Ahab?s Evil Quest: Melville?s Symbols In Moby-Dick Essay, Research Paper

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Melville?s Symbols in Moby-Dick

Herman Melville began working on his epic novel Moby-Dick in 1850, writing it

primarily as a report on the whaling voyages he undertook in the 1830s and early 1840s.

Many critics suppose that his initial book did not contain characters such as Ahab,

Starbuck, or even Moby Dick, but the summer of 1850 changed Melville?s writing and

his masterpiece. He became friends with author Nathaniel Hawthorne and was greatly

influenced by him. He also read Shakespeare and Milton?s Paradise Lost (Murray 41).

These influences lead to the novel Melville completed and published in 1851. Although

shunned by critics after its release, Moby-Dick enjoyed a critical renaissance in the 1920s

and as assumed its rightful place in the canons of American and world literature as a

great classic. Through the symbols employed by Melville, Moby-Dick studies man?s

relationship with his universe, his fate, and his God. Ahab represents the league humans

make with evil when they question the fate God has willed upon them, and God is

represented by the great white whale, Moby Dick. In Moby-Dick, Herman Melville uses

a vast array of symbols and allegories in the search for the true explanation of man?s

place in the universe and his relationship with his fate and his God.

The focus of cruel fate and evil symbols is placed on the head of Ahab, captain of

the Pequod. Ishmael, though narrator of the story, is not the center of Moby-Dick after

Captain Ahab is introduced onto the deck of the ship and into action. The focus of the

novel shifts from the freshman whaler to experienced Ahab, an ?ungodly, god-like man?

(Melville 82). Having been a whaler for many years, he is a well respected captain, yet

his previous voyage has left him without a limb, and in its place is a peg leg carved from

whale ivory. Ahab remains below decks shadowed in obscurity for the initial stages of

the Pequod?s journey into the Atlantic. Ahab soon reveals his devilish plan to his crew,

however, in a frenzied attack of oratory ? he wishes to seek, hunt, and destroy the White

Whale, the fabled Moby Dick. It was the white whale Moby Dick which had, on Ahab?s

prior voyage, ravenously devoured his leg, and Ahab harbored a resentful revenge on his

persecutor. Any mention of Moby Dick sent Ahab into a furious rage (Melville 155). He

riles against Starbuck, the first mate and Starbuck replies, ?vengeance on a dumb brute! .

. . to be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab, seems blasphemous? (Melville 155).

It is through Ahab?s speech and his subsequent dialogue with Starbuck that a

second major symbol is introduced into the story, Moby Dick. Blasphemy is irreverence

toward God or something sacred, not irreverence toward a dumb brutish whale. Yet

Starbuck accuses Ahab of blasphemy. Melville places this rather harsh accusatory word

in the mouth of the Christian-minded Starbuck, directed at a devilishly revengeful Ahab.

The only way actions taken against Moby Dick could be blasphemous is if he is sacred.

Through indirect descriptions of Moby Dick and direct rantings of an insane man,

Melville peppers Moby-Dick with hints and clues at the true essence Ahab sees behind

the symbol of Moby Dick.

According to sailors stories and legends, Moby Dick is seen in two places at once

at different places around the globe. In this trait Melville is suggesting omnipresence, a

godlike trait (Melville 172). The sailors think he is immortal, another godlike trait,

because he has been harpooned many times and still lives (Braswell 152). Ahab himself

believes Moby Dick?s power is outrageous, like God?s omnipotence. Ahab states in

Chapter XXXVI, ?that inscrutable thing [Moby Dick?s power] is chiefly what I hate?

(Melville157). In addition to the godlike characteristics of omnipotence and

omnipresence, Moby Dick has garnered a reputation for tearing through sinners. He

shows godlike justice and mercy in saving Steelkilt and killing the unjust Radney, as the

crew learns from the sailors of the Town-Ho (Auden 11).

Melville uses many other symbols to make the white whale a symbol of divine

power (Braswell 151). His awful austere beauty is godlike, as is his titanic power and his

pyramidical white hump. His color, white, has signified a special sanctity; and Melville

devotes an entire chapter, narrated by Ishmael, in which he explores the meaning of

whiteness through the ages and through the eyes of many different cultures (Arvin

221-222). In Chapter LI, the Pequod sights a mysterious silvery jet of water obviously

emanating from a whale. The sails are spread and the ship gives chase, but the

?spirit-spout? is never identified. If this spirit-spout is emanating from Moby Dick, it is

reminiscent of God?s pillar of fire in Exodus. Through these and other small clues and

symbols, Melville insinuates that Moby Dick is sacred and godlike.

What Melville slyly intimates with symbol he states explicitly through the mouth

of an insane Shaker. When the Pequod meets the ship Jeroboam, the command of the

ship is virtually in the hands of an insane Shaker who thinks he is the archangel Gabriel.

Shakers were a religious sect that believed that humanity?s sin was caused by Adam and

Eve?s first act of carnal sin (Guiley 137). Gabriel?s rantings reveal his beliefs that Moby

Dick is God incarnate (Auden 11) and predicts doom for those who hunt ?his divinity?

(Melville 295). Those who seek to destroy Moby Dick are destroyed by him. Harry

Macey, second mate of the Jeroboam, who pursued Moby Dick is killed. Like insane

Gabriel, few critics doubt that Moby Dick is a symbol for God (Buell 62). However,

Moby Dick is seen as unjust and too-powerful by Ahab, suggestive of an Old Testament

conception of God. Rather that being a loving Deity, Moby Dick embodies ?the Old

Testament Calvinistic conception of an affrighting Deity and his strict commandments?

(Murray 42). T. Walker Herbert states that Moby Dick represents a God run amok

(112-114). Ahab?s feelings toward a God he feels has unjustly wronged him is his

inciting force to chase Moby Dick around the world.

What Captain Ahab is seeking, by way of symbols and allegories, is the grand

mystery of the universe. Ahab wishes to search heaven for the secret of human woe and

suffering (Hillway 89) and wrest the secrets away (Spiller 455). Ahab believes God is

punishing him unjustly, and Ahab?s mad quest is to avenge this private insult (Murray

46). Melville uses allusions to the Bible to emphasize this classic struggle between man

and God. Ishmael says that Ahab is chasing a ?Job?s whale round the world? (Melville

177). In the Old Testament, Job claims that God has unjustly wronged him, similar to

Ahab?s belief. By comparing Job and Ahab, Melville forces ?readers to consider God?s

character, especially as it relates to human suffering? (House 213). Ahab conveys all of

humanity?s protests against the injustices of fate, Melville makes Ahab the symbol of

humanity and Moby Dick a symbol of God, conferrer of Fate. ?When Ahab strikes at

Moby Dick . . . he does so in a mad desire for revenge on God, whom he holds

responsible for its [evil?s] existence? (Braswell 150). Ahab refuses to accept the fact that

limitations on humans prohibit them from attacking God, yet Ahab tries. ?A

contemporary French critic got a the heart of the matter when he said that the only reason

Ahab tries to harpoon Moby Dick is that he cannot harpoon God? (Braswell 151).

Ahab?s blasphemous hunt of Moby Dick has made him a sinner against God. By

striking back at fate Ahab has become the mirror image of his Old Testament namesake,

evil king Ahab of Israel (Kazin 44). Ahab desires to look through the ?pasteboard mask?

of reality and see what is behind physical objects (Melville 157). Ahab wants to look

behind the mask of Moby Dick and see God, to challenge him and question his justness.

Ahab believes God is oblivious to the suffering of mankind (Braswell 154) and even

states, ?Sometimes I think there?s naught beyond? the mask of Moby Dick (Melville

157). Not only has Ahab questioned God?s justice, he has questioned His very existence.

This blasphemy against God and non-acceptance of human limitations has made Ahab

seek evil forces to harpoon God, God in the guise of Moby Dick.

Ahab?s association with the evil forces in the universe is made apparent by

Melville many times in Moby-Dick. Ahab declares himself to be mad and ?demoniac?

(Melville 160). His evil properties would lead him to be called the Antichrist by the

Church Fathers (Murray 40). Ahab sets sail on Christmas Day, leaving port when

Christ?s life began, symbolizing Ahab?s oppositeness to Christlike values (Braswell 152).

Ahab also baptizes his specially made harpoon in the name of the devil ? ?Ego no

baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli.? The translation of Ahab?s Latin is, ?I

do not baptize thee in the name of the father, but in the name of the devil.? Ahab

baptizes his harpoon in the blood of his pagan harpooners: Queequeg, Dagoo, and

Tashtego. Ahab?s personal whaleboat abounds with heathens, led by Fedallah, whose

name suggests ?dev(il) Allah,? the Crusader view of Allah (Murray 41).

Melville adds more symbolism near the end of the novel. When Ahab announced

his devious intentions early in the voyage, he offered an Ecuadorian dubloon as a prize

for the first man who sighted Moby Dick. The coin shows the sun moving into the

zodiacal constellation of Libra, the Scales. Did Melville plant this symbol to suggest the

scales of fate were weighing in on Ahab? (Chase, ?Melville? 59). Fate weighed Ahab

and found him wanting because his evil quest ends in despair. He chases Moby Dick,

Moby Dick does not chase him. Had he not pursued Moby Dick, Moby Dick would not

have destroyed the entire ship and its crew, save Ishmael who survived the encounter

(Arvin 217). On day three of Ahab?s hunt, the whale destroys the whaling boats and the

Pequod, thereby destroying those who seek to escape their human limitations and

question their divinely ordained fate. Melville?s allegories and symbolism ? Ahab

symbolizing men who feel wronged by God and Moby Dick symbolizing a vengeful God

who will destroy those who wish to destroy Him ? are woven into a timeless

masterpiece of exposition and are revealed through a vast array of symbols, hints, and

rantings.

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