THE MACKSEY JOURNAL
Johns Hopkins University • Baltimore, MD

Volume 3 Article 52

2022

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Recommended Citation

Dodd, Payton (2022). “‘Draught of a Draught’: *Moby-Dick* as a Living American Document.” *The Macksey Journal*: Volume 3, Article 52.

Published by JHU Macksey Journal, 2022

‘Draught of a Draught’: *Moby-Dick* as a Living American Document

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Abstract

In the years following Melville’s induction into the literary canon during the mid-twentieth century, scholars have dubbed *Moby-Dick* the “Great American Novel” because of the endurance and malleability of Melville’s themes, especially those that praise or critique the core values of American democracy. Since World War II, rhetoricians have been resurrecting Melvillean political symbols—particularly the *Pequod* and the White Whale—to comment on the ideals and trajectory of the nation during nearly every national crisis that has arisen since the 1940s. Yet, in order for a nineteenth century text to evolve with America herself, either Melville’s abstract prose must lend itself towards perpetual modernization, or readers are subconsciously editing the text by extracting its timeless bits while ignoring its archaisms. To prevent the cultural revision of *Moby-Dick*, we must interpret Melville’s American allegory holistically, rather than isolating its situationally relevant aspects. By comparing interpretations of this string of uniquely American symbols and themes woven into the plot of the novel (what I henceforth refer to as the “American thread”), which have been recontextualized repeatedly over six decades of scholarship, this paper contemplates the benefits and dangers of forging a perpetually relevant text. What core truths about American politics does Melville capture within the text? Why is it so easy to read ourselves and our modern world into the story, 170 years later? And, most importantly, what essential parts of the text are irrevocably lost when we do?

Keywords*:* American politics, textual revision, *Moby-Dick*, Twenty-First Century

Herman Melville prefaces *Moby-Dick* with eighty quotes from miscellaneous sources—literature, ships' logs, political speeches—collected by a "Sub-Sub-Librarian" (Melville) under the single heading "Extracts." Only a select few bear any thematic relevance to the body of the novel; most are simply included for their mention of the word "whale." This is not to suggest "Extracts" is without purpose. The repetition of "whale" eighty times in quick succession is maddening and obsessive. It overwhelms the mind, it is ubiquitous, the sole occupation of the reader's thoughts—not unlike the mentality of a certain manic captain or his author. Yet, it also presents the whale in a kaleidoscope of contexts: a Biblical figure, a Hobbesian government, an economic commodity, or just a simple sea creature. The whale makes for an apt metaphor in all intellectual meridians.

In 2005, Andrew Delbanco prefaced his biography of Melville with his own collection of epigraphs, this time humorously compiled by a Sub-Sub-*Sub*-Librarian. Deviating slightly from Melville, his quotes do not center around whales, but rather around *Moby-Dick*. Delbanco's "Extracts" features references to *Moby-Dick* from modern (mid-twentieth century onward) American sources—newscasts, literature, sitcoms. They follow the White Whale from Hiroshima to Randle McMurphy to *The Simpsons*. *Moby-Dick*, just as its namesake, is omnipresent. Again, the whale swims through seas of contexts: he is a political metaphor, an advertising tactic, a throwaway joke, a whale! If Melville's "Extracts" emphasizes Ahab's obsession with the White Whale, Delbanco's "Extracts" underlines American culture's fanaticism for *Moby-Dick*.

American popular culture and scholars of literature alike hail *Moby-Dick* as the "American Bible,"[1] not because the novel is primarily, or even largely, concerned with American politics (for good reason; how effectively could sailors protest the U.S. government from the middle of the ocean?). Rather, what makes Melville's commercial flop the "Great American Novel" is the enduring relevance of his small, but significant, commentaries on the *Pequod*'s country of origin. Since the early twentieth century, American scholars and readers of *Moby-Dick* have related the events of the novel to developing political crises, an enduring phenomenon partially encouraged by Melville's refusal to bestow a concrete meaning upon his abstract and philosophical text. Because academics have been anchoring their reading of Melville's American symbolism to their current moment since the 1940s, scholarship on *Moby-Dick* has inadvertently fossilized a record of the evolving relationship between the novel, the American democracy, and her citizens. Yet, this string of rereadings has also documented how readers have edited the text of *Moby-Dick* by superseding Melville's writing with their own perceptions of how it *should be*, not how it is. While scholars have heretofore connected *Moby-Dick* to their concurrent time, as well as identified the tendency of the novel to metamorphose, I would like to build upon existing scholarship not by providing yet another modern retelling of *Moby-Dick*, but instead by conducting analyses of analyses. By comparing political interpretations of the text through the past few decades, I will trace the evolution of the novel's relationship to American politics, illustrate how readers have accidentally edited the text of *Moby-Dick*, and reiterate the dangers of these irreparable alterations. For, only through the dissection of these literary analyses can we begin to reconstruct the complete novel—our ship of state—from its splintered axioms and allegories.

[1] Term coined by Nathaniel Philbrick in *Why Read Moby-Dick?* Penguin, 2011.

Although Melville first published *Moby-Dick* in 1851, it was not widely studied until the Second World War, when F.O. Matthiessen revived it with a strictly anti-fascist reading of the power dynamic between the tyrranous Captain Ahab—a man elevated to the status of a god—and his whalers, who suffer the majority of the consequences of their leader's machiavellianism (Matthiessen 446). This reading, whether or not Matthiessen intended it, is partially a reflection of American politics at the time: Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito were embodiments of ultimate evil who withheld the inalienable right of freedom from their citizens in the name of global domination. To Matthiessen, Ahab became a warning against an American dictator who would lead the country to ruin.

Although Matthiessen's reading heavily contributed to the renewal of public interest in *Moby-Dick*, it is incredibly unlikely that Melville wrote his American thread as a satire on fascism,[2] largely because it was far from the primary political issue in mid-nineteenth century America. Nevertheless, Matthiessen, along with dozens of scholars to have emerged since, have interpreted the American thread in relation to the looming political questions of their own eras. This is what Sorin Radu Cucu and Roland Vegso call the "self-reproductive capacity" in their essay "Moby-Dick and Perpetual War." They define the self-reproductive capacity as the tendency for readers to connect the events of a fictional work to their current global environment (Cucu and Vegso 14). Although it is common for many readers to relate to works of literature in some form, some books accommodate and encourage the self-reproductive capacity more than others due to the malleability of their text. Because of Melville's philosophical prose, *Moby-Dick* is perhaps among one of the most adaptive texts: "Melville's narrative constitutes itself both as a mirror that can capture the world it does not directly know and as a lens through which events, situations, and belief systems can be observed as being rooted in the world" (Cucu and Vegso 14). At least to Cucu and Vegso, it is Melville's particular style of writing that elicits modern rereadings. While his verbose and speculative prose is not unique to *Moby-Dick*, the length of the novel as well as its examinations into the human condition elevate the relevance of *Moby-Dick* over Melville's other works. What makes *Moby-Dick* particularly riveting as a case study of the self-reproductive capacity is that it has been one of the most popular novels among scholars since the mid-twentieth century. Ergo, scholarship on the novel has inadvertently fossilized a record of how American readers respond to the book in light of an evolving culture. *Moby-Dick* does not simply "capture the world it does not directly know," it retains and absorbs it.

To support the assertion that *Moby-Dick* acts as a catalyst for the self-reproductive capacity, let us examine the American thread from contrasting historical perspectives. In "Rewriting Moby-Dick: Politics, Textual Identity, and the Revision Narrative," John Bryant analyzes the film *Moby Dick* (1956, dir. John Huston) as Melville's original story filtered through an anti-McCarthyist lens. In adapting the novel into a script, screenwriters Huston and Ray Bradbury had to sensationalize the story, or otherwise make it captivating to their audience by making it relevant.[3] Huston and Bradbury reinvented *Moby-Dick* as a bitter criticism of

[2] While the term "fascism" didn't exist until the early twentieth century, that doesn't restrict Melville from writing about a dictatorial environment that resembles fascism. Though to claim Melville intentionally penned an "anti-fascist" novel would be inaccurate.

[3] Although, the fact that Warner Bros. greenlit Huston's expensive film indicates there was significant public interest in Melville's *Moby-Dick* already.

McCarthyism, with Ahab acting as the senator who monomaniacally pursues what he considers to be pure evil (i.e., Communism). But after the White Whale martyrs Ahab, his crew continues hunting the creature to their demise, which the screenwriters intended as a statement on the foolishness of "blind allegiance to mad authority" (Bryant 124). Thus, in tweaking their film to appeal to a mid-century American audience, Huston and Bradbury participate in the Self-Reproductive Capacity as well as anticipate the same thought process in their viewers. However, altering the details of the novel—as Huston and Bradbury do when they send the *Pequod*'s crew after Moby Dick following Ahab's death—presents a significant set of issues, especially in a film, which likely reached a larger audience than had read *Moby-Dick*. Because many Americans were likely more familiar with the movie over the book, Huston's film endangers Melville's text by superseding it in the American consciousness. Effectively, the reimagined events depicted in the film have the potential to rewrite Melville's original text in the name of a more accurate reflection of the times—McCarthyism, in Huston's case.

Forty-five years later, the next American war following our crusade against communism yet again revived *Moby-Dick* in popular culture. In "The Cold War's 'Undigested Apple-Dumpling': Imaging 'Moby-Dick' in 1956 and 2001," Walter C. Metz argues that the War on Terror renewed public interest in *Moby-Dick*, because Melville's "bitter warning" against reckless megalomania became pertinent when the Bush Administration became "hell bent on avenging the loss of his buildings, New York City's legs" (Metz 225). Similar to Huston and Bradbury's anti-McCarthyist satire, Metz connects a vengeful political figure to Ahab. This connection between the two readings suggests that American leaders who are possessed by the need to defend their freedom (from Communism, from terrorism) could be a common occurance in U.S. politics, and one that is adequately reflected in *Moby-Dick*. While Metz makes this connection nearly three years after September 11th, public intellectual Edward Said delivered a speech on the same subject only a few days after the attack. He declared that the Bush Administration painted Osama Bin Laden as a "symbol of all that's evil in the world" and swore to pursue him to the ends of the earth, which is inevitably America's end: to obsess over revenge and killing instead of recognizing their faults that placed them in harm's way. As a consequence they, like Ahab,[4] are "borne out to sea, wrapped around the white whale with the rope of his own harpoon and going obviously to his death" (Said). Said's comparison, however, isn't entirely accurate because Ahab dies via Fedallah's whale line, not his own harpoon: an unlikely oversight from a scholar who wrote the introduction to the novel in one edition[5] (Bryant 122). No matter the cause of Said's minor inaccuracy, his speech, as well as his misreading, exhibits the self-reproductive capacity, not only because he extrapolates Melville's text to his time, but also because he slightly alters the text in order to better communicate his message. Like Huston and Bradbury, Said keeps a nineteenth century text relevant by tweaking its details to fit a more specific cultural event. But again, it isn't *Moby-Dick* alone that happens to perfectly align with the developing political situation. The work of applying and updating the

[4] Interestingly, Said drew a similar comparison in regard to the First Gulf War a decade prior: "Anyone who has read Moby Dick would find it irresistible now to extrapolate from that great novel to the real world, to see the American empire preparing once again, like Ahab, to take after an imputed evil." Clearly, even the same scholars are prone to evolving readings of *Moby-Dick*. See Said, Edward. "Empire of Sand." *The Guardian*, Jan 12, 1991, pp. 2.

[5] The 2010 Penguin-Random House edition of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*.

novel is done by the reader, who compromises the integrity of Melville's original text by molding it into an allusion that fits uncannily well.

Thus far, the endurance of *Moby-Dick* has been the result of modern artists who artificially contort the text to better suit their comparison and their audience. When taken in isolation, this trend would suggest that there is no such thing as a timeless text, and Melville's novel only survives because influential figures force it to evolve. Yet, this perpetual modernization cannot be entirely attributed to a group of stubborn bibliophiles; there must exist a quality within *Moby-Dick* that tends toward timelessness. In other words, Melville's style contains a subtle element that desires evolution.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe or Henry David Thoreau, whose works directly challenge nineteenth century American issues from slavery to voting taxes, Melville writes about more intangible conflicts. In "*Moby-Dick* and the American 1848," Michael Paul Rogin concludes that the American thread is so difficult to analyze because it is, at the same time, concretely about Melville's America, and something else entirely. He speculates, "Were *Moby-Dick* simply a political allegory, then nothing would be lost by translating its representations back to their referents, for that would have been the purpose of writing it. Yet as a political allegory *Moby-Dick* remains, paradoxically, above politics, neither losing itself in political complexity nor transforming its political present into something new" (Rogin 108). In his examination of the nature of allegories, Rogin determines that when an author writes a text as a direct commentary on specific individual events, to replace the symbols with their real-world counterparts would detract nothing from the story. For example, if Melville wrote Ahab as a satire of, say, John C. Calhoun,[6] to replace the former with the latter would preserve that sense of power and mania over the crew of the *Pequod*. But Ahab's character is more complex than a caricature of a politician can covey: he is compassionate, noble, and a "grand, ungodly, god-like man" (Melville 79), all of which are qualities that are lost when Ahab is reduced to mere allegory. Therefore, while the American thread most definitely contains commentary on United States politics, it is also something more profound and intangible.

But then, the nature of Melville's critique is also distinct from most forms of allegory, for there exists no one-to-one correlation between subject and symbol. In "Ahab, American," Susan McWilliams explains that *Moby-Dick* is intentionally didactic because Melville's characters are "made to appear bigger or more dramatic than their counterparts in real life" (McWilliams 237). While most allegories satirize particular well-known figures, Melville refrains from caricaturing antebellum politicians. Instead, he allegorizes *Americans*, for each of his Nantucketers subscribes to some distinctly American belief—universal tolerance, the right to freedom, the self-made man, just to name a few. But if Melville caricatures American characters, what he really critiques is the egalitarian idealism his nation was founded upon, which enables his commentary to endure. In "Moby Dick, Millennial Attitudes, and Politics," Milton R. Stern asserts that Melville's commentary remains relevant because his writing speaks to the soul of American democracy, with particular regard to "the political translations and contradictions of American expectations and attitudes" (Stern 60). And American attitudes *are*

[6] For a discussion of the parallels between Ahab and Calhoun, see Heimert, Alan. "Moby-Dick and American Political Symbolism." *American Quarterly*, vol. 15, no. 4, 1963, pp. 516.

contradictory. For example, Ahab loves a community he is not a part of. He dreams of liberating mankind from oppression—a noble venture—yet broods alone while his crew celebrates their community. In satirizing American attitudes, like the contradictory definitions of brotherhood and independence exhibited by Ahab, Melville chose to base his American thread not on his United States, but on a communal United States—a U.S. that transcends time. Because *Moby-Dick* addresses—either explicitly or symbolically—the philosophical core of America, so long as America's values persevere, so does public interest in *Moby-Dick*.

Likewise, as long as Americans bicker over the same problems, Melville's criticism of those problems remains relevant. This assertion is best supported by an excerpt from "Loomings," and perhaps the passage that first establishes the American thread. Ishmael, while contemplating his compulsion to return to the sea, remarks that the Fates have planned three noteworthy events: "'GRAND CONTESTED ELECTION FOR THE PRESIDENCY OF THE UNITED STATES' 'WHALING VOYAGE BY ONE ISHMAEL' 'BLOODY BATTLE IN AFFGHANISTAN [sic]'" (Melville 7). The first event is a recurring one in American history, evidenced by the Jefferson-Burr tie in 1800, the Lincoln-Davis secession in 1860, the infamous Bush-Gore decision in 2000 (and perhaps, the insurrection-inspiring Biden-Trump election in 2020). Although Melville would only have been aware of one of these scandals at the time of writing, he nevertheless observes a pattern of messy elections that is seemingly inherent to the nature of the United States, if not the principle of democracy itself. Likewise, conflicts between Afghanistan and the Western world have been a recurring concern in America.[7] In this passage, Melville likely would have been referring to the First Anglo-Afghan war, which ended with a devastating loss for the British Empire in 1842, therefore warranting the adjective "bloody." But since then, this allusion to a battle in Afghanistan has become nearly impossible to read without first thinking of the War on Terror in 2001 and the Taliban-led coup in 2021, even though Melville could not possibly have written about them. As I am not a scholar of the Middle-East, it would be inappropriate for me to comment on a possible cause of repeated conflicts between Afghanistan and the West. Whether Melville was able to identify a historical pattern, or simply happened to choose a nation the U.S. would eventually quarrel with, may not ever be known, nor is his reasoning particularly relevant. Intent aside, this third event contributes to the timelessness of Melville's novel because, like the contested elections before it, which event it refers to depends on the reader. Although many of these events occurred after the publication of *Moby-Dick*, they paradoxically become part of the novel due to the self-reproductive capacity.

Where, then, does Ishmael's voyage (and the novel itself) fit into this discussion of cyclical historical patterns? In *Prophecies of Leviathan: Reading Past Melville*, Peter Szendy insists, "reading is *without end*: without heading, without head. Promised or delivered unto prosthetic and prophetic rereadings that remain always to come" (Szendy 93). The "prophetic" nature of Melville's writing invites endless interpretations as history progresses and repeats, which explains why Ishmael places himself between two historical events: *Moby-Dick* itself is

[7] Why Melville chose to allude to Afghanistan instead of another nation the U.S. frequently clashes with is an intriguing (albeit not entirely topical) question—especially since the U.S. was not involved in the First Anglo-Afghan War, but was instead preoccupied with its own Mexican-American War and various Native American revolts around the time of writing.

part of the evolving relationship between time and American history. Every time these events repeat themselves, Ishmael sets out on another voyage—in 1850, in 2000, in 2021—coinciding with renewed public interest in *Moby-Dick*, when its poignant lessons again become relevant. Indeed, *Moby-Dick* itself has become a pattern in American history.

Moby-Dick endures at least partially due to its unique position as a living text that adapts and evolves in connection with its subject, but with this immortality comes an equally unique set of problems. Some scholars worry that the self-reproductive capacity overshadows, and even overwrites, Melville's original text. In "Moby-Dick and Perpetual War," Sorin Radu Cucu and Roland Vegso discourage modern allegorical interpretations of the American thread because they "strip the elaborate and expansive text down to a unified and compact plot structure, reducing it to a cautionary or visionary tale about blind ambition's path to self-destruction" (Cucu and Vegso 13). Although Melville's abstract ideas and themes persevere 170 years later, there inevitably exists some aspects of the text that are resigned to the nineteenth century—the whaling industry itself, for example. As smaller details become increasingly timely, readers will dismiss them in favor of *Moby-Dick*'s eternal messages. Similarly, since *Moby-Dick* is a favorite reference in popular culture, much of the American population knows at least the general plot of the novel: crazy captain hunts whale. But this summary, too, was manufactured through years, if not decades, of entertainment media focusing on this oversimplification of the central conflict (notice it does not acknowledge the heroic side of Ahab). Although summary of such a famous book is inevitable, which details we choose to exaggerate determines the cultural niche and influence of the novel. (Indeed, if the plot was instead summarized as "man marries cannibal, sails around the world with him," the novel would occupy an entirely different niche in American culture.) This dangerous process results in an incomplete reading: one that succeeds in grasping Melville's themes, but discards the complexities of the text that make it so messy and so beautiful.

To provide an example of this reduction, I will discuss an instance where cultural applicability became dangerous. After presidential candidate Al Gore rescinded his concession to George W. Bush and demanded a recount of votes in November 2000, a *BBC News* report declared, "Al Gore clung to the wreckage with the ferocity of a Captain Ahab" (Carver). In the name of cultural applicability, the reporter combined the "ferocity" of Ahab with the image of grappling on to the remnants of his ship, which is, in this context, Gore's prospects of winning. Suffice to say, Ahab does not survive his encounter with the White Whale, and the journalist erroneously replaced Ishmael with the relentless captain. However, a comparison of Gore to Ahab being dragged down to his death would be a bit too opinionated and predictive for the report, which was written at a time where either candidate could have won. On the other hand, to liken Gore to Ishmael floating on a broken plank lacks the crazed character that Ahab brings to the metaphor. Therefore, the reporter's marriage of the two textual events is the most practical option and is effective in communicating his idea. But it also broadcasts a textual inaccuracy to a national audience. The *BBC News* article altered the cultural perception of *Moby-Dick* by erasing the need for Ishmael. It likely determined the perception of the novel for readers who are unfamiliar with the text beyond the universal "man chases a whale" that is common knowledge among American audiences. This is when the self-reproductive capacity becomes dangerous: when it possesses the power to shift the popular conception of the book.

Likewise, John Bryant cautions against applying *Moby-Dick* to modernity in the interest of the preservation of the original text. In "Rewriting Moby-Dick: Politics, Textual Identity, and the Revision Narrative," Bryant argues that texts are subject to an invisible process of evolution that results from minor acts of editing, censorship, misquoting, as well as the self-reproductive capacity (Bryant 120). But with every insignificant change that editors overlook in new editions, Melville's original text is gradually lost. Bryant ponders, "Is there an inevitable slippage between our allegiance to material texts and our desire to make texts conform to a self-image born amid the exigencies of life, one that allows us to forget the text of the source and construct a text that fits the moment?" (Bryant 124). As evidenced in Edward Said's aforementioned speech following the September 11th attacks, readers—even scholars of Melville—are prone to misrememberings of the text or otherwise intentionally modify it to make a better comparison to modern day. These altered presentations of *Moby-Dick* threaten the integrity of Melville's original work when popular culture accepts them over the exact text. In fact, the revision of *Moby-Dick* is not merely a frightening possibility; parts of the text have already been lost. A month before Melville published *Moby-Dick* in the U.S., his editor in England, Richard Bentley, censored the novel so as not to upset his Victorian audience who were widely repulsed by paganism and homosexuality (Bryant 127). Bentley published the novel as *The Whale* in October 1851. However, he did not document all of his changes, so when *Moby-Dick* was published a month later in America, it retained some of Bentley's errors. Some of these edits still survive in many modern copies of the novel, due to editorial oversight (although, because there are few surviving copies of *The Whale*, these discrepancies are difficult to pinpoint and rectify). In mid-nineteenth century Britain, Melville's publishers "construct[ed] a text that fits the moment" by removing controversial subjects (Bryant 124). But as a consequence, Melville's true original text is already partially lost, and becomes increasingly endangered. Bryant advocates that scholars of Melville need to "create collaborative critical archives that enable us to edit revision and thereby witness what largely go [sic] unwitnessed" (Bryant 131). Until scholars and historians establish a sort of "fossil record" of the editions of *Moby-Dick* to assist in tracking changes between editions, readers must either restrict their modern connections or verify the accuracy of their reading before informing the public (Bryant 131). While perhaps the main reason why *Moby-Dick* endures as a staple in the American literary canon is because of its ability to reflect the current era, we irreversibly edit and endanger Melville's original text by superimposing our own meaning over prose that resists modernization.

I propose, then, readers of *Moby-Dick* must be both Ahab and Sub-(Sub-Sub) Librarians. The work of pursuing Moby Dick must be done, for new readings develop incessantly, and they beg for interpretation. Yet, while some scholars of Melville will analyze the novel in a holistic and academic manner, some politicians, entertainers, journalists, scholars, or other public figures will inevitably misrepresent the text. These alterations require compilation into our own edition of "Extracts," so we can trace the significance of *Moby-Dick* in American culture, as well as monitor how much the text is being edited, and therefore determine how the perception of the novel has shifted.

Despite the concern surrounding the fluidity of Melville's text, its evolution is a testament to its importance to American culture. Melville not only reflected the issues of his time in his magnum opus, but the foundational issues of the United States democracy, and in

doing so managed to encompass all times so long as the American empire survives. In “The Ship of State,” Brian R. Pellar maintains that Melville believed that literary geniuses do not accidentally mirror their times in their writing, but purposely respond to it and hope the times change because of them (Pellar 28). Because of the novel’s poor critical and commercial success, in 1851 *Moby-Dick* influenced very little outside of its own pages (aside from Melville’s reputation as a popular writer). Instead, Melville accomplished something quite extraordinary, albeit quite antithetical to his original vision: the times have not changed because of him, but his work has changed because of the times.

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