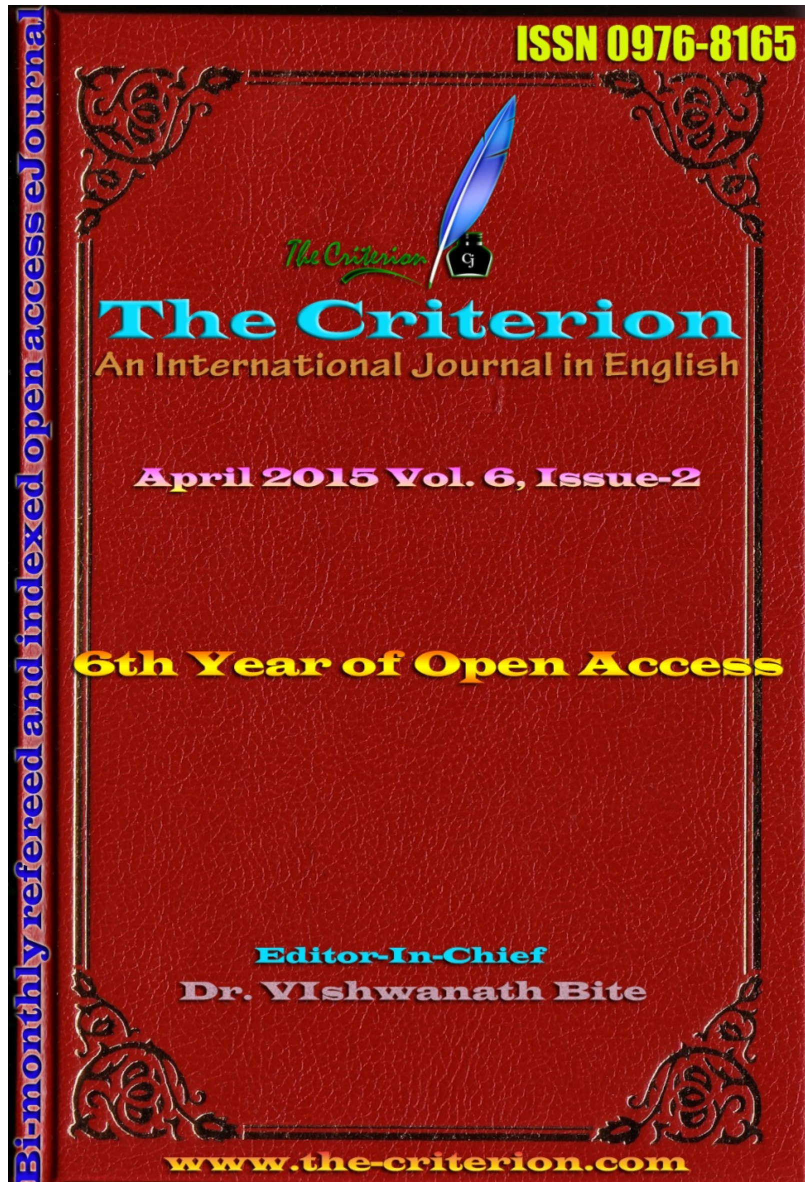

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The Web of Relationships in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick:* Negotiating the Interpersonal, Interracial and Interspecies

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Abstract:
The publication of Herman Melville's magnum opus *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* in 1851 occurred in a backdrop of highly strained racial relations in Pre-Civil War America. The recently concluded Mexican-American War of 1848 gave birth to the debate about "free soil"–whether slavery would be allowed in the newly captured territories–in Congress. The Abolitionist Movement had gained momentum by the mid-19th century and the voices denouncing slavery as inhuman and opposed to the precepts of 'civilized' behaviour had reached a crescendo, threatening the old Southern way of life. Given the racially charged atmosphere, Melville's meditations on race, slavery and ethnic difference are witnessed throughout the novel, not only in the surface symbolism of the 'whiteness of the whale' but also in his portrayal of the unique friendship between the white narrator, Ishmael and the non-white harpooner, Queequeg. In examining the ideologically divergent worldviews as embodied by Ishmael and Ahab this paper has attempted to trace the way in which Melville has written his belief in a "democratic humanism" (to borrow from Kaplan) to elaborate on a nuanced system of racial, class, naturalistic and personal relations in the novel.

Keywords: Interracial; Nature; Democratic Humanism; Anthropocentrism

Harold Kaplan states "that democracy and its moral dilemmas, particularly the problem of human equality, obsessed Melville at the time he was writing *Moby-Dick*. His mood was almost defiant on the subject…" (164). Melville's views on the subject were shared by Nathaniel Hawthorne and in a letter to Hawthorne, he elaborates on his "ruthless democracy" in *Moby-Dick* – "It is but natural to be shy of a mortal who boldly declares that a thief in jail is as honourable a personage as Gen. George Washington. This is ludicrous. But Truth is the silliest thing under the sun" (Melville as quoted in Kaplan 164). In the novel such egotistic claims to Truth, on which the entire edifice of the colonial worldview was erected, as professed by the hubristic white man are interrogated and unpacked as hollow. Melville's belief in a "Spirit of Equality" (Melville as quoted in Kaplan 164) that unites the meanest orders of mankind such as "renegades and castaways" (ibid.) with the noblest like George Washington under the "royal mantle of humanity" (ibid.), forms the underlying sentiment that runs through the text, weaving the seemingly disparate themes with a common thread. Interestingly, in the novel it is the narrator Ishmael who, functioning as a 'Mask' for Melville expounds and embodies his ideology of democratic humanity, albeit ironically after he has undergone a fitting 'education' at the hands of a 'noble savage'. By constructing a complex web of relationships that operate at the level of the interpersonal, interracial as well as interspecies, Melville explores not only the immediate socio-political context of inter-racial tension arising out of the ideology of 'whiteness' but also uses this web of relationships to explore the larger questions of life such as the ideas about fate, the limits of human potential and the nature of God, to name a few.

Interracial Currents

Ishmael, the White New Englander, in terms of his ideological and cultural horizon is entrenched in the Calvinistic Puritan framework at the onset of the novel. His rigidly Puritan sentiment is eager to uphold the 'utopia' of a virtuous human society established by God's new 'chosen' people, the White New Englanders, and the purity of which depends fundamentally on the sanitization and frequent elimination of the threat posed by the definitional 'other' within this schematization. An almost frenzied anxiety to maintain the illusory boundaries between the 'self' and 'not-self' entailed the need to quell absolutely any attempt at categorical transgression or interstitiality (even when that came from within the body of the 'self', which in the context of race relations should be read as the 'white body'). An effective elaboration of this microcosmic Puritan framework situated within the larger colonial vision can be found in Nathaniel Hawthorne's description of the "severity of the Puritan character" whose shadow fell indiscriminately on all 'outliers':

It might be…a sluggish bond-servant, or an undutiful child…an Antinomian, a Quaker, or other heterodox religionist…or an idle and vagrant Indian…[or] a witch, like old Mistress Hibbins…In either case, there was very much the same solemnity of demeanour on the part of [the Puritans] as befitted a people among whom religion and law were almost identical, and in whose character both were so thoroughly interfused that the mildest and severest acts of public discipline were alike made venerable and awful. (37)

This "solemnity of demeanour" is heightened in the mind of the solitary Ishmael when faced with the hybridity, both cultural and ideological, in the port-town of New Bedford. The vocabulary in which Ishmael's encounter of this multicultural town is set, recasts him in the image of the early heroic voyagers who first set foot on the Virgin Continent and persistently braved the untamed wilderness in establishing the New Frontier. The town of New Bedford is evocative of the idea of the New Frontier whose palimpsestic body always bore the signs of its native 'wildness' replete with its implied dangers despite its attempted erasure through a freshly written narrative of 'civilization'. Ishmael's midnight descriptions of the streets in New Bedford as "the blocks of blackness" (Melville 27), followed by his inadvertent stumbling into "the great Black Parliament sitting in Tophet" with "the Angel of Doom" preaching about "the blackness of darkness" (28) reinforce the nineteenth century racial stereotypes shared by him. His horror and revulsion at what he sees in these iterated metaphors of darkness is symbolic of the colonists gaze that can only identify the racial other through the emotive economy of fear and hatred. Further evidence of his cultural and ideological indoctrination is provided by his instinctual horror at first beholding the cannibal harpooner Queequeg, and is reproduced in the language he uses to give vent to his feelings, steeped as it is in racial stereotypes – "Such a face! It was of a dark, purplish, yellow colour, here and there stuck over with large blackish looking squares" (Melville 40). His racial prejudice and fear stem from a blinding ignorance about 'the other' causing him to denounce Queequeg as "unearthly" and "a terrible bed-fellow" (ibid.). However, Ishmael's early encounter with Queequeg paves the way for his cultural and ideological awakening and puts him in a position to encounter cultural relativism. The narratorial voice of the now mature and enlightened Ishmael is able to, in hindsight, locate the source of his irrational fear as "Ignorance…the parent of fear…" (Melville 41).

At the beginning of the novel, Ishmael does not differ much from Ahab in terms of his blinkered ideology and it is his relationship with Queequeg that acts as the pivot in bringing about the growth of Ishmael's character. However, crucially, the younger Ishmael has not yet attained the rigid fixity of aspect and mind visible in the much older Captain of the Pequod and this enables him to see himself from the eyes of the 'other' and realize, "[Queequeg] has just as much reason to fear me, as I have to be afraid of him. Better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian" (Melville 44). It is at this point that Ishmael recognizes the shadow line dividing the seeming fixity of the 'self/other' binary and he establishes a strong relationship of equivalence and reciprocity with the one he had not too long ago defined in terms irreconcilable with his notion of the self as "the devil himself" (Melville 41). Though they might initially partake of the same ideology, it is the inherent difference in the worldviews embodied by Ishmael and Ahab that ultimately leads to the salvation of the one and self-destruction of the other. Cyrus R.K. Patell notes that "For Ishmael, the world is an open-ended text with many interpretations, while Ahab is the reader who would rewrite the text of the world, who would force his own interpretation upon it" (Introduction xvi). The enforced company of the cannibal Harpooner forces Ishmael to come to terms with himself by recognizing the prejudices that have formed an integral part of his self-definition as a White American.

Negotiating the Interpersonal – Intimacy and Distance

Interpersonal relationships in the novel are established through the contrary modes of 'intimacy' and 'distance', and the adoption of one mode in opposition to the other functions as a relevant indicator of the character's self-fashioned subjectivity. In the novel, these two oppositional modes are upheld by Ishmael (intimacy) and Ahab (distance) and concretely shape as well as reflect their divergent worldviews. It is after being placed in a situation of physical proximity with the "wild cannibal" (Melville 43) that Ishmael's process of reinvention begins. However, at this stage it becomes important to point out that it is not only physical proximity that acts as a catalyst for the newly awakened self but primarily, Ishmael's receptivity to the possibility of categorical permeability and perhaps, dissolution. It is in this last that he differs so fundamentally from the ideologically blinkered and inflexibly stagnant despot of the Pequod for whom even the (enforced) communitarian life at sea offers no hope of regeneration.

Now that they have shared a bed together, when he turns his gaze on the other "with much interest" (67) rather than finding difference, Ishmael is able to recognize ties of kinship and affinity with the 'savage' who was radically his anti-thesis just a few chapters ago. In a radical repudiation of 'American exceptionalism', Melville presents Queequeg, the Pagan, as another version of the American Man, almost bordering on blasphemy from the Puritanical conception by comparing him to George Washington, the Founding Father of the United States and thereby the bearer of white Christian values. The irony is inherent in the fact that the catalyst precipitating Ishmael's process of re-education towards a more realistic worldview is one from whom the white supremacist ideology has definitionally withdrawn all authenticity and authority. In an interesting parallel, Ishmael like Hester Prynne from *The Scarlet Letter* negotiates the personal within this hierarchical and oppressive economy by questioning the established taxonomies on which this system is erected, consequently shedding earlier 'beliefs' as false consciousness in favour of new definitions of the self.

The location and recording of Queequeg's biographical history by Ishmael is a deliberate attempt on Melville's part to denounce the point of view of the 'civilized self' wherein the 'savage other' is seen as floating in a kind of ahistorical vacuum. Ishmael's growing sense of the "civilized hypocrisies" (69) from which his dark-skinned friend is free leads him to make one of the most controversial and defiantly irreligious proclamations in the text, "who is the cannibal? Are we not all cannibals?" By dedicating a chapter aimed at emplacing Queequeg firmly in a historical place and space, Melville counters the arrogance of the American colonial enterprise, which deliberately mis-recognized and mis-placed the geographical and physiological body of the native. Melville highlights the pervasiveness of the white man's shared illusion (delusion) of the glory inherent in the colonial enterprise by reiterating the civilizing ideology through various other characters such as the Captains Bildad and Peleg. They are only able to identify Queequeg through their inherited white vocabulary of power as the "Son of darkness" (104).

The principle of organization on board the Pequod draws a direct parallel with the world at large. Kaplan while drawing attention to the "cosmopolitanism of the Pequod's crew" (169) points out that "it is an international society including "a deputation from all the isles of the sea and all the ends of the earth…"" (169). The upper echelons of the crew, the three mates, are White New Englanders either from Nantucket or Martha's Vineyard and the subsequent tier of harpooners–Tashtego, the Indian, Daggoo the Negro and Queequeg the South Sea cannibal–are men of colour. The hierarchical organizing principle is determined on race and class lines elaborating on the overarching theme of the novel. Above and beyond the crew stands the absolute dictator in his isolation, governing the microcosm of the ship with tyrannical authority. Ahab starkly contrasts with Ishmael in terms of the 'intimacy' he shuns and 'distance' he maintains from the rest of the crew. He instills fear in the mind of the superstitious crew by virtue of this distance, emerging from the depths of the ship's hold where his cabin is located, in a kind of double parody as the 'prince of darkness,' to lord over it. Ahab offers another contrast to Ishmael in terms of his 'colour-blindness' which can be interpreted as either his inability to read or his indifference to the 'diversity' of the crew. The only colour Ahab shows sensitivity to, admittedly sensitivity arising from a monomania, is the 'whiteness' of the whale. Ironically, Ahab's misanthropy enables him to remain focused on his insatiable lust for a misguided vengeance and harness everyone on board towards a common objective. What at first presents itself to the reader and the crew as a romanticized version of an imagined community at sea bypassing the strict delineations of race, yoked by a common idea, is immediately undercut by the very content of the idea – violence and monetary gain. Through a clever manipulation of the crew on board in order to realize his personal vendetta against the White Whale, Ahab is able to unite the crew by ties that seemingly go beyond race or class while maintaining his hegemony through the perpetuation of a carefully systemized pecking order. As Kaplan aptly notes, "The Pequod finds unity in greed and its driving impulses in violence. These are the adventures and trials of a universalist society, stripped of coherent moral traditions, experimenting with freedom in an un-explored savage world." (170). The crew on the Pequod is stratified precisely to avoid the dangers of democratic relationships arising from intimacy which Ishmael has already 'fallen prey to' and which would prove anathema to Ahab's reign of unquestioned power.

An Anthropocentric Vision – Ahab/the Whale

In Ahab's megalomania "Melville exposed the positive faith in nature to its extreme reversal…But in doing so he transformed and revived the humanistic affirmations which were

the complement of that assumption on behalf of nature. It is fair to say that Ahab's hatred of the whale reads like an inverted and poisoned pantheism" (Kaplan 170). Ahab sees nature as antagonistic, something to be conquered and defeated, as malicious and deliberately malevolent. He attempts to reinstate the Humanist conception of Man as the Supreme Being, the unquestionable center of the universe and from such a standpoint his dismemberment by Moby Dick is seen as an affront to this supremacy of Man as the lord of the universe, particularly of Nature. Ahab's anthropocentric ideology dictates the necessity of categorically fixing as inferior this creature which belongs to a lower order of creation, Nature, and thereby rightfully dominating it. This distorted lens for ordering the world masquerades as a justification for his desire to annihilate this monstrous anomaly of Nature as retribution for its arrogant display of power. He is unable to view the loss of his leg as a defensive act by a "dumb brute" (Melville 175) as Starbuck calls the whale but rather as a deliberate, offensive attack on his character and a severance of a part of his identity. His monomanic hunt for the whale is an attempt to restore the scales of power in favour of Man; he has suffered a humiliation at the heroic level and will stop short of nothing but the death of the Leviathan. But the courage or dignity of American heroism taken to an extreme results in madness and Ahab as the 'fallen angel from grace' is willing to defy God himself – "I'd strike the sun if it insulted me…Who's over me?" (Melville 176). However, ironically, his fetishistic pursuit of the whale locates and fixes him inversely as a slave to Nature. In his mad obsession Ahab has already regressed from the type of 'heroic' Mankind at the brink of attaining Godhead into its very obverse of the slavish beast that has no control over his destiny. Because he must out of a frenzied compulsion follow the whale till the destruction of either, he is no longer his own master as he poses to be.

Ahab's inability to reconcile himself with the limits of man's potential posits him in sharp contrast to Ishmael. Ishmael has submitted to the power of Nature and God over man and uses humour as well as his recognition of the 'universal human' condition – a condition shared by all mankind – to make peace with the idea that man is not Supreme. In the very first chapter of the novel entitled "Loomings", Ishmael states that he does not regard being asked to sweep the deck by a sea-captain as an indignity because "however the old sea-captains may order me about – however they may thump and punch me about, I have the satisfaction of knowing that it is alright; that everybody else is in one way or other served in much the same way- either in a physical or metaphysical point of view, that is; and so the universal thump is passed around" (24). Ahab's denial of such a syncretic equality shared by all mankind, particularly when confronted by "the universal thump" which serves as a great leveler, concretize him in the mould of a tragic hero, compelled to script his own narrative of death.

In acknowledging his freedom as complete, Ahab wages a war against a force he cannot defeat and this sets the stage for his fall. Kaplan elaborates that in "aggrandizing against nature, he has turned his last-ditch individualism into an aggrandizement against the human community" (168). In so doing Ahab becomes the tyrant dictator of the ship and his vain attempts to appropriate God's power decides the fate of his crew in pursuance of his own monomanic desires, ultimately leading them to their death. As Starbuck points out, "…he would be a democrat to all above; look, how he lords it over all below!" (Melville 180). In his final speech with Starbuck, Ahab recognizes that he has been waging a loosing battle against forces larger and mightier than him, and he questions the verity of his absolute autonomy, "Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm?" (531). However, Ahab's articulation of his awareness that in this 'furious, foaming chase' he has

alienated himself from humanity (including his own) and metamorphosed into "more a demon than a man" (530), is only momentary. Ahab's tragedy derives from the "nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing" (ibid.) that has an unshakable possession of his being and impels him to, in his Satanic guise, turn away from the decisive moment of potential salvation with renewed vigour and determination towards his self-destructive path of Faustian overreaching. By standing in opposition to not just Nature but also Man, Ahab becomes a figure of isolation yet defiant to the last – "Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hates sake I spit my last breath at thee" (Melville 559). In a classic reenactment of the Satanic oppositional philosophy – "Evil be thou my good" – Ahab is lost in the darkness of his own heart wherein his fall was immanent as the inevitable consequence of a consuming megalomania. His misanthropic isolation from humanity and religious recalcitrance, rather defiance, of the ultimate Author forecloses any possibility of salvation. Ahab's imagined ignominy in life brought on by the severance of his leg which he attributes to personal malice on the part of the whale, must translate into an actual ignominy in death as just punishment for the sin of transgressing to God-like presumption. The final image of the novel reconstitutes and reverses the role of Ahab from being the once loud and boisterous dictator of Mankind to one of voiceless otherness inhabited by the whale.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it must be noted that for one like Ahab, the dangers to an imagined eminence of the self are not located in an exteriority that proves defiant and perpetually elusive but emanate from the space of inescapable interiority. "Let Ahab beware of Ahab" (Melville 471) is a warning he does not, rather as a tragic hero he cannot, heed. It is his own ravenous urge for vengeance and not the exaggerated perils posed by the whale that lead to the final dissolution of the self. On the other hand, as the mouthpiece for Melville, Ishmael symbolically emerges as the sole survivour of the Pequod, who must arise Lazarus-like from a watery grave to proselytize the debilitating consequences of an irreverent hubris. His tale becomes a messianic sermon forewarning Mankind of the limits of humanistic endeavour, beyond which lies an irredeemable ruination of the soul. The novel, then, reads like a polemic against an aggressive individualism that experiences the universe as an attribution of one's desires and a rejection of Ahab's Nietzchean conception of the death of God. For Ahab, the infection in the new pronouncement 'If God is dead, I am God', is a kind of all-consuming addiction which corrupts absolutely. Even the brief moments of lucidity afford no solace as they become painful reminders to "a forty years' fool" (530) of the fulfilling and nurturing marital life he could have had but abandoned. Rather than provoking a change of heart they become testaments reaffirming his belief in the usurpation of power by an unjust universe that has already bereft him of his only chance at humanity, his Mary. The only thing driving him forward now, on a path of no return, is his engulfing bloodlust for the White Devil. It seems fitting to conclude this paper by directing Ishmael's insightful question at the Ahab who in the final sections of the novel has become the type of defeated humanity he so vehemently shuns, "Who aint a slave? Tell me that" (24).

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