
Starbuck and Pip

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Pip and Starbuck, both minor characters in Melville's *Moby Dick*, are nonetheless important to the development of the novel's themes. Starbuck and Pip both have connections to Jonah, and these connections develop the theme of the irrelevance of religion. They also have in common the fact that they both have major impacts on Ahab near the end of the book.

A Jonah story is one wherein a character starts prophesying after a time alone at sea. Pip's connection to Jonah is clear: he starts to preach only after he spends some time on his own at sea. Indeed, he only speaks two lines, both in the chapter "Midnight, Forecastle," before the chapter "The Castaway," in which he is left on the sea for the day. Pip's name is also mentioned in chapter 27, "Knights and Squires," but he speaks no words. He ends the book as a prophet, as even Ahab says: "Hands off from that holiness!" (ch. 125). So it is obvious that he was changed to a prophet by his time alone, making him a Jonah figure.

Starbuck's connection is more tenuous but also more interesting. He preaches to Ahab throughout the book but does not preach to the crew. Starbuck spends time at sea alone after the Pequod sinks, and then does his preaching to the world in the form of the

book: Ishmael is Starbuck. Pip, after being stranded alone, does not believe that he is Pip anymore, and has a reasonable explanation for what happened to himself: “Pip? whom call ye Pip? Pip jumped from the whale-boat. Pip’s missing” (ch. 125). In the same way, after the story takes place, Starbuck does not think that he is Starbuck. Ishmael tells us that Starbuck is left on the ship, which sinks, but the emphasis that he puts on this detail is rather conspicuous: it is mentioned that Starbuck stays on board in each of the last four chapters. We have reason to doubt Ishmael, our narrator: Pip is crazy after only one day floating at sea, while Ishmael spends two days at sea **on a coffin**. So we have another Jonah pattern.

And yet Pip does not cure Ahab, and Starbuck/Ishmael ends up giving quite a mixed message through the book. These facts are related to the theme, mainly developed in the beginning of the book, of the irrelevance of religion. The theme is best expressed by Ishmael’s speculation that Bildad “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). Without Starbuck, this theme would have much less of a connection with the end of the book.

Pip and Starbuck are also significant as the only people who involve themselves in swaying Ahab’s resolve to kill the whale. Their varying degrees of success reflect the theme of unfathomable knowledge in that Ahab is only swayed by Pip, who is crazy and therefore, we assume, not intentional in his healing of Ahab. He would cure Ahab, if Ahab would let him: “Like cures like; and for this hunt, my malady becomes my most desired health” (ch. 129). In contrast, Starbuck, who is intentional in his attempts to keep Ahab from the whale, does not really make much headway. When he is “careful not to touch him, or be noticed

by him” (ch. 132), Ahab gives a long speech to Starbuck about how hard life is, which is one of the longer ones ever made by Ahab: only when Starbuck keeps his distance does he get anything from Ahab. When Starbuck follows Ahab’s speech with an attempt to stay the Captain’s course, though, he is met with failure. Thus, only the one who does not try to sway Ahab has any success at it, even as, thematically, only those who do not try to achieve wisdom through philosophy can achieve wisdom. Ahab is connected to knowledge in other ways, for instance his charts. Starbuck and Pip splice themselves into this connection and make the line firm.

Religion is misguided and knowledge is unneareable. Starbuck and Pip, two of the more likeable characters on board the ship, end their voyages with insanity and death, respectively. Chief mate and bell-boy, white and black, they develop at least two major themes of Melville’s novel together. Like may cure like, but it takes all kinds.