

Symbolism in chapter 87: the grand armada



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Melville's novel, *Moby Dick*, is filled with symbolism and messages that relate to human behavior and the effects of that on the world. This is shown in Chapter 87 'The Grand Armada,' which takes place while the *Pequod* is traveling through straits. Here, they encounter a large herd of whales, contrary to how whales usually travel, which in the sperm whale case, is solitarily. There was also a pirate ship that was in pursuit of the *Pequod*. The *Pequod* speeds away from the Pirate ship and towards the whales, and they end up killing a whale. Within the chapter, Melville explores philosophical thoughts and ideas, such as isolation. However, the philosophical thoughts of Ishmael are not the only important parts of the chapter. The actual behavior of the whales and the crew of the *Pequod* are important since they reflect on the effect of humans on nature. 'The Grand Armada' is a chapter that expresses the innate actions of animals and the negative effect of humans on the world. It also relates to human nature, which is shown in Gilbert's essay, since the occurrences in this chapter relate to Gilbert's views on human behavior, as well as some of my own.

'The Grand Armada' is an important chapter in the novel since it showcases a motif of the book, man versus nature. This is shown through the behavior of the whales. In this chapter, Ishmael and the *Pequod* encounter a large pod of whales traveling together for safety. However, before humans started hunting whales, sperm whales were usually solitary or in small pods. This change in behavior of the whales show the negative effect of human activity on nature. Another important part of this chapter is how the crew members react to the pirate ship and the whales. They speed away from the pirate ship, which in a way, was hunting the *Pequod*, but towards the whales, to

hunt them. This is ironic since the Pequod was running away from a ship that they did not believe had the right to harm them, but went to murder whales instead. This is possible since most of the crew view the whales as inferior creatures that are meant to be killed for human benefit. However, Melville calls this into question when Ishmael's boat is trapped in the center of the herd, where things are mostly calm. Here, they observe the whales and their human-like characteristics. For example, Melville includes a passage about mother whales and their calves. This shows the crew members in the boat that whales are not inferior creatures that do not mean anything since the actual families are shown to them. 'The Grand Armada' is a chapter that shows the importance of nature and counters the idea of human superiority and anthropocentrism.

'The Grand Armada' is also important due to the relationship it has with the real world and people's lives. Although people do not usually see herds of whales on a daily basis, the symbolism and philosophical thoughts of Ishmael are relatable and relevant to everyone. In this chapter, Ishmael ponders about isolation as well as calm when his boat was trapped in the center of the ring, there was chaos around them due to the instinct and distress of the whales. However, the boat was in a relatively calm place since there were whales circling them, resulting in a steady position where they could observe their surroundings. Ishmael called this the center of the storm and noted how he had that center of calm, even when there is chaos around him. Melville writes, "we were now in that enchanted calm which they say lurks at the heart of every commotion." (Melville, 423). This relates to Gilbert since in his essay, he references the "moment of calm and metaphysical

understanding... the near constant human attempt to bring those polarities together" (Gilbert, 3). This shows that although 'The Grand Armada' is set in a herd of whales, Ishmael's thoughts of isolation and calm are relevant to everyone since they relate to more than just whaling.

Another way that this chapter is relevant to normal life is the idea of wanting more than necessary. This is shown in the actions of the whalers since they tried to mark and harm more whales than they could manage or even bring to the Pequod. The process of "drugging" is a cruel and barbaric practice, in my opinion, since there was no way the harpooners were going to be able to kill all of the whales they harmed. They merely attacked multiple whales for the convenience and possibility of killing one or two more, which is shown when Melville states "more whales are close round you than you can possibly chase at one time...you must wing them, so that they can be afterwards killed at your leisure." (422). In the end, they only ended up actually killing one, so all of the other whales that were harpooned were wounded for no reason. This showcases the theme of greed since the whalers were harming an unnecessary amount of whales, especially since they were not going to be able to kill and take all of them anyways. This relates to human life since in society, there are those who take more than needed at the cost of others. This idea is firmly rooted in multiple systems such as capitalism, monarchies, and oligarchies, due to the uneven separation of money and power, as well as the usual effect of exploitation, 'The Grand Armada' exposes a part of human nature and society and brings the reader to question their own actions and community.

'The Grand Armada' is a crucial chapter in the story due to Melville's inclusion of multiple themes and motifs. This chapter re-explores the idea of mankind and civilization versus nature through the changes in the behavior of the whales due to human interference. Also, the idea of anthropocentrism is questioned by showing the reactions to the harpoons as well as the families of the whale pod. This chapter also relates to the lives of the readers due to the philosophical thought of Ishmael concerning isolation and peacefulness. A more negative aspect of human nature, greed, is also brought to light in this chapter through the act of "drugging." This shows that although the chapter is about hunting whales, it is a chapter that shows the negative aspects of human nature and society.