



## Discourse Analysis of Symbolism in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*

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### Abstract:

This study explores the symbolism of the Whale, the Pequod, and the Sea in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) using discourse analysis. The research aims to reveal how these symbols are represented and how their meanings shift across different contexts in the novel. Employing a qualitative approach, the study examines how language, ideology, and perspective shape symbolic interpretation. The findings show that Melville's symbols are not fixed but fluid, reflecting the dynamic interaction between human belief, power, and nature. The Whale embodies humanity's struggle with the unknown, the Pequod mirrors social and ideological structures, and the Sea represents both the vastness of nature and the limits of human understanding. Through discourse analysis, this study concludes that Melville constructs meaning as a process of negotiation rather than a static allegory. The results contribute to literary studies by demonstrating how discourse shapes symbolic meaning, offering new insight into how language and ideology influence interpretation in classic literature.

**Keywords:** Moby Dick; Herman Melville; symbolism; discourse

### Abstrak:

Studi ini mengeksplorasi simbolisme Paus, Pequod, dan Laut dalam *Moby-Dick* (1851) karya Herman Melville menggunakan analisis wacana. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengungkap bagaimana simbol-simbol ini direpresentasikan dan bagaimana maknanya bergeser di berbagai konteks dalam novel. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, studi ini mengkaji bagaimana bahasa, ideologi, dan perspektif membentuk interpretasi simbolik. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa simbol-simbol Melville tidak tetap tetapi cair, mencerminkan interaksi dinamis antara keyakinan manusia, kekuatan, dan alam. Paus mewujudkan perjuangan manusia dengan yang tidak diketahui, Pequod mencerminkan struktur sosial dan ideologis, dan Laut mewakili luasnya alam dan batas pemahaman manusia. Melalui analisis wacana, studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa Melville membangun makna sebagai proses negosiasi daripada alegori statis. Hasilnya berkontribusi pada studi sastra dengan menunjukkan bagaimana wacana membentuk makna simbolik, menawarkan wawasan baru tentang bagaimana bahasa dan ideologi memengaruhi interpretasi dalam sastra klasik.

**Kata kunci:** Moby Dick; Herman Melville; simbolisme; wacana

## INTRODUCTION

*Moby-Dick* (1851) is a classic work of American literature by Herman Melville, known for its complex themes and extensive use of symbolism. The novel is narrated by



Ishmael, the main character in the story, who is aboard the whaling ship Pequod. Captain Ahab is the stubborn captain of the Pequod, obsessed with hunting the white whale, Moby Dick. Ahab is accompanied by various crew members, one of whom is Queequeg, a Polynesian harpooner who later becomes Ishmael's friend. The study of symbolism is important in literary analysis because the symbols in the novel contain multiple layers of meaning. These symbols are often interpreted from different perspectives, making Moby-Dick a text full of evolving and contested meanings.

Previous studies of Moby-Dick have examined its key symbols, such as the whale, the Pequod, and the sea, often interpreting them from theological, philosophical, or semiotic perspectives. These works provide new insights but tend to present these symbols as having fixed meanings. From this gap, the main research question of this study arises: how are the key symbols in Moby-Dick, such as the whale, the Pequod, and the sea, presented and described in the story? To answer this question, this study applies discourse analysis to Melville's text, while also reviewing previous studies to support its claims.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies of symbolism in Moby-Dick have yielded diverse interpretations from various perspectives. From a religious and moral perspective, Zanolli (2021) links the whale to biblical images such as Leviathan, interpreting it as a symbol of divine wrath and spiritual testing. Similarly, Yadav. S & Yadav. K (2019) and Islam. MD. (2019) view the whale as an embodiment of evil, destructive power, and human moral struggle. While these studies differ in their theological emphases, their understandings share a commonality in depicting the whale as possessing fixed meaning. This contrasts with this study, which views symbolic meaning as discursively constructed and subject to change.

On the other hand, there is also a focus on ecological, natural, and thematic symbolism. Khosyatillah (2008) interprets whales, the sea, and ships as reflections of human destiny and divine mystery, while, Lamberson (2019) emphasizes whales and the ocean as representations of nature's vastness and indifference. These scholars highlight the relationship between humans and nature, showing how Melville uses natural imagery to express existential uncertainty. Eyyubova (2024) reinforces this perspective by depicting the sea as a symbol of human struggle, spiritual quest, and moral testing. While these studies highlight the richness of natural imagery in Melville's work, they view these



symbols as fixed and unchanging in meaning.

From a mythological and archetypal perspective, DeMond (1995) interprets the whale and Ahab through universal mythic patterns, depicting the White Whale as part of an eternal cycle of destruction and rebirth. His work demonstrates the spiritual depth and archetypal patterns in Melville's symbolism, but his explanation tends to separate the symbols from the actual language and context of the story. In contrast to the above approaches, this study emphasizes that symbolic meaning is formed through narrative language, the context of the story, and the ideologies that emerge in the text.

Several scholars have also explored the Pequod and the White Whale as cultural, political, or ideological symbols. McHugh & Blake (2021) interpret the Pequod as a nation or small world shaped by power and charisma, drawing on Charles Tilly's theory of state formation. While Plachá. I., (2008) positions the White Whale as an American cultural icon, particularly during World War II, Dodd (2022) expands on this idea by describing *Moby-Dick* as a living document whose symbols continually shift over time. Schwarcz. C (2012) adds a decolonial reading, depicting the Pequod as a space marked by colonial authority but also by indigenous resistance. These studies demonstrate that Melville's symbols can be interpreted diversely within cultural and ideological contexts. However, these studies emphasize how later readers reinterpret these symbols, rather than how their symbolic meanings are actually constructed through the novel's language and discourse.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study explores the symbolism of the Whale, the Pequod, and the Sea in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) using discourse analysis. The research aims to reveal how these symbols are represented and how their meanings shift across different contexts in the novel. Employing a qualitative approach, the study examines how language, ideology, and perspective shape symbolic interpretation. The findings show that Melville's symbols are not fixed but fluid, reflecting the dynamic interaction between human belief, power, and nature.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of a discourse analysis on the main symbols in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*: the Whale, the Pequod, and the sea. These symbols shape the novel's exploration of humanity, nature, faith, and power. The analysis shows



that their meanings are not fixed but discursively constructed, shifting across textual, cultural, and ideological contexts. Each subsection examines how these symbols function within the narrative and compares their interpretations with previous studies to reveal both similarities and differences.

### **The Symbol of “Whale”**

The White Whale in Melville’s *Moby-Dick* serves as the novel’s most complex symbol, its meaning shifting across characters and contexts. From a discourse perspective, the whale is not a fixed emblem but a product of language, ideology, and perception. Ahab sees it as evil and vengeance, while Ishmael views it as divine mystery, showing that meaning is built through discourse rather than absolute truth.

Zanoli (2021), Yadav, and Islam interpret the whale through theological and moral frameworks, connecting it to the biblical Leviathan and seeing it as a symbol of divine wrath, evil, and human struggle. These readings portray the whale as a moral and spiritual trial, aligning with Ahab’s worldview. However, this study argues that such interpretations reflect Ahab’s ideology rather than the novel’s full discursive complexity.

Lamberson (2019) offers an ecological view, describing the whale as the vast, indifferent force of nature that defies human understanding. Ishmael’s remark that the whale “must remain indescribable” illustrates how language fails to contain nature’s autonomy, supporting the idea that meaning arises from interaction, not fixed symbolism. Conversely, DeMond (1995) interprets the whale mythologically as part of an eternal cycle of destruction and rebirth. While his reading enriches the whale’s spiritual depth, it detaches it from Melville’s linguistic realism. The White Whale embodies a broad spectrum of meanings divine power, natural indifference, human rebellion, and existential mystery. The studies of Zanoli, Yadav, and Islam emphasize its theological and moral implications, while Lamberson and DeMond expand it into ecological and mythological dimensions. Through discourse analysis, this study finds that the whale’s symbolism is not fixed but fluid, continually redefined through language, ideology, and perception. Thus, the White Whale stands not merely as a symbol of evil or divinity but as a living process through which Melville explores how meaning itself is created and transformed within discourse.

### **The Symbol of “Pequod”**

The Pequod stands as one of the most complex symbols in *Moby-Dick*, representing human society, ideology, and collective destiny. The ship functions as a microcosm of



civilization where diverse beliefs and hierarchies coexist, shaped by power and language. Ahab's authority turns the ship into an instrument of revenge, while Ishmael's narration exposes its fragility and moral decay. McHugh interprets the Pequod through Charles Tilly's political theory, viewing it as a self-governing state sustained by coercion and charisma (McHugh & Blake, 2021). This aligns with Dodd's interpretation of *Moby-Dick* as a "living American document," where the Pequod's fall mirrors the collapse of democratic ideals. Both readings see the ship as a political construct defined by power, though Dodd focuses more on historical context than textual discourse.

In contrast, Schwarcz approaches the Pequod from a decolonial perspective, reading it as a colonial vessel embodying both imperial dominance and indigenous resistance. He highlights how its multiracial crew reflects social inequality and linguistic hierarchies, which aligns with discourse analysis in uncovering power relations. Lamberson expands on this further, interpreting the Pequod as a human attempt to dominate nature, an attempt doomed to failure. He views the ship as an artificial island of civilization adrift in a vast, uncontrollable sea, symbolizing human fragility against natural forces.

Overall, these various perspectives demonstrate that the Pequod is an important symbol whose meaning continually changes depending on social, political, and environmental contexts. This study aligns with these perspectives by viewing the Pequod as a symbolic place where language and ideology interact to shape meaning about humanity. However, while previous studies such as McHugh and Dodd emphasize the political side, and Schwarcz focuses on a decolonial perspective, this study explains how the ship's meaning is constructed within the text through discourse, namely through the interaction between Ahab's authoritarianism, Ishmael's reflective thinking, and the camaraderie of the crew. From a discourse analysis perspective, the Pequod is not simply a fixed symbol of society, but a living place where language, power, and ideas intersect.

### **The Symbol of "Sea"**

The sea in *Moby-Dick* stands as one of the novel's most complex symbols, representing both the story's physical setting and a vast space for human reflection and existential questioning. From a discourse perspective, the sea is not merely a backdrop but a dynamic arena where perception, power, and ideology interact to construct meaning. Ishmael's shifting descriptions—sometimes serene, sometimes terrifying—reveal that meaning in Melville's text is never fixed but fluid, shaped by narrative voice



and context.

Zanoli reads the sea through a Christian lens, linking it to the Great Flood and the Book of Job, and viewing it as a sign of divine mystery and moral testing. Khosyatillah similarly interprets the sea as both nurturing and destructive, a mirror of God's power that symbolizes creation and annihilation. While both highlight its spiritual role, they treat the sea as a stable allegory, whereas this study sees it as a shifting construct shaped through discourse and perspective.

Lamberson expands this discussion ecologically, describing the sea as nature's boundless indifference. He argues that Melville's ocean resists human control, embodying forces that defy language and reason. This view strengthens the idea that meaning in *Moby-Dick* arises from the interaction between human discourse and nature's autonomy, showing the limits of language in representing the natural world.

Eyyubova interprets the sea as a symbol of human struggle and moral testing, calling it both "the setting and the soul of Melville's philosophy. She highlights how the ocean devours characters physically and spiritually, reflecting their search for meaning. While her reading is largely descriptive, this study extends it by showing how such transformation is expressed through Melville's shifting tone, diction, and narrative contrasts between Ahab and Ishmael. Finally, DeMond situates the sea in a mythological framework, seeing its endless motion as the rhythm of creation and destruction that governs gods and humans. His view aligns with this study's discourse approach in recognizing the sea as a living process rather than a static image.

The sea in *Moby-Dick* is not a single, stable symbol, but rather a constantly shifting symbol, its meaning shaped through discourse. While previous studies such as those by Zanoli, Khosyatillah, Lamberson, Eyyubova, and DeMond have highlighted the theological, ecological, and mythological significance of the sea, this study reveals that its meaning changes through Melville's use of language, tone, and perspective. The sea is presented as both a concrete setting and a discursive space where Ahab's conflict, Ishmael's reflection, and humanity's struggle against nature intersect. Through this interaction, Melville portrays the sea as a representation of human uncertainty and the limits of understanding, proving that the meaning of the sea in *Moby-Dick* is dynamic, context-bound, and created through discourse itself.



## CONCLUSION

This study aims to analyze how the key symbols in *Moby-Dick*, namely the whale, the Pequod, and the Sea, are presented and described in the story. The findings of this study reveal that these symbols do not have fixed meanings, but are shaped through discourse, where language, ideology, and perspective interact to shape interpretations. The whale represents humanity's struggle with the unknown, the Pequod reflects human society and power relations, and the Sea symbolizes the vastness of nature as well as the limits of human understanding. Through discourse analysis, this study concludes that Melville uses these symbols not as static images, but as dynamic constructions that reflect the constantly changing relationship between humans, nature, and beliefs. Theoretically, this finding strengthens the view that literary meaning is discursively produced, while practically it encourages future research to explore how language continues to shape symbolic interpretations in classical literature.

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