

Mortal Combats from Classics to Contemporary: Archetypes in the Matrix
of Melville's Nautical Fictional Combats

Roby Mathew

Assistant Professor

St. Joseph's College, Moolamattom

Dr. R. Anitha

Principal & Research Guide, D.B College, Thalayolaparambu

Ernakulam

Abstract

When the pandemic stricken world battles with the invisible and invincible enemy globally, the metaphoric battles have been waged in the spacio-temporal literary world. The archetypal battle between the hunter and the game occupied in the literary classics has evolved to fit in well with the socio-political life of human beings appropriate with the cultural variations. Whether it is a battle in the physical realm or a figurative one, the archetypal traits remain the same. The mythical quest to reclaim the lost Paradise after defeating the mythical monsters underlines all the literary works which are centered on the archetype of hunter. Herman Melville's epoch making novels which accelerated the momentum of nautical fiction globally reiterate the existence of the archetypal battle with an invincible enemy to bring order in his own life, as he is a Narcissistic hero. The recent socio-political occurring across the globe reminds us of the political implications of the archetypal battle that has invaded the political life too. This paper titled 'Mortal Combats from Classics to Contemporary: Archetypes in the Matrix of Melville's Fictional Nautical Combats' attempts to unearth the archetypal characters and

situations from classical nautical works to the evolutionary encroachment of the same in the socio-political affairs.

Key words: archetype, collective unconscious, Leviathan, nautical

The sea narratives from Homer's *Odyssey* to the arguably first sea novel *The Pilot* (1824) by James Fenimore Cooper to *The North Water* (2016) by Ian McGuire are suspenseful narratives teeming with telling challenges and excruciating hardships. A panoramic view of character, plot and setting of the sea narratives lead us to the vast depository of character traits and situations which originate from the literary and religious narratives of time immemorial that are transferred from one generation to the other in the form of a historical sense or 'Collective Unconscious', to borrow the term of Carl G. Jung, the notable Swiss Psychologist. Many have eked out their life in the sea, while many have proved their prowess to conquer the elemental forces in the sea. Many have befriended the fauna in the sea, but many have butchered them mercilessly. Thus the ocean and the islands are the 'prairie' of wanderers and hunters in the nautical fiction. The archetypal hunter and game prototype, in the turn of the centuries, has evolved to conform to the socio-political life of the 21 century man.

The year 2019, the bicentennial birth anniversary of Melville, witnessed the second revival of Herman Melville whom Harold Bloom praised as the beginner of American literature. The name and fame of Melville is reborn every turning of milestones in the history of world literature. Melville, as he introduced his credentials as "the sea is my oxford and Yale College", ventured onto whaling ships to eke out a living after his fall from prosperity with the death of his father and had to live like the biblical Ishmael, the disinherited son of Abraham who had to meet with the harsh realities in the desert. This fall from material inheritance to economic

disinheritance might have inspired Melville to give birth to Ishmael, the legendary narrator in *Moby Dick*. The ever reverberating opening” Call me Ishmael”, a sentence in imperative form, viz, either a request or a command reminds the readers about the affinity of Melville to the social outcaste Ishmael. Herman Melville, the herculean American Writer, unnoticed and led an oblivious life, though unwittingly imbibed the tradition of literature and contributed sizably to its repository for the inspiration of others. What abounds this repository of literature is the bountiful depository of archetypes. Carl G. Jung in his *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* speaks of archetypes as , “ The Contents of the collective unconscious, on the other hand, are known as archetypes” (Jung 21). Northrop Frye in his seminal essay ‘Archetypal Criticism’ rightly comments the archetypal analysis of literary works as, “In the criticism of literature, too, we often have to "stand back" from the poem to see its archetypal organization.” (Frye 140) This stepping back from a collection of literary works which is an objective reading reveals to us the recurring patterns and characters ever prevalent in literature across time and space.

The characters to whom he breathed life walked out of the pages to the readers hearts with their peculiar idiosyncratic nature ranging from the monomaniac captain Ahab in *Moby Dick* to the care free beachcomber Melville himself in *Omoo* to Tom, the lover of unconditional freedom and the seeker of Paradise in *Typee*. One may wonder at the craft of Melville in shaping characters and situations which made indelible mark in the readers’ mind. Part of the answer leads us to what T.S Eliot arguably penned in his epoch making essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ as:

Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would

continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year;...the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within the whole of literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order” (Eliot 55)

He further adds that, “This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional” (55)

Herman Melville, the admirer of Shakespeare, designed his characters in the mould of Shakespearean heroes with will and flaws, and who are distinct and everlasting. His seminal character Ahab though falls in the mould of King Lear and the whaler boy Pip in the role of Fool in the drama King Lear, Captain Ahab best suits in the mould of a Marlovian character with blasphemy and revenge. A stepping back from the frame of the character, Captain Ahab is akin to very many eternal characters in world literature. By his self love he is akin to the Greek mythical character Narcissus. Similar to Narcissus, Ahab sees his reflection in the water on the white whale and he projects his rage on to the dumb brute. Ahab is analogous to Prometheus, the Aeschylus legendary hero who stole fire for men. In the chapter ‘The Lamp’ Ishmael remarks “He burns, too, the purest of oil, in its unmanufactured and, therefore, unvitiated state; a fluid unknown to solar, lunar, or astral contrivances ashore” (Melville 352). Many an occasion Ahab reminds us of the Satan in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* when Ahab declares, “Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I’d strike the sun if it insulted me” (136). On and on Ahab becomes blind with his rage where he behaves like Oedipus and the white whale takes the guise of the Sphinx in the desert.

Danniel Hoffman in his popular essay ‘Moby –Dick: Jonah’s Whale or Job’s?’ ponders over the mastery of Melville as the myth-maker. He opines that,

Melville, as Constance Rourke suggested, “ Melville used the familiar method of the legend-maker...drawing an accumulation of whaling lore from many sources, much of it from New England, some of it hearsay, some from books, including stories of the adventures of the ships encountered at sea, or further tales suggested by episodes within the main sequence of his story”. (Hoffman 60)

Melville’s sequels like *Typee* and *Omoo* take their characters and settings from his own whaling expeditions in the south Pacific islands and his short span of life with the natives in the Marquesas Islands and the life as a beach comber after the escapade from the Typee valley. But his magnum opus is the recreation of the inspirational narrative *The Wreck of the Whaleship Essex* by Owen Chase which depicts the ill fated November 20, 1820 when an enraged sperm whale in the Pacific dismantled the whaling ship named *Essex*. Fascinated by the breathtaking account of whaling expeditions in the Pacific, Melville relied history to fashion his narrative. A close observation of Captain George Pollard Jr., the 29 year old captain of the whaling ship *Essex* had an indelible inspiration for his creation of Ahab. After his return to Nantucket he captained a second whaling ship named *Two Brothers* which also wrecked on a coral reef after two years. Thus he was branded an unlucky and ill- fated captain like Melville’s Captain Ahab. The notable Marxist critic Lois Tyson remarks , “ Like all cultural manifestations, a novel is a product of socioeconomic and hence ideological conditions of the time and place in which it was written, whether or not the author intended it so” (Tyson 66). The influence which shapes the characters and the structure of literature which are termed as socioeconomic factors, historical sense or knowledge of tradition are the various manifestations of archetypes which spring from the collective unconscious which Carl G. Jung laid forth. It may not be a strict adherence to

tradition or socioeconomic factors, but a liberal mould of shaping characters and situations from one's own psyche.

Wanderers and hunters are the two seminal archetypal characters who have influenced nautical literature. These archetypal characters dominated Herman Melville greatly that he fashioned his nautical works in such a manner that they occupied the centre stage in them. It is suggestive of the way *Moby Dick* opens with the reckoning of Ishmael about his decision to leave the land and he declares that ,” having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world” (3). But this wandering is devoid of women on board. Like his successor Earnest Hemingway founded his fictional world devoid of any influential female characters. It is a masculine world of adventure and hunting. Chilla Bulbeck in her book *Facing the Wild: Ecotourism, Conservation and Animal Encounters* makes a passing reference that, “ Where the Western woman's path to the other lies through New Age spirituality or ecofeminism, men are more likely to find their wild selves through wilderness experience.” (Bulbeck 145).

The folk belief that bringing women in a ship for an extended voyage might infuriate the sea gods and heavy storms may be erupted in the sea. On the contrary women on board may distract the crew members might be the logical social reason behind the taboo. Hence, the character formation itself is centered on various socio-mythical taboos and superstitions along with socioeconomic factors. These beliefs are there in the collective psyche of man. One of the reverting archetypal characters is the hunter. The very act of hunting is pivotal for innumerable narrative structures. *Moby Dick* also falls in line with this archetype of situation. Daniel Hoffman in his essay ‘*Moby- Dick: Jonah's whale or Job's?*’ argues that:

The narrative of the hunt embodies the seminal myth of a divinely –endowed hero who in hand –to-hand combat rids his people of the evil monster that was

their scourge. Ahab appears to belong to the company in which Ishmael jocularly enrolls himself: among Perseus , Theseus, and Saint George .(Ishmael maintains that Cetus, the Medusa and the dragon, being sea creatures, were necessarily whales).(60).

The hunter archetype most often patronizes men. In this parlance Melville's *Moby Dick* is obviously fashioned out of hunter archetype where Captain Ahab is the hunter and the white whale is the game. In other words, addressing hunt in the animal world, the act involves antagonistic relation between the predator and the prey. In the watery world of *Moby Dick*, the hunt is between the predator and the prey. The hunter archetype always heralds the prowess involved in venturing out to the unsafe and intrepid terrains including the watery part of the world. It is affirmed when Chilla Bulbeck refers to masculinity in hunting as, "The masculinity of hunting belongs to a tradition that poses the city and its comforts as dangerously feminizing" (145).

The ocean is obviously a world which challenged people far and wide across time and space. To tame this untamable watery part of the world which appear to Ishmael as," And meet it is, that over these sea-pastures, wide –rolling watery prairies and Potters' Fields of all four continents" (397). Analyzing the archetypal cycle drawn by Conor Neill, the Psychologist, in his blog titled ' Understanding Personality: The 12 Jungian Archetypes' borrowing the twelve archetypal characters identified by Carl.G Jung, Ishmael the narrator in *Moby Dick* who is the alter ego of Melville himself typifies the 'explorer' who thirsts for freedom which culminates in the desire for paradise. A short perusal of Melville's principal characters corresponds to the explorer archetype. In *Moby Dick* both Ishmael and Captain Ahab are the prototypes of explorer. In *Typee* Tomo embodies the explorer and in *Omoo* too the protagonist is an explorer wandering from island to island. Thus Melville's characterization is akin to the mythical character Ulysses

in Greek mythology whom the popular English poet Alfred Lord Tennyson “I cannot rest from travel: I will drink/ Life to the lees” (Tennyson 1). Tennyson’s lines remind us of what Ishmael proclaims in the ‘Loomings’ as, “If they but knew it, almost all men in their degree, sometime or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings towards the ocean with me” (3). Ishmael couldn’t resist from travelling to unknown lands which he vividly voices forth in the chapter called ‘Loomings’ as, “but as for me, I am tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote. I love to sail forbidden seas, and land on barbarous coasts.” (7)

No archetypal character is pure because in the pursuit for accomplishing the feat various traits will be exhibited by the principal characters. In the case of Captain Ahab, he is an amalgamation of the character archetypes like ruler, explorer, hero and lover. Ishmael who is the passive observer like Jonah is a compendium of innocent, explorer, everyman, lover and caregiver. Hence all the characters of Melville whom we meet on the pages fall into any of the twelve character archetypes by Carl G. Jung. In a way the opening chapter in *Moby Dick* illustrates the traits of the character archetypes of an explorer.

As human beings fill the pages with their distinctive archetypal traits, animals occupy equal mythical stature in classical works too. The leviathan started its mythical flight from the Bible itself in the Book of Genesis. Satan who tempted eve to disobey God in the Garden of Eden was in the guise of a Serpent. In cunning he was invincible to Adam and Eve. In the Book of Job in the Bible God vivifies its might as “Any hope of subduing it is false;/ the mere sight of it is overpowering” (The New Revised Standard Version, Job 41: 7). The only slayer of this leviathan in the words of the prophet Isaiah is Lord, the creator of the Universe. Isaiah prophesies “On that day the LORD with his cruel and great and strong sword shall punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan than the twisting serpent; and he will kill the dragon that

is in the sea". (Isa 27:1) Melville unwittingly ascribes this mythic stature to the antagonist in *Moby Dick* and denominated it as Leviathan.

Carl G. Jung who justified the character archetypes with the principle of 'Collective Unconscious' opined that there are four cardinal orientations these character archetypes are seeking to realize. Ahab who is a hero, explorer, ruler and a lover in Narcissistic way actualizes to provide a structure to the world by annihilating the white whale. He also leaves a mark in the world as he is a hero archetype. Since he is an explorer archetype he undertakes a spiritual journey. In the same way as he is a lover he is connected to others. Thus the Jungian principles are detrimental in analyzing the character traits with their orientations.

In par with the archetype of character is the archetype of situations. John Gardner, an American novelist once remarked that there are only two plots in all of literature: someone goes on a journey and a stranger comes to town. A short perusal of the principal literary works across space and time reminds us of the statement by John Gardner. Journey is the pivotal frame in most of the literary pieces. Whether it is a physical journey or a spiritual journey, the quest is central to them.

Herman Melville who penned his magnum opus *Moby Dick* and other minor works incorporated the Christian mythologies including biblical names like Ishmael and Ahab. Melville, the admirer of William Shakespeare, moulded Ahab in the guise of a Shakespearean tragic hero with the archetypal tragic flaw as hubris. The antagonist in this tragic tale is the mythical leviathan that figures in the book of *Job*. In the Bible God challenges Job in the following sentence: "Can you fill its hide with harpoons/ or its head with fishing spears?" (Job 41: 7). In *Moby Dick* Captain Ahab gives an emphatic 'yes' to the challenge and the quest began. The metaphorical quest is to avenge leviathan and regain paradise. The mythic revenge between Satan and Man began which began in the Garden of Eden is incessantly described in the lore of

yore. Ishmael's description affirms this eternal rage when he speaks of Ahab in the chapter Moby Dick as, "all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down" (153). In various mythical cultures across the world the whale that is presented as Leviathan in *Moby Dick* is narrated as serpent. Chilla Bulbeck in her book *Facing the Wild: Ecotourism, Conservation and Animal Encounters* remarks that "In the Mirning Aboriginal people's dreaming, the whale is a manifestation of the Rainbow Serpant, Djidara." (Bulbeck 68)

The quest in Melville's works is not only for the invincible leviathan but also for the lost paradise. Having spent his life on whaling ship as a whaler, his mind as an explorer always longed for the mythical paradise. This quest for the mythical paradise is partly due to the inhumane treatment that a novice whaler is meted at in a whaling ship. In his search for the ideal place is pegged at the South Sea Islands in the Pacific. It is evident in titling his sequels as *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* and *Omoo: A Narrative Adventures in the South Seas*. A panoramic view of literature sheds light on the description of life in South Pacific Islands in the works of British, American and European writers. The South Sea Islands figure in the narrative of the French naval officer Pierri Lotti titled as *The Marriage of Lotti*. The Island life is again featured in the *South Sea Tales* of the Scottish writer Robert Louis Balfour Stevenson. Rupert Brooke in his poem 'Tiare Tahiti' closes the poem as 'Well this side of Paradise!...' James A. Michener and A. Grove Day jointly authored the text *Rascals in Paradise* which dealt volumes of South Sea Islands as Paradise. It is affirmed when Tommo the central character in the seventh chapter in *Typee* who is Melville himself wonders at looking at the valley as, "Had a glimpse of the gardens of Paradise been revealed to me, I could scarcely have been more ravished with the sight" (30)

The archetypes that Jung observed as the models of people across time evolved to fit into the society across time and space. It entered the realm of human affairs like politics, business and religious practices. For instance, the American myth of avenging the evil which had its advent in Ahab who ventured to hunt down the unfathomable mystery has its leniency in the twentieth century American Presidents. George Bush was instrumental in the assassination of Saddam Hussain, the Iraqi President, in 2004, about which Edward Said remarked as, “Bush has treated Saddam as his personal Moby Dick, to be punished and destroyed- the war plan was designed for that”. The year 2011 witnessed the murder of Osama bin Ladan, the founder of Al-Quaeda during the tenure of President Barack Obama. The mythical hunt for evil is again repeated when the present American President Donald Trump announced the murder of Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi, the founder and leader of ISIS in 2019. Moby Dick in the above mentioned contexts was evil in the guise of terrorism. The avengers are admired and praised for the heroic deeds. When the world stands frozen in facing COVID 19 the pandemic which becomes ubiquitous like the white whale in *Moby Dick*, takes us to the invincible enemy whom in *Moby Dick*. The predator and the prey in the hunter archetype assume their guise in accordance with culture and technology. Archetypal hunter duos like Grendel and Beowulf in *Beowulf*; Saint George and the Dragon in the myth of St. George; Medusa and Perseus in Greek Mythology is obvious in another archetypal hunt of CORONA virus and everyman. Stepping back from literature and social events remind us of the presence of archetypes in various guises across time and space.

A bird’s-eye view of the literary development reminds us of the ubiquitous existence of recurring characters and events in literatures across the globe. Their manifestations may vary from region to regions befitting the cultural variations. If literature is the written document of man’s experience and visualizations they obviously have their roots in the society in which we inhabit with all the challenges and their countermeasures. The challenges and mythical battles which human beings waged across centuries haven’t ceased to exist, but manifested in

multifarious guises. This volley of manifestations throw light on the fact that matrix of the battle will remain the same in the collective unconscious which have witnessed and stored and transferred the mythical battles.

Work Cited

Bulbeck, Chilla. *Facing the Wild: Ecotourism, Conservation and Animal Encounters*. Earthscan, 2005.

Eliot, T.S. 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. *The Egoist*, No 4, Vol.VI,1919.

Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton University Press,1973.

Hoffman, Daniel. 'Moby- Dick: Jonah's whale or Job's?'. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Moby-Dick*. edited by Michael T. Gilmore. Spectrum Book,

Jung, C.G. *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Trans. R.F.C Hull. Princeton University Press,1968.

Melville, Herman. *Moby Dick*. Wordsworth Classics, 2002.

- -- . *Typee*. Wordsworth Classics, 2002

Neill, Cornor. 'Understanding Personality: The 12 Jungian Archetypes'. Conorneill.com.

Conorneill. 21 April 2018. <https://conorneill.com/2018/04/21/understanding-personality-the-12-jungian-archetypes/>

Tennyson, Alfred Lord. 'Ulysses'. Poetry Foundation.org. Poetry Foundation.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45392/ulysses>

The New Revised Standard Version Bible. Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1998.

Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. Routledge, 2006.