

Herman Melville Style between the Prospective hope and the Fate: with Reference to Moby Dick

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Abstract: This paper discusses Herman Melville Style between the Prospective hope and the Fate with Reference to Moby Dick. The story features two protagonists, Ahab and Ishmael, who both fulfill ritual roles and embody two states of mind. The theme of this paper is that of a continuous search for an answer which is elusive and inscrutable. This paper seeks to understand Herman Melville Style between the Prospective hope and the Fate. Herman Melville's Moby-Dick offers a diversity of human conducts towards nature. This paper probes into the ethical motives behind the respective conducts of the main characters, namely, captain Ahab, the chief mate Starbuck, the sailor Ishmael. Full of vengeance, Ahab abandons human reason and deals with the conflict between Moby-Dick and him according to the law of the jungle. Reasonable and indifferent, Starbuck emphasizes the economic value of the whales and his conduct is driven by the anthropocentric economic ethic. Diametrically opposite to Ahab and Starbuck, Ishmael extends his love to the whales and develops an ecological ethic during the voyage of the Pequod. The death of Ahab, the tragedy of Starbuck, together with the survival of Ishmael best illustrate Melville's ethical leanings and further reveal his ethical thought delivered in the novel.

Keywords: Hopes, Human Society, Nature, water, illusion, and Fate.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the American literature of the 19th century the term is applied to the imaginary line separating wilderness from civilization. It is opposed to the community oriented culture of the Puritan settlers of New England. In time the frontier line was moved farther and farther, and the concept came to refer to a different reality. In Melville's book the frontier is the liquid dimension that separates the crew of the Pequod from the purpose of their journey: the mythical white whale. Melville chooses to change the traditional journey on land, which reenacted the real travels towards the west, with a voyage on the sea. The sea is not only the frontier which must be conquered, but mainly it is the symbolical sacred space where only the initiated can go. Thus, the story can be analyzed from the ritual perspective of the initiation in the sacred space. In his book *The Sacred and the Profane* Mircea Eliade analyzes these two concepts taking into account their importance for the spiritual accomplishment of man. He makes the difference between spaces, analyzing their content. Thus, sacred space is characterized by specific features which make it easier to be recognized. Herman presents a world of sea animals with the white whale as the subject of the story and a human society symbolized by the Pequod. By describing the clash between whales and the Pequod, Herman Melville makes a thorough, intensive and unique probe into the relation between man and nature. The current research on Moby-Dick from eco-criticism mainly focuses on the idea of mastering nature through industrial technology, and Ahab's embodies contemporary "American hope that technology would empower free man," and his quest becomes an allegory of that attempt to master nature which characterized industrial capitalism in its new found confidence.¹ Such idea sheds light on the understanding of the novel so far as the relation between man and nature is concerned. However, the diversity of the main characters' conducts on the Pequod and the variety of ethical notions held by these characters remain to be folded.

2. DISCUSSION

Melville noted that the book he had just written, namely *Moby Dick*, or the Whale had brought him the fulfillment he had been looking for many years. "A sense of unspeakable security is in me this moment, on account of your understanding the book. I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb. Ineffable sociabilities are in me. It is a strange feeling—no hopefulness is in it, no despair. I speak now of my profoundest sense of being, not of an incidental feeling." (Melville, 212) The book transformed Melville from a successful writer of adventure stories into a sort of pariah of the American literary stage. Typee, *Omoo* or *Redburn*, his early literary successes, cannot be compared to his more mature works *Bartleby the Scrivener*, *Billy Budd*, *Benito Cereno* or *The Confidence Man*. *Moby Dick* is the first step on his path to a different type of writing. Though much of the book does not especially share either in the American Renaissance or in Emerson's philosophy, it offers a mixture of these two trends in a very original way. Lan Ousby believes that Ahab's chase is a daring probe into the heart of the nature, a challenge to God's almighty power, which is grand display of courageous heroism.³ Harold Bloom sees in Ahab an idealist, a "worldly, godly figure" (Harold Bloom 103). Bloom's argument is resonant with that of Captain Peleg, one of the largest owner of the *Pequod*: "He (Ahab) is a grand, ungodly, god-like man" (MD 68). What Both Bloom and Peleg impress the readers is that there is divinity in Ahab; however, Ahab is not divine, he is temporal, and his life is inseparable from the other members of the society. In this sense, Ahab does live up to Peleg's moral judgment that "Ahab has his humanities" (MD 69). The humanity mentioned by Peleg refers to love, for his judgment is based on the fact that Ahab has a young wife and a young son. But there is no love which does not become help.⁴ Being a "worldly" man, a member of human society, Ahab does offer help and shows "his humanities" several times, especially at the end of the novel: Pip has gone mad after falling overboard and drifting alone in the sea. Ahab shows sympathy for Pip, and takes him under his protection; Ahab opens his heart to Starbuck with whom he reflects upon his past life; Before the final chase, he orders Starbuck to stay aboard rather than risk his life confronting *Moby-Dick*. In the above mentioned examples, the humanities Ahab shows attest to the positive moral judgment made by Captain Peleg. However, love by no means predominates Ahab (Laurence Macphee, 140). In him we also see his nonhuman side, and many of his actions and words are totally against the human ethic. When Pip pleads with Ahab to abandon his quest for vengeance, rather than be swayed, Ahab tells Pip that he will murder him; For several times, he rejects Starbuck's persuasion and once he even threatens to kill him; Ahab's cruelty reaches its height when he refuses to offer help to the *Rachel*. The Captain of the *Rachel* has lost two sons in an encounter with *Moby-Dick*. He begs Ahab to join the search. Instead of being moved, Ahab rejects, and tells him to leave his ship simply because the help to the *Rachel* will delay his quest for *Moby-Dick*. If we say what the *Rachel* has lost are the two sons of the captain, while what Ahab has lost is humanities, for it is natural for a man to help others in need, to express his love or his concern for those who are suffering, but for vengeful Ahab, his nonchalance outweighs his humanity. Never will Ahab relinquish his quest for *Moby-Dick*. Where the humanities are absent, the bestiality emerges. In the novel, the author for several times puts Ahab and animals together to indicate the similarities between them. In the novel, we read: He (Ahab) lived in the world, as the last of the Grisly Bears lived in settled Missouri. And as when Spring and Summer has departed, that wild Logan of the woods, burying himself in the hollow of a tree, lived out the winter there, sucking his own paws; so, in his in clements, howling old age, Ahab's soul, shut up in the caved trunk of his body, there fed upon the sullen paws of its gloom! (MD 126-127) What readers are impressed here is that Ahab lives in the cabin lonely just as the "Grisly Bears" and the "wild Logan" that have already lost their contact with the human society and live in isolation. Furthermore, there are a lot of descriptions about the likeness between Ahab and the Whales. In Chapter 30, "The Pipe", Ahab smokes to windward all the while, with such nervous sniffs, as if "like a dying whale". In many places of the novel, the depiction of the sameness between Ahab and *Moby-Dick* is so close that "the two almost becomes one" (Kevin J. Hayes 58). In the late chapters, it is noticeable that the physical features Ahab and *Moby-Dick* share: Both have deep furrowed brows. The portraits of the furrowed brow of *Moby-Dick* occur on many occasions, especially in the final chapter, *Moby-Dick's* knitted forehead appears menacing. The emphasis of the furrowed brow on Ahab's forehead also catches the readers' eyes. In Chapter 113, "The Forge", Ahab asks Perth the blacksmiths to smooth out his forehead, but Perth tells him that a wrinkled brow is the one thing he cannot smooth out. Ahab realizes the reason why his forehead is unsmoothable is that his wrinkled brow though seen in the flesh, actually "has worked down into the bone of my skull--that is all wrinkles!" (MD 401) when Ahab confronts *Moby-Dick*, The two wrinkled brow face one and another. The frequency of the resemblance between Ahab and *Moby-Dick* suggests that Ahab is liken to a whale. Bestiality, the very common thing Ahab shares with *Moby-*

Dick now comes to the fore. So it can be concluded that what works on Ahab is not the ethical rules and regulations of the human society, but where bestiality comes from: the principle of the survival of the fittest, the law of the jungle. Actually, the law of the jungle lies dormant in Ahab and he has been driven by it for the whole career of his whaling life. Ahab struck his first whale when he was eighteen, and has been in the whale fishery for forty years. Out of the forty year, he has not spent three ashore. He even left his newly-wedded wife the next day of his marriage to make war on the deep. As Ahab says: "the madness, the frenzy, the boiling blood and the smoking brow, with which, for thousand lowerings old Ahab furiously, foamingly chased his prey.....(MD 443)". Unlike millions of people who are engaged in the whale fishery driven by its profit, Ahab' hunting of whales is not out of economic concern, but for the pleasure of mastering nature. For such a pleasure, Ahab abandons the duty of a father and a husband. Ahab has been on war with whales for forty year and he is the constant winner of the existential competition with whales until one encounter with Moby-Dick: One captain, seizing the line-knife from his broken prow, had dashed at the whale, as an Arkansas duellist at his foe, blindly seeking with a six-inch blade to reach the fathom-deep life of the whale. That captain was Ahab. And then it was, that suddenly sweeping his sickle-shaped lower jaw beneath him, Moby-Dick had reaped away Ahab's leg, as a mower a blade of grass in the field.(MD 152.153) Ahab wants to annihilate Moby-Dick, so does Moby-Dick. The war between Ahab and Moby-Dick is not a war between man and animal, but a fierce fight between animals for survival, which symbolizes the live-or-die principle in the animal world. In this war fought according to the law of the jungle, Ahab has lost one of his legs, and becomes the loser of the existential competition. Ahab sinks into the revengeful desire after being defeated by Moby-Dick and this desire strengthens his consciousness of the law of the jungle so that whatever he does and says is totally out of animal's intuition and instinct. Ahab has lost the ability to reason and make sound judgment. It is well known that the difference between man and animal lies in the fact that man has reason, and man is capable of reflecting upon his conducts and learning lessons from his or others' experience. But such a difference cannot be seen in Ahab. On the voyage of hunting Moby-Dick, Ahab has enough time to change the course of the Pequod and his destiny, but he fails to make the slightest effort. During the hunting journey, the Pequod has encountered all together nine whaling ships. Each of them has profound meanings and serves as a warning to Ahab's pursuit. The Captain of the Samuel Enderby has lost an arm to Moby-Dick, but he reflects and jests about it to make the best of the bad situation so that he becomes reconciled with nature. The Delight has lost five stout men. The Delight is the last whaling ship the Pequod has encountered, which is also the last, and sternest warning to Ahab. But all the warnings go unheeded by Ahab, for "Ahab never thinks; he only feels, feels, feels (MD 460)". Ahab feels his way just as an animal does. Eventually, Ahab and Moby-Dick, the two with deep furrowed forehead confront one another. A new existential competition begins. Ahab darts the harpoons and strikes the whale. But when Ahab stoops to clear a snarl in the line, it loops round his neck, and snaps him out of the boat in an instant. Ahab is gone and never returns. Ahab is dead. The tragedy of Ahab lies in the wrong ethical notion he holds. Ahab has a family, but he abandons the family pleasure and betrays the human ethic. What's more, he degenerates himself into an animal. Instead of thinking with reason, Ahab is reasonless and deals with the clash between Moby-Dick and him in way of the law of the jungle as an animal does. But man is different from animals. Man has reason, while animals have not. The law of the jungle cannot be applied to solve the conflict between man and animal. The mingling of the two sets of totally different principles throws Ahab into ethical confusion with which Ahab cannot soothe his animosity against Moby- Dick, which finally leads to his tragedy. So it can be concluded that the real cause of Ahab's tragedy is the law of the jungle that runs through his blood and the fact that he abandons the ethic of the human society and accepts the ethic of the animal world.

3. CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to examine closely Herman Melville Style between the Prospective hope and the Fate. (Melville, 395-397) The sea becomes the grave of the ship and the crew, a water of death reminding of the great mythical floods. Ishmael only survives because he has a narrative role to accomplish. Ritual harmony is eventually restored and balance is found again as catharsis follows the ritual sacrifice. "Buoyed up by that coffin, for almost one whole day and night, I floated on a soft and dirge-like main. On the second day a sail drew near, nearer, and picked me up at last It coincides with maturity and spiritual growth. He accomplishes the rite of passage by crossing the threshold during the period spent at sea (one day and night) which in ritual terms represents the cosmic cycle of death and regeneration.

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