THE MEANING OF THE GAMS IN *MOBY-DICK*

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Rezumat

Lucrarea abordează aspectele sociale prezente în *Moby-Dick*, mai ales acelea ce se desprind din întâlnirile vasului *Pequod* cu alte nave, întalniri cunoscute sub numele nautic de „gam". Analiza acestor întâlniri ajută la o mai bună înţelegere a legăturii dintre individ şi societate, a atitudinii lui Melville faţă de această problemă.

In his *Herman Melville: Representative Selections*, Willard Thorp writes that "Every serious book or article that Melville wrote is a variation on the social theme (Thorp xcviii)." Since a "gam" is an encounter with another whaler (followed or not by some sort of socializing), it would perhaps be useful to look at the nine gams in *Moby-Dick* in terms of Melville's views on society.

In Chapter 53 of *Moby-Dick*, one finds the following attempt to define a gam:

> So, then, we see that of all ships separately sailing the sea, the whalers have most reason to be sociable—and they are so. Whereas, some merchant ships crossing each other's wake in the mid-Atlantic, will oftentimes pass on without so much as a single word of recognition, mutually cutting each other on the high seas, like a brace of dandies on Broadway; and all the time indulging, perhaps, in finical criticism upon each other's rig. As for Men-of-War, when they chance to meet at sea, they first go through such a string of silly bowings and scrapings, such a ducking of ensigns, that there does not seem to be much right-down hearty good-will and brotherly love about it at all. As touching Slave-ships meeting, why, they are in such a prodigious hurry, they run away from each other as soon as possible. And as for Pirates, when they chance to cross each other's cross-bones, the first hail is—"How many skulls?"—the same way the whalers hail—"How many barrels?" And that question once answered, pirates straightway steer apart, for they are infernal villains on both sides, and don't like to see overmuch of each other's villanous likenesses.
>
> But look at the godly, honest, unostentatious, hospitable, sociable, free-and-easy whaler! What does the whaler do when she meets another whaler in any sort of decent weather? She has a "*Gam*," a thing so utterly unknown to all other ships that they never heard of the name even; and if by chance they should hear of it, they only grin at it, and repeat gamesome stuff about "spouters" and "blubber-boilers," and such like pretty exclamations. Why is it that all Merchant-seamen, and also all Pirates and Man-of-War's men, and Slave-ship sailors, cherish such a scornful feeling towards Whale-ships; this is a question it would be hard to answer. Because, in the case of pirates, say, I should like to know whether that profession of theirs has any particular glory about it. It sometimes ends in particular elevation, indeed; but only at the gallows. And besides, when a man is

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elevated in that odd fashion, he has no proper foundation for his superior altitude. Hence, I conclude, that in boasting himself to be high lifted above a whaleman, in that assertion the pirate has no solid basis to stand on.

But what is a *Gam*? You might wear out your index-finger running up and down the columns of dictionaries, and never find the word. Dr. Johnson never attained to that erudition; Noah Webster's ark does not hold it. Nevertheless, this same expressive word has now for many years been in constant use among some fifteen thousand true born Yankees. Certainly, it needs a definition, and should be incorporated into the Lexicon. With that view, let me learnedly define it.

GAM. NOUN—*A social meeting of two (or more) Whale-ships, generally on a cruising ground; when, after exchanging hails, they exchange visits by boats' crews: the two captains remaining, for the time, on board of one ship, and the two chief mates on the other* (*MD* 1048-1050).

As "social meetings", the meaning of the gams relies in the various attitudes and moods displayed by the crew of the *Pequod* during the encounters. These attitudes both underlie and frame the behavior of the sailors towards one another and especially towards Ahab. Apparently unimportant, the "gam" section of *Moby-Dick* allows the reader to learn about the "valor" of each man and reveals just how much of their humanity the crew have managed to retain, as opposed to Ahab. Far from being "spotless as a lamb" (as Melville once wrote to Hawthorne regarding his state of mind after completing his best-known masterpiece), the crew of the *Pequod* display the ruggedness and aggressivity that was common and even necessary for survival on nineteenth-century whalers. Almost all of them, however, constantly look forward to human contact. Ishmael is not the only one to realize that all men are connected through a "monkey rope"; Starbuck thinks about his family back in Nantucket, Flask about his poor mother; most of the crew show their loyalty to Ahab and do everything in their power to alleviate his pain and distress when his boat capsizes. These are proofs of the common humanity of those on board the *Pequod*, their need to interract with others, the power of their attachment to another fellow human being.

Ahab permitting, the gams could have functioned as safety valves, they could have provided a minimum of social interaction and exchange. In fact, they were never more than abortive, sad encounters.

The most significant in this respect is the gam with the *Rachel*. Here we see a captain of another Nantucket ship—Captain Gardiner was an aquaintance of Ahab—coming with a request that no other captain could turn down: he asked Ahab to join in the search for his son, who, along with his mates, had been lost at sea while chasing the same white whale Ahab was chasing—Moby-Dick.

In an attempt to win Ahab's good-will, Captain Gardiner reveals the details of a terrible story; the whaleboats of the *Rachel* had been scattered in two opposite directions when the tragedy stroke; not one but two of his sons were in the boats, each one in a different direction so the Captain could not make up his mind whom to save first. Eventually, his chief mate decided to follow the ordinary procedure of a whale-ship in such circumstances and headed toward the boats with most men in them. Thus, by saving one son, Captain Gardiner lost the other one, a lad of twelve. Now he only wanted one thing from Ahab: to allow the *Pequod* to be chartered and unite with the *Rachel* in the search; thus, by sailing four or five miles apart, on parallel lines, they could sweep a "double horizon."

Stubb reacts vigourously--"what says Ahab? We must save that boy!" But Ahab remains unmoved, standing "like an anvil, receiving every shock, but without the least quivering of his own." In a fit of despair, the horrified captain declares:

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> "I will not go till you say *aye* to me. Do to me as you would have me do to you in the like case. For *you* too have a boy, Captain Ahab—though but a child and nestling safely at home now—a child of your old age, too.—Yes, yes, you relent; I see it—run, run, men, now and stand by to square in the yards." (*MD* 1361-2)

But Ahab brutally destroys the last flicker of hope Captain Gardiner may have been entertaining:

> "Avast," cried Ahab—"touch not a rope-yard!" Then in a voice that prolongingly molded every word—"Captain Gardiner, I will not do it. Even now I lose time. Good-bye, good-bye, God bless ye, man, and may I forgive myself, but I must go. Mr. Starbuck, look at the binnacle watch, and in three minutes from this present instant warn off all strangers: then brace forward again, and let the ship sail as before." (*MD* 1362)

That being said, Ahab descended to his cabin. Overwhelmed by sorrow Captain Gardiner "silently hurried to the side; more fell than stepped into his boat and returned to his ship." The *Rachel* then continued her lonely search, "weeping for her children, for they were not."

One can now detect a pattern in Ahab's behavior. His is a permanent attitude of refusal of identifying with other people's feelings, be they of joy or sorrow. Thus, in the gam of the *Samuel Enderby,* Ahab refused to identify himself with a fellow-captain's misfortune; again, in the gam of the *Bachelor* he refused to identify himself with the happiness of another fellow-captain, and now in the gam of the *Rachel* he refused to identify himself with a fellow-captain's sorrow. His order to "warn off all strangers," demonstrates without a doubt his own attitude toward others. No friend, no aquaintance can impress him; all human beings are strangers to him. Ahab is not able to feel the "monkey rope" connecting al humans as Ishmael does. Therefore he will feel no responsibility, no link, no obligation, not even the slightest sympathy toward others.
Fatally, Ahab's decisions will affect his crew too. Included in the mass of mortals for whom the captain of the *Pequod* feels no compassion, they will be denied the basic human feelings and their free expression. Forced to give in not only their bodies but also their souls to Ahab, the crew are emotionally frustrated to the point of mutilation. This situation is compellingly described in the fragment below:

> …so Ahab's purpose now fixedly gleamed down upon the constant midnight of the gloomy crew. It domineered above them so, that all their bodings, doubts, misgivings, fears, were fain to hide beneath their souls, and not sprout forth a single spear or leaf.... Alike, joy and sorrow, hope and fear, seemed ground to finest dust, and powdered for the time, in the clamped mortar of Ahab's iron soul. Like machines, they dumbly moved about the deck, ever conscious that the old man's despot eye was on them. (*MD* 1365)

The predicament in which the crew are is best illustrated by the paradoxical situation of the one person who dares to question the utility of Ahab's mad quest: Starbuck. The latter even uses the word "blasphemy" to characterize the former's immoral endeavor. But Ahab shrewdly makes him realize what the alternative to perfect obedience is: rebellion against the lawful captain and, since mutiny is punishable by death, Starbuck is denied his free will and is reduced to a silence that Ahab cheerfully takes for compliance. Not without realizing how wrong he is when, for instance, turning down Captain Gardiner's request for help, for he says: "May I forgive myself!"

In the gam of the *Rachel*—as well as in those of the *Delight* and the *Bachelor*—we can trace one theme that Melville approached in much of his work: the communal character of human

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experience. Happiness and sorrow are part and parcel of the human condition and therefore, by rejecting them or refusing to share them with others represents a denial of the human condition, of life in community. The end of the *Pequod* is, Melville implies, the end of any human enterprise that is based on the selfish pursuit of private goals while the needs of the others are neglected and despised.

On the contrary, the salvage of Ishmael—one who realises the common bond of humanity and is able to establish such satisfactory relationships as the one with Queequeg—seems to suggest that, once again, love is the answer; moreover, the return of the *Rachel* is, after all, generated by an act of love: the decision of one person, Captain Gardiner to postpone an economically fruitful endeavor in order to look for his son allows Ishmael, another human being, to be saved. Melville comes with no easy answers to the moral dilemmas of humankind. There is no certain way to happiness no matter the way one decides to follow; even Ishmael, although saved from drowning, will be forced to resume his sailing in search for the most precious goals of all: meaning to his life. Until then, he will remain, as Melville aptly put it, yet "another orphan."

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