

## Sacred Space, Rituals of Initiation in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*

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### Abstract:

*Moby Dick* is a book which can be interpreted in many ways as it is a universal story. The quest of the *Pequod* in search for the mythical white whale represents the wish of man to return to the sacred space which he only glimpsed at and was never able to explore. The story features two protagonists, Ahab and Ishmael, who both fulfill ritual roles and embody two states of mind. The theme of the book is that of a continuous search for an answer which is elusive and inscrutable.

**Keywords:** sacred space, journey, ritual, power, mask, water, illusion.

In a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne H. Melville noted that the book he had just written, namely *Moby Dick, or the Whale* had brought him the fulfillment he had been looking for many years. "A sense of unspeakable security is in me this moment, on account of your understanding the book. I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb. Ineffable sociabilities are in me. It is a strange feeling—no hopefulness is in it, no despair. I speak now of my profoundest sense of being, not of an incidental feeling." (Melville, 212) The book transformed Melville from a successful writer of adventure stories into a sort of pariah of the American literary stage. *Typee*, *Omoo* or *Redburn*, his early literary successes, cannot be compared to his more mature works *Bartleby the Scrivener*, *Billy Budd*, *Benito Cereno* or *The Confidence Man*. *Moby Dick* is the first step on his path to a different type of writing. Though much of the book does not especially share either in the American Renaissance or in Emerson's philosophy, it offers a mixture of these two trends in a very original way. Emerson's philosophy is rendered by the rewriting of the term transcendentalism, namely in the response of man towards the

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environment which in this case is the sea. Transcendentalism initially appears as a philosophical movement developed in New England in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One of its core beliefs is the inherent goodness which can be found in both man and nature. Other important concepts are self-reliance and independence, which are considered the bases for a definite change in human consciousness. Emerson's essay *The American Scholar* supports these views.

"So shall we come to look at the world with new eyes. It shall answer the endless inquiry of the intellect. What is truth? What of the affections? What is good by yielding itself passive to the educated will? Build, therefore, your own world. As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions. A correspondent revolution in things will attend the influx of the spirit." (Emerson, 80)

In Melville's book these concepts are perceived from a double point of view, either positive or negative, depending on the character. The story is centered on the quest of the *Pequod* which can be seen as an instance of the American romance of the frontier. In the American literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the term is applied to the imaginary line separating wilderness from civilization. It is opposed to the community oriented culture of the Puritan settlers of New England. In time the frontier line was moved farther and farther, and the concept came to refer to a different reality. In Melville's book the frontier is the liquid dimension that separates the crew of the *Pequod* from the purpose of their journey: the mythical white whale. Melville chooses to change the traditional journey on land, which reenacted the real travels towards the west, with a voyage on the sea. The sea is not only the frontier which must be conquered, but mainly it is the symbolical sacred space where only the initiated can go. Thus, the story can be analyzed from the ritual perspective of the initiation in the sacred space. In his book *The Sacred and the Profane* Mircea Eliade analyzes these two concepts taking into account their importance for the spiritual accomplishment of man. He makes the difference between spaces, analyzing their content. Thus, sacred space is characterized by specific features which make it easier to be recognized. In many cases it is surrounded by some boundaries which must be crossed in order that the faithful man could enter it. Sacred space is "homogeneous and neutral, there is no breaking that

can determine qualitative differences among its constituents.” (Eliade, 16) Generally speaking, the sacred contains all "reality," or value, and other things acquire "reality" only to the extent that they participate in the sacred. The most genuine manifestation of the sacred is hierophany. According to Eliade, hierophanies give structure and orientation to the world, establishing a sacred order. Man can enter sacred space by fulfilling certain rules and obeying some principles. Consecration is the way in which the faithful man understands that he is part of another dimension due to the distinctive marks which he reads around him. The signs contrasting the sacred from the profane space are created by the spiritual illumination lived by man. On the contrary, profane space is fragmentary, it has no "qualitative differentiation and, hence, no orientation is given by virtue of its inherent structure."(Eliade, 17) Thus, profane space gives man no pattern for his behavior. In contrast to profane space, the site of a hierophany has a sacred structure to which religious man conforms himself. A hierophany amounts to a "revelation of an absolute reality, opposed to the non-reality of the vast surrounding expanse.”(Eliade, 25) The sacred implies the discovery of the sacred nature of man’s soul which is later mirrored in the space surrounding him.

Any such story has a protagonist who fulfills the ritual it presupposes. In the beginning the narrator Ishmael is in the position of the novice, the innocent who does not have anything of value in the world. He is in a suicidal mood, feeling deeply the alienation caused by the disappointment with reality. Later, he increasingly recedes into the background as a commentator, with his voice starting to resemble the one of an omniscient narrator at times, able to see in all parts of the ship and into the private motivations of the other characters. “Some years ago, having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. (...) By reason of these things, then, the whaling voyage was welcome; the great flood-gates of the wonder-world swung open, and in the wild conceits that swayed me to my purpose, two and two there floated into my inmost soul, endless processions of the whale, and, amid most of them all, one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air.”(Melville, 1)

The character acts as if he was prepared for the unknown opening before him and he is able to adapt to any circumstances. He is the type of the survivor and the teller of the story. In ritual terms Ishmael is meant to take on the challenge of the quest as he deliberately leaves behind all the values that linked him to the material world. Initiation presupposes leaving the stable, organized and reasonable reality for the temptations of the mysterious unknown. Like in any mythical tale, the protagonist has to make the appropriate choice before being allowed to enter the sacred space. The opposite of Ishmael is Ahab, the one who is not able to give up the memories of his terrible past. Melville's book is a ritual contest between these two characters which represent two states of mind. Their destiny is the main topic of the book. In *Moby Dick* departure is voluntary, but it has different reasons. Ishmael wants to travel the world because he cannot cope with the reality of New Bedford or Nantucket and the common existence on land. For the other members of the ship the reason is simply the wish to get rich due to a good catch of whales. The latter cannot be included in a ritual because they are not able to abandon the material values of reality. The qualities needed by a protagonist to start such an exemplary quest are moral integrity and innocence of the soul. Once he yields to the temptations of the world the quest fails and revelation is prevented. Ishmael survives the final catastrophe also because he feels compassion for all the whales captured and killed by the crew. A good example can be found in the chapter describing the catching of the whale by Stubbs. "The red tide now poured from all sides of the monster like brooks down a hill. His tormented body rolled not in brine but in blood, which bubbled and seethed for furlongs behind in their wake. The slanting sun playing upon this crimson pond in the sea sent back its reflection into every face, so that they all glowed to each other like red men. And all the while, jet after jet of white smoke was agonizingly shot from the spiracle of the whale, and vehement puff after puff from the mouth of the excited headsman." (Melville, 203) The description of the agonizing animal shows the pity of the narrator towards the animal. This feeling of mercy was already mentioned in the sermon of Father Mapple whose rendering of Jonah's story anticipates the tragedy of the *Pequod*. Thus, at the narrative level the story gets a

circular form based on the pattern of loss and regeneration. At the same time it symbolically reminds of the theme of predestination in an original way. Ahab's voyage of revenge represents the deliberate choice made by him to dedicate his life to the pursuing of the white whale. The double predestination, for good and for bad, is like a crossroads for Ahab, who in choosing the latter sentences himself and the crew members to their doom. The circular form of the book matches with the theme of predestination as an initial bad decision triggers a whole destiny. The final tragedy of the crew is the natural consequence of the departure on the whaling voyage. The captain acts like the supreme master on his ship, although a long part of the voyage he is not seen by the others. He symbolically stands for the double decoding of the concept of power: power at its best and power at its worst. Power at its best belongs to the legitimate rulers, to the protagonists who are given the role to change the world for its benefit. They are accepted and obeyed by the community, as they rightfully have that place. Power at its best can also belong to those who, even if they are on a superior position, treat their inferiors in a good way. Ishmael pities the whales and does not take full advantage of the superiority provided to him by weapons. Power at its worst is the type of power which taints human nature and pushes man to do bad deeds. Once he decides to use it in this way, the protagonist cannot control his instincts and transforms into a tyrant and a destroyer of cosmic harmony. This type of power is characteristic for impostors, for those assuming roles which were not meant for them. Ahab manipulates the crew into obeying his will and he hides his true intentions until the moment he has fully controlled them. Yet, like all impostors and instigators, he falls, no matter how hard he tries to avoid his fate. The captain's fate is paradoxical as he both hates and longs for Moby Dick, the object of his desire. He is torn apart between the wish to reunite himself with the sacred and the awareness of his inferiority because he is not able to find the white whale. Eventually, they will meet, but only to find a common doom.

In an initiation quest an essential quality is to accept the presence of the other world which manifests itself either directly by several signs or indirectly in the form of messengers. Assimilating the other is the main feature of a successful ritual. The

departure from reality is caused by a loss, a lack of balance in the harmony of the world which must be restored. Melville rewrites the tradition in a personal way. The book contains a number of characters that give it the symbolical value of a stage on which humans come and play their roles in this world. The crew-members of the *Pequod* are carefully drawn stylizations of human types and habits. They have often been described as a self-enclosed universe. There are 30 crew members, and as there were thirty states in the Union at the time, it has been suggested that, in its diversity, Melville meant the *Pequod* to be a metaphor for America. Nevertheless, only some of them get to the forefront, assuming the main roles in this sea tragedy.

The crew of the *Pequod* is made up of people who want to get rich and have no proper relationship with the sacred space beyond reality. The destiny they live on the ship is similar to the one awaiting the sailors on the usual whale ships. Some of them belong to different races: Queequeg is a cannibal from the South Seas, Tashtego is a Native American harpooner, Daggoo is an African harpooner and Fedallah is believed to be of Persian origin, having lived in China too. The common point uniting them is greed. The thirst for adventure and for spiritual fulfillment is found only with Ishmael and Ahab. In ritual terms they embody two roles which are familiar to the majority of myths and legends. Ahab is the instigator because he commands the ship and sets the cause of the voyage. Ishmael is the donator as he enriches the crew spiritually or at least those listening to him. The donator is the one who opens the road towards the answer for the meaning of the quest. In Ahab's case the situation is more complicated as he represents an indirect instigator. The instigator is a positive character that challenges the protagonist to an adventure. He is the one who creates the narrative line as he makes the story continue by his presence. Ahab is an instigator because he gives a purpose to the crew: to chase and find Moby Dick at all cost. Apparently, it is a noble deed because the white whale had damaged many ships and had killed many people. It mutilated Ahab too in a previous encounter. Yet, an episode in the text reveals the true identity of the captain and the meaning of his quest becomes different. Towards the middle of the voyage Ahab nails to the mast of the *Pequod* a doubloon coin, promising it to the first

man who raises Moby Dick. "It so chanced that the doubloon of the *Pequod* bore the letters, Republica del Ecuador: Quito. So this bright coin came from a country planted in the middle of the world, and beneath the great equator, and named after it. Zoned by those letters you saw the likeness of three Andes' summits; from one a flame; a tower on another; on the third a crowing cock; while arching over all was a segment of the partitioned zodiac, the signs all marked with their usual cabalistics, and the keystone sun entering the equinoctial point at Libra."(Melville, 133) This episode marks the entrance of the story in another symbolical stage. The reward promised by Ahab is a form of temptation for the crew who are blinded by their greed. Ahab acts like an evil instigator who instead of helping the others pushes them to their doom. The narrator mentions that the coin came from a country "planted in the middle of the world", which could be taken as an instance of an axis mundi, the vertical line keeping the world in balance. The axis mundi has great magical powers in several myths and legends, but in this text its meaning is reversed. It is nailed to the mast of the *Pequod* as a sort of a pagan token of war, the mast itself becoming a totem pole menacing and fascinating the crew at the same time. The symbols on the coin are significant too: flame, tower and a crowing cock, standing for fire, stone and call. They are the symbols of an apocalypse: the fire of destruction and the cock crowing on judgment day. The trick played by Ahab on the crew relies on the double meaning of these symbols, thus revealing the dual nature of the captain. The last important element is the zodiac sign. Libra is the sign of the zodiac placed in autumn and it coincides with the autumn equinox when night and day are equal. After this moment darkness grows and light fades. The bargain set by Ahab is actually a trap out of which darkness will emerge and not the light of hope. The captain fulfils now another ritual role, namely the one of the trickster. Once a positive cosmic power, it starts to embody the negative aspects of human nature. A trickster is a being who follows his own will, offering a parallel world to the real one, made on the rules he invents. A trickster usually stays in the margin and observes the other characters' moves which he speculates on his own behalf. He has the quality to easily adapt to any situation and to make it favorable to him. A trickster's game consists of the

relativity of truth and of moral values which he speculates on his own behalf. In *Moby Dick* Ahab adopts the mask of a victim, telling the others how he got mutilated by the whale and thus explaining his journey. The captain embodies the concept of the impostor who knows how to use his powers in order to achieve his goals. The suggested approach uses the theory of the mask. Identity can be true or false, the mask being either a part of human nature as its faithful mirroring, or an instrument meant to hide the true intentions or ideas. If the mask is honestly assumed, then it becomes a concrete element in the nature of the person. The negative masks attract by their complexity and ambiguity, as they become a way of hiding the true nature of the protagonist. An impostor is a man who knows very well how to convince the audience of the truth of his words. Ahab tells the crew about his previous unfortunate meeting with Moby Dick, showing them the ivory leg as proof. Apparently it is a just revenge and the crew reacts accordingly. Actually, the captain plays a dangerous game on the members of the *Pequod*. He uses the double quality of language, namely the language of truth and the language of subversion. Symbolically speaking, the language of truth corresponds to the characters wearing an honest mask as their narrative discourse matches the expectations of the public. This sort of language is simple, analytical, and its ultimate purpose is to morally improve the audience. The language of subversion is more challenging, even fascinating. It creates a dangerous illusion by its duplicity as the speaker never renders his true intentions. The language of subversion plays upon the naivety of the audience and it belongs to characters who know very well the weaknesses of human nature. Ahab creates a sort of theatrical performance due to which he convinces most of the members of the crew. He assumes the identity of a sufferer until his goal is reached and the game is ended. Ahab's motivation to chase Moby Dick is clearly presented. "The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung. Ahab did not fall down and worship it; but deliriously transferring its idea to the abhorred white whale, he pitted himself, all mutilated, against it!" (Melville, 153) The passage points to the monomania



tormenting the captain as perceived by Ishmael the narrator. Yet, a true trickster masters the art of using the appropriate mask and language in order to manipulate the audience in his favor. The instigator performs also the role of the guardian of the threshold, selecting the chosen ones and facilitating their access to the sacred space. Ahab symbolically performs a rite of passage which eventually makes the crew fall into the abyss of the sea. The unknown space the ship enters belongs to the white whale and it is forbidden to common people. The final punishment comes as the result of the defying act performed by the characters. It was already suggested in the doubloon coin, an image of duplicity and of falsehood.

Water functions as a liquid frontier, standing for life and death. According to Eliade, the water of life is linked to the sea, to the concept of fertility and regeneration of the universe. "Waters represent the primordial substance out of which all beings are born and to where all of them return. They will never exist alone because waters are always germinating, containing in their non-fragmentary unity the potential of all forms." (Eliade, 183) The water of life also illustrates the cosmic theme of the world creation. The water of death is associated to the concept of fall, natural calamities, and the apocalyptic floods. Ahab's position as a negative trickster transforms the fertile waters of the sea into a tomb for the crew, a death anticipated by the coffin built by Queequeg. This coffin, initially made because the crew thought the harpooner will die of fever, saves Ishmael's life. He uses it as a life buoy after the final disaster. Thus, the water of death becomes the water of life, just like in the cycle of destruction and regeneration of the old stories. Ahab's mistake is not only the fact that he follows Moby Dick everywhere, even in the forbidden seas, but the fact that he entered the sacred space of the mythical whale unprepared. This space belongs to the white whale which by a strange action of destiny becomes Ahab's totem animal. They share in the mystery surrounding them, in the scar they have inscribed on their bodies, in the passion with which they seek to destroy each other. Before appearing on the ship's deck Ahab was heard by the crew walking along his cabin and still he was invisible to them. Moby Dick rules the waters of the forbidden sacred space and still almost nobody sees it. The fatal

mistake of the captain is that he does not make the difference between spaces. He applies the rules of profane space in the realm of sacred space. In ritual terms man can transcend the limited sphere of the profane and become part of the sacred by accepting its rules. Sacred space is homogeneous and neutral, while profane space is fragmentary and catches the seeker in its labyrinth. The journey of initiation is the way in which man prepares himself for the ultimate encounter as the journey is more important than what you find at the end of it. Ahab's story reveals the pattern of a man punished for his wish to catch the master of the sacred space. In such a space the protagonist is open to receive and accept the signs and the messengers sent to him. The consequence of disobedience is spiritual exile. During his first meeting with Moby Dick Ahab lost the chance of being accepted in the sacred space as he misunderstood the patterns of the sacred and treated them as being profane. In the realm of the sacred no mistakes are accepted and forgiveness does not exist. Due to such guilt one can interpret the captain's obsession as a sort of spiritual blindness which he is fated to by the cosmic powers. On the other hand, Ahab suffers another type of loss. A basic ritual concept is the myth of the eternal return. In performing exemplary acts man detaches himself from profane time and reenters sacred time. Once he found himself in the presence of the sacred man will always try to return to that place and period of time in which he had the chance to see beyond the threshold of the common existence. Thus, symbolically man becomes part of cyclic time which helps him to endure more easily the passing of years. In Ahab's case it is the wish to relive the first encounter with Moby Dick and to do what he did not have the possibility to do before : to hunt and kill the white whale. The deeds of Ahab can be interpreted in the negative light of the man dominated by one thought which acquires the quality of an exemplary act. Yet, this is only a dream because the return does not coincide with the expectations of the traveler. In this context Ahab can be identified with the eternal wanderer, traveling the world in order to accomplish his dream.

The final chapters of the book narrate about the fatal reunion of the two: the whale god and the wandering man. It is as if the two extremes once touched each other

and they have been looking for the other ever since. They both are solitary beings, spiritually inscrutable and live a self-imposed exile. In the story Ahab appears late on the deck, just like Moby Dick appears late in the text. Moby Dick's rules are not challenged by anyone, while Ishmael or Starbuck dare to question the decisions of the captain. The final hunting is emblematic for this initiation story. It lasts for three days, and it ends with the complete destruction of the ship. Three is a magical number, and it usually represents life and hope. In this case the connotation is reversed as the third day coincides with the fall. In the chapter entitled *The Third Day. The Chase*, reunion is achieved in a tragic way, human and god bound together by the same fate. "At length as the craft was cast to one side, and ran ranging along with the White Whale's flank, he seemed strangely oblivious of its advance and Ahab was fairly within the smoky mountain mist. The harpoon was darted; the stricken whale flew forward; with igniting velocity the line ran through the groove. Ahab stooped to clear it; he did clear it, but the flying turn caught him round the neck, and he was shot out of the boat ere the crew knew he was gone." (Melville, 395-397) The sea becomes the grave of the ship and the crew, a water of death reminding of the great mythical floods. Ishmael only survives because he has a narrative role to accomplish. Ritual harmony is eventually restored and balance is found again as catharsis follows the ritual sacrifice. "Buoyed up by that coffin, for almost one whole day and night, I floated on a soft and dirge-like main. On the second day a sail drew near, nearer, and picked me up at last. It was the devious-cruising Rachel, that in her retracing search after her missing children, only found another orphan." (Melville, 399) Ultimately, Ishmael accomplished his initiation, though in a tragic way. It coincides with maturity and spiritual growth. He accomplishes the rite of passage by crossing the threshold during the period spent at sea (one day and night) which in ritual terms represents the cosmic cycle of death and regeneration. Though in the letter to Hawthorne Melville confessed that he had written "a wicked book," the message is that of a continuous search for an answer which is as elusive and inscrutable as the white whale.

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