



## *Moby-Dick: From a Multi-genre, Multi-Cultural Perspective*

by: *Michael Kouroubetes*  
Department of English

### ABSTRACT:

Scholars throughout the ages have used *Moby-Dick* to represent many different aspects of the cultural battles that were occurring during the nineteenth century. Often *Moby-Dick* has been seen as an allegory for American white culture dealing with the anti-slavery issues that would inevitably lead to the Civil War. Some scholars argued the white whale symbolized the inevitability of the monoculture of whiteness to devastate the nation. However, this article focuses on Melville's use of variant romance genres to intervene in these previous interpretations and shows that the novel can be interpreted from a mixed form aspect generating a text that favors it being viewed from a multi-cultural perspective.

Melville, by combining visionary passages, along with factual passages, creates a text that seemingly depicts one mono cultural approach, while actually arguing many cultural perspectives. The article uses scholarly texts, New Historicism, Queer Theory, and close readings to show that the type of romance genre it was written in, in of itself, allows one to view the text via a multi-cultural approach and not a land locked narrative interpretation to justify a white monoculture view.

## *Moby-Dick: From a Multi-genre, Multi-Cultural Perspective*



Scholars through several decades have used *Moby-Dick* to represent many different aspects of the cultural battles that were occurring during the nineteenth century. Often *Moby-Dick* has been seen as allegory for American white culture dealing with anti-slavery issues that would inevitably lead to war. Some scholars, like Michael Paul Rogin argued that the white whale symbolized the inevitability of the monoculture of whiteness to devastate the nation (Rogin 142). I will be intervening in previous interpretations of *Moby-Dick* and focusing on Melville's use of the romance genre and its sub-genres, along with the mixed form genre, in order to show that the novel can be interpreted, and fruitfully so, from a multicultural perspective. Reading *Moby-Dick* via a multicultural perspective using the hybrid genre approach allows the text to make a claim in favor of multi-cultures and against white dominance. By using an interpretive approach, the novel is intercepting the mono-cultural white biasness of its time. It means the text is attuned to the crucial importance of non-white, non-English speaking perspectives, in other words it does not assume "white" universality and superiority. By focusing on the novel's use of the hybrid genre, and by reading from a perspective attuned to multiple perspectives, we can see that the novel is showing that it favors a global perspective, inclusive of multiculturalism and not just showing a white monoculture America. We become more attuned to global perceptions used in the allegories, images, and narration that assumes a more global perspective. The blend of multi-genres in *Moby-Dick* is the akin to the blend of multi-cultural growth that occurred in the antebellum era, especially due to the American expansionism that occurred after the Mexican-American war was won by America in 1848. The increased



cultural diversity that the American expansionism resulted in is also analogous to the diverse types of writing that was occurring in Melville's day. In fact the main type of fiction Melville used, as scholar David S. Reynolds points out "were Romantic Adventure fiction, dark reform literature, radical-democrat fiction and subversive humor" (Reynolds 94). My intervention is to add to this anti mono-cultural whiteness argument by showing how the text supports multi-cultural perspectives.

Melville wrote *Moby-Dick* in the early 1850's during what is considered the Antebellum Period. The time ranges from the end of the War of 1812 to the beginning of the Civil War. During these years, the American Nation also fought the Mexican American War from 1846 to 1848, which inevitably lead to our winning the conflict, which in turn lead to a great American expansionism: California, amongst other territories were now part of the United States. However, during the Antebellum Period, the country was greatly polarized. Due to slavery and the abolitionist supporters, a great battle of ideologies was fought. By annexing California, the Fugitive Slave Act was passed in order to appease the southern states that supported slavery. The Fugitive Slave Act meant that any escaped slave had to be returned to their respective owner, no matter what state in the union they were caught in, which meant not only the southern states, but also the northern states. This lead to an even a greater conflagration of discourses that would finally result on the American Civil War. As Timothy Powell dramatically indicates, the text of *Moby-Dick* "dramatizes the conflict between the nation's will to empire, which exponentially increased the country's multicultural diversity, and the dominate white society's will to monoculturalism, which kept the imagined community of U.S. "citizenship" predominantly white" (Powell 153). Race was at issue: for example black people were thought to be inferior and were, therefore, supposed to be enslaved by the superior monoculture white people of United States; American Indians were thought of savages, in some cases noble savages, but savages nonetheless, and were banished to desolate areas of the Americas. It was a battle to support the ideology that America was ultimately a white Christian spiritual nation. As Powell points out the "will to monoculturism" was "predominately white," while in fact due to the American expansionism of the antebellum era, America had increased its "multicultural diversity."



During the Antebellum Period, the romance genre was in full bloom. Writer's like Edgar Allen Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville were some of its great practitioners. Hawthorne wrote in the preface of *The House of Seven Gables*, a romance novel written in 1851, a kind of definition of what a romance story is:

When a writer calls his work a romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a novel. The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity...the former [the romance form]--while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart—has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation... and, especially, to mingle the marvelous rather as a slight, delicate, and evanescent flavor, than as any portion of the actual substance of the dish offered to the public. (Limm 3)

Hawthorne is asserting two elements in his definition of romance versus the antebellum novel form. A novel's text consisted of "very minute fidelity," an attempt at verisimilitude. Whereas Hawthorne is stating that romance can, and should "mingle the marvelous" within the text in order for the text to achieve what he considers is the ultimate goal it should achieve which is to reveal "the truth of the human heart." Melville's *Moby-Dick* goes even further than Hawthorne's definition of what a romance novel should do by not only revealing "the truth of the human heart" but also ultimately grapples with the question of what is the human condition. Due to the battle over culture that was being played out during the 1840s and 1850s, the human condition was defined in monocultural terms before, but now had to be defined to include "multicultural diversity" due to America's expansionism.

Sheila Post-Lauria astutely points out in her book *Correspondent Colorings* Melville in the Market Place in her chapter on "Originality: the Case for *Moby-Dick*" that Melville was using an even more elaborate mode of writing in addition to the romance narrative, he also used the "mixed form narrative" (Post-Lauria 113). By historicizing the other novels that were published at the time by authors such as Samuel Kimball and



Sylvester Judd who were writing in a “sub-genre” which was called the metaphysical form novel, she shows that Melville was not only writing in the romance genre, but also in the mix form genre which included the metaphysical form. The metaphysical form texts combine both realism and metaphysical rumination in order to not only reflect the social structures of their times, but also engage in “moral” metaphysical questions. Their purpose was to mix the elements of the realist and the philosophical, only in order to ultimately emphasize the philosophical (Post-Lauria 112). However, she concludes that Melville goes further than the metaphysical authors, and even the romance authors, to create an even more complex hybrid form of writing that not only relays the minutia of antebellum culture, and incorporates metaphysical musings, but goes further to include multi-variants of other literary forms such as dramaturgy and poetry. As Post-Lauria points out, Melville’s greatest work, *Moby-Dick*, was seen as a book that was inspired, not planned, but in reality was planned.

Melville’s use of the mixed form and metaphysical narrative combines the real and the ideal, into a complimentary narrative, resulting in the whole being greater than the parts. Post-Lauria quotes Ishmael’s words to “look at this matter in every light” to show that *Moby-Dick* is a narrative that masterfully weaves many parts and techniques into a synergistic text, in order to provide a superior perspective on the human condition. As Post-Lauria explains how the mixed form actually supports multiple perspectives, including those multiple perspectives of differing cultures to show a greater complexity to the narrative world. She describes the mix forms usefulness for this multi-cultural approach: Melville’s concept of narrative form in *Moby-Dick*, based on mixed form, helps us understand its intentionality and distinction in depicting the disparate segments of segments of experience—or as Ishmael proclaims in *Moby-Dick*, the “separate citation of items”...the suggestion by the Northwester-Newberry editors that Melville built “better than he knew” (to borrow Emerson’s phrase) should be reformulated to suggest that Melville built better than we knew. (Powell 121)

By using these mixed forms of narration, Melville’s text is also presenting a multi-cultural perspective “disparate segments” by including worldwide allegories, allusions and imagery, that goes against



the perspective of monoculture whiteness ideology of the antebellum period.

We get a multi-cultural perspective and mixed form narration example in *Moby-Dick*, in the chapter titled *The Doubloon* (Melville 331). The *Pequod*, Ahab and crew, have been hunting Moby Dick for months and the text shows Ahab restless and frustrated that he has yet to find and destroy the White Whale. In this chapter, Ahab paces the *Pequod*'s deck restlessly until he sees the doubloon again and again which draws his "glance shot like a javelin with the pointed intensity of his purpose" (Melville 331) that shows his obsession with his quest to kill Moby Dick. But one day he is "newly attracted." And here the text states that Ahab has a revelation "in some monomaniac way whatever significance might lurk in them" (Melville 331). In the coin the Quaker Ahab sees himself "there is something egotistical in mountain-tops and towers" and the text goes on to describe Ahab as "the firm tower that is Ahab" (Melville 332) and Ahab concludes "So be it, then, Born in throes, 'tis fit that man should live in pains and die in pains!" so far Ahab the coin serves merely as a mirror of himself and his inner "egotistical" quest for the white whale. In the doubloon Starbuck, also a Nantucket Quaker, but a pragmatic white sailor, says "I've never marked the coin inspectingly"—for him it is a coin, but coin he wishes not to look deep into for meaning because "the coin speaks...sadly to me" (Melville 333). Stubbs, also a Nantucket sailor and often the most humorous of them all, describes the coin in a Shakespearean style of deep symbolism and allusions to detail human fate:

I'll try my hand at raising a meaning out of these queer cruvicues here with Massachusetts calendar...let's see now. Signs and wonders...Aries...begets us; then Taurus, or the bull—he bumps us the first thing; then Gemini...is Virtue and Vice; we try to reach Virtue, when lo! Comes Cancer, the Crab, and drags us back...[then] Leo, a roaring Lion, lies in the path...we escape and hale Virgo, The Virgin! That's our first love, we marry and think to be happy...when pop comes Libra, or the Scales—happiness weighed and found wanting...[then] Scorpio...stings us in the rear; we are curing the wound, when whang come the arrows all round; Sagittarius, or the Archer, is amusing himself. As we



pluck out the shafts...here's the battering-ram, Capricorn...full tilt, he comes rushing, and headlong we are tossed; When Aquarius, or the Water-bearer, pours out his whole deluge and drowns us; and, to wind up, with Pisces, or the Fishes, we sleep. (Melville 334)

The roundness of the doubloon, the doubloon which seals oath to destroy Moby Dick, comes to not only signify the prize the one who spots him first, but comes to also be seen as Stubbs muses over the Fate of man, or in other words the human condition. Round, round we go like the sun signs of the earth, where we are "begat" then "then bumped" then face "Vice and Virtue" and trying for "Virtue" are only to be dragged back to face "roar of the lion" and to finally marry our first love only to have "happiness weighed and found wanting" followed by the stings and arrows of life then to be battered "headlong we are tossed" to be "deluge[d] and drown us" finally finishing with us to "sleep" with the fish. The text shows us how a simple object can also symbolize from womb to tomb our whole existence.

The chapter goes on to show the differing perspectives that the multi-cultural crew have toward the doubloon nailed to the mast. Flask, who is from Martha's Vineyard, counters Stubbs with "I see nothing here, but a round thing made of gold," (Melville 334) it is just a reward for spotting Moby Dick. Flask's perspective is that of a realist, the coin only represents prize money. Then Manxman, who is from England, after circling around the coin and seeing on the other side of the mast a nailed horse-shoe, he sees the coin's juxtaposition with the horse-shoe as a prophecy of doom when "If the White Whale be raised, it must be in a month and a day" (Melville 334) from his perspective it is an ominous omen. The doubloon does not just represent a monetary value, but it represents the fate of the human condition, it is part of an apocalyptic perspective, one that will befall the crew. Then Queequeg, the harpooner from the South Sea island, looks at the coin, compares his tattoos to it and says he does not know what to make of it, in fact to him it's "old button off some king's trowsers" (Melville 335). Queequeg's narration is "subversive humor," and matter of fact. However when Fedallah peers at the coin, he "makes a sign to the sign and bows" (Melville 335), for the oriental mysterious Fedallah he sees it from his sun worshipping perspective, from his own spiritual perspective. However, the examination of the coin is finished by the now insane black young man, Pip. He



perceives it as the “the ship’s navel...unscrew your navel, and what’s the consequence” (Melville 335). From Pips perspective, coin represents the ships center and points out in his own insane murmurings that if you “unscrew” the navel, or center, what happens? The center is destroyed and all consumed. The text shows Pip, like the Shakespearian fool who may sound insane or “foolish”, but also conveys truth, that something ill will occur. To summarize, all the characters, from differing cultural perspectives see the coin in different ways, and in turn provides the mix form text of *Moby-Dick* with a multi-cultural perspective, rather than just a monoculture white perspective.

Post-Lauria points out “the mixed form narrative...combine[s] a Lockean positivistic world view...with a reflective, mystical, often visionary, Kantian point of view” (Post-Lauria 104). The mixed form novel combines philosophical musings, along with scientific facts to create an amalgam of styles collected in one text that show that not merely is there the physical realm to address to the reader, but also a deeper metaphysical aspect also. We see Post-Lauria’s analysis in the very beginning of *Moby-Dick*. Melville begins his novel with the chapter called Etymology. It begins, ironically, that the etymology is “Supplied by a Late Consumptive Usher to a Grammar School”, and however the text goes further describe the “Usher”

The...Usher...I see him now. He was ever dusting old lexicons and grammars, with a queer handkerchief, mockingly embellished with the gay flags of all the known nations of the world. He loved to dust his old grammars; it somehow mildly reminded him of his mortality. (Melville 7)

Melville’s text sets up how the novel will be about the multi-cultural world perspective and the human condition. He symbolizes this by having the Usher dusting his books with a handkerchief “embellished with the gay flags of all the known nations of the world” and the text will remind “him [us] of his [our] mortality.” This part of the narration then is followed by the “Extracts” were text presents an exhaustive array of writings concerning whales. This extensive listing of facts shows numerous historical multicultural perspectives of whale lore. The text quotes biblical scripture, scientific journal extracts, to journal from dangerous encounters with the whales for such as presented by the Missionary Journal of Tyerman and Bennet “Being once pursued by a



whale which he had wounded...the furious monster at length rushed on the boat" (Melville 15) only for the crew to survive by "leaping into the water when they saw... [the] inevitable" (Melville 15). Again, via the mixed form genre, Melville's text shows us the breadth of spiritual (biblical) representations, scientific description "The whale is a mammiferous animal without hind feet" (Melville 13); including adventurous and dangers encounters with them. The text not only sets up different multicultural publishing, but also blends in the metaphysical, the scientific and the adventure romance genre that achieves even foreshadowing of the *Pequod's* destruction, when a whale "rushed on the boat" to lead to its destruction. From *Moby-Dick's* introduction we begin with "scholars and artists" (Limm 6) we get the disparate elements of the mixed form novel and in turn multi-cultural diversity.

In the chapter titled *The Quarter Deck* we see how the mixed form genre also comes to illuminate the multicultural perspective and how it is used to overcome monoculture white ideology. In this chapter Ahab, first nails the doubloon to the mast that serves to galvanize the quest to kill Moby Dick. In Shakespearean like dialogue Ahab commands the crew to gather. He then commands his three harpooners, all of whom come from multicultural races that have suffered at the hands of white monoculture ideology: Daggo, Tashtego and Qeequeg. As scholar Timothy Powell points out astutely that Daggo, who is African and can be jailed at any American port; and Tashtego who is an American Indian whose tribe was destroyed by white colonizers and Qeequeg who represents the brutally colonized "Marquesas Island" islanders (Powell 164-165). Then in an arch Shakespearean scene begins an unholy ritual asking the three harpooners to come together:

Attend now, my braves...ye harpooners, stand there with your irons...cross your lances full before me...let me touch the axis"—Ahab grasps them and it seemed as though...[Ahab] shocked into them the same fiery emotion accumulated with the Leyden jar of his own magnetic life. The three mates quailed before his strong, sustained, and mystic aspect. (Melville 142)

Ahab brought their "lances" together and grasped them at "the axis" imbuing them with "his won magnetic life" and his "mystic aspect." Melville's text is incorporating the dark romances of Hawthorne such as *Young Goodman Brown*, where Young Goodman Brown finds himself in



the woods witnessing a witches Sabbath being performed by his fellow pilgrims and from then on does not know what to believe of his fellow Christian citizens, whether he experienced a dream or actual witchcraft. In both cases Ahab's demonic ritual, like Young Goodman Brown's own witnessing of a possible witches ritual, are analogous to each other and the dark romance genre. Ahab goes even further to raise his three multicultural harpooners to the rank of "noblemen" while the three white officers serve only as "cup bearers" (166). Melville's text not only uses an amalgam of Shakespearean drama, but also the genre of dark romance to create a mixed form text that raises the three multicultural harpooners symbolically to a standing higher than their "white" fellow sailors. The text thus makes a claim through its use of genre that a multicultural discourse also exists, not only an antebellum monoculture discourse.

In the chapter titled *A Squeeze of the Hand* we also see how Melville's text's again uses the mixed form genre to imply multicultural perspective of oneness versus a monoculture perspective of only "white" oneness. There is a shift in the narrative text from the individual narrative, Ishmael, to a metaphysical "allegorical" perspective narrative. As Zachary Limm states about Melville's writing technique "the text serves the larger purpose of producing fiction that defies narrative convention...casting new light on the psychology of his characters or illustrating or allegorizing the fictional but fact-based material condition in which the narratives unfold" (Limm 6). In it the crew is gathered on the deck squeezing the spermaceti from a white whale that Stubbs caught. In this chapter the text uses mixture of realism and metaphysics to lead to an allegory of what humankind really is. Ishmael and his fellow multicultural ship mates are processing the sperm from the whale that they have to do by hand. The text shows the factual elements necessary to process the remains of the sperms fluid (squeezing the white liquid over and over again). It is during this process that Ishmael has metaphysical realization:

Squeeze! Squeeze! Squeeze! All the morning long: I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it; I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborer's hand in it...such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did the this avocation beget; that I was continually squeezing their hands, and



looking up into their eyes sentimentally...why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humor or envy! Let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness. (Melville 323)

The labor of refining the spermaceti leads to a physical connection to his fellow multicultural crew on a metaphysical spiritual level where Ishmael states "why should...cherish any social acerbities, or know the ill-humor or envy". He goes on to not recognize any cultural differences during this orgiastic like scene, but to all humans "universally into the very mild and sperm of kindness". What begins as labor, dealing with commodity of refining the spermaceti ultimately become eulogized into a metaphor for universal oneness. Melville's use of the mixed form takes us from the mundanity of existence to a metaphysical realization that all humans, all cultures are "universally" one in the end. The text uses the metaphysical style genre to rebel against the monoculture antebellum world of its time period.

The novel's use of various genres is even more evident through Melville's incorporating the Shakespearean soliloquy. The soliloquy is another element that is part of the dramaturgy. It is where the character on a stage, or in a novel, addresses the audience, and/or reader, revealing their motivations or plans. In the case of Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Ahab often soliloquizes to the crew, in order to convince them of his planned quest for vengeance on the white whale, and maintain the unity of his multicultural sailors, especially to avoid their mutinying against his fatal goal of killing Moby Dick. His soliloquies create multicultural unity in order to battle the white monoculture symbol that Moby Dick symbolizes. When Ahab, in *The Quarter Deck*, nails the doubloon to the mast and asks for his crew's unity in his quest, they all realize he going after the infamous white whale, Moby Dick. When Starbuck vehemently questions Ahab's quest before the whole crew for "vengeance on a dumb brute...that simply smote thee from blindest instinct! Madness! To be enraged with a dumb thing" (Melville 139). Ahab replies with a soliloquy that reluctantly convinces Starbuck not to defy him:

Hark ye yet again,--the little lower layer. All visible objects, man are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act...some unknown but still reasoning thing puts for the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If



man will strike, strike through the mask!...he [Moby Dick] tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous with inscrutable malice sinewing in it...but look ye, Starbuck, what is said in heat, that thing unsays itself. There are men from whom warm words are small indignity. I meant not to incense thee. (Melville 140)

Ahab convinces Starbuck by going a “little lower layer” and how “some unknown but still reasoning thing puts...its feature from behind the unreasoning mask”. He is telling Starbuck that what may be “vengeance on a dumb brute” is really battling a “reasoning thing.” Ahab even apologizes to him. His soliloquy gets Starbuck’s “tacit acquiescence” and Ahab is able to unite his multicultural crew to “strike through the mask” and move forward with the deadly journey. Ahab’s very last words are a powerful soliloquy that shows his defiance, even as he is about to be destroyed, by the monoculture that the White Whale symbolizes. He cries out:

Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell’s heart I stab at thee; for hate’s sake I spit my last breath at thee. Sink all coffins and all hearses to one common pool! And since neither can be mine, let me then tow to pieces, while still chasing thee, though tied to thee, thou damned whale! Thus, I give up the spear! (Melville 426)

Ahab, despite knowing of his looming doom against the “unconquering whale,” battles on with his last “breath” against Moby Dick. As Powell points out “Despite the strength of Ahab’s multicultural alliance” (Powell 173), Ahab is destroyed by the monoculture of antebellum America that the white whale symbolizes. The text, using the soliloquy as a part of the mixed form genre, thus reinforces the cultural battle of monoculture ideology versus a multicultural ideology that was being fought for decades before the Civil War.

In conclusion, Melville’s text by using the romance mixed form genre, a genre that is composed of disparate narrative styles, complements Powell’s approach to analyzing *Moby-Dick* not only from a monoculture perspective, but from a “historical multicultural line of analysis” (Powell 176). The Antebellum period was a time of great cultural unrest. A cultural battle was being fought between monoculturalism identity and multicultural identity due to American expansionism. Melville’s text, in its various narrative elements, supports



that it can be analyzed via multicultural perspective. This can be seen especially during a historical time period where America's monoculture ideology was being questioned so vehemently that it inevitably led to war. It behooves the scholar to examine Melville's masterful use of various narratives in order to garner a greater perspective of the time period in which he wrote his masterpiece, *Moby-Dick*.

#### Works Cited

- Lamm, Zachary. "That Darker, Though Truer Aspect of Things': Melville's Failed Romances." *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 47 (2014): 1-16. Print.
- Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick*. Ed. Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford. 2nd ed. New York: Norton & Company, 2002. Print.
- Post-Lauria, Sheila. "Correspondent Colorings: Melville in the Marketplace." Amherst: U Of Massachusetts P, 1996. 101-122. Print.
- Powell, Timothy B. "Herman Melville: Ruthless Democracy." *Ruthless Democracy: A Multicultural Interpretation of the American Renaissance*. Princeton, NJ; Princeton UP, 2000. 153-176. Print.
- Reynolds, David S. "Its wood could only be American!: *Moby-Dick* And Antebellum Popular Culture." *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Moby-Dick - Herman Melville*, Updated Edition (2007): 93-116. Print.
- Rogin, Michael Paul. "Moby-Dick and the American 1848." *Subversive Genealogy The Politics and Art of Herman Melville*. Berkley, California: University of California Press, 1983. 102-151. Print.



