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The Whale, Ahab, and the Transgender Human Condition

It seems impossible to explain the following without first relaying the opportunistic timing of how I came to read *Moby-Dick*. By coincidence, I started questioning gender and my relationship to it at the same time I started reading the novel. In my own experience, and in the experience of peers I've conversed with, transgender self-realization occurs on a spectrum between "aha moments" and drawn out, amorphous states of uncertainty. My realization was very much the latter. Any certainty I have found in my gender identity now grew from the dull ache of a near half decade of consideration.¹ The beginnings of this realization occurred during a conversation with a classmate on a study-away semester. This classmate suggested the idea of gender as identity and declaration. She was matter-of-fact. "If you feel like a woman, you can just be a woman" she said. I cannot recall what prompted the statement. Later, when I returned home from this trip, another close friend expressed something in a similar vein. I cannot recall what spurred this either. Perhaps both of these women had gotten their hands on Judith Butler long before I did, and perhaps they saw something within me that I did not. I had yet to understand the contemporary social freedoms and malleability around identity and the intellectual resources available to those sorting it all out. Regardless, at the time, I did not agree with the notion that all gender identity awaited an otherwise simple act of expression—that if one felt themselves to be a certain gender, that person had reasonable grounds to declare themselves as said gender. I believed what I had been told and what most everyone is still told: That the gender assigned at one's birth prescribes a set of behaviors and social expectations they cannot

¹ These are the moments when the "Q" in "LGBTQ" refer to "Questioning" as opposed to "Queer".

supersede. There are *men* that range from hyper masculine to hyper feminine in behavior or appearance, *women* who vary in the same way, yet they are still *men* and *women*, respectively. Designation of gender always trumped any supplementary descriptors. This philosophy on gender remains prevalent today in both exclusionary feminist and socially conservative spaces.

Now, transgender realities have become so entrenched in sociopolitical discourse that it feels almost disingenuous to say that in the early 2000's, transgender people existed as a murmur in the background of most people's lives. There were, of course, pride parades and certain exposures to media I had experienced. The "T" of LGBT had more or less been around longer than I can remember. However, the reality of transgender individuals as understood today had not yet come to fruition. In her introduction to *The Transgender Studies Reader*, Susan Stryker describes how as recently as the mid 1990's, even the academic world met conversations of transgender theory with significant backlash and conflict.² Thus, I had never been exposed to any compartmentalization of identity, the body, and attraction.³ Culture never showed me those distinctions. That is to say, for me, the infinitely complicated state of the queer human condition was reduced to gay men and lesbian women. When transgender people were *not* a murmur in my life—when they took the forefront of my attention—they were mostly presented as television punchlines. Transgender women existed as clowns, sexual fetishists—someone on Jerry Springer's stage at whom to holler and laugh. The television show *Friends*—a staple in my childhood home—maintained a steady queer-as-insult approach to comedy, further conflating cis men in drag with transgender women.⁴ Before Time Magazine's 2014 photo cover of Laverne

² Stryker, Susan., and Stephen Whittle. *The Transgender Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

³ This is, anecdotally, quite a common sentiment amongst queer people.

⁴ Samantha Riedel details thoroughly the show's prevalence and culturally detrimental queerphobia in her write-up "Why Everyone's Favorite 90's Show is Hugely Transphobic". <https://www.them.us/story/friends-is-transphobic>.

Cox taglined “America’s next civil rights frontier”, I saw Cox’s 2009 television credit of “Transsexual Protistute” in HBO’s *Bored to Death*.⁵

One of the more popular public spectacles of queer objectification and ridicule occurred around the time of my gendered self-reflection. In a 2011 airing of CBS News’ *60 Minutes*, Anderson Cooper asked the singer Stephanie “Lady Gaga” Germanotta about rumors of her having “a male appendage—that [she was] a hermaphrodite”.⁶ Cooper was referring to a transmisogynistic rumor that somehow became so widespread that this otherwise respected journalist felt his question warranted inquiry. Germanotta’s reply “Would it be so terrible?” felt both simple and profound. This moment represents the beginning of an eloquent shift in social understanding and awareness of gender variance for me. It was one of the first times I can recall trans realities receiving a Buddhist-like acknowledgement of existence, free from judgment or opinion. Would it be so terrible, indeed? From what I saw, there were no transgender parents, baristas, or librarians. I never considered it as something people do to live an otherwise unremarkable life. Then I found others. Online, of course, were a group of women sharing photos of themselves, crying over lovers, and relaying their work days in shopping malls. Their gender expression was not for laughs or sexual thrills. They were average, and it was unbelievable. Once I saw this otherwise unremarkable life as a possibility for myself, I no longer felt as though I had any choice but to address it. However, transitioning was not an exciting or freeing moment for me. It was a problem to solve. I felt no relief. In fact, quite the opposite. I felt burdened. What was I to do? The answer for me was to seek out a therapist to address a possible

⁵ I mention this because the character’s title adds nothing to the scene except to enhance the perceived absurdity of the lead’s situation. Cox’s character simply appears, interacts with the show’s lead, then exits the scene—a true “Why does she have to be trans?” moment.

⁶ NBC. *60 Minutes*, Feb. 13, 2011.

(and now defunctly named) diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder.⁷ It was frightening, isolating, and confusing.

This was about the time that a professor of an undergraduate course assigned the novel. My experience of *Moby-Dick* in tandem with the terrifying weight of this possible social self-destruction anchored the two experiences: Gender transition and *the whale*, so to say. But not only that, the novel felt familiar in the context of my queer uncertainty. It was in particular Ahab's maniacal ranting of the quarter deck speech that rang with a familiar seizable insanity. First mate Starbuck poses a reductive counter argument to Ahab's goal: "Vengeance on a dumb brute... To be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab, seems blasphemous"⁸. Ahab's explanation of the complicated and multifaceted metaphor of the hunt remains painfully relatable: "All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event... 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!"⁹ Ahab seeks a metaphorical *something* regarded as utterly impossible to obtain, refuted by all social expectations and structure, as well as ensuring certain death. Yet, to Ahab, that *something*—all encompassed in the whale—is malleable, destructible, or in some way, subject to his will. No matter how miniscule or fruitless, Ahab knows that *something* is accessible in even the most minute way. "Who's over me?" he says, "Truth hath no confines"¹⁰. This felt unbelievable. Where Ahab sees a whale in this pasteboard mask, I saw social expectations of assigned gender. One's body, seen by others,

⁷ I feel compelled to place a disclaimer here explaining how problematic these feelings were then and are now. My approach to handling these uncertainties with identity quite easily falls into what some would call "trans medicalism" and "cis assimilationism". At the time, I did feel as though this was a problem that necessitated medical intervention both psychologically and endocrinologically. This does not mean my feelings and approaches are applicable to every single person nor any one individual person. As far as I'm concerned, any which way one feels and any which way one takes action or inaction toward their expression of gender remains perfectly reasonable to me.

⁸ *MD*. 133.

⁹ *Ibid*.

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

and the assumptive truths of reality that exude from that body, is what I felt shoved near to me. That expected performance of gendered behavior feels similarly flimsy and unreasoning. So too did this assigned gender task me with an unbearable weight of a life ordered to live—a demand that I neither could fulfill nor desired to do so. “That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate,” Ahab says, “and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him”.¹¹ It is this refusal I grew to admire.

Ahab’s axioms echoed in my mind through monumental decisions. I felt as though I had to take actionable steps toward gender transition. This meant taking steps toward a dismemberment of nearly all aspects of my life: Social, familial, professional, and intrapersonal. The beginnings of gender transition, in many ways, are a total deconstruction of the self. Only later does this bring a reconstruction of what people call your “real” or “true” self. I have never felt more like myself now, but this feeling only came after dissolving most existing aspects of myself. The only way I knew how to do this entailed moving away from family and friends, seeking endocrinological intervention, then refusing to visit loved ones for months or explain to them the reason why. These decisions needed the steadfast resolve and full tilt confidence of a do-or-die-trying sailor. “Ahab’s quenchless feud seemed mine,” says Ishmael.¹² And in a similar way, what Ahab felt, I felt too. As unrelated as the two topics may initially seem, this is the undeniable reality of the thesis: I saw something both relatable and useful in Ahab’s mad quest. This thesis attempts to explain what that something is and what transgender intellectual utility may be sifted out of that realization.

Refutations arise when drawing from Ahab a theory on transgender utility. Upon my first reading of the novel, I ignored or justified—perhaps out of necessity—Ahab’s more despicable

¹¹ *MD*. 133.

¹² *MD*. 144.

behaviors. I have read passing comments that suggest, upon my first reading, I may have missed Melville's intended allegory of the novel. Idealizing Ahab in this way—or at least incorporating his philosophical approach to living a life authentically—was the exact opposite of the novel's intention; that, inversely, the audience ought to draw wisdom from Ishmael. One ought to embrace a passive observational approach to life's secrets demonstrated by the sole survivor. Through my pursuit of understanding the relationship to my gender transition and Ahab's conquest, I have found equally damning reason to refute all of Ahab's behaviors. Such evidence includes character comparisons to Shakespeare's King Lear and Milton's Satan—characters who flail wildly against the consequences of their own destructive behavior. Scholars need not speculate on Melville's intention behind these parallels.¹³ However, I would like to navigate a kind of dialectical thinking toward Ahab. I believe there exists an approach to studying Ahab where one does not forgive his behavior, yet still carves out some significant character aspects to utilize. Even further, I would like to reconcile the split between *Moby-Dick's* inciting conversation on free-will versus destiny that surrounds Ahab. I believe these carvings and navigations—these reconciliations—potentiate a useful philosophy for queer people braving the hostile social conditions of visible gender variance. What does it take to be someone dejected, refused, or incompatible with a life tethered to social expectations and restrictive etiological truths? What is it about Ahab's disposition that resonated with me in my time of gendered self reflection? And what can Ahab do for me now? Recognizing the Ahab within oneself in order to harness and temper one's destructive rage seems important enough to acknowledge, at the very least. Only then can one hope to temper those compulsions.

¹³ There are specific lines toward the end of the novel that quite literally reads "...the flag of Ahab, went down with his ship, which, like Satan, would not sink to hell till she had dragged a living part of heaven along with her..." as well as the chapter that suddenly becomes directions or scripts a la a stage play.

In order to avoid an entirely self-serving topic, the scope of this thesis expands beyond “Upon my first reading, why did *Moby-Dick* affect me the way it did?” to “What could possibly be the relationship between *Moby-Dick* and the transgender experience?” In the context of literary queer theory, does *Moby-Dick* hold utility outside of my own highly situational encounter? Does *Moby-Dick* have something useful to say to a transgender person? A possible answer is that *Moby-Dick* may lay a foundation to a specific intellectual process that parallels the transgender human condition. Realizing oneself as transgender necessitates an understanding of gendered norms, applying those norms to oneself, recognizing a dissatisfaction toward that application, and then navigating these norms in a more suitable way. It requires an unavoidable drive to subvert gender constructs despite its consequences. While Ishmael navigates this intellectual process, too, I prefer to focus on the inciting character, Ahab. Ahab negotiates a similar intrapersonal intelligence to the transgender person through a shared sense of agency, rebellion, and self-constructed destiny. Understanding this connection necessitates understanding *Moby-Dick* as redefining tautological expectations--a disruption that parallels the necessary redefinition of the transgender self. I mean not to imply that Melville had any foresight or insight into the phenomena. I do not consider *Moby-Dick* a story about transgender people by any definition. I consider it a story that may have something to say to transgender people navigating circumstances similar to my own.

While scholars have cogently analyzed Melville’s work through the lens of queer theory, these previous analyses often focus on navigating conceptual cisnormative masculinity. There exists some utility in these approaches as they apply to my topic, but the compulsion to distance my arguments away from the cis homosexual experience comes from an understanding that the moments like the intimacy between Queequeg and Ishmael—like sailors forging new lives outside

of the context of women—only scratch the surface of any self-actualization necessary to understand the transgender experience. While these concepts can and often do circumstantially overlap, the navigation of socially rejected homosexual love formulates entirely outside of the transgender human condition. These moments in the novel have no bearing on constructing the similarities I see in the characters of *Moby-Dick* and the way transgender people navigate their existences. If anything, associating cisgender homosexual men with transgender people reduces the transgender potentiality to be found within the novel. It is not the intimacy between men that I find significant for the claim of this thesis, but Ahab's interrogative approach to the instilled tautological and foundational truths of his life. It is objectively a story about cis men, but I now consider it a novel edifying to transgender thought, and I would like to invite readers to consider it in a similar way.

However, a more or less obvious critique arises: Is *Moby-Dick*, in all its grand metaphor, a Rorschach test? Are its themes and metaphors malleable to any and every hyper-focused interest or ideal of its respective reader? Perhaps so.¹⁴ Is this a bad thing? Part of me remains unconcerned with the answer. Transgender study exists in such a small window of academic history that I have grown bored. I want to find transgender theory in places no one thinks to look. Why not stretch the study's limitations and take new lenses to old materials? While I do not further explore her work in this thesis, Toni Morrison has demonstrated this approach wonderfully concerning black characters in literary pieces that otherwise use, abuse, and discard them—*Moby-Dick*'s Pip being one among her examples in *Playing in the Dark*.¹⁵ More relevant to this thesis, according to Meredith Farmer, Christopher Castiglia touches on this notion of shaping Melville's work to contemporary issues found through each generation. About Castiglia, Farmer

¹⁴ As for *Paradise Lost*, which I will briefly touch on, I would almost certainly say yes, that is the case.

¹⁵ Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark*. Vintage Books, 1992.

writes, "...[Castiglia] suggests 'every generation needs a new 'Melville' suited to that generation's assumptions and needs'--and that 'a sense of possibility' might enable us to 'discover a Melville for our time'".¹⁶ Why not co opt literature to the direct benefit of transgender ontology and pedagogy that has never been intended for us? Would it be so terrible?

To fully realize this analogy, readers must once again attempt to understand one of the most multifaceted metaphors in literary history: What is the white whale? I find the answer provided in my Norton's edition of *Moby-Dick* somehow both comprehensive and wildly unsatisfactory. Editor Hershel Parker's footnote states, "Ahab sees the whale...as the embodiment or agent of some power outside the physical world of visible nature...Both God and the devil are such powers...".¹⁷ I suppose one must consider the consequences of confining the great American novel's richest metaphor to a footnote. But for the purposes of this thesis, Ahab must see the whale as representational access to influence on all Earthly and divine authority. The issue I have with Parker's note is the isolated use of "God". It is not *just* God or the devil, it is God *and* the devil *in* everything. "All visible objects..." Ahab says, "...be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal...".¹⁸ Clearly, Ahab intends to supersede knowledge of the material world, but these specific distinctions extend further into what I can only relay as sociopolitical and divine authority. That is to say, Ahab sees all behavior, thought, action, or symbol as subject to a similar malleability as to the contest of man versus man, versus nature, or versus God. This notion potentiates the transgender intellectual utility I see now and saw then upon my first reading. If all life is subject to the type of fair play Ahab addresses, then so too are the notions, constructs, and expectations of gendered behavior. By redirecting Ahab's hostility

¹⁶ Otter, Samuel, Jonathan Schroeder, and Meredith Farmer. *Ahab Unbound Melville and the Materialist Turn*. Edited by Jonathan (D. S.) Schroeder and Meredith Farmer. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022.

¹⁷ *MD*. 133.

¹⁸ *Ibid*.

away from God, the devil, or influences of subjectifying power, gender variant individuals suffocated by gender essentialist authority may themselves make an opportunistic strike. These strikes can exist in both the ephemeral space of individual queer thought as well as the more literal spaces of the body, interpersonal relationships, and legal authority. Transgender identity begins intrapersonally, but the social consequences begin when one moves from thoughts of gender variance to observed behaviors of gender variance, i.e., when one manifests their variance into the world around them—when one strikes through the mask. That is to say, if gender expectation exists as an influential authority in someone’s life, when they then experience gender dysphoria, they must decide to what extent they act on that dysphoria. These actions can range anywhere from private internal negotiations to an outwardly realized transition in the physical and social sense. This spectrum, regardless of the extent of its manifestation, necessitates an active rebellion against social and political authorities similar to the philosophies expressed by Ahab.

Elaborating on this has been arduous. Often, the whole topic felt unsubstantiable. But its presence has always been undeniable. Regardless of its potential legitimacy, be it hysteria, an illusion, or a misunderstanding, there exists *something* that relates the way I understand a transgender experience and the experience expressed by Ahab in this novel. The following is my attempt at elaborating that *something*. The most potent relationship between *Moby-Dick* and my topic exists through the presence of Immanuel Kant’s work. Melville references Kant in the novel, and Judith Butler references Kant in *Undoing Gender*. I take a look at this connection by placing Judith Butler’s, Michel Foucault’s, and Kant’s frustrations with authoritative knowledge next to Ahab’s refutation of the truth. Then, I take a look at some writers and ideas that qualify Ahab as despicable, villainous, and an otherwise poor role model. I meet these dissenting

opinions with some academics that emphasize the relatability and usefulness of Ahab's character. And finally, I take a granular look at some of Ahab's significant moments in the novel. Toward the end of this work, I go line-by-line through Ahab's statements in an attempt to fully realize the relationship between what Ahab says and how I understand it in relation to what I call "transgender utility"; What about Ahab's philosophies is useful to the transgender reader? One possible answer I explore is Ahab's demonstration of reconciling fate and free-will and how that reconciliation relates to the transgender desire to navigate gender in conjunction with the will to do so.

The academic chain of work from *Moby-Dick's* philosophies to the ideas in this thesis are as follows: A significant amount of this work—nearly all of my academic work—exists only because of Judith Butler's work. But Butler often leans on Michel Foucault who himself (and like many) can attribute much of their academic work to Immanuel Kant. Like Ahab, feelings on Kant seem loaded to say the least.¹⁹ And while I am not a philosophy student—thus, I lack a significant contextual framing for his work—I must touch on Kant in order to detail thoroughly the trail of thought from this discussion on Ahab to Butlerian queer theory. This is possible due to a specific essay Kant wrote titled *Was Ist Aufklärung?* I can draw a direct line of references from my work on *Moby-Dick* here through *Undoing Gender*, Foucault's *What Is Critique*, and Kant's *Was ist Aufklärung?* To what extent Melville read Kant, I am unsure. But without creeping into Melville's intentions behind *Moby-Dick*, the inclusion of Kant's metaphorical presence on the *Pequod* provides at least some academic and intellectual validity to the line

¹⁹ I could probably say the same for all three of these writers.

between the philosophies of Butler and the philosophies present throughout Melville.^{20 21} There exists ghosts of each in the other's work.

Kant's presence in *Moby-Dick* exists literally and in contest with the ideas of John Locke. The crew have just harvested a whale and the *Pequod* is swaying in the water. The ship requires a balanced weight of two whales' heads on port and starboard to steady itself. The narrator (Ishmael, at this point) states "[W]hen one side you hoist in Locke's head, you go over that way; but now, on the other side, hoist in Kant's and you come back again...some minds for ever keep trimming boat...throw all these thunder-heads overboard, and then you will float light and right".²² Hershel Parker's note on this paragraph states "[It] rejects both positions and humorously advocates dispensing with them, along with views of all such heavy thinkers..." which itself is, ironically, a pretty Kantian notion.²³ Get rid of all this weight, Ishmael suggests; It's only slowing the voyage. It is a rejection of intellectual authority. Locke's inclusion in this moment remains irrelevant as far as I am concerned. However, Kant's name, followed by a suggestion to behave or think in a way that resembles Kant's philosophies, proves vital to this thesis. The first lines in *Was ist Aufklärung* read "Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another".²⁴ Get rid of all this historical intellectual instruction, Kant suggests; It's only slowing down thought.

But this is less about Ishmael's aversion to established thought and more about Ahab's.

When I say that Ahab understands the whale as a rejection of sociopolitical and divine authority,

²⁰ I will mention skirting around Melville's intent quite a lot while simultaneously brushing up against the idea. It is a delicate dance where I cannot seem to avoid committing to one side or the other when it comes to considering authorial intent.

²¹ *MD*. 250.

²² *Ibid*.

²³ *MD*. 250.

²⁴ Kant, Immanuel. *What Is Enlightenment?*, 1784. <http://www.columbia.edu/acis/ets/CCREAD/etscc/kant.html>

these three philosophers fit serendipitously into each one of those categories: Kant in the divine, Foucault for the political, and Butler in the sociological. These three writers reflect Ahab's philosophies. And while all three of these relate to the other in some form or fashion (as it is quite difficult to isolate society, politics, and religion), I can better clarify my thoughts by focusing on one of these aspects for each of these writers. Kant makes a specific point to address the clergy in *Was ist Aufklärung* and wrote the essay in Prussia just before the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire. Foucault, while also inevitably addressing the church, mostly addresses the powers of the state in its authority over language (and therefore thought and sexuality). And finally, Butler famously highlights the tautological enactment and concomitant mimicry of gendered behaviors. I feel confident in summarizing the work of all three of these great thinkers with Ahab's own words: "Thou requirest a little lower layer", "Who's over me?", and "Truth hath no confines".

To Ahab, "truth" exists outside sources of authority. This reflects Kant's theory that instructors of thought enforce tutelage demonstrated by his gesture toward books, pastors, and physicians. These instructive agents provide knowledge in the form of pre-established modes of thought. Ahab rejects such modes. And not only do these truths of society—these modes of thought—burden the individual, the individual is similarly burdened by the bureaucratic restraints of political authority. These authorities only exist in contexts where one cannot exercise complete control of their surroundings. In Ahab's case, such places include anywhere that is not him literally captaining his own ship. If Kant would encourage one to shed pre-established thought, Ahab would instead encourage digging deeper into that thought.

Foucault explores this exact notion. His 1978 lecture to the French Society of Philosophy directly addresses Kant's *Was Ist Aufklärung*. Foucault excavates Kant's essay to suggest that it

encourages one to disregard all knowledge in favor of individual, isolated thought: Instead, think in a vacuum. But Foucault turns this notion right back around to its initial suggestion. He suggests that Kant's essay actually encourages one to return to the sources of their intellectual authority to then consider the meaning of such sources. Foucault writes,

Not wanting to be governed was a certain way of refusing, challenging, limiting (say it as you like) ecclesiastical rule. It meant returning to the Scriptures, seeking out what was authentic in them, what was really written in the Scriptures. It meant questioning what sort of truth the Scriptures told, gaining access to this truth of the Scriptures in the Scriptures and maybe in spite of what was written, to the point of finally raising the very simple question: were the Scriptures true?²⁵

What Foucault suggests is what Ahab does: Revel in individualistic, "enlightened" thought about the forces attempting to influence thought. Foucault suggests that Kant may be telling readers *not* to disregard all sources of knowledge, but instead critique them with the individualist "enlightened" approach: Think for yourself, but don't go rogue. Concerning *Moby-Dick*, this might be one reason why Ahab does not *refuse* to participate in the contest of divine authority, but instead seeks to prove its reciprocity. When Ahab says he will strike the sun, it is not in an attempt to remove the sun's influence. Ahab wants to discover the extent of the sun's influence on him, in turn discovering his influence on it.²⁶ How else might one know themselves to such great heights if not by testing the authoritative limits of the world's knowledge? To dispose of such knowledge, to Ahab, would mean disposing of the very tool he needs to know himself.

Ishmael's behavior suggests the opposite: Do not engage at all. Ishmael lacks the monomania (or perhaps the ego) to care about any of this. Thus, the novel shows two characters with similar starting points lacking identity and enlightenment. However, they take near opposite

²⁵ Foucault, Michel. *The Politics of Truth*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1997. 45-46.
https://monoskop.org/images/4/47/Foucault_Michel_The_Politics_of_Truth_2007.pdf

²⁶ *MD*. 133.

paths to obtain that identity and enlightenment. Ishmael grows out of his involvement with the world completely. Like Ahab, Ishmael enacts Kant's theory of enlightenment through intellectual sovereignty symbolized by their shared oceanic voyages. For example, both Ishmael and Ahab only tolerate land long enough to set sail. It is their fortitude in that tolerance that differs. However, Ishmael does not demonstrate Foucault's extension of that Kantian notion. Ishmael does not follow through with Foucault's proposition of returning to the scriptures to discern their authenticity. Instead, Ishmael only observes independently and ends his participation with outside sources of knowledge when such interactions become inevitable. If *Moby-Dick's* narrative makes an ultimatum of "play or leave", Ishmael leaves. He does this quite literally toward the end of the novel. He does not participate in the final conflict with the whale. By the time of the chase, he is removed completely.^{27 28}

Finally, there's Judith Butler. You really cannot talk about queer theory anymore without talking about Butler. In an essay *Beside Oneself*, Butler explores the relationship found between bodily autonomy, grief, violence, and identity. The topic of what constitutes "realness" of a life lived outside of social expectation and norms arises. The relevance of this piece rests in Butler further distinguishing the differences between elements of knowledge and elements of power, concepts seemingly conflated in Kant's *Was ist Aufklärung?*. Butler directly addresses Foucault's

²⁷ While it is difficult to discern at exactly what point in the novel Ishmael checks out, I think chapter 107 is the last time Ishmael refers to himself as "I" in the narrative until his return in the epilogue. Thus, he then seemingly vanishes from interaction with the activities of the *Pequod's* voyage. Writer Henry Golemba suggests it is officially chapter 111. Interestingly, writer Golemba introduces the notion of Ishmael exiting the narrative as a negative; That Melville intended Ishmael's wishy-washy commitment to the voyage as justification for his removal. A real biblical "Revelations" attitude toward one's lukewarm faith that God considers deserving of expulsion. This is counter to most other claims I've seen of the novel. Usually, scholars consider Ishmael's survival as indicative of the virtue in not participating. However, Golemba's piece focuses heavily on Melville's intention instead of textual evidence. Golemba, Henry L. "The Shape of 'Moby-Dick.'" *Studies in the Novel* 5, no. 2 (1973): 197–210. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29531590>.

²⁸ Further discussion on Ishmael's absence from the narrative will occur later with Virginia Buck.

What is Critique? in this essay and gives an account of his lecture. Butler, while quoting Foucault, writes,

“The question of who and what is considered real and true is apparently a question of knowledge. But it is also...a question of power... [O]ne of the first tasks for a radical critique is to discern the relation ‘between mechanisms of coercion and elements of knowledge’.²⁹

Perhaps Virginia Buck (another thesis writer I will address later) and other Ahab-as-a-warning academics consider this inability to discern that relationship as Ahab’s folly. Perhaps Ahab, while attempting to understand the world outside of its intellectual parameters, disregards those parameters to the point of reckless destruction.

But if this were the case, then according to Foucault, Ishmael is similarly at fault.

Foucault states,

It is...not a matter of describing what knowledge is and what power is and how one would repress the other or how the other would abuse the one, but rather, a nexus of knowledge-power has to be described so that we can grasp what constitutes the acceptability of a system...³⁰

In other words, to figure it all out, as both Ahab and Ishmael desire, one must balance both the authority of past intelligence *and* sovereign thought. Kant and Foucault will not consider someone “enlightened” unless they contend with both of these sources. Neither Ishmael nor Ahab demonstrate this balanced contention.

So, what is the relationship between these theories on knowledge, their accompanying academics, and the transgender intellectual utility hidden within *Moby-Dick*? Simply put, Ahab and Ishmael demonstrate interactions with knowledge and coercion. First, I think Ahab shows the inevitability of the transgender person’s involvement with the play of intellectual authority. This is more aligned to the common person’s experience: Unlike Ishmael, we—real nonfiction

²⁹ Butler. *Undoing Gender*. 27

³⁰ Foucault. 61.

people—cannot leave the narrative. For the transgender person this means contending with knowledge and coercion relating to gender. This entails things like the intrapersonal intelligence of one’s identity in relation to gender and the encouraged behaviors and expectation behind one’s assigned gender at birth—identity and expression. Even in the case of someone who represses their compulsion to transition, their dysphoria still exists and must be acknowledged once recognized even if that acknowledgement exists in the form of rejection by way of heeding to the social expectations of gender expression. In this analogy, to leave in the way Ishmael does, means existing impossibly outside of any lived realities of intellectual authority, and therefore, outside of the lived reality of previously instilled expectations tied to one’s gender. Like it or not, if there is a perceived body, there are gendered expectations.

Secondly, Ahab rallies with these theories through his seafaring. His perpetual chase of the whale ensures his perpetual life at sea. This life at sea exists as his attempt to carve out new Foucaultian “realness” or “truth”. If, as Ahab believes, truth has no confines, but he still must contend with *some* reality, then the continued escape away from land fulfills his identity as always in motion. I clarify this a bit more later, but the important thing to consider is that if Ishmael exists as one side of this contention with coercion and knowledge, then Ahab exists as the other. If Ahab shares the same sentiment as Ishmael—that time spent on land creates suicidal ideation—then Ahab’s survival depends on this perpetual chase of the whale. Thus, his identity hinges on his survival. On this relationship between “realness” and identity, Butler writes,

I think we should not underestimate what the thought of the possible does for those for whom the very issue of survival is most urgent. If the answer to the question, is life possible, is yes, that is surely something significant. It cannot, however, be taken for granted as the answer. That is a question whose answer is sometimes ‘no,’ or one that has no ready answer, or one that bespeaks an ongoing agony. For many who can and do answer the question in the affirmative, that answer is hard won, if won at all, an

accomplishment that is fundamentally conditioned by reality being structured or restructured in such a way that the affirmation becomes possible”.³¹

In the same way Ishmael substitutes pistol and ball for seafaring, Ahab substitutes suicidal ideation for hunting this whale, and therefore, his sense of self. Considering again the rates of suicidal ideation among transgender people sans familial acceptance, I think both Ishmael and Ahab become incredibly sympathetic to the transgender reader by this merit alone. To put it simply, *Moby-Dick* shows two people who cannot live without a pursuit of identity in the same way transgender people seemingly cannot live without a pursuit of identity. This is all to say that Ahab, while not necessarily queer, and definitely not transgender, maintains the agency, abrasiveness, and inquisition necessary to be queer or transgender within a social context that refutes such dispositions. Ahab needs his identity. That identity exists in conflict with some status quo. Therefore, I consider Ahab as a character within the same philosophical and intellectual camp as Kant, Foucault, and Butler, all of whom I would consider as in the camp of modern transgender people.

Before elaborating on Ahab as a model of culturally subversive thought, I would like to look at some dissenting opinions toward Ahab. These dissensions attempt to show Ahab as antithetical to the aforementioned philosophers’ theories on enlightenment mostly due to the perceived intent behind Ahab and his death. But to do that, I have to first acknowledge Ahab’s analog to John Milton’s Satan in *Paradise Lost*. Throughout *Moby-Dick*, Melville alludes to not just the King James Bible on multiple occasions, but perhaps more significantly for this thesis, *Paradise Lost*. In fact, *Moby-Dick* shares the intended reading style of both the KJV and *Paradise Lost* in that one finds less value in the narrative and more value in the philosophical musings in between narratively significant moments. After reading *Paradise Lost* for this study,

³¹ Butler. *Undoing Gender*. 29.

and being marginally familiar with the KJV, I believe that one cannot fully understand *Moby-Dick* without some understanding of both.

While I try to avoid speculating about Melville's intentions (and find such speculations mostly irrelevant to this topic), the analogy of Ahab to Satan remains overt and undeniable. While the text uses a heavy hand to show the similarities between Ahab and Satan, these analogies do not exist solely through these references. *Paradise Lost* and *Moby-Dick* share more than the similarities between Ahab and Satan. Most of what they share manifest as an authorial frustration with elements of etiology. One of these elements is the divide between masculinity and femininity. When, in "The Symphony", Ahab faces a turmoil of gendered life path and existence, it is reasonable to assume that Melville shared an intrigue similar to Milton's seen throughout *Paradise Lost*. The rigid and raw construction of the gender binary found within *Paradise Lost* remains more poignant to this analysis. It is a poem about the creation of gender. Adam and Eve are the etiological source of Butlerian performances. These two are gender incarnate. Because of their foundational state, every thought, action, or behavior should be interpreted as the infallible gendered ideal. And as it turns out, both Adam and Eve base their existences on information relayed to them from another; A frustrating subjugation felt by Eve, Ishmael, and Ahab alike.

One difficulty of this topic is in making any statements of certainty about the transgender experience. Explorations of identity remain highly unique through every part of the reflective process. Some transgender people know early and repress their feelings in favor of social conformity, others realize themselves as transgender then take social and medical interventive steps within short periods of time over just a few years. It is important to recognize that the declarative statements readers will find here are subject to my own experiences and biases. No

universal transgender experience exists. I can relay the facts of transgender history, but the thoughts, feelings, actions, order of operation on medical and social intervention, are all aspects highly subject to irreplicable states of time, place, local and global acceptance, as well as accessibility to information, medicine, and finances. Any one of these aspects vastly change the experience of what one would call “their transition” or lack thereof. But when I look to Ishmael, I see a familiar someone who is dejected, cranky, and staving off suicidal ideation. His boredom cannot be entertained away.³² He is a man who has chosen his own name and leaves a dissatisfying life in hopes to find something more suitable—not to find joy, necessarily, but to find a way to cope with his own inexplicable frustrations. Ishmael has dysphoria. I did not come to this conclusion when I first read the novel, nor did I necessarily relate to Ishmael as a character from any gendered lens. When I say this, I do not mean to say Ishmael experiences the DSM-5 definition of “clinically significant distress or impairment related to a strange desire to be of another gender”. I mean Ishmael experiences an incompatibility with the life he finds himself living, and when he simply cannot tolerate this life further, instead of seeking destruction or ending his life, he seeks a more socially subversive approach to live it. We can see this in a number of ways: The famous use of “call me” as opposed to “I am”, the accommodating and receptive plasticity of his character, and the accompanying introspective nature necessary to explore this identity. Ahab feels this, too. The difference is, he has long set sail. He no longer has a life on land to make him grim at the mouth. Just as Ishmael escapes to sea upon reaching some intolerable threshold brought about by life on land, Ahab has escaped to live his entire life in this separated state of sailing. In this sense, Ahab acts as a sort of equal-opposite to Ishmael: They

³² This is depression, no doubt, but also something greater than. Rob Mayo writes on the presence of non-gendered dysphoria found through the characters of David Foster Wallace’s oeuvre. The highly controversial transgender author Andrea Long Chu makes a similar but more compelling claim concerning the character Neo in *The Matrix*. Chu’s thoughts are far more substantiated considering the commentary on the two directors of the film who later in life came out as transgender women themselves acknowledging the similarities to Neo’s story and the transgender experience. I say this due to the rarity of seeing the word “dysphoria” outside of the context of “gender dysphoria”.

both must escape to sea, but they differ in their needs and approaches to living a life away from land and its concomitant expectations. This is all to say that Melville understands a familiar frustration with an incompatible life.

I spoke recently with a colleague about the subject of this thesis. Before they fully realized I was—at least partially—coming to the defense of Ahab (or perhaps coming to a defense of Ahab), this colleague stated “Ahab is just like any other tyrannical leader with his unwitting masses. He’s kind of like Donald Trump in that way”—the implication being that Ahab tricks the Pequod's crew into executing his personal conquest over the whale. Perhaps my colleague, like others, saw the men of the Pequod as hoodwinked victims to Ahab’s disastrous conquest. Because the two of us had not yet become well acquainted, he stopped himself and said “I’m sorry, you’re not a Trump-Republican are you?”. At this point, the casual attribution of Ahab as the novel’s antagonist or antihero is not new to me. Writers spend entire articles and book chapters not only agreeing with my colleague’s sentiments, but belittling the figure of tyrannical Ahab in a way similar to public reactions toward Trump’s presidency. Leslie Sheldon, an academic who I will further address shortly, emphasizes the humiliating moments of Ahab fumbling over his prosthetic leg on a foreign vessel. Sheldon intends to emasculate Ahab in a way that reminds me of the online commentary that drew attention to the size of Trump’s hands. I get it. It feels good to imagine the powerful as impotent. But when I first read *Moby-Dick*, the empathy I felt for Ahab’s existential philosophies clouded any accusatory judgment I perhaps ought to have felt toward him. When I saw aspects of myself reflected in his rants, I seemingly forgave the other aspects of Ahab’s character that most know and emphasize: His cruelty, his opacity, and his selfishness.

However, I think neither my previous feelings of total admiration nor my colleagues' present summations on Ahab are entirely correct. Neither a total admiration nor a total condemnation of Ahab's character seems productive. Similar to the divided crew of the Pequod, I can see truth in both the attitudes of the crew and the attitudes of the harpooners. Ahab is a character I used to inspire and encourage myself during a difficult time. He is also someone who selfishly goads unconsenting others into a watery grave. However, categorizing Ahab does not end with this dichotomy. Readers can and have placed Ahab in many roles. Just how people often find themselves playing the hero, villain, and sage during individual social interactions depending on circumstance, I would like to elaborate on how different readers have categorized Ahab's personhood and behavior based on their circumstantial perspectives.

Reflecting my colleague's sentiments, Ahab as a tyrant seems like the most commonly held view. Both to my benefit and detriment, academia has exhausted this discussion. Everything I feel compelled to say about the reprehensible attributes of Ahab seems derivative. But I will state something obvious: Ahab is the captain of a ship. Ships do not function on the American idealism of democracy. They function by a sort of dictatorship only checked by the threat of mutiny. My elaboration on this point is similarly not to defend Ahab, but to acknowledge something that seems ignored by the intellectual camp of Ahab-the-Tyrant. This is how ships work. There is one sole leader. To subvert the demands of that leader begets violent consequences. Insubordinate sailors walk the plank. This reality remains neutral. Often, those who enforce their authority with violence are considered good leaders by certain standards of success. American law and order fades as the Pequod sets out to sea. Thus, the hierarchy of the ship replaces the hierarchy of the state. For Ishmael, this is part of sailing's appeal. *Moby-Dick* even doubles down on this sentiment with the inclusion and subsequent ignoring of Starbuck's

appeal to divine and familial order. Ships need captains. *Moby-Dick* shows that some people need ships. The authoritative structure appeals to those people.

While acknowledging the hierarchy of a sailing vessel, I should not disregard the squandered potential for Ahab to be a good ruler. Ahab could rule virtuously. However, this calls into question philosophical beliefs on what makes a ruler good based on individual principles. The wisdom Ishmael receives from Captain Peleg regarding Ahab's character mirrors Ishmael's own virtuous thinking about the divide between social norms and the reasons for them. "...it's better to sail with a moody good captain," Captain Peleg says, "than a laughing bad one".³³ Peleg asks Ishmael and the audience, where do your values lie in leadership? Does the occasional violent iron fist justify a successful voyage? If Ahab were to succeed in his conquest, how would this change the way people perceive and categorize him? If nothing but the ends of the voyage change, would readers still call Ahab tyrannical?³⁴

But asking "what if?" hardly seems fruitful. Ahab did fail. His hunt led to the deaths of many men who agreed to sail for employment, not vengeance. Further, author Leslie Sheldon may argue that Ahab's failure cannot separate itself from Ahab's character; Sheldon says Ahab's characterization begets his failure. And in a way, Ahab himself agrees. I will detail why this might be the case later on when discussing chapter 132, "The Symphony". In the meantime, Sheldon highlights Ahab's more reprehensible Satanic commonalities in his piece "Messianic Power and Satanic Decay". Sheldon writes, "[Ahab] is a cripple, something of which Melville reminds the reader by using Miltonic echoes at various points...though a tower, has an 'obscur'd' glory...A tyrannical aspect of the Satan of *Paradise Lost*...is developed and asserted

³³ *MD*. 74.

³⁴ The main retort to my sentiments here lie in Ahab's fiduciary responsibility toward his crew concerning the dissenting parties of *The Pequod*, namely, Starbuck, Stubb, and Flask.

by Melville throughout the story of Ahab's relationship with his mariners".³⁵ Sheldon continues to emphasize the humiliating circumstances both Ahab and Satan share. He emphasizes the indefensible characterizations shared between Milton's Satan and Ahab, and aims to relay the futility of Ahab's quest through their shared humiliation. To further damn Ahab, free-will remains the major caveat between these two. If anyone suffers from a fate outside of their choosing, it is Milton's Satan.³⁶ Ahab's perceived agency potentiates his guilt. Ahab is going to kill this whale, spit in the face of God, kill all these men, and he is going to do this through his God-granted free-will—something Satan arguably never had. Regardless, it is this unshakable certainty that I find both useful and admirable in the context of subverting gender essentialism.³⁷

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This by-any-means-necessary demeanor rings similarly true to the transgender experience. When I came into some semblance of certainty about the path forward concerning medical and social transition, I no longer felt I had a choice in the matter—not, at least, if I was going to find any semblance of contented happiness. The line between decision and necessity became blurry. A substitute for pistol and ball indeed. "Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine," says Ishmael.³⁹ Sadly, but importantly, sociologists have thoroughly documented this sentiment of transition as a deterrent to suicide.⁴⁰ I cannot say with any certainty that I would have died without taking my own personal steps toward gender transition, but at the time, I felt as though

³⁵ Sheldon.

³⁶ This statement may be contentious. While William Blake, Lord Byron, and Percy Shelley may agree, Milton himself probably does not.

³⁷ The "Byronic Hero", a school of thought on characters considered admirable even in err, applies to Ahab in this reading.

³⁸ I will elaborate on the conversation of Ahab's free-will later, but in the case of Satan, the topic of free-will versus agency—and therefore the justification behind Satan's punishment—rests shrouded in the same fog of uncertainty that *Paradise Lost* has around gendered distinctions.

³⁹ *MD*. 144.

⁴⁰ Green, Amy E, Jonah P DeChants, Myeshia N. Price "Association of Gender-Affirming Hormone Therapy With Depression, Thoughts of Suicide, and Attempted Suicide Among Transgender and Nonbinary Youth". *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2021.10.036>

the prospect remained my only chance at a semblance of living a life authentically. I too found myself at an unavoidable decision where my principles might bring tragic consequences regardless of the action—whether they be to transition or not. Judith Butler elaborates on this same notion of necessity when they answer a self-proposed question on how gender variant people enter the political field. Butler writes, “[Gender queer and nonbinary people] make us not only question what is real but they also show us...how new modes of reality can become instituted...[Increasing possibilities for gender] is not luxury; it is as crucial as bread.”⁴¹ Butler portrays the inevitability of the situation: Transgender identities necessitate a deconstruction of the confines around an assigned gender at birth. This destruction, negation, or repurposing is less a decision and more like a part of viscera.

Sheldon emphasizes the indefensible characterizations shared between Milton’s Satan and Ahab, and he aims to relay the futility of Ahab’s quest. Sheldon emphasizes Melville’s comparison of Ahab to Satan. For example, Sheldon calls attention to characteristics Ahab and Satan both share and the similarities in their experiences throughout their respective narratives. Sheldon does this by discussing one moment in each of the stories: Ahab’s boarding of *The Samuel Enderby*, and Satan’s encounter with Jacob’s ladder. Both of these moments demonstrate their incidental main characters confronting inaccessible tools of otherwise dignifying ascension. As heaven’s gate locks Satan out of paradise, the lack of accommodations for Ahab’s leg lock him out of spaces beyond *The Pequod*. Sheldon writes,

[Ahab] is faced with a towering, insurmountable ladder which insults his pride, tempts him with succor almost within reach, and yet reminds him of his physical and spiritual loss...Satan was most impressive within the narrow, restricted Hell tailored by demonic technology to show infernal personalities in their best light, but once outside this contrived and flattering milieu, his true weakness is demonstrated, particularly at the foot of the tantalizing stairs...Likewise, Ahab is most potent in the artificial, protected

⁴¹ Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*, 29.

environment of the *Pequod*, with ‘kindly’ and ‘ingenious’ devices to accommodate his handicap. Ahab (who had previously proclaimed that he could ‘strike the sun’ is a cripple, unable to climb the *Enderby’s* ladder.”⁴²

Sheldon finishes his section on Ahab stating “[His] final act in the novel is an ineffectual, suicidal attack on the Whale, motivated appropriately ‘from hell’s heart...for hate’s sake’”.⁴³

I find this rather harsh. And yet, I do not necessarily disagree. Or at least, I understand why Sheldon has this reading. These points are difficult to refute. Sheldon is right. These moments are dreadful for both Ahab and Satan. Look at what they must endure. These moments act as brutal reminders of each character’s worst moments. The gate denies Satan a return to former comfort, and a foreign ship denies Ahab the comfort of fluid mobility. For Satan, this is a direct consequence. However, for Ahab, the boarding of the *Enderby* seems more circumstantial. The whale took Ahab’s leg by no act of his own sans going to work.

However, recontextualizing this moment to the rest of the novel, Ahab does retread his emasculation and dies by his own hand in the attempt to reclaim his sense of self and autonomy. I will argue later how Ahab maintains his autonomy despite Sheldon’s claims, but for the time being, I understand why readers would agree with this. Knowing this still relinquishes no admiration I feel toward Ahab. Though he fails, Ahab only understands himself and his identity through this retreading. If he cannot seize his masculinity through the conquest of the whale, he must die trying. I do disagree with Sheldon’s suggestion that possible successes or failures change Ahab’s characterization. Even if Ahab’s character necessitates self destruction, it makes no difference to qualifying the success of his metaphorical strike of the sun. I say this due to my own suggestion that Ahab finds victory in proving the mere possibility of the strike. When Ahab continues the chase, when he darts the whale even once, he succeeds. The deed is done. After

⁴² Sheldon, 32-33.

⁴³ Sheldon. 37.

that exchange with the whale, as far as Ahab is concerned, it does not kill him in any way that matters.

In his article, Sheldon often references a psychologist in the 1950's named Henry Murray. Murray seems to favor Ahab in a way that resembles my position. Murray wrote an article called "In Nomine Diaboli" where he mostly details the religious allegories of the novel, but takes time to discern Melville's intentions behind the novel. I find Murray's claims on Melville's intent most relevant to my argument even though I prefer not to appeal to any intentionality. Regardless, I would like to take a look at what Murray has to say about Ahab's role in the novel. First, drawing from Melville's letters to Hawthorne, Murray writes,

...in *Moby-Dick* Melville 'meant' something...which he considered 'terrifically true...so harmful that it were all but madness for any good man, in his own proper character, to utter or even hint of.' What seem decisive here is the passage in Melville's celebrated letter to Hawthorne: 'A sense of unspeakable security is in me this moment, on account of your having understood the book...I have written a wicked book'...The implication is clear: all interpretations which fail to show that *Moby-Dick* is, in some sense, wicked have missed the author's avowed intention.⁴⁴

Sheldon takes this and seems to argue that because Melville knew the book to be wicked, the leading character of the narrative ought not be revered. I consider it rather obtuse to think Melville is not one to revel in his own wickedness.⁴⁵ Unlike Milton, Melville never struck me as one to cater to an altruistic audience according to social and divine expectations. Murray agrees. In his argument, he attributes Ahab's character as reflective of Melville's interiority. This is important to keep in mind when reading the following quote from Murray in which he states,

"[the whale] has received the projection of Captain Ahab's Presbyterian conscience, and so may be said to embody the Old Testament Calvinistic conception of an affrighting Deity and his strict

⁴⁴ Murray. 440-441

⁴⁵ Further evidence for this statement can be found in Starbuck's whiny refusal to assimilate to the blasphemous and chaotic culture of sea life. Further, while I only say this on a hunch due to my own lack of research on the subject, this exchange reads as Melville's dog-whistle for his romantic or sexual attraction for Hawthorne or men in general.

commandments, the derivative puritan ethic of nineteenth-century America, and the society that defended this ethic”⁴⁶

Or, the divine, the political, and the sociological. Ahab versus the whale represents the Freudian Id versus the Superego.⁴⁷ So Murray asks, “[How is it] that Melville, a fundamentally good, affectionate, noble, idealistic, and reverential man, should have felt impelled to write a wicked book[?]”⁴⁸ He answers claiming that this has to do with the Freudian *Eros*.⁴⁹

[I think] Melville, in the person of Ahab, assailed Calvinism in the Whale because it blocked the advance of a conscience beneficent to evolutionary love. And so, weighed in the scales of its creator, *Moby-Dick* is not a wicked book but a *good* book, and after finishing it Melville had full reason to feel...’spotless as the lamb’...Melville’s clear intention was to bring not rest, but *unrest* to intrepid minds...Was it the poet’s function to buttress the battlements of complacency, to give comfort to the enemy? [Melville’s enemy] was the dominant ideology, that peculiar compound of puritanism and materialism, of rationalism, and commercialism...In such circumstances every ‘true poet,’ as Blake said, ‘is of the Devil’s party,’ whether he knows it or not.⁵⁰

So, Murray understands Ahab as the combative antagonist of suppressive social expectations concomitant to marriage. Not only can Ahab solely understand himself this way, he seems to understand the inevitability of his actions and consequences demonstrated by “The Symphony”.

In chapter 132, “The Symphony”, Ahab analyzes an imagined version of himself: One in which he lives on land with a wife and child. It allows for my most gracious reading of Ahab by introducing more of his interiority. Standing over the side of *The Pequod*, Ahab mourns for an imagined but impossible version of himself. Seizing one of Ahab’s rare moments of vulnerability, Starbuck begs Ahab to return the ship home. Starbuck knows *The Pequod*

⁴⁶ Murray. 444.

⁴⁷ Murray. 444.

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Ranker’s *Strike Through the Mask* has a lot to say in refutation of this. Ranker, Elizabeth *Strike Through the Mask*. Johns Hopkins University Press. 1997.

⁴⁹Or “the drive of life, love, creativity, and sexuality, self-satisfaction, and species preservation”. As defined by Professor Celia Easton. Easton, Celia. *Freud Notes*. Accessed 25 March, 2023.

<https://www.geneseo.edu/~easton/humanities/Freud.htm#:~:text=Eros%20is%20the%20drive%20of,destruction%2C%20violence%2C%20and%20death.>

⁵⁰ Murray. 449-451.

continues to sail into troubled waters for one purpose only: Killing a single whale. The narrator (presumably, what's left of Ishmael's presence at this point in the story) spends a significant amount of time personifying the air and the sea as feminine and masculine, respectively. The "gentle thoughts of the feminine air" manifest as birds flying overhead while "mighty leviathans, sword-fish, and sharks" indicate "the strong, troubled murderous thinkings of the masculine sea".⁵¹ Ahab looking over the reflective water leads me to believe the words of the narrator reflect the feelings of Ahab in this chapter. He sees safety in the feminine home life of a wife and child. He experiences a longing for normalcy—something boring, soothing, and not of his nature.

In a way similar to the humanizing scene of the *Enderby*, "The Symphony" shows Ahab mourning. If the boarding of the *Enderby* shows the foundational cracks in Ahab's physicality, it is "The Symphony" that shows the emotional cracks. Here, Ahab is doubtful, uncertain, and perhaps scared. He recognizes his foreboding death, mourning both the soon-to-pass consequences of his hunt as well as the loss of a life he could have lived. He imagines a life lived more according to social expectation on land that would fulfill patronly duties.⁵² Ahab processes these two possibilities—his life now at sea and the imagined life on land—by assigning gendered language to each while staring into the dividing line of the air and sea. The air has "a woman's look" described as "soft and pure" juxtaposed with the "man-like sea" heaving "long, strong, lingering swells".⁵³ Seemingly, the sea's violence cultivates its subsequent masculinity: "...mighty leviathans, sword-fish, and sharks; and these were the strong, troubled, murderous thinkings of the masculine sea".⁵⁴ Ahab sees the sky and ocean as split distinctly between chaos and peace, or male and female, respectively. Ahab understands that he traded a life of peace—a

⁵¹ *MD*. 388.

⁵² Murray attributes Ahab's aversion as Melville expressing his resentment toward married life.

⁵³ *MD*. 388.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*.

life in the dry air—for a life of conflict in the ocean. He weighs the masculinity within himself against the femininity that he left behind. While this could be seen as an overcompensation, or a re-seizing of lost masculinity, Ahab shows the impossibility of relinquishing this version of himself. “...what cozzening, hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing...making me ready to do what in my own proper, natural heart...Is it Ahab, Ahab?”⁵⁵ ⁵⁶

This moment calls into question the extent of free will and self control which reminds me of Maya Angelou’s “I did then what I knew how to do. Now that I know better, I do better.” Would Ahab be Ahab if he knew how to live in the peaceful air of familial and societal comfort? If Ahab cannot define his masculinity (and thus himself) in terms of marriage, can he then truly consider himself a man without the chaos of the ocean’s violence? Does Ahab know better? If so, can he do anything about it? Ahab may instead see the foreboding fight with the whale as his own self-affirming action, a self-affirmation that necessitates a relationship to his masculinity. If Ahab cannot seize his masculinity, he must die trying—a notion of the gendered self I find highly sympathetic and relatable. Daniel Shaw—another academic whose work I will discuss—suggests that Melville may, at around the time of writing the novel, also feel this sympathy himself.

But first, a fellow thesis writer by the name of Virginia Buck poses the most fascinating and relevant evaluation of Ahab concerning the topic of this thesis. Her graduate thesis is another transgender reading of *Moby-Dick* (the only other one put to paper as far as I can tell). However, Buck’s focuses on body modification and the conflict of subjectivity versus objectivity. Finding Buck’s work felt unreal and deeply validating to my own endeavors. Reading her work was both devastating to my sense of uniqueness around this topic yet deeply comforting in its reassurance.

⁵⁵ *MD*. 390.

⁵⁶ I believe this line has two different versions between the American and European editions of *Moby-Dick*, but I do not believe the difference changes my overall point.

I felt far less crazy for bringing transgender theory to *Moby-Dick*. Yet, I almost could not disagree with Buck more. In her work, “Something In This Slippery World That Can Hold: A Trans Feminist Analysis of *Moby-Dick*”, Buck emphasizes the truth-seeking motifs of the novel. She details three competing approaches to this truth-seeking shown between Ahab, Ishmael, and Queequeg. Buck’s approach reads, “This thesis argues that...[*Moby-Dick*] does not subscribe to masculinism or gender essentialism...On the contrary, [it] presciently dramatizes the conflicts inherent in essentialism”.⁵⁷ While I agree the novel challenges essentialist thought, I disagree with Buck’s use of Ahab as a vessel for that essentialism.

The idea of essentialism haunts the conversation around transgender theory. This is because one's agency to manipulate their gender hinges on the disruption of preexisting etiological thought. Even within the in-group conversations amongst transgender people, there exists a small schism of those who believe gender as something inherent to the self as opposed to gender existing as an illusive concept purely reliant on arbitrary social expectations and behavior enforced through all of human history. I will briefly elaborate on this later. Regardless, according to Buck, Queequeg and Ishmael act as philosophical foils to Ahab’s essentialist truth seeking. Buck writes “Queequeg has accomplished mind/body unity through his body modifications...exemplifying the body as a descriptive agent rather than something that must be accepted without change”.⁵⁸ Similarly, Ishmael hardly exists in any physical or objective way throughout the novel. Thus, his noncorporeal form allows him an embrace of true subjectivity, while Ahab “manifests an ontological interest and drive to know the true nature of things” in tandem with his revulsion toward his vulnerable physical form.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Buck. iv.

⁵⁸ Buck. iv-v

⁵⁹ Buck.5.

I find this agreeable enough but remain unconvinced on its relevance to the novel's ability to detail the objectivity/subjectivity conversation. In fact, I agree with most of Buck's claims in this piece up until she and I hit our point of contention in which Ahab plays the role of the essentialist. Buck equates Ahab to the "Dark Transcendentalist" in that Ahab seeks the same universal truth of Emerson's Over-Soul, but with a self-sabotaging twist. On the Over-Soul, Buck states "Nature embodies reality, and because humans are part of nature, they contain elements of transcendent reality within them".⁶⁰ Thus, Ahab's violence toward nature begets violence toward himself. Therefore, he squanders his attempts of enlightenment in a manner not unlike the ouroboros; Ahab's success can only exist paradoxically by way of his own self-destruction. Shortly after this statement, Buck makes an intellectual leap I do not quite follow:

[Presumably, according to Ahab] all physical objects correspond to some ideal truth; the material form and the ideal concept are tantalizingly related, yet their relation[ship]...remains hidden...Ahab is a Platonic essentialist who longs for transcendence...driven to discover the essences behind the material world, and he largely expects those essences to be fixed rather than fluid: if an object carries one meaning, then that object will always have that meaning and no other".⁶¹

Two of Ahab's statements lead me to believe Buck's analysis may miss the mark. Chiefly, Ahab's target of "...the white whale agent, or...the white whale principal..."⁶² The inclusion of the whale as an agent implies that the whale exists as a variable object—an otherwise empty vessel for these confining truths. To Ahab, it does not matter that the whale is a whale. It just as easily could have manifested in Ahab's life as any destructive or imposing force. Thus, Ahab does not necessarily find himself in conflict with nature, he only finds himself whaling, circumstantially. This refutes Buck's claim due to Ahab's conquest not necessitating self

⁶⁰ Buck. 13.

⁶¹ Buck. 14-15.

⁶² *MD*. 133.

destruction by combating nature and therefore combating himself. If Ahab seeks conquest over the “white whale [as] principal”, then the agent could be anything. Had Ahab found himself maimed by a carriage, perhaps he would seek truths in destroying wagon wheels.

Secondly, Buck’s axiom of Ahab expecting truth or meaning, and only one singular meaning, behind pre-established truths does not quite sit right with me either. This is due to Ahab’s statement further along in his rally. Ahab says “Truth hath no confines”.⁶³ Seemingly, Buck read this claim to mean: There exists a perceived falsehood claiming to be “truth” that envelopes the singular actual essential truth. The notion of the “the little lower layer” may contribute to Buck’s interpretation: *The* (singular) lower layer as one sole essential truth below the one sole illusion of truth. However, I feel compelled to state that this notion of breaking through masks could just as easily lead to turtles all the way down—layers upon layers of truths presented to the observer. Ahab suggests this when he says that “Perhaps there is naught beyond”, understanding that there may not exist even one reality outside of the experience he currently understands. However, that statement “truth hath no confines” reads to me as truth *never* having confines as opposed to the current, singular truth he experiences as not having confines. I read Ahab as confronting mask upon mask—prison after prison—each with their suns and walls to strike. Thus, this creates two philosophical interpretations of Ahab, neither of which are essentialism: That there exists no truth, or that there exists infinite layers of truth. Concerning our gender analogies to the novel, this might potentiate theories of no discernable identities conflicting with a world of infinite discernable identities. That is to say, if we read *Moby-Dick* (and Ahab, specifically) through a transgender theoretical lens, all gender identity, performance, and expectation is subject to either dissolution or limitless determination: A topic, perhaps suitable for another time.

⁶³ *MD*. 133.

Conversely, Buck further claims “Ishmael’s lack of physical self-description hints at a fluid identity, which is exactly what saves him from the dead end of the quest for transcendent, essential selfhood...”.⁶⁴ Thus, “*Moby-Dick* suggests that the healthiest gender and spirituality are a questioning gender and spirituality, not a fixed gender and spirituality”.⁶⁵ This brings me swiftly to my next summation of Ahab: The antithesis to Ishmael; or, Ahab as the cautionary tale.

Often, scholars like Buck imply Ishmael’s lack of form or presence within the novel as emboldening his sole survivorship; If Ahab’s destructive and resistive path to truth leads to death, it is Ishmael’s passive, Buddhist (or—more likely for Melville—a Schopenhauerian) approach that leads to survivorship.⁶⁶ Though *Moby-Dick* was released in 1851, Melville’s exposure to Schopenhauer can only be confirmed around 1867 according to Boston University’s Christopher M. Ohge.⁶⁷ Even further, Ohge states that the marginalia found in Melville’s copy of Schopenhauer’s *Studies in Pessimism* date circa 1891 just before Melville’s death. Thus, speculating on how much Schopenhauer’s theories on will influenced Melville and in what ways seems unhelpful here. But the notion of Ishmael as Ahab’s foil remains relevant. To critique this notion of Melville intending Ahab’s death a punishment—and therefore Ishmael’s survival a reward—I reintroduce the scholar Daniel Shaw.

⁶⁴ Buck. v.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Stanford’s synopsis of Schopenhauer’s work details this most succinctly: “...[Schopenhauer] believes that the supreme principle of the universe is likewise apprehensible through introspection, and that we can understand the world as various manifestations of this general principle. For Schopenhauer, this is not the principle of self-consciousness and rationally-infused will, but is rather what he simply calls “Will” – a mindless, aimless, non-rational impulse at the foundation of our instinctual drives, and at the foundational being of everything.” Wicks, Robert, "Arthur Schopenhauer", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/schopenhauer/>.

⁶⁷ Ohge, Christopher M., “Introduction to Melville’s Marginalia in Arthur Schopenhauer’s *Studies in Pessimism*. <https://melvillemarginalia.org/intro.aspx?id=42>

If Leslie Sheldon is the antagonist of my thesis, then Daniel Shaw is one of its champions—an ineffective champion, as I will show, but a champion nonetheless. Daniel Shaw wrote an article called “The Tragic Heroism of Captain Ahab” in the collection *The Locus of Tragedy*. In it, Shaw finds himself in a state of empathetic admiration toward Ahab similar to my own. This article explores the artistry and marvel of a character’s suffering. About Ahab, Shaw writes,

...the experience of tragedies is pleasurable in part because of that suffering, and in a way that goes beyond the mere catharsis of unpleasant emotions...Tragic pleasure comes from the esteem we feel for such characters in part because they show themselves willing to pay such a terrible price for upholding their convictions.⁶⁸

I agree wholeheartedly with this sentiment. Who doesn’t love a man with convictions? And the only true convictions are those that come at a price of which there are few greater than one’s own life. But I consider Shaw an ineffective defender of my position because of his reasons for it. Shaw appeals to Melville’s intentions behind the *Moby-Dick*. Shaw writes,

It was Melville’s contact with Hawthorne’s writings...that led to Melville’s transformation from an adventure novelist into a tragedian...[Melville] self-consciously sought to create an American tragic hero, spending a great deal of time investing his whaling captain with a noble and kingly stature. Melville did not do so simply to have Ahab be seen as a monstrous monomaniac mired in irrational illusions.⁶⁹

Shaw claims that Melville himself intends the audience to admire Ahab’s principled death and convictions. If this were the case, I would say, Melville failed. Look at the collective disdain toward Ahab. Further, in the above passage, Shaw alludes to a singular moment in Melville’s writing to Hawthorne. That letter states,

[An individual experiencing a certain tragic phase of humanity] declares himself a sovereign nature (in himself) amid the powers of heaven, hell and earth. He may perish; but so long as he exists, he insists upon treating with the Powers that be an equal basis. If

⁶⁸ Shaw. 233.

⁶⁹ Shaw. 233.

any of these powers choose to withhold certain secrets, let them; that does not impair my sovereignty in myself; that does not make me tributary.⁷⁰

On this passage, Shaw writes, “Notice how Melville switched from the third to the first person... indicating how personally he took this theme,”⁷¹ implying that a slip-of-the-pen indicates a clue (or intended expression of) Melville’s interiority. While this would strengthen the defense of my claims, I am again unconvinced by the reasoning. I would love to agree with Shaw here and state “Aha! Melville *did* form Ahab out of an admirable reflection of himself. Thus, Ahab’s journey is not a cautionary tale!” However, switching from the third to the first person is, conversationally, pretty common. I read this more as Melville embodying or roleplaying the type of person conveyed.⁷²

Unfortunately, Ahab suffers for his authenticity in a way that might resemble how queer people suffer for their authenticity. While I regard Shaw’s gracious approach to Ahab’s character as helpful in permitting complexity to these discussions around Ahab, I disagree with the implication here that honesty potentiates admirability. I’m certain that the phrase “Be who you are” has made its way into a commercial advertisement for Target’s Pride Month sale on swimwear. Ahab demonstrates the cruel reality of not relishing in, but suffering from, authenticity. Ahab remains one of the most true-to-principle characters of literary history: The foil to Ishmael’s noncorporeal plasticity. Being forged of bronze and madness maddened, Ahab simply cannot help himself, and it is ugly.⁷³ His authenticity begets grotesquery in the same way transitioning does. And I don’t mean this as something to discourage or shame others away from pursuits of authenticity. Quite the opposite. Transitioning is often ugly in the way that broken

⁷⁰ Melville. “Letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, [April 16?] 1851. <http://www.melville.org/letter2.htm>.

⁷¹ Shaw. 239.

⁷² I often do this myself with imagined characters of whom I feel zero relation or empathy using general “yous” or embodying the example of which I am trying to convey.

⁷³ Mentioning this brings to mind the struggle I have with Satan and his own free-will. If God gives you choice, yet hardens one’s resolve, how much free-will can be expected of either Satan or Ahab?

bones are ugly, and it necessitates the same coddling and grace afforded to those who suffer them. Even in a social vacuum, gender transition brings with it doubt—“Is this the right thing to do? Am I *actually* trans?”. It brings self-abuse. In the infinitum of social context and consequence—In changing one’s name, choosing public restrooms, traveling abroad, coming out to family, risking disownment, risking career, so on and so forth—gender dysphoria remains one of the deadliest ailments from which one can suffer. And the mortality rate is by our own hands.⁷⁴ These are not moments exemplative of the beauty in sincerity. While beautiful moments of trans self-discovery do exist—of course they do—these moments manifest in tandem with the wretched, *Ahabian* parts of this authenticity. As transgender people fall in and out of reactionary media’s cultural sights, as it stands today, the ugliness feels unavoidable.

In all the grand moments of choice found in navigating gender identity, one does not choose to suffer. One suffers inevitably. I see this inevitability to suffer in Ahab highlighted in “The Symphony”. This unwavering aspect of Ahab’s behavior draws the most significant comparison to Milton’s Satan in the presumption that they are both flailing in futile rebellion to their inescapable destiny. But is this presumption warranted? How does a closer consideration of fate versus free-will change how one might think about these characters? There are two ways to look at this: The first is that both Satan and Ahab are self-emboldened to rebel and suffer for it. The second is that they are assigned by divinity to rebel (and thus, suffer for it). Concerning Satan, the academic consensus favors the sympathetic latter. I tend to agree, but I will complicate my position on this matter later. But the extensive academic defenses of Satan have spawned their own school of thought spanning backward hundreds of years. Blake, Shelley, and Byron

⁷⁴ Tanis J. The power of 41%: A glimpse into the life of a statistic. *Am J Orthopsychiatry*. 2016;86(4):373-7. doi: 10.1037/ort0000200. PMID: 27380151. Transgender people suffer an attempted suicide rate higher than every medical disorder combined. This number decreases significantly based on familial support experienced by individual subjects. I will find that study as well.

remain among the most famous and hard-hitting of the contenders. Sympathy for the devil has become so concomitant to *Paradise Lost* that I find myself far more interested in the objections to Satanic Heros, Byronic Heros, or Satanic School writers. But for some reason, despite their analog, Ahab garners far less sympathetic criticism. Why is this the case? In contrast, I would like to introduce some counter opinions to those more in favor of Ahab.

Meredith Farmer, in her intro to *Ahab Unbound*, comes to the defense of Ahab in an unprecedented way. As the release of this collection occurred during the writing of this thesis, it could not have come at a more serendipitous time. *Ahab Unbound* sets out to “see [Ahab as] worthy of our empathy and our compassion” by “recast[ing] him as a contingent figure, transformed by his environment”.⁷⁵ Farmer wants readers to see Ahab as a product of his environment as opposed to someone vehemently removing themselves from that environment. While I am averse to entirely removing Ahab’s agency—and thus, his responsibility for the narrative’s destruction—this collection makes for an incredible reassessment on Ahab that further validates my first reading of the novel. But more pointedly, one essay in this collection details a reflective empathy in Ahab that felt astoundingly familiar:

Christopher Castiglia, an English professor at Pennsylvania State University, wrote an essay called “Approaching Ahab Blind” that potently reflects my own thesis’ inceptive thought: Some people see a version of themselves in Ahab. Castiglia’s essay is a personal narrative on his struggles with blindness—but not just his blindness, the privately crafted accommodations Castiglia has made for himself to deal with his blindness. He tells of a time when such accommodations failed and of the rage that accompanied that failure. He shows how *Moby-Dick* can be “a parable of compassion”.⁷⁶ The relevance and relatability of Castiglia’s piece is

⁷⁵ Farmer, Meredith. *Ahab Unbound*. 2.

⁷⁶ Castiglia. 179.

two-fold: It “offer[s] a coming-out narrative” and uses that narrative to sympathize and defend Ahab’s otherwise disagreeable disposition.

First, the coming-out. Castiglia is legally blind. While this may sound odd, (who comes out as blind?) the way he details the feelings of isolation and embarrassment of his blindness has a familiar ring to queer coming-out narratives. Castiglia writes “every effort to deny what separated me from other readers left—leaves—me, paradoxically, with a deeper sense of isolation”.⁷⁷ By attempting to normalize himself as an academic, he only forced himself into a unique closet. This made his private frustration all the more invisible and therefore less sympathetic to any potential outsider. He writes “[N]ot only has my shame about being blind kept me from discussing its challenges with others who might share my experiences, but the constant visual presence of the glowing scar tissue creates a literal and inescapable barrier between me and everything else”.⁷⁸ I hope it is obvious that I am not attempting to liken physical disability with the realities of transgender people, but I feel confident in saying Castiglia’s writing resembles a common sentiment of transgender people. I know these feelings myself: The closets, the shame, the alienation, the “barrier” between myself and cis heteronormativity. In one way or another, I imagine most marginalized individuals can also relate.

Castiglia discusses the necessary accommodations he crafted to succeed in his field. Then, he likens these accommodations—these subtle adjustments of his life—to the accommodations Ahab has built for himself across *The Pequod*. I find this astounding because, while Leslie Sheldon characterizes the boarding of *The Samuel Enderby* as Ahab’s most despicable moment of humility—his Satanic rejection from Jacob’s ladder to heaven—Castiglia uses this moment to cultivate a sympathetic reading for Ahab. This is the most validating and

⁷⁷ Castiglia. 182.

⁷⁸ Castiglia. 182.

encouraging analysis I had read thus far: Castiglia’s personal narrative on seeing his own struggles with disability reflected in the very same moment that Sheldon details as Ahab’s damnation. Ahab is not locked out of life’s plenty because he is crazy. Instead, Ahab is angry because he is locked out of that plenty. Castiglia gets it. What a joy it was to have been shown this piece. Where Ishmael states “Ahab’s quenchless feud seemed mine”, Castiglia writes “Ahab’s emotions in [his] moment of crisis are familiar to me...”.⁷⁹⁸⁰ What Ahab felt, I felt, too. Castiglia ends his essay with the implication that one ought to temper these *Ahabian* behaviors through transparency, “suspending pride[, and] extending generosity”.⁸¹ I agree, to an extent. Who wants to live their life spitting-mad with pride and setup for humiliation? But I believe there are *Ahabian* parts of the individual that will not, and perhaps should not, be tempered. After all, I have set out to find the transgender utility of Ahab as a character. I would not want to throw him away at the end of all this.

These interpretations of Ahab are important, but where in *Moby-Dick* is the potential utility for transgender people? To find it, I want to refocus this discussion away from the collective academic conversation around Ahab and instead talk about Ahab in the context of transgender thought. This begins with an analysis of the overarching pedagogical tone of the novel—a tone that begins in the very, *very* first pages.

The poor “Etymology” and “Extracts” chapters remain so overlooked that Ishmael’s statement has become lauded as the most known first line in literary history. *Whale Weekly*, a 2022 substack blog doling out chapters of *Moby-Dick* in (estimated) chronological order to a subscribing audience, boldly—and to my disappointment—decided not to begin the online book club’s first portion with the proper beginnings of the book. “The entire unabridged text of the

⁷⁹ *MD*. 144.

⁸⁰ Castiglia. 183.

⁸¹ Castiglia. 191.

novel will be included (even “Etymology” and “Extracts”, for you purists out there),” writes the editor, “but there are occasional changes to the order of the chapters. These changes won’t have a significant impact on the experience of reading the novel but...I’ve placed Chapter 1: Loomings before “Etymology” and “Extracts” so we can start off with the iconic ‘Call me Ishmael’.”⁸² I am one of these purists, and I argue that this change of pacing does indeed have a significant impact on the reading experience. But I am no purist for arbitrary reasons. Like the beginnings of the novel, I never felt that the narrative of *Moby-Dick* superseded its philosophies. In fact, quite the opposite. I describe *Moby-Dick* in the same way I describe the Bible: It’s one of the greatest books ever written, and also it’s kind of a bad story. If you’re looking for a whaling adventure with a beginning, middle, and end, you may walk away disappointed. However, if willing readers float aimlessly around in the wordy musings of disjointed thought and feeling, it can feel transcendent. For *Whale Weekly*, and seemingly the common reader, to falsify the novel’s odd and unusual first pages—to attempt to shoehorn the book into having a more expected beginning, middle, and end—creates a false expectation of the novel—an expectation of traditional storytelling absent from *Moby-Dick* and the same expectation attributed to the commercial failure upon the novel’s release. Readers should experience *Moby-Dick* in its intended order not because of Melville’s intentions, but because its musings cater to a book less about storytelling and more about reflection. When asked “What is *Moby-Dick* about?” I would say it’s not really a story about whaling. At least, telling a story about whaling is not what the novel is *for*. The novel is about a metaphor.

So the book actually begins with a stage direction followed by “The pale Usher—threadbare in coat, heart, body, and brain; I see him now”.⁸³ It’s unassuming. I understand

⁸² *Whale Weekly*. Accessed Jan. 2023. <https://whaleweekly.substack.com/about>

⁸³ *MD*. 6.

why readers want to gloss over these. However, the excerpts operate as a sort of mood lighting for the novel. The first beckons the divinity: “‘And God created great whales.’ – *Genesis*”. The next heeds simultaneously to the divine and sociopolitical: ‘Leviathan maketh a path to shine after him; One would think the deep to be hoary.’ – *Job*.’⁸⁴ I think the collected Extracts effectively set the novel’s tone, but this is a good single example to expand on. In this passage from The Book of Job, God the Father is speaking directly to Job, humbling him to divine might. “Who the hell are you compared to such a being as me?” God says, more or less. God questions Job on his potential hubris to understand and thus control the events enacted by an omnipotent and omniscient lord. That interaction foreshadows Ahab’s attempts at doing exactly that. And here in lies the value in “Extracts”. Readers must understand the whale in the context of divinity, elusivity, and power—the way Ahab understands the whale. They must understand “The Leviathan” in the context of divine, sociopolitical, and intellectual authority. It is large, oceanic, but non distinct. To Ahab and Thomas Hobbes alike, the whale is the collective organism of political power and “the great enemy of God”.^{85 86}

The Job passage is only one potent example that details both the authority of divinity and also the power of the Leviathan as a mythic force. The Extracts chapter does not only describe the whale of the novel’s namesake. It describes the imagined version of the whale—the idea of the whale similar to the way Peleg conveys to Ishmael an imagined version of Ahab. Both Ahab and the whale first exist to the audience as hyper-realized versions of themselves. After all, Ahab is

⁸⁴ *MD*. 7.

⁸⁵ "leviathan, n." OED Online. December 2022. Oxford University Press.

<https://www-oed-com.dartmouth.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/107692?redirectedFrom=leviathan&> (accessed January 09, 2023).

⁸⁶ The naming of the leviathan in parallel to *The Leviathan* by Thomas Hobbes is no coincidence made clear by the more apt 20th or so excerpt. “‘By art is created that great Leviathan, called a Commonwealth or State—in Latin, Civitas) which is but an artificial man”, applies more succinctly. The white whale quite literally sharing the name of Hobbes’ political social contract theories adds a rather on-the-nose layer to the otherwise abstracted metaphor Ahab imagines. For further detailed reading of the comparative analysis on Melville and Hobbes: Craig, Leon Harold. *The Platonian Leviathan*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press,, 2017.

just a man, and the whale is just a whale. Yet, they are both also greater than the sum of their parts. Peleg, in chapter 16, emphasizes this distinction when he says, “He’s a grand, ungodly, god-like man...above the common...been used to deeper wonders than the waves fixed his fiery lance in mightier stranger foes than whales....*he’s Ahab*, boy...”.⁸⁷ I see these imagined versions as reflective of a notion I mentioned before: Ahab existing as both who he says he is and who others say he is. Ahab, like all of us, will have personality traits that are both mutually exclusive and simultaneously true. I feel that this duality of Ahab goes underappreciated by the casual reader and academics alike, in part due to the indifference shown toward the first two chapters of the novel.

Before Farmer’s collection, I felt quite alone in my efforts to even vaguely sympathize with Ahab. I felt as though scholarship had ignored the complexities and dialectics around Ahab in a way similar to the disregard of “Etymology” and “Extracts”.⁸⁸ When Melville wrote Ahab as both a protagonist (in the sense that he has more of a traditional leading narrative role and arc including a beginning, middle, and end to his story as opposed to Ishmael) and that he is also the antagonist (in the sense of Ahab as a destructive tyrant), I do not understand those who reduce his complexities into a singular role. As both a living breathing man and a being with infinite depth and meaning, Ahab deserves the same complexities as attributed to the whale in the beginning of the novel. Peleg declares his depth of character as Melville demonstrates through his moments of mysticism, madness, humility, self-doubt, and eventual death.

Before getting to the inciting speech of “The Quarter-Deck”, the next major insight into Ahab that I would like to revisit is the boarding of *The Samuel Enderby*.⁸⁹ To further antagonize

⁸⁷ *MD*. 73.

⁸⁸ Oddly, this is not the case for Milton’s Satan. In fact, it seems the whole purpose of studying *Paradise Lost* at this point exists as the pursuit of such complexities *not* afforded to Ahab despite their similar circumstances.

⁸⁹ Note that this chapter, too, begins with the thematic stage directions.

Leslie Sheldon's piece, instead of seeing *The Pequod* as Ahab's Pandemonium, I recognize the ship as an extension of Ahab—an extension he leaves behind, temporarily, when boarding a foreign vessel. Ahab sees the constructed extensions of himself as the collective of himself—meaning, what he has controlled and changed about his life and body have become as much a part of himself as the parts of his life and body that were granted to him at birth. Here exists at least one of Ahab's experiences that parallels the transgender experience. Yes, the *Pequod* functions as a protective layer in the vein of Sheldon's argument, but it also acts as a shelter from a world hostile to Ahab. *The Pequod* acts as much a part of Ahab's body as his ivory leg. Ahab cannot exist as himself without a ship accommodating his disabilities. When Satan departs from Pandemonium, he leaves behind his kingdom. When Ahab disembarks the *Pequod*, he leaves behind physical extensions of himself and thus pieces of his identity. Melville demonstrates this by showing the *Pequod* as equally tailored to Ahab's form as that whalebone prosthetic. Sheldon seems to make the point that Ahab is nothing without his ship. And I would say that's true in the same way most people amount to nothing without the tools necessary to succeed and most people see themselves in what they have created.

But I am less concerned with what Ahab abandons in this moment than with what he seeks to gain: A sense of comradery. I find Sheldon's reading of this scene such a shame. What a beautiful moment for the downtrodden and emotionally isolated Ahab. I cannot hold Christopher Castiglia's work in a higher regard. I feel a deep sense of togetherness with any other transgender person I meet due to the same emotions Castiglia conveyed when reading this encounter and the same emotions Ahab expresses. Ahab finds understanding in his meeting with Captain Boomer. Upon seeing Boomer's own whalebone ivory prosthetic, Ahab "in less than a minute, [was] dropped to the water...soon alongside of the stranger"--or the nautical equivalent of a full on

sprint.⁹⁰ I find it difficult to put to words the feeling of being in the presence of another transgender person. Better yet, the feeling of being in the presence of *only* transgender people. Castiglia understands this feeling. He saw a mirror within Ahab that reflected a part of him that may have felt once impossible to reflect. How could anyone understand how *I* feel without experiencing the things *I* have experienced? When Castiglia read *Moby-Dick*, he saw a character who *gets it* in the same moment where Ahab has found someone who *gets it*.⁹¹

By the end of their interaction, Captain Boomer leaves Ahab with a wisdom of passivity: “Did’st thou cross his wake again?” asks Ahab, “But could not fasten?”. Boomer responds, “Didn’t want to try; ain’t one limb enough?”.⁹² Boomer has let it go. Ahab has still not found an equivalent philosophical passion toward the meaning of the white whale. What to make of Boomer’s resolve, I am not entirely sure. I know that he holds an interesting position unique to the novel. He is not the evaporated Ishmael, nor is he burning with opposition. He parallels the passive acceptance of Ishmael, yet suffers the same dismemberment as Ahab.

Now, I would like to finally and fully address the inciting incident of this thesis. Ahab’s quarter-deck speech demonstrates the first of Ahab’s complications as a character. In it, he displays his simultaneous authenticity and coercion. “(*Enter Ahab: Then, all.*)” writes Melville,

⁹⁰ *MD*. 322.

⁹¹ While I continue to avoid conversations around Melville’s intentions toward writing what he wrote, this chapter does make me wonder how Melville understands this “it”. What about Melville incites a moment like this? While I have intentionally avoided the subject due to avoiding convolution, perhaps it was his assumed homosexuality, or his relationship with Hawthorne that led him to such degrees of emotional isolation. It could be his simultaneous obsession and aversion to Christianity and its relationship to the Protestant work ethic of the young United States. It could be his apparent disdain for society as a whole. Regardless, I truly do not feel as though moments like these can be conveyed without personal experience.

Concerning this, Melville’s November 17, 1851 letter to Hawthorne seems most telling. Melville writes, “I felt pantheistic [when I received your letter]—your heart beat in my ribs and mine in yours, and both in God’s. A sense of unspeakable security is in me in this moment, on account of your having understood the book... [I] feel spotless as the lamb... I speak now of my profoundest sense of being, not of an incidental feeling. Whence come you, Hawthorne? By what right do you drink from my flagon of life? And when I put it to my lips—lo, they are your and not mine. I feel that the Godhead is broken up like the bread at the Supper, and that we are the pieces. Hence this infinite fraternity of feeling..But, now and then as you read, you understood the pervading thought that impelled the book—and that you praised.”

⁹² *MD*. 325.

introducing a sense of simulacra to the chapter.⁹³ ⁹⁴ Ahab is performing. Yet, the moment hardly reads as insincere. Quite the opposite. Yes, he needs to rally the crew to his cause, and it is from this need that readers draw their accusations of inauthenticity. But the novel later conveys Ahab's equivalent conviction. Before the speech, Ishmael describes Ahab as having thoughts that are "so completely possessing him...that it all but seemed the inward mould of every outer movement".⁹⁵ He poses a "bigotry of purpose".⁹⁶ His insides are out. Any deception or ill-intention he may bear originates in authenticity. Ahab does not so much trick the crew as attempt to persuade them to see within the white whale what he sees. I understand how this might be read as manipulation. But, when I read these details—regardless of his destructive nature—I see little but honesty. Ahab uses this authenticity as the power behind his persuasion. To say Ahab tricks or deceives unwitting men into his personal vendetta negates the realities of this chapter. Yes, there are crew members who did not sign up for this. Yes, Ahab abuses his authority by changing the priorities of this mission from fiduciary to a targeted hunt.⁹⁷ However, he is not lying here. He does not abandon the general harvesting of whales as a commodity. He just no longer sees value in the material world, nor does he value monetary gain over philosophical understanding.

Starbuck affirms this with his question "How many barrels will thy vengeance yield thee...?". And Ahab replies, "...thou requirest a little lower layer"t.⁹⁸ This little lower layer is an

⁹³ *MD*. 130.

⁹⁴ "Chapter 28: Ahab". "Chapter 29: Enter Ahab; To him, Stubb". These implications of a performance—a stage play both real and acted—calls to mind Judith Butler's theory on gender performativity. However, I am unsure if more exists to explore with this notion beyond trite coincidence. The notion of simultaneous authenticity throughout performance calls to mind a real "fake it 'til you make it" attitude of the self. You are what you say you are. And with enough repetition and performance as the desired self, you will be what others say you are too.

⁹⁵ *MD*. 130.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*.

⁹⁷ It is also important to note the aside Ahab makes undercutting most perceived altruism when he states "Starbuck now is mine; cannot oppose me now, without rebellion". I will address the conflict between Ahab's intention and Ahab's (and thus the crew's) inevitable death later.

⁹⁸ *MD*. 132.

appeal to understandings outside of one's immediate interpretations of the world. Ahab asks Starbuck to think in metaphors and subjectivity much in the same way that Melville primes the reader for this kind of thinking when starting the novel with whales as an agent of meaning.⁹⁹ As Ahab compels the crew to understand the subtext of all existence, Melville compels the reader to understand it through the true beginnings of the novel: the whale as transcendent; the whale as greater than. Just like the grade school teachers who have forced their poor students to read *Moby-Dick*, Ahab needs Starbuck to know that the whale is not just a whale. When educators ask students "What is the whale?" the answer they seek has little to do with the white whale principal. "It's just a whale?", wrong answer! It's not about what Ahab sees with his own eyes. It's about the grander implications of its existence and potential destruction. Scholars have studied the novel so exhaustively because of its potent ability to compel readers into instilling meaning into the whale in the same way Ahab does. Not only does Ahab want his crew to think the way he thinks of the whale, instructors want students to think the way Ahab thinks.

So why the vilification of his character? When gender essentialists on billion dollar American news outlets produce propagandistic documentaries asking "What is a woman?" the answer they seek exists similarly in the perceived objectivity of pre-instilled notions of the body. Their answer is "a person born with a vagina and ovaries".¹⁰⁰ When queer theorists ask "What does it *mean* to be a woman?", they appeal to this same little lower layer of experience, feeling, and identity—or mind, body, *or* spirit. I see the Starbuck versus Ahab philosophical understanding of the world as this same argument of gender essentialists versus queer theorists.¹⁰¹ The

⁹⁹ There's also something to be said about Melville's capitalism-averse oeuvre seen in *Tartarus of Maids*, *Bartleby the Scrivener*, and perhaps *The Confidence Man*, though I'm not familiar enough with the latter to make a confident claim.

¹⁰⁰ Their literal answer is often "An adult human female" which, in its simplicity, only serves as a "gotcha" to those in agreement with the etiological status quo and obtuse understandings of biology and sociology.

¹⁰¹ We really do not have to get into the subject of transgender people that argue the transgender experience originates in a similar physical objectivity of transgenderism as intersex. This line of thinking appeals to the authority of a study showing gray matter mismatching the development of genitalia (and also the horrific David

statement “All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks” asks the crew to understand the material world as both simulacra—false representational copies of authenticity—and also layered with implications instilled by the individual’s *and* the commonwealth’s projected understanding of those objects.

So what is anyone supposed to do when, according to Ahab, nothing exists as it seems? What is anyone supposed to think when truth holds no tangible utility when considering its arbitrary and destructible nature? I don’t think Ahab knows either. But this is the intrapersonal navigation he follows: When he discusses the reality or meaning behind the existence of the whale, Ahab states “Sometimes I think there’s naught beyond, but ‘tis enough” demonstrating his lack of concern around objectivity. He only sees value in the pursuit of perceived objectivity.¹⁰²

¹⁰³ A Buddhist theologian might label this as *Dukkha*, the ouroboros, or a serpent eating its own tail—the self-consumptive chase of worldly desire that perpetuates a life of dissatisfaction.¹⁰⁴

Boomer’s physician, Dr. Bunker, offers an interesting perspective on this perpetual chase. After Boomer declares that one limb is, indeed, enough to lose, Bunker states “give him your left arm for bait to get the right”. Bunker attempts to relay an unending equal trade of the self in hopes of restoration.¹⁰⁵ Boomer is done, and Dr. Bunker considers this wise. They no longer understand.

Reimer case study by psychologist John Money at Johns Hopkins University). These are the foundational studies of what some deem “tritrans” arguments. Someone considered “tritrans” attempts to maintain strict qualifications around who is or is not “truly” transgender. I do not feel versed enough to acknowledge any potential flaws or misinterpretations of these studies. Frankly, even if there existed some measurable and thus diagnosable aspect of gender dysphoria, I would not agree that said diagnosis would act as a suitable allowance to gender variant expression and identity. Further, and more truthfully, I really just don’t want to get into it here. Regardless, the neurological study and further details on Reimer can be found here, respectively:

[10.1016/j.neuroimage.2009.03.048](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuroimage.2009.03.048).

<https://embryo.asu.edu/pages/david-reimer-and-john-money-gender-reassignment-controversy-johnjoan-case>

¹⁰² MD. 132.

¹⁰³ On the illusory confines of these assumedly objective truths, Michelle Foucault’s *The Politics of Truth* helps clarify the manipulation of such “objective” understandings around human sexuality. In a similar way, Judith Butler uses the term *the appearance of substance* as their interpretation of such confines when discussing gender performativity in their work “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution”.

¹⁰⁴ To Ahab’s credit, according to this same theology, if anyone in their search for meaning figures out how to *not* devour their own tail they might transcend out of *Samsara* and thus into a new divine plane of existence—or enlightenment. Good luck.

¹⁰⁵ MD. 325.

Dr. Bunger's following statement implies Ahab misattributes malice to the whale's actions. "[I]t is quite impossible for [the whale] to completely digest even a man's arm," Dr. Bunger says, "[H]e knows it too... what you take for the White Whale's malice is only his awkwardness".¹⁰⁶ This, again, fundamentally misunderstands Ahab's cause. The white whale principal does not matter so much as the white whale agent. Who cares what the whale meant to do? Ahab's quest supersedes the object of the whale. Both Bunger and Boomer again attempt to appeal to preconceived notions of objectivity. So many people around Ahab want to minimize the meaning of the whale and thus minimize Ahab's identity itself. It's no wonder Ahab ignores them. How can one be expected to behave outside of that Butlerian visceral identity even if they so desire? This struggle becomes clear in "The Symphony".

Concerning gender theory, I see parallels to Butler's claim (quoting Simone De Beauvoir) that "If one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one, then becoming is the vehicle for gender itself".¹⁰⁷ This would mean that both Ahab and the transgender person not only find a sense of self and identity through the pursuit of identity and self, but that their identity is that pursuit. Frankly, that sounds exhausting. But I get it. This reminds me of a concern I had when I started my own gender transition: "To what end?" I thought. I spent a significant amount of time with other transgender people (mostly women) who understood their life as a series of thresholds. They saw transition as a list of achievements toward the becoming of their desired gender, and if only they could accomplish such achievements, they would then be happy. "If only I could start HRT" preceded "if only I could get facial feminization surgery" which begot "If only I could get sexual reassignment surgery". I—knowing myself as someone who rarely practices gratitude for my immediate blessings—foresaw an emotional crash for myself once I

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Butler. *Undoing Gender*.

met these same thresholds. I knew that transitioning would not solve my life's problems. I knew it would not inherently make me a happy person, and I wanted to brace myself when I had passed through each threshold, still dissatisfied. Even knowing this—after coming out, starting HRT, changing my legal documents, feeling as though I had more or less “finished”—I still experienced quite an emotional episode upon finding myself with no transition-related goals to pursue. My life had become the pursuit, and the end of that pursuit felt jarring. What was I left to do? Live a normal life on land? Yuck.

As previously mentioned, on my first reading of *Moby-Dick*, circa 2011, I had not yet known much about the novel. Knowing less about Ahab (and even less about the public and academic attitudes surrounding Ahab), I fell headfirst into his rallying call to action—perhaps because Ahab comes alive in this chapter. The reader's previous experiences with Ahab up to the point of the quarter deck speech consist of Peleg's tales, the “Ahab” chapter (which reinforces this notion of a man forged), a half-dozen lines of dialogue, and “the affair of the pipe”.¹⁰⁸ Unlike Peleg's description, Ahab's namesake chapter breaks away from his mythical form, his legendary status. Peleg's declaration of “He's Ahab, boy” grows into something Ishmael sees for himself: “He looked like a man cut away from the stake...His whole high, broad form, seemed made of solid bronze, and shaped in an unalterable mould, like Cellini's cast Perseus”.¹⁰⁹

This comparison says more about Ahab than one might initially recognize. Cellini's Perseus, a rather gruesome statue on display in Florence, shows the young man holding Medusa's head triumphantly, which pours out innards from the neck. Sword in hand, Perseus poses in victory atop the rest of Medusa's remains. The statue displays the traditional ideal male form

¹⁰⁸ Another—perhaps the first—reference to air as feminine occurs here: “For, as when the red-cheeked, dancing girls, April and May, trip home to the wintry, misanthropic woods; even the barest, ruggedest, most thunder-cloven old oak will at least send forth some few green sprouts, to welcome such glad-hearted visitants; so Ahab did, in the end a little respond to the playful alluring of that girlish air”. *MD*. 104.

¹⁰⁹ *MD*. 102-103.

defeating a monstrous woman. Art historian Michael Cole reconveys the letter of a contemporary viewer that states “I cannot get enough of watching the blood that pours impetuously from [Medusa’s] trunk”.¹¹⁰ This likeness strikes me. The two combating forces of *Moby-Dick*’s narrative parallel the conflict between Perseus and Medusa in a telling way: Medusa wanted to be left alone, but Perseus had something to prove. Regardless, what would be the novel’s foreshadowing Ahab’s victory acts instead as a red herring. Perseus’ conquest proves himself a man. And while Ahab finds himself committed to masculinity as he understands it, the novel does not afford Ahab that same traditional victory. However, I would argue that Ahab’s contest with the whale neither proves nor disproves his identity or masculinity. I will elaborate on this shortly.

To continue, the “Ahab” chapter also details Ahab’s prosthetic. And not just his prosthetic, it incites the conversation around the degree of his mutilation that I briefly discussed with Castiglia’s work earlier. How much of himself was lost to the whale? Apparently, professor and contentious public figure Camille Paglia, makes the initial claim of Ahab’s loss of limb as “a sexual injury”.¹¹¹ Paglia’s *Sexual Personae* approaches the world history of literature while she maintains a notion of “the mother as an overwhelming force who condemns men to lifelong sexual anxiety, from which they escape through rationalism and physical achievement”.¹¹² *Moby-Dick* lends itself comfortably to this claim. Paglia continues, “the harpoon Ahab darts at *Moby-Dick* is a phallic mental projection, born of frustrated desire”, as if Ahab must sexually

¹¹⁰ Michael Cole (1999) Cellini’s Blood, *The Art Bulletin*, 81:2, 215-235, DOI: 10.1080/00043079.1999.10786883

¹¹¹ It frustrates me that I have found yet another author whose work I would like to discuss but rests under a shadow of controversy and thus compels me to write a disclaimer. I doubt I am alone in my sneering at Paglia’s statements on the transgender human condition. It’s such a shame because I think she does have some interesting things to say about *Moby-Dick* and its relationship to gender identity. Paglia makes claims around the current state of transgender youth that I find horrendous, on Jordan Peterson’s Youtube channel of all Godforsaken places, but from the very little I know about her, she at least appears to hold a genuine interest in the conversation when compared to most ideologues.

¹¹² Paglia, *Sexual Personae*. xiii.

penetrate the whale to prove himself as a man.¹¹³ I consider the claim meaningful for reasons that may be outside the scope of this thesis: Mainly, that Ahab understands his identity as a reclamation of his masculinity, and secondly, that Ahab understands manhood as one's ability to penetrate, kill, or conquer.

What I find more interesting is Paglia's claims on the novel's thematic reclamation of manhood by way of escaping *from* femininity as opposed to *toward* masculinity. "*Moby-Dick* rejects male sexual destiny," Paglia says, "which Romanticism portrays as a servitude to female power".¹¹⁴ Paglia claims to have discovered Melville's secret meaning behind *Moby-Dick* intuited by Hawthorne: *Moby-Dick* acts as a masculine-unleashed response to Hawthorne's female-centric oeuvre. Much like the novel as a whole, Ahab lives a life completely divorced from the presence of women. Thus, his sense of self can only exist in manhood—whatever that means to him. According to Paglia, the whale exists as a literal trophy of reclaimed masculinity free from the oppressive influences of any woman. I should be happy to find that someone has made such a claim. So why am I not convinced?

First, Paglia's claim is a little too Freudian for my taste, even compared to Henry Murray's. The idea that Ahab seeks self reclamation by penetrating the whale with a phallus reads far too reductive. I hold Ahab in higher regard than to consider him a man who understands himself as only fulfilled through symbolic intercourse with his tormentor. If the whale has castrated Ahab, then it would serve as a supplementary metaphor for Ahab's reclamation of identity, not the catalyzing incident for that attempted reclamation.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*. 589.

¹¹⁴ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*. 584.

¹¹⁵ I am unconvinced the whale has literally castrated Ahab. There are some suggestions, like the use of "dismasted" when discussing Ahab's injury, but the language around the incident is vague enough to maintain plausible deniability. I think Paglia would agree her arguments remain more metaphorical even if *Sexual Personae* often reads as if this were not the case.

Secondly, if Ahab were after the whale for vengeance over a lost sense of manhood, I think he would say as much. I think he would not bother dressing up the issue in an attempt to convince his crew. Yes, the hunt includes Ahab's sense of self—and thus his sense of masculinity—but I doubt Ahab sees the whale in such a simplistic and direct way.¹¹⁶ The novel as Ahab's sexual bildungsroman—while not necessarily wrong—again necessitates an appeal to yet another little lower layer. I would expand Paglia's claim that Ahab's conquest behaves as a pendulum swing away from the mentally oppressive presence of women and instead say that Ahab's conquest embodies a movement away from the oppressive presence of all life's expectations. Yes this includes women, but it also includes the expected behavior of men in relation to women, i.e., the expected gender performance of manhood in relation to all sociopolitical and divine authority. After all, how might masculinity and manhood be defined without a feminine foil? I think Ahab seeks exactly that: A sense of self, as a man, outside of the gendered expectations of manhood—a true, pure, unsoiled sense of his gendered self.

So what is the whale to Ahab if not a sexual conquest? When I talk about the whale as representative of sociopolitical and divine authority, I tread into the territory of terms so inclusive that they effectively mean nothing. So I will attempt to narrow it down. If I were to edit the beginning of Ahab's speech as I understand it (and thus stripping it of all Melville's artistry for the sake of clarity and utility), it would read as follows: "All visible objects...are pasteboard masks...in each [of life's] event[s], [something] puts forth [the features of the 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". This mask ignites this thesis. It is Ahab's most potent analogy. It invokes within my reading the daisy-chained theories on the

¹¹⁶ If anything, Ishmael's narrative proves more conducive to Paglia's claim. While Ahab's life is equally male-centric, Ishmael escapes the sea for clear reasons, cozies himself into the marriage ceremony with Queequeg, and expresses his emancipatory joy in other homoerotic signaling like the A Squeeze of the Hand chapter.

nature of the self by Kant, Foucault, and Butler. Ahab sees life as a series of falsehoods. Where might such falsehoods originate? Presumably, he means his social interactions. Perhaps the way he was raised, the advice he has been given, the laws enforced upon him by the government, the dogma instilled by his church. All of this has created a life around Ahab that he finds suppressive, limiting, or confining in some way: Suffocating. Most importantly, he considers these suffocating features as inauthentic—falsehoods that both boast their authority and hide their intellectual fragility. These forces do not exist in the same way Ahab does. They are illusions coercing the viewer into restricted behaviors. Realizing these things as a wall implies Ahab cannot necessarily see through the falsehoods of his life, but imagining the wall as flimsy—easily broken—implies he understands *something* beyond this big falsehood. Further, he understands that illusive *something* is available to him in some way—a carrot on the end of a stick. When reconsidering one’s gender identity and presentation, all of this—the social interactions, the advice, the restriction, the enforcements—contains a gendered bend that becomes recognizable and elusive. The transgender person must contend with these same elements when altering their relationship to the world around them. What is that *something* to Ahab? He does not know. I do not believe Melville necessarily knows either. All I can say is that when a transgender person reads this, they can posit that *something* as the instilled gendered norms and expectations originating from nearly every person and aspect of their lives—an expectation imposed on them due to an assigned gender at birth that feels incompatible to said person: A dull ache, ennui, or the general malaise of incompatibility often attributed to gender dysphoria.¹¹⁷

To continue, Ahab states “[The whale/mask/life] heaps me; I see in [it] outrageous strength...that [whale/mask/life is] what I hate”. Tell me about it. To stay on topic of the whale as a gender seized, I have personal theories. So many cis people behave in ways according to

¹¹⁷ I also like “a splinter in your mind” as referred to by the Wachowskis.

taught, reinforced, and repeated behaviors of their gender and never recognize these behaviors as Butlerian repeated performance. They cannot be blamed for not recognizing these things. Why would they recognize them? Parents instill gendered behavior and expectation from the moment of their child's birth in ways the parents themselves also do not recognize either.¹¹⁸ People spend their whole lives understanding a seemingly fundamental aspect of life: Men do this. Women do that. And this reality exists because men have this body, and women have that body. Simply by existing in the way that we do, transgender people disrupt these cornerstones of thought.

Seemingly, all aspects of one's life may be defined by the expected behaviors of their gender. I sympathize with someone's frustration when transgender theorists and queer people upset that understanding. However, I similarly hate that reality of expectation. And thus I refuse it. The outrageous strength of this reality becomes clear when coming out as transgender means shattering the expectations loved ones have concerning another's life. A friend of mine's father expressed his grief toward not being able to walk his queer daughter down the aisle. While that's not effectively true in any sense, what he grieves is the loss of gendered expectation he instilled in his daughter when she was born. The shattering of this man's expectation is heartfelt, but ultimately minor when contextualized with the correlation of transgender suicide attempts to familial rejection. I hate that too.

Then, Ahab states "I will wreak that hate upon him...I'd strike the sun if it insulted me. [If] the sun [could] do that, then I [could do that to the sun]". Ahab believes there exists no influential force that cannot also itself be influenced even if in the most minimal way. In other words, one cannot touch without also being touched. And I agree. To bring it to its most extreme example, this phenomenon appears even in interactions with God. If Ahab understands ultimate

¹¹⁸ Kleeman, J. A. "The establishment of core gender identity in normal girls: II. How meanings are conveyed between parent and child in the first 3 years" *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 1, no. 2, 1971.

authority as God, why would he think otherwise? Adam and Eve are able to hide (if only for a moment), Abraham successfully bargains, and parishioners confess to gain forgiveness. One influences God's favor or disapproval through acts. Thus, if the almighty can be changed, for better or for worse, what then on Earth—what then in all of reality—supersedes an individual's influence? Ahab's theory remains sound based on the only evidence he has, and he intends to put that theory to practice by actualizing the extent of his influence through the symbolism behind killing that whale.

This is the big one for me. I believe transgender people understand this manipulation of the influential forces of gender whether they recognize it within themselves or not: The intrapersonal intelligence to recognize oneself outside of the instilled values of their assigned gender at birth, the opportunistic seizing of previously disallowed social expectations of another gender, the “ever a sort of fair play” in repurposing or rejecting gender roles to one's own satisfaction. The tendrils of gendered social expectation bind an unfathomable number of life's aspects. To recognize and then reject most, all, or none of that based on a decision, *not* on expectation, *not* on influence, requires a fortitude not unlike what's detailed in Kant's *Aufklärung*, not unlike Foucault's claim that repression is the fundamental link between power, knowledge, and sexuality, and not unlike Butler's question “does [gender's] constructedness imply some form of social determinism, foreclosing...agency and transformation?”¹¹⁹

And finally, “Who's over me?” Ahab says, “Truth hath no confines”. Antithetical to how most think of truth as a great liberator of thought and behavior, when Ahab amalgamates truth

¹¹⁹ I am specifically referring to Kant's axioms throughout *What Is Enlightenment?* Summarized succinctly in the opening lines of the essay: “Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one's own understanding without another's guidance. This nonage is self-imposed if its cause liest not in lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage to use one's own mind without another's guidance. *Dare to know!* (*Sapere aude.*) ‘Have the courage to use your own understanding,’ is therefore the motto of the enlightenment”. <http://www.columbia.edu/acis/ets/CCREAD/etscc/kant.html> Foucault. *The History of Sexuality*. 5, and Butler. *Gender Trouble*. 11.

with authority, he calls into question the authenticity of the truths presented to him. How could truth, knowledge, and fact be suppressive? More importantly, and to Ahab's point, what does truth look like when it does not suppress in such a way? While this is best saved for another time, I think Foucault attempts to answer this through his discussions in *The History of Sexuality*. Regardless, In the following chapter, "Sunset," Ahab contradicts himself. At least, he introduces a metaphor for his destiny that I find potentially complicating and thus worthy of exploration. In this chapter, Ahab sits alone and speaks to himself—an aside to the audience as implied by the continued use of stage direction. While contemplating his previous speech and the coming voyage, Ahab squabbles internally with the weight of divine authority. He imagines himself like Holy Roman emperors wearing a crown gemmed with a nail of Christ's crucifixion. He states "[Persuading the crew was] not so hard a task...my one cogged circle fits into all their various wheels, and they revolve".¹²⁰ This industrious imagery continues into the next and more notable statement: "The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run".¹²¹ This invokes two intertwined themes I would like to elaborate on: Ahab as a self-constructed, immalleable sovereign and the Miltonic damnation of that sovereignty.

Moby-Dick proves that the conversation around Ahab's free-will versus his destiny remains too reductive. Ahab has a path, a fixed purpose on iron rails; that path will not change. This is his fate. But Ahab laid those rails himself. This is his free-will. "What I've dared, I've willed; and what I've willed, I'll do!" he says, "I now prophesy that I will dismember my dismemberer. Now, then, be the prophet and the fulfiller one".¹²² Ahab pushes the point here stating "Starbuck [thinks me mad], but I am demoniac, I am madness maddened!" Initially, this seems like an arbitrary doubling down on his own insanity, and in a way, it is. What is twice as

¹²⁰ *MD*. 136.

¹²¹ *Ibid*.

¹²² *Ibid*.

insane as being insane? Ahab understands himself as superseding insanity in a kind of horseshoe theory of his self awareness. The use of demoniac implies a sense of power and in some ways a sense of control—a demon might be crazy but it is also purposeful. Demons have goals and reasoning. They are chaotic, but their existence and presence accompany explanation. A demon exists within its own rules of divine ritualistic confines. But the phrase “madness maddened” has always stuck with me. Even further, Ahab elaborates calling it a “wild madness that’s only calm to comprehend itself!”¹²³ Ahab’s egomania creates a type of meta-egomania in that the madness exists as part of him and extends out to look back upon itself with a new detached comprehension. That is to say, he is mad with an additional madness that acts as an outsider looking in with clarity. I am unsure if this clarifies anything about Ahab as a character sans conditioning the reader to understand Ahab as multifaceted, contradictory, and perhaps dysfunctional in every sociological sense. But this layering readies a dialectical approach to Ahab useful to understanding his character in relation to the conversation of fate versus free-will. Shortly after claiming his madness as itself maddened, Ahab says, “The prophecy was that I should be dismembered; and—Aye! I lost this leg. I now prophesy that I will dismember my dismemberer.”¹²⁴ This line establishes Ahab’s understanding of himself as someone both subject to the fate of his existence and also someone with enough agency (or free will) to design such fates. This theme is vital to understanding Ahab’s interiority as detailed in chapter 133, “The Symphony.”

If “The Quarter-Deck” leaves one questioning Ahab’s proclivities, perhaps “The Symphony” provides some answers. Queequeg has built his coffin, Ahab has tied himself to now madness-touched Pip, and the *Pequod* has met a series of ships, each carrying a captain who

¹²³ *MD*. 136.

¹²⁴ *MD*. 136.

warns of the coming danger. Ahab now cries over the side of the *Pequod* when opportunistic Starbuck attempts to sway Ahab into deciding not to pursue the mission. But Ahab's eyes glow. He is "tied up and twisted; gnarled and knotted".¹²⁵ What was once Ahab's exposed, thoughtful interiority has collapsed into impregnable ruins of smoldering ash. This is the beginning of the end of Ahab as anything other than *Ahab*—the following chapters will be his final form. Scholars define this chapter as Ahab either sealing his fate or succumbing to it: Ahab as most resolved in his disregard for the humanity of others. If Ahab had any compassion, they say, it has dissipated by this moment in the novel.

Ahab faces a decision or perhaps a missed opportunity from a past decision. But this decision is a singular married unit. Because of their arbitrary separation detailed by the narrator, the two souls of the sky and sea are now considered one. What to make of this? It supports an argument for fate: The two paths of air and sea lead to Ahab's singular identity of self destruction regardless of his decision. Before Ahab lies an amalgamation of his choices and his destiny, and according to divine authority, this fate and this free-will should not be separated. But Ahab has never shied away from breaking religious instruction. So what is the narrator doing here in "The Symphony"? What to make of the land and sea juxtaposed, yet arbitrarily divided, by their gendered descriptors? These descriptions read, again, as more reflective of Ahab's interiority due to that similar line in chapter 28. Ahab's "faint blossom of a look, which, in any other man, would have soon flowered into a smile" accompanies the description of that initial description of air as feminine.¹²⁶ Interestingly, the air and flowers in chapter 28 do not describe a potential life with women as they do here in "The Symphony". There, it only describes Ahab as happy. The return of this feminine air in "The Symphony" at first, perhaps a little out of context, implies a

¹²⁵ *MD*. 388.

¹²⁶ *MD*. 104.

return to a life next to a woman, his girl wife and child—i.e. a life lived in relation, opposite to a woman. But considering the initial context of “girlish”, there may exist a more complicated association.

The more I think about “The Symphony” the less I know what to say about it. It undeniably demonstrates Ahab's sense of self that seems to both confuse him and lead him to a sense of resolve. He clearly feels some form of desire for a version of himself that cannot be, yet simultaneously refuses that imagined self. In other words, he seems to desire both and neither. Even further, he questions his sense of self and his prized autonomy in the question "Is Ahab, Ahab?"¹²⁷ I am not confident in my feelings when I say that Ahab recognizes himself as out of control in this moment. Perhaps he is not mourning due to a lack of control but mourning due to knowing any attempts at a life on land lead him away from the pieces of himself that make him Ahab. If I were to create a gendered analogy for this moment—as I am wont to do—when I realized myself as transgender, I both had a choice and also had no choice: Simultaneous fate and free-will. These choices were either to live authentically or live a life of repression. I *could* choose to repress and ignore my own gender dysphoria, but also knew that option only led to internalized alienation and increased suffering.

To further complicate this potent exchange, immediately after making these gendered distinctions, the narrator seems to walk back their classifications of the air and sea: “But though thus contrasting within, the contrast was only in shades and shadows without; those two seemed one; it was only the sex, as it were that distinguished them”. I am not entirely sure what the narrator implies here. Is it that the difference is miniscule? That the two paths before Ahab are the same but with only minor differences in aesthetic? Or that there are two wildly different paths that lead to the same end? There may be two readings to be had with the split of masculine

¹²⁷ *MD*. 133.

sea and feminine air: Ahab either envelopes himself within his own identity, knowing that he cannot exist in a way outside of his compulsions; or Ahab wishes he could live in a way outside of his compulsions but understands himself trapped in a doomed fate of masculine death at sea. In other words, Ahab must be honest or he must perform.

I truly begin to sympathize with and forgive Ahab in these moments.¹²⁸ I do not believe he can help himself, and I pity his compulsion. Ahab cannot act in a way in which he does not know how to act.¹²⁹ He demonstrates the inevitability of character. I believe the queer person feels this, too: An inclination toward authenticity weighed against foreseeable consequence. Ahab understands his forthcoming consequences are inevitable.

On queer inevitability, Judith Butler writes “Some people have asked me what is the use of increasing possibilities for gender. I tend to answer: Possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread”.¹³⁰ There exists no utility in the expression and expansion of the gendered individual because utility is outside of the question. I read Butler’s statement as an acknowledgement of the inalterable trajectory of the transgender individual. In all my discussion on agency, autonomy—striking through the mask of divine authority—originates in a visceral, inalterable, and (almost certainly) unstoppable force. It is the stone under fabric that cannot be ironed flat. Ahab similarly understands himself as outside of this utility. Perhaps he knows that the existence of a choice between suffering authentically and suffering inauthentically matters not.

¹²⁸ And while I feel terribly for Starbuck—and to continue his misfortune—I simply disregard his sorrow because he’s less interesting.

¹²⁹ There is a discussion of causal determinism and stoicism to be had here. Considering the aforementioned known marginalia in his copy of Schopenhauer’s *Religion: A Dialogue, and Other Essays*, Melville certainly would have been conscious of this school of philosophy when writing “The Symphony” chapter. However, I am simply uninterested in having the conversation about the legitimacy of philosophical determinism or free-will because, as I will demonstrate, I think the answer for Ahab is a blend of the two.. If I had to guess, I believe Melville similarly has little interest in that conversation save for his desire to portray these philosophies through Ahab’s interiority, as opposed to arguing any potential victor or sole validity.

¹³⁰ *Undoing Gender*: 29.

In a 1958 article in *CLA Journal*, Therman O'Daniel details the significance of this chapter declaring it "one of the most significant and artistic chapters in *Moby-Dick*".¹³¹ O'Daniel does a wonderful job working through what makes "The Symphony" special in relation to the rest of the novel and how it relates to Ahab's and Starbuck's characterizations. I find this piece mostly agreeable up until O'Daniel's (pleasantly and conveniently labeled) third point of the article: The chapter's exhibition of fatalism within the novel "in its most intense form".¹³² He writes, "there are forces at work within [Ahab] that compel him to pursue his dreadful course. There is no freedom of the will for Ahab".¹³³ ¹³⁴ O'Daniel believes that Ahab's compulsion leaves him without the ability to make a decision at all. In a similar way, a 1969 article in the *Journal of History and Ideas* titled "Melville's Use of Demonology and Witchcraft in *Moby-Dick*" attributes the imagery of glowing eyes as indicative of Ahab experiencing a state of demonic possession implying an inability to make decisions for himself and also an implication—presumably supported by Ahab's own declaration of being demoniac—that Ahab is absent from decision making. The author of that article, Helen P. Trimpi, also appeals to Melville's "interest in demonology and witchcraft as a literary subject" evidenced by Ahab's baptism of the harpoon and in the same letter to Hawthorne mentioned earlier. Due to Ahab's claims on a fate constructed, a prophet living that constructed prophecy, if Melville intended for Ahab to be literally possessed, it seems unlikely that said possession originates from anywhere or anything

¹³¹ O'Daniel. 1.

¹³² O'Daniel. 57.

¹³³ O'Daniel. 57.

¹³⁴ O'Daniel writes "Life is a comparatively simple thing to ordinary Starbuck: merely a matter of right or wrong, and he cannot understand why anyone should choose to do wrong, especially when it is known to be so". What an incredible summation of Starbuck's character: It is both compassionate and condemning, gracious and critical. It is everything I feel about Starbuck wrapped wonderfully into a single sentence. It is a matter of fact: Concerning the sociopolitical and religious rigidity felt by Ahab, Starbuck finds life perfectly compatible. He simply fits, and thus, he simply does not understand.

When I came out to my mother, she asked me "Why can't you just be a feminine man?". I'm not sure what more to make of that comparison but there is something there.

other than Ahab himself. I consider O'Daniel's claim uncharitable because I believe Ahab when he states that this dreadful course was built with irons forged of his free will. O'Daniel further likens Fedallah to Mephistopheles and Ahab his Faust.¹³⁵ With my limited understanding of Faust, does this not show Ahab as *not* suffering from inescapable fate, but a character suffering the consequences of his decisions? Something Ahab knows, expects, and perhaps even desires. This becomes further evidenced in his resolve shown later in "The Chase" chapters.

So how does a character so defined by his contrarian agency draw such academic certainty around his inability to escape destiny? Like most people, Ahab both has choices and no choices: He can heed the warnings of other captains by sailing back to the states, or continue forward toward the whale. However, I kind of agree with O'Daniel and Trimpi, just not for their same reasons. I am similarly unconvinced Ahab has a true choice in this matter. At least, I do not believe he has a choice in the sense that his character allows him to change trajectory. How much choice does one have against the natural compulsions of one's character? Ahab could, in theory, end the hunt. I say this due to his mourning—his regret—when looking back on his life.

...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!...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 demon than a man!--aye, aye! What a forty years' fool—old fool, has old Ahab been!¹³⁶

Would not a possessed man, a man with no choice, remain steadfast and hardened in his life? Ahab looking back and wondering "what if?" implies lost opportunity which itself implies decision making. But Ahab as the demon and Ahab being possessed by the demon are two very different concepts.

¹³⁵ Murray's same acknowledgement and dismissal. Murray. 443.

¹³⁶ *MD*. 389.

This chapter also brings reason to the iron rails of Ahab's self-constructed destiny, and that reason lies mysteriously in the gendered symbolism of his understanding of life on land and life on the sea. It is as if Ahab knows he should be happier on land, and perhaps he could be if he tried, yet he understands his identity is tied to the ocean. Why? I cannot say. Perhaps identity lives within one's viscera. And that viscera can be ignored, rejected, or fought against through choice and decision making. But the feelings of one's gut cannot be willed away. This is where the value of "The Symphony" lies. The argument on free-will versus agency appears obtuse. Instead, "The Symphony" details the internal conflict of facing decision in the context of compulsion and identity. To what extent can one be expected to overcome decisions when those decisions are tied to a sense of self?

This balancing act rears its head in discussion on gender transition. When claiming that gender dysphoria originates from a state of nature—a measurable disconnect between the hard-encoded, sexed mind and the hard-encoded, sexed body—problems arise on diagnosing and accessibility. Seasoned queer theorists will recognize this as *transmedicalism*. Who is measuring, by what measurement, and why? Who, by some measurable and objective series of parameters, is "really" trans? Who is *allowed* in? This ideology stands conversely with the notion of gender as self-identification. Everyone can and should measure themselves against their expected gendered performance and decide for themselves how they identify and present. While I lean toward the latter (I do not care. Gate's open. Identify and express yourself as you see fit.), the compulsion to reject, reassign, ignore, "play" with one's gender identity and expression certainly comes from exactly that: a compulsion or desire. Something that is as part of the essential self as one's hunger for bread.

Paglia herself makes for an interesting inverse example to my own narrative when attempting to clarify the gendered potentiality of this thinking. Her story seems like an equal-opposite to mine. While she does consider transgenderism a product of some pharmaceutical company's opportunistic cabal, Paglia also identifies herself as transgender. By her own claim, she experiences gender dysphoria. This is the compulsion. Her choice lies in what she then does about her dysphoria: nothing. As far as I know, she did little outside of making platitudes about this dysphoria. She did not feel compelled to change her name or pronouns. And while she is by no means a stereotypical or "normative" woman, she seemingly lives within the expected confines of her assigned gender at birth relative to someone who has adapted their identity and presentation to a gender not assigned to them at birth. While some might find this odd or repressive, I find it perfectly reasonable: desisting. There are plenty of understandable reasons for a gender dysphoric person to effectively *not* transition in the way gender transition is currently considered. It's a lot to do, and if one would prefer not to, then by all means, do not bother.

I think Ahab looks back at his life, his decisions, his nature, here, and he decides not to push against what he knows is inevitable. He has a fate before him that he has constructed, and a choice on whether or not to press against it. But the choice remains futile. Perhaps, in one way, Virginia Buck is right about Ishmael. Perhaps when faced with an inevitability by one's own design, the only way to survive it lies in one's ability to supersede life all together. The problem is that the novel affords Ishmael a very inhuman privilege of fading out of life's contentions while Ahab must stay and suffer.

At one point, I was convinced the chapters that make up "The Chase" indicated a negation of my previous points on Ahab and the novel as a whole. Now, I think "The Chase"

chapters do little to influence this thesis. Here's why: The crew's expectations come to pass. They spot the whale. Ahab as the first to sight the whale and his subsequent claim over the doubloon remains suspect: "There she blows!...[T]he grand god revealed himself..."¹³⁷ The whale eventually takes *The Pequod* into its mouth and snaps it in half. Ahab has come within six inches of the whale's mouth with no way to harpoon it, yet. Ahab and the crew take to the smaller whale boats to finish the hunt. The three chapters detail a confused chaos, and it becomes difficult to discern exactly how the events play out. But Ahab's prosthetic breaks. How he positions himself for the following strike, I am not sure. But on day three of this fight, Ahab "darted his fierce iron, and his far fiercer curse into the hated whale".¹³⁸ He has done it. He has made a strike at the mask. Throughout this conflict, Ahab demonstrates resolve. "Ahab is for ever Ahab, man. I am the Fates' lieutenant; I act under orders," he says.¹³⁹ While the central conflict of the novel occurs here, the central conflict of this thesis has passed. Ahab's internal struggle ends when he embraces the part of himself that must confront the whale. The confrontation of the whale itself makes no difference in Ahab's characterization. The doubt and uncertainty of Ahab's self discovery ends in "The Symphony" regardless of what occurs during this fight with the whale. While Ahab's death by his own strike seems like the most significant aspect of these chapters, it is not the fact that Ahab perishes that refutes his cause. Even counter to Ishmael's survivorship, Ahab's death is irrelevant. Death in literature often accompanies glory and reverence. It does not inherently mean defeat. But how can one consider Ahab's encounter a true victory? The image of Ahab strung up, his body presumably tied to the whale as it drags him under the violent ocean, hardly seems glorious. But the victory is twofold in "The Symphony"'s resolve—the clarity of understanding oneself and dying anyway—and the existence of the strike,

¹³⁷ *MD*. 391-393.

¹³⁸ *MD*. 407.

¹³⁹ *MD*. 402.

fatal to the whale or not. Shaw shines light on the glory of Ahab's death while Sheldon shows how the captain's descent parallels God's harshest punishment. However, I have always considered Ahab's final moments as an expected price as opposed to a surprise punishment (if there is such a difference). The text gives readers little reason to believe Ahab's dart kills the white whale. Yet, regardless of whether the whale survives Ahab's strike, I have never considered his final moments a failure due to the successes of otherwise miniscule influence over that thing he chiefly hates. He has proven his theory on the reciprocity between himself and the forces attempting to control his behavior. He has shown that if anything in this world can influence him, he can influence it.

So, why might scholars like Sheldon consider this a failure? Why might readers understand this encounter as demonstrative of futility and hubris? What to make of Ahab's death? When considering the Ishmael/Ahab dichotomy of acceptance and refusal, Ahab's death-as-punishment remains most damning to my sympathetic reading of the character. Because, if I surmise Melville's true intent of the novel (via the letters to Hawthorne highlighted by Henry Murray), Melville has shown two paths through Ishmael and Ahab: Enlightenment and suffering. The novel does not provide any answers to the problems of identity, agency, or authority except to live life in Ishmael's impossible state of absence.

After reading so many refutations, I have tried to see Ahab as the villain of this story. Yet, as I have detailed previously, Ahab was—and still is—a rather formative figure in my life. These days, I feel slightly more level-headed in my thoughts toward him. Yet I still hold two staunch versions of him in my mind. There exists my youthful lens. The one that makes me feel wide-eyed like a hunting dog tracking a bird. I think about that mad conquest and feel hot in the head with excitement over the prospects of grand ideological conflicts against a world that often

wishes to snuff me out. “His quenchless feud seemed mine” could not be better stated.¹⁴⁰ Then I talk myself down. I consider the man with moral and fiduciary responsibilities. I consider the captain promised to Ishmael by Peleg, the moody good captain as opposed to the laughing bad one—the captain that does not lead his entire crew into death for selfish purposes. I understand Ahab has skewed priorities. I wish I could argue that hunting the white whale does not compromise Ahab’s morals. What would the novel look like if Ahab had killed the whale? If he had still perished, but only gotten himself killed? I think this would be a very different discussion.¹⁴¹

I think a new question for this thesis arises: “Why do the circumstances of land compel some to die at sea?” I think there exists a socially rejected few—people who are disenfranchised, abused, or otherwise suppressed. I think *Moby-Dick* shows two of these rejected few. Ahab’s moxie comes from knowing that nothing can stop him until those forces are willing to do so violently. This is the pasteboard mask to Ahab: All authority, in some form or another, is mostly nonsense. This is where I see the transgender intellectual utility of *Moby-Dick* and Ahab, specifically. This is what a trans person ought to take away from *Moby-Dick*. Everything influencing the transgender individual to behave under certain gendered expectations exists as flimsy walls vulnerable to an influential strike. While everyone must contend with these expectations, no one must succumb to them. Yes, there will be consequences. But how much choice does anyone really have when it comes to their identity? I would like to further invite transgender readers, scholars, to find themselves, the utility for themselves, in works like *Moby-Dick*. Divine the utility from novels that were never meant to aid us, novels that did not even know we existed.

¹⁴⁰ *MD*. 144.

¹⁴¹ And though it now seems petty in all the grand philosophical noise, death, and destruction, Ahab really snubs Tashtego out of that dubloon.

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