

Transcendentalism in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*

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Abstract—Ralph Waldo Emerson's Transcendentalist beliefs had dominated American literature in the Romantic period. It has remained an appealing interest in exploring whether Herman Melville had been influenced by Transcendentalism and in what ways it is embodied in his work. Therefore, this study carries out a detailed analysis of Melville's Transcendentalist tendency in his masterpiece of *Moby-Dick*. It is found that the characterization of Ahab as a Transcendentalist hero and Ishmael as an Emersonian Individualist are two cases in the point. Furthermore, it also reveals the embodiment of Oversoul in the narration. Altogether, they testify the sign of Transcendental influence over Melville in this novel.

Index Terms—transcendentalism, Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, Emerson

I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays *Moby-Dick* is universally regarded as the summit of both Melville's art and American nineteenth-century fiction. In his *Studies in Classic American Literature*, D. H. Lawrence (1923) exclaimed simply: "It is a great book". Moreover, its author, Herman Melville, is regarded primarily as an inventor of adventure yarns at home and abroad nowadays. Over the years, both the writer and his great works, particularly his masterpiece, have received increasing attention and interest among literary critics and academics. Various interpretations of the main characters in this novel have exhibited mainstream ideology during each specific era in the human history.

Ralph Waldo Emerson is acknowledged as a great thinker and an essayist in American literary history. He is a representative of the American Romanticism in the mid-19th century as well as a distinguishing leader of the Transcendentalist movement. As the leading New England Transcendentalist, Emerson has effected a most articulate synthesis of the Transcendentalist views. His ideas in his great works had liberated men from traditional restricted thinking and profoundly prompted the progress of American literature.

Herman Melville and Ralph Emerson are two significant historical figures who happened to exist around the same period of American history. More or less, there seemed to exist certain link between these two great minds. Therefore, it has been an unfailing interest for researchers to study the connections and similarities between the two great thinkers and their thoughts conveyed in the masterpiece.

Moby-Dick is a story about the conflict between Ahab, the captain of the Pequod, and the white whale or whales at large. Ahab is the most controversial figure in the novel, even in the American literary world. Questions arise concerning what transcendental qualities Ishmael possesses; what kind of a hero Ahab is portrayed to be and what kind of attitudes Melville holds towards the relationship between Man and Nature and Man and God. The key answers to those questions could be found through the analyses of the relationship between Melville's thoughts and the American Transcendentalist beliefs, and such demonstration can also unveil the influence of Transcendentalism on Melville and his great work.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Almost every year saw academic publications on Herman Melville and his work of *Moby-Dick*. In overall terms, the study of *Moby-Dick* is on the dramatic rise. The center locates in its seemingly uncoordinated form like the prose poetry, the rhythmic lines, the mixture of genres and multiplicity of voices, the whaling saga with highly spiritual suggestions, a symbolic allegory of man's challenge to nature, a paradoxical presentation of man's inner contest between the good and the evil, Melville's romantic pessimism about doubt and faith, the theme of death and baptismal rebirth, to name a few.

Various interpretations have been invoked among critics. They are: "an adventure sage; an adventure with a vague spiritual tone; an emblem-story of man and nature; a burning symbolic representation of 'a profound conflict in the soul of man'; an allegory of man's attack upon nature; and last, a study of a man in revolt against evil and chaos in the universe" (Parke, 1981, p.309). Among them, one of the most heated topics falls on the discussion about Transcendentalist thoughts conveyed from this literary work and Melville's understanding of and attitude towards it.

Ralph Emerson proposes Transcendentalism and Transcendental movement in the historic period of American romanticism. He defines *Oversoul* as the supernatural level of reality. It is the creator of all and the source of the extraordinary, proceeds, in turn, the soul and the world of nature, circulates in all the space, embodies and demonstrates itself in the observable nature. Spirit or Mind creates all, and at the same time, it is the object to be approved: its

translation into things is the evidence of God's existence which is generally regarded as the visible objects (Cavell, 2003, p.56). In Emerson's Transcendentalist eyes, people's thoughts could be delivered through nature and particular spiritual facts could be symbolized by particular natural facts.

Moreover, considering the Nature as the most sanctifying moral influence on man, Emerson advocates a direct intuition of a spiritual and immanent God in nature (Chang Yaixin, 2007, p.60). It is an important moment of "conversion" when one has completely sunk into nature and become one with it; the soul has completely transcended the limits of individuality and becomes part of the Oversoul. He should be able to see into the depths of infinite time, comprehend the path of things and the divine unity of the Universe by intuition, and communicate the feelings of contact with nature to his fellowmen. It holds the belief that people get to know the outside world through their five senses and the inner world through their intuition. Furthermore, according to the explanation of "the infinitude of man" by Emerson, if a man could rely on himself to cultivate and bring out the divine within himself, he can hope to become better or even perfect (Chang Yaixin, 2007, p. 61).

It is not hard to notice that the research focus has been shifting to the examination of key characters in this novel and the representation of their personality and fate in the story. Based on Freudian psychological doctrines, the emphasis of critical reading of *Moby-Dick* averted to human modern psychic puzzlement with the typical example of the character Ahab and his monomaniac syndrome. In the article "In Nomine Diaboli" written by Henry A. Murray, Ahab is seen as the insurgent Id, who is deeply involved in a moral conflict against the white whale known as the cultural Superego; whereas the first mate, Starbuck represents the reasonably realistic Ego struggling unsuccessfully to control Ahab's retaliatory instincts. In 1949 appeared Richard Chase's *Herman Melville: A Critical Study*. Chase felt that the most important theme of Melville's works before *Moby-Dick* was that of "the young man's awakening, or introduction to experience" (Parker & Hershel, 1988, p.510). Leon Howard disagrees with the critical concept in his *Herman Melville: A Biography* that the subconscious mind is of primary importance in writing. He says: "In dealing with Melville's books, I have concerned myself primarily with the observable evidence of their growth" (Howard, 1951, p.206). Nonetheless, Newton Arvin shifts to a different point of view of the stylistic features of Herman Melville and he analyses the basic structure, typical symbolism, and unique language of this novel efficiently.

Despite this, more and more researchers in China show their interest in other themes. In his article "The Narrative Art of *Moby-Dick*", Wang (2006) carries out a systematic analysis of *Moby-Dick* in the perspectives of narrative structure, time, narrator and focalization. Additionally, eco-criticism has been gaining more and more popularity in literary and cultural studies. It offers an ecocritical study of *Moby-Dick* with an intention of unfolding the ultimate fight between human beings and nature and the necessity of establishing a harmonious relationship between people and nature in the way of ecologically sustainable development. In brief, it could be concluded that *Moby-Dick*, in narrative art, is an encyclopedia-formed novel rich in characteristics of modern novels, therefore, has far exceeded his own time.

III. THE TRANSCENDENTAL IDEAS EMBEDDED IN *MOBY-DICK*

A. *Ahab as a Transcendentalist Hero*

In Emerson's most famous essay "Self-reliance", he wrote, "Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of the mind". Man's quest for his self-reliance was indeed a search for communion with the wholeness of God, the unity of the universe and the great spiritual force of Oversoul (Emerson, 1841, p.133). By establishing such a relationship with the world, Emerson makes it certain that it is a human being who takes control over fate. And it is suggested that self-reliance is a good virtue of man.

It is pretty obvious to insist that Ahab resembles the "hero" that Emerson seemed to have in mind in his essays. In *Self-Reliance*, Emerson described the self-helping man in high praise that all praise and welcome should be given to the self-helping man together with honors and respect (Emerson, 1841). Ahab certainly fits that description as a Transcendentalist hero.

It is typical of westerners to pursue truth with an inextinguishable enthusiasm. Even though Ahab has nobody else to blame for his destruction, Melville never intends to criticize him in the novel. The truth is, he speaks highly of Ahab's admiring courage and unique personality. Without any doubt, Ahab is portrayed as a great hero. After all, the development of a society does need people like Ahab who are "true braves".

In this story, Ahab persists in his pursuit for revenge despite all kinds of difficulties and obstacles from both the spiritual and material senses. He relies on his own in this crazy yet alone fight, even though he has his crewmen at his order. For when the situation gets worse and all the crew members become desperate, Ahab is the only one who still holds his maddening belief and is ready to throw himself at the sea for the final killing of the white whale. Ahab has spent years of his life on the sea in search of Moby Dick and he has isolated himself for the ultimate goal at the price of his normal life with his family on earth and even his own life. The meaning of his life depends on the outcome of the revenge, meanwhile, other worldly matters seem pointless and bleak in his eye.

As a human being, Ahab transcends the blind submission to the authority of the universe. Through defying all superior powers, he is determined to break the unfathomable form of the universe and locate the meaning of life. Ahab achieves self-realization in his chasing after Moby Dick. In his opinion, it is not some meaninglessly absurd action but reborn of his spirit. In a word, Ahab's physical anguish as well as his spiritual unrest and the strong desire for terminal truth accompanies his vindictive chase for the White Whale. From this perspective, Ahab could be labeled as a typical

transcendentalist hero.

B. *Ishmael as an Emersonian Individualist*

For Ishmael, voyaging on the sea has become a journey in search of knowledge and values. Appropriately enough, Ishmael is the only survivor of the final confrontation with Moby Dick (Ousby, 1979, p.82). Like other people on land who are longing for the sea, the experiencing Ishmael is also the case. For him, the sea water is the image of “the ungraspable phantom of life”. It represents the hidden secret and unknown world where Ishmael struggles to find the full truth (Ousby, 1979, p.85). Frustrated and disappointed at life on earth, Ishmael turns his last hope to the life of a crewman on the sea. It is on the ship under the leadership of the captain Ahab that he begins to meditate on life and gradually comprehend the meaning of the universe. In other words, two elements of nature—the white whale and the mysterious sea invite and tempt Ishmael's questing and meditative soul, providing his soul with a new realm to expand and get rejuvenated. In this situation, running for the sea implies eager thirst for its curing effect and Ishmael's communion with nature in order to understand the meaning of the world.

According to Transcendentalism, all of the true Transcendentalists should be able to feel moments of communion with the *Oversoul*. In Chapter 35, “The Mast-Head”, readers are shown a glimpse of the *Oversoul* in “soul pervading mankind and nature” (Melville, 1994, p.257). Ishmael, as a version of Emersonian innocence, had gone through all kinds of experiences with the mystic ocean for his revelation (Emerson, 1841).

Ishmael has been seeking and thinking about the true principle between man and nature throughout the voyage with the identities of both a sailor and a thinker. Throughout his whaling voyage, he becomes mature with profound insight into and fear for the deep secrets of human life. Ishmael has found his answer to the puzzles of the symbolic white whale and the universe. He was lucky to find love and friendship on his ship, due to which he was given an opportunity to survive at last. To put it another way, Ishmael was the only survivor of the ship for he absorbed the ultimate truth from the experiences on the ship. That would be: to let it live as it is and fully respect it. Hence the mission falls on Ishmael's shoulders to get rid of Ahab's control successfully, and survive the catastrophe to tell the story. He even confesses that “the problem of the universe revolves in me” (Melville, 1994, p.170). Ishmael's attained his salvation due to his successful communion with the universe, the God, and the great spiritual force, which attribute to the “Oversoul”.

The first half of the nineteenth century witnessed prevailing slavery and racial discrimination in America. Deeply concerned about the society, Emerson advocated that people should be treated for who they are in no regard of their creed or color. Melville, like Emerson, was deeply concerned about the social problems in his time, such as freedom, democracy, religion, and races. Melville's depiction of friendship among the sailors is an indication of his humanitarian attitude towards all men of various backgrounds. We can also notice his firm appeals for true democracy and equality. In *Moby-Dick*, Melville creates a merry world on the strictly hierarchical Pequod—the world of sailors. Together they experienced hardships and happiness, and to some extent they were brothers in life and death. It is only them who are enjoining the sublime of human virtues—friendship or fraternity. In this adventurous craze, psychological influence and spiritual belief would affect people to a degree beyond imagination.

Moby-Dick is a novel calling for universal democracy, which shows Melville's enlightened views on humanity. The friendship between Ishmael and Queequeg is treated by Leslie A. Fiedler and other critics as the most celebrated homosexual bounds in American literature (Harris & Fitzgerald, 1983, p. 248). “Queequeg is for Ishmael,” as D.H. Lawrence long ago observed, “the embodiment of a mode of being—instinctive, sensuous, affectionate—that the self-estranged Westerner needs to recover to become whole” (Lawrence, 1923, p.137). To this point, Queequeg acts like a follower of Emerson. Transcendentalists advocate man's harmonious relationship with nature. Being a noble savage in the story, Queequeg lives his whole life based on harmony with nature. He teaches Ishmael life skills on the sea which represent his principles and attitude towards nature. It is from Queequeg that Ishmael achieves his personal growth and spiritual development to adopt a harmonious and respectful way in the world.

C. *The Embodiment of Oversoul in Moby-Dick*

Emerson is a representative of the American Romanticism in the mid-nineteenth century. His new voice leads American Romanticism to a new and mature period—New England Transcendentalism, which is, in essence, romantic idealism on Puritan soil. “The Universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Spirit is present everywhere” (Emerson, 1990, p.835). Generally speaking, the *Oversoul* is seen to be the most important thing in the universe, for it represents the spirit of God. It permeates in the universe and exists in humanity and nature alike.

Literarily speaking, this conversion — first from nature to spirit, and then from matter to mind, and finally transfers into “intellectual truth” is known as *Symbolism* in literature. Under this influence, many writers, such as Hawthorne and Melville, begin to apply Transcendentalist ideas in their literary creations in one way or another. “A preoccupation with the demonic and the mystery of evil marks the works of Poe, Hawthorne, Melville and so on” (Chang Yaoxin, 2007, p.163). All these items of the literature, such as mythology, symbol, imagination, mysterious nature, contribute to the mystery of *Moby-Dick* by and large. Hence, Melville has indeed the very Transcendentalist focus of nature in the composition of *Moby-Dick*. The mysticism and the symbolic meaning of these two things are given more weight. It corresponds to the characteristics of Transcendentalism. In this way, *Moby-Dick* is the product of literary tendency of the time.

The most evident symbol in this novel is the white whale. It represents evil and goodness simultaneously, as Chase

described “(it is) paradoxically benign and destructive, erotically beautiful yet brutal” (Chase, 1962, p.60). For instance, the whale is depicted as a sacred animal, like the cow or the bear, of a solemn cult (Melville, 1994, p.557). It is considered as the purest and the most valuable creature in the sea, and no other living animals could stand by its company. The white whale “seems more beautiful, even than Zeus himself swimming in the shape of a white bull (Melville, 1994, p.558). What’s more, even the whale’s tail is described as “no fairy’s arm can transcend it” (Melville, 1994, p.348). The prestigious position of the Moby Dick equals that of the Oversoul in transcendentalist belief. Therefore, it is natural to conclude that the embodiment of Moby Dick echos with the transcendentalism.

The whiteness of the whale includes innumerable sweet and horrible associations. The extraordinary range of possibilities and concepts gives this work its great richness. Melville dedicates to glorify the whiteness, he even designs a whole chapter, especially to discuss the whiteness of the whale. Descriptions in over a hundred chapters develop an image of Moby Dick, representing beyond just a whale but a gigantic symbol. The whiteness symbolizes pureness in nature, where human being make a living and develop their civilization. The goodness in nature provides men with the opportunities to seek communions with the Oversoul and to transcend beyond earthly limitations.

At the same time, Melville regards the sea as the “foe” to man and demonstrates the nature of cruelty, uncertainty, relentlessness and terror. It is a place where the allegory of man’s fighting against nature and their fate is conceived. If you cannot find the ultimate truth in the sea, you may get it from various activities on the sea. To put it more clearly, if the sea is not a place where you can find God, it may be the perfect ideal place to understand God. Because the sea stands for a pure world free from the pollution of human civilization and it is also a preserve for the primitive culture. Thus, it is every man’s dream to be out sailing on the sea in desire for their return to pure nature. In summary, whether the white whale symbolizes evil or kindness is left for our reader to decide, just as Melville concluded that it is beyond the art of man (Melville, 1994, p.547).

IV. REASONS FOR MELVILLE’S TRANSCENDENTAL IDEAS

A. *Influence of Transcendentalism on American Literature*

The early and middle nineteenth century is widely known as the American Romantic period. Among the main currents of thought at that time, Transcendentalism marks the dominating culture of this special period in terms of influence. In this movement, the development of Transcendentalism had witnessed an unprecedented prosperity in American culture and history. The climax of Transcendentalism in literature contributes to the American romanticism. It is above all characterized by the enhancement in the sense of literary nationalism. It freed the American writers from the traditional constraints of European literature and provided them an opportunity to make their own Bible.

Melville’s era saw the acme of individualism, which has been holding a prominent position in American culture. In the process of its development, Emerson’s values of individualism have posed great influence upon American individualism. Ever since then, American writers set about focusing on their own literary themes and establishing their unique American style. It paved the path for the growth and flourish of American literature. Therefore, it is safe to say that the Transcendental literature movement is all the while influencing writers and poets in their thoughts and writing style. Likewise, Melville became dedicated to confront estrangement in his corrupt world to explore the possibilities of liberty and aspire towards spiritual freedom (Levine, 2013).

B. *Melville’s Personal Preference*

In 1849, Melville wrote Duyckinck a more detailed comment on Emerson: “Yet I think Emerson is more than a brilliant fellow... .. Swear he is a humbug — then is he no common humbug ... To my surprise, I found him quite intelligible” (McSweeney, 1986, p.8). The brief appreciation of Emerson gives way to a generalization pertinent to other great minds: “I love all men who dive. Any fish can swim near the surface, but it takes a great whale to go down stairs five miles or more; and if he doesn’t attain the bottom, why, all the lead in Galena can’t fashion the plummet that will. I’m not talking of Mr. Emerson now — but of the whole corps of thought-divers, that have been diving and coming up again with blood-shot eyes since the world began” (McSweeney, 1986, p.10).

Emerson exhorts his audience to be conscious of using one’s will to judge and attack others, as those attacks will come back in a deadly recoil. Whether or not it was an original image, he may have set the course somewhere in Melville’s mind for the unforgettable ending to Moby-Dick and Ahab, where Ahab’s lasing out of unbalanced hatred toward the evil he sees as the white whale comes back to hit him directly and to sink the Pequod.

V. CONCLUSION

Melville embodied his ambivalent attitude toward the movement in the wide spectrum of his masterpiece *Moby-Dick*. In this book, the Pro-Transcendentalist beliefs have different perceptions and different concerns, sometimes even a various amount of conflicting ideas and beliefs, thus creating different focuses on the life and as a result, different conclusions.

Melville spoke ahead of his time. He knew that he was doomed to write a book like *Moby-Dick* in his day, but he just could not help himself because he was a dedicated literary artist. Thus born in the nineteenth century, Melville did not receive recognition until the twentieth. Lawrence says that Melville is a real American because he always felt his

audience in front of him, and for him, life must be a progression towards an ideal. On the one hand, even though living in a social milieu of aggressive optimism, Melville was addicted to revealing the evil side of human nature. Melville is a writer who has discovered modern problems way ahead of its due time.

So *Moby-Dick* can be regarded as such a classical representative of Melville's insightful pondering on man and their life. It tells a tragic story of the doomed failure of human civilization resulted in the process of desanctification of the human being. It is a novel that is "a challenge and affront to all the habits of mind that typically prevailed in the nineteenth-century" (Mumford, 1929, p.180) with an intention to shock us into an awareness of how catastrophic the result would be if we do not make a timely retrospection. Its reflection on life's true meaning is still of great benefits in a modern sense, and its ending in the form of a total ruin declares publicly the necessity of a spiritual remolding of the human mind.

For his tendency to metaphysical pondering and soul inculcation, Melville's position in literature is secure yet unique and solitary, looking backwards to a suffocating year of religious belief and forward to an unbalanced age of scientific mania. Besides, the fact that Melville is generally regarded as a writer of American Romantic Period yet his works, especially *Moby-Dick*, lived beyond his time makes it clear that what Melville saw was far further into the future and what he conveyed was more true in the modern industrialised world. Therefore, *Moby-Dick* steps far beyond the scope of the Transcendentalism. Hence, it is widely acknowledged as a great literary classic in the world literature.

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