

“Forty Years on the Pitiless Sea”: Masculinity and Sexuality in *Moby-Dick*

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Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, published in 1851, is a first-person narrative in which Ishmael tells the story of the doomed Pequod, a whaling vessel led by its captain, Ahab, on an obsessive hunt to kill the notorious White Whale. This work of fiction is rife with metaphor, and at its heart is Ahab's quest for revenge on Moby Dick, the whale that escaped the captain's wrath, his leg in tow. Although revenge is certainly motivating in Ahab's murderous plot, there are other factors that make his desire to kill the White Whale even more salient. He is a character betrayed by the animal to whom he devoted his entire life. His hatred for Moby Dick consumes him completely and is so intense that we come to suspect emotionally driven motives that arise due to the particular conditions of whaling in which Ahab is immersed. Ahab seems to hold a deep affection for the whale and the industry that he lived and, ultimately, died for. This affection comes from the aspects of whaling that make the killing of whales and the industry itself more meaningful than a simple source of income, both for Ahab and the other men on board the Pequod. These conditions are influenced by the homosocial environment of the whaleship and its effect on masculinity and sexuality, which intertwine to complicate the whalers' understandings of personal and group identities. Masculinity and sexual identity are complicated in *Moby-Dick* and the damaging effects of stringent hegemonic masculinity are apparent in Ahab's monomaniacal self-destruction. Melville presents an idealized version of masculine identity that is revered by the characters in the novel while simultaneously deconstructing, rejecting, and queering it. Finally, he demonstrates its destructive force in the novel's final scenes, as the hunt for Moby Dick—and Ahab's life—comes to an end.

Masculinity is privileged by Ishmael's narration early in *Moby-Dick*, aligned with courage, bravery, and strength. William Baurecht claims that "Ishmael begins the voyage imbued with the values of the masculine mystique" (Baurecht 57). Ishmael describes "man, in the ideal," as "so noble and so sparkling, such a grand and glowing creature, that over any ignominious blemish in him all his fellows should run to throw their costliest robes" (Melville 103). Baurecht argues that because Melville was "living and writing in the shadow of masculine ideology and its ethos, [his] dramatization of heroism's awful result is a radical rejection of the male mystique" (Baurecht 53). Baurecht contends that Melville ultimately rejects the male mystique by demonstrating the damaging, fatal effect it has on the men on board the Pequod through Ahab's obsession with the White Whale. Further, he argues that "Melville's fascination with Ahab's supermasculinity and its wretched consequences, appears to arise out of his recognition of the fearful obligation manhood imposes upon the individual" (Baurecht 60). Approaching *Moby-Dick* with a critical lens focused on the damaging aspects of masculinity does lend itself to an understanding of the ways in which Ahab's monomania is driven in part by his obsession with asserting masculine force and presenting an external hypermasculine identity. Ahab becomes a figure who represents the damaging ideals of masculinity. Baurecht states that "Ahab is representative of manhood, [...] he is masculinity enmeshed compulsively in its vision of what a man is destined 'to be,' i.e., 'do'—his work" (Baurecht 54). In losing his leg, Ahab loses his previous relationship to his work, which ultimately damages his personal masculine identity.

In biting off his leg, the White Whale did not only survive Ahab's attack, but did so while ripping off one of his appendages "as a mower a blade of grass in the field" (Melville 156), consequently emasculating him. To emasculate is to render less effective, and in losing his leg, Ahab's ability to effectively hunt whales, the very thing that defines his career, is severely threatened by both his

physical disability and his resulting insanity. Ishmael describes this, saying that Ahab “cherished a wild vindictiveness against the whale” that is fuelled by associating with Moby Dick “not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations” (Melville 156). Ahab overcompensates for the loss of his body and mind to Moby Dick by constantly asserting his power and authority, leading to what Ishmael describes as Ahab’s monomania. Ahab’s monomaniacal quest to kill Moby Dick is a direct result of how he “piled upon the whale’s white hump the sum of all [his] general rage and hate” (Melville 156) after suffering an embarrassing defeat at the fins of the White Whale. His singular obsession with the White Whale is exemplified when Ahab says, “What I’ve dared, I’ve willed, and what I’ve willed, I’ll do! [...] The prophecy was that I should be dismembered; and—Aye! I lost this leg. I now prophesy that I will dismember my dismemberer. Now, then, be the prophet and the fulfiller one” (Melville 143). Here, it is clear that Ahab understands that the only way that he can undo the effects of his emasculation is by doing to Moby Dick what Moby Dick attempted to do to him. There is a distinct interplay between Ahab’s desire to avenge himself and his masculine identity, for if we understand his dismemberment as emasculation, then we begin to comprehend a more nuanced foundation of his obsession. Robert Shulman explains that “the Whale may be the aggressor, but Ahab’s role is extremely complicated, since he both desires and hates, since he is also aggressor as well as victim” (Shulman 193). He says that Ahab “is attracted by the whale’s male, phallic powers [...] at the same time that he hates and is repelled by them” (Shulman 193). This analysis lays the foundation for the complicated relationship that Ahab has with Moby Dick specifically, but also with the whaling industry and his identity more broadly.

Ishmael’s description of the ideal man as unblemished can be used to understand Ahab’s desire to overcompensate for his missing leg, as he sees it as a flaw that must be overshadowed by his

otherwise perfect masculinity. The appearance of flawlessness is necessary for Ahab, because, as Ishmael describes, “that immaculate manliness we feel within ourselves [...] bleeds with keenest anguish at the undraped spectacle of a valor-ruined man” (Melville 103). As Baurecht states, “the spectre of the male mystique is the inevitable possibility of cowardice emerging from the caverns of one’s suppressions” (Baurecht 57). The fear of appearing cowardly to others is what haunts Ahab; it is what he wants so desperately to overcome. Ahab’s quest to kill Moby Dick is, in his eyes, essential for him to avoid being seen as a failure or a disgrace, and therefore he is unable to accept the loss of his leg. His life is built around an industry that values immaculate masculinity above all else, and he must prove that he can retain his position as an ideal man by asserting his power over the creature that threatened to strip him of this title. This is why Baurecht considers Ahab, as a “tragic hero,” to be “the epitome of the masculine mystique; always striving to conquer” (Baurecht 55). Baurecht claims that “the quintessence of masculinity is the imperative to test one’s courage and, it is hoped, to triumph in battle, whether literally in war or figuratively in masculine competition of the marketplace of middle-class society” (Baurecht 56), and this driving force of competition is clear in Ahab. He has lost to Moby Dick once, and in order to reinstate his masculinity, he must avenge that loss or die trying. Because of this, “Ahab’s passionate grandeur symbolizes the masculine mystique’s pathetic argumentum absurdum, for his delusions with the primacy of intellect, with male certitude and dominance, are his unmaking” (Baurecht 55).

Many readers tend to understand male bonding in *Moby-Dick* as holding the potential for a utopian homosocial environment in which race and class are erased and all men are considered equal. However, Robyn Wiegman argues that

no matter how far the fraternity goes [...] it depends ideologically upon the hierarchy within all patriarchal relations, sexual difference. As the most stable feature of the male bond, gender [...] gives the bond its cultural power, providing a seemingly natural, essential difference against which the masculine can define itself. (Wiegman 735)

Moby-Dick is incredibly complicated in its definition of masculinity, as it appears to critique the damaging nature of hegemonic masculinity while simultaneously esteeming it. Despite Melville's positive messaging about gender, he ignores the subjugation of women entirely, which is something that a feminist reading of the novel cannot ignore. The novel has very few female characters, and Melville creates a world in which women do not seem to exist at all. However, they *do* exist; just not on board the whaleship. Wiegman says that by "[d]iffusing the bond's internal hierarchies of race, sexuality, class, and ethnicity, gender thus articulates not only power relations between men and women but also those among men, establishing the masculine as internally cohesive, as itself without difference" (Wiegman 736). This is the destructive, hierarchical masculinity that is at play in *Moby-Dick*; it is what ultimately drives Ahab insane as he asserts power through masculine domination of other people and of nature. Without women present to oppress, he turns to the oppression and control of other men and of whales.

If we understand Ahab's quest to kill Moby Dick as an assertion of masculine power, it is interesting to consider the divide between the way in which Ahab apparently perceives himself and the way in which he is perceived by others. Ahab's quest is both internally and externally motivated, just as his masculinity is both internally and externally defined. Although he believes that it is necessary to kill the whale or else be considered weak, he is not actually seen that way by his crew. His understanding of how others see him is therefore skewed by the way in which he sees himself. This is

evidenced in the descriptions of Ahab prior to his announcement that the Pequod will set out with the singular goal to kill the White Whale. As the Pequod departs from Nantucket, no one knows “that with the mad secret of his unabated rage bolted up and keyed in him, Ahab had purposely sailed upon the present voyage with the one only and all-engrossing object of hunting the White Whale” (Melville 158), yet they still view him as a masculine force and as a hypermasculine authority.

The first time that Ishmael lays eyes on Ahab, he says, “so powerfully did the whole grim aspect of Ahab affect me [...] that for the first few moments I hardly noted that not a little of this overbearing grimness was owing to the barbaric white leg upon which he partly stood” (Melville 109). In effect, Ishmael’s perception of Ahab’s power is so overwhelming that he does not even notice what Ahab considers to be his most damaging flaw. Further, Ishmael does not see his captain’s ivory leg as a weakness, but instead as something that *adds* to his air of authority and power. He describes Ahab’s missing leg not as a flaw, but instead as “barbaric” (Melville 109), implying that it is a mark of uncivilized, rebellious strength. This is in direct opposition to how Ahab views himself, driven mad by how “the White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung” (Melville 156). For “long months of days and weeks, Ahab and anguish lay stretched together in one hammock, [...] then it was, that his torn body and gashed soul bled into one another; and so infusing, made him mad” (Melville 156). Ahab’s fear of becoming weak after losing his leg ultimately results in “his special lunacy storm[ing] his general sanity [...] so that far from having lost his strength, Ahab [...] did now possess a thousand fold more potency than ever he had sanely brought to bear upon any one reasonable object” (Melville 157).

Although the Ahab we encounter in *Moby-Dick* is emotionally removed and isolated from his crew, there are instances in which his desire for intimacy reveals itself. During an emotional and revealing conversation with Starbuck in "The Symphony," Ahab says, "Close! stand close to me, Starbuck; let me look into a human eye; it is better than to gaze into sea or sky; better than to gaze upon God" (Melville 406). This plea shows Ahab's desire for both physical and emotional intimacy, as he yearns to connect with Starbuck. This human connection, which Ahab denies himself consistently throughout the course of the novel, moves him significantly, reminding him of the love that he has lost by confining himself at sea. Ahab says, "I see my wife and child in thine eye," pleading with Starbuck to stay on board the ship when he finally "gives chase to Moby Dick" (Melville 406). He explains this, saying, "That hazard shall not be thine. No, no! not with the far away home I see in that eye!" (Melville 406). Through this interaction, we understand that what he lost to the White Whale represents all that Ahab sacrificed by devoting himself to his life at sea. Robert Martin asserts that "the story of Ahab is not merely one of personal madness, but also an account of an industrial system and its waste and destruction" (Martin 194). Ahab's life has been shaped by the whaling industry, both by his thirty-seven years spent at sea and the ways in which it has altered his capacity for human connection. Ahab tells Starbuck about his life and regrets in a moment of emotional vulnerability, revealing that his marriage was only consummated once, as he "sailed for Cape Horn the next day, leaving but one dent in my marriage pillow" (Melville 405).

Being on a ship physically constricts him from acting on his sexual desire, and in its place is the homosexual desire that is constructed on board the whaleship. *Moby-Dick* is rife with homoerotic imagery in both Melville's descriptions of male bonding in the homosocial environment of the Pequod and in the whale hunt itself. Masculinity comes into play not only through the hypermasculinity that

is valued aboard the whaleship, but also through the male bonding narratives that offer a queer alternative to *Moby-Dick's* masculine norms. Because the Pequod is a homosocial environment that excludes women completely, masculinity is altered in ways that do not necessarily reflect the norms of masculine identity on land. These men are not only experiencing the demands of manliness within themselves, but are also placed hierarchically on a scale of masculine prowess, at which Ahab appears on top. Ishmael experiences male bonding with his crewmates that moves beyond simple workplace interaction towards an intimacy that blurs the lines of sexuality and physicality. Martin explains that “[s]exuality between men contains a subversive potential in its challenge to the isolation of the individual as a cog in an industrial machine” (Martin 194). The isolation that whalers experience while they are at sea for extended periods of time requires that they connect with each other to form meaningful bonds, and this is evidenced throughout the novel. There are moments of tenderness on board the Pequod that are rooted in homoeroticism. Michael D. Snediker notes that “Melville’s characters seem oblivious to erotic contexts that strike readers as flagrantly sexual” (Snediker 156). Shulman elaborates on why Melville includes these passages of flagrant homoeroticism, arguing that “[t]hrough Ishmael, Melville repeatedly uses deceptively understated phallic jokes in order to satirize conventional religious, economic, and social values; to assert the counter value of an integral, socially defiant, creative self” (Shulman 179). He further states that the kind of “brotherly love” that Ishmael and other men on board the Pequod experience is “of a sort that is strongly disapproved of in most Anglo-American communities” (Shulman 184). He explains that “[t]he conventional ideas of sociality, love, and comradeship” that were socially acceptable this time are present, but that they are “deliberately associated with homosexuality or—what is equally offensive to those who accept conventional social standards—with bisexuality” (Shulman 184). Martin clarifies

that “Melville is not suggesting that homosexuality is superior to heterosexuality but rather that transgressive sexuality of any kind, by putting conventional order and authority in question, offers a subversive, or queering, potential” (Martin 193). The two contrasting understandings of masculinity in *Moby-Dick*, as either a hierarchical competition or as subversive homosexuality, are at odds throughout Melville’s work while feeding off and strengthening each other. They play into each other— homoeroticism fuelling the masculine virility that is on display during the whale hunt—and are inextricable from each other.

The homoeroticism present in *Moby-Dick* is a direct product of the homosocial environment aboard the Pequod which allows any heterosexual men aboard the ship to experience intimacy without women present, and to release that homosexual desire through the act of killing whales. Harpooners are not the only men who feel satisfaction in lancing the whales; every crew member is involved and absorbed by the hunt and experiences release the moment that a targeted whale spurts blood. Additionally, directing pent-up sexual energy towards the hunt allows heterosexual men to relieve anxiety about the homosexual desire they experience through an act of hypermasculine display, while simultaneously satisfying that homosexual desire through the homoerotic act of killing the whale. With most his life spent at sea, it seems likely that Ahab’s experience of whaling is structured by this same cycle of buildup and release. Therefore, Ahab’s failure to successfully kill Moby Dick prevents that release, and the fact that he loses his leg explains why he believes he must kill the White Whale, as his sexual energy was never released *and* he was emasculated in the process. Shulman describes Moby Dick as “[t]he most profound and powerful sexual symbol in *Moby-Dick* [...] ‘the great American Phallus,’ in D. H. Lawrence’s words” (Shulman 190), saying that “[a]t the same time that the Whale is in Ahab, Ahab is also in the Whale, furiously, impotently resisting the force which he

wants to destroy but to which he is also passionately attracted” (Shulman 193). So, at the root of his desire to destroy the whale is his deep, unabating attraction to its phallic power. In finally killing Moby Dick, Ahab would be able to avenge the loss of his leg and simultaneously experience the sexual satisfaction in the kill that he was denied so long ago. This is partly why he is bound by “heart, soul, and body, lungs and life” to “hunt the White Whale” (Melville 383).

A notable instance of same-sex intimacy that exemplifies the desire that builds on board the ship occurs in “A Squeeze of the Hand,” the chapter of *Moby-Dick* that is “usually read as a utopic dream of homoeroticism” (Snediker 167). Throughout “A Squeeze of the Hand,” Ishmael describes the process of squeezing the lumps present in “cooled and crystallized” sperm “back into fluid” (Melville 322). Ishmael says that he “squeezed that sperm till [he himself] almost melted into it,” until “a strange sort of insanity came over [him]; and [he] found [himself] unwittingly squeezing [his] co-laborers’ hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules” (Melville 322). This accidental hand-touching turns to intentional hand-touching, as Ishmael describes how “at last [he] was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally” (Melville 323). This intensifies further, with Ishmael exclaiming, “[c]ome; 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” (Melville 323). Robert Shulman asserts, regarding scenes like this, that they hold power “[b]ecause for Melville as for Ishmael the power of self is inseparable from sexual potency,” and this is why “he repeatedly turns to sexual imagery when he wishes to render his sense of his deepest and most fundamental integrity” (Shulman 186). As the sailors “squeeze [them]selves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness” (Melville 323), they subvert respectability while simultaneously forming emotional bonds that are founded in empathy for one another. As Shulman states, “[p]rimal, sexual

energy is intrinsically subversive of conventional order and of respectable systems [...] Ishmael's gigantic sexual pun is thus a perfect vehicle for conveying his radical rejection of conventional systems and their makers" (Shulman 187). In "A Squeeze of the Hand," Melville is effectively rejecting normative masculinity and the taboo of homosexual desire in favour of intense, emotional and physical intimacy between men. After all, on board the Pequod, all they have is each other.

Robert K. Martin describes this chapter as "affectionate, comradesly sexuality at its most evocative" (Martin 195). "A Squeeze of the Hand," however, stands alone in its intimate group camaraderie "for it rests upon a momentary suspension of the real" (Martin 195). As Martin explains, "Melville is too much of a cynic about human nature and too honest about the realities of economics and labor to let this vision last" (Martin 195). Despite this, the chapter still exists, in part because Melville is "too much of a radical dreamer not to entertain the possibility of such a transformative sexuality in which men enjoy each other and, at least temporarily, abandon their place in the order of work" (Martin 195). The whaling industry is set up in such a way that, according to heteronormativity, it should prevent emotional and sexual connectivity. However, Melville resists this assumption by allowing the men on board the Pequod to have experiences that are explicitly sexually charged and intimate. As Baurecht states, Ishmael is a romantic, "ch[oosing] to become a common worker [...]" because he was "convinced that a life at sea would be exhilarating among manly companions to whom he was tightly bound by rank, common interest and role" (Baurecht 56). The intensity of the intimacy built amongst the whalers is palpable, and demonstrates the potency of the sailors' desire not only for emotional companionship, but also physical closeness.

Robert Shulman claims that "[Ishmael's] [phallic] imagery, including his pun on 'sperm,' is deliberately suggestive" (Shulman 184) in order to "help Ishmael satirize the norms of the respectable

community” (Shulman 194). Shulman states that sexual energy can be “horribly destructive; but it is also essentially creative, since in the natural world it is the source of all life” (Shulman 187). Thus, “Ishmael’s gigantic sexual pun is thus a perfect vehicle for conveying his radical rejection of conventional systems and their makers” and his “enormous phallic imagery also embodies Melville’s belief that the sources of artistic and sexual creation are closely related” (Shulman 187). The act of sexual creation and bonding in “A Squeeze of the Hand” occurs because the men are confined to a space that requires alternatives to traditionally heteronormative society because of their isolation. Shulman claims that “‘A Squeeze of the Hand’ may contain one of Melville’s few social affirmations—that brotherhood saves and that love redeems” (Shulman 185), and this explains why moments like these are so valuable to whalemens.

Another pervading homoerotic component of *Moby-Dick* arises from Melville’s descriptions of the whale hunt, in which whales are hunted and killed, in such a manner as to allow the men to release the sexual energy that builds in scenes such as “A Squeeze of the Hand.” The time following the sighting of a whale and leading up to its death closely follows a pattern of arousal, from seduction to consummation, beginning with the vessel’s stealthy tracking of the mammal and intensifying until the climactic plunge of the harpoon. Before a whale is spotted in Chapter 61, “Stubb Kills a Whale,” Ishmael notices that “the seamen at the main and mizen mast-heads were already drowsy” on this “exceedingly still and sultry” day, as he too “idly swayed in what seemed an enchanted air” (Melville 230). Upon Ishmael’s sighting of a “gigantic Sperm Whale,” he describes how “[a]s if struck by some enchanter’s wand, the sleepy ship and every sleeper in it all at once started into wakefulness” (Melville 230). In their excitement, Ishmael claims that “[t]he sudden exclamations of the crew must have alarmed the whale” (Melville 230), so Ahab “orders that not an oar should be used, and no man must

speak but in whispers” (Melville 231) and the crew trail the whale silently, until “the monster perpendicularly flitted his tail forty feet into the air, and then sank out of sight like a tower swallowed up,” when it becomes clear “that the whale had at length become aware of his pursuers” (Melville 231).

With the now hunt in full force, the crew abandons stealthy seduction, instead reverting to animalistic cries that rouse excitement in every member on board. Stubb “cheer[s] on his crew to the assault,” encouraging Tashtego to “give ‘em the long and strong stroke!” and to “give it to him!” (Melville 231), while “every oarsman in the strained boat involuntarily bounced forward with the one tremendous leading stroke which the eager Indian gave” (Melville 231). While the language used here is not literally sexual, alongside the excitement of the crew, it certainly carries suggestive undertones. The men are raucous, with “[Tashtego’s] wild screams [...] answered by others quite as wild” (Melville 231). This is the portion of the hunt that builds arousal which remains tremendous until the whale is dead.

The seduction and arousal culminate in the act of killing the whale, when Stubb “[darts] dart after dart into the flying fish” while “jet after jet of white smoke was agonizingly shot from the spiracle of the whale, and puff after puff from the mouth of the excited headsman” (Melville 232). Once “the waning whale relaxed in his wrath,” Stubb proceeds to “slowly churn[] his long sharp lance into the fish, and ke[ep] it there, carefully churning and churning” (Melville 232) until the whale begins “spasmodically dilating and contracting his spout-hole, with sharp, cracking, agonized respirations” (Melville 233). Finally, “gush after gush of clotted red gore [...] shot into the frightened air; and falling back again, ran dripping down his motionless flanks into the sea” (Melville 233). Once this event concludes, the excitement fades as the whalers have achieved their goal, with Stubb “st[anding] thoughtfully eyeing the vast corpse he had made” (Melville 233). One does not have to reach far to

read this imagery as an erotic representation of a sex act concluding in a male orgasm. The phallic harpoon is plunged repeatedly into the whale until blood erupts in an incredibly gory death. Through viewing the whale hunt through a homoerotic lens and examining the sexual imagery that Melville employs, it becomes clear how important the kill is to the entire process, as there is no release of the energy built up during the arousal phase if the whale does not die. This partially explains Ahab's desire to kill Moby Dick, as he aims to finish what he had started years before in a hunt that was likely a similar experience to the one described in "Stubb Kills a Whale."

Through considering the whaleship as a site of (predominantly repressed) homosexual desire and the whale hunt as the release of that desire, we can begin to understand Ahab's obsession with Moby Dick as sexually driven. Ahab's life is completely controlled by the whaling industry: whaling is his occupation, the crew is his family and fulfills his desire for emotional intimacy (when he allows it), and the whale hunt allows sexual release. Ahab makes evident the importance of whaling in his life when he describes to Starbuck the experience of killing his first whale, saying,

On such a day—very much such a sweetness as this—I struck my first whale—a boy-harpooner of eighteen! Forty—forty—forty years ago!—ago! Forty years of continual whaling! forty years of privation, and peril, and storm-time! forty years on the pitiless sea! for forty years Ahab has forsaken the peaceful land, for forty years to make war on the horrors of the deep! [...] out of those forty years I have not spent three ashore (Melville 405)

and following this by describing "the desolation of solitude" of "this life [he has] led" (Melville 405).

He is unable to abandon his course for Moby Dick because he cannot imagine his life any other way.

William Glasser claims that Ahab "is led once more towards a conclusion he has approached again and again during his many years of life on the ocean: that an apparent injustice pervades his world"

(Glasser 464-465). I argue that this injustice is that he has been betrayed by the very thing to which he has been endlessly devoted: the whale. Glasser's recognition that "it is not simply the painful infliction of a wound against which Ahab is reacting, but that his deepest reaction is brought about by the *thoughts* that he associates with Moby Dick while he lies wounded" (Glasser 466) is vital in understanding why Ahab is so obsessed with the White Whale: he feels betrayed.

Just as Ahab's reputation preceded his initial appearance in *Moby-Dick*, so too does Ishmael build up suspense pending the White Whale's long-awaited arrival. When we finally encounter Moby Dick in the novel's 133rd chapter, the whale has taken on an almost mythical air. Ahab leads the Pequod on a hunt for the White Whale that lasts for three days and ultimately ends in disaster. Shulman remarks that throughout this chase, "the White Whale is repeatedly described in imagery which suggests, among other things, the sexual act" (Shulman 190). Ishmael describes Moby Dick's breaching, saying that he "[c]rushed thirty feet upwards, the waters flashed for an instant like heaps of fountains, then brokenly sank in a shower of flakes, leaving the circling surface creamed like new milk round the marble trunk of the whale" (Melville 422). Shulman states that details such as these "render the primal creative act, except that in connection with Moby Dick, the act and the energy are destructive: that breaching immediately precedes the fatal battering of the Pequod" (Shulman 190). Ishmael describes the White Whale's magnetic quality, that he "shed off enticings," so that it was "[n]o wonder there had been some among the hunters who namelessly transported and allured by all this serenity, had ventured to assail it; but had fatally found that quietude but the vesture of tornadoes" (Melville 409). Shulman discusses Ahab's relationship to Moby Dick, saying that "the Whale may be the aggressor, but Ahab's role is extremely complicated, since he both desires and hates, since he is also aggressor as well as victim" (Shulman 193). The White Whale and Ahab play off of each other in such

a way that “we are not sure who is pursuer, who is pursued” (Shulman 193). Like the other whale hunts that Ishmael describes in *Moby-Dick*, this final hunt is rife with sexual imagery. However, the difference is Ahab’s personal relationship to Moby Dick. Their emotional connection fuels his passion and desire for the White Whale, which makes the sexual aspects of the hunt even more salient.

Ishmael describes Ahab “with body arched back, and both arms lengthwise high-lifted to the poise [...], dart[ing] his fierce iron, and his far fiercer curse into the hated whale” so that “both steel and curse sank to the socket, as if sucked into a morass, Moby Dick sideways writhed” (Melville 424). As Snediker explains, “[q]ueer theory complicates our understanding of sexuality’s shifting constellation of identity, power, and desire. At the same time, it frees us to think about pleasure separate from bodies as its own deep aesthetic condition” (Snediker 167). Reading Ahab’s relationship to Moby Dick through a queer lens allows for a more complicated and nuanced reading of the text, in which man and whale are engaged in a relationship far more complicated than simply that of predator and prey.

For Ahab, “[a]ll that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks and sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, made practically assailable in Moby Dick” (Melville 156). Moby Dick represents all that Ahab has lost to a life at sea. Baurecht identifies the meaning that men take in their work under societal conditions of hegemonic masculinity, claiming that “[f]or a man, life’s meaning is created in work, even when he hates work” (Baurecht 56). The meaning of whalers’ lives is defined by the whaling industry, and this meaning is projected onto whales. In Ahab’s case, he projects meaning and his emotional trauma onto Moby Dick. Baurecht explains that “males internalize a dysfunctional romanticism while striving to achieve manhood”

(Baurecht 58), and this dysfunctional romanticism is apparent in Ahab's obsession with and desire to overpower Moby Dick. Through examining the conditions of whaling that affect masculine and sexual identities, Ahab's relationship with Moby Dick can be read as the narrative of a scorned lover.

Baurecht explains that Ahab's "[r]omantic deviance encourages self-direction, self-isolation [...], resistance, self-affirmation, and the fear as well as exhilaration of freedom" (Baurecht 58). Each of these qualities are apparent in Ahab, who refuses to listen to reason, cherishing his madness. His obsession with Moby Dick defies logic, a truth of which even Ahab himself is acutely aware.

Addressing this, he cries, "'They think me mad [...] but I'm demoniac, I am madness maddened! That wild madness that's only calm to comprehend itself!'" (Melville 143). He is consumed by his own torment, locating the root of his pain in Moby Dick: the one that got away.

When Ahab's monomaniacal quest to seek revenge on Moby Dick is considered within the context of masculinity and sexuality in the whaling industry, it becomes dense with meaning that extends beyond revenge, moving towards a narrative shaped by lust and desire. Through understanding the whale's place in the whale hunt as the object of sexual desire, and whaling for Ahab as more than just an occupation, one can begin to weave a narrative that is built around a story of love, sexuality, sacrifice, and betrayal. For Ahab, the whaling industry replaces the norms of life on land with a life at sea that is punctuated with danger and desire, and it is only when his desire for a whale is rejected that he becomes consumed by hatred, replacing his love with desire for revenge. For Ahab to move on with his life, he must come to terms with Moby Dick's act of betrayal through revenge. Of course, he is never able to reach this redemption, with Moby Dick ultimately taking not only Ahab's life but the lives of his crew (apart from Ishmael). The ending of the novel illustrates the futility of Ahab's quest, and reminds the reader that betrayal is safest forgiven, as revenge has the potential to

end in disaster. By focusing all his energy on a single whale, Ahab effectively ignores the masses, with Moby Dick's initial betrayal resulting in Ahab's own act of unfaithfulness to the men whose lives depended on him and were ultimately sacrificed for his monomaniacal cause.

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