

The Writing of Human Subjectivity in Moby Dick

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Abstract

Based on Marx's and Engels' thoughts on human subjectivity, this study debates with the ecological studies of Moby Dick in the academy, discusses in depth the writing of human subjectivity in the novel, and presents the underlying logic of hunting and killing of whales by tracing back to human labor and analyzing its alienation. Exploring the writing of "human subjectivity" in Moby Dick can not only reveal Melville's in-depth insight into human behavior, but also tap into the inherent problems of capitalist relations of production, provide a literary level of reflection for sorting out the relationship between human beings and nature and society, and highlight the importance of Moby Dick's call to protect the environment by grasping human subjectivity, which highlights the significance of Moby Dick's call to protect the environment by grasping human subjectivity.

Keywords

Moby Dick; Melville; Rebuttal of "Anthropocentrism"; Human Subjectivity; Alienation of Labor.

1. Introduction

Moby Dick, or The Whale (1851) is a novel written by Herman Melville (1819–1891) in 1851. Since its publication, it has sparked widespread controversy among critics. Critics have offered diverse definitions of the work. For example, The Atlas describes it as "an encyclopedia of information, rhapsody, and speculation about the whale"; [1] Ian Ousby refers to it as a legendary masterpiece, noting that the novel is "a collection of drama, adventure stories, philosophical explorations, scientific research, and epic poetry"; [2] Philip Armstrong, on the other hand, argues that Moby-Dick "provides a commodity history". [3] This work primarily tells the story of humanity's revenge against the white whale. Due to the extensive descriptions of human whaling and marine life in the book, academic research on it has focused on ecological aspects. Brady Krien argues that "Melville offers a clear portrayal of how humans worked to harness ecology for industrial ends". [4] Armstrong points out that "*Moby-Dick* simultaneously humanizes the whale and shows the whale voraciously consumed by humans,". [5] "While the anthropocentric activities of the harpooners bring in huge profit to human society, they have done a lot of damage to the existential environment of the sea animals, and also deprives the living right of the sea lives, especially the sperm whale". [6] Among the numerous ecological studies of Moby-Dick, there is no shortage of criticism of human whaling, analyzing Melville's negative attitude towards humanity, permeated with a strong sense of pessimistic reflection. However, beyond his negation, did Melville also present a positive attitude in the novel? Additionally, few studies have analyzed the underlying behavioral logic behind human whaling, yet understanding this logic is crucial for fundamentally analyzing ecological issues and seeking solutions. Drawing on the thoughts of Karl Heinrich Marx (1818–1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) on human subjectivity, this paper aims to engage in dialogue with previous ecological studies of Moby-Dick, explore the portrayal of human agency in the novel, and analyze the underlying logic of human whaling through an examination of human labor. Discussions centered on "human subjectivity" can reveal Melville's profound examination of

human behavior, helping to clarify the relationship between humans and nature, as well as between humans and society, and providing literary reflections for the further development of both.

2. The Unpredictability of Nature and the Disaster of Whaling: A Rebuttal of “Anthropocentrism”

Moby-Dick, centered on the human whaling journey, is often studied as an ecological text. Lawrence Buell (1939–) notes that “*Moby-Dick* comes closer than any other novel of its day to making a nonhuman creature a plausible major character and to developing the theme of human ferocity against nature”. [7] However, another different view believes that with “neither exploitation nor vengeance, Ishmael anthropomorphizes the whale towards whom he cherishes a feeling of sympathy and reverence.” [6] Different from previous critics, Krien holds a neutral view, stating that *Moby Dick* charts “the relationship between human and nonhuman, between individual and system in ways that make interrelationships and interdependencies explicit”. [4] Overall, academic opinions on Melville and the ecological perspectives in *Moby-Dick* can be broadly divided into two sides: one side argues that Melville supports anthropocentrism and writes anti-ecological themes in *Moby-Dick*; the other side asserts that Melville critiques anthropocentrism and advocates for ecological themes of respecting nature. Despite these differing views, most scholars agree that *Moby-Dick* is narrated from an “anthropocentric” perspective. The claim that *Moby-Dick* embodies “anthropocentrism” is open to debate, as it fundamentally raises the question of the relationship between humans and nature: “Are humans at the center of nature?” or “Can humans dominate nature?” In *Moby-Dick*, Melville uses the unpredictability of nature and the disasters encountered during whaling to negate these questions.

Nature, with its unpredictability, dominates humanity. In *Moby-Dick*’s descriptions of maritime weather, the unpredictability of nature is fully revealed, and in these weather depictions, humanity is in a passive position. For example, when the ship passes through the “Cape Tormentoto”, known as the Cape of Good Hope, “In tempestuous times like these, after everything above and aloft has been secured, nothing more can be done but passively to await the issue of the gale”. [8] Humans are helpless in the face of the unpredictable weather at sea. It is evident that despite possessing numerous tools, “when faced with natural disasters such as earthquakes, typhoons, and tsunamis that demonstrate the destructive power of nature, humans have no choice but to passively accept them”. [9] A typhoon at sea is like a violent storm: “It will sometimes burst from out that cloudless sky, like an exploding bomb upon a dazed and sleepy town”. [8] Faced with a howling typhoon, humans can only passively endure it. The novel depicts sailors facing typhoons. Even though the whaling ship was well-equipped, with “preventer tackles been attached to it”, the helmsman of the *Pequod* was still “had several times been reelingly hurled to the deck by its spasmodic motions” in the face of nature’s overwhelming power. [8] This demonstrates that even when humans utilize tools such as whaling ships for ocean voyages, they remain insignificant in the face of nature’s unpredictable climate.

In addition to the unpredictability of natural climate, humans are also vastly outmatched by natural creatures. Previous studies have pointed out that *Moby Dick* contains numerous scenes of humans persecuting white whales, with Ahab being a typical example. Armstrong describes Ahab’s quest as “an allegory of that attempt to master nature which characterized industrial capitalism in its new found confidence”. [5] However, as directly described in the novel, Ahab loses a leg in his confrontation with the white whale, and *Moby Dick*’s jaw is as “a mower a clade of grass in the field”, effortlessly “reaping away Ahab’s leg”. [8] Ahab then embarked on his quest for revenge, but ultimately, on the third day of his pursuit of the white whale, he and all the

crew members except Ishmael perished at sea. This vividly reveals that the natural forces represented by the white whale are powerful, and humans are powerless to resist them. As such, in *Moby-Dick*, humans appear particularly insignificant when faced with the overwhelming power of nature, lacking the ability to dominate it. In the relationship between humans and nature, “humans have never been, and can never be, the center; they have never been, and can never be the masters of nature”. [9]

In summary, *Moby-Dick* explores the unpredictability of nature and the immense power of natural creatures, deeply revealing humanity’s insignificance in the face of nature. Melville’s portrayal demonstrates a profound insight into the human condition: humanity has never been the center of nature, nor has it ever possessed the ability to dominate it; the laws governing nature are not subject to human control. As described in the post-battle scene at the end of “*Moby-Dick*”: “Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago”. [8] After humanity’s failed attempt to resist nature, it suffered heavy casualties, while nature swiftly restored its mysterious and unpredictable calm. In the grand scheme of things, it is nature that truly holds the power of dominion. “The movement of celestial bodies, the cycle of the seasons, the changes in temperature, and the growth and decay of all things are not subject to human will; on the contrary, they dominate humanity. The true center of the world is not humanity, but nature”. [9] Given that humanity is not the center of nature, what ability does it possess to engage in whaling, and what is the purpose of such behavior?

3. Cetology and Whaling Tools: Manifestations of “Human Subjectivity”

Throughout human history, the exploration and transformation of the objective world have been manifestations of human subjectivity, highlighting the distinction between humans and non-humans. Engels once pointed out, “we, with flesh, blood and brain, belong to nature, and exist in its midst, and that all our mastery of it consists in the fact that we have the advantage over all other creatures of being able to learn its laws and apply them correctly”. [10] In other words, humans are part of nature, not its center, but the distinction between humans and non-humans lies in humans’ ability to understand and transform the world. This is also the key to breaking free from the “anthropocentric” interpretive trap in previous studies of *Moby Dick*, namely, “liberating humanity from the misreading of centrality”, and recognizing that in the practice of transforming nature, “humanity is always the subject rather than the center”. [9] About Human subjectivity, Marx stated that “free, conscious activity is man’s species character”, [11] encompassing “subjectivity, autonomy, and active creativity”. [12] For humans possess subjectivity, they are able to understand the objective world and engage in active transformative activities. The studies on whales and the descriptions of whaling tools in *Moby-Dick* vividly demonstrate humanity’s subjectivity in understanding and transforming the world. Through their autonomous cognition of natural objects, humans highlight their own subjectivity. *Moby-Dick* contains numerous in-depth explorations of whales, even dedicating a separate chapter titled “Cetology” to their discussion, which demonstrates humanity’s autonomous cognitive capacity regarding natural objects, including whales. “In his consciousness of species, man confirms his real social life and simply repeats his real existence in thought”, [11] meaning that through their cognition of the world and accumulation of knowledge and thought, humans continuously deepen their understanding of themselves and the world, thereby affirming their existence and essence. “Melville relates the whale and whaling to virtually every field of human endeavor”. [13] “*Moby Dick*’s ‘Cetology’ chapter is an encyclopedic catalogue of whale names, appearances and behaviors”. [14] In the “Cetology” chapter, Melville cites experts from various fields such as biology, history, and sociology to

argue for whales, for example, Linnaeus's research on whales: "On account of their warm bilocular heart, their lungs, their movable eyelids, their hollow ears, penem intrantem feminam mammis lactantem". [8] This definition method applies human descriptions of bodily features to define whales, essentially using human cognition of whales to distinguish themselves from this animal. As Ward states, "Melville also uses the physical dimensions of the Whale as a frame of reference for observations on man and his world", [15] thereby affirming human existence. Humans, while autonomously cognizing natural objects, actively create nature through the content of their cognition. This process highlights human subjectivity. As Engels stated, "Labor produced man himself" and "labor begins with the making of tools". [10] The whaling tools depicted in the novel are based on the understanding of whales and are the products of Marx's "free, conscious activity" [11], fully embodying human subjectivity. Multiple chapters in *Moby-Dick* are named after whaling tools, such as "The Line", used to track whales that have been struck by harpoons and have dived deep into the ocean; [8] the "The Crotch" which is the "for the purpose of furnishing a rest for the wooden extremity of the harpoon"; [8] the "Quadrant", an instrument to "take sight of the sun fire"; [8] and "The Needle" used to determine direction when steering the whaling ship. [8] Human, as Marx noted, "can only express his life in real, sensuous objects", [11] indicating that the essence of humanity must be manifested and confirmed through its connection with real sensory objects. Human life activities are not isolated self-contained cycles but must be realized and expressed through interaction with external objects. Because humans possess subjectivity, they can engage in three mutually reinforcing practical activities: cognitive understanding of whales, creation and updating of whaling tools, and whaling behavior. Whaling deepens human understanding of whales, and through the cognitive relationship with whales as real natural objects, human essence is affirmed; as the understanding of whales deepens, humans actively create and continuously update whaling tools, driving whaling behavior and understanding of whales to new depths. In the whaling process, humans utilize physical strength, intelligence, and labor skills to create whaling tools and apply them to whales, which not only meets survival needs but also embodies human life force and value, highlighting humanity's subjectivity in understanding and transforming the world.

Research on whales demonstrates humanity's autonomous and proactive cognition of natural objects, while the creation of whaling tools represents the proactive transformation of natural objects based on cognition, thereby promoting humanity's deepening understanding of both natural objects and its own subjectivity. *Moby-Dick* uses whale research and whaling tool descriptions to showcase humanity's ability to recognize and transform the world based on its subjectivity. This reflects Melville's affirmation of human subjectivity. However, the whaling depicted in the novel is not merely an individual human activity but has evolved into a large-scale, predatory whaling industry. This phenomenon seems to contradict the practical principle of seeking to understand the objective world and thereby understand oneself. Why does humanity, endowed with autonomous cognitive and active creative abilities, engage in the indiscriminate slaughter of whales? This question merits further exploration.

4. From Whaling Practices to the Whaling Industry: The Origins and Alienation of "Human Subjective Labor"

As subjects, humans can affirm their value through labor, a key practical activity that acts upon objects. However, with the development of capitalism, labor has become alienated. Workers have transitioned from actively laboring to realize their self-worth to being forced to labor solely for survival, losing control over their labor. They have been reduced from subjects to tools, becoming mere appendages of the products of their labor. In *Moby-Dick*, whaling labor illustrates the process of transitioning from affirming human essence to being enslaved by

whale oil due to the alienation of labor. This reveals the underlying behavioral logic behind humanity's rampant slaughter of whales.

In primitive society, humans possessed agency and could achieve self-affirmation through labor. *Moby-Dick* traces the origins of human whaling behavior, focusing on the Nantucket people living along the riverbanks. "They first caught crabs and quohogs in the sand; grown bolder, they pushed off in boats and captured cod; and at last, launching a navy of great ships on the sea, explored this watery world".[8] Marx pointed out that "man confirms his real social life and simply repeats his real existence in thought", [11] emphasizing the importance of human essential needs and practical activities. People must prove their existence value and meaning through actual life, practice, and interaction with others and society, and demonstrate their uniqueness and essential strength. The Nantucket people initially demonstrated their abilities in the real world through self-sufficient labor such as "catching crabs and digging for clams". From "growing bolder" to "gaining more experience", they achieved their value through autonomous labor and gradually increased their confidence in exploring the world. This resonates with Engels' view that labor "is the prime basic condition for all human existence", [10] and produced man himself. By crafting tools such as fishing nets, small boats, and large ships, the Nantucket people engaged in various forms of labor, including catching bluefish, trapping turtles, and exploring the aquatic world. Through this process of affirming their subjectivity, they fulfilled both their physical and spiritual needs.

Indeed, humans initially achieved self-affirmation through labor. However, with the development of capitalism, humans became increasingly alienated from their labor, reduced to slaves of labor products and tools of mechanical production. The novel depicts the whaling industry developed under capitalist influence, with the Nantucket people "parceling out among them the Atlantic Pacific, and Indian oceans".[8] Early Nantucket labor was primarily self-sufficient, but in the capitalist-influenced whaling industry, the whales caught and the whale products produced by workers no longer belonged to them but fell into the hands of capitalists. "Captain Ahab, along with Captains Belcher and Farr, who remained on land, were both owners and shareholders... The over 20 sailors from various countries on board were the workers, with whales as their labor objects, and the final product being whale oil. However, the ultimate possessors of the whale oil were the shipowners, not the sailors".[15] This phenomenon aligns with Marx's theory of alienated labor: "estranged labor turns thus Man's species being, both nature and his spiritual species property, into a being alien to him, into a means to his individual existence. It estranges man's own body from him, as it does external nature and his spiritual essence, his human being".[11] The workers on the whaling ship no longer labor to affirm themselves but to obtain "share of the catch" to sustain their survival. Ishmael once said, "If we had a lucky voyage, might pretty nearly pay for the clothing I would wear out on it". [8] The workers' autonomy in labor is stripped away, and the "real, sensuous object" disappears, leaving them unable to affirm their subjectivity.[11]

It is evident that under capitalist production relations, human labor has been transformed from autonomy to compulsion. Marx pointed out that workers' labor "is not voluntary but coerced; it is forced labor".[11] In the capitalist mode of production, the subject-object relationship between humans and labor products is inverted, with labor products becoming dominant and humans reduced to their appendages. Whale products are high-value labor products. For example, whale oil "was used in the production of soap, textiles, leather, paints, and varnishes, and it lubricated the tools and machines that drove the Industrial Revolution"; Spermaceti, "the waxy substance from the heads of sperm whales, produced the brightest- and cleanest-burning candles the world has ever known"; ambergris "a by-product of irritation in a sperm whale's bowel, gave perfumes great staying power and was worth its weight in gold". [16] This high-value labor product provided workers with "lay", which was crucial for their livelihood. To obtain this share, workers were forced into the continuous hunting of whales. This behavior

exemplified the alienation of human labor, as despite possessing subjectivity, humans were compelled by the capitalist economic system to rely on whale hunting as the sole means of securing survival resources. Only by continuously hunting whales could the production of whale products continue, and workers could obtain their share to sustain their lives. This vicious cycle deeply reveals the essence of labor alienation under the capitalist system, where humans, in their pursuit of survival, gradually become tools controlled by labor products.

The alienation of labor brought about by capitalist development has caused humanity to lose sight of the pursuit of self-worth in the struggle for survival. In *Moby-Dick*, the Nantucket people transition from early fishing activities to the rise of the whaling industry, where workers are forced to hunt whales to obtain “wages”, illustrating how alienated labor subverts humanity’s subjectivity. Labor should be an active practice through which humans realize themselves and explore the world, yet it has now become a shackle of survival. To break this dilemma, it may be necessary to re-examine capitalist production relations, reconnect labor with human value, and restore labor to its original purpose of affirming human agency, enabling humans to escape the fate of being enslaved by the products of labor and once again become the masters of labor.

5. Conclusion

A re-reading of *Moby-Dick* reveals that, at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century, Melville had already begun to explore the concept of human subjectivity. By tracing the origins of human subjectivity, he exposed the issue of alienation in labor and warned humanity to prioritize the relationship between subject and object in labor. “And I only am escaped alone to tell thee”, Ismael’s “escape” at the end of the story vividly illustrates humanity’s helplessness and passivity in the face of nature, once again revealing that humanity cannot be the center of nature; while “to bring you the news” indicates that Ismael can recognize, write, and recount the whaling story, reflecting humanity’s subjectivity in understanding the object. “Thee” refers to the reader, and the content is Melville’s letter of encouragement, reflection, and warning to all humanity that ecological destruction should not be attributed to “anthropocentrism”, but rather that humanity must grasp its subjectivity. Because the relationship between humans and nature is one of subject and object, only humans can play a subject role. At the same time, humanity should examine alienated labor and reflect on capitalist production relations. Thus, amidst the pessimistic reflection that often attributes ecological issues to “anthropocentrism”, *Moby-Dick* holds significant contemporary relevance in reclaiming humanity’s subjectivity. Natural Science Foundation.

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