

# Faustian Myth in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I am going to explore Faustian Myth in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) which is an outstanding work of American Renaissance and Romanticism. This novel is about an irrevocable quest of Ahab, captain of the whaler *Pequod*, to seek revenge on Moby Dick, a whale which has destroyed his ship on his previous voyage that severed his leg from the knee. Here, in this paper I am not relating Faust's story to this novel in a traditional way by talking about devil, pact and damnation but regarding this novel Faustian by the characteristics that it shares with the character of Faust by examining its boundless aspirations, its expansionism, its identification of knowledge with power, its attempt to subdue nature, its yearning for control over its own destiny.

Herman Melville (1819-1891) was an American writer most famous for his novel *Moby Dick* although the fame from the novel came posthumously. Melville did experience fame in his lifetime from *Typee*, however, although in typical United States fashion, he first had to get the travelogue published overseas in London in 1846 before receiving wide acclaim stateside a year later for the sensational account of a tribe attributed to acts of cannibalism that had to be billed as a novel because few believed the truthfulness of his narrative. His books written directly after *Typee* were initially released by his publishers with the intent of drawing as much popular acclaim but soon it was discovered that Herman Melville was not out to titillate the masses with exoticisms but had some depth in his questioning of human existence. The excitement over Melville as a man may be held responsible for sometimes excessive praise of his writing, for the elaboration of awful but often improbable "hidden meanings" and for the amusing contradictory opinions among enthusiastic critics. To Lewis Mumford, for instance, Melville is always a conscious artist; to Van Wyck Brooks he is an unconscious artist. To M. Josephson, Melville is an escape writer; to Mumford he is a realist in the deeper sense.

Melville's principal concern in all his novels are "a concern with the problem of self discovery and self realization". In *Moby Dick*, the voyage is, literally or metaphorically, one into "landlessness". the whaler *Pequod's* voyage into landlessness is Melville's version of the Romantic transformation of the Faustian ethos. This novel is a Faustian venture in its epic ambitiousness, thus represents Melville's efforts to understand some deeper spiritual truths. Melville's interest was to sought the new world, that is the world of mind. The Faustian mind aimed at knowledge of and, through knowledge, at benefit from or mastery over the forces it perceived. Faustian space symbolized the soul's claim to dominance over what is "other".

In *Moby Dick* Melville confronts this collapse of Faustian space and its consequences. The experience of space is the

central factor in *Moby Dick*. At first Ishmael voices the traditional Faustian yearning for "limitless space": " I am tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote." In order to satisfy this yearning, he has repeatedly shipped as a merchant sailor(p. 15). His now opting for a whaling voyage will lead to a very different experience, although his early remarks reveal a duality of purpose consonant with traditional Faustian aspirations: he wants to experience not only the sea, which in the symbolic world of *Moby Dick* is the mirror of the self, but also alien worlds beyond the sea, that is, the truly "other". this journey of *Pequod* bears out this landlessness, this failure to encounter "otherness". The voyage becomes an experience of the void that leads to a heightened experience of the self. Here, Ahab like Faust suffers boundless solitude. Ishmael also suffers this despair and isolation. this is a voyage towards self where characters face ultimate truth that is the realization of self. The real object of Faustian quest is self in all its mysterious complexity. in this way, this novel is a product of the mind which has turned its attention from chaos and confusion towards the contemplation of mind. this voyage is an endeavor to see more clearly into the mystery of the self, but this endeavor being in vain, the mystery looms for ever unresolved. the confrontation with the whale most clearly reveals the problems facing Faustian man. The whale as symbol brings us closer to the Faustian quest in its romantic stage than the whale as objective reality: what is sought after is no longer knowledge of the "other" but knowledge of the self. Ishmael's interpretation in "The whiteness of the Whale" is the least definitional of all, and it is for that reason symbolically the truest: more than anyone else Ishmael hints at the insoluble ambiguities the endless mysteries suggested by the whale, whose color serves to reinforce his role as "phantom" and "idea", since whiteness" in its profoundest idealized significance... calls up a peculiar apparition to the soul" (p 166).

*Moby Dick* demonstrates that when the "not me" becomes a mystery inaccessible to the mind and thus, in effect, a void, the "me" becomes a mystery insusceptible to definition. Ahab, who does not know whether the whale is "agent" or "principal", inscrutable mask or inscrutable essence (p 140) , has the same questions concerning the whale's counterpart, himself: "Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm?" (p 445). Ahab's plight is prefigured in his fantasy of the artificial man that he wants the blacksmith to forge. He does not want him to have "eyes to see outwards," but instead "a skylight on top of his head to illuminate inwards"; within, however, there is only a void, since the artificial man, though endowed with a "chest modeled after the Thames tunnel, " will have "no heart at all" (p 390). In reference to the lack of progress into knowledge characterizing his quest, Ahab claims that " we are turned round and round in this world" (p 445). The loss of "otherness" entails a reduction of the Faustian quest to an endless solipsistic circle from which there is no escape into something even resembling an absolute.

Ishmael's emancipation from traditional Faustianism is incomplete so long as he has not transcended what Kierkegaard considered man's self-defeating desire "to lay hold of something so really fixed it can exclude all dialectics, so long, that is, as he even desires a "final" answer. As a participant in the action of the novel, Ishmael shares with Ahab, Bulkington, and the others the dilemma inherent in the pursuit of an aim fatally beyond human reach. But Ishmael dives but is not annihilated. He survives to become the narrator of the action he participated in, and it is as narrator that he best exemplifies the essence of Romantic Faustianism, the recognition that "the goal of the journey of life is the experience of the journey itself." Ishmael never gets any answer from this circular quest:

Round the world! There is much in that sound to inspire proud feelings; but whereto does all that circumnavigation conduct? Only through numberless perils to the very point whence we started ... Were this world an endless plain, and by sailing eastward we could forever reach new distances, and discover sights more sweet and strange than any Cyclades or Islands of King Solomon, then there were promise in the voyage. But in pursuit of those for mysteries we dream of, or in tormented chase of that demon phantom that, some time or other, swims before all human hearts; while chasing such over this round globe, they either lead us on his barren mazes of midway leave us whelmed. (p 204).

There are two types of Ishmael's character in the novel. In Walter E. Bezanson's words, "the first Ishmael is the enfolding sensibility of the novel, the hand that writes the tale, the imagination through which all imagination of the book pass. He is the narrator... The second Ishmael is not the narrator, not the informing presence, but is the young man of whom, among others, narrator Ishmael tells us in his story... This is forecastle Ishmael or the younger Ishmael of 'some years ago'. Narrator Ishmael, moreover, is concerned with both narrative and narration. When focusing on narrative, he tries imaginatively to recapture the moods and hopes and perceptions of forecastle Ishmael and his companions; his narrative deals with the then, with an experience already completed. When focusing on narration, Ishmael's concern is with the now- with his ongoing

endeavor to put into words what happened then. The now, representing an experience not yet completed, puts its stamp upon the books as emphatically as the then: novel "is always in process and in all but the most literal sense remains unfinished. For the good reader the experience of the novel is participation in the act of creation. Authorial Ishmael's endeavor to give form and tentative meaning to his journey in the Pequod resulted in a book that is as much about the experience of writing a book as about the experience recalled in the book. And in a sense, the writing turned out to be as frustrating as the journey: both experiences fail to provide answers to the questions they evoke. The difference consists in Ishmael's responses to these failures; and his responses reveal different Faustian selves.

In its demonstration of the failure of traditional Faustianism, the novel is a deeply pessimistic book: all the aspirations of the captain and crew, whether other directed or inner directed, meet with frustration or disaster. In this way, this novel explores Faustian quest.

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