



The Philosophy of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*

Biography

Herman Melville, the famous American short story writer, novelist, and poet, was born in 1819 in New York City and died in 1891. He produced numerous literary works, including his romantic accounts of life in Polynesia titled *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847), *The Piazza Tales* (1857) and *The Confidence Man* (1857), and his most famous work, *Moby-Dick*, in 1851. His “metaphysical” work, *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land*, was published in 1876. His novella, *Billy Budd*, another masterpiece, a “morality tale” and psychological study about an angelic young sailor, Billy, whose innocence, charm and popularity arouses jealousy and leads to his downfall and hanging, was unfinished at his death but was later completed by his widow and others. When Melville’s father, a merchant, went bankrupt and died suddenly, Herman, the third of seven children, about 15 years old at the time, had to drop out of school to help support the family. He worked as a teacher, helper on his uncle’s farm, and clerk at a local bank. During this time, however, he read extensively in mythology, anthropology and history, but was especially fascinated by Shakespeare’s magnificent poetry. He also learned at this time of the thrilling true story of the whaling ship *Essex* attacked and sunk by a giant whale in the South Seas in 1820.

In 1839, Melville took his first sea voyage as a cabin boy on a merchant ship. A year later, he joined the crew of the whaling vessel *Acushnet* in January of 1841. After a year and a half on the *Acushnet*, he and a fellow seaman were captured by cannibals in the Marquesas Islands, who, Melville said, treated him well, and lived with them for about a time until he was rescued by an Australian whaling ship, the *Lucy Ann*. He travelled on the *Lucy Ann* to Tahiti where he and another crew member committed mutiny. He was briefly jailed, but escaped and travelled to the nearby island Eimeo where he worked on a potato farm. Uninspired by potato farming, he joined the whaling ship *Charles and Henry* as a harpooner. When the *Charles and Henry* anchored in *Maui Island* 5 months later, he worked as a clerk and a bookkeeper in a general store in Honolulu. In August of 1843 he enlisted in the United States navy and worked as a seaman on the navy ship *United States* as it sailed around the Pacific. In October of 1844, Herman returned to his mother’s house to write about his adventures. His first manuscript, *Typee*, in which Tommo, the narrator, is captured by cannibals in the South Pacific Marquesas Islands, was rejected by publishers because they could not believe the story. It was later published to favourable reviews in London where it was seen to explore the relationship by a New Englander and an exotic foreign culture. The modest financial success of his early works enabled him to marry Elizabeth “Lizzie” Shaw, the daughter of a prominent Boston family, in 1847. His best-known work, *Moby-Dick*, inspired by the true story of the *Essex*, was not well-received in the United States, but was slightly better received in England. The great American writer, Nathaniel Hawthorne, impressed by an early manuscript of *Moby-Dick*, became a lifelong friend and gave

Melville much encouragement. There have been somewhat speculative claims of a homoerotic relationship between Melville and Hawthorne, and there are definite homoerotic passages in *Moby-Dick*, usually in the form of humor. After the disappointment of *Moby-Dick*'s reception, and the tragic early deaths of several of his children, and difficulties in his marriage due to financial problems and his drinking, Melville battled depression, obscurity, and financial ruin. A trip to Europe to visit Hawthorne did little to lighten his depression. Melville toured from 1857 to 1860 giving lectures on a wide range of topics associated with his adventures before moving back to New York where, believing himself a failure, he worked as a customs inspector on the New York docks until his death. However, many scholars now see *Moby-Dick* as the quintessential American novel and one of the great literary works of all time. *Moby-Dick*, written by a man who never finished high school, is now on virtually every high school reading list in the United States and is celebrated around the world. Many of Melville's other works are also now recognized as masterpieces.

Moby-Dick

Since, according to the microcosmic doctrine, every living organism is an image of the entire cosmos (a "little world" in its own right), one of the best ways to explore the true meaning of the novel is to explore its main characters, most importantly, Ishmael, the narrator in the novel and spokesperson for its deepest values, Ahab, the monomaniacal captain of the *Pequod* bent on revenge against the great white whale that took his leg in a sea battle years earlier, Pip, the timid black youth who is the conscience of the novel,¹ and Queequeg, the "tattooed savage" Polynesian cannibal harpooner with whom Ishmael is forced, reluctantly, to share a tiny bed. Upon waking following next morning, Ishmael exclaims: "You had almost thought I had been his wife".²

The novel begins with one of the most famous lines in literature: "Just call me Ishmael". Since one never knows Ishmael's real name, he is assigned no specific identity in the novel and is thereby enabled to be the ideal "democratic" person who represents everybody.³ Although Ishmael hints that he has a New England Presbyterian background, the name "Ishmael", in Jewish, Christian and Muslim literature connotes an outcast and a wanderer. Ishmael was the first son of Abraham, not conceived by his barren wife Sarah, but by her Egyptian handmaiden, Hagar. Thus, the Biblical Ishmael "shall be a wild donkey of a man" (Genesis 16:2). That is, although the narrator of the novel, who expresses its deepest values, may, formerly, have been a *New England* Presbyterian, he has become an outsider, a "wild donkey" of a man who wanders the wild seas of life, representing all human beings, attempting to plumb the cosmic depths. Ishmael, the best candidate for a philosopher in the novel, states that whereas the Right Whale is Lockean and Stoic, the Sperm Whale is Platonic and Kantian. Although, clearly, said tongue in cheek in one of the many humorous passages in the novel, the comparison repeats the microcosmic idea that even whales have human characteristics.

Captain Ahab fanatically forces the crew of the *Pequod* to hunt down *Moby-Dick* in revenge for taking his leg in an earlier encounter. Ahab's name is also significant. In the Biblical *Book of Kings* (16:28-22:4), Ahab is an evil idol-worshipping ruler. The Ahab of *Moby-Dick* wears a prosthetic leg made of whalebone, symbolizing his own identity with the whale. Ahab has come to resemble the whale that he hates. Ahab is, at one point in the novel, called an "ungodly god-like man", suggesting that his fanatical hatred of the whale has made him more than a man can be, almost godlike, but, since that exceeds human nature, the price is that he is robbed of his humanity and the capacity for love. When *Moby-Dick* is sighted Ahab's hatred for the whale

makes him lose all restraint and, in the ensuing fight, Moby-Dick drags Ahab to his death to the bottom of the sea.

Pip, the former slave, becomes so frightened on one of the whale hunts that he jumps out of the boat. His absence, in the chaos of the hunt, is not noticed and he is found, completely by accident, after floating around alone for a considerable time with the sea, by the harpoon boats as they return to the Pequod. Since the sea symbolizes the wild unfathomable part of the world, Pip, alone with the unfathomable secrets of the universe for so long, glimpses things that mere human beings are not meant to see, and goes mad. Although he may appear to be mad from a human perspective, he has actually achieved a kind of wisdom that is too high for mere human beings: “So man’s insanity is heaven’s sense”.⁴

Although Ishmael is frightened by his first glimpse of the savage heavily tattooed harpoon-toting cannibal, Queequeg turns out to be a remarkably decent person. One gets the feeling as the novel progresses that one would actually end up trusting Queequeg more than most human beings. After coming to know Queequeg’s character, Ishmael is forced to conclude that it is “Better [to] sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian.”⁵ It is not long before Ishmael is as comfortable with the cannibal Queequeg as he would be with his New England Presbyterian forbears – once again illustrating the microcosmic unity that unites all living beings.

Moby-Dick may appear to be a mere adventure story, a battle between the crew on a fragile whaling ship and a monstrous white whale, but it is actually an exploration of unfathomable depths of the cosmos, and, given the microcosmic doctrine, of the unfathomable microcosmic depths of the human soul as well. Each of the characters, the fanatical evil, even Satanic, Ahab, the gentle timid Pip, the “philosopher” Ishmael, the unexpectedly moral and decent “savage” cannibal Queequeg, and the rest of the crew all correspond to aspects of the human soul. The crew of the *Pequod*, this microcosm of the human family, wanders over the wild seas of life searching to plumb the unfathomable depths of the primal sea until, at the end of the novel, the great whale rises up out of the depths, which is at the same time their own depths, and shatters their little worlds.⁶

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¹ Moby-Dick, Chap 93

² Moby-Dick, Chap’s 4, 110

³ Way, *Herman Melville*, p. 53

⁴ Moby-Dick, Chap 93

⁵ Moby-Dick, Chap 3

⁶ Chap’s 1, 135

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Links:

There is a complete online edition of *Moby-Dick* at Project Gutenberg: URL: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2701/2701-h/2701-h.htm>

There is a complete online edition of *Billy Budd* at Bibliomania. URL: <http://www.bibliomania.com/0/0/36/1006/frameset.html>

There are several of Melville's works, including several commentaries on his works, at *Project Gutenberg*. URL: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/search/?query=Herman+Melville>

There is a complete user-friendly online version of *Clarel* at URL: <https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Clarel>