# A Biblical Archetypal Study on *Moby Dick**

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*Abstract*—*Moby Dick*, one of Herman Melville's masterpieces, has received tremendous concern for its profound and multiple symbolic and metaphoric meanings. And the pervasive biblical terms and allusions deserve particular attention. This paper, based on Frye's archetypal theory, studies *Moby Dick* from the perspective of biblical archetypal criticism. The association between the characters and their biblical archetypes helps to reproduce the ancient matrix of The *Bible*, such as the crime of human beings, themes of sin, the fall, and redemption. The exploration of the biblical archetypal theme in *Moby Dick* provides us a new perspective to understand the profound significance of the novel. Melville reveals the opposition between good and evil in human beings and shows his contradictory religious outlook as well as his spiritual reflections of his time.

*Index Terms*—Melville, *Moby Dick*, The *Bible*, archetypal criticism

## I. INTRODUCTION

Herman Melville (1819-1891) was born in a Calvinist family. His father Allen Melville was a member of the Unitarian Church, but after marrying Maria Gansevoort, a Calvinist, he joined her Dutch Reformed Church. Delbanco (2005) had researched the mother's religious influence on Herman. He pointed out that Herman received "the rudiments of a religious education" from his mother, and she "brought biblical stories, examples, and precedents into the lives of all her children…" (p.21). Melville received schooling in the "God fearing" Albany Academy. But when his family went bankruptcy, he had to leave school at the age of 15. In 1837, he sailed on a whaling ship to Liverpool, England and became a sailor in South Pacific. Returning from the sea in 1847, he got married with Elizabeth Shaw who was a Unitarian and ended up as an official member of All souls Unitarian Church in 1884.

Like most of Melville's other works, *Moby Dick* was created according to the author's nautical experience. The story is about a revenge adventure: Captain Ahab was bitten by a fierce white whale named Moby Dick, so full of resentment he wanted to revenge. His ship almost traveled around the world and finally met with Moby Dick. After three days' tracking, he hit the whale with a harpoon, but the boat was broken by the whale, and Ahab was entangled in the rope and fell into the sea. All the ship crew fell into the sea, and only the sailor Ishmael (the narrator) was salvaged.

Since Melville's exegetical imagination was well in advance of the age in which he lived, *Moby Dick* remained in obscurity until the 1920s. Many critics attempted to approach the book from various perspectives, among which the symbolic meaning was the most extensively explored. Feidelson (1953) describes Melville's epic novel as a "symbolic voyage"(p.496). Edinger (1995)considers it "a night sea journey", "a descent to the underworld" (p.368) and Gentile (2009) sees it as a story of the soul's pilgrimage towards redemption.

*Moby Dick*'s richness of biblical names and biblical allusions also received extensive attention. After elaborative research on Melville's use of The *Bible* Pardes (2008) refers *Moby Dick* as "a grand embodiment of the Bible"(p.15). Wright (1940) points out that "in the matter of characterization, Melville is indebted to the Bible for certain prototypes"(p.187).

## II. ARCHETYPE AND ARCHETYPAL CRITICISM

The word "archetype" consists of two parts, arche ("first") and typos ("impress, stamp, type"). It was first been used by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato. According to Jung (1968), "archetype" is an equivalent to eidos, one of the words regularly employed by Plato in reference to the theory of ideas of forms. Jungian parallel to the Platonic eidos is the archetype-as-such (an sich), and he describes it as "an inherited mode of psychic functioning" or "pattern of instinctual behavior belonging to collective unconscious"(p.79). Jung believed that the archetypes were universal images that existed in ancient times and were formed in the most primitive stage of human beings. Archetypes are preserved and presented in fantasies, dreams, folktales, myths, literary works or other forms of human mentality (Williamson, 1985). In 1934, British scholar Maud Bodkin published *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry*, then the term "archetype" had widely been adopted in the literary criticism circle. In 1957, the Canadian critic and theorist Northrop Frye for the first time introduced archetype in the literary field and adopted *archetype* in a "traditional" sense. In his *Anatomy of Criticism*, he pointed out that the existence of the collective unconscious is an "unnecessary hypothesis in literary criticism" (Frye, 1957, p.112). He defined *archetype* as "a symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough

in literature to be recognizable as an element of one's literary experience as a whole" (Frye, 1957, p.365). He also gaged further specifications of archetypal symbolism in the second essay and archetypal meaning in the third.

According to Frye (1957), archetype is a typical and recurring image and archetypes functions as a connection between poems. Thus, archetypal criticism is primarily concerned with literature as a social fact and as a mode of communication. By the study of conventions and genres, it attempts to fit poems into the body of poetry as a whole. He takes archetype as a systematic and structural analysis device to view literature as a "total form" and "leads us at once to the question of what sort of total form criticism can see in literature" (Frye, 1952, p.99).

Since archetypal study in literature is concerned with the original imagery, ritual, myth, folklore, etc. related to literature and anthropology, it constitutes the source of archetype criticism.

In critical practice, archetypal criticism attempts to discover various narrative structures, images, symbols and character types in literary works, seek out the basic forms and archetypes behind them, and to apply various archetypes to the analysis and evaluation of literary works. This theory has important value and significance for the development of western literature and literary research.

### III. BIBLICAL ARCHETYPES IN *MOBY DICK*

Due to the magnificent influences of archetypal criticism in Western literary studies and culture, many writers have borrowed various archetypes from Milton, Homer, Shakespeare etc. to interpret their works. Pops analyzed the Jungian archetypes in Melville's works and found that there are archetypes such as "Great Mother, the Shadow, the Wise Old Man etc."; all these symbols "changed their tendency and significance during the course of Melville's writing career" (Pops, 1970, p.290). Gentile (2009) took *Moby Dick* as a pilgrimage archetype. Jeske (1976) found that when writing *Moby Dick* "Melville responded either consciously or unconsciously to the archetypes' presence in the play (*Macbeth*) and transformed it into his own idom"(p.8). Jung (1966) once referred *Moby Dick* as the greatest American novel. In fact, he did the exegesis in his *Symbols of Transformation*, and adopted the mother-hero archetype to view *Moby Dick*. Frye (1951) once pointed out that some specific symbols may "expand over many works into an archetypal symbol of literature as a whole", thus "*Moby Dick* cannot remain in Melville's novel: he is absorbed into our imaginative experience of leviathans and dragons of the deep from the Old Testament onward"(p.100).

Frye had recognized the profound significance of *The Bible* as literature work and its influence on "Western imagination as a unity". He pointed out that "many issues in critical theory today had their origin in the hermeneutic study of the Bible; … many formulations of critical theory seem to me more defensible when applied to the Bible than they are when applied elsewhere" (Frye, 1981, "Introduction" xix). He thoroughly discussed the "archetype" in *The Bible* such as the biblical images and narrative patterns and shows clearly how they form "a mythological universe" which influences western literature down to the eighteen century and to a large extent till now.

Melville's borrowing and use of the archetypes from biblical texts far surpassed his contemporaries. Wright's research on Melville's use of *The Bible* revealed that:

> In the thirteen volumes of prose there are approximately 650 references to Biblical characters, places, events, and books. Two thirds of these references, or some 430 of them, are to the Old Testament, 200 are to the New Testament, and about a dozen are to the Apocrypha. In this list forty-seven of the sixty-six canonical books are represented (1940, p. 185).

Pardes (2008) called *Moby Dick* "a grand embodiment of the *Bible*"(p.17). Meanwhile, Melville's "biblicism" was never doubted from the studies of from Lamrence Thompson (1952) to the more recent studies (Sacvan Bercovitch, Michael Rogin and Lawrence Buell etc.) which offered historical contextualization of Melville's use of the *Bible*.

Heidmann examined the marking and marginalia in the Bible, which offered a better understanding of Melville's use of the Biblical archetypes. He found besides some annotations to the metaphors and allusions, "Melville picked out small fragments. Surprising often he marked proper names, such as Lamech's wives in Genesis 4:19, 'Ada'and 'Zillah,' or in Psalm 83:6, the name 'Hagarenes'" (Heidmann, 1979, p.7). Why did Melville mark these things? Probably for historical events, for intricate writing device… But One thing is for sure, from Melville's usage of biblical names and allusions in *Moby Dick*, he must have endowed them more than we read on surface. Therefore, an archetypal reading to *Moby Dick* would undoubtedly provide us more insights into the reshaping of the characters in *Moby Dick* and strengthen our interpretations of the theme.

*A. Biblical Archetype of Characters and Their Implications*

Frye (1951) discussed the significance of character archetypes in myth: "the importance of the god or hero in the myth lies in the fact that such characters…", and they "gradually build up the vision of an omnipotent personal community beyond an indifferent nature" (p.108). Patell (2015) further mentioned that most of Melville's characters carry "biblical names, and the novel is full of other biblical names and allusions"; "Melville's use of names like 'Ishmael' and 'Ahab' invites us to read *Moby Dick* in the way that the Puritans read the Bible…" (p.70).

This section will make an analysis of the Biblical archetypes of *Moby Dick* and see into the characters such as Ishmael, Ahab, Starbuck, Captain Bildad and their implications.

*(a). Ishmael the Narrator*

Ishmeal's tragic destiny had been confirmed by Frye (2008) in his *Words with Power being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature*. He pointed out that Ishmael constitutes the typical plot of a "lost heir", and it's "the story of the rightful successor returning to claim his inheritance" (p. 241).

Ishmael's "archetype" comes from "Genesis", the Old Testament. Sarah, Abraham's wife, was sterile, so she sent her maid Hagar to her husband as a concubine. Hagar gave birth to Ishmael, but soon Sarah also became pregnant and gave birth to Isaac. In order to give Isaac the exclusive right of inheritance, she persuaded Abraham to kick Hagar and her son out of the house. Ishmael in the novel basically maintains his "archetype" in terms of character identity, living milieu and life experience. Ishmael gave up the cozy terrestrial life but went to sea as a sailor, which coincides with his archetypal character, who, after being driven out of their homes had to vagabondize in the desert. "The desolate and vast sea" in which he struggled chasing the whale for a long time is a metaphor for wilderness of Balaam in which Hagar and Ismael survive by hunting animal. In "Genesis", "Ishmael" means "God shall hear", so when the mother and son were thrown into the wilderness, and Ishmael was dying of thirst, Hagar burst into tears, God miraculously revealed a spring and rescued Ishmael. Correspondingly, when the "Pequod" sailors were drowned with the ship, only Ishmael survived by the unexpected "coffin" lifebuoy.

Obviously, Ishmael and his biblical archetype share some similarities. At the very beginning of the novel, he was frustrated, lonely and totally despaired, he thought it "high time to get to sea as soon as I can" (Melville, 1999, p.2). But on board, he developed friendship with the "cannibal" Queegqueg, in him he saw "the traces of a simple, honest heart", and they two even formed a "cozy, loving pair" (Melville, 1999, pp.49-52). Hence, though self-cast in the "wilderness of water" Ishmael grew beyond the "drizzly November" self. Melville elaborately crafts the allegory. Just as Wright (1974) points out: "truth is to be sought in the solitary wilderness" (p.48). For Ishmael and his archetype, they both are in a quest for truth, the oasis or the secure land where they can be recognized and accepted. Though the going is tough, finally by finding "the redeemer—the Leviathan, the giant sea-animal which had been created by the lord" (Kirsch, 1958, p.134), they can be redeemed.

*(b).  Captain Ahab*

Unlike Ishmeal who is "a good Christain; born and bred in the bosom of infallible Presbyterian Church"(Melville, 1999, p.70), Ahab is a pagan, and his name just heralds a tragic ending. Even before Ishmeal meets him, Captain Ahab was told by Captain Peleg "he's a grand, ungodly, god-like man, Captain Ahab;... oh,! He ain't Captain Bildad; no, he ain't Captain Peleg; he's Ahab, boy; and Ahab of old, thou knowest, was a crowned king!" (Melville, 1999, p.97) "God-like" makes him transcend the human realm and endows him with an archetype, therefore he is made to follow the fate of his archetypes.

He can easily be associated with King Ahab in the Old Testament. King Ahab is the seventh king of the northern kingdom of Israel after the division of the ancient Israeli nation. It can be said that the fate of Ahab is doomed by King Ahab (King Ahab was killed on battle field while Captain Ahab was killed on the sea hunting the white whale), and the character of King Ahab provides the "genes" of Ahab's. On the one hand, Ahab embodies the scheming and talented side of his "archetype." As the ruler, King Ahab married Jezebel, a Phoenicians, the daughter of King Sidon. He maintained peace and diplomacy with the powerful southern kingdom of Judah and stabilized the surrounding situation. He once led few troops to defeat the invading Syrians, and set up a market in Damascus to make long-term profits. Captain Ahab was also witty and courageous and had been whaling for 40 years. He was very particular about commercial efficiency and a very competent captain. But when he led the "Pequod" to sea for the last time, he used his wit and might only to satisfy his desire for revenge and deal with the tense and delicate relationship with his subordinates. For him, Violence becomes scary, and merit becomes an accomplice to maintain tyranny. Most importantly, Ahab inherits the blasphemous character of his "prototype". In the Old Testament, the story of King Ahab is often regarded as an example of "God's retribution theory", and people pay more attention to his ungodly evil side: he married Jezebel as queen, who worshiped Baalite prophet, built a temple for Baalite and erected a statue, let Jezebel kill the Lord Prophet, and let go of Yahweh's enemy, the king of Aram. All these behaviors are incompatible with Judaism. In this regard, Captain Ahab went even further. He worshiped pagan gods. His particular deity was the spirit of fire, and he was so obsessed with other objects of this cult, such as the light, the sun, the stars.

He despised all gods and claimed himself a "true child of fire" and fire is "the personified impersonal". When the three lighting-rod were hit by thunder, he exclaimed:

> Oh! thou clear spirit of clear fire, whom on these seas I as Persian once did worship, till in the sacramental act so burned by thee, that to this hour I bear the scar; I now know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that thy right worship is defiance. … Oh, thou clear spirit, of thy fire that madest me, and like a true child of fire, I breathe it back to thee (Melville, 1999, pp.497-498).

Ahab even used this power of fire to urge his crew. When Startbuck pleaded him that he was disobeying the God, he used his burning harpoon to threaten them into continuing hunting Moby Dick.

False prophecy contributes both of Captain Abab's and his archetype's death. For King Ahab, before launching the battle to take back Romoth Gilead, he followed Jevhovah's advice to invite four hundred prophets for their advice. But they were not the Lord's prophets but liars, so they told Ahab he would win the battle. Only Micaiah, who was the real lord's prophet told him he would be killed. But Ahab ignored Micaiah's words and ended up with death.

Captain Ahab's death also has much to do with the false prophet. Cryptical Fedallah predicted that "ere thou could

die on this voyage, two hearses verily be seen by thee on the sea; the first not made by mortal hands; and the visible wood of the last one must grown in American". He even promised Ahab that "I shall still go before thee thy pilot" and "hemp only can kill thee" (Melville, 1999, p. 490). Ahab took it as he would be immortal and this prophet became his guarantee for victory. Actually, there existed so many honest prophets like the four hundred for King Ahab. He ignored everything-- the pleadings of Starbuck, the ravings of the mad Gabriel, the testimony of ships which have met the whale, the whisperings of his own heart, what he followed was Fedallah's prophet and his malevolent obsession--to kill Moby Dick (Wright, 1974, p. 65).

Just as Frye (2008) concluded: "what obsesses Ahab is in a dimension of reality much further down than any whale… The professed quest is to kill Moby Dick, but as the portents of disaster pile up it becomes clear that a will to identify with (not adjust to) what Conrad calls the destructive element is what is really driving Ahab" (p.243).

Melville's successful shaping of Ahab is due to his comprehensive understanding and deep grasp of the archetypal characters. This "pre-understanding" is also important to readers. Once we understand the archetypes prefiguring the protagonist Ahab, the inner nature of his evil can be revealed.

*(c). The First Mate---Starkbuck*

On Pequod, the first "Emir" Starbuck was the only person who dared to oppose Ahab. Out of a pragmatic attitude and devotion to God, he disagreed with Ahab from the very beginning, but his resistance was weak. He tried several times to wake Ahab from his maniac revenge plan but in wain. He knew that obedience to Ahab would lead to the destruction of the whole boat and the only way to save is to imprison or kill Ahab. He had the opportunity, ability, and intention to do so, but he's lack of enough courage. "And brave as he might be… he cannot withstand those more terrific, because more spiritual terrors, which sometimes menace you from the concentrating brow of an enraged and mighty man" (Melville, 1999, p. 129).

So, when fighting against "irrational horrors", he could not withstand "spiritual terror". It was the deep fear caused by Ahab's great evil willpower that prevented him from taking actions, thus he could only hopelessly watch Pequod fall into the abyss of destiny. The opposite and unified relationship between Ahab and Starbuck is exactly the isomorphic echo of the relationship between King Ahab and Obadiah, the chief of his house in the Book of Kings. Obadiah "really awed the Lord", but due to his low status, he only endured silently King Ahab's allotheism; when Jezebel slaughtered the prophets of Jehovah, he secretly hid 100 prophets and fed them until the danger was over; he was very kind and full of respect to the prophet Elijah, which was quite opposite to the attitude towards King Ahab. This humanitarian "good man" image is also a true portrayal of Starbuck, who forms a sharp contrast with the ferocious Ahab.

*(d). Captain Bildad*

Besides the above-mentioned archetypes, Melville still arranges other characters who were undoubtedly, from *The Bible*. As the half owner of Pequod, Bildad—whose name comes from the book of Job in the Old Testament—is a rather devout Christian compared to his old partner, Peleg. He spent all days studying *The Bible* and spreading the scriptures in sailor-like dialects everywhere, but just like Bildad the Shuhite in the Book of Job, what he did run counter to what he believed. Although he often mumbled: "lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust do corrupt", he has a reputation as an "incorrigible old hunk" (Melville, 1999, pp.92-94). He has always hated the cannibalism behaviors, but he spent most of his life with whales making them shed large buckets of blood for joy. when Pequod was setting sail, he reminded everyone, "Don't forget your prayers, either… Don't whale too much a'Lord's day, men; but don't miss a fair chance either, that's rejecting Heaven's good gifts… (Melville, 1999, p.120)." This kind of utilitarianism is the author's exaggerated development of the prototype character. The advice of Bildad the Shuhite for Job did not violate religion and business, but Captain Bildad's words were for his business profit; what's interesting is that Job was able to prosper after all, while Bildad, the owner of the ship, fell into the sea. The contrast constitutes the ultimate irony.

There are still other archetypes in *Moby Dick*—Elijah, whom Ishmael and Queequeg encountered before boarding Pequod, and the name is from Tishbite prophet Elijah; Gabriel, the Neskyeuna Shaker, his name can also be associated to Ahijah from the Books of Kings.

*B. Biblical Archetype of Themes*

Since archetype criticism provides us with "a possibility of seeing literature as a complication of a relatively restricted and simple group of formulas that can be studied in primitive culture", "then the search for archetypes is a kind of literary anthropology" and "the profound masterpiece seems to draw us to a point at which we can see an enormous number of converging patterns of significance (Frye, 1951, pp.99-100).

Melville successfully reproduced the character archetypes in *The Bible*, and restated the theme of it with superb narrative skills, so that the theme of mythology can be renarrated in the work, and "the pattern of significance" is better illustrated.

Through Father Maple's preach, Ahab's destiny has already been foreseen, which is, whoever goes against the God's will will be punished. As what has been mentioned above, Melville is a devout Christian. The environment in which he lived from a young age moulded his faith in God, which he never changed through his life. In Protestantism, fatalism and original sin are the basic doctrines, which teach people to obey God's will and to worship God, but to disobey God,

no matter how strong one's own strength is, they will eventually be punished and abandoned.

In *Moby Dick*, Father Maple deftly recreates Jonah's sea adventures in his preach. By narrating the omnipresence and omnipotence of God, it emphasizes that people should completely obey the God's will, give up self and take God as the center. Maple made his point clearly in this regard. Man must obey the God, and disobeying oneself shows how hard it is to obey God. The plot in the novel also confirms that Jonah's experience is a complete prototype. When Ahab embarks on his voyage with hatred, the image of Jonah reappears. At this time Father Maple is also looking for God, and so is Ahab, although he has absolutely no idea what God is. Ahab here is very similar to the early unrepentant Jonah who is self-centered and only recognizes his own laws. Though Jonah later obeyed the God's will, Ahab did not. His arrogance and stubbornness ended up ruining the entire boat, except the convinced Christian Ishmael. Jonah chose to obey and saved everyone. Ahab chose to fight to the end, and naturally he perished. Melville expresses clearly here that people must obey God completely in order to be redeemed in the predicament, otherwise, they will go to destruction.

But on the other hand, the cultural environment shaped his struggle for faith and his attitude toward God. In the same period of the 19th century in the United States, there was another school of thought—transcendentalism. The spokesperson Emerson (1969) believed that "man is his own god "(p. 134). Under the influence of transcendentalism, beliefs such as "God" and "Savior" began to collapse and people turned to "depend on themselves for spiritual perfection" (Chang, 2016, p.57).   Although he dared not to abandon the constraints teachings in *The Bible* completely, nor the reverence and worship of God, Melville also began to doubt God under the influence. In this regard, Melville's Ahab is quite in line with Emerson's criteria for a person's "self", and perfectly practices Emerson's "Self-reliance". He is a "Godless, Godlike" man who strives for his own belief. But Melville's pessimism is different from Emerson's positive transcendental philosophy, so Ahab lost his life in the end. What he won is the spiritual victory. Melville criticized Ahab's rebellion, but he also secretly expressed a little admiration for Ahab.

Melville put forward a different point of view on what human beings should rely on to save themselves. He also hoped that on the basis of obedience to God, and with their own efforts, human beings can finally conquer nature and obtain redemption, so as to achieve Nirvana or rebirth (Crown, 1991). In this sense, Ishmael is the perfect character in the author's mind and becomes his spokesman.

## IV. CONCLUSION

Through the archetypes in *Moby Dick*, especially the interpretation of biblical archetypal characters and the reproduction of biblical themes, this paper reveals Melville's unique creative skills with his effective use of *The Bible*. The association between the characters and their biblical archetypes helps to reproduce the ancient matrix of *The Bible*, and the exploration of the biblical archetypal theme also enriches the significance of the novel. Although he believes that human beings should absolutely obey God，Melville also expresses his doubts about God from another angle.

In a word, the biblical archetypal study provides us a new perspective to reflect on the relationships between good and evil and human's greediness and arrogance. Today, when human beings are destroying nature and plundering resources for economic development, perhaps this novel can bring us more practical significance.

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