
From the Writer

When I first began thinking of a subject for my paper, I looked first to the aspects of *Moby Dick* that intrigued me most. I found Ishmael and Queequeg's relationship at the beginning of the novel to be of particular interest to me because of a class discussion. I noticed how the relationship seemed to be more friendly than erotic, and I saw how the historical context of the relationship needed to be taken into account, making way for the interpretation that Melville wanted all men, regardless of origin, to be equal. What I did not consider, however, was how the equality argument could be used to talk about the novel as a whole. I realized that my thesis was too narrow and could not facilitate further argumentation in the world of academia.

With a resolve to formulate some of my own ideas before being influenced by any secondary sources, I considered the lack of women in *Moby Dick*. This led me to believe that Melville wanted to use manhood to represent something very specific. I came up with two different needs manhood could symbolize in the novel: the need for acceptance and the need for dominance. I then began to look at secondary sources to see what other scholars had to say on the subject. In fact most of the time I spent working on this paper was spent reading source after source—I wanted to make sure that I left no stone unturned and no room for anyone to say I had not done enough research.

While writing the actual paper, however, I realized that I had incorporated too many passages from secondary sources and not enough of the text of *Moby Dick*. This was a problem because the majority of the paper was written about everyone's ideas except my own. At this point, I knew I needed something more for my essay—an original idea that would give readers something for their time. Ultimately, I used passages that illustrated Ahab's capacity to feel to interpret his obsession with the *Moby Dick* not as a desire for revenge but as a personality trait.

If I had to edit this essay again, I might make the whole first section on the different representations of manhood in the novel a little more coherent. All in all, however, I am proud of the work I have accomplished.

— Veronica Faller

TIED BY CORDS WOVEN OF HEART-STRINGS: A STUDY OF MANHOOD IN HERMAN MELVILLE'S *MOBY DICK*

“All the individualities of the crew, this man’s valor, that man’s fear; guilt and guiltlessness, all varieties were welded into oneness, and were all directed to that fatal goal which Ahab their one lord and keel did point to.” (Melville 415)

Critics have long concerned themselves with the theme of male bonding, or at least manhood, in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*. Some have called whaling “an avatar for the most base, violent, and stringent version of masculinity available in the mid-nineteenth century” (Dillard 20), while others attribute Melville’s plot and setting to a contradictory response to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (Paglia), in which a woman is the main character and the story happens on land. Undeniably, *Moby Dick* is peppered with passages that comprise ambiguous homoeroticism, revenge for emasculation, and male unity, which suggests that fraternal bonds are an integral part of not only the plot of *Moby Dick*, but also the meaning of the novel as a whole. Melville specifically chooses to create an entirely male cast of characters, and two interpretations of what I have found manhood to symbolize in *Moby Dick* are firstly, an innate desire in all humans for dominance over other beings, and secondly, an innate desire in all humans for acceptance from other beings. This study will examine both interpretations in the context of the novel as a whole and will combine the two to explore an interpretation of Ahab’s monomaniacal obsession with the white whale, which previous studies have not addressed.

The need for acceptance in *Moby Dick* stems from the broad range of characters aboard the *Pequod*. From Pip, the black cabin boy, to Starbuck, the god-fearing first mate, the motley crew defies all social prejudices commonly present in nineteenth-century America. The first boundary crossed in the novel is the one between Christian and savage, as evidenced in the beginning of the novel when Ishmael is forced to share a bed with Queequeg. “No man prefers to sleep two in a bed,” Ishmael declares, later modifying this statement to say, “Ignorance is the parent of fear . . . I was . . . as much afraid of [Queequeg] as if it was the devil himself . . .” (Melville 29, 34). Here, Ishmael is afraid of the unknown; cannibals such as Queequeg are not what he is familiar with. And yet, Ishmael brings this strange bed-sharing experience upon himself—it is he who decides to “take to the ship” (Melville 18). At the start of the novel, he confesses,

Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; 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. (Melville 18)

Here, Ishmael admits to the human need for salvation from the pressures and restrictions of everyday life. What makes him different from the other sailors, however, is his orphan status. Ishmael has no family and therefore feels that if he cannot find love and acceptance on land, he will find it on the ocean. This idea brings him to pack up and spend the night at the same inn as Queequeg.

Indeed, in the beginning stages of the novel, Ishmael does find an accepting family in Queequeg after the initial shock of the harpooneer’s differences has worn away. Ishmael describes their interactions with tender tone and affectionate language, saying they are a “cosy, loving pair” and finding Queequeg’s arm draped over him in the mornings “in the most loving and affectionate manner” (Melville 57, 36). The reader would think Ishmael “had been [Queequeg’s] wife,” as though “naught but death should part [the two] twain” (Melville 36, 38). The two become increasingly more intimate with each other, and Ishmael eventually defies the restrictions of

his Presbyterian upbringing by taking part in Queequeg's idol worship, citing the Golden Rule: "And what is the will of God?—to do to my fellow man what I would have my fellow man do to me . . . What do I wish that this Queequeg would do to me? Why unite with me in my [religion] . . . I must then unite with him in his . . . I must turn idolator" (Melville 57). At this point, Ishmael symbolically erases the line between different religions, making room for the acceptance he craves as an orphan.

Some critics see Ishmael and Queequeg's relationship not as friendly, but as homoerotic. In an argument written in 1994 entitled "Lovers of Human Flesh: Homosexuality and Cannibalism in Melville's Novels," Caleb Crain asserts that Melville chose to use cannibalism as a euphemism for homosexuality (34). This is not a totally random association, because in Melville's day, the savages of the South Pacific islands were infamous for both their cannibalism and their promiscuity between both genders. Crain states that for Melville's nineteenth-century American heroes, "cannibalism and homosexuality violate the distinctions between identity and desire; between self and other; between what we want, what we want to be, and what we are" (34). I give credit to Crain's comparisons of homoerotic love and cannibalism, and I agree that both are similar because each incites a strong desire for the other's body; lovers and cannibals alike become possessive and irrational when stricken with that need. I believe, however, that Ishmael and Queequeg's relationship is more than just sexual—it is a manifestation of the human desire to be loved and accepted as an equal. According to his study entitled "Of Friendship: Revisiting Friendships between Men in American Literature," Josep Armengol-Carrera agrees. He draws a line between homosexuality and homosociality, saying that while one is concerned with desire, the other is associated with friendship. He states that "love and friendship between men might, eventually, contribute to the promotion of more egalitarian societies" (207). The supposed homosexuality in *Moby Dick*, therefore, is actually homosociality, which illustrates the belief held by Melville that all men, orphan and savage alike, not only need each other, but also should be accepted as equal.

Now, some readers may challenge my view that the need for acceptance is a masculine trait at all. After all, many believe that this desire shows somewhat of a weakness and is therefore feminine. In a previous argument written by Mark Lloyd Taylor called "Ishmael's (m)Other:

Gender, Jesus, and God in Melville's *Moby Dick*," Taylor presents a similar theory to mine, separating the masculinity of God the Father as a dominating force and the femininity of God the Son as a loving and accepting higher power. Indeed, my own argument that Melville uses manhood to represent a need for other human beings seems to ignore the fact that Ishmael compares his relationship with Queequeg to one between man and wife. I parry this with textual evidence: Melville very obviously chooses to exclude females from his major cast of characters. Philip Armstrong's "Leviathan is a Skein of Networks': Translations of Nature and Culture in *Moby Dick*" explains the lack of females in the novel as Melville's personal belief that women would not play a huge role in the industrial revolution. He writes that Melville "represses the possibility of female economic and cultural agency altogether by utterly excluding women characters from his novel" (1053). Robyn Wiegman, in her article entitled "Melville's Geography of Gender," offers another explanation: "The male bond provides an illusion of autonomy, of self-creation . . ." (748). In other words, Melville deliberately chooses to exclude femininity in favor of exemplifying man's ability to survive without women. By keeping his characters strictly male, Melville provides no room for ambiguity in his portrayal of manhood.

As *Moby Dick* progresses and the *Pequod* sets sail, Ishmael and Queequeg's relationship fades in significance (with the exception of the chapter "The Monkey Rope"¹), and Ahab emerges as the main character in the novel, along with a new representation of manhood: the need for dominance. The way in which Melville achieves this transition is through the establishment of a chain of command onboard the *Pequod*. Ahab, the captain, gets the most screen time, followed by the three mates, Starbuck, Stubb, and Flask, then the harpooners, Queequeg, Tashtego, and Dago. In the chapter entitled "Knights and Squires," Ishmael notes, "In that grand order of battle in which Captain Ahab would presently marshal his forces to descend on the whales, [the three mates] were as captains of companies . . . each mate . . . always accompanied by his boat-steerer or harpooner" (Melville 106). Ahab, with true manliness, is clearly the dominating force on the ship, and all others act beneath him. The hierarchy is the first superficial manifestation of a need for dominance; it is necessary for the *Pequod* to function successfully.

Other representations of manhood as a dominating force, however, are unveiled with psychoanalytical studies of Ahab's obsession with the Moby Dick. Now, the scope of this essay does not include discussion on the abundant sexual imagery present in *Moby Dick*; I would not go as far as to say what Camille Paglia does in her book *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*, where she suggests that Ahab's injury is a sexual one, and the harpoon he thrusts at the Moby Dick is a "phallic mental projection, born of frustrated desire" (589). I will, on the other hand, admit that on the surface, psychoanalysts of *Moby Dick* are correct in assuming that Ahab's struggle with the whale is actually a manifestation of erotic frustration. Ahab may have lost more than a limb in his first encounter with the great leviathan, and indeed his injury seems to be a symbolic emasculation. His obsession with the whale would then be due to avenging his shattered manhood.

Thankfully, other psychoanalytic interpretations delve well beyond any sexual problems Ahab may have and into his problems with the repressed nineteenth-century American culture, which I find to be more pertinent to Melville's intentions for the novel. Back in Melville's day, all respectable men had to adhere to a strict doctrine of Christian faith and were expected to denounce non-Christians like Fedallah and Queequeg. Ahab's crew, being composed of men from all over the world, is the ultimate defiance of his own religion. In an essay entitled "In Nomine Diaboli," Henry Murray says this candidly: "[Ahab] has summoned the various religions of the East to combat the one dominant religion of the West" (443). By captaining a crew of infidels and savages, Ahab asserts power over his own stifling religion; by defying it, he has stepped away from tradition and given in to his desire for dominance. Murray goes on to suggest a Freudian interpretation of the novel, noting,

Ahab is captain of the culturally repressed dispositions of human nature, that part of personality which psychoanalysts have termed the "Id." If this is true, his opponent, the White Whale, can be none other than the internal institution which is responsible for these repressions, namely the Freudian Superego . . . Starbuck, the First Mate, stands for the rational realistic Ego which is overpowered by

the fanatical compulsiveness of the Id and dispossessed of its normally regulating functions. (443–444, 446)

If this interpretation is true, then it only goes to show man's innate and internally secret desire to have control over all that opposes him.

David Leverenz, in a book entitled *Manhood and the American Renaissance*, throws out an opposing point of view to my theory of the need for dominance. Instead of a need to dominate, Leverenz argues that Ahab has a need to be dominated. "Ahab *struggles*² for absolute dominance," Leverenz writes, "over his crew, over his malevolent God, and perhaps over his still more malevolent self" (281). And yet, Ishmael and Ahab are "doubles of a self that loathes itself" (Leverenz 280). In other words, Leverenz believes that Ahab and Ishmael each have an intense self-hate, and a desire to be dominated by a higher, unloving power. While Leverenz may speak the truth about Ishmael,³ I disagree that his assertion applies to Ahab. In chapter 37, "The Sunset," in which Ahab is found soliloquizing about the hunt for the Moby Dick, Ahab cries, "I now prophesy that I will dismember my dismemberer . . . Ye've knocked me down, and I am up again . . . Naught's an obstacle, naught's an angle to the iron way!" (Melville 143). As I am sure other readers will perceive this passage, Ahab speaks like a man who wishes to dominate, not be dominated.

As has been shown, the need for dominance and the need for acceptance are prominent in *Moby Dick*. Combining these two interpretations of manhood in *Moby Dick* opens the door to a realm of new understanding on Melville's view of human nature. If man craves both acceptance and dominance, then he not only wants to succeed and rule over his fellow beings, but also feels the need to be loved by the very individuals he has asserted supremacy over. Almost apologetically, man yearns to be put up on a pedestal, worshipped by those who were created by God not to be his inferiors, but his equals. In other words, though all men are supposedly created alike, each secretly longs for the elevation of his own importance in relation to others. The epitome of man in *Moby Dick*, then, is Ahab.

If this idea were shared by Melville, then how does his novel compromise this paradox of equality and desire for greatness? The most obvious answer is in chapter 36, "The Quarter Deck," where Ahab first introduces the gold doubloon. "Whosoever of ye raises me a white-headed whale . . .," Ahab cries, "he shall have this gold ounce, my boys!" (Melville

138). The desire for the doubloon unites the crew, allowing them to accept Ahab's monomaniacal search for the Moby Dick. Ishmael admits, "A wild, mystical, sympathetical feeling was in me; Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine" (Melville 152). Because any crewmember is eligible to receive the coin at voyage end, equality is established between men of different race, religion, age, and background. On the other hand, the doubloon also serves as an agent for Ahab to gain dominance over his crew, considering that without the proper motivation, the crew might not have chosen to abandon their hunt for normal whales.

My discussion on manhood, then, actually opens up the door towards the larger theme of something I will term "egotistical insecurity." I would like to define egotistical insecurity as man's fear that he will fail to achieve his personal destiny. Egotistical insecurity is not the anxiety induced by trying to impress others or an inferiority complex; rather, it is the belief that you are better than others combined with the fear that you will not be able to show it. What I view to be the main conflict in the novel, Ahab versus whale, arises as a result of this egotistical insecurity. Ahab believes he must kill the whale because he sees it not as an animal but as a rival, a challenge to his superiority. Ahab shouts, with a "terrific, loud, animal sob, like that of a heart stricken moose," about how the whale has defiled and violated his body: "It was that accursed white whale that razeed me; made a poor pegging lubber of me for ever and a day!" (Melville 139). Being the extreme case of someone with an egotistical insecurity, Ahab's immediate response to a challenge to his superiority over all beings leads him to take his monomaniac obsession to unhealthy heights, ultimately resulting in his demise.

At this point, I would like to address some of the issues raised by the skeptic in me. She feels that I have been ignoring the obvious reasons Ahab would want to slay the Moby Dick. "Back off of the fancy interpretation for a bit," she says to me. "Isn't Ahab's obsession stemming from a simple need for revenge?" After all, in his speech to Starbuck in Chapter 36, Ahab calls his own obsession a need for vengeance.⁴ Additionally, critics such as T. Walter Herbert Jr., author of the article "Calvinism and Cosmic Evil in Moby Dick," claim that Ahab "takes [the attack] as a cosmic affront and determines to be revenged" (Herbert 1614).

While I do acknowledge that the obvious interpretation of Ahab's quest is for revenge, I will remind my skeptic that human beings are not so simple, and that Ahab's need for revenge is only on the surface. Ahab desires to display his preeminence; interpreting his obsession as a need to exact revenge would ignore the positive human qualities Ahab possesses. Sharon Talley, in her book *The Student Companion to Herman Melville*, accurately points out, "through Ahab's interactions with [his crewmembers], Melville reveals the human possibilities that still lurk within the captain's soul" (57). In chapter 125, "The Log and the Line," Ahab reaches out to Pip, a young boy much lower than him on the totem pole, and takes him under his wing, saying, "Oh, ye frozen heavens! Look down here. Ye did beget this luckless child, and have abandoned him . . . Ahab's cabin shall be Pip's home henceforth . . . thou touchest my innermost centre, boy; thou art tied to me by cords woven of my heart-strings" (Melville 392). In chapter 132, "The Symphony," Ahab laments his wife's loneliness, saying, "I widowed that poor girl when I married her . . . what a forty years' fool – fool – old fool, has old Ahab been!" (Melville 405). Additionally, Starbuck witnesses Ahab "[drop] a tear into the sea; nor did all the Pacific contain such wealth as that one wee drop" (Melville 405). These passages illustrate Ahab's capacity to feel, showing that his obsession with the whale is more than an uncomplicated desire for revenge. Revenge is petty; it is too black and white and so much smaller than Ahab's real justification of the "fiery hunt" (Melville 165). I believe that egotistical insecurity is an inherent part of Ahab's personality—he cannot help himself when the Moby Dick, the threat to his supremacy, is alive. Therefore, Ahab is concerned not with the past actions of the whale, as revenge would suggest, but with what the whale represents.

The drama's done. There is no doubt that with *Moby Dick*, Melville meant to convey something important—something that would stretch beyond the minds of nineteenth-century Americans and into those of the readers of the future. By connecting the human needs for acceptance and dominance, Melville achieves a display of truth through Ishmael, who is saved by a coffin on which "a complete theory of the heavens and earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth" is carved (Melville 366). And yet, Melville chooses to have Ahab, the epitome of manliness, perish along with the rest of the crew. Perhaps Melville is hinting at the

absurdity of his own ideas, deliberately showing his readers that those possessed by their own egotistical insecurity become not perpetrators of greatness, but victims of the desire for it. When all is said and done, man's existence is temporary; nature will not wait for him to achieve his destiny, as Melville asserts at the end of his masterpiece:

Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawn-
ing gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides;
then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea
rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago. (427)

NOTES

1. In this chapter, Ishmael and Queequeg are literally tied together by a rope: "For better or for worse, we two, for the time, were wedded" (Melville 255), Ishmael tells the reader of their hempen bond.
2. Emphasis my own.
3. In chapter 1, Ishmael declares, "Who ain't a slave? . . . 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 . . . and so the universal thump is passed round . . ." (Melville 21).
4. "... My vengeance will fetch a great premium *here!*" (Melville 139).

WORKS CITED

- Armengol-Carrera, Josep P. "Of Friendship: Revisiting Friendships between Men in American Literature." *The Journal of Men's Studies* 17.3 (2009): 193–209. Print.
- Armstrong, Philip. "Leviathan is a Skein of Networks": Translations of Nature and Culture in *Moby Dick*." *ELH*, 71.4 (2004): 1039–63. Print.
- Crain, Caleb. "Lovers of Human Flesh: Homosexuality and Cannibalism in Melville's Novels." *American Literature* 66.1 (1994): 25–53. Web. 21 March 2010.
- Dillard, Jessica. "A Whale of a Man: Manhood, Homoeroticism, and Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*." MA thesis. Sarah Lawrence College, 2006. Print.
- Herbert, T. Walter, Jr. "Calvinism and Cosmic Evil in *Moby-Dick*." *PMLA* 84.6 (1969): 1613–19. Web.
- Leverenz, David. "Ahab's Queenly Personality: A Man is being Beaten." *Manhood and the American Renaissance*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989. 279–306. Print.
- Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick*. 2nd ed. Norton Critical Editions. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. Print.
- Murray, Henry A. "In Nomine Diaboli." *The New England Quarterly* 24.4 (1951): 435–52. Web.
- Paglia, Camille. "American Decadents: Poe, Hawthorne, Melville." *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990. 572–97. Print.
- Talley, Sharon. "The Great Art of Telling the Truth in *Moby Dick*." *Student Companion to Herman Melville*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007. 49–64. Print.
- Taylor, Mark Lloyd. "Ishmael's m(O)ther: Gender, Jesus, and God in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*." *The Journal of Religion* 72.3 (1992): 325–30. Web. 21 March 2010.
- Wiegman, Robyn. "Melville's Geography of Gender." *American Literary History* 1.4 (1989): 735–53. Web. 21 March 2010.

VERONICA FALLER, or Vee, is a member of the ENG 2013 class from North Reading, Massachusetts. She is a pre-medical biomedical engineering major. Vee decided to take Professor Degener's seminar, "The Whale," because she wanted to study a topic that would be completely different from those of her math and science courses. This essay was written for Michael Degener's course, WR 150: The Whale.