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Moby Dick: The Narratorial Enigma

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Abstract:

Moby Dick, The masterpiece that names Melville, The proud author of the work is said to be narrated in first person by Ishmael, the Narrator –Character. Ishmael even after being named as the sole narrator of the work fails at times as the narrator of the work. He largely happens to be like a chameleon narrator. Moby Dick: The narratorial Enigma is the product of my sincere study to find an answer to this dilemma of the narrator.

Every work has a hidden agenda; a puzzle like enigma which is partially or impartially created by its creator; but even the creator is insufficient to realize that puzzle and unlock it. The key always remains a sole property to him; the ultimate creator; who is behind every creation. The creator is dead after the creation; it is then the reader begins...as it is echoed in the words of Roland Barthes: "death of the author and the birth of the reader." The unravishing storm in the mind of the creator finds its calmness with the birth of his creation; which is awaiting innumerable rebirths.

Herman Melville's classic tale about the whale, *Moby Dick*, is the sole work that blessed its creator with the boon of immortality. Centuries after its birth the work is still a puzzle; a puzzle hard and challenging; eating the sleeps of millions always. Each puzzle dies to give a new birth which turns out to be more challenging and harder than the previous ones. It is a genius of a kind, one of the greatest whale story ever written is truly an encyclopedic source for a newborn whaler.

Melville's *Moby Dick* which Richard Chase described, "as the most startling and most characteristic product of the American imagination is a strange and difficult work. Of the nine novels he published in his lifetime *Moby Dick* stood between his successes and failures. It was since 1919 that it began to be regarded as a masterpiece. It is not only a big book; is also a peculiarly full and rich one, and from the very beginning it conveys a sense of abundance, of high creative power, that exhilarates and enlarges the imagination.

Many characters are named after the Old Testament prophets and kings, these are all stronger but the mightiest of them all, captain Ahab, challenged the nature. The work reflects his passionate learning, personal style and a steady insight into the forgotten connections with the past. The book is rather an experience of the quest rather than the quest for the whale.

Moby Dick is a strange mixture of fantasy and realism based upon the pacific whaling industry, the major commercial activity in the mid nineteenth century America. The narrator who calls himself Ishmael, an outcast wanderer, ships abroad the whaling vessel Pequod in New Bedford. The work is the journey of the sane officers dominated completely by their insane captain's obsessed determination to pursue, one particular whale that had previously destroyed the captains boat and left him mutilated in body with an artificial leg.

The book is named after the whale, Moby Dick. Melville elevated a local custom which otherwise was likely to be lost by attributing it with a shield like fictive element of the quest for the leviathan. It is a revenge tale about the revengeful quest of a wounded man for the powerful force of nature; Moby Dick; and the perishing memories of the questors and the wounded questor into the deep perils of the sea, who engulfs all; leaving one as the sole survivor and witness to unveil and unfold the awful revenge tragedy of stubbornness that outlived the American imagination.

"Call me Ishmael", the novel opens with this statement. The beginning statement of the work leads the reader to the sole survivor; spared to accomplish the task of narration; Ishmael, the narrator of the work. The novel unleashes not just a tale of quest instead the reality of such a quest, the life and energy behind the quest. Every description opens a clear picture of the incident described. Now the question is, was Ishmael sufficient for the job? Can we crown him as the sole narrator of the work or is it a narratorial enigma?

The act or process of telling the particulars of the story is referred to as narration. It is the fiction writing mode whereby the narrator communicates directly with the reader. Ishmael is the so called narrator of *Moby Dick*, who is the speaker or voice of the narrative discourse. He is the single voice or rather the single mind from whose pool of thoughts the whole story is unfolded.

Melville maintained the first person narratorial voice in the early chapters, in which we get a picture of Ishmael, his meeting and acquaintance with queequeg; all these deals with Ishmael's life, queequeg's and his adventures which finds a mark when he boards the ship, but after boarding the ship the narration changes and the narrative focuses more on the cetological details than the plot. Ishmael the narrator and character fails to remain constant, he is seen disappearing without reasons. Ishmael constantly failed

to protect his role as the first person narrator of the book. Even though he resumes the thread of narration he largely becomes a silent figure.

Melville, through *Moby Dick* has given to the world an encyclopedia on whaling. He has stored such minute details of whaling and has coronated the profession. Almost half of the book details the profession of whaling, the life of whalers, description of the sea, information on killing a whale, extraction of whale oil and in a word, all about whaling. These chapters marginalize the first person narrator to a kind of peripheral narrator employed to do the narration. These chapters in fact could have been narrated by Melville himself. The major reason for not considering Ishmael as the narrator of these chapters is his inefficiency in the profession of whaling and the over powering efficiency and experience of Melville.

Melville after the death of his father at the age of twelve was forced to maintain himself. He worked as a bank clerk, a salesman, a farmhand, a schoolteacher, but in none of these jobs was he able to earn more than a bare maintenance for himself. In June 1839 he took the momentous step of going to the sea. He was attracted by the idea of sea faring life. He stepped the St.Lawrence, a combined cargo and passenger vessel to Liverpool. Later he shipped abroad the whaler Acushnet from New Bedford as a member of the crew, bound to the Pacific Ocean and remained at sea for few years. He had inured the perils and rigors of whale hunt, had also lived for a period among the savage people. Melville thus having a firsthand experience to the reality of whaling narrated these chapters with such brevity and clarity laying before the reader a clear picture of the whaling industry. Ishmael even being a scholar would fail to explain these chapters in such detail because of his lack of experience. Ishmael is marginalized in these chapters, where Melville employed a first person peripheral narrator who can be Melville himself to detail on whaling.

The next narratorial enigma arises in those chapters in the form of soliloquies, descriptions and conversations, where the author employed the omniscient narrator. Each character is described in detail, all about their internal characters and external appearances. Narrator gives a detailed description of the mates, especially Starbuck, Stubb, Ahab and Flask. Ishmael seeing these characters for the first is insufficient enough to describe them. Then chapters in the form of conversations between characters, like Stubb describing about his dream to Flask, conversation between Ahab and carpenter, Ahab's conversation with the captains of other ships. These conversations are explained in such detail like the narrator have heard and seen them. Ishmael cannot come around on all these occasions and overhear them. Here too Melville has employed the omniscient narrator who is outside the text.

The author has employed devices like soliloquies to bring the deeper thoughts and reactions of the characters. A first person narrator would fail to read the inner thoughts of the characters. Only a person outside the text could narrate these chapters in detail. Towards the end chapters describing the chase for Moby Dick is explained in complete detail. Ishmael being part of the operation would fail to explain those chapters in that detail, only a person who is outside the action could explain the whole action.

Melville thus employed a third person omniscient narrator in the chapters. Switching to a third person narrator allows Melville to show the reader such moments which transpire outside the narrator's point of view but which are still interesting to the reader and help in deciphering the other characters in the story. Melville needs a third person omniscient narrator as the character grows larger and the story more complex, which could get into the thread of narrative anytime.

Melville has employed an eye of god narration in the work where the speaker or writer assumes like he has god like knowledge. Melville has presented before his readers this narratorial enigma. Ishmael is like a mouth piece employed by Melville to complete the tale and probably to add to its realistic nature. Ishmael thus can be named as the marginalized narrator of the work. Melville has created a profound and philosophically complicated tale set in a world of largely uneducated working class men. One can only assume Melville to be the omniscient narrator and the peripheral narrator; but is it really Melville himself is still an enigma and the narratorial enigma continues...*Moby Dick* with all its complexities and varied natures, still remains to occupy one of the greatest place in world literature.

References

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