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**An Eco critical perspective in the novel “Moby Dick” by  
Herman Melville**

**Ms.Joshi Shaluja Praxy**

*Lecturer,*

*St. Eugene University,*

*Lusaka, Zambia.*

**Abstract**

Herman Melville, an American author, is renowned for his literary masterpiece "Moby Dick". This essay aims to analyse Moby Dick by applying ecocriticism theory. The author wants to study the novel using eco-criticism from three different angles, including nature, society, and spirit, to examine American society (Love, Glen A, 2003). This will help contemporary society become more knowledgeable about avoiding and addressing problems of this sort. This paper, which is divided into multiple sections, begins by introducing Melville and Moby Dick as well as ecocriticism. Then, it uses eco-criticism to analyze the novel from three different angles before concluding to an end by discussing the novel's true meaning as a whole (Qi, Wenjin, 2020).

**Keywords:** Eco-criticism, Ecology, *Moby Dick*, Human and nature.

**I.INTRODUCTION TO MELVILLE AND HIS MOBY DICK**

Herman Melville (1819–1891) was an American writer and poet who endured a great deal of painful indifference from his contemporaries. However, around the year 1920, he was all of a sudden recognised as a famous American author. He used to travel by sea, which considerably aided his writing because he created numerous well-known pieces based on his experiences (Melville, Herman, 2019). Furthermore, he wrote much throughout his life, including

several short tales such as *Bartleby the Scrivener*, a significant amount of poetry, which is now gaining greater honour and recognition, and two celebrated novels, *Benito Cereno* and *Billy Budd*. In 1851, Melville's masterpiece *Moby Dick*, also named "The Whale", was published. At present, it is regarded as one of the influential American novels reflecting the American society of the 19th century. It mainly narrates a story about a Monomaniac captain named Ahab together with his crew who is revenged on a huge whale and goes to collapse all of them with it, except the narrator Ishmael (James, Cyril Lionel Robert, 2001).

### **Introduction to Eco-Criticism**

Eco-criticism, which has its roots in the United States, is a type of literary critique. William Rueckert proposed using the term "eco-criticism" in the year 1978. Eco-criticism is a long-term speculation on environmental issues and ecological issues in the field of literary inquiry (Buell, Lawrence, 2009).

One of the most well-known and fruitful recent trends in literary and a cultural study is eco-criticism. Originating in the United States as a minor, mostly regional form of environmentally oriented approach in the late 20th century, it has since spread throughout literature departments and become a successful new branch of the humanities not only in the U.S. and Europe but around the globe. A scholarly community that had been profoundly influenced by the theoretical disciplines of cultural studies, post-structuralism, and postmodernism initially faced Eco-criticism with strong opposition.

However, it has gained increasing recognition as an important new field of research and teaching that opens up a wide range of new perspectives and can help to reaffirm the relevance and responsibility of the humanities and literary studies at a time when the process of globalization, and the concomitant globalization of knowledge and science, is still primarily interpreted in economic and technological terms. (Zapf, Hubert, 2010). It examines and re-evaluates the interaction between humans and the natural world from a distinctive ecological standpoint. In the 1990s, it grew like a tornado and spread to countries across the globe, becoming a global phenomenon (Huang, Betsy Pei Chih, 2004). Eco-criticism is highly potent due to its unique features. It is both a promise to reality and an effect to reconnect mankind with nature, addressing the issue of human alienation (Buell, Lawrence, 2009).

Because its ultimate goal is to create a new spiritual and material homeland of man and environment, it not only uses deconstruction as a theoretical weapon but also transcends it and becomes constructive criticism (Qingqi, Wei, 2014).

## **Reflection in Three Aspects**

### **Reflection in Nature**

During the author's lifetime, the growth of the American capitalist economy led to the chase of money being the dominant societal trend. The government encouraged individuals to exert all reasonable efforts to fully dominate all resources, particularly natural resources (Davis, Gerald F, 2009). As a result, countless Americans went whaling in the oceans, making America the world's biggest whaling producer. At that time, American whalers outperformed all other cooperating whalers worldwide. The explanation in *Moby Dick* adds to the whaling industry's opulence (Demuth, Bathsheba, 2019):

Sail a navy of upwards of seven hundred vessels; manned by eighteen thousand men; yearly consuming 4,000,000 of dollars; the ships worth, at the time of sailing, \$20,000,000; and every year importing into our harbours a well reaped harvest of \$7,000,000 (Fouquet, Roger, and Peter JG Pearson, 2006).

These whalemens travelled to every nook and cranny of the ocean in search of whales so they might profit more. It goes without saying that the whaling industry significantly harmed the equilibrium of the sea's ecology when whale oil was shipped all over the world. Ahab was one of these individuals' spokespeople at the time. At a very young age, he got into whaling. During his forty-year whaling career, he caused massive environmental devastation.

On the one hand, people engaged in conflict over resources. They also destroyed nature since *Moby Dick* was an embodiment of nature (Urbanová, Kristína, 2021). *Moby Dick* was benign and did not assault people by nature because he was not a human.

He had unmatched strength, cunning wit, and he often beat whalemens. Additionally, *Moby Dick* bit off Ahab's leg out of self-defence, but Ahab intended to kill it out of curiosity and retaliation. After the first two failures in the struggle with it, Ahab was completely dominated by his crazy desire—for retribution and eventually went to disaster with *Moby Dick* and the entire crew (Grewell, Gregory Paul, 1992). The author's perspective on how men and nature interact is further examined as follows:

As revealed at the book's conclusion, Melville sees a battle arising between humans and nature that would ultimately ruin both. According to him, coexisting peacefully with nature rather than fighting it is the ideal course of action (Russell, Edmund, 2001).

## **Reflection in society**

### **Tyranny and democracy**

In the novel, Melville showed how lying, oppression, suspicion, and other bad traits were common among civilized men. The different circumstances at the captain's table in Chapter 34 afforded an obvious demonstration of this topic. During Ahab's meal with his three companions, there was neither commotion nor conversation. Aside from that, they also adhered to several guidelines. Ahab should enter the dining room first, followed by Starbuck, both Stubb, and Flask. Flask was the last person to finish the lunch, but he still had to get up and go before the others. In contrast to Flask, who frequently felt hungry after meals, Ahab always had plenty of time for his meals (Tally, Robert T, 2009).

On the other hand, there were many positive traits among the uncivilized guys. They were laid-back and incredibly amiable. Their words and deeds were not hypocritical. When Queequeg met Ishmael for the first time, he gave the latter fifteen dollars in silver, which represented half of his possessions, within two days. In contrast to the formal setting of the leaders' supper, the three harpooners did not observe any table etiquette at the captain's table. They conversed loudly while eating instead (Olson, Charles, 2018). These distinctions indicate that the uncivilized men enjoyed greater independence than the other men.

### **Job Discrimination**

With the public's bias against the whalemens and Ahab's prejudice against the blacksmith, it is simple to comprehend why people have misconceptions about those men working in low-paying vocations. While the world valued their labour and goods, these blacksmiths and whalers were hated by everyone. However, all Martial Commanders—whom the public was always happy to honour—had been butchers as well, and those with the bloodiest badge.

At this point, Melville sought to make the general audience wonder why those men who killed thousands of humans could have tremendous honour, but these men who killed animals for a career could not win the same level of respect from others (Rogin, Michael, 1985).

### **Racial Discrimination**

Racial discrimination in America is a further societal issue that the book touches on. However, since the first group of Europeans arrived in this "New Land" and said that this continent was God's Eden and that everybody was treated equally there, it did not apply to women, black people, or Native American Indians (Higham, John, 2002). At present, not everyone living on American soil is treated equally.

When Melville lived in the past, racial prejudice had reached its peak. Before him, the American plantation economy had grown for about a century, and after him, President Lincoln would abolish slavery, thus there was a serious issue with how to manage interactions between many races and nationalities at the time (Sundquist, Eric J, 1993). Ishmael's experience is simply one of many instances in the novel when these elements are discussed. When Ishmael wanted to stay for one night at Spouter-Inn, he was told he had to share a bed with a "savage." The author gave a lot of detail about what Ishmael was thinking:

Lord saves me, thinks I, that must be the harpooner, the infernal head-peddler. His bald purplish head now looked for the entire world like a mildewed skull. Had not the stranger stood between me and the door, I would have bolted out of it quicker than ever bolted a dinner. It was now quite plain that he must be some abominable savage or other shipped aboard of a whaleman in the South Seas, and so landed in this Christian country (Khosyatillah, Khosyatillah, 2008).

Even though the fact that the inn's landlord, Peter Coffin, had previously taught Ishmael about the attributes of Queequeg, he still felt this savage sight was horrifying. When he first encountered Queequeg, he was on the verge of losing control of his fear. Ishmael's reaction to a non-believer exemplified the common ideals held by people of colour in everyday life (Singh, Sharan Pal, 1995). The novel highlighted how society divided people based on their skin tones or religious convictions.

## **Reflection in Spirit**

### **Lack of Spiritual Independence**

On Pequod, the majority of the laborers were from various lower socioeconomic groups. Because they were undereducated and didn't have a nice upbringing, they turned to being seafarers to get by and raise their families. The Pequod crew's way of thought was not autonomous. Even though it required them to assume considerable risks, they all obeyed Ahab's instructions.

Only the first mate, Starbuck, could speak with Ahab, but he was frequently swayed by Ahab's eloquence and authority. After the Spanish gold coin was affixed to the ship's mast and the crew members and Ahab pledged an oath, Pequod's fate was determined. The crew was in danger multiple times while chasing Moby Dick, but they couldn't save themselves (Pascarelli, Laura E, 2005).

This was owing to not just Ahab's oppression, but also to their spiritual reliance on him. "Unlike the other crew members on board, Ahab has a great desire. He views the murder of Moby Dick as his ultimate life objective because he is driven by a desire for vengeance"(McWilliams, Susan, 2012).

As a result, Ahab used the crew's dependence on religion to further his own goals. Finally, the crew's fate was connected to Pequod by Ahab's obstinate desire for vengeance, and they were so ruined by Moby Dick.

### **Lack of Beliefs**

When Melville created his masterpiece, Moby Dick, the American industry was rapidly developing. The conquering of nature was just one of many methods the Americans used to pursue their zealous pursuit of wealth. However, environmental issues did not exist at first, which made these civilized guys more blatantly unethical. Some of them abandoned their religious convictions and led meaningless lives, while others engaged in worldly pleasures.

In this book, Ahab was a typical example of these people. "Though nominally included in the census of Christendom, he was still an alien to it." (James, Cyril Lionel Robert, 2001) Ahab did not believe in God and even thought of himself as a god. Ahab would not have pursued Moby Dick so relentlessly if he had a heart of compassion for nature as there was a strange power in it. Moby Dick made an appearance for the first time because of the erratic weather, making it a representation of nature. But Ahab vowed to kill it, whatever it was (Bender, Bert, 1990).

The narrator claims that even if the sun were to oppose him and cause him harm, he would still exact retribution on himself. As a result, when he had these notions, he abandoned his religious conviction, which caused calamity for him and his crew.

The uncivilized man Queequeg had his steadfast belief rather than betraying it like the civilized folks. He insisted on offering prayers in front of his puppet idol. Additionally, he would observe Ramadan every year, which involved sitting for the day in a particular position without drinking or eating or even moving. He let a carpenter build him a coffin by adhering to his own beliefs and customs after he collapsed from illness. To everyone's surprise, he made a full recovery on day two. Melville saw the benefits of devout religion in this way and praised individuals who could uphold their religious convictions.

Even the cool-headed and logical Ishmael in the book had a theological conflict at the time. "Although Ishmael professes to be a Christian, he frequently wonders about God's mercy" (Du, 2015). He experienced his own crisis of belief.

### **Spiritual Alienation**

Readers will also notice traces of estrangement in the text.

Despite the fact that the three companions shared Ahab's cabin with him, they hardly ever went inside to visit him. Even though it was mealtime, these four individuals continued to call one another without any apparent reason. Although it didn't seem strange to the commanders, the entire crew did. The crew did not have any close friendships. Ishmael and Queequeg were close friends until Ishmael sailed, but once they were both sailors and harpooners, they rarely had the opportunity to speak.

One of the reasons for this shift was that they were members of separate groups when they first boarded the ship. Alienation exists not only between acquaintances and peers but also between relatives and spouses. When Ahab lost a limb, his family treated him with amazement and alienation rather than compassion or consolation (Thomson, Rosemarie Garland, 2017). Furthermore, his wife became estranged from him due to their unhappy marriage and extended absences for business.

Given his lack of ties to his family, Ahab's ferocious desire for retribution against a whale seemed reasonable. He had been apathetic to his life for a long time, which was a result of estrangement.

## **The Realistic Significance**

Moby Dick's meaning in the real world is very important. A recent study on the book says it has many themes that will have a big effect on future generations. That is the interaction between people and society, people and nature, and people and other people, illuminating the realistic relevance of this task—the value of harmony (Zhao, Zhang, 2021). First, Melville stressed the significance of maintaining a balance between people and nature.

The power of nature is limitless, and man is powerless to subdue it. It was also the author's perspective on nature, which suggests that it possesses a strange and terrifying force. Any attempts to defeat it will inevitably fail, and nature will pay you back by punishing you more severely (Ren & Wang, 2018). However, the captain of the Pequod, Ahab, was unaware of this and took action to battle nature, which ultimately led to his demise in hell. That clarifies what we should do today: When we encounter the challenge of how to build the economy and safeguard the environment, we should encourage the development of the economy as well as environmental protection. However, when the two parties disagree, the latter should always take precedence since "clear waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets," as Chinese President Xi Jinping stated in 2005 (Yang, Le, Jiahao Zhang, and Yufeng Zhang, 2021).

Second, Melville emphasized how crucial social harmony is for people. In other terms, that is the peace among the many nations and races, particularly among the people. On the one hand, Melville wrote about numerous instances of employment discrimination. Heavy and low-paying labourers did not receive the same respect as others. Harpooners who took significant risks with their lives could only be compensated poorly; carpenters, blacksmiths, and gilders could be paid even less. Because of job discrimination, attitudes toward one another were influenced by people's income levels. However, white people were seen as being far superior to other races, and wild people from primitive tribes were typically despised.

Melville also emphasized the value of spiritual balance in his third point. Only Starbuck, the first mate, had his thoughts and was able to express them in the book. He repeatedly forewarned Ahab and even spoke with him, but this did not mean that he would lose Ahab's trust (Sobreira, Ricardo, 2021). Instead, when Ahab chased Moby Dick in a tiny boat, he trusted Starbuck and refused to permit him to take any chances. However, because the crew lacked critical thinking skills and blindly adopted Ahab's insane suggestions, they soon realized their shared doom.

The topic of how to end spiritual alienation is also crucial. Everyone in society ought to discover their purpose in life. People that have an open mind will value life much more and live longer. If there is spiritual harmony in society, human estrangement must be eliminated (Adorno, Theodor W, 1981).

## II.CONCLUSION

Through Moby Dick's vivid and in-depth depiction of whaling and a tragedy at the book's conclusion, Melville exposed several of issues with nineteenth-century American society and emphasized the significance of achieving harmony between people and nature, people and society, and people and the human spirit (Bookchin, Murray, 1982). In this way, the book not only provides a wealth of facts for the study of nineteenth-century American society, but it is also of great value to our contemporary society. The pursuit of economic prosperity should be accompanied by consideration for nature, community, and spirit to achieve sustainable development.

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