

Symbolism in ‘MOBY DICK’ by Herman Melville

¹D. Bhuvaneshwari , ²Dr.K.B.jasmine Suthanthira Devi

¹M.Phil Research Scholar, ² Professor in English

Department of English, Prist University, Thanjavur, India.

Abstract:

HERMAN Melville was born on August 1, 1819 in New York. His father named Allan Melville traced his descent to earlier Scotch-Irish emigrants to New England. By the spring of 1835, Herman went from the job of the bank to that of a clerk in the fur shop to get time to attend Albany classical school. In 1839, the financial position of the family further deteriorated. Herman Melville requested Peter Gansevoort to get him an employment on a sailing ship bound for voyage in Atlantic. Herman Melville had known the sailor's conditions and the sea-life during his voyage, and pronounced his comments in *Moby Dick*. The sea-life is a substitute for pistol and ball to the sailor. Herman Melville sailed into the ship on the 1st January, 1841 with a companion T.G. Greene (Toby) at the bay of Nukuheva in Marquesas Island, as given by his wife in her journal. The American whaling was to reach the prime of its glory in those days. Herman Melville produced *The White Jacket* and *Redburn* which are better books than *Mardi* which was not reviewed favourably by the English critics. Herman visited London in the ship *Southampton* on October 11. During the last years of his life Melville suffered bad health. He experienced repeated attacks of rheumatism. On a cold day in January 1891, he took a long walk with the result that he felt dizziness which caused the heart ailment. His condition continued deteriorating and he succumbed to his ailment on September 28, 1891, a month after his seventy-second birthday.

Introduction:

In Melville's novel, *Moby Dick* representing evil and mysterious nature, symbolizes terror. It is not only the enormous size of the deformity of the jaw that made him terrible, but his intelligent malignity heightened the sense of fear. "Nor was it his unwonted magnitude, nor his remarkable hue, nor yet his deformed lower jaw, that so much invested the whale with natural terror, as that unexampled malignity which according to specific accounts, he had over and over again evinced in his assaults. More than all, his treacherous retreats struck more of dismay than perhaps aught else." This is somewhat remarkable that the White Whale had "infernal afore thoughts of ferocity." The death and the disaster caused to the hunters crunched one leg of Ahab and disabled him. For Ahab, it is the sign of the intellectual and spiritual exasperation. "The White Whale swam before him as the

monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies, which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung." Ahab transferred the intangible to the abhorred whale. "All evil to Crazy Ahab was visibly personified, and made practically assailable in *Moby Dick*."(p40)

The White Whale has been regarded differently by different writers. It is a symbol of evil, and of Christ and God also. It represents inscrutable mysteries of nature and has become a symbol of the stern Calvinistic Doctrines. It is a force of evil to Ahab. The White Whale has white colour which is not only a symbol of purity, but of terror also. It is indefinite: "Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stubs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milkyway? Or is it, that as in

essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors, is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blackness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows a colourless, all colour atheism from which we shrink?" Thus, the White Whale is in absence of all colours as well as their mixture, and symbolizes immensities and vastness, and causes terror with the thoughts of annihilation. Ahab traces the root of all evil, "White, like life, includes joy, but to see it that way only is to be a transcendental optimist. The White Whale is life itself with its Good and its Evil; it is the final mystery which no man may know; and which no man should pursue unrelentingly. To life, the veil of Goddess is destruction, to the disciple of Truth and life."

Moby Dick is the mysterious nature and truth. Dr. Ahab seeks after truth which has eluded him, and Ahab loses his life in its quest. The Nature and its forces are impregnable. Like Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea*, Ahab has transgressed his limits.

Thomas traces in the White Whale symbol of evil and stresses that Melville is a God-hater. He remarks that "the White Whale is essentially a symbol of evil..... though not abstract, but very specific, theological kind of evil that corrupts the universe," In Melville, Thompson has pointed an element of sarcasm. Starbuck has killed a whale and a sense of pity has been aroused. "Mr. Thompson has revealed the similarity between the image of the suffering. Whale and forty- first Chapter of Job, in which Jehovah describes the impregnable attributes of Leviathan thereby, as it were, taunting the afflicted the Taunter, dismembering the Dismember. Bewley, disagreeing with Thompson, projects the image of the suffering Christ in the Whale. It would be better to institute analogy between the dismembered whale and the

suffering Christ. "Prefiguring the suffering of Christ, the psalmist cried: "they have pierced my hands and feet, they have numbered all my bones." The better explanation would be to bring in the image of Christ for parallelism with the dismembered whale than to attribute it to Melville's intention of insulting God. Thomson, further, has seen in the image of the harpooned whale, "attacked by lines to three whaling boats from the *Pequod*" a jibe at God with which Bewley does not agree. The following passage is important:

"Seems it credible that by three such thin threads the great Leviathan was suspended like the big weight to an eight day clock." Suspended? and to what? To three bits of board. Is this the creature of whom it was once so triumphantly said- "Canst thou fill his skin with barbed irons? Or his head with fish spears? The sword of him that layeth at him cannot hold the spear, the dart, nor the habergeon; he esteemeth iron as straw; the arrow cannot make him flee; darts are counted as stubble; he laugheth at the shaking of a spear!" "This is the creature? This he? Oh! That unfulfillments should follow the prophets. For with the strength of a thousand thighs in his tail.

Leviathan had run his head under the mountains of the sea to hide him from the "Pequod's fish spears."

The above passage treated to be a jibe at God by Thompson has nothing of the sort if this extract is studied in the context of the whole *Moby Dick*. Bewley repudiates the charge with his own comments:

"I think it not unreasonable to see something reminiscent of the three arms of the cross from which Christ hung in those three bits of wood from which Leviathan is suspended.- The tormented Leviathan, running his head under the water of the sea, recalls Psalms 69, which is commonly accepted as prefiguring the suffering of

Christ. Moreover, the Fish was early symbol of Christ and Christ was pierced by a spear, “it is possible that Melville reference to the ‘Pequod’s fish- spear is, most deeply at the expense of Ahab and his crew rather than at the expense of God.”(53)

Bewley’s interpretation is more plausible and correct when he traces, in the dismemberment of the fish, the sufferings of Christ. Through his knowledge of Shakespeare and Hawthorne, Melville was baffled with the question of the preponderance of evil in this world. The White Whale is the symbol of God who was stern and exacting, and Melville was not an orthodox Christian. To many it became a representative of malignancy and evil. The White Whale is not evil, and the malignancy has been attributed to it by the monomaniac Ahab. It is the squid which has been explained as the symbol of evil, it resemble the White Whale.... “The grand Squid was surely meant by Melville for his symbol of evil. It is, one would expect, evil in a Manichean rather than in a Christian sense, but the Squid’s horrid anaconda’s arms invoke the Christian serpent; and they also give an added meaning to a later reference to Captain Ahab as an anaconda of an old man.” The problem of good and evil is mixed up, and it is difficult to separate one from the other. Moreover, the value of a great work lies in profundity of its meaning, and in its contents capable of being explained in diverse ways.

It is easy to see in the White Whale the image of God. In the chapter ‘The Whale as a Dish’, the negro cook has prepared the Whale steak for Stubb who eats it in the light of the candle prepared from the whale oil. Melville has observed, “That mortal man should feed upon that that feeds his lamp, and, like Stubb, eat him by his own light, as you may say.” Melville describes the history of the whale as a delicacy. Eating whale by its own light is not a sarcasm at God’s

expense, but at the expense of a hypocritical and the savages world, that like the four hundred prophets of the king Ahab, uses the light of God for its profit “Further, Stubb asks the negro cook to teach the sharks, who are eating the dead whale outside while Stubb eats in his own cabin, a lesson. The negro cook preaches in the light of whale they are devouring.”

Later when the poquod enters china after crossing the circles, Melville in the most poetical language depicts the mother whales, pregnant ones, and the nursing whales. The infants are suckling. The picturesque account of the whales has been compared with the beautiful vision which Beatrice explains to Dante. *Moby Dick* comes to symbolize good. Ishmael does not see any evil in huge fish and goes to sea to gain spiritual health.

The Whale is a symbol of benevolent nature which becomes malevolent at times. It is a blend of the good and the evil both. Just as nature is destructive and savages, similarly the whale also has become an evil incarnate. Just as nature, like mother, feeds her infants, similarly the whale also serves as a food to the crew. Like its paradoxical white colour which is absent as well as the concrete of all colours, the White Whale is a symbol of the two opposite qualities of good and evil, epitomized in nature.

In the portrait of *Moby Dick*, different psychological meanings and the Jungian interpretations have been discovered. Hendry A. Murray in his chapter on *Moby Dick*, ‘In Nomine Diabole has studied a psychological symbol. Freud divided the psyche into Id, Ego, and Super-ego. Id represent the dark unconscious of man. Ego is the portrayal of the ideal. In the children’s dreams, and the adolescent’s phantasies, the archetypal persons who have become heroes and the heroines in the myths and the legends, have appeared. Our ancestors found in their objects of the

environment, sea and sky, superbeings, and patterns. Herman Melville felt that these archetypal figures were not merely ornamental pieces, but had passionate identifications. “Only by proceeding in this way could Melville have learned on his pulses what it was to be Narcissus, Orestes, Oedipus, Ishmael, Apollo, Lucifer. “like a frigate”, he said, “I am full with a thousand soul.” In Dr. Ahab, he discovered the image of Lucifer, and an element of anti-Christianity. Seen in the terms of the psychological terminology Ahab and Moby Dick respectively stand for ‘Id’ and ‘Super-ego’. Hendry A. Murray explicates their symbolic meaning in the following terms:

“Stated in psychological concepts, Ahab is Captain of the culturally repressed dispositions of human nature, that part of personality which psychoanalysts have termed the ‘Id’. If this is true, his opponent, the White Whale, can be none other than the internal institution which is responsible for these repressions, namely, the Freudian Super-ego. This then, is my second hypothesis. Moby Dick is a veritable spouting, breaching, sounding whale, a whale who, because of his whiteness, his mighty bulk and beauty, and because of one instinctive act that happened to dismember his assailant, has received the projection of Captain Ahab’s Presbyterian Conscience, and so may be said to embody the Old Testament. Calvinistic Conception of an affrighting Deity and his strict commandments, the derivative puritan ethic of the nineteenth century America and the society that defended this ethic.”(76) The White Whale with its gigantic size, and destructive power symbolizes the formidable institution of the Presbyterian conscience exercising its mighty influence on the mind of America.

The symbol of the White Whale has been studied and applied to Melville’s life also. The fish also represents the

sermonizing parents of Melville: “Also, and most specifically he symbolizes the zealous parents whose righteous sermonizing and corrections done the prohibitions in so hard that a serious young man could hardly reach outside the barrier except possibly far away among some tolerant, gracious Polynesian people. The emphasis should be placed on that unconscious (and hence inscrutable) well of inhibition which imprisoned the Puritan’s thrusting passions. “Melville has portrayed this predicament in ‘Moby Dick’. “How can a prisoner reach outside,”(88) except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the White Whale is that wall, shoved near to me.....I see in him outrageous strength with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. As a symbol of a sounding, breaching, white-dark, unconquerable New England conscience what could be better than a sounding, breaching, White-dark, unconquerable sperm whale.” Through the symbol of the White Whale representing the Calvinistic doctrines, against which it was futile to struggle, and which caused many repressions disallowing the gratification of the legitimate urges, Melville has successfully high-lighted the problem of his times as of himself, Melville’s parents were brought up in the Puritan faith which enjoined many “dos” and “don’t dos”. Melville himself has referred to the contributory factors of his mother’s prohibitory dispositions. In *pierre*, it is the “high up, and towering and all forbidding.....edifice of his mother,s immense pride.... Her pride of birth.... Her pride of purity” that is wall shoved near, “that wall that stands between the hero and the realization of his heart’s resolve.” Thus, Melville directed his attack not on mother, but on the Fate his mother’s God, and the other cramping institutions which suppressed the legitimate urges.

Melville renounced the world and the public of his time, because they were the

walls of the imprisonment, creating barriers in the realization of truth.

The White Whale has been treated as the symbol of Jehovah, the God of the Old Testament. The God of Hebrew is stern and exacting. Melville studied Milton's *Paradise lost* in 1850, and it is the same God in Melville's 'Moby Dick' "Who brought qeremiah into darkness, hedged him about, and made his path crooked; the God adopted by the fire and brimstone." Puritan who said, "With fury poured out I will rule over you." "The sword without and the terror within shall destroy both the young man and virgin. "I will also send the teeth of beasts upon them." "It will heap mischiefs upon them." "To me belongeth vengeance and recompense."

Melville at times abandoned the principle of Ego which enables a person to adjust with the reality and the outside world. He fathomed the unconscious, and detested the repressions and inhibitions, caused by the formidable institutions. Through the agency of Ahab, he "burst his hot heart's shell upon the sacrosanct Almighty and sacrosanct sentiments of Christianity."

Conclusion:

The two churches that Ishmael enters in these chapters suggest two distinct religious attitudes. The sermon preached in the black church is on "the blackness of darkness," suggesting that evil is impenetrable and cannot be understood by human beings. Father Mapple's sermon about Jonah demands that people heed God's call and proclaim the truth even in the face of great hostility, even when that truth goes against conventional ways of thinking. While the first sermon exemplifies the belief that the human being's power of understanding truth is extremely limited, the second suggests that God gives humans the power to apprehend truth, and that men and women should be so confident in their vision of this truth as to defy any opposition.

Throughout Ishmael's narrative, these two interpretations of human understanding vie with one another for primacy.

The comical process by which Ishmael befriends Queequeg introduces one of the novel's major facets: the topic of race relations. By developing a relationship with this "savage," Ishmael shows that he isn't bound by his prejudices. Indeed, his interactions with Queequeg make Ishmael realize that although most would call Queequeg a savage, the harpooner actually has a deeper understanding of what "civilization" means than most whites do, as his grooming habits demonstrate. Realizing that Queequeg treats him "with so much civility and consideration" while he himself was "guilty of great rudeness," Ishmael reexamines stereotypes about so-called savages. In fact, "for all his tattooings," says Ishmael, Queequeg "was on the whole a clean, comely looking cannibal." Queequeg's tattoos and supposed cannibalism mark him, in terms of nineteenth-century beliefs, as the ultimate savage. Tattooing is a voluntary alteration of the body that, unlike a hairstyle or clothing choice, is permanent; cannibalism is another fundamental Western taboo. Beyond these two characteristics, Queequeg is a veritable melting pot of different racial and ethnic traits: African, Polynesian, Islamic, Christian, and Native American. Allegedly from Kokovoko, an island in the South Seas, he worships an idol that looks like "a three days' old Congo baby" (West African) in a Ramadan (Islamic) ceremony and carries a tomahawk pipe (North American indigenous tribal).

Reference:-

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