

Aspects of Moby Dick

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This has a glow of appreciation,
despite its looseness I like
the piece.

Moby Dick remains one of those extraordinary pieces of literature which cannot be classified under any special category except probably under the general heading of novel. Yes, it is a novel -- we may say that much. Still there are parts of this book, strangely different from any other book making it much more than just a novel. It becomes a testament, nearly a literature in itself, complete in its very wide scope of human symbols. There is something enigmatic about the whole book, it is so out of place in our body of literature; it forces us to approach it from an impressionistic point of view. We can never be sure that what we say about it is correct. All we know is that this chapter we like, this character is wonderful, this is a symbol of something, this is an excellent insight, this is epic, this passage we shall read again.

Eventually, however, for our own insatiable curiosity and for our insistence that ~~nothing~~ nothing need be mysterious if looked at realistically, we open the book and seek into it. We are as much surprised by the sense of fantasy as we are by

the sense of realism. The cadence of the book is also strange -- more like a series of slides rather than a continuous moving picture. Themes and characters ~~which~~ which are stressed in one place are suddenly dropped for other matters. The 'I' of the book which is so definitely established by character at the beginning fades and comes back throughout the narrative. The work seems, therefore, to be written from a shifting point of view -- sometimes from the personal eyes of Ishmael, other times from the all seeing eyes of the author. These uneven qualities give the book much of its unorthodoxy as a novel.

Another peculiarity of Moby Dick is its changing speech patterns. We encounter biblical, colloquial and Shakespearian passages in many diversified instances. Sometimes this use of language suggests to us the attempt of the novel to shift into different mediums of expression. There are undoubtedly many passages which could pass as the best of American poetry, and others come very close to the drama in their intention. This use of different ~~of~~ mediums brings to mind almost immediately such a work as Joyce's 'Ulysses' which also makes extensive use of many different devices for the sake of the narrative. But, what makes Moby Dick as good as it is, is the fact that it remains a unity, a total entity when considered at its termination. This unity, of course, is achieved by the singularity

Since you are not consistent in ~~the~~ handling titles, I put them into standard form, i.e. italicized.

*English teachers will
prefer to make this a singular
noun instead of a plural.*

of the theme (whaling, and the chase of the White Whale) which is never lost sight of and which ties everything together quite neatly, as all life and action is hinged to it and expressed in their relation to it. None of the parts exist for their own individual existence. Although there are many sections which appear almost independent of the remainder of the novel because of a tableau-like effect that the individual chapters give, their significance with the entirety of the novel, their relation to the whole, is their only reason for being. Their serial like arrangement enforces a distinct and strong unity which only seems to be further and almost mystically confirmed with the ending of the book. Everything, directly and indirectly, upon reaching the climax seems to be in one way or another very important to it. The magnanimous hand of fate or destiny, as seen in the destruction of the Pequod, its captain and its crew, indubitably makes every line of the novel become a part of its fulfillment. The current of direction is felt with all its inevitability as we reach this tremendous climax. No where in literature does the climax have such magnitude and importance as it does in Moby Dick -- it is the final complete destruction of all its characters -- all so very representative of mankind -- the overwhelming inclusiveness of its effect that makes the climax a sort of end of the world -- for, the world of the book is the Pequod, its human beings, its decks, its masts, its noises,

its remembrances, and when they perish, the sea never looks emptier than it does at that moment. If ever we desire to experience the soundless void which at the death of a human being or the extinction of a race is so unimaginable and unreal to the mind, we must experience that void as the Pequod disappears from the face of the sea. The silence of uninhabited time and space is the ~~xxx~~ void which completes Moby Dick. We cannot ever really know that void ourselves, but to get a glimpse of it as such in the greater moment of insight is like feeling one's breath stop for a moment and existing in the stillness of non-entity.

The symbolism pervading Moby Dick ~~throughout~~ through its entire length is without doubt its most important aspect. We can only experience the greater shock of the climax, the greater meaning of all its context only in the light of these symbols. Thus, the Pequod must be more than just a whaler, the ocean more than just water, the ~~xxxxxxxx~~ whales more than just big fish. While we must not be so unimaginative as to designate a system of symbols which is to hold true for the whole book, (for, upon reading the book this seems impossible) we should allow to invade the mind whatever symbolic significance is ready to emerge from the reading. It is only in the experience of many symbols that we can hope to achieve an understanding of the book. Thus, for example, the Pequod as a symbol can be viewed from several levels --

as representing the world, or a nation, or simply a body of men destined for a common fate. Each symbol when considered for its distinction gives us a different picture when juxtaposed with the other symbols of the book. The Pequod may very well represent all three ideas if considered one at a time. Ultimately, symbolism must become a personal affair since it is most likely to be intimately tied up with the experience of the reader. Thus, this validates to a certain extent, the great variety of symbolic interpretation which is most assuredly bound to arise from so complex a novel. It can never in all its detail mean the same for two people. And since Melville himself did not set down any absolute system to the symbolism, it should seem that he left that task up to the discretion of the reader. 'Take out of Moby Dick what you can', he must have said, and left it there.

A word about the originality of Moby Dick is always forthcoming. It is interesting to note that Moby Dick appears at a time in American literature when a series of original ~~work~~ works are appearing. Thoreau's unique Walden, Whitman's new poetry seem to be in keeping with the experiments of form and content. What is surprising about Moby Dick is that we are not bothered by any overbearing attempts to be different. The form of Moby Dick seems to be as natural and as vital as the characters themselves. The whole experience of reading it is unique because it has no equal in literature. It is so much

a summing up of so many things we have read previously that part of its success is due to the recognition we have of these former experiences.

So much has been said about Moby Dick already that it would seem foolish to go on to say anything else. However, one more word. I should like to point out one unusual effect the book creates in the reader -- and that is a sympathy for all the characters regardless of their individual ways and actions. Melville makes them so understandable that we are almost tempted to conclude that understanding is the sole criterion for love. But most likely that is more of an impression than a reality. We extend ourselves to these characters because in the end they represent ourselves -- and it is with this sympathetic mirror image that Melville captures the wandering eye of the reader. Suffice it to say that Moby Dick is an unusually outstanding experience that will remain for a long time in the memory of the reader.