

THE NARRATOR CALLED ISHMAEL

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ABSTRACT

Herman Melville's Moby Dick is a novel which records the adventurous voyage of Captain Ahab in the quest of a particular whale with a white hump and a white forehead. This whale is named "Moby Dick" and the story is told by a narrator named Ishmael. It is through Ishmael that we experience the entire sequence of events which make up the novel. The novel does not only recount Captain Ahab's quest for the whale but it also describes the experience that Ishmael gains from this quest as a member of the crew on board the Pequod, that man can never be triumphant when he challenges nature and he loses his reasoning when the only object of his life becomes revenge. Ishmael embodies man as a thinker; whose dreams transcend space and time. Moby Dick describes not only man's philosophic wandering but also a world of moral tyranny and violent action, in which Ahab plays the main role. It is Ishmael's contemplation, his dreaming that verbalizes the wonders of the seas, the fabulousness of the white whale and terrors of the deep. The ruminations that make up the essence of the story are provided by Ishmael, who is a powerful narrator.

Key words:

Moby Dick, Pequod, Ishmael, Ahab, narrator

Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* is a complex novel about the adventurous voyage of a monomaniac captain Ahab in the quest of a particular whale with a white hump and a white forehead. This whale is named "Moby Dick" and the story is told by a narrator named Ishmael, who is introduced to us in the opening chapter of the novel: "Call me Ishmael" (*MD* 1). Ishmael is one of the motley crew aboard the *Pequod*. It is through him that we experience the entire sequence of events which make up the novel. A newcomer to whaling, Ishmael serves as the eyes and ears of the readers aboard the *Pequod*. He is, at the end, the only witness alive to tell the tale. The crew except Ishmael perishes. He lives to narrate the tale of hatred and revenge: "Because one did survive the wreck...I was he whom the Fates ordained to take the place of Ahab's bowsman" (*MD*583). The novel does not only recount Captain Ahab's quest for the whale but it also describes the experience that Ishmael gains from this quest as a member of the crew on board the *Pequod*, that man can never be triumphant when he challenges nature and that man's desire for revenge blinds him to reasoning. In *The American Novel and its Tradition*, Richard Chase opines: "The novel renders reality closely and in comprehensive detail. It takes a group of people and sets them going about the business of life. We come to see these people in their real complexity of temperament and motive" (12).

Moby Dick describes not only man's philosophic wandering but also a world of moral tyranny and violent action, in which Ahab plays the main role. It is Ishmael's contemplation, his dreaming that verbalizes the wonders of the seas, the fabulousness of the white whale and terrors of the deep. The ruminations that make up the essence of the story are provided by Ishmael, who is a powerful narrator. It is Ishmael's speculation that explains the terror that the readers experience when the whale in all its ferocity is described. It is Ishmael himself who is conspicuous because, to the readers he embodies man as a thinker, whose dreams transcend space and time as he watches the seas: he is both the observer as well as the narrator of the story. He is wise, thoughtful, and tolerant and enjoys himself in the world around him.

This novel is a flash-back on Melville's experience at sea. In a letter to Hawthorne, dated June 1, 1851 he wrote:

My development has been all within a few years past. I am like one of those seeds taken out of the Egyptian pyramids, which after being three thousand years a seed and nothing but a seed being planted on English soil, it developed itself, grew in greenness... Until I was twenty-five I had no development at all. From my twenty-fifth year I date my life. Three weeks have scarcely passed, at any time between then and now, that I have not unfolded myself.

(*The Portable Melville* 433)

This letter was written just after the completion of *Moby Dick* and the "unfolding" that he mentions, refers to October 14, 1844, two months after his twenty-fifth birthday, when he disembarked at Boston harbour after a series of long and tedious cruises and beachcombing, through the oceans and lands which offered him the material for his rich narratives. In his fiction Melville voices the thought that man must undertake a mental journey and interact with nature in order to gain spiritual knowledge.

Moby Dick is based on Melville's personal experiences while on board a whale ship, called the *Acushnet*, on which he had actually served. The story is narrated by Ishmael; a schoolmaster who longs to go to sea. He arrives at New Bedford having made up his mind to go to the Pacific: "...I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world..." (MD1). On the ship *Pequod*, Ishmael meets a conglomeration of people among whom the stern captain of the vessel Captain Ahab deserves special attention. Ishmael learns that Captain Ahab had lost one of his legs in an earlier encounter with a white whale known to whalers as "Moby Dick". A deep scar on the face of Captain Ahab adds to his sinister looks. Ahab lived only to see the realization of a single, obsessive dream: to kill the white whale which took away his leg:

... It was Moby Dick that dimasted me; Moby Dick that brought me to this dead stump I stand on now...it was that accursed white whale that razeed

me; and made a poor pegging lubber of me forever and a day!...I'll chase him round Good Hope, and round the horn, and round the Norway Maelstrom...before I give him up... (MD 166)

He even offers a reward in gold to the first man who sights the whale. This shocks the mates of the ship, but they do not react because they seem to be under the strange spell of Ahab. After days of fierce activity on the sea and grappling with the storm Moby Dick is sighted. The struggle between the crew and the whale lasts for three days. In this fierce struggle the *Pequod* is destroyed and Ahab killed. The novel does not only recount Captain Ahab's quest for the whale but it also describes the experience which Ishmael gains from this quest as a member of the crew on board the *Pequod* that man is never triumphant when he challenges nature:

The ship? Great God ,where is the ship?' Soon they through dim, bewildering mediums, saw her side-long fading phantom...only the uppermost masts out of water; while fixed by infatuation ,or fidelity, or fate ,to their once lofty perches , the pagan harpooners still maintained their sinking lookouts on the sea. And now, concentric circles seized the lone boat itself , and all it's crew , and each floating oar and every lance –pole, and spinning animate and inanimate all round and round in one vortex , carried the smallest chip of the Pequod out of sight... (MD 581,582)

Melville employs a natural and powerful style of narration. He uses the language that Nantucket whaling captains speak. The characters are named after the Old Testament prophets and kings, who are mighty men, Captain Ahab being the mightiest of them all. He even has the courage to challenge the very order of creation itself. It is this constant sense of power that holds the attention of the readers. *Moby Dick* focuses on man's life as it appears to the novelist. He even tries to create an image of life itself as a ceaseless creation. The novel projects the powerful hold that nature has over man. But ironically, man tries to fight back and impose his strength on nature which is a superior force even when he knows that he has to accept defeat. Captain Ahab is possessed with the desire for revenge and he is determined to achieve his objective at any cost.

Herman Melville's major novels such as *Typee* (1846), *Omoo* (1847), *Mardi* (1849), *Redburn* (1849), *White-Jacket* (1850), *Moby Dick* (1851) etc are first-person narrations; and not those of either character or plot. They form personal adventure chronicles, and are also confessional recitals which create a form of narration in which the voice of the narrator tends to become the epicentre of the novel:

... *Moby-Dick* seems to be far more of a poem than it is a novel, and since it is a narrative, to be an epic, a long poem on an heroic theme, rather than the kind of realistic fiction that we know today...Yet ... what distinguishes *Moby-Dick* from modern prose fiction, what ties it up with the older, more

formal kind of narrative that was once written in verse, is the fact that Melville is not interested in the meanness, the literal truthfulness, the representative slice of life, that we think of as the essence of modern realism. His book has the true poetic emphasis in that the whole story is constantly being meditated and unravelled through a single mind...

(“Ishmael and Ahab: an Introduction to Moby Dick”)

The reader finds these elements in *Moby Dick* as he reads on: Melville used the whaling profession which was a necessity during those times, as the backdrop to his novel. The motley crew of the *Pequod*, which consisted of different people of the world, are placed together in the ship by the novelist and each one provides a foil for the exposure of each one's nature so that the reader is in a position to understand each character and the thought behind the novel. The novel is complex and tells the tale of the voyage of a monomaniac captain called Ahab in the quest of a particular whale with a white hump and a white forehead. This whale is named Moby Dick and the story is told by a narrator named Ishmael, who is introduced to us in the opening chapter of the novel: “Call me Ishmael” (MD1). This statement not only establishes the identity of the narrator, but also brings the narrator close to the reader. Intimacy between the reader and the narrator is ensured by this statement. Ishmael is one of the crew aboard the *Pequod*. It is through him that we see the entire sequence of events that make up the novel. A newcomer to whaling, Ishmael serves as the eyes and ears of the readers aboard the *Pequod*. He is, at the end, the only witness alive to tell the tale.

Ishmael was the name of the first son of Abraham in the Old Testament. The Biblical Ishmael was born to a slave woman because Abraham's wife, Sarah was believed to be infertile. When Sarah gave birth to Isaac, Ishmael and his mother were turned out of Abraham's household. The name has come to symbolize orphans and social outcasts. Ishmael of *Moby Dick* tells us right from the beginning that he turned to the sea out of a sense of alienation from human society. Ishmael is a wanderer he is in fact a school teacher. He resembles Melville himself and in many ways, the *Pequod* to Ishmael, is not only a whaling ship, but also provides him with an opportunity to learn and to look deeper into life.

Moby Dick is a novel that has always called the attention of the reader, particularly with Melville's employment of Ishmael as a very human narrator. The colloquial matter of fact beginning of the novel sets the tone of the narrative and familiarizes the reader with the narrator who is penniless and who seems to be depressed claiming that he enjoys a sense of freedom when he goes to sea. In the opening of the novel the narrator introduces himself:

...Call me Ishmael. Some years ago – never mind how long precisely – having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. It is a way of driving off the spleen and regulating the

circulation. Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off - then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can... (MD 1)

Moreover, he loves to go to sea because of the ...wholesome exercise and pure air of the forecandle deck. (MD 5)

Ishmael is not only a character in the novel, but the single voice that skillfully narrates the story. Here, reference may be made to Harrison Hayford's article "Loomings": Yarns and Figures in the Fabric":

...In *Moby Dick* Ishmael plays the role - a frequent one in Melville's writings - of sympathetic but perplexed observer. What he chiefly confronts and observes is the tragedy of Ahab in his revengeful attack upon the great White Whale. In this perspective the book's early chapters are preparation for Ahab. Before Ahab's appearance, Ishmael builds up in them the physical and conceptual worlds which make probable Ahab's character, his language, his thought and his actions. In "Loomings" Ishmael starts on his narrative way as participant and observer. As he tells the story, his manner with words, his habitual ways of perceiving and dealing with situations, his preoccupations of thought, all reveal his character. Through these means the first chapter begins to establish the grounds both of Ishmael's sympathy with Ahab and of the differences between them that mark his dissociation from Ahab...

(Norton Critical Edition 658)

Ishmael the narrator is endowed with a perpetual sense of wonder. He marvels at the universe and the wonders it holds, and the infinite creatures that inhabit the land and sea. He is a philosopher and a man of action as well as contemplation. He observes the polarities within himself and around himself. Life at sea had revealed to Melville a world of horror, suffering and evil that he had not dreamt of before. Ishmael's initial encounter with Queequeg in the *Pequod* later becomes a bond that exists between man and man. Ishmael is not merely an orphan; he is an exile, searching alone in the wilderness...with a black man for his only friend. ("Ishmael and Ahab: An Introduction to *Moby Dick*) and as the novel proceeds it is seen that it is this bond that is fundamental to the philosophy of the novel. It is peculiarly personal and emphasizes on the subjective individual consciousness. In the first twenty five chapters, Ishmael describes his friendship with Queequeg, and at first appears to

be shocked with the latter's ways. But this association teaches him to look beyond a man's appearance. Ishmael's experience with Queequeg provides him with an insight in order to look deeper into a situation as well as the people he comes into contact with. Through the friendship of Ishmael and Queequeg, it is clear that Melville projects the fact that irrespective of nationality, a close bond can exist between men...But what is worship? – to do the will of God? – *that* is worship. And what is the will of God? – to do my fellow man what I would have my fellow man do to me – that is the will of God. Now Queequeg is my fellow man... (MD 54) Besides the bond of friendship that exists between Ishmael and Queequeg, it is to be noted that the entire crew also shares the bond with each other and though Ahab forces his crew to swear to kill the whale he is also shown to be concerned about them even if it is in a selfish way.

Ishmael's narration allows the reader to visualize the might as well as the splendour of the sea and the pristine beauty of the white whale. He provides the essence of the story through a narration that allows the reader to speculate upon the profundities of life. His narration bears witness to a keen power of observation: of Ahab and his moods, the feelings of the crew and also the relationship of the crew with Ahab.

Ishmael's role is important because, to the reader he embodies the thinking man, whose dreams transcend space and time as he observes the seas and the life in it. It is clear to the reader that he is both observer as well as narrator. However, he does not go against the tide and despite his oath-taking with the crew, he cannot be a part of Ahab's plan for his sensitivity that places him above the crew itself. Awed by the powerful personality of Ahab, he too does not oppose him. Instead, he obeys his orders and performs all duties allotted to him.

Ahab, unable to come to terms with the loss of his leg, coerces his crew into believing in the necessity of eliminating the whale. He is unrelenting and, with determination sets forward in his quest. His struggle reminds one of the struggles of a man who tries to pitch his strength against the forces of nature when he feels that he is wronged, little realizing the futility of his exercise. Ishmael, who is one of the crew, is at first convinced by Ahab's arguments. He is also sympathetic towards him because he feels that Ahab has been wronged. Thus, he too, later takes the oath administered to the crew by Ahab.

I, Ishmael was one of that crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest; my oath had been welded with theirs; and stronger I shouted, and more did I hammer and clinch my oath, because of the dread in my soul. A wild mystical, sympathetic feeling was in me; Ahab's quenchless quest seemed mine. With greedy ears I learned the history of that murderous monster against whom I and all the others had taken our oaths of violence and revenge (MD 181).

Though Ishmael is involved in the action he fails to create an impact on Ahab and the subsequent direction that the affairs of the *Pequod* would take. Mostly, he is a detached narrator who witnesses the action but is not directly involved in it despite the fact that he also joins the rest of the sailors in taking the oath to kill Moby Dick. Unlike Nelly Dean in *Wuthering Heights*, he does not influence the course of events in the novel. Ishmael understands the implications of Ahab's action, he understands the fact that Ahab's determination and his subsequent action will only spell disaster, yet, like the other sailors, he is mesmerized by Ahab despite his intuitive understanding of the matter.

Like any other narrator understands that in the mind of Ahab, Moby Dick was "...not only ubiquitous but immortal (for immortality is but ubiquity in time)..." (MD185). Burning with the desire for ultimate revenge Ahab's thoughts and actions are concentrated only on the capture of the whale. He constantly feels that he is being taunted and challenged and that the white whale symbolises unlimited power and brute force. Ahab also realises the fact that Moby Dick is indifferent to man's wishes and desires and so he is frustrated. Ishmael is able to gauge the seriousness of Ahab's intentions which later proved to be meaningless because of Ahab's overriding obsession with the whale. His revengeful attitude towards Moby Dick extended in some degree to all sperm whales. He thinks that the more sperm whales he kills the more would his chances of killing Moby Dick increase. Thus, he does not allow his sailors to remain idle. Ahab is portrayed as seemingly afraid of his chief mate Starbuck since he does not support his plans to kill Moby Dick. He even thinks that Starbuck will frustrate his plans and that the sailors might take a long time to locate the white whale. Aware that the sailors may revolt and turn against him, he keeps them busy by asking them to keep an eye on every kind of whale. While providing the reader with a spell-binding and realistic narration, Ishmael also weaves a dramatic story.

At the beginning of the novel, Ishmael sees a picture at the Spouter-inn, which shows a huge whale destroying a whaling ship. The landlord of the inn bears the name of Peter Coffin. The mysterious character Elijah predicts that the *Pequod* would meet with a tragic end and that Ahab would be doomed. Later in the story, a character named Gabriel warns Ahab against chasing the white whale which he feels, is a divine incarnation and killing him would be blasphemous. Ishmael also tells us that Ahab ignores all other omens like the falling of the trumpet from the hands of one of the captains of a whaling-ship, the small fish swimming away from the *Pequod* to follow that other ship, the appearance of the corpusants, which signal danger to the crew, and an eagle swooping down and carrying away Ahab's hat. But Captain Ahab like all men who turn a blind eye to such indications when their end is near, does the same and brings about his own death and the death of the crew with the exception of Ishmael who lives on to narrate this tale. In this context Alfred Kazin in his article "Moby Dick" says:

...*Moby Dick* is not so much a book about Captain Ahab's quest for the whale as it is an experience of that quest...*Moby Dick* seems to be far more of a poem than it is a novel, and since it is a narrative, to be an epic,

a long poem on a heroic theme...Melville half-consciously...drew upon many of the traditional characteristics of epic in order to realize the utterly original kind of novel *he* needed to write in his time – the spaciousness of theme and subject, the martial atmosphere, the association of these homely and savage materials with universal myths, the symbolic wanderings of the hero, the indispensable strength of such a hero as Captain Ahab...

(*Introducing the Great American Novel* 34)

However, Ahab is sure of only one thing, and that is to kill the whale that had taken his leg. Even if the gods were to oppose his purpose, he would defy them in order to fulfill his goal. He ignores the implications of challenging a stronger force. Ishmael follows Ahab and sees in him not only man's confusion but a sense of moral tyranny and violence in which Ahab is just a toy, compelled to accept what destiny doles out to him. Man is tossed around in the face of a stronger power and all his efforts to oppose the undeserved injustice meted out to him are proved futile. Ahab's drive is to prove and not to discover. He seeks to dominate nature, to impose and to inflict his will on the outside world, be it on the crew that must obey him or the whale which does not bow down to his wish. Ishmael's description of Ahab's chase symbolizes man's defiance of nature. Ahab expresses the inexplicable rage against nature which all can feel. He is seen as a mad captain who disturbs the sleeping crew as he stomps along on his wooden leg. He represents man who makes all efforts to assert his will and feels anger and frustration at his inability to do so. Ahab, watching the sea heaving around him, feels that it is a mad horse that has lost its rider and when he looks at his own reflection in the water is utterly disturbed at the thought that man is as insignificant as a drop of water that falls into the sea.

Ishmael, therefore possesses deep sympathy and understanding for the entire crew, and is perceptive enough to understand that the *Pequod* is heading for disaster. He is not merely a narrator or a witness to the mighty struggle between Ahab and the whale, but is also a philosopher, well versed in literature and the philosophies of the world. In the course of the novel, we find him ruminating on free will, predestination and damnation. He appears to be like the Greek chorus, who narrates events and comments on them. Melville's own view of life seems to be reflected in the novel by Ishmael who realizes the existence of both good and evil in life. In Captain Ahab we see the undeniable urge to defy nature. The antagonist is the whale Moby Dick, the sworn enemy of Ahab and the conflict between them is bound to end in the death or destruction of either.

Ishmael ruminates on the futility of man's insensible venture during which he is oblivious to all reason and it may be said that he personifies thought while Ahab personifies man's will. Both are thinkers, the difference being that Ishmael is an observer and can do nothing to bring about any change in Ahab. At the same time it appears that he has identified his own condition as that of the helpless man who is placed against forces which are beyond

his control. Ahab, in contrast actively seeks the whale in order to assert man's supremacy over what he feels is his adversary or a superior power which challenges him. Ahab is presented to the readers by Ishmael as a captain who in his own way is also concerned about his crew although he is determined not to allow them to forget the white whale and their resolution to kill him:

Though consumed with the hot fire of his purpose, Ahab in all his thoughts and actions ever had in view the ultimate capture of Moby Dick; though he seemed ready to sacrifice all mortal interests to that one passion...Nor was unmindful of another thing. In times of strong emotion mankind disdain all base considerations but such times are evanescent...

(MD 216,
217)

In the last section of the novel, the whale is sighted. The struggle for existence between the whale and Captain Ahab lasts for three days. In this fierce conflict the *Pequod* is shattered, and Ahab killed. All the crew members perish except for Ishmael who survives to narrate the saga of hatred and revenge. Ahab's reason to kill the whale may seem to be logical since he lost his leg to the whale. But on a deeper note, this struggle connotes the kind of spiritual that becomes a kind of spiritual conflict that is beyond solution because of the very nature of Ahab himself. He has put himself against the amoral forces of nature and proves to be limited.

Ishmael tells the readers that the white whale is a creature that lived in seclusion at sea. It haunts the seas mostly frequented by sperm whale fishermen, but very few knew of its existence. It was rumoured that it had assaulted several men who tried to chase it down and kill it. Ishmael enlightens the readers about the omnipresence of the whale at sea, that it travelled at great speed, that some sailors regard Moby Dick as immortal and awe-inspiring. The whale caused premonition of probable danger whenever the sailors took to the deep sea and so, it was a constant source of fear to the sailors.

Ishmael has the ability to philosophise upon the enigma of a creature that he knows, cannot be easily defined. That he understands this shows Ishmael's ability to be objective, to be rational, and to attempt to bring home the unplumbed significance of a colour that seems to elude all colours and which is an attribute of the white whale, Moby Dick. The objective tone with which the chapter has been narrated points to Ishmael's sense of the moral as it relates to the larger macrocosmic universe in which Moby Dick is situated. His perspective on this chapter is not only large and sweeping, but discursive so that the subsequent actions of Captain Ahab must also be understood against the significance of the chapter.

Captain Ahab dared to challenge the whale with his six-inch long knife. But the whale reaped Ahab's leg just as a mower reaps a blade of grass and since then Ahab had been nursing an irrational desire for revenge against the whale. The whale thus becomes a symbol

of all the malicious feelings that men feel till they are left with nothing but only the craving for revenge while choosing to ignore the consequences

As Ishmael points out in *Moby Dick* there are two forces struggling for supremacy over each other; Captain Ahab representing finite man and the White Whale or Moby Dick representing amoral nature. The White Whale has snatched away Ahab's leg and attacked several other whaling men; as it has snatched the arm of Captain Boomer, killed a mate named Macey and five other whale-men belonging to the ship called Delight. These incidents bring the tragedy closer to the reader and Moby Dick the whale is thus identified with death and destruction and an ominous sense of his presence engendered by these tragic happenings. Man, in his blind quest for revenge refuses to see reason.

Interestingly, in the final encounter Ahab and all his men except Ishmael are killed by the white whale. It may be said that Ahab symbolizes man's illogical effort to redress all wrongs suffered by him at the hands of the inhuman world and his is the dogged quest for justice during which he shows determination, courage and concentration however misplaced, to forge his way forward. Ishmael builds up the plot in order to show Ahab's relentless struggle against the whale, his undeterred struggle and resolute promise not to give up, in the face of any eventuality. Ishmael shows the reader how Ahab tries to dominate nature and to impose his will on the world, be it through the crew from whom he expects instantaneous obedience or the whale which is, obviously indifferent to him. He is spurred on by the defiance of the whale which he feels is a challenge to him. It is through a depiction of his struggle that Ishmael makes one feel that man's position in this world is miniscule and his effort to acquire justice is fruitless. Yet his struggle proves futile, and he meets with a tragic end, only to prove that man's strength is puny in the face of nature. Ahab's death only serves to prove Ishmael's point about man's inability to gain supremacy over nature.

Ishmael is a meditative man like Ahab and seems to enjoy peace of mind when at sea for he is primarily a sailor. When compared to the rest of the crew of the '*Pequod*', we see that he is more cautious than all the men on board the whaling ship. He reacts emotionally and intellectually to every incident that takes place and offers his comments on different things and people.

Ishmael builds up in his narrative towards the final days when Ahab and his crew members would battle with Moby Dick. On the first night of the chase Ahab and the rest of the crew sense the presence of a whale. With the approach of dawn, he orders his men to be ready on the mast heads and he too, takes up a position in order to keep a close watch. When Ahab sights Moby Dick he cries out with delight: There she blows! – there she blows! A hump like a snow-hill! It is Moby Dick! ... (MD552) and the sailors too rush forward for a glimpse of the much talked about whale. Very soon all the boats, except that of Starbuck are lowered and the crucial chase begins. During the chase, a large number of herons fly towards Ahab's boat, indicating that Moby Dick is nearby. During the chase the white whale rises and seizes Ahab's boat in its jaws, splitting it into two. The crew has to save itself by clinging on to the

shattered boat. The whale swims around the wreck and seems prepared for another assault. Ahab himself manages to swim with difficulty in the midst of the sea-foam. But Ahab's pride is not diminished. His determination now touches new heights and he even ignored the second omen. On the second day of the chase, Ahab loses his ivory leg, but his determination is not diminished in any way. He declares: "I'll ten times girdle the unmeasured globe; ye and dive straight through it but I'll slay him yet!" (MD 569)

Ishmael has reiterated throughout the novel that Ahab's chase is not an ordinary chase and the whale, not an ordinary one. It symbolises man's insatiable search for meaning in an indifferent universe. Ahab differs from the common man who passively accepts misfortune as a part of his life. Ahab puts up a brave fight against the forces that are greater than him, though he perishes in his struggle. His courage is admirable because he makes an attempt to assert himself and he decides not to meekly accept defeat at the hands of a force that is definitely superior to him. Ishmael, however, understands better:

...Narrator Ishmael has an instinct for the morally and the psychologically intricate. He presses close in after the intertwinings of good and evil, tracks down the baffling crisscross of events and ideas, ponders their ambiguities and inversions. He is keen for a paradox and quick to see polarities – so keen in fact that the whole experience seems a double vision of what is at once noble and vile, of all that is lovely and appalling

...

(Norton Critical Edition 646)

The character of Ishmael was used by the novelist to project among others; man's estrangement and helplessness. A satisfactory conclusion to any episode in man's life is not possible and what is left with man is his insatiable mind. His role is not that of a simple narrator. Endowed with the ability to analyze human nature, Ishmael analyzes the characters of various persons except Queequeg. Till the end of the novel he remains an objective observer of the people on board the *Pequod*. His comments reveal his understanding of human psychology. He does make the effort to make Ahab see reason and abandon his project but Ahab turns a deaf ear to his effort

Ishmael's strong sense of right and wrong does not however, compel him to judge Captain Ahab. It is because of his non-judgmental stance that the drama unfolds unimpeded even as his constant philosophising moulds the response of the reader. He is the prism that reflects the divergences and convergences of the tale that cannot be easily understood. Ishmael, therefore, is a tool as well as a medium, character as well as narrator.

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