

## Historically Conceiving the Irrationality of Moby-Dick through Antebellum America, or: the Apotheosis of Paradox

Michael Donelan

### Publication Date

24-05-2023

### License

This work is made available under a All Rights Reserved license and should only be used in accordance with that license.

### Citation for this work (American Psychological Association 7th edition)

Donelan, M. (2023). *Historically Conceiving the Irrationality of Moby-Dick through Antebellum America, or: the Apotheosis of Paradox* (Version 1). University of Notre Dame. <https://doi.org/10.7274/24870372.v1>

This work was downloaded from CurateND, the University of Notre Dame's institutional repository.

For more information about this work, to report or an issue, or to preserve and share your original work, please contact the CurateND team for assistance at [curate@nd.edu](mailto:curate@nd.edu).

Historically Conceiving the Irrationality of *Moby-Dick* through Antebellum America, or: the  
Apotheosis of Paradox

## Introduction

“I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look,” but none are comfortable with what they see. Melville certainly was not, when from the masthead of a socially sinking family he saw the crises of Antebellum America unfolding around him. And in a different sense, nor have *Moby-Dick*’s interpreters been comfortable they understand him. The deep contradictions native to every conceivable layer of meaning have undermined settlement on a standard interpretational paradigm. But viewing the text through the eyes of a historian reveals its contradictory elements as reflections of Antebellum American society. Thus, a historical assessment of *Moby-Dick* suggests that the failure to reach a hermeneutic consensus is not merely a temporary phase which will culminate in literary understanding; rather, it is the proper and final state of interpretation.

Scholars chase an imagined dogma of *Moby-Dick*: a conclusive and legitimate approach to understanding what the text tells the reader. But the historical context of the work’s creation had no dogma. There was no legitimate interpretation of 19th century American society, because there can be no legitimate interpretation of a community which holds the principles of democratic rule in one hand, and the overseer’s whip in the other. What Melville recognized was that the fundamental irrationality of the Antebellum system spawned contradictions that riddled every corner of society. These can be roughly grouped as contradictions of truth, power, and identity. And in building them into *Moby-Dick*, he created a work that cannot properly be given a definitive meaning. It is the image of its mother culture, and like that culture, will defeat any attempt at rationalization. Ultimately, this creates a narrative of the United States in the mid-19th century. Historically analyzing *Moby-Dick* reveals what pure literary criticism failed to: that the work defies interpretation, and by exposing the limits of justified comprehension, Melville

synthesized an epistemic attitude that uniquely reflected the paradoxes of Antebellum America, especially as relating to truth, power, and identity.

## Literary Background

### Reviewing the Literature: Orthodoxies of Subversion

This paper, while maintaining great respect for and humility towards the endless critical work on Melville, aims to critique the interpretational methods of the past. Thus, it will present a historical narrative built largely on primary sources. Indeed, the inescapably historical nature of *Moby-Dick* is essential to recognize. The text must not be removed from its context.

But especially since Rogin's *Subversive Genealogy* and Reynolds's seminal *Beneath the American Renaissance*, few scholars would find this aim immediately objectionable. Rogin, for instance, offered a cautious thesis on the influence Melville's surroundings played in the text, focusing on his familial relations and literary tastes.<sup>1</sup> And Reynolds, playing off this emphasis on environment, advanced a more aggressive position, whereby Melville and other 19th century authors were recast as the mouthpieces of deep cultural currents.<sup>2</sup> But this is not to discredit the more traditional narrative, which imagined Melville as essentially an isolated genius, creating his art from sheer individual talent in something akin to a Great Man theory. Seeing its peak in the mid-20th century, it offers Arvin's 1950 *Herman Melville* and Bethoff's 1962 *The Example of Melville*, alongside Delbanco's resuscitation of the narrative in 2007's *Melville: His World and Work*.<sup>3</sup> For all the genius of these latter texts, however, today's competing interpretations largely see Melville primarily as a product of his context.

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: Herman Melville and the Politics of the Family* (New York: Knopf, 1983), xi-xii.

<sup>2</sup> David Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 3-11.

<sup>3</sup> Otter, Samuel. "Melville: His World and Work (review)." *Leviathan* (Hempstead, N.Y.) 9, no. 1 (2007): 69.

Where, then, does this paper conflict with the standard? It is in accepting the consequences of the context-centric model, and embracing historical assessment as the prime rubric for analysis. Ironically, the competing orthodoxies of *Moby-Dick*'s interpretation all focus on subversion of standard practices. They disagree, however, as to what primarily Melville is subverting. Is it the new, industrialized capitalism? Imperial expansion? Hierarchy? Antebellum sexuality? Any scholar would concede he is protesting all of these in part, but by searching for ultimate messages, the literature fails to accept that *Moby-Dick* derives so completely from its historical context that, much like that context, its abundant contradictions and perspectives cannot justify any coherent interpretation.

#### The "Hermaneutic"

The answer, as the historical analysis will demonstrate, is to recognize the irrationality of the text's native time and place, and thus the irrationality of the text itself. This unique interpretational posture might be termed—with great satisfaction, but greater risk for accusations of misspelling—the "Hermaneutic" of Melville.

The Hermaneutic is not merely the lack of a central message. It also encompasses: the countless contradictions; the paradoxes of interpretation, of individual story elements as well as of the work as a whole; the variety of possible interpretations of story elements, even when they do not immediately conflict; and the meta questions of the text's origin and reliability. Simply, it is the uncertain spirit of *Moby-Dick*, the summation of its shameless defiance of categorization, interpretation, and rationalization. It is precisely that epistemic attitude previously referred to, which uniquely reflects the paradoxes of Antebellum America.

But “in landlessness alone resides highest truth,” if any is to be found.<sup>4</sup> The shore of conceptualization must thus be left behind, and the historical evidence confronted. But it poses no threat to these claims. The historical reality is that mid-19th century American society had a plague of contradictions in truth, power, and identity, which conditioned the Hermeneutic of *Moby-Dick*.

## Historical Analysis

### Contradictions in Truth: the Doubloon Spirit

In late February, 1842, an Illinois State Representative took the stage at the Springfield Washington Temperance Society. Against all popular practice and crowd expectations, it was not to rail against drinkers. Rather, it was to denounce that tradition, and laud praise upon “kind, unassuming persuasion.”<sup>5</sup> The 33-year-old Lincoln proclaimed that “though your cause be naked truth itself, transformed to the heaviest lance... you shall be no more able to pierce [the alcoholic’s mind], than the hard shell of a tortoise with a rye straw.”<sup>6</sup> He adapted the sentiment to slavery in his eulogy for Henry Clay, lambasting those uncompromising radicals “who would shiver into fragments the Union of these States... and even burn the last copy of the Bible, rather than slavery should continue another hour.”<sup>7</sup> It was to be the unsatisfactory zeitgeist of Antebellum politics. The founding documents already prescribed and defended an incoherent system, whereby the self-evident truth of equality was valued simultaneous to the outright devaluation of slaves for state population assessment, and more obviously the toleration of

---

<sup>4</sup> Herman Melville and Hershel Parker, *Moby-Dick: An Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 91.

<sup>5</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Temperance Address,” Abraham Lincoln’s Temperance Address of 1842, accessed December 3, 2022, <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/temperance.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Eulogy on Henry Clay,” Lincoln’s Eulogy on Henry Clay, accessed December 3, 2022, <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/clay.htm>.

profane alienations of “inalienable” rights. But Antebellum compromise would exacerbate the irrationality of the American system, in a development Melville was acutely aware of, and registered in *Moby-Dick* through its numerous contradictions of truth.

The Fugitive Slave Act, for instance, shattered whatever willful ignorance northerners had awarded themselves, and did much the same to the sanctity of the law; it thus exposed them to the contradictions underlying American society. In the case of the former point, the Act brought slave reclamation parties deep into the North. One in September 1851 sought to capture two slaves in Christiana, Pennsylvania who had escaped two years prior; including a U.S. Marshal in its ranks, it culminated in a violent shootout with a militia of former slaves, creating a national spectacle few northerners could have ignored.<sup>8</sup> Such cases thus confronted them, Melville included, with the awful contradictions in the country’s values and practices which they had ignored for decades, ultimately eroding respect for legal authorities previously imagined as unquestionably legitimate, and tantamount to truth itself. The attempted conviction—also in 1851—of “Jerry,” an escaped slave in Syracuse, New York, perfectly captures this pattern. After Jerry briefly escaped his trial, only to be promptly recaptured and beaten by two officers, a bystander concluded he was a “fugitive from, not justice, but injustice,” capturing in his person the deep irrationality of a legal system which upholds a truth deeply against intuitive moral knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

Granted, both the Christiana and Syracuse episodes came after *Moby-Dick*’s completion.<sup>10</sup> But they were scant weeks after, and thus manifest those attitudes towards truth which were prevalent during its composition. In the trial of a white supporter of the Christiana

---

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Delbanco, *The War Before the War: Fugitive Slaves and the Struggle for America's Soul from the Revolution to the Civil War* (Penguin Press, 2018), 286-288.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 288-289.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 286, 288.

milita, for instance, juror screenings brought to light a hesitancy about association with the legal system which seems exemplary of a deeper cultural current. One potential juror, pleading he be removed from consideration, cited his heart disease, explaining that “any agitation will bring it on,” a comment to which even the judge wryly responded “I am in nearly the same situation myself.”<sup>11</sup> To another potential juror touting his difficulty hearing, the same judge remarked his “disease has become epidemic to-day.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, in a metaphorical sense, the deafness of the North was the last escape from a fundamentally incoherent system of social values, in the hopes of clinging to an imagined ultimate truth of the United States as an equitable nation. There is no better specimen of this longed-for deafness than precisely this hesitancy to participate in the legal process. Given the trial’s historical context, it seems these jurors were not attempting to escape the limelight, but to escape implication in a system built on contradiction and free exploitation of truth. Jerry’s story, for instance, did not end with his violent reclamation by two officers. During his trial, a crowd of twenty-five hundred surrounded the police station, and with salvos of bricks brought the proceedings to an end. Unsatisfied, they attacked in the night, spiriting away Jerry for escape to Canada.<sup>13</sup> The contradictions of truth that the legal system generated thus fermented in Northern society into a wide cultural movement, primarily oriented by alienation with legal authority.

Such episodes plainly impacted Melville. In addition to this macroscopic cultural experience, he was personally confronted with this Antebellum irrationality. The famed Daniel Webster, for instance, was relatively close to the family, having defended Melville’s grandfather and future father-in-law on charges of colluding with Melville’s father to steal the principal on

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 290-291.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 291.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 289.



bank loans.<sup>14</sup> But Webster was a fierce northern advocate of the Fugitive Slave Act, and thus would have served as one avenue of exposure to the political system's incoherence.<sup>15</sup> And as for the future father-in-law, he was Lemuel Shaw: future Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court, and a bulwark of the very legal system which constructed and maintained the irrationality of American life.<sup>16</sup> In the trial of runaway slave Thomas Sims, for instance, Shaw denied the defense a writ of habeas corpus; this despite his personal beliefs that slavery was "so odious, that nothing can be suffered to support it, but positive law."<sup>17</sup> This presumably impacted Melville, given the central and paternal role Shaw played in his life.<sup>18</sup>

Further, the head attorney for the defense in the Sims case was Richard Henry Dana Jr., whose sailing memoir *Two Years Before the Mast* inspired Melville's own early works.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, personal literary experience was central to his perception of this epistemic and moral crisis: David Fenimore Cooper's novel *The Red Rover*, which influenced him much as did Dana's work, offers a contrast between the outer legality and inner corruption of the slave ship, against the illegality but romanticism of the pirate vessel, questioning the relationship between Antebellum law and true reality.<sup>20</sup> It is thus unsurprising that Melville's novella *Benito Cereno*—more explicitly than *Moby-Dick*—positions "the nominally legal institution of slavery as a betrayal of humanity."<sup>21</sup> But the conflict over slave laws was primarily a matter of contradiction in the

---

<sup>14</sup> Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: Herman Melville and the Politics of the Family* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 29.

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Delbanco, *The War Before the War: Fugitive Slaves and the Struggle for America's Soul from the Revolution to the Civil War* (Penguin Press, 2018), 276.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: Herman Melville and the Politics of the Family* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 10.

<sup>19</sup> Herman Melville and Hershel Parker, *Moby-Dick: An Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 560.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: Herman Melville and the Politics of the Family* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 4.

<sup>21</sup> M.E. Grenander, "Benito Cereno and Legal Oppression: A Szaszian Interpretation," *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, no. 2 (1978): 338.

nation's deepest truths; Melville's richest expressions of contemporary happenings thus come abstractly, in veiled metaphors that mimic the incoherence of Antebellum society in different terms.

*Moby-Dick* abounds with such elements of incoherence. These are built from three atomistic contradictions: first, what might be termed "simple contradictions"; second, non-meta contradictions; and third, meta contradictions. The actual contradictions the text offers can fall in any of these three categories, or can arise from an interpretation of a contradiction in one category which conflicts with the interpretation of a contradiction in another category. This allows contradictions themselves to become self-referential, creating an infinite and dense web of possible interpretations, all of which produce problems with other interpretations. But to simplify, the text's incoherence stems from these three classes. The first is exemplified in instances like Ishmael's inconsistency regarding the number of shipmates aboard the Pequod. These can partially be attributed to oversights, but at least some of them may be intentional, and all of them contribute to the text's inescapable incoherence. The second class is seen in episodes like "Cetology," where the knowledge of the whalers—in this case, the "knowledge" that whales are fish—contradicts scientific understanding.<sup>22</sup> The contradiction here is contained within the text. This distinguishes it from the third class, exemplified in the ending of "Cetology" when Ishmael remarks "this whole book is but a draught—nay, but the draught of a draught," raising meta questions of the nature of the text.<sup>23</sup> Was it written by Ishmael, or Melville? Is Melville's *Moby-Dick* also such a preliminary work, for if it is, does that not undermine the very messages it seeks to convey, this one included? Clearly, meta contradictions are the necessary consequence of the meta elements.

---

<sup>22</sup> Herman Melville and Hershel Parker, *Moby-Dick: An Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 110-111.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

But as outlined, these three classes are not exhaustive of the kinds of truth contradictions Melville constructs. Compounds, as it were, can be constructed from these atomistic parts. Nowhere is this as lucid as “The Doubloon.”<sup>24</sup> Not only are the shipmates’ interpretations contradictory, but so too are the interpretations by the text’s readers. Consider that some could argue the coin has a definite meaning, others could believe it has subjective meaning, and still more could say there is no meaning at all, save perhaps what characters project onto it. And these multilayered contradictions themselves can be analyzed by questioning how the characters can come to different conclusions from the readers, whether it is the characters or readers who are projecting meaning, and so on. This creates contradictory interpretations of the interpretations. *Moby-Dick* therefore manifests what might be called a “Doubloon Spirit,” which pervaded American culture in areas like constitutional interpretation, or the weighing of moral law against positive law. By manufacturing an infinite and kaleidoscopic network of hermeneutic approaches, Melville expresses the equally multi-layered contradictions of Antebellum America. Truths concerning the country’s values can contradict each other, but so too can theories of why those truths do or do not in fact contradict. In the face of this outrageous epistemic toxicity, the only answer, it seems, is accepting Melville’s Hermeneutic, and realizing the infinitely spiralling irrationality not only of *Moby-Dick*, but of its native time and place.

Against this Hermeneutic argument, there is a valid objection that Melville does advance a coherent solution to the Antebellum crisis of truth, in the form of his proto-pragmatist concept of whale-like double vision. That is, to recognize the sunlit world from one eye, the tryworks-lit world in the other, and never slip into either Emersonian naivete or total recognition of the truth. Perhaps this pointed to an optimism in facing American politics. Granted, this would be in keeping with Lemuel Shaw’s influence, as his faith in the immunity of positive law from moral

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 317-321.

principles is a bedrock to the jurisprudence of Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. and other pragmatists.<sup>25</sup> And there is surely no shortage of passages to cite. Of particular note is Ishmael's warning in "The Masthead." And not to be forgotten is the crew's final doom thanks to Ahab's monomania. Thus, there seems evidence that, despite his recognition of the seeming incoherence of the American political approach, Melville ultimately had a more optimistic take, since he defends a noncontradictory epistemic stance through *Moby-Dick*.

But Melville's more private thought, comprising his letters and personal reading, undermine this narrative, and point once more to the Hermeneutic. For instance, two checkmarks—the highest praise Melville awarded in his marginalia—adorn opposing arguments in his copy of Schopenhauer's *Religion: a Dialogue*:

PHILALETHESE: The truth, my dear sir, is the only safe thing; the truth alone remains steadfast and trusty; it is the only solid consolation; it is the indestructible diamond. [checkmark]

DEMOPHELES: Yes, if you had truth in your pocket, ready to favour us with it on demand. All you've got are metaphysical systems, in which nothing is certain but the headaches they cost. Before you take anything away, you must have something better to put in its place. [checkmark]<sup>26</sup>

To bless mutually exclusive positions with a checkmark in itself embodies the all-pervading spirit of contradiction in Melville's thought. But simultaneously, it speaks to his Hermeneutic in a more direct manner, since it highlights that the pragmatic approach embraced here by Demopheles is not the exclusive recipient of Melville's agreement. Rather, Melville simultaneously recognizes truth as the only and ultimate authority. This echoes his personal correspondence, where in one letter to Hawthorne, he defends the reality of inconvenient, unpopular, and objective truth. Positioning it above the people both in existence and

---

<sup>25</sup> "Legal Pragmatism." Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Accessed December 16, 2022. <https://iep.utm.edu/leglprag/>.

<sup>26</sup> Melville, Herman. "Melville's Marginalia in Arthur Schopenhauer's *Religion: A Dialogue*." Melville's Marginalia Online. Ed. Steven Olsen-Smith, Peter Norberg, and Dennis C. Marnon. 2 April 2012. <https://melvillemarginalia.org/Viewer.aspx>.

comprehension, he lauds it as “ridiculous to men” and quips that a clergyman would be run “out of his church on his own pulpit” if he instead preached the real truth.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Melville’s personal thought more approximates the Hermeneutic than noncontradictory alternatives, suggesting he felt and embodied in his work the total incoherence of 19th century American values.

### Contradictions in Power: Hierarchy and Legitimacy

*Moby-Dick*’s sensitivity to its historical context extended also to the realms of power and hierarchical legitimacy. At the heart of this was the artificiality of the white, Protestant elite’s position in society. Again, contradictions quickly appear. In one sense, absent the technology and legal system of the time, the elites could not possibly maintain their position. Thus in one sense, the social hierarchy’s legitimacy is manufactured, and does not reflect the “true” distribution of power. This alone creates a contradiction in the political elite. But in another sense, technology and the legal system are natural social features, and thus the order that results from them should fairly possess an aura of natural legitimacy. Further complicating matters is the question of whether natural social hierarchies are indeed legitimate, and the period’s pseudoscientific activity that manufactured evidence for a racially-predicated natural social order. This paper will not examine these questions themselves, as except for the phrenological case, they all carry convincing but lengthy philosophical justifications. Rather, it is the consequences of these ideas’ competition which will command attention. The central claim is that Antebellum America suffered from a deep uncertainty regarding power, hierarchical legitimacy, and the relationship between these two factors.

---

<sup>27</sup> Herman Melville and Hershel Parker, *Moby-Dick: An Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 566.; Melville presumably meant a Romantic, material narrative which emphasized the brutality of existence, instead of an Emersonian optimism or, even more traditional, a mainstream Christian view.

However one might define the United States' elite in the early 19th century, Melville was born into it. Economically, socially, and politically advantaged, his maternal Gansevoorts and paternal, "e"-deficient "Melvills" stood at the height of the American state. Both his grandfathers were heroes of the Revolutionary War, one finding wealth as a slave owner, the other as a merchant.<sup>28</sup> Though his family would gradually slide into "genteel poverty" and social irrelevance, as a young man especially he knew the world of the elites, with relatives who had traveled the Earth, served as naval officers, succeeded in business and law, advocated for violent expansion, and in the case of his father-in-law, Shaw, reached the height of the Massachusetts judiciary.<sup>29</sup> Further, his descent from this lofty class afforded him a unique perspective and anxiety. For Melville to capture the incoherence of American hierarchies in *Moby-Dick* was thus to recount a subject he was intimately familiar with and entangled in.

There was, however, much to be familiar with. Antebellum society was everywhere partitioned into hierarchies and relationships of authority, with the frequent rebellions against them revealing their failure to conform to the natural distribution of power. Beginning in the 1820s, laborers in the North, for instance, developed a fear of "wage slavery" or "white slavery" over their oppression under a social-economic system which did not recognize their actual power; strikes thus become a form of revolt against what they perceived as the illegitimate status quo.<sup>30</sup> And some interpret Republican Motherhood as a protest against the exclusion of females from the public and political spheres: a norm which was not remotely rooted in natural ability.<sup>31</sup> But these pale before the artificial construction of slave-master relationships. Simultaneously, slave rebellions like Nat Turner's reflect the illegitimacy of the social order, even clearer than do

---

<sup>28</sup> Wyn Kelley, ed., *A Companion to Herman Melville* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 3.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-7, 11.

<sup>30</sup> Troy Rondoni, *The Great Industrial War: Framing Class Conflict in the Media, 1865-1950* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 22-23.

<sup>31</sup> Eyal Rabinovitch, "Gender and the Public Sphere: Alternative Forms of Integration in Nineteenth-Century America," *Sociological Theory* 19, no. 3 (2001): pp. 344-370, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0735-2751.00145>, 354.

fire-eaters' frantic, pseudo-scientific "theories of race," which aimed to provide "neat justifications for consigning blacks to an inferior caste."<sup>32</sup> These hierarchies were incoherent precisely because they were illegitimate on the basis of actual power, and rooted in irrational explanations. *Moby-Dick* was thus conceived in an environment saturated with these contradictory hierarchies.

Though Melville approaches authority and hierarchy from multiple angles and in many episodes, the best case to analyze in relation to slavery is in fact one that bears no immediate connection to race. Namely, "The Town-Ho's Story." Steerkilt is "superior in general pride of manhood," being a "tall and noble animal with a head like a Roman," he could have been "Charlemagne, had he been born to Charlemagne's father."<sup>33</sup> He thus is the paradigmatic challenge to the social order: the image and substance of a ruler, in all ways but birth. Though Melville's account can also be read as challenging whether natural talent is an appropriate predicate of social status, or is in fact equally arbitrary since it simply passes the social order from the hands of man to those of fate, of greatest relevance to the historical context is the irrationality of the Town-Ho's hierarchy. Indeed, it is the picture of the contradictory hierarchies of Antebellum America. Supposedly holding some higher justification, it is never articulated. It thus constitutes the arbitrary stratification of the society, contrary to the only objective measure of social influence actually available, exactly in the manner of the economic, sexual, and racial divisions imposed on Antebellum society.

---

<sup>32</sup> Robert Starobin, "The Negro: A Central Theme in American History," *Journal of Contemporary History* 3, no. 2 (1968): pp. 37-53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002200946800300203>, 37, 48-49.

<sup>33</sup> Herman Melville and Hershel Parker, *Moby-Dick: An Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 193.

### Contradictions in Identity: Created and Authentic

Contradictions of identity underlied those of truth and power in Antebellum America. The text comments on identity and categorization from any number of perspectives, including class, sex, species, religiosity, and—of greatest interest in this paper—race. Again, the Hermeneutic allows all of these approaches to *Moby-Dick*'s philosophy of identity to enjoy validity; or perhaps it deems all of them equally invalid. And even these twin theories of validity themselves create a paradox in interpretation: for if the first is accepted, it contradicts itself by admitting valid hermeneutics exist, since the absence of such hermeneutics is the basis of admitting equality between the approaches; and if the latter is accepted, then the rejection of any valid meaning itself becomes the hermeneutic, but this creates a valid meaning. As one can see, the contradictions rapidly spiral into something incomprehensible. Fittingly, this constitutes something of the identity of the book itself. It is as a prion. *Moby-Dick* infects whatever rational approach is offered to it by warping it in on itself, exposing its self-referential logic and dependence on ultimately contradictory grounds. To identify the text as that which resists valid interpretation is to accept the Hermeneutic. But to humbly recognize this resistance to analysis and nonetheless extract historical lessons from the text yields promise. For in Melville's pages is to be found a stirring image of the contradictory identities Antebellum society projected onto its members according to their race.

One simple explanation of why the imposed identity of the slave is irrational is due to its arbitrary conceptual boundaries. For instance, an 1849 letter to the *Milwaukee Sentinel* details the writer's conversation with another man, who owned thirty slaves and some ten thousand acres of land in Missouri and Iowa. Concerning a border dispute between the states, the other man said he fervently hoped to have his property end up in the latter, in which case his slaves



would be free. The motive for this newfound mercy? He could sell his land for \$19,000 if it were in Iowa, while losing his slaves would only cost \$10,000.<sup>34</sup> The irrationality was inescapable; human rights were not endowed freely, but calculated by latitude and profit. The identity of the slave, unlike the natural identity of the human, thus lost the stable groundings of definite reality, and became a function of social constructions that were artificial, and thus necessarily arbitrary. To imagine a human being is a human being when they stand to one side of a line, and a slave when they stand to the other, invests an arbitrary construct with the power to overrule definite reality—that is, the reality that a human being is always a human being. This is thus one source of the slave identity’s irrationality.

Again, identity is a ubiquitous theme in Melville’s masterpiece. But there is no example more iconic than that whispered line: “call me Ishmael.”<sup>35</sup> In this simple proclamation, Melville confronts the eternal problem of identity in literature, in a manner strikingly particular to its historical context. When slaves often carried the names of their owners, to name oneself was a powerful demonstration of self-ownership, and sovereign determination of identity.<sup>36</sup> But simultaneously, Melville creates contradictions in interpretation. Can the reader trust that “Ishmael” is the narrator’s name? Behind this cliché ponderance is a profound question of the narrator’s identity. If the reader cannot know with certainty his name, how could they know his identity? How could they know he has the authority to create his own identity? What if this “Ishmael” is skylarking the reader through the entire text? In that case, for him to invent the

---

<sup>34</sup> "Opinion of a Stockholder." *Milwaukee Sentinel* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin) IV, no. 219, January 1, 1849: [2]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*. [https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.library.nd.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANX&docref=image/v2%3A119BAA7547\\_AD9B50%40EANX-11B1209B179ED060%402396394-11B1209B2AB99B58%401-11B1209B977D5610%40Opinion%2Bof%2Ba%2BStockholder](https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.library.nd.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANX&docref=image/v2%3A119BAA7547_AD9B50%40EANX-11B1209B179ED060%402396394-11B1209B2AB99B58%401-11B1209B977D5610%40Opinion%2Bof%2Ba%2BStockholder).

<sup>35</sup> Herman Melville and Hershel Parker, *Moby-Dick: An Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 16.

<sup>36</sup> “Recall Their Names: The Personal Identity of Enslaved South Carolinians,” Charleston County Public Library, October 9, 2020, <https://www.ccpl.org/charleston-time-machine/recall-their-names-personal-identity-enslaved-south-carolinians>.

identity of Ishmael is just as arbitrary and unjustified as identifying a particular line, across which an individual becomes property. Melville thus creates, in this single instance, a web of contradictions so dense that they mirror the conceptions and justifications underlying the Antebellum identity of the slave.

### **Conclusion**

From the pages of *Moby-Dick*, upward leaps an apotheosis. But not of truth, or personal realization, or any other singular, rational, and conclusive end. Rather, Melville deifies paradox, not as an abstract philosophical experiment, but as a visceral expression of his era. He was acutely aware of how his society, driven particularly by its desperate accommodation of slavery, had contaminated itself with contradictions and incoherent structures, centered especially around truth, power, and identity. Ultimately, the meaning of *Moby-Dick* escapes its reader just as the White Whale did Ahab, and just as the white-dominated Antebellum world did Melville. But the meaning, the rational foundation, of the text and its native world escape not because of their elusiveness, or lofty theoretical dominion, but because they never existed. “I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look,” but reason cannot be found.

## Works Cited

- Delbanco, Andrew. *The War Before the War: Fugitive Slaves and the Struggle for America's Soul from the Revolution to the Civil War*. Penguin Press, 2018.
- Grenander, M.E. "Benito Cereno and Legal Oppression: A Szaszian Interpretation." *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, 4, no. 2 (1978): 337–42.
- Kelley, Wyn, ed. *A Companion to Herman Melville*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006.
- "Legal Pragmatism." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://iep.utm.edu/leglprag/>.
- Lincoln, Abraham. "Eulogy on Henry Clay." *Lincoln's Eulogy on Henry Clay*. Accessed December 3, 2022. <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/clay.htm>.
- Lincoln, Abraham. "Temperance Address." *Abraham Lincoln's Temperance Address of 1842*. Accessed December 3, 2022. <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/temperance.htm>.
- Melville, Herman, and Hershel Parker. *Moby-Dick: An Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*. 3rd ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018.
- Melville, Herman. "Melville's Marginalia in Arthur Schopenhauer's Religion: A Dialogue." *Melville's Marginalia Online*. Ed. Steven Olsen-Smith, Peter Norberg, and Dennis C. Marnon. 2 April 2012. <https://melvillemarginalia.org/Viewer.aspx>.
- "Opinion of a Stockholder." *Milwaukee Sentinel* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin) IV, no. 219, January 1, 1849: [2]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.library.nd.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANX&docref=image/v2%3A119BAA7547AD9B50%40EANX-11B1209B179ED060%402396394-11B1209B2AB99B58%401-11B1209B977D5610%40Opinion%2Bof%2Ba%2BStockholder>.

Otter, Samuel. "Melville: His World and Work (review)." *Leviathan* (Hempstead, N.Y.) 9, no. 1 (2007): 69–76.

Rabinovitch, Eyal. "Gender and the Public Sphere: Alternative Forms of Integration in Nineteenth-Century America." *Sociological Theory* 19, no. 3 (2001): 344–70.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/0735-2751.00145>.

"Recall Their Names: The Personal Identity of Enslaved South Carolinians." Charleston County Public Library, October 9, 2020. <https://www.ccpl.org/charleston-time-machine/recall-their-names-personal-identity-enslaved-south-carolinians>.

Reynolds, David. *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*. New York: Knopf, 1997.

Rogin, Michael Paul. *Subversive Genealogy: Herman Melville and the Politics of the Family*. New York: Knopf, 1983.

Rondinone, Troy. *The Great Industrial War: Framing Class Conflict in the Media, 1865-1950*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010.

Starobin, Robert. "The Negro: A Central Theme in American History." *Journal of Contemporary History* 3, no. 2 (1968): 37–53. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002200946800300203>.