

---

# Ships on the Sea

Thomas Smith

7 October 2002

The structure of Melville's novel *Moby Dick* implicitly divides it into parts (e.g. Land; Leaving the Harbor; After Meeting the Town-Ho; etc.). Each part tries on a different overall view of the universe.

The first part of the narrative portrays Ishmael believing in an all-powerful Providence. He writes "doubtless, my going on this whaling voyage, formed part of the grand programme of Providence that was drawn up a long time ago." (ch. 1) He seems to think this only until he arrives in Nantucket, and this indeed makes sense, as he writes later "For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life." (ch. 58) His departure from the shore is symbolic of his departure from the safety of avoiding Philosophy ("With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship," ch. 1). Note that he arrives in Nantucket by ship, but his mode of transport to New Bedford is not specified. Hence, his first encounter with a ship signals his first change of heart.

In Nantucket, we find that Yojo is "a rather good sort of god, who perhaps meant

well enough upon the whole, but in all cases did not succeed in his benevolent designs.” (ch. 16) Ishmael has already told us that he respects Queequeg’s worship of Yojo, and equates it with his own worship of the Christian God. This connection signals a change to a belief in a God that is basically good, but not powerful. We find that Bildad probably “had long since come to the sage and sensible conclusion that a man’s religion is one thing, and this practical world quite another.” (ch. 16) This second part, then, is about a benevolent but weak God.

A third point of view is presented once the Pequod sets sail: the Transcendentalist view. It is set forth with verbal irony: “Men may seem detestable as joint stock-companies and nations; knaves, fools, and murderers there may be; men may have mean and meagre faces; but man, in the ideal, is so noble and so sparkling, such a grand and glowing creature, that over any ignominious blemish in him all his fellows should run to throw their costliest robes.” (ch. 26) The connection with Nature is set forth in the Cetology chapter.

The harmoniousness of creation is interrupted when Ahab appears. From categorizing and admiring nature, the reader begins hearing about the suboptimal dinnertime arrangements of the officers (ch. 34, “The Cabin-Table”).

After this point, the focus shifts as the Pequod encounters things on its journey. Whales, sharks, and ships may all shift the focus. For instance, after the cook preaches to the sharks (ch. 64), beginning a theme of the failure of Man to hear God’s word, we hear of the Jeroboam (ch. 71) with Gabriel threatening to open the Vial if the members of his crew don’t listen.

This structure is at harmony with the book’s purpose, it suits itself to episodes of

philosophy on encountering the various elements of the sea. What's more, it fits in well with one of the book's central symbols, the Island. The two points of view that were tried on land, a traditional form of Christianity, and Christian Dualism, are thus portrayed as more reasonable. Melville chose well when he decided to put forth his plot in this manner.