



Christian Symbolism Adapted To Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*

BA Thesis English Language and Culture, Utrecht University.

Lisa Zanolì

6197779

Supervisor: Paul Franssen

Second Reader: Cathelein Aaftink

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to find a connection between Christian symbolism in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and the historical context of the mid-nineteenth century. This is achieved by performing a close reading of the novel itself, as well as reading secondary sources by researchers who have already discussed this topic. One of the key results is that Melville uses Christian symbolism to address his criticism on nineteenth-century America. This leads to the idea that Melville criticises certain values held by some Christians. In essence, *Moby Dick* can be read as an allegory for nineteenth-century social structures in the United States.

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Introduction

Moby Dick is a novel written by Herman Melville that is filled with various symbolism, including Christian symbolism. This study will examine the Christian symbolism in the novel, trying to find out how and why it is used. To get to the root of the meaning of this symbolism, I need to establish the religious situation during the time *Moby Dick* was written. According to Dorrien (2) and Perry (15), Calvinism played a defining role in the establishment of Bible culture in nineteenth-century United States. This led to a period of uncertainty and quick changes regarding religion (Dorrien, 2). Because of this, I will mostly analyse Calvinistic Christian symbolism. I would like to specifically examine to what extent this symbolism plays a role in Melville's view and criticism of contemporary society. Therefore, I will examine the religious situation as well as political and ethnocultural tensions during the mid-nineteenth century and seek to understand the religious symbolism within these contexts. The aim of this study is to contribute to the literary discussion surrounding *Moby Dick* and hopefully prove of value for historians interested in the nineteenth-century United States, specifically in the effects of religion on the life of American citizens.

The research question I will be asking myself during the writing of this thesis is as follows: How does the Christian symbolism found in the novel *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville engage with US society of his time?

To answer this, I have formulated related sub-questions that will be relevant to this study:

- i. What identifies the contemporary society of Herman Melville's time (mid-nineteenth century) regarding religion?
- ii. How can the Christian symbolism in *Moby Dick* be interpreted?
- iii. How does Melville engage with contemporary society in *Moby Dick*?

This thesis will focus on two aspects: Christian symbolism and the historical contexts of *Moby Dick*. I will try to find a connection between these two aspects in hopes to contribute to the literary discussion surrounding *Moby Dick*. The historical context in *Moby Dick* has been researched by various scholars already, such as Patterson and Pettey. For example, Patterson argues that themes of democracy is heavily included in *Moby Dick*, especially in characters such as Captain Ahab and Ishmael, while Pettey states that topics such as cannibalism and slavery are defining for the novel in terms of symbolism. Even though Pettey briefly mentions Christianity, both scholars do not explicitly link Christianity to their findings. Christian symbolism in *Moby Dick* has been researched by other scholars, such as Pardes, Vargish and Vaught. Whereas Pardes claims that *Moby Dick* should be read as an interpretation of the Bible (7), Vaught argues that the religious aspects in *Moby Dick* explain religion as a whole (10). Vargish takes another point of view and states that Christian symbolism is not the only religious symbolism found in the novel, and that for instance Gnostic mythology should be taken into consideration (273). This shows that the symbolism in the novel can be interpreted in various ways, and that there are multiple answers possible.

As mentioned before, Calvinism had a great influence in the establishment of Bible culture in the nineteenth century (Dorrien, 2 & Perry, 15). According to Willisky, Bible culture entails how the Bible is interpreted and read at a specific point in time. In the nineteenth century, this meant that “the Bible was clear in meaning, persuasive in message and authoritative in truth claims” (15). The importance of the Bible is seen particularly in Calvinism, since “Calvinism is an attempt to express all the Bible and only the Bible” (Palmer, 10). On top of this, both Herbert (163) and Bluestein (197) state that many instances of Calvinism are seen throughout *Moby Dick*. Bluestein expresses that literary Calvinism is based around the idea that a clear distinction between good and evil exists, and that evil must be prevented or defeated. An example of this in *Moby Dick* is seen in the fact that the narrator seems to force the idea that

the White Whale is inherently evil onto the reader, mostly seen in Chapter 41 titled *Moby Dick*. The influence of Christianity in Melville's fictions might also be due to the fact that he was baptised and attended the Reformed Dutch Church (Ide, 9). However, according to Parker (34), Melville felt uncertain about his own devotion to Christianity and would often not show up at church.

Similar to the religious elements in the story, Melville also seems to describe and criticise contemporary society. The crew on board of the Pequod consists of various ethnicities, for example including a South Islander, African and Indian men. The manner in which these characters are portrayed is an example of Melville's views on society. Moreover, according to Heimert (499), Melville saw the States as a ship and its history as a sea journey, explaining why the Pequod might be interpreted as a metaphor for America altogether. For instance, Captain Ahab allegorically representing a democratic leader shows the vulnerability of democracy.

I will argue that there is a connection between the historical context and the Christian symbolism in *Moby Dick* and that this connection mostly has to do with Melville's views on society. I will specifically focus on politics and ethnocultural tensions in nineteenth-century America, since that has not been researched as extensively as other topics surrounding Melville studies. In this way I hope to contribute to the literary discussion surrounding *Moby Dick*.

Chapter 1: Between Calvinism and Churches: Religion in Mid-Nineteenth Century United States

The mid-nineteenth-century was a tumultuous time in the United States regarding religion. Increasing ideologies with Protestants roots and church-membership, ever-changing Bible culture and the influx of immigrants and Catholicism played its role in defining the era. As will be discussed later on, the United States experienced quite some quick changes regarding religion and Bible culture and it is therefore difficult to exactly define or generalise on the religious situation during the mid-nineteenth century. However, there are still various events and communities that helped define the religious situation in the United States. This chapter will deal with religious developments during the early- to mid-nineteenth century and also take in consideration religious viewpoints Melville himself might have had.

It is important to take into consideration the events that happened in the late eighteenth century, since these influenced the ideas people had on religion in the nineteenth century. Gabriel has stated that the eighteenth century is characterised by a strict order (34). Virtues such as balance, reason and natural law, which were thought of to have been created by God shaped people's ideologies (Gabriel, 34). Religious communities in the eighteenth century were small and Protestantism had, in comparison to the seventeenth century, lost almost all of its power (Gabriel, 35). The most defining events, however, were the American Revolution (1765-1783) and the Declaration of Independence (1776), which resulted in a great sense of freedom amongst American citizens. The importance of freedom was seen in American politics as well as religion: people now had the freedom to choose and decide on their own. This is seen in the fact that religion became "the full responsibility of the common people organized into voluntary congregations", meaning that a separation of church and state took place (Gabriel, 37). People from all over America transformed the Christian traditions previously known, in the sense that the old Christian tradition was abandoned and new

traditions emerged. This is something that was still present during the nineteenth century, as will be discussed later on. On the other hand, these events also divided the American citizens: some people agreed with the changes, whereas more conservative-minded people preferred the America they knew before the Revolution (Gabriel, 38).

Religion in the nineteenth-century United States was for a great part defined by the Bible culture. Bible culture refers to the way the Bible is interpreted and read, as well as the function and authority it possesses at the time (Willsky, 14). Willsky describes how during the nineteenth century the Bible was seen as plain: every single thing written in the Bible was thought of to be straightforward and clear (14). This meant that “the Bible was clear in meaning, persuasive in message and authoritative in truth claims” (Willsky, 15). This essentially meant that many people were able to think of their own interpretations, which consequently resulted in new religious movements with Protestant roots (Willsky, 14), similar to what happened during the end of the eighteenth century as described above. In these new religious movements, the Protestants argued that the Bible must be seen as the “only arbiter of truth and religious authority” (Willsky, 16). The idea that the Bible should be seen as ultimate authority is quite clear in Calvinist teachings, since “Calvinism is as broad as the Bible” and can be seen as an “attempt to express the Bible” (Palmer, 9-10). In a sermon from around 1560, John Calvin states that there is no need for spirituality or mystics in his teachings, but that the word of the Bible is enough to understand God’s will. He explains that the texts written by the apostles provide sufficient information on what God wishes from his believers (De Wit & Steenvoorde, 146-149). In essence, Calvin highlights the authoritativeness of the Bible in this particular sermon: there is no need for anything other than the Bible. The authority of the Bible is also highlighted by Perry, who states that “historians have often identified the way that the Bible was positioned as an answer to the era’s problems of authority” (2). This means that the Bible was used as a source and a model for authority,

religiously as well as politically (Perry, 2). Therefore, various movements within Protestantism, including Calvinism, rose to popularity and gained followers.

However, the religious tension in the United States during the mid-nineteenth century also emerged from the fact that Catholicism became present, which happened due to immigration and territorial expansion. Due to this territorial expansion, the people of the United States were exposed to all sorts of new religions, including Catholics from Latin America. The rising presence of Catholics created fear and dislike amongst Protestants, which for instance resulted in a Protestant mob attacking a Catholic convent and school in Massachusetts in 1834 and advertisements with anti-Catholic messages (Oxx, 2 & Perry, 10). This most likely led to a division between Christians, in particular between Protestants and Catholics. At the same time, America experienced an event called The Second Great Awakening, which lasted from 1800 to 1840. This Second Great Awakening involved many Protestant Christian religious changes which led to the democratisation of American Christianity (Oxx, 12). The idea of democracy was crucial in the creation of America as a nation and Bible culture was deeply implemented in this (Perry, 9). This democratic aspect of the Bible was seen in the idea that every civilian should be able to understand and use the Bible, which also ties in with the idea that the Bible was seen as plain and straightforward, as well as a source of authority. Subsequently, this led to increased church membership in the first half of the nineteenth century (Oxx, 12 & Willsky, 14), since there was now a certain accessibility to the Bible: everyone could interpret the Bible in their own way, and not just the people with religious authority. Because of the influx of Catholic people and the rise of new Protestant movements, America now consisted of many different ideologies.

However, there was a certain group that did not agree with these different ideologies. The American Bible Society, which was founded in 1816 by Joseph Hornblower, tried to create a Christian consensus by providing every household with a copy of the Bible (Wosh, 13). Their

goal was to create a sense of inclusiveness to bind Americans together. The Society eventually turned into a big corporation and “established the Bible as an article of mass consumption” (Wosh, 20). Instead of focusing on the message within the Bible, the Society focused on the presentation of the Book and the Bible essentially became a medium to earn money with. Nord (7) adds onto this argument, stating that religion became a great part of the rising printing industry. However, this was a two-faced development: leaders of religious movements saw potential in expanding this business and spreading their religious ideas, but also considered it to be dangerous, since the “authority of the standing-order churches was fading” (Nord, 8). Eventually, the Bible becoming more available to common people created an increase of church-membership and various new Protestant movements.

Taking Melville’s own experiences into consideration, it appears that it is quite difficult to provide a clear and reliable argument. According to biographer Gunn, many biographers find themselves struggling with the fact that they are dependent on Melville’s fictions and poems (12). Nonetheless, Gunn states that Melville has shown a certain unbelief or uncertainty regarding religion in his works (14). This is seen in the fact that Melville often provides the reader with questions surrounding religion and philosophy. Through his narratives, it seems as if Melville regards religion as something that could be either a blessing or a curse (Gunn, 15). From Gunn’s *A Historical Guide to Herman Melville*, it appears that little is known about Melville’s religious tendencies. For example, there is no proof as to how often Melville attended church (Gunn, 169). According to Hershel Parker, who has written many books and biographies on Melville’s life, Melville was often criticised for his ideas about religion. For instance, Melville “made himself a local scandal for not attending church” (39). Moreover, Parker states that Melville took on a relativist view on religion, meaning that he showed interest in religion besides Christianity, for instance Ancient Greek and pagan religions. Melville’s low church attendance and sceptic take on religion did not do him any favours,

since he received quite some negative reviews by the newspapers the New York Independent and the New York Churchman, who argued that his take on religion was “a pity” (Parker, 71). All in all, it can be argued that Melville was not afraid to voice his opinions on religion by expressing doubts and asking questions, as well as exploring other religions.

Taking all into consideration, this chapter provides a generalisation that does no justice to the whole period. This is due to the fact that the establishment of religious and Bible culture evolved over many decades and that not every part of the United States experienced the same movements or events. Nonetheless, some defining factors are the American Revolution and Declaration in Independence during the late eighteenth century, as well as the rise of immigrants and Catholicism. The development of mass-producing Bibles and making them available to the common people has had defining consequences as well: more people were able to have their own thoughts about the Bible books. The Bible became a book with great authority, but at the same time the accessibility became better. With a rise of Bible production, more people were exposed to the texts which may explain the rise in church-membership as well as an influx of religious movements. The Calvinistic idea that the Bible should be seen as the most authoritative source on Christianity therefore became more prominent. To circle back to Melville, it appears to be the case that he definitely showed interest in religion in his works. As mentioned before, Melville often put questions or certain outlooks on religion in his narratives and this suggests that the religious situation in the United States intrigued him. With that being said, I would like to argue that the contemporary situation in the mid-nineteenth century had its influence on the way Melville has portrayed religion in his narratives.

Chapter 2: Christian Symbolism in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*

According to various scholars, including Cook, "the Bible was the single most important literary influence on *Moby Dick*" (6). This influence is seen in various elements in the novel, for instance from the naming of certain characters to Biblical elements incorporated in the novel. This chapter therefore will deal with the most prominent examples of Christian symbolism, namely the Biblical Books of Job and Jonah, as well as Calvinistic elements found in the novel. Since there is much to cover, this chapter will mostly offer a generalised interpretation of the religious symbolism found in the novel in order to be able to analyse the historical context of this matter.

According to Cook (VII) and Young (388), the Book of Job was one of the greatest influences on the writing of *Moby Dick*. The importance of Job is seen throughout *Moby Dick* and ties in with other Christian references within the novel. A clear example is the identification Melville makes between Leviathan and whales. According to Job 41:1-34, Leviathan was a mighty sea serpent that ruled over the seas. By referring to the White Whale as Leviathan, Melville highlights the size of Moby Dick, but by doing so also creates the idea that Moby Dick is inherently evil. This is explained in Chapter 41: *Moby Dick*. In this chapter, the narrator explains that the White Whale is known to attack whaling ships. According to Young, the idea that Leviathan was a whale was up for debate during Melville's time, suggesting that identifying Leviathan as a whale was a traditional idea. However, Melville still utilised the Leviathan to connect Moby Dick to the Book of Job (389). Since there are quite a few chapters of *Moby Dick* dedicated to the greatness of whales and the whaling industry, Melville identifies whales with the mythical Leviathan. However, there is a certain duality to the Leviathan as described in the Bible. In the Book of Job, the Leviathan is an evil being that can be interpreted as the wrath of God (Young, 390). However, in Psalms 74:14, the Leviathan is killed by God as food for the Hebrew people, therefore showing that the

Leviathan was used as a tool by a merciful God. In essence, *Moby Dick* behaves similarly to the Leviathan as seen in Job: the White Whale does not seem to show any mercy towards Captain Ahab and his crew, but demolishes the whole ship and consequently kills all crew except Ishmael. The reason why Ishmael is the lone survivor is explained in the Epilogue: “And I only am escaped alone to tell thee. – Job” (Melville, 663). This quote highlights two aspects: first, the fact that Captain Ahab failed to complete his revenge since he was killed by *Moby Dick*, and two, that Ishmael is the one who is reconciled with God. The Book of Job centralises around the questions what God’s role is within the existence of evil in the world (Cook, VII). The importance of evil in the world is also heavily intertwined in Calvinistic teachings, and especially the Book of Job was an important source (Cook, 15). As mentioned before, Leviathan had two major functions in the Bible, and Melville seems to stress the mighty sea monster that represents the wrath of God. This means that *Moby Dick* functions as a way to test Ahab and his crew, similarly to how Job was tested in his Book. This wrath was crucial in Calvinism since it focused on mankind being punished for their sins (Young, 389). This highlights the influence Calvinistic teachings must have had on the writing of *Moby Dick*.

On the other hand, the Book of Job is not the only source Melville must have taken inspiration from. As opposed to Cook and Young, Pardes (11) and Herbert (1613) claim that the Book of Jonah was of considerable influence as well. At the beginning of the novel, Ishmael listens to a sermon by Father Mapple, who speaks about Jonah and whose story teaches “a lesson to us all as sinful men” (49). The idea that mankind is sinful is inherently a Calvinistic idea as well (Bluestein, 199), which once again shows the influence of Calvinist teachings within the novel. The Book of Jonah is important to Melville’s *Moby Dick*, since it deals with a similar incident: an attack by a whale. However, Jonah and Captain Ahab present an opposite reaction to this attack. As stated in Jonah 2:1-9, Jonah prays to God and shows

remorse, whereas Captain Ahab only seems to be filled with an obsessive rage. This difference may explain why Captain Ahab and the Pequod eventually lose to the whale, since Captain Ahab does not show any kind of remorse for his antagonistic behaviour. Even though the hunt for the White Whale will lead to not only Ahab's downfall, but also that of his crew and ship, it can be argued that he is as evil as the Whale. On top of that, Jonah realises that he is sinful and accepts his punishment, whereas Captain Ahab does not seem to think of himself as sinful at all. The sermon by Father Mapple on the Book of Jonah highlights these thoughts as well, focusing on Jonah's realization of being a sinner. According to Herbert (1614), the main point of the sermon by Father Mapple is that Jonah knows that his punishment is just, which is in accordance to Calvinistic teachings. Moreover, the sermon by Father Mapple also seems to be foreshadowing the downfall of the Pequod, since Captain Ahab shows opposite behaviour compared to Jonah.

The influence of Calvinism on *Moby Dick* is seen throughout the novel. Melville has mainly incorporated two Books from the Bible, namely those of Job and Jonah. According to Young (389) and Herbert (1614), these two Books are crucial for Calvinistic teachings since they focus on the fact that mankind is seen as sinners and that they are therefore punished accordingly, in this case by a mighty Leviathan or whale. It can be argued that Captain Ahab views Moby Dick as a personification of the evil God, since he believes the whale to be a monster. According to Herbert (1615), Calvin "envisioned a monster God who put into effect (...) an eternal malice against which mortal effort is futile". It seems to be the case that Melville has described Moby Dick in similar terms, creating a parallel between the Book of Job and *Moby Dick*.

Potentially the most striking example of Christian symbolism found in the novel is Melville's use of names, including but not limited to Ishmael and Ahab. Captain Ahab was named after the Biblical figure of King Ahab. Herbert states that Melville's representation of

King Ahab as Captain Ahab was heavily influenced by the Calvinistic interpretation of King Ahab (1613). According to Kings 16:29-33, King Ahab was an evil man who ruled over Israel and allowed the worshipping of different gods. The description of King Ahab is quite negative: he is evil, and on top of that does not care much for his people. In a way, it can be said that Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick* rules with an iron fist as well. He is the one who decided to hunt down the White Whale at all costs. Captain Ahab can be described to be evil as well: he decided to hunt down the White Whale, disregarding the fact that this might be fatal for himself and his crew. Captain Ahab continues his obsessive hunt, even though Starbuck clearly shows his doubts: “‘Vengeance on a dumb brute!’ cried Starbuck, ‘that simply smote thee from blindest instinct! Madness! To be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab, seems blasphemous.’” (Melville, 194).

The name Ishmael comes from the first son of Abraham and his wife Sarah’s slave, Hagar (Genesis 16:15). According to Genesis 16:6-16, Sarah was overcome with jealousy and Hagar fled into the desert, where an angel came down to her and told her that her son must be named Ishmael. On top of that, the angel says that “He will be a wild man; his hand [will be] against every man, and every man’s hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren” (Genesis 16:12). After the birth of Abraham’s second son Isaac, Sarah ordered Abraham to send Ishmael away. Abraham does not want to, but God speaks to him and tells him to do so (Genesis 21:9-12). In essence, Ishmael becomes a castaway before he can settle down. This shows some similarities to Melville’s Ishmael: both seem to be wandering or lost. In Melville’s Ishmael this is mostly seen at the beginning and ending of the story: at the beginning, Ishmael is looking for a captain who would hire him on a sea voyage, whereas at the end he floats on a coffin at sea, waiting for a rescue ship to come around.

This chapter dealt with various cases of Christian symbolism in *Moby Dick*, especially focusing on Calvinistic elements as well as two Bible Books. There is a vast amount of

Christian symbolism in *Moby Dick*, and this survey only represents some of the more important cases. Many scholars have written on their own findings on the Christian symbolism in the novel, and with this chapter I tried to create a generalised idea on what the symbolism might mean and why Melville used it to this extent. The Calvinistic elements integrated in the novel might be a reflection of the religious environment Melville grew up in; however, the many examples of Christian symbolism in the novel might also explain Melville's own doubts about religion. As seen in the previous chapter, Melville's fictions and poems often contained theological and philosophical questions, and by incorporating Christianity to such an extent, *Moby Dick* can be read as Melville's interpretations of Calvinistic doctrines. By identifying certain figures and creatures from the Bible with his own characters, Melville creates a criticism on the mid-nineteenth century religious situation. On top of that, the idea that there is not one defining interpretation for *Moby Dick*'s use of religious symbolism might also be due to the fact that the religious situation in mid-nineteenth century United States was quite diverse.

Chapter 3: How Melville Portrays the Nineteenth-Century United States in *Moby Dick*

This chapter deals with how Melville portrays the nineteenth-century United States in *Moby Dick*, especially focusing on political aspects. The following paragraphs will discuss the rise of interest in politics and the development of democracy. It is important to consider the fact that these developments differ per state and that this description is a generalised view of the political situation. Since authority is a central theme throughout *Moby Dick*, this chapter will also discuss the place of authority within a democratic society. *Moby Dick* can be read as a critique on society: the Pequod can be seen as a metaphor for the United States altogether, with its crew representing certain aspects of society. Using Captain Ahab as a metaphor for a democratic leader, Melville shows that democracy as a form of government has certain weaknesses, for instance being vulnerable to manipulation. Melville also addresses American hypocrisy by reversing the image of the noble white man and savage foreigner, mostly seen in the behaviour of characters such as Stubb and Queequeg. Both these factors lead to the idea that *Moby Dick* can be read as a commentary on nineteenth-century America by the means of metaphors and reverse stereotypes.

Before *Moby Dick* can be analysed, a general description of nineteenth-century America is necessary, especially the political situation. Since the idea of authority is seen throughout *Moby Dick*, the following paragraphs will provide a brief explanation of the development of democracy in the United States, and subsequently focus on the notion of authority within democracy. Similar to the religious situation, politics in the nineteenth century involved quick changes and developments, for instance the growing interest in democracy. According to Altschuler & Blumin, during the 1820s American citizens felt that politics “was not really the people’s business” (15) and political engagement was quite low, illustrated by the fact that small numbers of people showed up for elections. Of course, voting was a right reserved for white men, since women and people of colour only earned the right to vote during the first

half of the twentieth century (Ryan, 11). However, Altschuler & Blumin describe a shift in public engagement with politics: from the 1828 election onwards, more people showed up to vote (21). Eventually, political engagement reached a peak in 1840, when the majority of eligible voters would actually vote. Both the Whig and Democratic parties would organise meetings which added on to this political engagement (Altschuler & Blumin, 21). On top of that, the United States still experienced the influx of many immigrants from Western European countries, resulting in the continuing of democratic developments. Since various nationalities now resided within one region or city, there was an instability of nationality, according to Ryan (12). This leads to the assumption that democratic developments within the United States were not a consequence of a “singular national culture” (Ryan, 12), but rather the result of many different cultures with different ideologies coming together in one place.

An important aspect of democracy and politics in general is the concept of authority, which is also seen throughout *Moby Dick*. According to Warren, authority in democracy is a necessary evil (46). This is explained by the fact that “authority has a necessary and symbiotic relationship to democracy” (Warren, 47). Within a democracy, there is no absolute leader, however, there still needs to be some authority to make and execute decisions. Authority within democracy exists in the idea that a democratic leader is unable to hide behind power or old traditions. That is to say, a democratic leader must always be prepared to explain certain decisions and justify them (Warren, 47). Moreover, the difference between a democratic and nondemocratic leader as suggested by Schmitter & Karl (76), is how democratic leaders come to power and how they can be held accountable for their actions. Subsequently, the leader gains trust and it is believed they are acting in favour of the collective: the goal is to create consensus among the citizens. However, Warren states that “authority is irreducibly damaged by questioning” (48). Interpreted in the light of democracy, this means that the aforementioned notion of trust disappears when citizens start questioning their leaders.

Therefore, authority within democracy should be built upon trust as well as consensus among citizens.

One of the ways Melville reflected nineteenth century America in *Moby Dick* is seen in the way he deals with authority. The representation of authority in Captain Ahab's characterisation is directly influenced by the political situation during the 1800s. Patterson studied democracy and leadership in *Moby Dick* and states that the most prominent example of this is seen in Captain Ahab's rule over the Pequod (289), in which Ahab shows to be a representation of a democratic leader. As aforementioned, Warren states that authority in democracy is based on certain aspects, including the importance of trust. Ahab trusts his crew in commanding the ship when he is away: "For several days after leaving Nantucket, nothing above hatches was seen of Captain Ahab" (Melville, 142). However, this trust is not necessarily returned. As Warren has pointed out, not being trusted is a political problem for a figure of authority in a democracy. This is seen in the scene where Starbuck clearly doubts Ahab's decision to encourage the crew in hunting down Moby Dick. This is remarkable since Starbuck is Ahab's chief mate (Melville, 133), meaning that he is supposed to be Ahab's right hand. Going back to Warren's statements that democracy is vulnerable when the public questions their leader, this is essentially what Starbuck is doing when he exclaims: "I am game for his [Moby Dick's] crooked jaw, and for the jaws of Death too, Captain Ahab, if it fairly comes in the way of the business we follow; but I came here to hunt whales, not my commander's vengeance" (Melville, 191). Starbuck even goes as far as state that the hunt is "madness!" (191). Ahab does not, similar to a true autocrat, silence Starbuck or punish him; but instead uses persuasion and manipulation tactics to try to win over the rest of the crew to create consensus. Ahab then uses this received trust to continue his dangerous and destructive journey in hopes to hunt down the whale. Ahab manages to eventually manipulate the crew as if he were a democratic leader by winning them over with the use of pity: "It was Moby Dick

that dismayed me; Moby Dick that brought me to this dead stump I stand on now.” (190). Moreover, Ahab also uses togetherness: “The crew, man, the crew! Are they not one and all with Ahab, in this matter of the whale? See Stubb! He laughs!” (192). Finally, Ahab almost creates a feeling of belligerence: “Death to Moby Dick! God hunt us all, if we do not hunt Moby Dick to his death!” (195). By using pity, togetherness, and belligerence, Ahab manages to manipulate his men and works as an agitator to create consensus and win trust. This highlights Ahab as a democratic leader: even though he is not elected by the people, he manages to get consensus. Melville hereby points out the vulnerability of democracy: the public is easily manipulated, even when questioning arises. The destruction of the Pequod is not necessarily Melville disagreeing with democratic leadership, but should be read as a warning that democracy does have weaknesses and should not be considered perfect: even a democratic leader can be dangerous and lead to destruction.

Another way Melville reflected nineteenth century America is seen in the diversity of the crew aboard the Pequod. In Chapters 26 and 27, both titled *Knights and Squires*, the narrator describes the different people joining the whaling voyage, which includes a variety of nationalities and ethnicities. This diversity is quite representative of the mid-nineteenth-century United States, since America reached a peak number of immigrants in the 1840s, which led to an influx of different ethnicities and religions (Smith, 391 & Spickard, 4). According to Horsman (153), America experienced some ethnocultural tensions since slavery was still present and Native Americans and white people were unable to assimilate. An example of a non-white character is Queequeg, who is from the fictional island of Kokovoko, “an island away to the West and South” (Melville, 66), but the novel also includes characters from African American, Native American, and Indian descent. The characters also show diversity in religion and culture. The most prominent example of this is seen in the character of Queequeg. Queequeg is introduced as a heavily tattooed cannibal (Melville, 25). There is

development in the way Queequeg is portrayed by the narrator: at first, he seems quite scary and intimidating, but eventually he and Ishmael become bosom friends. Ishmael even joins in when Queequeg worships his idol Yojo, thinking to himself: “I was a good Christian; [...] How then could I unite with this wild idolator in worshipping his piece of wood?” (Melville, 61). The following monologue addresses Ishmael’s internal struggle with the meaning of worship and highlights the differences between him and Queequeg, eventually coming to the realisation that “Now, Queequeg is my fellow man” (61) and “I must then unite with him” (62). This highlights Melville’s criticism on American society and more specifically the hypocrisy it involved: according to Pettey, “Melville distrusted hypocritical condemnations of savages or cannibals by Christian culture” (32).

Another way of showing this hypocrisy is seen in the characterisation of Stubb. In Chapter 93, *The Castaway*, Massachusetts native Stubb leaves cabin boy Pip out in the open sea after becoming angry with him for losing the chance of catching a whale. This scene is in clear contrast to those in Chapter 13, *Wheelbarrow* and Chapter 78, *Cistern and Buckets*, in both of which Queequeg saves a man from drowning. Leaving someone out in the open sea to drown is behaviour that is more expected to belong to a savage, therefore Melville reverses the role of Stubb and Queequeg: from this example, it appears that Stubb is much more of a savage than Queequeg, who, as aforementioned, was described as one. By reversing these characters, Melville abolishes the existing stereotypes in the nineteenth-century United States and thus shows America’s hypocrisy: belittling a non-white person to a savage, whereas the white man could easily be savage himself.

Democracy developed significantly during the nineteenth century, especially due to the influx of various cultures, even though rights such as voting were reserved for white men. Authority within democracy is a difficult subject, since it involves interaction between leaders and citizens and is mostly based on trust. It can be described as necessary evil: the presence of

authority is necessary since there needs to be some kind of structure within a government, however this authority must be based on trust and consensus. Melville illustrates this idea of necessary evil by characterising Captain Ahab as democratic leader: by gaining the trust of his crew through the means of manipulation, this eventually leads to the Pequod and all its crew being destroyed. This highlights that, in Melville's view, democracy is something vulnerable and sensitive to manipulation. Melville also reflects American society by introducing various characters with cultural and ethnic differences: due to an influx of immigrants, many different cultures lived next to each other. By reversing the role of the white man and the non-white savage, for instance seen in Stubb and Queequeg's characterisations, Melville criticises the existing stereotypes and hypocrisy in America.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to find a connection between Christian symbolism and nineteenth-century America regarding the novel *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville. This research involved both a close reading of *Moby Dick* as well as a literature study regarding religion and society in nineteenth-century America. To achieve the desired results, I formulated the following research question: How does the Christian symbolism found in the novel *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville engage with US society of his time? To answer this, I also formulated some related sub-questions involving Christianity and society in nineteenth-century America as well as an interpretation of *Moby Dick* within these contexts.

The main argument is that Melville uses *Moby Dick* to criticise society, in particular the Christian white man. He criticises society by viewing it as hypocritical and problematic. The first idea that leads to this conclusion is that the Pequod represents America as a nation. This is seen in, for example, the various ethnicities on board of the ship. Another point of interest lies in the idea that Captain Ahab allegorically represents a democratic leader. By doing this, Melville points out that democracy as form of government in the United States should be viewed as vulnerable to manipulation and persuasion. Since voting rights in the mid-nineteenth century remained solely for Christian white men, their behaviour would have been reflected in their governing as well. The main reason why Melville views Christian values as hypocritical and problematic is seen in some instances throughout the novel in which Melville reverses stereotypes. According to Melville, the white Christian men tend to condemn the non-whites as savages, but do not realise that they themselves are in fact the ones behaving like savages. An example of this is seen in the parallel between Stubb and Queequeg. By doing so, Melville not only addresses ethnocultural tensions in American society, but also shows that the country is ruled by hypocritical values held by many Christians.

One of these values is the idea that evil must be destroyed. This is an ongoing theme throughout *Moby Dick* as well, since Captain Ahab views the White Whale as the ultimate evil and wants to hunt it down. Melville shows that this desire to hunt evil eventually does not work, since Captain Ahab meets with his own downfall. However, not only Ahab, but his ship as well as all of his crew except one survivor join Ahab in his downfall. Essentially, Melville shows the hypocrisy within society and politics: their Christian ideal of destroying evil will eventually become their own downfall. This is seen in for example the ethnocultural and political tensions: the inequality of society regarding non-white people.

Taking all of this into consideration, I argue that *Moby Dick* should be read as a criticism on society that is still applicable today. *Moby Dick* is an allegory that uses a fascinating story to show society their hypocrisy and problematic ideas. The link between Christian symbolism and the historical context is found in the idea that Melville finds a connection between certain issues in society and addresses them.

For future researchers I would recommend looking at different aspects of nineteenth-century society. For example, I deliberately left out the influence of capitalism and the Industrial Revolution due to lack of time. However, I believe that these aspects were also of significant influence on *Moby Dick*.

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