When Melville completed *Moby-Dick* in 1851 he wrote to his friend, Nathaniel Hawthorne, to whom he dedicated *Moby-Dick*: “I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb.” What did he mean by this? Well, first, he felt an “infinite fraternity of feeling” with Hawthorne because Hawthorne “understood the book” and shared what Melville called “that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin”—that “blackness, ten times black”—“from whose visitations…no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free.” *Moby-Dick* embodies this “blackness, ten times black” in image, character, scene, and action as part of the tragedy of American and Democratic History writ large. *Moby-Dick* is a savage attack on the hypocrisy of Christianity and the pursuit of gain as the overriding value of America. Through Ahab’s epic and tragic pursuit of the white whale, *Moby-Dick* locates the sources of American tragedy and apocalypse in the very values of Freedom and Individual autonomy that underwrite the American experiment in democracy.

How did Melville come to write this “wicked book” about a seemingly mad captain bent on destroying ship, crew, and world in order to wreak havoc on Moby Dick for having sliced off his leg in “mortal” combat at sea? Melville was born in 1819 into a comfortable New York patrician family whose maternal and paternal grandfather fought in the American Revolution. The economic ruin and suicide of his merchant father plunged his family into economic ruin, so Melville had to quit school and go to sea as a common sailor. For him, as for his protagonist Ishmael, “a whale-ship” became his
Harvard and his Yale. In 1842, Melville jumped ship with his friend Toby Greene and spent four weeks with the Typee tribe in the Marquesas. Melville’s first book, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846) was based on this experience. The book made him popular as the “man who lived among the cannibals.” Melville wrote several other popular books based on his experience as a sailor; *Omoo* in 1847; *Mardi*, a philosophical allegory, in 1849; and *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* in 1850, both based on his experience as a seaman.

But Melville had, as it were, bigger fish to fry. He was split between his need to write for the market place and his ambition to write the Truth. “Try to get a living by the Truth—and go to the Soup Societies,” he wrote while he was working on *Moby-Dick*. “Dollars damn me, and the malicious Devil is forever grinning upon me, holding the door ajar…What I feel most moved to write, that is banned—it will not pay. Yet altogether write the other way I cannot.” (539) In writing *Moby-Dick*, which he described as a “romance of adventure, founded upon the wild legends in the Southern Sperm Whale Industries” and his experience as a harpooner, Melville began to experiment with subversive ways to engage in philosophical reflection and social critique—to tell the truth—and maintain his popular marketplace appeal by working between FACT and SYMBOL.

We see this in the TITLE: *Moby-Dick, or the Whale*: Moby Dick is a symbol and myth and the Whale is the Fact. Melville seeks to combine the REALISM of the everyday whaling industry with ROMANCE, to as he says “get poetry out of blubber.” *Moby Dick* is at once the story of a Whaling Adventure and a Metaphysical Quest. Like the voyage of the *Pequod* itself, *Moby-Dick* is at once a Commercial Adventure and a
Hermeneutic Quest for the meaning of things. Melville’s narrative interweaves the 
Literature of Whaling and Imaginative Literature, especially Shakespeare and other 
English Renaissance writers. Its language combines the American vernacular of sailors 
with Biblical and literary language, allusion, and imagery.

In *Moby-Dick* Melville seeks to capitalize on the popular and national interest in
Whaling through an ADVENTURE STORY that is also a HERMENEUTICAL
QUEST—a metaphysical quest for the meaning of the universe and a deep diving
exploration of the problem of good and evil, the problem of knowledge, the nature of
things, and the promise, possibility, and ultimate tragedy of DEMOCRACY in America
and worldwide symbolized by the Apocalyptic ending.

*Moby Dick* is at once a utopian celebration of DEMOCRACY and the ideals of
communality and love as they are embodied in the cross-race, same sex relation of the
South sea islander Queequeg and the white American Ishmael and the common LABOR
of the multiracial and multinational CREW; and *Moby-Dick* is also a JEREMIAD
against the FAILURES of the AMERICAN ERRAND as it is embodied by the greedy
COMMERCIAL pursuit of CAPITAL and PROFIT—at any cost—and the DANGER
of UNLEASHED DEMOCRACY as it is embodied in the unleashed INDIVIDUAL
and IMPERIAL WILL TO POWER or WILL and POWER of Ahab, and the ultimate
FAILURE of the crew to REBEL AGAINST AHB’S TOTALITARIAN WILL.

The simultaneously FACTUAL and SYMBOLIC dimensions of Melville’s
pursuit of the White Whale are most powerfully dramatized in the face-off between Ahab
and Starbuck in Ch. 36: “The Quarter Deck,” in which Ahab announces his intent of
pursuing the White Whale to the crew. In this chapter Ahab nails a Spanish doubloon to
the main mast of the ship and announces that whoever first “raises” the white whale
Moby Dick will get the sixteen dollar gold piece. When Ahab announces that this is what
they have shipped for, only Starbuck, the deeply religious first mate protests in the name
of business and money.

“Vengeance on a dumb brute!” “How many barrels will thy vengeance…fetch in
our Nantucket market,” Starbuck asks. But Ahab sets his quest to kill evil and find out
the meaning of things against Starbuck’s mere capitalist pursuit of money, an act that
allies Ahab’s pursuit of the white whale with Melville’s own pursuit of Moby-Dick as
means of defying the market by writing a deep-diving inquiry into the nature of things.

“Thou requirest a little lower layer,” Ahab tells Starbuck, setting forth his vision of the
whale not as money but as a symbol of the “pasteboard mask” of the world throughout
which some “inscrutable malice” expresses itself. “That inscrutable thing is chiefly what
I hate,” Ahab declares, “and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principle, I
will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I’d strike the sun if it
insulted me.”

Here Ahab not only announces himself to be a deeper reader than Starbuck; he
also allies himself with Emersonian transcendentalism, first in reading Moby Dick as
symbol of some higher meaning or truth; and second in asserting the absolute authority
and autonomy of the Individual over all things. “I’d strike the sun if it insulted me,”
Ahab asserts. “Who’s over me?” he asks. These qualities make Ahab by turns an epic
hero who wants to “strike through the mask!”; a Nihilist, “Sometimes I think there’s
Nought beyond”; a Democratic Individualist, “Who’s over me?”; and a tragic figure
brought down by the very qualities that make him heroic.
As a fictional embodiment of the best and the worst in liberal democratic ideology, Ahab is at once a heroic and a tragic figure. Although Ahab has his “humanities” – he sympathizes with the values of home and hearth reflected in Starbuck’s eyes and he hold the hand of Pip, the black cabin boy, in an act of empathetic identification with the outcast slave – Ahab also ends by destroying not only the ship of America as ship of the world but the very possibility of liberal freedom represented by its global and multiracial crew of “mariners, and renegades and castaways.”

The symbolism of the whale, and especially Moby-Dick, is similarly indeterminate in *Moby-Dick*. Melville’s pursuit of the White Whale is linked with the Problem of Knowledge and a critique of the Enlightenment faith in human reason and science. Associated with an “unwritten origin” and the “secrets of the sea,” the whale becomes a symbol of the UNKNOWN, NATURE, and the OTHER, a kind of mirror, like *Moby-Dick* for Ahab, of man’s “monomaniac” obsessions. Beginning with the first chapter “Loomings,” in which the figure of Narcissus plunges to his death in seeking to “grasp” the “image of the ungraspable phantom of life,” this mirroring motif, and the terrorist prospect that the world merely mirrors back the dark and tormented soul of man, recurs throughout the novel.

Having analyzed every part of the whale from head to tail, including the whale’s penis, in his chapter on “The Tail” (Ch. 86) of the whale, Ishmael confesses: “Dissect him how I may…I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will.” As Melville makes clear in his chapter on “Moby-Dick” (Ch. 41) very few had actually seen Moby Dick and even fewer had engaged in battle with him. The fear of “a Sperm Whale of uncommon magnitude and malignity” emerges out of a mixed brew of experience, “wild rumors,”
“ignorance” and “superstition,” and the fancy of sailors. “No wonder, then,” Ishmael observes, “that ever gathering volume from the mere transit over the widest watery spaces, the outblown rumors of the White Whale did in the end incorporate with themselves all manner of morbid hints, and half-formed foetal suggestions of supernatural agencies, which eventually invested Moby Dick with new terrors unborrowed from anything that visibly appears.” And it is out of this that the myth and terror of Moby Dick as “not only ubiquitous, but immortal,” continually “athirst for human blood,” and with an “intelligent malignity…he had over and over again evinced in his assaults” was concocted as a projection of human terrors that may have little to do with the fact of the white sperm whale as such.

The narrative fluidity of _Moby-Dick_, the ways the first-person narrator floats in and out of view, sometimes surfacing as the voice of Ishmael and sometimes submerged in the voice of an apparently omniscient narrator, creates a doubleness of perspective and an ironic inflection that counters the more specifically nationalist, democratic, and affirming dimensions of the narrative. In the “Knights and Squires” chapters of the book (chapters 26 and 27), for example, Ishmael appears to give voice to Melville’s defense of whaling and the whaleman as the “aesthetically noble” subject of his democratic epic. On the nether side of Ishmael’s voice, however, looms a less sanguine and more critical omniscient narrator who appears to undermine and ironize the contemporary rhetorics of Jacksonian democracy, labor radicalism, millennial Christianity, literary nationalism, and global revolution that Ishmael exudes.

A similar conflict or dialectics between the Democratic Dream and the Demonism of the World informs the development of character, scene and action in the novel. The
promise of democratic community is bodied forth in the interracial, cross-cultural, and same-sex “marriage” of Ishmael and Queequeg in “A Bosom Friend” (Ch. 10) and the utopian vision of erotic comradeship in “A Squeeze of the Hand” (Ch. 94). In this chapter the “business” of sperm squeezing merges into a fantasy of baptismal deliverance as Ishmael imagines crew members squeezing sperm and each other in communal and masturbatory acts of labor and love. “Squeeze! squeeze! squeeze! All the morning long; I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it…and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers’ hands in it…. Come; let us squeeze hands all around, nay. Let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness.”

This scene of visionary democracy and erotic comradeship is set against the darker, more hell-fired vision of Chapter 96 “The Try-Works,” in which Ishmael almost loses the ship by falling asleep at the helm. The experience leads him to express what might be read as the moral of the book and the reason for Ishmael’s lonely survival: “Give not thyself up, then, to fire, lest it invert thee, deaden thee; as for the time it did me. There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness. And there is a Catskill eagle in some souls that can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces.” Ishmael is only one of several characters in the novel, who like the whale, deep dives as a means of knowing like Ahab, or deep dives as a means of seeing like the black cabin boy Pip, or as a means of deliverance like Queequeg, who is described as a midwife with “great skill in obstetrics” when he “dived to rescue” Tashtego from death after his fall into the Heidelburgh Tun. But perhaps because Ishmael is a figure of balance, who can “dive
down into the darkest gorges” and like the Catskill eagle “soar out of them again,” he is the only major character, except for Moby-Dick, who survives.

But even Ishmael’s lone survival is troubled by the fact that *Moby-Dick* was first published with two endings. In the edition of *Moby-Dick* published in London, the novel ended with the apocalyptic sinking of the *Pequod*: “Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousands years ago” (Ch. 135). This final sinking of the *Pequod*, which was named after a tribe of Native men, women, and children nearly annihilated by the Puritans in 1637, suggests the apocalyptic sinking not only of the ship of America but the ship of world.

This conclusion is, of course, a problem since no one survives to tell the story. And the novel begins with the words “Call me Ishmael” and the telling of the story of Moby-Dick from the first-person point of view of a character who may or may not be actually named Ishmael. The American edition corrected this error by adding an “Epilogue,” in which Ishmael survives on the life-buoy coffin of his dead “Bosom Friend” and some time bedfellow Queequeg. The life-buoy was “shot lengthwise from the sea, fell over, and floated by my side,” Ishmael tells us, as if Queequeg magically hurled it from below. In fact, there’s something magical, comical, tagged on, and possibly slyly joking about this entire “Epilogue,” in which we are told that “The unharming sharks…glided by as if with padlocks on their mouths” and “savage sea-hawks sailed with sheathed beaks.”

Why does Ishmael survive? Why not Queequeg? Or Pip, the little black cabin boy, who dives the deepest and is the wisest in the story. As a biblical descendant of
Hagar the servant of Abraham and thus at least a figurative slave, Ishmael may represent some renewed possibility of liberation and democracy, or at least that’s what Cold War critics thought. But Ishmael also bears the burden of the crew’s failure to revolt and thus the failure of revolutionary tradition and the collective will of the workers in the present. Ishmael survives the failure of the democratic dream in the “Epilogue,” but “only” as “another orphan,” a modern Job, and a figure of the American as alienated orphan in an increasingly alienating, fatherless, and radically unmothered world. We do not know the meaning of that survival; and neither did Melville or America.

Unlike Nathaniel Hawthorne, who was the Golden Boy of American literature, Melville violated the public taste and the political and religious beliefs of his time in *Moby-Dick*. The novel was not popular in its time: in fact, ironically, during the 19th-century, it was the chapters on whaling that were most valued and the more symbolic, mythic, and deep diving dimensions of the novel were ridiculed and debunked. In a review of *Moby Dick* in *Southern Quarterly Review* (1852), the reviewer dismissed the book as grounds for a *Writ de lunatico* against Melville:

**In all those portions of this volume which relate directly to the whale...**
**the interest of the reader will be kept alive, and his attention fully rewarded.... In all the scenes where the whale is the performer or the sufferer, the delineation and action are highly vivid and exciting. In all other respects, the book is sad stuff, dull and dreary, or ridiculous. Mr. Melville’s Quakers are the wretchedest dolts and drivellers, and his Mad Captain, who pursues his personal revenges against the fish who had taken off his leg, at the expense of ship, crew and owners, is a monstrous**
bore, whom Mr. Melville has no way helped, by enveloping him in a sort of mystery. His ravings, and the ravings of some of the tributary characters, and the ravings of Mr. Melville himself, meant for eloquent declamation, are such as would justify a writ de lunatico against all parties (William Gilmore Simms, pp. 624-25, Norton)

Melville and *Moby-Dick* were FORGOTTEN until the post-World War I period when the novel was canonized as an American masterpiece deeply prophetic of the modern and contemporaneous world of totalitarianism, holocaust, nuclear annihilation, global capitalism, alienation, and even most recently the War on Terror. [New Yorker cartoon].

As the Trinadadian Marxist C. L. R. James observed in his 1951 book *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways: Herman Melville and the World We Live In*, history and the world needed to catch up with Melville’s imaginative vision before it could read and understand his uncannily prophetic pursuit of the White Whale.