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3-8–2019
ENG 391MM
Midterm Essay #1

Philosophical Tradition in Moby Dick: Ishmael of the Enlightenment

The introductory chapters of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* may convince one that the narrator, Ishmael, intends to champion the Judeo-Christian values of his Presbyterian upbringing. But later scenes display a broad awareness of the entire Western philosophical canon. Ishmael steps outside philosophical boundaries by weighing numerous religious and philosophical traditions within his narrative, and using his own reason to distill the "problem of the universe" (Melville 99).

Ishmael's initial reaction to his strange bedfellow, Queequeg, suggests loyalty to his Presbyterianism. Queequeg's exotic tattoos and the wicked harpoon on his person make him a savage fright for the "good Christian" Ishmael (Melville 11). Most impressively Ishmael apostrophes dramatically to "thou great democratic God" as he introduces the officers of the Pequod, an authorial soliloquy in celebration of the God of Jacob (Melville 73). Accordingly one might read Ishmael as wholeheartedly and singlemindedly celebrating the Judeo-Christian moral tradition.

This reading is overthrown however by Ishmael's wry wit in describing his religious upbringing: "I was a good Christian; born and bred in the bosom of the infallible Presbyterian Church" (31). Without context this assertion may seem sincere but the following argument for idol-worship reveals the tone as sarcastic: a *good* Christian… the *infallible* Presbyterian Church. Ishmael's true belief in the deep fallibility of the church explains his earnest engagement with other religious and philosophical traditions. When he raises the subject of determinism, Ishmael, in contrast to strict Christian doctrine, illustrates the Greek Fates—rather than the Hebrew YHWH—as the weavers of his destiny (3). Such open-mindedness to pagan explanations of philosophical phenomena makes Ishmael a more complex intellectual figure than a strictly Christian perspective could embody. In addition Ishmael demonstrates understanding of Hindu mythology when he points out in "Of the Monstrous Pictures of Whales" that one of Vishnu's many forms was the *leviathan* (166). In the same chapter Ishmael claims the Greek hero Perseus as a whaleman (166). Using pagan mythology to substantiate the significance of the whaling trade he so loves illustrates that Ishmael has a similar reverence for these pagan mythologies. Most of all, as warm-heartedness overcomes

prejudice, Ishmael notably remarks “better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian,” declaring that Queequeg’s neighborly behavior justified him entirely as a friend and as a human being, far more than his pagan worship should condemn him (13). Most demonstrative of all, after Queequeg’s heroic water rescue of a “bumpkin” (37) who was jeering at him only minutes before, Ishmael suggests that Queequeg must figure that “we cannibals must help these Christians” (38). In actuality, Queequeg’s kindness towards his mocker reflects Christ’s command to “pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44) much more than the behavior of the misguided bumpkin himself. In short although Ishmael boasts a fortress of Judeo-Christian background, his broad command of and respect for pagan narrative makes him a narrator independent of the church, freely critiquing it by leveraging pagan myths towards truth, and by celebrating moral behavior over cultural origin.

Perhaps in reality, therefore, Ishmael is an outsider of philosophy entirely, which is what one would expect of an artistic intellectual. In closer accordance to Enlightenment philosophy than religious doctrine, still other scenes demonstrate that rather than turning to any particular doctrine for answers, Ishmael leverages his own Reason to distill truth from numerous religions and philosophies. Throughout the novel, for example, Ishmael breaks from narrative in order to discourse on the practice of whaling and often to argue for the nobility of the whaleman’s enterprise. In “The Advocate”, Ishmael advances the claim that “the world declines honouring us whalemen” because whaling is viewed as “a butchering sort of business” (68). Such is the dominating doctrine of the day. But by use of his own reason Ishmael conceives of a view he finds more logically consistent. If we honor the whalemen because they are butchers, he asks, then why do we delight to honor military commanders? (68). Not content to accept the common wisdom of the day, Ishmael prods towards greater truth using his own Reason. Most daringly of all, Ishmael uses Christ’s Great Commandment to justify turning idol-worshipper at Queequeg’s behest: if one is to love thy neighbor as thyself (Matthew 22:39), and not worship idols (Exodus 20:4-6), and one wants savages to convert to the Christian religion—a moral duty for all European explorers who took seriously Christ’s command to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19)—then does loving a neighbor involve honoring their request that you worship their idol, as you would want them to honor your God? With loyalty to no doctrine in particular, seems to point out a contradiction in church doctrine. He

illustrates again as in his contrast between sober cannibals and drunken Christians that moral behavior, not cultural identity or law, should ultimately determine who is righteous.

And if Ishmael is the philosophical outsider, the wildman, the outcast, then perhaps the conclusion of the novel will reveal who in Melville's world is the natural born son: Isaac.