Queequeg and Abab: The Noble and the Savage

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The sermon spoken by Fleece to the sharks in the chapter "Stubb's Supper" touches on one of the central themes of *Moby-Dick*. In a short essay on the subject, Rod Phillips argues that Melville uses this humorous chapter to carry a more "serious" and "subversive" message (93). I focus on that theme of savagery and mastery, or nobility, for my analysis of the book. My arguments center on the characters of Queequeg and Captain Ahab—characters who clearly epitomize the ideas of nobility and savagery. Melville seems to comment on some of the accepted prejudices of the day by ironically juxtaposing the idea of the "noble savage" against the concept of white supremacy. Marsha Vick identifies this device as "defamiliarization," which presents common ideas in a new light, often through the use of contrasts and opposites. These contrasts then "give new meaning to the object or idea expressed" (329). Similarly, Mary Blish explains that much of Melville's meaning is found in "reversed images" (55), or images that mean exactly opposite of what they seem. In viewing the contrast between Ahab and Queequeg, the reader is led to question accepted ideas about the "angels" and the "sharks" in society by reversals and ironies found in the descriptions of these two characters.

Based on evidence about Melville and his time period, the topic of nobility and savagery is appropriate. In his essay "Historical Perspectives on Herman Melville, an Early Civil Rights Advocate," William E. Rand explains that the slavery issue dominated politics between 1830 and 1860 (91), about the time Melville would
have been working on *Moby-Dick*. He cites Philip Fisher, who asserts Melville's interest in slavery (92) and says that it "approaches absurdity" to argue that "the best professional fiction writers holding anti-slavery sentiments could constantly ignore a [... ] phenomenon so violently controversial" (93). Further, Michael C. Berthold explains that whale imagery was often used in relation to the slavery issue during that time period. Clearly, Melville had reason to write about race and slavery as evidence shows in *Moby-Dick*.

In order to elucidate some of Melville's commentaries about nobility and savagery, it is useful to compare directly a few of his descriptions of Queequeg with his descriptions of Captain Ahab. The first of these comparisons will cover some of the outward attributes of the characters, such as their physical appearances, their respective stations on the ship, and their common social interactions. Most importantly though, the crux of the matter is revealed through their inner character—in their regard for God and man, in their moral values, and in their ability to "govern" their "voraciousness."

**Markings and Attributes**

As we see in Ishmael's first impressions of each man, Queequeg and Ahab are both quite shocking in appearance. He first sees Queequeg late at night in his room at the Spouter-Inn and exclaims, "Such a face! It was of a dark, purplish, yellow color, here and there stuck over with large, blackish-looking squares [...]. There was no hair on his head [...] but a small scalp-knot twisted up on his forehead. His bald, purplish head now looked for all the world like a mildewed skull" (29-30). Ishmael eventually sees that Queequeg's whole body is covered with markings like those on his face, and is very startled by his savage appearance.

Ishmael describes the "foreboding shivers" at his first sight of Ahab (109). He compares Ahab to a "solid bronze" statue and immediately notes his prominent white scar. "Threading its way out from among his gray hairs, and continuing right down one side of his tawny scorched face and neck, till it disappeared in his clothing, you saw a slender, rod-like mark, lividly white." He compares it to the mark made on a tree by a sudden lightning strike, "leaving the tree still greenly alive, but branded" (110). Ishmael is struck powerfully by "the whole grim aspect" of the captain, owing in large part to Ahab's white scar and also to the white whale-bone peg leg he stood on.

The significance of these remarks in Ishmael's narrative suggests that they are important to Melville's deeper messages about the characters as well. Although Queequeg's tattoos suggest his savagery and idolatry, and perhaps his ferocity, this assumption is met with an unexpected explanation later in the book. A prophet "had written out on his body a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth; so that Queequeg in his own proper person was a riddle to unfold; a wondrous work in one volume" (399). The reader sees here a reversal of the intial impressions of these markings. What seems
at first to be a manifestation of savagery in Queequeg becomes a token of his nobility and worth, even a hidden explanation of the world.

Ahab’s white scar, on the other hand, comes to appear almost black in later descriptions. Ahab speaks about his scar with the blacksmith: “Aye, man, it is unsmoothable; for though thou only seest it here in my flesh, it has worked down into the bone of my skull—that is all wrinkles!” (403). The significance of this remark is found in the continuation of the scene. Ahab requests his special harpoon from the blacksmith and proceeds with the devilish rites of its dedication for the hunt of the white whale (403–05). By this association, the scar becomes a manifestation of his infernal hatred for Moby Dick. This vengeance has become so much a part of him that it is even carved into his appearance and, as he says, into his bones.

The contrast between first impression and the later explanation regarding each character’s appearance is an example of Melville’s use of defamiliarization and reversal to illustrate his messages. Queequeg’s dark scars become manifestations of a deep, mystic, and religious belief—an explanation of light or truth. And while Ahab’s scar does seem grim from the beginning, it turns from a white scar to a dark symbol of his inner motives and character.

**Captain and Harpooner**

As with the physical features, it is simple to observe the rank each man has on the ship. But again, Melville presents ironies in these situations that turn the reader’s perception around and emphasize his own point. Queequeg is exceptionally skilled as a harpooner, which Peleg and Bildad acknowledge after he demonstrates his ability (Melville 84). Ahab is described as a “good whale-hunter, and a good captain to his men” (87). Bildad says that he is “above the common” men. It could be said that in the eyes of Peleg and Bildad and their whaling expedition, Queequeg is valuable for his savage abilities and Ahab for his ability to govern as captain.

Yet Melville again “defamiliarizes” this situation of commander and follower in some of his descriptions of Queequeg and Ahab. Queequeg is of noble descent. “His father was a high Chief, a King, his uncle a high Priest [. . .]. There was excellent blood in his veins—royal stuff” (56). Vick points out that Melville gives dignity and status to Queequeg with the description that he “was George Washington cannibalistically developed.” She further notes that this statement “bestows the highest dignity possible on a non-white character at the same time that it calls into question the use of racial characteristics as criteria for determining identity and worth” (331). Clearly, Queequeg is not a stereotypical savage.

Queequeg’s duties on the ship and his attitude toward them provide further commentary. In the chapter titled “The Dart,” Melville explains how the harpooner is expected to row the hardest of anyone in pursuit of a whale, then stand and throw the harpoon fast into the whale, and finally move to the back of the boat for the officer to take over (245–46). In “The Monkey-Rope” (270–71) and
“Cistern Buckets” (287–88), he describes the dangerous and exhausting duties of “cutting-in” and “bailing the case” after the whale has been taken. Finally, Queequeg becomes almost fatally ill in attending to the harpooner’s duty as “holder,” stowing casks in the bottom of the ship (395). It seems that some of the most skilled men on the ship, the harpooners, had the most dangerous and difficult jobs. However, as Ishmael observes, “Queequeg disdained no seeming ignominy, if thereby he might haply gain the power of enlightening his untutored countrymen” (57). Though his work was as strenuous and difficult as a slave’s, his attitude was that of a true leader—working hard for the benefit of others.

Ahab, as was stated before, is seen as a good captain and a good leader. His craft of leadership is certainly shown in his first grand speech on the quarterdeck. He is able to excite the main body of the crew to join him in his quest for Moby Dick. He overcomes Starbuck’s misgivings at least to a degree that Starbuck goes along with it, too. When the time finally does come to chase the white whale, not a man shrinks from it, but each is hypnotized by an “awe of Ahab” and is carried along with the rest of the crew toward Ahab’s goal (454). He has such qualities of leadership that Melville comments,

They were one man, not thirty. For as the ship that held them all; though it was put together of all contrasting things [. . .] yet all these ran together to form one concrete hull [. . .]. [E]ven so, all the individualities of the crew [. . .] were all directed to that fatal goal which Ahab their one lord and keel did point to. (454–55)

Ahab is capable of a powerful kind of leadership and charisma. Yet it is ironic to note that he himself is a slave of sorts. Ishmael describes Ahab’s “monomania” as a “wild vindictiveness,” a “frantic morbidness,” and a deep kind of lunacy (160–61). As Ahab speaks with Starbuck on the second day of the chase, he admits that he cannot change his course in spite of numerous warnings and signs that the quest is ill fated. “Ahab is forever Ahab,” and “I am the Fate’s lieutenant, ” he says (459). And just before he is killed, “Towards thee I roll, though all-destroying but unconquering whale; [. . .] for hate’s sake I spit my last breach at thee” (468). Ahab was to a point that he felt no control over his course of action—only the enslaving force of violent hatred. This proved not only his destruction, but also the death of his entire crew, but one.

Although he was commissioned as leader of the ship and had great skill at leadership, Ahab’s passionate bondage disqualified him as a leader in some of the most important aspects—the wisdom to choose a correct course to follow and a concern for those that followed him. Melville’s “reversed images” reveal here a captain who is unfit to command and a servant with the instincts of a very capable leader.

Dining on the Pequod

As one notes the different qualities of leadership in Queequeg and Ahab, it is also interesting to look at the social interaction of the two on a smaller scale. The
passages about their respective eating habits provide some good substance for comparison, particularly relating to Melville’s descriptive commentary on the scenes:

Over his ivory-inlaid table, Ahab presided like a mute, maned sea-lion on the white coral beach, surrounded by his warlike but still deferential cubs [. . .]. They were as little children before Ahab [. . .]. I do not suppose that for the world they would have profaned that moment with the slightest observation [. . .]. These cabin meals were somehow solemn meals, eaten in awful silence. (131)

Of Queequeg and his fellows, Melville writes the following:

In contrast to the hardly tolerable constraint and nameless invisible domineering of the captain’s table, was the entire care-free license and ease, the almost frantic democracy of those inferior fellows the harpooners. While their masters, the mates, seemed afraid of the sound of the hinges of their own jaws, the harpooners chewed their food with such a relish that there was a report to it. They dined like Lords; they filled their bellies like Indian ships all day loading with spices. (133)

These passages seem to compare the idea of slavery and freedom through the careful use of language in connection with the respective situations. Melville contrasts the despotic presence of Captain Ahab with the “democracy” of the savages. He ironically calls the harpooners “inferior,” alluding to the accepted racial ideas of his day, and juxtaposing this with his description of the harpooners as “Lords.” This was certainly unexpected for the “democratic” American society of the time to see the cannibal, the Indian, and the negro described as free and democratic, while the leaders on the ship act as though under the power of some tyrannical despot. Again, Melville analyzes and reverses the prejudices of the day in order to defamiliarize these common views and cause the audience to analyze from a new perspective. The mates are perhaps “as little children before Ahab” because of his moodiness and pride, while the democracy of the harpooners shows through their tolerance of one another.

Still deeper in this analysis of consumption, one can contrast Mark E. Boren’s description of Ahab with the cannibalistic background of Queequeg. One sees evidences in the book that Queequeg has been raised a cannibal, such as his sale of shrunken heads or his filled teeth (28–29). And yet in the story he does not kill anyone.

Of Ahab, however, Boren says, “[He] devours his crew as his quest devours him [. . .]. [H]e constantly invests everything about him with material significance, and he voraciously consumes anything that crosses his path” (29). Ahab comes out of this comparison as the savage and the cannibal, while the “savages” are again ennobled through Melville’s ironic narrative.

**Christian and Heathen**

For the prejudices of the day, Ahab and Queequeg are also seen on very unequal ground as relating to religious matters; Ahab comes from a “nobler” Christian society and Queequeg retains his heathen persuasions. Such prejudices
are most noticeably displayed at Queequeg’s first meeting with the owners of the Pequod. Peleg tells Ishmael that they do not allow heathens on the ship without papers. “‘Yea,’ said captain Bildad in his hollow voice, sticking his head from behind Peleg’s, out of the wigwam. ‘He must show that he’s converted. Son of Darkness,’ he added, turning to Queequeg, ‘art thou converted to any Christian church?’” The two captains continue referring to his heathenism with references to the biblical Philistines, and to the devil (83). We hear very little about Ahab’s religion in the opening chapters except Peleg’s description of him as “a good man—not a pious good man like Bildad, but a swearing good man” (77). One can see that although Ahab may be somewhat less than a religious man, Peleg and Bildad make a distinction between him and Queequeg because they see Queequeg as a heathen and Ahab as belonging to their own Christian society.

Whatever advantage Ahab may have over Queequeg in religious matters in the eyes of others, it is obvious in observing the practices of the two that savage Queequeg is the truly religious one, while Ahab’s only religion was defiance.

Ishmael is introduced to Queequeg’s religion at their first meeting, in which Queequeg makes obeisance to his small wooden god, Yojo (31). He shows an almost fanatical devotion in “The Ramadan” as he meditates for hours on end (78–82), and his high estimation of his god is again displayed as he contemplates death, lying in his coffin with his arms crossed over little Yojo (397). Ishmael asserts during this time that “no dying Chaldee or Greek had higher or holier thoughts than those, whose mysterious shades you saw creeping over the face of poor Queequeg.” Ishmael even speculates on his “destined heaven” (396).

Ahab contrasts with Queequeg’s devotion. Christopher T. Hamilton illustrates the full measure of his defiance toward God in a discussion of chapter 119, “The Candles.” He cites Ahab’s soliloquy in which Ahab speaks to God: “Thou knowest not how came ye, hence callest thyself unbegotten; certainly knowest not thy beginning, hence callest thyself unbegun” (417). Hamilton says that Ahab refers here to the Son of God and shows how Ahab “attacks the very foundation of the Christian faith by denying that Christ should be called the only begotten Son of God” (152–53).

Again, the reversal of traditional roles between civilized man and savage serves to “defamiliarize” the reader from these traditions. One is led to consider devotions of people more carefully than to simply assign them to one denomination or another. Ishmael’s inference that Queequeg is heaven-bound serves also to challenge common beliefs that Christians are the only ones capable of being saved. Clearly, Melville wishes to challenge not only racial, but also religious prejudices in society.

**Regard for Man**

Although the noble captain of the ship, Ahab, should value his crewmembers’ lives, Queequeg is the one who shows the only regard for the lives of his shipmates in the story. In the opening chapters, he is the only one who dives into the ocean
to save a “bumpkin” during the crossing to Nantucket. He does this in spite of the man having previously insulted him (60). Later, he is the first to dive into the ocean after Tashtego, who is caught inside the case of a whale (289).

On the other extreme, Ahab continually shows his disregard for the lives of others. Starbuck contemplates a musket that Ahab had pointed at him and observes, “The very tube he pointed at me!—the very one; this one—I hold it here; he would have killed me with the very thing I handle now—Aye and he would fain kill all his crew.” Starbuck continues and asserts that the Captain cares nothing for the crew.

The incident with the Rachel is a most telling experience of Ahab’s disregard for anything or anyone but himself and his desire to fight Moby Dick. Ahab is deaf to the pleas of the Rachel’s captain for help in searching for his lost son (433–36). It is clear at this point that Ahab has become entirely enslaved to his frenzied quest; its completion is the only thing of any worth to Ahab. He shows that he has lost all desire for anything but consuming the white whale, no matter who or what might be injured along the way.

The fact that Queequeg is a cannibal brings such an irony to these human relations that Melville practically forces the reader away from any racial or ethnic prejudices to reconsider the worth of such “savages” in contrast to many civilized white people. Ahab and Queequeg become symbols for the ideas that Melville wishes to convey, and his message is made clear by the stark contrasts between the characters, or the contrasts between what one expects of the characters and what Melville describes.

Reflections

The lunacy of Ahab and his eternal hatred for the white whale strikes a core issue in the book. Blish points out a few statements in the book that describe how Ahab in his mind attributes all the evils of humankind to the Whale. She remarks, “[J]ust so do racists ascribe the ills of their time and place to those humans who happen to have a skin color different from their own” (59). Melville uses his “defamiliarization” techniques ultimately to invite readers to consider racism and prejudice from a detached point of view. It allows us to see our own nature or actions that are similar to Ahab, as well as to sympathize with the noble nature of the outwardly savage Queequeg. In retrospect, Fleece’s speech to the sharks becomes a speech to every reader. He refers to them (or us) as “fellow-critters,” reflecting the savage nature that is in every man, and he explains the importance of governing that nature. Melville exposes the inherent fallacies that he sees in such prejudice through his reversals from racial preconceptions about the characters of Ahab and Queequeg. He entreats the reader to examine the soul for such ungodly scars as Ahab bears and to look to bring out the nobility that is found in savage Queequeg.
Works Cited


