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**THE DICHOTOMY OF MELVILLE’S *MOBY DICK*: AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTALISM AND ANTI-TRANSCENDENTALISM**

**Melville’in *Moby Dick* İsimli Eserinde Karşıtlık: Amerikan Transandantalizmi ile Karşı-Transandantalizm**

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**Olgahan Bakşi YALÇIN\***

**Abstract**

Counting on his own experiences as a seaman aboard whaling ships, American novelist Herman Melville (1819–1891) comments on the complex human relationship with the sea and its uncertainties in his masterpiece, *Moby Dick* (1851). To this end, in his maritime novel, Melville tells the story of the obsessive quest of Captain Ahab of the whaler *Pequod* for revenge on Moby Dick, the albino sperm whale that destroyed his vessel and bit off his leg at the knee on the previous whaling voyage. In creating a character like Ahab, Melville seems to emphasize the evil and destructive side of humanity, focusing on the limitations and potential destructiveness of human nature. On the other hand, the narrator of the novel, Ishmael, displays many aspects of American transcendentalism throughout the novel. Thus, the two opposite protagonists are reflected in the structure of the novel as the transcendental idealism and optimism that Ishmael displays in the early part of the novel are replaced by Ahab’s obsession for revenge and dictatorial leadership in the second half of the book, which is also appropriate for Shakespearean tragedy. This paper seeks to explore how the characters of Ishmael and Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick* match American transcendental idealism with dark romanticism in the form of a Shakespearean tragic plot.

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**Keywords:** Herman Melville, American Transcendentalism, Anti-transcendentalism, Shakespearean Tragedy, Dichotomy

### Öz

Balina gemilerinde denizcilik yaparken edindiği deneyimlerden yola çıkan Amerikalı romancı Herman Melville (1819–1891), *Moby Dick* (1851) isimli başyapıtında insanın denizle ve denizin belirsizlikleri ile olan karmaşık ilişkisini ele alır. Bu amaçla, denizcilik temalı romanında Melville, balina avcısı Kaptan Ahab'ın, bir önceki av sırasında gemisini tahrip eden ve bacağını dizinden koparan albino sperm balinası Moby Dick'ten intikamını almak için girdiği saplantılı arayışının hikâyesini anlatıyor. Ahab gibi bir karakter yaratırken, Melville, insan doğasının kötü, yıkıcı yanını ele almakta ve insan doğasının sınırlılığı ile potansiyel yıkıcılığına odaklanmaktadır. Öte yandan, romanın anlatıcısı Ishmael, roman boyunca Amerikan Transandantalizminin birçok yönünü yansıtmaktadır. Bu nedenle, romanın karşıt iki kahramanı, romanın yapısına da yansımaktadır. Şöyle ki, Ishmael'in romanın ilk bölümünde sergilediği Transandant idealizm ve iyimserlik, kitabın ikinci yarısında yerini Shakespeare trajedisine de uygun olan Ahab'ın intikam takıntısına ve diktacı liderliğine bırakmaktadır. Bu makale *Moby Dick* isimli eserde Ishmael ve Kaptan Ahab karakterleri aracılığıyla, Amerikan Transandant idealizmi ile Karşı-Transandantalizmin Shakespeare trajedisi formunda nasıl bir arada kullanıldığı göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Herman Melville, Amerikan Transandantalizmi, Karşı-Transandantalizm, Shakespeare Trajedisi, Karşıtlık

“Everything in nature is lyrical in its ideal essence; tragic in its fate, and comic in its existence” (1955, p. 305)

George SANTAYANA

### Introduction

Counting on his own experiences as a seaman aboard whaling ships, American novelist Herman Melville (1819–1891) deals with the complex relationship between humans and the sea with its uncertainties in his masterpiece, *Moby Dick* (1851). In this canonical maritime novel, the reader follows the story of Captain Ahab who starts an obsessive quest for revenge on Moby Dick, the albino sperm whale that destroyed his vessel and bit off his leg at the knee on the previous whaling voyage. Through his characterization of Captain Ahab, Melville highlights the dark, evil, and destructive side of humanity with an emphasis on the potential tyranny and cruelty of human nature. Hence, he is rightfully considered to be one of the leading dark romanticists (or known as anti-transcendentalists) along with Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe, all of whom believed that any optimistic outlook on humanity is naïve because individuals are prone to sin and self-

destruction, not as inherently possessing divinity and wisdom (Reynolds, 1988: p. 524).

Accordingly, although the narrator of the novel, Ishmael, displays many aspects of American transcendentalism in the early part of the novel as soon will be discussed, his transcendental idealism and optimism are replaced by Ahab's obsession for revenge and dictatorial leadership in the second half of the book. As John Bryant remarks in his essay "*Moby-Dick* as Revolution," scholars have long speculated the view that Melville began to write about the action and adventures of sea life, but after his encounter with Hawthorne, he altered the book entirely to include the Shakespearean story of Ahab (Bryant, 2007: p.201). Thus, it is possible to trace the influence on *Moby Dick* of Emerson and his transcendentalism as well as the characteristics of dark romanticism, which is also appropriate for Shakespearean tragedy. This paper seeks to explore how the characters of Ishmael and Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick* (1851) match American transcendental idealism with a Shakespearean tragic plot.

In comprehending the dual nature of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, the first mention should be made of the contemporaneous transcendentalist movement. Transcendentalism is an idealistic literary and philosophical movement of the mid-19th century in America and Ralph Waldo Emerson, an American essayist and poet, was at the center of the Transcendentalist movement as well as Henry David Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller. As Jerry Phillips and Andrew Ladd inform us in their work, *Romanticism and Transcendentalism: 1800–1860*, the Transcendentalist movement created a romantic philosophy that enabled America's greatest thinkers, artists, and poets, to find a way to express the essential spirit of the American experience (2006: p.30). In his essays and public lectures, Emerson explains transcendentalism as a spiritual doctrine according to which every human being has the capacity for divinity and the ultimate truth of the spiritual nature of the universe is accessible to every human being. It is society, traditionalism, and religious institutionalism that prevent individuals from the fulfillment of their potentialities (Gura, 2007: p.193). In his essay "Nature" (1836), Emerson writes that the presence of God is inherent in both humankind and nature and can best be sensed through intuition rather than through reason and logic (American Transcendentalism, 2019). Briefly, transcendentalism stresses the importance of individualism, intuition, nature, and self-reliance as opposed to Calvinism, or the doctrine of predestination practiced by the Puritans at that time.

The impact of Emerson's transcendentalism on Melville's novel is clear from the very first chapter when the narrator, Ishmael, is introduced to reader with the first lines as "*Call me Ishmael*" (*MD*, p.3). The narrator does not say whether "*Ishmael*" is his real name or not, which undermines the significance of his identity as a character in the novel and at the same time emphasizes what he represents — the bright side of humanity. When life becomes grim or boring, Ishmael turns to

the sea for meaning, but this time to the final voyage of the *Pequod*, a whaling vessel. He displays a positive, somewhat romantic and transcendental attitude and tone towards the sea and nature. To illustrate, one can consider the words Ishmael employs while explaining why “almost all men in their degree, sometime or other” share with him “nearly the same feelings towards the ocean” (MD, p.3). As the evidence indicates, Ishmael perceives the idea of the sea and its environment as “magic” (MD, p. 4). Likewise, recognized as a founder of the Romantic Movement in England, Samuel Taylor Coleridge sees the ocean as the “realm of unspoiled nature and a refuge from the perceived threats of civilization” in his narrative poem, *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) (Klein, 2002: pp.1–10). In line with this romantic approach to the sea, Ishmael asks the reader rhetorically why one feels a kind of “mystical vibration” when one’s ship is out of sight of land or why the old Persians held the sea holy or why the ancient Greeks had “a separate deity” for the sea (MD, p. 4). It concerns what, as Ishmael himself answers, “we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life” (MD, p. 5).

Here one cannot help remembering the transcendental thought of the universal soul, referred to as “The Eternal One” by Ralph Waldo Emerson. In his essay, “The Over-Soul” (1841), Emerson explains the idea of the universal soul as follows: “within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty; to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE” (2000: p. 271). In other words, what Emerson is claiming here is that all of the World, with its knowledge and splendor, lives within us, in our souls as also clear in his following words: “We see the World piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul” (2000: p. 272). Thus, one can argue that Ishmael is a character who manifests transcendental ideals, with the all-embracing world-soul reflected in the narrative point of view.

There seems to be a kind of affinity between transcendental idealism and Melville, who calls the sea a divine place where one comes face to face with one’s own true self or identity. However, there is also a sharp contrast between Melville, on the one hand, and Emerson and Thoreau, on the other. According to transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau, Walden Pond is a place where you can purify yourself, while the sea in the novel, *Moby Dick*, is the place where not only whales but also hunters are fiercely killed or driven to delirium, as in the case of the character called Pip, who lost his mind through extreme fear. Therefore, although the book opens as a whaling voyage full of transcendental images conveyed through the narrator, Ishmael, whose adventure the reader is following, finishes it with a kind of Shakespearean tragedy in which Captain Ahab causes all the crew to die in pursuit of futile vengeance. After encountering the realities and nature of whaling, Ishmael “was not only struck by nature’s ‘impersonal stolidity’ but perceiving an emblem for the law of life in the sharks and the gulls feeding upon the whale’s

*corpse, he was revolted by the "horrible vulturism of earth"* as Melville puts it (quoted in Matthiessen, 1968: p. 406).

Obviously, despite his frequent idealism, Ishmael was not a naïve Emersonian, as often pointed out by commentators, and accordingly, he never stops changing throughout the book, which could be as a result of his curious mind. One remarkable characteristic of Ishmael is his way of thinking: for instance, life for Ishmael is like a puzzle to be studied, contemplated and solved. Thus, throughout the book, Ishmael tries to understand and explain what things mean in life. An example of his habitual conundrum-solving occurs in Chapter 3, *The Spouter Inn*, where "a very large painting so thoroughly besmoked" (*MD*, p.10) and famously characterized as "chaos bewitched" (*MD*, p. 11). After opening a window to look at it better, he carefully scrutinizes the canvas, considering every possibility before he forms his interpretation. Therefore, as an idealist man whose "way of thinking is in higher nature" (2000: p. 100) in the words of Emerson in "The Transcendentalist" (1842), Ishmael is a character who displays the transcendentalist principles of high thought, curiosity and open-mindedness. However, the more the romantic and transcendental narrator — Ishmael studies, explores and scrutinizes the realities of life, the sadder and wiser he eventually becomes as the tragic end of the novel reveals.

Among many other examples of Ishmael's humanitarianism, the episode where he ends up having to share a bed with a stranger called Queequeg is also illustrative of his sympathetic nature. When Queequeg enters the room, Ishmael — already in bed after waiting a while for the stranger to turn up — is initially alarmed at Queequeg's frightening appearance, but finally resolves to sleep in the same bed with him since he realizes he has a good nature: "What is all this fuss I am making about, thought I to myself-the man's a human being just as I am: he has just as much reason to fear me, as I have to be afraid of him. Better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian" (*MD*, p. 22). At this point, Melville seems to be articulating his ideas and values through Ishmael who does not nurture strong aversions to people who are merely different, but is usually prepared to give even strangers the benefit of the doubt. Through Ishmael's love of humanity, Melville seems to point to the essential dignity and equality of all men regardless of background, class, culture, nationality or race. This also may remind one of the innate human optimism of transcendentalism as well as the thought that every individual has to be respected because every individual has a universal soul.

Ishmael's position as the narrator may also exemplify the transcendental idealism of the novel, *Moby Dick*. As David Herd in the introduction to Melville's *Moby Dick* informs the reader, during the composition of *Moby Dick*, for Melville "writing and reading are a continuous process" as his "sentences are the product of his research" (2002: p. xx). Hence, Ishmael, the narrator, sounds more like an antiquarian, accumulating books on his favorite subject. Ishmael becomes "the enthusiast as sub-sub-librarian, browsing, fondling, cataloging his collection" and

approaches “*his subject with the harmless zeal of the book-collector*” as Herd puts it (2002: p. xx). As a result, Ishmael, the transcendental enthusiast, shares not only his experiences but also his vast knowledge of whaling, such as the division of whale-types into Folio, Octavo, and Duaodecimo. In the second half of the book, after Captain Ahab appears, Ishmael begins to transmute into an omniscient narrator, telling the reader things that do not happen in his presence such as the ideas of Captain Ahab or Starbuck. At this point, one can remember Emerson’s Transcendental mystical experience he asserts in his essay “Nature” (1836): “*standing on the bare ground — my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into the infinite space — all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; all currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God*” (2000: p. 22). As Michael McLoughlin also argues, Emerson adheres to the microcosmic theory that each particle reflects all of the spirits that transcend all-natural phenomena: thus, there is a unity of Man and Nature, which is also unity with God (2003: p. 22). Similarly, Ishmael becomes a transparent eyeball disappearing into the narration and into the story of Ahab but seeing and knowing all, which changes him into the godlike all-knowing perspective of the third-person omniscient.

One should also look at how Melville felt about transcendentalism to understand the dual nature of *Moby Dick*, in which the author combines transcendental idealism with a Shakespearean tragedy. In his well-known work entitled *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*, F. O. Matthiessen remarks that Melville “*felt a strong attraction in the transcendental beliefs; he frequently underscored Emerson’s lines with that heavily-freighted nineteenth-century word ‘noble.’ At the same time, his untrained but keen thought was thrashing to get free from many of their implications*” (1968: p. 184). Melville might have liked to solve the problems of the world as optimistically as transcendental idealism: however, the transcendental doctrine appears shallow and superficial to him at times due to the limitations and destructiveness of the human nature (McLoughlin, 2003: p.75). Perhaps this is the reason why Melville shows that while the sea can be as mystical and magical as described by Ishmael at the beginning of the book, and at the same time, dark and tragic. The same sea might have enabled Melville to benefit from the Shakespearean tragedy. Melville seems to go farther than Emerson in his perception of Nature that what we all make of Nature depends on our mood. Like in “Nature” Emerson writes, “*Nature always wears the colors of the spirit*” (2000: p. 23) and thus our mood determines the way we see Nature either as angelic or devilish.

Melville’s essay, “Hawthorne and His Mosses” (1850), in which he expresses his views on the state of American literature at that time, also illustrates the transcendental yet tragic tone of *Moby Dick*. What Melville wrote in this essay about Hawthorne and Shakespeare seems to be envisaging his development as an American writer equaling and even surpassing Shakespeare (McLoughlin: p. 42;

Sedgwick: p. 85). Melville proclaims literary nationalism in his essay as clear in his words: "And we want no American Goldsmiths; nay want no American Miltons... No American writer should write like an Englishman or a Frenchman; let him write like a man, for then he will write like an American" (1988: p. 2268). Here it is possible to see a pattern of Emerson's influence on Melville in these words since Emerson in "American Scholar" (1937) expresses similar ideas as clear in the following lines: "We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe... We will walk on our feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our minds" (2000: p.79). However, unlike Emerson, Melville was "never satisfied with what delighted the poet, with immersion in nature, in pure sensation, with the return to elemental life unblemished by the strivings of thought" as Matthiessen informs us (1968: p.407).

Instead, Melville, the man who lived among cannibals seems to possess both optimistic and pessimistic views of life reflected in the pattern of simultaneous embrace and rejection of transcendental ideas in his novel. As is clear in his essay, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," for Melville, "some may start to read Shakespeare and Hawthorne on the same page" (1988: p. 2266) and the darkness that Melville finds most profound in Hawthorne's Calvinism and Shakespeare "fixes and fascinates" him (1988: p. 2265). Similarly, as Charles Olson first states in *Call Me Ishmael: A Study of Melville* madness, villainy and evil are abundant in Shakespearean plays and the dark side of human nature in Shakespeare attracts Melville's pencil for the magic (1947: p. 43). Accordingly, in Chapter 42, *The Whiteness of the Whale*, the reader is warned against the evils of the world: "Though in many of its aspects the visible world seems formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright" (*MD*, p.162). Hence, under the influence of Shakespearean tragedy and Hawthorne's Calvinistic darkness, in the second half of the book, Ishmael's transcendental idealism cedes ground to the tragic narrative of Captain Ahab.

When Ishmael, the transcendentalist, becomes omniscient, his separate dramatic existence is not so easily felt by the reader. Ishmael even turns into a chorus through which Ahab's actions, thus his tragedy, are described and commented upon. On the other hand, it is interesting that Ishmael seems to be the main hero of the book since he is the only survivor who clings to Queequeg's coffin-turned-life buoy at the end to tell the story. However, without Captain Ahab, the Shakespearean tragic hero whose tragic flaw leads not only himself but his entire crew to ultimate destruction, *Moby Dick* would be another of those sea-novels Melville wrote. F. O. Matthiessen defines a typical tragic hero as a man who should be "in conflict with other individuals in a definite social order" since anybody who "has a compound comprehension of the mixed nature of life," is aware of "the fact that even the most perfect man cannot be wholly good" (1968: pp.170-80). Therefore, the writer of tragedy should acknowledge the inevitable co-existence of good and evil in man's nature. Thus, he should be capable of creating a kind of reconciliation be-

tween such binary oppositions. Melville seems to acknowledge the dual nature of man since Captain Ahab is portrayed as a man in conflict with forces outside himself in line with the characteristics of dark romanticism as well as Shakespearean tragedy. These forces seem to be gathered in *Moby Dick*, the white sperm whale, especially right after it “*had reaped away Ahab’s leg*” (*MD*, p. 153).

The Shakespearean influence on Melville and his sea novel *Moby Dick* has also been traced and analyzed by several critics. To illustrate, in his essay entitled “*Moby Dick and Shakespearean Tragedy*” Julian C. Rice summarizes the findings of various commentators on the Shakespearean influence in *Moby Dick* in order to approach the second half of the novel as a Shakespearean tragedy (1970: p. 444). As Matthiessen firmly establishes the impact of Shakespearean tragedy in the novel, it is possible to find numerous parallels regarding language, emotional effect, situation, and tragic action between *Moby Dick* and Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *Timon of Athens* (Sedgwick: p. 85; Rice: pp. 444–468). For instance, as quoted in Rice, Raymond Hughes in 1932, felt that *Moby Dick* “*shadows Shakespeare’s tragedies in thought, imagery, dialogue, grammar, idioms and philosophy implied and expressed*” (p. 446). Accordingly, Shakespeare’s use of language provides Melville with a range of vocabulary for expressing passion, which seems to intensify Captain Ahab’s soliloquies. As Hughes also mentions, digressions, remote allusions, Shakespearean words, repetition of words for emotional effect and the use of puns are abundant in the novel (1932: pp. 103–113). Therefore, Ahab’s language can be characterized as nervous and lofty contrasting “*the long ease and sea swell of Ishmael’s narrative prose*” as Olson puts it (1947: p. 68). Given Shakespeare’s power over Melville, it is not surprising that some parts of Ahab’s speech to the crew in Chapter 36, *The Quarter Deck*, actually amount to *blank verse* as seen below:

“*But, look ye, Starbuck, what is said in heat,  
That thing unsays itself. There are men  
From whom warm words are small dignity.  
I meant not to incense thee. Let it go.  
Look! See yonder Turkish cheeks of spotted  
tawn-  
Living, breathing pictures painted by the sun.*”  
(*MD*, p. 136)

The influence of Shakespearean tragedy can also be seen in the composition of scenes in *Moby Dick* as Ishmael presents his characters, and choreographs many of their situations by means of explicit stage-directions. For example, in Chapter 36, *The Quarter Deck*, we read his directions as “*Enter Ahab: Then all*” (*MD*, p.132) or in Chapter 37, *Sunset*, as “*The cabin; by the stern windows; Ahab*

*sitting alone, and gazing out*" (MD, p.139). As a means of heightening his dramatic effect, one can argue that Melville delays Ahab's appearance until all the others have been seen, keeping him inscrutably in his cabin for several days after leaving Nantucket. Finally, in this atmosphere, Captain Ahab is introduced as standing upon his quarter-deck (MD, p.133) and Ishmael, characterized by finding puzzles in life, becomes the tragic dramatist who strives to understand and explain the mystery of Ahab's obsessions as well as the ultimate cosmic puzzles that have tormented his captain.

Like in Shakespearean tragedies, the novel deals with the problem of evil through a tragic character with a demonic purpose. Thus, the name Ahab also seems to have been chosen deliberately since according to the Old Testament, Ahab did more to provoke the Lord of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him (Thompson, 1966: p.152). Having this information in mind, at the very beginning of the book, Peleg feels the urge to entreat Ishmael to "*wrong not Captain Ahab, because he happens to have a wicked name*" (MD, p.69). However, Ahab proves to be wicked since possessed by feelings of anger and revenge, he provokes the anger of the whale, Moby Dick, more than once, as a result of which the white sperm whale causes the *Pequod* to sink. While Ahab with the harpoon-line around his neck is dragged into the depths by the diving Moby Dick, in the whirlpool of the sinking ship all the crew follow their Captain's obsession to death. Therefore, in the light of the biblical allusions, the name Ahab helps the reader develop expectations about the *upcoming events*.

Not only Captain Ahab's name but also his physical appearance contributes to his overall unnerving nature. Right after he is seen by the crew as well as the reader for the first time, Ahab is described as a man who is "*cut away from the stake, when the fire has overrunningly wasted all the limbs without consuming them or taking away one particle from their compacted aged robustness. His whole high, broad form, seemed made of solid bronze, and shaped in an unalterable mould, like Cellini's cast Perseus*" (MD, p.102). This description emphasizes Ahab's inspirational, yet dictatorial strength along with his unswerving monomania, which dooms the entire crew as well as himself. Moreover, the scar on his body, "*threading its way out from among his grey hairs, and continuing right down one side of his tawny scorched face and neck, till it disappeared in his clothing, you saw a slender rod-like mark, lividly whitish,*" (MD, p.102) strongly evokes Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. As Harold Bloom informs us, Melville read Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* aloud to his family as he was planning *Moby Dick* (2007: p. 201). Therefore, Ahab's physical similarity to Shelley's monster may help to coerce his crew partly through fear. At the same time, like a Shakespearean tragic hero, he is inspirational and charismatic, winning their loyalty while passing around the measure, obliging them all to drink. One way or another, Captain Ahab can inspire others to act on his obsessions:

*“Drink and pass!” he cried, handing the heavy charged flagon to the nearest seaman. “The crew alone now drink. Round with it, round! Short draughts—long swallows, men; ’tis hot as Satan’s hoof. So; it goes round excellently. It spiralizes in ye; forks out at the serpent-snapping eye. Well done; almost drained. That way it went, this way it comes. Hand it to me—here’s a hollow! Men, ye seem the years; so brimming life is gulped and gone. Steward, refill!”*

(MD, p.137)

In Chapter 36, *The Quarter-Deck*, Captain Ahab announces his quest for the albino whale Moby Dick, which is significant in revealing his monomaniac, dictatorial character. As the first mate of the Pequod and one of the major characters in the novel, Starbuck opposes Ahab and his vengeance on Moby Dick calling the whale “a dumb brute!” that “*simply smote thee from blindest instinct!*” (MD, p.136) For Starbuck, having a grudge against a being created by nature is not only madness but also blasphemy. Here much younger than his captain, Starbuck is portrayed as a reasonable, calm person standing in stark contrast to the obsessive Captain Ahab. Ahab gives a long speech silencing his first mate in the Shakespearean tradition and then as if he is on a stage, he continues to speak quietly: “*(ASIDE) something shot from my dilated nostrils, he has inhaled it in his lungs. Starbuck now is mine; cannot oppose me now, without rebellion*” (MD, p.136). Ahab clearly refuses to accept the idea that Moby Dick’s behavior is motivated solely by instinct since the white whale’s actions meant something more to him. It would be significant to remember here that Ahab’s understanding of Moby Dick contrasts with Ishmael’s interpretation of the painting at the Spouter Inn mentioned earlier. Ishmael, the transcendentalist, is calm and patient taking his time to collect information so that he can interpret the meaning of the painting. However, Ahab is all impatient because for him, “*understanding the deeper meanings does not involve contemplating its external appearance*” (MD, p. 54). Instead, there must be a direct and violent action to unravel the hidden truth. Thus, it is natural that Ahab can understand Moby Dick only by projecting his own rage onto the whale. Therefore, the whale gradually becomes a reflection of Ahab, as also related by Ishmael in Chapter 41, *Moby Dick*:

*“All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the*

*brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; 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 the general rage and hatred felt by his whole race from Adam down."*

(*MD*, p. 153)

In his article entitled "'Wandering To-and-Fro": Melville and Religion" Emory Elliott asserts that Ahab's monomania is similar to a kind of mental illness common in Puritan New England according to which if one loses his confidence of salvation, he/she becomes so wracked with fear and self-hatred at his spiritual failure that he can commit suicide or murder the family members (2005: p.189). Bearing this information in mind, it is not surprising that in order to accomplish his purpose, Ahab will ignore all the warnings and bad omens he receives in his final days aboard the *Pequod* and not only sacrifice his own life but also the lives of many others. On the other hand, Ishmael contrasts the whale's significance to himself, rather than to Captain Ahab, in Chapter 42, *The Whiteness of the Whale*, with some associations and reflections of the color white and what it may symbolize. Most significantly Ishmael does not interpret the white whale in only one way; to him rather, it is a combination of many things. Although Ishmael believes that everything has a meaning in life, the sperm whale possesses the kind of greatness that is beyond his interpretation and understanding. This is the reason why the greatness of the whale is so frightening for Ishmael. In other words, it may mean "*if there is no meaning beneath the surface of things, then the universe is indeed a bleak and empty place*" (Hayes, 2007: p.58). On the other hand, for Ahab, what separates Moby Dick from the rest of the species is "*that unexampled, intelligent malignity which, according to specific accounts, he had over and over again evinced in his assaults*" (*MD*, p.152). As Matthiessen also concludes, Ahab's monomania is a result of this great natural intellect that had been turned into a deadly weapon for executing the demands of his flexible will (1968: p. 438). Thus, there will be no peace for him unless he destroys Moby Dick, the real and symbolic source of his rage. Melville's anti-transcendental approach is obvious in his projection of the primitive, dark human drives far beyond the scope of the intelligent mind.

Curious to solve the puzzles one encounters in life, Ishmael tries to unravel the dark mysteries of Ahab as he believes that Ahab's secrets "*[need] be plucked at from the skies, and dived for in the deep*" (*MD*, p.127). However, within the first few chapters of the novel, Ishmael informs the reader that he already "*lost [him]self in confounding attempts to explain the mystery*" (*MD*, p.33) to the point where he eventually disappears from the novel as a character. As the narrator, Ismael presents pieces of information to unravel Ahab's mysterious character in

Chapter 113, *The Forge*, where Ahab prepares the harpoon with blood saying: “*I do not baptize thee in the name of the father, but in the name of the devil*” (*MD*, p. 402). Both Christ and the Holy Ghost are absent in Ahab’s world, so he baptizes the harpoon in his evil world by using “*black magic to achieve his vengeful ends*” as Olson puts it (1947: p. 53). Therefore, the optimistic, all-embracing transcendental world presented at the beginning of the book is different from the evil, wicked world with Ahab. Melville meant to write a wicked book as what he wrote to Hawthorne when the book was consummated implies: “*I have written a wicked book and feel as spotless as the lamb*” (Quoted in Olson, 2004: p. 63). Melville’s wicked book is the story of Ahab, the Shakespearean tragic hero, whose hate for the white whale turns into “*a vengeful pursuit of it from the moment the ship plunges like fate into the Atlantic*” (Olson, 1947: p. 54).

Even though Ahab is wicked and full of black magic, his relationship with Pip may show that “*Ahab has his humanities*” after all, as Captain Peleg puts it in refuting Ishmael’s fears of his captain’s wicked name (*MD*, p. 69). Like an indicator of his tragic dual nature, in Chapter 125, *The Log and Line*, when Pip calls to Ahab, Ahab cries to the sailor who has seized Pip: “*Hands off that holiness!*” (*MD*, p. 426). This is a crucial scene since Ahab offers to help another human being for the first time in the novel and even asks Pip to come and stay in his cabin. The relation between Ahab and Pip may recall the pathos of the bond between the King and his Fool in Shakespeare’s *King Lear* as Matthiessen also points out (1968: p. 343). After this moment, there seems to be a weakening in his vengeful pursuit. To illustrate, in Chapter 132, *The Symphony*, it is noticed that Ahab is no longer the proud, wicked dictator forcing his crew to follow his obsession with a fever of anger. There is even a moment when he feels emotional and “*drops a tear into the sea*” (*MD*, p. 443). It is only Starbuck who sees “*how he heavily leaned over the side, and he seemed to hear in his own true heart the measureless sobbing that stole out of the center of the serenity around*” (*MD*, p. 443). In his article, “*The Castaway in Moby-Dick*” Gordon Mills discusses the role of Pip and Starbuck in the development of captain’s humanities in detail (1950: p. 232). Thus, one can argue that both Pip and Starbuck contribute to the imagery/description of Ahab’s heroic suffering, which is another significant element to indicate the Shakespearean influence in the novel.

In this state of mind, when Ahab talks to Starbuck about his wife and child creating sympathy in the reader, he gives the impression that he is about to abandon his pursuit. In the same scene, he even questions himself and his obsession with whale hunting: “*Forty years of continual whaling!*” “*and then, the madness, the frenzy, the boiling blood and the smoking brow, with which, for a thousand lowerings old Ahab has furiously, foamingly chased his prey---more a demon than a man!---aye, aye! What a forty years fool---fool---old fool, has old Ahab been! Why this strife of the chase?*” (*MD*, p. 443) For a rare instance, his revenge seems to be less severe, less pursued as he also questions the forces beyond him, asking:

*“What is it, what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what cozening, hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time; recklessly making me ready to do what in my own proper, natural heart, I durst not so much as dare? Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, which lifts this arm?”*  
(MD, p. 444)

Ahab appears to be aware of the absurdity of his quest, yet he feels that he is compelled to pursue it by some force that he cannot overcome. As Ahab debates on this moral dilemma, he goes to the other side of the deck to gaze into the water, but Fedallah, too, looks over the rail (MD, p. 445). In tracing the effect of Shakespeare on Melville, Fedallah's prophecy is worth mentioning as according to his prophecy seemingly impossible things must happen before Ahab dies. As Matthiessen also argues, “*Ahab feels assured for this voyage when he is told that the Parsee will perish before him and will appear again after death and that ‘hemp only’ can kill Ahab*” (1968: p. 432). Fedallah, who happens to be pinioned in the entangled lines on the albino sperm whale's back after his disappearance on the second day of the chase, is seen again. It also turns out that right after Ahab darts his harpoon into the whale, the line runs afoul and catches him around the neck. Therefore, fulfilling the expectations of the Shakespearean tragedy, the prophecy comes true at the end of the book, leaving the reader with the final image of Ahab when the *Pequod* swirls into the sea. Perhaps Ahab strives not only to conquer the whale but also to comprehend the meaning of his conflict with the whale, all of which resolve only when he loses his life (Myers, 1942: p. 16). By chance the only survivor of the crew, Ishmael is found on the only bit wreckage from the lost *Pequod*, Queequeg's by the *Rachel*, another whaling ship looking for her lost crew and “*Ahab's tragic grandeur comes only through Ishmael's retelling of the tale*” as Hayes remarks (2007: p. 56).

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, as a transcendentalist, in the first half of the book, Ishmael tries to ascend to the level of the divine through nature, singing the praises of Ralph Waldo Emerson's musings that “*the whole circle of persons and things...*” is “*...one vast picture which God paints on the instant eternity for the contemplation of the soul*” (2000: p.50). However, as the end of the novel reveals, Ishmael could

not “*access the entire mind of the Creator,*” nor does he himself become “*the creator in the finite*” (2000: p.52). Unlike Emerson’s benign nature, there is no creation but only destruction in *Moby Dick*. Melville’s nature is cruel as it leaves Ishmael shipwrecked and Ahab dragged to the bottom of the sea. Wishing to become one with nature and the divine, Ishmael’s journey starts with a transcendental idealism but the reader witnesses the heroic madness of the captain in the great drama of the sea – his hope to destroy nature to understand the unknown. Hence, one can conclude that Melville deliberately takes his direction away from transcendentalism toward anti-transcendentalism displaying the dark and destructive side of human nature.

In light of the information presented above, it is possible to trace the influence of Emerson and his transcendentalism as well as the Shakespearean tragedy plot in *Moby Dick*. Making use of the psychological struggles of the individual in the hostile environment of the sea, Melville seems to use Emerson’s transcendentalist ideas to warn the reader against the dangers of both the tyranny of one person and the passivity of many people in a community. To this end, he creates a character, Captain Ahab, who intends to hunt and kill the beastly Moby Dick no matter the cost. Ahab’s obsession with the whale is portrayed as an example of the evil and destructive side of humankind in contrast with Ishmael’s optimistic and transcendental idealism described earlier. On the figurative level, thus, the novel can be seen as an exploration of the author’s tortured quest to discover the meaning of life as well as the dual nature of man. To this end, he creates two opposite protagonists, Ahab and Ishmael: while the former represents the destructive tendencies and tyranny of hierarchical religions, and institutions in which the pain and suffering of others are easily ignored, the latter employs a variety of different perspectives in accomplishing his task rather than allowing one epistemological position to dominate his search for knowledge or his efforts. Thus, one can conclude that the American novelist Herman Melville (1819–1891) still appeals to the contemporary reader by touching on the current issues of democracy as well as the tendencies of dictatorship still unresolved in contemporary society.

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