

SARTRE'S EXISTENTIALISM IN HERMAN MELVILLE'S *MOBY DICK*

Ambar Andayani

Department of English

University of 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya, Indonesia

Email:

Abstract. From the perspective of Sartre's existentialism, it can be concluded that Ahab is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Through what he does against that white whale, he gets his meaningful existence. Ahab exists only to the extent that he fulfills himself. Ahab gets happiness with his plan and act to kill his mighty woe. Furthermore Ahab's decision at the same time creates an image of man that in general will do the same thing.

Keywords: existentialism, existence, essence, character

INTRODUCTION

Existentialism becomes a great philosophy in the nineteenth century. It is a very famous philosophy that many philosophers contribute their minds for it. Existentialism is the basic philosophy about human, which is suitable with this era where now we are compressed by high technology and we neglect human values. Then finally we come to a question why we exist?

Some philosophers who were enthusiastic on existentialism were Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Berdyaev, Jaspers and Sartre. They come from different countries, Soren Aabye Kierkegaard comes from Denmark; Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche comes from Roken, Prussia; Nicholas Alexandrovitch Berdyaev is from Kiev, Russia; Karl Jaspers is from Oldenburg, Westphalia; and Jean-Paul Sartre was born in Paris. Nevertheless they have one same idea about existentialism that for human being, existence comes first before essence, that makes we are different from another creature.

The idea of existentialism is very universal, that the writer is interested to

discuss and she finds the reflection of it in the work of Herman Melville i.e. *Moby Dick*. Melville chooses the sea as the setting of the story that symbolizes freedom of nature and whaling, a dangerous job that was so popular in America in the 1840's as the topic of the story that symbolizes adventure. Melville does not choose social life that happens everyday, distinctively however he takes setting of the sea that needs a deep contemplation to interpret. Then the story of whaling involving the captain and the crews has strong characters that all of them are men. The story describes high spirit and struggle to catch a whale that is Moby Dick. Clifton Fadiman (1962) in his afterword gives a comment about this literary work: "Here is a rich, vivid account of life at sea, of ships and sailors, of man against nature, of whaling in the mid-nineteenth century. At every level the Pequod's expedition is an extraordinary one".

In this case Pequod is the name of the ship. The captain and the crews have a tremendous and tense journey. In this journey, there are many conflicts; between the crews and the captain, among the crews, between

captain and the whale and the captain with the nature. All of those conflicts give ideas explaining the existence of an individual as a human philosophically. Those become the answers of all questions we have about human life. It is also quoted in Melville's *Moby Dick* (1962: 3). But the same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life and this is the key to it all.

The above statement means that everything happens in our life and what we see from other people have the same image. That is a very universal idea. When we realize that life is full of trouble and conflicts, each individual has his own life and we are very close with the fate; then we come to a great curiosity in the human life mystery, as Melville's words the ungraspable phantom of life.

Melville's *Moby Dick* is one of the greatest novels in the world. It was published in 1851, in London and New York, as a great literature, the writer considers Melville's *Moby Dick* has many aspects that can be analyzed. This is a valuable literary work that includes humanity, religion, and culture. Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* is a classical sea-story which is full with humanity messages. Since the writer finds the idea of existentialism in this work, she wants to analyze it in reference with Sartre's existentialism. The theory that she applies is theory of Sartre's existentialism to explain the existentialism reflected in Melville's *Moby Dick*. The writer considers the existentialism is mostly performed in the character of Ahab, so in this study she tends to focus on it.

Literature is actually a manifestation of an idea of an author. Sometimes he wants to tell about a family life, or in the other time he wants to explain a social problem through his work. An author tells about what he sees and he feels in his life. Rene Wellek and Austin

Warren states in his book *Theory of Literature* (1978: 110) states: "The relation between literature and ideas can be conceived in very diverse ways. Frequently literature is thought of as a form of philosophy, as 'ideas' wrapped in form; and it is analysed to yield 'leading ideas'".

By reading literature we will have rich knowledge and wide horizon that we can appreciate it as a valuable one. It is also stated by Wilfred L. Guerin in his book *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* that the larger function of literature is to teach morality and to probe philosophical issues. As Melville's *Moby Dick* contains of humanity or moral, religion and culture; the writer needs a theory to appreciate this work. She can feel satisfied if only she can find something worth in his mind after reading it. From Melville's *Moby Dick* the writer is very interested that she finds a philosophical idea which is universal. From any philosophical ideas, like absurdity, existentialism and phenomenology; one that is revealed from this work is existentialism. She applies Sartre's existentialism for the theory of her study.

Jean Paul Sartre was born in Paris, 21 of June 1905. He passed the examination of Baccalaurent when he was 21 years old. In 1929 he passed a test to become a teacher council. He got scholarship to go to Berlin and meet Hussrel. Through Hussrel he knew the method of fenomenology which was then developed in his philosophy about existence (Sartre in Iser, 1999). The followings are some of Sartre's ideas about existentialism which reveal in Melville's *Moby Dick*:

- "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism." (Sartre, 1988: 15; cq. Iser, 1999).
- "Man is nothing else but his plan; he exists only to the extent that he fulfills himself; he is therefore nothing else that the

ensemble of his acts, nothing else than his life." (Sartre, 1988: 32).

- "... in creating the man that we want to be, there is not a single one of our acts which does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he ought to be." (Sartre, 1993: 17).

RESEARCH METHOD

Concerning the data collection and analysis, the discussion will apply descriptive qualitative method. According to Hancock et al (2009:6), qualitative research focuses on description and interpretation of the words/data and this can lead to an evaluation of an organizational process. It also focuses on description and interpretation that might lead to development of new concept or theory or to an evaluation of an organization process.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

According to Sartre man exists with awareness to be himself that can not be exchanged. Therefore if we want to understand about man, we must approach him as a subject. It is different from other things that have no awareness in their existences. For other things, their existences mean their essences at once. While for man, existence comes first before essence.

"Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism"

We can say an object has a meaning because it has function, so the essence here is the meaning itself or the value. For man, even though he exists he has no meaning unless he makes it. When we read Melville's *Moby Dick*, we wonder why Ahab wants to kill the white whale, Moby Dick. There is a vengeance since we know Ahab loses his leg because of the ferocious jaws of Moby Dick, he

feels worthless if he does not do it. He wants to make value in his life then he insists the crews to chase Moby Dick until it dies. The quotation from the work will give the explanation about it.

"Captain Ahab, I have heard of Moby Dick-but it was not Moby Dick that took off thy leg?"

"Who told thee that" cried Ahab; then pausing. "Aye, Starbuck; aye, my hearties all round; it was Moby Dick that dismasted me; Moby Dick that brought me to this dead stand on now... it was that accursed white whale that razed me; made a poor pegging lubber of me for ever and a day!"..."Aye, aye! And I'll chase him around Good Hope, and round the Horn, and round the Norway Maelstrom, and round perdition's flames before I give him up. (Melville, 1962: 171, 172)

The above quotation is the dialogue between Ahab and Starbuck. Starbuck, one of Ahab's crew tries to ask about Ahab's personal matter. From this we can know Ahab's feeling, since the white whale takes off his leg there is an anger in Ahab's mind. Ahab has only one purpose in his whaling, he wants to revenge Moby Dick. He feels Moby Dick has destroyed himself, that he thinks as if he becomes clumsy and stupid because of it. He feels hurt that he is so mad to kill Moby Dick. In this case Ahab as a man aware of his existence then he wants to make value for himself. He thinks it is the only way to make himself valuable. Then nobody can hamper his will, neither his crews.

From the idea of Sartre that "man is nothing else but what he makes of himself", it is clearly seen from the character of Ahab. Ahab fills his life with his own way, according to what he feels in his life. He perceives that his life is meaningful, if he revenges Moby Dick. It is also suitable with the word "for man, existence comes first before essence"; in his existence Ahab has bad experience that

makes him to have a mighty woe, Moby Dick. Then he creates the essence for himself with the will to hunt the white whale until it dies.

“Man is nothing else but his plan; he exists only to the extent that he fulfills himself; he is therefore nothing else than the ensemble of his acts, nothing else than his life”

Man as a creator of himself will never finish with his struggle, except if only he is dead. As an existence which is free to welcome his future, man plans everything for himself. He is responsible to himself. He will always try to seek happiness in his life. Whatever his existence and what he makes of his life, he is the only one who is responsible for it. Only from that responsibility, man can reach happiness. This second idea of Sartre can be explained from what we know about Ahab's life.

What I've dared, I've willed; and what I've willed, I'll do! They think me mad-Starbuck does; but I'm demoniac, I am madness maddened! That wild madness that's only calm to comprehend itself! The prophecy was that I should be dismembered; and-Aye! I lost this leg. I now prophecy that I will dismember my dismemberer. Now, then, be prophet and the fulfiller one. (Melville, 1962: 177)

From what Ahab says we can feel that he has a strong will. He realizes that his crews included Starbuck consider him as a mad person, since he wants to kill Moby Dick. However this is not without a reason, there is a cause behind it. That Ahab have lost one of his leg because of the ferocious jaws of the white whale, Moby Dick. Then Moby Dick becomes the mighty woe in Ahab's life. There is only one choice in his mind for this condition. He must destroy Moby Dick because by doing it he feels content.

When we compare Sartre's ideas with what happened to Ahab, Ahab exists with his

wounded heart because of his mighty woe Moby Dick. In this case he has a responsibility for his future life. There is a cause and effect in this event, since the white whale makes him wounded he wants the white whale to be wounded too. Furthermore he wants to kill Moby Dick, and nobody can stop his will. So he fulfills himself by taking a revenge to Moby Dick.

“In creating the man that we want to be, there is not a single one of our acts which does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he ought to be”

In creating himself, man has opportunity to choose. Whatever he chooses to always good, which is better than other alternatives that he has. Then when he chooses the good one, the act of choosing is based on the image of human that in general will do the same thing. In this case, man's choices finally will be a decision which involves all humans. This condition can be seen clearly if we observe what Starbuck says.

“I am game for his crooked jaw, and for the jaws of Death too, Captain Ahab, if it fairly comes in the way of the business we follow; but I came here to hunt whales, not my commander's vengeance.” (Melville, 1962: 172)

“But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and to be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk to to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me. For could the sun do that, then could I do the other; since there is ever a sort of fair play her in, jealousy presiding over all creations ... The crew, man the crew! Are they not one and all with Ahab, in this matter of the whale? See Stub! He

laughs! See yonder Chilian! He snorts to think of it. (Melville, 1962: 173)

Starbuck is one of Ahab's crews. He expresses what he feels against Ahab's will to kill Moby Dick. For the first he rejects to follow Ahab's will since he realizes it is not a pure whale hunting, there is an anger in Ahab's mind; this is seen from Starbuck's expression. But after a while Starbuck also thinks that the white whale is a challenge, there is an extreme violence and mysterious hatred in this animal. starbuck

CONCLUSION

Finally from the perspective of Sartre's existentialism, it can be concluded that Ahab is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Through what he does against that white whale, he gets his meaningful existence. Ahab exists only to the extent that he fulfills himself. Ahab gets a happiness with his plan and act to kill his mighty woe. Furthermore Ahab's decision at the same time creates an image of man that in general will do the same thing.

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