

CONCISE ANALYSIS

Moby-Dick, or, The Whale (1851)

Herman Melville

(1815-1891)



INTRODUCTION

Moby-Dick is a psychological allegory. Literally a chronicle of whaling, figuratively it is the psychodrama of Ishmael--an "inside narrative," just as Melville called *Billy Budd*. All the major characters represent aspects of his own psyche. He undertakes a voyage into the wilderness of the sea--the depths of himself--and enacts the archetypal individuation process explained in "Model of Metaphors." The spiritual goal of the voyage is psychological wholeness and wisdom attained through the perception of Truth (the white whale).

Like Hawthorne in "Main Street," Melville was dismayed by literal-minded readers, as he wrote in a letter to Hawthorne (November 1851): "Why, ever since Adam, who has got to the meaning of this great allegory--the world? Then we pygmies must be content to have our paper allegories but ill comprehended." This accounts for his sarcastic tone

establishing in all respects the reasonableness of the whole story of the White Whale, more especially the catastrophe. For this is one of those disheartening instances where truth requires full as much bolstering as error. So ignorant are most landsmen of some of the plainest and most palpable wonders of the world, that without some hints touching the plain facts, historical and otherwise, of the fishery, they might scout at *Moby-Dick* as a monstrous fable, or still worse and more detestable, a hideous and intolerable allegory (Chapter 45).

Such people read like Flask reads the white whale, literally and simply--as representing only something material. In the chapter "Jonah Historically Regarded," Ishmael cites geographical facts in arguing that the biblical story of Jonah cannot be literally true, it must be understood as figurative literature. Christian readers accepted their figurative Bible stories as Truth, why could they not accept his story likewise? He

ends the chapter with sarcasm ostensibly directed against himself: "I say it [his argument] only shows his foolish, impious pride, and abominable, devilish rebellion against the reverend clergy" (end Chapter 83). This chapter is Melville's reply, discretely delayed, to the sermon of Father Mapple.

At the end of his sixth paragraph in Chapter 1, Melville gives you "the key to it all": "...that story of Narcissus [Ahab], who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all."

The theme of narcissism is elaborated later in Chapter 99, "The Doubloon," where every member of the crew sees the coin and the white whale subjectively, projecting themselves, except for Ishmael and the slave boy Pip who has lost his ego. The ship is analogous to the world and to Ishmael's psyche, captained by the likes of Ahab, the wounded ego. The key to individuation, wisdom and even survival is overcoming narcissism as epitomized by Ahab--egotism is killed by Truth--through objectivity as represented by the slave boy Pip and balance as symbolized by Ishmael up in the Mast-head and at the end while clinging to the coffin of Queequeg. By the end of the story, Ishmael has implicitly absorbed the principles represented by Queequeg, Bulkington, Pip, the existential carpenter and Moby-Dick (all redeemers or Christ-evoking figures, representing what is required for psychological salvation), attaining wholeness and becoming a pantheistic "whaleman."

POINT OF VIEW

Most critics read literally and miss the psychological allegory: "But before the book is far along, Captain Ahab takes center stage, and it seems at times that Melville has forgotten his narrator, especially when characters are presented alone, in meditation or reciting soliloquies. At the end of the book, when only Ishmael survives...the reader is reminded that his endurance had to be assured in order to save someone to tell the tale." (James E. Miller, *A Reader's Guide to Herman Melville*, 76)

As aspects of Ishmael's psyche, the other characters move in and out of the foreground in a dramatic order as expressions of his psychological development. As Ahab becomes increasingly dominant, Ishmael recedes. In scenes of the crew gathered on deck, to a degree Ishmael is one with them all, even Flask, except that he is independent otherwise--an "isolato." Walt Whitman expresses a comparable egalitarian sense of containing everyone in "Song of Myself."

MOST SIGNIFICANT EXTRACT

"My God! Mr. Chace, what is the matter?" I answered, "we have been stove by a whale." *Narrative of the Shipwreck of the Whale Ship Essex of Nantucket, which was attacked and finally destroyed by a large Sperm Whale in the Pacific Ocean*, by Owen Chace of Nantucket, first mate of said vessel, New York, 1821. This account establishes the plausibility of a sperm whale sinking a large ship. It not only could happen, it had happened. The Essex had killed the mate of that whale. "Not one of fifty of the actual disasters and deaths by casualties in the fishery, ever finds a public record at home." (Chapter 45)

Of course, there was also a real Mocha Dick, legendary by the 1830s, a white whale alleged to have sunk three ships and to have stove in three others before his death in 1859. Moby-Dick cannot be captured or killed because he represents the ultimate triumph of Nature and metaphysical Truth that is beyond human understanding, but he can be "encountered" as a numinous manifestation of the divine.

CETOLOGY

"If we are to sense the *epic quality* of the tragic action played out before us...then we must develop some consciousness of the whale in history, in folklore, in mythology--we must acquire some sense of awe and mystery as we contemplate the whale's complexity, antiquity, and immensity... The huge quantity of material on the manufacture, metaphysics, and mythology of whales [is] the abundant *blubber* that swells the book to its enormity and keeps it afloat." (Miller, *Reader's Guide*, 97)

The empirical data about whales, and a chapter such as “Of the Monstrous Pictures of Whales,” is evidence in an argument for objective accuracy in reporting simple facts: “In a word, Frederick Cuvier’s Sperm Whale is not a Sperm Whale, but a squash.” The cetology and commentary on whales demonstrate how subjective people are in reporting even simple facts, the limitations of empiricism and how elusive is the Truth: “So there is no earthly way of finding out precisely what the whale really looks like” (Chapter 55). Here the whale is analogous to God: “Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will. But if I know not even the tail [tale, history] of this whale [the world], how understand his head [God]?” And, “The more I consider this mighty tail, the more do I deplore my inability to express it” (end Chapter 86). The transcendent experience of the divine is ineffable.

Another reason for the abundant information about whaling is aesthetic. Most readers know almost nothing about the subject. The more they learn in advance, the more they will bring to the dramatic conclusion. The final encounter with Moby-Dick is a majestic evocation of the divine, potentially for the reader a vicarious transcendent experience. To be most effective, the action at the climax must be continuous, uninterrupted by explanations of how the harpoon rope uncoils and other such technical details.

FOCUS OF MAIN SECTIONS

- Chapters 1-22 Ishmael & Queequeg
- 22-45 Ahab & Moby-Dick
- 46-72 The business of the Pequod
- 73-105 Whales and whaling
- 106-135 The search & the chase

30 KEY METAPHORS

These metaphors will seem reduced to signs when summarized, but they are too complex to be signs. In the narrative they have multiple implications. Some are archetypal and some are also in the *Bible*. For one example, in *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620-47* William Bradford uses the old biblical metaphor a “sea of troubles” and depicts the voyage of the Mayflower as mythic, paralleling the journey of the Israelites to salvation--a promised land. Melville draws resonance from that myth. This technique of correspondences was later called the “mythic method” by T. S. Eliot in reviewing *Ulysses* (1922) by James Joyce and is a characteristic of Modernism, used by O’Neill, Faulkner, Welty, and others. All-caps added:

1. The subtitle of *Moby-Dick*; or, *The Whale* makes the book analogous to the WHALE. It is a whale of a book. The book is to the reader as the whale is to Ishmael.
2. ISHMAEL is the individual soul in need of psychological salvation. His name identifies him with his New England background and associates him with the biblical Ishmael, the son of Abraham by the slave Hagar who was sent forth into the wilderness and became the patriarch of a vast nation: “And he will be a wild man, his hand will be against every man, and every man’s hand against him” (*Genesis*). Melville probably knew that Cooper used the name for his aggressive pioneer Ishmael Bush in *The Prairie* (1827) and may have intended to contrast his Ishmael, who “goes wild” and makes a journey into the wilderness but overcomes the aggressive Ahab in himself and seems almost androgynous in his receptivity, especially when he “marries” Queequeg.
3. WATER-GAZING is deep thinking, introspection, looking down into the deeper self, the unconscious--the undersoul: “Yes, as meditation and water are wedded for ever” (Chapter 1). Queequeg was an islander who now lives at sea like the whale.
4. LAND is conventional society, the “slavish shore” (Chapter 23): “Consider them both, the SEA and the land, and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself?” (Chapter 58)
5. Our “insular Tahiti” is our innocence, what remains of our childhood in us, our memory of pure happiness, our paradise lost, our ignorance of the Truth. Billy Budd lives there. “For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one INSULAR TAHITI, full of peace

and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return!" (end Chapter 58)

6. "That unsounded OCEAN you gasp in, is Life" (end Chapter 72); the "bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature" (end Chapter 35) .
7. "...those SHARKS, your foes" (end Chapter 72) .
8. BULKINGTON is the helmsman on the passage out to sea, the spirit of independence and sea-voyaging--a spiritual guide (Chapter 23) identified with the "Spirit-Spout" that leads to Moby-Dick.
9. QUEEQUEG is primitive human Nature, "a simple honest heart," the deepest Self: "You cannot hide the soul." He is "almost sublime," a redeemer: "No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world. This soothing savage had redeemed it" (Chapter 10).
10. In the MONKEYROPE chapter Queequeg is tied to Ishmael vertically like the soul or unconscious is tied to the topside ego (Chapter 72). It is Queequeg who presses his "forehead" to Ishmael's and tells him they are "married; meaning, in his country's phrase, that we were bosom friends; he would gladly die for me, if need should be." Ego and Self are "wed" in the individuation process. In the end, they have become one in Ishmael, representing his wholeness. The union is psychological and fraternal, *not sexual*: "affectionately throwing his brown tattooed legs over mine, and then *drawing them back*" (Chapter 11, italics added). Queequeg is the human counterpart to Moby-Dick, enigmatic Nature with tattoos that correspond to the scratchings on the whale. That is why Ahab sees him as a "devilish tantalization" (end Chapter 110).
11. Late in the book, Ishmael and Queequeg are on deck together SQUEEZING SPERM lumps in a bath: "while bathing in that bath, I felt divinely free from all ill-will...till a strange sort of insanity came over me." Ishmael is being transformed by a feeling of brotherhood that is "insane" in being unrealistic--it "goes overboard," as he almost does in "The Mast-head." The passage is full of sexual double entendres: "loving," "beget," "squeezing their hands," "as much as to say,--Oh!," "Come," "let us squeeze ourselves into each other," "Would that I could keep squeezing that sperm for ever!"; "For now, since by many prolonged, repeated experiences, I have learned that in all cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife..." Ishmael implies that the common bisexuality of sailors long at sea is harmless "insanity" and affirms that "in all cases" man eventually must seek attainable felicity "in the wife." He says he looked into the eyes of fellow sailors and squeezed their hands. His sexual fantasizing is a "conceit of attainable felicity...in the *intellect* or the *fancy*" (italics added). Melville may have been thinking of this passage, among others, when he said in a letter to Hawthorne, "I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb."
12. The SHIP is the psyche of Ishmael and multi-ethnic America leading the World on its passage out through time. Lest we lead the way to a great tragedy, we must beware of charismatic leaders like Ahab.
13. "The sun hides not the ocean, which is the DARK SIDE OF THIS EARTH, and which is two thirds of this earth. So, therefore, that mortal man who hath more of joy than sorrow in him that mortal man cannot be true--not true, or undeveloped. With books the same." Jolly Stubb is the mere stub of a man, undeveloped and untrue in his view--he is "too damned jolly." Most of the humor or jolliness in Melville's book occurs on land before Ishmael goes to sea. Life is two-thirds tragic, like *Moby-Dick*, roughly speaking. "The truest of all men was the Man of Sorrows"—Jesus Christ (Chapter 96).
14. AHAB is the captain of the psyche, the wounded Ego, a Shakespearean tragic hero with the fatal flaw of pride (end Chapter 124). He is a monomaniac projecting his obsession at the expense of everyone else. The owners of the Pequod are capitalists, but Ahab is a radical in violating his contract by giving up the pursuit of whale oil to seek revenge. He drowns in his subjectivity, the sea.

15. Personifying his secret obsession, FEDALLAH stays hidden below decks until Ahab reveals his intention to the crew, by now a Satan in his solipsism: "So far gone am I in the dark side of earth [the sea] that its other side, the theoretic bright one, seems but uncertain twilight to me" (end Chapter 127).
16. The CARPENTER is his opposite, seeing no meaning at all, in contrast also to Christ the carpenter. He reflects what he sees as a meaningless universe--an Existentialist outlook: "I do not mean anything, sir. I do as I do." His indifferent outlook is Ishmael's corrective to Ahab's monomania: "Faith? What's that?" "Why, faith, sir, it's only a sort of exclamation-like--that's all, sir" (Chapter 127).
17. In "The Quarter-Deck," Ahab smites his chest, which makes a sound that Stubb says "rings most vast, but hollow." Ahab is here identified with a suit of armor, Hawthorne's symbol of Calvinism in the Governor's Hall in *The Scarlet Letter*. Starbuck resists Ahab only verbally, accusing him of madness and blasphemy. Ahab defends himself with a speech in the tradition of Platonic dualism: "Hark ye, yet again,--the little lower layer. All visible objects, man, are but as PASTEBOARD MASKS." The white whale is an existential wall "shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough." Casting philosophy aside like a pasteboard mask, he proceeds to vent his hatred, making clear that his only motivation is revenge: "Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me" (Chapter 36).
18. The Christian STARBUCK lets "faith oust fact," consequently he is no help to Ishmael. Starbuck is too conventional and hence too weak to lead a mutiny against Ahab that would have saved everyone: "I think I see his impious end; but feel that I must help him to it."
19. PIP is objectivity, because he loses his ego when abandoned at sea to drown. His relationship to Ahab is dramatized in "The Cabin": "There is that in thee, poor lad, which I feel too curing to my malady." Ahab wants his revenge, he does not want to be objective: "If thou speakest thus to me much more, Ahab's purpose keels up in him." Objectivity is a slave to ego: "Oh, master! master! I am indeed down-hearted when you walk over me." PIP is the corrective to Narcissicism—"the key to it all."
20. The Mast-head is the highest place on the ship, where a sailor can see the farthest and where whales are first sighted. The MASTHEAD is not identified with the head in the limited sense of reason or ordinary rational consciousness, it provides a transcendent perspective both literally and figuratively. But there is a danger up there of losing balance and going overboard, as he implies Emerson does (Chapter 35).
21. "Thar she blows!" means a whale spout has been sighted, which Ishmael identifies with the questing spirit of Bulkington and with the "SPIRIT SPOUT" leading to the squid and then on to Moby-Dick.
22. "The DOUBLOON" is nailed to the mast at the middle of the ship: "This bright coin came from a country planted in the middle of the world, and beneath the great equator, and named after it." Pip calls it "the ship's navel" and says of Ahab, "the White Whale; he'll nail ye!" The coin represents the goal--Moby-Dick--and responses to it are analogous, as each member of the crew projects his subjectivity, except for Pip and Ishmael. Here the allegory is multiple, layered, amplifying--making analogous the coin, the whale, the world, the ship and the Captain. *Moby-Dick* and Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* are the most complex layered allegories in world literature before James Joyce in *Ulysses* (1922). "Hark ye yet again,--the little lower layer," says Ahab.
23. Near the climax, after Ahab welds the crew to his purpose during a storm, his COMPASS NEEDLES "were exactly inverted" (Chapter 124). Ahab himself has become inverted, sailing into an opposing wind, against Nature and/or God (like the Postmodernists of the 20th century). The Pequod "seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander's soul" (Chapter 96).
24. Ishmael gets inverted momentarily when he falls asleep at the helm and wakes up staring into the hellish fires of the TRYWORKS pots, almost losing control and capsizing the ship: "Give not thyself up, then, to fire, lest it invert thee, deaden thee; as for a time it did me. There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness [as in Ahab]." The parallel inversions suggest that Ishmael to some

degree contains the same tendency as is magnified in Ahab. His inversion scene concludes with commentary that amounts to a gloss on Hawthorne's story "Young Goodman Brown," about a Calvinist who gets inverted by the doctrine of total depravity and loses all faith (Chapter 96). Ahab is not pursuing Truth, but revenge. His subjectivity is his only Truth: "All are Ahab." A solipsist, he makes his own needle: "God help thee, old man, thy thoughts have created a creature in thee; and he whose intense thinking thus makes him a Prometheus; a vulture feeds upon that heart for ever; that vulture the very creature he creates" (end Chapter 44). Ahab prefigures the mad tyrants of the 20th century--Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, Saddam and all the rest.

25. The SQUID is an existential image of meaninglessness, its tentacles groping in the air as if for meaning. Down in the depths, the sperm whale devours it—"his only food." The squid is rarely seen because it is nauseating to contemplate. It rises into consciousness when we pursue the Truth, the whale, led by "the spirit-spout": "No perceptible face or front did it have...an unearthly, formless, chance-like apparition of life" (Chapter 59). In contrast, the sperm whale has a definite form and, especially in the case of *Moby-Dick*, it represents Meaning displacing Meaninglessness, as in a myth. This is the first dramatization of existentialism in American literature, followed by "Bartleby the Scrivener" (1855). Poe was existential in his outlook, but did not dramatize this with specificity.
26. The WHITE WHALE symbolizes Truth: "It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all." (Chapter 1) "For unless you own [acknowledge] the whale, you are but a provincial and sentimentalist in Truth. But clear Truth is a thing for salamander giants only to encounter; how small the chances for the provincials then?" (end Chapter 76)
27. The first chapter is called "Loomings." Ishmael weaves his story like history is woven on the LOOM OF TIME: "The great sun seemed a flying shuttle weaving the unwearied verdure... The weaver-god, he weaves; and by that weaving is he deafened, that he hears no mortal voice." Melville's pantheist alternative to the Christian trinity: the sun rather than God the Father, the weaver god like the Holy Ghost, and the whale embodying Truth and psychological salvation--hence a Christ-evoking figure (Chapter 102). The conventional Christian--Father Mapple or Starbuck--could read *Moby-Dick* as dramatizing the fate of a sinner (Ahab), like the story of Jonah. However, Melville has woven a "counterpane" with a variegated pattern including pantheism and ridicule of conventional Christians. Ishmael's first savior is a cannibal. Eventually he sees "Chance, free will, and necessity--no wise incompatible--all interweavingly working together."
28. The RACHEL returns and saves Ishmael, a matter of chance, but still an affirmation of humanity--the heart--appreciating Christian charity and providing a hopeful end to the tragedy: "Aye, chance, free will, and necessity--no wise incompatible--all interweavingly working together" (Chapter 47).
29. The various criticisms of American culture and the warning that unless Americans become more independent they may elect an Ahab and lead the world to catastrophe--all are transcended by an egalitarian spirit most clear in the MULTI-ETHNIC CREW, the exaltation of the pagan harpooners and the hopeful ending, with Ishmael transformed.
30. "And there is a Catskill EAGLE in some souls that can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces. And even if he for ever flies within the gorge, that gorge is in the mountains; so that even in his lowest swoop the mountain eagle is still higher than other birds upon the plain, even though they soar" (Chapter 96). The redeemed Ishmael and idealistic America share the spirit of a mountain eagle.

Michael Hollister (2015)

MYTHOLOGY

The most obscure dimension of *Moby-Dick* to most readers is the substructure of allusions and parallels to world mythologies. As an independent scholar Melville became an expert in comparative mythology before it was an academic field. H. Bruce Franklin has analyzed mythologies interwoven throughout the works of Melville in *The Wake of the Gods*, as exemplified here:

Moby-Dick first establishes the psychological truth of Ahab's mythic struggle with the White Whale, and then it redefines the various myths of the world by comparing them with its own central myth. It dramatizes some of the myths as ridiculous and others as more or less half-truths.... (61) Many details of Ahab's story parallel details in the story of Osiris.... Melville saw Egyptian mythology as the direct source of the Hebrew mythology and therefore of the myth of the Christ.... He drew from this source his own version of the savior myth--*Moby-Dick*, which he submits to us as a kind of truth not found in Christian, Hebrew, or Egyptian mythology. (74, 97)

