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Cavalcade of Discourse

Examining the narrative forms and literary status of Moby Dick

One of the most widely recognized and bestselling works of great literature, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* remains the work he is best known for. The epic story of obsession and pursuit of the unattainable has earned its rank as a masterpiece of American fiction. Yet the author of this great book never enjoyed much success as a writer in his lifetime, nor much recognition for his now most famous work, now regarded as work of genius. Largely unrecognized by antebellum readers in his own time, *Moby Dick* took decades to achieve the status of Great American Novel due to the unconventional narrative techniques that would eventually elevate the work to its current status within academia and popular culture. The work remains an important piece of literature, and is continually analyzed within academia for its depth of meaning related to fate versus free will, and its innovative approach to novelistic structure which incorporates metanarrative, metafiction, and various fictitious digressions that ultimately create an immersive experience for the reader. Not until approximately the outbreak of the First World War did the modernists of the literary public begin to appreciate the novel in all its intricacies and boost its popularity, leading to the prominent exposure the work has today in film and popular culture.

Part I: *Moby Dick* as a Great American Novel

The assimilation of literature into other forms of media is one method to measure success. Lawrence Buell notes that among the many ways in which a work of literature achieves great success, “The most obvious and surefire is to have been subjected repeatedly to a series of memorable rewritings [in whatever genre or media], thereby giving the text a kind of master-narrative status” (137). The frequency with which Melville’s story is alluded to or retold in film and television is testament to the novel’s credential as a Great American Novel (GAN). However, the rehashing of a story over the last century since gaining popularity also leads to “One of the conspicuous ironies of this novel’s canon history i[n] that since it achieved GAN status... it has become since the 1950s a text of frequent reference for journalists, cartoonists, and bloggers as well as for academics, there’s been a pronounced disconnect between the predominant critical identification with the Ishmaeleian perspective” (Buell 146). Popularity often leads to overuse and misinterpretations, and often the deeper, more philosophical themes of the novel are left out of reinterpretations. Robert Milder admits that while “The metaphysical themes that absorbed Melville strike few critical sparks today; political themes do” (Milder 158), yet the themes that audiences tend to find within the text of any large volume of literature spanning multiple human perspectives and social commentary can be expected to offer varied and unique insights for a diverse readership. . Milder qualifies his argument by suggesting the literary public we see what it chooses to in any novel viewed as “great”, and that “It may be that we are always reading our own and that GAN theory and practice amount to a form of cultural autobiography” (Milder 158).

In addition to the criteria for GAN status including an array of meanings and interpretations, Buell offers that “Still another recipe is the heterogeneous symbolic assemblage

of individuals, often positioned in a confined space in the service of a common task or defined against the background of an epochal public event” (138), which the novel satisfies exceptionally well with a highly diverse crew unified by their oath to chase the captain’s whale. Buell continues to argue that “Moby-Dick, with its complex ideologization of the shipboard microcosm, the global village that is the Pequod’s crew, today stands pre-eminent among the classic US fictions” (138). The assemblage of men from the Far and Middle East, Africa and Pacific islands, as well as American New Englanders could hardly be more different in their background, but the occupation of whaling, isolation, and most importantly, the leadership of a single authority in Ahab provide a convenient method of bringing a cacophony of voices together on the ship, most notably in the blood oath sworn against Ahab’s whale. The common goal and authority figure trope is useful not only as plot device for providing polyphony and justification for exotic characters, but has become a trope of the GAN wherein the melting pot of the American nation is mirrored in what Buell calls a “heteroglot assemblage device (149) that brings solidarity to the cast and justifies a plot wherein a single monstrous whale is targeted, rather than a more sensible and profitable pursuit of many whales.

To avoid the redundancy of a plot where the target whale is continually sought after and escapes, or make a much shorter book, Melville supplies the reader with a plethora of digressions and expository chapters along the way. If the novel did nothing other than focus on the single white whale, it would have to be much shorter, or risk wearing out the audience with multiple failed attempts. Instead, the narrative turns didactic for the majority of the middle section of the novel, and provides the reader with what Chad Luck calls a “wonder-cabinet” of chapters explaining whale biology, history, and whaling technique. The inclusion of so much ancillary knowledge about whaling adds to the readers’ experience by increasing the knowledge of whales

for the reader, thereby vesting interest in, and bringing familiarity to, the otherwise foreign business of whaling. Luck argues that the technique of familiarizing and enticing the reader to appreciate the subject matter by providing background anecdotes and curiosities was not uncommon in the period and “that there is good reason to suppose that Melville was conversant with wonder discourse and with the display strategies of the wonder-cabinet” (10-11). Even the crew of the ship itself can be understood as a collection of oddities that give the reader an account of the nature of traveling on intercontinental whaling voyages, and the cetological digressions on whale anatomy, mythology, and taxonomy function as museum pieces (Luck 13), from which the reader grows more vested in the what Ishmael calls “the honor and glory of whaling”. Luck considers the depth and range of encyclopedic and historic digressions on whaling as necessary because, “true knowledge of the whale is only possible, and only communicable, through a stubborn materiality that is finally untranslatable” (Luck 20).

The abundance of background information on whales that many readers find taxing if not exhausting, combined with the use of a “heteroglot assemblage device” as a trope going back to Homeric Epic is evidence that Melville intended his novel to be interpreted as great, if not *the* Great American novel. While the concept and term GAN was not in use at the time, there is evidence to suggest Melville was not simply following up his previous sea voyage novels with a longer story that had a new spin. While Melville had experience on whaling vessels, his account of *Moby Dick* as the death of all hands but one, at the whim of a malevolent albino sperm whale could hardly be considered historically factual, even in the fast and loose sense of authenticity which his previous works *Typee* and *Omoo* were given. Melville was combining historical accounts of the whale attack on the *Essex* with fantastic myth to produce an epic and grandiose novel. Yet Milder correctly points out that “Melville himself would have had mixed feelings

about his book being hailed as a GAN” (158) given its unconventionality, and Buell points out that historically, “not until the late 1860s was a self-conscious discourse of the great American novel possible” (135). However, it is apparent that Melville labored to produce something different from his previously successful novels, and we can surmise from the change in style and subject, as well as the inclusion of constantly changing narrative forms and abundance of ‘curiosities’ provides to lengthen the text and build interest, that Melville certainly intended the novel to be something fantastic, and accepted that his innovation would not be universally embraced.

Sheila Post-Lauria provides an interesting analysis of Melville’s choice to include the varying forms of narrative peppered throughout the novel. Shifting from the perspective of Ishmael on the deck, to expository chapters, to historical accounts. shows “Melville’s concept of narrative form in *Moby-Dick*, based upon mixed form, [and] helps us understand its deliberateness, intentionality, and distinction in depicting the disparate segments of experience” (316). Indeed, the unconventional use of multiple narratives was deliberately chosen by the author to set the novel apart from other literature of the past, perhaps with the lofty goal of demonstrating what a novel was capable of in variance of story-telling technique. (Post Lauria 316). Melville combines the classical trope of a diverse cast of characters unifying under a single leader, for a common goal with a multitude of narratives forms and discourses, in the foil of an epic so captivating and complex it would eventually be retold in countless forms. The impetus with which the novel is presented suggests that Melville’s intention was less of an attempt to satisfy his contemporaries with a style they expected, or even wanted, and rather to show critics and readers what great literature is capable of, and how a great novel should be composed.

Part II: The Structure of the Novel

Much can be said for the manner in which Melville organized his most famous work, beyond the intention of creating a collection of discourse and style that took literature to new and soaring heights. Melville's meta-analysis of his novel, and writing in general, will be discussed at length later in the paper, but here it is useful to consider how, when examining the varied forms of the novel from a unique structure where "Out of the trunk, the branches grow; out of them, the twigs. So, in productive subjects, grow the chapters" (Melville 419). The task of writing a long and in depth novel is discussed directly by Ishmael within the text of the novel, no doubt also serving as commentary by Melville on his own plans for, and struggles with, writing the book. The metaphor of branches and twigs can be interpreted as the digressive chapters that stem from the trunk of the plot within *Moby Dick*, giving the work a larger framework and set of topics to add depth to the overall work. The shifts in narrative offer the reader more than a single path to follow when taking the journey from Nantucket to the whaling grounds. Dialogues exist between characters like Stubb and Flask, Ahab and Starbuck, and between Queequeg and Ishmael. The novel includes closet dramas from the perspectives of the lesser known members of the crew, expository chapters detailing technical elements of whaling, anatomical expositions, and historical accounts. The more dramatic sequences demonstrate how "Melville shares with others of his day 'many lessons of craft from Shakespeare' including the use of the soliloquy to dramatize 'psychological state'" (Post Lauria 310). The reader gains an understating of the hearts of minds of the crew, the officers, and even other whaling vessels in the short story games with other ships through the technique of mixing narrative form; something that could not be achieved with a single narrative with the same breadth and effect. Along with polyphony and multiple perspective, the narrative shifts incorporate additional topics less likely to be discussed by a

single narrator retelling his journey, and the reader can then appreciate “Melville's formulation of a mixed narrative form that blends science and fiction, philosophy and poetry, urges the modern reader to consider this matter of mixed form, as Ishmael repeatedly counsels his readers, “in every light” (Post Lauria 306). Without descriptive and analytical digressions on whaling, the novel would struggle to find a voice for examining topics not likely to be discussed by the novice whaler Ishmael.

In fact, Ishmael dissolves as the assumed narrator frequently and increasingly as the novel progresses, only to return triumphantly in the epilogue as the lone survivor. (Buell 146) Melville's choice to shift from Ishmael's story-telling of joining the crew with Queequeg, to digressions into whale oil processing and whale mythology can be appreciated by suspending the identity of the narrator and hearing the voice of the author behind Ishmael, or assuming that Ishmael remains the narrator, but is only one of two protagonists. Buell agrees that from the beginning of the voyage to the last day of the chase, Ishmael's presence is only occasionally felt with any force; “in the popular discourse Ishmael scarcely exists, unless one counts novelistic echoes” (Buell 147). Ishmael always remains the narrator, but is the main character only up to the cetological chapters, wherein Melville's exposition becomes the driving force of the text. The latter half of the plot is moved along by assuming Ahab as the main character, only to have Ishmael reappear in the epilogue. By splitting the role of protagonist between Ahab and Ishmael, the dichotomy of innocent casual observer, and the monomaniacal force that drives the plot, Melville cleverly presents the two most important perspectives in the text without having to change the narrator completely. The choice is also important for highlighting the narrative arc from learning about the ship's crew and whaling, to appreciating the ship's mission, and back to the original innocent perspective in order to appreciate the intended emotional thrust of the work.

Another method of examining the structure of the novel exists in considering the physical journey of the ship and how it mirrors the emotional arc of the two protagonists. The different narrative forms are placed into the work in groups, possibly a deliberate choice by Melville to mark the dramatic change in Ahab and Ishmael as the story progresses. The expository chapters take place in the long tedious journey southwards towards the Cape of Good Hope, and once again after the ship rounds the Cape in violent weather. The type of narrative chosen for each segment's "organic expression might be expected to derive its natural form from the movement of ship and crew over the watery world of the novel" (Eldridge 146). The histrionic sequences seen in "The Candles", "The Quarterdeck", and the final three days of the chase represent the most significant dramatic points in the novel (Eldridge 157); the revelation of the true nature of the voyage, the climax of the voyage, and the conclusive final act, respectively. Eldridge further argues that the novel's narrative forms can be broken into sections delineated by chapters, and that the sections are matched by the ship's journey:

Certain distinctive chapters, four in all, provide the information necessary for charting the ship's course. In fact, they do more: they not only give geographical details related to the ship's itinerary and progress but use specific maritime settings for reaffirmation of Ahab's 'fixed and fearless, forward dedication' to the quest, which is the primary unifying force in the novel. (147).

Eldridge presents specific emotional turning points in the narrative that come with correlative shifts in the path of the ship which "emphasizes with lively detail the specific geographical setting – the Cape of Good Hope, where the winds howl over 'long troubled seas'" (Eldridge 148). Careful readers will be able to trace the voyage of the ship along an imagined map given the dictation of the journey from Ishmael, and the slow and uneventful journey up and down the

South American coast offers the perfect opportunity for Melville to offer expository chapters and whaling, while “developing the figurative parallel between the ship’s undeviating course amidst the cape storms and Ahab’s monomania amidst the torment of his emotions... Melville underlines the progress toward catastrophe” (Eldridge 148). Rounding the cape is highlighted as a particularly important portion of Eldridge’s analysis of the emotion arc of the novel, representing “the third stage of the voyage, the situation of the *Pequod* is made explicitly suggestive of Ahab’s mind”, whereas the narrative then shifts to focus on Ishmael upon heading into the hunting grounds of the white whale and reflecting on the peaceful scenery; the polar opposite of the obsessed, vengeful captain’s chapters that come just afterwards. (Eldridge 148)

Although unconventional, Melville’s choice to include multiple narratives was not unheard of. The eccentricity of Melville’s writing is well established, yet it does not in and of itself explain the cavalcade of forms used to tell the sort of *Moby Dick* from varied perspectives and “many continue to look beyond Melville’s literary culture for explanations and sources” (Post-Lauria 302). The use of multiple narrative formats to tell a long epic was indeed an established method within antebellum literature. Post-Lauria notes the connection between *Moby Dick* and period literature that would have influenced its composition:

The metaphysical discussions, genre shifts, use of Shakespearean conventions, and mixture of facts and romance-typically considered Melville’s improvisations-also appear in ‘mixed form’ narratives, a genre once popular but now largely forgotten. Through his heterogeneous form Melville links his work to a popular yet subversive end within antebellum literary culture. (303)

Post-Lauria continues to argue that critics focus too heavily on Melville’s personal writing style and his more popular, but structurally different novels *Omoo* and *Typee* when analyzing *Moby*

Dick because “Such theories misrepresent Melville's motivations, intentions, and actual performance in *Moby-Dick*. Modern scholars grounded in textual and biographical explanations seem to dismiss the contextual basis of narrative form in this work” (Post-Lauria 302). Since situational factors can never be fully determined, and motivations for particular passages can never been deduced exactly, the extent of analyzing authorial intent rests upon examining the narrative forms used, if such techniques had been used before, and analyzing the text Melville has presented to the reader. An appropriate examination of Melville’s work requires considering if the choice to structure the novel in such a disparate yet overlapping way was both influenced by similar styles of literature available at the time, and a conscious choice to write a novel in a complex way that should be considered as an adroit execution of writing ability, whether the reading public liked it or not.

The technique of using differing and separate narratives was not unheard of, but was also not popular in Melville’s time, so it is little wonder that the book would take seven or so decades to become rediscovered by Modernists looking for innovative approaches to writing, and that it sold so poorly upon first publication. In an era before the internet and widely disseminated reviews, the first few opinions on a book were often the deciding factor in success or failure, and “While reviewers readily acknowledged Melville's work as mixed form, they did not all approve. Melville published *Moby-Dick* during a time when readers argued over the proper form of the novel. This critical debate, gone largely unnoticed, is crucial to gauging the popularity of *Moby-Dick* in Melville’s day” (Post Lauria 312). Authorial intent is evident in a letter Melville sent to his contemporary Richard Henry Dana, about the forthcoming novel’s narrative form:

It will be a strange sort of book, tho', I fear; blubber is blubber you know; tho' you may get oil out of it, the poetry runs as hard as sap from a frozen maple tree;-& to cook the

thing up, one must needs throw in a little fancy, which from the nature of the thing, must be ungainly as the gambols of the whales themselves. Yet I mean to give the truth of the thing, spite of this. (Post-Lauria 305)

It seems unfair to assign the inclusion of mixed form in *Moby Dick* to the author's eccentricities, or purely to imitation of other mixed narrative works of the time. It would be more accurate to evaluate the structure of the novel on the basis of being intentionally crafted to offer the reader the widest variety of lenses with which to examine his masterpiece.

Part III: Metanarrative and Metafiction in *Moby Dick*

The series of expository chapters on the practice of whaling in the middle section of the novel serve not only to offer Ishmael's unique perspective as a greenhorn of whaling vessels learning the craft, but also to allow the reader to join in that journey through didactic discourse. Melville entices to reader with the "honor and glory of whaling" through Ishmael's narrative and fosters a sense of belonging that transfers to the reader by proxy:

The more I dive into the matter of whaling, and push my researches up to the very spring head of it, so much the more am I impressed with its great honorableness and antiquity...I am transported with the reflection that myself belong, though but subordinately, to so emblazoned fraternity. (Melville 523)

As the reader begins to feel like an old hand on the ship by learning the art of whaling along with Ishmael, it builds sense of comradery with the crew and vests emotional interest in the story.

The familiarity with whaling also allows Melville to avoid stopping the narrative during action sequences to explain the significance of certain situations. Melville directly alludes to his forthcoming expository chapters early in the text, explaining that that the digressions to come will be important later on; “All these particulars are faithfully narrated here, as they will not fail to elucidate several most important, however intricate passages, in scenes hereafter to be painted” (Melville 420), which demonstrates a metafictional element in *Moby Dick*. When Ishmael writes “This peculiarity of the whale’s eyes is a thing always to be borne in mind in the fishery; and to be remembered by the reader in some subsequent scenes” (277), we can see Melville’s metafictional intent, as he intends the reader to learn something about whaling in the hope that later developments will be more appreciated when the reader recalls details that at first seem mundane. For example, when a “fast-fish” runs out, and the “main-line” is peeling off the “king-post” faster than the pilot can bring up slack; being familiar with the industry terms and concepts saves Melville the trouble of interrupting the narrative to explain that this situation puts the crew of the whale boat in danger, as they are all linked to the whale line by the oars. Careful readers will already have known this from a chapter dedicated solely to how the line is laid out in the whale boats prior to lowering. Setting up the reader with foreknowledge is the first example of the metafiction Melville uses within the text, even going so far as to make a footnote about the utility of having previously discussed “pitchpoling” so that further explanation is not necessary (788n1).

The importance of meta-analysis of the text is seen in the way Melville builds tension and then satisfies the reader with narrative shifts. It has already been noted that the cetological discussions take place during the lull period that matches the uneventful and tedious passage of the ship through open water; some twenty chapters span a single day on board. (Eldridge 152)

This has the effect of making the reader feel like a member of the crew by experiencing the tedium and repetition of manning the watches on the mast heads and the long, involved process of whale oil processing. The transition to a whale chase, and a sighting of the white whale not only moves the story along, but is all the more welcome to the reader after having been starved for plot development, and the action sequences are thereby synthetically enhanced. Eldridge notes how the tension is built up and then satisfied as “Melville manages a dramatic pause before the final action as Starbuck and the land like beauties of the central Pacific bring Ahab to the verge of relinquishing the quest. The flow of the narrative alters at midpoint – here, an exciting shift into action, like that in the first division” (154).

Eldridge also notes how the expository chapters move from more straightforward and technical to increasingly abstract, and “In order to pace the narrative, Melville varies the mood through scenes alternating between serenity and violence, but he keeps tension mounting steadily as the Pequod moves toward the equator” (Eldridge 161). The didactic chapters end with the discussion of whale skeletons and fossils, foretelling the death of either crew, or whale, with the ship approaching the hunting grounds, Queequeg in the coffin, and Ahab beginning a constant vigil on deck. (Eldridge 159) This transition marks not only the end of encyclopedic accounts, but of the beginning of the foreboding culmination of the novel that has been systematically built up throughout the entire text. Eldridge continues to argue that the narrative shifts represent intentional efforts to provide anticipation for the conclusion, and to expand the narrative beyond a simple hunting or vengeance plot; “Melville developed *Moby Dick* through more artistically practical methods than analogies or mere association of ideas...Melville’s disorder was simply that of the great organic artist who is careful to provide his work of art with the architecture necessary for orderly growth” (Eldridge 162).

An additional aspect of metanarrative is the metaphor of the whale; both structurally described from head to tail in subsequent chapters, as well as describing the novel itself as a “whale of a book”. It is likely that the alternate title of the book, *The Whale*, is meant to be taken as a metaphor for its length and depth, if not as a metanarrative comment on Melville’s largest and most challenging work of epic, prose poetry, and drama. The intent is most obvious where Melville peeks out from behind the authorial curtain of Ishmael the narrator to address the reader; “To produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme. No great and enduring volume can ever be written on the flea” (655). The grandiose and tenacious undertaking of writing a novel with such varied narrative forms and addressing such lofty philosophical topics is channeled through the subject of the book being the largest monster man had yet faced. This imposing task is what may have inspired Melville to write, through the narrator, that “One often hears of writers that rise and swell with their subject, though it may seem but an ordinary one. How, then, with me, writing of this Leviathan? Unconsciously my chirography expands into placard capitals. Give me a condor’s quill! Give me Vesuvius’ crater for an inkstand!” (655).

Perhaps Melville’s metafictional dialogue is most obvious in the fourth wall breaks that take on truly unique characteristics. We can plainly see the author addressing his own doubts or shortcomings about his task to produce a great book in ostensibly intentional errors made where he “had forgotten to say that there were found in this ambergris, certain round, hard, bony plates”, and where he “should like to conclude the chapter with the above appeal, but cannot, owing to my anxiety to repel a charge often made against whalemens” (591). Most conspicuous is the suspiciously intoxicated tone of chapters focused around games with other ships, where Melville uses nonce words and sounds curiously aloof; “Flip? Did I say we had flip? Yes, and we flipped it at the rate of ten gallon the hour... when the squall came [for it’s *squally* off there by

Patagonia]” (639). Nowhere is Melville’s metanarrative presence is more intimately felt as when admitting his own limitations while appealing to the reader that “Seldom have I known any profound being that had anything to say to this world, unless forced to stammer out something by way of getting a living. Oh! Happy that the world is such an excellent listener!” (Melville 538).

Part IV: Fate versus Free Will in *Moby Dick*

Moving on from a structural analysis of the novel, and how Melville uses narrative forms with metanarrative and metafictional techniques, we now consider what themes the author uses these devices to address, beginning with Ahab’s monomania. John Rathbun has expertly considered the multiple levels of symbolism within the text showing Ahab’s obsession; for instance drawing attention to the physical manifestations of the captain’s resolve. Just as the path of the ship mirrors the emotional arc of the protagonists, the light from the lamp swinging over the head of Ahab reveals to Ishmael that the course drawn on the ship’s map has it’s “complement in the gleams and shadows which trace ‘lines and courses upon the deeply marked chart of his forehead” (Rathbun 6). A captive of his own obsession, and unable to make ethical or reasonable choices about the fate of the crew or himself, Ahab knows only his own torment, as he opines, “How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there’s naught beyond” (236). The conflict between duty to the ship’s masters and the safety of the crew, and his quest for revenge often puts Ahab at odds with his first officer, and the inclusion of dramatic apostrophe offers both characters the opportunity to address the reader with their perspectives. Often, Starbuck’s internal monologues reveal as much about Ahab as do his own speeches, as well as the passages where Starbuck addresses God, perhaps the only force capable of swaying Ahab;

“God help thee, old man, thy thoughts have created a creature in thee; and he whose intense thinking thus makes him a Prometheus; a vulture feeds upon that heart for ever, that vulture the very creature he creates” (292). Melville uses dramatic irony to highlight Ahab’s obsession where the reader knows that even divine will cannot deter Ahab, yet Starbuck pleads with God for a change in Ahab’s resolve. When it has become obvious Ahab will not be deterred by any omen or moved by reason, the dialogues between captain and first mate become warnings, and foreshadow the downfall of Ahab as Starbuck pleads, “I ask thee not to beware of Starbuck; thou wouldst but laugh; but let Ahab beware of Ahab; beware of thyself, old man” (682).

A paradox is considered in which the captain seems to defy the will of God, personified in the white whale, by pursuing him, knowing that he may be an unconquerable enemy, yet it must be God that has fated Ahab with the attack that took his leg and planted the seed of vengeance within him. Rathbun again correctly analyzes the philosophical nature of Ahab’s predicament by deterministic laws, suggesting that “if the world and the human beings in it are unconditionally submissive to the compulsory divine will, then ‘Fate is the handspike’ to which all men dance” (5). Alternatively, the possibility of free will can be argued for, if we accept that Ahab has the capacity to allow Starbuck’s better judgment to change his mind and turn away from Moby Dick. Ahab’s choice to defy the will of God instead of listen to reason is the sin that might explain why Ahab’s punishment as a tormented soul and his eventual demise. Specifically, God may be punishing Ahab for ignoring the request of the *Rachel* to search for her lost children, and for dismissing the smashed whale boats and warning of the captain of the *Delight* that the white whale is invincible. Indeed, we see that the fate of the crew is weighed upon the blood oath sworn in “The Quarterdeck”, and sealed by the influence of Ahab, as Ishmael explains “Nor is the history of fanatics half so striking in respect to the measureless self-deception of the fanatic

himself, as his measureless power of deceiving and bedeviling so many others” (455-456). In fact, Starbuck calls Ahab’s mission a blasphemy outright, urging him to “Think, think of the blasphemer- dead, and down there!- beware of the blasphemer’s end! (458). One cannot help but consider the role of divine punishment given the ominous memento mori present in the conclusion as “The three chase units complete the ever-narrowing circle of fate, and Ishmael alone is left to contemplate the vortex, clinging to his lost friend’s coffin” (Eldridge 161).

Whether the *Pequod* is doomed by Ahab’s influence and monomania or the outcome is predetermined by the will of God, there is ample evidence that Ahab’s vengeance is as much directed at the white whale as it is at divine will as fate, of which Moby Dick is merely the physical manifestation. Ahab addresses the St. Elmo’s fire atop the masts in “The Candles” in the same existential and defiant manner in which he berates the elusive whale. Here, we consider if Ahab is deifying the “personified impersonal” as God’s will, or fate, of which we can certainly say that it is the true target of Ahab’s obsession, whether or not it is personified by the whale, or if the whale is simply the means by which he seeks to exact his revenge for his injury. Again, we see the strength of Melvillian apostrophe as Ahab address the almighty:

In the sacramental act so burned by thee, that to this hour I bear the scar; I now know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that thy right worship is defiance. To neither love nor reverence wilt thou be kind; and e’en for hate thou canst but kill; and all are killed. No fearless fool now fronts thee. (724)

Ahab has abandoned any piety to a God he views as tormentor and instead perceives himself as knowing the true essence of fate as deterministic, and thus his only recourse is to act against it as an individual, counterbalancing will, however impotent. Ahab vows his own unconquerable will against the divine will, the Queen’s defiance to the King’s divine providence:

I own thy speechless, placeless power; but to the last gasp of my earthquake life will dispute its unconditional, unintergral mastery in me. In the midst of the personified impersonal, a personality stands here. Though but a point at best; whencesoe'er I came; wheresoe'er I go; yet while I earthly live, the queenly personality lives in me, and feels her royal rights. (724-725).

The physical mark on Ahab's forehead alludes to the mark of Cain, if we allow the white whale to stand for Abel, showing Ahab's surrender to his monomania as his fate to be damned by God. In the midst of the personification of an indifferent and predetermined fate, Ahab stands as a living sacrifice to his own will for revenge.

Melville may ultimately be arguing for hard-determinism; as the narrative shift to Ahab as protagonist in the final portion of the novel mostly concerns his vehement resolve and failure to kill the white whale. The realization of the hopelessness of his circumstance but inability to alter his path leads even the monomaniacal captain to ask himself:

Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm? But if the great sun moves not of himself; but is an errand-boy in heaven; nor one single star can revolve, but by some invisible power...By heaven, man, we are turned round and round in this world, like yonder windlass, and fate is the handspike. (778)

If Ahab's volition has God's will as the cause, then surely he would be unable to affect any change in the outcome, as he himself admits, "The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run" (243). Perhaps Melville intends the reader to surmise that Ahab's monomania clouds his judgment and he fails to see that God's will and his own are one and the same, and to his own frustration of purpose, "Naught's an obstacle, naught's an

angle to the iron way!” (243). If the truth or knowledge of the impossibility of the freedom to act against fate is evident anywhere in the novel epistemologically, Melville may be suggesting this concept in ‘The Quadrant’. The failure of objective nautical instruments frustrates Ahab because it is only through the “quadrant with its ‘numerous cabalistical contrivances’ Ahab realizes that it is the means for looking into God's eye. But the eye discloses only Ahab's position in the larger world. It remains silent in predicting the success of Ahab's quest or even whether he is on the right track”, yet Ahab’s failure to accept this omen of divine ordination and as Rathbun points out, he is left “Cursing ‘all the things that cast man's eyes aloft to that heaven, whose live vividness but scorches him’, Ahab destroys the quadrant, and resolves to rely on the ‘earthly way’ of computing direction and destination: that is, ‘the level ship's compass, and the level dead-reckoning” (7).

Melville does not limit the consideration of free will and fate to the one protagonist; Ishmael thoughts are delineated within the narration, and the officers offer the kind of diversity of perspective that demonstrates the effectiveness of narrative shift within the novel. In “The Mat-Maker”, Melville’s use of heteroglossia is evident as Queequeg’s foreign philosophy mixes with Ishmael’s Christian worldview producing a possible alternative to a free will/deterministic dualism; “This warp seemed necessity; and here, thought I, with my own hand I ply my own shuttle and weave my own destiny into these unalterable threads” (311). Melville seems to be suggesting that if the individual cannot know all the variables, then fate is unknowable, and one is able to manipulate the course of one’s life to a degree indistinguishable from free will. As he summarizes later in the same paragraph, Ishmael argues for a kind of appreciable “free will, still free to ply her shuttle between given threads; and chance, though restrained in its play within the right lines of necessity...has the last featuring blow at events” (Melville 311). Even the often

flippant Stubb wonders aloud “whether the world is anchored anywhere; if she is, she swings with an uncommon long cable” (731), suggesting that the illusion of freedom should be sufficient to stave off the depressive emotions brought on by Ishmael’s realization that “All men live enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters round their necks” (408).

Part V: Contemporary success and reputation of the novel

In attempting a fair and objective analysis of *Moby Dick* within the canon of the Great American Novel, it is important to consider both reputation bias and the negative reaction to the work when it was first published and today. Many readers were turned off by the number of discursive chapters only related to the plot in the abstract way discussed earlier. This problem persists in its current readership, exacerbated by becoming required reading in college courses, it’s dated anthropological views, and lofty philosophical musings. However, because of the prominence of the work within literary circles, hailed as a masterpiece for its proficiency of composition, innovative use of narrative technique and frequent inclusion in popular culture, the text has endured as a seminal American epic. A bias for complexity has caused “both late Victorian common readers and turn-of-the-twenty-first-century bloggers have regularly been swayed, even against their intuitive judgments, by what they take to be critical consensus, as for instance with those today who accept *Moby-Dick* [1851] as a possible GAN while confessing that they don’t much like or understand it” (Buell 137). This paper has shown the validity of placing *Moby Dick* on the shelf amongst other GANs for its execution of a modern epic told through inventive techniques of narrative and a calculated structure, as well as the depth of topics expounded dialectically and figuratively through a diverse cast of characters interacting within highly evocative conflicts. Criticism, analysis, and conversations about the novel that focus on

the initially negative reception may miss the reason it has gained such notoriety today. If we fail to appreciate Melville's unconventional approach as calculated, or are intimidated by its reputation or breadth, we are left trying to ascertain authorial motivation that cannot be determined or are swept up in the literary bias that clouds clear analysis of the novel. The best possible approach may be to examine the text of the novel as the Author presents it, and heed his words regarding how *The Whale* should be appreciated metaphorically as an extensive volume of literature, and philosophically as a commentary on fate:

By good rights he should only be treated of in imperial folio... Since I have undertaken to manhandle this Leviathan, it behooves me to approve myself omnisciently exhaustive in the enterprise; not overlooking the minutest seminal germs of his blood. (654)

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