



## God is Silent, the Sea is Not: Moby-Dick and the Failure of Religious Consolation

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### Abstract

Herman Melville's Moby-Dick is a work that depicts in great detail the silence of God when faced with human suffering and the indifference of the universe. The authors of this article try to show how the book is a reflection of the loss of traditional religious comfort, where the silence of the deity is contrasted with the continuous sound of the sea - a power that is both beautiful and frightening. Captain Ahab's rejection of God, Ishmael's philosophical thoughts, and the crew's tragedy are like Melville's existential struggle with meaning, morality, and metaphysical order. The sea metaphorically becomes the character that speaks while God is silent and this situation represents the 19th-century world that has a faith crisis because of scientific progress and theological suspicion. Using close reading and theological and philosophical concepts that are mainly based on Calvinism, Romanticism, and proto-existentialism this work says that Moby-Dick is not a story about the divine justice, but it is rather a witness of the lack of religious certainty in the disorderly universe. Melville's literary theology does not give a clear solution, it only offers a scary perception of a universe where the human being's search for meaning is both glorious and fated. This paper rightfully regards Moby-Dick as a very important book in the literary history of spiritual disillusionment and metaphysical questioning

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## حين يصمت الإله ويهدر البحر: موبى ديك وفشل العزاء الديني

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### المستخلص

يرمان ملفيل في روايته موبى ديك يصور بتفصيل عميق صمت الإله في مواجهة معاناة الإنسان، ولا مبالاة الكون إزاء ذلك. يحاول مؤلفو هذه المقالة أن يُبينوا كيف أن الرواية تُجسد فقدان العزاء الديني التقليدي، حيث يُقابل صمت الإله بصوت البحر المستمر — قوة تجمع بين الجمال والرعب في آنٍ معاً. رفض القبطان أهاب للإله، وتأملات إسماعيل الفلسفية، ومأساة طاقم السفينة، كلها تمثل صراع ملفيل الوجودي مع المعنى، والأخلاق، والنظام الميتافيزيقي. في الرواية، يتحول مجازياً إلى شخصية ناطقة بينما يظل الإله صامتاً، وهذه الصورة تمثل أزمة الإيمان التي سادت في القرن التاسع عشر نتيجة التقدم العلمي والشك اللاهوتي. ومن خلال القراءة التحليلية الدقيقة، واستخدام المفاهيم اللاهوتية والفلسفية المستمدة أساساً من الكالفينية والرومانسية والمذهب الوجودي المبكر، يؤكد هذا البحث أن موبى ديك ليست حكاية عن العدالة الإلهية، بل شهادة على غياب اليقين الديني في كون مضطرب. اللاهوت

الأدبي لدى ملفيل لا يقدّم حلاً واضحاً، بل يطرح رؤية مخيفة لكون يصبح فيه بحث الإنسان عن المعنى مسعىً مجيئاً، لكنه محتوم النهاية. تُعد هذه الورقة موبى ديك كتاباً مهماً في التاريخ الأدبي لانتهيار الإيمان الروحي وطرح الأسئلة الميتافيزيقية. الكلمات المفتاحية: موبى ديك، هيرمان ملفيل، العزاء الديني، الصمت الإلهي، الأزمة الميتافيزيقية.

## Introduction

### 1- The Storm of Faith in Moby-Dick

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* is not just a story of the sea but also a metaphysical journey that takes place in the absence of a divine voice and the vast mysterious ocean. The very core of the story is a spiritual crisis—one that is paralleled with Melville's own ordeals with theological doubt, the insufficiency of religious comfort, and the philosophical effects of a silent or missing God in the nineteenth century. In a society where traditional Christian stories had been a source of comfort during hard times, *Moby-Dick* uncovers the vulnerability of such beliefs. Captain Ahab's fierce chase after the white whale turns into a metaphor for his revolt against a voiceless god, and at the same time, Ishmael's living is like a respectful and more uncertain wrestling with the understanding of life and endurance. The book was created during a period when the United States was in the middle of a rapid intellectual and spiritual transformation. The upbeat mood of the Transcendentalist philosophers like Emerson and Thoreau was still present but comfortably overshadowed by the increasing power of scientific rationalism, biblical criticism, and the fading of orthodox Calvinism. Melville, being an artist who is deeply affected by these streams, characterizes the idea that the world is a moral place that is ruled by a kindly god, as quite challenged. Instead, he offers a story where the ocean—an unruly and formidable character—talks louder than any god. Melville expresses, "the unintelligible currents of God's intention" still remain "hidden" (*Moby-Dick*, 1851/2009).

Captain Ahab, the novel's deeply flawed anti-hero, is a man who reflects the existential defiance. His single-minded chase of the white whale, which he characterizes as a force of evil from the devil, is a hot anger against a non-existent or wrong God. The line uttered by Ahab, "I'd strike the sun if it insulted me," is a rebellion on a metaphysical level which is similar to that of Milton's Satan or Camus's Sisyphus (Melville, 1851/2009). However, Melville does not depict Ahab as a hero; he is so obsessed with his mission that he is like a fire pulling the crew to their doom. The loss of traditional theodicy as the handling of Ahab's tragedy of to the very core of suffering and chaos is not just it. Contrasting Ahab is Ishmael, whose voice not only sets the tone of the novel but also remains intact after its disastrous ending. Ishmael's story is told with irony, disbelief, and introspection throughout. Instead of coming to terms with the spiritual issues of the book,

Ishmael just leaves them open. His survival incidentally might indicate a form of existential strength—some critics give it the name "a theology of ambiguity" (Delbanco, 2005). In this picture, the sea is thus both the image and the material: it is the place where men are looking for God but they get only themselves, being moved by the winds and the waves. As Richard J. King (2019) argues, the ocean in *Moby-Dick* is not simply the location of the story—it is an "ontological presence," a character who can talk, think, and feel like a human being, revealing the unfathomable depths of being (p. 28).

### 2. Divine Silence and the Nineteenth-Century Religious Crisis.

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* is a product of a historical moment still contaminated with spiritual anxiety and a theological crisis. The mid-19th century in America was the era of a cleavage in the connection between individuals and religious institutions, the foremost reason for this being the diminishing of the Calvinist orthodoxy, the advent of the Transcendentalism, and the increment of the power of science and rational inquiry. Melville's intellectual pilgrimage—from a youngster soaked in Calvinist teachings to a mature artist struggling with doubts and metaphysical despair—parallels the cultural move from religious certainty to spiritual ambiguity. The silence of God in *Moby-Dick* is the biggest part of the story not just a trick to capture the reader's attention but still as an illustration of the bigger faith crisis which was the intellectual atmosphere of Melville's time.

Calvinism, through the doctrines of predestination, divine providence, and the depravity of man, was the core of the early American religious thought. Even so, when Melville authored *Moby-Dick* in the late 1840s, religious assumptions that had formed the basis of those theological concepts were increasingly open to challenge. The focus on divine justice and providence, which was formerly a comfort, now seemed to be lacking when faced with natural disasters, suffering, and scientific findings that have cast doubts on the literal interpretation of the Bible. Scholars such as Harold Bloom (2000)(1) have stated that *Moby-Dick*'s representation of God indicates a departure from personal and providential that characterizes the god of Calvinism and turns into something very far and unknowable—the force that is more similar to the indifferent vastness of nature than the loving Father of Scripture.

This transformation is strongly illustrated in *Moby-Dick* by the symbolic opposition between the "silent"

God and the “speaking” sea. Many of the characters certainly use God or religious terms, but their requests often remain unanswered. Though Father Mapple’s sermon, granted divine mercy and the possibility of repentance, was still optimistic on the theological plane at the beginning of the novel, it is now being gradually weakened by the negative side of the journey. Ahab’s theological rebellion—his decision not to comprehend a divine will that perpetrates the presence of evil—is not a case of a single madness. Instead, it is a philosophical crisis resulting from religious disillusionment. The white whale, for the core of it, represents the rage against a universe without a voice: “Is Ahab Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm?” (Melville, 1851/2009)

Theologically, Ahab personifies with the ramifications of tragic fate in a world that is not morally clear and without the presence of a compassionate God. His mission, which is fundamentally a metaphysical war, is not to get revenge but to obtain answers, judgment, and cosmic justice from a silent entity. Ahab’s notion that the whale is a cover for an evil god is a representation of people’s need to be assured and to give the silent world a voice. As the literary expert Andrew Delbanco (2005) states, “Melville’s deepest discord was not with God’s justice but with God’s silence” (p. 137). This silence of God, at one time in history, which could have been taken as mystery or the experience of the divine, in *Moby-Dick*, it has become a place of horror and nothingness.

Melville’s discussion of religious silence definitely also connects him with the Transcendentalist movement, more so with the reflections of Ralph Waldo Emerson. While Emerson was promoting an inherently good and loving God who was reachable through nature and our intuitive faculty, Melville was still doubtful. In a letter addressed to Nathaniel Hawthorne, Melville talks about his “shock of recognition” that the universe may be indifferent rather than just (Melville, 1851/1993). Unlike Emerson’s deep-seated optimism, Melville perceives the natural world—embodied by the sea— not as a clear window into God but as a sign of the unknowable and of danger coming from within.

This doubt is mirrored in the character of Ishmael, whose voice is almost indistinguishable between one that questions God and one that is uncertain about the existence of God. He discusses the failure of language to reveal truth, the ridiculousness of an attempt to understand the ‘whiteness of the whale’ and the abundance of retaining unresolvable meanings. Ishmael’s spiritual status of uncertainty is in stark contrast to Ahab’s dark fate of being sure. Richard E. Brantley (2004) states that Melville’s brilliance comes from his decision not to solve the problem of faith and doubt in *Moby-Dick* where the book “gives no dogma,

merely the pain of seeking” (p. 92)

The nineteenth-century religious conflict was not only about religion but it also had a scientific aspect. Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859), which was published just a few years after *Moby-Dick*, is a work that not only deepened this crisis but also removing the need for god from the explanation of life. However, before Darwin had come on the scene, people like Charles Lyell in geology and Ludwig Feuerbach in philosophy had already started to take apart the very foundations of Christian belief. Melville, aware of these changes, goes as far as to visualize a narrative that fully embraces modern skepticism. His ocean is definitely not the place for divine revelation, but rather it is the unfathomable depth—a place where human minds have to deal not with divine clarity but with the indifference of the universe.

In the end, divine silence in *Moby-Dick* is an indirect reflection of a theological issue. Melville’s God is not missing, not present, but rather a hidden, unknowable, and frightening being in his silence. Religious comfort’s failure in the novel is not because of the absence of religious language but its inability to exert any power. The characters invoke God, yet their appeals remain unanswered. The rituals of meaning are unable to stand the experience. Thus, Melville’s is a voice not only for a historical moment but also for the human condition: the need for a voice from beyond and the fear of eternal silence

### **3. The Sea as Voice: Nature, Meaning, and Metaphysical Indifference**

In *Moby-Dick*, the Sea is not just a background for the journey, it is a character – a huge, mysterious force that communicates with power beyond any human or god’s voice. As the name of this article indicates, God is quiet, but the sea remains so. The ocean in Melville’s work is a symbol of the indifference of the universe, a natural force that seems to be the source of something deep although it still does not reveal its full meaning. Melville coming out of the sea narrates a universe where religious and moral beliefs disintegrate, thus, humans become like drifters while facing the depth of the unknown.

Sea’s omnipresence throughout *Moby-Dick* gives it almost god-like power. It directly influences Ishmael’s mind and turns into a symbolic space for both danger and philosophical debate. The sea is painted with words that evoke the sublime—vast in size, beautiful and scary, cold but still fascinating. Melville’s work of art highlights admiration, but it is admiration without any relief. The Christian God, who is said to be ruling with kindness and mercy, is quite different from the ocean. The sea is just as moral as the absence of the dark. “Think of the sea’s cleverness; how its most terrifying animals glide beneath the water, mostly invisible,”

Ishmael speculates, thus the ocean is the nature of hiding and not caring at all (Melville, 1851/2009).

This act of hiding becomes the focus of the novel's philosophical investigation. Melville is a case of the sea in metaphysical terms where he describes it as the visible face of an invisible reality. Ishmael reflects on this, "meditation and water are wedded forever," thus connecting the ocean with reflection and spiritual searching (Melville, 1851/2009). However, what the sea exposes is not a godly presence but rather a cold and dark void. While traditional theology may see the natural world as a confirmation of God's design, Moby-Dick totally changes this view: nature is definitely not heaven's reflection, and the sea no longer carries the message of salvation. It is noisy, violent, and hungry, but it has no reply.

Whale itself, Moby Dick, is still the sea's unexplainable nature in a metaphysical sense. Ahab argues that the whale is not only the spirit of some unknown entity: "That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate" (Melville, 1851/2009, p. 140). The whale, just like the sea, becomes a screen where Ahab puts his rage from his existence. It is both silent and speaking—dumb in its refusal to provide a meaning, but very loud in its reaction to being ignored. The whiteness of the whale, in particular, is still very suggestive in this sense. As Ishmael states, white can be a sign of both good and bad, the known and the unknown (p. 190). Therefore the whale goes on to say by being so overloading to human categories of signification its color is still a paradox.

From a philosophical point of view, Melville's sea is a representation of the same ideas of the mind of Schopenhauer and later of Camus. Schopenhauer depicted the world as governed by a senseless, aimless "will"—a force which was similar to Melville's ocean. Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, conceptualized the "absurd" condition of man who is constantly searching for the meaning in the silent universe. The sea in Moby-Dick acts in the same way. It is at one time the source of happiness and of uneasiness—a medium which reflects the ridiculousness of human desire to get an answer from the divine. To quote William Spanos (1995) "Moby-Dick is best to be understood as 'an ontological inquiry into the nature of being in a world from which the God of meaning has receded'" (p. 71).

Melville's ocean further positions the sea as a character that challenges typical anthropocentric narratives. The ocean is not a space where humans have their concerns addressed but it instead highlights human insignificance. The Pequod, a small boat on a vast ocean, is therefore a metaphor of human vulnerability when confronted with the enormity of nature. The crew's torment and death are most certainly not a part of a divine plan; rather, they are the consequence of being in a universe that is indifferent.

The sea, in this way, acts as both a judge and a witness. It neither comes in nor feels. It just exists.

However, the sea definitely seems to "talk" - not with words, but with figures of speech, movement, and size. Its voice is the wind's scream, a wave's impact, a light from scary beings under the water given to the eyes. Ishmael, as a narrator and a witness, gives one voice to the sea's frightening eloquence. His talking becomes a human effort to reply the sea's question - to give a story to the disorder, a meaning to the lack of interest. But even Ishmael's voice is very tentative, full of irony, and searching. He still exists, not because he has become the master of the sea or understood it, but because he has agreed to its mystery.

This acceptance represents the fullest extent of Melville's spiritual satisfaction. Ishmael is the only character who acts through listening rather than fighting. He is more of a thinker than a doer. His "floating coffin" (Queequeg's casket) thus becomes a metaphor of life rejuvenation by surrender, not victory. Ahab's anger at silence is, obviously, the very opposite of Ishmael's calm. Endurance, however, is a form of wisdom: not the one that comes from revelation, but that which is gained by persistence when absence is present. The writer Laurence Buell (1986) states, "Melville's sea is no longer a place of salvation, but still it is a medium for moral testing" (p. 119).

In the end, the ocean in Moby-Dick extols a fresh metaphysics—wherein nature is no longer a divine communication but a presence that can be experienced, suffered, and maybe even understood through its quietness. It appeals to the audience to give up naive theological schemas and encounter the abyss face-to-face. Thus, Melville prefigures the existential and modernist tendencies that would be predominant in the twentieth-century literature and philosophy. The ocean's voice is not for soothing but for agitating, it does not disclose God but it insists that we acknowledge His possible silence.

#### **4 .Ahab, Ishmael, and the Failure of Religious Consolation.**

Herman Melville's Moby-Dick is a great example depicting the failure of religious consolation through two main characters who are Captain Ahab and Ishmael. These individuals are symbols of two different ways people deal with silence from God and the absence of meaning in the world—Ahab by means of anger and rebellion and Ishmael by means of doubt and patience. Both characters are not comfortable with the faith that they have, however, they are each on a different journey through the novel's metaphorical desert. This article is aimed at going into all the details of their deeds, philosophies, and destinies to demonstrate that Moby-Dick is faith's inadequacy as a lipstick for the human encounter with the disorder and pain.

Blinded by his all-consuming hatred, Captain Ahab is usually depicted as a figure wishing to overthrow God's position in the universe of morals. His hatred for the white whale, which he believes to be the manifestation of a wicked or indifferent force, is certainly not the sole reason for his hatred—it is also a deeply theological rebellion. He states emphatically: "Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me" (Melville, 1851/2009). In this utterance, Ahab lays bare his conception of the universe: one in which divine beings are deceitful, and where justice is only granted if it is carried out by humans. The defiance of this Promethean is both Milton's Satan and Shelley's Frankenstein, however, Ahab's fight is not with a moral deity—it is with a silent one.

Ahab's hopelessness is not a result of only the physical pain he experienced (his lost leg) but also of the metaphysical betrayal. To him, the whale was not the cause of the accident, but it was done with a purpose: a personal insult from a cosmic force that did not intend to be understood. Andrew Delbanco (2005) points out, "Ahab has got an unhealable wound that is spiritual just like it is physical" (p. 148). This spiritual wound is the image of Melville's bigger critique of providential theologies which assert that suffering is of a good cause. In Ahab's opinion, if the pain is not compensated by God's fair play, then it has to be avenged by the human side. His journey turns into an ironic version of religious faith: complete dedication, blind devotion, and the greatest sacrifice—however, it is not the salvation that is sought, but the destruction. However Melville is also not fully supportive of Ahab. The story introduces him as a person with a great charm, but a very destructive one, a genius who is tragically doomed. His lack of ability to understand the world's unclear nature makes him a sad character. Ahab is unable to bear the silence of God; he wants to have a meaning and if there is none, he constructs it himself—by means of violence. This unwillingness to live with the doubt and uncertainty is exactly what brings about the tragedy of his life. The object of his belief is not God, but his idea of justice. Thus, Ahab, paradoxically, is reenacting the very mistake of those religious systems which he actively rejects: a moral order in a dark place.

On the other hand, Ishmael's journey is calmer, deeply thoughtful, and, in the end, more receptive to lack of clarity. While Ahab is focused on trying to find a pattern in the world, Ishmael is only seeking a way that the world might be by a simple attempt at understanding—even if that understanding turns out to be in doubt. Right from the start, Ishmael's narrative voice is very much aware and doubtful. His choice to go to sea is presented as a spiritual act of depression treatment, a figurative journey down to the dark and the unknown. "Every time I start feeling gloomy about the

mouth... I discreetly go to the boat," he confesses (Melville, 1851/2009). Ahab, who perceives the sea as a war zone, is completely different from Ishmael, who rather imagines it to be a place for meditation.

Ishmael is the only one among the crew who resurface at the end of the Pequod story. His survival, however, is not a heroic act, but rather a result of an accident or perhaps a symbol. He is given back to life by the coffin of Queequeg that was now used as a lifebuoy: a death thing changed into a life thing. This scene is at the core of Ishmael's new understanding of the world—he makes things up, is sarcastic, and his position is quite precarious. The coffin-lifeboat can be interpreted as a metaphor of human persistence: in a world without clear answers survival alone becomes significant. As Elizabeth Renker (1996) points out, "Ishmael's survival is not a triumph over the sea, but a surrender to it—a gratitude for its energy and indifference" (p. 112).

Religious comfort, if we use traditional terms, is basically a guarantee of peace, justice, and salvation. It provides stories where pain has its place, and it is carried out by divine providence. On the other hand, in *Moby-Dick*, the situation is more complicated because no such consolations are there. Ahab, trying to get religious answers, is misled by his own belief. Ishmael, on the other hand, by accepting uncertainty, manages to survive. By this contrast, Ishmael is shown as Melville's solution to the spiritual dilemma: not by faith in God, but by telling stories, thinking, and bravely facing the life which has no metaphysical guarantees.

The novel is also a means to criticize institutional religion through its secondary characters. Father Mapple's sermon, which was given at the beginning of the book, is the main idea of Jonah's story being a cautionary tale of disobedience and a teaching of repentance. It paints a very good and simple moral world in which a divine wrath is the only way to spiritual healing. Still, the journey of the Pequod overturns this message. The crew, on the one hand, is not saved by disobedience, and, on the other hand, not condemned by rebellion—they are like players in a performance that is going on without any moral recognition. The sea is like a force that is neutral and it does not care if you are virtuous or sinful. The insincerity of Father Mapple's religion becomes quite obvious as the story moves on—his words do not describe the world which the characters live in.

Melville's religious beliefs were rather complicated and multiple. In his letters and written notes, he manifested his reluctance to God, theology, and the existence of meaning. In a letter addressed to Nathaniel Hawthorne, he openly declared: "I have pretty much made up my mind to be annihilated" (Melville, 1851/1993). On one hand it is a very direct admission and on the other hand, it is the anguish that forms the core of *Moby-Dick*—

this anger being most clearly shown through Ahab's rebellion and Ishmael's patience.

Melville explores one of the deepest human needs for the search of meaning in the silent cosmos through these characters. Ahab is the personification of the perils of religious absolutism—the state of mind that requires no mystery. On the other hand, Ishmael stands for a delicate, comical intelligence: The capacity to be comfortable with uncertainty, to be receptive rather than controlling, and thus to tell a story without feigning comprehension. In a world where God remains silent, the decision is not only whether to believe or disbelieve, but also whether to rebel or reflect.

### Conclusion

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* challenges the reader to recognize the unsettling nature of divine silence and the delicate nature of religious consolation. The novel deepens its criticism of the traditional view of providence and salvation by focusing on absence and ambiguity. Ahab, who is not able to tolerate the silence, wants to extract a message out of the whale and thus he envisions a hostile god through the animal and hence, it is his rebellion that not a revelation of truth but death is the final outcome, at which time he uncovers the risk of demanding an answer where there is none.

This research stresses on *Moby-Dick* as "a theology of absence". The sea and the whale are no longer symbols of God's providence but signs of silence of the universe. It draws upon Melville's placement in the broader 19th-century religious crisis and Melville's reference to existential philosophy to make the argument that the novel turns out to be one of the firsts modernist texts to deal with doubt and the absurd. When God does not speak, the ocean is the one that speaks not with consolation but with truth

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