

The Gold Coin and Blasphemy in *Moby Dick*

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Moby Dick is rich in connotations, far beyond a mere whaling adventure. By analyzing the different meanings of the gold coin and the manifestations of blasphemy, we may know more about the profound meanings about *Moby Dick*, and especially, the meaning of destined fate.

Keywords: connotation, the gold coin, blasphemy, fate

Introduction

As a magnificent and spectacular masterpiece of the nineteenth century, *Moby Dick* has consistently attracted considerable attention from readers, and the meaning of it also boasts a wealth of interpretations. There are a thousand *Moby Dicks* in a thousand people's eyes. In addition to the aforesaid, scholarly research on it has never ceased since the twentieth century. Debates over the writing style, characteristics, representative significance of characters, and whether the white whale and the sea possess symbolic meaning have always been hot topics in literary circles. Aside from her earlier writing on the white whale and the captain, the author proceeds to analyze the different meanings of the gold coin and the manifestations of blasphemy in the novel this time.

Interpretations of the Gold Coin

Melville specifically links the gold coin to the white whale: "Therefore, however the sailors may indulge themselves in one respect or in all according to their own ways, every one of them stands in awe of it and regards it as a talisman for capturing the white whale" (Melville, 2005, p. 331). Accordingly, the meanings embodied by the gold coin are exactly those of the white whale. Drawing upon the gold coin, Melville interprets and expands the symbolic implications of the white whale. (Technically, it would be difficult for him to attach these meanings directly to the white whale, for the white whale does not appear until the end of the novel to build a fatalistic atmosphere. Separating an object from its symbolic meaning is a frequent technique Melville employs in his fiction).

To Starbuck, the first mate, the engravings on the gold coin read: Oh, these three everlasting majestic mountain-peaks, with a dark valley between them, looking almost like some vague earthly symbol of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Thus, within this valley of death, God encircles us; and the sun, that righteous deity, still shines overhead amid our sorrows, bestowing upon us a beacon, a hope. If we bow our heads and look around, this dark valley is filled with dreary earth; yet if we lift our eyes, even before our gaze is fully raised, we behold the radiant sun that revives our spirits (Melville, 2005, p. 332).

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This passage also conveys Starbuck's feelings toward the entire pursuit. In the talisman, he perceives Ahab's blasphemy—he sees God enthroned high above in the “valley of death”, while human beings, especially Ahab, lie trapped deep in the abyss. He invokes the sun, which for him symbolizes justice and hope. For Ahab, by contrast, the sun is another enemy of nature: “Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me” (Melville, 2005, p. 120). Yet Starbuck fails to realize that **he himself is his own hope**. He could have put an end to this hopeless chase, had he pulled the trigger outside Ahab's cabin door. Hence for him, the very existence of the gold coin is a bitter irony of his fate.

The second mate Stubb's interpretation of the gold coin is equally mystical, yet more humorous and resigned. “See, the sun revolves among them. Aye, on this coin it is crossing the threshold between two of the twelve zodiac houses arranged in a circle. Almanacs! You do not tell the truth on this matter; in truth, you books must know your place and what you ought to say. You ought to volunteer truth and facts, and we will exert our minds actively” (Melville, 2005, p. 333). Some obscure premonition tells him that this whaling voyage differs from all previous ones, yet he cannot pinpoint exactly how. He hopes the gold coin will reveal hidden truths to him, which is of course futile. To him, the gold coin is like a book of revelation whose pages he cannot unlock.

The third mate Flask's reaction reinforces his practical perception of the white whale. To him, the white whale translates into cold cash—and so does the gold coin. “It is worth sixteen dollars, that is certain; and at two cents a cigar, that makes nine hundred and sixty cigars. I do not smoke filthy pipes like Stubb; I am fond of cigars” (Melville, 2005, p. 334).

Next comes the old man of Manxman Isle. For him, the gold coin signifies doom and death. This doom is foreshadowed earlier in the novel: “I wonder whether those high-spirited, exuberant young men know upon what they dance. I will dance upon your graves” (Melville, 2005, p. 129). Stubb calls him “the hearse-driver”. He remarks, “Leo is that roaring, ravenous lion of the zodiac. Ship, old ship! At the thought of you, my old head shakes helplessly” (Melville, 2005, p. 334). To the old man of Manxman Isle, both the gold coin and the white whale stand for death—a death, along with the white whale, that might have been avoided.

For Fedallah, however, the gold coin sheds all derived symbolic meanings and returns to its original significance. “Ah, take the sign for a sign, and bow to it” (Melville, 2005, p. 334). Within the novel, Fedallah is Ahab's “companion” (a servant of the devil). Fedallah seems to have broken through the dividing wall and seen what lies beyond it. He knows the voyage will end in death; his awareness is clear and definite, unlike the old Manxman's vague foreboding. Fedallah foresees that he will perish in the encounter with the white whale, and so will Ahab. Therefore, the coin requires no interpretation for him. As a symbol of *Moby Dick*, it represents an inevitable future, plain and unambiguous, needing no decoding from Fedallah. This also explains why Fedallah seldom speaks and never sleeps. He transcends the mortal rage embodied by Ahab. None of the other crew members share his knowledge; only Ahab partakes in it through secrecy and delusion. Indeed, Stubb's comment about him can serve as an epigraph for the whole novel: a sign is merely a sign.

Pip's understanding of the gold coin echoes the broader pursuit of the white whale, the white whale in its figurative sense, and even the novel as a whole. He observes, “I see, you see, he sees; we see, you see, they see” (Melville, 2005, p. 335). On one level, the gold coin motivates the crew to hunt the white whale, yet this “pursuit” also carries metaphorical weight beyond mere revenge. This holds true for Ahab, for most of the crew, and for readers at large.

Manifestations of Blasphemy

Another layer of meaning, direct or indirect, projected onto *Moby Dick* carries the same peril as Melville's own blasphemy. This thematic undercurrent runs through the entire book. Apart from Ahab's defiant declaration on the quarter-deck in Chapter 36, which betrays his contempt for God's supreme authority and constitutes blasphemy, Queequeg's almost playful interpretation of the gold coin also represents an act of blasphemy. Queequeg utters few words; he merely compares the engravings on the coin to the tattoos covering his own body. As Queequeg makes this comparison, Stubb observes: "He is comparing signs; look at his own thigh-bone; I suppose he fancies the sun is inside his thigh, or his shank, or his intestines, just as old village crones prattle about surgeons' astrology. Good heavens, what has he found round his thigh—Sagittarius the Archer, I'll wager" (Melville, 2005, p. 334). This reading carries sexual connotations. For all its philosophical meditations, *Moby Dick* is also filled with veiled sexual innuendo that readily appeals to adolescent readers. In Queequeg's case, what he locates "round his thigh" refers to the male genitals—figuratively linked to the arrow on the archer's bow.

This may sound far-fetched, yet such sexual imagery recurs time and again throughout the novel. When Ishmael shares a bed with Queequeg, he remarks: "But see now how elastic obstinate prejudices become when softened by affection" (Melville, 2005, p. 39). Though ostensibly a tribute to friendship, the line is in fact a bawdy allusion to the male organ following ejaculation. The word "Sperm" in the original text functions as a double entendre, signifying both semen and whale oil.

Another slang term for the male phallus is "dick", which forms part of the white whale's very name. Melville links the white whale to sexuality with grave thematic purpose. For Melville, sex stands for power, creativity and life force. The whale is vigorous, vital and assertive, forming a stark contrast to Ahab. Powerful as Ahab is, he is barren. When the white whale "breaks his mast", Ahab loses more than a leg; he is symbolically castrated. Not in the literal sense, for we learn that shortly after his wedding, Ahab "sailed for Cape Horn on the second day, leaving but the indentation of his head upon the nuptial pillow" (Melville, 2005, p. 425). Symbolically, Ahab has forfeited his sexuality and his life force, sealing his doom in his final confrontation with the white whale.

Conclusion

In Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, the gold doubloon nailed to the mast is Ahab's reward for spotting Moby Dick. It symbolizes worldly greed and manipulative temptation, driving the crew toward his personal revenge instead of normal whaling work. Each sailor interprets the coin's carvings through his own mind. The coin acts like a mirror: each crew member reads its engravings according to their own beliefs and inner nature, rather than seeing an objective truth. Ahab's blasphemy emerges when he elevates himself to fight the white whale, which he sees as cosmic evil. He defies divine power, letting arrogant obsession override reason, foreshadowing the Pequod's fatal destruction.

Reader-response critics argue that the boundaries and constraints governing possible interpretations of a text are fluid, and that dominant readings hinge on how critics define the various components of the reading process. As a narrative medium, the novel generally presents basic descriptions and facts. In Melville's work, meaning must be uncovered by the reader. Accordingly, *Moby Dick* yields manifold readings and serves as a vast repository of unfathomable potential meanings.

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