

Plot Overview

Ishmael, the narrator, announces his intent to ship aboard a whaling vessel. He has made several voyages as a sailor but none as a whaler. He travels to New Bedford, Massachusetts, where he stays in a whalers' inn. Since the inn is rather full, he has to share a bed with a harpooner from the South Pacific named Queequeg. At first repulsed by Queequeg's strange habits and shocking appearance (Queequeg is covered with tattoos), Ishmael eventually comes to appreciate the man's generosity and kind spirit, and the two decide to seek work on a whaling vessel together. They take a ferry to Nantucket, the traditional capital of the whaling industry. There they secure berths on the Pequod, a savage-looking ship adorned with the bones and teeth of sperm whales. Peleg and Bildad, the Pequod's Quaker owners, drive a hard bargain in terms of salary. They also mention the ship's mysterious captain, Ahab, who is still recovering from losing his leg in an encounter with a sperm whale on his last voyage.

The Pequod leaves Nantucket on a cold Christmas Day with a crew made up of men from many different countries and races. Soon the ship is in warmer waters, and Ahab makes his first appearance on deck, balancing gingerly on his false leg, which is made from a sperm whale's jaw. He announces his desire to pursue and kill Moby Dick, the legendary great white whale who took his leg, because he sees this whale as the embodiment of evil. Ahab nails a gold doubloon to the mast and declares that it will be the prize for the first man to sight the whale. As the Pequod sails toward the southern tip of Africa, whales are sighted and unsuccessfully hunted. During the hunt, a group of men, none of whom anyone on the ship's crew has seen before on the voyage, emerges from the hold. The men's leader is an exotic-looking man named Fedallah. These men constitute Ahab's private harpoon crew, smuggled aboard in defiance of Bildad and Peleg. Ahab hopes that their skills and Fedallah's prophetic abilities will help him in his hunt for Moby Dick.

The Pequod rounds Africa and enters the Indian Ocean. A few whales are successfully caught and processed for their oil. From time to time, the ship encounters other whaling vessels. Ahab always demands information about Moby Dick from their captains. One of the ships, the Jeroboam, carries Gabriel, a crazed prophet who predicts doom for anyone who threatens Moby Dick. His predictions seem to carry some weight, as those aboard his ship who have hunted the whale have met disaster. While trying to drain the oil from the head of a captured sperm whale, Tashtego, one of the Pequod's harpooners, falls into the whale's voluminous head, which then rips free of the ship and begins to sink. Queequeg saves Tashtego by diving into the ocean and cutting into the slowly sinking head.

During another whale hunt, Pip, the Pequod's black cabin boy, jumps from a whaleboat and is left behind in the middle of the ocean. He goes insane as the result of the experience and becomes a crazy but prophetic jester for the ship. Soon after, the Pequod meets the Samuel Enderby, a whaling ship whose skipper, Captain Boomer, has lost an arm in an encounter with Moby Dick. The two captains discuss the whale; Boomer, happy simply to have survived his encounter, cannot understand Ahab's lust for vengeance. Not long after, Queequeg falls ill and has the ship's carpenter make him a coffin in anticipation of his death. He recovers, however, and the coffin eventually becomes the Pequod's replacement life buoy.

Ahab orders a harpoon forged in the expectation that he will soon encounter Moby Dick. He baptizes the harpoon with the blood of the Pequod's three harpooners. The Pequod kills several more whales. Issuing a prophecy about Ahab's death, Fedallah declares that Ahab will first see

two hearses, the second of which will be made only from American wood, and that he will be killed by hemp rope. Ahab interprets these words to mean that he will not die at sea, where there are no hearses and no hangings. A typhoon hits the Pequod, illuminating it with electrical fire. Ahab takes this occurrence as a sign of imminent confrontation and success, but Starbuck, the ship's first mate, takes it as a bad omen and considers killing Ahab to end the mad quest. After the storm ends, one of the sailors falls from the ship's masthead and drowns—a grim foreshadowing of what lies ahead.

Ahab's fervent desire to find and destroy Moby Dick continues to intensify, and the mad Pip is now his constant companion. The Pequod approaches the equator, where Ahab expects to find the great whale. The ship encounters two more whaling ships, the Rachel and the Delight, both of which have recently had fatal encounters with the whale. Ahab finally sights Moby Dick. The harpoon boats are launched, and Moby Dick attacks Ahab's harpoon boat, destroying it. The next day, Moby Dick is sighted again, and the boats are lowered once more. The whale is harpooned, but Moby Dick again attacks Ahab's boat. Fedallah, trapped in the harpoon line, is dragged overboard to his death. Starbuck must maneuver the Pequod between Ahab and the angry whale.

On the third day, the boats are once again sent after Moby Dick, who once again attacks them. The men can see Fedallah's corpse lashed to the whale by the harpoon line. Moby Dick rams the Pequod and sinks it. Ahab is then caught in a harpoon line and hurled out of his harpoon boat to his death. All of the remaining whaleboats and men are caught in the vortex created by the sinking Pequod and pulled under to their deaths. Ishmael, who was thrown from a boat at the beginning of the chase, was far enough away to escape the whirlpool, and he alone survives. He floats atop Queequeg's coffin, which popped back up from the wreck, until he is picked up by the Rachel, which is still searching for the crewmen lost in her earlier encounter with Moby Dick.

Themes, Motifs & Symbols

Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

Major Themes

Ahab as a Blasphemous Figure:

A major assumption that runs through *Moby Dick* is that Ahab's quest against the great whale is a blasphemous activity, even apart from the consequences that it has upon its crew. This blasphemy takes two major forms: the first type of blasphemy to prevail within Ahab is hubris, the idea that Ahab thinks himself the equal of God. The second type of blasphemy is a rejection of God altogether for an alliance with the devil. Melville makes this point explicit during various episodes of the novel, such as the instance in which Gabriel warns Ahab to "think of the blasphemer's end" (Chapter 71: The Jeroboam's Story) and the appraisal of Ahab from Peleg in which he designates him as an ungodly man (Chapter 16: The Ship).

The idea that Ahab's quest for Moby Dick is an act of defiance toward God assuming that Ahab is omnipotent first occurs before Ahab is even introduced during Father Mapple's sermon. The lesson of the sermon, which concerns the story of Jonah and the whale, is to warn against the

blasphemous idea that a ship can carry a man into regions where God does not reign. Ahab parallels this idea when he compares himself to God as the lord over the Pequod (Chapter 109: Ahab and Starbuck in the Cabin). Melville furthers this idea through the prophetic dream that Fedallah tells Ahab that causes Ahab to conclude that he is immortal.

Nevertheless, a more disturbing type of blasphemy also emerges during the course of the novel in which Ahab does not merely believe himself omnipotent, but aligns himself with the devil during his quest. Ahab remains in collaboration with Fedallah, a character rumored by Stubb to be the devil himself, and when Ahab receives his harpoon he asks that it be baptized in the name of the devil, not in the name of the father.

The Whale as a Symbol of Unparalleled Greatness:

When Melville, through Ishmael, describes the Sperm Whale during the many non-narrative chapters of *Moby Dick*, the idea that the whale has no parallel in excellence recurs as a nearly labored point. Melville approaches this theme from a variety of standpoints, whether biological or historical, in order to prove the superiority of the whale over all other creatures. During a number of occasions Melville relates whaling to royal activity, as when he notes the strong devotion of Louis XVI to the whaling industry and considers the whale as a delicacy fit for only the most civilized. In addition, Melville cites the Indian legends of Vishnoo, the god who became incarnate in a whale. Even when discussing the whale in mere aesthetic terms Melville lauds it for its features, devoting an entire chapter (42) to the whiteness of the whale, while degrading those artists who falsely depict the whale.

The theme of the excellence of the whale serves to place Ahab's quest against *Moby Dick* as, at best, a virtually insurmountable task in which he is doomed to failure. Melville constructs the whale as a figure that cannot be easily vanquished, if it can be defeated at all.

The Whale as an Undefinable Figure:

While Melville uses the whale as a symbol of excellence, he also resists any literal interpretation of that excellence by refusing to equate the species with any concrete object or idea. For Melville, the whale is an indefinite figure, as best shown in "The Whiteness of the Whale" (Chapter 42). Melville defines the whiteness as absence of color and thus finds the whale as having an absence of meaning. Melville bolsters this premise that the whale cannot be defined through the various stories that Ishmael tells in which scholars, historians and artists misinterpret the whale in their respective fields. Indeed, the extended discussion of the various aspects of the whale also serve this purpose; by detailing the various aspects of the whale in their many forms, Melville makes the whale an even more inscrutable figure whose essence cannot be described through its history or physiognomy.

The recurring failed attempts to find a concrete definition of the whale leave the Sperm Whale, and *Moby Dick* more specifically, as abstract and devoid of any concrete meaning. By allowing the whale to exist as a mysterious figure, Melville does not pin the whale down as an easy metaphorical parallel, but instead leaves a multiplicity of various interpretations for *Moby Dick*.

A more personalized interpretation for the thematic significance of the inability to define the whale relates to Ahab's comparison of Moby Dick to a mask that obscures the unknown reasoning that he seeks. In this interpretation, the inability to define a whale is significant not in itself, but because it stands in the way of greater reasoning and understanding.

Moby Dick as a Part of Ahab: Throughout the novel, Melville creates a relationship between Ahab and Moby Dick despite the latter's absence until the final three chapters through the recurrence of elements creating a close relationship between Ahab and the whale. The most significant of these is the actual physical presence of the Sperm Whale as part of Ahab's body in the form of Ahab's ivory leg. The whale is a physical part of Ahab in this instance; it is literally a part of Ahab. Melville also develops this theme through the uncanny sense that Ahab has for the whale. Ahab has a nearly psychic sense of Moby Dick's presence, and more tragically, the idea of Moby Dick perpetually haunts the formidable captain. This theme serves in part to better explain the depth of emotion behind Ahab's quest for the whale; as a living presence that haunts Ahab's life, he feels that he must continue on his quest no matter the cost.

The Contrast between Civilized and Pagan Society: The relationship between Queequeg and Ishmael throughout Moby Dick generally illustrates the prevalent contrast between civilized, specifically Christian societies and uncivilized, pagan societies. The continued comparisons and contrasts between these two types of societies is often favorable for Melville, particularly in the discussion of Queequeg, the most idealized character in the novel, whose uncivilized and imposing appearance only obscures his actual honor and civilized demeanor. In this respect, Melville is fit simply to deconstruct Queequeg and place him in entirely sympathetic terms, finding the characters from civilized and from uncivilized societies to be virtually identical. Nevertheless, Melville does not include these thematic elements simply for a lesson on other cultures; a recurring theme equates non-Christian societies with diabolical behavior, particularly when in reference to Ahab. Ahab specifically chooses the three pagan characters' blood when he wishes to temper his harpoon in the name of the devil, while the most obviously corrupt character in Moby Dick is conspicuously the Persian Fedallah, whom the other characters believe to be Satan in disguise. With the exception of Queequeg, equating the pagan characters with Satan does align with the general religious overtones of the novel, one which presumes Christianity as its basis and moral ground.

The Sea as a Place of Transition:

In Moby Dick, the sea represents a transitional place between two distinct states. Melville shows this early on in the case of Queequeg and the other Isolatoes (Daggoo and Tashtego), who represents the transition from uncivilized to civilized society unbound by any specific nationality, but in an overwhelming amount of cases this transitional theme relates to the precarious line between life and death. There are a number of characters who teeter at the brink between life and death, whether literally or metaphorically, throughout Moby Dick. Queequeg again proves to be an example: during his illness he prepares for death and in fact remains in his own coffin waiting for illness to overtake him, but it never does (Chapter 110: Queequeg in his coffin). The coffin itself becomes a transitional element several chapters later when the carpenter converts it into a life-buoy and it thus comes to symbolize both the saving of a life and the end of one (Chapter

126: The Life-Buoy).

Several of the minor characters in *Moby Dick* also exist in highly transitional states between life and death. After Pippin jumps to his death from the whaling boat and is saved only by chance, he loses his sanity and behaves as if a part of him, the "infinite of his soul" had already died; essentially, the character becomes a shell of a person waiting for death. Melville further elaborates this theme through the blacksmith, who works on the sea primarily as a means to escape life. He came on his journey to escape from the trappings of life after his family had died, and exists on sea primarily as a passage before his eventual death.

Harbingers and Superstition:

A recurring theme throughout *Moby Dick* is the appearance of harbingers, superstitious and prophecies that foreshadow a tragic end to the story. Even before Ishmael boards the *Pequod*, the Nantucket stranger Elijah warns Ishmael and Queequeg against traveling with Captain Ahab. The Parsee Fedallah also has a prophetic dream concerning Ahab's quest against *Moby Dick*, dreaming of hearses (although he misinterprets the dream to mean that Ahab will certainly kill *Moby Dick*). Indeed, the characters are bound by superstition and myth: the only reason that the *Pequod* kills a Right Whale is the legend that a ship will have good luck if it has the head of a Right Whale and the head of a Sperm Whale on its opposing sides. An additional harbinger of doom found in *Moby Dick* occurs when a hawk takes Ahab's hat, thus recalling the story of Tarquin and how his wife Tanaquil predicted that it was a sign that he would become king of Rome.

The purpose of these omens throughout *Moby Dick* is to create a sense of inevitability. Even from the beginning of the journey the *Pequod*'s mission is doomed by Captain Ahab, and the invocation of various omens serves to endow this mission with a sense of grandeur and destiny. It is no suicide mission that Ahab undertakes, but a grand folly of hubris.

The Limits of Knowledge

As Ishmael tries, in the opening pages of *Moby-Dick*, to offer a simple collection of literary excerpts mentioning whales, he discovers that, throughout history, the whale has taken on an incredible multiplicity of meanings. Over the course of the novel, he makes use of nearly every discipline known to man in his attempts to understand the essential nature of the whale. Each of these systems of knowledge, however, including art, taxonomy, and phrenology, fails to give an adequate account. The multiplicity of approaches that Ishmael takes, coupled with his compulsive need to assert his authority as a narrator and the frequent references to the limits of observation (men cannot see the depths of the ocean, for example), suggest that human knowledge is always limited and insufficient. When it comes to *Moby Dick* himself, this limitation takes on allegorical significance. The ways of *Moby Dick*, like those of the Christian God, are unknowable to man, and thus trying to interpret them, as Ahab does, is inevitably futile and often fatal.

The Deceptiveness of Fate

In addition to highlighting many portentous or foreshadowing events, Ishmael's narrative

contains many references to fate, creating the impression that the Pequod's doom is inevitable. Many of the sailors believe in prophecies, and some even claim the ability to foretell the future. A number of things suggest, however, that characters are actually deluding themselves when they think that they see the work of fate and that fate either doesn't exist or is one of the many forces about which human beings can have no distinct knowledge. Ahab, for example, clearly exploits the sailors' belief in fate to manipulate them into thinking that the quest for Moby Dick is their common destiny. Moreover, the prophesies of Fedallah and others seem to be undercut in Chapter 99, when various individuals interpret the doubloon in different ways, demonstrating that humans project what they want to see when they try to interpret signs and portents.

The Exploitative Nature of Whaling

At first glance, the Pequod seems like an island of equality and fellowship in the midst of a racist, hierarchically structured world. The ship's crew includes men from all corners of the globe and all races who seem to get along harmoniously. Ishmael is initially uneasy upon meeting Queequeg, but he quickly realizes that it is better to have a "sober cannibal than a drunken Christian" for a shipmate. Additionally, the conditions of work aboard the Pequod promote a certain kind of egalitarianism, since men are promoted and paid according to their skill. However, the work of whaling parallels the other exploitative activities—buffalo hunting, gold mining, unfair trade with indigenous peoples—that characterize American and European territorial expansion. Each of the Pequod's mates, who are white, is entirely dependent on a nonwhite harpooner, and nonwhites perform most of the dirty or dangerous jobs aboard the ship. Flask actually stands on Daggoo, his African harpooner, in order to beat the other mates to a prize whale. Ahab is depicted as walking over the black youth Pip, who listens to Ahab's pacing from below deck, and is thus reminded that his value as a slave is less than the value of a whale.

In a work of literature, a theme is a recurring, unifying subject or idea, a motif that helps us understand a work of art better. With a novel as richly ambiguous as *Moby-Dick*, we look at themes as guides, but it is important to be flexible while we do so. A good deal is left to individual interpretation so that one reader might disagree with another without necessarily being "wrong" or "right" about what the novel is saying. With that in mind, consider the following sections.

Defiance

Because of the dominance of Ahab's quest in the novel, the theme of defiance is of paramount importance. Father Mapple prepares us for a consideration of defiance with his sermon about Jonah in Chapter 9. Jonah suffers from the sin of disobedience. When God asks him to submit to God's will, Jonah attempts to flee from god. He thinks that he can find some country where God does not rule. What he learns is that he must set aside his own wishes, his own vanity, if he is to follow God's way. Father Mapple puts it like this: "And if we obey god, we must disobey ourselves; and it is in this disobeying ourselves, wherein the hardness of obeying God consists."

Whether he is fighting against God or the rules of nature or some sort of perverse evil authority, Ahab is a defiant man. After Starbuck suggests that it is "blasphemous" to seek revenge on some poor dumb brute, such as a whale, when it merely followed instinct and took off the captain's leg, Ahab responds that he would "strike the sun if it insulted me" (Chapter 36). Ahab explains

that he is not seeking revenge against a mere whale. He sees the White Whale as a mask, a façade, for his real enemy, which is an authority that rules over Ahab and which Ahab refuses to accept. The nature of that authority is debatable. We might infer that it is the order of nature, which Ahab sees as evil because Ahab insists on being placed higher in nature than a mere man can be.

Certainly Ahab is mad; even he knows that his monomaniacal obsession is not “normal.” But he strikes us as not being a man who would want to be normal. Ahab strikes back against the inscrutable figure behind the mask because Ahab sees no justification for submitting to it. He rebels with anger because he wants to be more than he is. Ahab defies whatever authority there is and stands against it with a soul that can be killed but not defeated. In that sense, he condemns himself to death; but it is a death that he prefers to submission. In his madness and egocentrism, tragically, he takes his ship and most of his crew with him.

Friendship

In contrast to Ahab’s self-centered defiance is the theme of friendship, or camaraderie, which is characterized primarily through Ishmael and Queequeg. The two meet under awkward circumstances. As a result of a shortage of beds at the Spouter-Inn, as well as the mischievous nature of the proprietor, Queequeg and Ishmael find themselves in a frightening situation. Ishmael has no idea that his bunkmate is a “heathen” and concludes that the aborigine who enters the room late is a cannibal. Queequeg doesn’t even know he is to share his bed with anyone and does threaten Ishmael’s life. It’s not an auspicious beginning for a friendship, but things soon get better because both men are open to the positive possibilities of diversity. They are characters who can and do grow and change. Queequeg left his native island of Kokovoko to learn about the rest of the world. Ishmael has similar motives for his ventures. Both understand that people from different cultures can learn from each other, and both value their differences as well as their similarities. An example is their respect for each other’s religion. Although Queequeg is no Christian, he does attend services at the Whaleman’s Chapel in New Bedford. Later, Ishmael bonds with Queequeg by sharing a pipe of tobacco and later making a burnt offering to Queequeg’s little idol, Yojo.

Although it is not investigated in detail, this kind of friendship is also somewhat true of the crew of the Pequod, which is a microcosm of life from various cultures. Ishmael alludes to the camaraderie as he describes working whale blubber with the other men. Unfortunately, there are exceptions aboard ship. Stubb is one. His scene with the black cook, Fleece, may have been designed for humor; but it seems more like an illustration of the absence of brotherhood. The gams with other ships do provide positive opportunities for camaraderie. Significantly, Ahab has almost no interest in friendship. He eventually banishes the one person, Pip, who begins to get close to him. Ahab’s mission allows for none of the warmth of friendship.

Ultimately, and symbolically, Queequeg indirectly saves Ishmael’s life. It is Queequeg’s coffin that pops to the surface after the Pequod sinks, providing the narrator with a life buoy and allowing him to survive until the Rachel rescues him. Queequeg could not have planned this, of course, but his loving nature would approve of his part in his friend’s good fortune.

Duty

Because most of the action of the novel takes place aboard ship, it is not surprising that duty is a major theme in *Moby-Dick*. The problem is how it is to be interpreted. For Father Mapple, the first duty of any shipmate is to God. We can serve our professional obligations only within that larger value system. This is not the case with Ahab. After Ahab's initial disagreement with Starbuck on the quarter-deck (Chapter 36) regarding the ship's mission, the crew sees Ahab as its highest authority. Later in the voyage, Ahab and Starbuck have another confrontation, again concerning duty, in the captain's cabin (Chapter 109).

Starbuck is a sincere Quaker with a hierarchy of loyalties: He feels a duty first to God, then to his employer (who supports Starbuck's family), then to his captain. When Starbuck discovers that some of the barrels in the hold of the ship must be leaking oil, he reports the situation to Ahab. The first mate expects the captain to stop the ship and turn all hands to a check of the casks because the ship's official mission is to capture whale oil and bring it home safely. As he says, "What we come twenty thousand miles to get is worth saving, sir." Ahab sardonically responds, "So it is, so it is; if we get it." Starbuck means the oil; Ahab means the White Whale. Starbuck reminds Ahab of the owners' interests, but the captain could not care less about the owners. He points a loaded musket toward the first mate and declares that there is "one Captain that is lord over the Pequod." Starbuck returns to the deck, and Ahab soon decides it is more prudent to stop the ship and make repairs.

It is clear, however, that the captain feels only one duty on this mission, and that is not to the owners or even to God but to Ahab. He will pursue his own monomaniacal goal in defiance of whatever gets in his path. The only way to stop Ahab is to kill him. When Starbuck has an opportunity to shoot the old man, with the same musket that Ahab pointed at him, the duties become confused in the first mate's mind. He has a duty to his family. How is that duty best served? He has a duty to the men who may well die with Ahab. But Starbuck feels a higher duty—to himself, to God, perhaps simply to decency. He is unable to pull the trigger, not through weakness but due to his own system of values. Because Starbuck cannot kill his captain, he must serve him.

Death

Although it does not dominate until the end, the theme of death casts an ominous shadow over the novel. When Ishmael arrives at the Spouter-Inn, he immediately notices a large, obscure oil painting, a "boggy, soggy, squitchy picture" (Chapter 3) with such a confusion of shades and shadows that, for some time, he can make no sense of it. Contributing to the theme of death, and foreshadowing events later in the novel, the subject seems to be a ship foundering in a terrible storm and under attack from a whale. The inn's proprietor is named "Coffin," contributing symmetry to a book that begins and ends with a coffin.

From the first, Ahab appears to be familiar with death. He looks like a man "cut away from the stake, when the fire has overrunningly wasted all the limbs without consuming them" (Chapter 28). His mission has only two possible results: death for many of the men or victory over forces

that probably cannot be defeated by this mortal. As practical as he is, Starbuck sees this; yet Starbuck cannot intentionally bring on his captain's death.

The Pequod's voyage is a voyage to death, and the prophecies in the novel all anticipate it. Elijah, a prophet of doom, cryptically warns of dark endings before the ship sails. The Shaker prophet aboard the Jeroboam, who calls himself Gabriel, predicts that Ahab will soon be joining the dead at the bottom of the sea. Fedallah's prophecy is most elaborate as he details events leading up to and including Ahab's death. The Parsee's predictions all come true in unexpected ways.

The novel ends in death for all but the narrator, Ishmael, who lives to tell the tale because his friend Queequeg's coffin has been caulked and pitched to become a life buoy, which emerges from the vortex of the sunken Pequod to bring new life and hope to the narrator. In the first British publication, there was no epilogue explaining Ishmael's survival; a criticism of the story was that it was told by a dead man. Melville solved that problem with a poetic conclusion so ideal that it is difficult to imagine the novel without it.

While the themes add cohesion to the novel, it is important not to become lost in them. Above all, Ishmael has told us an excellent "yarn," as Father Mapple would say, and we should enjoy.

Symbols in literature are usually objects used to represent or suggest important concepts that inform and expand our appreciation of the work. *Moby-Dick* offers some of the most widely known symbols in American literature. Being widely known, however, does not imply that the symbols are simple or easy to understand. Like the themes in the novel, the symbols are ambiguous in enriching ways.

Father Mapple's Pulpit

Father Mapple's pulpit in the Whaleman's Chapel effectively represents this former harpooner's approach to his ministry. Everything about the chapel reminds a visitor of life and death at sea. Father Mapple is the captain of the ship, the congregation his crew. The pulpit itself is shaped like the prow of a ship and features a painting of a vessel battling a storm near a rocky coast, an angel of hope watching over it. Without much effort, we can see that the pulpit represents the leadership of the pastor and implies that God himself is the pilot of this ship. Mapple's "shipmates," as he refers to the congregation, often find themselves battling storms on rocky coasts—either literally, in ships, or figuratively in the rest of their lives. They need the hope and consolation of God's grace, as represented by the angel.

Mapple ascends to the pulpit by climbing a rope ladder like one used to mount a ship from a boat at sea. He then pulls the rope up after him, effectively cutting off contact with worldly matters. In similar ways, the captain of a whaling ship assumes the pilot's role as he cuts off contact with land; the ship becomes a floating microcosm at sea. Melville makes effective use of contrast throughout the novel; here, it is between Mapple and Ahab. Mapple is an elderly but vigorous man of God who sees his role as leading his ship through rocky waters by gladly submitting to the will of a higher authority. Ahab is an ungodly man who doesn't mind wielding authority but

resents submitting to it. He wears his defiance proudly. In this sense, the pulpit represents the proper position for a ship's captain, performing his duty in leading his congregation toward an understanding of performing God's will.

Queequeg's coffin

The symbolism of Queequeg's coffin changes as the novel progresses. Initially, the coffin represents Queequeg's apparently impending death and his nostalgic link to his home island. The coffin is shaped like a canoe because of the custom on Kokovoko of setting the corpse adrift in such a craft. The belief was that eventually it would float over the ocean to the sky, which connects to the sea, and ultimately to one of the islands (stars) in the sky. Queequeg saw similar canoe coffins in Nantucket, and the custom of setting the corpse adrift is widespread among sea-faring people around the world.

The coffin represents ongoing life when it becomes Queequeg's sea chest after he decides not to die. It represents hope for renewal and a practical means of saving life when it is rigged to serve as a life buoy. Finally, the coffin is a symbol of hope and even rebirth when it springs from the vortex of the sunken Pequod to provide Ishmael with a means of staying afloat until the Rachel rescues him.

The White Whale

The White Whale is one of the best known symbols in American literature. What it represents depends entirely on who is noticing. To Starbuck, Moby Dick is just another whale, except that he is more dangerous. Early in the novel, Starbuck challenges Ahab's motives for altering the ship's mission, from accumulating oil to killing the White Whale. On the quarter-deck in Chapter 36, Starbuck calls it "blasphemous" to seek revenge on a "dumb brute ... that simply smote thee from blindest instinct!" If Starbuck sees anything beyond that in the whale, it is that Moby Dick represents the captain's madness and a very serious diversion from the ship's proper mission.

The Samuel Enderby's captain, who has lost an arm to the White Whale, sees it as representing a great prize in both glory and sperm oil but seems very reasonable in his desire to leave the whale alone. He says to Ahab, "There would be great glory in killing him, I know that; and there is a ship-load of precious sperm in him, but, hark ye, he's best let alone; don't you think so, Captain?" (Chapter 100) Ahab points out that the "accursed thing is not always what least allures."

To some, the White Whale is a myth. To others, he is immortal. But one significant question is, What is the White Whale to Ahab? Ishmael grants that Ahab views the whale as an embodiment of evil. Ishmael himself is not so sure. The narrator often sees both sides of a question, never more so than in Chapter 42, "The Whiteness of the Whale." There he tells us that Moby Dick's whiteness might represent good or evil, glory or damnation, all colors or the "visible absence of color."

For Ahab's interpretation, it is helpful to consider the captain's comments in the pivotal Chapter

36. There, the captain says he sees Moby Dick as a “mask,” behind which lies a great power whose dominance Ahab refuses to accept. Ahab sees that inscrutable power as evil. Some scholars argue that it is not the whale, or the force behind the whale, that is evil; the evil is in Ahab. Others see the captain as simply insane. Ahab is out of control as he rants about attacking the force behind the façade of Moby Dick. He wants to kill the whale in order to reach that force. Ahab seems to want to be a god. As great and charismatic a man as he can be in his finest moments, the captain is destructively egocentric and mad for power. To Ahab, we might conclude, the White Whale represents that power which limits and controls man. Ahab sees it as evil incarnate. But perhaps it is just a big, smart fish.

Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text’s major themes.

Whiteness

Whiteness, to Ishmael, is horrible because it represents the unnatural and threatening: albinos, creatures that live in extreme and inhospitable environments, waves breaking against rocks. These examples reverse the traditional association of whiteness with purity. Whiteness conveys both a lack of meaning and an unreadable excess of meaning that confounds individuals. Moby Dick is the pinnacle of whiteness, and Melville’s characters cannot objectively understand the White Whale. Ahab, for instance, believes that Moby Dick represents evil, while Ishmael fails in his attempts to determine scientifically the whale’s fundamental nature.

Surfaces and Depths

Ishmael frequently bemoans the impossibility of examining anything in its entirety, noting that only the surfaces of objects and environments are available to the human observer. On a live whale, for example, only the outer layer presents itself; on a dead whale, it is impossible to determine what constitutes the whale’s skin, or which part—skeleton, blubber, head—offers the best understanding of the entire animal. Moreover, as the whale swims, it hides much of its body underwater, away from the human gaze, and no one knows where it goes or what it does. The sea itself is the greatest frustration in this regard: its depths are mysterious and inaccessible to Ishmael. This motif represents the larger problem of the limitations of human knowledge. Humankind is not all-seeing; we can only observe, and thus only acquire knowledge about, that fraction of entities—both individuals and environments—to which we have access: surfaces.

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

The Pequod

Named after a Native American tribe in Massachusetts that did not long survive the arrival of white men and thus memorializing an extinction, the Pequod is a symbol of doom. It is painted a gloomy black and covered in whale teeth and bones, literally bristling with the mementos of violent death. It is, in fact, marked for death. Adorned like a primitive coffin, the Pequod becomes one.

Moby Dick

Moby Dick possesses various symbolic meanings for various individuals. To the Pequod's crew, the legendary White Whale is a concept onto which they can displace their anxieties about their dangerous and often very frightening jobs. Because they have no delusions about Moby Dick acting malevolently toward men or literally embodying evil, tales about the whale allow them to confront their fear, manage it, and continue to function. Ahab, on the other hand, believes that Moby Dick is a manifestation of all that is wrong with the world, and he feels that it is his destiny to eradicate this symbolic evil.

Moby Dick also bears out interpretations not tied down to specific characters. In its inscrutable silence and mysterious habits, for example, the White Whale can be read as an allegorical representation of an unknowable God. As a profitable commodity, it fits into the scheme of white economic expansion and exploitation in the nineteenth century. As a part of the natural world, it represents the destruction of the environment by such hubristic expansion.

Queequeg's Coffin

Queequeg's coffin alternately symbolizes life and death. Queequeg has it built when he is seriously ill, but when he recovers, it becomes a chest to hold his belongings and an emblem of his will to live. He perpetuates the knowledge tattooed on his body by carving it onto the coffin's lid. The coffin further comes to symbolize life, in a morbid way, when it replaces the Pequod's life buoy. When the Pequod sinks, the coffin becomes Ishmael's buoy, saving not only his life but the life of the narrative that he will pass on.

Analysis of Major Characters

Ishmael

Despite his centrality to the story, Ishmael doesn't reveal much about himself to the reader. We know that he has gone to sea out of some deep spiritual malaise and that shipping aboard a whaler is his version of committing suicide—he believes that men aboard a whaling ship are lost to the world. It is apparent from Ishmael's frequent digressions on a wide range of subjects—from art, geology, and anatomy to legal codes and literature—that he is intelligent and well educated, yet he claims that a whaling ship has been “[his] Yale College and [his] Harvard.” He seems to be a self-taught Renaissance man, good at everything but committed to nothing. Given the mythic, romantic aspects of Moby-Dick, it is perhaps fitting that its narrator should be an enigma: not everything in a story so dependent on fate and the seemingly supernatural needs to make perfect sense.

Additionally, Ishmael represents the fundamental contradiction between the story of Moby-Dick and its setting. Melville has created a profound and philosophically complicated tale and set it in a world of largely uneducated working-class men; Ishmael, thus, seems less a real character than an instrument of the author. No one else aboard the Pequod possesses the proper combination of intellect and experience to tell this story. Indeed, at times even Ishmael fails Melville's purposes, and he disappears from the story for long stretches, replaced by dramatic dialogues and soliloquies from Ahab and other characters.

Ahab

Ahab, the Pequod's obsessed captain, represents both an ancient and a quintessentially modern type of hero. Like the heroes of Greek or Shakespearean tragedy, Ahab suffers from a single fatal

flaw, one he shares with such legendary characters as Oedipus and Faust. His tremendous overconfidence, or hubris, leads him to defy common sense and believe that, like a god, he can enact his will and remain immune to the forces of nature. He considers Moby Dick the embodiment of evil in the world, and he pursues the White Whale monomaniacally because he believes it his inescapable fate to destroy this evil. According to the critic M. H. Abrams, such a tragic hero “moves us to pity because, since he is not an evil man, his misfortune is greater than he deserves; but he moves us also to fear, because we recognize similar possibilities of error in our own lesser and fallible selves.”

Unlike the heroes of older tragic works, however, Ahab suffers from a fatal flaw that is not necessarily inborn but instead stems from damage, in his case both psychological and physical, inflicted by life in a harsh world. He is as much a victim as he is an aggressor, and the symbolic opposition that he constructs between himself and Moby Dick propels him toward what he considers a destined end.

Moby Dick

In a sense, Moby Dick is not a character, as the reader has no access to the White Whale’s thoughts, feelings, or intentions. Instead, Moby Dick is an impersonal force, one that many critics have interpreted as an allegorical representation of God, an inscrutable and all-powerful being that humankind can neither understand nor defy. Moby Dick thwarts free will and cannot be defeated, only accommodated or avoided. Ishmael tries a plethora of approaches to describe whales in general, but none proves adequate. Indeed, as Ishmael points out, the majority of a whale is hidden from view at all times. In this way, a whale mirrors its environment. Like the whale, only the surface of the ocean is available for human observation and interpretation, while its depths conceal unknown and unknowable truths. Furthermore, even when Ishmael does get his hands on a “whole” whale, he is unable to determine which part—the skeleton, the head, the skin—offers the best understanding of the whole living, breathing creature; he cannot localize the essence of the whale. This conundrum can be read as a metaphor for the human relationship with the Christian God (or any other god, for that matter): God is unknowable and cannot be pinned down.

Starbuck, Stubb, and Flask

The Pequod’s three mates are used primarily to provide philosophical contrasts with Ahab. Starbuck, the first mate, is a religious man. Sober and conservative, he relies on his Christian faith to determine his actions and interpretations of events. Stubb, the second mate, is jolly and cool in moments of crisis. He has worked in the dangerous occupation of whaling for so long that the possibility of death has ceased to concern him. A fatalist, he believes that things happen as they are meant to and that there is little that he can do about it. Flask simply enjoys the thrill of the hunt and takes pride in killing whales. He doesn’t stop to consider consequences at all and is “utterly lost . . . to all sense of reverence” for the whale. All three of these perspectives are used to accentuate Ahab’s monomania. Ahab reads his experiences as the result of a conspiracy against him by some larger force. Unlike Flask, he thinks and interprets. Unlike Stubb, he believes that he can alter his world. Unlike Starbuck, he places himself rather than some external set of principles at the center of the cosmic order that he discerns.

