

On the Modernity of Moby Dick

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Abstract: Moby Dick is a great classic born in the earth of Romanticism with modern features. Its modernity explains its popularity since the 1920s and its everlasting charm among readers and critics all over the world. what has been considered as failures and shortcomings in the novel turn out to be unmouted speciality of Herman Melville. Being a conscientious author Melville adopts thoughtful and cunning strategy to deliver his profound messages in the disguise of a romantic marine adventure by Ahab and Ishmael. This essay tries to interpret the modernity in Moby Dick from the perspective of structure, theme and style.

1. Introduction

Melville was popular among his contemporaries after he published *Omoo* and *Mardi*. Readers were fascinated by his marine scenery and his own adventures of more than two years' wandering as a sailor. This experience was very rare for white people, especially for people of prominent and literary origins like Melville. His sea novels made him a well-accepted writer and brought him timely economic gains to support his increasing family. He would continue his career as a popular writer about adventures and savages if he wouldn't meet Hawthorne in 1848, which changed his life and his writing dramatically. It is a fortune for modern readers but a misfortune for both Melville himself and his contemporary readers.

Melville has long been admiring Hawthorne; this respect triggers his revolution in his writing. Melville was a mature and conscious writer, who was sharp enough to find out that the European subject, especially British subject was still dominating American literature although the new nation obtained its political independence nearly one hundred years ago. To achieve the literary independence and originality in American literature, Melville wrote the famous essay "Hawthorne and His Mosses" to call on the attention of American authors to stop imitating and following European literature.

In "Hawthorne and His Mosses", Melville spoke highly of Hawthorne and placed him an American counterpart of Shakespeare; this title was later entitled to himself by 20th century readers. Melville incited American writers to write American subjects with American settings and American techniques and American themes. He himself went even further: he not only wrote in American way but also much ahead of his romantic period---he wrote in modern manners especially for his masterpiece *Moby Dick*.

Melville's modernity is thorough and multiple. This article will analyze *Moby Dick* from structure and theme to show its modernity.

2. Modernity in Structure

Moby Dick is "an incongruous blend of formal exposition and traditional narration, a partial novel that could also serve as a handbook or treatise on whaling, a chaotic melange of adventure, metaphysics, and amateur scientific investigation."^[1]

It is not a conventional novel with a single united plot. Instead the novel consists of many non-narrative parts, which makes it hard to comprehend by readers upon its publication. At the beginning of the novel, there is an Etymology about the word "whale" and an Extracts of eighty pieces concerning whales from heterogeneous sources. Among the 135 chapters there are forty eight unusual chapters focusing on cetological knowledge and discussions. The Etymology,

Extracts and cetological chapters are all about whales, including scientific knowledge about whales, philosophical meditation, historical and political episodes as well as physical description and category about whales. These non-narrative parts were considered to be irrelevant and inconsistent to Ahab and Ishmael's hunting adventures. Until 1930s in Harvard Library, *Moby Dick* was placed under the category of cetology instead of the category of literature[2]. From this fact we can find out how the non-narrative parts influenced readers and critics.

The Etymology is supplied by a consumptive Usher and the Extracts are offered by a sub-sub librarian. Both of them are tragic losers questing for the meanings of life, but inevitably fail in front of the overwhelming fate and knowledge. Christodoulou claims that the usher and the librarian are not real characters; they are "bodiless beings"[3], like the phantoms in Shakespeare's plays. They are twin characters, spokesman of the author, delivering oracles or messages to readers. They provoke an atmosphere of death, decadence and depression, which sets tone for the novel. They also arouse the readers' interest and curiosity about the following story and thus form a strong sense of suspense and tension, which in turn stimulates the readers' intelligence and cognition.

The Etymology delivers three definitions for the word "whale" from dictionaries and thirteen spellings of whale. The three pieces of etymology gives definitions of what a whale is. Huckluyt emphasizes the importance of the letter "h" because it is the backbone and supporting letter of the word "whale". although the letter does not produce sound, it is the "signification of the word"; without it, the word will lose its essence and go wrong both in meaning and appearance. If we omit "h", the word becomes "wale", meaning the scar of whipping, the wrinkle. In the following chapters, Melville describes the long scar from the head through his face extending along the body of Ahab, "It resembled that perpendicular seam sometimes made in the straight, lofty trunk of a great tree, when the upper lightning tearingly darts down it, and without wrenching a single twig, peels and grooves out the bark from top to bottom ere running off into the soil, leaving the tree still greenly alive, but branded."(129) The description of Ahab' scar predicts his great agony and tragic fate, but the writing about his solidarity and strong will also arose the readers' imagination about the confrontation between Ahab and the white whale. Simultaneously when the white whale has not appeared, but is commented and talked about by the crew, Queequeg recognizes that there are great wrinkles like wales on the head of the whale, similar to Ahab's. This coincidence is meaningful and thought provoking. Two strong wills and giants, holding the same great pain and injury, struggle against each other and perish with each other out of hatred and revenge which can be avoided.

Both Webster and Richardson's dictionary characterize the whale with "roundness or rolling", "arched or vaulted"(9). These features are also prolepsis, cohering the repeated depiction of *Moby Dick*. Its great size, great power, great value, beautiful appearance and great ferocity are all revealed through its conspicuous vault and rolling and swallowing. The definition in the Etymology is the solid philological foundation of the whale. Based from the Etymology, the following parts of the novel are capable to explore the extended meanings of whales.

The thirteen spellings of whales begin from the Hebrew language, then to the Latin language, the European languages of Dutch, Swedish, German and French, to British language, the last being the two languages for the small countries in the South Pacific Ocean. From time and space, the thirteen languages follow a certain order: the order of the history of human being and human civilization. From the origin of the Bible to the Feegee language the trace shows the process from the center of culture to the remote and backward edge in geography. In time there is a turn from ancient to the new ones.

The Extracts also follow the the same geographic and historic order to show the width and length of whales and whaling. The eighty extracts extends the tragic and mysterious atmosphere of the Etymology on the one side; while on the other side the Extracts connect the Etymology and the hunting adventures, linking them together through diversified discourses. In this way the Extracts serve as a helpful joint in the novel in form.

3. Modernity in Theme

Besides modernity in structure, *Moby Dick* exhibits strong modern features in themes. The themes in *Moby Dick* are quite avant garde and the themes are rather complicated and profound in the way of presentation.

The quest theme is no new thing for literary works, but the quest theme in *Moby Dick* is complicated, clustered and contradictory. Throughout the novel the quest theme is the main thread linking all the characters, plots and scenes.

Ishmael is tired of land life and searching for the meaning of life on Pequod. During the voyage he is also delivering questions about the final truth of life, universe, human society and nature. All these are consolidated and encapsulated in the image of whales. Melville praises Ahab and Ishmael's ambition to try, to struggle and to fight against the Almighty by presenting their courageous and persistent image, learned and knowledgeable intelligence. Ahab is depicted as "an ungodly god", "a king"(128) etc. Ishmael is a poet, philosopher, a social critic and scholar.

However, these questings are also accompanied by the futility of attempts, the meaninglessness of life, the humbleness, insignificance of human beings and the inexhaustibility of knowledge and fate. Ahab, besides his positive features as the American Adam, turns out to be an insane revenger who takes no mercy of the many innocent crew in his stubborn revenge to *Moby Dick*, the white whale. Along with his holiness, grandliness and sympathy to Pip are his indifference to life, cruelty to nature and irrational insanity which is out of the reach of human imagination. Ishmael, contrary to the his self praise, is in fact a selfish and hypocrite man, which can be shown from his acquaintanceship with Queequeg. Ishmael holds a previous prejudice to Queequeg because he is a cannibal. When Ishmael finds that Queequeg is strict and pious with his religious fast, he tries to persuade him to be practical and flexible, but Queequeg refused bluntly. When they get familiar, Queequeg shared all his dollars with Ishmael frankly and he didn't refuse. The two events reveal the falsity of Christians and the innocence and perseverance of primitive people.

In *Moby Dick*, Melville expresses his respect and fidelity to God, but at the same time he often criticizes Christianity for their hypocrisy, greed and cheating. True Christians should be unselfish, philanthropic and pious of God, but in *Moby Dick*, the Christians seem to be pious; they speak and act according to the Scripture, but when lured by economic interests, Christian beliefs is worthless.

As to the theme of nature and the relationship between man and nature, *Moby Dick* also takes on a complicated look. *Moby Dick*, the white whale is considered to be the symbol of nature in the novel. It is beautiful, peaceful and nourishing as well as cruel, ferocious and destructive. Melville praises the crew's conquer of the sea, believing it a sign of human productivity and progress in industry. It is a revelation of man's power in the long subjugation to the power of nature since the appearance of human being on the earth. It stands for human ambition and accomplishment. But viewed from other perspectives, human activity and industry in the sea is a conquest and destruction to natural environment and natural lives. The final ending of the novel is the death of both the crew and the white whale, which suggests that in a battle between nature and humans no one is the winner; both are losers.

From the above comments we can find that Melville holds ambiguous attitude to life, nature, Christianity and all the other themes in the novel. This ambiguity is one of the signs of his modernity.

4. Conclusion

Melville leads to his modernity in *Moby Dick* out of several reasons. The first reason is his independent consciousness in American literature, which we have discussed at the beginning of the essay. The second reason is the influence from Hawthorne, because Hawthorne's ambiguity enables the novel to include more profound and diversified themes and forms. The third reason may be the new setting of American romanticism: the new continent and the emerging of the new nation which arouse kaleidoscopic presentation in literary expressions. When D.H.Lawrence is commenting on Melville, he says that when futurists has no paint, Melville has already been a futurist. Melville being the futurist may be the best note for his modernity in *Moby Dick*.

5. Notes

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References

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