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Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*: Employment of Naturalism in its Rudiments

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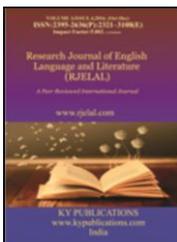
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ABSTRACT

Naturalists oppose the supernatural. They deny the existence of ghosts, goblins, gods and other spooky entities. This seems like a statement about what there is, a piece of metaphysics, but it may also be taken in a methodological way. Naturalists oppose tarot-card readings and séances, and other strange ways of finding out about the world. This is far from a trivial doctrine. Many people believe in ghosts and astrology. Many more believe in some religion. Declarations of atheism are not just controversial in some parts of the world, but positively dangerous. These claims by themselves are, however, unlikely to cause much excitement among philosophers. One would have to look long and hard to find a philosopher who defends the existence of goblins or the use of tarot cards to predict the future. God might seem to be a different matter. It is likely that the population of philosophers (both past and present) is as theistic as the population at large, but mere atheism is not enough to characterize an interesting philosophical position. Many philosophers who call themselves existentialists, such as Sartre, or positivists, such as Carnap, or critical theorists or postmodernists are atheists but not happily classified as naturalists. While Emile Zola is believed to be the pioneering champion of naturalism, Joseph Conrad and Herman Melville are nevertheless huge contributors to naturalist philosophy and have deployed the facets of naturalism in their works. The paper presents the aspects of naturalism in *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville.

Key Words: Naturalism, Impulses, hereditary, environment

INTRODUCTION

Naturalism unlike realism adopts more a philosophical position and holds man responsible for his actions and negates divine interventions. Naturalism considers human beings to be determined by their heredity and environment. The individual is at the mercy of determining social and economic forces. Each human being is determined by heredity and environment and "subject to the social and economic forces in the family, the class,

and the milieu into which that person is born" (Abrams 153). Naturalistic themes, thus, include an opposition between "human will and hereditary and environmental determinisms that both shape human beings and frustrate their desires" (Howard 40). Naturalism addresses the crisis of the meaninglessness of traditional notions of honour, religion, and love. Naturalist narrative upholds the belief that human beings are "merely a higher order animal whose character and fortune are determined

by two kinds of forces--heredity and environment, with no participation in a religious world" (Abrams 153). This belief perceives the human being as belonging "entirely in the order of nature, with no participation in a religious or spiritual world beyond nature" (Abrams 153).

Herman Melville, in his works, employs mostly scientific naturalism and consequently literary naturalism. His works *Moby-Dick*, *The White Jacket*, *The Confidence Man* and *The Encantadas* contain naturalistic themes. The themes and characteristics of the works are the presence of contradictions and tensions in the text related to theme and form, a focus on lower class characters, pessimistic determinism, and harsh settings.

Moby Dick: A Naturalist Narrative

Moby-Dick (MD) was initially conceived as a realistic narrative about sea life; but it took on epic scope as a naturalist narrative as Melville progressed in its composition. In the novel, the narrator, Ishmael, recounts his ill-fated voyage as a hand on board the whaling ship *Pequod*. Outfitted with an eclectic crew including South Sea islanders, North American Indians, blacks, and New England salts, the whaler leaves Nantucket on Christmas Day, bound on a commercial hunt for whales. As the trip progresses, however, Ahab, the ship's captain, exerts his will over the crew and converts the voyage into a quest to destroy his personal nemesis, a celebrated white whale known as Moby Dick. Ahab had lost a leg to the whale in a previous encounter, and his search is further fueled by his monomaniacal conviction that Moby Dick visibly personifies all earthly malignity and evil. The story concludes with a turbulent three-day struggle between the white whale and the *Pequod*'s crew. The whale has been variously interpreted as God, evil, good, and as a symbol of the ambiguity of nature. The protagonist Ahab in *Moby Dick* is a man who lusts for vengeance. As the plot unravels, the readers learn Ahab's intention to kill the giant whale despite the knowledge of its indomitable power. Ahab's desperation to hunt down the whale and hopefulness of the victory of the avenging act is indicative of the naturalist narrative's potential to be in "despair and hope at one and the same time" (Furst 22). His lust for vengeance blinds him of the

impending danger behind such a rather unthoughtful act.

By emphasizing the peculiarity of the ship, Melville intensifies the following sequence of events in which the *Pequod* is unable to successfully communicate with the *Albatross*. This is most clearly seen when the *Albatross*'s captain drops his trumpet, his only tool for communication, "Putting his trumpet to his mouth, it somehow fell from his hand into the sea; and the wind now rising again, he in vain strove to make himself heard without it" (217). This act, having occurred "at the first mere mention of the White Whale's name to another ship" (217) foreshadows the *Pequod*'s eventual encounter with Moby Dick, while also acting as an implied warning that literally cannot be heard by Ahab.

The end of the novel announcing the victory of whale over Ahab is indicative of naturalistic approach adopted by Melville which gives no room for any divine intervention to subdue the tragic ending. Melville finds extraordinary in the ordinary, and presents the detailed commonalities of life aboard a ship alongside robust moments of the human spirit acting according to its nature, good or bad. Ahab's final confrontation with the White Whale is anything but common or normal, but such strings of mundane events are what take the *Pequod* to that fateful point. Moreover, a strong humanistic virtue shines through in Ahab's obsession.

The narrative of *Moby Dick* is rather objective. Despite the first person narration, the reader can sense the detachment on the part of Ishmael. Ishmael is presented to us as a detached man who faces events of life with stoic resignation: "And doubtless, my going on this whaling voyage, formed part of the grand programme of Providence that was drawn up a long time ago." (MD, p.22) Ishmael, despite travelling aboard the same ship introduces other character with sheer objectivity and the portrayal harbors little sympathy or consideration for the fellow shipmates and the misfortunes few meet with. Ishmael's naturalist enterprise is ambitious, and by devising the system he distances himself from *ad-hoc* naturalists, the

mere observer and recorder, calling himself “*the architect, not the builder*” (MD, p.116) This aspect of novel substantiates the naturalistic philosophy adopted by Herman Melville.

The choice of character in Moby Dick too hints at the naturalistic portrayal for the protagonist being a common man with no heroic qualities. Not just the protagonist, the characters and location are common place. The works mainly deal with characters from lower class or lower middle class. Poor characters are of chief interest to literary naturalism. Donald Pizer establishes that “the naturalist populates his novel primarily from the lower middle class or the lower class. His characters are the poor, the uneducated, the unsophisticated” (Pizer 11). Ahab, embodies few of the qualities one would expect in a leader, given his physical handicap and questionable mental health. The book’s narrator Ishmael takes to the sea as an alternative to the land. Ishmael informs readers at the outset of *Moby-Dick* that “having little or no money” he prefers to go to sea as a “simple sailor” Melville’s works are abundant with commoners. Naturalists also treat all characters fundamentally alike heedless of class, caste and creed. The portrayal of the ordinary man ruled by his heredity, milieu and the pressures of the moment is on account of the physiological, scientific and mechanical view of human life believed by the proponents of naturalism.

The novel is a narrative from Ishmael’s point of view. Ishmael too is a character from a social milieu who cannot dream a life of sea voyages as a passenger with a rather empty pocket as communicated by him so: “*For to go as a passenger you must needs have a purse, and a purse is but a rag unless you have something in it.*”(MD, p3). However, Ishmael too is driven by his impulse to sea adventures but not too ambitious to dream of feats. He is contented with the sea voyages as a sailor and is not fretful of the tribulations he faces on account of his financial condition.

“No, when I go to sea, I go as a simple sailor, right before the mast, plumb down into the fore-castle, aloft there to the royal mast-head. True, they rather order me about some, and make me jump from spar to spar, like a grasshopper in a May

meadow. What of it, if some old hunks of a sea-captain orders me to get a broom and sweep down the decks? What does that indignity amount to, weighed, I mean, in the scales of the New Testament? Do you think the archangel Gabriel thinks anything the less of me, because I promptly and respectfully obey that old hunks in that particular instance? Who ain’t a slave? Tell me that. Well, then, however the old sea-captains may order me about—however they may thump and punch me about, I have the satisfaction of knowing that it is all right; that everybody else is one way or other served in much the same way—either in a physical or metaphysical point of view, that is; and so the universal thump is passed round, and all hands should rub each other’s shoulder-blades, and be content. (MD, p7)

Naturalistic works exposed the dark harshness of life, including poverty, racism, violence, prejudice, disease, corruption, prostitution, and filth. Pessimistic determinism is a dominant feature in the naturalist works. The crew of the Pequod is destined to meet death by the White Whale. The harsh determinism of the sea is a naturalistic theme. The pessimistic determinism and harsh settings are intimately connected in naturalistic works. The novel Moby Dick too holds a bleak setting:

It was a queer sort of place—a gable-ended old house, one side palsied as it were, and leaning over sadly. It stood on a sharp bleak corner, where that tempestuous wind Euroclydon kept up a worse howling than ever it did about poor Paul’s tossed craft. (MD, p14)

As the novel proceeds, Ishmael introduces Queequeg, the description of whom necessarily support Emile Zola’s (the pioneering exponent of naturalism) popular phrase ‘human beast’.

Such a face! It was of a dark, purplish, yellow colour, here and there stuck over with large blackish looking squares. His bald purplish head now looked for all the world like a mildewed skull. Meanwhile, he continued the business of undressing, and

at last showed his chest and arms. As I live, these covered parts of him were checkered with the same squares as his face; his back, too, was all over the same dark squares; he seemed to have been in a Thirty Years' War, and just escaped from it with a sticking-plaster shirt. Still more, his very legs were marked, as if a parcel of dark green frogs were running up the trunks of young palms. It was now quite plain that he must be some abominable savage or other shipped aboard of a whaler in the South Seas, and so landed in this Christian country. I quaked to think of it. (MD, p24)

Ishmael was left with no choice but to accept this beastly ship mate of his. But, contrary to his appearance, he sounded more civilized to Ishmael. *I pay this particular compliment to Queequeg, because he treated me with so much civility and consideration, while I was guilty of great rudeness; (MD, p25)* He continued journeying as a sailor to New Bedford, Massachusetts post the initial reluctance of sharing the whalers' inn with Queequeg. It doesn't fail the notice of the reader to note the racism that exists in the narrative. The adjective 'cannibal' and the mention of 'dark-skin' that Ishmael identifies with Queequeg in the narrative is exemplar of the racist notion of primitiveness associated with the color. One also finds Ishmael taken aback by the civilized and polite manners of Queequeg contrary to his expectations. After the initial jiffy, Ishmael claims to have gotten along with the new acquaintance of his. The feeling of astonishment expressed at the civilized behavior of Queequeg by the narrator implies the barbaric behavior associated with the dark-skinned people. The prejudice harbored for the dark-skinned people is made exemplar during the discussion over Queequeg being let aboard the ship. The naturalistic features of the narrative cast light on the element of racism concurrently running in the novel. Naturalism maintains human beings are impulsive and he is responsible for his actions. The circumstances act as catalyst to bring out the impulsive beast within. Ishmael and Queequeg take a ferry to Nantucket, the traditional capital of the whaling industry. There they secure berths on the Pequod, a savage-looking

ship adorned with the bones and teeth of sperm whales. Peleg and Bildad, the Pequod's Quaker owners, drive a hard bargain in terms of salary. Human being's impulsive behavior is best expressed at in the novel. The heated argument that erupts between Captain Bildad and Captain Peleg over the salary for whaling is exemplar of this.

"Thou Bildad!" roared Peleg, starting up and clattering about the cabin. "Blast ye, Captain Bildad, if I had followed thy advice in these matters, I would afore now had a conscience to lug about that would be heavy enough to founder the largest ship that ever sailed round Cape Horn."

"Captain Peleg," said Bildad steadily, "thy conscience may be drawing ten inches of water, or ten fathoms, I can't tell; but as thou art still an impenitent man, Captain Peleg, I greatly fear lest thy conscience be but a leaky one; and will in the end sink thee foundering down to the fiery pit, Captain Peleg."

"Fiery pit! fiery pit! ye insult me, man; past all natural bearing, ye insult me. It's an all-fired outrage to tell any human creature that he's bound to hell. Flukes and flames! Bildad, say that again to me, and start my soul-bolts, but I'll—I'll—yes, I'll swallow a live goat with all his hair and horns on. Out of the cabin, ye canting, drab-coloured son of a wooden gun—a straight wake with ye!" As he thundered out this he made a rush at Bildad, but with a marvellous oblique, sliding celerity, Bildad for that time eluded him. (MD, p65).

Their immediate reconciliation post the argument despite combat of slightly physical nature supports the naturalistic view of man's imminent reaction to his circumstances. On Pequod, they eventually meet the ship's mysterious captain, Ahab, who is still recovering from losing his leg in an encounter with a sperm whale on his last voyage. Captain Peleg introduces Ahab to Ishmael as a man of queer fashion and hardly attached to anyone on the crew. This also substantiates naturalist portrayal of characters being the victims of determining natural and social forces beyond control; their inability to

share a sincere loving communication stifles their emotional, social, and psychological development.

Description of Captain Ahab by the shipmates doesn't really provide an affirmative figure of action but a victim of circumstances who has upheld his whaling spirit despite major tragedies. For being the protagonist in the narrative, Captain Ahab is necessarily not painted a man who embellishes heroic qualities in a naturalist works. Ahab, the monomaniacal ship captain of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, is a man plagued by revenge. Searching the seas for the whale who took his leg and along with it, his ability to effectively assimilate into society, Ahab continually shows himself to be a man concerned with a single unvarying mission. Naturalist works maintains the characters common place and mostly driven by impulsive instincts. Critic Henry Alonzo Myers states that Ahab's "madness is beyond common experience only in its intensity" (Myers 33). Additionally, Melville refers to the ship's captain as a "strange captain," (217) emphasizing the oddness of the man, rather than the unfamiliarity that would be expressed with terms denoting him a "stranger" or "unknown" captain. Queequeg's blind reverence for the religious ways during the Ramadan leaves Ishmael in awe.

.....I have no objection to any person's religion, be it what it may, so long as that person does not kill or insult any other person, because that other person don't believe it also. But when a man's religion becomes really frantic; when it is a positive torment to him; and, in fine, makes this earth of ours an uncomfortable inn to lodge in; then I think it high time to take that individual aside and argue the point with him.(MD, p70)

He tries to speak and civilize Queequeg. However, Queequeg rather trusts his personal instincts over his new shipmate's views. The Pequod leaves Nantucket on a cold Christmas Day with a crew made up of men from many different countries and races. Soon the ship is in warmer waters, and Ahab makes his first appearance on deck, balancing gingerly on his false leg, which is made from a sperm whale's jaw. He announces his desire to pursue and kill Moby Dick, the legendary great white whale who

took his leg, because he sees this whale as the embodiment of evil.

Moby Dick had reaped away Ahab's leg, as a mower a blade of grass in the field. No turbaned Turk, no hired Venetian or Malay, could have smote him with more seeming malice. Small reason was there to doubt, then, that ever since that almost fatal encounter, Ahab had cherished a wild vindictiveness against the whale, all the more fell for that in his frantic morbidness he at last came to identify with him, not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations. (MD, p126)

The White Whale's supernatural presence in the narrative is further solidified by Ahab's view that it is sheer evil. This signification is crucial because it is Ahab's obsession that propels the narrative—his understanding of the whale as evil incarnate drives the crew to their ultimate destruction.

"All evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in *Moby Dick*. He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all general rage and hate felt by his whole race" (MD, p200).

Ahab nails a gold doubloon to the mast and declares that it will be the prize for the first man to sight the whale. As the Pequod sails toward the southern tip of Africa, whales are sighted and unsuccessfully hunted. During the hunt, a group of men, none of whom anyone on the ship's crew has seen before on the voyage, emerges from the hold. The men's leader is an exotic-looking man named Fedallah. These men constitute Ahab's private harpoon crew, smuggled aboard in defiance of Bildad and Peleg. Ahab hopes that their skills and Fedallah's prophetic abilities will help him in his hunt for Moby Dick.

The Pequod rounds Africa and enters the Indian Ocean. A few whales are successfully caught and processed for their oil. From time to time, the ship encounters other whaling vessels. Ahab always demands information about Moby Dick from their captains. One of the ships, the *Jeroboam*, carries Gabriel, a crazed prophet who predicts doom for anyone who threatens Moby Dick. His predictions seem to carry some weight, as those aboard his ship

who have hunted the whale have met disaster. While trying to drain the oil from the head of a captured sperm whale, Tashtego, one of the Pequod's harpooners, falls into the whale's voluminous head, which then rips free of the ship and begins to sink. Queequeg saves Tashtego by diving into the ocean and cutting into the slowly sinking head.

During another whale hunt, Pip, the Pequod's black cabin boy, jumps from a whaleboat and is left behind in the middle of the ocean. As Pip is left alone surrounded by the ocean in its humongous form, he realizes the "ocean immensity" (MD, p453). He goes insane as the result of the experience and becomes a crazy but prophetic jester for the ship. Soon after, the Pequod meets the Samuel Enderby, a whaling ship whose skipper, Captain Boomer, has lost an arm in an encounter with Moby Dick. The two captains discuss the whale; Boomer, happy simply to have survived his encounter, cannot understand Ahab's lust for vengeance. Not long after, Queequeg falls ill and has the ship's carpenter make him a coffin in anticipation of his death. He recovers, however, and the coffin eventually becomes the Pequod's replacement life buoy.

Ahab orders a harpoon forged in the expectation that he will soon encounter Moby Dick. He baptizes the harpoon with the blood of the Pequod's three harpooners. The Pequod kills several more whales. Issuing a prophecy about Ahab's death, Fedallah declares that Ahab will first see two hearses, the second of which will be made only from American wood, and that he will be killed by hemp rope. Ahab interprets these words to mean that he will not die at sea, where there are no hearses and no hangings. A typhoon hits the Pequod, illuminating it with electrical fire. Ahab takes this occurrence as a sign of imminent confrontation and success, but Starbuck, the ship's first mate, takes it as a bad omen and considers killing Ahab to end the mad quest. After the storm ends, one of the sailors falls from the ship's masthead and drowns—a grim foreshadowing of what lies ahead.

Ahab's fervent desire to find and destroy Moby Dick continues to intensify, and the mad Pip is

now his constant companion. The Pequod approaches the equator, where Ahab expects to find the great whale. The ship encounters two more whaling ships, the Rachel and the Delight, both of which have recently had fatal encounters with the whale. Ahab finally sights Moby Dick. Ahab's lust for vengeance was highly engrossing to an extent that Ishmael despite being the detached narrator through the narrative shares the similar horrifying fascination to hunt down the large whale which had taken away Ahab's leg leaving him fatally injured in the earlier encounter.

Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine. With greedy ears I learned the history of that murderous monster against whom I and all the others had taken our oaths of violence and revenge. (MD, p 121)

The sight of Moby Dick as Ishmael puts it across:

Out of the bottomless profundities the gigantic tail seems spasmodically snatching at the highest heaven. So in dreams, have I seen majestic Satan thrusting forth his tormented colossal claw from the flame Baltic of Hell. But in gazing at such scenes, it is all in all what mood you are in; if in the Dantean, the devils will occur to you; if in that of Isaiah, the archangels. (MD,p251)

The harpoon boats are launched, and Moby Dick attacks Ahab's harpoon boat, destroying it. The next day, Moby Dick is sighted again, and the boats are lowered once more. The whale is harpooned, but Moby Dick again attacks Ahab's boat. Fedallah, trapped in the harpoon line, is dragged overboard to his death. Starbuck must maneuver the Pequod between Ahab and the angry whale.

On the third day, the boats are once again sent after Moby Dick, who once again attacks them. The men can see Fedallah's corpse lashed to the whale by the harpoon line. Moby Dick rams the Pequod and sinks it. Ahab is then caught in a harpoon line and hurled out of his harpoon boat to his death. The aspect of the naturalistic philosophy that emphasizes

the powerlessness of modern tragic characters and traces their helplessness to social forces, social factors, social pressures

and tendencies. (Farrell, "Observations",
150)

substantiate the death of Ahab at the end of the turbulence. All of the remaining whaleboats and men are caught in the vortex created by the sinking Pequod and pulled under to their deaths. Ishmael, who was thrown from a boat at the beginning of the chase, was far enough away to escape the whirlpool, and he alone survives. He floats atop Queequeg's coffin, which popped back up from the wreck, until he is picked up by the Rachel, which is still searching for the crewmen lost in her earlier encounter with Moby Dick.

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