

FILM

Moby-Dick (1851)

Herman Melville

(1819-1891)

adaptation by Ray Bradbury & John Huston (1956)

ANALYSIS

Moby-Dick is the greatest American novel. This is the only film adaptation that is faithful to the book. All other movie versions are ridiculous. The only improvement any of them has made over this adaptation is in special effects—more spectacular shots of the white whale underwater. These are entertaining to see, but they add nothing to understanding and actually distract from the meanings of the book. Movie critics have been especially stupid in responding to this film. Ray Bradbury is a discerning writer who is largely true to Melville and John Huston was the most literary director in Hollywood.

Contrary to the critics, the casting is perfect—especially Gregory Peck as Captain Ahab. Queequeg is also brilliantly portrayed. Unlike their critics Bradbury and Huston display a deep knowledge of the book, although they are limited in how much of it they can present in a film. They are able to include significant lines of dialogue that are over the heads of movie critics, such as the Pequod as a symbol of the world, expressed when Orson Welles as Father Mapple dresses like a sea captain, preaches from a pulpit in the form of a ship's prow and refers to everyone in the world as "Shipmates." They also convey the pantheistic divinity of *Moby-Dick*, who seems to be everywhere in the world at once. As Pip says, "That a great white god." They establish that the story is a psychological allegory when Ishmael says that the sea is a "mirror" of himself. As in the book, Ahab likewise refers to the physical world in dualistic terms, all objects as "pasteboard masks," evoking both Platonic philosophy and Christianity. Such lines are supported in the book by passages of elaboration and dramatization that economy must exclude from the film. Christianity is validated by the plot when Elijah's prophecy at the outset is fulfilled at the end, also confirming Ahab's statement of belief in predestination.

No actor is likely to surpass Gregory Peck in portraying Ahab. In addition to having half of one leg chomped off by *Moby-Dick* he is given a facial scar and white strands of hair that make it appear he has been struck in the head by lightning. Ahab in his wounding and mad passion for revenge sees himself as Christlike, with an "inner crucifixion," but the book and the film depict him as Satanic. He is opposed by his Christian first mate Starbuck, the most stable, moral and sane character. Starbuck alone challenges Ahab: "I came to hunt whales, not my commander's vengeance. It's blasphemy." After struggling with his conscience Starbuck cannot "buck the stars." He cannot mutiny and shoot Ahab because of his Christian humility—"Judge not lest ye be judged." The film depicts Starbuck more favorably than does Melville, who deplores the tendency of Christians to be pacifists. Ahab is unChristian when he refuses to help the captain of the *Rachel*, an allusion to the Bible, who has lost his son at sea: "God forgive you, Captain Ahab!" Just afterward Ahab gives the order, "Stoke up the Tryworks!" It is clear in the book but not in the film that the Tryworks fire is an evocation of Hell. Starbuck refers to "God's invisible power," cautions wisely, "Let Ahab beware Ahab" and says of the crew, "He has stolen their souls."

For the most part this film reduces the book to a great dramatic adventure, one of the most spectacular yarns in world literature. Except for Starbuck the mates and harpooners are colorful personalities rather than symbols of differing perspectives on the whale/doubloon as they are in the book. Stubb, who in the book is the mere foolish stub of a man, is said in the film to be "wise." Pip in the book goes mad, loses his ego, and comes to represent the principle of objectivity, whereas in the film he gets to be captain of the ship when Ahab goes out after *Moby-Dick*, until soon after when he is killed by a falling mast. There is no Bulkington aboard, no Fedallah, and most of Melville's metaphors are left out—such as the squid, the monkeyrope, masthead dreaming, sperm squeezing, the weaver god, and mat-weaving—but the essence of

the book is dramatized with great power and subtle art. The only discordant aspect of the film is the conventional studio orchestra music on the sound track.

Michael Hollister (2015)

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“Most reviewers didn’t care for it.”

“They didn’t care for Gregory Peck as Ahab. They don’t know the book, so they brought nothing to the film. They wanted you to be Ahab because that’s how they think of you. I thought Greg was perfect in the role. I used to think you were an Ahab, but now I think you’re more an Ishmael after all. Pursuing the Truth. You’re a current Ishmael, though. I don’t think you’ve ever really seen the whale. Do you? You feel it intuitively, though, and you keep on searching, picture after picture.”

“Wife after wife!” he roared with laughter.

“I’m sorry this time she turned out to be a crocodile!”

They laughed and cried.

“Sarah, you should have seen us! Not me and Cici, the crew. Off the coast of Wales in high seas, during the worst weather in the history of the British Isles. Orson gave such a magnificent sermon as Father Mapple that I was inspired! But after that, the catalogue of misadventures was just incredible. We constructed several whales. From giant models to some only a few feet long, but they looked mechanical and most of them quickly sank. Then we built three white latex whales about ninety feet long that were towed by tugboats. Thirty thousand dollars a piece! We lost two of them. I believe one finally beached on the shores of Holland. On New Year’s Eve our last white whale snapped loose and began to drift away. I jumped onto its back. Lose the whale, lose me!” he laughed. “I opened the hatch and climbed into the whale. I saluted the crew and took a long pull from the bottle and yelled, ‘I’ll see you next year! Then I popped inside and closed the hatch!’”

They shared a brief hilarity, then he burst into a fit of coughing and groped for his mask... He sounded as gritty as an old salt on the Pequod...bearing on toward the main idea like the Pequod with a wind in his sails until he coughed again, convulsed once again into such a horrible hacking fit that she watched for blood in his beard.

Michael Hollister

See John Huston, *An Open Book* (Knopf 1980) 253-57

