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Empathy For Captain Ahab

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Empathy For Captain Ahab

(TITLE)

BY

Ronda S. Dively

THESIS

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ABSTRACT: Empathy for Captain Ahab

For decades, Herman Melville's Captain Ahab has been the focus of much critical commentary, the majority of which fashions him to be a deranged monomaniacal tyrant who coerces his crew into unfathomable dangers, who does not cope with tragedy in a rational manner, and who, because he is so obsessed with his quest, is incapable of relating to other human beings. This study, however, advocates a more empathetic reading of Captain Ahab's character, based upon close explication of Melville's text. Using the passages from *Moby Dick* which have been cited in the past as indictments of Ahab, along with other pertinent material from the novel, this discussion attempts to establish that Ahab is not insane but is a man who reacts understandably, even normally, to a life filled with devastating pain and fear.

This thesis addresses several specific indictments of Ahab's character, indictments which collectively have tarnished the positive image of the captain that Melville projects throughout the novel. F.O. Matthiessen and Kerry McSweeney, for instance, contend that Ahab is an acute monomaniac. While in fact Ahab does refer to himself as a monomaniac, this study argues that Matthiessen and McSweeney have applied the term too stringently. Another accusation damaging to Ahab has been made by both Robert Zoellner and John Lauber. Citing the quarter-deck scene, they claim that

Ahab deviously forces his crewmen to partake in the hunt for Moby Dick. Nevertheless, careful reading of the text during and immediately following the confrontation on the deck, coupled with an intent to empathize with Ahab, reveals that the captain simply does not have to resort to such devices nor does he intend to. Adding to the collection of negative perspectives, Rudolph Von Abele believes Ahab treats his men with "despotic ruthlessness." On the contrary, as this study establishes, Ahab generally regards his men in kind manner, and when he does become angry (usually because his quest is in jeopardy), he is overcome with guilt and the urge to make amends.

Another assertion explored in this empathetic reading of Ahab concerns the supposed use of Perth the blacksmith and Captain Boomer of the *Samuel Enderby* as foils. Zoellner claims that these characters were included by Melville as examples of exemplary behavior in the face of tragedy, and thereby they emphasize how poorly Ahab responds to his crippling misfortune. In contrast, this analysis contends that Perth and Captain Boomer's respective situations simply are not analogous to Ahab's, and therefore these characters cannot serve as objects of comparison. Rather, they assist in helping Melville probe different intensities of personality--Ahab's, of course, representing the most intense. Finally, this discussion suggests an alternative reading of Ahab's character that depends largely upon Edward F. Edinger's finding that the old captain is a "study in the

psychology of resentment." There exists pointed evidence in *Moby Dick* that Ahab is indeed resentful and definitely under the control of some psychological reflex driving him to retaliate against the source of his grief. Because he is captive to a normal psychological response, Ahab must be excused for his sometimes aggressive actions. Additionally, this study concludes that his resentment fosters positive traits in Ahab, namely his ability to relate to and empathize with others.

Ronda S. Dively
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Empathy for Captain Ahab

Undoubtedly the most complex and intriguing figure in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, the infamous Captain Ahab has challenged literary critics for years with his many-faceted personality. Although each of the numerous perspectives on Ahab boasts an original angle, many of the prominent critics concur on at least two points of his character. First, many interpretations have presented the *Pequod's* captain as the archetypal Romantic hero. Kerry McSweeney in his analysis of *Moby Dick*, *Ishmael's Mighty Book*, links Ahab with Satan in *Paradise Lost*, "whose linear descendants include the dark Romantic hero" (67). Henry Nash Smith likewise notes Ahab's resemblance to the ideal man of the Romantic Age in his article "The Madness of Ahab" (26). Sharing this view is John Lauber who devotes an entire essay, "Sultan of the *Pequod*: Ahab as Hero," to a discussion of Romantic heroic tendencies in Ahab (31). The view of Ahab as Romantic hero is the only common opinion that considers the Captain in a somewhat positive vein; the second prevalent perspective on Ahab insists that he is acutely insane. Even the critics

who mark him as a Romantic hero recognize his madness and deem it a qualifying trait for the title they have ascribed to him. Nonetheless, whether those who study Ahab seem to admire him or to condemn him, virtually all believe that he is unquestionably, radically deranged. Admittedly, the number of literary scholars refuting such interpretations is few, but to accept the majority's findings without careful reflection upon Melville's text would be irresponsible. In fact, in light of the Captain's history and the very nature of the whaling expedition, the instances these critics cite as proof of Ahab's dementia are unconvincing. Indeed, Ahab is obsessed with the Great White Whale, but that fact alone does not verify his insanity. As is evidenced in several particular episodes throughout the course of *Moby Dick*, Captain Ahab's behavior speaks not of a man who has lost his grasp on reality, but speaks of one who is reacting understandably, even normally, to a traumatic life plagued with devastating pain and fear.

To accept the theory that Ahab was a relatively sane individual reacting understandably to his situation, one must fully comprehend the extent of his suffering before and after his initial encounter with Moby Dick. Even before he becomes a whaler, Ahab is known to have lived a life of insecurity and disappointment. In an early chapter of *Moby Dick* entitled "The Ship," the reader learns that the

grizzled old Captain endured an empty childhood, for he was orphaned at age one by the death of his widowed mother (93). Without parents, Ahab was stripped outright of any stable beginnings, and surely any imaginative reader can estimate accurately how vulnerable he must have felt when he began to realize that he had no family. Apparently, he never did develop any strong ties to people in Nantucket, for he boarded his first whaling ship at age eighteen, from that point on living less than three years of the remainder of his life on land (506). In the chapter of *Moby Dick* entitled "The Symphony," Ahab reveals how debilitating that lifestyle has been for him. Talking to Starbuck, he exclaims in a despairing tone: "Forty years of continual whaling! forty years of privation, and peril, and storm time! forty years of the pitiless sea! . . .out of those forty years I have not spent three ashore. When I think of this life I've led; the desolation of solitude it has been; . . . oh, weariness! heaviness!" (506-507) This emotional passage clearly indicates the agony that the very nature of his life has imposed upon him. Growing up with no parental support or guidance (as one must assume since Melville doesn't mention it), Ahab chooses perhaps the most attractive means of subsistence for a young man in his insecure condition. As the distressful lament in "The Symphony"

indicates, he has realized the insufficiency of his life but by that time has not the means or the gumption to start afresh. One leaves this passage with the impression that Ahab felt trapped. Undoubtedly his dismal childhood and adolescent situation denied him the opportunity to explore other possibilities for his life.

Though the significance of Ahab's young life must not be ignored in a comprehensive analysis of the captain's behavior aboard the *Pequod*, insecure beginnings can only partially account for the intense pain he bears throughout his life. The most potent source of his suffering is the confrontation with Moby Dick during which the gigantic whale tore his leg from his body. In fact, in the chapter entitled "The Symphony," and immediately following the telling of his dismal life history, Ahab indicates the injustice of his physical loss in light of his wretched early existence. He asks Starbuck, "Is it not hard, that with this weary load I bear, one poor leg should have been snatched from under me?" (507) This passage merely hints at the agony Ahab experiences over the loss of his leg without revealing the raw physical anguish that he had to endure. Captain Peleg's comments to Ishmael early in the tale suggest the hideousness of that wound. Responding to Ishmael's inquiry about the *Pequod's* captain, Peleg replies, ". . . I know that on the passage home, he was a little out of his

mind for a spell; but it was the sharp shooting pains in his bleeding stump that brought that about, as any one might see" (93). Even in light of such graphic description of Ahab's suffering, most critics, as will be noted later in this study, feel that Ahab overreacts to this injury and thus becomes mad. However, there do exist those who read Ahab more sympathetically and will attest to the repercussions of that wound. One such critic is John Lauber who, referring to the chapter entitled "The Ship," notes several facts that should help mold the reader's attitude toward the *Pequod's* captain. As regards the significance of Ahab's leg he states, "the first fact that we learn about Ahab is critical--the loss of the leg; the second, that it was lost in no ordinary way but was 'devoured, chewed up, crunched, by the monstrousest parmacetty that ever chipped a boat!'" (31) Though others have admitted the significance of the injury to Ahab's mental state, none has so adequately and clearly pinpointed the essence of that confrontation between Ahab and the whale as Lauber has. Using the terms that Melville himself uses, Lauber suggests that Ahab's loss was not the everyday, ordinary accident to which one may easily and philosophically adjust. On the contrary, it was a hideous, excruciating injury received during a direct struggle between a man and a beast fifty times his size. Such a poignant personal conflict must arouse in the defeated an

anger so vehement that those who have never experienced such pain cannot begin to realize the impact of it.

Both the despair of his young existence and the appalling injury that left him permanently crippled have set Ahab apart from ordinary humanity and contributed to his often unsettled disposition. It is the vindictive anger directed at the beast that attacked him, however, that stimulates those critics who insist Ahab is insane, and they focus on that intense drive for revenge as they work to prove their analyses. His unswerving determination to locate and destroy the White Whale has been cited as evidence of Ahab's madness which critics agree, and Ahab himself declares, is a form of monomania. Henry Nash Smith, in his article "The Madness of Ahab," depends on the definition of this illness proposed in 1844 by Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw of the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts. [That definition reads: ". . .the conduct [of a monomaniac] may be in many respects regular, the mind acute, and the conduct apparently governed by rules of propriety, and at the same time there may be insane delusion, by which the mind is perverted. . . .the mind broods over one idea and cannot be reasoned out of it" (17). Undeniably the *Pequod's* captain perseveres throughout the novel to destroy Moby Dick, and truly he cannot be swayed from that purpose. Therefore, on the most basic level of this definition, Ahab is a monomaniac.]

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As will be discussed further in this study, the problem with this label as it has been applied to Ahab is that critics such as Kerry McSweeney and F.O. Matthiessen have used it in its most exacting form. They have maintained Ahab's case is so acute that he cannot reach beyond his very narrow vision to relate to individuals outside those integral to his selfish cause. Shaw's definition asserts that the monomaniac can function intelligently and retains a sense of what is proper, but even these positive traits applied to Ahab's observable behavior are sterile compliments. To label Ahab simply an intelligent, proper man perverted by his obsession with the White Whale is to ignore the complexities of his character. Ahab is a deeply emotional man who craves meaningful contact with other human beings, and on several occasions in *Moby Dick* the reader witnesses an Ahab who breaks free of his selfish design to interact with his shipmates. One such occasion arises in the chapter entitled "The Symphony," in which Ahab and Starbuck share their feelings about the expedition. As Starbuck approaches Ahab who stands alone on deck, the older sailor releases a teardrop into the ocean below him. During the conversation that ensues between the two men, Ahab begs:

" . . .close, stand close to me Starbuck, let me look into a human eye. . . . By green land; by the bright hearthstone! this is the magic glass, man; I see my wife and my child in

thine eye. No, no; stay on board, on board!--lower not when I do; when branded Ahab gives chase to Moby Dick. That hazard shall not be thine. No, no! not with the far away home I see in that eye!" (507) Clearly these are not the words of a man so crazed by his own purpose that he is unable to see the apprehensions or the needs of others. Such sentiments suggest that Ahab has more depth than the the casebook monomaniac, for he is able to abandon thoughts of his personal venture and is capable of sensitively relating to others on subjects besides that of the Great White Whale. In this episode, Ahab reveals his own needs as well. He must cling to someone for a moment--talk to another man so that he might give utterance to his own despair. Clearly, an acute monomaniac would not engage in such a catharsis. He would not dwell upon loved ones or concern himself with the well-being of a person who could possibly be vital to obtaining his objective.

Another glaring instance of Ahab's search for significance outside the chase for Moby Dick is his relationship with Pip. In the chapter entitled "The Log and The Line," Ahab, feeling pity for the Negro boy who has been emotionally abused by some of the crew, approaches him and speaks: "Oh ye frozen heavens! look down here. Ye did beget this luckless child and have abandoned him. . . . Here boy; Ahab's cabin shall be Pip's home henceforth, while

Ahab lives. Thou touchest my innermost center, boy; thou art tied to me by cords woven of my heartstrings" (489). Again, these hardly seem the articulations of an acute monomaniac. The empathy Ahab expresses in these lines moves him to the point of self-sacrifice--the forfeit of his solitude. Additionally, though the Manxman who witnesses the scene believes Pip and Ahab are drawn together because they are both "daft" (490), Ahab's own words indicate that some profound emotion attracts him to the boy. Not only would a full-fledged monomaniac resist such companionship because it would divert time and concentration from his purpose, but also he would be incapable of relating so sensitively to others because his obsession would completely consume him, blinding him to others' infirmities.

Even critics who label Ahab a monomaniac recognize the incidents with Starbuck and Pip as breaking character. Kerry McSweeney, the same critic who claims that the key to understanding Ahab is the notion of monomania (69), states in reference to the exchange between Ahab and Starbuck in "The Symphony" that "Ahab is strongly drawn out from the contracting circle of his monomania" (75). But even though McSweeney admits that Ahab demonstrates humanitarian tendencies which seemingly disprove that he is literally monomaniacal, he maintains that such a display is fleeting and thus does not cancel evidence of his mental imbalance.

C.N. Stavrou apparently reads that scene in "The Symphony" much differently from the way McSweeney does. In reference to the captain's emotional outpouring in that scene, Stavrou comments on Ahab's character in general: "This is the enthralling humanity and heroic verve of Ahab. . . . What is more, it speaks eloquently not only of Ahab's sanity, but of his conscious awareness of his quest and of his unhampered volition" (316). Stavrou rightly views this conversation with Starbuck as only one instance of Ahab's humanity. As will be determined later in this study, there exist numerous displays of Ahab's compassion and concern for others in the text of *Moby Dick*. In contrast to Stavrou's analysis and to what becomes obvious in the novel itself, McSweeney's stringent use of the term monomaniac as applied to Ahab seems too confining because it implies that the captain's obsession with Moby Dick is out of balance with other facets of his nature. The scenes with Starbuck and Pip certainly weaken such an inference.

In the fashion of McSweeney, Matthiessen admits Ahab's humane words and actions toward Pip appear out of character, but he contends that such instances are momentary lapses and insignificant in judging Ahab's personality since Ahab is not diverted from his diabolical plan. Specifically, he comments in reference to the scene with Pip that "No such

purgation transforms Ahab. . . . he refuses to be detracted from his pursuit by the stirring of sympathy for others . . . " (451). Perhaps this relationship with Pip does not transform Ahab, but it does prove that he thinks and feels about situations besides his own personal vendetta against Moby Dick. Furthermore, Matthiessen is not convincing when he insinuates that Ahab is perverted just because he does not abandon his pursuit as a result of his friendship with Pip. First, with this claim he links mental aberration with intense drive and determination, and second he asserts that a camaraderie with a young boy would be sufficient reason to influence any mentally and emotionally balanced person away from a goal.

The fact that Starbuck and Pip fail to dissuade their captain from his goal, via the emotional scenes they share with him, is but one argument the critics have used to suggest Ahab's mental imbalance. Numerous Melville scholars uplift the "Quarter-Deck" scene as potent evidence of Ahab's fanaticism, which is fueled by his intention to find and destroy Moby Dick regardless of the danger imposed upon his crew. Such interpretations present Ahab as a sorcerer who deviously uses uncanny powers to coerce his sailors into accepting his unhealthy obsession as their own. Robert Zoellner, referring to that scene in "The Quarter-deck" during which Ahab touches the center of his mates' crossed

lances, declares that "Mere men are thus to lethal Ahab nothing more than mechanical ancillaries to his electric will" (104). John Lauber certainly must applaud this observation of Zoellner's, for he, noticing what he believes to be a paradox in Ahab, insists that "assertion of his [Ahab's] individuality is for him the supreme value, yet to assert it he must crush the individualities of all those he commands" (36). Those rather strong criticisms of Ahab might be valid were it not for the idea of free will. Zoellner and Lauber obviously do not view the *Pequod's* crew as a group of men who have chosen their own destinies; rather, they view them as a mob of mindless disciples who are so mesmerized by Ahab that they've lost all ability to function independently.

On the contrary, the *Pequod's* crewmen are individuals who have willingly chosen to embark on an inherently perilous voyage, fully aware that they will perhaps be required to endanger themselves for the sake of the expedition. Underscoring this reality is the information found in "The Affidavit" which confirms that all sperm whales, not just the object of Ahab's revenge, pose an undeniable threat to the whaling vessel's crew. In that chapter, Ishmael notes that ". . .The Sperm Whale is in some cases sufficiently powerful, knowing, and judiciously malicious, as with direct aforethought to stave in, utterly destroy, and

sink a large ship; and what is more, the Sperm Whale has done it" (206). Following that opening, Ishmael offers a catalog of ships destroyed by various sperm whales throughout history, leaving no doubt in the reader's mind that what Ahab has requested of his crew is not beyond the everyday perils they face by choice. Furthermore, as is clear in the "Quarter-deck" scene, those men are in no way forced to welcome Ahab's plan, but after Ahab has explained his preoccupation with Moby Dick and has affirmed that he is the white whale that Tashtego, Daggoo, and Queequeg have encountered before, he asks his crewmen if they will join him. This is the immediate response: "Aye, Aye!" shouted the harpooners and seamen running closer to the excited old man, "A Sharp eye for the white whale; a sharp lance for Moby Dick!" (Melville, 166) As is evident in this passage, Ahab doesn't have to resort to coercion because the men are thrilled by the prospect of such an adventure. After all, they have been asked to do nothing more than is expected of them--to catch a whale. They simply are aiming at a larger target this time, a target the *Pequod's* harpooners have seen before, yet one that apparently does not arouse any extraordinary fear in them.

Speaking more explicitly of the crew's general reaction in the "Quarter-Deck" episode is Ishmael's response a bit

later in the chapter entitled "Moby Dick." Remembering the intense drama, he remarks:

I, Ishmael, was one of that crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest; my oath had been welded with theirs; and stronger I shouted, and more did I hammer and clinch my oath, because of the dread in my soul. A wild, mystical, sympathetical feeling was in me; Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine. With greedy ears I learned the history of that murderous monster against whom I and all the others had taken our oaths of violence and revenge. (180)

Ishmael, as well as all the other sailors, voluntarily has become caught up in the phantasm of the whale. He has become aroused by the anticipation of a magnificent feat looming in his future. Ahab asks them to join him in this feat, and when they respond positively, he releases a sob, half shouting, "God bless ye, men" (166). This hardly seems the attitude of a man bent on forcing his subordinates into some endeavor they abhor. In truth, the majority of the crew becomes motivated by the intriguing aura that surrounds Moby Dick, not by any threats or coercive devices employed by their captain.

In addition to passages indicating the response of Ishmael and the rest of the crew to their captain's request, there exists other vital evidence in Melville's text which would seem to refute the claims of Zoellner and Lauber that Ahab callously uses his men as pawns in his game of revenge.

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Indeed, scholars who argue along this vein must assume that the Great White Whale is so unspeakably threatening that for Ahab to ask his crew to destroy the beast is consciously to compel them toward insurmountable danger. Believing this, they prove that they themselves have been ensnared in the myth of Moby Dick despite the fact Melville has offered ample suggestion that reports received about the Great White Whale might be nothing more than fables. He establishes this ambiguity in the chapter entitled "Moby Dick" which explores the nature of whale fishery lore. The prevailing idea in this section is that the uncommon treachery of Moby Dick was not necessarily a reality. Rather it was a myth propagated by the love for storytelling germane to the whaling industry. At one point in the chapter after relating some stories of the White Whale's supposed malice, Ishmael remarks, "Nor did wild rumors of all sorts fail to exaggerate, and still the more horrify the true histories of these deadly encounters. For not only do fabulous rumors naturally grow out of the very body of all surprising terrible events . . . but in maritime life, far more than in that of terra firma, wild rumors abound, wherever there is adequate reality for them to cling to. And as the sea surpasses the land in this matter, so the whale fishery surpasses every other sort of maritime life, in the wonderfulness and fearfulness of the rumors which sometimes circulate there" (181). With such commentary, Melville seems to suggest

an ambiguity about the actuality of Moby Dick's threat as compared with other sperm whales, for this information follows another telling remark from Ishmael concerning tales about the White Whale. Referring to whalers who ignorantly gave battle to Moby Dick, Ishmael explains, ". . . such hunters . . . were content to ascribe the peculiar terror he bred more, as it were, to the perils of the Sperm Whale Fishery. . . . In that way, mostly, the disastrous encounter between Ahab and the whale had hitherto been popularly regarded" (180-181). So even if the *Pequod's* crew knew about Moby Dick, chances are, being familiar with the exaggerative story telling engaged in by most whalers, they would not have felt forebodings stronger than they might have experienced at the thought of chasing any sperm whale. Consequently, based upon what Melville tells the reader about the realities of the sperm whale industry, Ahab cannot be accused of dragging his men into a situation that they as sperm whale fisherman should have opposed or especially feared.

Verification of Ahab's choleric demeanor, according to Melville scholars, does not hinge only upon his conduct in the Quarter-deck scene. In fact, several critics speak in much more general terms about Ahab's supposedly despicable behavior, insisting that throughout the voyage depicted in *Moby Dick* the *Pequod's* captain is tyrannical and completely insensitive to the needs of his men. Rudolph Von Abele states

that "He treats his men with a despotic ruthlessness" (594), while Nicholas Canaday, Jr. believes that the term "old Mogul" as applied to Ahab throughout *Moby Dick* "connotes a cruel indifference to the welfare of his subordinates. . . ." (41). Although at times Captain Ahab does seem violent and overbearing, such broad statements as Von Abele's and Canaday's ignore those numerous occasions during which Ahab demonstrates sensitivity to the crew's needs and desires. Besides those already noted involving Pip and Starbuck, one instance that speaks of Ahab's consideration occurs during the depiction of his manner at the cabin table. As Ishmael describes it, dining with the *Pequod's* captain was potentially a pleasant experience: "In his own proper turn, each officer waited to be served. They were as little children before Ahab; and yet, in Ahab, there seemed not to lurk the smallest social arrogance" (153). Not only does Ahab encourage an atmosphere of equality at the dinner table, but apparently, as is evidenced in the remainder of the passage describing mealtime with the captain, he does not attempt to enforce stringent rules of etiquette. As regarded talking, Ishmael notes, ". . .at table old Ahab forbade not conversation; only he himself was dumb" (153). And in reference to Flask's ever deciding to help himself as opposed to Ahab's serving him, Ishmael admits that ". . .Ahab never forbade him. And had Flask helped himself, the chances were Ahab had never so much as noticed it"

(154). As these excerpts indicate, Ahab did not naturally conform to the role of the ruthless, tyrannical sea captain that many critics would like to apply to him. In this setting, where he is hidden from the sea and protected from provocation, Ahab shows no signs of a controlling, domineering personality. He is satisfied to take his meal quietly while his men enjoy theirs in what fashion might suit them.

Such observation is not to argue that Ahab never becomes angry or violent; he does on many occasions. Scenes like that at the cabin table merely suggest his attacks of rage are balanced by spells of human kindness, some of which have already been discussed. One instance of his fury, commonly cited as an example of his ruthless nature, involves his first mate, Starbuck. In that episode found in the chapter entitled "Ahab and Starbuck in the Cabin," Starbuck informs Ahab that there is a leak in the oil barrels and they must stop to fix it lest they lose the valuable substance. After the two men argue for some time, Ahab refuses to stop the ship and threatens Starbuck with a loaded musket (449). Undeniably critics are justified in perceiving as savage Ahab's behavior at this point; after all, he jeopardized a man's life. Yet critics who attack Ahab for this infraction fail to address his ultimate reaction to this encounter with his first mate. After Starbuck leaves the cabin, Ahab thinks about what has just transpired. Minutes later he ascends to the deck and

says, "Thou art a good fellow, Starbuck, . . . [to the crew] Furl the t'gallant-sails, and close-reel the top-sails, fore and aft; back the mainyard; up Burtons, and break out in the mainhold" (450). In other words, he does as Starbuck originally asked of him--he stops the ship. Ahab's ensuing compliment and eventual acquiescence to Starbuck's request dilute the potency of the captain's earlier threat. While at first one becomes incensed at Ahab's inability to control his temper, upon reading a few lines later about his obvious regret and his willingness to make amends, any indictments of him must be abated. That episode between Ahab and Starbuck in its entirety does confirm that the captain can become fiercely domineering, but it also verifies that he does possess a conscience demanding he treat fellow men humanely. Stavrou in his sympathetic treatment of Ahab summarizes the captain's demeanor in scenes like the preceding in the following manner: "Though he stamp, and shout, and threaten, and cajole, and beg, and order, and will his men to be one with him, the milk of human kindness flows too warmly in Ahab to permit him many moments of untroubled conscience" (314). But Ahab's humanity is not the only important factor illuminated by this scene. Additionally, it substantiates the observation made earlier that he is not a casebook monomaniac, for he postpones his quest at a vital point so he can in his way apologize to Starbuck and demonstrate his ability to concede.

Another common argument raised to verify Ahab's mental instability concerns his supposed inability to react to his suffering in a rational fashion. Various critics have extracted other unfortunate characters from *Moby Dick* to hold up in contrast to Ahab as examples of people who have adjusted to their personal pains in a relatively healthy manner. Those who pursue this vein of argument do not succeed in proving their point, mainly because Ahab's experience has been so much more catastrophic than the experiences of those presented as objects of comparison. Robert Zoellner in *The Salt Sea Mastodon* uses Perth, the blacksmith, as a model of proper adjustment to tragedy. Considering the blacksmith next to Ahab, Zoellner claims that "Perth suggests that it is possible to undergo the agony of existence without cracking as Ahab has; the blacksmith's wholeness hints at the existence of a deep-seated flaw in Ahab" (102). Although the blacksmith, like Ahab, had endured devastating loss, a lasting token of his torment, his injury, is considerably less crippling than Ahab's. Losing some toes, which at most would cause a limp, cannot be equaled to the loss of a leg, without which one cannot stand of his own accord. Several passages in *Moby Dick* comment on the physical burden of Ahab's injury, noting the daily struggles effected by his handicap. For instance, late in the novel when Ahab boards the *Samuel Enderby*, he

experiences difficulty in the task that whole men would not have undergone. After Ahab reaches the ship in his small rowing craft, Ishmael explains: ". . . here a curious difficulty presented itself. . . . Ahab had forgotten that since the loss of his leg he had never once stepped on board of any vessel at sea but his own, and then it was always by an ingenious and very handy mechanical contrivance peculiar to the *Pequod*. . . . So, deprived of one leg, and the strange ship of course being altogether unsupplied with the kindly invention, Ahab now found himself abjectly reduced to a clumsy landsman again; hopelessly eyeing the uncertain changeful height he could hardly hope to attain" (415).

Awkward movement, however, is not the only physical plight Ahab must withstand as a result of the injury. In a discussion with the *Pequod's* carpenter still later in the novel, Ahab speaks of the discomforting sensation he often discerns in the empty space left by his missing leg. Directing the inquisitive carpenter to stand next to him, Ahab explains that the claims of dismasted men are true: they can feel their lost limbs. "Look," he commands, "put thy live leg here in the place where mine once was; so, now, here is only one distinct leg to the eye, yet two to the soul. Where thou feelest tingling life; there, exactly there, there to a hair, do I" (446). These two telling excerpts clearly indicate that the loss of his leg sentenced Ahab to a life of continual

strife. Not only has this once strong and vital man been stripped of his agility and hence his confidence, but also he must forever suffer in his ghost-leg the haunting sensations which continually remind him of the horrifying and painful assault of the Great White Whale. With the abundance of references to Ahab's physical distress and the obvious lack of references to Perth's physical deficit, these two characters cannot be justly compared for their reactions to respective bodily infirmities.

Nevertheless, in his contrast of Ahab to Perth, Zoellner's main contention is that the blacksmith handles emotional trauma much more appropriately than Ahab does. Undeniably, both men have lived through catastrophic events of comparable proportions, but Zoellner's use of Perth as an example of how Ahab should have responded mentally to tragedy is faulty because the circumstances igniting their emotional upheaval are so dissimilar. Indeed, Perth had experienced devastating emotional trauma in the loss of his home and his family, but as is made evident in the chapter entitled "The Blacksmith," the misuse of alcohol led to Perth's ruin (Melville, 458). And so, in actuality, Perth's ultimate tragedy resulted from a character flaw, a personal weakness which rendered him incompetent. How different this situation is from Ahab's. Certainly Ahab made no conscious decision to indulge in a vice. Ahab's mental anguish originated directly

from an injury inflicted upon him while he was engaged in the everyday operations demanded by his lifelong profession, not from some degeneration of his character.

The gravity of Ahab's emotional pain as it resulted from his dismemberment is suggested in a passage found in the chapter entitled "Ahab's Leg." As is related in this chapter, Ahab was found one night in a semiconscious state, the artificial limb having nearly pierced his groin (Melville, 460). Most critics agree this passage establishes that the loss of his leg bears significance far beyond the maiming of his body. Even Zoellner, early in his analysis of Ahab, admits the import of the wound: ". . .the loss of his leg leads directly to a second wound, an additional violation of his person. . . . Moby Dick has not only deprived Ahab of his leg but also indirectly struck at the most vital point of a relationship (his marriage) which is the primary humanizing influence of his old age. . . . The loss of his leg threatened Ahab's life; the subsequent groin wound has threatened his life source" (92). As Zoellner indicates, in both a literal and figurative sense the ivory limb has threatened Ahab's manhood. Another passage that indicates how deeply Ahab has been scarred emotionally surfaces in a brief soliloquy following his acknowledgment of the amount of time the carpenter will require to carve a new ivory leg. Turning from the carpenter he grumbles, "Oh life! Here I am, proud as

Greek god, and yet standing debtor to this blockhead for a bone to stand on!" (447) This outburst reveals Ahab's discontent with his dependent condition, undoubtedly abhorrent to a man so self-sufficient by nature.

Relative to Perth's situation, then, it becomes apparent that Ahab's loss is considerably more physically crippling than his subordinate's, and as regards emotional parallels the two men at least have suffered comparable levels of grief. Consequently, although the superficial similarities between the blacksmith and his captain are obvious (i.e. age, handicaps, young wives), comparing Ahab and Perth as regards their respective responses to misfortune is unjust. The blacksmith of course can easily become passive and accept his fate simply because retaliation requires only that he confront a weakness in his personality. He was the original source of his own adversity. Contrarily, Ahab suffers an injury directly inflicted upon him by a monstrous beast; thus he can focus upon a tangible, living object for revenge.

Another model of supposed exemplary behavior in the face of tragedy is Captain Boomer, the man in charge of a London whaling vessel called the *Samuel Enderby*. Presumably the antithesis of Ahab, Boomer has been revered by certain critics as an example of healthy adaptation to a catastrophic personal injury. Arguing that Ahab's "misfortunes really do not jus-

tify his mania," Thornton Y. Booth lauds Boomer because, in "explicit contrast" to Ahab's supposedly reprehensible behavior, "He is quite content to go about his business, continuing sailing on the depths of life, yes, but not actively seeking out its worst evils" (92). Elmer Fry likewise praises Boomer in contrast to Ahab. Declaring that Ahab behaves insanely, Fry states: "Captain Boomer of the *Samuel Enderby* has suffered Ahab's ill luck; but Boomer responds entirely rationally to his situation, and Ahab is incapable of any response which does not explain and compensate for the cosmic injustice he senses" (167). These scholars insist that Boomer, who also has lost a limb to Moby Dick, serves as positive proof that Ahab is unbalanced, for unlike Ahab he accepts his wound as the manifestation of the intrinsic dangers of a whaler's life. Furthermore, Boomer won't seek revenge against the White Whale because he recognizes that Moby Dick cannot be conquered. Zoellner also esteems the *Enderby's* commander and asserts, "Captain Boomer has cultivated a philosophical imperturbability to match the imperturbability of the pyrammidical cosmos he confronts. . . . The thumps of cosmic process, if taken in stoical good humor and mutual charity, should forge rather than sever the bonds of human affection. Boomer . . . [has] been humanized by Moby Dick to just the extent that Ahab has been dehumanized" (116-117). Essentially, Zoellner contends that Boomer is more mentally stable than Ahab because he

refuses to avenge his wound, and he concludes that Boomer has been drawn closer to humanity while Ahab has become isolated. Clearly, Zoellner admires Captain Boomer's reaction to his costly encounter with Moby Dick, while he criticizes Ahab's vow of revenge on the whale. This might be a valid response if the captains' injuries were comparable; they are in fact very different. Although both lost their limbs in a clash with Moby Dick, Boomer's arm was not rent from his body by the jaw of the whale as Ahab's leg was. Boomer's arm had to be amputated by his ship's doctor because gangrene had set into a cut inflicted by a harpoon (Melville, 436). He never felt the grinding teeth of Moby Dick tear his flesh and break the bone from his body. Consequently, the fact that he felt a bit more charitable than Ahab should not be surprising. A piece of metal or, more accurately, a germ had caused Boomer's misfortune; the Great White Whale had caused Ahab's. To use Boomer, then, as an example of how Ahab should have behaved toward Moby Dick misleads, primarily because the whale did not directly accost him as it did Ahab.

Regardless of whether or not Moby Dick directly injured the *Samuel Enderby's* captain, most critics seem to agree that Melville developed characters such as Perth, the *Pequod's* blacksmith, and Captain Boomer as foils serving to demonstrate how Captain Ahab should have coped with his personal tragedy. Such an assertion is difficult to accept because Perth and

Boomer are very unattractive men by their own rights and especially when contrasted with Ahab. If Melville's intention had been to make Ahab appear deranged or evil through comparison with other suffering men, certainly he could have created someone a bit more impressive than the despondent, self-destructive Perth or the annoying jokester, Captain Boomer. Both have personality traits and mannerisms which, when contrasted with Ahab's, serve only to compliment him, not to degrade him. With acceptance of this premise and the help of scholars who tend to view Ahab a bit more sympathetically than the norm, it is possible to arrive at a reading of Ahab's character that is not only convincing but seems more in line with what Melville intended in light of his own text.

Henry Alonzo Myers proposes an interpretation of Ahab's character that, in addition to accounting for his sometimes volatile behavior, offers a reasonable motivation for the inclusion of Perth and Captain Boomer. Myers insists that Ahab can be best understood by realizing that men differ from each other in this respect: ". . . each lives on his own plane of intensity. . . . a man feels according to his capacity, and not according to circumstance. . ." (23-24). This would explain why three men--Ahab, Perth, and Boomer--having experienced terrible misfortunes would react in such vastly different manners. Perth, after losing his wife and his family, is rescued from thoughts of suicide by the allure

of the sea (459), only to live the remainder of his days in a state of wretched depression. Melville describes Perth as such: ". . . he toiled away, as if toil were life itself, and the heavy beating of his heart. And so it was.--Most miserable!" (457) Thus, the blacksmith communicates one method of responding to tragedy. He succumbs to the agony of his experience and withdraws into a state of continual internal suffering.

Yet another response to tragedy is illustrated by Captain Boomer whose behavior is noticeably the opposite of Perth's. In short, Captain Boomer takes nothing seriously--not the loss of a limb or loss of another person's. When Ahab boards his ship, obviously distraught and intent on knowing the circumstances of Boomer's injury and the whereabouts of Moby Dick, Boomer decides to engage in an obnoxious stand-up comic routine. As "dismasted" Ahab stands on the *Enderby's* deck, trying desperately to secure some vital information, Boomer and his sidekick, Bungler, deliver a series of what they believe to be humorous jabs (418-419). Although humor is widely considered to be healthy, in this case it is unwarranted and downright cruel. Ahab's continued seriousness throughout this encounter clearly signifies the freshness of his pain and the heaviness of his grief; nevertheless, the *Enderby's* captain callously laughs and jokes with Bungler, making light of a situation that has obviously caused Ahab

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tremendous agony. The final insult of this meeting is leveled by Bunker. When Ahab, becoming more and more excited, eagerly asks where Moby Dick was last seen, Bunker who is "snuffing" around Ahab "like a dog" responds: "Bless my soul, and curse the foul fiend's . . . this man's blood--bring the thermometer!--it's at the boiling point!--his pulse makes these planks beat!--sir!" (420) Bunker then takes a lancet from his pocket and feigns readiness to draw Ahab's blood. This interplay between Captain Boomer and the *Enderby's* doctor demonstrates blatant disrespect toward their solemn and grieving quest. Consequently, rather than a character to be admired, Boomer is the epitome of the man who refuses to see the solemnity of any situation even for the sake of another individual. Boomer's lighthearted deportment is another alternative to Ahab's behavior offered by Melville, but by creating such an irksome figure, he surely did not intend to demean Ahab. And while it is true the *Pequod's* captain contrasts vividly with both Perth and Boomer, it is difficult to believe that Melville preferred either man's attitude over Ahab's since they are both so obviously flawed themselves.

According to Myers' observation, what has been perceived by various readers of *Moby Dick* as a mental imbalance in Ahab is really just an intensity of personality that is emphasized by the inclusion of contrasting characters such as Perth and Captain Boomer. Most assuredly Ahab does not accept passively

his fate and withdraw into himself as Perth does, and likewise he cannot laugh off misfortune as Boomer does--such behavior is simply not in his nature. Captain Ahab feels more deeply than the average man, as is evidenced in his many poignant soliloquies interspersed throughout *Moby Dick*, and this facet of his personality is not something for which he should be readily condemned, especially when such intensity is tempered with obvious displays of human compassion. It is this intensity, in fact, that according to Myers "makes Ahab unusual and a hero" (24).

Realizing that Ahab is an exceptionally intense individual is imperative to assessing his character accurately, but that realization does not explain the reason for such intensity. For decades, scholars have speculated upon the nature of Ahab's drive, providing various rationales for his conduct on the *Pequod*. Most explanations for his behavior depend upon elaborate allegorical interpretations of *Moby Dick*. Robert Bergstrom, for instance, believes that Ahab "imagines himself the representative of his race before the throne of God." Furthermore he asserts that Ahab views his injury as the work of his creator who "endowed his creatures with intelligence and will only to frustrate both faculties with an irrational universe." Ahab sees himself, says Bergstrom, as an "inverted Messiah" (176). Another critic favoring allegorical interpretations of *Moby Dick* is Alfred

Kazin who implies that Ahab considers man to be an accident in this vast universe. Specifically Kazin argues: ". . . Ahab . . . is a hero of thought who is trying by terrible force, to reassert man's place in nature. . . . Ahab is trying to give man in one awful, final assertion that his will does mean something, a feeling of relatedness with the world" (83). Bergstrom and Kazin are only representatives of two common modes of allegorical explication of *Moby Dick*. The first contemplates the novel as a battle between Ahab and God, while the second regards it as a metaphysical struggle of a man who has lost his identity in a vast and indifferent world. Although they undoubtedly are valuable on an elevated level of interpretation, such allegorical analyses remove the reader to a realm of uncertainty about the novel because they center on religious and philosophical musings which cannot be verified in the text. Fortunately, knowledge of Melville's religion and life philosophy simply are not required for valid understanding of *Moby Dick* or of Captain Ahab. A literal reading of this brilliant novel is especially fulfilling because Melville offers scene after scene of concrete information regarding the complex natures of his major characters. The various insights he affords into Ahab's personality leave no doubt that, at least on one level, the *Pequod's* captain is like any other human being caught up in a painful emotional struggle. On that level he is understood not as an "inverted" Christ

figure or as a rebel against the universe, but as a man who embodies virtues, weaknesses, sensitivities, uncertainties and fears like any other human being.

Though allegorical interpretations of *Moby Dick* are prevalent, there are critics who believe that reliance on intricate symbologies when evaluating Melville's text is not a sound approach. The most eloquent spokesman for this point of view is Henry Alonzo Myers. He notes the assumption that it is necessary to decode *Moby Dick* in order to get at its meaning arose from the contents of a letter written by Melville to Hawthorne. The pertinent part of the letter reads: "Why ever since Adam, who has got to the meaning of this great allegory--the world? Then we pigmies must be content to have our paper allegories but ill comprehended" (Weaver, 327). Scholars such as Myers who refuse to accept allegorical interpretations of *Moby Dick* contend that this letter speaks of books in general. Specifically, Myers claims that this excerpt of Melville's letter was not intended to link the writer and recipient as fellow creators of allegories. Furthermore, in rebuttal to that letter, Myers cites the passage in the novel in which "Melville expresses his fear that the ignorant may mistake the book 'for a hideous and intolerable allegory.'" Regarding that statement, he claims that "As evidence, the specific statement in *Moby Dick* more than cancels the comment in the letter about books in general" (18).

Later in his discussion on this topic, Myers offers his alternative approach to *Moby Dick*, one that centers on Ahab as a human being. Myers maintains that "Melville felt that whatever essential meaning lies in *Moby Dick* could be found in the life of a living Ahab by an Ahab himself. Further, the meaning goes far beyond abstract comprehension; it must come through the senses, the feelings, and the imagination, not merely through the understanding. For this reason *Moby Dick* is primarily a tragic interpretation of an action, not a philosophical essay, not a dance of symbolic phantoms. Ahab is a man and not a force, the sea is the sea and not a symbol, and the whale is a whale and not an arbitrary sign of evil" (19). Sanford E. Morowitz echoes Myers when he says in his essay "Old Man Ahab" that "Ahab is the aging captain of a whaler before he is the symbol of philosophical rebellion or anything else. . . . The reader coming to *Moby Dick* for the first time visualizes the ship and the adventures of its crew before he turns a microscopic lens upon them for the purpose of critical analysis, whereupon the strands do come apart. . . . But a part of that complexity lies in the fact that the major characters are people with very real human qualities; they are not simply clothed abstracts . . . " (139-140). Both Myers and Morowitz in their respective studies of *Moby Dick* refuse to expend their energies "decoding" the novel primarily because to do so would leave

them surmising about things they can never know for sure. Instead, they advocate focusing on what Melville provides in the text--an intense, vividly described human drama, the central figure of which is a fully developed character whose complex emotions are readily observed and interpreted.

If, then, the focus is on Ahab and the "very real human qualities" he exhibits in the novel, it is helpful to turn to Edward F. Edinger who offers a most persuasive analysis of Ahab's being, an analysis which convinces within the confines of Melville's text. Edinger, in his Jungian interpretation of *Moby Dick*, pinpoints what it is within the man that is the source of Ahab's drive and determination. In the chapter of his work which specifically analyzes the *Pequod's* captain, Edinger states: "Ahab is a study in the psychology of resentment. Resentment that strives to get even, that inflicts one hurt for another, that asserts one's personal power over anything that challenges it, or that withdraws in sullen, wounded majesty, disdaining to communicate with a world that doesn't recognize its sovereignty, those are the expressions of Ahab in every soul" (65). This resentment that Edinger distinguishes in Ahab, this need to "assert one's power over anything that challenges it," is announced in the chapter entitled "Sunset" by Ahab himself. Alone in the cabin he soliloquizes: "The prophecy was that I would be dismembered; and--Aye! I lost this leg. I now prophecy that I will dismem-

ber my dismemberer. . . . I will not say as schoolboys do to bullies,--Take some one of your own size; don't pommel me! No, ye've knocked me down, and I am up again. . . . The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run" (171). As is evidenced in *Moby Dick*, this vow of revenge over the loss of his leg is prompted by a resentful anger that becomes the defining force of Ahab's character. That resentment is a psychological reaction to a traumatic experience that exposes both positive and negative qualities in Ahab but which, as will be noted herein, is not a response for which the old captain should be condemned. In fact, as Edinger asserts, Ahab's is a purely natural reaction, and though it may not be admired on all counts, it is certainly understandable.

As has already been established, Ahab has credible reason for his feelings of resentment, and if the reader truly attempts to empathize with him he will realize that the hatred spawned by the debilitating anguish he experienced needs an outlet. The impact of his loss is so devastating that he is compelled to "strive to get even" with the source of his pain and "to inflict one hurt for another." To impress the impact of Ahab's wound upon the reader, Melville makes the extent of his suffering apparent at the novel's outset. In the chapter entitled "The Ship" Captain Peleg tells Ishmael that Ahab's leg was "devoured," "chewed up," and "crunched" by Moby Dick.

Melville's choice of words in describing the attack leaves no doubt that it was especially violent and horrifying. Additionally, he makes clear that the injury was so catastrophic it sent Ahab into a spell of delirium (93). In that same passage, Peleg explains that after the wound Ahab experienced a marked change in personality. Peleg relates to Ishmael: "I know, too, that ever since he lost his leg last voyage by that accursed whale, he's been a kind of moody--desperate moody . . . (93). But the physical pain and the emotional upset are only a couple of aspects of his misery. Melville also informs the reader of Ahab's serious groin wound inflicted by his new peg leg (439), of his lost sense of self-sufficiency (415, 447), and of his resulting inability to relax (134). As Melville is careful to establish, Ahab's clash with the White Whale drastically changed his life for the worse, physically and mentally shattering him so that he could not be the same man he was before the assault. He had been robbed of his physical independence and his intellectual contentment. Considering how his life had been so altered, it is no surprise this man hungered for revenge.

After carefully studying the amount of evidence Melville offers concerning the torment Ahab has endured, it is difficult to imagine that any reader would not excuse him for his revengeful actions. For someone who has suffered as Ahab has, it would seem more out of character not to attempt retalia-

tion, especially when the assailant could be confronted during the everyday pursuits of the victim's profession. Considering not only the deprivation Ahab feels but also the relative ease with which a counter attack could be accomplished, the motivation for revenge on Moby Dick seems more than warranted.

Taking all this into account, Ahab is justified on a level of human understanding. However, it is not to be assumed that his pursuit is entirely noble. In a few episodes of *Moby Dick* the festering resentment driving Ahab fuels his potential for violence and cruelty, and those displays are most damaging to Ahab's image. Yet even in those scenes cited frequently as verification of Ahab's corruption, Melville has been careful to allow room for empathy as regards the old captain's general character.

One particularly violent outburst has been previously discussed in some length earlier in this study: i.e. the exchange between Ahab and Starbuck during which Ahab threatens his first mate with a loaded gun (449). Coupled with the fact that Ahab later apologizes to Starbuck and grants his request, the idea that Starbuck is asking to delay the voyage when Ahab was so close to reaching his long sought after goal should assuage the anger the reader initially directs at Ahab. Another scene speaking negatively of Ahab involves the crew of a whaling vessel called the *Rachel*. At first glance, Ahab emerges from that scene as an extremely callous individual,

for he refuses to help the *Rachel's* captain search for some lost whalers, including his son. Though Ahab adamantly denies Captain Gardiner's plea, his denial is composed of gentle words that should evoke empathy for him. In response to Gardiner's request, Ahab replies: ". . . I will not do it. Even now I lose time. Good bye, good bye. God bless ye man, and may I forgive myself, but I must go" (498). Clearly, with this response Ahab is abandoning a man in need, but what should also be noted in this passage is the obvious regret and guilt Ahab is feeling as he expresses those words. He does not rudely rebuke Captain Gardiner for seeking his help, but he asks God to bless him and acknowledges the fact that he is doing wrong. The admittance of his guilt feelings in this episode suggests that Ahab knows the difference between right and wrong, and he wishes to do right. Otherwise, he would not express worry about his ability to accept his actions following this encounter. Similarly, after the confrontation with Starbuck, such regret prompts him to make amends. Without acknowledgment of Ahab's guilt and remorse in these two otherwise incriminating scenes, it remains easy to condemn him. However, one who is willing to empathize with Ahab, remembering the trauma he has endured, senses that he wants to do what is moral, but he is subject to some internal drive (resentment) too strong for him to overcome.

Melville offers additional indication that Ahab is struggling to overcome his rage and its power over him in an exchange between the captain and Perth in the chapter entitled "The Forge." In that scene, Ahab inquires of Perth: "How can'st thou endure without being mad? Do the heavens yet hate thee, that thou can'st not go mad?" A few lines later Ahab, referring to his wrinkled brow as evidence of his torment, bares his feelings to Perth: ". . . can ye smooth out a seam like this blacksmith . . . if thou could'st, blacksmith, glad enough I lay my head upon thy anvil, and feel thy heaviest hammer between my eyes. Answer! can'st thou smooth this seam?" Figuratively speaking of course, Ahab is desperate to know at this point if his brow, creased by worry about his personal torment, can be softened. He is asking Perth to erase the signs of anguish on his forehead so he can be free of the madness that troubles him. That madness is the same force that drives him toward his quest. After Perth's negative reply, Ahab laments: ". . . aye, man, it is unsmoothable; for though thou only see'st it here in my flesh, it has worked down into the bone of my skull . . ." (460). In this excerpt he speaks as if the creases are separate entities working on him against his will. Though he wishes them gone, he knows they cannot be smoothed because he feels them rooted there. This conversation with Perth reveals he is moved by some force within, some inner turmoil he has fretted over and

wishes to subdue, but that propels him toward his goal. He can with his mind tell himself to cease with his revenge, but his mind, his intellect is not in control. The truth is, he cannot be wholly responsible for his vehement outbursts or his seeming disregard for others because a psychological reaction has charge over his soul--a feeling of resentment for a horrible loss, the import of which is stressed in the novel. The helplessness of Ahab suggested in the scene with Perth should only increase the flow of empathy for the old captain. While interactions with Starbuck and Captain Gardiner incite anger enough to dispel some of the sorrow aroused over his loss and the resulting struggles he faces, the discourse with Perth prevents an outright condemnation of Ahab. The suggestion that he is prisoner to psychological turmoil inflamed by his intense resentment lessens the personal blame that otherwise might be attributed to him.

[Because he is driven by a powerful resentment which results from profound suffering, Ahab cannot be held fully responsible for his sometimes abrasive actions.] The reality established by Melville that Ahab is captive to a psychological drive is adequate reason to excuse his obsessive and revengeful conduct. However, a thorough and just analysis of Captain Ahab's personality should extend beyond excuses for his occasional outbursts, for Ahab's resentment induces

behavior which, aside from being understandable, is in several instances quite admirable. The positive quality manifest in Ahab as a result of his resentment is his sensitivity to the problems and/or fears of other characters in the novel. The resentment he has harbored and brooded over for so long has given him the capacity to recognize and address the sufferings of other men. However, those characters in *Moby Dick* who do not succumb to feelings of resentment are ineffectual in their relationships with others who are grieving. Perth, for example, withdraws completely, unable to help or even to sympathize with Ahab when the captain inquires about his method of coping. Captain Boomer is not only ineffectual but is also inhumane when Ahab turns to him for assistance. His refusal to address seriously the loss of his own limb and of Ahab's is degrading to the *Pequod's* captain who is obviously still hurting.

In contrast, when Ahab is confronted with the troubles of certain individuals aboard the *Pequod*, he is not only able to relate to them, but he is also able to comfort them. When the Manxman scolds a mumbling Pip for interfering with procedures on the quarter-deck, Ahab, uttering those emotional words considered earlier in this study, immediately rescues him: "Oh, ye frozen heavens!. . . . Ye did beget this luckless child, and have abandoned him, ye creative libertines. Here, boy; Ahab's cabin shall be Pip's home henceforth, while Ahab lives.

Thou touchest my innermost center, boy; thou art tied to me by cords woven of my heartstrings." Further into the passage, using Pip as an example, Ahab charges that the gods are "oblivious of suffering man" (489). Clearly, in this instance, Ahab expresses that he and Pip are bound by their common misery, and he scolds the forces that have continued to ignore their torment. He understands, as a result of personal experience, that Pip has been alienated from those who might be able to help him. Because he cannot stand to see Pip suffer in isolation as he has, he invites the child to share his own cabin. Later in the novel in the chapter entitled "The Symphony," Ahab communicates with Starbuck on the same level of understanding as he did with Pip. In that episode, quoted earlier in this study, Ahab reveals that his long absence from home has been painful, and he does not want Starbuck and his family to experience the misery of long separation from each other. He then instructs Starbuck not to endanger himself by lowering for Moby Dick. This scene with Starbuck and the defense of Pip disclose Ahab's ability to empathize with others as a result of the calamities he has endured. Without the felt resentment he displays, Ahab would not have directed his anger toward his own vindictive pursuit, and more importantly, he would not have comprehended the need to right the wrongs suffered by Pip and Starbuck. Because he feels a need to avenge the injustices leveled at him, he feels

a responsibility to help others rectify the injustices hurled at them, and when he doesn't act on that feeling (as with Captain Gardiner), he feels guilty.

This interpretation of Ahab's character is but one perspective in a vast collection of conflicting studies written over the past century. The primary motivation behind this empathetic reading is to challenge those numerous critics who have in the past judged the *Pequod's* captain too harshly, narrowly focusing on a few isolated episodes which they claim prove Ahab's mental imbalance. They have labeled him a monomaniac, and in the strictest sense of that term Ahab is a monomaniac, for he is obsessed with one pursuit from which he is never swayed. However, because the prominent critics remain fixed on his monomaniacal tendencies and insist on perjoratively interpreting his behavior from that confining perspective, Ahab emerges from most literary analyses as nothing more than a lunatic who recklessly and selfishly sacrifices his ship and his men so that he can seek revenge against a beast he cannot conquer. Though Ahab does eventually confront the whale which destroys the *Pequod* and its crew, his conduct preceding the fatal clash is not as perverse as the critics intimate. As is revealed throughout *Moby Dick*, Ahab is an extremely complicated individual who, in addition to entertaining an intense obsession, harbors human needs and sentiments which demand expression. For years, critics have

ignored or glossed over the humane elements of Ahab's personality and have branded him a demented tyrant. Nevertheless, a less extreme, more empathetic reading of Melville's famed novel will reveal Captain Ahab to be a troubled yet sensitive individual who is coping understandably and even admirably with a psychological urge to strike back at the beast that caused his agonizing fate.

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