

# On the Prophetic Truth in Moby Dick: a Biblical Study of Archetypes

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## Abstract

**Published in 1851, Moby Dick is audaciously experimental and defiantly unique for its time. Many scholars attribute problematic aspects of the book to this authorial ambition, the narrative style or symbolic meaning and archetype analysis, etc.. For the Melville critic, the obsessive insanity of the the crew is one of those problems. This study aims to explore how their insanity or madness contains prophetic truth by mainly analyzing these two figures Elijah and Gabriel, whose archetypes can be traced back to the Bible. Based on the studies of essence of madness and the diachronic research of madness, insane discourse is explored and gives a hint of prophetic madness.**

## Keywords

**Moby Dick, Prophetic Truth, Madness, Discourse, Biblical Archetype.**

## 1. Introduction

Moby Dick, generally regarded as Melville's magnum opus and a giant American work in 19th century, involves the categories of religion, navigation, nature and human being. As Melville is devoted to researching in religion, this novel is haunted with strong religious atmosphere. One of the most fruitful ways to appreciate the novel's religious complexity is through the names that Melville gave to its characters according to biblical archetypes. Many characters in the novel can find their archetypes in the Bible, and they have very similar personality characteristics. It can be seen that the religious connotations embodied by the characters in the novel tend to be consistent with the Bible archetype. In the Bible, prophets are often images that ordinary people cannot understand, and have behaviors or actions that are different from ordinary people, which is also endowed with mysterious circumstance. In Moby Dick, several near-prophetic figures also appear insane, but the words and discourse they have given are cautionary. Starting from the perspective of prophetic truth, based on Foucault's theory of madness, this paper analyzes the insane discourse in Moby Dick by using the biblical archetype interpretation method, and re-interprets the relevant characters in the novel.

## 2. Correlation between Moby Dick and Bible

"Call me Ishmael", the very first line of Moby Dick, identifies Ishmael as the narrator whose biblical archetype is the illegitimate son of Abraham and was cast away after Isaac was born. There are a number of other biblical names in the book as well, including Ahab who, according to the Hebrew Bible, was an evil king who led the Israelite into a life of idolatry. Melville's Ahab is obsessed with Moby Dick, an idol that causes the death of his crew. The ship that saves Ishmael "the Rachel" is named for the mother of Joseph, known for interceding to protect her children. It is Rachel, as depicted in the Book of Jeremiah, who convinced God to end the exile placed upon the Jewish tribes for idolatry. The rescue of Ishmael by the Rachel in Moby Dick can thus be read as his return from an exile caused by his complicity in Ahab's idolatry of the whale because he was on the Pequod's crew. Melville's use of these names grants his novel a rich layer of additional meaning.

Another influence of Bible to Melville's *Moby Dick* is obviously manifested in the setting of characters. As one of the renowned western literary classics, *Moby Dick* is embodied with a lot biblical elements and the characters of the novel can be found innuendo in biblical figures. The most representative one is the monomaniac captain Ahab in Pequod, which is an inevitable discussion object in researches of *Moby Dick*. However, Ahab's personality to some extent is in coincidence with the biblical Ahab in Kings and his monomania or madness needs dialectical analysis based on chapters in Bible. Melville's narrative, saturated with biblical names, imagery, tropes, and language, suggests fateful likenesses between Captain Ahab and King Ahab of Israel. Ahab is firstly described as "a grand, ungodly, god-like man" by Peleg, a member of Pequod. "He's Ahab, boy; and Ahab of old, thou knowest, was a crowned king! And a very vile one. When that wicked king was slain, the dogs, did they not lick his blood?" (Melville, 142) The biblical Ahab was known for the evil he did "in the sight of the Lord" (1Kings:16:30), in particular his idolatry. The prophet Elijah accused him of forsaking God's commandments and worshipping Baal, and rightly prophesied that "dogs would lick his blood" (1Kings 21:19). In addition to their names and sacrilege, the two Ahabs share a sinful association with ivory. The luxurious ivory-paneled house that King Ahab made for himself, ridiculed by the prophet Amos together with the "beds of ivory" of the wealthy, is evoked not only by the many whale-ivory adornments of the ship Captain Ahab inhabits but also by his "ivory leg", his "ivory stride", his "ivory stool", and his "ivory-inlaid table". Captain Ahab's consciousness has been shaped by the Bible: he blasphemes by perverting Jesus' baptismal words. This is the intertextuality between Bible and *Moby Dick* and insinuates the co-personality of cruel and merciless, despotic and extravagant between the two characters, demonstrating the close correlation between *Moby Dick* and Bible. Apart from those archetypes, there are still two prophetic archetypes worth reconsidering, Elijah and Gabriel, who are also biblical archetype-based characters and give hints of mystery with the obscure saying, being worth analyzing dialectically. The two are not inconsequential bystanders who are crazy and insane to the action, but characters of significant depth and feeling, and active participants in the interpolated questing and prophetic narratives that lie at the heart of *Moby Dick* and they will be mainly encapsulated in details as the mad figures to show the innate truth underlying in seeming madness.

### 3. Motif of Madness Inherent in *Moby Dick*

*Moby Dick* is a typical work about madness in literary circles. The crew in Pequod embody with mysterious color and insanity holds sway on them, especially with the leadership of the monomaniac captain Ahab. With an arbitrary aim, the crew crazily execute Ahab's order in the wide spread ocean, heading for the trace of the giant whale and preparing to killing *Moby Dick* at every moment. They seem to be enchanted by certain ineffable power in the abysmal water, and madness consequently correlates with Pequod and its crew. In Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, "One thing at least is certain: water and madness have long been linked in the dreams of European man." (12) In Renaissance, ship of fool functions as a carrier that brings the fool or mad into water in order to let water purify these irrational souls because water represents mystery and to some extent madness and has close relationship with the composition of human body. Heinroth, who is mentioned in Foucault's study of madness and is great half anthropological, half-cosmological scholar, interprets madness as "the manifestation in man of an obscure and aquatic element, a dark disorder, a moving chaos, the seed and death of all things, which opposes the mind's luminous and adult stability" (15). *Moby Dick*, as a navigation novel, fully indicates how madness is inherent as a motif while the main length of the novel is set at ocean.

Madness has long been a representative motif in literature and researches about madness is comparatively rich. The book *Madness and Civilization* did a diachronic study of history of

madness. Madness discourse has its own discourse system that permeates knowledge, first, because all these absurd figures are in reality elements of a difficult, hermetic, esoteric learning that is beyond human rational recognition. In Middle Ages, madness is seen as something divine and sacred. In the constitution of the cosmos, there is a dialogue between madness and reason, where madness has a share in the truth. The emerging of classical rationalism interrupts the dialogue between madness and reason and puts madness into a pathological disease. In literature, madness and language are closely related. They send us on expeditions to the depths of the unthinking; within Heideggerian dictum, this would mean the "untruth of being". We can speak only in language and this is compatible with the possibility of being mad, because madness and language are inseparable in articulating the unsayable, which is excretion of nothing, as noted by one scholar David Cooper in his work *The Language of Madness*: "Madness exists as a veil which consists in the truth of an unsayable situation".(23), emphasizing and illustrating the intellectual agnosticism of madness. In Foucault's studies, madness is revealed in the light of freedom or truth and discourse of madness remains as a tool to decomposing a one-dimensional reading of the world. Consequently, it is by language, or discourse that the profound connotation of madness is excavated in literature.

Melville's *Moby Dick* in particular includes characters and explanations reflecting a firm understanding of truth and insanity. Two prophetic figures, Elijah and Gabriel, who has archetypal figures in Bible, are presented as enigmatic being whose language cannot be apprehended by their followers and the undetectable connotation of their utterance brings mad shadows on the characters. This paper will analyze the two figures and their discourse of madness will be explored so as to further apprehend the innate truth of madness in literature.

## 4. The Representation of Prophetic Madness in Two Prophetic Figures

### 4.1. Cryptic Elijah as a Revealing Prophet

Elijah is the cryptic prophet who helps to set an early tone of dark mystery in the novel. He alerts Ishmael to possible problems with Ahab and secrets aboard the Pequod. As an outsider, Elijah's prophecy is endowed within his mysterious words which are regarded as crazy. Chapter 19, only a few pages long, presents the scene that the narrator Ishmael and shipmate Queequeg meet a shabbily dressed man who prophesies doom for all who join in Ahab. The men start a conversation about the boat and its captain, Ahab. When Ishmael tells him he and Queequeg have just signed a contract to work on the Pequod, the mysterious man Elijah asks "Anything down there about your souls?"(Melville, 154), suggesting that to work on that ship for Ahab is to sign your soul away. The man tells them, perhaps ironically, not to worry about it, since "A soul's a sort of a fifth wheel to a wagon"(Melville, 154). Ishmael brushes off the man's warning as meaningless for he looks crazy and mad. When Ishmael starts to walk away, he finally learns the mysterious man's name: Elijah. In the Old Testament, Elijah was a prophet of Israel and appears in Kings. Like most prophets mentioned in the Old Testament, Elijah's job involved condemning sinful leaders and foretelling the punishments that God would bring if people didn't repent. His first appearance is telling King Ahab of Israel that because he has turned Israel to false gods Baal, a drought will cover the land. Under the background of Bible, Elijah in *Moby Dick* performs as an inclusive prophet who comes to foretell the catastrophic disaster Pequod will suffer and be in a persuasive stance to talk about their selling souls to Ahab, insinuating Elijah in the Bible condemns those followers of Ahab who advocates monomaniac worship of Baal and gathers a group of pagans.

Ishmael and Queequeg are confused by Elijah's words and repeat the madness personality of Elijah constantly. In chapter 19, madness initially represents in the outlook of one person. "He was shabbily appalled in faded jacket and patched trousers; a rag of a black handkerchief investing his neck. A confluent small-pox had in all directions flowed over his face."(Melville,

154) Secondly it is due to the inscrutable language. The narrator Ishmael shows his puzzle to Elijah's words many times. "What are you jabbering about, shipmate?"; "Who's Old Thunder?" said I, again riveted with the insane earnestness of his manner."; "What all this gibberish of yours is about, I don't know, and I don't much care, for it seems to me that you must be a little damaged in the head." (Melville, 156) Elijah seems to be an insane man in others' eye, those people can only find nothingness in the expression but the nothingness is in the plenitude of truth that signing with Ahab without deep understanding of him is putting themselves into abyss and it is anticipated by Elijah and conceals in his seemingly mad language.

#### 4.2. Mysterious Gabriel as a Warning Prophet

Gabriel is the raving Shaker prophet aboard the Jeroboam. He correctly predicts Ahab's final resting-place. In chapter 71, as the Pequod's crew works on the whale, another Nantucket whaling ship, named the Jeroboam, approaches. Its captain and some of the crew come nearby in an open boat. There is a "malignant epidemic" aboard the Jeroboam so the captain refuses to board Ahab's vessel. In addition, the stranger ship seems almost under the control of a raving Shaker prophet who thinks he is the archangel Gabriel in the Bible and believes that Moby Dick is the incarnation of the Shaker God and warns against confronting the White Whale.

Throughout the Bible, God would send messengers on His behalf to convey a Word or a message to the people of God. Messages could come in the form of dream or vision, but at times messages would be conveyed through an Angel of the Lord. The Angel Gabriel is mentioned in the Bible multiple times, all of which were events that would change the course of history in alignment for the fulfillment of God's will in the world. The biblical archetype Gabriel plays his role of a prophet to foretell future, mainly mentioned in Daniel and Luke. In Daniel, he functions to interpret the visions that Daniel had been given and to convey the hope and additional prophecy of the coming Christ in the future. "Daniel, I have now come to give you insight and understanding. As soon as you began to pray, an answer was given, which I have come to tell you, for you are highly esteemed" (Daniel 9:23). In Luke, Gabriel sustains his role as an emissary of God and his discourse becomes divine and powerful. "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news" (Luke 1:19). It is Gabriel who stands in the presence of God, which emphasizes God's unwavering trust in him and the great power Gabriel's words hold.

As a member of Jeroboam, Gabriel has his own discourse power because his madness has presented certain prophetic truth in an antecedent disaster this ship suffers. It is important to note that the biblical Jeroboam, the king in the first book of Kings, suffers because of obstinacy and his failure to heed the warnings of a prophet. And the vessel Jeroboam also suffers when it ignores Gabriel's prophetic warnings, mad though this Gabriel may be in the view of Pequod's crew. Gabriel is also an enigmatic figure for his shipmates. "His story was this: He had been originally nurtured among the crazy society of Neskyeuna Shakers, where he had been a great prophet." (Melville, 383) As a prophet known by his shipmates, Gabriel is endowed with divine power at the first beginning. But insanity and craziness given by others still turn be to the attributives for Gabriel because the Shakers, a Christian sect, he belongs to is an mysterious group to the rest of the crew, representing the exclusive perspective of pagans.

A strange, apostolic whim having seized him, he had left Neskyeuna for Nantucket, where, with that cunning peculiar to craziness, he assumed a steady, common sense exterior, and offered himself as a green-hand candidate for the Jeroboam's whaling voyage. They engaged him; but straightway upon the ship's getting out of sight of land, his insanity broke out in a freshet. He announced himself as the archangel Gabriel, and commanded the captain to jump overboard. (Melville, 383).

Melville's depiction from the point of view of unbelievers illustrates how Gabriel's doings, though a prophet in his religious community, seem to be insane and odd. This is the religion

that cast anagogic light on Gabriel. However, the knowledge to the unsayable category operates with the “madness within thought”. Again, as *The Language of Madness* indicates, madness is a state where the utterance of unsayable truth in an insayable situation is contained. Gabriel, as a prophet in the novel, accurately foretold a havoc of Jeroboam caused by hunting down the Moby Dick. In the encountering with Ahab’s Pequod, his prophetic warning continues.

Greedily sucking in this intelligence, Gabriel solemnly warned the captain against attacking the White Whale, in case the monster should be seen; in his gibbering insanity, pronouncing the White Whale to be no less a being than the Shaker God incarnated; the Shakers receiving the Bible. (Melville, 385).

As it denotes, this white whale is the incarnation of God and any behavior that infringes living right of the whale indicates a kind of profane attitude to divinity. Regarding himself as the prophet of God, Gabriel can act, think, or hallucinate as he wants, or so it appears. He regards the whale as the Shaker God, releases a plague on the ship, and on occasion works peacefully with the crew. At times, Gabriel’s incoherent, highly excited behavior suggests a form of mania. Despite Gabriel’s occasional periods of insanity and hallucination, his words or discourse reveals lucidity and calmness with the knowledge of religious sect.

## 5. Conclusion

Madness has long been a classic theme in literature, in which the language of madness is decomposed to the possibility of freedom of the expression of our Being in unrecognizable world. Placed in the social context of the mid-19th century, the novel *Moby Dick* is a clear example of how madness and rationality are defined. Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* entails with the discussion of madness which is represented on the character’s personality and weird story plot. But there lies sanity within insanity, mainly showing in the prophetic figures Elijah and Gabriel whose images can be traced back to Bible. The prophets were communicators, and like all great communicators, they utilized a wide range of verbal and nonverbal elements in their prophetic speeches that have a connection between literature and madness manifesting the power of the lost articulation of the repressed voice. And it is this novel that the repressed truth is articulated by two mysterious or even mad prophets Elijah and Gabriel. In the strange act of the two figures, certain innate truth and prophecy of future is underlying beneath the surface of seemingly madness.

Based on the biblical archetype, illustrations of the prophetic madness are easier to understand and mysterious existence of being mad has a chance to be deconstructed by Foucault’s studies on madness. As Nietzsche said, “Man signifies Thinker. There lies madness.” Mad men Elijah and Gabriel in *Moby Dick* are appropriate illustration for the dual existence of oracle and madness in prophets’ language, thus making a power of prophetic madness and contributing as an evidence for readers to better grasp the phenomenon of madness in literature works.

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