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Research Paper: Moby Dick

# **Introduction**

"Moby Dick; or, The Whale" is a novel written by Herman Melville in 1851. It is his masterpiece, and it took him one and a half year to finish it. The novel has 135 chapters, and it depicts a tale of whale-hunting obsession. Ahab, the captain of the whaling ship, is obsessed with his quest for hunting Moby Dick, the whale who is responsible for the loss of his leg during the previous voyage. The novel could not garner reputation until after the hundredth anniversary of the writer's birth. Today, the book is considered one of the greatest books in the world.

# **Plot**

The narrator, Ishmael, plans for a whaling voyage and signs up for the voyage on Pequod, a whaler owned by Bildad and Peleg. He and his friend, Queequeg, come to know about the ship’s captain, Ahab, that he is recovering from the suffering of one of his earlier voyages. The ship sets sails on a cold Christmas day. Ishmael meets the crew members. Starbuck is the first mate; the second mate is Stubb; the third mate is Flask. Queequeg, Tashtego, and Daggoo are their harpooners respectively. Ahab appears for the first time after the ship sets on the voyage and says his sole purpose of this voyage is to take revenge on Moby Dick, the white whale. Fedallah is Ahab’s harpooner.

The Pequod makes encounters with many other ships during the voyage. The ship advances in the sea and the crew keep on hunting the whales on the way. However, Ahab is getting more obsessed with time by his quest of killing Moby Dick. Every time the ship confronts another ship in the sea, Ahab asks the crew on that ship if they have any news of the white whale, Moby Dick. Fedallah makes a prophecy that Ahab will die in pursuing his quest but Ahab ignores it. Queequeg falls ill during the voyage and he thinks he will not survive. He asks for making a coffin for him. Somehow he recovers and the coffin is kept for use as a lifeboat. Ahab and Starbuck quarrel out of the tension built between the two because of Ahab's desperate quest.

At last the day comes when Ahab sights Moby Dick. The crew prepares for hunting the whale. They try for three days to kill the whale but to no avail. Moby Dick happens to be impossible to kill. On the third day, Moby Dick wrecks the ship. The Pequod sinks and all aboard die. Only Ishmael survives to tell the tale of the wicked Moby Dick (Melville).

# **Themes**

‘Moby Dick’ is a novel that entails various complexities and involves multiple themes. First, the narrator of the story, Ishmael, talks about fate many times and points to the future events in an indirect way. The reader senses that the captain and the ship will have a tragic end. Second, Ahab has limited knowledge to hunt the whales or vice versa, i.e., some whales are unconquerable. Ishmael describes different disciplines of study; however, he finally admits that human knowledge is limited. Third, the perception of reality is difficult to be achieved. The whale is cunning, and it is hard to tackle it. Ahab says at one place that he is not fighting the white whale only, he sees his real enemy in the form of the whale. It is like the whale wears the mask. Fourth, death is a dominant theme of the novel as it can be seen that all the characters die at the end except the narrator, Ishmael. Fifth, this is a story of a ‘deviant’ man, Ahab, who strives against the rules of nature or a kind of his perceived evil representative, the white whale (Brodhead).

# **Symbolism**

The whale is a symbol of death or evil. Ahab is obsessed with the idea of eliminating this evil forever. The whale is dangerous, cunning, and brutal. These are all attributes of evil. The whale is almost undefeatable; only death stands true to this fact. The ship symbolizes ill fate. The coffin serves as a symbol of death at first but becomes a symbol of life at the end of the story (Zoellner).

# **Conclusion**

‘Moby Dick’ is a story of good and evil, revenge and forgiveness, and reality vs. obsession. The author considers many things to explore such as signs of destiny, limits of humanity, deviance against nature, etc. From one perspective, it is a fight of one man against the representative evil force. Another perspective suggests the sheer stubbornness of the protagonist to defeat the invincible. The novel offers much substance to the critical readers for pondering over. It is complex, deep, and multidimensional. It is rightly regarded as the magnum opus of the author.

# **References**

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