
“Ahab’s Hat Was Never Restored”: The Theme of Vanity in *Moby-Dick* with Reference to Ecclesiastes

Shuyang Xu*

Tianjin Foreign Studies University, Tianjin 300203, China

*Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.

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Abstract: As one of the most representative works of Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* is of great magnitude in the history of American literature. Ahab’s paranoid pursuit of the whale forms the pivotal tension of this work, with numerous allusions and references to biblical knowledge and images. The debacle of the whale hunting, heralded by Ahab’s lost hat as an important image, echoes the theme of vanity in the Book of Ecclesiastes, which has barely been discussed in previous studies. This paper, taking the hat of Ahab as a clue, seeks to probe into the theme of vanity in *Moby-Dick* with reference to Ecclesiastes reflected in the null obsession and pursuit, feeble human will and power, and doomed vanity and judgment.

Keywords: *Moby-Dick*; Vanity; Ecclesiastes

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1. Introduction

Called by Melville as a “wicked book” in his famous letter to Hawthorne, *Moby-Dick* makes its remarkable existence in the history of American literature with the epic marine story where temporal order is overturned, human emotions and will are intensified, and nature’s power is made overpowering. According to Harold Broom, “*Moby-Dick* today is, together with *Leaves of Grass* and *Huckleberry Finn*, one of the three candidates for our national epic” ^[1]. An extensive room is left for interpretations in the peculiarity and iconoclasm of this work, deviating from convention. The paranoid pursuit of the white whale Moby Dick as a lifelong career that costs the devotion of body and soul can be taken as a tension lying at the core of this work, together with captain Ahab the pursuer as an unorthodox hero. Rather than a traditional heroic mission driven by a righteous intention to acquire either glory or salvation, the whale-hunting in this work is totally out of the irrepressible rage and hatred pulling the life of all the crews in peril; sharply different from the widely accepted image of a heroic protagonist who upholds the good and stands in awe of

God and fate, Ahab makes his debut as an “ungodly” yet “god-like” man. “Our sympathies go to those he brushes out of the way,” and “mere fact, sober report, would not bear him out” [2]. Possessed with the fanatic irrationality, blasphemous way, and tyrannical authority, he’s repeatedly called as “monomaniac” and “demonic” by the narrator Ishmael; and instead of ending with a cheerful triumph extolled by the folk, the fanatic yet grand pursuit vanishes into oblivion as the whole Pequod perishes in the roaring sea under the attack of the whale. Vivacious as human life and power seem in this mission, an overwhelming sense of vanity sweeps through the work.

Several images are endowed with significance in *Moby-Dick*, among which the hat of Ahab is an inconspicuous yet highly important clue. Ahab seems to always keep the hat on his head however the condition turns. He would “slouch” his hat when he ponders, determines, and persists through ordeals. Implicated in the hat are Ahab’s obsession and self-will. As the hat disappears into the horizon under the claws of the wild hawk, everything carried in it vanishes simultaneously. The theme of vanity, as is manifested in Ahab’s lost hat that’s never restored, can be taken as an allusion to Ecclesiastes of The Holy Bible narrating the nullity of human life. Though devoid of the presence of the leviathan as that in the story of Jonah or Job, the Book of Ecclesiastes well covers the essence of vanity embodied in this doomed defeat. This paper, taking the hat of Ahab as a clue, seeks to probe into the theme of vanity lying beneath the seemingly heroic mission with reference to Ecclesiastes.

2. Null obsession and pursuit

Both the efforts to obtain a goal and the goal itself, common or noble, utilitarian or idealistic, are considered “vanity” or “vexation” in Ecclesiastes. The Pequod can be taken as a ship of unworldly pursuit isolated from the established regulations in the mundane world. Ishmael, rejecting the respectable pecuniary career to earn a decent living, steps on the ship to let the water of the ocean wash out his “growing grim,” seeking the image of “ungraspable phantom of life” despite the trials and tribulations awaiting in the sea life [3]. To the mariner Bulkington, as is depicted by the narrator, all that suits the morality and comfort of the folk on the land causes jeopardy to the ship. What he fanatically pursues is the truth hiding in the raging sea: “Better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety! For worm-like, then, oh! who would craven crawl to land!” [3]; and in his response to Starbuck’s retort of the worthless quest of Moby Dick, Ahab the leading captain, driven by sheer hatred of vengeance, also abhors taking money as the ultimate goal. Yet the ship itself profits from procuring whale oil and the primal need for the crew is to survive. It is ironically a gold doubloon that Ahab uses to genuinely raise the morale of the crews. Though having the latent wish to knock off the hats of the people on the streets to shun the social hierarchy, Ishmael still lies in command of the ones with the “hat” on the ship, as do the other crews. Pecuniary pursuit, as the orientation of life for the folk, is sarcastically identified as the answer to all things in Ecclesiastes. The incompatible goal between survival and ideal nullifies the transcendental pursuit, which in this sense is an “evil travail” where all riches perish.

The most stunning quest that unfolds the whole story is Ahab’s maniac obsession in revenging the whale Moby Dick, which is manifested in the hat he wears. In his solitary deliberation before making an adamant decision to persist in the vengeful pursuit, he wears the “slouched hat” that signifies his struggle and the mania out of rationality. When he tosses the lighted pipe, the few sources of his pleasure, into the sea and lurchingly paces the planks with a

slouched hat, comfort and enjoyment give in to sheer desire for revenge. Rage and hatred thus dominate his pursuit, outweighing any temporal pleasure. Another moment marked by his hat is after a mariner witnesses the “spirit-sprout,” Ahab, trying to grasp the weak possibility of Moby Dick’s presence, is found to sit erectly towards even with the closed eyes, tightly clenched hands, and the unremoved hat with the rain and half-melted sleet of the storm still dripping down ^[3]. The hat he never takes off, even in adverse conditions, signifies his obsessive pursuit at the cost of comfort and company. As is also commented by his observer: “Terrible old man! thought Starbuck with a shudder, sleeping in this gale, still thou steadfastly eyest thy purpose” ^[3].

Ecclesiastes, in confronting the void of life, promotes worldly happiness and laments over the lack of enjoyment: “Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works” ^[4]. Yet Ahab chooses a life of suffering to fulfill his morbid vengeance—a life where even the small pleasure of smoking is deserted, and even without being able to wear the hat in a proper way. A magnificent and transcendental feat as the whaling mission driven by intense hatred is, the ultimate destination is vanity for “Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in any thing that is done under the sun” ^[4]; all the ordeals and obsessions involved to fulfill the mission proves to be null and void as “all things are full of labor” which man cannot utter and “there was no profit under the sun” ^[4]. The essence of worthless pursuit is presciently perceived by Ahab in the chapter “Symphony” at the dawn of the final chase. He comes to the realization that the vengeful life deprived of temporal enjoyment is a “weariness” and questions the meaning of all these sufferings:

“and then, the madness, the frenzy, the boiling blood and the smoking brow, with which, for a thousand lowerings old Ahab has furiously, foamingly chased his prey—more a demon than a man!—aye, aye! what a forty years’ fool—fool—old fool, has old Ahab been! Why this strife of the chase? why weary, and palsy the arm at the oar, and the iron, and the lance? how the richer or better is Ahab now?” ^[3]

Implicit in the pursuit of the whale is “a metaphor for a worthless pursuable goal or for something that is beyond understanding” ^[5].

3. Feeble human will and power

The insurmountable willpower of mankind is well exemplified in Ahab. The very first and briefest description of him is “ungodly” yet “god-like.” Despite the physical deformity and the crucifixion on the face, he maintains the imperious demeanor as a king and God “in all the nameless regal overbearing dignity of some mighty woe” ^[3]. To Ishmael, he is “a king of the sea, and a great lord of Leviathans” ^[3]. The volatile mood, ecstatic passion, morbid obsession, and tyrannical authority exuded in his chase for Moby Dick are a peculiar demonstration of his vivacity; and his blasphemous way in putting himself onto any God is his fearless belief in free will and human power. He paces on the deck with the “half-slouched” hat in determining to make the provoking speech to instigate the morale of the crews to slaughter the whale. With the hat on, he wields the power of God to judge the righteous and the wicked in attributing all his afflictions to the whale and befalling his own judgment on it:

“He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will

wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me. For could the sun do that, then could I do the other..." [3]

The hat he wears here, as an agent of humanity and authority, shows the unconquerable human willfulness against God and fate that Ahab firmly upholds. This overwhelming willpower is also manifested in his never taking the hat off, even in the face of harsh weather. The belief in human power outweighing nature is revealed in his claim that "none but cowards send down their brain-trucks in tempest time" [3] when encountering with the wild wind.

Nevertheless, human will and efforts, according to Ecclesiastes, are unfortunately all vanities in front of the almighty God no matter how vehement or grand they can be. Thus, life's fulfillment comes solely from "the gift of God" and it is necessary to fear God and obey the reigning power of the universe: "For in the multitude of dreams and many words there are also divers vanities: but fear thou God" [4]. This theme resonates with Ahab's blind conviction in self-will. His physical affliction is a sound proof of the repercussions of defying God. "Ahab's search for the whale is like a search of revenge against God as the loss of Ahab's leg is attributed to a previous encounter with the white whale" [5]. And the whole ship eventually lies at the mercy of the wind and the whale, winding up as a "hearse." The heroic fortitude Ahab displays in refusing to take off his hat, confronting the wind, is rendered a negligible struggle as the hat is eventually taken by the hawk. The ultimate contend with Moby Dick, in the same vein, represents the feeble human power. Though Ahab denies Moby Dick as the conqueror, he can do nothing but watch his life waning in the whale just like the hat that can never be restored. The triviality of human power has been perceived early at the moment when "from beneath his slouched hat Ahab dropped a tear into the sea; nor did all the Pacific contain such wealth as that one wee drop" [3]. This hat, concealing the tear, confronting the storm and wind, taken by the wild hawk and never restored, is an incarnation of human's incorrigible frailty. Unconquerable as Ahab's determination is to chase and avenge the whale with his God-like bearing, in no way can he truly surpass the power of God and fate. As is emphasized in Ecclesiastes, it is God who possesses the power to "judge the righteous and the wicked," for "there is a time there for every purpose and for every work" [4].

4. Doomed vanity and judgment

A vast sense of the emptiness of life prevails through the Book of Ecclesiastes, commencing from the prologue "vanity of vanities; all is vanity" [4]. The life and labors of the mortals are of meager significance as "all go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again" [4]. And all pursuits, including the quest for knowledge and wisdom mentioned in the volume, are but chasing the wind. The pursuit of the whale, in this sense, is tantamount to the pursuit of wind that's unattainable and meaningless, for "what profit hath he that hath labored for the wind?" [4]. Though Ahab implements his fervid hatred and obsessional chase throughout the mission, several epiphanies of life's vacuity dawn on him. He utters to himself on beholding the sounding-board made from coffin: "how immaterial are all materials! What things real are there, but imponderable thoughts? Here now's the very dreaded symbol of grim death, by a mere hap, made the expressive sign of the help and hope of most endangered life" [3]. He thus resorts to a monomaniac mind with the topmost "woe" and "grief" to deal with the vanity of life. And Moby Dick the very source of his animosity constructs also the very meaning of the meaningless life which proves to be fruitless as Ahab gives up the spear and sees his end. All the firmest fortitude and insurmountable willfulness, just like the hat he tries

so hard to keep as a token for his strength, fade into obscurity, just like the disappeared hat taken by the hawk that is never restored. The futile quest well demonstrates that human labor taken under the sun yields no profit ^[4].

The determinism of human fate is also reflected in the fall of Ahab, which can be taken as the final judgment of God. The heralding seed has been planted in the name “Ahab” resembling the Israeli king who was judged by God for his “wickedness” to defy God. The oracle to bring evil on him, take away his prosperity and that “him that dieth of Ahab in the city the dogs shall eat; and him that dieth in the field shall the fowls of the air eat” ^[4] foretells the fate of Ahab and his crews as the retribution of his blasphemy. The wild hawk taking his hat and the whale as his ultimate pursuit are tokens of God’s power in portending Ahab’s doomed fate. The former, as the envoy of God, is a sign of the following deteriorating development. And the latter can be juxtaposed with the leviathan sent by God in the Book of Job. As the “red-billed savage sea-hawk” that goes eddying round Ahab darts away with the hat he tries to keep regardless of the conditions, the ominous omen is sent on the ship. Its disappearance into the sea, together with the hat, is a prophecy of his predestined death in the sea, sealing his doomed defeat. For the whale as the agent of God, in response to God’s taunting question, “Canst thou draw out Leviathan with a hook?” ^[4] Ahab, rather than humbling himself before God as Job, unleashes all his malevolence on the whale till his last breath:

“Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell’s heart I stab at thee; for hate’s sake I spit my last breath at thee. Sink all coffins and all hearses to one common pool! and since neither can be mine, let me then tow to pieces, while still chasing thee, though tied to thee, thou damned whale!” ^[3]

Yet he culminates in an adverse way as Job is killed by the whale. The ultimate debacle confirms God’s sovereignty and that all his valiant efforts in contending fate are but vain and futile struggles, just like his irretrievable hat taken by the hawk. The doomed fall again echoes what is emphasized in Ecclesiastes: “For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity” ^[4].

5. Conclusion

In *Moby-Dick*, Melville weaves a magnificent tragedy in the portrayal of the hero, combining both God-like and Satanic features, the epic mission to confront the leviathan, and the insurmountable human will against fate. The profound influence of Ecclesiastes is left on the theme and reaches its pinnacle at the ultimate fall of the pursuit. Proclaiming the decision to slaughter the whale at any cost with his slouched hat, Ahab chooses the life of woe to materialize his revenge, and he refuses to take the hat off despite the storms and winds to withhold his will against nature. Still, all his attempts are nullified as God’s power, represented by the hawk and the whale, wipes out the existence of both his hat and his life. Though the pursuit, resonating with Ecclesiastes, proves to be an agonizing defeat between human and fate, and the providence of God to “bring every work into judgment” cannot be known by mortals, the work is still an enlightening hymn for the great fortitude displayed in the doomed mission to confront the vanity of life.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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