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The Blurred Line between Good and Evil in *Moby-Dick* and Post-WWII Cinema: How John Huston Read Melville for his Movie Adaptation

La difusa línea entre el bien y el mal en *Moby Dick* y en el cine posterior a la Segunda Guerra Mundial: cómo John Huston interpretó la novela de Melville en su adaptación cinematográfica

UNAI IZQUIERDO BERASALUCE
Institution address: UNED. Depto. de Filologías Extranjeras. Facultad de Filología. Paseo Senda del Rey 7. 28040 Madrid, Spain.
E-mail: uizquierdo@flog.uned.es
ORCID: 0000-0002-6159-4805
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Abstract: John Huston found ambiguity between good and evil in Melville's *Moby-Dick*, which he represented in his 1956 movie adaptation. Hans Robert Jauss' reception theory complements this analysis of both works through the reactions of their audiences. *Moby-Dick* is analyzed together with its adaptation, considering the work as a fluid text, to offer a deeper perspective on its ambiguity between good and evil. While the novel responds to Transcendentalism's enthusiastic view of nature and its search for essential truths, Huston's adaptation reflects how post-WWII cinema was influenced by the conflict and the consequent difficulties in separating good and evil in humans, who were seen as capable of both sublime noble acts and devastating evil.
Keywords: *Moby-Dick*; Herman Melville; John Huston; ambiguity; good and evil.

Resumen: John Huston apreció ambigüedad en la representación del bien y el mal en Moby Dick, de Melville, y la trasladó a su adaptación cinematográfica de 1956. La estética de la recepción de

Hans Robert Jauss complementa este análisis de ambas obras con la reacción de sus respectivos públicos. Se analiza a *Moby-Dick* junto con su adaptación, considerando la obra como un texto fluido, para ofrecer una perspectiva más profunda sobre su ambigüedad entre el bien y el mal. Mientras que la novela responde a la visión entusiasta de la naturaleza del transcendentalismo y a su búsqueda de verdades esenciales, la adaptación de Huston refleja cómo el cine posterior a la Segunda Guerra Mundial recibió la influencia del conflicto y las consiguientes dificultades para separar el bien y el mal en el ser humano, al que se consideraba capaz tanto de sublimes actos nobles como de un mal devastador.
Palabras clave: *Moby Dick*; Herman Melville; John Huston; ambigüedad; el bien y el mal.

1. INTRODUCTION: GOOD AND EVIL IN POST-WWI CINEMA AND HERMAN MELVILLE'S *MOBY-DICK*

This paper examines the nuanced portrayal of good and evil in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* and John Huston's 1956 movie adaptation through reception theory, specifically Hans Robert Jauss' concept of the horizon of expectations. Analyzing these works within nineteenth-century Transcendentalism and the Cold War, this study highlights how their ambivalence toward good and evil is articulated and understood in relation to these distinct historical contexts.

A deeper understanding of *Moby-Dick*'s well-known ambiguity regarding good and evil benefits from considering the text as a fluid entity that encompasses its various versions, including extra-authorial adaptations. In Melville studies, the concept of the fluid text, as articulated by John Bryant, acknowledges that *Moby-Dick* exists in multiple sequential versions, evolving from the original writer to revisionary writers and adaptors ("Wound" 202). Linda Hutcheon further validates the critical legitimacy of adaptations, describing them as "interpretive creations" and a form of "cultural revision" that extends the originating author's fluid text (171).

From a fluid text perspective, adaptation represents a way to reshape narratives in response to changing historical contexts. John Huston's *Moby Dick*, as an adaptation, engages in an aesthetic pattern that reacted to the troubled post-WWII years by generating a film production focused upon the fragile barrier that separated good and evil at that time. Similarly, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* avoids a univocal interpretation of good

and evil's embodiment. Melville responded to Transcendentalism, championed by Ralph Waldo Emerson, which advocated for a rejuvenated American culture rooted in the nation's awe-inspiring landscapes. Unlike Emerson, Melville recognized the perils of nature and lacked optimism in humanity's inherent goodness or its capacity to attain knowledge solely through direct experience (Gray 97).

The deep and ambiguous reflection on good and evil in *Moby-Dick* interlaces with the Cold War context surrounding John Huston's 1956 adaptation. Building upon Hutcheon's positions, this adaptation serves as a cultural revision that explores the complexities of Melville's fluid text, in which Huston found a suitable material to reflect the distorted line between good and evil in the post-WWII era.

How Huston, as a reader, understood the novel after the outcome of WWII is essential to exploring his representation of good and evil in the film, as is the reception of *Moby-Dick* in Melville's time, which sheds light on his intentional ambiguity regarding morality and human capabilities. Given the importance of context in studying the portrayal of good and evil in *Moby-Dick*'s fluid text, Hans Robert Jauss' reception theory supports the discussion in this paper.

Reception theory is particularly well-suited for studying a text as a fluid entity because, for Jauss, texts are dynamic units the appreciation and ideas of which fluctuate over time. The set of ideas, assumptions, and social behaviors prevalent during Melville's and Huston's eras constitutes what reception theory defines as the "horizon of expectations," elucidated by Jauss in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (1982). The task of the critic is to analyze the text and its reception context to determine the balance between the readership's expectations and their fulfillment in the text.

When a text fails to meet readers' expectations, it can lead to frustration but also prompt a shift in the readership's horizon within a specific historical moment. Jauss considers this transformative capacity of the reception process to be a crucial part of the literary work's emancipatory function. Reception theory reconstructs the reception context of each work to uncover its emancipatory potential. The ensuing analysis also examines whether the ambiguous portrayal of good and evil adheres to or diverges from prevailing aesthetic norms or ideologies during the release of Melville's novel and Huston's film adaptation.

2. An Inseparable Mixture of Good and Evil: The Inscrutable White Whale and the Adaptation of *Moby-Dick* as a Blasphemy

Upon the publication of *Moby-Dick*, Melville confessed to Nathaniel Hawthorne that he had "written a wicked book, and fe[lt] spotless as the lamb" (Niemeyer 37). However, this alleged wickedness must be considered alongside Ishmael's warning against viewing the white whale as "a hideous and intolerable allegory" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 164). This quotation to Ishmael reinforces the critical view contending that Melville avoided a singular interpretation of the novel and its symbols, including the whale, whose meaning is deliberately open to a wide range of interpretations, unlike conventional allegories.

In the nineteenth century, readers were accustomed to the moral teachings of Puritan allegory, which provided a one-to-one correspondence between symbol and meaning. Nathaniel Hawthorne had already begun to subvert this tradition in works like "Young Goodman Brown" (1835) to critique Puritan allegorists, but Melville went further by overturning these clear parallels entirely. This departure sets the stage for understanding how Melville challenged the traditional expectations of nineteenth-century readers about goodness and evil, as explored through Jauss' concept of the horizon of expectations.

The "pure evil" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 151) Moby Dick represents for Ahab is far from absolute in the novel's network of references. Fortunately, Melville provides readers with a rich—albeit ambiguous—background to tease out the text's deep meaning. The section entitled "Extracts" at the beginning of the novel is the first part of this background. It contains a variety of quotations concerning whales, ranging from the Old Testament and Shakespeare to scientific treatises and traditional sources; just as *Moby-Dick* mixes its main plot with an epic atmosphere, chapters influenced by drama, and minor genres like technical manuals or exegesis. "Extracts" anticipates the blending of genres that puzzled the first readers of *Moby-Dick* and would define many modern novels. Jauss emphasizes the importance of the literary genre system, wherein readers engage with a text and assess their horizon of expectations, suggesting that readers tend to displace any element not perceived as typical of the genre.

To reconstruct a work's horizon of expectations, analyzing historical documents reflecting contemporary reactions complements the tradition of a genre. Early critical reviews of *Moby-Dick* include one by the literary magazine *Athenæum* on October 25th, 1851, which claimed that *Moby-*

Dick was "an ill-compounded mixture of romance and matter of fact" and that "the idea of a connected and collected story ha[d] obviously visited and abandoned its writer again and again in the course of composition" (Chorley 581). As follows, on December 6th, 1851, the *Literary Gazette* judged it to be "an odd book, professing to be a novel; wantonly eccentric; outrageously bombastic" (qtd. in Weinstein 209). These initial reactions demonstrate that the novel's structure and heterogeneity widened the aesthetic gap between readers' expectations and what they found, with some even failing to recognize it as a novel.

As confusing as it turned out to be, Melville's intention in both "Extracts" and the entire work is to offer diverse materials whose symbolic meanings readers feel unable to reconcile into a coherent body of signs. "Extracts" serves as the first map to encourage speculation on the novel's meaning, presenting a list of quotations related to whales, with the first five originating from the Bible:

> And God created great whales. (Genesis)
>
> Leviathan maketh a path to shine after him;
> One would think the deep to be hoary. (Job)
>
> Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. (Jonah)
>
> There go the ships; there is that Leviathan whom thou hast made to play therein. (Psalms)
>
> In that day, the Lord with his sore, and great, and strong sword, shall punish Leviathan the piercing serpent, even Leviathan that crooked serpent; and he shall slay the dragon that is in the sea. (Isaiah) (*Moby-Dick* 8).

The quotations referring to Leviathan in Job, Psalms, and Isaiah could connect Moby Dick with evil and death, as Leviathan embodies the dark, destructive forces to which God grants some freedom and which He will ultimately slay to eradicate evil and misfortune, as put forth in Job and Isaiah. Maria Isabel de Sousa contends that Ahab considers himself predestined to remove this malicious force (18), and quotes Ahab wondering if it is God who "does that beating, does that thinking, does that living, and not [Ahab]" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 396). The interpretation of Moby Dick as an evil creature is mainly associated with Ahab's vision of the white whale as a symbol of evil. Ahab is free in his confrontation with

the whale only within God's plans, as Leviathan shall be killed someday, perhaps by Ahab, to rid the world of the monster's evil. Ahab's obsession with the whale torments him, but he feels that his monomania cannot solely originate from within himself.

The generation of Americans reading *Moby-Dick* upon its publication was steeped in Reformed Christianity, which emphasized a divine plan determining all events. This worldview struggled to reconcile worldly evil with the notion of objective justice. As T. Walter Herbert aptly states, Protestant theology provides a major solution to this contradiction: "The ledgers that are so heavily weighted toward injustice in this world will be corrected at the end of time" (97).

For Melville, choosing a tortured and evil character as the instrument of God aligns with his intellectual curiosity about Christian beliefs and his skepticism about humanity's innate goodness. Melville had already expressed disagreement with Ralph Waldo Emerson's trust in humanity and optimistic view of nature. For instance, in *Typee* (1846), the narrator, Tom (an intelligent and enlightened ethnographer), describes the white civilized man as "the most ferocious animal on the face of the earth" (182). Many of Melville's readers would have found it conflicting to see a character like Ahab as the means that God uses to eliminate the evil represented by Leviathan, given their assumption of a just and pious liberator chosen from among humanity.

John Huston supported this interpretation of the fight between Ahab and the white whale, viewing Ahab's pursuit as "an attempt to extinguish the epitome of evil that God allows to exist in the world" (qtd. in Meyers 223), a view shared with Ray Bradbury, the screenwriter of the movie adaptation. The cultural trend arising in the post-WWII era (late 1940s and 1950s) was often considered conformist and conservative, contrasting with the social revolution of the 1960s. But, in *The Romantic Manifesto*, philosopher Ayn Rand argues that Modernism fully took over the United States after a temporal halt during WWII (36). Rand chronicles how the established Romantic school lost ground while Modernism increasingly depicted the depraved and morally corrupted as common subjects in American culture, in lieu of merely artistic idealizations representing the capacity of the individual for heroism and moral good. This perspective adds another layer of complexity to Ahab's apparent evilness, creating a character whose capability for sublime deeds blurs the line between good and evil. After the movie's release, some critics questioned several decisions to adapt the novel, though the production team and subsequent

bibliography on the movie revealed that these changes aimed to apply this central idea to the film, as the audience's readiness to confront the ambiguity between good and evil was more conducive in the context of the movie adaptation compared to the novel's initial reception.

Thus, the shifting horizon of expectations over time brought different receptions of *Moby-Dick* across different mediums. For example, Milton R. Stern notes how faithful Stubb's statement in the Spouter-Inn when he first meets Ishmael is to the novel: "Mind, lad, if God ever wanted to be a fish, he'd be a whale." Yet Stern wonders why the significance of these words is lost in the adaptation, as the movie "is not clear about the Nature of God," and "we cannot know whether Ahab obeys or disobeys whatever God the movie assumes" (473). As Huston himself puts it, despite the clear connection between Moby Dick and God at the beginning of the movie, "[the critics] failed to recognize that [the novel] was a blasphemy," and that, for Huston, "Ahab speaks for Melville, and through him he is raging at the deity" (qtd. in Spengler 145).

For post-WWII filmmakers and viewers, the recent past provided a backdrop of conflicting sides committing atrocities in the name of their causes, with God allowing the existence of evil, which wartime heroes confronted. *Moby-Dick*, as a fluid text, presents ambiguity between good and evil that extends beyond Melville's work; it incorporates cultural revision by other artists interpreting Melville's messages. Huston and Bradbury believed Melville depicted God in the white whale and saw Ahab's actions as blasphemous, and the director preserved many aspects of the novel to show this view. Part of the dialogue between Ahab and Starbuck in Chapter 36, "The Quarter-Deck," is reproduced almost verbatim. Starbuck rebukes the captain for his rage against "a dumb thing," which "seems blasphemous" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 133). Starbuck's judgment supports Huston's interpretation of the story, which he defines as "a blasphemy, . . . an assault on God" (Meyers 473). In the movie, Ahab answers that "[he]'d strike the sun if it insulted [him]," aligning with Melville's work and Huston's vision of Ahab. For the director, Ahab views the whale as "the mask of a malignant deity who torments mankind" and "pits himself against this evil power" that "Melville doesn't choose to call Satan, but God" (qtd. in Inge 703). In turn, Huston seems to draw upon this same chapter, in which Ahab thinks of Moby Dick as a mask against which he turns his anger:

> All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event . . . 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, *Moby-Dick* 133)

Ahab's vendetta against evil is irrational because it is ultimately a fight against himself; against the evil in his human condition. Melville scholars have interpreted the white whale as a symbol representing the coexistence of good and evil in everyone (e.g., Ishag 54–56; Hao and Chi 14–17). The climax of their battle inside the captain is his fierce obsession with Moby Dick. In Chapter 41, "Moby Dick," an excerpt expresses the whale's meaning to Ahab as a symbol of humanity:

> The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung. That intangible malignity which has been from the beginning; . . . All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 148)

Although some "deep men" feel that the "malicious agencies" and "the intangible malignity which has been from the beginning" are "eating in them," Ahab identifies this malignity in Moby Dick. These evils are present in every human being, and Ahab does not realize that God's evil, which he sees in the whale, is also in himself. Ahab's self-deception leads him to immolation because the evil that the whale represents for him is the target of his hatred, but by attacking Moby Dick, he mutilates his own body, just like the white whale ripped off his leg in the past.

A key difference between the novel and its movie adaptation lies in Melville's greater emphasis on repentance and humility. Despite the biblical associations of the white whale with Leviathan in "Extracts," which could imply Ahab's struggle against evil power, Melville balances this notion with the story of contrition presented in Jonah and also quoted in "Extracts." Father Mapple recounts how Jonah, swallowed by a great fish when attempting to flee God's dominion, is delivered when he prays and accepts his punishment. Contrarily, in Chapter 41, "The Whiteness of the Whale," Ishmael explains that Ahab, in his initial encounter with Moby Dick, "did not fall down" but "cherished a wild vindictiveness against the

whale" and "pitted himself, all mutilated, against it" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 148). Ahab did not become mad just when the whale tore off his leg, but rather when he was "forced to turn towards home, and for long months of days and weeks, . . . his torn body and gashed soul bled into one another; and so interfusing, made him mad" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 147–48).

Considering the Calvinist substratum of American churches, the events and traits characterizing Ahab as similarly evil to the white whale do not necessarily imply a break in the reader's horizon of expectations at Melville's time. The doctrine of innate depravity, stemming from the Fall or original sin, was widespread, asserting that human nature was partially corrupt, hence incapable of choosing the path of salvation and refraining from evil. After his first defeat against Moby Dick, Ahab lets himself be invaded by his dark side, latent in all human beings since the Fall, according to Puritan belief. In essence, the fruitless first hunt for the white whale serves as the catalyst for unleashing the inherent malignancy within Ahab.

But there are also grounds for suggesting a mixed reaction from readers to Ahab's challenge. From their perspective, the main reason for understanding (which certainly does not mean 'supporting') the captain's degradation would be the aforementioned Puritan belief in the fallen human nature, which ends up causing damnation in the absence of strength in God. The reason to reject Ahab's fight against Moby Dick would stem from interpreting his monomania as a direct defiance of God's will. Unlike other captains maimed by the whale, Ahab neither repents nor ceases his pursuit and, like Satan, is depicted as a soul that rebels against God consumed by pride and vengeance, seeing evil in the natural creation by a divine tyrannical figure.

Ahab's behavior must also be understood within the shifting landscape of Reformed Christianity in America, which was gradually losing its unquestioned authority (Herbert 97). This transformation coincided with a period of comprehensive identity formation across America in the nineteenth century. Literary critic Francis Otto Matthiessen coined the term American Renaissance in his 1941 book, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*, spotlighting Ralph Waldo Emerson as the vanguard of Transcendentalism. This movement, blending European romantic individualism with an emphasis on inner truth-seeking, regarded nature as a companion to introspection and esteemed the power of knowledge as a route to transcend intellectual growth and spirituality. Melville is often categorized within the

pessimistic offshoot of Transcendentalism, which portrays nature as reflective of both human consciousness and its darker aspects.

In response to the spiritual oppression in Christianity, Melville often satirically alluded to scriptures and their moral authority. Jonathan A. Cook has explored Melville's fixation on evil and extensive use of biblical allusion. Cook highlights an instance of Melville's irreverence when Flask, alluding to the biblical story of Satan's afflictions upon Job, suggests that sometimes God allows evil to roam freely, while Stubb insists that Fedallah should be thrown overboard because he is the Devil (178–79). What is more, Melville suggests similar insubordination in Ahab, as Ishmael narrates how the captain attached "not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations" to the whale, identifying in it "the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down" (*Moby-Dick* 149) that he will not let escape.

Based on this rationale is the idea of Moby Dick as an agent of divine justice punishing Ahab's challenge to God, which finds support in speech and report. In Chapter 54, "The Town-Ho's Story," Moby Dick is described as an "*inverted visitation* of one of those so called judgments of God which at times are said to overtake some men" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 190, my emphasis), symbolizing God's action over those who try to grasp His power for themselves. Likewise, in the last chapter, "The Chase. Third Day," Ishmael reports that "Moby Dick seemed combinedly possessed by all the angels that fell from heaven" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 406) when the whale outmaneuvers the boats, which makes Moby Dick side with a vengeful God defending Himself from the whalemen of the *Pequod*, who defy His authority and obey Ahab's orders. Another clue is the formula Ahab uses in Chapter 113, "The Forge," to make a pact with his harpooneers, whom he baptizes in the name of the Devil: "*Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli!*" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 384). From this perspective, Ahab could represent evil itself, yet is also a sort of tragic hero (Bercaw 16; Hayes 55), as he rebels against God or, perhaps, against his evil works reflected in nature (Spengler 159).

Huston and Bradbury endeavored to depict this amalgamation of virtue and malevolence in Ahab, in conjunction with the darkness present in God's natural creation, on the big screen. Studying Huston's adaptation is crucial within the postmodern paradigm, where texts are seen as fluid entities. From this perspective, Melville, as a writer, is known to us only through his texts, whose ideas exist solely within the realm of textuality. Instead of limiting understanding to a single version of *Moby-Dick*, we

must acknowledge that textuality encompasses not only printed words but also the text as an ever-evolving entity. Bryant insists on considering any state or version of the text that helps us understand it more fully, including its adaptations (216–17). Huston's movie is especially significant as it reshapes the ambiguity of *Moby-Dick* through reading and subsequent reformulation by the film artists.

Building on this reasoning, this paper examines the perception and articulation of ambiguity between good and evil in the novel and its adaptation through the relationship of text recipients—screenwriters, novel readers, or cinema spectators—and their horizon of expectations within their historical period. At the center of this dynamic, *Moby-Dick* and its vision of good and evil exist in multiple versions—not only Melville's original but also the interpretations and revisions by readers and adapters, who infuse the work with the particularities and cultural anxieties of their times. Bryant illustrates how *Moby-Dick* exists as a multiplicity of versions by citing an interview with Edward Said, wherein the critic seems to attribute to Melville's Ahab the manner of death depicted in the 1956 movie adaptation ("Rewriting" 1043–49). Said asserted, "In the final scene of the novel, Captain Ahab is being borne out to sea, wrapped around the white whale with the rope of his own harpoon and going obviously to his death" (qtd. in Bryant, "Rewriting" 1045). Said conflates the demise of the cinematic Ahab with Melville's Ahab to elucidate the US response to 9/11 as akin to suicidally binding oneself to a self-created monster—a stance exemplifying the shift from readings of *Moby-Dick* as a simplistic battle between good and evil that had taken place until the Cold War (Metz 224, 229). In doing so, Said ironically overlooks Fedallah's significance in Ahab's death, a critique of Orientalism in Melville's work according to postcolonial criticism (see Finkelstein; Leroux).

Bryant encapsulates this interpretation by explaining how Fedallah prophesies that only hemp, the material of whale-lines, can destroy Ahab, linking these ropes to Fedallah and the Orient ("Rewriting" 1046–48). Melville appears to reinforce the view of the Orient as mysterious and fatalistic, but he is actually associating the notion of fate with human beings themselves, their choices, and their self-destruction, while disassociating fate from the supernatural. Fedallah's prophecy logically warns Ahab that pursuing Moby Dick and being tied to the monster will destroy him, but Ahab's hubris prevents him from interpreting Fedallah's ominous signs. In the novel, Ahab is strangled by the whale-line and swiftly consumed by the sea in his pursuit; not only for chasing the monster

he had elevated to the status of evil, but also for misreading Fedallah's prophesies (and the Orient). Ahab ties his destiny to the mystical, and Fedallah, fundamentally, to the purely causal.

Said's postcolonial perspective likely guided his view of *Moby-Dick* as countering the Western portrayal of Islam as the antagonistic foil or Other, influencing his interpretation of Ahab's death. Put differently, the current horizon of expectations, influenced by the climate of anxiety and debate following 9/11, shaped Said's (mis)attribution. Additionally, by blending Melville's novel with Huston's movie, Said affirmed the adaptation's textual identity while expanding the symbolism of the whale-line to encompass media and contemporary politics, highlighting *Moby-Dick*'s inherent fluidity ("Rewriting" 1047).

In a similar vein, Bradbury's omission of Fedallah from the film underscores the ambiguous interplay of good and evil within Ahab, yet it disregards Fedallah's role in the intricate struggle between Ahab—driven to combat the evil inherent in God's creation—and Moby Dick—embodying the malevolence that God permits to exist unrestrained. Bradbury saw Fedallah as a production hindrance and transferred his role to Ahab, possibly due to censorship during the Cold War Era (Eller 36), part of the horizon of expectations at that time, in which Fedallah might have been perceived as possessing anti-American traits.

Melville keeps Fedallah's origins mysterious but introduces him as a Persian pagan with long white hair wrapped around his head like a turban and wearing a Chinese-style coat. Despite Iran's neutrality in WWII, its sympathy with the Axis powers prompted invasions by the UK and the Red Army, fearing oil shortages and supply disruptions via the Persian Corridor. During the Cold War, Chinese nationals faced Senator Joseph McCarthy's anti-Communist campaign, targeting Americans perceived as Soviet tools. In the 1950s, some critics associated Fedallah with sixth-century BC Parsee fire-worshippers, followers of the prophet Zoroaster who battled evil spirits or *ahriman* (for example, see Finkelstein for Fedallah's interpretation as an assassin, connecting his onomastics to the Islamic Fedai order, which killed using hemp-derived intoxicants). This view suggests that Parsees performed God's work and interprets Fedallah as a divine double agent thwarting Ahab's plans, echoing communist espionage fears.

The production circumstances, part of the screenwriter's and director's horizon of expectations, probably made them perceive Fedallah as expendable, much like how the whalers aboard the *Pequod* view him—

as closer to a villain. Nevertheless, an uncensored interpretation of Fedallah adds complexity to the interplay between good and evil, portraying him as potentially malevolent yet also a facilitator for Ahab's encounter with God's wrath in nature, which the captain relentlessly pursues and mistakenly believes he can overcome.

The fluidity of the text (as defined by Bryant) and its dynamic nature (depending on its readership and their changing societal circumstances, as outlined by Jauss' horizon of expectations) enabled the film adaptation of *Moby-Dick* to capture the ambiguity between good and evil. The creators saw the novel as a means to express the blurred line between these extremes following WWII's unrest and horrors. The portrayal of Ahab as a tragic hero rebelling against the evil allowed in nature took time to be embraced. Jauss offers *Madame Bovary* (1857) as an example of a work that initially failed to meet readers' horizon of expectations, and which, like *Moby-Dick*, required decades to find a context of reception where its messages could resonate (27–28).

Regarding the horizon of expectations of *Moby-Dick*'s readers, mid-nineteenth-century America was one of the periods that most steemed nature. Emerson's ideas thrived in a patriotic climate, encouraging Americans to engage directly with their country's landscape. While the notion of good and evil in Ahab, as previously discussed, may have been more readily accepted, the idea of evil in nature, as suggested in *Moby-Dick*, likely challenged readers' assumptions about nature, which, as the driving force for the nation's development, was inherently positive for Americans.

To blend and harmonize good and evil in creation, Melville seemingly drew upon the romantic concept of the sublime. Humanity's relationship with nature, as per romantic aesthetic philosophy, could justify the simultaneous awe and fear that, for Melville, the creation sometimes inspires. Scott Horton cites Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) to explain Melville's use of Moby Dick for exploring the sublime:

> There are many animals, who though far from being large, are yet capable of raising ideas of the sublime, because they are considered as objects of terror . . . And to things of great dimensions, if we annex an adventitious idea of terror, they become without comparison greater (Burke 131).

Kant rendered the sublime into different modes.[1] Throughout *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1787), *The Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and *The Critique of Judgment* (1790), he distinguished between the mathematical and the dynamic sublime, the first covering an element of huge dimensions, and the latter corresponding to an object of impressive power. As the most powerful and enigmatic creature of the ocean, Moby Dick embodies aspects of both sublime notions, eliciting varied reactions from the novel's characters.

As for proud Ahab, he is obsessed with Moby Dick not so much due to the evil that the whale represents but because he cannot control or defeat its natural power. Ishmael, for his part, is the reflective character who cannot identify good or evil in Moby Dick. Through him, Melville seems to voice his own uncertainties about understanding the division between these two opposites, and the sea is the romantic setting where Ishmael struggles to distinguish both.

The upsurge of maritime studies has enriched the reading of the ocean and its creatures as metaphors or symbolic settings. The sublimity in the sea, according to Holmqvist and Pluciennik, can be both "absolutely great" and "absolutely menacing" (725). Frank J. Novak identifies a series of binary oppositions that acquire meaning through the aquatic medium. The main dichotomy is beauty versus terror, manifested in the ocean as "a contrast between physical appearances" (119). The quotation from Burke above belongs to the second chapter of the second part of his *Inquiry*, entitled "Terror," where he directly links terror with the sublime and treats this feeling as a key part of the sublime experience: "Indeed, terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime" (131).

Ishmael identifies beauty—manifested in the color white—and terror as capable of raising ideas of the sublime. In Chapter 42, "The Whiteness of the Whale," Ishmael first defines whiteness as something that "refiningly enhances beauty, as if imparting some special virtue of its own" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 151) and gives many examples of how the color white embellishes various natural and non-natural objects, such as marbles, pearls, Japanese tree flowers, the alb of Catholic priests, etc. But then Ishmael explains that when white is "divorced from more kindly associations" and "coupled with any terrible object in itself," white can "heighten that terror to the furthest bounds" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 152).

[1] Melville owned a copy of Burke's *Enquiry* (Sealts 9, 44).

These beautiful and terrible objects, like the white bear, the white shark, or the white whale, belong to marine environments and represent the combination of beauty and terror in such natural settings.

Burke laid negative stress on his notion of the sublime, which made a difference in the contribution to the romantic sublime of other authors. While for his predecessors the sublime was "liberating and exhilarating, a kind of happy aggrandisement" (Paulson 69), Burke posited that terror is the main source of the sublime. But, in line with the tension between good and evil that underlies *Moby-Dick*, Burke's *Inquiry* shows that the sublime consists of "two equally important, although mutually incompatible, experiences" (Gasché 26)—like delight and pain, clarity and gloom, or society and lonesomeness—to prove that, in Burke's words, "opposite extremes operate equally in favor of the sublime" (157). Therefore, Ishmael's descriptions of sublime sea objects align with Burke's terrifying sublime and his pairing of terror with its antithesis, the beautiful.

White evokes feelings of the sublime by giving beauty to certain animals and making them cause fear. The most representative and impressive example is the whiteness of the whale, on which Ishmael reflects in the eponymous chapter. He emphasizes that the "elusive quality" of white, when deprived of any positive or negative associations, can by its own means intensify terror, as there is still "an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of panic to the soul than that redness which affrights in blood" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 152). Consequently, terror lies in the white color because white is ungraspable, as it enhances beauty and terror simultaneously.

In the novel, Melville's ambivalent stance toward good in nature and trust in humanity intertwines not only with the Burkean but also with Immanuel Kant's concept of the sublime, prominent in nineteenth-century Romanticism. According to Kant, the sublime involves an encounter between the "I" (the individual as subject, or the ego) and that which can annihilate that "I" completely (Battersby 28–29). The Kantian sublime accounts for the function of the ocean in the example provided by Milton R. Stern, who argues that in Chapter 92, "The Castaway," Pip drifts alone across the endless Pacific and goes insane because he cannot bear the view of God "as an eternal, disinterested emptiness" that the ocean represents. By extension, "there is no conscious benevolence or malevolence," and Moby Dick is "as colorless, blank, ubiquitous, eternal, and blind as the Pacific in which Pip is momentarily abandoned" (471). Accordingly, the novel is laden with passages describing the paradoxical coexistence of

beauty and wickedness in nature, aligning closely with the Calvinistic concept of humanity in a constant struggle between its virtue and innate depravity, with which readers must have been familiar:

> Consider, once more, the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began. . . . Consider all this; and then return to this green, gentle, and most docile earth, consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 215)

In this quotation, nature and the human soul share the same dichotomies and conflicts. Through the novel's characters, Melville suggests that their attitudes toward the white whale reflect different perspectives of humanity toward the world and nature. Ahab, compelled by a desire to be above nature, feels threatened by it and embarks on a quest to pursue the evil he sees in Moby Dick. Meanwhile, Ishmael seeks freedom and self-discovery but remains unfazed when unable to find a clear cut between good and evil in the ocean's natural mysteries, which he cannot comprehend.

Screenwriter Bradbury almost entirely relies on Ahab to convey the struggle between nature and humanity, a recurring theme throughout the movie. The opening credits, featuring nineteenth-century engravings of whaling scenes, establish the film's focus on gloomy lighting to underscore nature's dangers and indifference to humanity. Scenes in New Bedford or aboard the *Pequod* feature dim lighting and sepia tones, capturing human despair in the face of nature through the worn, taciturn countenances of the villagers and whalers, whose lives depend on the sea. This composition contrasts with the hunting scenes, employing technicolor and black-and-white imagery to create an allegorical, turbulent atmosphere presenting the encounters with the mysterious white whale. Hence, the whale's instinctive defensive response, shaking his body and resisting the harpoons that hurt him, represents God's wrath against the pride inside Ahab, whom Huston sees as "a kind of Anti-Christ, noble in his blasphemy" (Meyers 223). Just as Christ, who is human insofar as He is the Son of God made man, is humble and gentle, in Christian theology, the Antichrist is a proud and triumphant human being who will spread hatred, war, and revenge, as opposed to Christ, who preached love, peace, and mercy. Both can work great wonders, but those of the Anti-Christ are terrible deeds.

To understand the portrayal of good and evil in the film, it is essential to explore the evolving perception of the 1950s—once seen as marked by censorship and conservatism—and how they shaped the horizon of expectations for both artists in their cinematic representations and viewers in their reception. James T. Patterson points out that "many of the 'threats' to older ways of life in the 1950s were exaggerated" (344). He refers to Senator McCarthy's anti-Communist efforts in the Cold War era, which echoed the Red Scare of the 1920s and involved blatant accusations of association with leftist organizations against many Hollywood stars and directors. Patterson also acknowledges "exposed undercurrents of dissatisfaction and rebellion" (344, 374) that were to grow in the 1960s. Similarly, Gertrude Himmelfarb highlights how the generation later dubbed "the revolutionaries of the sixties" benefited from "attending colleges that flourished ... thanks to the G.I. Bill of Rights and the infusion of government funds" initiated by WWII (13). This support nurtured the emergence of intellectual movements like the Beat Generation, providing "the intellectual stimulus to challenge the dominant culture" (14). In "Bad Old Days: The Myth of the 1950s," Alan J. Levine notes a gradual relaxation of censorship soon after WWII, paving the way for the so-called revolution of the sixties and the emergence of movies "more mature, even bleak, sometimes, even, repulsively cynical or perverse" (92).

John Huston's words describing Ahab in his film as a noble Anti-Christ and the captain's fight against Moby Dick as an act of blasphemy become significant when viewed from this different perspective about post-WWII cinema. Over time, critical interpretations of the film have shifted, with contemporary analyses considering the director's remarks about the movie and its reflection of the American cultural milieu in the aftermath of WWII. Cold War criticism framed *Moby-Dick* within America's anti-communist struggle, emphasizing Ishmael's assertion of liberty against Ahab's tyranny (Pease 113), with the *Pequod*'s destruction symbolizing the loss of American diversity—echoing Pacific atomic tests—and Ishmael's survival symbolizing enduring American freedom (Metz 223–24).

Nonetheless, authors like David Hunter argue that a new artistic trend emerged as Americans grew skeptical and fearful because of "the ever-present threat of nuclear destruction, divisive conflicts such as the Vietnam War and a changing moral framework" (109). Through examples of movies starring John Wayne, this author illustrates the process whereby Modernism fueled "moral relativism and a growing lack of positive

metaphysical abstractions" (199), which expanded throughout post-WWII American cinema.

Whereas pre-war films maintained a clear distinction between right and wrong, movies steadily moved "toward the creation of a cultural landscape in which the distinctions between good and bad became blurred" (107) after the war, when the individual had difficulties finding a clear cut between good and evil and walked on the thin line demarcating sublime good deeds and devastating evilness. Ahab, as an Anti-Christ, has the polyglot crew of the *Pequod* as his followers and pacts with them to kill Moby Dick—a symbolic act that Huston employs to convey the novel's great blasphemy.

Thus far, John Huston's adaptation has generally met the audience's horizon of expectations regarding *Moby-Dick*'s canonical perceptions. Viewers have identified elements of the film with good or evil or, more recently, have appreciated the film as an example of the trend blurring this binary in post-WWII cinema. In Melville's deliberate ambiguity, Huston found a canvas to explore this theme further, with the novel and film complementing each other.

Contrary to Melville's earlier novels, *Moby-Dick* presents a nuanced exploration of good and evil, displeasing readers with its unconventional structure. While Melville's audience was accustomed to complex themes, his earlier successes, like *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847), were rooted in their exotic South Seas settings, where Melville criticized colonialism and missionary activities. In *Moby-Dick*, Melville capitalizes on the sea's allure and Pacific legends, yet its oceanic setting serves purposes beyond mere adventure-seeking readers.

Melville utilizes the sea and Ishmael to endow the text with metaphysical uncertainty, hindering any definitive association of the novel's symbols with good and evil. For instance, in Chapter 1, "Loomings," Ishmael engages in philosophical speculation and seeks categorical answers to his questions. As the narrative unfolds, however, Ishmael realizes that he cannot reconcile every symbol he encounters with a singular, definitive meaning—an ambiguity extended to readers attempting to interpret the novel as a cohesive whole.

In the same vein, Ishmael's parsing of the color white in "The Whiteness of the Whale" is arguably another map that works together with "Extracts" to explore the meaning of the whale and its peculiar hue. Ishmael sees white as such a "vague, nameless horror" and "so mystical and well nigh ineffable" that he "almost despair[s] of putting it in a

comprehensible form" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 151). Furthermore, the terrible creatures Ishmael gives as examples of acquiring the "elusive quality" of white (like the white shark) are described in quasi-oxymoronic terms, displaying an "abhorrent mildness" owing to the opposite emotions aroused by the contrast between their nature and outer appearance, making them "the *transcendent horrors* they are" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 152, my emphasis).

The chapter "The Whiteness of the Whale" exemplifies why *Moby-Dick* is an artistically emancipatory, groundbreaking text in its ambiguous definition of good and evil. Ishmael employs rhetorical tactics in assembling this chapter to explain what the white whale and its color mean to him, contrasting with the evil they signify to Ahab, but Ishmael's rhetoric does not lead to a definitive conclusion, as the color white (and, ergo, the white whale) has both good and evil associations interacting within it.

The novel plays a two-level game with the reader. First, readers expect a whaling adventure novel when they start reading it. In fact, Melville, in a letter to his editor, defined the first draft as "a romance of adventure, founded upon certain wild legends in the Southern Sperm Fisheries, and illustrated by the author's own personal experience, of two years and more, as a harpooneer" (qtd. in Gray 121). What readers found in *Moby-Dick* subverted genre expectations: instead of a straightforward narrative of a whaling voyage, the novel dispenses with the generic conventions and rejects being merely the romance Melville described to his editor. As such, *Moby-Dick* is based on a legend and contains fantastic, preternatural occurrences, partially fitting Walter Scott's definition of romance as a "fictitious narrative in prose . . . ; the interest of which turns upon marvelous or uncommon incidents" (Abrams et al. 20–21). But Melville went beyond what readers could expect from a romance of adventure by joining writers who broadened the restrictive concept of genre, a process that began in the eighteenth century with the appearance of genre-mixing texts. The work's eclecticism increases its elusiveness in defining the color white, leaving the reader guessing whether it embodies good or evil. Melville defied the unambiguous allegorical mode by introducing whiteness as a symbol that escapes Ishmael's rhetoric, scientific observation, and the multiplicity of voices of the novel, testing readers' assumptions of white as a symbol of purity through a text where the meaning of one of its most important symbols is constantly deferred.

Thus, the union of the dangerous whale and the inscrutable white color, coupled with the unclear identification of Moby Dick as good or evil, prevail over Ahab and his crew. To Ishmael, white overwhelms humans, as its indefiniteness reflects "the heartless voids and immensities of the universe" and right after "stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 157). Above all, Ishmael makes the color white stand for emptiness, for nothing, "the visible absence of color" that at the same time is "the mystical cosmetic which produces every one of [nature's] hues, the great principle of light," but "for ever remains white or colorless in itself," "all-color of atheism" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 157). As a result, at the novel's end, Moby Dick remains a mysterious symbol, neither good nor evil, but an enduring, powerful force that no one can defeat or comprehend.

3. Conclusions: The Appreciation of Ambiguity in a Time of Moral Uncertainty

The blurring of good and evil in Melville's *Moby-Dick* stems from the author's skepticism and romantic strain, while the WWII context is pivotal in Huston's adaptation.

In Melville's novel, the white whale is the main symbol of good and evil, and Ishmael cannot but blur out the distinction between both opposites when confronting the monster. To combine good and evil in Moby Dick's ambiguous meaning, the evidence suggests that Melville drew on the Burkean sublime, which manifests itself in how opposites blend and produce sublimity.

Ishmael, the sole survivor and arguably the most compelling character, expresses the most inaccurate judgments about Moby Dick's significance. Ishmael is eventually unable to apprehend the leviathan, and the most he can do is look at Moby Dick and its whiteness as a powerful abstraction with ambiguous meaning. Melville's doubts about humanity's ability to grasp the world's significance gave rise to the white whale, a symbol breaking with Puritan certainty based on moral certainty and the transcendentalist accurate connection between the written word and reality.

Comparing Huston's *Moby Dick* (1956) with his prior works reveals consistent artistic and aesthetic themes. Both in the noir *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948), he explored

the destructive effects of greed and pride, which blind individuals and lead to ruin. His documentary *Let There Be Light* (1946) delved into the emotional scars borne by American veterans returning from WWII, and Melville's *Moby-Dick* provided fertile ground to continue exploring the consequences of encounters between tortured souls and human pride.

Notwithstanding the time that separates *Moby-Dick* from Huston's movie adaptation, the novel underwent a reevaluation in the post-WWII era, when the director interpreted the ambiguity of symbolism in the Melvillian novel in light of a trend emphasizing the liminal space between good and evil in post-WWII cinema. This shift in the appraisal and interpretation of *Moby-Dick* aligns with the principles of fluidity and dynamism of text in reception theory and Postmodernism: *Moby-Dick* has never been a static entity but re-read and reinterpreted by different generations and in different eras. Its heterogeneity of genre and symbolic openness regarding good and evil might have caused it not to meet the horizon of expectations of nineteenth-century readers, but later generations found it to be an emancipatory work addressing existential doubts about morality in a hostile world.

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