

Storms of Coming Climate Change in Moby-Dick

By Steven Herrmann

Now that I've introduced the key elements of the story in *Moby-Dick*, what I want to provide for our audience is a quick glance on some of the underlying purposes we see in Melville's writing of a number of the specific chapters of his shaman-novel where he gives us clear references to what today we would refer to as "climate change," or "global warming" within our world's oceans and biosphere.

In the opening Chapter called "Extracts," 81 extracts are presented by Melville in chronological order that build to a climax point where he informs us about several *insurrections* that took place on whale ships between 1824-1845. For instance, in 1842, a year after Melville set sail for the Offshore Grounds in the South Pacific, an insurrection took place on the whaler *Sharon*. In 1824, five years after he was born, a mutiny took place on the whaler *Globe*. The *Globe* insurrection was led by a bloody mutineer named Samuel Comstock, an officer aboard the ship who is said to have ruthlessly killed the captain with an ax and became the ringleader of the rebellious revolt.¹ So right from the beginning of the novel, we are presented with an archetypal portrait that is at the center of Melville's prophecy of doom to the American experiment in political and economic Democracy, which he felt was imperiled by an insane capitalistic hunt for whale oil.

What was the alternative Melville presented readers with at the time? It is what I've called Spiritual Democracy. Although he was clearly alert to national politics, Melville also had his finger on the pulse of American economic inflation, which was caused by the material strata of democracy and the big industry of the

whale-fishery. This was symbolized by two owners of the ship, Bildad and Peleg, whose names come from the Old Testament, and from Ahab himself, the lightning-scarred captain of the ship whose sole aim was not to amass as many barrels of oil as possible to illuminate the homes and churches of New England, and returning home heroically with a huge profit in his pocket, but rather, with a sole aim of killing the great white sperm whale, Moby Dick.

In a stupendous definition of what I'm calling Spiritual Democracy, we can hear Melville giving eloquent voice to the freedom and liberty individuals were granted by the founding fathers in our US Constitution with the Religious Liberty Clauses, by God, or the Self, to chart our own course in the American experiment of democracy, to speak up for what is right, through the divine agent of *conscience*: the personal and transpersonal voice of our vocation:

But this august dignity I treat of, is not the dignity of kings and robes, but that abounding dignity which has no robed investiture. Thou shalt see it shining in the arm that wields a pick or drives a spike; that democratic dignity which, on all hands, radiates without end from God; Himself! The great God absolute! The centre and circumference of all democracy! His omnipresence, our divine equality!... thou just Spirit of Equality, which has spread one royal mantle of humanity over all my kind! Bear me out in it, thou great democratic God!... Thou who didst pick up Andrew Jackson from the pebbles; who didst hurl him upon a war-horse; who didst thunder him higher than a throne!ⁱⁱ

Melville was a relativist and a metaphysician. He was also a fine mathematician. The whaleship was, as his narrator Ishmael said, “My Yale College and my Harvard!” He knew aboard the *Acushnet* how to count barrels of sperm oil, one by one. He knew how much they would fetch in the New England market economy. In chapter 2, “The Carpet Bag,” Ishmael calls the launching port a “queer sort of place” that “stood on a sharp bleak corner, where that tempestuous wind Euroclydon kept up a worse howling than ever it did in poor Paul’s tossed craft.”ⁱⁱⁱ Euroclydon happens to be a cyclonic wind that blows tempestuously in the Mediterranean Ocean usually in the Autumn and Wintertime. It’s mentioned in the Book of Acts 27: 14 as a strong gale from the Atlantic Gulf, which wrecked the Apostle Paul’s ship on the coast of Malta while he was enroute to Rome on his way to preach the news of Jesus as the Messiah. So here again is an image of shipwreck in relationship to a coming storm.

In chapter 3, we’re taken into the dark atmospherics of the novel when “Ishmael” describes what he sees as he enters the Spouter Inn. In a visage of a large oil painting, Ishmael sees in his mind’s eye that it contains “unaccountable masses of shades and shadows,” and he endeavors further to delineate it as “chaos bewitched,” which pleased his Master, Hawthorne. What was most puzzling and bewitching to Ishmael was “a long, limber, portentous, black mass of something hovering in the center of the picture.” Ishmael continued: “It’s the Black Sea in a midnight gale.” “It’s the unnatural combat of the four primal elements.—It’s a blasted heath.—It’s a Hyperborean winter scene.—It’s the breaking-up of the ice-bound stream of Time.” This fills him with a reverie of a faintly remembered resemblance to a great fish, or the great Leviathan himself. He then says: “The picture represents a Cape-Horner in a great hurricane.”^{iv} *A great hurricane!* What do these images bring to mind for those of you in the audience living in the USA

today after the devastating destruction of Hurricane Helene last week that leveled parts of Florida and flooded Ashville, North Carolina? It was the second largest hurricane in recorded US history.

We can see from the very beginning of the story, therefore, that this is an environmental novel with contemporary significance that will focus on a fierce excoriation of the political and economic strata of democracy with a narrative of facts about the coming storms of climate change. The industrial inflation that sealed the fate of American democracy and launched the ship of State on an ill-fated whaling voyage in 1850, at the time of the California Gold Rush, was formed as Ishmael said in “Loomings” during a “damp, drizzly November in my soul.” It was doubtless “formed in part by the grand programme of Providence that was drawn up a long time ago” and the bill ran something like this: “*Grand Contested Election for the Presidency of the United States*. “WHALING VOYAGE BY ONE ISHMAEL. “BLOODY BATTLE IN AFFGHANISTAN.”^v Did we not see such a bloody battle in Afghanistan two decades ago with the “crusade against evil” launched George Bush. Is that not where Osama Bin Laden was killed? And what do you make about a grand contested election of the presidency for the United States? Have we not seen such a contested election recently along with an attempted insurrection? Does this remind you of anything currently afoot in our American democracy?

This is what “those stage managers, the Fates,” put Ishmael down for “this shabby part of a whaling voyage,” he said, when others were set down for “magnificent parts in high tragedies.” It was a calling that came to him from the American Self that he had to say “yes” to without his own “unbiased free will and discriminating judgment” interfering. It was a decision made by a hand far above

his head. His calling as he said was to write the “Gospels” in his century. It is a myth for our times as well.

I want to move forward now to Chapter 9, “The Sermon,” where Melville recounts the story of Jonah and the whale from the Old Testament. Here we’re confronted with a religious figure, Father Mapple, who gives an ominous sermon to the people of Nantucket. The worshippers in the seaman’s bethel fear him because of the ponderous weight of his prophetic statements. Everything he says is in excess because he speaks from a pulpit far above the commoners, at an exalted level, where every Word he speaks hit the mark. He is speaking to all of. Ishmael says that while the preacher was speaking his weighty words “the howling of the shrieking, slanting storm” outside the chapel “seemed to add new power” to Father Mapple’s voice during the deliverance of the sermon. When “describing Jonah’s sea-storm,” it seemed to Ishmael’s mind that “the preacher seemed tossed by a storm himself.” More: “His deep chest heaved with a groundswell; his tossed arms seemed the warring elements at work; and the thunders that rolled away from his swarthy brow, and light leaping from his eye, made all his simple hearers look on him with a quick fear that was strange to them.”^{vi}

Again, storm, the four elements—earth, water, air, fire—are in turmoil in the American Soul, as they are also today in the World Soul due to increasing climate change. Ishmael’s calling in *Moby-Dick*, his summons as an American author, was “To preach the Truth to the face of Falsehood!”^{vii}

We are now confronted with figure of Queequeg, a Polynesian harpooner from an island in the South Seas. We meet up with him in Chapter 10, “A Bosom Friend.” Ishmael and Queequeg are “inseparable twin brothers,” since in a spiritual democracy all of the world’s inhabitants and nations are interconnected. As the narrator pithily says reading Queequeg’s mind: “It’s a mutual, joint-stock world, in

all meridians. We cannibals must help these Christians.”^{viii} Some of the South Sea islands are currently threatened with submergence of their villages and towns by rising seas, due to the melting of polar ice, permafrost, and increasing carbon emissions. Melville seems to have been pointing to this fact at a time in history when such things were not even on the horizon of our political or economic awareness yet. But Melville saw the tragedies at sea and he spoke out against it, such as in chapter 19, “The Prophet.” There a dialogue occurs between Ishmael a strange and ominous figure who prophetically calls himself “Elijah,” an old ragged sailor. The stranger Elijah calls out to Ishmael “Stop!” He asks him directly with pointing finger: “ye havn’t seen Old Thunder yet, have ye?” “Who’s Old Thunder?” replied Ishmael.^{ix} We will hear more about Old Thunder, Captain Ahab, later on.

In “Midnight, Forecastle,” Chapter 40, another interesting reference is made to the rising tides of climate change in the following lines by the Lascar Sailor, during a drunken scene on the deck: “By Brahma! boys, it’ll be douse sail soon. The sky-born, high-tide Ganges turned to wind! Thou showest thy black brow, Seeva!”^x Who is Seeva? This interesting statement shows Melville’s astute awareness of Spiritual Democracy as the unity of all religions with Nature’s God, which of course includes the sea and sky. He sees that the sailors on the ship of American democracy will soon be doused by Brahma, and the black brow of Shiva, Creator, Preserver, and Destroyer of the Universe in Hindu mythology. Shiva will cause the rising of the Ganges, one of the mightiest rivers in the world, which flows down from the Himalayas and empties into the Indian Ocean. Shiva, an incarnation of Brahma and Vishnu—the Hindu Trinity—will turn the Ganges into a great wind-storm that will churn the milky ocean white and lead to unimaginable destruction.

In Chapter 48, “The First Lowering,” the action of the tragic drama begins to heat up as Queequeg, the Polynesian, holds an “imbecile candle in the heart of that almighty forlornness” in the dark shadows of the night. “There, then, he sat” says Ishmael, “the sign and symbol of a man without faith, hopelessly holding up hope in the midst of despair.”^{xi} How many of you are holding up hope in the midst of despair today as we approach the upcoming presidential election? Ahab then goes after his prey in earnest, with whole thunder-clouds piled upon his lightning-scarred tornado-brow.

In Chapter 60, we enter the calm before the storm. “Again” declares Ishmael: “as the profound calm which only apparently precedes and prophecies the storm, is perhaps more awful than the storm itself; for indeed, the calm is but the whisper and envelope of the storm; and contains in itself, as the seemingly harmless rifle holds the fatal powder, and the ball, and the explosion.”^{xii} Are we not awaiting the thunderous fall of more lethal balls and explosions in the Middle East today, before the next storms come our way? Where will they land next? How will economists help to solve the problem of excessive fossil fuels that scientists tell us are causing the problems?

Now let us fast forward to Chapter 114, “The Gilder.” Here Old Thunder declares: “Would to God these blessed calms would last. But the mingled, mingling threads of life are woven by warp and woof; calms crossed by storms, a storm for every calm.”^{xiii} How many more calms will we have to endure before we learn the peace that comes from a higher wisdom?

“Warmest climes but nurse the cruellest fangs,” Ishmael says in the opening lines of Chapter 119, “The Candles.” The “tiger of Bengal crouches in spiced groves of ceaseless verdure. Skies the most effulgent but basket the deadliest thunders; gorgeous Cuba knows tornadoes that never swept northern lands. So, too,

it is, that in these resplendent Japanese seas the mariner encounters the direst of all storms, the Typhoon. It will sometimes burst from out that cloudless sky, like an exploding bomb upon a dazed and sleepy town.”^{xiv} Super Typhoon Krathon, equivalent to a Category 4 Atlantic hurricane, was situated in the Bashi Channel in the northern part of the Luzon Strait, between Taiwan and the Philippines, as I was writing this lecture up for you yesterday on October 2nd, 2024. It had winds of 150 mph. according to the Joint Typhoon Warning Center (JTWC). It made landfall near Taiwan’s major port city this morning. It is moving northeast across the island, bringing heavy rains, strong winds and damaging storm surges.

As lightning, storm, and thunder peals roll overhead of the ship, Ahab announces himself as “Old Thunder!” as he gropes his way on his whalebone leg along the bulwarks to find his pivot-hole before the final chase begins. In the end, “concentric circles” form in the Pacific sea-currents and the lone boat is swallowed up in the heart of the sea “spinning, animate and innominate, all round and round in one vortex” until the smallest chip of the Pequod is carried out of sight. This too is a Hurricane-warning, Typhoon-warning, or Storm-warning: the swirling eye of a spinning whirlpool that swallows up the men, like the Whale did Johah.

Now let’s amplify these images a little, Rob, and see what your young scholars might have to say about Melville’s call for a healing solution, for whales, the sea, and the people who are privileged to live on this gorgeous green-blue planet.

ⁱ Melville, Herman. (1988). *Moby-Dick*, New York, Penguin, 636.

ⁱⁱ *MD*, 126, 127.

ⁱⁱⁱ *MD*, 11.

^{iv} *MD*, 13, 14.

^v *MD*, 3, 7.

^{vi} *MD*, 52, 53.

^{vii} *Moby-Dick*, 54.

^{viii} *MD*, 68.

ix MD, 101.

x MD, 190.

xi MD, 245.

xii MD, 306.

xiii MD, 535.

xiv MD, 547.