

# Liquidity and Syntony: A Study of the *Pequod* in *Moby Dick* From the Perspective of Neo-tribalism

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Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* tells the story of Captain Ahab leading the whaling ship *Pequod* on a quest for revenge against the white whale Moby Dick through the perspective of Ishmael. This paper takes *Moby Dick* as the research object and focuses on the whaling ship *Pequod* in particular. By applying the theory of neo-tribalism proposed by Michel Maffesoli, this paper analyzes how the neo-tribe is formed by the crew members of *Pequod* during the voyage and how it is bonded together by Ahab's obsession with revenge. It pays attention to the collective resonance of the crew's "undirected" being-together and analyzes the role of the whaling ship as a special space in this process, finally unveiling the underlying forces and vitalism that work behind neo-tribalism.

**Keywords:** Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, neo-tribalism, the *Pequod*

## Research Context

Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) tells the story of Captain Ahab leading the whaling ship *Pequod* on a quest for revenge against the white whale Moby Dick from the perspective of Ishmael. *Moby Dick* delves deeply into such themes as obsession, the nature of good and evil, and the power of nature. Among all these interpretations, the ship *Pequod* is always at the center of analysis for its prominence throughout the voyage, and it can be analyzed as a neo-tribal community, which comprises diverse groups of individuals from different backgrounds, races, and cultures, yet connected by the shared emotion and experiences. While applying the theory of Maffesoli, this paper intends to direct attention to understudied aspects of neo-tribalism presented in *Moby Dick*, thereby shedding light on contemporary forms of sociality and calling for more research on "community" and the metaphor of "tribe".

## The Underground *Puissance* and Vitalism Behind the *Pequod*

The *Pequod* manifests *puissance* as a vessel that harbors a collective energy and will transcending the visible

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Supported by the Beijing Social Science Fund Project "A Study of Imperial Consciousness in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century American Novels" (Project No. 20WXB005).

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and institutional aspects of society. The crew, composed of diverse individuals from various backgrounds, comes together on this ship with a shared yet intense purpose, that is to hunt the vicious white whale, Moby Dick (Yang, 2014, p. 111). This shared goal creates a powerful underlying force that binds them, much like *puissance* that Maffesoli describes as the inherent energy of the people, an energy that exists beneath the surface of formal or institutional social structures and propels the social body forward.

Through the first-person narration of Ishmael, although he felt himself a member of the crew, he could not help but question:

The subterranean miner that works in us all, how can one tell whither leads his shaft by the ever shifting, muffled sound of his pick? Who does not feel the irresistible arm drag? What skiff in tow of a seventy-four can stand still? (Melville, 1967, p. 203)

Such metaphorical expressions as “the subterranean miner” and “irresistible arm” imply an energy which goes beyond what is comprehensible and visible, yet plays a significant role in helping the sailors during the arduous and isolated voyage. These literary expressions mirror the idea of *puissance* as an inherent, powerful force that drives human actions and social phenomena. This force binds people together in social groups and drives them to act in unison, even if they may not fully understand the reasons behind their actions (Whitburn, 1979, p. 34).

Apart from being a mighty yet non-institutional force, the operation of *puissance* is deeply related to vitalism, a more primordial and divine concept, the “will to live” in Maffesoli’s terms. Vitalism emphasizes the inherent force that compels living beings to keep going, consciously or unconsciously, to resist death and void. The constant movement, whether it is the miner’s work or the skiff being towed, represents the ongoing struggle for life. The crew of the *Pequod* on a journey, driven by a force that keeps them moving forward despite the dangers and uncertainties, is a clear manifestation of the mighty *puissance* as well as the vitalistic impulse that seeks to overcome obstacles and continue the journey of life. The idea of *puissance* together with its underlying vitalism is aptly implied in the literary creation of the *Pequod* so that analyzing it from this point makes clear the existential resources humans have in the face of nihilism and nothingness.

### **The Crew Members as the Affectual Nebula**

The crew members share an intense emotional bond that unites them closely. When the sight of the whale is announced, there is a collective sense of excitement and fear, as described in the text: “while the mariners began to gaze curiously at each other, as if marveling how it was that they themselves became so excited at such seemingly purposeless questions” (Melville, 1967, p. 176). This shared yet inscrutable emotional response to a significant event ties the crew, much like the way an affectual nebula binds individuals through collective sentiments. It shows how their emotions are intertwined, and the anticipation and anxiety of the hunt are felt by all, creating a sense of unity beyond individual differences (Zhou, 2012, p. 206).

In addition to emotional bonding, the *Pequod* also embodies an *affectual nebula* in its chaotic composition, comprising individuals from diverse backgrounds, ethnicities, and cultural origins. Queequeg, Ishmael, and other crew members each come from distinct origins and possess unique personalities. This diversity reflects the historical context of 19th-century America, which forms the foundation for the inevitable mingling of different peoples and cultures (Yang, 2011, p. 78).

The whole idea of affectual nebula diverges from other sociological terms used for describing a group of people in that the latter only come into being with a pre-defined outset. However, in terms of affectual nebula,

individuals are all the while naturally bonded, and the core of affectual nebula is unpredictable and chaotic in spite of the tight bond.

In binding crew members, the mighty power of shared emotions is strengthened by onboard rituals. Activities on the *Pequod* are not just practical tasks but also have a symbolic and ritualistic aspect. The process of preparing the harpoons, the chanting before a hunt, and the way the crew celebrates a successful catch (or mourns a failure) are all part of a shared ritual (Lackey, 1987, p. 45). “‘Huzza! huzza!’ cried the seamen, as with swinging tarpaulins they hailed the act of nailing the gold to the mast” (Melville, 1967, p. 177). These rituals serve to reinforce the group’s identity and strengthen the emotional bonds among the structurally dispersive and chaotic crew members.

Characterized by shared emotion, chaos, and differences, the concept of affectual nebula offers us a feasible metaphor for understanding the unity of the *Pequod*, which is on its own chaotic and all-encompassing (Hustis, 2014, p. 55).

### **The “Undirected” Being-Together of the Crew Members**

In *Moby Dick*, the crew members of the *Pequod* showcase another important idea in neo-tribalism: Neo-tribes are formed undirectedly (Maffesoli, 1996, p. 79). Different from traditional tribes or institutional groups, the “undirectedness” of neo-tribes emphasizes a natural, spontaneous form of sociality where people come together without a strictly defined, long-term purpose beyond the shared experience of being in the group.

In traditional tribalism, tribes are often formed around kinship, with members sharing a common bloodline or family connection, whereas on the *Pequod*, the crew members come from diverse backgrounds (Hustis, 2014, p. 33). Their connection is based on something undirected, non-institutional other than traditional kinship, which is a fundamental aspect of traditional tribalism (Hull, 1947, p. 20). The crew of the *Pequod* is initially brought together by the general pursuit of whaling, but their day-to-day life on the ship is filled with shared experiences that are not always directly related to the overarching goal of catching whales. During a calm period at sea, the crew engages in activities like storytelling, singing, and sharing their thoughts, all of which are natural, spontaneous, and centered on the present moment. Ishmael and Queequeg’s conversations about their different cultures and past experiences are not driven by the goal of whaling but occur naturally as a form of social bonding. This aligns with the idea of “undirected” being-together, which highlights shared experience of the moment rather than coming together for a long-term, pre-defined purpose.

The relationships among the crew members are based on emotional and affective bonds rather than contractual, rational, or civilized agreements. Queequeg and Ishmael’s friendship is a prime example. Their friendship develops through casual conversations, based on mutual respect, shared experiences, and an emotional connection, as is described in the text: “And then we sat exchanging puffs from that wild pipe of his, and keeping it regularly passing between us” (Melville, 1967, p. 67). They exchange puffs, share their fears and dreams, and support each other through the trials of life on the ship. This emotional bond is not formed with a specific, long-term, or pre-defined goal in mind but is a result of their close proximity and shared experiences.

To go further, the “undirected” being-together manifests an organic way of theorization, which diverges from its mechanical counterpart. It downplays the agency and will of human beings, forming a stark contrast to individualism and also embodies Melville’s criticism of the prevailing optimism, thus securing for him a distinct position in his time.

### **The *Pequod* as *Genius Loci* From the Perspective of Proxemics**

From the perspective of proxemics, the concept of *Genius Loci* is also of great significance in analyzing neo-tribalism. The *Pequod* functions as *Genius Loci* in neo-tribalistic terms in the whole journey, as it creates a unique sense of place that is central to the crew's identity and social interactions. From the very beginning the *Pequod* is presented as more than just a spatial ship; rather, it is often presented with great affection, "A noble craft, but somehow a most melancholy! All noble things are touched with that" (Melville, 1967, p. 86). As it is shown in late chapters, it is indeed not just a ship, but a home that offers a sense of belonging. Just as *Genius Loci* is the spirit of a place that gives it a unique identity, the *Pequod* has its own distinct character. The ship creates a sense of place integrated in the crew's experiences and carves out an exclusive place for the members, where they eat, sleep, work, and share their lives, serving a crucial function in bonding the crew as a neo-tribe (Zifferblatt, 1972, p. 55).

When Captain Ahab reveals his quest for Moby Dick to the crew, the deck becomes the stage for this important event. "When the entire ship's company were assembled, and with curious and not wholly unapprehensive faces, were eyeing him" (Melville, 1967, p. 175). This shows how the specific spaces on the ship are used for social interaction, much like how a village square or a neighborhood gathering place in a traditional community serves as a center for social life. The *Pequod*'s spaces are not just physical areas but are loaded with symbolic meaning and social significance, which is a key aspect of *Genius Loci* in proxemics.

The *Pequod* also represents a continuous spacetime for the crew as the only constant in their lives. As the days and weeks pass, the routine of life on the ship becomes a part of the crew's existence. The daily routine on the *Pequod* is a rhythm that binds them all. It is the Dough-Boy, the steward who announces dinner for the mariners: "It is noon; and Dough Boy, the steward thrusting his pale loaf-of-bread face from the cabin-scuttle, announces to his dinner and master" (Melville, 1967, p. 162). This sense of continuity in the spatial and temporal context creates a strong connection between the crew and the ship, much like how a long-established community has a sense of continuity over time, with the same places being used for generations. The *Pequod*'s stability amid the ever-changing ocean provides a sense of security and belonging, which is an important idea of *Genius Loci* in the context of proxemics and neo-tribalism (Shah & Kesan, 2007, p. 354).

Whether physically or mentally, the *Pequod* sets clear boundaries that define the group. The ship's hull physically separates the crew from the outside world, creating a distinct social unit with its own rules and its own society. In this way, the physical hull lays the foundation for a shared mental and psychological unity, where the members of *Pequod* are now open to non-traditional possibilities.

### **Conclusion**

Viewed through Maffesoli's neo-tribalism, the *Pequod* embodies a dynamic community united not by kinship but by shared emotions, rituals, and proximity. Melville envisions the *Pequod* as a microcosm of contemporary sociality, where fleeting yet powerful bonds arise from fluidity, revealing how human vitality and meaning persist amid instability and the dissolution of traditional communal forms. The study illuminates the novel's complex social relationships, deepening understanding of 19th-century American society and shedding light on contemporary phenomena. Framing the *Pequod* as a neo-tribal community mirrors contemporary society's fragmented interconnectedness, urges reflection on social values, and affirms *Moby Dick*'s timeless insights into humanity and social life.

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