

The tragic dimension of moby dick: "the specksynder"



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Chapter 33 of Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick*, titled "The Specksynder," is another of those non-narrative interstitial chapters that serves to give fits to many first-time readers, but that, like the others, contains within it a symbolic and metaphorical dimension without which a comprehensive understanding of the tragic depth of the character of Capt. Ahab is impossible (Spanos 1995, p. 192). Furthermore, without fully understanding the extent of Ishmael's perspective of Ahab, it is impossible to grasp the full significance of the political dynamic at work in the construction of the novel's narrative. In this chapter, Ishmael takes a break from the narrative drive to offer a digression on the governing hierarchy aboard a whaler, but beneath the surface of this deceptively extraneous meditation exists an insightful rumination on the dangerous waters of political power grasped by Ahab through which the crew of *Pequod* must navigate. The non-narrative chapters exist to provide a framework that enlarges the more profound implications of the narrative drive in order to transform the story proper from mere drama into the realm of tragedy. "The Specksynder" in particular is intended to generate a sense of proportion to Ahab that the novel stripped of these chapters would not be capable of providing. "The Specksynder" commences this undertaking of investing gravitas through correlative demonstration. Ishmael informs his readers about the history of the specksynder, which was the title given to the chief harpooner. The specksynder was more than that, however; he was an officer on the same level as the captain, at least in relation to the whaling aspects of the expedition. Over the years the specksynder lost his elite privilege and position to become merely the chief harpooner, entitled to none of his previous authority. The office of specksynder is not one associated with <https://assignbuster.com/the-tragic-dimension-of-moby-dick-the-specksynder/>

Ishmael's contemporary whaling experience during and is in fact a very archaic piece of maritime history. The question becomes, then, why does Ishmael include this information in his narrative and what is the significance to his story? By itself the specksynder chapter would appear to exist in a vacuum; it only achieves its intended resonance through its metaphorical attachment to Captain Ahab and his acquisition of authority aboard the Pequod. At all times it is vitally important to remember that Ahab assumed power aboard his ship through democratic means and the purpose of the voyage is a capitalist one, not the monomaniacal one to which Ahab subscribes and eventually is successful in imprinting upon the crew.

Ishmael's cogitation about the specksynder's equality of influence only takes on meaning when directly applied to Ahab's grasp for greater power than he is originally supplied by the financial backers of the expedition. The implication of the lessening investment of authority in the specksynder and his diluted role aboard whaling ships carries with it the concept that Ahab must be seen as absolute authority on the Pequod and that there not even be the suggestion that a division of power exists on that ship. While it may be true that once upon a time whaling vessels essentially were managed through a bipartite commission of control, Ahab must viewed as informing himself with ultimate and unquestioned authority which is eventually recognized by the crew. When Ishmael writes of the sultanism of Ahab's brain he is implicitly drawing a connection between the loss of the legalized custom of power afforded the specksynder and the investment of the same into Ahab not as a result of official establishment of dominance, but rather through acquisition by force of will (144). The correlation between a dictator and a whaling ship captain is not immediate; it is, in fact, entirely artificial.

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Ahab is not lord and master by virtue of a natural assumption, but is rather invested with appointed leadership closer to that of a Cabinet-level secretaryship than a despot. Ishmael's conveyance of the specksynder's role and its loss in stature is therefore directly inspired by the usurpation of powers beyond his grant by Ahab. The ultimate point of the chapter is not made until the short final paragraph in which Ishmael makes explicit the link between the archaic topic of the chapter and its full meaning. Ishmael writes that " Ahab, my Captain, still moves before me in all his Nantucket grimness and shagginess; and in this episode touching Emperors and Kings, I must not conceal that I have only to do with a poor old whale-hunter like him" (145).

The connection between emperors and kings and specksynders and ship captains lies in the reality that kings and emperors are automatically empowered with despotic authority regardless of their intellectual inferiority to their subjects. Shakespeare and the great tragedians of the past could automatically infuse their writing with the requisite elements of tragedy by writing about kings and emperors, but Ishmael admits that he has no such luxury when attempting to place Ahab into the role of tragic figure. The role of the chapter on the history of the specksynder therefore exists to extend Ahab's dominance. He comes to be seen as invested with not only the traditional power of ship's captain, but also that formerly given to the specksynder, yet at the same time is shown to have the intellectual superiority over his crew that is enough to gain their confidence and loyalty to the point where they give in to his own monomaniacal coup d'etat. The most frequent complaint from many readers of Moby-Dick is the interstitial chapters intrude upon the narrative drive of the plot while very often

appearing to be pointless digressions, but " The Specksynder" contains a
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direct allusion to just how incredibly vital these digressions really are in the construction of a simple whaling captain as a profoundly tragic figure.

Ishmael asserts that “ Nor would the tragic dramatist who would depict mortal indomitableness in its fullest sweep and direct swing, ever forget a hint, incidentally so important in his art, as the one now alluded to” (145).

What may appear to be an exceptionally unnecessary chapter containing information without which an understanding of the story of Pequod could exist is revealed to be an elemental addition to the foundation of Ahab’s growth into a genuine figure of tragedy. Only by investing Ahab with the kind of all-encompassing power awarded kings and emperors simply through accident of birth can Ahab achieve the profound heights that lend him the necessary gravitas to bequeath to him the right to be called a tragic figure.

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