



# The Impotence of God: Theodicy in "The Town-Ho's Story" of *Moby-Dick*

DANIEL REES

The first time that the reader experiences the eponymous White Whale's violence in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* is curiously not through any direct means, but "by a circumstance of the Town-Ho's story, which seemed obscurely to involve with the whale some wondrous, inverted visitation of one of those so-called judgements of God which at times are said to overtake some men" (Melville 240). This description of the story as circumstantial, obscure, and inverted makes the story's function in *Moby-Dick* anything but clear. Critics have long puzzled over meaning of this chapter, with Sherman Paul opening the discussion by arguing that it is an allegory of Christian justice and democracy, reading Steelkilt and Radney as representatives of good and evil respectively, resulting in an interpretation of the novel where Radney is destroyed when he rejects Christian democratic ideals. Don Geiger disagrees, positing that the chapter is an inversion of a Christian allegory with Steelkilt as an "angry Christ" (468), resulting in his interpretation of the book as Melville's frustrations with "a tyrannous God" (471). William Spofford and Edward Rose both disagree with the allegorical framework of Paul and Geiger by arguing that neither Radney or Steelkilt is solely at fault; Spofford first articulates that Steelkilt is not a Christ figure, and Rose builds upon this to more fully articulate the ambiguities of the story.

However, these arguments do not synthesize the ambiguities with the themes

of justice as future critics do, resulting in incomplete interpretations. Allen Austin, Marcia Reddick, John Cyril Barton, and Philip Egan provide more holistic interpretations, with Austin reading Steelkilt as Satan, the captain and the whale as God, and Radney as Christ, therefore arguing that God does not punish Satan but instead kills his own son. Reddick finds that both Steelkilt and Radney are evil and that the whale taking only Radney is fundamentally unjust, noting that "Melville's view of life is too dark" for "simple stories of good and evil." Egan's emphasis on the rehearsal of Ishmael provides an answer to why the story is narrated in such a strange, twice-told manner. Finally, Barton's focus on Lima and the Spanish inquisition causes him to read the story as "apocrypha" (176). However, there has been inadequate synthesis of these themes in the action of the whale and what effects it has on the story. The story is neither an allegory of Christian justice nor purely ambiguous. Instead, the characterizations and ultimate act of the whale's divine punishment of Radney, but not Steelkilt, present an inverted theodicy as an expression of *Moby-Dick's* frustration with the seeming injustice of God.

Ishmael's role in the story as the narrator has been something that has long puzzled critics of "The Town-Ho's Story," but most who address it agree that its primary function is to question the story's reliability. However, it does more than this alerting the reader to the religious and spiritual elements

of the narrative to come. As Egan notes, "The story is neither a simple repetition of a legend, nor a simple piece of invention, nor even a combination of the two. We must suppose that Ishmael is synthesizing a tale from at least two sources and is further enriching it with his own imagination" (342). Egan argues that Ishmael's audience, their interruptions, and Ishmael's swearing on the Bible are all features that define his narration (339). The audience also defines the narration, as they frequently interrupt and cause Ishmael to digress about features of the text which otherwise would be relatively insignificant, such as his description of Lakemen and Canallers that complicates good and evil in the story. Ishmael conveys it in Lima "to a lounging circle of my Spanish friends, one saint's eve" (Melville 240), and this setting and audience heighten the religious tones of the frame narrative. The audience is representative of Christian decadence, and the description of their passive posture foreshadows the inaction of God in the coming narrative. Additionally, the setting of Lima on a saint's eve, a city described later as having "churches more plentiful than billiard-tables, and for ever open – and 'Corrupt as Lima'" (Melville 247), sets up the theme of spiritual perversion. A city that should be a bastion of holiness with its intense Catholicism and high churches-to-billiard-tables ratio is as corrupt as anywhere else, providing a commentary that devotion to God has not improved this city. The unbelieving audience in a religiously corrupt city sets up the passage as being inherently tied to impotent spirituality, and the corruption of this city foreshadows the corrupt nature of God's justice in the story.

Furthermore, Ishmael's final assertion on the Bible contributes to the theological elements of the narration, but also its ambiguity. A key feature of this passage is its similarity to the Peruvian inquisition

(Barton 165). Don Sebastian "quietly" inquires of Ishmael whether he is finished, and receiving an affirmative answer, presents an accusation against him that questions the story's truth in a "suit" (Melville 256). The gravity of Don Sebastian's quiet tone combined with the legal language put Ishmael in a scenario not unlike an inquisition. This inquisitorial nature is carried further when one of the company references "Auto-da-Fés" (Melville 256), or burnings of heretics. Ishmael cares not for the increasing danger, humorously requesting the "largest sized Evangelists you can" (Melville 256). He finds it comical to imply that Catholics give more credence to symbols based on dimensions rather than substance, and this cavalier attitude for religious norms raises the question of whether or not his oath is seriously intended. Though the request may not be Ishmael's humor, it is at least Melville's irony, for there is no subtlety in the request that is dripping with satirization of Catholic rituals. Additionally, the use of "Evangelists" instead of the entire Bible clues the audience into the idea that the preceding passage was related to the Gospels and justifies scrutinizing the narrative for caricatures of spiritual beings, specifically Christ figures. His request to bring the priest, which is completely unnecessary to the oath, adds to the satire of Catholicism; it is "an elaborate inside joke—an attack upon Catholic authority and a quest for truth through inquisitorial practices" (Barton 165). These elements make his subsequent oath and the truth of his narrative completely impotent as a method of finding truth in the story. The inquisition of the Dons highlights the perils of Christian justice while presenting a legitimate inquiry into truth, but Ishmael's answer provides no certitude to their inquiry. This ambiguous ending to the chapter provides Ishmael with a way of

providing no answer as his answer to the theodicy he presented through *Moby-Dick's* singular judgement of Radney.

Within Ishmael's story, the characterization of Steelkilt and the captain provides a second layer of conflict between a Satan figure and a God figure, respectively. Steelkilt appears to be a Christ figure, with Geiger and Paul reading him as such, but he is more accurately a Satan figure (Austin 237), the "cozening fiend" (Melville 244) that possesses Radney (Spofford 268). Steelkilt contains elements of Christ, primarily the description of his hanging between two crucified thieves, but even while he is crucified, he hisses and writhes, reminiscent of snake-like motion (Melville 251). He refuses to be flogged (248), is unwilling to turn the other cheek when touched by Radney's hammer (246), and says, "I come in peace (255)," contrasting Christ's claim that, "I came not to send peace, but a sword" (*King James Version*, Matthew 10.34). These features do not align him with Christ, but rather serve to create an ironic reversal, for Steelkilt's character shares more in common with a Miltonic Satan: "Heroic stature, enormous pride, indomitable determination, and fiery hatred" (Austin 238). There are even Satanic elements to his character, such as being locked in the hold with one third of the crew and hissing demonically (Austin 240). Instead, Steelkilt is best read as a Satan figure; he is "a sort of devil indeed" (Melville 242), and the elements of Christ that he does possess exist so that they may be reversed into Satan's features.

On the other hand, the captain represents a powerless God in the allegorical framework, as Austin notes by pointing to the exile of Satan into the hold with one-third of the crew and drawing upon the role of the captain in Melville's broader work (238). Yet the captain, after the initial act of banishment, has no power over Steelkilt and

can only punish the followers who betray Steelkilt (Melville 251). Steelkilt gains complete power over this iteration of God, even inverting God's week by commanding him to rest on an island for six days before resuming on the seventh (Melville 255). This God has no power to punish the mutineer, and this represents a total failure on God's behalf to even attempt justice against Satan. This view of God supports reading this chapter as an inversion of the theodicy of Job, a portion of the Bible which Melville draws heavily upon in *Moby-Dick*. This captain has no control over the leviathan of *Moby Dick*, he has no power as Satan usurps his kingdom, and Steelkilt, as Satan, even has the power to threaten God with divine justice in the form of lightning (Melville 255). The God represented in the character of the captain is not a God of love, but a God of leniency toward the one most deserving of punishment, Satan.

Radney, the first mate, represents a sort of Christ figure, but it is unclear whether he represents Christ or inverts Him. Reddick reads him as an inverted Christ figure, referencing Radney's whipping of Steelkilt (Melville 252), contrary to Christ's reception of whippings, and the mate's metaphorical spitting on Steelkilt's face (Melville 244-245), when Christ is the one expectorated upon in scripture (Reddick). More than this, he has bones broken (Melville 246). Contrary to this, however, he has a resurrection before punishing Steelkilt, seeming to give him moral authority despite his sins. Radney emerges from his berth in the morning, where he has lain since his wound, wrapped in bandages, similar to Christ's or Lazarus' resurrection, and proceeds to punish Steelkilt in the impotent captain's stead (Melville 250-251). The whipping is hesitant and long overdue, but the Satan figure gets punished for his rebellion, representing a possibility that God, at least in the form of Christ, is just.

However, there is a flaw in the punishment, which for mutiny should be death. Christ merely whips Satan, and then allows him to go free, and therefore the punishment does not fit the crime. Though some justice has been given, it is not enough, and this will come back to haunt both the captain and Radney. Ultimately, it matters little whether Radney's character is an inverted or traditional Christ figure, as he fails in the same way that his Father, the captain, does. This presents them both as equally culpable for Steelkilt's actions which follow. Both have the moral authority to punish Steelkilt, but the captain is too lenient and the Christ too merciful. As Austin writes, "The captain's action is altogether without explanation—The mystery Melville himself cannot fathom, for it represents God's permissiveness towards Satan, an act beyond human comprehension" (241). The theodicy that this reading of the characters in "The Town-Ho's Story" presents is a challenge to the message of the Evangelists: If Christ really died and rose again to conquer evil, then why does Satan still prosper and dominate the earth with evil? For Satan is still "roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it," (Job 1.7), and Ishmael has "seen and talked with Steelkilt since the death of Radney" (Melville 257).

This analysis of the allegorical symbolism of each character as a different spiritual entity sets up the final and most significant passage of the story: the actions of Moby Dick, a second representative of God, which represent the ultimate inversion of justice. Radney is taken by the whale while no one else is harmed, a "strange fatality" that occurs "as if mapped out before the world itself was charted" (Melville 254). Radney's character is littered with predestination language, being described as "the predestined mate" (Melville 245) right before he touches Steelkilt's cheek, as well as "doomed and made mad" (Melville 242)

in his initial characterization by Ishmael. The mate has been predestined to an unjust end by God while the mutineer escapes this divine punishment, creating the ultimate reversal of justice. Complicating this injustice is the fact that Moby-Dick acts as the representative of the God of damnation in this passage. The critics unanimously argue that the whale functions as a divine agent, and all of the other spiritual parallels seem to support reading the whale as another divine figure, but as Rose notes, "Not only could Melville not believe in any conception of God, Calvinistic or Emersonian, he could not believe in belief" (541). The story itself is described as an "inverted visitation of one of those so called judgements of God which at times are said to overtake some men" (Melville 240). This heavily qualified statement throws all certainty out the window and leaves the audience to decide whether the actions of the whale in the story are from God or not. Therefore, it is possible that the whale merely represents the cruelty of nature, just as there is a possibility of Christ being just. However, considering Moby Dick's divine symbolism which has already been presented in "The Whiteness of the Whale," it is also possible that it is a representative of God, and specifically a God that damns the undeserving to Hell. The captain is the God of leniency, a twist on the traditional description of the Deity as the God of love, and in the same way this vengeful God taints the justice of God. Radney's shirt is seen caught in the "teeth that had destroyed him" (Melville 254-255), similar to descriptions of Hell, an abyss, which the whale resides in, with "wailing and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 13.50). This God of damnation has the power and authority to punish Satan, but instead kills his own son, a twist on the positive sacrifice represented by the Gospels. This is the God who damns sinners to eternal torment in Hell, descending with

Radney into the abyss just as Christ is described as descending into Hell in the Apostle's Creed, yet in this instance it is because Radney has been condemned. No reason is given for why Steerkilt is spared, just as no reason is given for the captain's inability to punish Steerkilt, and this moment presents a frustrated theodicy that cannot account for how God does not punish the guilty and damns those that seem innocent.

As a result of the God of leniency and the God of damnation's inability to punish Steerkilt's evil, his continuing life becomes more and more corrupt. He convinces almost the entire crew to mutiny with him, humiliating the captain and escaping justice with finality, even inverting God's week. This final act represents Satan's total hegemony over God's will, thus representing the final inversion of the story of Job in this chapter. In Job, it is clear that God is in control for the entire book, but in "The Town-Ho's Story," it is clear that Satan is the one with the authority. It presents a reversal of the theodicy of Job, where at the end of the story God and evil are not fully reconciled, but it is clear that God has the supreme power to allow evil to happen even if it seems contradictory. In "The Town-Ho's Story," God allows evil because He chooses for unknown reasons not to stop it, and the guilty go unpunished. Yet the resurrected Radney's whipping of Steerkilt presents a possibility for justice, and the whale's ambiguously divine nature forecloses strong conclusions. Thus, the theodicy, though close to reaching a guilty verdict, presents a hung jury to the reader and leaves them to find their own meaning in the seeming evil in the nature of God.

The Town-Ho's theodicy is frustrated, convoluted, and ambiguous, presenting great frustration for Christian and atheist alike, but ultimately the point which this chapter and *Moby-Dick* make about life is that

despite Ishmael's assertion, "Surely all this is not without meaning" (Melville 26), it is impossible to determine the nature of God's justice though it be searched for with the monomania of Ahab. With this futility in mind, perhaps swearing on the Bible is the solution to this lack of clarity regarding knowledge of God's justice. Ishmael swears that a story that provides no answers and told to him by a representation of Satan is absolutely true, allowing the book to laugh at the hope of solving any of its conundrums of justice and meaning.

#### WORKS CITED

- Austin, Allen C. "The Other Side of Steerkilt: The Town-Ho's Satire." *American Transcendental Quarterly*, vol. 52, 1981.
- Barton, John Cyril. "'An Unquestionable Source?': Melville's 'The Town-Ho's Story,' the Inquisition, and W. B. Stevenson's Twenty Years' Residence in South America." *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 68, no. 2, University of California Press, 2013, pp. 145–179, <https://doi.org/10.1525/ncl.2013.68.2.145>.
- Egan, Philip J. "Time and Ishmael's Character in 'The Town-Ho's Story' of *Moby-Dick*." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 14, no. 4, 1982, pp. 337-347, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29532188>.
- Geiger, Don. "Melville's Black God: Contrary Evidence in 'The Town-Ho's Story.'" *American Literature*, vol. 25, no. 4, 1954, pp. 464-471, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2921661>.
- Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick*. Arcturus Publishing Limited, 2021.
- Paul, Sherman. "Melville's 'The Town-Ho's Story.'" *American Literature*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1949, pp. 212-221, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2922026>.
- Reddick, Marcia. "'Something, Somehow like Original Sin': Striking the Uneven Balance in 'The Town-Ho's Story' and

*Moby-Dick.*" *American Transcendental Quarterly*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1996, p. 81, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=f5h&AN=9607293648&site=ehost-live&custid=s8875894>.

Rose, Edward J. "Annihilation and Ambiguity: *Moby-Dick* and 'The Town-Ho's Story.'" *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 45, no. 4, 1972, pp. 541-558, <https://doi.org/10.2307/364426>.

Spofford, William K. "Melville's Ambiguities: A Re-Evaluation of 'The Town-Ho's Story.'" *American Literature*, vol. 41, no. 2, 1969, pp. 264-270, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2923955>.