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Midterm Essay #2

Dark Ahab, Humane Starbuck: Melville's Moral Men

Moby Dick's narrator, Ishmael, blesses first-mate Starbuck with an elaborate introduction to Starbuck's unique values and persona in the chapter "Knights and Squires". The mysteries of Captain Ahab, however, are not revealed until his dramatic declaration of intent in "The Quarterdeck". This same chapter also uses the figures of Ahab and Starbuck to contrast two leading whalemens' motivations for setting sail.

In Chapter 40 "Midnight, Forecastle" Starbuck's crewmates, whom he calls a "heathen crew that have small touch of human mothers in them," sing with boisterous levity of pursuing the White Whale. One shouts "Blood! but that old man's a grand old cove! We are the lads to hunt him up his whale!" to which a chorus responds "Aye! aye!" In addition, even our narrator Ishmael confesses that he too sang in joy at the prospect of conquering Moby Dick, that ubiquitous eternal beast with the wrinkled forehead, seen in many places at the same time, and in many times at the same place. Starbuck, on the other hand, objects to Captain Ahab that he came aboard to pursue whales in the plural, and is even willing to risk his life for whales — but, as he clarifies, he wants to hunt to live, not live to hunt, not to seek "my commander's vengeance," since "revenge on a dumb brute" that will not "fetch thee much in our Nantucket market". Starbuck, then, does not see moral victory in killing any particular whale, nor in killing whales in general, nor especially in taking "revenge" against an animal that he perceives as unintelligent. Humane Starbuck is in it, as we would say, for the money; that is, for the practical utility of making money, seeking to cause no more harm than practically necessary. Such restraint is displayed in "The Pequod Meets the Virgin". Third-mate Flask notes an infected prior wound in the whale and deliberately harpoons the whale in that spot, sending the poor beast into "more than sufferable anguish". To this Starbuck reacts "Avast! There's no need of that!" Starbuck's consistent objections to "revenge on a dumb brute," and to harming whales unnecessarily, confirm his role as the novel's champion of the pragmatic hunt, a "staid and steadfast man" who withstands "the ordinary irrational horrors of the

world... yet cannot withstand... more spiritual terrors... the concentrating brow of an enraged and mighty man.”

The just-quoted line is a well-placed narrative prolepsis. With it, Ishmael suggests that Starbuck will succumb to such an “enraged and mighty man”. Unfortunately for Starbuck and his practical mission, his captain, dark Ahab, is just this type of man. When Starbuck objects to the pursuit of Moby Dick on the basis that it “will not fetch thee much in our Nantucket market,” Ahab rebuts that “the white whale agent or the white whale principle” is what he hates. One might interpret Ahab’s meaning as simply that he declares his moral mission to be greater than Starbuck’s monetary quest. But Ahab’s proclamation runs deeper: to Ahab, all earthly objects are “as pasteboard masks,” that are merely hiding some “reasoning thing”. As Ishmael puts it, the intelligent malice of the universe that, to Ahab, so palpably affronts his pride — this same pride that “demasted” him when he first leapt at Moby Dick with a six-inch knife — is made “practically assailable” in Moby Dick. Thus, Ahab’s moral revenge, against not just Moby Dick but the universe’s refusal to bend the knee before man, is for him a treasure greater than any gold on earth. Starbuck’s attempt to sway Ahab by mention of the Nantucket market illustrates just how incapable poor practical Starbuck is of understanding the mighty madman—twice his own age—who leads the Pequod with a moral, not practical, mind. Even more illustrative is what Ahab does *not* value. Before Ahab even announces his specific purpose to the crew, he offers up something extremely valuable to any materialists among the crew—likely most of them. He flashes before the awed crew a doubloon of Spanish gold and, promising it to the first man who spots Moby Dick, nails it to the mast. Let’s be clear: the man who makes it to shore with that much gold may never have to ship out again; it’s a treasure to the practically-minded man. If any reader held reservations about the singularly moral character of Ahab’s madness, Ahab’s offer of an entire gold doubloon for so much as a *sighting* (not the capture or killing) of Moby Dick makes it clear that dark Ahab is motivated by principles that transcend the earthly concerns of his first mate.

In this sense Melville raises philosophical questions beyond Ahab’s particular revenge-quest: the practical and earthly versus the abstract and moral. The former is exemplified by Starbuck, whom Ishmael introduces as a “staid, steadfast man” of “hardy sobriety and fortitude,” who “cannot withstand... more spiritual terrors...” Conversely it is these spiritual terrors which swirl like a hurricane within the tortured and sordid soul of dark Ahab. Based on his rebuttal to Starbuck’s practical objections: “I would strike the

sun if it insulted me,” we can tell where mad Ahab stands. The final act of the novel will perhaps reveal a third balancing actor who measures the might of these opposing moral men.