

Traces of Religion and Science in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*

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Abstract: It may be stated that despite his scanty schooling, Melville has shown deep interest in the prevailing trends of his age. A true representative of his age is that he struggled hard not only to resolve the conflict between the Calvinistic and the Emersonian theories but also to bring a compromise between religion and science. Though basically a Christian confronted with the complex question of human existence, his experience as a sailor offered him ample scope to develop a systematic knowledge of the outer world. This systematic knowledge of the universe endowed him with the scientific spirit to solve the basic problems of human existence. But while attempting to solve the mystery of religion, he doubted his own religious faith. His religious faith and scientific beliefs are projected in his two major characters, Ishmael and Ahab respectively. Ishmael represents the religious mind of Melville upholding all the virtues of religion; he does not have the heroic grandeur of Ahab - an unheroic hero. Ahab is a real hero, hero of Melville's scientific self that is not prepared to admit defeat from a subhuman, a Prometheus who has descended on earth in the nineteenth century to establish the supremacy of man over creation at the cost of his own life.

Keywords: Moby Dick, Religion, Science, Emerson, Transcendentalism, Sin

1. Introduction

The dust of controversy thickens as to the interpretation of Ahab and Moby Dick, the huge White Whale pursued by Ahab. Is Ahab the devil trying to destroy the order and harmony of the universe fighting futilely against God, i.e., Moby Dick, or attempting to become God? Is Ahab a man with heroic proportions striving to wrest the secret of creation, or protesting against the evil of the universe? Is Ahab simply a monomaniac, irresponsible and mistaken in his quest? Does Ahab represent the "Id" and Moby Dick the Freudian "Superego"? These are a few examples of the various questions which have been asked and answered by a number of Melville scholars. In view of the medley of interpretations concerning *Moby Dick*, in order to avoid critical shipwreck, I am trying to give an interpretation in the light of circumstantial evidence found in the book instead of giving a symbolic and psychological interpretation as done by D. H. Lawrence and others.¹ My contention is that Ahab is neither a devil, nor a monomaniac but a heroic man with a scientific self and a quite rational attitude towards life. And Moby Dick is not an incarnation of God but an evil creature with enormous strength to crush the superiority of man over creation. In fact Ahab's struggle with Moby Dick is the struggle of the scientific man with the evil of the universe for his survival, the idea being ultimately to establish the superiority of man over creation.

2. Religion and Science in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*

It is important to note that the medley of interpretations concerning *Moby Dick* is due to Melville's own religious conflict, an obvious outcome of the intellectual background of the nineteenth century. In this period of flux and turmoil there persisted an atmosphere of religious doubts in America because of the conflict between the Calvinist theory of predestination with its sense of innate depravity and original sin emphasizing

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the sovereignty of God and the supreme authority of the scriptures, and Emerson's concept of "transcendentalism" which emphasized the free play of the human soul rapturously caught up in an infinite, spiritual quest. Many writers, in fact, were so severely plagued by this conflict that they doubted their own religious faith. Melville's religious conflict, in particular, drove him to make the coherence of truth itself a subject matter for deep meditation, thus extending ample scope to his critics to investigate that conflict in their own ways. But the critics are so much obsessed with Calvinistic and Emersonian theories that they have almost ignored the fundamental conflict of the age, i.e., the conflict between religion and science.

My contention is that the religious doubts of Melville are the natural outcome of this fundamental conflict between religion and science, which is responsible for his dual personality representing his religious as well as scientific outlook. *Moby Dick* is a towering book and is generally acclaimed as a world classic. It is more than a major episode in Melville's life-long struggle with religious issues; it is considered to be his masterpiece. It not only presents his religious outlook but also the scientific attitude that he has developed through his experience as a sailor.

The choice of an archetypal name for the narrator is specifically significant in the sense that Melville's intention has been to create a religious atmosphere in the narrative. Ishmael, the narrator, is named after that outcast" wrongly disinherited son of Abraham and Hagar: he and Hagar were cast out of Abraham's family by Sarah (Genesis 16:11-12). The prototype Ishmael was portrayed as a spiritual wanderer. From this point of view our Ishmael is no less a wanderer. When he finds his life on shore grim, he decides to go to the sea. He is an outcast in the sense that he has been cast out of the Pequod by God for His glorification. The Pequod is a self-contained world in itself. As the only survivor of the Pequod, Ishmael becomes an outcast of the Pequod world which, in turn, becomes a blessing in disguise. Like many an enlightened Christian of his age, Melville was not dogmatic about any particular religion or creed. Ishmael, the religious mind of Melville, reflects this liberal attitude of the author towards religion. In his view "a man can be honest in any sort of skin;" "better to sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian" (Melville 1972:367). That's why he does not hesitate to share the bed with Queequeg, a tattooed cannibal, who becomes his bosom friend.

He cherishes "the greatest respect towards everybody's religious obligations" (*ibidem*:178). Of course he has his own religious doubts which are explicit in the statement, "Heaven have mercy on us all - Presbyterians and pagans alike - for we are all somehow dreadfully cracked about the head, and sadly need mending" (*ibidem*). He becomes somewhat impatient with Queequeg's queer notions about Yojo and Ramadan, his practice of unmovable posture and fasting; he fails to realize adequately the significance of fasting and other rituals by a non-Christian. But it is only the pagan Queequeg and his Yojo who bring Ishmael back to life and wholeness by suggesting the use of his outlived coffin as a life buoy. Thus Queequeg becomes the pagan or black counterpart Ishmael.

Ishmael's description of Father Mapple's sermon on the Biblical Jonah helps to create an atmosphere of religious fear and has a direct relevance to the life of sailors who go on a whaling voyage. The sermon anticipates the tragic fate of Ahab and his crew who would be killed by the White Whale. Father Mapple's contention is that "if we obey God, we must disobey ourselves; and it is in this disobeying ourselves, wherein the hardness of obeying God consists" (*ibidem* :136).

In emphasizing this contention, Ishmael's purpose is to prepare his readers for the tragic end of Ahab. In the course of the narrative he will show that Ahab, who has always willfully obeyed the promptings of his self and hence has disobeyed God, deserves the punishment. But this contention is a highly controversial one as it conforms to the Calvinistic theory of predestination but not to Emersonian "transcendentalism."

One can also obey his self and God at the same time which will be taken up later while considering Ahab and his egotistic self. Ahab's prototype was the wicked king who married Jezebel, a believer in Baal, and built shrines to heathen gods and killed god's prophets without paying any heed to their words. As the king of Israel, he misled his men into a fated battle and at last died with his followers. Again the choice of another archetypal name for his protagonist is doubly meaningful in the sense that Ishmael-Melville has deliberately tried to portray Ahab in the Satanic image. In Chapter 33 Ahab has been portrayed as a dictator. He has been painted as socially inaccessible: "Though nominally included in the census of Christendom, he was still an alien to it" (*ibidem*:250).

To heighten the devilishness of Ahab, Ishmael- Melville has deliberately associated him with Fedallah who serves as the evil spirit of Ahab. Ishmael takes Fedallah as a part of Ahab's self: "As if in the Parsee Ahab saw his fore thrown shadow, in Ahab the Parsee his abandoned substance" (*ibidem*:645). It is as if Ahab is not Ahab without Fedallah. Fedallah in Arabic ("feda" + "Allah") means "the sacrifice of god." The term was originally applied to assassins, hence refers to a messenger of destruction (Beaver 1972:800). But Fedallah is portrayed as a Parsee (an Indian Zoroastrian) who is supposed to be a fire-worshipper. In so naming a Parsee as Fedallah, Melville brings out the confusion between Islam and Zoroastrianism, obviously exposing his own religious confusion. As Faustus had sold his soul to the devil in exchange for knowledge and power, Ahab here sells, as it were, his soul to the fire-worshipping Fedallah to gain absolute power to kill Moby Dick. Ahab becomes more and more active after Fedallah's appearance at the time of first lowering and dominates the ship in the scenes "which are imagistically also fire-dominated (thunder-storms and lightning, the fire of the forge and sheen of the burning mast-heads)" (Kohli 1966:14).

Ahab baptizes the special harpoon forged for him to kill Moby Dick using pagan blood (blood of Queequeg, Tashtego and Dago, three pagan harpooners) as the baptismal fluid not in the name of God but in the name of the Devil. Not only has Ahab been pictured by Ishmael in a Satanic image, Moby Dick has been repeatedly portrayed as God to present the eternal conflict between good and evil. Father Mapple refers to the whale as God when he says, "As we have seen, God came upon him in the whale, and swallowed him down to living gulfs of doom ..." (Melville 1972:142).

Twice in the book (in chapters 55 and 82) the whale has been referred to as the first incarnation of God in Hindu mythology. In Chapter 71, Gabriel, a mad prophet, announces himself as the archangel and spreads the news that the White Whale is "no less a being than the Shaker God incarnated" (*tibidem*: 422). Some whalers have declared Moby Dick "not only ubiquitous, but immortal (for immortality is but ubiquity in time)" (*ibidem*:281). The above portrayal of Ahab as Satan and Moby Dick as God by Ishmael-Melville makes it apparent that Melville's sympathies are more with the religious spirit than with the scientific one and deludes many critics to interpret Ahab and Moby Dick on the surface level as above without going deep into the narrative. But a careful study of the text and circumstantial evidence would reveal that the scientific self of the author is in constant conflict with his religious mind and the above interpretation of Ahab and Moby Dick is not based upon critical judgement.

First of all it is to be noted that Moby Dick is not an incarnation of God. In fact, Vishnu's Matchya Avatar was meant for rescuing the Vedas, whereas no such purpose has been served by Moby Dick. Secondly he does not save his own species from destruction. He is very much conscious of his own self and always tries to defend himself against his enemies and to save himself from extinction. Thirdly, unlike Matchya Avatar he does not pursue his enemies but is being pursued by them, does not attack his pursuers but counter-attacks. Fourthly, the demoniac indifference with which the White Whale tears his enemies, "whether sinning or sinned against" (*ibidem*:643) does not matter, is enough to show his devilishness. Lastly Moby Dick cannot be immortal as some whalers think because Ishmael-Melville has ascribed their beliefs to "superstitions" (*ibidem*:281).

Though repeatedly pictured as Satan or Lucifer by Ishmael, Ahab is not a devil because his defiance is directed not against God but against the White Whale who is a part of God's creation like himself. In his previous voyage his encounter with the White Whale was a natural outcome of his romantic mind. He was attracted towards the White Whale because of its uniqueness. He did not have the slightest apprehension that his encounter with the White Whale would be fatal for him. He lost one of his legs and came back a defeated man. Now his vindictiveness against the White Whale is natural. Man, being the supreme creation of God, has created so many scientific appliances to establish his supremacy over other creatures of the universe.

Here Melville-Ahab anticipates the Darwinian theory of the "Origin of the Species," "the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest." It does not matter who survives - Ahab or Moby Dick. It is significant to note that nowhere in the novel has Ahab uttered a single word against God. All his actions in the course of the narrative which are pictured as devilish, diabolical or monomaniac are set against his archenemy, Moby Dick, but not against God. Then how can we account for his devilishness? Rather Ahab

recognizes some invisible, mysterious power that impels him "against all natural lovings and longings" to chase the white whale.

Here is no defiance against God but Ahab's willful submission to His command. God wants him to continue his struggle against Moby Dick so that the fittest would survive. Here God dictates to him what his rational self desires. Ahab proclaims, "Ahab is for ever Ahab, man I am the Fate's Lieutenant; I act under orders" (*ibidem*: 672). As stated earlier, one can obey his self and God at the same time. In his obedience to both Fate and Self, Ahab becomes an Emersonian champion of the Calvinistic theory of predestination. One's self-reliance is not an irrational attitude, rather a scientific one. If self-reliant Ahab cannot kill Moby Dick, who else can? "It is further important to note that Ahab is not a monomaniac. Like King Lear, Ahab is more sinned against than sinning. His determination to kill the white whale is the only flaw that becomes fatal for him. He has not committed any sin in obeying the promptings of his self.

He is rather persecuted by his circumstances. His is a woe that is madness - Moby Dick has deprived him of his leg, has given him a consciousness which always torments his self. Ahab in his "frantic morbidness" at last identifies all his bodily woes with the white whale. Unlike the scholar gypsy of Arnold, Ahab is not suffering from hypochondriac melancholy. His woe is genuine. His prosthetic leg always haunts his consciousness. He is so much preoccupied with the thought of Moby Dick that, when Starbuck is referring to some leak in the casks, he says: "let it leak! I'm all a leak myself. Aye! Leaks in leaks" (*ibidem*:585). For Ahab "past is all deception, the future futureless" (Eliot 1943:22).

He has to rely upon the present. That is precisely the reason why he is determined to pursue Moby Dick till his future becomes futureless. If at all he will be branded as a monomaniac, he is a monomaniac made, not born. That Ahab is not irresponsible and mistaken in his quest can be justified in contrasting his character with" a minor character, Pip, who becomes mad after his cowardly act of jumping off the whale-boat. Pip's real madness intensifies the apparent madness of Ahab. Only in his insanity, Pip comes to feel the pangs of cowardliness. He becomes a living lesson to all cowards that they will die many times before their death. Mad Pip here acts as a catalyst to invigorate Ahab's heroic spirit.

Some critics have taken the death of Ahab to be a suicide. But I personally don't subscribe to this view. There are several ways of committing suicide, one of which Albert Camus says is total forgetfulness of one's self. This may be true for Antony who commits suicide because he wants to forget his self of "dying honor," a self that is ashamed of bearing Antony who has wounded his reputation, reputation which a thousand kisses of Cleopatra cannot recover. Antony sacrifices his self for the sake of love. Ahab sacrifices his family, his child, his "lovings and longings" for the sake of self. How can a fully self-conscious man like Ahab totally forget his self to commit suicide? The proposition is simply hypothetical. My proposition that Ahab is endowed with a scientific self can be deduced from the discussion below.

Merlin Bowen (1960:3) defines the self as something that is both given and achieved: as an aboriginal, stable, though ever elusive center of identity on the one hand, and on the other as a realization in action of the full human and individual potential. A man is both his inmost sense of himself and the outward declaration of that sense in his interaction with the opposing world For identity comes through one's realization of separateness from this outer world.

If science is the systematic knowledge of the physical or material world, self in its realization of the full "human and individual potential" offers that systematic knowledge of the physical or material world. Only after one gains knowledge of the outer world can he realize his separateness from it. When he realizes his separateness from the outer world, he realizes his own self or identity. In other words, one's scientific knowledge of the outer world makes him understand his own self and identity. Emersonian self-reliance may be taken as a scientific way of looking at God. Ahab's self reliance is obviously an outcome of his scientific knowledge. Because of his knowledge of magnetizing of steel Ahab reveals his egotistic self before his crew: "Look ye, for yourselves, if Ahab be not lord of the level loadstone! The sun is East, and that compass swears it" (Melville 1972:628). Here in depicting the round gold as the image of the rounder globe Melville-Ahab has sufficiently proved his scientific knowledge about the world that is round-shaped like a globe and has hinted that his ego is the natural outcome of his scientific knowledge. That Ahab is a man of grandeur is emphasized by Captain Peleg, who holds a very high opinion of Ahab: "He is a grand, ungodly, godlike man,

Captain Ahab, ... he ain't Captain Bildad; no, and he ain't Captain Peleg; *He's Ahab*, boy; and Ahab of old, thou knowest, was a crowned king!" (*ibidem:170*). Captain Peleg obviously refers to something great in Ahab, that is, his heroic self. Stubb, the second mate, who is insulted by Ahab in Chapter 29, has been, as it were, hypnotized in his dream by the personality of Ahab. Instead of kicking him back, he considers it an honor to be kicked by Ahab, obviously heightening the greatness of Ahab.

In spite of the conflict between his conscience and his egotistic self, Ahab stands alone, a heroic man pitted against all the forces of Nature. In spite of the dire prophecies by Fedallah, Ahab's determination to chase Moby Dick clearly shows his scientific spirit. Even after the disastrous happenings of the first day's chase, Ahab is not disheartened; he threatens Moby Dick with heroic exclamation: "Aye, breathe your last to the sun, Moby Dick!" cried Ahab, "thy hour and thy harpoon are at hand! ..." (*ibidem:667*).

The second day's encounter becomes still more disastrous than the first. The whale breaks the ivory leg of Ahab and Fedallah is drowned. Still Ahab turns a deaf ear to Starbuck's plea that he abandons his pursuit of the white whale. Ultimately comes the third day's encounter with the whale which becomes fatal for Ahab and his crew. Here is a real heroic man with promethean fire in him who has struggled with his enemy till the last drop of blood flows in his body. We have respect for Ahab as we have for Tamburlaine. Both are cripples - Timur the born cripple, Ahab crippled by the whale, but nonetheless great heroes. Timur lays the world at the feet of his wife and when death takes her, he threatens heaven in his rage and burns a town in honor of her funeral. No less a hero, Ahab challenges the sun in his fury: "Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me" (*ibidem:262*). Both are great heroes, but Timur's heroism in burning a town is irrational whereas Ahab's heroism in pursuing the whale is rational and scientific.

3. Notes

The White Whale has been discussed as God and Ahab as the Satanic figure, a Calvinistic heretic in rebellion (Thompson 1952).

According to Murray (1962:68): "Stated in psychological concepts, Ahab is captain of the culturally repressed dispositions of human nature, that part of personality which psychoanalysts have termed the 'id.' If this is true, his opponent, the White Whale, can be none other than the internal institution which is responsible for these repressions, namely the Freudian Superego."

In his essay, "*Moby Dick*," D.H. Lawrence (1964: 160) offers a psychological Interpretation in which Ahab's vengeance against the whale becomes symbolic of the white man's attempt to destroy his phallic consciousness, and Ahab becomes Sir Clifford Chatterley dressed in a whale man's suit.

4. References

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