Moby Dick 2 Essay, Research Paper

Moby Dick

The moral ambiguity of the universe is prevalent throughout Melville?s

Moby Dick. None of the characters represent pure evil or pure goodness.

Even Melville?s description of Ahab, whom he repeatedly refers to

“monomaniacal,” suggesting an amorality or psychosis, is given a chance to

be seen as a frail, sympathetic character. When Ahab?s “monomaniac” fate

is juxtaposed with that of Ishmael, that moral ambiguity deepens, leaving

the reader with an ultimate unclarity of principle. The final moments of Moby Dick bring the novel to a terse, abrupt climax.

The mutual destruction of the Pequod and the White Whale, followed by

Ishmael?s epilogue occupies approximately half a dozen pages. Despite

Melville?s previous tendency to methodically detail every aspect of

whaling life, he assumes a concise, almost journalistic approach in the

climax. Note that in these few pages, he makes little attempt to assign

value judgements to the events taking place. Stylistically, his narration

is reduced to brusque, factual phrases using a greater number of

semicolons. By ending the book so curtly, Melville makes a virtually

negligible attempt at denouement, leaving what value judgements exist to

the reader. Ultimately, it is the dichotomy between the respective fortunes of Ishmael

and Ahab that the reader is left with. Herein lies a greater moral

ambiguity than is previously suggested. Although Ishmael is the sole

survivor of the Pequod, it is notable that in his own way, Ahab fulfills

his desire for revenge by ensuring the destruction of the White Whale

alongside his own end. Despite the seeming superiority of Ishmael?s

destiny, Melville does not explicitly indicate so. On the contrary, he

subtly suggests that Ishmael?s survival is lonely and empty upon being

rescued: “It was the devious-cruising Rachel, that in her retracing search

after her missing children, only found another orphan.” (724) That single

instance of the appellation “orphan” as applied to Ishmael speaks volumes

when taken in light of the destruction of the Pequod and her crew.

Melville?s inclusion of Ishmael?s survival as an epilogue, a suffix

attached to the dramatic destruction of the Pequod, suggests that

Ishmael?s survival is an afterthought to the fate of Ahab and the rest of

his crew. Ishmael?s quiet words at the beginning of the chapter, “Why then

here does any one step forth? ?Because one did survive the wreck,” (723)

indicate a deep humility on Ishmael?s part. The question is then raised of why Ishmael is the sole survivor. It is

clear that Ishmael significantly differs with Ahab concerning their

respective perspectives of the White Whale. Ishmael clearly indicates in

the chapter “The Try Works” how disagreeable he finds the mission and

mentality of those around him: “?the rushing Pequod, freighted with

savages, and laden with fire, and burning a corpse, and plunging into that

blackness of darkness, seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac

commander?s soul.” (540) Here, Ishmael breaks his usual detached

observancy and boldly divorces himself from Ahab?s mission and those whom

Ahab has recruited to aid him .

Ishmael further distinguishes himself from the rest of the crew by being

the sole non-exploiter of whales in general. Melville makes it clear early

on that Ishmael initially chooses to ship on the Pequod for the

experiential value of whaling. It has been indicated that his outlook on

the whale is the only significantly benign one. Whereas Ishmael is

terrified by the “whiteness of the whale,” Stubb sees economic gain in the

valuable whale oil, subtly hinted at by his overbearing gloating upon his

first kill. In the harpooneers, we see a violent savageness, even in

Queequeg?s otherwise loving nature. To Ahab, the whale is a emblem of pure

evil. Even prudent, rational Starbuck looks on the whale as a dumb animal,

which it is his duty to exploit. The terror that Ishmael perceives is a consequence of his own vague fear

of the whale?s “nothingness.” What Ishmael fears is the mystical,

terrifying manifestation of white in the natural world, coupled with its

subversion of the sense of purity attached to whiteness in the human

world. Ishmael is distinguished from the rest of the crew in his ability

to consider the perspectives of the others. In his role as narrator,

Ishmael?s ability to detachedly analyze the viewpoints of those around him

may be what saves him. Note also, that in his narration, Ishmael is the

one character to cast any reverence upon the grand scale of the whale.

Unlike the values the others place on the whale, Ishmael is capable of

viewing the whale solely for its being, as one of the many viewpoints that

he considers through the course of the novel. In contrast, Ahab?s views of the whale are singular and focused. Melville

describes it as a “monomaniacal” obsession, but it is clear in Ahab?s

complexity that there are other factors at work. Ahab remains virtually

unidimensional until the chapter “The Symphony,” where he freely shares

his feelings with Starbuck. In allowing us to see the subtle complexities

of Ahab?s obsession, Melville makes it clear that Ahab is not an inhuman

machine of revenge. Ahab?s questioning of “what nameless, inscrutable,

unearthly thing is it; what cozzening, hidden lord and master, and cruel,

remorseless emperor commands me?” (685) replaces his previous portrait as

the depraved lunatic. The reader is now left to question whether Ahab is

indeed maddened by his obsessive hatred, or simply overwhelmingly

determined, but blinded by his anger. Note though, that despite whatever

end comes of him, Ahab succeeds in avenging himself upon the whale.

Although he is swallowed up by the sea before he can be fully aware of his

success, he does expend his last moments fulfilling his mission. At the

last, he proclaims, “from hell?s heart I stab at thee; for hate?s sake I

spit my last breath at thee.” Whatever Ahab?s motivations, it cannot be

discounted that this objective of is his being realized even with his

dying breath. With the characters of Ishmael and Ahab structured into their respective

places, the stage is set for the novel?s finale. The ambiguous

circumstances of the last chapter “The Chase ?Third Day,” are further

complicated by the portrait of the whale that Melville himself composes.

Melville portrays whales methodically throughout the novel, approaching

them from a scientific, sociologic, philosophic and even poetic points of

view. Despite the relative benignness of the novel?s previous leviathans,

Melville makes the White Whale markedly different: “Moby Dick seemed

combinedly possessed by all the angels that fell from heaven.” (715)

Despite the seemingly lunacy implied by Ahab?s insistence that the White

Whale is an evil force, the ruthless efficacy with which Moby Dick defends

himself seems to vindicate Ahab in the end. It is this mutual malevolency

that is the impetus for the downward spiral of violence begetting violence

that culminates in the mutual destruction of Ahab and Moby Dick. In being

left to valuate the respective fates of Ishmael and Ahab, the reader is

forced to examine what each character has accomplished or lost in his

choice of actions. Ishmael is fortunate enough to be the sole survivor of

the Pequod, but it is left unclear to what traumas he faces. Ahab

ultimately succeeds in his goal, but does so at the expense of his life,

his ship and his crew. Melville makes no attempt to delineate for the

reader a moral hierarchy, and in doing so, completes the ambiguity. The

reader is then left with the possibility of assigning symbolic relations

between the characters. If looked at from the grandest scale, it is

possible to see the whale and the sea as a morally ambivalent cosmos. If

so, then the fault of Ahab and the crew of the Pequod is their futile

attempt to master a force of nature far beyond their comprehension, and

are destroyed for it. The image of Ishmael floating helplessly upon the

ocean, without even the wreckage of the Pequod then becomes a strikingly

lonely image of humanity adrift in a universe neither good nor evil.

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