

Moby Dick's Captain Ahab, A Hero Representing Courage and Determination

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After reading "Moby Dick; or The White Whale" by Herman Melville, it is tempting to focus on Captain Ahab's obsession as a flaw that leads to not only his death but also the death of his entire crew. A tragedy that only leaves the narrator, Ishmael, to share the story. However, the obsession results from something much more profound and nobler. His fixation on finding and destroying the white whale is an example of strength and purpose that pushes people beyond their immediate physical needs to stand up against forces outside their control. Captain Ahab is an example of a hero who puts everything he has into righting what he sees as wrongs in the world. This purpose is in contrast to so many parts of American society in the pre-civil war era that let evil exist and grow because they lacked commitment and focused instead on personal and commercial concerns.

By naming his hero after King Ahab in the bible, Melville shows how we view a hero and who is writing the history defines how we perceive that hero. Biblical Ahab was the husband of the infamous Jezebel and someone who rejected the monotheistic god Yahweh to support the worship of the pantheistic Baal of his Wife's Phoenician culture. The writers of the bible attacked King Ahab and portrayed him poorly to further their goals. They pass over how Ahab ruled well and long and achieved much for Israel and their partners in Judea. We are exposed to Captain Ahab through the point of view of Ishmael, a biased observer who, like the bible's authors, focuses on the negative results

of Ahab's actions and not the positive ones.

Melville uses a salty and aged wharf rat to warn Ishmael that Ahab is not your standard Yankee whaler captain. The old seaman points out that the Captain lost a leg to a whale. And in a wonderful tumble of words, tells Ishmael, "Lost by a whale! Young man, come nearer to me: it was devoured, chewed up, crunched by the monstrousest parmacetty that ever chipped a boat !-ah, ah!" (80). Here we learn that even though Ahab lost a leg in a horrible way to a whale, he is still going out to sea.

The co-owner of the ship, Captain Peleg, later describes Captain Ahab in glowing terms. "He's a queer man, Captain Ahab — so some think — but a good one. Oh, thou'lt like him well enough; no fear, no fear. He's a grand, ungodly, god-like man, Captain Ahab; doesn't speak much; but, when he does speak, then you may well listen. Mark ye, be forewarned; Ahab's above the common" (89). This is not the description of an obsessed, monomaniacal madman. A few pages later, Peleg shares a time when the Pequot was damaged in a typhoon near Japan and how Ahab and he were focused on saving lives when most people would have thought of death and judgment (101). This establishes the one-legged captain as someone who can face significant challenges and overcome them.

We do not learn of Captain Ahab's noble quest until he nails a gold coin onto the mainmast and offers it as a reward to the first crew member who spots the white whale, Moby Dick (178). More than offering this reward, he gives a rousing speech to his men. Like a general before a battle, Ahab asks them to join "to chase that white whale ... till he spouts black blood and rolls fin out. What say ye, men, will ye splice hands on it now? I think ye do look brave" (180). When Starbuck points out that searching for one whale will distract them from their goal of gathering oil, Ahab drives home his point that he is

not after revenge. He sees his nemesis as the source or result of evil. He states, "I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him" (181). In so stating, he establishes this as more than a personal cause or a crazy endeavor. Unlike Don Quixote, he is not tilting at windmills. Through this speech, he is enlisting his army to battle evil — A cause larger and more important than financial success.

When that battle is finally joined in the book's final chapters, we learn the true strength and leadership of the man. He does not push his pawns forward. He joins them in their assault. Over three days, and three chapters, Ahab leads his men, taking on the same or greater risk. On that first day, he drives his boat to attack Moby Dick, and when the confrontation is about to happen, he gives up the tiller and takes up a harpoon, facing the whale head-on (605). When that attack fails, and he is left treading water in the sea, Ahab does not call for his own rescue. Instead, he orders the Pequot to, "Sail on the whale! — Drive him off." (608).

Ahab starts the third and final day of the chase by greeting the morning and letting his crew know that it is a great day and that it will be a day of action. By saying, "Ahab never thinks; he only feels, feels, feels; that's tingling enough for mortal man! to think's audacity. God only has that right and privilege" (622). This is a man of action who, not knowing it was his last day, still pushes himself and men forward to remove the evil that Moby Dick represents from the world.

His last words could stand as an example to anyone facing overwhelming odds. "Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee. Sink all

coffins and all hearses to one common pool! and since neither can be mine, let me then tow to pieces, while still chasing thee, though tied to thee, thou damned whale! Thus, I give up the spear" (633)! This is defiance and strength that channels and goes beyond some of Shakespeare's greatest heroes. He isn't just calling his men to go once more into the breach. He is leaping in himself and committing to follow his foe beyond death. Then Ahab drives his harpoon into the flesh of Moby Dick, is tied to the whale, and brings about his own death.

When national leaders call people to action or honor the war dead, they cite the ultimate sacrifice of giving up one's life. Although it didn't turn out too well for Captain Ahab or his crew, he did go after his enemy with everything he had, never hiding or shirking from his role in the effort. Soon after this novel was published, John Brown embodied the example of Ahab as he took on overwhelming odds to attack America's white whale, the institution of slavery. In doing so, Brown helped bring about the conflict that would finally end the country's original sin.

To this day, Captain Ahab's dedication to destroying what he perceived as evil, as monomaniacal as it was, stands as a good example. In our world today, there are people, governments, and movements that threaten others and the progress humanity has made. And if we hold back and focus on harvesting more whale oil, evil will range unchallenged. We may need fewer Starbucks and more Ahabs in the world. More people willing to get back up after having their figurative leg bitten off, search the globe, find the agent or source of evil, and then plunge our harpoons into it as we shout defiance over the din and follow it to hell and beyond.

Works Cited.

Melville, Herman, *Moby Dick; or the Whale*. 1st ed., New York, Harper & Brothers,
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