

Moby Dick

Please Silence Cell Phones

Dr. Alan Haffa

Herman Melville (1819-1891)

- Childhood and family
- Sea Voyages; Whaling Voyage; Polynesian Cannibals
- In Hawaii opposed Christian missionaries converting natives
- Early Auto- Biographies
- His religious practices uncertain; joined Unitarian church but other scholars claim he despised all “isms”

Moby Dick

- Dedicated to Nathaniel Hawthorne
 - Admired psychological depth
- Commercial failure
- Rediscovered in 1920s
- American Classics: Religion, Fate, Economic Expansion, Rugged Individualism
- Multi-cultural

Ishmael and Queequeg at The Spouter Inn (24)

- “You gettee in,” he added, motioning to me with his tomahawk, and throwing the clothes to one side. He did this in not only a civil but a really kind and charitable way...For all his tattooings he was on the whole a clean, comely looking cannibal. What’s all this fuss I have been making about, thought I to myself—the man’s a human being just as I am: he has just as much reason to fear me as I have to be afraid of him. Better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian.”

Queequeg as a Composite of Foreign Influences

- Supposedly from Polynesia
- Worships an idol, Yojo, that resembles “a three days old Congo baby”
- Tomahawk pipe
- Yet performs a Ramadan ritual that suggests Islam
- Considered too Christian to go back and rule in his island home as a King

Ishmael worships Yojo (52)

- "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 in worshipping his piece of wood? 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 do to me—that is the will of God. Now, Queequeg is my fellow man. And what do I wish that he 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."

Sermon and Jonah

- Father Mapple: former whaler now a preacher
- Memorial plaques to dead whalers
- Mourning widows; Death is always present
- But if Christian Heaven promises eternal salvation and happiness, why so much mourning?
- Jonah: symbol of man's disobedience to God and willfulness; Story inspires Mapple to preach
- Ahab and Jonah: sign of judgement upon Ahab for his willfulness

Captains Peleg and Bildad (88)

- Ishmael: "Queequeg is a born member of the First Congregational Church...the great and everlasting First Congregation of this whole worshipping world; we all belong to that; only some of us cherish some crotchets noways touching the grand belief; in that we all join hands."
- Gift of Evangelical book
- Peleg: "Avast there, avast there, Bildad, avast now spoiling our harpooner...Pious harpooners never make good voyages—it takes the shark out of `em; no harpooner is worth a straw who aint pretty sharkish."
- Bildad stalks off and watches sail makers and picks up scraps of cloth

Prophet Elijah and Captain Ahab

- Mysterious sailor, Elijah, hints at something dark and ungodly about Captain Ahab
- Elijah preached to King Ahab against Jezebel and worship of Baal
- Moby Dick as Baal; Nature God
- Ahab as Pagan
- Greek hero: Fatalistic; Fatal Flaw—obsession with revenge; Yet Noble and Brave;
- Intent on asserting his own will over Nature and God, Ahab is doomed to fail

Is Whaling a Noble Profession?

- Book debates this question
- Clearly the whalers are brave and dedicated
- Whale oil used to anoint kings
- Leviathan in book of Job and Jonah
- Yet the whalers seek to conquer what God tells Job cannot be conquered.
- Description of how whales are butchered is brutal
- Moby Dick is no Grendel; not Evil incarnate
- Leviathan is God's greatest natural creature

Pact between Ahab and Crew (161-2)

- Nails gold Doubloon
- Starbuck: "Vengeance on a dumb brute! "that simply smote thee from blindest instinct! Madness! To be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab, seems blasphemous."

Ahab and the Whale: Symbol of Death and the Limitations on Man

- Ahab: "How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there is naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me...Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me..."
- Starbuck: "God keep me!—keep us all!"

Ahab is Pagan

- Pagan Harpooners Queequeg (Polynesian), Tashtego (Indian), and Daggoo (African) cross harpoons
- Ahab: “my three pagan kinsmen there—yon three most honorable gentlemen and noble men...God hunt us all, if we do not hunt Moby Dick to his death!”
- They drink a toast from harpoons
- Later, Ahab baptizes a harpoon with their blood (484)

The Jeroboam

- Shaker Prophet, Gabriel
- The Jeroboam had hunted Moby Dick, but Gabriel prophesized against it, calling Moby Dick “the Shaker God incarnated.”
- A harpooner killed
- Gabriel to Ahab: “Think, think of the blasphemer—dead, and down there!—beware of the blasphemer's end!”

Typhoon and the Candles

- Pequod sails into storm, pursuing Moby Dick
- White flames appear on the masts; Ahab—a good omen; Starbuck—sign that God opposes Ahab
- Ahab's Harpoon Glows; He blows it out "to blow out the last fear"
- Compass is damaged; Ahab declares himself "lord over the level loadstone yet" and makes his own needle.
- Ishmael notes that in "this fiery eye of scorn and triumph, you then saw Ahab in all his fatal pride."
- Ahab seeks to master the natural world--Pride

The Rachel

- Biblical reference: Rachel is second wife of Jacob—mother of Joseph and Benjamin
- Captain has lost a ship
- Youngest son is in the ship
- Wants Ahab to search with him
- Ahab refuses
- Symbolizes the inhumanity of Ahab, who wants to pursue Moby Dick

Three Day Chase

- First Day: Moby Dick capsizes Ahab's boat
- Second Day: Moby Dick is harpooned; all three whaling boats capsized and Ahab's whalebone leg broken
- Third Day: Moby Dick is chasing the Pequod! MD sinks the Pequod; Ahab is caught in his line and goes down
- Ishmael only survivor; Saved by The Rachel

Death of Ahab

- 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. Sink all coffins and all hearses to one common pool! and since neither can be mine, let me then tow to pieces, while still chasing thee, though tied to thee, thou damned whale! Thus, I give up the spear!"
- Ahab is defiant in death

Summary

- Crew represents multi-cultural America
- Religious message is ecumenical and universalist
- Rejection of Western Civilization: Dominance over nature; Pride and willfulness; Traditional ideas of heroism conflict with true Christianity and piety
- Warning to a Young Nation about to discover its power