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# Nature Is the Teacher: Rational Ecocentrism for Ultimate Self-Realization in “Moby Dick” and “The Old Man and the Sea”

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**Abstract:** Hemingway and Melville offer a wide range of diversity of human beings' conduct towards nature through their novels *The Old Man and the Sea* and *Moby Dick*, respectively. Both novels describe the characters' interactions with nature at distinct ecocentric levels. While one protagonist shows positive interactivity towards nature (positively ecocentric), another shows a considerable disregard for nature's majesty by placing oneself first (Anthropocentric). This paper seeks to investigate the characterization of the protagonist in the two novels through an ecocentric perceptible. In essence, the characters' interactivity with nature will reveal their characters. This discourse places them side by side to demonstrate their similarities and dissimilarities in character, will and determination, and obsession in achieving their quest. The paper is an ecocentric analysis of the two novels to conclude whether the quest of the protagonists shows their preoccupations with revenge or self-realization.

**Keywords:** Anthropocentric, Ecocentric, Hemingway, Melville, Nature.

## 1 Introduction

*The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway and *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville are pieces of literature that have vast similarities from the motif to the setting around marine life. Existing literature and literary interpretations of *Moby Dick* depict it as a highly symbolic text with an environmental vision relevant to contemporary society. In her interpretation of the current discourse, Schultz relates the text to modern American culture where the white whale has been enlisted as extinct; therefore, *Moby Dick*'s triumph is a successful symbolic defender of the species intertwined in the conservation of marine life [1]. She further links the story to an environmentalist perspective on the concerns of the physical world about marine life in New Englanders, seemingly inclined to condemn the perpetuation of the illegal and irresponsible slaughter of marine life of our times. An almost identical stance, [2] in their analysis of human nature depicted in *Moby Dick*, essentially show the interdependence of nature and humans in perfect conflict and harmony. In this masterpiece, the author shows the different aspects of the story that show humans and nature's relationship, carefully showing through *Moby Dick* that nature dominates humans, [2]. Most of the analysis of the stories *Moby Dick* and *The Old Man and the Sea* shows a stark reverence of the work of nature, which is peculiar. Herein takes the vantages of ecocentrism and anthropocentric interpretations of the texts to carefully extrapolate the relationship of the protagonists in the work with nature, relevantly drawing the works to the ultimate discourse of the awakening, the self-realization of characters in the works. Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* is also essentially a story of nature that practically invites literary analysis from two perspectives; the realist and the allegorical perspective. Scholars have argued through the realist part that the reader can immediately determine from the first read: indeed, as Hemingway himself discusses, the story of an old man and a fish, [3]. Presumably, the story mentions real men with their struggles at sea. The protagonist travels to the deep sea eighty-four times, and he never gives up a typical story of the life of a fisherman. In his eighty-fifth time, the protagonist has a big catch then loses it to the shark.

Another vantage of interpretation befitting the story is interpreting it with the allegorical perspective, whence the story invites both intrinsic and extrinsic interpretations. In essence, there is an outer meaning as mentioned herein, and the underground symbolic meaning that relates to the immediate society, forming essential archetypes (a representation

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that is universally inherited from the collective consciousness of our predecessors) essentially depicting facts between man nature that are fundamental for the existence of man. Whether Allegorical or not, the interpretations would invariably draw meaning from the relationship between man and nature.

## 2 Discussions

### Similarities and Dissimilarities

An independent study of the two novels Melville's *Moby Dick* and Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* reveals a stark similarity; that both novels can be analyzed with an Eco critic's eye. Essentially, the two works of literature present two fish stories where one is a whale and another a marlin, [4]. Enlarging the story would reveal further similarities and differences, which essentially draws a critical delve into the analysis of this point of view. An ecocentric analysis of the relationship between man and man, man and nature, and man and himself would essentially show the similarities and dissimilarities of both characters, their will and determinations, and essentially their obsession in achieving their quest [5]. Furthermore, this ecological consciousness draws special attention to the apparent symphony in the depiction of revenge or self-realization in the two novels by focusing on the character's ecocentric relationship with nature; therefore, answering the questions of whether the protagonist comes close to full self-realization, through their experiences of bad luck that are consistent throughout the story, or whether the vengeful over an animal trying to defend itself, comes close or realizes himself at all.

Both Melville and Hemingway attribute literature to utilize the explicable nature to probe deep into humankind's reality. Additionally, the reader will perceive that nature has been employed merely to develop the characters distinctly by considering that nature is multifaceted. Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* are both noteworthy epitomes of works that employ the concept of nature for character development, as through it they feature the stark differences and similarities in the characteristics of the protagonists. With no specific attributions, the authors encode the protagonists with qualities of love, tenacity, hope, vindictiveness, and evil personalities, culminating in an output, fundamentally, with substantial elements that are minute in terms of the approach to humankind through nature. According to [6], nature and the study of cognition are critical landmarks in the comprehension of human values, especially the social dimension of social-ecological systems, [6]. Different conceptualizations of relational and assigned values relevant to the study of human-nature interactions are essential in depicting the character trait in this study. It is practical as it builds knowledge on the function and the role of values. The organic relationship between nature and the protagonists in the two works of literature is crucial, as it explicitly points out the position of nature in human life.

### *Santiago's Positively Ecocentric Nature*

The accents Hemingway places in Santiago's harmonious inner world in *The Old Man and the Sea* are apparent in the tale of a sea voyage that invariably asks consumers of this literature to appreciate the character's nucleus personality and his relationship and attitudes toward nature. Essentially, Santiago has a forced or determined interaction with nature from different perspectives, yet he cannot conquer against the forces of the universe and nature surrounding them. Santiago experiences ignominy in the novel presented by his community as a result of his failure. He becomes a laughing stock in the villages after going for eighty-four days in the sea without successful fishing. However, Santiago is conversant with the sea, and he has depicted great prowess in his previous expeditions; hence he shows persistence by never giving up eighty-four times. His perseverance, patience towards the sea nature, and strong-willed character led him to finally capture a marlin. Thence, intending to regain his prized pride and fulfillment, Santiago utilizes nature, the sea, to be fulfilled. He is not as strong as he used to be as he refers to his withered strength during his voyage he wishes he would have his helper with him [7]. However, in his interaction with nature in the novella, Hemingway shows he and his 'la mar' are in harmony [8]. [8] shows this oneness through direct comparison, [9]. He states "His eyes were the same color as the sea and were cheerful..." [7]. The purpose of this cheerful diction may easily be misconstrued as a rebellion and symbolic struggle with Mother Nature. However, this represents the older man's energy, zeal, and determination that is unchanged even in his prime age. This allegorical connotation draws Santiago as a determined and zealous personality.

Santiago's positively ecocentric nature is evident in his ardent interaction with the constituents of nature. He communicates to the sea with respect, reverence, and love and says, "I love you and respect you". The thoughts about marlin are that he is like a brother to him, whom he wishes he could feed. Santiago is confident, optimistic, cheerful, confident, brave, and positive toward nature since Hemingway uses these and more specific sentence constructs positively constructed to represent this side of him. Notably, he is not only in harmony with the sea but also with the great sea Goddess since even though he is not religious; he makes a distorted prayer to the sea Goddess "... I promise to make a pilgrimage to the Virgin of Cobre if I catch him" Hemingway [7]. This wish is granted only to be taken away a few days later. Perhaps the story aims to show how nature triumphs over human beings despite his apparent love and harmony with the environment and the great sea goddess. The protagonist experiences an egregious, extended run of

lousy luck, but for eighty-eight days of constant interaction with nature, Hemingway essentially shows his ultimate archetype of a resolute and bold heart.

#### *Ahab's Anthropocentric Err Negatively Ecocentric Nature*

Although Hemingway portrays his protagonist in harmony with nature throughout his triumph, Melville's constructive marginal for his protagonist is in complete disharmony with nature with an antiecological consciousness that essentially shows his Taohua characteristics [10]. But the audience should not be misconstrued to think that clash with nature always shows negative characters. However, as Santiago depicts his courage through a harmonious relationship with nature, Melville's disharmony also shows his persistent and courageous character. As for Melville's standards, the bad invariably champion over the good most dramatically and drastically possible. Like Santiago, Ahab sets out on a voyage with a vengeful quest against *Moby Dick*, a strong character of nature in the sea. Through this perspective, scholars have found a rationale to depict *Moby Dick's* essential literature for nature [11]. The appearance of the white sperm whale is unique as he is described as having a bushy about, crooked jaw, wrinkled brow, and his form was enormous [8]. [8] almost depicts it as close to having human characteristics, and he enjoys fleeing from hunters, but suddenly turns to attack them in their own pursuit, destroying their open voyages. Such is the powerful force of *Moby Dick*, godly like only capable of being bestowed by the mighty gods of the sea, the mighty goddess of nature. These characteristics of *Moby Dick* are essential to showing the characterization of Ahab as an epitome of evil [12]. Before [8] introduces his protagonist, he provides the audience with an air of mystery about him, the captain of the Pequod. This mystery is compelling through Ishmael's powerful narration. The reader finds a deep meaning from Ishmael's first inquiry about the captain, whence he is told that Ahab, the captain is a "man of few words but deep meaning". [8]. He appears as a complicated character, grand and ungodly like who does not have any reverence for anything other than himself. His hatred for *Moby Dick* has made him a paranoid and highly irritable man bent only on revenge [13]. We encounter the ungodly Ahab who refuses to submit to a higher power or reverence in the introduction. He fails to acknowledge that there are fundamental forces beyond himself, such as the mighty forces of nature through the sea or *Moby Dick*. Ergo, Ahab is negatively ecocentric as his background nature in terms of value and reverence.

#### **Their Will and Determination Through an Ecocentric Perspective**

##### *Santiago's Will and Determination*

Certainly, Melville's protagonist is presented with the same cunning that Hemingway suggests through Santiago; as a highly determined character whose determination squarely equates his neurotic nature. However, as Santiago is determined and obsessed with his catch, he makes a bet reverences to the heart. Even though his catch leads to the ultimate destruction of marine life, the reader cannot help but feel pity for him and feel like the sea goddess, who is high and mighty, has failed and betrayed him.

##### *Depiction of Ahab's Will and Determination*

The audience connects positively with Santiago, but Melville never stops to employ positive pathos to the character Ahab and makes the audience sympathize with his decisions and obsessions. His appearance is imposingly frightening, if not revolting, and the narrator, Ishmael, shivers at his visage. He resembles "a man cut out from the stake, when the fire has overrunning wasted all his limbs without consuming them or taking away one particle from their compacted aged robustness" [8]. Far from godlike is his description, and least mythic is his aura from the onset of the tale. However, he is surrounded by an ecocentric legend, cured by nature (lightning) and grim. As scholars reveal, equally legendary is the white whale that bit off one of his legs [14]. He reveals his rebellious nature against the whale's legendary status in an attempt to make himself superior to it by having his bitten-off leg replaced by the jaw of another sperm whale. Essentially, he makes himself partly a whale and somewhat a man, but the depiction of his character as great goes only as far as his leg goes [15]. Melville preoccupies himself with showing this rebellious side of Ahab to construct his character, on the one hand, essentially depicting that he was majorly in a quest to outdo nature and the gods. Ahab ignores the vast alien immutabilities of humanist struggles and the natural world. Through this nature, the reader experiences some elements of fate that he has created for himself. Even though he is informed that his attack on *Moby Dick* will potentially cause calamities to the voyage, he is adamant and determined and focused only on his vengefulness and, in the process, reveals his dark and evil side. The circus the white whale takes the voyage is also essential as, from it, the reader can depict that the mighty whale gave them enough chances to revere him and perhaps flee if they can. *Moby Dick* reacts to the mistreatment he receives from humans.

#### **Perfect Harmony or Perfectly Anthropocentric with nature or Obsessions?**

##### *Their harmony in obsessive quests*

The reader may experience Santiago in a negative light. Still, the relevance of this conclusion is occluded because even though the audience might incline Santiago in a positive light while Ahab is negatively light, it is not just in black and white as it seems from an ecological perspective. One of the significant unfathomable characteristics that some researchers depict is their harmony in destroying nature. Some schools of thought specifically that inclined to the conservation of marine life and wildlife lean much in showing how the two protagonists ignite a negative light, an obsession where nature and eventually nature or human beings suffer the consequences. Even though subtle, Santiago goes against nature by killing nature's very own, hence igniting another struggle between him and nature. In his obsession, he, however, fails to challenge the forces of nature by returning home with only bones and his tired body to show. Ahab goes against the forces of nature, just as Santiago, launching a war on it. However, both protagonists illustrate their tragic endings, which ultimately show how inferior to nature their human nature is, even with their indomitable courageous characters that never allowed them to give up. Santiago fights the merlin while Captain Ahab fights against the shark until one ends up seriously injured while the sea devours him in the end.

### ***Their Symphony in the Majesty of Human Effort***

#### ***The majesty of human effort in Santiago***

Both characters represent the greatness of human effort from a brave, strong, and determined point of view. Human effort and brevity are at the center of Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* through Santiago, who, to show the majesty within his effort, risks portraying pride, then going against his conformities to the grandeur of his environment. His dilemma is that he has tried for eighty-four days to catch fish in vain despite having immersed considerable experience shown through prowess in his youth. The whole village knows about his skills, but they have started doubting them since he began to lose. Therefore, an alternative pedagogical perspective might dismiss his efforts as simply a man is trying to model himself as an archetype of hegemonic masculinity in his advanced age. This view is even made robust in overtones through the character's conversations with self, whence he says, "I told the boy I was a strange old man, now is when I must prove it" [16, p.53]. In this discourse, Santiago is seen to be on a mission to prove himself to the society that he is a heroic artisan, a genteel patriarch, and self-made, hence corresponds to an individual who is starting over, improving, ever tinkering. The actions depict that he is fearful that he is about to be an expired product and out of the storehouse [16]. This instance goes against the reputation he has gathered for himself among the audience as a character who respects and reveres the universe. He is seen to seemingly dismiss the glory of nature in saying, "I'll kill him though... In all his greatness and glory" [16, p.53]. He preoccupies in such a quest to challenge the majesty of nature.

Some critiques, such as Gurko [17] have held this view and echoed that Santiago depicts "epic" individualism" with the idea that his obsessive desire to challenge nature makes his move from the confinements of his society [17]. The critics inherently dismiss the overtones of Santiago's love of nature and his environment. In his own right, Santiago risks being perceived as a person with a mission to renew his life and restore his character to be once again a proud member of his community. Imminently, he reads the undertones of pride in his kill, as Hemingway writes; "You did not kill the fish only to keep alive and to sell for food, he thought. You killed him for pride and because you are a fisherman... If you love him, it is not a sin to kill him. Or is it more?" (88-89). In this context, Santiago doubts whether he must have killed the marlin for his ambitious escapades, as he tries to give himself a rationale behind his actions. If he killed for pride, then it should be for the satisfaction of endurance and not proving his masculinity to himself and the world. Let it not be that he was not looking for a way out of being branded more proud and lonely, unlucky than enduring. In exploring the character of Santiago through the vantage of ecocentrism with a mission to dismiss the claims that he is a proud character with overtones, the audience should note that even though it is the deepest desire of the character, these traits are neutralized. The neutralization is essentially achieved by the fact that he conforms so much to the universe around him. It is so hard not to notice how Santiago worships his nature. Although he says that he will kill the fish, he asks him to understand his rationale that he is a fisherman; thus, killing him is what he has to do to prove himself. He neutralizes his speech by saying that he loves him and is somewhat sorry for his act of killing; "I love and respect you very much. But I will kill you dead before this day ends" [17, p.43]. Santiago's interactivity with nature rationalizes his motives, reducing them to simply those of an innocent fisherman doing what he is meant to do, like all fishermen. Even as harms his 'brother', he still reveres his majesty, hence his obsession in achieving his quest is positively ecocentric.

#### ***The majesty of human effort in Ahab***

Despite the majesty of the human effort of the character Ahab in Melville's *Moby Dick* to that of Santiago, through the vantage of his conformity to the ecocentric characteristics, the reader cannot fail to notice the vivid contrast between good and evil in *Moby Dick*'s obsessive efforts that inherently brands him the enemy of nature, this good versus evil moral conflict rationale is drawn in vast symbolism throughout the story [2]. Allegory, through symbolism and carefully chosen diction, complements the themes that are prevalent in the story, highlighted as being the limitations of knowledge, as embodied by Ishmael, and the deceptive nature of fate. In *Moby Dick*, the author, Melville's account of Ahab's quest to pursue and capture the monstrous white whale and the quest seem logically impossible, just as the three-day-long quest



fronted by Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea*. The allegoric implications further affirm the deliberate use of symbols to change the overall plot while still using the same protagonists. However, these aspects notwithstanding, it can be found in the fact that *Moby Dick* as an allegory is represented in the symbolic elements of Pequod, *Moby Dick*, Queequeg's Coffin and the captain concerning the whaleboat to elucidate an allegoric narrative that seeks to trigger the cognitive perceptions of the reader to read between the lines.

Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* incorporates the titular character of the whale to have an allegoric resonance to knowledge in his obsessive quest. Knowledge is what points to an inherent understanding of good and evil. The relation between the captain and the whaleboat and the unending quest to make the white whale captive is a meaning for human beings searching for purpose in life, willing to go against all the great forces they should otherwise revere [17]. Unlike Santiago, Ahab is so focused on searching for his purpose in life, having a sole desire to capture and kill *Moby Dick* that he loses his grip on reality and the magnificence of the nature around him, a fact that eventually costs him his life. It is an epistemological grounded perspective that stamps the idea that the course by the captain points to a quest for understanding, meaning and transcendent, rather than the literal meaning of the incorporated diction. This rationale calls on the audience to understand the force behind the whale that Ahab means to kill.

To understand the force behind the whale connected to the ecocentric and Ahab's inherent obsession with achieving his quest is a call to have a religious understanding of the text. The purpose of the quest may often be misconstrued or seen as murky and unclear [18]. To this effect, there is notable evidence as the story commences with a great quotation from the bible, about Leviathans and whales. Some of the names incorporated in the story emanate from the Bible. The names include Ahab, Elijah, and Ishmael, who was the son of Abraham in the Bible. Since the Biblical accounts of Ishmael posit that his father disowned him, so is the character of Ishmael in *Moby Dick* as he is portrayed as an outcast in the novel. In the sublime authority of religiousness of nature is Melville's entanglement of secular theodicy and nature [19]. These aspects are augmented; it can be said that *Moby Dick* used the quest by the captain to capture the white whale as an allegory for religious understanding. The allegoric depiction of good and evil is the element of religious rebellion. As [20] points out in his analysis, in *The Humanism of Moby Dick*, Melville's story places meaning to the whale in being able to directly represent God and the absence of God. The whiteness of the whale can be associated with religion. Additionally, the same whale is also associated with an inherent lack of color. According to the Christian Deity, the metaphorical association further points to the aspect of Ishmael being appalled by the whiteness of the whales. The reason can be pinned on the whale being a mystery, indefinite, and dangerous. It goes to substantiate that the story *Moby Dick* portrays an obsessive struggle between good, represented by the fish equated nature as a symbol of God through his whiteness, and evil represented by Ahab.

### Revenge or Self-Realization

Many literary interpretations are inclined to the fact that the protagonists of *Moby Dick* and *The Old Man and the Sea* are interlocked through a symphony purpose of self-realization. This discourse supports this claim with evidence that this conclusion is inherently linked to the conformity of the character, or not, to the majesty of Mother Nature. The nature of humanity captured in the works would go to deep and dangerous lengths to question their meaning of life even without the character's realization or masking to the endeavors for self-realization for revenge [21]. The imagery employed in the two works is strikingly different but serves the same purpose. In *The Old Man and the Sea*, Santiago's imagery shows him as a lover of nature, fish, water, and god; he reveres these things that constitute nature, and in his quest, he unites with nature [22]. This union commands to a resolute intelligentsia that the majesty of nature is, with no malice, no conspiracies, and no evil intelligence; the grandeur of nature comes natural, and so should the love and reverence to this majesty to achieve the ultimate metaphysical cupola.

In contrast to Santiago, Ahab's world is chaotic in the protagonist's desire for vengeance against nature, from an intrinsic point of view that makes him an enemy of nature. From the beginning of the story, Melville preoccupies himself with depicting Ahab's vengeance so that it is almost everything the audience fixates upon in drawing his spectacular, melodramatic archetype. Consequently, this audience ends up accepting the horrible truth of his nature with no hope that his insane persuasiveness and his puritan hatred for nature that equates to transcended anthropocentrism would be redeemed [23]. However, the reader should notice that the author makes *Moby Dick* conspicuously absent throughout the tale until the last three chapters. Melville depicts *Moby Dick* as evil through Ahab's eyes; hence Ahab's humane insecurities are thwarted, sadly deranges, and make him not likable enough to succeed in his mission. However, in this failure, his totally consumed persona, the overtones of self-realization are apparent. In drawing this conclusion, the reader should note the words of Rene Girard in his work *Scapegoat*. He states that the unuttered contrary of the lack of difference would result in an obsession with establishing oneself as a hero and the other as an evil [24]. Note that Ahab remains conspicuously absent through the book except in Chapter 9, where he reappears tired of his obsession with his equals, and the author revisits his monomania [8]. With it comes the first instance of Ahab's self-realization.

Ahab creates Moby Dick and links him with self to justify his tendency and hatred towards evil he mistakably sees in nature. Correspondingly, Melville makes a formidable opponent in Moby Dick but inherently creates himself through the other's inextricable relationship. In this sense, as he tries to create a slave-master relationship, endeavoring to make himself master of nature, the sea, and most of all, a master to Moby Dick, he inherently makes himself a servant, the slave. His failure is most heartbreaking to the audience, who has followed through Ahab's vicarious daring, who simply cannot come to grips with his failure. The ultimate realization is that the two masters cannot exist together; hence, in his persuasive obsession, he has to give one, to his pitiful end, a servant.

### 3 Conclusions

In summary, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* embody the allegoric relationship between man and nature and the depiction of good and evil in both plots with respect to ecocentrism. To this effect, the denotation revolves around the protagonists, their interactions with nature, their reverence or lack of respect for Mother Nature's ultimate power, coupled with the challenges they encounter in their quest to gain a higher understanding of life. The difference between good and evil, as portrayed by the ecocentric relationship as it is grounded on epistemological terms. The development of the characters through ecocentrism is inherently essential in denoting the characteristics of the protagonists, their determination and will and their obsessive desires to achieve their quest which even though it shows the majesty of human effort in symphony, the authors' methods are so starkly dissimilar that it seems they both had distinct purposes for the stories. In a similar stance from both author's perspectives. However, it is shown that their premier preoccupations in the novels were to inherently elucidate the principal concerns of human lives in self-realization, an awakening of sorts that seeks to trigger the cognitive perceptions of the reader to read between the lines. Sufficiently, the masterpieces of Ernest Hemingway in his novel *The Old Man and the Sea* and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* substantiate that it is essential for humans to live in harmony with nature, for it is in nature that man finds or loses himself significantly.

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