The Whale and the Minnow: *Moby Dick* and the Movies

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These statements are based upon a reading of the Warner Brothers script. The film's release dateline is New Bedford, 4 July 1956.

TEACHERS of literature have all realized, at one time or another, that an example of what art is not may provide material for a fruitful discussion of what art is. In the case of *Moby Dick,* the price of a ticket to the Warner Brothers' version of the whaling story plus the price of the paperback classroom text add up to a ship's-hold full of ideas for teaching the novel. For instance, as proof for what one tells students about the necessity for relationship as well as density in an artwork, the colorfilm provides ample evidence that concentration by itself accomplishes very little. The movie does teach, negatively, that the important thing is concentration of reflexive elements: elements which reflect each other forward and backward and thereby explain, increase, and join in each other's meaning.

Destroying symbolic unity in the attempt to meet the demands of the film medium, scriptwriter Ray Bradbury has lifted most of the book's scenes of pure action out of their meaningful context, and has regrouped them in order to create a fast-paced narrative. The film, consequently, generates confusion and thematic pointlessness along with the excitement of violent action. For example, the movie combines "The Mast-Head" (Ch. 35), "The Grand Armada" (Ch. 87), and *"The Samuel Enderby"* (Ch. 100); "The Spirit-Spout" (Ch. 51) and "The Chase" (Chs. 133-135); "The Castaway" (Ch. 93) and, again, "The Chase" chapters.

"The Mast-Head's" function in the novel is to emphasize the error, horror, and death involved in forgetting one's historical identification with the human community and in ignoring the realities of physical existence in order to lose oneself in the pursuit of ideality. "The Grand Armada," on the other hand, points out the polar error involved in timorously accepting herd thoughts, attitudes, and behavior without the saving courage often needed for individual difference and bold action. *"The Samuel Enderby"* serves to reinforce the impression of Ahab's cursedly erroneous reaction to a force that is "best let alone." But in the film, only the meeting with the *Enderby* retains any significance. "The Mast-Head" is reduced to a gasp-taking view of the dizzy heights and dangerous possibilities of the lookout's job; the "Grand Armada" has only the proportions of a scene in a slaughterhouse or of the wagon train massacre in a Magnivision Sioux uprising.

The book's "Spirit-Spout" suggests that ideality is too ephemeral a goal for man's most heroic aspirations. The silvery spout ironically lures the *Pequod* around the Cape of *Good Hope.* And Ahab is presented as torn between the necessary "horizontal" drive to conquer earthly obstacles and the monomaniacal "upward" drive of his idealistic assault upon the ultimate and the eternal. He is fearful that his quest may be as misdirected as the ghostly spray is misdirecting. But in the movie, the spirit spout is merely a BIG Screen, technicolor, awesome first sighting of the white whale, and a wide-angle lens replaces significance.

In "The Castaway" chapter, Melville places Pip alone in the blank, eternal, endless Pacific in order to create a metaphor of man in the universe. It is a chapter of enormously high symbolic voltage, offer-

ing one view of God, or ideality, as an eternal, disinterested emptiness. The significance of a naturalistic universe is a greater burden of possible truth than the human mind can bear (even Ahab will not accept this possibility; thus his plea to the corposants in "The Candles"), and Pip is driven insane. Indeed, Melville is careful to specify that

> The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely, though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad.

This chapter helps the reader to focus on the center of the novel: God and the universe do not care for man, and there is no conscious benevolence or malevolence. Moreover, man cannot exist in the God-sea of ideality. The white whale is as colorless, blank, ubiquitous, eternal, and blind as the Pacific in which Pip is momentarily abandoned. And not only is the whale a possible view of God, but he is also a view of God's works. He is a natural manifestation of the sea, a creature of the deeps, one of the heartless, ever-juvenile eternities of the unwarped primal world—indeed the symbol of it all. What the novel allows Pip to see gives that poor orphan-slave the richly important function of the fool or the madman in a work like *King Lear*. Yet in the film, Pip merely goes mad because he is frightened by the butchery, blood, and bellowing of the fight with Moby Dick. Instead of presenting the human truths associated with philosophical madness, the movie serves up the "colossal scope" that produces movie behavior which should be reserved for the psychological soap-opera, the joke, or the chill-and-thriller.

John Huston, the producer-director, has stated that even college professors will be satisfied that his production is faithful to the spirit of Herman Melville. The mingled contempt and uneasiness in this statement indicate that probably Mr. Huston hopes he is not talking about "college professors" or "experts" at all. What he seems to hope we will think he means is "purist." In one sense, Mr. Huston has a very justifiable argument. There are tremendous difficulties in transferring a vastly complex structure from one medium to another. Also, it is important that a profound document like *Moby Dick* be taken from the relative inaccessibility of the classroom and be placed before millions in an exciting and popular mass medium. Mr. Huston knows that even the "professors" will cheer the attempt to do so. One might be labeled a purist if he objected to details like the *Pequod's* sailing from New Bedford instead of Nantucket (even granting that much is lost by the deletion of the trip to Nantucket and the brief stay there). Or one might be a purist if he objected to invented scenes of sentiment like the farewell closeups of the women on the quay and Starbuck's wife on the widow's walk. One even might possibly be a purist if he objected to the invented, maudlin qualities of Ahab's suggestion that his pay be turned over to the families of the men lost in the *Rachel's* whaleboat. For a movie cannot be the *same* thing that a book is, and many changes are downright necessary.

But the student, or the intelligent reader or movie-goer may ask, and the college professor *must* ask, "To what purpose have the changes been effected? What are the consequences of the changes in emphasis?" Reflection answers that all the changes have been made either to satisfy the demands of sentiment (as in the case of the women, or Ahab's pay), or the demands of action (as in the case of Ishmael's invented fight and Quee-

queg's consequent renunciation of death in order to save his personal friend, who is getting the worst of the fight). And, as the helter-skelter piecing together of chapters suggests, regardless of the producer's intentions, "adventure" becomes the picture's major purpose. For this purpose, Mr. Bradbury's hacking and piecing is admirably logical, almost inevitable. Dressed in fancy dialogue partly borrowed from Melville, *Moby Dick* is a suspenseful adventure film, a salty, wet western. But as a rewriting of Melville's book, the script loses thematic profundity and unity. Ahab and the whale provide the best examples.

When the movie Ahab first states his rationale for hunting Moby Dick, he tells Starbuck that "it is our task in life to capture whales and furnish up their oil for the lamps of the world. By performing our task well and faithfully we render a service to mankind that pleases Almighty God. Moby Dick challenges all this. He would drive us whalers back to the land. He would plunge the world into darkness. He would deny God's will and himself rule over the oceans." Ahab is presented as a humanitarian, religious soldier who would rid the world of a murderer. "I only know that Moby Dick is evil," he says. Yet every time he meets a whaler who has seen Moby Dick, he is beside himself with anxiety lest someone else may have beaten him to the final, fatal harpoon. Although Ahab behaves in the same dual manner in the book, the novel provides the irony (a sophistication of technique which the moviemakers have yet to learn) and the relationships which allow for aesthetic unity—which provide insight into Ahab's motivations. But there is no way to know whether the movie Ahab is a religious humanitarian or a selfish monomaniac. The movie Ahab loves and serves God and man, yet, with only fuzzy regard for the meaning of "The Candles," the film has Ahab quench the St. Elmo's fire as an *actuality* of his dominance over human and physical nature. Is Ahab a vengeful dictator, or an altruistic saint? The novel gives us both —and more—gives us a man whose torturingly disparate impulses are always controlled by his alter-ego, Fedallah (whose complete dismissal from the movie is not the least of the film's unjustifiable subtractions).

But the movie gives us not one Ahab, but two men whose relationship is never made clear and whose motivations, therefore, are never discernible. One Ahab is an inexplicable caricature of Melville's demonized Prometheus; the other is the man who is really-a-good-guy-beneath-his-rough-exterior, one whom the producers must have assumed the audience would like to see in control of the whaling voyage. Consequently the audience can never know if it is Ahab's or Starbuck's estimation of the whale's meaning that is the central one. One of the two must be right, for unlike the book, the movie offers no alternative criteria other than Ahab or Starbuck by which to interpret the whole. Ishmael, for instance, is reduced to a country bumpkin who happens to be a sympathetic character with a penchant for moral narration.

The whale himself is presented as personified evil not only by Ahab but even by secondary characters like the Manxman. Yet, at the end of the chase the movie tells us, *via* Starbuck (whose own revision of attitude—from reluctance to enthusiasm—is also inexplicable), that as for the mighty deeds of Moby Dick, why, "Any whale could have done that, any year. We went to sea knowing that. Moby Dick is no devil. He's a whale. A monstrous big whale, aye, but a whale—no more. And we're whaling men—no less. We don't turn from whales; we kill them. We'll kill Moby Dick." We are asked to shift the direction of our confusion and to believe that the whale is no more than so many tons of blubber. For they *do* kill Moby Dick! After all the sound and fury about Ahab and his whale, the audience is asked to believe that the movie is about

men, who, given a job, do not run from it. As an affirmative "message" even this conclusion is confused by the death of the crew, for the steel and rubber white whale is no slouch, and pays back favors in kind. Perhaps the movie's moral is that they that go down to the sea in ships will do their job even if it kills them.

However, the film's confusions can serve an excellent purpose. Having recounted the movie's fragments to my classes (assigning classes to see the film will make the job painless), I was gratified to find that less than a dozen questions exposing the differences between the book and the movie afforded the students insight into the novel in surprisingly brief time. I offer some questions here as possible suggestions rather than as workbook standards.

1. What does the film lose by the deletion of Fedallah?

2. What evaluation of the whale does the book offer (and the movie not offer) by not allowing the whale to be caught?

3. In the movie, lightning allows Ishmael to see the picture on the wall of the Spouter Inn. How does this dramatic camera-device create on film one of the meanings of the book?

4. In the movie, Stubb tells Ishmael, "Mind, lad, if God ever wanted to be a fish, he'd be a whale, believe that, he'd be a whale!" Does Stubb have any right to make this statement? Why is this statement faithful to the book? Why is the significance of this statement lost in the movie?

5. In the movie, when Ishmael first meets Queequeg, he cried out, "Landlord . . . Peter Coffin! Coffin! Save me!" How does this prepare for a later action at the close of the film? Except for the play on words which relates Ishmael's cry for help to his being saved by Queequeg's coffin, is there any further significance to the coffin in the movie? Is there in the book?

6. Because the movie is not clear about the nature of God, and because we cannot know whether Ahab obeys or disobeys whatever God the movie assumes, does Father Mapple's sermon have any relation to the rest of the film? In the book is there any relation between the sermon and Ahab's career? Ishmael's?

7. In the movie a sailor earns the gold doubloon, and Ahab magnanimously insists that the man must take it. In the book Ahab himself earns the coin. Compare Ahab's speech about his winning the doubloon (Ch. 133) with the movie version. Which version helps to define Ahab? Which version merely depends on accident? Why?

8. At the beginning of the movie, the shores of home are equated with love and safety. At the beginning of the book, the shores of home (Peleg, Bildad, Aunt Charity, "The Lee Shore") are something more than love and safety. What overtones of meaning are added thereby to Ahab's quest in the book and are lost in the movie?

9. In the movie, the gold doubloon seems to be an evil jinx—one cannot be sure just why. All the movie sailors see one thing in the coin: purchasing power. In the book, those who look at the coin see different things. How does the relativity of definition help define the whale as well as the characters who see the whale as different things? Does the doubloon explain or add to anything in the movie?

10. In the movie, why is Ishmael the one man who survives? Is there any reason beyond the obvious need to have someone left to tell the story? In the book why is Ishmael the lone survivor?

If "college professors" can guide their students' perceptions in any way, perhaps they can demonstrate that the students must—for the preservation of the value and integrity of their own minds—must subject the mass media, which condition them, to the same scrutiny which is demanded in the classroom. The students begin to see that as a complex exploration of fundamental problems like man's relationship to himself and to God, like the nature of God, like the proper bases for human ethics and values, the book simply is not in the film. And when they see this, they see that literature courses do offer, and the mass media could offer, material that is important for more reasons than the cultural purist's say-so.