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AP English Literature and Composition

11 April 2023

*Moby-Dick: A Sisyphean Affair*

Motivation underlies the progress of each individual toward their goals; brings about the greatest feats of human nature; can cast into one the imperishable flame of one's own desire, one which may burn long after the demise of the original. Indeed, the motivation of one man can be as immensely powerful as a ceremonious army, as a nation of individuals—as the crew of a whaling ship. Ahab's motivation speaks for others, but if monomaniacal motivation is so powerful a force as to submit others to its will, how must we react when it goes beyond the hands of the individual actor? Do we control our motivations or do they control us? Jean-Paul Sartre contends that they cannot—and, in fact, *must* not—control us in order for us to lead an “authentic” life. Sartre explains authenticity as the individual's constant manifestation of their freedom to choose for themselves who they are, what they think, and what they believe; in *Existentialism is a Humanism* Sartre writes the following: “man is responsible for what he is. Thus, the first effect of existentialism is to make every man conscious of what he is, and to make him solely responsible for his own existence” (Sartre 23). On this matter of

“authenticity,” *Moby-Dick* speaks plenty and powerfully. In order to understand the roles of motivation and authenticity in *Moby-Dick*, as they converse with the broadly understood canon of modern existentialism, we must break apart the relationship its characters have with their own motivation, with their own autonomy—we will observe Captain Ahab’s single, powerful motivation, the Pequod crew’s blatant inauthenticity, and how Ahab’s eventual denial of himself as an autonomous actor ultimately effectuates his demise, in the end discovering an existentialist sub-narrative within Melville’s great work, one that advocates for the consistent manifestation of one’s own will rather than submission to the will of another.

Allow me to address the elephant in the room: the White Whale. Ahab’s great exclusive and elusive object of obsession has eluded the work itself. The general public may make of the White Whale a banal platitude all they wish, but the White Whale thrusts upon the reader the at once grim and sublimely joyous realization of the power of personal motivation. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus parallels the ostensibly futile struggle of human endeavor with the punishment of the Greek mythological figure Sisyphus; in so doing, he asserts that the struggle for, and acquisition of, purpose are the greatest determining factors of human happiness. Sisyphus condemned by the gods to push a boulder up a mountain, eternally, only to see it fall tragically to the

mountain's base each time he reaches the summit, but Camus sees this not as a tragic toil, but as a cause for pride in the constant personal importance of the task.

Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.

(Camus 119)

In much the same way, Ahab is doomed to eternally chase the White Whale, Moby-Dick, until one of them perishes. Each drop of that mythical oil, each atom of that great white head, in itself forms Ahab's world. In the strength of his overwhelming motivation Ahab finds such power as to mold the wills of his crewmates into simply implements, tools of his revenge mission. In spite of Ahab's misfortune at the end of the work, his success in exacting his will, precisely because he allows his unrelenting tenacity to dominate the direction of his decisions, and in such successes he finds satisfaction. Look only at Chapter 37: Sunset : "What I've dared, I've willed; and what I've willed I'll do... I now prophesy that I will dismember my dismemberer... The path to my purpose is laid with iron rails, whereupon my soul is grooved to run" (Melville 183). Ahab's

assertion of his will upon others emboldens him; it makes him rather the puppeteer than the puppet, an autonomous, authentic actor in his own tale. In the same satisfaction that Sisyphus derives from pushing his boulder, Ahab finds the strength to overwhelm the autonomy of most of his crew with his existential power.

Ishmael gives further proof of Ahab's powerful will in the titular Chapter 41, "Ahab, to that one end, did now possess a thousand fold more potency than ever he had sanely brought to bear upon any one reasonable object" (Melville 201). Melville poses the individual's singular motivation as among the greatest sources of power and success in human endeavor. By allowing his monomaniacal mission to take the centerpoint of his life, allowing the White Whale to become his Sisyphean boulder, Ahab assumes the power of a king, directing the will of his subjects, or the role of puppeteer, maneuvering his marionettes.

If Ahab's authenticity is such that it negates the crew's, it follows that, under such analysis, Sartre and Camus would reproach the other members of the Pequod. Ahab's strong-willed and rhetorically persuasive coercion of the crew aside, it must be noted that at several points throughout the journey it is heartily acknowledged that the impending doom of the Pequod will likely come at the hands of Ahab's chase, Ishmael's account of the whaleship Essex's story and Starbuck's concerns throughout are some examples, and yet little attempt is made to redirect the path of the ship until the final

chapters of the novel. Rather, the crewmates, beginning with Ishmael himself, are content to take on Ahab's mission, allowing him to superimpose his will upon theirs. Ishmael admits so in Chapter 41: "Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine. With greedy ears I learned the history of that murderous monster against whom I and all the others had taken our oaths of violence and revenge" (Melville 194). Ishmael is careful to say that Ahab's feud "seemed" his; something has made it appear as though the feud is his when it is not. The crewmates took on these "oaths of violence and revenge" in place of their own oath to an object of their own designation. They ransom their own goals to some mystical force which, in reality, is only a mask for their lack of autonomy. Starbuck's meditations in his soliloquy "Dusk" exaggerate this lack of autonomy, this mystical force, to a nearly comical degree, "Will I, nill I, the ineffable thing has tied me to him; tows me with a cable I have no knife to cut" (Melville 184). Starbuck cites some mystical force, something beyond reason which he cannot override, and by submitting to this force for the majority of the book's duration, he denies his own autonomy and puts his decisions in the the hands of fate or destiny or simply Ahab; Starbuck wishes that he could deny Ahab but lacks the necessary ability or perhaps the resolve to do so—by claiming that the force binding him to Ahab defies description, he is, in fact, willing it so; Starbuck searches for some "knife" with which to cut the chord tying him to Ahab, but he fails to realize that his own existential authority, his own ability to

choose his fate for himself, is that necessary tool, and in so doing he falls victim not only to Ahab but to himself as well. Other considerations for why the crewmates submit to Ahab so easily, so completely are certainly reasonable. For instance: the crewmates have a laboral responsibility; as employees they must follow the orders of Ahab given he outranks them. They have a fiscal responsibility as they are promised payment by both the company and Ahab on the condition of a successful voyage and successfully sighting the White Whale respectively, which to several members of the crew would be astronomical in magnitude; they have a moral responsibility, one must question what lengths the members of the crew would have to reach in order to dissuade Ahab from his mission, perhaps the members of the ship are not all willing to commit acts of violence toward their comrade, as those in the "Town-Ho's Story" did, and there is the matter of fidelity, among sailors loyalty is certainly important; chapters such as "The Monkey Rope" elucidate the necessity of trusting one's fellow crewmates due to the great danger permeating whaling. However, the reality is that the acknowledgement of their eventual demise by Starbuck and the willingness with which the members of the Pequod denounce their autonomy are nothing short of inauthentic in the most obvious sense of the word. The crew, strangely coerced by an obviously deranged and vengeful man due to the incredible magnitude of his will, remain inactive in stopping Ahab, and this decision, this silence, leads them directly to their graves. Melville makes the

somewhat obvious point that opening oneself entirely to the influence of choices which are not their own, or to allow those choices to become their own due to some “ineffable thing” is not the optimal or even the most morally just way to live; simply allowing oneself to become subject to worldly considerations like money or employment or loyalty, which become somewhat arbitrary in the face of the certain deaths of themselves and others is not the honorable route; it is the cowardly route: “the coward is responsible for his own cowardice... he is like that because he has made himself a coward through his actions” (Sartre 38). In Chapter 132: “The Symphony,” Starbuck makes a final attempt to shift the course of the Pequod back to Nantucket Island. On the mildest, most beautiful day, Ahab stands looking over the railing; to him Starbuck: “Away with me! let us fly these deadly waters! let us home!... I think sir, they have some such mild blue days, even as this, in Nantucket” (Melville 592). In this act, the most heroic of the novel, Starbuck very nearly convinces Ahab—Melville wishes the reader to see this as the most heroic moment, as it nearly saves the lives of tens of men. Yet Ahab resists, and when he turned to look at Starbuck, “the Mate had stolen away” (Melville 593). By giving up Starbuck acquaints the novel’s greatest act of courage, of heroism, with its greatest act of cowardice. Melville wishes for the reader to steer clear of this example, but this is only the tip of the proverbial iceberg, as the nearer to the

conclusion of the journey you go, the greater the transgressions against the principles of autonomy and authenticity on behalf of the Pequod become.

A lack of authenticity is most easily recognized when individuals simply play a role rather than being a unique individual capable of complex emotional decision making. Sartre's fundamental assertion "existence precedes essence... man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself" is essential in understanding the distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity. A tool or object which is conceived and defined before it is fashioned has an essential purpose, but human beings, in the existentialist view, are not and thus do not. They do not have defined roles that they must follow—any instance of them doing so would be considered inauthentic by Sartre. Some of the roles taken on by the members of the Pequod are harpooner, captain, and blacksmith, but no single member of the crew *is* a harpooner or a captain or a cook in the same way a harpoon *is* a harpoon, but the most egregiously inauthentic of these ostensible roles is that of the Hollow. Some characters, whether from the moment they board or toward the end of their journey, suffer symbolic deaths in which they no longer consider themselves real humans with will and agency, but are rather like husks, humans in name though not in behavior. Most notable among these is the Pequod's blacksmith Perth, a man who loses his wife and children to the scourge of the bottle. Perth gives in to the call of the mermaids who



coerce him: “Come hither! bury thyself in a life which, to your now equally abhorred and abhorring, landed world, is more oblivious than death. Come hither! put up *thy* grave-stone, too, within the churchyard, and come hither, till we marry thee!” (Melville 529). These mermaids suggest that he live in a reality in which he is not a man with a constant sense of self, but rather a man who simply ambles about with no motivation, no authenticity, just the primal urge to carry on living. For the purpose of this analysis I will refer to such characters as Hollows, to take after the nomenclature of 2011’s *Dark Souls*. Hollows are human beings who no longer have any interest in the practice of decision making or authentic living, but instead go on as mere vessels, facades of human existence, often carrying out some caricature of their prior tasks, they are humans who have entirely given up on the prospect of living a real life, but for whatever reason “still have left in them some interior compunctions against suicide;” they are going through the motions in other words, although to a staggering degree (Melville 529). What could possibly be a greater affront to the Sartrean authenticity? It is precisely the mindset that one’s actions have no personal importance, that one must give up, that one must fall into a mere role, a husk, a Hollow, which Melville points out as erroneous. Had the members of the Pequod been more proactive in exercising their existential power, perhaps the novel’s ending would be different. Though let us rejoice that they did not! For had the novel’s ending been different, Melville’s warning about

the dangers of idleness would be a mere whisper. One defines oneself by their actions; it is the responsibility of each individual to act in such a way as to reinforce their fellows, further their standing, increase their happiness; when one simply gives up or submits to another or allows one single individual to forsake them and those around them, they have failed in their responsibility to act in good faith, to act authentically. Melville mentions in Chapter 69: "The Funeral," "Thus, while in life the great whale's body may have been a real terror to his foes, in his death his ghost becomes a powerless panic to a world" (Melville 337). In much the same way, when one symbolically dies, as Pip or Queequeg or Perth, one salutes a new life as a "powerless panic".

It may remain unclear what the precise connection between motivation and authenticity is. Motivation and authenticity are intrinsically linked—one's motivations have to be wholly their own in order to be authentically theirs. So then, where does Ahab come back into play? As the Pequod races toward its folly in the culminating portions of the work, Ahab begins to frequently refer to himself as being the subject of some unidentified force that compels him to continue his chase of the White Whale. He is no longer absolutely sure whether it is he who places the iron rails on which his soul is bound or whether it is someone or something else. This unfortunate turn of course leads to the death of everyone on the Pequod save for Ishmael, though I am in no way suggesting that had Ahab simply confirmed for himself that he was truly still in control

of his decisions he would have miraculously felled the White Whale and lived happily ever after. It seems that he could have instead been convinced otherwise, as he nearly was by Starbuck in "The Symphony," until he finally convinces himself that he is no longer in charge, that destiny has taken the wheel: "Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm?... By heaven, man, we are turned round and round in this world, like yonder windlass, and Fate is the handspike" (Melville 592). A man who is convinced of his ability to change and control his mind will perhaps be persuaded, but a man who is convinced that some universal destiny is pulling and pushing him toward or away from outcomes will not and cannot be convinced to change his mind. It is here when Ahab relinquishes his autonomy, that the Pequod's fate is sealed, and he ceases to be an authentic actor altogether. Had Ahab relished in that "mild, mild wind, and [that] mild looking sky," had he retained his existential authenticity, had his constant motivation, his Sisyphean boulder, remained his own, he may have turned the ship around, but he did not.

Although Melville may not have intentionally written an existentialist novel, especially since the existentialists he most closely resembles came long after the publication of the novel, Camus' explanation for motivation and an ideal which is closely related to Sartre's idea of authenticity are both present in *Moby-Dick*. Yet, the similarity between Ahab's struggle and the struggle of Sisyphus is staggering. Recall the

most important stipulation of the boulder task: the infinitude of it. Ahab too repeats his task. On the first day Moby Dick is spotted, Ahab gives chase, fails, and retreats. On the second day Moby Dick is spotted, Ahab gives chase, fails, and retreats. On the third day Moby Dick is spotted, Ahab gives chase, fails, and dies. In the repetition of his destined task, Ahab, unlike Sisyphus, finds no satisfaction, only defeat and death; this is precisely because the task is not his; it is the will of another. Ahab finds himself no longer in such ownership of that great beast's oil, as Sisyphus owns the mineral flakes of the night-filled mountain; he instead becomes object of the White Whale, and he himself, by forsaking his authenticity, forsakes himself. When one takes ownership of his own decisions, one can fail honorably, but when one is incapable of that, there is no honor, only the very futility and sterility described by Camus as unlike the reality of Sisyphus. Ahab dies in futility not because his death accomplished no apparent goal but because he no longer willed it so. In this Melville gives his greatest insight into the nature of human endeavor: one cannot infuse another's actions or goals with motivation; such motivation must come from within. Each individual, holds responsibility for their own existence, their own motivation, just as Ahab, not Fate, holds responsibility for his.

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