DEATH AND RESURRECTION IN MOBY-DICK

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by
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This paper will examine myth and archetype in Moby-Dick, and discuss the motifs of death and resurrection, which are here usually derived from the patterns of Egyptian mythology. Because of its use of archetypal imagery, Moby-Dick cannot be pinned down to a final resolution of what is the "truth" or "theme" of the book:

Not for a moment dare we succumb to the illusion that an archetype can be finally explained and disposed of. Even the best attempts at explanation are only more or less successful translations into another metaphorical language. (Indeed, language itself is only a metaphor.) The most we can do is to dream the myth onwards and give it a modern dress. And whatever explanation or interpretation does to it, we do to our own soul as well, with corresponding results for our own well-being. The archetype—let us never forget this—is a psychic organ present in all of us.

The paper will explore different truths or themes while avoiding limiting conclusions. As Henry James has said, "If you must indulge in conclusions, let them have the taste of a wide knowledge." This is then one approach to a wide understanding of the work.

"Myths," says Jung, "are original revelations of the pre-conscious psyche, involuntary statements about unconscious psychic happenings, and anything but allegories of physical processes." They have a much more vital meaning:

The great problems of life are always related to the primordial images of the collective unconscious. These images are really balancing or compensating factors which correspond with the problems life presents in actuality. This is not to be marvelled at, since these images are deposits representing
the accumulated experience of thousands of years of struggle for adaptation and existence. Every
great experience in life, every profound conflict,
evokes the treasured wealth of these images and
brings them to inner perception; as such, they
become accessible to consciousness only in the pre-
sence of that degree of self-awareness and power
of understanding which enables a man also to think
what he experiences instead of just living it
blindly.  

It is from this body of images that myth springs, and
myth, then, belongs as much to the modern man as to
the primitive.

Western civilization has assumed that what is
"true" or "real" may be divided from what is "false" or
"unreal" by an imposed standard of "fact" as separate
from "non-fact"; but the true or the real is not always
this tangible or, even, rational. Those truths which
are more complex than scientific fact are bound by no
rules of reason; and they are therefore much harder to
grasp. Myth is an attempt to "get at" this higher
reality, and once this has been accepted, the immense
value of myth is evident.

The preternatural, which is aesthetically apprehended
and controlled by myths, does, it is true, set itself
off from the real world as we ordinarily perceive it. But
that is not because it is less than ordinarily real but
because it is far more than ordinarily real . . .  

Chase states that "the word 'myth' means story: a myth
is a tale, a narrative, or a poem; myth is literature

[more accurately, myth later becomes literature] and
must be considered as an aesthetic creation of the human
imagination." Mythic truth defies the laws of reason,
of time and space; therefore, "the whole groundwork of
myth is magical; for the storyteller can compose myths
about wonderfully potent animals and men who defy the
laws of time and space . . . ." "I suggest," Chase says,
that myth dramatizes in poetic form the disharmonies,
the deep neurotic disturbances which may be oc-
casioned by this clash of inward and outward forces,
by making them interact coercively toward a common
end, myth performs a profoundly beneficial and life-
giving act. This I call the Promethean function of
myth. For Prometheus is the intermediary between
God and men. He is the dynamic principle and art
of life, and he helps man to defend himself against
the old Zeus, who treacherously seeks, as Toynbee
writes, to set "his foot on the neck of a prostrate
Universe." It is the destiny of Zeus to grow re-
mote, tyrannical, frozen, inhuman, and reactionary.
It is the destiny of man to rebel against this
tyanny.6

Melville was consciously aware of archetypal
symbols and their universality. In discussing the
whiteness of Moby Dick, Ishmael says, "Nor, in some
things, does the common hereditary experience of all
mankind fail to bear witness to the supernaturalism of
this hue."7 Both in conscious and unconscious ways, the
poet, the artist, and the novelist draw upon this common
experience. As Northrup Frye says, "The unity of a
work of art, the basis of structural analysis, has not
been produced solely by the unconditioned will of the
artist . . . ."8

Critics and historians like Northrup Frye and
Joseph Campbell have pointed out the importance of a
central myth or monomyth which informs all subsequent
mythologies.
In the solar cycle of the day, the seasonal cycle of the year, and the organic cycle of human life, there is a single pattern of significance out of which myth constructs a central narrative around a figure who is partly the sun, partly vegetative fertility and partly a god or archetypal human being.  

This is often referred to as the "quest myth," and Frye explains how all literary genres are derived from it. When the hero's quest is seen in terms of its fulfillment, the result is a central pattern of archetypal images which corresponds to the comic vision of life. When the quest is seen in the form of its ordained cycle, the result is the tragic vision. "In the tragic vision the human world is a tyranny or anarchy, or an individual or isolated man, the leader with his back to his followers, the bullying giant of romance, the deserted or betrayed hero." Ahab is such an isolated leader or betrayed hero.

In the tragic vision the animal world is seen in terms of beasts and birds of prey, wolves, vultures, serpents, dragons and the like. [Or perhaps, sharks.]

In the tragic vision this world usually becomes the sea, as the narrative myth of dissolution is so often a flood myth. The combination of the sea and beast images gives us the leviathan and similar water-monsters.

_Moby-Dick_ conforms to this tragic vision. The _Pequod_ and the ocean are a microcosm. This smaller world is incredibly cruel and harsh; the ocean generally described as tormented and wild in contrast to the peaceful land:

... then turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the
land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return.\textsuperscript{11}

The ocean is an archetypal symbol for the unconscious, and, indeed, this tragic world reminds us of the tormented unconscious of Ahab which will not let him sleep; it drives him still further on his monomaniac quest. The tragic world of myth is then translated in \textit{Moby-Dick} to the watery world where,

\ldots what is harmful and destructive in nature takes three major forms. The first is the Ocean itself, seething with sharkish ferocity, the home of the great white squid as well as of the great white Whale, persistently slaughtering even its own children. The second is Moby Dick who, like Typhon, incarnates both the Ocean and "every part of nature which can be considered noxious and destructive to mankind." The third is the Typhoon which strikes the Pequod, which singles out Ahab's seat in his whale boat for destruction, which reverses Ahab's compasses and his ship's course, which lights the Pequod's masts and Ahab's harpoon, which is personified, worshiped, and deified by Ahab.\textsuperscript{12}

Melville then had the perfect setting in which to deal with problems of ultimate reality, for, as Ishmael says, ". . . as every one knows meditation and water are wedded forever."\textsuperscript{13}

In regard to \textit{Moby-Dick}, Franklin reminds us that "Melville more destructively attacks religious and mythological orthodoxy and more constructively creates a new myth."\textsuperscript{14} Throughout the book allusions, references, and suggestions are made to other mythological divinities:
Perseus, St. George, Hercules, Jonah, and Vishnou. If close attention is paid to these, it will be noted that the manner in which they are presented sometimes makes these other divinities appear ridiculous in comparison to the striking reality of Moby Dick—

The definition of both the whale and the particular god is a product of the syntax, the speaker, the rhetorical figure or figures, the tone, and the context. If, for instance, in a whimsical tone and a fanciful conceit, a particular god considered to be a preserver of man is held up to the whale, the whale's malice may be intensified while the preserving god may be made to seem equivocally frivolous.

At other times the importance of the other divinity is intensified—

Or if a treacherous god is compared to Moby Dick in a context describing the whale's treachery, this attribute of the whale and of the other god may be at once intensified and made more significant.15

The myths of Attis (Phrygia) and Osiris (Egypt) play an important role in the book. These myths are not presented in a ridiculous manner. Quite the contrary, there seems to be a rather close patterning of Moby-Dick along the lines of these myths. H. B. Franklin has also noted the significant role of the Osiris myth in Moby-Dick.

These myths are permeated with the motifs of death and resurrection which were previously mentioned as being significant in Moby-Dick. A close correspondence of Moby-Dick with these myths and with the previously mentioned central myth of literature requires
that the hero experience not only death and defiance, but a resurrection; and if Ahab is not resurrected, he represents only one half of this epic hero whose other half is seen in Ishmael. To examine this contention, the cycle of the hero and his quest in the monomyth must first be examined.

In his book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell summarizes the monomyth:

The mythological hero, setting forth from his commonday hut or castle, is lured, carried away, or else voluntarily proceeds, to the threshold of adventure. There he encounters a shadow presence that guards the passage. The hero may defeat or conciliate this power and go alive into the kingdom of the dark (brother-battle, dragon-battle; offering, charm), or be slain by the opponent and descend in death (dismemberment, crucifixion). Beyond the threshold, then, the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which severely threaten him (tests), some of which give magical aid (helpers). When he arrives at the nadir of the mythological round, he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward. The triumph may be represented as the hero's sexual union with the goddess-mother of the world (sacred marriage), his recognition by the father-creator (father-stone-moment), his own divination (epothesis), or again—if the powers have remained unfriendly to him—his theft of the boon he came to gain (bride-theft, fire-theft); intrinsically it is an expansion of consciousness and therewith of being (illumination, transfiguration, freedom). The final work is that of the return. If the powers have blessed the hero, he now sets forth under their protection (emissary); if not, he flees and is pursued (transformation flight, obstacle flight). At the return threshold the transcendental powers must remain behind; the hero re-emerges from the kingdom of dread (return, resurrection). The boon that he brings restores the world (elixir).

The changes rung on the simple scale of the monomyth defy description. Many tales isolate and greatly enlarge upon one or two of the typical elements of the full cycle (test motif, flight
motif, abduction of the bride), others string a number of independent cycles into a single series (as in the Odyssey). Differing characters or episodes can become fused, or a single element can reduplicate itself and reappear under many changes.16

As Campbell notes, the face of the epic hero can change from myth to myth. Melville's hero, Ahab, is shown variously as wearing several masks.

Because of its wide familiarity, the Christian myth presents a good starting point for a comparison of Ahab with various forms of the hero. Biblical allusions are quite common in Moby-Dick, and many times these allusions make Ahab appear as a kind of Christ figure.

Prior to the voyage, Ishmael is asked if he has never heard of some event which happened to Ahab off the Cape Horn long ago "when he lay like dead for three days and nights. . .";17 an event which calls to mind Christ's death and resurrection. The Pequod begins its voyage and Ahab his monomaniacal hunt on December 25, Christmas Day. Later in the book, a "moody stricken Ahab stood before them with a crucifixion in his face. . ."18 Speaking to himself, Ahab says, "Is, then, the crown too heavy that I wear? this Iron Crown of Lombardy."19 In a footnote this is described as "A crown . . . said to contain a nail from the Cross."

Ahab is also the self-appointed destroyer of evil; he is Prometheus, hurling defiance at the gods, and the god which he defies is personified in the malign white whale, Moby Dick. Moby Dick is more than just a
whale. He is, in all the awesome terror that surrounds the term, the "leviathan." If he does not make his appearance until the last three chapters of the book, he is felt or experienced throughout the work. (The mysterious spirit-spout for so long proceeds the Pequod.) Most of what is actually known about the history of this creature is told in the chapter "Moby Dick." Being nearly isolated on the ocean, the Pequod's crew are largely dependent on rumor for most of their information. Accordingly, most of their knowledge of Moby Dick is rumor. The rumors, it is true, nearly deify the whale, and he is seen by many as a supernatural creature.

His "uncommon magnitude," "malignity," "ferocity," "cunning," and "malice" have made him larger than life:

One of the wild suggestions referred to, as at last coming to be linked with the White Whale in the minds of the superstitiously inclined, was the unearthly conceit that Moby Dick was ubiquitous; that he had actually been encountered in opposite latitudes at one and the same instant of time.

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... it cannot be much matter of surprise that some whalemen would go still further in their superstitions; declaring Moby Dick not only ubiquitous, but immortal (for immortality is but ubiquity in time)... 20

There is almost nothing told of the white whale that is not at least ambiguous, and it is usually mythical. However, as noted before, what is true or real is not always tangible or rational. The truth must be judged by far different standards. N. B. Franklin states, "... we should never forget that this ubiquity is
dubious in so far as it is presented as historical truth. Nonetheless it is ultimately of the greatest truth." Jung notes that the idea of God or an all-powerful divine being is present universally because it is an archetype. Ahab says to Starbuck,

All visible objects, men, are but as pasteboard masks... If men will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught behind. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heeds me; I see in him outrageous strength with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him... Who's over me? Truth hath no confines.

It is Ahab's mind that defines the white whale. Moby Dick's malignity is a certainty to Ahab--

The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel esting in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung. .. all evil, to crazy Ahab was visibly personified and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon upon it.

As Franklin points out, "As a god to Ahab and the Pequod's crew, Moby Dick may be a false god, but he must be a god." Ahab does not fall down and worship this intangible malignity, "...but pitted himself, all mutilated, against it." Ahab's defiance remains to the last Prometheus breath; he pits himself against this assumed evil. However, unlike Prometheus, Ahab
does not return with the fire; he is finally consumed.

As shown before in the summary of the mono-
myth, the hero is either slain or dismembered and des-
cends into death, or he goes alive into the kingdom of
the dark. Ahab, too, experiences a dismemberment which
may be compared to a death, and he descends to the in-
fernal regions. He himself says that he is "damned,
most subtly and most malignantly damned in the midst
of Paradise!" 26 Ahab is closely linked with Fedallah,
the fire-worshiping Parsee, who is described as the
devil; but Ahab's Hell reigns within him:

... a chasm seemed opening in him, from which
forked flames and lightenings shot up, and accu-
cursed fiends beckoned him to leap down among
them; when this hell in himself yawned beneath
him, a wild cry would be heard through the ship;
and with glaring eyes Ahab would burst from his
state room, as though escaping from a bed that
was on fire. 27

Campbell notes that the hero receives some type of
supernatural help. For Ahab, this comes from his my-
sterious boat crew headed by the Parsee, ". . . five
dusky phantoms that seemed fresh formed out of air." 28
Ahab's harpoon is tempered in pagan blood and in
nomine diaboli. His ship is the scene of infernal orgies
and sails into the night—even fire—". . . as if re-
morselessly commissioned to some vengeful deed." 29 This
infernal imagery culminates in the following passage:

... as the wind howled on, and the sea leaped,
and the ship grounded and dived, and yet steadfastly
shot her red hell further and further into the
blackness of the sea and the night, and scornfully
champed the white bone in her mouth, and viciously spat round her on all sides, then the rushing *Pequod*, freighted with savages, and laden with fire, and burning a corpse, and plunging into that blackness of darkness, seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander's soul. 30

Ahab has here fulfilled the conditions of death and defiance of the hero.

Up to this point, the general cycle of the monomyth has only been dealt with. In *Moby-Dick* Melville has made numerous references to other mythological divinities; and it will be seen that the myths of Osiris and Attis give a kind of central order to *Moby-Dick*.

The myth of Attis comes from Western Asia. Attis was a god of vegetation whose death and resurrection were annually celebrated in the spring, a young shepherd who was beloved by Cybele, the Mother of the Gods. She may have been either his lover or his mother; he was either killed by a boar or by self-mutilation, in which he unmanned himself under a pine tree and bled to death. In the rituals the worshipers were often known to wound themselves and sprinkle his altar with blood. This was quite possibly intended to be a means of strengthening Attis for his resurrection, which occurs after night has fallen. He rises from the tomb and thus serves as a promise to his followers that they too will rise from the grave. This ritual occurs annually in the spring and was thought to hasten the general resurrection in nature. Various phallic rituals play
part in these rites which probably took place on the 24th or 25th of March, the latter being the date then reckoned to be the vernal equinox. The regeneration of the worshipers which also occurred was often a form of baptism. The devotee descends into a pit covered with a wooden grating. A bull is driven onto the grating and stabbed to death; the devotee is then drenched with the hot blood of the bull, and through this baptism he is born again to eternal life.

J. G. Frazer also notes that in the Julian calendar the winter solstice was placed on December 25th and was regarded as the nativity of the sun. It is on this day that the sun increases in power; the day begins to lengthen. 31

Osiris is the Egyptian counterpart to Attis, a death and resurrection which were also celebrated annually. Osiris was the offspring of the earth-god, Seb and the sky-goddess, Nut. He had two brothers, Horus and Set (or Typhon), and two sisters, Isis and Nephthys. Osiris and Isis were married, and Osiris became the ruler of Egypt. He reclaimed the Egyptians from savagery, gave them laws and taught them to worship the gods. He finally gave the government of Egypt to Isis and journeyed around the world to teach civilization and agriculture. When he returned, he was worshiped as a diety, but his evil brother, Typhon, plotted against him. While Osiris was sleeping, Typhon and his counter-
parts measured his body and built a coffin. At a banquet they promised to give the coffin to whomever it fit. When Osiris got in, they nailed it shut and threw it into the Nile. At this time Osiris was in the twenty-eighth year of his reign or life and the sun was in the sign of Scorpio (about October 23-November 21). Isis went in search of his body, found it, and brought it back to Egypt. However, Typhon found it and cut it into fourteen pieces, which he scattered about. When he heard Isis weeping, the sun-god, Re, sent Anubis who, with the other brothers, pieced the body together and performed Egyptian rites for the departed. Isis fanned her wings over the body; Osiris revived and henceforth ruled as king over the dead in the other world. In this way Osiris became the Egyptian symbol for the death and resurrection of all men.\(^5\)

Franklin states that the probable source of Melville's knowledge of the Osiris myth is Plutarch and Maurice. Along with the above summary of the myth, certain facts mentioned by Franklin will be important to remember. First, as there are many versions of the myth, the slayer of Osiris is represented in several different ways: a crocodile, a hippopotamus, the Nile, the ocean, his brother and conspirators at a feast, a hot desert wind, small fish, a huge fish, one or several constellations, the winter solstice, the autumnal equinox, a snake, a scorpion, and incarnate hate,
destructiveness, or evil. Maurice says Typhon represents all that is noxious and destructive to mankind. Franklin also identifies the three main symbols of Osiris as the hawk, the coffin, and the phallus. "His (Osiris') dismemberment in the fall or winter symbolizes the seasonal disaster in nature. The seasonal resurrection of the sun causes, symbolizes, or is symbolized by his resurrection." 33

Moby-Dick reveals a wealth of Egyptian references, indicating emphasis on the Osiris myth. At one point in the narrative, Starbuck is compared to a "revivified Egyptian." 34 Reference is made to the fact that "Ahab seemed a pyramid," 35 and also to Ahab's "Egyptian chest." 36 Moby Dick's hump is described as "a high, pyramidal white hump." 37 Ishmael states that "the earliest standers of mastheads were the old Egyptians ... the first pyramids were founded for astronomical purposes ... ." 38 In his discourses on cetology, Ishmael refers to the lines and crossings on the sperm whale's visible surface as being hieroglyphical, like the marks on pyramid walls. 39

As mentioned above, there are three specific symbols associated with Osiris: the phallus, the hawk, and the coffin. All of these elements appear significantly in Moby-Dick. The most striking example of phallic imagery occurs in the chapter "The Cassock," which is a detailed account of the phallic ritual involved in
the butchering of the whale. According to the myth, this portion of the body of Osiris was lost when he was dismembered by Typhon. In the above discussion of Attis, reference was also made to the god unmanning himself under a pine tree. When Ahab is wounded the second time (a topic to be discussed in more detail later), he too is very nearly castrated. A hawk, too, appears in _Moby-Dick_. As Ahab is standing the mastheads, his hat is stolen by a hawk. It is also a hawk which becomes entangled in the red flag and is nailed to the mast by Tashtego as the _Pequod_ sinks on the third day of the chase. Ishmael makes the first reference to a coffin. At his first whaling port, when he stays at the Spouter-Inn, he discovers that the landlord's name is Peter Coffin. The most notable instance of the image of the coffin deals with the coffin which Queequeg has prepared for himself. This particular episode is quite similar to the incident at the banquet with Osiris. Queequeg too is measured for his own coffin, if at his own request; and Queequeg expects to be cast into the water in it when he dies. Queequeg is not nailed into his coffin, and he does not use it when he finally dies, but it saves Ishmael's life.

The obvious counterpart to Typhon is _Moby Dick_. Even as Typhon dismembers Osiris, so does _Moby Dick_ dismember Ahab. Even as Typhon is earlier described as "incarnate hate, destructiveness, evil, all that is
noxious and destructive to mankind," so too "...all evil, to crazy Ahab [was] visibly personified and made practically assailable in Moby Dick." In the myth, Typhon is identified with a crocodile, a huge fish, the ocean, etc. Moby Dick is just one aspect of all that is "harmful and destructive in nature." Other aspects of nature identified with Moby Dick are the Ocean and the Typhoon. In the book Ahab addresses the Typhoon as a god. The crocodile, one of the possible slayers of Osiris, was worshiped by the Egyptians because he is tongueless. Ishmael mentions that the Sperm Whale is also tongueless, or at least the tongue is too small to be capable of protrusion.

The idea of a baptism of blood was previously mentioned in conjunction with the Attis myth where the devotee was drenched in the blood of a slain bull. In Moby-Dick there are also many references to different types of baptism; and a baptism is, in itself, a symbolic death and resurrection. The most striking incident which bears both similarities to and differences from the Attis myth is the oily "birth" or "baptism" of Tashtego in the whale itself. While belching oil from the head of a captured sperm whale, Tashtego loses his hold and falls into the oily well--

...Queequeg had dived to the rescue. ...diving after the slowly descending head, Queequeg...had thrust his long arm far inwards and upwards, and so hauled out our poor Tash by the head. He severed, that upon first thrusting in for him,
leg was presented; but well knowing that that was not as it ought to be, and might occasion great trouble;—he had thrust back the leg, and by a dextrous heave and toss, had wrought a somerset upon the Indian; so that with the next trial, he came forth in the good old way—head foremost. As for the great head itself, that was doing as well as could be expected.

..............................................................

And thus, through the courage and great skill in obstetrics of Queequeg, the deliverance, or rather, delivery of Tashtego, was successfully accomplished. . . .41

The most important relation between these myths and Moby-Dick is the relation between Ahab and Osiris.

As Osiris is annually dismembered by Typhon, so is Ahab dismembered or wounded for three successive years by Moby Dick. The first time, Moby Dick took Ahab's leg. This occurred in midwinter, and as the ship rounded the Patagonian Cape, Ahab lay in his hammock in a kind of death from which he emerged and "far from having lost his strength, 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."42

He received the second wound shortly before the Pequod sailed. This wound resulted indirectly from the first:

For it had not been very long prior to the Pequod's sailing from Nantucket, that he had been found one night lying prone upon the ground, and insensible; by some unknown, and seemingly inexplicable, unimaginable casualty, his ivory limb having been so violently displaced, that it had steadfastly smitten, and all but pierced his groin; nor was it without extreme difficulty that the agonizing wound was entirely cured.43

Osiris' phallic member was lost, and here, too there is
a close correspondence between the myth and the novel in the dismemberings and the type. On the second day of the chase, Ahab's ivory leg is snapped off—leaving a splinter; on the third day Ahab is finally killed.

Osiris ruled over the underworld, and in an earlier section Ahab was discussed as ruler of the infernal regions. While looking at the face of the doubloon he has nailed to the mast as a reward for the first man who sees Moby Dick, Ahab says,

... look here,—three peaks as proud as Lucifer. The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that, too, is Ahab; all are Ahab. . . . Methinks now this coined sun wears a ruddy face; but see! aye, he enters the sign of storms, the equinox! And but six months before he wheeled out of a former equinox at Aries! From storm to storm! So be it, then. Born in throes, 'tis fit that man should live in pains and die in pangs!  

The first equinox he mentions is under the sign of Libra, the period of the autumnal equinox. The second, in the sign of Aries, is the period of the vernal equinox. The latter he equates with a kind of birth, the former with a death. "Between the autumnal equinox and the winter solstice," states Franklin, "the sun, for those in the Northern Hemisphere, may be construed mythologically as descending to rule the infernal regions, from which it slowly emerges as the vernal equinox approaches."  

Each of Ahab's wounds occurs at approximately the time of the autumnal equinox or winter solstice; each time he is described as having died, in a metaphorical sense.
For a period before and after the sailing of the *Pequod*, Ahab seems to disappear, or to "[have] hidden himself away with such Grand-Lama-like exclusiveness; and, for that one interval, sought speechless refuge, as it were, among the marble senate of the dead."45 In speaking of going down into his cabin, Ahab says, "It feels like going down into one's tomb for an old captain like me to be descending this narrow scuttle, to go to my grave-dug berth."47 Ahab, too, experiences a resurrection in the spring, much like Attis whose resurrection in the spring was said to symbolize the general resurrection in nature.

As the sky grew less gloomy; indeed, began to grow a little genial, he became still less and less a recluse; as if, when the ship had sailed from home, nothing but the dead wintry bleakness of the sea had then kept him so secluded. ... For, as when the red-cheeked, dancing girls, April and May, trip home to the wintry, misanthropic woods; even the barest, ruggedest, most thunder-cloven old oak will at least send forth some few green sprouts, to welcome such glad hearted visitants; so Ahab did, in the end, a little respond to the playful allurings of that girlish air.48

Ahab, too, revives with the revival of the sun.

The hero in the monomyth must not only cross the threshold into adventure into the kingdom of the dark, but he must experience a resurrection; he must return with the elixir or boon for the world or himself. Ahab, of course, dies, but while he fails, Ishmael completes the mythic cycle.

The issue of whether *Moby-Dick* is Ishmael's
book or Ahab's has received much critical attention. In order to see the complete epic cycle in the book and to see the full development of the death and resurrection motifs, Ahab and Ishmael must be viewed as separate halves of the epic hero. It is Ahab who experiences the necessary death and attempts to slay the dragon; it is Ishmael who is saved, who is born again. Ahab and Ishmael are often identified with each other; it is possible to see them as separate halves of the epic hero.

A stepmother rejects both Ishmael and Ahab. Before signing with the Pequod, when he and Queequeg are at the inn, Ishmael is reminded of the time when he was sent to bed by his stepmother and lay there for sixteen hours waiting for a "resurrection." Shortly before sighting Moby Dick, Ahab is, in a sense, reunited with the stepmother:

But the lovely aromas in that enchanted air did at last seem to dispel, for a moment, the cankerous thing in his soul. That glad, happy air, that winsome sky, did at last stroke and caress him; the stepmother world, so long cruel—forbidding—now threw affectionate arms round his stubborn neck, and did seem to joyously sob over him, as if over one, that however willful and erring, she would yet find it in her heart to save and to bless.49

Both Ishmael and Ahab are also identified with fire. Ahab is described as a "fiery old man." In the chapter, "The Candles," Ahab is even more clearly identified with fire,
Oh, thou clear spirit, of thy fire thou madest me, and like a true child of fire, I breathe it back to thee. . . . Here again with haughty agony, I read my sire. Leapt! leap up, and lick the sky! I leap with thee; I burn with thee; would feign be welded with thee; defyingly I worship thee.50

When Ahab swears the crew to his fiery purpose, Ishmael's pledge is also raised,

I, Ishmael, was one of that crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest; my oath had been welded with theirs; and stronger I shouted, and more did I hammer and clinch my oath, because of the dreading in my soul. A wild, mystical, sympathetic feeling was in me; Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine.51

The fire within him seems to consume Ahab. At times he bursts from his stateroom:

For, at such times, crazy Ahab, the scheming, unappessedly steadfast hunter of the white whale; this Ahab that had gone to his hammock, was not the agent that so caused him to burst from it in horror again. The latter was the eternal, living principle or soul in him; and in sleep, being for the time dissociated from the characterizing mind, which at other times employed it for its outer vehicle or agent, it spontaneously sought escape from the scorching contiguity of the frantic thing, of which, for the time, it was no longer an integral.52

It is Ishmael who represents this escaping other half. While Ahab is closely linked with the fire-worshiping, Satan-like Farsee, it is Queequeg, the natural, noble, proud and honest pagan, who is called Ishmael's "own inseparable twin brother."53 In Love and Death in the American Novel, Leslie Fiedler states,

... In Moby Dick, the protagonist of the frame story is Ishmael, who becomes the trapped spectator of the drama of Ahab's fall, experiencing the catharsis of which Ahab is incapable. The heart, that is to say, witnessing the mad self-destruction
of the head is itself purified and redeemed. Thus, in "The Try-Pots," Ishmael renounces his baptism of fire when he says, "Give not thyself up, then, to fire, lest it invert thee, deaden thee; as for the time it did me." When told he can only be killed by hemp, Ahab proclaims that he is immortal on land and sea; he hurls defiance to the bitter end, but he does die. While Ishmael goes to sea as a kind of symbolical suicide, as a "substitute for pistol and ball," he is finally reborn. Ironically, and mythically, Ishmael is saved from drowning by clinging to the coffin prepared for Queequeg. (When the cask used as a lifebuoy was lost overboard, the only substitute to be found was this coffin.) Ahab says of this "lifebuoy,"

Here now's the very dreaded symbol of grim death, by a mere hap, made the expressive sign of the help and hope of most endangered life. A life-buoy of a coffin! Does it go further? Can it be that in some spiritual sense the coffin is, after all, but an immortality-preserver? I'll think of that. But no. So far gone am I in the dark side of earth, that its other side, the theoretic bright one, seems but uncertain twilight to me.

Ishmael is reborn by means of this "symbol of grim death"; Ahab could not be, for he was too far gone "in the dark side of earth." Campbell states that the passage over the threshold is for the hero a form of self-annihilation. This was the actual intent for Ishmael, and the final reality for Ahab, but Campbell goes on to say that this passage is actually a passage inward whereby the hero
is reborn. While it was not true for Ahab, it was indeed a rebirth for Ishmael. The voyage which began as an escape from life for Ishmael becomes a life-renewing act. Ahab is destroyed by his confrontation with what he sees as complete evil:

If Ishmael, in the end, rises reborn on the coffin-buoy from the womb-grave of the sea, it is partly because, in his meditations on the whiteness of Moby Dick, he has risen to a truer sense than Ahab's of the paradoxical mingling of Good and Evil in the White Whale.

Other matters make Ishmael's resurrection possible: where Ahab, in his monomania, is separated from all human ties, including his wife and child, Ishmael recognizes the importance of human fellowship. While squeezing sperm, Ishmael receives a kind of counter-baptism to fire—a baptism of water, and he is then aware of a common bond of all mankind:

Would that I could keep squeezing that sperm forever! For now, since by many prolonged, repeated experiences, I have perceived that in all cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fireside, the country; now that I have perceived all this, I am ready to squeeze case eternally.

Ishmael is therefore capable of experiencing the resurrection which is impossible for Ahab.

The importance of these interlocking motifs of death and resurrection is elsewhere reinforced in the book; and the basic paradox of life in death becomes a recurrent statement.
The death images prominent in the beginning of the book are conveniently summarized by Ishmael:

It's ominous, think I. A Coffin my Innkeeper upon lending in my first whaling port; tombstones staring at me in the whalemen's chapel; and here a gallows! and a pair of prodigious black pots too! Are these last throwing out oblique hints touching Tophet?61

Many other images have been discussed before: pulling Tashtego from the head of the whale, the infernal orgies on board the Pequod, the coffin of Queequeg. There is also the Ocean, who consistently devours her own children; the hints touching the satanic character of Fedallah; the resurrection of Queequeg after his Ramadan and after his sickness on board ship. In the midst of death and destruction, there is, however, the promise of a resurrection. This final paradox is nowhere so artfully displayed than in the episode in which the coffin built for Queequeg is converted to a lifebuoy, the very lifebuoy which finally saves Ishmael. The paradox of life in death is very subtly stated and restated throughout the book. While visiting the Whalemen's Chapel Ishmael reflects,

But Faith, like a jackal, feeds among the tombs, and even from these dead doubts she gathers her most vital hope.

Yes, there is death in this business of whaling—a speechless, quick chaotic bundling of a man into Eternity. But what then? Methinks we have hugely mistaken this matter of Life and Death. Methinks that what they call my shadow here on earth is my true substance... Methinks my body is but the lees of my better being. In fact, take my body who will, take it I say, it is not me.62

"This business of whaling" is a microcosm: Ahab takes
with him all mankind. The crew is described as an
"Anacharsis Clootz deputation from all the isles of the
seas, and all the ends of the earth. . . ." A footnote
by Melville explains this:

Composed of men of different nations and races,
like the motley deputation which Clootz led into
the French National Assembly in 1790 to symbolize
all mankind's support of the French Revolution.63

With his one live and one deed leg, Ahab himself is a
kind of walking paradox. Even Queequeg, the symbol of
friendship and baptism by water, lends his blood in a
diabolic baptism of Ahab's harpoon. The chapter,
"Bower In the Arsacides," contains a description of the
skeleton of a stranded whale hung with vegetation—

Life folded Death; Death trellised Life; the grim
god wived with youthful Life, and begat him curly-
headed glories.64

Here the paradox also works in reverse: Death in Life.
When Ishmael quotes Solomon he seems to be speaking di-
rectly of Ahab, "the man that wandereth out of the way
of understanding shall remain (i.e. even while living)
in the congregation of the dead." Though fiery and
strong in his purpose, Ahab is, in a sense, already
dead, or, "most subtly damned in the midst of Paradise."
But Ishmael, who describes himself as "a quiet ghost
with a clean conscience," is reborn, and although Ahab's
death does not lead to Ahab's resurrection, it leads
to Ishmael's.

The motifs of death and resurrection, life in
death, death in life, are nowhere as plainly evident as in the Jonah story—an important controlling image for the book. Jonah seeks escape from God, from life, and, symbolically, he "dies" as he enters the belly of the whale, or crosses the threshold; and from this "death" he is finally reborn. It is this story which Father Mapples uses as the text for his sermon:

> But what is this lesson that the book of Jonah teaches... As sinful men, it is a lesson to us all, because it is a story of the sin, hard-heartedness, suddenly awakened fears, the swift punishment, repentance, prayers, and finally the deliverance and joy of Jonah.65

Ahab can be viewed as Jonah, as Osiris, and as Attis, but where Jonah repents, Ahab's final words are defiant:

> Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee. Sink all coffins and all hearse to one common pool! and since neither can be mine, let me then tow to pieces, while still chasing thee, though tied to thee, thou damned whale! Thus, I give up the spear!66

However, the death is not without its resurrection;

Ishmael survives—

> Buoyed up by that coffin, for almost one whole day and night, I floated on a soft and dirge-like main. The unharmed sharks, they glided by as if with padlocks on their mouths; the savage sea-hawks sailed with sheathed beaks. On the second day, a sail drew near, nearer, and picked me up at last. It was the devious-cruising Rachel, that in her retracing search after her missing children, only found another orphan.67

As mentioned before, Ishmael is perhaps saved by his recognition of the paradoxical mingling of Good and Evil in the White Whale; the harmonizing of opposites has
often been considered a unique aspect of Melville's style. In *Moby-Dick*, Melville has dealt in many ways with the ambiguities inherent in life. In spite of the "gentle joyousness—a mighty mildness of repose in swiftness" which characterizes *Moby Dick*, the whale often seems to be cruelly, wantonly, destructive.

Like his contemporaries, Poe and Hawthorne, Melville was obsessed with what Harry Levin has called "the power of blackness," but Melville, sees in death a possible resurrection. In *The Encantadas* he points out that the Galapagos tortoise is, in equal measure, black and bright.

In *Moby-Dick*, Melville ponders those insistent questions of human existence:

Is the absolute reality behind the appearance of things Pure Evil, or Pure Good, or Pure Indifference? Must a man confront that reality defiantly and even vengefully, or may it be confronted thankfully, worshipfully, lovingly? Is men's will free to make decisions that are genuine choices, or are all his acts and thoughts the irresponsible effects of the workings of a meaningless Necessity? Is the authentic hero the man who stands proudly apart from the ruck of mankind and shakes his fist grimly at "the gods," or is he the man who recognizes, with humility and an expansive joy, the mutuality of indebtedness and dependence that holds himself and all other human beings together in a chain of common affection?

These are the questions with which myth concerns itself, and Melville turned to myth to deal with them in an imaginative and complex form.


3 Jung, p. 314.


6 Chase, pp. 129-143.


9 Frye, p. 155.

10 Frye, pp. 160-161.

11 Melville, p. 236

12 H. Bruce Franklin, p. 54.

13 Melville, p. 13.

14 Franklin, p. 54.

15 Franklin, p. 63.


17 Melville, p. 87.

18 Melville, p. 111.

19 Melville, p. 147.

20 Melville, p. 158.
21 Franklin, p. 59.
22 Melville, p. 144.
23 Melville, p. 160.
24 Franklin, p. 65.
25 Melville, p. 160.
26 Melville, p. 147.
27 Melville, p. 174.
28 Melville, p. 187.
29 Melville, p. 353.
30 Melville, p. 354.
32 Frazer, pp. 420-426.
33 Franklin, pp. 73-74.
34 Melville, p. 103.
35 Melville, p. 115.
36 Melville, p. 160.
37 Melville, p. 159.
38 Melville, p. 135.
39 Melville, p. 260.
40 Melville, p. 160.
41 Melville, pp. 289-290.
42 Melville, p. 161.
43 Melville, p. 385.
44 Melville, pp. 359-360.
45 Franklin, p. 89.
46 Melville, p. 386.
47 Melville, p. 112.
48 Melville, p. 111.
49 Melville, p. 443.
50 Melville, p. 417.
51 Melville, p. 155.
52 Melville, pp. 174-175.
53 Melville, p. 271.
55 Melville, p. 355.
56 Melville, p. 12.
57 Melville, p. 433.
58 Campbell, p. 91.
60 Melville, p. 349.
61 Melville, p. 64.
62 Melville, p. 41.
63 Melville, p. 108.
64 Melville, p. 375.
65 Melville, p. 45.
66 Melville, p. 468.
67 Melville, p. 470.
69 Ibid., pp. viii-ix.
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