Political Symbolism in *Moby Dick*: A Casebook

Published in 1851, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* has been, and continues to be, studied by scholars around the world. Many agree that the story is not only a famously known whale hunt, but also holds symbolic references to various political figures and instances in America during the time of the book's release. Melville strategically uses characters such as Ishmael, Ahab, the harpooneers and several others on the *Pequod* to depict different ideas of representative political leaders in America in the nineteenth century. These ideas continue to be debated across the board as representations of different people. Along with characters, various scenes in *Moby Dick* are believed to display Melville's response to many controversial matters such as the Sims decision and the Fugitive Slave Laws.

Ishmael, the main character, walks us through *Moby Dick* giving us insight to the story from his own perspective. One author in particular, David Reynolds, describes him as "the transformed version of another radical-democrat fiction: the b'hoy." Reynolds defines the b'hoy as a figure of both reality and legend, displaying a mixture of good and bad qualities such as being rebellious, egotistic, and indolent as well as having native intelligence, confidence, and respectable manners (Reynolds 534). This is understandable considering Ishmael's change in personality throughout the book. At the beginning of the book, we meet someone who wants to walk around knocking people's hats off and in the end, we know someone very different.

Some scholars have argued that Ishmael's perspective in the story was Melville's way of showing his own political opinions. I couldn't agree more. Alan Heimert states, "From Ishmael's position on the 'margin of the scene' may be gathered hints of Melville's own perspective on the political struggles of 1850" (Heimert 526). Heimert later associates Ishmael with the Democratic Party for ridiculing Bildad as "an incorrigible old hunks." He goes on to explain that, "the term

could have meant in 1850—particularly to one of Melville's background—only the conservative Democrats, the "Hunkers" to whom profit was more important than principle" (528). He claims:

> If this episode is, as one suspects, Melville's invitation to approach *Moby-Dick* as something of a political "fable," then Ishmael's point of view has been clearly identified with the "Barnburners," or "Free-Soilers," as their opposition to the extension of slavery eventually led them to be called. (529)

"Free-Soilers" and "Barnburners" both were anti-slavery groups in the 1850s and, due to Melville's creation of Ishmael and Queequeg's friendship as well as other racial details throughout the book, one can agree with Heimert's argument. In saying so, "Barnburners" and "Hunkers," as referred to in Heimert's previous statement regarding Bildad, although both part of the Democratic Party, disagreed on the issue of slavery. Barnburners opposed the extension of slavery and later left the Democratic Party to join antislavery groups, whereas Hunkers were not totally against it. Relating Ishmael to the Barnburners and Bildad to the Hunkers creates an image of displeasure, further supporting the idea of Melville's antislavery approach.

Not only did Melville use the characters in *Moby Dick* to express his own political frustrations, he also used them to portray other political figures. Ahab, for example, is believed to represent many different people. According to David S. Reynolds, Ahab "has been variously associated with radical abolitionist Garrison, with Garrison's arch-opponent Calhoun, and with the moderate politician Daniel Webster" (Reynolds 531). Controversially, some believe that Ahab represents not a person, but rather an idea. Philip Armstrong argues that "Ahab embodies contemporary American hopes that technology would empower free men and his quest becomes an allegory of that attempt to master nature which characterized industrial capitalism in its new found confidence" (Armstrong 1042).

Alan Heimert, on the other hand, argues that Ahab represents John C. Calhoun. He claims, “When Melville came, two years later, to imagine the captain of the *Pequod*, he created him very much in the image of the unforgettable Calhoun” (Heimert 524). Calhoun was a proslavery South Carolina Democratic senator in the 1850s (Yothers 135). Heimert goes on to say, “Like Melville’s Ahab, Calhoun seemed to lack the “low, enjoying power” and to experience “moments of softness” only when thinking of his family… Like Ahab—whose ideal man had “no heart at all” and “about a quarter of an acre of fine brains”—Calhoun was dedicated to the proposition that “invincible mind” made “man the lord of the world” (Heimert 522). In many ways, Heimert and others compare Ahab to Calhoun. I agree with this idea due to the fact that Calhoun was a relentless military official and rarely stopped the chase until he was victorious. In many ways, I see that same characteristic in Ahab’s chase of the White Whale.

Similarly to the way scholars compare Ahab to an idea of American imperialism, Melville compares the character Queequeg to Black Sampson, another character in a famous radical-democrat novel by George Lippard. By doing so, Melville creates a friendship between Ishmael and Queequeg that breaks down the barrier between the “b’hoy stereotype” portrayed by Ishmael and “the savage non-white” portrayed by Queequeg. Queequeg resembles Black Sampson in many ways. For example, Reynolds writes:

> In his characterization of Queequeg, Melville may have been indebted to George Lippard, the most popular radical-democrat novelist of the day. Lippard’s best-selling volumes Blanch of Brandywine (1846) and Washington and His Generals (1847) both had included memorable episodes involving a massive black soldier of the American Revolution, Black Sampson, who slashed through British lines with his tremendous scythe waving and his dog "Debbil" by his side. Radical-democrat egalitarianism had

> special import in the portrayal of Black Sampson, who is not only poor but also a Negro slave haunted by memories of his former noble stature as the son of the king of an African tribe. (Reynolds 535)

There are many similarities between the two including their physical descriptions, their background as sons of kings, and several other details. For example, where Queequeg carries a harpoon wherever he goes, Black Sampson carries a "tremendous scythe." Once again, another connection between the two is the use of the word "Debbil" or, as altered by Melville, "debel." Melville uses these images and the friendship between the two to "lift Queequeg out of the mire of sensationalism because he has him embraced by an enriched version of that flexible radical-democrat hero, the b'hoy" (535). I believe that Melville connects the two in an effort to convey his opposition to slavery.

Along with Queequeg, there are two other harpooneers on-board the *Pequod*: Tashtego and Daggoo. A theory proposed by Alan Heimert and later elaborated on by Philip Armstrong, is their representation of the three sections in which America built its prosperity in the nineteenth century. Armstrong notes, "Many studies have shown how *Moby-Dick* satirically recognizes America's dependence upon the labor of Native Americans, African American slaves, and Pacific Islanders" (Armstrong 1050). He later goes on to further a similar idea proposed by Alan Heimert ten years later. He says:

> Alan Heimert provided a more detailed allegorical reading according to which the harpooneers represent the various ethnicities whose disenfranchisement financed mid-nineteenth-century American prosperity: Queequeg stands for Pacific enlistees in the whale fishery, a major contributor to the Northern economy; the Gay Head Indian Tashtego evokes the ongoing dispossession of Native Americans in the West; and the

> "coal-black negro-savage" Daggoo embodies the Southern economy's continued reliance on slavery. (Armstrong 1050)

I agree with this idea because it is evident in America's history the dependence on the labor of minorities. Depicted in *Moby Dick*, the harpooneers do all the work, and the mates, who are each ironically described to be white, reap all the reward.

"Whatever the ultimate meanings of *Moby-Dick*, its themes are not unrelated to the American political situation in the stormy Compromise year of 1850" states Alan Heimert (Heimert 532). The year of 1850 provided numerous political upheavals in America. Melville refers to various situations involving the controversy of slavery, most prominently so, the Sims case. Philip Armstrong notes that Michael Paul Rogin relates *Moby Dick* to Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw's decision to return an escaped slave by the name of Thomas Sims to his former plantation in the state of Georgia and thereby declared the Fugitive Slave Law constitutional. He later goes on to say that in the same month of the court ruling, Shaw sent Melville, his son-in-law, a copy of Owen Chase's account of the *Essex* sinking. He continues:

> In this moment of exchange, Shaw embodies simultaneously an interest in two kinds of agency—that of the animal, and that of the slave—both of which, in different but "translatable" ways, threatened the mid-nineteenth-century American economy. These coterminous assaults upon American confidence manifest themselves, in Melville's novel, in the intimacy of the relation between the threat represented by the agency of the animal, and that of those various human "others" upon whose labor, in 1851, American federal and economic stability remained tenuously poised. (Armstrong 1051)

In Father Mapple's sermon in *Moby Dick*, Melville expresses a well known antislavery doctrine of the "higher law," opposing the extension of slavery. Foster also states that in one of

Melville's letters to Hawthorne, he references a "clergyman speaking the dangerous truth" which he later goes on to say "looks clearly like Melville's response to the Sims case" (Foster 17). Later in *Moby Dick*, Melville depicts an almost master-and-slave-like relationship between Captain Ahab and Pip, one of the younger crew members. In the chapter "Midnight, Forecastle," Pip prays, "Oh, thou big white God aloft there somewhere in yon darkness, have mercy on this small black boy down here; preserve him from all men who have no bowels to feel fear" (Melville 173). With close resemblance to an image of slavery, Foster comments about Pip's prayer, "On his very first appearance Pip is the Negro, calling on the "big white God" to have mercy on "this small black boy," and it is Negro as well as Fool that I think we should see him." Foster follows this statement by saying that "In Ahab's turning his back on Pip in Act V of the tragedy, Melville may have symbolized Judge Shaw's repudiation of the Negro in the Sims case" (Foster 24).

In conclusion, *Moby Dick* holds numerous symbolic references to political figures and situations. Although there are many controversial ideas for each detail in the book, I can agree with some more than others. There are evident clues throughout the book pertaining to characters such as Ahab and scenarios such as Father Mapple's sermon. I agree with the connections Alan Heimert and Charles Foster have made between the two and their historical significance. Melville has successfully masked the symbolic details in his book for decades and I am confident that he will continue to do so for centuries to come.

Works Cited

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