

We Are All Aboard the Pequod

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By Chris Hedges

The most prescient portrait of the American character and our ultimate fate as a species is found in Herman Melville's "Moby Dick." Melville makes our murderous obsessions, our hubris, violent impulses, moral weakness and inevitable self-destruction visible in his chronicle of a whaling voyage. He is our foremost oracle. He is to us what William Shakespeare was to Elizabethan England or Fyodor Dostoyevsky to czarist Russia.

Our country is given shape in the form of the ship, the Pequod, named after the [Indian tribe exterminated \(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pequot_people\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pequot_people) in 1638 by the Puritans and their Native American allies. The ship's 30-man crew—there were 30 states in the Union when Melville wrote the novel—is a mixture of races and creeds. The object of the hunt is a massive white whale, Moby Dick, which, in a previous encounter, maimed the ship's captain, Ahab, by biting off one of his legs. The self-destructive fury of the quest, much like that of the one we are on, assures the Pequod's destruction. And those on the ship, on some level, know they are doomed—just as many of us know that a consumer culture based on corporate profit, limitless exploitation and the continued extraction of fossil fuels is doomed.

"If I had been downright honest with myself," Ishmael admits, "I would have seen very plainly in my heart that I did but half fancy being committed this way to so long a voyage, without once laying my eyes on the man who was to be the absolute dictator of it, so soon as the ship sailed out upon the open sea. But when a man suspects any wrong, it sometimes happens that if he be already involved in the matter, he insensibly strives to cover up his suspicions even from himself. And much this way it was with me. I said nothing, and tried to think nothing."

We, like Ahab and his crew, rationalize madness. All calls for prudence, for halting the march toward environmental catastrophe, for sane limits on carbon emissions, are ignored or ridiculed. Even with the flashing red lights before us, the increased droughts, rapid melting of glaciers and Arctic ice, monster tornadoes, vast hurricanes, crop failures, floods, raging wildfires and soaring temperatures, we bow slavishly before hedonism and greed and the enticing illusion of limitless power, intelligence and prowess. We believe in the eternal wellspring of material progress. We are our own idols. Nothing will halt our voyage; it seems to us to have been decreed by natural law. "The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run," Ahab declares. We have surrendered our lives to corporate forces that ultimately serve systems of death. Microbes will inherit the earth.

In our decline, hatred becomes our primary lust, our highest form of patriotism and a form of eroticism. We are made supine by hatred and fear. We deploy vast resources to hunt down jihadists and terrorists, real and phantom. We destroy our civil society in the name of a war on terror. We persecute those, from Julian Assange to Bradley Manning to Edward Snowden, who expose the dark machinations of power. We believe, because we have externalized evil, that we can purify the earth. We are blind to the evil within us. Melville's description of Ahab is a description of the bankers, corporate boards, politicians, television personalities and generals who through the power of propaganda fill our heads with seductive images of glory and lust for wealth and power. We are consumed with self-induced obsessions that spur us toward self-annihilation.

After the attacks of 9/11, [Edward Said \(http://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/26/obituaries/26SAID.html\)](http://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/26/obituaries/26SAID.html) saw the parallel with "Moby Dick" and wrote in the London newspaper The Observer:

Osama bin Laden's name and face have become so numbingly familiar to Americans as in effect to obliterate any history he and his shadowy followers might have had before they became stock symbols of everything loathsome and hateful to the collective imagination. Inevitably, then, collective passions are being funneled into a drive for war that uncannily resembles Captain Ahab in pursuit of Moby Dick, rather than what is going on, an imperial power injured for the first time, pursuing its interests systematically in what has become a suddenly reconfigured geography of conflict.

Ahab, as the historian Richard Slotkin points out in his book "Regeneration Through Violence," is "the true American hero, worthy to be captain of a ship whose wood could only be American." Melville offers us a vision, one that D.H. Lawrence later understood, of the inevitable fatality of white civilization brought about by our ceaseless lust for material progress, imperial expansion, white supremacy and exploitation of nature.

Melville, who had been a sailor on clipper ships and whalers, was keenly aware that the wealth of industrialized societies came from the exploited of the earth. "Yes; all these brave houses and flowery gardens came from the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian oceans," Ishmael says of New England's prosperity. "One and all, they were harpooned and dragged up hither from the bottom of the sea." All the authority figures on the ship are white men—Ahab, Starbuck, Flask and Stubb. The hard, dirty work, from harpooning to gutting the carcasses of the whales, is the task of the poor, mostly men of color.

Ahab, when he first appears on the quarterdeck after being in his cabin for the first few days of the voyage, holds up a doubloon, an extravagant gold coin, and promises it to the crew member who first spots the white whale. He knows that "the permanent constitutional condition of the manufactured man ... is sordidness." And he plays to this sordidness. The whale becomes a commodity, a source of personal

profit. A murderous greed, one that Starbuck denounces as “blasphemous,” grips the crew. Ahab’s obsession infects the ship.

“I see in him [Moby Dick] outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it,” Ahab tells Starbuck. “That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I’d strike the sun if it insulted me.”

Ahab conducts a dark Mass, a Eucharist of violence and blood, on the deck with the crew. He orders the men to circle around him. He makes them drink from a flagon that is passed from man to man, filled with draughts “hot as Satan’s hoof.” Ahab tells the harpooners to cross their lances before him. The captain grasps the harpoons and anoints the ships’ harpooners—Queequeg, Tashtego and Daggoo—his “three pagan kinsmen.” He orders them to detach the iron sections of their harpoons and fills the sockets “with the fiery waters from the pewter.” “Drink, ye harpooners! Drink and swear, ye men that man the deathful whaleboat’s bow—Death to Moby Dick! God hunt us all, if we do not hunt Moby Dick to his death!” And with the crew bonded to him in his infernal quest he knows that Starbuck is helpless “amid the general hurricane.” “Starbuck now is mine,” Ahab says, “cannot oppose me now, without rebellion.” “The honest eye of Starbuck,” Melville writes, “fell downright.”

The ship, described by Melville as a hearse, was painted black. It was adorned with gruesome trophies of the hunt, festooned with the huge teeth and bones of sperm whales. It was, Melville writes, a “cannibal of a craft, tricking herself forth in the chased bones of her enemies.” The fires used to melt the whale blubber at night turned the Pequod into a “red hell.” Our own raging fires, leaping up from our oil refineries and the explosions of our ordinance across the Middle East, bespeak our Stygian heart. And in our mad pursuit we ignore the suffering of others, just as Ahab does when he refuses to help the captain of a passing ship who is frantically searching for his son who has fallen overboard.

Ahab is described by Melville’s biographer Andrew Delbanco as “a suicidal charismatic who denounced as a blasphemer anyone who would deflect him from his purpose—an invention that shows no sign of becoming obsolete anytime soon.” Ahab has not only the heated rhetoric of persuasion; he is master of a terrifying internal security force on the ship, the five “dusky phantoms that seemed fresh formed out of air.” Ahab’s secret, private whale boat crew, which has a feral lust for blood, keeps the rest of the ship in abject submission. The art of propaganda and the use of brutal coercion, the mark of tyranny, define our lives just as they mark those on Melville’s ship. [C.L.R. James](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/C._L._R._James) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/C._L._R._James), for this reason, describes “Moby Dick” as “the biography of the last days of Adolf Hitler.”

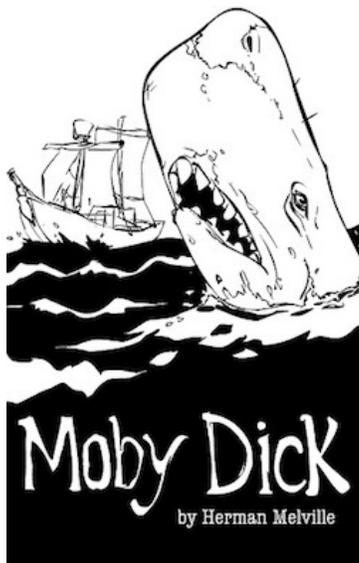
And yet Ahab is no simple tyrant. Melville toward the end of the novel gives us two glimpses into the internal battle between Ahab’s maniacal hubris and his humanity. Ahab, too, has a yearning for love. He harbors regrets over his deformed life. The black cabin boy Pip is the only crew member who evokes any tenderness in the captain. Ahab is aware of this tenderness. He fears its power. Pip functions as the Fool did in Shakespeare’s “King Lear.” Ahab warns Pip of Ahab. “Lad, lad,” says Ahab, “I tell thee thou must not follow Ahab now. The hour is coming when Ahab would not scare thee from him, yet would not have thee by him. There is that in thee, poor lad, which I feel too curing to my malady. Like cures like; and for this hunt, my malady becomes my most desired health. ... If thou speakest thus to me much more, Ahab’s purpose keels up in him. I tell thee no; it cannot be.” A few pages later, “untottering Ahab stood forth in the clearness of the morn; lifting his splintered helmet of a brow to the fair girl’s forehead of heaven. ... From beneath his slouched hat Ahab dropped a tear into the sea; nor did all the Pacific contain such wealth as that one wee drop.” Starbuck approaches him. Ahab, for the only time in the book, is vulnerable. He speaks to Starbuck of his “forty years on the pitiless sea! ... the desolation of solitude it has been. ... Why this strife of the chase? why weary, and palsy the arm at the oar, and the iron, and the lance? How the richer or better is Ahab now?” He thinks of his young wife—“I widowed that poor girl when I married her, Starbuck”—and of his little boy: “About this time—yes, it is his noon nap now—the boy vivaciously wakes; sits up in bed; and his mother tells him of me, of cannibal old me; how I am abroad upon the deep, but will yet come back to dance him again.”

Ahab’s thirst for dominance, vengeance and destruction, however, overpowers these faint regrets of lost love and thwarted compassion. Hatred wins. “What is it,” Ahab finally asks, “what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what cozening, hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time. ...”

Melville knew that physical courage and moral courage are distinct. One can be brave on a whaling ship or a battlefield, yet a coward when called on to stand up to human evil. Starbuck elucidates this peculiar division. The first mate is tormented by his complicity in what he foresees as Ahab’s “impious end.” Starbuck, “while generally abiding firm in the conflict with seas, or winds, or whales, or any of the ordinary irrational horrors of the world, yet cannot withstand those more terrific, because spiritual terrors, which sometimes menace you from the concentrating brow of an enraged and mighty man.”

And so we plunge forward in our doomed quest to master the forces that will finally smite us. Those who see where we are going lack the fortitude to rebel. Mutiny was the only salvation for the Pequod’s crew. It is our only salvation. But moral cowardice turns us into hostages.

Moby Dick rams and sinks the Pequod. The waves swallow up Ahab and all who followed him, except one. A vortex formed by the ship’s descent collapses, “and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago.”



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"Moby Dick" book cover illustration.

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