

Ishmael's  
harmonization of  
body and soul in  
moby dick



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Herman Melville's novel *Moby-Dick* is well known for the epic sea voyage that takes place over the course of the text. However, this journey doubles as not only a physical journey of movement from place to place but also a spiritual one. Ishmael's journey in *Moby Dick* can be compared to Whitman's in "Song of Myself" as both of them take a physical journey into nature and experience a harmony of body and soul. When the body and soul come together the individual will experience a love of the self, a love of others and a love of nature. In no particular order, Ishmael experiences all of these by the end of the novel.

Ishmael is so unhappy on land that he is cold towards others and even has death on the mind. "This is my substitute for pistol and ball" he says, "With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship," (Melville, 21). He is desperate enough on land to possibly be considering suicide. He needs to be saved. Going on a whaling voyage out at sea is what will begin his harmonization of body and soul and will maybe be what saves him. On this journey into nature Ishmael experiences physical challenges that will spark some of these harmonizations.

Before his voyage, Ishmael is alone and cold towards others stating that he had to stop himself from, "... deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off," (21). He is miserable. However, aboard the *Pequod*, Ishmael creates bonds with other members of the crew, specifically Queequeg. Through physical labor, Ishmael is literally connected to Queequeg by a rope. "So that for better or for worse, we two, for the time, were wedded; and should poor Queequeg sink to rise no more, then both usage and honor demanded, that instead of cutting the cord, it should

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drag me down in his wake," (288-89). This is in contrast to the beginning of the novel where he is alone and cold towards others. The wording here also reinforces the idea of love for another on an even stronger level than we would have thought. Words like 'for better or for worse' and 'wedded' are associated with a marriage. There is a metaphorical marriage between Ishmael and Queequeg through their connecting rope. This particular physical task creates a purpose for not only Ishmael's own life but also a connection with another man's. Love for another is accomplished.

Ishmael experiences a spiritual awakening on the ship one night that can be linked to the love of oneself. In "The Try-Works", Ishmael is steering the ship when he falls asleep. He awakens and realizes what has happened just in time to keep the ship from capsizing. This leads to Ishmael's realization:

Look not too long in the face of fire, O man! Never dream with thy hand on the helm! Turn not thy back to the compass; accept the first hint of hitching tiller; believe not the artificial fire, when its redness makes all things look ghastly. (376)

Here, Ishmael is referring to the fire within Ahab that represents the evil within him. The evil within him is what drives this journey of revenge on the white whale. Ahab's fire causes Ishmael to lose sight of both his own moral direction and himself altogether. But coming to this realization is a wake-up literally and spiritually which allows Ishmael to return to the direction his moral compass is pointing him in. Refusing to follow the evil within Ahab allows Ishmael to return to himself, invoking a love for himself.

Finally, Ishmael experiences a harmony with nature on his journey at sea. Originally, he is on the whaling ship to kill whales for a profit, and then on the voyage to help Ahab with his revenge. Ishmael's views of whales have been swayed by Captain Ahab. In "The Grand Armada" Ishmael's smaller boat ends up surrounded by whales. In one sense the crew find themselves in the eye of the storm, being surrounded by these creatures who are made out to be evil and deadly. But in another sense these few members of the crew have been given the chance to draw back the curtain and see into a world of the whales they could not understand from Ahab. The smaller whales came up to the side of the small boat where they were able to be pet like, "household dogs," (345). This is important because it shows the kind and calm nature of this particular animal when they are not being hunted. From this point on, Ishmael is able to create a better understanding and a bigger appreciation for these whales. In this moment Ishmael no longer wants to harm the whales, beginning his love of nature.

Ishmael getting this view into the world of the whales, uninterrupted and unbiased, is similar to what Whitman states to readers in his "Preface to the 1855 Edition of 'Leaves of Grass'". He tells readers he will have, "...nothing hang in the way, not the richest curtains. What I tell I tell precisely what it is," (341). In a way, Ahab was the curtain between Ishmael and his understanding of the whales. Once he was able to pull away the curtain and break through that wall of whales he saw the creature for what it truly is. This knowledge allowed him to complete his love of nature.

There are a couple of clues within the text to reinforce the completion of

Ishmael's harmony of body and soul. Carl F. Strauch states that:

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Ishmael rejects all the self-assured scientific and analytical methods of his day as a means to understanding the whale because he prefers the living creature and a living universe, the spontaneous and unreflecting acceptance of organic relation in nature. (Strauch, 477-478).

The rejection of man-made ideas is the rejection of the satisfaction of the outer-self. Ishmael has moved on to pleasing his inner self which is why he is saved. While he is physically saved by the coffin and the Rachel, it can be assumed Ishmael is also spiritually saved. Ishmael is telling the story of the white whale as a story from his past. He is looking back on a time in which he was sad and miserable, meaning he may no longer feel that unhappiness he once did. This could mean that he has reached harmony of body and soul by the end of his journey leaving him saved and satisfied.

Walt Whitman went on a similar journey to Ishmael's in which he searched for his own harmonization. Rather than boarding a boat for a whaling voyage, Whitman's journey took place in the grass. Leading up to stanza 16 of "Song of Myself", Whitman sees a catalogue of many different people only to come to the realization that not only does he respect them all, but he sees himself in many of them "Regardless of others, ever regardful of others, /...One of the Nation of many nations, the smallest the same and the largest the same," (353) This is where Whitman harmonizes and finds a love for others the way Ishmael did with Queequeg. Ishmael is tied physically to Queequeg the way Whitman feels tied to all of these strangers he is peering into the lives of and feels he has a purpose with them.

Whitman invites his soul into his body in stanza five. When he does this, "Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and / knowledge that pass all the argument of the / earth," (348). When the body and soul come together, so do peace and knowledge. This is what happens when Ishmael reminds himself to not look too long into the fire within Ahab. This leaves Ishmael with a new sense of peace and the ability to gain knowledge about the whales that does not come from Ahab. Finally, Whitman harmonizes with nature when similarly to Ishmael, he rejects man and man-made ideals in favor of higher powers and the inner self. In stanza 20, Whitman states that he knows his life cannot be understood or measured by any scientific instruments constructed by man. This is similar to Ishmael rejecting the wisdom given to him by Ahab, who is just a man, in favor of the knowledge he can receive from being in nature with the whales.

It is clear that on a voyage to hunt whales, Ishmael becomes a new person. The character goes from an individual alone and unhappy on land to sea where he becomes connected to himself, to others and to nature. This allows him to ultimately be saved. Whitman's "Song of Myself" helps us to see and to better understand Ishmael's own harmonization of body and soul in *Moby-Dick*.

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