The Dragon-Killing Theme in Moby-Dick

It is well-known that *Moby-Dick* is tied closely to the Bible. Some names of the characters that appear in *Moby-Dick* have biblical connotations. The name of the narrator Ishmael is mentioned in Genesis, and the name of the protagonist Ahab in The First Book of Kings. In the Bible there are some prototypes of the whale Moby Dick as well as the main characters.

With some knowledge of the Old Testament and *Moby-Dick*, the question may arise: Is Moby Dick Jonah’s whale or Job’s whale? It cannot be ascertained whether the great fish which swallows up and spits out Jonah is really a whale, nor can it be known exactly whether what is called the "Leviathan" in Job is a whale, but what is relevant and what is important, is that Melville wrote as if they were whales. The images in Job and Jonah are very different, even contrary to each other. Melville often used the word "leviathan" to refer to whales, but it has very strong biblical connotations and reminds readers of Job. Leviathan is the dragon in disguise in Revelation, the archenemy of the Messiah that has to be defeated. In contrast, in Jonah, the whale is a messenger, an agent of God, chasing and gulping down Jonah as God ordained.

*Moby-Dick* can be read from these two contrasting perspectives: if Moby Dick is seen as Job’s whale, Ahab and the whale represent good and evil respectively and the story can be read as a kind of dragon-killing story, with Captain Ahab as a creditable hero. If Moby Dick is Jonah’s whale, it is a messenger of God and consequently Ahab is a sinner who stands against God like Jonah. These two contrasting and contrary views seem to represent two extreme views of the relation between Ahab and Moby Dick in the history of criticism of *Moby-Dick*. Ahab is both a hero and a villain. *Moby Dick* is both a dragon and a messenger of God. Instead of choosing between the two views, we should enjoy reading the story in both ways at the same time. In this paper, I propose that the dragon-killing story is the plot and Jonah’s story is the counterplot. Both should be read and understood together.
The story of dragon-killing is a very famous legend and found all over the world. The theme is related to quest-romance. It seems plausible that Melville wrote the novel with Book I of The Faerie Queene in mind. It is well known that the book is based on the dragon-killing theme, and indeed, it is the most famous variation. In Japanese mythology, the theme appears in the Japanese classic The Kojiki.

In The Faerie Queene, the dragon wasted the land and expelled the royal blood, and the dragon in The Kojiki, the eight-forked serpent of Koshi (Yamatanooorochi) came every year and devoured a maiden. Moby Dick is also a cruel monster.

In The Faerie Queene and The Kojiki, a woman plays an important role in that her marriage with the hero promises the prosperity of the kingdom. It may not be known exactly why Melville omitted this important character, but there are several possible reasons.

First, as the dragon is an imaginary monster, the dragon-killing story is originally a myth or a legend. On the other hand, Moby-Dick is based and formed upon the realities of whaling in the nineteenth century. It does not seem possible to include a female character in the story, especially if she must be a beautiful and graceful lady.

Second, repeating the original story in its entirely does not seem to be suited to Melville’s purpose. That would have made Moby-Dick a love story. In Moby-Dick, he is concerned with religious and philosophical problems. The hero must be an obstinate, old captain, not a young and lovable sailor. And what Ahab wishes to accomplish is fundamentally different from the hero of the original story. Ahab’s goal is to chase the whale, not to marry a princess. To Ahab, killing the whale becomes the ultimate goal in his life and he does not care about anything else. The biggest difference is that the hero Ahab cannot carry out his mission.

Moby-Dick does follow the dragon-killing theme, but at the very last stage it deviates from the original story: although the hero represents good and the dragon symbolizes evil, in Moby-Dick the problem of good and evil is complicated and equivocal.

Yet it is undeniable that the dragon-killing theme offers the basic plot to Moby-Dick. This is why Moby-Dick is an adaptation of the dragon-killing story.