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### A Sermon Writ In High Heaven: Astrology and Interpretation in Moby-Dick

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**A SERMON WRIT IN HIGH HEAVEN: ASTROLOGY AND INTERPRETATION IN  
*MOBY-DICK***

By  
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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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## Introduction

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* has been infinitely picked apart and analyzed in terms of broad themes of finding meaning, understanding free will (or a lack thereof), American capitalism, man's connection with nature, its characters, and many more. As a keystone of the American literary canon, Melville's epic tale of sailors and seafarers locked in an ongoing battle with nature has a seemingly endless body of scholarship, touching upon even the most minute and seemingly insignificant details. However, amongst this scholarship lies a vacancy of analysis about the astrological elements of the novel. John F. Birk broadly defines astrology as, "the study of the influence of celestial bodies on humankind," and for a novel that so heavily focuses on questions of meaning-making and fatedness and free will, the few explicit mentions of astrology in the novel do not factor into scholarly investigation into those questions as much as they should (26).

On the other hand, the theme of meaning-making and interpretation is well-established as one of the novel's most pervasive concepts. Ishmael's constant analysis of signs and symbols that he encounters accompanied by Ahab's obsessive drive to find understanding and knowledge combine to create an epic internal struggle underlying the more ostensible external conflict between Ahab and the whale. Within this shared struggle of finding meaning, Ishmael and Ahab significantly differ in their respective methods of determining meaning, adding yet another layer to this conflict. Melville establishes the two main characters in opposing stances regarding interpretation: Ishmael approaches meaning in a way that allows him agency in assigning meaning himself to an object or event. Ahab, on the other hand, struggles against the powerlessness he feels as he attempts to extract meaning from where he believes it to be inherent, already placed there by some higher power that, try

as he might, he has no means of accessing. This feeling of powerlessness causes him significant anxiety, expressed by a desire to violently break through the surface of whatever he is attempting to understand. These modes of interpretation directly compete with one another, seeming to offer no common ground or room for compromise, that is, until a new contender offers a potential solution to each character's quest for meaning.

These two conflicting ideas of interpretation are brought together in Chapter 99, "The Doubloon" by none other than Stubb, the second-mate who is often dismissed as the happy-go-lucky source of the heavy novel's welcome comic relief. As several characters each have a go at interpreting the symbols stamped on Ahab's doubloon, his "reading," directly relating to the entire astrological cycle, brings to light questions of fatedness, understanding, and mortality. However, it is his allusion to astrology in particular that I find especially noteworthy. While many critics argue that this scene is the most vital for understanding the novel's stance on questions of interpretation, the inclusion of astrology within it often goes overlooked. I argue that, far from being simply frivolous or comedic, Stubb's use of astrology in his own analysis presents a metaphorical middle ground between Ishmael and Ahab's methods of interpretation. Not only does he employ both Ishmael's and Ahab's respective strategies within his own analysis, his supplemental use of astrology represents a combination of their methods, in that astrology involves both relinquishing and assuming agency in interpretation. Specifically, the constellations believed to impact humans are fixed, their significance non-negotiable: "Every planet and every angle, as it passes over each birth sensitivity, results in an accent" (Birk 27). However, one has agency in the extent to which they apply those fixed meanings: "While bequeathing a unique set of features, time and place of birth are no more than tools by which the native forges a destiny. Heaven furnishes the

implements; the native does with them as he or she will” (Birk 31). Thus, Stubb’s proposition of astrology in the midst of the interpretive quandary of the Doubloon’s significance offers a combinatory solution to Ishmael and Ahab’s respective stances on interpretation. In interpretation, one can simultaneously forfeit some agency in knowing that there may be one “true” underlying answer, but one can also maintain agency in assigning one’s own unique interpretation of what is already there.

Stubb, in presenting this middle ground, also links Ishmael and Ahab to Queequeg and Pip in the scene, which serves to further explore and develop this idea of a middle ground of their interpretation. Both are associated with imagery of astrology assigned by Stubb himself, thus indicating their significance within the context of this new interpretive framework as further illuminating issues with Ishmael and Ahab’s methods. Their connection indicates that Stubb’s use of astrology is not merely an instance of comedic relief meant to accompany other “trivial” readings of the doubloon; these themes are pervasive throughout the rest of the novel and therefore not meant to be dismissed.

Therefore, the argumentative structure of this thesis is as follows: I will begin by establishing Ishmael’s and Ahab’s conflicting methods of interpretation which are set up in advance of “The Doubloon” chapter. Then, I will turn to “The Doubloon” and discuss Stubb’s role in the interpretive struggle between Ishmael and Ahab through his use of astrology in his own reading. Stubb’s observations of Queequeg and Pip in “The Doubloon” additionally raise questions of interpretation directly linked to Ishmael and Ahab, and so I will begin by unpacking Stubb’s descriptions of these characters within the chapter then move to their various impacts on Ishmael and Ahab’s quest for meaning after that particular scene throughout the rest of the novel. This chronological structure will hopefully shed new

light on the age-old questions of the novel's epistemological project raised by "The Doubloon" through the lens of Stubb's astrological insight.

### **Historical Context and Literature Review**

When Melville was writing *Moby-Dick*, astrology was highly relevant to his own life as well as American popular culture as a whole. William D. Stahlman cites the appeal of astrology for colonial Americans as, "a means for turning the mystery into a puzzle, and puzzles are capable of solution" (553). While historians trace the official practice of astrology as originating in Ancient Egypt, much of the popularity of astrology in the United States was heavily tied to British interest in the area (Birk 31). According to Stahlman, England saw a fluctuation of the publishing of books on astrology, reaching a high in the seventeenth century, decreasing in the eighteenth century, and increasing again in the nineteenth century (551). He posits, "While this is only a partial index to the shifts and changes in the acceptance of astrology in England, it does give us a profile against which American interest can be measured" (551). While the patterns in England were generally reflected in America presumably due to their continued ties, Birk cites a more specific reason for the downturn in astrology's popularity in the eighteenth century: "Several centuries of witch-hunting had taken their toll; the 'Age of Reason' saw the growing ascendancy of the scientific method" (40). However, crucial to the resurgence of astrological belief in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and also to Melville's life was the rise of the almanac. Stahlman writes that the almanac was, "a vernacular genre which provided information on a range of topics, from farming and road conditions, currency exchange rates, the tides, and the positions of the planets, as well as the future states of the weather" (151). While almanacs had been part of American society since its founding, the nineteenth century saw "a burgeoning popularity" in

their consumption, and Birk cites Viola Sachs' sentiment, "In almanacs everyday affairs and practical advice mingled with astrological calendars" (42).

As a sailor himself, Melville's life was significantly influenced by both astrology and almanacs, as evidenced in many of his works, not exclusively *Moby-Dick*. Birk writes, "Also composed before *The Whale*, *Mardi* displays a more wholesale incorporation of astrology...an abundance of references to stars and constellations intimating far more than an amateur's familiarity" (21). However, it is the fact that *Moby-Dick*'s references to astrology are much more understated and sparse that is worth exploring. In a novel so heavily focused on life at sea, while of course filled with discussions of the heavens and nature, the emphasis on astrology and almanacs, while clearly an important part of life at sea, is only mentioned explicitly a few times throughout the text, the most in depth being Stubb's monologue in which he interprets Ahab's doubloon in terms of the entire cycle of the zodiac. I believe that this seemingly random inclusion, often overlooked by Melville scholars, is just as significant in the more widely accepted notion of the novel's theme of meaning-making and interpretation, and I posit that astrological themes, propagated by Stubb, another character that often goes underappreciated, hold equal weight within the context of Ishmael's and Ahab's grand searches for meaning within the novel.

While scholarship regarding astrology in particular within *Moby-Dick* is fairly sparse, there is one critic in particular who has delved deep into the topic. In his highly controversial work, *Tracing the Round: The Astrological Framework of Moby Dick*, John F. Birk argues that Melville intentionally structured *Moby-Dick* around an incredibly intricate zodiacal framework. He acknowledges the many approaches that have been taken by Melville scholars to discern some "discernable architecture of *Moby-Dick*" in the tangled, sprawling



work, and proceeds to outline exactly how *Moby-Dick* figures into the structure of the zodiac (16). After giving ample context about astrology's role in 19<sup>th</sup> century America as well as Melville's life specifically in Part One, he argues that the novel can be sectioned into six separate blocks of paired, opposing zodiac signs. He supports this framework with many parallel structures more obvious in the novel, such as the fact that the *Pequod*'s voyage lasts exactly one calendar year. In Part Two, he then dives into the specific elements of each "block" of the structure, examining the implications of the opposing signs on their various places within the chronology of the story. He does so in an extremely meticulous way, providing significant portions of textual evidence to back his claim, even going as far as to include percentages and specific numbers of occurrences of words or thematically related ideas within the block. After thoroughly outlining each of the six blocks, in Part Three he shifts to discussing the characters in regard to their astrological significance, specifically various signs that they are associated with, starting with minor characters and concluding with Ahab, Ishmael, and the whale. He even delves into Melville's own astrological ties, drawing parallels between Ishmael's "Leonine" tendencies and traits and his own. Part Four involves an exploration of the novel's allusion to constellations that are not included in the Zodiac but still have significant bearing on each of the blocks that he previously outlined.

Birk then synthesizes and concludes his argument in the final chapter into three basic topics: "Then, in three distinct and significant dimensions- those of its structure, its characters, and its metaphysical stance- we can reassess *Moby-Dick*" (328). Specifically, he pushes back against some scholars' assumptions that the narrative structure of *Moby-Dick* is "loosely wrought," and positing that it in fact, "exhibits a near-obsessive intricacy of design" (323). He also concludes that this framework "put[s] to rest criticism of the two chief

*dramatis personae* of *The Whale*,” arguing that an exploration of Ishmael and Ahab’s respective astrological associations gives a “fresh perspective” on their personalities and motives, as well as more broadly illuminating the implications of meaning in the novel in regard to previous scholars’ debates about the religious and literary influences on the novel.

Birk is acutely aware of the literary feathers he ruffles with his argument; in his preface he refers readers to an appendix containing strong criticism for his work, including a claim that, “...its major faults are so pervasive that I doubt that any amount of revision could rectify them” (343). He situates his work amongst the “thousands of papers, books, and articles churned out annually by freshmen and Ph. Ds” by acknowledging the many commonly examined themes of the novel throughout his work, such as the debates over the novel’s structure, the significance of certain motifs and symbols (the whale itself, the painting, the doubloon, etc.), the classical influences on the novel, and the ideas of free will and predestination. However, where he sets himself apart is the meticulous detail with which he outlines his proposed framework. Each chapter includes a plethora of textual evidence, which one person criticizes as “...ransack[ing] Melville’s text for passages that, in the author’s eyes, fulfill those astrological specifications” (343).

I find Birk’s argument persuasive and innovative, bringing a fresh light to the seemingly endless abyss of Melville criticism. His close reading of the text demonstrates an incredible breadth of knowledge both within the text and without, and his passion for *Moby-Dick* and astrology shines through. However, for the purposes of my argument, I am not fully exploring his claim that Melville intentionally created an astrological framework for the novel. Instead, I’m choosing to focus on the significance of astrology within the novel as a lens through which to examine the novel’s commonly accepted epistemological project,

specifically through analysis of the Doubloon chapter, the section of the novel that most explicitly mentions astrology. Like Birk, I am interested in exploring astrology as a convention in Melville's time and its potential influence on the creation of *Moby-Dick* and the novel's stance on meaning-making and interpretation. However, my argument, while significantly aligned with Birk's in the assertion that the presence of astrology in the novel is often overlooked by Melville scholars, deviates from his in that I am not attempting to make a claim about Melville's framing of the overall work. While it is appealing to attempt to construct a tangible framework from a work so utterly complex, I focus more on exploring a less commonly tread path of analyzing the astrological themes in the Doubloon chapter in particular. Birk prides himself on his incredibly intricate proposed framework, and rightly so; his claim, "Virtually its every chapter, scene, and character expresses the influences governing the planet and stars" is backed by a plethora of textual evidence that could only result from a scrutiny and dedication worthy of the most stalwart Melville scholar (323). However, I am merely using his text as a reference in my own argument that narrows the focus more tightly around the astrological themes of the novel, specifically in "The Doubloon" chapter, within the framework of Ishmael and Ahab's respective searches for meaning. Stubb's astrological monologue as well as other character's allusions to astrology often go overlooked, and I posit that their inclusion is quite significant within the broader context of Ishmael's and Ahab's respective quests for meaning as a representation of a metaphorical middle ground between the two conflicting methods of interpretation.

### **Ishmael and Ahab**

In order to understand the importance of the elements of astrology in terms of the novel's themes of meaning and interpretation, it is crucial to understand the main

epistemological ideas that the novel presents, specifically the two different modes of interpretation put forth by Ishmael and Ahab. Throughout the novel, each character propagates their own respective mode of interpretation that directly opposes the other, thus proposing a binary of interpretation that reads as follows: Ishmael advocates for and represents the idea of something being devoid of meaning, and the interpreter assigns or fills it with meaning himself. Ahab, on the other hand, sees objects as containing pre-existing meaning, placed or assigned by some higher power, that one must excavate or uncover himself in order to fully understand it. For the purposes of this argument I will generalize each method in terms of external or assigned meaning (Ishmael), or internal or inherent meaning (Ahab). Of course, each character prefers his own method, but Ishmael's hotly debated omniscience as the story's narrator allows him access to Ahab's thoughts and therefore grants him an awareness of his counterpart's interpretive tendencies, thus allowing him to comment on them. The two ways that Ishmael and Ahab contextualize and understand meaning leading up to "The Doubloon" chapter are key to understanding the astrological connections to meaning that Stubb will present.

Ishmael's quest for meaning places the agency of the interpreter squarely within himself in an empowering move emblematic of his own place of power as the story's narrator. Grant McMillan acknowledges the significance of Ishmael's role in the story: "His consciousness is the medium through which the narrative filters, seeking to explain, to reach some understanding of his experience; if we fail to comprehend this, we fail to comprehend *Moby-Dick*" (206). Throughout the novel, he understands meaning in a way that places the emphasis on his own ascription of significance to the events or symbols that he encounters throughout the story as opposed to uncovering meaning that already exists.

Ishmael explicitly mentions meaning quite early in the narrative, immediately establishing the theme as crucial to the rest of the story. He muses:

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 (15-16).

While vague and confusing in its own way, this train of thought demonstrates Ishmael's determination to get to the bottom of the grand idea of meaning. His uncertainty is noteworthy; by prefacing a fairly authoritative statement with "surely," it sounds more as if he is attempting to reassure himself of the fact that the questions that he poses, such as, "Why Did the old Persians hold the sea holy? Why did the Greeks give it a separate deity, and own brother of Jove?" hold some sort of significance (15). His use of the double negative, "...all this is not without meaning" implies an air of indecision despite an attempt at a commanding declaration, which makes sense given its place at the very beginning of the narrative (15). While he does seem to reach the conclusion, "...this is the key to it all," the unclear nature of what exactly he's referring to indicates Ishmael's certainty that meaning itself is utterly important going forward but leaves the exact nature of it ironically up for interpretation.

After pondering the action of interpretation, Ishmael actually does some effective interpretation of his own, and in doing so reveals his methodology, that is, actively assigning his own meaning, with more certainty. His observation, "...a swinging sign over the door with a white painting upon it...and these words underneath— 'The Spouter-Inn: — Peter Coffin.' Coffin? — Spouter? — Rather ominous in that particular connexion, thought I,"

highlights the notion of assigning connection between ideas rather than attempting to uncover it, particularly through the emphasis on his own agency in the matter, "...thought I" (20). Ishmael himself makes this connection, and he does not attempt to posit that such a connection is already inherent. He does so by doubling back on his observation, further emphasizing the fact that this connection was one that he himself made and can easily be reversed: "But it is a common name in Nantucket, they say, and I suppose this Peter here is an emigrant from there" (20). This preliminary instance of Ishmael's interpretation sets the tone for the many ensuing occurrences that follow throughout the narrative, preemptively establishing the notion that, to Ishmael, meaning is better assigned than excavated.

Ishmael's ensuing metafictional interpretation of the painting in the Spouter-Inn reveals significant information about how he processes meaning, further contextualizing the discussion of his method in contradistinction with Ahab's. In this scene, the narrative switches to second person, directly placing the reader in the place of the interpreter of this particular painting as opposed to their previous role of interpreter of the novel: "On one side hung a very large oil-painting so thoroughly besmoked, and every way defaced, that...it was only by diligent study and a series of systematic visits to it, and careful inquiry of the neighbors, that you could any way arrive at an understanding of its purpose" (21). This establishment of the physical murkiness of the painting as an obstacle to understanding it directly parallels Ishmael's previous (and future) struggles to achieve full comprehension of certain symbols and events, but he finds clarity by telling whomever is attempting to understand the painting how *not* to go about it. The obscurity of the painting remains an obstacle to understanding: "But what most puzzled and confounded you was a long, limber, portentous, black mass of something hovering in the centre of the picture... A boggy, soggy,

squitchy picture truly, enough to drive a nervous man distracted” (21). However, Ishmael describes a longing to overpower and discover its meaning, foreshadowing Ahab’s approach. His knowing observation, “Yet was there a sort of indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity about it that fairly froze you to it, till you involuntarily took an oath with yourself to find out what that marvelous painting meant,” indicates what is, in Ishmael’s opinion, the ultimate futility of trying to uncover meaning from such an inaccessible entity (21). The language of unattainability continues, and Ishmael’s tone grows sarcastic as he predicts, “Ever and anon a bright, but, alas, deceptive idea would dark you through. —It’s the Black Sea in a midnight gale. — It’s the unnatural combat of the four primal elements. — It’s a blasted heath. — It’s a Hyperborean winter scene. — It’s the breaking-up of the icebound stream of Time” (21). Ishmael’s portrayal of this imagined reader’s attempt to find meaning in an incomprehensible shape as “deceptive” indicates a scorn on his part of this particular mode of interpretation. Ishmael then proceeds to propose a potential solution that could arise from employing a different form of interpretation, one that Ahab will notably exhibit much later: “But at last all these fancies yielded to that one portentous something in the picture’s midst. *That* once found out, and all the rest were plain” (21). Here, he alludes to the tempting yet, in his view, ultimately unproductive tendency to approach meaning as something preexisting “in the picture’s midst,” that, once uncovered, would make “plain” the significance. This direct foreshadowing of Ahab’s exact method of interpretation stands out, especially given that it is followed by a direct command from Ishmael to this imagined reader: “But stop” (21). Ishmael not only presents the less ideal method of interpretation that vastly differs from his own, but actively dissuades the reader from attempting it.

After the direct disavowal of what will become clear as Ahab's system of understanding, Ishmael establishes his own. He declares:

In fact, the artist's design seemed this: a final theory of my own, partly based upon the aggregated opinions of many aged persons with whom I conversed on the subject. The picture represents a Cape-Horner in a great hurricane; the half-foundered ship weltering there with its three dismantled masts alone visible; and an exasperated whale, purposing to spring clean over the craft, is in the enormous act of impaling himself upon the three mast-heads (21).

His presentation of his interpretation as a "theory" rather than authoritatively stating the true significance of the painting based off of a decoding of the "portentous something" further highlights the importance of the agency of the interpreter in Ishmael's method. Not only does Ishmael bring his own interpretation to the table, he consults other people as well, a facet of his interpretive mode that Ahab does not share.<sup>1</sup> He also does not assign further significance to his own theory, immediately returning back to his previous narrative style and content in the following paragraph: "The opposite wall of this entry was hung all over with a heathenish array of monstrous clubs and spears..." (22).

An important element of Ishmael's approach to meaning is his acceptance of not achieving total understanding. This tolerance of what one could view as a lack of power directly contradicts Ahab's obsession with conquering something by fully gleaning meaning

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<sup>1</sup> Ishmael's description, "For several days after leaving Nantucket, nothing above hatches was seen of Captain Ahab... Yet their supreme lord and dictator was there, though hitherto unseen by any eyes not permitted to penetrate into the now sacred retreat of the cabin," accompanied by the fact that much of Ahab's musing about meaning occurs as asides to himself that Ishmael overhears heavily emphasizes Ahab's isolation throughout the novel, especially in regard to his quest for meaning (105).



from it. Ishmael demonstrates this acceptance when he attempts to analyze Father Mapple's pulpit: "I pondered some time without fully comprehending the reason for ["dragging up the ladder step by step till the whole was deposited within"]" (43). While he eventually elaborates his thought process and his various interpretations, he prefaces those musings by acknowledging that even despite significant reflection he can't reach a solid conclusion. He then engages in a dialogue with himself in an attempt to work through the complicated implications of the pulpit:

No, thought I, there must be some sober reason for this thing; furthermore, it must symbolize something unseen. Can it be, then, that by that act of physical isolation, he signifies his spiritual withdrawal for the time, from all outward worldly ties and connexions? Yes, for replenished with the meat and wine of the world, to the faithful man of God, this pulpit, I see, is a self-containing stronghold— a lofty Ehrenbreitstein, with a perennial well of water within its walls (43).

His insistence that there "must be some sober reason for this thing" demonstrates the tenacity with which Ishmael seeks to determine meaning, but his subsequent question, "Can it be..." demonstrates an openness to multiple possibilities as opposed to egotistically determining the ultimate, true answer. He then concludes with his own interpretation, emphasizing his own agency in the process by indicating that he "sees" the pulpit as a sort of fortress rather than asserting that it truly is one, thus reaffirming his own agency in the process of assigning his own meaning, an issue that Ahab struggles with immensely.

Where Ishmael is content to assign his own meaning without ultimately determining the true meaning of the events and symbols that he encounters on his journey, Ahab's quest for knowledge is embodied by aggression and a need to dominate symbolic objects by

uncovering the meaning that he believes to be inherently hidden within them. Henry Alonzo Myers reflects, “In the course of the pursuit Ahab can find no contentment in the purpose from which he cannot swerve; he feels therefore that there is a meaning in his life which eludes him,” effectively summarizing this idea of Ahab’s monomania surrounding the quest for meaning as well as his quest for revenge against Moby-Dick (29).

One way in which Ahab’s method of interpretation significantly differs from Ishmael’s is his desire to have complete agency over what he’s interpreting. His attempts to do so specifically involve direct address of the object, using apostrophe to render whatever he’s interpreting as being alive in some way, thus able to be interrogated. For example, his address to the whale’s head<sup>2</sup> hanging against the side of the ship, “O head! Thou hast seen enough to split the planets and make an infidel of Abraham, and not one syllable is thine!” demonstrates a similar conversational tendency as Ishmael’s approach, except instead of working through meaning by conversing with his own ideas, he directly addresses the subject in a vain attempt to receive an answer (254). However, his repeated attempts to do so grant him no further understanding, thus demonstrating the futility of his endeavors and potentially the inferiority of his method compared to Ishmael’s. He similarly attempts to animate an inanimate object through direct address when addresses his quadrant: “Foolish toy! Babies’ plaything of haughty admirals, and commodores, and captains; the world brags of thee, of thy cunning and might; but what after all canst thou do, but tell the poor, pitiful point, where thou thyself

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<sup>2</sup> Remarkably, the whale was decapitated by none other than Stubb, emphasizing his subtle presence amongst these intense scenes of characters attempting to find meaning. Additionally, the detail that Ahab, “took Stubb’s long spade- still remaining there after the whale’s decapitation- and striking it into the lower part of the half-suspended mass, placed its other end crutch wise under one arm” directly evokes the imagery of physically breaking through the barrier of meaning as he attempts to do so in his questioning of the head (254).

happens to be on this wide planet...” (396). In the same scene, he also directly appeals to the sun:

Thou sea-mark! Thou high and mighty Pilot! Thou tellest me truly where I *am*- but canst thou cast the least hint where I *shall* be? Or canst thou tell where some other thing besides me is this moment living? Where is Moby Dick? This instant thou must be eyeing him. These eyes of mine look into the very eye that is even now beholding him; eye and into the eye that is now equally beholding the objects on the unknown, thither side of thee, thou sun! (396)

Ahab’s desperation to uncover meaning through the location of Moby Dick translates into his attempts to breathe life into the objects that, in his view, contain the answers that he’s seeking, and by doing so render them able to somehow reveal these answers. This apostrophic tendency also reveals his upset at the lack of agency that he has in his process of finding meaning. Where Ishmael is in control of interpretation, Ahab feels as if he is constantly seeking out answers from things that are stoically silent. Even though he has agency in attempting to assert dominance over them, often by using physical force or violence, it only goes so far, and he ultimately fails at his quest to uncover their illusive meaning.

Ahab is additionally obsessed with the acquisition of knowledge in general, which goes hand in hand with his desire to extract meaning from objects. These two ideas come together in the scene in which he contemplates the whale’s head. He addresses it, saying, “Speak thou vast and venerable head...speak, mighty head, and tell us the secret thing that is in thee. Of all divers, thou hast dived the deepest...” (254). In this case, his desire to determine meaning in an object is not necessarily linked to the idea of it being a symbol in and of itself but a vessel that carries deeper understanding of worldly secrets. He does,

however, indicate his belief that meaning or knowledge does in fact inherently exist within objects or symbols when he references the, “secret thing that is in thee.” He also uses apostrophe multiple times, reiterating his belief that directly addressing something will make it a physically assailable target from which to glean understanding. This search for hidden knowledge will be paralleled in his interactions with Pip, whom he believes has gained access to the same hidden knowledge as the whale: “Now, then, Pip, we’ll talk this over; I do suck most wondrous philosophies from thee! Some unknown conduits from the unknown worlds must empty into thee!” (416). Ahab’s belief that meaning inherently exists within objects or symbols contributes to his obsession with finding worldly secrets within physical objects or even people.

Ishmael’s commentary of Ahab’s method of interpretation strongly indicates a personal bias against said method. While each character maintains their personal system throughout the story, Ishmael’s own narration reveals an active conflict between his preferred method and Ahab’s through his subtle criticism of it, thus making Stubb’s eventual alternative, combinatory method all the more vital later on as a potential solution to these diametrically opposed ideas. However, as the story’s narrator, Ishmael has complete control and agency over how the rest characters are portrayed, thus it is important to keep in mind that there is no unfiltered account of Ahab to analyze. To this point, Mark Edelman Boren posits, “Placing confidence in Ishmael as witness to Ahab's monomania leads to a skewed reading of the text. When we stop looking through the eyes of a lowly sailor who must have everything explained to him, and who must pathologically interpret his world to feel adequate to it, the rest of the text changes dramatically...” (1). While he acknowledges that Ishmael does indeed favor the ability to interpret the world himself, Boren points out the

many factors of Ishmael's background that may lead to his biased interpretation of Ahab and his decisions. That being said, I believe that, since Ishmael's approach is indeed to analyze and interpret his surroundings and situation, his musings about Ahab's monomania are perfectly valid grounds for understanding Ishmael's method of interpretation as being presented as ideal in comparison to Ahab's.

For example, Ahab himself outwardly grapples with these ideas of meaning quite publicly, providing Ishmael with grounds to back his internal observations and opinions about Ahab's "monomania." His declaration to Starbuck, "All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event— in the living act, the undoubted deed— there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask!" explicitly demonstrates Ahab's penchant for violence paired with interpretation (138). He sees the act of understanding as one that requires physical violence in order to reach the meaning underneath the surface of the object. He continues, "How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see him in outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it" (138). By extending the metaphor of striking through a mask to a prison wall, a physical barrier meant to contain, Ahab even further demonstrates the extent to which he believes that meaning exists trapped behind a wall that must be broken through in order to discover it. However, he expresses doubt of the existence of meaning at all. His addition, "Sometimes I think there's naught beyond," indicates that, even though he posits these theories of meaning with what seems to be utter certainty and authority, he himself also questions the notion that meaning is inherent

behind any sort of barrier. However, his vague reassurance, “But ‘tis enough,” points to the monomania that Ishmael constantly ascribes him; there is no clear connection to what exactly he says is “enough” and anything that he previously said, thus suggesting that he doesn’t need any particular reason for believing in his own theory, simply that his own belief that he just laid out suffices to justify his logic. His addition, “Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I’d strike the sun if it insulted me. For could the sun do that then could I do the other; since there is ever a sort of fair play herein, jealousy presiding over all creations ” not only foreshadows the incident in which he verbally assaults the sun in an attempt to animate it to glean the location of Moby Dick, but also generally alludes to his tendency to utilize apostrophe in an attempt to animate and therefore acquire information from inanimate things (138). His inclusion of “since there is ever a sort of fair play herein,” indicates his belief in a logical system in which, if the sun were able to speak to the extent of insulting him, he would be able to insult it in turn, thus personifying it to the extent of being able to interact and gain meaning from it. The fact that Ishmael is a witness to Ahab’s musing and relays it to the reader verbatim gives him credibility in his later analysis of Ahab’s way of interpreting the world and also helps to establish the strong dichotomy and active conflict between their respective approaches.

The descriptions of Ahab’s attempts at finding meaning provided by Ishmael provide insight into Ahab’s own thought process and illuminate its discrepancies from Ishmael’s own preferred method. Ishmael reflects:

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 from his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it (154).

While much of this observation could be classified as conjecture on Ishmael's part, particularly his classification of Ahab as "crazy," he clarifies Ahab's methodology in regard to interpretation, putting it into his own words and even interpreting it himself, as opposed to the previous instances of mere observation of his actions. The fact that Ishmael's classification of Ahab's behavior, both before and after this particular reflection, directly corresponds to the events that Ishmael himself witnesses proves that Ishmael acknowledges that Ahab has a method of interpretation that significantly differs from his own. Additionally, this observation in particular continues to frame understanding and interpretation in a physical context, positing that Ahab sees the significance of the symbolism of the white whale as "practically assailable," the most common theme of Ahab's tendency to attempt to extract meaning himself. This metaphor extends to the description of Ahab's desire to "burst his hot heart's shell upon" the whale's hump, or exterior, in an attempt to defeat and understand it. Here, Ishmael acknowledges and describes Ahab's method of interpretation in his own words, rather than simply relaying his observations or direct transcriptions of Ahab's dialogue, thereby further establishing the credibility of the idea of the two separate interpretations within the text. Since he makes this observation not long after Ahab's speech, I would argue that Ishmael's analysis here is a demonstration of his own method; he takes what he observed and interprets it for himself, thus further establishing tension between his own method and Ahab's by assigning Ahab's a more negative connotation.

Ishmael notably also employs apostrophe similarly to Ahab, but with an entirely different goal. Directly after Ahab's speech, he addresses what he views as foreboding occurrences, saying, "Ah, ye admonitions and warnings! Why stay ye not when ye come? But rather are ye predictions than warnings, ye shadows! Yet not so much predictions from without, as verifications of the foregoing things within. For with little external to constrain us, the innermost necessities in our being, these still drive us on" (139). However, his goal in addressing "admonitions and warnings" is not to glean information; instead he himself is assigning the identity of foreboding warnings to the previously described, "low laugh from the hold", "presaging vibrations of the winds in the cordage," and, "hollow flap of the sails against the masts" (139). He also asks a direct question of these signs, and his pondering, "But rather are ye predictions, ye shadows!" implying his own uncertainty and therefore desire to gain understanding from these occurrences directly. However, he then proceeds to answer his own question, alluding more toward Ahab's ideology of finding meaning "from within," but ultimately concluding that "the innermost necessities in our being," i.e. the ability to create meaning for oneself, are the driving factor behind his understanding of these foreboding signs that he's attempting to interpret. Ishmael's acknowledgment of an alternative to his own preferred method indicates a connection between these two diametrically opposed ideas. This commonality established by said acknowledgment allows for the possibility of a third method of interpretation, presented in a much subtler way.

### **Stubb and Astrology in "The Doubloon"**

Ishmael's and Ahab's now established methods of interpretation are simultaneously upheld yet also challenged in the chapter entitled "The Doubloon." While Ishmael's and Ahab's methods have been framed as the main, opposing forces that frame the novel's



epistemological project, this chapter introduces multiple alternative methods of interpretation by way of the diverse cast of secondary characters alongside Ahab. Critics hail this chapter as a focal point of understanding the novel's potential, highly varied stances on interpretation; Sharon Cameron writes that, "...the discussion of the doubloon passage is central to any interpretation of the novel" (579). John D. Seelye also acknowledges the chapters' critical popularity given the Doubloon's status of "a symbol of ambiguity" but begrudges a lack of commentary of "the meaning of the coin in terms of the symbols stamped upon it" (350). It is here that I will attempt to demystify the significance of the doubloon in relation to Ishmael and Ahab, specifically through the frame of Stubb's analysis and subsequent narration of Queequeg's and Pip's analyses, which will demonstrate a continuation of astrological ideas and characters later in the novel.

While many critics agree upon hailing "The Doubloon" chapter as a keystone to interpreting the novel, they ironically dismiss Stubb, the character who directly takes over Ishmael's role of narrator halfway through the chapter, as simply a source of comic relief amongst the other, more "rich" interpretations.<sup>3</sup> Alan Dagovitz effectively disputes this unfair critical stance, arguing that Stubb can and should, "be read as an exemplar of wisdom" (330). He questions, "What justifies these more or less single-note readings of Stubb? After all, his name appears in the chapter headings four times, second only to Ahab. Two chapters are

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<sup>3</sup> Dagovitz includes many examples of such disparaging criticism: "W. H. Auden ... writes: 'A man who makes a religion out of the comic is unable to face suffering. He is bound to deny it and look the other way. When Stubb looks at the Doubloon, he abstracts from it the features which can fit into his view of life and ignores the rest'" (331), "Edward Rosenberry puts it bluntly: "Soulless and mechanical, or untrue and undeveloped: that in the end is Stubb" (333), (Quoting John Bryant) "Stubb remains nothing more than a stand-in for an attitude of 'comic indifference' (p. 206). His is a secondary role, the 'indifferent' member of a "chain of fools," serving as a "fictive displacement of a redemptive humor" for Ahab' (332).

dedicated to extraordinary episodes centered on Stubb and pregnant with symbolism— “Queen Mab” and “Stubb’s Supper” (chaps. 31 and 64). Stubb is the first to kill a whale. The list goes on” (330). While Dagovitz’s defense of Stubb focuses more broadly of the philosophy of knowledge contributing to morality<sup>4</sup>, my defense of Stubb lies within his specific use of astrology in his attempt at understanding the doubloon, which I argue makes him a key figure in the ensuing conflict of interpretive methods as presenting an interpretive middle ground of understanding meaning. Stubb’s wisdom lies in his unassuming introduction of an entirely new, reparative epistemological framework through his suggestion of astrology as a method of interpretation.

Ishmael, upon observing Ahab’s continued scrutiny of the doubloon he previously nailed to the mast, remarks, “But one morning, turning to pass the doubloon, he seemed to be newly attracted by the strange figures and inscriptions stamped on it, as though now for the first time beginning to interpret for himself in some monomaniac way whatever significance might lurk in them” (345). In describing Ahab’s desire to find meaning within the doubloon, Ishmael’s judgmental tone again emphasizes his personal distaste for the way that Ahab approaches interpretation in a way that differs from his own, particularly with his emphasis on Ahab’s search for meaning that “lurk[s] in” the doubloon, implying that meaning somehow already inherently exists within it. This description sets up the proceeding conflict underlying the various attempts at the interpretation of the doubloon’s significance.

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<sup>4</sup> Dagovitz theorizes, “...attention to Melville’s understanding of wisdom shows he is suspicious of evaluating wisdom according to the content of one’s discourse, a mistake often committed in traditional treatments of Stubb. By filling out Melville’s conception of fine philosophy with recent scholarship, criteria for wisdom emerge that prioritize one’s ability to live skillfully and learn from the world” (330).

Ishmael's preliminary description of the doubloon offers little of his own interpretation but serves to provide the reader an unbiased description of the physical object that various characters will interpret in many different ways. First and foremost, one cannot overlook the immediate connection to his words that open the narrative; he attributes his motivation for embarking on this voyage to the fact he had "little or no money in [his] purse", and the symbol that houses so much literary significance to the idea of meaning in the novel happens to be a gold coin. Also significant is that Ishmael's initial description of this coin includes a fleeting yet crucial allusion to astrology. He describes, "Zoned by those letters you saw the likeness of three Andes' summits; from one a flame; a tower on another; on the third a crowing cock; while arching over all was a segment of the partitioned zodiac, the signs all marked with their usual cabalistics, and the keystone sun entering the equinoctial point at Libra" (345). First, his use of the second person directly brings the reader into the situation, acknowledging our own desire to attempt to decipher the doubloon's significance as well as the characters'. The second person also calls back to the scene with the painting, thus emphasizing the connection to the search for meaning. Daniel H. Garrison draws a connection between the painting and the doubloon, specifically the images of, "the whale arrested in mid-course over the three masts of the ship, the sun in mid-course over the three mountain peaks" (173). He writes, "The coincidence is no idle one, for the Pequod is presented as a microcosm of the world ashore, with its own peaks and valleys... The linked analogies of murky painting and cryptic doubloon point to meanings deeply embedded in the fabric of Moby-Dick" (173). Birk even points out the physical similarities of the two objects: "The three masts of the ship match the coin's three peaks, which in turn embody the tale's three major powers: Ahab (a fiery volcano), the whale with a 'tail like a Lima tower' (the

tower), and narrator Ishmael (the crowing cock)” (336). Additionally, Ishmael’s mentioning of astrology within his completely objective description sets it up as being a crucial element of the overall appearance of the doubloon, thus highlighting its importance as a concept within his own struggle to find meaning, especially when many of the characters that will try to discern the meaning of the doubloon will not include anything astrological in their readings, potentially indicating an oversight on their part.

The narration of the ensuing scene is quite unstable; it starts with Ishmael relaying the events but eventually shifts to Stubb narrating what he’s seeing. Ishmael first relays Ahab’s attempt to interpret the doubloon out loud:

There’s something ever egotistical in mountain-tops and towers, and all other grand and lofty things; look here- three peaks as proud as Lucifer. The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that too, is Ahab; all are Ahab; and this round gold is but the image of the rounder globe, which, like a magician’s glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back to his own mysterious self. Great pains, small gains for those who ask the world to solve them; it cannot solve itself (346).

Ahab’s self-awareness in his own egotism is striking; instead of attempting to find an inherent meaning within the doubloon’s symbols, he instead connects all the symbols to himself, claiming that the world “mirrors back” to oneself. He upholds his own quest for agency in interpretation by asserting that the world “cannot solve itself,” placing the onus on mankind, and more specifically himself, to discover meaning rather than have it revealed to him, even though he does try to render things capable of revealing meaning to him through apostrophe. Ahab also briefly mentions astrology: “Methinks now this coined sun wears a ruddy face; but

see! Aye, he enters the sign of storms, the equinox! And but six months before he wheeled out of a former equinox at Aries! From storm to storm! So be it, then” (346). The fact that Ahab mentions astrology right after Ishmael does indicates its overall importance, as both major characters that grapple with meaning have now made mention of an alternative method of interpreting worldly signs and symbols that Stubb will eventually allude to. The fact that both characters are aware of it and seem to accept it to some degree indicates the potential for understanding or acceptance of it as an alternative method. Furthermore, the fact that Ishmael and Ahab mention different astrological signs while observing the same set of symbols further demonstrates the separation between their respective modes of understanding, with astrology itself being a common thread between them.

Where Ishmael and Ahab touch briefly on astrological concepts, Stubb offers an incredibly in-depth exploration of the zodiac in his own interpretation of the doubloon:

Look you, Doubloon, your zodiac here is the life of man in one round chapter; and now I'll read it off, straight out of the book. Come, Almanack! To begin: there's Aries, or the Ram—lecherous dog, he begets us; then, Taurus, or the Bull—he bumps us the first thing; then Gemini, or the Twins—that is, Virtue and Vice; we try to reach Virtue, when lo! comes Cancer the Crab, and drags us back; and here, going from Virtue, Leo, a roaring Lion, lies in the path—he gives a few fierce bites and surly dabs with his paw; we escape, and hail Virgo, the Virgin! that's our first love; we marry and think to be happy for aye, when pop comes Libra, or the Scales—happiness weighed and found wanting; and while we are very sad about that, Lord! how we suddenly jump, as Scorpio, or the Scorpion, stings us in the rear; we are curing the wound, when whang come the arrows all round; Sagittarius, or the Archer,

is amusing himself. As we pluck out the shafts, stand aside! here's the battering-ram, Capricornus, or the Goat; full tilt, he comes rushing, and headlong we are tossed; when Aquarius, or the Water-bearer, pours out his whole deluge and drowns us; and to wind up with Pisces, or the Fishes, we sleep. There's a sermon now, writ in high heaven, and the sun goes through it every year, and yet comes out of it all alive and hearty. Jollily he, aloft there, wheels through toil and trouble; and so, alow here, does jolly Stubb (347).

Dagovitz sees this soliloquy as another instance of Stubb's wisdom in his ability to tell an "extraordinary story of the human condition, filled with suffering and joy, hardships and triumphs, that finally ends in *death*" (340). However, it is Stubb's shift in attitude that he finds most laudable: "...rather than remaining within a human perspective, which would make the narrative rather pessimistic, he shifts to the perspective of the sun, which goes through everything, 'and yet comes out of it all alive and hearty'" (340). It is precisely this optimistic shift in thinking that for Dagovitz indicates astuteness as opposed to critics' dismissal of Stubb as a mere source of comic relief, for example: "By adopting a new perspective, Stubb is able to accept the narrative of life, filled with pain and death as he well knows, and remain jolly. A useful ability, and quite in line with our criteria for wisdom" (340). While certainly a reparative reading of the constant dismissal of Stubb's intelligence, this reading by Dagovitz glosses over the zodiacal content of Stubb's speech, falling in line with many other critics' tendency to simplify the speech as whole. On the other hand, Birk posits that Stubb's lengthy soliloquy heavily alludes to the novel's supposed zodiacal framework, saying that it is, "not so much an extended comment on the vulnerability of the human species as a summary of the *Pequod's* own voyage through the many vicissitudes which is *Moby-Dick*, from when Ishmael 'begets'

his adventure to the ultimate disposition of the ship and crew in the eternal sleep ‘with Pisces, or the Fishes’ exactly one year later” (25). I posit that Stubb, in his own, “jolly,” cryptic way, is proposing an alternative method of interpretation to assuage the intense anxiety displayed by Ishmael and Ahab to propagate an assured, “correct” way.

Stubb’s insight ultimately combines Ahab’s and Ishmael’s methods, thus offering a potential alternative and even definitive answer to the question of how exactly one should go about interpretation. His use of another text to attempt to understand the doubloon is a meta move that introduces a whole new complication into the fray of the characters’ struggles to find meaning. His proclamation, “I’ll get the almanack and as I have heard devils can be raised with Daboll’s arithmetic, I’ll try my hand at raising a meaning out of these queer curvices here with the Massachusetts calendar” both mirrors and complicates Ahab’s approach to meaning as being inherent and needing to be excavated or decoded (347). Dagovitz also points out, “Notably he says “*a* meaning” rather than “*the* meaning,” indicative of the wise (and humble) intuition that one’s own interpretation is not necessarily final” (340). Where Ahab wishes to have enough power over whatever he’s interpreting to be able to extract his meaning with his sheer willpower and dominance, Stubb is content to consult other sources to aid him in his quest to “raise a meaning out of” the doubloon’s symbols, as well as accept the fact that one “true” meaning is ultimately unachievable. He also addresses the book directly in a move emblematic of Ahab’s apostrophic tendencies, exclaiming, “Book! You lie there; the fact is, you books must know your places. You’ll do to give us the bare words and facts, but we come in to supply the thoughts... Signs and wonders eh? Pity if there is nothing wonderful in signs, and significant in wonders! There’s a clue somewhere...” (347) Here, Stubb explicitly outlines both Ishmael’s and Ahab’s respective modes of understanding in a way that combines them,

placing them in a complimentary framework instead of a competing one. He expresses frustration at the book's containment of meaning without easily revealing it when he points out that it simply "lie[s] there," and by mentioning the idea of "a clue somewhere," he indicates a belief that the meaning he seeks is hidden within the book and must be extracted. However, he directly contradicts this methodology by describing the book as providing "the bare words and facts" while we as interpreters "come in to supply the thoughts." By including the contrasting method alongside interpretive tendencies more typical of Ahab, Stubb sets up the framework of a method that includes both, thereby offering a potential solution to the seemingly unanswerable question that Ishmael and Ahab grapple with.

Stubb then ties astrology to this new method that he's outlining, framing the use of astrology in the quest for meaning as a desirable alternative. His exclamation, "By Jove, I have it! Look, you, Doubloon, your zodiac here is the life of man in one round chapter; and now I'll read it off, straight out of the book. Come, Almanack!" draws a parallel between the progressive cycle of the signs of the zodiac and the life of man as similarly cyclical. His direct action of consulting the almanac for the information about the ensuing zodiac cycle also further implies his willingness to forfeit some of his own agency in interpretation, which is also a hallmark of the practice of astrology in general. After describing the detailed progression through all the signs, using language of continuity and linearity, Stubb concludes, "There's a sermon now, writ in high heaven, and the sun goes through it every year, and yet comes out of it all alive and hearty. Jollily, he, aloft there, wheels through toil and trouble; and so, alow here, does jolly Stubb" (347). This establishment of the answer to the doubloon's significance being written by celestial bodies, particularly the sun, is ironic when compared to the scene in which Ahab curses the sun for not providing him with hidden knowledge. This parallel implies and



confirms that the answer to questions of how exactly one should attempt to find meaning does in fact lie with the sun and stars, directly affirming Stubb's astrological philosophy. Similarly, Stubb connects himself to the sun's "wheel[ing] through toil and trouble" of repeating cycles that give meaning to events below by mentioning "so, alow here, does jolly Stubb." He implies that he, by offering this interpretation and decoding of astrology for the reader by consulting the almanac, is doing equivalent labor as the sun's prepared "sermon" of meaning, thus framing his argument as being utterly truthful, delivered from the heavens themselves.

Stubb's subsequent observation of another sailor's interpretation further reveals his own position of superiority over the other interpreters. Stubb observes Flask declare, "I see nothing here, but a round thing of gold, and whoever raises a certain whale, this round thing belongs to him. So what's all this staring been about? It is worth sixteen dollars, that's true; and at two cents the cigar, that's nine hundred and sixty cigars" (348). The sudden shift from Stubb's incredibly detailed analysis involving the consultation of an outside text to a surface-level interpretation that only involves the monetary value of the doubloon rather than its inherent meaning offers a striking contrast and demonstrates the option of refusing to interpret at all. Stubb's analysis of this event, "Shall I call that wise or foolish, now; if it be really wise it has a foolish look to it; yet if it be really foolish, then has it a sort of wiseish look to it," implies that regardless of the perception of this sailor's less nuanced view, there is some semblance of wisdom in it, even if it seems foolish or was meant to be wise in the first place (348). This instance reinforces Stubb as a figure who heavily engages with various modes of interpretation to the extent that Ahab and Ishmael do, thus assigning himself significant credibility with his own interpretations that he posits.

## Queequeg and Pip

Stubb proceeds to observe two characters that are objects of Ahab's, and also Ishmael's, interpretive desire: Queequeg and Pip. I posit that it is no coincidence that these two character's attempts (or lack thereof in Pip's case) to read the doubloon occur fairly closely together. By having Stubb in particular describe each character's reaction to the doubloon, a narrative connection is made between Stubb's astrological interpretation of the doubloon and these two figures. Later in the novel, both Ishmael and Ahab will attempt to interpret various aspects of each of these characters, thus emphasizing Stubb's power in connecting Ishmael and Ahab to Queequeg and Pip in their quest for meaning. In this section I will begin with each character's portrayal in the Doubloon Chapter, then extrapolate from the rest of the text their additional significance to the question of interpretation raised by Ishmael and Ahab's opposing methods.

First, Queequeg's astrological significance cannot be ignored. Birk writes, "Thoroughly arrayed in the markings of the Zodiac, [Queequeg] is a constant reminder of astrology's role and a teasing embodiment of the sign of secrets" (222). It is Stubb who first draws the connection between Queequeg and astrology in the Doubloon chapter. When first observing Queequeg attempting to analyze the symbol, Stubb narrates:

Here comes Queequeg—all tattooing—looks like the signs of the Zodiac himself. What says the Cannibal? As I live he's comparing notes; looking at his thigh bone; thinks the sun is in the thigh, or in the calf, or in the bowels, I suppose, as the old women talk Surgeon's Astronomy in the back country. And by Jove, he's found something there in the vicinity of his thigh—I guess it's Sagittarius, or the Archer. No: he don't know what to make of the doubloon; he takes it for an old button off some king's trousers (348).

Stubb's connection of Queequeg's tattoos to the signs of the zodiac is incredibly poignant, especially as not only Queequeg himself does not understand them and desires to, but Ahab also desperately tries to uncover their meaning as well. However, the reader doesn't have access to Queequeg's actual thoughts; we simply receive his actions mediated through Stubb's observation and subsequent interpretation, casting some doubt into Queequeg's actual connection to astrology. However, Queequeg's action of comparing notes on his various extremities does have astrological significance in and of itself, as each astrological sign is associated with a certain part of the body (Birk 26). For example, the areas that Queequeg examines, the thigh, calf, and bowels, are associated with the signs of Sagittarius, Aquarius, and Libra respectively (Birk 28). This connection is especially poignant given that Stubb then correctly relates Queequeg's scrutiny of his thigh in particular to its corresponding sign. This layered observation demonstrates Stubb supplying his own astrological interpretation to Queequeg's simple action of consulting his own tattoos, thus connecting Queequeg to Stubb's astrological method of interpretation which in turn connects him to Ishmael and Ahab's.

While this instance would support the claim that Stubb adheres to Ishmael's method of interpretation, Stubb proceeds to refute his previous supposition. His assertively bewildering contradiction, "No: he don't know what to make of the doubloon; he takes it for an old button off some king's trousers," implies a defensive dismissal of his previous interpretation, signifying a potential seed of doubt within his previously confident and assertive manner (348). This condescending dismissal could also be a stereotypical assumption about the cannibal's lack of intelligence or ability to extrapolate the information either from his tattoos, from the doubloon, or both. We learn later from Ishmael that Queequeg himself does not know the actual meaning of his tattoos: "Queequeg in his own proper person was a riddle to unfold; a

wondrous work in one volume; but whose mysteries not even himself could read..." (384). However, while seeming to reduce Queequeg to a simpleton who mistakes a coin for a button, Stubb also grants him his own agency to interpret the doubloon as he pleases as opposed to forcing his own astrological interpretation upon him. By stopping his own interpretation full force with an assertive, "No," Stubb could be acknowledging his own bias, a favoritism for the mystic, in what he perceives Queequeg to be doing, and perhaps even his own hopefulness at the achievement of an answer ("And by Jove he's found something there..."), and attempting to stifle it in favor of Queequeg's own, original interpretation. He potentially recognizes the extent to which he has projected his own preference of consulting a written text onto Queequeg; he consults his tattoos in the exact same way that Stubb consults his almanac. In this instance, Stubb demonstrates both continued association with astrology as a method of interpretation but also nuance in understanding the agency and free will that accompany the act of analyzing symbols, thus supporting the notion that Stubb offers a compromising method of interpretation that synthesizes the agency of Ishmael's method with the idea of inherent meaning of Ahab's.

Ahab's strained relationship with Queequeg demonstrates a connection between astrology, reading, and his unearthing method of interpretation. As previously discussed, Queequeg is one of many vessels that Ahab sees as containing meaning that, to him, is frustratingly inaccessible. Queequeg himself, however, shares this sentiment of frustration with Ahab. In an attempt to understand his own tattoos, Queequeg, by carving them onto his coffin, "was striving, in his own rude way, to copy parts of the twisting tattooing on his body...a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth" (384). The irony of Queequeg being, "a wondrous work in one volume; but whose mysteries not even himself could read, though his own live heart beat against them," is

not lost on Ishmael or Ahab. While Ahab most ostensibly grapples with this notion, exclaiming, “Oh devilish tantalization of the gods,” Ishmael shows his intrigue with more nuance. His narration, “These mysteries were therefore destined in the end to moulder away with the living parchment whereon they were inscribed, and so unsolved to the last. And this thought it must have been which suggested to Ahab that wild exclamation of his, when one morning turning away from surveying poor Queequeg...” (384) heavily implies that Ishmael himself first conceived the idea of the fleeting, unconquerable nature of Queequeg’s meaning. It is only when he supplies, “This thought it must have been which suggested to Ahab that wild exclamation,” that Ishmael merely speculates that Ahab is thinking along similar lines as opposed to the idea originating with Ahab himself. This defensive move on Ishmael’s part demonstrates his own desire for knowledge and ultimate fear at the fleeting and impermanent nature of it, but also a need to somehow keep his own desire a secret while highlighting Ahab’s similar desire. By portraying both Ishmael’s and Ahab’s fascination with the significance of Queequeg’s tattoos in the same scene, Melville frames Queequeg as a key to the question of meaning in the novel by bringing the two principal characters together in a shared desire to determine his meaning using their respective methods. Additionally, by portraying Queequeg’s “interpretation” of the doubloon in such an ambiguous way through Stubb’s astrological lens, Melville draws the connection between the quest for meaning and astrology. The parallel between Queequeg “studying” his own tattoos to try to interpret the doubloon, Stubb’s astrological symbol, and Ishmael and Ahab in turn trying to “study” him indicates a direct tie between the search for meaning and astrology, and specifically how Stubb’s method serves as a way to solve their interpretive quandaries by combining elements of both methods.

Pip, the cabin boy, additionally serves the purpose of demonstrating the inaccessibility and therefore desirability of certain deeper knowledge that both Ishmael and Ahab attempt to glean for themselves. Stubb's description of Pip in "The Doubloon" and his subsequent interactions with Ahab demonstrate another character that carries the significance of Stubb's astrological interpretation through to the rest of the novel.

Ishmael describes the impactful event of Pip's near drowning as, "an event most lamentable; and which ended in providing the sometimes madly merry and predestined craft with a living and ever accompanying prophecy of whatever shattered sequel might prove her own," drawing immediate ties to the idea of fatedness that accompanies the practice of astrology (331). After being left to drown at sea by none other than Stubb himself, Pip is rescued but returns in what the crew of the *Pequod* interpret as a state of insanity: "From that hour the little negro went about the deck an idiot; such, at least, they said he was" (334). Before exploring Pip's interpretation of the doubloon as mediated by Stubb, it is important to unpack Ishmael's description of his insanity due to its significance in understanding both Ishmael's and Ahab's curiosity towards it. In what Jimmy Packham refers to as a "peculiar fit of omniscience" (567), Ishmael definitively attributes the cause of Pip's insanity to what he experienced as a "castaway" in the vast, endless ocean:

The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely, though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps...He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad (334).

Ishmael's puzzling omniscience, or lack thereof, has been rightly discussed by many critics. While the true extent to which we as readers are supposed to understand Ishmael as both narrator and character will never be definitively solved, many have speculated different explanations for the inconsistencies in his narration. John W. Rathbun sees Ishmael's role as author and character as following Melville's tendency in his other novels to include narrators with dual roles. He makes the distinction between these figures as "chroniclers" and "writers", saying:

As chroniclers they give us descriptive accounts of events and data designed to add to readers' education and experience, the effect of which is to validate the "truth" of what they are saying. As writers of books, on the other hand, they allow themselves an imaginative leeway which compromises the aims of the plain language of journalistic discourse even as it intensifies the "meaning" of what they are telling us" (3).

Tara Robbins Fee relegates Ishmael's "omniscience" to inconsistencies in his psyche due to his trauma: "Ishmael's implausible narration in *Moby-Dick* (with its evident concealments, inventions, and fantasies) results from his status as a traumatized survivor and that through his incoherence, the novel insists that accounts of trauma cannot be subjected to the totalizing schemata of narrative aesthetics..."(137). Bryan C. Short sees Ishmael's sudden omniscience in this scene in particular as idiosyncratic: "Romantic as *Moby-Dick* is, its events are presented as falling within the realm of possibility. Ishmael often goes out of his way to offer rational explanations of apparently strange phenomena. Pip's experience thus works against the realism of the novel" (8). However, for the purposes of my own argument, I posit that Ishmael is merely following his tried and true method of interpretation by assigning the significance of Pip's madness that the other sailors clearly cannot fathom.

Compared to uncertainty Ishmael has displayed in the past, he narrates the account of Pip's journey to the depths with a commanding, authoritative tone, mirroring the matter-of-factness of his description of event itself: "But it so happened, that those boats, without seeing Pip, suddenly spying whales close to them on one side, turned, and gave chase; and Stubb's boat was now so far away...that Pip's horizon began to expand around him miserably. By the merest chance the ship itself at last rescued him" (334). The consistency of his tone in delivering these events as if they are mere plot points in the greater action of the story gives what could be seen as conjecture significant narrative weight as being truthful, at least to himself. However, due to the fact that Ishmael has no way of ascertaining the exact truth of this theory, one could conclude that he is in fact assigning this explanation of Pip's insanity himself instead of being truly "omniscient" in this particular moment.

Therefore, in an incredibly complex move, Melville has Ishmael assign the significance of Pip's madness that Ahab will then attempt to unearth himself. In particular, Ishmael chooses to frame the knowledge that Pip gains as "hoarded heaps" given to him by a higher power, in this case, a personification of Wisdom itself. This viewpoint of knowledge or meaning as something both physically buried underneath a physical barrier to be breached, in this case the sea, and as something valuable worth excavating, is exactly the philosophy that Ahab so tenaciously believes and pursues.

Pip's initial descent into insanity has occurred before the scene in which the crew of the *Pequod* take turns attempting to solve the mystery of the doubloon. As with Queequeg, we only see Pip's actions mediated by Stubb. He narrates, "This way comes Pip...He too has been watching all of these interpreters-myself included- and look now, he comes to read..." (348). By referring to both himself and all the other crewmembers as "interpreters," Stubb



explicitly connects the unfolding scene to the broader theme of interpretation pursued by the novel itself. The use of the word “read” provides a plethora of possible meanings of Pip’s ensuing, “I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look” (348). While Pip does not immediately perform a direct interpretation of the doubloon like any of the other characters, Stubb perceives him as performing a “reading,” thus implying that Pip’s perceived nonsense is actually linked to the doubloon in some way. Stubb himself makes the connection, “Upon my soul, he’s been studying Murray’s Grammar!” drawing a parallel between his own consultation of a text in studying the object at hand that he himself previously did with the almanac (348). However, by using the verb “to look,” Pip does in fact interpret the scene at hand, reporting the fact that various people around him are all looking at the same object. Interestingly, Birk interprets this moment as significantly supporting his claim of Melville’s intended astrological framework: “His ‘I look, you look, he looks; we looks, ye look, they look’ is a set of six, half the number of signs in the zodiac...Pip’s reading also bespeaks an acquired wisdom. The coin, a token of *The Whale* itself, he thus perceives as a six-part series and orders, ‘Form two and two!’- an outright divulging of *Moby-Dick*’s six-block, ‘two and two’ design of paired signs” (229). However, I posit that what Pip goes on to say is more explicitly related to astrology and to its interpretive implications.

While his initial babbling doesn’t quite address the doubloon itself, Pip does eventually refer to it directly in an apparent moment of clarity: “Here’s the ship’s navel, this doubloon here, and they are all on fire to unscrew it. But, unscrew your navel, and what’s the consequence? Then again, if it stays here, that is ugly too, for when aught’s nailed to the mast it’s a sign that things grow desperate.” (349). In one of the few sources (that I’ve found) apart from Birk that dives into the astrological significance of the Doubloon chapter, Seelye writes,

“Although Pip's speech is not operative within the framework of zodiacal symbology, it nonetheless hearkens to that system. The center, or navel, of the Grand Man of the zodiac, his "reins"-or loins-is the sign of Libra, for the Balance is the center of all meaning, suggesting, as it does, equilibrium and stasis” (354). This connection of human anatomy to astrological signs, similar to the connection between Queequeg and the sign of Sagittarius, provides an additional zodiacal connection made by another character other than Stubb; Ishmael’s initial observation of the coin alludes to “the keystone sun entering the equinoctial point at Libra,” thus indicating the acknowledgement of the Doubloon’s key importance as a symbol of the interpretive middle ground between Ishmael’s and Ahab’s respective epistemological strategies (345). By referring to the doubloon as the “ship’s navel,” Pip himself assigns the doubloon a central position in the ship’s anatomy, thus implying its utmost importance as a symbol of interpretation. Pip, having been granted knowledge of the deep and, according to Ishmael, prophetic knowledge of the future, can clearly see that the crew are quite eager to “unscrew” the doubloon, which ostensibly refers to receiving it as a reward for spotting Moby Dick, but also could allude to the desire to successfully understand mysterious symbols and deeper meaning. By rhetorically asking what the “consequence” of such unscrewing would be, he implies that once discovered, the “truth” that one seeks in interpretation would no longer exist to provide a drive or motivation to understand signs or symbols, thus eliminating Ishmael’s and Ahab’s (for example) primary ambitions in the novel. He further accentuates the undesirability of this possibility by saying that the alternative, the doubloon remaining in place, is “ugly too,” and his assertion that the existence of anything in the doubloon’s place is “a sign that things grow desperate” further

highlights the desperation inherent in mankind's, and in this case, the crew's need to fully understand the world around them, or in this case, the doubloon.

His incoherent murmurings take on a much more ominous tone when he predicts, "Oh, the gold! The precious, precious gold! — the green miser'll hoard ye soon!" (349). Short insightfully connects this instance to Ishmael's previous description of Pip's encounter in the depths: "The miser merman's hoarded heaps of "The Castaway" give way to gold of which Pip says, "the green miser'll hoard ye soon" (22). Not only does this connection indicate a continuity of the idea of a higher power with the ability to grant knowledge but also reclaim it, Pip's reference to the gold as "precious" mirrors Ahab's opinion of Pip as a vessel of this invaluable knowledge. Overall, while Pip himself does not directly allude to astrology, the fact that he is a character that is so central to Ahab's method of interpretation in particular that is mediated entirely through Stubb signifies an important continuity of Stubb's ideas through the character that he describes in-depth.

Once Pip makes his journey to the depths and back, Ahab takes a particular interest in him, and is one of the only crew members to actively seek out his newfound wisdom by attempting to interpret his ramblings: "Where sayest thou Pip was, boy? ... And who art thou, boy?" (411). He also reduces Pip to an object, paralleling Ishmael's description of the wisdom of the deep being granted to him as "hoarded heaps" when he admonishes the Manxman, "The greater idiot ever scolds the lesser...Hands off from that holiness!" (412). Here, he directly reveals that he views Pip as a direct link to the knowledge that he so fiercely desires which thus makes him valuable. His statement, "Here, boy; Ahab's cabin shall be Pip's home henceforth, while Ahab lives. Thou touchest my most inmost centre, boy; thou art tied to me by cords woven of my heart-strings," also shows Ahab's

acknowledgment of their connection through the attempted acquisition of this knowledge (412). The language of being tied together also directly parallels Ishmael and Queequeg's connection by the monkey rope, suggesting a connection between these two sets of physically paired characters. A small detail that concludes the scene and ties both Pip and Ahab back to astrology arrives at the very end of the chapter. The Manxman's reflection, "There go two daft ones now...one daft with strength, the other daft with weakness. But here's the end of the rotten line- all dripping too. Mend it, eh? I think we had best have a new line altogether. I'll see Mr. Stubb about it" (412) draws Stubb back into the picture of Ahab's and Pip's relationship. The allusion to lines after Ahab's attributing the closeness of himself and Pip as being akin to physical attachment by rope as well as the Manxman's need to consult Stubb about the possibility of replacing an old, rotten rope further connects Stubb and his interpretive methods to Ahab and Pip's closely tied relationship.

### **Conclusion**

Birk astutely remarks, "Stars and seafarers share an ancient, intimate connection" (33). Melville, aware of this connection from his own personal experience as a sailor, imbued *Moby-Dick* with themes relating to the heavenly bodies' impact on humankind. Themes of astrology go hand-in-hand with themes of interpretation, as evidenced by Ishmael and Ahab's respective quests for meaning. Anxiety relating to a lack of control over one's fate or the meaning of signs or symbols is not a struggle unique to 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans who turn to astrology for answers; Melville captures this same anxiety in his whalers aboard the *Pequod*. Ishmael, content to assign his own meaning yet still unsure of the correctness of his assumptions; Ahab, fretful of his inability to truly break through the surface to find meaning he believes inherent within; these characters, with their respective fears and worries about

finding meaning, demonstrate the natural human tendency of desiring control in some way.

This concept is not a new one in terms of interpreting this novel. Birk quotes Daniel Hoffman as positing, “free will versus determinism to be ‘the most urgent philosophical problem of the book,’” as well as William Mowder: “The paradox of human free-will existing in a deterministic cosmos stands at the very center of the novel” (325). While my argument does not attempt to fully solve these questions (more likely related to the Miltonic influences evident in the novel) I believe that a closer look at the astrological themes of the novel could clarify some of these questions, especially given their connections to the ideas of agency within interpretation.

The metafictional aspect of this argument additionally cannot be ignored; at the risk of falling prey to viewing Melville’s work as a “hideous and intolerable allegory,” the parallels between Ishmael’s and Ahab’s quest for meaning and the act of reading and interpreting literature, even *Moby-Dick* itself, are striking (171). Birk demonstrates an approach akin to Ahab’s, for example; he believes that Melville himself designed an intricate framework for the novel centered around astrology that he manages to actively uncover. My reading, and many other readings of the novel, would fall into a strategy more representative of Ishmael’s in that we observe what is in front of us and assign the significance that we see fit based on what we observe. As Birk points out, there is certainly conflict within the literary community over these methods of interpretation: “Speculation meets disdain. Statistical analysis (even as rudimentary as word counts) applied to literary texts is dismissed as sacrilege” (6). Finding a true answer as to the ultimately “correct” way to interpret literature is as impossible and as doomed an endeavor as Ahab’s monomaniac quest for revenge against the white whale. However, I believe that Melville’s inclusion of astrology,

specifically within the framework of the opposing interpretive methods set up by Ishmael and Ahab, subtly supplies an alternative to the constrictive binary of interpretation that the two main characters propagate. Astrological belief demonstrates a middle ground between the absolutes of meaning as being either assigned or inherent, and by subtly including it in arguably the most important scene relating to meaning, “The Doubloon,” Melville acknowledges the impossibility of truly “knowing,” but supplies the remedy to the anxiety of not “knowing” in reminding us of our own agency to interpret as we please, much like one interpreting signs from the heavens above.

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