

The attack on transcendentalism



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Herman Melville, the author of *Moby Dick*, attacks the views of the Transcendentalists by portraying Moby Dick, the white whale, as the personification of evil. This completely opposes the Transcendentalist idea that there is only good in the world. Throughout the story, Melville also incorporates the Anti-Transcendental principles that the truths of existence are illusive and that nature is indifferent, unforgiving, and often unexplainable. Moby Dick and Captain Ahab both refute the Transcendentalist principle that there is no evil, there is only love. The Transcendentalists feel that the world is filled with goodness, however, the Anti-Transcendentalists believe in the more reasonable idea that man has the potential to be either good or bad. Moby Dick is portrayed as evil in the story as Ahab tells of how he lost his leg to the white behemoth. After Ahab loses his leg to the white whale he creates himself as the “race-hero”; moving against the presence of evil, Ahab vows to kill the source of evil: Moby Dick. (Stern, 74) Ahab, therefore, unconsciously casts his own evil onto Moby Dick. The whale also personifies the evil that exists within Ahab. The evil Ahab possesses is the result of his obsession with extinguishing the evil in the whale. The very evil that exists in Ahab is that which the transcendentalists deem to be non-existent. Melville is therefore striking heavily upon the ideals of the Transcendentalists. Ahab also seeks to control nature, which goes against Transcendentalist views that man and nature are equal before God. Ahab’s passion to dominate nature gives him an evil persona and counters Transcendentalist views. “He, Ahab, is evil, Melville seems to say, because he seeks to overthrow the established order of dualistic human creation” (Stern, 74) Nature’s indifference is shown by Moby Dick as it pays sparse attention to Ahab, regardless of how much time

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Ahab puts into the whale. “ the great white whale that is essentially indifferent to him.” (Stern) According to Transcendentalist views, nature is supposed to be good and loving, but this is disproved by Melville’s blatantly obvious portrayals of the malicious sides of Nature. The Transcendentalist principle that nature is good and rational is tackled by the Anti-Transcendentalist ideal that nature is indifferent, unforgiving, and often unexplainable. Melville presents this in Moby Dick by using the sea as a setting. The sea is a vast and often times unexplainable phenomenon. The damage that the whale does to the boats and crew members is how Melville shows the true nature of the sea. “ But as the oarsmen violently forced their boat through the sledge-hammering seas, the before whale-smitten bow-ends of two planks burst through, and in an instant almost, the temporarily disabled boat lay nearly level with the waves” (Melville, 327) The story, Moby Dick attacks the rosy-cheeked ideals of the Transcendentalists by introducing the characteristics of evil and indifference. The Transcendentalists believe that there is no evil, however, it is shown in Moby Dick that Man has the potential for good and evil, as does nature. In Anti-Transcendentalism nature is not portrayed as a wonderful, rational thing, but realistically as an indifferent, unforgiving, and unexplainable wonder. Melville deals heavy blows against the optimistic views of the Transcendentalists by portraying characteristics of evil and attacking nature. Melville weaves Anti-Transcendentalist principles by using images of destruction and iniquity. These images show the true nature of the world and do not attempt to hide it in an attempt to make the world seem happy.