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Raciocultural Union and “Fraternity of Feeling”

Ishmael’s Redemption in *Moby-Dick*

Emily Butler-Probst

Herman Melville’s focus on Ahab in *Moby-Dick*, and particularly his focus on the destructive consequences of Ahab’s obsession with discovering hidden truths, is not necessarily a concern with the desire to seek truth, but rather with the isolation that Ahab brings upon himself through his searching. Ahab’s “madness” is a madness of isolated fixation with truth which can be countered by human companionship—much like Melville’s own friendship with Nathaniel Hawthorne. In a letter written to Hawthorne, Melville expressed the connection that he felt with Hawthorne as a fellow author and friend who understood him and his writing: “A sense of unspeakable security is in me at this moment, on account of your having understood the book . . . I feel that the Godhead is broken up like the bread at the supper and we are the pieces. Hence this infinite fraternity of feeling” (*Letters* 142). Melville’s expression of his profound connection to Hawthorne is significant because it is both an intellectual connection and an emotional bond coming out of Hawthorne’s recognition of the major themes at work in *Moby-Dick*. Melville’s spiritualized description of the connection and deep friendship that he shares with Hawthorne is particularly interesting because it is intensified in Melville’s depiction of Ishmael and

Queequeg's companionship. Just as Melville and Hawthorne's friendship is comparable to communion bread, Ishmael's multicultural companionship with Queequeg is a redeeming experience that saves him from the belief that he can possess all of the answers to life's questions. As such, Queequeg becomes a Christ figure who introduces Ishmael to cultural otherness and relativism, saving him mentally from the hellish madness experienced by Ahab in the same way that Queequeg's "coffin" physically saves Ishmael at the conclusion of the novel (*Moby-Dick* 427).

In order to illuminate the ideal nature of Ishmael's communal multiculturalism, Melville juxtaposes the character of Ahab, who directs his efforts only toward his own selfish, personal mission to dissect the meaning of *Moby Dick*. His expressed goal moves beyond a desire to achieve vengeance for the loss of his leg to an epistemological desire to "strike through the mask" of the whale's enigmatic surface and discover the underlying secrets within (140). Ahab's pursuit of the whale is a pursuit of absolute truth, and as a result, he requires unitary, objective answers in order to locate the whale and extract the knowledge that he seeks. When Ahab is presented with the head of a decapitated whale that the crew has harvested, he asks this severed head to reveal the solitary secret contained within, commanding the personified whale head: "Tell us the secret thing that is in thee. Of all divers, thou hast dived the deepest" (249). Ahab's assertion in this passage that the whale has "dived the deepest" illustrates Melville's metaphoric treatment of diving as a symbol for deep knowledge and abstract interpretation. As Ishmael also attempts to interpret the white whale and his significance, he notes that explaining the full mystery of the whale "would be to dive deeper than Ishmael can go," indicating his interest in understanding the whale coupled with recognition of his own limitations and the inaccessibility of the deepest depths of knowledge (158). Additionally, the notion of diving as an indication of interpretation can be seen in "The Doubloon," when the efforts of various crewmembers to interpret the coin that Ahab has nailed to the mast causes their faces to take on an aspect that "might be somewhere within nine fathoms long. And all from looking at a piece of gold" (333). This change in facial expression stems from the crewmembers' interpretive process. The crewmembers' attempt to discover meaning in the ambiguous images depicted on the coin causes their faces to become "nine fathoms long"—paralleling the diving movements of their minds into

the oceanic depths of epistemological mysteries. Melville's link between diving and deep interpretive thought explains Ahab's claim that the deep diving whale may be able to provide answers to the mysteries that plague his life, such as the ultimate reason or purpose behind the loss of his leg. Ahab's need to understand the significance of his injury, and his desire to pursue these answers in spite of the dangers to himself and his crew, represents an obsessive impulse, a need to ascertain definitive truths beyond their practical limits. Lauren Becker observes a similar problem with Ahab's fixation on definitive answers: "[Ahab's] monomania can be seen as an obsessive desire with his Truth, regardless of its practical consequences. Even when he learns of his Truth's impracticality, his stubbornness will not allow him to give it up" (43). Ahab's insistence, not only that the severed whale head holds access to truth, but also that the head contains only one truth or "secret thing," illustrates his devotion to seeking out a singular, definite answer as the purpose of his quest.

Ahab's obsession with diving into interpretive depths is ultimately a solitary and destructive one, something that he expresses to Starbuck before his final assault on the whale when he cries out that his life has been a "desolation of solitude" (405). Ahab's reflection on his isolation causes him to acknowledge the detachment that began with his role as a captain and intensified during his pursuit of Moby Dick. As Ahab observes, his role as a captain contributed to his initial isolation, because his authoritative role formed the "walled-town of a Captain's exclusiveness, which admits but small entrance to any sympathy" (405). After noting the authority that isolates him from common sympathy and communion with others, Ahab charts a progression from isolation to the dehumanizing obsession with truth that has dominated his life: "And then, the madness, the frenzy, the boiling blood and the smoking brow, with which, for a thousand lowerings old Ahab has furiously, foamingly chased his prey—more a demon than a man!" (405). Ahab's interaction with Starbuck throughout this discussion is surprisingly open, but it describes a life that has been continuously private and closed off, both due to the isolating attributes of his authoritative career as a captain and, more significantly, due to the dehumanizing isolation of his obsession; a fixation with definitive truth that the other crewmembers cannot necessarily understand. It is this obsession with delving into the depths to find the ultimate truth while shutting out

the comforting voices of community which causes Ahab to launch into a pursuit of Moby Dick that destroys both himself and the entire crew with the exception of Ishmael (*Moby-Dick* 406).

Although Ahab's destructive demise suggests that isolation and an obsessive desire to grasp absolute truth can be destructive, Melville's desire to write, ponder, and explore complex ideas, and his similar depiction of Ishmael, reveals that intellectual searching is still a valuable pursuit—as long as it is conducted in a safe manner. In order to safely pursue intellectual inquiry Melville proposes that the individual must be tethered to other human beings as he searches in much the same way the monkey-rope joins Ishmael and Queequeg while they work on harvesting materials from whales (*Moby-Dick* 255). In her study of physical contact and the pursuit of knowledge, Lisa Ann Robertson notes that the attempt to decipher truth can be beneficial so long as it is balanced by human companionship and the awareness that many absolute truths are unattainable: "We are incapable of knowing if metaphysical reality exists objectively because it is empirically unverifiable. Still, trying to discover these truths makes for a grand adventure, as Melville so aptly demonstrates" (7). Robertson adds that the persistent search for deeper knowledge is personally fulfilling, but that it "must be accompanied by human touch" so that the pursuit of knowledge does not result in the psychological damage experienced by Ahab (7). The potential for human contact or companionship to save a mind mired in abstract searching can be observed in a metaphorical sense in the chapter "Cistern and Buckets," when Queequeg rescues Tashtego from drowning in a sinking whale head in which he has become trapped. As Tashtego is helping to harvest spermaceti from one of the whales, he falls inside the whale's head while it is sinking into the water, an incident associated with abstract contemplation: "Tashtego—like the twin reciprocating bucket in a veritable well, dropped head-foremost down into this great Tun of Heidelburgh, and with a horrible oily gurgling, went clean out of sight!" (271). The combination of Tashtego's descent into the contemplative depths of the sea and his physical placement of falling "head-foremost" into this whale's head both convey the concept of excessive contemplation or absolutism, while the fact that he is drowning in these depths confirms the inherent risk of this pursuit. When it comes to the intellectual space represented by the whale's head, Samuel Otter remarks that the result is considerably disappointing because "it's disgusting. It's oily. It's gurgling. And you're drowning in it" (151).

As Tashtego plunges into this intellectual abyss, he has the potential to face the same isolated destruction as Ahab; however, Melville prevents Tashtego from facing this solitary demise by having Queequeg leap into the water and save Tashtego's life. After diving in after Tashtego, Queequeg uses his sword to cut a hole in the bottom portion of the descending whale head and then pulls Tashtego out of this newly-formed hole. Melville's portrayal of Queequeg's approach to rescuing Tashtego goes beyond a simple description of saving a drowning man and into language that imbues the process with the metaphor of childbirth. While rescuing Tashtego, Queequeg "thrust[s] his long arm far inwards and upwards, and so haul[s] out poor Tash by the head," an action which deliberately mirrors the birthing process (272). Additionally, the success of the Queequeg's operation and rescue is described by Melville as the "deliverance, or rather, delivery of Tashtego" (272). Tashtego's "delivery" by Queequeg highlights the role of community and the need to be reborn from destructive habits. Instead of drowning in a whale head that is associated with abstract pondering, Queequeg's rescue provides "both a literal release from the whale's head and a figurative release from conceptual cages" (Otter 152). This release is both initiated and completed by interpersonal contact which frees Tashtego's mind from isolated intellectual destruction. It is also significant that Queequeg's rescue is framed as a form of "delivery" or childbirth, because his role in saving Tashtego from death in contemplative depths represents a form of redemption that harkens back to Christian salvation, which necessitates being "born again" into a new mindset and outlook on life. Tashtego's experience of a "second birth" by being saved from drowning in contemplative depths allows Melville to set up a metaphorical salvation narrative through the redemptive efforts of Queequeg. Queequeg's role as a "savior" and his rescue as a form of "salvation" are displayed in a more overt sense through Queequeg's influence on Ishmael in the early chapters of *Moby-Dick*. Just as Queequeg saves Tashtego from an untimely death in intellectual waters, he also saves Ishmael from a fate similar to Ahab's disastrous pursuit of definitive truths, allowing Ishmael to embrace multiple sources of knowledge.

Ishmael's first encounter with Queequeg and their resulting companionship initiates a transition in Ishmael's mind from an Ahabic dependence on detached observation and excessive contemplation to a

balanced embrace of both intellect and community. When Ishmael arrives at the Spouter Inn to rest for the night before setting out on his whaling voyage, he is informed that all the rooms are currently occupied and that he will need to share a bed with a harpooner. Ishmael's initial reluctance to share a bed with Queequeg stems largely from the innkeeper Peter Coffin's description of Queequeg as "a dark complexioned chap" who "eats nothing but steaks, and likes 'em rare" (28). Coffin's description of Queequeg as a harpooner from an unfamiliar cultural and racial background is a source of anxiety for Ishmael, an anxiety which he attempts to assuage by silently watching Queequeg undress and conduct his worship practices. Ishmael's observation of Queequeg lasts for a surprisingly long time, objectifying and stereotyping Queequeg as a terrifying Other: "It was now quite plain that he must be some abominable savage or other . . . A peddler of heads too—perhaps the heads of his own brothers. He might take a fancy to mine—heavens! look at that tomahawk!" (34-35). Ishmael's stereotypical view turns Queequeg into a frightening figure rather than allowing him to appreciate a new culture that he could embrace. Observing Queequeg's alternate cultural practices from the safety of the bed, Ishmael sees Queequeg as an enigmatic figure with tattoos and other features that are mysterious to Ishmael and cause him to long for answers: "I am no coward, but what to make of this head-peddling purple rascal altogether passed my comprehension . . . I was so afraid of him that I was not game enough just then to address him, and demand a satisfactory answer concerning what seemed inexplicable in him" (34). Ishmael's obsessive observation of Queequeg's tattoos and his interest in discovering the "inexplicable" in Queequeg at this point is almost identical to Ahab's later observation of Queequeg's tattoos. When Ahab is exposed to Queequeg's tattoos, which are imbued with a meaning that will inevitably "moulder away" upon Queequeg's death and remain "unsolved to the last," he studies them and expresses his frustration that he may constantly study or "survey" Queequeg, but will never discover the ultimate meaning of the enigmatic tattoos, referring to the inaccessibility of the truth behind them as a "devilish tantalization" (366-367).

Unlike Ahab, who dies as a detached, obsessive observer in pursuit of absolute truth, Ishmael is forced out of his observer status and into the role of a participant and companion. Ishmael's anxious observation of Queequeg quickly transforms into outright terror when Queequeg

extinguishes the lights, jumps into the bed, and initiates physical contact with Ishmael: “I sang out. I could not help it now; and giving a grunt of astonishment he began feeling me” (35). As Joseph Fruscione observes, Queequeg’s physical contact with Ishmael shatters the illusion that Ishmael can arrive at knowledge through observation and forces him into the role of a participant: “For Ishmael, this safe distance at which to experience ‘the spell’ of looking disappears; he quickly transforms from an audience of to a participant in Queequeg’s pre-sleep ritual” (15). Ishmael’s sudden transition from observer to participant dismantles his dependence on detached observation and causes him to embrace physical contact as a source of knowledge because sole dependence on sight is an inadequate empirical method. Robertson explains that the detached visual senses are simply unable to arrive at interpersonal truths about Queequeg and Ishmael’s companionship: “Just as his early visual impressions of Queequeg as an ‘infernal’ and ‘wild cannibal’ are revealed to be incorrect, so his sense of sight fails to provide him with accurate information about his new relationship with Queequeg” (13). Ishmael’s physical contact with Queequeg serves to initiate his embrace of Queequeg’s cultural identity, a cultural embrace which Ishmael expresses only a few paragraphs later: “What’s all this fuss I have been making about, thought I to myself—the man’s a human being just as I am” (36). Contact with Queequeg transforms Ishmael, disrupting his confidence in the detached intellectual gaze and allowing him to recognize the need for interpersonal contact in order to discover multicultural truths.

While the description of Ishmael and Queequeg’s physical contact, shared bed, and “marriage” bring to mind homoerotic associations, this relationship has been explored by other critics (see, for example, the works of Steven B. Herrmann and Leslie Fiedler), and it is worth noting that the concept of marriage and romantic attachment is also utilized in the Bible as an allegory for salvation. In the book of Ephesians, husbands are urged to base their treatment of their wives on the example of Christ’s love for the church: “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word” (Eph 5.25–26). In this case, the biblical allegory of marriage is designed to represent an intimate relationship between a redeeming lover, Christ, and his bride, the church, which receives his affection. Given that this marriage places

Christ in the role of the husband and the church as a wife, it is particularly striking that Melville uses his familiarity with the Bible to place Ishmael in the position of a wife figure when he awakens the next morning after sharing the bed with Queequeg: “I found Queequeg’s arm thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate manner. You had almost thought I had been his wife” (*Moby-Dick* 36). This bond with Queequeg is vital to Ishmael’s psychological health; Paul McCarthy observes in his study of madness that the fact that “touchy, imaginative Ishmael manages to keep his equilibrium” without declining into madness himself is primarily due to the direct influence of Queequeg (348). By positioning Queequeg as a Christ-figure and Ishmael as an individual in need of redemption, Melville is also utilizing the concept of marriage to present a picture of salvation, the primary difference being that Ishmael receives a cultural redemption rather than a religious conversion.

Melville continues to develop Ishmael’s story as a salvation narrative in the chapter “A Bosom Friend,” when Ishmael’s perspective undergoes a shift from seeing Queequeg as an intriguing enigma to viewing him as a potential companion. While Ishmael’s earlier experience in sharing a bed with Queequeg implies a redemptive marriage, this passage clearly describes Ishmael’s acceptance of Queequeg as a “salvation” of sorts that is accompanied by an internal transformation: “I began to be sensible of strange feelings. I felt a melting in me. No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world. This soothing savage had redeemed it” (56). Ishmael’s loving friendship and quasi-marriage to Queequeg gives him a form of redemption, endowing Ishmael vicariously with a degree of exposure to an alternate culture and thus an alternate understanding of truth. Ishmael equates the newfound cultural syncretism between Queequeg’s beliefs and his own with a religious revival that has saved him from damnation, in this case an interpersonal and multicultural relief from the obsessive need for certainty.

Melville’s depiction of Queequeg as a Pacific Islander rather than a more homogeneous American identity and Queequeg’s role in personally saving Ishmael from obsession and insanity are interconnected attributes that may be linked to nineteenth-century perceptions of decreased insanity among non-white cultures. As Norman Dain notes in his study of nineteenth-century concepts of insanity, researchers during this period observed fewer cases of insanity among Native Americans and African

Americans and thus assumed that insanity was primarily a consequence of living in an industrialized society that was deemed more civilized than other indigenous cultures (89). Lynn Gamwell and Nancy Tomes add that the belief that other cultural identities were not susceptible to madness was fairly prevalent in the nineteenth century and influenced whether individuals from other denigrated races could be admitted into insane asylums: “Because medical authorities linked mental derangement with advanced civilization, they tended to assume that the more ‘childlike,’ dependent races, including Indians and African Americans, suffered less frequently from insanity and therefore did not need asylum care” (56). By depicting Queequeg as the cure for Ahabic madness, Melville invokes some contemporary notions of the Other as less influenced by insanity, but he rewrites or perhaps “redeems” the imperialist nineteenth-century implications of this worldview by allowing Ishmael to find healing by embracing Queequeg’s cultural identity. As Ishmael begins to unite with Queequeg, he also integrates attributes of Queequeg’s culture into his own lifestyle, joining Queequeg in some of his cultural practices. Shortly after Ishmael and Queequeg begin to pursue a relationship, Ishmael asks Queequeg if he can share a smoke with him on his tomahawk pipe, an action that illustrates the cultural merger between Ishmael and Queequeg, as well as an embrace of community: “Soon I proposed a social smoke; and, producing his pipe and tomahawk, he quietly offered me a puff. And then we sat exchanging puffs from that wild pipe of his, and keeping it regularly passing between us” (56). By sharing Queequeg’s pipe, Ishmael allows himself to embrace a new cultural practice and engages with Queequeg as an equal and sociable compatriot.

Ishmael’s transformation through the influence of Queequeg is so profound and dramatic that he eventually transitions from observing Queequeg’s unique tattooing in a detached manner in “The Spouter Inn,” to placing similar tattooing on his own body: “The skeleton dimensions I shall now proceed to set down are copied verbatim from my right arm, where I had them tattooed” (346). Ishmael then expresses his desire to leave the rest of his body “blank” so that his remaining skin can serve as the canvas for a poem he is composing, possibly in remembrance of Queequeg (346). Ishmael’s description of these tattoos is particularly significant because unlike Queequeg or Ahab, the description of his tattoos serves as his primary physical description in the novel. In *Melville’s Anatomies*,

a work which informs many of my observations about physicality and identity in the latter portion of this essay, Samuel Otter observes that “in contrast to the pages devoted to the details of Ahab’s aspect and ailments, the regard for Queequeg’s figure and figures, and chapter after chapter lavished on the whale, no words in *Moby-Dick* describe the features of Ishmael” (165). As a result of Ishmael’s limited physical description, his own description of his tattoos serves to define him because he offers up no other physical identifiers: “[When] Ishmael reveals that he has the measurements of a whale skeleton tattooed on his arm, the fact that he has a tattoo, and even the fact that he has a right arm, come as something of a surprise” (Otter 165). By physically identifying, and in some ways defining Ishmael by his tattoos, Melville suggests that Ishmael has embraced Queequeg’s culture to such an extent that it has defined his identity, in much the same way that a new religious belief might serve to redefine an individual’s consciousness. However, it is important to note that Ishmael’s acceptance of tattooing is not just an acceptance of racial conversion by Queequeg, but it is also an example of cultural syncretism because his tattoos are English words and figures rather than tattoos that resemble Queequeg’s. Ishmael’s embrace of Queequeg’s culture through smoking the other man’s pipe and the tattooing of his own body without necessarily abandoning his original cultural identity express a model of cultural hybridity and merging within Ishmael’s mind.

Ishmael’s willingness to cover his body with tattoos in this way is particularly striking when compared to the protagonist from Melville’s first novel, *Typee*: Tommo refuses to accept tattooing, and, by extension refuses the raciocultural conversion that accompanies it. Tommo’s first concerns with the process of tattooing seem to stem from a concern that tattooing will damage his physical appearance; Tommo describes himself “shuddering at the ruin [the tattoo artist] might inflict upon my figure-head” (*Typee* 219). Regardless of Tommo’s initial concerns about the physical damage of tattooing, it becomes evident over the course of his narration that Tommo is far more concerned about the religious implications of tattooing than he is about a change in his physical appearance: “A fact which I soon afterwards learned augmented my apprehension. The whole system of tattooing was, I found, connected with their religion; and it was evident, therefore, that they were resolved to make a convert of me” (220). Tommo’s hostility toward receiving tattoos from the *Typee* is not

only a rejection of the religious conversion implicated by tattooing, but it is also a refusal to become a part of the Typee culture he is being invited to join, which becomes evident as he begins to search frantically for a means of leaving the Typee settlement (220). The idea that Tommo's aversion to tattooing suggests a deeper rejection of cultural conversion rather than simply religious conversion comes from Otter's observation that the anxiety surrounding Tommo and tattooing is ultimately an anxiety about embracing an alternate racial consciousness. Otter explains that "Tommo is afraid not of theological conversion but of racial conversion. Tattoos are 'engrafted upon white skin'—as though the operation involved a translation of living tissue from Polynesian to American" (40). Tommo's rejection of tattooing in a physical, religious, but most importantly, cultural sense indicates that he is not fearfully rejecting the practice of tattooing in particular but is instead rejecting the larger symbolism of an opportunity for raciocultural salvation through the Typee people, the same salvation provided to Ishmael by Queequeg in *Moby-Dick*.

Ishmael's connection with Queequeg is not only significant because it "converts" him to a more pluralistic way of seeing the world, but also because it serves to introduce him to a wider web of human interconnectivity, a connectivity that is displayed quite prominently in the chapter "The Squeeze of Hands." While Ishmael is breaking down the tiny globules of spermaceti with his crewmates, he experiences a moment of radical interconnectivity where the boundaries between himself and the other crewmembers destabilizes:

I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers' hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget . . . Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness (322–323).

This extreme dissolution of interpersonal boundaries presents a strong depiction of love—a love which, as William Ellery Sedgwick observes, must eschew divisions and segmentation: "All that withdraws men from men and puts barriers between them, and obstructs the flow of vital sympathies, all that is evil . . . Virtue does not keep herself to herself on the quarterdeck but descends and fraternizes with the men" (161). As Sedgwick's quote

suggests, love and interpersonal connection should not be concerned with the hierarchies that generally carve up human existence as a dissecting scalpel would, but love should instead find companionship in a variety of people, including those from diverse or oppressed perspectives.

The experience of blurred boundaries through squeezing the spermaceti also presents an alternate approach to pursuing knowledge as Ishmael engages in tactile contact along with his crewmates rather than isolated dissection. Otter expresses the function of “The Squeeze of Hands” in dissolving intellectual hierarchies through physical touch when he notes that “in this scene, fingers are extended and boundaries stretched. The monumental difference represented by the whale is caressed and inhaled rather than dissected, calibrated, or deciphered” (159). The tactile and communal method of engaging with the whale that Otter describes here is directly oppositional to Ahab’s obsessive dive for truth and reveals a communal presence which can sustain individuals as they pursue deeper truths. The benefit of interpersonal connection as a means of ameliorating obsession can also be observed in this instance as Ahab’s manic quest, which has “infected” the entire crew to a certain extent, is forgotten and replaced by community: “I forgot all about our horrible oath; in that inexpressible sperm, I washed my hands and my heart of it” (322). Ishmael’s communal interaction has the power to supersede the destructive influence of Ahab’s obsessive quest for absolute truth because it provides him with a different source of focus and fulfillment, in much the same way that pragmatism as a philosophy seeks out community and eschews the pursuit of absolute truths. Leigh Hunt, an essayist that Melville read while he was writing *Moby-Dick*, describes a similar curative influence through community in his essay “Advice to the Melancholy” (Sanborn 109). In this essay, Hunt argues that communal and domestic pursuits helped to alleviate melancholy feelings which also constituted a form of mental illness: “Increase all of your natural and healthy enjoyments. Cultivate your afternoon fire-side, the society of your friends, the company of agreeable children” (24). In reading this essay, Melville may have found part of the inspiration for his own depiction of a redeeming communal experience, an experience which saves individuals from madness and also prevents them from losing their sanity in the first place. As Robertson observes, Melville’s depiction of community presents companionship with other human beings as a

source of peace that the individual can take solace in, particularly after confronting the impossibility of deciphering the mysteries of existence: “Periodic physical contact with another human being is Melville’s antidote to the maddening fact that the ‘secrets’ of the universe are impenetrable” (7). By engaging in human affection, which ideally breaks down hierarchal and interpersonal boundaries, individuals are exposed to a variety of commingling perspectives and may even become less certain that there is a definitive truth to pursue in the first place.

While Ishmael’s alternate, communal and pragmatic approach to understanding the world is promoted as a better option than Ahab’s obsessive destruction, this does not necessarily mean that Ishmael’s approach is void of challenges or free of frightening implications. While Ishmael’s mode of thinking can be quite liberating in its disassociation from the limitations of categorization and domination by obsessive extremes, it is also an insecure, perilous, and frightening existence because the individual is no longer able to rely on formulaic, ingrained cultural knowledge. Ishmael’s embrace of cultural syncretism by uniting Queequeg’s beliefs with his own is also an embrace of a pragmatic approach to truth which emphasizes the importance of community in arriving at an understanding of truth and a rejection of the concept of absolute truths. While the official genesis of pragmatist philosophy wasn’t until the late nineteenth century, Maurice Lee notes that Melville’s writing contains early echoes of this communal, experiential, anti-absolutist philosophy (396). As a worldview that shuns objective truths, the pragmatist philosophy that Ishmael seems to be embracing also has the unfortunate consequence of setting him adrift in a world that he can never fully understand, a world where his experiences are rewriting his understanding of truth on a constant basis. Edwin Shneidman explores a similar idea to the instability of pragmatism when he writes that a complex worldview that embraces ambiguity and duality is terrifying because it is completely oppositional to the “ordered” world that people are familiar with: “To exist with the knowledge of ambivalences, dualities, and oxymorons is a more complicated challenge than to live in the more simple world of the sixteen valid moods of Aristotelian syllogism. And even more frightening, for unlike the ordered Aristotelian world, there are no magic talismanic formulas to guide us” (Shneidman 556). Ishmael’s hierarchal destabilization in “Squeeze of Hands” is a good example of the uncertainty that Shneidman is referring to in this case. While Ishmael is

exposed to a state of transcendental union with the crew in the communal act of sperm-squeezing, an experience of all individuals being squeezed “into each other” and becoming one is a radical new state of being that can potentially be just as terrifying as it is exhilarating. Ishmael’s active blurring and merging of hierarchies and cultural boundaries enables him to move beyond the limitations of objective analysis and enter into an exciting state of being that is free from the pitfalls of absolutism. However, in spite of the joys of Ishmael’s communal blurring, his experiences also signify the entry into a frightening world of uncertainty, liminality, and the unsettling potential for aimlessness.

Ishmael exists in Melville’s narrative as a means of introducing an alternate way to negotiate the world, one which does not depend on detachment, dissection, or absolutism. Ishmael observes after investigating the whale’s tale that in spite of his efforts and repeated explorations, he will never fully comprehend the mysterious attributes of the whale: “Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will. But if I know not even the tail of this whale, how understand his head? much more, how comprehend his face, when face he has none?” (296). Ishmael accepts that some answers are beyond the scope of his knowledge even though he also enjoys searching for this knowledge of the whale. His intellectual pursuit and embrace of unknowability reflects the pragmatic desire to pursue truth, even as it rejects the pursuit of absolutes. The acceptance that Ishmael displays by recognizing his own limited knowledge, as well as the fact that he cannot “dissect” the whale in order to arrive at definitive truth, sets Ishmael in direct contrast to Ahab who must “strike through the mask” in order to break through appearances and arrive at absolute truth (140). This problematic, unrelenting “dissection” of cultural mysteries is precisely what Ahab does as he studies Queequeg obsessively and then expresses his frustration when he cannot arrive at an explanation for what Queequeg’s tattoos mean (367).

While Ahab is himself a mixed character at many points, both romanticized and destructive, the juxtaposition between Ahab and Ishmael allows Ishmael to present himself as the solution for the pitfalls and devastation encountered by Ahab. As Emory Elliott explains, Ishmael’s survival is a form of balance because he combines deep, in some cases even scientific, contemplation with interpersonal union: “One moment, he is the empirical scientist cataloguing and defining in detail each type of whale in the ‘Cetology’ chapter while at another he

is squeezing the sperm and the hands of other seamen, appreciating the universal communication and spirit that flows through them” (190). Because Ishmael engages in both communal enrichment and a search for knowledge, the knowledge that he discovers is more multicultural and interpersonal, making him less vulnerable to the obsessive destruction encountered by Ahab. Ishmael’s survival provides hope to readers because it offers an alternative to the destructive fate met by Ahab. Robertson describes Ishmael as the redemptive solution to Ahab when she writes: “Once his voyage has begun, Ahab will not abandon it, but others learn ways to make it manageable. Ishmael is Ahab’s problem solved. The quest requires a shuttle-like approach that alternates between seeking and resting, questing and communing” (14). Because Ishmael embraces community, he achieves a balance between “questing” after truth and “communing” with others a balance which changes his outlook on the pursuit of knowledge, allowing him to appreciate the chase after knowledge more than any definitive knowledge that he may gain from the pursuit.

Ishmael’s companionship with Queequeg is not only a source of personal solace, but ultimately a force that completely transforms Ishmael’s worldview and ensures his future survival. Without his embrace of a spiritual redemption through Queequeg, Ishmael’s lifestyle would be an echo of Ahab’s obsessive, detached approach to the world, and it would likely have the same destructive result. Instead of experiencing death as Ahab and the rest of the crew does, Ishmael emerges from the wreckage as the only survivor of the Pequod. His continued survival is once again due to Queequeg, as Ishmael explains that Queequeg’s coffin, the only remaining symbol of Queequeg himself, has survived the disaster and preserved his life (*Moby-Dick* 427). The death of Queequeg and the manner in which the symbol of that death, his coffin, becomes the source of Ishmael’s continued life, merely cements the depiction of Queequeg as a cultural Christ figure which reoccurs throughout the novel. Through Queequeg, Ishmael is culturally converted, welcomed into an understanding of truth that is communal and infinite in its expansive potential. A worldview that can contain the conflicting, multicultural views of the community and still hunger for more without obsessing over truths that are unattainable.

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