were studying Pablo Neruda. In the preceding paragraphs of this thesis, I have compared and explored four striking similarities that I found during my study of the films. These four similarities show the reader how two distinctly different films have similar stories and comparable messages. Both films deal with life's lessons and struggles on an equal level. In this thesis, I hope to have shown the reader just how two dissimilar films can be strikingly similar.

The stories in these films and books do not tell only what the author or the director planned, they speak of things beyond words. They paint pictures of love, struggles, death and the importance of feeling poetry. To me these films, these books and these characters came alive: they live and breathe the words that have been written or scripted. Even without immediately realizing
it, the stories in the films touched me. They made me look at life differently and realize that mine, and that of those around me, wasn’t so bad.

After seeing these films and reading these books, I felt as if I had known the characters and the authors; they were my friends, my family, my lovers. For me, the amazing journey that I experienced with the two films has changed my views on the sea, love, death, life and poetry as something we yearn for and do not just enjoy. They also enhanced my compassion for others once I understood that the meaning of life is different for everyone and that which some call living, others call a living “Hell”. I understand why these films have had such success, not only in Europe but also all over the world; they touch everyone with their story and I certainly recommend them to anyone interested in poetry, love or simply life.
Appendix A

And it was at that age . . . Poetry arrived in search of me. I don't know, I don't know where it came from, from winter or a river. I don't know how or when, no, there were not voices, there were not words, nor silence, but from a street I was summoned, from the branches of night, abruptly form the others, among violent fires or returning alone, there I was without a face and it touched me.

--Pablo Neruda
 Appendix B

Los ensueños

Mar adentro, mar adentro,
y en la ingravidez del fondo,
donde se cumplen los sueños,
se juntan dos voluntades
para cumplir un deseo.

Un beso enciende la vida
con un relámpago y un trueno,
y en una metamorfosis
mi cuerpo no era ya mi cuerpo;
era como penetrar al centro del universo:

El abrazo más pueril,
y el más puro de los besos,
hasta vernos reducidos
en un único deseo:

Su mirada y mi mirada
como un eco repitiendo, sin palabras:
mas adentro, más adentro,
hasta el más allá del todo
por la sangre y por los huesos.

Pero me despierto siempre
y siempre quiero estar muerto
para seguir con mi boca
enredada en sus cabellos.

Daydreams

Sea inside, sea within,
and in the weightlessness of the depths,
where dreams are attained,
two spirits join
to fulfill a desire.

A kiss arouses a life
with thunder and lightning,
and in a metamorphosis
my body is no longer my body;
as if I have penetrated the center of the universe:

An embrace most childish,
and the purest of kisses,
until we have been reduced
into only one desire:

Your gaze and my gaze
like a repeating eco, without words:
more inside, more within,
to the farthest point of all
for blood and for bones.

Yet I always awake
and I want always to be dead
to follow with my mouth
entangled in your hair.

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42 R. Sampedro, Cartas desde el infierno, p.52.
Translated by M. Iseri.
Appendix C

Ode al Mar 43
de Pablo Neruda

AQUÍ en la isla
el mar
y cuánto mar
se sale de sí mismo
a cada rato,
dice que sí, que no,
que no, que no, que no,
dice que sí, en azul,
en espuma, en galope,
dice que no, que no.
No puede estarse quieto,
me llamo mar, repite
pegando en una piedra
sin lograr convencerla,
entonces
con siete lenguas verdes
de siete perros verdes,
de siete tigres verdes,
de siete mares verdes,
la recorre, la besa,
la humedece
y se golpea el pecho
repitiendo su nombre.

Oh mar, así te llamas,
oh camarada océano,
no pierdas tiempo y agua,
no te sacudas tanto,
ayúdanos,
somos los pequeños
pescadores,
los hombres de la orilla,
tenemos frío y hambre
eres nuestro enemigo,
no golpees tan fuerte,
no grites de ese modo,
abre tu caja verde
y déjanos a todos
en las manos
tu regalo de plata:
el pez de cada día.

Ode To the Sea
by Pablo Neruda

HERE in the island
is the sea.
but what sea?
it's always overflowing
constantly
it says yes, then no,
then no, then no, then no
then yes, in blue
in sea spray, raging,
it says no, then no.
it can't be still.
my name is sea, it repeats
it beats against a rock
and when they aren't convinced,
so
with seven green tongues
of seven green dogs,
of seven green tigers,
of seven green seas,

it covers, it kisses,
it moistens
and beating its chest
repeating its name.

Oh Sea, this is your name,
oh comrade ocean,
don't waste time and water,
getting so upset,
help us instead,
we are meager fishermen,
men from the shore,
who are hungry and cold
and you are our enemy,
don't beat so hard,
don't shout so loud,
open your green coffers
and give us everything
in our hands.
your gift of silver:
the fish of everyday.

43 http://www.pierdelune.com/neruda5.htm 2004
Amada Mar  

de Ramón Sampedro

Amada mía:

Tu calma serena y tranquila me embelesa cuando la luna en la noche tropical ilumina tu cara.

Me trastorna tu sonrisa blanca y rizada; y embobado sonrio también.

Me enloqueces cuando te agitas y ruges apasionadamente. Sobre tu ondulado vientre me arrullas y meces como el huracán. Pareces una erótica y frenética bailarina.

Yo me dejo querer como un vanidoso amante por tus tiernas caricias. Quisiera penetrar en ti para adorarte eternamente, mi seductora amante, la mar.

Beloved Sea

by Ramon Sampedro

Beloved sea:

Your still and tranquil calm captivates me when the moon of the tropical night illuminates your face.

Your white and ridged smile disturbs me; and the way you grin amazes me, too.

It drives me crazy when you rave and roar passionately. On your wavy stomach I am lulled to sleep and you rock me like a hurricane. You appear to be an erotic and frantic ballerina.

I am left wanting like a conceited lover by your tender caresses. I want you to understand that I will adore you for eternity, my seductive lover, the sea.

44 R. Sampedro. Cartas desde el infierno, p. 47. Translated by M. Iseri.
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