

MOBY-DICK

Herman Melville

Moby-Dick; or, The Whale (1851)

Overview

While not accepted as such at the time, Moby Dick (and actually all of Melville's work) fall into the category of American Gothic, which was an interesting flip side of the optimistic, expansive, and positivistic novels of the first part of the 19th century. His work also counters the expansive Transcendentalists, especially Emerson, whose Unitarian religion embraced the ideas of Buddhism and concepts of Hinduism, especially as they had to do with positive, transformative, self-actualizing potential. Melville, however, incorporates the world's religions, but he does so to demonstrate the dark, destructive aspects, and to propose a deep questioning of the self-assured optimism of the Unitarians and other "blended" religions. Melville's work opens the portal to a deep questioning of the American Dream, the American expansionism, and openly questions the morality of the vision. He exposes the madness, blood-lust, ambition, greed, and twisted desires that animate the ambitious of the western world: the whalers, the slave ship owners, the speculators, and even the Christians. The story is about Captain Ahab's madness, and whaling ship he turns into a kind of doomed "ship of fools" that takes its diverse whaling crew on a journey of what can be seen as either madness or profound illumination of the nature of perception, reality, and the darkness (ironically portrayed as blindingly white). The whaling voyage is more than an allegory; it is a prism that breaks the white light into its component colors of the spectrum. This it presents a multiplicity of interpretive possibilities in the quest to restore what Ahab's "prelapsarian" (or pre-whale mutilation) state. Melville calls into question all motives seeking vengeance or riches.

Story

The book starts with a literature review of sorts: a listing of quotations about whales (also considered leviathans of the sea), which seems fairly interminable. If you ever wondered if Melville intended a simple sea adventure, this is an opportunity to see that it's far from the roughly contemporaneous sea tales such as *Midshipman Easy* by Frederick Marryat.

We are introduced to the story by the protagonist who introduces himself, "Call me Ishmael." We do not know if that is his real name, and it is easy to suspect now, given that Ishmael is the name of the son of the Biblical Abraham and Hagar, his wife's maid. Ishmael is considered a prophet and ancestor of Mohammed, and thus fits well with the book's central questioning of Christianity.

After Ishmael introduces himself, he tells us he's going to go to sea again, this time to sign on for a 3-year sea voyage on a whaler. So, he goes to New Bedford, the hub for whaling employment, and he stays in the Spouter Inn. He meets Queequeg, a highly tattooed harpooner from the South Pacific, who has just returned from peddling the last human head he brought with him. Queequeg is a cannibal and a head-hunter as well as being a master harpooner. Queequeg is the son of a King of a nation in New Zealand. As a part of his preparation to become King, Queequeg is traveling with Europeans to find out what kinds of knowledge and technology he can bring back to help his people.

Ishmael and Queequeg sign on with the ship, the Pequod. They then attend a church service delivered by Father Mapple whose message is about Jonah and the Whale, with the moral that if you do not preach Truth in a world of falsehood, you will be punished.

Queequeg and Ishmael go to Nantucket on a schooner where Queequeg saves the life of a person who had mocked him. They prepare to board the Pequod, and learn that it is owned by Quakers, who are greedy and grasping. They learn that their captain, Captain Ahab, is known as a deeply ungodly man. Despite that, and the presence of an itinerant soothsayer, Elijah, who foretells doom, Ishmael and Queequeg go ahead with being on Captain Ahab's ship.

Onboard, they meet the first mate, Starbuck, a practical, Nantucket native and a Quaker. Second mate is Stubb, from Cape Cod, third mate is Flask from Martha's Vineyard. They meet the harpooners, Tashtego (Indian) and Daggoo (African).

They meet Captain Ahab, who has a peg leg fashioned from a whale's jawbone, who immediately informs them that he will hunt and kill the beast whale that snapped off his leg at the knee. That bad whale is Moby Dick.

In the meantime, as a whaling ship, they hunt other whales as well. The first whale they encounter is too strong and wily for the crew to kill it. They continue on their voyage, passing by the Cape of Good Hope and also having various "gams" with other whalers. In a "gam," the crew of one ship boards the other and they socialize a bit. The first gam is with the Town-Ho, which is on the verge of mutiny.

The second gam is with the Jeroboam, which is afflicted with an epidemic. The Jeroboam experienced a near-mutiny. It seems that almost every whaling ship has a mutiny or a near-mutiny, putting into question the legitimacy of total power and the remedies for despotism.

The Pequod catches whales. The first is a Sperm Whale. They then catch and kill a right Whale, primarily because it is considered good luck. They then meet with another whaling ship, the Jungfrau, and they compete for a whale, which neither is able to capture. The next whale killed is a Sperm Whale.

After the whale carcass is processed and the blubber rendered into oil (ambergris), a few on board hatch a plan to steal ambergris from the next ship they find. The voyage is hard, and whale-fishing harder. It has a negative impact on many of the crew. For example, Pippin loses his mind after being entangled in the whale line.

The Pequod continues to hunt whales and to have "gams" with other whaling ships. Captain Ahab becomes increasingly obsessed with Moby Dick and takes the ship into dangerous, uncharted waters in the Pacific. Starbuck is so alarmed he considers shooting Ahab, but cannot.

The ship approaches the waters where Moby Dick is said to be inhabiting. As he nears his prey, Captain Ahab becomes so obsessed that he will not even respond to entreaties for help by a nearby ship, whose captain is an acquaintance of Ahab. Ahab will not help his friend find his son. Instead he plunges into the seas where he finds Moby Dick.

The battle with Moby Dick lasts three days. In it, eventually all die. Fedallah is drowned when he is tangled in the harpoon line. Ahab likewise gets tangled in a harpoon line and drowns. Moby Dick destroys the Pequod and all die except Ishmael, who lives because he is able to hold onto a lifebuoy fashioned at Queequeg's behest from Queequeg's canoe.

Ishmael is the only survivor. He is plucked from the ocean by the captain of the Rachel, the same captain Ahab refused to help. The captain of the Rachel is searching for his lost son, whom he never finds, save for the new "proxy" son, Ishmael.

Themes

Obsession Captain Ahab's entire life has come to revolve around his obsession with the whale that bit off his leg. He takes his whaling ship, the Pequod, on a long voyage ostensibly to hunt and kill Moby Dick. However, Captain Ahab's obsession deepens and descends into madness. The book repeats the word, "monomaniac," to characterize Captain Ahab, the "monomaniac man." Captain Ahab has become monomaniac because of the single-mindedness of his pursuit, which Melville describes this way: "For with

the charts of all four oceans before him, Ahab was threading a maze of currents and eddies, with a view to the more certain accomplishment of that monomaniac thought of his soul" (Chapter 44). After traveling with Captain Ahab, the reader may even begin to ask: Is *Moby Dick* real or figurative, the physical manifestation of a dark, destructive obsession?

Racism Melville's most heroic figure in *Moby Dick* is not its mad Captain Ahab. Nor is it the rather unreliable Ishmael. Instead it is the tattooed headhunting cannibal, Queequeg. In this aspect, Herman Melville is following a theme that was popular in the literature of the early 19th century. One good example is that of Frederick Marryat, the naval officer who also wrote novels. His *Mr. Midshipman Easy* (1836) also featured sailors considered "savage" (African or from the South Pacific) who were, in the end, the most valiant, trustworthy, and honorable. Melville seeks to counter the racism prevalent at the time. "For all his tattooings he was on the whole a clean, comely looking cannibal. What's all this fuss I have been making about, thought I to myself—the man's a human being just as I am: he has just as much reason to fear me, as I have to be afraid of him" (chapter 3).

Comparative Religion In *Moby Dick*, many religions find themselves in a single ship, the Pequod. There is the Quakerism of Father Mapple and other crew members, Catholics who observe Lent, Muslims who observe Ramadan. In fact, Queequeg observes Ramadan, a time of "Fasting and Humiliation. Ishmael is a Presbyterian, Tashtego, an "unmixed Indian from Gay Hed, the most westerly promontory of Martha's Vineyard" (Chapter 27), the second mate's squire, practices his own religion. Melville is quick to point out that they can exist side by side, where the Christian religion clearly shows itself to be the most hypocritical, hierarchical, and hostile to human happiness.

Characters

Ishmael, the narrator: Ishmael is a young man from Manhattan who has been on sailing ships before, but now wants the adventure of a whaling ship. He begins his voyage with all the typical prejudices of the day, but then, by the end, has developed a deep friendship with Queequeg.

Captain Ahab: The captain of the Pequod, who is obsessed with catching and destroying the great white whale, Moby-Dick, because the whale bit off his leg at the knee. Ahab is charismatic and irresistible, but his goals are dark and destructive. Ahab is scarred, mutilated, and wears an artificial leg fashioned from a sperm whale's jaw, to remind him of his need for vengeance, and also to express dominance.

Starbuck, Chief Mate: He resists the obsession of Captain Ahab, and in doing so, Starbuck represents the desire to avoid confrontation, and the purity of purpose.

Three competing and complementary religious characters, all of whom reflect prophets or prophecy:

Father Mapple: Quaker pastor who refers to the Biblical character of Jonah, who was swallowed by a whale for his disobedience.

Elijah: Named after the prophet in the Old Testament, he refers to secrets and the unknowable. He represents dark, chthonic forces.

Fedallah: Ahab's harpooner, but also a spiritual guide who predicts Ahab's death as a prophecy and a message about the spiritual consequences of obsession.

Moby Dick, the White Whale: The encounters with Moby Dick are dangerous and transformative, as though one enters into a zone of mystical power, something akin to the "sublime" as described by Edmund Burke; simultaneously beautiful and horror-inspiring. Moby Dick is first and foremost a giant sperm whale, but it is also a leviathan, a divine force for good (or pure destruction), and the physical manifestation of obsession and vengeance.

Queequeg: tattooed aborigine from the South Pacific, has a canoe-shaped coffin. At first, Ishmael is nervous and suspicious about him, fearing his tattoos and the possibility that he is a cannibal. Later, they establish trust and the friendship saves Ishmael's life. Queequeg survives a near-mortal illness, and after surviving it, he begins to carve patterns into the coffin. Ishmael observes that the patterns follow the patterns of his tattoos.

Pequod: the whaling ship of Captain Ahab. It may have been named after the Pequod tribe. It is a wooden sailing ship out of Nantucket, and it is rigged with huge ports for ropes and harpoons. It also carried smaller whaleboats which were used for towing carcasses to the ship.

Discussion Questions

1 Moby Dick protects and seeks revenge on all those who have killed whales or who would destroy whale habitat. How might Moby Dick function in today's setting? A giant deer which hunts down deer-hunters? Doves that attack dove-hunters? Or, a horror scenario - a gigantic aborted fetus that seeks revenge on doctors who perform abortions? What would the aborted fetus consist of? Mutating stem cells that attach themselves and mutate doctors and their staff?

2 Melville's works are built on inversions and reversals. The oppositions call into question the nature of the original thing being described. For example, in "The Encantadas" (the Galapagos Islands are a kind of bizarre inversion of the Edenic Marquesas Islands. The Marquesas seem to come from Homer, frightening fog-shrouded barren volcanic crags and pyroclastic beaches, where the only inhabitants are enormous centenarian tortoises and preternaturally aged mutineers and castaways. Describe the function of the inversions and reversals.

3 In Moby Dick, Herman Melville subverts stereotypes and expectations. For example, in America, the white "civilized" Americans are the true savages, especially when contrasted with the kind, considerate cannibals of Feejee. In the South Pacific, "civilizing" missionaries stripped the Polynesians of the Sandwich Islands of their culture and human dignity. The most self-righteous Christians, the Quakers, had the most "unchristian" values. Can you think of any situations where that might happen now? If you were to write Moby Dick in 2018, where would you include ironies?

Captain Ahab (Monomaniacal)

Character: Perhaps one of the most notorious despotic tyrants in literature, Captain Ahab is characterized many times by a single word, often repeated in the text: "monomaniac." The only other character in the book to which the term is applied is the Moby Dick himself, the "White Whale (that) swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung" (Chapter 41). Captain Ahab is the captain of the whaling ship, the Pequod, which sails out of Nantucket, Massachusetts, the whaling capital of the world. Whaling is very dangerous business because in order to obtain the valuable whale fat (blubber) which is melted down into oil, it is necessary to kill giant sperm whales which, not surprisingly, are not too keen on contributing their body and their life for man's physical if not spiritual illumination.

Parallels Herman Melville read, studied, and enjoyed the entire Shakespeare portfolio of plays, and so it is not too surprising that we see echoes of Shakespeare's anti-heroes and villains, such as the twisted and cruel *Richard III*, whose physical deformity, as in the case of Captain Ahab, came to define him and his peculiar brand of unblinking regicidal urge. Lady MacBeth (of *MacBeth*) has successfully "unsexed" herself in the person of her greatest understudy, Captain Ahab, who likewise crosses over to the dark side to invoke daimonic energies for his own revenge lust. *Titus Andronicus* shocks us with his violence, but even as bloodthirsty as he is, cannot compare in terms of carnage with the whale-butcherery of Captain Ahab. There are other novels with evil Leviathans, if not whales, at least not human. The first that comes to mind is *Beowulf*, the Anglo-Saxon epic poem that features the warrior Beowulf and the horrid beast, Grendel. There are many rather tragic parallels which serve to give sympathy to the devil (Grendel) rather than the fey warrior, Beowulf. But, such is literature (!)

Illustrative Passages

Mutilated Moby Dick is responsible for Captain Ahab's condition. As Ahab himself puts it, "it was Moby Dick that dismasted me; Moby Dick that brought me to this dead stump I stand on now. Aye, aye," he shouted with a terrific, loud, animal sob, like that of a heart-stricken moose; "Aye, aye! it was that

accursed white whale that razed me; made a poor pegging lubber of me for ever and a day!" Chapter 37. Ahab was "dismasted off Japan" (Chapter 28), and the fact that he lost his leg in that area is not a coincidence. At that point in time, Japan was considered one of the most dangerous and isolated places on the face of the earth. So, it is not surprising that Moby Dick was found in those waters. The "White Whale ... that intangible malignity ... which the ancient Ophites of the east revered in their statue devil" (Chapter 41) represents pure evil. Thus, when Captain Ahab pursued the whale, it is not just an act of vengeance, or retribution, but also but it becomes, somewhere along the way, an exploration of the attraction of evil, embodied by the whale.

Revengeful Although Moby Dick has bitten off Captain Ahab's leg, leaving him with "an ivory leg... fashioned from the polished bone of a sperm whale's jaw" (Chapter 28), (and also appropriately white), it is hard to feel sorry for him, or even to feel enthusiasm for his single-minded (monomaniacal) pursuit of the White Whale. If anything, Ahab inspires a sense of horror, and his description of the incident in which he lost his leg inspires one to see the pursuit of vengeance as ultimately futile. After all, nothing will restore Ahab's leg, and even the most satisfying encounter with Moby Dick will not result in a restoration to the "prelapsarian" state.

Tragic Captain Ahab is known for his "grim aspect," and the fact that he is utterly relentless in his pursuit of the whale. Ahab forces his crew to circumnavigate the globe to pursue the whale, and all his waking thoughts are filled with the hunt. His nights are also filled with self-torment. He cannot sleep at night in his bed, but tosses and turns, twisting his blankets and leaving his pillow as hot as a heated brick. In constructing a novel which calls into question the overall meaning of the "great quests," it also emphasizes the day to day relationships of the protagonists, which, at the end of the day, are what imbue life with meaning. In the case of *Moby Dick*, the friendship between Queequeg and Ishmael, which is intensified by being in often hostile circumstances, due to the monomania and obsessiveness of Ahab is what, at the end, gives life meaning.

Despotic As a leader, Ahab is absolutely authoritarian. He requires absolute obedience, and when there are potentially mutinous men, Ahab requires even more demonstrations of loyalty: "Ahab seized a loaded musket from the rack (forming part of most South-Sea-men's cabin furniture), and pointing it towards Starbuck, exclaimed: "There is one God that is Lord over the earth, and one Captain that is lord over the Pequod.—On deck!" chapter 109

Ironically, Herman Melville knew the intensity of mutiny from his own experiences on board a sailing ship. In fact, Melville spent time in a jail in the South Seas (Marquesas Islands) for participating in a mutiny. He escaped and later wrote about it. In doing so, Melville demonstrated that his feelings were definitely with the crew, and not with the officers or the captain, especially a despotic, obsessed, captain who endangered the crew with his relentless pursuit of the dangerous leviathan, regardless of the places he might lead him.

Negative Melville does not allow the narrative to cast Captain Ahab as simply a mad, monomaniacal captain who is trapped in an endless revenge fantasy. Of course, that is a part of the narrative, but on a deeper level, it is not at all clear what purpose or final end might be served if Ahab actually were able to kill Moby Dick. His leg would not be restored, nor would he feel satisfaction. Further, while the White Whale is considered evil, it's clear that he is not evil in and of himself, but that evil has been projected onto him "monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung" (Chapter 41). Melville suggests that the pursuit of Moby Dick is in essentially nihilistic, and that the travels are a strange inversion of other circular wanderings such as Dante's *Inferno* or *The Odyssey*. Yet, instead of having the satisfaction of arriving home (eventually) or finding ways in which the punishment fits the crime (contrapassos in Dante), Melville suggests that the entire process has no meaning at all, except for that which is assigned to it by people's imaginings.

Angry The whale is white, but instead of considering it to be a symbol of purity, or even of death (as in Asian cultures), Melville suggests that the whale's color represents an absolute nothingness in our existence, experience, and ideas about the past, present, and future. "Is it that by its indefiniteness it

shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a colour as the visible absence of colour; and at the same time the concrete of all colours; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows—a colourless, all-colour of atheism from which we shrink?” (Chapter 42).

Discussion Questions

1 - Captain Ahab is one of the most repellent characters in English language literature. We know that he's obsessed, and that he tromps around on a pegleg, which was the result of an encounter with Moby Dick the "great white" which snapped off his leg at the knee. The fact that Ahab is so cruel makes us naturally seek the innocents to identify with. At the end of the novel, who did you find yourself feeling kind fellow feelings for?

2 -- Ishmael overhears Captain Ahab talking about his own obsessiveness and extreme rage to kill, and his madness. In that moment, Captain Ahab says he is more insane than people could ever suspect. When you contemplate what Ahab is saying, does it make sense? How? How not? How does Ahab's rant become a kind of self-aware rant about ranting, which is, ultimately nihilistic?

Ishmael (Unconventional / Questioning)

Character: Ishmael is the protagonist of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851). He's not a whaler by trade, but a teacher. However, he suffers from dark moods and the only thing that helps him is to go to sea. He does not have funds for a sea voyage, so he joins on as a crewmember and earns his way to be on the ocean. His first experience with a whaler is with the Pequod, and he is immediately thrust into a different world with a wide array of people of different backgrounds, cultures, and personalities. We meet Ishmael at the beginning of the novel, where he explains that going to sea is an antidote to whenever he feels the "damp, drizzly November in my soul" (Chapter 1). As we get to know Ishmael better, we see that he has a rather conventional upbringing, but he is open to new experiences because he questions the status quo, especially the institutions such as church (Christianity) and also human-engineered authority, which he views as often placing the insane or the incompetent in charge. At heart, Ishmael is a philosopher, but he does not develop a system of thought, but instead sees all patterns as demonstrating the ultimately nothingness of human knowledge.

Parallels Ishmael is a wanderer, a seeker, and a questioner. There are other protagonists who journey around the world just to find that all the institutions they had believed in are ultimately empty. One that immediately comes to mind is Candide of the novel of the same name by Voltaire. Voltaire is more directly satirical, but Melville also has his moments of satire and broad humor, especially when he shares his thoughts that are often quite extreme (which makes us smile), or they reveal a fundamental but often denied truth. Another possible parallel could be Charles Darwin's *The Voyage of the Beagle* which was published in 1839. In it, Darwin makes careful observations and reflects on the nature of things. Instead of being ultimately nihilistic, as is Ishmael, Darwin is a positivist and believes in a narrowly constructed notion of cause and effect.

Illustrative moments

Open to new experiences When Ishmael encounter Queequeg at the Spouter's Inn he agrees to share the only remaining bed in the Inn with Queequeg despite the fact that Queequeg is a cannibal who was out peddling a human head that very evening. Further Queequeg slept with his tomahawk, and had a terrifying appearance, as he was covered with tattoos. So, not only is Ishmael willing to go on a voyage on a dangerous whaling ship, he was willing to consort with a potentially dangerous person. He is also open to new technologies. Ishmael appreciates technological efficiency and change. In a very memorable chapter, he details how a freshly harpooned whale is butchered, with extremely specific details. He also includes technical passages and details to provide a solid background.

Questioning Although he does not directly raise questions, Ishmael makes observations about human institutions (Christianity, slavery, government) that raise questions about their validity. Further, he refuses to acquiesce to the status quo, and he questions why people instantly condemn cannibals when he points out that all are already cannibals (although his argument is pretty weak). Ishmael is a Presbyterian Christian, but he does not condemn the religions of others, but says “I cherish the greatest respect towards everybody’s obligations” (Chapter 17). He ultimately concludes, “Heaven have mercy on us all—Presbyterians and Pagans alike—for we are all somehow dreadfully cracked about the head, and sadly need mending” (Chapter 17).

Philosophical Ishmael recognizes patterns and proposes many meanings for them. For example, when Queequeg starts carving designs on his coffin-canoe, Ishmael recognizes that the pattern corresponds to his tattoos, and he makes connection to identity and existence. He also analyzes the often overlooked practices, such as the concept of the “gam,” which is a meeting of whaleships, and the customs of boarding each other’s ships. In doing so, he compares the “gam” with what happens when pirate ships meet, and he reflects that the customs of the “gam” are aspirational, and that the captains behave in a way that reflects what they’d ultimately like to be able to achieve. Ishmael also demonstrates that he has a philosophical mindset, and his way of looking at the world can make him a bit depressed. For example, he has a tendency to “grow grim about the mouth” which makes him need to go to sea. That said, he is self-ironizing and finds gallows humor in things. For example, after saying that he is depressed at times, he immediately hyperbolizes it a bit by saying “I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses” and that going to sea is “my substitute for a pistol and ball.”

Sensitive – Despite his initial misgivings, he listens to Queequeg and comes to understand his heart. Their friendship is warm, trusting, and full of a communication that is open and expressive of ideal human companionship. Ishmael listens to Queequeg and truly tries to see from other perspectives. For example, at one point he questions, “who is not a cannibal? I tell you it will be more tolerable for the Fejee that salted down a lean missionary in his cellar against a coming famine” than to mistreat a goose to fatten his liver for pate (Chapter 65). Ishmael is sensitive toward the suffering of other beings, and he dislikes against cruelty toward animals. In the whale fishing grounds, Ishmael sympathizes with the whale, and points out its horrible suffering as it is harpooned and desperately tries to escape.

Introspective – Ishmael makes many commentaries about the condition of the human being and the nature of the world (on slavery, cannibalism, etc.) He observes the often disconcerting qualities of groups. For example, he points out that Quakers, who are known for being pacifists, are, once boarded on a whaling ship, are “the most sanguinary of all sailors and whale-hunters. They are fighting Quakers; they are Quakers with a vengeance.” (Chapter 16). He also reflects on Queequeg’s Ramadan and contemplatively contrasts it with his own Presbyterian brand of Christianity. Ishmael listens and reflects rather than being an intrusive presence. In another instance that illustrates his tendency to introspect, Ishmael listens to Captain Ahab at sunset and becomes aware of just how obsessed Ahab is, and to what degree he considers himself mad: “They think me mad – Starbuck does; but I’m demoniac, I am madness maddened!” (Chapter 37).

Discussion Questions

1 – When Ishmael says of Captain Ahab after hearing his mad ravings, “As I walked away, I was full of thoughtfulness; what had been incidentally revealed to me of Captain Ahab, filled me with a certain wild vagueness of painfulness concerning him. And somehow, at the time, I felt a sympathy and a sorrow for him” (Chapter 16), what does it make you think about Ishmael’s other observations in the book. List two or three other people Ishmael has observed and describe Ishmael’s mindset as he does so. What do you learn, and how does it make you think about people and activities in a more complex way?

2 – Describe the job of the harpooner and the “specksnyder” (whale fat cutter) on the ship. What are their jobs? How do they perform them? What do they mean, metaphorically, considering that the whaleship is its own cosmos, and has its own cosmology?

3 – Starbuck, the First Mate of the Pequod, follows Captain Ahab's orders, even they mean almost certain death. When Starbuck comments "'God keep us, but already my bones feel damp within me, and from the inside wet my flesh. I misdoubt me that I disobey my God in obeying him!" (Chapter 135), what is he saying? How is Melville problematizing authority, blind obedience, and ultimately, the outcome of an ordered society that allows despots to rule?

Queequeg (Extrovert)

Overview: Queequeg is a central character in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851). Born in the South Pacific the son of the chief of a nation that spans small islands, Queequeg is a noble person on many levels. Not only is he noble by birth, but also his character and personality make him an admirable and loyal friend. He is an uninhibited, warm, and loyal friend who is devoted to his religion, committed to his friendships, and technically proficient at his craft (harpooning). He is also skillful and creative, with the ability to carve intricate designs onto his canoe and also his handles of his knives, and also to put together a fashion ensemble that pleases him, as well as surprising and delighting onlookers. Queequeg is the son of a King and his reasons for joining the whalers was to learn more about Christians in order to make his people happier. Unfortunately, though "the practices of whalemens soon convinced him that even Christians could be both miserable and wicked; infinitely more so, than all his father's heathens" (Chapter 12). Queequeg possesses a strong desire to always adhere to values of his religion, compassion for friends, and generosity.

Parallels The Renaissance essayist, Michel de Montaigne wrote in his essay, "On Cannibals", that the so-called "savage" cultures are really much more civilized than the European ones. He points to the fact that the cannibal cultures have no words for greed or avarice, and they do not practice slavery. He echoes what Bartolome de las Casas described as a "Noble Savage" in his work, *In defense of the Indians*, that described his experiences in the Mexico of the Spanish Conquest. Both Montaigne and de las Casas are rather naïve in their adulation, which is also echoed in Melville.

Illustrative moments

Enterprising When we first learn of Queequeg, we do so through the landlord of the Spouter's Inn in New Bedford, Massachusetts, who comments that Queequeg is usually an "airley to bed and airley to rise" kind of person, but he late because he is having trouble selling the last of the human heads he has brought to sell. His enterprising nature also manifests as artistic expression. Queequeg carves with his jackknife and also with his harpoon knife designs that are very intricate, "as close packed in its mazes of design. as the prints of that fine old Dutch savage, Albert Durer" (Chapter 57). He later starts to make intricate carvings in his canoe / boat. Ishmael recognizes the patterns as the same ones that festoon Queequeg's body.

Loyal Queequeg is a loyal and dedicated friend. After he and Ishmael form a friendship while they are in New Bedford waiting on a whaling ship, Queequeg announced that he considers him to be "married" to him (which is his way of expressing loyalty and deep friendship). Indeed, Queequeg proves himself to be honest, loyal, and generous with Ishmael. Queequeg speaks transparently and openly and immediately impresses Ishmael for having an innocent, honest soul. "For all his unearthly tattooings, I thought I saw the traces of a simple honest heart; and in his large, deep eyes, fiery black and bold, there seemed tokens of a spirit that would dare a thousand devils" (Chapter 10). Queequeg is considered innocent in some degree because of the nature of his language, which does not contain the concepts or a vocabulary for deviousness.

Skillful Queequeg is a harpooner of such skill that he has fashioned his own harpoon. He has a great deal of success with it, and when they encounter a whale, Queequeg works with Starbuck and plunges the harpoon in precisely the correct spot. Queequeg steers them skillfully to avoid having an accident with the stricken whale, and there is a great description of a wounded whale pulling the ship, the Pequod, like a sleigh through the ocean. In addition, Queequeg has also created his own tomahawk, and he also builds the pulleys and riggings used in conjunction with the harpooning.

Outgoing Like his fellow South Pacific harpooners, Queequeg is open and outgoing. This quality is depicted as an aspect of free, open, and honest people who are transparent with their emotions and motives. One good example occurs when the “pagan harpooners” are helping convert the whale’s blubber into whale oil, and they “narrated to each other their unholy adventures, their tales of terror told in words of mirth.” (Chapter 95). Queequeg, like his fellow harpooners, is outgoing and expressive. When he is informed that half his bed at the Spouter’s Inn has been rented to another person, Queequeg does not protest. Instead, he accepts Ishmael simply and without ado.

Devoted Queequeg is a very religious man who takes care to follow ceremonies as prescribed by his religion. He carries with him always a statue of a deity, which Ishmael describes through outsider eyes: “...a curious little deformed image with a hunch on its back, and exactly the colour of a three days’ old Congo baby. Remembering the embalmed head, at first I almost thought that this black manikin was a real baby preserved in some similar manner. But seeing that it was not at all limber, and that it glistened a good deal like polished ebony, I concluded that it must be nothing but a wooden idol, which indeed it proved to be.” (Chapter 3). Queequeg consults his deity on main decisions, even which whaling ship to enlist with. Ishmael looks skeptically at Yogo, he respected Queequeg’s beliefs and practices.

Self-Sacrificing – Queequeg pronounces himself to be “married” to Ishmael (deep friendship) and he is willing to die for him. In fact, he does sacrifice himself, not only in terms of protecting Ishmael on board the Pequod, but also in directing Ishmael to convert his “coffin canoe” into a life buoy. This life buoy (which is in many ways the body of Queequeg) does in the end save Ishmael’s life after the final fatal skirmish with Moby Dick. In addition, he sacrifices his sense of self-determination, sometimes at the behest of Yojo. For example, he lets Ishmael select the whaling ship (as directed by Yojo), of the three up for three-years’ voyages: “the Devil-dam, the tit-bit, and the Pequod” (Chapter 16). Ishmael selects the Pequod, named after a celebrated tribe of Massachusetts Indians.

Discussion Questions

1 The kind of friendship that Queequeg offers Ishmael is very different from the ones that are generally offered by and between the New Englanders that Ishmael is used to dealing with. First, not many New Englanders would offer up their bed without complaining. Second, they would not necessarily be so generous with their time. What are other ways that Queequeg’s friendship is unique?

2 How does Queequeg view religion and religious duty? How does he relate to the little black idol he carries with him? Does he condemn non-practitioners of his religion? How does his attitude compare with that of Christians?

3 Describe examples of noble behavior and innate nobility that Queequeg demonstrates toward his fellow harpooners, Ishmael, and to the crew in general. How might they relate to his sense of self as the son of the King of his native lands?

Reference

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