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in *Warrior* and *Moby-Dick***

PROFESSIONAL PAPER

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The Mind Is Its Own Place: Trauma in *Warrior* and *Moby-Dick*

Literary texts are often employed to help flesh out themes and characters in films. One example of this is the usage of quotes from Herman Melville's novel *Moby-Dick* in the film *Warrior*, directed by Gavin O'Connor and released in 2011. The film follows the development of relationships between two brothers and their father. One of the brothers, Tommy, and the father, Paddy, are U.S. veterans. A prevalent theme in the film is, as the title suggests, their dealing with the combat trauma they experienced. In relation to that, understanding trauma, the lack of that understanding, and the isolation which stems from that lack are explored. What makes the novel particularly suitable in this context is the fact that it also tackles trauma. Both Ahab and Ishmael have suffered traumatic events, and both deal with them in different ways. Ishmael tries to work through it by constructing a narrative about it, while Ahab spirals out of control as he continues to view the whale as the personification of all evil. In that sense, a parallel could be drawn between his acting out and Tommy's engaging in soft risk-taking and entering the MMA tournament, with the difference that for Tommy it turns into an opportunity to start working through.

The aim of this essay is to look at the ways in which the film makes use of excerpts from the novel, enriching its exploration of trauma, in order to give more depth to the viewers' understanding of the symptoms of PTSD resulting from combat trauma.

KEYWORDS

***Warrior*, *Moby-Dick*, structural trauma, combat trauma, PTSD**

Literary works are often used as hypotexts in films to aid or complicate their reading. The film *Warrior*, directed by Gavin O'Connor and released in 2011, makes use of a number of quotes from Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (first published in 1851). The film deals with the interrelationships of three characters, a father and his two sons. Both the father and one of the sons are US veterans and suffer from PTSD. What particularly makes this novel appropriate to the topic of the film is the similarity in the professions of whalers and soldiers. Both are marked by strict adherence to hierarchy and by isolation, with the average whaling voyage lasting up to five years (Bercaw Edwards 88). In addition to that, both are narratives of trauma which involves the re-establishment of the symbolic order by means of constructing new myths about oneself and the world, as well as a need to be heard and understood. This essay aims to look at how *Warrior* makes use of excerpts from *Moby-Dick* to illustrate the effects of combat trauma in order to argue that canonical texts can be effectively used to deepen the viewers' understanding of the complexities of PTSD.

The film opens with shots of an industrial setting. The colour palette is markedly grey. The day seems peaceful enough, which is further emphasized by the extradiegetic music, the song "Start a War" by The National. However, though the melody is soft, the following lyrics point to a much more complex picture: "[w]e expected something, something better than before. We expected something more. Do you really think you can just put it in a safe behind a painting, lock it up, and leave?...Walk away now, and you're gonna start a war" (*Warrior* 00:00:51-00:01:21). Right at the beginning of the film, the themes of unfulfilled expectations, disappointment, avoidance, and conflict are established. At the same time, the viewers' attention is slowly directed towards the first of the main characters. A shot of a quiet street is followed by that of a church, apparently after some sort of a support-group meeting. The shot is framed by the windscreen of a car, with the racking focus moving from a rosary hanging from the rear-view mirror to the people leaving the church. The camera then follows an older man as he gets into his car and starts on his way home. A series of close-ups follows: he plays an audiocassette of *Moby-Dick*, the camera moving from his hand to his face, after which the rosary is seen again. This is how the viewers are introduced to Paddy Conlon, a veteran, and as will become apparent, a recovering alcoholic. A man's voice coming from the car radio starts reading, "Chapter 36. The quarter-deck. Enter Ahab: Then all" (Melville 257). This is accompanied by a close-up of Paddy's face, clearly establishing a parallel between the two characters. The audiocassette continues, "[i]t was not a great while after the affair of the pipe, that one morning shortly after breakfast, Ahab, as was his wont, ascended the cabin-gangway to the deck" (Melville 257). The first section of this sentence is heard as the rosary is in focus. These are the first cues to reading Paddy as Melville's Ahab.

Ahab is the captain of the Pequod, a whaling ship. On the previous voyage he lost his leg to the white whale, Moby Dick. Ever since then he's been "moody" and "savage", with the "hell in himself" driving him to hunt down the whale (Melville 257, 302). Later on in the book the readers also learn that he has trouble sleeping (he suffers from nightmares and night sweats, and sleeps three hours a day), gets worked up easily, and generally experiences a rollercoaster of emotions, ranging from a subdued pensiveness to manic behaviours and everything that comes with them (e.g. thrill-seeking by engaging in dangerous activities). All of these patterns of behaviour are symptomatic of PTSD. Paulson and Krippner define PTSD as "a condition that results from experiencing (or witnessing) life-threatening events that extend beyond one's coping capacity, emotional resources, and/or existential world view" (1). For Ahab, that life-threatening event is the loss of his leg. This loss, however, could also be interpreted as an absence materialised. In LaCapra's discussion of trauma, he emphasizes that loss and absence should not be equated, because "losses are specific and involve particular events" (700), whereas an absence is "the absence of an absolute that should not itself be absolutized or fetishized such that it becomes the object of fixation and absorbs, mystifies, or downgrades the significance of particular . . . losses" (702). In other words, the loss of Ahab's leg, a specific occurrence, functions as a metaphor for the absence of his ability to understand and control nature (the significance of the whale with respect to this will be elaborated later on in the essay). This structural trauma also serves to explain Ahab's monomania. When discussing the correlation of absence, loss, and anxiety, LaCapra claims that

[t]he conversion of absence into loss gives anxiety an identifiable object – the lost object – and generates the hope that anxiety may be eliminated or overcome...In converting absence into loss, one assumes that there was (or at least could be) some original unity, wholeness, security, or identity which others have ruined, polluted, or contaminated and thus made 'us' lose. Therefore, to regain it one must somehow get rid of or eliminate those others – or perhaps that sinful other in oneself (707).

Ahab is frustrated over the fact that he cannot conquer nature. Therefore, he transfers the blame for it onto the whale that lost him his leg. What is interesting to mention here is that his prosthesis is "fashioned from the polished bone of the sperm whale's jaw" (Melville 219), which could be interpreted as Ahab wanting to reassert his control over the traumatic event, as well as attempting to work the trauma through by means of re-constructing the story. When discussing the Lacanian notion of the real and its relation to trauma, Bistoien writes about how humans depend on language in the construction of identity and reality, and how, as a consequence, both identity and reality are bound to be identity and reality

of lack, owing to the impossibility of being fully rendered in language (69-70). The constant attempts to compensate for that lack fail, so a protective shield is formed by telling stories and constructing myths which "offer a promise of wholeness and closure" (59). After a traumatic event, one is forced to reinvent oneself and reality. And this is what Ahab does. He portrays himself as a tragic hero. His speech is lofty, he very often talks about his goal almost as of an epic undertaking, and there are sections of the book which are constructed almost like a play, with frequent asides being noted, etc. And his tragic flaw, the refusal to accept that man is not a ruler, but just another part of the whole that is nature, is what goads him on. He sees his journey as a necessity, something pre-ordained, and cannot rest. "[T]his smoking no longer soothes," (Melville 224) he says. He is "toiling, not pleasuring," his pipe doesn't offer any comfort, and so "[h]e tosses the still lighted pipe into the sea" (Melville 225). When at sea after his trauma, Ahab is never at peace. In that respect his compulsive returning to sea, the setting of the traumatic event, could be interpreted as acting out, as opposed to Ishmael's working through by narrativising.

Similar to Ahab, Paddy is a man that has been through a traumatic event which has left him permanently scarred and he is now in a constant state of turmoil. Although "[a]ctive membership in organised religion and one's internal spiritual belief system can give an individual an interpretative scaffolding" (Paulson and Krippner 13), the film hints that it will not help Paddy much longer. The camera follows his car journey home and sees him drive up his street as the cassette continues: "'It's a white whale, I say,' resumed Ahab, as he threw down the top-maul; 'a white whale. Skin your eyes for him, men; look sharp for white water; if ye see but a bubble, sing out'" (Melville 260). This is interspersed with shots where a man is seen sitting on Paddy's doorstep, implying a complex relationship at the very least. He takes some pills and washes them down with alcohol. In the ensuing scene we learn that the man is Paddy's son, Tommy. The whole exchange is filmed using medium and medium-long shots, as well as medium close-ups. The collocutor is always in the foreground, while the speaker seems to be trapped in the middle ground. A long take is used to establish a parallel between the father and the son, as the camera moves from Tommy holding out the bottle to Paddy, back to the bottle, and then to Tommy. Both have the same problem. Both, as will become apparent, use the same coping mechanism to deal with the effects of combat trauma. The scene finishes, and the title, *Warrior*, appears. This confirms the parallel and firmly establishes the problem of PTSD in the film. The interior scene which follows points out another problem symptomatic of PTSD. In one of the shots, Tommy is in the living room while Paddy is in the kitchen, framed by a doorway (as was Tommy in one of the exterior shots). The exits from those rooms point to different directions, and the shot is divided in half by a wall. All of this indicates feelings of isolation and

restriction, which are also indicative of trauma, as traumatised individuals avoid close emotional relationships (Degloma 110). This is also what Ahab, his chief, second, and third mate, and their harpooners feel. They are all Isolatoes, "each . . . living on a separate *continent* of his own" (Melville 216; emphasis added). Towards the end of *Moby-Dick* Ahab asks his chief mate, Starbuck, to look into his eyes and stand close to him, wanting to experience connection, needing for the other person to understand him.

The issues of understanding and making sense are dealt with throughout the whole novel. If one keeps in mind the fact that the story is narrated by Ishmael, himself the sole survivor of the foundering of the Pequod, it comes as no surprise to find that a lot of the chapters amount to a systematic attempt to explain the whale. Ishmael offers scientific facts, tries to systematise whales, looks at their anatomy, explains what parts can be used in what way, gives an overview of whales as motifs in art, etc. An especially telling chapter is "The Whiteness of the Whale", in which Ishmael thinks about the significance of whiteness and puts forward clashing arguments. It can symbolise beauty, regality, "divine spotlessness and power" (Melville 288), but albinism is repelling and evocative of the pallor of death. White is the absence of colour and all colours at once (thinking of the dispersion of light), it is "a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink" (296). Whiteness here is at the same time tempting and repelling, emptiness and fullness, a signifier which does not really have a (clearly definable) signified. The remark about atheism also seems to link whiteness with the idea of indifference. If there is no higher being that could hold man accountable, the man is left to his own devices. He is, in the context of *Moby-Dick*, abandoned. The white whale would in this reading be the vessel of cosmic indifference, so to speak. During the chase, Moby in no way shows interest in the Pequod. He ignores the whalers, at most giving a display of his strength as a warning and continues on his way "only intent upon pursuing his own straight path in the sea" (679). This indifference and inscrutability of the whale make him the perfect symbol of nature.

In the film, both Paddy and Tommy are Ahabs, but both are also each other's whale, in the sense that each reminds the other of the consequences of combat trauma (compare with the way Tommy was introduced). Neither can fully understand the other or a healthy father-son relationship because Paddy was not really present when Tommy was growing up, and Tommy does not really know what it means to have a father. By extension, if one thinks about the Lacanian idea of the father, it could easily be claimed that Tommy can now only associate authority with trauma. As Degloma points out, "[c]hildren are typically thought to be more vulnerable members of social groups, who given a traumatic environment of primary socialisation, are especially susceptible to derivative traumatic stress in childhood and later in life" (112). Having been

exposed to family violence (Paddy beat his wife), Tommy leaves home with his mother. After she falls ill and dies, Tommy joins the US Marines. Having lost his family, he tries to replace it with a different one, but one that has similar attributes to the original – strict hierarchy and association with violence. He is deployed to Iraq, where his unit gets caught in friendly fire, and only Tommy survives. Paul and Krippner point to the fact that “Iraq active duty combat veterans . . . went to war as a unit and came back as a unit. They have a built-in support system, with access to others who experienced the same phenomena” (32). It is this support system and the understanding that comes with it that Tommy loses. Haunted by survivor’s guilt, he promises Pilar, the widow of a fallen brother-in-arms, to do anything he can to help her family. He manages to enter Sparta, an MMA tournament, in the hopes of winning the five-million-dollar prize, which he would forward to her. He looks to his extended surrogate family for support he never had from his real family.

When he decides to leave home, Tommy asks his older brother, Brendan, to come with him as well. Brendan decides to stay behind, which damages their relationship seemingly irreparably. He also enters Sparta because he needs the money to prevent his family from losing their house. The film moves back and forth from one brother to the other, strengthening the parallel between the two brothers, as well as juxtaposing them. What is established as a constant, however, is that both of them continuously push Paddy away. Brendan refuses to let him see his family and cuts communication down to phone and mail. Tommy later calls him “just some old vet I train with” (*Warrior* 01:11:00-01:11:02) and says that “[h]e means nothing to [him]” (01:11:02-01:11:04), and when he decides to let Paddy train him, he makes it clear that he wants to let sleeping dogs lie. In one scene set in a diner, Tommy warns Paddy not to expect father-son bonding, to which Paddy sternly demands that Tommy hand over the pills he is taking, which as Paulson and Krippner note were widely administered to help cope but were largely unsuccessful in achieving that (21-22), and that he stop “threatening to walk every five minutes” (*Warrior* 00:29:21-00:29:24). Later on, when Paddy comes up to wake Tommy up in the morning to begin their training, Tommy is very quick to dismiss Paddy’s attempt to establish a closer relationship. Paddy comes up with a cup of coffee and Tommy’s old poster on which they used to keep track of his wrestling wins. One of the shots employs racking focus, showing first Tommy’s old trophies in the foreground, then moving further into the shot to bring the viewers’ attention to Tommy lying in the shadows, with the trophies and the darkness behind him keeping him visually trapped (adding to the emotional isolation), just like the trauma of his childhood and his PTSD.

The film then focuses on the brothers as they train. Brendan approaches his old friend, Frank, and asks for help. Frank’s training method

includes listening to classical music during training sessions, which points to the concept of the music of the spheres, i.e. the idea of universal harmony. That seems to be a foreshadowing of the resolution of the film, because emphasis is put here on being in unison with the whole. With *Moby-Dick* taken into account, that is the only thing that will ensure survival, or in this case winning and/or resolving trauma. During Paddy and Tommy's training, isolation is pointed to once more. In one of the scenes, another excerpt from *Moby-Dick* is heard: "Captain Pollard once more sailed for the Pacific in command of another ship, but the gods shipwrecked him again upon unknown rocks and breakers; *for the second time his ship was utterly lost, and forthwith forswearing the sea, he has never tempted it since*" (Melville 307; emphasis mine). This follows closely after a scene in which the viewers learn about Tommy's 'surrogate family', emphasizing not just the isolation, but also the difficulty and seeming impossibility of re-establishment of meaningful, close relationships. Another thing this quote does in the book is re-affirm the credibility of the events. It refers to the account of the sinking of the Essex, an actual whaling ship which was sunk by a white whale, an event which was well-known at the time *Moby-Dick* was published. Along with other elements of the novel (like the scientific facts already mentioned), it works to make the story more believable and realistic. In the film, the realistic feel is achieved by the use of a hand-held camera, a often employed in documentaries, but one also used to imply instability and loss of control (Barsam 254). The use of documentary-like filming technique just serves to underline the reality of what war veterans have to face in peace.

During the training sequence, the screen is split into several shots. This functions as a device that allows us to track the brothers' progress, while also condensing the weeks leading up to Sparta into a couple of minutes. Hurdles are established for both brothers. For Brendan, it is Marco, a contender who had already been chosen to compete; for Tommy it is Mad Dog Grimes, a fighter whom he has already beaten before. Other than that, there is Koba, a Russian fighter, and apparently an insurmountable obstacle. It is during this montage that another quote from the novel is used: "...to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self. Great pains, small gains for those who ask the world to solve them; it cannot solve itself" (Melville 541-42). This quote comes from the chapter titled "The Doubloon", which is a Spanish coin Ahab promised to the man who spots Moby Dick. It is used in a scene during Brendan's training when Marco gets injured, which opens the way for Brendan. Neither this opportunity nor the tournament later on should be interpreted by the characters as offering ready-made solutions to their problems. They just present an opportunity for working through their trauma. They still have to confront each other.

In order for Tommy to work through his PTSD, he needs to find a way to trust his family again (primarily, it seems, his brother, who has reached a level of understanding with Paddy on account of his affliction with PTSD). When the tournament starts, Tommy avoids seeing Brendan and tries very hard not to be present in the media. However, because footage of him fighting Mad Dog goes viral, a soldier in Iraq recognises Tommy as the person who saved his life and goes to the media with this information. It is that report that is on the news as Paddy leafs through some materials about the contestants and listens to the audiobook:

. . . the sea-crashing boat, the whale wheeled round to present his blank forehead at bay; but in that evolution, catching sight of the nearing black hull of the ship; seemingly seeing in it *the source of all his persecutions*; bethinking it – it may be – a larger and nobler foe; of a sudden, he bore down upon its advancing prow, smiting his jaws amid fiery showers of foam.

Ahab staggered; his hand smote his forehead. 'I grow blind' (682; emphasis mine).

The quote in combination with the report on the television work to direct the viewers' and characters' attention to the reality of PTSD. Up until this point the audience is aware of it, but the film focuses more on how the characters interact. The problem of understanding shifts to the experience of war. Being in an environment where one could die at any moment leaves veterans unable to adjust to life at home. Paulson and Krippner point out that "the combat landscape supervenes on the home environment, such that there is no safe place" (19). There is also the complexity of dealing with the fact that one has taken life, which is the most prevalent traumatic experience in war (14). A coping strategy might be "emotional numbing," which is used to avoid sharing problems and can lead to detaching oneself emotionally (16). An example from Tommy's behaviour is his continual isolation, his rejection of Brendan and Paddy's attempts to re-establish their relationships. A moment which is especially important is the casino scene. After Tommy and Brendan run into each other and exchange some pretty hefty words, Tommy goes to the casino (a form of soft risk-taking, which is also a typical symptom), where Paddy looks for him. He tries to get Tommy to open up by showing that he understands ("Can't sleep, huh? I know about that" at 01:34:13-01:34:22), but he only gets a response after he tells Tommy that he's proud of him. This is when Tommy says that he had deserted and had accidentally found himself in the right place at the right time, and portrays what he did matter-of-factly ("What was I supposed to do? Let them drown?" at 01:34:57-01:35:00). Paddy tries twice to get him to talk, but Tommy cuts the conversation short by saying, "[t]hat is none of your business, *man*" (emphasis mine) and "[i]t's too late now. Everything has already happened" (01:35:29-01:35:30, 01:36:05-01:36:07).

He then tells Paddy he does not need him and that he, Paddy, is nothing to him, eventually driving him off. This unravelling of PTSD is continued in the next scene, where Paddy is seen drunk, listening to *Moby-Dick* and pleading with nobody in particular to "stop the ship" (01:38:01-01:38:02). The quote is interrupted by Paddy's pleading, but parts are clearly audible: "The whale! The ship!" cried the cringing oarsmen. 'Oars! oars! Slope downwards to thy depths, O sea, that ere it be for ever too late, Ahab may slide this last, last time upon the mark!" (Melville 682). When he spots Tommy, he moves towards him and says, "Ahab! You godless son of a bitch! You stop the ship! You godless son of a bitch!" (*Warrior* 01:38:17-01:38:27). He keeps pleading as he moves to his room, and as he is framed by the doorway, he says, "For the love of god! They're lost! Stop the ship!" (01:38:53-01:39:00). The 'they' changes to 'we' in Paddy's speech as Tommy tries to get him to go to sleep: "We're lost. We're all lost Tommy. We'll never make it back" (01:39:44-01:39:55). This is the culmination of the film's dealing with the effects of combat trauma. It is in this moment that Tommy realises what could happen to him if he does not face his PTSD head on, how it could spiral out of control at any given moment. All is set for the final confrontation.

Both Tommy and Brendan manage to go through to the final. As the viewers follow their fights, the camera gradually moves in closer. The brothers' first two fights are filmed almost entirely from outside the cage, making them look enmeshed in the wires, trapped in the cage, and by extension in the circumstances that led them to this point. The fights against Mad Dog and Koba, Tommy's and Brendan's final hurdles, are also filmed mostly through the mesh, with the camera movements being very jittery, and only short intervals being filmed from within the cage. The final is a chance for Tommy to work through his trauma, as he is finally ready to confront his brother. Interestingly, Brendan is wearing white shorts, pointing to the fact that Tommy first needs to understand their relationship, and then move on to work through his more recent trauma. During the rest period after the first round, Tommy is framed in a low-angle shot through the mesh. That, coupled with his walking around, gives the impression of him as a caged animal, wild and incapable of self-control. After Brendan pops Tommy's shoulder in round three, the sound is muffled, which again emphasizes his isolation in that moment (the viewers clearly hear what Frank says to Brendan). In the rest period between the last two rounds, there are a couple of shots of Tommy crying, a close-up and an extreme close-up of his eyes, both filmed through the mesh from the outside (again, implying distance). The extradiegetic music playing is another song by The National, "About Today", which speaks about distance between two people and not knowing how to bridge the gap. Only in round five does Tommy finally accept the family and support he is being offered. Brendan manages to get him into a hold, and only after his brother repeats several

times that he is sorry, that 'It's okay' (02:08:51-01:08:52), and that he loves him, does Tommy tap out. The film ends with the two brothers walking down a corridor, approaching the camera, Brendan's arm round Tommy's shoulders. Tommy accepts Brendan's offered help and can begin dealing with the complex mechanism of trauma he is entangled in. He needs to give in and risk vulnerability to start getting better. Ahab, on the other hand, remains a tragic hero to the very end, which costs him his life. His death is made to look like a perversion of birth – the rope of the harpoon he managed to imbed in the whale coils round his neck and eventually pulls him under water. The book ends with a reassertion of the indifference the whale symbolises: ". . . all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago" (685). Man suffers because he cannot come to terms with the fact that he is a part of, and not apart from, his surroundings. Tommy is allowed to move on because he discards Ahab and takes up Ishmael's pen in an attempt to understand himself.

Gavin O'Connor's film *Warrior*, therefore, uses a number of elements to illustrate the complexity of trauma. It uses a multi-layered intertextual relationship with *Moby-Dick* to emphasize man's struggle with trauma by pointing to the feeling of isolation that accompanies it due to emotional distancing, as well as the difficulty of understanding and making oneself understood. It also employs song lyrics to condense and express complex ideas such as disappointment, avoidance, conflict, distance, and estrangement, either as help to establish them, or to further elaborate on them. With the use of cinematographic devices, such as the handheld camera and the framing of shots so that characters seem trapped, it draws attention to the claustrophobic feelings that come with processing trauma. By harking back to one of the most well-known American novels, it portrays the complexity of life after trauma and brings the viewers closer to understanding the extent of the sacrifices military service requires.

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