

**Investigating American Leadership Through Exploring
the Parallels Between George W. Bush and Captain Ahab
in Moby Dick**



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Abstract:

The current study explores the deep impact of literature on shaping United States presidential policy. It also delves into the striking parallels between the leadership of President George W. Bush and the character of Ahab in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. Both of them exhibit blind pursuit of their enemies for the sake of revenge. This comparative analysis focuses on themes of power obsession and egoistic self-interest in Bush's relentless pursuit of terrorism and Ahab's persistent hunting of the white whale. Based on the historical shreds of evidence of Bush's leadership and the literary analysis of Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick*, this article examines both leadership's consequences on their related environments, highlighting the considerable damages resulting from their irresponsible leadership. By examining these parallels, it is clear that both of the compared personalities exhibit a very high level of egoism in their leadership. Focusing only on their personal motives, they drive their surrounding environment to extreme deficiency.

Mots-clés: Captain Ahab, George W. Bush, leadership, obsession, power, revenge, terrorism, the white whale

1. Introduction

The reader of the huge tapestry of literature and history often discovers parallels that emerge alongside historical time line. These parallels often reveal the complexities of human nature in pursuing their enemies. This study explores the intriguing similarities between George Bush, the 43rd President of the United States, and Captain Ahab, the legendary protagonist of Melville's *Moby Dick*.

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At first glance, the comparison between a real-life political figure and a fictional character may appear unconventional to readers; however, undertaking a deep political and literary analysis of both personalities, striking parallels emerge to reveal the nature of egocentric personalities who may take on important responsibilities. For George W. Bush, a pursuit of terrorists, who had destroyed the Trade Center Twin, was an obligatory mission that haunted him day and night, and he saved all means to attain his goal. Similarly, Captain Ahab, whose leg was taken by the white whale, spared no efforts in order to kill him, neglecting the fact that he was putting the ship and its crew in peril.

George W. Bush, a controversial figure in American politics, served as President from 2001 to 2009. His presidency was well recognized by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which resulted in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, in addition to the global financial economic crisis of 2008.

Analogously, Captain Ahab, also a controversial character in American fiction, embodies the archetype of the egocentric character overwhelmed by egoism and obsession. His tenacious pursuit of the white whale called 'Moby Dick', is an absolute allegory for the careless perils of a horrific vengeance.

The comparison between both personalities is a matter of fact since *Moby Dick* is considered an icon for America; thus, always Captain Ahab is compared to obsessed leadership. The novel is full of themes and symbols that endure forever; themes of power, responsibility, and greed are common obsessions shared by both personalities.

2. Passion for Power

During his presidency, which lasted from 2001 to 2009, George W. Bush was known for his unwavering pursuit of power. Bush's eminent target was to assert America's political and economic supremacy all over the world. In the aftermath of the terrorists' attacks, Bush's obsession with power became flagrant; he deliberately launched the war on terror and invaded Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. This policy was supported by his administration and blessed by the American people. The deputy, John C. Yoo, supported Bush and justified the invasion action by stating, "to take whatever actions he deems appropriate to preempt or respond to terrorist threats from new quarters" (Kakutani, 2007, para. 1).

Furthermore, Bush's vision for foreign policy was characterized by a determination to extend a worldwide American authority. His reason for invading Iraq and killing Saddam Hussein was to deconstruct Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD); consequently, Bush and his administration showed readiness to eradicate weapons of mass destruction found in Iraq. Bush's determination to kill terrorists was revealed in his speeches just after the 9/11 attacks: "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality" (Suskind, 2004, para. 44).

On other hand, Ahab, the famous captain of the ship named Pequod, is

described in the novel *Moby Dick* as “an ungodly godlike man”, a “strange” man possibly mad and unfriendly. Ishmael, the narrator and the only survivor of the shipwreck, discovers that a nasty whale has taken off the Ahab’s leg, and the latter is seeking revenge from this particular whale. The whale is named Moby Dick, and is widely famous for its glaring whiteness, its strength, and its elusiveness.

Despite the crew’s fears of Ahab and the ambiguous prophecies of Elijah, who warns the narrator and other members of the ship of the captain, they decide to take the adventure on the Pequod.

Regarding Bush’s administration, various voices warned them against the relentless pursuit of terrorists in order to avoid intriguing wars and worldwide antipathy.

3. Quest for Revenge

George Bush persuaded his people that killing Saddam Hussein would bring security to his country, and he was convinced that he was on mission from God. Bruce Bartlett, a domestic policy adviser at Ronald Reagan’s office and a columnist in *The New York Times*, examines Bush’s speeches and governance, revealed that:

This is why George W. Bush is so clear-eyed about Al Qaeda and the Islamic fundamentalist enemy. He believes you have to kill them all. They can't be persuaded, that they're extremists, driven by a dark vision. He understands them, because he's just like them. . . . This is why he dispenses with people who confront him with inconvenient facts. (Suskind, 2004, para. 2)

George W. Bush’ presidency was controversial since he involved the country in an unidentified war. The primary justification used by Bush and his administration for the war on terrorism is the widely accepted theory of the attacks on the twin towers on September 11, 2001; however, this theory vanished in the backstage of the White House.

Meanwhile, Bush’s real intention behind his war on terrorism was not, to protect national security, as he said to his people, but rather a pure revenge for the assassination attempt of his father by Saddam Hussein, as he claims. For Bush, there was no real concrete reason to tell except saying that he believed his instinct!

By following his instincts, Bush caused the United States to lose over 4,000 young American soldiers in wars in the Middle East. Thousands more were injured and sustained disabilities, and many others endured psychological trauma.

In the same parallels, Captain Ahab’s relentless quest for killing the white whale, Moby Dick, is a strong metaphor for the destructive nature of erroneous ambition and the obsessive pursuit of power. Ahab follows his egoism and singular obsession to revenge from the white whale, leading to tragic consequences for the Pequod and all the crew.

Ahab’s strong and charismatic personality helps him in convincing a whole crew to chase and kill a whale for the sake of revenge. This scene echoes Bush’s

strong and confirmed determination and persistence to invade Iraq and kill Saddam Hussein. The drive for power and supremacy consumes both characters, and they are both prepared to do whatever it takes to achieve their objectives. Bush's administration embodies the dangers of an unchecked executive power, while Ahab's monomaniac pursuit symbolizes the vanity of human ambition.

The vengeance concept had driven Ahab to a hysteric state, leading him to just seek and kill a whale without thinking of the negative consequences for the crew and the ship. For Bush, he showed no regret to falsify arguments of Iraq's Weapon of Mass Destruction.

Furthermore, both Ahab and Bush show a lack of concern for the effects of their decisions, prioritizing their own goals ahead of the wellbeing of others. As far as Bush's pursuit of power caused deconstruction and instability in the Middle East, Ahab's monomaniac persecution of the white whale results in the death of all the crew and the wreckage of the Pequod except the narrator.

4. Enslavement between Past and Present

The war on Iraq (2003) reveals the multifaceted perspective of enslavement in the global era. In the nineteenth century, enslavement centered on the subjugation of Black people to the Whites in order to dehumanize them and force them to serve the White race.

Iraq suffered a significant loss of sovereignty during its invasion; this was a clear enslavement, especially since the United States in collaboration with its allies, took control of every political decision in Iraq, leading the country to total mass destruction. The United States, together with its allies, founded new frameworks, including the drafting of a new constitution that aligned more with Western ideals. This new situation was planned to coerce and limit Iraq's sovereignty to exert any political action.

Another form of enslavement was under the strict control of Iraq's oil industry; the American companies were awarded large contracts without competitive bidding. Consequently, Iraq's economic reconstruction was totally subjugated to foreign companies.

The Iraqi people suffered from various sorts of violations; furthermore, the presence of the American troops and the imposition of their western rules led to the disruption of the Iraqi ways of life and a loss of cultural norms.

Moreover, the Bush administration manipulated the American public using rhetoric of terrorism to justify their war on Iraq. This manipulation is also a form of psychological enslavement where public opinion and political discourse were dominated to support the war agenda.

On other hand, Herman Melville eloquently introduced slavery metaphorically in his novel *Moby Dick* (1851). Though the novel is not about slavery, meanwhile, Melville implicitly discussed themes of slavery and whale industry. The novel highlights these important themes equally since they were two major

industries at the time the book was written. It was however essential for Melville to point it out. The novel was expected to be a sea adventure; meanwhile, Melville smartly exhilarated people to a given perspective of slavery, mainly with the rise of the Fugitive Slave Act (1850).

Both industries had been passed through the Atlantic; Melville's perception of slavery was discussed through the whale industry, for slavery at that time was too difficult to deal with. Meanwhile, he used the metaphor of whale chasing to depict similarities between slavery and the pursuit, apprehension, and execution of runaway slaves to show readers the cruelty of the slave industry. The whale industry perceived whales as lifeless objects that can be persecuted and killed for commercial benefit; Melville equally put the slave and whale industries in the same rank to depict the cruelty of these industries.

For Captain Ahab, his monomaniac pursuit of the white whale and his narcissistic will to kill the whale whatever cost consumes him, making him slave to his revenge. Eventually, because of his hatred and vengeance, Ahab lost himself and the whole crew.

From another perspective, Captain Ahab is also compared to landowners who sought only their interests by laboring their slaves in their fields, making them do hard work without the least human circumstances. The narrator, Ishmael in Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), shows this attitude through the following quote:

"Who ain't a slave? Tell me that. Well, then, however the old sea-captains may order me about—however they may thump and punch me about, I have the satisfaction of knowing that it is all right; that everybody else is one way or other served in much the same way— either in a physical or metaphysical point of view, that is; and so the universal thump is passed round, and all hands should rub each other's shoulder-blades, and be content." (Melville, 1993, p. 6)

All members of the crew are somehow tied to the supremacy of the white captain, Ahab. And despite Ahab's increasing madness and danger in his quest, the crew found himself subjugated to Ahab's monomaniac desires.

The narrator, Ishmael, often contemplates the human condition, emphasizing mainly on freedom and enslavement. He glorifies the ocean, which represents the extreme vast, dangerous, and mysterious side of humans, and admires the green and beautiful land symbolized in Tahiti. He observes the fact that humans are always enslaved by their own dreams, fears, and ambitions. He expresses all these melted sentiments in a highly crafted philosophical and metaphorical paragraph: "For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return!" (Chapter 58 p 230).

5. Prophetic Beliefs in the Context of Bush and Ahab

Both George W. Bush and Captain Ahab follow prophetic beliefs to justify

their deeds. Bush policy toward his invasion of Iraq was claimed to be a god mission to settle peace in that region and in the Middle East in general. This claim was reported by Nabil Shaath, who was present during the Palestinian Israeli Summit at Sharm El-Cheikh in Egypt (2003). Mr Shaath declared:

“President Bush said to all of us: 'I am driven with a mission from God'. God would tell me, 'George go and fight these terrorists in Afghanistan'. And I did. And then God would tell me 'George, go and end the tyranny in Iraq'. And I did” (George Bush: 'God told me to end the tyranny in Iraq,' n.d. para. 2).

Captain Ahab, in parallel with George Bush, believes in prophecy, a sailor of the crew named Elijah, who stands as a biblical figure who warns the crew of the obscure and gloomy fate awaiting the Pequod under the leadership of that Captain. The sailors believe also in prophecies and try to make Elijah read their future in the stars. Ahab ceases the opportunity to let them believe that their destiny is to kill the monster and get rid of the evil forever. Ahab believes that his fate is to kill the white whale, who symbolizes evil for him:

Aye, aye! and I'll chase him round Good Hope, and round the Horn, and round the Norway Maelstrom, and round perdition's flames before I give him up. And this is what ye have shipped for, men! to chase that white whale on both sides of land, and over all sides of earth, till he spouts black blood and rolls fin out. What say ye, men, will ye splice hands on it, now? I think ye do look brave. (Melville, 1993, p. 135)

For Captain Ahab, his life has no value without getting rid of the white whale, whatever this adventure costs him. As well as President Bush, he continues his pursuit of terrorism, whatever it costs the whole country.

6. From Ahab to Bush: The Continuity of Imperial Ambitions

In his seminal book *Orientalism* (1979), Edward Said (1935-2003) explained the West's vision toward their interference in the Orient as a must for developing their counties and that the Orient countries have to be controlled. In 1910 James Balfour (1848-1930) argues in front of the House of Commons the necessity of “England in Egypt”:

First of all, look at the facts of the case. Western nations as soon as they emerge into history show the beginnings of those capacities for self-government . . . having merits of their own . . . You may look through the whole history of the Orientals in what is called, broadly speaking, the East, and you never find traces of self-government. (Said, 1979, p. 32)

Echoing the same doctrine, George Bush promised a “reduced American presence in Iraq” in 2007, arguing that Iraqi leaders would not be able to make their home secure without the presence of the American Army; Bush said that:

Iraqi leaders from all communities ... understand that their success will require U.S. political, economic, and security engagement that extends beyond my presidency. These Iraqi leaders have asked for an *enduring relationship* with

America. And we are ready to begin building that relationship -- in a way that protects our interests in the region and requires many fewer American troops. (Judis, 2007, para. 3)

So, the United States adopted a neo-imperialist doctrine under George W. Bush's governance, which is distinguished by its self-confident commitment to global supremacy and interventionism. After the sad attacks of September 11, the Bush doctrine placed a strong emphasis on preemptive strikes and the expansion of democracy, especially in the Middle East. Bush's administration launched wars on Afghanistan and Iraq to prominently carry out imperialistic objectives, which was justified by its necessity of battling terrorism and destroying WMDs.

Critics contend that by imposing American political and moral systems on other countries while sometimes ignoring their sovereignty and opinions, this strategy is the continuity of past imperialism. The ensuing geopolitical unrest and extended military deployment in these areas highlight the controversial character of Bush's and the US's neo-imperialist approach.

The Trinidadian Marxist scholar, C.L.R. James (1901-1989), wrote an important book entitled *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World we live in* (1953), where he explained how Melville criticizes imperialism through Captain Ahab. James draws Melville as a prophetic voice, warning the world of the dangers inherent in the pursuit of unlimited power and supremacy; themes that resonate with the imperialist policies are still observed in the modern world. C.L.R. James makes connections between Ahab's relentless pursuit of the white whale and the imperialistic tendencies of the 20th century. He argues that Melville's work serves as an insightful critique of imperialism, highlighting the moral and ethical costs of such endeavors:

Men who are thinking like that, classes of people in a nation who are thinking such thoughts, are being steadily prepared for desperate action. If now there descends upon them a violent catastrophe that ruins them and convinces them that the life that they have been living is intolerable and the grave doubts that have previously tormented them are justified, then they are going to throw aside all the traditional restraints of civilization. They are going to seek a new theory of society and a new program of action, and, on the basis of this theory and this program, they are going to act. This is what happens to Ahab when a whale bites off his leg. the whale is Moby Dick..... In Moby Dick, he decided, was the solution of his problems. If he killed Moby Dick it would solve all that was troubling him. (C.L.R. James as cited in Rubio, n.d. para. 5)

Philip Rubio, an assistant professor at South Carolina University, characterizes both policies that of G.W. Bush and Captain Ahab's as the 'Whatever' policy. This term is used to describe the policy of carelessness or indifference of G.W. Bush and Captain Ahab in achieving their own goals, neglecting the fact of being surrounded by other people with whom they are put in dilemma through this 'Whatever' policy.

Moby Dick (1851) is a classic novel published at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution and one year after the Fugitive Slave Act. It was also just three years after the US Mexican War (1846-1848), led by President James K. Polk (1845-1849), under the Manifest Destiny ideology that was coined in the same year of his nomination. This ideology is an expansionist doctrine that advocates US territorial expansion that forced Natives to leave their homes, as well as to launch war on other territories that were unqualified to the expansionist-minded US administration. According to C.L.R. James, Melville was able to weave a story that depicts the actual conflicts and predicts the future of that country: "The outstanding fact, however, of the 19th century... is that Melville in *Moby Dick* saw more clearly than even Dostoevsky in *The Possessed* what the future of capitalism was going to be." (James as cited in Rubio n.d.)

Through the analysis of *Moby Dick*, C.L.R. James was able to draw a parallel comparison between the 19th-century US administration mindset represented in Ahab and the actual totalitarian and expansionist US administration doctrine represented in G.W. Bush, concluding that both cases advocate the same doctrine that feeds totalitarianism and barbarism in pursuing their targets.

7. Conclusion

Captain Ahab and George W. Bush were two important figures driven by one incarnation, and both of them have caused collateral damage to their surroundings. Ahab's preoccupation to eliminate the sperm whale, believing that the whale is a symbol of terror and evil, led him to madness, ultimately driving his crew and the ship *Pequod* to destruction.

Similarly, President Bush's monomaniac pursuit of terrorism, mainly his eagerness of launching wars on sovereign countries, had wide-ranging impacts on not only these invaded countries but also for the United States and the whole world. While Bush's actions were rooted by ideological and political interests, Ahab's pursuit of the whale was driven by personal reasons and born out of revenge.

In *Moby Dick* (1851), the writer tends to illustrate the black side of humanity in the character of Captain Ahab, and how he victimizes himself and blames the white whale for the evil happens to him. This monomaniac behavior let many ask the question of who is really the leviathan. From another perspective, Nathaniel Philbrick wonders in his book *Why Read Moby Dick* (2011) about the significance of the character Ahab to the world. Captain Ahab refers to every dictator who tyrannizes people and to any profitable company that exploits people's resources everywhere.

George W. Bush had launched the war on what he called 'Terrorism,' in this war, thousands of people were killed, injured, and disappeared. Many described this war as the most criminal war committed by an American president. After this terrible war, several Human Rights groups asked for the arrest of George W. Bush for his horrible crimes, describing him as a terrorist.

The parallel drawn between Ahab and Bush ultimately serves as a cautionary warning about the dangerous nature of idiosyncratic leadership. It examines how history perceives leaders who step over the thin line between resolve and insanity.

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