

# Gnostic conquest in moby-dick



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Many deities are invoked and discussed throughout Moby-Dick. Yet, despite some vivid allusions to Gnostic theology, the overall impact of these allusions generally go unnoticed. However, understanding how Gnostic theology is explored in the novel reveals and allows for a clearer reading of Ahab's role as a tragic anti-hero, Ishmael's skeptical philosophy, and the overrunning theme of how to live amidst the problem of evil. First, it is necessary to make clear the Gnostic themes which are present in the novel, and define Gnostic terms and ideas to make sense of Melville's allusions.

First, one must view Moby-Dick as a god and a messenger of divine judgment to understand how Moby-Dick is a representative of the Gnostic Demiurge. According to Gnostic tradition, the Demiurge is the son of Sophia, daughter of the true and benign God who rules over the cosmos. In the Gnostic mythos, the deceptive Demiurge is known by the name Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament. As Thomas Vargish succinctly explains, the Demiurge is a "reaction to and dissatisfaction with the Christian attempt to explain the origin of evil" (273). This Gnostic deity's goal is to despise the spiritual and lead all humans away from the one true spiritual (nameless) god through the material and nature. One can see why Melville would sympathize and find Gnosticism attractive. Raised religious, Melville probably had an easier time believing the God he grew up believing in was not completely good, instead of simply declaring himself an atheist.

Chapter 42, "The Whiteness of the Whale" is a crucial chapter for understanding how Ishmael views Moby-Dick as a god. In the course of the chapter, comparisons are made between the whiteness of the whale and "Jove ... made incarnate in a snowwhite bull" and also a white horse, who

possessed divineness " that in it which, though commanding worship, at the same time enforced a certain nameless terror" (159-161). Here we are given examples of a god incarnate as an animal, and an animal made god. The latter of which, the white horse which enforces nameless terror, echoes Job's encounter with God, in which God gives no answer, but rather demonstrates his power to affright Job into reverent awe.

However, after comparing the whiteness of Christ to the whiteness of the whale (Moby-Dick), Melville writes, " with whatever is sweet, and honorable, and sublime, there yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue [white], which strikes more of a panic to the soul than that redness that affrights in blood" (160). Here Ishmael demonstrates his Gnostic theological leanings, wherein he acknowledges the existence of the spiritual yet defies it through Cartesian skepticism. While for Melville's mainly Protestant audience the color white represents the purity of Christ, for Ishmael it suggests the deception of God, later illustrated at the end of the chapter when he writes, " all these are but subtle deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without; so that all deified nature paints like the harlot..." (165). Ishmael even writes that whiteness is the " veil of the Christian's Deity" punning on both how it is literally the veil of God in Revelation, as well as a veil whose whiteness hides the " Christian's Deity" from humanity and therefore hides the cosmic evil of the deity, deceiving us into believing the " Christian's God" is benevolent. Ishmael's argument is that humans instinctively are skeptical of whiteness as it is the material God's mode of deceiving, and glimpses of uncomfortable whiteness point us towards the truth of God's true nature. Ishmael ends the

chapter by saying, "all these things the Albino whale was the symbol. Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?" Based on this chapter, we can gather that Moby-Dick is a god, but a god of deception. The deceptive god Ishmael alludes to echoes elements of the Gnostic conception of the Demiurge, a lesser god who rules over Earth.

However, some would wonder whether or not Melville had knowledge of Gnostic doctrine or if he simply by chance echoes Gnostic ideas. However, Melville certainly had awareness and artistic appreciation for Gnostic thought. As Thomas Vargish shows in his article, "Gnostic Mythos in Moby-Dick," the main source for Melville was Andrews Norton's *The Evidence's of the Genuineness of the Gospels*, which when published in 1844 became a popular theology read. Gnostics are directly referenced in the novel *White Teeth*, and are also explicitly mentioned in the title of the poem "Fragment of a Lost Gnostic Poem of the 12th Century" published in Melville's poetry collection *Timoleon* (Vargish 272-273). There is no doubt of Melville's familiarity of Gnostic theology and mythos, which is further explored in the mythos of *Moby-Dick*, which is an American Gnostic tragedy.

Ahab's relationship with Yahweh is similar to Job's. He is seeking justice on his own terms by defying God yet simultaneously knowing his power cannot match God's. Ahab attempts to defy the Demiurge in his hunt for Moby-Dick. The most illuminating chapter to explore his outright defiance of god is found in the chapter titled "The Candles." Here, Ahab calls out multiple gods, all of whom are ultimately assumed to be the Demiurge in disguise. First he calls on the Zoroastrian deity Ahura Mazda, "Oh! Thou clear spirit of clear fire whom on these seas I as Persian once did worship, til in the sacramental act

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so burned by thee, that too this hour I bear the scar I now know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that thy right worship is defiance" (382). Ahab, far from being the simpleton pirate-like sailor he is often portrayed as, is a learned and cultured man, who once traveling in Persia, presumably with Fedallah, worshipped as a Zoroastrian. However, he has learned since then that true worship of this world's creator is, as he says in his own words, defiance. He calls upon Sophia, the Gnostic mother of the Demiurge and cosmic being which Gnostic sects such as the ophite followed (Varnish 272) though vaguely: " yet while I earthly live, the queenly personality lives in me, and feels her royal rights" (382). Later in the speech he subtly refers to his, at the very least appreciation, of Christ: " Come in thy lowest form of love, and I will kneel and kiss thee; but at thy highest, come as mere supernal power; and though thou launchest navies of full freighted worlds, there's that in here that still remains indifferent." I turn to Philip Young's interpretation of the text for guidance, he writes, " In the lowest (most human) form of love, he [the god Ahab addresses] would be Jesus. But the main point is Ahab's utmost refusal to concede this power in its " highest" absolute dominion over him, or even to admit his own inferiority" (Young 332). Ahab possessed a clearly Gnostic conception of the Christian religion, since Gnostics viewed Jesus and his message as one based in love and devotion to the spiritual. Early Gnostics point to passages such as First Corinthians 13, where Gnosis is seen as a gift from Monad the one true God, " If I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all secrets and all gnosis..." (Nock 261-262). Gnostics viewed Jesus as a Gnostic prophet whose goal was to lead humanity away from the material, and point them to the spiritual, true God known

usually as Monad. Jesus, to the Gnostics, defied Yahweh (the Demiurge), and here Ahab attempts to emulate the Gnostic conception of Christ.

Understanding Ahab's character, one of a Gnostic prophet, is crucial to understanding his role in the novel. Ahab is intended by Melville to be a sympathetic tragic hero, akin to Macbeth and King Lear. The key to defining these anti-heroes is that they evoke sympathy in their audiences through their common humanity, but also evoke pity because we can see their tragic mistakes that lead them to death. If one takes a surface interpretation of Moby-Dick, that Ahab is simply on a quest to kill a whale to get revenge, one views Ahab as a madman, and the antagonist of Moby Dick, leading many sailors to their deaths. However, if one views Ahab as a Gnostic tragic hero, he is both justified in his defiance of God, and sympathetic in his earnest desire for truth. The pity arises from Ahab's tragic flaw: his hubris or pride, and conviction that he can defeat the Demiurge through the material.

Early in the novel we get a sense of Ahab's tragic flaw. In chapter 36, The Quarter-Deck, after discussing his desire to break through the "pasteboard mask" by killing Moby-Dick, Ahab says to Starbuck, "Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me" (140). Ahab is dedicated to his cosmic antagonism, perhaps too much so, for it results in rage instead of Ishmael's heavily contrasted desire to seek truth through knowledge.

Unlike Jesus's paradigmatic example, Ahab attempts to defy the Demiurge through the physically destroying him. In the Gnostic conception of Jesus, Jesus defies the demiurge through knowledge, or Gnosis, of the reality of the demiurge's deceitful nature. Ishmael's Gnostic theology is summed up in this sentence from Chapter 85, "Doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of

some things heavenly; this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye" (293). Ishmael's solution lies in skepticism without complete denial of the spiritual. He doubts "all things earthly" but holds that intuitions point to the spiritual. Through this Gnostic worldview he neither adheres to organized religion nor complete atheism, but finds a balance that approaches god with the supposition that god may be malevolent or indifferent.

In light of Ishmael's gloomy theology, that the world is a deception set up by a malevolent god, how then should we live? Melville, through Ishmael answers that question. The answer is in one sense Moby-Dick, the book. The book is an example of defiance through art, and its encyclopedic nature acts almost as a guide to defiance. For example, in reading Moby-Dick, one learns about the physiology of the heads of right whales and sperm whales, yet we understand them through Ishmael's claim that the right whale is a stoic and the sperm whale is a Platonist (267). Even what can be proved or discussed with scientific accuracy, such as the heads of whales, is tinted with highly subjective philosophical or theological claims. So, then, the response to the empty and deceptive nature of the world is not rational atheism, but a vague spirituality rooted in love for knowledge; this theme mirroring the Gnostic quest of gnosis (Greek for knowledge). Throughout the novel, Ishmael stresses the limits of science. He writes, "however baby man may brag of his science and skill ... yet forever and forever ... the sea will insult and murder him, and pulverize the stateliest, stiffest frigate he can make" (224). The sea, representing the vast cruelty of the cosmos and the circulatory nature of history (a concurrent theme throughout the novel, see the final

paragraph of Brit [225] and the final sentence of The Chase-Third Day [427]), cannot be mastered through knowledge. Rather, for Melville, knowledge enlightens us, and allows us to live authentically, knowing the reality of God's cruelty, but enjoying ourselves in spite of him. This enjoyment of one's life despite knowing the cruelty and malevolence of God is the only source of true happiness.

The most poignant and unashamed instance of this near Epicurean philosophy is in the chapter "A Squeeze of the Hand." Here Ishmael describes a highly sensual encounter found by squeezing a sperm whale's oil (though Ishmael refers to it as sperm either erroneously or on purpose to heighten the sexual language). He writes,

Squeeze! Squeeze! Squeeze! All the morning long; I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it; ... I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers' hands in it, in taking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affection, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally; as long as to say, -Oh! My dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities or know the slightest ill-humor or envy! Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay let us squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness. (323)

Where Ahab's spiritual defiance towards the Demiurge are his monologues in "The Candles," Ishmael's climax of defiance is in the above referenced passage. The best way to live, for Ishmael, is to simply enjoy life through



simple avocations. An important factor in this passage is that Ishmael is not alone, he squeezes with others. The homoerotic overtones of the passage are crucial. Melville sees this homosexuality as defiant to the cultural norms of the time and thus, in the context of Gnostic thought, freeing from the Demiurge's restrictive laws placed on humanity. Like Ishmael's "marriage" to Queequeg (the only happy marriage in the novel), the all-male squeeze-session is one of the few instances of pure joy.

Ishmael challenges the Demiurge through non-physical defiance. He does this through *Moby-Dick*, a novel of defiance towards many elements of society and religion. *Moby-Dick* is both a novel in its story, dialogue, and poetic writing, yet it is also an encyclopedia of sorts on the nature of whales and the American whaling industry.

Yet this knowledge of whales does not come from conventional learning and standard education. The knowledge that Ishmael employs is solipsistic and comes from experience. This too, is defiance against the Demiurge and society. Two times Ishmael mocks Yale and Harvard as being inauthentic, evidently inspired by Melville's own decision not to attend college (Melville 101). Instead of college, Melville (and Ishmael) become learned in the classics both Western and Eastern, and come to know the world through whaling and sailing. Ishmael, sets up a thesis for *Moby-Dick* in the opening chapter, "Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth [...] I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can" (18) and later "I love to sail forbidden seas [...] Not ignoring what is good, I am quick to perceive a horror, and could still be social with it" (22). The thesis of the novel itself is that all humans intuitively desire to escape the norms of society, set up by

religion, and rebel, though few act upon it. Interpreting Ishmael's thesis in *Moby-Dick* knowing Melville's exploration of Gnostic thought helps explain the radical and almost otherworldly quality to the novel: the novel is in constant dialogue with the question of evil and experience in the context of Gnostic thought. It attempts to give a philosophy of life in face of the incomprehensible problem of evil.

The Gnostic philosophy espoused by Ishmael is a fulfillment of Cartesian skepticism. The Cartesian concept of the cosmic jester is discussed in the chapter "The Hyena" in which the god of this earth and the universe itself are viewed as "a vast practical joke ... at nobody's expense but his own" and later, "death itself, seem to him only sly, good natured hits, and jolly punches in the side bestowed by the unseen and unaccountable old joker (188). This is Ishmael's humorous reference to Descartes' attempt at an explanation of the problem of evil and the question of whether or not we can doubt our own existence. However, whereas Descartes decides that the Christian God could never be so cruel as to deceive us of our own existence, Melville concludes that the God of this earth is not benevolent and is actively trying to deceive us, as seen most clearly in "The Whiteness of The Whale" and "The Candles." Because Melville demonstrates that the Demiurge is playing a cosmic joke, *Moby-Dick* is a fulfillment of Cartesian skepticism taken to the furthest extreme through Gnostic thought. Earlier in the novel, in the chapter "The Mast-Head," Ishmael describes a sailor asleep at a masthead dreaming. In the passage, life is described as "borrowed from the sea" and from "the inscrutable tides of God" (136). Here Melville references Descartes' question of whether or not our existence is merely a dream.

Again, challenging Descartes' timidity, Ishmael, instead of saying God's goodness makes the suggestion of life being a dream void, argues that God keeps us asleep by his inscrutable tides. And later writes that when we awake, which in the context of the Gnostic thought of the novel means coming to the revelation that the universe is a deception formed by a deceiving deity, that "your identity comes back in horror. Over Cartesian vortices you hover. ... And [you] drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever" (136). Unlike Descartes, for Melville there is no hope. We are doomed to be deceived and live a vain life.

However, the tone of both "The Mast-Head" and "The Hyena" are jocular.

Like the chapter "A Squeeze of the Hand," Melville's solution and key to living life amidst the depressing realization that God is a deceiving, malevolent being, is to defy him through knowledge, countercultural pleasure, and laughing at, or alongside, God. As Ishmael says in "The Hyena," "There is nothing like the perils of whaling to breed this free and easy sort of genial, desperado philosophy" (188). Notice the terms he uses to describe his philosophy. First, unlike Descartes, he does not dismiss the philosophy of seeing life as a practical joke, rather he "breeds this free and easy philosophy" through whaling, embracing this philosophy instead of running away. It is "genial," meaning cheerful; the mode of defiance to laugh along with the hyena-like Demiurge. Ishmael makes a similar statement near the beginning of the novel when he writes about cosmic evil, "I am quick to perceive a horror; and could still be social with it ... since it is but well to be on friendly terms with all the names of the place one lodges in" (22). Here, as in "The Hyena" it is through knowledge of cosmic evil,

embodied in Moby-Dick, that Ishmael achieves his defiance. He also describes the philosophy as “desperado,” meaning openly and purposefully defiant. For Melville, as we see in both “A Squeeze of the Hand,” and the opening thesis of “Loomings,” going to sea is a jocular and desperado defiant act against the Demiurge, and the fulfillment of Cartesian skepticism is the key to enjoying life. Ishmael’s Cartesian continuance is also important because Descartes qualified many of his ideas by constantly referring to God’s supreme goodness so as not to upset the academy of Paris. Melville, however, with nobody to keep happy, having never attended college, throws no censorship on his philosophy and presents it in brutal, though humorous, honesty.

By evaluating the novel while keeping close attention to the Gnostic mythos Melville employs throughout the novel, many new understandings of passages are revealed. Ahab’s role as a tragic anti-hero, Ishmael’s neo-Cartesian skepticism, and the form of Moby Dick itself are given new understanding that allows for a fuller reading of the symbolic hunt for the whale.

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