

Piety on the Pequod

Melville's Use of Faith to Face an Uncertain Universe in *Moby-Dick*

When faced with the same inscrutable ocean and quest, Ishmael and Ahab have completely different reactions. In a search for meaning, Ishmael travels the world and is able to see truths both beautiful and ugly. With these insights, faith develops in Ishmael that allows him to accept the same uncertainty that drove Ahab to madness. Ahab, when faced with this, goes mad trying to understand what it holds and eventually chooses to defy, rather than understand it. These two reactions in the pursuit of truth mirror Herman Melville's own battles and how he views himself. When faced with a bleak universe, Melville and Ishmael both succeed in not going completely mad like Ahab.

For Herman Melville, the pursuit of epistemology is not just based on a metaphysical idea but as something of personal value. Melville's life drastically changed with two events that could be seen as acts of God; the death of his father and the success of his first novel, *Typee*, with his subsequent decline. After being born into a financially stable family, declining after his father's death, becoming successful again, and his final decline, it was natural for Melville to wonder as to why these events had happened to him. How can you understand a universe in which a genius author can die as a footnote in American literary history? A similar dilemma is faced by Ahab, who was demasted by the same creature he had been successfully hunting for years. With these different questions of God and the universe, there were two very different responses. Ishmael, the character closely modeled after Melville's own life, faced this uncertainty with acceptance. When wondering why he might be hurt by the world, Ishmael asserts "Who ain't a slave?...however they may thump and punch me about...everybody else is one way or other served in much the same way" (Melville 6). Rather than feeling slighted by the

world when bad things happen, Ishmael accepts those events and trusts that “everybody else is one way or other served in much the same way” This sentiment allows Ishmael to face the uncertainty of the world and this belief is only strengthened as his faith in God develops. Ahab, when faced with the uncertainty of the world represented by Moby-Dick, reacts very differently, saying “Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I’d strike the sun if it insulted me” (Melville 178). Instead of accepting that life “may thump and punch me about”, Ahab insists he wishes to “strike” back against the universe. This resistance to uncertainty is coupled with Ahab’s rejection of God and his ease in addressing “blasphemy”. This angry response contrasts greatly with Ishmael's good-hearted acceptance.

These two different reactions represent Herman Melville’s own contemplation of his life and how it could have gone. Just like Ishmael, when Melville faced the uncertainty of the universe, he accepted his inability to decipher the world, a skill that was strengthened through his faith. After his sudden success with *Typee* and his drawn-out decline, Melville could have easily become like Ahab and despised that uncertainty and blamed his misfortunes upon it. In fact, the start of Melville’s professional decline was actually characterized as madness much akin to Ahab’s. After the publishing of his second book, *Pierre: or, The Ambiguities*, the New York newspaper *Day Book* published a news story with the title of “HERMAN MELVILLE CRAZY” reporting that his latest book was composed of “the ravings and reveries of a madman” (Parker 131-132). This demonstrates that Melville’s failure was associated with him being a “madman”, an eerily similar descriptor given to Ahab. Ahab’s futile suicidal drive was also seen in Melville according to author Nathaniel Hawthorne. As Hawthorne notes in his journal, Melville had

“pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated” (“Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne”). This sentiment echoes Ahab’s mindset and he resigned to being destroyed in his quest for Moby Dick. Hawthorne speculated that Melville “will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief” (“Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne”). Similarly, Ishmael's journey started with a restlessness that was only satisfied when he got a “definite belief”: a belief in God. *Moby-Dick* is Melville’s contemplation of how he learned to accept uncertainty in the world and how different it could have gone. This uncertainty in the universe is largely characterized by Moby Dick himself.

The job of relating attributes of Moby Dick to the world’s ambiguity is largely done in Chapter 42 “The Whiteness of the Whale”. As the title of the chapter suggests, Ishmael thinks “It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me” (Melville 204). While this “whiteness” is often associated with beauty in nature, Ishmael recognizes it is as a reflection of metaphysical truth. As Ishmael explains, “whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors” (Melville 212). This means that even when adding together the whole of the universe, or the “concrete of all colors”, it still amounts to nothing, whiteness, and the “absence of color”. In a journey to find meaning, this is a truth that Ishmael needs to face and eventually embrace. While this whiteness appalls Ishmael, he comes to accept it through his faith in God. This inability to understand the whale is an extension of the mystery surrounding God and His existence. The first use of the word “inscrutable” refers to the “inscrutable tides of God” (Melville 173), a way to describe the incomprehensible nature of God. This same term is used to describe Moby Dick and as Ahab says “That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreck

that hate upon him” (Melville 178). Ahab does not care whether or not Moby Dick is God himself or simply an agent of Him, the fact that Ahab cannot understand him is the reason why he fills with “hate”. This hatred slowly drives Ahab mad as he continually tries to understand God and the world. Through the eyes of Ishmael, the fact that the world is “inscrutable” is not always terrifying. During the normative center of the novel, when a whaling boat’s crew including Ishmael see families of whales peacefully swimming within a pod. In this passage, it is said that “these inscrutable creatures at the center freely and fearlessly indulge in all peaceful concernments” (Melville 424). The use of “inscrutable” during this abnormally peaceful scene demonstrates that to Melville uncertainty can be beautiful as long as it is accepted. A similar sentiment is shared at many of the ends of the “informative” chapters, such as Chapter 32. “Cetology”, in *Moby-Dick*, in which Melville precedes to tell you everything he knows about whales but generally concludes by saying that we do not know much. As an older man of faith, Melville is able to incorporate an appreciation of the unknown in the structure of *Moby-Dick* itself. This acceptance and appreciation of uncertainty characteristic of Ishmael and Melville contrasts with Ahab’s continual, feverish attempts to understand the “inscrutable” nature of the universe.

After surviving an assumedly fatal illness, Queequeg carved his tattoos into his once-coffin. It is revealed that Queequeg's tattoos were the “work of a departed prophet... written out on his body a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth” (Melville 524). Ahab, when faced with directions on how to attain “truth”, but the inability to decipher them exclaims, “Oh, devilish tantalization of the gods”

(Melville 524). This force contributes to Ahab's madness, as the truth feels so close yet always unattainable. Another chance at divine truth presents itself in Pip. After temporarily being a castaway at sea, Pip saw the face of God and subsequently went insane. The rest of the crew dismissed Pip's prophetic abilities as simple madness but, Ahab recognized his understanding of the world and quickly befriended the previously rankless cabin boy. After viewing his divinely mad rants, Ahab says "Ahab's cabin shall be Pip's home henceforth, while Ahab lives. Thou touchest my inmost centre, boy; thou art tied to me by cords woven of my heart-strings" (Melville 567). Ahab grants Pip a "home" in his personal cabin, so he can get closer to understanding the uncertainty that was driving him crazy. While this pursuit spells destruction, Melville also believes it is better to pursue the truth and perish than to have never tried at all saying, "in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God—so, better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety!" (Melville 117). While the pursuit of Ahab may seem fatalistic these efforts towards the "highest truth" are worth the risk of perishing "in that howling infinite". In the pursuit of truth, undesired truths may be found or you may go mad in the chase. While Ishmael was able to find some truth and meaning, it was bleak with the revelation that the universe is empty and unempathetic. Ishmael was able to swallow this emptiness but, Ahab got lost in being unable to decipher the truth that was set right in front of him.

Despite having found a deeply nihilistic truth of the universe, Ishmael did not go mad. This acceptance can be attributed to Ishmael's development of faith throughout the book. At the beginning of the book, Ishmael is an atheist who pokes fun at religion, particularly orthodox

practices. “Why the Life Insurance Companies pay death-forfeitures upon immortals ... why all the living so strive to hush all the dead; wherefore but the rumor of a knocking in a tomb will terrify a whole city” (Melville 42). Ishmael takes pleasure in pointing out contradictions in religion and asserts that “what they call my shadow here on earth is my true substance”(Melville 42). While Ishmael disagrees with Christianity at first, he also wants to believe in something bigger than himself. However, it takes him some time to understanding sacrificing oneself for one’s faith. As Queequeg remains motionless during his fast, Ishmael remarks, “it seemed so downright senseless and insane to be sitting there all day and half the night on his back in a cold room, holding a piece of wood on his head” (Melville 93). Without any sense of spirituality, Ishmael sees the act as “senseless” and instead of seeing Yojo as a divine idol, he sees a “piece of wood”. Despite his acceptance and even participation in Queequeg's faith, he has yet to see any purpose or meaning. However, this does not mean he lacks the desire to find meaning in spirituality. While defending Queequeg’s practices Ishmael recounts that the religion he is alluding to is “the same ancient Catholic Church to which...all of us, and every mother’s son and soul of us belong; the great and everlasting First Congregation of this whole worshipping world” (Melville 97). Despite being an Atheist, Ishmael believes that all of humankind worships something bigger and belongs to the same ultimate religion. Many experiences on the ship shake Ishmael’s doubt into becoming Agnostic saying “Doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly; this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye” (409). Ishmael neither has complete belief in God or complete doubt, resulting in him regarding both “with equal eye”. In the whale’s mist and a rainbow comes both earthly and Godly phenomenon comes together to enlighten Ishmael’s mind. The fog/mist

of the whale represents Ishmael's doubts while heaven seeks to illuminate through those doubts in the form of a rainbow.

Ishmael's faith in God is fully realized as he describes faith as being akin to a Catskill eagle saying, "even if he for ever flies within the gorge, that gorge is in the mountains; so that even in his lowest swoop the mountain eagle is still higher than other birds upon the plain, even though they soar" (Melville 465). In this metaphor, Ishmael shows that even when those of faith are down or their faith falters, their lowest point is a "gorge" in the mountains, so that even when faith is at its lowest, it still soars "higher than other birds upon the plain". Ishmael comes to this conclusion as he sees how God's sun contains true light, unlike the "artificial fire" of the try-works (Melville 464). Ishmael recognizes his belief in false ideas in the past as he gives thanks for "the glorious, golden, glad sun, the only true lamp-all others but liars!" (Melville 464). After this revelation of faith, Ishmael can finally understand the uncertainty and evil in the world saying, "Nevertheless the sun hides not Virginia's Dismal Swamp, nor Rome's accursed Campagna, nor wide Sahara, nor all the millions of miles of deserts and of griefs beneath the moon" (464). Faith does not "hide" the evils of the world, it simply makes all the "griefs beneath the moon" tolerable. Even while faced with uncertainty or the knowledge or harsh truth, Ishmael is able to accept the world through faith, while soaring above those without. This transformation echoes Nathaniel Hawthorne's prediction for Melville when he said, "If he were a religious man, he would be one of the most truly religious and reverential". When enveloped in a scene of divine proportions, Ishmael is overcome while squeezing spermaceti remarking, "I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me... let us squeeze ourselves universally into the

very milk and sperm of kindness” (Melville 456). Ishmael has a kind of “insanity” engulf him as he becomes connected to his fellow humankind. Ishmael becomes maddened momentarily and Pip permanently when faced with scenes of celestial origins. However, Ahab is overcome by madness of a different kind.

Down on the plains, Ahab struggles with madness while pursuing truth and God himself. Without faith, Ahab moves beyond trying to understand the inscrutable nature of the world and instead tries to defy it. Part of the sadness of the story is the fact that Ahab has clarity in understanding his own madness. The mad Captain was able to view his quest sanely when he says, “all my means are sane, my motive and my object mad” (Melville 202). While Ahab’s plans are perfectly calculated and sane, the purpose of these plans is completely “mad”. In the same vein of his methods being “sane”, Ahab in some ways believes that being mad is a choice saying “In no Paradise myself, I am impatient of all misery in others that is not mad. Thou should’st go mad, blacksmith; say, why dost thou not go mad?” (Melville 530). Ahab asks the blacksmith why he doesn’t go mad as if it is not only a choice but a natural reaction to the widespread, baseless suffering humans endure. Without faith to give reason or trust, Ahab’s only choice is to go mad. This choice is made when Ahab faced his own seemingly random suffering and in turn, projected onto the whale “not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations” (Melville 200). What adds to the tragedy is the fact that Ahab does doubt his fated quest and desires to be better. As he contemplates why he continues with the mad endeavor, he wonders what “cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time”

(Melville 592). Through the pursuit of a beast of which Ahab does not know is the agent or principal, he finally considers whether he himself is the agent or principal. While Ishmael has continually commented on the connections to mankind he has discovered on the Pequod, Ahab distances himself from not only humans but gods saying, "Ahab stands alone among the millions of the peopled earth, nor gods nor men his neighbors!" (Melville 602). Faith means feeling a connection to the earth and madness means breaking off those connections. Ahab begins to believe that the only way to face the uncertainty of God is to become God-like. This change is shown from the doubtful "Is Ahab, Ahab?" (Melville 592) of whether he is the agent or the principal to the definite "Ahab is for ever Ahab" (Melville 611). This transformation is further transfixed when Ahab holds a loaded musket towards Starbuck and says, "There is one God that is Lord over the earth and one Captain that is lord over the Pequod" (Melville 517). To achieve this level, Ahab prepares himself to face God through Moby-Dick using a spear bathed in the blood of three pagans and baptizes it howling, "Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli" (Melville 532). Ahab baptizes the spear in the name of the devil, in direct opposition to God. With this diabolical, pagan spear Ahab goes on in his pursuit of Moby Dick, the agent of God or God himself. As Ahab approaches his final battle with the beast, he cries, "I turn my body from the sun" (Melville 622). This turning from the "sun", as has been described as God's true light by Ishmael, represents Ahab ultimately turning away from God as he turns away from His sun. Ahab severs his connection to God and goes further in attributing his last act to the devil saying, "from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee" (623). As Ahab's chance for faith redemption wane, he turns from hating the inscrutable and trying to understand it, to defying the unknown and God.

In contrast to both Ishmael and Ahab, Starbuck's unshakable faith creates a completely different character. Ishmael set sail in search of meaning, but Starbuck joined the *Pequod* for entirely practical reasons. This is because Starbuck has already found meaning through his religion and has complete faith in God. He has a healthy respect for the spiritual world but doesn't feel the drive to find universal truth like Ahab or Ishmael. Starbuck sees Moby Dick not as a stand-in for God or Evil or truth, but as what he actually is: a whale. "Vengeance on a dumb brute! ... To be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab, seems blasphemous" (Melville 178). Unlike others in the crew, Starbuck simply sees Moby Dick as "a dumb brute". Not only is it foolish, but Starbuck labels the grudge as "blasphemous" believing that killing one of God's creatures out of hate is sinful. Through trusting God's judgment and his own rationality, Starbuck sees the physical world as for how it presents itself. Frustrated with this literal interpretation, Ahab tries to explain "All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks ... Sometimes I think there's naught beyond" (Melville 178). Ahab believes that there is something deeper behind "all visible objects" and that Moby Dick is his chance to see what is behind the "pasteboard masks". Seeing behind the pasteboard masks would allow Ahab to see the existence of God, but he sometimes thinks "there's naught beyond". This quest after Moby Dick is ridiculous to Starbuck not only because it is irrational but also because he already believes himself to understand God. Starbuck makes one final appeal to Ahab before he goes after Moby Dick, saying, "Great God! But for one single instant show thyself ... never, never wilt thou capture him, old man" (Melville 611). In the process of Starbuck asking Ahab to give up the chase, he calls on God to appear and tells Ahab that he will never "capture" God. For Starbuck,

the Pequod's task was simply to hunt whales and return to Nantucket. Starbuck's ultimate goal wasn't to find universal truth or to fight God, but simply to return to his wife and child. This is because Starbuck is rational and has already found the meaning and faith that Ishmael and Ahab were searching for.

Through *Moby-Dick*, it can be seen that Melville's own struggles with universal truth and misfortune come through in both Ishmael and Ahab. The reader is challenged to face the same battle through an invitation of Ishmael's, "how may unlettered Ishmael hope to read the awful Chaldee of the Sperm Whale's brow? I but put that brow before you. Read it if you can" (380). The book is not only Melville understanding his own trek through the unknown but inviting the reader to also face that uncertainty and come to accept it. This comes with a challenge if you are faced with a mystery, "read it if you can". While Melville welcomes readers into the same fray, his struggles are embedded into the characters themselves. There is a part of Melville's present self that resembles Ahab in the way that his failing literary career was characterized as insanity by others and the way in which he would berate and beat his wife and family. However, the character of Ahab is also a contemplation of how Melville could potentially be if he were to look for justice from an uncertain principal after misfortunes. Ishmael, however, is both the story of Melville's development and his ideal self, using faith to accept the uncertainty of the world and trusting the principal behind it. At the end of the novel, it can be seen that those same misfortunes can save us. Ishmael is saved by the misfortune of Queequeg's sickness and death in the form of Queequeg's former coffin turned into a life raft. While faith can in some ways save and allow us to accept the uncertainty in the world, it still does not change the fact that we are

orphans alone waiting to be rescued and that the sea will roll on “as it rolled five thousand years ago” (Melville 624).

Works Cited

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