

The primitive in herman melville's moby dick



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Among the numerous themes and ideas that author Herman Melville expresses in *Moby Dick*, one of the less examined is the superiority of the primitive man to the modern man. As an undertone running through the entire book, one can see in *Moby Dick* the same admiration of the “ noble savage” that is so prevalent in Melville’s earlier tales of the simple and idyllic life of the cannibals, even though the focus has been shifted to the dangers of seeing things from only one point of view and to the struggle between good and evil. Before proceeding to a discussion of how Melville glorifies “ primitive man” in *Moby Dick*, a working definition for the term must be agreed upon. In her illuminating essay, “ The Concept of the Primitive,” Ashley Montagu points out the fallacy of using the term “ primitive” in a scientific context because it is so ambiguous and has so many different connotations attached to it. He shows that so-called “ primitive” peoples are neither as undeveloped, uncivilized, or simple as the term implies. However, here I will use the term subjectively, with all its implications, because when Melville idolized primitive man, he did not have a specific, scientific definition in mind. He had an ideal, the ideal of man before the corrupting influences of civilization had taken their toll. On one level of thought, Queequeg offers a prime example of the superiority of a truly “ primitive” man. This “ native of Kokovo” is the romanticized picture of the peoples Melville encountered in his sojourns on the tropical isles, whose innocence and virtue so impressed him. He displays his selflessness and strength when he dives after and rescues from the icy water the young “ bumpkin” who made fun of him several minutes before and when he frees the unfortunate Tashtego, who was caught inside the “ Heidelburgh tun.” Also, Queequeg ironically seems to be more civil than the supposedly “ civilized” Ishmael: “ I pay this

particular compliment to Queequeg, because he treated me with so much civility and consideration, while I was guilty of great rudeness.” Quite apart from these qualities, which can be attributed to many various white men as well, is his being always “ content with his own companionship” and “ equal to himself.” This is an outward manifestation of the essential purity and innocence of him and his race, which is further emphasized by his being made unfit by the Christians he has encountered to ascend “ the pure and undefiled throne of thirty pagan Kings before him.” The parallel of this to his experiences with missionaries converting cannibals in the Pacific islands is obvious: he believed that missionaries ruined the natural joy, exuberance, and innocence of native peoples. The ultimate testament to the goodness of Queequeg is the effect he has on Ishmael. “ I felt a melting in me. No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world.” Many have said that a central theme of Moby Dick is that it is impossible to attach only one meaning to anything, and that to try to do so, as Ahab does, is very dangerous. If one subscribes to this point of view, Queequeg is responsible for the fact that Ishmael is the only one among the entire crew that is saved, because, after the first meeting with him, Ishmael comes to see the world differently. Says Clark Davis, “ Under the influence of the more naturalistic ‘savage,’ Ishmael learns to understand what he sees from more than one perspective.” Of course, he also saves him literally, because it is his coffin that Ishmael finally uses as a life-buoy. Queequeg, owing to his primitiveness, is good in almost every sense of the word, and brings to civilized Ishmael a better perspective on life. On a higher level of thought, it is possible to see an analogy between the whale-men, the whaling ship, and whaling itself, and primitive man, his nomadic tribe, and the hunt

that was his way of life. Ishmael says, "Your true whale-hunter is as much a savage as an Iroquois" and describes Ahab contemplating the motivations of his "savage crew." The prolonged absence of Christian civilization slowly transforms the whale-men, until they are restored "to the condition in which God placed them, i. e. what is called savagery." When a whaling ship leaves port, it leaves the civilized world and plunges into the world of the primitive, where the sea rolls "as it rolled five thousand years ago" and wild, furious nature, unmodulated by the influence of man, holds complete sway. (see Chapter 58: Brit) There, the ship shares many characteristics with a nomadic tribe, roving across the prairies in search of great beasts to hunt and kill. These ship-tribes are few and far between, and when they meet, it is an opportunity to tell stories and to exchange any useful knowledge they may have gathered. In addition, the whale hunt itself provides a metaphor for the hunt that took up most of the primitive men's time and provided them with their sustenance. When the harpooners all hurl their harpoons at a whale, the image of cavemen hurling spears at a mammoth is vividly conjured up. The virtues required of the prehistoric mammoth-hunters are also observed in the whalemens; both must have courage, perseverance, and solidarity. So, when Melville devotes several chapters to an exposition of the glories of whaling, attempting "to endow the whaling industry with a mythology befitting a fundamental activity of man in his struggle to subdue nature," he is not just trying to provide some credibility for the topic he has chosen to write about. He is, perhaps sub-consciously, also yearning for the by-gone glories of the hunt and showing his admiration of the now rare virtues of that beautiful and romantic fictitious character, the "noble savage." Finally, we come to Ishmael and his quest, the thread and glue that bind the book

together. At the beginning of the book, Ishmael is angry at the world and, to “ward off the spleen,” goes on the whaling voyage. Says Ishmael, “a whale-ship was my Yale College and my Harvard,” and that is where he now goes to better understand life. As all men originally came from the sea, so the sea calls them back it is the basic longing, shared by all at one time or another, for the land of one’s birth. The sea where Ishmael embarks on his travels has remained unchanged since before the coming of man, making it “primitive” in the purest sense of the word. It is a kind of ancient reservoir of wisdom, and it is there that Ishmael has come of age and where he has learned to understand everything he sees from more than one perspective. Ishmael has also learned not to become too attached to any one idea, and to value human companionship. Like Nathaniel Hawthorne, Melville felt that modern society was becoming corrupt and immoral, and he wanted to return to the “roots” of humanity. He recognized the dangers inherent in the new commercialism and, in one of the great themes of Moby Dick, he uses Ahab to warn us against the consuming national obsession of pursuing the American Dream too ardently. During his tumultuous life, Melville felt the stresses of modern life in abundance, and the short time he spent among savages that seemed to be free from those pressures must have offered an alternative, however remote and impractical. So, in *Typee* and *Omoo*, he praises the virtues of the savages and attacks the missionaries and their interference. In *Moby Dick*, that feeling of reverence and admiration toward man’s primitive beginnings is still there in the noble persona of Queequeg, in the whalers and whaling that he glorifies to such an extent, and in the primeval ocean itself, which teaches its wisdom to Ishmael.