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*“Moby Dick: Ishmael’s Epic Voyage Revisited”*

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# ***Moby Dick*: Ishmael's Epic Voyage Revisited**

## **Introduction**

*Moby Dick* is usually regarded as "the greatest American novel ever written" (Rudd) by many critics and important authors such as D.H Lawrence, who said that it was "the greatest book of the sea ever written"(168). No, doubt Herman Melville's sixth novel is an epic that deals with several classic epic themes such as knowledge, fate, revenge and the self. However, what makes it a more singular novel is that it also displays scientific and natural knowledge. Besides, personal experience in the whaling world is provided by Ishmael's voice, a novice whaler who "not simply watches but deciphers what he sees" (Arvin 1). The purpose of this paper is to prove that Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* is an epic that joins together two traditions of epics and mingles them in order to build a more complex epic. In Melville's epic a hero takes a circular voyage and comes back to civilization renewed and reborn with a greater knowledge, "beginning with Odysseus, Beowulf and Sir Gawain- not to mention Spiderman or Batman- the epic culminates around the hero's journey of self discovery and spiritual maturation" (webpages.uidaho.edu, 2014). This triumphant hero shares his knowledge making a "retelling of that story" on his return (Sten and Sten 82) acting somehow like a preacher allowing us to begin our own trip of self-discovery. In order to carry out the analysis following Thomas Drake's study of classical epic will serve as the basis for the analysis of *Moby Dick*. Campbell's *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* will stand as the guideline to approach the stages of the hero's journey: departure, initiation and return.

## ***Moby Dick*: characteristics of classical**

Before focusing on *Moby Dick*, the concept of epic should be defined: a classical epic is "a long narrative poem in a dignified style about the deeds of a traditional or historical hero" (yourdictionary.com). The first examples that come to mind are *The Iliad*, *Beowulf* together with John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Thus, these four works are of great importance when approaching *Moby Dick* because Melville's novel contains numerous similarities with them and the epic tradition.

According to Thomas Drake, the most common features found in classic epics are the following:

- 1) The poet remains objective and omniscient.
- 2) It involves deeds of superhuman strength and valour.
- 3) Vast setting, the action spans not only geographical but also often cosmological space.
- 4) It involves supernatural and-or otherworldly forces.
- 5) Sustained elevation of style.
- 6) The plot centres around a Hero of unbelievable stature. (webpages.uidaho.edu)

## 1) Omniscient and objective poet

The exemplary novels mentioned above tend to fulfil the six features and *Moby Dick* does as well. Significantly, there are several chapters in this novel that do not contribute to the development of the plot but are devoted to other issues that have little or nothing to do with Moby Dick's hunt. These chapters are regarded as the ones which granted the novel "the unpopularity of methodically describing the appearance and activity of the whale and the various processes involved in whaling"(Ward 164). It is due to those chapters that the novel was not praised as it is today, because neither common readers nor critics could accept "what appeared to them an incongruous blend of formal exposition and traditional narration, a partial novel that could also serve as a handbook or treatise on whaling" (Ward 164).

As a matter of fact, *Moby Dick* seems to be sometimes in disagreement with the first feature, although, Ishmael is subjective, his point of view is commonsensical so he can be regarded as the voice of Melville in the novel. Ishmael is usually caught reflecting on his own thoughts, and as stated recently, his voice is just a mask of Melville's, thus Melville's opinion is given on the different matters Ishmael's digressions lead him to, "And what are you, reader, but a Loose-Fish and a Fast-Fish, too?" (330). For sure, "there is nothing on which Melville digresses that does not serve his meaning" (cs.princeton.ed) and even those unpopular chapters stand for a metaphorical meaning that can only be grasped with further analysis of the same. With some sense it can be said that *Moby Dick* "is not a *classic* epic, for we feel too strongly the individual who wrote it"(Melville and Kazin 41) and although we read Ishmael's words, we hear Melville's ideas.

The very first sentence of Moby Dick, "You can call me Ishmael" (1), is known

worldwide as one of the best openings in American literature, however, "Ishmael is not the given name of Melville's narrator; it is the name he appropriates for himself" (Sten and 82). Ishmael writes and narrates the story of the hunt of Moby Dick when he has finished the epic quest and has returned to civilization. He already knows the end because he has lived that story, "his relationship to other people is that of a story-teller to his audience" (Dryden 113) and he cannot help to "foreshadow events to come" (cs.princeton.ed). Maybe, a proof of his 'foreshadowing behaviour', can be found at the beginning of his narration when he tells that he finds himself "pausing before coffin warehouses"(1), and in the end where he asserts that he is saved by "the coffin-lifebouy"(469).

## **2) Deeds of superhuman strength and valour**

*Moby Dick* may not seem to contain deeds of superhuman strength and valour, since everyone seems like real people without any superhuman power. Nevertheless, what is beyond human features is not physical but mental. Captain Ahab's monomania in pursuing the "Great Leviathan" (56) as often called, is far beyond any common behaviour. He not only risks his own life, but also is willing to sacrifice the life of any person in the crew for the sole purpose of achieving his insane revenge. "Dismembered, unnaturally vengeful, self-slave and self-exiled from the land and the women" (González Moreno 12), Ahab conceals a self-destructive obsession with revenge. This revenge is related to the other superhuman features of epics, although in a different scope than expected.

### 3) Setting

Usually the settings of epics are vast and they often involve cosmological locations. As can be appreciated in *Beowulf*, the setting includes real locations in Denmark and Geatland, southern Sweden. However, it also includes magical or mystical locations such as the cave where Grendel and his mother lived. In *Moby Dick*, the setting is a vast metaphorical sea usually cosmologically extrapolated, "Aloft, like a royal czar and king, the sun seemed giving this gentle air to this bold and rolling sea; even as a bride to groom"(442). Thus, although the voyage depicted in the novel is placed at the real oceans of this world, the reader usually may feel immersed in the middle of the universe just as little Pip does when he falls from the boats, "Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs"(343). With regard to time setting, epics usually tell an ancient story set in a remote past, for instance, *Beowulf* is placed in the year 500 A.D. In contrast, *Moby Dick* is set in the mid-nineteenth-century, when the book was first published (1851) and it does not recall events that happened long ago.

### 4) Supernatural and-or otherworldly forces

Epics involve supernatural and/or otherworldly forces, commonly portrayed as great harmful monsters such as dragons or other mythological creatures. The dragon that killed Beowulf, Cetus the monster that kidnapped Andromeda, Geryon in the *Divine Comedy* or Satan in *Paradise Lost*, are clear examples that epics contain unearthly figures. *Moby Dick* not only contains a monster of these qualities, but the whole book is named after it. It is said that Herman Melville took inspiration for his

novel from a real albino whale that used to be spotted round the Pacific Ocean during the nineteenth century. Described as a "renowned monster, who had come off victorious in a hundred fights with his pursuers" (melville.org), the real albino whale was known as 'Mocha Dick'. Depicted throughout the whole novel as a monster of colossal dimensions, the chapter that better exemplifies the unnatural features of Melville's white whale is chapter 42, titled 'The Whiteness of the Whale'. In this chapter some of the qualities of the whale such as its "ubiquity" (122) and peculiar colour that make it a godly creature, are well explained by Herman Melville, who accordingly places Moby Dick along with epic supernatural creatures.

Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the althought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a colour as the visible absence of colour; and at the same time the concrete of all colours; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows—a colourless, all-colour of atheism from which we shrink?(163)

## **5) Language and form**

With regard to the style of *Moby Dick*, it can be said that in numerous ways the novel does not fulfil the sustained elevation of style proper of classical epics, due to its objective and factual knowledge about whaling and other deeds. This factual information is well depicted in chapters like 'Cetology' (Chapter 32) or 'The Fossil Whale' (Chapter 104), where these data form the basis, however, in some other passages such as those where Ahab's soliloquies are placed like in 'Sunset' (Chapter 37) or 'The Forge' (Chapter 113), it regains that epic sense the reader can perceive in language. The epics that inspired *Moby Dick* share a similar language and form, "The style is marked by repetition, a pronounced use of epithets and a variety of names for these main characters. The speaker often refers to events, places, and characters outside the main

narrative, giving the poems a feeling of great scope and comprehensiveness" (karolus.net). In the case of *Moby Dick* as well as the others, there often covertly exists numerical repetitions "two innkeepers, two goings-to-bed, two chowders, two comrades, two Quaker captains" (Hayford 34), not only with number two but also "the number three makes roughly two-hundred and fifty appearances in Herman Melville's novel" (delpenich). Many epithets like "Snow-white wings", (442) as well as a great amount of events, places and characters are used. For instance, in chapter 82 'The Honour and Glory of Whaling', Melville shows his vast knowledge of the whaling history and heroes probably learnt during his personal whaling voyages.

## 6) Epic Heroes

Before defining the hero, a classification of the different kinds of epics must also be drawn in order to correctly place Melville's novel. As was already stated lines before, *Moby Dick* is an epic that joins together two epic traditions to create an original and unprecedented complex narration. It joins together the epic of combat or conflict, as in the case of *The Iliad* or *Beowulf* and the epic of spiritual quest, as in *The Divine Comedy* or Milton's *Paradise Lost* (Sten and Sten 2). Due to Ahab's thirst for revenge it can be linked to the first tradition, the tradition of combat or conflict in which Ahab seeks to kill the whale or Beowulf pursues to kill Grendel and other mythological monsters. On the other hand, Ishmael belongs to the second tradition, the tradition of the spiritual quest. Ishmael does not seek to kill Moby Dick, although he is at some point absorbed by Ahab's magnetism. However, both quests are interrelated, they share a spiritual and metaphysical component that unites them. Ahab is portrayed as overreacher, as a "madman" (138), while on the other hand, Ishmael is depicted as

commonsensical, practical or "cautious" (167). Nevertheless both are struggling through a spiritual battle that leads them to their very end "There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness" (351). It is true that Captain Ahab seems a conflict epic hero but certain musings show how he is struggling in the spiritual scope too:

"All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man 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." (153)

Ishmael's focus his quest to reach the ultimate sense of life. This search is similar to Dante's salvation of his soul when he wanders through *The Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, although the one Ishmael undertakes is more related to metaphysics than to religion as such. As Christopher Sten points out "Ishmael's story envelop Ahab's, (...) this is Ishmael's story more than it is Ahab's" (2). It is true that the last part of the book is almost only centred on Ahab's monomaniac pursuit of the white whale, but it is a story told from the point of view of Ishmael. As the story is told by Ishmael, the elements that link the narration, are more closely related to the spiritual quest tradition than to those elements of the conflict one. As far as the novel is narrated by Ishmael "the theme of the quest for the soul takes on an overriding importance" (Sten and Sten 3) and it makes of him the true main character. Obviously, conflict epics are also related to spiritual affairs but they are more "concerned in a fundamental way with mythology" (Hutson and McCoy 9); for example Gods and Demigods. Therefore, they are not centred on the search of the self and the salvation of the soul as the quest of Ishmael is.

*Moby Dick* has a plot centred on two heroes, Ishmael usually overwhelmed and Captain Ahab, the one that owns an 'unbelievable stature'. Nevertheless, as this paper is going to prove Ahab is not the main protagonist of the novel. Essentially, an epic needs

a hero and as it has already been stated in *Moby Dick*, there are two kinds of epics, the conflict and the spiritual one, thereupon two different kind heroes are to be found in the novel too. By definition an epic hero is "normally of superior social station, often a king or leader in his own right. He is usually tall, handsome, and muscular. He must be preeminent, or nearly so, in athletic and fighting skills" (firstyear.barnard.edu). This definition of the hero clearly matches with the description of Captain Ahab, thus the hero of conflict epics: "His whole high, broad form, seemed made of solid bronze and shaped in an unalterable mould, like Cellini's cast Perseus" (102). As can be noted, there is an explicit reference to Andromeda's saviour of the sea monster Cetus, Perseus.

As captain of the ship, Ahab holds a superior social status and although he is not a king, he surely is a leader oftentimes called "unseen tyrant" (437). There is no doubt about his fighting skills when he is always eager to test them against Moby Dick, "Ahab will dam off your blood, as a miller shuts his watergate upon the stream!" (454). Although Ahab is well-built and leads the crew of the 'Pequod', "The epic hero is sometimes outstanding in intelligence" (firstyear.barnard.edu) and there is where Ishmael excels. In the very first pages of *Moby Dick*, that Ishmael is a common person with "little or no money in [his] purse, and nothing particular to interest [him] on shore" (1). However, this 'commonness' of his is absolutely false, "Ishmael takes scholar's delight in displaying his learning"(1). There is no earthly way in which a common person such as Ishmael claims to be, could write a narration so full of scientific, historical, mythological and geographical knowledge among others. Melville's narration is very influenced by Nathaniel Hawthorne's, whom he greatly admired, and both come from the romance tradition, "in its narrative form, *Moby Dick* fits the traditional literary form of a quest romance" (Brodhead 29). Melville uses Ishmael in a complex and sometimes inconsistent way, through the novel it can be appreciated a

duality in the roles of Ishmael as narrator. Sometimes he acts as an internal narrator having restricted knowledge of what happens, he can only describe what he sees and thinks, but sometimes Ishmael subjectively acts as a third-person narrator, one that knows more than he could know. This duality creates a channel for Melville to express his own ideas and thoughts.

Ishmael appears as an accessible narrator to the readers, one whose knowledge comes from experience and not from education. Ishmael always questions everything he watches and experiences, always trying to reach to his own soul. Thus, "Ishmael's effort to discover his own buried self or soul" (Sten and Sten 8) is what makes him a truly spiritual hero. As stated before, *Moby Dick* comes from the romance tradition, both Melville and Hawthorne are not realistic authors, therefore their fiction has more to do with the romance than with novels and that is represented in *Moby Dick* which is "virtually unique in romantic literature"(Brodhead 29). In Melville's work there are mixed technical elements, documentary of whaling together with metaphysical aspects and philosophical tales of adventure.

Although Ishmael and Captain Ahab are the true main protagonists in *Moby Dick*, there are many other little quests that in the end come to merge in the same one, "In *Moby Dick*, in contrast, many characters are on separate although interrelated voyages, pursuing a host of internal secrets" (Brodhead 30). Ahab's and Ishmael's quests, which are the white whale and the discovery of his own soul, are connected. In addition, other members of the crew like Pip, Queequeg or the crew itself for instance, have their own quest too, every quest that appears in *Moby Dick*, with no regards of how crucial it is for the plot, is somehow connected and interrelated. Pip descends to the depths of the primal world and returns renewed although apparently maddened, Queequeg saves Ishmael with his own refusal to die by fever and the crew not only

pursue Moby Dick but the rest of the whales too (Brodhead 30). Hence, the whole book includes multiple quests apart from the main two ones and it "organically demands the expressive interrelation,[...] not a single stroke is introduced that has not a meaning for the myth as a whole" (Slotkin 123).

As Richard H. Brodhead suggests there is "ultimately one imagination travels on all these voyages"(30), that is, a final unity encircles all the quests, therefore providing the totality of the work with a sense of unity as a whole. This unity is not only found in the union of quests, but also in the singularity of many other elements that can be found throughout the pages of Melville's novel: It has one victorious hero, one failed hero "one white whale, one doubloon, one ungraspable phantom of life and one sea" (Brodhead 30). Accordingly, this unity leads us to place the novel as a one which is quite similar to myths and legends themselves. "Mythical patterns of several cultures [...] from Christian Bible to Greek mythology, American folk traditions and frontier characters" (Hoffman 235) that together with all quests, make of *Moby Dick* a book that can stand by itself alone as it needs no explanation, "it is self-sufficient, self-explaining and self-justifying like all myth" (Slotkin 539).

### **The Journey of the Hero.**

It is time to analyze the hero's circular voyage described through the novel. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1968), Joseph Campbell defines the epic journey as follows:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow men (47)

In his work *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1968) Joseph Campbell describes the three stages the heroes undertake in epics: Departure, Initiation and Return (1). These three stages Campbell describes give shape to a circular movement in which at the end the hero comes back renewed. Along the pages of *Moby Dick* it can be appreciated how Ishmael describes this circular voyage, although in a metaphorical way, not as clearly as classical epic heroes describe theirs. Captain Ahab fails in his quest and is unable to return to civilization, since he is destroyed by the terrible white whale, thus this analysis will prove that Ishmael is the real hero of *Moby Dick*.

## 1) Departure

The first stage is the 'Departure' of the hero. The departure always starts with a 'Call to the Adventure', it "can come in the form of a message, letter, dream, temptation, last straw, or loss of something" (Peterson 2014). In the first page of the first chapter Ishmael asserts to feel a "drizzly November in [his] soul" and such a bad mood that "it requires a strong moral principle to prevent [him] from [...] methodically knocking people's hats off" (1). Ishmael feels lost and does not know what to do with his life, "like *The Divine Comedy*, *The Waste Land*, and other spiritual epics, *Moby Dick* opens with its hero in a fallen state of emotional torpor and confusion" (Sten and Sten 5), thus feeling an urgent need to escape from this world. Usually the call to adventure is given by a herald: "the Whale itself, [...] also serves as the herald that call's him to adventure"(Sten and Sten 7). At the end of 'Loomings', the first chapter, Ishmael explains that what it made him to go to sea "was the overwhelming idea of the great whale himself" (7). To Ishmael, this idea of the great whale symbolises the whole

universe, the great incognita that dwells in all of us and that it is related to the self-understanding of each person, the things we can understand and those that are far from human understanding. It appears as an ontological symbol, a metaphysical being characterised by both the knowable and the unknowable (waddo.net) and it can be "the source of either salvation or damnation" (Slotkin 549).

After the call to adventure has been sent and received by the hero, it may be ignored "for it is always possible to turn the ear to other interests" (Campbell 60). The adventures undertaken by epic heroes are usually risky and may conclude with their own death, but what distinguishes a real hero from a failed one, is the fact that the successful one does not fear his own death, for the 'awakening of the self' (sunnypress.edu) cannot occur without a previous death. Surely, in Ishmael's nature, those impulses that lead him to act in any direction without previous thinking do not exist. Before accepting the 'Call to the Adventure' Ishmael doubts, but "his unconscious knows there must be a dying to the world before there can be a rebirth"(Sten and Sten 6), thus he accepts it knowing there may exist danger. Here is where Ahab shows his failure, in his inaptitude to accept death to return, in his inability to understand that there is a power beyond his will "Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, or God, or who, that lifts this arm?" (444).

As Dante is helped by Beatriz in the *Divine Comedy*, Ishmael needs to be helped too, "for those who have not refused the call, the first encounter of the hero-journey is with a protective figure" (Campbell 64). The ultimate help that Ishmael receives to expel his doubts is given by Queequeg, "the abominable savage" (22), when he encounters him for the first time in the bed of the 'Spouter Inn'. Queequeg, the tattooed cannibal, may seem at first glance as the 'Devil himself' (219) but far from that, he is the soul-companion Ishmael needs to start his voyage. Queequeg is the one that entrusts

Ishmael, appealing to 'Yojo' the "amulet against the forces he is about to pass" (Campbell 64), the task of finding a whaling ship in which to enrol, thus, giving him the task of finding the vehicle for their journey. Queequeg himself may be portrayed as the image of the successful hero that has returned and now helps the rest of fellows. Apart from embodying the role of savage and a cannibal, he also stands for protection "representing the benign power of destiny" (Campbell 67). Queequeg helps Ishmael as much as he can, so, Ishmael reaches the conclusion they both are sort of tied or married as can be seen in Chapter 10 'A Bosom Friend', "I and Queequeg — a cosy, loving pair" (45).

After accepting the call and receiving help, what an epic hero must do is start moving. He initiates his journey but has to encounter a first obstacle, "the threshold guardian is the gateway to the new world the hero must enter to change and grow"(svsoft.com). As Polyphemus stands for 'threshold guardian' or 'gatekeeper' to Odysseus, in *Moby Dick* there are also characters that act as inquisitors to Ishmael. In Melville's novel there is a predilection for number three as has already been stated: it is not surprising then that the number of threshold guardians is also three. The first encounter with a threshold guardian occurs in chapter 7 'The Chapel' where Ishmael enters the chapel of New Bedford and listens to the sermon of Father Mapple. The preacher's sermon is delivered with hints of maritime jargon and deals with a hymn, a version of Psalm 18, where the story of Jonah is narrated and the way he was trapped in the belly of a whale. Ishmael sits in the chapel while Queequeg leaves, nevertheless, as Christopher Sten accurately states, what Mapple says is paradoxical: the call is irresistible, the call must be freely accepted, but there is no chance of escaping it if your destiny lies in the inside of the belly. Whether the call is accepted or refused, there is no escaping the experience of Death (11). This preaching sets the tone of the voyage very

clearly: as Jonah, Ishmael needs to get inside the whale in order to die and be reborn. However, it may be hinted that you are predestined to that fate, or otherwise, you may be able to choose whether to accept or refuse thanks to your own free will, "the only absolute knowledge attainable by man, is that life is meaningless" (goodreads).

The second threshold guardian is to be found in the enrolment of Ishmael and Queequeg on the whaling ship *Pequod*. This scene takes place in chapter 16, 'The Ship', where firstly Ishmael and then Queequeg are tested by the two Quaker owners of the ship, Captain Peleg and Captain Bildad. These two owners are in need of sailors for the next voyage and "like Father Mapple, Peleg has the job of separating false aspirants from true ones"(Sten and Sten 18). Once Ishmael steps into the ship the interrogation begins, "*ever been in a stove boat?*" (71), after a few questions Ishmael is depicted as an absolute illiterate in the whaling field. Nevertheless, what grants him the possibility to keep on with his journey is that he convinces Peleg and Bildad of his eagerness to join the crew "Well, sir, I want to see what whaling is" "Dost thee?" asks Peleg while Ishmael answer is truly honest, "I dost" (73).

Understanding the possible dangers he may be about to suffer and enrolled on the *Pequod*, Ishmael with Queequeg overcome the third and last threshold guardian, Elijah. Quite significant is the fact that Elijah was the biblical prophet that predicted the fall of Ahab, a biblical king, "the prophet tries to shake the initiate's resolve by casting doubt on the ship's whole enterprise" (Sten and Sten 22). In this case, Ishmael does not understand the cryptical language of Elijah and concludes it is nonsense. After dismissing "Elijah's diabolical incoherencies" (99) and having passed the tests of the three threshold guardians, they get aboard the *Pequod* in order to begin the sea voyage.

The last section of the Departure stage is found in the entrance of 'The Belly of the Whale', which paradoxically suits the purpose of the novel. This entrance in the

belly of the monster "illustrates the fact that the devotee at the moment of entry into a temple undergoes a metamorphosis" (Campbell 79), such a temple is the very ship itself. Taking into account that 'Pequod' stands for the name of a Native American tribe almost destroyed, the etymology of the name shows that there is also prophecy in the election of the ship. This temple is the place where Ishmael will endure his struggle and will come out of it renewed, as he does after the shipwreck.

## **2) Initiation**

The second stage of the hero's journey takes place when "the hero moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials"(Campbell 81). In spiritual epics, these trials are portrayed as metaphorical trials in which the hero must not undertake a physical fight but a mental one. In *Paradise Lost*, this struggle takes place when Adam and Eve repent, as Jonah did to God, and learnt the correct way of life. Regarding Ishmael, he does not fight against God but against the magnetic presence of Ahab, "Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine" (148). If Ishmael wants to have "a chance of being swallowed by the whale, he must keep from being swallowed up by Ahab's rage, as all others are" (Sten and Sten 33). Although he does not know yet, the key element to free himself from Ahab's ruin is the "ambivalence in the nature of the White Whale" (Slotkin 546). The good and the evil it represents, the duality of Life.

The next step of Campbell's work is the 'Meeting with the Goddess'. Where in other epics such as *Beowulf* women appear in order to join together with the male hero, in Melville's epic only two women appear in the text and none of them is really important in plot terms. As the very nature of the book is metaphorical, it can be said

that the encounter with this woman comes as a metaphor too. In chapter 35 'The Mast Head', Ishmael ascends to the top of the ship and beholds the "infinite series of the sea" (129). Water has often been seen "as an element associated with women" (threemusketeers.net 2014) and due to the fact that the vast sea is formed by water, it can be said that the encounter with the goddess comes with the sight of the sea. This encounter is alienating because it unites the hero with the female and grants him his other half. The sole purpose of this encounter is to find unity and strength to endure the incoming battles, "the hero may meet a powerful female figure with whom he finds unity and bonding of some kind" (changinminds.org).

There is little protagonism of female characters as shown before. Campbell's next step consist in the 'Temptation of the Woman' but such a temptation, is not applicable to *Moby Dick*. The following segment is 'The Atonement with the Father', which is the point where the hero faces the father and a revelation occurs, "the successful hero always finds: the face of the Father and the face of the hero are one and the same" (Sten and Sten 58). Ishmael's revelation occurs throughout a very metaphysical paragraph in the chapter 87 'The Great Armada':

And thus, although surrounded by circle upon circle of consternations and affrights, did these inscrutable creatures at the centre freely and fearlessly indulge in all peaceful concernments; yea, serenely revelled in dalliance and delight. But even so, amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being, do I myself still for ever centrally disport in mute calm; and while ponderous planets of unwaning woe revolve round me, deep down and deep inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy (323).

This revelation can be related to the one that in a shorter way Pip feels when he falls from the boats and watches 'the face of God'. They both find that looking through the "water which reflects the features of the heroes and contain the mysteries in the depth"(Slotking, 539), they behold the reflection of their very nature, and that there is no major God than yourself. Thus, "meaning is not to be found in the surfaces [but] it is

significantly behind them" (Dryden 84).

Once the revelation has been understood, the hero rejoices because "a greater understanding is achieved"(changenminds.org) and he is now ready for the most difficult part of the journey, the death that qualifies for rebirth. One of the most significant chapters in Melville's masterpiece is the one titled 'A Squeeze of the Hand'. Here Ishmael's joy might be misinterpreted as joy due to homosexuality, but the reader who interprets epically the work, will find there the 'Apotheosis' of the hero.

Now, the proof of his blessedness:

I forgot all about our horrible oath; in that inexpressible sperm, I washed my hands and my heart of it; I almost began to credit the old Paracelsan superstition that sperm is of rare virtue in allaying the heat of anger; while bathing in that bath, I felt divinely free from all ill-will, or petulance, or malice, of any sort whatsoever (345).

After this revelation he is free from Ahab's burden, he has achieved his goal and has set his soul free, he has seen the mother and he has seen the father, here "Melville challenges the notion that the meaning of existence can be discovered by men" (Gilmore, 1977:1). What the hero now has to face is the destruction of his past self and the birth of his new one.

Immediately before the returning movement of the hero there is still one more thing to do, "indicated by Joseph Campbell [...] as the Ultimate Boon stage which is actually the Mastery of two worlds stage" (gordonnapieronline). Ishmael still has to prove that he really has understood life. For example, in *Star Wars* this ultimate boon occurs when Luke relies on 'The Force'. In *Moby Dick* this understanding is portrayed in the chapter 96, 'The Try-Works', where the whale's flesh is dismembered and turned it into oil. Oil is the final purpose of the whaling trade and a metaphor that perfectly explains Ishmael's success is drawn at the end of the chapter, "But even Solomon, he says, the man that wandereth 'out of the way of understanding' shall remain in the

congregation of the dead" (348).

Once the goal is achieved, the hero must return to civilization to narrate his story to the rest of the people and try to teach them the correct way of life understanding, "the full round, the norm of the monomyth, requires that the hero shall now begin the labour of bringing the runes of wisdom" (Campbell 126). "*Moby Dick* is a book about man's attempt to understand and interpret the world" (Gilmore 1) Ishmael must bring back that knowledge with him and trumpet it.

### **3) Return**

Just as a 'refusal of the call' can happen, a 'refusal to return' is also possible "the responsibility has been frequently refused"(Campbell 126) when the time of returning comes. For instance, in Mount Doom after destroying the 'One Ring', Frodo claims to be too exhausted to come back. Ishmael returns happily to civilization, as he has not got a greedy nature, "he has no selfish motive, nothing beyond simple curiosity" (Sten and Sten 65). In chapter 104 '*The Fossil Whale*', Ishmael addressing the reader directly realises that he has a greater knowledge within himself and although it would be very pleasant to remain there, his return, handling that knowledge, is more important for human kind. He is the light that would secure the passage to people to that temple and to return victorious as him, "In this Afric Temple of the Whale I leave you, reader, and if you be a Nantucketer, and a whaleman, you will silently worship there"(377).

As the last part of *Moby Dick* is almost related to Captain Ahab, some of the stages of the hero's journey are either skipped or briefly summarized since Ahab becomes the main focus. However, the whole narration of Ahab's misfortunes can be seen as Ishmael's intentions of warning the reader in order to still return successful. At

this point, the following stages of the hero are going to be reorganised from Campbell's original order to suit the succession of events as they occur in Melville's work.

The whole narration deals with the monomaniac hunt of the white whale Moby Dick, and the final encounter is portrayed during the 'Three Days Chase'. Along chapters 133, 134 and 135 Captain Ahab together with the crew battle the ferocious monster and finally on the third day of the chase, the white whale hunts them "Aye, he's chasing ME now; not I, HIM—that's bad; I might have known it, too. Fool!" (461). Moby Dick not only kills Ahab, but destroys the 'Pequod' and kills everyone except Ishmael, who is miraculously saved by the 'coffin-lifebuoy' made out of Queequeg's coffin. This is called in Campbell's terms "Rescue from Without" and it involves that the hero "has to be brought back from his supernatural adventure by assistance from without" (Campbell 137). Queequeg's mixture of heathenism and Christianity, a sign of understanding between cultures, allows Ishmael to be saved, "The coffin is a Christian symbol turned upside-down by non-Christian philosophy and becomes an object no longer of burial but of salvation"(waddo.net).

'The Magic Flight' is the next step and it consists in the physical return of the hero from the temple. Usually this return is granted by a magic or supernatural source that helps the hero to 'quickly' undo the road and land in civilization again. This magic flight is portrayed in *Moby Dick* in the 'Epilogue', when Ishmael after the 'Pequod's' shipwreck, is rescued by the 'Rachel', another whaling ship. It is not strange at all that the name of the ship 'Pequod' has a further significance, the name 'Rachel' has it too. Jeremiah 31:15 shows Rachel "inconsolable after the loss of her children"(Herd 492) and it is not a coincidence that she "found another orphan"(469) in saving Ishmael. The shipwreck is Ishmael's separation from his prior self and marks the point where he is

reborn. When he comes out of the water it can be said that he is baptised again into the world together with his new task, "In the Christian myth, the rebirth through water archetype is very prominent" (Igrutinović). As Harry Potter is saved by the flight of the 'Phoenix' in *Harry in the Chamber of Secrets*, Ishmael is magically rescued thanks to the aid of the 'Rachel'.

'The Crossing of the Return threshold' is the next stage, but it does not appear in Melville's narration. Here, "the hero is represented taking what he has learnt from his quest and beginning to use it in his homeland"(prezi.com). Nevertheless we know nothing of what Ishmael does immediately after landing from the 'Rachel' so it cannot be clearly stated if he traverses this stage or not. What we know for sure is that Ishmael writes *Moby Dick* and "the value of the book arises from the nature of Ishmael. [...] Melville's romantic style of writing is exemplified if not amplified in his character" (cs.princeton.edu, 2014). Maybe this stage, which does not seem to explicitly appear in the book, is united with the next stage, 'The Mastery of the Two Worlds'. This is one of the last stages of the hero and it involves the process in which the hero takes his new role. Often, successful heroes take the role of rulers, teachers or preachers: for instance Aragon rightfully takes the throne of Gondor. Ishmael as a common person, takes the role of writer and leaves us his written narration for our benefit, "one of Ishmael's idiosyncrasies, is that he turns his most factual communication into an occasion for his most profound metaphysical ponderings"(cs.princeton.edu). It is thanks to his educational prose that we are supposed to learn the correct way, a good reader would reach to understand that "the novel is very much an allegory with symbolic meanings" (Slotkin 3).

The last stage of the hero is the 'Freedom to live'. In this stage there is an "effect[ive] reconciliation of the individual consciousness with the universal will"

(Campbell 151) and therefore, the hero is able to keep living until his physical life comes to an end. After dying there is still life for the successful hero because he has reached immortality. This life can be possible in many ways, Luke melts with 'The Force', the echoes of Leonidas and his 300 hundred are still heard in the Thermopiles, the hobbits become the true owners of the shire and Frodo goes to the 'Undying Lands' of the elves. With regard to Ishmael, we only have his book as his legacy and his words teaching us that "whatever happens to our carcasses and lives, good men will remain" (Mumford 127).

## **Conclusions**

This paper has shown the common characteristics of classical epics drawing a comparison between Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and them. A further analysis of the kind of epics and heroes has also been stated, pointing out that in *Moby Dick* we can find the conflict epic and the spiritual one. As explained, thanks to Ishmael's role in the text there is a predominance of the latter over the former one and that although he has not the physical potential to be a conflict hero, he proves to be a well-equipped spiritual one. His ability to accept death and rebirth is what makes him successful, in contrast to the obstinacy of Captain Ahab who denies the supernatural powers and defies them "I'd strike the sun if it insulted me"(138). Afterwards, it has been proved that Ishmael follows the stages of an 'Epic Journey' as Joseph Campbell detailed in his academic masterpiece, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (1968). As any other epic hero Ishmael undertakes a departure, a subsequent initiation and a triumphant return, he dares, dies and is reborn renewed. Finally, "like all great works of art *Moby Dick* will support many readings, many interpretations"(usdca.ed) , but any reader that has understood the epic

insight, will have understood that "the way of growth is not to become more powerful but to become more human"(Slotkin 126).

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