

# [Representation of coffin in moby dick](https://assignbuster.com/representation-of-coffin-in-moby-dick-essay-samples/)

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In Herman Melville’s Moby Dick (1851), the coffin which symbolizes death, alternately is associated with life and death. Melville employs the coffin as image representing the inevitability of death and intersperses the word ‘ coffin’ throughout the novel. Indeed, the only certain reality of the whalers is their ultimate lot, death. A few allusions are made to characters who have the last name “ Coffin”, near Ishmael’s neighborhood is a coffin warehouse, and a carpenter constructs a coffin aboard the whaling vessel. These ominous references to coffin foreshadow approaching death. The coffin imagery reminds the whalers that they do not fight against whales – they are crusading against death.

In Moby Dick, the characters’ attitudes toward death can be traced by their reactions to the coffin. First of all, the book begins with Ishmael in a depressive mood gazing at coffin warehouses. At the sight of the coffin warehouses he decides that he has nothing to lose and initiates plans to start a marine career, whaling. Ishmael contemplates, “ I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses” (Melville 7). Beholding the somber portent of death, Ishmael does not flout death by choosing a dangerous occupation; rather, he accepts it as a fact, deciding to move on with his life. The mass production of coffins augurs the future demise of the sailors on their deathly expeditions to capture whales. At the end, only Ishmael survives the voyage, clinging on to a coffin. “ Ishmael now understands and accepts mortality (Queequeg’s coffin) as the absence of presence and the center of being” (Spanos). In both instances, the coffin imagery surfaces at the beginning and at the end as a presentiment of death and its inherence in life.

Melville foreshadows imminent death for Ahab employing the coffin imagery. Melville portrays the one-legged Ahab tottering on the verge between the lines of life and death. “ His one live leg made lively echoes around the deck, every stroke of his dead limb sounded like a coffin tap. On life and death this old man walked.” (Melville 221). This vivid coffin imagery of his false, ‘ dead’, leg indicates that he too will die on his mission to avenge himself on Moby Dick which badly mangled and amputated his leg in a perilous encounter. Fedallah prophecies to Ahab that “ neither coffin nor hearse can be thine”(Melville 465). This second premonition of not being enclosed in a coffin yet dying proves to be Ahab’s fate and Fedallah’s ironically. Ahab shows his contempt for death by daring to face Moby Dick and to vindictively slaughter him; however, Ahab wounds up dying in Moby Dick’s jaws as harpoon entangles him and thrusts him from the deck into the ocean.

The coffin symbol emerges yet again Queequeg, another of the whalers, denoting Queequeg’s looming death and his resilient spirit to live. Queequeg grows morbidly sick aboard the whaling vessel until resigning the hope of ever recovering he asks the carpenter to make him a coffin. He desires a “ coffin-canoe …without a keel; though that involved uncertain steering and much leeway adown the dim ages” (Melville 448). This special coffin canoe floating without sails or direction on the seas is Queequeg’s pregnant statement of his philosophy of an uncertain afterlife. The physical coffin aboard the ship is a very telling sign of the impending deaths of everyone except Ishmaels. Moby Dick destroys the ship and in a series of unfortunate accidents seaman after seaman is carried down into their oceanic graves.

The coffin imagery also outlines another belief of Queequeg’s where man, barring all malicious acts, can either choose between life or death. Ishmael observes that “ now that his coffin was proved a good fit, Queequeg suddenly rallied, soon there seemed no need for the carpenter’s box” (Melville 450). When asked the reason for his miraculous recuperation Queequeg replies that he remembers that he has something to do back on land. His salient point is that when one has a strong will to live, it has the potential to overcome the pangs of death. Like a true warrior, he fights death and then utilizes the same instrument of death, the coffin, as a chest to pack his paraphernalia. This action further marks his resolution to soldier on and live, and in essence, chooses his fate. “ In Moby Dick fate is a common theme that threads throughout the novel. When considering what type of novel this is, fate plays a part as well (Gallo). The coffin symbol continues to represent resilience against death for seeing tough times ahead and no float, Queequeg himself comes up with the idea to fit the coffin-chest with a life buoy. This life-confirming decision saves Ishmael’s life. Surprised at the coffin’s transformation Ahab exclaims that “ the very dreaded symbol of grim death but by a mere hap, made the expressive sign of the help and the hope of most endangered life. A life-buoy of a coffin!…Can it be that in some spiritual sense the coffin is after all an immortality preserver! I’ll think of that” (Melville 491). With these words Ahab simultaneously predicts its future usage as a means to preserve from death. On his close shave with death by the lifesaving coffin, Ishmael reveals that “ owing to its great buoyancy, rising with great force, the coffin life-buoy shot lengthwise from the sea, fell over, and floated on my side. Buoyed up by that coffin for almost one whole day and night, I floated on a soft and dirge-like main (Melville 533). The coffin defies gravity and defies death but bobbing along the sea with Ishmael as the lone survivor. The sea has two forces – the pull of gravity and the force of aquatic buoyancy. Ishmael’s fellow crewmen are sucked by gravity’s pull into their watery graves as the ship sinks. On the other hand he is buoyed up by the coffin, which ironically metamorphoses into a signal of hope.

Scattered in the novel are people who have last name Coffin. Ishmael tells us that there existed a family of Nantucket named Coffin. These Coffins were famous whalers and seamen who pioneered whaling. Peter Coffin, Miriam Coffin, Simeon Coffin, Macey Coffin, Charley Coffin, and Captain Coffin all have a place in the novel as harbingers of death (Melville 342). Captain Coffin who supervised operations on the Syren, discovered a rich whaling field in Japan. In history the USS Syren (1803) which predates Moby Dick, is a US Navy vessel which was captured by the British Royal Navy in 1814 (USS Syren). Simeon, Macey, and Charley Coffin have an unprecedented in-depth knowledge of whales that awes Ishmael. Their last names can also be a mechanism used to point their deaths on the waters. Peter Coffin is the landlord and owner of the Spouter Inn introduces Ishmael to Queequeg. Indeed, the poetic irony is that both men become united by a coffin for Queequeg’s coffin means life for Ishmael.

In sum the coffin imagery of Moby Dick help clarify the characters’ stances on life and death issues and designate the grim outcome of Ishmael’s whaling expedition. The coffin traditionally represents death as at funerals however, with sailors who die in a tumultuous sea, coffins become superfluous. Ishmael, Ahab, Queequeg face decisions with respect to the coffin which influence both their lives and their deaths.