

# The Comparison Between the "Moby Dick" and "The Old Man and the Sea" From the Perspective of Ecocriticism

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## ABSTRACT

**Ecocriticism focuses on the relationship between literature and natural environment and advocates the application of ecological concepts in literary research and the reading and criticism of literary works from the perspective of ecology. Ecocriticism takes the overall interests of the ecosystem as the highest value, opposing anthropocentrism, and holds that human and nature are equal, and that human is the son of nature and a part of nature. Through the lens of ecological criticism, this article briefly introduces the ecological criticism of positive thinking, reverse thinking and the significance of ecological criticism and analyses the protagonists in "Moby Dick" and "The Old Man and the Sea" symbolizing disparate anthropocentrism to help people better understand the two works, so that people can get rid of the values of anthropocentrism, at the meanwhile, set up the right values.**

**Keywords:** *ecocriticism, anthropocentrism, "The Old Man and the Sea", "Moby Dick"*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Ecocriticism, which lays emphasis on the relationship between human and nature, refers to an ideological product that integrates literature with ecological ideas. It holds that the whole environment of the ecosystem is the highest value, and human beings and nature are mutually equal, so the idea of anthropocentrism is strongly opposed. In literary works, ecocriticism is mainly presented in the form of criticism, criticizing human's destruction of the natural environment and playing the role of alerting the world with the help of nature's punishment of human behavior. The studies of "Moby Dick" and "The Old Man and the Sea" based on ecological criticism have important literary value and social significance, which can profoundly reveal the ecological crisis caused by human destruction of nature, awaken the ecological consciousness of human society, enlighten people to build an ideal social environment for human society to live in harmony with the natural environment.

## II. A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF ECOCRITICISM

### A. Positive thinking of ecocriticism

Ecological problem is an important problem in the development of the world at present, and it has become a hot topic in various social disciplines. As an important part of literary criticism, ecocriticism mainly refers to the "people-centered" way of thinking and the paradox

of "anthropocentrism", while ecocriticism in literature mainly aims at the opposition and criticism of "people-centered" and "anthropocentrism". It can be found that when analyzing the formation stage and development process of ecocriticism, a substantial number of scholars in literary mainly adopts the mode of positive thinking, respect the principle and requirements of aesthetics of literature in the process of ecological criticism, apply literary aesthetics as a starting point, subsequently undertaking ecological concept and the expression of ecological criticism, however, not all the works conveying positive thinking of ecocriticism have the deep meaning of ecological criticism, among which they are merely an expression of the author's own feelings towards the natural environment. For example, in the artistic value of the novel "The Old Man and the Sea", the fight between the old man Santiago and the shark illustrates the toughness and tenacity of human beings as well as the humanistic spirit in difficulties. Therefore, based on the positive thinking analysis of ecological criticism, the characters in the novel "The Old Man and the Sea" are successful and profound.

### B. Reverse thinking of ecocriticism

On the contrary to positive thinking of ecocriticism, the reverse thinking of ecocriticism is a kind of thinking mode with the nature of seeking for differences which mainly refers to the reverse discussion of things or opinions expressed by the ecocriticism and is an innovative development of traditional and conventional cognition. For example, "Moby Dick" and "The Old

"Man and the Sea" reflect the reverse thinking mode of ecocriticism, what's more, thought the lens of ecocriticism, the characters and themes of the novel are endowed with new connotations and ways of expression. As can be seen the analysis of the man and the natural environment in "The Old Man and the Sea" reveals that the author's creative gist is based on the idea of "people-oriented", so the description of marlin in the novel is "sublime", whereas in the novel "Moby Dick" more profoundly embodies the idea of "human center", an expression of the non-confrontational relationship between man and nature. In the process of fighting against the white whale, Captain Ahab reveals the biased understanding of the relationship between man and nature during which the reader understand the human should respect the development law of nature while reap the benefits of nature.

### *C. The significance of ecocriticism*

Ecocriticism mainly focuses on the relationship between literature and the natural environment, advocates the study and interpretation of literary texts with ecological concepts and knowledge, and emphasizes that the text should be interpreted and analyzed from the ecological perspective instead of the traditional perspective. Currently, ecocriticism is understood as a criticism of the nature in the field of literature. The most important role of ecocriticism is to reproduce the important status of the theme of nature in the literary world, and to warn the human under the industrial civilization, arousing people's numb ecological consciousness. With the progress and development of social productive forces, the human society under the industrial civilization commands an extremely strong desire to possess and conquer the nature, and constantly exploits and destroys the natural environment, resulting in the opposition between human society and the natural environment. For example, through the novel "Moby Dick", human become deeply aware of the serious consequences brought by human destruction of nature and the severe harm of anthropocentrism. The novels "Moby Dick" and "The Old Man and the Sea" are both ecocriticism with the tragic ending, which are classic works signaling the ecological thought of people by virtue of the anti-ecology and anti-nature ending in the novels. With the help of the important role and positive significance of ecological criticism, the author reminds human beings to respect and care for nature, eliminating the state of opposition to the natural environment, and avoiding being punished for excessive aggression against the natural environment.

## **III. ANALYSIS OF "MOBY DICK" AND "THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA" FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ECOCRITICISM**

### *A. Analysis of Santiago*

Ecocriticism mainly discusses and examines the relationship between man and nature in literary works, including the physical and spiritual influences of nature on human society, as well as human criticism of the destruction of nature. "The Old Man and the Sea", Ernest Hemingway's masterpiece, is a literary work about fishermen and the sea which is also a classic of ecocriticism. The novel tells the story of an old fisherman, Santiago, who went out fishing gainlessly for eighty-four days in a row but he did not lose heart and went on to sea. On the eighty-fifth day the old man finally caught a rare big marlin, but was attacked by a swarm of sharks on the way back, and finally arrived at the shore with only a skeleton left. Based on ecocriticism, the character image of Santiago is more of a tragic hero with sad and helplessness. Because Santiago's behavior is contrary to the nature, the final result of Santiago is not to win and make profits. In this novel, the image of Santiago represents human beings, while marlin and shark are the images of nature and avengers respectively. When Santiago kills marlin in order to gain profits, it is also a scene where human beings rely on various means to conquer nature, and the appearance of sharks is more of an avenger image of nature. It is also the existence of sharks that makes old Santiago highly unlikely to obtain profits through marlin. The failure of old Santiago has a certain inevitability. In light of the perspective of ecocriticism, in the process of destroying and conquering nature, human beings actually break away from the natural environment and are bound to receive the punishment from nature.

### *B. Analysis of Captain Ahab*

The writer of "Moby Dick", Melville, is a representative writer of romantic literature in the American literary. The list of works on the subject of the sea are numerous in his career. The creation of "Moby Dick" is closely related to his voyages which mainly tells the story of Ahab, Captain of the Pequod, who had his leg bitten off by a white whale named Moby Dick. In revenge, Ahab summoned his crew to hunt down and kill the white whale. In the end, the man and the whale were killed in three days of battle. In the novel, Captain Ahab killed white whales for economic benefits, so the whaling industry was full of blood and excitement of the lucrative business. With more than 40 years of whaling experience, Captain Ahab embodied the heroic qualities of tenacity, perseverance, courage and confidence. Captain Ahab's last voyage to sea was a journey of revenge. In order to hunt down the white whale that swallowed his leg, Captain Ahab's journey

of revenge was also a process of provocation and conquest by human beings against nature. He regarded the sea as the object he conquered and controlled, and proved the paradox of "man can conquer nature" at the cost of the lives of all the people on the ship. In the end, all the people except Marley died in the sea after three days of fighting. Captain Ahab's anthropocentrism led to a tragic end for himself and his crew, which was also the inevitable result of man's attempt to conquer nature and disregard the law of natural development.

#### **IV. SIMILARITIES BETWEEN "MOBY DICK" AND "THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA" BASED ON ECOLOGICAL CRITICISM**

##### *A. The same tragic ending*

In "Moby Dick" and "The Old Man and the Sea", both Santiago and Captain Ahab are fail to challenge nature according to their endings. In the novel, "The Old Man and the Sea", Santiago only brought back a set of bones after a fierce fight with a shark. As a fisherman, this was a failure without doubt. In "Moby Dick", captain Ahab was buried at sea, a failure as well. These two protagonists share the same tragic ending and the same characteristics in the images, namely the spirit of indomitable courage and never giving up. Santiago in "The Old Man and the Sea" demonstrates his indomitable spirit in the process of fighting with marlin and shark, and knows that he cannot defeat the shark, but still endures the pain fighting with the shark. This behavior represents the powerful spiritual power of man in his conquest of nature. The same is true of Captain Ahab in the novel Moby- Dick, who is a strong and brave symbol of human image, but also ends in tragedy in the final episode of the novel. Santiago ends up with only the bones of the marlin pulled back after being seriously injured, and Captain Ahab ends up dead at sea.

##### *B. The same causes of the tragedy*

From the perspective of ecocriticism, it can be found that from the failure and tragic ending of Captain Ahab and the old man Santiago, this is the punishment of humanity's provocation to nature. When the old man Santiago fights with the shark, he maintains that he should not go out to sea so far, which implies that the human has left the field of his life and invaded the field that does not belong to him. Therefore, the final result can only be failure. So old Santiago catches the Mighty Marlin, which seems to be a temporary success, but Marlin is eventually eaten by a school of sharks and the old man almost dies. Santiago's anthropocentrism hoped that the great marlin would bring benefits to human beings, and this anthropocentrism results in its final defeat. In the novel "Moby Dick", Captain Ahab challenges the authority of nature for his own personal enmity. This kind of anthropocentrism thought is the

root cause of the tragedy. Therefore, from the perspective of ecocriticism, the failure of Captain Ahab in "Moby Dick" and Santiago in "The Old Man and the Sea" are both due to the anthropocentrism, which reminds people that they should not be antagonistic to the nature.

#### **V. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN "MOBY DICK" AND "THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA" BASED ON ECOLOGICAL CRITICISM**

##### *A. Anthropocentrism in "Moby Dick"*

In the face of nature, human beings are crazy to squeeze, like a conqueror. Human beings firmly believes that they are the highest species above nature. At the same time, whaling further promoted the discovery and colonization of the New World due to the whaling ships' voyages. The whaler, whose footprints are found in almost every uninhabited corner of the earth, has discovered vast unknown seas and islands, and the whaler has become the early developer and pathfinder.

The novel's "Avenger", Captain Ahab, makes an ineffectual first appearance. "He was standing on deck so fiercely and seriously that I was reminded of a bronze statue that was tall and wide of form. That scar reminded me of a line one can see in a great tree that has been struck and marked by lightning. One of Captain's Ahab's legs was made of ivory, the ivory of the smooth bone of a whale's jaw." The heroic yet bitter Captain Ahab takes a grudge against Moby Dick the white whale as an enemy, an animal that harms men and ships. His spirit was as strong, extreme, and mad as he looked. One of his legs was bitten off by a white whale, but in the business of whaling, the risks and benefits coexisted, and every whaler was in danger of physical injury or even death. Captain Ahab had a wealth of professional knowledge of whaling, and the field he could excel was inviolable domain of Moby Dick. What he had suffered was only instinct of Moby Dick for self-defense. Nevertheless, Captain Ahab didn't reflect on why Moby Dick attacked humans, nor on the misconduct which he and his fishing boats had plundered at sea. In addition, he could not bear the shame brought upon him by Moby Dick. With a mad sense of revenge, he was like a rough ruler of the sea, contemptuously calling the white whale a white ghost, a white squid, and his stool was made of whale bones, which were visible in the ship's daily utensils. All these reflect man's invasion and destruction of nature. In the final battle of life and death, Ahab chased Moby Dick. His mate persuaded him "Oh, my captain! my captain! Noble soul! Grand old heart, after all! why should anyone give chase to that hated fish. Let us home!" But Captain Ahab ignored this, and directed all his resentment against the white whale as the embodiment

of all malevolent powers, and this hatred of the white whale made him moody and irritable, and a paranoid man bent on revenge. Hiding their motives and intentions from the crew in the killing of Moby Dick even at the cost of the lives of the entire crew, this selfish and brutal behavior thoroughly demonstrated the ugly behavior of human beings under the influence of self-interest. In terms of the ecological perspective, human centralism of Captain Ahab manifests more contemptuous of the nature which is the typical representative of anthropocentrism, profoundly reflecting the idea of "human center". The bias of the relationship between man and nature in cognition is revealed that human beings should respect the development law of nature while pursuing interests. The beluga whale's painful struggle in the novel is appalling and distressing. There is no doubt that it is an atrocity that human beings destroy the natural environment to meet their own needs.

#### *B. The humanistic thought in "The Old Man and the Sea"*

The discrepancy between Santiago and Captain Ahab's anthropocentrism is that Santiago is in a contradictory state. Santiago is not depicted as a man struggling to conquer nature, but shaped as strong and undefeated spirit through his wrestle with marlin and sharks, which reflect the old man's awe for the natural environment and life.

First of all, in the novel "The Old Man and the Sea", sea was credited with "Lamar (in Spanish). In the eyes of the old man, Sea liked a selfless dedication of the female, "But the old man always thought of her as feminine and as something that gave or withheld great favor, and if she did wild or wicked things it was because she could not help them." The old fisherman understood and forgave her. He deeply loved, pitied, and respected all that lived in the sea, including small seabirds, turtles, flying fish, dolphins, giant marlins, and even sharks. The old man also felt pity for the helpless little seabirds that, delicate and weak, flew and foraged across the vast ocean, all of which can see the harmony and intimacy between "The Old Man and the Sea". Second, Santiago was a fisherman, a man who lived by the sea. For one thing, the sea provided people with a plentiful source of food. The flying fish were the old man's good friend and his chief food during his fishing trips. He measured the giant marlin by the standards of human interest, asserted that he could provide food for ma that is "enough to sustain a man through the winter." The sea, on the other hand, satisfied man's desire for material things. This rare giant marlin would bring him economic benefits "at the highest price in the market," even though he was covered in scars, Santiago would have to fight to the death with the big fish, to possess it, to conquer it. The expansion of desire killed the soul and the good nature

of man. In addition, the fish was a powerful proof of Santiago's identity. He was a lonely, solitary old fisherman, who had been fishing for eighty-four days in a row without getting anything. Some sympathized with him, others made fun of him. Even though the old man was optimistic by nature, he could hardly hide his disappointment. On the eighty-fifth day, he was determined to kill the huge marlin to prove his dignity. In the process of killing the big marlin, Santiago showed the arrogant heart of human trying to conquer nature. At this time, those beautiful emotions had been replaced by his strong possessive desire. His hunting and killing of marlin symbolized the ruthless plunder of nature by human beings. Finally, on the way back, Santiago was attacked by a swarm of sharks, which was the climax of the novel. The shark had eaten up the great marlin he had fought so hard for, leaving only a huge skeleton. The shark here stood for the punishment of nature. Even if he conquered the great marlin, the gains was destroyed by nature. It can be concluded that the gains are made by nature and lost by nature. The end of the novel, Santiago speculated on a boat and was well aware that their invasion of nature would be punished, " The shark was not an accident.", because " he had come up from deep down in the water", meaning that human is entering beyond the areas of their life, and invasion to the deep sea area does not belong to you. Santiago is an image full of awe and love for the nature, but challenging the authority of nature for the sake of livelihood. As a part of the ecosystem, human beings have the same status as other creatures in the nature. Therefore, the thought of "The Old Man and the Sea" subverts the traditional anthropocentrism and different from the anthropocentrism of Captain Ahab in "Moby Dick".

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

Both "The Old Man and the Sea" and "Moby Dick" successfully use the ideological role of literature to reflect the attitude and thought of ecocriticism, which is of great social value and literary significance. "The Old Man and the Sea" and "Moby Dick" use their literary discourse power and the way of reverse thinking to turn from praising to criticizing the characters in the novels, which not only encourage the readers but also alert them to a certain extent. In terms of natural ecology, in "The Old Man and the Sea", the old man loves the sea and the sea gives him expectation and strength. But in "Moby Dick", Ahab tries to kill the whale and conquer nature. Through the sharp contrast between the two books and the analysis of the hero's attitude towards life and nature, it can be seen that the natural ecology reflected in "The Old Man and the Sea" is in harmony on the whole whereas these are not harmonious in the "Moby Dick", so the ship sank, the crew ended in tragedy. The studies of "Moby Dick" and "The Old Man and the Sea" based on ecocriticism can fully reveal

the serious consequences caused by human's conquest and destruction of nature, and warn human society to abandon anthropocentrism, respect and care for the natural environment, and live in harmony with the natural environment. Therefore, human beings should maintain a heart of reverence for nature, establish a sense of respecting and protecting nature. If man were to retaliate against every attack on nature, he would be doomed to self-destruction, with disastrous consequences like Ahab.

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