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Mentally Ill or Culturally Mad: Study of Madness in Moby-Dick

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Abstract

Madness is one of the important themes in the 19th-century masterpiece of American literature, Herman Melville's Moby-Dick; The Whale. Regardless of being either the minor or main character, many of the characters throughout the story appear to be insane. In order to explore the idea of madness in the novel, this essay refers to one of the most important studies of insanity in the western culture, Madness and Civilization by Foucault, which examines how insane people were labeled through different eras from the Middle Ages to the modern times, and what contextual and social features were involved in considering one as mad. This essay aims to explore the characteristics of four minor figures; Elijah, Gabriel, Pip, and Fedallah in Moby-Dick, in order to unravel the idea behind calling or considering these characters as mad men. In other words, I seek to answer whether they are in fact mentally ill, or if there might be other reasons for them to be labelled as mad. Through studying these characters, this paper would extract a pattern from the text of Moby-Dick, which happens to echo with Michel Foucault's views toward madness.

Keywords: Madness, Moby-Dick, Michel Foucault, Madness and Civilization, minor characters.

Introduction

Madness is one of the most prominent themes in the history of literature. Whether exploring the different eras of written texts, or studies on novels, poems or even plays, madness has always been a significant subject of interest; e.g. in Don Quixote, Hamlet, Crime and Punishment, to name a few. The masterpiece of Herman Melville and the 19th-century literature of America, Moby-Dick, is an example of a literary text saturated with madness. Captain Ahab, as the central figure of this narrative, is the most evident embodiment of insanity on the deck of the Pequod. Nevertheless, Ahab is not the only mad man in the story of Melville. "Elijah, Gabriel, Pip, Fedallah, possibly Ishmael, Perth the blacksmith, and others are close to or on the other side of 'the thin red line' separating the sane from the insane" (McCarthy 39). These characters are ranged from minor figures in the novel such as Elijah whom we see in only one chapter of Moby-Dick, to Ishmael who is the narrator of the novel. Distinct aspects of some of the characters mentioned above, alongside with Ahab as the infamous patient, have been the subjects of studies such as "Forms of Insanity and Insane Characters in Moby Dick."Paul McCarthy in the above essay treats the characters of Moby-Dick as being mentally mad as he propounds two versions of

madness for the novel: moral insanity and monomania. Both these illnesses are defined by scientist in the 1830s, a few decades before the publication of Moby-Dick. Moral insanity was seen as the expressing of powerful feelings such as anger in an immoral sense and monomania is the fixation of the mind on a subject, mostly being of self-centered nature (McCarthy 40). The author speculates that Herman Melville might have been familiar with the new concepts of his time, and the same way he has researched on many details of his novel such as biology and psychology. Therefore, McCarthy allows himself to diagnose every mad character of the novel with either one of the illnesses or in some cases with both.However, in the 20th century, Michel Foucault granted us with a new perspective toward madness and insanity. In his great work on the subject of insanity, Madness and Civilization, Foucault suggests that "madness is constructed by society and its institutions has been profoundly influential" (Mills 98). It is no longer just the illness of the mind that determines whether or not a person is insane, and society plays a role in the determination of the mad individual which cannot be dismissed. Nonetheless, this has not been the attitude toward madness and "even when it is clear that psychological damage is the result of social conditions, sexual abuse or poverty, the individual is held to be at fault or to blame" (102). In the process of the study of madness in European societies, Foucault tries to find the elements and conditions which influence the picture of insanity, even in the contemporary world.One of the main elements that shapes the figure of insane humans is called the great confinement by Foucault. In the seventeenth century, with the rise of the age of reason, many institutions such as hospitals started the confinement of "those called, without exact semantic distinction, insane, alienated, deranged, demented, extravagant" (Foucault 66). This was a structure much similar to the confinement of lepers in the Middle Ages; however, it did not distinguish between the minorities. "Poor vagabonds, criminals, and 'deranged minds' would take the part played by the leper" (7). Thus, the insane was seen as a marginalized group, without the proper distinction from the criminals or foreigners. This confinement, which took almost two centuries to reshape, affected the understanding of madness for the societies and common people. In the age of reason, they "confined the debauched, spend-thrift fathers, prodigal sons, blasphemers, men who 'seek to undo themselves,' libertines. And through these parallels, these strange complicities, the age sketched the profile of its own experience of unreason" (65).

This sketched profile however, did not lose its power even after the end of the great confinement in the 18th century. "This was the first time since the Great Confinement that the madman had become a social individual; it was the first time that anyone had entered into conversation with him, and that, once again, he was questioned" (Foucault 200). The mad humans were still seen as those who were freed from an institution and "it [was] difficult to say whether they are mad, sick, or criminal" (201). Their marginality which was ignited with the great confinement was intensified even further. The insane were only "a little more than a social profile, a caricatural silhouette. There [was] something inside them that concerns and touches the unreason of the eighteenth century. Their chatter, their anxiety, that vague delirium and that ultimate anguish they experience commonly" (201). Therefore, social structures played a significant role in formulating the marginalization of insanity and the presupposition about the madmen. These assumptions were so solid, that people were terrified of the disease being released from

houses of confinement and they feel threatened by the existence of madness in their cities. (202)

As mentioned, the status of insanity changed since the 17th century and its effects are still visible in our modern societies. However, this essay emphasizes on the view of Renaissance on the subject of madness. Renaissance is an important time for studying the reality of insanity since this is the time in which the voice of madness was freed and insanity had the opportunity to show itself to society (Foucault 24, 38). With the appearance of mad figures in the literature written during European Renaissance, a structure of recognizing the reality of madness was built, and paradoxically, madness was considered as the path to knowledge. The madness helps humans to free themselves from the everyday reality of life to a broader and superior reason. "It is closer to happiness and truth than reason, that it is closer to reason than reason itself" (Foucault 14). In the eyes of people, a mad man might seem to be the unreason; however, "in his simpleton's language which makes no show of reason, the words of reason that release, in the comic, the comedy: he speaks love to lovers, the truth of life to the young, the middling reality of things to the proud, to the insolent, and to liars" (Foucault 14). The suppressed reason of madness in the age of reason after the 17th century which had shown itself after the hospitalization of madness as "something inside them" as Foucault articulates it, had a prophetic feature in it. "This knowledge, so inaccessible, so formidable, the Fool, in his innocent idiocy, already possesses. While the man of reason and wisdom perceives only fragmentary and all the more unnerving images of it, the Fool bears it intact as an unbroken sphere" (Foucault 22). It is not to be gained, nor to be learned, yet it is the nature of the mad prophets. The knowledge is made of madness and only belongs to the insane humans. However, this knowledge which is beyond the understanding of the seemingly sane people of the society, has been hospitalized, confined and marginalized and therefore, neglected.

As Foucault shows the significance of a group of minorities in society, it is also crucial to give voice to the minor characters in literature and analyze them, because "it is a commonplace observation in criticism that minor character exists to serve the story and throw fresh light on the central consciousness of the protagonist, whose world or larger narrative context is itself made manifest by the multiplicity of secondary characters" (Reed 4). With the analysis of minor characters, the better understanding of the events of the story and major characters and viewpoint of the narrator of the story is achieved. It "helps establish the relationship of 'story' and 'discourse'—the events in the novel and the rendition of these events in the narrative itself" (Woloch 38). Therefore, with the study of the minor characters of Moby-Dick, we understand the course of the story and the discourse of other characters or even the writer himself. This study allows us to have a broader comprehension of the novel, with more possibilities of understating the narrative and characters.

Moby-Dick is one of the novels most explored by scholars; yet, the study of madness from an outlook other than being a sickness has not been done on the novel properly. Furthermore, only the major characters have been the center of critics' attention. However, this is a significant task to change the perspective of the study toward the minor figures of the novel, and to observe insanity not as an illness but as an insight. To do so, the four most distinct minor characters of Moby-Dick who are also mad have been chosen: Elijah, Gabriel, Pip, and Fedallah.

Captain Ahab has not been included in the study, since he is the major character of the novel and at the center of the most studies on Moby-Dick. This essay is going to study the madness shown in the novel; however, it does not seek to answer whether the characters in questions are in fact insane or not. In the coming sections, I analyze the small society of the Pequod and the narration of the novel, and how it shapes the insanity of these characters. Then I explore the features of each four madmen of the story, to see how they are different from others and if they are as Foucault explains the reality of madness from a viewpoint other than the society's or not.

Four Mad Figures of Moby-Dick

1. Elijah

The first time we read about Elijah, is in chapter 19, "The Prophet", when Ishmael and Queequeg are going to the ship and meet "a stranger". The first glance of Ishmael on his appearance rewards us with this description: "He was but shabbily apparelled in faded jacket and patched trowsers; a rag of a black handkerchief investing his neck. A confluent small-pox had in all directions flowed over his face, and left it like the complicated ribbed bed of a torrent, when the rushing waters have been dried up" (MD 86) . Therefore, Elijah is presented like a poor or a sick man as he is dressed in a sloppy way and his face is the face of a seemingly ill man. This is why Ishmael uses the word "stranger" for him. It also seems that he does not answer Elijah's question so that he would have more time to examine this unusual man: "trying to gain a little more time for an uninterrupted look at him" (87). However, Elijah's strangeness is not only limited to his appearance, but also to the way he acts or even talks. "'Aye, the Pequod —that ship there,' he said, drawing back his whole arm, and then rapidly shoving it straight out from him, with the fixed bayonet of his pointed finger darted full at the object." Further, he continues to comment on Ishmael and Queequeg's contracts: "Anything down there about your souls?" (87). Accordingly, it seems that all the strange attitudes of Elijah only forces Ishmael to announce him as a mad man. "What all this gibberish of yours is about, I don't know, and I don't much care; for it seems to me that you must be a little damaged in the head" (87). It seems as if the only reason that Ishmael has for calling him insane is the way Elijah is strange to him and the way he is dressed. Ishmael is so afraid of Elijah and his strange manners that he calls him "Beggar like stranger" (88), following the same trail of marginalizing the strange men since the renaissance by the society as Foucault suggests. Although Elijah has been represented as a lunatic person in Moby-Dick, his insanity has been built by the assumptions of the narrator. Despite the portrayal of him built by the social norms, the reader understands Elijah's knowledge serves the narrative and the narrator. As Melville has named the chapter "Prophet" to show that he is conscious of the complex reality of madness, Elijah is the prophet, presenting truth to Ishmael. The captain of the ship seems more mystical for the narrator since the first time Ishmael has heard his name. However, finally he hears some truth from Elijah:

That's true, that's true—yes, both true enough. But you must jump when he gives an order. Step and growl; growl and go—that's the word with Captain Ahab. But nothing about that thing that happened to him off Cape Horn, long ago, when he lay like dead for three days and nights; nothing about that deadly skrimmage with the Spaniard afore the altar in Santa?—heard nothing about that, eh? Nothing about the silver calabash he spat into? And nothing about his losing his leg last voyage, according to the prophecy. Didn't ye

hear a word about them matters and something more, eh? No, I don't think ye did; how could ye? Who knows it? Not all Nantucket, I guess. But howsoever, mayhap, ye've heard tell about the leg, and how he lost it; aye, ye have heard of that, I dare say. Oh yes, that everyone knows almost—I mean they know he's only one leg; and that a parmacetti took the other off. (MD 87).

Yet, Ishmael still calls him crazy and his talk, gibberish. Though he is still presented to us as insane through Ishmael's descriptions even after hearing his truth, the name of the character hints the reader to his prophetic features. Elijah is "The famous ninth-century prophet who served in the northern kingdom in the reigns of Ahab and his son Ahaziah" (Douglass, Tenney 865). He is the prophet who has few predictions which are all turned out to be the truth, including the prophecy of the doom of King Ahab (Achtemeier 280). Reaching the end of the story, we see how his warnings and prediction were true; however, Ishmael refuses to listen to him because he sees him as an outcast. Even at the end of the chapter, we see how frightened Ishmael is of Elijah. Assuming that Elijah is following Ishmael and Queequeg, "the sight of him struck me so… anxious to see whether the stranger would turn the same corner that we did" (MD 88). Thus, it is questionable to call Elijah mad since Ishmael declares him to be. The narrator's diagnosis might not be reliable since he is scared of the prophet, and is surprised by his appearance and the strangeness of his speech.

2. Gabriel

Gabriel, the second mad man to be discussed in this essay, is a member of Jeroboam ship of Nantucket who has called himself the archangel Gabriel. Gabriel, the biblical figure, is "an angel mentioned four times in Scripture, each time bringing a momentous message" (Douglas, Tenney 1046), and with fabricating this allusion, the writer emphasizes on his awareness of the madness he is presenting to his audience. The biblical angel is the messenger of God and in the same manner, Gabriel in Moby-Dick considers himself a messenger and a prophet. At first, he was a normal man as Stubb narrates the story, "but straightway upon the ship's getting out of sight of land, his insanity broke out in a freshet" (MD 251). However, it is significant to observe how his change of character, can be interpreted through different perspectives: "all the preternatural terrors of real delirium, united to invest this Gabriel in the minds of the majority of the ignorant crew, with an atmosphere of sacredness" (251). How Stubb sees Gabriel is a delirious man, but for the crew of the ship, his insanity is sacred and holy. They are afraid of him as Ishmael was terrified of Elijah.

However, terror cannot be the only device for Gabriel, to be able to rule the Jeroboam. He has predicted the danger of hunting down Moby Dick for his crew members, and also claims to have power over a sickness, Plague as he calls it, on the ship. Therefore, "his delusions rule not only himself but the crew and officers as well" (McCarthy 43). Moreover, as what Elijah has done for Ishmael, Gabriel is the one warning his shipmates about Moby-Dick and after seeing his warning to be true, they somehow believe him. But as the messenger of God that he claims to be, his job does not finish on the ship and his prophetic sight, must serve other humans as well.

During the gam between the Pequod and the Jeroboam, Gabriel warns Ahab of his faith to fulfill the duty of madmen in the Renaissance before being confined and silenced: "Think, think of thy whale-boat, stoven and sunk! Beware of the horrible tail!" (MD 252). In addition, talking about the letter for the dead

sailor, Gabriel says "'Nay, keep it thyself,' cried Gabriel to Ahab; 'thou art soon going that way.'" (254). Ahab reacts to his warning as it is expected of anyone in the book who encounters an insane man, since they are all the reflection of the western society in their behavior toward madness. He yells and curses and refuses to listen to him, as Ishmael has done to the previous mad man seen in the novel. One last feature of Gabriel that hints he might be more than just an insane person, is the instance in the chapter when Captain Mayhew tries to interrupt what Gabriel is saying while he is interrupted by the sound of waves (252). The superiority of Gabriel as a prophet and a savior is proven to his society on the Jeroboam; nonetheless, he is seen as an insane person in the eyes of the others.

3. Pip

The third mad character that has been explored in this essay is "the most insignificant of the Pequod's crew; … Negro Pippin by nick name, Pip by abbreviation" (MD 319). From the first description of this character and with the study of his name, Pip is shown and labeled as a castaway similar to the name that chapter 93 suggests. First of all, he is introduced as "Negro Pippin". His race and the way it is presented by Ishmael the narrator somehow shows the viewpoint toward Pip. Additionally, Pippin which is supposed to be his full name, is still a nickname. Dissimilar to Elijah or Gabriel, there is no biblical implication of Pip's name, but his name suggests his minority status, both in narrator's eyes and in the ship's hierarchy.

Even though Pip is "very bright…, [who] loved life, and all life's peaceable securities" (MD 319), his joyous characteristics do not last very long. When he is appointed for the lowering, he is very nervous, and further at the third lowering, the most important moment of his life occurs. He jumps out of the boat for the second time but this time he is left behind in the ocean. And this is the instance that made the joyful little black boy, insane. "The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul" (321). This might be compared to the storyline of Gabriel, in which his insanity broke out when he entered the ocean. Accordingly, Pip also went insane because of the ocean. It is the water that "carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwrapped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs" (321).

It seems as if the ocean has given him sight. He has changed, Pip is "missing" (MD 391), and of course because of his change, everybody on the ship is ready to just call him mad: "a black! And crazy!" (399). This is another example of justifying someone's difference who is even from a minority group, the same way the society decided to marginalize minority groups to a larger extend because of their race, social status or appearance in the time of great confinement. However, in the later pages of the novel, it is shown how Pip is smarter and saner than anyone of his shipmates, unlike what any of the crew think: "too crazy witty for my sanity" (335).

In the chapter "The Doubloon", when some of the characters of the novel start analyzing and symbolizing the coin nailed to the ship, it is Pip, the last one interpreting the coin in a hierarchical line of characters, who sees the bigger picture and have the better understanding of the situation. He sees the coin as the screw which holds the whole ship in one piece. Remove the screw, which is

supposed to happen when the white whale is seen, and the whole ship falls apart (MD 335). This is another instance when a supposedly insane character warns every one about the fate of this hunt, but still no one listens. He even rings the bell and tells them of their inevitable end: "Bell-Boy, sir; ship's-crier; ding, dong, ding! Pip! Pip! Pip!" (392). This might be far-fetched; however, when hearing the same sound of the bell from Pippin's mouth in his last meeting with Ahab, it is hard not to notice how the ringing of the bell resembles the sound of the church when announcing someone's death. Pip's childish attitude and his race and social status, prevents others to listen and understand the truth that he is offering.

4. Fedallah

Fedallah is the most significant and apparent prophet in the story of Moby-Dick with his three prophecies for Ahab. It is in the 117th chapter, "The Whale Watch", when the reader for the first time hears the prophecies of the death of Captain Ahab. Nevertheless, Ahab refuses to listen to the knowledge bestowed on him with deconstructing each prophecy and declaring to be "immortal..., on land and on sea" (MD 337). However, in the final section of the novel, with the three-day chase of the Moby-Dick, the reader and Ahab himself realize that each and every prophecy of Fedallah turned out to be the truth, "a forbidden wisdom, it presages both the reign of Satan and the end of the world" (Foucault 22). Being reasonable, Fedallah tries his best to warn Ahab. When the danger is closer than ever for the crew on the Pequod, "He would stand still for hours: but never sat or leaned; his wan but wondrous eyes did plainly say—we two watchmen never rest" (MD 401). Fedallah is the watchman alongside Ahab himself, yet he proves not to be looking for killing the beast.

Although Fedallah's intention can be interpreted as virtuous as mentioned above, he is probably the most hated character on the deck of the ship. From the moment he appears in the story, he is described as an outcast, a devil, or a mad man. The first descriptions of Fedallah are about his race: "tiger-yellow complexion peculiar to some of the aboriginal natives of the Manillas;--a race notorious for a certain diabolism of subtilty" (MD 181). The feature of Fedallah that defines him for other members of the crew is his race, thus he and his companions are the "outlaws. . . [and] queer castaway creatures" (191). The strangeness of Fedallah and his origins led to other characters to label him as Satan. He is called Beelzebub in two different occasions in the novel (Melville 191, 261), a Biblical name which is "used to designate the leader of the forces of evil" (Achtemeier 96), probably because Fedallah is the leader of the group of foreigners. The assumption of him being a devil goes as far as calling his voice satanic and hurtful for the ears of the Christians (MD 186) and believing that he has a tail hidden away under his clothes (259). It is in the Chapter "The Doubloon" that the mockery of his actions, hints the madness of Fedallah. "Here comes that ghost-devil, Fedallah; tail coiled out of sight as usual, oakum in the toes of his pumps as usual. What does he say, with that look of his? Ah, only makes a sign to the sign and bows himself; there is a sun on the coin--fire worshipper, depend upon it. Ho! more and more" (335)

To conclude, Fedallah is pushed to the margin of the story in every way possible by the narrative of the story. He has no voice throughout the novel and when his voice is heard, it is by another mad character, Captain Ahab, and he does not hear the prophetical knowledge of Fedallah properly. Although he might not have the best of intention, yet his warnings are not to be forgotten. By showing

him as insane, calling him devil, and make a minor figure out of him, Fedallah is, in fact, another one of the "good angels mobbing thee with warning" (MD 418), just to be ignored.

Conclusion

Since the publication of Moby-Dick, studies have tried to grasp the reality of madness in the novel, yet the concept has been studied mostly as an illness. However, as Michel Foucault suggests in his study, madness cannot and should not be considered as a simple illness of the mind of a human being, therefore used as a mean to blame the individuals for their actions. Condemning the insane person, the impact of the society on the problem of insanity is disregarded and it causes the limitation of perspectives from which the madness is viewed. Thus, in analyzing the mad characters of Herman Melville's novel, it has not been enough to diagnose them with different categories of madness. The focus of this study is to present in what manner the portrayal of madness is painted in the story and its reasons through exploring the four minor characters who had symptoms of insanity or were named mad and implied by the narrator of the novel or other characters: Elijah, Gabriel, Pip, and Fedallah.

All the characters which have been studied in this paper, other than being minor characters of the novel, are assumed to be members of a minority. Fedallah is from Asia and Pip, a black boy. Their initial description also represents how their race affects their persona. On the other hand, not being foreigners, Elijah and Gabriel belong to the minor groups of society because of their appearance and actions. Elijah's clothes make Ishmael to assume him as a beggar and then a sick man. Gabriel's odd way of speaking and body language is the reason for Ahab to furiously declare him mad. In every case of these four characters, a dissimilarity and contrasting feature encourages the characters of the novel to dub them insane, in the same fashion Foucault speculates that western society had done since the 17th century.

Still, other than being suppressed and forcefully being named mad, these characters have one important quality that has been explored by Michel Foucault in his study of madness. Before the confinement of insanity in the age of reason in western societies, madness was viewed as the path to knowledge unachievable to the sane human beings. Nevertheless, this wisdom was extensively extinguished, repressed, and fought against with the caging of the madness. This made the mad prophets, pushed toward the margin of the society and might have caused their abilities to be forgotten. However, in Moby-Dick, with all the mockery and marginalizing of the madness, the knowledge of the insane and their truth shows its light to the readers, even though none of the characters of the novel can perceive that truth presented to them.

Every one of the four madmen included in the study, warns characters and the readers of the book of the inevitable ending of the story. Elijah is the first one to notify Ishmael in following the path of Ahab and leaving with the Pequod. Afterward, it is Gabriel who had warned his own ship of the dangers of facing Moby-Dick and does the same for Ahab. Pip also sees the dark fate of the ship after spotting of the ship and at last, it is Fedallah whose prophecies are the most detailed and exact foreshadowing of the ending of the novel. However, in all these cases, their voice is not heard as the voices of minorities are not to be heard even though it is the voice of reason. Thus, the study shows and supports the path Foucault has shown for insanity, as it has been a means for reaching the truth.

However, this truth is not just limited to Herman Melville's novel. Many works of literature had dealt with the concept of madness in different ways, yet they are mostly viewed as the illness of the mind. Studying insanity from a new standpoint, especially from the view point of the minorities whose voices are marginalized both by the authors of the books and scholars, presents new paths of understanding other pieces of literature as well. Thus, this study might benefit not only readers and students of literature, but also the researchers of sociology and psychology.

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