

“A Fin of the Whale”: Food Imagery in Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*

Food Conference Submission

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In a June 29, 1851 letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville reported on the progress of what would become *Moby-Dick*, asking, “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 all ere this.” This letter’s use of such culinary language anticipates a continued use of food imagery throughout the novel. Most obviously, Melville shows how public occasions around food reflect a sense of cultural identity to build community and reflect power relationships. For the sailors in this maritime community, meal time can encourage a sense of fellowship as they share stories. Meal-times also capture the highly hierarchical approach to eating among the captain, officers, and crewman. Moreover, when these scenes involve characters from multiple backgrounds, we often see how culinary mishaps capture cultural misreadings. Queequeg particularly reveals how European sea captains have misread his island’s practices, adding humor at times while also raising criticisms of cultural chauvinism. Melville also illustrates ritualistic uses of food / drink that foster a sense of spiritual investment such as with Queequeg’s Ramadan and Ahab’s use of alcohol during the scene when he asks for the crew’s help in finding Moby Dick.

While these overt uses of food scenes certainly are valuable, they can overshadow the less obvious questions about eating that arise when one considers humanity’s position in the food chain of this particular ecosystem. Who eats whom is a question at the edges of the novel. While the whaling industry identifies whales as a commodity and the work details the perspective of the human being as having “dominion” over the natural world, Melville infuses a strong theme of what he calls “the universal cannibalism of the sea”—that the sea itself contains predatory animals who consume all matter of beings, including (we assume) Ahab and the bulk of his crew at the end of the novel after the sinking of the *Pequod*.

The ways in which Ishmael describes the relationship of predator-prey reveal a tension about the metaphysical implications of these questions. While naturalistic descriptions dominate the book, in the final scene, Ishmael returns to a spiritualized reading of the landscape. Rather than acknowledge that the sharks that surround him leave him alone most realistically because they have likely already been satiated, Ishmael invokes a sense of Biblical language. While Ishmael recognizes that humans provide a food source, he does not leave the reader with that image. The omission is notable, suggesting an anxiety about the reality captured by the sea’s dominion over humanity and his need to make some kind of sense of the devastation he has witnessed and survived. Ultimately, Ishmael’s rhetorical choices, particularly in the epilogue, broaden the ways in which food can be understood. More than just a cultural marker, food can provide a vehicle to explore assumptions about humanity’s position in the natural world.