

Thought melville's moby dick

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Though Melville's "Moby Dick" has been amply explicated as an allegorical novel engaged in metaphysical and philosophical themes, the richness and density of Melville's narrative scope in Moby Dick demands close scrutiny, not only for its forthright allegorical connotations, but also for its arcane and esoteric connotations, which provide a variety of meta-fictional comments and divulgences regarding the novel's radically experimental narrative form. "As almost anyone who has ever looked closely into Melville's novel knows, Moby-Dick is an incredibly rich and complex work with as intricate a set of symbols, image patterns, and motifs as is to be found in a work of literature anywhere in the world." (Sten 5)

Particularly peculiar to many readers of "Moby Dick" are the generous discourses on cetology and whaling included in the novel. "An abrupt change of direction in Moby-Dick takes place at the thirty-second chapter. From the sharp, swift description of New Bedford and Nantucket and from the narrative speed of the adventures of the seaport, we move suddenly into bibliographical considerations of a pseudo-scholarly nature." (Vincent 121)

Though the cetological references in "Moby Dick" may, at first appear to be naggingly incongruous with the hitherto established adventure-tragedy, as we will see in the following discussion, the narrative form and structure of "Moby Dick" is, in fact, can be shown to comprise a literary facsimile of the cetological sciences as Melville understood it in his time-period.

While it would be misleadingly simple to describe the narrative form of "Moby Dick" as "a whale," this description, with slight modification, can be justified by a close reading of the novel and by an inquiry into the

compositional ideas and influences that inspired Melville during the novel's composition. The aforementioned modification is this: that the narrative form of "Moby Dick" is constructed to evoke the anatomical composition of cetaceans insofar as the Moby Dick

"Great White Whale" comprises the central allegorical symbol in the novel, and, therefore, also symbolizes the creative urge of the artist from initial inspiration to final completion: "the extracts are the epic material--" fragmentary, scattered, loosely related, sometimes contradictory"--out of which Melville's epic poetry was made. (Sten 4)

It is essential that "Moby Dick" be regarded as possessing a solid, harmonious structure, despite the initial oddness and experimentalism of its surface level appearance. Nowhere is there "waste in Moby-Dick; every concrete detail serves a double and triple purpose[...] No detail is unleavened[...] even such a chapter as "The Specksynder," at first seemingly irrelevant, contributes to the designed effect of the whole novel. (Vincent 125)

To understand the utter necessity of Melville's inclusion of detailed cetological material in "Moby Dick" it is useful to appraise some of the immediate influences on his thought and artistic philosophy during the time of the novel's initial composition and extensive revisions.

As is well known, two of the most profound influences on Melville during the composition of "Moby Dick" were William Shakespeare and Nathaniel

Hawthorne. Despite the gulf of centuries between these two writers, both were recent discoveries for Melville at the time of his writing "Moby Dick."

Foremost among Melville's appreciations for each of these writers was his conviction that each of them had accomplished a confrontation with endemic evil in their works. "To understand the power of blackness at work in Melville's imagination, we need to note that even while he was composing Moby-Dick, this omnivorous reader, the novelist, was discovering the plays of Shakespeare, especially King Lear, {...} and the allegorical fiction of Nathaniel Hawthorne. (Tuttleton)

Shakespeare's influence on Melville exerts itself in the inclusion of actual playscript in the course of the novel, frequent asides and soliloquies, and most profoundly, on the tragic scope

and figure of Captain Ahab. Hawthorne's influence claims a much stronger relationship to the novel's symbolic and allegorical structures. In fact, Hawthorne's own pioneering allegorical techniques may have provided the single most influential power on Melville's conception of "Moby Dick."

If Hawthorne had shown Melville that "one American was expressively aware of the evil at the core of life, he had also provided a narrative strategy suitable for Melville's own literary confrontation with evil, "a perception toward which Melville had been groping for seven years of authorship and of self-scrutiny, but which he had not completely realized nor dared to disclose." (Vincent 37) This narrative strategy relied most heavily on Hawthorne's allegorical techniques. By investing traditional elements of

storytelling with deeper, more symbolically complex meanings, Hawthorne achieved an idiom which is both moralistic and confessional in nature.

An example of Hawthorne's allegorical technique is his novel "The Scarlet Letter." In this novel, a struggle between spiritual faith and evil temptation comprises a central theme." This struggle is represented allegorically in the story by a careful employment of symbolism, character development, and plotting. Lacking an established literary idiom which was wide enough to directly confront the duality of his own ambiguous feelings toward Puritanism and human morality, Hawthorne developed an intricate set of symbols and allegorical references simultaneously conceal and explicate the confessional elements of the story.

Individual objects, characters, and elements of the story thus function in "dual" roles, providing, so to speak, overt and covert information. In constructing a self-sustaining iconography within the confines of a short story, Hawthorne was obliged to lean somewhat on

the commonly accepted symbolism of certain objects, places, and characteristics.

The allegorical method, by articulating thematic ideas which challenge "cut and dried" explanations of such profound realities as faith, morality, innocence, and the nature of good and evil, allowed Hawthorne to delve into issues of the utmost personal profundity, but to express them within a language and symbolic structure that anyone could understand.

By reaching through his own personal doubt, guilt, and religious ambivalence to find expression for the irony and injustice of Puritanical dogma, Hawthorne was able to embrace ambiguity, rather than stolid religious fervor, as a moral and spiritual reality. By using the symbolic resonances of everyday objects, places, and people in his fiction, Hawthorne was able to show the duality - the good and evil - in all things, and in all people, thus reconciling the sheer division of good and evil as represented by the edicts of his (and America's) Puritanical heritage.

Melville's admiration for Hawthorne's successful development of a narrative form capable of expressing profound spiritual and philosophical themes of inspired him to elevate the first draft of his whaling adventure story, which hitherto had closely resembled his popular "travelogue" writings, such as "Typee." Moby-Dick took six years to complete. "It was not until a signally successful reputation had been established that Melville was ready, as he put it, to "turn blubber into poetry." (Vincent 15)

What Melville intended was to craft his erstwhile adventure story, along with his comprehensive notes and observations and researches into cetology and whaling into an allegorical novel on par with what he esteemed Hawthorne to have done in his own novels and short stories. Upon completion of "Moby Dick" Melville made his artistic debt to Hawthorne quite clear. "The godfather of Moby-Dick was guaranteed additional fame when Melville gratefully dedicated his whaling epic to Hawthorne "In Token of my Admiration for his Genius.'" (Vincent 39)

Melville's most obvious gesture toward Hawthorne-inspired allegory is, of course, the development of Moby Dick himself: the whale as the pervading, all-important and central symbol of the novel. This central symbol connects deeply with the archetypal symbolism of the ocean, representing form emerging from watery chaos or the primeval unconscious:

" In Moby-Dick this inner realm is of course represented by the sea, a universal image of the unconscious, where all the monsters and helping figures of childhood are to be found, along with the many talents and other powers that lie dormant within every adult. Chief among these, in Ishmael's case, is the complicated image of the Whale itself, which is all these things and more and also serves as the " herald" that calls him to his adventure. (Sten 7)

Regarded in this light, the cetological details of " Moby Dick" acquire an additional power and connotative dimensions, as the initial " call to adventure" and the primary form which rises from the sea of the unconscious, the whale symbol stands not only for the complex physical universe (form) but also as the explicative symbol for the narrative construction of the novel itself. " The cetological center recognizes the truth of Thoreau's dictum: " we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us." [...]

The cetological center of Moby-Dick is the keel to Melville's artistic craft." (Vincent 122) Even as technical descriptions of the whale's anatomies are given in the novel, the non-scientific, anecdotal experiences of whales at sea

as narrated by Ishmael, forward the marriage of whale-symbolism to the novel's narrative form. Upon his discourse of the "spirit-spout," Ishmael remarks: "advancing still further and further in our van, this solitary jet seemed forever alluring us on."

This relates to the lure of inspiration, of the need for self-expression, for the first intimations of the ensuing artistic expression. The signal-spout of inspiration leads the artist (writer) toward his form. But it is first, formless: simply a haze of imaginative impulse and intuition: a signal on the horizon. Ishmael further notes that "that unneareable spout was cast by one self-same whale, and that whale, Moby Dick." This latter connotation indicates that inspiration flows from the eventual harmonious conclusion; that is urge and objective are one, but that the objective form is also merged tightly with theme.

As Ishmael gains a closer, more intimate apprehension of whales, the development of his character and spiritual insight are correspondingly elevated. The more detailed are the cetological experiences and catalogues, the more wholly expressive and self-possessed and sure becomes Ishmael. "Moby-Dick is, among other things, an encyclopedia of cetological lore having to do with every aspect of the whale--the scientific, zoological, oceanographic, mythic, and philological.

And it recounts Ishmael's slow recovery from melancholia {...} These thematic elements are interspersed with chapters detailing Captain Ahab's pursuit of the white whale" (Tuttleton). Still deeper correspondences between the cetological material and Melville's narrative form are

established in Ishmael's descriptions of the whales "blubber" and "skin" which he posits as being indistinguishable. This is reflected in the narrative structure of "Moby

Dick" where it is equally as difficult to apprehend where the "skin" (overt theme and storyline) of the novel ends and the "blubber" (cetological and whaling discourses and catalogues) begin. Melville makes it perfectly clear that the "blubber" is an as indispensable part of his novel as it is for the whale's body. "For the whale is indeed wrapt up in his blubber as in a real blanket or counterpane; or, still better, an Indian poncho slipt over his head;" therefore, too, is the expository material, the "blubber" of the novel wrapped around its central, allegorical aspects.

The realism of the cetological details in "Moby Dick" is impressive. Many critics account it as a reliable source as any known from Melville's time-period on cetology or whaling. This realism provides a concrete grounding for the novel's adventure and theatrical demonstrations, as well as for the highly concentrated symbolism that forwards Melville's powerful themes. Again, like a whale, Melville's narrative form is massive and sprawling, but capable of dynamic flow and incredible speed. Seen in this regard, the cetological materials are not only deeply necessary to give the novel "ballast;" they also provide for its eventual "sounding" or ability to probe great depth of theme and profundity.

The detailed cetological aspects of "Moby Dick" may, indeed, prevent the reader from an easy, and immediate grasp of the novel's "meaning" or even its astounding climax. Just as the whale's hump is believed by Ishmael to

conceal the whale's "true brain" while the more easily accessed "brain" know to whalers is merely a know of nerves, the secret "core" of "Moby Dick" can only be pursued with patience and close, deep "cutting" due to the organic and harmonious nature of its narrative form.

By keeping in mind the previously discussed aspects of the relationship between "Moby Dick's" comprehensive cetological materials and their symbolic relationship to the novel itself, its form and themes, Ishmael, while discoursing on the desirability of whale meat as fit food for humans, offers an ironic gesture toward the novel's probable audiences. "But what further depreciates the whale as a civilized dish, is his exceeding richness. He is the great prize ox of the sea, too fat to be delicately good."

The radically experimental form of "Moby Dick" is a successful form which owes a debt to its conception to the allegorical techniques of Nathaniel Hawthorne. By building on

Hawthorne's idiom, Melville achieved a rigorously complex, but exactly realized idiom, one which still challenges the sensibilities and sensitivities of readers and critics to this day.

Works Cited

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