

# Interpretation of Confrontation Between Man and Nature in *Moby Dick* From the Perspective of Individualism

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*Moby Dick*, the masterpiece of Herman Melville, is a novel with the theme of the ocean. It is known as the summit of the works in the field of the relationship between man and nature. The vivid and full characters and the symbol of the relationship between man and nature in this novel are praised by the world. The main characters in the novel, Ahab, Starbuck, and Ishmael, have different attitudes towards *Moby Dick* and nature. Ahab, as captain, wanted to kill *Moby Dick* for his own selfish desires, being a representative of extreme individualism; as a devout Christian, Starbuck's believed that man should obey nature; Ishmael, the sailor, looked at nature with a rational and equal view. This thesis will apply individualism and other relevant theories to study *Moby Dick* to point out the causes and results of the battle between man and nature, so that readers can better understand the confrontation between man and nature and the adverse consequences of this confrontation under the background of the novel, stimulate people's awareness of environmental protection, and inspire human beings to respect nature and protect nature.

**Keywords:** *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville, individualism, man and nature

## Introduction

Herman Melville is one of the most important American novelists in the 19th century. In 1839, Melville went to the sea to make a living. He first became a sailor on a merchant ship, and then became a sailor on whaling ships and naval warships. He traveled a lot of places, suffered a lot, and formed an indissoluble bond with the sea. Melville's works mostly focus on the sea and island life, and reflect the social reality and show his ideological attitude by describing strange marine adventures and island customs.

*Moby Dick* was written around 1851, when American capitalism was rising. It was an era of industrial development. Conquest and possession were the main theme of that era around 1851. People conquered nature step by step through advanced technology, cut down forests, established industrial parks, and enjoyed the convenience brought by their technology, but at the same time, this behavior was also deeply damaging nature. If people continue to develop at this speed, the consequence will be the destruction of mankind itself. However, most people in that era were not aware of this problem. This paper describes the confrontation between man and nature to the extreme through the struggle between Ahab fleet and *Moby Dick*, so that people can understand the power of nature to the greatest extent, and trigger people to rethink the relationship between them.

### Literature Review

Up to now, there have been many research results on *Moby Dick* at home and abroad. It mainly involves Christian theological tradition, ecological criticism, natural balance and imbalance, ethical thought, and narrative skills. These works analyze the novel incisively and vividly from simple to deep, from single to multiple. It has greatly enriched the research results of this novel. There are a lot of perfect articles about *Moby Dick*.

As for the overseas works, they mainly focus on Christian theological tradition. For example, Jonathan A. Cook's *Moby-Dick and Twenty-First Century Theodicy* examines *Moby-Dick* as a 19th-century fictional response to the Christian theological tradition (Cook, 2022). In addition, overseas works also focus on eco-criticism. For example, Zhao Yue and Zhang Mengyang's "An Eco-critical Analysis of *Moby Dick*" interprets the novel *Moby Dick* by the theory of eco-criticism and also concludes its realistic significance, and they believe that people should pay attention to society, spirit and, more importantly, nature in order to realize a sustainable development (Zhao & Zhang, 2021). Also, there are some works on individualism. For example, Furui Yoshiaki's "Lonely Individualism in *Moby-Dick*" reconsiders the concept of individualism in this novel by analyzing Ahab's solitude (Yoshiaki, 2020).

For the domestic scholars' researches, they also focus on ecologism. For example, Zhan Yating's "The Ecological Sublime in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*" analyzes *Moby Dick* from the distinction between ecological sublime and traditional sublime (Zhan, 2021). Teng Yao's "Interpretation of *Moby Dick* From the Perspective of Eco-criticism" interprets the basic plots and confrontation in this novel to awaken people's awareness of ecological protection (Teng, 2020). There are also works focus on the main characters in this novel. For example, Xie Hui and Lu Daofu's "*Moby Dick*: An Analysis of Ahab's Narcissistic Personality Disorder" analyzes the cause of Ahab's death from his character, and further arouses readers' concern about healthy personality shaping (Xie & Lu, 2021).

The above works and other excellent works have studied the novel from different aspects. Obviously, the research on this novel is relatively sufficient, but there is less research on the relationship between man and nature and individualism in *Moby Dick*. This thesis will employ the theory of individualism to analyze the world outlook of the characters in the novel. The purpose is to make readers better understand the characters in the text and make people think in their own shoes, so as to guide people to respect and protect nature.

### A Brief Introduction to Individualism

Individualism is not a synonym for selfishness. It is completely different from the word selfishness. Hayek, a British scholar, gave a new definition of individualism, which is different from our one-sided understanding of individualism in the past.

#### The Definition of Individualism

Individualism is a social, political, and ethical philosophy, which emphasizes personal freedom and personal interests and self-control. This theory holds a view that the individual itself is the goal, and the society is only the means to achieve the individual goal; and all individuals are morally equal. The same French is individualism, which originates from Latin individual, which means independent individual and indivisible thing.

Individualism can mean a lot of things. As a value system, it advocates that all values are centered on the individual, and the individual itself has the highest value: As a general attitude towards political, economic, social and religious behavior, it includes a high evaluation of personal self-confidence, personal private life, and respect for the individual, as well as a variety of domination over authority and the individual. That is to say, a person's personal value needs are the highest, and everything of others cannot be above themselves. Individual rights are paramount.

### **The Classification of Individualism**

Friedrich August Von Hayek, a British economist and political philosopher born in 1899, is one of the main critics of collectivism in the academic circles of the 20th century. Hayek believes that all forms of collectivism (even those based on voluntary cooperation in theory) can only be maintained by centralized institutions in the end. At the same time, he proposed two categories of individualism: One is called "atomic individualism" and another is called "true individualism".

The first is atomic individualism or pseudo individualism. The individual advocated by this so-called "individualism is an isolated existence", which is not related to the people and things around it. This view holds that the individual is an atomic isolated existence before society and its members, which is extremely stupid in Hayek's view. But the Captain Ahab in this book is a typical representative of extreme individualism. For his own hatred, he ordered the crew of the whole ship to kill Moby Dick. His behavior is just in line with the characteristics of pseudo individualism.

The other is the true individualism advocated by Hayek, which is an individualism based on connection. It advocates that individuals are in a certain social environment, closely linked with society and its members, not an isolated existence. Moreover, there are universal connections between people and between people and society, so we cannot talk about individuals without society, nor can we talk about society without individuals. People and society are like fish and water. Fish cannot breathe without water, and people will become stupid without society.

### **The Causes of Confrontation Between Man and Nature**

The biggest cause of the battle was Captain Ahab's hatred of Moby Dick. Ahab ordered the whole ship to kill Moby Dick for his own selfish desire, which cost almost everyone's life. Another is the distorted hierarchical relationship between people on the fleet. The crew had to obey the captain's orders. First, people with lower status did not dare to resist because of the orders of their superiors, and second, they chose to take risks in order to get Ahab's reward due to their livelihood.

### **Man's Wrong Value of Nature**

In *Moby Dick*, in addition to Moby Dick, there are three main characters: Ahab, Starbuck, and Ishmael. The three of them have three different attitudes towards Moby Dick, which also reflects their views on nature.

The first is Ahab. As a captain, Ahab is a very important character in the novel, but he is also the most controversial character. Many years ago, Ahab was bitten off a leg by a beluga whale on a whaling ship. From then on, he decided to kill Moby Dick for revenge.

Some people think Ahab is a hero; others think he is a devil. It is undeniable that he does have the courage that ordinary people do not have: abandon his wife and children and lead the fleet to kill Moby Dick for revenge. But he was too proud and selfish, which made him a devil with only hatred in his eyes. He is the representative

of extreme individualism and focuses on his own personal interests in everything he does. As the captain of a ship, he should shoulder the responsibility of the captain and protect the life and safety of every member. However, instead of protecting the team members, he ordered the crew to risk their lives to avenge him. From this point of view, he is extremely selfish and typical of pseudo individualism. In the novel, he is irritable and unreasonable towards the crew, which is as frightening as the tyrant in ancient times. For example, he would call the crew a dog and let him go back to the kennel. In the film, his appearance is very mysterious: He stands on the deck with only one leg and crutches in his hand, standing there without saying a word and staring at the sea silently. He had no other thoughts in his mind at this time except revenge.

In Ahab's view, all natural things are subjective reflection of self. In the novel, everyone expressed their views on Spanish gold coins. In Ahab's eyes, the gold coins he saw were his own shadow. "The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that, too, is Ahab; all are Ahab" (Melville, 2013, p. 447). He thought that the volcano, tower, and rooster in the gold coins were all Ahab. It can be seen from this that he imposes his consciousness on natural things, and he cannot see anything else in things except himself. It is precisely his self-centered idea that reflects his view of nature. He hates Moby Dick and nature. He believes that nature is the embodiment of evil forces. In Ahab's eyes, objects visible to the naked eye are masks of invisible real things. However, Ahab's natural consciousness is wrong. He took revenge on Moby Dick, showing that in his heart, he thought the beluga whale could be conquered. In this novel, the beluga whale represents nature. In other words, Ahab believes that nature can be conquered by mankind. He wants to conquer nature, which is beyond his power.

Contrary to Ahab, Ishmael, the sailor, was full of awe and longing for nature. Because he had been teaching on land for a long time and was also very poor, he was tired of life on land and began to yearn for the ocean. "Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world" (Melville, 2013, p. 17). In his view, the ocean is full of mystery, and the sea is the embodiment of mystery. Moreover, unlike Ahab's hatred of Moby Dick, he believes that Moby Dick is a symbol of the beauty of nature. Although Moby Dick is huge and frightening, he was curious about the adventure of beluga whales and wanted to explore it. He believes that the white of Moby Dick symbolizes nature or the universe. It is an empty, meaningless, neutral, and unknown way of existence that is not transferred by human consciousness. He is different from Ahab and Starbuck. He looks at nature with an equal eye and explores the internal essence of nature.

Starbuck, the first mate on the fleet, was a devout Christian. Therefore, his view of nature is closely related to Christianity. As is known to us, Christianity believes that nature is a gift from God and a tool for human use. At the same time, Christianity advocates that nature is a tool to punish human beings, so human beings must comply with nature. This is also Starbuck's natural consciousness. In his opinion, Moby Dick is sent by God to manage nature. Seeking revenge from Moby Dick is against God and nature, which is not desirable. As a result, when the Captain Ahab called the fleet to kill Moby Dick, Starbuck had a fight with him.

### **Twisted Relationship Between Man and Man**

In this fleet, the relationship between people is unequal, and this inequality is also one of the reasons for this tragedy.

First of all, the captain is supreme and his orders cannot be disobeyed. When people were told that it was revenge after getting on board as usual, they had no choice but to follow the captain. Moby Dick has a chapter devoted to the dining of the people on board. The first mate Starbuck should confirm that the Captain Ahab is seated before greeting the second mate for dinner, and so on. When they leave the table after dinner, the order is the opposite.

Flask was the last person down at the dinner, and Flask is the first man up. Consider! For hereby Flask's dinner was badly jammed in point of time. Starbuck and Stubb both had the start of him; and yet they also have the privilege of lounging in the rear. If Stubb even, who is but a peg higher than Flask, happens to have but a small appetite, and soon shows symptoms of concluding his repast, then Flask must bestir himself, he will not get more than three mouthfuls that day. (Melville, 2013, p. 164)

This also reflects the strict hierarchy on board and the unequal interpersonal relationship between people. Moreover, Ahab also preached to them about his struggle with Moby Dick, which also excited the crew. As a result, all people on the ship wanted to avenge the captain.

Ishmael, the only survivor on board, had different ideas from Ahab. Therefore, when the fleet attacked Moby Dick, he tried to persuade the captain not to do so, but because of his low status, the captain could not listen to him, so he had no way to stop the tragedy. This also reflects that the interpersonal relationship on board is unequal.

What is more, people who could be captain at that time must be rich. Of course, there are poor people on board. That's why Ahab used gold coins to lure the crew to avenge him. "I see nothing here, but a round thing made of gold, and whoever raises a certain whale, this round thing belongs to him...It is worth sixteen dollars, that is true" (Melville, 2013, p. 450). There is no doubt that this is a great temptation for the poor. The poor without status and wealth cannot earn a gold coin even if they work all their life, so they are excited. This is not only the class gap, but also one of the reasons for the tragedy. Just as animals can fight animals bigger than themselves in order to survive, people can do unusual things for money.

On this whaling ship, the relationship between people is distorted. People with high status can dominate people with low status at will and even abuse them. The crew could not resist the captain's order. Even if they wanted to live, they had to follow the fleet to kill Moby Dick.

### **The Embodiment of Confrontation Between Man and Nature**

In *Moby Dick*, the fleet represents human beings and the Moby Dick represents nature. The confrontation between Ahab's fleet and Moby Dick is equivalent to the confrontation between man and nature in the long river of history.

#### **The Attack From Moby Dick**

Ahab joined the whaling ship, and then he was bitten off a leg by a beluga whale in catching a whale. Moby Dick is a peculiar sperm whale.

A peculiar snow-white wrinkled forehead, and a high, pyramidical white hump...The rest of his body was so streaked, and spotted, and marbled with the same shrouded hue, that, in the end, he had gained his distinctive appellation of the White Whale. (Melville, 2013, p. 198)

It is extremely powerful. When attacked, it often breaks the whaling boat. It often shows an unparalleled cunning full of wit. People are convinced by all kinds of rumors and omens about Moby Dick, so the discussion of Moby Dick is legendary. Moby Dick can be regarded as a symbol of the impermanent power of nature. Unlike

other whales, it haunts a certain water area according to the season and its own rules. It has no clue and is unknown. Therefore, the existence of Moby Dick brings fatalistic fear and sadness to the people who hunt it all the time. In such countless contradictions, countless conflicts have emerged. Moby Dick acts as the chief of nature and claims to be the patron saint of nature, so the conflict between Ahab and Moby Dick is inevitable. After the Moby Dick bit off Ahab's leg, Ahab made up his mind to avenge himself. However, Moby Dick is the king of the sea and a frightening creature. In a way, I think the attack of Moby Dick on humans is acceptable. After all, if human beings were not so crazy about killing it, it would not become so grumpy. As we know, the law of nature is natural selection and survival of the fittest. The instinct of animals is to live. Facing endless human killing, whales can only protect themselves out of instinct. Moby Dick is not afraid of humans, but also has the ability to attack humans, which is also confirmed in the novel: After the fleet fought hard for three days and three nights, Ahab stabbed Moby Dick with a harpoon, but Moby Dick also broke the ship. Ahab died with the Moby Dick, and all the people on the fleet died in the sea except Ishmael, the narrator.

### **Ahab's Hostility to Nature**

Ahab is a very stubborn man. His stubbornness is close to madness. All the time he was thinking about killing Moby Dick. He thought that his ultimate goal was to kill Moby Dick. When other people killed a white whale but not Moby Dick, he is unhappy at all, even a little disappointed. Moreover, after his leg was bitten off by Moby Dick, he actually made a prosthetic leg from whale bones. As we can see, he did this to remind himself to step on Moby Dick. The reason for Ahab's tragedy lies in his courage to challenge nature. Moby Dick represents infinite nature. When the *pequod* was hit and sank to the bottom of the sea, everything seemed to restore the calm that nature should have. There is no rational embodiment in Ahab, but only irrational crazy behavior. The loss of rationality is one of the main reasons for his tragedy. In Ahab's heart, Moby Dick is the evil and terrible enemy, which is difficult to conquer and must be defeated.

In contrast, Ishmael is full of awe of nature and has a friendly attitude towards nature. Whether on a ship or elsewhere, he can always find the beauty of the sea and whales. Sometimes he also regarded whales as humans, which showed that animals and humans were equal in his heart. Ishmael also pointed out that the ocean has its own ecological value. And Ishmael was the only survivor of the tragedy. Ahab's tragedy and Ishmael's survival prove that only by conforming to nature and protecting nature can human beings develop well.

If Ahab is the representative of human challenge to nature, Moby Dick is the epitome of counterattack against the attack of powerful human. They are a pair of irreconcilable contradictions, which embodies the strong impact of man and nature. In the long historical process of mankind, the crazy plundering of nature is based on the expanding human vanity and arrogance. It is an evil force hidden in modern civilization. In *Moby Dick*, Ahab hides such an evil force. He insisted on enduring the physical pain caused by the loss of a leg, but he could not let go of the failure and disgrace brought to him by that leg. Therefore, it was not the incomplete body, but the frustrated soul that made him lose his mind. In fact, Ahab was not knocked down by beluga whales, but was harmed by an irrational desire for revenge, which is also the punishment of nature for our human madness.

### **The Enlightenment of the Confrontation**

The struggle between the fleet and Moby Dick represents the struggle between mankind and nature. Ahab's attempt to conquer Moby Dick is bound to fail. Therefore, it is impossible for human beings to conquer nature.

People must conform to nature, protect nature, and live in harmony with nature in order to achieve sustainable development.

Moby Dick's creation background is the era of rapid industrial development, so this article has a certain alerting significance, which is to appeal to people to protect nature. Take the killing of beluga whales as an example. At that time, when the whaling industry was just developing, it was indeed a thing that could bring great wealth to mankind. However, with the development of the times, the number of whales is becoming less and less. Now the government departments explicitly prohibit the capture of whales. It can also be concluded that people must conform to nature and do not attempt to conquer or change nature.

The natural environment is the basic condition for human survival and for developing economy. Without the vast natural environment of the earth, it is impossible for mankind to survive and reproduce. Therefore, maintaining ecological balance and protecting environment is a fundamental problem related to human survival and social development. I believe that as long as we insist on protecting nature and abandon conquering nature, we can realize the harmonious coexistence between man and nature and realize sustainable development of mankind.

### Conclusions

To most readers, *Moby Dick* is a very attractive novel. Melville did not cause much sensation after writing the novel, and even sold only three copies in the first year. It was not until Melville's death that this masterpiece was discovered and read to this day.

From the perspective of individualism, this thesis analyzes Ahab's character and interprets the tragedy of the confrontation between the fleet and Moby Dick. The purpose is to make people realize the importance of conforming to nature and protecting nature through the analysis of this tragedy. *Moby Dick* plays a role in warning human beings to respect nature by telling a tragedy. This thesis studies the relationship between man and nature, so as to promote people to better think and solve the grand proposition of harmonious coexistence between man and nature.

Due to the lack of sufficient knowledge and limited energy, this thesis has some limitations, and the continued research will be done in the future.

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