

Get Off of My Cloud: Imagery, Ahab's God Complex, and the Hatred of Nature in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*

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WRITER'S COMMENT: *Moby-Dick* was neither the easiest nor the most entertaining read for me. So when Professor Kilgore assigned his ENL 158A class a research essay on one of its chapters, I had a hard time deciding what to write about. I chose the chapter "Ahab and the Carpenter" at random. However, the specific imagery involving Greek mythology and Roman politics caught my eye, and I knew that I wanted my essay to address these images directly. When I found his article on Ahab's hatred of nature, I started to wonder why Stephen C. Ausband only addressed the nature and mechanistic imagery and why Ahab would employ classical, nature, and mechanistic imagery in his dialogue, especially when talking about himself. The result of this train of thought was an extension of Ausband's analysis in which Ahab's hatred of nature is attributed to psychological issues that may have existed before *Moby-Dick* took his leg. While this novel is not my favorite, having this chance to combine my close-reading skills, my love for the classical era, and my interest in people's psychological states made this essay surprisingly engaging, and I hope that the readers feel the same way.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Stephanie Hoogstad's essay was written for my course on the American novel before 1900. The assignment asked students to do a close reading of one chapter from a novel in relationship to a scholarly source. The task was not merely to incorporate research but to present an original argument overlain against either a critic of the novel or a historical source relevant to it. Stephanie's essay is a mature, lucid, and smart response to the assignment. First of all, she tackles *Moby-Dick*, which is no easy thing; then she carefully and convincingly points out the limitations of one critic's view of Captain Ahab through textual evidence and analysis, offering her own reading in the process. This is exemplary work.

—John Kilgore, Department of English

In “The Whale and the Machine: An Approach to *Moby-Dick*,” Stephen C. Ausband argues that Captain Ahab’s isolation in Herman Melville’s novel “is due to misophusism,” or “hatred of the natural” (211). Focusing on mechanistic versus nature imagery, he says that Ahab’s obsession with revenge on Moby-Dick has made him a machine that hates all nature. Ausband discusses how Ahab’s conversations with the carpenter and the blacksmith—such as in Chapter 108, “Ahab and the Carpenter”—show that this hatred has caused a frustration with his natural, human weaknesses. Ausband’s assessment is valid; however, he neglects to see that the imagery in “Ahab and the Carpenter” offers a psychological explanation for this hatred. A closer reading of “Ahab and the Carpenter” reveals that the use of regal/godly, nature, and mechanistic imagery implies that Ahab’s “misophusism” ultimately stems from a god complex.

The regal/godly imagery in reference to Ahab, the blacksmith, and the carpenter allows the reader to see Ahab’s god complex. Ahab uses this imagery to refer to himself, especially in Chapter 108. For example, in a rant, Ahab says that he is “proud as a Greek god” and “so rich, [he] could have given bid for bid with the wealthiest Praetorians at the auction of the Roman empire (which was the world’s)” (Melville 360). While the word “proud” in the first image may hint that his pride is merely as great as a god’s, the deeper implication is that Ahab thinks he is as magnificent as a god. The second image links him to Praetorians. In a footnote to *Moby-Dick*, Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker say that Praetorians were the guard who chose the emperor (360n5); Ahab himself says that the Roman Empire was the world’s empire, so he sees the Praetorians as the appointers of the world’s emperor. By saying he “could have given bid for bid” (360) with them, Ahab indicates that he thinks he is at least as rich—most likely richer—than the Praetorians and, therefore, more influential than the most influential of the ancient world. While these statements may be read as only demonstrating Ahab’s hubris, the godly imagery for the blacksmith and the carpenter suggests that his complex is much stronger than excessive pride. Ahab refers to the blacksmith as “Prometheus” and the carpenter as “manmaker” (359); Ausband says that they are considered “partners in the business of man-making” (203). Since Ahab equates them to a great, titan-like creator, the reader might think that he looks up to the blacksmith and the carpenter as gods. However, he still orders them about as their superior. He tells the carpenter how to do his job, giving him commands like “there; keep

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thy finger on it" (Melville 359) as he is measuring the leg. Ahab also commissions the blacksmith for "a pair of steel shoulder-blades" (359) and a metal man. These orders show that Ahab thinks he knows better than these professionals and that he can command them in their own fields. This places him above them and, as he regards them as titans, makes him the god of the gods. Therefore, this imagery shows that Ahab is not just very proud but also thinks he is an infallible, all-knowing god.

Ahab's nature imagery builds on the regal/godly imagery's base for his god complex; it shows that Ahab feels that he is above nature and resents that he must rely on it. One instance of Ahab's demeaning nature is in this comment to the carpenter: "a very tidy, and, I may say, an extremely gentlemanlike sort of business thou art in here, carpenter;—or would'st thou rather work in clay" (359). One reading of the passage is that Ahab is comparing the carpenter's work to the creation myth of man, since God made Adam out of clay, but there is another possible reading. The "or" in the statement can be read as Ahab saying that the carpenter can do one or the other, not both. This reading would make calling the carpenter's work "very tidy" and "extremely gentlemanlike" an insult to the nature image in the latter half of the statement, and it would seem that Ahab thinks worse of this nature-oriented work. Ahab more directly places himself above nature in his departing rant to the carpenter, when he says, "I would be free as air" (360). Ahab is saying that if there were not certain restrictions on him, he would be on the same level as air. Air exists above and supports all nature; therefore, Ahab says that he could and should be on a level above nature, which would cause it to be dependent on him, not the other way around.

However, Ahab also admits that he is dependent on and influenced by nature, which frustrates him to the point of hating it. After building himself up as a god-like man, he says, "and yet I owe for the flesh in the tongue I brag with" (360). This statement shows that Ahab grudgingly sees that he owes his whole existence to nature, even though he still thinks himself a god. He even sees that he owes nature for his unnatural leg: "yet standing debtor to this blockhead for a bone to stand on" (360). The term "blockhead" connects the carpenter to nature by saying his head is like a wooden block, and so he is an aspect of nature to which Ahab is indebted. Ausband argues that Ahab's leg is "mechanical, artificial, a product of the 'man-makers,' the carpenter and the blacksmith" (204). However, while it is molded by men, the material of the leg—bone—comes from nature,

so Ahab is once again indebted to nature. This fact, when it collides with Ahab's god complex, makes him despise nature to the point that he wants nothing to do with it. He would "dissolve [himself] down to one small, compendious vertebra" (Melville 360) so that he would need minimal support from nature. He also wishes to no longer remember what nature has cost him, to avoid remembering that it has made him more dependent. He asks the carpenter, "Canst thou not drive that old Adam away" (360). While Ausband is correct to say that this shows that "he would be rid of the softness and fallibility of flesh" because he is frustrated with "a weakness inherent in a merely human body" (204), the desire comes from a complex that would ideally have him independent of those things he considers beneath him yet beyond his control.

The mechanistic imagery in the text supports Ahab's feelings of superiority towards nature and explains that his god complex causes him to prefer the mechanical. The strongest instance of mechanistic imagery is when Ahab orders the blacksmith to make him "a complete man after a desirable pattern":

Imprimis, fifty feet high in his socks; then, chest modeled after the Thames Tunnel; then, legs with roots to 'em, to stay in one place; then, arms three feet through the wrist; no heart at all, brass forehead, and about a quarter of an acre of fine brains [...] put a sky-light on top of his head to illuminate inwards. (Melville 359)

As he calls this statue "a desirable pattern" for man, it implies that Ahab thinks this plan is better than nature's; therefore, Ahab thinks he is a better creature-designer than nature. This belief makes him seem like a god. Ausband points out that, except for "legs with roots to 'em," this plan is completely void of nature. Ausband says that this choice gives the statue "qualities of both a giant tree and the Colossus at Rhodes, qualities shared by Ahab himself" and that this parallel makes the statue an ideal version of Ahab (203). Considering this reading, one can see Ahab's god complex in that he thinks that he could design the nature in him (his body) better than nature did. However, Ausband's reading does not consider two readings behind this use of mechanistic versus organic language. The first is that it shows that Ahab prefers the mechanical to nature because he can control the mechanical. He knows he can decide the make of the mechanical man-statue; however, by the fact that he can still feel his "flesh and blood" leg and tries to have the carpenter take it

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away (Melville 360), Ahab knows that he cannot do the same with nature. Therefore, nature flusters Ahab's god complex as he feels that he should be able to control even the god-like; being able to manipulate the mechanical flatters his complex, so he prefers it. The second reading is an extension of Ausband's: while the phrase "legs with roots to 'em, to stay in one place" does connect the statue to earlier descriptions of Ahab, this aspect of Ahab was specifically chosen for this ideal replica because it defies, not expresses, nature. Moby-Dick, who Ausband says is "the organic principle of the universe" (207), took Ahab's leg. Nature struck him and was able to move him. This statue, as an ideal version of Ahab, must then be unmovable to satisfy Ahab's desire to defy nature for disproving his view of himself. This commission reinforces Ahab's god complex by allowing him to think that he knows better than nature and by giving him control over the mechanical in a defiant way toward nature.

Ausband's interpretation is correct: Ahab does hate nature, and this hatred causes him to isolate himself from all nature, become a machine, and be obsessed with destroying nature. However, Ausband does not address why Moby-Dick's attack shook Ahab, though he dances around it by calling Ahab "a titan" (211). He treats Chapter 108 as an instance of Ahab's hatred for his natural weakness, but it also provides clues to the real reason why Moby-Dick's attack affected him: nature disrupted his view of himself. This chapter shows that Ahab knows that nature is supporting him and destroyed a part of him. He still wants to believe that he is superior, and this chapter illustrates how far he will go for this image: using godly imagery to boost his pride, demean nature, manipulate all who will let him, and try to replace his human weakness with mechanical strength. While Ausband's observation that Ahab's isolation comes from more than just misanthropy (211) is important for understanding the imagery in *Moby-Dick*, that is not the end of Ahab's psychological issues; they stem from a deeper problem, one that the use of regal and godly terms suggests is not just hubris, but a god complex.

Works Cited

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