

The Maturing of the American Novel

It was the unique religious basis of the American way of life which brought to its culture a strong unusual moral characteristic. Issues of morality prevailed in American literature such as can be seen in "*The Scarlet Letter*", one of the first great American novels. "*The*

Scarlet Letter" deals mainly with the results of sin, the feeling of guilt, and the means of repentance and of forgiveness. The same concern with morality can be seen in *Moby Dick*, a book written by Herman Melville, and considered among the greatest American novels.

HERMAN MELVILLE (1819 ~ 1891)

Melville was born in New York City, into a family which had lost most of its fortunes. When he was 20 he traveled by ship to Liverpool, England, working as a cabin boy. When he returned to the United States he became a school teacher briefly and then sailed to the South Seas on the whaler boat named *Acushnet*.

After sailing for 18-months Melville deserted the ship in the Marquesas Islands and with a companion lived for about a month among the native cannibals. He escaped aboard an Australian boat, and arrived at Papeete, Tahiti, where he was temporarily imprisoned. He worked as a field laborer and then shipped to Honolulu, Hawaii, where in 1843



he enlisted as a seaman on the U.S. Navy frigate *United States*. After his discharge in 1844 Melville began to write novels based on his experiences and to take part in the literary life of Boston, Massachusetts, and of New York City. When he was 31 Melville moved to a farm and befriended the American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne. His stories gradually acquired more than just a character of adventure. They came to express Melville's philosophical purpose and increasingly conveyed symbolic meaning. These qualities predominate in his greatest masterpiece, the novel *Moby Dick*; or *The Whale* (1851) which Melville dedicated to his friend Hawthorne.

THE STORY

The main theme of this novel shows the conflict between Captain Ahab, master of the whaler boat *Pequod*, and *Moby Dick*, a great white whale that once tore off one of Ahab's legs at the knee. Ahab is dedicated to revenge; he drives himself and his crew over the seas in a desperate search for his enemy. The whole story is narrated by Ishmael one of the boat's crew members. The body of the book is written in a wholly original, powerful narrative style, which, in certain sections of the work, Melville varied with great success. The most impressive of these sections include the rhetorically magnificent sermon delivered before sailing and the soliloquies of the mates; extensive "flats," passages conveying nonnarrative material, usually of a technical nature, such as the chapter on whales; and other ornamental passages, such as the tale of the Tally-Ho. These sections can stand by themselves as short stories of merit. The work is invested with Ishmael's sense of great wonder at his story, but it nonetheless conveys full awareness that Ahab's quest can have but one end. And so it proves to be: *Moby Dick* destroys the *Pequod* and all its crew except Ishmael.

Captain Ahab is master of a whaling boat hiring men to take a perilous voyage. Tall and broad, Ahab appears to be a man of iron. However, across his face there is a long, white scar and one of his legs is the white, carved jawbone of a whale. His original leg had been bit off by *Moby Dick*.

Ahab was determined to kill the whale. At sea, he announces his determination to the crew and con-

vinces the sailors to help him. The boat represents a micro universe traveling across eternity. As his anger against the whale grows into fury, Ahab seems like a man resolved to overcome Destiny, to confront and subdue God Himself

All the temperaments of human personality are represented in the crew that accompanies Ahab. There is a rational and practical assistant who is unable to dissuade Ahab from his intent. Another crew member is brave but foolish and his strength is easily used by Ahab in his pursuit of the whale.

Practically all human races are represented within the crew -- with Indians and blacks working on the boat. They appear to be frightening, brutal savages in the beginning. However they accompany the mood of the assistants they work for.

Aboard the boat there is an infidel, Fedallah, who counsels Ahab. As Ahab's avengement against the whale grows, he becomes less human and more cruel, and becomes closer to Fedallah, who prophesies that Ahab will be shielded from death in his pursuit of the whale. Ahab misunderstands these prophecies, and is only able to see them clearly when he is about to die.

The story has its climax with Ahab's ultimate encounter with *Moby Dick*, the great whale. The following extract includes a selection of different parts taken from their final encounter. Ahab and his men leave the main boat, and go out in smaller boats to chase and spear the great whale.

Moby Dick

Numbers of sharks, seemingly rising from out the dark waters beneath the hull, maliciously snapped at the blades of the oars, every time the men dipped them in the water; and in this way accompanied the boat with their bites. It is a thing not uncommonly happening to the whaleboats in those swarming seas; the sharks at times apparently following them in the same patient way that vultures hover over the banners of marching regiments. But these had been the first sharks observed since the White Whale had been first sighted; and whether it was that Ahab's crew were all such barbarians, and therefore their flesh more attractive to the senses of the sharks - a matter sometimes well known to affect them, - however it was, they seemed to follow that one boat without molesting the others.

Suddenly the waters around them slowly swelled in broad circles; then quickly upheaved, as if sideways sliding from a submerged berg of ice, swiftly rising to the surface. A low rumbling sound was heard; a subterranean hum and then all held their breaths; as bedraggled with trailing ropes, and harpoons, and lances, a vast form shot lengthwise, but obliquely from the sea. Shrouded in a thin drooping veil of mist, it hovered for a moment in the rainbowed air; and then fell swamping back into the deep. Crushed thirty feet upwards, the waters flashed for an instant like heaps of fountains, then brokenly sank in a shower of flakes, leaving the circling surface creamed like new milk round the marble trunk of the whale.

"Give way!" cried Ahab to the oarsmen, and the boats darted forward to the attack; but maddened by the irons corroding in him, Moby Dick, seemed combinedly possessed by all the angels that fell from heaven. The wide layers of iron muscle overspreading his forehead, white beneath the transparent skin, looked knitted together; as head on, he came churning his tail among the boats; and flailed them apart; spilling out the irons and lances from the mates' boats, and dashing in one side of the upper part of their bows, but leaving Ahab's almost without a scar.

While some of the men held back on the strained planks; and as the whale swimming out from them, turned, and showed an entire flank as he shot by them again; at that moment a quick cry went up. Lashed round and round the fish's back; pinioned in the turns upon turns in which, during the past night, the whale had reeled involutions of line around himself, the half torn

body of a man was seen; his clothes frayed to shreds, his distended eyes turned full upon old Ahab.

"The whale, the whale!" Ahab cried. "He turns to meet us! I grin at thee, thou grinning whale! Look ye, sun, moon, and stars! I call ye assassins of as good a fellow that ever gave up his ghost. Oh, oh! oh, oh! grinning whale. Why fly ye not?"

The eyes of all the men were enchanted as they watched intent upon the whale, which from side to side strangely vibrating his predestinating head, sent a broad band of overspreading semicircular foam before him as he rushed. Retribution, swift vengeance, eternal malice were in his whole aspect, and in spite of all that mortal man could do, the solid white buttress of his forehead smote the ship's starboard bow, till men and timbers reeled. Some fell flat upon their faces. Like dislodged trunks, the heads of the harpooners aloft shook on their bull-like necks. Through the breach, they heard the waters pour, as mountain torrents down an opening.

Diving beneath the settling ship, the whale ran quivering along its keel; but turning under water, swiftly shot to the surface again, far off the other bow, but within a few yards of Ahab's boat, where for a time, he lay quiet.

"Oh, lonely death on lonely life! Oh, now I feel my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief. Now then from all your furthest bounds, pour ye now in, ye bold billows of my whole foregone life, and top this one piled wave of my death! 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 row to pieces, while still chasing thee, though tied to thee, thou damned whale! Thus, I give up the spear."

The harpoon was darted; the stricken whale flew forward; with igniting velocity the line ran through the groove; - ran foul. Ahab stooped to clear it; he did clear it; but the flying turn caught him round the neck, and silently as Turkish assassins kill their victims, Ahab was shot out of the boat before the crew knew he was gone. Next instant, the heavy anchor on the rope's final end flew out of the boat, knocked down an oarsman, and hitting the sea, disappeared in its depths.

DISCUSSION

1. Why do you think the sharks follow only Ahab's boat? What does that imply?
2. What evidence is there that Moby Dick acts with near human consciousness?
3. Do Ahab's last words give evidence of courage or of the psychosis with which he sought the whale?
4. Can Ahab be considered a plausible character?
5. What does Ahab's death represent?