Symbolic Interpretations of Moby Dick

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SYMBOLIC INTERPRETATIONS OF MOBY DICK

being

A Thesis Presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the Fort Hays Kansas State College in
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts

by

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In my study of the various interpretations attributed to Herman Melville's novel, Moby Dick, I have become aware of the great confusion among critics of literary symbolism and the problems involved. The facts that so much has been written on Moby Dick and that so many varied interpretations have resulted seem to indicate that Moby Dick offers a challenge to the reader and that there is a deeper and more profound meaning behind this adventure story than meets the eye. It is safe to say that no American novel has stimulated so much thinking in the realm of literary criticism as Moby Dick.

My intention in this thesis is certainly not to solve the unsolvable, but to cast light upon the problems as they have been discussed by literary critics. I intend to present the problems of interpretation and the various interpretations proposed and to offer an evaluation in the light of modern-day criticism.

In the first chapter, I attempt to point out concisely why there is a problem of interpretation of Moby Dick. Herman Melville does not throw light upon the correct interpretation either in the text itself or in outside sources. It seems that Melville himself did not have a clear set pattern of symbols while writing the book, but he seemed to have developed various symbols as he was in the process of writing his novel.
In the second chapter, I have outlined the most important interpretations proposed by Melvillean scholars, arranging them in three main categories; namely, allegorical, non-allegorical symbolical, and non-allegorical non-symbolical. After each interpretation I have given an evaluation in view of my own personal interpretation, the basis of which is directed by a closer study of the text of Moby Dick itself.

In the third chapter, I have considered outside sources which possibly might have influenced Melville in his writing of the book. These evidences consist mostly of conclusions arrived at by scholars who delved into the sources of Moby Dick which are basically autobiographical and literary. I have used those items which would support the interpretation given in the final chapter.

In the fourth chapter, I have presented a reading of Moby Dick, based on my personal reading of the book and the study done by the most important Melvillean scholars. The conclusion arrived at in this thesis is that Moby Dick is a tragedy woven into an exciting sea adventure. The hero is Captain Ahab, whose downfall is his excessive pride which produces a senseless monomania about a "dumb brute." As for the symbolism in the book, the reader is free to interpret the various symbols as he is inspired by the actual reading of the story, except where Melville is explicit in the presentation of certain symbols in the actual text itself.
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To the faculty of St. Joseph's Military Academy, Hays, for their interest and encouragement given during the writing of this thesis, I gratefully dedicate these pages.
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"To produce a mighty book," wrote Herman Melville, "you must choose a mighty theme. No great and enduring volume can ever be written on the flea, though many there be who have tried it" (454). Most American literary critics will agree to the fact that Moby Dick is a mighty book about a mighty theme, but as to the interpretation and definition of the theme the opinions are myriad.

At the core of the problem is the interpretation of the two main figures in the novel, Captain Ahab and the white Whale, Moby Dick. Every reader capable of perceiving more in the book than an exciting adventure story on the high seas or a treatise on an extinct maritime industry soon becomes an enthusiastic whaleman, endeavoring "to hook the nose of this leviathan" (131). He soon discovers that more is at stake than the mere capture of a gigantic mammal of the deep. If Melville himself, through Ishmael, could declare that his "whole book is a draught - nay, but the draught of a draught" (142), it at least behooves all commentators to avoid easy and superficial interpretations.

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1 Numbers following quotations indicate pages in the Modern Library edition of Moby Dick. Any quotations from other editions or books will be indicated by standard footnotes.
It seems that Herman Melville intended that his tragic hero, Ahab, and his white whale be invested with a plurality of meanings. At any rate, Melville induced a formidable body of conflicting interpretations. In Pierre, the novel written immediately after Moby Dick, Melville writes:

Say what some poets will, Nature is not so much her own ever-sweet interpreter, as the mere supplier of that cunning alphabet, whereby selecting and combining as he pleases, each man reads his own peculiar lesson according to his own peculiar mind and mood.  

Perhaps Melville supplied in his whale story a "cunning alphabet" for each of his readers to read his own lesson. One does not need to read Pierre to obtain this clue to Melville's riddle of his greatest book; there are clear hints throughout the novel itself. For example, in the first chapter of Moby Dick Melville, discussing the fascination exercised of men by water, says:

Surely all this is not without meaning. And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life, and this is the key to it all.

There are innumerable meanings to this whale story, just as there are innumerable readings of other examples of "Nature's cunning alphabet." However, it does not follow that each meaning is equal in value to every other. Symbolic interpretation, to a large extent, is depended upon the mental equipment and knowledge of the reader for its

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validity. It is my contention that a "via media" is to be sought in evaluating Moby Dick in terms of internal and external textual criticism in order to avoid the extreme views either of defect or excess.

Today more scholarly work is done on Melville than on any other American writer, and it enters precisely on the symbolism in his great American novel. A bibliography of Melvillean studies would list at least 570 books and articles, 112 on Moby Dick. Anderson, however, remarks that only a small fraction of the periodicals are scholarly studies. Malville seminars are given in the graduate schools of English at Chicago, Columbia, Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and other leading American universities, and in Canada at the University of Toronto. A Melville Society of over 100 scholars is active. In our own decade, Moby Dick and Melville are still discussed, and Moby Dick has been called "the greatest phoenix rising out of the 19th century literature," as scholars have rediscovered Melville in his profundity of thought and fineness of artistry.

In order to appreciate the various schools of interpretation of Moby Dick, it would seem best at this point to state some clear notions and definitions of the concepts of symbolism and allegory.


Symbols in other subjects, such as mathematics, algebra, chemistry, and the like, are usually defined with sufficient clarity and conciseness. Painting, astronomy and even religion have well defined and labeled terminology. In literary symbolism, however, we do not have as clearly marked paths to follow. Nevertheless, the reader needs some kind of working definitions in such a wide and controversial field as literary criticism.

If we view the word etymologically, the root of the word symbol indicates an association. Skeat's Etymological Dictionary, p. 624, points out that the word is derived through the French symbol and the Latin symbolum from the Greek ἰμβαλλειν, to bring together, throw together, compare. Another etymologist points out that the primitive sense of this Greek word means "tallies, the two halves of a coin or other like object which any two contracting parties broke between them; hence the derived sense of a token or ticket." 6

Symbol, therefore, in its root sense concerns the relation of one thing or object to another. In terms of literary symbolism, the word has a technical meaning which the ordinary dictionaries such as Century, Funk and Wagnals, and Webster would not contain. Dr. Violar Chittenden White in her doctoral dissertation quotes the classical definition of Dr. Helen Flanders Dunbar, the author of Symbolism in

Medieval Thought, which will serve our purpose. Dr. Dunbar wrote:

"Literary symbolism is an expression of meaningful experience having its basis in association with three types: 1.) arbitrary (extrinsic); 2.) descriptive (intrinsic); and 3.) interpretative (insight)."\(^7\)

All three of the above types would be applied in general "to a word or phrase signifying an object which itself has significance; that is, the object referred to has a range of meaning beyond itself."\(^8\)

When we discuss the word allegory, we encounter the same difficulty as with the word symbol. The word allegory ethymologically derived through the Latin allegoria from the Greek ἀλληγορία, meaning "a description of one thing under the image of another." This Greek word is compounded from the Greek ἀλλα, other, plus ἀλογεια to speak, i.e. to speak otherwise, as Skeat points out (p. 14).

Allegory is used in a story for interest and perhaps persuasion "by converting it (the story) into a narrative in which the agents, and sometimes the setting as well, represent general concepts, moral qualities, or other abstractions."\(^9\) The distinction between symbol and allegory is not between objects and persons, or between individual and universal significance, but between the whole and the part.\(^10\) Allegory, therefore

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\(^7\)Viola Chittenden White, Symbolism in Herman Melville's Writings, (Durham, 1934), p. 15.


\(^9\)Norton., p. 2.

\(^10\)White, p. 181.
is that branch of symbolism which has as its chief distinguishing characteristic the narrative or time element.

Whether Melville himself had such clear notions of the concepts of symbolism and allegory and had consciously worked out symbolism throughout his work is a much debated point. Richard Chase, a well-known Melvillean scholar, sees an over-all deficiency in Melville's symbolization. He wrote that:

the symbols of Movement and Stasis, Light and Dark, Flight and Fall, Space and Time, Mountain and Valley, and so on are often beautiful and sufficient in their context, but they are sometimes crude or vague. Often Melville was unable to refine them and to work out the careful variations upon them which the scope of the work demanded.\[1\]

As a young novelist, Melville had taken the literary field by storm. He was a total success with his first charming, provocative South Sea novel, Typee (1846). His sequel, Omoo (1947), also helped to establish his fame and spread his name across the literary horizon. His reading audience wanted more of such adventure stories, and when he wrote Mardi, readers were puzzled. It was a book pervaded by a different atmosphere and milieu, being satirical and metaphysical. Then, he returned to his forte, adventure at sea, with Redburn (1849) and White-Jacket (1859). His reviewers looked upon Mardi as a mistake and hoped that he would not experiment with other types of novels than those which sky-rocketed him to fame.

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Moby Dick was written in 1851, and the reviewers were again puzzled. It was neither a South Seas adventure story nor a romance. Most reviewers both praised and censured Melville; a few praised it highly; one or two attacked the book savagely; only a few had glimpses of what we see today.

One contemporaneous reviewer called it "an ill-compounded mixture of romance and matter of fact;" another said that it was "as eccentric and monstrously extravagant in many of its incidents as even Mardi." A few literary men recognized that the novel was more profound in thought and finer in artistry than in any book he had written previously. A twenty-five page review in Revue des deux Mondes praised Melville highly for the book for his transcendental quality of thought and placed Melville along with Emerson, Hawthorne, and Poe as a great American writer.

The reviewer for Harper's Monthly Magazine wrote in the December, 1851, issue that:

The author has constructed a romance, a tragedy and a natural history, not without numerous gratuitous suggestions of psychology, ethics and theology . . . . Beneath the whole story, the subtle, imaginative reader may perhaps find a pregnant allegory, intended to illustrate the mystery of human life. Certain it is, that the rapid, pointed hints which are often thrown out, with the keenness and velocity of a harpoon, penetrate deep into the heart of things, showing that the genius of the author for moral analysis is scarcely surpassed by his wizard power of description.

12 This and the following quotations are taken from Roper, pp. 168-170.
Another reviewer, in the *Literary World* (November 22, 1851) whose editor, Evert Duyckinck, was a personal friend of Melville's, thought it "a most remarkable sea dish - an intellectual chowder of roman philosophy natural history, fine writing, good feeling . . ."

After *Moby Dick*, reviewers of Melville's new books grew fewer. The majority of them thought that Melville had become progressively worse. In 1857, *The Confidence Man* reinforced this opinion and then *Israel Potter* in the same year had also. An evaluation of *Moby Dick* was expressed in three lengthy articles, surveying Melville's whole career, which appeared in *The New Monthly Magazine* (1853) and *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* (1853 and 1857). These reviews admired his early "genius," but deplored the growing "extravagance" and "wildness," the "trick of metaphysics and mobid meditation." All three reviews advised him to return to the matter and style of his South Seas adventure novels of *Typee*, *Omoo*, and others.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, to whom Melville dedicated *Moby Dick*, thought that the book was a great one, although his detailed impressions of it, unfortunately, were never recorded. He wrote to Duyckinck about his friend's new novel:

> What a book Melville has written! It gives me an idea of much greater power than his preceding ones. It hardly seems to me that the review of it, in the *Literary World*, did justice to its best points.

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13Roper, p. 172.
In England only one edition was published. The well-known publishing firm of Bentley published *Moby Dick* as *The Whale* on October 18, 1851, and sold only 287 copies. In the United States, one edition and four reprints were published in the 19th century. After 1900 to 1922, 12 editions were published and more readers delved into *Moby Dick* than in the past half of the 19th century.  

From the above-mentioned reactions to Melville's novel even during his lifetime and shortly after, we see a confusion of ideas as to the purpose and interpretation of the novel which Melville himself did not elucidate. Melville seems to have given the impression that he himself did not know precisely what he was driving at. In midsummer in 1851 while he was pushing *Moby Dick* through the press and at the same time writing the final chapters, just one jump ahead of the printer, he wrote to Hawthorne on June 29, 1851:

> The Whale is only half through the press ... Shall I send you a fin of the Whale by way of a specimen mouthful? The tail is not yet cooked, though the hell-fire in which the whole book is broiled might not unreasonably have cooked it ere this.  

On July 24, 1851, he added to Hawthorne the fact that he was talking about his whale in his June 29th letter and said: "As the fisherman say, 'He's in his furry' when I left him some three weeks ago. I'm going to take him by his jaw, however, before long, and finish him up in some fashion or other."  

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1. Rooper, p. 171.
3. Weaver, p. 322.
It is not exactly known how much time elapsed before Melville decided that Moby Dick was to send the Pequod to the bottom of the sea. Less than a month after this last letter to Hawthorne, on August 20, 1851, while Melville was writing the closing chapters to his novel, an actual whale had sunk a ship near the Off-Shore Ground. This catastrophe was written up in the Panama Herald with the headlines: "Thrilling Account of the Destruction of a Whale Ship by a Sperm Whale -- Sinking of the Ship -- Loss of Two of the Boats; and Miraculous Escape of the Crew."\[17\]

The above mentioned incident seems to indicate a coincidence which should not be taken lightly. Even as far as the name of Moby Dick is concerned, there is evidence of a similar name being attached to a white whale before Melville wrote his novel. Melville may quite probably have read the story, "Mocha-Dick; or the White Whale of the Pacific (a leaf from a Manuscript Journal)," published by John M. Reynolds in the Knickerbocker Magazine for May, 1839. When it is remembered that Melville was contributing juvenalia to the periodical press in this very year, it does not seem unlikely that such an exciting true story, published in a household journal, should have come to his attention and therefore become the basis of his adventure story. His imagination could well have been kindled by reading of the exploits and final death of the White Whale, the victor in a hundred fights with whaleboats, whose renown among whalemens was so universal that the

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customary salutation between passing ships in the Pacific was: "Any news of Mocha-Dick?"

So striking, it appears, is the resemblance between this leviathan of fact, and the White Whale of Melville's fiction, that one is inclined to give some consideration to the twofold claim propounded by one Melvillean scholar:

That Reynolds, by writing his "Mocha-Dick, the White Whale of the Pacific (a leaf from my Journal [sic],)" did Melville, the youthful school teacher and embryo journalist of Albany, a great service I must affirm, for it furnished him with the grand idea for his chef d'oeuvre "Moby Dick," and, I feel sure, determined him to voyage the wonder world on a whaler in search of "the one grand hooded phantom."18

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CHAPTER II

A SUMMARY OF VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS

OF MOBY DICK

Approximately sixty years after the death of Melville, some barrier between Moby Dick and the reader arose, and a wave of enthusiasm for the story of Ahab has swept the curious into a search for its meaning—a search which has taken a strange turn. Instead of seeking to explain the essential greatness of the book in terms of his quest for certainty and his great discovery, the critics of Moby Dick have become absorbed in hidden meanings, in the interpretations of vague symbols and the ferreting out of concealed analogies. H. A. Myers is of the opinion that this assumption that it was necessary to decode Melville's story in order to get at the meaning had its beginning in the notion that Moby Dick is an allegory.¹

Melville insisted upon the substantial reality of his masterpiece. He wrote in Moby Dick:

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 (257).

In this quotation, as well as in letters which he addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Nathaniel Hawthorne, Melville points out definitely

that his work is not to be looked upon as an allegory. In a letter to Mrs. Hawthorne on January 8, 1852, Melville seems to be chastising her for reading too much into his work. He was answering her letter of December 29, 1851, where she outlined a certain symbolical meaning which she got from reading the book.

It really amazed me that you should find an satisfaction in that book. It is true that some men have said they were pleased with it, but you the only woman . . . . But, then, since you, with your spiritualizing nature, see more things than other people, and by the same process, refine all you see, so that they are not the same things that other people see, but things, which while you think you but humbly discover them, you do in fact create them for yourself — therefore, upon the whole, I do not so much marvel at your expressions concerning Moby Dick. At any rate, your allusion for example to the "Spirit Spout" first showed to me that there was a subtle significance in that thing — but I did not, in that case, mean it. I had some vague idea while writing it, that the whole book was susceptible of an allegorical construction and also that parts of it were — but the speciality of many of the particular subordinate allegories, were [sic] first revealed to me, after reading Mr. Hawthorne's letter which, without citing any particular examples, yet intimated the part-and-parcel allegoricalness of the whole.²

Melville complained to Nathaniel Hawthorne that too many readers see Moby Dick as an allegory. He wrote concerning Moby Dick that "why, since Adam, who has got to the meaning of this great allegory — the world? Then we pigmies must be content to have our paper allegories but ill comprehended."³

²Quotation in Charles R. Anderson, Melville in the South Seas, (New York, 1939), p. 64, taken from the Catalogue of the American Art Association, New York, 1931, Sale No. 3911. The letter bought by J. W. Bentley (buying name for an anonymous purchaser) for $3,100, is, unfortunately, not available for scholarly use.

³Quoted in Raymond M. Weaver, Herman Melville, Mariner and Mystic, (New York, 1921), p. 327.
Despite the fact that Melville cautioned readers not to look upon *Moby Dick* as a "hideous and intolerable allegory" and also not to see symbolism where there is none, as seen in his words to Mrs. Hawthorne, a wide and almost unbelievable variety of interpretations have been offered in the past fifty years. Milton R. Stern, in an introduction to a series of discussions on *Moby Dick*, describes some of the more bizarre interpretations:

The variety of the materials is determined by every conceivable range of interpretative and biographical opinion. Stemming from the warped and warping readings of Weaver, through the distortions of Mumford, on up to the present day, we have criticisms that see Melville's fiction as documentation for psycho-biographical statements about homosexuality, Oedipal fixations, sex-fear, sex-lust, infantilism, castration complex, an unhappy marriage, envy of the father, poverty, social pretention, or any kind of pretension, extension, or intention you wish. Even sophisticated contemporary critics like Arvin (who has written one of the best of all the Melville studies) and Chase have utilized Freudian assumptions, Jungian readings, religious archetypalism, and the symbology of systematic political thought to arrive at statements that sometimes seem to be illuminations of the critic's mind rather than of the prose at issue.\(^4\)

In this chapter I will present the most important interpretations offered by various Melvillean scholars and an evaluation of each. For the sake of order, I will arrange the different interpretations in the following three-fold order: namely, allegorical non-allegorical symbolical, and non-allegorical non-symbolical. The members of second group are by far in the majority,

followed by those of the first. The third type of interpretation has very few adherents.

In Chapter XLV of Moby Dick appears Herman Melville's well-known admonition against looking at the White Whale as a fable or an allegory, quoted earlier in this chapter. Those who admit of allegory claim that this remark of Melville is misinterpreted as a blanket condemnation of allegorical literature. They would say that this passage is merely Melville's protest that white wales are realities, not imaginary sea-monsters.\(^5\) The allegorists justify their interpretations on three grounds: (1) Melville's own comments on the book; (2) The manner in which Melville changes his source for the book, Mocha Dick; and (3) Melville's tendency to think in symbols.\(^6\)

The discovery of allegory in Moby Dick is by no means recent. In 1851, a reviewer in Harper's Magazine made this comment: "Beneath the whole story the subtle, imaginative reader may find a pregnant allegory intended to illustrate the mystery of human life."\(^7\) No other details of what this allegory may be were given. An unknown writer in the Times Literary Supplement saw the great White Whale as allegorizing "what some old theologians have called the


\(^6\)Cook, p. 61.
evil principle of the universe . . . . Opposed to the whale is the
giant heroism and resolution of Ahab."8

The twentieth century continued to bring critics who
look upon Moby Dick as an allegory. Some look upon the novel as
a religious allegory, while others do not make the distinction,
although it appears from their explanations that their interpreta-
tions also can be called religious allegories and those allegories
which have various religious symbolisms accompanying the allegory.
By a religious allegory I mean that allegory which is religious in
tone throughout the entire narrative, as distinguished from reli-
gious symbolism which is applied to any object referring to a range
of meaning beyond itself.

I have only found two authors who see a religious allegory
in Moby Dick, both of whom are Catholics. Sophie Hollis, in a
scholarly article in a Catholic monthly, wrote:

Moby Dick is more than the story of a whaling boat
and its captain. It is an allegory; the green land is
the oasis of faith (a bucolic, non-thinking faith); the
sea is the tree of knowledge which is fraught with dangers
to the peace of the soul; and the whale is the hand of
God. And what is Captain Ahab, desperate man, who not
only ventured on the high seas but deliberately sought
that hand, not to discover its sinews and strength, but
to destroy it.9

8"Herman Melville," *Times Literary Supplement*, July 26,
1923, p. 494.

9Sophie Hollis, "Moby Dick: A Religious Interpretation,"
The Catholic World, CXIII (May, 1946), p. 158.
Hollis holds the opinion that Melville swept an eighteenth century New England, with its cheerlessness, profundities and undigested European heritage intertwined with a dyspeptic Protestantism, into the symbolic entities of the ocean, the ship, and Moby Dick, the great white whale.\textsuperscript{10}

Hollis sees the possibility of two different interpretations in reference to Moby Dick. The first would have man, as portrayed by Ahab, bound to his fate and pursued by a malignant God who wills the bound creature to woo his nightmare end. If this be the case, then the whale stands for an evil God himself or the symbol of that "unimaginable" malignant thing. A second interpretation has man, as portrayed by Ahab, as shaping his destiny by his own will and mind. He is captain of his soul. If this be the case, then the whale is under the orders of God to smite the proud Lucifer (Ahab) who dares to ape God. Hollis thinks that Melville accepted the former interpretation after a struggle took place in Melville's own mind.\textsuperscript{11}

Hollis arrives at the conclusion that an ubiquitous pantheism pervades the book and that the symbols themselves take on personality. For an example, she explains the color white which held such an attraction for Melville. She ends her analysis by stating that "the dramatic saga of Moby Dick shows a tragedy of

\textsuperscript{10}Hollis, \textit{loc. cit.}

\textsuperscript{11}Hollis, p. 159.
the man who is neither believer nor infidel."

Much of what Hollis interprets is plausible, but she forces some points in order to establish a complete, formulated religious allegory. Her allegorical interpretation of the sea, for example, lacks textual evidence. She mentions that the Greeks gave the ocean a special deity, which is irrelevant. She claims that God gave orders to the whale to smite the "proud Lucifer," yet it is the "proud Lucifer" who is pursuing the whale.

Father Francis X. Canfield offers a second religious interpretation on the allegory of Moby Dick in connection with the Book of Job in the Bible. It is his conviction that

study and reflection make it highly plausible to say that the Book of Job is the most likely key to this great American novel. Moby Dick is Melville's dramatic presentation of the same theme that is found in the Book of Job, the story of an attempt to fathom the ways of Divinity, the Source of all things.

Fr. Canfield's theory is supported, first of all, by Melville's familiarity with Job, the man of sorrows. He points out that in Melville's personal Bible forty-five markings are made in the Book of Job, some of which are on passages alluded to in Moby Dick. Both Job and Captain Ahab, he points out, are set off on their search after experiencing physical evil. He sums up the

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12 Hollis, p. 162.
striking similarity of theme between the Book of Job and Moby Dick as follows:

Both authors have the same lesson to teach: man is powerless to know the Almighty. His ways are not ours. God directs the events of day-to-day living and even draws good out of evil. Our attitude should be one of humble submission. Job and his friends try to explain God's mind in their own terms. Ahab tries to pierce the "pasteboard masks" of "outward events" that he might reach the Reality beyond and thus share in the wisdom of the Absolute . . . . Whereas Job quickly repents and acknowledges his foolishness at the first sign of God's displeasure, Ahab is carried away by his pride and ignores the warnings of Providence, entering a covenant with Satan that he might achieve his purpose.14

The resemblance between Ahab and Job is striking, but Melville's characterization of Ahab does not resemble Job throughout. It is true, as Wright asserts, that "there is a general correspondence between the books of the Bible which Melville scored and commented upon and those which he quoted and alluded to,"15 but, there is not enough of Job in Moby Dick to warrant the opinion that Melville had particular reference to the Book of Job as he wrote Moby Dick. The similarities between Job and Moby Dick in general vague and general, such as the use of the terms "evil" and "malice," which can be found in other books of the Bible besides Job. Fr. Canfield mentions that Ahab's pride is his sin, which was the same with Job.16 But is not also the case with Shakespeare's

14 Canfield, p. 260.
15 Canfield, p. 255.
16 Canfield, p. 259.
heroes in the tragedies, as well as the reason for the fall of most
men?

One of the most common allegorical interpretations has
been that Ahab's feud with Moby Dick represents man's heroic and
eternal struggle against any indifferent, even hostile, nature.\textsuperscript{17}
An equally common one is that this struggle was between man and
moral evil. The early scholars of Melville, such as Freeman, Mum-
ford, F. V. Morley, and Weaver, who espoused these two common
allegorical interpretations were rather cautious in assigning
a definitive interpretation. John Freeman in his work\textsuperscript{18} portrays
Moby Dick as a Leviathan and a "great enemy." Lewis Mumford held
that

the White Whale stands for the brute energies of existence, blind, fatal, overpowering, while Ahab is the spirit
of man, small and feeble, but purposive, that pits its
puniness against this might, and its purpose against the
blank senselessness of power\textsuperscript{19}

F. V. Morley sees Moby Dick as the allegorical symbol "of all
ranging wild enmities of nature."\textsuperscript{20} Raymond Weaver looks upon the
whale as representing "the demonism at the cankered heart of Nature,"

\textsuperscript{17}Carl Van Doren, \textit{White-Jacket}, (London, 1924), pp. 251-252.

\textsuperscript{18}John Freeman, \textit{Herman Melville}, (New York, 1926).

\textsuperscript{19}Lewis Mumford, \textit{Herman Melville} (New York, 1929), p. 184;
Mather in his review of Moby Dick completely agrees with Mumford,
"Herman Melville," \textit{Saturday Review of Literature}, V (April 27, 1929),
946.

\textsuperscript{20}F. V. Morley, "Whaling Days," \textit{Saturday Review of Literature},
I (March 14, 1925), 594.
with Captain Ahab as its human opponent. He states that "on the white hump of the ancient and vindictive monster, Captain Ahab piles the sins of all the rage and hate of mankind from the days of Eden."\textsuperscript{21}

The fact that these four critics do not outline a definitive interpretation makes it rather difficult to oppose. They start off with the premise that \textit{Moby Dick} is an allegory and leave it up to the individual reader to determine what definite meaning the allegory will take. It is surprising that they refer little to the text itself. Their reasons for assigning an allegory to \textit{Moby Dick} rest primarily on the three grounds given earlier in this chapter which I evaluated and found insufficient and weak.

Foremost among the recent defenders of the allegorical interpretation is Richard Chase, who discusses his interpretation in detail in his critical edition.\textsuperscript{22} Chase looks upon \textit{Moby Dick} as a "mytho-poetic" allegory and a romanticized travelogue-novel. He probes Melville's psyche and American culture and decodes the novel by using a fusion of concepts from Frazer, Jung, Rourke, and others. Ahab was "the American cultural image"; a "primitive magician -- a Shaman"; "both the father and the son." The central idea of the tragedy is the self-defeat of leadership. \textit{Moby Dick} represents not evil, but purity -- inviolable spiritual rectitude.\textsuperscript{23}


\textsuperscript{23}Chase, p. 178-180.
According to Chase, the figure of Ishmael -- the outcast seeking his birthright -- is implicit in all Melville's work, from Typee to Billy Budd. Melville evolved the idea of Ishmael from the complex infantile experience of his own self-mythicized orphanhood and then developed it into the mask-consciousness which tells the story of Moby Dick. Chase states:

In Moby Dick, Ishmael had become American Man -- a possibly heroic personality hidden behind a mask which asked in effect: What is this man? or What may he become? In each of Melville's novels the masked Ishmael confronts us with this question. Melville's other heroes must be seen as a series of answers the question. Among these heroes Ishmael seeks his paternity, his mythical connection with society and the order and power of Nature.24

Chase's interpretation of Ahab, Pip, and Bulkington are unusual and interesting. In his critical study, he writes:

Ahab is a false hero because he violates the deep-running natural necessity of life's rhythms, smashing recklessly athwart nature's balance of life and death, performing that huge suicidal act of abstraction which is the only way he knows of re-allying himself with nature. In Moby Dick occurs the first portrait of another kind of false hero -- little Pip. If Ahab's fault is that he returns and returns and returns without ever being able to withdraw, little Pip's fault is that he withdraws and is never able to return. Bulkington, combing with Ahab, the man of power, action, and intelligence, and Pip, the silenced anchorite, is the embodiment of the rhythms of being and consciousness. He is Man fully formed, fully human, fully wise.25

Chase does not stop with American culture as a means of decoding the novel. He sees a lot of homoeroticism and homosexualism

24Chase, p. 179.
in *Moby Dick* as well as in other works of Melville, who he claims loved men better than women. Chase remarks that "Melville could only see female beauty, tender, erotic and joy-giving, in men: in the beautiful youth Antonius; in that Ishmael who knew such bliss with Queequeg . . . ."\(^{26}\)

As for the last point, I think that Chase's views are unwarranted in view of the fact that no biographer of Melville brings out the slightest hint that Melville had homosexual tendencies. His married life appears normal in his biography. As to Chase's implication that Melville's preference of men is strongly portrayed by the lack of women in the novel, I would answer simply that it was not customary for women to work on ships and whaling vessels.

Chase also sees certain characters in *Moby Dick* as combinations "of the scientific curio and the folk lore."\(^{27}\) The only characters whom he discusses are the cannibal Queequeg, the American Indian Tashtego, and the Negro Daggoo. I find it difficult, and I presume folklorists would also, to see folk heroes in the likes of these three savages.

From what has been written about Chase's interpretation, we see that it is rather intricate because of the psychological factors that he claims to have discovered in probing Melville's

\(^{26}\)Chase, p. 295.

\(^{27}\)Chase, p. 82.
Chase's weakness lies in this over-emphasis on the field of psychology in dealing with Melville.

Chase believes also that a study of Melville and his intellectual equipment should not be conceived apart from a study of his art. He contends that those concerned with precise textual structural analysis, with order and concentration, have seen only Melville's sometimes unruly emotions, his vagueness, or his lack of system. I would agree with Mr. Chase that a textual, structural analysis would see Melville in a superficial way if the textual analysis were done with a glance and lacking deep consideration. But can we judge any author completely unless we examine the work which he has produced? Since Melville did not reveal all these poetical symbols that Chase sees in the book, I would say that Chase will have to present more convincing arguments.

In the symbolical and non-allegorical group of interpretations, we see a large variety of opinions and theories. William Sedgwick offers a rather cautious symbolical interpretation of *Moby Dick* which has attracted many Melvillean scholars. He stresses the point that Moby Dick is the center attraction of the book and not Captain Ahab. In *Moby Dick* the vision focuses of the mystery of creation, the chief emblem of which is the terrible White Whale. However, just as in Dante's poem all men are classified as they

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28 Chase, p. xi.
stand in relation to the will of God, so in Moby Dick the characters are classified as they are in relation to the whale -- according to whether they fear him, worship him, or ignore him. 29

What Sedgwick contends concerning the classification of the characters in the book in relation to Moby Dick, as we shall point out further in the fourth chapter, is quite reasonable. But I would answer that each character may also be classified in relation to Captain Ahab as well. More is said by Melville concerning this latter classification than the former, and therefore I would conclude that Captain Ahab is the center of attraction and not Moby Dick.

Sedgwick contends that when Melville wrote Moby Dick, whaling was an American tradition still serving the country, and since it touched the country's vital needs, it occupied a more central position than the American Navy. The American whale fishery expressed the best in the American character. The Pequod's crew of red, white, yellow, black, and dusky American emphasized the fact that the whaling industry chose its workers from the "melting pot" of the U.S.A. At the present day, however, not one in two of the many thousand men employed before the mast in the American whale fishery are American born, though nearly all the officers are. 30

30 Sedgwick, p. 90.
Sedgwick goes on to point out that in the mid-nineteenth century the whaling enterprise had arrived at its period of greatest vigor and had become a fit emblem or symbol of American enterprise. In Moby Dick we see the vast experience of Melville in the whaling industry. There is hardly a detail of a whaleship's gear and tackle which Melville does not describe from a practical viewpoint, making Moby Dick a practical manual for whalesmen.\textsuperscript{31}

The above facts, to which I would agree, are stressed by Sedgwick, and I think they weaken his position greatly when he begins to assign various meanings to symbols in the book. From his presentation of the above-mentioned material, one would expect that Sedgwick would rule out much symbolism, yet he does not.

A summary of the symbols in Moby Dick, as Sedgwick sees them, is given in the following words:

Ahab, the White Wale, the sea -- these are Melville's greatest creations in Moby Dick. Ahab is the hero, but the White Whale is the central character. The sea embraces them both and brings them face to face with one another. Ahab is more than a whaling captain; he is man, sentient, speculative, purposive, religious, standing his full human stature against the immense mystery of creation. His antagonist, Moby Dick, is that immense mystery. Moby Dick stands for the mystery of creation which confronts and challenges the mind of man at the same time that it lies ambushed in the process of his own consciousness. He is significant of the massive inertia in things, and of the blind beauty and violence of nature -- all that ignores or twists or betrays or otherwise does outrage to man's purpose. The sea stands for the symbol of the element of truth, as also of man's

\textsuperscript{31}Sedgwick, p. 90.
greatness and infinite aspirations. It is the ubiquitous hide-out of Moby Dick. It leads away from all definitions, all traditional sanctities, all securities.\textsuperscript{32}

When Sedgwick establishes Moby Dick as the central character, he is saying in effect that the mystery of creation is more important than man, represented by Ahab. He seems to me to be putting the cart before the horse. He stresses the fact that man is placing his full "human nature and stature" against this "immense mystery of creation." It would, therefore, seem to be more consistent for Sedgwick that the center of attraction is on the "pursuer" and not the "pursued."

Sedgwick agrees with most critics that the White Whale is all evil to Ahab, but he insists that it is wrong to say, as do almost all the critics of \textit{Moby Dick}, that Melville intended him to represent evil. He contends that "the White Whale has a tremendous power to do harm. But unless the word is so denatured as to be synonymous with harmful or dangerous, he cannot be called evil. If a man sees evil in him, then it is his own evil which is reflected back to him."\textsuperscript{33} This point seems very reasonable, and I would have to admit that I agree with his deduction since there is no definite proof that Melville directly intended Moby Dick to represent evil.

Willard Thorp sees a gradual transformation of the novel from a whale story in the beginning into a metaphysical level of

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{32}Sedgwick, p. 97.\\
\textsuperscript{33}Sedgwick, p. 111.
\end{flushright}
meaning as the story progresses. Melville, he contends, carried his story along on a narrative plane or level, culminating in the three-day chase which ends when Moby Dick sinks the Pequod. This is a reasonable and appealing contention which I accept in part. But there is according to Thorp a development of symbolism in Moby Dick as the chase continues, and I cannot agree with Mr. Thorp that Melville was sharply aware of any distinction. As to when Melville introduces various symbolisms into the novel -- that is, when Melville makes the transition from the narrative level to the metaphysical level -- Thorp does not say, although he makes this distinction. Thorp would also have to answer this question more satisfactorily: What about the symbolism of the sea, which is given at the very outset of the book, as well as other apparent symbols in the beginning of the book? Thorp seems at one point to contradict himself because he realizes this problem, but he does not answer it. He remarks:

Melville learned well how to invent and manipulate symbols, beginning with his earlier work of Mardi. Before the first chapter ends, we perceive that the sea over which the Pequod rushes to its doom has become a symbol of the ungraspable phantom of life. The greatness of a work of art is to be measured by its inexhaustibleness. Melville poured into Moby Dick all that he knew of men, their vices and their virtue . . . .

Thorp's symbolical interpretation differs from others by the fact that he has shifted the location of the conflict from Ahab

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and Moby Dick to the conflict as framed and evaluated through the eyes of Ishmael, and illuminated also by the Father Mapple sermon, the three mates, little Pip, Fedullah, the passing ships and other elements. Since Melville centers the conflict directly on Ahab and Moby Dick, I cannot see Thorp's purpose in making this shift, nor its importance.

Howard Vincent closely examines Melville's sources and his method of transmuting them into material for his book. He traces the growth of the book from its earliest germs in Melville's earlier books to its published state in 1851. Vincent's interpretation is the most difficult to pin down because he wove a reading of the book which assumed that the meanings were multiple and that the symbols shifted in significance. He speculates on some of these multiple meanings and leaves the rest up to the individual's interpretation.

Padriac Colum, in a short article, looks upon Moby Dick as an epic romance. He writes:

It is a mistake, I think, in the criticism of Melville's works, to approach Moby Dick as a novel. On the surface it is a novel; it is a prose narrative of a certain length dealing with possible men and possible events. But below the surface it is different. The men are possible, but they are also fabulous ... . What Herman Melville proposes to himself is not the theme for a novel but the theme for an epic. His characters are generalized like the characters of an epic -- "Ahab" and "Ishmael" are the names that rule out personal characteristics. Captain Ahab is an Achilles of the sea. There is hardly a character in

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35 Howard Paton Vincent, The Trying-out of Moby Dick (Boston, 1949).
the book, and all the incidents in it are only rehearsals for the great central incident -- the conflict between the steel-hearted man and the strange white whale that comes to represent "the mightiest animated mass that has survived the flood." If Herman Melville had consciously proposed to himself to make the epic of man's invasion of the Oceans, his theme and his handling of it could hardly, it seems to me, be different.36

At first glance this interpretation may not appear symbolical, but from the little which the author presents, it is evident that the epical character of Ahab stands for something or someone -- which Colum does not say. What he writes is appealing, but he does not give any reasons for his interpretation and merely generalizes. In answer to his affirmation that Moby Dick is an epic, we can give the formalistic argument that Moby Dick does not conform to principles laid down by the classical epic traditions, beginning with Homer and in the veins of the folk epic of Beowulf or the art epic of Paradise Lost, besides not being in poetic form.

The psychologically minded critics have found fertile ground in the symbolism of Moby Dick to probe for the spiritual disillusionment and tragedy of its author.37 Van Wyck Brooks suggests that Melville was reviving in his whale hunt the epic of Beowulf.38 D. H. Lawrence has gone so far as to find portrayed

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in Ahab's feud with the White Whale the universal inner struggle of man's dual ego -- the blood-being of the white race, hunted by its own mental consciousness. Criticisms of these men who deal with psychological abstractions would be similar to those offered when Chase was discussed earlier in this chapter.

J. B. Hall gives an interesting reading and out-of-the-way interpretation of Moby Dick as an industrial saga. He is of the opinion that the central myth in Moby Dick is capitalism. Ahab is the manager of an enterprise sponsored by absentee owners. Bildad and Peleg are large shareholders in the enterprise, and they have the confidence of the minor shareholders. This arrangement deprives any one class of moral responsibility. The men are driven by the mates, and the mates by the Captain. Stubb is a typical man of the whaling industry. He presents a pioneer type who thinks of virtue in terms of strength and power. His actions are frequently sadistic. Captain Ahab, in the spirit of free enterprise, seeks after the White Whale. He becomes the culture hero of the society which could launch a Pequod. He is seeking the Monster Whale. Ishmael, a member of the proletariat, survives the catastrophe and is picked up by the Rachael, a ship that can

only cruise aimlessly until some basic decision is made to liberate the crew. 40

The above interpretation sounds good, but it is entirely lacking any kind of evidence to support it. It is merely an interpretation that flowed from the author's imagination.

As it is evident from the material presented thus far, there is a wide range of possible interpretations concerning the symbolism in *Moby Dick*. Almost any avenue of interpretation can be taken, since Melville does not clarify his symbolization in the book itself. I would agree however with Matthiessen in his evaluation of the symbolical school of interpretation.

Some of the more extravagant of the symbolical interpretations of his masterpiece could have been eliminated if the critics had paid stricter attention to Melville's own text. 41

There is a small group of interpreters who would adhere to the opinion that there is neither allegory nor symbolism in *Moby Dick*. These proponents of the non-symbolical and non-allegorical interpretations begin with the premise that *Moby Dick* is simply an adventure story of a whale hunt. Archibald Macmechan, for example, reads *Moby Dick* as a great adventure novel which is typically American. He claims that nowhere but in America could such a theme have been

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treated in such a style. Whaling is peculiarly an American industry and of all whalenmen, the Nantucketeers were the keenest, the most daring and the most successful. Macmechan goes so far as to state that perhaps Melville went to sea for no other reason than to construct the monument of whaling in this unique book. 42

In view of the facts surrounding Melville's earlier years, it does not seem plausible that Melville went to sea in order to write Moby Dick. There is no evidence whatsoever to support the opinion that Moby Dick was conceived by Melville early in his life. His biographers all agree that Melville discovered that writing was his profession only after his many adventures in the South Seas. When we remember that Moby Dick was written only after Melville had already written ten volumes, it is extremely doubtful that he thought of writing the whale story early in his life, when he went to sea as a young teenager.

Macmechan goes on to state that Moby Dick

has the picturesqueness of the new world and above all, a free-flowing humour which is the distinct cachet of American literature. It shows reading of the book to be full of thought and allusion; but its chief charm is its freedom from all scholastic rules and conventions. Melville is a Walt Whitman of prose. This book is at once seen as an encyclopedia of whaling. It is a monument to the honor of an extinct race of daring seamen; but it is a monument overgrown with the lichen of neglect. 43

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42 Archibald Macmechan, "Melville," The Humane Review, VII (October, 1901), pp. 242-244.
43 Macmechan, p. 247.
It is true that *Moby Dick* is typically American but to simplify the entire novel as Mr. Macmechan does give the impression that he has a most superficial knowledge of the book. He admits that the book is full of thought and "allusion," but he does not explain what he means by this statement. His comparison of Melville to Walt Whitman would hardly support his position, since Whitman has much symbolism in his writings.

Leslie Fiedler, in a short article, claims that Melville was accepted at a late date precisely because some critics insisted that there had to be a lot of symbolism in most of Melville's characters. While this may very well be true, it certainly does not give evidence for his non-allegorical, non-symbolical interpretation; yet this basic argument is his only justification. He also includes the arguments usually given against the allegorists, which were presented earlier in this chapter.

W. Somerset Maugham defends his non-allegorical, non-symbolical interpretation by focusing on the personality of Melville and the psychological factors involved in the writing of *Moby Dick*. He discusses such points as Melville's eye for masculine beauty, his reading habits, and his style. Each argument that he gives for these three points have nothing to do with whether there is symbolism

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in the novel or not. He completely ignores the evident references in the text such as the symbolism in the references to the sea, Ahab's scar, and the like. He argues in generalities and does not add anything for his defense of importance.

In conclusion it seems to me that the strongest school of interpretation rests with the symbolical, non-allegorical interpreters. Their material is usually more scholarly presented, taking into consideration the possible sources of Melville's symbolism and frequently using the very text of Moby Dick to explicate their interpretation. I do, as a matter of fact, reject all three schools of interpretations, but I do find specific elements in the symbolical, non-allegorical interpretations, as those of Sedgwick and Thorp, which are acceptable because they are based on the text itself.
CHAPTER III

MELVILLE’S LIFE AND MILIEU

In the two previous chapters, we have tried to point out the apparent difficulties in interpreting Moby Dick. From the confusion resulting from these difficulties, concerning which Melville did not deign to elucidate, readers have produced many different interpretations of the novel’s symbolism. From the one extreme of an excessive dose of symbolism to the other extreme of the absence of it, critics have produced interpretations.

Since Herman Melville himself did not point out the path to follow in pursuing the apparently hidden meanings of his book, scarcely a student of Moby Dick has been able to refrain from developing some personal interpretation of the symbolism in Moby Dick. These interpretations result not only from the reading of the novel itself, but also from a consideration of outside sources which might have influenced Melville.

According to Dr. White the two main sources of Melville’s literary works, including whatever symbols they may contain, are his life (including not only the places and circumstances of his own wanderings and experiences but also contemporary events), and his

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1Viola White, Symbolism in Herman Melville's Writings, (Durham, 1934), p. 68.
intellectual surroundings, (which would take in the literature he read, the men of letters who influenced him personally, and the literary milieu in which he lived). I would like to pursue only a few points in these sources which will eventually aid me in developing the interpretation which I will favor in the next chapter, based largely upon the contents and text of *Moby Dick*.

Study of an author's life should ordinarily give an insight into the author's mind for a better appreciation of his writings. Melville's life has always been a puzzle, since biographical materials are scanty; the chief sources are his own autobiographical romances.  

The poet, novelist, and 'literary discover of the South Seas' was born at No. 5 Pearly Street, New York City, in 1819. His parents were both of substantial New York families, but his father's bankruptcy, soon followed by his death, left the mother in financial difficulties when the boy was only twelve. She then settled near Albany, where Melville attended the Albany Academy from 1830-34. Following a brief career as cabin boy on a cargo ship on the St. Lawrence River, he lived for a short time ashore in the slums of Liverpool, England (later described in his novel, 

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3 For a complete and trustworthy handbook of Melville concerning his South Seas experiences and its influences on him, see Charles R. Anderson, *Melville in the South Sea* (New York, 1939).
Redburn), which seemed to have awakened the abhorrence expressed throughout his fiction of the darkness of man's deeds and the evil seemingly inherent in nature itself.

As to what prompted Melville to go to sea, Melvillean biographers can only guess. S. F. Damon speculates that the seventeen-year-old ran away from home to be a seaman because he was inspired after his reading of Richard Henry Dana's Two Years Before the Mast; a very popular factual narrative of a life at sea which was published in 1836.

After his first brief seafaring interlude, he taught school at Greenbush, New York, and Pittsfield, Massachusetts, for four years. It was during this period that he began writing sporadically. In 1841, he shipped once more before the mast, aboard a Fair Haven whaling ship called the Acushnet, from which he jumped ship at Nuku Hiva in the Marquesas Islands. This experience is described in Typee and Mardi, his two early successful novels. Herman and his friend "Toby" Green spent at least a month among the handsome Marquesan Taipis, whose free and idyllic island life was flawed by their regrettable habit of eating their enemies. A passing whale provided an escape to Tahiti. Melville soon shipped on

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another whaler called Charles and Henry of Nantucket, which carried him finally to the Hawaiian Islands. In Honolulu he enlisted for naval service aboard the U.S.S. United States and was discharged fourteen months later while at Boston.

The youth had had a compelling personal experience, and, being a natural writer, he at once set to work producing a fiction based largely on his own adventures, employing literary materials which he was the first American writer to exploit. Typee, published in 1846, was the first modern novel of South Seas adventure, as the later Moby Dick was the first literary classic of whaling. In fact, Melville wrote little of significance that was not suggested by his experiences prior to his discharge from the Navy. His impulsive literary energies drove him steadily for eleven years, during which he was the author of ten major volumes, six of which were on the South Sea adventure theme.

Chase, in his critical study of Melville, asserts that Melville was not a supremely inventive writer. He had experienced too much too early and he wrote too furiously of his adventures, nearly exhausting his early experiences with the completion of Moby Dick, when he was only thirty-two years of age. Chase attributes the many seemingly glaring defects in the language of Melville to his impulsive writing.6

After Melville's first ten volumes, his fiction writing suddenly ceased, and his life fell into utter confusion, producing an enigma endlessly intriguing to his critics. Raymond Weaver's biography, for example, for lack of information summed up Melville's last forty years in one concluding chapter.

After Melville's discharge from the Navy in 1844, he married Elizabeth Shaw, the daughter of Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw of Boston. Not much is recorded about their family life, outside of the fact that Mrs. Melville had her hands full with Herman and very often was heroic with the unpredictable writer. The Melvilles settled in New York for three years, where Melville was an occasional reviewer for the Literary World, a monthly.

In 1849, he took a trip to England, visiting also Paris and Coblentz. On his return he took his family to "Arrowhead," a farm near Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where he became a close friend of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Plates of his earlier books were destroyed in the famous Harper fire of 1853. Not printed, his books were gradually forgotten by the public. In 1856, he made a journey to

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7 For an excellent analysis of Melville in psychological terms, see one of the most critical biographies written in the last two decades: Newton Arvin, Herman Melville (New York, 1950).

8 Raymond Weaver, Melville, Mariner and Mystic (New York, 1921).

9 For an account of the personal daily life of Melville, see Leon Howard, Herman Melville (Berkeley, 1951).
the Holy Land by way of Constantinople and Liverpool. He returned to America in 1857 and then sailed to San Francisco on the clipper ship Meteor, whose captain was his brother. After failing to obtain an appointment in the United States Consular Service, he moved to New York City, where he settled down humbly in 1866 as a customs inspector from 1866 to 1885. His trip inspired him to write Clarel, a tedious and shallow poem which contains a few memorable passages but which on the whole lacks depth due to his unfamiliarity with the poetical craft. He died quietly after finishing Billy Budd, the manuscript of which was not fully prepared for the press.¹⁰

From the brief biographical account mentioned above, there are a few conclusions that we can make. First, Melville had a great love for the sea which began in his early youth. It is no wonder, then, that the majority of his writings dealt with the sea and adventures on the sea. In writing Moby Dick, Melville found an opportunity to employ his vast knowledge of the sea and the whaling industry, of which work he was so proficient. The whale represents the strength and fury of the sea, just as the lion represents all the savagery and might of the jungle. Melville chose the whale-theme, therefore, to give his fullest expression of love and interest of the sea. Therefore, we conclude that Moby Dick is not to be looked upon as totally symbolical, standing for something else, but as something also that Melville experienced and loved -- the sea, whaling, ships, etc.

Although it is rather difficult to measure the influence of Melville's early life, with its adventures, setbacks, failures, and successes, to ignore them completely would be avoiding a source which can aid us in the untangling of Melville's symbolism, especially in *Moby Dick*. We can see from Melville's life that he was close to nature and only looked at sometimes in terms of symbolism.

Unfortunately, as White points out,\(^1\) there has been too much attention placed on psychoanalysis in the study of Melville, emphasizing certain autobiographical sources to the exclusion of others. A proper perspective of an author and his writings can be attained only by a proper and thorough evaluation of all important sources which may have influenced him. With Melville, it seems that the literary sources are frequently overlooked or underestimated.

Scholars speculate as to which authors and which writings influenced Melville in the writing of *Moby Dick*. Some of these writings appear quite meaningful after further investigation into the actual text of *Moby Dick*. Foremost among these literary works is the Bible. Nathalia Wright who has done extensive research on the Bible's influence on Melville's writings, tells us that Melville owned two Bibles which have come down to us.\(^2\) That Melville

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\(^{11}\) White, p. 68.

has marked certain passages in forty-four books of the Bible indicates his familiarity and use of the Bible. In Moby Dick we can easily see this influence of the Bible by such things as Biblical proper names, references made about Jonah and the Whale, Job, and the like. Wright is led to the opinion that the great motif in Moby Dick is prophecy because of the many Biblical allusions in Moby Dick. 13

B. Millicent, in a well-documented article, gives convincing proofs of a marked influence on Melville by Pierre Bayle, who published his Dictionnaire Historique et Critique early in 1849. 14 This dictionary is a vast repository of facts and opinions about false religions. Miss Bell quotes passages from Bayle which are recognizable in essence in Moby Dick. This may, however, be due to coincidence, since there are no linguistic echoes. This speculative article does suggest that certain religious symbolism is contained in Moby Dick, but I think it proposes a weak stand.

In a heavily documented article, W. Heflin locates another source for Moby Dick in a reference to a loadstone. 15 By comparing examples from Captain William Scoresby's book, Account of the Arctic

13 Wright, p. 203.


Regions, and Moby Dick, he conjectures that Scoresby's book was an important source for Melville's information about the sea and ships. This article is convincing because Melville is accurate in the use of nautical terms and various aspects of the sea and ships. This points out well the fact that Moby Dick can be looked upon as a valid expression of the life of the sea and the whaling industry from a practical sort of viewpoint and as a symbolical work only in part.

In conclusion, we must assert that it is extremely difficult to pin-point literary works which influenced Melville in the writing of Moby Dick, due mainly to the fact that Melville did not reveal these sources to us. Nevertheless, we should not dismiss the possible source if it can give us even an inkling to the unraveling of Moby Dick.

Understanding the milieu and the literary age in which Melville wrote can suggest certain additional influences on Melville. Melville was a product of an age which was undergoing great changes politically, socially, and journalistically. America was in the process of expanding its great natural resources. Politically, the common man came into his own under Jackson. American literature was finally emerging as a new "babe in the wilderness," developing its own nationalistic characteristics and potentials.16

Perry Miller\textsuperscript{17} points out that the literary scene in the 1840's and 1850's, during which time \textit{Moby Dick} was conceived and written, involved conflict between the advocates of an American, nationalistic literature and those who favored writing with a foreign flavor. There seems to be no doubt as to which side Melville favored since \textit{Moby Dick}, which featured the Nantucket whaling industry, is American through and through in its treatment of characterization, setting, and plot. No critic has ever doubted this point.

In terms of literary movements in American literature, we can say that Melville lived during the Romantic Period, which is usually defined by American literary critics as that period from 1810 to 1865.\textsuperscript{18} It was the age in which attention was focused on Americanism and all that the word connotes. Romanticism in literature was the dominant strain, fitting in well with the spirit of the times with its emphasis on individualism, emotionalism, use of the past in extravagant romances, and new emphasis on nature.\textsuperscript{19} Crawford makes the further observation that whereas seventeenth-century writing had been primarily religious and eighteenth-century writing primarily political, nineteenth-century writing on the other hand was centered

\textsuperscript{17}Perry Miller, \textit{The Raven and the Whale: The War of Words and Wits in the Era of Poe and Melville} (New York, 1956).

\textsuperscript{18}For an account of the times, both literary and political, in which Melville lived, see Van Wyck Brooks, \textit{The Times of Melville and Whitman} (New York, 1945).

\textsuperscript{19}Crawford, Kern, and Needleman, p. 49.
more in art, American art.

In order to appreciate the influence of Romanticism on Melville, we must outline briefly some basic characteristics of English Romanticism which was adapted by American writers. The term "romantic" is rather difficult to define accurately, since it can be taken in a historical sense as well as literary. Usually, the numerous and conflicting single "definitions" of romanticism are either so vague as to be next to meaningless or so specific as not to apply to the range and variety of the literary facts.

M. H. Abrams in his *Glossary of Literary Terms* presents the best treatment which I have found and the following observations are taken from this source. The usual limits of the Romantic period in England are usually set at 1798, the year of publication of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*, and 1832, when Scott died and the passage of the Reform Bill signaled the political preoccupation of the Victorian era.

Perhaps, the most useful way to discriminate Romanticism from other movements in literature is to specify certain attributes, which are common to a number of important writers in the period. Wordsworth, in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, actually sums up well the tone of the period by denouncing the poetic diction of the preceding century and proposing to deal with materials from

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"common life" in "a selection of language used by men." Abrams lists the following attributes of Romanticism:

1. The prevailing attitude favored innovation instead of traditionalism in the materials, forms, and styles of literature, and without regard to classical precedent. Other innovations in the period were the exploitation by Coleridge, Keats, and others of the realm of the supernatural and of "the far away and the long ago," and the use of symbolist techniques by Blake and Shelley.

2. Wordsworth continuously appealed from "artificial" rules and conventions to "nature" as the criterion of poetry, and Coleridge opposed to the neoclassic rules, imposed from without, the concept of organic "laws," by which each poetic work evolves, according to its own inherent principles, into its final form.

3. Romantic poetry, when it concerned man rather than nature, was often about the poet himself. And whether the romantic subject was the poet or someone else, he was usually considered longer an integral part of an organized society, but typically a solitary figure, and often a social non-conformist or outcast. Many major romantic works had as protagonist the rebel, whether for good or ill: Prometheus, Cain, the Satanic hero, or the great outlaw.

4. Many romantic writers viewed man as a being of immense potentialities, in touch with the infinite through an intuitive faculty, which they called either Reason or Imagination. "Our destiny," said Wordsworth, "our being's heart and home, is with infinitude, and only there."21

In every country, America included, Romanticism produced a new literature with wide variations among authors. Nevertheless, certain dominant characteristics of the Romantic Period exerted themselves in the majority of authors. Melville did go along with most of these tendencies or characteristics. However, he went contrary to some of them, William Charvat points out, which might explain partly why he was not accepted and recognized during his life.

21 Abrams, pp. 57-58.
These points of differences are minor and not worth discussing for the purpose of this chapter.

Many Romantic authors had been brooding upon problems for which answers were not easy to formulate. In Poe and Hawthorne the spiritual questioning of Romanticism found its first great American representatives. In their chief works they sought the reality of man in the hidden recesses of the mind and spirit and probed these obscure sources of behavior and moral judgment. Poe, like Keats and Coleridge, embodies his revelations in aesthetic symbolism, as for example, in the death of a beautiful maiden. By contrast, Hawthorne, who influenced Melville greatly, was equipped with a penetrating sense of history and found his symbolism in man's conflict and his social environment. Melville, whose Moby Dick was published one year after Hawthorne's Scarlet Letter, stands closer to the tradition of Hawthorne than to any other.23

Romantic reliance upon the importance of the subconscious inner life was illustrated well in Emerson's intuitionalism or transcendentalism and also produced a profound interest in abnormal psychology shown, for example, by Poe and Hawthorne, as well as Melville.24 Melville's characterization of Captain Ahab with his

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23 A good discussion of why Melville's Moby Dick was unsuccessful in its first printing and The Scarlet Letter, written in the same period, successful can be found in W. Charvat, pp. 41 ff.

monomania for destroying the white whale exemplifies this point well.

F. O. Matthiessen, an authority on Hawthorne and Melville, makes the point that both men were strongly influenced spiritually by the age in which they lived. He wrote:

Hawthorne had one of his characters say, "Everything, you know, has its spiritual meaning, which to the literal meaning is what the soul is to the body." This expressed the approach to reality that was made by many other writers of the age, who, notwithstanding wide divergences, took for granted the pre-eminence of spirit over matter. This formed common ground with the transcendentalists, including Melville. It is hardly refutable that Melville built his cunningly linked analogies in Moby Dick on this basis.25

Hawthorne and Melville were both obsessed by the ma of evil in the world. The New Englander, Hawthorne, prevailingly took the Puritan morality as a point of departure, while Melville drew symbols from land and sea for his explorations into the shadowed meanings of the universe. Matthiessen stresses the fact that no art that sprang from American roots in this period could fail to show the marks of abstraction. Melville was inclined to metaphysical speculation in his efforts to express the human tragedy involved in the doctrine of "innate depravity" that he had inherited from his Presbyterian youth.26

Melville was greatly influenced by strong Calvinistic tendencies, especially in regard to sin and guilt, predestination and the existence of moral evil in the world, as many New England writers were. With

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26 Matthiessen, p. 243.
little philosophical training and less theological conviction, Melville floundered in understanding these concepts which plagued him during most of his writing career. It is reasonable to expect that he would express these concepts of evil, sin, and the like in his writings, especially through the popular medium of symbolism. Most literary critics would agree that Melville was intensely absorbed by the enigma of evil and of moral responsibility, interwoven with man's destiny in nature and in eternity; but in this interest he was not unusual, for he shared it with such contemporaries as Poe, Emerson, and Hawthorne. 27

How much influence the literary age of Romanticism and the religious tendencies of the era had on Melville, we shall never know. It can be safely said, however, that every Melvillian devotee should consider well these sources which no doubt influenced Melville.

There are two general conclusions that we can make from the material presented in this chapter. First, Melville had a great love for the sea and he had a deep and practical knowledge of the sea and whaling. His precision in the use of nautical terminology point this out clearly. Secondly, he was a product of the Romantic Period in American Literature which used the literary medium of symbolism in writing to bring out concepts of abstraction, especially in terms

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of religious abstraction. Melville was a Presbyterian plagued with the enigmas of evil, sin, etc. It would seem that the writings of Melville, especially Moby Dick, could best be understood in this perspective and that a blend of symbolism and hard realism might be found beneath the words of this great novelist.
CHAPTER IV

A READING OF MOBY DICK

Although many critics see a great deal of symbolism and allegory in Moby Dick, it does not mean that Melville had all these abstractions in mind when he wrote the book. It cannot be denied that Moby Dick is rich in overtones and subtleties which seem to justify a search for hidden meanings. These hidden meanings have been the topic of research, theorizing, and speculation ever since the book has been published. It would be absurd for me to presume to present a reading of Moby Dick which represented Melville's exact intention; I am merely going to pursue a course of interpretation which seems to me to be the best mode of proceeding from the evidences which I have found.

I am guided in this reading by F. O. Matthiessen, who represented in 1941 what seems to me the most suggestive analysis and synthesis on the writing itself of what Melville created in Moby Dick. Matthiessen concentrated on the writing itself, on Melville's developing concepts of art and techniques, and on his relationship with his cultural past and present. Matthiessen examined more closely than earlier scholars the structure, the language, the matching of the tragic forces, the themes, and the implications. He concluded that the greatness of Moby Dick lay finally in its power to take man beyond history to the source of
his elemental energies.

It seems to me that the safest route to pursue would be one which would pay strict attention to the text itself. This does not mean that I will ignore completely other possible sources which will aid me in establishing my position, but I do mean that the text itself will be the deciding factor in my interpretation.

Before proceeding, I would like to recapitulate certain conclusions arrived at previously. First, *Moby Dick* is definitely not an allegory. The reasons for this assertion are the actual words of Melville, both in the novel and in outside sources which were mentioned earlier, and also because there is no evidence the novel itself that Melville wove an allegory consistently throughout the narrative. Secondly, I prefer to see a minimum of symbolism in the novel, based on the text itself and taking into consideration the economic factor in Melville's writing the book, his knowledge of the whaling industry, his lack of symbolism in earlier works, and in general his milieu and experiences before writing the novel. Thirdly, I am convinced that Melville himself had not planned a certain pattern of symbols in his novel, but that he developed many symbols as he wrote the book. This assertion is strengthened by the evidence given earlier where he expressed to Hawthorne that he did not know exactly how the book was to turn out. Furthermore, I will show from the text

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itself that Ahab had various interpretations of the whale as the book continued on. Added to this fact is the undeniable assertion that the characters in the book had different opinions for the meaning of Moby Dick, as well as for the Captain.

Moby Dick is not a perfect book, and we have to face the fact that Melville was not the genius that such critics as Freeman, Thorp, Vincent, and others would make him out to be. Melville was a fallible human being. We must realize the truth in his bitter self-criticism -- "all my books are botches." Everyone who has thoughtfully read the book knows that there is a rift in the narrative. First we are introduced to Ishmael, the narrator, and to Queequeg, one of the harpooners. We get to know them well and are led to believe that they are to be important characters in the book. After a hundred pages, the center of interest shifts, and Ishmael and Queequeg are relegated to unimportant roles. Although Queequeg makes an occasional appearance, it is as a picturesque figure, not as the fellow human being under the black and outlandishly tattooed skin we have been led to love in the earlier chapters. As for Ishmael, we forget all about him until he turns up again as the sole survivor, who has to continue to live in order that the story of the chase may be told.

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Although there is much read into the voyage of the Pequod in terms of symbolism, it is difficult for me to see any symbolism in it. If this voyage is symbolic, why are not those in Melville's other books? Most of his works -- Typee, Omoo, Mardi, Redburn, White-Jacket, The Confidence Man, and Billy Budd -- are stories of voyages as is one of his best short stories, "Benito Cereno." The plain symbol of the journey is one of the oldest in literature, for example Pilgrim's Progress, but it is evident from the text that it is symbolical, while in the case of Moby Dick, it is not. Melville, who had been a sailor, drew on his vast experiences constantly during his first five years as a writer. Pierre, written shortly after Moby Dick, is not a story of a voyage nor is "Bartleby," a short story which, in terms of form, is Melville's most faultless performance. It seemed that Melville was trying to break new ground when his failure of Moby Dick, which he considered such drove him from the field of writing.  

As Melville wrote his novel, it seems safe to say, he was brooding the riddle of existence and man's role in life, as did his contemporaries, Hawthorne and Poe. What subtleties he explored in this field should be primarily understood in relation to the whole drama of Ahab. Because of Ahab's quest for the meaning of the White Whale, Moby Dick is filled with thwarted gleams of insight,
with desperate searchings, with hints at symbols which are designed chiefly to turn the mind or the reader toward the profounder signi-
ificance of the story itself. Melville is concerned to have the reader know that the story is the flesh and blood of life and not a collection of scarecrow garments chosen to conceal his own pre-
conceived pattern of abstractions. The true meaning of Moby Dick goes far beyond abstract comprehensions; it must come through the understanding. For this reason, it seems that Moby Dick is primarily a tragic interpretation of an action, not a philosophical essay, not a dance of symbolic phantoms. Ahab is a man and not a force; the sea is the sea and not a symbol; and the Whale is a whale or, not an arbitrary sign of evil.

I would agree with H. A. Myers that in Moby Dick:

Melville and his romantic moods are still present in the form of Ishmael, but it is Ahab the actor, not Ishmael the narrator, who is the cent'r of interest throughout.

Just as Ishmael is forgotten in the awe excited by the central actor -- the reader hardly notices this fall from the whaleboat and is startled when he re-appears in the epilogue -- so Moby Dick is a tragic drama in spirit and form rather than a romantic novel or a mere tale. In spite of the great amount of space devoted to the Whale and to the Sea, the reader never loses sight of the hero and his destiny. The hero and main character of the book

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is the pursuer and not the pursued.

As in every tragedy, the central meaning lies in the relation of character to event. Ahab is the character, and the event is the experience of the chase and not the actual chase itself. This experience of Ahab is stated well by Myers when he wrote:

Ahab possesses the unyielding will which leads to the iron way of heroes, a capacity for feeling far beyond the ordinary, and a large share of intellectual curiosity. Ahab's purpose was not only to kill the whale but also to understand the events which beat against his own life heart; for this reason his final victory, coming at the moment of the loss of his ship and his life, is a victory of insight as well as of will. His last words are of triumphant understanding, and he thinks first of the triumph of his understanding, only later of the triumph of his will.

The moment of insight which answers Ahab's quest occurs when he discovers that his grief and his greatness are but the two sides of his nature. This point seems to be the key to the tragic meaning of Moby Dick. Minutes before his tragic end, Ahab shouts:

Oh, now I feel my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief. Ho, ho! from all your furthest bounds, pour ye now in, ye bold billows of my whole foregone life, and top this one piled comber of my death! Toward thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee (366).

Because Ishmael, the wanderer, sailed on the Pequod's last cruise and lived to tell the story, every reader of Moby Dick knows that Ahab sailed for vengeance. Possessed by one inflexible
purpose -- to destroy the White Whale -- Ahab forgot both love of life and his family and duty to the owners of the Pequod. It is true that Ahab was revengeful toward the Whale, but it is equally true that for Ahab the voyage was also a quest for certainty that ended in his great discovery. He was determined not only to conquer the whale but also to understand the meaning of his conflict with the mighty beast. Before the Pequod set sail, Peleg told Ishmael: "Ahab's above the common; Ahab's been in colleges, as well as 'mong cannibals; been used to deeper wonders than the waves; fixed his fiery lance in mightier, stranger foes than whales" (99). It is reasonable to conjecture that Ahab, who was an intelligent man, had deeper reasons for seeking out the Whale than for the simple reason of revenge because of his loss of limb.

Since the novel is entitled Moby Dick, the question may arise: If Captain Ahab is the center of attraction and the main character, why did Melville choose the title which he did? In answer to this, I would reply that it would have more appeal. As Walter Harding established in a short article, the phrase "Moby Dick" was in use four years before Melville published his book. The usually accepted source, as was mentioned earlier, is an article by John M. Reynolds in the Knickerbocker Magazine for May, 1839.

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This does not mean to say that Moby Dick is an insignificant character; he is closely bound up with Ahab, but second to Ahab.

In to point out various symbolical meanings attached to the Whale and to Captain Ahab, I will consider each character in the novel from the standpoint of how he looked upon the whale and the chase by their Captain. Finally, we will examine Ahab himself.

Melville mentions early in the book that not all whalemen "knew of Moby Dick's existence; only a few of them, comparatively, had knowingly seen him; while the number who as yet had actually and knowingly given battle to him, was small indeed" (177). Most of the common whalemen on the Pequod had probably heard of him and no doubt shared the general beliefs of his immensity, ferociousness, and the like. At most, they -- like those of their fellows who had not seen Moby Dick -- looked upon the White Whale as dangerous and intelligent. They thought of the whale as a particular danger, not as a deity or an agent of the deity, not as the devil or an agent of the devil, and not as a symbol of evil.

Starbuck, who had never seen the Whale, thought of it like the ordinary whaleman. In fact, he was shocked at Ahab's seeking "vengeance on a dumb brute ... that simply smote thee from blindest instinct!" (162). To the very end, Starbuck looked upon the Whale as "a dumb brute," who was dangerous but part of the business we follow" (162). He killed whales for a living, not for adventure, let alone an "heaven-insulting purpose" (167).

To Stubb, the happy-go-lucky second mate, whaling is a
lot of fun. "Think not" is his eleventh commandment" (125), and "a laugh's the wisest, easiest answer to all that's queer" (168), I would agree with R. E. Watters that the difference between Starbuck and Stubb is that Starbuck trusts in a personal God, while Stubb is a fatalist. 7 Stubb willingly follows Captain Ahab who, he says, acts on the right principle: "Live in the game, and die in it!" (494). In short, Stubb is lacking almost completely a sense of values. His attitude towards the White Whale is clearly that the quest for it is to be merely an adventure, a daring challenge. Both Starbuck and Stubb regard the White Whale as a dangerous specimen of sea life, without symbolic connotations. Both of them have no love for Captain Ahab, and at times they see Ahab as a mad-man in his chase after the Whale.

In Flask, one of the lesser characters in the book, we have a slightly different interpretation. He is described as a cruel man and a thorough materialist. Flask is so utterly lost . . . to all sense of reverence for the many marvels . . . and mystic ways of whales . . . that in his poor opinion, the wondrous whale was but a species of magnified mouse, or at least water-rat, requiring only a little circumvention and some small application of time and trouble in order to kill and boil . . . he followed these fish for the fun of it (116).

All he sees in the gold doubloon which Captain Ahab offers to the man who spots the White Whale is a certain number of cigars;

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the White Whale is worth so many more. In the face of death from Moby Dick, his last thought is of money.

Pip, the young Negro boy, had a great fear of the White Whale and probably looked upon the Whale as a supernatural phenomenon of evil or even an evil Deity. On one occasion after Pip heard the other sailors talk of the immensity and evil of Moby Dick, he cried:

Lord help such jollies . . . White squalls? white whale, shirr! shirr! Here have I hear all their chat just now, and the white whale -- shirr! shirr! -- but spoken of once! . . . Oh, thou big white God . . . have mercy on this small black boy . . . (176).

It is difficult to determine what Pip's interpretation of the Whale really is, since he has a natural youth’s fear of the great monster of the deep.

The three harpooners, Queequeg, Tashtego, and Daggoo, are the only persons aboard the Pequod who have seen Moby Dick, except for Captain Ahab. The three -- the South Sea Islander, the American Indian, and the African Negro -- have experienced Moby Dick before, but their interpretations of him are a mystery. Without complaints they do their work skillfully and courageously. They seem to be the only crewmen Ahab trusts to serve him faithfully in his pursuit of the Whale (528). They feel no hatred as they chase the Whale. As the Pequod sinks, the three harpooners remain at their posts, "fixed by infatuation, or fidelity, or fate, to their once lofty perches," still maintaining "their sinking lookouts on the sea" (565).
Fedallah's interpretation of the Whale is somewhat enigmatic, besides being similar to Ahab's. Fedallah rarely speaks to Ahab because Ahab "shunned Fedallah" (528). Fedallah is also a fatalist who foresees his own doom and that of Ahab. To Fedallah, the White Whale means death and a horrible "hearse" -- an instrument of a foreseen fate, just as Fedallah himself is an instrument of Ahab's all-consuming purpose.

Most critics would agree that each of the above-mentioned characters in the novel has his own personal interpretation of the Whale and his own evaluation of Captain Ahab. I conclude from this fact of the difference of interpretations of the characters on the Pequod that Melville had not assigned a particular meaning to the Whale, but left it up to the individual reader to make his own interpretation.

The interpretation of Ishmael is very interesting and different from the others. Before Ahab actually reveals his problem and his purpose of hunting down the whale, Ishmael, who is actually Melville as the narrator, has already told the reader that "the problem of the universe was revolving in him" (156). When Ahab binds the crew with an oath to hunt Moby Dick to his death, the occasion produced in Ishmael "a wild, mystical sympathetical feeling"; as he says, "Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine" (176).

We get an idea of what Ishmael's interpretation of the Whale was from the famous Chapter XXII, "The Whiteness of the Whale." Ishmael interprets the whiteness of the Whale as a symbol that the
universe is a formless, indefinite blank, and that beauty and meaning are "but subtile deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without" (195). Ishmael's interpretation differs from Ahab's in the fact that Ahab looks upon the White Whale in his monomania as a personification, whereas to Ishmael the Whale is merely a symbol. It is reasonable to attach the meaning to the Whale, as Ishmael does, but we should also realize the fact that Ishmael was extremely curious about and interested in this prize specimen of the sea. In the first chapter, Ishmael remarks that "chief among these motives" which induced him into going a-whaling

was the overwhelming idea of the great whale himself. Such a portentous and mysterious monster roused all my curiosity . . . . the great flood-gates of the wonder-world swung open, and in the wild conceits that swayed me to my purpose, two and two there floated into my inmost soul, endless processions of the whale, and, midst most of them all, one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air (6).

It is Ishmael who tells us so much about whaling in general and Moby Dick in particular. Fitzpatrick claims that the meaning, for Ishmael, "seems to be the totality of all meanings -- in a word, omniscience." It seems to me that this stretches the application of Chapter XXII a little too far. I do not doubt the apparent references to omniscience in the form of metaphors, but it seems to me that Ishmael looked at Moby Dick more through the eyes of curiosity and scientific interest.

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8 Fitzpatrick, p. 164.
Although Ishmael tells us a great deal about Moby Dick, further knowledge of the Whale is imparted to us during the various encounters with the ships hailed by the Pequod. Two ships, the Jungfrau and the Rosebud, had never even heard of the White Whale. The Bachelor had heard of him but chose not to believe in him. The Town-Ho regarded the White Whale as an instrument of God's justice, and the Jeroboam went so far as to consider him "the Shaker God Incarnated" (315). The Samuel Enderby had once encountered him, and her captain, who now wore a white whalebone arm as the price of his meeting with the Whale, admonished: "He's best let alone" (439). The Rachel had lost a whole boat's crew, including the captain's twelve-year-old son. The Delight buried the only body recovered "of five stout men" lost in the fight with Moby Dick. For each ship Moby Dick had acquired a different meaning.

It is worth mentioning that not one of these ships went looking for Moby Dick; they came upon him only by chance while they were hunting other whales. Moreover, it is only Ahab who is able to "raise" the White Whale on each of the three days. As Ahab boasted: "I only; none of ye could have raised the White Whale first" (537).

When the Whale is sighted for the first time, Ishmael gives a careful description of Moby Dick.

A gentle joyousness -- a might mildness of repose in swiftness, invested the gliding whale. Not the white bull Jupiter swimming away with ravished Europa . . . not Jove, not that great majesty Supreme! did surpass the glorified White Whale as he so divinely swam . . . .
... No wonder there had been some among the hunters who namelessly transported and allured by all this serenity, had ventured to assail it; but had fatally found that quietude but the vesture of tornadoes. Yet calm, enticing calm, oh, whale!

And thus, through the serene tranquilities of the tropical sea, among waves whose hand-clappings were suspended by exceeding rapture, Moby Dick moved on, still withholding from sight the full terrors of his submerged trunk, entirely hiding the wrenched hideousness of his jaw. But soon the fore part of him slowly rose from the water; for an instant... and warningly waving his bannered flukes in the air, the grand god revealed himself... (538-539).

From this description of Ishmael, we can see various metaphors applied to Moby Dick, but I fail to see any recurrent reference to a hidden meaning. I believe Melville wrote this description in such a way that the reader might attach whatever meaning he felt inspired to.

As for Ahab, we see that he had a complex conception of Moby Dick. He saw him as a physical power, a wilful intelligence, and a malignant divinity -- a trinity of body, mind, and spirit in seeming opposition to himself. Which of the three meanings is the meaning for the reader to choose depends, as Melville clearly implies by giving the three-fold meaning, a reflection of the reader's own personal character. From the first encounter with Moby Dick, Captain Ahab has hated him and he had

at last come to identify with him, not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations... All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of
life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified and made practically assailable 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 ...(183).

Ahab is not sure whether the White Whale is "agent" or "principal"; it is enough for him that the whale who is his enemy should be assailable. Ahab sees in the Whale "outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it." And he hates that "inscrutable thing" (162). As Ahab says on the third day of the chase, "all things that most exasperate and outrage mortal man, all these things are bodiless, but only bodiless as objects, as agents. There's a most special, a most cunning, oh, a most cunning, oh, a most malicious difference!" (555). Ahab had become solely intent, not on profitable cruises or dutiful responsibility to his crew, not even on glory and adventure, but "on an audacious, immitigable, and supernatural revenge" (186) -- and, I might add, despotic self-gratification.

There is no doubt that Ahab is made, and as time goes on, his monomaniac grows worse. He is frequently called a monomaniac and an "old insane man," as for example in Chapter 39. In Chapter 66 Ahab shouts: "I am immortal then, on land and on sea" (312). I am of the opinion that it was Ahab's great pride that drove him on his mission. He boasts in Chapter 73 that "Ahab is lord over the level loadstone yet." (333). In Chapter 74, he states that "Ahab can mend all" (337). It is this deep-rooted pride, therefore,
that makes Ahab such a tragic figure.

There is yet one more point in the book which is frequently the subject of much speculation, and that is Queequeg's coffin. Actually, it was not a coffin in one sense. Queequeg in his sickness had asked for a "canoe" such as "all whalemen who died in Nantucket were laid in" (437). But to the eyes of the carpenter and the crew the object requested was a coffin, not a canoe. And "out of some heathenish, coffin-coloured old lumber aboard, which, upon a long previous voyage, had been cut from the aboriginal groves of the Lackaday islands" (474), the carpenter made the coffin to fit one individual man by exact measurement.

But when Queequeg recalled some undone duties ashore, he changed his mind about dying and changed the coffin-canoe into a sea-chest. He also spent hours carving the lid, copying the tattooing on his body, with which he had earlier found resemblances upon the gold doubloon. "This tattooing," we are told, "had been the work of a departed prophet ... who by these hieroglyphic marks had written out ... a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth" (477). It was this creation of a coffin which saved Ishmael -- for when the Pequod's original lifebuoy sank with the man it had been dropped to save, Queequeg was the one who suggested that the coffin-canoe should be transformed into a lifebuoy.
As to the interpretation of this coffin-theme in *Moby Dick*, we can see a wide possibility of meanings. I cannot think that Melville assigned a single definite meaning. It is for the reader to choose his own. My own personal belief is that the coffin stands for life rather than death, since it provided the salvation of Ishmael. It is a symbol of life in the sense that when we accept the fact of death, as Queequeg did, we appreciate life more, and in the Christian sense that death is actually our birthday into eternity.

In conclusion to this reading of *Moby Dick*, I feel that *Moby Dick* is a tragedy woven into an exciting sea adventure. The hero is Captain Ahab, whose downfall is his excessive pride which produces a senseless monomania about a "dumb brute." Ahab pursued the White Whale not only for vengeance, but also to discover the purpose and to understand the conflict of his deep hatred for the White Whale. As for other symbolism in the book, the reader is free to interpret it as he is inspired by the actual reading of the story.

I would agree with William Hull that "an indefinite number of meanings is possible since the book exists as a system-function given content on indefinite levels by the reactions in the individual reader." 9

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A. BOOKS


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