

Shakespearean Influence on *Moby-Dick*

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In 1820 in the *Edinburgh Review* Sidney Smith said: "In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book?" (par. 4). That was the conventional idea concerning American Literature to the conservative British writers. But Melville proved this assumption of the British writers wrong not by arguing with them but by producing a huge work which in its quality is comparable to Shakespearean great tragedies. Melville's masterpiece *Moby-Dick* consists of thousands of references, but specially references of Shakespeare are in abundance in this book. When Melville wrote this novel, next to the Bible Shakespeare was in his mind because he wanted to prove the superiority of American Nation as well as American Literature. The protagonist of the novel, Captain Ahab, is comparable with Macbeth and Lear in many ways. Also the setting of the novel and language of the novel are like those of Shakespeare's plays. The construction of Ahab as the tragic hero-villain, his madness and blasphemous behaviour, the Shakespearean dramatic technique, the Shakespearean language and parallel scenes are the things which Melville borrows from Shakespeare. Though the portrayal of character and the construction of the novel are Shakespearean, the novel's greatness lies in its originality.

Melville creates Ahab in the model of a Shakespearean tragic hero. Melville's conception of Ahab as a tragic character was made possible by this immersion in Shakespearean tragedy. Shakespearean tragic heroes, for example Macbeth and Lear are blinded by hubris or pride. They are tragic because of their error in

judgment. Captain Ahab also becomes tragic because of the error in judgment. Ahab's misfortune is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some error of judgment, like Lear or Macbeth. Captain Peleg says about Ahab: "He is a grand, ungodly, god-like man, Captain Ahab, doesn't speak much; but, when he does speak, then you may well listen . . . Ahab's above the common" (68). Ahab is not a bad man completely. Like Macbeth, he is virtuous. In spite of his 'monomaniac' obsession with whale, Ahab has a good side in him. Macbeth is a loving husband. In the same way, Ahab has also a family. Seemingly he may be seen as an arrogant, short-tempered, bad captain, but in reality he is not. Captain Peleg, one of the sailors in the Pequod describes him in this way: "stricken, blasted, if he be, Ahab has his humanities" (69).

When the play *Macbeth* begins other characters talk about him. They talk about his courage and his bravery. The Captain in *Macbeth* says: "But all's too weak. / For brave Macbeth - well he deserves that name-" (1.2.15-16).

In *Moby-Dick* also different characters talk about Ahab before he appears in the novel. When the play *Macbeth* opens we find that everybody, including King Duncan feels proud of Macbeth. He is not introduced at the opening of the book. He comes after sometime.

Moreover, Ahab does have a Macbethian side in him. He suppresses his human side. Like Macbeth he says: "Talk not to me of blasphemy, man, I'd strike the sun if it insulted me" (136). He is damned because of his hubris. He cannot enjoy beauty as Macbeth cannot enjoy beauty. Feelings of love and beauty are denied in Ahab also. He is incapable of feeling love. We feel pity and fear for Ahab as he cannot enjoy beauty. The parallel language is evident by an

example when Macbeth says: "Stars, hide your fires. /Let not light see my black and deep desires" (1.4.50-51). In his soliloquy in the chapter "Sunset" Ahab says:

Dry heat upon my brow? Oh! time was when as the sunrise nobly spurred me, so the sunset soothed. No more. This lovely light, it lights not me; all loveliness is anguish to me, since I can ne'er enjoy. Gifted with the high perception, I lack the low, enjoying power; damned, most subtly and most malignantly! clammed in the midst of Paradise! (139).

There is greatness and grief in Ahab like Macbeth. For his suffering we pity him and we fear what would happen to him as he is blasphemous.

In *Macbeth* before Macduff meets and matches Macbeth, the protagonist tells himself:

Fear not, Macbeth no man that is born of woman
Shall e'er have power upon thee. (5.3.6-7)

But the fact is that Macbeth is killed at last. He surrenders himself totally opposite to the prophecy made by the witches. Ahab also thinks that he would be able to kill the whale, Moby-Dick. Ahab, like Macbeth, does not want to understand that Moby-Dick cannot be killed by a mere human being. There lies his flaw and that makes him a tragic hero like Macbeth.

Ahab is almost like a villain. He is like Iago in *Othello* or Edmund in *King Lear*. He is a malcontent who is not satisfied with his life. He has undertaken a lot of adventures earlier. But he is not happy with his life. Iago's mission is to destroy the life of Othello. Similarly, Ahab's aim is to kill Moby-Dick. As Iago fails in his attempt, Ahab

also fails in his attempt to kill Moby-Dick. In *Othello* Iago tells Roderigo:

. . . I retell thee again and again, I hate the Moor: My cause is hearted: thine hath no less reason. Let us be conjunctive in our revenge against him. If thou canst cuckold him thou dost thyself a pleasure, me a sport. (1.3.367-368)

If he can take revenge against Othello it would be a sport for him. Similarly, Ahab wants to take revenge to fulfill his quest. Ahab is vindictive and crazy like Iago. In *Moby-Dick* Melville says: ". . . Ahab had cherished a wild vindictiveness against the whale, all the more fell for that in his frantic morbidness he at last come to identify with him, not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations" (153). He seeks vengeance on the whale for taking away his leg. The idea of vindictiveness comes in their speeches. In *Othello* Iago in his last speech says:

Demand me nothing. What you know, you know.
From this time forth I never will speak word. (5.2.300-301)

Similarly Ahab says before dying: "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! Thus, I give up the spear!" (468). Their attitude is the same and both of them fail in their attempts.

A major assumption that runs through *Moby-Dick* is that Ahab's quest against the great whale is a blasphemous activity, even apart from the consequences that it has upon its crew. After losing his leg in a chase with Moby-Dick, Ahab begins his quest for the white whale as an open rebellion against God. Macbeth kills Duncan, which is against the law of God. Ahab does not obey God and he

also breaks this code. Ahab becomes a god himself. That is why he dies at last. He cannot kill the whale. Ahab with his sailors, except Ishmael dies.

In his blasphemous behaviour and madness Ahab is like Lear. Lear breaks the law of God by dividing the kingdom among his daughters. He says:

Meantime we shall express our darker purpose.
Give me the map there. Know that we have divided.
In three our kingdom. (1.1.35-37)

Kingship is given from God. A king is the representative of God to the common people. He cannot break the law of God. If he breaks the law he is blasphemous. In the same way Ahab is blasphemous as he thinks himself to be powerful like God.

The speeches of Ahab and of the mad little Negro Pip are closely imitative of Shakespearean heroics and Shakespearean mad scenes. Madness is one of the main themes in *Moby-Dick* and in *King Lear*. Lear is mad because of filial ingratitude. He is obsessed with the behaviour of his daughters:

O Regan, Goneril!
Your old kind father, whose frank heart gave you
all -
O, that way madness lies, let me shun that;
No more of that. (3.4.18-22)

Again Lear says: "Didst thou give all to thy two daughters! And art thou come to this?" (3.4.48-49)

In the chapter "Sunset" Ahab like Lear says in a soliloquy:

What I've dared, I've willed; and what I've willed I'll do!
They think me mad-- Starbuck does; but I'm demoniac, I
am madness maddened! That wild madness that's only
calm to comprehend itself. The prophecy was that I should
be dismembered; and Aye! I lost this leg. I now prophecy
that I will dismember my dismemberer. (139)

The word ‘madness’ comes in the speeches of both Ahab and Lear. The “monomaniac commander”, Captain Ahab is intent on using any and all means necessary to get revenge on the white whale. Ahab is mad because of his obsession with the whale just as Lear is obsessed with his ungrateful daughters. Ahab wants to kill it at any cost. Macbeth wants to kill Banquo so that he and his descendants can assume the power of the king. Ahab by killing God’s largest creation in this world wants to assume the power of God. He denies the existence of God like Macbeth and thus becomes blasphemous. Shakespeare through the character of Macbeth and Lear wants to mean that man’s existences is nothing in this vast world. They may be king but all of them are subject to death. One of Melville’s goals is to indicate the condition of man and man’s uncertainty in the universe. Throughout the book man’s insignificance in the universe is represented by the relationship of the crew to the ocean. This ship is the microcosm of the whole world.

Melville makes link between the language of Shakespearean characters and the characters of *Moby-Dick*. Although Melville’s writing has a freedom he has learnt the mastery of language from Shakespeare. Matthiessen says:

His practice of tragedy, though it gained force from Shakespeare, had real freedom; it did not base itself upon Shakespeare, but upon man and nature as Melville knew

them. Therefore, he was able to handle, in his greatest scenes, a kind of diction that depended upon no source, and that could, as Lawrence noted, convey something 'almost superhuman or inhuman, bigger than life.' This quality could be illustrated at length from the language of 'The Grand Armada' or 'The Try-Works' or the final chase, or from Ishmael's declaration of what the white whale signified for him. (429)

From Shakespeare Melville learns how to make language more dramatic. At this point Matthiessen says that Melville has learned to depend more and more upon verbs of action which lend their dynamic pressure to both movement and meaning. Melville has also learned something of the Shakespearean energy of verbal compounds and something, too of the quickened sense of life that comes from making one part of speech act as another. For example Ahab says: "I own thy speechless, placeless power but to the last gasp of my earthquake life will dispute its unconditional, unintegral mastery in me" (415). Here 'earthquake' is used as an adjective and 'placeless' is used as an adjective from a noun. Cope comments:

Sometimes the echoes blatantly re-read Shakespeare, as with the paraphrase of the famous "seven ages of man" speech delivered by the malcontent Jaques in *As You Like It* and echoed as part of Ahab's meditation:

There is no steady unretracing progress in this life; we do not advance through fixed gradations, and at the last one pause:- through infancy's unconscious spell, boyhood's thoughtless faith, adolescence' doubt (the common doom), then scepticism, then disbelief, resting at last in manhood's pondering repose of If. But once gone through, we trace the

round again; and are infants, boys, and men, and Ifs eternally. (406)

Though Ahab's speech initially disputes the gradation of age and the maturing intellect, he presents a catalogue similar--- if far less precisely concrete--- to that of Shakespeare's original, ending on a note that exudes Jaques' existential despair, which sums up life's final phase as "second childishness, and mere oblivion, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything". (AYLI 2.7. 165-166). (2)

In *King Lear* Gloucester says:

As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods
They kill us for their sport. (4.1.37-38)

In the same tone Ahab says:

That's more than ye, ye great gods, ever were. I laugh and hoot at ye, ye cricket-players, ye pugilists, ye deaf Burkes and blinded Bendigoes! I will not say as schoolboys do to bullies, --Take some one of your own size; don't pommel me! No, ye've knocked me down, and I am up again. (139)

There are similarities between the language of *King Lear* and *Moby-Dick* here. But whereas Gloucester's speech is about the insignificance of man, Ahab's speech is about his challenge against God.

Melville uses the same kind of scenes or parallel scenes of Shakespeare's plays in his novel. He uses scenes of comic relief, prophecy, supernatural elements etc. in his novel. Even more interesting are Melville's attempts to pattern the plot development

through constructing scene sequences following Shakespeare's plays. Scenes of thunder play an important role in *King Lear*. In *Moby-Dick* Melville brings thunder scenes also. The chapter "Midnight Aloft-Thunder and Lightning" deals only with thunder and lightning.

Like *Macbeth* prophecy plays an important role in *Moby-Dick*. In *Macbeth* the three witches, who are mysterious, make prophecy. In *Moby-Dick* in the chapter 'The Prophet' the prophet Elijah comes and he warns Ishmael and others from going to the voyage. He is also a mysterious figure like the three witches since his language is mixed with ambiguity. He describes Ahab as the 'Old Thunder'. He makes statements like the witches which are very difficult to understand. He is a stranger among sailors. The witches in *Macbeth* are strange figures. What they say comes true but their language is ambiguous. The witches tell Macbeth that he would be the king of Scotland in future and Banquo's descendants would become king in future. What Elijah tells also comes true. The ship 'Pequod' sinks at last. He says "Ye've shipped, have ye? Names down on the papers? Well, well, what's signed, is signed; and what's to be, will be; and then again, perhaps it won't be, after all" (79).

The storm scene of *King Lear* has a similarity with the storm scene of *Moby-Dick*. Olson comments:

The lovely association of Ahab and Pip is like the relations of Lear to both the Fool and Edgar. What the king learns of their suffering through companionship with them in storm helps him to shed his pride. His hedging and self-deluding authority gone, Lear sees wisdom in their profound unreason. He becomes capable of learning from his fool just as Captain Ahab does from his cabin-boy. In *Lear*

Shakespeare has taken the conventional ‘crazy-witty’ and brought him to an integral place in much more than the plot. He is at center to the poetic and dramatic conception of the play. Melville grasped the development. Someone may object that Pip is mad, not foolish. In Shakespeare the gradations subtly work into one another. In *Moby-Dick* Pip is both the jester and the idiot. Before he is frightened out of his wits he and his tambourine are cap and bells to the crew. His soliloquy upon their midnight revelry has the sharp, bitter wisdom of the Elizabethan fool. And his talk after his “drowning” is parallel not only to the Fool and Edgar but to Lear himself. (651)

Like Shakespeare’s plays there are supernatural elements in *Moby-Dick*. The Figure of Fedallah is associated with Hamlet’s father. Just as Hamlet is influenced by the ghost of his father, Ahab is influenced by the apparition of Fedallah. Fedallah’s enigmatic and secretive nature is portrayed from the start. Ishmael, the character Melville uses to tell the story, says that the hair-turbaned Fedallah remained a mystery to the last. Melville uses Fedallah’s entrance in the story to show that the demon remains a puzzle to mankind. Hamlet’s father’s figure remains a puzzle till the end.

These are some of the examples of Melville’s indebtedness to Shakespeare. But his work is not merely an imitation of Shakespeare’s work but a recreation to produce something new. Through this work Melville really becomes an American Scholar that Emerson, the great American philosopher, wanted and cherished for long. Emerson prophesies in “The American Scholar”: “Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands , draws to a close. The millions, that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign

harvests, Events, actions arise, that must be sung. That will sing themselves" (par.1). The American Scholar should not be the parrot of other men's thinking. The greatness of the novel *Moby-Dick* lies in Melville's understanding of human nature and its great theme. A proverb goes to say that no great and enduring volume can ever be written on the flea. To write a great book, one has to choose a great theme. As a result, Melville has chosen the white whale as his subject for his book and the theme of the novel deals with the story of the white whale. Melville is a writer who has the craftsmanship of portraying the truth about the nature of the world. In this story, the symbolic use of the white whale, Moby-Dick, allows him to show things of the world, God, fate, man's quest as they are. The white whale also symbolizes Christian God and through this Melville wants to show how dangerous the aspect of God can be if something stands against Him.

The influence of Shakespeare on Melville is very profound and deeply connected. There are numerous and diverse parallels in language, in emotional effect, in situation and tragic actions between *Moby-Dick* on the one hand, and *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello* and his other plays on the other. In *Moby-Dick* as in Shakespeare's tragedies there is a solid, crowded foreground of material things and of human characters and actions. Melville is successful in his mission to make his work great. He chooses the great theme and that greatness is depicted in Shakespearean way. Melville says in "Hawthorne and His Mosses": "men not very much inferior to Shakespeare are this day being born on the banks of the Ohio. And the day will come, when you shall say who reads a book by an Englishman that is a modern?" (543). Melville as an American wants to prove that an American can also be great like Shakespeare.

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