

The Persistent Whaleman: An Analysis on the Heroism of Capitan Ahab

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Abstract

Herman Melville is one of the most influential figures in the literature history of the world. He creates an overwhelming novel *The Whaling* or *Moby Dick*, which is considered as a bright pearl in the literary treasury of the world. He shapes a group of tragic heroes who dare to challenge and conquer nature. The novel *Moby Dick* tells a story of a whaling ship named Pequod and its impious, godlike man. Captain Ahab, whose obsessive search for the white whale Moby-Dick leads the ship Pequod and its crew to destruction. This piece of work, a realistic adventure novel, includes a chain of thinkings on the man's living condition. Realistic recordations and descriptions of white whale and the whaling industry cast the book. The novel *Moby Dick* displays the author's special knowledge, skills and rich experience. This paper focuses on the analysis of the main characters – Captain Ahab's madness, cruelty and heroism, which finally led to his tragic fate. In this process, the theme is revealed: human beings should be in harmony with nature. The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the author's descriptions of the contents and actions, appreciate the characteristics and fates of the main character, tap into the hidden significance, reflect the work's artistic value, explore its great realistic meaning, and reveal Melville's opinion on man and nature – they must be kept in harmony.

Key words: Heroism; Ahab; Harmony; Nature

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Moby Dick, once said to be American *Hamlet*, is one of the most famous works of Herman Melville who was a mid-nineteenth-century American writer. *Moby Dick* is said to be the perfect presentation of American dream. This novel includes different theology, history and so on. However, this novel was not accepted by the then people even after his death. Remained mostly ignored by people until the 1920s, when westerners went through the First World War, *Moby Dick* started to be resurveyed, and then its important significance was gradually approved. This book made Melville instantly famous. It was still in print throughout the world. Today, *Moby Dick* has become one of the most representative works of American literature. It showed the strong battle between man and nature.

In *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville turns narrative scene into burdensome whaling. When he narrates the story, he combines affairs with reason, telling history, discussing theology or praising nature or talking about philosophy. Some people view *Moby Dick* as a realistic works, while others consider it as a symbolic novel. That means the novel is full of various themes. Therefore, this thesis would like to tap into heroism in *Moby Dick*. The main character Caption Ahab is an abnormal person who is mad and cruel. He insists on pursuing and killing Moby Dick who wounds his leg. Thus he encourages the staff in the Pequod following him and accomplishing his goal, which leads to a tragic ending. Melville's special knowledge of whaling and tragedy makes him produce a great tragic story. And Ahab as a tragic hero who burns with a fierce fire becomes evil himself in his quest for destroying evil.

1. HEROISM IN THE AMERICAN CULTURE

The word "heroism" is derived from ancient England. Each age has its own heroes, but the hero may be a person or a group of people. Heroism develops in America with various features. Now I would like to introduce heroism from two parts.

Heroism is a quality of supernatural and legend. The term was originally related with knights, chivalry and courtly love story. The romantic stories concern with Alexander the Great, the knights of the Round Table, and Emperor Charlemagne. Arthurian legend has three groups. Some of the stories include a young knight of the test. Such as Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Others describe the conflict between passion and responsibility. Such as Tristan and Gottfried von Strasbourg Isolt. The third group is the Holy Grail Chretien de Troyes by the romantic Percival example.

In American culture, a cultural phenomenon has already formed, which is called heroism. Heroism is the core factor of American culture as well as the most important value. People who do not understand the meaning of heroism would not realize their behaviours. The definition of heroism in American Heritage Dictionary involves following parts: (1) The doctrine in the basic significance of personal independence. (2) The theory that freedom from government controls the individual economic or social goals. (3) The theory that personal interests are superior to the collective interests. American scholars believe that personal interest is absolute power. All values, rights and duties come from the heart of a person. But most important factor is independent, responsibility and self-respect which could discover the importance of independent not depending upon others. Heroism of American culture can really express the American thoughts. It is a typical Western political and social philosophy of capitalism. In the mid-nineteen-century, some reformers in America think that heroism should be limited into family life. They recognized heroism with a positive attitude. They thought that heroism respected personal rights and emphasized the free and equal rights between people and benefited the development of humanity and social progress. At that time, Emerson held that heroism was a kind of positive human spirits and value system which was helpful for the development of humanity and the progress of society. Heroism was a theory of humanity. It advocated that all the values was experienced by human and was individual-centered. He emphasized spirit and intuition and advocated that human should elaborate Transcendentalism. And he also thought that people should have confidence and help themselves. The improvement of heroism is the basic of the development of the world. Heroism in the purpose of seeking personal interests and self-reliance has been deep-rooted in the American literature. *Moby Dick*, as one of the representatives of American novels, fully reflects the American individual spirit.

2. CAPTAIN AHAB'S HEROISM

Since the foundation of United States, more and more people have pursued for freedom and individual. Then in many literatures, they describe many characters with

individual and heroism. *Moby-Dick*, for example, presents a tragic hero – Ahab. Now I would analyze the protagonist from three aspects.

Captain Ahab is the leading role of *Moby Dick*. People generally believe that Captain Ahab is a crazy person who is completely unbalanced. Ahab is the incarnation of the active and courageous madness that lays brooding and fierce, ever ready to spring to command, he is the atheistical Captain of the tormented soul.” On his previous voyage, Ahab meets Moby Dick and goes through a fierce battle with it, which leads one of his legs to be bitten off. He is pulled on the board of the ship Pequod but only an unconscious person. Then Ahab is fighting with fever. He lies on the bed for several days. He has been in a white jacket and swung in a strong wind, but then he seems to recover and “bore that film, collected front, and issued his calm orders once again. He is unable to keep balance by himself between his two legs because of the wounded by the great creature Moby-Dick. His reason and calm are deeply stimulated both in mental and physical. Therefore, Ahab makes his mind to kill Moby-Dick and conquers nature, leading to his way to death. However, he has the determination and courage to challenge nature, which embodies the spirit of heroism. Ahab is out at sea to seek and kill Moby-Dick as his unique purpose. At the moment of boarding the whaler, he is prepared all the work for killing the whale. Although Ahab’s motivation is full of the color of tragic, his determination to fight with nature embodies his heroism spirit. At that time, many whalers like Ahab suffer from the attack of Moby-Dick both in body and mind. However, Ahab is not affected by those beaten whalers and goes on with his first purpose. Captain Ahab once said they thought me as a mad person, so did Starbuck. However, he was really a devil and he was maddened. As for Captain Ahab, madness is treated as the final expression of his future thrust of his sea instinct. All of these seem to indicate that Captain Ahab is no rational crazy.

It is widely believed that Captain Ahab is a cruel and inhumane madman. He has changed a lot as he suffers the injury from Moby-Dick. It seems that he becomes crazy and he has apparently grown depressed and intense. In his heart, Ahab has his peerless powers: “All my means are sane, my motive and object mad.” The ship’s carpenter makes a new leg for him, the bones of whale jaw. The owners of the ship Pequod think that Ahab is the most suitable person for the owner of a Nantucket whaler. And Ahab has never turned up until the ship is out to sea. Afterwards, he orders all the people on the ship Pequod to gather on the deck board, telling them that the cruise they are taking is an extraordinary ship. The unique purpose of the ship Pequod is to find and kill the white whale, Moby-Dick, which is the “great gliding demon of the sea of life.” He is full of passions but only Starbuck does not agree with him

“Starbuck, the brave, the chivalrous, the humane man, the symbol of unaided Virtue and right-mindedness, tragically destined to be overborne by madness.”

It seems that he is a cruel monocrat on the boat society, and wherever he goes, the pessimistic atmosphere may appear. When the crew on the ship Pequod has a dinner with Ahab, the dinner is usually presided by him. There is no meeting, and stringent service order. When Captain Gardner of Rachel expects Captain Ahab to help him find his son, but his ship is lost after chasing the whale Moby Dick. Ahab refuses his request, because he does not want to waste time to chase the white whale, Moby-Dick. Ahab does not care about anyone on the ship Pequod, even their lives, in order to take revenge the white whale as his own purpose. He does not care about the benefits of the crew and any other person's feelings. Therefore, the inhumanity is one of the most common qualities in Ahab's characters.

It is the traditional idea that Captain Ahab endows with the special demonic features like a devil. He has a very strong imbalance and excessive madness. He was so mad that he nearly ignores all the requirements of other people. As a result, his selfish, heroism and unbalanced values of the world drive him out of normal behavior, killing himself and other crew members on the ship Pequod. These are Captain Ahab's traditional evaluation. People generally think that these shortcomings of his own lead to Ahab's death.

What the novel describes in *Moby Dick* is a nightmare that fights against with nature and fate. Ahab is called a great God-like figure, but he does not respect God. He considers himself as a GOD on the Pequod what is a miniature of American society. Ahab controls the world of the Pequod. He has ever said “I would not be defeated even if the sun offends him (Melville, 2003, p.139).” Ahab's confidence and madness make it impossible for him to live in harmony with Moby-Dick, which is a major reason for his tragic result. Ahab is a person who dares to fight with fate, leading to his tragic fate. After setting up his own goal, he went forward determined. His only purpose is to hunt down and kill the white whale Moby-Dick. When sailors are busy with hunting and killing the whales for money benefit on the ship Pequod, Ahab spends days hunting and killing Moby-Dick. Besides this, he would be neither eager for fame and fortune, nor have desire for power. In order to achieve his goal, he would dare to sacrifice his life. “and I their match. Oh, hard! That to fire others, the match itself must need be wasting! What I've dared, I've willed; and what I've willed, I'll do!”

From here, we could see Ahab's determination and courage to fight with fate and nature. His behavior challenging nature, similar with Oedipus in a play, passes on the man's spirit of conquering the world. In the play, Oedipus is a god who pays for wrongful knowledge and another god Prometheus steals a flame to help humans to fight against with hunger and coldness. As far as I am concerned, I think Ahab is a great person and a hero, someone who can not serve the role in the development of modern society. He does his best to try to discover the true

value of the world. And he has courage to face the dark side of the world and the troubles. With his poor forces sending to the challenges of nature, he is doomed to fail. However, his spirit is admirable, and it has distinctive characteristics of heroism.

“The heroic cannot be the common, or the common the heroic (Li & Chang, 1991, p.211).” From that he boards the ship Pequod, Ahab's insistence seems appear. No matter what kind of whaler he meets, he worriedly asks the news about Moby-Dick from the Albatross, the Rachel, and the Delight. “The circumnavigating Pequod would sweep almost all the known Sperm Whale cruising grounds of the world, previous to descending upon the Line in the Pacific.”

Ahab sails around the world just for hunting and killing it. He keeps his own promise, persists with actions, and never gives up during his pursuit of Moby-Dick. Therefore, in order to accomplish his goal, Ahab comes at a large cost. “Self-trust is the essence of heroism.” He laughs at God, such as “I laugh and hoot at you, ye cricket-players, you pugilists, you deaf Burkes and blinded Bendi goes! I will not say as schoolboys do to bullies – Take some one of your own size.”

From his forceful words, we can feel the arrogance of Ahab, who has a man of strong character. He satirizes God's wrong and evil, fights against power and dares to bear all the sufferings. We can say that Ahab is an admirable hero.

Although he fails to pursue Moby-Dick at the first two times, he never says giving up. We can find a special man named Ahab who is brave enough and fights to the end even if facing death. Ahab is a man who can be destroyed but not defeated. When Ahab pursues the white whale Moby-Dick for a third time, he talks with Starbuck that “Some men die at ebb tide; some at low water; some at the full of the flood; and I feel now like a billow that's all one crested comb, Starbuck. I am old; – shake hands with me, man.”

After saying these words, he firmly steps onto a non-return road. “Cowards die many times, but a brave man only dies once.” Finally Ahab kills Moby-Dick, but goes with it He fights for his beliefs and his goals. Although it is a tragedy for his death, his spirits should deserve honorable. He considers the ocean as his battlefield and swears to defend his status to the death. In his opinion, it's the best award for him to die in the deep ocean – his battlefield. His madness destined to his tragic fate, but at the same time, a heroic person of strong will and self-confidence rises up. Although he sacrifices his life, his spirit will survive forever. It is nature that causes his failure. While he himself knows the tragic results, Ahab still holds on his belief. That's why we say that he is a “tragic hero”.

3. TRAGIC IMPLICATION

In the masterpiece of *Moby Dick*, Ahab, the protagonist of the novel, is the presentation of human conquering nature,

while Moby-Dick is the miniature of strong nature. Both of the two factors are a pair of aculeated contradiction, which represents intensively the conflict between nature and human. There is always a leader on the process of altering and conquering nature. It is Captain Ahab who is the representation of man before nature as well as the hero sent by human to conquer nature. He abandons everything to protecting human's dignity. Everything that seems unknowing symptom, warning and imploration can not change his mind instead of more firmness. He drives his Pequod, heading on strong winds, experiencing millions of dangers and tests, in order to achieve his goal. At last, he accomplishes his goal at a large cost, killing the white whale and sacrificing himself and his crew.

Although Ahab is the representation of human, he has the quality of doughty that common people do not have. But at the same time, he also has misdeeds such as selfishness. He is nearly like a god who takes hope to people; he becomes a devil making people afraid of him. Above all, he is a real strong hero with flesh and blood. Only he can accomplish this task, which gets honors from humans. In practice, his death is inevitable, because he makes a serious mistake in the conflict between nature and man. He overestimates his power and considers himself as god. However, we know that man and nature are brothers who can not desperate from each other. And they are also competitions. Thus, man and nature are both harmony and conflict. We should conquer and alter nature according to nature's rule. Then we can take advantage of resources of nature and get benefits from it, which Ahab ignores. From these, man would be punished if he continues to harry from nature. On the other hand, Ahab does not solve the problems from inside leading the contradiction of interpersonal next to the contradiction between nature and man, which is one of his tragic end reasons.

Human is insignificant comparing with nature. Nature creates man likewise man conquers nature. In the process of altering and conquering nature, though there is a tragic side paying a price, that is not what nature can be compared with the infinite power and strong will that man has possessed. With subjective initiative, people can show their intelligent and wisdom in nature.

When we look back the great novel *Moby Dick* 150 years ago, we may feel a pity for the heroes in the works, but we can get a lot of knowledge and experience from it. In practice, the revenge that the white whale takes to Ahab and the Pequod is also nature to human, which is protecting it. As human's behaviour of cutting down the forest, hunting animals and polluting the environment immoderately, which threatens people's living conditions, such as mud-rock flow, wiping out species, desertification of land and so on. The reason for that is a person himself. Although people can conquer nature, he should aside by the rules of nature. Or it may pay a large price like Ahab. Human can not live alone without nature. No nature means no human, so human should keep in harmony with nature. It also means that human can

flourish only with nature together. Melville has already predicted what is happening after 150 years. We should think deeply from the revenge of Ahab. To protect nature is to protect human being.

CONCLUSION

Many characters in the novel *Moby Dick* Melville have described show that he is interested in reflecting various kinds of attitudes toward life.

Through the figures of the novel *Moby Dick*, we can find the greatness of human beings. Human being is able to achieve their goal with their subjective initiative. At the same time, we must recognize that we have to pay a huge price to know the world and control it. It is Ahab who dares to sacrifice himself, even his crew on the Pequod, which we are able to understand more about nature. Although Ahab is the representation of human, he has the quality of doughty that common people do not have. But at the same time, he also has misdeeds such as selfishness. Ahab is brave enough to be against the god and he has the spirit of hard personality and perseverance. All of these make him a hero. Nevertheless, during the struggle with the powerful force of nature, he is doomed to become a tragic figure. The wind soughs and the water gets cold, the hero goes over there never coming back. In that period, only death can build up their businesses of heroism completely and then they will be able to save their self-value and meet with this inevitable tragedy.

In a conclusion, different people would have different opinions about this novel *Moby Dick*, so different people will also have different views about it. However, in my paper, I analyze the novel *Moby Dick* through "heroism" Ahab displays during the course of seeking the white whale. We should realize the real intension that we should keep in harmony with nature; otherwise, we would get the revenge of nature.

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