
Whales As A Matrix For Beauty, Knowledge And Commodity In The Novel Moby Dick

Whales are a constant in the seemingly infinite range of topics covered in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. *Moby Dick* himself is the figure most often associated with the novel, his image sometimes decorating its front cover, but the descriptions of other whales throughout the book serve as the basis for some of Melville's most cogent thoughts about beauty, knowledge, and commodity. Melville uses whales as a means to slowly coax his readers into thinking of themselves as consumers and to consider their relationship with the products they consume.

In this essay, I'll look closely at three chapters that heavily feature description of the whale, chapter 55, "Monstrous Pictures of Whales;" chapter 74, "The Sperm Whale's Head--Contrasted View;" and chapter 92, "Ambergris." Through these readings, I'll explore how Melville uses the whales to discuss beauty, knowledge, and commodity before looking at how all three work together in forcing the reader to consider his own consumption.

Chapter 55 of *Moby Dick*, titled "Monstrous Pictures of Whales," is a takedown of the most common second-hand depictions of whales at the time of *Moby Dick*'s writing. Our narrator, Ishmael, explains to the reader that his duty is to better inform us "by proving such pictures of the whale all wrong" (Melville, 205). The worst offenders, Ishmael explains, are those most familiar with traditional beauty. Misinformed depictions of the whale are "found among the oldest Hindoo, Egyptian, and Grecian sculptures" (Melville, 205). In this passage, Ishmael is disheartened by popular whale depictions, regardless of their merit as art. If it wasn't bad enough that some artists bastardize the leviathan's image for the sake of creativity, others' depictions err by having no true "counterpart in nature" (Melville, 207). Here, Ishmael cares more about the depiction's accuracy than its artistic value or beauty. Why is it so important that not only Ishmael but the general public know what a whale really looks like? The answer is not immediately clear from this chapter but starts to take shape in Ishmael's disdain for expressive renditions of the leviathan.

Ishmael dismisses such crude attempts. He explains that trying to draw an accurate whale based on the observation of a beached one is like trying to draw a seaworthy ship based on observation of a wrecked one (Melville, 207). Additionally, it would be silly, Ishmael narrates, to try to extrapolate the shape of the whale based on its skeleton. Ishmael begins the chapter defensively as if to berate the reader for accepting erroneous sculptures of the whale.

I shall ere long paint to you as well as one can without canvas, something like the true form of the whale as he actually appears to the eye of the whaleman when in his own absolute body the whale is moored alongside the whale-ship so that he can be fairly stepped upon there. It may be worth while, therefore, previously to advert to those curious imaginary portraits of him which even down to the present day confidently challenge the faith of the landsman. (Melville, 205)

In this section, Ishmael narrates as if he's personally offended by the art world's dismissal of the whale's true form. At the end of this chapter, the reader is left guessing why exactly an accurate depiction of the whale is so important. As will become clear through observation of later chapters, Melville is trying to highlight the fact that so many people don't care to know

exactly what the whale looks like. Seeing a whale in its true form, Ishmael explains, alive and “in his full majesty and significance” is a rare thing (Melville, 207-208).

Melville closes the chapter by explaining that even his most valiant effort to impart his understanding of the whale to the reader is insufficient. Only through direct observation would the reader begin to see its true shape.

[...] the only mode in which you can derive even a tolerable idea of his living contour, is by going a whaling yourself; but by so doing, you run no small risk of being eternally stove and sunk by him. Wherefore, it seems to me you had best not be too fastidious in your curiosity touching this Leviathan. (Melville, 208)

Ishmael advises that by seeking such knowledge you risk ruin. The narrative of *Moby Dick* shows quite literally how chasing a whale can be deadly, but Melville is also hinting at a less tangible form of destruction, that of the reader’s worldview. The knowledge of a whale’s shape alone, not the deadly force of the whale, is enough to cause the reader significant anguish or “sinking” (Melville, 208).

Chapter 55 of *Moby Dick* is uniquely didactic. Ishmael rambles to the reader about just how wrong he is in thinking that paintings of whales are true to form. The chapter starts as a discussion of the differences between artistic renditions of the whale and reality, then quickly turns to carping at the former. It’s a strange lecture to receive. We’re left wondering why it’s so important that these sculptures be based in reality. Melville is using the whale to explain that beauty comes, at least in part, from nature. Melville is also playing with the idea that the reader doesn’t care about the whale’s true form. Does the reader actually want to see a real whale? Possibly. Would they like the feeling they get when they see one? Melville thinks not. These particular ideas are not made clear by chapter 55 alone, but through further examination of later whale-heavy chapters, they begin to come into focus.

Chapter 74, “The Sperm Whale’s Head--Contrasted View,” offers some of the book’s most vivid descriptions of whales yet. Tonally, Melville writes the chapter with a lab coat on. Ishmael takes the reader on a scientific tour of two whales’ heads, periodically interjecting his thoughts on the proceedings.

In the first place, you are struck by the general contrast between these heads. Both are massive enough in all conscience; but there is a certain mathematical symmetry in the Sperm Whale’s which the Right Whale’s sadly lacks. (Melville, 250-251)

Ishmael’s use of the word “sadly” is peculiar. We know from chapter 55 that Ishmael associates beauty with nature; is asymmetry not natural? This bit of editorializing is a means of anthropomorphizing the whale. The most beautiful humans are symmetrical, therefore so are the most beautiful whales. Anthropomorphizing aside, Ishmael’s account of the whale’s figure in this chapter becomes increasingly unscientific.

Ishmael’s thoughts about the whale transition from the rational and observable to the entirely speculative. Whereas a description of the shape of the whale’s skull involves little guesswork, Ishmael’s statements on the whale’s eyes are pure fiction. Ishmael is taken by the distance between the whale’s eyes, pondering how they may see directly in front of their face and if two images appear in the whale’s head instead of one.

The whale, therefore, must see one distinct picture on this side, and another distinct picture on that side; while all between must be profound darkness and nothingness to him. (Melville, 251)

Science tells us that whales, in fact, stitch the visuals from both eyes together and would not see black between their eyes (Madrigan). Facts aside, what Ishmael is stating could plausibly make sense. Here, Ishmael writes like a comedian, ignoring facts in favor of an interesting story that feels true. This guesswork for the sake of story is prevalent today too.

Comedian Chris Rock posits that people in countries with less food do not have food allergies like Americans do. "Do you think people in Rwanda have a lactose intolerance?" asks Rock rhetorically. In reality, over 50% of people in Rwanda are lactose intolerant, but the joke still works (Cox). Ishmael uses the same tactic to frame the whale as a strange beast, barely similar enough to humans for us to understand. Ishmael extends his incorrect theories about the whale's eyes to address knowledge in a general sense.

Is it not curious, that so vast a being as the whale should see the world through so small an eye, and hear the thunder through an ear which is smaller than a hare's? But if his eyes were broad as the lens of Herschel's great telescope; and his ears capacious as the porches of cathedrals; would that make him any longer of sight, or sharper of hearing? Not at all.—Why then do you try to "enlarge" your mind? Subtilize it. (Melville, 252)

Ishmael acknowledges that the size of the whale's eyes--like the size of a person's mind--does not determine the quality of their function. Melville uses this sentiment to once again address knowledge in a general sense. Though the whale's eyes are small, they see an enormous range of the world. The whale, in this case, can be substituted for the reader who is at this very moment exposing themselves to a wealth of knowledge. Ishmael, in contrast to the reader, focuses his efforts on learning about one narrow slice of the world through first-hand experience. Some chase knowledge with a wide net, Ishmael uses a harpoon. Ishmael's infatuation with knowledge of and from the inside of the whale is seen clearly in chapter 92.

Chapter 92, "Ambergris," is a deep dive into one particular commodity produced by the whale. The chapter opens with a brief history of ambergris, its superiority to similar solutions, and its modern uses in a slew of everyday products. After some time, Ishmael reveals (seemingly with glee) that this wonderful ambergris is "found in the inglorious bowels of a sick whale!" (Melville, 304). What's odd about this give-away is that the reader must have guessed where the chapter was going. Earlier, in chapter 77, Ishmael reports on a similar concept.

[...] the tun of the whale contains by far the most precious of all his oily vintages; namely, the highly-prized spermaceti, in its absolutely pure, limpid, and odoriferous state (Melville, 257).

Surely, with this passage and the fact that *Moby Dick* is a book about whaling in mind, the reader would have seen the ambergris twist coming. With this all-too-obvious reveal, Melville is pointing to the reader's ability to willfully ignore what's right in front of them.

Melville is getting at the idea of consumers intentionally turning a blind eye to the horrors of whaling in exchange for guilt-free use of its products. The first tip-off is the faux reveal touched on above. The second is Ishmael's reflection on the smell of ambergris. Ishmael is taken by the fact that the ambergris smells so pleasant but comes from such an objectively vile place.

Now that the incorruption of this most fragrant ambergris should be found in the heart of such decay; is this nothing? Bethink thee of that saying of St. Paul in Corinthians, about corruption and incorruption; how that we are sown in dishonor, but raised in glory. And likewise call to mind that saying of Paracelsus about what it is that maketh the best musk. (Melville, 304)

Ishmael is asking if there is no meaning associated with a desirable smell coming from the body of a diseased whale. He goes on to discuss this question as it pertains specifically to smell, but let us consider the whale as a symbol for whaling in general. The practice, as evidenced by the entirety of *Moby Dick*, is a difficult one that causes the demise of whales, sailors, and limbs. Ishmael's surly captain eventually describes, in a moment of fluster, his life at sea as forty years of "war on the horrors of the deep!" (Melville, 376). From the horrors comes not just ambergris, but all products of the whale, an entire industry built atop horrors. The concept of good things coming from bad places has huge relevance beyond whaling in Melville's day and is remarkably relevant today.

So-called "blood diamonds" mined in Sierra Leone using slave labor, smartphones assembled by workers who are exposed to bromine, burgers made from tortured animals are all quick examples of this theory in play. That's not to mention the countless other products that are not produced under morally questionable circumstances but underwrite them e.g. certain chicken sandwiches that fund gay conversion therapy, hummus companies that support apartheid, even your credit card company that lends billions of dollars to the fossil fuel industry. In these cases, it's easier not to think about the origin of the product or the destination of your cash. If I, an 1860s consumer, don't think too hard about where my perfume is coming from, I don't have to feel so bad about the whale or the whaler that gave their lives for me to smell better.

This ignorable grey area or "inconvenient truth," as Al Gore put it on the topic of climate change, seems to permeate all cultures. If there is a purest form, a type case, it must be slavery. It makes sense for Melville to hit on this topic in *Moby Dick*, which was published with slavery still legal in the United States and a civil war coming in just over a decade. If everyone had refused to purchase the products of slave labor, would the practice have been abolished? If banks had refused to fund slavery, would it have persisted? While Melville isn't drawing a direct connection between whaling and slave labor, he does expose similarities between the two, as they pertain to the moral responsibility of the consumer, in other words to the "horrors."

This chapter is a good indication that when Melville discusses the whales, he's discussing a multitude of rich themes. In typical Melville fashion, these ideas are nested in pages about the particular smell of an oil, or the specific shape of a skull. Through closer examination though, the tangents are rife with meaning.

Chapter 55, "Monstrous Pictures of Whales," uses whales as a means to discuss the origin of beauty. While sculptures and paintings may depict whales in a creative way, they fail to educate the viewer of a whale's true shape. Here and in chapter 92, Melville explores a consumer's willingness to turn a blind eye to the horrors of whaling. Chapter 74, "The Sperm Whale's Head--Contrasted View," puts the whale at the center of a discussion about knowledge. Melville likens the whale's eye to a human mind, posing the question of whether a broad second-hand knowledge base is more useful than a limited first-hand one. Finally, chapter 92, "Ambergris," exposes a consumer's ability to ignore the process behind his purchases.

Each of these chapters can be read as stand-alone decrees about the shape of the whale and

the smell of his innards. When examined together, however, a rich picture emerges about more than whaling. The whale is nature when Ishmael discusses beauty, ignorance when exploring knowledge, and commodity when looking at consumerism. The mundanity of these chapters means that the messaging behind them creeps up on the reader, only becoming clear late and leaving him with a bitter taste. This slow build allows Melville to pressure his readers into putting themselves in the hot seat, forced to consider that they may be the consumer who so piously ignores the horrible power of their wallet.

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