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Ahab's Soul: An Exploration of the Hero of Moby-Dick

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Ahab's Soul: An Exploration of the Hero of *Moby-Dick*

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, first published in 1851, represents one of the greatest American novels, even though its modern critical acclaim fails match its initial reception. Melville's novel influences thousands of readers, both academic and casual, making it one of the most well read and well-known novels ever written. A great deal of the fame and critical acclaim for *Moby-Dick* relied on the protagonist of the book, Captain Ahab. Captain Ahab's very compelling character draws the audience into his world with a stunning tale and a shocking character design. Captain Ahab's character undoubtedly forms the strongest driving force in the novel itself: his strong will and desire drives the whaling ship *Pequod* in its never-ending quest, his severe isolation creates a separation between the crew and their captain, and his intense monomania create the conflict and, ultimately, the resolution for the tale. *Captain Ahab, the protagonist of Moby-Dick, possesses compelling character traits that lend themselves to analysis and exploration, highlighting his willfulness, isolationism, and monomania.*

Strength of Will and Purpose

Captain Ahab, from the moment he is introduced, imposes his character and will upon the members of the *Pequod*. When Ishmael, the narrator of *Moby-Dick*, remarks to Captain Peleg on the strange and accursed nature of Ahab's name, the captain responds, "'Come hither to me—hither, hither,' said Peleg, with a significance in his eye that almost startled me. 'Look ye, lad; never say that on board the *Pequod*'". The enormity of the captain of the *Pequod*'s will and presence cause even a part-owner of the ship to whisper in fear. He even urges that Ishmael "never say it anywhere", implying that such a slight against Ahab could summon or manifest a terrible punishment from thin air (78). His will acts as a driving force behind the quest of the ship and her crew, driving them ever forward. Henry Myers states that (quote) "Starbuck and the

whalers are close enough to Ahab in spirit to be carried away at first by his wild will; it is not too mad to attract them, and when their own wills weaken, it keeps them true to his fixed course” (end quote). Myers points out that Ahab’s purpose is so indomitable, unstoppable, and overbearing that not even the whole crew of the *Pequod* could resist him, despite some of the wiser heads attempting to do so.

Ahab’s strength of will not only allows him to exert power over others, but also empowers him to continue his fight towards his purpose beyond what a normal man might be able to accomplish. Kenneth Lash writes, (quote) “Ahab's [ability to withstand and to fight the forked injustices of this world is] great and ever present. He will uphold man's stature in the teeth of anything and everything; he will somehow hunt down and outrage the outrageous, be it agent or god” (end quote) (442). The text of *Moby-Dick* backs up this statement. In Chapter 130, knowing he nears the end of his quest, Ahab stands half-in, half-out of his cabin, engaging in a staring contest with his Parsee seer, Fedallah. He does this, barely moving, barely eating, for days: (quote)“his whole life was now become one watch on deck... for longest hours, without a single hail, they stood far parted in the starlight; Ahab in his scuttle, the Parsee by the mainmast; but still fixedly gazing upon each other; as if in the Parsee Ahab saw his fore thrown shadow, in Ahab the Parsee his abandoned substance”(end quote) (Melville 401). In this description, along with countless others in the narrative itself, Melville conveys Ahab’s sense of strength and purpose. With his singular purpose of destroying the White Whale, (list) food, drink, and rest fall by the wayside. Even in his final moments, Ahab willingly throws everything to the wind in his dastardly quest. In the final paragraphs of the final chapter, Captain Ahab relentlessly attacks *Moby-Dick*, ignoring the warnings of his levelheaded first mate, Starbuck. Ahab finally spears

the whale but instantly falls to the power of the colorless Cetacean colossus. The White Whale then destroys the *Pequod* and drowns all her crew, all for the wrath of Captain Ahab (426-427).

Intentional Isolation

Captain Ahab not only possesses a character of strong will, but also a character of intense and intentional isolation. In an article entitled “Lonely Individualism in *Moby-Dick*”, Yoshiaki Furui points out that Ahab subjects himself to what the author calls (quote) “lonely individualism” (end quote) (Furui 600). Ahab’s individualism does not indicate a spirit of solitude, but rather loneliness. The importance of the distinction there rests solely on the emotional connotation of the words. The former can have positive connotations, but the latter feels purely negative. Loneliness, as Furui points out, entails a lack of proper human interaction and a desire to attain proper human interaction (Furui 601). Another researcher, Filip Cesar, identifies one of the biggest aspects of Ahab’s characters, saying (quote) “[Ahab’s] reclusiveness, solitude [,] isolation... [and] the central emptiness, the nothingness which looms behind the veil can only come to the fore through him and his pursuit” (end quote) (Cesar 64). Cesar simply points out that isolation and solitude constitute two of Ahab’s main characteristics. Susan McWilliams also points out that Ahab’s main characteristics include isolation: (quote) “Ahab’s most definitive characteristics [are] his isolation and his desire for domination” (end quote) (236). McWilliams comments on the nature of Ahab’s isolation, saying, (quote) “the extent of Ahab’s isolation is striking” (end quote) (239). Some connections, however, do bind Captain Ahab to others in his life.

Ahab’s connection with *Moby Dick* presents a break from the captain’s previous isolationism. The narrator reveals *Moby Dick* travels alone and without any pod, abnormal behavior for a social creature like the sperm whale. In the same way, Ahab isolates himself away

from the crew, abnormal behavior for a human, dependent on social structure. Furui argues that (quote) “Moby Dick swims the sea in its self-sufficiency without heeding the existence of the captain madly seeking it” (end quote) (608). Even after his moment of fury and power over the crew in Chapter 36, in which Ahab riles up the crew and swears them to destroy the White Whale, the narrator describes Ahab, alone in his cabin in the chapter immediately following (Melville 141-142). This leaves the audience wondering why Ahab clings to isolation and how, in a career that requires teamwork and coordination, he manages to separate himself so thoroughly.

If Ahab’s opportunities to interact and communicate with his crew abound, it becomes painfully obvious to the audience that he must be doing it on purpose. Furui shows that “Moby-Dick...binds maritime life within modern communication networks, wherein the characters find themselves tied to each other via various literal and metaphoric lines” (606). Furui makes the point that Melville includes the knowledge of communication purposefully and makes it vitally important to understanding how Ahab’s isolation must be on purpose. Furui calls this form of isolation (quote) “networked solitude” (end quote), by which he means that his isolation self-imposed and not a result of technological hurdles or situational isolation. Ahab (quote) “spends solitary time in his cabin poring over the chart and inscribing lines that foster an imaginary connection with the whale” (end quote), indicating that his desire is not to connect with his crew (606).

Discovering the reason behind Ahab’s isolation answers only the first question, however. The reason for Ahab’s peculiar and extensive isolation remains to be discovered. Furui indicates that it embodies American Individualism (600). Cesar’s argues that Ahab acts as a Gothic hero and his isolation becomes a necessary part of that reading (3). McWilliams postulates that

Ahab's isolation exemplifies the contemporary American zeitgeist (237). However, these interpretations overlook crucial textual evidence for the reasoning behind Ahab's complete isolation: his inability to connect or have relationships with normal humans. One of the most touching moments of the novel arrives with Ahab's conversation with the stalwart Starbuck near the end of the tale. As the two stand near the side of the ship looking out at the glorious day, Starbuck approaches Ahab and makes a plea to his heart to turn back. Ahab admits that he himself would listen to his own heart to return home to his wife. He says, (quote) "away, whole oceans away, from that young girl-wife I wedded past fifty, and sailed for Cape Horn the next day, leaving but one dent in my marriage pillow—wife? wife?—rather a widow with her husband alive!" (end quote) (Melville 405). Melville emphasizes a crucial moment here in that Ahab left his wife alone for years without ever once attending to her or their child. Crucially, Ahab persists, unable or unwilling to make lasting emotional, human connections. Instead, Ahab seeks to make a connection with Moby Dick himself.

Ahab, under the pretense of hunting down Moby Dick, spends three days in a headlong rush to catch up with and kill the White Whale. From Chapter 133 to 135, Ahab urges his crew to greater and greater efforts in the capture and destruction of his alabaster archnemesis. He continues despite every warning from Starbuck and every instance of the damning hearses, predictions of his ultimate demise (407-427). When Ahab finally does come face to face with the only creature which he pursues any real intimate connection with, the great beast kills him and sinks his entire ship, leaving only one man alive to tell the tale. However, his penchant for strange relationships does not stop with Moby Dick.

Pip, the adolescent African-American cabin boy made insane by a seaborne accident, maintains a strange and confusing connection with Ahab. They have a touching moment, spoiled

only by the realization of the pair's apparent insanity, wherein Pip decries that he will never let go of Ahab's hand, to which Ahab replies, (quote) "Oh, boy, nor will I thee, unless I should thereby drag thee to worse horrors than are here. Come, then, to my cabin.... see the omniscient gods oblivious of suffering man; and man, though idiotic, and knowing not what he does, yet full of the sweet things of love and gratitude. Come! I feel prouder leading thee by thy black hand, than though I grasped an Emperor's!" (quote) (Melville 392). This relationship, however, does not break Ahab's form, for he abandons Pip when he leaves to hunt down Moby Dick for the last time. John Wenke writes, (quote) "it must be recognized that [Ahab and Pip's] relationship is so marginal that it also reflects Ahab's alienation from society"(end quote) (Wenke 705). The relationship between the two madmen on the ship becomes so marginal and inconsequential that, when taken in the grand scheme of things, it does not fall into the category of an affectionate relationship. Ahab fixates monomaniacally on Moby Dick; everything else is but the whistling of the wind.

Monomania and a Mammal

Ahab's pursuit of Moby-Dick reveals nothing short of monomania. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines monomania as (quote) "a form of mental illness characterized by a single pattern of repetitive and intrusive thoughts or actions"(end quote) or, when applied to a long-term illness, (quote)"an exaggerated or fanatical enthusiasm for or devotion to one subject; an obsession, a craze"(end quote). Ahab's condition certainly fits into this definition. Wenke describes Ahab as (quote) "the monomaniacal schemer hunting Moby Dick"(end quote) (706). Even Ishmael, narrator of *Moby-Dick*, realizes Ahab's madness for what it is: (quote) "his torn body and gashes soul bled into one another; and so interfusing, made him mad"(end quote) (Melville 156). However indubitable his monomania, Ahab's purpose breeds mystery.


Ahab appears to perpetuate his own single-mindedness, driving himself mad. There must be a reason as to why Ahab becomes so fixated on his quest to destroy the White Whale. Critic Sheikh Islam hypothesizes that (quote) “one can consider Captain Ahab’s monomaniac quest as a challenge to God’s almighty power... because the white whale is one of God’s valued creatures, and he... vows to kill it without any justifiable reason” (end quote) (71). Islam contends that Ahab wished to stick it to God, in a way, by destroying a creature of his creation. In his article, Meyers claims that (quote) “the point of Ahab's monomania is that the same intensity which brought him to the top of his profession could terrible the consequences of his mistake. His resolve to destroy the white whale depended on his mistaken identification of evil” (end quote) (26). Ahab wanted to destroy the whale as it represented evil to him.

However, as with his isolation, the text indicates that Ahab’s destruction of the great white behemoth has more to do with his connection to it. Ahab seeks out the whale constantly, never ceasing, sacrificing the lives of all his crew. He ignores the predictions of the Parsee Fedallah and meets his end because of his own eagerness to destroy the monochromatic menace (Melville 426-437). In the end, Ahab fails to communicate with the whale and descends to Davey Jones’s Locker (Furui 603). His monomaniacal chase has just as much to do with his misguided attempts to connect with another human to end his isolation as it does with his cracked psyche.

Conclusion

Analyzing Melville’s Captain Ahab reveals a complex and fascinating character. His singular purpose and strength of will make him a compelling character to drive the narrative of the story and bring the conflicts to their head. Isolating himself severely, he demonstrates his inability to make any interpersonal connections and, instead, seeks to connect with the great

White Whale instead. Ahab’s monomaniacal goal of connecting with the whale ultimately leads to his death when he fails in his quest. Captain Ahab remains a strong character with a complex combination of will, self-isolation, and monomania.




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Ahab’s Soul: An Exploration of the Hero of *Moby-Dick*


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Abstract

In Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, each character forms a well-rounded and dynamic part of the novel. Being one of the greatest novels in American literary history, *Moby-Dick* contains several characters who each special talents. These characters exhibit strong qualities, like *Frank* (the people carrying emotional pain), like the *coastal* (the *Quaker* or *man of God*), like the *one* (the *Fig*). Captain *Ahab*, the *Pequod’s* commander, represents one of the most dynamic and deep of these characters. Driven by a strong will, *Ahab* possesses but a single purpose in hunting the *White Whale*, which creates a strong habit of isolation and introspection for the *single-minded* captain. Through his *novel*, *Captain Ahab* reveals a monomaniacal streak, strongly reflecting his isolation and single-minded purpose. However, readers and analysts alike often psychologize or overanalyze the captain of the *Pequod*, labeling him as only a madman or monomaniac. Instead, *Captain Ahab* reveals himself to be both troubled and driven, able to be moved by emotions and desires. Although his voyage ends with death and destruction, *Ahab* represents more than a single-minded beast of vengeance. “*Ahab’s Soul: An Exploration of the Hero of Moby-Dick*” will discover the reasons and study surrounding *Ahab’s* three character traits of isolation, monomania, and will, exploring the depth and scope of the *novel*, *Ahab*, as well as an overview of explaining some misconceptions and misunderstandings surrounding his character.





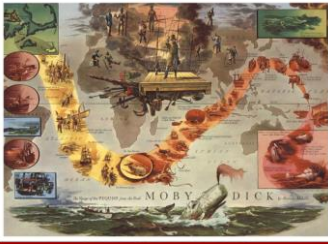


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“Ahab and anguish lay stretched together in one hammock.”
Herman Melville

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