Criticism of Emerson's Transcendentalism in Melville's *Moby-Dick*

Kritik mot Emersons transcendentalism i Melvilles Moby-Dick

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Abstract

In conceptualizing *Moby-Dick; or, the whale*, Herman Melville was both drawn and opposed to the ideas of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Through an analysis of the main characters in *Moby-Dick* and Emerson's writing, it becomes evident that Transcendentalism is embodied in the characterization of the novel's main characters. I argue that the eventual fates of characters in the novel reveal Melville's criticism of Emerson's ideas. Moreover, the depiction of ocean and land as a symbol of the soul in *Moby-Dick* mirrors Emerson's idealized relationship between man and nature. However, the ambiguous and horrific nature Melville produces shows that the romantic ideal of Emerson's is lacking.

Keywords: Transcendentalism, Melville, Emerson, Ahab, Ishmael

Sammanfattning

I skrivandet av *Moby Dick eller valen* så kom Herman Melville att både inspireras av och motsätta sig Ralph Waldo Emersons idéer. Genom en analys av huvudkaraktärerna i Moby Dick samt Emersons texter så är det tydligt att transcendentalism finns förkroppsligad i karaktäriseringen av romanens huvudkaraktärer. Jag argumenterar för att karaktärernas slutgiltiga öden i romanen uttrycker Melvilles kritik av Emersons idéer. Vidare så är skildringen av hav och land som en symbol för själen i *Moby Dick* en spegling av Emersons idealiserade förhållande mellan människa och natur. Emellertid den tvetydiga och fruktansvärda natur Melville skapar visar på bristfälligheten i Emersons romantiska ideal.

Nyckelord: Transcendentalism, Melville, Emerson, Ahab, Ishmael

Critics were divided on *Moby Dick* when it was first published in 1851. Regardless of Herman Melville's previous popularity as an author of enticing adventure stories set on the high seas or far away tropical places, *Moby Dick* did not receive a popular readership in its own time. Richard H. Brodhead writes that "its reviews were by no means all negative or undiscerning […] but in America it virtually disappeared from view. Undiscussed and unread, Moby-Dick became, for sixty years after it was published, something like a nonexistent book" (16-17). The novel saw recognition far later when perhaps the impact of the time it was a product of, antebellum US, was more keenly relatable. Compounded of the great questions of the day: the cultural division between north and south, the industrialization, the slavery and the conflict of expansion due to it, simultaneous with the underlying crisis of identity concerning US imperialism, made it touch mid-19th century life in the US on many levels. As Richard H Brodhead points at "The crisis of artistic creation that produced *Moby-Dick* coincided exactly with the national political crisis that helped bare the inevitability of civil war" (2). Despite its name and the novel's main story arc about the mad captain Ahab and his fatal obsession for revenge on the white whale Moby Dick, the novel encompasses a profound philosophical discussion that shifts the simple adventure into a reflection on both contemporary and ancient intellectual trends. It discusses society and existence in between the everyday chores aboard the whaling ship *the Pequod*. In one of the first critical reviews of the novel, Henry F. Chorley concludes that "The idea of a connected and collected story has obviously visited and abandoned its writer again and again in the course of composition" (*Athenaeum*, 25 October 1851).

Melville's work is both part of and a reaction to intellectual movements of his own age. As one of the Romantics he questions mankind's overconfidence in reason, society and the existence or nature of God. While Herman Melville did not wholeheartedly adopt any of Emerson's ideas, making *Moby Dick* what it was would not have been possible without the latter's valuable influence on American thinking. Transcendentalism became an important catalyst for others to react against, or to realize in their own art. In this essay, I will argue that Emerson suggests in his essays an arrangement of ideas that Melville opposes[1]. *Moby Dick* exposes and criticizes Transcendentalism as is evident in the characterization and eventual fate of its main characters.

[1] Melville wrote to E. A. Duyckinck in 1849 about one of Emerson's lectures he had attended. From the letter, we learn that except from eyeing a book of his it was the first time Melville learned about Emerson. This is also the only explicit mention of Emerson in Melville's correspondence, Braswell, 319.

In 1836 Ralph Waldo Emerson published the essay *Nature.* With him Transcendentalism became a known intellectual movement. His thoughts came to inspire not only his contemporaries but also coming generations. Emerson called for a distinguished American identity and culture that should be clearly felt through its art and literature. He wrote "Our age is retrospective" (Emerson 3). Feeling that the intellectual heritage of continental Europe being too burdensome and restrictive, Emerson tried through his lectures and writing to promote a holistic worldview, that man and nature were parts of a whole connected by a shared universal soul. In his philosophical examination of nature, he came to argue that, "[T]he universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking therefore, all that is separate from us, all which philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE" (Emerson 5). Transcendentalism emerged in the same time as Marxism developed in Europe. Both as reactions to how the industrial society was developing. But in contrast with Marxism that kept a material, secular and empiric approach to its criticism of society, Transcendentalism became more concerned with spirituality and intuition as means of coming to profound insights. Emerson's take on nature is that all objects share some inner soul pervading all of creation and linking one to another. This connection is most apparent in our appreciation of nature's beauty and felt when living in solitude in accordance with one's inner nature.

Melville's organization of chapters and digression from advancing the main narrative plays a key role in understanding Ishmael's obsession with whales. Moby Dick begins "some years ago" (Melville 21) in New York where the narrator Ishmael begins his tale of how he got into whaling. Ishmael, it will become clear, is obsessive in his attempt to collect everything there is to be known about whales and the whaling industry. Though the novel's name suggests otherwise, most of it is made up of these chapters about whales and whaling, seventeen of which focuses mainly on cetology: the zoological study of whales, dolphins and porpoises. Philip Hoare writes that "Melville's attitude to, and use of, science in Moby-Dick was in line with the eclectic ethos of that period. […] Melville used contemporary knowledge of natural history - or the lack of it - to his own ends" (160). Charles Olson suggests these chapters intentionally prolongs the conclusion of the story:

> The body of the book supports the bulk of the matter on the Sperm whale—'scientific or poetic.' Melville carefully controls these chapters, skillfully breaking them up: the eight different vessels the *Pequod* meets as she moves across the ocean slip in and out between the considerations of cetology.

> Actually and deliberately the whaling chapters brake the advance of the plot. (67-68)

These chapters though momentarily haltering the flow of storytelling are important not only to the internal compounding of the novel and their diversity of topics. They also offer a new take on the long-term psychological consequences of Ishmael's experiences. Ishmael's narration becomes important since in the epilogue he alone survives (Melville 536). Reliving the memories is hard for him and it is evident from the number of chapters devoted to the archiving and understanding of whales, that he is prolonging the advance of the plot, as already suggested by Olson. Sarah. K. Lingo suggests that "Moby Dick is meant to be organic: not just a telling but a reliving of Ishmael's story" (5). She points to some of the complexities attached to the novel's linear storytelling, as the events have already been experienced by Ishmael. For instance, in the first interview for employment onboard the Pequod by Captain Peleg, when inquired about his prior knowledge and experience on whaling, Ishmael answers that he knows nothing. The vast number of pages devoted to the whale and whaling industry would suggest the opposite, had the story not been a re-telling/living of the events. Lingo suggests that the writing becomes a "cathartic" method to control the trauma (6). Richard Boyd Hauck studies Melville's as well as other American authors' response to the creation that he calls absurd: "Their reaction to meaninglessness is both nihilistic and cheerful. The cheerfulness offsets but does not always cancel the nihilism. The logical response to nihilism is despair, but there is a power in the American character to organize, to build, to act, and to laugh in spite of a clear recognition that creation may mean nothing" (1). In addition, Ishmael as a character explores Emerson's ideas within the context of the whaling industry. John Bryant infers that the whale "conveys his [Ishmael's] comic desires of transcendence" (75). Ishmael exhibits the same faith in the spiritual transcendence or the connection Emerson asserted was possible between soul and nature, turning our interest to the ocean.

The image of the ocean throughout the novel is as both a place of awe-inspiring beauty and higher truth, much akin to Emerson's Transcendentalism and its, as Peter Conn writes, "tutelary benevolence of nature" (165). On the other hand, the ocean also symbolizes the human soul, as expressed by Ahab when he addresses the decapitated head of a sperm whale in the chapter *the Sphynx*: "O Nature, and O soul of man! how far beyond all utterance are your linked analogies!" (Melville 303). As the ship floats on the surface of the ocean it is at the mercy of the waves. The stirring, rolling waves obscure the vision as the ship tumbles and climbs its changing landscape. Human connection to nature has its limits as symbolically

shown through our literal inability to fully attain presence in the sky or; under the ocean surface, though limited vision of both is a possibility. From the elevated position of the masthead the viewer sees much further than from the deck, but also apprehends the stirring ocean more keenly.

The masthead is a place of transcendental experience of solitude and of the identity entering a trance-like state of harmony with nature. In *Nature*, Emerson writes about a similar type of experience of nature: "My head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space - all mean egotism vanishes" (9). Similarly, Ishmael describes how he is "lulled into… an opium-like" state of indifference and "loses his identity". The dreamlike, meditative state continues in a long passage where the "spirit ebbs away" and becomes one with all, and the interconnected truth of reality is laid bare, that all creation stems from "the inscrutable tides of God" (9). The theme of pantheism is evident, and it is even mentioned later in the passage. Ishmael is in an altered state of consciousness which clearly exemplifies Emerson's idea of solitude in closeness with nature: "I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God" (9). Even the language takes on a symbolic figurative similarity as Emerson's transparent eye-ball, from the lofty position of the masthead, only has a vast sea to fill its vision. The words I [eye] see [sea] all expresses the transformative power of the masthead as Ishmael transcends.

This awareness to nature at first seems rewarding, but sticking to the narrative lightheartedness of the adventure tale Ishmael recommends those that own whaling ships to not employ young men who seem romantic or philosophically inclined. While perched atop the masthead himself, he shows the reader why, because they make awful lookouts:

> But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch; slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror. Over Descartian vortices you hover. And perhaps, at mid-day, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever. Heed it well, ye Pantheists! (Melville 162-163)

There is a conflict in Ishmael's apparent immersion and belief in this dreamlike state of transcendental experience and his ridicule of the young men, too romantic or philosophical to feel self-preservation or be of any practical use to the world. As the story progresses this positive and lighthearted view of nature becomes outbalanced by the feeling of terror and indifference.

Melville's dichotomy between sea and land as a metaphor for the soul is a reflection of Transcendentalism's idea of the relationship between man and nature. As Emerson states in

his essay *Nature*: "a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society" (6). However, this view is dramatically upheaved in Melville's dichotomy of land and sea:

> Consider the subtleness of the sea; how its most dreaded creatures glide under water, unapparent for the most part, and treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure. Consider also the devilish brilliance and beauty of many of its most remorseless tribes, as the dainty embellished shape of many species of sharks. Consider, once more, the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began. Consider all this; and then turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? 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! (Melville 270-271)

All mild, benevolent pictures of nature are mixed with shade, gloom and perpetual feelings of danger.

Melville's characters are drawn to the ocean because they long to understand their existence and the contrast between land and ocean is fundamental for understanding Melville's assessment of man's inability to do so. Something in the waters draws man to it: "like silent sentinels all around the town, stand thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries" (Melville 21). In *Nature,* Emerson mentions how the presence of the stars wakes "a certain reverence" (6-7). Melville, though, keeping to the maritime theme of *Moby-Dick*, experiments with the same wish in man to achieve transcendence. Melville's nature, however, as represented by the ocean, is both beautiful and terrible to man. At the same time, land and sea represents a conflict within the soul of man which cannot be resolved. This conflict develops the crucial pursuit for meaning (by achieving transcendence) but also explains why it is almost impossible to fulfill:

> [G]limpses do ye seem to see of that mortally intolerable truth; that all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore? But as in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God" this is Ishmael's interpretation that if there was ever a God that "– so, better is it to perish in that

> howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety! (Melville 116)

If you search for meaning it is in "landlessness" you find it. However, land that has previously been represented by the positive "insular Tahiti", here becomes a dangerous impediment to man's search for transcendence. The insufficiency of land is similarly seen in Ishmael's description of the character Bulkington.

Ishmael idealizes Bulkington who first seems to outbalance the grim existence it entails to "keep the open independence of her sea" (116), which ends with the latter's literary apotheosis. Long before setting sail on the Pequod, Ishmael tells us about Bulkington, a southern man whom he describes as the epitome of 19th century manliness: "He stood full six feet in height, with noble shoulders, and a chest like a coffer-dam. I have seldom seen such brawn in a man. His face was deeply brown and burnt, making his white teeth dazzling by the contrast; while in the deep shadows of his eyes floated some reminiscences that did not seem to give him much joy" (Melville 34). Truly, a whaler among whalers, Bulkington is introduced from early on but returns to the story only once, just after setting off on their journey. Ishmael is impressed and awed at how a mariner that newly returned from a four-year voyage "could so unrestingly push off again for still another tempestuous term" (Melville 115). We are reminded of Ishmael's earlier comment on the importance of contrasting opposites in the symbolism of sea and land, which is apparent as Ishmael goes on to exemplify what supposedly went on inside Bulkington's mind:

> The port would fain give succor; the port is pitiful; in the port is safety, comfort, hearthstone, supper, warm blankets, friends, all that's kind to our mortalities. But in that gale, the port, the land, is that ship's direst jeopardy; she must fly all hospitality; one touch of land, though it but graze her keel, would make her shudder through and through. (Melville 115)

Land, port or society here offers a sense of disenchantment. Bulkington's ascendancy to godhood suggests that he epitomizes the concept of "landlessness". His perpetual up-rootedness is also reflected by that of Ishmael and Ahab. In the introduction to her thesis, Sara Ott suggests that: "The balancing of certain contradictions within an individual character or a task a character must perform reveals Melville's view that paradox is a crucial element of human existence" (1). Since land is so constricting, there is a circumspective captivation, a longing, in everyone toward the dark mysterious sea. At the same time, the ocean represents mortal peril. Melville offers an answer to the sense of disenchantment and up-rootedness felt among the main characters throughout the novel, that is, to accept the "landlessness". Being

precariously situated between the simultaneously hazardous elements of land and sea. Bulkington becomes godlike, and while Ishmael and by extent Melville, on the contrary, divorces Bulkington from any sense of joy, he praises it just the same. Bulkington's minor part in the novel, together with his joyless existence and exaggerated exit from the narrative, supports a reading of man's spiritual ability to live in transcendence with nature, as inherently flawed. Whereas Ishmael's aggrandizement of Bulkington seems inflated and almost parodical, it reflects the view held by Emerson in *Nature* that "The greatest delight" (10) of transcendence, "is less grand as it shuts down over less worth in the population" (11). Thus, the "occult relation" (10) as he puts it, between man and nature, is hardly attainable by everyone. Pip, the youngest of the crew, fits this description well as he experiences Melville's dark realization of Emerson's thoughts about going into "solitude" (1).

Pip's experience points to the fallibility of the idealistic nature and relationship to divinity as expressed in Emerson's Transcendentalism. Similar to Ishmael's moment of transcendence atop the masthead, the Castaway is another passage that takes on a dreamlike though nightmarish state of disintegrating identity. Pip, a young black boy, jumps off Stubb's boat in mid chase and is as promised left behind. This starts one of the strangest transformations in literature:

> Carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-merman, wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad." (Melville 396-397)

This is a far more sinister picture of the raw experience that, although similar to Ishmael's realization in solitude, shows us a more dominating image of nature and pantheism. Slavoj Zizek calls it the "demon God" (64). Brodhead suggests it is the "world formed through speechless, unmindful natural process" (5). As the "unwarped primal world" hints at an unveiled more truthful reality, the "strange shapes" inform us of Pip's inability to understand or digest what he perceives. "God's foot upon the treadle of the loom" brings mechanical connotations, which brings us to a new point in Melville's take on transcendental experience. In the intermediate time between his falling off the whaling boat and subsequently being salvaged by the Pequod, Pip experiences a mental breakdown. Ishmael warns the reader of the existential power of the sea: - "But awful lonesomeness is intolerable. The intense

concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity" (Melville 396). The Ocean is significant as an indicator of an essential problem with identity. As Ishmael describes how "the sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul." (Melville 396). The finite boundaries of his body are kept but the infinite of his soul is drowned. There is stark difference between Ishmael's and Pip's experiences. Ishmael is merely viewing the sea from a vantage point and this is perhaps important to the understanding of Melville's ocean as a reflection of the human soul. Ishmael is reflecting himself in the mirror-like waters and invests time in trying to make out what it could mean from an illusory sense of safety aboard the ship. Pip, on the other hand, is forced into these waters, metaphorically illustrating the human soul. The trio of Ishmael, Pip and Bulkington produces three distinct outcomes from the amalgamation of Melville and Emerson. The human search for a meaningful connection to the divine, so perilous, as symbolized by the ambiguous role of land and ocean, reaches its climax with the hunt for the white whale. Moby Dick takes on a multitude of interpretations as Ishmael's and Ahab's obsessions unfold.

Ishmael's obsession to make meaning of the whale shows the limitations of Transcendentalism. Ishmael cannot grasp the full magnitude of the whale, the concept of "landlessness." At first it is the physical boundaries that become problematic for him. In the Spouter Inn, where Ishmael later befriends Queequeg, there is a large oil painting that Ishmael suggests is a picture of a whale. He comes to this conclusion not from instantly looking at the painting. For it is as he puts it:

> A very large oil-painting so thoroughly besmoked, and every way defaced, that in the unequal cross-lights by which you viewed it, it was only by diligent study and a series of systematic visits to it, and careful inquiry of the neighbors, that you could any way arrive at an understanding of its purpose. Such unaccountable masses of shades and shadows, that at first you almost thought some ambitious young artist, in the time of the New England hags, had endeavored to delineate chaos bewitched. But by dint of much and earnest contemplation, and oft repeated ponderings, and especially by throwing open the little window towards the back of the entry, you at last come to the conclusion that such an idea, however wild, might not be altogether unwarranted. (Melville 30)

Coming to any kind of meaningful conclusion about the picture of the whale, he must not only go through lengthy discourses with the other inhabitants of the Spouter Inn, in some ways to almost reach a collective verdict on the matter, but he also needs to change the lighting that

settles on the painting, since the original perspective did not lead him to any conclusion. Finding a fixed answer is clearly an arduous task but as he goes on: "yet was there a sort of indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity about it that fairly froze you to it, till you involuntarily took an oath with yourself to find out what that marvelous painting meant" (Melville 30). Regardless of his efforts, he does not come to any answer other than that it is a whale, a mysterious symbol for what is "hidden". Ishmael is constantly pulled to this indefinite multiplicity of meanings as exemplified in the first instance with the painting, but later and more fundamentally shown through his many attempts at coming to terms with whales in general and, the whiteness of one whale in particular. Alastair Henry and Catherine Walker Bergström suggests that the white whale is a symbol that Melville uses to exhort the reader to ponder the meaning of his/her existence (313). The characters find themselves at loss to pin its meaning since it incorporates seemingly all meanings at once. Ishmael complains: "For in the mere act of penning my thoughts of this Leviathan. They weary me, and make me faint with their outreaching comprehensiveness" (Melville 432). Ishmael's view is that the meaning represented in the whiteness of the whale is too profound to be understood. Everything about this mystery is unfathomable, and Melville seems pessimistic about the prospect of man being able to connect with a nature that is "shoreless, indefinite as God". Everything that has been said about Melville's recognition of man's helplessness in the face of nature applies.

In a letter to fellow writer Nathaniel Hawthorne, Melville voices his doubts about the sensation of transcendence being nothing more than short lived glimpses in a human life:

> This 'all' feeling, though, there is some truth in. You must often have felt it, lying on the grass on a warm summer's day. Your legs seem to send out shoots into the earth. Your hair feels like leaves upon your head. This is the *all* feeling. But what plays the mischief with the truth is that men will insist upon the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion. (June, 1851)

From the letter it seems that Melville did not believe men could deliberately attune themselves to some Omniscience, as promised by Emerson, and thereby perceive the organic unity and abstract value of the universe. Hauck concludes that it was more characteristic of him to see God as The Practical Joker rather than as the Supplier of Ideal Truth (114). Though the whale is captivating and beautiful it still remains indecipherable. It is "enough to drive a nervous man distracted" (Melville 30), turning our interest from Ishmael to Ahab.

Ahab is the realization of Emerson's "Self-Reliance", the captain's monomania is a twisted take on the egoism and individualism expressed by Emerson and shows Melville's

critique of Transcendentalism. Emerson writes in his essay *Self-Reliance* that: "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, - that is genius" (19). Emerson intended to promote the individual's original thought process. What for critics seemed as self-absorption, or letting egotistical behavior to take precedence, was to Emerson the proof of man's connection with the universe. He continues: "This is the ultimate fact which we so quickly reach on this, as on every topic, the resolution of all into the ever-blessed ONE" (30). For Emerson, what seems to be perfect sense but is unauthorized by society is the acknowledgement of a higher truth, or God. As he puts it: "Self-existence is the attribute of the Supreme Cause, and it constitutes the measure of good by the degree in which it enters into all lower forms. All things real are so by so much virtue as they contain." (30).

In the characterization of Ahab's birthplace, Melville overstates the Emersonian virtue of self-reliance as a typically American trait. Ahab is born in a seafaring community centered on Nantucket, and Ishmael gives us a general overview of its people and history: "Issuing from their ant-hill in the sea, … two thirds of this terraquecous globe are the Nantucketer's. For the sea is his; he owns it, as Emperors own empires; other seamen having but a right of way through it." (Melville 77). Captain Ahab represents a special category of men that takes on these almost mythical qualities, the mythological American corporate executive pioneering the last american frontier. As Olson writes, "The Pacific is, for an American, the Plains repeated, a 20th century Great West" (114). The scale and industry of Nantucket seems a great exaggeration, but as a representation of early 19th century US, it shows the transformative power that was unleashed across the continent. John McWilliams concludes that the governmental system of the US had survived "together with its undeniable growth and visible if not universal prosperity," proved that it had "divine Providence" as it set itself conquering the continent (1). Writers wishing to define the American came to see liberty and equality as virtues inherent in the cultural fabric of the US. "Manifest Destiny", phrased by John L. O'Sullivan in 1845 "soon entered the language as a catchword for and justification of expansion" (McKay et al., 790). The durability of the American system together with a religious sense of being chosen, confirmed a narcissistic outlook on man and society, and made them perceive their nation as having a special ownership over nature. However, at the same time, there is something innate unjust in this exertion of control over nature. This is not a nation promoting coexistence with, or benevolence of nature, Ishmael's awe for the whaling industry is mixed with his gloomy view of its overconfidence. "[H]owever baby man may brag of his science and skill… yet for ever…the sea will insult and murder him… nevertheless, the continual repetition of these very impressions, man has lost that sense of the

full awfulness of the sea which aboriginally belongs to it." (Melville 270). Ishmael establishes a paradoxical relationship in these two quotes. The "sea will insult and murder him" speaks against the former quote's overbearing self-assurance. Keeping in mind what the sea represents in the previous analogy, as a hazardous but captivating place full of hidden meaning, it points to the overconfidence that Ahab symbolizes.

Furthermore, one should also remember that the novel portrays times before the US abolition of slavery. The different remarks voiced about slavery, makes meaning in a broader political context as a criticism of the unresolved issue. Ian McGuire finds that Melville and Emerson hold different positions regarding wage labor capitalism: "while Emerson imagines that newly constituted self [worker] as progressive, triumphalist and entirely suited to an emerging capitalism, for Melville, always suspicious of transcendentalist optimism, the self, Ishmael, remains awkwardly mournful and bereft" (304). The unfulfilled liberty of both the northern wage laborers, who critics regarded as perpetually locked in wage labor (sometimes called wage slavery) and who could never realize the American dream of "economic independence" (290), and the southern plantation slaves, were deeply problematic for Melville. McGuire summarizes Melville's view, as expressed in the novel, of the times: "the cruelty of the human world is only matched by the cruelty of nature itself" (305). This is further substantiated in Ishmael's speech about how he makes a point of being paid instead of paying: "I always go to the sea as a sailor, because […] there is all the difference in the world between paying and being paid". For as he observes, "The urbane activity with which a man receives money is really marvelous, considering that we so earnestly believe money to be the root of all earthly ills, and that on no account can a monied man enter heaven. Ah! how cheerfully we consign ourselves to perdition!" (Melville 24). Before Pip's dive into madness, the first mate Stubb has him put to task as a replacement oarsman in his boat. But after having to salvage the boy during a chase for a whale his patience expires, and he threatens to leave Pip in the water, would he jump off the boat again. Ishmael concludes "tough man loved his fellow, yet man is a money-making animal, which propensity too often interferes with his benevolence" (Melville 395) indicating an estrangement from an ideology that objectified humans and nature alike. It should be noted, though, that Melville in contradiction with earlier negativity, in the epilogue of *Moby-Dick*, has a ship called the Rachel salvage Ishmael from the sea: "in her retracing search after her missing children, only found another orphan." (536) The Rachel of course also represents this kind of industrial economy at sea. Though perhaps it is a comment on how our hope, in this case to find the lost son, sometimes takes over ordinary human life and makes it pause. But to take the novel's anti-capitalistic negativity one step

further, it is perhaps a byproduct of capitalism that the objectified son of a captain can hold such value to obstruct the whole attention of the crew for several days. In a time before US abolition of slavery we find the opposition between Pip and the lost son of the Rachel, one more pointer to Melville's critique of the American society. For as Stubb puts it: "a whale would sell for thirty times what you would, Pip, in Alabama" (Melville 395). Both Emerson and Melville share a common distaste for slavery, but Melville's criticism of it seems to be for not fully understanding the consequences of self-reliant leadership.

Emerson's idea of the self-reliant genius is transformed in Ahab to maddened dictatorship. He is a man of an inner law, he does not see his fellow men as equal, he manipulates, and intimidates everyone to his will. In a confrontation with his first mate "Ahab seized a loaded musket from the rack … pointing it toward Starbuck, exclaimed: 'there is one God that is Lord over the earth, and one captain that is lord over the Pequod'" (Melville 449). His instinct is not self-preservation or morality. Captain Ahab, though breaking with the capitalist objective of the whaling enterprise, manipulates the crew adhering to a basic agreement in capitalism that a man who works must also receive wage. In this case Ahab draws the crew's attention away from the practical disruption hunting Moby Dick really represents. Ahab nails the golden doubloon to the mast and exclaims that the first man to spot the white whale will also receive the doubloon, an acceptable exchange for the supposed loss the crew might see as a result of this new course of action. Even so, Ahab sees the value of hunting a few whales on the way, partly to assert his undisputable role as Captain onboard, but also to hone the skills of his crew. The crew seems shortsighted to accept this doubloon that hardly matches the combined lay of each man onboard and that also only one of them may collect as a reward for all their combined hard labor (Melville 409-414). McGuire also notes that Ahab's obsession with the white whale "may actually make him a better captain" (299), for as Ishmael conspires:

> Nor is it so very unlikely, that far from distrusting his fitness for another whaling voyage, on account of such dark symptoms, the calculating people of that prudent island [Nantucket] were inclined to harbor the conceit that for those very reasons he was all the better qualified and set on edge, for a pursuit so full of rage and wildness as the bloody hunt for the whales. (Melville 187-188)

We are invited to think of Ahab as a cautionary tale since Melville's or Ishmael's point was that you should not grasp a finite meaning or truth and that is precisely what Ahab does in his monomaniac hunt for Moby Dick. Ahab addresses the whale to give away some of its

secrets about existence, because to Ahab this is the epitome of nature: all-knowing, but uncaring. Ahab seems to recognize that there is a split between nature and the "soul of man", and that as he will later come back to, there seems to be thought behind actions in nature just as there are, behind actions by man. "Not the smallest atom stirs or lives on matter, but has its cunning duplicate in mind" (Melville 303). The lesson to be learned would be that by searching for this meaning you will forget to live, as shown from *the Symphony* where he laments that from a 40-year career at sea only three were spent at shore. (Melville 506). His fixation with the white whale is overpowering every strand of morality. "Moby Dick was yet to be slain; and though a thousand other whales were brought to his ship, all that would not one jot advance his grand, monomaniac object" (Melville 284). However, Ahab's irrational hatred is yet another perspective on transcendence. It too shows Melville's underlying critique of self-reliance. "Good and Bad", as Emerson writes, "are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it." (Self-Reliance 22). Emerson's idea of transcendence called for a firm inner voice and the strong disregard of tradition inherent in the self-made man. Ahab is a twisted take on both. His final demise in the confrontation with Moby Dick strengthens the idea that one should read his attitude toward finding meaning as flawed.

Melville plays with the theme of the hunt and reverts it, so the hunter becomes the hunted. The earlier up-rootedness as felt by Ishmael, Ahab and Bulkington, that was formerly described in terms of disenchantment with society and longing to find meaning in nature, here becomes transformed into a paranoid sensation of being chased:

> Ahab… in his forward turn beholding the monsters he chased, and in the after one the bloodthirsty pirates chasing him; some such fancy as the above seemed his. And when he glanced upon the green walls of the watery defile in which the ship was then sailing, and bethought him that through the gate lay the route to his vengeance, and beheld, how that through that same gate he was now both chasing and being chased to his deadly end… (Melville 367)

Ahab seems to not so much be searching for Moby Dick as he is chased into confronting him even though he knows it might be his end. In the chapter *Dusk,* Ahab begins to iterate this reversion: the festivity ahead, the stillness behind, "Methinks it pictures life." It pulls him behind and the strange sensation of living among the dead is Ahab's conclusion, "hunted by its wolfish gurglings" (Melville 172). It is similar to the deadly boundary previously shown in Bulkington's dichotomy of "port and sea". Moreover, the same feeling reoccurs in the Try-Works were the narrator, presumably Ishmael, while steering the Pequod becomes entranced

with the industry taking place onboard. A fire is lit on the ship to burn and boil the blubber from the whale. The light is reflected in the pitch-black ocean and long shadows are cast from everyone close to it: “Uppermost was the impression, that whatever swift, rushing thing I stood on was not so much bound to any haven ahead as rushing from all havens astern, A stark, bewildered feeling, as of death, came over me.” (Melville 404). The dreadful feeling of man always being chased, the awareness to death, is most evident in Ishmael’s description of the whale line. Between the grand philosophical discourses and obligatory pondering on the sublime beauty of the ocean, Moby Dick is also written to give a realistic depiction of work onboard. Comparing British and American traditional ways of keeping the whale line fixed in the boat he comes to a grim conclusion at the end of the chapter that:

> All men are enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters round their necks; but it is only when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that mortals realize the silent, subtle, everpresent perils of life. And if you be a philosopher, though seated in the whale-boat, you would not at heart feel one whit more of terror, than though seated before your evening fire with a poker, and not a harpoon, by your side. (Melville 276)

Ishmael recognizes that this realization is perilous and reaches us wherever we are.

What truly haunts the characters of Moby Dick is the underlying but persistent feeling of nothingness. Ishmael points this out in a chapter called *the Whiteness of the Whale,* that the whale is “the most appaling to mankind. … by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation” (Melville 196). Not only does it remind us of our mortality, but it is “a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink?” (Melville 196). This means that, life is not only going to end, it is possibly meaningless, or at the least has no meaning imbued by soul, universe or God.

As already stated, Melville’s view, as expressed in the novel, seems to be that the universe is unknowable. Though momentary glances of a connection with the spiritual universe is possible as seen with Ishmael in the masthead. It is beyond our grasp to remain in this state of immersion with nature. In contrast, Ahab seems assured that the whale and the “hidden” that it represents are everything else than good. He defies God in a culture that is strictly religious. His immense ego has no match on earth, so Melville turns Ahab into a lieutenant of the devil: “Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli!” (Melville 462). Olson translates: “I do not baptize thee in the name of the father, but in the name of the devil” (53). He is at the core a self-made man, the narcissistic American dream

personified: “And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all” (Melville 23). The “mild image” Ahab subsequently drowns in is the white whale, Moby Dick. “I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it” (Melville 167). Just as Ahab recognizes strength in himself, he acknowledges it in his enemy. The malice he himself gives voice to throughout the novel is similarly echoed in Moby Dick: “be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him” (Melville 167). Compared to his own incertitude towards having control over his own actions. It becomes evident that the whale reflects Ahab, and that the comparison Melville introduces by reminding us of the story of Narcissus in chapter one, is in fact about Ahab: “The wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him” (Melville 197). McGuire suggests that “The crucial difference between Ahab and Ishmael in this regard is that while Ahab rails against the divisions, Ishmael accepts and works with them (although he certainly does not go as far as the later Emerson and see them as part of a larger divine unity)” (303). Ahab is left with uncertainty and longs for connection with a greater whole but can never elevate himself above the ordinary. His confrontation with the white whale is forced in the same sense as all men are drawn to the mysterious water, i.e., the essential search for meaning. The tale of Narcissus recurs in similar manners throughout the novel. In chapter ninety-nine the crew reflect themselves in the golden doubloon to have it let go of its secrets (Melville 409-414). But to Ahab the whale is the symbol of synergy with nature. “Oh, man! Admire and model thyself after the whale! Do thou, too, remain warm among ice. Do thou, too, live in this world without being of it.” (Melville 300). Emerson proposes a more individualistic take on spirituality or closeness to God and disdains the conformity that is everywhere in society. When encountering other vessels, Ahab seems reluctant to be in the company of others: “as it eventually turned out, he [Ahab] cared not to consort, even for five minutes. With any stranger captain, except he could contribute some of that information he so absorbingly sought” (Melville 235). According to Emerson, in making life decisions, with your conscience as a guide rather than the influence from society, one becomes free. Melville juxtaposes Ahab’s experience to Emerson’s harmonious relationship between man and nature to subvert the latter’s conclusions of what an original relationship with God entails. It is anything but freedom that Ahab finds in his solitude. Questioning his autonomy, while also fighting a crusade against the malicious whale, Moby Dick. All the while the frightening

thought of there being nothing behind soul, universe and nature, permeates the story. Ahab addresses this after he has included the crew on his plans to catch and kill Moby Dick. The first mate Starbuck questions his reasoning for doing this, to which Ahab responds, "All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event - in the living act, the undoubted deed - there, some unknown but still reasoning thing put forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask!" (Melville 167). He describes the dualities of the material world visible to us through our senses, and the immaterial, only cryptically described as present "in the living act" and "undoubted deed." The passage continues with Ahab explaining the true cause of his lust for revenge: "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" (Melville 167). This is reminiscent of Ishmael's annihilating nothingness in "colorless, all-color of atheism." Furthermore, Ahab confesses to the first mate Starbuck that he harbors uncertainty about his free will and independence. Ahab disputes any form of innateness to freedom:

> What is it, what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what coezzening, hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time; recklessly making me ready to do what in my own proper, natural heart, I durst not so much as dare? Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm? But if the great sun move not of himself; but is as an errand-boy in heaven; nor one single star can revolve, but by some invisible power; how then can this one small heart beat; this one small brain think thoughts; unless God does that beating, does that thinking, does that living, and not I. (Melville 508)

Ahab comes to Emerson's conclusion, the "ultimate fact", that his thoughts are the acknowledgement of a higher truth. However, Ahab questions the autonomy of his thoughts and actions and believes himself to be controlled by a "hidden lord". He perceives there is a difference between what he does out of his "natural heart" and what he attributes to this "master". He defines this sensation as being undefinable, it is "nameless, inscrutable," and "unearthly". The whiteness of the whale is the culmination of this enigma. Melville makes us sympathize with the tragic captain who seems possessed. The chase for the White Whale is a controlling idea, and Ahab's monomania becomes a being on its own and even possesses him. "For, at such times, crazy Ahab, […] this Ahab that had gone to his hammock, was not the

agent that so caused him to burst from it in horror again. The latter was the eternal, living principle or soul in him; and in sleep, being for the time dissociated from the characterizing mind, which at other times employed it" (Melville 202). Emerson wrote of a similar kind of possessive sensation in his essay *The Over-Soul*, whence the realization that your thoughts are part of a higher cause, "I am constrained every moment to acknowledge a higher origin for events than the will I call mine." (*Self-Reliance and Other Essays* 52). Ahab's paranoia is an indication that Melville believed Emerson's *self-reliance* could lead to insane leadership. Ahab ascribes the same possessive "master" that governs his soul to be behind "the mask of" Moby-Dick. Or if by coincidence there would be nothing behind, that he will kill the whale anyhow. Ahab sees nothing immoral in such actions: "Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me. For could the sun do that, then could I do the other; since there is ever a sort of fair play herein, jealousy presiding over all creations. But not my master, man, is even that fair play. Who's over me? Truth has no confines" (Melville 167). Once again we are reminded of Emerson's words that man had the capacity for an original relationship with nature. Ahab's self-aggrandizement of himself as equal to the sun represents his longing for a relationship without intermediaries. This is in Melville's twisted take, a mark of hubris, Ahab becomes the democratic hero who at the same time radiates that he is equal to none.

Emerson's take on power in nature as the only measure of right is a dominating idea in Melville's conceiving of Ahab's vengeful chase. Emerson writes in his essay *Self-Reliance* "Nature suffers nothing to remain in her kingdoms which cannot help itself" (30). Ahab described by Captain Peleg as a "grand, ungodly, god-like man" (Melville 92) becomes conflicted after losing his leg to Moby Dick. Ahab's hatred takes on superhuman proportions, it distorts everything around him, monomania, and the singular truth in his worldview that the white whale must be his exit from the illusion. The crew joins his quest to kill the white whale. Everyone except Starbuck who reasonable retorts "Vengeance on a dumb brute!" (Melville 167). Meaning that the whale acts out of natural behavior. They are bound by oath to Ahab "I, Ishmael, was one of that crew; […] my oath had been welded with theirs; […] Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine. With greedy ears I learned the history of that murderous monster against whom I and all the others had taken our oaths of violence and revenge." (Melville 180). Ahab feels a loss of agency, self said he cannot enjoy and everything comforting, or soothing is "anguish" (Melville 170). He has decided as much as it has been decided for him that he must kill the whale or die trying. He is rational, but everything is commanded by this idea. Moreover, Pip's mental breakdown exemplifies the

same disintegration of identity as Ahab experienced in the instance of his "hidden lord". Melville's poetic language gives us a glimpse of what the two have seen, Ahab too have "been used to deeper wonders than the waves; fixed his fiery lance in mightier, stranger foes than whales" (Melville 92). In a conversation between Ahab and Pip after the accident, Ahab shows his "humanities" (Melville 93), in his care of the mad black boy Pip. He says, "Thou touchest my inmost centre, boy; thou are tied to me by chords woven of my heart-strings" (Melville 489). The nothingness or negation of self, permeating the novel, is concluded in Pip's nonsense vision of madness from *The Cast-Away*, and the cause of Ahab's monomania and cryptical reasoning for going after Moby Dick. Zizek describes it as "nature's automatic and senseless functioning" (66). Pip is a victim of circumstance, frail and black, quite the opposite to Ahab. But once the veneer of stability is peeled away and the experience of Melville's raw interconnectedness with nature remains, it is a controlling emotion that causes strong reactions in its victims. "For what are the comprehensible terrors of man compared with the interlinked terrors and wonders of God!" (Melville 117). The white whale symbolizes this overwhelming sense of awe or vulnerability, the full magnitude of what Emerson suggested with power in nature is conceived by Melville in the avatar of the white whale, and the incomprehensible all-symbolism it represents.

To conclude, in the epilogue Ishmael floats away surrounded by sharks. To remain afloat in the midst of terror, as Ishmael apparently does, makes one want to assume that the hero has prevailed. However, as is evident by Ishmael's prolonging of the narrative, his comical desires for transcendence in the masthead are thwarted by the ominous nature of the horrific ocean. The obsessive behaviour displayed by both Ahab and Ishmael, represents mankind's search for meaning, or the transcendence Emerson assured was possible in nature. Melville's symbolical dichotomy of land and ocean as a mirror of the soul exemplifies the inadequacy of Emerson's idealized relationship between man and nature. As evident in Ishmael's joyful immersion with nature in *the Mast-Head* is juxtaposed with Pip's drowned sanity. Emerson wanted to revitalize man's connection with divinity without intermediaries. He saw this divinity in nature and asserted man was part of this pantheistic whole. Solitude and self-reliance were means for the individual to reach transcendence. These traits are easily found in the characterization of Ahab. He represents Melville's criticism of Emerson's philosophical shortcomings. Ahab never finds a way to reach the spiritual ascendance promised, his attempts are initiated by man's search for meaning and subsequently stopped by Moby Dick, the culmination of nothingness. Though Ahab's, at times, vulgar displays of power in some instances speak against his suitability as a hero to achieve this ascendance, his

supposed counterpart Ishmael neither does. The two react differently to the threat of nothingness that is behind nature. Ahab in his monomania is fixed on killing the white whale, even though there might be nothing behind its actions. Ishmael in his obsession by trying to comprehend what is incomprehensible. Ishmael's humorous conclusion that young men who look romantic or philosophic make poor lookouts expresses the novel's central ridicule of Transcendentalism as conceived by Emerson. In contrast with Emerson's positive outlook on nature, Melville shows the reader a nature that is ambiguous, both beautiful and horrific, both the source of meaning and proof of its absence.

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