

Chasing Capital:

Class Struggle, Labor Conditions, and the Politics of Individuality in *Moby-Dick*

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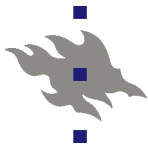
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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract <p>My thesis examines Herman Melville's <i>Moby-Dick</i> as an anti-capitalist text. I mainly utilize the theory of capitalism as defined by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the nineteenth century, focusing on class relations and the idea of class struggle; that is, the unrest that results from the inherent inequality of classes under capitalism. The aim of the thesis is to demonstrate the plausibility of an anti-capitalist reading of <i>Moby-Dick</i> and show how such a reading sheds light on the famously enigmatic character of Captain Ahab and on his motivations.</p> <p>To achieve this, I rely on social and historioeconomic analysis of the whaling industry to illustrate the usual working conditions on board whaling ships, and then apply my findings to a close reading of the novel. As Ishmael, the narrator, is generally the reader's point of access, I first analyze his position vis-à-vis the industry he is about to enter, highlighting his inexperience. Then, I demonstrate how any struggle he may have undergone as a result of that inexperience is suppressed in favor of highlighting Ahab, ostensibly supplanting the struggle of the lower-ranking crewmembers with that of their superior.</p> <p>Ultimately, however, I argue that <i>Moby-Dick</i> illustrates the immutability of class dynamics under capitalism, and that it does so mainly through its portrayal of Ahab who, despite being at the top of the <i>Pequod's</i> social hierarchy, suffers within the larger system that exploits him just as it does his inferiors. Furthermore, the perpetuity of these dynamics is illustrated by the fact that Ahab, despite becoming aware of his condition under capitalism, is unable to transcend the confines of that condition. Though he wants revenge against the whale, the insular nature of his position that arises from capitalist social hierarchies, combined with his self-involved mental struggle, results in an attempt at resistance that is ineffective precisely because of its solitary nature. In <i>Moby-Dick</i>, we then find just one representation of a ubiquitous capitalist system designed to crush individual resistance.</p>		
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1 Introduction

We drop our dead in the sea,—
The dead reek not of aught;
We drop our dead in the sea,—
The sea ne'er gives it a thought.

Herman Melville, *Mardi: and a Voyage Thither* (1849)

Certain works of literature capture our cultural imagination with a surprising ferocity. Many occupy this position because of their artistry, combined with a relevance to a particular time, culture, or social concern. Some, however, earn their place by offering a depth of meaning that appears to be boundless. It is this depth of meaning that interests me in the subject of my thesis: Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. This immense novel has been the subject of hundreds of critical interpretations in the last century, yet still more continue to appear. This would suggest that *Moby-Dick* still has something to say to us as contemporary readers. As one of those readers, I seek to offer my own, decidedly contemporary analysis.

In my thesis, I argue that *Moby-Dick* can be read as an anti-capitalist text. The whaling industry was rife with practices of worker exploitation, which makes it particularly suitable for this kind of study. As the novel portrays the whaling industry in great detail, one might expect these practices to be represented in its pages. *Moby-Dick*, however, largely glosses over the grim realities of a whaleman's daily life in favor of centering on Captain Ahab. This focus, although it takes away from the everyday strife of the worker, highlights the long-term detrimental impact of working in a capitalist society. Ahab can serve as a warning and a case study: though he has just undergone a traumatic event while whaling, the society of Nantucket shows little concern for him as a person, focused instead on the potential profit he might yet bring in. After forty years of dedicated work, the encounter with the white whale destabilizes his own notion of his place in the world, leading to his dawning understanding of the ultimate futility of his toil. His stand against Moby Dick can then be read as an attempt to understand his own position within the capitalist framework of the whaling industry. His failure, caused by his reproduction of ingrained capitalist practices, is an expression of the ubiquity of capitalism; a system that deliberately separates us from one another as it teaches us to strive for individual prosperity. As this reading is not particularly self-evident, this Introduction serves to situate it in the landscape of political Melville criticism and contextualize its theoretical background.

1.1 Political Readings

Moby-Dick has not always occupied its place of honor in the canon of American literature. By the time Herman Melville died, forty years after writing his “wicked book” (Melville 1850, 212), the exceptional depth and breadth of his magnum opus was still largely unacknowledged. An 1851 review by Henry F. Chorley from the *London Athenaeum* gives a good idea of the critical consensus about *Moby-Dick*: “the idea of a connected and collected story has obviously visited and abandoned its writer again and again in the course of composition” (in Branch 2013, 254). At the same time, there were those who did appreciate the novel while Melville was still alive: *London Britannia* commended Melville's “versatility of talent” (261), *Illustrated London News* highlighted his “singularly vivid and reckless imaginative power” (Reach 1851, 539), and William Young of *New York Albion* generously opined that *Moby-Dick* was “not lacking much of being a great work” (in Branch 2013, 271). Another one of the exceptions was Melville's close friend Nathaniel Hawthorne, who saw in *Moby-Dick* a “much greater power” (Hawthorne 1850, 211) than in Melville's preceding books.

It was not, however, until the year 1919 – the centennial of Melville's birth – that the so-called “Melville revival” occurred (vanden Heuvel 2014). Increased critical attention on Melville prompted a reassessment of his work, and it was out of this reassessment that *Moby-Dick* emerged an American classic. One of the first pioneers of Melville criticism was Carl Van Doren who, in *The American Novel* (1921), provided not so much a critical dissection as a comprehensive overview coupled with generous praise. “He wrote his book as if to make its rivals unnecessary” (88), Van Doren says of Melville, and labels *Moby-Dick* “the epic of America's unquiet mind” (97), ahead of its time. Van Doren was ahead of his: by placing Melville among the likes of Hawthorne, Twain, Henry James and Sinclair Lewis, he gave the first indication of the kind of place Melville would come to occupy in American literature. In his brief overview of the novel's symbols and his reading of Ahab as “Yankee Lucifer” (91), he made one of the first forays into interpreting *Moby-Dick* in its expansive, confounding, metaphysical entirety.

A great volume of criticism has been produced in the last hundred years, and for the most part, these critiques have found a way to coexist. Across the twentieth century, opinion has followed trends: in the earlier years, generally speaking, much of the focus was on Melville's

literary ability, and the symbolism of *Moby-Dick*. After the precedent set by Van Doren, the next true behemoth of *Moby-Dick* criticism arrived in F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* (1941), which put religion and spirituality at the forefront. Matthiessen viewed the *Pequod's* crew as a representation of the vices of humanity; he claimed that Melville was “more concerned with spiritual and metaphysical issues even than with the economic and social” (405), turning aspects of social commentary into a critique of morality based on the Christian doctrine. Melville himself and his personal politics only played a minor role in this book and the works that built on its premise, most notably Henry Nash Smith's “The Image of Society in *Moby-Dick*” (1953). Though Melville indicated some desire to criticize the society in which he lived, Matthiessen and Smith's focus remained on the text – and the text, Smith thought, failed to integrate Melville's beliefs, which meant they were not particularly relevant (Shaw 1993, 64).

The strong stances of the critics of the 1950s, however, were soon diluted. Their strict manner of interpreting *Moby-Dick* loosened over time, as the net of interpretation was cast ever wider, and particularly back into the political waters. Many critics became especially interested in the politics of Melville's time and the possibility of their reflection in the novel. As Melville began writing *Moby-Dick*, the US had just annexed Texas, and the Mexican War was looming; the subsequent 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo with Mexico was a victory not so much for the country itself as for the spirit of American nationalism (Potter 1976, 6). Furthermore, the individual states' attitudes toward slavery and the slave trade were causing rifts between the states and the political parties, which led to the signing of the Compromise of 1850. The Compromise consisted of five bills which admitted California as a free state and gave Utah and New Mexico the right to choose whether they would continue to be slave states, but also made it easier for slave owners to recover fugitives who escaped into free states (Rogin 1983, 165). Melville's own brother, Gansevoort Melville, was an active politician and orator of the capitalist-populist persuasion, and a vocal advocate for the Texas annexation as well as expansionist rhetoric (McGuire 2003, 287).

Considering the discord in society at the time and Melville's familial ties to it, it is no wonder that political readings incorporating this context became popular. Foster (1961) and Heimert (1963) both interpreted *Moby-Dick* as an anti-slavery text, though they came to opposing conclusions: the former felt that the novel was “an anti-slavery fable” (Foster 1961, 21), while Heimert thought Melville a critic of radical abolitionist rhetoric. Karcher (1980), Duban (1982),

Williams (1986), Pettey (2003), Lawson (2012) and others have offered interpretations incorporating the *Pequod*, Ishmael, Ahab, and Moby Dick himself as reflections of various strands of political thought from Melville's own time. The second (admittedly very broad) category of political criticism of *Moby-Dick* considers the novel in a contemporary political context. In the late 1960s, this especially meant the Cold War and the Vietnam War. Many were of the opinion that Ahab displays the traits of a totalitarian; Milton Stern (1969) went as far as drawing a connection between Hitler, Ahab, and Lyndon Johnson after Johnson approved the dispatch of troops to Vietnam (Shaw 1993, 68). Following these tumultuous years, a heretofore unfamiliar reading emerged: that of *Moby-Dick* as commentary on capitalism.

The *Pequod*, it was posited, is “the ship of the American capitalist state” (Shaw 1993, 74); she is doomed to sink, and so is the newly emerging industrial–capitalist America. Michael Rogin (1983) believed she is doomed because she is manned, in part, by those who represent a society which “killed the red man and enslaved the black”, and Moby Dick the whale represents the expansionism of manifest destiny come back to avenge those who unwillingly became its victims (Rogin 1983, 164). Leo Marx's *Machine in the Garden* (1967) draws a connection between the “iron rails” (MD, 149) of Ahab's purpose and the destiny of an America beset with the industrial revolution, in which man's connection to nature was replaced by a connection with machines, and the search for capital replaced a desire for transcendence. But it is Trinidadian scholar C.L.R. James who, ahead of the tide, provided the most sustained argument for *Moby-Dick* as anti-capitalist allegory in his *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways* (1953).

James' book is, in some ways, a product of its time and circumstance: World War II was still a very recent memory, and the Cold War had already begun. He wrote much of it while detained by the Department of Immigration at Ellis Island, kept hungry and in horrific conditions, which further opened his eyes to the “grave injustices which are being perpetrated [in America] in the name of the law” (173). Some of his arguments – such as the casting of Ishmael as a defining representative of the “type of young man” (47) that readily submits to totalitarianism – require a suspension of disbelief, but his analysis of the economic and social structures aboard the ship is rooted in the text itself. James argues that “mankind finds reflected in the water only the image of what it has brought with it” (59): Ahab is a man perpetually dissatisfied with the world and his circumstances, and dissatisfaction is all he finds at sea. His attempt to cast off his burden is steeped in selfishness; he perceives his men not as collaborators, but as tools to be freely used to

his end and discarded. He attacks society by co-opting the crew as his “arms and legs” (69), making his stand on the backs of others. Crucially, James connects the suffering of the working class to the suffering of the crew, and emphasizes Ahab's separation from them. Unlike Rogin and Marx, he thinks of the *Pequod* not as a symbol of American society, but as a demonstration of the perpetuity of the capitalist principles which underpin the ship's journey and cannot be thrown off even thousands of miles from the nearest American shore.

Two other significant pieces of anti-capitalist *Moby-Dick* criticism also deserve mention: first, the Melville chapter of Edward J. Ahearn's *Marx and Modern Fiction* (1989) and, second, Loren Goldner's *Herman Melville: Between Charlemagne and Antemosaic Cosmic Man* (2006). Ahearn's is one of the seminal works of what we know today as the discipline of Marxist literary studies, and the first work to put Melville and Marx into conversation with one another. The idea of such a pairing, he says, elicits “the greatest degree of wonder or outrage” (xi) even in scholarly circles. Because of this, his chapter takes a large-scale approach, focusing on colonialism and oppression in Melville's work in a wide sense, as well as the treatment of global economic development in *Moby-Dick*. Goldner, writing three decades later, is much bolder about the Marx-Melville connection: to him, Melville is the “American Marx” (Preface). He conceives of Ahab, Starbuck, and even Ishmael as representatives of the bourgeoisie, while Queequeg is the symbol of a new working class, the “cosmic man” of the title (Chapter 1) who resists the capitalist system via his “natural relation to the cosmos” (Tally Jr. 2009, 238). Goldner, however, largely forgoes close reading, choosing instead to examine broader ideas found in Melville's writing and contrast them with the ideology of American exceptionalism. Both of these critics, then, choose to examine *Moby-Dick* on a macro scale, connecting some of the larger problems that anti-capitalist critics contend with to Melville's whole body of work. If we wish to look at *Moby-Dick* in this context in more detail, C.L.R. James' work remains the most focused on the issue of worker rights and individualism under capitalism.

Like many critics before him, James makes a bold claim as to Melville's purpose: he “intends to make the crew the real heroes of his book, but he is afraid of criticism” (24). I do not plan to make claims about Melville's intentions with quite as much conviction as James; it is naturally not my aim to provide a definitive interpretation of the text. But, as Melville's words have stood the test of time, read by generations that would come to apply them to the world as they knew it, it is my hope that this thesis can contribute to showing the continued relevance of *Moby-Dick*.

1.2 Theoretical Scope and Main Thesis

In my reading of *Moby-Dick*, as in James' book, class struggle lies at the core of the argument. The “class” in class struggle is an outcome of social stratification; that is, the separation of a society into tiers on the basis of a socioeconomic factor, most commonly wealth. Class struggle itself, in broad terms, can be described as tension within a particular society, mainly between different social strata. The bourgeoisie – the wealthy – occupy the upper classes and own the means of production, this meaning the equipment, raw materials, tools, land, and anything else necessary to make products. The proletariat, also known as the workers or the working class, are the ones who provide the labor necessary for the making of those products. The product of their labor belongs to the owner of the means of production; instead of receiving the product, the worker receives a wage in exchange for his labor.

Karl Marx, in *Capital* (1867), offered the first comprehensive analysis of capitalism as a system and its life cycle. He conceived of class struggle as the pillar of capitalism, and presented as one of his examples the struggle over the length of a working day. As the means of production improve, he argues, the time needed to produce an item decreases. The working day, however, remains the same, and because “moments are the elements of profit” (352), the capitalist will seek to maximize the work each worker does during his day. As he needs money to survive, the worker must carry out labor; but in this relationship, the very nature of that labor is exploitative, because for the working class, work is the only way of procuring money. In that process, they produce more than they need: “wherever a part of society possesses the monopoly of the means of production, the worker, free or unfree, must add to the labour-time necessary for his own maintenance an extra quantity of labour-time in order to produce the means of subsistence for the owner of the means of production” (Marx 1867, 344). The worker, therefore, not only labors for the necessities of his own life, but also does the same for the owner, who can then extract surplus value from those items (by selling them back to the worker, for example). This basic relationship is one of the building blocks of capitalism as we know it.

The prioritization of profit and the treatment of workers like disposable and replaceable parts leads to a systemic deprivation of sleep, food, and leisure time. Marx lists dozens of examples of such worker abuses. One of the most unexpected is that of Mary Anne Walkley, a 20-year-old dressmaker who “died of simple overwork”. During a busy social season – the occasion this time

was a ball in honor of the Princess of Wales – the girls at the dressmaker's were all “exploited by a lady with the pleasant name of Elise”; they worked “on an average, 16 hours without a break, during the season often 30 hours, and the flow of their failing 'labour-power' was maintained by occasional supplies of sherry, port or coffee” (364).

Crucially, Marx views the resolution of class struggle as the end of capitalism. The problems endemic to class struggle “cannot be solved by appeal to rights and the laws and legalities of exchange” (Harvey 2018, 144); in other words, class struggle cannot be solved by institutions. Only when the working class seizes the means of production can capitalism be replaced. Marx uses the word “force” here, leading to an understanding of this seizure in terms of a violent overthrow or revolution, though it can also be understood to mean political force, i.e. the capacity to mobilize (Harvey 2018, 145). This is often specifically impeded by the capitalist, who discourages worker organizing such as unions.

It is important to acknowledge here that Marx and his contemporaries represent what can be described, with the benefit of hindsight, as the European tradition of anti-capitalist thought. As ideas, the separation of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, and the exploitation of the latter by the former, seem particularly relevant against the backdrop of the 1848 revolutionary wave across Europe, which remains the most widespread in the continent's history (Robertson 1952, vii). European revolutionaries took to the barricades not because they were inspired by Marxist ideas, but because of their lived reality under feudalism, monarchy, and a widespread subsistence crisis. Marx and Engels subsequently attempted to encapsulate that experience in *The Communist Manifesto*, connecting the workers' suffering to the capitalist systems that were evolving from feudalism (1848, 2). *Capital* further dissected the conditions that maintain the status quo between the workers and their employers, and predicted the return of revolution not just to Europe, but into every society where capitalism remains dominant.

The United States, by contrast, produced no socialist thinker as ubiquitous as Marx. Influenced by *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Adam Smith's magnum opus of classical economics, the newborn America worshipped enterprise and the businessmen who personified it. In an ever-expanding nation largely composed of agrarian workers, the pursuit of self-interest was not seen as selfish, but as an endeavor that could “boost the well-being of the entire nation” (Greenspan and Wooldridge 2018, Introduction). The closest the United States has to a treatise on the inner workings of capitalism is Joseph Schumpeter's *Capitalism, Socialism and*

Democracy (1942), which only marginally diverges from the essence of Smith's ideas. According to Schumpeter, historical change is driven not, as Marx thought, by workers, but by those who “build something out of nothing” (Greenspan and Wooldridge 2018, Introduction): inventors and businessmen like Edison and Ford.

This is not to say that socialism and anti-capitalism more widely had no foothold at all in the United States. In fact, *Capital*, published first in 1867, came on the heels of one of the most significant events in worldwide labor history, which happened in Illinois. In the early nineteenth century, socialist tendencies were still usually contained to isolated communities and sects, such as the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, known colloquially as 'Shakers', originally a European import. Similarly, official socialist organizations such as the Labor Party were founded by German, British, and Bohemian immigrants (Draper 2003, 11). In terms of political thought, if we had to find a thinker to compare to Marx, Josiah Warren, author of *The Peaceful Revolutionist* (1833), is often described as the first American-born anarchist (Bailie 1906, xiv). His writing helped spread socialist, anarchist, and revolutionary ideals across the continent, which eventually boasted a fairly strong labor movement that made the eight-hour work day one of its principal objectives. The fight for labor rights peaked in May 1866 in Chicago, during what is known today as the Haymarket affair, a peaceful demonstration turned conflict with the police that had an impact across the world and resulted in the establishment of May 1 as International Workers' Day (Green 2006, 5). The pushback from the government and the wider public, however, was especially strong, and the main thinkers behind the anarchist movement were spied on and prosecuted, leading to a lull in their writing and the labor movement's dissociation from anarchist and socialist theory (Green 2006, 318). As Marx, by comparison, continued writing relatively uninhibited, he was able to produce more detailed, more comprehensive work than his American counterparts. Therefore, despite focusing on an American novel that takes place on an American ship, I largely utilize the critique of capitalism in the European tradition, because it is this tradition that provides a stronger analysis of the social dynamics I wish to highlight.

The relationship between the capitalist and the worker, and the exploitation inherent therein, are at the core of my theoretical approach. Because this relationship continues to be the nucleus of capitalism, I also engage with broader capitalist ideas from an economic standpoint, but the crux of my argument rests ultimately on the laborers of *Moby-Dick* and the conditions into which

capitalism has forced them. It is on *Capital* and Marx's other works I primarily rely for the working definitions of key terms, but to bridge the centuries, I also utilize ideas found in David Harvey and José Manuel Sánchez Bermúdez, who provide more contemporary context: Harvey directly expands on Marx's ideas, while Sánchez Bermúdez comments on the changes capitalism has undergone in the last century and a half .

The separation of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, the subjugation and mistreatment of workers, the imposition of patterns of domination, and an emphasis on individual achievement that is to result in upward economic mobility – some of the main tenets of capitalism – are all elements that contribute to the ultimate tragedy of the *Pequod* and its captain. These stories still unfold around us every day; if anything, they have now multiplied. The epoch of the bourgeoisie has simplified class antagonisms, splitting society up into two “great hostile camps” (Marx and Engels 1848, 3) with a chasm between them that has been widening for a century and a half. The world's wealth has rapidly concentrated in the hands of just a fraction of the people who live in it, and the plight of the working class, as described by Marx and Engels in 1848, continues. In the 1840s, the owners of the *Pequod* use Ahab as a tool with a single purpose; in 2021, the modern worker in a fulfillment center is stripped of their humanity and reduced to an efficiency report. Examining the treatment of capitalism in *Moby-Dick* then allows us to challenge the idea that capitalism has ever functioned as a universal good. Furthermore, an anti-capitalist reading contributes to the conversation about capitalist dynamics in contemporary Western society by displaying their ubiquity, facilitating an understanding of how long these ideas have been with us and how deeply entrenched they are. To clarify how I aim to achieve such an understanding, the following section introduces the structure of my thesis by chapter.

1.3 Structure of the Thesis

In Chapter Two, in order to lay the basis for the argument that is to follow, I offer an overview of the history of wages and labor conditions in the whaling industry. I focus particularly on the work of whaling agents and the hoarding of capital, as well as the inequity inherent in the mode of employment of whalers. Whaling was difficult work, but it was hardly noble, with the men who supplied America with oil toiling in inhumane conditions for little pay. The crew of the *Pequod*, despite being fictional, is part of this tradition of exploitation and cannot be read as separate from it.

In Chapter Three, I pay particular attention to contrasting what we know of this reality with what appears in *Moby-Dick*, focusing first on Ishmael, the narrator. To begin with, I examine Ishmael's hiring – the most explicit discussion of capitalism in the text – in order to highlight the fact that he is exploited before he even officially enters the whaling industry. Furthermore, his inability to negotiate a reasonable wage exposes a naiveté about what to expect that is not reflected in the rest of the novel: for a man with no whaling experience, he is conspicuously quiet about the daily difficulties of life at sea. This, I argue, is a deliberate suppression of his struggle as a worker; instead of him, the novel focuses on the suffering of Ahab, corresponding to the on-board dynamic that puts the captain at the top of the hierarchy. However, by foregrounding his struggle, *Moby-Dick* allows for a detailed look at the fact that exploitation under capitalism – only briefly exemplified in the scene of Ishmael's hiring – has grave long-term repercussions.

In Chapter Four, I focus solely on Ahab, and aim to clarify his purpose in the hunt for Moby Dick, as well as the reason why he fails. For many, Ahab leaves the most lasting impression of all the characters present in the text, and his name has become the universally understood shorthand for boundless, dangerous obsession. In the first portion of the chapter, I interrogate this idea by situating Ahab within the capital-driven whaling industry and the rigidly capitalist society of Nantucket, illustrating the external forces that exert pressure on him. I then seek to define his motive, showing the process he undergoes in assigning meaning to the white whale. I argue that Moby Dick, in Ahab's eyes, has led to a realization of his place in the world, and of the unbearable reality that he has dedicated his life to an ultimately meaningless pursuit. In the latter part of the chapter, I aim to fortify this interpretation by revisiting ideas of hierarchy and power dynamics, inherently capitalist concepts that Ahab, after four decades of being indoctrinated under capitalism, tries to reproduce to his advantage. But by dominating the crew, he isolates himself on a fundamental level, and it is this isolation borne out of capitalism that causes him to fail. Ultimately, he suffers physically as well as mentally; the following chapter begins to illustrate the material realities of the whaling industry that may contribute to that suffering.

2 “An Enormous, Filthy Humbug”: Recruitment, Wages, and Working Conditions

At the height of its productivity – during the so-called Golden Age – American whaling and its products were enormously important to American culture, its spirit, and the domestic and international economies. The oil of whales captured across the globe by American whalers “lit the world” (Dolin 2007, 12), and in its glory days between the 1820s and the 1870s the industry propped up both the gross domestic product and America's standing in the world. The two most significant legacy ports – the small island of Nantucket, of *Moby-Dick* fame, and New Bedford, Massachusetts – were homes to dozens of families who built staggering wealth over generations: the Rotches, the Howlands, and the Aikens, to name just a few (Davis et al. 1997, 403). By the 1850s, a fleet of four vessels operated by one individual could bring that individual a profit of as much as \$24,000 per year. The true value of such a payday comes into perspective when compared with the annual salary of the President of the United States at the time, which amounted to \$25,000 (Davis et al. 1997, 412). Becoming a whaling agent quickly became an attractive prospect for conscientious young men.

2.1 Ships and Their Crews

Agents – those who organized the voyage, financed it, paid the bills, sold the product, and paid wages (Davis et al. 1997, 381) – had plenty of work to do when it came to sending out a whaling vessel: they had to hire a captain and crew; take out insurance; outfit the vessel with whaleboats, harpoons, rations, and equipment that may need to be replaced over the course of years at sea; plan out the voyage itself; and arrange for ports along the way in which the vessel could stop for supplies, send letters, and ship some of its cargo home. Their work was also not over once the vessel disappeared over the horizon: it was necessary to keep up correspondence with their captains and officers, negotiate access to cash and credit at overseas ports, and sell products (Davis et al. 1997. 396–98).

That they had something to sell in the first place, however, was hardly a personal accomplishment. Each vessel heaving up the anchor in an American harbor had on board a crew of approximately twenty-three to thirty-six men: the captain, a minimum of three mates, harpooners or boatsteerers, able seamen, ordinary seamen, greenhands, a cook, a steward and, on long voyages, also a carpenter, a blacksmith, a caulker, a cooper, and perhaps a sailmaker, a boatbuilder, or a painter (Davis et al. 1997, 10–11). These were the men who ensured a vessel

could even maneuver out of the port and, most importantly, they were the ones who engaged firsthand in the dangerous and exhausting business that was whaling. They were faced with the imminent danger of death not only during an active chase, but also during days of calm. Cyclones and sea storms were especially common in the Pacific, ships cruising near islands clashed with their indigenous populations, and even one's assigned tasks often carried an inherent danger. One man offers a fitting example: John Prior of the ship *Alfred Gibbs*, who had a sudden “fit” while in the main topgallant crosstrees (the highest accessible point of the mainmast), which caused him to fall. He suffered internal injuries and a jaw fracture, but he “providentially fell upon a dog which was lying on deck, which no doubt saved his life” (*WSL* 1856). In *Moby-Dick*, the danger is hinted at in the character of Bulkington who, despite appearing alive and well, receives a “stoneless grave” in the “six-inch” Chapter Twenty-Three, “The Lee Shore” (94). As the *Pequod* leaves port, Ishmael watches Bulkington standing at the helm, surprised to see him return to sea when he had just come back ashore a few days ago. From this desperation to return to the water despite its many dangers, he divines Bulkington's “sea-perishing”: because he goes so readily from one “dangerous voyage” to another, he will eventually fall victim to the ocean (95). The whaling agent, by comparison, spent most of his day surrounded by letters and other paperwork.

The imbalance between work carried out by the agent versus the whaleman can be traced all the way back to the days of drift whaling – that is, harvesting whale carcasses that washed up on the shore – on Long Island. Once it became clear that considerable money could be made from these beached whales, the town put into place regulations aimed at “determining who would profit” from the carcasses (Dolin 2007, 43). The regulations determined a set of roles, one of which was the blubber cutter. A group of these men was chosen from the towns on a rotating basis. This was not pleasant work and, even then, class could upset this surprisingly equitable order. In East Hampton, Long Island, the town's minister, Thomas James, and a local landowner, Lion Gardiner, both agreed to “give a quart of licker apiece to the cutters of every whale, and be free from cutting” (in Dolin 2007, 44, original spelling). Though buying one's freedom from whale cutting with alcohol seems quite humorous on so small a scale, these are nevertheless the beginnings of what came to be the typical labor distribution in the whaling industry. As whaling moved from beaches to the open sea and became not only unpleasant, but increasingly dangerous, those with influence bought their way out. They established themselves as part

owners or investors in whaling enterprises, while their purchased laborers undertook the years-long journeys, most of them, when all was said and done, for very little pay.

2.2 The Lay System

The whaling business “paid no wages” (MD, 68). Instead, a whaling contract would award a worker a “share of the net value of the voyage”, called a lay (Davis et al. 1997, 14). In practical terms, this meant that the bigger the final catch, the more money the worker stood to earn. The lay was usually expressed in fractions of a whole when written – as in $1/8$ – and that same number would be conventionally styled in speech as 'the eighth' lay. The eighth lay meant that, once the net proceeds of the voyage were calculated, the contract holder would be entitled to one eighth of those proceeds; though in this case, the “net” proceeds were only a fraction of the total profit in the first place. In the Golden Age, the customary split of earnings was seventy to thirty – 70% going to the owners and agents, 30% to the crew (Hohman 1928, 223). Out of that 30%, our hypothetical contract holder would receive his one eighth. This would be what was called a “short” lay, resulting in a respectable payday, while a lay such as the three hundredth, which Ishmael expects when he signs up for a voyage on the *Pequod* (MD, 68) would be a “long” one (Hohman 1928, 217).

This was a system almost completely unlike anything that existed in its time. Though some branches of fishery and agriculture employed a wage system similar to that of the lays, none went as far as the whaling industry in changing the relationship between the employer and the laborer. In essence, the whaling agents “forced their crews to share to the full the risks involved in the enterprise, without allowing the slightest part in the determination of the degree of those risks” (Hohman 1928, 221). Those “full risks”, in this case, were also more expansive than in most occupations. In addition to the physical danger, the crew assumed responsibility for the size and value of their catch, its safe transport home or to a friendly port and, of course, for their own wages. This shifted a significant amount of the weight of entrepreneurship off the entrepreneur's shoulders and onto the shoulders of those who often signed on without a penny to their name in the first place.

Furthermore, those who were penniless were frequently targeted, partially because, by the time the Golden Age rolled around, “industrious young men” could find their fortune in some stabler, shore-based enterprise (Nordhoff 1895, 11). Outliers – those who, like Ishmael, wanted

to experience an adventure out at sea and make a handsome sum – still existed, but as the whaling fishery's reputation worsened, last minute second thoughts and familial intervention often put them off (Dolin 2007, 222). The people who were left, aside from wanting for money, also tended to be in some kind of trouble, usually with drink or with the law. “Hundreds” of drunkards shipped out to sea, some of them hoping to keep out of temptation because many captains ran “dry” – alcohol free – voyages (Grindrod 1840, 496). These “ungovernable lads, runaways from parental authority, candidates for corrective treatment, vagabonds just from the clutches of the police” (qt. in Stackpole 1953, 471) were perceived as a stain on the whaling profession, but their behavior was certainly not helped by the conditions under which they were hired. The degree of their exploitation cannot be overstated.

Using the cultural narrative of whaling as a noble, adventurous, morally fortifying profession, agents would encourage men to sign contracts indiscriminately. Some outright lied: they would hire con artists who pretended to be shipping out to sea in a few days, expecting to earn at least a thousand dollars whaling, and invite the victim to sign up with them, some even going as far as personally escorting them to the ship in question. By the time the con artist had disappeared, it was too late for the new seaman to back out of the voyage (Dolin 2007, 222–23).

As a result of these practices, the whalemens almost completely lacked bargaining power, either individual or collective. If they did not want to sign on, often there were plenty of other men who would readily replace them, regardless of whether they were fully aware of what they were signing up for. All too often, what they signed up for was not worth it. “Seeing the world”, as Ishmael comes to understand in “The Ship” (MD, 64), is little more than a dream for a crew that is on land for about three weeks out of a four-year voyage, looking out at nothing but endless ocean the rest of the time. As for the money, the 30% of profits awarded to the crew, already quite paltry when taking into consideration the extent of the labor put into acquiring the product, was further shaved down by an endless array of charges. Before the profit was split between owners and crew, these included “pilotage, wharfage, gauging, commissions for the sale and handling of cargo, coopering, the expenses of watchmen and, upon occasion, insurance premiums” (Hohman 1928, 218). These are to be expected, as an endeavor the size of a whaling voyage incurs a lot of costs and employs a lot of people in its port of origin. The more questionable charges occurred after the profits were split. The captain and agent kept a list of deductions and advances for each member of the crew. Some were self-explanatory: the crew

received an advance before they left port, with the money usually being used to support the wives and children of those shipping out. This had to be repaid with interest, which was usually 6%, unless the ship sank or returned “clean”, without catching anything (Davis et al. 1997, 173). Another advance – also with interest – was given for the sailor to purchase a new set of clothing. On top of these, the crew member was charged five to ten dollars for loading and unloading the vessel, one to three dollars for the contents of the medicine chest, plus any special charges he may have incurred by stealing or damaging something, or deserting and being recaptured. These costs could be scaled based on one’s lay, but often they were not (Hohman 1928, 220).

As part of their contract, whalers did receive food, a bunk, and most of their work equipment. A complicating element of this, however, was the “slop chest”, normally housed in the captain's quarters, which carried spare clothes and shoes, kitchenware, and tobacco products for the crew to purchase (Williams 1964, 207). These items often carried high premiums. The sailors were supposed to provide their clothes and bedding themselves, but there was very little storage for personal belongings on the ship, which resulted in many of them shipping out with only the clothes on their backs (Hohman 1928, 219). If they wore out – as they did very quickly in the course of hard manual labor on board a whaling vessel – they had to be replaced from the chest, incurring debt on the sailor's account. Even those who managed to come prepared could be caught out if the ship wandered into cold waters, where up to four layers of clothing made of seal, dog, and squirrel skins were required to keep warm (Burns 1913, 120).

Elmo Hohman, whose specific dataset is unknown, and Davis et al., who offer an exhaustive list of sources in their appendices, all agree on the fact that “it was not uncommon for a seaman to find himself actually in debt to the agents of the vessel in which he had worked for a period of two to four years” (Hohman 1928, 219). Even then, however, some adventure literature suggests a whaling voyage may be worth it. If the sea is as enlightening as Ishmael tells us, could it be argued that those who labored on whaling vessels still found dignity in their work, and appreciated the transformative nature of the experience?

2.3 Weary, Dirty, Oily, Sleepy, Sick

For an answer to this hypothetical, it may be best to turn to American crewmen themselves. One such man, while serving as mate on the *Kathleen* out of New Bedford in the 1850s, put his feelings into a poem:

For the owners at home a few words I will say
We'll do all the work and they'll get all the pay
You will say to yourself tis a curious note
But don't growl for some day you may chance steer a boat
When your fast to a whale running risk of your life
Your shingling his houses and dressing his wife
Your sending his daughter off to the high school
When your up to your middle in grease you great fool.
(in Malloy 1989, 65, original spelling)

It is no surprise that life on board a cramped vessel that made its living by killing and boiling enormous animals was hardly a pleasant affair. The prolonged nature of most journeys, which averaged forty months, made some concessions on the part of the crew necessary. But the concessions asked of, for example, the captain, were very different from the sacrifices of the lower-ranking sailors. The captain's quarters, sequestered in the rear of the ship, were private and reasonably spacious, sometimes so large it was possible for the captain to bring his wife and children with him. The captain ate first and received the best of whatever food was still on the ship. And though he usually hunted for whales with the rest of the crew, at the helm of one of the whaleboats, he only played a small part in the messy business of stripping the carcass and harvesting the oil and whalebone (Dolin 2007, 258).

An ordinary seaman, by comparison, dwelled in the forecabin, at the front of the ship where the hull narrowed down to a point. Here, as many as twenty-five men slept in cramped bunk beds, under a low ceiling, in a section of the ship that received no light and was perpetually greasy with whale oil, not to mention infested with rats and cockroaches. They had mattresses of straw or corn husks, and only rarely could a man call a mattress his own: on average, only four beds were built for every six crewmembers, as two would presumably always be on watch (Davis et al. 1997, 47). Their food was “designed for longevity, not for taste” (Dolin 2007, 259): salted meat, usually so salty it had to be dipped in seawater to become edible; hardtack, a type of long-lasting, extremely hard biscuit; and hot meals traditionally consisting of some combination of rice, beans, potatoes, and dried vegetables. On special occasions, the cook (sometimes not actually being a trained cook, just a man charged with operating the stove) would serve “duff”, a “pudding” made of fresh- and saltwater mixed into flour, lard, and yeast. It is hardly surprising that it was a “potent breeder of heart-burns, indigestion, and dyspepsia” (qt. in Dolin 2007, 160,

original spelling), as was the regular food once it had sat in the hold for some time. This was an issue especially for vessels in tropical waters, where maggots and cockroaches attacked even the most impervious biscuit. Though their fare could be improved with freshly caught fish or provisions purchased in port, whalemens' journals evidence that most still found their food unfit for a "swill pail" (160).

If these conditions, suffered for years and years on end, were not bad enough, there was, of course, the work itself to get through. Melville describes the whale hunt quite accurately: a lookout would spot a whale, the men would lower for it in several boats, seeking to harpoon the animal in order to fasten it and then get close enough to kill it with a sharper, close range weapon, usually a long spear or "spade" (MD, 272). The sheer size and mass of the commonly hunted species of whales made this extremely dangerous. Many ships lost an entire boat of men at a time as the whale simply dragged it too far away to be found again. Some men drowned when their boat capsized, some – like Ahab – were dragged out of the boat by the harpoon line, and others still were swallowed by whales or simply broken by a single blow from the whale's enormous flukes (Davis et al. 1997, 400).

The harvesting process was no easy feat, either. The whale carcass was slippery with water and blood, making the cutting and processing dangerous for those who took part in it, and the pieces of blubber, peeled off the whale as the skin is peeled off a piece of fruit, were so large and heavy they were likely to cause death or serious injury if they slipped loose and fell on deck (Dolin 2007, 308). Some of this danger is illustrated in *Moby-Dick*: in "The Monkey-Rope", Ishmael secures Queequeg with a rope tied to both of their belts (like "Italian organ-boys holding a dancing-ape by a long cord") (287), while Queequeg is lowered to attend to the stripping of the whale carcass floating alongside the ship. If Queequeg were to slip and drown, or be eaten by sharks, "usage and honor" (288) demand that Ishmael would have to let the rope drag him to his death, too. In "Cistern and Buckets", Tashtego has the dubious honor of standing on a whale's head and lowering a bucket into the tun – the hollow portion of the forehead – to extract the spermaceti. He performs this task with great skill, but eventually slips and disappears under the surface of the liquid, in which he would have drowned were it not for Queequeg, who dives in to save him. Ishmael thinks that, had Tashtego drowned in the sperm, it would have been "the delicious death of an Ohio honey-hunter, who seeking honey in the crotch of a hollow tree, found such exceeding store of it, that leaning too far over, it sucked him in, so that he died embalmed"

(309); an assessment that is very much at odds with whalers' accounts from the time. For example, William Abbe, of the *Atkins Adams* out of Fairhaven, hated the harvesting process so much he had nightmares about it: “to dream you are under piles of blubber that are heaping & falling upon you till you wake up with a suffocating sense of fear & agony...to be weary—dirty—oily—sleepy—sick—disgusted with yourself & everybody & everything...to go through such a scene, I confess the very thought turns my stomach” (qt. in Dolin 2007, 168).

Melville himself went whaling on board three separate ships, and he certainly would have taken part in the processing of a whale carcass (Parker 1996, 185). As a result, these are realistic scenarios, but they are overwhelmingly focused on the bravery and heroics of the harpooners, particularly Queequeg's courage. Ishmael's perspective is comical, detached; it glosses over the dangers and turns them into adventure. He also, quite glaringly, never describes any kind of punishment taking place. His stories mainly revolve around those who would be entitled to do the punishing – Ahab and the mates – and the harpooners, who are too skilled to make mistakes. But on real whalers, punishment was doled out frequently – so frequently, in fact, that flogging was banned by law in 1850 (Dolin 2007, 255). Needless to say, this law was hardly followed. “Grumblers and growlers” (Dolin 2007, 256), those who lacked respect for the captain, and those who broke rules by, for instance, supplying alcohol on a dry voyage or attempting to desert, faced a range of unpleasant things that could be done to them. Flogging was not particularly high on the list of concerns. The most feared was the cat-o'-nine-tails, composed of nine strips of leather with knots scattered along each strip. This kind of whip left deep, bloody wounds that tore out flesh and were difficult to heal (Dolin 2007, 257). Though severe punishment was not a universal fact of whaling life, those with obstinate tempers or voyaging under particularly bad-tempered captains could find themselves on the receiving end.

All told, it was exceedingly rare for a ship to return home with the same crew that had shipped on it years before. Those who were conned into the voyage and those who found whaling too difficult were usually the first to attempt to leave, running away as soon as the vessel landed for the first time. Particularly desperate men stole whaleboats to try their luck in rowing to an unknown shore, and others resorted to extremes. Where quiet desertion proved difficult, they set fire to their own ships, bored holes in the hull to sink them, or mutinied by imprisoning or murdering the captain and officers (Dolin 2007, 273–74). Some, having stuck out the arduous journey, were quietly dispatched by those same officers on the way home, as fewer men on board

meant fewer men split the profits (Davis et al. 1997, 174). The isolation, filth, disease, mistreatment, rotten food, and the danger inherent in sailing and whaling – often for no money at all upon the journey's end – paint a bleak picture of the supposedly noble industry. It is hardly a surprise that the vast majority of crewmen only ever shipped out once, turning whaling from a legacy business to an increasingly exploitative system. The only ones who habitually engaged with it were the owners and agents, for whom every ship returned guaranteed a handsome profit. The entire business was “an enormous, filthy humbug” (Nordhoff 1895, 136); but the casual reader of *Moby-Dick* would be unlikely to realize it was so from the novel itself.

3 The (Un)Reality of Working Life in *Moby-Dick*

Building on the real working conditions on whaling vessels as introduced above, in this chapter, I undertake a more thorough exploration of the portrayal of working conditions in *Moby-Dick*. As previously suggested in my discussion of scenes dealing with the treatment of the whale carcass, the novel does not quite impress the full danger of these ministrations on its readers. A similar trend emerges upon examination of the other aspects of day-to-day whaling life. The objective of this chapter is to assess these differences and determine the role they serve in the narrative. I begin by examining the role of Ishmael, who is new to the whaling industry. I focus on his naiveté and lack of experience, which make him a perfect target for predatory hiring practices. His interaction with Bildad and Peleg shows just how quickly a capitalist system can take advantage of a worker. Furthermore, I suggest that Ishmael, based on what we know about him, would be unpleasantly surprised by the conditions on board a whaler; but, significantly, he never communicates such thoughts. His record of the voyage is very unlike surviving whalemens' journals, which are chiefly concerned with daily mundanities, general disgust at their diet and living conditions, and occasional threats on the captain's life¹. With Ishmael, most things relate to other things in a complex, metaphysical web of thought, unless there is an adventure to be had or a concept to explain, in which case that is his main concern. If we want to discern the characteristics of daily life aboard the *Pequod*, it is necessary that we hunt for them. Let us begin that hunt as Ishmael does – by stepping on the deck of the ship for the first time.

3.1 Bildad, Peleg, and the Price of Whaling

Ishmael and Queequeg, having just met and shared a bed for a number of days, decide to ship out on a voyage together. Ishmael is the one to go looking for a suitable ship, wandering into Nantucket harbor and assessing several of the vessels moored there before he settles on the eccentric *Pequod*. On deck, he meets Bildad and Peleg, two former captains, the *Pequod's* majority owners-cum-agents, and main obstacles to surmount before he can sign up for the voyage. More specifically, he needs to convince the two old captains that he is a suitable choice, and to negotiate for his pay. Though this is perhaps the least adventurous part of the *Pequod's*

¹ See, for example, the account of Richard Boynton as reprinted in Dolin: “I have heard today that our captain intends prolonging this voyage 16 months longer if that is the case I hope he will be obliged to drive a Snail through the Dismal swamp in dog dayes with hard peas in his shoes and suck a sponge for nourishment he had ought to have the tooth ache for amusement and a bawling child to rock him to sleepe” (2007, 312, original spelling).

journey, the inclusion of the scene in “The Ship” is consistent with *Moby-Dick's* trend of cataloguing the aspects of whaling life that may be unfamiliar to the reader. The lay system, an especially peculiar type of remuneration, is one of those aspects; furthermore, as it is the most direct discussion of payment and earnings, this chapter is one of the most obvious illustrations of capitalism at work in *Moby-Dick*. In their interaction, Peleg and Bildad hold the means of production; Ishmael possesses as a commodity his own labor-power. In simpler terms, Peleg and Bildad are the capitalists, Ishmael is the worker. It is because this relationship is so plainly visible that I analyze this chapter first, as the discussion in this section will allow for a comparison with more covert manifestations of capitalism later on.

In his quest to sign up for a whaling voyage, the lay system does not come as a surprise to Ishmael. He has a basic understanding of how it works: “in the whaling business they paid no wages; but all hands, including the captain, received certain shares of the profits called lays, and these lays were proportioned to the degree of importance pertaining to the respective duties of the ship’s company” (68). Aware that the rate of pay depends on one’s “degree of importance”, he even puts together a list of qualities he believes will make him more important – that is to say, qualities that will make him a more valuable worker than others. Although he is “a green hand at whaling”, his experience from merchant ships means that he is used to being on sea, can steer, work with ropes, “and all that” (68): for this, he tentatively expects the two hundred and seventy-fifth lay. What is more, he is “of a broad-shouldered make” (68) which, if taken into consideration by the old captains, may bring him up to the two hundredth lay. Broadly speaking, then, he thinks he is aware of the reward he may receive for his value as a worker: the two hundredth lay, optimistically.

In real historical terms, he is, in fact, still undervaluing himself. Davis et al. (1997), based on an analysis of almost 35 000 nineteenth-century labor contracts for whaling crew members out of New Bedford, provide a comprehensive overview of the average lay by profession. Ishmael, depending on how capable Bildad and Peleg believed him to be, could have been characterized as a semi-skilled seaman or an unskilled seaman. The average lay for these professions in 1840 – close to when *Moby-Dick* is thought to be taking place – was 160.1 and 178 respectively (Davis et al. 1997, 166), though outliers do, of course, exist. Hohman (1928, 217) has recorded instances of lays as low as 1/250 or even 1/350. Davis et al. have found boys’ contracts that amounted to about 1/4500, even 1/10000, of the ship’s net profit. Twenty-four of these belonged

to people who signed up in exchange for “clothes”, and one to a boy who signed up for “board”, meaning he received nothing other than the accommodation and food given to him on the ship; any slop chest purchases would have put him into debt (Davis et al. 1997, 160). These instances, however, are not only exceedingly rare, they also do not apply to someone of Ishmael's age and experience. Pay so low was almost exclusively given to the most inexperienced, youngest members of the crew; youngest, in the case of whaling, often meaning thirteen or fourteen years old. Even Ishmael's optimistic expectation of the two hundredth lay, therefore, shows a degree of naïveté about what to expect. He is theoretically aware of the workings of the lay system, but lacks the experience necessary to determine an appropriate wage.

Ishmael's lack of practical knowledge is a key consideration in this chapter. Logically, those who do not have experience with a certain type of exploitation are easier to exploit, and such is the case with Ishmael as well. He falls victim to an elaborate performance from the captains, culminating in his signing of a contract that severely undervalues him. When Captain Peleg asks what lay Ishmael should receive, Bildad suggests that the seven hundred and seventy-seventh lay “wouldn't be too much, would it?” (69). Ishmael is, of course, incensed, and appears to find an unlikely ally in Peleg, who puts him down for the three hundredth lay instead, more than doubling Ishmael's suggested share. In the ensuing argument between the captains, Ishmael appears to forget his hopes for the two hundredth lay, a third higher than what he ultimately receives. Instead of arguing his case, he signs the papers, seemingly satisfied. His easy acquiescence is at odds with his thoughts as the first approaches the *Pequod*: “it was high time to settle with myself at what terms I would be *willing* to engage for the voyage” (68, emphasis mine). This framing suggests that Ishmael thinks of his employment as doing the *Pequod*'s owners a kind of favor. For him to be willing to go, they have to offer good terms; he is putting value in his own labor-power. But, once he actually is in a position to negotiate, he does not do so, directly contradicting himself. The captains play a pivotal role in this shift: it is their behavior that confuses Ishmael and weakens his conviction of his own value as a worker.

The first captain he meets is Peleg, but Bildad plays just as crucial a role. As Peleg takes Ishmael down to the cabin, the ensuing interaction between the captains is as comedic as it is telling about the roles they play in the wider capitalist society of Nantucket. Some critics including Markels (1994), Rowe (2004), Bohanon (2007), and Margery and Carl Abbott (2020) suggest the interaction may be read as a “good cop – bad cop” routine: Bildad deliberately

undervalues Ishmael, so that Peleg's still-low offer then appears better than it really is, and Ishmael is led to accept less money than he is worth. The two captains are, in essence, scammers. There is no evidence in the text to conclusively prove this hypothesis, as the captains' actions are quite open to interpretation, but proving it is perhaps not as relevant when the product of their interaction is the same regardless: Ishmael's labor-power devalued. This is because Peleg and Bildad's verbal exchange, regardless of precise interpretation, offers a crucial insight into the construction of their opposite yet symbiotic capitalist personae.

Bildad inhabits more clearly the position of capitalist, holder of the means of production, and a rich man. He is open about his desire to hire Ishmael at as low a cost as possible, and though Ishmael is not without options – he could, after all, try his luck on any other ship in the harbor – Bildad holds the majority of the proverbial cards. Ishmael, having “peered and pryed” (61) about the *Devil-dam*, and looked over the *Tit-bit*, has chosen the *Pequod* above them all. This is the ship on which he wants to sail. Bildad is the only avenue of entry.

But though he does hold the ability to employ Ishmael, Bildad does not ultimately hold authority. The text cuts his moralizing off at the knees. As he spearheads the negotiation for Ishmael's pay, he is leafing through his Quaker Bible, reading aloud a passage from Matthew 6 that can be found in King James:

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (Matt. 6: 19–21)

This is a fairly straightforward warning: do not rely on material riches, which can be stolen, and will eventually turn to dust and lose meaning; invest, instead, in richness of spirit, which no one can take away. But because of Peleg's interruptions as he attempts to negotiate on Ishmael's behalf, Bildad is not able to read the entirety of the passage. What remains is both comical and almost explicitly telling about the text's stance toward Bildad and his ilk. “*Lay* not upon yourselves the treasures of the earth,” (69, original emphasis) he says before he is first interrupted, both a pun on the word “lay” and a warning against material greed. As if the passage was a justification, he then makes his offer. Surely, if Ishmael lives according to Quaker principles, he should not mind a lay so low he may not earn anything for three years' work, and

even return in debt. “Seven hundred and seventy-seventh,” Bildad reiterates, “for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (69).

Another piece of Bildad's moralizing comes after Peleg suggests a more appropriate lay. He commends Peleg's “generous heart”, but says the following: “thou must consider the duty thou owest to the other owners of this ship—widows and orphans, many of them—and that if we too abundantly reward the labors of this young man, we may be taking the bread from those widows and those orphans” (69). Here, he preaches the distribution of Ishmael's potential wealth to those less fortunate, as opposed to letting him accumulate it. He posits that Ishmael, being a capable, strong young man, has less need of money than widows and orphans, two of the most vulnerable groups in a nineteenth-century American society.

Though Ishmael has his opinions, they are hardly even needed here to point out Bildad's astounding hypocrisy. As established earlier, the lays of ordinary and able seamen very rarely amounted to riches, and Ishmael's final three hundredth lay would have likely just paid for his purchases from the slop chest, perhaps with change left over for tobacco. He even tells us as much: “if we had a lucky voyage, [the lay] might pretty nearly pay for the clothing I would wear out on it” (68). His earnings, therefore, would go toward his own upkeep, ensuring his continued efficiency as a worker. As the crew only split 30% of the profit in the first place, he would hardly be taking money away from the widows and orphans: quite the opposite, his earnings would ensure that he could continue whaling to make the money for the owners to split.

Along with the widows and orphans, Bildad invokes the other “owners of this ship”. Though he highlights the women and children, as they are the group most likely to elicit sympathy, he conveniently neglects to list all the other part owners, many of whom would have been well-to-do men (Davis et al. 1997, 382—84). He is, therefore, also reminding Peleg of the reality that undercuts his entire argument: *all* the owners of the *Pequod* expect their payday. Seventy percent of the ship's earnings will be split between Bildad, Peleg, and the rest of those who have a stake in the voyage.

He, however, does not seem to see the irony in the comfortably retired owner of a whaling vessel, in a pristine coat and a buttoned-up vest, based on solid land and intending to remain there, offering a nearly penniless sailor next to no money at all for three years' hard labor. Bildad, too, could give up some of his profit in favor of the widows and orphans he is so concerned about, but he does not seem to have thought of the option. His moralizing, then, only

serves to reinforce his position as the typical capitalist: a hoarder of wealth that is made for him by a crew of underpaid workers. The perversion of his own religion's message further takes away from his legitimacy: “a man’s religion is one thing, and this practical world quite another” (66). In this practical world, money takes precedence.

In comparison with Bildad's austerity, Peleg may seem his sympathetic counterpart. He is noticeably the wordier, more animated of the two old captains: he curses Bildad in increasingly flowery language, waxes lyrical about the adventure of whaling, and bastardizes Queequeg's name in various ways. According to Ishmael's first impression, Peleg “cared not a rush for what are called serious things, and indeed deemed those self-same serious things the veriest of all trifles” (66). This leaves us with the impression of Peleg as having few cares in the world besides the present moment. That, however, is also an illusion.

The impression of a foolish, unserious Peleg is shattered almost immediately, as he plays his own role in Ishmael's hiring. While Bildad uses Ishmael's lack of experience to underpay him, Peleg seizes on it as a guarantee that Ishmael does not anticipate the type of conditions that await him on board a whaler. The worst of these conditions are described in Chapter Two, with the aforementioned result that the vast majority of whalemens only ever shipped out once. Ishmael has no frame of reference for this. Peleg sees that for the vulnerability that it is, and immediately pounces on it. He asks if Ishmael has ever been in a “stove” (broken or damaged) boat. When Ishmael answers in the negative, Peleg's next question is as follows: “Dost know nothing at all about whaling, I dare say—eh?” (63) Such a question can certainly be read as a simple appraisal of a potential hire. At the same time, however, it is just as possible to interpret it as the question of a predatory agent who has found the perfect worker: a seaman who actively wants to ship, and simultaneously does not know what actually awaits him at sea.

In light of this interpretation, Peleg's next line of questioning also makes sense: first, he insults the idea of the merchant service; then, he grows “suspicious” of Ishmael's intentions and asks a series of questions aimed at determining whether Ishmael may have been a pirate, or in trouble with the law, or planning to kill the officers and take control of the ship. Ishmael, stung, is forced to defend his honor, becoming in the process even more determined to sail on the *Pequod*. He wants to prove Peleg's “insular prejudices” wrong (63), so when Peleg asks if he is the man to “pitch a harpoon down a live whale's throat, and then jump after it”, he answers “I am” without a second thought (64). Only with Ishmael thus primed does Peleg finally agree to

sign him on. Combined with his desperation to go to sea – his apparent alternative to “pistol and ball” (1) – is it any wonder, then, that Ishmael walks away with a contract that undervalues him, about to embark on a journey that holds horrors unlike anything he has encountered in the merchant service?

Just as his real-life counterparts did during the Golden Age of whaling, Peleg, himself the *Pequod's* retired “chief-mate” (61), frames whaling as an adventure; and not just any kind of adventure, but the kind that would entice a young man. He tells Ishmael to look out into the distance, onto the endless sea, to understand that he is not likely to “see the world” on the journey (64); but, at the same time, he talks up the profession, trivializes Ishmael's previous experience, and makes whaling sound like an exclusive club, enticing Ishmael to want to prove himself. As real Nantucket agents did, he exploits Ishmael's vulnerabilities to get him to agree to something of which he has no real idea.

Furthermore, as soon as the *Pequod* is underway, another side of Peleg comes out. Though his choleric outbursts have previously been presented as humorous, here they become less so. As the ship is leaving port (90), Peleg is overseeing the process, swearing up a storm. Ishmael, in the process of winding up the anchor, is so taken aback he pauses, now having second thoughts about the voyage. Seeing this, Peleg walks over, upon which Ishmael “felt a sudden sharp poke in [his] rear, and turning round, was horrified at the apparition of Captain Peleg in the act of withdrawing his leg from [Ishmael's] immediate vicinity” (91). “That was my first kick,” (92) says Ishmael, in a relatively lighthearted tone still, but the nature of his interactions with Peleg is changed. The once-friendly, funny old captain turns out to demand obedience with the intensity of a slave-driver, screaming at the lower-ranking seamen for some time before he has to leave the ship and return to Nantucket.

This is a confirmation of Peleg's true nature: he looks at his hires merely as tools that work what he views as *his* ship. Though a terror to the crewmen, when it is time to leave the *Pequod* and let it sail out onto the open sea, there is “a tear twinkling in his eye” (93) at having to leave her. This, much more so than his loud outbursts, is a display of genuine emotion; and in this case, he is the emotional counterpart of Bildad, who is stern but loathe to leave “a ship in which some thousands of his hard earned dollars were invested” (93). Though Peleg is, unusually, the quieter of the two here, the symbiotic relationship between the captains implies that he is hardly shedding tears because he has to say goodbye to the crewmembers.

Peleg is reminiscent of a more modern type of capitalism – one that presents success at work as an individual achievement, a point of pride that should be more rewarding than a wage – while still building his venture on the exploitation of his workers. For Bildad's “exploitation veiled by religious and political illusions”, Peleg has substituted “naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation” (Marx and Engels 1848, 5). Where Bildad's hypocritical Quaker morality dictates that one should love to work regardless of the reward, for spiritual betterment alone, Peleg stokes motivation in his workers by making them believe that whaling is an adventure, and to get to hunt whales is a reward in itself. Their combined approaches create a well-oiled operation that results in Ishmael sacrificing his notion of his own value in favor of getting the job, which he both needs and wants. His open desire to ship does not build rapport with the captains or make him more valuable as a worker; on the contrary, it makes it easier for Peleg to prey on his vulnerabilities. In this chapter, the novel's clearest stance on capitalist whaling practices, *Moby-Dick* illustrates the fact that the whaling industry is always and inherently exploitative of the worker. There is no way to exist in it without being touched by its focus on profit over everything else, because the gain of that profit hinges on underpaying and overworking the crew. Ishmael, as a new entrant, is immediately victimized, naively relying on a nonexistent sense of fairness on the part of the capitalist captains. Once this point is made, however, the rest of the text problematizes the notion of Ishmael's naiveté, which rapidly fades into the background. The following section demonstrates this process and attempts to find its root cause.

3.2 A Merchant on a Whaler

Ishmael, it must be noted, rarely complains about any aspect of his journey. We already know that he is adaptable, as evidenced by his relatively quick acquiescence to sharing a bed with Queequeg; but it is difficult to imagine that, faced for the first time with the difficulties of life aboard a whaler, he would simply quietly accept them. Available records suggest that many of those who, like Ishmael, shipped with slightly naïve ideas of their new profession, soon strove to abandon it at any cost (Dolin 2007, 274). This does not happen to Ishmael, but it is not because he is able to stoically deal with the miserable conditions on board; rather, it is because he hardly ever mentions those conditions, as if they were never present at all. Understanding why this happens can in turn help us understand the purpose of such an omission.

As he considers the journey he is about to undertake, Ishmael reveals that he detests the landsmen, “of weekdays pent up in lath and plaster—tied to counters, nailed to benches, clinched to desks” (1); but his job only gives the illusion of a looser yoke. He is at sea instead of sitting behind a desk, but he nevertheless labors under a hierarchical structure that relegates him to the very bottom of the pecking order. He is not entirely unaware of this fact. For instance, he introduces the idea of enduring capital punishment to the extent he has encountered it before: “true, they rather order me about some”, “and at first this sort of thing is unpleasant enough”(3). But, he says, “even this wears off in time” (4). He does not mind being thumped or kicked about occasionally, because he has faith in the “universal thump” that is passed around and will eventually be inflicted upon the original thumper, too. If one mistreats others, he will be mistreated in turn in the end. This assertion very early on seems to provide a justification for Ishmael glossing over the realities of life on a whaling ship. If he has learned to ignore mistreatment and miserable conditions, then there is no need for him to regale the reader with tales of it. He is, however, also very open about another fact: he has never been on a whaling ship before. His experience is in the merchant service, which has very few things in common with whaling; namely, that the merchant sailor serves on a ship, and that ship has a job to do.

Merchant vessels sailed set routes, which quickly became well-mapped, guaranteeing successful journeys provided that the ship avoided bad storms and hurricanes (Busch 1994, 87). The crew served under a master who, through his familiarity with the route, could calculate the length of the journey with high accuracy and even predict adverse weather. The voyage was planned from beginning to end, the sailor was paid in advance, and the job duties certainly did not include anything resembling the madness of the whale hunt (Davis et al. 1997, 17–18). Clifford Ashley, recording various nineteenth-century whaling experiences in *The Yankee Whaler*, thought that “seamanship was the least part of a whaleman's business” (Ashley 1926, 101). Not only that; Ashley specifically singled out former merchant sailors as the least suitable type of man for whaling for psychological reasons: “[the merchantman's] whole training had made him look upon a small boat as a last resort, and a flimsy one, in time of extreme peril. If he had been two or three voyages in the merchant service, nothing on earth could rid the sailor of his timidity in a small boat – he was no good whatever, except as a shipkeeper, aboard a whaler”; a job that would insult his pride and make him a “malcontent” (100). Charles Nordhoff, in his *Whaling and Fishing* (1895), recounts that merchant sailors in the 1840s and 50s would amuse

themselves by going into whaling shipping offices and inquiring about the job, only to reveal their occupation and have the agent suddenly “break off all communication” and claim that he no longer has positions open; such was the reluctance of agents to have merchant sailors on board (13). They were simply “too accustomed to making a passage to somewhere in particular” (Busch 1994, 89).

In addition, merchant sailors as a whole seemed to detest whalers. According to one such man, the whalers “looked more like fishermen and farmers than they did like sailors”, and their captain paced the deck with his head down “like a sheep” (Dana 1840, 177). Nordhoff, originally a merchant sailor, also gives voice to his complaints: “there is as much difference between a whaler and a true sailor, as there is between a child's tin trumpet and the bugle which calls to battle”. As a “real, genuine tar”— a true sailor – he “despised these fellows from the bottom of [his] heart” (Nordhoff 1895, 63). Whalerships were perceived as “dens of vice”, while the merchant ship, having “pride”, would never sink to something as low as drinking or inviting women on board (qt. in Busch 1994, 140).

Ishmael, clearly, has no such misgivings. He “wants to see what whaling is” (MD, 63). He is able to make his narrative so detailed and instructive precisely because the *Pequod* is his first whaling ship. Hand in hand with whaling, however, goes the grim reality of a whaler's daily life, plagued by much more than being “ordered about some” (3). He wants to see *what* whaling is, and one can assume that he would discover all its realities: the adrenaline of the whale hunt along with long periods of stasis and mind-numbing boredom (Dolin 2007, 358), and the exciting vision of profit along with a corn husk mattress and maggot-infested bread. A lesser man than him would take a chapter to feel sorry for himself, and many have, including Scoresby (1820), Dana (1840), Nordhoff (1895), Burns (1918), and Ashley (1926). Each of these personal accounts contains at least a few paragraphs reflecting on the miserable boredom of quiet days with nothing to do, wading waist-deep in blubber, or sleeping in cramped bunk beds. Scoresby overcomes these experiences and sings the praises of whale fishery as a noble profession; Nordhoff, on the other hand, prefaces his book by saying that if he deters a single young man from going to sea, it would have been worth it to put his life in writing (Nordhoff 1895, iii). In *Moby-Dick*, these small everyday miseries never appear on the page.

Melville explicitly references Scoresby in *Moby-Dick*, suggesting that he has read at least some of his considerable writings; but even if he did not, he would have plenty of experience to

draw on. Melville, too, went from serving on a merchant vessel, the *St. Lawrence*, in 1839, to signing up for a whaling voyage on the *Acushnet* two years later. Based on the way Ishmael presents the journey, one might think that Melville had an easy time of his, but there is no indication of that being true. He was, for example, in possession of a contract for the one hundred and seventy-fifth lay, a greenhand without the hope of earning very much (Parker 1996, 185). And though it is this voyage that seems to have lit the flame of inspiration, he was clearly no stranger to the conditions on a whaler. Melville, in fact, was a deserter: a year and a half into the voyage, he and a crewmate left the ship at the Marquesas Islands, though little is known about the precise reason. After spending only a month on the densely forested, rainy Marquesas, he shipped out again on board the *Lucy Ann*, joining a crew that was half in revolt, with some in a “sick-out”, claiming to have a disease that prevented them from working. As a result, many of the crew were arrested upon the ship's arrival in Tahiti, with Melville getting caught up in the hubbub as a “nominal prisoner” (Parker 1996, 226), neither imprisoned nor completely free. His last whaler was the *Charles & Henry*, on which he was contracted only until the next port in Hawaii (227).

Although Melville wrote very little about the thoughts he had while whaling (Parker 1996, 197), a distinct dissatisfaction can be inferred from the fact that he never remained anywhere for long – least of all on whaling ships. He was, it seems, plagued by the same affliction as the majority of whalers, and never actually completed a single voyage from beginning to end. He, like Ishmael, made the transition from the merchant service to whaling, and though he also may have experienced “his Yale college and his Harvard” (MD, 99) on board a whaler, he quite clearly cannot have been entirely satisfied on it. We cannot, therefore, justify Ishmael's lack of commentary on working conditions with the author's inexperience. Similarly, taking into consideration Peleg's treatment of the crew, it is highly unlikely that the *Pequod* would be the unique exception to the rule and actually offer spacious lodgings and quality food. It is certainly possible that Melville just focused on the things he was taken with, as opposed to the things that may have made him desert. He, however, cannot tell us the answer, so it is to the text itself we must turn in search of one.

Despite the lack of realistic portrayals of day to day life, Ishmael's narrative reflects his reality in another way. *Moby-Dick* is famous for its frequent digressions from the 'main', plot-based story, either into the realm of the scientific or into a tediously detailed description (the

killing and processing of a single whale, for example, is split into ten chapters, from Chapter 60 to Chapter 70). It cannot be omitted that this, too, is “what whaling is”. To a merchant who has never seen a ship used for these purposes, the experience of stringing up a massive whale and leashing it to the ship would certainly be something to leave a lasting impression. The whale hunt and its danger would, similarly, create enduring memories. And, of course, in reproducing these memories for an audience – also unlikely to know what whaling is – it is not surprising that the most captivating elements would rise to the surface. If, however, we conceive of *Moby-Dick* as an adventure narrative, yet another issue presents itself: Ishmael has no struggle to overcome.

Overcoming struggle is one of the basic building blocks of any narrative, but particularly an adventure (Cawelti 1976, 18), and yet it cannot be said that Ishmael overcomes much. He is, of course, the only survivor of the *Pequod's* sinking, but this is something that happens *to* him. He only plays a role insofar as every other member of the crew plays his role in getting the ship to Moby Dick's cruising grounds. Were he to struggle with accepting his new reality, to fight and beat the urge to desert unlike so many in his profession, then the narrative could perhaps be said to be truly Ishmael's. Were he to overcome, he could claim a moral fortitude, a place of authority on the experience of whaling from which his story would take on entirely different shades of meaning. As it is, however, these elements are missing. Not Ishmael's, but somebody else's suffering – somebody else's struggle to overcome – takes center stage.

Ishmael begins the novel by talking about his innermost feelings: his unrest on land, his apparent inclinations to suicide (1), and later his feelings about Queequeg and their friendship. Once he is on board the *Pequod*, however, this inner focus gradually turns outward and remains anchored there. We know the crew is uneasy about Ahab's manic behavior; but we do not know how Ishmael feels (148). We know that Starbuck desperately wants to make it back to shore, but we do not know how Ishmael feels (456). And, above all, we know that Ahab struggles mightily with his intention, his purpose, his very existence; but we do not know any of Ishmael's struggles. The entire crew looks to Ahab with some degree of fascination. Ishmael, despite his shrewdness, is similarly drawn in. Any small daily sufferings he may have experienced are passed over in favor of Ahab, thus supplanting the struggle of the working class with that of the captain, the man at the top of the hierarchy. In doing so, it may seem that *Moby-Dick* is reproducing the standard relation under capitalism: as the capitalist's interests are prioritized over the worker's, so is the captain's struggle seen as more important than the crew member's. José

Manuel Sánchez Bermúdez argues that the workers' inability to revolt against the overwhelmingly dominant Ahab is the true tragedy of *Moby-Dick* (Sánchez Bermúdez 2012, 13). However, textually, Ahab's status within the hierarchy of the ship is not so clear-cut.

3.3 The Tomb

In Chapter Two, I set forth some of the areas in which a whaler's life on board may have been less than satisfactory: lodgings, food, relations on the ship, lack of personal effects, and possible punishment. I have also already established that Ishmael, though the reader experiences the novel through him, does not go into detail in his descriptions of any of these aspects of whaling. The only time we see him sleep is at the Spouter-Inn, where he has to come to terms with sharing a bed with Queequeg, and where his increasingly peaceful sleep mirrors the growing trust between him and the harpooner. Similarly, he eats plenty in "Chowder", while still on solid ground in Nantucket, but makes no mention of food once he is on the ship. Though he mentions that his lay may pay for the clothes he would "wear out" (68), we see no actual wearing out or replacement of such clothes from the slop chest, and he forms no real relationships with the rest of the crew; on the contrary, his affectionate friendship with Queequeg mostly disappears from the page.

Ishmael, then, does not see fit to describe his own everyday experiences on board. But, as suggested in the previous section, he does see fit to inform us of such details of Ahab's life. The captain's cabin, for example, plays a significant role. In the beginning portion of the novel, it is "locked within" (88); Ahab is sequestered in it, never exiting until he is ready to state his mad purpose. In an apparent testament to its size, he shares it, for several days, with the "Parsees", the whaleboat crew he has brought along specifically to hunt for Moby Dick. Ahab, however, does not seem to consider it a luxury. On the contrary, when descending, he can be heard muttering that "it feels like going down into one's tomb" (109). Simultaneously, as illustrated in "The Chart", this is where he does his work, poring over charts of all four oceans in an attempt to predict Moby Dick's location. Ahab, then, somewhat accidentally predicts his demise: in the "tomb" is where he undertakes the investigation that eventually brings him face to face with Moby Dick, and to his death.

This is not the only instance of the cabin's prescient meaning. American captains, "as a set, rather incline to the opinion that by rights the ship's cabin belongs to them" (135). However, the officers, at least, usually have adjoining quarters where they sleep. On the *Pequod*, it is not so:

“the mates and harpooners of the *Pequod* might more properly be said to have lived out of the cabin than in it” (135). When they are permitted in, it is “something as a street-door enters a house”, coming in briefly and leaving again, and so they seem to reside mainly “in the open air” (135). When the officers sleep inside, Ahab is on deck taking his nightly walks. When Ahab is inside, they are not. Before the *Pequod* sets out, Ishmael mentions the cabin as a space in which the captain usually socializes, drinking with friends from land before departure and with the officers once out on the ocean (91), with real-life captains also being, in general, social creatures (ex. Dolin 2007, 279). This framing of Ahab's cabin as a place of ultimate solitude, and of Ahab's presence in it as exclusionary, illustrates the depth of his isolation, an inability to connect with others that, as will be shown in Chapter Four, eventually costs him his life. Simultaneously, the depiction of the captain's main status symbol as a “tomb” destabilizes the notion of the captain as gleefully residing at the top of the hierarchy.

As on every whaling voyage, the cabin is out of bounds to an ordinary seaman like Ishmael, with the exception of “The Cabin-Table”, in which he narrates the dinner rituals between Ahab and the officers. Dinners, too, are a reflection of Ahab's status. His food is cooked and brought straight to him, he begins eating first, and he is one of the few people on board who gets to eat at a table; though that table is still the “cabin” table, always anchoring Ahab to his tomb. This manner of eating is supposed to be a privilege, reinforcing Ahab's importance: “he who in the rightly regal and intelligent spirit presides over his own private dinner-table of invited guests, that man's unchallenged power and dominion of individual influence for the time; that man's royalty of state transcends Belshazzar's” (MD, 131). Ahab, as the leader of the voyage, is the closest thing to “regal”, and thus sits at the head of the table and receives the best sustenance. He also holds the others' sustenance, quite literally, in his hands: he carves the “chief dish”, then hands various cuts to the officers according to rank. Starbuck receives a “slice” of meat, but Flask, at the bottom of this particular pecking order, receives “the shinbones of the saline beef”. He also cannot, for example, help himself to the butter, for “on so long a voyage in such marketless waters, butter was at a premium” (132). Every sentence describing the meal is imbued with a sense of order and hierarchy, with the officers sitting “as little children before Ahab” (132), their obvious leader.

Ahab himself, however, does not step into this role. He does not use the opportunity to reinforce his dominant position. Instead, the meals are eaten in “awful silence” (132) because,

while he does not forbid conversation, he also does not speak. In taking their cues from their captain, the officers dare not talk either, creating an enchanted circle in which Ahab's high rank, once again, disadvantages him: he cannot make use of this prime opportunity to form social relationships because the others will not start a conversation for fear of being out of order. He remains "socially inaccessible" (135).

Finally, Ahab seems to be the only thing on the ship that wears out or falls, literally, apart. He is no longer whole: his flesh-and-blood leg is "long dissolved" (420), replaced by the ivory prosthetic. With the integrity of his body compromised, Ahab is destabilized as a person, and that lack of stability is visible in his physicality, as well as in his behavior. He loses the leg twice more: first, before the *Pequod* even leaves Nantucket, he is "found one night lying prone upon the ground, and insensible", with the leg having slipped sideways and almost "pierced his groin" (413), resulting in an agonizing wound. It is this wound that keeps him off the *Pequod* until the last minute, and confines him to his cabin in the beginning of the voyage, minimizing his chances to get to know his crew and increasing the impression of awe that later has everyone falling silent around him in fear. It is a reminder, perhaps, of the fact that the circumstances which cost Ahab his leg are an insurmountable obstacle between him and the world.

The second time Ahab loses his prosthetic, *Moby Dick* is directly at fault once again. After meeting the *Samuel Enderby*, whose captain reports a recent sighting of the white whale, Ahab leaves for the *Pequod* so quickly he splinters his leg in the process. The bone is put under even more stress when he turns too sharply to give orders for the chase, becoming too fragile for him to stand on it (413). Here, even the suggestion of the whale being close by results in Ahab falling apart, a portent of what is to come. The entire ship receives orders to ensure that he receives a replacement as soon as possible: the crew members are to find and cut a quality piece of jaw bone, the carpenter to carve the leg, and the blacksmith to fashion any necessary metal "contrivances" (415). Like the text itself, all on board have to prioritize Ahab's suffering before anything else. Here, his ability to command everyone only brings him closer to his own doom, and his inability to form relationships makes him impervious to reasoning. Ahab's privileges are elements of his downfall.

Instead of knowing the crew's dining habits, we know Ahab's. Instead of exploring the crew's lodgings, we explore Ahab's. In all his tragedy, he pulls attention to him, and this attention allows us to see him in all his dissatisfied emptiness. When he strikes his chest, it rings "most

vast, but hollow” (145), and his status symbols are the same. He is still very much dominant, both on the ship and in the narrative, but he is not dominating the crew only as the ultimate authority, but also as the person who suffers most, whose suffering takes hold and captivates everyone around him. “Every revelation” about him “partakes more of significant darkness than of explanatory light” (414). The workers, whom James considers the true heroes of *Moby-Dick*, are eclipsed, their treatment at Ahab's hands largely irrelevant in a story that is monopolized by his pain.

Ishmael, as one of these eclipsed workers, is at times little more than a transmitter of Ahab's thoughts and feelings, the reporter of things that happen around him as his own personality recedes. However, this shift, as this chapter has shown, happens in a deliberate manner. Initially, Ishmael's naiveté about the whaling industry is center stage, which allows for a practical demonstration of exploitative hiring practices. But after Ishmael is hired, at a time when his first impressions of whaling should logically be prevalent in the narrative, we encounter instead a focal shift to the outside, with Ishmael assuming the position of observer. As a result, Ahab takes precedence, dominating Ishmael's narrative as he dominates the crew. Here, *Moby-Dick* transitions from showing how capitalist exploitation can affect a single newcomer to centering on more enduring forms of exploitation and the suffering that arises from them. This leaves us with the impression that, regardless of position, the whaling industry runs on the suffering of men; a point that is further emphasized as the text displays the hollowness and detrimentality of Ahab's arbitrary hierarchical position. Ultimately, Ishmael and Ahab's positions both stem from unfettered capitalism and its prioritization of gain, but only one of them leads to a particularly thorough kind of ruin. In the final chapter, I attempt to unravel the many threads that converge in Ahab's revenge against Moby Dick: the beliefs imposed on him by the capitalist society of Nantucket, the whale's meaning, his personal motivations, and the roots of his failure. Considered together, these illustrate the potential long-term impact of exploitation on the worker under capitalism, irrespective of his place within the structure of the subjugated workplace.

4 The Iron Rails of Ahab's Destiny

As discussed in the Introduction, critique of *Moby-Dick* has followed trends: while earlier criticism was concerned mainly with the spiritual and metaphysical, with the 1960s came a move toward discussions of the social and political aspects of the novel. *Moby-Dick* criticism of the 1970s focused on “the capitalistic system, imperialism, race” (Shaw 1993, 71), paving the way for Marxist critique in the 1980s, and ultimately leading to modern interpretations that combine the metaphysical, social, political, and, more recently, also the ecological or ecocritical. However, despite spanning many decades and diverse critical trends, the majority of critics find a rare harmony in one thing: their treatment of Captain Ahab.

From F. O. Matthiessen's “disaster of an egocentric mind” (Matthiessen 1941, 418), through Rogin's view of Ahab as a despot whose freedom lies in the enslavement of his crew (Rogin 1983, 159), to Slotkin's “best and fullest expression of the totality of the crew he binds to his will” (Slotkin 1977, 25), the popular critical view of Ahab is less than favourable. This is an unsurprising reading: Ahab not only turns a whaling voyage into a personal vendetta, but he does so while terrifying most of his crew, soliloquizing on his boundless power, and ignoring those who try to moderate his behavior. He is a metaphysical rebel in the company of Satan, Lear, Macbeth, and Prometheus (McGuire 2003, 291) whose usurpation of the *Pequod's* journey leads to “satanic thralldom” (Lawson 2012, 58). This “godly, ungodlike man” (MD, 71) inspires a kind of universal fear: he is the result of what might happen if we let anger utterly consume us.

This is, of course, not to say that this is a ubiquitous or monolithic opinion. In the fairly recent past, Susan McWilliams (2012) and Gabriel Moseley (2009) have both offered readings that argue for a different, more sympathetic, interpretation. Moseley portrays an Ahab that is fundamentally torn, a “stricken being” (Moseley 2009, 1) who is sympathetic to universal human suffering; McWilliams similarly places him within the fabric of American society as its typified representative, not an extreme outlier. While it is naturally important to take into account Ahab as he is on the page, I seek to align my interpretation with McWilliams' especially in reading Ahab as “not an impersonal or otherworldly force at all but an ordinary human being” whose human qualities balance out his most extreme behaviors (McWilliams 2012, 235). Like McWilliams, I consider Ahab's moments of kindness, emotion, and inner struggle just as significant as those of madness. Interpretations that wholly strip him of his humanity and attempt to cast him as some manner of post- or anti-human, as Satanic or irredeemably evil, often neglect

these aspects of Ahab's character, choosing to focus mainly on his more 'maniacal' characteristics. *Moby-Dick*, of course, ends in bloodshed and tragedy, and to a degree it is quite natural to focus on those parts of Ahab that deliver him and his crew to their untimely end. On his way to that end, however, Ahab displays signs of internal conflict. He is not quite as ruthless as his current cultural reputation.

In their focus on Ahab's obsession, many have brought capitalism into the fold. Interpretations that discuss the (anti-) capitalist aspects of *Moby-Dick* often view Ahab as a dictator or despot. James calls Ahab the “embodiment of the totalitarian type” (James 1953, 21), but his study simultaneously considers Ahab very much a human, albeit a failed one. Although James' book is somewhat dated, I would like to follow his line of scholarship in first considering what we know about Ahab as he was before his final voyage, and setting this into the economic context of the period. My final argument about Ahab is twofold: first, I argue that Ahab's stand against the white whale is, at its core, a stand against capitalism. Using the evidence presented, I then illustrate the manner in which Ahab, despite becoming aware of the system that has exploited him, utilizes aspects of that same system in order to achieve his goal, reproducing deeply ingrained capitalist power dynamics and ultimately failing because of it.

4.1 The One Cogged Circle

To illustrate how capitalism has impacted every aspect of Ahab's life, let us first look at the simple and indisputable facts: he is an old, grey sea captain with forty years' experience as a sailor, whose last voyage resulted in the traumatic loss of a leg in an encounter with a white whale. He has a young wife and child, his father passed away before he was born, and his mother – the same mother who named him after a disgraced Biblical king – died when he was a year old. He is known to have suffered and been “desperate moody, and savage sometimes” (71) as a result of his injury, but he is nevertheless shipping out on another voyage aboard the *Pequod*. This is as much as Ishmael learns before he agrees to sign up himself, and he is not particularly comforted by it. It is not difficult to see why: although Ahab has an exceptional amount of experience, which should be reassuring to a sailor, his apparent state of mind does not seem to bode well.

As “it is always as well to have a look at [the captain] before irrevocably committing yourself into his hands” (72), Ishmael presses Peleg for more information about him. Peleg's

explanation is as confusing as it is concerning: “he keeps close inside the house; a sort of sick, and yet he don't look so. In fact, he ain't sick; but no, he isn't well either”. The details he provides are also vague at best: “I know that on the passage home, he was a little out of his mind for a spell; but it was the sharp shooting pains in his bleeding stump that brought that about, as any one might see. I know, too, that ever since he lost his leg last voyage by that accursed whale, he's been a kind of moody—desperate moody, and savage sometimes, *but that will all pass off* (72, emphasis mine).”

In reassuring Ishmael, Peleg repeatedly dismisses concerns about Ahab's health and his state of mind. Though he is naturally attempting to comfort Ishmael with his language, it would seem that he has not thought to question whether Ahab is fit to command the *Pequod*. He presents Ahab's education (“Ahab's been in colleges”), his experience and skill (“he's fixed his fiery lance in mightier, stranger foes than whales”), and even his marriage (“stricken, blasted, if he be, Ahab has his humanities”) as reasons to believe in his competence. He uses his own experience as a guarantee: “I've sailed with him as mate years ago; I know what he is—a good man” (72). In doing so, he hides from inexperienced Ishmael the true horror of traumatically losing a leg while whaling, and the impact this may have, even on a “good man” like Ahab.

However, if he does, in fact, suspect the true depths of Ahab's anguish, it is also likely that such a suspicion would encourage Peleg even more. After he has met Ahab, Ishmael looks back at his time in Nantucket and speculates that, “far from distrusting [Ahab's] fitness for another whaling voyage” because of the “delirium” he was reported to have suffered at sea, “the *calculating* people of that prudent isle were inclined to harbor the conceit, that for those very reasons he was all the better qualified and set on edge, for a pursuit so full of rage and wildness as the bloody hunt of whales” (MD, 166, emphasis mine). It is not only the captains who hope to profit from Ahab's suffering, but the entire island. This is because the sale of cargo brought back from a whaling voyage benefited not only the ship's owners, but also played a significant part in the local economy.

Nantucket, though often considered the birthplace of American whaling, was not ideal for it. Its harbor was surrounded by a sandbar that was not a significant obstacle in the early days of the industry, but as whaling vessels grew larger and their accumulated cargo heavier, anchoring them in Nantucket became difficult. With the ships sitting too deep in the water to make it over the sandbar, the oil and whalebone had to be rowed to shore in trips (Dolin 2007, 109). New

Bedford had no such problem in its own harbor, and also occupied a larger and more fertile swath of land with plenty of trees for shipbuilding (Dolin 2007, 117). By the 1840s, it had long eclipsed Nantucket in revenue, quality of life, and fleet size, boasting almost three hundred ships to Nantucket's fifty (Starbuck 1878, 376). The Nantucketers subsisted on sheep, and had to rely on money injected into the local economy by whaling to purchase everything else they needed.

Though “productivity” as we conceive of it today would likely be unfamiliar to a nineteenth-century Nantucketer, the ideas that drive it were very much present, disseminated by the doctrines of patriotism and religion. It was hard work that transformed the American continent from a perceived wilderness into an Anglo-centric civilization, and early America's devotion to work was the subject of many fascinated European accounts². For decades, the country strove toward Adam Smith's ideal of economic independence for each man. Furthermore, the pre-industrial capitalist American society had an “unequaled commitment to the moral primacy of work” (Rodgers 1978, xii), believing that, in addition to being every man's duty, work also served to sustain his character and his moral values. Idleness was a “horror” (Rodgers 1978, 5), and especially so to some of America's most devout religious communities. Puritans and Quakers – the latter being the predominant religion in Nantucket (Dolin 2007, 91) – were “laborers for their Lord, straighteners of crooked places, engaged in a task filled with hardship, deprivation, and toil” (Rodgers 1978, 4). Work possessed inherent value. Idleness, they believed, was something to be ashamed of, for the Lord put them on the Earth in a “Work-house”, not to idle, leisure, or play. The fact that Ahab's own society and his own religious community would make him a tool is, then, ideologically consistent with what we know of nineteenth-century America.

It is easy to imagine how the newly minted myth of Ahab may have excited the “calculating” locals. To see him step off the ship “naturally grieved (...) to the quick” (166) did not elicit sympathy from them, but rather stimulated their imaginations. If he could turn his “moodiness” and “delirium” outward, and use it as motivation to attack whales with a new ferocity, he could bring back a ship brimming with oil. “[The Nantucketers] are bent on profitable cruises, the profit to be counted down in dollars from the mint” (166), and wounded Ahab has the potential to be a particularly efficient cog in the profit-making machine. More value is, therefore, put on his potential productivity than on his health or wellbeing. What is more, these priorities are not

² Perhaps the best-known of these is Alexis de Tocqueville's, according to which the American “would think himself in bad repute if he employed his life solely in living” (1849, 162).

only apparent in Peleg and Bildad, already established as shameless capitalists, but in the entire society of which Ahab is part; or rather, the society of which he would be part if he had spent more than four years of his career on shore. Aside from his wife, he has no real social life there, only “old acquaintances” (167). His devotion to work has made him enough of an alien in Nantucket that the island as a whole is happy to exploit him.

This is an example both of the self-reinforcing nature of capitalism and of its impact on human relationships. Ahab, though based in Nantucket, has been out at sea for the overwhelming majority of his life. Of course, plenty of seamen enjoyed being at sea, and we have to account for the possibility that Ahab did as well, but it is hardly likely that, had he been given a choice, he would have chosen to go on voyages so long and gruelling. Whaling voyages stretched to three to four years in the first place because it was more economically efficient for the owners and agents (Davis et al. 1997, 158); for the men who actually worked on board, they meant more time away from home, worse food, and more uninterrupted time spent in cramped, wet, oily conditions. As such, there is virtually no record of the workers on board wishing for longer journeys, with the exception of captains who chose to stay out at sea against their own wishes to secure a good catch for the owners (Dolin 2007, 232). This, combined with the fact that Ahab eventually marries and has a child – and thus displays some desire for a meaningful connection back on shore – allows us to assume that if Ahab could have chosen to go to sea for shorter periods, he would have. He has spent, on average, only around twenty-seven days per year on land, and the rest on the journeys that made his money. Workers under capitalism “live only so long as they find work” (Marx and Engels 1848, 11); Ahab, more so than most, has had to sacrifice a significant portion of his life for a wage.

That he has continued to do so even after almost losing his life in the literal sense is a reflection on the capitalist whaling industry. It is all the worse for the fact that, had Bildad and Peleg taken a different view of his struggles, the events of *Moby-Dick* did not need to happen at all. The decision to indiscriminately send Ahab on a voyage is especially glaring because the text suggests that even the capitalist structure of the whaling industry can, to some degree, accommodate those who are unable to earn an income themselves. A few pages earlier, Ishmael narrates a brief summary of the life of Bildad, who “had concluded his adventurous career by wholly retiring from active life at the goodly age of sixty and dedicating his remaining days to the quiet receiving of his well-earned income” (66). Alongside him, dozens of people hold part

ownership of the *Pequod* and receive a share of her profits, many of them widows and orphans: a kind of primitive social security net for those left behind as a result of their husbands' and fathers' exceedingly dangerous profession. Why, then, can Ahab not be afforded a similar degree of consideration? Though his age is never exactly specified, he is at least fifty-eight, and in his forty-year career he has spent less than three years on shore (479). He is far above the average age for a sailor of his time, which was somewhere around thirty-five (Davis et al. 1997, 90). He has more than fulfilled the obligation toward himself and his country which dictates that work is every man's duty (James 1953, 12); he lost his limb in service to it. Bildad seems to have followed the Smithian path to successfully gaining economic independence, which has put him in a position of power over others; a position he is using to uphold the existing power structure. Ahab, on equal standing with him in age and experience, ought to be as entitled as Bildad to the “quiet receiving of his well-earned income” (66), but while Bildad keeps his books on shore, Ahab, on an ivory leg, commands a ship and crew through a treacherous ocean.

The role Bildad and Peleg play in denying Ahab opportunities for the “betterment” of his position represent the oligarchic capitalism that has been present in America, in varying degrees of strength, since Melville's time (Baumol et al. 2012, 119). “This world” – the practical world of whaling – “pays dividends”, Ishmael tells us, because Bildad worked his way up from a “little cabin-boy in short clothes” (66) to the staunch old ship owner that now sits before him; and yet, for all the superlatives Peleg ascribes to Ahab, for all his experience, there seem to be no dividends for him. There is little consideration for him as an individual; instead, he is the cog, part of the machine that simply does not dysfunction. All of his suffering will “pass off” (MD, 72), because man's pursuit of capital takes precedence.

In light of these circumstances, alongside my discussion of Ahab's rank contributing to his suffering, it is clear that Ahab is being exploited. He views himself as an essential part of life on the ship, the driver without whom the crew cannot function: “my one cogged circle fits into all their various wheels, and they revolve” (149); but, in the same manner, he is part of a capitalist machine that is larger than him, the wheel to someone else's “cogged circle”. Like a wheel, he too is manufactured by capitalism: his maniacal rage comes from an injury suffered on an overlong journey, the length of which benefits the owners only. After said injury, he has to suffer months on the brink of death, while the rest of the crew whales along the way back home (165). And, most importantly, he is on the journey in the first place because he is hunting an animal and

trying to turn it into a commodity. Now, as damaged as he is, he can still fit into the machine, and for all that is wrong with him he may power it more efficiently than before.

These, however, are not the only reasons Ahab is at sea. *Moby-Dick* is very famously a story of his personal revenge, which means that he is on the *Pequod* willingly. This section has highlighted some of the possible external elements – the lack of access to more secure employment, his lack of social connections in Nantucket as caused by the need to work for years at a time, and the island's capitalist society viewing his suffering and pain as drivers of profit. The following chapter examines his internal motivations, which are necessary to understand Ahab and what drives him. His role within and stance toward the capitalist society that created him cannot be fully perceived without an attempt at interpreting Ahab's mind.

4.2 Thrusting Through the Wall

At the heart of the novel – and thus, at the heart of Ahab's purpose – is the enigmatic Moby Dick. The reason is clear enough: it is Moby Dick that “dismasted” Ahab, and gave him “this dead stump” he stands on now (144). In Peleg's decidedly less poetic language, Ahab's leg was “devoured, chewed up, crunched by the monstrousest parmactety that ever chipped a boat” (63). The monster has roots in real events: *Moby-Dick* is inspired partly by the story of the whaleship *Essex*, which was indeed sunk by an aggressive whale near the Marquesas Islands. The sinking ship forced its crew to flee in their 20-foot whaling boats; after the officers convinced Captain George Pollard Jr. that the Marquesas were populated by cannibals and thus unsafe, they turned their boats South, resulting in a grueling journey of over three months. The crew were eventually forced to turn to cannibalism anyway, with Captain Pollard committing “gastronomic incest” by killing and eating his own cousin (Philbrick 2000, 193). The white whale's name is almost certainly derived from another albino sperm whale known to sailors as Mocha Dick, so named because he could often be seen in the waters near Mocha Island. His fame was due to his unusual color, as well as his persistent survival; when he was eventually killed, “no less than twenty” harpoons were found in his body, “the rusted mementos of many a desperate rencounter” (Reynolds 1839, 390, original spelling).

Though the two whales inspired the story, neither the *Essex*'s executioner nor Mocha Dick were subject to a revenge mission like Ahab's. It is in this relationship between one specific man and one specific whale in the novel that we can at least begin to theorize on how, exactly, one

might categorize the white whale. As with most topics concerning *Moby-Dick*, there have been hundreds of readings, many veering into the territory of “intolerable allegory” (MD, 184); and, as with any other element of the novel, a definitive meaning of the white whale is so elusive as to be nearly impossible. Only one thing can be argued with a degree of certainty: that Moby Dick symbolizes *something* to Ahab. In being “dismasted” by the whale, Ahab's body and mind were permanently changed, and the hunt for Moby Dick is Ahab's calibration to that change. Throughout the novel, as the *Pequod* approaches the white whale's cruising grounds, Ahab grows increasingly frantic, his actions inexplicable and his speeches more and more erratic, culminating in his claims to defy God in “The Candles”.

One of the clearest textual hints at Moby Dick's meaning can be found in “The Quarter-Deck”, wherein Ahab gives one of his more famous speeches:

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. (145)

Ahab perceives the world around him as a series of objects whose true nature is concealed. They project an inscrutable, “unreasoning” pasteboard mask exterior, from behind which an “unknown but still reasoning” thing sometimes shows its features. To understand the world around him, then, man must “strike through the mask”; and if he is to strike at all, to break through the mask should be the chief reason. This speech suggests that Ahab's main justification for violence is the discovery of the true nature of things, the “reasoning thing” which makes itself known by pressing against its mask. He conceives of himself as being in a prison of inscrutable external projections, and Moby Dick, it seems, is *the* wall of that prison. Literally striking through Moby Dick, then, equates to metaphorically striking through the pasteboard mask, an action which may reveal the larger intention behind Ahab's injury. It is chiefly “that inscrutable thing” (145) about Moby Dick that he hates. He cannot rationalize what has happened to him within the context of the word he knows, and he searches for the white whale with the hopes that a larger meaning will be revealed; that his missing leg is not simple happenstance and a consequence of the greedy whale hunt, but something higher, something that will contextualize his suffering. No longer capable of rationality, he “never thinks; he only feels, feels, feels” (498).

He does, however, admit the possibility that he is suffering for the sake of suffering: “sometimes I think there’s naught beyond” the wall, “but ’tis enough”. “Be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal”, Ahab “will wreak that hate upon him” (145). Therefore, whether Moby Dick's attack was part of a higher plan, or just the actions of an aggressive animal, Ahab is determined to destroy him. Although it was Moby Dick specifically who cost Ahab his leg, Ahab is focused more on the whale's symbolism. He seeks to make “*meaning* rather than *money* out of the flesh of the whale” (Honig 2016, 146, original emphasis). The destruction of the whale's body is a means of exercising revenge on much more than just Moby Dick himself: it is a revenge against the forces that move the universe in ways that resulted in Ahab's loss of limb.

I would argue that the nature of these forces is up for debate. The numerous rumors of the white whale resulted in “half-formed foetal suggestions of supernatural agencies, which eventually invested Moby Dick with new terrors”; many had “the unearthly conceit that Moby Dick was ubiquitous” (162), that is to say present everywhere, haunting oceans the world over like a phantom. Ishmael, instead of dismissing this idea of ubiquity, gives it some weight: citing Scoresby (1820), he points out that some whales captured in the Pacific were found to have harpoons used in the hunting grounds around Greenland embedded in them, lending weight to the idea that one whale may, in his lifetime, visit every ocean on Earth. “The secrets of the currents in the seas have never yet been divulged” (162), he says, stripping the myth of Moby Dick of spiritual superstition, and replacing an occult mystery with a scientific one. Unlike Ahab, then, Ishmael sees Moby Dick and the legend surrounding him as anchored in the present, tangible world.

Depending on whose thoughts he is reproducing – Ahab's, the crew's, or his own – Ishmael oscillates between the physical and the abstract when it comes to the white whale. Because he is the narrator, we see Moby Dick “at once as the bulkiest, heaviest, largest of all living beings, and as a 'phantom,' a vision, and a fleeting mental image” (Casarino 2002, 82). As these two worlds merge in Ishmael's narration, so is it necessary to consider them both when seeking to make meaning of Moby Dick the whale. First, to understand Moby Dick within the abstract and spiritual realm, there is no better passage in the novel than the famous “Whiteness of the Whale”. The “Albino whale” (175), says Ishmael, is the symbol of all the things described in the chapter, which meditates on the inherent uneasiness that occurs when we are confronted with the color

white in all its contexts. Whiteness, he argues, intensifies terror (169): the pallor of the dead, the eerie whiteness of the horse on which Death rides, and the milkiness of fog that makes ghost-like shapes all inspire a “vague, nameless horror” (168). Whiteness makes the familiar suddenly unfamiliar and terrifying: an animal as simple and straightforward as the bear is suddenly imbued with terror when it is whitened and made into the polar bear (169). Similarly, *Moby Dick* turns the familiar body of the whale into an unknown and unknowable entity. This abstract idea closely mirrors the changing physicality of the white whale on the page.

Within the physical realm, the novel's treatment of *Moby Dick* is particularly interesting. His initial encounter with Ahab – and every first encounter he has had with a whaling vessel – was the result of the captain and crew's desire to capture him and process his carcass. *Moby-Dick* often touches on the multitudinal use of whales: spermaceti and whale oil, filling “the tapers, lamps, and candles that burn round the globe” (96); whalebone, “with which the fishermen fashion all sorts of curious articles, including canes, umbrella-stocks, and handles to riding-whips” (298); and ambergris, “largely used in perfumery, in pastiles, precious candles, hair-powders, and pomatum” (366). The teeth of the whale could be used as canvases for scrimshaw and in jewelry-making (Dolin 2007, 178), and some – like Stubb – were known to consume whale meat as well. All of these products made the American whale fishery one of the most prosperous industries in American history. It was the whale, in its overwhelming physicality, that purchased the “lofty mansions” of New Bedford. The town's “brave houses and flowery gardens came from the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian oceans”, all “harpooned and dragged up hither from the bottom of the sea” (29). We are perpetually reminded throughout – especially in the more scientific chapters – that the whale is an item, and its parts are commodities.

In “A Bower in the Arsacides”, Ishmael describes the whale as a factory, and “the joists and beams; the rafters, ridge-pole, sleepers, and under-pinnings, making up the framework of leviathan”; “the tallow-vats, dairy-rooms, butteries, and cheeseries in his bowels” (400). He also offers a view of the whale's skeleton as an attraction, where one might “swing all day upon [the whale's] lower jaw” (403), and compares its spine and ribs to the hull of a ship. The idea of whale as commodity is complete. Here, the whale is explicitly framed as a sum of parts that add up to an essentially industrial whole. In life, he is a factory; freshly killed, while still wrapped in blubber, he is the vision of immense profit; in death, he is corsets and umbrella handles, candles and machine lubricant, Ahab's leg and the supporting structure for Peleg's wigwam. If he is not

put to use, he becomes instead a bleached ornamental skeleton on display in the villa of the king of Tranque (400).

The whale was hunted on a mass scale solely because of its commercial value. To the whaleman, the animal exists mainly so it can be commodified. “Extracting economic value from the whale” (L. Marx 1967, 306) is the primary aim of everyone on board except Ahab. If it were not for this process of commodification, the whale fishery would have never become the economic behemoth history remembers today. If whale oil had not had superior lighting and lubricating properties, the colonists certainly might have stuck to opportunistic drift whaling, processing the animals when they washed up on shore, but the occasional harvest of whalebone would hardly have been worth sending out a fully-manned vessel, much less an entire fleet. The body of the whale powered the machines that, in turn, powered the industrial revolution (Dolin 2007, 12). Moby Dick, when Ahab first encountered him, was part of this tradition: a whale like any other, a sum of its profit-yielding parts. But on the *Pequod's* journey, Moby Dick is an idea, a symbol. The spermaceti inside his forehead is of no concern. However, the wrinkled forehead itself, which suggests old age and, when paralleled with Ahab's “ribbed brow” (434), a kind of intelligent thought that would result in contemplative wrinkles over many years, singles him out and makes him instantly recognizable. Though he generally looks like a whale, the meaning commonly associated with “whale” as a concept does not exactly apply to him.

This sense of Moby Dick existing in-between definitions is strengthened by the fact that he is markedly not a 'factory'. We know his physical characteristics: “streaked and spotted”, pale in color, with a wrinkled forehead, deformed jaw, a “pyramidal” hump, and three holes punctured in one of his flukes (163). Combined with the spiritual attributes discussed above, he is, to say the least, an unusual animal; but it is quite clear that, unlike every other whale encountered in the course of *Moby-Dick*, he does not exist in the realm of commodities at all. There is no talk of extracting oil from Moby Dick. On the contrary, as I will discuss in a later portion of this chapter, the hunt for him is presented in direct juxtaposition to profitability. Moby Dick exists outside of the capitalist frame of the text. In this sense, the white whale is not really a whale at all.

What, then, is Moby Dick? He is not fully animal, and he certainly is not human. I would suggest that, just as Ahab cannot successfully deliver a killing blow and turn him from symbol back to whale, we can never quite pin a singular meaning on him. To do so would be to go

against his very nature. What we can do, however, is better contextualize his meaning to *Ahab*, because – at least within *Moby-Dick* – Ahab is the chief meaning-maker of the white whale. In the meaning he makes, Moby Dick comes to serve as the symbol of nineteenth-century capitalism. After his meeting with Ahab, the old order – in which Ahab uncritically participated in the whaling industry and its economic and capitalist structure – has been shattered. Moby Dick no longer belongs in that order, either. He is not a natural resource, and Ahab is not able to compartmentalize him as such. As with Ishmael's reflection on the whiteness of the animal, the familiar, known whale is turned into the unknowable Moby Dick. The white whale thus becomes a constant reminder of what Ahab can never get back: his leg, certainly, but more than that, he can never return to the ignorance which allowed him to be satisfied with his life. Ahab is suddenly aware of his condition, and this awareness makes him perpetually haunted by dissatisfaction. It was Moby Dick who brought that awareness, Moby Dick who broke through the hull of Ahab's ship and exposed the perceived dignity of forty years' hard work as simply toil for toil's sake, decades of labor that returned almost nothing in the end. If Ahab can no longer find satisfaction in the chase after capital, he will at least satisfy himself by extinguishing the life of the beast that made him aware of his place in the world.

The conflict at the heart of Ahab's relationship to the white whale is this: Moby Dick punishes the whalers for hunting whales, but hunting whales is what whalers do for a living. The attack brings this conflict to the forefront of Ahab's mind, and makes him aware of his inescapable condition, his place within the capital-driven pursuit to which he has devoted his life. Perhaps it is this, more than anything, that constitutes the pasteboard mask of the world: the unreasoning, relentless pursuit, behind which lurks the possibility of a meaning, “unknown but still reasoning”. If Ahab is to escape his prison, he has to strike through the wall to discover whether there is meaning on the other side: whether his forty years' service, his life's work, can return to being worthwhile after Moby Dick is gone, or whether this new condition is permanent. He likes “to feel something in this slippery world that can hold” (419); over the course of the novel, however, it becomes that it is not so much the world that is slippery, but Ahab's own grip on it. The world has remained the same; Ahab's understanding of it has irreversibly shifted.

The most prominent example of this is Ahab's own motivation, as stated by him, that sets him at odds with the rest of his crew. Within the lay system, the *Pequod's* company “depend for their profits, not upon fixed wages, but upon their common luck, together with their common

vigilance, intrepidity, and hard work” (MD, 129). As the men show great enthusiasm in spotting, hunting, and processing the whales they capture, it is reasonable to assume that they expect to make money, and expect to do so under a captain who will lead them in that purpose. In “The Quarter-Deck”, however, Ahab explicitly positions himself in direct opposition to this expectation: “And this is what ye have shipped for, men! To chase that white whale on both sides of land, and over all sides of earth, till he spouts black blood and rolls fin out.” (145) His purpose is something entirely different from theirs.

Starbuck – the designated keeper of the status quo – tries to reason with Ahab. While Starbuck is “game [...] for the jaws of Death” if death comes along as a result of their money-making pursuits, he sees no purpose whatsoever in Ahab's vengeance. “It will not fetch thee much in our Nantucket market,” he tells Ahab, to which Ahab dismisses the Nantucket market with a derisive “Hoot!” (145). Even once oil – the single most valuable commodity a whaling ship can acquire – is on board, Ahab feels no apparent need to protect it. When some of the oil barrels begin leaking, Ahab forbids the crew from fixing them, concerning Starbuck:

'What we come twenty thousand miles to get is worth saving, sir.'

'So it is, so it is; if we get it.'

'I was speaking of the oil in the hold, sir.'

'And I was not speaking or thinking of that at all. Begone! Let it leak! I'm all aleak myself. Aye! Leaks on leaks!' (422–23)

Starbuck's framing is clear: as they have already come this far, and done so much work to acquire it, it would be illogical to let the oil spoil when they have the means of saving it. This seems a natural way to think about things: the labor has already been done, and the oil is proof of that labor, the key commodity to exchange for a wage at the end of the voyage. No man who took part in the gruelling hunting and harvesting process would want it to go to waste; no man, that is, except Captain Ahab. Such is his commitment to hunting Moby Dick that he appears to have lost respect for his own work: he carries it out, and then does not mind erasing the results of it. The truly valuable work happens in his tomb, down in the solitary cabin, where he examines his maps and charts to find a way forward in the chase and satisfy not Bildad and Peleg, but himself.

His command to “let it leak” is one of Ahab's most open acts of defiance toward the capitalist principles of the whaling industry, and a display of his priorities. If, to Ahab, an empty barrel is

the same as a full one, then he has clearly ceased to find meaning in what he does; and he cannot try to recapture it unless he strikes through Moby Dick to the “unknown but reasoning” thing beyond. Furthermore, by aligning himself with the leaky barrels, Ahab gives an indication of his own self-image. The oil seeping out into the water represents lost value; that Ahab, too, is “all aleak”, is a display of his destabilized sense of self. It is no surprise that he feels his own value draining away: all his life, he has been told by American society and by his Quaker religion that work is imperative to living correctly, that it is necessary to toil in order to remain pious and morally sound, but on this last journey, he is coming to understand that this principle on which he has built his life is false. For better or worse, no one cares about Ahab's daily toil, or his struggle with his demons; they only care about the results he can deliver. Before, following the capitalist principles of the society whence he came, he could derive personal value from that same work, but Moby Dick has shattered his personal value system. Now, the hard-won oil is leaking into the sea, no one at home is the wiser, and Ahab feels the same whether he works or doesn't work. He cannot extract value from what he does, leading to the dawning realization that his life's work also has no personal value.

He comes to this understanding fully in one of his final speeches, when the monomaniacal, “ungodlike” man is momentarily replaced by just Ahab: human, tired, and old. Despite its length, the speech is worth quoting in its entirety to highlight Ahab's realization of how the inherently capitalist idea of prioritizing work over everything else has affected every aspect of his life, from the food he ate to the lack of spiritual and literal enrichment it has brought him:

When I think of this life I have led; the desolation of solitude it has been; the masoned, walled-town of a Captain's exclusiveness, which admits but small entrance to any sympathy from the green country without—oh, weariness! heaviness! Guinea-coast slavery of solitary command!—when I think of all this; only half-suspected, not so keenly known to me before—and how for forty years I have fed upon dry salted fare—fit emblem of the dry nourishment of my soil!—when the poorest landsman has had fresh fruit to his daily hand, and broken the world's fresh bread to my mouldy crusts—away, whole oceans away, from that young girl-wife I wedded past fifty, and sailed for Cape Horn the next day, leaving but one dent in my marriage pillow—wife? wife?—rather a widow with her husband alive! Aye, I widowed that poor girl when I married her, Starbuck; and then, the madness, the frenzy, the boiling blood and the smoking brow, with which, for a thousand lowerings old Ahab has furiously, foamingly chased his prey—more a demon than a man!—aye, aye! what a forty years' fool—fool—old fool, has old Ahab been! Why this strife of the chase? why weary, and palsy the arm at the oar, and the iron, and the lance? how the richer or better is Ahab now? (479–480)

As discussed earlier in this section, Ahab's confrontation with Moby Dick has made him aware of his circumstance, which he had only "half-suspected" before. Now that it is "keenly known" to him, he comes to understand the futility of his own life's work. This is Ahab's unbearable condition; his crusade against Moby Dick is the only thing he can think to do to cure it. The terrible awareness of his own place in the world has remained with him even as his health has improved, never to go away. Removing the white whale is the last option available: to thrust through him is to thrust through the wall that separates Ahab from a final understanding. He clearly suspects that he has lived a lie, but only vanquishing Moby Dick can provide a conclusive answer.

4.3 The Groove of the Soul

Unfortunately for Ahab, vanquishing Moby Dick is the one thing he is unable to do. Finally, then, to attempt to reach a complete understanding of him, we must examine the reasons for his failure. Why does *Moby-Dick* end so tragically? Why can a triumphant Ahab not suspend the corpse of Moby Dick from the side of the *Pequod* and sail home with his manic thirst quenched? The answer, naturally, depends on one's interpretation of the wider meaning of the novel, and of Ahab as a character. As this chapter so far has demonstrated, I interpret Ahab's mission as ultimately anti-capitalist in nature; my interpretation of his untimely end, then, is in keeping with this line of argument. Here, I lean especially on C.L.R. James and on José Manuel Sánchez Bermúdez's *The Neoliberal Pattern of Domination: Capital's Reign in Decline* in order to argue that Ahab's downfall hinges on two things: first, the depth of his indoctrination into the very same capitalist system that has so hurt him; and second, the depth of his individuality as begot by his circumstances.

I have already delineated the external forces of capitalism which bear upon Ahab, as well as his own perception of his place in the world and his relationship to Moby Dick. His restlessness and dissatisfaction are borne out of the sudden awareness of the possibility that his life may have been meaningless. That life, as discussed earlier, has mostly consisted of work, both a way of acquiring a wage and of sustaining one's moral integrity. Moby Dick eclipses Ahab's ability to look at the world as it was before; and because Moby Dick, unlike the moving gears of capitalist society, can be dominated, it is to him Ahab turns for answers. In the end, however, we do not

find out whether he is able to see a greater meaning to his suffering once again. As he is hunting Moby Dick, the harpoon line wraps around Ahab's neck like a noose, and the white whale drags him out of the boat and into the depths of the ocean.

The reasons behind his ultimate failure to “strike through the wall” are certainly numerous, but one ever-present thing stands out: his treatment of the crew. Broadly speaking, everyone on board is a worker in service of people who do not labor, but act only as collectors and distributors of capital. Sánchez Bermúdez's general definition of the working class within the “pattern of domination” under capitalism applies here: “the working class is made up of that great mass of human beings who lack means of production and subsistence, and are required to sell their labor-power to capital for a wage in order to survive and who are, therefore, constantly seeking to maximize their own utility, to serve a function within the complex social framework of capitalism” (Sánchez Bermúdez 2012, 20). The whalemens, Ahab included, own none of the means of production on the ship, which aligns them with one another as a subjugated class; but, at the same time, the owners of the means of production impose a social and economic order on the crew.

This peculiar manifestation of capitalist hierarchy on the ship – Ahab the superior, who is himself an exploited worker in Peleg and Bildad's employ – results in Ahab, thinking himself better than the crew, mistreating them just as he is being mistreated. Ahab's pride, individualism, and selfishness converge to create what C.L.R. James calls the “embodiment of the totalitarian type” (James 1953, 21). His crew feel simultaneously intimidated and bound to his purpose: an “ineffable thing” has tied them to him with “a cable [they] have no knife to cut” (150). Ahab heeds no resistance, no protest; the only thing he sees is what he wants to accomplish. The people around him are cogs in the grand machine of his revenge, just as he is a cog in the machine of capitalism, but he does not make a connection between these twin forms of domination. As the dominant class assumes the right to use, destroy and transfer the dimensions of the lives of the dominated classes (Sánchez Bermúdez 2012, 18), so does Ahab assume his right to use the crew – or, at the very least, the crew feels that way. According to Starbuck, he would “be a democrat to all above; look, how he lords it over all below” (150). “All above”, in this case, means those who would challenge Ahab. As no such person is present on the *Pequod*, he assumes his right to give orders to the others.

In Chapter Three, I have shown that the novel presents Ahab's rank as a negative – an aspect of life on board the *Pequod* that contributes to his struggle and dissatisfaction. This is further exemplified when, in order to convince them to hunt for Moby Dick, Ahab has to devise a way to make his revenge resonate with the crew. His rank plays a role in the lack of companionship between him and everyone else on board, and it is in part because of this lack of companionship that he turns to the universal language of the capitalist: money. He attempts to compete with the traditional system of commerce surrounding the hunt for whales by way of a single coin. As a reminder of the *Pequod's* main mission – not to harvest oil, but to capture Moby Dick – he nails a doubloon to the mainmast, a kind of punctuation for his manifesto, but to the crew he explicitly pitches it as a reward: the man who sights Moby Dick first, and thus performs best in Ahab's eyes, will receive the sixteen-dollar piece.

As this speech inspires great enthusiasm, Ishmael hints at something semi-mystical going on – “the mariners began to gaze curiously at each other, as if marvelling how it was that they themselves became so excited” (143) – and some critics have concurred with him in citing this as a 'magic' moment. Cecil Bohanon, for instance, argues that Ahab gains the respect of his crew here by building solidarity (Bohanon 2007, 27). These readings, however, seem to do a disservice to *Moby-Dick*. It can hardly be a coincidence that the first time Captain Ahab addresses his crew at length and lays out his mad purpose in full, he is doing so with an ounce of gold in his hand. He is referencing the lay-based economic structure which the sailors already know – the owners will pay them until their successful return to port – and is motivating them by substituting solid gold for the far-away idea of the pay they may receive if they survive to bring sufficient cargo back to Nantucket. This sways the crew from desiring the reward promised by the owners, and toward Ahab's own. He is exploiting the “simple, quantitative, acquisitive system of value honored by a capitalist society” (L. Marx 1964, 298).

Here, Ahab is plainly reproducing the dynamics of capitalism that have placed him in his current predicament. He is aware that the men, as workers, are much more enticed by the vision of profit than by his own pasteboard mask journey. As the doubloon is not “part of the system of capital that commissioned the ship”, it could even be argued that *Moby-Dick* is here deflecting away from capitalism (Shaw 1993, 77), presenting a genuine alternative power dynamic. This interpretation, however, does not hold up in the face of Ahab's other actions. Once it is time to pay the reward, for example, he does not make good on his promise. “Fate reserved the doubloon

for me” (483), he says, presenting himself as the only person who could have sighted Moby Dick first. The word “fate” suggests that this was, perhaps, his belief and intention all along: to inspire the devotion and hard work of his crew via a financial incentive, only to never actually give the doubloon away, thus using established capitalist frameworks for his own purposes. He is very clearly reproducing the capitalist system that exploits him and imposing it on his crew members.

This is far from the only time Ahab demonstrates his lack of care for the crew and his lack of connection with them. “The Quarter-Deck” is, in fact, a herald of something that will eventually come to dominate the novel: Ahab's isolation, and with it, his individuality. This is not to say that the rest of the crew is imbued with a collectivist spirit. Quite the contrary: according to Ishmael, they are all “isolatoes” (106). Sánchez Bermúdez identifies this – “the inability of the crew of the *Pequod* to unite and save their own lives by casting [Ahab's] insanity into the sea” (Sánchez Bermúdez 2012, 13) – as the true tragedy of the novel. This is, according to him, a defining feature of capitalism and its pattern of domination: the inability of the dominated class to unite, because they are actively encouraged to compete with one another and view each other as enemies. Though the *Pequod's* crew cannot be said to be actively hostile toward one another, Ahab's doubloon certainly raises competitiveness on a journey that is supposed to see them united behind a common purpose. Orders are also an essential part of the pattern of domination; Sánchez Vázquez writes that obedience is “the evidence that the other force is defeated or dominated” (1999, 15). Obeying orders, therefore, means accomplishing one's purpose as dictated by capitalism. Ahab gives orders, and thus structures the pattern of domination on board. In fulfilling them, each man attempts to be an individual best, because that is what he knows (Sánchez Bermúdez 2012, 19).

Isolation, then, is a key component of all relationships on the *Pequod*, and perhaps also the answer to why the crew never revolts against its captain. Though there are twenty of them against a single old madman, there is no more collective spirit among them than there is in Ahab. Even after a year in the very close quarters of a whaling vessel, Ishmael does not know the whole crew. He refers to a total of ten people by name: Queequeg, Tashtego, Daggoo, Starbuck, Stubb, Flask, and Ahab, his superiors in the social and economic structure aboard the ship; Bulkington, who, based on the chapter describing him, can be assumed to have died at some point during the voyage; and Pip and Fleece, one familiar to Ishmael because of his fall overboard and subsequent madness, the other because he is the cook. And, of course, knowing the names of these people

does not translate into any kind of meaningful connection. As already mentioned, even his close relationship with Queequeg, established while on land, fades into the background, only recurring in “The Monkey-Rope” and “Queequeg in His Coffin”.

If a sense of community is next to non-existent on board among the regular sailors, it seems quite natural that Ahab would be poorly equipped to establish one; in fact, he is unable to do so on a fundamental level. The captain's cabin, discussed in Chapter Three, is one of the clearest examples of this. For the first few days of the voyage, it serves as Ahab's hiding place, a literal tool of isolation; but as it is opened to the rest of the crew, Ahab does not open with it. In “The Cabin-Table”, as already shown, the rigidity of Ahab's separation from the officers, and the officers' separation from Ahab and each other, is plainly laid out. It is these dinners that show just how cut off Ahab is from the rest of the crew. Nobody stays in the cabin any longer than they have to (James 1953, 15), and it is difficult to see why they would. Ishmael claims that

in the cabin was no companionship; socially, Ahab was inaccessible. [...] He lived in the world, as the last of the Grisly Bears lived in settled Missouri. And as when Spring and Summer had departed, that wild Logan of the woods, burying himself in the hollow of a tree, lived out the winter there, sucking his own paws; so, in his inclement, howling old age, Ahab's soul, shut up in the caved trunk of his body, there fed upon the sullen paws of its gloom! (135)

Ahab is disconnected from the people around him in an essential way. He cannot be fixed. Ishmael views him as a relic of another time, the last stubbornly remaining “Grisly Bear” in a land that has not been forested for decades. The world around him unsettles him, as he unsettles the world and poor Flask, who “sits silly and dumfounded” before him (132). He is a “mute, maned sealion on the white coral beach” (132), with the mates his cubs, commanding respect with his presence alone, but simultaneously retreated so far into himself that his soul has to feed upon “its own paws” for subsistence. This metaphor highlights not only Ahab's advanced age, which results in an inability to relate to others, but also the fact that he beyond being able to relate. He can no longer benefit from companionship or friendship; his soul only survives when he regurgitates what he already knows and believes, and feeds his own madness back to himself.

Pip is, perhaps, the only exception. Like Ahab, he is not quite of this world, and can not relate to anyone else. Ahab's last conversation with Pip suggests that Ahab's resolve may have unraveled – “Ahab's purpose keels up in him” (471) – because Pip had shown him care.

Starbuck, of course, expresses some concern; but at its core, that concern is self-interested. Starbuck is chasing the vision of profit, and the prospect of seeing his wife and son again on shore. Pip, on the other hand, is only concerned for Ahab, and begs him not to leave because he does not want to see him hurt. This is a kind of care no one has shown Ahab in the course of the novel. Bildad, Peleg, and the whole society of Nantucket want their profit at the expense of Ahab's health. Some of the crew, now, want their dubloon, and so support his mad chase; others who attempt to stop him, like Starbuck, want Ahab to stop presenting an obstacle to regular profit-making. Only Pip does not care about what Ahab can give him.

In response to such selfless, pure, child-like care, Ahab displays a surprising degree of self-awareness: "There is that in thee, poor lad, which I feel too curing to my malady. Like cures like; and for this hunt, my malady becomes my most desired health." (471) A few pages later, in "The Symphony", Ahab puts a name to this malady: it is, at its roots, a result of his profound isolation. Pip, too, is utterly alone, part of him stuck forever in the sea where he had fallen out of a whaling boat, the rest imprisoned in a mind that no one else can begin to understand. His isolation and Ahab's are kin; one's suffering may relieve the other's. Ahab turns Pip away because to cure the malady of his isolation would mean to grow to truly care about someone else, and such care may make him hesitate in his confrontation with Moby Dick. In this final, pivotal moment, Ahab chooses individuality and wields it like a weapon.

He goes the entire journey with only his own thoughts as true, equal companions. Even at his most mad, the deference he has demanded of the crew keeps them from reaching out to him. Herein lie the roots of Ahab's ultimate failure: his desire to "make the world tolerable for himself" (James 1953, 75) has blinded him to the suffering of others. The recurring motif, of *his* doubloon and *his* Moby Dick and *his* ship, reveals that his suffering and isolation have bred a short-sighted selfishness. He dismisses a crew of skilled men, potential partners in his quest for meaning, because it never occurs to him that other people may have suffered at the hands of capital as he has. As parts of the exploitative pattern of domination, Peleg and Bildad have taught Ahab that the world cares little for his pain; as a result, he has sequestered that pain in the essential core of his being, a central driver he can never share with anyone. He can never share his *self*, which inhibits his ability to establish meaningful connections.

As I have shown, this lack of ability stems, in part, from the capitalist doctrines Ahab has internalized over the course of his life. The last of these doctrines that must be highlighted is the

kind of competitive individuality Sánchez Bermúdez talks about, wherein the individual strives to compete with other workers. Though Ahab no longer cares about being the best in his work as a whaling captain, he unconsciously transplants some of these beliefs onto his new work: the revenge mission. He does believe that he is the one person best suited to his purpose, and that he does not need help: “The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run. Over unsounded gorges, through the rifled hearts of mountains, under torrents’ beds, unerringly I rush! Naught’s an obstacle, naught’s an angle to the iron way!” (149)

Here, in plainest terms, Ahab's metaphor exposes the limits of his own imagination. He presents his revenge mission as a train – an unstoppable juggernaut, the driving engine of the industrial revolution. He alone can cleave through nature, pass through metaphorical gorges, over mountains, under rivers, because he follows the path to his purpose as surely and reliably as the train follows the track. The issue with this is obvious: rails can only be found in places man has gone before. The train passes through the landscape effortlessly because the path has been chosen and purpose-built for it. Ahab is going on an unprecedented revenge mission, but he is building on precedents. He could not actually diverge from the designated route without derailing; he thinks he is unstoppable, but his “fixed path” makes his purpose just that: fixed. It is exactly as he says: his soul is “grooved” in the iron rails of his destiny, wedded to the idea that Ahab's suffering is the greatest, sure that he alone can reach Moby Dick and kill him. But he is on the same path many have been before: the path of individual resistance. He is not capable of conceiving of a reality in which he is part of the kind of collective effort that can redefine the status quo and build new rails because, even as he begins to resist it, the capitalist system of which he is part has conditioned him to rely on no one but himself.

It is this self-reliance that ultimately leads to Ahab's demise. He goes up against Moby Dick almost entirely alone, with the help of three boatmen to row the boat he could not move by himself. Because of this, he alone throws the harpoon, and it is when he stoops to untangle the harpoon line – a job normally carried out by a second person (Dolin 2007, 49) – that the rope catches around his neck and pulls him to his death. In his quest to strike through the pasteboard mask of the world, he dares to come uncomfortably close to the core nature of the society that produced him. At the pivotal moment, that nature, as represented by Moby Dick, throws the noose, and his own inherently individualistic ways of behaving deliver him into it. Capitalism, in the end, proves itself to be a self-protecting system: it has made Ahab in all his madness,

forbidden him from truly knowing himself, and taken him back as soon as he made an attempt at dismantling its illusions. Having another person in the boat may have saved his life; we can only hope that, having borne witness to his demise, future Ahab's will come to that understanding. For this, malleable Ishmael becomes essential once again. At the beginning of his whaling career, he has seen what comes at its end; and, as the sole survivor, it is up to him to tell others what he has just experienced. Our task is to make meaning of the message he imparts.

5 Conclusion

In their endless chase after profit, capitalist systems around the world have a tendency to leave human collateral damage. It is only through awareness of their workings and their history that we can come to understand the role we play in them, and the manner in which they move our lives without our knowledge. In this thesis, I have taken the example of a fictional nineteenth-century capitalist society as portrayed in *Moby-Dick* and attempted to illustrate those very workings through my analysis. The people who powered the Golden Age of American whaling – the crewmen on whaling ships – were some of the most horrifically mistreated laborers of their time, which makes the text a suitable candidate for an anti-capitalist reading. Beginning with Ishmael, who enters the world of whaling a novice, as most readers do, I have shown how naïve new whalers fell victim to predatory hiring practices and signed up for journeys whose horrors they often did not understand. I then contrasted Ishmael's exploitation as a new entry to the world of whaling with the longest-serving whaler who appears on the page: captain Ahab.

In my discussion of Captain Ahab, I have shown the impact that a profit-driven capitalist society may have on an individual level. Ahab, before his meeting with the white whale, had dedicated all aspects of himself to whaling to the detriment of other areas of his life: after forty years of hard work, he has not achieved the ideal of economic independence as imposed on America by *The Wealth of Nations*, and has hardly been able to build a personal life, having only recently married and produced a child. He is not able to see his own exploitation until he loses his leg while hunting Moby Dick, an incident that makes him aware that “all visible objects are but pasteboard masks”; that the world we live in is a series of projections that must be destroyed in order to discover the true meaning of things. In chasing the white whale, Ahab searches for the true meaning behind his injury, growing aware of his place in the world and the ultimate futility of his existence up until this point. He has blindly followed the gospel of America and his Quaker upbringing, the idea that devotion to work will inherently improve one's life, and it has turned to dust and ashes in his mouth (James 1953,13).

Because the white whale stood (or, rather, swam) at the birth of this realization, it is the white whale he seeks to destroy in an attempt to return to ignorance, but he is not able to reframe the way of thinking that has been implanted in him by four decades of toiling in a capitalist society. He retains deeply ingrained ideas of domination and social hierarchy, of worker competition and

individualism under capitalism, which cause him to be unable to form meaningful connections, and thus rob him of the opportunity to find others who share his worldview. He is, ultimately, not able to grasp the true gravity of what he is attempting to do. His revenge remains in the realm of personal tragedy because he cannot quite understand that others have suffered as he has. The workings of capitalism have left Ahab thoroughly alone; and getting to the heart of a heartless system that is designed to crush individual resistance requires more than a solitary, heartbroken old man. It is chiefly in Ahab that *Moby-Dick* illustrates the depth of capitalism's capacity to cause personal tragedy and destroy the life of workers laboring under false impressions.

At the same time, this is of course not to suggest that I have exhausted the possibilities for anti-capitalist readings of *Moby-Dick*. On the contrary, my reading, concerned primarily with the two most prominent characters in the novel, only explores one of many possibilities. At this juncture, it is necessary to point out that capitalism, while a ubiquitous system, has the capacity to adapt depending on the characteristics of a particular society. As a result, certain groups experience the capitalist system in specific ways that are not widely applicable. When it comes to labor, women and people of color (and, of course, those who belong in both groups) are especially likely to be discriminated against in the contemporary workplace (Parker and Funk 2017). We may perceive these outcomes today as stemming from systemic racism, misogyny, and the patriarchy, but the Marxist tradition would argue that those ideological systems themselves stem from “real social and economic existence” in the first place (Selden et al. 2016, 69). In other words, the supposed natural inferiority of women and of non-white people is not justified by some natural order passed down from an abstract higher power. The white male ruling class came first, and it is only from its struggle to retain power and ensure it for their offspring that these notions originate. This fundamental truth was at the core of Marxist analysis of society before *Capital* was finished. As Marx and Engels write in the famous opening to their *Communist Manifesto*: “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle” (1848, 2), and “the ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class” (31).

Ideological systems, and the various factions into which they split society, are an inextricable part of capitalism as we know it. I have not had the space to examine these crucial intersections in this thesis, but I believe the analysis carried out here can serve as the basis for just such an inquiry. *Moby-Dick*, with all its seemingly inexhaustible meanings, remains an excellent candidate for the study of race and, despite only containing two brief appearances by female

characters, its forays into exposing the heart of American society hold relevance for a feminist analysis as well³. Questions along these lines can further clarify the novel's treatment of capitalism and its place in the Western canon. One may, for example, examine the ways in which race affects the place a person occupies within the capitalist framework of the whaling industry, and how these dynamics are exemplified in *Moby-Dick*: why, for example, is there such a marked difference in social and financial status between the harpooners and the Black members of the crew like Fleece? Furthermore, though they are only rarely spoken of on the page, yet another line of inquiry may look at the role of the mothers and wives who remain at home, the labor they carry out to take care of the house and family, and how these realities affect the laborers out at sea. A study that seeks to answer these questions and integrates elements of socio-ideological discourse into an anti-capitalist reading would no doubt produce a more detailed, more nuanced, longer analysis than I have been able to do in this thesis, and only further confirm the continued relevance of Melville and his magnum opus.

In the 170 years that have elapsed since the first print run of *Moby-Dick*, the world has changed in ways that would be difficult to succinctly describe even for a man as creative as Herman Melville. Whales, for instance, are now largely safe from man, replaced by fossil fuels that put an end to the horrors specific to the whaling industry and paved the way for new human rights abuses. Though some of the particulars of the twenty-first century are drastically different, it is my hope that this thesis has gone some way toward illustrating the fact that, were Melville writing today, he might have written a *Moby-Dick* that would not be so different from the classic we already know. His is a novel so immense it captures the issues of Melville's time just as astutely as it captures ours; moved, at its core, by the impulses that have gripped us all since time immemorial, repeatedly bringing us back to familiar places. *Moby-Dick* takes us on a tour of the old haunts of humanity: hubris, greed, individualism, and the desire to take that which does not belong to us. I have made of it a meaning that sympathizes with those clasped in the claws of forces larger than themselves; and there are readings, I am sure, that would categorically disagree with me. None of us are likely to put our finger precisely on the pulse of Melville's writing hand, especially when faced with a work as rich and puzzling as *Moby-Dick*, but luckily the novel accounts for that, too. Making meaning of things we cannot quite understand is perhaps the oldest human impulse of all. Wonder ye, then, at the fiery hunt?

³ For an example of a feminist interpretation of *Moby-Dick*, see Savage (2011).

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