

## Chasing the white whale

“Where lies the final harbor, whence we unmoor no more? In what rapt ether sails the world, of which the weariest will never weary? Where is the foundling’s father hidden? Our souls are like those orphans whose unwedded mothers die in bearing them: the secret of our paternity lies in their grave, and we must there to learn it.” (*Moby Dick*, ch 114; by Herman Melville, 1819-1891)<sup>1</sup>

*Moby Dick* is one of the two greatest works in English literature;<sup>2</sup> the other is *Middlemarch* (1871-72)<sup>3</sup> by George Eliot (1819-1880).<sup>4</sup> *Moby Dick* memorably and humorously opens with the young narrator’s words, “Call me Ishmael.” He is down in life’s dumps, “a damp, drizzly November in my soul”<sup>5</sup> (ch 1), and wants to sail the seas on a three-year whaling voyage. Perhaps, by doing something different, he might find meaning in his life.

Ishmael then relates the voyage of the whaleship Pequod, commanded by Captain Ahab. The monomaniacal Ahab has only one purpose in life: revenge on Moby Dick, a ferocious, white whale, who has destroyed Ahab’s ship and severed his leg at the knee. The great white whale is no mere fish (as the whalers call him), but symbolic of our life’s search for meaning.

But for Ahab, the white whale is ambiguously both evil and God incarnate, all that is bad in the world, the imperfection in which God has left the world, and the pain and powerlessness of man in such circumstances. Indeed, the whole tale is coloured by biblical allusions and nuances. A Buddhist, however, would see this theme as our search to understand suffering, and so overcome it. But Ahab, in true God-like wrath, vows to destroy this evil, the white whale, that he sees as the source of all his sufferings.

Ishmael, like Ahab, is seeking the meaning in his own life. But unlike Ahab’s fixation on killing what he sees as having hurt him, Ishmael is good-natured, open-minded, looking forward to his new adventures in the open seas. Melville’s language is profoundly beautiful, even poetic, as he realistically details the whale-hunting and process of extracting whale oil, as well as life on the ship of culturally diverse crew, as the book explores class and social status, good and evil, the existence of God and meaning of life.

Ishmael is also a musser. He not only tells us Ahab’s story, but looks deep into life itself, often in ways we would have never imagined, and so taps deep into our being. This is what makes great literature, rivalling (even outdoing) some of the great religious teachings. Read, for example, his deeply moving musing on “The Whiteness of the Whale” (ch 42). Feel the deep emotion behind these lines:

“...the butterfly cheeks of young girls; all these are but subtle deceits, not actually inherent in substance, but only laid on from without; so that all deified nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within...” (ch 42).

An informed Buddhist may blush at the familiarity of the musing here. For, we see this as a reflection on impermanence, and more. Notice the poetic flow of words and unity of ideas, and notice, too, it is still only *one* sentence, actually an unfinished sentence, one that fills

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.princeton.edu/~batke/moby/moby\\_114.html](http://www.princeton.edu/~batke/moby/moby_114.html). For *Moby Dick* audio readings: <https://librivox.org/moby-dick-by-herman-melville/> (public domain). If English is not your first language, you might like to listen to the reading while following the text, pausing whenever necessary to connect ideas and look up difficult words and phrases.

<sup>2</sup> D H Lawrence, in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, says that that “it is the greatest book of the sea ever written” (1923:168).

<sup>3</sup> See Reflection, “Middlemarch,” R352, 2014: [link](#).

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, both Melville and Eliot (nee Marian Evans) were born in 1819, the year Singapore was founded by Stamford Raffles.

<sup>5</sup> “Soul” here refers to what makes our lives meaningful, especially in terms of truth and beauty.

almost a page! Beautiful truth and truthful beauty flow in the minds of writers and the inspired unreined, so that they simply have to tell or pen them. Imagine, too, this was a time before we had the facility of the finger-tapping word-processor.

Amongst the book's most beautiful lines are those which open this reflection. These are Ishmael's musing on his own experiences. Ishmael was a Christian and is no more when he narrates his story. In fact, we almost see him as sympathizing with Ahab's obsession with killing the whale, a symbol for God in the novel. Ishmael resorts to biblical allusions to affirm his own disbelief in God: the Great White Whale is not what people make him out to be:

"Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will. But if I know not even the tail of this whale, how understand his head? much more, how comprehend his face, when face he has none? Thou shalt see my back parts, my tail, he seems to say, but my face shall not be seen.<sup>6</sup> But I cannot completely make out his back parts; and hint what he will about his face, I say again he has no face." (ch 86)<sup>7</sup>

The whale (God) has turned his back on the world by not showing his face. Although some people may fervently believe that God does exist, he has turned his back on them, too. As a result, God is not present on earth to help us understand what kind of God he is. Ishmael realizes and declares that we don't see God's works because there is no God to do them: he has no face, and as a result Ishmael doesn't know God and never will.

The erstwhile Christian Ishmael abandons his beliefs in an act of free will, and concludes that God does not exist. Hence, "[o]ur souls are like...orphans" (ch 114; above) and we are alone,<sup>8</sup> only having a "Siamese connexion with a plurality of other mortals" (ch 72).<sup>9</sup> Yet, Ishmael sees how all life is intimately interconnected.

He would make a very good Buddhist: indeed, Ishmael is a prototype of the modern Buddhist, a wise seeker, western or eastern, African or southern, a modern everyman who discovers the Dharma, and so discovers himself. He discovers that there is really no free will: we are all nose-led by our own white whales. Ultimately, if we look deep into how we live, we are likely to understand how others live, too. Then, we begin to see that there is really no will to be free with or from.

Even if we do not believe in God, a God, or gods, or we are not religious at all, we could still be chasing our great white whale. This is when we put the self first – which means to imagine that we *have* something before we have even *found* it. We have religious people claiming to pray for world peace, for example, when they are neither at peace with themselves nor with their own rivals. Or, those who act as if they are enlightened, when they are still overwhelmed by craving and self-pride.

Here, to "seek the self" is the diametrical opposite of "self-seeking." To be self-seeking is to see oneself to the exclusion of others, even to exploit them without ever understanding the consequences of our quest. We think that our intentions are "good" despite the fact that we are really hurting others, and not spiritually progressing ourselves. To be "self-seeking" is to chase the great white whale. Like Ahab seeking Moby Dick, we would then be looking for answers to questions that have no answers.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This is a direct reference to the Bible (Exodus 33:20-23), where the biblical God is recorded, in human terms to have a body and limbs, but allows Moses to see only his "backside."

<sup>7</sup> See also Piya Tan, Reflection, "When God walks away," R332 2014: [link](#).

<sup>8</sup> See further, Reflection, "The lone Buddhists," R234 2012: [link](#).

<sup>9</sup> See Tony DePaolo, "Filling the Void: The Struggle for Meaning in Moby-Dick," <http://www.viterbo.edu/personalpages/faculty/RRuppel/symposium/Tony.html>.

<sup>10</sup> On questions that have no answers, see **Unanswered questions**, SD 40a.10: [link](#).

To seek the self is to learn to understand our own heart,<sup>11</sup> to learn and understand why we are chasing our great white whale. The self is only a word for the mind, or better, our heart. It is deep within us. This is where we must look. Just as we first catch sight of the whale by its spout, by its breath, so too we would truly see our heart through our breath.

Our breath is the safe ship in which we sail in our inner voyage. Our breath gently but surely blows into the sails of our heart, bringing us closer to self-awakening, the bright sun rising in the eastern horizon. We are heading for the safe harbour and home. Our white whale has been caught and liberated: we are it.

No wonder, then, after Melville completed his prose epic, *Moby Dick*, he wrote to his friend and writer Nathaniel Hawthorne, "I have written a wicked book, but I feel spotless as a lamb." (Nov 1851).<sup>12</sup> Inspired by Hawthorne, Melville in *Moby Dick* loudly says "NO! in thunder" to Christianity.<sup>13</sup>

R351 Simple Joys 253

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<sup>11</sup> See the story of the 30 good friends, SD 26.9 (1.1): [link](#).

<sup>12</sup> Letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, Nov 1851: <http://www.melville.org/letter7.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> Letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, Apr 1851: <http://www.melville.org/letter2.htm>.