

English Honors Essay

The Whale, The Whaler, and the World:

An Ecocritical Evaluation of Melville's *Moby-Dick*

By

Matthew Davidson

Introduction

At the start of Walt Disney Studios 2002 film *Lilo and Stitch*, a movie about a dog-like extraterrestrial, Stitch, who crash lands in Hawaii and befriends an indigenous girl, Lilo. Before Stitch has arrived, Lilo finds herself in trouble because she was late for a dance class and worse, was soaking wet. When asked by her teacher “Lilo, why are you all wet?” Her response to her teacher’s dissatisfaction was that it was, “sandwich day.” After a moment of her teacher’s puzzled silence, Lilo explains:

Every Thursday, I take Pudge the fish, a peanut butter sandwich and today we were out of peanut butter. So, I asked my sister what to give him and she said a Tuna sandwich. I can’t give Pudge Tuna! Do you know what Tuna is?! It’s fish!!! If I give Pudge Tuna I will be an abomination! I’m late because I had to go to the store and get peanut butter cause all we have is, is, is stinkin’ Tuna!

In an attempt to calm Lilo down, the teacher replies to this outburst, “Lilo, Lilo, why is this so important?”, to which, Lilo plainly replies, “Pudge controls the weather.”¹ While this scene introduces Lilo as the cooky, adventurous, caring, person she ultimately proves herself to be, it also reveals her exceedingly modern view of the human role in the Great *Circle* of Being. Rather than having an anthropocentric view of the world, Lilo resembles modern environmentalist’s view, recognizing how deeply interconnected all the species of this “pale blue dot,”² are, and that small creatures and inconsequential actions, can have massive effects on the world’s ecosystems. Rather than viewing herself at the top of the ecosystem, Lilo seems to understand that she is just one species out of thousands, and instead of exploiting them, works to encourage growth and harmony. While Pudge may not actually control the weather, fish like Pudge and other species, are vital in maintaining balance in their ecosystems which though I am not a meteorologist, I dare say, does have some effect on weather.

¹ Dean DeBlois, Chris Sanders, *Lilo and Stitch*, 2002.

² Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space*, 1994.

The deep interconnection between species in shared ecosystems, as well as in totally different parts of the globe, evidenced in Lilo's actions, is a connection which is most at danger in the anthropocene. More than anything else, humankind's influence on our planet is our ability to totally reform ecosystems for our own benefit and use. A practice which has indelibly severed important connections more often than can be counted, across the globe. And even worse, has completely destroyed ecosystems, leaving hundreds of thousands of Pudges in our wake. The connections between species in an ecosystem, and Lilo's work to support those connections, highlights her environmentalist actions even if they were not motivated by environmentalist thoughts.

Of course, it is important to note that twentieth and twenty-first century, environmental critics did not invent the environmental outlook represented by Lilo's actions. Rather, the indigenous people that had for many centuries, occupied the Hawaiian islands had developed over the course of their civilization, an independent and much more interconnected method of living within their ecosystem. One that would be later recognized by historians and environmental critics, as an enmeshed and ecological way of life. An example of this, can be seen in the indigenous practice of nurturing household pets and even livestock, like a child or family member which is common throughout the islands of Southeast Asia and the Pacific, including the Hawaiian islands. Sailors in the early nineteenth-century, recalled on multiple occasions, how, on these islands, "pups and piglets are fed and nurtured by the women and become their playthings and pets."³ J. Macrae, a visitor to the Pacific islands in 1825, a little over twenty-five years before Melville wrote *Moby-Dick*, vividly described a scene wherein he "noticed a young woman walking along the street, and at the same time suckling several puppies

³ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Dominance and Affection: The Making of Pets*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984, 93.

that were wrapped up in a piece of tapa cloth hanging round her shoulder and breasts.”⁴ Even as recent as the 1950s, evidence was recorded of a Papuan mother, “nursing with one breast a child of about two to three years old and with the other breast a piglet,”⁵ these animals being held, “in great estimation, little inferior to their own offspring.”⁶ Living on islands with nowhere to go indigenous peoples across the world’s oceans, were forced to develop civilizations and cultures much more deeply interconnected with the natural world around them. Unlike those on continents, indigenous people had no “plan B,” if their overzealous and destructive actions were damaging to the environment resulting in soil destruction or deforestation, rendering their island uninhabitable, as soil destruction and deforestation had so much of the world over the course of industrialization.

Rewind roughly one hundred and fifty years from Lilo to the early nineteenth-century, and if you were an indigenous girl on the islands of Hawaii, a much different kind of alien would be frequenting your shores: Americans and Europeans, due to Hawaii being a popular destination and port for ships, especially for whaling vessels. Between 1841-1843, Herman Melville, the author of *Moby-Dick* and a whaler before that, would visit Hawaii aboard the whaleships *Acushnet*, *Lucy Ann*, and *Charles and Henry*, and again in 1843-1844 aboard the frigate *United States*,⁷ even living and owning a store in Hawaii for a brief time. Although the *Pequod* itself does not visit Hawaii in *Moby-Dick* uncharacteristically sailing east around Africa’s Cape of Good Hope rather than west around South America’s Cape Horn, still, Melville mentions Hawaii in *Moby-Dick* and has his characters visit Hawaii in *Omoo*, *Typee*, and *Mardi*.⁸

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Richard J. King. *Ahab’s Rolling Sea*, Chicago: The University of Chicago press, 2019.

⁸ Ruth Blair, *Melville and Hawaii: Reflections on a New Melville Letter*, “Studies in the American Renaissance,” 1995, pp. 229-250.

In contrast to the interconnection exhibited by the example from *Lilo and Stitch*, the world of whaling in the nineteenth-century, was heavily influenced by a complex relationship between whalers and the natural world largely exhibited through a disconnect with their immediate environment which resulted in exploitation. While evidence of this disconnect can be found in many different historical documents focused on the whaling industry, one place it is clearest is in the fictional, American, epic *Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville.

Within Melville's *Moby-Dick*, there exists a specific mentality regarding nature and specifically the whale. While this mentality is interestingly present throughout multiple forms of literature on and about whaling, it is at its most explicit in *Moby-Dick*. Melville's mentality toward nature and specifically whales, exhibited in *Moby-Dick*, is one defined by what seems to be a disconnect between how whaler's think about and therefore speak of, nature and the environment on a larger, global scale, versus how they view their immediate environment defined as that which is visible and can be immediately affected by human actions. This disconnect is most evident in interactions between whalers and living beings who are extensions of their environment. Oftentimes, specifically exhibited through interactions with whales, as well as in other more subtle forms of exploitation both of the natural world as well as of other people. The result, as I demonstrate in this essay, is the continued devaluing, exploitation, and destruction of natural beings. Furthermore, by drawing attention to how this disconnect manifests itself in *Moby-Dick*, and the consequences of that manifestation, I aim to draw attention to how I and other readers of this project, might also be consciously or subconsciously, governed by a similar mindset and the continued, destructive, effects it is having on humanity and the planet we occupy, in the twenty-first century.

Evidence of Devaluation

The disconnect between whalers and the natural world in *Moby-Dick*, is exhibited mainly, in the vast and varied descriptions of whales. In these descriptions of whales, there is a contrasting tone when addressing whales and nature, on a global scale, versus when whales are encountered directly. In the beginning, the language about whales intones general adulation. Yet, we can also sense an underlying fear perpetuated by the unknown and the total sense of uncontrollability attributed to nature. Such uneasiness often drove whaler's need for further control which they asserted wherever possible. In our very first description of "the great whale himself," in "Loomings" the first chapter of *Moby-Dick*, Melville dubs the Cetacea of the seas "mysterious monsters,"⁹ and Melville, in the same chapter, further poeticizes the whale with a grandiose description of their "island bulk." Though we have not actually encountered a living whale yet in the novel, Melville already, warns of their "nameless periles," characterizing the whale as something mythological in size, merciless in temperament, and monstrous in appearance, beginning to perpetuate a disconnect in our mind.

These first descriptions of whales in *Moby-Dick*, in which Melville portrays them mythologically and with general adulation, begins to create a distance between whalers and their environment as well as between the reader and the plot. In esteeming nature Melville inadvertently, is separating it from those who are not mythological or deserving of general adulation. Ecocritical literary scholar Timothy Morton writes that "putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration,"¹⁰ and, as will be further

⁹ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2003, 32. Further citations will be parenthetical.

¹⁰ Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2007, 5.

exhibited, the result of this sadistic admiration both for women and whales, is an othering which results in deindividualization and enables exploitation. Putting nature and aspects of the environment, on a pedestal and deeming them worthy of admiration results in subconsciously earmarking the environment around us as *not* worthy of admiration.

“Why?”, is unclear and in fact, could be explained a number of ways. Perhaps, we earmark our immediate environment as unworthy as opposed to the larger environment, because we are in it. Such a train of thought mainly implicates Manifest Destiny and other tenants of Christianity, which claim that humankind has rule and dominion over the earth. As Gatta explains, “From Saint Paul’s dictum that “if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature” (2 Corinthians 5:17), it followed that saints were called to participate in God’s consummation of the new Creation. The evangelical imperative of Reformation gave saints a dynamic vocation to advance God’s kingdom in the world—to render them, by today’s parlance, “cocreators” with God.”¹¹ However, it also might be that we view our immediate environment as unworthy because we have already earmarked parts of it as worthy. Especially in the growing popularity of gardens in the nineteenth-century, humankind repeatedly attempted to take the best parts of nature and subdue them to human life in gardens. Having taken the best, whatever was left was less than, and therefore open for exploitation, beginning a vicious cycle centered on consumption and resulting in a complete disconnect between humankind and the natural world as the relationship began to shift from one of equality to one of subjugation.

Throughout *Moby-Dick*, Melville continues to invoke both God’s presence and magnificence, as well as the mysteries of nature, in his descriptions of whales. In “The Advocate,” Ishmael gleefully exclaims that “the whale is declared ‘a royal fish’” (146). Here too,

¹¹ John Gatta, John. *Making Nature Sacred : Literature, Religion, and Environment in America from the Puritans to the Present*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, 2.

Melville might be alluding to the idea at the time, that the presence of the King of Creation was revealed in the whale. However, Dubbing the whale a “royal fish,” also romanticizes the whale as whales at the time, had a deep and lasting cultural connection to royalty. “We whalers supply your kings and queens with coronation stuff!” (147), Melville writes at the start of the chapter “Postscript,” in addressing the habit of anointing newly crowned royals with whale oil. In many cases too, such as with our visit to King Tranquo in “Bower in the Arsacides,” as well as in other mentions of royal claims over dead whales, we see the connection between whales and royalty, as the novelty and grandeur of owning the skeleton of a whale evidenced, such a thing only being possible for a handful of kings and queens and maybe a museum or two.

The opposite of this disconnect according to Morton’s writings, is the practice of living an *enmeshed* life. Morton’s term for a world in which humanity and every other species on this planet share equally and operate in harmony with each other. In this world, humanity becomes ecologically “open, radically open--open forever, without the possibility of closing again.”¹² For some, this openness might mean feeding fish, for others it is riding a bike to work instead of driving a car, or picking up trash on the highway, running outside instead of at the gym, or not eating meat. Whatever this openness or enmeshment looks like in your life as Morton goes on to summarize, it results in interconnectedness which leads to thinking ecologically resulting in further openness, beginning a positive cycle which counteracts the cycles of consumption and exploitation which a disconnect of the environment perpetuates.

For Melville as for others in the nineteenth-century, the idea of living an enmeshed life was a developing one. Yet, there was certainly a distinction between those who favored the Agrarian society America and largely the world, was founded as, in opposition to the industrial one it was becoming. A clear example of living such a life for whalers, could be seen in the

¹² Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010, 8.

many indigenous islands they visited where humans lived much more closely with the natural world. On many of these islands, American whalers saw advanced agricultural practices coming from a more interconnected way of life, that stood in stark contrast to their own island of Nantucket where the soil was worthless due to decades of harsh winds ravaging crops and plants, the result of decades of ruthless deforestation.

More universally and closer to home, activists, politicians, and artists of the time, most famously Henry David Thoreau, discussed and exhibited lives of enmeshment. Thoreau in 1844, moved to land owned by his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson, land on which sat the famous Walden Pond but not much else. On that land, Thoreau provided America with a clear example of a better way. In opposition to both capital-driven markets and a growing sense of industrialism as railroads and wires stretched across the continent, two things Thoreau detested, he bartered, recycled, and collected goods, building himself a simple log cabin. Ultimately, the cabin only cost him \$28.12, when houses generally cost between \$800-\$14,000 depending on size and location. Using siding from an old shanty, mixing his own plaster, and hewing timber of White Pine, Thoreau finished his home on the fourth of July 1844.¹³ In doing so, Thoreau not just in writing but also in living, made a case for a return to more traditional American ideals urging people to turn back from the path they were on. Thoreau with great foresight, wrote in 1854, “Men have an indistinct notion that if they keep up this activity long enough,” blindly industrializing, colonizing, and modernizing, “all will at length ride somewhere, in next to no time, and for nothing; but though a crowd rushes to the depot, and the conductor shouts ‘All aboard!’ when the smoke is blown away and the vapor condensed, it will be perceived that a few are riding, but the rest are run over.”¹⁴ Many who would find themselves run over went to their graves explicitly believing the system would protect them. As we will see later in this essay, in

¹³ Jill Lepore, *These Truths, a History of the United States*, W.W. Norton and Company, 2018, 230-231.

¹⁴ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, life in the woods*, Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1854, 58-59.

Moby-Dick we see many examples of those willing to exploit as part of the system in belief they were on the right side, only to find themselves too, a victim of exploitation down the line.

In “Nantucket,” Melville’s depictions and discussions of whales, are of a similar poetic vein to his first monstrous and mysterious descriptions. “The mightiest animated mass that has survived the flood,” Melville declares of the whale, an “island bulk,” an ironic contrast to the actual island of Nantucket, which he describes as an “ant hill in the sea” (92). Ramping up with excitement Melville continues defining whales as “Most monstrous and most mountainous!” In the same chapter, Melville writes dramatically, that whales are “That Himmalehan, salt-sea Mastodon, clothed with such portentousness of unconscious power, that his very panics are more to be dreaded than his most fearless and malicious assaults!”¹⁵ Clearly, for whalers, whales bore nearly deific status and were the definition of strength and power.

While villainy and size are the main focuses of these description as they were in the first quotes, already, we can sense a bit of the growing complexity in how the whale is viewed as the monstrous aspects of mysteriousness give way to a growing emphasis on the magnificence of mysteriousness, especially in the mysteriousness of nature. This shift in focus, in part can be credited to the idea that the environment was inhabited by God, a prevailing belief by Christians at the time, the idea itself, being a point stressed in the Second Great Awakening which began in 1790 and lasted into the 1840s. John Gatta argues that in the nineteenth-century U.S., “untamed nature was a revelatory field of divine creation.”¹⁶ Ishmael comes across this preeminent Christian creed of the time in “The Sermon,” a chapter in which a Nantucket pastor focuses on the story of Jonah a man who disobeyed God, was swallowed by a whale, repented, and was regurgitated back onto dry land where he finally obeys God. The sermon, delivered solemnly on

¹⁵ Ibid. 93.

¹⁶ John Gatta, *Making Nature Sacred: Literature, Religion, and Environment in America from the Puritans to the Present*, 7.

the eve of their voyage, impresses on Ishmael the truth that was so popular in culture which was that “God is everywhere” (77), even, in whales.

Father Mapple’s sermon on Jonah as well as the larger cultural permeation of religion, expands the disconnect especially in the lives of whalers. The main reason for this being the popular belief at the time, that God is everywhere, coexisting with the contemporary and equally pervasive Christian creed that all of nature was man’s to rule and subdue. Believing as Father Mapple asserted, that “God is everywhere,” as Christians of the time did, meant that God’s holiness was also in nature and could be experienced by humans if sought after. In the same way that putting nature on a pedestal resulted in disconnection and exploitation, this growing belief that God could be experienced in the natural world facilitated a sense of awe that can be found throughout *Moby-Dick*, as well as many forms of whaling documents, resulting in further exploitation. It is also important to note that at least by implication, the idea of God being intrinsically part of nature extends past Christianity to many of the world's religions. In the chapter “Of the Monstrous Pictures of Whales,” Melville discusses an ancient cavern in Elephanta, India, in which there is a depiction of the incarnation of Vishnu in the form of a whale (312). Gatta sums up how religion facilitated further complexity well writing that “untamed nature was at once a challenge, a force to be mastered by human industry, and a revelatory field of divine Creation.”¹⁷ This perilous position is one that has come to define America. Exploiting much of the acreage on this continent we designated whatever was left as protected creating national as well as state, and city parks, all across America. For whalers such as Melville, this duality was seemingly expressed more in thought than in action resulting in a degree of

¹⁷ Ibid.

reverence for the whale even amidst their continual destruction evidenced for example, in the moment of thoughtful silence observed by Stubbs following his killing of a whale (339).

The difficulty created in *Moby-Dick* by the dual ideas that the presence of God was in nature as well as that humans' had power to rule and subdue the living creatures of the earth, can also be found in the contrasting paintings that hang on the walls of the Spouter Inn and the chapel in New Bedford. Hanging in the dining hall of the Spouter Inn Melville describes a painting in which a ship is trapped in a hurricane, foundering, only its masts visible in the torrential rain and heavy waves. The only other visible thing in the painting is "an exasperated whale, purposing to spring clean over the craft, in the enormous act of impaling himself upon the three mast-heads" (38). Melville's description here highlights the powerlessness the sailors felt against nature during their many years aboard whaling ships. However it also highlights the futile attempts at controlling nature, which in part motivated whalers actions at sea, represented by the whale stuck by the mast heads in a crude allusion at puppetry with even less flexibility and individuality, large logs in the form of masts impaling the creature in three places, rather than a handful of strings.

In contrast to the painting in the Spouter-Inn, the next day, when Ishmael stops in at a local whalers chapel before venturing to the island of Nantucket, we are introduced to another painting hanging beyond the pulpit in the chapel. Like the painting in the Spouter-Inn, this work is of a ship, the ship, similarly trapped in a terrible storm. However, rather than being companioned by a whale, the other focus of the painting in the chapel, is an angel high above the clouds, whose light shines through the storm and provides hope for the sailors. Melville writes that the angel seems to say, "beat on, beat on, thou noble ship, and bear a hardy helm; for lo! The sun is breaking through; the clouds are rolling off -- serenest azure is at hand" (69). Here, rather

than highlighting the uncontrollability of the natural world, the painting highlights God's presence and his control, akin to the biblical passage in which Jesus subdues a terrible storm at the pleading of his apostles.¹⁸ The contrast the two paintings evidence in which humans constantly fight against the uncontrollability of the natural world while also intrinsically believing in God's existence in and control over the natural world, was a contradiction which was felt by whalers in the nineteenth-century on a daily basis. And, as I continue to argue throughout this essay, was foundational in the complex relationship with the natural world that led to the disconnect and exploitation of the environment that defined the whaling industry and is continually evidenced in *Moby-Dick*.

Not just for those in-universe, but for readers of *Moby-Dick* as well, the focus on these two paintings facilitates a disconnect with the natural world and an assertion of control over it. While not overtly acts of dominance, works of art in which the natural world is the focus are still motivated by an "impulse to reduce—and thereby, order and control." "Something out there is taken into the human world," Tuan writes. Explaining the process he states:

Marvels of nature that far dwarf man—are caught by strokes of the brush on canvas or paper. Captive nature is then put in a frame, nailed to the wall of a house, there to be looked at and appreciated or to serve as a pleasing background (a touch of wildness) among the ordered events of social life. It cannot be mere coincidence that landscape painting emerged in Renaissance Europe, at a time when Europeans took great pride in their cities and in their power over nature, and effloresced in China during the Sung dynasty (960-1279), a time known for its unprecedented expansion in commercial and economic life.¹⁹

In bearing witness to these paintings and in reading about them, Melville's audience begins to grow accustomed to the assertions of dominance and power that define *Moby-Dick* and thus,

¹⁸ See: *The Holy Bible*, Matthew 8:23–27, Mark 4:35–41, Luke 8:22–25. "English Standard Version," Wheaton: Crossway Publishing, 2001.

¹⁹ Yi Fi Tuan, *Dominance and Affection: The Making of Pets*, 4.

begin to grow desensitized to it. A process which as we will see, serves an important purpose in the novel.

As Melville continued his attempts to understand and define the whale in *Moby-Dick*, his adulation of them continued to grow resulting in further devaluation. Dealing directly with the whale in “Cetology,” Melville deems whales “unshored, harbourless immensities” (169). In an extensive categorization of whales in literary terms by book and folio, Melville writes that among all whales the sperm whale is “without a doubt, the largest inhabitant of the globe; the most formidable of all whales to encounter; the most majestic in aspect” (173), though in fact the much faster and elusive, blue whale is the largest inhabitant of the globe. Melville’s promotion of the whale and praise for his many varied features and abilities, continues to disconnect whales from the rest of the natural world, making possible the vast exploitation the species faced in the nineteenth and twentieth-century. Melville’s delineating the whales into books and folios also contributes to a disconnect with whales because it focuses and defines individual beings based on their physical attributes. Furthermore, defining whales by books and folios is also using historical language which helps define whales as “of the past,” contributing to the mythologization and further exploitation of their species. A connection often mirrored by the way Native American’s were discussed and treated in the nineteenth-century, as they underwent mass removal from the growing east coast into the uninhabited west quickly becoming to many, a distant memory of the past as the continued needs and trials of Native Americans were ignored.

Descriptions by Melville, of whales in *Moby-Dick*, continue to be exceedingly honorific and admirational, as well as numerous. In total, “more than one half of Melville’s selections

make the point that whales are very large, many others, that they are evil or monstrous.”²⁰ In a song sung by the crew in “Midnight, Forecastle.” we get the lines:

“Our captain stood upon the deck,

A spy-glass in his hand,

A viewing of those gallant whales

That blew at every strand”

Later in the song we already see the intertanglings of adulation and consumption when they sing:

“Oh, your tubs in your boats, my boys,

And by your braces stand,

And we’ll have one of those fine whales,

Hand boys, over hand!” (213).

In, “Of the Monstrous Pictures of Whales” discussed earlier, Melville, after cataloging a handful of atrocious depictions of whales determines that the “great Leviathan is that one creature in the world which must remain unpainted to the last” (315). And, during the chapter focused specifically on Moby-Dick: “The Whiteness of the Whale,” Melville describes Moby-Dick as “mystical,” and “well nigh ineffable” (230). When the *Pequod* had a gam with the *Town-Ho* in “The Town-Ho’s Story,” one of the ship’s mates terms Moby-Dick “Immortal” (306). As Melville contemplates whales diets while watching right whales skim brit off the surface of the ocean, he remarks regularly astounded by the size of whales, that, “their immense magnitude renders it very hard really to believe that such bulky masses of overgrowth can possibly be

²⁰ Lance E. Davis, Robert E. Gallman, and Karin Gleiter, *In Pursuit of Leviathan: Technology, Institutions, Productivity, and Profits in American Whaling, 1816-1906*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997, 1.

instinct, in all parts, with the same sort of life that lives in a dog or a horse” (325). Here, Melville hints at the tenuous lines between animals worthy of protection, care, and love, such as dogs, horses, and cats, and those creatures which are only worthy of exploitation such as whales.

Rarely throughout the novel, does Melville cease to ascribe compliment after compliment to the whale building him up and separating him farther and farther from reality, even as the exploitation it results in becomes harder and harder to ignore. In “Stubb and Flask Kill a Right Whale; and Then Have a Talk Over Him,” Melville denotes the whale's head “prodigious” and “noble” (380), even as the head hangs from the side of the ship decapitated and rotting. In “The Prairie,” a chapter in which Melville considers the whale physiognomically, he notes that when looking at the sperm whale head on, you get a sense that the creature is “stately,” and “sublime” (406). A vivid final example of the disconnect adulation produces can be seen during a gam the *Pequod* has. During the gam, a whale is sighted and both ships lower boats in pursuit of the whale. Harpoons were flung and the whale attacked. With one fin injured so that the poor creature could only “beat his side in an agony of fright,” like a bird with a clipped wing, “making affrighted broken circles in the air,” Melville writes that the sailors marveled at the whales “amazing bulk, portcullis jaw, and omnipotent tail,” even as Melville in the same paragraph, notes the complete deindividualization of the whale lamenting that “the bird has a voice, and with plaintive cries will make known her fear; but the fear of this vast dumb brute of the sea, was chained up and enchanted in him; he had no voice, save that choking respiration through his spiracle, and this made the sight of him unspeakably pitiable” (415).

This moment is key because Melville reacts to the death of a whale with much more solemnity than in other similar whaling documents. Furthermore, Melville also displays for a moment, a surprisingly progressive ethic towards animals. At a time when no one believed in

evolution yet, Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* not being published until 1859 and *Moby-Dick* being published in 1851, few were seriously considering whether animals had souls, emotions, or felt pain. Not just considering it, it is clear Melville believes it glancing over the fact, content with its implication, in his comment that the whale in this moment, had no voice to express the fear he felt. Though not willing to give him any kind of station on the species ladder referring to the whale as a "dumb brute of the sea," Melville does acknowledge and even more so, deeply feel, the terrible things whales were put through in the name of progress.

On top of being exceedingly honorific, at times, Melville even goes so far as to humanize whales, the ultimate adulation in a society in which the agency and rank of living beings was defined linearly with humans being at the top. Such a blurring between species lines for a moment, betrays an ecological worldview from Melville akin to Morton's enmeshment where, "Animals are not animals. Humans are not animals. Animals are not human. Humans are not Human." In this quote, Morton highlights the importance placed on the human species and calls it into question. Morton's description is of a world such as that experienced by Thoreau on Walden's Pond, or the world imagined by Whitman when he states at the beginning of "Song of Myself" in a moment of true openness and interconnectivity,

"I celebrate Myself,

And what I assume you shall assume,

For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you."²¹

If Lilo wrote this line we might imagine her saying, "For every atom belonging to me, as good belongs to you. And every atom belonging to you as good belongs to Pudge the fish."

In discussion of Whitman and his proto-environmentalism, Gatta writes:

²¹ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass The "Death-Bed" Edition*, New York: Random House Inc. 1993, 33.

Erotically conjoined with the totality of his environment, [Whitman] blurs customary boundaries between human and nonhuman orders of being in at least two crucial ways. First, his characteristic technique of identification with others extends to a sympathy with nonhuman life, particularly birds and mammals, that often surpasses literary conventions of personification. Second, his celebration of urban landscapes, in poems like “Song of Myself” and “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” blurs the geophysical distinction between natural facts and human artifacts, including structures of commerce. Just as he envisions a dilation of himself as private person into a universalized, Transcendental “kosmos” called Walt Whitman, so also he presents an expanded and culturally variegated model of “nature.”²²

Gatta’s discussion of Whitman is important because he too, highlights the importance of distance in our relationship with the natural world praising Whitman for blurring “the geophysical distinction between natural facts and human artifacts.” So too, in the previous quote, Gatta hints at an enmeshment in Whitman’s life and philosophy, as represented by his “Transcendental “kosmos,”” which aligns with the desired outcome of a world that pushes back against disconnection with and exploitation of, the natural world.

A step towards enmeshment, Melville’s anthropomorphization of whales intimates the rising connections being made between the many mammalian species in the budding field of evolutionary biology. However, his varied adulation of whales nevertheless, continues to put them on a pedestal. Melville notes for example, how the bones inside a whale’s fin “almost exactly answer to the bones of the human hand” (315), and how “like man, the whale has lungs and warm blood” (361). At another instance, Melville remarks that a whale “looked like a portly burgher smoking his pipe of a warm afternoon” (335), even further anthropomorphizing the whale to the point that he partakes in fashion and leisure activities; and, in a telling reversal of these comparisons, he even extolls humankind to be more like whales writing, “oh man! admire and model thyself after the whale” (361). This humbling insult leveled at a society with a

²² John Gatta, *Making Nature Sacred : Literature, Religion, and Environment in America from the Puritans to the Present*, 11.

hierarchical view of creation in which humans were at the top, goes one step further and crowns whales as the king of creatures, as well as works of art: “Of erections, how few are domed like St. Peters! Of creatures, how few vast as the whale” (362), Melville writes, bearing “immense superiority” (386), “high and mighty,” with “god-like dignity” (406).

Melville’s journey into the boundaries of species through the perceptions he made in regards to the similarity between humans and whales, on the surface betrays ecological progressivism. If humanity is at the top of the Chain of Being than to compare anything to humans is to at least metaphorically, raise them up as well. However, as the continued actions of those aboard the *Pequod* attest, this is adulation in word alone. Rather than bearing true affection for whales, the praise largely emanating from the pages of *Moby-Dick* are rooted in the idea that God is present in the whale as well as in all of nature. The praises of whales spoken and written by whalers is rooted in their faith. Whales in the minds of whalers, physically embody God. However, rather than resulting in true admiration and therefore respect, the dual creeds of Christianity that God and his holiness are present in nature while the earth is also humanity's to rule and subdue, only serve to put whales on a pedestal resulting in deindividualization and devaluation, rather than admiration, making them easier to exploit and ultimately, destroy. Something which as we will see, whalers surprisingly, have in common with sixteenth-century poets, though their focus was on women rather than on whales.

Processes of Deindividualization

As already briefly alluded to, once whales are actually seen and the first lowerings by the *Pequod* occur in pursuit of them, the descriptions and monikers used for whales shift dramatically. In large part, this shift as evidenced before, occurs as whales themselves shift in the minds of whalers from wondrous creatures in which to find evidence of God and his glory, to something specifically created to be dominated and used for the benefit of humankind, another contrasting and competing claim emphasized by the Second Great Awakening, and adopted in American culture in the mid-nineteenth-century. Now, instead of beautiful, individual, beings the whale, while the whaler is in hot pursuit of it, is othered and deindividualized for humankind's exploitation and consumption becoming now simply, "a fish" (270), or, "the fish" (338), and later, "their prey" (328). Later, in a term that continues to deindividualize while also implicating the rising wave of industrialization and science at the time, whales are called "leviathan lamp-feeder's" (412). Furthermore, throughout the pages of *Moby-Dick*, Melville repeatedly resorts back to the demonizing moniker of "monster" (338). While Melville certainly has many praises for the whale, his references to their size and villainy, tip the scales with ease and without question.

What these cold and distant views of whales indicate is that in man's immediate environment rather than a magnificent creature and a bearer of God's glory, much as human kind is said to bear God's image,²³ the whale, now as its near-lifeless body is being slowly towed back to the ship, is simply, "the trophy" (344). Dragging behind the boats as blood pours "from all sides of the monster like brooks down a hill, his tormented body [rolling] not in brine but in blood" (338), the whale is no longer "magnificent," and if God's spirit was truly in the whale then man killed him again, for now, the whale was only "a vast corpse" (345). When Stubb, after

²³ See: *The Holy Bible* "English Standard Version," Ephesians 2:10, Genesis 1:26-27, 9:6, 5:1, 1 Corinthians 11:17.

killing a whale, sits down to eat a part of it prepared for him by the *Pequod's* cook, the whale, reduced to livestock, is dubbed “prize ox of the sea” (353). Far now from “immortal,” after being ravaged by whalers, the whale unfastened from the side of the *Pequod*, becomes skin, fat, teeth, bone, and brain, harvested for human consumption. Nothing more than a “vast white headless phantom,” as it “floats farther and farther from the ship,” the “great mass of death,” seen “for hours and hours from the almost stationary ship” “till lost in infinite perspectives” (353).

The contrast and complexity is clear: whales as a species and nature in general, were wondrous places for reflection and to find God. Yet, the needs of humankind demanded their murder and harvesting, which was also seemingly justified by God’s granting to man of dominion over the earth. Yi-Fu Tuan, in his excellent work *Dominance and Affection*, also draws attention to this complexity: “While in art and religion humans show an enduring tendency to see animals as the embodiment of power and as larger than life, in day-to-day existence they unhesitatingly dominate and exploit animals in myriads of ways.”²⁴ Tuan’s observation of human psyche and the contradictions therein, draws attention to the very same disconnect I have discussed in this essay. While Tuan does not go so far as to explicitly relate our tendency to see animals as embodiments of power as a facilitating factor in their exploitation as I do, he nonetheless notes the peculiar connection. We have cars named after Mustangs in reference to their speed and strength, yet proceed to attempt to tame the will we prize in them time after time. Though we praise the work ethic and deliberation of turtles in our nursery tales we do not even contemplate stopping to help when we see one crossing the road. Even in our political realm, we cherish the wisdom of the elephant and the determination of the donkey even as elephants as a

²⁴ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Dominance and Affection: The Making of Pets*, 72.

species die of boredom in zoos, or are continually hunted to the brink extinction, while donkeys continue to serve as slaves doing the jobs men don't want to do only to be all too often, locked in a dirt floored cell alone at night. In a centuries-long and perfected practice of appropriation, we have taken every good part of animals for ourselves and left the deindividualized and so considered brainless, masses that were left to live lives in service of humanity rather than humanity serving its true purpose which is to steward creation and care for it.

Melville, in *Moby-Dick*, also employs tactics of deindividualization and devaluation in much more subtle ways. On top of through practices of praise and adulation that serve to put whales on a pedestal separating them from humankind, whales are further deindividualized and devalued in *Moby-Dick*, through an othering that occurs in a process employed by Melville similar to that of the Blazon, a style of poem originated by sixteenth-century French poets. In Blazons, women were praised through the singling out and metaphorical comparison of each individual part of their body.²⁵ Though sonnets like these on the surface, appear flattering and in celebration and acknowledgement of women, critics of Shakespeare's work and the Early Modern Period in general, such as Jennifer Park, have argued that the focus on the woman's features individually, rather than the woman herself as a whole, serves to objectify and deindividualize the woman reducing her to an object for male consumption rather than a person of individuality.²⁶ In these cases, as Moira Baker writes in her analysis of Philip Sidney's poetry, "the act of praising a woman is an act of self-fashioning as he dismembers her body and divests it of its autonomy. Through [Sidney's] stylized fragmentation and reification of the female body, he asserts his subjectivity as a poet, manipulating and controlling her objectified body."²⁷ This

²⁵ For an example see: William Shakespeare, *The Sonnets*, 130, New York: Penguin Books, 2017, 134.

²⁶ Jennifer Park, "Shakespeare's Plays and Sonnets," University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2018.

²⁷ Moira P Baker, "'The Uncanny Stranger on Display': The Female Body in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Love

Poetry." *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 56, no. 2, 1991, pp. 7–25.

“dismembering,” and “self-fashioning,” which Baker speaks of, is a consistent theme in the processes of devaluation and exploitation which can be seen consistently in *Moby-Dick* such as in the paintings in the Spouter Inn and chapel already discussed, as well as in the descriptions of whales.

While other historians and critics like Richard J. King, have noted Melville’s enthusiastic focus on the whale’s biology few to my knowledge have attended to or hypothesized about the effect this focus on the whale’s biology has on readers as well as those in the story who are privy to the scientific thoughts and conversations of Ishmael.²⁸ However, the similarity between the effects of the Blazon in poetry and of Melville’s dissection of the whale’s body in *Moby-Dick*, and the way both objectify and deindividualize their subject, seems clear. In the same way that the Blazon was used by poets to divest the women they focused on of their autonomy, Melville’s stylized adulations of whales and his scientific fragmentation of them throughout *Moby-Dick* applies a similar method: “Through stylized fragmentation and reification,” of the whale, Melville “asserts his subjectivity,” “manipulating and controlling [the whale’s] objectified body.” This objectification of the whale is effective on multiple levels, serving to disconnect the characters in the story further from their prey as well as disconnecting the reader from the whale, immunizing and numbing them to the atrocities inflicted on whales in *Moby-Dick* in a ramped up version of the controlling and manipulative qualities discussed in the two paintings in New Bedford. Rather than leave them feeling sorry for the whales, whose victimization underpins this “American classic,” Melville’s objectification of whales via the Blazon prevents all, within as well as outside the tale, from sympathizing with the whales, who are reduced from individuals to objects in our minds.

²⁸ Richard J King. *Ahab’s Rolling Sea*, Chicago: The University of Chicago press, 2019, 19.

As the action and exploitation increases in *Moby-Dick*, we can see the accumulating effects of the deindividualization that the Blazon encourages. In the two chapters that presage arguably one of the most gruesome scenes in *Moby-Dick*, in “The Grand Armada,” we can note the “fragmentation and reification,” in the description of the whales spout and tail alone, Melville’s mentioning the whale’s lungs, spout, windpipe, spine, ribs, blood, fibres (tendons), layers (blubber), tail, loins, and both flukes individually (432-441). In another scene in which a right whale and sperm whale have been killed, try’d out, and now only their decapitated heads remain strung up to alternate sides of the front of the *Pequod*, Melville, in an attempt at scientific examination, again evidences aspects of the categorical deindividualization perpetuated by the Blazon when he mentions the whale’s eyes, ears, mouth, teeth, lower jaw, tongue, spout-hole, lips, blubber, as well as the multiple parts of the whale’s skull including the cranium, junk, and case (380-397).

Melville’s objectification of whales through “stylized fragmentation and reification,” begins in his address of the “many monstrous pictures of whales,” drawn by his contemporaries in chapter fifty-five. In this first example, though defined less by adulation and more by a sense of clinical understanding, I think a degree of deindividualization still occurs. In these moments, Melville’s fragmentation runs deep as he looks at the whale’s fin “the bones of which almost exactly answer to the bones of the human hand minus only the thumb,” before dissecting the whale further in analysis of the individual bones in the whale’s fin noting that they have “four regular bone-fingers, the index, middle, ring, and little finger” (315).

As our brief discussion of these scenes suggests, what is interesting about Melville’s use of the Blazon is just how closely these examples of deindividualization through the employment of the Blazon, coincide with acts of violence towards whales in *Moby-Dick*, providing further

evidence for Melville's use of the Blazon in serving to deindividualize whales in an effort to reduce our sympathies for them. For example, the previous quote of the first use of the Blazon in *Moby-Dick*, occurs only six chapters before the first whale is killed. Ironically, that which was intended to express affection in the sixteenth-century, had now been perverted in the nineteenth-century and used for affecting domination.

Likewise, the next time we see this effect again uncoincidentally, is following the second killing of a whale in chapter seventy-three, after which, Melville spends six whole chapters dividing up and discussing the whale in an effort for total deindividualization. In these chapters, Melville dives deep into the whale's biology discussing in turn, their heads, eyes, ears (386), as well as their mouth, teeth, and lower jaw (389), all the while, accounting the terrible acts being done to these whales as the "jaw is dragged on board," the gums lanced, and the whales teeth dragged out "as Michigan oxen drag stumps of old oaks out of wild wood lands" (390). Regardless, Melville continues on unwaveringly, "Look at that hanging lower lip" (392), he writes, continuing his discussion of the whale's head. From there, he notes their tongues, spout-holes" (393), blubber (396), cranium, the individual parts of their cranium including the "junk" and "case" (398), as well as the rest of the skull (408), spine, neck, and vertebra (409), while making comparisons and adulations throughout, such as comparing the whales head to the Great Heidelburgh Tun, a giant German wine cask, as well as calling the whale's jaw "portentous," noting the "Mammoth Cave of his stomach" (389), and remarking on the whale's superiority and character (386).

After a gam with the *Virgin*, another whaling ship, and some philosophical musings, Melville picks up the body of the whale again "manipulating and controlling their objectified bodies," with renewed vigor. Melville discusses the whale's spout, lungs, windpipe (432), ribs,

blood (433), tail, the individual parts of the tail including the layers and fibres (437), as well as the whales' loins, and flukes (442). Here too, we can also see the close relationship between these episodes of deindividualization in *Moby-Dick*, and the episodes of violence that often occur in unison or shortly thereafter. For example, one of Melville's deconstructions of the whale's body directly precedes an event in which the *Pequod* comes upon a herd of whales including mother's and calves. In a gruesome event, the *Pequod* lowers its boats which sail into this herd and begin harpooning whales unscrupulously. Failing to actually kill the whales however, Melville recounts how one of the harpooned whales having worked the harpoon free from his body but with the rope wrapped around his tail, "tormented to madness, was now churning through the water, violently flailing with his flexible tail, and tossing the keen spade about him, wounding and murdering his own comrades" (453), before the whale himself finally succumbed to his wounds and was towed slowly back to the *Pequod*. The earlier desensitization is essential before this event because of how unnecessary and bloody the events of "The Grand Armada," was. Approaching a great herd of whales with no plans and only a handful of sticks with blades on the end, the crew of the *Pequod* with great harm to both people and whales, did a lot of damage wounding dozens of whales, yet only actually being able to capture one, highlighting the needless dangers and inefficiency of the whaling industry as well as the unprecedented brutality that was normalized in the industry as well as in literature about whaling.

With more specificity than ever, Melville employs the othering effects of the Blazon one last time in chapters one-hundred and two through one-hundred and five, as he sets up the final conflict of the narrative. In these chapters, Melville's narrator, coming across the full skeleton of a whale on an island in the Arsaides, sees the opportunity "to unbutton [the whale] still further, and untagging the points of his hose, unbuckling his garters, and casting loose the hooks and the

eyes of the joints of his innermost bones. The purpose of this, Melville states, was to set him before you in his ultimatum; that is to say in his unconditional skeleton,” examining the whale’s “joists and beams; the rafters, ridge-pole, sleepers, and underpinnings, making up the framework of Leviathan” (517), before wrapping up his analysis of the whale by speculating on his measurements. Melville’s language here reveals a number of layers. First there is a level of intimacy and perversion evidenced in this passage which putting something on a pedestal results in. Using language such as “unbuckling his garters,” and examining his “underpinnings,” Melville asserts ownership not just of the being as a whole, to do with as he pleases, but also each individual aspect of the whale. Each garter, joist, hook, and ridge-pole, Melville, free to reassemble and remodel what was once a whale, into any monster he pleases.

Second, in Melville’s descriptions of whales, his vision can often be so penetrative that it is borderline sexual, highlighting the unbalanced power dynamic and act of domination intrinsic in both whaling and nineteenth-century romance and intercourse. Melville’s talks of “unbuckling his garters,” and examining his “underpinnings,” “unbuttoning,” the whale, is speaking with language grounded in a sexually unbalanced power dynamic. This same underpinning and expression of sexual aggression can also be seen in the language Melville uses to describe the harpoon. Remarking on the harpoon and how it is stored in the whaleboat, he describes a “barbed,” “wooden extremity,” which rests in “the crotch,” “perpendicularly inserted,” so that it rests “projecting from the prow” (342). At a time when women could not vote, own property, or really express individuality at all, rather being through harshly gendered social structures, forced to remain at home and provide kids for their husbands as well as provide for their kids and their husband, women found themselves in a much similar situation with whales than they may have

been willing to admit. Though, while women have gained equality or at least made terrific strides, whales find themselves still, subjected to the whims of man.

Melville's intentions as he acknowledges them himself, have been to "manhandle this Leviathan." Picking him up and moving him about like a great Gepardo with his puppet, Melville through his discourse on the whale, robs the whale of individuality and motive, and reduces it to something that exists only to serve the needs of humanity. As Melville writes later, "Give me a condor's quill! Give me Vesuvius' crater for an inkstand! Friends, hold my arms! (526). For the work of subjectifying something as massive as the whale, "self fashioning as he dismembers," to again reuse Baker's words, is truly a monumental task.

Whalers, though living lives in nature, resemble those people Rachel Carlson described in her groundbreaking ecological work *Silent Spring*, when she describes people who "walk unseeing through the world, unaware alike of its beauties, its wonders, and the strange and sometimes terrible intensity of the lives that are being lived about us."²⁹ In fact, throughout *Silent Spring*, Carlson stresses the interconnected threads of the "fabric of life," "a fabric on the one hand delicate and destructible, on the other miraculously tough and resilient," and cries for humankind to end its barrages "hurled against the fabric of life,"³⁰ and instead find its place simply as a thread, a single species supporting a terrific tapestry. In "Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish" Melville too remarks on such a world when he states that we are all Loose-Fish and Fast-Fish, too (463), metaphorically defining someone who belongs to other humans and yet is also free.

Across environmental literature the dream of the interconnected world abounds.

Lawrence Buell imagines "a new kind of ecological holism, a post-humanist one, one that grants culture to nonhumans even as it insists that humanness including human 'culture' is embedded

²⁹ Rachel Carlson, *Silent Spring*, New York: Mariner Books, 1962, 249.

³⁰ Rachel Carlson, *Silent Spring*, 297.

in ecological process.”³¹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen echoes interconnectedness when he reminisces on how “the Mississippi is an earth artist, but its projects take so long to execute that humans have a difficult time discerning their genius.”³² Herzogenrath describes enmeshment as “a negotiation of dynamic arrangements of cultural *and* natural forces.”³³ What is quintessential about all these quotes is the ways they both intrinsically imply interconnectedness such as in the negotiations and dynamic arrangements mentioned by Herzogenrath, as well the agency and individuality of nature that is alluded to by Cohen in his delineation of the Mississippi river as an artist.

While on the surface, *Moby-Dick* is a novel about humans’ attempted assertions of domination over the natural world, their attempts are underpinned in the reality that humankind, especially whalers operating at a time before engines, were entirely dependent on Mother Nature for everything. In doing this, Melville supplies an undercurrent of interconnectedness as well. Early in the novel Melville references “those stage managers, the Fates” (31), and later remarks again on humanity’s powerlessness remarking, “For what are the comprehensible terrors of man compared with the interlinked terrors and wonders of God!” (143). Ahab in justification of his wayward traveling after Starbuck questions him, remarks, “Let the owners stand on Nantucket beach and outyell the Typhoons.” In “The Chart,” Melville discusses whalers’ reliance on Mother Nature through ocean currents which made it possible for Ahab and the *Pequod*, to hunt Moby-Dick across the world’s oceans. Melville remarks that Ahab, “with the charts of all four oceans before him,” “was threading a maze of currents and eddies” (241), knowing “the sets of all tides and currents” (242), “Hand in hand, ship and breeze blew on” (368), Melville writes. Laying out the dark reality whalers lived by but also here too, highlighting the finality of Mother

³¹ Lawrence Buell, *Prismatic Ecology*, “Foreword,” Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013, xi.

³² Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Prismatic Ecology*, “Introduction,” xix.

³³ Bernd Herzogenrath, *Prismatic Ecology*, “White,” 1.

Nature's control over man, Melville later writes, "however baby man may brag of his science and skill, and however much, in a flattering future, that science and skill may augment; yet for ever and forever, to the crack of doom, the sea will insult and murder him, and pulverise the stateliest, stiffest, frigate he can make" (325), "Painting and snorting like a mad battle steed that has lost its rider, the masterless ocean overruns the globe" (326). There are many ships at the bottom of the ocean in evidence of Melville's words. Wrecks such as the *Titanic* (1912), *Indigirka* (1939), *Shamia* (1986), *SS Edmund Fitzgerald* (1975), *Princess of the Stars* (2008), and *El Faro* (2015), all sunken by storms, bear witness to the truth that the sea will, "pulverise the stateliest, stiffest, frigate [man] can make."

For whalers such as Melville, storms were a near constant reminder of their powerlessness. In "The Mast-Head," Melville tells the story of Saint Stylites, "the famous Christian hermit of old times, who built him a lofty stone pillar in the desert and spent the whole latter portion of his life on its summit, hoisting his food from the ground with a tackle." Melville uses this story in order to provide an example to the reader of "a remarkable instance of a dauntless stander-of-mast-heads; who was not to be driven from his place by fogs or frosts, rain, hail, or sleet, but valiantly facing everything out to the last, literally died at his post" (193). In stressing Saint Stylites actions however, Melville also draws attention to just how much of an issue fogs, frosts, rain, hail, and sleet were for those atop the mast-heads of whaling ships and how scarce were such men who like Saint Stylites, was capable of standing up to Mother Nature herself. Capable or not, the ocean floor bears the bones of many men fallen from the mast-heads. As Melville warns early in *Moby-Dick*, "there is death in this business of whaling" (66).

Exploitation Expanded

_____The othering and deindividualization of whales in *Moby-Dick* for human consumption, facilitates a view of the environment in which whales as well as the rest of nature, were viewed as awesome and valuable in the abstract while also earmarked by God for consumption in the immediate. The purpose of this section is to look at the way such a view of the environment snowballs in *Moby-Dick*, resulting in the consumption of not just one aspect of the natural world but all aspects of it, as well as the crucial role the growing prevalence of industrialism and capitalism in the mid-nineteenth-century, played in the proliferation of this exploitation.

To read *Moby-Dick* is to read a novel whose greatness and glory is steeped in environmental destruction and exploitation. Far beyond just the White Whale, or sperm whales, or even whales, the mark of mankind is left indelibly throughout every nautical mile visited in the novel. When Ishmael in the first chapter of *Moby-Dick*, notices the “crowds of water-gazers” (27), “posted like silent sentinels all about the town. . . Fixed in ocean reveries,” and asks, “How then is this? Are the green fields gone?” (28), The truth was, the green fields were all gone. In a history of Nantucket the place from which the *Pequod* would depart, published in 1835, Obed Macy recounts how the destruction of the environment on Nantucket by settlers, devastated crops, fields, and livestock alike, originally driving the men to the seas in the first place. With true insanity if it be rooted in repetition without learning, Nantucketers, proceeded to exploit without rest, the harvests of the seas as they had the harvests of the land, irreparably damaging and diminishing the once vast species of whales to numbers that still have not recovered even centuries later.

When European settlers first arrived on the island of Nantucket in the early 1700s, it was arguably as veritable a paradise as any that whalers would visit in the nineteenth-century. Obed Macy recounts how the island was “covered with wood,”³⁴ with plenty of wild life, rich soil, and

³⁴ Obed Macy, *A History of Nantucket*, Mansfield: Macy and Pratt, 1835, 23.

the many benefits of lakes, rivers, and ocean, alike. Yet barely one hundred years later, Macy recounts bleakly that, “The forest has disappeared, and the greatest part of the island is left a naked plain, where the gale meets with no obstruction and animals find no refuge.”³⁵ By the war of 1812, things had gotten so bad that Macy recounts the terrible situation Nantucketers had put themselves in writing, “The soil will not produce a subsistence for one third of the people. Wholly destitute of firewood, and but a little clothing.” For many months and over an oppressive winter, the Nantucketers suffered in these conditions with no aid being able to be brought to the island due to British boats patrolling the shore.³⁶ European settlers' lack of aid was also the consequence of deracination as much as it was deforestation. Before and at the start of European settlement on the island of Nantucket, many indigenous tribes inhabited the island including the Pequod, whose lives would live on only in name alone, as indigenous peoples across the eastern United States were like whales and trees, caught up in systems of exploitation. These systems deindividualized them and then took everything from them consigning them to history and mythologizing indigenous Americans even as Europeans killed, relocated, and exploited those that remained.

The steps it took to get from a land of desire to desolation over barely a hundred years, were surprisingly easy, as they often are. Finding good soil, the Europeans farmed vigorously and any open land was plowed and planted. However, as the population slowly increased, and the soils nutrients depleted due to continued farming without allowing off years for the ground to lay fallow, more and more land was required for planting which meant trees were clear cut across the island. Without trees however, the situation only grew gravely worse. The cold sea winds ravaged livestock and crops alike, and where in 1729 five acres of land could produce over two hundred and fifty bushels of corn, the same five acres by 1835, could barely produce

³⁵ Obed Macy, *A History of Nantucket*, 35.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 117.

fifty.³⁷

When Ishmael arrives on the island of Nantucket in chapter fourteen of *Moby-Dick*, the general descriptions of desolation and the rampant consequences of exploitation, are on full display. “An elbow of sand” (94), “all beach, without a background” (93), is Melville’s first description of the “ant-hill in the sea,” called Nantucket, which he describes as situated off the New England coast “more lonely than the Eddystone lighthouse” (Ibid). In a restating of the sad state of things described by Macy, Melville notes that trees are so scarce on the island that “pieces of wood in Nantucket are carried about like bits of the true cross in Rome” (Ibid), and the green fields which Ishmael wondered whether still existed in New Bedford, were all but myth in Nantucket where “one blade of grass makes an oasis, three blades in a day's walk, a prairie” (Ibid).

What is most striking to me about looking at the early history of whalers is that rather than making original mistakes in their rapacious appetite for whales in the nineteenth and twentieth-century, they merely made the same mistakes on water which they had on land. Just as they ignored the slow decreases of yield in their farmland by continuing to jealously take whatever they could get, remaining content with benefit in the now regardless of consequence later; so too, as Obed Macy and whaling history attests, whalers ignored signs of the growing scarcity of whales, continuing to relentlessly hunt whales across every ocean and throughout all longitudes and latitudes. Macy recalls, in echo of the descriptions of once fertile soil in 1729, how when Nantucketers originally turned their conquering eyes upon whales for the first time, they were so numerous that they could be simply harpooned from shore and there was “no perceptible decrease of the number of whales during the period of the first thirty or forty years from the commencement of the fishery.”³⁸ Yet quickly, the piper required payment and Macy

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid. 64.

notes that as early as 1740, “The whales began to be scarce at the places where they had usually been taken, which rendered it necessary to explore new coasts in search of them.”³⁹

Originally able to find whales just off the beach and up and down the Atlantic coast, by 1812, just as they were driven from the land to the shore and from the shore to the water, so too were they now driven farther and farther away from home in search of whales. In the coming years, whalers would sail as far as into the Pacific, traversing the waters down both of the American continents, and around their capes, in order to find plentiful whale populations. By 1850, when the whaling industry was at its peak, Nantucket ships such as the *Pequod*, on a single voyage, would sail extensively crisscrossing both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Often rounding both the treacherous capes of South America and Africa, venturing north into the Arctic, as well as throughout the Mediterranean and other European oceans, the China seas, and throughout the Pacific islands, all in search of that which once could be killed from the very shores of Nantucket. Yet, as with their farms, it seems, the people of Nantucket did little to prevent the continued decline and collapse of the industries in which they were intrinsically linked for support. Macy evidences such noting, “The whaling business is the source of almost all the employment of every class of citizens on the island. There is hardly an individual, who does not, directly or indirectly, receive a share of the profits or participate in the losses of each voyage.”⁴⁰

In looking back and trying to evaluate how such naivety regarding species population and reproduction, as well as in general farming and land cultivation techniques, could be carried out by so many for so long, we are led back to the disconnect I attempted to evidence in the first section of this essay, which is not one humanity has managed to move past. In the same way Nantucket heedlessly used land and water, so too, do we now in the twenty-first-century, with

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 178.

equally obsessive presentism, use up our precious air and sell away the last members of once flourishing species. In a repetition of history that would be comical if not so devastating and destructive, we in modernity like those on Nantucket, having now depleted and destroyed our island, attempt now to take to the stars rather than the oceans, in search of new green fields to farm. Thinking, with equal if not more naivety than nineteenth-century whalers, that our actions on a red planet instead of a blue planet, will result in any kind of different outcome. Unless serious reform and reconnection is instituted between humanity and the many more numerous species which are regularly forced under foot, then no matter what planet, the plot will remain the same. As Morton writes in providing evidence of our disconnect in the twenty-first-century, “Every time I start my car or steam engine I don’t mean to harm Earth, let alone cause the Sixth Mass Extinction Event in the four-and-a-half-billion-year history of life on this planet.” Yet we do, and to the extent that we understand, which by now we all do, we are responsible.⁴¹

Returning to Melville and *Moby-Dick*, we can see further echoes of a disconnect between humanity and the natural world in which the natural world is exalted in the abstract but exploited in the immediate. Just as Morton evidences a disconnect in his example that humans are not responsible for environmental destruction due to individual but cooperative human action, so too, Melville through his writing, does not seem to see the compounding power of hundreds of ships killing thousands of whales when he writes that whales are “from the head-waters of the Eternities” (530), “immortal in his species, however perishable in his individuality” (534).

As briefly mentioned earlier, one of the key points I hope to express in this essay is that exploitation of the natural world is always exponential. Furthermore, the rising disconnect from the natural world correlates directly with the severity of exploitation. Whalers, both historically and aboard the *Pequod*, exemplify this the whale ship serving as an extension of Western

⁴¹ Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2016, 8.

civilization, “moving across an inscrutable Pacific wilderness.”⁴² Never restrained to simply the sperm whale, there was scarcely a living or non-living object in the natural world which whalers did not seek to use in one way or another. When sperm whales were not available to be killed the slower more docile right whale paid the price being harvested for its own stores of oil and bone or at times, simply killed for luck or to balance the pull of a sperm whale on the other side of the boat (3, 80). When all whales were scarce seals, porpoises, manatees, sunfish, and any number of lesser species were the victims of man's insatiability (172). When visiting the Galapagos, whalers would take tortoises and keep them on their ship as pets and then eat them.⁴³ They were choice because they could go over a year without fresh food and water and therefore remained always fresh themselves. On islands without tortoises, there are many examples especially during Melville's own whaling voyages, of monkeys being taken from islands as pets, as well as cruel treatment of animals for human entertainment.⁴⁴ Finally, whalers were regularly known to ravage native stores of fruits and vegetables in their brief visits to island ports ironically valuing the production of those things whose exploitation forced them into the sea to start with.⁴⁵ Even more ironically, at many of these island ports, Nantucket whalers were faced with much more enmeshed methods of farming and tactics against wind and the depletion of soil nutrients, which would have often saved their own crops. For example, when Francis Allyn Olmsted went on a whaling voyage in 1841, and visited Fayal, Olmsted noted how natives successfully grew crops

⁴² John Gatta, *Making Nature Sacred : Literature, Religion, and Environment in America from the Puritans to the Present*, 157.

⁴³ See: George Barker, *Thrilling Adventures of the Whaleship Alycone*, Peabody, Mass., G. Barker, 1916, 23, *Log/journal of the Ship Susan*, 1841 Nov. 22-1846 May 28, 1841, *Log/journal of the Ship Nauticon*, 1848 Sept. 13-1853 Mar. 24, day 5/6/49, Wilson L Heflin, *Herman Melville's Whaling Years*, Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004, 9.

⁴⁴ See: *Log/journal of the Ship Nauticon*, 1848 Sept. 13-1853 Mar. 24, day 10/28/48, Wilson L Heflin, *Herman Melville's Whaling Years*, Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004, 70, 107.

⁴⁵ See: Francis Allyn Olmsted, *Incidents of a Whaling Voyage*, New York, D. Appleton and co., Wilson L Heflin, *Herman Melville's Whaling Years*, Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004, George Barker, *Thrilling Adventures of the Whaleship Alycone*, Peabody, Mass., G. Barker, 1916, 23, *Log/journal of the Ship Susan*, 1841 Nov. 22-1846 May 28, 1841, *Log/journal of the Ship Nauticon*, 1848 Sept. 13-1853 Mar. 24.

such as bananas and oranges by placing them inside woven reeds or a cave to protect from the vicious wind that so regularly destroyed the vegetation on the island of Nantucket.⁴⁶

As in the non-fictional accounts of whaling, so too, in fictional accounts of whaling voyages such as in *Moby-Dick*, we can see continual and clear evidence of exponential exploitation. Melville describes a whaler during our visit to the Spouter-Inn, who brandishes a “sealskin wallet with the hair on” (47), and other sailors at the inn, are noted to wear beaver hats (Ibid), including Queequeg (54), and later, Ishmael recounts the donning of a bearskin jacket which he himself owns (63, 117). Ahab whether sitting or standing is supported by the extended exploits of whale harvesting via the “barbaric white leg upon which he partly stood” (159), and a “tripod of bones,” probably a stool, which he sits on when smoking his pipe (165). At times, nature is even exploited in an attempt for further exploitation of nature such as the double cruelty of when a bird was caught aboard the *Pequod* and a cage was made by the carpenter “out of clean shaved rods of right-whale bone, and cross-beams of sperm whale ivory” (549).

It is also important to make note of the fact that exponential exploitation of nature always leads to the exploitation of our own fellow humans as well. Though it is with a degree of rhetorical nature that Melville asks in his opening chapter, “Who ain’t a slave?” (30), in reality, under the industry-oriented, capital-driven society that fueled and was fueled by the whaling industry, no one, animal or not, could escape being used and deindividualized, just as the whale is in *Moby-Dick*. Before the journey aboard the *Pequod* begins, Ishmael meets a group of whalers just returning from a voyage, at the Spouter Inn. One of these sailors, having just returned from the south seas, “brought up a lot of ‘balmed New Zealand heads, and he’s sold all on em but one, and that one he’s trying to sell tonight, ‘cause to-morrow’s Sunday, and it would not do to be sellin’ human heads about the streets when folks is goin’ to churches” (44-45). The

⁴⁶ Francis Allyn Olmsted, *Incidents of a Whaling Voyage*, New York, D. Appleton and co., 1841, 35.

sailors fear or at least reluctance to sell the New Zealand heads on Sunday, reveals to us the ways religion and the dual components of ruling and subduing the earth, as well as exalting nature as a place to find and experience God, leads to conflict in people's day-to-day lives. The whaler trying to sell these heads, feels God condones his actions and has given him domain, yet he seems to feel a sense of guilt and shame selling the heads nonetheless, especially on Sunday. More than that thought, in this passage, we can note how the whaler's continued exploitation of the natural world specifically through the consistent hunting of whales, has appeared to desensitize him to the point that he is willing not just to kill and sell animals, but to exploit Indigenous societies taking and selling, the human heads of people's mothers, brothers, friends, and fathers.

Exploitation of the natural world's evolution into uninhibition can also be evidenced in *Moby-Dick* by the repeated perilous positions in which the three black men aboard the *Pequod*--Queequeg, Tashtego, and Daggoo--are put in. Prized as physical specimens rather than as people, it is they who because of their height and muscles, are forced into the most dangerous position in the whaleboat, that of harpooning the whale, the harpooner having to draw closer than all others in the boat to the whale and who finds himself most likely to be dragged out and under, by the preceding line of rope that is attached to the harpoons they hurl. In many other of the most perilous events faced by the crew of the *Pequod* too, it is Queequeg, Tashtego, and Daggoo, who are forced to deal with them. When in "The Monkey Rope," sharks are tearing the body of the whale to shreds before it could be processed by the crew, it is Queequeg who is tied to a rope and hurled overboard spade in hand, to fend off the vicious predators. "Straining and gasping there with that great iron hook," "half hidden by the blood-mudded water" (377), Queequeg found himself not just metaphorically but physically on the outside. No longer a perpetrator of exploitation, Queequeg was a victim of the indiscriminate destruction of humanity

and its industries, willingly sacrificed in the name of production and progress. While to a degree this victimization came with perks such as eating in the captain's cabin and being revered by the crew, it was a reverence closer to that which was also given to whales than any form of actual respect. While to a degree celebrated even harpooners were replaceable. The whaling industry was defined by its rapacious rate of turnover as the crew of a single ship might change dozens of times on a single voyage due mainly to regular desertions amongst ships crews.⁴⁷ Melville himself, deserted two ships, once in Nukahiva aboard the New Bedford whale ship *Acushnet* which, during her four years of hunting whales, shipped fifty-five men of which twenty deserted and eight were discharged,⁴⁸ as well as deserting from the ship that saved him from cannibals in Nukahiva, the New Bedford Whale ship *Lucy-Anne*, before deserting that ship as well, some months later, in Tahiti,⁴⁹ during his three years of whaling service between 1841-1844, roughly a decade before the publication of *Moby-Dick* in 1851. As Briton Cooper Busch in his book *Whaling Will Never Do For Me*, summarizes, "any voyage lasting over a single season could expect to turn over a substantial percentage of its crew before it reached home."⁵⁰ While the loss of a harpooner might set a whaling ship back some, more brave and brawny men looking for a chance at escape, were waiting on nearly every island whaling ships visited.

For Tashtego too, the realization of how little he is valued and how easily he and we in turn, can be exploited by the system we use to exploit others, was a rude and nearly death

⁴⁷ See: Wilson L. Heflin, *Herman Melville's Whaling Years*, Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004, 30, Log/journal of the ship Susan, 1841 Nov. 22-1846 May 28, Cincinnati: Cincinnati & Hamilton County Public Library. Genealogy & Local History Department, digitized: 2008, 5, William B. Whitecar Jr. *Four years aboard the whaleship. Embracing cruises in the Pacific, Atlantic, Indian, and Antarctic oceans, in the years 1855, '6, '7, '8, '9*, Philadelphia, J. B. Lippincott & Co.; [etc., etc.] 1860, Francis Allyn Olmsted, *Incidents of a Whaling Voyage, New York, D. Appleton and co., 1841*, 13, 17, Briton Cooper. *Whaling Will Never do for me: the American Whaleman in the Nineteenth Century*, Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2009, 92, *Logjournal of the Ship Susan*, 1841 Nov. 22-1846 May 28, 1841.

⁴⁸ Wilson L. Heflin, *Herman Melville's Whaling Years*, Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004, 30.

⁴⁹ Wilson L. Heflin, *Herman Melville's Whaling Years*, xxiii.

⁵⁰ Briton Cooper Busch. *Whaling Will Never do for me: the American Whaleman in the Nineteenth Century*, Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2009, 92.

inducing experience. In a later episode aboard the *Pequod*, when a man was required to hold onto a rope hoisted over a dead whale with a bucket, scooping out the liquified insides of the whales head, it is Tashtego who is forced into the perilous position and subsequently finds himself falling into the whales head, the force of which knocks the whale's head loose from the ship. So, Tashtego found himself drowning in the liquid inside the head of a whale that was sinking to the bottom of the sea. Had it not been for the courage of Queequeg who jumped in after him, Tashtego surely would have found himself resting among the bodies and bones of the very same creatures he had for so many years hunted, now also a victim of that same industry's rapacious appetite and indifference towards life. While these two instances might only be near-death rather than truly death inducing incidences, it is due more to the conductance of plot and the development of fiction, rather than reflective of the whaling industry in which, if you came close to death on the high-seas, you often found yourself leaving with him whether you like it or not.

In the case of the black stowaway aboard the *Pequod* named Pippin referred to as Pip, the story is much the same. Briefly disillusioned into thinking he was viewed differently, Pip is quickly reminded how easily he too can wind up a victim of industrializations exploitation when he costs his whaleboat a whale. "We can't afford to lose whales by the likes of you," Stubb says, "a whale would sell for thirty times what you would, Pip, in Alabama." As Melville comes right out and says, "Hereby perhaps Stubb indirectly hinted that though man loved his fellow, yet man is a money-making animal, which propensity too often interferes with his benevolence" (480). Melville's denoting man an animal is also a loaded term at such a time. In a world still defined by a Chain of Being the idea that man was an animal was borderline offensive. Furthermore, at the height of Christianity in America, referring to man as an animal could even be seen as sacrilegious, man in fact being made in the image of God. If man is an animal, and man is made

in the image of God, does God look like an animal? Is God an animal? Asking or even hinting at such questions in the nineteenth-century was certainly a risk let alone putting it into print. When Melville describes the plight of the whale as “chased over the watery moors, and slaughtered in the valleys of the deep,” becoming “the property of his executioner” (495), he is relating experiences that Pip, being a black boy from America, could probably relate closely to. In an invigorated version of the exploitation enacted upon whales, African slaves were deindividualized and othered, physically and philosophically, in justification of their continued exploitation under the same system of industry that daily spilled thousands of gallons of blood from the bodies of whales.

Finally, evidence of exploitation’s indiscriminate spread into affecting human life in *Moby-Dick*, can be seen in the interaction Melville recalls with King Tranquo, in the Arscides. Though three times in as many pages, Ishmael refers to Tranquo as his friend, yet his actions while visiting Tranquo are manipulative and betray a colonizing mindsight indicative of a life lived in continued exploitation. Ishmael, seeming to only value King Tranquo because he is in possession of a full-size sperm whale skeleton he dragged into the forest from his island beach, and made into a sacred temple. In contrast to actions generally displayed by friends, Melville recounts how Ishmael damaged trees and desecrated the temple, in attempts to get accurate measurements of the whale’s body for his own scientific purposes. All the while, paying little to no attention to his “friend” Tranquo, or the priests who were hard at work in the temple.

In a perversion of Morton’s ecological utopia where “Animals are not animals. Humans are not animals. Animals are not human. Humans are not Human,” the exploitation perpetuated by capitalist societies is one where no distinction is made except between what can be used for gain and that which cannot. Aware of this, and the many hundreds if not thousands of human lives lost each year in pursuit of whales, Melville pleads seemingly to no one but the lulling

waves and yet, to everyone, “For God’s sake, be economical with your lamps and candles! Not a gallon you burn, but at least one drop of man’s blood was spilled for it” (250). Of course, despite Melville’s progressive ecological views, he still operated with a predominantly anthropocentric focus and so here, is concerned only with the drop of man’s blood spilled, rather than the gallons that stained blue seas red as they poured from whales in “incessant streams,” “so vast the quantity of blood in [them], and so distant and numerous its interior fountains, that [they] will keep thus bleeding and bleeding for a considerable period; even as in a drought a river will flow, whose source is in the well-springs of far-off and undiscernible hills.” As Melville summarizes, “[they] must die the death and be murdered, in order to light the gay bridals and other merry-makings of men” (418).

In *Moby-Dick*, Melville provides enough evidence of the stream of bodies left behind whaling ships as to leave zero doubt in the minds of his reader that “there is death in this business of whaling” (66). On top of being victims of death, whalers certainly were also the regular perpetrators of death in a perpetual cycle of exploitation. As Melville clarifies in his discussion of killer whales, “we are all killers, on land and on sea; Bonapartes and Sharks included” (179). In a racist yet revealing look into Melville’s mind, he states categorically that the “true whale-hunter is as much a savage as an Iroquois” (322), a “Native American tribe with a warlike reputation,” as clarified in a footnote. Later after the first whale has been killed, Melville remarks that every sailor is a butcher (357). However adamantly Melville wants to exclaim the whaler as hero and the whaleship as a conquering steed, the truth is much more constantly in *Moby-Dick*. Melville reveals to us depiction after depiction of whalemens in which they are painted in the worst of lights often with disgust if not resentment. It is not an accident for example, that after the *Pequod* kills its first whale, Stubb, the first mate, sits down to a steak of whale meat and Melville scathingly holds up a mirror to human industry noting that Stubb

was not the only thing feasting on whale's flesh that night for, "Mingling their mumblings with his own mastications, thousands on thousands of sharks, swarming round the dead leviathan, smackingly feasted on its fatness" (346). Here too, as with Melville's statement that man is a "money-making animal," we see Melville's pushes against a hierarchy of species as put forward by the church and culture by and large. Contrasting the scene of Stubb's meal with the sharks, Melville holds humans up to the cold light, putting on full display the vicious and carnivorous ways that motivate and define Stubbs and sharks alike.

Melville at times pushes back against the capitalist society he finds himself wrapped up in and the ambivalence which those who spearhead such societies and enterprises have towards all life, human and animal alike. In an instance of Melville questioning the shaky lines set up by nineteenth-century society in regards to humans and their interactions with the natural world, Melville notes that though some look on the killing and eating of whales as gross or bad, much as they were beginning to see the consumption of dogs, cats, and horses, surely too, Melville speculates, "the first man that ever murdered an ox was regarded as a murderer; perhaps even hung" (354). Yet, in much the same way as the man who went from hunting whales to selling human heads, continued exploitation by members of society, led to desensitization and slow acceptance. Yet again, in another passage, Melville knocks at the door of an environmental philosophy that does not see a distinction between human and every other species stating, "Go to the meat market of a Saturday night and see the crowds of live bipeds staring up at the long rows of dead quadrupeds. Does not that sight take a tooth out of the cannibal's jaw? Cannibals? Who is not a cannibal? (Ibid).

Melville in this same passage also fires shots against the foundations of Christianity. Drawing attention to the hypocrisy evidenced by contemporary Christians's pretense that the natural world was a place to experience God, set against the backdrop of their daily destruction

and exploitation of the natural world, Melville concludes that “it will be more tolerable for the Fejee that salted down a lean missionary in his cellar against a coming famine; it will be more tolerable for that provident Fejee, I say, in the day of judgement, than for thee, civilized and enlightened gourmand, who nailest geese to the ground and featest on their bloated livers in thy paté-de-foie-gras” (Ibid). One-hundred and seventy odd years later, and the power and conviction of Melville’s words are as potent as if they just rolled off the printing presses. So quick to shout down those who may do wrong or just what we don’t condone, to survive, we spend our lives doing far worse not because we have to, but simply because we want to. This is not the only time Melville highlights the hypocrisy of the church’s position towards the natural world. With a sad resignation later in the journey, he remarks that whales must die “to illuminate the solemn churches that preach unconditional inoffensiveness by all to all” (418). Even on a metaphorical level, exploitation of other humans is prevalent: It is after all, after a tribe of Native Americans from what is now Massachusetts, driven to destruction by European action and disease, which the *Pequod* is named after. So, even as those aboard the *Pequod* exploit, they flaunt the name of those they have exploited. As Gatta amusingly discovered, “The English attitude toward the natives' rights,” and really toward the English’s rights over all other living things, “was never more succinctly expressed than by a town meeting at Milford, Connecticut, in 1640: “Voted, that the earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof; voted, that the earth is given to the Saints; voted, that we are the Saints.”⁵¹

As Melville depicts the merciless world that exploitation perpetuates, however, he nevertheless attempts to push back against it. In a brief moment of boy-like optimism Ishmael muses that “all hands should rub each other’s shoulder-blades, and be content” (30). Sentences later, looking at the bustling, capitalist society of New Bedford the capital of the American

⁵¹ John Gatta, *Making Nature Sacred : Literature, Religion, and Environment in America from the Puritans to the Present*, 8.

whaling industry at the time, Melville remarks that “The act of paying is perhaps the most uncomfortable infliction that the two orchard thieves entailed upon us . . . The urbane activity with which a man receives money is really marvellous, considering that we so earnestly believe money to be the root of all earthly ills” (31). It is with a similar level of irony that Melville describes one of the *Pequod's* owners, Captain Bildad, who “Though refusing from conscientious scruples, to bear arms against land invaders, yet himself had illimitably invaded the Atlantic and Pacific; and though a sworn foe to human bloodshed, yet had he in his straight-bodied coat, spilled tuns upon tuns of leviathan gore” (107).

While these words are a rebuke of Bildad, in them, we can also sense Melville’s growing disillusionment with Christianity. Raised by Christian parents, Herman Melville found himself introduced to religion at a formative age. Yet, hard times throughout his childhood, his family facing multiple deaths and bankruptcies during Melville’s upbringing, seem to have had a profound effect on how he viewed God, and certainly, how he viewed death. More than hard times though, the cynicism evidenced in Melville’s discussions of Christianity seem to imply that Melville had more than one negative interaction with those who use Christianity for manipulation and gain professing Christianity to a significantly higher degree than they act out the part. “Better to sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian” (50), Melville writes in chapter three of *Moby Dick*, and in chapter ten he makes it all the more explicit admitting that “Christian kindness has proved but hollow courtesy” (81).

Following his voyages, Melville also evidences a much more distant, transcendental, and interpretive, theology than the traditional Christianity in which he was raised. At the end of the chapter presaging the formal Christian sermon by Father Mapple which takes up chapter eight of *Moby-Dick*, Melville provides his current view of things displaying both the ways his experiences have caused him to reinterpret his religion, as well as the ways he saw religion

disillusioning effects on people, stating, “Methinks we have hugely mistaken this matter of Life and Death. Methinks that what they call my shadow here on earth is my true substance. Methinks that in looking at things spiritual, we are too much like oysters observing the sun through the water, and thinking that thick water the thinnest of air” (66). As Melville wrote to Nathaniel Hawthorne, “I feel that the Godhead is broken up like the bread at the Supper and that we are the pieces.”⁵²

In a general sense, Melville’s religious views can be interpreted as progressive even when held up against a modern light. When Ishmael is faced with sleeping in the same bed as a black cannibal, Melville writes lines that would certainly confound nineteenth-century as well as modern, American Christians and their general support of anti-immigration policies, when he ponders, “what is worship?---to do the will of God---*that* is worship. And what is the will of God?---to do to my fellow man what I would have my fellow man to do to me---*that* is the will of God. Now, Queequeg [the cannibal], is my fellow man” (82). It is also telling that in a discussion of cannibals and Christians, Melville grouped himself with the cannibals not the Christians, writing, “It’s a mutual, joint-stock world, in all Meridians. We cannibals must help these Christians” (92). It is interesting to wonder what part Christian hypocrisy in regards to murdering animals, played in Melville’s slow turn away from Christianity. As discussed in this essay, Melville’s fictional account of a whaling voyage is often times very different from other fiction and non-fiction accounts of whaling voyages in the 1840s and 50s, many of these “fish documents,” as King calls them, were consulted and at times, used liberally in his writing of *Moby Dick*. As King explains, “Melville created *Moby-Dick* within a crowded market of popular

⁵² John Gatta, *Making Nature Sacred : Literature, Religion, and Environment in America from the Puritans to the Present*, 19.

sea voyage narratives in which copying pages of others' writing was common and even scholarly."⁵³

Melville's differing and often more somber tone within *Moby-Dick*, along with his desertion following a brief whaling voyage, seem to stand in evidence of the fact that Melville did not condone, or at least could not stomach, the brutal actions daily required in the whaling industry. That men in such professions could call themselves Christian seems to have been a sticking point in Melville's mind and certainly seems to have contributed to his disillusionment with Christianity which continued to grow throughout the 1840s, ripening in the 50s. As Melville's Christianity waned, a form of proto-environmentalism and growing "domestic ethic of kindness," towards animals, began to govern his actions and attitudes as it had much of American culture at the time. Lydia H. Sigourney introduced a "domestic ethic of kindness," in 1838, writing, "instruct [your child] that the gift of life, to the poor beetle, or the crawling worm, is from the Great Father above,"⁵⁴ and from here, we see a view of animals begin to shift.

The shift in thought towards being kind to animals was also growing thanks to a new era of religious thought following the Second Great Awakening. In this shift, people such as Charlotte E.B. Tonna, an English evangelical, was rethinking the human-animal relationship, writing that the "restoration of kind relations between humans and animals was an important step toward rebuilding the paradise,"⁵⁵ which God originally intended earth to be. Jonathan Edwards, the renowned American preacher wrote "Some men would be moved with pity by seeing a brute-creature under extreme and long torments, who yet suffer no uneasiness in knowing that many

⁵³ Richard J. King, *Ahab's Rolling Sea*, 4.

⁵⁴ Lydia H. Sigourney, *Letters to Mothers*, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1846, 35-36.

⁵⁵ Charlotte B. Tonna, *Kindness to Animals*, Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, 1845, 8,9,12.

thousands of them every day cease to live, and so have an end put to all their pleasure, at butchers' shambles in great cities" (606). As Gatta explains:

Edwards establishes in *The End for Which God Created the World* that the ultimate end of all works of Creation is not human commodity but divine glory, just as the end of God's being is nothing other than the irreducible fact of God's essence. This remark encapsulates those peculiar contradictions that still inform our responses to animal life. Edwards's observation is verified today by the immense slaughter of animals that supports the American fast-food industry, though many of those who consume such foods go to considerable lengths to protect the life and health of household pets.⁵⁶

Forty years later, Harriet Beecher Stowe echoed and reemphasized this fact writing that "the care of the defenceless animal creation is to be an evidence of the complete triumph of Christianity."⁵⁷

By 1860, how humans interacted with animals was a key identifier of morals and character. As Katherine Grier notes in her book about the history of pets in America, "Gentle treatment of animals was regarded as an important attribute of good character and a useful test for distinguishing a good neighbor and citizen from a bad one."⁵⁸ The fact that such an ethic of kindness towards animals was spreading even while "human life was absolutely dependent on the labor of animals and on the products of their bodies, and when almost no one doubted that human beings had the divine right to be in charge of all the world's creatures,"⁵⁹ meant that the human-animal relationship by the 1840s and 1850s, when the whaling industry was at its height, was also at its most complex, as we can see in *Moby-Dick*.

Though Melville is not at the level of Morton questioning lines such as whether "Animals are not animals. Humans are not animals. Animals are not human. Humans are not Human," nor should we expect him to be, we can yet still, clearly note how Melville's thoughts are complex

⁵⁶ John Gatta, *Making Nature Sacred: Literature, Religion, and Environment in America from the Puritans to the Present*, 16.

⁵⁷ Harriet Beecher Stowe, "to Henry E Burton, esq.," 20 December 1881, Hartford: Stowe-Day Foundation.

⁵⁸ Katherine Grier, *Pets in America*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006, 182.

⁵⁹ Katherine Grier, *Pets in America*, 131.

and progressive, and push back against Christianity and the capitalist society that was establishing itself through the Industrial Revolution. Though Melville's environmentalism might be more veiled than Thoreau's idealistic depictions on Walden Pond, or Whitman's ethereal and spiritual connections to all living things, his fights and stands against established systems as well as society, are no less severe for their subtlety.

Furthermore, there are many times in *Moby-Dick* where the accustomed celebration and happiness that was often all too prevalent in the logs of whaling voyages when they killed a whale, seemed to be lacking. As if looking back on his participation in an industry of exploitation through the lenses of distance and time, Melville could see the destruction he perpetuated and might have been aware of its wrongs, both on an environmental and moral level. During breakfast in the Spouter Inn, Ishmael recalls how many whalers who had just returned from extensive voyages, "men who have seen the world," "had boarded great whales on the high seas--entire strangers to them--and duelled them dead without winking," "maintained a profound silence. And not only that, but they looked embarrassed" (58). In these passages we can see the shame and guilt creeping through. Many years of brutalizing animals led to a shame and embarrassment that seem to evidence itself most clearly in front of those who are most aware of the brutal actions required to kill a whale, such as here at the Spouter Inn, where whalers ate with whalers, all aware no matter how civil they may act around the table, of how savage they were upon the sea. As Melville notes in his observations of Queequeg, "You cannot hide the soul" (79), and though attempts might be made, the guilt and pain of a life lived exploiting others will always seep out whether at breakfast or in books.

Having desecrated King Tranquo's sperm whale skeleton temple, Melville concludes that the whale weighed roughly ninety tons, "reckoning thirteen men to a ton," Melville concludes that one whale weighs roughly equal to the mass of a whole village "of one thousand one

hundred inhabitants" (522). Scientific American concluded in 2015, that roughly three million whales were killed by the whaling industry between 1700-1950.⁶⁰ Sticking with Melville's math, that would equate to the mass of 3.3 billion people, almost half of the human population today. I bring this up to draw attention solely to the catastrophic size and sweeping reach of human exploitation of the environment. The destruction we have caused though on most damning display in our treatment of whales, infects all living things and each other. And, as scientific data has now made clear, has potentially and probably, cost us the survival of our species and even, this planet. Like Damocles' sword, our past actions towards the environment hang over our heads prophesying death. Though kings of the earth, exercising now our centuries long struggle for dominion, we find ourselves captive, cut off by the knees, a sword hanging over our heads, we now, finding ourselves faced with the lesson Damocles learned, that power and prestige, come at a price.

Conclusion

For many years, science has rung the alarm bell of our coming climate catastrophe. Scientists across many different fields, like Canaries in coal mines, scream from rooftops and Zoom cameras, in print and classrooms, that the human race must make drastic changes to mitigate the disasters we have caused. Over half a century ago, Rachel Carlson revealed her groundbreaking look into the state of the environment and the "diet of weak poisons,"⁶¹ we and the food we eat, are bathed in and consume, and the hazards it is causing to the lands, rivers, and skies, and all who dwell in and on them, including us. Yet little to nothing of substantial weight

⁶⁰ Daniel Cressey, *Scientific American*, "World's Whaling Slaughter Tallied at Three Million," *Nature Magazine*, 3/12/2

15, accessed 4/6/2021, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/world-s-whaling-slaughter-tallied-at-3-million>.

⁶¹ Rachel Carlson, *Silent Spring*, 12.

has been done and people seem to just not care. How can you possibly get people to care?

Charles C. Mann, In *The Wizard And The Prophet*, explores the counter environmental philosophies of “techno-optimism” exemplified by Normal Borlaug, the twentieth-century scientist and foundational figure in the “Green Revolution,” and the views of apocalyptic environmentalist William Vogt, a contemporary of Borlaug, who was an ornithologist and ecologist as well as writer and activist.⁶² In the book, Mann ponders whether it will be a return to a more enmeshed and environmentally friendly way of life or further technological innovation, which will ultimately solve the many problems of climate change and centuries of environmental destruction. While Mann never arrives at a conclusive decision, the book serving to provide information more than to persuade, Melville’s opinion on the matter is clear. Rather than the optimistic futures depicted in movies such as *Star Trek*, and Pixar Animation’s *Wall-E*, in which humankind takes to the stars in order for human life to continue, for Melville, such realities were the dreams of children and the idealistic. As Melville makes clear in *Moby-Dick*, exploitation of the environment can lead to one thing and one thing only: death. Returning the world to the indigenous. It is no coincidence that it was Ishmael alone that survived the *Pequod*. “Ishmael’s relation to us, the readers of *Moby-Dick*, is like that of Job’s messengers to Job,” Gatta writes, “the calamity he recounts, is a portent of further trials to come.”⁶³ While so many times the lines and ropes that connected whalers to the whale such as the ropes connecting the harpooned whale to the boat, or in the process of trying them out, fastened the whale to the side of the ship, ensured a power imbalance enabling exploitation, eventually, the natural world as the revolutions that defined the nineteenth-century attest, will grow tired of being exploited and subjugated, rising up and eventually, though maybe over the span of millenia, will restore the

⁶² Charles C. Mann, *The Wizard And The Prophet*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018, 5-7.

⁶³ John Gatta, *Making Nature Sacred : Literature, Religion, and Environment in America from the Puritans to the Present*, 164.

status-quo: enmeshment. Even, if at the cost of Homo-Sapiens.

Before justice is had and the natural world reclaims dominance however, it might still bring about our death as our existence is intrinsically tied to the very things we exploit and so often, drive nearly to extinction. In an astounding analysis of the whale-line in *Moby-Dick*, Gatta explains:

By describing the line that follows the harpoon, [Melville] discloses the elemental aspect of physical dependence, plunder, and exploit that underlies the deceptively mild, abstract quality of life in our technical civilization. Here the simple Manila rope is made to seem an archetype of the physical bond between man and nature, whether industrial or primitive. Although whaling is a rationalized, collective operation, based on a strict division of labor, it remains a bloody, murderous hunt. Playing this fact against the illusion that civilized man has won his freedom from physical nature, Melville transforms the line into an emblem of our animal fate. It signifies that we are bound to the whale by the needs and limitations of all living things, as, for example, hunger and death. Our precarious situation is illustrated by a man sitting in a whale boat. Technological progress does not alter the fact that his life remains enveloped in whale lines; at any moment the line may snatch him out of the boat. "For, when the line is darting out, to be seated then in the boat, is like being seated in the midst of the manifold whizzings of a steam-engine in full play, when every flying beam, and shaft, and wheel, is grazing you."⁶⁴

As much as we might wish we were Bourlaug's, inventing our way out of every problem, reality like Ishmael, bears the sad truth that we will meet our end enveloped in whale-lines, dragged to the bottom of the sea victim and victimizer together.

In Richard Powers's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Overstory* (2018), he writes that "the best argument in the world won't change a person's mind. The only thing that can do that is a good story."⁶⁵ In practicing what he preaches, Powers's book tells a story that though propelled by people, focuses on trees. Through the interweaving of people's lives and the exploration of the influence trees have on us both consciously and subconsciously, Powers provides in fiction,

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Richard Powers, *The Overstory*, New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2018, 336.

an example of the enmeshed world Morton described and the symbiosis scientists warn is needed for the survival of this planet. While *Moby-Dick* does not depict such an enmeshment, its contrasting depiction of a world centered on humanity's colonization of all living life on this planet in the nineteenth-century, is not an endorsement but an example of where such exercises will lead us.

In making the statement that only stories can change people's minds, Powers both singles out the importance of what we read in how it shapes our beliefs while also directing us to the responsibility and power authors hold in drawing attention to many of the world's greatest threats. Faced with this realization that science is failing to reach people, I like Powers, turn to words asking how what we read and have read as a country, has intrinsically influenced our relationship with the natural world. What I have found as I have hopefully begun to evidence in this essay, is that there are many authors whose names have been lost to time, classics that have fallen out of fashion, and authors many "old, white guys," who have found themselves sidelined by the new waves of feminism and pushes for social equality, that have spread across college campuses so far in the twenty-first-century.

Yet, these men have more to offer. As a discipline, lovers and critics of literature and members of English departments across the world, need to take a moment and wiping the slate clean, begin to re-examine the canon of American literature asking "what does this person have to say about our relationship with the natural world?" As we have asked and will continue to ask, "what does this person have to say about gender, race, class, industry," etc. Rather than looking at the implications of a syllabus with predominantly male authors, or white authors, we need to examine the implications of syllabi whose authors predominantly champion exploitative societies and portray skewed relationships between humans and other aspects of the natural

world in their writing. The time has come and gone when we can fake naivety when it comes to comprehending the effects what we read and watch, have on our thoughts and actions. We now must begin the uncomfortable task of figuring out the impact that has been had on us while we pretended we were unaffected, and begin to move forward with wisdom, speaking and reading words with forethought into what we are revealing about our own relationship with the natural world, as well as into how what we say influences how others view and interact with the environment around them.

In *Moby-Dick*, Melville grapples with mankind's place in this world. Throwing dominating man out into the indomitable ocean, he provides a case study into the influence and relationship between different species and humankind. In doing this, intentionally and unintentionally, Melville reveals a lot about his philosophy as well as the greater cultural philosophy towards the environment at the time, as well as in many ways, playing out for us in abbreviated time the effects of unbridled exploitation of the environment. In emulation of humankind's proficiency for celebrating and then destroying the natural world, Melville via the *Pequod* and her crew, lays out for his readers as I have attempted to lay out in this paper, the path and destination that awaits lives of environmental exploitation. Discontent to harvest only what is needed, Ahab with voracious will, exploited everything around him, whale, woman, man, monkey, shark, sailor, and everything in between. Melville is in no way shy about playing the scene out either. Exploitation leads to further exploitation, and further exploitation. With a voracious appetite, the *Pequod* hunts not just whales but every fish it stumbles across, robs islands of fruit, and manipulates, lies, and coerces, in the ultimate pursuit of wealth, which always ultimately, leads to death.

In one of the final gams of the *Pequod's* journey, she meets up with the *Virgin* and during

their meeting, whales are sighted. Melville reveals to us that the whale spotted rather than being a sperm whale, was a Fin-back whale, a species deemed uncapturable due to its incredible speed (421). Equipped with this knowledge, the *Pequod* lowers no boats in pursuit of the whale. Yet, apparently less educated or simply mistaken as to the species of the whale, the crew of the *Virgin* lowers boats in pursuit of this uncapturable whale. “In valiant chase of this unbearable brute, the *Virgin* crowding all sail, made after her four young keels, and thus they all disappeared far to leeward, still in bold, hopeful chase” (Ibid). Melville uses this brief scene to provide a moment of distinction between the *Pequod’s* captain Ahab and the captain of the *Virgin*, “Derick”. Melville, concluding the chapter, writes with clear denigration, “Oh! Many are the Fin-Backs, and many are the Dericks, my friend” (Ibid).

But here, I think Melville is wrong. While there are many Dericks, forced to use and sometimes even exploit the environment for their own sustainability and livelihood, the truth is, there are many, many, more Ahabs. Discontent with what we have and where we are, we pursue with unceasing determination and maniacal zeal, any and every opportunity to improve our station in life content with or ignorant of, the widespread destruction and exploitation which we leave in our wake. Sitting atop a pile of dead beings and celebrating our hierarchical position, we walk blindly towards certain death leading many friend and foe alike, along with us.

But, it’s never too late to be a Lilo, Literature can make us Lilos. By examining what we read and watch, and the influence it has on us, we can remold ourselves into enmeshed beings, we can break hierarchical chains. Rather than putting nature on a pedestal objectifying and dissecting every aspect of it, we can swim in it, be engulfed by it, become one with it, “For every atom belonging to [it] as good belongs to you.” Just be sure to take some peanut butter sandwiches with you and watch out for a fish named Pudge, he controls the weather.

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