

Ahab: The American Tragic Hero

In Melville's Moby-Dick, Great Britain is characterized throughout the text as a peculiar dichotomy of honor and buffoonery. At times, Melville refers to England romantically as the home of great lords, honorable deeds, and valiance. At other points in the book, however, Melville seems to consider England an outdated nation full of fools, governed by idiotic laws and inhabited by bumbling fools. Shakespeare's tragic heroes meet their downfall through some personal flaw. Melville links Ahab, captain aboard the doomed Pequod, to this bizarre characterization of England by several means. The presence of the Manxman aboard the ship serves as a reminder of Great Britain, and acts as a foil to Ahab's own character. Moreover, Melville's own depiction of Ahab in the book strongly suggests that of the Shakespearean tragic hero, further culturally linking Ahab to England. Melville's contrasting versions of England can be seen in Ahab's own character as well. At times, Ahab appears a tragic hero and, in his own mind, even a Christlike figure who nobly sacrifices himself in order to destroy evil. His own bullish refusal to accept reality, however, ultimately leads to his downfall. The comparison Melville draws between England and Ahab, therefore, serves to illuminate the captain's seemingly bipolar personality as he hunts the white whale.

At many points in the novel, Melville seems to ascribe to England the definition of honor. Upon meeting Queequeg in "Biographical," Ishmael comes to the conclusion that the "savage" is, in fact, incredibly noble. He describes Queequeg as a "sea Prince of Wales" (55) in a turn of phrase that serves both to link Queequeg to an indisputable benchmark of nobility (British royalty) and as a rather delightful pun. In "The Honor and Glory of Whaling", Ishmael argues that whaling ranks among the noblest professions of all. With no apparent irony, he describes whalers as "heroes, saints, demigods, and prophets" (362). He goes on to compare whalers to English saints, claiming that "a whaleman is the tutelary guardian of England; and by good rights, we harpooners of Nantucket should be enrolled in

the most noble order of St. George” (361). From these comparisons, the reader can see that Melville considers English gentry to be one of the noblest institutions in the world.

Despite these references to the greatness of English nobility, however, Melville appears to depict England as a nation full of buffoons at other points in the book. For instance, in “The Gam”, Melville describes the typical English whaler as follows:

“English whalers sometimes affect a kind of metropolitan superiority over the American whalers... but where this superiority in the English whaleman really does consist, it would be hard to say, seeing that the Yankees in one day, collectively, kill more whales than all the English, collectively, in ten years” (238)

Melville’s description of the English whaler, therefore, differs markedly from his description of the American whaler. Whereas the American whaler is the noblest sort of man, comparable to Saint George himself, the English whaler is typified as a smug little man with no particular achievements to back him up. Later in the text, Melville’s description of English law in “Heads or Tails” depicts England and Englishmen as utterly foolish. In this chapter, Melville relates the tale of a group of mariners who, upon killing a whale, have the carcass seized by “a very learned and most Christian and charitable gentleman” (398) who is permitted by English law to seize the whale for the Duke of the area. Melville describes this English gentleman in the most sarcastic and ironic of terms, but he scarcely treats the English mariners themselves any better. He describes the seamen’s reaction as follows: “Upon this the poor mariners in their respectful consternation – so truly English – knowing not what to say, fall to vigorously scratching their heads all around” (398). In this tale, then, Melville depicts the English nobility as greedy, English laws as nonsensical and arbitrary, and English commoners as idiotic.

Melville’s somewhat bipolar representation of England might be notable on its own. However, the author also takes pains to connect Captain Ahab to England throughout the novel. In this manner,

Melville projects onto Ahab the duality of nobility and idiocy that he attributes to England in the novel. One way in which Melville connects Ahab to England is through the presence of the Manxman aboard the Pequod, who serves as a British foil to Ahab's own character. The Manxman, in keeping with Melville's depiction of other Englishmen, serves alternately as an uneducated buffoon and as a source of wisdom and steadiness. Perhaps ironically, the Manxman seems to be at his most ridiculous when Ahab is playing the role of the noble hero, but is portrayed as wise when Ahab is acting at the height of his madness. For instance, in "The Log and the Line" the Manxman reveals where he is from in the following exchange:

"Where wert thou born?"

'In the little rocky Isle of Man, Sir.'

'Excellent! Thou'st hit the world by that.'

'I know not, Sir, but I was born there.'

'In the Isle of Man, hey? Well, the other way, it's good. Here's a man from Man, a man born in once independent Man, and now unmanned of Man'" (513)

Ahab makes fun of the Manxman, and his country's loss of independence, with clever wordplay, which the Manxman seems unable to follow. Later, however, the Manxman correctly interprets the ill signs accompanying the voyage, which Ahab bullishly chooses to ignore. When the Pequod approaches the Rachel, the Manxman mutters under his breath that "she brings bad news" (p. 521), which turns out to be true. He also foretells the date that Ahab will encounter Moby Dick when he says "If the White Whale be raised, it must be in a month and a day" (p. 431). In fact, the Manxman's grim predictions cause Ishmael to decide that he must have been an "old hearse-driver... before he took to the sea" (p. 431). Ahab, however, ignores all warnings from the Manxman about the ill fortune to come.

With his well-founded respect for the ocean and his correct reminders of the bad fortune ahead, the Manxman serves as a reminder of how incredibly reckless and bold Ahab is, to continue his hunt for Moby Dick even in the face of such ill omens as are presented him. He therefore acts as a foil to Ahab's character, acting foolish when Ahab is clever and wise when Ahab is foolish. This connection between the two characters serves to link Ahab to Britain through the Manxman.

Melville further cements the connection between Ahab and England by creating a character markedly similar to the Shakespearean tragic hero. From the reader's first introduction to Ahab, striking parallels can be drawn between the whaling captain and the flawed hero at the center of many of Shakespeare's plays. Like the Shakespearean hero, Ahab meets his downfall through a personal flaw. Shakespeare's tragedies often also contain elements of mysticism and prophecies in them. Macbeth has his witches, Caesar has his soothsayer – even Othello has old Brabantio warning him that Desdemona may deceive him.¹ As with King Lear, Julius Caesar, and Macbeth, Ahab's great flaw is his pride, which ultimately causes his own death as well as that of the crew. Also like the Shakespearean tragic hero, Ahab has his own augurers portending his death. From the beginning of the book, bad omens accompany the voyage. Even before Ahab first appears, Ishmael and Queequeg encounter Elijah, who hints at some ill fortune with his unsettling line, "I was going to warn ye against – but never mind... Shan't see ye again very soon, I guess; unless it's before the Grand Jury" (98). Ishmael's uneasiness is compounded when he and Queequeg stay at not one but two foreboding inns – one owned by a Mr. Peter Coffin (8), and the other with a "top-mast [that] looked not a little like a gallows" (64). Later in the book, during the voyage, the sailor Fedallah prophesizes to Ahab still more ill omens: that Fedallah will die before Ahab, that Ahab will see two hearses before his death, and that "'Hemp only can kill thee'" (p. 492). In a misguided overconfidence reminiscent of Macbeth's, Ahab misinterprets Fedallah's

¹ Othello, I.iii – "Look to her [Desdemona], Moor, if thou hast eyes to see:/ she has deceived her father, and may thee." Admittedly, Desdemona never does deceive Othello, but Othello's fear that she will proves to be his downfall.

warning, choosing to believe that he will die by hanging and therefore cannot die at sea. Even in his long soliloquies interspersed throughout the book, Ahab echoes the Shakespearean hero. Melville in this manner makes the parallels between Ahab and his Shakespearean counterparts readily apparent.

Ahab's speech and behaviors further connect him to the Shakespearean hero. Throughout the book, Ahab soliloquizes and speaks in formalized, somewhat archaic English, distinguishing him from the other characters. For example, in "The Symphony", most of the chapter consists of Ahab delivering long, eloquent monologues to Starbuck. An excerpt from one of these monologues is reproduced below:

"What is it, what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what cozening, hidden lord and master, and cruel remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time; recklessly making me ready to dowhat in my own proper, natural heart, I durst not so much as dare? Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who that lifts this arm?" (536)

This type of elevated language is reserved throughout the book for only Ahab. The use of monologue in the book, along with entire scenes narrated entirely in dialogue (the exchange with the Manxman previously referenced offers a brief example), highlight Ahab's connection to the classical English tragic hero.

These connections serve to craft a sort of American version of the classic English tragic hero in Ahab. Echoing the classical Shakespearean tragedy, Ahab blindly forges ahead in his quest to slay Moby Dick, and, like in the classic Shakespearean tragedy, the prophecies become true. After Fedallah's death, Ahab sees two "hearses": the sinking Pequod, and Moby Dick himself, with "the half torn body of the Parsee... lashed round and round to the fish's back... his distended eyes turned full upon old Ahab" (p. 560). Following this jarring sight, after a battle with the whale, Ahab's neck is caught by the end of his own harpoon, and Moby Dick drags him off into the ocean. During Ahab's final moments, the sailor

Tashtego is preoccupied with nailing a flag to the doomed Pequod's mast. Somehow a hawk gets itself caught between Tashtego's hammer and the flag, and, "his whole captive form folded in the flag of Ahab, went down with the ship" (p. 566). Thus we can see that, although the casualties of Ahab's folly were something less than the lives lost in the great battles of Caesar and Macbeth and Lear, Melville has attached a great symbolic significance to Ahab's death and the Pequod's sinking. The flag², and the bird caught between the flag and the ship's sinking mast, are both symbols of Ahab's entire country. This symbolism suggests that the entire American nation is bound to Ahab's folly, and that he is in some figurative sense bringing the country down with him. As with Hamlet's demise, Ahab's death takes on the symbolism of his whole's country's decline.

The reader can therefore understand that the character of Ahab is designed to represent an American version of the classical English tragic hero. Melville portrays England as alternately noble and idiotic, much like the Shakespearean tragic hero who alternates between noble motives and bullish, willful ignorance of the ill omens portending their own demise. Through use of the Manxman as a British foil to Ahab's own personality and Ahab's archaic, dramatic language, Melville links Ahab specifically to the Shakespearean tragic hero. Consequently, Ahab's ultimate demise is laden with the lofty significance of Shakespearean kings and emperors – when Ahab and his ship sink, his entire country and even heaven itself are symbolically dragged down to the depths with him.

References

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² Although the flag is not specified in the text, it seems reasonable to assume that it is an American flag

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