



Ahab and Abraham; Whales and Sons

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Abstract: This paper examines the similarities between the philosophical work of Søren Kierkegaard as well as the philosophy found in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. Specifically, Ahab, one of the main figures in Melville's work, and Abraham, the Biblical subject of Kierkegaard's teleology-based religious philosophy will be compared, and similarities between the two will expatiated upon, especially in the context of ethics. First, a brief exegesis of Kierkegaard's ethical philosophy will be offered, followed by an explanation of why Ahab lives by a Kierkegaardian mode of morality. Finally, Ahab's peculiarity, evidenced by a range of diverse and often contradictory scholarly work, will be discussed and explained. In examining Ahab through the lens of Kierkegaard's philosophy, it is the goal of this paper to reach a broader and more complete understanding of the enigmatic and often vexatious Captain Ahab, and therefore Melville's seminal novel as a whole.

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Separated more by space than by time or breadth of idea, Herman Melville and Søren Kierkegaard worked on opposite ends of the earth. It was the brilliance of both, and their addition to the philosophic, literary, and artistic consciousness of their own and subsequent generations that made them stand out among their age. Though the men grew up in vastly different circumstances and locations, the metaphysical, ethical, and epistemological parallels between them can be seen throughout their bodies of work, most clearly in Melville's landmark *Moby Dick*, and Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (written under the penname Johannes *de silentio*).

The prevailing impact of both author/philosophers is nearly unrivaled, both in America and on the continent. Sans Kierkegaard's philosophy and theologies it could be doubted whether the world would have subsequently been host to Husserl, Heidegger, the existential movement, or the postmodernists. And without Melville, specifically his American masterpiece *Moby Dick*, many of the last century's artistic and literary creations, which were so clearly influenced by the novel, could easily be thought to vanish or change past recognition.

At the heart of *Moby Dick* and *Fear and Trembling*, there exists two men, like Melville and Kierkegaard themselves, who are prominent to the point of inextricability from all subsequent art and culture. Abraham and Ahab, the central figures to both creators, exist as puzzles and symbols of faith, knowledge, and the world which they inhabit. To understand either of these men and the motives that drive them would be to comprehend the esoteric nature of the philosophies proposed by Kierkegaard and Melville.

The desperate disquietude of both, and their respective teleologies, embodies the beliefs of the artists who wrote about them and the core of their work. They both are made to struggle in the world, thrown into circumstances that require great sacrifice. Both Abraham and Ahab become "knights of faith," the term coined by Kierkegaard to describe those who, unlike the "tragic hero," largely cannot be understood and exist in the highest stage of life, transcending the sphere of the ethical.ⁱ

To attempt an understanding of their teleologies, Kierkegaard's description of the knight of faith must be understood. To explain this knight, Kierkegaard uses the Biblical story of Abraham. Abraham, called on by a powerful Old Testament God, was summoned to take his son, Isaac, to the Mount Moriah to kill him.ⁱⁱ As Genesis 22.1 has it, "...God did tempt Abraham, and

said unto him... Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering.”ⁱⁱⁱ

So Kierkegaard begins his theologically founded philosophies. He takes Abraham to be one of few great men who has to act according to paradox; according to the whim of a God who seemed to be acting unjustly. Kierkegaard explains the catalyst for Abraham following through with the action (of course Isaac is spared at the last minute, but Abraham *was* wielding the knife at the moment of intervention via *deus ex machina*) by explaining Abraham as being a man of faith. He writes, “Abraham had faith and did not doubt. He believed the ridiculous.”^{iv}

With this faith in the “absurd,” or “ridiculous,” Abraham exists at the top of Kierkegaard’s three tiered “stages of life” scale.^v Kierkegaard constructs the scale by beginning with the aesthetic, which consists of strictly temporal pleasures, then the ethical, or universal (of which Ishmael, Queequeg and the other characters of *Moby Dick* belong), and finally the “Religious.”^{vi}

Abraham’s post at the top of Kierkegaard’s stages of life makes him inexplicable to most people. It is his full investiture in faith that confuses us and separates him from the rest of humanity. It is astonishing that anyone could willingly take their only son to the summit of a faraway mountain and execute him based on an order from what can only be presumed to be God. Surely Abraham’s quest, like Ahab’s (which will be further examined) was not easy. As Melville himself notes, “...if we obey God, we must disobey ourselves, and it is in this disobeying ourselves, wherein the hardness of obeying God consists.”^{vii} However, Abraham’s quest was given, so he had to put his faith to work; faith in paradox and the absurd. It was this faith that became his teleology, and it was his teleology that allowed for his suspension of the ethical. Abraham moved beyond his normative duty to not murder his son and entered into the realm of paradox. As Jung E. Lee notes, Kierkegaard, through Abraham, “...seems to embrace, at least implicitly, a form of life which lies beyond the pale of ethical comprehension...”^{viii}

With this goal-based suspension of the ethical in mind, and maybe more importantly the incomprehensible nature of the religious stage of life, enters Ahab. Possibly best described by Captain Peleg at the beginning of the novel as a, “...queer man, Captain Ahab... He’s a grand, ungodly, god-like man... Ahab’s above the common; Ahab’s been in colleges, as well as ‘mong the cannibals; been used to deeper wonders than the waves; fixed his fiery lance in mightier, stranger foes than whales... *he’s Ahab.*”^{ix}

It is with this enigmatic peculiarity that we can categorize Ahab. Only through contradiction and speculation can we come close to understanding him as a character. However we must understand him, for at the bottom of Melville’s journey, Ahab exists as the lifeblood and heart. He is the hero, though not of the generic variety. Ahab is, like Abraham, Kierkegaard’s sort of hero. He defiles himself (and his crew for that matter) for his teleology, unforgettably represented in the white whale. He is, as one scholar puts it, “...rebellious to the bourgeois world, alienated from the comforts of traditional faith, pitting himself against all obstacles to reach and rife the secrets of the Infinite and Absolute.”^x

It is clear that Ahab, when carefully read, can be seen to transcend the ethical, transcend the rest of his crew, and sometimes he can even transcend the conscience of the reader (*Moby Dick*’s popularity did not occur until well after its publication). Ahab is a lone individual, pressed on by the demands of a quest that no one else shares and moreover, no one understands, leading one to think that Ahab’s obsession with the white whale is an externalized feature of an internal insanity. But like Kierkegaard, Melville points out, “...man’s insanity is heaven’s sense; and

wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God.”^{xi}

Due to his oddity and the singularity of his abstract quest, Ahab has been interpreted by many in a number of different ways. Of this historical attempt at identification, Woodson writes, “Various writers have accused Ahab of embodying the dark Puritan hatred of nature, the nineteenth-century capitalist greed for forceful acquisition, and even the insane persuasiveness of a twentieth-century dictator.”^{xii} The fact that that someone who, with singular devotion to his *telos*, might be received in diverse and even divergent ways is no surprise. Certainly Isaac might have felt feelings of confusion (to say the least) when his father held the knife over him on the Mount Moriah, unknowingly cast in a theological demonstration that nearly led to his death.

Without regard for the white whale’s command over Ahab that necessitated his seemingly insane behavior, Stubb, Starbuck, Queequeg, our stalwart narrator, and the rest of the *Pequod*’s devoted crew might easily be seen as hopeless Isaacs, caught in the midst of a teleological quest of another man, the force of which was beyond their comprehension. Again Woodson explains our captain as being, “Such a figure [who] calls forth ethical judgments, most often unfavorable ones.”^{xiii} Ahab, however, is operating in a system that forces him to necessarily suspend the ethical. “In his action he overstepped the ethical altogether, and had a higher *telos* outside it, in relation to which he suspended it.”^{xiv} It was within this category that Ahab led his crew to their demise (excluding Ishmael of course), under the auspices of a higher stage of life.

Interestingly, there have been other approaches to classifying Ahab’s role in the novel, including him being typified as the classical hero. For instance, Edward Rosenberry interprets Ahab’s singularity and devotion to the hunt of the white whale. He categorizes the *Pequod*’s leader by writing that he, “...fulfills the classical role of the tragic hero as precisely as if Aristotle, substituting the ocean and the deck for his accustomed stage, had dictated the terms.”^{xv}

Rosenberry might be right, but he is a peculiar sort of tragic hero if Ahab is one at all. We weep for the tragic hero. The tragic hero becomes clear to us. The tragic hero spills his own blood for the innocent, so that they may continue to serve righteousness. To Kierkegaard, “The tragic hero gives up what is certain for what is still more certain, and the eye of the beholder rests confidently upon him. But the person who gives up the universal to grasp something still higher...what does he do?”^{xvi} What Ahab did seemed to be quite opposite what the tragic hero does; Ahab caused the death of nearly an entire crew on his ship for the purpose of hunting a single whale.

A character like Jephthah, the Old Testament warrior of the Israelite clan, who sacrificed his precious daughters to protect his tribe, belongs on Aristotle’s stage, but not Ahab. We can weep for Jephthah and we can see that if we traded places with him, we might have done the same, forcing most of us into the role of tragic hero. The fact that he gave up something so that he and others could gain much more is a logical, reasonable choice. Its reasonableness allows us to commiserate with Jephthah; we weep for him and understand him because we understand his eternal plight.

But we do not weep for Ahab. We cannot weep for him; his end, his *telos*, is such that it exists beyond what we can know. Ahab seems bizarre and even frightful to us. Even Melville does not allow the reader to get in the mind of Ahab; certainly Ishmael does not know or understand him. Ahab himself notes his isolation late in the novel, “...for forty years has Ahab forsaken the peaceful land, for forty years to make war on the horrors of the deep!...when I think of this life I have led; the desolation of solitude it has been; the masoned, walled-town of a

Captain's exclusiveness, which admits but small entrance to any sympathy...oh, weariness! Heaviness!"^{xvii} So we are left only with postulation about those dark motives and wills that drive the man, the monomania behind the *Pequod's* journey. And this is where Rosenberry may have been mistaken. To categorize Ahab as the tragic hero would be to misunderstand the role of the tragic hero, misunderstand Ahab, or trivialize both. Ahab exists as our knight of faith and we weep not for him.

Our weeping, however, (or lack thereof) does not explain why Ahab exists in the third stage of life: the religious. Unlike Abraham, Ahab is not a deeply religious man. As far as the reader knows, he was not spoken to directly by God and given an order to chase the white whale. But he certainly felt a sort of cosmic draw to chase Moby Dick, whether that was destiny or not possibly he didn't even know. However during the chase, on the second day, he cries, "Ahab is forever Ahab, man. This whole act's immutably decreed. 'Twas rehearsed by thee and me a billion years before this ocean rolled, Fool! I am the Fates' lieutenant; I act under orders."^{xviii} So while Ahab was sure that his *telos* was at least on some level out of his control, the white whale was not specifically a theological goal as was Abraham's. For Ahab, the drive was knowledge and truth. The drive was the attainment of what he did not have and worse, never could. No man could have Moby Dick. The drive was mysticism; God and nothingness and everything at the same time. If the whole of *Moby Dick* is an allegory in explaining metaphysics and epistemology, then Ahab is the agent who seeks such universal explanations.

It could be argued that it was Ishmael who was the one who sought these higher truths and new levels of understanding, but Ishmael seems rather content to define life in the categorical manner from which Ahab seemed to be escaping, as seen in the chapter on cetology. As J.A. Ward notes, "...the cetological chapters give the illusion of objectivity and the effect of a wide view of life."^{xix} Of course they are written with clear sarcasm, but when juxtaposed against the drive and monomania of Ahab for some deeper truths than just the "illusion of objectivity," they serve their purpose well; the chapters highlight the nature of Ahab's quest and a fact about his epistemology: "...he is scornful of empirical science, which he associates with the land, the known side of reality : the knowledge that science gives is only the surface of things; the deep inner nature of reality lies beyond its power."^{xx} However, typical of that nineteenth century drive to know the world, prompted by new science and driven by the prospect of codifying objective and subjective truths, Ahab searches (both literally and figuratively) around the globe in search of that white beacon of knowledge that may provide answers.

In this way the white whale is akin to the Cartesian Cogito, it could be that unknown point of origin, that foundation on which it may have been possible to explain those eternal puzzles of life, ranging from the soul to the firmament. From the catalyst of a search for truth, Ahab launches his crusade to find the white whale. Elmer Stoll notes the noble nature of such a search. He writes, "The captain's resolve to take it upon himself to seek out and annihilate the source of the malignity, is godlike, for it represents human effort in its highest reach."^{xxi}

It seems that Ahab's search is meant to achieve some sort of explanation of the world that works; a system of knowledge and epistemology that covers all aspects of human life. Much of *Moby Dick* acts as a backlash to the empirical modes of thinking that dominated the Enlightenment, and it was a priority of Melville to show the shortcomings of objective truths. Ahab sums up his hatred by expressing his disdain for the tools and apparatuses that are so characteristic of scientific thought by saying, "Foolish toy! Babies' plaything of haughty Admirals, and Commodores, and Captains; the world brags of thee, of thy cunning and might; but what after all canst thou do, but tell the poor, pitiful point, where thou thyself happenest to be

on this wide planet...^{xxii} Ahab goes on to criticize science on a more broad scale: “Science! Curse thee, thou vain toy, and cursed be all the things that cast man’s eyes aloft to that heaven, whose live vividness but scorches him, as these old eyes are even now scorched with thy light...”^{xxiii} Ishmael might warn us, “Look not too long in the face of the fire, O man! Never dream with thy had on the helm!” but Ahab does just the opposite.^{xxiv} Ahab, both figuratively and literally, turns his “...back on the compass...”^{xxv} It seems that “the fire” is the only place that Ahab looks.

Kierkegaard also noted science and empiricism’s lack of ability in explaining the world and this can partly explain his exaltation of Abraham. Of objectivity, Kierkegaard writes, “The objective truth as such does not at all decide that the one stating it is sensible; on the contrary, it can even betray that the man is lunatic, although what he says is entirely true and especially objectively true.”^{xxvi} Instead, for Kierkegaard (and Ahab), passion and subjective truths are tantamount to objectivity and complacency. Thus Ahab represents a divergence from modernity and becomes the passionate figure that is so unlike the dull reasonability of the public. Gleim writes that Melville’s “...purpose was to convey ideas, without definite expression; to present the great enigma of life, in an enigmatic manner, and to emphasize the mystery of the ineffable mysteries.”^{xxvii} Ahab is at the center of this economy of ideas and strays far from those of his colleagues. As Kierkegaard notes, Ahab is living in, “the present age,” which is, “...essentially a sensible age, devoid of passion, [that] has nullified the principle of contradiction.”^{xxviii}

Ahab exists outside the world of public “leveling,” as Kierkegaard phrases it; he turns his back on the reason and searches for truth on another plane. Ahab, “...dies a lonely death on lonely life” because he feels his, “...topmost greatness...in [his] topmost grief...”^{xxix} Ahab’s journey, one that would prove to be his demise, places him in a special class that is also home to the passionate believers like Abraham. His journey was driven by near (if not complete) fixation on his teleology and the product was his own death. However, living without passion, without complete commitment to one’s own teleology, would be, to Kierkegaard (and Ahab and Abraham) impossible. It was this internal passion and quest that elevated Ahab into the role of the knight of faith. Instead of being governed by the voice of God, he was sent on a quest through his own desire for knowledge, in an age of empirical and objective conformity.

Melville’s tale, therefore, becomes not an ethical stipulation. It is not normative. *Moby Dick* does not apply to commonplace moralities, nor does Abraham. Ahab operates outside this realm paradoxically in an age of reason and leveling. But Melville has seen it, and so has Kierkegaard. Those scholars that have so poorly categorized Ahab’s quest have certainly not. The point of the novel, if there is one at all, demands an honest answer from every reader: “Hast thee seen the white whale?”^{xxx}

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- ⁱ Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (New York: Penguin Group, 1985), 15-32.
- ⁱⁱ Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (New York: Penguin Group, 1985), 8.
- ⁱⁱⁱ The Holy Bible: King James Version (New York: Harper, 1983), 25.
- ^{iv} Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (New York: Penguin Group, 1985), 54.
- ^v Ibid.
- ^{vi} Ibid., 61-72.
- ^{vii} Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (New York: Penguin Group, 1998), 40.
- ^{viii} Lee Jung, "Abraham in a Different Voice: Rereading "Fear and Trembling" with Care," *Religious Studies* 36, no. 4 (2000): 379.
- ^{ix} Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (New York: Penguin Group, 1998), 88.
- ^x Thomas Woodson, "Ahab's Greatness: Prometheus as Narcissus," *ELH* 33, no. 3 (1966): 354.
- ^{xi} Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (New York: Penguin Group, 1998), 454.
- ^{xii} Thomas Woodson, "Ahab's Greatness: Prometheus as Narcissus," *ELH* 33, no. 3 (1966): 351.
- ^{xiii} Ibid., 352.
- ^{xiv} Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (New York: Penguin Group, 1985), 88.
- ^{xv} Edward H. Rosenberry, "Moby Dick: Epic Romance," *College Literature* 2, no. 3 (1975): 59.
- ^{xvi} Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (New York: Penguin Group, 1985), 89.
- ^{xvii} Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (New York: Penguin Group, 1998), 591.
- ^{xviii} Ibid., 611.
- ^{xix} J.A. Ward, "The Function of the Cetological Chapters in Moby-Dick," *American Literature* 28, no. 2 (May 1956): 178.
- ^{xx} Ibid., 179.
- ^{xxi} Elmer E. Stoll, "Symbolism in Moby Dick," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12, no. 3 (1951): 448.
- ^{xxii} Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (New York: Penguin Group, 1998), 544.
- ^{xxiii} Ibid.
- ^{xxiv} Ibid., 464.
- ^{xxv} Ibid.
- ^{xxvi} Soren Kierkegaard, "The Present Age," in *Nineteenth-Century Philosophy*, eds. Forrest E. Baird and Walter Kaufmann (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2003), 307.
- ^{xxvii} William S. Gleim, "A Theory of Moby Dick," *The New England Quarterly*, 2, no. 3 (1929): 402.
- ^{xxviii} Soren Kierkegaard, "The Present Age," in *Nineteenth-Century Philosophy*, eds. Forrest E. Baird and Walter Kaufmann (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2003), 300.
- ^{xxix} Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (New York: Penguin Group, 1998), 622.
- ^{xxx} Ibid., 476.