The Intolerableness of All Earthly Effort: of Futility and Ahab as the Absurd Hero in Melville’s *Moby Dick*
In 1942, Algerian writer Albert Camus published a philosophical essay called *The Myth of Sisyphus* along with a fictional counterpart, *The Stranger*, wherein he presumed the human condition to be an absurd one. This, Camus claimed, was the result of the absence of a god, and consequently of any meaning beyond life itself. Without a god, without an entity greater than man, man has no higher purpose than himself and he himself is inevitably transient. As such, man, so long as he lives, is cursed with the inability to create or partake in anything lasting. The absurd is life without a tomorrow, a life of futility (Camus 92). As one of the main precursors of this view of life and of the human experience, Camus mentioned Herman Melville (Camus 83) and Captain Ahab’s chase for the white whale - Moby Dick.

Now, as will be indicated in the following, the most common critical position holds that the white whale of *Moby-Dick*, Melville’s magnum opus, is to be interpreted as a symbol of God, and thus Ahab’s chase is tragic by virtue of its impossibility for success. As such, the tragedy is entailed by the futility vis-à-vis its impermanence. However, the ambiguity of *Moby-Dick* allows for the possibility of several alternative interpretations as to the role of the whale: for instance that of the devil, evil incarnate or merely a “dumb brute” (167). As such, Ahab’s quest might as well be the pursuit of a creature which understands nothing of vengeance, thus rendering his objective equally, if not more fruitless, than the pursuit of a god.

According to Camus, the fact is that all human life is tragic by virtue of its inherent transience. Still, the axiomatic nature of such a statement renders it a truism (Camus 13), and therefore stating that Ahab is tragic is but an insufficient platitude, since by that logic all life is tragic in that it is ultimately fleeting. That all life is tragic, since it is futile, makes tragedy itself an inadequate measure of a man’s life. Instead, what matters is how man lives despite his innate tragedy, in spite of his intrinsic futility. Put simply: Tragedy is the deficiency of permanence or of meaning, whereas absurdity is perseverance in life in spite of its tragedy.

This essay will, through a Camusean or absurdist perspective, discern the actual unimportance of whether Moby Dick is a symbol of God or not, since the chase is equally futile regardless of the role of the whale. This is the devastating moral of *Moby-Dick*; human effort is completely and utterly futile. What is more, Ahab is well aware of this and yet he does not waver, making him a perfect manifestation of the absurd hero, as imagined by Camus. Whereas the conventional interpretations hold that Ahab is tragic through his futility, this essay will demonstrate that this futility is common to mankind. Still, the omnipresent

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1 The original title is *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* and quotations from it have been translated into English by myself

2 Henceforth all references are to *Moby-Dick*, unless otherwise indicated
sorrow of human tragedy is perhaps rendered less potent by a conscious rebellion against it. According to Camus, the absurd is finding value in what is tragic, in the fact that everything ends in death. And so, although the futility is inescapable, the lack of value is not. As such, with these premises on the human condition, Ahab’s fate is perhaps not as deplorable as it seems at first glance; in spite of his hopelessness he is compelled to make life his own and to create a purpose where there is none to be found.

Although not questioning the conventional reading of Ahab’s odyssey as a futile one, this essay will attempt to prove that however absurd it is, it is not necessarily meaningless. *Moby-Dick* is, perhaps, hinting at the opposite. This is to say, although every quest is ultimately futile, the perseverance and loyalty to any given quest gives it value and lessens, if not the tragedy, then at least the sense of tragedy and enables man to create the meaning he has been denied. The fact that everything ultimately remains unaltered offers man a freedom to live life as he pleases and the ever-present futility functions as a foundation for, rather than a hindrance to, human life and happiness. That “all is vanity” (405), does not mean you has to surrender.

To connect this to the absurd, as advocated by Camus, Camus gives his reader the myth of Sisyphus as the chief example. In the myth, Sisyphus is punished by the gods with the utterly futile task of pushing a giant boulder up the side of a mountain, only to see it tumble down the other side, where he is to fetch it again and repeat the pattern for all eternity. Still, Camus, much like Melville, does not let his hero despair. Camus tells us of Sisyphus, “he too means that all is well … The struggle to reach the summit is enough to fill a man’s heart. You have to imagine Sisyphus happy” (Camus 99). The same is true of Ahab, the chase, the struggle itself, is what constitutes his life, not the summit, not the catch. That “all is vanity” does not matter to him. The struggle itself is indeed enough to fill his heart.

**Be the white whale agent or be the white whale principal** (167)  
- The unimportance of whether the whale is God or not, since the chase is futile all the same.

Initially, as Edward Rosenberry claims, “the whale is commonly regarded as … God” (Rosenberry 85), the more common conception of Ahab as a tragic hero is illustrated. This tragic heroism is constituted by the futility of his seeking vengeance upon an unconquerable foe. Evidently, if Moby Dick is God, then he is too powerful to conquer. But what if he is not God? If the whale is conquerable and in fact conquered, what will become of Ahab? Ahab’s monomania forces him to reject everything but the chase for the whale, it becomes his entire
existence. But what becomes of a man who conquers his purpose and lives on?

As Ishmael implicitly discerns, concerning the human condition, when declaring the whaler’s inability to relinquish the hope of “one more whale” (157), the inevitable question is: what is left after having caught the last whale, or in Ahab’s case, having caught the mightiest whale? Hereby a palpable dichotomy emerges. This dichotomy is, as will be shown, purely a discrepancy of conditions and not at all one of results. This is to say, whether Moby Dick is God or whether he is the nothingness permeating human existence, again caused by human inability to partake in anything that is not ultimately futile, neither is in fact conquerable, causing Ahab’s mission to be essentially meaningless. Moby Dick might have any given role or carry any given symbolism or set of characteristics, Ahab’s quest remains futile nonetheless.

To exemplify, what makes Moby Dick so terrifying is his immense ability to wreak havoc; not only through sheer force but in combination with a resilience caused either by a very determined and cunning mind or merely by primal provocation. The power he wields seems supernatural inasmuch as it borders on omnipotent qualities. For instance, Ishmael suggests that “Moby Dick was ubiquitous” (183) and “immortal” (ibid.), thus referring to properties normally ascribed only to God. Obviously these features are petrifying to the crew, as they are to most humans. This is since they are incomprehensible as well as inevitably unconquerable. This is apparent. Still, in comparison, the counterparts of these phenomena are not without difficulties. In contrasting ubiquity and immortality with nothingness and transience respectively, these qualities are equally, if not more frightening to mankind. This is because they are entirely as unconquerable and yet they are, not only comprehensible, but common to all men, rendering their respective predicament all the more acute, through their inherent generality. All human life is transient and constitutes, at least in the absurdist perspective, nothing more than futility or nothingness.

To such a degree, whatever the whale represents becomes of lesser importance. Irrespective of the symbolism carried by the whale, the outcome of the chase is the same inexorable hollowness, or futility. And so, the ambiguity which is so frequent in Moby-Dick, actually serves as an instrument for conveying said hollowness. This is because regardless of the interpretation of the role of Moby Dick, the same futility is the implacable outcome.

The possibility that this ambiguousness was intentional, as a means to show the unimportance of whether Moby Dick is a representation of God or of nothingness is, for instance, substantiated by how the whale’s silence, in Ishmael’s perspective, is considered one of its principally enthralling qualities. For example, Ishmael states: “has the sperm whale ever
written a book, spoken a speech? No, his genius is declared in his doing nothing particular to prove it” (335). This is not only a palpable example of the paradoxical tangibility of ambiguity, but also a less than palpable, or perhaps, ambiguous example of the role of the whale. For silence is, on the one hand, a concrete illustration of nothingness and, on the other, the stance a potential God takes towards humanity.

In addition, Ishmael claims “the whale has no voice” (357), ascribing this to “seldom have I known any profound being that had anything to say to this world” (ibid). If there is a god, he does not speak to us, and if there is none then the result is the same silence. Again, the discrepancy is one of possible conditions and not of results. Ambiguity serves as a means to convey meaninglessness, inasmuch as even if there is anything to say, in this transient world, it is ultimately meaningless. In the absence of a “voice”, whether through God’s silence or by the absence of an actual god to say anything, there is an inscrutability which in itself is terrifying to man. As A.R. Humphreys argues:

> Supreme power, if there be any, is ambiguous and inscrutable. By its whiteness the whale symbolises ambiguity … By its featurelessness when viewed face to face … the whale’s head symbolises inscrutability … The metaphysical signposts, then, point finally not towards … Ahab’s hate but towards uncertainty, ambiguousness.

(72)

Thus ambiguity, regardless of what is ascribed to it, functions as an expression of futility; no matter the actions of man, the result will not differ. Whether left to the mercy of a supreme being or to an inescapable emptiness, man’s paradigm is wrapped hopelessly tight.

Nevertheless, *Moby-Dick*, in the midst of all hopelessness, does not leave its readers without a certain amount of hope. He does not let his story be governed by tragedy, since he leaves us the possibility of struggling despite of the implacable outcome. Be the white whale agent or be the white whale principal, Ahab has “fixed his fiery lance in mightier, stranger foes than whales” (92).

To connect this to the absurd, Camus utilizes Sisyphus. As has been mentioned, Sisyphus’ task is as futile as Ahab’s. In pushing his boulder up the mountain, where it will inexorably fall, there is no hope of permanence. What is important is that to Sisyphus, it does not matter who put the boulder in front of him to push. All that matters is that in pushing it, he creates his life, he lives. So too, it cannot matter to Ahab if Moby Dick is principal or agent, or even nothingness itself. But rather, the chase itself envelops his entire being. And so, all that matters is the struggle up the mountain or after the whale. Again, Camus, much like
Melville, does not let his hero despair. Camus tells us of Sisyphus: “You have to imagine Sisyphus happy” (Camus 99). The same is true of Ahab, the chase, the struggle itself, is the essence of his life. In hunting Moby Dick, whether his monstrosity is celestial or primitive, Ahab pushes his boulder up the mountainside. That “all is vanity”, all is futile, does not matter to him. The struggle itself is enough to fill his heart, in his monomania he has found what matters most and he never relinquishes it.

And so, regardless of what the whale really is or what it represents, Ahab is determined to continue the hunt for him. As he exclaims: “be the white whale agent or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him” (167), the actual unimportance of the role of the whale is confirmed.

If man will strike, strike through the mask! (167)
- Ahab’s recognition and “the absurd”

Secondly, concerning the absurd, you have to reach a recognition of the absurdity of life for it to be truly absurd. That this is true of Ahab will be shown in the following.

Ishmael tells us, very sagaciously, that “there is a wisdom that is woe” (405), thus indicating his recognition that not all information is benign. This however, does not prove Ahab’s knowledge of the same. Still, a statement like “if man will strike, strike through the mask” (167) validates such a claim. The recognition of a necessity to strike through the mask presupposes Ahab’s knowledge of such a mask, that is to say, a barrier containing the truth about life. Furthermore, the presumption can be made that Ahab not only acknowledges the mask, but has indeed struck through it. As he exclaims “all my means are sane, my motive and my object mad” (187), there is undeniably a cognisance of the futility of the quest, given the fact that any quest that is “mad”, is futile.

That this recognition is pivotal to the absurd condition was strongly maintained by Camus. And as his friend and contemporary writer, Jean-Paul Sartre verifies, indeed “the absurd is both a state of fact and the lucid awareness which certain people acquire of this state of fact” (Sartre 24). Camus’ stance, as interpreted by Robert Solomon, is illustrated via an example of a cockroach or a robot, perpetually repeating the same pattern or movement. Solomon claims that this is not absurd since neither insect nor machine fathoms the futility of their actions (Solomon). Clearly, the essence of the absurd is not only futility per se, but also the understanding of, and perseverance through it. Thus the dyadic relationship of tragedy and absurdity becomes perceptible.
As has already been touched upon, there is in fact a discrepancy between the two. What is tragic is the lack of meaning in any given quest, whereas what is absurd is the persistence that it is worth undertaking, despite said lack. This is to say, Ahab’s quest is futile, and this is what makes him tragic. However, the fact that Ahab is aware of the futility of his quest without relinquishing it is what truly makes him absurd and heroically so. As Camus argues, that even though the recognition of the absurd entails a great deal of despair “this cry of anguish cannot be allowed to thwart the absurd man … In the end, you are able to come to terms with the world, if you are determined to do so” (Camus 37).

And, not coincidentally, this is also the case with Captain Ahab who, according to Henry Myers, “was determined not only to conquer the whale but also to understand the meaning of his conflict with the mighty beast” (Myers 16). Ahab has apparently chosen to actively take part of this world, despite his hardships. Assuming that Ahab has struck through the mask, it has not deterred him from continuing his futile quest. This is the epitome of absurdism.

That Ahab has come to such a conclusion is perhaps best evidenced by his monologue concerning his pipe. The pipe is one of Ahab’s most cherished material possessions and his surrendering of it substantiates the claim that Ahab has realized the futility and “the intolerableness of all earthly effort” (74). He soliloquizes: “How now … this smoking no longer soothes. Oh my pipe! hard must it go with me if thy charm be gone! … What business have I with this pipe? This thing that is meant for sereneness … I’ll smoke no more” (134). Presupposing an absurdist logic, Ahab has chosen to accept his tragic condition.

Camus claims that the absurd condition, when man is confronted with it, is constituted by a twofold choice. The first comes at the point of anagnorisis in regard to the absurdity of the human condition; between total ignorance, a leap of faith, a conscious ignorance as promoted, for instance, by Sören Kierkegaard, and finally an acceptance, which is the Camusean ideal. The second choice, presupposing an acceptance in the first, is between an absurd life and death. Camus writes “when the awakening is consummated there are consequences: suicide or recovery” (Camus 16). That Ahab recognizes the absurdity, that is to say, the futility of every undertaking, is argued as he suggests, in respect to image of the masks, “I think there’s naught beyond” (167). That there is nothing beyond, nothing more than a life that will eventually pass is the grim truth of the absurdist.

Furthermore, that Ahab, in spite of his condition, must follow through is evidenced as he exclaims: “The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails” (171). Obviously, iron rails could be interpreted as the inescapability of fate, however, the fact that Ahab has countless
opportunities to renounce his vendetta and chooses to persevere, tells us how Ahab has put himself on these iron rails.

Now, this argumentation apparently gives countenance to the bleak view that consciousness is a curse. As Ahab admits that he is “Gifted with the high perception … damned in the midst of paradise” (170), the bleakness of acceptance shines through. However, it is not all bad. As Martin Heidegger argues, man’s recognition of his own mortality and of the subsequent transience of all his enterprises, is in fact not only what sets man apart from all other animals, but also what allows him to live life according to his own will, since there is nothing to answer to outside himself. Camus uses this argument and states:

The consciousness of death [‘the concern’] is the voice of anguish, forcing existence to ‘return to itself after having lost itself in the anonymous ‘man’… He finds himself in the midst of this absurd world and points to its ephemerality. He seeks his way among the shattered pieces. (Camus 25)

Woodson explains why the insight is pivotal, “that nature can be treacherously destructive is certainly not Ahab’s secret - all the characters, even Starbuck, earnestly subscribe to it - but only Ahab sees it as a challenge to the essence of his being” (Woodson 356). This is because while several characters are conscious enough to recognize the danger that death poses to life, Ahab seems the only one to recognize the danger of attributing death with such an importance as to cripple life with fear. The understanding of death as the unalterable result of life is what renders man free. Free, in fact, to the extent where he may live his life according to his own best judgment.

And so, the recognition of the human condition as futile is essential to the absurd state. That Ahab refuses to ignore the truth concerning the human condition is shown as he declares that: “If man will strike, strike through the mask!” (167). This is why Ahab, much like Sisyphus, is an exceptional manifestation of the absurd man, and as will be illustrated, the absurd hero.

**Thou canst consume; but I can then be ashes (477)**
- Ahab’s perseverance, his creation of his own purpose, when the world will not offer him one.

Thirdly, in presupposing all life to be tragic and Ahab’s quest as absurd, the question of what possibly motivates man in the face of his hopeless predicament, has been elucidated. Again, “the consciousness of death is the voice of anguish, forcing existence to return to itself”
(Camus 25). This is to say that the insight of man’s own mortality offers him a freedom which facilitates a greater purpose for life. In a world without meaning, Ahab is left with the choice of either creating his own, or wither away in resignation.

As Fyodor Dostoevsky, contemporary writer with Melville and fellow precursor to the absurdist movement would have it, through his character Kirilov: “If there is no God, then I am God” (Demons 614). This is not to say that Ahab is comparable to God, but rather that if there is no god, then Ahab cannot have anyone to answer to except for, of course, Ahab himself, and his intentions and actions, per se, assume the status of a purpose of their own. And, on the contrary, if there is a god, then Ahab will have his destiny and meaning delivered to him. The point is, no matter the case, Ahab as well as any absurd hero will never be content to either receive a destiny or to omit the opportunity to create his own. Sartre puts it: Ahab, like Sisyphus does things because “he feels like it and that’s that” (Sartre 31). The only mandate that matters is Ahab’s. Ahab himself shows this, “The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that, too, is Ahab; all are Ahab” (410). Again, Ahab’s world can but revolve around Ahab.

In comparison, although Sisyphus is forever banished to push his boulder, and although Ahab ultimately succumbs to Moby Dick, at least his life has been his own. According to Camus, there is value in that. Within his confinements, the absurd man finds his own freedom and perseveres in forging his own destiny despite of his limits.

For the absurd man, the existence of god is without significance, for if there was a god, and life was not transient, then the futility would be a permanent one. Immortality, it seems, renders life not less absurd, but even more so. This is because futility can only be cured by a purpose and purpose does not merely entail more time. To put this in context, Sisyphus’ task is obviously made more absurd because of the permanence of his labour.

This is where the idea of monomania fits in, the question of death itself fades. Instead, what materializes is the one thing that matters; chosen purpose, purpose on the basis of subjective choice. To paraphrase Immanuel Kant, human beings are purposes in themselves. This is the thought of the absurdist movement; if there is purpose, it is certainly personal; the target of a monomania. This is definitely hinted at in Moby-Dick.

Ishmael speaks of Ahab’s chase thus: “purpose, by its own sheer inveteracy of will, forced itself against gods and devils into a kind of self-assumed, independent being of its own” (202). In a world without purpose, Ahab can but create his own. The object of his monomania becomes this purpose and this purpose becomes his life.

To further explore Ahab’s motives, and place them in a more universal perspective,
there is indeed something very human about them. As Humphreys argues, “enough of intermittent humanity diversifies Ahab’s monomania to make him genuinely a tragic figure, a great man in ruin” (Humphreys 68). And to some extent he is right. To begin with, there is a palpable humanity in Ahab’s monomaniac enterprise, by virtue of its generality. Extreme as his undertaking is, the motive certainly stems from what Ishmael calls “a general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down” (186). Thusly, Ahab’s quest is an example of a human quest, presumably the quest for purpose in a world that is perhaps without meaning. The fact, that Ishmael refers to Adam, the predecessor of all mankind, obviously signifies a certain generality in this rage.

Furthermore, Ishmael points to the insatiability of man. In describing the mentality of sailors he states that not until the journey is over “does she altogether relinquish the hope of capturing one more whale” (157). Human beings are insatiable. As such, man will not be content with the meaninglessness of the world; in a world which offers no meaning, man will feel obligated unto himself to create a meaning of his own. Thus, Ahab is rendered not only a tragic hero but a human one; an absurd one.

To reconnect to Humphreys’ statement, that Ahab is a tragic figure by virtue of his humanity, and supposing it to be true, it would in actuality not necessitate any tragedy in Ahab, that is not applicable to any given man. Evidently there is vanity in his chase, on account of its futility, but again, whereas the tragedy is constituted by a futility found in all human activity, what sets Ahab apart is his absurd refusal to succumb to this condition. Even though he at times displays signs of anguish before his purpose, he never relinquishes his monomania. As such, monomania appears enviable in a sense, and Ahab a man to model yourself after, not as a madman, but as a man, courageous enough to fully indulge in his desires. Never mind anything else, seems the sentiment of Ahab. Ahab after all, is the boss of Ahab. Camus tells us: “the absurd has a value only so long as you do not acquiesce” (Camus 30). And in this respect Ahab is a monolith. Though he may question his path, he decides that “over unsounded gorges, through the rifled hearts of mountains, under torrents’ beds, unerringly I rush! Naught’s an obstacle, naught’s an angle” (171). Ahab is determined not to acquiesce. He may intermittently show understanding and even admiration for other stances towards life, still there is no renunciation of his own stance. According to John Parke: His occasional suspicion (“sometimes I think there’s naught beyond”) that this will not result in any discovery whatsoever, and so not in an effective revenge, deters him not at all. (Parke 334).

He does not change, even though he recognizes the potential madness of his quest, he
remains loyal to it, quite simply because there is nothing he desires more. Again, what is essential is the fact that in a world bereft of a higher meaning, the subjective meaning becomes the paramount value. As Roudiez argues, what is central about Ahab is that he lives the way he sees fit, which corresponds well with the ideal of Camus, evidenced for instance in *The Stranger* and how its protagonist’s supreme quality is his “living exactly the way he feels” (Roudiez 222). And the examples are many. That Ahab recognizes his own regrettable condition without attempting to alter it is perhaps best explained in his own words: “Let it leak! I’m all aleak myself. Aye! leaks in leaks! … Yet I don’t stop to plug my leak; for who can find it in the deep-loaded hull; or how hope to plug it in this life’s howling gale? (449).

Another promoter of this view of subjectivity is Woodson, who claims that: “Man must affirm his own uniqueness in order to exist as a man. This affirmation is of itself heroic and tragic” (Woodson 353), and although he calls it tragedy, whereas this essay labels it absurdity, the analogy remains that ‘uniqueness’ is crucial. Woodson continues:

Ahab’s “mad” purpose is to destroy that which he seeks … To live, to create a substantial body for oneself, is to destroy the other: man finds behind nature a competing mind and creative force; in order to become himself, man must destroy this competing other. (Woodson 355)

But then again, how do you destroy God, or worse, how do you destroy emptiness? The recognition of the impossibility only reinforces the sense of tragedy, still perseverance through it is absurd but inherently hopeful. As such, what matters is not the destruction, that is to say the end of the search, but the seeking itself. In attempting to destroy, or to find meaning, you may not be able to conquer God or futility, but you may be able to distance yourself from either one. And again, the attempt itself is what matters; the attempt itself is life itself. Camus mentions King Oedipus by Sophocles, the father of tragic literature.

It begins with the instant he knows. But at this moment he realizes blind and devastated, that the only thing tying him to this world is the cool hand of a young girl. Then an audacious word echoes: “Despite all my torments, my advanced age and my soul’s greatness, all is well.” Sophocles’ Oedipus thus expresses, as does Dostoevsky’s Kirilov, the absurd victory. (Camus 98)

That everything is well, or since nothing is in fact well, the ability to persevere and make such a statement in spite of the harshness of life is the absurd victory. And for Ahab to continue his
quest, his monomaniacal purpose in spite of the cost being the total sacrifice of all else constitutes his victory. In saying “thou canst consume; but I can then be ashes” (477), Ahab manifests his perseverance in the face of futility.

**Purpose, by its own sheer inveteracy of will (202)**

- Of rebellion, either against emptiness or against God and of the dichotomy of Ahab and Ishmael, both as tragic; Ahab as more of an absurd hero

Fourthly, despite all, futility renders all actions rebellious, either against God or against futility itself. When Ishmael mentions “own sheer inveteracy”, the emphasis being on own, it signifies the renunciation of any other authority than the self.

Still, how can there be value when everything is transient? Camus tells us to rebel, and Ahab rebels. As “Ahab’s ‘one supreme purpose’… attains ‘a kind of self-assured, independent being’” (Woodson 360), the closest thing to a remedy to the futility is obtained. Even if there is no meaning, man must create and ratify his own meaning, for “there is naught beyond” (167), to use Ahab’s own words. Richard Hauck explains in a review of his article on the absurd in American fiction, by Willard Thorp:

Camus gives the myth his own twist. To him Sisyphus is not a victim but a hero, because he refuses to bow to the gods and defies whatever they can do to him. Out of the paradox of his situation - that again and again he almost reaches the topmost secret - he makes an unendurable life. He never becomes resigned or despairing. He is constantly in revolt against his predicament of wanting to know but never knowing. The absurd hero wins over the gods by living the paradox of his life to the full. (Thorp 492)

The same is true of Ahab, he lives his life as he chooses; without resignation. And while he may occasionally question his mission, he never despairs. Sisyphus is free within certain boundaries, so is Ahab. To paraphrase Heidegger, they have both been ‘thrown’ into their unalterable conditions, yet they both possess a certain freedom of choice, the choice of what to do with their predicaments. Creating their own destinies is the freedom they share, although it is strongly inhibited. A conscious rebellion against whatever confines them, be it God or nothingness, be it entity or nonentity, be it principal or agent. Again, “the absurd has a value only so long as you do not acquiesce” (Camus 30).

This offers an opportunity to contrast Captain Ahab with a few characters who seem all the more disposed to yield to the terrible condition of man: the second protagonist of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael, and Captain Boomer of the Samuel Enderby, who much like Ahab was
mutilated by Moby Dick, but unlike him chose reconciliation rather than vengeance. On the one hand, Captain Boomer appears completely resigned after having been crippled, as is shown in his conversation with Ahab:

“Did’st thou cross his wake again?”
“Twice.”
“But could not fasten?”
“Didn’t want to try to: ain’t one limb enough? What should I do without this other arm?” (419)

As is illustrated by the brief conversation, Captain Boomer has chosen quite a different path than Ahab, and obviously it differs by virtue of Boomer’s passive stance towards life. Conversely to how Ahab has seized the opportunity to transform disaster into meaning, Boomer has simply yielded to the arbitrariness of life. No matter if his inauspiciousness was divinely planned or not, Boomer is content to accept it, causing him to be excluded from the absurd heroism that Ahab contrastingly represents. On the other hand, Ishmael, who is less passive in that he chooses to be a part of the voyage, and still far from as active as Ahab in that he ultimately chooses to be a part of Ahab’s voyage, constitutes a certain middle path.

Still, neither Ishmael nor Boomer can compare to Ahab in terms of the absurd struggle. Again, this is since Ahab does not acquiesce, does not yield, whereas Ishmael and Boomer do. This comparison elicits the distinction of tragedy and absurdity. Although mortality is common to all three characters, causing any enterprise of theirs to be equally futile and thereby tragic, what separates them is the stance taken towards said futility. While Ahab rebels, Ishmael and Boomer conform. As such, they are all tragic, still only Ahab carries the absurd heroism.

As Myers argues “it is Ahab the actor, not Ishmael the narrator, who is the center of interest throughout” (Myers 21). The activity, the rebellion against an existence that will eventually result in nothingness, is what constitutes the absurd hero.

Once more, what matters in life according to the absurdists is what you make of life and how you make life your own, in spite of its transience. Woodson points out that “Ahab’s greatness consists in his selfhood” (Woodson 358) whereas “Ishmael confessed to looking forward with dismay to his task of characterizing and explaining Ahab… he devotes several chapters to an analysis of Ahab’s purpose” (ibid. 359).

Again, between Ishmael and Ahab, the common denominator is Ahab’s purpose. To use Hegel’s dialectic of domination and submission, the master/slave-morality, Ahab goes after Moby Dick because he desires it, whereas Ishmael goes after Moby Dick because Ahab
desires it. Heidegger would label it ‘das Man’, an unauthenticity of Ishmael’s. And it is this unauthenticity which excludes Ishmael from the category of absurd heroism which Ahab is part of through his living life according to his own preference; the only way to some sort of happiness. And so Ahab’s “purpose, by its own sheer inveteracy of will” (202) is created where there is none to be found. To repeat Camus’ message, “you have to imagine Sisyphus happy” (Camus 99).

And the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it did five thousand years ago (535)

- Conclusion

As has been pointed out, there is an unimportance of what Moby Dick symbolizes. Whether, on one side of the spectrum, it is supposed to be God or, on the other, it is nothing more than an animal, the chase is futile. This is since God poses an unconquerable entity and since an animal understands nothing of vengeance, the conquering of it will offer no satisfaction. By this logic, no matter the role of Moby Dick, any given possible outcome of the hunt for it is eventually equally as futile as any other. Therefore, “the intolerableness of all earthly effort” (74), the tragedy common to all men, is constituted by the inability to partake in anything which is not ultimately futile. In the use of ambiguity, in the lack of an explicit or even tangible declaration of what the whale is, the inexorable futility is elicited. Since tragedy, by this definition, is common to all men, what separates men is the notion of the absurd. This is to say, the realization of, and perseverance through the inescapable tragedy. That Ahab has recognized this, is a key element in his absurd heroism. Equally as important to the notion of the absurd hero is the persistence that any given quest is worth undertaking, in spite of the nothingness it finally will result in. This is a subsequent trait in the character of Ahab.

And so, in futility, in an eventual nothingness, Ahab is forced to create his own purpose since purpose is otherwise unattainable. As such, his perseverance functions as a hindrance to the sorrow and sense of hopelessness entailed by the tragic state of the human condition. Still, futility renders all actions rebellious, and rebellion, either against God or against futility itself, is what differentiates Ahab from the other characters, like Ishmael or Captain Boomer. His ability to resist the temptation of yielding to the harshness of life is what completes Ahab as the absurd hero.

Perhaps the best caption of the human experience is Ishmael’s claim that whalers will never relinquish the hope of “one more whale”, which illustrates the futility of any given quest. For one whale more or one day more is all that you can hope for. Ahab did not get his whale, Ishmael did get his extra days. And in these days he may lament the death of Ahab, but
he will forever be unable to parallel the feats of Ahab’s life. The result of the hunt is ultimately futile and all that matters is the hunt itself, life itself. And in this hunt of Ahab’s, Ishmael is but a spectator. All men die, not all men truly live. Ahab’s fate is certainly absurd, and while his is as tragic as the fate of Ishmael’s, by the absurd logic, Ahab the rebel is the man to model yourself after. Monomania is enviable. The transience entailed by death cannot be allowed to pose a problem.

Death is nothing since death is everything. Because all life ends in death, the absurd man is rendered free in life. He may do with it as he pleases, without any judgment but his own. You might argue that he is still tragic, but in comparison with the man who surrenders, the grief of the human tragedy fades for the persevering man, the absurd man.

With death impending, man is rendered free and in the face of futility and of nothingness, man is left to either acquiesce or to rebel and make life his own. In an existence without meaning, man can but create his own and pursue it in a monomaniacal fashion. This is what life is, a “dumb blankness, full of meaning” (196).

There can, as has been repeated, be a value, be a meaning for those who are determined to find one, for those who do not yield, for the absurd hero, for Ahab and for Sisyphus. “You have to imagine Sisyphus happy” (Camus 99).
Works cited


