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Keith Waddington

D. Ketterer

Moby-Dick

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### **Moby-Dick as Ontological Symbol**

In fact . . . readers need to shun . . . every allegation that the book holds a concealed meaning. . . . Unquestionably this theory . . . that in reality *Moby-Dick* has a cosmic theme cannot hold. It is a hindrance, not a help, to the fullest enjoyment and appreciation of the book. And so must any other theory of a concealed meaning. (*Sewanee* 108)

Montgomery Belgion's 1947 essay "Heterodoxy on Moby-Dick" establishes a reading which denies a symbolic and tropological methodology to *Moby-Dick*. Similarly, amongst sundry scholars also adopting this same reading, E. E. Stoll, in "Symbolism in *Moby-Dick*," (*Journal* 140) submits a motive for those who voyage in search of hidden meaning: "Now that we are the greatest of peoples we must have a literature to match." Stoll reckons *Moby-Dick* an ambiguous though not symbolic work, suggesting that contemporary criticism, with its taste for symbolism, hinders an accurate reading.

Alternatively, Melville's own 17 November 1851 letter to Hawthorne states: ". . . a sense of unspeakable security is in me this moment, on account of your having understood the

book" (*Moby* 566) implying more to the text than the contents of a simple wailing whaling tale.

In light of such controversy and with the absolute plethora of what can be only described as astonishing readings of *Moby-Dick*, it seems unlikely that a truly definitive understanding of such a tropological work might ever surface. Nevertheless, it does seem clear that critical misdirection stems essentially from two positions: the subjugation of *Moby-Dick* to proposition, where the critic's own thesis becomes the primary text and the novel a mere supportive adjunct; or, a too narrow definition of the White Whale symbol which restricts an overall understanding of the novel.

Understanding the symbolic meaning of *Moby-Dick* then is a challenge embraced by varied critics, each with the understanding that therein lies the key to the text; and it is upon this premise that we shall ourselves proceed. To understand *Moby-Dick*, two principles are best observed: firstly, that *Moby-Dick* is essentially *Moby-Dick*; and secondly, that the conceptual rubric of holistic interpretation must be applied. As we shall see, according to these principles, the White Whale appears as an ontological symbol, a metaphysical being characterised by both the knowable: that which can be seen--above water--and the unknowable: that which cannot be seen--below water--of the whole universe.

The very encyclopaedic nature of *Moby-Dick* provides at once richness and resonance as well as the occasion for

misinterpretation. With such measure of detail, selective extraction can unfortunately provide proof of almost any fatuous point. Edwin Fussell's "*Moby-Dick* and the American West" provides such an example, where the White Whale becomes the hero of the novel: the king of the west, whilst simultaneously portraying, "The hero's mighty bulk [as] the body of America, extending in a westerly direction." (*Oxford* 115) Not just king then but also kingdom! Like Belgion, Fussell reads *Moby-Dick* essentially as a hunting story, with such hunting episodes as "Stubb & Flask Kill a Right Whale" demonstrating the novel in miniature--a reductionist suggestion which abates the bulk of *Moby-Dick* to mere pamphlet size.

Western references in *Moby-Dick* indeed are numerous: in Nantucket, three blades of grass in a days walk are said to constitute a prairie; Flask falls to rearing and plunging in the boats stern like a crazed colt from the prairies; the sailors sit on their boats' gunwales like Ontario Indians and so on. But such references are merely a means to an end, rather than an end in themselves, creating a particularly American resonance in what is a particularly American novel. When Fussell states: "There are almost more allusions to the West than to whaling; and the whales themselves, we quickly learn, are as often as not buffaloes," (119) we understand conclusively that *Moby-Dick* has been entirely forsaken, rendered an unexamined ghost-town abandoned to the progress of Frontier thesis theory. It is the inherent danger of detail,

here delineated, that sanctions a holistic rubric, where the greater picture is viewed foremost, where every detail serves as a pixel of that picture, rather than an artificial selection to be strung with more artificial selection in a never ending necklace of eccentric hypothesis.

Moving from outward expansion to inward reflection, Henry A Murray's "*In Nomine Diaboli*" offers a Freudian interpretation rendering Ahab captain of the culturally repressed dispositions of human nature: the Id; and his opponent, Moby-Dick, as the Freudian superego. Melville's categorical statement to Hawthorne, "I have written a wicked book," (*Moby* 566) is suggestive to Murray, that:

. . . all interpretations which fail to show the *Moby-Dick* is, in some sense, wicked have missed the author's avowed intention. (*Studies* 52)

According to this psychologically driven approach, Murray presents two hypotheses: firstly, that Captain Ahab is the antichrist: a human creature ". . . possessed of all Satan's pride and energy," (*Discussions* 28) with evidence of this stemming partly from more Melville correspondence: his book had been "broiled in hell-fire" (qtd. *Studies* 28) and "secretly baptised not in the name of God but in the name of the Devil," (qtd. *Studies* 28) and partly from frequent references in *Moby-Dick* to the Devil. "'I never saw him kneel," says Stub.' (qtd. *Studies* 28) Secondly, Murray proposes the nature of Moby-Dick to be a projection of Ahab's Presbyterian conscience embodying an Old Testament Calvinistic conception

of a vengeful fire-and-brimstone God: a derivative of puritanical American society. Further, *Moby-Dick* is a symbol born of Melville's zealously righteous sermonising parents who compelled Melville to seek escape at sea. According to Murray, in the battle between the *Pequod* and *Moby-Dick*, we see, in religious terms, the contest of various Eastern religions and the predominant religion of the West--with *Moby-Dick* representing the West. How might we reconcile the final victory of the laviathan with Melville's dissatisfaction with Christianity is a question the is tactfully avoided<sup>1</sup>

Certainly, the idea of some endemic wickedness in the conception of *Moby-Dick*--even without Melville's say so--is beyond dispute. The essential question though is the precise nature of that evil. Murray's adoption of a Christian framework leads him inevitable to incongruous conclusions. The actual wickedness of the book is the *abandonment* of the Nazarene--inspired perhaps by Hawthorne's suggestion that Melville say "NO, in thunder," to Christianity--within a holistic conceptualisation. Ishmael survives because, in a form of religious transcendentalism, he becomes himself part of the ontological symbol, the creative force. He becomes part of *Moby-Dick* just as he becomes part of *Moby-Dick*. In an abstract sense, Ishmael's passage allows him not merely to

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<sup>1</sup>A sense of this is discovered variously in *Typee*, the parabolic "The Lightning Rod Man," *The Confidence-Man* and elsewhere.

witness Moby-Dick but to create *Moby-Dick*. Ahab, on the other hand, dies not because he is some antichrist incarnate, but because he is intent upon destroying the *undestroyable*, symbolised by the White Whale.

Understanding the White Whale as an ontological metaphor to be sought though never destroyed, we must definitively differentiate between this supreme and singular whale and those legitimately hunted throughout the novel. The connective that binds together Moby-Dick and *Moby-Dick* is essentially the relationship between symbol and its indicative. Just as Plato sees reality as a shadowy dancing intimation of real, essential, perfect forms, in a similar manner the ontological symbol is not merely an emblem of the physical and metaphysical, but an integral. To destroy the symbol--besides being as practicable as destroying a shadow--would be to essentially destroy the object of the symbol. Ahab's plot then is an ontological oxymoron. Alternatively, lesser whales, though sanctioned quarry as real flesh and blubber whales, also--by virtue of their kinship to Moby-Dick--are allusion to the real meaning of Moby-Dick and the whale hunt itself.

All deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of the heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore. . . . As in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God--so, better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety! (*Moby* 97)

From this, it seems manifest that the whale hunt—not one intent upon the destruction of the indestructible, but the traditional whale hunt--serves in *Moby-Dick* as a structural metaphor according to the principle of the *Bildungsroman*. The seascape is a realm without boundary, where deep thoughts might roam where they will, not confined to the *landy* limits of orthodoxy and dogma. Of course, quietly opening trunk and chest, the crew holds individual hoards of orthodoxy and dogma.<sup>2</sup> As far as Ahab is concerned, the chest is the heart and, like a wound, is always open and bleeding.

The relationship between *Moby-Dick* and common whales is further complicated by the principle of protection we see at work, with *Moby-Dick* repeatedly acting as guardian to those providers of pure light. This strongly suggests, according to our ontological definition of the White Whale symbol, a determination that mystery might remain mystery, that enlightenment to any limited degree comes only from struggle and risk.

Indeed, light imagery is a predominant feature of *Moby-Dick* and radiates directly from the ontological matrix. When Ahab cries: "Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me," (*Moby* 142) we find fire imagery and light imagery appropriately--though in his case, ironically--

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<sup>2</sup>This is not to suggest that the heathen on board have all adopted Christianity: far from it. They have, as we shall see, adopted instead to orthodoxy and dogma of Ahab's monomania.

combined. The sun, bestower of life, source of creation and of philosophical light by which creation might be considered, is twisted and becomes for Ahab a malignant fire. This is most representatively Ahab's symbol: not only is he consumed by the internal hellish fires of revenge, but he inhabits a world where those external fires are all consuming. In addition to this, Ahab's interpretation of the sun as malignant is essentially a substitution of reason for *unreason*--at least according to the customary reading of the sun symbol--and a clear reminder of his similarly inverted understanding of the White Whale symbol.

Ahab, who occupies wholly the dark realm of his obsession, is chronically unable to recognise the multifarious nature of the universe: his monomania is *monoseeing* and *monounderstanding* and *monothinking* and *monomorality*. Ahab recognises evil as being the only moral imperative, and resultantly has no choice, can see no other choice, than to fight fire with fire in a world that is all hell fire and nothing more than hell fire. Ahab's goal then is to destroy his understanding of evil with evil itself. The encounter, of course, is entirely a matter of mistaken identities: the real battle is Ahab, locked within his Christian self-definition and newly cast in Lucifer's furnaces as evil incarnate, opposed to everything that *is*, the physical and metaphysical.

The crew of the *Pequod* also become corrupted by Ahab's obsession, for, normatively speaking, whalers are much like



the select members of Plato's Academy. In the search of illumination, only the whale hunter:

burns the purest of oil, in its unmanufactured, and, therefore, unvitiated state . . . He goes and hunts for his oil, so as to be sure of its freshness and genuineness . . . (*Moby* 356)

It is only in a realm without boundaries that the possibility of discovering truth exists, and the common whale, by virtue of its relationship with Moby-Dick, the ontological symbol, is the provider of such illumination. Of course, with the crew corrupted, the voyage is doomed.

The nature of the limitless ocean as a realm of philosophical exploration finds correlation in the nature of the *Pequod's* crew, defined according to microcosmic utility and with particular emphasis upon multi-ethnicity. Further, the varied hues of the crew should be considered in relation to the monochrome of the White Whale. D. H. Lawrence, in "Moby-Dick, or the White Whale," initially seems to grapple with this idea, though finally offers a shallow essay, inadequate for swimming fish and impossible for roaming laviathan.

It is the whiteness of the whale that becomes the entire basis for Lawrence's reading. Thus: "Melville knew. He knew his race was doomed. His white soul, doomed. His great white epoch, doomed. Himself, doomed. The idealist, doomed. The spirit, doomed." (*Discussions* 43) Moby-Dick is "the deepest blood being of the white race. He is our deepest blood-

nature."(*Discussions* 43) He is hunted by the suicidal "maniacal fanaticism of our white mental consciousness."(*Discussions* 44)<sup>3</sup> Lawrence, of course, misses the whole point: the whiteness of *Moby-Dick* is a deliberate ruse suggestive of the deceptive qualities of Creation--a deception which represents both absolute purity as well as its absolute antithesis.

. . . in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colour. (*Moby* 170)

As an ontological symbol, the whiteness of the White Whale must necessarily embrace the whole spectrum--the whole *cast* of characters--of existence, and here we see that this is concretely the case. But there is also confusion to absolute blankness:

. . . and when we proceed further, and consider that the mystical cosmetic which produces every one of her [Nature's] hues, the great principle of light, for ever remains white or colorless in itself, and if operating without medium upon matter, would touch all objects, even tulips and roses, with its own blank tinge--pondering all this, the palsied universe lies before us a leper; and like wilful

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<sup>3</sup>Unfortunately, Lawrence has already said: "He is warm-blooded, he is loveable. . . . the whale is not wicked. He doesn't bite. . . . He is lonely Laviathan"(35) None of this seems to describe *Moby-Dick*, and much less the essence of white culture.

travellers in Lapland, who refuse to wear colored and coloring glasses upon their eyes, so the wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him. (*Moby* 170)

There is here a sense not only of the artificiality, or *non-essentiality*, of "difference," where all coloration is merely a cosmetic embellishment upon the essential metaphysical oneness that forms the matter of matter, but also the idea that only the "wretched infidel" might stare into the face of creation--and that even he will find himself blinded before the whole truth is revealed. The "wretched infidel," as we shall see, is Ishmael.

The inherent dangers of staring into the face of Creation are further underscored by repeated images of whales wholly swallowing men. The most manifest example of this is the retelling, by Father Mapple, of the story of Jonah; but there are more subtle, symbolic swallowings, as when Ishmael enters the Spouter Inn through its whale jaw doorway and, soon after, when Peleg sits inside his shipboard tent, formed also of the jaws of a whale.

The crew presents both a microcosm of mankind and an environment conducive to new religious discoveries. Ahab's reading of the White Whale symbol is formulated within a Christian perspective, one which is more myopic than perceptive: a struggle with a Calvinistic vision--as correctly suggested earlier by Murray--without the safety valve of the

Calvinistic notwithstanding clause.<sup>4</sup> Ahab's myopia and his ultimate downfall finds a similar source. Ishmael, alternatively, discovers cosmological imperatives by adopting a stoic acceptance learned from his heathen friends.

Ahab projects personal meaning upon things incomprehensible, extrapolating his personal pain into the pain of all mankind--and all from within that Christian perspective. Charles H. Cook Jr. in "*Ahab's 'Intolerable Allegory'*" further suggests that all vagueness and ambiguities--including moral--in the novel are eliminated by Ahab in the "false and treacherous oneness focused upon the symbol of the White Whale." (*Discussions* 60) Unfortunately, Cook begins his *Ahabcentric* essay with the well cited passage:

So ignorant are most landsmen of some of the plainest and most palpable wonders of the world, that without some hints touching the plain facts, historical and otherwise, of the fishery, they might scout at *Moby-Dick* as a monstrous fable, or still worse and more detestable, a hideous and intolerable allegory, (qtd. *Discussions* 61)

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<sup>4</sup>The "Calvinistic notwithstanding clause" refers to the general understanding that understanding is generally impossible, that the workings of the All Mighty, especially concerning the patent contradiction of pre-ordination, which must include the creation of evil, essentially denies God's absolute goodness; and also the seeming conundrum of God also and necessarily being pre-ordained.

believing that Ahab himself commits this monstrous intolerable sin by allegorising the White Whale. Cook clearly is uncertain of his terms in suggesting that a single symbol can be an allegory: indeed, he seems to use both interchangeably, as if they are synonymous. Nevertheless, Cook is generally astute in his analysis of what Moby-Dick means to Ahab; but to define the White Whale according to Ahab's views is to adopt his monomania as our own--a performance unlikely to lead anywhere of any use.

Moving closer to a cosmological reading, Marius Bewley, in "*Moby-Dick and the Creative Force*" understands the symbolic Moby-Dick to represent Creation. Contrasting Ishmael and Ahab:

"Methinks that in looking at things spiritual, we are too much like oysters observing the sun through water, and thinking that thick water the thinnest air. In fact, take my body who will, take it , I say, it is not me."(qtd. *Studies* 153)

Ahab, according to Bewley, denies the hierarchy of body and soul and in doing so rejects creation.

Bewley traces several stages of Ishmael's progress through the novel and considers it within a Christian framework of redemption and resurrection. The importance, however, of a non-Christian framework is made clear as early as chapter ten:

I began to be sensible to strange feelings. I felt a melting in me. No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world. This soothing savage had redeemed it. There he sat, his very indifference speaking a nature in which there lurked no civilised hypocrisies, and

bland deceits. Wild he was; a very sight of sights  
to see. . . . I'll try a pagan friend, thought I,  
Since Christian kindness has proved such hollow  
courtesy. (*Moby* 53)

The maddened hand is undoubtedly a foreshadowing of Ahab's unhinged doings, just as the wolfish world is the maniacal evil of his universe. Notice that the world, once perceived as wolfish, is redeemed by Queequeg's stoicism and capitulation: a blank acceptance much like the unfathomable blankness of *Moby-Dick*. Understanding creation is clearly not possibly from within the realm of a hypocritical and dualistic Christian perspective, but requires a primitive acceptance of its holistic nature. The great mystery of the ontological symbol is one which should be understood not by questioning, but by acceptance. Thus, Queequeg, in the same scene, occupies himself with a book, satisfied merely to count the marvellous pages and making no effort to translate their mysterious markings.

Speaking of other mysterious markings, Queequeg's hieroglyphic tattooing, described as:

the work of a departed prophet and seer of his island, who, by those hieroglyphic marks had written out on his body a complete theory of the heavens and the earth and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining the truth; so that Queequeg, in his own proper person was a riddle to unfold; a wonderful work in one volume, (*Moby* 368)

establishes a connection between heathenism and philosophical understanding, heathenism and *Moby-Dick* and heathenism and *Moby-Dick*. Besides this, the key words, "prophet" and "seer," the former laced with Christianity, the latter--indeed most of this quotation--with heathenism, are suggestive of a religious vision which marries monotheism with a more seasoned--less hypocritical--paganism.

Delivered by a coffin featuring hieroglyphics--a crude transcript of those on Queequeg's body--delineates, for Bewley, that he is ". . . saved, or cured, by an acceptance of nature, of the earth and the heavens." (*Studies* 156) Bewley actually provides here another instance of that familiar Achilles heel of *Moby-Dick* analysis: exegesis within an overtly Christian framework. In the opening: "Whenever I find myself grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp drizzly November in my soul . . . then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can," (*Moby* 12) we see Ishmael exhibiting spiritual malaise. By the end of the voyage, in the Epilogue, Ishmael is symbolically resurrected with the aid of Queequeg's coffin. It is primitivism, heathenism if you will, that supplies the possibility of safety for Ishmael, not a simplistic acceptance of nature. The coffin is a Christian symbol turned upside-down by non-Christian philosophy and becomes an object no longer of burial but of salvation. In other words, the coffin itself is a symbol of Christian Orthodoxy--a doctrinal cul-de-sac--whilst the heathenistic markings represent non-Christian philosophy that has come to

terms with cosmological mystery and leads not to a dead-end but to Life. Ishmael's lack of Christian dogma, his willingness to share a bed with non-Christian philosophies and his unwillingness to cast good and evil--Manichean-like--as two separate composites of creation, partly delineates his edification during the voyage and explains also the final outcome. The fateful fate of Queequeg and the other heathens is rendered unavoidable by their active participation in Ahab's annihilistic monomania, whereby they relinquish the redemptive virtues of their non-Christian belief systems.

R. E. Watters "The Meaning of the White Whale" draws further attention to pagan philosophy and points of view, suggesting a plurality of symbolic meaning, examining each crew member as well as those aboard other ships and extracting their respective understandings of the White Whale. Sadly, he concludes: "This fact does not of course, make every meaning equal in value to every other: that kind of philosophical relativism was foreign to Melville's thought," (*Discussions* 78) and finally deciding that the soundest meaning is spoken by Ishmael, who understands the whale as a symbol of "a metaphysical hypothesis." (*Discussions* 83) By rendering the crews' views of minor merit, Watters essentially tosses his thesis into the void of oceanic wastes. Despite this and the general over-simplification, Watters is at least correct in his assessments of who thinks what, yet Ishmael tells us, as narrator, more of *Moby-Dick* than he tells us of the White Whale: since *Moby-Dick* is *Moby-Dick*, everything contained



within the pages forms a part of that "metaphysical hypothesis."

Just as readings of Moby-Dick based upon Christian philosophy are certain to lead nowhere, a similar fate awaits those who would abandon entirely the notion of all religion. John Parke, in "Seven Moby-Dicks," before becoming bogged down in numbered layers of meaning, provides an insightful examination of Moby-Dick, offering the leviathan as the noumenon of nature, though a nature that is entirely amoral. Similarly, Richard Chase, in *The American Novel and its Tradition*, adopts the notion of Moby-Dick as amoral nature:

As a symbol the whale is endlessly suggestive of meanings. It is as significant and manifold as Nature herself, and, of course, that is the point. Like Nature the whale is paradoxically benign and malevolent, nourishing and destructive. It is massive, brutal, monolithic, but at the same time protean, erotically beautiful, infinitely variable. It appears to be unpredictable and mindless; yet it is controlled by certain laws. (110)

This evidently avoids the connection between Moby-Dick and mysticism as it does between Moby-Dick and other common whales. Clearly, Moby-Dick symbolises Nature, but in a holistic and ontological sense: its vastness covers everything. It is at this point that we should again underline the syllogistic link between Moby-Dick the White Whale and *Moby-Dick* the book, in order to fully comprehend the comprehensiveness of the symbol. Other whales, source of the purest of light which only whalers might use, as we have seen,

demonstrate a Nature which is not above or outside of man, but part of man. There is a morality in Nature, just as there is an immorality, and Nature will act according to the nature of the individual. Ahab, who has chosen immorality--his refusing to assist in the search for the lost son of *The Rachel* is perhaps one of the strongest examples--consequently sees Nature in accordance with his own nature.

The most important limitation though of this "Moby-Dick as Nature" thesis--generally speaking and with particular reference to Chase's chapter--is the absence of the supernatural. Indeed, if the universe were naught but physical nature, Moby-Dick would be reduced to an almost redundant symbol ready to die a sudden death of malignant mundanity. Undoubtedly, there is in the sense of metaphysical the notion of both the natural and the supernatural; and one indication of the strong supernatural, spiritual, sense contained within the symbol of Moby-Dick is the series of portentous images that run through the novel, all of which are negative and point to the quest as being doomed from the very outset. The name of the ship itself qualifies as such, named after an Indian tribe almost entirely exterminated. It is most particularly during the closing stages of the voyage that tension is builded with presage layered upon presage: the reversed compass needle, the flame upon the yard-arm, the sound of wailing seals understood as the cries of dead sailors and so on. Indeed, *Moby-Dick*, besides featuring coffin imagery throughout, begins in the very first paragraph with a coffin:

Whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of ever funeral I meet . . .(12)

and ends in the very final paragraph also with a coffin:

. . . rising with great force, , the coffin life-buoy shot lengthways from the sea, fell over, and floated by my side.(470)

Although coffin imagery is most often utilised in the creation of supernatural foreshadowing, by providing the final means of deliverance--as a basic Christian icon--it serves with its new barbaric markings and its new powers of deliverance to subvert entirely that Christian system.

The White Whale then incorporates the natural and the supernatural both. The narrator himself describes the awesome comprehensive scope of the White Whale:

My thoughts of this Leviathan, they weary me, and make me faint with their out-reaching comprehensiveness of sweep, as if to include the whole circle of the sciences, and all the generations of whales, and men, and mastodons, past, present and to come, with all the revolving panoramas of empire on earth, and throughout the whole universe . . .(*Moby* 322)

If we have spent some considerable space to repudiating theories of Moby-Dicks symbolic meaning, the overview provided supplies us not only with a keen geography of scholarly study in this area, but also directions towards a more accurate and less limiting solution to the White Whale mystery. Perhaps suggestive of banality, the link between Moby-Dick and *Moby-*

*Dick* is absolutely essential to a full conceptual understanding of the White Whale's symbolic constitution. Indeed, the whole chapter upon whales as books, as folios and octavos and so on, besides being humorous, is an inferential statement of the correlation between Moby-Dick and *Moby-Dick*. In simple terms, *Moby-Dick's* encyclopaedic nature is a literary manifestation of Moby-Dick's multifarious ontological nature. Moby-Dick, certainly, is not what Ahab says he is. Indeed, the cataclysmic closing of *Moby-Dick* has led to a general misrepresentation of the White Whale, described often in terms characteristic of Ahab's moribund view and focused almost entirely upon the whale's destructive powers. In truth, Moby-Dick unmakes only those who seek his own unmaking. Indeed, as an ontological symbol, Moby-Dick is not so much a killer as one who ensures that suicidal attacks end with suicidal death. Indeed, during the first day of contact we find Moby-Dick of gentle disposition, offering gentle warning. On the second day he takes away Ahab's "evil shadow" Fedallah, and robs Ahab of his whaley leg. It is only on the final encounter, when fateful warnings remain unheeded, that those who would destroy are instead destroyed--not so much by Moby-Dick as by their own deluded wilfulness. None of this, of course, is to suggest that the world of *Moby-Dick* is an entirely rosy one. If Moby-Dick himself exhibits a generally benign countenance, we should avoid dislocating him from his cosmological realm, to which he is both physically and symbolically linked. The world of *Moby-Dick* is, as we see over

and over again, a predatory place where the primary literal activity is the hunt. But, to return to our point, if *Moby-Dick* is not then what Ahab says he is, just as assuredly, neither is he what Ishmael says he is. Rather, in that much less limiting way, *Moby-Dick* is what Ishmael says entirely in the entire novel.

*Moby-Dick*, a book with as much physical bulk as the voluminous laviathan himself,<sup>5</sup> is bigger than one man's tale. For this very reason chapters featuring stage directions, depicting actions to which Ishmael could not be privy, suggests holistic drama--"All the worlds a stage,/and all the men and women merely players: they have their exits and entrances"(As You Like It II.vii.139)--a drama we all must act and a drama that cannot be narrated by one voice alone. Hence the shifts not only of first person narration to third, but the shifts of narrative voice: sometimes comic, sometimes serious, sometimes ironic, sometimes didactic. Just as *Moby-Dick* contains all aspects of the many voiced human perspective--to whatever degree this is possible--so too its direct correlative, *Moby-Dick*, the White Whale, must contain all aspects of that same perspective. *Moby-Dick's* nature is described variously according to the nature of the witness, though, in all those very many multitudinous descriptions, the holistic overview

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<sup>5</sup>This is not merely a passing comment but another seemingly bromide connective actually owning important thematic ramifications.

provides both concord and focus, displaying the White Whale's essential and ontological nucleus. The variation of shipboard opinion regarding questions of ontology, rather like the variations of narrative voice, serve to underscore the essential mystery. And yet, more importantly, they describe the structural system of *Moby-Dick* as being microcosmically analogical and holistic, where each element of the book is related to the whole, where each view is an inkling of a new cosmological vision, where each point of light is derived from the blinking blinding light of Moby-Dick.

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Need help on symbols in Herman Melville's Moby-Dick? Check out our detailed analysis. From the creators of SparkNotes. Find related themes, quotes, symbols, characters, and more. Line-by-line modern translations of every Shakespeare play and poem. Definitions and examples of 136 literary terms and devices. Instant PDF downloads. Refine any search. Find related themes, quotes, symbols, characters, and more. Close. Requesting a new title requires a free LitCharts account. Moby-Dick, The White Whale The whale in general is invested with mythic significance and power, starting in the beginning extracts, showing the lineage and reputation of this largest sea "monster." The book looks at whales realistically and scientifically, and from the perspective of many cultures and traditions. Ultimately, we are left with only a sense of its mystery, which is what the author wants. A symbol needs mystery; it has to be suggestive. For Melville, this is the nature of life. The book looks at whales realistically and scientifically, and from the perspective of many cultures and traditions. Ultimately, we are left with only a sense of its mystery, which is what the author wants. A symbol needs mystery; it has to be suggestive. For Melville, this is the nature of life. Therefore, Moby-Dick may be seen to have various significations. Moby-Dick possesses various symbolic meanings for various individuals. Let him fear the symbol white universe is its uncertainty, emptiness, and infinite. That color is not only the representatives of purity and beauty, but also on behalf of death and soul. Ishmael thinks it is elusive and formidable.