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Interactions of power in *Moby-Dick*

*Moby-Dick* is the story of a man striking out against the gods and trying, unsuccessfully, to change his fate. This fate a direct result of the different levels of power he wields in different situations in the face of certain characters. Herman Melville presented to us the view that power is subjective, that it is bound to the environment the person is in, and not the person themselves. The example he used to illustrate this point is mainly Captain Ahab. Ahab has wild swings in his levels of control and ability to change things around him. He has wild swings in what we would define has power.

At the start of the book we hear of Ahab, meek, quiet, and pious. At this moment he, presenting himself to the owners of the ship, whom he is trying to extract his tool for vengeance from. He has played his cards right and the ship owners are completely convinced of his trustworthiness, “and wrong not captain Ahab because he happens to have a wicked name.” (Melville 79). They are convinced completely and utterly that there could be no wrong in hiring Ahab. Ahab did have enough power to influence events in this scenario but most of the power did lie with the Owners. The ability to decide ultimately did not fall in Ahab’s hands. Ahab could have had the best qualifications in the world, but all it would take to prevent him from becoming captain of the ship is a simple no from Peleg or Bildad (the owners). However, stories of Ahab’s madness have spread to sailors throughout Nantucket. An old Sailor by the name of Elijah warns against boarding the Pequod “look ye; when captain Ahab is all right, then this left arm of mine will be all right; not before.” (87). Thus, we get our first warning of Ahab’s insane plan.



Aboard the ship, we see nothing from Ahab for the first few days of the voyage. And finally emerging from his cocoon, he is transformed. Now, Ahab far away from land with ultimate power on the ship proceeds to manipulate the crewmates bending them even more to his cause. They grow “More and more strangely and fiercely glad and approving,” (137) as Ahab riles them up. He now wants and has the power to gain complete control of the people on the ship. Being far away from land he is the equivalent of God. There is no force on the ship greater than him. But this relationship is only superficial and based on people and situation. While this behavior applies to his crew, later encounters with ships from foreign lands, force a quick change in behavior of not only Ahab but all the crew.

When they first met the Virgin, they were friendly enough to give them some oil. And because of the circumstances it would be hard for them not to. They specifically tell us that such things are to be expected to occur from time to time. Then a right whale appears. The environment are now one of competition. The captain of the virgin is quickly defeated in the chase for the whale and left there. The next event of importance in our analytics is the meeting with the Rachel. Ahab starts of with standard procedure asking if they had seen the white whale who Ahab dearly hates.

The ship responds positive, then asking their own question about a lost whaleboat, saying “My boy, my boy is among them. For God’s sake – I beg” (398). Any sane captain would be obliged to aid in the search for the lost child. Indeed, Ahab is no sane man. He refuses the Rachel and forces the captain off his ship. To him loss of the whale is equal or even greater than the risk of death.

*Moby-dick* is a very complex tale. It is filled to the brim with diverse characters of all origins and personalities. This opens a lot of space for the diverse characters to interact in different ways. All these interactions defined by the characters and the environment. The level of power one holds in the real world as well as in *Moby Dick* is decided by the environment (which set up the rules for the game) and the characters.

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Melville, Herman. Moby-Dick. 2nd Norton Critical Edition, W.W. Norton & Company, 2002. WC.470