

Captain Ahab as a Hero in Melville's *Moby-Dick*

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Abstract: Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* tells the story of Ishmael, a sailor who joins the whaling ship Pequod, captained by the obsessed and vengeful Captain Ahab. Ahab's sole mission is to hunt down and kill the legendary white whale, Moby-dick, who had previously bitten off Ahab's leg at the knee. As a towering masterpiece of American literature, *Moby-Dick* is a novel that defies simple categorization and is renowned for its rich narrative complexity and profound thematic depth. Central to the novel is the character of Captain Ahab, whose quest to vanquish the white whale, Moby-dick, forms the back bone of the story. On the one hand, Ahab embodies various heroic qualities; on the other, Ahab is also perceived as a monomaniacal villain due to his apparent flaws and descent into madness. Through an examination of Ahab's actions, motivations and interactions, this essay argues that Ahab's heroism is multifaceted, encompassing elements of classical heroism as well as tragic heroism by exploring Ahab's heroic traits and their implications in the broader context of Melville's masterpiece.

Keywords: Ahab; Moby-dick; Classical Heroism; Tragic Heroism; Interactions

1. Introduction

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* is a towering masterpiece of American literature, renowned for its rich narrative complexity and profound thematic depth. At the heart of the novel is Captain Ahab, the enigmatic and monomaniacal leader whose obsessive quest to kill the white whale, Moby-Dick, drives the story. Ahab is a multifaceted character who embodies various heroic qualities despite his apparent flaws and descent into madness. This essay will explore Captain Ahab's heroism in *Moby-Dick*, considering his classical heroic traits, tragic dimensions, existential struggles, and the broader implications of his character

within the narrative. Through an examination of Ahab's actions, motivations, and interactions, we will uncover the subtle and often contradictory nature of his heroism.

2. Classical Heroism

To understand Ahab's heroism, one must first consider the classical notion of a hero. In classical literature, a hero is often characterized by extraordinary abilities, courage, and a sense of duty.^[1] In Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Captain Ahab possesses these qualities in abundance. He is a formidable sea captain, revered and feared by his crew. His physical and mental prowess is evident in his ability to command and navigate the perilous oceans. Captain Ahab embodies the traits of classical heroism through his leadership, physical and mental fortitude, and charismatic influence. These aspects of his character are vividly illustrated in various passages throughout the novel.

From the outset, Ahab's exceptional leadership and commanding presence are evident. As the captain of the Pequod, he navigates through perilous waters with authoritative confidence. His legendary status among seafarers, earned through past accomplishments as a formidable whaler, further enhances his heroic aura. This is encapsulated in Ishmael's description in Chapter 28, "Ahab", where he first introduces the captain: "He looked like a man cut away from the stake, when the fire has overrunningly wasted all the limbs without consuming them, or taking away one particle from their compacted aged robustness."^[2] This initial portrayal of Ahab is that of a strong, decisive leader who commands respect and loyalty from his crew. His ability to steer the Pequod through treacherous seas can be seen clearly in chapter 124, "the Needle", when the thunder the night before had a fatal effect upon the needle on the Pequod, making it of no more use than a knitting needle. It is Ahab who precisely determined the sun's position and commanded the crew to alter the ship's course

according to his judgement. He then crafted another needle himself using only a lance without its pole, a top-maul, and the smallest of the sail-maker's needles. By this, Ahab revived the spirits of the crew as he exclaimed, "Look ye, for yourselves, if Ahab be not lord of the level loadstone! The sun is East, and that compass swears it!" (Melville 533)

Ahab's unyielding determination to confront Moby-Dick is another hallmark of his classical heroism. He is making full preparations for his encounter with Moby-Dick, which can be seen from what Ahab has been doing with the charts. Nearly every night, the charts are laid out; almost every night, some pencil marks are erased and new ones added. With charts of all four oceans spread before him, Ahab is navigating a complex web of currents and eddies. This does not seem so absurdly hopeless to Ahab because with his knowledge of all tides and currents, he could calculate the drift of the sperm whale's food and recall the established seasons for hunting in specific latitudes. His knowledge and experience allow him to make reasonable, nearly certain, predictions about the best days to be in particular areas to find his prey. This reveals Ahab's extraordinary ability as a captain and his willingness to confront the whale again, despite his personal cost.

Ahab's charismatic influence is another defining trait of his classical heroism. His ability to galvanize his crew into sharing his vengeful quest against Moby-Dick is a testament to his persuasive leadership. In Chapter 36, "The Quarter-Deck", Ahab's speech, where he nails a gold doubloon to the mast as a reward for the first sighting of the whale, is a masterclass in motivational oratory: "Whosoever of ye raises me a white-headed whale with a wrinkled brow and a crooked jaw; whosoever of ye raises me that white-headed whale, with three holes punctured in his starboard fluke—look ye, whosoever of ye raises that same white whale, he shall have this gold ounce, my boys!" (Melville 177) This moment underscores Ahab's charisma and authority, compelling his crew to follow him despite their personal doubts and fears about the journey. His ability to inspire and lead in the face of adversity is a hallmark of classical heroism. In the second-day chase of Moby-Dick, Stubb voices what nearly the entire crew is feeling. By that point, the

excitement of the chase has stirred them up, and any pale fears and forebodings they might have earlier are now not only hidden due to their increasing awe of Ahab but are also shattered and scattered completely. They are all guided towards that deadly destination which Ahab, their sole leader and commander, aimed for. As Melville puts it: "They were one man, not thirty. For as the one ship that held them all, all the individualities of the crew, all varieties were welded into oneness." (Melville 570) As can be seen, Ahab transforms the crew's fear and uncertainty into a unified resolve to pursue the whale. His speeches, rich with Shakespearean grandeur, reflect a mind that, although tortured, possesses immense intellectual depth and rhetorical power.^[3]

Through these elements of leadership, fortitude, and charisma, Captain Ahab exemplifies the traits of a classical hero. Melville's portrayal of Ahab as a powerful, determined, and influential leader, even as he grapples with his inner demons and a seemingly insurmountable foe, underscores the enduring complexity and grandeur of his character.

3. Tragic Heroism

Ahab's heroism is also deeply rooted in the tradition of the tragic hero. Tragic heroes are typically characterized by a fatal flaw, which leads to their downfall.^[4] Ahab's tragic flaw is his obsessive vengeance against Moby-Dick. This obsession blinds him to reason and ultimately leads to his destruction. However, it is this very obsession that also elevates him to a heroic stature. His relentless pursuit of the whale transcends personal vendetta and touches upon universal themes of struggle against an indifferent and often hostile universe.

3.1 The Embodiment of the Sublime

In Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, the concept of the sublime plays a pivotal role in shaping Captain Ahab's character and his existential heroism.^[5] The sublime, which encompasses overwhelming beauty and terror, is epitomized by the white whale, Moby-Dick. Moby-Dick is described with awe and reverence, embodying the sublime in its purest form. There are enough remarkable physical traits and undeniable characteristics in Moby-Dick that captivate people's imagination intensely. It

isn't just his unusually large size that sets him apart from other sperm whales, but, as others have noted, a distinctive wrinkled forehead that is snow-white, along with a tall, pyramid-shaped white hump. The remainder of his body is so streaked, spotted, and patterned with the same mysterious coloration that eventually earns him the name of the White Whale. This name is truly fitting due to his striking appearance when observed moving gracefully through a deep blue sea under the midday sun, leaving behind a trail of frothy foam resembling the Milky Way, sparkling with golden reflections. Moby-Dick's immense size, mysterious whiteness, and elusive nature evoke both wonder and fear. As Melville puts it: "that so much invested the whale with natural terror, as that unexampled, intelligent malignity which, according to specific accounts, he had over and over again evinced in his assaults." (Melville 198) This description captures the awe-inspiring beauty and terror that Moby-Dick represents. Ahab's relentless pursuit of the whale symbolizes his quest to confront and comprehend the incomprehensible and terrifying forces of nature.

Ahab's recognition of the whale's power and his refusal to submit to it underscore his heroic defiance. Despite knowing the futility and potential destructiveness of his pursuit, he remains resolute. As he declares in Chapter 36, "The Quarter-Deck", "Aye, aye! and I'll chase him round Good Hope, and round the Horn, and round the Norway Maelstrom, and round perdition's flames before I give him up." (Melville 178) This unwavering determination highlights Ahab's existential heroism, as he confronts the sublime with defiance and an unyielding will. Ahab's defiance against the sublime forces of nature is articulated through his soliloquies in Chapter 37, "Sunset". Ahab thinks he has dared what he intends, and he will achieve what he intends! Though other people, especially Starbuck, may consider him insane, he knows he is driven by a demonic force, consumed by madness itself! Ahab even thinks he predicts now that he will defeat his own destroyer. Therefore, Ahab determines to be the same one prophet and the executor, which, in Ahab's viewpoint, is more than the mighty gods have ever been. Here, Ahab acknowledges the irrationality of his quest but remains driven by a deep-seated

need to challenge the sublime forces that shape human existence. This defiance against the sublime forces of nature is a central aspect of Ahab's character and his existential struggle. It represents his attempt to assert human will and understanding in the face of overwhelming and indifferent natural forces.^[6] Melville's portrayal of Ahab's struggle with Moby-Dick thus serves as a profound exploration of the human condition, the limits of human understanding, and the relentless pursuit of meaning in an indifferent universe.

3.2 The Embodiment of Evil

Ahab's view of Moby-Dick as the epitome of evil is a central theme in the novel. He perceives the whale not merely as a creature of nature but as a manifestation of all the world's malevolent forces. Throughout the novel, Ahab's fixation on Moby-Dick is depicted as an obsession with confronting the forces that shape his existence. In Chapter 36, "The Quarter-Deck", Ahab articulates his perception of the whale as a symbol of an inscrutable fate when Starbuck disagrees with his vengeance against Moby-Dick. He shouts, "Listen again — consider the deeper meaning. All visible things, my friend, are mere superficial facades. Yet within every event, every real action, there lies some unknown but still rational force shaping its essence behind the irrational facade. To me, the white whale represents that barrier, looming close to me. He challenges me; he overwhelms me. I perceive in him immense power, driven by an unknowable malevolence. It is this enigmatic essence that I primarily despise. Whether the white whale acts directly or indirectly, I will unleash my hatred upon him." Here, Ahab suggests that the whale is merely a mask behind which lies a malevolent force that governs his fate. This statement underscores Ahab's belief that Moby-Dick represents a profound and inscrutable evil, a symbol of the dark and malevolent forces that pervade the universe.

Ahab's quest against Moby Dick transcends personal vengeance and becomes a metaphysical battle against evil. Ahab's belief in the existence of an underlying malevolence in the universe is articulated through his powerful soliloquies and interactions with the crew. Ahab's struggle is vividly captured in his famous soliloquy when Starbuck is also present in Chapter 132, "The Symphony":

“What is this inexplicable, unearthly force? What deceptive, unseen ruler and merciless emperor controls me, compelling me against all natural affections and desires to constantly push, crowd, and thrust myself forward recklessly, ready to undertake actions I wouldn’t dare contemplate in my own right mind? Is it Ahab who acts, or is it I, God, or some other force that moves this arm?” From these words, Ahab reflects on the nature of his pursuit and he recognizes that his pursuit is driven by a force beyond rational control, highlighting his tragic awareness of his own fate.

The final confrontation between Ahab and Moby-Dick serves as the culmination of Ahab’s heroic journey. This climactic moment is a symbolic clash between man and nature, will and fate. Ahab’s relentless pursuit of the white whale reaches its tragic zenith, underscoring the themes of obsession, defiance, and the limits of human agency.^[7] The final battle is a testament to Ahab’s indomitable spirit and his refusal to surrender, even in the face of certain doom. As Ahab confronts Moby-Dick for the last time, his defiant exclamation captures the essence of his heroic struggle: I pursue you, relentless and ruinous whale; to the bitter end, I struggle against you. With all my fury, I strike at you from the depths of my soul, and with my final breath, I curse you. Let all graves and hearses sink into one shared abyss! And since neither will be mine, let me be torn apart while still pursuing you, even as I’m bound to you, you cursed whale! So, I surrender my weapon! These words highlight Ahab’s unwavering resolve to fight against what he perceives as the embodiment of evil, even at the cost of his own life. His declaration underscores his unyielding defiance against an indifferent universe, even as he faces inevitable destruction. His character thus embodies the timeless conflict between good and evil, elevating his pursuit to a heroic and tragic dimension.^[8]

In Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, the theme of fate and its inevitability is deeply intertwined with Captain Ahab’s tragic heroism. Ahab’s perception of Moby-Dick extends beyond that of a mere whale; he sees the creature as the embodiment of an inscrutable and malevolent force that dictates his destiny. This transforms his pursuit into a

profound metaphysical struggle against fate itself. Ahab’s recognition of and confrontation with fate, despite its inevitable outcome, underscores the tragic grandeur of his character. His unwavering determination to challenge and defy the malevolent forces that he believes control his destiny elevates his struggle to a heroic level, even as it leads to his downfall. Melville’s portrayal of Ahab’s battle against fate serves as a powerful exploration of human defiance, the limits of free will, and the tragic beauty of a life spent in relentless pursuit of an unattainable goal.^[9] Ahab’s death in the final confrontation with Moby-Dick is the ultimate realization of his tragic destiny. His demise underscores the inexorable nature of fate and the tragic dimensions of his character. Despite his defeat, Ahab’s legacy endures as a testament to the heroic spirit that dares to challenge the unknown and confront the sublime forces of nature.^[10] His heroic qualities, encapsulated in his defiance, determination, and unwavering will, continue to resonate with readers, highlighting the enduring power of Melville’s creation.

4. Ahab’s Interactions with Other Characters

In Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, Captain Ahab’s interactions with other characters, particularly Starbuck and Pip, reveal different facets of his complex personality and underscore key themes of the novel. These relationships highlight the contrasting worldviews and moral philosophies present within the narrative.

4.1 Ahab and Starbuck

The relationship between Ahab and Starbuck, the Pequod’s first mate, is marked by a fundamental clash of worldviews. Starbuck embodies reason, caution, and ethical restraint, while Ahab represents obsession, defiance, and the will to transcend ordinary limits. Their interactions underscore the thematic tension between reason and madness, duty and obsession. This is clear in Chapter 36, “The Quarter-Deck”, when Ahab finds Starbuck not so excited as other members of the crew in chasing the White Whale and asks if Starbuck is game for Moby-Dick, Starbuck answers: “I am prepared to face the whale’s twisted intentions and even the threat of death itself,

Captain Ahab, if they intersect with our mission. However, I joined here to hunt whales, not to fulfill my commander's personal vengeance. Even if you achieve it, Captain Ahab, how much satisfaction will your vengeance truly bring?" This quote captures Starbuck's pragmatic and rational perspective, as he tries to dissuade Ahab from his vengeful quest. But Ahab just ignores that and replies with irrationality, which drives Starbuck to cry: "Vengeance on a dumb brute!... that simply smote thee from blindest instinct! Madness! To be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab, seems blasphemous." (Melville 178) This interaction illustrates the profound moral and philosophical conflict between the two men. Ahab's unwavering resolve and refusal to heed Starbuck's pleas highlight his descent into madness and his defiance against any form of restraint or reason.

4.2 Ahab and Pip

Ahab's relationship with Pip, the young black cabin boy who descends into madness after a traumatic experience at sea, reveals a more humane and empathetic side to Ahab's character. Pip's ordeal resonates with Ahab, who recognizes a kindred spirit in the boy's suffering and madness.

In Chapter 125, "The Log and Line", When the Manxman seizes Pip by the arm and asks him to get away angrily, Ahab advances and mutters: "The more foolish one always criticizes the less. Keep away from that sacredness!" He then says to Pip: "Come here, boy; from now on, Ahab's cabin will be your residence as long as Ahab is alive. You touch the deepest part of me, boy; you are bound to me by threads woven from my heartstrings." This moment of empathy and tenderness towards Pip illuminates Ahab's capacity for compassion. Ahab's compassionate interaction with Pip stands in stark contrast to his usual stern and monomaniacal demeanor. In Chapter 129, "The Cabin", Ahab expresses a poignant recognition of Pip's madness and his own: "True art thou, lad, as the circumference to its centre. So, God forever bless thee; and if it come to that,—God forever save thee, let what will befall." (Melville 547) Ahab's understanding and acceptance of Pip's madness highlight his own awareness of the fine line between sanity and madness. His relationship with Pip thus serves to humanize

Ahab, revealing his vulnerability and the complexity of his character. It reveals a depth to his character that is often overshadowed by his obsessive quest. Ahab sees in Pip a reflection of his own tortured soul and recognizes the boy's suffering as a mirror of his own existential torment.

Through Ahab's interactions with Starbuck and Pip, Melville explores the contrasting worldviews and moral philosophies within *Moby-Dick*. Starbuck's reasoned caution and ethical restraint clash with Ahab's obsessive defiance and drive, highlighting the tension between reason and madness, duty and obsession. Meanwhile, Ahab's compassionate relationship with Pip reveals a more humane side to his character, adding depth to his portrayal as a tragic hero. These relationships enrich the narrative and underscore the multifaceted nature of Ahab's existential struggle.

5. Conclusion

Captain Ahab in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* is a character of profound complexity, embodying both heroic and tragic dimensions. His relentless pursuit of *Moby-Dick*, driven by a deep-seated obsession, positions him as a tragic hero whose greatness is inseparable from his downfall. Through Ahab's character, Melville explores themes of obsession, defiance, fate, and the human condition, inviting readers to reflect on the nature of heroism and the limits of human understanding.^[11]

Ahab's heroic qualities, including his indomitable will, charismatic leadership, and existential quest, underscore the multifaceted nature of his character. His interactions with other characters, particularly Starbuck and Pip, reveal the depth of his personality and the ethical and philosophical tensions within the novel. The final confrontation with *Moby-Dick* serves as the culmination of Ahab's heroic journey, highlighting the tragic dimensions of his quest and the inexorable nature of fate.

Ultimately, Ahab's legacy as a hero in *Moby-Dick* endures as a testament to the enduring power of Melville's creation and the profound questions it raises about the human condition. Through Ahab's tragic journey, Melville offers a compelling exploration of the complexities of heroism, the dangers of

obsession, and the existential struggle against the unknown.

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