

Jenna Miller

Mrs. Rutan

A.P. Literature and Composition

27 September 2015

A Deep Sea Meaning

A book can be deeper than a sea; you may ask yourself, is that even possible? Thomas C. Foster, the author of the book, How to Read Literature Like a Professor, would argue, yes. Seas, whales, friendship with savages; that all seems pretty simple, right? Well, it's not... There is a deeper meaning. Almost everything in book, Moby Dick, written by Herman Melville, is symbolism. Foster said, "Everything is a symbol of something, it seems, until proven otherwise"(Foster, 97) and Melville's tale, you have to read every word very carefully to fully understand the intense meaning. Moby Dick is a great book full of setting symbolism, communions, weather representation and questers. This classic book may just look like a straightforward voyage out to sea to kill some whale, but it's far from that. The book How to Read Literature Like a Professor, gives so many examples and so much evidence supporting the claim that everything in a piece of literature has a deeper meaning or is symbolic of something.

Symbolism can even be found in something as unornamented as a character's surroundings. Settings are very important, not only from an imagery standpoint, but also from a symbolic view. The book Moby Dick, is all about settings. The story takes you through multiple scenes and each one has a deeper meaning, a labyrinth truth. Ishmael, the main character in Moby Dick, knew that things were symbolic and he often times would describe it like so:

“Consider the subtleness of the sea; how its most dreaded creatures glide under water, unapparent for the most part, and treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure.... Consider all of this; and then turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself” (Melville,107).

The symbolism of the speech he gave was that this enormous world has two faces and so does everyone else. The comparison between land and sea is a constant struggle; sometimes humans have these same internal struggles. In Foster's book, such grapples can be seen from where a character is. Ishmael going to sea, escaping land to be in a lone, desilent plain of water, can be seen as a “place and space and shape that brings us to ideas” (Foster, 174) that Ismael is trying to escape from himself--- in the form of a quest.

Melville's biggest argument was that life is a mission-- or quest-- and everyone experiences one. Ismael was growing old and poor from a life in the city of Nantucket. He yearned for the feel of adventure and the sea was calling his name. Ismael said, “I am in the habit of going to the sea whenever I grow hazy about the eyes” (Melville, 5), and to the sea to kill an infamous whale was his quest. In the book by Foster, quests are made up of these five things:

- “1.) Our quester
- 2.) A place to go
- 3.) A stated reason to go there
- 4.) Challenges and trails

5.) The real reason to go” (Foster, 5).

Ishmael is the quester in Moby Dick; a place to go is the sea; Ishmael was convinced that he needed to go there to earn money; some challenges he faced were: living with a savage who ended up being his friend, doing the tiring work of being on a whaling ship, and most importantly, killing the most dangerous whale of all time; the real reason to go there was to go on an adventure. Foster’s theory on quests matched up precisely to the plot of Moby Dick.

Communion brings people together and describes a relationship between them depending on how they act. “Whenever people eat or drink together, it’s a communion” (Foster, 8), or in the case of Ishmael in Moby Dick, they smoke. A communion can be more than just the bonding of people over food, it can be bonding over anything you consume. Queequeg is a savage from the South Islands and Ishmael is forced to room with him. At first, judging each other because they are so different, they have a first impression of dredging each other’s existence. The savage offering a smoke, or an olive branch, is a sign of friendship and as they smoke together, they are in a communion. Ishmael said, “I’ll try a pagan friend, thought I, since Christian kindness has proved but hollow courtesy” (Melville, 10) and since the tomahawk smoke was offered and they bonded over it, Ishmael got over his dislike for the savage and ever since then, they shared communions of meals, smoking and drinking.

Melville’s story takes place on the rough Atlantic Ocean; where weather controls everything and the waves tell all for symbolism. Ishmael, is at the mercy of the weather in a whaling ship on the unforgiving ocean. The author mirrors the story with the weather; sometimes irony takes over. On the day of Ishmael’s best friend’s funeral, “the sky looks lacquered; the clouds there are none; the horizon floats; and this nakedness of unrelieved

radiance is as the insufferable splendors of God's throne" (Melville, 543); the day was perfect-- too perfect for a funeral at sea with the body floating home like the horizon. The irony ruins the *perfect* day and makes even the sun appear gloomy. Not only can weather be ironic, but it can also be symbolic. "It's a mild, mild wind, and a mild looking sky" (Melville, 201) and this is a symbol; maybe it's hard to see it, but you shouldn't "read with your eyes" (Foster, 226). Symbolism is to make you think; the mild wind that Melville is writing about is the calm before the storm-- a foreshadow to the havoc that is about to occur. Weather is a reflection of symbolism and "it's never just rain" (Foster, 75), there is always a deeper meaning or ironic twist.

In conclusion, Foster's theories are correct in describing symbolism in the classic book, Moby Dick. Setting, quests, communions and weather are all very powerful symbolic devices that can add so much context to the story and even irony that is very important. Every book has a setting and it takes place there for a reason. Every book has a quest or a goal to the journey. Every communion has a deeper meaning and describes characters relationships to each other and every book has weather that represents the feeling of the story. Stories are full of deeper meanings-- you just need to look beneath the surface.

Works Cited

- Melville, Herman, and Charles Child Walcutt. *Moby Dick*. Toronto: Bantam, 1981. Print.
- Foster, Thomas C. *How to Read Literature like a Professor: A Lively and Entertaining Guide to Reading between the Lines*. New York: Quill, 2003. Print.

