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Life and Death: Conjoined Twins

“Methinks we have hugely mistaken this matter of Life and Death” (Melville 55). Human are mortal creatures; we have a set beginning and a set ending. But life and death are not separate parts of our existence. For us death is a part of our daily lives and we cannot run from it no matter how advanced our societies become. While Life and Death appear to be different entities, Herman Melville continuously places Life and Death side by side in *Moby Dick*; this juxtaposition of Life and Death demonstrates how they are intertwined and connected despite their differences. Life and Death define each other; Death is the absence of Life, and Life is the absence of Death. These two states of being come together and combine to become what we recognize as life. Manifestations of this connection appear psychologically, physically, and symbolically throughout Melville’s story; such instances highlight how Life and Death coexist together in our world and in each other.

Weary Souls and Psyches

The interconnectedness of Life and Death can be seen psychologically in Ishmael, Queequeg, and Pip. These characters struggle to physically live because they are drowning in their own minds. Ishmael, Queequeg, and Pip’s mental dilemmas arise from different events in their life that cause each man to struggle mentally with Death. When

Ishmael introduces himself as the narrator of *Moby Dick*, he explains his reasoning for going to sea; Ishmael states,

Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball. With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship. (Melville 1)

Ishmael's references to window shopping for coffins and attending funerals, imply that he spent time thinking about death since he engaged in such morbid activities. Ishmael also references how his melancholy, his depression, occasionally dominates his life and causes him to turn his attention toward death. This depression drives Ishmael to the sea, but also causes him to question his existence and purpose. Ishmael turns to the ocean as a lifeline from his sadness and whenever he begins to dwell on death he takes "to the ship." Life and Death exist side by side in Ishmael's mind; he questions his will to live through his sadness, yet he wills himself to sea to escape from his grim life. He battles his own desire for death by fighting to survive at sea. While at sea, Ishmael's main focus was to survive since whaling was such a dangerous occupation. Since Ishmael was preoccupied with surviving, he forgot his melancholy desire for death. Ishmael looked to the sea to escape his depression, and it was the sea that became his salvation.

Ishmael does not suffer alone as he wrestles with life and death; Queequeg struggles mentally with Life and Death as well. When he falls gravely ill, Queequeg resigns himself to death. He prepares himself mentally and physically for eminent death, and orders a coffin be made. However, Queequeg recovers and declares that “at a critical moment, he had just recalled a little duty ashore, which he was leaving undone; and therefore had changed his mind about dying: he could not die yet, he averred...if a man made up his mind to live, mere sickness could not kill him” (Melville 476). Despite Queequeg’s physical state, he still managed to recover from his illness. Queequeg’s body wasting away to illness, but he was psychologically wasting away as well. In this passage, Queequeg says that “he changed his mind about dying: he could not die yet,” which implies Queequeg had no objections to dying previous to remembering his business on land. Queequeg mentally lost his will to live, and so his soul died before his body did. The entire crew gave Queequeg up for dead, including Queequeg. This expectation of death psychologically sent Queequeg to his grave. All of his peers expected Queequeg to die, and so Queequeg believed he would die as well. However, once he found a reason for living, Queequeg’s soul revived because he had unfinished business to attend to on shore. This unfinished business gave Queequeg the mental determination live, and his body responded to his determination by beginning to heal. The quick turnaround for Queequeg’s physical and mental health show how closely Life and Death are linked to each other.

Pip also embodies Life and Death in his mental state. When Pip prepares to send Queequeg to the grave he asks, “will ye do one little errand for me? Seek out one Pip, who’s now been missing long: I think he’s in those far Antilles. if ye find him, then

comfort him; for he must be very sad...Pip died a coward” (Melville 475). The use of third person narration here implies that Pip does not see himself as being fully alive. In this passage, Pip speaks as though he were another person and that the person he speaks of has died, for he references that “Pip” is where Queequeg will be going soon: the grave. This represents how part of the Pip we knew died when he jumped out of Stubb’s whale-boat. The trauma caused Pip to go crazy and lose part of himself connected with his sanity. In this way, part of Pip has died despite the fact that his body still living. Death and Life are brought together in Pip’s lifeless mind and youthful body. While Pip did not physically die, part of his soul gave up on living. Pip stands on the line between Life and Death; he is alive in death and dead in life. Pip’s paradox illustrate the close proximity of Life and Death.

Broken Bodies

Several characters embody the juxtaposition of life and death in *Moby Dick*, but Tashtego and Ahab physically show the intimacy between Life and Death. Both men touch Death while they are still alive, and thus contain Life and Death in their physical manifestations. Ahab embodies Life and Death in his physical appearance; he has a living leg and a dead, bone leg. While commissioning a new ivory limb, Ahab remarks to the carpenter, “When I come to mount this leg thou makest, I shall nevertheless feel another leg in the identical place with it; that is, carpenter, my old lost leg, the flesh and blood one, I mean” (Melville 467). Ahab’s bone leg reveals how Life and Death are interconnected. Ahab’s replacement leg is made of dead whale bone, so it represents Death; yet Ahab also has a leg that is still living flesh, this represent Life. Physically, Ahab has one dead leg and one live leg, side by side working together to carry Ahab to

his fate. But, we also see where Life and Death overlap in Ahab's phantom limb. Though this limb is a ghost and no longer alive, Ahab tells the carpenter he can feel his leg as if it had never been removed. This leg feels alive and yet occupies the same space as Ahab's dead limb. This shows how although Life and Death can coexist while remaining distinct states of being. Thus the juxtaposition of Life and Death manifest physically in Ahab.

This coexistence between Life and Death also manifests in Tashtego's fall into the Sperm whale's head. While attempting to retrieve the sperm oil, Tashtego accidentally falls into the Tun and the whale head breaks away from the *Pequod*. Ishmael chronicles the tragedy: "Looking over the side, they saw the before lifeless head throbbing and heaving just below the surface of the sea, as if that moment seized with some momentous idea; whereas it was only the poor Indian unconsciously revealing by those struggles the perilous depth to which he had sunk... poor, buried-alive Tashtego was sinking utterly down to the bottom of the sea!" (Melville 346-347). Tashtego was "buried-alive" in the slowly sinking whale head. Physically Tashtego was alive, but to those on the *Pequod* he was as good as dead because they saw no way to rescue him; and Tashtego would have died if not for Queequeg. Queequeg, full of foolish bravery, dove in after Tashtego and cut him out of the whale head as a midwife delivers a newborn child (Melville 348). Life and Death are physically manifested in Tashtego because he was a living creature being dragged to his death by a dead whale. He was Life inside the Dead whale, and the whale would have been the death of him. Tashtego touched physical Death when he fell into the whale head, but instead was reborn and given back his life by Queequeg who birthed Tashtego from certain Death into Life. Tashtego's tragedy serves as an example of how Life and Death can exist together and overlap.

Yin and Yang

The communion between Life and Death are seen symbolically throughout *Moby Dick*. The intimacy of Life and Death can be seen in the Whale God of King Tranquo, the coffin life-buoy, and Ahab's harpoon. When describing the measurements of whales, Ishmael recalls visiting King Tranquo's whale skeleton. While attempting to measure the Whale God, Ishmael commented on the juxtaposition between the green jungle and the white skeleton. Ishmael notes that "yet, as the ever-worn verdant warp and woof intermixed and hummed around [the skeleton], the mighty idler seemed the cunning weaver; himself all woven over with vines; every month assuming greener, fresher verdure; but himself a skeleton. Life folded Death; Death trellised Life; the grim god wived with youthful life, and begat him curly-headed glories" (Melville 448). The whale skeleton is a symbol of Death and the green vines symbolize Life. In this image, Life and Death are intertwined and inhabit the same place. The skeleton and vines show how Life and Death coincide and become inseparable. There is death in life and life in death; death will come to the living vines and there was life in the skeleton. Both symbols touch on mortality and show how Life and Death are juxtaposed.

In the same way, the coffin life-buoy demonstrate how Life and Death can function together. The coffin was built for Queequeg to be buried in when he died, however Queequeg never used the coffin. Later, the coffin was transformed into a life-buoy. What once served as a final resting place became a life-line. When the *Pequod* sinks, Ishmael alone survives "buoyed up by that coffin, for almost one whole day and night, [he] floated on a soft and dirge-like main" (561). The coffin, a symbol of Death, became a life-buoy. Ishmael, the man who took to the sea to escape death, was saved by

death; for if Queequeg had not fallen ill, the log and line life-buoy would not have been replaced. In the life-buoy, the two spectrums of life occupy the same space and become one entity. Death cannot be taken away from the life-buoy, because it was originally made to be a coffin; neither can Life be removed because the coffin has been transformed into a life-saver. Here Life and Death are combined and coexist in the same physical space. The life-buoy shows how Life and Death can be one in the same, for what was made entomb the dead saved Ishmael's life.

Akin to Ishmael's coffin life-buoy, Ahab's harpoon was wrought from both Death and Life. Ahab forged his harpoon in order to kill Moby Dick, but when blacksmith attempts to temper the steel with water Ahab exclaimed, "No, no—no water for that; I want it of the true death-temper. Ahoy, there! Tashtego, Queequeg, Daggoo! What say ye, pagans! Will ye give me as much blood as will cover this barb?" holding it high up. A cluster of dark nods replied, Yes. Three punctures were made in the heathen flesh, and the White Whale's barbs were then tempered' (483). The harpoon was made for Death, but christened with the Life-blood of the other harpooners. The harpoon, made of dead steel, symbolized Death for Moby Dick; the blood used to temper the barb represents Life. The harpoon demonstrates how Life and Death can intermingle in a single object. Just as Death and Life could not be separated from the life-buoy, they cannot be separated from Ahab's harpoon. The harpoon was made for Death, made to gorge itself on whale blood. However, the only blood it tasted was the human blood of Tashtego, Daggoo, and Queequeg as Fedallah died before darting the fierce harpoon. The harpoon, made in blood and Death, never killed its target; Moby Dick lived while Ahab died. This

irony shows how closely intertwined and interconnected Life and Death are in the story of *Moby Dick*.

Life and Death are two separate entities, yet Melville juxtaposes these two states and shows the connection they share. Just as Yin and Yang are polar opposites yet come together to complete each other in a circle, Life and Death are very different entities but coexist to define our mortal lives. Life and Death are juxtaposed throughout psychologically, physically and symbolically throughout *Moby Dick*; but such manifestations surround our everyday lives as well. Our mortal lives cause us to constantly walk with Life and Death. No one is guaranteed Life tomorrow and Death can creep up in unexpected ways, but we still live each day no matter how Life and Death intertwine. We live each day with the knowledge that someday we will die; we continue through Life, while acknowledging that Death is already in us as well. Humans themselves are the embodiment of how Life and Death coexist in their many different forms. Life and Death are as conjoined twins, they are never far apart and you cannot have one without the other; they are connected and coexist in the same body.

Works Cited

Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick*. New York, Simon & Schuster, 1999.