Subverted Romance in *Moby-Dick*

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Ⅰ. A Division of Heroes

Moby-Dick is a monster of a book. Thus, in an essay as short as this one, very few points of the book can be sufficiently expounded upon. This treatment will focus on the heroic characteristics of *Moby*-Dick's principal figures, Ishmael and Ahab, the narrative world Melville has woven for the reader, the peripheral characters of the tale, and the subversion of the romantic motif through such means as the demonization of rituals, equivocal metaphors, and Ahab's megalomaniacal obsession and subsequent barren sacrifice.

One obvious obstacle one runs up against when analyzing *Moby-Dick* from the archetypal perspective is the determination of the tale's hero. The two clear candidates for this dubious honor, Ahab and Ishmael, respectively embody the narrative aspects of *pathos* and *sparagmos* (death and dismemberment) and *agon* (conflict). Ahab's tale clearly follows the

theme of death, and the sense that "effective action [is] absent" and "foredoomed to defeat" (Frye 192). Furthermore, the very fact that Ahab has been "dismasted," that he has been dismembered by the White Whale, indicates a strong undercurrent of irony which threatens the romantic "dragon-killing theme" which is "the central form of quest-romance" (189). Though Ahab's struggle is central to the praxis, it can hardly be called a conflict, since Ahab is no match for his nemesis, Moby Dick. It is rather like a fly attacking a man—though the fly might flatter itself in thinking it might win, the man knows, and anyone who watches the struggle knows, that the struggle is nothing more than a slaughter, a momentary squashing of the bug which will soon be forgotten. The true conflict lies in Ishmael, who strikes out on the voyage and is caught up in the obsession of Ahab's quest (Chapter 36, *The Quarter-Deck*) but in time learns to relinquish such striving and be at peace with himself, his fellow man, and the natural and supernatural worlds. He fights a winnable battle. His striving is not doomed to failure.

Moby-Dick is framed within Ishmael's narrative, but it is Ahab's tale. Ishmael's narration of the events is a complete subversion of the traditional first-person narrative model. His is a voice that relates to the reader that which he sees and hears as well as that which he does *not* see or hear. He seems to have powers that go beyond the first-person narrator witnessing events, for though he is a principal character, he is not central, and he has the ability to relate in detail events and conversations to which he is not privy. Chapters upon chapters pass with no reference to Ishmael as a character in the tale, and it is only the divergences from the main plot (e.g., Chapters 55-57) that remind the reader of the narrator's existence. In this way, Ishmael breaks out of the narrative form that is supposed to bind him. He has a kind of limited

omniscience, which is a meaningless paradox at best.

Since the book opens and closes with Ishmael alone, one might instinctually assume that he is the hero, the central figure, of the tale. But is this assumption a hasty one? Truly, the story begins with Ishmael's lonely voice, enticing the reader to lend an ear to his tale with the famous opening line, "Call me Ishmael" (Melville 3); and it closes with Ishmael as the lone survivor, "another orphan" of a doomed quest (625). Is his mere survival alone enough for him to claim hero status? Although he himself experiences struggle and change, his primary function is to tell Ahab's story. Furthermore, the bulk of the story itself, though *supposedly* narrated by Ishmael, finds the young seaman strangely, but not conspicuously, absent. Though we encounter Ishmael's first-person pronoun "I" multiple times throughout the novel, we do not see him much after Chapter 24. He is, at best, a casual, ineffective observer. He has no direct impact on the praxis. His only influence is over himself. He touches nothing, and we can assume that were he not there, the tale would unfold in exactly the same fashion in which it already does. True narrative breakdown begins in Chapter 37, when Ahab's soliloquy is not even placed inside quote marks. Ishmael is the bard who sings the tale of the dragon-killing knight, but he is not the knight himself. He has the distinct advantage over other bards in that he witnessed many of the events first-hand, whereas most bards learn their tales second-hand. And yet, this bard speaks of conversations and events to which he could have no first-hand knowledge. We do not sense bardic embellishment, however. We simply sense that he is a conveyer of the events, not a character himself. Ishmael's absence in Ahab's story is therefore not surprising, because it is not his quest. His quest is one of self-discovery, but it is subsumed by Ahab's larger, grander quest for the White Whale. His

quest affects only himself, whereas Ahab's quest affects everyone.

Archetypally-speaking, Ishmael does not relate to the world presented in *Moby-Dick*, even when he is in silent agreement with Ahab's obsessive hunt. This world is Ahab's realm. Aboard ship, Ahab is master and king. He is all authority. And he wishes to extend that authority over all the sea, thus taming it by taming Moby Dick. Ahab holds his sailors' lives in his hands; they are his to dispose of as he will. And he wastes them all in his maddened pursuit. Ahab's personality dominates, and so it is he who must be identified as the book's central figure, as the hero. He is the knight who goes in search of the dragon, and yet his chase subverts that paradigm. The term "hero" must of course here be qualified. He is "hero" merely as the principal character, not, in the modern sense, as the good guy who defeats the bad guy, thereby uniting himself with a female figure, which symbolizes the re-establishment of social order and the hope and continuity of humanity. Unlike the romantic hero, his quest is overwhelmed with ironic elements, which will be discussed later, and it ends in tragedy. Ahab is an anti-hero who undercuts the traditional role of the hero.

Ⅱ. Inscrutability and Transcendence

In what type of world is such an attractive character as Ahab, with all of his lofty speeches and remarkable thunderings, considered an anti-hero? A consideration of such aspects as world, narrative pattern, mode, displacement, and the demarcation of the phases within a narrative pattern, all viewed through the lens of an archetypal critique, should assist in defining Ahab's relationship with his world. All stories are built on archetypes that are readily assailable, and our task here is to discover and elucidate what those archetypes are. We will coax them

into revealing themselves, for the sea to give up its dead, as it were, for *Moby-Dick* to divulge its secrets, and thus in an ironic fashion succeed where Ahab failed.

As in all aspects of this tale that we encounter, Ahab's world is hard to define in archetypal terms, for Melville seems to mix the archetypes in a stylistic displacement which adapts existing literary patterns (Foulke 33). Sometimes this adaptation is done intentionally, but most times it is a latent function of the dominant literary trends of the age in which the author writes. Melville admits that he wanted to write "'a romance of adventure founded upon certain wild legends'" (qtd. in Bryant 65). But by "romance," he meant a story with a central quest theme, not the modern sense of love story. The glue that keeps this rambling romantic novel full of digressions together is Ahab's world, the reality in which Ahab moves. The disjointed digressions in which Ishmael's voice is once again heard are a hallmark of the ironic narrative. But this irony is deviously embedded within what at first appears to be a romantic framework: the great dragon-killing quest. Once Ishmael and Queequeg board the *Pequod*, it ceases to be Ishmael's world and becomes Ahab's. Ahab's is the world of water, where the "unconscious reveals itself," where the mysteries of the universe are confronted (Hughes 55). Ahab's unconscious world, symbolized by endless water, is "incredible [and] frightening," where he "struggles in a regular panic against being swallowed up in the primitivity and unconsciousness" (54). When Ahab dominates the scene, the character of the world changes to suit the fiery spirit of this one-legged, megalomaniacal captain. With a sense of foreboding, the reader is introduced to the *Pequod*: "with all her might she crowds all sail off shore; in doing so, fights 'gainst the very winds that would fain blow her homeward" (Melville 116). Ahab's struggle is immediately implied, his

struggle against amenable forces that want to save him from his own folly. The *Pequod* in this portrait embodies the ironic heart of Ahab's toil. Indeed, the strain seems to be greater than Ishmael at first believes: the *Pequod*, "for refuge's sake forlornly rushing into peril; her only friend her bitterest foe" (116). The impression of futility, waste, and impending doom awaiting the ship and her crew can no better be summed up than in her name: the *Pequod*, the name of an Indian tribe annihilated. The very name prefigures a slaughter.

But remember Melville's stylistic displacement and his subversion of the romantic motif. A few chapters after the *Pequod* has set sail, the narrator lauds the ease of tropical whaling life: the world is without care, where the whalemen live in idyllic ignorance, "hear no news; read no gazettes . . . hear no news of domestic affiliations; bankrupt securities; fall of stocks; are never troubled with the thought of what you shall have for dinner" (169). Melville deliberately establishes a dichotomy in the portrayal of the world, making it sometimes fierce and hostile, sometimes peaceful and amenable. But the difference between these representations lies in Ishmael's and Ahab's dispositions. Ishmael speaks of the advantages of tropical whaling, but during these tranquil cruising days, Ahab is below decks, no doubt brooding in the darkness and in his darkening heart. Ahab's world has none of the freedom from worry that Ishmael's does. The captain knows too much, finds no delight in the warm days bathed in wholesome sunlight, for he has seen too much of an unforgiving, brutal world, and he lives only to revenge himself on the whale that crippled him. He lives only to revenge himself upon the mysteries he cannot comprehend. It is the inscrutability of the whale that he hates. It is the inscrutability of the universe against which he struggles. Ahab's dark thoughts become his food and drink. And thus

he dwells in his dark cabin whilst Ishmael and the others take their ease near the mast-head, where they enjoy the warm, pleasant, tropical sunshine.

There is a very marked distinction and conflict between the ironic, inscrutable world and the romantic, transcendent one. Both are readily discernible in the novel, and yet they co-exist without destroying each other. One is a life of the hardship of whaling. In idleness, a sailor might hear the old song, "'Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean, roll! Ten thousand blubber-hunters sweep over thee in vain'" (Melville 172). They sail upon "the inscrutable tides of God" (173), which at once suggests an ironic world of inscrutability and a romantic one where "the transcendent order" reveals itself (Foulke 50). Notice the reverence which the sailors use when speaking of the sea. The sea is a supernatural entity respected by all the whalers, save Ahab. Even the transcendent order is neither kind nor personal. Pip sums up the chasm between man and God, between the finite and the infinite, with his pitiful utterance, "Oh thou big white God aloft there somewhere in yon darkness, have mercy on this small black boy down here" (Melville 193). Here Pip encounters alienation and estrangement, such as the irony in Eliot's *Waste Land*, a barren spiritual terrain without hope, a Dionysian place where the unconscious overwhelms and causes madness. After the proclamation of the crew in Chapter 36 to follow Ahab in his quest, there arose in pathetic fallacy a great storm that evoked this desperate prayer from Pip. Nature being clearly aligned for or against the hero is a strong narrative romance trademark, yet the narrative is undercut by irony in this instance. The boy goes insane after his encounter with Ahab's ironic world, couched and disguised within the romantic transcendent framework. It is like a tiger lying in wait, crouching and ready to strike. In the crudest

implication, the sea is a metaphor for an inscrutable god and Moby Dick, for Ahab would control the whale, but he finds it as hard as controlling the sea: "panting and snorting like a mad battle steed that has lost its rider, the masterless ocean overruns the globe" (299). Indeed, the sperm whale is as faceless as God: "this high and mighty god-like dignity inherent in the brow . . . you feel the Deity and the dread powers more forcibly . . . for you see no one point precisely; not one distinct feature is revealed" (379). Though you stare right at the whale, right at divinity, you cannot comprehend it. You can make nothing of it. The characters of *Moby-Dick* are inundated with the images of inscrutability.

This ironic world couched in a romantic structure sometimes takes on the horrors found in the first levels of the *Inferno*, specifically "where the Gluttonous lie wallowing in the mire, drenched by perpetual rain and mauled by the three-headed dog Cerberus" (Dante 104). For their torture

> Cerberus, the cruel, misshapen monster, there
> Bays in his triple gullet and doglike growls
> Over the wallowing shades; his eyeballs glare
> A bloodshot crimson, and his bearded jowls
> Are greasy and black; pot-bellied, talon-heeled,
> He clutches and flays and rips and rends the souls.
> They howl in the rain like hounds; then they try to shield
> One flank with the other; with many a twist and squirm
> The impious wretches writhe in the filthy field. (104)

Much like the gluttons in hell, the shark massacre is a hellish scene. The sharks attack Stubb's whale "in foamy confusion . . . they viciously snapped, not only at each other's disembowelments, but like flexible bows, bent round, and bit their own" (Melville 329). In their mindless hunger, they devour themselves. In their single-minded pursuit of blood,

they destroy themselves. They writhe whilst being ripped and rent. This bloody dismemberment in this episode calls Ahab to mind, not only because he is himself dismembered but more importantly because this massacre prefigures Ahab's inevitable destruction. This frightening scene, at which Stubb simply laughs, mindless as the sharks he kills, cannot but unsettle any who encounter this dark and lethal world.

Though vestiges of classical heroism remain, this ironic world is no longer the idealized world of Perseus, "the first whaleman"; no longer the "knightly days of [their] profession, when [they] only bore arms to succor the distressed"; now they sail and hunt to "fill men's lamp-feeders" (Melville 395). The hunt for the white whale is a complete subversion of the dragon-killing motif. Classically, a monster ravages the countryside, indiscriminately killing the population, until a knight brave enough sallies forth and slays the monster, often in a struggle that lasts three days. But Ahab's search holds none of the motive for protecting the innocent; he does not go in search of the monster on behalf of those cruelly slain by it; he does not go to restore order and harmony to the land. He goes only to hunt his own vengeance, and as a counterpoint to the romantic dragon-killing knight who sacrifices himself so that others might live, Ahab is willing to sacrifice everyone else simply to satisfy his vengeance. Ahab does not draw away the monster, so that he may grapple with it far from the helpless masses; he sails the *Pequod* straight for Moby Dick; he lowers for it, and forces the other sailors to do so as well. He jeopardizes all the souls aboard ship in the vain hope of avenging himself on a brute. There is nothing Ahab will not sacrifice to his megalomaniacal obsession. In an ironic jab at narrative romance, Melville has Ahab and his men chase the whale for three days. Like the knight, surely Ahab will be successful, though he himself might die? Surely he will slay the white

monster of the deep? *Moby-Dick* has all the forms of narrative romance, but none of its essence. The substance of heroism is missing. Instead, the characters are pushed on by their fate, by incomprehensible forces they cannot control.

It is not until Chapter 87, "The Grand Armada," that the sailors truly begin to understand how little they control their fates. The *Pequod* is surrounded by scores of whales, and yet not a single harpooner dares to stab any of the beasts. These same men, who live to hunt the leviathan, now with the opportunity to slaughter dozens, do nothing. Why do they hesitate? Why do they not fulfill their quota of sperm in one fell swoop? They are confronted with a heretofore unknown frightening side of the watery world upon which they sail; they are "fearful of the consequences," for the whales had calmly and silently gathered about, seeming to embody the terrible hidden strength of the sea and all its creatures (Melville 423). They understand their smallness, their insignificance, that they are superfluous, visiting creatures unwittingly sailing upon the surface of powers and terrors that could drive them all mad, as they did Pip. It is precisely the incomprehensibility of the deep that allows these men to go about whaling. Their ignorance has veiled their eyes. They are the classic fools, rushing headlong into the unknown. Queequeg, the savage harpooner, dared not strike, for such an armada could have easily destroyed the *Pequod* and her crew. Again, these whales are dubbed "inscrutable." The repeated use of this word sheds some light on the world of *Moby-Dick*. The word *inscrutable* means "of such a kind that the meaning or purpose cannot be perceived" (Webster 500). Neither the sailors nor Ahab can understand the meaning or purpose of the sperm whales, much less Moby Dick. These magnificent creatures are nothing more than fuel for lamps, and we cannot help but

think of this estimation in counterpoint to Perseus and what he may have understood about his nautical nemeses. In this and other instances, Ahab can "neither control nor understand his experience," the very hallmark of the ironic hero in relation to his environment (Foulke 869).

Ⅲ. Peripheral Characters

The character's relation to his environment, whether it be amenable or hostile, is not limited to the main protagonists and antagonists. How the world treats the story's peripheral characters often also reveals much about narrative pattern. And the peripheral characters in *Moby-Dick* are directly linked to the entire quest, for it is their lives Ahab spends in futility. It is their talents which Ahab employs in the doomed chase. It is their souls that risk perdition, all "to hunt [their] commander's vengeance" (Melville 177). But how are they presented, and how do they interact with and add to the world about them? Melville tells us that they are escaping from the "carking cares of earth," these "romantic, melancholy, and absent-minded young men" (172). They find freedom from care in the roll of the sea. The swell of the sea is nothing if not romantic, so the draw of the limitless ocean for these young men is a foregone conclusion. But what is this about being absent-minded? Do not sailors, especially whalers, have to stand at mast-head and keep a keen eye out for whales? Is not unflinching vigilance the most basic job requirement? What if in a spell of absent-mindedness, he allows whales to swim by unmolested? He would catch his superior officers' wrath. He would receive severe discipline and be subjected to that whole world of care from which he desperately wishes to escape. Melville, in an effort to strengthen the ethos of the sailor, makes a rather tenuous historical connection between the progenitors of the Egyptians, "the builders of

Babel," and the mast-head watchers on present-day whalers (167). But perhaps Melville is closer to the truth than he appears to be, at least archetypally speaking. The builders of Babel wished to erect an artificial edifice high enough to reach the heavens, and in a way therefore, to get a glimpse of the divine, of that which lies beyond man's grasp and comprehension. Similarly, the mast-head watchers stand upon a high place and look out over the vast watery plain of infinity, hoping to spot the whale (and in this case, one specific whale), that embodiment of the inscrutability of the deep. These men are aggressively attempting to apprehend the divine. And so their fall, if we are familiar with the story of Babel, should come to us as no surprise. We should not be shocked at the outcome, though the characters themselves most likely are. Such an end that the *Pequod* meets must, therefore, seem tragic, for by escaping the cares of earth, these "romantic . . . absent-minded" sailors are seized by a mad captain's vengeful quest and are driven to their ruin at the whim of a beast with which they have no quarrel. The waste, futility, and meaningless of the peripheral characters' deaths, especially Starbuck's, is perhaps the greatest testament to the ironic undercutting of the superficial romantic motif disguising the true dark heart of this tale.

We mourn for the first mate, for though he proclaimed his intention to hunt whales and not his captain's vengeance, he is swayed by Ahab's magnetism. If he is not in support, he at least gives no strong opposition. He fails as the voice of common sense, as the first mate's should be. He may as well shout into the wind as influence Ahab into any rational course of action. Starbuck is tossed by cruel fate as everyone else aboard. His strings are pulled by malevolent forces, and he is bewildered by this ironic world born from the marriage of Ahab's madness and "the inscrutable tides of God" (Melville 173). Starbuck is but one of the crew

that scurry about the decks of the ship like insects, infinitesimal points of human activity in an infinite, inhuman expanse. They sail among "Descartian vortices"; the mast-head watchers hover over them, and these forces which set the universe in motion cannot be opposed or altered, no matter how much man might strive or desire it (173).

As for the second and third mates, Stubb and Flask, respectively, and others, such as the chief harpooners, Queequeg and Tashtego, their involvement in Ahab's quest seems only natural. They are all in different ways representations of "the ragged assembly of victims . . . the poor sod, the freak, the outsider . . . the scrubby opportunist, the rebel without a cause" (Foulke 866). Someone such as Stubb (the outsider), who has "converted the jaws of death into an easy chair," who "preside[s] over his whale-boat as if the most deadly encounter were but a dinner," would never survive in the doldrums of common terrestrial life, the land-lubber society (Melville 128). Flask, the rebel without a cause, "somehow seemed to think that the great Leviathans had personally and hereditarily affronted him; and therefore it was a sort of point of honor with him, to destroy them whenever they occurred" (129). Flask may be the closest in profile to Ahab, but his "revenge" is of a much more general, impersonal type. His hatred for the whales also serves as a kind of painfully-humorous counterpoint to Ahab's obsession. Starbuck calls it blasphemy to hunt the White Whale; and of hatred against a non-sentient animal, a beast, he calls it madness. Flask's bloodthirstiness is silly and half-baked in comparison to Ahab's.

Then come the freaks: Queequeg, Tashtego, and Daggoo. In genteel, 19th-century American society, these men will not do. They are of course outsiders like Stubb and Flask, but they are of a magnitude so far beyond the second and third mates that they transcend to a new order of being

—namely, the freakish aberration. Their unfamiliar customs—ones that might be called inscrutable—their body markings and outlandish dress and language suit them better for the wild sea than for the drawing room. Queequeg is the only one of the three harpooners who is encountered outside the confines of the *Pequod*, and after an initial fear, Ishmael learns to like him. Queequeg's central theme is that of appearance versus reality: he is no savage, though he may look the part, but instead treats Ishmael with "so much civility and consideration" that Ishmael feels guilty for prejudging him (Melville 30). Unlike Ahab, with all his civilized breeding and education, it is Queequeg who is willing to sacrifice himself for others. It is this unschooled savage who bests his European-bred brethren with an "innate sense of delicacy" (30). But he is lost, consumed in the fiery tempest that is Ahab's blasphemous wrath.

Tashtego is Stubb's squire, and his exposition is a glowing one. One has the feeling that the harpooners, once encountered, are the noblest of men who sail aboard ship. Tashtego is described as nothing short of the mythopoeic hunter: he was "an inheritor of the unvitiated blood of those proud warrior hunters" who "had scoured . . . the aboriginal forests" (130). And though he does not hunt the moose, like his forefathers, still his quarry is worthy of the chase: the great leviathan of the unfathomable sea. To have this dignified hunter's life wasted upon the futile rage of his captain attests to the meaninglessness and ineffectuality of the quest. The very fact that there are three harpooners, a number often employed in romantic narrative, further displays the ironic squandering of talent and potential. The quest motif is once again turned on its head.

Daggoo, the Negro, could find equality only on a whaling ship, where his skills are vital to the success of the voyage, and where the men are just as wanted as he. In his stature, his dress, and his "barbaric virtue,"

he is compared to the biblical king Xerxes, and yet with all his regality, he serves a shadow of a man: Flask, the weakling Ahab doppelganger (131). The whole *Pequod* crew is nothing more than riffraff, the very characters of narrative irony. But the harpooners are more than once praised for their noble savagery, as if their disconnection from modernity and western civilization somehow makes them morally superior. Their nobility is romantic in feeling, especially in the person of Queequeg. Ishmael is impressed with his inner character, despite his frightful appearance. But in the making of Ahab's special harpoon, there the romance is undercut. It is subverted in a kind of demonization which we will look at later on in this essay. It is sufficient to conclude that the sailors aboard the *Pequod* "are more or less capricious and unreliable" insofar as archetypal boundaries are concerned; "they live in the varying outer weather, and they inhale its fickleness" (231). But Flask, Queequeg, and Ahab seem to provide ample evidence refuting the ironic elements in their tale: they all possess that "singleness of purpose" of the "invincible hero of romance" (Foulke 866). This singleness of purpose is not a romantic theme, *per se*, and it is Ahab who allows his purpose to become obsession, and it is Ahab's obsession that tests the invincibility myth of the hero. And Ahab loses that wager. They are outcasts and freaks, bound together for one purpose. Of all things, their purpose, or rather Ahab's purpose, is the only thing seen clearly. All other experiences are muddled, and their sacrifice is without gain or meaning. One can hardly call it a sacrifice, for the word implies something gained to counterbalance something lost—a remission of sin or a wrong set right; a regeneration or a rebirth. In *Moby-Dick*, we see none of these things. It would be better called a slaughter.

Ⅳ. The Demonization of Rituals

Irony is a parody of either "tragedy's suffering [or] romance's apotheosis"; it inverts divine symbolism or religious rituals and demonizes them (Foulke 872). In *Moby-Dick*, nothing could be more true of Chapters 36 and 113, "The Quarter-Deck" and "The Forge." In Chapter 26, Ahab makes his first public appearance among the crew, and he comes as a dark priest, a celebrant of immoral mysteries. In this habit he comes and incites the crew to vengeance with the vehemence of his quest to hunt the White Whale. He exploits their inherent greed by promising a gold doubloon to the one who raises Moby Dick for Ahab, after which he bids them all drink from one cup in proclaiming their pledge: "'Drink and pass!'" (Melville 179). In a subversion of the Lord's Supper, when one drinks the wine as a testament to one's inclusion in the Body of Christ, so these whalemen drink to inclusion in the body of Ahab's vengeance, fury, monomania, and ultimately his destruction. Ahab's anti-Christ nature here is brazen. Christ asks his apostles if they can drink the cup from which he drinks, that same cup of servant suffering, of laying down his life for the good of many. And Ahab commands his crew also to drink of the same cup from which he drinks, a cup of satanic pride and mutiny against the natural and divine laws that govern man. "'Tis hot as Satan's hoof,'" Ahab tells them of the drink. The ritual has been demonized. This subverted parody of the Eucharist undercuts the selfless sacrifice of the romantic hero, the Christ-figure, whose blood waters the earth's fields and restores fertility. Moby Dick has dismasted Ahab, and so an infertile, impotent anti-priest offers up his crew in this ritual as a sacrifice to appease his vengeance. And then the men, unaware of the significance of their captain's actions, cheer Ahab. They applaud their destroyer.

The drink is "hot as Satan's hoof," hot as Ahab's intractable, pride-filled heart. There is no thankfulness for the hero's willing surrender, no grace communicated through the ceremony, no promise of renewal or continuity. The apotheosis of romance, the deification of the Christ-figure, effected in no small part by the forfeiture of his life, is perverted by a dismembered priest in a Mass where sins are mounted one upon the other, not forgiven. We do not find the immortal, undying character of the romantic hero in Ahab. We know that, just as when the sinner takes the Eucharist unworthily, so Ahab drinks to his condemnation. But it is a condemnation he willfully accepts; indeed, he compels it. He forces it upon himself. He seeks damnation with all his heart, and with all his strength, and with all his spirit.

Following along the same theme of the Christian mass, Ahab's litany with the sailors sounds more like a profession of faith, a recitation of well-known prayers or novenas, than a number of rhetorical questions.

> "What do ye do when ye see a whale, men?
> "Sing out for him!
> "Good . . . and what do ye do next?
> "Lower away and after him!
> "And what tune do ye pull to, men?
> "A dead whale or a stove boat!" (Melville 175)

What in this recitation is indicative of Ahab's satanic pride? They see the whale, so they lower to chase him, all the time singing a tune. But the flippant manner with which the men sing this song belies its meaning. If they do not have a dead whale, they will at least have a "stove boat," but *stove* is "the past tense of the verb 'to stave,' which means to smash a hole in something" (diCurcio 45). If when they lower for Moby Dick they do not kill him, then they will at least have their ships sunk by their

prey and all die trying. The sailors are all baptized into Ahab's madness with this proclamation of their faith in their mad captain. They drink and swear their fealty to the doomed pursuit; they call down curses upon their heads if they "'do not hunt Moby Dick to his death'" (Melville 181).

In Chapter 113, things get worse. Ahab has a special harpoon forged for his inevitable encounter with Moby Dick. The communal cup of damnation was drunk by all the men at Ahab's first appearance, early in the tale. Now the tale has grown long, whales have been hunted, signs have portended destruction, and the *Pequod* has sailed into the Pacific. They draw closer to the White Whale's cruising ground. Ahab therefore turns his mind to the construction of an instrument capable of slaying the monstrous whale. He must have a harpoon that can penetrate that inscrutability, pierce that divinity, and bring Moby Dick down into the realm of mortal man. After the harpoon is forged with horse-hoof nails and Ahab's razors, he does not temper the weapon with water but rather with human blood. Ahab calls forth the three pagan harpooners and craves their blood, for Christian blood is contrary to his purpose. The savages agree, the pricks are made, and Ahab's harpoon is baptized in blood. Little need be written in explanation of the subversion of the Christian rite of baptism. It is clear as the summer sun. But just in case we do not clearly understand Ahab's partaking in the mockery of the romantic ideal, he howls aloud: "'Ego no baptizo te in nomino patris, sed in nomine diaboli!'" (Melville 532). He baptizes, not in the name of the Father, but in the name of the devil. His diabolical harpoon becomes the Devil's instrument, as much as Ahab's black heart already is a tool from hell. In the Christian rite of baptism, one is baptizes into the Lord Christ's death, for it is only through His death that we are born again to life, and that life is everlasting. But Ahab's satanic baptism is a horrific parody

of that rite, and one has a sense that Ahab is by extension baptizing himself into death with Moby Dick, but in true ironic fashion, the whale does not die, and Ahab does not rise again to life. Indeed, he goes down into death everlasting. He has become the anti-priest who would rather brave the fires prepared for the Devil and his angels than accept the divine chastisement Moby Dick has given him and abandon his mission of vengeance. In this ritual, everything has become dark and demonized, and there is no turning back from the calamity that will occur. The baptism is a kind of oath, and in invoking the devil, Ahab has sealed the oath as a satanic one, so that as he shares in Satan's pride, so too will he share in his destruction. Pip, transformed after his encounter with that wide, terrifying expanse of eternity, only mutters to himself and laughs at Ahab in his arrogance. He looks upon "the black tragedy of the melancholy ship, and mocked it" (533). Narrative irony seems to find personification in this mad slave. Pip's "strange mummeries" are impossible to decipher, and so little is known as to what thoughts might dominate his imagination, but one thing is clear: Pip faced what Ahab rushes headlong to destroy (533). But Pip begged for mercy, and in *mercy*, he was driven mad. Ahab scorns mercy and will have none of it, so what will be the fate of one whose egotism would rather kill the divine than submit to it?

V. Ahab and the White Whale

That we might better place Moby Dick in his proper role in the archetypal narrative, let us delve further into the nature of the monster. The White Whale is the supreme manifestation of Melville's theme of *inscrutability*. The monster defies classification; rumors and tall tales about him abound; he is reckoned by some to be a kind of god; men tremble in fear at the mention of his name or the shadow of his

passing. He is a monster bent on destruction, for "'it was Moby Dick that dismasted me,'" cries Ahab to Starbuck and others in "The Quarter Deck" (Melville 177). The Whale is central to Ahab's ailment as well as "the controlling metaphor in the ironic mode [which] is the disappearance or dismemberment of the hero" (Foulke 865). He not only crippled Ahab but, as his words imply, ripped away his manhood as well. Not only do we see dismemberment, but we see enforced infertility—a diametrically-opposed outcome of the romantic motif. Not only is Ahab killed, but he is without a future. He does not live on. He is wiped away from the face of the earth, and the earth does not remember where he dwelt. Indeed, the ever-changing surface of the sea serves as the perfect metaphor for man's transient existence.

The sperm whale is a fearsome creature against whom whalemen strive for mastery. These sailors, if the stories are to be believed, should either be condemned for their stupidity or commended for their bravery. If the monster roams the seas, seeking ships and men that it may devour, then it is bravery and sacrifice that lead these men on. But if it is for oil to fuel men's lamps, or in Ahab's case, to hunt a brute that does not know the wrongs it has done, then the striving is either comically stupid or ironically tragic. In either case, man's foe in the world of *Moby-Dick* is no other than the great sperm whale, that particularly white one, who is "so incredibly ferocious as continually to be athirst for human blood" (Melville 196). But what is popular legend, and what is truth about the White Whale? In popular legend, and when he is met at the end of the book, he ceases to be a dumb brute, as Starbuck calls him, and becomes a sentient and malevolent being, capable of desire. A benevolent creature of the sea transformed into a monster of evil? Narrative irony twists the familiar and the benign into the strange and the malignant. So Moby Dick

has been altered.

In "The Jeroboam's Story," Gabriel, a self-proclaimed archangel, relates to Ahab the tale of Macey, the *Jeroboam's* late first mate. The vessel had some time before met Moby Dick, but Gabriel had warned the captain not to engage the monster. The chief mate, Macey, however, could not be prevailed upon to stay. And so he set forth with five men to overtake the whale. Macey, alone, in his pride was smitten from the ship by the whale and plunged into the sea where he was seen no more. The remainder of the boat's company was left unharmed, and so Macey met his end. When asked by Gabriel if he would pursue Moby Dick, Ahab straightaway answers in the affirmative, to which the archangel leaps up and cries, "'Think, think of the blasphemer—dead, and down there!—beware of the blasphemer's end'" (Melville 346). This episode serves to further warn Ahab against his pride and folly, to which he of course turns a deaf ear. Yet Gabriel does more than simply issue a warning: he imparts to the reader further description of the Whale in the word *blasphemer*. The word implies that Moby Dick is at least a divine agent and at most a god-like being. Gabriel's admonition only raises more unanswerable questions about the monster. Seemingly in line with Gabriel's theory goes the sea-tale that Moby Dick is a ubiquitous creature, possessing at least one of the qualities traditionally attributed to the Christian God: omnipresence. If this is not inscrutable enough, he is furthermore maintained to be immortal, "for immortality is but ubiquity in time" (198). So his immortality and his omnipresence points to a dragon-like monster of narrative romance, but his "deformed lower jaw" suggests a monster of irony unlike the magnificent wyrms of romance (199). The monster Moby Dick is an ambivalent creature, for in his descriptions are metaphors of the divine and the monstrous mixed.

This hideous nature is expounded upon in Ishmael's narration of "The Whiteness of the Whale," wherein the perennial question, why Moby Dick is white, is answered. From the archetypal perspective, it may have no other function than to further alienate man from nature, to divorce Moby Dick from other normal whales, for the creature the whalemen are accustomed to hunting now has a deformed lower jaw, a thirst for human blood, an unnatural white hide. In the ironic mode, the whale's whiteness symbolizes Moby Dick's transcendence of the order of dumb brutes and into the realm of man (which is a monstrous thought), where he thinks and acts in self desire, where he is just as, if not more, destructive and malevolent as man. He becomes a thing of horror. This is the terror that Moby Dick strikes in those who behold his dreadful form. How appalling it is to see a simple, benevolent creature become, by some inexplicable means, a murderous monster. For Moby Dick, the world must behold in this beast "the instinct of the knowledge of the demonism of the world" (Melville 211). In narrative romance, the dragon and the knight are often two sides of the same coin, diametrically opposed, a dark shadow of the other. But Ahab and Moby Dick are the *same* side of the same coin. They are both demonic, both proud, both vengeful, both bloodthirsty, and both unwilling to submit to powers greater than they. What Ahab hunts, he *is*, and that is the tragedy the captain cannot comprehend. But Moby Dick's knowledge and strength are greater than Ahab's, and therein the irony lies. There is the subversion of romance, for Ahab rails against an omniscient foe, and he cannot hope to prevail. Moby Dick assumes, but also undermines, the omniscience of God. Yet his knowledge lies in the demonism of earth. He is an indefinite, inscrutable thing "that shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation" (212). We are reminded

of Pip, driven mad by the fear of annihilation after apprehending the infinite. This fear is further realized in Ahab's fruitless attempt to kill his nemesis, instead finding himself literally wrapped up (he had been for a long time figuratively wrapped up) in his own devices of destruction and pulled down and drowned. But his death was clearly foretold in Chapter 130, "The Hat," in which Ahab's hat was plucked from his head by a hawk, which flew off and, at a great and high distance, dropped his hat into the sea. And so Ahab falls, but it is not like Satan, a bright, burning star. Cosmically speaking, Ahab's death is insignificant and barely visible, like the hat dropped so far away, at such a high distance, making barely discernible ripples in the waters, and then seen no more. Those far off, watching the tragedy of Ahab, cannot perceive his destruction. There is no *catharsis*, for the meaninglessness of it all, there at the end of all things, smothers any tragic end. What is learned? What lesson do we come away with? What can be said of Ahab's folly? There is *peripetia*, but the reversal of fortune happened long before, when Ahab gave his soul over to damnation. He is a dead man sailing, and the death of his physical body is anti-climactic. We are reminded of Icarus' fall, and we cannot avoid comparing Moby Dick to the unapproachable sun. How long can Ahab sail alongside the White Whale without being destroyed?

The mode and stylistic displacement Melville employs is ingenious in that it is deeply ingrained, and it is easily missed if not delved for. The fact that there are three harpooners suggests that *Moby-Dick* is narrative romance, for in this pattern, "events and characters come in sets of three" (Foulke 46). There are three days to the final chase. But if the purpose of romance is the realization of the wish-fulfillment dream, then we must conclude that *Moby-Dick* is not that but some other literary pattern. Does Ahab wish to destroy the whale or to merge with

him? Does he "rather than defeat his antagonist . . . merge with him" (51)? Following this line of thought, it would be appropriate to say that "Ahab hurls his harpoon as much at his own heart as at Moby Dick's, and the white whale dives with his heroic opponent entangled in the lines and identified with him" (51). But is this a merging, or does Ahab, in attempting to destroy the White Whale, destroy himself? Traditionally, a merging of hero and monster would require the death of both, but we are assured that Moby Dick does not die. He slays Ahab, then turns and destroys his ship. There is no merging, for merging implies a rebirth, or at the very least a healing. We sense none of that. Only annihilation remains.

If it is true that he merges with the whale, it is only insofar that he increases Moby Dick's wickedness. The whale subsumes his essence and in a mad fit of malevolence, turns and sinks the *Pequod*. In this case, it is Ishmael who "achieves a certain distance from the *Pequod's* hell-bent quest"; he emerges as the transfigured consciousness (Delbanco xviii). Indeed, it is he who says, in counter-point to Ahab, "'no more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world'" (qtd. in xix). The hero's apotheosis seems to be embodied in a new person, but is Ishmael worthy to bear Ahab's legacy? Villain though he is, Ahab shines like an all-consuming star, and Ishmael comes not near his strength. Ineffectual against Moby Dick, Ahab's strength in the world of men is indomitable. Though his pride destroys him, it attracts us. Ahab is therefore *not* immortalized in Ishmael. The latter's body is not strong enough a shell to hold such a blazing spirit. It would burn him up like a candle wick.

Ahab's struggle is problematic in multiple ways. Moby Dick is not the monster of *Beowulf*. The whale does not threaten mankind's continuance

as Grendel does. Moby Dick is hunted, and this lends to his ferocity. If mankind did not force the issue, Moby Dick would probably be happy enough to leave mankind alone. Man forces the conflict, whereas Beowulf went out to fight Grendel for the sake of his people. In Moby Dick "'the harpoons lie all twisted and wrenched'" (Melville 177). These powerless weapons are man's futile testament to a vain endeavor. Ahab is not "lured [or] carried away . . . to the threshold of adventure" but nearly beats down the door (Campbell 245). It is Ahab's inherent attractiveness that confounds the archetype. How far can Ahab go and we will still follow? Though Icarus fell, we do not despise him. We learn from him. Do we learn from Ahab? Do we despise him? Ahab's line "'I'd strike the sun if it insulted me'" seems a silly thing to say (Melville 178). Strike the sun, which knows not what it does, like hunting a creature that lives in the sea? Ahab at first appears to be an advocate for man's boundless freedom, for our desire to break all bonds and sunder all chains that bind us. But Ahab wears the heaviest chains of all—his bonds are unbreakable, for he has forged them in the fire of his demonic oaths. Ahab is an attractive character, and we hope he will confront the powers that be and meld with them, so as to raise his consciousness and perhaps be transfigured in the process. But all we see is mankind's curse fatefully played out, as Ahab "piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his own race from Adam down" (200).

Ahab's sacrifice is like Cain's, barren and unworthy, for the spirit in which it is offered cannot be accepted. Cain harbored jealousy in his heart; Ahab harbors contempt for all things in the universe above him. He cannot forgive Moby Dick for besting him. And so out of his death comes nothing. No seed is planted, no fruit born. The one lesson we learn is the lesson of tragedy—what to avoid. But we learned that from the helpers

and guides throughout the tale, from Starbuck to Gabriel, and we hardly need to witness Ahab's death to understand the blasphemy of the quest. There is no continuation, no marriage, no affirmation of the goodness of life. Ishmael's survival is not planned or decreed. It just so chanced that he did not die, and this coffin he uses to buoy himself up on the waves serves to solidify this theme of death and funeral, not rebirth. But that he has gone through death and has come out alive. Melville uses a unique bit of stylistic displacement in this final scene. It is by the very fact that everyone else died that Ishmael lived, but for all to die for the sake of one —that is the opposite of sacrifice found in narrative romance. And it was not through lack of trying that Ishmael survived. Had Ahab has his way fully, Ishmael would have perished as well. Ishmael's continued existence is the one enduring piece of evidence of Ahab's final failure.

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要約

『白鯨』の空想小説的モチーフを覆すこと

Jason M. White

この論文は「白鯨」の主人公であるイシュマエルとアハブの英雄的な性格に強調を置いて始まっている。メルビルが読者のために作り上げた物語の世界は板挟みの世界であり、時には空想小説の性格を見せ、また時には皮肉的な悲劇の性格を見せている。この論文では板挟みの世界が切り崩され、「白鯨」の物語としての背景にある真実が解明されている。物語の主人公を取り囲む登場人物は皮肉的性質を持った古典的航海物語の登場人物であり、詳細に分析されている。最後にこの論文では、儀式の悪霊化や、曖昧な比喩や、アハブの誇大妄想による強迫観念とそれに起因する不毛の犠牲を通した空想小説的モチーフを覆すことに視点が置かれている。