

Exploring Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* through the lens of Blue Humanities

Ann Maria G Palliyan

MA Student, Kristu Jayanti College (Autonomous), Bengaluru

Email id: annmariapalliyan@gmail.com.

Abstract

This research paper analyses the significance of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* within the context of the Blue Humanities, a field that incorporates the cultural, historical, and ecological dimensions of the ocean. Text portrays ocean as divine intervention and destructive force in several domain's. *Moby-Dick* critiques humanity's desire to dominate nature, symbolised by Captain Ahab's obsessive hunt for the whale, and highlights the consequences of exploiting the natural world. The ocean provides economic opportunities and inspires awe, symbolising nature's abundance and mystery. However, it also incorporates danger and chaos, as seen in violent storms and Ahab's self-destructive obsession with Moby Dick. This duality portrays humanity's fraught relationship with the marine world both reliant on and threatened by it challenging human attempts to dominate nature while emphasising its untamed power. The analysis portrays the contemporary concerns in environmental implications of how we relate with the ocean, suggesting that their themes of human vulnerability, respect for nature, and the limits of control remain highly relevant discussions about the ocean and ecological sustainability.

Keywords: Ecological sustainability, Divine intervention, Environmental implications, Human vulnerability

Introduction

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* is a foundational text for "Blue Humanities", a field that explores human bond with oceans, water, and the broader aquatic world. Through Ishmael's narration, the novel represents the ocean as an immensely complex force that both shapes and resists human understanding, capturing how it fascinates, terrifies, and transforms those who attempt to confront it. The analysis explores how Melville's portrayal of the ocean aligns with blue humanities themes, which focuses on key quotes that highlight humanity's smallness before the vastness of the ocean, the allure of the unknown, the paradox of interconnectedness and isolation at sea, and the consequences of humanity's hubris in seeking to control nature. Humanity's search for solace in the Ocean's Depths serves as a mirror for Ishmael's inner life and existential struggles, which represents both a sanctuary and a gap for contemplation. In Chapter 1 of the novel, Ishmael confesses, "Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul... I quietly take to the ship" (Melville 25). This line represents the sea's role as a therapeutic escape from the trials of life, where Ishmael can contemplate his existence and find temporary reprieve from despair.

Objective

The objective of this research paper is to examine how Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* portrays the ocean through the lens of Blue Humanities, focusing on its role as a constructive, destructive, and isolating force. It aims to explore how the sea functions as a space for emotional healing and philosophical reflection, particularly for Ishmael, while also revealing its violent and obsessive pull through Ahab's tragic journey. By analysing selected quotes and themes, the paper highlights Melville's nuanced engagement with the sea, showing how *Moby-Dick* not only reflects 19th-century maritime life but also anticipates contemporary ecological and existential concerns central to Blue Humanities.

Methodology

Moby Dick begins with the narratorial invocation “Call me Ishmael.” The narrator, much like his biblical namesake, lives as an outcast. Amid a story of tribulation, beauty, and madness, the reader is introduced to a number of characters, many of whom have names with religious resonance. The ship’s captain, Ahab, is gradually revealed to Ishmael and his friend as a man slipping into madness. Ahab’s first-mate, recognises this problem too, and is the only one throughout the novel to voice his disapproval of Ahab’s increasingly obsessive behaviour. That whale’s name is Moby Dick. The *Pequod* sets sail, and the crew is soon informed that this journey will be unlike their other whaling missions: this time, despite the reluctance of Starbuck, Ahab intends to hunt and kill the beastly Moby Dick no matter the cost. In the blue humanities, water is often associated with introspection and self renewal, as the vastness and openness of the ocean invite meditative thoughts (Gillis 23). For Ishmael, boarding a ship and facing the unknown becomes a means of managing internal turmoil, positioning the sea as a powerful remedy that lets individuals shed their worldly concerns. Ishmael’s urge to take to the ship suggesting that the ocean, in its depth and vastness, offers something that human society cannot, a kind of catharsis, a vast space to release one’s troubles into something larger and infinitely more complex than the self. The connection between water and meditation, Ishmael notes, is almost universal, suggesting that the sea’s mysterious draw has the power to stir contemplation in all who come near it.

It is not merely a place of comfort but a setting fraught with perils and mysteries which is beyond human understanding. In Chapter 44, Ishmael observes ocean, it is portrayed as deceptively beautiful yet lethal, a area that invites exploration but warns against assuming mastery. The Blue Humanities engages the ocean as a space or medium which is resistant to human understanding and control, where nature operates according to its own rules. The above quote encapsulates the Blue Humanities perspective that the ocean’s depths, filled with “unapparent” forces and creatures, which symbolises the limits and outcomes of human perception and the dangers of underestimating the natural world. Melville warns that beauty and peril often coexist in nature, underscoring the importance of humility when encountering the unknown. Isolation and Interconnectedness on the Open Sea portrays a vital role in the blue humanities also consider how the sea created and exhibited both as isolation and community. Aboard the *Pequod*, the mutual dependence creates a bond between the diverse crew members, yet they face isolation on the vast and indifferent sea. In Chapter 12, Ishmael muses, “It is not down on any map; true places never are” (Melville 86), which suggests that the ocean represents a liminal space outside conventional definitions, where connections between people emerge in unexpected ways. The *Pequod* is a microcosm of human society, filled with people from varied backgrounds are united in their journey, moreover isolated by the surrounding ocean’s enormity. This sort of duality mirrors the experiences of life, in which individuals are simultaneously isolated in their consciousness yet connected by sharing every minute struggles. The ocean as a “true place” which suggests space beyond human boundaries, a realm of raw existence where social structures become insignificant. The blue humanities emphasises on the paradox of interconnectedness and isolation that the sea fosters, as individuals must rely on one another for the survival which they are facing during the ultimate isolation of being small, fragile beings in a vast, indifferent ocean.

The Consequences of Humanity’s Hubris in Dominating Nature, Ahab’s obsession with Moby Dick exemplifies humanity’s dangerous impulse to conquer and control the natural world. His vendetta against the whale is more than a personal grudge; it’s a reflection of humanity’s tendency to project inner fears onto nature, seeking to dominate what resists control. In Chapter 41, Ishmael explains, “All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things... all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick” (Melville 233). Ahab’s pursuit of the whale, driven by his projection of “all evil” onto the creature, symbolises humanity’s destructive relationship with nature. Rather than recognising Moby Dick as a being that defies categorisation, Ahab tries to make it “assailable,” turning the ocean into a battleground for his grievances. The blue humanities critique such attempts to dominate nature,

viewing them as symptomatic of human hubris. Ahab's quest reveals the catastrophic consequences of this mind-set, as his refusal to see the whale as a natural force beyond his control ultimately leads to the Pequod's destruction. This theme of hubris demonstrates the danger in attempting to impose human will on the natural world, as the ocean, an autonomous and untameable force—responds to such acts of aggression with its own form of retribution.

The Ocean as a Space of Ultimate Mystery and Unmappable Depth , Melville portrays the ocean as a boundless mystery that defies human efforts to fully understand or control it. In Chapter 93, Ishmael reflects, the meditation occurs as he realises that the ocean, and life itself, resists being reduced to simple, material terms. Ishmael's observation acknowledges the ocean as a place where the boundaries between the physical and metaphysical blur, symbolising the limits of human comprehension. The blue humanities often interpret the ocean as a metaphor for infinity, a realm that forces humanity to confront its own existential questions. Ishmael's assertion that all materials are immaterial underscores the notion that our understanding of life remains incomplete without acknowledging the intangible mysteries that water represents. The ocean serves as a reminder that true knowledge may lie in the acceptance of the unknown, a principle that challenges humanity to respect nature's vastness rather than attempting to contain or simplify it. "Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can." (Melville 25) . The above passage from Chapter 1 of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael portrays his views on why he feels the need to go to sea. He describes times when he feels gloomy, restless, and fed up with life on land. His different moods, which he calls a "damp, drizzly November in my soul," cite reflects feelings of depression and frustration. He mentions that when these emotions take over, he notices death everywhere—through images like "coffin warehouses" and funerals. He even jokes about being so irritated that he wants to knock people's hats off, which shows his need to escape before his emotions get the better of him. For Ishmael, the sea turns into a solution to this inner turmoil. Which offers him a chance to reset, clear his mind, and find stability. The ocean, with its vastness and mystery, helps Ishmael step back from the stresses of everyday life and gain perspective. Unlike the restrictions of society placed on land, the sea feels free, open, and full of possibilities. It gives him a path to reflect on life without the constant reminders of death and monotony. This passage also shows that how Ishmael isn't alone in his feelings. He suggests that many people feeling which they are drawn to water when they're sad or restless, finding comfort in nature's power and beauty. The ocean, in two senses, acts as a physical escape and an emotional refuge. Ishmael's decision to go to sea isn't just about adventure; it's about healing and searching for meaning in the face of life's challenges. Through this, Melville highlights the ocean as a place that can both calm and inspire people in different perspectives, a theme that runs throughout the novel.

"But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask!"(Melville 209). From the above lines of *Moby-Dick*, Captain Ahab delivers a powerful and philosophical speech during the pivotal scene where he reveals his obsession with killing Moby Dick, the white whale. Here, Ahab puts forward his frustration with the limits of human understanding and his belief that there is a deeper, hidden force behind the events of life. He sees the world like having a surface which is "mask" that hides its true meaning. For Ahab, this mask is the representation of the outer appearances of things, which seem random or senseless but might be driven by some unknown but reasoning thing. Ahab believes that life's events are not entirely full of chaos but are shaped by a force or will that humans cannot see or fully understand. He feels trapped by this veil of mystery, which is unable to grasp the truth behind it. In the phrase, "If man will strike, strike through the mask," Ahab urges action. He believes humans should not accept the surface of things at face value but must confront the deeper reality which lies behind them. In case of Ahab, striking through the mask means pushing beyond appearances challenging the unseen forces that he believes control his fate. The idea ties directly

to Ahab's obsession with Moby Dick. To Ahab, the whale is more than a creature it is the embodiment of the mysterious, incomprehensible power that he feels rules the world. Ahab views the whale as an enemy, who is symbol of all the forces which limit human freedom and understanding. By killing Moby Dick, Ahab hopes to strike through the mask of the universe itself and confront the hidden truth behind his suffering. However, this mind-set reveals Ahab's tragic flaw. His belief in a rational force behind the "unreasoning mask" of the world reflects his refusal to accept life's unpredictability and chaos. Ahab's obsession blinds him to the possibility that not everything has a reason or deeper meaning. His determination to attack the whale turns into a symbol of humanity's struggle with nature and the unknown, but it also shows how destructive such obsession can be. This passage is central to the novel's exploration different existential themes. It reflects humanity's deep desire to understand the universe and also find meaning in life. At the same time, it highlights the dangers to impose the control or extract absolute truth from a world that resists full comprehension. Ahab's speech, filled with passion and defiance, captures the tension between the human curiosity and the limits of knowledge, setting the stage for his ultimate downfall.

The connection between water and meditation is also symbolic in *Moby-Dick*. The sea represents a space for exploration—both external and internal. Just as sailors venture into the unknown waters of the ocean, Ishmael uses the sea to explore the unknown aspects of his own mind and soul. Water, then, becomes not just a physical entity in the novel but also a symbol of the deeper mysteries of life and existence that the characters, particularly Ishmael, are trying to understand. Ultimately, this line emphasizes the profound relationship between water and the human mind. The sea offers more than just a physical escape; it provides an environment where deep reflection and meditation can occur. For Ishmael, this makes the ocean a place of healing and personal growth, where he can grapple with life's big questions and find temporary peace from the worries and complexities of everyday life. The idea of water being wedded to meditation highlights how natural and essential this relationship is, suggesting that the presence of water brings clarity and insight to the mind. In Chapter 35, *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael depicts the peaceful, almost otherworldly life of a whaler on the open sea. He describes this experience as a "sublime uneventfulness," meaning that life on a whaling ship is simple, quiet, and free from the usual distractions and chaos of everyday life. In this environment, you don't hear the usual news from the world, and you're not caught up in the hustle and bustle of society. There are no shocking headlines or sensational stories to distract you, so there is a kind of peacefulness in the absence of all the noise and excitement that typically fills people's lives.

Ishmael contrasts this life on the sea with the everyday world of land-dwellers. On land, people are constantly bombarded with information, whether through newspapers or gossip, and these often create unnecessary stress or excitement. But on the whaling ship, life is free from those distractions. There is no urgent news to worry about, and the rhythms of life on the ship are dictated by the natural world rather than human affairs. The absence of "startling accounts of commonplaces" means that the sailors' attention is focused on the sea and the quiet routine of their work, allowing them to live with a sense of calm and peace that comes from being disconnected from the busy world of civilisation. The whalers live "in the open air" and sleep "on the open deck," which suggests an intimate connection with nature. Instead of being surrounded by walls or artificial comforts, they are exposed to the vast, open sky and ocean. This constant exposure to the elements makes the sailors more in tune with the natural world. There is no separation between the sailors and the world around them—they are fully immersed in it. Ishmael also notes that, when they sleep, they "see no dream," meaning that they don't have the troubled or restless dreams that come from the pressures and worries of daily life. Instead, they are simply "suffused with the unmanifested in the unknown mightiness of the ocean," meaning that the vastness and mystery of the ocean fill their minds, allowing them to reflect on the ocean's power and their smallness in the grand scheme of things.

On the "HAND OF GOD", The "dark loneliness" portrayed by Ahab's is not just about being alone on the sea. It represents his inner isolation, the detachment from humanity, and his obsessive pursuit of vengeance against Moby Dick. He has closed himself off from the world and from any higher spiritual connection in his relentless drive for revenge. Ahab's obsession with the whale has consumed him to the point that he believes the only way to find meaning in his life is through this personal vendetta. This obsession has led him to a place of emotional and spiritual darkness, where he feels cut off from everything and everyone, including any sense of divine guidance or moral order. This is the "dark loneliness" Ahab speaks of his self-imposed isolation from any larger purpose or connection beyond his need to destroy the whale.

However, the line also introduces the idea that, despite this isolation, there is still the possibility of redemption or intervention. The "Hand of God" symbolises divine power or fate, and it suggests that even in Ahab's darkest moment, there is something beyond him reaching out. This divine hand may represent a chance for Ahab to reconsider his path, to return to a more spiritual or moral path rather than continuing down the road of obsessive vengeance. It may also represent fate itself, reminding Ahab that he is not in control of everything. The universe, or a higher power, still has influence over the events unfolding. Ahab's recognition of this "Hand" implies that, despite his desire to control his own destiny, there are forces beyond his understanding.

This moment of divine intervention also underscores one of the novel's main themes: the tension between human will and divine will, or fate. Throughout the novel, Ahab is portrayed as a man who believes he can bend the world to his will. He sees himself as a figure capable of challenging nature, fate, and even God. His quest to kill Moby Dick is not just about revenge against the whale, but about asserting his power over the natural world and defying whatever forces might try to control his life. The "Hand of God" reaching out in this moment serves as a reminder that no matter how much Ahab may try to control everything, there are forces beyond him that cannot be ignored. It is a moment of confrontation between Ahab's desire for absolute control and the reality that he is still subject to the larger, uncontrollable forces of the universe. Despite this potential for divine intervention, Ahab's response to the "Hand of God" is telling. Rather than embracing the possibility of redemption or guidance, he continues to focus solely on his quest for vengeance. His obsession with Moby Dick blinds him to the higher meaning or purpose that could be offered to him in this moment. Ahab's inability to accept the "Hand of God" highlights his tragic flaw: his pride and belief that he alone can shape his fate. Throughout the novel, Ahab repeatedly rejects any idea of fate or divine will, instead asserting his belief that he can carve out his own destiny. This defiance of divine power leads him to his downfall, as he continues his pursuit of Moby Dick despite the warnings of his crew and the overwhelming forces of nature.

The "Hand of God" can also be seen as symbolic of the larger mystery of life and the universe. Ahab's insistence on conquering Moby Dick is an attempt to impose order on the chaotic and mysterious world around him. However, this divine hand represents the unknown forces that Ahab cannot control. It speaks to the idea that the universe is larger and more mysterious than Ahab's personal desires, and that there is a greater power at work in the world that cannot be understood or controlled by human beings. The hand reaching out to Ahab serves as a reminder that no matter how much one might strive for control or understanding, there are forces that remain beyond human comprehension. The passage highlights the central conflict in Ahab's character and in the novel as a whole: the struggle between human will and divine or natural forces. Ahab's loneliness represents his emotional and spiritual isolation, while the "Hand of God" suggests that even in his darkest moments, there is the potential for something greater than himself to intervene. However, Ahab's rejection of this divine hand and his continued obsession with Moby Dick demonstrate his inability to accept the larger forces at play in his life. The tension between Ahab's wilful pursuit of vengeance and the mysterious, uncontrollable forces of the universe is one of the key themes in *Moby-Dick*, and this passage captures the moment where Ahab briefly confronts the possibility of divine intervention, only to push it aside in favour of his obsessive quest.

Conclusion

The conclusion of *Moby-Dick*, written by Herman Melville, is a powerful and tragic resolution to the themes of obsession, fate, and the human condition. Captain Ahab's relentless pursuit of the white whale, Moby Dick, has consumed him and driven him to madness throughout the novel. In the final pages, this obsession reaches its destructive climax, illustrating the devastating effects of single-minded vengeance and the inability to control one's destiny. The final confrontation between Ahab and the whale takes place after a prolonged chase across the seas. Ahab's hatred for Moby Dick is his obsession that blinds him to the danger surrounding him. Throughout the novel, Ahab has been portrayed as a symbol of human willpower and determination, but by the end, it is clear that his relentless pursuit of the whale is a form of self-destruction. Ahab's quest represents the dangers of pursuing personal vendettas without regard for the consequences. In the end, the whale, a force of nature beyond human understanding or control, proves to be an unstoppable force, and Ahab's obsessive quest ultimately leads to the annihilation of both the *Pequod* and its crew. The novel's tragic conclusion

also highlights the theme of fate and the insignificance of human life in the grand scope of the universe. The symbolic imagery throughout the conclusion emphasises the novel's key themes. The image of Ahab's death, entangled in the ropes of his own ship, and the destruction of the *Pequod* reflect the novel's pessimistic view of human efforts to master nature. Ahab's death, caused by his own obsession, serves as a cautionary tale about the destructive nature of unchecked ambition. The *Pequod*, once a symbol of human achievement and enterprise, is ultimately destroyed, symbolising the ultimate futility of human endeavours when they come into conflict with the overwhelming power of nature. The ocean, ever-present throughout the novel, serves as a metaphor for the vast, uncontrollable forces of the world. The novel leaves unanswered questions about the nature of existence, fate, and the possibility of human understanding in a world governed by forces beyond our comprehension. Ultimately, the ending of *Moby-Dick* is a meditation on the limits of human understanding and control. Ahab's tragic end, the destruction of the *Pequod*, and Ishmael's solitary survival all serve to reinforce the novel's central themes: the danger of obsession, the inevitability of fate, and the fragility of human life in the face of nature's vastness. The conclusion offers a powerful and sombre reflection on the consequences of humanity's attempts to master the unknown, leaving readers with a sense of awe at the universe's indifference and the destructive nature of unchecked ambition. Through its tragic ending, *Moby-Dick* challenges readers to reflect on the limits of human ambition and the unpredictable nature of life itself. The final pages of the novel are a stark reminder of the futility of attempting to control forces beyond our understanding and the consequences of letting obsession govern our actions.

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