

Psychoanalytic Reflections on Ahab in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*

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ABSTRACT

Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* has generated an endless debate in the literary world ever since its publication. The novel has such an enigmatic character that even after sixteen decades it fascinates the reader and compels the scholars to ponder over its complex narrative and say something new about it. This paper attempts to reflect upon the character of Ahab, the protagonist of the novel, in the light of psychoanalytic theory. His monomaniacal obsession to kill the whale even at cost of the lives of all his crew members, his sympathetic and compassionate disposition towards Pip, his indulgence into diabolic acts like smearing of the harpoons with blood, his anti-Christian acts, his insomnia, his narcissistic tendency etc. are some of his behavioural anomalies that still intrigue the reader. Is Ahab a cold and ruthless person devoid of human values? Is he a neurotic or schizophrenic? Is he mad?, are some of the questions this paper attempts to answer.

This paper will take into account Michel Foucault's seminal work *Madness and Civilization* and Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* to reflect upon the character of Ahab.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, Monomania, Neurosis, Insomnia, Narcissistic, Schizophrenia, Madness, Civilization.

INTRODUCTION

Moby Dick (1851) by Herman Melville is a very popular novel in America. The protagonist of novel is the egomaniacal Ahab, who is captain of Pequod, the whaling ship. This paper attempts to discuss the mental trauma in Ahab, who has lost his leg in an encounter with Moby Dick, the great white sperm whale. Although he has physically recovered from his wound, yet his mental state has been disturbed and his obsession with Moby Dick reflects it. His encounter with the Moby Dick has caused a deep and intense dent on his psyche which he is trying to fill up. His obsession with the whale was embedded in the absurd belief that Moby Dick was the physical embodiment of an unidentified, malicious force. For him, Moby Dick was the symbol of evil and his only motif was to demolish that evil. There is insanity or madness in the character of Ahab which has risen from a loss in the form of his leg. Ahab is so much obsessed with his monomaniacal desire that he doesn't care about his crew, even if they lost their lives. He has nailed a gold doubloon to the mast and has declared it as a prize for the one who first sights Moby Dick. He believed that images on the coin signify the battle between him and the whale, the mountain-tops and towers engraved on the surface of coin represents him, as courageous, the undaunted and victorious.

However, whiteness symbolizes purity and peace and it is the white colour of whale that the views of Ishmael, the narrator of *Moby Dick*, are contrary to those of Ahab. A series of examples by Ishmael in

Chapter 42 of *Moby Dick* reflects that the white colour is only increasing the insanity in Ahab and the trauma in his mind. There is peculiar emptiness about the colour white and it, “strikes more of panic to the soul than that redness which affrights on blood” (Melville, 840).

Ahab’s monomaniacal obsession to track Moby Dick and wreck vengeance upon it has so badly affected him that he looks at his crew members only as tools, the tools to spot Moby Dick. Ahab considers himself “the Fates’ lieutenant” that he is acting under the orders of destiny and its God’s will that Ahab must kill the Whale and destroy the evil. “Ahab is forever Ahab, man. This whole act’s immutably decreed. ‘T’was rehearsed by thee and me a billion years before this ocean rolled. Fool! I am the Fates’ lieutenant I act under orders. Look thou, underling! that thou obeyest mine”(Melville, 294).

Ahab himself crafts his harpoon and diabolically tempers it with blood of three harpooners instead of water. His soliloquy in most of the chapters of this novel helps the reader to have an insight in the character of Ahab. As in Chapter 37 of the Novel, his soliloquy is melancholic and he himself knows that everyone considers him mad and he himself agrees with them that he is mad.

“What I’ve dared, I’ve willed; and what I’ve willed, I’ll do! They think me mad- Starbuck does, but I’m demoniac, I am madness maddened! That wild madness that’s only calm to comprehend itself! The prophecy was that I should be dismembered; and- Aye! I lost this leg. I now prophesy that I will dismember my dismemberer” (Melville, 265).

The above quote from *Moby-Dick* said by Ahab is in itself the complete reflection of what is going on in Ahab’s mind. It is his monomania of killing Moby Dick that has blinded his vision, as said by him, “The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run” (Melville, 265). Monomania has been described as a type of madness in nineteenth century, the other type being the moral insanity. Monomania referred to “an unhealthy obsession with something, usually involving a specific belief or conviction about it, that led to poor judgement”(Web: study.com). Michel Foucault in his book *Madness and Civilization*, has examined the evolution of the concept of madness, through three phases, i.e. the Renaissance, the classical age and through modern experience. The process of separating mad from the society is what he has called “the Great Confinement. The evolution of madness in Ahab can also be studied in the similar way where he is confined to a vast sea where his obsession is becoming stronger and stronger with every passing day. The following quote from *Madness and Civilization* suits very well to the protagonist of *Moby-Dick*, who himself has chosen this confinement:

“Confined on the ship, from which there is no escape, the madman is delivered to the river with its thousand arms, the sea with its thousand roads, to that great uncertainty external to everything. He is a prisoner in the midst of what is the freest, the openest of routes: bound fast at the infinite crossroads. He is the Passenger par excellence: that is, the prisoner of the passage. And the land he will come to is unknown-as is, once he disembarks, the land from which he comes. He has his truth and his homeland only in that fruitless expanse between two countries that cannot belong to him”. (Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of insanity in the Age of Reason*)

As said by Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents*, “people commonly use false standards of measurement they seek power, success and wealth for themselves and they ignore what is of true value in life” (Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*). Ahab, instead of being happy that his life has been saved from

whale, tries to chase it. The ego in him becomes the cause of his fatal end. Captain Boomer of Samuel Enderby, who also had an encounter with Moby Dick, has lost his arm. However, he has accepted that it was an accident and there was nothing malevolent on the part of whale. He is happy that he is alive and unlike Ahab he has no desire to seek revenge from whale.

In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud has elaborated the concept of Id ego and superego. According to Freud, "Normally, there is nothing of which we are more certain than the feeling of our own self, of our own ego. This ego appears to us as something autonomous and unitary, marked off distinctly from everything else". (Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*). Ahab is fixed in his fantasy of chasing the Whale. If analysed in Freudian model of Id ego and superego, Ahab represents the Id, Starbuck is Ego and Moby Dick is Superego. Id demands immediate satisfaction and mere a sight of whale or his imagination of chasing it satisfies his Id. It is superego, which controls Id and hence, Moby Dick has completely controlled the mind of Ahab, whereas Starbuck tries to amend the irrational thinking in Ahab. It can be seen that it is Starbuck in Ahab's soliloquy, and when Starbuck yells at Ahab, 'Stop this madness, must we keep chasing him until the last man is dragged to the bottom of ocean?' (Melville, 840)

There are also neurotic or schizophrenic characteristics in Ahab. His obsession to kill white whale and his hallucinations of chasing the white whale even at the cost of the lives of his crew are reflecting the schizophrenia in Ahab. He doesn't sleep in nights and suffers from insomnia. He always shuts himself alone in his cabin, away from his family for the past forty years is also a reason for schizophrenia in him. His nightmares are only about whale and at one point in the novel, he says, 'I have chased you through my mind, through a thousand nightmares.' The character of Ahab, also reminds its readers of the Narcissus of Greek Mythology. He was extremely beautiful with a beautiful physique and falls in love with his own reflection in clean water and unable to get it, he died and gets converted into a flower which is known by his name and is found near rivers. The only difference between Ahab and Narcissus is that Narcissus falls in love with his beautiful image, but Ahab hates his image and the view of his bitten leg only increases his desire for revenge. However, it is the self love that became the cause of death in both of the cases.

FINDINGS

1. Eversince Ahab's Fatal encounter with Moby Dick, he begins to see it as an embodiment of all evil forces in this cosmos. His Mind is stuck in Moby Dick and his obsession to kill the whale at any cost, has overpowered his ability to think and to make any prudent decision as a captain of a Ship.
2. The whiteness of Moby Dick represents to Ahab an enigmatic and maddening disturbance, that he himself realizes that he is mad. He spends most of his time alone in his cabin thinking only to chase the whale and for him, his own desire for vengeance was more important than anything else.
3. Ahab's disturbance represents his disturbed Id.

CONCLUSION

The paper concludes that, the loss in the life of Ahab, either it is in the form of a part of his body or the loss of his family life, it has affected his state of mind and has given rise to the insanity or madness in him. He

considers himself the Fates' lieutenant who has been selected by God to demolish evil and for him, Whale is the embodiment of whole evil. There is madness, schizophrenia, and insomnia in Ahab which has blinded his vision and has overpowered his rational way of thinking. His single minded fixation with the whale leads to the death of all of his crew members including him except for Ishmael, the narrator, who is the sole survivor.

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