

# The metaphor and symbolism behind the white whale



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The white whale at the center of Herman Melville's masterpiece *Moby-Dick* is often considered to be one of the most symbolic characters in American literature. In part, this is because not only can the white whale mean many different things to each reader, but because it also is explicitly delineated as having different meanings to the tale's various characters. Although Captain Ahab's pursuit of the white whale is the centerpiece of the story, the other characters also reflect upon the whale's significance and it becomes a directly symbolic agent even within the direct narrative.

For Captain Ahab, *Moby-Dick* represents the personification of everything that has, is or will be evil in the world. That is, at least, the opinion that Ishmael holds of what Ahab thinks of *Moby-Dick*, as he says, "All evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in *Moby-Dick*" (154). Ahab's malice stems from the whale's theft of his leg, a 19th-century Puritanical substitute for the body part that Melville was forbidden to write about: Ahab's penis. The loss of his leg is a symbolic stand-in for the loss of Captain Ahab's manhood, which is really what was destroyed by *Moby-Dick*. Few events could be more evil than that to a hard-edged, embittered 19th-century sailor.

Ahab aches to transform *Moby-Dick* into a symbol of every conception of evil that has existed in the world, from the serpent slithering through the Garden of Eden onward, but ultimately *Moby-Dick* is reduced to being nothing more than a symbol for all the small offenses that men desire to construct into universal evils. At one point Ahab actually refers to the personal what he attempts to universalize when he says, "it was *Moby-Dick* that dismasted me; *Moby-Dick* that brought me to this dead stump I stand on now...it was <https://assignbuster.com/the-metaphor-and-symbolism-behind-the-white-whale/>

that accursed white whale that razeed me; made a poor begging lubber of me for ever and a day!" (138). Descriptive words such as "dismast" and "dead stump" carry deep rooted connotations of impotence—both in the sexual sense as well as the larger sense of being incapable of carrying out one's duties or desires. Moby-Dick took away Ahab's ability to stand on his own two feet, literally, but also took away his independence.

Ahab describes Moby-Dick as inscrutable, but that is merely Ahab wanting to imbue Moby-Dick with an element of almost supernatural abilities, as something that is beyond comprehension. For Ahab, Moby-Dick is evil the way that everything mysterious always has been and always will be evil: because people do not want to make the effort to understand the object of their dread. Ahab refuses even to try to understand what Starbuck might describe as pure beastly instinct, because the ignorance makes it easier to categorize Moby-Dick as pure malevolence. He says, "That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him" (139). Ahab's choosing to wreak his hate upon Moby-Dick is an attempt to turn the white whale into something sentient: not just a carrier of evil, but a creator of evil.

Ahab reaches the point where his need to infuse the whale with these attributes becomes obsessive. It takes imagination to become obsessive, however, and in that regard Ahab stands in direct contrast to Starbuck who refuses to instill any symbolism in the whale at all. Starbuck views Ahab as wanting merely to exact "vengeance on a dumb brute...that simply smote thee from blindest instinct!" (138). If what Starbuck says is true, then there is nothing standing between Ahab and pure madness. The only way that Ahab

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can escape this description is if Ishmael truly means it when he writes that “the White Whale’s infernal aforethought of ferocity, that every dismembering or death that he caused, was not wholly regarded as having been inflicted by an unintelligent agent” (154). If these words are the truth, if there actually is an element of consciousness that can be attributed to Moby-Dick’s actions, then it remains possible for Ahab to escape accusations of madness and monomania.

Of course, the idea that consciousness of that level does exist would be madness itself, at least based on what is known of whales and other animals so far. No evidence suggests that other animals possess the capability of malice aforethought. More likely the whale’s symbolic reality is expressed in another observation by Ishmael. Ishmael captures the essence of how the whale is representative of each individual’s consciousness when he observes that “by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe” (164). Ahab has let the darker part of his nature take over his personality and sees that in the whale, while Starbuck’s lack of imagination will only let him see the whale as dumb, brute beast. The whale is white, an unprismed conglomerate of the promise of all colors. Those colors are revealed only through the prism of each man’s unique consciousness, much like Moby-Dick’s meaning.