

# “Ahab and Moby Dick” in Connection with “Ishmael and Queequeg”

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This is a kind of supplement to my previous paper on Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick, The Functions of Ishmael and Queequeg in Moby-Dick*.<sup>1)</sup> With all the knowledge that I obtained by analyzing the relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg, I would like to discuss, here in this paper, the subject of “Ahab and Moby Dick” in *Moby-Dick*. This is because I am very interested in the possibility of approaching the general theme of *Moby-Dick* by shedding brighter light on the relationship between “Ahab and Moby-Dick” and “Ishmael and Queequeg.”

I believe that a comparative method or approach is, generally speaking, one of the best in any kind of research. This is especially true in the study of *Moby-Dick*. For the purpose of this paper I would like to apply this comparative method in the way of the following triangulation: (1) “Ahab and the White Whale”, (2) Ishmael and the White Whale, and (3) Ahab and Ishmael. I hope that the adequate consideration of this triangulation will help us understand the subject of “Ahab and *Moby-Dick*” more profoundly and a profounder understanding of the crucial subject will lead us to a profounder understanding of the literary work of *Moby-Dick* itself. (The term “Ahab and the White Whale” is used in two different ways in this paper: in a narrow sense; and in a broad sense. The “Ahab and White Whale” in a narrow sense means one of the three aspects of the triangulation mentioned above. The one in a broad sense is used in terms of the general theme of the novel.)

## (1) “Ahab and the White Whale”

What is the White Whale to Ahab? The White Whale is ‘something’ more than the whale that took off Ahab’s leg and on which Ahab vowed eternal vengeance. What is that ‘something’? Ahab himself tries to answer this question for the sake of Starbuck (and the reader, as well), the only man aboard the Pequod who resisted the captain’s idea of taking revenge on a dumb animal:

Hark ye yet again-- the little lower layer. 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! 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's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. 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.<sup>2)</sup>

"That wall" and "that inscrutable thing" are to be explained more explicitly by Ishmael as the narrator in the "Moby-Dick" chapter.

After explaining Moby-Dick from various angles (: legends about the whale, his distinguishing features such as his white wrinkled forehead and hump and his white body; his intelligence which arises fear) Ishmael begins to tell the reader what the White Whale is to Ahab in a deeper sense:

The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies, which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung. ... 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; all evil to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick.<sup>3)</sup>

How the monomaniac captain battles with "the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies" with "all the general rage and hate felt by the whole race from Adam down"<sup>4)</sup>—this is, so to speak, the core of *Moby-Dick* as 'Captain Ahab's adventurous voyage.'

## (2) Ishmael and the White Whale

In *Herman Melville, the Tragic Vision and the Heroic Ideal* Stanley Geist states: For Ahab alone the White Whale is a terrible incarnation: for the rest of the Pequod's crew, Moby Dick is another whaie to be harpooned, slaughtered and cooked down to oil—with a gold doubloon reward for the man who first sights him.<sup>5)</sup>

Isn't the White Whale an incarnation for Ishmael?

The keys to this question, I believe, lie in two of the most important chapters of *Moby-Dick*, where Ishmael tells his audience about himself to a large extent: Chapter 1 ("Looming") and Chapter 42 ("The Whiteness of the Whale").

After explaining what the White Whale was to Ahab in the previous chapter, Ishmael feels the necessity of explaining what the same whale is to himself. What is most interesting about his explanation here is that "it [is] the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled [him]." To Ishmael, such things as "the muffled rollings of a milky sea", "the bleak rustlings of the festooned frosts of mountains" and "the desolate shiftings of the windrowed snows of prairies" are all "as the shaking of that buffalo robe to the frightened colt!"<sup>6)</sup>

It is very important to realize the fact that the whiteness of the White Whale itself is the "shaking of that buffalo robe" to 'frightened man', Ishmael. It is also very important to know that this "shaking" exists far earlier in "the wild conceits that swayed [Ishmael] to [his] purpose"; we should remember that very impressive expression—"one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air."<sup>7)</sup>

Melville finishes the very first chapter in such a mysterious way without any comments upon the above-mentioned expression. Later, however, in the "Whiteness of the Whale" chapter the reader is to be aware of the implication and connotation that the "grand hooded phantom" has. With an everlasting itch to solve a sort of 'puzzle' concerning such mysterious words, we may find a key to solve the 'puzzle' in the following sentence:

Though thousands of miles from Oregon, still when he [a young colt] smells that savage musk, the rending, goring bison herds are as present as to the deserted wild foal of the prairies, which this instant they may be trampling into dust.<sup>8)</sup>

"Though thousands of miles from" the Pacific Ocean, when Ishmael sees the "grand hooded phantom" in his wild conceits, the terrible enormous white whale with "a peculiar snow-white wrinkled forehead and a high, pyramidical white hump" is as present as to the intrepid sailors in the ocean, whose boats this instant may be staving to splinters.

Just as the White Whale is "the monomaniac incarnation of all malicious agencies" for Ahab, so the White Whale is an horrible incarnation of 'something dark' in the world for Ishmael. In this sense we can see an identity between Ahab and Ishmael. And this identity causes Ishmael to have a feeling of 'sympathy' for Ahab before and after Ishmael sees Ahab aboard the Pequod.

With Captain Peleg's description of Ahab in his mind Ishmael walks away from the Pequod:

As I walked away, I was full of thoughtfulness; what had been incidentally revealed to me of Captain Ahab, filled me with a certain wild vagueness

of painfulness concerning him. And somehow, at the time, I felt a sympathy and a sorrow for him, but for I don't know what, unless it was the cruel loss of his leg.<sup>9)</sup>

Ishmael feels "a sympathy" for Ahab because of the dread which exists in his mind after he sees the "grand hooded phantom like a snow hill in the air" in his wild conceit that sways him to the whaling voyage. "Because of the dread in my soul," Ishmael narrates, "a wild, mystical, sympathetic feeling was in me; Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine."<sup>10)</sup> Chapter 41 is entitled "Moby Dick."

This "Moby Dick" chapter of *Moby-Dick* begins with the sentences as follow:

I, Ishmael, was one of that crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest; my oath had been welded with theirs; and the stronger I shouted, and more did I hammer and clinch my oath, because of the dread of my soul.<sup>11)</sup>

### (3) Ahab and Ishmael

While there is an essential identity between Ahab and Ishmael as we have seen, there are many differences between the two characters. It is often pointed out that Ishmael is a self-acknowledged coward, fugitive, outcast, escapist and that Ahab, by contrast, is a brave and heroic pursuer, outspoken in his hatreds. It is certainly interesting to bring out the contrast between the two in such manners. What is more interesting about the way of comparing, however, is that we can see more intrinsic differences between the two men by comparing the two different onenesses which we have already seen.

Though neither knows where lie the nameless things of which the mystic sign gives forth such hints: yet with me, as with the colt, somewhere those things must exist. Though in many of its aspects this visible world seems formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright.<sup>12)</sup>

These words, which Ishmael states as one of the conclusions of the "Whiteness of the Whale" chapter, seem to have essential connections with both the oneness between Ahab and Fedallah and the oneness between Ishmael and Queequeg. For Ishmael, it is certainly in "love" that the visible world seems formed, although the invisible world is formed in "fright".

As we have seen thoroughly in my previous paper, the relation between Ishmael and Queequeg in terms of friendship is nothing but the incarnation of Melville's idea and ideal of 'love'. As the monkey rope symbolically means, Ishmael and Queequeg "squeeze themselves into each other"!

For Ahab, it is not in 'love' that both the visible and the invisible worlds seem

formed. For Ahab, "all visible objects are nothing but as pasteboard masks."<sup>13)</sup> For Ahab, beyond all these masks lie "something inscrutable things" with "outrageous strength" which "shove near to" him. He hates them, and he must strike through the masks. For Ahab, the mask which he hates most of all those visible masks is the White Whale. The whale insulted Ahab by taking off his leg. For Ahab, however, the White Whale called Moby Dick is not only the horrible whale he hates because of his taken leg but also the dreadful whale he hates because of all "inscrutable", "malicious" things with "outrageous strength" behind is. Thus, for Ahab, the visible world is also formed in fright or horror or dread on which he must make war.

We remember that it was Queequeg that no more turned Ishmael's "splintered heart and maddened hand against the wolfish world." As Ishmael mentioned, "this soothing savage had redeemed it."<sup>14)</sup> Unlike 'bright' Queequeg, Fedallah functions throughout the novel as a 'dark' character, who turns Ahab's heart and hand more against the "bloody" world.

We also remember that the oneness between Ishmael and Queequeg indicated Ishmael's belief in 'universal love'. As for the oneness between Ahab and Fedallah, on the other hand, it suggests Ahab's exclusive attitude toward others as well as his monomaniac quest of Moby Dick with its dark atmosphere. The more monomaniac Ahab becomes, the more exclusive he gets. We can see how monomaniac and exclusive he is by taking a glance at some of the scenes of the Pequod's encounters with several other whalers.

"Have you seen the White Whale?"--this is the sentence with which Ahab speaks to every ship that the Pequod meets. What Ahab is interested in is only the reply to his question. Once he even refused Captain Gardiner's request to allow the Pequod to help in search for the captain's twelve-year-old son:

Avast, touch not a rope-yarn. Captain Gardiner, I will not do it. Even now I lose time. Good-bye, good-bye.<sup>15)</sup>

Unlike the oneness between Ishmael and Queequeg, the oneness between Ahab and Fedallah is not the relationship in which the two "squeeze themselves into each other." In this sense, there is a striking contrast between the two different onenesses concerned; that is, Ahab and Fedallah are not really two persons, because Fedallah is nothing but another Ahab. Fedallah has no shadow of his own, because he is Ahab's shadow. "In the Parsee Ahab sees his forethrown shadow, in Ahab the Parsee his abandoned substance." In other words, Fedallah is the incarnation of the darkest aspect of Ahab.

While Queequeg merges his 'self' into "a joint stock company" of two, leading

Ishmael to life, Fedallah comes out of Ahab's 'self', leading Ahab to 'death'. In this sense, it can be said that Fedallah is not only Ahab's "forethrown shadow" but also "a verification of the foregoing things within." Among many other 'omens' hanging on Ahab and the Pequod—"the presaging vibrations of the winds in the cordage" and "the hollow flap of the sails against the masts" after Ahab's victory over Starbuck on the quarter deck; the speaking trumpet which is dropped by the captain of the Goney as he tries to reply Ahab's question: "Have ye seen the White Whale?"; the ominous "Jeroboam's Story"; the splash of the corpse thrown overboard the Delight which sprinkles the Pequod in ominous baptism of death; Ahab's hat stolen by a sea hawk and dropped into the sea; and so forth—the existence of Fedallah is the blackest and most evil omen:

Ahab crossed the deck to gaze over on the other side; but started at two reflected, fixed eyes in the water there. Fedallah was motionlessly leaning over the same rail.<sup>16)</sup>

And it was that night when Moby Dick appeared. The chase began.

It was the last battle of Ahab with Moby Dick. At the same time, it was the last of "forty years of continual whaling." It was the last of "forty years of prevention and peril, and storm time." It was the last of "forty years of his life on the pitiless sea." And it was the last of "forty years of his war upon the horrors of the deep."

And what did Ahab get? Before he threw his last spear into Moby Dick, Ahab cries to himself: "Oh, lonely death on lonely life! Oh, now I feel my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief."

All these words cannot help reminding us of Father Mapple's "Sermon":

Delight is to him—a far, far upward, and inward delight—who against the proud gods and commodores of this earth, ever stands forth his own inexorable self.<sup>17)</sup>

Ahab made every possible endeavor to "stand forth his own inexorable self" throughout his life. For Ahab Moby Dick was nothing but the existence which seemed to stand in his way and keep him from "standing forth his own inexorable self" with its "natural terror." Ahab must challenge Moby Dick at the sacrifice of all human things: "the wife, the heart, the bed, the saddle, the fire-side, the country."

"But not yet have we solved" the question of what Moby Dick was to Ahab.<sup>18)</sup>

Finally, I would like to quote the following words of the man who knows Ahab best with the hope of offering 'a' key to the question. Ishmael says at the beginning of the novel:

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.<sup>19)</sup>

## NOTES

1. Kenji Ueda, "The Functions of Ishmael and Queequeg in *Moby-Dick*," *Collected Treatises on English and English Literature* (Beppu University) vol. 16, 1983. pp. 29-57.
2. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1967), p. 193.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 213.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 214.
5. Stanley Geist, *Herman Melville, The Tragic Vision and the Heroic Ideal*. (New York: Octagon Books, 1966), p. 22.
6. *Moby-Dick*, p. 225.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 225.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 207.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 207.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 225.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 193.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 564.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 576.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 453.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 29.