Moby Dick Essay, Research Paper

Herman Melville?s Moby Dick is a novel that uses many forms of religious imagery. Through the adventure of captain Ahab in his search of Moby Dick it describes the battle between the evil powers of the Devil against the good powers of God and Jesus. In this metaphor, the Devil is in Captain Ahab, God is in nature, Jesus is seen in Moby Dick, and mankind is represented by the crew of the Pequod. The voyage of the Pequod represents the journey of mankind on earth until the death of Jesus.

"As they narrated to each other their unholy adventures, their tales of terror told in words of mirth; as their uncivilized laughter forked upwards out of them, like the flames from the furnace; as to and from, in their front, the harpooners wildly gesticulated with their huge pronged forks and dippers; as the wind howled on, and the sea leaped, and the ship groaned and dived, and yet steadfastly shot her red hell further and further into the blackness of the sea and the night, and scornfully champed the white bone in her mouth, and viciously spat round her on all sides; then 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." (Melville 463)

This quote shows that the Devil is in Captain Ahab,. The entire quote shows his manipulation of his crew. Words like "flames," "blackness," "howled," and "huge pronged forks" turn the Pequod into a habitation of evil spirits. The influence of the commander can be seen upon these innocent men, whose only mistakes were failing to see the truth behind Ahab?s insane mission. The same idea is stated in Kyle Kombrink?s essay "A Passionate Soul in Hell." Kombrink writes, "The mind set of the captain is then carried over to his crew, so to be unified under a hierarchical structure. His madness becomes their dread and becomes the drive in all on board. The savage comes out in them all." The word savageness shows a hatred of religious morality. Therefore, the men are unholy as they stand on board of their ship that is laden with fire, and burning a corpse, and plunging into the blackness of darkness. All the momentum built up by the rushing of the ship towards the unnamed goal reaches its peak in the last statement , in which we realize that the aspects of the crew are exaggerated about in order to describe something much more evil – the insanity of Ahab himself.

Although his insanity is similar to the appearance of the crew in this excerpt, the meaning is better described in another sentence: "he was intent on an audacious, immitigable, and supernatural revenge." (Melville 202) The purpose of Ahab?s mission is simply that of revenge. It is the same as the case with Satan who never recovered from being thrown out of heaven.

In the first passage there seems to be glimpses of all the characters in Moby Dick. The wind, which is the power behind the ship, its crew, and even Ahab himself can be understood as a representation of God, who is the mastermind of everything. The white bone on which the Pequod chomps might signify the final goal of the captain, which would be for Ahab to chomp on the bones of his destroyed enemy, Moby Dick.

“The hand of fate had snatched all their souls; and by the stirring perils of the previous day; the rack of the past night’s suspense; the fixed, unfearing, blind, reckless way in which their wild craft went plunging towards its flying mark; by all these things, their hearts were bowled along. The wind that made great bellied sails, and rushed the vessel on by arms invisible as irresistible; this seemed the symbol of that unseen agency which so enslaved them to the race,” (Melville 606)

This quote shows that God is represented by nature. The wind is the force of God that guides the souls of the men. But it is not only a word found inside of Moby Dick it is also found in the Bible. “When God began to create heaven and earth – the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind in the spirit of God sweeping over the water – God said, ‘Let there be light…’” (Genesis 1:1-3) As you can see the wind is a representation of God in the first lines of the book of Genesis also.

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The wind from these lines can be compared with the stars in other lines and the ocean in even more. Imagery of Nature seems to be used in the book to represent the force of God. At one point along the voyage, Ishmael takes, “the mystic ocean…for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature.” (Melville 172-3) All of these images come out to be the idea of God as a giant, unstoppable force who sweeps God’s power across every corner of the universe.

The image of a peaceful ocean is countered by the fact that God is seen in the wild power of nature also. An example of this type of imagery is seen in this representation of the ocean: “Panting and snorting like a mad battle steed that has lost its rider, the uncontrollable ocean overruns the globe.” (Melville 299) This same image of a wild horse is used by God in the Book of Job to represent God’s untamable power. A God which can be both loved and feared invites the idea that God not only distributes blessings upon God’s people, but curses as well.

"Forced into familiarity, then, with such prodigies as these; and knowing that after repeated, intrepid assaults, the White Whale had escaped alive; it cannot but much matter of surprise that some whalers should go still further in their superstitions; declaring Moby Dick not only ubiquitous, but immortal (for immortality is but ubiquity in time); that though groves of spears should be planted in his flanks, he would still swim away unharmed; or if indeed he should ever be made to spout thick blood, such a sight would be but a ghastly deception; for again in unensanguined billows hundreds of leagues ways, his unsullied jet would once more be seen." (Melville 198)

Moby Dick, the White Whale, is understood by the whalers, in this quote, as being immortal. The metaphor ,Jesus is seen in Moby Dick, shows this to be true. To begin with, just the reference to Moby Dick as the White Whale is enough. Unlike any other whale in the ocean, Moby Dick is white, a color which appears to be good. The color white is seen as a symbol for the qualities of holiness and pureness. The spiritual leaders always appear robed in white, and Jesus, being spiritual as well as human, is associated with this color as well. Jesus? clothes during the transfiguration in the Gospel of Matthew, become, "as white as the light." (Matt. 17:2) Also, the fact that Melville capitalizes the words white whale seem to show the possibility of a religious interpretation.

The whalers proclaim Moby Dick to be immortal, in spite of this the whalers continue their attacks against him to destroy him. This could be similar to the persecution of Christ through his years as a teacher, which succeeded in his death. The groves of spears in the flank of the whale might be symbols of the crown of thorns, the nails in the hands and feet, and the spear in the side of Jesus as well. The difference between the two stories is that Jesus, unlike Moby Dick, was killed by his enemies. However, he could not be made to spout thick blood. After descending into hell he rose on the third day into heaven. In those three days, exactly the same length of time which Ahab and Moby Dick fought, Jesus fought and destroyed death. In light of his resurrection, the death of Jesus Christ was a deception, because, like the White Whale, he is immortal.

There are several other passages in Moby Dick which suggest the possibility that Moby Dick could be a metaphor for the figure of Christ. One example is used when talking about whales in general. However, the idea can be applied to Moby Dick. The passage reads, "Whales must die the death and be murdered, in order to light the gay bridals and other merry-makings of men, and also to illuminate the solemn churches…" (Melville 391) This statement shows the comparison between the whale and the claim made by Christians that Jesus had to submit to death at the hands of mankind in order to rise and become a light for the world. The word light can be used for both the whale and Jesus, as they illuminate the world in different ways.

"…it is a thing most sorrowful, nay, shocking, to expose the fall of valor in the soul. Men may seem detestable as joint stock-companies and nations; knaves, fools, and murderers there may be; men many have mean and meager faces; and glowing creature, that over any ignominious blemish in him all his fellows should run to throw their costliest robes. That immaculate manliness we feel within ourselves, so far in us, that it remains intact though all the outer character seem gone; bleeds with keenest anguish at the undraped spectacle of a valor-ruined man. Nor can piety itself, at such a shameful sight, completely stifle her upbraidings against the permitting stars." (Melville 126)

The issue this quote deals with is the fall of a man?s soul from valor to ruin. By using the metaphor, mankind is represented by the crew, this quote can be applied to the entire crew of the Pequod, other than Ishmael because his soul doesn?t fall. The crew seems to take on a large responsibility and become the representatives of mankind. This quote can be understood as referring to the crew of the Pequod and mankind itself.

The fall which Melville is talking about here might be the same type of fall that happened to Adam and Eve, who are the first of all of mankind in the Bible. It is the fall of souls who once seemed immaculate and glowing creatures, made in the likeness of God, but who chose to act against God?s will in disobedience. For Adam and Eve, this disobedience was eating the forbidden apple. For Starbuck and his crew this disobedience can be seen in following Ahab. The significance of the actions of the crew become possible if the character of Ahab is interpreted as the Devil and the figure of the White Whale is interpreted as Jesus Christ. So by the crew following Ahab in his quest to destroy the White Whale, the crew seems to be not only disobeying God, but revolting against God.

This fall is astonishing, because of the glory which is in all human beings, but, men are also created with free will, and the choice of evil is always possible. Once accepted, the result is a fall from valor to ruin. The most sorrowful thing is not freely chosen but is tempted by the Devil. Although man is divine, it takes Christ to combat the size of such an opponent. Just as Eve cannot refuse the charming words of the serpent, Starbuck cannot resist the force of captain Ahab: "…brave as he might be," Melville writes, "Starbuck cannot withstand those more terrific, because more spiritual terrors, which sometimes menace you from the concentrating brow of an enraged and mighty man." (Melville 126) Mankind has fallen victim to the manipulations of the Devil. At the end of the crew?s final encounter with Moby Dick after three days of battle, only one person is thought of as being worthy of forgiveness and is saved. So, we see Ishmael floating on top of a coffin at the end of the book, which may signify the rising of the dead for the second coming of the lord.

Through the use of a complex metaphor the religious imagery in Melville?s Moby Dick has been revealed. It is easy to see why the novel is hard to understand. It is sometimes more complicated than the Bible itself. It can also seem as long as the bible too.