Intrepid Warriors on Sea: Fishing and Masculinity in *Moby Dick*

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Received 9 October 2014; accepted 4 December 2014
Published online 31 January 2015

Abstract
In western culture, fishing is recognized as male activity, reflecting typical masculinity. In American culture, fishing is a unique representation of masculinity. In Melville’s novel *Moby Dick*, this cultural representation, fishing, is employed to construct masculinity, which expresses author’s optimistic attitude for American national literature, meanwhile reshapes American nation’s character and temperament.

Key words: Moby Dick; Fishing; Masculinity; Nationality

INTRODUCTION
Fish not only provides human being material necessities as a kind of food, but also “swims” into the spirit world of human being, and can find its image in religious rites as well as varied western literary works. For example, Father Mapple in *Moby Dick* extols the “giant fish” in his praying to God with other shipmates; the images of big marlin and shark in *The Old Man and The Sea* by Hemingway, Yeats’ poem *Fish* and so on. These literary works are the description of relationship between man and fish. Among the various literary works concerning “giant fish”, *Moby Dick* by Melville conveys deep cultural connotations.

Herman Melville, one of the American literary giants in the late 19th century, has created many acclaimed works by his abundant navigation experiences as well as legendary life experiences. Among his works, *Moby Dick*, published in 1851 in London, is rich in content and profound in influence, which becomes the research focus of scholars at home and abroad. The research on *Moby Dick* by scholars mainly concentrates on biographies of Melville, writing techniques and language value, philosophical themes, cultural themes and so on. After the hundreds of years’ research on *Moby Dick*, there have been fruitful results achieved. However, there is seldom study of fishing and masculinity, which leaves great space for the research in this paper. *Moby Dick* tells the story of journey led by Ahab, the captain of the *Pequod*, to pursue vicious Moby Dick. “Giant Fish” (as Moby Dick) is important in the tradition memory of western world, and represents the evil. Because there is a cultural memory of fear in the west, the collective unconsciousness of fish phobia has deeply influenced the western culture as well as literary creation.

Therefore, the process of fishing is quite tough; it is the competition of physical power, and the battle between life and death, which determines that the fishing is closely related to masculinity. *Moby Dick* depicts the labor and life of shipmates and whalers in the *Pequod* vividly, and praises them as the heroes, saints as well as prophets and “ascribes all the honor and the glory to whaling; for a whale-ship was my Yale College and my Harvard”(Melville, 1992, p. 68). Therefore, the whaling ship the *Pequod* becomes the best place to show whalers’ masculine traits such as bravery, adventurousness, unity, wisdom. Meanwhile, whalers’ heroism spirit of being perseverant, unswerving, courageous makes them noble in Melville’s work. In addition, the merits and characteristics of whalers featured by Melville in *Moby Dick* is that the American national spirit extols, thus keeps a line with American national culture. In this way, *Moby Dick* becomes the outstanding novel with distinctive American feature in the development of American literature.
1. IMAGE OF “GIANT FISH” AND THE CULTURAL MEMORY OF FISH PHOBIA IN THE WEST

1.1 Image of “Giant Fish” in Western Culture

In traditional western culture, “Giant Fish” refers to the giant ferocious animals in the ocean, such as sea monsters, whales. Moby Dick is not just in Melville’s novel, while it goes into the imaginative experience of sea monsters as well as dragons since the Old Testament. Therefore, sea monsters and dragons in western culture are the prototypes of great whale in literary works. In Motif-Index of Folk-literature, Stith Thompson defines the sea monster Leviathan as giant fish (Thompson, 1993, p. 165). Leviathan, as the symbol of evil, has appeared in the Bible. As the king of aquarium in the sea, Leviathan is extremely powerful, fierce and formidable. It lives in the sea and poses great threat to the passing ships, therefore leaving an image of terror in the memory of western people. In addition, Leviathan is described as “serpent”, “sea monster” and “dragon”. According to the classification of Frye in The Great Code: The Bible and Literature, “serpent”, “sea monster” and “dragon” all belong to devil image contrasting with apocalyptic images (Fyre, 1990, p. 215).

In addition to Leviathan, there is giant fish swallowing Jonah concerning the fish image. In Nantucket, Jonah breaks the will of God, God casts him into water, and orders a giant fish to swallow him. Then Jonah keeps praying to God in the plight. After praying for three days and nights, Jonah has been saved. From that on, Jonah swears allegiance to the Lord and acts in accordance with the will of God. The giant fish swallowed Jonah represents the God’s anger and a threat as well as punishment from alien power for Jonah, which poses an impression of fish phobia in the memory. In Moby Dick, Father Mapple retells the story of Jonah’s threat from giant fish, which strengthens the feeling of fish phobia in the memory of whalers.

It can be concluded that “giant fish” is described as cruel and frightening image in the western traditional culture.

1.2 Cultural Memory of Giant Fish Phobia

The Swiss psychologist Carl Jung’s collective cultural memory is a common memory within a certain cultural system, which symbolizing a cultural identity of a nation. In western culture, fish can pose a threat to human being and leaves an impression of fear. Western scholars have made academic research about fish phobia. American scholar Washington Matthews defined it as “Ichthyophobia” and pointed out that the fear originated from superstition, and it was a taboo of fish (Matthews, 1898, p. 105). S. W. Frost introduces the concept of “fish phobia” into European and American cultural context, and makes an analysis of complicated feelings ancient people towards fish. From the very beginning of human being’s existence, fish attracts the attention of human being, and becomes the food for them. In the primitive period, human being built their houses along the river or the coast of sea, what people can easily get more fish for food. Human being’s adjacent position to the fish helps to form an ambivalent feeling of both worshipping and fearful feeling towards the fish (Frost, 1934, p. 574). Frost thinks since the early times, the image of fish is horrible and terrifying in the memory of human being. When man ventures into the sea, the fish, with odd shape and strong power, hides in the deep water and attacks people and ships unexpectedly. Therefore, the worship to ship of ancient people originates from the feeling of fish phobia. Form what described about giant fish above, the cultural memory of western people’s fish phobia can be felt deeply. According to Carl Jung, the feeling of fish phobia accumulates and multiplies for days and months to become collective unconsciousness and psychological archetype, which poses a far-reaching influence on western culture as well as its literary creation.

The novel Moby Dick by Melville, a story about a horrible whale, is regarded as the classic epic concerning “fish phobia”. The giant fish Moby Dick kills a great many shipmates, and makes many whaling ships destroyed at the deep bottom of sea. Moby Dick snaps a leg of Ahab, the captain of the Pequod. Then Ahab determines to kill Moby, and starts an unusual voyage and a fierce struggle between Moby and whalers.

2. FISHING AND MASCULINITY CONSTRUCTION IN MOBY DICK

2.1 Fishing and Masculinity

In eastern culture, fishing is regarded as the recreation activities of literati as well as recluse, which symbolizes freedom and wisdom. However, in western culture, influenced by the feeling of fish phobia, fish is not the recreation object for human being any more. And the process of fishing is arduous, even the competition of power and the struggle between survival and death, which determines the close relationship between fishing and masculinity.

In American Masculinities: a Historical Encyclopedia, American scholar Bret Carroll expresses the idea that fishing shows masculinity: “As a livelihood, pastime, industry, and literary theme, fishing has been perceived and portrayed as singularly masculine, and, as such, it has played a distinct role in constructions of American manhood. Both recreational and commercial fishing have long represented a haven where men can escape from society and engage in contact with the natural world.”(Carroll, 2003, p. 184). The Danish scholar
Deborah Simonton also confirms the male feature of fishing in the work *A History of European Women's Work* (Simonton, 1998, p. 125). Their remarks show that fishing is closely related to masculinity, and it is a men’s exclusive activity, which can be regarded as a kind of cultural mark of man’s identity.

Therefore, fishing is regarded as the men’s exclusive activity in the western culture, which shows the distinctive masculinity. In American culture, fishing is a unique representation of masculinity, and Melville portrayed heroes in his novel with this cultural representation.

### 2.2 Masculinity Construction in *Moby Dick*

*Masculinity* by American sociologist R. W. Connell is considered as the classic work for the research on masculinity. Prof. Connel argues that masculinity is not a monolithic whole but can be divided into four main types: hegemony, subordination, complicity and marginalization, which experience variations in different societies, cultures, and different times and places (Connel, 1995, pp. 76-81). Among the four variations, hegemonic masculinity is the mainstream of masculinity, occupying the leading position in society, which shows the close relationship between masculinity and social culture. In a given historical period, there is always a kind of masculinity accepted and respected by mainstream culture in the society, and this accepted and respected type of masculinity becomes “ideal” for the expectation of society and is related to the dominant culture of the society, which is universally acknowledged and fully participated in construction. In American society at that time, bravery, adventurous spirit, individual struggle are the mainstream culture, which is also the basic traits of masculinity. The struggle and battle of whalers at sea is a full and proper expression of their masculinity. Whalers in *Moby Dick* are on the broad ocean and experience the strong storms, showing the power to conquer the sea. The broad ocean, as the whale-hunting place, is extremely vast, full of horrors and mysteries. It is turbulent, not stationary as the land. Among the great many ships at sea, whaling ship risks most highly. Whaling-hunting can bring people to the abyss of death, and it bets for life. Under the material and technical conditions at that time, whaling-hunting mainly depends on physical power and manual work. During the whaling voyage, the condition is quite poor. Whalers eat stale bread, drink water from the sea, stay in simple and shabby cabin, and should endure the extreme weather of severe coldness from polar area and torturing heat from the tropic area. As a high-risk industry, whaling can not be handled and conducted by anyone. Only the people who are adventurous, bold, brave and wise deserve the fresh and free air on the vast ocean.

Whalers in the *Pequod* are intrepid, wise, and as strong as iron. Three darters are from the primitive tribes and live a primitive hunting life before engaging in whale-hunting. They are powerful, strong and full of energy. Ishmeal thinks “for all his tattooings he [Queequeg] was on the whole a clean, comely looking cannibal” (Melville, 1992, p. 63) and “better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian” (Melville, 1992, p. 64). Then his appearance “ reminded me [Queequeg] of General Washington’s head, as seen in the popular busts of him. It had the same long regularly gradedretreating slope from above the brows, which were likewise very projecting, like two long promontories thickly wooded on top. Queequeg was George Washington cannibalistically developed” (Melville, 1992, p. 109). Wyn Kelley remarks that “the greatest of Melville’s epic heroes is Queequeg. Like Homer’s warriors or Beowulf and his men, he faces danger calmly and fearlessly. He exhibits precise and artful skill in his use of weapons. He decorates his body with pride. And he embodies an ethic of universal brotherhood that Ishmael mockingly identifies as more Christian than most Christians” (Kelley, 2008, p. 70). Starbuck is the chief mate of the *Pequod*, he is a native of Nantucket, and a Quaker by descent. He is a good assistant of Ahab, and can be said to be the wise and rational person in the *Pequod*. Initially, for the sake of all whalers’ safety and interests, Starbuck has prevented Ahab’s blind pursuit for Moby Dick many times. When Ahab, with frenzied revenge and extreme anger, is almost insane, Starbuck takes care of him, wears him tight iron cloth, helps him return to ration. Moreover, in the final duel with Moby Dick, Starbuck is courageous and fearless at the last moment of life. Stubb is the second mate in the *Pequod*, he is brave, optimistic and fearless when facing dangers. What’s more, he treats the toughest struggle as having a meal, and all other whalers as the guests invited by him. All the whalers are militant warriors and fighters, and the vast ocean is the battlefield of their glory. When the captain Ahab unveils the plan of killing Moby Dick and announce in public, the whalers, could not suppress their desires for conquest, and swear at sea.

As the main character of the novel as well as the leader during the whaling journey, the captain Ahab shows self-evident masculinity. Ahab comes from Nantucket which is the original place of whaling-hunting industry. In Nantucket, ocean is regarded as pasture by local people, and they think two thirds of the earth’s surface is covered by water which belongs to them. Ahab has voyaged to many barbaric places; his spear has stabbed numerous whales. His skill of handling whaling-hunting tools is excellent and outstanding. As the captain of whaling-hunting ship, Ahab risks his life and unit all the whalers in the *Pequod* to struggle with Moby Dick. Eventually, the *Pequod* is totally destroyed and not any whaler survives except the narrator of the story Ishmael, but it reflects the intrepid and fearless manhood. Richard Chase thinks “the whaling captain Ahab can be the representation of American hero in the 19th century” (Chase, 1980, p. 101). And Kazin also praises Ahab as “the noble American hero” (Kazin, 1962, p. 44). In addition, in the eyes of...
Ishmael, Ahab is also the hero with masculinity: “Captain Ahab stood erect, looking straight out beyond the ship’s ever-pitching prow. There was an infinity of firmest fortitude, a determinate, unsurrenderable willfulness, in the fixed and fearless, forward dedication of that glance” (Melville, 1992, p. 239).

In the novel *Moby Dick*, Melville depicts a picture of a group of heroes. The fishing of whalers in the *Pequod*, that is the whalers’ struggle with Moby Dick, is full of dangers and causalities, which shows the characteristics of masculinity, meanwhile highlights the character and temperament of American nation.

The middle of the 19th century witnesses profound changes in America. The completion of industrial revolution in New England areas has posed far-reaching influence on the development of American economy as well as the change of social structure. After the industrial revolution, machine production has gradually replaced the handicraft industry and become the main mode of production of American economic society. The use of machines makes the economic activities such as commodity production less reliant on work force and women can be able to conduct many activities which only men could in the previous time. Therefore, a large number of women are hired to conduct machine production. Women break through the traditional roles, walking from family to factory, and support themselves. The shift of the role has, to some extent, weakened the masculinity. Simone de Beauvoir once said: “[women] set free through the economic development consequent upon the social upheaval brought about by machinery. The problem of woman is reduced to the problem of her capacity for labor. Puissant at that time when techniques were suited to her capabilities, dethroned when she was no longer in a position to exploit them, woman regains in the modern world her equality with man” (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 46). The rise of women’s status brought by the modernization and economy poses a great challenge to the masculinity. Melville is also aware of the threat posed by the social reform to the dominant masculinity. Therefore, he depicts the group of heroes in the novel *Moby Dick*, aiming to defend dominant characteristics of masculinity at that time.

3. **MASCULINITY IN MOBY DICK AND NATIONALITY OF AMERICAN LITERATURE**

3.1 **The Developmental Situation of American Native Literature**

With the establishment of capitalism in America, capitalist economy has developed rapidly. In addition to the economic as well as political achievements, American people hope to achieve developments in national culture. However, used to be the colony of Great Britain, American literature affiliates to British literature and sets it as an example both in creation and criticism.

In order to change the declined situation of American literature, Ralph Waldo Emerson expresses in *American Scholar*: “Perhaps the time is already come, when it ought to be, and will be, something else; when the sluggish intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids, and fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the exertions of mechanical skill. Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close” (Emerson, 1837, p. 1). At the end of the article, Emerson remarks: “We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds” (Emerson, 1837, p. 14).

Meanwhile, Melville expresses his optimistic attitude towards American national literature by praising Hawthorne’s short novel in *Hawthorne and His Mosses*, which believes there will be “Shakespeare” in American literature (Melville, 1850, pp. 535-551). From the remarks of Melville, it can be inferred that he is confident that great literary theme will be born out of the American ordinary and everyday materials, and he will create literary works with it in mind firmly.

Daniel Hoffman thinks that in the American of exploration and expansion, hunting is important theme of national literature. And the novel *Moby Dick*, the whale as hunting object, is the greatest hunting story in America, which is an epic theme suitable to show American national characters. Melville praises the common American people with the masculine representation of wisdom, bravery, integrity as well as perseverance, which provides new topics for the development of American national literature.

3.2 **Moby Dick and the Nationality of American Literature**

*Moby Dick* depicts the whaling-hunting activity which American people are familiar with in the 19th century. Whaling-hunting industry originates from the ancient times, and becomes the main and important way of capitalist expansion. As the capitalist countries with long history, Britain, France, Germany and Spain are excel at whale-hunting, and their whaling ships infests in every corners of the oceans in the world. As the newly-established capitalist country, America has developed rapidly. And its whaling industry has developed and surpassed other capitalist countries by the middle of 19th century, which helps to accumulate a great fortune for the capitalist development of America and makes the tremendous contribution. Therefore, the development of whaling-hunting industry at that time is a pride for common American people. The whaling-hunting theme Melville wrote in his novel is not only the activity American people are familiar with, the characteristics of being adventurous, pioneering, enterprising and optimistic which the characters in the novel carry are the qualities
respected by American people. The characters and images created by Melville in the novel and their characteristics conform to the spirit of American nation, and resonate with the national culture. Therefore, 

Moby Dick becomes the outstanding novel with distinctive American characteristics in American literature.

Wyn Kelley defines Moby Dick as an epic (Kelley, 2008, p. 70), which puts it a equal position as Iliad, Odyssey, Beowulf and Don Quixote. It is known that Iliad and Odyssey enjoy the highest position in western classic literature and they are universally regarded as models of western literature. They have been the greatest epic since two thousand years. In western literature, Moby Dick is positioned equally with them, which shows the great artistic value of Moby Dick. It is also a testifying that American soil can nurture and create great classic literary works with its own distinctiveness. Wyn Kelly continues, “The plot of epic does not so much concern a battle between men and fate as in tragedy, or between men and their own natures as in comedy, as it is a conflict between men of one tribe or nation and those of another” (Kelley, 2008, p. 70). Whalers in the Pequod are from every corner of the world, some from Nantucket, some from Azores, others from Malta...However, Melville categorises them into common American people, and they stand for American nation to compete with other whaling ships to get profits for America in the ocean. Actually, the beginning period of 19th century witnesses varied sharp conflicts in American society: conflict between the white and the black, between the white and native Indians, even between different classes of the white. In Moby Dick, Melville intends to avoid social conflicts and contradictions so as to present the readers a group of positive and solitary heroes. The purpose of this creation is to praise the bravery and merits of American nation by fishing as well as masculinity of a group of heroes. Meanwhile, it expresses Melville’s wish that all the American people, whatever races, unit and face the difficulties together.

Melville identifies “Moby Dick as a gospel cetology” (Kelley, 2008, p. 58.) “Gospel cetology” has profound meanings. On one hand, cetology is related to science, which contains abundant knowledge and provides a large number of materials for navigation, whaling-hunting and the study of whales. Therefore, it can be regarded as a history of whaling-hunting industry as well as an encyclopedic work, which is exactly in line with American people’s psychology of utilitarianism and pragmatism. On the other hand, gospel carries religious meaning, and there are many biblical content as well as images in the novel Moby Dick. “Melville makes the boldest of claims for the novel as a new bible, a book of truth” (Kelley, 2008, p. 58). In this sense, Moby Dick carries both the scientific value and religious significance. And it is a practice of which Emerson has put forward in American Scholar: “We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds”(Emerson, 1837, p. 14), which adds a brilliance to American national literature.

The whale represents an evil force, while fishing is the indomitable struggle for goodness and justice against evil forces. The United States is in the rising period of capitalism, and there are varied good and evil forces struggling each other. So dauntless heroic masculinity is needed to fight for justice which the previous themes of American literature lack. The novel Moby Dick promotes the development of American literature by fishing. In addition, creating the literary mode with distinctive American characteristics to break through the confinement of British literature requires the courage and determination which are key in hunting whales. The novel Moby Dick by Melville is one of the forerunners of American native literature.

In the novel Moby Dick, Melville promotes the whaling-hunting industry to a sublime position, extols the American common people, portrayed the group of heroes with masculinity, which makes the humble whalers as the representation of pioneering American national character. Moreover, Moby Dick is the typical work to inherit and enrich the literary works of navigating theme, which has made an irreplaceable contribution in the process of constructing American national literature.

CONCLUSION

The image of “Giant Fish” is deeply rooted in western culture as well as the memories of western people. The process of fishing is tough, which is also the struggle and competition between powers, between wisdom and bravery, even between life and death. Therefore, fishing reflects the connotation of masculinity. In the novel Moby Dick by Melville, the whalers in the Pequod struggle toughly with Moby Dick. Eventually, Moby Dick is killed at the cost of all the whalers’ lives except that the narrator Ishmeal survives. Though the whalers lose their lives, they are glorious and show the masculine representations of bravery, wisdom, integrity, perseverance in the process of whaling-hunting, which refresh American national literature and helps to reshape American national character.

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