



Moby Dick

Ishmael reports rumours about Moby Dick which include half-formed suggestions of supernatural agencies.

Herman Melville
Moby-Dick
(1851)

Chapter 41

Forced into familiarity, then, with such prodigies as these; and knowing that after repeated, intrepid assaults, the White Whale had escaped alive; it cannot be much matter of surprise that some whalemens should go still further in their superstitions; declaring Moby Dick not only ubiquitous, but immortal (for immortality is but ubiquity in time); that though groves of spears¹ should be planted in his flanks, he would still swim away unharmed; or if indeed he should ever be made to spout thick blood, such a sight would be but a ghastly deception²; for again in unensanguined billows hundreds of leagues away, his unsullied jet³ would once more be seen.

But even stripped of these supernatural surmisings⁴, there was enough in the earthly make and incontestable character of the monster to strike the imagination with unwonted power. For, it was not so much his uncommon bulk that so much distinguished him from other sperm whales, but, as was elsewhere thrown out – a peculiar snow-white wrinkled forehead, and a high, pyramidal white hump⁵. These were his prominent features; the tokens whereby⁶, even in the limitless, uncharted seas, he revealed his identity, at a long distance, to those who knew him.

The rest of his body was so streaked, and spotted, and marbled with the same shrouded hue⁷, that, in the end, he had gained his distinctive appellation of the White Whale; a name, indeed, literally justified by his vivid aspect, when seen gliding⁸ at high noon through a dark blue sea, leaving a milky-way wake of creamy foam, all spangled with golden gleamings⁹.

Nor was it his unwonted magnitude, nor his remarkable hue, nor yet his deformed lower jaw, that so much invested the whale with natural terror, as that unexampled, intelligent malignity which, according to specific accounts, he had over and over again evinced in his assaults. More than all, his treacherous retreats struck more of dismay¹⁰ than perhaps aught else¹¹. For, when swimming before his exulting pursuers¹², with every apparent symptom of alarm, he had several times been known to turn round suddenly, and, bearing down upon them, either stave their boats to splinters¹³, or drive them back in consternation to their ship.

[...]

His three boats stove around him, and oars and men both whirling in the eddies¹⁴; one captain, seizing the line-knife from his broken prow¹⁵, had dashed at the whale, as an Arkansas duellist at his foe, blindly seeking with a six inch blade to reach the fathom-deep¹⁶ life of the whale. That captain was Ahab. And then it was, that suddenly sweeping his sickle-shaped lower jaw¹⁷ beneath him, Moby Dick had reaped away¹⁸ Ahab's leg, as a mower a blade of grass¹⁹ in the field. No turbaned Turk, no hired Venetian or Malay, could have smote him²⁰ with more seeming malice. Small reason was there to doubt, then, that ever since that almost fatal encounter, Ahab had cherished a wild vindictiveness against the whale, all the more fell for that in his frantic morbidness²¹ he at last came to identify with him, not only all his bodily woes²², but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations. The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung.

- 1 though ... spears. Sebbene migliaia di lance.
- 2 deception. Inganno.
- 3 jet. Sfiatatoio.
- 4 surmisings. Congetture.
- 5 hump. Gobba.
- 6 the tokens whereby. I segni per mezzo dei quali.
- 7 spotted ... hue. Macchiato, e marmoreo dello stesso colore velato.
- 8 gliding. Scivolare.
- 9 spangled ... gleamings. Luccicante di bagliori dorati.
- 10 retreats ... dismay. Ritirate lasciavano più sgomenti.
- 11 aught else. Qualsiasi altra cosa.
- 12 pursuers. Inseguitori.
- 13 either ... splinters. O sfondare le loro barche riducendole in frantumi.
- 14 oars ... eddies. Remi e uomini entrambi turbinanti nei gorgi.
- 15 seizing ... prow. Afferrando il coltello dalla prua rotta.
- 16 fathom-deep. In profondità.
- 17 sickle-shaped ... jaw. La mascella inferiore a forma di falce.
- 18 reaped away. Tranciato.
- 19 as a mower ... grass. Come una falciatrice un filo d'erba.
- 20 could have smote him. Avrebbe potuto colpirlo.
- 21 frantic morbidness. Morbosità frenetica.
- 22 woes. Dolori.

**LITERARY COMPETENCE****> VOCABULARY**

1 READ the text and match the highlighted adjectives with their meaning.

- | | |
|---------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1 unstained | 5 deceptive, unreliable |
| 2 omnipresent | 6 horrible |
| 3 corrugated | 7 striped |
| 4 unusual | 8 not injured |

> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

2 READ the text again and decide whether the following statements are true or false. Correct the false ones.

- 1 The whalemens had never been able to attack the whale.
- 2 The whale spouted thick blood.
- 3 Moby Dick's size was larger than that of other whales.
- 4 He had a protuberance on his back.
- 5 When seen swimming at night, Moby Dick took on the colour of the sea.
- 6 Moby Dick pretended he was swimming away, but suddenly turned back on his pursuers.
- 7 Captain Ahab had tried to kill the whale with his knife.
- 8 The whale had taken away his arm.

> COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

3 POINT out the realistic and exaggerated features attributed to Moby Dick. What quality is he given in this way?

4 SAY what crucial moment in Ahab's life is described. What were its consequences?

5 FIND where the voice of an omniscient narrator can be heard and explain his remarks.

> COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS AND RELATIONSHIPS

6 TRACE the influence of Romanticism in *Moby-Dick*.

7 DISCUSS. Explain in what sense *Moby-Dick* is a very American novel.