

THE MORAL QUALITIES OF QUEEQUEG, STARBUCK, AND AHAB

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of English

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for
Graduation with Honors

by

Robert James Werner

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ABSTRACT

Moby Dick or The Whale by Herman Melville reached the American public late in the year 1851. Early reviewers with a few perceptive exceptions, recognized only the narrative aspects of the novel. Most considered it a continuation by Melville of the genre of sea tale adventure stories. This style of writing had established his literary popularity with the publication of Typee and Omoo.

There is evidence to suggest, however, that Melville had concluded the writing of Moby Dick with a completely different purpose in mind. His goal was not to present merely an exciting account of the chase of a fabled whale; rather he sought a story which would express a large and liberal theme.

While powerful description would help further this purpose, physical detail alone was not sufficient for its accomplishment. Melville went a step beyond physical description and endowed his characters with specific moral qualities on the psychological level. Examination of Queequeg, Starbuck, and Ahab reveals their respective moral qualities as well as the significance those moral qualities have for the novel.

Queequeg, a pagan, embodies the moral qualities preached by Christianity: kindness, sincerity, selflessness, and love of his fellow man. As a result, he becomes a vehicle by which Melville can compare the religions and behavioral characteristics of civilized Christians and pagans.

Starbuck is influenced by two conflicting moral qualities. The first is a faith in God and a recognition of his need to do his duty as reflected through Christian principles. The second is his duty to obey his Captain in accordance with the traditions of the sea. The moral qualities provide a dual role for Starbuck in the novel. On one level he is in direct opposition to Ahab on the material and moral plane. On yet another level he is an unsuccessful counterbalance to the influence of Fedallah.

Ahab is motivated by one dominant moral quality, a desire to achieve universal justice for himself and all men through a determined assertion of will. His coercion of the minds of his crew for his own selfish ends leads to his destruction. Moreover, it helps establish his role in the novel as a tragic hero.

Melville's introduction of moral qualities changed the scope of the tale from mere narrative to a novel which abounds in parables, symbolism and allegory, a philosophical account of man's existence in the universe.

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I.

THE PRESENCE OF MORAL QUALITIES

THE PRESENCE OF MORAL QUALITIES

Melville, whose popularity had been established with the publication of Typee and Omoo, was considered a successful author of narrative sea adventures. It was from this perspective that critics in 1851 approached his publication of Moby-Dick or The Whale. Except for a few perceptive reviewers, the novel was judged for its narrative rather than symbolic content. The blindness of critics to this important aspect of the novel inevitably resulted in misunderstanding and bad reviews. The reviewer for the London Literary Gazette and Journal of Science and Art considered Melville's work in December of 1851 as follows:

What the author's original intention in spinning his preposterous yarn was, it is impossible to guess; evidently when we compare the first and third volumes, it was never carried out. He seems to have despaired of exciting interest about a leviathan hero and a crazy whale-skipper, and when he found his manuscript sufficient for the filling up of three octavos, resolved to put a stop to whale, captain, crew, and savages by a coup de main. Accordingly, he sends them down to the depths of ocean all in a heap, using his milk-white spermaceti as the instrument of ruthless destruction.¹

Similar reviews were frequent, and at times the condemnation became more blatant. The London Morning Chronicle offered the following appraisal of Melville's effort:

¹ Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford, eds., Moby-Dick as Doubloon: Essays and Extracts (1851-1970) (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1970), p. 61.

. . . [Melville's imagination] unchecked, as it would appear, by the very slightest remembrance of judgment or common sense, and occasionally soaring into such absolute clouds of phantasmal unreason, that we seriously and sorrowfully ask ourselves whether this can be anything other than sheer moonstruck lunacy.²

There is evidence to indicate that Melville had indeed initiated the writing as purely an adventure story. Luther S. Mansfield and Howard P. Vincent in the introduction to their edition of Moby-Dick point out that Melville specifically stated this to be his intention in a letter to his publisher, Richard Bently. Melville wrote in June 1850, "The book is a romance of adventure, founded upon certain wild legends of the Sperm Whale Fisheries, and illustrated by the author's own personal experience, of two years and more, as a harpooner."³ However, in 1850 Melville underwent a change which influenced not only the intention he had for the book, but also the form and style in which it would appear. Upon consideration of this change, Mansfield and Vincent conclude,

What happened was the release within Melville's mind of repressed forces, insights, and powers—forces generated probably as early as 1849 by the reading of Shakespeare. The release was made possible by the example, the friendship, and the counsel of his newfound friend and neighbor, Nathaniel Hawthorne, to whom, in warm gratitude, the finished novel was dedicated.⁴

² Parker and Harrison, Moby Dick as Doubloon, p. 72.

³ Herman Melville, Moby Dick or The Whale, ed., Luther S. Mansfield and Howard P. Vincent (New York: Hendricks House, 1962), p. x.

⁴ Melville, Moby Dick, Mansfield and Vincent edition, p. xi.

The result of this friendship should not be underestimated because it had considerable impact on the thrust of the novel. Vincent contends in The Trying Out of Moby Dick that, "Much of the talk about moral and metaphysical matters undoubtedly found its way directly or symbolically into the pages of Moby Dick."⁵ Thus the novel was altered both in emphasis and dimension. William S. Gleim in The Meaning of Moby Dick reflects upon the scope of the novel, "Moby Dick is really two stories; an ostensible story that treats of material things, and another story, hidden in parables, allegories, and symbolism, which treats of abstract things."⁶ Evidence of Melville's revised intention to expand the scope of the novel from mere narrative is not restricted to critics, but may be found in the work itself. In the oft-quoted passage of the chapter, "Fossil Whale," Melville blatantly announces his broad intent:

For in the mere act of penning my thoughts of this Leviathan, they weary me, and make me faint with their outreaching comprehensiveness of sweep, as if to include the whole circle of the sciences, and all the generations of whales and men, and mastodons, past, present, and to come, with all the revolving panoramas of empire on earth, and throughout the whole universe, not excluding its suburbs. Such, and so magnifying, is the virtue of a large and liberal theme! We expand to its bulk. To produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme.⁷

⁵ Howard P. Vincent, The Trying Out of Moby-Dick (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1949), p. 39.

⁶ William S. Gleim, The Meaning of Moby Dick (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), p. 2.

⁷ Melville, Moby-Dick or The Whale, ed., Charles Feidelson, Jr. (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Inc., 1964), p. 580. All further quotations from the text will be from this edition.

Thus Melville wished the reader to recognize that the novel was to deal with more than mere details of the whaling industry. But what was this mighty theme? Gerhard Friedrich addresses himself to this question in his critical study In Pursuit of Moby Dick. His conclusion is that Melville's "inquiry is ever a complex one, revolving around the mystery of the created world and the interrelated problem of what constitutes appropriate human behavior amidst the lands and oceans of reality."⁸ Melville's desire to emphasize the symbolic aspects of the novel and its "mighty theme" did not necessitate the abandoning of the story's main vehicle, the voyage. Rather, those newly realized perceptions and insights were introduced in conjunction with the literal detail of the whale hunt, giving the quest an added dimension. As Charles Feidelson, Jr., reflects in the introduction to his edition of Moby-Dick, "Symbolic imagination was the means whereby facts and ideas, whale hunting and remote analogies could be felt and presented as one."⁹

The most important effect of this introduction of symbolic imagination into the novel may be observed in the characters. On the individual level their scope was completely altered. Howard P. Vincent, referring to

⁸ Gerhard Friedrich, In Pursuit of Moby Dick (Wallingford, Pa.: Pendle Hill, 1958), p. 9.

⁹ Melville, Moby Dick, p. xvi.

this change, contends "The Whaling Voyage, a nearly completed manuscript must now treat of the universal as well as the particular. Characters must be altered, enlarged."¹⁰ It was during this alteration process that Melville chose to assign specific moral qualities to certain members of the crew. The characters could now be distinguished from one another by physical detail as well as by the morals they reflected in the symbolic level of the novel. For the purposes of this paper, moral qualities shall be defined as those values, attitudes, or ethics pertaining to the distinction between right and wrong or good and evil in relation to the actions, volitions, or character of responsible beings. Having been imbued with these moral qualities the characters could each exhibit an individualized moral sense, the power of apprehending the difference between right and wrong.¹¹

These moral qualities colored the meaning of the entire novel. The crew became all men, the quest was the voyage of life. As Lawrence Thompson proclaimed in Melville's Quarrel with God, "The ship Pequod represents, predominantly, a microcosm of the world; its officers and crew represent, predominantly a cross section of humanity, bound on its life-voyage toward the mystery of death."¹²

¹⁰ Vincent, The Trying Out of Moby Dick, p. 35.

¹¹ Oxford English Dictionary, Vol. 6 L-M (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1933), p. 653.

¹² Lawrence Thompson, Melville's Quarrel with God (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), p. 204.

Having established Melville's intention to reflect upon a large and liberal theme, and having suggested a subsequent infusion by Melville of distinct individualized moral qualities into the characters of his crew, one may now proceed to an analysis of these characters and their respective moral qualities. It is on Queequeg, Starbuck, and Ahab that attention is now focused.

II.

QUEEQUEG

QUEEQUEG

Queequeg is a perfect example of a character exhibiting an added dimension due to the infusion of moral qualities. Because of the humor inherent in his early relationship with Ishmael, however, the importance and complexity of his role is often overlooked. His similarity to the simplistic Polynesians of Melville's previous works is only superficial. Close examination suggests significant disparities. Discussing this metamorphosis Howard P. Vincent comments, "The growth from Typee simplicity to Moby Dick complexity may be noticed by comparing Kory Kory with his latter counterpart Queequeg. A simple savage soul has in the change of name gathered unto himself a world of meaning. No longer is a savage by a river's brim merely a savage—he is a way of life, a symbol of ethical truths."¹³

Queequeg's character had been subjected to the influence of two conflicting cultures. The primary shaping had occurred in the Polynesian society of which he was a royal member. Having left that culture, and immersed himself in the business of hunting whales, Queequeg found himself in the midst of civilized Christian society. Ishmael, describing the effect of this exposure to a strange culture, concludes ". . . Queequeg,

¹³ Vincent, The Trying Out of Moby Dick, p. 35.

do you see, was a creature in the transition state; neither caterpillar nor butterfly. He was just enough civilized to show off his outlandishness in the strangest possible manner."¹⁴ This blending of savage and western characteristics makes Queequeg the perfect vehicle by which Melville can compare and contrast the two cultures. As Miller explains in his critical study of Melville, "Ishmael's experiences after his first encounter with the savage Queequeg soon led him to make some ironic contrasts not only between civilization and savagery but also between Christian and pagan religions."¹⁵ It is in these contrasts, that the moral qualities by which Queequeg governs his relationship with his god, and other men, become apparent.

Attention will now be focused on the first of these contrasts, the disparities between savagery and civilization which are manifested in the interrelationships of men. The first comparison of Queequeg to civilized Christian men comes in "The Spouter Inn." Having overcome the initial shock of finding a stranger in his bed, Queequeg exhibits what one critic has called "barbaric virtues."¹⁶ His actions toward Ishmael are at once kind and sincere. As Ishmael thoughtfully reasoned, "He really did this

¹⁴ Moby Dick, IV, p. 35.

¹⁵ James E. Miller, Jr., A Readers Guide to Herman Melville (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1962), p. 88.

¹⁶ Miller, A Reader's Guide to Melville, p. 95.

in not only a civil but a really kind and charitable way. . . . 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 as much reason to fear me, as I have to be afraid of him. Better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian"¹⁷ It soon becomes apparent to Ishmael that kindness and sincerity are values governing most all of Queequeg's relationships with other men, they are qualities inherent in his very nature. This quiet demonstration of natural virtue soon elevates Queequeg in the eyes of Ishmael. Ishmael begins to realize the superiority of Queequeg's character to the majority of civilized men, as opposed to his earlier preference of the savage only to a drunken Christian. Indeed, Ishmael readily perceives the irony of the situation in which a savage displays impeccable manners and an inherent sense of delicacy, while a Christian demonstrates only rude curiosity. When Queequeg makes clear his intention of dressing first, in order that Ishmael might have privacy in the room, his actions are considered as follows." I pay this particular compliment to Queequeg, because he treated me with so much civility and consideration, while I was guilty of great rudeness."¹⁸

Sincere kindness and consideration readily differentiates Queequeg from the "hollow courtesy" of the civilized world. These however were not

¹⁷ Moby Dick, III, p. 51.

¹⁸ Moby Dick, IV, p. 55.

the only moral qualities pointing to his superiority. Ishmael was quick to realize that Queequeg would not exhibit the hypocrisy which ran rampant in a Christian civilization. Here indeed was an honest man. "You cannot hide the soul. Through all his unearthly tatooings, I thought I saw traces of a simple honest heart; and in his large, deep eyes, fiery black and bold, there seemed tokens of a spirit that would have a thousand devils."¹⁹

Queequeg's actions also point to a certain self-collectedness in his character. Ishmael considers this almost Socratic wisdom and adds Queequeg was ". . . content with his own companionship; always equal to himself."²⁰ This self-assurance enables Queequeg to deal with certain situations in a manner completely alien to the behavior of most civilized men. Witness for example Queequeg's near death from fever late in the voyage of the Pequod. He wasted away, passively approaching death until he remembered a task on shore yet unfinished. Realizing he should not die yet, he recovered. Concerning this act of will amazing to civilized men, Ishmael could only reply, "In a word, it was Queequeg's conceit, that if a man made up his mind to live, mere sickness could not kill him. . . ."²¹

¹⁹ Moby Dick, X, p. 82.

²⁰ Moby Dick, X, p. 83.

²¹ Moby Dick, CX, pp. 611-12.

The disparity with civilized man was not confined to strength of will.

Ishmael reports that while such an illness would require a prolonged period of convalescence for a civilized man, a savage can be normal in about a day.

One further moral quality must be considered which reflects the difference between civilized man and Queequeg. Queequeg in addition to the virtues previously mentioned exhibits an instinctive love for his fellow man. In a civilized Christian society this is preached but rarely seen. The savage Queequeg is love embodied. It is this love which displays itself in the rescues he makes in the novel. Queequeg is willing to risk his life for any man regardless of his race or personality. Thus he rescues an Indian, Tashtego, as well as a bumpkin who had only recently insulted him. For such selfless acts Queequeg seeks no rewards. As Ishmael exclaimed after the first rescue, "Was there ever such unconsciousness? He did not seem to think that he at all deserved a medal from the Humane and Magnanimous Societies."²²

Thus by the infusion of moral qualities into the character of Queequeg Melville could effectively criticize the hypocrisy and hollowness of men in the civilized world. Moreover, Ishmael's recognition of the presence of these superior moral qualities in Queequeg serves a two-fold purpose. First, it educates him, unveiling his eyes and allowing him

²² Moby Dick, XIII, p. 95.

to view the faults in all civilized men including himself. Recognition of these faults is the first step toward their removal. Second, the presence of these moral qualities in a living breathing man helps restore Ishmael's faith in the potential for good in man. Encouraged, Ishmael reflects, "No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world. This soothing savage had redeemed it. There he sat, his very indifference speaking a nature in which there lurked no civilized hypocrisies and bland deceits."²³

The moral qualities embodied in Queequeg emerge not only in the different behavioral patterns characterizing the interrelationships of savage and civilized men, but also in the religions of the respective cultures. We are first introduced to Queequeg's religion with Ishmael's description of their initial night together at the Spouter Inn. Before retiring, Queequeg offers a sacrifice of shavings and a piece of biscuit to his ebony idol, Yojo. From that point on Melville, through Ishmael, offers a critical commentary on Christianity by comparing it to the natural instinctive religion Queequeg adheres to. William S. Gleim contends, "Queequeg personifies religion. Ishmael's liking for Queequeg as shown by favorable comments on his personality means that Melville had a sincere regard for natural religion."²⁴ Ishmael first views Queequeg's sacrifice as

²³Moby Dick, X, pp. 83-84.

²⁴Gleim, The Meaning of Moby Dick, p. 53.

queer proceedings. They are completely overshadowed by his curiosity concerning Queequeg's general character. Melville reserves serious consideration of Christian and pagan religions for a later portion of the novel, chapter seven through ten. Careful examination of these chapters yields further knowledge of the moral qualities Queequeg embodies.

Chapter seven finds Ishmael entering the chapel to witness a sermon by Father Mapple, attendance at such service being customary before embarking on a whaling voyage. To his surprise, upon entering he recognizes Queequeg already seated. As Ishmael relates, Queequeg was

Affected by the solemnity of the scene, there was a wondering gaze of incredulous curiosity in his countenance. This savage was the only person present who seemed to notice my entrance; because he was the only one who could not read, and, therefore, was not reading those frigid inscriptions on the wall.²⁵

Queequeg like Christian men holds his own beliefs close to his soul, yet exhibits curiosity over the religious activities of other men. This parallels Ishmael's curiosity at the pagan's rituals. This series of four chapters keenly illustrates the differences between Queequeg and Father Mapple, the Christian and pagan realm of religion. Father Mapple enters the chapel and ascends the pulpit by a ladder of cloth covered rope. Having reached the height, he deliberately pulls up the ladder. Ishmael considers this action, and maintains that because of Father Mapple's considerable reputation, he

²⁵ Moby Dick, VII, p. 64.

could not suspect him of utilizing tricks of the stage. The very denial of the suspicion, however, suggests the thought had occurred, and implies at least a partial recognition by Melville of the dramatic theatrics often associated with Christian worship. Ishmael finally concludes that Father Mapple's actions were an act of physical isolation, separating him from temporal matters. In the following chapter Ishmael reports the much discussed sermon on Jonah and the necessity for obeying God. From this point Melville moves to a direct comparison of Christianity and pagan religion as demonstrated in chapter 10. The first difference may be observed in the distinctive natures of Father Mapple and Queequeg. Queequeg's calm unconsciousness contrasts sharply with the intense orthodoxy of Father Mapple. As Vincent notes in The Trying Out of Moby Dick, "For thematically Queequeg is a counterpart to Father Mapple, it is no accident that Melville moved directly from a man of God, to the savage idolator, from the Christian to the pagan. . . . Where Father Mapple was the extreme intensity of spiritual consciousness, Queequeg is on the other hand the instinctual and unconscious self."²⁶

Similarly there is a distinction between the manner and tone of the service in the chapel, and Queequeg's ritual. In the chapel Father Mapple separated himself from the congregation, delivering a dramatic sermon to

²⁶ Vincent, The Trying Out of Moby Dick, p. 76.

an audience that could not participate but only passively listen. Queequeg on the contrary seeks to join himself with Ishmael, that they might both participate in the friendly ritual. As Miller suggests in his study of Melville, "The Christian Father Mapple's isolation and superior aloof position contrasts sharply with the Pagan Queequeg's affectionate invitation to Ishmael to join in the worship of his idol."²⁷ The manner of Queequeg's ritual is the active offer of sacrifice as opposed to the passive participation in orthodox Christian religions.

The differences in the pagan and Christian mentality also manifest themselves in the relationship of men to their respective gods. From Father Mapple's sermon we see an emphasis on the necessity of obedience and the promise of harsh punishment should one ignore his duty to God. There is no personal contact with God by the members of the congregation, who must rely on the words of Father Mapple. In Queequeg's pagan rituals man can become truly close to his idol. Thus Queequeg is free to peer into the face of Yojo, whittle at his nose or kiss his forehead. Moreover, while he does offer sacrifices to Yojo, he does so voluntarily rather than from fear of threats of eternal damnation.

Just as the moral qualities governing Queequeg's relationships with men educate Ishmael to the faults of civilization, so the values

²⁷ Miller, A Reader's Guide to Melville, p. 88.

Queequeg reflects in his pagan rituals educate Ishmael in the realm of religion. Having befriended Queequeg he realizes that the importance of religion and man's relationship to God should transcend bickering questions over which is the infallible church, and what are the correct procedures for worship.

Even though the moral values embodied in Queequeg indicate his general superiority when compared to his civilized counterparts, one should not assume that he is perfect. Queequeg like other men has his faults, and Melville does not attempt to conceal them. In chapter 10, Ishmael comments on Queequeg's self-collectedness. He seldom associates with or pays any attention to the other sailors. He is content with himself and preserves utmost serenity. In the next chapter, on their trip to Nantucket, Queequeg catches a young man mimicking him, and bodily hurls him into the air, "Dropping his harpoon, the brawny savage caught him in his arms and by an almost miraculous dexterity and strength, sent him high up bodily into the air, then slightly tapping his stern in mid-somerseset, the fellow landed with bursting lungs upon his feet . . . "28 Miller contends this action brings Queequeg's ultimate weakness to the surface. This weakness he suggests is instinctive hostility, ". . . which flashes out as readily as the love and with the same intensity renders him finally deficient—like the

28 Moby Dick, XIII, p. 94.

virtuous but fickle savages of Typee and Omoo."²⁹ I would hesitate to concur with Miller and categorize Queequeg as instinctively hostile in his relations with other men. The tone of the incident, as well as Queequeg's courageous effort to save the young man's life, seems to reflect an intent that was more playful than hostile. Nevertheless it does indicate a certain deficiency on Queequeg's part. He has been in civilization long enough to realize the uniqueness of his personal appearance, and to have become accustomed to the rude curiosity and mimicry of strangers. His actions therefore suggest at least a flaw in his imperturbability. A more likely inference of instinctive hostility can be drawn in "The Shark Massacre" chapter 64. The narrator explains the difficulties in preserving the recently killed whale from the sharks. He indicates that certain tactics designed to repel the sharks often succeed only in increasing their ferocity. The narrator carefully points out, however, that the experienced seaman would recognize that the situation was not severe, "But it was not thus in the present case with the Pequod's sharks, though, to be sure, any man unaccustomed to such sights, to have looked over her side that night, would have almost thought the whole round sea was one huge cheese, and those sharks the maggots in it."³⁰ Nonetheless, Queequeg and another seaman begin what

²⁹ Miller, A Reader's Guide to Melville, p. 114.

³⁰ Moby Dick, LXVI, p. 395.

the narrator calls "the incessant murdering of the sharks." Melville's indication that such actions were not necessary, as well as his utilization of such condemnatory nouns as "massacre" and "murder" does point toward an instinctive hostility limited to these creatures of the deep.

Similarly, while the values of Queequeg's natural religion contrasts favorably with orthodox Christianity, some defects are present. Ishmael views Queequeg's inexplicable Ramadan as a parallel to certain absurd rituals carried on by more knowledgeable Christians, ". . . Heaven have mercy on us all—Presbyterians and Pagans alike—for we are all somehow dreadfully cracked about the head, and sadly need mending."³¹ Moreover, Queequeg reflects the same closed mindedness concerning other religions as Christians manifest concerning Pagans. Ishmael admits, ". . . I do not think that my remarks about religion made much impression upon Queequeg . . . he somehow seemed dull of hearing on that important subject, unless considered from his own point of view."³² Finally, Queequeg is guilty of the same smug contemptuousness that characterizes many Christian thoughts about the validity of other religious outlooks. As Ishmael perceived "He looked at me with a sort of condescending concern and compassion, as though he thought it a great pity that such a sensible young man should be so helplessly lost to evangelical pagan piety."³³

³¹ Moby Dick, XVII, p. 121.

³² Moby Dick, XVII, pp. 126-27.

³³ Moby Dick, XVII, p. 127.

Having examined the moral qualities endowed in Queequeg, one may draw several conclusions. Queequeg becomes a vehicle by which Melville can compare and contrast the behavioral characteristics of civilized Christians and Pagans. Ironically, it is the pagan that exhibits the moral qualities preached by Christianity, specifically, kindness, sincerity, selflessness, and love of fellow man. Moreover, Melville compares and contrasts the stern, intense orthodoxy of the Christian religion with the affectionate, active rituals of the Pagan. Endowment of these virtues in Queequeg manifests an important result in Ishmael. The veil is removed from Ishmael's eyes, allowing a recognition of the faults that often characterize the behavior of Christian men. Likewise, because of Queequeg's example, Ishmael transcends the bickering of conflicting religions, and realizes a greater feeling of closeness to God. Even though Queequeg is endowed with superior moral qualities, he is not meant to be interpreted as a perfect man. He does reflect some human faults. Thus his imperturbability is occasionally penetrated. Moreover, he exhibits some of the same closed minded attitudes as his Christian counterparts.

III.

STARBUCK

STARBUCK

The moral qualities inherent in the character of Starbuck are crucial in the formation of his role in the novel. One of the primary moral qualities reflected in Starbuck is loyalty to and faith in God. Friend Starbuck is a steadfast and faithful Quaker. This faith in God establishes two roles for Starbuck in the novel. On a broad level he provides moral opposition for Ahab. As Nicholas Canaday, Jr. concluded in his work Melville and Authority, Starbuck, the chief mate of the Pequod, brings to the novel the orthodox Christian attitude toward Ahab's pursuit of the white whale."³⁴ Yet another function of Starbuck in the novel is to provide a counter or balance for Fedallah. Merlin Bowen in his critical study The Long Encounter: Self and Experience in the Writings of Herman Melville suggests, "Starbuck stands forth far more clearly than others as a spokesman for the heart and as chief counter to Fedallah."³⁵

While Starbuck recognizes his moral responsibility to God, he cannot ignore his feelings to adhere to his Captain's authority. As Canaday remarks, "Starbuck believes that it is his responsibility to extricate himself and the crew from the tangled web of Captain Ahab's authority. His dilemma

³⁴ Nicholas Canaday, Jr., Melville and Authority (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1968), p. 53.

³⁵ Merlin Bowen, The Long Encounter: Self and Experience In The Writings of Herman Melville (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 149.

is that on the one hand he knows himself to be the most powerful force for good on the Pequod, and on the other hand as second in command of the ship he is bound to uphold his Captain's authority."³⁶ Melville through his presentation of Starbuck's moral qualities and his emphasis on certain weaknesses in Starbuck's character makes clear the inevitable outcome of the struggle. As Ronald Mason reflected in The Spirit Above the Dust,

In Starbuck a pitiful unresolved struggle between his divided loyalties to his God and his Captain undermines still further the native irresolution not uncommon in a man of serious and idealistic purpose. It is Melville's incidental lesson, through Starbuck and his tragedy, that the passionate intensity of evil will is inevitably more than a match for the best of idealistic intentions if left without reinforcement of a purpose as bold as its foe's.³⁷

This struggle between Starbuck's moral values is manifested in the scenes of direct confrontation between Ahab and Starbuck, in Starbuck's personal introspections, and in the narrator's descriptions. It is on those passages that attention is now focused.

Even before Melville presents the reader with a description of Starbuck, the role of the first mate is established. In the chapter "Merry Christmas" the command given to Starbuck by Bildad has both literal and moral implications. Bildad turns to Starbuck and says, "but away with thee, friend Starbuck, and do our bidding."³⁸ From the beginning Starbuck

³⁶ Cannaday, Jr., Melville and Authority, p. 56.

³⁷ Ronald Mason, The Spirit Above The Dust (London: John Lehmann Ltd., 1951), p. 140.

³⁸ Moby Dick, XXII, p. 143.

is therefore aware of his duty with respect to the ship and its owners. Since Ishmael has already characterized Bildad and Peleg as "Quakers with a vengeance," the reader is also aware of Starbuck's spiritual role on the forthcoming voyage. Whether or not Starbuck's moral qualities will be sufficient for the task has yet to be established.

Genuine insight into the moral and physical nature of Starbuck begins in the chapter "Knights and Squires." In this chapter, Melville suggests not only the strengths in Starbuck's character but also the weaknesses which will render him ultimately ineffective in doing his moral duty. Starbuck was a Quaker by descent, earnest, steadfast, and endowed with an inner strength. He was a man of natural reverence and deep spiritual perceptions. As Ishmael characterized Starbuck, "Uncommonly conscientious for a seaman, and endued with a deep natural reverence the wild watery loneliness of his life did therefore strongly incline him to superstition; but to that sort of superstitions, which in some organizations seem rather to spring somehow from intelligence than from ignorance."³⁹

While this natural reverence and spiritual perception often influenced Starbuck, a far more important influence was his memory and love for his family. Ishmael considering this factor suggests, "and if at times these things-bent the welded iron of his soul, much more did his far away domestic

memories of his young Cape wife and child, tend to bend him still more from the original ruggedness of his nature, and open him still further to those latent influences which, in some honest-hearted men, restrain the gush of dare-devil daring. . . ."40 Thus Starbuck's courage was prevented from being foolhardiness by his memory and love for his family.

Melville continues his examination of the nature of Starbuck's courage noting that it could often withstand conflict with the terrors of the world, but could not withstand more terrible spiritual horrors. Ishmael, when considering Starbuck's courage describes it as, ". . . generally abiding firm in the conflict with seas, or winds, or whales, or any of the ordinary irrational horrors of the world, yet cannot withstand those more terrific, because more spiritual terrors, which sometimes menace you from the concentrating brow of an enraged and mighty man."41 John Bernstein in his book Pacifism and Rebellion In The Writings of Herman Melville summarizes Starbuck as follows: "Starbuck however is not concerned with rebelling against the gods. He sees human life as being made meaningful through faith, and for him, the comforts of home—both physical and spiritual are reason enough to rejoice in living."42 Thus through

40. Moby Dick, XXVI, p. 158.

41. Moby Dick, XXVI, p. 159.

42. John Bernstein, Pacifism and Rebellion In The Writings of Herman Melville (London: Morton & Co., 1964), p. 117.

description early in the novel Melville has suggested Starbuck's role as the voyage, presented his moral qualities and revealed his weakness. Starbuck is faithful and spiritually perceptive. He is restrained from daredevil foolhardiness by his love and memory for his family. He is courageous against physical terrors but weak against those more spiritual horrors. As this is the type of horror embodied in Ahab, specific mention of Starbuck's weakness emphasizes its presence and forewarns the reader of the eventual outcome. Starbuck's values of Christian Orthodoxy are soon put to the test in his first direct confrontation with Ahab.

The first direct confrontation with Ahab came in the scene on the Quarter deck. Ahab has dramatically revealed his purpose, and engaged the crew's support in his hunt for the white whale. Starbuck alone desists and attempts to fulfill his duty by carrying out the literal and spiritual bidding of Peleg and Bildad. On the literal level, he reminds Ahab of the business intent of the voyage. "I am game for his crooked jaw, and for the jaws of Death too, Captain Ahab, if it fairly comes in the way of the business we follow, but I came here to hunt whales, not my commander's vengeance."⁴³

⁴³ Moby Dick, XXXVI, p. 220.

On the spiritual level, Starbuck realizes such a voyage conflicts with his moral values. Thus he responds to Ahab, "Vengeance on a dumb brute! that simply smote thee from blindest instinct! Madness! To be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab, seems blasphemous."⁴⁴

We have already been warned of Starbuck's inability to withstand spiritual horrors, and the first manifestation of this weakness now occurs. Ahab encourages Starbuck to join in the quest and recognizes his victory.

Ah! constrainings seize thee; I see! the billow lifts thee! Speak, but speak!—Aye, aye! they silence, then, that voices thee. (Aside) Something shot from my dilated nostrils, he has inhaled it in his lungs. Starbuck now is mine; cannot oppose me now, Without rebellion.⁴⁵

Ahab's aside and his recognition of victory are important for several reasons. In the aside, the reader is made aware that Starbuck has absorbed at least a small amount of Ahab's attitude. From this point on he will be unable to feel completely justified in his opposition to Ahab's authority. This in itself will prevent him from acting to stop Ahab. Moreover, this passage signals the first failure of Starbuck to adhere to his duties on both the literal and moral level. One further item of importance occurs in the scene. After Starbuck no longer resists Ahab, but merely calls on God for protection, his role as a counterbalance to Fedallah may be first

⁴⁴ Moby Dick, XXXVI, p. 220.

⁴⁵ Moby Dick, XXXVI, p. 222.

observed; "But in his joy at the enchanted, tacit, acquiescence of the mate, Ahab did not hear his foreboding invocation; nor yet the low laugh from the hold. . . ." ⁴⁶ In Starbuck's first defeat Fedallah feels his first victory.

Ahab's recognition of his victory over Starbuck's opposition is soon reaffirmed by Starbuck's own recognition of defeat in the chapter, "Dusk." Starbuck realizes he is helpless against Ahab. "My soul is more than matched. She's overmanned and by a madman!. . . But he drilled deep down, and blasted all my reason out of me!" ⁴⁷ Moreover, Starbuck also recognizes the indecisiveness that will characterize his future conduct: the conflict between the duty he feels toward God and his pity and allegiance to his Captain. As he woefully admits, "Oh! I plainly see my miserable office,—to obey, rebelling; and worse yet, to hate with touch of pity!" Even Starbuck's choice of words points to this indecisiveness. "Will I, nill I, the ineffable thing has tied me to him; tows me with a cable I have no knife to cut." ⁴⁸ The only thing he can do is hope that the whale will get lost in God's ocean.

Ishmael is also aware of the inability of Starbuck's virtue to

⁴⁶ Moby Dick, XXXIV, p. 222.

⁴⁷ Moby Dick, XXXVIII, p. 228.

⁴⁸ Moby Dick, XXXVIII, p. 228.

successfully combat Ahab. As he characterizes their voyage in the chapter on Moby Dick, "Here, then, was this greyheaded, ungodly old man, chasing with curses a Job's whale round the world, at the head of a crew, too, chiefly made up of mongrel renegades, and castaways, and cannibals, morally enfeebled also by the incompetence of mere unaided virtue or right mindedness in Starbuck. . . . "49

Starbuck's next important appearance is in the chapter "The Doubloon." In this chapter Starbuck offers an interpretation of the symbols on the coin from the perspective of the orthodox Christian. The passage emphasizes Starbuck's willingness to interpret all things in a spiritual context. Moreover, it shows his willingness to overcome a gloomy thought by turning away, rather than continuing any direct confrontation. Starbuck's faith in God, one of the main moral qualities affecting the conduct of his life, is implicit in his description of the doubloon,

A dark valley between these mighty, heaven-abiding peaks, that almost seem the Trinity, in some faint earthly symbol. So in this vale of Death, God girds us round, and over all our gloom, the sun of Righteousness still shines a beacon and a hope. If we bend down our eyes, the dark vale shows her mouldy soil; but if we lift them, the bright sun meets our glance half way to cheer.⁵⁰

In the lines immediately following this passage, Starbuck realizes that the

⁴⁹ Moby Dick, XLI, p. 251.

⁵⁰ Moby Dick, XCIX, p. 551.

beacon of hope, the sun, is not always present. Rather than continuing to think about this prospect he walks away, "This coin speaks wisely, mildly, truly, but still sadly to me. I will quit it, lest Truth shake me falsely."⁵¹ This tendency by Starbuck to consider only the good side of nature is not restricted to symbols or coins, for he applies it steadfastly to his contemplation of the sea. Later in the novel, gazing over the boat's side, Starbuck reflects, "Loveliness unfathomable, as was ever lover save in his young bride's eye!—Tell me not of thy teeth-tiered sharks, and thy kidnapping cannibal ways. Let faith oust fact; let fancy oust memory; I look down deep and do believe."⁵²

The second scene of direct confrontation between Ahab and Starbuck occurs in the captain's cabin. Starbuck tells Ahab that they must break out the barrels of oil from the hold in order to locate a leak. If they do not do so, much of the precious oil will be lost. Once again he is assuming the posture of the rational man cognizant of the purpose of their voyage, doing the bidding of the owners. The fact that Ahab finally relents reveals very little about the moral qualities of Starbuck. What is important is the terms utilized by Melville to describe Starbuck's attempts to convince Ahab. The description indicates the inner conflict of the first

⁵¹ Moby Dick, XCIX, p. 552.

⁵² Moby Dick, CXIV, p. 624.

mate. He is determined to put forward the best interest of the ship, yet he is painfully aware of the limits to which he may act against the captain's authority. Melville's word choice emphasizes this indecisiveness as Starbuck enters the cabin, ". . . the reddening mate, moving further into the cabin, with a daring so strangely respectful and cautious that it almost seemed not only every way seeking to avoid the slightest outward manifestation of itself, but within also seemed more than distrustful of itself. . . ."⁵³

Perhaps the most important confrontation scene occurs in the chapter, "The Musket." Again Starbuck is indecisive. He realizes that Ahab is past the point where reasoning or remonstrance can persuade him to change his course. The rational Quaker eyeing the musket weighs his alternatives. He cannot endure the thought of imprisoning Ahab for the remainder of the voyage. Moreover, they are hundreds of leagues away from land so Ahab cannot be put ashore. Starbuck is keenly aware that should nothing be done, the ship's company is doomed. He realizes this prospect of future doom saying, "But shall this crazed old man be tamely suffered to drag a whole ship's company down to drown with him?—Yes it would make him the wilful murderer of thirty men and more, if this ship come to deadly harm, and come to deadly harm, my soul swears it will, if Ahab have his way."⁵⁴ In making the decision all of Starbuck's moral qualities come into

⁵³ Moby Dick, CIX, p. 604.

⁵⁴ Moby Dick, CXXIII, p. 651.

play. He is painfully aware of the spiritual implications of Ahab's quest. He realizes only he can save the ship. He reflects upon his loved ones at home. All of these reasons, however, cannot bring him into action and direct revolt against the captain. As Melville writes, "Starbuck seemed wrestling with an angel, but turning from the door, he placed the death-tube in its rack, and left the place."⁵⁵ Reflecting on this scene Gerhard Friedrich writes, "But Starbuck cannot act upon impulse, he is the Hamlet of Quakerism, he must think, consider, weigh, query, be principled, delay Here the Quaker part of mankind is wrestling with the spirit, and deciding for good or ill, against the 'death tube' as an instrument in human relations."⁵⁶ Starbuck cannot kill Ahab even if to others it seems justified. This is not the only instance in which Starbuck has the opportunity. When Ahab goes aloft to scan the horizon for Moby Dick, it is Starbuck who is given the duty to secure the rope. Ahab recognizes and relies upon Starbuck's Christian values. Starbuck's role as a balance to Fedallah is also briefly implied here. Melville writes that Ahab scanned the entire crew before going aloft, but shunned Fedallah before commanding Starbuck to take the rope.

The final confrontation between Ahab and Starbuck comes in "The

⁵⁵ Moby Dick, CXXIII, p. 652.

⁵⁶ Friedrich, In Pursuit of Moby Dick, p. 25.

Symphony." In this scene there is actually a kind feeling between Starbuck and Ahab. Ahab can see his wife and child in the eye of Starbuck. At this moment Starbuck makes an intensified effort to persuade Ahab to forsake his quest, that they both might return to Nantucket and their families. Ahab persists, however, and continues the voyage. This passage perhaps more than any other highlights Starbuck's role as an unsuccessful counter to Fedallah in his attempt to influence Ahab. When Ahab gazes in Starbuck's eyes he sees home and family. At the scene's conclusion Ahab rejects this view and moves to Fedallah. As Melville writes,

But blanched to a corpse's hue with despair,
the Mate had stolen away.

Ahab crossed the deck to gave over on the otherside, but started at two reflected, fixed eyes in the water there. Fedallah was motionlessly leaning over the same rail.⁵⁷

The conclusion is now inevitable. Starbuck and the moral qualities he represents temporarily appear soothing for Ahab, yet he rejects them, leaving the first mate in despair. The final move is then made across the moral spectrum or deck to Fedallah.

The final chapters in the novel reinforce Starbuck's helplessness. He ceases active resistance to Ahab, calling on God for protection; "God keep us, but already my bones feel damp within me, and from the inside

⁵⁷ Moby Dick, CXXXII, p. 686.

wet my flesh. I misdoubt me that I disobey God in obeying him!"⁵⁸ To the end Starbuck is unable to untangle his conflicting loyalties to his God and Captain Ahab.

The foregoing examination of Starbuck's confrontations with Ahab, his mental introspections, and the narrator's descriptions yield several conclusions concerning the moral qualities he reflects. Starbuck harbors two conflicting moral values. The first is a faith in God and a recognition of his need to do his duty as reflected through Christian principles. The second is his recognition of his duty as first mate to serve his Captain. This is especially important, because after his acquiescence to Ahab on the quarter-deck with its implications of approval for the quest, any actions by Starbuck may be considered rebellion or mutiny. The conflict of these two moral values helps to define Starbuck's twofold role in the novel. On one level he provides direct opposition for Ahab on both the spiritual and material plane. Thus he represents the material and rational interests of Peleg and Bildad while at the same time reflecting the spiritual opposition of orthodox Christianity. On yet another level he is an unsuccessful counterbalance to the influence of Fedallah. Starbuck's inability to resolve this conflict between his values stems from a weakness presented early in the novel. Starbuck's courage which bravely withstands material

⁵⁸ Moby Dick, CXXXV, p. 711.

terrors is powerless against spiritual horrors. His extraordinary spiritual perception recognizes this unstoppable enemy in the mind of Ahab, and the inevitable result is tragedy. As Nicholas Canaday, Jr. summarized in Melville and Authority, ". . . the tragedy of Starbuck is that he is not strong enough completely and finally to stand apart from Captain Ahab and defy his authority. It will be remembered that to stand apart from the proud gods of earth was one of Father Mapple's tests for the faithful Christian. This is the test Starbuck ultimately fails."⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Canaday, Jr., Melville and Authority, p. 54.

IV.

AHAB

AHAB

Ahab is the central character of Moby Dick, and easily the most complex. As with Starbuck and Queequeg, his moral qualities are critical to his role in the novel. It must be considered a tribute to Melville's artistry that Ahab has been interpreted in such diverse manners. Some literary scholars have initiated their consideration of Ahab from the perspective of Christian orthodoxy. If this viewpoint is accepted, Father Mapple becomes the main spokesman in the novel, offering the proper land values and the moral perspective of the Christian faith. Because he departs from those values, and willfully opposes God while leading his crew to destruction, Ahab is branded as a Satanic monster. Given Melville's numerous allusions to the biblical significance of Ahab's name, as well as the prophecies of destruction from such creatures as Elijah and Gabriel, this interpretation cannot be wholly discounted.

Other critics have chosen to approach Ahab from the opposite end of the spectrum. The result is an interpretation in which Ahab emerges as a complete hero, a mighty human antagonist to God. Melville spends a great deal of time contrasting Ahab with the rest of humanity, emphasizing the greatness of his character, and his extraordinary stature. This interpretation must also be given its proper share of consideration.

The moral qualities of Ahab, however, do not completely support either one of these views. Melville makes it clear that Ahab does not accept the orthodox land values of Father Mapple during his quest for Moby Dick in the sea world. To base a condemnation of Ahab on his departure from a set of values he does not accept, is not totally fair. Conversely, Melville also emphasizes certain qualities in Ahab that can not be classified as heroic. A more logical examination would seem to suggest a fusion of these two critical viewpoints. If such a position is taken, Ahab becomes a tragic hero in the novel. Thus he may exhibit the extraordinary qualities Melville emphasized concerning his being, as well as a portion of the character defects correctly attributed to him by those whose condemnation stems from a Christian morality. Evidence suggesting such an interpretation is implicit in a digression Melville makes early in the novel. Leaving momentarily his description of Captain Bildad, Melville alludes to the nature and stature of Ahab who remains to be introduced,

So that there are instances among them of men, who, named with Scripture names . . . and in childhood naturally imbibing the stately dramatic thee and thou of the Quaker idiom, still, from the audacious, daring, and boundless adventure of their subsequent lives, strangely blend with these unoutgrown peculiarities, a thousand bold dashes of character And when these things unite in a man of greatly superior natural force, with a globular brain and a ponderous heart; who has also by the stillness and seclusion of many long night-watches in the remotest waters, and beneath constellations never seen here at the north, been led to think untraditionally and independently . . . that man makes one in a whole nation's census—a mighty pageant creature, famed for noble tragedies. Nor will it at all detract from him, dramatically regarded, if either by birth or other circumstances, he have what

seems a half wilful overruling morbidness at the bottom of his nature. For all men tragically great are made so through a certain morbidness.⁶⁰

Acceptance of Ahab as a tragic hero brings on one's interpretation of his moral qualities. The primary moral quality motivating Ahab's quest, and the one which raises him above the commonplace to heroic status, is his desire to pursue justice for man in the universe, his determination to assert man's will whatever the cost. William Ellery Sedgwick in his critical study Herman Melville The Tragedy of Mind reflects upon Ahab as follows, "Ahab pursues the truth as the champion of man, leaving behind him all traditional conclusions, all common assumptions, all codes and creeds and articles of faith He will at any rate have the universe show its cards, so that a man may know how it stands with him, whether or not there is anything beyond himself to which he can entrust his dearest hopes, and then bear himself accordingly."⁶¹ This aspect of Ahab's moral character is presented not only by his own actions and words, but also in the descriptions of him by the narrator and other characters in the novel.

Descriptions of Ahab's being, both physical and moral, alert the reader to his extraordinary status and his quest for moral justice throughout the novel. The earliest occurs in Captain Peleg's response to Ishmael's

⁶⁰ Moby Dick, XVI, p. 111.

⁶¹ William Ellery Sedgwick, Herman Melville The Tragedy OF Mind (New York: Russell & Russell Inc., 1962), p. 109.

curious inquiries concerning Ahab. Peleg's reply is important for two reasons. It immediately establishes the Captain as being above common status. More importantly, however, it alludes to Ahab's familiarity with the primal world, indeed his opposition to it. Thus Peleg responds,

Mark ye, be forewarned; Ahab's above the common;
Ahab's been in colleges, as well as among the cannibals;
been used to deeper wonders than the waves; fixed his
fiery lance in mightier, stronger foes than whales.⁶²

Evidence of Ahab's past history of combat with primal forces continues throughout the novel. Ishmael refers to it when he considers Ahab's first appearance on the deck after their departure from Nantucket. He specifically reflects on theories explaining the livid white scar which ran down Ahab's face and neck. There was speculation as to whether the scar was a birth mark, or the remnant of some terrible wound. Again Ahab is linked with primal battle. As Ishmael relates, "But once Tashtego's senior, an old Gray-Head Indian among the crew, superstitiously asserted that not till he was full forty years old did Ahab become that way branded, and then it came upon him, not in the fury of any mortal fray, but in an elemental strife at sea."⁶³

One final allusion to Ahab's combat with those forces beyond the human plane, occurs later in the novel in the chapter on Ahab's leg. While

⁶² Moby Dick, XVI, p. 119.

⁶³ Moby Dick, XXVIII, p. 169.

in port in Nantucket, Ahab had again suffered a wound inexplicable to the common man. As the reader discovers, "For it had not been very long prior to the Pequod's sailing from Nantucket, that he had been found one night lying prone upon the ground, and insensible; by some unknown and seemingly inexplicable, unimaginable casualty, his ivory limb having been so violently displaced, that it had stakewise smitten, and all but pierced his groin . . . " ⁶⁴ Thus even prior to the Pequod's voyage, Ahab had asserted his will, and thereby the will of all men against the primal elements. Nonetheless, the moral quality motivating this action is only alluded to in these instances. It is only in the pursuit of Moby Dick that the reader can glimpse first hand Ahab's self assertion and solitary quest for universal justice. That the nature of Ahab's quest transcended the literal whale hunt into the moral dimension, becomes apparent in Ishmael's description of Ahab's relation to Moby Dick. The white whale was not a mere leviathan, but the symbol of more spiritual things. Thus Ishmael suggests, "The White Whale 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. That intangible malignity which has been from the beginning; to whose dominion even the modern Christians ascribe one-half of the worlds; which the ancient Ophites of the east revered

⁶⁴ Moby Dick, CVI, p. 590.

in their statue devil" ⁶⁵ Lawrance Thompson in his work Melville's Quarrel with God considers Ishmael's explanation, noting, "The White Whale represents, predominantly, the incarnation of the ultimate and ulterior mysteries generally associated with the dualistic attributes of God." ⁶⁶ It is the nature of Ahab's response to this symbolic whale which brings to light his heroic moral qualities, qualities which were only alluded to in previous references to primal combat. Ishmael, referring to Ahab's response, reports,

Ahab did not fall down and worship it [intangible malignity] like them; but deliriously transferring its idea to the abhorred white whale, he pitted himself, all mutilated, against it. . . . He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it. ⁶⁷

Such response is indeed a quest for universal justice. Maurita Willet, in an article comparing Ahab to characters in Hawthorne's work refers to his refusal to accept the world's injustices, "Ahab unlike Hester and Dimmesdale, refuses to bow his head to fate or the way things are, or to die in an acquiescent death out of sheer enervation, or to lower sad eyes to the world's injustices, or to lie down in his gloomy grave." ⁶⁸ Such action, in

⁶⁵ Moby Dick, XLI, p. 247.

⁶⁶ Thompson, Melville's Quarrel With God, p. 204.

⁶⁷ Moby Dick, XLI, p. 247.

⁶⁸ Maurita Willet, "The Letter A, Gules, and the Black Bubble," in Melville and Hawthorne In The Berkshires, ed., Howard P. Vincent (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1968), p. 74.

the face of overwhelming risks must necessarily be considered heroic.

Newton Arvin in his study of Melville declares, "In its highest expression it is the heroic self-trust and self-regard of the modern Western man asserted in the teeth of all that would overbear and diminish him, whether natural or beyond nature."⁶⁹

To prevent the reader from doubting Ahab's sanity to such a degree as to question whether he is able to comprehend the significance of his actions, Melville allows his protagonist to express in dialogue the nature of the quests which Ishmael has suggested. An example occurs in the scene on the Quarter-deck. Starbuck considers the whale as a dumb brute. Ahab offers a twofold explanation for the beast. It is either the pasteboard mask behind which some reasoning principle operates, or it is the principle itself. In either case, justice demands one action of Ahab, "If man will strike, strike through the mask! . . . I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate, and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principle, I will wreak that hate upon him."⁷⁰

Ahab's private ruminations likewise reveal his assertive response to the cosmos. Even he is aware of his superiority to common man. This

⁶⁹ Newton Arvin, Herman Melville (Toronto: George J. McLeod Ltd., 1950), pp. 176-77.

⁷⁰ Moby Dick, XXXVI, p. 221.

superiority is one reason for his inability to acquiesce in indifference.

Ahab reflects, "Gifted with the high perception, I lack the low, enjoying power; damned, most subtly and most malignantly! damned in the midst of Paradise!"⁷¹ Unable to exist passively, Ahab seeks primal combat in an effort to achieve justice. As he assertively announces,

I now prophesy that I will dismember my dismemberer. Now, then, be the prophet and the fulfiller one. That's more than ye, ye great gods, ever were . . . Swerve me? Ye cannot swerve me, else ye swerve yourselves! . . . The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run.⁷²

The assertiveness of Ahab's character arises again later in the novel in a similar personal introspection. Ahab approaches the gold doubloon to examine its images and contemplates, "There's something ever egotistical in mountain-tops and towers, and all other grand and lofty things; look here,—three peaks as proud as Lucifer."⁷³ Most important, is his realization and acceptance of these images as a reflection of himself. "The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that, too, is Ahab; all are Ahab; and this round gold is but the image of the rounder globe, which, like a magician's

⁷¹ Moby Dick, XXXVII, p. 226.

⁷² Moby Dick, XXXVII, p. 227.

⁷³ Moby Dick, XCIX, p. 551.

glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors his own mysterious self."⁷⁴

One further instance may be cited in which Ahab announces his determination to achieve justice by asserting the will of man. To the white flame of the corpusants Ahab delivers his rebellious message,

Oh! thou clear spirit of clear fire, whom on these seas I as Persian once did worship, till in the sacramental act so burned by thee, that to this hour I bear the scar; I know now thee, thou clear spirit, and I know that they right worship in defiance. To neither love nor reverence wilt thou be kind; and e'en for hate thou canst but kill; and all are killed. No fearless fool now fronts thee. I own thy speechless, placeless power⁷⁵

Thus Melville, through his allusions to Ahab's past life, his descriptions of Ahab's moral and physical being, and his presentation of Ahab's actions and dialogue created a protagonist of extraordinary and heroic scope; One whose motivation stemmed from the presence of a single dominating moral quality, the desire to achieve justice for man in the universe through an heroic assertion of will.

Despite the heroic nature of Ahab's quest, the manner in which he seeks its accomplishment ultimately leads to his tragic downfall. Ahab in the course of his confrontation with the primal elements willfully commits an unpardonable sin, the coercion of the physical and spiritual natures of the members of his crew. Nicholas Canaday, Jr., pondering this side of

⁷⁴ Moby Dick, XCIX, p. 551.

⁷⁵ Moby Dick, CXIX, p. 641.

Ahab, writes,

But there is a unique and grave seriousness to Captain Ahab's position as a ship's master, because Ahab tyrannically coerces not only the bodies, but also the souls of his crew. So powerful is the sway Ahab achieves over his men that it enables him even to engender their enthusiasm for the diabolical pursuit of Moby Dick, which is not only spiritually dangerous, but—what is more important to these workers in the sperm oil industry—unprofitable as well.⁷⁶

The inevitable result of such coercion is downfall. As Maurita Willet suggests, ". . . Ahab, being human, with the flaw of intellectual pride and his sin of manipulation of others to his own end, had to pay the full price for spurning the brotherhood of man . . . "⁷⁷

Ahab's monomania offers no excuse for his actions. Despite his madness, he retained his formidable natural intellect, subtly using it to achieve his goal. Ishmael, pondering this retention of natural intellect, reports, "But, as in his narrow-flowing monomania, not one jot of Ahab's broad madness had been left behind; so in that broad madness, not one jot of his great natural intellect had perished. That before living agent, now became the living instrument."⁷⁸ But is superior intellect enough to achieve coercion? Melville contends that it lacks sufficient power in and of itself when he writes, "For be a man's intellectual superiority what it will, it can never assume the practical, available supremacy over other

⁷⁶ Canaday, Jr., Melville and Authority, p. 40.

⁷⁷ Willet, "The Letter A, Gules, and the Black Bubble," p. 74.

⁷⁸ Moby Dick, XLI, p. 249.

other men, without the aid of some sort of external arts and entrench-

ments."⁷⁹ Ahab's position as Captain of the Pequod provides him with such an aid, the traditions of naval authority. Moreover, Ahab's intellect readily perceived the presence of such an aid. Melville writes,

. . . Captain Ahab was by no means unobservant of the paramount forms and usages of the sea.

Nor, perhaps, will it fail to be eventually perceived, that behind those forms and usages, as it were, he sometimes masked himself; incidentally making use of them for other and more private ends than they were legitimately intended to subserve.⁸⁰

Ahab's successful coercive tactics begin with his appearance on the quarter-deck. He successfully maneuvers the crew into such a frenzied state that they swear an oath to hunt the whale. Previous mention has been made of his overpowering of Starbuck's objections at this point in the voyage. Ahab realizes, however, that the pretences of a normal voyage must be maintained if he is to achieve his goal, "Ahab plainly saw that he must still in a good degree continue true to the natural, normal purpose of the Pequod's voyage; observe all customary usages, and not only that, but force himself to evince all his well known passionate interest in the general pursuit of his profession."⁸¹ It is this attempt to maintain the normal purpose of the voyage that is suggested as the cause of Ahab's acquiescence to Starbuck in his desire to repair the whale oil leak. Ahab's coercion

⁷⁹ Moby Dick, XXXIII, p. 198.

⁸⁰ Moby Dick, XXXIII, p. 198.

⁸¹ Moby Dick, XLVI, p. 286.

assumes numerous forms. Having enlisted the men's support he maintains their interest by offering the gold doubloon to the first man sighting Moby Dick. Moreover, he is not averse to using dramatic appearances or threats to maintain control. Thus, during the appearance of the corpusants Ahab dramatically threatens the enchanted crew with his fiery harpoon, "All your oaths to hunt the White Whale are as binding as mine, and heart, soul, and body, lungs and life, Old Ahab is bound. And that ye may know to what tune this heart beats; look ye here; thus I blow out the last fear!" And with one blast of his breath he extinguished the flame.⁸² Similarly, with much drama and showmanship Ahab rights the reversed compass to the amazement of his ignorant crew. Canady reflecting on Ahab's skillful coercion, concludes,

Thus by relying alternately on promises of reward and threats of violence, Ahab retains control of the crew on the dangerous and evil mission. While his methods include getting his men emotionally involved in the hunt, demanding oaths from them, and even resorting to violence if necessary, Captain Ahab also knows when to divert their attention from the pursuit to other matters of commonplace nature. The flexibility and imagination of Ahab's methods of command demonstrate his skill in maintaining his authority over his crew.⁸³

In summation, an examination of Ahab and the moral qualities he embodies justifies an interpretation of him as a tragic hero. He is a

⁸² Moby Dick, CXIX, p. 644.

⁸³ Canady, Jr., Melville and Authority, p. 42.

character of heroic stature, exhibiting extraordinary perception and intellect. Moreover, allusions to his past as well as his quest of Moby Dick suggest that he is accustomed to contact with those forces of which lesser men are completely ignorant or only dimly aware. His noble quest manifests the primary moral quality motivating his character, a desire to achieve universal justice for himself and all men through a determined assertion of will, regardless of the risks. His inability to achieve that objective stems from a tragic flaw, his willful and unpardonable coercion of the minds and bodies of his crew for his own ends. Such action reduces his stature from a completely noble antagonist of God, and leads to his inevitable destruction.

CONCLUSIONS

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Melville's intention to write a novel with a large and liberal theme forced him to go beyond the mere physical detail necessary to present the chase of a fabled whale. As a result, he endowed his characters with unique moral qualities on the psychological level. This not only expanded their scope, but also helped to define their particular roles in the novel. Nowhere are the presence of moral qualities more evident than in the characters of Queequeg, Starbuck, and Ahab.

Queequeg's character had been influenced by his native Polynesian society as well as western civilization. He was therefore the perfect vehicle by which Melville could compare and contrast the behavioral characteristics and religions of Christian civilization and pagans. On the behavioral level Queequeg ironically embodies those virtues that are preached but rarely witnessed in Christianity. His example educates Ishmael to the faults of civilized men while simultaneously restoring his faith in man's capability for good. On the religious level Queequeg's unconscious religion is favorably contrasted with Christian orthodoxy. This enables Ishmael to transcend the bickering of conflicting religions and realize a greater closeness to God. Queequeg, however, is not to be interpreted as the perfect man. Like his Christian counterparts, he too has faults. For example, Melville implies a certain amount of instinctive hostility. Moreover, he

exhibits some of the same smugness and closedminded attitudes as Christian men.

Starbuck harbors two conflicting moral qualities. He is a faithful Quaker and therefore recognizes his Christian duties as established in Father Mapple's sermon. As first mate of the Pequod, however, he is also acutely aware of his duty to obey his captain. The presence of these two qualities determines Starbuck's roles in the novel. He provides opposition for Ahab on both the moral and material planes. Thus he attempts to represent the rational interests of the ship's owners while simultaneously offering the moral opposition expected of an orthodox Christian. From a different perspective Starbuck's role is that of an unsuccessful counterbalance to the influence of Fedallah. Starbuck is never able to successfully resolve the conflict between his moral values because of an inherent character weakness emphasized by Melville. Starbuck's courage which remains firm in the face of natural terrors cannot overcome those horrors of a more spiritual nature. Because Ahab embodies this type of horror, Starbuck is powerless, and the outcome is inevitable tragedy.

Ahab is motivated by one primary moral quality, his desire to achieve justice for himself and all men through a determined assertion of independent will. The nature of this quest, as well as Ahab's extraordinary perception and intellect imply a character of heroic proportions. His willful and selfish coercion of the minds of his men in order to achieve his own

desired goal is his primary flaw. The result is inevitable destruction of himself and his crew, and a reduction in stature to that of a tragic hero.

Melville's decision to expand the scope of the story from mere narrative adventure was not immediately perceived by early reviewers of the novel. More recent literary scholarship has suggested Melville's reading of Shakespeare and his friendship with Hawthorne, as the primary factors causing his introduction of symbolic imagination into the story. The moral qualities of Queequeg, Starbuck, and Ahab are one manifestation of this symbolic imagination.

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