
A Naturalistic Gaze of Hermen Melville toward Landscape, Seascape and Animals

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Abstract

Ecocriticism elucidates relationships between human and non-human nature. Ecocritics encourage the readers to think seriously about the relationship of humans to nature, ethical and aesthetic dilemmas posed by the environmental crisis, and about how language and literature transmit values with profound ecological implications. It examines how human perception of wilderness has changed throughout history and whether or not current environment issues are accurately represented in popular culture and modern literature. Ecocritical theories are applied to a work in which the nature and wilderness play a dominant character in author's life and place. Its approaches lead a step ahead towards the bonding and dependence of Men upon Nature and vice versa. The aim of this article is to explore an ecocritical analysis of the select novels of Herman Melville who investigates human beings' relationship, culture, attitudes, ideas towards nature and its consequences so that the increasing gap between the relation of mankind and nature can be decreased. He gives more importance to landscape and seascape which includes rocks, seas, soil, trees, flora and fauna. The very existence of man depends on ecology man and natures have been sharing indispensable relationship. Melville portrayed the pathetic condition of animals as a victim of the tyranny and selfishness of man. Melville's use of animals is unique in that he treats them with a thoroughly naturalistic eye before establishing their roles in his complex texts.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Humans, Animals and Nature.

The study of literature from an ecological or environmental perspective has become a leading area of research. The immense impact of nature on human life and man's response to nature is a major theme in literary writing and discourse. It is believed that nature precedes culture. When culture was established, nature already existed. Pertaining to this, if one has to study culture, s/he has to study nature first because it is interwoven in literature. Ecocriticism is commonly defined as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glottfelty 18). As one of the newest forms of literary criticism emerge at the end of the twentieth century, ecocriticism was formalized as the literary theory in the late 1970s amidst concerns of human-induced environmental degradation, which has forced humans, especially artists, to re-evaluate their relationship with nature.

By the mid-nineteenth century, Thoreau and other writers in America and England were already drawing attention to the threats to the environment by urbanization and industrialization. Later in the century, increasing alarm at the rapidity and extent of the human despoliation of nature led to what came to be called "the environmental movement" to preserve what remained of the American wilderness: the most noted advocates were the American writers John Burroughs (1837-1921) and John Muir (1838-1914). As a nineteenth century writer, Herman Melville tries to probe within the human consciousness to trace the hidden instincts of man towards environment. He is well-versed in exploring the minds of his characters and records their inner fluctuations toward nature and its creatures. Most of his works reflect his personal association with pain, suffering and death, and his personal disillusionment and surliness. His skill and perspective ability to describe objects and situation, and to develop into the psychology of his characters serve as notable complements to the darker aspects of his works. He is not only a writer but an observer of human nature.

The novel *Moby Dick* is Melville's 'Voyage book'. It deals with his own experience wandering around the seas as a sailor. This book is one of the interesting tales of the sea voyage of sailors. Melville, owing to his knowledge of the sea and his acquaintance with the whaling industry, has given a unique strength and vitality to the theme. He emphasizes the

notoriety of the easily recognized white humped monster and uses the latest scientific details regarding the habits of the sperm whale. There is also a technological description of the complications connected with whale hunting, the elaborate preparation of equipment, the harpooning, the killing and cutting up of the whales and the melting of the blubber into oil. It clearly exhibits the conquering attitude of human over nature and animals.

Moby-Dick is the masterpiece of Herman Melville who allegorically and vividly depicts the cruel killing of Whale by Captain Ahab and the sailors on the whaling ship, and their tragically being drowned in the sea. The physical description of sperm whale and the psychological intention of Captain Ahab reveals Melville's ecological awareness toward nature and commercial greediness of human begins. In *Moby-Dick*, White Whale comes to represent elements of the human condition or human nature. Melville's use of animals is unique because he treats them with a thoroughly naturalistic eye before establishing their roles in his complex works such as *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*, *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas*, *Mardi: And a Voyage Thither*, *Redburn: His First Voyage*, *White Jacket* and *Moby Dick*. The aim of each work, writes F.L. Pattee, was a portrayal of himself "He could center upon nothing objective. He like Byron, could write only of himself. Unless he had personally felt, or actually experienced, his imagination took no fire. All that he ever wrote was autobiographical, egocentric and always it is an ego in fire rebellion." (38-39)

The relationship between land and the sea echoes the conflict between adventures and domesticity, between frontiersmen and city dwellers. Ahab's tragic monomania and his obsessive pursuit of the Whale is an exposition on the feelings of disillusionment in mid-nineteenth century America and on the idea that the single-mine pursuit of an ideal is both vain and destructive. Some critics consider that in *Moby-Dick*, Melville parlayed the story of a Sea captain's vengeful search for a legendary whale into a narrative suffuse with profound speculation concerning the nature and inter-relationship of the individual, society, God and the cosmos. The novel is also highly acclaimed as a distinctly American book.

In *Moby Dick*, the Protagonist, Captain Ahab is the representative of selfish mankind of commercial world in front of nature. His inner instincts are always wanting to conquer nature. He is a person of having strong spirits and uncompromising attitude that ordinary people do not have which makes the readers to find him crazy, selfish, self-serving and other misdeeds. Captain Ahab's process of exterminating Whale is a symbol of mankind's conquest of nature. Today whale species is protected because of their rarity, which vividly embodies the fragility of ecological biodiversity. In the case of the big whales, the clash between nature and mankind can only be death-and-death. The hunting behavior of human shows the most brutal side of mankind against the nature and its creatures. Similarly, the reaction of nature is also desperate resistance and sinister retaliation. Ahab is determined to hunt whale which causes him to break his connections with humanity and lose his humanness. Melville says, "he swam the seas before the continents broke water; in Noah food he despised Noah's Ark; and if ever the world is to be again flooded, the eternal whale will still survive, and, rearing upon the top-most crest of the equatorial flood, spout his frothed defiance to the skies." (*Moby Dick* 493).

By giving the reader the view of a naturalist, Melville ensures that there will be no lingering aspect of a false cultural image of whales to taint the heaps of symbolism that will be placed on *Moby Dick*. Later in the novel, Melville devotes Chapter 55, "Of the Monstrous Pictures of Whales" to an exposition of mistaken ideas of whales that survive in history, culture, and print, all for the expressed purpose of setting "the world right in this matter" (Melville 285). The interfusion of science and the metaphysical within the totality of the White Whale was a deliberate attempt by Melville to merge the physical with the spiritual in a manner that echoed Emerson's "every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact" (Emerson 13). In

“Calvinism and Cosmic Evil in *Moby-Dick*”, T. Walter Herbert Jr. argues that the symbolism of evil surrounding the White Whale is a subtle portrayal of the Calvinist God, at least to Ahab, who Melville named after an Israeli King of the Old Testament whose demise is predestined by God, but who was also explicitly utilized by Calvin in his theology “to illustrate God’s treatment of the reprobate and to support his doctrine of providence” (Herbert 1616). Herbert clarifies that Father Mapple’s sermon casts Ahab into a similar situation as Jonah, but whereas Jonah repents, Ahab becomes enraged. He sees the universe as being controlled by malevolence.

Herman Melville intended the animals to be symbolic of elements of the human condition and their significance revolves around the themes that constitute literary naturalism: an emphasis on determinism, extreme and harsh settings, and the destructive attitude of human nature. Literary naturalism is highly attentive to determinism: “most distinctively, they [literary naturalists] pushed further toward determinism, economic or biological or cosmic—than American novelists had cared or dared to go before” (Budd 43). Melville explored this concept in profound and complex ways, attempting in the process to demonstrate that the vast world conspires to destroy animals’ inhabitants by casting them into uncontrollable circumstances.

Herman Melville was a man who put American literature on to the level of world literature with his literary classic *Moby Dick*, the famous ‘Whaling Story’. Melville devotes an entire chapter of *Moby-Dick*, “Does the Whale’s Magnitude Diminish? —Will He Perish?” to the question of whether whales can survive the depletion of their numbers given the booming whaling industry. At its height in the 1830s, the whaling industry of Melville’s time saw roughly 5,000 sperm whales being killed annually (Whitehead 1096). Melville chose extinct animals to be symbolic elements of human determinism because it plays a significant role in the destruction of landscape, seascape and animals. Throughout *Moby-Dick*, nature and the world are stated to be “oblivious...of...woe” and “so long cruel” (Melville 590). Melville’s use of whales as a symbol of determinism which coincides with species of extinct animals being killed off at swift rates by deliberate measures during the period of time when Melville wrote *Moby-Dick*. The sperm whales felt as helpless victim to barbaric hunting intention of selfish human begins.

To conclude, human determinism afflicted generations of entire species with mass-slaughter. Herman Melville literally focuses on the environmental crisis and the need for humans to live in harmony with nature.

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