

The Creative Launcher

An International, Open Access, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

UGC Approved- (Sr. No. 62952)

An Ecocritical Study of Malville's *Moby Dick*

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Abstract

The continental philosophy has laid emphasis on the gross dismissal attitude of man to pro-animal or non-human discourse, and how man-talk has gained attention all along to prove his apocalyptic status of anthropocentrism. The continental writers tend to feel that the strength and cunningness of man alone do not make him the crown of creations; on the contrary, man is the most bungled of all animals, the sickliest, and one has strayed more dangerously from its instincts. Based on this notion the focus is constrained to human-animal studies to drive home the feeling of compassion on non-human animals with reference to Melville's *Moby Dick*. Ecocriticism examines how human perception of wilderness has changed throughout history and whether or not current environment issues are accurately represented or even mentioned in popular culture and modern literature. Thus, the present analysis of *Moby Dick* props the ways in which interactions between literature and other cultural practices produce and reflect especially the feelings of compassion, and identifies the advocacy of animals of this world, and the progress of ecocritical thought and compassion for nonhuman species.

Key Words- *Ecocritical, Anthropocentrism, Survival, Non-Human.*

The most important function of literature today is to redirect human consciousness to a full consideration of its place in an endangered natural world to recover the lost world of integrity as survival depends upon harmony and cooperation not only among human beings, but among all the animate and the less animate. What is recommended here is that any place

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of work should not forego compassion on fellow species the canon of literature should interpret nature both at personal and philosophical levels with the intention of appreciating all forms of life. In most literary theory “the world” is synonymous with society- the social sphere pertaining to entire ecosphere. According to Berry Comner’s first law of ecology, “everything is connected to everything else” (Glotfelty p XX), which states that literature does not float above the material world, but rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, and idea interact with each other. Environmental problems are now global in scale and their solution will require worldwide collaboration. The man has been the centre of conversation in all literary discourse leaving aside the other non-human animals.

The strength of *Moby Dick* is that it can sustain a vast diversity of readings it has defined how authors and readers have thought about whaling for one hundred and fifty years. No ecocritical reading of books about whales or whaling could avoid a discussion of Melville’s *Moby Dick*. *Whales* have become an important symbol of the ocean and the natural world, partly because of their existence which is not restricted to national area. Furthermore, their awesome size and their aspects make them difficult to ignore, and writers throughout history have felt compelled to consider them in the early industrial world, they were one of the most important “resources” available from the natural world and the contemporary texts reflect these statistical details.

In *Moby Dick*, a number of themes reflect on human attitudes to the world of nature. There is a naked acceptance of the American nationalistic project that whales have to be killed to provide oil for the American industries. Killing whales is cruel and degrades humans to the same level of predators. Today whale species is protected because of their rarity, which vividly embodies the fragility of ecological biodiversity. People like to humanize animals, from dependable horses, to tricky otters, to intelligent dolphins. When animals are indiscriminately killed, man alone will be left in the world. Melville conveys this idea in his chapters, to make man understand that he should humanize himself. Ahab, the main character

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spends three days on deck during the chase which shows his inhuman blood-lust, and indeed, Ahab needs to be humanized.

However, Ahab's determined pursuit of the whale causes him to break his connections with humanity and lose his humanness. To remain motivated and focused on his task, Ahab subconsciously distances himself from things that make him comfortable. He finds those things that once soothed him, which have lost their power and charm now. Ahab is more deliberate in isolating himself from his fellow men. He never speaks at meals making the officers' supper stifling and awkward, when he harpooners laugh and joke and are sociable. He refuses to participate in games which are part of the normal social order of the seafaring world. In his quest to conquer the whale, he becomes less than a human person. Through his dehumanization of Ahab, Melville brings out compassion for whales *Moby Dick* was written at a time when such attitudes like compassion and sympathy for animals were not utterly absent but were barely conceived by man in the mid-nineteenth century, two first the Judeo-Christian allegorical notion that saw the whale as a "leviathan" a symbol of either God's power.

It is contended that the whale is immortal in its species, however perishable in his individuality. Melville says, "he swam the seas before the continents broke water; in Noah's ark 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). Melville's entire volume constitutes a vigorous apologia for the whaling industry, and it can be claimed that his description of the animal's suffering aims at attacking whaling and whaling industries. He evokes a kind of sublime pathos seeing the animals as a victim of the tyranny and selfishness of man. Such portrayal of whales and their suffering in the hands of man elevates them beyond their vulgar status as mere commercial products.

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The novel explicitly evokes “pity” in describing the laborious and ineffectual attempts of escape by an aged and crippled sperm whale from the Pequod’s crew. Melville describes it:

It was a terrific, most pitiable, and maddening sight. The whale was now going head out, and sending his spout before him in a continual tormented jet; while his one poor fin beat his side in an agony of fright. Now to this hand, now to that, he yawed in his faltering flight, and still at every billow that he broke, he spasmodically sank in the sea, or sideways rolled towards the sky his one beating fin. So have I seen bird with clipped wing making affrighted broken circles in the air, vainly striving to escape the piratical hawks.

The character of Starbuck best represents the parameters of the mid-nineteenth century attitude to animal suffering. The aversion to cruelty displayed by “humane Starbuck” in his attempt to stop Flask’s tormenting of the infirm whale during the incidents cited above is both practically and economically rational. Flask’s sadism endangers the crew as it counter productively agitates the tormented animal, and mirrors his distaste for unprofitable herosim, “in him courage was not a sentiment; but a thing simply useful to him...thought Starbuck, I am here in this critical ocean to kill whales for my living and not to be killed by them for theirs.” (101). In the same way Starbuck objects to Ahab’s passionate pursuit of the white whale because it distracts them from the voyage’s commercial objective.

The novel thus mythologizes the whale in order to deny the possibility of its extinction, in a manner diametrically opposed to aims of the late twentieth-century environmentalism, which mythologizes the whale to make it a symbol of vulnerable biodiversity. Melville’s oceans do not change; they remain inexhaustible and eternal. Today many species are on the brink of extinction, and environmental enthusiasts have emerged to transcend national boundaries in a way completely unknown to Melville. Through a juxtaposition of the past and the present the reader can trace the process of change from *Moby Dicks*’ time to the current new global consciousness.

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