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Man's Relentless Search for Knowledge in Melville's *Moby Dick*

Upon the completion of the novel that would posthumously become his defining work, Herman Melville composed a letter to fellow writer Nathaniel Hawthorne, stating, "I have written a wicked book" (Redden). Wicked as it may be, Melville's *Moby Dick* certainly does not want for theological symbolism. Melville makes it apparent that the narrative structure of the novel operates on a deeply theological level from the very first line, in which the narrator invites the reader to call him Ishmael. The biblical allusions and religious symbols recur throughout the novel, but only to intensify the godlessness of the epic whaling voyage that the crew of the *Pequod* embarks on. Captain Ahab's hunt for the White Whale is, in truth, Ahab's attempt to transcend the boundaries of human knowledge and to experience the unknown. In doing so, Ahab directly challenges the omnipotence of God, and this is precisely what Melville deemed 'wicked'. For unlike the biblical Job or Jonah, Ahab is unwilling to submit to God and recognize the limitations of his humanity. Melville makes it clear that Ahab's relentless quest for Moby Dick symbolizes the unholy pursuit of divine knowledge, and, by an extension, of God, by employing religious diction to describe the whale itself, by highlighting the experiences of several characters who choose not to interfere with the forces of Nature, and ultimately by revealing the fatal consequences of Ahab's choice to pursue that which cannot be pursued.

Ahab's compulsive desire to encounter the White Whale is indicative of an underlying desire to encounter the totality of God Himself along with all of His Wisdom, and this is overwhelmingly clear in the language Melville uses to describe the physical and spiritual qualities of the whale. First and foremost, the god-like immensity of the whale cannot be overstated. Ishmael reflects on the fact that although the whale is the largest and profoundest living being that Nature has to offer, the entirety of its body is usually hidden because "it is a thing eternally impossible for mortal man to hoist him bodily into the air" (315). Just as man can only catch momentary glimpses of the whale in the unfathomable depths of the sea, man can likewise only have fleeting experiences of the divine. To further his elevation of the whale to a metaphysical level, Ishmael constantly refers back to the presence of the whale in Greek mythology as well as in biblical writings. By doing so, he suggests that, like God, the whale is ancient and perhaps as timeless as the oceans themselves. Ishmael is certainly not alone in his veneration, for other whalers "[declare] Moby Dick not only ubiquitous, but immortal" (Melville 224). But of all the qualities Ishmael describes, it is Moby Dick's whiteness that he finds most profoundly evocative of its divine knowledge. Melville devotes an entire chapter to his narrator's philosophical musings on the significance of the color white, and Ishmael concludes with an assertion that white represents both holiness and sheer terror. The notion that these two qualities can coexist is incomprehensible, and Ishmael struggles to wrap his mind around it in the same way that man struggles to comprehend the fullness of the universe and of its Creator. Therefore, it is the dualistic nature of the White Whale that makes it so terrifying and alluring, for the whale is the very embodiment of the Knowledge of good and evil, Knowledge that belongs not to man, but to God alone. As the narrative drives forward, there are

many instances in which the White Whale and God become nearly interchangeable. In one instance, young Pip directly addresses God with characteristics suggestive of the whale, saying, ““Oh, thou big white God...”” (219). In another instance, Ishmael describes Moby Dick as “the grand god” (627) upon seeing him breach. Melville emphasizes the divine qualities and paradoxical mystery of the White Whale in order to equate Moby Dick with God, for neither of these beings should be approached without fearful admiration and awe.

Understanding that Moby Dick is indeed symbolic of divine knowledge, every character in the novel apart from the stubborn Ahab recognizes that this whale is not a force to be reckoned with. The voice that most consistently conveys the idea that the White Whale exceeds human comprehension is that of the narrator. Somewhat of a whale aficionado, Ishmael provides the reader with cetological chapter after chapter, each one revealing his desire to move ever further into the unfathomable mysteries that the whale offers. But despite his endless attempts to peel back the skin and crack open the skull of the whale, even Ishmael admits defeat, saying, “Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will” (441). Ishmael acknowledges that some knowledge is simply not for mortal man to attain. His deep reverence for Nature also emerges in his frequent associations of the whale with profound silence, which suggests that the whale itself has an unspoken sacredness about it. When the amateur Ishmael first sits down at a table with experienced whalers, he expects to hear stories about the glory of whaling; instead, “to [his] no small surprise, nearly every man maintained a profound silence” (58). Later though, when Ishmael too can count himself among the experienced whalers of the world, he gains an understanding of the reverent silence that is owed to the whale. Ishmael addresses the reader, saying, “In this Afric Temple of the Whale I leave you,

reader, and if you be an Nantucketer, and a Whaleman, you will silently worship there” (529). Ishmael’s reflections reveal that, in an attempt to describe something as great as the White Whale, and, by extension, God, words often fail; some things must remain unspoken. After all, he asserts, “Seldom have I known any profound being that had anything to say in this world” (434). Although Ishmael is the character that perhaps harbors the deepest appreciation of the whale, he is not the only character who recognizes that some knowledge is off-limits to man. Melville describes Captain Ahab’s first mate, Starbuck, as “endued with a deep natural reverence” (148), and it is Starbuck indeed who asserts, “I will have no man in my boat who is not afraid of a whale” (149). Like Ishmael, Starbuck views the whale, and more specifically Moby Dick, as a creature that should be fearfully admired, but not angrily pursued. It is of little surprise, then, that Starbuck fights Ahab’s unwavering plan to destroy Moby Dick to the bitter end, urging the Captain to change his mind with no success. Finally, the last character who must be included in the discussion of yielding to Nature is Captain Boomer of the *Samuel Enderby*, one of the ships the *Pequod* encounters on its voyage. Boomer serves as an interesting foil to Ahab because he too has lost a limb to Moby Dick; however, unlike Ahab, he never again pursues the whale after his injury. Melville presents the character of Captain Boomer as evidence that one can come into contact with Moby Dick and use the profound encounter to inspire awe rather than vengeance. Because Boomer does not seek revenge on the whale, he and his entire crew are in high spirits, and therefore stand in stark contrast to Ahab’s dreadful crew, who are more or less aware of their fated end. Though Boomer warns Ahab of Moby Dick, saying, “He’s best let alone,” Ahab counters his warning with “What is best let alone, that accursed thing is

not always what least allures” (511). And so Ahab, unwilling to submit to the whale, continues onward in his death march.

Though every other character seems, at least on some level, able to recognize the profundity and insurmountability of Moby Dick, Ahab remains unwilling to surrender to the whale, and ultimately perishes in his futile attempt to defeat it. While others are able to see a certain sacredness in the whale, Ahab sees only evil, “[piling] upon the whale’s white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down” (226). Melville’s choice to compare Ahab to the biblical Adam is telling, though, and he even draws upon this comparison again when he has Ahab exclaim, “I feel...as though I were Adam, staggering beneath the piled centuries of Paradise” (621). Melville constructs this comparison to emphasize that Ahab’s hunt of the whale is not a surface-level plot for revenge, but the deeply-rooted, ancient human thirst for Knowledge. Much like Adam, Ahab gets a whiff of the tree of Knowledge and is not satisfied; he has to bite in. And, like Adam, the Knowledge he seeks will ultimately destroy him. So, even while Ahab proclaims his fierce hatred for Moby Dick with nearly every breath he takes, it is crucial to understand that because Ahab envies the Knowledge which that whale represents, his hatred actually springs from an intense reverence and admiration. This jealousy of Nature and of the Divine emerges when Ahab addresses the head of a dead whale, saying, “Speak thou vast and venerable head... and tell us the secret thing that is in thee. Of all divers, thou hast dived the deepest” (366). What Ahab craves is not only the death of the whale, but, in essence, to become the whale. He wants to be worshipped like a god, to be the “great lord of Leviathans” (165). For this endeavor, the Faustian Ahab would exchange even his soul for the pursuit of the White Whale, for “he [seems] ready to sacrifice all mortal interests

to that one passion” (256). And sacrifice he does, for Ahab spends forty years of his life on the seas searching for Moby Dick. Amidst all of the other biblical symbolism present in the novel, it would be wrong to overlook the significance of that number, forty. In biblical language, forty is representative of the amount of time it takes for something to come to fullness, the time it takes for restoration and redemption to take place. So it was when Noah sailed over the flooded earth for forty days and forty nights, and when the Israelites spent forty years in exile. Though Noah and the Israelites both withstood their trials and received redemption, there will be no redemption for Ahab. Ahab is cognizant of this when he says, “What a forty years’ fool — fool — old fool, has old Ahab been!” (621). Because Ahab refuses to acknowledge the sovereignty of Nature, he ultimately perishes and brings his crew down with him. It is this unwillingness to surrender, this refusal to kneel before the Divine that destroys him. Indeed, of all the crew members, it is Stubb who perhaps most clearly identifies Ahab’s tragic flaw when he says, “I never yet saw him kneel” (275).

Captain Ahab’s relentless search for the White Whale is the relentless search for Knowledge itself, the unholy pursuit of God that has been perpetuating itself among mankind since the fall of Adam. Rather than humble himself before the whale, Ahab strives to “pierce the profundity” (620) in an attempt to know that which cannot be known. He resolves to chase Moby Dick to the ends of the earth, and he would likely delve into the depths with that whale if he could. Melville takes his reader alongside Ahab on his monomaniacal quest, and the reader consequently experiences the gradual descent into madness that comes with chasing the unattainable. Truly, Melville was not mistaken when he labelled *Moby Dick* as ‘wicked’, for he

clearly uses Ahab's godless voyage to show that the pursuit of Knowledge beyond human reach can only end in utter destruction and defeat.

Works Cited

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Redden, Mariah Sue. "Moby Dick and the Color of the Elusive." *Apollon*, 2015.