

On Psychopathology and Existence: Ahab and Lear

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Abstract: Ahab, the notorious captain of the Pequod in Herman Melville's 1851 novel, *Moby-Dick*, is put in relation with *King Lear*, the desperate old regent from William Shakespeare's eponymous play published in 1608. Its main character, apart from Macbeth, is considered to have had deep influence on Melville, especially in creating the character of Ahab. What ties them together is not only their overabundant quest for meaning, if ever, but their obsession with pursuing their targets. Whereas at the beginning of the seventeenth century conflicts are established on the inside of the protagonists rather than on the outside, the nineteenth century still sees Ahab's monomaniacal escapism outside of his consciousness, the latter due to forces that he does not perceive as coming from within. However, in terms of psychopathology both characters show symptoms: the differences and parallels of their behavior are elaborated on in the context of their personal realities and of issues of existence.

Keywords: Herman Melville, William Shakespeare, *Moby-Dick*, *King Lear*, Psychopathology, Existence

1. Introduction

Herman Melville (1819-1891) belongs to the late period of American Romanticism. Much of his prose was written within a period of eleven years. His first novel, *Typee*, was published in 1846, and, *The Confidence Man*, in 1857. The last one, *Billy Budd*, had a late arrival in 1891. Yet, it was in 1851 that Melville completed his masterpiece, *Moby-Dick, or, The Whale*, which brought him success and fame only long after his death. The novel can be considered as a romantic piece of art, built up on an adventurous voyage. It is also a philosophical narration in which the primary aim of the protagonists is to find the meaning of life, maybe to understand the self and the world. This aim is a real challenge for both the protagonists and the reader, since man's ability to discover the meaning of existence is questioned.

The wonderful and mysterious adventures that Melville describes in the novel constitute a mixture of his real experiences, the ones that he was acquainted with through reading, and some others which are the fruit of his imagination. As for the real ones: it would not be easy to give an account of a whale voyage the way Melville did, without

having partaken in one in some way or another. In fact, Melville had the opportunity to partake in a voyage like that and to explore the mysterious seas: he shipped aboard the whaler 'Acushnet' in 1841 (this was his second taste of life at sea). During this voyage, he even jumped ship at the Marquesas Islands where he spent one month among the 'cannibals' and then managed to escape. Soon after this, he shipped as boat-steerer on the Nantucket whaler 'Charles and Henry.' Melville was also influenced by two factual narratives about whaling which he had read. One of them was about the ramming and sinking of the Nantucket ship 'Essex' by a whale. The other one concerned a monstrous white whale called Mocha Dick who had attacked and destroyed a number of boats and whalers before it was finally killed by a Swedish whaler near the Brazilian coast. As Richard Chase writes in his critique about *Moby-Dick*, "It is probable (...) that he [Melville] discovered that the legends, tall tales and folklore of whaling could be more than embellishments to his narrative; they could be for him what other bodies of folklore had been for Homer, Virgil or Camoens (...) – the materials of an epic." [1]

It is the influence of Shakespeare and that of Hawthorne on the novel that should also be mentioned here. As Luther S. Mansfield and Howard P. Vincent describe the birth of *Moby-Dick*, "What happened was the release within Melville's mind of repressed forces, insights and powers – forces generated probably as early as 1849 by the reading of Shakespeare. The release was made possible by the example, the friendship, and the counsel of his new-found friend and neighbor, Nathaniel Hawthorne, to whom, in warm gratitude, the finished novel was dedicated." [2] Hawthorne may have dominated the present in Melville's life, so did Shakespeare represent aspects of the past. His influence is quite obvious in *Moby-Dick*, especially in the language and in the employment of dramatic forms, which make themselves strongly felt in the novel, though not in the earlier chapters. Melville was inspired much from *King Lear*. For example, while 'listening' to the speeches and soliloquies of Captain Ahab, the main character of the novel, the reader realizes that that figure is shaped by a number of Shakespearean heroes, particularly Lear and Macbeth. Since it is probably *King Lear* that produced the greatest effect on *Moby-Dick*, a comparison between the character of the drama and that of the novel is made to see in what way they relate to or contradict each other.

2. Ahab and Lear

2.1. Approaching Lear

King Lear as a Renaissance tragedy reflects a changing moral philosophy, lays emphasis on individual psychology, and demonstrates a new man's relation with a new reality. A new type of individual, a new tragic hero is in emergence. A new man and a new moral order, where it is no longer the gods, God or the Supernatural that bring decisions and influence the course of action (as in the medieval miracle plays), although these elements are still present in the play, e.g. in the fervent religiousness of Edgar. Instead, the individuals bring their own decisions – with all the aftermath coming along – and with that, a fuller knowledge and understanding of the quintessence of existence may be reached through their own faults and follies. But tragedy being what it is, this also means that this realization goes along with doom.

The characters of the play can be divided into two groups: the ones who represent unselfish devoted love (Cordelia, Kent, Edgar, and, in a way, the Fool), and the others who are hard self-seekers (Goneril, Regan, Edmund, Cornwall, and Oswald). Lear and his parallel Gloucester fall outside these two circles; they could be situated in the middle of the scale in between the two sides. For the reader, Lear is an ambivalent character. His character neurosis will not give room to ambivalence until it is too late, though. Lear is the least typical hero of Shakespearean tragedies. He is already old, and moreover, he is superficially assumed one of the least attractive roles in Shakespearean literature: that of a bad father. The opening of the first scene is dramatically

heightened: Lear himself attempts to manipulate affection which can only be given freely.

2.2. Approaching Ahab and Lear

King Lear's counterpart in *Moby-Dick* is Captain Ahab. He was named after the Old Testament ruler King Ahab who provoked the Israelites' God more than any king before. Metaphysically speaking, Melville deliberately endows Captain Ahab with features that are characteristic of Satan. But Ahab does not embody Satan; he is rather a human creature with characteristics that seem to resemble Satan's. Psychoanalytically speaking, these 'satanic' elements are elements that are in every human being: it is the Id that manifests itself by drives and urges.

As the reader can learn from the novel, Captain Ahab is described as ungodly and as godlike at the same time. He is completely obsessed with the hunt for the whale who seems to be the embodiment of divine power. On the one hand, Ahab is a rebel against the inscrutable forces in the universe, but a seeker for truth on the other. But Ahab does not realize that the truth lies within himself. Opposed to his power is love, but as Daniel Hoffman puts it, "Love, to be an effective counter-principle, must find its proper object; should love turn inward it becomes its own opposite, the wish for death." [3] This is the trap that Ahab falls into: he does not realize that only an outward-reaching love can overcome the wished-for death. He does not realize that his monomaniac behavior is pathological. Not the whale but himself stands in the way. Ahab's self and the whale as the object that he projects onto are not equated in an adequate weighting. Thus, he puts the evil side in the whale on a pedestal and represses his own share of his inner conflict.

While the manifestations of love in *Moby-Dick* occur in a few chapters only (e.g. the very first one: the Narcissus myth), *King Lear*'s central issue is love and expectations. It is through the character of Cordelia that love is best represented in the play. Cordelia is strong and tender at the same time. Her love is of a kind that is connected with real desire; a kind that does not bargain or make conditions, it is given freely. Shakespeare deliberately presents Cordelia as absolutely positive, otherwise her death at the end would not be such a shock. When Lear recognizes Cordelia he starts to speak about love. This is the first time he does so after the first scene of the play, yet he still does not speak about it as something that is his own: "If you have poison for me, I will drink it. I know you do not love me; for your sisters have, as I do remember, done me wrong: You have some cause, they have not." [4]

Yet it is true that he asks Cordelia to forgive him, which is a manifestation of some insight: "You must bear with me. Pray you now, forget and forgive: I am old and foolish." [5] Lear's long monolog at the beginning of the last scene is peculiar and very expressive indeed. His scale of values has been altered completely: love has taken the highest position. Lear, in opposition to Ahab, seems to realize that it is the power of love, and of realizing human mechanisms, which determines the real meaning of existence.

Some critics have gone so far as to identify Cordelia with Christ, which is not surprising if we accept her role in the play as the exclusive symbol of love. This parallel may show that in Shakespeare's *King Lear* it is the loving God, or the God of Love of the New Testament that appears, while Melville's *Moby-Dick* presents to us the punishing God of the Old Testament embodied by the White Whale. Henry A. Murray in his critique on the novel writes that "(...) The Pequod sails on Christmas Day. This new year's sun will be the god of Wrath rather than the god of Love." [6]

3. Psychopathology, Existence, Religion

3.1. On Psychopathology and Existence

From a psychoanalytic point of view, one could say that Lear pre- or unconsciously uses at least one of the wide range of mechanisms of defense of the Ego, possibly 'disavowal of reality' combined with 'projection,' [7, 8] in order not to have to see clearly how foolish his behavior is. Using these mechanisms Lear projects his affection onto Cordelia, anticipating Cordelia to show her love on the same 'level' that he is expecting. With that, Lear unconsciously tries to force Cordelia to state her affection the way he does, which she will not do. Thus Lear cannot identify her with his expectations of how he wants her to be. Thus honest Cordelia is being cast off by Lear. In his eyes, he had been talking of love and paternal care, but his assumptions as they appear in moments of emotional stress, let alone in situations of existential relevance, or, limit situations, [9] reveal ferocious egotism, if not narcissism.

Of course, the psychiatric psychopathology concept of limit situation (in asking for the 'how') seems to relativize the psychoanalytic psychopathology concept of character reaction (in asking for the 'why'), [10] yet a character will respond to a given situation in one way or another. That is why it can be helpful to explore character psychoanalytically, as well as character analysis from a psychiatric and a psychoanalytic viewpoint can be useful for illuminating historicity of human beings in their times. [11, 12] However, the reader cannot help feeling pity toward that old man whose mind obviously has begun to fail with age and who is made to suffer fearfully for errors for which, in a way, nature might be to blame.

A conspicuous parallel could be drawn between King Lear and Captain Ahab, based on the storm scene of the play and that of the novel. [13] In *King Lear*, the storm scene is considered to be the center of the play. It represents a turning point in Lear's transformation; it takes place both on the outside and on the inside of Lear's soul, "Thou think'st 'tis much that this contentious storm invades us to the skin: so 'tis to thee. But where the greater malady is fixed, the lesser is scarce felt", [14] and: "The body's delicate. This tempest in my mind doth from my senses take all feeling else (...)" [15] The beginning of the scene echoes Lear's speech in which he asks nature to take revenge on his daughters, "These dreadful summoners grace. I am a man more sinned against than

sinning." [16] This sentence marks an important stage in his process of change. He now realizes his mistakes and he is aware of them, yet he cannot decide who he really is and where the limits of his power are. Compared to the first scene where he seems to be infallible, making no mistakes like a god, he gradually comes to the conclusion that there is no real difference between human beings. Therefore no-one has the right to punish or to judge anybody. This is the first time that Lear shows sympathy with others: until this moment he is only pitiless and insensitive.

The setting of the chapter "The Candles" in *Moby-Dick* is very similar to that of Lear's storm. It is also a storm in two ways, taking place both on the inside and on the outside. One major difference between Lear and Ahab, however, is that Ahab does not realize and does not admit even to himself that he is a human being possessing faults and making mistakes; in a way he has suspended any insight into his own psychopathological behavior. His own character structure imparts hysterical elements, depicted in the way he acts: he does not even get close to rearranging his own thinking at all. He is literally driven to the whale. The mechanism of repression is significant, especially for hysterically structured characters. Lack of self-reflection, avoidance of ambiguity as well as the absolutization of his chase after an object, i.e., the whale, hint at the assumption that the figure of Ahab could be a hysterical personality structure with paranoid features, functioning on a borderline personality level. [17] He has split up his inner objects in 'good' and 'bad,' the phenomenon of a stable binary orientation is depicted here, i.e., "(...) eine Form der Spaltung (...), bei der die Aufteilung in 'gut' und 'boese' relativ stabil ist und nicht schnell von einem Extrem ins andere umschlaegt." [18] Ahab's perception of his own doing is ego-syntonic, i.e., he does not seem to see anything wrong in his attitude and actions, which of course does not mean that what he does is right. It is only in his very own subjective experiencing that Ahab perceives the way he acts as adequate. Ahab does not reveal his love for his fellows, but uncovers his hate. He turns the burning harpoon upon his crew, thus forcing them to continue the quest for, or rather fight against the Supernatural, "But dashing the rattling lightening links to the deck, and snatching the burning harpoon, Ahab waved it like a torch among them, swearing to transfix with it the first sailor that but cast loose a rope's end." [19]

The change in Ahab sets in the next day after the storm, and it is Ahab's cabin-boy, Pip, who brings about the change. Pip's relation to Ahab is similar to that of the Fool to King Lear. Pip is a reminder of Ahab's soul. This constellation could be interpreted as Pip functioning as Ahab's Superego. Psychoanalytically speaking – i.e., following transference concepts [20] – one can assume that Melville displaces aspects of Ahab's Ego-ideal toward Pip. In a way, he splits Ahab up into two parts. Ahab encompasses the Id and the Ego, Pip 'plays the role' of the Superego. The challenge that Ahab is confronted with is the challenge of coping with the diverse pressures that are laid upon his soul. Ahab does not seem to be able to realize these pressures as psychological

phenomena; any relativization of his self as a precondition for developing of identity seems to be missing in him. [21] This might also be the reason why the novel is often not considered as epic as it presents itself at first sight. [22]

As Pip lives in the cabin with him, the picture of another Ahab appears in front of us: that which Peleg insisted on before the fatal voyage. Peleg then refused that the Captain's wicked name was to be feared. He revealed that Ahab had a wife and a child, and therefore the captain meant no harm at all. As Charles Olson writes, "Ahab has his humanities, but they had been set aside in his hate for the White Whale." [23] Pip continues to be the agent of Ahab's change until the last chapters where he recedes. But the influence he has had on Ahab cannot be eliminated. Toward the last days of the hunt, for example, Ahab trusts his life to Starbuck's hands. The culmination of the stage where Ahab proves to possess his humanities is obviously the "The Symphony" chapter. He talks to Starbuck about his family, his wife and his child: "About this time – yes, it is his noon nap now – the boy vivaciously wakes; sits up in bed; and his mother tells him of me, of cannibal old me (...)." [24] Ahab even reaches a state of mind where he asks God to destroy his brain, the 'organ' that made him proud of himself right from the beginning of the novel: "I feel deadly faint, bowed, and humped, as though I were Adam, staggering beneath the piled centuries since Paradise. God! God! God! – crack my heart! – stave my brain!" [25]

As mentioned before, there is a parallel between Ahab's relation to Pip and that of King Lear's to the Fool; Lear can learn as much from the Fool as Ahab can from Pip. It is the companionship with him that helps the king shed his pride. The Fool appears together with the first signs of Lear's madness. [26] This cannot be accidental since this is where the question, 'Who is a fool and who is not?' may first be raised. The situation is paradoxical because Lear begins to see clearly when he starts to go mad: "O most small fault, how ugly didst thou in Cordelia show! Which, like an engine, wrenched my frame of nature from the fixed place, drew from my heart all love, and added to the gall. O Lear, Lear, Lear! Beat at this gate that let thy folly in and thy dear judgement out." [27] The phenomenon of Lear's seeing more clearly also refers to the Fool, who helps Lear in this process, or more precisely, he functions – once again as something coming close to the concept of the Superego – as the living conscience of Lear.

The figure of the Fool is connected with paradoxes in a way, too. His famous archetypal qualification as 'Lear's shadow' [28,29] is a nice example of the large paradoxes he uses. The function of the Fool is not only paradoxical in the sense that somebody cannot be the shadow of themselves, but mentioning the shadow which is nothing tangible, he also refers back to the truly existential question, 'Who are we? What does it mean to have an identity?' This question implies another similarity between the drama and the novel: what lies at the heart of *Moby-Dick* is also the helpless urge of man of exploring the unknown, the unconscious, and to find the answer to existence itself. This is what can be conceptualized as the coercible invention of modern man: the search for the

self as the process of becoming an individual. [30]

Besides being the parallel of King Lear's Fool, Pip in *Moby-Dick* is often compared to Shakespeare's King himself. As seen in Charles Olson's critique, "(...) someone may object that Pip is mad, not foolish. In Shakespeare the gradations subtly work into one another." [31] Seeing more clearly after going mad is characteristic not only to Lear, but to Pip as well. And it hints at the necessity of going through crises, [32] within which inherent structures emerge. [33] Yet, although Lear sees more clearly and some transformation has taken place, [34] in the end Lear does not reach the point of becoming himself, a process that would result from active self-reflection. [35]

3.2. Aspects of Religion

As mentioned above, in *King Lear*, Cordelia represents unconditional love which makes her easily identifiable with Christ. Her love seems connected with real desire; strength and tenderness make for a character that represents much of an ideal. In *Moby-Dick*, it is only Starbuck who represents Christian values. He is the only one who could put an end to Ahab's wickedness and save the crew. But he lacks the power to do so. His Christian faith means to him complete resignation to Destiny and the unconditional acceptance of Divine Power. Opposed to Starbuck, the narrator of the novel, Ishmael, represents a kind of rebellion against evil. The only reason why he could be considered a representative of Christian values like Starbuck is that by the end of the fatal voyage he understands that it is the power of love that can combat the Devil, i.e. overcome evil. [36] In a way, he resembles Lear. Melville speaking through Ishmael seems to intend to express an average human being's attitude to life: trying to seek meaning in every event of life and admitting that nothing happens for its own sake.

In *King Lear*, Edgar's pagan and sadistic side becomes obvious. It can be related to Ahab and his followers (except for Starbuck), "(...) who represent the horde of primitive drives, values, beliefs and practices which the Hebraic-Christian religionists rejected and excluded, and by threats, punishments, and inquisitions forced into the mind of unconscious Western man." [37] This is most characteristic to Queequeg, Ishmael's only friend on the Pequod, who, as a savage, worships Yoyo, a black figurine.

4. An Existential Dimension

In *King Lear*, love causes the conflict at the beginning, and the sacrifice of love cannot be avoided in the end. After Cordelia has died Lear has to face the cruel fact that he is no king, he is no God: he cannot resurrect Cordelia. 'What are then the possibilities of a human being in the world? Is he or she limited or not? What is the difference between animals and humans, humans and God? What is needed and what is redundant for a human being to deserve the name of human?' For Lear, living is now out of the question. His last agonizing speech, after hearing that even Edmund is dead, is the denial of the possibility of existence, "And my poor fool is hanged!

No, no, no life? Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life, and thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more, never, never, never, never, never!" [38] 'What is the real sense of Cordelia's death?' one may ask. She is the sacrifice in the traditional sense of the word. Sacrifices have been offered in hope of a positive change; Cordelia dies to paradoxically balance Lear's total hopelessness and complete denial of existence. She dies so that Shakespeare may show us that the gods are still there to punish false love and to embrace the pure. Psychoanalytically speaking, he may also show us that a leader with psychopathological (and/or monomaniac) structure – narcissistic, hysterical or else – has to be questioned at any rate. This implies emancipation on the part of the followers. For the leader and for the followers it is a challenge, and a chance. [39]

Once more metaphysically referring to Cordelia as a symbol of sacrifice, Stanley Cavell puts it, "(...) in Cordelia's death there is hope because it shows the gods more just (...). Cordelia's death means that *every* falsehood, every refusal of acknowledgment will be tracked down." [40] This is how Shakespeare denies and declares the meaning of existence at the same time, creating the largest and most meaningful paradox of the play. As to *Moby-Dick*: the same question emerges while approaching the end of the story. 'Who are we, human beings in the world, and what are our possibilities? What are our possibilities if we project onto the 'wrong' objects? Does God have total control over us, or do we have a free will?' For the concept of Ahab's character, the answer concerning free will is negative. Toward the end of the "The Symphony" chapter he resigns to his fate and claims that pursuing revenge is now beyond his will. It is God who is in charge of our deeds. Or, the Id has taken control. "Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm? (...) how then can this one small heart beat; this one small brain think thoughts; unless God does that beating, does that thinking, does that living, and not I. By heaven, man, we are turned round and round in this world, like yonder windlass, and Fate is the handspike." [41]

5. Conclusion

Both the tragedy and the novel seek an answer to the possibilities of a human being's existence by directly scrutinizing existence itself. To understand human abilities and limits, it seems that, according to Shakespeare and Melville, one has to see clearly what their mission here on earth might be, and what the meaning of existence might be. When talking about existence the question of ethics comes logically into the picture because the question of being is usually presented as a conditional being. In the tragedy, Shakespeare ties together ethical questions with paradoxical phenomena in order to ultimately refuse the grounds of any moral principles whatsoever. The play can indeed be taken as a systematic and methodic denial of almost everything. After refusing the grounds of moral doctrines, Shakespeare has to deny the possibility of existence itself. Instead, the metaphor of existence here may be love combined with reflection. That is the reason why existence loses its sense

with its destruction. However, love is also presented as a sacrifice, and that does not extinguish the hope that there may still be some sense in living. In *Moby-Dick*, ethical principles are not denied but rather emphasized. The end of the story reveals that humans have to follow the truth in a reflecting way, i.e., to have the self use reasonable compromise formation in order to balance the Id and the Superego, so that there may be a chance of living in the world in an acceptable way.

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- [10] cp. Stanghellini G, Fuchs T (2013). Editors' Introduction. In: Stanghellini G, Fuchs T (eds.). One Century of Karl Jaspers' General Psychopathology. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. XIII-XXIII.
- [11] The psychoanalytic psychopathology concept differs from the psychiatric psychopathology concept in using several different terms and approaches, yet it need not necessarily be that far from the latter as long as it provides space and openness, and as long as it does not make use of shortcut deterministic labeling that will suggest shortcut deterministic etiopathology concepts. Apart from the fact that fictional characters are not patients, from a perspective of psychoanalytic psychopathology the question of motifs in characters can heuristically play a crucial role not only in broadening the understanding of possible personal motivations but even in discovering an anthropological dimension in the characters' dealings with obstacles, tribulations, and crises. All in all, the approach encompasses exploring of what von Matt terms the 'psychodramatic substrate' of a work of fiction (cp. von Matt P (2001). Literaturwissenschaft und Psychoanalyse. Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam).

- [12] cp. Kuechenhoff J (2000). Aesthetische Form und unbewusster Sinn – Selbstfuersorge und Identitaet in Moby Dick. In: *Psyche* 54 (1), pp. 51-72. Here the concept of identity is applied from a psychoanalytically informed, yet existential philosophy perspective.
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