UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

DOOMED VOYAGE: AMERICA'S EVOLVING RELATIONSHIP WITH *MOBY-DICK*

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO

THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY

PAYTON DODD

ADVISOR: BLAKE ALLMENDINGER

LOS ANGELES, CA

MARCH 18, 2022

ABSTRACT

DOOMED VOYAGE: AMERICA'S EVOLVING RELATIONSHIP WITH *MOBY-DICK*

BY PAYTON DODD

In the years following Melville's induction into the literary canon during the mid-twentieth century, scholars have dubbed *Moby-Dick* the "Great American novel" because of the endurance and malleability of Melville's themes, especially those that praise or critique the core values of American democracy. Since World War II, rhetoricians have been resurrecting Melvillean political symbols—particularly the *Pequod* and the White Whale—to comment on the ideals and trajectory of the nation during nearly every national crisis that has arisen since the 1940s. Yet, in order for a nineteenth century text to evolve with America herself, either Melville's abstract prose must lend itself towards perpetual modernization, or readers are subconsciously editing the text by extracting its timeless bits while ignoring its archaisms. To prevent the cultural revision of *Moby-Dick*, we must interpret Melville's American allegory holistically, rather than isolating its situationally relevant aspects. By comparing interpretations of this thread of uniquely American symbols and themes found in over six decades of scholarship, this paper contemplates the benefits and dangers of forging a perpetually relevant text, as well as identifies a lack of scholarship that discusses the thematically integral ending of the novel, where the *Pequod* (America) falls to ruin. What core truths about American politics does Melville capture within the text? Why is it so easy to read ourselves and our modern world into the story, 170 years later? And, most importantly, what essential parts of the text are irrevocably lost when we do?

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Herman Melville wrote the "Great American Novel,"[1] *Moby-Dick* (1851),[2] during national debate over the Compromise of 1850, when pre-Civil War tensions were at a climax. Although the ethics of slavery shaped much of the political debate (and indeed, much of Melville's novel), the American identity itself was in flux as Northerners, Southerners, and impartial citizens alike questioned the values their nation was founded upon. While many scholars of *Moby-Dick* attempt to piece together the influence of antebellum politics in the novel,[3] few examine how Melville's political commentary transcends any definitive political era, which is essential to the evaluation of how well the Great American Novel actually encapsulates *America*. Melville communicates much of his insight into the American democracy through the nature and interactions of symbols, most

---

[1]The Great American Novel is a title academics bestow upon a small number of classic books written by American authors that they feel capture the soul of the American democracy. *Moby-Dick* is one of the more popular novels to bear that title. The term was coined by John William De Forest in "The Great American Novel." *The Nation*, 1868. For more information on *Moby-Dick*'s status as a Great American Novel, see Lawrence Buell's essay, "The Unkillable Dream of the Great American Novel: Moby-Dick as Test Case." *American Literary History*, vol. 20 no. 1, 2008, pp. 132-155.

[2]The full title of the novel is *Moby-Dick; Or the Whale*. However, in this thesis I will refer to the book only as *Moby-Dick*, both for the sake of brevity, and to differentiate it from the British edition of the text entitled *The Whale*, which I will discuss later on.

[3]There is no definitive antebellum criticism from Melville's contemporaries (besides mixed reviews of his novel) due to a neglect of the book before its revival during the 1940s.

notably the *Pequod*, which many scholars recognize as a stand-in for the United States. The *Pequod* is at once a microcosm of the American population, a monument to atrocities committed against minorities, and a warning of the consequences of America's most prided ideals. Yet, in their analyses many scholars have passed over the destruction of the *Pequod*, which is an integral aspect of the plot because it contains what Melville believed to be the ultimate fate of his nation. How Americans read themselves into *Moby-Dick*, as well as the consequences of neglecting to consider the novel's conclusion is what I aspire to ascertain from my examination of the uniquely American threads[4] woven throughout the novel.

This is less a thesis on *Moby-Dick* itself, and more an examination into our *reaction* to Melville's novel. But to effectively dissect how scholars interpret *Moby-Dick*, we must first begin with the text they are interpreting as necessary context. Therefore, before exploring the timelessness and the exclusion of Melville's American thread, the uniquely American symbols within *Moby-Dick* must first be enumerated. In "Moby Dick and American Political Symbolism," Alan Heimert concludes that the *Pequod* embodies the American Republic, for the ship is built from wood found in the three regions of the U.S. (the North, the South, and the West)[5] while the crewmates come from a diverse array of cultures, thereby bringing the Great Melting Pot of America onto a vessel. Indeed, Heimert connects the thirty crewmates aboard the ship to the thirty U.S. states in 1850 (Heimert 501). While Heimert was one of the first scholars to suggest that the *Pequod* symbolizes America,

---

[4]When, in this thesis, I use the term "American thread," I refer to the aspects of *Moby-Dick* that most directly and intentionally deal with American themes, as opposed to other topics of contention within the novel, such as religion, psychology, etc.

[5]"They [the crew] were one man, not thirty. For as the one ship that held them all; though it was put together of all contrasting things—oak, and maple, and pine wood" (Melville 557).

and still remains an authority on the topic, recent scholars have since solidified Heimert's reading by considering extratextual connections between the *Pequod* and the mid-nineteenth century United States. In "The Ship of State," Brian R. Pellar elucidates that many rhetoricians of Melville's time compared America to a united ship navigating troubled waters but nevertheless prevailing: the "Ship of State." In fact, while Melville's was composing the novel, Senator Henry Clay infamously argued that the Compromise of 1850 "plugged the leaks...that threatened to sink the ship of state" (given the conclusion of *Moby-Dick*, clearly Melville didn't agree) (Rogin 107). As evidenced by this example, the metaphor of the ship of state was most often cited in debates over the question of slavery, but Pellar counters that the brewing Civil War is not the only American political crisis that the *Pequod* is connected to. He calculates that Captain Ahab was born in 1783, which was the year the American Revolution ended, and thus the same year that the United States was born as an official independent nation (Pellar 34). As the head of the Ship of State, Ahab's notable year of birth strengthens the connections between America and Melville's primary American symbol. Yet, the *Pequod*'s namesake, while reiterating the ship's ties to American conflicts, also complicates the reading of the American thread by introducing racial injustice into Melville's commentary.

While examining the racial politics in *Moby-Dick* is largely a separate discussion from my own political reading, the two critical perspectives intersect both in the anatomy and wreck of the *Pequod*. To many scholars of Melville, the discussion of race is understandably inseparable from their analysis of *Moby-Dick*'s American symbolism, for race relations have always been embedded in American politics. Provided that Melville penned the novel in a country soon to be at war over race, the construction of the *Pequod* incorporates elements of racial commentary. The name "Pequod" is a deviant spelling of "Pequot," which is the name of a Native American tribe from modern-day Connecticut. In the seventeenth century, English colonists massacred the Pequot people,

a fact which prompts many scholars to link the fate of the Pequot tribe to the demolition of the *Pequod*. Yukiko Oshima, in her essay "Dreaming a Dream of Interracial Bonds: From *Hope Leslie* to *Moby-Dick*," connects Captain Ahab to the Pequot people because both "transform themselves into vengeful monomaniacs against the whites or whiteness only when provoked," and were ultimately eradicated by that unjust force (Oshima 244). However, Oshima's reading likens Moby Dick to the colonists when in reality, the whale was not the hunter (for most of the book, at least), like the colonizers were, but rather the hunted creature, who retaliated only out of self-preservation. While Oshima does present an interesting reading of Ahab's battle against whiteness, there must be a more persuasive answer as to why Melville named a vessel of American capitalism after an Indiginous tribe slaughtered by the British. In "The Ship of State," Brian R. Pellar ventures a guess: the *Pequod*'s namesake emphasizes America's history of "exploiting and exterminating" native peoples to build their empire (Pellar 34). Pellar frames the *Pequod* as a symbol of the American economy, and thus naming the vessel after a massacred tribe insinuates American capitalism prospers at the expense of minorities. The destruction of the *Pequod*, then, represents an economic collapse, as Moby Dick, the "hand of God," smites the American empire (Pellar 41). In an antebellum context, the downfall of an economy based on slave labor likely would have referred to a law abolishing the institution, later to become the Thirteenth Amendment.

In the same vein, Melville decided to make the three harpooneers members of historically marginalized races in the U.S.: Pacific Islander, Native American, and African. In "Moby Dick and American Political Symbolism," Alan Heimert notes that these three particular races are those that the U.S. most famously[6] trampled on in order to build the American empire (Heimert 502). To be

[6]Interestingly, Latinx and Asian-American oppression are absent here, although there is a Chinese-American sailor onboard (Melville 175). Asian-American labor exploitation on the West

explicit, Columbus decimated Pacific Islanders, colonists massacred Indiginous peoples, and of course, Africans were still widely enslaved at the time of writing. Assuming that the White Whale was meant to personify imperialists, it makes sense that the harpooneers belong to persecuted races,[7] for this is their chance to retaliate against their oppressor. Yet, Moby Dick triumphs and crashes into the ship, killing the three harpooneers. Melville's decision to write his white imperialist symbol as an executioner of minorities projects quite a bleak message, though sadly not an unreasonable one, which I will explore in the body of this thesis.

Furthermore, the White Whale has been regarded as a symbol of racial oppression both in antebellum and in modernity (although the color white itself is only partially to blame for its connection with racism). Michael C. Berthold's essay "Moby-Dick and the American Slave Narrative" expands upon the greater cultural context surrounding Melville's symbols, tracing the use of the whale as a "popular symbol for slavery and its prophesied eradication" in pre-1851 abolitionist rhetoric (Berthold 135). Antebellum writers, including Abraham Lincoln, regarded the whale as a great beast that can only be conquered through cooperation and related that belief to the fight against human enslavement (Berthold 135). Although slavery has long been outlawed, twenty-first century America still wrestles with racial injustice, and thus Melville's allegorical crusade against prejudice endures. In Inez Martinez's article "Trump's Base, Ahab, and the

---

Coast didn't gain national attention until about a decade after the publication of *Moby-Dick*. Yet, the Mexican-American war was concurrent with the novel's writing, so its exclusion from such a large and messy novel—aside from the possibly ironic declaration "Let America add Mexico to Texas" (Melville 64)—remains yet to be explained.

[7]Even while boarding the *Pequod*, the owners of the ship originally refuse to employ Queequeg despite his masterful aim because they "'let no cannibals on board'" (Melville 87).

American Dream," she connects the "whiteness of the whale" to modern white supremacy—an immoral monster that will destroy the nation if left unaddressed (Martinez 3). Although slavery and white supremacy are notably different in practice and in their severity (although similar in their tenets), the symbol of the whale and the crew's quest to slay it are comparable in both antebellum and contemporary contexts: the whale is a racial injustice imposed by whites, and American citizens must band together to eradicate the racist institution. Despite the two scholars' oversight in regard to the meaning of Moby-Dick's victory, the similarity between these two readings—one documenting antebellum rhetoric, the other diagnosing injustices within Trump's America—indicates that as institutions of racial oppression evolve, the text of *Moby-Dick* evolves with it.

Not only does race theory influence the formation and reading of American symbols, but it also offers insight into the ending of the novel. To many scholars of race, Ishmael's survival is a testimony to the power of the universally tolerant individual. Though the exact reason why Ishmael perseveres is still heavily debated, his marriage to Queequeg is one of the more popular explanations. To Berthold, Ishmael survives because of his appreciation for diverse cultures, as evinced by his reliance on Queequeg's coffin, which the cannibal covered with stories and images from Rokovoko, his native island (Berthold 142). Because Ishmael does survive instead of Queequeg, white dominance is not completely usurped, however Melville's ending at least significantly questions the racial hierarchy if not upsets it (Berthold 143). Nevertheless, Ishmael's dependence on a physical embodiment of Queequeg's culture preaches the necessity of learning to appreciate other ethnic traditions. Timothy Powell, however, reads the passage with a bit more cynicism. In "Herman Melville: Ruthless Democracy," he argues that Ishmael's rescue indicates a triumph of the white race over diversity (Powell 174). Because the crew of the *Pequod* is racially diverse, Powell concludes that the ship's destruction is not emblematic of the fall of the United

States government, but rather of its racial heterogeneity. Despite Ishmael's tolerance for other cultures, he is still white. In Powell's reading, unlike Berthold's, there is no hope for rescue from America's wreck; no matter how accepting Americans become of each other's differences, whiteness will always dominate as the cultural standard.

In contrast, other scholars view the ending from a political lens. In "The Cold War's 'Undigested Apple-Dumpling': Imaging 'Moby-Dick' in 1956 and 2001," Walter C. Metz argues that in the 1956 film directed by John Huston, Ishmael represents freedom, which survived despite Ahab's totalitarian regime: a reading obviously shaped by the Cold War (Metz 222). Yet, if Metz and Huston seek an all-American hero to resist Ahab's tyranny, the just and pious first mate Starbuck would make more sense as a lone survivor, for he opposes Ahab more aggressively than the philosophical Ishmael. Additionally, their metaphor falls flat because of Ishmael's passive nature, which doesn't quite fit the offensive attitude of the "global policeman." Meanwhile, Jason Frank agrees that freedom plays an important role in deciphering the ending, but to the opposite effect. In "Pathologies of Freedom in Melville's America," he claims that Ishmael's rescue subverts America's destruction because unlike the rest of the crew, he does not believe in a right to absolute freedom. Rather, he accepts the cruel complexities of existence and embraces his codependence on his crewmates (Frank 454). So, in Huston's analysis, Ishmael is freedom, while in Frank's analysis, Ishmael discourages freedom. While these two interpretations are antithetical to one another, neither are incorrect. These contrasting readings illuminate a perplexing phenomenon that occurs semi-frequently within scholarship on *Moby-Dick*: two scholars can read the same passage of text and propose entirely plausible meanings, though they reached opposite conclusions—an idea I will explore in the body of this thesis.

Although many scholars contemplate the significance of Ishmael's rescue, few ponder what, exactly, he needs rescuing from. If Ishmael is Melville's solution to surviving an institutional collapse, what meaning lingers in the wreck of the *Pequod*? In "Moby Dick and American Political Symbolism," Alan Heimert compares the voyage of the *Pequod* to America's history (in a sense, her voyage through time), yet he, too, fails to explain what the *Pequod*'s destruction signifies in his interpretation (Heimert 499). Considering Heimert's argument, it would follow that the ship's ruination would signal the end of America's history, but even with that symbol implied, he offers no interpretation of the fall of the American Empire, or its cause: the White Whale. This is a significant gap in interpretation found in many works of criticism on the American thread within *Moby-Dick*, which I shall expand upon in Chapter 3 of this thesis. Milton R. Stern, however, attempts to tackle the meaning of the ship's sinking. In his article, "Moby Dick, Millennial Attitudes, and Politics," Stern faults foundational American ideals with the ultimate ruination of the country. He asserts that Melville satirizes American exceptionalism through Ahab's illusion of divinity, for Ahab "won't settle for a world that bites off his leg, jostles his demands and expectations: he is both very Romantic and very American" (Stern 53). Ahab's tragic flaw is he refuses to settle for his worldly possessions (i.e. his family, his pay, his pipe, etc.) and instead aspires toward greatness: a flaw which very closely resembles the American Dream. The belief that his own personal drive is stronger than the divine, as embodied by Moby-Dick, is what results in the destruction of the democracy. In accordance with Stern's theory, Melville warns against extreme manifestations of America's idealism, for eventually the United States will impose herself upon a righteous battle she cannot win.

But what does Melville hope will change in response to his message? Although Stern's reading of the *Pequod*'s destruction is logical, to urge America to change her ideals is not exactly pragmatic advice, and it is unlike Melville to present a change-or-die solution to such a complicated

set of issues. Alternatively, some scholars posit that Melville's original intent for *Moby-Dick* is no longer relevant, but rather his ultimate point within the American thread—whatever it may be—depends more on the reader than on the text itself. In "Moby-Dick and Perpetual War," Sorin Radu Cucu and Roland Vegso develop an intriguing theory on why scholars of *Moby-Dick* from an array of eras all venture to apply the text of the novel to their own time. They observe that not only is the prose malleable in its meaning because of its vague wording and heavily-symbolic content, but also many of the novel's themes are simply abstract ponderings into the metaphysical (Cucu and Vegso 13). In other words, Melville (as personified by the pensive narrator Ishamel) spends much of the novel philosophizing on intangible yet timeless concepts, such as superiority, nature, fate, interdependence, and so on. As the collective American attitude continues to evolve, *Moby-Dick* appears to evolve with it because Melville refuses to provide concrete explanations of any of his symbols, which encourages their perpetual relevancy, and thus manifests in the very conundrum this paper foolishly seeks to resolve. Perhaps this was Melville's intention.[8] Or, perhaps it is the very nature of the symbol to invite alternate readings: even as they reveal a facet of their meaning, they conceal another (Gleim 403).

This theory on the perennial relevance of *Moby-Dick* directs our discussion to what exactly twenty-first century readings of Melville's American symbolism entail. Unsurprisingly, it has much to do with the War on Terror.[9] In "The Cold War's 'Undigested Apple-Dumpling': Imaging

---

[8]Indeed, Ishmael himself admits of the symbolism of the White Whale, "To analyse it, would seem impossible" (Melville 192)

[9]At least, in current published scholarship. Once we achieve a certain degree of removal, I have no doubt the next decade will see interpretations of *Moby-Dick* and COVID-19 populating library shelves.

'Moby-Dick' in 1956 and 2001," Walter C. Metz notes that *Moby-Dick* was revived in cinema shortly after 9/11 and he draws parallels between the megalomania of Ahab and of the Bush Administration, set on hunting Osama Bin Laden to the ends of the earth for taking the World Trade Center (the "legs" of New York City) (Metz 225). Metz's analysis of cinematic adaptations of *Moby-Dick*, while not completely topical to a discussion of literature, nevertheless qualifies as an interpretation of Melville's story. Moreover, Metz's article is useful because it establishes a positive correlation between international conflict and renewed public interest in *Moby-Dick*. Based on the evidence Metz provides, it appears that Melville's warning of destruction as a consequence to relentless pursuit becomes especially pertinent during times of escalating militarism. Since Melville wrote the novel at the height of Civil War tensions, the increased relevancy of *Moby-Dick* during wartime isn't a total surprise. But if cinematic adaptations of the book acquire new meanings in new eras, surely the *Pequod* is not exempt from a fresh reading in the new millennium. In fact, Cucu and Vesgo joke that at the end of the world, scholars of Melville will proclaim that *Moby-Dick* predicted it (and I will be right there alongside them).

Thus concludes my overview of potential meanings of Melville's American symbols. However, in researching for this thesis, I have identified that a concerning pattern has emerged among recent works of scholarship about the American thread: scholars often ignore the meaning of the destruction of the *Pequod*—the symbol they work so hard to interpret. It is not difficult to find evidence within *Moby-Dick* for criticism from any literary school, simply because there is so much text to pull from. Yet, political scholars interpret the same scenes again and again in new or slightly updated ways. In doing so, they skip over other parts of the text that contradict their symbolic analysis in favor of presenting *Moby-Dick* as a text that *completely* encapsulates the struggles of their time. However, manufacturing a text as malleable as modernity comes at the cost of sacrificing

some passages that refuse to adopt an updated interpretation. With this thesis, I will first dissect the timelessness of Melville's American commentary with the goal of pinpointing why *Moby-Dick* invites modernization. Second, I will build upon existing scholarship by connecting *Moby-Dick*'s endurance to the destruction of the *Pequod*. For, if the *Pequod* continues to reflect America, then its decimation forewarns of a collapse of the modern United States. Finally, I will stress the consequences of ignoring the ship's tragic fate. Because when scholars of Melville pass over the ending of the novel, they not only lose Melville's warning of American fallibility, but they also present an incomplete interpretation. As a possible solution, I will conclude this thesis by advocating for a holistic reading of the American thread.

CHAPTER 1: *MOBY-DICK* AS A LIVING DOCUMENT

American popular culture and scholars of literature alike hail *Moby-Dick* as the "American Bible,"[10] not because the novel is primarily, or even largely, concerned with American politics (for good reason; how much can sailors protest the U.S. government from the middle of the ocean?). Rather, what makes Melville's commercial flop the "Great American Novel" is the enduring relevance of his small, but significant, commentaries on the *Pequod*'s country of origin. Since the early twentieth century, American scholars and readers of *Moby-Dick* have related the events of the novel to developing political crises. In this chapter, I will identify which of Melville's stylistic choices invite modernization as well as explore how the novel has and continues to metamorphose according to the particular outlook of its reader. Furthermore, by comparing political interpretations of the text through the past few decades, I will illustrate how readers have accidentally edited the text of *Moby-Dick*, and reiterate the dangers of these irreparable alterations.

Although Melville first published *Moby-Dick* in 1851, it was not widely studied until the Second World War, when F.O. Matthiessen revived it with a strictly anti-fascist reading of the power dynamic between the tyrranous Captain Ahab—a man elevated to the status of a god—and his whalers who suffer the majority of the consequences of their leader's machiavellianism (Matthiessen 446). This reading, whether or not Matthiessen intended it, is partially a reflection of American politics at the time: Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito were embodiments of ultimate evil who withheld the inalienable right of freedom from their citizens in

[10]Term coined by Nathaniel Philbrick in *Why Read Moby-Dick?* Penguin, 2011.

the name of global domination. To Matthiessen, Ahab became a warning against an American dictator who would lead the country to ruin.

Although Matthiessen's reading heavily contributed to the renewal of public interest in *Moby-Dick*, it is incredibly unlikely that Melville wrote his American thread as a satire on fascism,[11] largely because it was far from the primary political issue in mid-nineteenth century America. Nevertheless, Matthiessen, along with dozens of scholars to have emerged since, have interpreted the American thread in relation to the looming political questions of their own eras. This is what Sorin Radu Cucu and Roland Vegso call the "self-reproductive capacity" in their essay "Moby-Dick and Perpetual War." They define the self-reproductive capacity as the tendency for readers to connect the events of a fictional work to their current global environment (Cucu and Vegso 14). Although it is common for many readers to relate to works of literature in some form, some books accommodate and encourage the self-reproductive capacity more than others due to the malleability of their text. Because of Melville's philosophical prose, *Moby-Dick* is perhaps among one of the most adaptive texts: "Melville's narrative constitutes itself both as a mirror that can capture the world it does not directly know and as a lens through which events, situations, and belief systems can be observed as being rooted in the world" (Cucu and Vegso 14). At least to Cucu and Vegso, it is Melville's particular style of writing that elicits modern rereadings. While his verbose and speculative prose is not unique to *Moby-Dick*, the length of the novel as well as its examinations into the human condition elevate the relevance of *Moby-Dick* over Melville's other works. What makes *Moby-Dick* particularly riveting as a case study of the

[11]While the term "fascism" didn't exist until the early twentieth century, that doesn't restrict Melville from writing about a dictatorial environment that resembles fascism. Though to claim Melville intentionally penned an "anti-fascist" novel would be inaccurate.

self-reproductive capacity is that it has been one of the most popular novels among scholars since the mid-twentieth century. Ergo, scholarship on the novel has inadvertently fossilized a record of how American readers respond to the book in light of an evolving culture. *Moby-Dick* does not simply "capture the world it does not directly know," it retains and absorbs it.

To support the assertion that *Moby-Dick* acts as a catalyst for the self-reproductive capacity, let us examine the American thread from contrasting historical perspectives. In "Rewriting Moby-Dick: Politics, Textual Identity, and the Revision Narrative," John Bryant analyzes the film *Moby Dick* (1956, dir. John Huston) as Melville's original story filtered through an anti-McCarthyist lens. In adapting the novel into a script, screenwriters Huston and Ray Bradbury had to sensationalize the story, or otherwise make it captivating to their audience by making it relevant.[12] Huston and Bradbury reinvented *Moby-Dick* as a bitter criticism of McCarthyism, with Ahab acting as the senator who monomaniacally pursues what he considers to be pure evil (i.e. Communism). But after the White Whale martyrs Ahab, his crew continues hunting the creature to their demise, which Huston and Bradbury intended as a statement on the foolishness of "blind allegiance to mad authority" (Bryant 124). Thus, in tweaking their film to appeal to a mid-century American audience, Huston and Bradbury participate in as well as anticipate the Self-Reproductive Capacity. However, altering the details of the novel—as Huston and Bradbury do when they send the *Pequod*'s crew after Moby Dick after Ahab dies—presents a significant set of issues, especially in a film, which likely reached a larger audience than had read *Moby-Dick*. Because many Americans were likely more familiar with the movie over the

[12] Although, the fact that Warner Bros. greenlit Huston's expensive film indicates there was significant public interest in Melville's *Moby-Dick* already. Whether this was a result of the Cold War cannot be said.

book, Huston's film endangers Melville's text by superseding it in the American consciousness. Effectively, the reimagined events depicted in the film have the potential to rewrite Melville's original text in the name of a more accurate reflection of the times—McCarthyism, in Huston's case.

Forty-five years later, the next American war following our crusade against communism yet again revived *Moby-Dick* in popular culture. In "The Cold War's 'Undigested Apple-Dumpling': Imaging 'Moby-Dick' in 1956 and 2001," Walter C. Metz argues that the War on Terror renewed public interest in *Moby-Dick*, because Melville's "bitter warning" against reckless megalomania became pertinent when the Bush Administration became "hell bent on avenging the loss of his buildings, New York City's legs" (Metz 225). Similar to Huston and Bradbury's anti-McCarthyist satire, Metz connects a vengeful political figure to Ahab. This connection between the two readings suggests that American leaders who are possessed by the need to defend their freedom (from Communism, from terrorism) could be a common occurance in U.S. politics, and one that is adequately reflected in *Moby-Dick*. While Metz makes this connection nearly three years after September 11th, Professor of Literature at Columbia University Edward Said delivered a speech on the same subject only a few days after the attack. He declared that the Bush Administration painted Osama Bin Laden as a "symbol of all that's evil in the world" and swore to pursue him to the ends of the earth, which is inevitably America's end: to obsess over revenge and killing instead of recognizing their faults that placed them in harm's way. As a consequence they, like Ahab,[13] are "borne out to sea, wrapped around the white

[13]Interestingly, Said drew a similar comparison in regard to the First Gulf War a decade prior: "Anyone who has read Moby Dick would find it irresistible now to extrapolate from that great novel to the real world, to see the American empire preparing once again, like Ahab, to take after

whale with the rope of his own harpoon and going obviously to his death" (Said). Said's comparison, however, isn't entirely accurate, as Ahab dies via Fedallah's whale line, not because of his harpoon: an unlikely oversight from a scholar who wrote the introduction to the novel in one edition[14] (Bryant 122). No matter the cause of Said's minor inaccuracy, his speech, as well as his misreading, exhibits the self-reproductive capacity, not only because he extrapolates Melville's text to his time, but also because he slightly alters the text in order to better communicate his message. Like Huston and Bradbury, Said keeps a nineteenth century text relevant by tweaking its details to fit a more specific cultural event. But again, it isn't *Moby-Dick* alone that happens to perfectly align with the developing political situation. The work of applying and updating the novel is done by the reader, who compromises the integrity of Melville's original text by molding it into an allusion that fits uncannily well.

Thus far, the endurance of *Moby-Dick* has been the result of modern artists who artificially contort the text to better suit their comparison and their audience. When taken in isolation, this trend would suggest that there is no such thing as a timeless text, and Melville's novel only survives because influential figures force it to evolve. Yet, this perpetual modernization cannot be entirely attributed to a group of stubborn bibliophiles; there must exist a quality within *Moby-Dick* that tends toward timelessness. In other words, Melville's style contains a subtle element that desires evolution.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe or Henry David Thoreau, whose works directly challenge nineteenth century American issues from slavery to

---

an imputed evil." Clearly, even the same scholars are prone to evolving readings of *Moby-Dick*. See Said, Edward. "Empire of Sand." *The Guardian*, Jan 12, 1991, pp. 2.

[14]The 2010 Penguin-Random House edition of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*.

voting taxes, Melville writes about more intangible conflicts. In "*Moby-Dick* and the American 1848," Michael Paul Rogin concludes that the American thread is so difficult to analyze because it is, at the same time, concretely about Melville's America, and something else entirely. He speculates, "Were *Moby-Dick* simply a political allegory, then nothing would be lost by translating its representations back to their referents, for that would have been the purpose of writing it. Yet as a political allegory *Moby-Dick* remains, paradoxically, above politics, neither losing itself in political complexity nor transforming its political present into something new" (Rogin 108). In his examination of the nature of allegories, Rogin determines that when an author writes a text as a direct commentary on specific individual events, to replace the symbols with their real-world counterparts would detract nothing from the story. For example, if Melville wrote Ahab as a satire of, say, John C. Calhoun,[15] to replace the former with the latter would preserve that sense of power and mania over the crew of the *Pequod*. But Ahab's character is more complex than a caricature of a politician can covey: he is compassionate, noble, and a "grand, ungodly, god-like man" (Melville 79), all of which are qualities that are lost when Ahab is reduced to mere allegory. Therefore, while the American thread most definitely contains commentary on United States politics, it is also something more profound and intangible.

But then, the nature of Melville's critique is also distinct from most forms of allegory, for there exists no one-to-one correlation between subject and symbol. In "Ahab, American," Susan McWilliams explains that *Moby-Dick* is intentionally didactic because Melville's characters are "made to appear bigger or more dramatic than their counterparts in real life" (McWilliams 237). While most allegories satirize particular well-known figures, Melville refrains from caricaturing antebellum politicians. Instead, he allegorizes *Americans*, for each of his Nantucketers subscribes

[15]See Heimert, 516.

to some distinctly American belief—universal tolerance, the right to freedom, the self-made man, just to name a few. But if Melville caricatures American characters, what he really critiques is the egalitarian idealism his nation was founded upon, which enables his commentary to endure. In "Moby Dick, Millennial Attitudes, and Politics," Milton R. Stern asserts that Melville's commentary remains relevant because his writing speaks to the soul of American democracy, with particular regard to "the political translations and contradictions of American expectations and attitudes" (Stern 60). And American attitudes *are* contradictory. For example, Ahab loves a community he is not a part of. He dreams of liberating mankind from oppression—a noble venture—yet broods alone while his crew celebrates their community. In satirizing American attitudes, like the contradictory definitions of brotherhood and independence exhibited by Ahab, Melville chose to base his American thread not on his United States, but on a communal United States—a U.S. that transcends time. Because *Moby-Dick* addresses—either explicitly or symbolically—the philosophical core of America, so long as America's values persevere, so does public interest in *Moby-Dick*.

Likewise, as long as Americans bicker over the same problems, Melville's criticism of those problems remains relevant. This assertion is best supported by an excerpt from "Loomings," and perhaps the passage that first establishes the American thread. Ishmael, while contemplating his compulsion to return to the sea, remarks that the Fates have planned three noteworthy events: "'GRAND CONTESTED ELECTION FOR THE PRESIDENCY OF THE UNITED STATES' 'WHALING VOYAGE BY ONE ISHMAEL' 'BLOODY BATTLE IN AFFGHANISTAN [sic]'" (Melville 7). The first event is a recurring one in American history, evidenced by the Jefferson-Burr tie in 1800, the Lincoln-Davis cessation in 1860, the infamous Bush-Gore decision in 2000 (and perhaps, the insurrection-inspiring Biden-Trump election in

2020). Although Melville would only have been aware of one of these scandals at the time of writing, he nevertheless observes a pattern of messy elections that is seemingly inherent to the nature of the United States, if not the principle of democracy itself. Likewise, conflicts between Afghanistan and the Western world have been a recurring concern in America.[16] In this passage, Melville likely would have been referring to the First Anglo-Afghan war, which ended with a devastating loss for the British Empire in 1842, therefore warranting the adjective "bloody." But since then, this allusion to a battle in Afghanistan has become nearly imposible to read without first thinking of the War on Terror in 2001 and the Taliban-led coup in 2021, even though Melville could not possibly have written about them. As I am not a scholar of the Middle-East, it would be inappropriate for me to comment on a possible cause of repeated conflicts between Afghanistan and the West. Whether Melville was able to identify a historical pattern, or simply happened to choose a nation the U.S. would eventually quarrel with, may not ever be known, nor is his reasoning particularly relevant. Intent aside, this third event contributes to the timelessness of Melville's novel because, like the contested elections before it, which event it refers to depends on the reader. Although many of these events occurred after the publication of *Moby-Dick*, they paradoxically become part of the novel due to the self-reproductive capacity.

Where, then, does Ishmael's voyage (and the novel itself) fit into this discussion of cyclical historical patterns? In *Prophecies of Leviathan: Reading Past Melville*, Peter Szendy insists, "reading is *without end*: without heading, without head. Promised or delivered unto

---

[16]Why Melville chose to allude to Afghanistan instead of another nation the U.S. frequently clashes with is an intriguing (albeit not entirely topical) question—especially since the U.S. was not involved in the First Anglo-Afghan War, but was instead preoccupied with its own Mexican-American War and various Native American revolts around the time of writing.

prosthetic and prophetic rereadings that remain always to come" (Szendy 93). The "prophetic" nature of Melville's writing invites endless interpretations as history progresses and repeats, which explains why Ishmael places himself between two historical events: *Moby-Dick* itself is part of the evolving relationship between time and American history. Every time these events repeat themselves, Ishmael sets out on another voyage—in 1850, in 2000, in 2021—coinciding with renewed public interest in *Moby-Dick*, when its poignant lessons again become relevant. Indeed, *Moby-Dick* itself has become a pattern in American history.

Moby-Dick endures at least partially due to its unique position as a living text that adapts and evolves in connection with its subject, but with this immortality comes an equally unique set of problems. Some scholars worry that the self-reproductive capacity overshadows, and even overwrites, Melville's original text. In "Moby-Dick and Perpetual War," Sorin Radu Cucu and Roland Vegso discourage modern allegorical interpretations of the American thread because they "strip the elaborate and expansive text down to a unified and compact plot structure, reducing it to a cautionary or visionary tale about blind ambition's path to self-destruction" (Cucu and Vegso 13). Although Melville's abstract ideas and themes persevere 170 years later, there inevitably exists some aspects of the text that are resigned to the nineteenth century—the whaling industry itself, for example. As smaller details become increasingly timely, readers will dismiss them in favor of *Moby-Dick*'s eternal messages. Similarly, since *Moby-Dick* is a favorite reference in popular culture, much of the American population knows at least the general plot of the novel: crazy captain hunts whale. But this summary, too, was manufactured through years, if not decades, of entertainment media focusing on this oversimplification of the central conflict (notice it does not acknowledge the heroic side of Ahab). Although summary of such a famous book is inevitable, which details we choose to exaggerate determines the cultural niche and

influence of the novel.[17] This dangerous process results in an incomplete reading: one that succeeds in grasping Melville's themes, but discards the complexities of the text that make it so messy and so beautiful.

To provide an example of this reduction, I will discuss an instance where cultural applicability became dangerous. After presidential candidate Al Gore rescinded his concession to George W. Bush and demanded a recount of votes in November 2000, a *BBC News* report declared, "Al Gore clung to the wreckage with the ferocity of a Captain Ahab" (Carver). In the name of cultural applicability, the reporter combined the "ferocity" of Ahab with the image of grappling on to the remnants of his ship, which is, in this context, Gore's prospects of winning. Suffice to say, Ahab does not survive his encounter with the White Whale, and the journalist erroneously replaced Ishmael with the relentless captain. However, a comparison of Gore to Ahab being dragged down to his death would be a bit too opinionated and predictive for the report, which was written at a time where either candidate could have won. On the other hand, to liken Gore to Ishmael floating on a broken plank lacks the crazed character that Ahab brings to the metaphor. Therefore, the reporter's marriage of the two textual events is the most practical option and is effective in communicating his idea. But it also broadcasts a textual inaccuracy to a national audience. The *BBC News* article altered the cultural perception of *Moby-Dick* by erasing the need for Ishmael. It likely determined the perception of the novel for readers who are unfamiliar with the text beyond the universal "man chases a whale" that is common knowledge among American audiences. This is when the self-reproductive capacity becomes dangerous: when it possesses the power to shift the popular conception of the book.

---

[17]Indeed, if the plot was instead summarized as "man marries cannibal, sails around the world with him," the novel would occupy an entirely different niche in American culture.

Likewise, John Bryant cautions against applying *Moby-Dick* to modernity in the interest of the preservation of the original text. In "Rewriting Moby-Dick: Politics, Textual Identity, and the Revision Narrative," Bryant argues that texts are subject to an invisible process of evolution that results from minor acts of editing, censorship, misquoting, as well as the self-reproductive capacity (Bryant 120). But with every insignificant change that editors overlook in new editions, Melville's original text is gradually lost. Bryant ponders, "Is there an inevitable slippage between our allegiance to material texts and our desire to make texts conform to a self-image born amid the exigencies of life, one that allows us to forget the text of the source and construct a text that fits the moment?" (Bryant 124). As evidenced in Edward Said's aforementioned speech following the September 11th attacks, readers—even scholars of Melville—are prone to misrememberings of the text or otherwise intentionally modify it to make a better comparison to modern day. These altered presentations of *Moby-Dick* threaten the integrity of Melville's original work when popular culture accepts them over the exact text. In fact, the revision of *Moby-Dick* is not merely a frightening possibility; parts of the text have already been lost. A month before Melville published *Moby-Dick* in the U.S., his editor in England, Richard Bentley, censored the novel so as not to upset his Victorian audience who were widely repulsed by paganism and homosexuality (Bryant 127). Bentley published the novel as *The Whale* in October 1851. However, he did not document all of his changes, so when *Moby-Dick* was published a month later, it retained some of Bentley's errors. Some of these edits still survive in many modern copies of the novel, due to editorial oversight (although, because there are few surviving copies of *The Whale*, these discrepancies are difficult to pinpoint and rectify). In mid-nineteenth century Britain, Melville's publishers "construct[ed] a text that fits the moment" by removing controversial subjects (Bryant 124). But as a consequence, Melville's true original text is already

partially lost, and becomes increasingly endangered. Bryant advocates that scholars of Melville need to "create collaborative critical archives that enable us to edit revision and thereby witness what largely go [sic] unwitnessed" (Bryant 131). Until scholars and historians establish a sort of "fossil record" of the editions of *Moby-Dick* to assist in tracking changes between editions, readers must either restrict their modern connections or verify the accuracy of their reading before informing the public (Bryant 131). While perhaps the main reason why *Moby-Dick* endures as a staple in the American literary canon is because of its ability to reflect the current era, we irreversibly edit and endanger Melville's original text by superimposing our own meaning over prose that resists modernization.

Despite the concern surrounding the fluidity of Melville's text, its evolution is a testament to its importance to American culture. In "The Ship of State," Brian R. Pellar maintains that Melville believed that literary geniuses do not accidentally mirror their times in their writing, but purposely respond to it and hope the times change because of them (Pellar 28). Because of the novel's poor critical and commercial success, in 1851 *Moby-Dick* influenced very little outside of its own pages (aside from Melville's reputation as a popular writer). Instead, Melville accomplished something quite extraordinary, albeit quite antithetical to his original vision: the times have not changed because of him, but his work has changed because of the times. Melvile not only mirrored the issues of his time in his magnum opus, but the foundational issues of the United States democracy, and in doing so managed to mirror all times so long as the American empire survives. Which begs the question: how long can the nation endure before its issues sink the Ship of State?

CHAPTER 2: THE END OF *MOBY-DICK*, THE END OF AMERICA

No story is complete without an ending. The conclusion of a story often contains a key to understanding the messages communicated in the body of the piece. While *Moby-Dick* is a complete story on its own (albeit a messy one), its American threads, too, craft a narrative when woven together. Within his novel, Melville recapitulates the history of the United States, from its formation, to its racially diverse citizenry, to its economy. But perhaps most integral to the interpretation of the American thread is its ending, which it shares with the overarching plot of *Moby-Dick*. Melville ends his novel with Moby Dick destroying the *Pequod*, killing everyone onboard except for the narrator Ishmael, who fell out of a rowboat during the chase. For this discussion, I have isolated these three variables for discussion: the *Pequod* (the destroyed), Moby Dick (the destroyer), and Ishmael (the survivor). In this chapter, I will survey readings of the ending of *Moby-Dick*, in which Melville foretells the destruction of the United States. I will also attempt to isolate a repeated idea among contrasting interpretations in order to extract a potential warning from the conclusion of Melville's political allegory.

Because, as we explored in the previous chapter, Melville captures the recurring issues of the United States, it is entirely plausible that the force he feared would destroy the American Empire could still be threatening the nation now, which makes the interpretation of Melville's message especially relevant. Although many scholars refrain from discussing the destruction of the *Pequod*, a select few place more importance on the symbolic meaning of Ishmael's rescue: a result of the *Pequod*'s desolation that nonetheless contains the key to its prevention. Within Ishmael's survival, Melville offers a remedy to a disunited America; one that, if heeded, might offer hope in the midst of political crisis.

As previously established, most scholars agree that the *Pequod* is a symbol for some facet of America, whether it be the democracy, the citizenry, the economy, something else, or more likely, all of the above. To Antebellum rhetoricians (i.e. Melville's contemporaries), each installment in a long catalogue of compromises over the question of slavery warranted a doomsday declaration that the Ship of State had finally sunk (Heimert 500). In almost every instance, their purpose of foretelling the destruction of the Ship of State was to implore politicians to consider the consequences of their indecision, with the ultimate goal to prevent the ruination of the country.[18] Yet, in *Moby-Dick*, the prophecy of the *Pequod*'s dire fate does not remain a grave warning. It comes to fruition. Part of the reason why the shipwreck is so tragic is because there are dozens of omens foretelling catastrophe that Ahab consciously ignores. Therefore, to Melville there is a point of no return: a moment where warnings cease to matter and the wreck of the Ship of State shifts from possibility to certainty. This raises two primary questions: what, to Melville, was the issue that finally wrecked the Ship of State?; and is there hope for avoiding it?

But first, the wreck itself. Because there is no singular way to read *Moby-Dick*, there is also, somewhat frustratingly, no concrete answer as to what sinks the *Pequod*. Nevertheless, a number of scholars present compelling interpretations that highlight America's shortcomings. In "Trump's Base, Ahab, and the American Dream," Inez Martinez identifies Captain Ahab's selfish hunt against the White Whale as a side effect of the American Dream: a belief system that places the prosperity of the self over the wellbeing of others. She argues that Melville's warning

[18]In current politics, many climate change activists employ a similar tactic of inspiring action through fear. See Johnsen, Kirsten Ellen. "When it Comes to Climate Change We are All Captain Ahab." *Medium*, Aug 20, 2018.

against American individualism lies within the narcissistic nature of Ahab's "noble" and catastrophic quest:

> Ahab's relentless assertion of his will against a force of nature, the white whale, reveals the underbelly of the American claim of a limitless right to pursue happiness and exposes the grandiosity of the ego's search to assert such power regardless of consequences to others. Ahab's vendetta provides a grim warning about American individualism conceived as unlimited by the common good (Martinez 4).

Thus, when the *Pequod* sinks, it becomes a tragic reminder of the consequences of Machiavellian ambition in a competitive economy. To Martinez, if the privileged continue to relentlessly pursue their own happiness without regard for how their actions affect others, American society will fall apart while a disproportionate number of people suffer at the hands of Machiavellian leaders (Martinez 9). Yet, Martinez's use of the conditional "if" to structure her argument indicates that she believes Melville intended the *Pequod*'s destruction as a warning of America's approaching destruction, not as a declaration of its present demise. This minute difference implies that Melville thought there was still hope for America's redemption, a fact which I believe is supported by Ishmael's survival.

For additional insight into Melville's intended message behind the sinking of the Ship of State, Jason Frank turned to the personal letters Melville wrote while he was working on *Moby-Dick*. In "Pathologies of Freedom in Melville's America," Frank divulges that Melville "cast a critical eye on the defining American value of freedom itself, which he believed, taken as a superordinate ideal, set the course for national self-destruction" (Frank 445). In the text of the novel, this dangerous outlook manifested as Captain Ahab's indignation at the White Whale. Aside from avenging his leg, one of the primary motivations for Ahab's chase is his belief that

Moby Dick is a cruel god that must be destroyed in order to liberate mankind.[19] Therefore, because Ahab is an American, he feels entitled to complete autonomy, even if to achieve it requires "an audacious, immitigable, and supernatural revenge" (Melville 186). But the reason that Frank's interpretation of the demise of the *Pequod* is noteworthy is because freedom is one of America's foundational ideals. Thus, his explanation fits with the earlier exploration of the timelessness of *Moby-Dick*. If the novel remains relevant because it discusses issues that are intertwined with the bones of the American democracy, as opposed to its fleeting eras, then Melville's warning against the right of freedom taken to an extreme, too, resonates beyond a single moment in history.

Conversely, Alan Heimert proposes a reading that both considers Melville's time and connects to future eras. In "Moby-Dick and American Political Symbolism," Heimert discusses not the cause of the *Pequod*'s destruction, but its aftermath. Because the *Pequod* itself represented America due to its wood being harvested from the three main regions of the nation, Melville's description of these once unified woods as broken boards floating in the ocean "embodied the nation's fears of beholding the broken and dishonored fragments of a once glorious Union" (Heimert 527). To Melville's contemporaries, fears of a fractured nation were especially pressing as the Northeast and Southeast states became increasingly divided over the issue of slavery. Yet, in a two-party political system, the dominant factions (in Melville's era, the liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats; today, the opposite) often oscillate between near-bipartisanship and extremism. Therefore, even if the modern United States is not on the

[19] "all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically accessible in Moby Dick. He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down" (Melville 184).

brink of civil war, worrying over a polarized country is a feeling that readers can relate to in any moment of American history. Melville, however, harbors hope even among the splinters of America's former glory: "But the shipwreck in *Moby-Dick*, followed as it is by Ishmael's salvation, emerges as a symbol of hope to the faithful disciples of democracy" (Heimert 527). Even if, as Melville fears, the United States falls to disunity, Ishmael's survival intimates that *something* will survive its collapse.[20] Even though Martinez and Frank isolate an extremist view of independence—a central American tenet—as the cause of the obliteration of the *Pequod*, Heimert believes that the spirit of democracy itself, the idealism that formed the Great American Experiment, will endure despite the death of the nation. And while the shipwreck is lamentable, that survival of the democratic spirit is more important than the survival of its body.

To better understand the force that destroys the *Pequod*, it is useful to examine the direct cause of the shipwreck: Moby Dick. Although Captain Ahab's mania is what positions the crew on the brink of doom, and is indirectly at fault for their demise, it is the White Whale that inspires the chase. In other words, Moby Dick represents an entity—an ideal, an unconquered frontier, a level of influence—that will ruin America if she pursues it relentlessly. Therefore, to interpret the shipwreck of the *Pequod* without considering the role of the White Whale within it is to put forth an incomplete analysis.

Yet, reading the White Whale presents a more daunting task than reading the *Pequod*, for Melville designed Moby Dick as a symbol of both all things and nothing. Like Heimert, Lakshmi Mani presents an interpretation of the White Whale that is based in Melville's time, but leans toward modernity. In "The Apocalypse and the Avatar in Melville's Fiction," Mani elucidates that although the whale itself was a popular rhetorical symbol in its own right, the White Whale

---

[20] What, exactly, that something could be is explored later in this chapter.

echoes another prevalent symbol in the mid-nineteenth century: "the fabulous White Steed of the Prairies, an image of the western paradise of innocence in America" (Mani 227). If the White Whale is interchangeable with the White Steed, the pursuit of the horse would indicate a crusade to conquer the "western paradise"—the final frontier (until, at least, space travel became viable). The conquest for control over both North American coasts could also illuminate a larger argument against American imperialism, as the hunted (the would-be colonists) become the hunters and revolt against the imperialist power, not unlike the American Revolution. In the context of *Moby-Dick*, the whale is transformed into a colony standing against the invasion that threatens his prosperity. However, this reading is not completely supported by the novel, for America was not the only empire in the nineteenth century. In fact, the British Empire possessed far more land and power than the U.S., but even the British whalers beg Ahab to give up his quest.[21] While an imperialist commentary isn't impossible, America's interactions with other imperialist countries that refuse to hunt the White Whale significantly complicate the reading. Furthermore, Mani acknowledges the difficulty of deciphering the White Whale. Mani calls Moby Dick a symbol of the "impenetrable mystery of the universe" that is at once powerful, honorable, and wicked (Mani 225). Because of Ishmael's fascination with the White Whale and his ultimate indecision over what, exactly, the whale represents, the text makes it evident that Moby Dick is, in some capacity, an enigma unsolvable to humankind. This is why interpreting the American thread, and the ending in particular, proves so herculean for scholars: we must find answers within a symbol Melville himself left uninterpretable.

---

[21]Captain Boomer, who lost an arm to Moby Dick, advises, "'There would be great glory in killing him, I know that; and there is a ship-load of precious sperm in him, but, hark ye, he's best let alone'" (Melville 441).

However, a symbol without a definite interpretation is both a puzzle without solution (as Mani believes), and a malleable clay. Because it defies a singular fixed meaning, it shifts to accommodate a variety of readings (not unlike *Moby-Dick* as a whole). In "'Its Wood Could Only Be American!': *Moby-Dick* and Antebellum Popular Culture," David S. Reynolds attempts to compensate for the multifaceted nature of Melville's symbol by bestowing upon the White Whale a range of possible meanings instead of a single vague one. Like a number of scholars, he bases his interpretation in nineteenth century America, although he acknowledges, "Such historical source-study can be constricting, for in fact *Moby-Dick* moves beyond slavery or antislavery, protemperance or antitemperance, to a literary realm in which subversive reform energy and rhetoric, rather than reform message, become the literary artist's central concern" (Reynolds 531). Instead, Reynolds describes Moby Dick as the culmination of all the evils the various reform movements of the 1830s[22] sought to remedy. Despite a lack of textual reference for some items in the extensive list of problems during the Age of Reform, Reynolds' broad definition of Moby Dick as a distinctly American evil works rather well. It's an evil that threatens to destroy the nation (i.e. sink the *Pequod*), yet presents a new and fatal issue if aggressively hunted: that being the political instability associated with a great amount of change in a short window of time. Furthermore, his reading of the White Whale complements the earlier diagnosis of extreme independence as the malady that dooms the *Pequod*. Each of these reform movements fought for what they believed to be inalienable human rights, and thus pursued their freedom from corrupt institutions that were injuring their quality of life. Therefore, Melville's message becomes rather clear—while it is noble to fight evil for your fellow man, like Ahab, a

[22] Reynolds explicitly names abolitionism and temperance, but his argument might also apply to women's suffrage, prison reform, labor laws, nature conservation, and education.

relentless pursuit of immediate progress endangers the nation. The American thread is a warning against demanding an unreasonable[23] level of freedom from a government that is slow to implement change. Moreover, while Reynolds grounds his interpretation in the Age of Reform, the underlying message applies to all American eras so long as there exists imperfections within the government and social climate that activists protest. Indeed, many of the conflicts the aforementioned reform movements addressed persist in the modern era, although in altered forms. We, the contemporary American citizenry, are still in pursuit of democracy's White Whale.

Although Reynolds characterizes the White Whale as a preventable evil, Brian R. Pellar insists that America's reckoning is inevitable. In "The Ship of State," Pellar extrapolates Reynolds' reading by exploring one of the many movements of the Age of Reform in depth. He begins his discussion on abolitionism by citing a letter Melville wrote to a friend[24] concerning the sinking of the *Ann Alexander* after a whale charged the ship: "I make no doubt it *is* Moby Dick himself, for there is no account of his capture after the sad fate of the Pequod about fourteen years ago" (qtd. in Pellar 40). Fourteen years prior to the date of the letter, 1851, would place the *Pequod*'s shipwreck sometime in 1837. As for the significance of that year, Pellar guesses that Melville was referring to the Great Panic of 1837:

> As the price of cotton was hit hard (or rammed) and started to sink, so did the whole economy of the great Ship of State, for cotton was used as collateral in almost all of the banking loans at the time. To an abolitionist, this sinking of the economy, along with

---

[23]I do not mean to imply that the demands of the Age of Reform were unreasonable. Rather, Ahab's quest for liberation from all human suffering was unreasonable.

[24] To Evert Augustus Duyckinck, dated November 7, 1851.

> many of the Northern New York banks tied into it by the falling price of a product of slave labor, must have looked like retribution from the hand of God—that is, like a great white whale ramming the Ship of State itself (Pellar 41).

In many places in the novel, Melville presents Moby Dick as an agent of God,[25] which connects Pellar's reading to the text. And for the most part[26] Pellar's interpretation is sound: the *Pequod* is the American Economy, embodied by the booming whaling industry, but God in His divine justice sends the White Whale to wreck the sinful economy founded on inhumanity. Thus, the once-victim now becomes the destroyer of the industry, and the American Economy collapses in 1837. Yet, if Melville is simply commenting on an event that had occurred more than a decade before the composition of his novel, the American thread within *Moby-Dick* reads more like historical fiction than an allegory. Indeed, drawing a warning, much less a message that speaks to the core of the American democracy, proves difficult when the Great Panic of 1837 had been resolved by the early 1840s. Therefore, what can be extracted from Pellar's reading is not the historical minutia, but rather his interpretation of the White Whale as divine retribution. Because if Moby Dick is God's damnation of America, the cause of the nation's ruin shifts from the whale to the nation itself—a reading that is consistent with the reckless character of Ahab, who drives the ship to its demise. But not all blame should be cast upon Ahab, for every crewmate besides Starbuck agrees to and aids in the chase. While Ahab may be the scapegoat for the mania that

---

[25] In "The Whiteness of the Whale," Ishmael enumerates many examples of parallels between the color white in holy symbolism and in Moby Dick himself, thus making the White Whale divine (Melville 189).

[26] A level of dissonance exists between Moby Dick's whiteness and his role as avenger of the enslaved, which Pellar neglects to address.

sends the *Pequod* to its grave, the rest of the crew (the nation) contributed to its ruin. The key to interpreting the American thread lies not in the ideal that will destroy America if chased, but the ideal within American culture that will collapse its own nation from within. And, subsequently, if devastation is unavoidable, what hope remains once even God has lost his trust in us?

To call a man who predicts the end of his own nation "hopeful" seems paradoxical. Yet Melville concludes his novel not with destruction, but with salvation, sounding one last somber note of hope for democracy's survival. By permitting Ishmael to survive the shipwreck, Melville intimates that when America crumbles, *something* will endure, whether it be her memory, her democratic spirit, her people, or something else entirely. Or, perhaps, Ishmael's rescue instead offers a remedy to the evil that threatens to tear America apart—for Ishmael must possess some quality that renders him worthy of rescue, a quality that no other crewmate exhibits.[27] Indeed, in unlocking the meaning of the epilogue, we unlock Melville's ultimate hope for America's redemption, tucked in between the lines of his text like a butterfly trapped in Pandora's box.

However, Melville's inclusion of the epilogue is a choice whose history adds a layer of mystery to its discussion. Melville was always more popular overseas than he was in his motherland during his lifetime, so he published *Moby-Dick* in three volumes titled *The Whale* (now its subtitle) in Britain about a month before its American debut. While adjusting an American text for a British readership, Melville's editor tweaked some parts of the novel in order to ensure it appealed to his Victorian audience. One of these edits was completely omitting the Epilogue. Although the reason for its omission is unknown, it is unlikely that Melville hadn't yet

[27]It is important to note that Ishmael, though not the only crewmate to exhibit caution, consistently understood the many omens as predictive of ruin. Symbolically, he recognized America was headed in a morally wrong direction.

penned the Epilogue because he foreshadows Ishmael's rescue in "The Castaway."[28] But whether its exclusion was an oversight by Melville's editor, or a conscious decision, we cannot be sure. Nevertheless, the Epilogue ironically becomes the ultimate American passage in the novel because its message of hope was one that was shared only with an American audience. Still, some critics argue that the Epilogue lacks meaning altogether. In "Composing *Moby-Dick*: What Might Have Happened," E.L. Doctorow insists that Melville wrote the Epilogue to plug a plot-hole:

> Ishmael is treated [by Melville] with great love but scant respect—he is Ishmael all right in being so easily cast out, and if he is called back, it is only to be cast out again. I wonder if it was not a private irony of his author that the physically irresolute Ishmael, with roughly the same protoplasm as the Cheshire Cat, is the *Pequod*'s sole survivor. I can't help feeling he would not be so, if his continued life was not factually necessary to give voice to the tale (Doctorow 20).

By killing his first-person narrator, Melville would have created a conundrum of who is telling the story of the wreck of the *Pequod*. Thus, as Doctorow suggests, his decision to tell (most of) the story through the eyes of a first-person narrator necessitates at least one survivor. However, to accuse Melville of adding an Epilogue only to preserve the narrative voice is to misread the ending, for two main reasons. Firstly, as has been established, Melville references the ending in "The Castaway," which indicates the concluding scene was a part of Melville's plan for the

---

[28] After the Black cabin boy Pip falls overboard and is left floating in the water for hours, Ishmael comments, "The thing [drifting at sea] is common in that fishery; and in the sequel of the narrative, it will then be seen what like abandonment befel [sic] myself." See Melville, Herman. *The Whale*. vol 3, Richard Bentley, 1851, pp. 61.

novel. Secondly, at numerous points within the novel, Melville inexplicably abandons Ishmael as the narrator and replaces him with an unnamed omniscient voice. Therefore, to kill Ishmael would be of little consequence to the novel because he has disappeared from the story previously. So I reassert, Ishmael's survival is an entirely conscious choice by Melville, and an event brimming with thematic importance.

In a bleaker interpretation of the novel, some scholars of race interpret Ishmael's survival as the triumph of the white man. In "Herman Melville: Ruthless Democracy," Timothy Powell views the primary struggle of the novel—a racially diverse crew hunting a white whale[29]—as an allegorical battle against monoculturalism. He argues that, when Ishmael survives, "Herman Melville seems to be picturing a white man as the sole survivor of the wreck of diversity—the last, if not the first, representative of 'American' identity" (Powell 174). Here, when Moby-Dick wrecks the *Pequod*, the white race is rinsing out the Great Melting Pot, leaving only a lonely white man as a representative of what America was. A lonely white man saved by the culture of his Pacific Islander bosom friend, a culture he tolerates but does not completely understand. If only a white man needed to survive, Starbuck, Stubb, or Flask—the three mates onboard—could easily have replaced Ishmael as the novel's orphan. Instead Melville leaves us with Ishmael, thereby indicating that he exhibits a virtue no other sailor does.

I propose that the quality that makes Ishmael special is the same quality that also makes him slightly irritating (in a lovable way): his extensive and lugubrious philosophizing. Because

---

[29]While the crew as well as the harpooneers—the men actually stabbing at the whale—are remarkably diverse, the main pursuer of Moby Dick is the caucasian Ahab. Although this does not negate Powell's reading, for many abolitionists were white, it does complicate it. How can Ahab hyperfixate on eliminating whiteness when he himself is white?

Ishmael spends so much of the novel simply thinking—a true Prince Hamlet—only he truly understands that "Nothing exists in itself" and reconciles multiple perspectives (Melville 53). While Ahab and Starbuck struggle over opposing ideals, Ishmael alone sympathizes with Ahab's quest yet comprehends its danger. To combine this with my favored readings of the *Pequod* and the White Whale, the American thread unravels as follows: Ahab and his crew unwaveringly demand complete independence from human suffering. As a result, they insist on too much progress in a short amount of time, which spells disaster for a democracy designed to incorporate change gradually. Therefore, the Ship of State is destroyed both by the relentless progressives (Ahab and his crew) and the traditional system that refuses to incorporate their demands (the White Whale), leaving only Ishmael floating in its wake. As a remedy to the impending shipwreck, Melville offers Americans Ishmael's bipartisan method of interpreting any particular issue like the reading of a doubloon. When Ishmael returns home an orphan to begin retelling of the voyage of the *Pequod*, it is the democratic spirit surviving beyond the Great American Experiment.

However, it must be addressed that the *Pequod*'s destruction and Ishmael's rescue become especially confounding to interpret when there exists a lack of scholarly discussion on the topic. Within the extensive research on the American thread that I conducted in preparation for this thesis, the few sources mentioned in this chapter were among some of the only works of scholarship that explored the Epilogue (some more thoroughly than others). Although Melville's ambiguous symbols allow for multiple interpretations, and thus make the American thread laborious to discuss due to the sheer volume of possible meanings that coexist within the same text, to ignore the conclusion of the novel is to present an incomplete interpretation of the American thread. This frequent omission of *Moby-Dick*'s conclusion from scholarly debate

becomes especially dangerous when the few sources that dare to tackle the material are inherently problematic.

CHAPTER 3: THE NEGLECT OF THE EPILOGUE

As established in Chapter 1, the way we read *Moby-Dick* indirectly revises the text of the novel. When rhetoricians, critics, or even citizens misrepresent the contents of the book, their comments have the potential to permanently edit the text. So when accredited scholars promote a reading that ignores, opposes, or doubts the messages within the very text they analyze, they not only influence future scholarship that builds upon their interpretations, but they also corrupt the novel itself. In this final chapter, I will engage with recent scholarship that attempts to represent the American thread to varying degrees of success. In response to my assessment of these interpretations, I will propose a standard of evaluating sources that promises to limit the deterioration of Melville's text.

In "Pathologies of Freedom in Melville's America," Jason Frank observes that Melville is rarely discussed in terms of politics because he was not an activist, he rarely wrote outside the realm of fiction, and his work doesn't clearly fit into liberal or conservative paradigms (Frank 436). The lack of explicit political commentary in *Moby-Dick* makes the American thread more cumbersome to examine because it is not as obvious as Melville's discussion of, say, fate or madness. Yet, I disagree with Frank's assertion; although the American thread might not be the most popular topic among Melvillean scholars, it is not under-researched in any capacity. (Indeed, less than a fourth of the sources I read made it into this thesis.) However, while I contest Frank's claim that scholarship on the entire American thread is scarce, I concede that one area of the American thread in particular is widely neglected: the Epilogue.

As established in Chapter 2 of this thesis, any arc within a story is incomplete without an ending. The same is true for interpretations of a story—because a theory that explains the first

two acts of a plot, but conflicts with the third, is ultimately an invalid theory. By the same logic, any interpretation of the American thread that betrays some of its details or otherwise neglects them is an inadequate interpretation. Unfortunately, many of the few works of scholarship that address the Epilogue are flawed in their analytic method. This issue is especially dangerous, not only because it misconstrues Melville's message of bipartisan consideration, but also because the general dearth in sources that discuss the ending gives unproportional weight to the scholarship that does engage with the novel's conclusion, even if these readings are flawed. Therefore, to neglect the ending is to perpetuate the misreading of the American thread.

For the purpose of evaluating the efficiency of the following interpretations of the final pages of *Moby-Dick* while allowing for a variety of interpretations that confirm and compete with one another, I will define the most accurate[30] readings as the ones that incorporate the greatest amount of details without any conflict between said details. That is to say, if a scholar perceives the White Whale as the Soviet Union, and the *Pequod* as the Confederate States of America, their interpretation of the American thread does not meet the criteria of my definition because two of the details cannot coexist. If a scholar's reading falls short of my definition of a plausible theory, I do not mean to discredit the scholar, for their analysis could contribute to another discussion of *Moby-Dick*, but for our exploration of the American thread, unfortunately their examination is insufficient.

In the ensuing pages, I will present a number of erroneous interpretations with the purpose of both illustrating the deficiency of plausible readings of the American thread and

[30]By "accurate," I mean the most plausible and relevant reading to the scholar's area of study, whether it be race, gender, etc. I do not mean the closest to Melville's original vision.

supporting my claim that there exists a fundamental issue in the way modern scholars read *Moby-Dick*—one that favors the relevancy of the text over its substance.

One of the main ways that readings stray from my definition of an accurate reading is scholars interpret symbols without considering the relationship between them. For example, in "*Moby-Dick's* Lessons, or How Reading Might Save One's Life," Carol Colatrella interprets *Moby-Dick* as an allegory of the nineteenth century education reform movement. Consequently, she identifies the *Pequod* as a university[31] and whales, including the White Whale, as books (Colatrella 174). At first, the comparison appears reasonable because scholars at universities relentlessly pursue knowledge, much like how the crew of the *Pequod* hunts whales. But if Moby-Dick is a book, and he destroys the *Pequod*, then in Colatrella's reading, scholarship dooms universities. Although knowledge can sometimes lure Faustian scholars to their downfall (at least in literature), to claim that books can ruin universities seems unlikely at best. Indeed, the opposite—that books elevate universities—sounds much easier to argue. However fascinating Colatrella's education-reformist reading might be, it doesn't stand simply because of the relationship between two of the symbols. Furthermore, she posits, "Ahab's anger causes the demise of the *Pequod's* crew, with the notable exception of Ishmael, whose survival shows that democracy's project of diversity remains vulnerable to individual desires and luck" (Colatrella 179). After explaining her education-centric theory, Colatrella proceeds to an entirely different reading—one that not only conflicts with itself, but her earlier assertions. Firstly, she argues that it is Ahab's indignation that sinks the *Pequod*, which is a valid point. But Ishmael survives for a *purpose*; he alone is redeemed because he alone understands a truth or enacts a virtue possessed

[31]"I prospectively ascribe all the honor and glory to whaling; for a whale-ship was my Yale College and my Harvard" (Melville 112).

by no other crewmate. Instead, Colatrella attributes Ishmael's rescue to individualism and "luck." So, if Ishmael contains the remedy to Ahab's fatal vice, luck can cure anger and prevent the sinking of the *Pequod*. Or, if combined with Colatrella's first reading, Ishmael is luckily rescued from the anger that dooms a university in its pursuit of knowledge.

Admittedly, Colatrella does present a viable theory later in her essay. She asserts, "Ishmael is an exemplary reader who adjusts his outlook and behavior based on experiences and reflections, while Ahab represents a failed reader who cannot change his behavior even after confronting the disastrous outcomes seeing Moby Dick has had for other whaling crews" (Colatrella 167). In fact, her realization that Ishmael is privy to all the omens foretelling the destruction of the ship while Ahab ignores them is completely supported by the text and not too distant from my own reading of Ishmael as a man who is able to view any situation from multiple perspectives. However, even this accurate reading conflicts with her earlier characterizations of Ahab as just an angry captain, and Moby Dick as a book. Therefore, the main issue with Colatrella's research is that it contradicts itself far too often. And if the scholar cannot argue in favor of a single, cohesive reading, how does she mean to convince the reader of her argument?

Colatrella's analysis of the American thread most noticeably suffers from a lack of consideration of how Melville's American symbols interact with each other, which makes for a clear example. But while her essay is one of the more recent instances of this type of interpretive error, Colatrella's work is far from the only piece whose effectiveness is hindered by it. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for scholars to prioritize the meaning of individual characters

and objects over a unified allegorical reading.[32] At least in regard to the American thread, an allegorical reading—in which each symbol is interpreted in relation to other symbols, as opposed to on its own—seems more effective in relaying Melville's message. If Melville truly did intend to critique the shortcomings and dangers of the American democracy, as I believe he does, it would be more likely that his tale of America's failure, fall, and partial rescue would be contained in a quasi-parable within the novel. Therefore, we should strive to treat the American thread as such—a full story in itself—not fragments of a larger work like splintered boards floating in the Atlantic. For when *Moby-Dick* is retold across generations, we tell of a mad captain steering a doomed ship after a godly whale, not of whales, lucky rescues, and angry men.

To reiterate: Melville rescues Ishmael for a particular reason. In "The Doubloon," Ishmael remarks, "some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth" (Melville 430). Assuming Melville practices what he preaches, he wrote each event within *Moby-Dick* with a particular meaning in mind. While the cause of Ishmael's survival is debatable (and likely multi-faceted), in order to effectively explain why *Ishmael* survives, a theory must involve a quality that Ishmael alone possesses and/or exhibits. In "Lincoln's Electric Cord," Elizabeth Samet posits, "Ishmael ultimately survives because he acquires a rather Thoreauvian aloofness from the hunt for Moby Dick—a removal so complete that it has provoked some readers to complain that he disappears altogether from the novel" (Samet 71). Although it is true that Ishmael spends a fair amount of the novel merely philosophizing, which therefore removes him from the present task of the whale hunt, he is never "aloof." Aloofness implies an annoyance or distaste for the task that he distances himself from, whereas Ishmael rarely, if ever, expresses a

[32]See, for example, Berthold; "Moby-Dick and American Slave Narrative"; Gleim, "A Theory of Moby Dick"; Mani, "The Apocalypse and the Avatar in Melville's Fiction"

frustration with the chase. Ishmael's mental hermitude is one of contradictions: when he disagrees with Ahab's quest, he still empathizes with it;[33] when he becomes pensive, he still maintains a brotherly love for his crewmates.[34] Unlike Thoreau, Ishmael does not praise the power of the individual, he lauds human connection. These paradoxes are integral to my reading of Ishmael's unique virtue as a bipartisan awareness. Moreover, while Ishmael does disappear as the narrator for select chapters, he does not disappear from the novel, not only because he ultimately returns for the concluding chapters, but also because he is inextricably linked with the material. Ishmael is the primary narrator of the novel because he is retelling his adventures to groups of sailors all over the world as well as writing it[35]—the story is important to him; he could not abandon the memories of the family whose loss orphaned him.

Additionally, Samet provides an alternative reading of Ishmael's survival, albeit one that just as equally misinterprets his personality. She argues that Ishmael's survival offers an escape from the collapse of the democracy for citizens who understand they have lost their freedom

---

[33] "I, Ishmael, was one of that crew [who agreed to chase the White Whale]; my shouts had gone up with the rest…and stronger I shouted, and more did I hammer and clinch my oath, because of the dread in my soul. A wild, mystical, sympathetical feeling was in me; Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine" (Melville 179).

[34]"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 around; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness" (Melville 416).

[35] We begin the novel with Ishmael recounting the story in present time, then resume the present-day in "The Town-Ho's Story," where he tells of his adventures in hotels in Spain.

once they pledge their allegiance to it and therefore consciously reclaim their own sovereignty (Samet 92). Ishmael recognizes Ahab's tyranny and the danger of his quest. However, he never becomes truly independent because he continues to aid Ahab, from the moment he chooses to cheer at the doubloon until he embarks on Ahab's personal rowboat on day three of the chase. Despite his understanding of Ahab's shortcomings (and likewise, the failings of democracy), Ishmael does not waver in his allegiance to Ahab's quest, aside from fleeting moments of quiet regret. Alternatively, if Melville intended his survivor to have severed themself from Ahab's fallen democracy, the first mate Starbuck should have survived instead of Ishmael. Starbuck becomes so opposed to pursuing the White Whale that he nearly commits mutiny by shooting Ahab in his sleep. The trait Ishmael possesses that scholars deem is the reason for his preservation must be Ishmael's alone—something that elevates the importance of his survival over that of any other crewmate. Yet, frequently scholars like Samet suggest that Ishmael survives because of his opposition to Ahab—a quality more befitting of Starbuck—or because of his selfless love for his fellow man, which Queequeg exhibits to a greater degree. A disproportionate weight on qualities that don't distinctly belong to the character of Ishmael prevents the fulfillment of the reading of the American thread. Melville's message in Ishmael's survival is lost if Ishmael is not the crewmate who should have survived.

Another factor frequently overlooked in the analysis of the ending of *Moby-Dick* is the question of Melville's intended audience. In "Moby-Dick and American Political Symbolism," Alan Heimert claims, "When in the 1840s the Democrats[36] of the South became obsessed with anticipations of suffocation and strangulation, Leviathan for them was not a special economic interest but the power of the Union itself" (Heimert 516). Therefore, the *Pequod* is not America,

[36]At this time, Democrats were the conservative party in America.

but Southeast America,[37] whose way of life is threatened by the Union—the White Whale—and retaliates, only to result in their own demise.[38] Although Heimert's essay is perhaps the single most invaluable source to the formation of this thesis, he nevertheless takes a slight misstep in the formation of his theory: Melville wrote *Moby-Dick* from a Northern abolitionist perspective, not a fearful Southerner's. Ignoring the fact that Melville himself was both a Northerner and an abolitionist, nearly all of the crewmates aboard the *Pequod*—nay, most of the characters within the novel—exhibit a progressive tolerance for members of a variety of races, including historically marginalized ones. Notably, Ishmael learns to love the Pacific Islander (and cannibal) Queequeg after stereotyping him as a menace, then later feels a brotherly connection to all men aboard the ship, as exemplified in "A Squeeze of the Hand." However, not only does the philosophical and open-minded Ishmael embrace members of other races as his kinsmen, but so does the infamous Captain Ahab. After Pip, the Black cabin boy, is driven near-mad after falling off of the ship, Ahab forms a connection to him because he recognizes himself in Pip, which endears the boy to him.[39] In Heimert's interpretation, Ahab would be the Jefferson Davis of the *Pequod*, leading the South in its crusade against the Union. But Melville's Ahab is among the most tolerant men onboard the ship—empathizing with a poor Black orphan who is often

---

[37]Although Heimert attributes this belief to all antebellum Southerners, I would like to narrow the category to white, land-owning Southerners.

[38]If Heimert's interpretation is to be believed, this is a strikingly accurate prediction of the outcome of the looming Civil War by Melville.

[39]"'Thou [Pip] touchest my [Ahab's] inmost centre, boy; thou art tied to me by cords woven of my heart-strings'" (Melville 522).

ridiculed by the other men, despite being himself a powerful rich white man.[40] Thus, Heimert's interpretation is flawed because he does not consider the perspective of Melville's text, nor its audience.

Had the aforementioned articles simply been odd contributions by niche scholars, their misinterpretations would not be so problematic. However, because they are among some of the only pieces of scholarship that discuss the American thread holistically, these incomplete analyses become dangerous because they set the foundation for the field. These are the readings which future scholars must build off of in order to isolate Melville's warnings for an America in the midst of a political crisis. Just as the self-reproductive capacity threatens the integrity of Melville's text, the widespread neglect and misinterpretation of the Epilogue buries Melville's relevant messages between irrelevant analyses of arbitrary symbols.

Although the prior examples serve as evidence of a pandemic of misreadings that plagues scholarship of the American thread, this does not mean that a quality interpretation cannot be produced. In "Melville's Meditations," Catherine Zuckert presents a cohesive analysis of the American thread that does not neglect nor modify the ending of the novel. And while I may not agree with every detail of her reading, frankly, my skepticism matters little. Not only does Zuckert's essay encourage a holistic and, by my definition, accurate reading of the American thread, but it also acknowledges that Melville's symbols resist definition, so that pugnacious scholars like myself have room to modify her argument or propose their own alternative reading. What makes Zuckert's essay on how democracy clashes with the natural world so successful is

---

[40]Melville even reverses their economic and social standing when Ahab declares, "'I feel prouder leading thee by thy black hand, than though I grasped an Emperor's!'" (Melville 522). For, although Ahab leads Pip, the cabin boy is more valuable to Ahab than royalty.

its fulfillment of the following criteria: it interprets Melville's symbols as embodiments, to a degree, of uniquely American phenomena; it identifies a shortcoming of the American democracy rooted in her [America's] own ideals; it proposes a resolution derived from Ishmael's rescue; and it acknowledges the self-reproductive capacity. These four aspects create a complete and effective, although not an ultimate or conclusive, engagement with the American thread.

Firstly, Zuckert interprets Melville's American symbols by asserting that the *Pequod* is a microcosm of the American economy. Each sailor receives different wages according to their level of skill and experience, but the crew nevertheless works together as a team to achieve a common goal, much like a capitalist system (Zuckert 101). This interpretation of the *Pequod* as a capitalist vessel fulfills the first requirement of analyzing Melville's symbols in an American light. Next, Zuckert argues that, because nature is indifferent toward man, "rebellion on behalf of humanity—the demand that suffering have just cause, that the impersonal whole recognize the claims of individuality, that there be reason—is the greatest danger to democracy, because it arises out of and yet against the democracy of nature itself" (Zuckert 102). In this quote, she identifies the democratic tenet—"that the impersonal whole recognize the claims of individuality"—that Melville critiques in his discussion of the *Pequod*'s voyage, while recognizing that individualist ideals are central to American democracy. This isolation of corrupted individualism as a democratic tenet fulfills the second requirement of identifying a way in which America fails because of the nation's own core beliefs. Then, Zuckert proposes that Ishmael survives because of his philosophical nature, a trait unique to the narrator:
"To be free, it is necessary to depart from the 'lee shore'—that is, to question conventional Christian morality and the comforts of familiarity in the way that the common sailor Ishmael does but the first mate Starbuck never dares. The man who 'braves the sea'—instead of clinging

to landlocked, particular beliefs and conventions—discovers the essential equality of all creation" (Zuckert 101). While Ahab fights for *individual* triumph over the chaos of an uncaring universe, Ishmael simply seeks to understand and accept. He is a man of thought, not of action, and unlike Ahab, when his views conflict with the world, he questions his paradigm, rather than force the world into submission. This identification of how Ishmael deviates from his crewmates reveals Melville's remedy for avoiding the shipwreck of the Ship of State, and thus fulfills the third requirement. Finally, Zuckert connects the democratic battle against nature to modern scientific developments that seek to usurp the flawed and fragile human condition, therefore engaging the self-reproductive capacity in her reading (although not necessarily subscribing to it) (Zuckert 108). Although not integral to the text itself, acknowledging the self-reproductive capacity aids in understanding how Melville's American message still perseveres. Therefore, because Zuckert's reading follows the four criteria of a holistic analysis of the American thread, it both contributes to the understanding of the American themes within *Moby-Dick* and serves as a reliable supplemental source for future scholarship.

While no piece of scholarship is perfect (this thesis included), essays that discuss the four aforementioned areas without details that contradict each other are often more successful in interpreting the American thread than ones that do not. Because there are myriad ways to read the same set of events and characters (an attribute I believe to be a conscious choice by Melville), the sheer volume of competing interpretations guarantees that no reading of *Moby-Dick* will, or should, be universally taught and accepted. Rather, implementing a standard for what makes an effective analysis of *Moby-Dick* ensures that even converse theories on the same text can coexist, so long as they are plausible and do not ignore significant details. As scholars continue to reread *Moby-Dick* in light of an evolving culture, sticking to a set of

expectations will hopefully work to prevent the accidental editing of the text through misreadings.

CONCLUSION

Herman Melville prefaces *Moby-Dick* with eighty quotes from miscellaneous sources—literature, ship's logs, political speeches—collected by a Sub-Sub-Librarian (Melville) under the single heading "Extracts." Only a select few bear any thematic relevance to the body of the novel; most are simply included for their mention of the word "whale." This is not to suggest "Extracts" is without purpose. The repetition of "whale" eighty times in quick succession is maddening and obsessive. It overwhelms the mind, it is ubiquitous, the sole occupation of the reader's thoughts—not unlike the mentality of a certain manic captain or his author. Yet, it also presents the whale in a kaleidoscope of contexts: a Biblical figure, a Hobbesian government, an economic commodity, or just a simple sea creature. In this way, "Extracts" foreshadows Ishmael's perception of the White Whale as a symbol of the entire natural universe and of nothing at all (Melville 195).

In 2005, Andrew Delbanco prefaced his biography of Melville with his own collection of epigraphs, this time humorously compiled by a Sub-Sub-*Sub*-Librarian. Deviating slightly from Melville, his quotes do not center around whales, but rather around *Moby-Dick*. Delbanco's "Extracts" features references to *Moby-Dick* from modern (mid-twentieth century onward) American sources—newscasts, literature, sitcoms. They follow the White Whale from Hiroshima to Randle McMurphy to *The Simpsons*. *Moby-Dick*, just as its namesake, is omnipresent. Again, the whale swims through seas of contexts: he is a political metaphor, an advertising tactic, a throwaway joke, a whale! If Melville's "Extracts" emphasizes Ahab's obsession with the White Whale, Delbanco's "Extracts" underlines American culture's fanaticism for *Moby-Dick*. While we chase the whale, we do not hunt him. We venerate him.

If Melville has pervaded American culture since the Second World War, perhaps it is true that there remains nothing new to be said about *Moby-Dick*, the American Bible read and scrutinized in a volume comparable to its Christian counterpart. Yet, the scholarship on Melville's most popular work has created a leviathan in its own right. I suggest, then, it may be time to conduct analyses of analyses. For, the text of *Moby-Dick*, if left alone to collect dust on the shelf of the ever-expanding Anglophonic canon of literature, shall cease to evolve. It is only by our engagement with Melville's text that we discover and rediscover new meaning in light of a new America. We are no longer reading *Moby-Dick*. We are reading our own culture and experiences reflected back at us in print.

But with that said, we as readers must not be afraid to let the *Pequod* sink. By that I mean, if a detail resists modernization—either because it acts as an artifact of nineteenth century life, or because it refuses to fit a theory—it cannot be ignored. It cannot be plugged up like a hole in the side of a ship, while we cross our fingers hoping that it won't spill over and soil our otherwise modern theory. Let the water rush in. To understand *Moby-Dick* is not simply to comprehend Melville's existential reveries, but to embrace the novel in all of its messiness. It is to accept that some excerpts—on pre-satellite navigation, on peddling shrunken heads, on whale-skin cassocks as fashion statements—desire to remain in 1851. But we cannot erase these antiquities any more than we can reconcile them in a modern setting. *Moby-Dick*, while immortal, is not timeless. It, like the White Whale, is ubiquitous in time, but still *in time*. Although we shall remain to read our own experiences into Melville's more abstract ponderings, the relevance of all details of the text is not worth the cost of irreversibly editing it. There comes a time when we must give up the chase.

As for Melville's uniquely American message contained within the American thread—a treasure trove of untold riches buried deep beneath the sand, the key to reversing the impending catastrophe of the American empire—admittedly, I have not fully uncovered it. Nor shall I. While I do stand by the reading I presented in Chapter 2, it is far from the only reading. Like most other isolated threads woven throughout the novel, Melville wrote the American thread in a manner that encourages multiple interpretations, which separates *Moby-Dick* from many classic works of literature. That said, although it presents a significant amount of extra work, the American thread (and the scholarship that addresses it) is worth analyzing because the lack of a definitive meaning simply means the American cautionary tale can mean whatever the current political situation needs it to (so long as the reading is supported by the text). It can promote racial tolerance or protest reckless, tyrannical leadership or discredit the American Dream. Though there exists no single "answer" to what Melville believed would ruin his nation, his American messages are nevertheless applicable to the current (whatever current is) political situation. Melville's treasure is a mound of doubloons, and like Ishmael, we must learn to read the American thread from multiple perspectives.

I propose, then, readers of *Moby-Dick* must be both Ahab and Sub-(Sub-Sub) Librarians. The work of pursuing Moby Dick must be done, for new readings develop incessantly, and they beg for interpretation. Yet, while some scholars of Melville will analyze the novel in a holistic and academic manner, some politicians, entertainers, journalists, scholars, or other public figures will inevitably misrepresent the text. These alterations require compilation into our own edition of "Extracts," so we can trace the significance of *Moby-Dick* in American culture, as well as monitor how much the text is being edited, and therefore determine how the perception of the novel has shifted.

As for me, I've provided my reading and completed my chase. I return to shore all the wiser, though the White Whale swims on, unconquerable. He rushes toward the next American crisis and waits for a reader to chase him further into the twenty-first century. There's work yet to be done.

Go on. Your voyage awaits you.

Works Cited

Berthold, Michael C. “Moby-Dick and American Slave Narrative.” *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 35, no. 1, 1994, pp. 135-148. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25090518. Accessed 16 Apr. 2021.

Bryant, John. "Rewriting Moby-Dick: Politics, Textual Identity, and the Revision Narrative." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, vol. 333, 2013, pp. 120-133. *Gale Literature Criticism*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/TDDFFN035682940/GLS?u=uclosangeles&sid=GLS&xid=cdc71d62. Accessed 8 May 2021.

Carver, Tom. “Eyewitness: Watching America Vote.” *BBC News*, Nov 13, 2000. news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/1021342.stm. Accessed 13 Mar. 2022.

Colatrella, Carol. “*Moby-Dick’s* Lessons, or How Reading Might Save One’s Life.” *Ungraspable Phantom: Essays on* Moby-Dick, edited by John Bryant, et al., Kent State University Press, 2006, pp. 165-182. *HathiTrust Digital Library*, hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015064865168. Accessed 31 July 2021.

Cucu, Sorin Radu, and Roland Végső. “Moby-Dick and Perpetual War.” *Handsomely Done: Aesthetics, Politics, and Media after Melville*, edited by Daniel Hoffman-Schwartz, Northwestern University Press, 2019, pp. 13-34. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvcwnvx0.5. Accessed 1 May 2021.

De Forest, John William. “The Great American Novel.” *The Nation*, 1868. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin & American Literature*, utc.iath.virginia.edu/articles/n2ar39at.html. Accessed 17 Mar. 2022.

Delbanco, Andrew. "Extracts." *Melville: His World and Work*, Knopf, 2005, pp. xiii-xix. Accessed 11 Mar. 2022.

Doctorow, E.L. "Composing *Moby-Dick*: What Might Have Happened." *Ungraspable Phantom: Essays on* Moby-Dick, edited by John Bryant, et al., Kent State University Press, 2006, pp. 15-25. *HathiTrust Digital Library*, hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015064865168. Accessed 30 July 2021.

Frank, Jason. "Pathologies of Freedom in Melville's America." *Radical Future Pasts: Untimely Political Theory,* edited by Romand Coles, et al. The University Press of Kentucky, 2014, pp. 435-458. Accessed 13 May 2021.

Gleim, William S. "A Theory of Moby Dick." *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1929, pp. 402–419. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/359241. Accessed 16 Apr. 2021.

Heimert, Alan. "Moby-Dick and American Political Symbolism." *American Quarterly*, vol. 15, no. 4, 1963, pp. 498-534. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2710971. Accessed 16 Apr. 2021.

Mani, Lakshmi. "The Apocalypse and the Avatar in Melville's Fiction." *The Apocalyptic Vision in Nineteenth Century Fiction: A Study of Cooper, Hawthorne, and Melville.* University Press of America, 1981, pp. 207-270. *HathiTrust Digital Library*, catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/007103814/Home. Accessed 31 Aug. 2021.

Martinez, Inez. "Trump's Base, Ahab, and the American Dream." *Journal of Jungian Scholarly Studies*, vol. 13, 2018, pp. 3-17. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2018302975&site=ehost-live. Accessed 20 May 2021.

Matthiessen, F. O. *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. Oxford University Press, 1941. Accessed 10 Oct. 2021.

McWilliams, Susan. “Ahab, American.” *The Review of Politics*, vol. 74, no. 2, 2012, pp. 233–260. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/23263301. Accessed 1 May 2021.

Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick; Or, The Whale*, edited by Harrison Hayford et al. Northwestern University Press, 2001.

Metz, Walter C. “The Cold War's ‘Undigested Apple-Dumpling’: Imaging ‘Moby-Dick’ in 1956 and 2001.” *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2004, pp. 222-228. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/43797181. Accessed 16 Apr. 2021.

Oshima, Yukiko. “Dreaming a Dream of Interracial Bonds: From *Hope Leslie* to *Moby-Dick*.” *Ungraspable Phantom: Essays on Moby-Dick*, edited by John Bryant, et al., Kent State University Press, 2006, pp. 238-255. *HathiTrust Digital Library*, hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015064865168. Accessed 1 May 2021.

Pellar, Brian R. “The Ship of State.” *Moby-Dick and Melville’s Anti-Slavery Allegory*. Springer, 2017, pp. 27-45. *HathiTrust Digital Library*, hdl.handle.net/2027/ucbk.ark:/28722/h28p5vb83. Accessed 1 May 2021.

Powell, Timothy. “Herman Melville: Ruthless Democracy.” *Ruthless Democracy: A Multicultural Interpretation of the American Renaissance*. Princeton University Press, 2000, pp. 153-177. Accessed 20 Sept. 2021.

Reynolds, David S. “‘Its Wood Could Only Be American!’: *Moby-Dick* and Antebellum Popular Culture.” *Critical Essays on Herman Melville's* Moby Dick, edited by Brian Higgins, et al. G.K. Hall, 1992, pp. 523-545. *HathiTrust Digital Library,* hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015028465865. Accessed 6 Aug. 2021.

Rogin, Michael Paul. “*Moby-Dick* and the American 1848.” *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville*. Knopf, 1983, pp. 102-153. Accessed 7 Sept. 2021.

Said, Edward. “Interview with Edward W. Said.” Interview by David Barsamian, *The Progressive Magazine*. 16 Nov. 2001. progressive.org/latest/interview-edward-w.-said/. Accessed 11 Mar. 2022.

Samet, Elizabeth. “Lincoln’s Electric Cord.” *Willing Obedience: Citizens, Soldiers, and the Progress of Consent in America.* Stanford University Press, 2004, pp. 50-92. *HathiTrust Digital Library,* hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015058090328. Accessed 17 Aug. 2021.

Stern, Milton R. “*Moby Dick*, Millennial Attitudes, and Politics.” *Emerson Society Quarterly: Journal of the American Renaissance*, vol. 54, no. 1, 1969, pp. 51-60. Accessed 23 Aug. 2021.

Szendy, Peter. *Prophecies of Leviathan: Reading Past Melville*. Translated by Gil Anidjar, Fordham University Press, 2010. Accessed 15 Sept. 2021.

Zuckert, Catherine. “Melville’s Meditations.” *Natural Right and the American Imagination: Political Philosophy in Novel Form*. Rowman & Littlefield, 1990, pp. 99-131. *HathiTrust Digital Library*, hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015015167391. Accessed 18 Aug. 2021.