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Melville's *Moby-Dick*: A Lesson in Reading.



by Mary Dengler

In May of 2017, when a small band of faculty from various disciplines at Dordt College participated in a week's seminar on Melville's *Moby-Dick*—a novel that most of us hadn't read for years, if ever—what we discovered was not a simple narrative about a whale and his pursuer. Instead, we discovered Herman Melville's genius—his ability to weave the history and elements of whaling, the ambiguity of industry, the enigma of nature, and the self-destruction of revenge into a powerful experience. In reading it, we discovered a mystery—how we make sense of disparate texts, weaving them into a shape that impacts our lives.

This mystery is introduced by John Bryant and Haskell Springer, editors of the Longman Critical Edition of *Moby-Dick* (2007), when they

remind us that the work is “structured around... two consciousnesses”: those of narrator Ishmael and Captain Ahab.¹ The result is analogous to the “dual vision”² of the whale, whose eyes on the sides of its head perceive two unconnected views of the world. This dual vision is apparent in the disparate views of Ahab and Ishmael throughout the narrative. Ahab—whose leg was removed by whale Moby Dick in a previous encounter, resulting in an excruciating physical and mental recovery—obsessively pursues, in pride and revenge, what he considers the cause of all his misery and the embodiment of cosmic evil, bringing about his own destruction. By contrast, Ishmael, who merely seeks relief from depression through a whaling voyage, observes and considers everything and everyone, to the extent of losing himself twice in trances and almost causing his ship's and his own destruction. One could say that while Ahab pursues the whale, Ishmael pursues the essence of everything, from Moby Dick to Captain Ahab, whaling, whalers, the ocean, nature, and life itself. In both pursuits—Ahab's physical and focused pursuit of Moby, and Ishmael's intellectual and desultory pursuit of everything—understanding never fully arrives for characters or readers. In fact, if the novel does nothing else, it leads us to multiple, contradictory insights.

Like the whale's two eyes perceiving two different perspectives of the world, the two protagonists force readers to perceive and construct the world in two different ways. But while readers might be tempted to believe in the left-brain, right-brain theory as they read (i.e., to ignore the

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facts of whaling and focus on the narrative, or vice versa), they should remember that unlike whales, they can synthesize not only disparate parts of the novel but contradictory perceptions of Ishmael and Ahab into a whole. According to Stephen M. Kosslyn and G. Wayne Miller, in “Left Brain, Right Brain? Wrong,” the idea of classifying kinds of thinking that work independently of each other, or even of people as being left-brained or right-brained, is the result of an “urban myth” and “lacks basis in solid science.”³ What is really meant by left brain and right brain is two complementary types of functions—“in how each side processes very specific kinds of information”; for example, “The left hemisphere processes details of visible objects whereas the right processes overall shape. The left hemisphere plays a major role in grammar and decoding literal meaning whereas the right plays a role in understanding verbal metaphors and decoding indirect or implied meaning.”⁴ Proving the truth of that theory, readers see the whale as the basis of New England economy, the antagonist of the narrative, and a many-layered metaphor or symbol, enriching the narrative. While both men decode Moby as a whale worthy of processing for its precious substances and as a mysterious creature, Ahab interprets it as a symbol of evil, while Ishmael interprets it as both a representative of Nature’s transcendent spirit and a misconstrued embodiment of Ahab’s obsession.

In reading *Moby-Dick*,⁵ then, readers move uncertainly between perceptions of Ishmael and Ahab, as well as among those of the other whalers, attempting an interpretation of objects and events. Readers’ left brains work to decode factual details about whaling—its captains and mates, its harpooners and servers, its provisions and dangers, its processing of whales, the various kinds of whales, their skeletons, their blubber and brains and spermaceti and ambergris, their manner of moving through oceans, their fossils and survival, their responses to danger. Simultaneously, readers’ right brains weave the details’ implications into the narrative—Ishmael and Queequeg’s meeting, their introduction to the *Pequod*, Captain Ahab’s power over his crew, their responses to the seemingly bizarre events,

their encounters with other whaling ships, their three-day war with Moby, the *Pequod*’s sudden end, and Ishmael’s epilogue. Putting the two—details and events—together, readers find a significance, analogous to that of their own lives.

This weaving together of factual detail and narrative plot is analogized in the chapter “A Bower in the Arsacides,” in which Ishmael narrates a recalled whaling adventure. He recalls exploring a whale’s skeleton after it had been washed ashore and dragged, by islanders, to a temple of palms to be worshipped. As he describes the living palms interweaving the whale’s skeleton, he considers the mysterious weaving together of his own experiences and of life and death in general, reminding readers of the Providential weaving together of their own circumstances, and the connection between these circumstances and events to come.

Besides offering the two components of a novel (factual detail and narrative), *Moby-Dick* reminds us that everything allows for multiple, contradictory interpretations—from the companionship of Ishmael and Queequeg to the whale itself, the ship, the hunt, the whale-oil rendering, the ethnic groups represented, the idiosyncrasies of each whaler, the doubledoon, the novel’s genre, and the ending. Even Moby’s whiteness is described as an emblem of either innocence or death (183), the “colorless, all color of atheism” (184), the “heartless voids and immensities of the universe” (185), the “charnel house” beneath the colorful “harlotries” of nature (185), and “the peculiar apparition of the soul” (182). Even the whaling industry, like Moby, invites different interpretations.

For example, in Ch. 96, “The Try-works,” if the whale is, for Ahab, the embodiment of evil since the beginning, what does Ishmael’s description of the try-works imply? And of what does he warn readers when he recounts his staring too long into the furnace flames? Ishmael carefully describes the deck’s brick and mortar furnace, in which its two huge iron pots are heated for boiling the whale blubber to render the valuable whale oil, which is later poured into casks and buried in the ship’s bowels. Clearly, we see an efficient factory, employing workers and pro-

viding whale oil for American lamps, but its imagery also depicts whales as victims in the inferno of American greed, the ship (becoming an ironic metaphor for the whale itself) filled with blood and blubber. But then, Ishmael compares the whale to a “burning martyr,” as its fat, like a martyr’s blood, provides the immolating fuel while the harpooners’ laughter at the flames in the night suggests torture at the hands of demons like those in Dante’s *Inferno*. Even Ishmael, “Wrapped...in darkness” (375), becomes entranced by the flames, loses consciousness, turns away from the prow and compass, and nearly capsizes the *Pequod*. In response, he warns readers not to give themselves solely to either woe (referencing “the Man of Sorrows” [376]) or light-hearted humor (referencing Rabelais [376]) because being either too sympathetic to creatures or too callous to their suffering can be destructive. Is that a warning not to view whales, whaling, or other enterprises with either woe or light-heartedness? If so, Ishmael tells us to be circumspect.

Ironically, in Ch. 98, “Stowing Down and Clearing Up,” after a dispassionate summary of the shipboard whaling industry, Ishmael turns to the cleansing of the ship and crew with lighted-heartedness. After noticing the cleansing power, or “virtue,” of sperm oil and ashes, he suggests that the whale, like Nature, provides everything needed to support human existence, including a skeleton for temples and tools, brains and flesh for food, skin for coverings, blubber for oil, ambergris for perfume, and (in this chapter) spermaceti for fragrant cleansing. This fragrant cleansing he links to sexuality and companionship when he remarks that after the crew’s own ablutions, they return to the “immaculate” deck, “fresh, aglow, as bridegrooms new-leaped” from out the wedding sheets, ready to spend the evening companionably discoursing of household furnishings and taking tea by moonlight (379), that is, until another whale is spotted. In that case, the whole

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chase begins again. The chasing, killing, rendering, and cleansing he compares to not only the work-life and social-life cycle but also the life-and-death cycle: as soon as we are cleansed from one life, we must begin another, according to Pythagoras (380). From Ishmael’s perspective, life, like whaling, eventually kills humans, whose souls are cleansed by death, only to begin the life process again. In that sense, whaling is analogous not only to life but also to rulers, to the state, or to war. All move toward one end.

As for multiple significances of objects, the meaning of the coveted “doubloon,” in Ch. 99, depends on the interpreter’s ideological framework. To Captain Ahab, the Andes’ three summits represent a tower, volcano, and victorious fowl, each image

a validation of Ahab himself. For Starbuck (the morally-conflicted Quaker and first-mate), who sees Ahab defying the warnings of God, the three summits represent the Trinity, with the “sun of Righteousness,” shining a “beacon of hope” into the “gloom,” though to him it may be “in vain” (382). Irreligious second-mate Stubbs chooses to see only the zodiac in the coin’s hieroglyphics, interpreting each sign positively for himself, while obtuse third-mate Flask sees a thing of gold and what it will buy. Ironically, it is only young Pip, separated from sense when he jumped ship in terror during a whale hunt and was only later rescued, who interprets it most sensibly. He sees it as what will be found attached to the sunken ship at the “resurrection,” just as a “darky’s” wedding ring was found in a cut-down tree, the only remains from a racial hanging and burning (384-5).

One of the more telling contrasts involves the *Pequod*’s meeting with the *Samuel Enderby*—the brief conversation between the two captains. When Captain Boomer, who lost one arm to Moby but plans no revenge, learns of Captain Ahab’s pursuit of the whale, he assumes madness in Ahab since, to Boomer, the whale’s behavior was awkward, not malicious. According to Boomer’s surgeon, the whale—by design of

“Divine Providence”—can only swallow, not digest, the arm and strikes only “to terrify by feints” (390), not destroy. Granted, Captain Boomer is kept jolly by the ship’s provision of “hot rum,” but his interpretation of the whale’s aggression as a tactic to intimidate, not an intent to destroy, preserves his life.

Unlike Boomer’s acceptance of divine providence in both his and Moby’s limitations, Ahab defies both nature and God in believing he can control them. His ignoring what are interpreted by Starbuck as warnings—from messages and requests delivered by Starbuck, Fedullah, Pip, and various ships, to the storm and the snapping off of even his artificial leg by Moby—puts Ahab in a sinister light. One reading can perceive Ahab as a tragic figure—in his belief (expressed to the “blockhead” carpenter) that his greatness is challenged by Moby and he can rid the world of evil (whatever opposes him) in killing that creature. Another reading can perceive Moby, assisted by the ocean’s maelstrom, as the representative power that punishes such hubris. Another reading can perceive a psychopathic man driven by pain to self-destructive revenge. Yet another reading can perceive Ahab as the despotic ruler who believes he can change the order of things, or even the manufacturer who heartlessly exploits nature and employees to satisfy a growing demand. Still another can focus on Ishmael as emblematic of survivors, devoted to neither power nor revenge but to insight.

The only whaler to interpret events correctly, to perceive the danger of defying God’s providence, is Starbuck, who goes down with the rest. Is Melville critiquing loyalty and obedience that trumps wisdom? Should Starbuck have defied Captain Ahab when he saw Ahab’s self-destructive, arrogant impiety? In his struggle between obedience and defiance, this pious man chooses the obedience that destroys him.

In the end, no one survives except Ishmael, who wanted nothing. In return, he, like Job, has learned greater respect for the mystery of nature, life, death, and God. In the end, readers are left as uncertain as Ishmael—and Melville—but have gained greater respect for the mystery of whales, nature, nature’s God, and reading.

Endnotes

1. John Bryant and Haskell Springer, eds., “Introduction,” *Moby-Dick*, Herman Melville (Pearson & Longman, 2007), xvi.
2. Ibid.
3. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-theory-cognitive-modes/201401/left-brain-right-brain-wrong>, posted January 27, 2014. Accessed June 14, 2018.
4. Ibid.
5. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, Longman Critical Edition, edited by John Bryant and Haskell Springer (Pearson & Longman, 2007). All quotes are taken from this edition.