



Volume 12, Issue 3, May 2025, p. 21-35

Article Information

Article Type: Research Article

This article was checked by iThenticate.

Article History:

Received

04/05/2025

Received in revised
form

13/05/2025

Available online

15/05/2025

THE IMAGERY OF ANIMALS IN HERMAN MELVILLE'S MOBY-DICK

Iman Saud Dhannoon ¹

Abstract

Abstract- Animal imagery is a common literary device used by writers in the late nineteenth century English literature to convey various themes so as to create allegorical writing. Recently, the variety of critical comments and viewpoints on animals and non-human creatures have been seen prolifically in fiction. Herman Melville, an American novelist and critic, has given a material turn and gone beyond traditional investigations. The paper is searched to point out how the representation of animals in fiction stands for human modern life and how the characters in Moby-Dick seem to cross the boundaries of human-nonhuman creatures. The paper tries to answer the questions: Is there harmony relations between man and nature? Should man accepts God's justice throughout his life? The aim of the paper is to work between possibilities and impossibilities; human and nonhuman species in nature.

Keywords: Imagery, Animals, Novel, Moby-Dick, Herman Melville.

1- Introduction-

Animal imagery is a common literary device used by writers to convey various themes such as ideas and emotions. Writers, like George Orwell, in *Animal Farm*, employs the image of animals so that to present an allegorical writing. For instance, the animals in the novel stand for political figures and social classes. The pig

¹ Faculty of Medicine/University of Tikrit, emansuod@gmail.com.

resembles ruling class while the horses represent the working class. Furthermore, the representation of dogs is to show the secret policy of the rulers at the time the novel was written.

In *Lord of the Flies* which is written by William Golding, there is a profound touch of animal images. Golding creates his characters as they live in a land and the land is full of various animals. The story is about a group of British boys driven on an island start showing a tendency of extremely feral behavior in their struggle for survival, and revert to the primitive state of human kind when life was lawless and only might was the rule for all to fall in line. The novel, therefore, displays horde mentality and many boys fall behind the power manager, Jack, who destroys their inbuilt discipline and values to rule them like a dictator.

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* is one of the important novels which focuses on the imagery of animals. The infamous white whale known as a *Moby-Dick* which is compared to human and nature conveys a deep meaning. The vast array of meaning is that is the white whale good or evil? Is it nature? Does it resemble human existence? Is it killed? The novel has been a point of puzzling to critics since a century ago for it is concerned to superficial elements. The novel has been largely searched from allegorical, political, and philosophical points of view. The research is entirely different. The entry to the text is done by rethinking of the opposites, breaking national boundaries. Boundaries that hinder the reader from understanding the text from the new modern side.

The 21st century interpretation of *Moby-Dick*, as it is seen by Sanborn, is that the novel is like a deep study of conscious and unconscious. Accordingly, the type of study may draw the reader to the condition of "dream like" which is a part of modern analysis of association-reading. The novel displays the association between the characters who are humans and the animals which are nonhumans such as pequod, Whales, Sharks, and ocean which are all stand for key components to the text. By

doing this, the reader will definitely uncover another new relationship connects these two entries with ecology and energy as well.

2- Intersectionality-

As *Moby-Dick* belongs to the modern age, it is possible to interpret the text from various viewpoints. For instance, Robert Zoellner puts it as “It is a critical tourism that *Moby-Dick* is a mass of interpretive knots” (xi). Likely, Sanborn, in his book, *The New Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, declares that the novel is “A figuratively representing elements and qualities exclusively related to human (12).

The huge turn of materialism at the beginning of the twenty first century has put a new emphasis on nonhuman elements and has opened up new gates for reading and understanding the novel such as political affairs, natural things, identity belonging, femininity, material elements, and the relationship between what is human and nonhuman in the universe (Farmer 38).

The assimilation of the characteristics of the whales and human is largely seen in chapter one. Malville attracts the reader to focus on the allegorical whale may symbolize evil ako. The whale is actually much more assimilated to human beings. The closeness between these two natural entities implies femininity between the mother whale and the baby, this is very vivid especially in the nursing scene. The juxtaposition between what is human and nonhuman is suggested through the following speech delivered by Ishmael: “We were occasionally visited by small tame cows and calves; women and children of this routed host” and “like household dogs they came snuffling round us to our gun ways” (Melville 387).

Accordingly, the image of motherhood is depicted and particularly linked to the role of the mother (Mariana, Guida 109). Thus, mimicry is present, and the limitation of children and dogs compared to human behavior is sentimental.

In the story of Pequod, readers can find a hint of fellowship and help between shipmates. Whales seem as they act as mutual supporters taking care, and help each

other. They protect the weak ones seeking for peace against their killers who want to take their oil, and this what is belied to be “peculiar domain of humanity” (Sten 325).

Armstrong, on the other hand, interprets the idea of animal humanization in *Moby-Dick* as something related to sociological truth. By showing the truth, Armstrong displays how the role of the same gender is reproduced in nature and counted as natural (Leviathan 105). Through an exact comparison between humans and animals, Melville seems as making fun, also. He, from one side pushes the unfamiliarity of the context when approaching the image of the wild whale. Hence, from the other side, the image of the whales is employed as a tool for criticism to modern societies, the western, in particular. The image of the whales is compared in the novel to the careless modern young people of high class societies for their accessive attention to run after life pleasures and deflection after trivial things.

In *Moby-Dick*, the image of the mythical white whale who “can destroy an entire ship and its crew with one blow” exemplify the animal possessing qualities such as vengefulness, agency, and malice, which are hardly to attribute to nonhuman animals and which are also ejected as anthropomorphism at the time of Melville (Armstrong, What Animals Mean 104). Thus, the white whale resembles a bridge between a legend and a real living animal who is equipped with an “unexampled, intelligent malignity” and an “infernal aforethought of ferocity” (Melville 182).

In *Moby-Dick*, Melville, through his description, justifies individuals who have supernormal tendencies and those who attempt to overcome the limits put on species in the world by “willingly attempting to kill their pursuers”:

He had several times been known to turn around suddenly; and bearing down upon the, either stave their boats to splinters, or drive them back in consternation to their ship (183).

From the above lines, we can find out that when individuals aim to exceed the limits, imposed on their species by human power, they should have supernatural tendencies help them kill their pursuers. The point of intersectionality is that the whale seems as intellectual as human.

3- Voice and Muteness-

It is commonly stated that language and animality are linked to the two species of life; human and nonhuman. What can be said about language and speech in *Moby-Dick* is that both presence and absence of language represent reality. The technique of language, also, reinforces the reader of human and nonhuman continuum and separates the power of I and body. According to Martinez Benedi and Savarese *Moby-Dick* “stages the problem of language – how it produces the categories [...] which then require the bandage of personification” (486). So the distinction between language and speech is categorized in the novel.

However, the argument of the two researchers was later developed by employing rules taken from cognitive science. The researchers, therefore, referred to two main ideas:

- 1- “Lower level perceptual systems” which interprets life without “language” which is a main category to explain, interact, and categorize.
- 2- “Higher order thought” which subsequently interprets and fully describes that system (466). *Moby-Dick*, according to the above explanation of the approach of language, is subjected to the first idea which is the lower perceptual system. By doing so, it is astonishing how plants become human-like and humans tree-like as a form of humanism in Melville's works. It is only Melville's hope to “linger over sensation, to delay the moment of conceptual master”. Consequently, Melville has stopped working on the flavor of pure sensation that the use of language in his works is to explore the sense of the world and to express reality. Similarly, the body of the white whale which is still a frame of the problem of language.

In chapter twenty four, Melville displays the narrator, Ishmael as a thinker on the voice of the white whale who can communicate quickly. This suggests the technique of muteness, one of the traditional western views of animals. The view that confirms the lack of language. The view that shows some other ways of communication rather than language such as gestures. Finally, Ishmael recognized that there are different ways to communicate between animals and humans, and the language can be of a different tool.

Ishmael, in fact, tries to make a sense of the environment he and the various animals live. Therefore, he narrates a story years after the Pequod demise. As Briasco Luca noticed, Melville's *Moby-Dick* should be looked at as one of the "Adventure interpretations". In this sense, we can notice Ishmael as if he observes tragic facts he witnesses. His philosophical perspective, his thinking of the world, his variety of roles, and his epistemological view of knowledge prove his deep perception of the world. Ishmael's reflection of the muteness of the white whale can be evoked in chapter eighty-two when he sat thinking of the voice of the whale "The Pequod meets the virgin", in that he was a witness of the old blind whale. After the episode, Ishmael remarks:

It was a terrific, most pitiable, and maddening sight.

The whale was now going head out, and sending his
Spout before him in a continual tormented jet; while

His one poor fin beat his side in an agony of fright.

Now to his hand, now to that. He yawned in his

Faltering flight, and still at every billow that he broke,

He spasmodically sank in the sea, or sideways rolled.

However, Melville presents Ishmael's observation of the disability of the whale to speak is to highlight the element of animality and otherness of species in this world. In this sense we can put a boundary that separates animals from humans which is language. With the description of Ishmael to the voiceless whale he found that there

are categories called nonhumans which contradict humans. The scene of the chapter reveals the feeling and pity towards the old whale. The empathy we feel is the reaction to Schultz's words "Melville adds the rhetoric of sentiment to that of sensationalism to intensify his reader's sorrow for the whale's death" (105). Schultz's description of the situation of death is to make the reader aware of the suffering of the whale.

Schultz's description is in fact compared to Harriet Stowe's description to the death of a child, written "to raise the awareness of the brutality of slavery" (106). However, Robert Zoellner reported Ishmael's situation that his "redemptive realization that the largest and most powerful creature on the face of the earth is, like man, subject to all the ills that flesh is heir to" (172). This view embodies Ishmael's love to the Medicare whale as he nicknames it that he humanized it and gave it some human characteristics. What makes the scene more painful and pitiful is the fact that the whale could not express its terror and horror through voice. On the contrary, it keeps the sentiment "chained up" and "enchanted" within itself.

Moby-Dick himself is an instance of creative boundaries of animality which suggest the notion of deterritorialization. The process which displays the position of the characters in the novel and questions the relationship between humans and nonhumans. It is the place in which the two poles live in and the affordance between them is the judge. Such relationship are particularly "detrimental, as humans and whales are sharks enter into zones of proximity associated with death, eventually destroying each other" (Lamberson 14).

Soon, in the novel, the relationship between the two species moved to become beneficial. For example, Stubb successfully passed through his becoming-animal to deterritorialize the deadly aspects of whaling which makes him a murderer to the whale.

4- The Limits of Human Knowledge:

In chapter eighty-five, Ishmael becomes unable to take sense of the whale's breathing organ. He finds that it is hard to classify by humans. It cannot be considered a nose or a mouth. It is rather a mysterious organ "you might almost stand in it, and yet be undecided" (370). The only image that is recognized by Ishmael is to decide that it is nonhuman. It is a fact that humans should possibly know what is between the human and nonhuman world. The epistemological skepticism which is a challenge between two different things such as human and nature; human and nonhuman demands a wide knowledge for humans to meaningfully know the world. The dismantling relationship between these two species in the world is to conceive what is now and what was then. Ishmael, on the other hand, realized a scientific fact that the whale is a fish "a whale is a spouting fish with a horizontal trail" (137). Thus, the arbitrary classification of the whales by Ishmael is a part of scientific knowledge.

In chapter eighty-one, the same thing is very close. Ishmael cannot fully grasp rationally or describe the suffering of nonhuman creature; but he is able to recognize the huge pain. He also cannot clearly think of the solution of the face of the whale which cannot be felt by humans. This is the language that speaks man. Ishmael's tone suggests the inability to express and interpret action by describing the voice of the whale:

As this windpipe solely opens into the tube of his
 Spouting canal, and as that long canal [...] is
 Furnished with a sort of locks for the downward
 Relation of air or the upward exclusion of water,
 Therefore the whale has no voice but then again
 What has the whale to say?

Ishmael's description of the whale is by silence and this silence implies the other of the human who cannot speak contrasted to humans who has to say what he thinks

of. Ishmael goes on to compare between what is humane and non-human that he compares the spout of the whale to the “semi visible steam” of the great philosopher like Jupiter, Plato, Dante, etc. while they are meditating deep thoughts (374).

In reality, language versus silence. The inability of the whale to speak implies the idea of silence. The language of the whale is then questionable. However, the ability of human language to express reality is a challenge which suggests the idea of speech which characterizes human beings from any other species in nature. Therefore, from the linguistic viewpoint, humans “cannot live outside the language” (Benedi 286), and this is a part of reality.

5- Literary Naturalism:

As Herman Melville visited many places in France throughout his life and wrote about them, he was convinced in the thought that says: “Writers should write what they know”. Melville had a stout scientific sensibility of the remote places he had visited. Therefore, natural science played a great part in his works fused with his artistic view to nature. Melville's naturalism linked between art and science, particularly, in *Moby-Dick*. The presence of animals is essential in the text that functioning as complicating symbols to stand for reality. In literary naturalism, the use of animals as signifiers for signified notions, does not mean that the main concern of the text is animals. However, man is the main focus.

Naturalism to Melville may mean different meanings: The majority is scientific naturalism and literary naturalism. He utilizes scientific naturalism to suggest symbolism out of Darwinian thought which is cycling around literary naturalism. Naturalism has been arisen from qualities of man according to Pizzer (10). These qualities can be associated to “heroic and adventure” or “clash between two characters controlled by environment” (11). The value of these characters is humanistic because their fate gives importance to individuals and their life. Pizzer vies the tension of those creatures as an influence in naturalistic literary works. The

tension of nonhuman creatures suggests “that even the least significant human being can feel and strive powerfully ... and that no range of human experience is free of the moral complexities and ambiguities” (12). This means that even poor characters are involved in literary naturalism.

From the very beginning of the novel, Ishmael informs the reader at the outside of *Moby-Dick* that “People having little or no money”. Therefore, he prefers to go to sea as a “simple sailor” (16). This implies that *Moby-Dick* is engaged with the lives of commoners. Melville willingly managed to deal with the life of man by metaphoric usage of animals, and this quality is seen in most of his works.

Literary naturalism features pessimistic determinism which distinguishes the link between realism and naturalism. Furthermore, literary naturalism suggests literary works that include crises, crimes, dilemma which destroy characters and give no chance to escape. Natural history which is a branch of natural science is a systematic study of any category of natural objects. This would suggest the fact that all naturalists are scientists but not all scientists are naturalists (Smith 5).

Natural science including description of environmental elements such as animals and other objects within the surrounding of the author that are well-known in the field of literature. In *Moby-Dick* and *The Encantadas*, Melville employs scientific naturalism in describing settings and animals such as sperm whales and tortoises so as to represent and symbolize the mood of human beings.

In *The Truth of the Thing: Notification in Moby-Dick*, Betsy Hilbert states that Melville’s novel includes “a massive conglomerate of fable and textbook, epic, allegory, zoologic treatise, philosophic exploration, easy romance, and guidebook” (4). This is so because, according to Hilbert, the novel grants the reader a detailed interpretation of different components of whaling. Therefore, chapter one is devoted to give explanation about the white whale while chapter twenty-four, “The Advocate” exposes the contribution of the whale to the world. This serves the subject matter of the narrative fiction.

Within the limits of zoology, Melville distinguishes the lives of the whales among any other animals or fish kind. He said that “a whale is a spouting fish with a horizontal tail” (48). The tail is described as it is with horizontal flukes and nasal openings. Here, the narrator offers a classification system of category “The various species of whales need some sort of popular comprehensive classification, of only an easy outline one for the present, hereafter to be filled in all its departments by subsequent laborers” (144).

Melville displays most of the biological features of whales which are classified by scientists as mammals, though he announced that he takes “the good old fashioned ground that whale is a fish”. Melville’s definition of the fish, according to the text, is only a creature of a sea. For example, in chapter 83, “The Grand Armada”, there is a reference to motherhood: “Nursing mothers of the whales” (423). After that, we can find a prolific description to the flavor of milk and behavior “very sweet and rich ... it might do well with strawberries” (425).

The natural selection of animals is highlighted by Melville in chapter 55, “The Squid”. As Ishmael states, “they fancy that the monster [The Squid] to which these arms belonged ordinarily clings by them to the bed of the ocean” (112). There are also so many images of animals portrayed by Melville exemplified in the 302 images of birdlife which is a shadow of biological theories illustrate the existence of birds in the species since the first creation of the world.

Melville pictures the location of birds on “tower-like rock” as superficial devices embodies all birds in the universe. The same as for the penguin which is portrayed as it is not a “lower” creature because it spends most of his life near water. An albatross is not “higher” simply for it roosts in nests off ground and can show proudly his ability to fly.

Via scientific naturalism, Melville used symbolism in order to create a vision of literary naturalism. In *Moby-Dick* and *The Encantadas*, he creates string elements and

deeper engaging of thematic concepts “in practice the naturalist is usually direct” (Pizer 144).

However, the use of animal images as symbols becomes an essential component in a literary text that gives it flavor to be trend of literary naturalism. The symbolic elements of animals as human beings suggests the thematic condition of a literary work. The elements such as extreme, settings, harsh conditions, determinism, or characters destruction.

‘Determinism’, is a term used by Melville profoundly and in a too complex method. The concept, as Budd states, “most distinctively ..., pushed further toward determinism-economic or biological or cosmic-than American novelists had cared or dared to go before (Budd 43). Melville’s view towards determinism is taken into two contrasted view points; religious and Darwinian conceptualizations of the universe which are basics in *Moby-Dick*.

The religious sense of determinism is seen in Melville’s usage of Biblical material in his literature. Furthermore, the religious touch is seen in *Moby-Dick* in Nathalia Wright’s Melville’s use of *Bible* is an important study of Biblical conceptualization and notion. Also, the Biblical scripture on Melville’s literary works. His employment of the *Bible* in his works refers that Christianity and Judaism are no less important to realize Melville’s texts, for both is just as diffused in the works as natural science. From the divine part of argument, Wright wrote about Melville’s fulfillment of the Bible, saying:

A numerical estimate of them [allusions to the Bible]

In proportion to the length of each volume is even more

Revealing, for thus arranged, his books stand in this order:

Clarel, Moby-Dick, Billy Budd and other prose pieces,

The Confidence Man, Poems, Pierre, The Piazza Tales,

Redburn, Israel Potter, White Jacket, Mardi, there thus

Appears to be a correspondence between the most ambitious

Expressions of Melville's genius and his use of the Bible ... it
Was in his most profound thought and his most distinguished
Style that he relied most heavily on scripture (Wright 9).

What is the most significant thing in *Moby-Dick* is that the link between literary naturalism and determinism and how the supernatural elements capture the fable whale participates in releasing the spread of determinism. In the Bible, Christianity functions as a phenomenon to declare that God's will governs all destinies.

In *Moby-Dick*, the white whale represents a symbol of determinism in religion, the tortoise of the Galapagos stand for determinism from the Darwinian standpoint. As Lehan presents it, "Literary naturalism derives mainly from a biological model. Its origin owes much to Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution, based in turn on his theory of natural selection. Darwin creates a context that made naturalism- with its emphasis upon theories of heredity and environment- a convincing way to explain the nature of reality for the late nineteenth century (47). While the fate of the world is destined by God.

Melville used whales and tortoises as symbols to stand for elements of determination and coincide with species of animal beings that are killed by deliberate measure during the time he wrote *Moby-Dick*. Melville, ultimately, concludes that whales will "outlast all hunting" but reveals in the process that he understands the potential of existence to an animal so ruthlessly pursued. The image of animals presented in the novel represents the life of human beings that is captured and directed by different circumstances.

Conclusion

Animal imagery is a common device in fiction which conveys the suffering of human beings in life. *Moby-Dick* is Herman Melville's masterpiece of the nineteenth century English literature. The novel suggests Melville's deep understanding of nature and the relationship between man and natural creatures. In the novel, all

characters seek fortune from nature and God's justice is the destiny; Those who have friendly attitudes in life will definitely gain good fortune, and vice versa. The characters show the potential of the supernatural beyond what is shown. The phenomenon of language which is the hallmark that distinguishes humanity is one of the elements of nature that can distinguish what is human and what is non-human. The relationship between man and the white whale indicates the tone of the author. It is vivid that Melville tries to tell the reader that the harmony between these two species is the ultimate salvation of human destiny. The lesson behind the research is that man in nature should not pay great attention to immediate interests; However, s/he should take into consideration the long-term interests.

Work Cited

The Bible

Blamires, Harry (ed). *A Guide to Twentieth-Century Literature in English*. London: Methuen, 1983.

Budd, Louis J. "The American Background". *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism*. Ed. Donald Pizer. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995. 21-46. Print.

Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory-An Introduction*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.

Fowler, Roger. *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms*. Routledge and Kegan Inc. Ltd. 1987.

Hilbert, Betsy. "The Truth of The Thing: Nonfiction in Moby-Dick". *College English* 48(1984):824-831. Print.

Kenney, William. *How to Analyze Fiction*. New York: Monarch Press, 1966.

Lamberson, J. Gregory. *Herman Melville's Use of Animals: The Chain of Natural Science, Anthropomorphic Symbolism*. M.A. Thesis, Colorado State University, 2013.

Lehan, Richard. "The American Background", *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism*. Ed. Donald Pizer. NY: Cambridge University Press. 1995. 47-73.

Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick*. New York: Penguin Books, 2003. Print.

---- "The Encantadas", *The Piazza Tales*. New York: Russell and Russell, 1963. 181-252. Print.

Pizer, Donald. *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, Revised Edition. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984. Print.

Smith, Richard. *Melville's Science: Devilish Tantalization of the Gods!* New York: Garland Publishing. 1993. Print.

Reuben, Paul P. PAL: *Perspective in American Literature-A Research and Reference Guide-AN Ongoing Project*. Retrieved January 19, 2007, from <http://web.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap3/melville.html>