Moby Dick Essay, Research Paper

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Moby Dick Character Analysis: Ahab

Moby Dick can be viewed as a tragedy. Webster?s Dictionary defines tragedy as a ?dramatic composition, dealing with a serious or somber theme, typically that of a great person destined through flaw of character or conflict with some overpowering force, fate or circumstance to downfall or destruction.? This describes Moby Dick very well, as we discover as the story unfolds. Ahab, one of the key characters in the novel, can be viewed as the protagonist, one who causes the actions that occur and who brings the story to its tragic conclusion. He is seen as the tragic hero. He is a man distinguished by courage and ability, who is admired for his qualities and achievements. The reader can sympathize, feeling pity and compassion for Ahab. We can understand to some extent the feelings that this man must have experienced and we can relate to them. The villain or antagonist to Ahab is Moby Dick, the White Whale whom Ahab pursues, leading to the death of himself and his crew. This leaves Ishmael as the only survivor to tell the story. Ahab is a deeply disturbed man. He could be viewed as a crazy lunatic. Though crazy as he is, he clearly knows what he wants to do and has a clear plan to do it and carries it out to the end. Ahab can be seen as both the tragic hero and a crazy lunatic.

The story unfolds in New Bedford, where the narrator Ishmael comes seeking a job on a whaling vessel. In New Bedford he shares a bed at an Inn with a cannibal from New Zealand. The cannibal is a skilled harpooner named Queequeq. Ishmael and Queequeq become immediate friends. The two end up choosing the vessel named The Piquod. One of the two owners, Peleg who they interview with before they are given positions with the ship, describes Ahab as a ??grand, ungodly, god-like man, Captain Ahab; doesn?t speak much but when he does speak, then you may well listen.? (76) We are told by Peleg that he is ?..moody, desperate moody and savage sometimes.? ??Better to be a moody good captain than a laughing bad one.? (77) The name Ahab is symbolic and taken from the Bible. Ahab was an evil man having had someone killed so he could be king. He was named after his widowed mother, who died when he was only twelve months old. Peleg seems to want Ishmael to overlook the wickedness of Ahab. Ishmael comes away more struck by sympathy and sorrow for him and the loss of his leg, overlooking the dark side of Ahab. Ishmael tells of his impression of Ahab, after they have been out at sea for several days. Ahab was in his cabin out of view of the crew up until then. Ishmael?s description gives the reader a picture of the devastation that the whale did to the captain?s body. Regardless of Ahab?s disabilities, the captain maintains a strong sense of dignity. The reader soon finds that Ahab?s temperament is very mean spirited as evidenced in his run in with Stubb, who had suggested that he find some way to muffle the planks when he walked as he disturbed the crew. He no longer finds simple pleasure anymore because of the torment of his obsession. This is illustrated when he throws his favorite pipe into the sea. The pipe is a symbol of peace and tranquility. Not something in the disposition of this man. Melville uses symbols like these throughout the book.

During the voyage, Ahab gathers his crew, giving them grog and performing a pagan ceremony to join him in hunting down and killing Moby Dick. This is an example of his manipulation of the crew in to supporting him. He entices them with the prospect of winning a gold doubloon, which he stakes on the mast to the first person that spots the white whale. To appeal to his harpooners he engages them in a pagan blood ceremony.

These acts work in getting them on his side. The only one who is horrified by this is Starbuck, his first mate. He sees the mad man, incapable of keeping to the mission at hand, which is harvesting whales for profit. Starbuck acts as a thorn in Ahab?s side throughout the story, keeping Ahab somewhat honest during the voyage

We can see Ahab as a tormented man; he suffers in physical and mental pain, and is obsessed by only one thing, vengeance against the whale. This does not allow him room in his heart for love and affection for others. The whale symbolizes a thing, he must destroy to regain what he has lost in his life, his freedom, and his mastery over his world. He sees his encounter with the whale as a defeat. By being maimed by the whale he is no longer the invincible, immortal ?godlike? sea captain, Peleg has portrayed. He knows that in this pursuit he may die and so may his crew. He has accepted this fate. To regain what he has lost he must be victorious or die trying. Ahab is a man who we know had been to sea for years, three voyages, neglecting his wife and child in Nantucket. He is a loner with no friends. No one can come close to him. He is feared.. Numerous examples support that something is not quite right with Ahab?s mental state. Early on, we learn that he has stowed away, much to the surprise of the crew, a mysterious group of oriental men (Parsees) who act as Ahab?s own personal whaling crew, designed specifically to hunt Moby Dick. The leader, Fedallah, it seems is perceived by the crew as having a dark influence over Ahab. Stubb at one point confides to Flask that he thinks that Fedallah is the devil himself and Flask thinks that Ahab may have struck a deal with him.

Another example that demonstrates his madness is the sad case of Pip, the castaway. The small African boy was required to replace an oarsman on Stubb?s boat; he was cast overboard and nearly drowned. From the experience, he goes mad. Pip seemed to have been sacrificed for the sake of Ahab?s obsession. We see a similar story in Ahab?s own life. He had abandoned his own wife and child. Seeming to remember back to those days, he shows a small sign of affection toward the insane Pip.

When the Pequod meets the whaling ship, the Samuel Enderby, on the high seas we get a look at the mindset of Ahab opposed to the mind of a rational and sane sea captain. Captain Boomer had suffered a similar fate to that of Ahab?s at the wrath of the white whale. Instead of a leg he lost his hand. His hand was replaced by whale ivory. The two engage in a discussion. Ahab is interested in knowing the location of the whale. Captain Boomer does not want to have anything to do with the whale and he thinks Ahab is crazy for wanting to pursue him and risk further bodily injury.

Along the long journey, the Pequod encounters some problems with whale oil leaking in the hold. Starbuck immediately tells Ahab that they need to fix the problem or they would loose their profits. Ahab does not want to waste time in his pursuit of Moby Dick but finally agrees to his responsibilities as captain.

In the chapter ?Pequod Meets The Bachelor,? we see the contrast of what could have been the fate of the Pequod. The Bachelor was a ship with a happy crew loaded with a large cargo of whale, headed home. Had not a mad man been the captain of the Pequod, the same happy ending would have resulted instead of the tragic one we will see later on. Later, the Pequod meets another ship, the Rachel. Ahab asks the usual question about the whereabouts of the white whale. Captain Gardinar of the Rachel it turns out is missing a boat with his young son in it and needs the aid of The Pequod to find the boy. Ahab seems more interested in the subject of the white whale then the missing boy. Ahab refuses Gardiner?s plea for help. His refusal shows how his mania has overtaken his sense of human decency.

Ahab meets his end in the final three chapters, which describe the chase and his crew?s death brought on by Moby Dick. Ishmael is the loan survivor, clinging to the coffin originally prepared for what was thought as a dying Queequeg. The use of coffin, another symbol Melville uses to show us survival over death. The Rachel picks up Ishmael at sea, saving his life and allowing him to tell the story.

Ahab is not a typical hero. A contrast to Ahab would be the sailor named Bulkington, a cabin mate of Ishmael. He may have been more the conventional hero then Ahab. Ishmael described him as follows:

?He stood full six feet in height, with noble shoulders, and a chest like a coffer-dam. I have seldom seen such brawn in a man?.His voice at once announced that he was a Southerner, and from his fine stature, I thought he must be one of those tall mountaineers?When the revelry of his companions had mounted to its height this man slipped away unobserved, and I saw no more of him till he became a comrade on the sea. In a few minutes , however, he was missed by his shipmates, and being, it seems for some reason, a huge favorite of them, they raised a cry of Bulkington! Bulkington! and darted out of the house looking for him.? (23-24)

Bulkington, of course later died with rest of the crew on the Piquod. The man well liked is in sharp contrast to the sad, disfigure, crazy man, Ahab.

Regardless of the view you take about Ahab?s sanity, everyone can agree that he had a gripping obsession with the white whale. Moby Dick, who symbolizes much more then an animal is never killed by the crazy Ahab.

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