*Govind R
Assistant Professor
Department of English
M.S.M. College, Kayamkulam
India
govinnan@gmail.com

**Neethu Varghese
Assistant Professor
Department of English
B.C.M. College, Kottayam
India
neethuvarghesebcm@gmail.com

Engaging Hamlet and Moby Dick: A Case Study in Inter-generic Affinity

Abstract

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (*c*1600*)* and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) are epitomes of the respective genres of drama and fiction. Separated by thousands of miles, and two centuries and a half, the two authors, however, seem to share a penchant for exploring the dark recesses of the human mind, and to take recourse to almost the same tropes of literary expression. Humanism and the philosophy of individualism which were in their blooming stage when Shakespeare produced his works, took some time to cross the Atlantic, and attain maturity as critical thought on the American soil. The pitfalls of individualism and romantic idealism become concerns in both works. Above all, the pivotal factor in both the narratives is the human urge for revenge. It is also curious to find that apart from the thematic focii that unites the two works, certain structural similarities, in terms of elements like plot progression, rhetorical ruminations, soliloquies, conflictual intensities and character orientation, also underlie the two narratives. The dramatic element in *Moby Dick* and the prosaic dialecticism in *Hamlet* could be seen to unite them in purpose and execution. Both works display subtle and careful commentaries on the vagaries of power and its connection to

nation's identity.The paper tries to examine the structural and thematic confluences and divergences these two works exhibit.

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (c1600) and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) are epitomes of the respective genres of drama and fiction. Separated by thousands of miles, and two centuries and a half, the two authors, however, seem to share a penchant for exploring the dark recesses of the human mind, and to take recourse to almost the same tropes of literary expression.Humanism and the philosophy of individualism which were in their blooming stage when Shakespeare produced his works, took some time to cross the Atlantic, and attain maturity as critical thought on the American soil. The pitfalls of individualism and romantic idealism become concerns in both works. Above all, the pivotal factor in both the narratives is the human urge for revenge. It is also curious to find that apart from the thematic foci that unite the two works, certain structural similarities, in terms of elements like plot progression, rhetorical ruminations, soliloquies, conflictual intensities and character orientation, also underlie the two narratives. The dramatic element in *Moby Dick* and the prosaic dialecticism in *Hamlet* could be seen to unite them in purpose and execution.

Shakespeare is cited as an influence on a large number of writers in the following centuries including major novelists as Herman Melville, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy and William Faulkner.The thematic and structural affinity that *Moby Dick* holds in hindsight towards *Hamlet* is, however, one that is not wholly imitative but effusive of a tremendous creative engagement with the model provided by Shakespeare. In a humorous vein, with no disrespect for the Bard, it may be said that *Moby Dick* leaves no room for T. S. Eliot to speak of it as an 'artistic failure'; but *Hamlet*'s magnificence paradoxically lies in this "artistic failure" which proceeds from its psychoanalytical subtlety.Melville's tropological denunciation of the pathological passion for revenge in the characterization of Captain Ahab is more materially grounded and absolutely expounded when compared to Shakespeare'streatment of the same in the character of Prince Hamlet. Melville frequently uses Shakespearean devices, including formal stage direction and extended soliloquies in *Moby Dick*. In fact, Shakespeare so influenced *Moby Dick* that the novel's main antagonist Captain Ahab is deemed a classic Shakespearean tragic figure – a man of accomplishments, brought to his doom by a tragic flaw that lies impervious to his conscious perception or control.

Revenge is a passion that is akin to a double-edged sword which injures at both ends. It drastically alters the physical and the psychic circumstances of the protagonist as well as

the victim, hurling both into emotional and spiritual disarray. Inthe play and in the novel,the culmination of revenge is in a scene of colossal destruction that transcends the limits of justified target, turning the palace in *Hamlet* and the sea in *Moby Dick* to a stage strewn with corpses. The similarity in the effect is traceable to the causes too. The urge for revenge, proceeds and operatesfromdivergent backgrounds. In *Hamlet*, it isShakespeare's in-depth knowledge of the inscrutable ways in which even the most eruditehuman mind can rationalize itself into irrational courses, that comes forth when Prince Hamlet launches himself into the terrain of revenge, based on a couple of most unreliable pieces of evidence – his premonitions, and the words of the Ghost of King Hamlet. When the Ghost of his father urges Hamlet to "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (Act1 Scene v Line25), Hamlet exclaims: "Murder!", obviously looking askance at the credibility and reliability of the piece of information. (Act 1 scene v Line 26) The same Hamlet immediately blurts out, "O my prophetic soul! My uncle!" (Act I Scene v Line 41) when the Ghost reveals that, "The serpent that did sting thy father's life/Now wears his crown." (Act I Scene v Line 39-40). In the world of Christian faith, the Ghost of the dead man is as untrustworthy as the Devil himself, and hence not to be heeded to. And a vague feeling in the mind that the man who married his mother could be the murderer of his father too,is also too flimsy an evidence to be proceeded upon. But it proves to be more potently influential on the subjectivity of the Prince at that juncture. It is at this point thatHamlet's revenge, superficially camouflaged as his filial duty to avenge the death of his father, assumes its psychological foundations in the thwarted desire for power and the sexual jealousy for the surrogate father that Claudius has become. That Hamlet vacillates in the pursuit of his revenge is direct proof of his sense of castrating guilt involved in his personal pursuit of power and sexual fulfillment.Hamlet's frequent swings between self-pity and unrestrained rage demonstrate the latent illegitimacy of his passion.

In*Moby Dick*, the character of Captain Ahab is invested by the novelist with a more directly palpable and more realistically grounded motivation for revenge, in the loss of one of his legs while huntingMoby Dick. There is a suggestion that Captain Ahab has not only lost a leg, but his manhood too. In other words, Captain Ahab's behavior after the accident suggests that he has become impotent. This partly explains why Captain Ahab does not take the loss of his leg to Moby Dick as an accident that might befall any whaler. The loss irreparably mutilates his sense of self-esteem, and he comes to the conclusion that he cannot purge himself of the self-attached stigma of impotence until he has annihilated the cause for his castration. He feels insulted by the dead weight of the artificial leg, which works as a constant

reminder of his wounded pride, and urges him incessantly to pursue his revenge scheme. Ahab's lust for revenge is directed at killing the whale rather than inflicting continuous pain. It is the whale which seems to play the role of the torturer and, by doing so, adds depth to Ahab's revenge scheme, which looks initially mad. Ahab's revenge scheme destroys all his shipmates except for Ishmael, who survives to tell us the story. Indeed, Ahab's revenge scheme leads to the destruction of the ship, The Pequod, which is a mini-cosmos or a miniature of America itself.

The situations being similar, what matters is the response of the respective authors and the audiences to the passion and the agents of revenge. The mind of Elizabethan England, to the taste of which Shakespeare was more than eager to cater, was imbued with the notions of patriarchal lineage, absolute monarchy, and individual honour. Hence, both the playwright and the audience find it convenient to make a tragic hero of Hamlet, whose tragic death in the justified pursuit of revenge is attributable to the tragic flaw of 'procrastination' resultant from his erudition and rational thought. The audience sympathizes with Hamlet in his plight, it is impressed by his reflective act of sparing the life of Claudius in prayer, it is callously amused by his most unsympathetic remarks to Ophelia, and it takes a lenient view of his indiscriminate spilling of innocent blood.Ahab, on the contrary, is time and again accused by his companions, of course with the presumed collusion of the readers, of being irrationally engaged in amonomaniac quest for revenge upon an enemy far beneath him in reason – a whale, a creature of instinct rather than conscious intent.And, unlike Hamlet, Ahab is singular in his purpose and all his actions are devoted to the one goal of revenge. Even so, Melville does provide the reader with many passages of Ahab's inner-reflections and possible regrets upon his seemingly fated course (a consciousness "unlimited and at war with itself").

The state of ethical decay and the resultant depressive influence on the human mind in which Denmark generally finds itself after the death of King Hamlet, is most poignantly conveyed in remarks such as those of Francisco that "I am sick at heart" (Act 1 scene i Line 9), or of Marcellus that "Something is rotten in the State of Denmark"(Act 1 scene iv Line 90). It is also palpable in the censorious remarks on the inebriated merrymaking of King Claudius and companyat night.(Act 1 scene v Lines 8-12). A century and a half later, the same sentiment, set against the backdrop of New England in the sway of Quakerism, is to be encountered in the character of Ishmael, the narrator of Moby Dick. Appropriately

nomenclatured with archetypal overtones, Ishmael declares himself to be driven to the verge of a pathological mood of vandalism. He has joined the whaling voyage "to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street and methodically knocking people's hats off – then I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I could. This is my substitute for pistol and ball."(Melville 1) If Ishmael, Francisco and Marcellus are specimens of those who are impatient with the artificial mores of social organization,the type of social isolation that the man in the grip of the passion for revenge turns himself into, finds apt demonstration in both Hamlet and Captain Ahab. The plot of the revenge is surreptitiously hatched and kept a secret passion in the heart by both Hamlet and Ahab, and every moment of its delay gnaws at their own heart. Ahab would not have been let to captain the ship if his real mission had been revealed. And Claudius is quick to devise the means to eliminate Hamlet once he realizes that the Prince has detected his guilt.

Set against a medieval background, the narrative of *Moby Dick* is found to borrow frequently from the conventions of stagecraft so firmly instituted by William Shakespeare in his plays. Intense scenic descriptions, rhetorical ruminations, the presence of the supernatural in the form of prophecies, omens and apparitions, mythical allusions, songs and asides – all find their appropriate use in Melville's novel. Even the characterization is on the lines of organizing the *dramatis personae* in a medieval drama: Captain Ahab as the protagonist in the dramatic conflict with the force of nature, is hierarchically followed by the three mates, and then the three harpooners, themselves followed by the minor characters.The Shakespearean dramatic device of the 'wise fool' could be encountered, though convolutedly, in the characterization of Pip.The Negro boy, Pip, offers a study in contrast to Ahab, in his response to the mishaps at sea. Frightened for his life, he jumps twice from the boat towed by the wounded whale, and the second time, he is left for a while to drown deep before he is saved by the crew of the ship. The narrator presents the salvaged Pip to the readers in philosophical terms: "Pip saw the multitudinous God-omnipresent coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it: and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man's insanity is heaven's sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which to reason is absurd and frantic…" (Melville 339).

At the zenith of this inter-generic transference is the soliloquyof Starbuck, the First Mate of the ship, situated and delivered almost in the Hamletian vein. In the chapter titled "The Musket', Starbuck, akin to the irresolute Hamlet, weighs the pros and cons of

murdering Ahab at sea. The resonance of two of the magnificent soliloquies of Hamlet, "To be or not to be" (Act 3 scene i Lines 56-89) and "Now might I do it pat, now a is a-praying …. And so a goes to heaven …" (Act 3 scene iii Lines 73-98) could distinctively be heard in the pronounced thoughts of Starbuck, at the threshold of Ahab's chamber, with a loaded musket in his hand, pondering to murder the captain in his sleep. Caught in the same Hamletian ethical dilemma, Starbuck thinks aloud: "But if I wake thee not to death, old man, who can tell, to what unsounded deeps Starbuck's body this day week may sink with all the crew! Great God, where art thou? Shall I? Shall I? –"(Melville 442).

Reference to the histrionic methodology of plot construction is again encountered in the interaction between Starbuck and the ship's carpenter. Protesting against the suggestion to convert the coffin he had made for Queequeg into a lifebuoy, he speaks in Aristotelian terms: "I don't like it at all… I like to take in hand none but clean virgin fair and square mathematical jobs, something that regularly begins at the beginning, and is at the middle when midway, and comes to an end at the conclusion." (Melville 450).It is, much like the grave digger scene in Hamlet, a comic interlude meant to relieve the tension pervading the environment which portends the ominous loss of life. Humorously concluding the episode the carpenter says, "Some superstitious old carpenters now, would be tied up in the rigging ere they would do the job. But I'm made of knotty Aroostook hemlock; I don't budge. Cruppered with a coffin! Sailing with a graveyard tray! (Melville 451). The principles governing the structural progression of the dramatic plot, semi-humorously mentioned by the Carpenter are, however, seriously adhered to by Melville, throughout the course of the narrative. Right from the beginning of the novel, the plot conforms to the successive stages through which the dramatic conflict of a Shakespearean tragedy unfurls itself. The entry of Ishmael marking the 'exposition' of the plot is followed by a steady rise in the intensity of the tragic tension caused by the uneasy relationship between the Captain and the crew, as well as between the men on board and the sea at large.

The story of Claudius and Gertrude in the Shakespearean play also gets a humorously veiled reference in the speech of the carpenter: "It's the old woman's tricks to be giving cobbling jobs. Lord! What an affection all old women have for tinkers.I know an old woman of sixty-five who ran away with a baldheaded young tinker once. And that's the reason I never would work for lonely widow old women ashore … But heigh –ho! There are no caps at seabut snowcaps" (Melville 451). The cap mentioned here is none other than the proverbial

"cuckold's cap". It isquite natural that the only aspect of histrionic emotion in a Shakespearean play that is amiss in the all-male world of *Moby Dick*is romantic love.

Bibliography

Arvin, Newton.*Herman Melville*.Connecticut: Greenwood, 1972. Print.

Chase, Richard. Ed.*Melville: A Collection of Critical Essays*.New York: Prentice Hall, 1962. Print.

Melville, Herman. *Moby Dick.* London: J.M Dent and Sons Ltd,1975.Print.

Metcalf, Eleanor Melville. *Herman Melville: Cycle and Epicycle*. Connecticut: Greenwood, 1970. Print.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. New York: Dover Publications, 1992. Print.