Moby Dick Essay, Research Paper

English 12 JMZ

Moby Dick

By Herman Melville

The Characters and Plot

There are numerous characters in Moby Dick, but only a few of them

have any impact on the story. A common sailor named Ishmael is the

narrator. The book, however, focuses on Captain Ahab, the one-legged

commander of the whaling ship Pequod. Ahab has sworn to kill the

gigantic whale Moby Dick, who took away his leg. Starbuck is the

first mate of the Pequod. Queequeg, Tashtego, and Daggoo are the

three harpooners.

The story begins with Ishmael becoming restless. He decides to go

out to sea on a whaling ship. In the port of New Bedford, he meets

and shares a room with a harpooner named Queequeg. The two of them

become close friends, and agree to ship out together.

The day after they reach Nantucket, Ishmael begins searching for a

whaling ship preparing to leave harbor. Out of three ships ready to

leave, he chooses the Pequod. The owners of the ship, Captains Peleg

and Bildad are excited to hear of Queequeg from Ishmael and gladly

let him join the crew. They are told the captain of the ship is

named Ahab. Peleg and Bildad say that he is a good man, but because

of some strange illness, he is confined to his cabin.

On Christmas day, and with Ahab still in his cabin, the Pequod sets

sail in the Atlantic. As the weather begins to warm up (several

months after leaving port), Ahab is finally seen on deck. The

strangest thing about Ahab is his leg. Instead of flesh and bone, he

has a white ivory peg leg.

As the weeks wear on, Ahab starts to become friendlier. One day, he

calls the crew before him. He tells them that the sole mission of

the Pequod is to kill Moby Dick. Moby Dick is a gigantic sperm whale

with a crooked jaw and a deformed forehead. He has never been

defeated, and has attacked and sunk entire ships. Ahab admits he

hates Moby Dick for taking his leg away, and wants revenge. The crew

agree to this challenge, and swear to hunt him down. The only who is

not excited about hunting down Moby Dick is first-mate Starbuck.

For many months, the Pequod sails South, through the Atlantic,

around the Cape of Good Hope (the southern tip of Africa), and into

the Indian Ocean. Along the way, they kill and drain the spermaceti

oil from every sperm whale they encounter. Each time they meet

another ship, Ahab begins the conversation with ?Hast seen the White

Whale??.

Finally, after entering the Japanese sea, the Pequod encounters a

whaling ship named the Enderby. The Enderby?s captain had just

recently lost his arm to Moby Dick. Ahab becomes so excited at the

news that he breaks his ivory leg. The ship?s carpenter builds him a

new one.

Once reaching the waters around the equator, the Pequod meets

another whaling ship, the Rachel. They had seen Moby Dick, and had

become separated from one of the whaling boats during the battle.

Ahab refuses to help them look for the missing men.

At last, Moby Dick is spotted by Ahab. In the first day of

fighting, the whale is harpooned many times, but escapes after

smashing Ahab?s boat. On the second day, the whale is harpooned

again, but still escapes. On the third day, Ahab?s harpoon pierces

the whale, but the rope catches him by the neck and Moby Dick drags

him to the bottom of the sea. An angry Moby Dick rams and sinks the

Pequod. Only Ishmael survives, and he is rescued by the Rachel.

My Response

Moby Dick was not the novel I expected. I was under the impression

that it would be about seafaring and the whale Moby Dick. Instead,

Moby Dick is a story about Captain Ahab?s obsession. There is very

little in the story about the revenge itself, just about Ahab?s

monomania. Out of 465 pages, only forty-two of them deal with the

actual battle between Ahab and Moby Dick.

The novel places very little emphasis on actual seafaring. Ishmael

never even steps on a boat until page seventy-four. Even when the

ship finally leaves port, the mention of anything involving sailing

or the life of sailors is kept to an absolute minimum.

There is, however, plenty of emphasis is on whaling, the anatomy of

whales, and their behavior. The book goes into great detail

describing the whalers of Nantucket, and gives in-depth explanations

of the different types of whales, quoting several outside sources in

the process. The narrator mentions the awesome size of the sperm

whale, and how few books even try to describe it. He also shows

great respect for people who go whaling, and describes the

camaraderie that forms between them. This is an annoying

inconsistency in the novel, since Ishmael (the narrator) tells the

reader that he has never been on a whaling ship before, and has never

seen a live whale.

The first twenty-three chapters focus on Ishmael?s thoughts and

actions. He introduces the reader to whaling and describes the

Pequod. After the ship sets sail, he seems to vanish from the story.

At certain intervals, however, he plays minor roles, and it is

Ishmael that survives to tell the story.

From chapter twenty-four onward, the novel is almost completely

about Ahab hunting for Moby Dick. He has the blacksmith construct a

special harpoon, made from the finest iron, and soaked in the blood

of the three harpooners. The forging of the harpoon is somewhat

ironic, since the rope attached to that same harpoon is what drags

Ahab to the bottom of the sea.

Despite Ahab?s apparent madness, he still seemed able to reason

clearly. He carefully and methodically located the region of the sea

that Moby Dick is most likely to be in (an almost impossible task,

considering the size of the Earth?s Oceans). When he first set sail,

Ahab?s original plan was to hunt only Moby Dick and ignore other

whales. Once he realizes that his men will abandon him if they do

not make some sort of a profit while at sea, he encourages them to

hunt other whales and boosts the morale of the crew.

Ahab is definitely the hero of Moby Dick, but he is a tragic hero.

Everyone in the novel who knew Ahab prior to losing his leg

considered him to be a great man, and one of the finest captains

ever. After the loss of his leg during the first battle with Moby

Dick, Ahab?s tragic flaw appeared. He was obsessed. He wanted

revenge, and nothing else. Ahab considered Moby Dick to be the

embodiment of all that is evil. This monomania is what sent the

Pequod halfway around the world to the Pacific Ocean, where Ahab (and

almost everyone else on the Pequod) died.

Ahab becomes focused on his one view of the whale. Ahab?s preceives

the whale as the embodiment of evil. The whale?s white color lends

an ambiguity to the image of the whale as evil.

The great White Whale, Moby Dick, symbolizes many different things.

The first thing it represents is Ahab?s anger. The whale?s body is

deformed, as is Ahab?s. The whale is driven by animalistic rage,

mirroring the anger in Ahab. Ahab thinks Moby Dick is a monster, but

it is really Ahab who has become the monster. The whale serves as a

scapegoat for Ahab?s miserable existence.

Another thing Moby Dick can represent an unreachable goal. He is a

legendary whale, and the object of a wild and exciting chase through

three oceans. And, despite the efforts of the Pequod, they never

defeated him. The whale was a goal that no one could achieve, but

people still destroyed themselves trying.

One odd thing about the novel is that despite all the pain, death

and destruction Moby Dick has caused, I do not consider the whale to

be evil or monstrous. In fact, I was almost happy to see the whale

turn on his hunters and destroy them. I cannot fully appreciate all

the feeling about whales that the novel attempts to create.

When Moby Dick was written, whales were thought of as dumb brutes.

They were found in large enough numbers that people hunted them

endlessly, and never worried about killing them all. Whaling was an

admired profession. People needed whale oil for their lamps.

Spermaceti oil was used to make perfume and other cosmetics.

In today?s society, things are radically different. Whales are

thought to be just as intelligent–if not more intelligent–than

humans. Some scientists believe they have a complex language,

something not mentioned in the book at all. Whales are an endangered

species, almost hunted to extinction. In fact, many countries have

outlawed whaling. Most people consider whaling to be cruel and

inhumane. The Japanese are despised worldwide for continuing to hunt

them. Television programs portray them in a positive light. Whale

are mammals that nurse their young and breathe air, just like human

beings. They are not giant fish. Today?s children are taught to

respect whales, and are taken to aquariums to be educated about them.

After the invention of the electric light bulb, whale oil lamps were

no longer used. Modern cosmetic products contain no spermaceti oil.

Their manufacturers proudly make claims that no animals were harmed

while making the cosmetics.

The real ?dumb brutes? in the novel are not the whales, but the

whalers. They are uneducated about the true nature of their prey.

In a sense, Moby Dick was simply exacting revenge for the centuries

of pain and death mankind has inflicted on whales.

In the time of Herman Mellville, man?s dominance over nature was

idealized. Today, we are taught to respect and preserve our

environment. This different frame of reference makes it very

difficult to appreciate the symbolism in this novel. The main focus

of the novel, however, is on obsession and its destructiveness.

One of the most important elements in a great literary work is

universality. The main idea of the novel (destructive obsession) is

universal, even though the symbolism is not. Moby Dick was clearly a

great novel, although it was nothing like what I expected.