

Ahab's Sentimental Moment

Moby Dick's Captain Ahab is a notoriously driven character who, in his relentless quest for vengeance against Moby Dick, walks the line of obsessive madness. Ahab's sole quest in the novel is vengeance against the white whale. The monomaniacal mission seems, in fact, a clear defiance against God and fate itself. Ahab appears to have willingly resigned himself as a "tragic hero," doomed to fail in his quest. However, one rather sentimental moment presents itself towards the novel's conclusion. The passage in which Ahab momentarily doubts himself, misses his family and is tempted to accept inner peace, or religion, is brimming with emotion. Herman Melville's strong use of evocative language, unexpected sentimentalism, and alluring personification leads the reader to double think Ahab's no-looking-back battle against God. This passage suggests that, perhaps, Ahab has moments of doubt and sorrow like the rest of us. If so, Ahab becomes a much richer and compelling character with hidden layers to unfold in his motivation to kill Moby Dick.

The passage opens with a description of Ahab as he has been presented thus far: unflinching and deeply rooted in his mission. Ahab is "tied up and twisted; gnarled and knotted with wrinkles" with a "splintered brow." Melville's diction choice here evokes images of an ancient tree, rough and distorted, steadfast and unshakable. These descriptions also allude to Ahab's ship, the Pequod. Ahab has, in his quest for Moby Dick, become one with his ship. He has become a part of its character and structure, just as knotted and gnarled as the ship itself. Like an old tree or his weather-worn ship, Ahab has been contorted by his lifelong mission. He has lost a leg, left his family, and renounced God, yet

remains steadfast in his determination to kill Moby Dick. Melville's word choice reminds the reader of Ahab's character and what we've seen of him thus far. Yet, what has splintered Ahab's brow? It is not merely knobby or twisted, but broken and fractured, suggesting a slowly deteriorating resolve. The reader finds that, for some reason, Ahab *does* have something holding him back from wholeheartedly chasing vengeance. Can Ahab have a conscience? Can he be remorseful of the life and ideals he has given up for his quest?

Ahab's splintered brow, or the possibility of his remorse, is reinforced when he "watched how his shadow in the water sank and sank to his gaze." Ahab has had a strong sense of self and purpose thus far in his quest. This is reinforced by his deep-rooted, knotted, steadfast character description in the passage's opening. Yet, Ahab suddenly has difficulty finding his shadow in the sea's reflection. His shadow is unclear and murky, as is his sense of self at the moment. Melville mentions the water's "profundity," which Ahab unsuccessfully strove to pierce. The word "profundity" insinuates understanding, wisdom, or insightfulness. Melville portrays the sea with these living characteristics to add deeper meaning to Ahab's inability to pierce its depths. If the sea was merely "deep" or "shadowy," Ahab's inability could be attributed to the bright, reflective sun or poor eyesight. Instead, the sea appears to hold great secrets and knowledge. Perhaps this knowledge pertains to methods to defeat Moby Dick, or even the secret to life. Regardless, Ahab can't tap into the sea's knowledge. His inability to pierce its wisdom correlates to his inability to see his shadow. Ahab's resolve is momentarily shaken, his strong identity is murky. The passage opens with these subtle hints of Ahab's emotional moment to

contrast what the reader has seen of Ahab thus far in the novel. As the passage continues, the reader becomes aware of *what* is tweaking Ahab's heartstrings.

Miriam and Martha, Ahab's children, are introduced to the novel in this passage. Their reference serves two purposes: to set the tone for a sentimental moment while reminding Ahab of his doomed mission. It's fitting that Ahab only thinks of his children during this rare moment of sorrow. They remind him of what he has missed over the years. Any close relationship, fatherly role, or love affair has been sacrificed to hunt the white whale. The pairing of Ahab's remorseful, "splintered brow" and ache for his children suggests the sentimental. For a moment, losing his children causes more pain than the possibility of failing to kill Moby Dick. Although Ahab has willingly forgone his life for his mission, at this moment, the idea causes Ahab grief. Miriam and Martha also reference the Bible's Miriam, or Mary, and Martha. The two were sisters and housed Jesus in his visit to Bethany. This blatant Biblical reference perhaps serves to remind Ahab of his mission to defy God. *Ahab* is Miriam and Martha's father. Not God, as metaphorically exists in the Bible. Although Ahab misses his children and the life he could lead with them, they serve as reminders to why he gave them up. Thus, Miriam and Martha's memory both splinters Ahab's brow further and tightens his resolve to defeat Moby Dick, and God.

Ahab's momentary sentimentalism is heightened by the allure of heaven, personified as a feminine "enchanted air." This "glad, happy air" endeavors to tempt Ahab from his mission against God, accept inner peace, and reach heaven upon death. Her lure is intensified by her clear personification as a thinking, living, breathing entity with the power to consciously appeal to Ahab. She actively implores

Ahab to turn away from vengeance with strokes and caresses, affectionate arms, and joyous sobs. She directly contrasts Ahab's knotted character, reminding him what fulfillment could be like. Everything about this representation of heaven is appealing. Her smooth, graceful manner never falters in her moment of powerful persuasion. Even her sobs are joyous and unburdened by revenge or inner turmoil. The air's human characteristics contribute to the appeal's intensity. Denying or ignoring human emotion is much more difficult than denying, say, an inanimate object or idea. The appeal for Ahab to give up his mission becomes a personal request, an intimate exchange. Melville's personification of heaven splinters Ahab's brow more than the recalled idea or theory of heaven could.

Ahab's wooden resolve seems to crack, for a moment, from the "enchanted air" and memories of his children. Yet, thus far, he has internalized his sadness. He hasn't spoken or acted on his emotions, and hasn't shown that the temptation of fulfillment has truly shaken his resolve. The reader can only assume from Melville's word choice and character descriptions so far. Towards the end of the passage, however, "one wee [tear] drop" rolls from "beneath his slouched hat." This concluding sentence contributes a climactic end to Ahab's sudden inner remorse and sentimentality; it proves his sentiments. Ahab does not shed tears, plural, or cry or sob. *One* tear drop rolls down his cheek, hiding secretly beneath his hat. His tear is exceedingly small. One, singular tear drop is minute to begin with. Furthermore, this one tear drop, tiny already, is described as "wee." This exaggeratedly small tear showcases more of Ahab's sorrow than a torrent of tears could have. All his internalized thoughts, emotions, regrets, and sorrows are concentrated in this one. It's a powerful tear that contains the

weight of Ahab's sentimental moment. This tear proves that Ahab *has* acknowledged heaven's allure, his children's absence of a father, and what he has given up to pursue Moby Dick.

This passage clearly showcases a hidden aspect of Ahab's character. Although Ahab has seemed stubbornly steadfast in his mission, even he has moments of doubt and regret. Upon closer inspection of the passage, the reader can determine the reasoning and thought process behind Ahab's emotions. He misses his children and his human ties, is suffering from a murky sense of self, and is tempted to pursue personal fulfillment instead of vengeance. Melville's word choice and use of personifications add depth and reason to these sentimental experiences. As a result, Ahab becomes a more relatable and complex character.