The Role of Pagans and Pagan Gods in *Moby Dick*
---With Special Reference to Ishmael and Ahab---

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**Introduction**

It is generally accepted that Herman Melville (1819-91), born and bred as a son of the parents who were members of the Dutch Reformed Church in America, was influenced by the Calvinistic tradition of New England. Of course the Calvinistic emphasis on the sovereignty of God and the depravity of Man admits no room for any idolatry. Nevertheless, Melville presented many pagan aspects in his sixth novel *Moby Dick* (1851), and even made one of the characters confess that “it’s a wicked world in all meridians; I’ll die a pagan” (56). Furthermore, in his letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-64), to whom *Moby Dick* was dedicated, he wrote that he had written “a wicked book.”

The aim of the present paper is to examine the role of some of the influential pagans and pagan gods presented in the narrative with special emphasis on their relation to the two dominant characters, Ishmael and Captain Ahab. This will serve to illustrate at least one of the pagan aspects of this book and of its author who admitted wickedness that it implied.

**I. Ishmael and Queequeg**

Melville’s love of “Rousseau’s Child of Nature and Chateaubriand’s Noble Savage” in his early works has already been pointed out by D.H. Lawrence. In *Moby Dick*, however, it is not Melville but Ishmael, the first person narrator and character, that first shows a sympathetic response to a savage with a noble nature, a pagan called Queequeg who worships a wooden idol Yojo. There is no doubt that Queequeg is such a noble savage as is suggested in Lawrence’s phrase. He is “sublime” (50) and preserves “a simple honest heart” (49) and “the utmost serenity” (50). He is “the son of a King” and, as it were, “George Washington cannibalistically developed” (49) and the “sea Prince of Wales” (55). He is even “Zoroaster” (473).

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2) Herman Melville, *Moby Dick, or, the Whale* (“The Modern Library”; New York: Random House, 1950), p. 56. All references hereafter to the text will be to this edition; numbers within parentheses are the page number of the novel under discussion.
Before going on board the *Pequod*, Ishmael is mysteriously drawn to this noble savage and as a result forms a solemn friendship with him. The friendship thus formed may indicate Ishmael’s naive attitude as a young sailor or may symbolize Eros entering into Thanatos, as Newton Arvin observes. But it should be noticed that Ishmael tells that “those same things that would have repelled most others, they were the very magnets that thus drew” (51) him. Consequently he decides: “I’ll try a pagan friend...since Christian kindness has proved but hollow courtesy” (51). These words, expressed by young Ishmael trying to escape from Christendom, indicate that, besides his naivety and the power of love that enters into his death-wish, there is another motive that drives him to form a friendship with a pagan, a motive which suggests the sympathetic attitude of Ishmael toward paganism, toward the idolatry of his pagan friend. Since he is a Christian “born and bred in the bosom of the infallible Presbyterian Church” (52), this sympathetic attitude seems to insinuate even his ironical conversion to paganism or his desertion of Christianity and his final acceptance of idolatry. In fact, in the chapter entitled “The Bosom Friend,” he explains how he has come to turn idolater through his friendship with Queequeg:

I was a good Christian; born and bred in the bosom of the infallible Presbyterian Church. How then could I unite with this wild idolator [sic] in worshipping his piece of wood? But what is worship? thought I. Do you suppose now, Ishmael, that the magnanimous God of heaven and earth — pagans and all included — can possibly be jealous of an insignificant bit of black wood? Impossible! But what is worship? — to do the will of God? *that* is worship. And what is the will of God? — to do to my fellow man what I would have my fellow man to do to me — *that* is the will of God. Now, Queequeg is my fellow man. And what do I wish that this Queequeg would do to me? Why, unite with me in my particular Presbyterian form of worship. Consequently, I must then unite with him in his; ergo, I must turn idolator.

Ishmael’s reference to “the magnanimous God” that cannot possibly be jealous of Queequeg’s idol is again an irony since “the infallible Presbyterian Church,” in the bosom of which Ishmael was brought up as a New England boy, seems to have something to do with New England Puritanism based on Calvinism. This irony proves the pagan tendency on Ishmael’s part.

A pagan drive in Ishmael is suggested, later on the *Pequod*, in his reaction to the phallus of a whale, an object that has a certain kinship with Queequeg’s black idol. Describing the black phallus from what seems to be a sympathetic point of view, he associates it not only with Queequeg’s Yojo but also with the pagan god referred to

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6) See, for example, V.L. Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought* (New York, 1930), p. 16.
The Role of Pagans and Pagan Gods in *Moby Dick*

Not the wondrous cistern in the whale’s huge head; not the prodigy of his unhinged lower jaw; not the miracle of his symmetrical tail; none of these would so surprise you, as half a glimpse of that unaccountable cone, — longer than a Kentuckian is tall, nigh a foot in diameter at the base, and jet-black as Yojo, the ebony idol of Queequeg. And an idol, indeed, it is; or rather, in old times, its likeness was. Such an idol as that found in the secret groves of Queen Maachah in Judea; and for worshipping which, king Asa, her son, did depose her, and destroyed the idol, and burnt it for an abomination at the brook Kidron, as darkly set forth in the 15th chapter of the first book of Kings.\(^7\)

Although his sympathetic attitude itself proves his pagan inclination, another wicked reaction directed toward Christianity seems also to be revealed in connection with his description of the phallus. While the mincer, clad in the decent black pelt removed from Yojo-like phallus, is engaged in his work of cutting the horse-pieces of blubber as if he were “a candidate for an archbishoprick” or “a lad for a Pope,” his mates cry, looking at the minced pieces drop, “Bible leaves! Bible leaves!” (418). As Ishmael is one of these impious crew, the satirical cry of the mates is Ishmael’s, too. Moreover, as he is linked to his pagan friend not only by “the very magnets” (51) but also by “an elongated Siamese ligature” (318) of the monkey-rope, the ironical proceeding of the mincer clad in the wicked pelt does not seem inappropriate if performed by Ishmael himself. In the “Dusk” chapter Starbuck soliloquizes that the revelry on the forecastle is “the infernal orgies” (168) of the heathen crew, while in “The Cassock” chapter Ishmael indirectly takes part in the blasphemous phallic ritual by showing sympathetic response to the Yojo-like phallus and to the wicked ritual.

As is seen in his suggestive description of the ironical ritual scene, Ishmael’s faith in Christianity is a superficial one. Though he admits that he was a good Christian of the Presbyterian Church, he writes on the other hand that “long exile from Christendom and civilization inevitably restores a man to that condition in which God placed him, i.e. what is called savagery” (271), and then confesses: “I myself am a savage, owning no allegiance but to the King of the Cannibals; and ready at any moment to rebel against him” (271). In contrast with Ishmael’s seeming faith in Christianity, Queequeg’s faith in his idolatry is firmly maintained. In the chapter entitled “His Mark” he is warned to spurn his idol by Captain Bildad, a retired captain and shipowner of the *Pequod* brought up under the strict influence of Nantucket Quakerism. As a man absorbed in the study of the Scriptures for the last thirty years, he persuades Queequeg

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\(^7\) Cf. I Kings 15: 11–13: “And Asa did that which was right in the eyes of the Lord, as did David his father. And he took away the sodomites out of the land, and removed all the idols that his fathers had made. And also Maachah his mother, even her he removed from being queen, because she had made an idol in a grove; and Asa destroyed her idol, and burnt it by the brook Kidron.”
to convert, referring to the idols in the Bible
defering to the idols in the Bible\cite{footnote8}: “Son of darkness, I must do my duty
by thee; I am part owner of this ship, and feel concerned for the souls of all its crew; if
thou still clingest to thy Pagan ways, which I sadly fear, I beseech thee, remain not for
aye a Belial bondsman. Spurn the idol Bell \cite{footnote8}, and the hideous dragon; turn from
the wrath to come; mind thine eye, I say; oh! goodness gracious! steer clear of the fiery
pit!” \cite{footnote8}. In spite of his reference to the idols in the Bible, Bildad’s effort to convert
Queequeg is in vain just like the persuasion of Job by his namesake in the Book of
Job.\cite{footnote9} Queequeg goes on board the Pequod with his idol, and in his death-bed, from
which he survives in a comical way, he tells one of the crew “to go to his bag and bring
out his little god, Yojo” \cite{footnote9}.

Queequeg may have come to Christian lands originally with a strong desire for
self-improvement as is suggested in the chapter “Biographical.” But before meeting
with the inquisitorial persuasion by Captain Bildad, he has already taken a negative
view of the Christians and Christianity. He admits that “even Christians could be
both miserable and wicked; infinitely more so, than all his father’s heathens” \cite{footnote56},
and he is actually “fearful Christianity, or rather Christians, had unfitted him for
ascending the pure and undefiled throne of thirty pagan Kings before him” \cite{footnote56}. In
“The Wheelbarrow” he says to himself, “It’s a mutual, joint-stock world, in all meridi-
ans. We cannibals must help these Christians” \cite{footnote61}. Then in “The Ramadan” he
convinces Ishmael that he knows “a good deal more about true religion” \cite{footnote87}. Indeed,
in “The First Lowering” chapter, Ishmael tells that Queequeg, when left on the
ocean, “sat, the sign and symbol of a man without faith, hopelessly holding up hope in
the midst of despair” \cite{footnote225}. But this does not necessarily prove the faithlessness of
Queequeg. He may be in despair on his way from Christian lands to his native land,
but he is a man with faith and hope in his idolatry, if not in Christianity. Thus he
remembers his little god Yojo in his death-bed.

It may be observed that, apart from the friendship formed with his pagan friend,
Ishmael is after all atheistical or skeptical on the ground that he tells about “a color-
less, all-color of atheism” \cite{footnote195} in the famous chapter entitled “The Whiteness of the
Whale.” But it must be admitted here that there are two Ishmaels in the narrative;
the young Ishmael on the forecastle and the narrator Ishmael.\cite{footnote10} What is dealt with
in the present analysis concerning the mysterious friendship is the young Ishmael who
goes to sea as a “substitute for pistol and ball” \cite{footnote1}.

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\footnote{8}{Cf. II Cor. 6: 14-16: “Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what
fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with
darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with
an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols?” See also Harold Beaver’s
738-9.}

\footnote{9}{Bildad is the second, and least consoling, comforters of Job. Cf. Job 8: 2-3: “How
long wilt thou speak these things? and how long shall the words of thy mouth be like a strong
wind? Doth God pervert judgment? or doth the Almighty pervert justice?”}

Tyrus Hillway and Luther S. Mansfield (Dallus, 1965), p. 36.}
The Role of Pagans and Pagan Gods in *Moby Dick*

whiteness of the whale is, as Walter E. Bezanson points out, the product of the narrator Ishmael that tells the story as hindsight. It may also be observed that Ishmael’s final survival from the fatal encounter with Moby Dick is symbolic of Christian salvation or regeneration as well as of love and death of Queequeg. But the fact remains that Ishmael escapes death by means of the very coffin in which Queequeg once prepared for death with his idol Yojo in it. Thus it can be assumed that Ishmael’s final survival is symbolic, ironically enough, of the survival of his paganism strengthened by Queequeg’s.

II. Ahab and Queequeg, Tashtego, Daggoo: Ahab and Fedallah

If the friendship formed between Ishmael and Queequeg is the first pagan pact in the narrative, the second one is formed between Captain Ahab and the three harpooners, Queequeg, Tashtego, and Daggoo. It is evident that the latter two members, Tashtego and Daggoo, belong to a race which believes other gods than the one god of the Hebraic-Christian religion. Tashtego is “an unmixed Indian from Gay Head” (117) and Daggoo is “a gigantic, coal-black negro-savage, with a lion-like tread — an Ahasuerus to behold” (118).

Some other pagan aspects are also attached to both of them besides their racial paganism. Just like Ishmael in the Bible who lived in the wilderness as an archer, Tashtego is “an inheritor of the unvitiated blood of those proud warrior hunters, who, in quest of the great New England moose, had scoured, bow in hand, the aboriginal forests of the main” (117). Moreover, according to Ishmael’s explanation, this Indian is a man who reminds the beholders of the superstitions of some of the earlier Puritans of New England that regarded the wild Indians as “a son of the Prince of the Powers of the Air” (118). The prince of the powers of the air is, as the Epistle of Paul teaches, the spirit that works in the sinful children of disobedience. Tashtego thus appears as a man with a heretical aspect. As for Daggoo, he is another noble savage in that he is a negro with “all his barbaric virtues” and that it looks as if “a white man standing before him seemed a white flag come to beg truce of a fortress” (118). He too is represented as a man with a heretical attribute. His name reminds us, as Harold Beaver observes, of one of the pagan gods in the Bible, Dagon, which is referred to by Ishmael as “that fish, flesh, and fowl idol of the Philistines, Dagon by name” (361).

In the narrative these three pagan harpooners are often contrasted with the civilized Christian crew, especially with the three white mates, Starbuck, Stubb, and Flask.

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13) Cf. Gen. 21:20: “And God was with the lad; and he grew, and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer.”
14) Cf. Eph. 2:1-2: “And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience.”
These three are all men brought up in New England. Starbuck is "a native of Nantucket, and a Quaker by descent" (111); Stubb is a native of "Cape Cod" (115); Flask is a native of "Tisbury, in Martha's Vineyard" (116). In "The Cabin-Table" these two parties show a strange contrast before their chief, Captain Ahab. The three white mates all behave as if each of them were "Abjectus, or the Slave" (146), while in the behaviors of the pagans there is "the entire care-free license and ease, the almost frantic democracy" (149). A contrast of this kind is further repeated. In "The Life-Buoy" chapter, where the crew of the Pequod hear a strange cry from somewhere on the sea, "the Christian or civilized part of the crew said it was mermaids, and shuddered; but the pagan harpooneers [sic] remained unappalled" (514). These pagan crew seem to play an important role in the vengeful chase after Moby Dick by Captain Ahab.

The wicked aspect of Captain Ahab is suggested first of all by the fact that he has a namesake in the Bible as is the case with Ishmael and Bildad.16) In the narrative, however, his wickedness is shown most obviously in the "impiety and blasphemy" (552) which drives him to hunt and kill Moby Dick. In this impious and blasphemous hunt he reveals special kinship with the three pagan harpooners mentioned above. He forms what may be called the second pagan pact with them twice; first in the murderous charices in "The Quarter-Deck," then in the devilish baptism in "The Forge." In the murderous charices it is shown that his sympathetic attitude is rather to the pagans and not to the white mates. As these three white mates do not respond to him when he tries to shock into them the fiery emotion accumulated in his own "magnetic life" (164), he orders the three mates to be the cup-bearers to the pagans. In the devilish baptism of tempering the barbs by the blood of the pagans, he speaks out, intentionally disregarding the three mates: "Ahoy, there! Tashtego, Queequeg, Daggoo! What say ye, pagans! Will ye give me as much blood as will cover this barb?" (484). Then he cries: "Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli!" (484).17) The phrase "in nomine diaboli" affords sufficient proof of the diabolical nature of their twice contracted union, and diabolism is not entirely irrelevant to paganism or idolatry.

The diabolical nature of Captain Ahab can be seen more clearly, and perhaps most symbolically, in his relation to another pagan sailor called Fedallah, a Parsee. That Fedallah is a Parsee, a fire worshipper, bears witness to the pagan aspect of this mysterious character. But apart from his idolatry he has a characteristic aspect of the pagans presented in the narrative as having something to do with the two dominant characters, Ishmael and Ahab. Like Queequeg's Yojo or Daggoo, he too appears in the image of black. "A rumpled Chinese jacket of black cotton," Ishmael observes,

16) Cf. I Kings 16:30-33: "And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord above all that were before him. And it came to pass, as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took to wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Zidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshiped him. And he reared up an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he had built in Samaria. And Ahab made a grove; and Ahab did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him."

17) "I do not baptize thee in the name of the father, but in the name of the devil!"
"funerally invested him, with wide black trowsers [sic] of the same dark stuff" (216). Fedallah's companions are also the pagans with a certain diabolism. They are men with "vivid, tiger-yellow complexion peculiar to some of the aboriginal natives of the Manillas; — a race notorious for a certain diabolism of subtility" (216). Indeed there is always something mysterious and diabolical about these heathen crew that are hidden behind the curtain for the most part of the narrative. Ishmael's explanation of their chief, however, is effective enough for us to understand the essential nature of this fire worshipper as well as of his men. In the chapter entitled "Ahab's Boat and Crew. Fedallah," he tells:

He was such a creature as civilized, domestic people in the temperate zone only see in their dreams, and that but dimly; but the like of whom now and then glide among the unchanging Asiatic communities, especially the Oriental isles to the east of the continent — those insulated, immemorial, unalterable countries, which even in these modern days still preserve much of the ghostly originalness of earth's primal generations, when the memory of the first man was a distinct recollection, and all men his descendants, unknowing whence he came, eyed each other as real phantoms, and asked of the sun and the moon why they were created and to what end; when though, according to Genesis, the angels indeed consorted with the daughters of men, the devils also, add the uncanonical Rabbins, indulged in mundane amours.

As is suggested in this paragraph, the diabolism of this pagan chief reminds us not only of the primitive pagan elements of the earth's primal generation but even of the elements of Zoroastrian or Manichaean dualism such as sun and moon, light and dark, or the spirit of good and evil in apposition. With this heretical heathen fire worshipper Ahab forms another pact.

The dominant power that worked in forming Ishmael-Queequeg pact is Queequeg's magnetism issuing from his firm faith in his idolatry. In Ahab-harpooners pact, the former is doubtless the chief of the members, as he inspires his diabolism into the paganism of the latter. In Ahab-Fedallah pact, however, the latter rather controls the former just as Queequeg does Ishmael. Fedallah is "authority over" (231) Ahab; he occupies Ahab's shadow as if "to blend and lengthen Ahab's" (327); he foretells, "I shall still go before thee thy pilot" (491), and is actually dragged down by Moby Dick while Ahab and the other crew are still alive; moreover, when his dead body is seen lashed round to the back of Moby Dick in the final scene, "his distended eyes turned full upon old Ahab" (559), thus accelerating Ahab's vengeance against Moby Dick. It is true that in "The Hat" Ishmael tells that "Ahab seemed an independent lord; the Parsee but his slave," but he tells at the same time that "in the Parsee Ahab saw his forethrown shadow, in Ahab the Parsee his abandoned substance" (527). Thus Fedallah inspires his diabolism into Ahab's.

It has been pointed out that Ishmael turns idolater under the influence of Queequeg's idolatry. In Ahab-Fedallah pact, however, neither Fedallah nor Ahab actually worships fire, but rather rejects or defies it. In the famous chapter called "The Candles," Ahab cries to a pallid fire of the corporants that appear on the mast when the Pequod is attacked by the Typhoon: "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 now know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that thy right worship is defiance" (499). But these words of defiance do not necessarily prove that Ahab is not a fire worshipper. It is said that the Parsees do not in fact worship fire though they show particular veneration for the god of fire and that the sun worship is an integral part of their religion.\(^1\) In the light of these facts, both Ahab and Fedallah can be regarded as the fire worshippers after all. They both worship the sun. In "The Doubloon," Stubb soliloquizes as he looks at Fedallah bowing before the image of the sun on the doubloon nailed to the mainmast: "What does he say with that look of his? Ah, only makes a sign to the sign and bows himself; there is a sun on the coin — fire worshipper, depend upon it" (431). Ahab too worships the sun, though it is suggested indirectly. Looking at the dying whale, he soliloquizes, perhaps identifying himself with the whale: "He turns and turns him to it, — how slowly, but how steadfastly, his homage-rendering and invoking brow, with his last dying motions. He too worships fire; most faithful, broad, baronial vassal of the sun! (italics mine)\(^2\) The word "too" implies that Ahab, as well as the dying whale, worships the sun, as J. Bernstein observes in his analysis.\(^3\) It is true that in "The Quarter-Deck" Ahab tells Starbuck that he would "strike the sun if it insulted him. But, as his words are spoken on condition that "if it insulted" him, the possibility of Ahab's idolatry cannot be denied. Ahab thus discloses his pagan aspect in relation to Fedallah.

The reason for Ahab's defiance against the fire should be explained by his blasphemous consciousness of the existence of cosmic evil embodied in Moby Dick. In "The Quarter-Deck" he tells Starbuck, explaining the reason for his vengeful chase after Moby Dick: "All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event — in the living act, the undoubted deed — there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask!...To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me" (162). Then in "The Candles" he cries to the fire on the masts: "There is some unsuffusing thing beyond thee, thou clear spirit, to whom all thy eternity is but time, all thy creativeness mechanical" (500). These words tell that the fire on the masts is nothing but "the mask" which symbolizes the existence of "some unsuffusing thing beyond." Thus the fire on the masts is the very equivalent of

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2) Loc. cit.
Moby Dick in the eyes of Ahab, and Moby Dick must be struck through.

III. Ishmael and Moby Dick

In the analysis above it has been mentioned that some idols or the symbols of the idols such as Yojo, Belial, Bel, Dagon, the sun and fire, play a certain role in developing the mysterious relationship between some of the pagan sailors and the two dominant characters. In the narrative some other pagan gods are presented again in connection with the relationship between the two characters, Ishmael and Ahab, and the whale, especially the whale called Moby Dick.

In the so-called cetological chapters, various analyses of the whale from various angles are made by Ishmael. The analyses in these chapters enable us to see Ishmael’s attitude toward the whale. But just from the beginning of the narrative one characteristic attitude of Ishmael toward the whale seems to be suggested. In the first chapter “Loomings” Ishmael tells that “the overwhelming idea of the great whale himself” (6) is one of the chief motives for his escape from the land. But to hunt “the great whale,” Moby Dick, is not the final cause of his going to sea. He tells on the other hand that he is “tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote” and that he loves “to sail forbidden seas, and land on barbarous coasts” (6). Moreover, referring to the Narcissus myth, and perhaps thus identifying Narcissus’ motive with his own, he tells: “Why did the old Persians hold the sea holy? Why did the Greeks give it a separate deity, and own brother of Jove? Surely all this is not without meaning. And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, 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” (3). As later in “The Mast-Head” he tells about the “sunken-eyed young Platonist..., disgusted with the carking care of earth, and seeking sentiment in tar and blubber” (156-7), it is not irrelevant to assume that Ishmael identifies his exodus from the land to the sea with Narcissus’ romantic dive into the water.

If it is admitted that Narcissus’ romantic motive, which is in a sense a pagan one,21) is working in Ishmael in his escape from the land, it can easily be understood why he remembers the pagan gods when he actually faces Moby Dick for the first time. In contrast with Starbuck, who sees in Moby Dick “Great God” and persuades Ahab to give up his impious chase “in Jesus’ name” (552), Ishmael is struck with awe of the glorious White Whale surpassing Jupiter, Jove, or even “that great majesty Supreme”:

A gentle joyousness—a mighty mildness of repose in swiftness, invested the gliding whale. Not the white bull Jupiter swimming away with ravished

21) Randall Stewart argues that T.E. Hulme’s definition of the word “romantics,” which regards them as all those who reject the doctrine of Original Sin, is perhaps the most useful and the best of all the definitions of the word. Cf. Randall Stewart, op. cit., p. 46. See also T.E. Hulme, Speculations (London, 1960), pp. 116, 236.
Europa clinging to his graceful horns; his lovely, leering eyes sideways intent upon the maid; with smooth bewitching fleetness, rippling straight for the nuptial bower in Crete; not Jove, not that great majesty Supreme! did surpass the glorified White Whale as he so divinely swam.

Ishmael's romantic association of Moby Dick with the pagan gods seems to be working in his observation of the great Sperm Whale. In the chapter entitled "The Praire," he expands his romantic association after he has observed that "high and mighty god-like dignity" and "the Deity" (345) are inherent in the brow of the great Sperm Whale:

And this reminds me that had the great Sperm Whale been known to the young Orient World, he would have been deified by their child-magian thoughts. They deified the crocodile of the Nile, because the crocodile is tongueless; and the Sperm Whale has no tongue, or at least it is so exceedingly small, as to be incapable of protrusion. If hereafter any highly cultured, poetical nation shall lure back to their birth-right, the merry May-day gods of old; and livingly enthrone them again in the now egotistical sky; in the now unhaunted hill; then be sure, exalted to Jove's high seat, the great Sperm Whale shall lord it.

The comparison of these imaginative paragraphs, which so much the better reveal Ishmael's natural reaction to the whale, enables us to assume that the essential motive for his escape from the Christian land may be identical with Narcissus' romantic pagan dive into the water. If this identification is admitted, it may also be admitted to say that just as Narcissus is drawn to his own image so is Ishmael drawn to the image of his own. And his image is embodied in his view of Moby Dick and the great Sperm Whale, where he refers repeatedly to such pagan gods as Jupiter, Jove, the crocodile, and the merry May-day gods.

Other examples, in which his pagan response to the whale is revealed, can be found in two of the cetological chapters, "Of the Monstrous Pictures of Whales" and "The Honor and Glory of Whaling." In the former chapter, he tells about the monstrous pictures of the whale found here and there in the world, and tells as follows, referring to the pagan gods of the Orient:

Now, by all odds, the most ancient extant portrait anyways purporting to be the whale's, is to be found in the famous cavern-pagoda of Elephanta, in India. The Brahmins maintain that in the almost endless sculptures of that immemorial pagoda, all the trades and pursuits, every conceivable avocation of man, were prefigured ages before any of them actually came into being. No wonder then, that in some sort our noble profession of whaling should have been there shadowed forth. The Hindoo whale referred to, occurs in a separate department of the wall, depicting the incarnation of Vishnu in the form of leviathan, learnedly known as the Matse Avatar. But though this sculpture is half man and half whale, so as only to give the tail of the latter, yet that small section of him is all wrong. It
looks more like the tapering of an anaconda, than the broad palms of the true whale's majestic flukes.

This passage is told for the purpose of correcting the pictorial delusions of the whale, especially those of the whale found among the oldest Hindoo, Egyptian, and Grecian sculptures. "The Matse Avatar" is represented only as one of the examples that do not give us the real form of the whale. But at the same time he does not forget to show his negative view of the Christian painters' portraits of the whale, and tells, with an ironical touch, that they succeed "no better than the antediluvian Hindoo" (263). Even Guido's picture of Perseus rescuing Andromeda, Hogarth's "Perseus Descending," or Jonah's whale "as depicted in the prints of old Bibles and the cuts of old primers" (263), all these are attacked with a comical touch. The negative view of the Christian paintings of the whale shows that his reference to the Matse Avatar is made in order to enhance the authenticity of the pagan pictures of the whale as against the Christian paintings.

Vishnu is again referred to in "The Honor and Glory of Whaling" chapter. After having finished a comical reasoning that Perseus, Jonah, St. George, and Hercules were all whalmen, he tells:

Nor do heroes, saints, demigods, and prophets alone comprise the whole roll of our order. Our grand master is still to be named; for like royal kings of old times, we find the head-waters of our fraternity in nothing short of the great gods themselves. That wondrous oriental story is now to be rehearsed from the Shaster, which gives us the dread Vishnoo [sic], one of the three persons in the godhead of the Hindoos; gives us this divine Vishnoo himself for our Lord; — Vishnoo, who, by the first of his ten earthly incarnations, has for ever set apart and sanctified the whale. When Brahma, or the God of Gods, saith the Shaster, resolved to recreate the world after one of its periodical dissolutions, he gave birth to Vishnoo, to preside over the work; but the Vedas, or mystical books, whose perusal would seem to have been indispensable to Vishnoo before beginning the creation, and which therefore must have contained something in the shape of practical hints to young architects, these Vedas were lying at the bottom of the waters; so Vishnoo became incarnate in a whale, and sounding down in him to the uttermost depths, rescued the sacred volumes. Was not this Vishnoo a whaleman, then? even as a man who rides a horse is called a horseman?

Perseus, St. George, Hercules, Jonah, and Vishnoo! there's a member-roll for you! What club but the whaleman's can head off like that? (362–3)

According to H.B. Franklin, the Matse Avatar, the incarnation of Vishnu, is allegedly insisted, in a symbolical sense, as the incarnation of Moby Dick. In fact in the chapter "Of the Monstrous Pictures of Whales," Vishnu has appeared as a whale. In

the above passage, however, "Vishnoo" is regarded not only as a whale but also as a
whaleman, and is placed among the other heroic whalemen, Perseus, St. George,
Hercules, and Jonah. It should be noted here that the members, among which Vishnoo
is included, are all presented with a pagan aspect. Perseus is regarded as "a son of
Jupiter" (360). Hercules is, as we know, a celebrated hero of Greek mythology, the
son of Zeus and Alcmene. Even Jonah, a prophet in the Bible, is associated indirectly
with Perseus. "And let no man doubt this Arkite story," Ishmael tells, "for in the
ancient Joppa, now Jaffa, on the Syrian coast, in one of the Pagan temples, there stood
for many ages the vast skeleton of a whale, which the city's legends and all the inhab-
itants asserted to be the identical bones of the monster that Perseus slew. When the
Romans took Joppa, the same skeleton was carried to Italy in triumph. What seems
most singular and suggestively important in this story, is this: it was from Joppa that
Jonah set sail" (360-1). In "The Sermon" chapter, Father Mapple admires Jonah's
final repentance in the whale's belly in spite of his wicked attempt to flee from Joppa
for "countries where God does not reign, but only the Captains of this earth" (41), while
Ishmael admires Jonah here as one of the whalemen that set sail from the very Joppa.
Not only Jonah but St. George, a Christian martyr beheaded after his conversion to
Christianity, is also described from a sort of pagan point of view. Ishmael regards
the famous story of St. George and the Dragon as "akin to the adventure of Perseus
and Andromeda" (361). Thus, according to Ishmael, Vishnoo, the symbolical incarn-
atation of Moby Dick, becomes "our Lord" as one of these heroic whalemen. The fact
that Vishnoo is Ishmael's "Lord" seems to indicate that in his imaginative world the
pagan gods embodied in Moby Dick take the place of the one god of the Hebraic-
Christian religion. If Ishmael is thus drawn to Moby Dick, his romantic exodus from
the land to the sea is after all a "wicked" one.

IV. Ahab and Moby Dick

Ishmael's romantic imagination comes to an end when he is actually attacked by
Moby Dick and recognizes for the first time the maliciousness of the whale embodied
in "his predestinating head" with "retribution, swift vengeance, eternal malice" (564).
This is an entirely new experience for the young Platonist Ishmael. But it is not so
with Captain Ahab, who has already recognized the "inscrutable malice" (162) or the
"intangible malignity" (183) in Moby Dick. Unlike young Ishmael, who imagines
pagan gods, Ahab regards Moby Dick, from the beginning of the narrative, as a symbol
of the Christian God or as something that has to do with it. In the chapter entitled
"Moby Dick," Ishmael explains Ahab's attitude toward this symbolical whale:

Small reason was there to doubt, then, that ever since that almost fatal encounter,
Ahab had cherished a wild vindictiveness against the whale, all the more fell for
that in his frantic morbidness he at last came to identify with him, not only all
his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations. The White
Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious
The Role of Pagans and Pagan Gods in *Moby Dick*

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 reverenced in their statue devil; — Ahab did not fall down and worship it like them; but deliriously transferring its idea to the abhorred white whale, he pitted himself, all mutilated, against it.

This famous paragraph, in which Ishmael refers to the ancient Ophites, a Gnostic sect of the early Christianity, and the paragraph in “The Candles,” in which Ahab cries that “there is some unsuffusing thing beyond thee, thou clear spirit, to whom all thy eternity is but time, all thy creativeness mechanical” (500), may allow an interpretation that explains Ahab’s view as suggestive of the view of God of the heretical doctrine of Gnosticism. Gnosticism taught that the material world, the visible universe, was not the work of the Supreme Being, but of a far inferior agent, the Demiurgus, or the Creator, who was also the God of the Jews.  

Indeed, as if to support this interpretation, Starbuck whispers, looking at the infernal orgies of the heathen crew, that “the white whale is their *demigorgon* (italics mine)” (168). But, whether the captain of these heathen crew is a Gnostic or not, it must be admitted at least that, in the eyes of Ahab, Moby Dick is the symbol of something that should be rejected.

As a man who rejects this symbolical object, Ahab’s role is almost that of Adam or of Satan against God. As another Adam he piles upon the white whale’s hump “the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down” (183) and feels as though he were “Adam, staggering beneath the piled centuries since Paradise” (533). As another Satan he does not stop his impious and blasphemous chase after Moby Dick though Starbuck persuades him to give it up, saying: “In Jesus’ name no more of this, that’s worse than devil’s madness” (552). Moreover, just like Milton’s Satan, or like Adam expelled from Paradise for his sin of disobedience to God, Ahab is a man of earthly imperfection, the symbol of Original Sin. “A slender rod-like mark, lividly whitish,” which seems to be “a birth-mark on him” (121), runs from his crown to sole. In the “Doubloon,” his Satanic aspect is actually disclosed when he soliloquizes looking at the doubloon nailed to the mainmast:

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. 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

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24) Harold Beaver comments that the word “*demigorgon*” is a conflation of Demogorgon, primeval god of ancient mythology, and Demiurgos, the Platonic Creator. Cf. Harold Beaver, *op. cit.*, pp. 771–2.
image of the rounder globe, which, like a magician’s glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self.27) (428)

This kind of Ahab’s Satanism, issuing from his wicked rebellion against Moby Dick, leads him further to the declaration of his being a demigod of Greek mythology, Prometheus. On account of his tormented spirit Ahab makes himself, as Ishmael observes in “The Chart,” “a Prometheus” (201). Ahab himself is conscious of his being the demigod. Conversing with the carpenter, he utters: “Oh, Life! Here I am, proud as Greek god, and yet standing debtor to this blockhead for a bone to stand on! Cursed be that mortal inter-indebtedness which will not do away with ledgers. I would be free as air; and I’m down in the whole world’s books” (468). As is suggested in his negative response to Starbuck’s persuasion, Ahab’s desire for freedom or his will to strike through the mask is too strong to be defeated by the “mortal inter-indebtedness” or by “the whole world’s books.” Thus he declares that “Ahab is forever Ahab” (672), and repeats the blasphemous words on various occasions. Looking at Queequeg’s tattooing, he exclaims: “Oh, devilish tantalization of the gods!” (477). Sympathizing with Pip, he cries: “There can be no hearts above the snow-line. Oh, ye frozen heavens! look down here. Ye did beget this luckless child, and have abandoned him, ye creative libertines” (513). Or he tells the carpenter: “Thou art as unprincipled as the gods, and as much of a jack-of-all-trades” (518). His final words are the very cries of Prometheus staggering as Adam but defying as Satan: “Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell’s heart I stab at thee; for hate’s sake I spit my last breath at thee” (564).

It is necessary to remember here that the exact correspondence between Ahab and Prometheus has often been denied. H.A. Murray argues, for example, that Ahab is no Prometheus since all thought of benefiting humanity is foreign to him.28) Indeed it is. He chases Moby Dick for his personal vengeance. But in literature, as John Bernstein points out, Promethean legend is often used as a symbol of rebellion against the unjust authority just as the bodily defects are often used as a symbol of Original Sin.29) Ahab is therefore another Prometheus. The authority embodied in Moby Dick is “all that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought” (183). What he tries to strike through is the mask of the unjust authority of this kind, whether it is the mask of Christianity or not. Thus Ahab plays the role not only of Adam or Satan but also of Prometheus, a hero of Greek

27) Cf. Starbuck’s Christian response to the doubloon: “A dark valley between three 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” (428).
Conclusion

We have so far seen the sympathetic response of Ishmael and Ahab to pagans and pagan gods. This sympathetic attitude is also Melville's. He used his experience among the pagan cannibal tribes as raw material for some of his early books such as Typee (1846) and Omoo (1847). In his last book Billy Budd (finished in 1891 and published posthumously) he presented its protagonist as a sort of upright barbarian. Even in Moby Dick he made Ahab play the role of Osiris, the Egyptian mythological hero.50)

In his essay entitled "Hawthorne and His Mosses" (1850), he wrote about Hawthorne: "He is immeasurably deeper than the mere critic. For it is not the brain that can test such a man; but it is only the heart. You cannot come to know greatness by inspecting it; there is no glimpse to be caught of it, except by intuition; you need not ring it, you but touch it, and you find it is gold."31) Then in June, 1851, he also wrote as follows, in his letter to Hawthorne, disclosing his "wicked" view of God: "I stand for the heart. To the dogs with the head! I had rather be a fool with a heart, than Jupiter Olympus with his head. The reason the mass of men fear God, and at bottom dislike Him, is because they rather distrust His heart, and fancy Him all brain like a watch."32)

Melville's "wicked" emphasis on "intuition" and "heart" rather than on "brain" and "head," as is seen in the above quotations, seems to be repeated again in Moby Dick in his characterization of Ishmael and Ahab. Ishmael refers to "the instinct of the knowledge of the demonism in the world (italics mine)" (194) and tells that "doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly; this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye (italics mine)" (372). The equivalent of Ishmael's "instinct" or "intuitions" is found again in Ahab. He admits that he is "gifted with the high perception (italics mine)" (166) and in his monologue he declares: "Ahab never thinks; he only feels, feels, feels" (italics mine) (554).

It would be dangerous to identify Melville with Ishmael and Ahab. Yet if parallelism proves correspondence, the "wicked" attitude of Ishmael and Ahab toward pagans and pagan gods seems to be also Melville's more or less. In this sense Moby Dick is a mouthpiece of its author.

There are indeed many other pagan aspects in Moby Dick besides the one examined in the present paper. Further analyses of these aspects are yet to be made.

(29 June 1974)

31) Quoted from Herman Melville: Representative Selections, with Introduction, Bibliography, and Notes, ed. Willard Thorp (New York, 1938), p. 333.
Abstract

Melville presents various pagan characters and pagan gods in his sixth novel *Moby Dick*. Though a good Christian brought up in the Presbyterian Church of New England, Ishmael shows special sympathy with Queequeg, a pagan worshipper of the idol, and consequently he turns idolater. The friendship thus formed suggests that Ishmael's final survival from the fatal encounter with Moby Dick is symbolic of the survival of his own paganism.

Captain Ahab also reveals special kinship with the pagans, especially with the three harpooners, Queequeg, Tashtego, and Daggoo, and forms a sort of pact *in nomine diaboli*. His diabolical nature, however, is seen most symbolically in his relation to Fedallah, a Parsee. Though neither of them actually worships fire in the narrative, their particular veneration of the sun proves that they are fire worshippers after all.

Ishmael's motive for escape from the Christian land is a romantic one. He identifies his going to sea with Narcissus' romantic dive into the water, and as a romantic young Platonist he finds in Moby Dick the embodiment of various pagan gods.

Ahab's view of Moby Dick is a little different from Ishmael's. He regards it as a mask of something which must be struck through, and in his vengeful chase he plays variously the roles of Satan, Adam, and even of the Greek mythological hero Prometheus.

Melville's remarks in his criticism and letter suggest that the wicked attitude of Ishmael and Ahab is also Melville's. In this sense *Moby Dick* is a mouthpiece of its author.