



Aidenn: The Liberty Undergraduate Journal of American Literature

Volume 1 | Issue 1

Article 5


2015

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Recommended Citation

Schlaudt, Joel (2015) "Tale of the Whale," *Aidenn: The Liberty Undergraduate Journal of American Literature*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 5.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lujal/vol1/iss1/5>

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Tale of the Whale

“Call me Ishmael” (Melville 1). With those three words begins one of the greatest American classics and one of the most debated American novels of all time. *Moby Dick*, often acclaimed as the first American epic, has fascinated literary minds for over a hundred and fifty years with its high language, deep symbolism, and obscure meaning. It is a tale that baffles the experts and novices alike, giving birth to hundreds if not thousands of literary critiques, essays, and treatises attempting to delve into the work’s metaphorical, symbolic, and often confusing content. Of course, this massive volume of critique is only opinion based on study of the novel, and as such, the writings are often at odds with one another in their interpretations of Melville’s meaning, forcing the reader to scavenge what he can from them all and make his own way through a sea of criticism. One of the many authors in this debate, A.N. Deacon, expresses his own interpretation of the novel for the literary journal *Critical Review* in an article simply entitled “Moby Dick.” In the essay, though he does accurately capture one of the main tenets if not the central theme of the book, Deacon makes several claims about the novel that do not seem to fit with the evidence seen in the actual story.

To begin with, Deacon holds that through his writing, Melville is attempting to show that “meaning is found (if anywhere) in the splendour, beauty, and awesome powers of the whale” (Deacon 78). However, this is not the impression we get when we look closely at the work itself. For one thing, if this claim were in fact true, Ahab and his crew’s hunt would be a quest in search of the meaning personified in the whale. And such a quest would be viewed by the author in a positive light, regardless of Ahab’s feelings about it, would it not? After all, a protagonist seeking truth is typically depicted in literature as noble and heroic, overcoming incredible obstacles to reach the ultimate goal, such as in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* or the stereotypical

fairytale. But that is certainly not the case here—for Ahab himself or for his mission. He is portrayed throughout the book as hard and wolf-like (Melville 238) and described in the chapter “The Quarter Deck” as wild, strange, and fierce (Melville 232). He shows no respect for order or authority, placing himself above the constraints of common men as evidenced by his quote, “Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I’d strike the sun if it insulted me” (Melville 236). Neither is there anything noble about his search. In the same chapter of “The Quarter Deck,” Ahab admits openly that personal vengeance on the whale is his sole purpose; he longs to see the creature wallow in its own blood (Melville 236). Even Starbuck, his first mate, decries such a mission as “madness” and “blasphemous” (Melville 236). Obviously then, Ahab is not on an intrepid mission to discover truth; he is determined to *overthrow* the malevolent power of the whale, not discover or attain any virtues. Furthermore, Ahab states outright: “How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me...that inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him” (Melville 236). The quote shows emphatically that to him, the whale does not represent meaning; in fact, Moby Dick is the exact opposite—the “inscrutable thing” that blocks Ahab from what he is truly seeking. Obviously then, the idea that Melville attempts to personify meaning in the white whale is not what the text itself shows.

Secondly, Deacon posits that Ahab is “not really a coherent creation” (Deacon 78) because outwardly he “is a crazy, obsessed old sea-captain” (Deacon 78) and inwardly “a marvelous rhetorical performance...a creature of grand gestures...of magniloquent soliloquies and wildly blasphemous actions...” (Deacon 79). But couldn’t the “grand gestures” and “wildly blasphemous actions” stem from Ahab’s crazed obsession? After all, Melville himself demonstrates how seemingly contradictory attributes can be embodied in a single object in his

treatment of a whale's tail in Chapter 86. He describes the awesome might and colossal power of a sperm whale's tail, declaring, "Could annihilation occur to matter, this were the thing to do it" (Melville 543), and yet emphasizes the "maidenly gentleness" and "delicacy equaled only by the daintiness of the elephant's trunk" (Melville 545). The idea of contrast and seeming incongruity in the whale Melville is attempting to draw out here could also be applied to Ahab who, as Deacon states, has actually internalized the characteristics and qualities of Moby Dick (Deacon 82). Furthermore, the seemingly antithetical qualities of Ahab can easily be seen as different manifestations of the same passion: obsession. Whether he stands silent for days and nights on the deck, weathering snow storms and sleet and refusing to leave his place as in Chapter 51, or whether he launches into an eloquent tirade against his first mate as in Chapter 109, Ahab is driven solely by his blind resolve to find and destroy the white whale. His bewildering character swings are the outward fruits of a single emotional attitude. Ahab's character isn't so much disjointed and incongruent as it is consumed and ravaged by the powerful passion of his determination, a very real and very believable state for a vengeful human being.

However, Deacon does effectively capture the central meaning and chief analogy of the book: "...Ahab is rebelling against and defying a rather crude version of the Calvinist idea of God: an all-powerful, bullying God, who predestines men's actions, and whom Ahab has madly identified with the white whale" (Deacon 79). First off, the association and symbolism of the whale as deity is strong throughout the book. After all, the color white is most often associated with divinity as Melville shows in Chapter 42, "The Whiteness of the Whale." He demonstrates the relation of the color to many of the attributes we associate with God—such as beauty, power, justice, and holiness—and even takes the comparison all the way to God Himself: "...the great white throne, and the Holy One that sitteth there white like wool" (Melville 274). However, this

is not painted as positively as might be expected, for he says in the same passage, "...with whatever is sweet, and honorable, and sublime, there yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of a panic to the soul than that redness with affrights in blood" (Melville 274). Hence, it appears that Melville is coloring some of the ideas and associations made about God in a doubtful, uneasy light and attaching them to the white whale. The full negativity of these qualities becomes increasingly obvious when the development of *Moby Dick* is considered throughout the novel as a whole—his illusive impersonality in "The Spirit Spout" as his ghostly spout ever eludes the pursuing crew, and his awesome power yet vengeful cruelty in "The Chase—Third Day" during the bloody overthrow of the *Pequod*. Notice that these both relate to elements of Calvinistic theology—the inexplicability of God's will and His complete sovereignty, respectively—and that they are strongly negative. Even the whale's face is twisted and misshapen as seen in "The Quarter Deck" (Melville 232). Also, there can be no denial that Ahab is in full rebellion against this God Melville is portraying. The ceremony he forces upon his crew in "The Quarter Deck" brings to mind a distorted Communion as he bids the men drink into a covenant to destroy the white whale, with a mention of Satan thrown in to demonstrate the full perversion and rebellion of the act (Melville 238). Even the *Pequod*, as a ship outfitted by the captain to carry out his vengeful purposes, is portrayed in such a way so as to convey the barbaric nature of Ahab and his mission. The passage describing her in Chapter 16 calls her "a cannibal craft, tricking herself forth in the chased bones of her enemies. All round, her unpanelled, open bulwarks were garnished like one continuous jaw, with the long sharp teeth of the Sperm Whale inserted there for pins..." (Melville 101). The impression here is of a hunter—a god-hunter if considered with the previous analogy of the whale as deity—loaded with trophies of her past victims and ready, with cruel jaws, for another. It is a chilling picture of

man's rebellion and Ahab's demoniac obsession to skewer his idea of God on a harpoon.

Overall, it is clear that, as Deacon says, Ahab is in utter defiance of God, or at least of the image of Him he has projected upon the white whale.

Moby Dick, though a great classic, is a baffling literary work that has had critics vying over its interpretation for decades. Many of their critiques and essays on the novel are hit and miss, sometimes effectively portraying what we see in the work itself and sometimes not. A.N. Deacon's contribution to the discussion is no exception. Though some of his claims pertaining to Melville's view of meaning and the construction of Ahab's character are not consistent with the evidence in the text, he does pin down the underlying theme of the work: a rebellious man on a mission to cast down and destroy the idea of a Calvinistic God. *Moby Dick* is essentially a literary exploration of human nature and its relationship with the Divine; it is no wonder that despite all the controversy, it has been hailed as an epic and one of the Great American Novels for so many years.

Works Cited

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