

# THE 'YIN YANG' OF THE WHITE WHALE? THE SENSE OF DUALITY IN HERMAN MELVILLE'S MOBY DICK

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**Abstract:** American Literature is considered to have gained its independence from the dominance of British Literature in early nineteenth century with the rise of the Romance tradition. A foremost writer of this tradition in America is Herman Melville and this article analyzes Melville's *Moby Dick* to investigate how the writer treats contrasting concepts in his works to demonstrate the duality of existence that is closely related to the American experience.

**Keywords:** *Nineteenth Century American Literature/ The Romance Tradition/ Herman Melville/ Analysis.*

**Özet:** Amerikan edebiyatının İngiliz edebiyatının etkisinden sıyrılıp özgürlüğünü elde etmesi, ondokuzuncu yüzyıl başlarındaki Romantik Yazın geleneğine bağlanmaktadır. Bu makale, romantik geleneğin önde gelen yazarlarından olan Herman Melville'in *Moby Dick* adlı eserini incelemekte ve yazarın "varoluş" kavramını irdelerken, bu kavramın içinde barındırdığı çelişkileri gösterebilmek için, eserinde karşıt kavramları nasıl kullandığını açıklamaya çalışmaktadır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** *Ondokuzuncu yüzyıl Amerikan Yazınında Romans geleneği/ Herman Melville/ İnceleme.*

The general mood in America in early nineteenth century (1820-1860) is a significant factor in American Literature giving way to a different form of self-expression. National expansion, political independence and the discovery of a distinctive American voice of the young nation are, therefore, considered to have led American writers of the time to feel a need to express their literary independence. This need has found its form in the romance tradition, and such solidification of the new American experience nurtured the first masterpieces of the period referred to as the 'American Renaissance'.

One of the masterpieces in this period is *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville and this article aims to analyze this work in terms of the sense of the "duality of existence" in it caused by the conflicting aspects it contains with emphasis on selected representative examples and tries to answer the questions:

- 1- whether Melville has an aim of reconciling the opposite concepts in *Moby Dick*.
- 2- whether Melville succeeds in reconciling the opposite concepts in *Moby Dick* if he has such an aim.
- 3- whether Melville's aim is to prove the fact that it is impossible to reconcile the opposite concepts in reality, to which the "yin yang" philosophy of Ancient China from which the article gets its title, is quite parallel as it suggests that there is always a drop of 'white' in 'black' and a drop of 'black' in 'white'.

Based on the data obtained from the investigation of the above-given items, the article aims at questioning one of the key concepts in Melville's *Moby Dick*, that is the 'union of opposites'.

## **DUALITY of TRUTH'**

Herman Melville gives a redefinition of the real and finds ambiguity in truth itself. He has a great doubt that has to do with the nature of truth; and "he is increasingly sure that truth is double- that it is dialectical and contained in a tension" (Lewis, 1959: 143), which is due to the continuous oppositions in truth. Such beliefs of Melville lead him "to hope that beyond all the apparent formlessness, wildness and anarchy of experience, there is an ultimate Rationality, an absolute order and purpose, in the knowledge of which one can reassuringly abide". (Arvin, 1950: 34)

He, thus, believes that 'his right future as an adult person and writer lies not in avoiding the clash between contradictions in our universe such as life and death, consciousness and the unconscious, mind and emotion but in confronting these antinomies head-on.' (Arvin, 1950: 88) Trying to 'seemingly' reconcile the opposite concepts in truth and intuitively seeing beyond them make Melville become fully conscious of the intellectual, emotional, graspable and ungraspable perplexities, difficulties, and enigmas, which he reflects vividly in his *Moby Dick*.

A radical polarity Melville feels and reflects in *Moby Dick* is the one felt in physical Nature. By presenting the Pacific and the white whale based on his notion

of contradictions in Nature, Melville demonstrates his viewpoint of Nature which supports that there is renewal, restoration and a fresh life in the natural world despite the 'malignity, destructiveness, despair and death, which are somehow mysteriously interinvolved in it.' (Arvin, 1950: 286)

Melville's great focus on the Pacific, which he takes as a symbol of Nature- a huge, restless power, starts and is justified at the very beginning of *Moby Dick* in Chapter 1 "Loomings" when Ishmael, the narrator, says 'Meditation and water are wedded forever.' and 'what thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries study in water is their own reflected image, which is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life'. So, the key to the ungraspable- the truth- is in the story of Narcissus according to Melville who takes water, the subtlety of the Pacific as a means of presenting the contradictions within physical Nature.

To express the opposing nature of the Pacific, a striking image of the land, as a place of pleasure and security in contrast to the terrors and wonders of the sea, is given by Melville in Chapter 6 "The Street". The Pacific is full of obscurity and it, therefore, provides a delusive vision of Nature before us. It is both a place of beauty and hidden dangers as hinted in Chapter 111 "The Pacific":

When gliding by the Bashee Isles we emerged at last upon the great South Sea; were it not for other things, I could have greeted my dear Pacific with uncounted thanks, for now the long supplication of my youth was answered; that serene ocean rolled eastward from me a thousand leagues of blue.

There is, one knows not what sweet memory about this sea... (Melville, 1993: 395)

Melville's belief that the Pacific -as a symbol of Nature and infinite profound of truth- is both destructive and nourishing, awful and beautiful shows that Melville's Nature is unpredictable and full of ambiguity such as the White Whale, *Moby Dick* which is a part of the ocean and inevitably has contrasting aspects likewise.

To express the contrasting, manifold and mysterious aspects of the white whale- as a creature and reflection of God - Melville starts by presenting the reader some "Extracts" about whales from the literature of the world. His extracts, by establishing the legendary character of the whale and its enigmas, prepare to make a real whale chase also a symbolic voyage and give the reader clues to try to grasp the 'ungraspable whiteness' of *Moby Dick*.

From then on, the irrational but irresistible symbol- the white whale- draws both the reader and Melville like a moving magnet in its pursuit; yet, means different things to different people. It is both beautiful and terrible, infernal and heavenly. These contradictions are due to its whiteness, a colorless all-color that is completely paradoxical since it involves all the colors and the union of them. It is by means of this colorless color that Melville illustrates the contradictions he gives to Nature.

Like Nature, the white whale has both a "dark" and a "bright" side. Its darkness is suggested by its whiteness signifying death and corruption owing to its being the

same color as the "charnel", an object of death as expressed in Chapter 42 "The Whiteness of the Whale".

As opposed to the dark nature of the whale, a sense of light, purity, innocence, holiness and divine spotlessness in the whale is also felt as an outcome of the contrasting use of "whiteness" in Melville's symbolism and this should draw attention to the sublime meaning he gives to Moby Dick and its absence of color whose indefinite meaning cannot be fully identified by rational explanation and thus causes a nameless horror.

It is this fear that the color white as a symbol of all contradictory aspects in Nature presents due to its indeterminacy, universality and muteness. It is indeterminate, as one cannot identify its exact meaning. It is universal due to its symbolic qualities full of contradictions, and it is mute since it does not lend any meaning nor give clues about its significance and exact meaning as expressed in Chapter 42 "The Whiteness of the Whale".

Despite the indefiniteness of the meaning of the color white caused by the above-mentioned qualities, one can obviously see a parallelism between Moby Dick and God. This arises from the fact that Moby Dick does have an ever-present color-a meaning- despite the fact that it seems to lack it. Its color has an absent presence just like the existence of God whose presence is felt everywhere in spite of its physical absence. This provides one with evidence for the spiritual essence of the whole novel that Melville takes as his main point of view; and hence it illustrates to what extent contradictions in the whiteness of the whale contribute to Melville's ideal 'on the surface': reconciling the opposites.

Apart from his presentation of the universal contradictions in our world, Melville also includes in Moby Dick the duality within the interpretations of the events that take place or objects in our physical Nature. Therefore, one cannot fully understand whether Melville has been successful in transcending opposites-if he has such an aim- without examining the duality caused by varying interpretations.

As exemplified by the reactions to the doubloon in Chapter 99 "The Doubloon", Melville is concerned to show that the same "thing" means different things to different people. And it is at that moment that a complex symbol begins to emerge.

Such a presentation of different interpretations of the same object is seen at its most obvious in the chapter entitled "The Doubloon", where various members of the crew examine in turn the gold coin that Ahab has nailed to the mast as a reward for sighting the white whale.

Predictably enough, Ahab interprets the design on the coin as a reflection of himself, his own glory, his search for the unsearchable but not the result of his search. This is what the young black boy Pip reflects by saying "I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look." in Chapter 99 as he believes all the people on the deck

"look" at the doubloon but actually see nothing "deep" except their own reflections which one could find quite parallel to Ahab's urge to search Moby Dick but not really find it. The doubloon, therefore, is a symbol of achieving anything impossible for Ahab.

As for Ishmael, it is a symbol of the duality of the world and human destiny. He believes that it represents the equator as it is an "equatorial coin" coming from Ecuador, a country located at the equator, and it illustrates the division of our world and destiny in two grand alternatives having to do with one's self. The first alternative he sees is related to self-absorption and thus relates to Ahab's situation. It suggests turning inwards which consequently leads one to isolation, madness and suicide as Ahab experiences throughout the novel due to extreme feelings of revenge and anger he has absorbed. The second alternative he sees is the exact opposite of the first, which is having a *carpe diem* philosophy and thus having an urge to be a part of this universe. The demonstration of this kind of living through the characters Flask and Stubb is what causes the partial vision of optimism in the novel.

It is this philosophy that makes Flask immediately see the coin in terms of its financial value and the number of cigars it would buy, while to Stubb, the design is a whimsical picture of man's inevitable progress from the cradle to the grave and this happy-go-lucky fellow, therefore, considers the doubloon as a symbol of life and death as natural concepts.

The same variety of interpretations is seen in the case of the reactions of the crewmembers and Ahab himself to his pursuit of Moby Dick. This is mainly because Melville treats this event in the same way as the doubloon and he is concerned to show that not only an object such as the doubloon but also an event such as the pursuit of the white whale means different things to different people on the Pequod who are representatives of most social and ethnic groups in American society at the time. Out of their contrasting reactions to the chase Melville constructs a complicated statement about the American view of Nature which is mainly expressed through the different interpretations of the three characters Ahab, Starbuck and Ishmael.

To Ahab, the pursuit of the white whale is all-important as Moby Dick has wounded him, and therefore his determination to get his revenge becomes an obsession. The whale, he insists, struck him out of malice, not blind instinct; indeed, it represents all the evil in the universe to him. Ahab's quest then is an attempt to penetrate to the heart of nature's mystery - to confront God himself if necessary, but certainly go beyond the normal limits of human knowledge.

In such an endeavour, Starbuck - the Pequod's practical and God-fearing chief mate- sees only lunacy and blasphemy since he is an earnest Nantucket Quaker and in his eyes whaling is simply a business. He is only interested in earning a living, not in pursuing romantic quests. Nature exists for Starbuck merely to be exploited and thus he inevitably disapproves of Ahab's policy, and at one point even debates mutiny against the captain.

Like Starbuck, Melville ultimately disapproves of Ahab's pursuit although he is impressed by Ahab's defiance of the universe, his wilfulness and his fatal pride which make sense within our imaginative recollection of Christian heroism - meekness, submission, obedience, and the salvation of mankind. To make clear that he is against such a quest, Melville designs the description of Ishmael's reactions.

To begin with, Ishmael is converted by Ahab's inflammatory rhetoric; he cheers his captain enthusiastically with the rest of the crew. But as the voyage progresses, he becomes more and more detached and starts to doubt Ahab's sanity. While Ahab conducts his frenetic pursuit of Moby Dick, Ishmael settles for a different sort of quest. Ishmael's quest is, as stated by himself at the beginning of the book, meditative, thus safer than Ahab's. Hence, the way he approaches the pursuit of Moby Dick is inevitably contradictory with that of Ahab's.

### **DUALITY CAUSED by CERTAIN CHARACTERS in MOBY DICK**

The reason why one sees various contradictions caused by the interpretations of Physical Nature is mainly the different characters in Moby Dick. Therefore, one cannot reach a full understanding of the nature of the "opposites" in Melville's Moby Dick without examining the duality caused by certain characters.

One of the characters that must be investigated is Captain Ahab whom Melville isolates in a great exclusiveness. He makes Ahab 'khan of the plank, and a king of the sea, and a great lord of leviathans'. For the American has the Roman feeling about the world. It is his, to dispose of. He strides it, with possession of it. His property. He bends its resources to his will. The Americanization of the world. Who else is lord?' (Olson, 1997: 73)

Because of that certain "sultanism of his brain", Ahab is captain of the Pequod. He is furious and without fear, proud and morbid, wilful and vengeful. He worships fire and swears to strike the sun to make it explicit that it is not the white whale as insensate thing but as creature and agent of whatever rules the world that he means to smite.

Hence, what is most significant about Ahab is his being a 'grand, ungodly, god-like man' fit to be a tragic hero, who associates himself with demonic powers, the Devil, and darkness by challenging the powers of reason, humanity and the light of the sun and fire, and experiences a downfall. This wilful nature of Ahab inevitably leads the reader to spot certain conflicts in him throughout the novel.

An obviously felt conflict in Ahab is that ever-renewed clash felt between "heart and intellect" seen in the form of "love and hatred" or "humanity and inhumanity", and this contradiction contributes a great deal to the dramatic conflict of the whole work.

This contradiction is felt when Ahab reveals his humanities in loving and seeking what is good in the world but expresses them wrongly: By hating and pursuing what

is hurtful in it. One can thus combine a number of incidents in which the motives are hate and love contending by following the prompters that solicit his tenderness in those incidents.

One such incident that shows that Ahab does have humane feelings despite his revengeful god-like nature is when during a night of storm his solipsism is most violent and his hate most engendered. That night Ahab uncovers his whole hate. However, the morning after the storm the change in Ahab sets in and the black boy Pip - the shadow of Pip - is the agent of the change. Like a reminder of Ahab's soul he calls to Ahab, who cries to the sailor that has seized Pip: "Hands off that holiness!" It is a 'crucial' act: for the first time Ahab has offered to help another human being who has been able to touch his heart.

From this moment, Ahab's tone is quieter, less angry and strident. He even questions his former blasphemies, for a sadness grows in him as Pip lives in the cabin with him. Pip continues to be, mysteriously, the agent of this bloom once it has started. Says Ahab: "I do suck most wondrous philosophies from thee!" He even goes so far as to ask God to bless Pip and save him. But before he asks that, he threatens to murder Pip, Pip so weakens his revengeful purpose as he by his madness has seen God. This relationship between Ahab and Pip and the revelation of Ahab's feelings show that hatred and love as well as humanity and inhumanity are indispensable features of Ahab's personality, and this is what mainly makes his tragedy- that a man full of love and benevolence is devoted to hate and destruction.

A similar duality, which is seen at a more concrete level, is that caused by the two contrasting characters Ahab and Ishmael, the narrator.

Although both Ahab and Ishmael are faced with the same problems of mankind such as God's impersonality and indifference to injustice, their attitudes are different due to the different personalities they have.

As Ahab was assaulted and violated by God it is observed that for him there is only a strong will to overcome the moral tyranny of this indifferent universe. In his attitude violent action is seen as he has a great urge to exercise power and get in terms with a power that has crippled him: Moby Dick. The demonic disillusionment of Ahab's parallel to his self-enclosed, inward individualism in its extreme forms as well as his desire to be superior to God and possess a totality of meaning of the powers above him make him become a fanatic figure in this quest. Others attempt to persuade him to desist from this quest, but Ahab cannot recognize the "other" and therefore he exemplifies a ruinous individualism and inhumanity caused by his unregenerate will despite the fact that he also represents nobility of spirit and romantic charisma.

In contrast to Ahab, Ishmael is the embodiment of humanity, meditation and contemplation. Right from the start, he nails his colors to the mast and tells there is no point in looking for absolute meanings or a totality of understanding of this universe for the image that continually swims before us, he says, "is the image of the

ungraspable phantom of life". He acknowledges the "otherness of nature". Chapter 52 "The Albatross", for example, ends with his recognition of human limits:

But in pursuit of those far mysteries we dream of, or in tormented chase  
of that demon phantom that, some time or other, swims before all human  
hearts; while chasing such over this round globe, they either lead us on  
in barren mazes or mid-way leave us whelmed. (Melville, 1993: 196)

Due to the above-quoted view of his, Ishmael promises nothing 'complete' and it is as if we hear Melville speaking since it is a reflection of Melville's thought that "He, who has never failed somewhere, that man cannot be great; thus, failure is the true test of greatness." (Matthiessen, 1968:187) To Melville, "any human being supposed to be complete, must for that very reason be faulty" and that is why he says he can live with both doubts and intuitions.

Neither Ahab, with his heroic quest and limitless self-assertion causing insane pride nor Ishmael, is a complete man which is mainly due to Melville's thought of mankind as radically imperfect and composed of a continuous challenge of opposites whose central tension is what the novel takes its life from.

Thus, Melville, by means of creating these two different characters, voices one's divided self, the most fundamental conflict of which is the one between the good and evil.

### **DUALITY of the 'GOOD and EVIL'**

As for all elements of Nature he includes in the novel, the "rivalry" between the good and evil in Mankind is Melville's central concern of his vision throughout *Moby Dick*. It is due to his belief that, "beyond all the moral and physical evil, beyond wickedness and suffering, there is an absolute Goodness or Justice on which one can unquestionably rely" (Arvin, 1950: 34) and unless the author has a profound comprehension of the mixed nature of life, of the fact that even the most perfect man cannot be wholly good but can have some "evil" inside, whatever he creates will not give the illusion of human reality.

For Melville, evil is a reality both in the physical and moral senses, and cannot be run away. "Evil is no accident," Melville says in a prose sketch called "Rammon" "It is an irremovable element." But the good is irremovable and real too. Thus, good and evil can be inextricably and confusingly intermingled - a state that is to be one of Melville's chief sources of ambiguity. What is experienced in life, to Melville, is the complex, mysterious interplay between these two ultimate principles which is a duality essential to human nature; thus, there is a paradox at the very heart of life.

This paradox between the good and evil in *Moby Dick* can be seen at its most vivid if we first consider the two contrasting concepts in American truth: Adamic innocence and experience.



The matter of Adam: the young innocent, liberated from family and social history; advancing hopefully into a complex world he knows not of; radically affecting that world and radically affected by it; defeated, perhaps even destroyed but leaving his mark upon the world. The analogy between the "matter of Adam" (Lewis, 1959: 127) and that of the Americans - the last first people in the world (Olson, 1997: 14) - is inescapable and it is Melville who makes it manifest by saying, "The world is as young today as when it was created; and this Vermont morning dew is as wet to my feet, as Eden's dew to Adam's." (Matthiessen, 1968: 191)

Hence, the matter of Adam and the story of the Fall are the basis of the conflict between Adamic innocence and experience in *Moby Dick* since this duality reflects Melville's idea that "innocence is inevitably foredoomed by black malice". For Melville, the drama of the Fall of Man is a drama in which divine and absolute justice is countered by infernal evil in a contest for the immortal soul of God's creature, Man, and in which Man, yielding to the temptation of the evil spirit, turns rebel against God's will, disobeys it, and involves himself in the guilt of Original Sin. This American rhythm of the Adamic experience - the birth of the innocent, the foray into the unknown world, the collision with that world, "the fortunate fall," the wisdom and maturity which suffering produced- is exactly what Melville reflects in his work, and thus the "American hero as Adam becomes the hero as Christ and, once and for all, enters the dimension of myth" (Lewis, 1959: 130) which is a great source of the sense of 'duality' in *Moby Dick*.

To be able to see how Melville's attitude to the duality of Adamic innocence and experience gets its support from his myth, the matter of Adam, and how Melville deals with this contradiction, Chapter 96 "The Try-Works" may be taken as an example.

In "The Try-Works" Ishmael falls asleep at the tiller one midnight, as the *Pequod* is passing through the Java Seas toward the haunts of the great sperm whales. Waking up, but not yet aware that he has been asleep, Ishmael finds himself staring into the mouth of hell: "a jet gloom, now and then made ghastly by flashes of redness," an infernal scene through which giant shadow-shapes like devils are moving about some dreadful work. He is "horribly conscious of something fatally wrong"; "a stark bewildered feeling as of death" comes over him. Then he realizes that he has turned in his sleep and is facing the two furnaces, or "try-pots," and the three black harpooners stoking the masses of whale blubber from which the oil is extracted ("tried-out"). The moral follows with the felt analogy between the natural event and the soul of man offered by Ishmael.

There occurs (as Ishmael sees it) two dangerous alternative conditions. On the one hand: an empty innocence, an ignorance of evil, which - granted the tough nature of reality- must be either immaturity or spiritual cowardice. On the other: a sense of evil so inflexible in its refusal of the existent good that it is close to a love of evil, a pact with the devil. Each alternative is a path toward destruction; the second is the very embrace of the destroying power.

Similarly, the conflict of these two alternatives, both of which lead one to despair and physical or spiritual death, is what Ishmael experiences upon the sinking of the ship and the death of everyone on Pequod except himself. The contrast that he is saved by the "coffin" -an object of death- made for his close friend Queequeg displays that there is ambiguity and duality within reality. Despite the fact that Ishmael is "seemingly" alive in the end, his situation is worse than that of all others who have died since he will recall and live that treacherous dream-"death"- again and again to tell others about it throughout his whole life which can only be considered as a physical survival that is no more than a punishment and an obligatory mission.

As demonstrated by the case of Ishmael's "physical survival" and all other previously stated and discussed items which provide concrete examples of how Melville deals with and approaches the "duality of existence", it can be concluded that in spite of the fact that Melville glimpses a possible synthesis of contradictions throughout the whole novel he indeed presents the reader the ever-challenging nature of opposites rather than their reconciliation, and thus reflects that he has no confidence in nor an aim of achieving a union of opposite concepts which supports the assumption that what he is trying to succeed in is to prove it is impossible to reconcile opposite concepts in reality as suggested in the "yin yang" philosophy of Ancient China- a drop of white in black and a drop of black in white...forever.

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