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### (Im)mortal Men: Trauma and Mortality in Moby-Dick

Madeline Spencer-Orrell  
mspencerorrell@gmail.com

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TRINITY COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

(Im)mortal Men: Trauma and Mortality in *Moby-Dick*

submitted by

Madeline Spencer-Orrell, Class of 2020

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for  
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

2020

Director: Christopher Hager, Ph.D.

Reader: Chloe Wheatley, Ph.D.

Reader: Hilary Wyss, Ph.D.

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## Acknowledgements

Thanks to my family, particularly to my mom for listening to me talk about whales and trauma far more than the average conversation entails, and to my dad, brothers, and stepdad for their constant encouragement.

Thanks to my friends: Carin Colebaugh, Megan Caljouw, Dominique Bolduc, Alex Chambers, and Stephen Comeau for always being there for me, listening to my complaints, and withholding judgements for staying up until 4:00 a.m. writing. Thanks to my fellow thesis writers: Julia Kennard, Olivia Ogden, Ben Gambuzza, Rhone O'Hara, and Madison Boyd for your comradery and the attempt for collective stability throughout this process.

Thanks to Professor Katherine Bergren for successfully guiding myself and my fellow writers through these uncharted waters. Thanks to Dr. Dan Mrozowski for his scattered yet always dependable and spot-on advice throughout this process and for wearing funky socks with me on Tuesdays. Thanks to the whole Trinity College English Department for providing a home for me during my time at Trinity. From my peers to my professors, everyone is a friend in 115 Vernon Street.

Thanks to the entire Allan K. Smith Writing Center: a home within a home in 115 Vernon Street; I have never been a part of a more encouraging, welcoming, and intelligent group of people. I would particularly like to thank Sara Barrett and Sarah Thomas for their tutoring expertise (I'm sure my readers would also like to thank you for this) and Professor Tennyson O'Donnell for telling me I was crazy for doing two thesis projects yet still providing me with candy in the Writing Center.

Thanks to the Psychology department: through my time with these wonderful professors, I have developed an incredibly useful insight into the workings of the human mind. Thank you especially to Professor Molly Helt for her amazing humanity, kindness, and brilliance; Trinity is incredibly lucky to know her compassion for people and for learning.

Thanks to my softball team and coaches for their friendship and support on and off the field (even though most of them are STEM majors and the extent of their knowledge about this thesis is that it's about a whale), and for keeping me sane during quarantine. Thank you to Coach Caitlin Hitchcock for providing me with the opportunity to attend Trinity in the fall of 2016, to Coach Brittany Sarnese for her award-winning smile following me around for the past four years, and to Coach Molly Rathbun for her constant optimism and strength.

Finally, thank you to my thesis adviser, academic adviser, and life adviser Professor Christopher Hager. Before taking your Introduction to American Literature course in the fall semester of my first year at Trinity, English was one of my least-favorite subjects... and look where we are now. Thank you for your dedication to my education over my years as your advisee, for your unwavering support throughout this thesis project, your boundless hoard of Melville knowledge, and for introducing me to *Moby-Dick*. Your encouragement over the last four years has led me to places in English academia I never thought I would go.

The interactions among language, the body, and the self are complicated in *Moby-Dick* by the effects of trauma on Ishmael, Queequeg, and Ahab. *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael's narrative, and these three characters cannot be analyzed without the concurrent analysis of the effects of trauma. Ahab's traumatic past drives the novel's plot; the trauma that Ishmael endured affects his retelling of the story because of his retrospective narration; identity cannot be determined without the consideration of mental health or illness. My methodology of creating a concordance led me to the discovery of the persistent focus on mortality and humanity throughout the novel. Individuals' perceptions of mortality and humanity are extremely influenced by trauma, as will be discussed throughout this thesis. The exploration of trauma in *Moby-Dick* will show—through the manifestations of Post-Traumatic Stress-Disorder in the identities and actions of Ishmael, Ahab, and Queequeg—how the effects of trauma are incredibly variable from person to person.

### **Background and Methodology**

There are numerous instances of trauma that various characters experience throughout *Moby-Dick*. However, while multiple characters go through traumatic events, they are all affected differently. In my studies of both English and psychology, the power of language has always been at the forefront of these subjects. In psychology, we often study the relationship between language and the brain. How does humans' processing of language affect our thoughts and behaviors? And how do our thoughts and behaviors affect our production of language? There are innumerable potential interpretations of any given combination of words. Interpretations of language are heavily dependent on an individual's past experiences. Intention is another gray area created by the countless possible interpretations of the meaning of language. In the study of

literature, readers and critics often wonder (and even try to define) what the writer's intentions are with a certain work. Additionally, from a student's perspective, we are always reminded to talk about the experience as a reader rather than what we assume to be the writer's intentions. While it may be expected that the intention and effect of language may almost match, sometimes they are not even in the same ballpark. This incongruence between intention and interpretation combined with the numerous possible meanings of a single word is what sparked my curiosity about how a single word can change throughout one novel written by one author.

When I set out to do this research on *Moby Dick*, I originally wanted to discover how the meaning of a single word could change throughout the course of a single text. The word that I chose to research is "man" (and plural, "men"). In hindsight, I realize that my choice of word may be what led me down a different path—but I seem to have ended up at a similar destination to what I expected, nonetheless. To dive into such a deep novel, I decided to create a concordance of the words "man" and "men" in *Moby Dick*. In the Google Sheet I created of this, I noted every passage that included "man" or "men." This included only the stand-alone words "man" and "men," not words that include them, such as "whaleman" or "landsmen." If there were multiple "man"s and/or "men"s in close proximity, I included them in the same entry. At the end of the novel, I had over six hundred entries. While I was creating my concordance, I marked passages that stood out to me. This part was a completely subjective process, and if someone else were to go through this same process, I am sure the notes on their concordance would look remarkably different. Of my original fifty-five highlighted passages, twenty-seven of them were related directly to mortality or immortality. These ideas appeared to be significantly more prominent than I had imagined they would be. Additional dynamics that became clear in the creation of my concordance were: man versus God and man versus whale. A third, less-

evident dynamic that occasionally arose was man versus himself. In relation to the ideas of mortality and immortality, these dynamics either inhibit or support one's (im)perishability. So, through my method of research, I ended up with the question: how do aspects of mortality and immortality influence the identities of characters in *Moby Dick*? After more research and more writing, this question evolved even further. Trauma plays a significant role in shaping the characters of the novel; multiple characters seem to struggle with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Because of the significant role that trauma plays in the novel, I revised my research question to: What are the effects of trauma in *Moby-Dick*?

When we are first introduced to Ishmael, he immediately dives into his struggle with suicidal thoughts and claims that going to the ocean is how he distracts himself from these ideations. So, right from the start, Ishmael's struggle with mortality is unmistakably a part of his identity. And although, societally, it is becoming more common and respectful to separate an individual's being or identity from the mental illness they suffer from, their mental illness will still influence who they are, nevertheless. An aspect of identity that has typically been an important identifier is gender, particularly masculinity (and femininity). But masculinity does not appear to have the same importance in *Moby Dick* that I expected when specifically looking at the words "man" and "men." Something that is crucial to recognize is the lack of prominent female characters in the novel. Occasionally a female will be mentioned, like the Innkeeper, but we only see them briefly at the beginning of the novel. Because of this, a possible explanation for the lack of importance of masculinity is that there is not femininity for it to be compared or contrasted with. So, with gender playing a less significant role than expected, struggles with mortality and immortality arise to fill the gaps in the identities of our characters. A comparison

that can be and is made in *Moby Dick* is that between the human and the nonhuman. The following literature will begin to explore how language, trauma, humanity, and identity interact.

## Literature Review

A lot of secondary literature argues that Ishmael is an unreliable narrator. What many of these arguments don't stress, however, is the idea that Ishmael is narrating retrospectively. *Moby-Dick* is a trauma narrative; all of Ishmael's recollections are informed by the trauma of the voyage. Unexplainable parts of Ishmael's narration are often referred to as "inconsistencies." Many critics have attempted to explain this in various ways. Susan VanZanten Gallagher discusses past critics' explanations for these inconsistencies: some claim that Melville lacked artistic skill, making the changes in narration from first-person to third-person omniscient a mistake. More recent critics, VanZanten Gallagher notes, suggest that Melville was experimenting with the structure and form of his writing, purposefully choosing to make these deviations in narration. VanZanten Gallagher argues that Ishmael is a prophetic narrator, and that the "oddities of narration are prophetic traits, not artistic lapses on Melville's part."<sup>1</sup> While it is possible that Melville meant for Ishmael to some kind of divine narrator—and this argument provides an explanation for the inconsistencies in narration—his character does not match the typical prophetic principles. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a prophet as a "divinely inspired interpreter, revealer, or teacher of the will or thought of God or of a god; a person who speaks, or is regarded as speaking, for or in the name of God or a god."<sup>2</sup> Although Ishmael is Christian, he does not set out to inspire, reveal, or teach anything about the word of God. While Ishmael may turn to religion in times of need, he is not regarded as speaking in the name of God.

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<sup>1</sup> VanZanten Gallagher, 11

<sup>2</sup> "Prophet." Oxford English Dictionary, oed.com.



I argue that the narrative inconsistencies are not exactly “inconsistencies.” While Ishmael may not follow a steady course when retelling his story, this does not mean that his narrative is not his own when it seems to be omniscient. The inconsistencies are more likely a result of the traumas that he has endured. Once someone suffers a trauma, memory is often affected; since Ishmael tells this story retrospectively, his recollection of events during the timeline of *Moby-Dick* has been altered in his retelling. This thesis is predicated on the deduction that the entire novel is recanted retrospectively; the whole journey has already occurred, and Ishmael is retelling the events of the novel based on his memory. Therefore, Ishmael has already experienced the wreck of the Pequod that concludes the novel. Watching his entire crew die in the wreck of the ship is an extreme stressor for Ishmael. This thesis argues that Ishmael suffers from PTSD because of the wreck, consequently affecting the focus of his narration and the accuracy of the events as he retells them post-traumatically. PTSD will be discussed in detail in the first chapter.

A trauma narrative accounts for Ishmael filling in holes with things that he did not actually experience or sharing others’ experiences as if they were his own. As VanZanten Gallagher describes, “[he] disappears from the dramatic action midway through the book, he reports scenes and conversations which he could not have witnessed, and his style varies erratically.”<sup>3</sup> A question that is often asked in regard to some of the narrative inconsistencies is: How can Ishmael know what is going on behind closed doors? I would respond, How often have you heard the retelling of a story from someone who wasn’t there, but tells the story as if were? The answer is probably pretty often. Simply because Ishmael does not explicitly share where he received information from does not mean that the information should be discounted. Ishmael has

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<sup>3</sup> VanZanten Gallagher, 11

made it clear to the reader from the very beginning of the novel (as I discuss in Chapter 1) that he is open and honest about what he shares. However, the reader has also been made aware that all of the information he discloses may not be accurate, and the origin of the information may be unknown, which is further emphasized in light of his traumatic past. VanZanten Gallagher claims that, “as the narrator, Ishmael is more tentative about hidden meanings. His narrative reflections are deliberately ambiguous.” She uses this ambiguity in narration to support her argument that Ishmael is a prophetic narrator, but Ishmael’s narrative ambiguity could simply be a result of the traumas that he has endured. Although Ishmael the narrator and Ishmael the character are often treated as separate identities in criticisms of *Moby Dick*, they were once the same. It is crucial to keep in mind that we are receiving a retrospective narration throughout the novel because it heavily influences both Ishmael’s narrative style and the accuracy of the information that we receive.

Although narrated by Ishmael, the culminating events of *Moby Dick* revolve largely around the effects of Ahab’s traumatic past. Tara Robbins Fee, in her article “Irreconcilable Differences: Voice, Trauma, and Melville’s *Moby-Dick*,” also discusses the division between Ishmael as the narrator and Ishmael as a character. Her article, like this thesis, assumes that Ishmael tells this story retrospectively. Because of the retrospective narration, Ishmael has endured the devastating trauma of the *Pequod*’s wreck when retelling these events. Additionally, we must be reminded that Ishmael suffered from mental illness even before setting out on the whaling voyage. Fee argues that the dissociation between himself as a storyteller and character is a direct effect of the traumatic experiences he endured on the *Pequod*. Fee claims that, as readers, we must keep in mind the differences between Ishmael as a narrator and Ishmael as a character because “two great traumas, the monomaniacal captaincy of Ahab and the wreck of the

*Pequod* lie between them.”<sup>4</sup> Fee is intrigued by Melville’s decision to inflict a new wound in the novel. *Moby Dick* “invents a trauma and beckons the reader to experience it,” which Fee claims is “strange” because it “creates a wound where one did not exist.”<sup>5</sup> Another peculiar aspect of *Moby Dick* as a story surrounding trauma is the seeming inability for the characters to heal post-traumatically. Fee suggests that Melville may be leading the reader “to believe that no real healing is possible,” and that the novel presents the reader with the idea that “a survivor of trauma can choose only between a damaging dissociation and a suicidal monomania.” Although mental illness was not formally recognized until the mid-1900s, Melville was still able to address issues of mental illness in his fiction. As Melville shows in his work, just because specific language does not exist to discuss a certain issue, the issue can still very much exist.

Another important aspect of trauma is whether or not one’s trauma has been processed. The effect of one’s trauma is greater and more debilitating when it has not been processed. Since there was little awareness of mental illness during the time Melville was writing, it is not surprising that the characters with mental illness do not heal, as Fee notices in her analysis. It is important to recognize that even though mental illness was present in the 1800s, there were not proper methods for treating it. Insanity and psychosis, characterized by consistent breaks from reality and complete madness, were the extent of “treatable” mental illness during this time.<sup>6</sup> The only thing that could be wrong with someone mentally was complete lunacy. So, for people like Ahab who had only had their leg severed by a whale, or Queequeg who almost died hanging from the side of a whaling ship, any mental troubles they experienced were simply troubles. Furthermore, treatment for mental illness was not what we know it to be today—and treatment

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<sup>4</sup> Fee, 139

<sup>5</sup> Fee, 148

<sup>6</sup> Grob, 416-417.

only existed, again, for psychosis. Treatment ranged from interminable hospitalization in a mental hospital or asylum to lobotomy, from bloodletting to exorcism.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, since proper treatment for any mental illnesses less severe than total madness did not exist during Melville's time, it is understandable why his traumatized characters are not able to heal.

The first edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), the official manual of the American Psychological Association that lists all of the classifications of mental disorders, was not published until 1952, a century after *Moby-Dick* was published. "Gross Stress Reaction" (GSR) was a diagnosis in this manual which is similar in definition and symptoms to PTSD as we understand it today. A classification for PTSD was added to the DSM in its third edition, published in 1980. So even though the knowledge about or language for PTSD as a legitimate mental disorder or syndrome was not available during Melville's time, he was still able to explore the effects of trauma on his characters. Trauma typically manifests itself in severe psychological distress,<sup>8</sup> but this distress is not always visible. While Ahab's distress is conspicuous, it is often difficult to determine Queequeg's sentiments. The indiscernibility of Queequeg's emotions and thoughts is largely due to the language and culture barrier between him and Ishmael. Although the communication between the two greatly improved after their first meeting, these boundaries still exist.

Fee argues that the "shifting narrative" in *Moby Dick* displays two things: "the failure of continuity and consistency to communicate the shattering truths experienced by those who have endured great trauma, and [...] the ethical responsibility of a narrator to refuse to bind those truths back together in some imitation of wholeness."<sup>9</sup> She further discusses how the effect of

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<sup>7</sup> Foerschner

<sup>8</sup> "Trauma." Psychology Today. Sussex Publishers. Accessed February 5, 2020.  
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/trauma>.

<sup>9</sup> Fee, 150

Ishmael's "refusal" to create one seamless narrative through an "imitation of wholeness" "opens up the prospect of a narrative that inscribes the complications involved in survival."<sup>10</sup> If Ishmael as a character is not able to heal himself, why would Ishmael as a narrator be able to heal his narrative? The unresolved effects of the traumas in *Moby Dick* manifest themselves throughout the novel, significantly altering the experience of the reader.

Contrasting Fee's suggestion that there is no healing in what will be referred to as a "trauma novel," Michelle Balaev suggests that the trauma novel is a method to induce healing for the author. Balaev discusses the effect of the trauma novel in her article "Trends in literary trauma theory." She claims that trauma can "[create] a speechless fright that divides or destroys identity."<sup>11</sup> This is clearly seen in the separation between the character Ishmael and the narrator Ishmael. The traumas that he endured while on the ship and in its ultimate wreck caused a dissociation between the person *telling* the story of his life and the person who was actually present in the story. Balaev argues that "[a] defining feature of the trauma novel is the transformation of the self ignited by an external, often terrifying experience, which illuminates the process of coming to terms with the dynamics of memory that inform the new perceptions of the self and world."<sup>12</sup> As previously stated, Ishmael's largest traumas occurred on the *Pequod*, Ahab's trauma was Moby Dick severing off his leg, and Queequeg's trauma (which will be explored fully in Chapter 1) is his leaving his homeland. Ishmael's post-trauma self does not simply transform, as Balaev suggests here; rather, his self splits in two, as Fee discusses. Ahab's post-trauma self is transformed from a normal man into a monomaniacal, god-like figure. His self is now centered around the spite that he feels for Moby Dick because of the trauma he

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<sup>10</sup> Fee, 150

<sup>11</sup> Balaev, 149

<sup>12</sup> Balaev, 150

caused. Queequeg's post-trauma self cannot return to his homeland because he does not want to bring disappointment back with him. This variation in transformation displays how trauma manifests itself differently in individuals. In *Moby-Dick*, there is not just life and death; the trauma novel complicates this straightforward dyad. For the characters of *Moby-Dick*, there are two forms of life: pre-trauma and post-trauma.

In addition to the destruction or transformation of identity post-trauma, Balaev discusses how traumatic experiences can disrupt the relationships or attachments that exist between the self and others.<sup>13</sup> The environment that exists both physically and emotionally between individuals grants the trauma a space to manifest; in this space, relationships can be strained, damaged, or otherwise altered. Since the self can only truly be defined in relation to others, the space that exists between people encapsulates one's identity. The "personal and cultural histories," Balaev argues, "define the character's identity, and thus influences the meaning of the traumatic experience."<sup>14</sup> For Ahab, he is not able to move forward after his traumatic past. Instead of processing the trauma that has occurred and moving on with his life, he lets his trauma consume him, fueling his monomania and eventually leading to the demise of the *Pequod*. The "meaning of trauma" is discussed as how the trauma affects an individual's identity and life. Trauma would not be "meaningful" if it did not alter the person carrying that trauma. Balaev further argues that "[the] meaning of trauma often changes each time the protagonist recalls the traumatic event or each time the story of trauma is told to a different individual."<sup>15</sup> *Moby-Dick* complicates this changing of meaning for Ahab's character by having Ishmael be our narrator. As previously stated, the fundamental events of the novel are dependent on Ahab's trauma and monomania.

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<sup>13</sup> Balaev, 160

<sup>14</sup> Balaev, 160

<sup>15</sup> Balaev, 162

With Ishmael as our narrator, it is difficult to see the exact pre-trauma and post-trauma Ahab. Rather than getting Ahab's view of himself before and after losing his leg to Moby Dick, we get other characters' descriptions of him. However, it is still clear that Ahab's trauma affects his thoughts and actions. Although we are only told snippets of his past life, we know that he went from being a husband and father with captaining an occupation to solely a monomaniac old man with a vengeance and a death wish. A favorable feature of Ishmael's narration is that he is able to provide candid chronicles on how Ahab's monomania affects others because of his external perspective.

*Moby-Dick* provides an interesting insight into how individuals go about processing or resolving their traumas without professional psychological treatment. Balaev suggests that the trauma novel “[demonstrates] that healing is achieved through various behaviors not tied to language, such as direct contact with the natural world.”<sup>16</sup> Ishmael's action of going to sea instead of killing himself supports Balaev's argument because the way that he temporarily heals his mental illness resides in nature. Although this method of coping works for Ishmael, Ahab has another idea for what will heal his monomania. He seems to believe that killing Moby Dick would be the one remedy to his trauma. But since Moby Dick destroys the *Pequod* and almost all of the crew, the reader is not able to see if Ahab would have been cured by attaining revenge. However, this raises the question: Was Ahab so far gone in his monomaniacal state that death was his only escape from madness? Melville also makes the reader question: at what point does one's mental illness become incurable?

Healing is typically thought of in a physical sense. Cuts, broken bones, burns—physical traumas—can clearly all heal. But so can mental traumas, even though they are not always

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<sup>16</sup> Balaev, 164

thought of in the same capacity. Critic Sharon Cameron explores the corporeal body in relation to the self in her book chapter “Identity and Disembodiment in *Moby-Dick*.” She discusses “the body’s composition” and how it “manifests itself with respect to the idea that bodies are incomplete.”<sup>17</sup> The physical human body is a consistent and crucial marker or means for comparison throughout *Moby-Dick*. Cameron’s suggestion that the body is incomplete leaves room for other things to fill these spaces. Rather than aim for self-completeness, characters often reach to outside or environmental sources for help becoming complete. One place where this is seen is when Ishmael searches for a place to stay in New Bedford. Cameron argues that his narration brings up matters surrounding the human body and how it is inhabited. “The idea about seeing into the body” (in this case, represented by Ishmael looking inside various inns for a place to stay), she says, “is complicated in *Moby-Dick* by an even more fantasmal idea that one could enter others’ bodies as, for example, a soul inhabits a body.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, if a soul can inhabit a body, what is stopping other powers from entering the same body? If the human body is incomplete and searching for completeness, particularly from outside sources, how do we know what is truly us and what is something else?

Cameron claims that “[a]ttempts to depict what lies inside the person as visible on the body, or to internalize what lies outside the body and hence to ask where an ‘outside’ goes when it is no longer visible,” are common notions in literature, but that it is not the case in *Moby-Dick*. Rather, Melville strives for the reader to discover “the self’s relation to its own body”<sup>19</sup> literally, not cushioned by metaphor. The “primitive issues of identity” that are evident throughout the novel combine with “hermeneutic issues,” (issues concerning interpretation) creating a tension.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Cameron, 15

<sup>18</sup> Cameron, 18

<sup>19</sup> Cameron, 17

<sup>20</sup> Cameron, 19



To parallel the construction of humanness and human bodies, Cameron examines how the physical taking apart and processing of the whales' bodies shows a connection that exists "between literalization and embodiment." She claims that the "taking apart of the whale [...] deflects from the more compulsive dissection and reconstitution of the novel's characters, again as if, could one just take bodies apart, one might see of what they are made."<sup>21</sup> But since we cannot do this, we must rely on the intellectual constructions of identity that are displayed through actions. Cameron further discusses the relationships between the personal and impersonal and between otherness and identity. She wonders where the line between the personal and the impersonal is—if it exists at all. The relationship between otherness and identity is greatly complicated in the novel because, in *Moby-Dick*, "curing" one's identity seems to only be possible through outside sources, namely nonhuman sources (including Moby Dick and Queequeg's coffin, as we will see). Relying on outside or environmental supports to fulfill one's own wishes has proved to be problematic, which is evident in *Moby-Dick*, particularly through Ahab's character.

Critic Stephen Ausband explores a mechanistic approach of reading and analyzing *Moby-Dick*. In his analysis, Ausband labels Ahab as "the supreme isolato" and claims that Melville "draws heavily on the kind of mechanistic imagery"<sup>22</sup> that has been seen in his past novels. The effect of this imagery further develops the reader's understanding of Ahab as a nonhuman character. While Ahab may not be in control of his mechanistic attributes, he becomes fully immersed in his nonhuman nature. Ahab's "deliberate, continued, and complete estrangement from the rest of mankind"<sup>23</sup> is shown in the mechanistic imagery throughout the novel, according

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<sup>21</sup> Cameron, 19

<sup>22</sup> Ausband, 197

<sup>23</sup> Ausband, 197

to Ausband. The first instance in which the reader receives this imagery is in discussion of Ahab's wooden leg—before we even meet him. The estrangement we see “nourishes his monomania,” and Ahab “willfully dooms himself and his followers to destruction in his quest for revenge.”<sup>24</sup> Although Ausband recognizes and discusses the mechanistic imagery associated with Ahab throughout the entire novel, it is crucial for this thesis to recognize its origin: Ahab's traumatic loss of his leg. Ahab has an inherent need to take revenge on the one who made him both physically and mentally nonhuman. Ausband notes that interactions between Ahab and both the carpenter and the blacksmith “demonstrate his frustration at his own weakness, a weakness inherent in a merely human body.”<sup>25</sup> Melville is able to use this mechanistic imagery to discuss the effects of trauma without using the word “trauma.”

## Chapter Overview

There is an abundance of secondary literature that analyzes and critiques *Moby-Dick*. As seen above, there are innumerable and incredibly varying parts of the novel to be explored. With my educational background being primarily in English and psychology, the interactions among language, mental illness, and the self are the elements of the novel that are in my particular interest. Ishmael's inconsistent narration has been explained as Melville's artistry or error; the mental wounds have been argued to either induce healing or show that healing does not exist in a trauma novel; Ishmael's narrative shapes characters' human- or nonhumanness. This thesis further explores the effects of trauma on Ishmael, Ahab, and Queequeg throughout the course of the novel. Both Ishmael and Ahab's traumas are evident to the reader. Queequeg's trauma, however, is not as apparent and is only briefly discussed by Ishmael. Despite being less distinct

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<sup>24</sup> Ausband, 197

<sup>25</sup> Ausband, 204-5

than Ishmael and Ahab's trauma, Queequeg's trauma will be explained and examined in Chapter 1 and he will be interpreted as a traumatized character. *Moby-Dick* is unarguably a trauma novel but is has only recently been regarded as such in its secondary literature.

This thesis builds upon the works of Fee and Balaev, analyzing the effects of trauma in *Moby-Dick* and departing from past work that does not consider these fundamental, consequential effects. Past work that explores the relationship among language, the body, and the self will also be considered in concert with the language of trauma and mental illness. Chapter 1 will explore how the individual traumas that Ishmael and Queequeg experience deepen their connection and identification with mortality and humanity. Ahab, on the other hand, becomes increasingly estranged from mortality and humanity after his trauma, which will be investigated in Chapter 2. This thesis aims to discover how the perceived mortality and humanity of Ishmael, Queequeg, and Ahab are affected and altered by their traumatic experiences and inquire as to why trauma can have such varying effects on different people.

## CHAPTER 1

### Ishmael and Queequeg: Mortal Men

Ishmael's character cannot be discussed without acknowledging the traumatic events that have occurred throughout his life. As discussed in the introduction, many critics have proposed explanations for the inconsistencies in Ishmael's narration. However, the trauma that Ishmael has endured does not seem to play a significant role in these explanations. Depending on the person, trauma can have long-term negative effects on an individual's mental health. And, consequently, when someone's mental health is affected, other aspects of their being and mind are also affected (like memory, identity, and increased levels of depression, to name a few). Recognizing Melville's own traumas over the course of 30 years of life before he wrote *Moby-Dick* is also crucial to be able to properly understand the perspective from which Ishmael's narration was created.

Although trauma theory is a relatively new and still developing literary theory, texts have dealt with issues surrounding trauma for many years. Jensen discusses the use of autobiographical fiction as a way for an author to process their own trauma(s). Caruth discusses literature through a Freudian lens of trauma. She asks questions concerning wounds, voice, life, and death. The inconsistencies in Ishmael's narration throughout the novel, or, rather, his altered recollection of events as a result of his traumatic past, become evident when we examine the trauma that our narrator endured. Since Ishmael witnesses all of his shipmates die—and was very close to death himself—mortality is clearly an important aspect of Ishmael's identity and, moreover, his retelling of events in the novel. This chapter will analyze notions of mortality and

immortality as they are presented in *Moby-Dick*, particularly in relation to Ishmael and Queequeg and the formation of their identities.

“Call me Ishmael,” our narrator plainly introduces himself at the very beginning of the novel. He immediately begins to discuss with the reader his cold and wintry “hypos” and the various reasons for his desire to set sail. He wastes no time with frills; he attempts to draw the reader into the deepest parts of his life right off the bat. By not easing into the relationship with his reader, Ishmael is able to create a deep relationship with the reader in the first moments of the story. The reader is instantly drawn into the connection because of the closeness that sharing such personal information creates. This establishment of familiarity so early on in the novel allows for Ishmael to create a trusting environment where the reader will hesitate to question the extent of information that Ishmael provides the reader with. Why would a narrator give out such personal information if he is then going to hide other information from his reader later on? As I will later discuss, the reader should be wary of trusting the actual accuracy of the information provided by Ishmael; however, the reader should not question whether or not Ishmael is sharing what he believes to be true.

Ishmael also describes to the reader that going to sea is his “substitute for pistol and ball.”<sup>1</sup> He is able to recognize his own depressive tendencies and suicidal thoughts, which would often make a reader question the reliability of such a narrator. But because of the rapport that Ishmael establishes by sharing such personal information, the reader’s experience is already more intimate than it typically is in the first pages of a novel, and, subsequently, some of the mistrust that would accompany this mental instability is alleviated. Ishmael concludes the first paragraph of the novel by generalizing his experience. He states, “[if] they but knew it, almost all

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<sup>1</sup> Melville, 18 (subsequent citations of this edition of *Moby-Dick* will appear parenthetically)

men in their degree, some time or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings toward the ocean with me” (18). Ishmael is confident that, regardless of whether or not they are aware of the feeling, all men feel the same way about the ocean as he does. Through crafting this closeness between himself and the reader, Ishmael creates a relationship that will last throughout the entire novel. The intimacy in sharing something so deep about himself, in this instance his mental illness and instability, shows his humanity.

From the first chapter to the last, Ishmael discusses the connection of the ocean to “mortal men.” The second instance of the word “man” in *Moby-Dick* occurs within Ishmael’s discussion of the innate draw of the ocean: “Posted like silent sentinels all around the town, stand thousands upon thousands of *mortal men* fixed in ocean reveries” (18; emphasis added). Described here as “mortal men,” Ishmael recognizes the impermanence of human life and how the ocean is able to provide a distraction from the idea of mortality. The penultimate occurrence of “man” occurs during the chase and ultimate wreck of the Pequod. With “all their enchanted eyes upon the whale,” Ishmael describes Moby Dick in the moments before the Pequod’s total wreck. “Retribution, swift vengeance, eternal malice were in his whole aspect, and spite of all that *mortal man* could do, the solid white buttress of his forehead smote the ship's starboard bow, till *men* and timbers reeled” (425; emphasis added). The same impermanence that was so obvious to Ishmael at the very beginning of this novel comes full circle at the end as he witnesses the deaths of all his shipmates. While Ishmael’s recognition of human mortality persists throughout the entirety of *Moby-Dick*, these two instances of “men,” the second and the second-to-last, reflect a shift in the meaning of mortal to our narrator. The second instance shows a commonality between all men: regardless of differences between men, all men will die. The second-to-last occurrence, however, shows an inherent powerlessness in humanness. Again,

Ishmael recognizes that all men will die, but this time it's a helpless recognition rather than a comforting one.

The most profound effect of Ishmael's trauma appears to be his definitive association with human mortality. Ishmael claims to have had previous experiences with depression and suicidal ideation, which can often originate from avoiding the daily pain and suffering that comes from daily life. At the beginning of the novel, Ishmael found comfort in mortality—knowing that the emotional suffering that is inherent in human existence would eventually cease. But by the end of the novel, after one hundred and thirty-five chapters of processing his trauma, Ishmael is scared of death. As Ishmael is able to work through his trauma throughout the novel, his connection to “mortal man” deepens.<sup>2</sup>

As Kurtz claims, “[f]undamentally, trauma is a wound.”<sup>3</sup> The study of trauma, primarily in the area of clinical psychology (and later translated into the world of literature), began in the mid-1900s. Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was not clinically recognized as a disorder until 1980; previously mental illness associated with trauma was classified as “Gross Stress Reaction” (GSR). To this day, there is no “cure” for PTSD. Progress can be made with patients through various approaches of psychotherapy, but many psychologists argue that there is no “cure” to mental disorders. When diagnosing PTSD, one criterion required for the patient to have for the disorder is a stressor. To have a stressor, the patient must have been “exposed to: death, threatened death, actual or threatened serious injury, or actual or threatened sexual violence, in the following way(s): Direct exposure, witnessing the trauma, learning that a relative or close friend was exposed to a trauma, or indirect exposure to aversive details of the trauma, usually in

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<sup>2</sup> My reading of *Moby-Dick* is predicated on the assumption that he is telling the story after all the events have occurred, particularly the wreck of the Pequod.

<sup>3</sup> Kurtz, 1

the course of professional duties (e.g., first responders, medics).”<sup>4</sup> This definition leaves a significant amount of room for the interpretation of what a trauma is—but this is not a bad thing. Trauma is hard enough to recognize and to treat, let alone define. It is also important to notice that if someone experiences a stressor, it is not inevitable that this person will experience trauma as well. Two different people can experience the exact same stressor but, because of different past experiences and chemical makeups in their brain along with a slew of other differences, the first person could be seemingly unaffected while the second person is severely traumatized. As the sole survivor of a shipwreck, watching your close friends die, and almost dying yourself, there are multiple stressors in that one event. And for Ishmael, he discusses that he had preexisting mental health issues (namely depression and suicidal ideation) before even setting out on the Pequod’s voyage. Therefore, this trauma is not the only thing that he is dealing with mentally and his past mental health struggles make him more susceptible to being traumatically affected by stressors.

In her article “Surviving the Wreck,” Jensen discusses the relationship between the author and the narrator in a literary text surrounding events of trauma. She looks at the relationships between trauma and the body, writing and post-traumatic identity, and trauma narratives and autobiographical fiction. Jensen also explores how the textual representations of each of these variables provide both different lenses for the reader to examine the text through and opportunities for the author to use the text to reflect on these variables in his/her own life. Jensen’s interest comes from that of personal experience; she has used autobiographical fiction to help process her own trauma. In this article, she suggests that Melville uses Ishmael’s narrative as a method of healing through autobiographical fiction. Melville is able to create a

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<sup>4</sup> American Psychiatric Association, 271-272



distance between himself and his trauma through Ishmael and his fictional trauma; this distance allows for Melville to begin to work through his own trauma in a way that is not too overwhelming. Of the trauma that Melville has experienced, Jensen gives a quick summary: “Melville’s childhood was marred by his father’s bankruptcy, emotional instability and early death, and his later life was blighted by his belief that he had inherited his father’s madness.”<sup>5</sup> The recurring stressors that Melville’s father provided through his actions added up to a significant amount of trauma for Melville. Also, since mental illness has a genetic component, Melville would not have been wrong to worry about his own mental health given his father’s history. This genetic component likely made Melville more susceptible to both being affected by stressors and developing PTSD.

Jensen notes four symptoms of PTSD articulated in the DSM-V: re-experiencing the trauma, avoiding the trauma, negative cognitions (including depression), and arousal (including aggressive or compulsive actions). We know that Ishmael struggled with negative cognitions, namely depression and suicidal thoughts, before even setting out on this whaling journey. And although he doesn’t describe to the reader what happens after he is saved by the Rachel, his previous struggle with mental health would make him more susceptible to developing PTSD. Furthermore, we can distinguish from the narrative language, as Jensen suggests, the effects of Ishmael’s trauma.

Since the inability to retell a series of events chronologically and accurately is a common result of PTSD, Ishmael the narrator should *not* be separated from Ishmael the character as they often are in criticisms. As a post-traumatic narrator, Ishmael is reconstructing the story as linearly as possible. Jensen argues: “research in trauma studies has long demonstrated that

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<sup>5</sup> Jensen, 432

traumatic experience disrupts normal memory processes, leaving victims with a fractured sense of their past.” With a disrupted memory process, Ishmael’s narrative is not necessarily accurate. Furthermore, the argued inconsistencies in his narration are to be expected post-traumatically. Ishmael is not a prophetic narrator; he is simply doing his best to retell his story with as much detail and accuracy as is possible—regardless of the view it seems to take. While Ishmael could not have seen what was happening behind closed doors, it is possible that someone who was present told him what happened and Ishmael simply relays the information to his reader in a manner that suggests his own presence.

Although Ishmael is traumatized, he still has the emotional space to reflect on his relationship with Queequeg. Once the two are able to get past the language barrier that exists between them, Ishmael claims that it’s “Better [to] sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian” (36). Throughout the novel, Ishmael and Queequeg develop a brotherly relationship (maybe even more than brotherly) despite their differences. Critic Charles Haberstroh examines male identity in *Moby Dick*; one of the relationships he focuses on is the one between Ishmael and Queequeg. They rely on one another for company and dependability, among other things. Haberstroh argues that Ishmael relies on Queequeg “to be a center of safety.”<sup>6</sup> Queequeg’s tranquility contrasts with Ishmael’s “mental gymnastics”, as Haberstroh describes, and distracts Ishmael from his own racing mind. These two characters have opposite yet complementary personalities. Haberstroh also claims that “Ishmael’s mind must keep moving, because to stop moving would be to leave himself open and unguarded. Thus, there is always a hint of the frantic in his constant compulsion to verbalize.”<sup>7</sup> Ishmael’s vulnerability is something the reader often finds endearing. People generally do not like to feel vulnerable; being able to clearly see

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<sup>6</sup> Haberstroh, 95

<sup>7</sup> Haberstroh, 95-96

vulnerability in our narrator creates a sense of empathy for Ishmael. Both Queequeg's calmness and sureness in himself are qualities Ishmael may be jealous of. But this does not make Ishmael's own character less valuable. The individual worth of Ishmael and Queequeg would be less apparent without the juxtaposition evident in their relationship.

An idea briefly presented by French Philosopher and Sociologist Bruno Latour in his book *We Have Never Been Modern* deals with the separation between the human and the nonhuman. The nonhuman can be either beast or God. Latour discusses the "conjoined creation of those three entities."<sup>8</sup> He suggests a hierarchy amongst the three with beast at the lowest point, man in the middle, and God at the highest point. Man, beast, and God are all treated independently, but as Latour claims, "hybrids [of the three] continue to multiply," which he argues is an "effect of this separate treatment."<sup>9</sup> Beings can exist between these three points, but he makes it clear that it is a ladder. By the end of *Moby-Dick*, Queequeg's character questions this hierarchy. At the beginning of the novel, and in the ideology of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century US, it would have been difficult to argue that Queequeg—as a non-white person and a "cannibal"— would exist anywhere other than between beast and man on Latour's hierarchy. But by the end, Queequeg becomes godlike in his own nature—without losing the qualities that make him "bestly." To make Queequeg fit on this hierarchy, man, beast, and God would have to make up the three points of a triangle, with Queequeg right in the middle the triangle.

When the reader is first introduced to Queequeg at the beginning of *Moby-Dick*, he is described as a "dangerous man," (32) a "wild cannibal," (35) and a "savage" (27). But as Ishmael becomes more familiar with Queequeg, he seems to be less concerned with his physical attributes. "And what is it, thought I, after all! It's only his outside; a man can be honest in any

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<sup>8</sup> Latour, 13

<sup>9</sup> Latour, 13

sort of skin” (34). This narration shows that Ishmael is not blind to Queequeg’s physical features but is more focused on his actual character and morals. The two quickly become bonded in their shared bed.

Although the two become close, there is still a lot Ishmael doesn’t know about his “bosom friend”<sup>10</sup> (56). As Queequeg dresses himself, putting his boots on under their bed, Ishmael remarks, “though by no law of propriety that I ever heard of, is any *man* required to be private when putting on his boots” (38; emphasis added). He continues, “But Queequeg, do you see, was a *creature* in the transition state—neither caterpillar nor butterfly” (38; emphasis added). Although described as savage, Ishmael credits that Queequeg was just civilized enough to function in a typical human society. A few chapters into their growing friendship, Ishmael states: “Queequeg was George Washington *cannibalistically* developed” (55; emphasis added). Farther down the same page, he shares that “*savages* are strange beings,” and a bit farther, “we *mortals* should not be conscious of so living or striving” (55; emphasis added). Queequeg is an unknown being; Ishmael is sure he is a cannibal and a savage, but not sure that he is a man or a mortal. This ambiguity in Queequeg’s character creates some confusion for the reader when constructing his identity. However, Ishmael’s acceptance of Queequeg without knowing his true being shows the reader just how welcoming he is of others, which then makes the reader accept Queequeg regardless of his true identity. Both Ishmael and the reader are forced to take Queequeg for all he is: savage, cannibal, mortal man.

When Ishmael learns more about his fast friend, he informs the reader of Queequeg’s background. He includes a story about how he left his homeland of Kokovoko, where Queequeg

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<sup>10</sup> “He seemed to take to me quite as naturally and unbiddenly as I to him; and when our smoke was over, he pressed his forehead against mine, clasped me round the waist, and said that henceforth, we were married; meaning, in his country’s phrase, that we were bosom friends; he would gladly die for me, if need should be.” (56)

was royalty, “to see something more of Christendom than a specimen whaler or two” and to enlighten his “untutored countrymen” (59). He requested passage from a visiting ship to take him to “Christian lands,” which he was denied. But this didn’t stop Queequeg. He paddled after the ship, determined to learn about the Christian people. To get from his canoe to the ship, he “darted out,” accidentally capsizing his canoe, “climbed up the chains; and throwing himself at full length upon the deck, grappled a ring-bolt there, and swore not to let it go, though hacked in pieces” (59). Hanging for dear life, the captain still would not welcome him on board; he threatened to throw Queequeg overboard, “suspend[ing] a cutlass over his naked wrists” (59). Fortunately for Queequeg, the captain eventually allowed him on board. “Trauma” is typically defined as a mental injury that can be “caused by emotional shock.”<sup>11</sup> Emotional shock can certainly be a result of a distressing or near-death experience, like what Queequeg has experienced in trying to board this ship. After spending time aboard the whaling ship, Queequeg discovered that “even Christians could be both miserable and wicked; infinitely more so, than all his father’s heathens” (60). From capsizing his own canoe to hanging for dear life from a ship, from receiving a threat to be thrown overboard to finding out his one prospect for enlightenment has proven hopeless, Queequeg has had some traumatic experiences in his life—both physical and emotional.

Queequeg, in Chapter 110, becomes very ill and is believed to be on his deathbed. Ishmael narrates: “at this time it was that my poor pagan companion, and fast bosom-friend, Queequeg, was seized with a fever, which brought him nigh to his endless end” (363). Queequeg first “caught a terrible chill,” which then turned into a fever, and eventually he lay in his hammock, “close to the very sill of the door of death” (364). But even in this clearly human,

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<sup>11</sup> “Trauma.” Oxford English Dictionary, oed.com.

mortal experience of sickness and dying, Queequeg is not fully human, nor is he fully beast. Ishmael describes Queequeg: “like circles on the water, which, as they grow fainter, expand; so his eyes seemed rounding and rounding, like the rings of Eternity” (364). One of his wishes on his deathbed was for the carpenter to build him a coffin. Transferring some of his earthly belongings—including a flask of water, a pillow, and a “small bag of woody earth”—to his coffin, Queequeg propagated his life into this object. However, “now that he had apparently made every preparation for death; now that his coffin was proved a good fit, Queequeg suddenly rallied” (366). Ishmael describes that Queequeg had some unfinished business ashore, and therefore decided that he could not die yet.

Queequeg had simply “changed his mind about dying,” and, when asked, confirmed that “whether to live or die [is] a matter of his own sovereign will and pleasure” (366). For Queequeg, “if a man made up his mind to live, mere sickness could not kill him: nothing but a whale, or a gale, or some violent, ungovernable unintelligent destroyer of that sort” (366). The juxtapositions among language concerning man, beast, and god throughout Ishmael’s narration—including “endless end,” “death,” “Eternity,” and “sovereign will”—creates confusion about Queequeg’s humanity. Additionally, immediately after Queequeg describes that it is up to a man whether he lives or not, Ishmael narrates: “[n]ow, there is this noteworthy difference between savage and civilized; that while a sick, civilized man may be six months convalescing, generally speaking, a sick savage is almost half-well again in a day” (366). Even when Queequeg displays godlike power, he is characterized as a savage.

After convalescing, Queequeg continued to project himself onto his coffin. “Many spare hours he spent,” Ishmael narrates, “in carving the lid with all manner of grotesque figures and drawings; and it seemed that hereby he was striving, in his rude way, to copy parts of the twisted

tattooing on his body” (366). With his worldly belongings inside and his skin’s tattooing decorating the exterior, the coffin is fundamentally an extension of Queequeg’s life. Jumping to the end of the novel, this very extension of the civil savage is what saves our narrator. Ishmael describes:

Till, gaining that vital centre, the black bubble upward burst; and now, liberated by reason of its cunning spring, and, owing to its great buoyancy, rising with great force, the coffin life-buoy shot lengthwise from the sea, fell over, and floated by my side. Buoyed up by that coffin, for almost one whole day and night, I floated on a soft and dirge-like main. The unharmed sharks, they glided by as if with padlocks on their mouths; the savage sea-hawks sailed with sheathed beaks. (427)

As Ishmael was about to be pulled down into the vortex created by the sinking *Pequod*, Queequeg’s coffin came to his rescue. Queequeg is clearly not simply a human character. His identity begins solely as a savage, unquestionably a beast-man hybrid. But in the second half of the novel, he is no longer *just* a savage. He becomes a reliable man and shipmate; he is an integral member of the crew. In addition to having more “manly” characteristics as his character develops, Queequeg also has godlike qualities. He seems to control his own death, so, while still a mortal being, he is godlike in this nature. Queequeg also, through the extension of his own self that is his coffin, saves Ishmael’s life. Additionally, there is an interesting parallel that arises between Queequeg’s wooden coffin and Ahab’s whalebone leg. The wooden coffin that Queequeg projects his own life onto ends up saving Ishmael’s life, whereas Ahab’s whalebone leg that physically supports his own life (similar to the role of Queequeg’s coffin) is ultimately a representation of the motivation of the chase that resulted in the wreck of the *Pequod* and the

deaths of most of the crew. This parallel between artificial extensions of these characters' lives will be further examined in the following chapter.

Ishmael is hyperaware of his humanity and the reality of death. Ahab is unaware of his mortality and believes he is invincible, which I will further examine in the second chapter. Queequeg, on the other hand, is *aware* of his mortality—yet he is the one who controls it. Ishmael presents the reader with an idea of “degrees of fatality” in Chapter 41. It has been evident throughout the novel that different characters seem to have different ideas about their own mortalities and humanity. This passage shows the reader that our narrator is also tuned into the varying extents to which our characters believe they are mortal. Ishmael narrates:

But at length, such calamities did ensue in these assaults — not restricted to sprained wrists and ankles, broken limbs, or devouring amputations—but fatal to the last *degree of fatality*; those repeated disastrous repulses, all accumulating and piling their terrors upon Moby Dick; those things had gone far to shake the fortitude of many brave hunters, to whom the story of the White Whale had eventually come. (152 ;emphasis added)

In terms of degrees of fatality, just like the man-beast-God hierarchy, Queequeg clearly has a unique placement. His conception of mortality is vastly different from his shipmates. The concept Ishmael creates in this passage of degrees of fatality can inform how people identify themselves on an individual basis. For Ishmael, he was contemplating death when we were first introduced to him on page one, with no impression of any other existence. I would argue that Ishmael would have only the first degree of fatality. For him, it is either life or death; there doesn't seem to be an in-between. Although Queequeg is able to decide when he dies—no god or sickness can kill him—he likely only has the first degree of fatality. As previously discussed, Ishmael describes: “it was Queequeg's conceit that if a man made up his mind to live, mere



sickness could not kill him” (366). There seems to still be only life or death for him, regardless of his ability to decide when it occurs—but this is not all. Queequeg does not only control his own death, it seems; he also controls Ishmael’s. At the end of the novel when the *Pequod* is wrecked, Queequeg knew it was his time to die; and in the time of his own death, Queequeg offered up the wooden extension of his life to save his bosom friend, the equivalent to taking a bullet for him.

Whaling is not typically a quest for revenge. Typically, whaling voyages serve the purpose of killing whales and harvesting their bodies. For example, whale oil was used to fuel lamps and their bones were made into corsets (or prosthetics, like Ahab’s). All crewmembers of the *Pequod* went on this whaling voyage as employees; they would only get paid adequately if their haul made adequate profit. They did not sign up for this voyage to assist in Ahab’s quest for vengeance, and although they were caught up in Ahab’s monomania, the crew was still hunting whales as anticipated. The crew still had to turn a profit, regardless of Ahab’s agenda. The desire for profit coupled with the seeming lack of care for mental illness in the actions of the novel are evident in Chapter 93, “The Castaway.” Stubb is crazed with the monetary value of a whale’s body, even in comparison to a human’s life. After Pip is launched out of the boat by a whale during a hunt, they lose the whale in order to save Pip. But Stubb commands: “Stick to the boat, Pip, or by the Lord, I won’t pick you up if you jump; mind that. We can’t afford to lose whales by the likes of you; a whale would sell for thirty times what you would, Pip, in Alabama. Bear that in mind, and don’t jump any more” (320-321). Stubb is furious that the crew had to let a whale loose to save Pip, and warns him that he won’t save Pip if it happens again. Stubb sticks to his word, and Pip ends up almost drowning. This does not elicit much of a response from our narrator. It is likely that his own trauma has made him apathetic. In his retrospective retelling of

events, he is able to *recall* the events, but not the emotions that he associates with them. In this scenario, Ishmael simply reacts with a description: “[it] was a beautiful, bounteous, blue day; the spangled sea calm and cool, and flatly stretching away, all round, to the horizon... Bobbing up and down in that sea, Pip’s ebon head showed like a head of cloves” (321). Although Ishmael shares that he expects one of the boats in their wake to rescue Pip from the water, Ishmael seems unfazed by these events. He knows that Pip would die if no one helps him, but he still does not feel responsible to be the one who does help him. While, again, there are aspects of race that influence the events and Ishmael’s reactions, we will focus here on Ishmael’s retelling of the story. At the end of this chapter, Ishmael goes on to discuss the relationship between insanity and divinity. Ishmael believes that while “bobbing” in the ocean, “[Pip] saw God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it,” and that because he was able to see God, “his shipmates called him mad” (321-322). Ishmael concludes, “man’s insanity is heaven’s sense; and wandering from all mortal reason man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God” (322). In Ishmael’s deliberation regarding Pip’s encounter with God and his insanity, it is clear that mental health and illness takes center stage in Ishmael’s representations of characters. Insanity is present in many of the other characters in this novel, which normalizes Ishmael’s own experiences with his trauma, depression, and suicidal ideation.

The ocean provides sufficient distraction from humanity for Ishmael and, arguably, all men. As Ishmael describes the fascination that all men have with the ocean, he recognizes the impermanence of humanity and acknowledges how the ocean distracts men from the daunting idea of mortality. Ishmael says, “[p]osted like silent sentinels all around the town, stand thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries” (18). His direct identification

of men as “mortal” illustrates the closeness of transience to his own experience as a man.

Ishmael continues with the idea of “ocean reveries” on the next page; he further explores what he believes is a human instinct that draws men to the ocean: “There is a magic in it. Let the most absent-minded of men be plunged in his deepest reveries—stand that man on his legs, set his feet a-going, and he will infallibly lead you to water, if water there be in all that region” (19). There is some kind of draw of humankind to the incredibly expansive, terrorizing ocean—a draw strong enough to unconsciously lead a man to it, regardless of distance. The wondrousness of the unknowability of something so great is calming to the human mind that is constantly grappling with and trying to escape the ultimate death that all humans face. The degree of fear of death that characters face helps the reader construct identities for these characters in *Moby Dick*.

Although the ocean can distract men from mortality, whaling presents men with even more dangers than are present on land, which, while terrifying, makes the ocean even more exciting. Whaling is truly a life-threatening endeavor, but whalers are fully aware of the risks that accompany such an occupation. Leading up to his trip to sea, Ishmael subtly mentions some dangers that he is expecting on his journey, which we can assume other whalers are also aware of. Whaling involves journeying out on a relatively small ship into perilous waters to hunt mammals more than eleven times the size of an average person. To not expect some dangers on such a voyage would be ludicrous. Paintings of whales capsizing ships even hang on the walls of inns where crewmembers stay. Throughout the novel, Ishmael explores certain dangers more comprehensively. The peril of a whale-line earned an entire chapter solely on the topic. Although dependent on the material it’s made of, the whale-line has varying degrees of softness and elasticity—but all lines are stronger than one would expect at two-thirds of an inch thick. This small but incredibly strong rope is what the harpooner attaches to his harpoon and, once a whale

is struck, tows the whale into the ship with. Without this whale-line, the body of a whale would not be able to be retrieved. The whale-line is what, at the end of the day, allows the whalers to collect their wages. For men, there is no use for a body of a whale that sinks to the ocean floor.

Even though the whalers' craft relies so heavily on this rope, it is also what brings a considerable amount of danger to the men on the whaleship. In Chapter 60, "The Line," Ishmael describes the role of the whale-line and the peril that it brings upon the entire ship:

the whale-line folds the whole boat in its complicated coils, twisting and writhing around it in almost every direction. All the oarsmen are involved in its perilous contortions; so that to the timid eye of the landsman, they seem as Indian jugglers, with the deadliest snakes sportively festooning their limbs. (228-9)

For a rope durable enough to haul in a whale weighing about 100,000 pounds, it would take the slightest graze of a whaler to send him flying into the ocean. In Ishmael's description here, he places the focus on the "contortions" of the rope in relation to the ship. The eye of the landsman is "timid", suggesting that the eye of the oarsman is fearless. For something to be "festooned" would be to be formed in the shape of a "chain or garland of flowers, leaves, etc., suspended in a curved form between two points."<sup>12</sup> From this definition, the line would provide two points of suspension for the limbs of an oarsman to be chained between. The oarsman therefore must be intrepid, looking upon such a terrifying line with daring, adventurous eyes.

He expands upon the perils of the whale-line shortly after the previous passage, detailing his experience of the contortions of the rope and the ship:

Perhaps a very little thought will now enable you to account for those repeated whaling disasters—some few of which are casually chronicled—of this man or that man being

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<sup>12</sup> "Festoon." Oxford English Dictionary, oed.com.

taken out of the boat by the line, and lost. For, when the line is darting out, to be seated then in the boat, is like being seated in the midst of the manifold whizzings of a steam-engine in full play, when every flying beam, and shaft, and wheel, is grazing you. (229)

Nowhere on the ship is safe when the whale-line is employed. Each man must be incredibly cautious for their own livelihood. The “whaling disasters” that have been documented often involve a whale-line. And even just one line can contort itself around the ship, creating the “steam-engine”-like nature that he compares it to.

Ishmael further continues to describe this experience, sharing that on a whaleship, you are constantly moving, rocking back and forth with the movement of the waves:

as the profound calm which only apparently precedes and prophesies of the storm, is perhaps more awful than the storm itself; for, indeed, the calm is but the wrapper and envelope of the storm; and contains it in itself, as the seemingly harmless rifle holds the fatal powder, and the ball, and the explosion; so the graceful repose of the line, as it silently serpentine about the oarsmen before being brought into actual play—this is a thing which carries more of true terror than any other aspect of this dangerous affair. But why say more? All men live enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters round their necks; but it is only when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that mortals realise the silent, subtle, ever-present perils of life. (229)

As the “calm... prophesies the storm,” there is a biblical and authoritative tone that Ishmael uses at the beginning of this drawn-out simile. The “storm” that represents the potential of death seems to be the word of God; the authoritative tone suggests a permanence that is unable to be detached from the idea of mortality. The calm that the rope encompasses before it is employed is the most terrifying part, according to Ishmael; before it is darting and contorting itself around the

ship, the whalers do not know what to expect and where it will fly. If there is a moment where one is not caught up in whale-lines and it is calm, then this is more frightening than actually being entangled in such a life-threatening position. As Ishmael claims that “[a]ll men live enveloped in whale lines,” there is a contradiction in this description. To be “enveloped” suggests a fullness that does not match the physique of the whale-line. It is less than an inch in thickness, and it would take a meticulous coiling around a person to become properly enveloped in the rope. Ishmael augments the presence of the whale-line in this description, matching its size in his description to the amount of damage it can do to a man.

Ishmael’s chronicle of the whale-line further exhibits Ishmael’s deepened connection with mortality in his post-traumatic narration. While he recognizes that when mortals are in the calm before the storm, they are not always consciously aware of these perils—but as soon as they are “caught in the swift, sudden turn of death” these perils are unmistakable and can even be paralyzing. The death of a man’s soul unmistakably accompanies the death of his body. For Ishmael, the “perils” of life may slip his mind, but they never cease to exist. And when these dangers do present themselves, Ishmael is crippled with the fear of human mortality.

Ishmael excitedly recaps the dangers that accompany hunting and killing whales in Chapter 98 after finishing his description of how whale oil is processed in the preceding chapter. He finishes the tale with,

and away they fly to fight another whale, and go through the whole weary thing again. Oh! my friends, but this is man-killing! Yet this is life. For hardly have we mortals by long toilings extracted from this world’s vast bulk its small but valuable sperm; and then, with weary patience, cleansed ourselves from its defilements, and learned to live here in clean tabernacles of the soul; hardly is this done, when—There she blows! —the ghost is

spouted up, and away we sail to fight some other world, and go through life's old routine again. (331)

In Ishmael's extensive comparison of whaling to living, he ponders what the point of living is if, as soon as we have lived, we are dead. Once the trials and tribulations of this life we know are over, we simply go on to fight another battle in another body in another world. In the preceding paragraph, Ishmael exclaims, "Oh! the metempsychosis!" (331). Metempsychosis is defined in a footnote as "the passing of the soul of a dead person into a new body" (331). This discussion of metempsychosis and reincarnation suggests that Ishmael may believe that individuals' souls do not cease simultaneously with one's physical form. However, as readers, we cannot be sure that these beliefs Ishmael is projecting are truly his own. On such a perilous journey like the one Ahab leads, this deliberation of what happens after death is to be expected. But exclamations do not always equate with one's beliefs, leaving the reader unsure of Ishmael's true beliefs.

Furthermore, because of Ishmael's own mental instability that we have experienced since the beginning of the novel, the reader cannot always trust the accuracy of what he says. But even though Ishmael's claims and beliefs cannot always be taken at face value, his narration is still valuable to understand his own processing of his experience on his whaling journey. From this passage, we can tell that Ishmael is open-minded and accepting of different beliefs and that he is not sure of his own beliefs. While this can create a sense of uncertainty for the reader, Ishmael remains relatable to multiple different readers. And since he is not set in his own beliefs, the reader can conform him to their own.

Ishmael's inherent need to compare his own form to another's can be explained through the theory of symbolic interactionism. George Herbert Mead, one of the founders of this theory, explains that "selves exist only in relation to other selves, as the organism as a physical

object exists only in its relation to other physical objects.”<sup>13</sup> Social comparison is necessary for an individual to create an accurate representation of their self and the social groups that they belong to. Without comparison across species, species would not even exist to begin with. It was only through differences between groups of beings that the biological classification known as the taxonomic system came to be. Through the existence of other beings with different anatomy than humans, Ishmael is able to justify the significance of the human anatomy. Therefore, Ishmael’s comparison of the physical forms of man and whale helps him be able to understand his own self better in relation to this other.

Scattered throughout the novel, Ishmael compares the body of “men” (rather than a specific character) to the body of whales. One of the main comparisons he makes is the way in which each creature perceives the world through the positioning of their eyes on their figure. Ishmael examines these distinct bodies in Chapter 74, “The Sperm Whale’s Head Contrasted View.” He says: “[m]an may, in effect, be said to look out on the world from a sentry-box with two joined sashes for his window. But with the whale, these two sashes are separately inserted, making two distinct windows, but sadly impairing the view” (263). To Ishmael, the way in which the whale gathers their optical information of the world around them is “impaired”. He believes that the eyes are what distinguishes humans’ front from their sides and back. In our world, as humans, we rely so heavily on optical information and feedback to successfully interact with our environment. But Ishmael does not recognize in this chapter that whales rely on other senses far more than humans do; eyes are neither the distinguishing feature of whales nor the sense that whales rely heavily on. In the great depths of the ocean that whales reach, sight is often not a productive way to interact with their environment. Ishmael could not have known the importance

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<sup>13</sup> Mead, 1982 (need to find real source for this, just from encyclopedia)



of marine mammals' sonar systems. Whales use the sounds they produce to help locate things in their surrounding landscape. But Ishmael is so centered around the human experience and tries to project it onto these completely different creatures. This shows that Ishmael has a difficulty in seeing others' points of view, even where there is a clear anatomical difference. How, then, does he see the world for other people that share the same anatomy? For Queequeg, does Ishmael think that he experiences the same world? While it may be clear to the reader that no, their experiences of the world are indeed very different, this may not be apparent to our narrator. However, since he cannot distinguish others' viewpoints from his own even when it is a whale's viewpoint, this illustrates that he is simply naïve and oblivious, rather than intentionally disregarding the experiences of others.

Ishmael further ponders the difference of positioning of the eyes of humans and whales in Chapter 74. He wonders about the whale's perception of the world around him and the processes that his brain must go through to create this image.

How is it, then, with the whale? True, both his eyes, in themselves, must simultaneously act; but in his brain so much more comprehensive, combining, and subtle than man's, that he can at the same moment of time attentively examine two distinct prospects, one on one side of him, and the other in an exactly opposite direction? (263)

There is a degree of wonder that surrounds this idea of seeing, perceiving, and comprehending visual information from two distinct sides of the whale's body. To this day, there is still so much that is unknown about the workings of a human brain. How, then, can we begin to understand the workings of a brain whose information we cannot even perceive? While we know what the image of the world looks like for humans, it is impossible for us to know what the image of the world is for a whale. Is it true, as Ishmael states, that the whale's brain is more "comprehensive"

than man's, simply because of the placement of his eyes? Earlier in the chapter, Ishmael suggests that a whale must perceive "one distinct picture on this side, and another distinct picture on that side; while all between must be profound darkness and nothingness to him" (262-3). While humans and whales are both mammals and share many anatomical features, Ishmael is projecting the important aspects of human anatomy onto that of a whale. Ishmael assumes that the "two distinct windows" must be "impairing" their view of the world—but this is not true. Vision is not nearly as important for whales as it is for humans. But as Ishmael identifies deeper and deeper with "mortal man" as the novel progresses, he projects human features onto other beings.

This projection of humanness onto others is also evident in the transformation of Queequeg's depiction throughout the novel. His portrayal begins as a savage Pagan and a wild cannibal and transitions into a clearly mortal man with some kind of divine power. Although Queequeg is seemingly able to control the moment of his death, he tells Ishmael that if any man "made up his mind to live," (366) then he could not be killed. So, even in this god-like moment, the emphasis is still on humanity. Once Ishmael is able to transform Queequeg's character's depiction from a beast to a man, Ishmael does not allow for him to be seen as a divine character. Additionally, the trauma that Queequeg suffered in leaving his Pagan homeland occurred when he was in search of enlightenment. He believed he would find this in the Christian world and, when he realized that Christians did not have what he was in search for, decided that he could not bring this disappointment home with him and never returned. The decision to never return home creates a separation or gap between the complete savage that he used to be and the beast-man hybrid that he has transformed into. And while his god-like qualities are not recognized as such by Ishmael, it is clear to the reader that Queequeg's hybridity extends past beast-man into the "god" realm, as well. Queequeg's post-trauma identity is centered around humanity and

mortality; he is no longer just a bestial character and, although he does seem to control his death in a god-like manner, he is a mortal man.

Ishmael focuses on the traumatic events of others' lives for three main reasons. First, knowing that he is not the only one to have experienced trauma helps him normalize his experience and recognize that he is not alone. Second, talking through others' traumas can help him better comprehend his own. Third, telling this story retrospectively (*after* experiencing his own trauma) makes trauma an important identifier for Ishmael; other aspects of their identities become less important for Ishmael. His trauma shapes his own identity, the identities of others, what information he shares with the reader, and the accuracy of the memories he recalls.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Ahab's Estrangement from Humanity**

The previous chapter discussed Ishmael's clear connection with mortality that resulted from his trauma. This chapter will explore the effects that Ahab's trauma has on his characterization. Rather than being *more* connected to his mortality, Ahab becomes alienated from it. He becomes less of a man, and more of a god-like character. Moby Dick is a god-like character, as well. Although he is a whale, his characteristics make him seemingly immortal. Because Ahab *survived* the wrath of this godlike whale, making it out with only the loss of a leg, he believes that he cannot be terminated. His wooden leg is a constant reminder of both his physical loss and his superhuman gain, affecting the events of the novel.

The plot of *Moby Dick* primarily follows Ishmael on his journey as a crewmember of a whaleship named the Pequod; but we quickly learn that this is not just any whaling journey. Our captain, Ahab, is setting out on an endeavor of retribution against the great white whale, Moby Dick; on one of Ahab's previous whaling journeys, he brutally lost his leg from the knee down to Moby Dick. Following this traumatic event, Ahab was driven to a degree of insanity, often referred to as "monomania." Ishmael often discusses Ahab's monomania, which proves to be one of his defining characteristics in the novel. Ahab's insanity is the driving force behind his thoughts, behaviors, and actions. As the captain of the Pequod, Ahab's decisions heavily influence the events in the novel. Unlike Ishmael's, Ahab's traumatic past is clear to the reader and does not need to be parsed out. What does need closer observation, however, is the effect that Ahab's monomania has on his representation and actions throughout the novel. Ahab, as I

will examine throughout this chapter, is generally unaware or in denial of his human mortality. His monomania causes him to believe that he is a godlike, immortal being. Learning about Ahab's trauma and identity from Ishmael creates room for misrepresentation and misinterpretation.

Having suffered his own violent trauma, Ishmael's memory and narrative has already been altered, making information he gained second-hand more likely to be changed in Ishmael's narration. Analyzing a character whose descriptions the reader receives from a first-person narrator inherently creates a division in their identity. For all characters, there is a self-identity and a prescribed identity. The self-identity is that which the character believes himself to be. The prescribed identity is created by those who interact with and often describe the character. There is always a division between these two identities, but they are both valuable. As discussed in the previous chapter, others' traumas become important identifiers for Ishmael when telling his story after having endured his own trauma. But even if Ishmael was not reliant on trauma for constructing others' identities, it is clear that Ahab's identity already revolves around his traumatic past. This chapter will explore how Ishmael creates an identity for Ahab in his post-trauma narrative and how Ahab's traumatic past affects the events in the novel.

From Ishmael's perspective, the reader only sees Ahab's post-trauma self, although there are some glimpses of his pre-trauma self that Ishmael chooses to include. It is not simply Ahab's physical description of his "ivory leg" and roughness of his figure that determine who he is. While his physical description does play a role, Ahab's characterization also relies heavily on the description of his disposition and personality. Captains Peleg and Bildad provide Ishmael with an assorted account of Ahab's character. "He ain't sick; but no, he isn't well either... He's a queer man... but a good one... He's a grand, ungodly, god-like man... Ahab of old, thou knowest, was

a crowned king!” (78) Peleg adds to his description that “Captain Ahab did not name himself”; rather, he was given his name to “somehow prove prophetic” (78). A biblical prophecy details Ahab, king of Israel, dying by accidental stabbing of a sword,<sup>14</sup> which could be compared to a potential accidental impalement by a harpoon. However, Captain Peleg assures Ishmael that “[i]t’s a lie” (78). He continues in his description, emphasizing that Ahab is “a good man—not a pious, good man... but a swearing good one” (78). Although he is moody, “it’s better to set sail with a moody good captain than a laughing bad one” (79). Ishmael did not meet Ahab until after the Pequod set sail, so he had to rely heavily on others’ accounts and descriptions of the captain. Ishmael’s decision to include this dialogue, spanning a page and a half, illustrates this reliance. This suggests that he expects his reader to have the same amount of trust in him that he did in Captain Peleg and Captain Bildad in creating this identity for Ahab.

Ahab’s identity is created almost exclusively through his relationship with Moby Dick. While Ahab may have had a different identity prior to the white whale effectively amputating his leg, his life and character now revolve solely around his desire for vengeance. We can see the potential for difference in Ahab’s disposition in the description of his family. In Captain Peleg’s original description of Captain Ahab, he details that he “has a wife—not three voyages wedded—a sweet, resigned girl,” and that “by that sweet girl that old man has a child” (79). How could such a menacing figure have such a gentle wife and child? But once Ishmael actually meets his captain, there is no mention of his family. Ahab’s mind is constantly flooded with thoughts on Moby Dick and how he can conquer this monster.

These descriptors from Captains Peleg and Bildad combined with Ahab’s own actions and dialogue throughout the novel bring up questions surrounding his mortality and fate. Ahab

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<sup>14</sup> “1 Kings 22.” The International Bible Society. <https://www.biblica.com/bible/niv/1-kings/22/>.

being described as godly yet prophesied to die unexpectedly presents the reader with a contentious situation. Will he die, as fated, or will his godlike nature save him? As we discover at the end of the novel, Ahab cannot be saved—nor can he be cured. Although the reader is fully aware that Ahab is still mortal, Ahab believes that he is an eternal being. To return to the idea of “degrees of fatality” presented in the previous chapter, the relationship between Moby Dick and Ahab demonstrates just how invincible Ahab believes himself to be.

Ishmael’s narration in Chapter 41 shows the reader the white whale’s true power. Moby Dick creates questions about humanity and death for Ishmael that he had not previously considered. He tells his reader that whalers would treat Moby Dick like any normal whale before his otherworldly strength, imperishability, and celestial nature was discovered. Until this realization, whalers would “boldly and fearlessly” pursue him, just as they would any other sperm whale—but Moby Dick was not just any sperm whale. Ishmael narrates:

But at length, such calamities did ensue in these assaults — not restricted to sprained wrists and ankles, broken limbs, or devouring amputations—but fatal to the last *degree of fatality*; those repeated disastrous repulses, all accumulating and piling their terrors upon Moby Dick; those things had gone far to shake the fortitude of many brave hunters, to whom the story of the White Whale had eventually come. (152; emphasis added)

Does this notion of the “last degree of fatality” indicate that even Ahab and his eternal soul will be deceased if he dies by the fins of Moby Dick? Ahab, as we will now see, would place himself off this spectrum—he does not seem to connect himself to fatality in the slightest.

Just as Ishmael’s character emphasizes human mortality and *impermanence*, Ahab’s character emphasizes his own godlike immortality and permanence. In Ishmael’s acknowledgement of just how powerful Moby Dick truly is in the reflection from Chapter 41, the

reader can begin to comprehend Ahab's view of his own power in comparison to this truly godlike whale. *Moby Dick* discourages even the bravest of whalers, keeping them from chasing this unearthly creature for fear of their lives. No *man* is able to defeat him. But Ahab is not just any man; he is the "lord" of his whale ship. He does not believe that *Moby Dick* is able to defeat him. For Ahab, *Moby Dick* is "the monomaniac incarnation" of "malicious agencies" (156). To defeat *Moby Dick* would be to defeat his all-consuming mania in its physical embodiment. If Ahab is able to conquer the white whale (as he believes he will), to rid the ocean of *Moby Dick*, he would purge himself of his monomania. As Balaev suggests, the trauma novel displays that healing comes from natural or environmental sources—not from the self. Gestalt therapy, one of the many different approaches to psychotherapy, suggests that relying on environmental support rather than self-support can prove to be harmful—in Ahab's case, it becomes deadly.<sup>15</sup> The therapy also poses the theory that people are incomplete and are constantly looking to fill holes in their self, which furthers Cameron's analysis of *Moby-Dick*.

She argues:

More than incomplete, bodies may seem insubstantial because their essence is invisible. Hence the image of Narcissus who falls toward the water in death because 'he could not grasp [his] tormenting, mild image' (1:26), could not touch as well as comprehend it. For bodies contain essences (as the common notion of the body as a vessel suggests), and this idea about containment when it is literalized, as the novel attempts to literalize it, causes tragedy in the end.<sup>16</sup>

Ahab's inability to discover and create his post-trauma identity causes the eventual downfall of the Pequod. Gestalt therapy suggests, similar to Cameron's analysis, that trouble comes when

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<sup>15</sup> Perls

<sup>16</sup> Cameron, 16



individuals begin to look to outside sources to fill these holes: for Ahab, this external source is Moby Dick.

The following passage from Chapter 51 creates a juxtaposition between both man and ocean and Ahab and Moby Dick. The comparisons that Ishmael makes shows the reader how he categorizes and differentiates these entities. Ishmael narrates: “By night the same muteness of humanity before the shrieks of the ocean prevailed; still in silence the men swung in the bowlines; still wordless Ahab stood up to the blast” (194). Here, the silences of Ahab and humanity parallel each other. Ishmael’s language of silence creates a bond in this parallel. Humanity is mute, Ahab “wordless.” Ahab’s transience is substantiated by this correlation. However, this ephemerality we see in Ahab is only in relation to the shrieking ocean, not in Ahab’s own self-image of immortality. It is crucial to separate these two identities, self-identity and prescribed identity, because they are two distinct, independent creations. The ocean’s “shrieks” are contrasted with the silence in this description. This contrast between man and ocean shows the permanence of both the ocean and its inhabitants. Since man is silent and mortal in nature, the polarity in the ocean’s vast sound is what separates man and ocean, manifesting the immortality, or permanence, of the ocean.

When the Pequod believes that they first encounter Moby Dick in Chapter 59, he is characterized as an eternal being, shrieking just as the ocean does. The contrasting relationship that Ishmael sets up in Chapter 51 aids the reader in furthering their understanding of the first meeting. Daggoo is the first man to see the creature in the water:

It seemed not a whale; and yet is this Moby Dick? thought Daggoo. Again the phantom went down, but on re-appearing once more, with a stiletto-like cry that startled every man

from his nod, the negro yelled out— “There! there again! there she breaches! right ahead! The White Whale, the White Whale!” (225)

Although it is not actually Moby Dick that Daggoo spots, these descriptions can be generalized to large ocean creatures. The imperishability of Moby Dick is corroborated by the description of a “phantom;” phantoms are known to be everlasting beings, often appearing to be figments of the imagination. Daggoo does not recognize this creature at first; such a large, white, supernatural creature surely could not be a whale. And although it is just a squid, the vocalization associated with this creature further equates these beings with the shrieking ocean.

The notion of Moby Dick’s immortality is further supported when related back to the relationship created in Chapter 51 between sound and permanence. The way that Ishmael’s narration in Chapter 51 sets up the ocean’s correlation with permanence and screams prefaces the Pequod’s first encounter with Moby Dick, guiding the reader to make the connection between Moby Dick and his celestial nature. As Moby Dick reappears with his “stiletto-like cry,” we see the clear contrast between this and the “muteness of humanity,” further substantiating his affinity with the “shrieks of the ocean.”

As critic E. L. Grant Watson says, Ahab, “that godlike, godless old man,”<sup>17</sup> is the counterpart of the otherworldly whale. This correspondence and equivalence between the two characters helps to shape their individual identities in relation to each other. Moby Dick is the “symbol or mask of that outer mystery”<sup>18</sup> of the madness we see in Ahab. Moby Dick is magnetic, attracting and overwhelming the imagination of the reader, just as even the mere idea of the whale drives Ahab into his monomania. To Ahab, Moby Dick is the only cure he sees for his mental illness. This projection allows him to have something physical to conquer, although, in Ahab’s situation,

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<sup>17</sup> Watson

<sup>18</sup> Watson

this becomes deadly. Watson argues that “[Ahab] is the incarnation of the active and courageous madness that lies brooding and fierce, ever ready to spring to command, within the man of genius.”<sup>19</sup> Moby Dick’s embodiment of Ahab’s madness is apparent through his distinct relationship with Moby Dick. The white whale *is* his madness, and there is never a moment in the novel that Moby Dick doesn’t exist in some part of the ocean; but it is only when either the idea of the white whale is brought into Ahab’s mind or that Ahab actually encounters the white whale that his monomania “springs to command” and entirely overtakes Ahab. In Balaev’s discussion of the trauma novel, she argues that “healing is achieved through various behaviors not tied to language.”<sup>20</sup> It is clear to the reader that Ahab’s sole road to healing is through the destruction of Moby Dick.

Returning to the whale-line passage<sup>21</sup> and analysis from the previous chapter, the narration sets up different relationships for different characters. At the beginning of the passage, as the calm “prophesies the storm,” we are taken back to Ahab’s own prophecy, dying by accidental impalement. Ishmael claims that it is only when caught up in such dangerous affairs “that mortals realise the... perils of life,” creating a dichotomy between those who are mortal, like himself, and those who are eternal, like Ahab. Even though Ahab is in a situation that resembles his prophecy, he is not at all afraid. Ahab, as “lord over the Pequod”, is an eternal figure and is therefore unaware of the “perils of life,” even when “enveloped in whale-lines”.

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<sup>19</sup> Watson

<sup>20</sup> Balaev, 164

<sup>21</sup> “as the profound calm which only apparently precedes and prophesies of the storm, is perhaps more awful than the storm itself; for, indeed, the calm is but the wrapper and envelope of the storm; and contains it in itself, as the seemingly harmless rifle holds the fatal powder, and the ball, and the explosion; so the graceful repose of the line, as it silently serpentine about the oarsmen before being brought into actual play—this is a thing which carries more of true terror than any other aspect of this dangerous affair. But why say more? All men live enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters round their necks; but it is only when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that mortals realise the silent, subtle, ever-present perils of life.” (229)

The distinct interdependence of the souls and physical beings of characters such as Ishmael and Queequeg suggests that the two will cease to exist simultaneously. This is evident as mortality and the ever-present perils of life are the focal points of Ishmael's narration. As is evident in this passage, mortality is something that cannot be escaped. Whether or not one recognizes this fact, and the way that someone comes to terms with it, can help to identify who they are. To Ahab, since he does not view himself as mortal, these life-threatening dangers are inapplicable. He is never paralyzed by the perilousness of the whale-line; he does not blink an eye in the chase of the most formidable sea creature. The duality of soul and physical being seems to exist only for Ahab. But why does this duality exist only for Ahab? While some boundaries are fuzzy, it is clear that for most of the characters, there is only life and death.

Both Ahab himself and the characters surrounding him create a notion of eternity in Ahab's identity. Although Ishmael and the reader know that Ahab is a human being just like the rest of the crew members, this does not alter Ahab's self-perception. In Chapter 109, Ahab declares to his crew members: "There is one God that is Lord over the earth, and one Captain that is lord over the Pequod" (362). Although readers know Ahab is just as mortal as all the other crew members, he compares himself here to a God, which creates the idea of eternity in his character, challenging his transience. Despite Ishmael's decision to not capitalize "lord" when Ahab claims he is "lord over the Pequod," the reader may wonder if Ishmael genuinely believes what Ahab is preaching. Seeing that "Captain" is capitalized just as "God" is makes it even more difficult to distinguish Ishmael's opinion because of the disjointed capitalization. Later, in Chapter 134, Ahab further deliberates his eternity, this time directly in relation to his own identity: "Ahab is for ever Ahab, man" (418). This passage substantiates the idea that Ahab's identity and soul will outlast his physical being. As he seems to address Starbuck at the end of

this sentence with “man,” as is typical in their dialogue, Ahab may actually be addressing this claim that he is “for ever” towards himself in an attempt of self-encouragement, strengthening his certainty in the chase of Moby Dick. The duality that Ahab creates for himself in the novel between soul and physical being refers only to him, not the rest of the characters. This suggests that the rest of the characters’ souls will cease to exist along with their physical beings. This clear contrast between Ahab and “regular” men further separates him from mortality. The distinct “other”-ness that Ishmael creates for Ahab affects the development of identity for both Ahab as an “other” and for Ishmael in his conventional being. In *Moby Dick*, we see this in the way that individual characters group themselves and the way that other characters group them. The carpenter, as he’s fashioning a new prosthetic for Ahab, describes Ahab’s relationship to his leg. “But Ahab; oh he’s a hard driver. Look, driven one leg to death, and spavined the other for life, and now wears out bone legs by the cord” (361). Ahab’s being has already outlived one of his own limbs. The carpenter’s description of our captain shows his estrangement from humanity; this need to constantly replace this part of his physical body feeds into Ahab’s belief that he is an eternal being. Towards the end of the novel, Ishmael shares: “Ahab never thinks; he only feels, feels, feels; *that’s* tingling enough for mortal man! to think’s audacity. God only has that right and privilege” (419). But since Ahab believes that he is a god-like being, he has this “privilege.” As eternity becomes a part of Ahab’s identity, he seems to forget certain aspects of mortality.

Ahab generally disregards the mortality of others. This neglect of humanity serves his thirst for revenge. When the Pequod meets a ship named the Rachel, Ahab asks their captain: “Hast seen the White Whale?” to which their captain replies, “Aye, yesterday. Have ye seen a whale-boat adrift?” (397). Captain Gardiner reveals that his son is lost at sea, and he begs Ahab

to help them search for the boy. “I will not go,” Captain Gardiner claims, “till you say *aye* to me” (398). But Ahab will not help them search for the captain’s lost son, for it will inhibit his quest for vengeance. “Captain Gardiner, I will not do it. Even now I lose time... may I forgive myself, but I must go” (398). Even Stubb said they “must save that boy” (398). Ahab cannot escape the hyper-fixation he has on his quest, even to save a child.

The increasingly all-encapsulating drive for the capture of Moby Dick creates a unique motivation for the Pequod. Ishmael recounts, “How it was that they so aboundingly responded to the old man’s ire—by what evil magic their souls were possessed, that at times his hate seemed almost theirs; the White Whale as much their insufferable foe as his” (152). This whaleship’s journey is not solely for the capture of whales for their materials, it is a journey of revenge. It is also evident to the reader from this narration Ishmael is aware that this obsession is not normal. The “evil magic” by which the crew’s “souls were possessed” is clearly unusual. While the “hate” Ahab feels is justified, he drags the rest of the crew into his monomania. By approaching *Moby Dick* in mechanistic terms, Ausband observes, Ahab’s “deliberate, continued, and complete estrangement from the rest of mankind.” He claims that the mechanistic imagery Melville uses with Ahab “nourishes his monomania,” allowing him to “willfully [doom] himself and his followers to destruction in his quest for revenge.”<sup>22</sup> The mechanistic imagery, in addition to fueling Ahab’s monomania, dehumanizes Ahab. This suggests that if a person has unprocessed trauma, they cannot successfully be human; normal “human” functioning is put on hold when a person is handicapped by trauma. But Ahab’s dehumanization is not necessarily degrading; the way that Ahab becomes godlike in his character shows how he took control of his dehumanization.

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<sup>22</sup> Ausband, 197

Ahab is able to take control in his unhuman nature, becoming more and more estranged from his crew specifically and humanity in general. It is important to note, as Ausband does, that it is not just Ahab himself who is affected in this “quest”. Rather, he *and* his followers are “doomed” to “destruction.” The estrangement from his crew justifies Ahab’s lack of care for them. To further Ausband’s analysis, physically having a wooden, clearly unhuman leg is a constant reminder of the trauma that Ahab has suffered. Having this constant reminder feeds into Ahab’s unconscious estrangement from humankind. Melville was methodical in his use of mechanistic language surrounding Ahab because the reader is forced to see the separation that Ahab desires. It is not the characters surrounding Ahab who actively push him away; rather, it is Ahab himself who diverges from humanity. The reader can see the manifestation of Ahab’s monomania and how his insanity creates a dangerous situation for those around him as he becomes increasingly unaware of just how greatly the lives of himself and his crew members are in danger in their pursuit of Moby Dick. The dehumanization of Ahab’s character through Melville’s use of mechanistic imagery emphasizes his self-perceived immortality.

In addition to his disregard of others’ mortality, Ahab believes that he is invincible—even against the indestructible, ever-powerful white whale. With eternity seeping into his self-image, Ahab has no concern for his own life and believes that he *will* defeat Moby Dick. The reference to monomania shows that Ahab is not in his human form, that he is possessed by his thoughts and his fixation on Moby Dick:

Here, then, was this grey-headed, ungodly old man, chasing with curses a Job’s whale round the world, at the head of a crew, too, chiefly made up of mongrel renegades, and castaways, and cannibals... Such a crew, so officered, seemed specially picked and packed by some infernal fatality to help him to his monomaniac revenge. (158)

Our narrator also recognizes the effect that Ahab in his monomania has on others. Ahab is able to entice his crew members, emphasizing the divine nature that defeating the white whale would encompass. They become bound by the possession that Ahab endures in his monomania.

Ahab's trauma lessens his regard for others because of his hyper-fixation on revenge. Both this hyper-fixation and Ahab's seeming lack of care for others discernably illustrate his continued estrangement from humanity.

Ahab's trauma remains unprocessed. Since he is not able to work through his traumatic experience, it becomes manifested in his monomania. Ahab becomes completely isolated from those around him and estranged from humanity. He believes that he is invincible and even immortal. Through this manifestation, he puts his own life and the lives of the rest of his crew members at risk. For Ishmael, trauma is an important identifier for the characters in *Moby-Dick*. Because of his own experience with trauma, Ishmael is able to understand the effects that others' traumas can have and he successfully highlights these effects in his post-traumatic narration. Characters' relationships with their own selves, their connection to others, and their connection to humanness are greatly affected by their traumatic experiences.



## CONCLUSION

### Trauma and Mortality in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

What began as a simple inquiry into the function and potential transformation of language throughout a novel turned into an exploration surrounding mortality. When I began this project, everything was “normal.” Submitting my proposal in the middle of the spring semester of my junior year, I was ready to spend eight months researching the language and behavior in Melville’s nautical world. I was not ready to be finishing this project from my own home amidst a global pandemic. As I write these final paragraphs, the entire world is experiencing a collective trauma. The COVID-19 pandemic was something that no one could prepare for and has brought mortality into the forefront of many people’s minds. It has made us realize how much enjoyment we find in our daily lives and how much we take “normal” for granted. The impermanence of both daily life and simply life has been shoved in the world’s face, with a neon sign pointing directly at it.

Mortality has become a harsh reality for hundreds of thousands of people. People’s humanities are emerging in a variety of ways, and many are learning what it means to them to really *be* human. Extroverts are learning how much they rely on the presence of others to feel human. Teachers are realizing that humanity is not equal, because many of their students do not have access to the means to learning from home. Athletes are learning how greatly their sports provide structure to their daily lives and that competition is what makes them truly feel human. Physical human connection, in a range of capacities, is something that everyone has taken for granted. For Ishmael, coming close to death himself on his voyage, as the whale line whips

around the ship or as the ship is wrecked by Moby Dick, is what reminds him both of his mortality and humanity. The world has been faced with a similar grounding experience.

Trauma is a well-known, established concept in the world of psychology. However, like almost all functioning of the brain, we don't really know how it works. Stressors can turn into traumatic events for some people and not others. As seen through the characters in *Moby-Dick*, the effects of trauma can be incredibly different from person to person. While a traumatic event can make one person more grounded and attuned to the world around them, it can largely unsettle another person, even to the point where they have lost all sense of reason or driven to some form of insanity.

Throughout this thesis, the ideas of trauma, mortality, and humanity have been explored in the world of *Moby-Dick*. But in our world, these same ideas are just as pressing. While the language now exists to discuss issues surrounding PTSD and other mental illnesses, it still remains largely undiscussed at a societal level. There is an academic discourse about trauma but suffering from mental illness has not become normalized in society. There is a great stigma surrounding mental illness, making people hide from potential help. This lack of discourse about mental illness in society can be extremely harmful. Without properly processing traumatic events, as was evident through the manifestation of Ahab's trauma, PTSD can become extremely dangerous for both the person suffering from PTSD and the people around them.

As in *Moby-Dick* and in life, individuals' identities are complicated by the effects of trauma. While in the 1800s, there were not professional treatments available for mental illnesses like PTSD, there were still methods for people to process traumatic events. Ishmael's method was writing. Being able to put his story on paper and shape it in his own way gave him the narrative power for his trauma to make sense to him. For Queequeg, it is difficult to observe the

psychological effects of his trauma and how he handles it. But with Ahab, it is clear that his trauma has remained unprocessed.

Ahab, unlike Ishmael and Queequeg, became almost completely estranged from humanity and mortality. His monomania drove himself into his own mind, becoming completely isolated from those around him. Ishmael and Queequeg's traumas are not perfectly resolved, but they are still able to function in their daily lives without putting themselves or others in harm's way. Additionally, they become more connected to each other and to humanity. Ishmael's post-trauma narrative further deepens his connection with being a "mortal man." In Chapter 60, "The Line," he artfully describes man's relationship with mortality: "All men live enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters round their necks; but it is only when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that mortals realize the silent, subtle, ever-present perils of life" (229). Mortality is not something that humans are always thinking about. As Ishmael describes at the very beginning of the novel, exploring the great, unknowable ocean provides all humans with a distraction from life. And it is not until mortality becomes a reality, whether you're sitting amidst a whale-line whipping around you or you can't leave your house because of a global pandemic, that we realize the true peril of life: death.

It is up to each and every one of us, but especially during this time, to check in on one another. You do not need to have an extensive knowledge about mental health and illness to reach out to your friends, family, or colleagues to ask if they are okay. We are all globally experiencing a stressor. For some of us, this may not be traumatic; for others, this may be an extremely traumatic and debilitating experience. There is no way to know if we do not ask. You don't need to be a therapist to ask a friend, "How can I help you get through this?" Sometimes,

just asking can be enough; they know that they are cared for. *You* are cared for. It is a collective responsibility to be human and to make others feel human.

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