

# Ishmael's albatross



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“ Alone, alone, all, all alone, Alone on a wide wide sea! This soul hath been Alone on a wide wide sea: So lonely 'twas, that God himself Scarce seemed there to be.”-The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. On the surface, Herman Melville's Moby Dick suggests an entwined universe of events captained by fate. However, Melville's novel also explores spiritual isolation as a universal human reality that creates events both independent from, and a part of, this fate. Ishmael's experiences aboard the Pequod are archetypal examples of human isolation and sociality. In the character of Ishmael, Melville reconciles the idea of an ultimately unknowable cosmos to human purposefulness and fulfillment. “ And I only am escaped alone to tell thee,” the author cites Job, reminding the reader that the story of Moby Dick will be reiterated by a single storyteller, who represents the indelible liveness of all humanity. While the world of Moby Dick often appears irrational, cruel and meaningless, Ishmael's greatest achievement is his ability to derive value from social interaction, thus allowing him to connect to a collective human experience. The first appearance of Ishmael shows him caught up in his own isolation and desperate to escape on a sea adventure. Ishmael is only too aware that he is alone and deliberately joins an enterprise that will bring him closer to others: “ Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth... whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me...then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball” (1). His early travels bring him into contact with Queequeg, who provides Ishmael with a defining emotional connection. Queequeg is one of the characters with the most reason to disengage himself from the company of others. He is considered a “ savage” in a culture whose practices and language are largely unfamiliar to him. Very few individuals are willing to

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approach Queenqueg. However, Queequeg may easily be one of the most open and serene characters in *Moby Dick*. "Savage though he was, his countenance yet had a something in it which was by no means disagreeable. You cannot hide the soul. Through all his unearthly tattooings, I thought I saw the traces of a simple honest heart," Ishmael observes of his companion, noting that, "he seemed entirely at his ease; persevering the utmost serenity; content with his own companionship; always equal to himself" (71-72). Ishmael continues, admitting, "I felt a melting in me. No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world. This soothing savage had redeemed it" (73). It is in this scene that the isolated Ishmael begins to transform. He becomes aware that there is a worthwhile individual outside of his philosophical personal musings, whom he does not have to guard himself from. Rather, Ishmael realizes that he can in fact befriend Queenqueg and engage in a mutual and accepting relationship. As a result, Ishmael becomes acquainted with a man who has achieved the personal peace that Ishmael seeks. Ishmael is a storyteller and a philosopher, surrounded by a ship full of comrades. However, he and his shipmates are isolated souls, and he is persistently aware of that fact, saying, "They were nearly all Islanders in the Pequod, Isolatoes too, I call such, not acknowledging the common continent of men, but each Isolato living on a separate continent of his own" (174). Throughout Ishmael's journey aboard the Pequod, Melville portrays a fluctuation between isolation and sociality as Ishmael struggles to come to terms with a universe that he believes is governed by an unknowable divine, allowing little purpose to the human beings occupying it. He yearns to connect with someone or something that will give him purpose and the largely foreign crew of the

Pequod seems to enforce his despair. Whether because their of races, stations, or circumstances, the individuals aboard the ship seem indelibly disparate. Ishmael ponders the presence of Ahab, the man “fated” to be apart from humanity by choice and chance. However, Ishmael is also aware of the fact that “every mortal that breathes...has this Siamese connexion with a plurality of other mortals” (463). A pivotal moment for Ishmael occurs during Chapter XCIV, “A Squeeze of the Hand,” during which the crew dismantles Stubbs’ whale. While the crewmembers are squeezing globules of sperm, Ishmael is overcome by his sense of connection to his fellow beings: I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers’ hands in it... Such an abounding affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking into their eyes sentimentally; as much as to say, -Oh! My dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humor or envy! Come let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves into the very milk and sperm of kindness (601). While this section is doubtlessly tinted with Ishmael’s characteristic sarcasm, his sentiments are nonetheless genuine. During this time, he realizes, “Man must eventually lower, or at least shift his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country” (602). Ishmael realizes that moments are the best part of life. Momentary human contact allows one to share life experiences with others and enjoy fulfillment. In Chapter XCVI, “The Try-Works,” Ishmael further reflects, “Give not thyself up, then, to fire, lest it invert thee, deaden thee; as for the time it did me. There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is

madness" (612). Ishmael can finally identify his problem, which is that he has been feeding the consuming "fire" of self-focus. An undeterred focus on oneself, he says, such as that which engenders Ahab's estrangement from his fellow human beings, is foolish and often fatal. Ahab's monomaniacal focus on the whale and on his own revenge, has alienated him from others and as a result of this "sin," his crew is caught up in a thoughtless tragedy. It is a mirror to Ishmael's own tragedy at the outset of the novel- the one that would have him "involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses" (1). Much like the ancient mariner of Coleridge's famous poem, who receives a nod from Melville in the chapter LII, "The Pequod meets the Albatross," Ishmael eventually learns to shift his focus onto others. He realizes that while the world and the question of fate and diety may be unsolved, the world has its beautiful moments, and these are ultimately redemptive. Ishmael survives not because he is better or more moral than the other characters in the novel; he is not. His survival is founded on chance, as many things in this novel are. Ishmael endures due to the fact that he bears the burden of knowledge: the story of Ahab and the white whale, Moby Dick. As the lone storyteller, the story becomes Ishmael's redemption and his discovery of purpose. Redemption allows him to return to the ocean, to survive his experience on the Pequod without bitterness, and to come to a place of peace. Perhaps Ishmael's finest moment of reflection comes earlier in the novel, amidst the story's retelling: And thus, though surrounded by circle upon circle of consternations and affrights, did these inscrutable creatures at the center freely and fearlessly indulge in all peaceful concernments; yea, serenely reveled in dalliance and delight. But even so, amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being, do I myself still for ever centrally disport in mute calm;

and while ponderous planets of unwaning woe revolve around me, deep down and deep inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy (561). Most importantly, Ishmael has achieved wisdom- he is a mirror of his world and those who have touched it. He has come to accept the unknowns of his universe and gratefully accept fleeting moments of “felicity.” And this is Ishmael's albatross: we are all part of something larger than ourselves within the bond of human experience. Works Cited Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” August 2003. Project Gutenberg: Online Book Catalog. 6 March 2008. <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/12713>