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**An Evolutionary Analysis of *Moby Dick*:**  
**The *Pequod's* Search for Brotherhood, Status, and Mystery**

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## Introduction

Several years ago, I read the primatologist Frans de Waal's *Chimpanzee Politics*, detailing the daily lives and power struggles of one chimpanzee colony in the Arnhem Zoo, in the Netherlands. I was working for a marketing firm at the time, spending my days "clined to a desk" like Ishmael's Manhattanites in the opening pages of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. Reading about primates made it increasingly difficult to view our species as anything but what we are: the third chimpanzee. It suddenly became easy to spot the small coalitions that would build, and to identify the alphas and the aspiring alphas all the way up the ladder. Watching--and participating--in the small, daily dramas of office life after reading *Chimpanzee Politics*, it all made more sense. Everyone that has worked in a group knows of the tensions that arise based on perceived discrepancies in wages. De Waal cites a study in which capuchin monkeys pull a lever to receive a slice of cucumber. The monkeys happily do this task repeatedly. Then, within sight, another monkey pulls a lever and receives a grape, the favorite snack of capuchins. The monkeys receiving cucumbers typically throw a temper tantrum and cease cooperating, in apparent protest of their inferior reward; suddenly, they would rather have nothing than a taste of mediocre cucumber. Most primates have various forms of altruism, culture, and a sense of fairness, and after seeing chimpanzees make-up after a fight--usually entailing a period of awkward eye contact avoidance, followed by a hesitant approach, finalized with a hand clasp--it is very difficult to see human behavior as being drastically different from other mammals, and especially our closest primate relatives.

An interest in primatology naturally led to an interest in human evolution, and as the work of De Waal, Jane Goodall, Jared Diamond, E.O. Wilson and, of course, Charles Darwin increasingly impacted my understanding of human nature, I began to wonder: if evolution is true, and human behavior is influenced by biological impulses as well as cultural ones, and culture is influenced by biology and vice-versa, then should not evolutionary theory be applicable to literary studies?

The union offers an enticingly improved understanding of human nature and the arts. The theory of natural selection has had too great an impact on the human understanding of the world that, even if only because of its cultural force, it deserves to be better accounted for in literary studies. As the evidence in support of natural selection increases so, too, does its applicability to the arts. While evolutionary theory is not a "grand myth" in the tradition of religion--its reliance on empirical evidence

ensures that it is always open to challenge or debunking--its explanatory power has largely supplanted religious belief as the paradigm within which humanity views the world. This impacts how people worldwide approach issues such as climate change, medicine, and visits to the zoo. The increasing influence of science on culture has, in many ways, already seeped into the humanities. In bookstores, books by scientists by Richard Dawkins and Steven Pinker are given a prominence rivaling any contemporary fiction writer, and other scientists showing comparable adeptness at crafting accessible prose have found similar success on bestseller lists. Literary scholar Richard Holmes, famed biographer of the Romantics, earned much acclaim for his *The Age of Wonder* (2008), a broadening of the conception of British Romanticism to better incorporate the innovative scientists and science of the time into the lore of the famed collection of imaginative and innovative poets and writers. The reaches of evolutionary theory are even entrenched in the punk rock subculture, evidenced by Bad Religion front man--and Ivy League professor of biology--Greg Graffin, whose book *Anarchy Evolution* (2010), is a philosophical interweaving of punk rock ethos and a naturalist world view.

Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) is a notoriously complicated text. Its appeal and difficulty are both rooted in its vastness, a feature of this strange classic's narratorial point-of-view, Ishmael. Ishmael is a character interested in all things, with a proclivity to approach subjects from a multitude of perspectives. I chose it as the primary text for this paper precisely because of its difficulty, its resistance to easy comprehension. If an evolutionary approach to literature is a valid critical perspective then it should be so for all pieces of literature, not only those most easily lent to the theoretical framework.

Studying *Moby Dick* from a "literary Darwinist" perspective, then, offers intriguing possibilities. Because the text predates any of Darwin's work, it is immune to direct influence. Gillian Beers, in her *Darwin's Plots* (1983), traces Darwinian theory in late-Victorian literature, analyzing the influence of evolution as discourse. I do not intend to offer that kind of analysis. Natural selection, as the driving force for evolution, has determined the flexible, creative, and abnormally large human brain. In approaching literature as an adaptive function of that monster-brain, the challenge is to connect the nuanced, subtle, and imaginary nature of literary representation to the more broad evolved behaviors and motivations that define the human species. This form of analysis is valid for any literary text produced at any time, but in working with a text which predates Darwin there is no danger of influence on Melville's book from Darwin's theories on natural selection and evolutionary psychology. Themes relevant to natural selection in *Moby Dick* assuredly come only from Herman Melville's interpretations and observations of reality. Another advantage to working with Melville's masterpiece is

that its complexity makes it resistant to a reductive analysis. Several works of Darwinian literary criticism in recent years have fallen into that trap, reducing works of literature to representations of simple evolutionary behaviors. David Barash's *Madame Bovary's Ovaries: a Darwinian Look at Literature* is probably the most commonly cited example of this. Acknowledging the representations of evolved motivations in a literary text is fruitful, but to a very limited extent. Acknowledging the representations of the effects of evolved motivations with a changing environment is closer to the goal of evolutionary literary criticism, and it is a far-reaching and robust ambition, drawing from disparate areas of evolutionary studies, including psychology, anthropology and, of course, cultural studies.

This paper will focus on several specific aspects of *Moby Dick*: the narrative's physical setting, its social setting and its hunt, the main cause of action within the text. These three themes have a particularly strong relevance to evolved human nature. The driving force of natural selection is an organism's relationship to its environment; for humans this environment includes not just our physical surroundings, but social and cultural influences. Ours is an especially social species, and *Moby Dick*'s social setting--all male, strange mix of hierarchical and egalitarian--is a challenging representation of traditional social structures. The text offers a mixed portrayal of the whaling ship Pequod's hierarchy, which at times appears to be a raw authoritarian dictatorship, at other times flirts with reverse-domination democratic principles, and all the while the ostensible ruler, Ahab, embodies few of the characteristics one would expect in a leader, given his physical weakness and questionable mental health. The oceanic setting is also muddled and contradictory, at times seeming to be a surreal nowhere, immune to laws of nature and, especially, man. The book's narrator, Ishmael, takes to the sea as an alternative to land, which he announces almost immediately, stating that he had "nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world." It is in "the watery part of the world" where Ishmael, Ahab, and the crew of the Pequod act out an ancient human ritual: the hunt. But what to make of this peculiar hunt? The prey's size is almost beyond comprehension, and its whiteness is inscrutable. Ostensibly, a whaling ship is the capitalistic extension and expansion of a traditional hunt-for-food but this mission is a far cry from our forebears pursuing large mammals on an African savannah, or in a European forest. What to make of these peculiarities?

An evolutionary analysis of *Moby Dick* will consider these peculiarities from the standpoint that fiction serves an adaptive function. *Moby Dick*, as an exceptionally ambiguous text, presents a peculiar challenge to that premise. It is a fragmented, highly referential prose-work, one which exemplifies a post-industrial way of conceptualizing the world. Why is the text as it is? Unintelligibility is an

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overarching theme throughout, whether it be the faceless whale, covered in unreadable hieroglyphics, or an ever-changing and impossible-to-predict watery setting, and this speaks to a struggle in cognitive understanding. Much of the ambiguity has its root in tensions that exist between the text and reality, the disparity between what the texts portrays and what our biological predispositions are. This is seen in the all male environment of the ship, in which the men seem to have no interest in the opposite sex and family. It is seen in the strangeness of the hunt itself, the immensity of the predator-prey and the sheer impossibility of understanding the unlikely terrain. It is seen also in the absurdity of Ahab's leadership; he is a madman and the crew knows it, he is physically broken and destructive, offering no promise of personal gain to his crew, and yet they follow him to their ultimate demise. A recognition that these configurations are highly irregular guides my reading, and emphasizes why the predilection for fiction creation and consumption endures in the human species, and also why *Moby Dick* has endured for well over a century.

## Evolution and Literature: Theoretical Summary

That the capacity to create literature is an evolved part of the human biological construct is a truism. If a person is able to do something, anything--twiddle his thumbs, say--then the potential for that ability is an evolved trait. What is curious about the human propensity to create fiction is its universality and the seemingly misappropriation of resources dedicated to the engagement of telling, writing, hearing and reading known untruths (Brown, 85-86) (Tooby/Cosmides, 175) (Miller, 157). This leads to the question of whether or not the human interest in fiction is an adaptation--a specifically evolved trait which offers specific advantages to fitness and survival--or merely a by-product of other adaptations, or, less likely, a result of genetic drift.<sup>1</sup>

Hypotheses regarding the evolutionary origin of the arts in general and literature in particular are varied. Even Steven Pinker, who famously described the arts as "cheesecake for the mind," has reluctantly conceded that literature, more so than the other arts, is likely to be an adaptation, due to its high potential benefits as thought experiment, or imagined explorations of actions and reactions, a feature that Pinker sees as unique to the literary arts (170-171).<sup>2</sup> The anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake has proposed that the origin of the arts is related to expressions of love and the mother/infant bond, calling the "baby talk" that is a universal part of that relationship "the exchange of verbal information about the world and everything to do with participating in an impromptu expression of accord and a narrative of feelings, ideas, and impulses to act" (149). Geoffrey Miller focuses on literature as a product of sexual selection but not survival selection, a sort of cognitive peacock's tail, a way of showing-off one's intellect by displaying a high level of linguistic prowess (156).

Another evolutionary explanation for the literary mind is found in the active human capacity for cognitive mapping (Carroll, 152). One of the reasons humans are so adaptable is the ability to hypothesize. People can imagine extremely detailed hypothetical situations, as supported by, for example, our rich literary traditions (oral and written). But cognitive mapping goes deeper than this, accentuating and sharpening the human awareness that the world is populated by other living beings that think thoughts different than our own, or "theory of mind," allowing and encouraging people to explore and consider the consciousness of other sentient beings. This is a valuable skill in all human

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<sup>1</sup> Genetic drift refers to the random development of traits due to genetic isolation, not because of sexual or natural selection.

<sup>2</sup> Just as cheesecake exploits plays on evolved tastes for sugars and fats, Pinker argued, so do the arts target pleasure neural pleasure points.

societies, given the high social nature inherent to the species. Relatedly, the literary mind allows for the exploration of hypothetical situations, for hypothesizing in general. Human survival has depended upon an evolved capacity to negotiate "complexities extended through social rather than physical space and unfolding in an event-filled rather than abstract time;" narrative is an essential tool for that negotiation (Storey, 86).

Most people intuitively enjoy stories; children listen contentedly to fairy tales, and, more recently, watch movies and television shows that feature a basic narrative structure. Some critics--Brian Boyd and Peter Swirski among them--liken literary tradition to play, something that humans eagerly engage in, both as participants and observers, and are afforded the repetitive practice of helpful skill sets.<sup>3</sup> This parallel accounts for literature's capacity for transmitting values, moral codes, and practical advice. Additionally, it both hones and utilizes empathic tendencies, allowing participants to "practice" feelings by offering fictional characters and situations that elicit strong emotional response. Fictional narratives elicit real emotional responses to events that are imagined but grounded by real human motivation and observation. As Swirski notes, fiction actually communicates fact, just as much as any science or history textbook. The differences are in degrees and not nature (Swirski, 6). This is made possible by mirrored emotionality, the human ability to feel the results of actions and situations not actually happening to oneself, or even a friend, relative, or observable stranger.

There are many more theories as to what evolutionary advantages this need for fiction extends, attempts to explain why humans of all cultures dedicate tremendous energy and time to imagining, receiving and sharing fiction (Tooby, 175). The reasons for the persistence of the arts throughout human evolution may never be known, but meditating on the likelihood that literature originates--and perhaps persists--as an adaptive function that is a constructive tool in human survival is a powerful reminder of the importance of the humanities, and of a "consilient" approach to literary studies.

The famed Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson made his case for "consilience" in his book of that title, published in 1998. "Consilience" refers to an integrated body of knowledge, connecting theories of all disciplines; a vertical, non-hierarchical chain of knowledge (Wilson, 6-12). Wilson's proposed "epigenetic rules" provide a biological basis for cultural understanding, suggesting that human culture and biology are intertwined and restrained by one another. These rules, he proposes, provide the gateway from evolutionary science to the humanities, and, by extension, from the humanities to the

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<sup>3</sup> I use "play" to refer to "activity engaged in for enjoyment and recreation, esp. for children," and not to a theater performance. Play serves an essential role in human development, especially in the development of social cognition.

furthest reaches of theoretical physics. Evolutionary studies, concerned with "how evolution has shaped human bodies, minds, and behavior; how culture has emerged out of nature; and how culture has equipped us to modify our behavior," provide the necessary fieldwork to understand and apply epigenetic rules (Boyd, 3).

The benefits for such a paradigmatic enlargement are numerous. Scholars should apply the best knowledge available in approaching any issue and, increasingly, the best knowledge of human nature stems from evolutionary studies. One example of the fruitfulness of a consilient line of inquiry is regarding Freud's oedipal theory. The tenets of his theory--that there is, early in life, a natural sexual attraction to one's mother which extends into a hateful jealousy of one's father--are patently false, a fact that has been proven, decisively, several times over, most notably by the now-mountainous amounts of evidence in support of Edvard Westermarck's theory of reverse sexual imprinting, or "The Westermarck Effect."<sup>4</sup> Because we know beyond a reasonable doubt that Freud's Oedipal paradigm is not a valid understanding of human nature, its relevance to literary study should only be inasmuch as any unproven hypothesis can be relevant to serious scholarship, and should not be accepted as a viable explanation of human experience (Sugiyama, 306-315).

I am approaching the textual subject of this paper, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), from the perspective that literature is the product of a human mind, and so its thematic and imaginative representations are bound by biological constraints and motivations that are human species-typical, or sub-categories of "human life history theory," the outline of which, for mammals, typically includes birth, growth, reproduction, social relations (if social), and death (Carroll, 212). There is, of course, much variety within that framework, especially in humans, and out of that variety springs individual differences, which largely inform the arts.

Literature features characters that serve as representations of the real-world human psyche; those characters are generally in situations of conflict--representative, however loosely--of real world problems. Narrative is in part, then, "the representation of the problems humans encounter in their lives and the constraints individuals struggle against in their efforts to solve them" (Sugiyama, 186). Thus, human life history theory becomes a constructive organizing principle in literary analysis, as those problems and constraints individuals struggle with are rooted in human life history. In my reading of *Moby Dick*, certain of these themes quickly became of apparent significance. Social function is of great

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<sup>4</sup> The Westermarck Effect posits that children raised together will almost never have sexual feelings for one another, or for any other people with whom extensive contact is had early in life.

importance to the novel, especially in terms of intrasexual male bonding, coalition building, and hierarchical tension. Reproduction is relevant in that its absence is felt and directly referenced. The need for cognitive activity--of learning, "an appetite for knowledge"--is highly stressed, reflective of a unique degree of openness in Ishmael, the novel's narrator and point-of-view (Carroll, 201) (Boyd, 434). There are also more general anxieties related to resource acquisition and technology and these anxieties, much like all the anxieties included in the representations of factors regarding life history theory, reveal tensions shaped by a changing environment and individuals' struggles to cope with those tensions.

*Moby Dick*, like all literary texts, is an imagined representation which mediates between an individual and his or her environment. E.O. Wilson wrote that natural selection and the process of human evolution do not work quickly enough to create a mental system with the precision required "to respond automatically and optimally to every possible event" (Wilson, 143). "The arts," he concluded, "filled the gap" (143). These are rough guidelines, but they are the ones that inform the biocultural perspectives of this thesis. As most literary Darwinists note, an evolutionary analysis often coincides with other ways of reading art.

Secondary sources which do not claim to be informed by evolutionary studies, then, are also referenced. Scholarship on *Moby Dick* is as sprawling as the novel itself, and much of it, predictably, has an intuitive application of knowledge regarding an evolved human nature, and how that nature informs the text. Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1966), for example, provides valuable insight into the significance of male-male bonding within the narrative. Fiedler's observations confuse coalition building and male cooperation for homosexuality, but still portray the textual nuances which indicate anxieties regarding reproduction and heterosexual pair-bonding. Donald Pease, in his article "Melville and Cultural Persuasion" (1986) provides fruitful analysis of the strange hierarchical order of the whale ship Pequod, and Richard Slotkin, in "*Moby-Dick: The American National Epic*" (1973) focuses on the strange textual representation of the relationship between its hunter characters and their pray. David Dowling, in his *Chasing the White Whale* (2010), provides valuable historical and cultural context to *Moby Dick*, with an emphasis on its enduring relevance, a fact indicative of a consistency in human cultural understanding which is best accounted for by biology.

The paradigmatic structure of this thesis is informed largely by evolutionary studies. Evolution is driven by the tensions created by an organism's pursuit of life history motivations in relation to its environment. For humans--highly social, highly intelligent, and highly imaginative--that environment

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is inclusive of culture. The application of secondary texts dealing specifically with *Moby Dick* and the works of evolutionists and evolutionary literary critics inform this paper with, I hope, fruitful results.

### **Men and Men and Again: Male-Male Bonding and Following Orders in *Moby Dick***

The depiction of *Moby Dick*'s social setting is divergent from species-typicality. The all-male crew of the Pequod shows little or no interest in reproductive or sexual success; many of its members, including Captain Ahab, willingly leave their families for years at a time, with high risk of never returning. Noticeably absent are any female characters, even as threats to the male bond, a typical role for women in male bonding epics.<sup>5</sup> Once they embark on their voyage, the crew additionally shows surprisingly little interest in financial gain, evidenced by their choice to follow Ahab, who does not hide his main objective, the destruction of the whale Moby Dick, which mission offers a disproportionate amount of risk for comparatively little gain. The descriptions of the crew are apt for a group that follows Ishmael in their rejection of what is ashore, and their ways of interacting are likewise, at times, irregular. One particular scene describing the interactions of the crew deserves special attention. The homerotic "sperm squeezing" chapter, "A Squeeze of the Hand," strongly indicates that the motives of the crew and the reasons for its unusual variance from behavioral norms are to create a coalition, a reverse-dominance alternative. The human ethologist Robin Fox's observation that traditional epics often focus on male bonding, which will be described in the ensuing paragraphs, is extremely pertinent to an interpretation of *Moby Dick*'s social setting, and identifying its peculiarities. The final oddity that will be considered is the hierarchical structure of the ship, and, specifically, Ahab's relatively unchallenged role as leader. Ahab is an unlikely captain, unfit in most every way; physically disabled and incapable, emotionally and mentally unstable. While his clever use of pseudo-democratic rhetoric and charisma may, as some critics have asserted, offset these traits enough for him to maintain his command of the crew, other explanations--the crew's intensive bond, mysticism, and the search for an alternative society--signal that more attention need be given to the topic.

The three key uniting factors amongst the crew--male-male bonding, hierarchical order, and shared focus--are powerful motivators, especially in relation to group living. Their details thus offer information especially pertinent to the text as a whole. In most any narrative of men living in a group these elements are found, as they are necessary for social cohesion amongst people. In the details are the differences that make *Moby Dick* distinct. The social order portrayed on the ship is partly a re-

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<sup>5</sup> Approaching *Moby Dick* as an amalgamated form of traditional epic and modern narrative is well established. Richard Slotkin's "*Moby-Dick: The American National Epic*" establishes the appropriateness of this interpretation.

imagining of traditional hunting myths and expressions of biological urges that likely evolved in the Pleistocene Age. This re-imagining, perhaps, indicates attempts to place these urges in a more modern, post-hunter gatherer and industrialized context.<sup>6</sup>

The extreme emphasis placed on the differences between the men of the Pequod gives special significance to their unity. The crew is more than a group of whalers, but an outline for cooperation amongst individualistic people in a multicultural setting. Ishmael, by rejecting common society, announces himself to be an irregular person, a man apart.<sup>7</sup> He goes to great lengths to express that his fellow crewmen on the Pequod--and whalers in general--are likewise exceptional. In the summation of the characters comprising the crew, Ishmael explains, "They were nearly all Islanders in the Pequod, *Isolatoes* too, I call such, not acknowledging the common continent of men, but each *Isolato* living on a separate continent of his own. (127)" The equation of "Islanders" (literally, people from islands) with "Isolatoes" (people disconnected spiritually or sympathetically from their society or time) connects the crew's outcast character to its geographical origin, a connection in line with the text's dichotomy between ocean and land in regards to setting. These men are, indeed, born on land, but that land is itself afloat. The description also highlights the crew's individually solitary nature. This point, however, is lightly contradicted by the following line, "Yet now, federated along one keel, what a set these Isolatoes were," which puts emphasis on the unity of the crew (128). The section's distinction that many of the crewmen come from different islands points to the multicultural theme. The concept of living and working in close quarters with people from radically different cultures is especially prominent in *Moby Dick*, a book which "forces us to reconsider our own prejudices and assumptions toward other cultures" (Dowling, 48).

The relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg is an explicit example of a cross-cultural interracial friendship. The two meet as bedfellows, as the Spouter-Inn has no available sleeping space for Ishmael but beside Queequeg in a single bed. Ishmael's anxiety leading up to his first contact is pronounced, as the initial information provided by the proprietor of the inn about Queequeg reveals only that he is a harpooner and spends his time selling shrunken heads in town, the latter fact an understandably worrisome one to Ishmael. Their first encounter is a foreboding one, as Queequeg enters the room late, appearing strange in the night, and visible only to the narrator is "the savage's"

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<sup>6</sup> The Pleistocene Age--spanning from roughly 1.5 million years until 10,000 years ago--is the age from which anatomically modern humans emerged. More traits characteristic of our species were likely shaped by life in the Pleistocene than any other.

<sup>7</sup> As indicated in the previous chapter by his a) association of land with masses of people, and b) conscious decision to abandon that setting.

bald head, abundance of tattoos, and the aforementioned shrunken head, leading Ishmael to meditate, "Ignorance is the parent of fear, and being completely nonplussed and confounded about the stranger, I confess I was now as much afraid of him as if it was the devil himself who had broken into my room at the dead of night" (40). As Ishmael's ignorance of his new roommate withers, so too does his nervousness, and to great effect.

Queequeg's fearful countenance, and the landlord's vague forebodings, increase the impact of Queequeg's genial nature and the almost-immediate friendly intimacy the two share. Ishmael describes, "Upon waking the next morning about daylight, I found Queequeg's arm thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate manner. You had almost thought I had been his wife" (43). The impression of the strange, tattooed harpooner goes from "devil" to "loving and affectionate" in the span of a few short paragraphs. The dramatic shift serves to increase the impact of "the first epistemological crisis of the novel:" Ishmael's coming-to-terms with Queequeg, having to reconsider his own, culturally informed systems of judgment which cause his initial fear of Queequeg's appearance and foreign origins (Dowling, 47).

Resource access, a motivation which likely predates human history, is here a key factor in fostering multicultural unity.<sup>8</sup> Queequeg is at the Spouter-Inn as a whaler, taking part in a vital American industry. Ishmael's emphasis of Queequeg's friendliness and all the countries and islands represented in the ship's crew is an invitation to see the group as a harmonious band of brothers, but, in equal measure, *Moby Dick* emphasizes the asocial and untamed character of the crew (Bersani, 79). Starbuck, the ship's first-mate, describes them as "a heathen crew that have small touch of human mothers in them! Whelped somewhere by the sharkish sea. The white whale is their demigorgon" (172). Ishmael reiterates the sentiment, saying they are "chiefly made up of mongrel renegades, and castaways, and cannibals" (188).

This emphasis on the differences and wildness of the characters accentuates the strength unification, and gives greater importance to the ties that bind them together. Starbuck's proclamation that "the white whale is their demigorgon" alludes to their collective goal. The shared focus is as important a unifying factor as resource acquisition. Economics have put them on the ship, of course, because the high demand for whale oil is the cause of the enterprise, but *Moby Dick* affords them a shared focus. That the whale is here given a feminine identity ("gorgons" are feminine) gives the text a

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<sup>8</sup> While shared focus and increased access to resources are definitive motivators related to human social life, the prevalence of both characteristics in other group-living primates, especially chimpanzees, indicates that these traits likely predate human history.

moderately traditional structure. In traditional male bonding epics, a female's primary role is typically to threaten the male bond (Fox, 128). The emphasis on the multicultural makeup of the crew might indicate an environmental stress; given the continued effects of a then-burgeoning global economy, working closely with people from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds is and was an important feature of the human environment. Ishmael's preoccupation with the matter, his initial fear and then celebration of Queequeg, outlines the mental processes necessary to overcome fear of a cultural difference. It strengthens Ishmael's likeability, and maps multicultural coalitions by outlining a clear strategy in overcoming cultural differences, and the benefits of doing so.<sup>9</sup> *Moby Dick* stresses cultural differences and ways to cope with and adopt new cultural insights, effectively imagining a scenario of increasing relevance to people's daily lives, especially in the northeastern United States of in the 19th century.<sup>10</sup>

To that end, criticism of Melville's work that focuses on race tends to be misguided. Much of that work is in search of ideology, and *Moby Dick* is void of an easily quantifiable ideology regarding race relations. Although it does, especially in the relationship between Queequeg and Ishmael, indicate that culture cannot be an insurmountable difference to brotherhood, it is more accurate to say that the text imagines one possible reality of race relations than to claim that it adheres to any ideological model. Arnold Rampersad, in his "Melville and Race" paper, observes the ambiguity on race, noting "...the precise nature of his meanings on the subject (race), is hard to ascertain" (160). Carolyn Karcher, author of *Shadow over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race, and Violence in Melville's America* (1980), notes that Melville's views were inconsistent, and called him, in regards to his depictions of race, "a refractory conformist and a reluctant rebel" (161). The difficulty these critics have in quantifying a cohesive and definable stance on race is reflective of the newness of the issue. *Moby Dick* concerns itself first with the exoticism of "new" cultural traditions, and then acceptance. It maps an environmental concern for many people: how to work peacefully and productively alongside people from other, previously unknown groups with vastly different cultural attributes, and proposes an imagined scenario accordingly. This is most clearly illustrated in the relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg, with its beginning defined by fear, and its consummation an overwhelmingly positive one.

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<sup>9</sup> That this improves Ishmael's likeability for most readers can be stated with a degree of objectivity, based on Gottschall and Carroll's empirical survey of agonistic structures in Victorian literature, which found a massive preference amongst readers for characters that display strong willingness for obtaining education or culture and making friends. (Carroll, 157)

<sup>10</sup> American census data from the 1800s shows the continued growth of multinational immigration to the US, with a significantly skewed sex ratio (about 110 foreign-born males to every 100 foreign-born females throughout the 1800s).

There is strong evidence that male bonding is an adaptational characteristic, meaning that it is a specifically evolved trait, successful because it provides advantages to survival amongst those that have it. Lionel Tiger, in his *Men in Groups* (1969), proposes that "intense emotional attachment between males has its roots in the prehuman group-living primates but came to full flower in hominid evolution... with the development of hunting and warfare" (Fox, 126).<sup>11</sup> Fox makes it clear that the male-male bond is, in a sense, in competition with the male-female bond, reflecting the asymmetry of male and female reproductive strategies (127). The high male parental investment typical of humans--a likely result of the incorporation of meat into the regular diet, a necessity resultant from the large human brain--likely created the need for group hunting and increased emphasis on group protection, both roles that, in early human history, were almost exclusively occupied by men (127).<sup>12</sup> The male bond, then, is both "equal to, and in many ways inimical to, the male-female bond, serving its own important evolutionary functions" (128). Fox asserts the high prevalence of the male-male bond in traditional epics and stories, "in the same way that sexual competition between dominant and subordinate males for fertile females would dominate the earliest narratives," and this trend certainly indicates that the male-male bond is a significant evolutionary trait, if not one that is commonly considered as such (128).<sup>13</sup>

The kinship goes beyond simple friendship, and involves a vetting process to select males with the "right qualities," leading to initiation rituals and "female exclusion," in which heterosexual unions are given secondary status (126). This vetting process is clearly evident in *Moby Dick*, indicating that the innate motivation for male-male bonding is being evoked in the text. When Ishmael first applies for a position on the ship, he is treated roughly by the ship's owners. Captain Peleg scoffs at his merchant service experience, and accuses Ishmael of having lungs of a "soft sort," and then proceed to intimidatingly question him, focusing largely on Ishmael's ability to think under pressure and willingness to follow commands (85). Bildad and Peleg, as the owners of the ship, then assign to Ishmael one of the lowest wages, or "lays," concordant with Ishmael's inexperience and mild manner (90-91). Queequeg, in his interview, arouses suspicion from the religious captains, due to his appearance and their (correct) presumption that he is a non-Christian. He, however, impresses with his

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<sup>11</sup> Tiger is a renowned anthropologist, and one of the first to propose biological origins for human social interaction.

<sup>12</sup> Women provided the bulk of necessary carbohydrates. The disproportionate investment in childbirth and long period of human infant dependency were the fundamental reasons for the differing roles.

<sup>13</sup> Fox's essay focuses on *Gilgamesh*, *Tain Bo Cualinge*, *Beowulf*, *The Iliad*, *Morte d'Arthur*, *Chanson de Roland*, and, as an exception to the trend, *Volsung Saga*. That male-male bonds are still a prevalent and popular theme today, (as seen, for example, in the popularity of "bromance" movies) however, is significant; this is not a quirk of antiquity.

harpooning skills, and receives a much higher lay (101). These forms of testing reveal two things about the ship's crew: selection is based on character and professional ability, and not necessarily in that order. Queequeg earns immediate respect by merit, thus indicating that certain traditional standards of male fitness--physical prowess and courage, namely--are used in the process. The early and clear vetting by Bildad and Peleg indicates that the narrative deals with strong male-male bonding, having significant impact on later sections in the book, especially the sexual overtones of "A Squeeze of the Hand," to be discussed shortly.

The male-male bond is a powerful motivator in the life history of human males, with strong correlations to survival (especially obtaining food, defeating enemies, and avoiding predators), social relations (building coalitions, achieving status), and with indirect correlations to parenting and cognitive activity (Carroll, 89). In exception to human motivational systems and Fox's analysis, however, *Moby Dick's* band of hunters shows little or no interest in parenting or kin relations. In general, they work against these interests. Unlike any of the epics Fox analyzes, there is no female protagonist. Fox asserts that the traditional role of a female protagonist in the male-male bonding narrative is to threaten and/or enable the bond, having something to gain from it (Fox, 129). In *The Iliad*, Helen--her departure with Paris to Troy is the stated cause for the Trojan War conflict--serves as a disabling female. Briseis, as a passively disruptive female--her appropriation by Agamemnon is the source of the rift between Agamemnon and Achilles, a rift which ultimately ends the friendship of Achilles and Patroclus. She is, in the words of Fox, "the agent of the heterosexual bond in its constant battle for attention with the male bond (134)." This tension that Fox outlines--the tension between male/female and male/male bonds as a result of asymmetrical reproductive goals--is curiously absent in *Moby Dick*.

In some sense, then, the role of females in the heterosexual bond is simply replaced by males. This is seen in Queequeg and Ishmael's relationship, which, as already noted, begins as bedfellows, with Ishmael comparing himself to a wife and Queequeg to a husband, and quickly leads to a warm friendship, one which Ishmael claims had redeemed his "splintered heart" (66). In *Beowulf*, no human female disrupts the male bond, but Grendel's mother, ultimately, brings about the hero's demise, and by extension the male-male bond between Beowulf and Hrothgar (Fox, 132). *Moby Dick*, while ultimately destroying the crew, is decidedly male; he is, at one point, described as a "demigorgon," but this is exceptional. Likewise, Ahab, whose single-minded death mission could also be said to destroy the crew, could be considered, symbolically, semi-female, as there is evidence that he was, in his earlier

encounter with Moby Dick, castrated: the text describes him as having been "dismasted" by Moby Dick, which implies emasculation (166). While neither implication is complete, it is noteworthy that both the whale and Ahab are the primary threats to the male bond of the crew.

Similar observations are made by Leslie Fiedler, in his *Love and Death in the American Novel*. He notes that "there is an almost hysterical note to our insistence that the love of male and male does not compete with heterosexual passion but complements it" (Fiedler, 368). He goes on to characterize the intense male bonding in *Moby Dick* as being "cast in the peculiar American form of innocent homosexuality" (370). Fiedler concludes that the book is a love story, and that that love "develops in the pattern of a marriage" (372). Fiedler's senses are alert to the thematic significance of the intersexual affiliation, even recognizing that the instinct does compete with heterosexual passion. He fails, however, to recognize that "the peculiar American form of innocent homosexuality" on display is an evolved, universal tendency for male-male bonding recast, perhaps, in cultural terms appropriate to America, and heightened according to the particularities of the Pequod's circumstances, being at sea and completely isolated from a female presence.<sup>14</sup> That lack of a feminine presence renders the competition between what Fiedler casts as heterosexual and homosexual passion void. The characters that are noted to have left female partners behind--Ahab and Starbuck most notably--are distinctly apart from the crew's shared affection, and they would be the characters most likely to externalize tensions resulting from such competing wants. For Ishmael, "heterosexual passion" seems not an issue. The bond totally supplants the heterosexual relationship, and those partaking in its cooperative good feeling hardly express longing for family or women, appropriating "heterosexual passions" for the all-male crew.

The 94th chapter of the book, "A Squeeze of the Hand," provides an example of the crew providing for itself what one might traditionally expect from a heterosexual partnership. The chapter has highly sexualized overtones in describing the rough and tumble whaling men gather to squeeze the cooled lumps from a captured sperm whale's oil, "a sweet and unctuous duty" (397). As Ishmael buries his hands in the sperm he achieves a kind of ecstasy, which quickly leads to a shared ecstasy;

I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers' hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules.

Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I

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<sup>14</sup> Cultural variance--based on environmental, genetic, and random factors--is dependable, but if a given trait is a specifically adapted feature of human nature, it will exist in all cultures, albeit in different forms. For a lengthier exploration of the subject, download UCLA anthropology professor Robert Boyd's fall of 2009 lecture series, "Models of Cultural Evolution." <http://podcast.oid.ucla.edu/courses/2009-2010/2009fall/anthro186p-1/podcast.xml>

was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally; as much to say,--Oh! my dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humor or envy! Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness. (398)

The language used to describe the action--sperm squeezing--in conjunction with the hand-holding, abundant affection, and intensive eye contact give the passage a clearly romantic tone. However, the emphasis is on the bond, shared intimacy. Considering sex as an evolved proximal mechanism with several functions, one of the most prominent being as a means of inducing good will and creating a bond, defines the scene as depicting another act that helps to unify and placate the men. In the near-complete absence of reproductive sexual contact as an option, this sexualized environment proves a positive means of uniting the group. The passage, in other words, is not necessarily homosexual but it is sexual, both in language and the function of what is being described. It strongly indicates a larger camaraderie, one that is inclusive of the crew-at-large.

The text thus displaces two of the primary functions for female protagonists in the male-male bonding epic, enabling and disabling, in the process further distancing *Moby Dick's* male bonding from the traditional forms represented in epics. While most of the crew shows no interest in family, several prominent characters have left their heterosexual relations in order to partake in the voyage. This is the strongest vestige of there being any competition between the male camaraderie on the Pequod and the heterosexual reproductive relationship. Notably different from Fox's defined roles for women in the epic, however, is that they are not enabling or disabling. These women are totally powerless, used only as references and their memories never causing deep regret. Captain Ahab has a much younger "girl-wife" and a son whom he never names. The blacksmith, Perth, drank away his "daughter-like, loving wife" and three children, and went a-whaling. Only the first-mate Starbuck--the lone voice in opposition to Ahab--shows a desire to see his wife again. Ishmael, an orphan, admits to no loving connection to anyone until he meets Queequeg, implying, in the process of explaining those warm feelings, that his previous human relationships had negative outcomes; "I'll try a pagan friend, thought I, since Christian kindness has proved but hollow courtesy" (66). This sentiment indicates the reasons for abnormalities in the male-male bond of the crew. Unlike the characters of the epics Fox describes, these men are not heroes or aristocrats. This is a society of outcasts creating an alternative to "regular" life. In addition to the economic forces impacting the society of the time, population trends also influenced the text. Both a steady increase in "foreign born" residents in the U.S. and sex ratio

(disparity in males and females) from 1830-1860 provide the context for *Moby Dick's* creation.<sup>15</sup> Men of low social rank, especially in a time of extra-intensive sexual competition caused by a skewed sex ratio, are likelier to find their "heterosexual passions" unfulfilled.<sup>16</sup> The bond portrayed in *Moby Dick* may be a reflection of these amalgamated factors of its characters and their society.

Robin Fox, in addition to writing of male-male bonds in epics, has also written about epic male rivalries. He notes that "those who top the hierarchy are men like Achilles, Ajax, Odysseus, Agamemnon, and Diomedes--they are huge, sleek, bellicose animals." He further observes that the contests staged among members of the same army award "the talents typical of elite warriors: speed, guile, martial art, level-headedness, muscular bulk, and power" (Barash, 29). These same traits are displayed and valued amongst the crew in *Moby Dick*, but elicit little competitive tension. Queequeg's prowess with the harpoon earn him a lofty lay, for example, and he gains acceptance in spite of his strange appearance when he makes an impressive show of physical prowess and selflessness in saving a drowning man (75). Conversely, Ishmael displays little beyond an able mind, and receives his lay accordingly. One expects tension to result from such clear systems of rank. The lack of tension is softened somewhat by Ishmael's narration. Ishmael is clearly content to be of lower standing, even expecting assignation of a very low lay. Many of his early interactions with others, however, indicate that, while not an alpha male, he is prone to defensiveness and emotional outbursts. This is evidenced by his impatience with the Spouter Inn's landlord, whom Ishmael suspects is intentionally ambiguous regarding his descriptions of Queequeg, Ishmael's still-unknown roommate. The landlord is entirely unmoved when Ishmael raises his voice, indicating that Ishmael is perceived as non-threatening, but Ishmael's defensiveness indicates that he is prone to emotional outbursts when provoked. That scene, notably, precedes his meeting with Queequeg and his acceptance onto the Pequod. That Ishmael becomes less prickly after these events is a further indication that the crew's pacification is in part a result of its bond.

*Moby Dick* is very much the story of extra-intensive male bonding in place of reproductive opportunity. Fiedler goes so far as to call it a love story, but this confuses the male bonding. The roots of the bond, according to Fox, are in cooperation for resource acquisition and defense, a decidedly different source of inspiration than the likely impetus for the heterosexual bond. While Fox asserts that the male-male bond is often in competition with male-female unions, and Fiedler holds a similar view

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<sup>15</sup> As according to US census data of the time, found here: <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/> .

<sup>16</sup> This is true regardless of whether intersexual (female choice) or intrasexual (male competition) selection is employed (Buss, 25).

regarding the "innocent homosexuality" he sees as unique to American literature, neither adequately defines the situation in *Moby Dick*, wherein the male-male bond has actually supplanted the male-female bond. That Ishmael so warmly describes Queequeg as holding him as a husband holds his wife, taking the primary symbol of contemporary (for then as now) Western reproductive success--the matrimonial union--and altering its context to fit a male-male friendship, indicates as much. "A Squeeze of the Hand," similarly, gives a romantic, sexualized description of the male workplace, again describing an activity inherent to male cooperation in terms as romantic as they are platonic. Many of the traditional aspects of the manly union are in place, but what is missing is competition with one another and from without the bond, by females.

The lack of jealousy amongst the crew harkens, perhaps, to the lack of potential for sexual competition, a feat easier accomplished with the absence of that other sex. Jealousy is a universal emotion, with special potency amongst men (Barash, 2) (Storey, 41).<sup>17</sup> One would expect to find it as a result from the assignation of lays, but this is given no attention following the initial decisions made for Ishmael and Queequeg. In relation to communal living and cooperation, humans show some predilection for egalitarianism, and this is especially so amongst males (Boehm, 2). "Egalitarian" within human society is more accurately described as a reverse-dominance hierarchy, however, meaning that autocratic leadership is strongly discouraged, if not strictly forbidden.<sup>18</sup> The strong evidence for an egalitarian culture aboard the ship seen in, for example, the shared intimacy amongst the crew, the common standing amongst the majority of the men, and the lack of jealousy as an expressed emotion in the text, is strongly contradicted by the formal hierarchy in place. Males that are "social equals in similar situations are expected to fight, or at least to strut and posture" (Barash, 35). In other words, a large group of men, living and working together within a hierarchy, are expected to compete and develop rivalries. Part of the explanation for this is the exclusion of major females on the ship, eliminating the male bond's competition. In equal measure, however, is the effect had by the strict order of hierarchy, and Captain Ahab's hold over the crew, especially.

The hierarchy is demonstrated early on, in the assignation of lays. It is further drawn in strict delineation of rank. Captain Ahab is the first-in-charge, followed by Starbuck, the first mate. Starbuck

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<sup>17</sup> This is supported, in part, by crime statistics, which show an enormous gulf between violent domestic crimes committed by men than women. I do not claim that men feel more jealousy than women, but that jealousy's affect on men is more profound, at least inasmuch as it inspires outward violence.

<sup>18</sup> Reverse dominance hierarchies consist of would-be subordinates banding together with the express purpose of preventing dominant individuals from over-asserting themselves. It is often expressed in cultural norms, such as discouraging bragadocio and excessive wealth, and encourage modesty and sharing.

precedes the second mate Stubbs and third mate Flask. When boats are dispatched from the ship in pursuit of a whale, each of these men command one, and each boat also follows a strict hierarchy, with a harpooner serving as second officer. From the harpooners on down, the whale men exist in the kind of egalitarian order that fosters the loving sentiment seen in "A Squeeze of the Hand." Even within the hierarchy, however, little animosity is expressed. While most of the men enjoy a strong friendship, Ahab remains apart, and his character is another force, in conjunction with the camaraderie of the crew, that keeps the hierarchy peacefully intact.

In Ahab's first address, he announces his intentions to obtain revenge against Moby Dick. Starbuck is the lone voice of opposition, saying, "I came here to hunt whales, not my commander's vengeance. How many barrels will thy vengeance yield thee even if thou gettest it, Captain Ahab? It will not fetch thee much in our Nantucket market" (167). Given the situation--the majority of the crew is, like Starbuck, there to hunt whales and here, with the support of the first-mate, would be an ideal time for mutinous rebellion--the lack of support for Starbuck is strange. Here is a place where one would expect to see conflict, with Ahab already having been suspected of insanity by the crew, and now openly acknowledging his plan to employ the crew in his personal vendetta, ignoring their ostensible want for payment.<sup>19</sup> The repression of rebellion expressed is recognized by other critics of *Moby Dick*. Donald Pease attempts to explain the non-mutiny of the crew with a dissection of Ahab's response, which reads:

Hark ye yet again--the little lower layer. 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 puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! 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 nought beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he leaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent; or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. 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 free play herein, jealously presiding over all creations. But not my master, man, is even that fair play. Who's over me? Truth hath no confines. Take off thine eye! more intolerable than friend's glaring is a doltish stare (167).

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<sup>19</sup> The crew is paid on commission. They earn a percentage of what the ship earns, that percentage being dictated by their individual "lays."

Pease claims that Ahab "wins" the argument by not responding "either in or to the terms of Starbuck's argument; rather, he displaces Starbuck as well as the terms of his argument onto another scene. On this scene, however, Starbuck cannot continue his argument with Ahab." By recasting Starbuck's terms, Pease claims, Ahab reverses the positions of the two men, himself advocating a mutiny against cosmic design. Pease is correct in recognizing that the failure of Starbuck's attempted mutiny requires explanation. His explanation, however, is unsatisfactory. Ahab violates the responsibility inherent to a captain by placing his personal vendetta ahead of the crew's safety and financial gain. Pease attempts to place the full strength of Ahab's ability to maintain his authority on a clever bit of philosophical rhetoric. In literature as in life, however, a group of united men are unlikely to respond only to Ahab's counter-mutiny. If the men are, as Pease indicates, inclined to mutiny--why else would the winning part of Ahab's response to a mutiny be another mutiny?--they would be disposed to choose the one most beneficial to themselves, as whaling men, quite proud to be of that occupation. What Ahab offers that Starbuck does not is a single entity upon which the men may pursue as though it is an enemy. He imbues *Moby Dick* with intentionality and identity and it is, in part, to this that the men respond. Shared attention, uniting against or in favor of a common enemy, especially one that has intentionality, is an innate part of human social function (Boyd, 101). Historically, this form of social cohesion helped groups complete projects that required more than one individual, and band against a common enemy.<sup>20</sup>

Ahab also comes out of this scene with a strange, supernatural aura. As he addresses the crew, they "gaze curiously at each other, as if marvelling how it was that they themselves became so excited at such seemingly purposeless questions" (164). This description of the crew marveling at Ahab's hold over them, looking to each other for a reason, is partly the source of that spectral aura. There is also, however, a deficit of logical explanation for Ahab's power, even given the strength of shared focus and rhetorical trickery. This, on its own, would be a small thing, perhaps a minor disagreement between myself and Melville on what "logical explanation for Ahab's power" might be. The crew's reaction, however, marveling at their own enthusiasm, as if possessed to support their captain, further strengthens the feeling. Additionally, Ahab invokes mysticism in his speech, employing otherworldly imagery like striking the sun, and "sinewing inscrutable malice," implying hidden, perhaps divine forces. The scene violates logical and psychosocial norms in a way which serves to accentuate Ahab's charisma, as well as give him an aura of magical mystery.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> This issue will be explored further in the following chapter.

<sup>21</sup> Much has been written about a proposed innate human tendency for filling in the gaps of understanding with paranormal or supernatural explanations, indicating that many readers will, predictably and unconsciously, perceive Ahab as

The source of Ahab's power is further defined by his frequent association with machinery, and by connecting that to his uncanny ability to focus the crew's attention on his solitary goal. In the passage Pease analyzes, Ahab uses narrative to direct the men's focus solely on Moby Dick. By dramatically engaging everyone's focus on a singular thing, Ahab is able to divert the crew's attention from Starbuck's dissent. This is a very human rhetorical trick. Just earlier, however, he makes a humming sound that Ishmael proclaims to be "so strangely muffled and inarticulate that it seemed the mechanical humming of the wheels of his vitality in him" (165). That Ahab's noise is described as "strangely muffled and inarticulate" and "mechanical" emphasizes his inhumanity. That, in conjunction with the crew's mystified reaction to their own acquiescence, bestows upon Ahab a mix of rhetorical skill and inhuman strength, a mix stirred by the traces of mysticism in his own speech. There is no absolute reason for Ahab's power in the scene, or in the text as a whole. His single-mindedness, here, holds appeal for the crew, but the narcissistic nature of his address makes it an incomplete explanation. That Ahab recasts Starbuck's argument is certainly true, but it is not enough to explain the crew's support, which is acknowledged within the text by depicting Ahab as inhuman both directly, by imbuing him with machine-like characteristics, and indirectly, by the crew's confused reaction.

This is not the only instance of Ahab's manner of leadership violating psychosocial and logical rules in a manner implying supernaturality, however. In chapter 29, the second mate submissively suggests Ahab muffle the sound of his peg-leg as he walks the deck, so as not to wake the sleeping men below. Stubb is easily cowed by the captain. "I was never served so before without giving a hard blow for it," muttered Stubb... 'It's very queer. Stop, Stubb; somehow, now, I don't well know whether to go back and strike him, or--what's that?--down here on my knees and pray for him?... It's queer; very queer; and he's queer too; aye, take him fore and aft, he's about the queerest old man Stubb ever sailed with" (133). The conclusion of Stubb's immediate reflection of the confrontation has him saying, "Coming afoul of that old man has a sort of turned me wrong side out. By the Lord, I must have been dreaming, though--How? how? how?" Here again there is no adequate explanation for Ahab's authority over Stubb. Stubb himself is utterly dumfounded by his submission. This minute detail of the book has a significant impact on Ahab's characterization. Stubb's paralysis defies explanation. The logical gaps in the text exploit a natural human tendency to equate the unknown with the supernatural. That these gaps occur within the text is a subtlety difficult to quantify. However, that the characters are themselves baffled by

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possessing otherworldly powers. Peter Swirski, in *Of Literature and Knowledge*, explicitly addresses the issue in literature, noting that such represented violations of norms in narrative can serve "to hyperbolize very real traits (66)."

their willingness to concede to Ahab is easier to judge, and to the same effect. Stubb's lingering sense of having been turned "wrong side out" by his captain, the repetition of the "queerness" of the encounter, and his appeal to the Lord all indicate something highly abnormal.

Authors are dependent on certain common understandings amongst readers, and many of these are biologically based. Repression "exercises pressure against imaginative constructs from which it has been excluded. It can make itself felt not through neurotic symptoms emerging out of a personal subconscious but aesthetically, through the sense of incompleteness or falsity in an imaginative construct" (Carroll, 48). In addition to a "sense of incompleteness or falsity in an imaginative construct," however, are unspoken features that are very much a part of a text. David Barash asserts that the character Pilate in *Song of Solomon*, by Toni Morrison, "magically" shows her independence by her lack of a navel (Barash, 8). Ahab's leadership--his victory over Starbuck in the above passage is a striking example--defies natural laws, creating a space in the potential understanding of the text. Barash's example is physical, and physical irregularities are more readily recognizable. Behavioral representations are more difficult to quantify, due to human behavioral flexibility. In *Moby Dick*, it is implicit that Ahab has unseen powers. A suicidal, handicapped, potentially insane leader openly in pursuit of his own self-interests is extremely unlikely to retain a leadership role over a group of egalitarian-leaning outcasts. The text includes continual machine-metaphors to describe Ahab, and a vague awareness amongst the crew that Ahab has special powers, thus partially filling the space left by the improbable dynamics of the ship's hierarchy.

And so the crew exists in a contradictory social world. Although there is a hierarchy, there is almost no competition amongst the men. It is tempting, then, to assign the label "egalitarian" to the Pequod, especially considering the loving nature of the crew. Indeed, that affection partly explains the lack of tension, as shared affection limits ill will. The all-male consistency of the crew further increases the believability of its faux-egalitarian makeup, except for one missing ingredient: there is no reverse dominance pressure. The exertion of power comes almost exclusively from Ahab down, a system of authority that inevitably leads to tension. The lack of tension, then, bestows upon Ahab a preternatural aura. Both ideas are extrapolated from textual clues, which associate Ahab with machinery, and show the crew to be put in something like a trance by their Captain, not understanding how he influences them so profoundly.

In considering the social life of the Pequod's crew, an evolutionary reading further exposes why *Moby Dick* is a challenging text. It depicts a social dynamic that contradicts basic human motivation, leaving

readers to sort the details inconsistent with human nature. This puts an extra burden of understanding on readers, requiring cognitive order be put on disordered concepts. This is especially relevant to Ahab's role as Captain, considering the crew's inexplicable reactions to him, the extreme unlikeness of his maintaining status, and the text's descriptions of him as inhuman.

E.O. Wilson states that, in human evolution, "There was not enough time for human heredity to cope with the vastness of new contingent possibilities revealed by high intelligence... The arts filled the gap" (Wilson, 224-225). Peter Swirski has a similar view, contending that literature is an important form of "thought experiment," a way to imagine possible and potential realities in opposition to one's own. Taking the normal species sex ratio (nature sets it at near 50/50) and extrapolating that to the cultural life on the Pequod (100% male), it is clear that the setting is highly irregular. Because the human motivational system is always active, regardless of the situation, its resultant behaviors still find expression, but in atypical ways. In this sense, *Moby Dick* cognitively maps a way of coping with a changing environment, offering an imagined alternative to a traditional heterosexual bond. Because the issue was a prevalent one at the time of its writing, this reading of the text is given added weight.



## Seascape Versus Landscape

In the first chapter of *Moby Dick*, the book's narrator and protagonist, Ishmael, invites readers to imagine an idealized landscape. The landscape features "trees, each with a hollow trunk... and here sleeps his meadow, and there sleep his cattle; and up from yonder cottage goes a sleepy smoke" (22). Following a windy, "mazy way, reaching to overlapping spurs of mountains bathed in their hill-side blue," however, is the element that completes the picture: "the magic stream." Ishmael goes on to extol the virtues of water, affirming its sanctity to the cultures of antiquity and modernity alike. He concludes the passage by retelling the 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" (23). The description of the ideal landscape is uncannily similar to what recent studies have indicated is an innate habitat preference for humans. The painters Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, for example, oversaw an extensive survey hoping to discover how an ideal landscape would look. They found immense cross cultural similarities. The polling was done in the USA, China, Russia, France, and Kenya, and the results show an overwhelming preference for a painting that has trees and an open area, a human figure, animals, and evidence of human settlement, such as a recognizable home. Further preferences, not at all surprising to anyone even vaguely aware of real estate prices, are for water and the color blue (Wilson, 166-170)(Dutton, chap. 1).

That Melville's depiction of an idealized landscape should bear striking resemblance to the results shown by extensive polling and sociobiological research is not surprising. Authors tend to be excellent folk psychologists (Boyd, 49) (Carroll, 13) (Storey, 60).<sup>22</sup> What is curious about the description is that, in elaborately describing the perfect setting, *Moby Dick* hones in on one aspect. Assuming that water is the most important part of the picture, as the text and surveys indicate, very few, if any, people would want to live for years in an environment consisting only of water. Ishmael opens the book by saying, "whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul... then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship" (21). Even as Ishmael is able to, with confidence, describe an ideal human landscape, he chooses to "get to sea" and

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<sup>22</sup> Folk psychology is an ability to assess human psychology inherent to the development of theory of mind, and refers to the human skill at predicting what others want, how people will react to situations, and reasons for those actions, etc.

"quietly take to the ship" to escape society. It is not an impossibly strange irregularity, but it is an obvious fact that far more people prefer to live on land than on a ship at sea, in spite of Ishmael's insistence that almost all men would feel the same, "if they but knew it." There is tremendous significance in Ishmael's decision to leave society behind. That his decision is atypical of the species is clear. The details of that atypicality can be read in the indicated life history motivations, and exploring those details further defines the significance of setting in relation to *Moby Dick* and Ishmael, its narrator and ostensible point-of-view.

The most immediately identifiable issue in Ishmael's decision is his discomfort within the human world. He puts this in life or death terms with his allusion to Cato "with a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship" (21). The reference to Cato and his "philosophical flourish" also indicates that the problem with living on land--that which drove Cato to suicide in Rome and Ishmael to sea in America--is a societal one.<sup>23</sup> In part, then, we know that the unsuitability of the city is cultural, related to the social environment. Ishmael's very name indicates that he is a social outcast, rejected by society, even if his decision to abandon the shore is a conscious one.<sup>24</sup> Ishmael condemns, generally, the lifestyles of urbanites, claiming they are "of week days pent up in lath and plaster--tied to counters, nailed to benches, clinched to desks" (22). His focus on stillness, especially using imagery related to work, is significant. In conjuring his most denigrating imagery of life in the city, these are the two factors he focuses on.

Life at sea, then, provides an alternative to stillness, in both the physical, immediate sense, and a professional sense. The sea and city are juxtaposed in the opening chapter, as Ishmael describes the wharves as a kind of border region.

The Manhattanoes, belted round by wharves as Indian isles by coral reefs--commerce surrounds it with her surf. Right and left, the streets take you waterward. Its extreme downtown is the battery, where that noble mole is washed by waves, and cooled by breezes which a few hours previous were out of sight of land. Look at the crowds of water-gazers there.

(21)

The specification of commerce hints to an important motivating factor in Ishmael's early decision making: resource acquisition. Consideration of that passage indicates that the sea is a tremendous supplier of resources. The explication that all the streets go waterward, in conjunction with the allusion

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<sup>23</sup> Cato's suicide is considered to be an eventual result of his incorruptibility within a very corrupt political culture.

<sup>24</sup> The Biblical Ishmael and his mother were cast out of his father Abraham's house, and wandered the desert for much of his young life.

to commerce, is a clear statement of specifically commercial value. That Ishmael's goals are, in part, economic is asserted when he notes that he never goes to sea as a passenger, "for as a passenger you must needs have a purse, and a purse is but a rag unless you have something in it" (23). While he seeks payment, though, it is also clear that he has little ambition in the way of being more than a simple sailor. In stating his disinterest in achieving rank of Commodore, Captain, or Cook, he adds, "it is quite as much as I can do to take care of myself, without taking care of ships, barques, brigs, schooners, and what not" (23). This detail further shapes his character as an outcast, an aimless wanderer. While part of his reason for going to sea is in search of payment, there are obvious indications, beyond even his lack of ambition to climb the whaling hierarchy, that money is not the sole, or even primary motivation.

The wharves and battery described function as a border between city and sea. Ishmael emphasizes the amount of time people spend looking out at the sea saying, for example, that they are not contented but to be at "the extremest limit of the land... They must get just as nigh the water as they possibly can without falling in. And there they stand--miles of them--leagues" (22). The divide separating land and sea, it seems, is difficult to cross. The impression that an invisible border separates the two is furthered by the description of people "posted like silent sentinels all around town, thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries" (21). Describing the people as "sentinels" implies that they are a kind of border patrol, while their being "fixed in ocean reveries" indicates a kind of worship. Together, the descriptions impose a feeling of fear and wonder. Of greater significance for Ishmael, perhaps, is that few people cross the border. Ships come in, deliver their goods, and depart. People go as near to the water's edge as they can, but never go beyond, a point made very clear. As Ishmael describes his desired destination, then, he emphasizes both the chance for pay, and the escape from the social world, implicit by the legions that do not leave the shore.

By focusing on the population's contradictory fascination with and apparent fear of the water, though, Ishmael indicates that he seeks a certain degree of status. He wants to escape the city and its people, but he chooses to go to a place he considers to be of tremendous significance to the society he wishes to escape. There is a subtle implication that these legions of landmen, "tied to counters, nailed to benches, clinched to desks," are afraid of going where Ishmael goes, wanting to get so near to the water, but ultimately never exiting terra firma.

The sea's danger, and especially the danger inherent to whaling voyages, is a recurring theme in the chapters leading up to Ishmael's eventual departure. As he sits in the Nantucket chapel, regarding the plaques commemorating the numerous deceased whalers, he thinks, "Yes, Ishmael, the same fate

may be thine. But somehow I grew merry again. Delightful inducements to embark, fine chance for promotion, it seems" (53) The passage again reveals a duality typical of Ishmael's thinking. He laments the danger, but immediately celebrates the decision. These two sensations are tied to his status seeking motivation, which draws him to the sea. Significantly, however, his competitive drive pits him against the faceless urbanites. He is drawn to the dangers to which they cannot submit and the opposite of the stillness and man-made efficiency of the city. These two points are essential to determining the significance of the setting to *Moby Dick's* narrative. That Ishmael sets himself in contrast with urban dwellers, and the sea with land, allows him to better unite with his fellow crew members, a key trait of the social atmosphere in the novel.

The sea functions, then, as an enabler to the male-male bond that exists amongst the crew. In contemplating the oddities of that bond, I had some difficulty in determining the significance of the absence of females. Fox's observations assert that in male bonding narratives women, generally, serve to enable and, ultimately, challenge the strength of male bonds leaves a gap in understanding the nature of *Moby Dick's* male union. The bond, as observed in chapter 2, serves to replace heterosexual union, but this is only possible in a setting that excludes females, and, relatedly, discourages competition. The whaling ship and the land/sea dichotomy contribute to both.

Without the presence of females, the fierceness of competition amongst the men is softened, as there is no pressure of sexual selection. The crew's bond, as it is, is made possible by this detail.<sup>25</sup> The whaling ship specifically precludes female inclusion, at least in the text.<sup>26</sup> This is indicated early on, as Ishmael contemplates the plaques commemorating the deceased sailors of New Bedford. He notes the women wearing "the countenance if not the trappings of some unceasing grief," and is certain that they are the relations of fallen whalers, indicating that the men go to sea and the wives stay grounded (52). The theme continues, of course, with the wives of Ahab, Starbuck, and the blacksmith all getting some level of remembrance in the course of the narrative. The water's edge allows but a small number of men to cross, and those are of a particular kind: Isolatoes, islanders, and wildmen.<sup>27</sup> It is important that Ishmael makes these distinctions about the crew being "whelped somewhere by the sharkish sea," and identified as islanders. The men embody the dichotomization between land and sea, society and

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<sup>25</sup> Sexual competition amongst men is generally believed to be stronger than amongst women. This is strongly supported by greater reproductive variance amongst human males than females, sexual dimorphism, higher numbers of violent crimes committed by males, and greater percentages domestic disputes relating to male jealousy (Archer, 250-251)(Barash, chap. 1).

<sup>26</sup> In actuality, the vast majority of inhabitants on a typical whaling ship were male, there was a small female presence, especially wives of captains, throughout the 1800s.

<sup>27</sup> This is further explored in chapter 3, page 2

those cast out. This unites them, giving them a common identity and setting the stage for the male bonding that is strong enough for Leslie Fiedler to insist *Moby Dick* is a homosexual love story (370). Their identification with the sea in opposition to the land is their commonality. They have a common enemy, and little reason for competition. The sea is the enabler of the male bond. It brings the men together, provides them a common purpose, a common enemy, and subtracts from their world the primary source of inter-sexual competition amongst human males: females.

In the land and sea dichotomy, it is clear that the Pequod's crew are of the sea. Their character reflects the sea's, and vice-versa, harkening back to Ishmael's early emphasis of water's reflective nature. The diversity of the men, for example, is similar to the sea's described variances. As Ishmael introduces the crew, he specifies that few are American born, and specifies a variety of colors, origins, and decorative dress (124-128). This mixture of people parallels the varying descriptions of the ocean's character, which is, for example, described in visual terms as "greenish white water," "dancing white water," "silver," "golden," "azure," and "glassy." The critic James Weldon Long, in his essay "Plunging into the Atlantic: The Oceanic Order of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*" (2011), observes that Ishmael's narrative style is itself oceanic, in its fluidly digressive nature, exploring a wide range of philosophical, scientific, and historical topics (2). Just as within Ishmael's narrative style it is difficult to locate patterns, so is *Moby Dick's* ocean resistant to easy description. And just as Ishmael's meandering thoughts are indicative of a wide-range of interests and intensive need for cognitive activity, so does the ocean represent a need for that activity, a rebellion against the tameness of man-made cities and squashed nature.

This aspect is asserted through the frequent comparisons between the ocean and land, and their inherently different worldly conceptions. In chapter 23, the text states that "the port is safety, comfort, hearthstone, supper, warm blankets, friends, all that's kind to our mortalities" (115). Alternatively, "all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of the sea." The earth is shallow, the sea is deep, a perfect place for Ishmael to pursue his thirst for cognitive activity. The earth is settled; again, absent in the denigrating descriptions of the land is anything related to the natural world-- that is, anything apart from human civilization. In *Moby Dick*, the mysteries of the land--the dark, lush forest of the idealized landscape--are absent, and "in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God--so, better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety" (116)! The ocean, though dangerous and frightening, is preferable to the relative safety of solid terrain. The indefinite nature of landlessness is

here considered more dangerous than tangible physical risk. Abstract dangers are consistently described as being of greater danger than immediate physical harm, especially when comparing earth and water. There is an anxiety about living on land, one which can be explored through the dichotomy Ishmael creates between the Earthly settings.

The sea is an unknowable construct, utterly unpredictable and without pattern. By contrast, the land is continually described as tamed; either it is well lit and visible, or paved and still. *Terra firma* affords no chance for Ishmael to enact his most primal motivations. He cannot hunt, cannot seek shelter, nor can he explore to obtain knowledge because of the stillness of the urban picture; life there is unchanging. While the physical dangers, opportunity for resource gathering, and social standing are all powerful motivations in Ishmael's decision to go whaling and also characteristics of the text's setting, the most significant and recurring descriptions of the sea relate to its ambiguity, the unrealness of its representation. The descriptions of the ocean as "indefinite as God" and the "howling infinite" are consistent with the the ocean's curiously wide-ranging characteristics. The ocean is also likened to "Hell's flames," another seemingly paradoxical analogy. As being ten thousand fathoms indicates, the ocean can be all these things; endless diversity is possible in "the vast swells of an omnipotent sea." The ocean is regarded for its resistance to human understanding. The given characteristics of the setting place a high value on mystery and a low value on the known; the sea is desirable and frightening, powerful and deadly, while the land is a sunny and immobile expanse. The text starkly warns against attempting to deny the ocean's mutability. In Father Mapple's relation of the Biblical tale of Jonah, the ocean's "eddy depths sucked Jonah ten thousand fathoms down"--an impossible depth--only for Jonah to be brought from "the shuddering cold and blackness of the sea" towards "the warm and pleasant sun, and all the delights of air and earth." (63) The sermon then warns, "Woe to him who seeks to pour oil upon the waters when God has brewed them into a gale." The sea is wild and infinite, cold and black, whereas the land is pleasant, sunny, and delightful. Further, the passage warns of attempting to still, or tame the water ("woe to him who seeks to pour oil..."). The passage distinguishes the dry and wet parts of the world, harkening back to the earlier descriptions of the stillness of urban occupations, and insisting on the dangerous infinite of the oceans. The continual denigrations of those characteristics of the land, however, are not a condemnation of the cognitive need for understanding. Rather, the juxtaposition celebrates the process of understanding, creating an atmosphere ripe with endless fodder for consideration.

Ishmael's condemnations of urban living in particular and landed life in general typically refer

to stillness, safety, and light, the inverses of his oceanic worldview. Behind the safety and stagnant professional life Ishmael views as inherent to city life is an ambivalence toward advanced technology, and this indicates the source of the textual anxiety toward life on land. From the invention of spears and axes all the way up to today's airplanes and air-conditioners, toolmaking and technological innovation is a product of the general intelligence inherent to the human brain, and these traits are far more prevalent in our species than any other (Pinker, 109) (Darwin, 390-391) (Wilson, 548). They not only help humans adapt to settings, but force new settings to adapt to us, as forests are cut and over their remains are put pavement, buildings, and agriculture. Tool making is an evolutionary adaptation, specific for the purpose of survival. Post-industrialization, however, technological innovation is no longer strictly a means of survival; increasing innovation has led to innovation for economic purposes, inspiring inventions of convenience. Ishmael laments this shift, and the setting of his story allows for that lamentation's expression. Literary scholar David Dowling writes,

Chief among the things *Moby Dick* saves us from is the mind-numbing effect of the landlocked life and its sedate, highly regulated routines that shut us off from our deepest selves and indeed encourage a kind of superficial unexamined life. Our current age of abundance begets a mastery of our environment, from its freeways to its shopping malls, that insulates us from what Ishmael calls, in the chapter "Brit," the untamed chaos of "the masterless ocean that overruns the globe."

Dowling places Ishmael's sentiment into the contemporary context because the landlocked sedation, regulated routines, freeways and shopping malls he associates with today's industrialized West are the direct descendents of the urban life that was just establishing itself in Ishmael's America. The chapter to which Dowling refers, "Brit," associates "science and skill" with mastery of the environment, and celebrates the belief that, in spite of man's advances in "science and skill," "for ever and for ever, to the crack of doom, the sea will insult and murder him, and pulverize the stateliest, stiffest frigate he can make" (270). Ishmael's lamentations reveal further his anxiety regarding the new human environment. His continual comparisons of the predictability of the mechanically tamed *terra firma* and the utterly untameable *terra incognita* show this tension to be a major concern of Ishmael's psychic organization, and, through his narration, a crucial part of *Moby Dick's* thematic structure.

Industrial imagery is oft-seen in *Moby Dick*, further indicating an ambivalence regarding nature-conquest. In chapter LX ("The Line"), for example, the whaling "line is darting out, to be seated in the boat, is like being seated in the midst of the manifold whizzings of a steam-engine in full play,

when every flying beam, and shaft, and wheel, is grazing you" (Melville, 276). Ishmael identifies the whaling line as a primary danger to the whaling men and it is, ultimately, what brings Captain Ahab to his watery grave. That Ishmael uses "the manifold whizzings of a steam-engine in full play" to express horror indicates a further negativity felt toward technology, "an almost physical apprehension toward the machine" (Smith, 26). That the type of machine identified is a steam-engine stresses Ishmael's association between machinery and land conquest. The railroad provided the primary means of settling the American frontier, a process rapidly approaching a close in Melville's time. While American literary wanderers typically travel west to the edge of land, Ishmael goes east into the unknown, away from settlement and into the unconquerable.

The railroad continues to be of important metaphorical value, with Ahab concluding chapter XXXVII ("The Sunset") by saying, "The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run. Over unsounded gorges, through the rifled hearts of mountains, under torrents' beds, unerringly I rush! Naught's an obstacle, naught's an angle to the iron way" (171) (Smith, 28)! Ahab's fixed purpose is incessant, like the chugging of the railroad, further solidifying the metaphorical value of the railroad as conqueror, tamer of land. Additionally, it equates technology with a fixed, linear progression, as Ahab's path "is laid with iron rails." In Ishmael's oceanic point-of-view, such easily discerned patterns are assigned a negative value. This exemplifies Ishmael's disposition and, by extension, the dominant perspective within *Moby Dick*. Technological dominance, stagnation, and fixed definitions are all derided, beginning with Ishmael's early depictions of city life, a depiction of the landed life relatively static throughout Ishmael's narration. These anxieties reflect a confluence of influences in America that were whirling in the air during Melville's lifetime. There was the religious fervor of the Second Great Awakening, rapid industrialization and the "settling" of the frontier, as well as the relevant scientific discoveries, largely in tension with strict religious views (Givens, 192). There was also a markedly skewed sex ration and an increased emphasis on monogamy, both potential contributors to a fantasy of an intensive all-male coalition.

Later, Ishmael meditates upon the beached remains of a Sperm Whale. As he absorbs the scene, his mind wanders into a telling discourse:

Through the lacings of the leaves, the great sun seemed a flying shuttle weaving the unwearied verdure. Oh, busy weaver! unseen weaver!--pause!--one word!--whither these ceaseless toilings? Speak, weaver!--stay thy hand!--but one single word with thee! Nay--the shuttle flies--the figures float from forth the loom; the freshet-rushing carpet for ever slides away. The weaver-god, he weaves; and by that weaving is he deafened, that he hears no mortal voice; and by that humming, we,

too, who look on the loom are deafened; and only when we escape it shall we hear the thousand voices that speak through it. For even so it is in all material factories. The spoken words that are inaudible among the flying spindles; those same words are plainly heard without the walls, bursting from the opened casements. (427)

The passage identifies the sun as a tool of weaving; the unseen weaver-god cannot hear the voices of people drowned out by the sound of weaving, a symbol for tool-use, but also used to include the more advanced technology and economic conditions of an industrialized economy, via the reference to "material factories." The emphasis on the noise, so powerful that it drowns out all mortal voices, is another critical description which equates the modern work environment with technology. The sun, object of light, grounds the passage: this weaving is affiliated with the land. The weaver-god's "ceaseless toilings" and the "freshet-rushing carpet for ever slides away" imply endless labor of the sort inherent to early industrial factory work, but also a tension between the land and sea, as the "freshet-rushing carpet for ever slides away" is reminiscent of ocean waves, coming into the shore and then sliding away. The passage correlates industrialization with the land, and places it in opposition to the sea. In an earlier passage, the act of weaving is used as a metaphor for "free will still free" within a confined set of outcomes (214). That passage describes the contrasting weaving styles of "savage" Queequeg and Ishmael and how, despite Queequeg's "hitting the woof slantingly, or crookedly, or strongly, or weakly," the "straight warp of necessity (is) not to be swerved from its ultimate course. Ishmael says of himself, "I myself were a shuttle mechanically weaving and weaving away at the Fates." Ishmael concludes the passage by pronouncing that both styles are ruled by chance, and that chance "has the last featuring blow at events." While Ishmael turns the act of weaving into a meditation on fate, weaving here, again, is equated with land. With an emphasis on the borders of the shuttle and their ultimate restraint of Queequeg's free-form weaving, and Ishmael's own mechanical work on "the straight warp of necessity, not to be swerved from its ultimate course" the image is in contrast to the infinitude of the ocean, and, again, these conditions are associated with death. Ishmael loves ambiguity and loves to contemplate, as evidenced by this transference of the act of weaving into a meditation on universal mortality, another example of his ocean-like narration. Ishmael's opposition to machinery helps define his character as open to new ideas and curious about matters knowable and not alike (Carroll, Gottschall, Johnson, Kruger, 492).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> In the interdisciplinary project that resulted in the article "Paleolithic Politics in British Novels of the Longer Nineteenth Century," empirical studies done on reader reactions to protagonist and antagonist characters in said period literature are identified in relation to specific personality traits. Overwhelmingly--and not surprisingly--a pattern of certain types

Ultimately, the ocean overwhelms all machinery, and proves insurmountably resistant to conquest. In "The Needle" (Chapter 124), the ship's compass becomes demagnetized following a violent storm, throwing the ship off course. The problem is only fixed when Ahab observes the direction of the sun; tools, even ones as reliable as the compass, do not hold sway over the oceans. Likewise, in "The Chart" (Chapter 44), Ahab pores over charts of all four oceans, attempting to predict Moby Dick's location. He is described as "threading a maze of currents and eddies, with a view to the more certain accomplishment of that monomaniac thought of his soul." While "it might seem an absurdly hopeless task to seek out one solitary creature in the unhooped oceans of this planet," the text assures that it does not seem so to Ahab, "who knew the sets of all tides and currents; and thereby calculating the drifts of the Sperm Whale's food." It would appear, then, that the ocean is not so unreadable as the text implies, because Ahab, through intense observation, has some skills at comprehension which the other sailors lack. However, Ahab's abilities, impressive as they are, never go beyond powers of observation. He is, ultimately, totally unable to manipulate the oceans himself, much as he would like to. His insistence on trying, however, juxtaposes his character with Ishmael's. Ishmael is of the ocean, and floats with its currents, even as Ahab seeks to manipulate them.

*Moby Dick* is largely a celebration of that most prized of human evolutionary traits, the complex brain, and Ishmael's narration flexes its vast potential often. The ocean provides an ideal setting for this, as its vast depths were, in Melville's time and still today, largely undiscovered. Precisely because its surface is unchanging and its depths unknown it is ideal for a metaphor of the exploration of self, so adequately summarized in Ishmael's own voice:

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 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!  
(270-271)

The oceanic setting of *Moby Dick* supplants the role of enabling/disabling female in the traditional male-male bonding narrative, by providing a locale in which no females are present, and in which it is imperative for males to work together, creating "the fraternal warmth engendered by

communal activity" (Bersani, 76). The strangeness of the setting, the unlikelihood of men living on a ship for whole years concurrent, pushing the limits of even human habitat selection, allows for the uniquely outcast male society to live in something approaching an egalitarian order. The ocean in *Moby Dick* is the great enabler/disabler. As the setting of *Moby Dick*'s ostensible plot--I say "ostensible" because, as William Gleim notes in his famed *The Meaning of Moby Dick* (1962), the novel "is really two stories; an ostensible story that treats of material things; and another story, hidden in parables, allegories, and symbolist, which treats of abstract things"--it functions as something greater than the place where action occurs and characters live lives. Charles Olson's poetic interpretation of Melville's novel, *Call Me Ishmael* (1947), opens with an acknowledgment of the vastness of the novels' setting and connects it to a patriotic sense of American identity; "I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America... I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy" (11). Such interpretations of Ishmael's oceans ignore that Ishmael chooses to travel east, away from America, and away from green forest and broad western deserts, both frontier geographies that Ishmael acknowledges and dismisses. His ambivalence with the tools of the American pursuit of its Manifest Destiny and development as a nation--the steam engine, the science and the factories--is evidenced by the metaphoric significance assigned them. The ocean of *Moby Dick* is representative of a psychic shock, resultant of rapidly changing environmental conditions, in the form of a hurried shift to an industrialized society with its incumbent cultural and lifestyle alterations.

### **The Hunt, The Prey, The Captain**

The opening of the third chapter of *Moby Dick*, "The Spouter-Inn," describes a painting hanging in the Spouter Inn of New Bedford. This passage contains the earliest detailed physical description of a whale in the book. The whale is being hunted, and its visage is described as a "limber, portentous, black mass of something hovering in the centre of the picture over three blue, dim, perpendicular lines floating in a nameless yeast" (30). Ishmael, unsure of the what the black mass is, leans in for closer inspection, and contemplates:

Ever and anon a bright but, alas, deceptive idea would dart you through.--It's the Black Sea in a midnight gale.--It's the unnatural combat of the four primal elements.--It's a blasted heath.--It's a Hyperborean winter scene.--It's the breaking-up of the ice-bound stream of Time. But at last all these fancies yielded to that one portentuous something in the picture's midst... But stop; does it not bear a faint resemblance to a gigantic fish? even the great leviathan himself (30)?

Ishmael's encounter with the painting mirrors, in some ways, his subsequent first glimpse of Moby Dick, the living embodiment of "the great leviathan himself." First, only the whale's hump is seen, as he "withholds from sight the full terrors of his submerged trunk, entirely hiding the wrenched hideousness of his jaw." Although its form is slow in showing, the leviathan's "whole marbled body formed a high arch... and warningly waving his bannered flukes in the air, the grand god revealed himself" (512). The whale's form is not readily apparent or contextualized. "The ocean and the whale not only exceed man's grasp and surpass his understanding," wrote Melville scholar Brian Way, "they exist on a different, a vaster, time-scale" (37).

The whale's lack of clarity reflects its multitudinousness. In this sense, the whale resembles the ocean; it is everything and nothing. "Physiognomically regarded, the Sperm Whale is an anomalous creature," Ishmael proclaims (333). This perspective proves futile in coming to an adequate understanding of the whale's head, causing Ishmael's analysis to meander. Ishmael judges that in the Sperm Whale's countenance there is a "high and mighty god-like dignity inherent in the brow, so immensely amplified, that gazing on it, in that full

front view, you feel the Deity and the dread powers more forcibly than in beholding any other object in living nature" (334). These two examples of Ishmael's attempts at understanding this aspect of his prey, significantly, reject both scientific and Christian perspectives, the two pre-eminent competing worldviews at the time of *Moby Dick*'s creation. After flailing with an attempt at regarding the whale "physiognomically," Ishmael recasts his impressions in religious terms, but by insisting that the whale's image as resembles more "the Deity" than does "any other object in living nature," Ishmael subverts a Christian view of things, one which would insist that the deity, such as it is, is seen more in man than any other animal. The dual dismissal is in thematic keeping with the other, more general descriptions of the whale-prey. This whale, it seems, is designed to be just out of reach of the explanatory powers of both religion and science.

In "Cetology" (chapter 32), Ishmael indulges in a prolonged meditation on the various classifications of whale types, ostensibly reporting on the demystification of whales achieved by scientists working in the Linnean method of classification. However, much of the focus is on the futility of such attempts. The early descriptions in that chapter, such as "Utter confusion exists among the historians of this animal (Sperm Whale);" "Unfitness to pursue our research in the unfathomable waters;" "Impenetrable veil covering our knowledge of the cetacea (137)" impress upon the reader that understanding is impossible. Still, Ishmael continues with one of the longest chapters in the book, delineating some of the anatomical and behavioral differences betwixt varieties of whale, giving special attention to the commercial advantages and disadvantages inherent to each type, with the Sperm Whale being "by far the most valuable in commerce" (141). Ishmael summarizes all of this with an homage to *Macbeth*, saying that "facts" are "mere sounds, full of Leviathanism, but signifying nothing." This sets the pattern for the whale's portrayal, as later chapters assert the futility of making an adequate conclusion of the whale's symbolic value (Dowling, 55). In "The Fountain," for example, the whale spout is something "you might almost stand in, and yet be undecided as to what it is precisely," and "The Tail" includes the statement, "Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not" (358) (363). With these descriptions, the whale's connection to the ocean is apparent. The animal has the curious ability to defy science and order, as much as its habitat, the ocean, does. "Cetology" is a rebellion against the then-popular scientific methods of classification, and against the burgeoning theories of simplification or reductionism. Ishmael loves that which he

is unable to understand, and shows this by countering any ineffable or indecipherable thing with long (too long, some critics have noted), enthusiastically meandering explorations of possible explanations, such as "Cetology." "The gaps in Ishmael's understanding of the whale... become occasions for wonder that inspire Ishmael's love," David Dowling notes (60).

Hidden within the Linnean systematizing of "Cetology" is a demonstration of the importance of first-hand experience and observation in the gathering of knowledge. Following the initial observations of the difficulty in understanding whales, Ishmael notes that of the published authorities on the subject only a few had actually seen living whales, and only one "was a professional harpooner and whaleman" (138). Captain Scoresby's experience as a harpooner and whaleman--Scoresby being the one source Ishmael allows much credit for, proclaiming him the best authority on the "Greenland or Right Whale"--indicates that knowledge of the animal is best attained by hunting it. This places special value on having a direct role in the acquisition of resources, and especially the act of hunting, one of the most traditional forms of cooperative male action (Boehm, 7). This kind of thinking is typical of Ishmael's character and his high degree of intellectual curiosity, which is stated on the first page of the book ("I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world"), and, as the provider of the novel's point-of-view, Ishmael's value largely shapes the narrative. If the hunt and its prey bear thematic similarity to other aspects of the novel, that is because there are tensions that consistently show themselves in vital motivational behaviors of Ishmael's. Namely, his struggle to come-to-terms with an industrialized way of living, and a continual need to grapple with matters outside of dominant explanatory paradigms. This message also has a clearly didactic meaning, encouraging experiential knowledge in addition to armchair acquisition. If we consider instruction to be one of the fundamental adaptive advantages of fiction, this message in *Moby Dick* is of overwhelming importance(Dutton, 188).

That such a message is a response to environmental changes of the time--specifically, increasing mechanization, religiousness, and scientific exploration--is expressed in the character of Moby Dick. There is, for example, a curious recollection of the loss of Ahab's leg, caused by the mammoth white cetacean. "Moby Dick had reaped away Ahab's leg, as a mower a blade of grass in the field. No turbaned Turk... could have smote him with more seeming malice" (185). The passage shows a muddled conception of machinery, first comparing the whale to a mower--an emotionless tool of human ingenuity--but then endowing the whale with

the feeling of malice. This shows an ambivalence both toward machine and animal indicative of a struggle to assign agency to a being unknowable, or, perhaps, to avoid assigning agency to an animal, since most humans will very naturally do the latter much more predictably than the former (Brown, 92) (Boyd, 137). Contemporary studies show that people predict change of position with far greater accuracy in animals than cars, despite the fact that most contemporary urban dwellers have spent their lifetimes being cautious of steel more so than fang. The sudden appearance of so many non-organic forms in human history is shown, in *Moby Dick*, to be difficult to process. In addition, because the assignation of agency has had obvious evolutionary benefits--it is safer to assume that a rustle in the leaves is a snake and have it be the wind than it is the reverse--there is an innate human tendency to "overattribute" agency as a cause of events (Boyd, 200). The tensions resultant from such confusion inherent to the human mind in a mechanized world--tensions that all of us feel every time we become angry at a malfunctioning car or computer--permeate the text, and especially its portrayals of the great white whale and the activity surrounding it.

Ishmael's initial knowledge of the whale is told to him by other whalers who convert the prey into a mythical, impossible creature--a fact Ishmael himself is aware of when he notes that, in "minds of the superstitiously inclined, was the unearthly conceit that Moby Dick was ubiquitous; that he had actually been encountered in opposite latitudes at one and the same instant"--bringing the Pequod's hunt to truly epic proportions (183). Sperm whales are one of the largest varieties of whale, and Moby Dick, we learn, has "an uncommon bulk" (184). "In *Moby Dick*," writes critic Richard Slotkin, "the American epic takes the form of a colossal hunt. All the elements of the hunter myth are developed to their archetypal extremes (Slotkin, 13). The "archetypal extremes" that Slotkin identifies are the value placed on the mysteriousness of nature, the theme of the hunter's initiation into a new life, and the immensity and excessive ambiguity of the prey (13, 14). Slotkin's observation is poignant, as the extremes to which he refers reflect the extreme changes impacting the human environment of the novel's world. The sheer immensity of Moby Dick is indicative of an industrialized, urbanized world; traditional hunter-gatherers chased large game a fraction the size of the white whale, but such a group's population--the recipients of the resultant resources--is but a fraction of Ishmael's New York.

The leviathan's size sets the Pequod's mission in opposition, again, to how Ishmael

describes life on land. His lamentations of the stillness of city work, and his implicit criticism of the denial of direct resource acquisition, are thirstily rectified in the pursuit of the great whale. The accentuation of Moby Dick's size and danger is an absurdly gross exaggeration of prey, reflective of an urbanized society. As the citizens of Ishmael's Manhattan, tied and clinched to their workplaces, live in stillness and relative safety, whilst exporting entirely their need for supplies of raw materials. Further, the ultimate abandonment by the crew of its mission to return to land with valuable ocean-resources in tow indicates a separation from society unlikely in a pre-industrial and urban setting, wherein the interdependency and relations between hunters and gatherers would make such dissolution far more taboo within the group of hunters.

The economic significance of the Pequod's mission is clear: the sperm whale's oil is a valuable commodity. References to the substance's value are numerous, explicitly and implicitly. In chapter 97, "The Lamp," Ishmael describes the wonder of artificial illumination, whilst comparing the whalers to hunters of meat. In "Cetology," Ishmael is careful to delineate the various market advantages of each kind of whale, emphasizing the oil of the sperm whale as the component differentiating it from its brethren. It is natural, then, given the great value put on the stuff, that the intensive bonding Ishmael experiences with his fellow hunters in "A Squeeze of the Hand" is centered around spermaceti, and arises from the process of preparing it for sale. The thematic significance of the male-male bond is, perhaps, exemplified in that scene, and its connection to the precious sperm oil stresses the importance of the hunt in strengthening that bond. For humans to develop strong urges to build coalitions, resource acquisition had to have been a key motivation, especially in intersexual coalition building.

Hunting, along with fighting, is one likely impetus for male unity among humans, and it is the rallying point for the men of Melville's novel (Fox, 126). The whalemens are proud of their shared identity, which provides them with a unifying outsider status inherent to professions of high value and high risk, and this one entails taking extreme personal risk to hunt the largest mammal on the planet (Dowling, 22). This pride is evident in Ishmael's long asides--and I hesitate to call them asides, they so permeate the text--about the history of whaling, always delivered in promotion of the industry's importance to civilization, and always valorizing its most successful practitioners for their courage and ableness. He notes, for example, that "the whale-ship is the founder of that now mighty colony (Australia)," and

asserts that whaling has "aesthetically noble associations connected with it" (119). He adds that the bloodline of whalers has royalty in it, albeit from a distance, and that the profession is "imperial" (119). In discussing the long fascination people have had with whale iconography, the value placed by populations on the whale's form is emphasized and, by extension, a cause for pride in the act of whaling is increased (258-266). Then, legendary names like Perseus, the mythical Greek hero, are included, with the identifying label of "first whaleman" (348). Such mythical heroes exemplify the bravery and status of whalers in general; "any man may kill a snake, but only a Perseus, a St. George, a Coffin, have the heart in them to march boldly up to a whale" (349).<sup>29</sup> Storytelling is an important component to building group cohesion and shared status (Boyd, 151,164). This mythologizing is an important part of the whalers' shared identity, and is of the long human tradition of creating art and stories revolving around hunting, going all the way back to the earliest known examples of cave art, which almost exclusively depicts scenes of large game hunting. Perhaps the unique requirements of group coordination and sharing necessary for successful hunting are the origin of persistent hunting mythology, a special niche requiring a special degree of cooperation.

While Ishmael is keen to argue for an inherent high status to be given those participating in whaling and build a shared identity in the process, Ahab exploits the hunting narrative to convince the crew to pursue his vengeance. Ahab's hatred of Moby Dick makes his version of the hunting myth "a violation of traditional (hunter's) ethic, in which the hunter and the beast are lovingly to share and interchange identities" (Slotkin, 20). Whereas Ishmael spreads whaling mythologies across time and place to build a shared identity of heroism, Ahab converts the narrative into a single mission, to which he draws the attention of the entire crew: the destruction of Moby Dick.

Ahab uses narrative as a strategy not only to help solidify his command, as discussed in chapter 3, but also to satisfy his personal vendetta. The captain's obsession with the leviathan is monomaniacal, which is in opposition to the whaleship heroes Ishmael describes, all brilliant hunters by design or accident, but none fueled by personal revenge, at least not in Ishmael's version of events. Ahab piles all of his rage upon the whale, and communicates this rage to his crew. The crew's responsiveness to his rhetoric is natural; he proposes a clear direction and a

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<sup>29</sup> St. George's "whale" is actually said to have been a dragon, a fact which is noted in the text. The Coffin family were a well-known Nantucket family of whalers.

specific prey, exploiting the group's unity and responsiveness to a perceived threat. Ishmael details the process.

A wild, mystical, sympathetic feeling was in me; 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 (180).

Several things stand out in the passage, in regards to the effectiveness of Ahab's message on the men. Ishmael focuses on feelings of sympathy and shared sentiment, and to the act of listening to stories. Ahab uses the crew's willingness to unite--indeed, a willingness that proves consistent throughout documented human history, and to accomplish just such tasks as these--to gather them around, tell stories of Moby Dick's strength and evil, and have the men swear an oath to kill this immense being. The two main characters of the novel, Ishmael and Ahab, use narrative to unite the crew under the shared identity of hunters. Whilst Ishmael is drawn to the unity of the act, and is directionless in the process--he chooses the ship somewhat arbitrarily, because it was willing to take himself and Queequeg, and is most elated in moments of bonding, be they with the crew in general or Queequeg in particular--Ahab has a single purpose in mind, and recruits the entire crew to fulfill his mission. Because of Ahab's violation of the "traditional hunter's ethic," the crew mostly sacrifices the original, economic and resource goals of the voyage. Large game hunters traditionally seek to provide resources for their groups, and the Pequod's abandonment of that goal emphasizes their alienation from landed society.

This crucial disconnect, ironically, shows a certain similarity to the pointlessness of urban labor which Ishmael derides early in the novel. By recasting the whale hunt as something other than an act of resource acquisition, the very purpose of the whale voyage is lost. However, Ahab does have a purpose, which "is laid with iron rails... Naught's an obstacle, naught's an angle to the iron way" (171). Ishmael and the crew, by their acquiescence to Ahab's authority, commit to a life that is similar to the landed one which they have left behind. The moment the hunters relinquish their duty to supply oil to the *terra firma* civilization, they become clinched not to desks, but to Ahab's iron rails. They no longer choose their direction, nor can they vary the ship's course, and they further forfeit the hunters' high ground. When the people of the Manhattanoes stand around, watching the seafaring commerce, the implicit value is on the exchange of goods, the food and raw materials entering the city. This is demonstrated not only by the great attention to which the people pay this border ground where goods are delivered, standing around as "silent sentinels," but also the manifold streets leading to the docks. All streets, the

veins of the American metropolis, lead to the docks. Ahab's perversion of the hunter myth not only forces the men to relinquish their status as hunters, but, in a sense, as isolatoes and outsiders. Ahab's path is laid with iron rails, and upon those rails there can be no floating. The men, by committing to Ahab's monomania, succumb to the simplicities the novel criticizes.

Further, by the association of Ahab's mission with technology, what is left of the hunt becomes industrial, a part of the conquest of nature by human monomania, in the forms of religious, scientific, and technological reductionism. Much of the language used to describe the whale and its chasers is reminiscent of language used to describe aspects of what was, in the nineteenth century, the American frontier. The whale's forehead, for example, is likened to a vast prairie, that vast native habitat of much of the western United States, being settled and mapped by railroads just as *Moby Dick* was being written. The connection is more fervently explored chapter 105, "Does the Whale's Magnitude Diminish?--Will He Parish," which makes direct comparison to "the humped herds of whales with the humped herds of buffalo" (436). A prolonged meditation on the rapid deficit of buffalo that coincided with human settlement in the American West speaks to a uniquely contemporary problem of over hunting, indicated by Ishmael's specification that before American expansion into the west, "the buffalo in Illinois exceeded the census of men now in London, and though at the present day not one horn or hoof of them remains in that region" (437). He also specifies that "when the far west was a wilderness and a virgin" the buffalo were quite plentiful (437). The connection is clearly drawn from the westward expansion to the loss of buffalo.

In drawing that connection, however, Ishmael makes a case for the whales being the more resilient species. The crux of his argument is that the whales have an advantage over their hunters because they are in their natural habitat and their human hunters are not, an advantage not had by the buffalo. He also indicates that the whales adapt their behavior to counter increased poaching by humans, traveling in caravans for better protection. Indeed, it is a "serious consideration of extinction," albeit one that is difficult to interpret (Dowling, 64). The difficulty may result from reading within a 21st century context. It is near impossible not to read irony when interpreting the statement that "the far different (compared to a buffalo hunt) nature of the whale-hunt peremptorily forbids so inglorious an end to the Leviathan," while considering today's dwindling whale populations and Ishmael's own admission that whales formerly were easier to hunt off the American shores, indicating that the numbers were already dwindling, and an awareness of that fact (437). His theory regarding a "Polar citadel" in which the whales can "bid defiance to all pursuit of man" is enormously absurd, but the tone

is less so. Given, however, the choice of metaphor in making Ahab's purpose set on iron rail and the clear correlation with railroad imagery and the settlement of the American West, the whale's imminent decline is, at the very least, being considered, and an ironic reading of "Does the Whale's Magnitude Diminish?--Will He Perish?" is a viable interpretation, becoming another implicit criticism of technologicalization and urbanization. If not the oil needed for lamps and the human fear of wilderness, concern regarding the sperm whale's numbers would itself be extinct.

The potential for irony is a significant detail in weighing the hunt's full value. Given the positive accentuation of the male bond, it is tempting to accept that the hunt is, foremost, a rallying point for crew, a coordinated activity by which the isolatoes may unite. Such an activity--acquisition of valuable resources requiring cooperation--is of increased importance to a group consisting of individuals that have already failed or refused to unite within their native cultures. However, Ahab's recasting of the hunt changes the focus. Rather than being about the unity of men, *Moby Dick* comes to be about the abuse of unity of men. Ahab uses their willingness to unite under a common goal, and subverts the very terms of the hunt, eliminating its economic motivation.

Replacing the economic motivation is Ahab's revenge, his steely resolve set to travel down two metal tracks. It is tempting, again, to assign a symbolic value to the whale. It is compared to the prairie and the fading populations of the buffalo, and The Pequod's own mission is metaphorically correlated with the settling of the west, via Ahab's mechanistic associations. It would be easy, then, to interpret the hunt as an allegory for humanity's usurpation of a natural world, and a neat connection of that usurpation and both science and religion, depicted within the text as two forms of misleadingly definite ways of thought.

But the hunt, like so many thematic schemas within *Moby Dick*, does not so easily lend itself to symbolic interpretation. In chapter 42, "The Whiteness of the Whale," assigning meaning to the whale is explicitly made out to be an impossible task, albeit one that Ishmael chooses to embark on. The chapter is a meandering journey through the various cultural, mythological and natural significances of the color white. Being that the whiteness of the whale is largely what defines the animal, the various contradictory characteristics of the absence of color are obviously applied to the leviathan, as well. "Whiteness refiningly enhances beauty," Ishmael observes, not long before adding that, when "coupled with any object terrible in itself, it heightens that terror to the furthest bounds" (189-190). He then focuses on whiteness' "indefiniteness," and concludes by proclaiming, "And of all these things the Albino Whale was the symbol. Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt" (197)? The effect of the chapter is

confusing. Any symbolism one may apply to the whale is rendered, if not entirely suspect, partially so. While the whale is, at times, implied to be similar to the American West, "The Whiteness of the Whale" makes a mockery of any symbolic consistency created. One traditional--and perhaps the predominant--conclusion from this is that the hunt is a metaphor for the futility in finding definite answers to the questions of existence. If the whale represents everything, and Ahab's obsessive quest to conquer the whale ultimately proves to be destructive, then certainly this reading is a viable one, although it is incomplete.

While finding determinate meanings for the hunt and its prey may be a Sisyphean task, there is much to be said about the subtleties of *Moby Dick's* depiction of the Pequod's pursuit of its prey. If it is about something so general as the impossibility of definite answers to existence, the nuances of the language used to make the point indicate that this is a reaction to environmental pressures. Anxieties about increasing urbanization and mechanization permeate the chase of the whale, especially by comparing the animal specifically to those parts of America just being settled en masse by humans at the time of the book's conception, and the recasting of a resource gathering mission into Ahab's steam-engine-like monomaniacal pursuit.

The hunt further serves as a rallying point for the men, an additional enabling factor in the male bond. Ishmael uses narratives centered around the activity to create a shared identity, noble and heroic, as a way of creating a measure of status for the ship's isolatoes, evidenced by the frequent assertions of nobility inherent to the profession. Hunting, being one of the two likeliest motivators for an evolved predilection for same-sex bonding amongst males, resonates as a primordial form of a uniquely high-cooperative form of labor. A hunt, perhaps more so than any other profession, has a romantically nostalgic quality; it is may be the most primal of professions, and its prominence in the text is itself a lamentation. Ishmael's mini-narratives about whaling--largely dedicated to placing it in an historical context--accentuate this aspect.

These romantic notions of group hunting are subverted by Ahab's hijacking of the purpose of the ship, and the pursuit of his enemy leads to the demise of the Pequod and all its crew, with the lone exception of Ishmael. Ahab, exploiting the willingness of a united crew to work together, puts the men at his service like cogs in a machine. The captain's textual alignment with industry reveals ambivalence about industrialization; if the hunt is, in part, a celebration of male bonding and a rejection of stagnation, Ahab's co-option of Pequod at the expense of the crew's lives highlights that ambivalence.

## Conclusions

*Moby Dick* is a deeply ambiguous text. Just as Ishmael can look at the same sea and see white, gold, green, blue or verdure, critics have eyed the novel's white whale and variously seen "the last phallic being of the white man" (D.H. Lawrence); "the monster Grendel in *Beowulf*, another record in the Northern consciousness of the hard fight against the savage elements" (Van Wyck Brooks) and the text has been described as being "the Unconscious itself, which torments man, and is yet the source of all his boldest efforts (*Moby Dick's*) hidden meanings are without sequence, continuity, or coordination," as well as an anticipation of the American Civil War (Mumford) (Mathiesson, 290) (Gleim, 2). The confusion is not a coincidence. When Greil Marcus puts his sensitive touch on the book's pulse, he comes away saying that every reading of Melville's novel is a rereading, given the diffusion of the book and its metaphors into the American cultural consciousness (Marcus, 286). It is a book as thematically open as its setting, in active rebellion of the taming not only of the American frontier, but of daily existence in a rapidly mechanizing world.

*Moby Dick* is the imaginative result of the tensions created by a dynamic, human mind interacting with a dynamic environment. In considering the narrative from this perspective, focusing on human life history--the evolved behavioral stages and relevant motivations that characterize the species--provides some interpretive structure. In *Moby Dick*, certain elements of life history are of particular importance, some in their felt absence, and others in their high prominence.

The portrayal of the ocean as a setting reveals several issues pertinent to the text. The water is, firstly, offered as an alternative to an urban life, characterized within the text as hopelessly stagnant. The vastness of the ocean, its endless movement, depth, and danger are, conversely, celebrated. The recurring enforcement of this land/sea dichotomy emphasizes this point. Land is light, safe, and still, and the ocean is dark, dangerous, and in perpetual motion. The dichotomy displays a strong valuation of cognitive activity, an evolved human function. Pattern finding is one of the innate human pleasures for which there is an endless appetite, and is, possibly, a defining trait of human intellect (Boyd, 14). *Moby Dick* features an obsessive display of pattern resistance. That is to say, much of the book is given

over to finding patterns in places where there either is none, or none readily apparent. This theme is abundantly expressed in the text's setting but also permeates other fundamental aspects of the narrative, such as, for example, the whale itself, and the widely varied appearances and cultural backgrounds of the Pequod's crew.

By juxtaposing the ocean, which is equated with pattern resistance, and the land, which is associated with visibility and its terrain easily understood, it is signaled that the source of this need results from an increasingly tamed landscape, evidenced by descriptions of a paved New York and also continual references, often subtle, to a spreading urbanization and mechanization. Ambivalence about these process of urbanization and mechanization are expressed in nuanced ways, often effecting the imaginative order of the text through metaphor, with a fearful description of a menacing whaling line that whizzes and whirls like the insides of a steam engine and the menacing, mechanical hum inside Captain Ahab's throat. It is also expressed in more flamboyant thematic schemas, such as comparing Ahab's ambition to the steadfastness of a locomotive, replete with destructive conclusions. The negative portrayals of complex machinery depicted in *Moby Dick* correlates with the simplification of patterns, the lessening of cognitive activity. While this particular correlation involves two fundamental processes of evolved human intelligence, tool use and pattern finding, it portrays these two functions in conflict with one another. Faced with the choice of a stable, relatively safe environment constructed and maintained by people, Ishmael opts instead to delve into a dangerously unpredictable, inhospitable world.

The world Ishmael enters is populated by a group of whalers that share at least one key characteristic with him: they are all of the same sex. Every last sailor on board the Pequod is a man, and those few that show even a hint of interest in reproductive or heterosexual pair bonding have abandoned that hint on shore, with the lone exception of first mate Starbuck. The muscular display of male-male bonding in the text places an abnormally large emphasis on the proximal mechanisms related to group building and cooperation. Ostensibly, this kind of friendship--itself likely to be an evolved mechanism, in rivalry of heterosexual bonds--proffered advantages onto those with a predilection for such unions in the way of increased potential for resource acquisition and safety against potential threats. This group, however, shirks both safety and wealth whilst enjoying the pleasures of their camaraderie. The absence of the usual external threats to the unifying bonds in fictional depictions of such an assemblage--a woman or women, rival groups of men--is ultimately replaced by Ahab's vendetta. The group's readiness to pursue his personal mission shows not only a

curious ambivalence towards authority--even the crew members are never quite sure why they follow the man--but also the importance of shared focus in group cohesion. The ship's crew remain united for the most part, even in death, and this is largely because of the shared focus proffered by their captain and their shared identity as whalers.

Plot points in the text largely enable these stressed particulars relevant to human life history. The uniqueness of the setting, for example, fosters the high value placed on pattern finding, as water is inherently resistant to such exercises. Further, by being at sea in an enclosed social environment committed to hunting, a prolonged action almost strictly belonging to men only, a female presence is precluded, allowing the social bonding to remain strictly an act among males. The hunt itself, with Ahab's rhetorical flourish, becomes a fight against a predator with agency, according the driving action a singularity upon which the crew further unites. Ahab exploits the predilection among groups of men to engage against a common enemy by emphasizing the whale's agency, giving a face to the faceless sperm whale, and, in the process, helping to cement his own authority.

In beginning to write this thesis, I chose three aspects of *Moby Dick*--the setting, the characters, and the action--on which to focus and consider from within an evolutionary paradigm, believing narrative to be an adaptive feature of an evolved human mind, and literary representation to be placed within an objective scale of human nature. It became apparent that the themes I have just outlined are of over-arching significance to the text. Male-male bonding, hierarchical anxiety, anxieties concerning a changing environment and serious concern over increasingly complex and relied upon tool use--perhaps at the expense of other abilities upon which humans have relied upon for thousands of years, and have an evolved motivation to exercise--are all heavily accentuated. It may be taken for granted that these are purely cultural matters, in part because people take so much for granted. The bond formed--and often depicted and romanticized in narrative--between human males, however, is truly unique among primates. Such close and sustained alliances, maintained even without immediate reward beyond the pleasures of camaraderie are unique to humans, inasmuch as the best available research shows. That pleasure that coincides with social bonding is itself a sign that such bonds are adaptive traits.

These observations indicate what *Moby Dick* is about, but similar observations have been made by other critics and set into different paradigms. As in the case of Fiedler, who describes *Moby Dick* in largely Freudian terms, some of these other paradigms are patently false, insofar as their claims to explaining human nature go. By thinking of these issues in *Moby Dick* from an evolutionary standpoint,

however, I believe literary scholars may more responsibly interpret the text, and also better describe its relationship to the world.

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