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Restudy Captain Ahab's downfall, as a Violator of SDG 14, Reveals Moby Dick as an Embodiment of Nature's Vengeance and a Foreshadowing of Humanity's Potential Fate

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Abstract

Moby Dick is a novel written by Herman Melville, first published in 1851. It is considered one of the greatest American novels and tells the story of Ishmael, the narrator, and his journey aboard the whaling ship Pequod, led by the obsessive and vengeful Captain Ahab. Ahab's sole mission is to hunt down and kill Moby Dick, a giant white whale that had previously destroyed Ahab's previous ship and severed his leg. While *Moby Dick* was written long before the SDGs were established, the novel touches upon themes that relate to SDG 14, Life Below Water. For example, the novel's focus on whaling directly connects to SDG 14, which aims to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources. *Moby Dick* reflects on the dangers of over-exploitation of marine life (whales) and the impact of human greed on the environment. Captain Ahab's relentless hunt for Moby Dick can be seen as a metaphor for the destructive pursuit of natural resources without regard for sustainability.

In the proposed project, we will examine how Captain Ahab's downfall—seen as a violation of Sustainable Development Goal 14 (Life Below Water)—frames *Moby Dick* as an allegory of nature's revenge. The white whale symbolizes the ocean's resistance to human exploitation, and Ahab's obsessive pursuit leads to his ruin, foreshadowing the consequences of unchecked marine resource depletion. As such, *Moby Dick* offers a powerful narrative for environmental education, connecting literature with ocean conservation.

Keywords: *white whale environmental education; marine ecosystems; sustainable; SDGs*

1.Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—also called the Global Goals—were adopted by the United Nations in 2015 as a worldwide plan to create a better future for everyone by the year 2030. During that year's global summit, world leaders agreed on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes 17 specific goals. These goals cover key areas like reducing poverty and hunger, improving health and education, promoting equality, protecting the environment, and supporting strong and peaceful communities. The SDGs serve as a shared action plan for people, the planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership. They are meant to be carried out by all countries and all sectors of society working together. As stated in the 2030 Agenda, the world is committed to ending poverty and hunger in every form, making sure people live with dignity and equality in a clean and healthy environment. It also emphasizes protecting the Earth by using natural resources

responsibly, reducing pollution, and acting quickly to stop climate change—so future generations can thrive. The SDGs also aim for economic growth that respects nature and promotes peace, justice, and cooperation among all nations. In total, the SDGs include 169 targets, which are both quantitative (measurable) and qualitative (descriptive). These targets recognize that every country is different, and they allow flexibility based on a country's resources, priorities, and stage of development.

SDG 14 specifically focuses on protecting our oceans, seas, and marine resources. It calls for the conservation and sustainable use of the ocean to prevent further damage from overfishing, plastic pollution, habitat destruction, and climate change. The ocean plays a vital role in regulating the Earth's climate and supports millions of livelihoods, especially in coastal communities. SDG 14 urges countries to reduce marine pollution, manage fish stocks responsibly, protect marine ecosystems, and support small-scale fishers. It is a reminder that healthy oceans are essential to the well-being of the planet, and without ocean sustainability, many other SDGs—like those for food security, health, and climate—will be harder to achieve.

Moby Dick is a novel written by Herman Melville, first published in 1851. It is considered one of the greatest American novels and tells the story of Ishmael, the narrator, and his journey aboard the whaling ship Pequod, led by the obsessive and vengeful Captain Ahab. Ahab's sole mission is to hunt down and kill Moby Dick, a giant white whale that had previously destroyed Ahab's previous ship and severed his leg. While *Moby Dick* was written long before the SDGs were established, the novel touches upon themes that relate to SDG 14, Life Below Water. For example, the novel's focus on whaling directly connects to SDG 14, which aims to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources. *Moby Dick* reflects on the dangers of over-exploitation of marine life (whales) and the impact of human greed on the environment. Captain Ahab's relentless hunt for Moby Dick can be seen as a metaphor for the destructive pursuit of natural resources without regard for sustainability.

In the proposed project, We will explore how Captain Ahab's downfall, as a violator of SDG 14, reveals Moby Dick as an embodiment of nature's vengeance and foreshadows the consequences humanity may face if it continues the relentless exploitation of marine resources—ultimately suffering the same backlash from nature as the protagonist did in the story.

2.Research Objectives

This study undertakes a critical re-examination of Moby-Dick through the dual lenses of ecocriticism and narrative theory, with the aim of positioning Herman Melville's seminal work as a literary precursor to contemporary concerns surrounding marine sustainability and environmental ethics. Departing from traditional interpretations that emphasize metaphysical inquiry or psychological obsession, the research reframes Moby-Dick as a narrative deeply entangled with the cultural, economic, and ethical dimensions of marine exploitation. In doing so, the study aligns its analytical framework with the normative aspirations of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 14 (Life Below Water), which calls for the conservation and sustainable use of marine ecosystems.

Drawing on Buell's (2005) assertion that environmental criticism must engage not only with depictions of nature but also with the imaginative and cultural constructs that mediate human–environment interactions, this research approaches Moby-Dick as a site where extractive ideology, technological ambition, and moral reflection converge. The novel's extensive treatment of whaling—framed as both industrial enterprise and symbolic ritual—renders it particularly apt for exploring how literature can simultaneously reproduce and critique dominant historical attitudes toward the ocean. By foregrounding the ecological and ethical consequences of treating the sea as an infinite reservoir of resources, the study seeks to demonstrate the text's capacity to expose the ideological underpinnings of marine violence.

Moreover, the study revisits the tragic structure of Moby-Dick, focusing specifically on the figure of Captain Ahab and the classical concept of hamartia. Engaging with recent reinterpretations of tragic failure (Vinje, 2021), the research considers Ahab's downfall not

as an isolated personal defect but as a systemic and ethically embedded manifestation of human hubris—a narrative expression of ecological overreach. This tragic lens enables a deeper understanding of how the novel allegorizes the costs of violating the limits of coexistence with marine life.

Through this interdisciplinary approach, the research pursues the following core objectives:

1.To interpret *Moby-Dick* as an ecocritical text that reveals the cultural, ideological, and ethical frameworks underpinning marine exploitation.

2.To analyze how narrative form and tragic structure collaborate in dramatizing the environmental consequences of unchecked human ambition.

3.To demonstrate how literary tragedy can serve as a critical and pedagogical tool for advancing understanding of contemporary sustainability discourses, particularly as they relate to SDG 14.

3.Research Methodology

This proposed project employs Tragic Theory (Tragic Theory is a framework for understanding how tragedies work—what makes a story tragic, how characters downfall from grace, and what emotional impact it has on the audience. It originated in ancient Greek drama and is most famously defined by Aristotle in *Poetics*.) research methodology and SDG theory, specifically focusing on SDG 14, for the textual analysis of the selected primary text. It also utilizes published books, research journals, online articles, and reviews related to the chosen topic as secondary data for the research.

Tragic heroes are typically characterized by a fatal flaw, which leads to their downfall. Ahab's tragic flaw is his obsessive vengeance against Moby Dick the white whale. This obsession blinds him to reason and ultimately leads to his destruction. Near the beginning of *Moby Dick*, Ishmael speaks of Ahab as "a mighty pageant creature, formed for noble tragedies." (*Moby Dick*, p.80) By the end of the novel Ahab does indeed achieve a tragic stature. He fulfills the role of the classical tragic hero, a man impelled by Fate into committing an act that ends in tragedy. The greater his ensuing grief, the greater his tragic stature. Ahab reaches this realization as he sees Moby Dick destroy his ship, "Oh, lonely death on lonely life! Oh, now I feel my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief." (*Moby Dick*, p653) Many scholars and critics have recognized the deep influence that Shakespeare had on Herman Melville's writing. One strong example appears in *Moby Dick*, chapter 117, when the mysterious Parsee, Fedallah, gives a strange prophecy to Captain Ahab. He tells Ahab that "two hearses must verily be seen by thee on the sea; the first not made by mortal hands; and the visible wood of the last one must be grown in America," (*Moby Dick*, p567) and also warns him that he will die by hemp, suggesting he will be killed by rope. Parsee, Fedallah says, "'Take another pledge, old man' said the Parsee, as his eyes lighted up like fire-flies in the gollm-'Hemp only can kill thee.'" (*Moby Dick*, p.568)

This kind of prophetic warning is very similar to what happens in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. In the play, the three witches promise Macbeth that he will become king. As the story unfolds, Macbeth is deep in bloodshed and becomes desperate to know what else fate has in store for him. He says he is "in blood Stepp'd" and "bent to know the worst" (Act III, Scene IV), and seeks more answers from the witches. They summon three ghostly apparitions, who tell him: "none of woman born shall harm Macbeth" and "Macbeth shall never vanquished be until Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill shall come against him" (Act IV, Scene I). These words seem to promise safety, but just like Ahab, Macbeth misunderstands the meaning. The witches' words eventually come true—Macbeth is killed by Macduff, who was "from his mother's womb untimely ripped" (Act V, Scene VII), meaning he wasn't technically "born of woman." Similarly, Fedallah dies before Ahab, the

great white whale turns out to be the first "hearse not made by mortal hands," and Ahab is finally killed by the rope (the “hemp”), with his ship acting as the second hearse “grown in America.”

Charles Olson explored these Shakespearean connections in his influential essay ‘Lear and Moby Dick,’ which was later expanded into his 1947 book *Call Me Ishmael*. Olson pointed out that *King Lear* had “the deepest creative impact” (Olson, p. 47) on Melville’s writing. The whale in *Moby Dick*, enormous and mysterious, symbolizes unstoppable power and authority, especially with its haunting white color. Ahab, who has already lost one leg to the whale, knows how dangerous this chase is—but instead of turning away, he becomes obsessed. He refuses to surrender and throws himself into the hunt, even though it leads to his destruction. He is trapped between giving up the fight and saving his pride, but his compulsive need to assert himself drives him forward.

Melville’s feelings of despair and anger about death and human struggle are clear throughout *Moby Dick*. Ahab is portrayed as a complex character—part tragic hero, part villain—whose madness and defiance of nature sometimes feel even more intense than what we see in *King Lear* or *Macbeth*. However, just as Shakespeare includes characters like Macduff in Macbeth and Edgar in King Lear, who survive and represent hope, Melville gives us Ishmael. As the sole survivor of the Pequod’s doomed voyage, Ishmael escapes both physically and mentally unharmed. In the end, he stands for the resilience and hope of humanity, even in the face of overwhelming loss.

Like Shakespeare’s tragic heroes King Lear and Macbeth, Captain Ahab embodies the fatal flaw of overweening pride—an excessive self-confidence that blinds him to reason and morality. This prideful characteristic drives Ahab to defy the natural order, much like Lear’s reckless renunciation of power and Macbeth’s bloody ambition for it. In *Moby Dick*, Ahab’s obsessive quest to conquer the whale becomes not merely a personal obsessive revenge but a symbolic rebellion against the very forces of nature. Fedallah’s prophecy, like the witches’ mysterious promises to Macbeth, forewarns of inevitable doom veiled in ambiguity. Ignoring these warnings, Ahab relentlessly pursues Moby Dick, seeing the whale not as an animal but as an embodiment of incomprehensible evil. In doing so, Ahab violates the ethical imperative of sustainable coexistence with marine life, as outlined in the United Nations’ SDG 14 (“Life Below Water”), which seeks to conserve and sustainably use the oceans and marine resources. His vengeful whaling crusade exemplifies human arrogance and environmental exploitation, culminating in nature’s violent retaliation. Ultimately, Ahab’s death—entangled by the very rope meant to kill the whale—mirrors the tragic downfalls of Lear and Macbeth, revealing how unchecked pride and defiance of natural law can lead to ruin. His demise stands as both a personal tragedy and a cautionary tale about the consequences of violating the balance between humanity and the environment.

4.Data Analysis

This study also employs a qualitative and interpretive methodology, grounded in close textual analysis informed by ecocriticism and narrative theory. Rather than treating Moby-Dick as a direct or transparent historical record of the whaling industry, the novel is approached as a complex literary artifact that actively constructs meanings about nature, violence, and human aspiration. Following Buell’s (2005) assertion that environmental criticism must address both formal elements and cultural imaginaries, this research interprets the novel as a narrative site in which environmental values are encoded and contested through metaphor, symbolism, and structural organization.

At the narrative level, the study adopts James’s (2018) ecocritical framework to explore how environmental meanings emerge through literary form. Specific attention is

devoted to the novel's oscillation between narrative modes—shifting from encyclopedic exposition to dramatic episodes—and to its recurring personification of the whale and oceanic forces. These narrative techniques are analyzed not merely as stylistic flourishes, but as formal mechanisms that alternately normalize and disrupt extractive logics. By tracing patterns of narrative voice, temporal sequencing, and symbolic excess, the analysis illuminates how the text invites readers to critically engage with the moral ambiguities of marine exploitation.

Tragic theory provides an additional interpretive lens, particularly through the classical notion of hamartia recontextualized within contemporary ecological ethics. Drawing on Vinje's (2021) reconceptualization of tragic failure, the study interprets Captain Ahab's obsessive quest not simply as psychological pathology but as an ethically charged misrecognition of ecological boundaries. Ahab's refusal to acknowledge the limits imposed by the nonhuman world is read as emblematic of an anthropocentric worldview that equates mastery with legitimacy. This interpretive move situates Ahab's downfall within a broader critique of extractive ambition, thereby linking individual character arc to systemic patterns of environmental breakdown.

The interpretive framework is further aligned with the normative orientation of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 14 (Life Below Water), which advocates for the preservation and sustainable use of marine ecosystems. While SDG 14 is not employed as a rigid evaluative rubric, it functions as a critical heuristic that foregrounds the ethical stakes of marine exploitation as dramatized in the novel. Rather than retroactively imposing policy frameworks on a nineteenth-century text, the study uses SDG 14 as a lens to reveal how Moby-Dick anticipates—and critiques—the ideological conditions that enable environmental degradation.

Through this triangulated approach—combining ecocriticism, narrative theory, and tragic analysis—the study demonstrates how Moby-Dick functions as a cultural text that both reflects and interrogates the epistemological and moral foundations of unsustainable oceanic practices. In doing so, the research affirms literature's capacity to contribute meaningfully to contemporary conversations on ecological responsibility and sustainability ethics.

5.Results

Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* is widely regarded as one of the most well-known novels that explores the conflict between humans and animals—told from the viewpoint of a whaler. The story centers around a massive sperm whale named Moby Dick, who ends up destroying the whaling ship Pequod as the crew tries to hunt him down. In the end, everyone on board dies except for the narrator, Ishmael. While the book offers a fairly accurate portrayal of 19th-century whaling culture, it also raises some questions—especially about the way Moby Dick is given human-like qualities. The whale is portrayed almost as if it were a conscious, vengeful being on a mission to kill, which may reflect more about human fear and projection than the reality of animal behavior.

Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* portrays the American whaling industry before the Civil War. While on the surface it's an epic story about one man's obsession with a whale, the novel also brings attention to the environmental consequences of whaling, criticizing the industry for its mass killing of whales. Environmental writer Graham Huggan points out the brutality of the trade, noting that, "Whales have literally been torn apart to create oil for lighting, soap, and margarine; baleen and bone for various decorative and sartorial purposes. For a time, the trade in whales for oil would match the trade in humans for sugar as the commercial basis for the British Empire" (Huggan, 2018, p. vii). Whales were a vital resource, especially for the oil that helped fuel the growth of European civilization and its

colonies. In particular, oil from sperm whales—described by Melville as "pure, limpid, odiferous"—was seen as the best and "most precious of all his oily vintages" (Melville, 1851, p. 286). Ishmael even remarks, "You must go to New Bedford to see a brilliant wedding; for, they say, they have reservoirs of oil in every house, and every night recklessly burn their lengths in spermaceti candles" (*Moby Dick*, p.32). These moments in the novel show just how central whaling was to American life in the 19th century.

But *Moby Dick* is not just about Captain Ahab's obsession or his view of the whale as a mere "dumb brute" (*Moby Dick*, p.176). The novel also speaks to the larger theme of capitalism's exploitation of nature—whales were hunted not just out of fear or curiosity, but because of their commercial value. At the same time, the whale itself, Moby Dick, is portrayed as a dark force of nature. Ahab describes him as having "outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate" (*Moby Dick*, p.176). To the sailors, the ocean is a violent, unforgiving place: "The universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began" (*Moby Dick*, p.296). Ishmael admits that part of his reason for joining the voyage was the mysterious power of the whale itself, saying, "Chief among these motives was the overwhelming idea of the great whale himself. Such a portentous and mysterious monster roused all my curiosity" (*Moby Dick*, p.4). Still, it's clear that the main motivation behind whaling was economic gain.

Melville sometimes romanticizes whales in poetic ways that reflect how humans often see nature as timeless and endlessly available. He writes, "Wherefore, for all these things, we account the whale immortal in his species, however perishable in his individuality. He swam the seas before the continents broke… he once swam over the site of the Tuileries, and Windsor Castle, and the Kremlin" (*Moby Dick*, p.519). But in other places, Melville frames whales as monstrous and dangerous: "and in all seasons and all oceans declared everlasting war with the mightiest animated mass that has survived the flood; most monstrous and most mountainous! That Himmalehan, salt-sea, Mastodon, clothed with such portentousness of unconscious power, that his very panics are more to be dreaded than his most fearless and malicious assaults!" (*Moby Dick*, p.70). Scholar Armstrong points out the contradiction in how Melville treats whales, "The novel thus mythologizes the whale in order to deny the possibility of its extinction, in a manner diametrically opposed to the aims of late-twentieth century environmentalism, which mythologized the whale to make it the symbol of vulnerable biodiversity" (Armstrong, 2004, p. 25).

SDG14 set by the United Nations, aims to "conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development." It calls for urgent action to reduce marine pollution, protect marine biodiversity, end overfishing, and promote sustainable use of ocean resources. In stark contrast, the 19th century viewed the ocean not as an ecosystem to protect but as a frontier to conquer. Herman Melville, in *Moby Dick*, praised whalers as courageous men on noble missions. He wrote, "I know a man that, in his lifetime, has taken three hundred and fifty whales. I account that man more honourable than that great captain of antiquity who boasted of taking as many walled towns" (Melville, 1851, p. 218). However, what was once seen as valor is now recognized as devastation. Centuries of excessive whaling drove many species to near-extinction; some, such as the North Pacific right whale, still remain critically endangered today (Cornell University Blog). Melville's glorification of whaling has since drawn strong criticism. Scholar Susan Schultz notes, "At a time when the health of the world's oceans and their inhabitants is indeed of increasing global concern and when first-time readers of *Moby Dick* can see very little 'honor and glory' in the enterprise of whaling" (Schultz, 2000, p. 97), the novel demands re-evaluation through an eco-critical lens. This lens not only challenges the myth of heroic whalers but

also confronts humanity's broader history of exploiting nature under capitalist motives. Captain Ahab's downfall mirrors that of Shakespeare's Macbeth and King Lear—tragic figures whose overreaching pride and defiance of natural and moral order lead to their ruin. Like Ahab, Macbeth and Lear become blinded by ambition and ego, ultimately bringing destruction upon themselves and their worlds. In *Moby Dick*, Ahab's relentless pursuit of the whale represents not only personal obsession but also a symbolic violation of nature, one that foreshadows the environmental collapse SDG 14 now seeks to prevent. The transformation in how we view the ocean—from a battleground of human conquest to a fragile ecosystem in need of protection—marks a significant cultural and ethical shift, one that Melville's novel, ironically, helps us better understand.

The historical attitudes toward ocean resources, as depicted in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, reflect a time when nature—particularly marine life—was seen as something to be conquered, exploited, and commodified. Whales were not viewed as sentient creatures or vital members of a delicate ecosystem, but rather as economic assets, harvested for their oil, bones, and baleen. The glorification of whalers as noble heroes, celebrated for their success in killing hundreds of whales, represents an outdated worldview rooted in domination, greed, and human-centered pride. However, the growing environmental crisis and the establishment of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 14 (SDG 14) demand a radical transformation in this mindset. SDG 14 emphasizes the conservation and sustainable use of the oceans, seas, and marine resources, calling for urgent action to reduce pollution, halt overfishing, protect biodiversity, and promote practices that ensure long-term ecological balance. In my view, to move from being exploiters to guardians of the sea, humanity must undergo both a cultural and ethical shift:

1. Reframing Nature as a Living System, Not a Commodity

Just as *Moby Dick* mythologizes the whale as a powerful, almost supernatural force, modern societies must learn to respect marine life not for its market value, but for its intrinsic worth and ecological importance. Marine ecosystems regulate climate, provide oxygen, and support millions of species—including humans. Viewing the ocean as a living, interconnected system is essential to fostering respect and responsibility.

2. Embracing Sustainable Practices

Unlike the destructive whaling industry of the 19th century, today's industries must implement sustainable fishing methods, reduce bycatch, and ensure that marine habitats are protected. Policies should support community-based coastal management, especially involving small-scale fishers who depend directly on healthy oceans.

3. Environmental Education and Awareness

Literature like *Moby Dick* can be used in environmental education to reflect on the consequences of unchecked exploitation. By engaging students and the public with cultural narratives and environmental science, we can build a deeper emotional connection to ocean conservation.

4. Global Cooperation and Policy Enforcement

As SDG 14 highlights, safeguarding the oceans requires international cooperation. Countries must enforce regulations against illegal fishing, marine pollution, and habitat destruction. Marine protected areas (MPAs) and global agreements must be strengthened to ensure compliance and long-term stewardship.

5. Reinterpreting Cultural Narratives

Just as scholars now read Moby Dick through an eco-critical lens, societies must reinterpret their historical relationships with nature. This means questioning long-held myths of conquest and dominance and replacing them with stories of coexistence, humility, and resilience.

6.SDG 14 and the Ethical Reframing of Marine Life

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 14 (Life Below Water) provides a contemporary ethical and policy-oriented framework that advocates for the conservation and sustainable use of marine ecosystems. It addresses pressing global challenges such as the mitigation of ocean pollution, the protection of marine biodiversity, the regulation of overfishing, and the promotion of long-term ecological balance (United Nations, 2024). Although Herman Melville's Moby-Dick predates the formulation of the SDGs by over a century, the novel's dramatization of oceanic violence and its moral implications resonate powerfully with the ethical imperatives embodied in SDG 14.

In this study, SDG 14 is not employed as an anachronistic metric to evaluate Melville's historical moment, nor as a checklist imposed upon a literary artifact. Rather, it serves as a normative interpretive lens—one that enables a critical reassessment of the novel's environmental representations in light of contemporary sustainability discourse. This approach foregrounds themes of ecological responsibility, marine stewardship, and the ethical boundaries of human ambition, framing Moby-Dick not merely as a literary classic, but as a text that engages with—and anticipates—modern concerns about oceanic ethics and environmental crisis.

Viewed through this lens, Captain Ahab's obsessive pursuit of the white whale becomes more than a psychological or metaphysical tragedy. It exemplifies a symbolic transgression of the ecological limits that SDG 14 seeks to defend. Ahab's worldview, which perceives the ocean as a hostile frontier and marine life as a resource to be dominated, starkly contrasts with the sustainability-centered ethos of SDG 14. The Pequod's ultimate destruction may therefore be read as an allegory of ecological collapse, a narrative prefiguration of the consequences that follow when human systems pursue unchecked exploitation of natural environments.

Importantly, SDG 14 also functions as a bridge between literary interpretation and environmental education. By situating *Moby-Dick* within the context of modern sustainability goals, the novel emerges as a powerful pedagogical resource—one that reveals how cultural narratives historically legitimized practices such as whaling, while offering a lens through which contemporary readers can interrogate the ideological roots of environmental degradation. In this way, SDG 14 does not constrain literary analysis; it enriches it, enabling a deeper exploration of how narrative forms mediate ethical relationships with the marine world.

7.Research Limitations

While the integration of SDG 14 into literary analysis provides valuable ethical insight, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, as a policy-based and normatively prescriptive framework, SDG 14 was not designed as a tool for literary interpretation. Its application to a nineteenth-century fictional text necessarily involves a degree of conceptual abstraction. The objective of this study is not to measure empirical outcomes within the narrative, but to use SDG 14 as a heuristic for interpreting the ethical dimensions of Moby-Dick. This requires careful attention to symbolic resonance rather than empirical validation

Second, the scope of the study is limited by its reliance on a single primary text. While Moby-Dick offers a rich site for ecocritical inquiry, exclusive focus on Melville's novel constrains the generalizability of the findings. The environmental themes illuminated in this analysis may not be representative of the broader spectrum of nineteenth-century maritime literature, nor do they encompass non-Western perspectives on oceanic ethics. Future research might address this limitation by conducting comparative studies across diverse literary traditions and geographies.

Third, the qualitative and interpretive nature of the study entails an element of subjectivity inherent to literary criticism. Although the analysis is grounded in established frameworks—including ecocriticism, narrative theory, and tragic theory—the interpretation of motifs, symbols, and ethical implications remains contingent on critical judgment. Alternative theoretical approaches, such as postcolonial or theological readings, could yield different insights that fall outside the scope of this study.

Finally, the historical distance between *Moby-Dick* and the emergence of SDG 14 presents a temporal limitation. The novel was produced in a socio-economic context fundamentally distinct from today's sustainability discourse. Applying modern ethical frameworks to historical texts risks presentism—the imposition of contemporary values onto past cultural artifacts. To mitigate this, the study treats SDG 14 not as a prescriptive measure but as a reflective instrument, one that enables ethical dialogue between past and present without collapsing their historical specificity.

8.Ecocritical Reframing: From "Heroic Whaling" to Environmental Violence

Although Moby-Dick is often interpreted as a metaphysical tragedy or a testament to American ambition, an ecocritical lens reveals that the novel also serves as a sustained meditation on environmental ethics. Rather than merely presenting the ocean as a passive backdrop for human action, Melville renders it as a morally and materially charged space. Schultz (2000) contends that the novel's encyclopedic structure—its oscillation between narrative episodes and digressions on cetology, whaling industry practices, and philosophical reflections—is not ornamental but instrumental. These digressions repeatedly redirect the reader's attention to the ecological ramifications of transforming living marine bodies into economic value. In this context, the whaling expedition emerges as a cultural system that legitimizes industrial-scale marine violence through ritualized language, hierarchical organization, and institutionalized practice.

This interpretive shift is especially pertinent to the present study's engagement with SDG 14 (Life Below Water), as it positions Moby-Dick as a potential text for environmental education. Instead of isolating Captain Ahab's obsession as a psychological anomaly, the narrative foregrounds the structural forces—industrial, ideological, and historical—that render his obsession intelligible, even heroic. Through Schultz's ecocritical approach, the Pequod is reimagined not merely as a vessel for tragic destiny, but as a mobile apparatus of extraction and ecological disruption. The ocean, under this framework, is no longer an "empty space" to be conquered but a living ecosystem whose exploitation provokes both ethical and material consequences.

By emphasizing this systemic dimension, the novel lays bare the contradiction between romanticized myths of nature and the realities of ecological degradation. Whales, simultaneously depicted as awe-inspiring wonders and commodified resources, exemplify this duality. This tension parallels contemporary sustainability discourse, in which celebratory narratives of maritime enterprise often obscure the environmental costs of resource extraction. Within the scope of SDG 14, Moby-Dick thus functions as a cultural case study in how literary narratives can naturalize—and thereby perpetuate—environmentally destructive practices. Schultz's analysis ultimately supports reading Moby-Dick not only as a work about nature but as a critique of unsustainable human-ocean relations.

9.More-than-Human Ethics: Whale Bodies, Sympathy

To deepen the ecocritical analysis, Armstrong (2004) introduces a vital ethical framework that reconceptualizes the whale not as a mere symbol or antagonist, but as a "more-than-human" presence that challenges anthropocentric worldviews. Armstrong's

emphasis on compassion underscores how the novel continually destabilizes the boundary between human subjectivity and animal objecthood. Even when the crew employs commercial and militaristic language to describe whales, the narrative inserts moments of ambivalence—scenes marked by wonder, hesitation, and moral discomfort—that interrupt an instrumental logic of domination.

This ethical reorientation is central to the aims of SDG 14, which calls not only for better marine governance but also for a shift in how societies value marine life. When viewed through Armstrong's perspective, the whale's body becomes a contested site of meaning: it is simultaneously a commercial object, a sublime entity, and a moral provocateur. This complex representation compels readers to question the legitimacy of violence normalized through economic and cultural systems. Armstrong's focus on affect and sympathy enables Moby-Dick to function as a text that "teaches" sustainability—not through didactic messaging, but by immersing the reader in the affective structures that make exploitation possible, and then gradually unraveling them.

Within this interpretive frame, Moby Dick's "revenge" ceases to function as a literal act of animal vengeance. Instead, it serves as a narrative device that dramatizes the ethical consequences of unchecked anthropocentrism. The whale becomes an allegorical figure—embodying a "more-than-human" resistance to extractive logic. This reading reinforces the broader argument that Ahab's downfall symbolizes the collapse of human exceptionalism in the face of ecological limits. As such, Armstrong's analysis strengthens the view that Moby-Dick anticipates contemporary debates about marine ethics, sustainability, and the moral scope of human responsibility.

10.An Anthropocene Lens: The Pequod as a System of Extraction and Feedback

A third layer of analysis emerges through Krien's (2021) Anthropocene reading of Moby-Dick, which frames the novel not as a tale of individual obsession but as a narrative of interconnected systems—economic, technological, and ecological. Krien's interpretation is particularly useful for enriching the present study's "Results and Discussion" section, as it substantiates the claim that the Pequod operates not just as a ship or stage for personal tragedy but as a systemic mechanism that organizes energy, labor, knowledge, and violence into a unified extractive enterprise.

Within this paradigm, Ahab's monomania is not the origin of destruction but a symptom of an already entrenched industrial logic. The routines of the crew, the ship's machinery, and the commercial imperatives of whaling converge to form a system in which marine life is transformed into oil, capital, and geopolitical prestige. The novel thus stages a feedback loop: the more aggressively the system seeks to dominate nature, the more it accelerates its own instability and collapse. This dynamic prefigures a central concern of Anthropocene discourse—the ecological consequences of human systems that overreach by commodifying nonhuman life.

Krien's contribution fortifies the study's claim that Moby-Dick anticipates the systemic crises that SDG 14 seeks to address. The novel's catastrophic ending is not merely poetic justice but a structural warning: when extractive imperatives override all other values—when even labor, knowledge, and meaning are subsumed into production—the result is ecological self-destruction. In this light, the narrative becomes pedagogically significant for sustainability education, not because it prescribes solutions, but because it reveals the consequences of a worldview that denies limits.

11.Integrated Insights: Ecocriticism and the Sustainability Agenda

Taken together, the insights of Schultz (2000), Armstrong (2004), and Krien (2021) provide a cohesive framework for reinterpreting Moby-Dick as a work of lasting relevance

to ecocriticism and Anthropocene studies. Schultz elucidates the novel's critique of cultural systems that normalize marine exploitation; Armstrong supplies an ethical vocabulary that expands the reader's empathy beyond the human; and Krien contextualizes the Pequod within a larger system of extractive feedback loops. These perspectives collectively affirm the novel's pedagogical utility in the context of SDG 14, framing Ahab's demise as an allegory for the collapse of unsustainable human-ocean relations.

In sum, Moby-Dick should be re-evaluated not merely as a literary artifact of American Romanticism, but as a complex environmental text that interrogates the logics of conquest, commodification, and ecological transgression. Its enduring relevance lies in its capacity to reveal the moral, systemic, and existential dimensions of marine exploitation—a relevance that resonates powerfully within contemporary debates about sustainability, ocean ethics, and global environmental futures.

12.Conclusion and Discussion

Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, though written in the 19th century, remains deeply relevant in today's context of environmental awareness and sustainability. Through the lens of Tragic Theory and SDG 14 (Life Below Water), Captain Ahab's doomed quest emerges not only as a personal tragedy driven by overconfident pride but also as a powerful allegory for humanity's historical and ongoing exploitation of marine life.

Ahab's downfall—mirroring Shakespearean tragic heroes like Macbeth and King Lear—highlights the consequences of over proud and the failure to respect natural boundaries. His obsessive pursuit of Moby Dick symbolizes a larger, systemic human impulse to dominate nature, an impulse that has contributed to marine degradation and biodiversity loss. Melville's depiction of whaling as a noble and heroic endeavor reflects the values of his time, when the ocean was viewed as an infinite resource to be conquered. However, through modern ecological understanding and the framework of SDG 14, we now recognize the dangers of such thinking. What was once perceived as valor is now seen as environmental violence.

This re-evaluation calls for a shift in perspective. As SDG 14 urges, the ocean must be protected through sustainable practices that reduce overfishing, marine pollution, and habitat destruction. Melville's romantic and mythic portrayal of the whale, contrasted with the violent reality of the whaling industry, reveals the tension between human fantasy and environmental responsibility. The novel, therefore, becomes a site of critical reflection—not only on literary tragedy but on the ecological tragedies unfolding in real life.

Furthermore, the sole survival of Ishmael suggests a glimmer of hope. He represents the possibility of learning from past mistakes, of bearing witness to the consequences of unchecked ambition, and of choosing a more respectful relationship with the natural world. Just as SDG 14 encourages global cooperation to safeguard marine life for future generations, *Moby Dick* encourages its readers to question humanity's place in nature and the cost of our actions.

Melville's *Moby Dick* offers both a timeless narrative of personal downfall and a prophetic warning about ecological destruction. By viewing the novel through an eco-critical lens informed by SDG 14 and tragic theory, we gain valuable insights into the cultural, ethical, and environmental implications of humanity's historical treatment of the ocean. This approach underscores the urgent need for a more sustainable and humble interaction with the life below water.

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