



A POLLON

Moby-Dick and the Color of the Elusive

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After completing work on what would become his masterpiece, *Moby-Dick* or, the Whale, Herman Melville drafted a letter to friend and fellow author Nathaniel Hawthorne, noting: “I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb” (Coffler 108). In this letter, Melville acknowledges the power embodied in his novel and suggests an interpretive clue in decoding the symbolic complexities of this “wicked book,” through his characterization of feeling spotless upon the novel’s completion. Early in the novel, the colors black and white are used in their familiar and traditional senses, but Melville then draws on historical and cultural details to overturn, upend, and further charge this binary to create a sophisticated signifying system throughout the text. At first glance, the novel appears to be a simple but rather lengthy documentation of whaling; a closer look, however, shows how Melville examines the terrifying realities of society.

In *Moby-Dick* completed in 1851, Melville writes of the seafaring life, a life he had learned through his own experiences. Melville writes in *Moby-Dick* that “I prospectively ascribe all the honor and the glory to whaling; for a whale-ship was my Yale College and my Harvard” (122). While *Moby-Dick* may serve as an in-depth look into whaling, the novel intellectually provides much more. Ishmael, the narrator, is the reader’s companion and indeed interpretive guide throughout the novel, relating the activities of the characters and his life aboard the whale ship, *The Pequod*. Ishmael’s companion and harpooner, Queequeg introduces Ishmael, and ultimately the reader, to the insight regarding the topic of race and ethical background of what the western world regards as the “savage,” theoretically determined by cultural factors such as the practice of cannibalism. While the novel closely examines the development of these



two central characters and various others, Ahab and his ambitious scheme to kill the sperm whale, *Moby-Dick* unfolds.

An important aspect that separates Melville's writing from other writers in his day is Melville's unique technique of "fusing fact and symbol" (Karcher 2623). While many scholars have read this conflation allegorically, the distinction between the terms allegory and symbolism is important, and particularly relative to this novel. M.H. Abrams explains as thus:

a symbol, in the broadest sense, is equivalent to a sign—that is, anything which signifies something else; in this sense all words are symbols. In discussing literature, however, the term symbol is applied only to a word or phrase that signifies an object or event which in turn signifies something, or has a range of reference, beyond itself...It is an attribute of many private symbols—the White Whale in Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) is another famous example as well as one reason why they are an irreplaceable— literary device, that they suggest a direction or a broad area of significance rather than, like an item in an allegorical narrative, a relatively determinate reference. (my emphasis 185)

In Charles Feildelson, Jr.'s analysis of Melville's novel, he characterizes the narrative as a symbolic voyage and uses a traditional interpretive approach. Feildelson contends that Melville describes this voyage as a vision and, consequently, the lure of the sea becomes a parallel of the mind's "quest for knowledge" (671). Several scholars have examined within the text of Melville's novel the meaning of color and religious symbols, while other scholars have explored race, society, and other textual and cultural



symbols. For example, Feildelson asserts, “unlike Hawthorne, the Melville of *Moby-Dick* does not verge towards allegory, because he locates his symbols in a unitary act of perception” (674). Not only does Melville charge the narrative events with symbolic meaning, but he also draws from several maritime disasters to add to his signifying system. Melville’s knowledge of these types of disasters, the dangers of voyages, and the desperation and fortitude necessary to maintain life are important elements in this narrative, yet the question that resonates throughout the novel is, at what moral and spiritual cost? Melville seems to answer this question through a complex system of using colors that operate symbolically and referentially.

Linguistic scholar Ferdinand de Saussure provides a structural framework useful in examining signifying systems, and examining Melville’s use of color. In Saussure’s essay “The Nature of the Linguistic Sign,” Saussure notes that language is a complex network of various meaning for each given word. Saussure identifies that “[s]ome people regard language, when reduced to its elements, as a naming-process only — a list of words, each corresponding to the thing that it names” (832). However, Saussure notes that “[t]he linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound image. The later is not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses” (832). By acknowledging the ambiguity of a word’s meaning, Saussure’s theory is used to identify various interpretations and meanings operating behind the symbolism of certain colors in *Moby-Dick*.



In this essay, Melville's signifying intricacies in a symbolic play of color, particularly the elusive nature of the color of white are examined, which is suggested physically by the white whale's flight, psychologically by Ahab's depreciating sanity in chasing the white whale, and ultimately functions to suggest a diminishing sense of spirituality within the borders of humanity. Melville establishes a basic symbolic structure regarding color by drawing on the traditional and highly familiar binary dichotomy of black signifying evil, death, and fear, contrasted with the color's opposite signifier, white, which typically indicates purity, goodness, and godliness. Melville then infuses these symbols with racial significance based on prevalent mid-nineteenth century views regarding color and racial theories, and then complicates their symbolic function.

John Wenke examines Melville's references to racial theories in his book, *Melville's Muse*, and suggests that Ishmael provides an interpretive tool for the reader as an example of cultural and racial impartiality regarding specific groups of people; Ishmael identifies the human race as a whole. Wenke argues "Ishmael does not concern himself with the ethics of cannibalism, seeing instead the cannibalistic nature of humans as a given. Ishmael's indictment focuses on civilized sham, the masked denial of basic instinct" (128). Ishmael's relationship with Queequeg illustrates how color especially regarding race, that of white skin automatically determines the power, authority, and a sense of superiority relative to race.

What makes the judgment or religious choice of another human being different from another simply because of difference in color? Michel Eyquem de Montaigne in



his essay “On Cannibals,” touches upon the Western world’s ethnocentric perspective of other cultures. “Of Cannibals,” recounts Montaigne’s observations regarding his meeting with a cannibal who had been brought to France by the French explorer Villegagnon in 1562 (1). Montaigne writes: “So we may well call these people barbarians, in respect to the rules of reason, but not in respect to ourselves, who surpass them in every kind of barbarity” (5). Through the physical symbols of race as a reflection of humanity, Melville demonstrates the flaws inherent in judging, evaluating, or simply understanding people according to the superficialities of color, and thus challenges the artificial boundaries created by men to separate men, ideologically, spiritually, and physically. The bond evident by Queequeg and Ishmael’s relationship suggests that humans are the ones who create the boundaries between races, not nature, and not God. This issue of morality is referenced early in the novel. Ishmael notes that “for all his tattooing he was on the whole a clean, comely looking cannibal. What’s all this fuss I have been making about, thought I to myself” the man’s human being just as I am: he has just as much reason to fear me, as I have to be afraid of him. Better to sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian” (Melville 26). The last part of the quote that puts into perspective how the limitations of a two-sided belief system can create prejudices and ill treatment towards individuals who are different in areas of culture, social concepts, and religious viewpoints.

The role of religion in the novel provides an additional layer of meaning also symbolized by color. Melville received the basis of a religious upbringing from his mother; and while Melville was not an avid churchgoer, he was continuously fascinated by questions of religion and spirituality (Delbanco 21). Melville was highly familiar with



the text of the Bible, including its literary use of irony and paradoxes and indeed the Bible served as a stylistic and creative example for him as well. With this knowledge, Melville was able to expose the ways in which humans misuse and distort religious intent (Coffler 109). Coffler explains the political and religious issues of the time and notes that Melville's allusions "reveal the spiritual struggle of a deeply thinking person at a time when traditional ideas about God and the Bible were being challenged and even destroyed by the sciences and by the new biblical criticism coming out of Europe" (119). Melville also tested "troubling theological issues of free will, predestination, salvation, and damnation that so engaged orthodox Calvinists in earlier centuries" by making puns, jokes, and even downright obscene notions towards these ideals (Dunne 65). Considering the historical background of religious upheaval due to scientific background, naturally structures of learned doctrines were questioned.

Peculiarly enough, Melville does incorporate evolutionary references into his work testing the waters of his stance even more. Melville writes, "It is also very curiously displayed in the side fin, the bones of which almost exactly answer to the bones of the human hand, minus only the thumb. This fin has four regular bone-fingers, the index, middle, ring, and little finger" (Melville 289). Comparing the side fin of a whale to that of a human hand would easily rile many religious sanctions by questioning the very foundations of how and where humans were created. In so doing, individuals who believed in this form of science would be viewed as contesting the teaching of the Bible. Melville also relates the behavior of whales in terrifyingly close comparison to the behavior of humans, exploring the differences between male and female. Melville observes:



[the] point of difference between the male and the female schools is still more characteristic of the sexes. Say you strike a Forty-barrel-bull—poor devil! All his comrades quit him. Strike a member of a harem school, and her companions swim around her with every token of concern, sometimes lingering so near her and so long, as themselves to fall a prey. (431)

Interestingly, if Melville had left out the words “school” and “harem,” the reader may simply assume humans are the topics being characterized. The point Melville is making is actually a question regarding whether or not humans are really that different from animals. Are humans, even more barbaric and even more uncivilized than these untamed creatures of the waters? Naturally, such a suggestion would cause uproar because humans, according to religious doctrines, are made by God in the image of God; the Darwinian assumption of connecting man to animal was considered nothing more than blasphemy. As a result, both of these passages on science introduce how the symbolism in *Moby-Dick* represented the ongoing disputes between theologians and scientists.

Several scholars have also explored the significance of color in this novel. Samuel Otter in his book *Melville's Anatomies* recognizes the importance of color's meaning:

Ishmael focuses on the chromatic characteristics of *Moby-Dick*, singularly and disturbingly white among a species known for its blackness... In Ishmael's analysis, [white] means elusive ghastriness, nameless terror, the pallor of dead, the expressive hue of the shroud. The devotees of whiteness, he suggests, may be worshipping not God but the Devil. (137-138)



This passage expresses the validity and importance of “reading” color in this text to understand the significance of racial theories, spirituality, and man’s perhaps perilous humanity. However, I argue against Otter’s belief that Ahab worships the Devil; instead I point out the negative aspects of religion associated with the color white and how this perspective in retrospect changes the reader’s understanding of the symbolism behind white and the reader’s understanding of God.

Chapter 42 of Melville’s novel, titled “The Whiteness of the Whale” plays careful attention on paralleling the different meanings of the color white. Melville writes: “Whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors: it is for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in the wide landscape of snows — a colorless, all color of atheism which we shrink” (212). This passage has great significance for it describes the source of Ahab’s continuous chase of the whale, which is “full of meaning” provided through a signifying “landscape of snow.” Ahab does not “shrink” from the object (Moby-Dick) which is described as “a colorless, all-color of atheism” (212). By using the color white in a context other than its traditional symbols, Melville reveals how a human’s obsession to acquire a certain object (in Ahab’s case, spirituality) can lead to the loss of everything, i.e. morality, spirituality, and humanity. In addition, Melville discusses the traditional meaning and more acceptable context of the color white to describe how cultures honor the context of the color:

Though in many natural objects, whiteness refiningly enhances beauty, as if imparting some special virtue of its own, as in marbles, japonicas, and pearls;...



and the great Austrian Empire, Caesarian heir to overlording Rome, having for the imperial color the same imperial hue, and though this pre-eminence in it applies to the human race itself, giving the white man ideal mastership over every dusky tribe;... though in the Vision of St. John, white robes are given to the redeemed, and the four-and twenty elders stand clothed in white before the great white throne, and the Holy One that sitteth there white like wool; yet for all these accumulated associations, with whatever is sweet, and honorable, and sublime, there yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of a panic to the soul than that of redness which affrights in blood. (204-205)

Melville continues with his color analogy, noting that while the color white may serve as one form of symbol, that symbol may also have a different side of representation. Melville does this through his description of an Albino man, describing the elusive unease associated with white, writing:

What is it that in the Albino man so peculiarly repels and often shocks the eye, as that sometimes he is loathed by his own kith and kin? It is that whiteness which invests him, a thing expressed by the name he bears. The Albino is as well made as other men — has no substantive deformity — and yet this mere aspect of all-pervading whiteness makes him more strangely hideous than the ugliest abortion. Why should this be so? (208).

In the essay “‘Warmest Climes but Nurse the Crullest Fangs’: The Metaphysics of Beauty and Terror in *Moby-Dick*,” Frank G. Novak expounds upon this indescribable



nature of the multifaceted symbol in which Melville has introduced through the symbolic possibilities of the color white. Novak contends that “the more beautiful the scene or image the more ominous and malevolent is the terror associated with it” (333). Does the same fear in which Ahab tries to conquer the elusive “whiteness” of Moby Dick relate to how the Albino man “is loathed by his own kith and kin”? Why should a color which symbolizes so many things that are considered “pure” be feared, unless the color is honored out of fear. A hypocritical attitude takes place towards the way individuals perceive meaning. A similar instance is found in the book of Matthew in verse 23, lines 27 under the section entitled “Seven Woes” when Jesus addresses his crowd and his disciples:

“Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like the whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean. In the same way you, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.”

The above passage helps to demonstrate that what an individual sees is sometimes not what truthfully lies beneath the surface. Furthermore, the reader must once again return to Saussure’s idea of the linguistic sign and that “[s]ome people regard language, when reduced to its elements, as a naming-process only — a list of words, each corresponding to the thing that it names” (832). However, “[t]he linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound image” (832). Melville’s symbolic meanings are often inversions; what the reader may perceive as an object’s meaning may not in



reality be the object's meaning. With Melville, the meaning often changes and this contributes to the understanding of the intricate system of symbols within his work. Each symbol serves as its own purpose; however, when looked upon in context with another symbol, that symbol's meaning can change by its referential context within the novel's signifying system of symbols and various meanings.

In examining the character Ahab, the novel's signifying system is particularly important. Kenneth Gross in *Shylock and Shakespeare* compares the character of Shylock to Ahab. Gross explains that "Shylock, like Melville's vengeful Ahab, has here set himself beyond any rational calculation; rejecting any fear that the real cost of pursuing what he himself calls 'a losing case' might be greater than its imaginary gain" (72). This brings into context Melville's symbolic element of Ahab's three day chase of Moby Dick. The symbolism of the number three is of high importance in Christianity. In *The Evolution Dialogues: Science, Christianity, and the Quest for Understanding*, Catherine Baker explains the relationship between Jesus and God. Christian leaders during the fourth century determined, "based on biblical and other writings...that God is a trinity, or three-in-one: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (Baker 119). Using the three-day chase as a symbol for the Trinity supports the notion that Melville uses Moby Dick and the fleeting nature of the color of the whale as an absence of a religious force, i.e. atheism. In reading the chase in this symbolic way Ahab is at battle between saving his soul as a Christian and defeating the whale; or succumbing to the "colorless, all color of atheism which we shrink" (212). However, Melville inserts a twist of plot; Ahab does not defeat Moby Dick and is ultimately abandoned by the psychological support of the Trinity by receiving no form of spiritual salvation or fulfillment at the end of the three



day chase. The continual decline of the chase leads to Ahab's deprecating sanity because he sees he has no form of faith, no form of redemption and yet he cannot conquer the atheism, or absence that has plagued him throughout the novel. In a sense, all hope is lost for man, his ship, and his crew. Returning to Samuel Otter's work *Melville's Anatomies* and his idea that "the devotees of whiteness...may be worshiping not God but the Devil" (138), it is made clear that in no way is Ahab being tainted by an evil force such as the devil - instead he faces a one far worse, that of society. Melville would not be able to demonstrate the hypocrisy that has formed and corrupted the true purposes of religions without his inverted use of color. Melville identifies through this technique that religions are not sanctions to hide behind and to be used but rather guides to live by untainted by politics and prejudices formulated by the human mind.

Furthermore, Melville uses the "art" of whaling and the symbols associated with whaling to assert his morphed definition of white. Melville is able to construct a new definition of white, a more tainted one, defined by moral absence instead of the term's more idealized definition of innocence and purity. From this perspective, the idea of "the other" or a factor of society that identifies something that is different from the idealized, the socially accepted, or simply "the norm" (Dollimore 12-13) is introduced. Melville acknowledges his own fascination with the element of color in his essay "Hawthorne and his Mosses," writing:

Whether Hawthorne has simply availed himself of this mystical blackness as a means to the wondrous effects he makes it to produce in his lights and shades... Certain it is, however, that this great power of blackness in him derives its force



from its appeals to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free. For, in certain moods, no man can weigh this world, without throwing in something, somehow like Original Sin, to strike the uneven balance. At all events, perhaps no writer has ever wielded this terrific thought with greater terror than this same harmless Hawthorne. Still more: this black conceit pervades him, through and through. You may be witched by his sunlight, - transported by the bright gildings in the skies he builds over you; — but there is the blackness of darkness beyond; and even his bright gildings but fringe, and play upon the edges of thunder-clouds...it is that blackness in Hawthorne, of which I have spoken, that so fixes and fascinates me.” (9-10)

The following interaction of characters demonstrates Melville’s fascination with the color black as described in the above passage, yet more directly in the context of mid-nineteenth century racial discourse as well. Daggoo, a harpooner of Captain Ahab’s crew asks, “Who’s afraid of black is afraid of me” (191). The response given to him is from a Spanish Sailor, who comments: “thy race is the undeniable dark side of mankind—devilish dark at that” (191). By integrating and inverting common stereotypes of the color black into the text, the color white thus becomes twisted and viewed in a different perspective, pointing out not only Ahab’s tragic flaw and the ultimate loss of his internal battle but also the struggle humanity must endure.

The fascination of the symbolism of the colors black and white for Melville can be further understood and complicated through the character of Queequeq. Queequeq



is described by Ishmael as a “dark complexioned’ harpooner” and “[f]or all his tattooing he was on the whole a clean, comely looking cannibal” (Melville 16, 26). Once again, Saussure’s theories of the ways in which signs operate within signifying systems provides an interruptive perspective that is strongly suggested by Melville’s characterization of Queequeg. Here, the importance of Queequeg’s skin functions as its own signifying system for it contradicts that of either the white man or that of the black man. The tattoos that cover the surface of Queequeg’s skin becomes a unique signifying system within the text’s more complex system of color symbolism. Melville writes:

Poor Queequeg! When the ship was about half disemboweled, you should have stooped over the hatchway, and peered down upon him here; where, stripped to his woollen drawers, the tattooed savage was crawling about amid that dampness and slime, like a green spotted lizard at the bottom of a well. (520)

In these early scenes, Ishmael “reads” Queequeg from a superficial, external perspective and adds to this outer interpretation the issue of morality. However, as the novel progresses and Ishmael gets to know this man, Ishmael’s interpretation of Queequeg’s morality and character begins to shift. In chapter three, as Ishmael and Queequeg are preparing for bed, Ishmael reveals that Queequeg’s behavior can be described as “civil,” “kind,” and “charitable” (Melville 26). Ishmael’s observation causes him to reassess his evaluation system and Ishmael wonders: “What’s all the fuss I have been making about, thought I to myself—the man’s a human being just as I am: he has just as much reason to fear me, as I have to be afraid of him” (26). As Ishmael shows, being of different



complexion or society, does not change the fact a person can be civil, humane even. Consequently, further examining how Melville employs the common ideal of white and inverts the traditional meaning of color, leading to a troubling sense of tainted corruptness.

In spite of the nineteenth century's commitment to social reform, Melville had difficulty writing directly, and thus the task of writing his novel required the use of his intricate system of symbols. In his book *Calvinist Humor*, Michael Dunne describes the issue readers may have while reading Melville's work, explicating:

Few readers in the twenty-first century are likely to expect perfection from others—including righteous Christians and biblical literalists—and so few would be shocked to find these others mocked by any other author for their-only-to-be expected human imperfections. In fact, contemporary readers may be so 'advanced' as to blunt the effect of some of Melville's Calvinist humor. This is a point raised by Hershel Parker in his analysis of Melville's theology of outrage: 'The final irony may be that for modern readers able to accept Melville's darkest meanings Christianity is so 'diluted' that they have become insensitive to his satire and, more appallingly, have lost his apprehension that the impracticality of Christianity is tragic'...However, even those who never even think about 'the impracticality of Christianity' can often relish Melville's insistent skewerings of his fictional characters." (81)

While this excerpt may suggest that Melville's writing was meant for his time period alone, I must strongly disagree. The art of Melville's writing and his system of symbols



makes it possible for readers of any time period to understand the impracticality and dangers presented with organized religion, not just Christianity as Hershel Parker states in the passage. This system also includes the same issues in regards to racism as well, for whether we like to admit it or not, racism still exists in modern times. Texts such as Melville's *Moby-Dick* can, however, help alleviate, if not eliminate, ways in which these issues may be identified, solved, and even prevented.

In conclusion, Melville's novel *Moby-Dick* is an intricate signifying system of colors that do more than simply invert the traditional symbols of black and white. Melville symbolizes white to suggest its elusive nature, which is suggested physically by the white whale's flight, psychologically by Ahab's depreciating sanity in chasing the white whale, and ultimately functions to suggest a diminishing sense of spirituality within the borders of humanity. The meaning of one symbol must be unraveled in order to understand another, even more complex symbol, whether the symbol be one concerning racism, religion, or society in general. Melville notes early in his text that "Ignorance is the parent of fear," (24) yet by creating his system of symbolism, Melville does not expect any of his readers, if read properly, to be lead astray in fear from the presence of ignorance. The understanding of such matters simply lies in the complex nature of the intricacy of symbols and symbolism. Symbols ultimately become tools to learn how we digest and understand, not ignore, the unknowns we, as humans, fear.



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