

HUMOR IN MOBY DICK

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JOHN TODD COKE

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An Abstract

Presented to

the Graduate Council of  
Austin Peay State University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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by

John Todd Coke

August 1980



## ABSTRACT

A masterpiece of literature remains a masterpiece by continuing to reward its readers. But it is unfortunate that some of the most rewarding elements in a distinguished work of fiction are sometimes obscured by the shadows that its reputation casts. It is therefore the job of each new generation of readers to re-examine those relics of the far and recent past, and expose them to the resuscitating breath of a novel point of view.

In this reading of Moby Dick, I have tried to show that the book has suffered the depreciation of many years of too-formal appreciation. It has been my intention to show that Moby Dick is much more entertaining and much less metaphysical than most scholarship has insisted. I have tried to show that the novel not only contains humor, but that it depends upon humor as an important source of thematic statement, as an aesthetic element, and as the agent of good, simple amusement.

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August 1980



To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Thesis written by John Todd Coke entitled "Humor in Moby Dick." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

  
Major Professor

We have read this thesis and  
recommend its acceptance:

  
Second Committee Member

  
Third Committee Member

Accepted for the Council:

  
Dean of the Graduate School

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PART I

INTRODUCTION

The problem of Moby Dick is one of perspective. I read the book as an extended satire based on the honest but errant perceptions of Ishmael. In his faith in the nobility of Man, the whaleman specifically, and in his enthusiasm for the chase, Ishmael ignores the symbolic quality of the hunted whale. He spends a great deal of time describing the sperm whale's remarkable characteristics. But his intention is to glorify the whale as an object of the hunt and to thereby ennoble the men who hunt it. The result, however, is that the sperm whale emerges as a creature of great dignity in its own right. Likewise, Ishmael's treatment of the Pequod's crew, in its attempt to glorify and praise the whaleman, unintentionally reveals them to be rather an arrogant and unprincipled lot. His attempt to elevate the whale to a status that justifies men's preoccupation with it instead succeeds in glorifying the whale beyond any possible comparison with his predators. And Ishmael's attempt to dignify the hunt leaves Man looking comic and pathetic in the shadow of his prey. The paradigms of this vision are Ahab and Moby Dick. Ahab represents an ironically reversed image of what is best and noblest about human nature. Ahab is determined and there is no doubt about the source of his determination. But Ahab, Ishmael conspicuously fails to perceive, has never considered the possibility that his fate has been a just one; that, in fact, he might have been spared a more stern lesson by the



white whale. Death is more final than truncation. Ahab's nobility, in Ishmael's eyes, has to do with his stubborn certainty that he has been wronged. His determination to pursue vengeance is simply the indication of this deeper conviction. But Ahab refuses to see himself as an aggressor or as a perpetrator of wrong. Ahab presents a picture of human arrogance, the type of self-love that unapologetically justifies unconscionable abuses in the interest of a personal whim. Moby Dick, in contrast, is a model of genuine greatness: serenely puissant, inoffensive except when mortally offended, and as capable of firm certain activity as the planets themselves.

Moby Dick exists on three levels. There is the most obvious plane on which the book is a grand metaphor for the whole of life and the human condition. This is the assumption that is at the core of the overwhelming majority of criticism, and much of the criticism in the following section. These critics choose some aspect of the book and enumerate its innumerable parallels in life and in other works of art. But the book also exists on the level of pure comedy, as I will try to demonstrate. It is also a long, confused tale about an impressionable young man who has a sometimes profound and sometimes comically shallow insight into human nature, and who embarks on a fishing trip of heroic proportions.

The truth, of course, and the third level of interpretation, rests at the intersection of these two extreme points of view. Only by playing the ironic voice of the narrator against the depth and profundity of the action can the full circle of Moby Dick's true meaning be approached.



PART II

REVIEW OF SCHOLARSHIP

To suggest that in addition to being a monument to the darkness of the human soul Moby Dick is also a humorous book is to swim against the mainstream of critical thinking. The stone face of criticism will concede that Ishmael's ironic tone is amusing at times; but Ishmael is as likely to ponder the transcendent issues of mortality as he is to justify with wit and detachment some form of behavior that is at least superficially absurd: like going whaling in the first place. The humor that informs Moby Dick is less superficial than an ironic tone of voice or turn of phrase, although it certainly embraces those affectations.

In brief, stripped of cumbersome metaphysics and its intimidating reputation, Moby Dick is an unlikely fish story that demands an outrageous suspension of disbelief, and promises to in turn reward credulity with a clearer glimpse of the human plight.

In Melville: The Ironic Diagram<sup>1</sup>, John Seelye demonstrates an awareness of the tensions and dualities at play in Moby Dick, but focuses on their function as agents of Melville's highest concern. By associating Ahab with the straight line and Ishmael with the circle, Seelye claims, Melville identifies a conflict between absolutism and relativism that is the most important recurring tension in Moby Dick. Ahab is a personification of purpose without

<sup>1</sup>John Seelye, Melville: The Ironic Diagram (Evanston, 1970).

compromise, while Ishmael represents compromise without purpose. Neither character is ennobled by his bias, or particularly enlightened by his experiences. At the end of the book Ahab's purpose is thwarted, and Ishmael is still without a clear resolve. In Seelye's opinion, Moby Dick is a definition of Man's fate: a perpetual search for determination in a universe without a clear place or purpose for man.

As far as this interpretation goes, it is fine. Ahab and Ishmael are certainly antipodes, and a geometrical expression of the fact is as good as any other. Ishmael is a survivor while Ahab shuns simple survival. But in the larger context of the work, this is just a single example of a persistent theme of balancing contradictions that literally permeates Moby Dick. In fact, Melville seems to be adhering to some unwritten universal law of eternal human incompatibility. The contrasting elements in the book are more than simply ironic; they are comically equiponderant. Ishmael is a relativist and Ahab is an absolutist; Pip is a madman who is wiser than simple rationality will allow. Pip is "protected" by the dangerous madman, Ahab, who has reached beyond reason's ability to answer complex questions simply. Queequeg is a primal animal who looks like a cannibal, but is actually an island aristocrat and a practicing moral philosopher. Ishmael is a reflective

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urban truth-seeker hungry for the taste of saltwater wild-life and simple truths. When Ishmael confronts simplicity in the person of Queequeg, he is at first repulsed, then charmed, then he forgets about Queequeg altogether and submerges himself in the imponderables of blubber and whale oil.

Clearly Melville's ironic pairing of characters was not intended to be exclusive, and so it is hard to believe that any satisfactory interpretation of the whole of the book can be based on an analysis of just one of these pairs. In fact, Melville has turned irony into a symbol that parodies itself. Intricate patterns like these can not be so easily abstracted from a chronicle of events like Moby Dick without offering a hint of the felicity behind them. It is almost as if Melville is playing a public game, moving his pieces according to predictable rules of play, and constructing an elaborate facade in the form of symbolic allegory.

Seelye does not follow his hypothesis nearly as far as it could lead him, and he completely misses the comic vision basic to the ironic oppositions he perceives. His criticism correctly points to Melville's use of geometric imagery as a metaphor for the relationship between extreme personality types (represented by Ahab and Ishmael). But in his reach for a systematic approach, he exaggerates the thematic significance of his observation, and at the



same time loses sight of its human appeal. Every person-ality has a unique shape, and each shape complements another in the vast puzzle of human strengths and weaknesses. Seelye recognizes the depth of the theme of individual human limitation and collective human interdependency, but by trying to extend his observation into a major statement about Moby Dick, he sacrifices the sense of fun that is immanent in Melville's clever restatement of these familiar ideas.

The most typical kind of insensitivity to the humor in Moby Dick is expressed by Milton Millhauser in his article, "The Form of Moby Dick."<sup>2</sup> Millhauser analyzes Melville's storytelling in terms of the standard unities of time, place, and dramatic action observed by the classical tragedians, Aeschylus and Sophocles. It would be off the subject to comment on the degree to which the classical dramatists that Millhauser calls upon fail to adhere to the binding rules that he attributes to them (Classical drama is an invention of seventeenth-century French Neoclassicism more than it was ever a truth relevant to the Greek stage.); but by making this association, Millhauser gives himself a steady framework for an elaborate interpretation of Moby Dick, focusing on its

<sup>2</sup>Milton Millhauser, "The Form of Moby Dick," Critics of Melville (Coral Gables, 1972).



"classical tragical import."<sup>3</sup> Ahab, he believes, is the prototypical hero at odds with all of the traditional impediments to human perfection: pride, the taciturnity of God, and philosophic impotence, to mention just an exemplary few. Millhauser displays reverence for the elevated theme of Moby Dick, its respect for the elements of classical unity, and its symbolic style: "Order is opposed to excess . . ."<sup>4</sup>; "Everything that is noble and doomed about Man's nature . . ."<sup>5</sup>; "A tragedy modeled to the vehicle of prose."<sup>6</sup> His Moby Dick is humorless, pedantic, and as full of meaningful splinters as the Pequod after its terminal confrontation with the whale.

Again, what is missing in an interpretation like this, one that is determined to reach for transcendence, is a feeling for Melville's grasp of the casual comedy of human experience. Even metaphysicians take a day off now and then. Moby Dick certainly does suggest all of the things that Millhauser sees in it, but it does not insist on them with the implacable intensity of a Greek tragedy, as Millhauser imagines. Instead of slowly building tension throughout the book and then releasing it all at once in a cathartic burst, Melville plays with conventional preconceptions about the way an important theme should be treated.

<sup>3</sup> Millhauser, pp. 242-243.

<sup>4</sup> Millhauser, p. 255.

<sup>5</sup> Millhauser, p. 260.

<sup>6</sup> Millhauser, p. 260.

He offers several lesser climaxes, and parodies the classical notion of fatalism by balancing the seeming significance of an event against its real importance in the greater context of the story: Fedahalla is ominously interred in a sinking whale's head, only to be rescued, playfully undercutting the strength of the event as a symbol and deliberately wasting the potential of the scene as a device for stimulating tension. He inflates minor details into grand symbols: when Ahab throws his pipe into the sea, for example, the gesture implies a rejection of everything inconsistent with his narrow purpose. And Melville sometimes leaves seemingly significant details undeveloped: having suffered an amusing devaluation from a three-dimensional symbol of the inherent goodness of primal man to a simple two-dimensional harpooner with odd mannerisms, a death wish, and a lot of tattoos, Queequeg is a forgotten man by the middle of the book.

Just as Melville is capable of stretching the symbolism of Moby Dick beyond credibility, he is equally capable of mocking the transcendental ambitions of his story with light-hearted descriptions and dramatic effects inappropriate to the real depth of the meanings the book suggests. An appreciation of this playful protean quality of Moby Dick lightens the weight of the book considerably, eliminates the need to explain with precision its every inconsistency, and allows for Melville's use of a loose

narrative style that would be inimical to an earnest tragedian. Compare the intimate hallucinogenic quality of the "Try-works" chapter with the mood of detached pragmatism that motivates Ishmael's momentary conversion to paganism in chapter two. Melville is more flexible than the tragedian. He has a sense of humor. More importantly, he has a sense of the equivocal distinction between the comic and the serious qualities of mind. Certainly, a tragedian created the Ahab who dared to challenge the forces of nature. But a man with a sense of humor created the stuffy whaler who tried so hard to find a force in the universe greater than himself that, with small difficulty, he succeeded.

An approach to Moby Dick only slightly less schoolmasterly than Millhauser's is Charles Feildson's treatment of the book's symbolism.<sup>7</sup> He, too, ignores the comic aspect of the book, but does so in favor of an assessment of Moby Dick as a gauge of the various intellectual currents active in nineteenth-century America. In order to erect standards of comparison, Feildson uses Whitman and Emerson as foils by which to position Melville along an imaginary scale of metaphysical sensibility ranging from the extreme of Whitman's loose conception of experience as of value for its own sake to the rigid intellectualism of Emerson

<sup>7</sup> Charles Feildson, Jr., "Symbolism in Moby Dick," Symbols in American Literature (Chicago, 1953), pp. 27-35.



that would have all physical phenomena participate in an even greater reality hidden from us by our sensory apprehension of it.

Feildson first demonstrates Melville's distance from Whitman's casual habits of thought. The world of Moby Dick, Feildson assures us, is one of "symbolism and pregnant meaning"<sup>8</sup>; nothing in the book should be judged as of significance in and of itself. "Some certain significance lurks in all things."<sup>9</sup> But most importantly, that certain significance is never clear, and can only be suggested. The symbols in the book, he claims, function as illuminative touchstones which lead the reader toward a progressively more solid grasp of a hidden truth lying behind the details and images which simultaneously obscure and suggest it. The sky, for example, becomes symbolic of an eternal female element; the sea suggests a violent male principle; and finally, Ahab represents that human longing for supernatural vision expressed by Emerson's consonant image of the transparent eyeball. Ahab longs to become nothing, to see all.

Feildson is interesting, but his tenuous grasp of the humanity that underlies Ahab's symbolic function leads him to a level of solemnity that blurs his vision. The evidence lends little support to the view that Ahab wants to

<sup>8</sup>Feildson, p. 28.

<sup>9</sup>Feildson, p. 30.

sacrifice himself to some vague spirit of impersonal unity. There is more weight to the argument that what Ahab wants is to become everything, or at least to challenge everything that is, and that he is so blinded by his megalomania that he finally sees nothing at all except horrendously magnified images of himself.

Melville is clearly working with the principles of transcendentalism; but he echoes them in a mocking voice. His symbol of spiritual yearning, Ahab, is not a fundamentalist Emersonian looking for text-book release any more than he is a simple Quaker turned from "enthusiasm" to devil worship because old-time religion has lost its appeal. He is a magnificent egomaniac out to recreate the world in his own image, and at war with any force that challenges his inflated self-conception. As Feildson says, he is a heroic figure. But as Feildson fails to say, Ahab is also a fool. And this fact provides one of the richest comic veins in Moby Dick. Melville has intentionally applied all of the appurtenances of tragedy and high moral adventure to a tale about a man epically ill-equipped to carry them forth undiluted. Ahab galvanizes his crew with senseless words well spoken, and then successfully pilots his ship of fools to a doom that was never any less than certain. It is the fool that underlies the philosopher in Ahab that gives his character its true dimension as a symbol of the human aspiration to overcome, just as it is



the philosopher that underlies the fool in Pip that gives his character real symbolic power. Transcendental overtones abound in Moby Dick, but they seldom exist independent of audible comic murmurs.

Thornton Booth sees the ironic quality of Ahab's mission, even if he stops short of proclaiming it actually funny. In "Moby Dick: Standing up to God,"<sup>10</sup> Booth aligns Ahab with that long legion of metaphysical rebels who would dare to question God's organization of things, the first and most famous of whom was the biblical Job.

Moby Dick, Booth testifies, is a book about man's relationship to the gods. It asks the question, "What does Man have the right to expect of his gods?"<sup>11</sup> Ahab is the suppliant in Booth's interpretive arrangement of things, while the white whale is a divine vehicle by means of which Ahab's tidy answer is delivered. Ahab's mistake is the same as Job's: he proudly assumes himself worthy to question the gods. To Booth, Ahab is a presumptuous Everyman who learns the hard way a lesson about how far the gods will allow themselves to be pushed.

The problem with Booth's interpretation is one of sacrifice. To turn Ahab into an Everyman, Booth must

<sup>10</sup> Thornton Y. Booth, "Moby Dick: Standing up to God," Nineteenth Century Fiction, XVII (June 1962), 33-43.

<sup>11</sup> Booth, p. 35.

smooth the rough edges of character that make Ahab's election to the office of divine examiner truly ironic. Ahab is not a Job figure at all. Job was a pious man who suffered for no apparent reason the torments of the damned, and lived through the experience with his faith intact. When the whirlwind told him to suffer quietly because he was incapable of fathoming the ways of God, he complied with all of the speed and humility that his sebaceous body could muster. Job's was a type case in the art of persistence under purposeless duress.

On the contrary, Ahab pursues adversity. There is never any indication that the white whale singled Ahab out for hardship; it is Ahab who is determined to chase the whale. It is Ahab who plays the role of God, tormenting a reasonably peaceful creature until it is forced to revolt against him. The irony is that Ahab cannot respond with any authority to the challenge of the whale. To lose sight of Ahab's complexity, to turn him into a shallow symbol for the metaphysical curiosity of men, is to do serious damage to one of the book's deepest and most comic ironies. Ahab's dissatisfaction with the ways of the world clearly preceded any actual affront ever delivered to him by it. Indeed, one of the least-heard but most likely conjectures is that if the gods ever did bother to respond politely to Ahab's catechisms, Ahab probably wouldn't be satisfied by their answers anyway. From the first, Ahab has chosen

the path of defiance, and Melville charts the course of Ahab's belligerence with a fine point, underlining all of the irony and humor that Ahab's certain frustration implies. The description of Ahab's first confrontation with the white whale creates a vivid image of his stupidly arrogant defiance of any force willing to pay enough attention to him to offer resistance. He actually had the vainglorious courage to attack, with a six-inch carving knife, the leviathan that devoured his leg and marked him for life.

Ahab is a figure who defines himself by means of opposition. He is only as great as the battle he is waging. And the image of the disparity between competitors in Ahab's proud contest for supremacy is truly comic. He is no simple Everyman. The figure in the book who satisfies that definition is rather the captain of the Samuel Enderby who, recognizing the superiority of his antagonist, tucks away his pride, and his remaining limbs, and leaves well-enough alone. The tragedy, irony, and meaning of Ahab's plight are inseparably associated with the comedy of his incredible foolishness.

The notion that comedy is an important element of Moby Dick, a device that helps bridge the distance between the symbols that appear and the symbolic vision that they suggest, is completely lost on critics of the Jungian school. These critics tend to lose sight of particulars,



subsuming them under broad headings that compromise the integrity of isolated elements for the sake of an elusive unity of comprehension. The problem with ideological blindness to particulars in Melville is that Melville uses immediacy to intensify general effects. Horror is magnified by each incident of the horrible; comedy, by each incidence of humor. But the effect is never more important than the images, or sums of images, that contribute to it. If Melville had been an ideolog, writing a pat tale in support of preconceived notions, his descriptions probably would have been less amusing. Comedy and irony are the languages of uncertainty; ideology is too serious to be taken with a smile.

In "Big Medicine in Moby Dick,"<sup>12</sup> Reginald C. Cook speaks for the Jungian school. He turns Melville into an inspired abstractionist who uses mundane images only coincidentally, and even then only because they help him elucidate invisible truths. The question that Cook perceives in Moby Dick is whether or not the force which governs the universe is aware of human destiny. He points to the Quaker-Deck chapter for support of his argument. There, he claims, Ahab reveals that he believes he can best the universe by calling forth the magical forces of nature. Ahab becomes a medicine-man-thamaturge in the Jungian sense: an archetype of the seeker for forbidden truths.

<sup>12</sup>Reginald C. Cook, "Big Medicine in Moby Dick," Accent VIII (Winter, 1948), 112-119.

The medicine Ahab thinks he can evoke through symbolism and ritual is the "elemental substance" which is aware of Man's presence and willing to support him for the price of prayer and homage. The white whale is, predictably, an animistic symbol.

The shortcoming of an interpretation of Moby Dick as dogmatic as this is that it completely loses sight of the fine distinction between the visual reality that Melville can present and the degree to which literal truth has to be damaged for the sake of symbolic effect. Once this distinction has been lost, the book must be approached as either a descriptive narrative of an unlikely adventure or a vague prose allegory. The interplay between life, art, and meaning that symbolism initiates is sacrificed unnecessarily to dogma. As a simple adventure narrative, Moby Dick is desultory and confusing at best; but as an unrelenting moral allegory it is sheer confusion. When the two categories are not arbitrarily abstracted from Moby Dick, however, the book is both amusing and profound. What, for example, would Cook make of the scene in which the whole crew of the Pequod drinks to the destruction of Moby Dick? The image follows almost without pause from the succession of forebodings in the chapters preceding it. Ishmael has described Ahab's stern, scarred look; Starbuck has warned Ahab that the nemesis who cost him his leg may next cost him his life; the gold piece has been nailed to



the mast. Yet in this scene, crew members inured to the self-evident threat of danger drink with mindless enthusiasm to the success of Ahab's unnecessary adventure, to the prospect of facing an unprofitable extra hazard for no extra charge, and to the vigor of their own collective madness. The picture is symbolic, of course: a consecration of perverted purpose. But it is no less absurd for being functional. Melville is demonstrating the weakness of ordinary men at the mercy of mad power. An unwavering ideological approach to Moby Dick compromises Melville's occasionally comic treatment of the condition of Man, and it depreciates the greater purpose of the book by naming it allegory instead of art.

So long as critics continue to pump Moby Dick full of indiscriminate significance, the less-appreciated facets of the book, like its humor, are in danger of being forced completely out of view. For example, in "Moby Dick: The Myth of Democratic Expectancy,"<sup>13</sup> Harry Slochower turns Melville into a political scientist who speaks in an arcane symbolic language, possibly for fear of being understood by ordinary readers. Thankfully, Slochower has made himself available as an intermediary. Beginning with the sublimely obvious contention that myth is mankind's response to an unanswerable question, he proceeds to

<sup>13</sup> Harry Slochower, "Moby Dick: The Myth of Democratic Expectancy," American Quarterly, II (1950), 249-269.

inform us that Moby Dick is an elaborate mythical vision of American Man's relationship with a social order that defines his collective human destiny. The Pequod, we are told, is a kind of post-diluvian Noah's Ark aboard which the essence of the American Man has been distilled. The Pequod, like America, is an interracial, semi-democratic commune that runs the risk of succumbing to its most grandiose notions about itself. What Ahab, the articulate spirit of the Pequod, is trying to do (and by inference, what America is also trying to do) is push himself beyond the limits imposed upon men and civilizations by the human condition. The Pequod, and America, suffer from the peculiarly American delusion that "the sky is the limit,"<sup>14</sup> whatever that means. Needless to say, Ahab pushes the limits too far. But Slochower's argument demands that the diagram be followed through. He dedicates a number of words to speculation about the implications that Ahab's success would have had. He even goes so far as to claim that had Ahab accomplished his vendetta, a new "golden age" of Man and an era of Mankind's "near absolute power" would have come about. That he can even think in terms of the possibility of Ahab's success is a measure of the strain that a reluctance to compromise with the evidence can create. What is amusing here is neither the book nor the interpretation, but rather the gulf that separates the two of them.

<sup>14</sup>Slochower, p. 259.

Unfortunately, this is the area in which much of the humor associated with Moby Dick resides.

A faulty interpretation of the novel is valuable nevertheless because it gives insight into the mechanics of Melville's comedy. The strain that symbolism imposes on credibility, and Melville's manipulation of that factor in his art, are exposed when an unwary critic attempts to stretch too far, for the sake of a contrived interpretation, an image or idea in Moby Dick. The images in the novel, especially the broad single metaphor of the Pequod and its crew, have already been stretched to the limit by the demands of good sense on the apparatus of symbolism. Any further strain of the sort that Slochower subjects them to is likely to result in some very unfunny damage to the work of art. It is important that the balance established by Melville between subtle comedy and high seriousness is not pushed into low comedy and sententiousness by the force of over-interpretation. Moby Dick has both humor and depth, but it is not a ridiculous slapstick with a peripheral meaning. Neither is it a full course of unleavened didacticism, as Slochower believes it to be. Like form and function in a great work of architecture, point and presentation in Moby Dick are intimately united.

More solid ground supports Alfred Kazin's "An Introduction to Moby Dick."<sup>15</sup> Something of a humorist

<sup>15</sup>Alfred Kazin, "An Introduction to Moby Dick," Atlantic Monthly, CXCVII (1956), 81-95.



himself. Kazin is careful to point out that Melville does not lack wit either. Kazin's argument does not focus on the humor in the novel to the exclusion of the greater elements of plot, symbol, and character, but neither does Kazin forget that Melville carries a healthy level of self-mockery along with him on even his most extended philosophic forays.

Like almost every serious critic of Moby Dick, Kazin acknowledges the heroic quality of the book, its elevated tone, and the occasionally obscure but never meaningless philosophical airs that envelop it. Also in the mainstream of critical opinion is Kazin's association of Moby Dick with the epic tradition in poetry. In Ishmael, Kazin sees an ill-defined ego expanding to an awareness of the experience of mortality. This allows for an approach to Ishmael's first-person narrative that is at once credible and symbolic in a manner that goes beyond allegory's simple one-to-one correlation of symbols with their deep meanings. In contrast, Kazin sees in Ahab a personification of mortal awareness intensified to the point of madness. It is madness that leads Ahab into his obsession; however, it is the fact of a shared mortality that allows him to transform his crew into a charged band of rebels willing to help him strike out against a common human complaint. Kazin also deals with the book's lesser figures: Ahab the hero is contrasted with Father Mapple,

who warns men against challenging their condition of subservience to God. Pip is contrasted with the eminently sane, but ultimately ineffectual Starbuck. And the obvious contrast between Ishmael and Queequeg is acknowledged.

The value of a study like Kazin's is in its fidelity to the verifiable. Delicate balances are Melville's specialty, and an awareness of them is the first stage in a growth toward appreciation of Melville's humor. The humor in Moby Dick is also a matter of delicate balances. As precariously as Melville suspends Ahab, or Ishmael, between the extremes of selfless receptivity and pure ego, his manipulation of situations between the extremes of suggestivity and silliness is equally adept. With an appreciation of the intricate balance between the comic and the philosophical in Moby Dick, another dimension of Melville's skill emerges. In the same sense that the survival of Ishmael is humorous, for example, it is also profound. Ishmael is a simple schoolmaster. He has never been to sea on an adventure of this physical scope or symbolic significance before. He knows nothing about the "real world" of whaling, and is blissfully unaware of the dismal possibilities implicit in his situation. Yet he boards a whaler that even the most seasoned seamen are wary of, becomes an instant expert on the technical minutiae of whaling, and survives a mid-sea apocalypse that



destroys a whole shipful of veterans without himself suffering an inconvenience any more serious than damp clothing. The facts are amusing, even incredible, if given much thought. But Melville diverts critical attention away from the transparency of this fiction by forcing interest beyond the surface of events, and inward toward the deeply buried gems of truth that it conceals. On this level of examination, where humor and elevated thought embrace, Ishmael becomes a symbol of the industry and resilience of a man unburdened by weight ideology, but willing to tolerate, all the while remaining wary of, those who are. Ishmael is balanced between the absurd and the profound in a manner characteristic of the humor of Moby Dick.

Charles H. Cook also comes very close to isolating the tensions that create humor in Moby Dick. His concern is more conventional, however. In "Ahab's Intolerable Allegory,"<sup>16</sup> Cook claims that the contrary characters of Ishmael and Ahab are broadly representative of two distant poles of human awareness. Ishmael's survival, Cook believes, is a thinly concealed celebration of the non-committal approach to life's paradox, as opposed to the type of determined certainty that motivates, and dooms, Ahab. Ahab's problem is that he takes too seriously

<sup>16</sup> Charles H. Cook, "Ahab's Intolerable Allegory," Boston University Studies in Literature, I (1955), 45-52.

the human ability to allegorize. By exercising without restraint his exaggerated tendency to generalize from the particular, and to attribute simple human motivations to complex natural events, Ahab is able to inflate his own suffering into the collective hurt of mankind, and to simplify the significance of the white whale by naming it Evil. Ahab believes that the death of Moby Dick will somehow mystically eliminate the evils of mortality. His failure then is one of imagination. He trusts the mind's tendency to associate like with like, evil with hurt, metaphysics with the monumental in nature: he allegorizes.

Cook goes on to point to the irony of Ahab's oversimplification. Sensing a hidden significance in Moby Dick, the result of his unconscious self-projection, Ahab sets out to eliminate the evil the whale appears to represent. But to eradicate evil, he must become evil himself. Ahab commissions the forces of darkness to assist him in self-destruction. Ishmael clearly survives because he does not succumb to allegory.

Cook's analysis is deep. Melville is certainly dealing with the broad categories of human moral awareness into which each human being willingly or unwillingly falls. Ahab is an egoist who attempts to remake the world in his own image, and Ishmael is a pragmatist too open-minded to ever presume certainty about anything profound. Ahab and his crew represent the eternal contest between heroic man,

for whom the world must meet certain exacting standards or else be put to the test, and ordinary mankind, to whom the spirit of time, place, and circumstance appears a more powerful force than any possible effort of the human will. Cook's parallels are intact, and his philosophy is sound. But he, too, misses the humor of his subject. Cook is so absorbed in the symbolic importance of Ahab's heroic oversimplification that he completely loses sight of its outlandish stupidity. He even misses the comedy in the scene that closes the book. Ahab, who has at last found and cornered his prey, confidently sets out to satisfy his vengeance. The whale, however, is only mildly annoyed by Ahab's belligerence. The result of the showdown is that Ahab is yanked out of the boat by the neck of his harpoon line and summarily dragged out to sea, like a snarling pet at the end of a choker collar. Ishmael, too, is as funny as Cook would have him profound. Beneath the certain significance of his pragmatism and resiliency, his typically American ability to cope and survive, is an uncommitted and essentially neutral personality. Ishmael's survival is really never presented as anything more than that: the survival of a survivor. What effect the voyage and his association with a lunatic hero like Ahab will have on him remains to be seen. Ishmael aspired to adventure, and with debatable good fortune, found it. The book closes there, in an open-ended amalgamation of scene,



symbol, and meaning. Ishmael touches the profound without ever venturing near enough to embrace it. The defenses that prolong his life perpetuate his sense of life's mystery.

Although not a conventional work of criticism, John Parke's "Seven Moby Dicks"<sup>17</sup> covers a wide range of possible approaches to Moby Dick. (It is actually an anthology of interpretation.) Parke is not particularly interested in the mood of the book, and is barely aware of the demands that symbolism places on an author. He does not try to justify or explain the strengths and weaknesses of Melville's style. And because he fails to acknowledge and deal with Melville's comic strain, his superstructures lack the depth of human association necessary to evoke life from mere patterns. There is no suggestion that Melville might have approached his "deep meanings of no certain significance,"<sup>18</sup> with anything but the stiffest sobriety. By treating Melville as a master of architechtonics, with a vivid but single-minded sense of the relationship between objects and the meanings they suggest, Parke blinds himself to most of the humor in Moby Dick, and turns Melville into a very somber genius indeed. By concentrating on the heady matters posed by the book, he misses much of its heart.

<sup>17</sup> John Parke, "Seven Moby Dicks," New England Quarterly, XXVIII, 319-338.

<sup>18</sup> Parke, p. 330.



Still, as a flexible approach with considerable pragmatic value, Parke's analysis is valuable. It is both a crutch for the reader out of touch with critical opinion and a convincing testament to Moby Dick's complexity. This is important because it is out of an uncustomary interplay of the real and the surreal, the symbolically true and the literally unlikely, the simple and the profound, that the book's humor originates. Despite his insensitivity to the nuances of Melville's method, Parke does adequately outline the various levels from which the book can be approached. First, he claims, Moby Dick can be read as a simple adventure story that could not have taken place if a sensible man like Bulkington had not been killed off in the first few pages. Bulkington's death symbolizes the triumph of unbridled and adventurous forces over those committed to reason, precaution, and worldly affairs. On the next level of interpretation, the novel can be read as a story of man and nature. The important scenes here are of the Try-works phantasmagoria and of Ahab's magnetizing of the compass needle. Third, Moby Dick is a story of the conflict in the soul of Man: Captain Ahab's internal conflict leads him to attribute deliberation to the white whale. The next approach is existential: the book suggests the indifference of the universe. Fifth, and more Calvinistic, Moby Dick is a tale about the sin of pride. On this level, the conflict of reason (Starbuck) with the

powers of madness (Ahab) is the story's vital tension. On the sixth level of interpretation, Melville's work is the story of Man's confrontation with Chaos. Since men define their own worlds, Ahab is in revolt against existence itself. Finally, Moby Dick is a story about Ahab's (and Mankind's) inability to locate and objectify Evil.

Reluctant to admit evil as a part of himself, Ahab tries to destroy its reflection by attacking a neutral object. His determination to eradicate evil combines with a lack of self-awareness to lead him to self-destruction.

The weakness of this superstructure outlined by Parke, which is not to discount the overall success of his broad attempt at interpretation, resides in its inattention to the way these meanings function in the novel. Parke gives us a Melville so absorbed by the search for meaning that he cannot smile at folly and pretension. An uncommitted reading of Moby Dick belies this impression of the book's unrelenting gravity. In addition to the profound, Moby Dick embraces a range of emotion from pathos to whimsy, and its moments of lightness grow out of the same mechanisms that make the book profound.

D.H. Lawrence offers one of the most unified and least insistent readings of Moby Dick. His essay, "Moby Dick, or the White Whale,"<sup>19</sup> provides the flexibility of

<sup>19</sup>D.H. Lawrence, "Moby Dick, or the White Whale," Studies in Classical American Literature (New York, 1923, 1951).

perspective necessary to hold an irregular collossus like Moby Dick within the frame of a single field of vision. Even if he doesn't scale the plateaus that are easily the book's most celebrated aspect, Lawrence at least realizes that no serious approach to the work can proceed without preliminary acknowledgment of the unique mixture of mood and matter in the novel. He appreciates the inconsistency and confusion of the book, and tries to account for these apparent shortcomings before venturing to interpret any of its more abstract elements, like symbolism, imagery, and meaning. Although Lawrence sees the work as more accidental than close reading reveals it to be, he at least understands that it is sometimes, even if sometimes unintentionally, humorous. This is a level of awareness that should precede lofty speculations and one from which any higher critical approach should proceed. Lawrence recognizes that the shortcoming of a strictly ideological approach to Moby Dick is that it assumes a set of conditions that the book is unwilling and unable to fulfill. As he points out, Melville was less pedantic than playful, and less faithful to the mechanics of logic than to the dreamy patterns of intuition. Unfortunately, Lawrence, too, stops short of an unreserved declaration of amusement with Moby Dick, and often himself falls into the exegetical traps of allegory and symbolism that Melville set, diabolically, throughout the book. But if anything like a complete



approach to the novel is possible, it is so only out of a combination of approaches. And if D.H. Lawrence does incomplete justice to the depth of Moby Dick, almost every other critic does injustice to the book's lighter elements.

Lawrence immediately punctures the balloons of ideological and systematic criticism by confessing that he is "bored by questions of life."<sup>20</sup> And so despite debatable motivation, he takes that important first step toward appreciation of the lesser elements of Moby Dick. Lawrence's rejection of what is obvious about the book, in deference to what is rare and exceptional about it, lends prominence to the less-celebrated characteristics of the novel. And his aphiosophical stand insists that Moby Dick must first succeed as a book, and only after that as a puzzle of meanings. He understands that the whole must be understood as a combination of parts.

Although a book with some secondary symbolic significance, says Lawrence, Moby Dick is primarily the story about a "Crew of garbled American Practicality involved in a mad chase."<sup>21</sup> He goes on to add that Moby Dick, "a tale about a bunch of maniacs hunting down a lonely white

<sup>20</sup>Lawrence, p. 115.

<sup>21</sup>Lawrence, p. 341.



whale,"<sup>22</sup> is "of profound significance, and considerable tiresomeness."<sup>23</sup> But hidden behind Lawrence's sardonic pose is a valuable critical statement. Moby Dick need not be revered out of proportion to the real significance of the subjects it broaches. Often the book is deliberately less than profound: sometimes comically so. The artificial distinctions that critics of ideology and high philosophical import draw are unnecessary and deceptive. The fundamental assumption behind D.H. Lawrence's criticism is that the success of a great book has to do with the way that art embraces the trivialities of common experience. Moby Dick's tiresomeness, and its humor, have their parallels in life as surely as life's puzzles and distortions have their reflection in Moby Dick. A similar refusal to sacrifice for the sake of an easy interpretation the irregularities and fragments that bring Moby Dick to life should be at the foundation of every reading of the novel.

<sup>22</sup> Lawrence, p. 350.

<sup>23</sup> Lawrence, p. 120.

PART III

HUMOR IN MOBY DICK

## The Adventure

Moby Dick begins with an instance of humor employed to a point. Ishmael informs us in the first chapter that he takes to the sea whenever he begins to suffer from the "drizzly November of the soul,"<sup>1</sup> a curious motivation, and adds that in fits of depression he often feels like "stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off" (p. 2). The description conveys the urgency of Ishmael's black mood: he suffers intensely, as the lucidity of the image suggests. But his description of a self-absorbed manic-depressive bent upon systematically reducing every other citizen to the same level of misery reveals a largeness of spirit that might not have been conveyed by a simple description of despair. From this comic portrait of despondency's aversion to the moodlessness of others, one infers that Ishmael is a man capable of looking at himself with the same critical detachment that he naturally applies to his observations of other men. The scene that Ishmael creates, as inconsistent as it appears to be with the serious nature of the subject that he is trying to introduce, and as inappropriate as it seems as an image of black depression, demonstrates that he is a man who is capable of healthy

<sup>1</sup>Herman Melville, Moby Dick (New York, 1968), p. 1. Future references to this source will be indicated by page number within the body of the thesis.

self-mockery, even at times when bemusement might not be a typical response.

This preliminary glimpse into Ishmael's character colors one's impression of Ishmael's story. The first hint of humor in Moby Dick reveals that Ishmael is capable of dealing in a light, conversational manner with things that are of unsuspected significance. It is fair to say that any man capable of contriving comic images to objectify his darkest sensibilities is capable of dealing lightly with almost anything. The humor here is more than simply a clue to the man through whose eyes the drama of the book unfolds. It is a kind of prophecy--an announcement that from this point forward one must look beyond the deceptive tone of the narrative in order to appreciate the significance of the events being described; its presence is an indication of Ishmael's tendency to respond in unexpected ways, and it provides a framework of paradox for the remainder of the tale. By subverting with humor one's accustomed responses to serious matters, Ishmael encourages greater attention to overtones, loose ends, and the implications of his narrative than he might have commanded by other means.

In the chapter called "The Carpet Bag," Ishmael reaches his intermediate destination of New Bedford. There he offers a dreary portrait of the place. Apparently, he has come through New Bedford on his way to Nantucket



because it is a point of tradition among whalemens to follow that route. Ishmael is able to trivialize his curious adoption of a ritual that he accepts but does not understand by hinting that he is merely following the same path "as most young candidates for the pains and penalties of whaling" (p. 3). But the scene that he describes is a bleak one. The night he must spend in New Bedford is "dark and dismal," he is alone, in unfamiliar territory, and without enough money to bargain for relief. However, instead of a moody description of isolation, or a sentimental sketch of a lone figure walking quietly through the night, what brings the fact of Ishmael's solitude into perspective is an unsuspected touch of humor. Alone and probably more than a little apprehensive, Ishmael stands in the middle of a New Bedford highway and engages in a lively conversation with himself. He recites homilies and reminds himself that a fellow of his paltry means cannot afford to be too choosy about a place to stay. The theme of his soliloquy is an important one: the responsibility of a man to resign himself to what is within his power; and it is one that will be echoed many times and on many different levels throughout the book. But in this instance it is the humorous treatment of the subject that attracts attention. When Ishmael urges himself to "be sure and inquire the price, and don't be too particular" (p. 5), he articulates the conviction of a pragmatist who refuses to take the facts too

seriously. Though at this point Ishmael appears to be just a lonely and uncertain young man tentatively committed to a dubious enterprize and anxious for a warm place to lose his thoughts for the night, his funny monologue reveals in him an inner quality of mind that is to follow a stable course throughout his succession of strange experiences.

When Ishmael decides, without being too particular, on the Spouter Inn as his place of lodging for the evening, he manages to adjust himself to the gloomy squalor of the place with the same half-humorous, half-philosophical detachment that has been typical of him from the first. The place is a chaos of warped wooding, low ceilings, and stale air. And he is forced to compromise one of his long-cherished principles when he learns that there won't be enough room for him for the night unless he is willing to share a bed. Following a bout between contradictory commitments to principle and to pragmatic flexibility, Ishmael finally agrees to share a bed with the man forbid-  
dingly referred to by the host as "a harpooner." The consequences of his compromise don't make themselves felt until later in the evening. Ishmael has not yet seen his bunkmate.

Until it is time for him to act out his compromise, Ishmael spends the evening in the main room of the inn, eating chowder, feasting on the sight of exotic foreign whaling men, and congratulating himself on his resilience

in a difficult situation. He does not realize how prophetic his interest in the odd-looking whalers will be; in fact, he is feeling so comfortable with the situation, and with himself, that he risks embellishing his description of the inn with a few brazen puns. They are not very good ones, it should be said, and by themselves are hardly worthy of attention in a study of humor (He mentions, for example, that the sailing ship that an old salt is carving into a bench "didn't make much headway."), but they, too, are examples of comedy employed to a purpose. Here the humor caricatures Ishmael's self-satisfaction--the air of composure that he is trying to effect--and it sets the scene for the crisis that follows Ishmael's sobering first encounter with Queequeg.

Ishmael's self-assurance lasts only as long as he is able to suppress an imagination overworked by unfamiliar observations. And when the host of the Spouter Inn mentions that Ishmael's prospective bunkmate will be returning to his bunk as soon as he completes some difficult negotiations concerning the disposition of a shrunken head, Ishmael's cocksure facade crumbles into terror. The scene that follows is one of the comic highpoints of the book, rich in irony-of-situation and timed masterfully. Ishmael, unaware that the innkeeper is taking advantage of his inexperience and playing a practical joke, at first politely insists and then desperately pleads with the host to be more forthcoming



about the atrocities that he will likely suffer at the hands of the headshrinking savage whose bed he has been tricked into sharing. And the host, determined to exploit the situation for all of the amusement that a straight face will evoke, refuses to acknowledge the danger Ishmael is in, to respond to his anger, or to indicate that there is anything at all out of the ordinary about selling shrunken heads on the sidewalks of New Bedford, or about cohabiting with a murderous savage. Frustration finally forces Ishmael into a defensive posture. Unable to impress the landlord with his concern in any other way, Ishmael executes a stiff-lipped, painfully precise evaluation of the situation that is an hilarious unintentional parody of his schoolmasterly other self. Facing the landlord "as cool as Mt. Helba in a snowstorm" (p. 7), Ishmael litigiously accuses him of "telling me . . . stories tending to beget in me an uncomfortable feeling toward the man /Queequeg/" (p. 8). But the host's facade is solid. He shrugs off Ishmael's bluster with a look of incomprehension and leaves him to choose between fantasy and a damaged sober sense.

When Ishmael again elects to compromise, and makes himself as comfortable as possible on his half of the bed, the uncertainty of his commitment to brotherly tolerance is quickly justified. The initial impression that Queequeg evokes is not a reassuring one. When he returns from his bartering, his first priority, after undressing to reveal



a hideously tattooed immensity of brawn, is to conduct a forbidding ritual of fire and quiet incantation that in Ishmael's imaginatively charged state could easily be interpreted as cannibalistic and preprandial. Not surprisingly, Queequeg's otherworldly appearance and behavior seriously strain Ishmael's equanimity. Somehow, however, Ishmael manages to contain himself until the end of Queequeg's rite. But when the savage begins to polish his tomahawk in a manner that suggests ceremonial preparation, Ishmael's forbearance forsakes him. He explodes into a scream that is a simultaneous plea to heaven, the police, and the angel who watches over men who are about to be devoured by cannibals. And in final desperation, he screams for the innkeeper, who is drawn by the commotion but still refuses to acknowledge that there is anything unusual going on.

Despite the outrageous character of this burlesque, the real significance of the affair emerges after the host has revealed his subterfuge and explained that Queequeg is not nearly as dangerous as he appears. Ishmael's reaction is to treat the situation as a learning experience and to incorporate its implied truths about the common needs of men and the danger of trusting in generalities and suspicions into the pragmatic framework that he uses to define the world. When he concludes that "for all his tattooings, He /Queequeg/ was on the whole a clean and comely looking

cannibal" (p. 20) and that despite appearances to the contrary it is "better to sleep with a sober cannibal than with a drunken Christian" (p. 21), the revelation is subtle and complex: subtle because Ishmael seems to have penetrated to the soul of the matter, and complex because the confusion of events seemed to be working against the pursuit of wisdom. While the circumstance and the human frailties that it exposes are comic, Ishmael's determined philosophical readjustments reveal the sincerity of his commitment to good sense.

Less amusing of itself, but pertinent to the subject of humor's relationship to sound thinking, is Ishmael's own statement on the value of laughter. It is found at the beginning of the chapter entitled "Breakfast." His remarks, as offhanded as they at first appear, are hardly less than a thesis on the relativity of perspective, and they reveal the level of self-awareness that Ishmael must maintain in order to laugh at himself when others might be less objective, and that his observers must rise, too, in order to appreciate the altitude of Ishmael's point of view. When he declares that any man "who has something bountifully laughable about him . . . has more in him than you might think" (p. 23), he is acknowledging that the relative depth of foolishness of anything is largely a matter of point of view. Ishmael's philosophy allows him to suffer fools without himself deigning to foolishness because he makes it his own

responsibility to sort the chaff of an amusing situation from the seeds of reflection; and he can suffer being made a fool of because he recognizes that being laughed at is not synonymous with being laughable: anyone can learn from an experience of whatever character. Ishmael's sense of humor, sometimes strained by his willingness to suffer the amusements of others at his own expense, is more than just a corollary to his abiding pragmatism. It is at the heart of it. Pragmatism merely suggests to him the path of least resistance; humor smooths the path by eliminating mordant fixations and chronic self-doubts. Rather than boil with hatred, Ishmael will laugh along with his antagonist; rather than combat depression with an even darker mood, he will go to sea and lose himself in an instructive group effort; rather than nourish untested fears of the unknown, he will befriend a cannibal, or pursue a whale. If Ishmael's serene levelheadedness sometimes gets him into trouble, makes him the butt of a cruel joke, or amuses others incapable of such lofty joviality, it is important to remember that there is another hero in this tale who could learn an important lesson about life from Ishmael's casual code.

However, since humor derives from a breakdown of expectation, Ishmael's effort to maintain a pragmatist's distance from events is itself sometimes a source of amusement. The result of Ishmael's constant measuring of



himself against a studied conception of what the ideal character should be is that he creates a fairly precise image of that ideal character. And the image Ishmael's musings reveal provides a measure of Ishmael's fidelity to his adopted philosophy of tolerance and common sense. Knowing how Ishmael should react, according to the principles he tirelessly espouses, it is sometimes amusing to observe his genuine reactions. For example, if any single principle was impressed upon Ishmael by the incident with Queequeg, it was that a man of ideal character should not allow ignorant presupposition to cloud his relations with his fellow men. Despite the birth of this insight from an incident more memorable for its humor than for the revelation that grew out of it, Ishmael seemed to digest the lesson completely. He dismissed his false vision of the man who will become his best friend and managed to laugh about, as well as learn from, the incident. From this moment on, one assumes, Ishmael will never again embrace pernicious presuppositions about anyone or anything, last of all, Queequeg. He will never pursue knowledge where there is none; his judgments will be considered, and based on fact; and he will remain eternally alert to the difference between prejudice and proof. Yet not five chapters later, in the chapter entitled "A Bosom Friend," Ishmael is at it again. After having spent just one day with Queequeg, Ishmael presumes himself competent to discourse on the subtleties of the cannibal mind:



"Savages are strange beings," he assures us. "At times you don't know exactly how to take them" (p. 50). In this case, Ishmael's ruminations are an amusing contrast to the pragmatism that, at its best, provides the force and substance of his difficult ideal. And even when that pragmatism functions flawlessly, as it does when Ishmael tries (later in the same chapter) to overcome the paradox of faith posed by Queequeg's proselytizing, the delicate balance between stability of principle and flexibility of application that common sense demands of any creed never appears independent of a challenge to Ishmael's self-possession. Indeed, Ishmael's frequent dialogues between self and soul are the source of much of the humor in Moby Dick. Ishmael often manages to distill a sound moral maxim from a mountain of casuistry. When, for example, at the end of their first day together Queequeg makes a gesture that Ishmael interprets as an invitation to join him in the worship of a sooty wooden idol, Ishmael is forced to challenge with common sense his own religious prejudices, the laws of God imparted to him during a childhood spent "in the bosom of the infallible Presbyterian Church" (p. 53). To Ishmael, as committed to the abstract logic of human affairs as to the rigors of orthodox Christianity, Queequeg's overture poses a complex problem: how can a Christian of good faith worship an idol, and how can a friend in good conscience refuse? Miraculously, Ishmael manages to

subvert the biblical proscription of idolatry, avoid suffocation in the thin air of metaphysics, solve the problem, and still remain faithful to the pragmatic tradition that has served him so unpredictably and so well thus far. He reduces the Bible to the injunction that true Christians submit to the will of God. Then he nimbly identifies the will of God with the pragmatism of the Golden Rule. Thus placated, he props up the dogwood divinity, "salamis for him once or twice" (p. 61), and generally behaves with all of the enthusiasm that he is now certain that Queequeg would demonstrate if the situation were reversed and the two of them were instead sharing a hymnal "in the bosom of the infallible Presbyterian Church." Ishmael's pious conversion to idolatry in the name of his deep Christian faith is a broad comic stroke. At the same time that it enshrines Ishmael's ethic of common sense, it acknowledges with satire the difficulty of recognizing common sense amidst the confusion that contradictory principles creates.

### Nantucket

Without bothering to catalogue all of the puns, exaggerations and understatements that punctuate Ishmael's and Queequeg's combined assault on Nantucket, it is fair to say that their incongruous alliance does not lack humor. Once the two friends have cemented their loyalty to one

another with pagan incantations and Mrs. Hussey's cod chowder, they proceed to challenge fate with an almost-childlike indifference to caution. However, in the chapter entitled "The Ship," events preliminary to their upcoming voyage threaten to dispel the casual air of new friendship between them and to awaken Ishmael, at last, to some of the ominous realities of his new trade.

In Nantucket, Ishmael learns that Queequeg's little idol has issued an oracle assigning to him the task of selecting a ship. This turn of events unsettles Ishmael; part of the pleasure he has taken in Queequeg's company has had to do with Queequeg's superior knowledge of whaling vessels. The god's selection of Ishmael as its agent causes him several moments of second thought: he had no idea how to select a proper ship. But Ishmael's humorless predicament does not fully mature until it is exploited to the last laugh by Captain Peleg, the irreverent Quaker who is half-owner of the Pequod. When Ishmael is drawn to the Pequod because it looks "quaint," and then tries to curry Peleg's favor with an account of his brief experience aboard a merchant ship, he strains his first pragmatic injunction against pretense and sets himself up for a volley of good-natured ridicule at the hands of one of the few exclusively comic characters in the book. Peleg scorns Ishmael's "experience" as a seaman, mocks his unfamiliarity with the ways and places of whalers, parodies his



ignorance of whaling, and accuses him of learning seamanship from pirates. Peleg does not respond to Ishmael's "callow youth in search of adventure" affectation, and the feigned viciousness of his reaction to Ishmael's innocent question about Ahab's missing leg drives Ishmael to another of his schoolmasterly declamations: "What you say is no doubt true," he tells Peleg, "but how could I know there was any particular ferocity in that particular whale?" (p. 75). After reassuring himself that Ishmael is merely ingenuous, and not the simpleton he appears, Peleg, like the host of the Spouter Inn before him, relents. He takes Ishmael into his confidence, and promises to make him one of the crew. In this humorous exchange all of the themes that elevate Moby Dick above a simple account of a whaling voyage are inconspicuously foreshadowed: the foolishness of men and the metaphysical seriousness of whaling; the suggestive distinctions between men and object of the land, and those of the sea; the "illness" of Ahab, and the malice of the white whale. In Nantucket, aboard the Pequod, Ishmael's story begins to undergo an eerie transformation from objectivity to allusiveness that is the first perceptible stage in a process that will finally elevate narrative to allegory, event to parable, and recollection to revelation. Not incidental is the fact that the transformation hinges on an ostensibly humorous event. Comedy suggests men's insensitivity to the profound. Peleg plays his smiling



part, and Ishmael humbly protests, both men blind to the mysteries that surround them.

Aboard the Pequod, Ishmael loses more than his status as a tellurian equal among equals; he also loses the stage to Peleg and Bildad. These two imposing personalities reduce Ishmael to a powerless witness to the haggling that will determine the precise amount that he is to be under-paid. While Ishmael has silently calculated the value of his services at anywhere from the two-hundredth to the two-hundred seventy-fifth lay (or part), and has magnanimously resolved to accept a more generous offer, Peleg has a difficult time persuading Bildad that Ishmael is worth more than the seven-hundred and seventy-seventh lay. The two engage in a loud and long debate, but Bildad refuses to change his offer, and finds in his selective biblical readings ample divine sanction for his cupidity. Peleg screams his amazement at Bildad's pious fraud. The scene is riotous. Finally, Peleg's threat of physical violence, clearly more theatrical than sincere, overrules Bildad's invocation of the scriptures (the verse about "laying" up treasures in heaven rather than on earth), and Ishmael is put down in the books for a three-hundredth lay. Pleased that a capital crime has not taken place on his account, Ishmael accepts the offer without complaint, cautiously informs his unpredictable employers about Queequeg, and accepts a position for him as harpooner without haggling

over wages. After negotiations are completed and the homicidal atmosphere has subsided, Bildad and Peleg join each other on the transom and in a manner completely inconsistent with the uproar of a moment ago, engage Ishmael in a friendly conversation. Though Ishmael is confused by the sudden shift in mood, he doesn't appear to recognize the possibility that he has been expertly had, that Bildad and Peleg have managed to terrorize him into accepting an offer that, under more stable conditions, he would probably have refused. Ishmael's willingness to learn from experience is occasionally outweighed by his willingness to remain ignorant.

The sense of uncertain significance that permeated the "Nantucket" chapter, the ominous words of men who have cultivated a quiet wisdom and a sardonic sense of sport as a result of their lives on the sea, evidence of Queequeg's unsuspected depth, and haunting stories about the invalid captain combine, by the chapter entitled "The Ramadan," to create complex overtones that cloud simple analysis and make Ishmael's naive faith in reason appear increasingly comic. It is not that Ishmael's pragmatism is an inefficient instrument of learning; rather, it is Ishmael who is occasionally an inefficient instrument of pragmatism. Humor frequently results from his inability to consistently derive truths from his adopted philosophy. It is true that he forgave the landlord of the Spouter Inn and befriended

Queequeg as a result of a healthy openmindedness, but after being deceived by Bildad and Peleg and dismissing the strange stories about Ahab with a shrug and a claim of "sympathy" for the captain, it is hard to accept Ishmael as a man suspicious enough to successfully arrive at knowledge by flowing without protest with the course of events. His philosophy is sound, even noble in its commitment to the reexamination of longstanding assumptions, but its methodology sometimes sabotages him. When Ishmael boards the Pequod at the behest of a wooden god and promptly sells his fate for a bargain, his lack of circumspection is considerable; but when he returns to Queequeg with news of a successful day of bargaining, blind to the dubiety of his actual accomplishment, half-seriously convinced of the providence of the idol's command, and redoubled in his dedication to the philosophy of unprotesting submission to experience, the richness of his self-deception is humorous. Ishmael knows how to philosophize. His shortcoming is that he doesn't know how to gather facts. And if tenable conclusions derived from untrustworthy details are not funny in themselves, the smugness that Ishmael sometimes affects as the result of them is.

In the first paragraph of the chapter entitled "The Ramadan," Ishmael's tendency to congratulate himself prematurely for accomplishments of only apparent fidelity to his precious pragmatic law adds a deeper level of humor to



a scene that is not without it already. Returning from the Pequod, Ishmael finds Queequeg involved in a ceremony of fasting and humiliation. Since Queequeg seems deeply involved, Ishmael decides not to disturb him. Then, possibly because the success of the day has lifted him to an awareness of his rare ability to force calm reason on a situation threatening to decay into irrationality, Ishmael delivers a lofty panegyric to himself, praising especially his gift of tolerance in matters of religion. He claims to "cherish the greatest respect toward everybody's religious obligations, no matter how comical" (p. 76), and insists that he would honor "a congregation of ants worshipping a toad-stool" (p. 80). He concludes his defense of sacrosanct absurdities with a satire of the homage men pay to other men of wealth. His speech is genuinely funny. It mocks liberal sentiment with a gross exaggeration that transforms simple openmindedness into a saintly act. But the wit of Ishmael's Declaration of The Rights of Man to make a fool of himself in whatever way he chooses is overshadowed by a deeper cause for amusement. Ishmael is not so free of illusions as he thinks he is. Events have already proven him a fool; and a greater one for forgiving in others what he fails to recognize in himself. Supercilious egalitarianism is a scant improvement on ignorant prejudice.

By the time for boarding ship, Ishmael has succeeded in repressing whatever second thoughts about whaling that



his rude initiation at the hands of Bildad and Pelog might, under less-confusing circumstances, have provoked. Secure in the good sense that has brought him to the brink of the sea, and confident of the pragmatic flexibility that has resulted in his friendship with Queequeg and his enrollment on the list of the Pequod's shipmen, Ishmael charges headlong into his whaling adventure with all of the self-satisfaction of an ignorant man. So certain is Ishmael of the prosaic good fortune of his situation that he refuses to surrender to suspicion, even when proclamations by a dockside prophet (Elijah), rumors about Ahab's madness, and shadowy figures skulking through the night combine to suggest possible flaws in his serendipitous picture of events. And again, in the chapter entitled "Going Aboard," Ishmael's insensitivity to the subtle air that distinguishes the genuinely foreboding from the merely uncommon contrasts with a darkening atmosphere of mystery to exaggerate the humor of his reaction to another of Queequeg's native customs: that of using the plush rumps of fat men as ottomans. In Ishmael's retelling, the custom suggests a parallel to the inventive ways in which the disadvantaged are further presumed upon by the privileged elements of all ostensibly enlightened cultures. The idea of "fattening some of the lower orders to furnish a house comfortably," of buying "eight or ten lazy fellows, and laying them around in an

alcove," or of "calling an attendant . . . to make a settee of himself in some damp and marshy place" (p. 83) is comical at the same time that it is an acid indictment of casual exploitation and the cruel abuse of power. It is difficult not to admire Ishmael for his wit and insight; in his abstract understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of men he is wiser than most. And in his reluctance to adopt arrogance as a reward for his insight he is better yet. But it is important to remember that while Ishmael can with some justification mock the pretensions of society and congratulate himself for his tolerance and flexibility, Elijah, the weird prophet of the docks, has issued oracular misgivings about the Pequod's mission, and Ishmael has seen a phantom crew of whalers board the ship in the anonymity of night. While Ishmael can decorate his understanding with wit, more amusing is his inability to enlarge understanding with observation. And his confidence in his own sound-mindedness is an amusing exercise in self-deception. It tends to disguise with false optimism, or deny altogether, those mysteries of life and nature for which there can be no simple explanation, and against which there is no defense. Events will impress him with this fact as his new enthusiasm matures into understanding.

### The Good Work

Moby Dick moves forward in starts and bursts, stalling in detail twice for every prolonged stretch of

narrative. It is in this spirit of tantalizing hesitation that the Pequod's voyage finally begins. Ishmael boards ship alongside a collection of human curiosities and quickly familiarizes himself with the strange inhabitants of his new environment. Then, perhaps suppressing second thoughts, Ishmael becomes defensive. In the chapter entitled "The Advocate," he launches seriously impassioned invectives against the detractors of whaling, countering their heresy with a chapter-long defense of his new profession. His litigiousness is laughably precise; it upholds the honor of whalemen with all of the dignity and tediousness of a scholarly monograph, and at the same time homicidally satirizes that pedantic condition of mind that calls upon itself to assemble, in the interest of superfluous clarification, numberless masterpieces of longwindedness. He finally arrives at the predictable conclusion that whalemen, among whom he now proudly numbers himself, serve their creditors equitably in an enterprise that is at the same time necessary, romantic, and heroic. "The Advocate" and the more cumbersome cetology chapters are first-rate Menippean satire. Details are coiled so persistently around a central skein that by the time the ungainly mass of supportive data has been compiled, the reason for its accumulation has long since shrunk to insignificance, buried so deeply beneath a weight of scholarship that no one is any longer very interested in digging



it out. The speaker never actually proves his point: he simply tires his auditors into indifference, and accepts their submission as a form of admission. So it is with Ishmael's defense of whaling. The listener is amused, bored, and then finally persuaded because the point Ishmael defends doesn't seem particularly important. What is humorous about Ishmael's pertinacity is that he should bother to persevere at all. If he wants to perceive whalemen as heroes that is his privilege. What will finally convince us of the accuracy or exaggeration of his position are events and their implications, not the polish and poise of a rhetorician. Ishmael's is a straw-man argument and it is humorous because he uses enough straw to bury a continent.

Indeed, it is possible to extend the Menippean interpretation into an approach to the whole of Moby Dick. With its starts and pauses, divagations, monologues and compendiums of seemingly useless information, it at first appears to fit the Menippean mold comfortably. Until the story has accumulated a sufficient weight of implication, and until a number of puzzling incidents persuade us that there is more than a simple whaling story involved, Moby Dick does seem like a mound of matter perched on a mouse of a theme. But here again, events emerge that amuse us with our own ability to embrace the obvious at the expense of what is true. After having been led to believe otherwise by a discontinuous flow of narrative, a seemingly



futile grasping for significance, and an editorial tone that seems unaffected by foreshadowings and hints at a greater theme, it is disorienting to concede that the story is, in fact, as significant as its generous portents would have one believe. This overstatement that is actually understatement is the broadest source of humor in the book: it touches characters and events only incidentally, insinuating itself into the mood of the narrative, the character of events.

### The Men

In "Knights and Squires," Ishmael introduces the Pequod's crew and describes the status and functions that follow from their respective ranks. Starbuck is deliberate and stoical, a man of active virtue and restrained passion. Flask is a loud and sometimes amusing mediocrity who habitually says more than he means. Ahab is proud and paradoxical, with a character that will challenge one-hundred and thirty five chapters for an adequate treatment. The harpooners are primitives barely touched by the temperance that a presumably more-advanced culture demands, but with a sense of honor that challenges any of the other crew members for comparison. It is Stubb, however, who is most often the source of humor.

In the chapter entitled "Queen Mab," Stubb is revealed as a character hopelessly fated to amuse. It is his nature

to look for the humor in every situation, and his misfortune to be the natural victim of serious men's sour dispositions. Not that he doesn't occasionally deserve his condition: he is prouder than he is perceptive and louder than he is deep. He is insensitive to the changeability of men, and stubborn in his faith that the world appears to others exactly as it does to him. His is a limited consciousness secure in its understanding but incapable of appreciating either its own limitations or the presence of other superior souls. When Stubb is at his hardy best, he can inspire his men to high spirits and hard work. But when stubborn Stubb's pride conflicts with the inspired fury of a temperament like Ahab's, he is driven to deceive himself into the belief that he has not been outdone. The futility of his effort makes him comical despite himself; for example, in the chapter entitled "Enter Ahab," the captain's premiere on deck is celebrated at Stubb's expense. Advised by Stubb that honor forbids his being treated like a menial, Ahab demonstrates his respect for Stubb's integrity by calling him a dog, a donkey, and ten times an ass. Then, in the "Queen Mab" chapter, Stubb recounts a dream that has obviously been inspired by the incident. In Stubb's dream, Ahab kicks him with his ivory leg. Stubb is correct to have interpreted Ahab's affront as equivalent to a kick in the pants. But his attempt to lessen the significance of the imaginary kick by rationalizing Ahab's

use of his ivory leg instead of his real one is comical. Demonstrating a casuistry of lesser hope, but superior in self-deception even to some of Ishmael's more inspired flights of paralogism, Stubb concludes that the kick, and therefore the incident, meant nothing because the offending limb was not genuine. A sincere kick would have come from a flesh-and-blood foot. Renewed in self-respect, Stubb emerges from the incident unenlightened and willing to forget the past.

In the chapter entitled "The Cabin Table," humor lightens an otherwise-tiresome description of whaling protocol. The chapter offers a glimpse of the three mates as each tries to harmonize his personality with the demands of his respective rank. The dinner hour every evening provides a model of the ships hierarchy. The cook announces dinner. Ahab bids the first mate to assume command and seats himself at the table. Starbuck commands until Ahab is prepared to eat. Then Starbuck summons Stubb to command and descends to dinner in his turn. Stubb than summons Flask, last and least in authority among the mates, and descends to the table himself. The routine follows lines strictly defined by authority. The most important eat first and all of the mates command for a time in their turn. It is revealing, however, that Starbuck rises to his command gravely and with dignity, like a man encumbered by the knowledge of his proximity to power. Stubb, in contrast,



takes advantage of his brief command to indulge the two dominant aspects of his nature: insouciance and good sense. He "lounges about on the rigging a while, then slightly shaking the main brace, to see whether it will be all right with that important rope" (p. 91). And Flask, the most comical and least responsible of the mates, rises to his moment of absolute power with a spark of childlike celebration. He "winks in all sorts of directions, kicks off his shoes, strikes into a sharp but noiseless squall of a hornpipe . . . and goes down rollicking" (p. 92). But before he reaches the captain's table, Flask carefully adjusts his manner to reflect a somber humility appropriate to an occasion of the consequence of mealtime in the presence of the captain. He enters "in the character of Abjectus the Slave" (p. 95). Flask's character is clearly compromised by the demands of decorum.

But Flask doesn't suffer the repressions of protocol in spirit alone. His stomach is also affected. An apparent newcomer to the ranks of command, Flask can only half-enjoy his new status; his ego is fed at the expense of his body. The rules of the Pequod demand not only that the mates approach the dinner table in descending order of rank, but also that they leave the table in reverse order. In consequence, Flask hardly has time to pick up his fork before an abrupt cue from the captain indicates that the ship's business has been too-long delayed, and that Flask



should terminate his meal and allow the captain and his mates, by now full and amiable, to file out in ascending order of rank and return to their responsibilities above deck. Poor Flask has less time to eat than he had in command of the ship. The effect of his promotion from the enlisted status of a crew-member to the commissioned status of a mate has been to raise his level of responsibility and decrease his consumption of food. Flask has been promoted into a higher tax bracket. And it is possible to extend Flask's predicament into a larger thematic statement. There is often something pathetic about an object of humor, and Flask's condition is not entirely foreign to any of the characters in the book. He is an ironic figure whose aspirations conflict humorously with his condition. Queequeg's aspiration to civility and Ishmael's chronic naivete are themselves humorous foibles that derive from the same ironic root. And Ahab's tormented reluctance to abandon revenge and settle accounts as they stand clearly reflects the humor of certain frustration. All of these examples suggest that it is impossible for a man to arrive at a point of perfect equity. The death of the spirit is signaled by the death of desire, yet only impossible visions thwart spiritual death and provide a reason for perseverance. Queequeg never stops being an illiterate savage, though he is unfailingly a decent human being; Ishmael never fully understands, though he never questions the wisdom of that

objective; and Ahab never conquers the whale, though he never concedes the contest. And Flask never dances a horn-pipe, commands the ship, or gets a full meal, though he pursues promotions relentlessly to that end. All of these men, all men, are pathetic in their inability to arrive at satisfaction; all are admirable in their pursuit of it; and all are, in the largest sense, humorous for doing what they ignorantly think they must do. Moby Dick is a book about serious matters, but as a statement of the narrow theme of human accomplishment, the book is a comedy. There are really no great men or high places here, only flawed men comically stumbling toward chimeras.

Nor does the Pequod's caste system cease beyond the captain's table. Ship protocol allows the harpooners to eat after the men of the captain's table. Closest to the distant origins of humanity, and first in the face of danger, these sloppy heroes are second only to Ahab in their hunger for blood, and inferior only to Flask in their conformity to the unspoken orders of good taste. When their turn at the table is announced, they charge below deck like animals startled by a blaze. As far as they are from the starched propriety of the captain's table, however, the scene that their mealtime presents is one of vigorous, if vaguely barbaric, good humor. They playfully threaten to behead the cook if he doesn't bring them more meat, quickly. Tashtego particularly "has an ungentlemanly way of

accelerating [the cook] by darting a fork at his back, harpoon-wize" (p. 115); and Tashtego periodically reduces the ship's gourmet to a state of quivering by "laying out a circle on his head preliminary to scalping" (p. 116). The antics are all in fun, though the cook seems less amused by the prospect of his slow and painful death than do the rest of the men. And from the point of view of everyone but the cook, the scene is quite funny.

An important contrast emerges between the humor of the captain's table and that of the feast of harpooners. The humor of the captain's table arises from repression: Flask especially is amusing for his near inability to maintain the prescribed facade of decorum. And the effect of that humor is to suggest a revaluation of the sacred commonplace, dignity. High ideals are born by superhuman exertions, and they fall with comic results when their standardbearers are themselves inclined to the frailties of the less-than-superhuman. The humor of the captain's table is the humor of men committed to universal principles that they can neither define nor uphold. These vague principles of order and restraint allow civilizations to survive by suppressing the improvident impulses of individual egos. But when the principles are unclear, behavior becomes a matter of form rather than of meaning, and humor frequently results. At the harpooner's table, in contrast, matters of the moment overrule the larger questions of ethics. These are men



dedicated to no ideal higher than that invoked by common desire; food, fun, the threat of violence blend in an atmosphere that is at once playful and in touch with the elemental source of human life. No foggy ideals cloud the motives of men willing to acknowledge, on the same level with the demands of the heart and mind, those of the stomach and the loins. The comedy of the harpooner's table emerges from a reluctance to surrender to dignity. In these two congregations the two broad categories of humor are matched with their corresponding conditions of mind. Flask's hornpipe signals a barely repressed impulse, just as does Tashtego's mock scalping. There are no advanced or retarded cultures, no civilized or cannibal natures: there are only variations in the degree to which cultures are willing to tolerate restraint. And it is the necessary restriction that social intercourse demands of the individual human nature that is the final source of the humor in both cases. The laws of group preservation expose amusing flacidities in the moral constitutions of men: it is funny that Flask and Tashtego can barely contain themselves; it is disastrous that Ahab cannot.

It is interesting that the single character who recognizes that society exists at the expense of individual freedom, and that evil and complete freedom are closely related, himself resists restraint and thereby jeopardizes the safety of the "society" under his command. Nominally,



Ahab's justification for avenging himself on Moby Dick is a warped but perhaps sincere belief that in destroying the whale he will be destroying all evil. The chapter entitled "Moby Dick" makes this clear. Ahab "deliriously transferred . . . all that stirs up the lees of things . . . ; all truth with a malice in it . . . ; all the subtle dimensions of life and thought; all evil . . . were personified and made practically assailable in Moby Dick" (p. 125). His ostensibly noble vendetta, however, transforms him into something as bad as the evil that he has seen. But this is obvious. What is amusing is the observation that in fact Ahab doesn't turn himself into anything that he was not already. He merely uses the whale as justification for the sort of self-indulgence that tempts every participant in society. Declarations of the whale's malice simply disguise the accumulated frustrations of a spirit held captive too long by society's priests of brotherhood and forbearance. Ahab's disregard for his responsibility as the leader of a business enterprise is an affront to social regulation comparable to Flask's harmless hornpipe or Tashtego's teasing knife-play in everything but the scale of its expression, the extent of its effect on other men, and the persistence with which it is indulged. In all of these instances, men are disagreeably restrained by necessary principles of order. There is little humor in the tragedy that Ahab's assumption of unwonted freedom precipitates;

but there is a kind of humor in the observation that a man who claims to know so much of evil knows so little of himself.

A distinguishing characteristic of practical intelligence is the ability to appreciate the latent intelligence of the common man. And madman though he may be, Ahab is not stupid. It is true that little of the humor that can be identified with Ahab is without a macabre underside. Still, there is a devilish humor in the ingenuity of his deceit. Ahab manages to lose the fabric of the whaling community with the approval and assistance of those who are most likely to suffer for his indiscretion. After rallying the crew to his side with emotional rhetoric and a golden coin, Ahab diverts suspicion by carrying on with whaling as usual. In the chapter entitled "Surmises," Ahab's plan becomes clear. In order to avoid mutinous accusations and to color his vendetta with a gloss of adventure, Ahab nurtures his crew on the easy prey of well-charted seas. By this device he hopes to convince his men, all of whom have a stake in the financial success of the voyage, that he, too, is a businessman rather than a lunatic, a lover of the hunt rather than the rabid enemy of a single whale. He feigns devotion to duty so convincingly, in fact, that for the moment the ingenuity of his deceit is more amusing than anything that results from it: one is caught up in the game of whaling just like the rest of the crew. However, the humor

of the situation lasts only so long as Ahab's madness remains harmless. When his monomania turns bloody, and more than just the greed and spinelessness of the crew are on display, the deception loses its comic edge.

Of course, the impression this far has been that the humor in Moby Dick is largely secondary to one of the book's larger elements of symbol, character and meaning--that what is funny about it is so only in service to some greater purpose that time and events will reveal. In a strict sense, this is true. Ishmael's confidence is amusing from the perspective of a reader's greater awareness: the element of dramatic irony allows the character to grope comically for an insight that is clear to the reader. Queequeg's mannered savagery is amusing as a challenge to preconceived notions about civility and culture; it demonstrates how easily the two can be confused. And what is amusing about the other characters--Ahab, Stubb, and the rest--is revealing at the same time that it is comical. But because the humor in the book so often serves a larger purpose, there is a tendency to look for humor only in scenes and situations that hint at greater things. Again, this is not an improvident impulse. The humor in Moby Dick is often a device for inconspicuously suggesting larger themes, and for short-cutting description with a quick revelation more significant than lengthy paragraphs of exposition or dialogue. But this use of humor also blinds the theme-bound reader to some of the



amusing incidentals that appear in the desultory course of the story. One of countless such examples occurs at the end of the first of the chapters on cetology (#32). After listing every possible name for every possible member of every possible family of whales in every possible ocean of all the known seas, Ishmael concludes his scrupulous taxonomy with a further list of specious whales. He has accomplished what he immodestly acknowledges to be an unprecedented service to science and posterity, equivalent to the "uncompleted . . . Cathedral of Cologne" (p. 126). As his readership snores, Ishmael invites an enthusiastic apostrophe to the muse of unfinished masterpieces: "God keep me from completing anything" (p. 133); and he hails his goal of deliberate imperfection with a parting allusion. Several of the Leviathans that are spoken of, he claims, are frauds, "full of Leviathanism, but signifying nothing" (p. 142). This ludicrous pastiche of dubious learning and delightful wit is as dispensable to the story as it is refreshing. It is the sort of comedy that doesn't require having already read the book at least once to appreciate. In a whaling book that is sometimes as unfathomable as its subject, a little uncomplicated humor offers a welcome pause between profundities.

#### Whaling

In the organized chaos of the first whale chase, Elijah's ominous prophecy materializes in human form. As



the mates prepare to lower their whale boats, they notice for the first time an extra whale boat and harpoon crew that Ahab has apparently smuggled aboard. They also notice that Ahab's imperial harpooner is a Mediterranean type, grim and sinister in appearance. His look is so appalling that common consensus half-seriously judges him and his grisly crew to be "the paid spies and secret confidential agents on the water of the devil, their lord" (p. 143). Fedallah's deckside debut is a dramatic moment, and it stimulates disaffection among the crew members, who have sworn to help avenge Ahab's wound. Not only, it now appears, did Ahab mistrust them, he was also prepared to wage a private campaign had they mistrusted him. But the mechanisms of whaling are well-ordered and the discipline of the chase disallows long moments of mutinous reflection. The boats drop, winches whine, commands are shouted, and the crew's curiosity is drowned in salt spray and the desire for self-preservation. As quickly as the real danger that awaits them is forgotten, the immediate one takes possession, and the mates return in the frenzy of the chase to that attitude of detached competence that is the source of much of the unexpected humor in the whaling scenes. After having been impressed in the abstract with the extreme dangers of whaling, and having heard Ishmael's testimony to the heroic spirit that is the whaler's standard equipment, it is amusing to discover how lightly these heroes actually take

their peril. Stubb admonishes his crew "in a tone so strangely compounded of fun and fury . . . that no oarsman could [help] . . . pulling for the sheer joke of the thing" (p. 150). Stubb goes about his job lazily, "loungingly managing his steering oar" (p. 151) and yawning conspicuously. In the last phase of the fray, when the boats are challenging each other for proximity to the whale, he pulls his boat across Starbuck's bow and hails the first mate in a manner that belies the presence of danger. The mates talk briefly about the suspicious additional crew, and then Stubb, who would have been pleased to chat longer, is gently urged back to duty and profit by Starbuck, who is himself not averse to a brief mid-crisis parlay.

Ishmael, too, is puzzled by the cavalier mood that seems to possess his whaling companions in the middle of the most dangerous and unpredictable inevitability of their profession. When the boats are lowered, and mortal souls confront an agent of their own potential destruction, religion and philosophy appear to him the most likely refuge. And when Ishmael learns that violent death is the least terrifying misfortune likely to result from a lowering--that there is also the possibility of lonely abandonment in the middle of the sea, "in the heart of that almighty forlornness" (p. 160)--the gallows humor of the whalemens commands the full force of his powers of reason. Again, Ishmael's thinking is not entirely adequate: his thoughts tend to

pantheism and infallible Presbyterian platitudes about the interdependence of all things. Nor is it particularly funny, except as a further example of the frustrations that face any philosopher who attempts to generalize his way out of a paradox. But his reflections, in the chapter entitled "The Hyena," do contribute to an understanding of the humor in the paradoxical detachment of men who have every reason to keep the full force of mind and eye firmly focused on events before them, and to an understanding of that particular irony that permeates the book, contrasting every event of gravity and significance with a suggestion of the transience of all things.

In a flash of incomplete insight, Ishmael concludes that at times men take "this whole universe for a vast practical joke, the wit thereof he but dimly discerns" (p. 161), and he associates this elevated level of perspective with the dangers of whaling. Because "that odd sort of wayward mood that comes over a man in times of extreme tribulation" (p. 167) is so abundantly available to whalemén, they recognize more clearly the brevity of life, its unpredictability, and its dearth of comfort and pleasantries. This insight grown from proximity to death gives whalemén the depreciated estimation of individual importance and the awareness of the immensity of the cosmos that allows them to approach events of the moment from the perspective of eternity, and to laugh at death as they marvel at the



continuity of life. Though the equation lacks an adequate estimation of evil, the power of individual human compulsion, or the motivation to try and succeed despite the brevity of life, it should not be judged for what it does not attempt. In fact, Ishmael has offered as a by-product of his curiosity about the fearlessness of remarkable men a remarkable glimpse into the nature of that variety of consciousness that is more sensitive to the humor than to the horror of human life, and an insight into the peculiar brand of humor characteristic of Moby Dick. Tragedies are the creation of minds incapable of disassociation of hurt from cause, of separating the individual ego from the impersonal chain of cosmic events. Comedy, in contrast, presumes the more logical, but emotionally more difficult assumption that the universe deals in accidents and probabilities rather than in righteousness and law, that humans are free within the narrow limitations of class, culture, and genetics, and that the human drama does not necessarily unfold according to the presuppositions of any one of its players. A measure of Ahab's deviation is the extent to which he fails to profit from the lessons of his trade.

A consequence of the whaleman's metaphysical sensitivity is his defensive pride in the profession. It seems humorous that men so conscious of their mortal limitations should be dedicated on so philosophical a plane to a profession that promises to further abbreviate the brevity



of life. And though the humor of that contradiction is never completely counteracted by the mound of evidence offered by Ishmael in defense of whalers and their lot, Ishmael's protests do succeed in puncturing with humor some of the pretensions that underlie prejudices against whaling and his accusations do expose some of the shallow chauvinisms of the maritime industry. Though Ishmael's argument does not make men who are aware of human limitation appear any better for having devoted their lives to an occupation that enshrines mortal limitation, he does manage to argue persuasively that whalers are on a par with belligerent man-of-war's men, slave-ship sailors, and pirates. And he accomplishes this difficult act of advocacy by means of a rhetorical device embraced by all of the great orators and sanctified by time: sneering derision. Comparing the methods by which meeting ships address one another, he concludes, in the chapter entitled "The Gam," that the "silly bowing and scraping and ducking of ensigns" (p. 168) indulged in by man-of-war's men make those sailors appear absurd. And merchant vessels "crossing each other's wake in the mid-Atlantic will oftentimes pass on without so much as a single word of recognition, mutually cutting each other off on the high seas, like a brace of dandies on Broadway" (p. 200). And slave ships "are in such a prodigious hurry that they "run away from each other as soon as possible" (p. 201). But the funniest condemnation is targeted at the

pirates, who think themselves masters of the sea: all powerful and accountable to no one. "How many skulls?" they ask each other as they pass. Of course, Ishmael admits, "the pirate's variance with the law does occasionally end in his uncommon elevation; indeed, but only at the gallows" (p. 203). This type of elevation, however, leaves a pirate with "no proper foundation for his superior attitude" (p. 205). By lifting himself above the whaleman in this way, Ishmael insists, "the pirate has no solid basis to stand on" (p. 206). The cause of whaling is barely assisted by this foolishness, and Ishmael hardly justifies his own prejudices. Whalemen are not ennobled by his conviction that they are better than murderers, merchants, and thieves. Part of the comedy of the scene revolves around the irony of Ishmael's indignation. Events demonstrate that whalers are not unrelated in motive or sentiment to any one of the three. But comedy needn't stop to analyze itself, and the scene is funny. In addition, it prepares a place for the mound of scholarly information that Ishmael presents as evidence of the mystery and promise of revelation with which whaling has attracted both the brightest and the most boring of human minds and mouths.

In the chapter entitled "Monstrous Pictures of Whales," Ishmael reveals the "truth" about whales and whaling by quoting a legion of supposed authorities on the art. These experts he considers "the primal source of all those

pictorial delusions" accepted as fact by credulous ages up to and including his own. Tracing the origins of this folly back to "the oldest Hindoo, Egyptian, and Grecian sculptures" (p. 220) is tedious stuff, barely enlivened by Ishmael's attempt to counteract ignorance and fancification with parody, reliable source-work, and the wisdom of experience. In fact, the mistakes of ancient experts are more amusing than Ishmael's facts. And the satire that Ishmael dispenses as a tonic for error is, here, dull and lifeless. His earnestness dulls his sword. One is tempted to believe that Ishmael might have actually learned something as a whaleman and become a bore as a result. Only once in the chapter does his adversary scholarship rise to a level of comic vision equal to that of the detached, stubbornly pragmatic equivocation that has been his strength and weakness thus far. Trying to isolate the worst blunder committed in the cause of pseudo-scientific cetology, he points to the work of the nineteenth-century scientist Frederick Cuvier, "brother to the famous Baron." Before showing any of the pictures of sperm whales in Cuvier's 1836 edition of the Natural History of Whales to anyone in Nantucket, Ishmael warns, "you had best provide for your summary retreat" (p. 226). The whale that Cuvier proudly pictures is not a sperm whale at all, nor is it any other variety of whale or mammal. It is not even an animal.



Cuvier places "the cap-sheaf to all this blundering business" (p. 227) by mistaking a garden squash for a sperm whale. Curious about the origin of the error, Ishmael suggests that Cuvier may have "derived that picture . . . as his scientific predecessor in the same field" (p. 231). The parallel he draws between the field of science and a field of vegetables almost compensates for the tiresome earnestness of the rest of the chapter. Its implication that queer creations grow wild in both varieties of field is certainly appropriate to the character of Ishmael's study. And the amusement at everything except whaling and truth that it suggests is certainly characteristic of Ishmael. Learned men are no more immune to misplaced self-confidence than are merchants and pirates.

The point of all this is that the prestige of a pursuit is often the product of fancification rather than fact. Pirates are ennobled by people's ignorance: it is easy to glorify the strength and independence of characters one is never likely to encounter and with whom legend has been generous. A realistic look at piracy, however, reveals disgusting truths that implicate all men and that are more comfortably disguised in myth. Whaling suffers similarly from men's ignorance. Ishmael is trying to correct popular misconceptions by puncturing misleading myths about whaling. He offers facts derived from his personal experience or from credible alternative sources. And he elevates his



story onto a plane of suggestivity intended to satisfy the public's need for something more than the literally true. He is trying to replace false and derogatory whaling myths with a positive new one, and is following the logical steps to that end. The problem, and a particular source of humor in the chapters that are more academic than amusing, is that scholarship, too, is cloaked in myths. To counteract falsehoods well founded in false learning, it is necessary to combat the persuasive assumption that for a book to have been written, or a fact proclaimed, there must have been a truth at issue. Ishmael has to deal with the fundamentalist orthodoxy of the printed page, and with a congregation of hearers trained to worship truth at the bidding of a priesthood of the published. This is a real problem: a lie heard by half the world is likely to be more influential than a truth shared by a privileged few. With the example of Cuvier's squash, Ishmael tries to deal with the issue of sufficient proof by laughing at an outrageous abuse of the principle. This, he implies, is the sort of sanctification of fantasy that glorifies pirates, that denigrates whalers, and that falsifies the record. But ultimately the question is one of how much evidence and documentation is necessary before an opinion can rightfully be called a fact. An amusing incident in the chapter entitled "Less Erroneous Pictures of Whales" illustrates the problem of provability and shows the difficulty of Ishmael's plan to reconstruct

men's minds regarding the whale. He mentions that Scoresby, "after giving us a full length of the Greenland whale," goes on to show detailed pictures of boathooks, knives, and other assorted whaling minutia (p. 232). He then protests that Scoresby does not provide "a sworn affidavit taken before a Greenland Justice of the Peace" to satisfactorily confirm that the "ninety-six fac-similies of magnified Arctic snow crystals" are indeed authentic (p. 232). Superfluous confirmation is as funny as confusing a vegetable with a whale; however, Ishmael's parodic acknowledgment of the problem of proof is insufficient treatment. The problem is never resolved. Ishmael begins his attempt to rescue the world from cetological ignorance by basing his apology for the profession on observations of fact, and on reliable scholarship, but he ends by recounting an incredible story with religious overtones about the one that got away.

If Ishmael's anthology of scholarship tends to leave one either drowsy and unimpressed or laughing, and his story tries one's willingness to suspend disbelief, at least his first-hand observations redeem his conviction that whalemen are noble. In the chapter entitled "The Line," the dangers that whalemen have to endure without question or protest are rendered powerfully. Scenes of brave men in the act of bravery do more to defend whaling against the attacks of prejudice than do all of Ishmael's tiresome scholarly sources combined. When Ishmael describes the

paralyzing fear that men aboard a whaling boat must repress in order to retain the presence of mind necessary to function in a life-threatening situation, the description makes its point. Potential nooses of rope swirl around their necks ominously while monsters threaten to rise from the sea and dash their small whaling boats into splinters. And the testimony is enhanced by the unspoken fact that the narrator experienced the event firsthand. In fact, Ishmael is on such reliable ground when he bases his judgments on personal experience that he can sometimes successfully indulge his philosopher's tendency to generalize. Previously, Ishmael's generalities have hinted at his inexperience, but actual participation in a trade appears to have matured him as a man and seasoned him as a wit and philosopher. When, in the chapter entitled "The Dart," he humorously extrapolates a truth about men from his observation of the demands the mates place on harpooners, his satire has more than just wit: it has the sting of a deep truth cleverly implied. The harpooner is expected to row the whaleboat to the whale, to provide an example of effort and enthusiasm for the rest of the crew, to remain conspicuously indifferent to danger, and then, with a thrust of the heavy harpoon, to kill the whale, after which he is then expected to return humbly to his oar and goad the men into an enthusiastic return to the ship. Ishmael comments that he, for one, cannot bawl very heartily and work at the



same time. "It is the harpooner that makes the voyage" (p. 239). The harpooner emerges from the description as a kind of overman. And Ishmael's comic self-abasement combines with what is clearly his admiration for the harpooners to suggest that all accomplishment results from the dependence of the inept upon the able. The example satirizes the inept both for their weakness and for their pernicious reduction of the strong to weakness by overburdening them with responsibilities that should rightfully be shared. The heroic spirit is compelled to spend its private greatness in the interest of a public good, a concession for which strength is never fully recompensed. For the first time, Ishmael's wit accords with his wisdom. Because he has the weight of a real experience behind him, his satire succeeds. He meets the requirement of believability demanded of those who belittle.

### The Opposition

The counterpoint to Ishmael's tireless defense of whaling occurs in the chapter entitled "Stubb's Supper." By this time, an impressive weight of evidence has been offered in defense of whaling. Ishmael has culled literary sources, foraged through ancient forests of scholarship, combatted current misconceptions, offered impressions based on his personal experience, and begun an attempt to alter the erroneous popular mythology of whaling. His attempt has



at times been impressive; more often, it has been either overlong, or absurd, in that Menippean sense of comic excess. But finally, in the chapter about the harpooners, his earnestness and defensiveness collide to the advantage of his cause. The nobility of whalemen is convincingly argued on the strength of Ishmael's implied association of all whalemen with virtues of self-sacrifice and bravery characteristic of the harpooners. And the method or argument by realistic description rather than by recourse to personal opinion or pedantic enumeration has given his bias a foundation firm enough to allow occasional flights of generalized satire without threat to the final sobriety of his defense. The method persuades his hearers by patient indulgence. Conscious that scholarship bores, and opinions alienate, Ishmael resorts to a clever reconstruction of fact, correctly assuming that the proper opinion can be coaxed forward by a calm demonstration of the truth. That the method is itself a kind of censorship, and therefore tendentious, is less important to him than is the fact of its successful service to his cause. So, when old Fleece, the cook, appears on deck in "Stubb's Dinner" and unconsciously suggests an attitude toward whaling (and Man) opposed to the glorification that Ishmael has advocated, the effect is significant despite the humor of the scene. The fact that Fleece is not in the service of any prescribed point of view and that his involvement in whale butchery is

not direct gives his ignorant wisdom the impact of objectivity. His uncalculated mumblings are the first real hint in the book that it is Man, and not the whale, who is a beast; that it is the whale, and not Man, who should be glorified. And consistent with the frequent presence of humor in Moby Dick as an analgesic in the bitter pill of truth, Flask's deckside monologue is comical. Summoned by Stubb, who in one of his dense and happy moods has taken enough time from a busy schedule of work and gluttony to humiliate the ship's cook, Fleece assumes the deck reluctantly. When Stubb complains that his whale steak is too thoroughly cooked, adding that the sharks snapping at the dead whale alongside "prefer it tough and rare," Fleece reacts like an artist offended by a bourgeois patron. The analogy between men and sharks is subtly stated in this scene, but Stubb's intention to further compromise the cook results in a more elaborate, and more amusing, statement of the parallel. Rising to an exordium on the subject of the proper preparation of whalemeat, Stubb notices that the noise of the hungry sharks overboard threatens to overpower his voice. He appoints Fleece missionary to the sharks, and enjoins him to preach civility and silence to them. Fleece performs his mission sanctimoniously, accepting the lantern offered to him by Stubb, and carrying its light to the sharks as a symbol of the supernatural truth he bears. The scene is a comic inversion of Father Mapple's sermon

in Chapter Nine. "Fellow critters," Fleece accurately begins, "I'se ordered here to say dat you must stop dat dam noise dare" (p. 239). Ministers always preach some brand of sacrifice. "Do you is all sharks," he continues, "and by natur very voracious . . ." (p. 240). Appetite is a necessity that tends to excess in all creatures of prey. "But if you gobern de shark in you, why den you be angel" (p. 240). The sermon then rises to a homelitic crescendo: "For all angel is not'ing more dan de shark well goberned . . . Don't be tearin de blubber out your neighbor's mout . . ." (p. 250). Fleece is a black Father Mapple, and an unwitting parodist in his own right. By the time he surrenders the pulpit, distinctions between whalers like Stubb and sharks like those of Fleece's congregation fade before persuasive evidence of their common inhumanity.

A reconstructionist undercurrent persists throughout the chapters about the processing of the dead whale. The intention of these chapters is ostensibly educational: Ishmael wants to familiarize his audience with the facts as well as the spectacle of whaling. But the effect of all this literal description is figurative. It expands Fleece's analogy between human and oceanic culture by acknowledging, with eloquent silence, the similarity between the lives and deaths of whales and those of men. The whale emerges from these descriptions of thoughtless carnage ennobled. In a hardly laughable, but half-humorous way, Ishmael's defense



is rebutted by the weight of his own evidence. It is an important source of humor in Moby Dick that Ishmael can so casually pronounce apostrophes to the blindness of humanity while at the same time remaining insensitive to the implications of his own story, and to the incompatibility of admiration for both whales and their predators. Whalemen are not glorious for having made the life of the sperm whale more like their own. When, in the chapter entitled "The Funeral," Ishmael describes how the depleted body of the whale is cast away from the ship and into the mouths of a waiting host of sharks, the scene is ripe with tragic overtones. He calls it "a doleful and mocking funeral" (p. 252). But before recognizing the source of that tragedy in a pointless conflict of life against life, he indulges a trite reflection about the limitations of human knowledge. Given the chance to rise above his material, he drowns in it. He reflects that in the future, passing boats will mistake the dead whale for an island and record its position on maps that will confound posterity and make ships change their routes "as silly sheep leap over a vacuum because their original leader leaped there when a stick was held" (p. 253). Ishmael succeeds at irony and misses the pathos of the event. When he sarcastically impugns tradition by this example-- "there's the story of your obstinate survival of beliefs never bottomed on the earth . . . . There's orthodoxy!" (p. 253)--his technique



is better than he knows. The parody is supported by the evidence, but Ishmael has missed the point. Why should we be troubled by a dead whale's exposure to sharks when a live one has already suffered the company of men? If the point missed is unamusing, at least the hollow certainty responsible for the oversight is not.

These chapters leave some doubt about what is really noble about whaling. Despite Ishmael's protestations on behalf of his profession, the simple observations of a man like Fleece linger persuasively. By the time Ishmael ends his description of the capture, killing, and dereliction of the whale, it is not easy to decide whose side to be on: both whales and whalers display enviable perseverance and bravery. If the whale is valuable, so is he innocent; if man is wily and persistent, so is he "voracious," like Fleece's congregation of sharks. When Ishmael abandons his whaling defense, satisfied of its success, and returns to the story in the chapter entitled "The Jerobaum," the paradoxical conflict between the elements of heroism and vileness simultaneously present in the nature of Man is left to be satisfactorily resolved by some future seer. Ishmael's personal satisfaction with a shallow resolution in favor of whalers, however, is a fact of importance to much of the humor and dramatic irony to follow. Those overtones that argue for a less-glorified conception of whalers (and of Man) activate a skepticism that will challenge the surface of

events to reveal its deeper meaning. It is impossible, for example, to appreciate the scene in which the Pequod meets the Jeroboam as strictly humorous after having digested so many doses of medicine for false faith.

Apparently, when the Pequod met the Town Ho earlier, Ishmael heard of a strange and amusing incident familiar to Nantucket whalers, about a lunatic who developed messianic delusions and paralyzed a whaling ship with fear and superstition until he was finally cast off. The irony needs no elaboration. However, when in the chapter entitled "The Jeroboam Story" the Pequod meets the Jeroboam, Ishmael sees the fanatic personally. The wild man has named himself Gabriel, declared himself an emissary of God, and seized the Jeroboam by pretending "with that cunning peculiar to craziness" (p. 256) to be merely mortal. At sea, he commanded the captain to jump overboard, "published [a ] manifesto, whereby he set himself forth as the deliverer of the isles of the sea and vicar-general of Oceania" (p. 257), and won the entire crew of the ship [possibly excepting the captain] as his disciples. The men aboard the Pequod are amused and amazed by the meeting. Gabriel greets them personally from a rocking whaleboat in mid-sea, his red hair flaming, eyes and freckles aglow. But Ahab has his own mission to fulfill. He asks Gabriel if he has seen the white whale, and receives the warning, "Think, Think of thy whale-boat stoven and sunk! Beware the horrible tail"

(p. 257) as a reply. Ahab recoils from the archangel, offended by his reluctance to cooperate, and the Pequod's crew treats the incident like an eerie, but largely comical, episode. But Gabriel has spoken sound lunacy. The incident is appropriate punctuation for the end of the long debate between the defenders and detractors of whaling. It transcends the issue of Man's primal nature and embraces the question of his sanity. Although Gabriel exaggerates to an amusing degree an intrinsic human tendency to delusion and egocentricity, men of extraordinary vision characteristically demonstrate a similar tendency. And though Gabriel is a lunatic by popular consensus, his warning does demonstrate a gift of prophecy. This comical episode makes it clear that it is not enough to ask simply whether Man is good or evil, right or wrong: the essential paradox of human motivation hinges on the question of whether or not Man is by nature sane.

The chapter entitled "The Monkey Rope" frames that question with a vivid example. And again Ishmael's ironic perspective blinds him to the profundity of his own reflections. This incident, too, he treats comically. In order to insert a blubber hook into the flesh on the dead whale's back, a member of the crew, usually a harpooner, must be lowered by rope onto the half-submerged back of the whale. This would pose no problem but for the sharks that also attend the carcass, snapping and charging with



blind ferocity for an indiscriminate chunk of blubber. The harpooner is lowered into this foray by a single crew member to whom he is inextricably attached by ropes and blind faith. It is the job of the man at the deckside end of the monkey-rope to hoist and pull the harpooner out of the mouth of danger, or back from the jaws of death. And it is the job of the man on the back of the whale to go about his business quickly, in order to avoid the sacrifice of too much blubber to the sharks; efficiently, despite being jerked about like a puppet; and stoically, without gratuitous comment concerning his proximity to an unpleasant demise. In the incident described, Queequeg and Ishmael share opposite ends of the monkey-rope. Ishmael finds the experience instructive. He generalizes perceptively about two of the book's most persistent themes (individuality and death), correctly perceiving that unrestricted free will, like the freedom Ahab craves, is as impossible in life as it is for men on the monkey-rope. He questions the divine arrangement of Providence, summarizing with detached irony the source of the central conflict in Moby Dick. But what is intolerable to Ahab is merely true, with a kind of comic finality, to Ishmael. He acknowledges that "an even-handed equity never could have sanctioned so gross an injustice" (p. 260), and recognizes his condition as symbolic of "the precise situation of every mortal that breathes" (p. 262). To

Ishmael, however, the thought that "if your apothecary sends you . . . poison, you die, . . . if your banker breaks, you snap" (p. 263) is cause for humility, impotent wonder, and amusement. Unable to breach his will for an all-out assault on providence, Ishmael concludes with profound humor that "That unsounded ocean you gasp in is Life; those sharks, your foes; those spades, your friends; and that between sharks and spades you are in a sad pickle and peril, poor lad" (p. 270). These amusing life-or-death reflections superimpose a larger paradox on those questions of the character of human nature or the sanity of human impulses. The issue here, as it is evoked perpetually by Ahab, is whether or not Providence itself is good or evil, sane or insane.

The final issue in questions that probe into the nature of Man and the character of God is again that of verifiability. At what point does a conviction pass from credibility into craziness? When is a truth more than a prejudice? And, finally, how is it possible to know anything at all about an experience as brief and complex as mortality? The cetology chapters in Moby Dick seem to occur when questions of this sort have reached an intense level of insistence. Their function as understated acknowledgments of the problem of verifiability has already been discussed in connection with Ishmael's campaign to eliminate popular misunderstandings about whales, whalemens, and

whaling. By the end of "The Monkey Rope" chapter, however, Ishmael's loxidromical dialogue has navigated him into an unavoidable collision with the most complicated issues of life and human nature. Appropriately, by the chapter entitled "The Prairie," he manages to lessen the impact by conducting another exercise in pseudo-cetology that challenges the validity of any conclusions that might appear to follow from the preceding examples. And characteristically, he treats the inevitability of epistemological agnosticism as cause for amusement rather than complaint. Ishmael consistently avoids value-abstractions by relying on his humor and good pragmatic sense. In "The Prairie," he applies the ancient Greek aesthetic of symmetry and the suspicious modern science of physiognomy, or face-reading, to the frontal part of a whale's head. This eclectic analysis reveals that the whale is a genius. Ishmael is slightly bothered by the finding, since to his knowledge, no "Whale has" ever written a book or spoken a speech" (p. 271): two certain indications of high intellect. But all his misgivings are resolved by his observation that "his the whale's great genius is declared in his doing nothing particular to prove it" (p. 273). Having offered this comical example of the inadequacy of the many instruments of human inquiry, Ishmael proceeds to a more realistic appraisal of Mankind's fateful inability to be certain about



anything of importance. "Physiognomy," he admits, "like every other human science, is but a passing fable" (p. 300). Questions of the value and nature of life, of Providence's good or bad intentions, of the proper response of Man to a paradoxical condition, are no less profound for their lack of a definitive final resolution; and Ishmael's humorous justification for an unwillingness to commit himself to anything larger than a whaleboat or more important than a friend is itself profound. But it is Ahab's vindictive certainty that is the most troubling response. He is too sure of the finality of his dark vision to look at it with humor, and he is compelling because the same consciousness of mortal limitation that keeps Ishmael laughing at the foolishness of men, keeps men from preemptorily declaring Ahab wrong. Physiognomy is a paradigm for human blindness. Ishmael is amusing because he acknowledges both physiognomy and blindness but believes fully in neither. Ahab rises above comic irony by refusing to acknowledge anything except his own private vision, and by embracing it without question.

### Whales and Whalers

In the chapter entitled "The Pequod Meets the Virgin," a series of humorous events carry philosophical overtones. The first overture of the Jungfrau (Virgin) is friendly. Her mates hail the Pequod deckhands, indicating that their shipmaster would like to come aboard. Ishmael then mentions

that though the Germans were once masters of the art of whaling, they are now the least-important whalers in the world. When Derick, master of the Jungfrau, comes aboard the Pequod, that judgment seems an understatement. Not only has his ship failed to capture any whales, but the purpose of his visit is to borrow whale oil for the Jungfrau's lanterns. The vessel has no whales, no oil, and no reservations about announcing the humiliating facts to the entire sea-going population of the world. The Germans have not only lost their skill, they have sacrificed their pride. The Pequod's mates remain politely composed in this awkward, and humorous, situation, giving Derick the lamp oil he needs and wishing him more than his share of good fortune. Then a large group of whales appears. It is followed by a sick old bull whale with a missing fin, a wheezing spout, and a noxious intestinal disorder. The poor old whale is pathetic. Obviously near death, he can barely keep pace with the eight other whales who seem to be making an effort to include him in their slow parade. Without bothering to acknowledge that this whale's condition suggests obvious parallels with that of Captain Ahab, that his frail determination and hopeless struggle with the inevitable accord well with the plight of Ishmael, Ahab, and the crew of the Pequod, it is enough to point out that this old bull, perceived unphilosophically and with an innocent lack of sympathy, offers a comic spectacle.

Noticing that the whale's alimentary terminus is the source of more disturbance than is the weak flapping of his arthritic tail, Stubb calls for the peregrinic. "Think of having half an acre of stomach ache!" he adds (p. 300). "Adverse winds are holding mad Christmas in him, boys. It's the first foul wind I ever knew to blow from astern" (p. 300). The old whale is the object of a festival of word play. But the most amusing element in the encounter is the reaction of the German shipmaster. He forgets about his lamp oil and directs his whaleboats to pursue the helpless old bull. And patient Starbuck, who is outraged by Derick's lack of gratitude, directs his whaleboats to chase the worthless bull to spite him. Both whalers stir themselves into a riotously rabid competition for the wasted whale. This is human nature, and not whaling, on display. And if that nature is not consciously evil, it is at least capricious and petty. But the whaler's relationship to the life and death of the whale is roughly analagous to the relationship between Providence and Man. And Providence is itself at times seemingly capricious and petty. There is real comedy in this commotion, but the scene is more than simply amusing.

The two-party chase is slapstick madness. The German gets his whale boat away first, triggering Stubb, Flask, and Starbuck into a frenzy of threatening gestures and heavenly euphemisms calculated to harass their crews into making up the lost distance. Conscious of the imminence of



danger, but unable to stutter or squawk in fear, the old whale engages his single flipper in a desperate flurry, "sending his spout before him in a continual tormented jet" (p. 311), and arcing unavoidably into a wide circular path of escape. Flask dances on the planks of his whale boat, promising his crew "slap-jacks and quohogs for supper . . . baked clams and muffins . . . three thousand dollars . . . a whole bank! The Bank of England" (p. 314) as remuneration in the event of their success. Stubb impatiently inquires of his crew, "Why don't some of ye barst a blood-vessel? Who's that been dropping an anchor overboard?" (p. 315) and proffers brandy by the hogshead as an incentive to rupture or a cerebral hemorrhage. The Pequod's boats pull abreast of Derick's crew, but Derick's harpooner is in better position for the toss. Just as he stands to aim, a large sea crab latches onto one of his whaleboat's oars, sending the little craft into a sharp turn that nearly capsizes it. His crew becomes disquieted and his vessel is forced into the path of the adversary's whaleboats, which are quickly approaching the confusion. Stubb's harpooners are poised and seemingly indifferent to the human barrier separating them from a clear shot at their tired old target. Derick senses his disadvantage and commands his harpooner to hurl, despite the awkward position of his whaleboat. Not to be outdone, all three of the Pequod's harpooners--Queequeg, Tashtego, Daggoo--

instinctively spring to their feet in a diagonal row and toss their spears over the heads of the Germans, landing three successful blows. The old whale is still impressively powerful, despite his age and disability. He pulls the three whaleboats forward with such force that they knock Derick's whaleboat aside, spilling his screaming crew and baffled harpooner overboard like loose change. Glancing by, Stubb consoles the foundering whalers with an assurance that their plight will not be long ignored: "Don't be afraid, my butter boxes," he shouts, "ye'll be picked up presently--all right--I saw some sharks astern" (p. p. 320). Then he resumes that unique combination of a soliloquy and a declamation that serves as his whip on the back and carrot under the nose of his crew. And delighted at the experience of being violently impelled by the supernatural power of a threatened whale, Stubb exclaims, "Hurrah! this is the way a fellow feels when he's going to Davy Jones--all a rush down an endless inclined plane" (p. 321), ironically presaging with his delirious observation the terminal catastrophe of Moby Dick.

As the incident grinds to a disorganized culmination, pathos displaces humor. The old whale is not only crippled and dyspeptic, he is also blind. He couldn't possibly have escaped. Ishmael, alone in his sensitivity to the injustice of this sporting adventure, comments bitterly, "For all his old age, his one arm, and his blind eyes, he must die ✓

the death and be murdered, in order to light the gay  
bridals and other merry-makings of men, and also to  
illuminate the solemn churches that preach unconditional  
inoffensiveness to all" (p. 337). But the rest of the  
crew treat the incident like just another conquest,  
possibly more satisfying than most for having included  
in it the humiliation of a rival. No one but Ishmael, and  
possibly Starbuck, who hesitates to deliver the death blow  
to the whale, recognize that the real villains of this  
competition are the men who have thoughtlessly surrendered  
their noblest elements of pity and self-restraint for the  
sake of a moment's pride at the expense of a helpless  
creature. At this point, the incident becomes ironic. The  
crippled whale's resemblance to Captain Ahab, also doomed  
and also vigorous in his opposition to fate, is obvious.  
Less apparent is the cumulative irony of the event. Previous  
chapters have left some doubt about whether a sensitive  
reader's sympathy should be with the men or the whales. This  
incident cleverly perpetuates that doubt. Here, the whale  
is weak and helpless, victimized by human predators indiffer-  
ent to his suffering and amorally bent upon ending it in  
death. But later in the book there is an incident in which  
men are weak and helpless, and at the mercy of the animal  
conscience of a seemingly vindictive whale. Indeed, there  
is nothing in the book that refutes Ahab's claim that he  
has been administered an injustice by a whale that



demonstrates a capriciousness in malice at least equal to the thoughtless cruelty of the Pequod's whalemén. The scene with the old whale is an ironic mirror-image of the fatal encounter with Moby Dick. The chaos and comedy of this chase are echoed by the formality and foreboding of the latter. The efforts of the whalemén in their pursuit of this feeble victim are ironically underscored by their timidity in the face of a more capable adversary. And the apodictic end of the blind and finless whale parallels the certain death of Ahab, and the inevitable destruction of his crew.

The moral ambivalence of the episode is magnified by the following chapter. After watching an exercise in slapstick nonsense ripen into pathos, it is difficult to understand Ishmael's motive for returning to his defense of whalemén, unless it is a protective reaction to cushion himself from the truth. But in the chapter incongruously entitled "The Honor and Glory of Whaling," he is flying the whaling banner higher and more proudly than ever. Dissatisfied with having merely attributed to whalemén those elements of strength, character, and courage worthy of the greatest of men, he now scavenges heaven and the heroic legends in search of further praise. The effect is comic in overstatement and healthy in irony. Perseus, we learn, was "the prince of whalemén" (p. 337). The legendary leviathan that he "harpooned" in order to rescue Andromeda

was, Ishmael assures us, none other than a whale of indeterminate variety: presumably one with two flippers and a like number of functioning eyes. With suspicious earnestness, he adds that this primordial whale, killed by the son of Jupiter, was not attacked maliciously: "Those were the knightly days of our profession, when we only bore arms to succor the distressed and not to fill men's lamp feeders" (p. 337). The references to chivalry and lamp feeders connect fantasy to the previous episode, suggesting that whaling has long since passed out of its chivalrous youth and into a lesser age of greed and exploitation. Ezekiel, too, figures into the distinguished lineage of whalemén. When he descriptively confers upon his vision a likeness to "a dragon of the sea," Ishmael confidently presumes that the prophet spoke poetically, "plainly meaning a whale" (p. 340). The dragon that St. George slew was also a whale, since, according to Ishmael, "it would much subtract from his glory . . . had he but encountered a crawling reptile of the land" (p. 341). Naturally, Jonah and Hercules are included in the august peerage. And finally, the greatest of whalemén is revealed to be none other than the protean Hindu deity, Visnu, who, in one of his earthly incarnations, recovered the lost Vedas from the bottom of the sea by assuming the body of a whale. The chapter is delightfully whimsical, but its placement complicates the moral judgment that events refuse to let one suspend. Ishmael has overreacted in his defense,

ineffectively countering hard evidence of human selfishness, indifference to unnecessary suffering and cruelty, with comical fantasies about idealized men who know only noble motives, do heroic deeds, and speak directly to Providence. These light reassurances are like a narcotic: when their false vision fades, the truth that invited it reappears.

The integrity of whalemens suffers further compromise when, in the chapter entitled "The Fountain," Ishmael attempts to solve the paradox of the sperm whale's spout. The method of his inquiry is pseudo-scientific and amusing; but this is not just another of Ishmael's parodies of scientific hubris and human limitation. Though "The Fountain" acts as a kind of comic interlude between serious chapters on "pitchpoling" and the awesome character of the whale's tail, Ishmael appears satisfied with the metaphor at which he arrives. He mentions that despite the importance of the spout as a guide to the whale's location, few authorities claim to fully understand it. Some believe it to be vaporous, some liquid. Some believe it an essential element in the whale's breathing process, some a luxury that allows for communication through "soundings." Ishmael acknowledges his confusion and admits his lack of expertise on the subject. Then he confidently proceeds to explain away the mystery. His method is fancifully hypothetical, and very funny. Working from the fundamental conviction that "from the heads of all ponderous, profound beings such as Plato, Pyrrho, the Devil, Jupiter, Dante, and so on,



there always goes up a certain semi-visible steam" (p. 349), he concludes that the whale's spout is nothing less than a visual symbol of the genius of the species. And to sanctify his conclusion, Ishmael resorts to confirmation by personal experience. He mentions that once, while he was in his attic thinking about eternity, his hair began to get moist. Looking at himself in the mirror, he saw "a curious and involved worming and undulating in the atmosphere" over his head (p. 350). From this combination of guesswork and inspired lunacy, Ishmael concludes that the sperm whale's self-evident profundity and inspiration make it among the noblest creatures on earth. His analysis stops at this charming conclusion. He does not go on to question the decorum of reducing these noble creatures to lamp oil. He ignores the fact that aboard his whaling vessel there is not a single Pyrrho or Dante capable of raising a meditative spout equal to that of the sickest finless whale. And he ignores the fact that by this definition, the single "profoundest" whaleman aboard the Pequod is also the greatest enemy of inspiration and profundity. Again, Ishmael's lightness is inappropriate to his subject. Precisely like the common men that he parodies and pities, Ishmael, with his broad philosophical vision and immediate personal experience, instead of rising to real knowledge and insight, ends by resting on convictions grounded in fantasy and a wisdom mindless of the facts.

That the secret subject of Moby Dick is actually Man's overestimation of himself is clear in the chapter entitled "The Grand Armada." In this chapter, Ishmael takes the occasion of a whale chase to establish a few more parallels between the behavior of whales and that of men. His intention is transparently didactic: he doesn't mean that we should interpret these similarities literally. But his insight here is greater than he realizes. The whale-behavior that he describes is too complex and evocative to be comprehended by means of anything less than a literal comparison with a human counterpart. According to Ishmael, since whales at sea often follow predictable migratory routes at certain seasons, they sometimes find themselves travelling in large groups, or herds, loosely organized by the purpose they share. Like students in a classroom or listeners at a debate, their common object of attention implies a collective purpose and a social order. But unlike men, who organize only at the threat of violence or personal loss, and then only at the insistence of other more persuasive men, whales appear attuned to some ubiquitous disembodied voice of order and harmony. No bull whale forces them to join the armada, no sergeant-at-arms punishes violators of protocol. They follow without complaint a silent voice of reason. Ishmael is curious about this phenomenon but more interested in the disruptive effects that approaching whaleboats have on this tidy

natural arrangement. When the whales are forced by threat of death to release their combined focus on this mysterious beacon or order, and to switch their attentions to the preservation of their individual lives, the combination of disorientation and fear leaves them in a condition Ishmael called "gallied." They swim around in violent confusion, bumping each other and spouting irregularly, finally lapsing into a kind of catatonic stupor. Amazed by this tendency to consternation in supposedly intelligent creatures, Ishmael looks to human behavior for a parallel. "Witness," he insists, "human beings, how when herded together in the sheepfold of a theatre pit, they will, at the slightest hint of fire, rush helter-skelter for the outlets, crowding, trampling, jamming and remorselessly dashing each other to death" (p. 351). Then he dismisses with joking irony the whale's odd response, sarcastically urging that we "withhold any amazement at the strangely gallied whale before us, for there is no folly of the beast of the earth which is not infinitely outdone by the madness of men" (p. 351). But more amazing than the whale's proper fear and confusion is the strange source of his normal serenity. And if men are homicidally distracted from the pleasant entertainment of the theatre by the fear of fire, imagine the whale's reaction to having been torn from the providential beacon of necessity by the threat of a harpooner's barb. Possibly, human behavior is an inadequate measure of the whale's mystery.



Appropriately, Ishmael's next target for satire is the institution of human law. Following so closely behind the chapter on the polite society of whales, it is difficult to believe that a didactic contrast is not being implied, though Ishmael seems to have hit upon the subject at random, as an easy mark loosely related to his study of the heads and tails of whales. In the chapter entitled "Heads or Tails," he ponders the question of rightful ownership, using the law of whaling as a metaphor for law itself. Since humans do not enjoy a direct link with the will of the world, law must be their lord and judge. When men disagree, it is the law that must intrude, impose negotiation and compromise on ravenous appetites, and impress an image of impersonal justice upon events. Since the law is considered by common consensus a noble and necessary fact of life, Ishmael is bothered by its occasional injudiciousness. A whale caught and carried to port by an English crew, for example, belongs, according to law, to the Lord Warden of the Empire, the Duke of Wellington. To illustrate a completely legal injustice, Ishmael constructs an imaginary conversation between an old mariner and an agent of the duke. After explaining in detail to the duke's official the difficulties of his maritime way of life, the old sailor is frustrated to learn that almost all the profit from his risk will go to an invisible man of title who was safely absent from the voyage. The

official's justification for the vague duke's ownership is a legal one: "It is his," he calmly explains. Ishmael searches the law books for a reason supporting this pre-emptory point of law. In Plowdon he finds something close to an explanation. Ishmael comments ironically, "Says Plowdon, 'the whale so caught belongs to the king and queen because of its superior excellence.' And by the soundest commentators this has ever been held a cogent argument in such matters" (p. 355). Researching further, he discovers that at one time, according to William Prynne, the queen demanded ownership of the tail of the whale because ladies of her court used the black limber bone of the Greenland whale to make stays for the royal bodice. But, Ishmael notes, "this same bone is not in the tail; it is in the head" (p. 360). Finally unable to discern the primal atom of logic responsible for this monstrous legal tangle, Ishmael abandons the search in comic desperation, satisfying himself with an allegorical explanation of the nonsense. Perhaps the king's desire for the "highly dense and elastic head peculiar to that fish may possibly be grounded upon some presumed congeniality" he suggests (p. 360). With this explanation, Ishmael reassures himself that "there seems a reason in all things, even in law" (p. 365). If this parody is not intended to contrast the benign lawlessness of the whale's society with the confused litigiousness of Man's, that is its function nevertheless. The

primordial absurdity that Ishmael is looking for is not to be found written in ancient books of law; it is written on the living hearts of men.

One of the funniest scenes in Moby Dick owes its comic success to the undertone of venality that Ishmael properly recognizes as a significant impulse in human affairs. Ishmael knows that without greed, the law of "loose and fast fish" would be unnecessary. But he also knows that human cunning is more flexible than a moral convenience. The real law of the sea, therefore, is catch-as-catch-can. Indeed, there is something in most men that makes them admire creative guile and celebrate the man who successfully challenges an impersonal maxim. Clearly not immune to this admiration for inspired scurrility, Ishmael tells the story of the Rosebud as if it were a personal victory, or an unparalleled prank. In the chapter entitled "The Pequod Meets the Rosebud," he recalls the meeting of the two ships at sea. The chapter begins lightly. The Rosebud is a French ship with a Guernsey captain who demonstrates an incapacity for whaling unmatched even by Derick of the Jungfrau. Instead of whaling conventionally, the Rosebud has been prowling whale herds, waiting to take whales that have floated to the surface after dying naturally. This concession to danger has resulted in an unfortunate situation, however. The odor of dead, dyspeptic whales has left the French whaler with a permanent insult to its name.



After issuing several predictable epigrams, Ishmael mentions that one of the dead whales seems to have died under conditions that would make it a likely source of ambergris, a valuable oil found in certain decaying whale carcasses. Stubb also senses ambergris and concocts a plan to persuade the Frenchmen to part with their noxious but valuable cargo. He conspires with the French first mate, who becomes convinced that he will be saving his fellow-crewmen's senses and embarrassing his stupid captain by agreeing to loose the whale. The two men arrange to convince the Guernsey captain that the whale is carrying a pestilence that will endanger his crew. They arrange an impressively sober dialogue of nonsense in English, meaningless to the French-speaking captain, and translate it in his presence to mean that he and his ship are in great danger and can be spared only by the kind intervention of the Pequod and her crew of humanitarians. Stubb's appraisal of the captain as "no more fit to command a whale ship than a St. Jago monkey. In fact he's a babboon" (p. 366) translates into a warning that a "blasted" whale like this one alongside his **ship** caused death in six men yesterday. For the translation of his claim to have slept with the captain's wife, Stubb receives grateful thanks and the offer of a glass of wine. To the Guernsey captain's great relief, Stubb and his crew happily agree to tow the sick and stinking carcass away from his vessel, toward their own. That

Ishmael finds in this scene only a source of amusement, and not cause for reflection as well, says much about the subversive effects of greed upon innocent minds, supposedly hardened by learning and philosophy, against the weaknesses of common men. Ishmael is too human to fully appreciate human limitation; he too-quickly abandons philosophy to celebrate the craft of guile.

The chapter entitled "The Cassock" offers another unapologetically comic scene that reveals something more of human nature than is at first apparent. Following chapters that describe what becomes of a taken whale once it has been stripped of meat and hauled aboard, "The Cossock" at first seems just another apostrophe in an increasingly tedious oration concerning the thrift and industry of whalermen. Ishmael is proud that his fellow whalers find some practical use for almost every part of the whale: Oil is processed from the head and hide; some bones are ground into additives for medicine; soup and steaks can be made from the fins. The sincerity of Ishmael's pride and the duration of his panygyric soothe us into a bored complacency that magnifies our surprise at his actual intention. All of his sincerity and excess have been calculated to disguise an outrageous pun. Though every part of the dead whale has its practical use, there is one part that serves a merely ornamental function. Ishmael saves his description of the use and nature of this part for last. It finally becomes

clear that the unmentioned part is part of the whale's unmentionables, and there is a quasi-religious ceremony that accompanies its removal from the carcass. In "The Cossock," Ishmael describes the ceremony. A sailor called the "mincer" carries the monstrous member to the forecastle deck, where it is circumcised in a sanctimonious parody of the familiar lesser ritual and hung on the rigging to dry. When the foreskin has cured sufficiently, the mincer cuts holes in it for his arms and head and slips lengthwise into it. Then he stands before the crew "invested in the full canonicals of his calling" (p. 371), and symbolically fit for employment "in the peculiar function of his office" (p. 375). Ishmael winkingly calls the mincer's office "an arch-bishoprick," and compares him to the Pope. The parody of all religion and sanctimony implied by this burlesque is obvious. But what is revealing about this scene is the whaler's choice of a tremendous organ of desire as the comic investment for their high priest. A look at the whaler's record of willfulness belies the humor of the symbol. The mincer's "arch-bishoprick: is a gloriously accurate image of the mindless appetite of Man.

#### Some Good Men

Covert condemnation posing as anecdote is temporarily preempted by Ishmael's description of a meeting between the Pequod and the Samuel Enderby. Captain Boomer of that ship



is a hilariously philosophical character whose good humor and rare ability to concede gracefully to the inevitabilities of his profession almost reinvigorate one's waning faith in humankind. The Pequod's confrontation with the Samuel Enderby is a seminal event. From that ship, Ahab receives the information that sends the Pequod to the bottom of the sea, and from Captain Boomer he hears a last echo of sound common sense. In the chapter entitled "Leg and Arm," Ishmael recalls the meeting. Sighted from a distance, the Samuel Enderby signals the Pequod, and her captain makes overtures that suggest that he is anxious to relate some vital information. Captain Boomer, too, has lost a limb to the white whale, and he has knowledge of the monster's whereabouts. But once Ahab boards the Samuel Enderby, it becomes clear that Captain Boomer is anxious to exchange tall tales and enjoy the company of a stranger, but is not disposed to share Ahab's zeal for revenge. Boomer remains stubbornly gregarious despite Ahab's entreaties. He graciously offers Ahab a drink, perhaps to wash the foam from his lips, and takes advantage of his impatient visitor's companionship to lazily tell the tale of his unfortunate adventure, casually inviting his private physician to add any details that might lend an extra touch of humor to his epic of amputation. Boomer palavers while Ahab fumes. Instead of exaggerating the pain he surely suffered or minutely describing the aspect of the face of death, Boomer

laughs about how he took advantage of his condition by increasing his ration of hot toddies. And he goads his teetotaling doctor with the accusation that he is a surreptitious drunk: "I'd rather be killed by you than kept alive by any other man," he reassures his medical friend (p. 136). When Ahab finally coaxes Boomer toward the subject of Moby Dick, the happy captain explains that he has no intention of arranging another meeting between himself and the white whale. His logic is simple and sane: "Didn't want to try to; ain't one limb enough? What should I do without this other arm? And I'm thinking Moby Dick doesn't bite so much as swallow" (p. 380). Having suffered the pleasant company of a decent humble man, Ahab returns to the Pequod armed with the knowledge that will lead to his destruction (Boomer has given him the location of the whale.), deceived into false confidence by his success, and determined to remain deaf to Captain Boomer's entreaties for common sense. Ahab's abrupt departure leaves Boomer doubting Ahab's sanity. However, a few hot toddies and a good laugh help Boomer put Ahab's maniacal fixation in the proper perspective.

As if to further impress upon his audience the nature of the alternative posed by the Samuel Enderby, Ishmael continues to provide information about that ship as he watches it sail pacifically out of the range of sight. He mentions, in the chapter entitled "The Decanter," that the

whaling house of Samuel Enderby and Sons is one of the oldest and most respected of maritime dynasties. He compares it in nobility to the royal houses of Tudor and Bourbon, and suggests that the ships of that company are associated with men of a character that is not at all exceptional on the sea. He insists that humor and hospitality are typical of whalemens who fly the Enderby banner. And with this observation, he underscores the dismal mood of his own ship. To further illustrate the contrast, he recalls a later personal experience that he enjoyed aboard that same ship, long after old Ahab touched her planks with his ivory heel. By this time, Ishmael had read about the House of Enderby and Sons, and had learned enough to be impressed with its credentials. That the firm traced its foundation to an unrecorded year prior to 1775, that it claimed large fleets in the north and south Atlantic, and that it was the first whaling company to open the seas off Japan to whalers, are credits that win Ishmael's respect. But more impressive to him is the formidable reputation of Samuel Enderby and Sons for hearty Anglo-Saxon hospitality. His personal experience of that good cheer establishes, with humor, the cold sterility of Ahab's life of purpose and denial. When Ishmael boarded the Samuel Enderby, somewhere off the Patagonian coast, he was treated to alcohol and good company, and shared gladly in the preparation of the ship for an upcoming squall. The description of drunken



sailors happily reefing topsails in a gale, like a family of besotted monkeys, is hilarious. When the job was finished, the hands found themselves "so sober that we had to pass the flip again" (p. 380). Afterwards, Ishmael is treated to beef and dumplings, bread and brotherhood. His appreciative recollection of this brief interlude with hospitable men emphasizes with understatement the contrast between this and his less-fortunate experience about the Pequod. The whalers of the Enderby "passed round the beef and the can, and the joke; and were not soon weary of eating, drinking and laughing" (p. 382). More vividly than any description of inhumanity or horror, this humorous scene contrasts with the mood of impotent fatality aboard the Pequod.

Since Ishmael allows no important conclusion to stand independent of thorough scholarly confirmation, his resort to scholarship in defense of the claim that true brotherhood and kindness reside undiminished among a certain breed of English whalemens comes as no surprise. What is surprising is his rejection of the hortatory manner that has accompanied all of his previous declamations and made of them either the subtle stuff of Menippean satire, or else the generously overripe fruit of learning. In "The Decanter," Ishmael concludes his discussion of the hospitality of the Enderby Whalers with a clearly satiric treatment of academics. His amusement at scholarly austerity suggests his conviction

that the living truth can never be satisfactorily captured by learning alone. Admitting as a facetious preliminary that good cheer among whalers is neither normal or natural, Ishmael undertakes research into the records of old English whalers in an attempt to discover some clue to the origin of the strange fellowship aboard the Samuel Enderby.

Though his assumption of the abnormality of good cheer among whalers is an amusing overstatement, its prescient accuracy as a portrait of the last few days of the Pequod's existence colors it with a quality of foreboding that compromises its humor. But this is a faulty beginning that humorously contradicts Ishmael's superior pose; he is too busy ignorantly satirizing learning to notice the parallel. Temporarily blinded by the brilliance of his own wit, Ishmael is so convinced of the validity of his conviction that English whalers enjoy a fellowship unique to their nationality that he self-consciously constructs an argument to support this view. There is no pretense to integrity; neither the facts nor the experts he summons are reliable. He claims that during his research in the Leviathanic histories, he came across an ancient Dutch volume "which by the musty whaling smell of it," he knew must be about whaling (p. 391). The nose of fate intervened to guide him. In the volume, by a likely scribe by the name of Fritz Swackhammer--an onomatopoetic fellow from Amsterdam--he hoped to find an explanation for the differences in attitude and behavior exhibited by whalers of different

nationalities. He had the volume translated by his equally unlikely friend, "Dr. Snodhead . . . Professor of Low Dutch and High German in the College of Santa Claus and St. Potts" (p. 400), who accepted for his labors "a box of sperm candles" (p. 403)--probably intending to lucubrate with them later in the semester. Dr. Snodhead allegedly translated the work, revealing it to be the records of a ship's merchant from Holland. From the translated work, Ishmael learned that the merchants of Dutch ports provide their whaling patrons with a reserve of ale far in excess of the amount provided to whalers who ship from American ports. From this information, Ishmael constructs a comical hierarchy of fellowship that depends on the level of intemperance typical of a whaling boat's point of origin and ports of supply. The satire is terse, and reveals a serious flaw in academic methodology. Argument, observation, and research lose integrity when they are in the service of a preconceived point of view. But Ishmael's amusing consciousness of error does not make him any less wrong. He is not dealing with men who are simply so drunk that they have no choice but to be hospitable or fall down. The men of the Samuel Enderby represent a different kind of Man, affected by the inspirations of a different kind of captain. Their moral compasses are not reversed, they recognize the relationship between mortality and limitation, and they are motivated to hospitality and



fellowship by a healthy sense of the destructive powers of self-indulgence and pride. They are, in short, everything that Captain Ahab and the helpless crew that he dominates are not. That they brutalize creatures as guiltless as the whale is, in their case, an accident of occupation; not, as it is with Ahab and his crew, a deliberate gesture of defiance aimed with malice indirectly at God.

### The Chase

From the moment of his parting with Captain Boomer, Ahab involves the Pequod in the exclusive pursuit of Moby Dick. He erases from his awareness every aspect of whaling not directly related to the conquest of the white whale. Everything but revenge is reduced to insignificance by the thunder of Ahab's obsession. From the moment Ahab abandons the remotely redeemable pursuit of commercial whaling for the sake of a purely self-indulgent vendetta, his mission becomes, like the mincer's arch-bishoprick, a symbol of renegade willfulness. And the crew of the Pequod is implicated in the offense by their cooperation in the deed. Given the battle conditions aboard the Pequod after her confrontation with the Samuel Enderby, it is curious that Ishmael should choose this time to attend the question of the effect of whaling on the total population of whales. Apparently, only now that the predatory atmosphere aboard the whaler has been magnified by Ahab's monomania has

Ishmael bothered to consider in other than commercial or mythological terms the actual killing of a whale. It is not amusing that Ishmael should rise to a pantheistic consciousness at the precise moment that he is most deeply implicated in a profound affront to God and nature; but the irony does offer a comical glimpse of the inadequacy of his brand of pragmatism. To learn from experience, one must recognize in it the presence of meaning. Ishmael occasionally has to be reminded to think, and to realize that there is something important to be considered. But more amusing in this case is his conclusion about the impact of whaling upon the entire community of whales. In the chapter entitled "Does the Whale's Magnitude Diminish?" Ishmael reasons that since the whale "swam the seas before the continents broke water" (p. 413), its antiquity assures it an immunity to extinction. He further lists references to the survival of the buffalo despite systematic hunting by the Indians and optimistically compares the survival rate of the whale to that of the buffalo. He essentially absolves the whalers from a moral responsibility for their deeds. The thrust of his argument is that it is acceptable to hunt animals that have always been hunted and have always managed to persevere. Admittedly, this rigorously self-justifying apology is amusing only in perspective. Ishmael is correct in his opinion that a species can survive reasonable depredation: the world functions on the principle of

prey and predator. But the condition he is now a participant in is not reasonable. Ahab is a maniac who has enjoined his crew to kill for the sake of killing, and this is what Ishmael should recognize. The fate of whales, he should have considered long ago, before burying the subject under an attractive halo of mythology. With his rejection of reason and mercy, Ahab has taken on more than just a white whale; and by complicity, the crew makes his transgression their own.

In the chapter entitled "The Forge," Ahab rides oratorical indignation to a crescendo of bitter feeling. He speaks to his blacksmith in poetic feet that are surer than his own, comparing himself, with the license of a man of only one thought, to the toughened scars that cover his body and face, to the cold insensitivity of steel, and, more convincingly, to a madman. He orders a special harpoon forged out of carefully gathered horseshoe stubs that he has been carrying around like gold coins in a secret leather bag. Their steel is the toughest metal workable. Not surprisingly, he intends for all this symbolic steel to rest finally in the hump of Moby Dick. In the fever of the moment, Ahab takes a glowing rod from the blacksmith and begins to work it himself, revealing with the gesture the final privacy of emotions as intense as those that drive him. Adding still further to the symbolic tension of the scene, Ahab, his face flushed by the heat of the forge,



ministers unholy communion to his three harpooners, confirming them into his satanic brotherhood by annealing the barb of his fresh harpoon in their heathen blood.

After the extemporaneous ritual, Ahab utters in Latin a parody of the Christian baptismal incantation, and attaches the line to his spear. The scene is almost-unbearably meaningful, threatening with every increase in dramatic intensity to burst through the limitations of symbolism and the restrictions of narrative into an unintentional parody of itself. But it succeeds, making the comic epilogue that follows a complete surprise, doubly effective for appearing unexpectedly. As the harpooners are walking away, dazed by the glare of the forge and the brilliance of the spectacle, Pip's laughter echoes across the deck. But it is not laughter appropriate to the preceding scene. Pip's laugh is "light, unnatural, half-bantering"; it blends "with the black tragedy of the melancholy ship, and mocks it" (p. 420). The effect of Pip's last laugh is to dissipate the air of gloom painstakingly evoked by Ahab. It forces a revaluation of the high purpose that everyone aboard the Pequod except Pip thinks himself obliged to serve. Pip's laugh is like a pronouncement of divine amusement at the indignities men suffer at the hands of fate.

As the chase grows more faint, it becomes harder to take Ahab seriously. In the chapter entitled "The Needle," he fluctuates paranoically between the extremes of self-

possession and self-doubt. After having stood on the topdeck during an electrical storm and challenged the gods to defy him, and having survived, through the strength of his will, timid Starbuck's aborted attempt at assassination, Ahab appears incongruously disturbed by the failure of his navigational equipment. It is true that the ship's compass possesses a certain symbolic quality that lends its reading more than just a practical importance, but compared with mainmasts illuminated by lightning during a storm in the chapter entitled "The Candles," a false indication of direction is relatively innocuous. Ahab's over-reaction reveals the amusing frailty of even the stoutest conviction. "The Needle" begins with lordly Ahab standing at the helm of his ship, periodically turning to look at the sun behind him. The depth of his participation in the moment leads him to confuse cause with effect. Since the ship is travelling west, he imagines himself leading the sun, charting its course like the captain of heaven. So engrossed is Ahab in this specious metaphor, he refuses to believe it when the steersman informs him that the ship's compass indicates a direction opposite to the obvious course of the ship. He calls the steersman a liar, and has to explain the malfunction of the compass by associating its false reading with the thunder storm of the night before. In fact, nature is palpably refusing to submit to Ahab's delusion.

The compass, like Moby Dick, reflects an image of purpose independent of human will. Ahab is no more in control of his ship than he is master of his fate. The simplicity of his delusion and the depth of his arrogance are reflected by the humorous recalcitrance of the compass as it witlessly refuses to cooperate with Ahab's poetic conception of events. By failing to endow the phenomenon of the misreading compass with the same symbolic configuration that he has associated with every other event in his recent experience, Ahab misses by choice an important lesson in metaphysics. There is nothing that obliges nature to conform to Man's habitual conception of her. Ahab has lost faith in the invisible powers that govern events and has replaced the loss with a magnified vision of his own making. His is a foolish religion of self-love that transforms personal misfortune into tragedy: it ignores the suffering of others, devaluates justice as it emphasizes revenge, and embraces the convenient as it ignores the obvious.

Neither is the crew immune to the selective interpretation of omens. Though less inclined than Ahab to mutilate prophecies in order to make them conform to some preconceived notion of personal privilege, the Pequod deckhands are not above indulging in a bit of superstitious optimism. And they, too, occasionally allow vain hope to color the facts. An amusing example of this tendency to seek consolation by deliberately mistaking a mere portent for the final



catastrophe occurs in the chapter entitled "The Long Buoy." As the Pequod nears the equator in pursuit of Moby Dick, the crew members are troubled by an accumulation of signs that seem to hint at some forthcoming tragedy. They are bothered by Ahab's midnight diatribes, and by his adverse relationship with the crew; they are puzzled by the problem with the ship's compass, and tend to interpret the difficulty as somehow ominously symbolic; and, more immediately, they are bothered by the plaintive wailing of seals, beasts whose cries are said to echo the voices of newly drowned sailors. Conditions aboard the Pequod are disconcerting, to say the least; and the crew is correct in its interpretation of signs as unfavorable. They are no longer involved in a whaling voyage from which they can hope to profit materially. Their sole consolation for success will be a vicarious participation in another man's lunatic revenge. Their chances for failure overwhelm the unlikely possibility of their success. And failure will almost certainly mean death. What's more, a symbolic configuration of events suggests that Moby Dick is more than a mere whale, and Ahab has ritualistically enlisted the support of the powers of darkness in his contest with the allusive monster. In the face of the magnitude and symbolism of the confrontation that is developing, a little superstitious timidity on the part of the crew seems only appropriate. But the men are so anxious to allay their

fear that they jump with comical alacrity on the first unfortunate event that will accommodate interpretation as the fulfillment of a long list of chary forebodings. When, at sunrise, a sleepy sailor falls into the sea while trying to climb to the masthead, his fellow deckhands celebrate with amusing perversity his unlucky demise. They think that his unfortunate encounter with fate is the tragedy that events have presaged, and that by reluctantly succumbing to death the sailor has spared them the necessity of bothering further with dreary omens concerning the future. The shortsightedness of this wishful interpretation is as funny as is the ease with which the desperate sailors are able to devalue, in the interest of collective equanimity, a lost human life. But when the lifebuoy that was thrown overboard to assist the drowning man itself sinks heavily to the bottom, and the men can think of no replacement for it other than Queequeg's elaborate coffin, their reluctance to revalue the sailor's death in the context of these successive portents becomes amusing. Superstitious men can hardly be blamed for ignoring symbols that speak an unpleasant truth so clearly.

And in the penultimate fever of the chase, Ahab's self-conscious determination to remain insane is another comic surprise. Though self-doubt has an epic parallel in Christ's last-minute words of misgiving, Ahab's reluctance to associate too freely with Pip for fear that Pip's

impersonal madness may cancel out some of the self-indulgent fury of his own appears an extreme form of overcompensation. Anyone so concerned about maintaining the intensity of his madness needn't worry about lapsing into unwonted sanity. Of course, Ahab is correct to perceive in Pip a curiously reversed mirror-image of himself. Where Ahab's is an exaggerated personality, Pip's consciousness is independent of personality: he speaks of himself in the third person and demonstrates none of Ahab's morbid concern with subjective grievances. While Ahab's mania is specific, bound to a single tragedy and a single object of fixation, Pip's insanity is general, loosely associated with the entire phenomenon of irrational, super-sensory awareness: his disoriented wisdom calls into question, more urgently than does Ahab's, the ultimate nature of sanity, experience, and truth. And while Ahab is driven to action by a mad rage, Pip is pathologically detached. What he does manage to say usually contains some veiled reference to the vanity of all human aspiration; a lazy doctrinaire fatalist, he doesn't even bother to escape the fate of the doomed ship, though he recognizes earlier than Ahab what the Pequod's end will be. Ahab, embracing the doctrine of strife, charges with proud abandon into the fire that consumes all of the elements and reconciles all opposites in its destructive blaze; Pip, embracing the doctrine of being, unselfishly surrenders to a boundless



presence in the presence of which it is impossible for a man to be proud.

Of course, the contrast between Ahab and Pip occasionally leads the drama in the direction of humor. In the chapter entitled "The Cabin," Pip holds Ahab by the hand and exchanges mad monologues with him in a chapter-long example of a failure to establish communication. While Ahab expresses his fear that Pip's insanity may mingle with and dilute his own, Pip begs Ahab to step on him and substitute a willing black body for the captain's lifeless white leg. Finally, Ahab leaves Pip with a blessing and the threat of homicide, both expressed within the space of a short paragraph. And Pip, standing in the spot Ahab has just left, attempts with humorous futility to puzzle out Ahab's judgment that the two men are somehow one. But his inexperience with paradoxes of the literary type leaves him incapable of saying anything more coherent than "Pip! Pip! Pip! Bong! Bing! Ding! Who's seen Pip?" (p. 440). He finally pursues the problem to the captain's chair in the middle of the ship, where his concentration falters and his imagination is overrun by a pleasant fantasy of Admirals, Lieutenants, and disembodied epaulets at the dinner table, toasting shame to cowards. The scene is a rare one. It provides comic resuscitation for a scene threatening slow death by asphyxiation from gloom.

Ahab apparently escaped Pip's healing presence just in time. In the chapter entitled "The Symphony," he has grown sane enough to consider the impressive dimensions of his foolishness. Standing on the main deck on the day before the first sighting of Moby Dick, Ahab contemplates with uncharacteristic sentimentality the exaction that a whaling career has demanded of his humanity. For the first time, he impresses one as a fellow human. He recalls the wife, friends, and family that he might still boast of had whaling not insinuated itself into his young blood and dominated him with an exclusivity increasing with the years. When Starbuck joins him at the railing, Ahab drops a tear into the sea and shares with him what must be, to Ahab, an unprecedented confidence. He tells Starbuck that this day reminds him of the day when, at sixteen, he killed his first whale. The irony of the timing of this revelation, just three days before it is certain that Ahab has killed his last whale, is self-evident. More interesting is Ahab's choice of the killing of a whale as an occasion for tender sentiment. His amusing inability to connect that first murderous deed with its increasingly careless successors, and finally with the absurd vendetta in which he is now involved, leads one to doubt that Ahab is as transformed and regenerate as his tears and unfamiliar tenderness suggest. But this is Ahab's moment of tragic recognition, a necessary preface to the coming catastrophe, and an indispensable

element in the ritual of fate and the conventions of art. That Ahab is actually more sentimental than tragic, and more foolish than aware, is amusing but ultimately unimportant. He is simply playing out his imperfect notion of the tragedy that he is certain fate has assigned to him. In fact, part of Ahab's insanity rests in his belief that all action is out of his control--that everything, including his insanity, is in the hands of fate. When Ahab complains of himself to Starbuck later in the same scene that because he sacrificed the pleasantries of a commonplace human existence, "a forty-years-fool has old Ahab been" (p. 441), he is only partially correct. He is a fool, but not because of his isolation, his career as a whaling captain, or even his angry fascination with Moby Dick. An insensitivity to the noble innocence of the whale and observation of a doctrine of appetite and destruction simply make Ahab a magnified example of the self-indulgence and barren pride common to most men. Ahab is a fool because he recognizes more clearly than anyone, except Pip, the implications of his actions, and yet chooses to behave as though he had no choice. As the scene ends, Ahab regretfully concludes that "we are turned round and round in this world, like yonder windless, and Fate is the hand spike" (p. 441). He pauses for a moment to wonder where murderers go "when the judge himself is dragged to the bar" (p. 455), and then he returns to the chase with renewed determination, having apparently forgotten that fools become so by behaving foolishly.



From the time of their deckside meeting until the final scene, Starbuck becomes for Ahab a silent reminder of the futility of revenge. Ahab recognizes in Starbuck more than just a shared humanity: Starbuck represents an alternative too sensible to ignore. While Ahab insists on another attack following each unsuccessful one, Starbuck reminds him that it is not yet too late to stop. And in order to decide whether or not to listen to Starbuck's advice, Ahab has to confront the vision of humanity that Starbuck provokes. By embracing humanity, Ahab will save his life, but he will lose the sense of purpose that drives him. Rejecting humanity, he can only hope to play out his vengeance to the end. In the chapter entitled "The Chase--Second Day," Ahab makes his choice. Though he admits that Starbuck forces him to confront in himself a disturbingly pleasant sense of human kinship, Ahab balks at the thought of a merely human existence. A feature role in his own private melodrama is more appealing to him than a cameo appearance in God's. He takes Starbuck aside and tells him, "Starbuck, of late I've felt strangely moved to thee; ever since that hour we both saw--thou know'st what, in one another's eyes. But in this matter of the whale, be the front of thy face to me as the palm of this hand--a lipless, unfeatured bland. Ahab is forever Ahab, man. This whole act is immutably decreed" (p. 457).

Finally, then, Ahab's failure is one of judgment. About the single issue that will ultimately decide his fate,

Ahab is uncharacteristically lucid. So, for all of his poses and sullen proclamations, it is his common humanity that prescribes his end. Being a man, he stumbles with a comedian's lack of grace, into the pitfall of self-deception. Ahab sees a vision of himself reflected in the mirror of another human soul, and rejects it as an impossible ideal. Instead, he chooses to invest his faith in a vision of God reflected in the surly aspect of a big fish. Ahab's fatal choice not only certifies his death with a kind of comic inevitability, it reduces him unwillingly to the status of a common man, from whom truths about all men can be derived. And contrary to the implications of Ahab's vision of heroic Man, eternally opposed to the inscrutable will of an impersonal god, Ahab's end and the decisions that confirm it argue for an appraisal of Man that is less promethean and heroic than limited, deluded, and comically ill-equipped to abide God's stubborn silence with grace.

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