



Religious Ambiguity of Herman Melville in *Moby Dick*

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Abstract: The representative work of Herman Melville *Moby Dick* is a profoundly religious novel. Under the cover of the novel, Melville reveals his loyalty and rebellion to Christianity. This paper intends to reveal his religious ambiguity from three different perspectives: the white whale that is the combination of a divine and a demon, Ahab who is both the king and slave, and Ishmael who is both abandoned and saved.

Keywords: Moby Dick, religious ambiguity, Melville.

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I. INTRODUCTION

"Melville is one of the greatest American novelists in the world in the nineteenth century. His representative work *Moby Dick*, with a thrilling scene, a deep exploration of philosophy and the romantic epic narrative style reached the peak of the nineteenth Century American novel. Even D.H. Laurence commented this novel is an unparalleled sea epic. It is a story about the captain Ahab of Pequod who led the crew to kill the whale with Ishmael, the sailor, as the narrator. Ahab's leg had been bitten off by the whale. The angry captain vowed to kill the whale, only ended up with the death of all the crew and destroy of the ship. Finally, only Ishmael survived to tell the people the tragic story. It is not difficult for readers to find that the novel is closely connected with the Bible about characters portrayal and image implication, and that many of the characters in the novel are taken directly from the Bible. Moreover, the Bible scriptures are quoted many times. This shows that the influence of the Bible on the author's literary creation. The influence of religion on Melville is a topic that cannot be neglected.

II. THE WHALE: BOTH A DEVIL AND A DIVINE

In *Moby Dick*, the white whale is legendary and even gives off divine halo. It is everywhere, and

it even miraculously appears in different places at the same time. It has supernatural power, and the iron fork of sailors could not hurt it at all. The crazy sailor, Gabriel, called it the embodiment of a god. The pagan sailors called it the sea monster, and Ahab regarded it as a symbol of evil. Its serene and magical appearance conceals the insidious and violent power. The color white is elegant, noble and daunting, because white itself is the symbol of the most meaningful divine power, and the mask of the Christian God. So the white whale became a combination of multiple meanings and symbols. *Moby Dick* is a demon. Melville grew up in the environment of Calvinism culture and family education. Calvinism emphasizes the fatalism, insisting that "the original sin" can be saved only through the mercy of God, but not by the power of man himself. The white whale symbolizes the original sin of human life, that is, the devil that cannot be conquered, because it is the devil who tempted Eva to steal the forbidden fruits and violate the order of God, so the devil is the symbol of the original sin. As for the white whale is the devil, there are many clear descriptions in the book. It is mentioned in the novel that the sailors equate Ahab with the white whale. Ahab is a demon-like ruler on the ship, so undeniably *Moby Dick* is the same devil. To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to

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me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But it's enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. (Chapter 36, *Moby Dick*) People could feel the whale's evil strength from the description. It is also mentioned in the novel that Ahab regards the whale as not only the enemy of his physical being, but also his intellectual and spiritual enemy, and for him, the whale is the incarnation of all kinds of evil thoughts. Evil is the devil."

The white whale can also be regarded as a symbol of divine power, while Ahab represents the evil force of mankind. The novel condemned Ahab's rebellion against the power of God. In Chapter 24 of *Moby Dick*, Melville writes:

Let me assure ye that many a veteran who has freely marched up to a battery, would quickly recoil at the apparition of the sperm whale's vast tail, fanning into eddies the air over his head. For what are the comprehensible terrors of man compared with the interlinked terrors and wanders of God!

Clearly, Melville regards the whale as God, because it has the "interlinked terrors and wanders of God." Starbuck yelled at Ahab "Madness! To be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab seems blasphemous." "Yet, in most instances, such seemed the white whale's infernal afrethought of ferocity, that every dismembering or death that he caused, was not wholly regarded as having been inflicted by an unintelligent agent." The tone of the narrator is telling readers that whales are divine which is unconquerable.

III. AHAB: BOTH THE KING AND THE SLAVE

Ahab is a king from 2 kings of Old Testament of *Bible*. As the seventh-generation king of Israel, he was more vicious than the former Israeli kings. Ahab was shot dead by the arrow in the battle with Jehoshaphat, king of Judah. After he died, dogs even lick his blood. The captain of Ahab is exactly the same as the king of Ahab in the Bible. Captain Ahab is ambitious and self-centered paranoia. He was bitten off a leg in a whaling voyage by Moby Dick.

King Ahab and the captain have striking similarities in their personalities and religious beliefs. Like King Ahab, Captain Ahab was also intelligent and bravery. He was both a competent captain and an excellent whaler. He was the Khan on the ship, the king of the sea, and the great master of the sea monsters. From the perspective of religious belief, the king Ahab and the captain Ahab had an astonishing agreement. They were all pious pagans. Ahab tolerated Jezebel to worship the God of Baal, to build the temple of Baal, to kill the prophet of Jehovah, and freed the king of the king Aram. These acts are against God's will. Captain Ahab, as a

Christian, worshiped fire. Like Persia pagan, he was infatuated with the light of fire, the sun and the stars. He even worshiped the fire and claimed to be the child of god of fire. In addition, King Ahab and Captain Ahab have similar fate. King Ahab was tyrannical and overbearing and overbearing. Jehovah warned Ahab "the whole house of Ahab will perish. I will cut off from Ahab every last male in Israel slave or free." As a result, Ahab, who ignored the prophet's dissuade, persisted in invading Assyria, and was eventually shot in the battlefield. The tragic death of King Ahab foreshadowed the inevitable tragic fate of the captain Ahab. Ahab was paranoid, irritable. He thought it was the whale who made him lose his dignity. For him, the white whale was his target of revenge.

Ahab is a slave of revenge. To be more specific, Ahab is in a more difficult spiritual dilemma. His closure, isolation, and coldness made it impossible for him to gain the deep friendship like young Ishmael befriended with Queequeg or get the salvation of the soul from the others. In pursuit of the white whale, what Ahab concerned about is how to deceive his sailors to take revenge together with him. He not only regarded the whale as his enemy, but also opposed himself to the sailors on the whaling ship. Ahab is not only incompatible with nature, but also loses its social position. Under such heavy mental pressure, the confrontation between Ahab and the white whale has become a confrontation with oneself, and the pursuit of Moby Dick has also become the pursuit of self. Melville also believed that Ahab was like pursuing his own shadow. Therefore, this courageous and resolute and stubborn captain is actually confronted with himself as his greatest enemy. In this sense, Ahab is lost in revenge, and the pursuit of Moby Dick was finally achieved along with his own physical destruction.

In Ahab, we see the spirit of people who believe in themselves in the rising stage of the United States. People at that time believed reasons, individualism, confidence and controlling power over nature, the world, and even the fate. But, as the rational observer and thinker of the times, Melville has shown his own fear and anxiety for the human irrational freedom. Human beings often see only one part of the universe and destiny, and humans then become arrogant and assume that they can control their own destiny. But they did not expect that they began to start a lonelier suffering journey. This is just as Calvinism believes that only God is free, that is, God does not obey any laws. Unless God is willing to reveal it, we will not understand or even know his verdict. We can only grasp the little tip of eternal truth. As for anything else, including the meaning of our own life, it is hidden in a mystery which can neither be seen nor explored. Humans' resistance is

lonely, painful and impossible to win. Moreover, in reality, People like Ahab cannot enjoy the happiness of human life, and cannot feel the blessing of God. Eventually, Ahab and the white whale perished together, symbolically indicating that the supremacy of God and the absolute rule of God of humans' destiny.

IV. ISHMAEL: BOTH ABANDONED AND SAVED

The name of Ishmael is of great significance. It comes from the Old Testament of Bible. Abraham's wife Sarai is infertile, so she sends her maid Hagar to her husband to build a family through her, and Ishmael, the son of Hagar was born; then Sarah herself is pregnant, and give birth to his son Isaac. In order to make sure his son's exclusive right of inheritance, Sarai persuades Abraham to drive the mother Hagar and the son Ishmael out. So Ishmael became an abandoned child. The name has thus become a symbol of homeless or vagrant. From Moby Dick, we can see that Ishmael is not only a vagrant in the world, but also a spiritual wanderer seeking the meaning of life. From three aspects of character identity, activity environment and life experience, Ishmael basically maintained his "Archetype" characteristics. Firstly, he left the safe and comfortable life on land, and became a sailor and a wanderer in the sea, and the "Archetype" character Ishmael and his mother from Bible were driven out into wilderness; secondly, he struggled with the whales in the desolate vast sea for a long time, and this desolate and vast sea signifies the wilderness where "prototype" Ishmael was driven and where made a living by hunting. As we all know that Ishmael went to sea because of some kind of depression in his heart. According to his own understanding, being a whaler is a kind of suicide--- he believes that the whaling ship crew is the abandoned people. It can be seen that the author adopts the "archetype reference" to his character to illustrate that Ishmael, like the original one from the Bible, is an abandoned vagrant in the sea to show the same loneliness, hardship and danger of the life and of the sea.

On the surface, Ishmael is the one who is abandoned, however, in another sense, he is also the saved one. There are reasons for him to be the only saved one on the whaling ship. Different from the blind and irrational paranoid Ahab and different from the cold-hearted and selfish Anthropocentrism Starbuck, Ishmael views the whales, the shipmates and the whaling journey with more insightful and open and rational attitude, and he positively examined of the relationship between man and nature. His long-time study of the whales, especially the Moby Dick itself, dispelled his hatred imposed by Ahab for the giant whale and eliminated the influence of Starbuck's anthropocentrism on him,

thus formed a unique idea of the great whale. In the eyes of Ishmael, the great whale was personified instead of being the object of using or killing; Ishmael was full of sympathy and awe for the personified whale in the whole voyage of Pequod. Ishmael's acceptance, appreciation and peaceful coexistence with the white whale show his attitude to his understanding of tolerance of nature and also contribute to his final salvation when all others were destroyed at last.

From the land to the sea, Ishmael sought a cure for mental deficiency and witnessed inhuman whale hunting of humans. Ishmael gradually awakened and realized the terrible fate of being hostile to nature. He respected nature and sensed the mystery and invincibility of nature. The vast ocean makes Ishmael aware of his own insignificance. He respects the nature represented by the whales and the sea, and sees himself clearly under the inspiration of the mysterious power of nature, and deeply understands the meaning of life and the value of human existence. On the other hand, Ishmael is different from Ahab, His views the status of humans in the universe and the relationship between man and nature with a sober and objective attitude. Ishmael was sincere and pious, and became good friends with Queequeg. The vast ocean and mysterious Moby Dick convey the mystery of nature which must fill Ishmael's heart with awe. The wandering life on the sea even made him realize that the invincibility of nature also brought him friendship and reestablish the hope of survival. To some extents, this kind of love of life and friendship with another human is the booster of Ishmael's new life. Standing on standpoint of the spectator, Ishmael examines everything around him. Instead of being in crazy pursuit of a whale like Ahab, he calmly reflects on the way out for humans and the relationship between man and nature. Ishmael reveres nature and relies on the power of nature to return to the normal path of life. Therefore, he escaped from natural revenge and became the only survivor.

V. CONCLUSION

It can be said that religious ambiguity is one of the most important causes of Melville's life tragedy, but the paradoxical thing is that religious confusion also constitutes the strong motivation internal tension in Melville's creation in his literary career. After the last meeting with Melville's in Liverpool, England, Hawthorne gave the most accurate comment on Melville's religious perplexity and pursuit:

Melville, as he always does, began to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and informed me that he had pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated; but he does not seem to rest in that annunciation; and, I

think, will never rest until he gets hold of a definite brief. It is strange how he persists and has persisted since I knew him, and probably long before---in wandering to-and-fro over these deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we were sitting. He can neither believe nor he comfortable in his unbelief; and his too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other. (Hawthorne, 1987)

Apparently, Melville was entangled between the two confusing and paradoxical beliefs.

Based on Hawthorne's recall, Melville was regarded as the "exiled Cain" who is destined to wander forever in the wilderness of religion and metaphysics. However, this indefatigable, uncompromising pursuit and exploration was the greatness of Melville, as Hawthorne lamented that if Melville a believer, he must be one of the most pious, most respected believers; he has a noble nature, and he is more immortal than most of us. As an agnostic with religious background, a theorist who does not believe in reason and an indefatigable pursuer to the ultimate goal of uncertainty, these incompatible internal contradictions doomed Melville's pursuit of truth is full of entanglement and suffering. He never stopped religious pursuit in his life. He had a heated quarrel with God, which ended up without the expected answer.

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