

# *Moby-Dick*: The Incomprehensible Monstrosity of the Whale

Patrick Charles Poulin

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## ***Moby-Dick*: The Incomprehensible Monstrosity of the Whale**

**Patrick Charles Poulin**

In one of the theses in his essay “Monster Culture: Seven Theses,” Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues that the monster is “the Harbinger of Category Crisis” (1996, 6). He defines monsters as resistant towards categorization and classification, and as forces that resist and frustrate our desire to understand things through purely rational means. Herman Melville’s classic philosophical take on nautical adventure, *Moby-Dick* (1851), is, among many other things, an extended treatment of the monster’s shifty, ambiguous and incomprehensible nature. The novel’s titular whale is a monolithic force that evades our understanding, as it “resists any classification built on hierarchy or a merely binary opposition” (Cohen 7). Like the monster figure Cohen discusses, Moby Dick is a hybrid concept; it cannot be understood only through biological classification or rational thought. Melville forces us to come to terms with the sublime and overwhelming nature of the whale’s semiotic elusiveness through his scientific digressions, his discussion of the whale’s sublime whiteness, and his presentation of its massive and pervasive *physical* presence in the final chase. While the novel’s sudden and jarring shifts into documentary discussions of the practical and rational elements of the whale as a biological entity disturb us because of their lack of closure or of complete understanding, Melville’s descriptions of the whale’s whiteness in particular haunt us because of their contradictory implications, with whiteness taking on paradoxical meanings so maddeningly ambiguous as to induce terror. More complex still, Melville does not leave his whale stranded in the realm of pure idea. Moby Dick’s appearance in physical form at the end of the novel depicts awesome sublimity through not just his dread-inducing immanence, but also his enormous physical *embodiment* and *presence*. Together, these elements present an idea of monstrous category crisis in that the whale is endlessly ambiguous and polysemic, is impossible to

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**Patrick Charles Poulin** is a 19 year old Pure and Applied Science student at Dawson College. He works as a karate instructor and is an aspiring filmmaker based in Montreal. He studied *Moby-Dick* and the text’s ambiguity through the lens of both English and Humanities in the Reflections special area of study at Dawson College. He is a big fan of horror and experimental films.

classify empirically, and resists comprehensive understanding in its many symbolic roles, from mythical leviathan, to bringer of fate, to random embodiment of nature.

*Moby-Dick* has multiple chapters that are laden with purely empirical information, but Melville's objective facts about whales are only elusively straightforward. These chapters are spread out throughout the novel, initially seeming almost random in their placement, and often disrupting the course of the narrative of Ahab's mad quest to destroy the whale that dismembered him. However, the placement of these chapters is of acute significance, particularly when one considers their contextual juxtaposition with the chapters around them. Cohen writes, "In the face of the monster, scientific inquiry and its ordered rationality crumble," suggesting that monstrosity not only is independent of classification and understanding, but can actively undermine it (1996, 7). Melville's novel supports this, as the placement of his empirical tangents suggests a profound lack, or ever-widening circle, in what empirical observation can capture. Chapter 61, for example, "Stubb Kills a Whale," combines elements of both adventure and philosophy. Narrator Ishmael indulges in heavy romantic ideology, such as his observation that "in that dreamy mood losing all consciousness, at last my soul went out of my body" (Melville 220). Immediately following his musings, the crew engage in an exciting chase after a whale (Melville 220). Three chapters later, "Stubb's Supper" is a deeply disturbing chapter that reflects on the nature of death and power, as Stubb eats the whale he killed previously, by light of a lamp fueled by whale oil. Yet, only four chapters after Ishmael's romantic musings and the crew's exhilarating kill, and only a single chapter after the disturbing chapter about supper, Melville decides to spend chapter 65 explaining the practical details of how the whale can be used "as a dish," lending both culinary and historical knowledge to what has previously been an ironic commentary on Stubb's act. After a section boasting such heavy philosophical and moral implications, there is something chillingly, ironically incomplete about such clear-cut descriptive passages as "three centuries ago the tongue of the Right Whale was esteemed a great delicacy in France," or "[i]n the case of a small Sperm Whale the brains are accounted to a fine dish" (Melville 230, 231). In the wake of the previous chapters demonstrating romantic and transcendental ideas of deep thinking, forcing us to consider the ironies we live by, what our place in the world is, and perhaps even to question whether God and divinity exist (and all the while encouraging the reader somehow to think *Moby Dick* might embody them), these matter-of-fact passages about cooking whales arrive with shockingly misplaced (oversimplified) clarity. This factual information, though

seemingly an attempt to better know the whale in all its facets from mythical to practical, is placed in a way that makes the juxtaposition feel unfulfilling—even wrong-headed—and highlights Ishmael’s inability to do more than touch the surface of the deeper ideas also at play. Chapter 65, “The Whale As a Dish,” and the many others like it, read quite like documentaries, but, despite their assuredness of tone and pretensions to complete coverage, they disturb in their inability to encompass a comprehensive truth. Through these juxtapositions, Melville is tearing down the hermeneutic circle, showing that it is impossible to completely know that which we seek to know by sticking doggedly to one framework, and that, even through multiple fields of study, the truth or essence of something may never be fully understood. The whale thus becomes not only a biological entity, not only the source of Ahab’s rage, not only a mythical presence, and not only an incomprehensible idea—but all of these. Melville clearly understands narrative structure and form, experimenting with and in some cases subverting these concepts in order to underscore the monster’s elusive thematic nature. The novel thus becomes less about elusive meaning than about the problem of representation. Melville even writes later on in the book, in a similarly factual chapter about the whale’s tail, “Dissect him how I may, then, but I go skin deep; I know him not, and never will” (283). Here Melville offers an upfront critique of empirical understanding, but his juxtapositions of similar empirically-driven chapters further complicates the limitations of all schools of understanding.

While Melville’s digressions into the realm of studied knowledge and objective rationality hint at the unknowability of Moby-Dick, his motif of whiteness suggests its contradictory, even paradoxical nature. In *Dive Deeper* (2012), his chapter-by-chapter analysis of, and commentary on, *Moby-Dick*, George Cotkin writes that white is “a color of dualisms” (2012, 81). Its many implications suggest a sort of war within the colour, in that its very nature contradicts itself and that it means multiple things that do not seem like they could coexist. In chapter 42, “The Whiteness of the Whale,” Melville’s Ishmael ‘dives deep’ into the contradictory nature of Moby Dick’s iconic hue, and the many conflicting implications it connotes. Early on in the chapter, Melville writes, “in many natural objects, whiteness refiningly enhances beauty” (151). He then goes on to describe how, in objects such as pearls, the colour white is an embodiment of beauty. However, as Cotkin points out, “whiteness can represent a danger to ships, in the form of icebergs” (82). Off on this nautical adventure, white should be nothing but utterly terrifying, but somehow, as this chapter’s musing suggests, it is still perceivable as beautiful. Ishmael is careful in his deliberations to highlight the polysemic permutations of what he calls this

“colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink” (157). Whiteness is utterly sublime; it is an indication of danger but also a distinction of beauty, somehow both sinister and pure; it is horrifying but inviting.

As indicated in the reference above to a simultaneous fullness and absence of color, another important contradiction implied by the whiteness of the whale revolves around the nature of colour itself. According to the science of optics, white is the simultaneous presence of all colours—similarly, one could say, to how Moby Dick’s whiteness, and the whale itself, are the simultaneous presence of multiple and often conflicting ideas. In the physics of optics and reflection, the colour white also reflects all colours that hit it, just as Moby Dick reflects all ideas that are projected onto it. For the monomaniac Ahab, the whale is redemption and vengeance. Ishmael writes that “all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. He piled upon the whale’s white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down” (Melville 148). For the dreamy, romantic Ishmael, who writes “The Whiteness of the Whale” chapter as a counterpoint to Ahab’s own viewpoint, the whale is a beautiful, terrible figure of transcendent wonder and awe. Yet, whiteness is also heavily associated with invisibility, transparency, and a *lack* of colour. A blank canvas or *page*, for example, waiting to be filled with colour, is white. The paradoxical simultaneity of white as both absence of colour and the presence of all colours at once is an overwhelming prospect. In this way, while white is fullness it is also lack. Ishmael comments on this idea of colour as well, writing, “[t]hough in many of its aspects this visible world seems formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright” (156). If whiteness is both complete colour and lack thereof, then this passage suggests that whiteness, in both complete visibility and invisible intangibility, represents both love and fright, as Melville intentionally plays with binary phrasing. The passage also suggests, by hinting at the ‘invisible spheres’ of our world, that there are things we cannot perceive or know, or perhaps are afraid of knowing, despite our desire to. Melville here suggests that beneath or behind the visible world, that which we can comprehend, there is a lurking sense of another, darker reality—an invisible one that pricks at our awareness as a kind of niggling essential lack, that which is unknowable.

These invisible spheres could perhaps be similar to what Cohen refers to in his seven theses on the monster, when he writes that, “The horizon where the monsters dwell might well be imagined as the visible edge of the hermeneutic circle itself” (1996, 7). The uncertainties and contradictions surrounding the whiteness of the titular whale challenge the hermeneutic circle, and the invisible spheres of its tempting truth (or truthiness)—that unknowable

nature which we fear so deeply. Moby Dick's whiteness both encourages analysis and resists—even confounds—solutions, placing the whale as a monstrous metaphysical force that exists on the edge of meaning. The monster is framed as an object to be read. “The monstrous body is pure culture,” writes Cohen (1996, 4). “A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read” (Cohen 1996, 4). But in its place as a ‘harbinger of category crisis’, it also exists to frustrate reading, to resist easy signification and/or representation. As Ishmael presents it, the whale’s polysemy—its embodiment of so many contradictions—renders it an unreadable symbol, defined only by its lack of definition, its indefinability. Within these negative hermeneutics where the monster lives, binary (indeed, all) classificatory systems collapse, and the idea of comprehensive understanding and complete knowledge dissolve.

It is important to consider that after chapter upon chapter of developing the elusive, mysterious nature of Moby Dick as discussed in the two previous paragraphs, Melville does eventually place the crew—and by extension the reader—face to face with the whale, giving him shape and embodiment within the novel’s physical realm. The novel’s last three chapters, constituting an extended chase of Moby Dick that occurs over three days, can be read as deeply disturbing, in that Melville is attempting to make the whale that much more terrifying by assigning a sudden, ubiquitous, massive *embodiment* to that which has so far existed solely in the realm of suggestion. This emphasis on physicality is essential in understanding the sublimity and elusive monstrosity of Moby Dick, because seeing the whale as a tangible, concrete being is terrifying in that its physical grandeur becomes yet another factor of the novel’s deconstruction of categorical thinking. While the essential nature of Moby Dick—whether one sees him as mythical being, physical monster, or pure idea—remains obscure throughout the novel, the final chase gives him form and identity, almost making him a comprehensive entity in his sheer thundering physicality. Arguably, its physical presence adds another paradoxical signification to the whale, maintaining, even exacerbating its ever-elusive meaning. As if to disseminate the physical embodiment of the whale into esotericism, Ishmael uses heavily romantic and religious language upon first sighting the whale, noting that “A gentle joyousness—a mighty mildness of repose in swiftness, invested the gliding whale” as “he so divinely swam” (Melville 392). These descriptions are similar to the ideas brought about earlier in the novel, as they still hint at something larger that is not seen; that is, they continue to endow the whale with a romantic sense of mystery, even as they are almost immediately followed by description of the hard physical reality of Moby Dick’s immensity. Melville writes that Moby Dick was “still withholding from sight the full terrors

of his submerged trunk, entirely hiding the wretched hideousness of his jaw” (392). Here Melville makes reference to the great, overwhelming power of the whale, which yet remains undiscovered—still a part of the lurking, unfathomable deep. Finally, when the whale emerges at long last, it is said that, “the grand god revealed himself” (Melville 393), implying that this is truly a being of immense and terrifying power and scale whose appearance creates shock and awe rather than sudden clarity or comprehensive certainty. These depictions of the whale are an attempt to physically ground it, but as the romantic ideologies of Ishmael are undying, so too is Moby Dick’s polysemic wonder—for, as discussed earlier, Moby Dick reflects back all that is projected onto him. This can be especially seen in a passage from the third day of the chase, when Ishmael describes the whale’s ferocity as so destructive that “Moby Dick seemed combinedly possessed by all the angels that fell from heaven” (Melville 406). This passage’s references to fallen angels can mean two things, both of which have vastly different implications but simultaneously support the idea that Moby Dick’s monstrosity resists classification. The first interpretation is that Moby Dick’s presence cannot be described physically, and as such his descriptions fall into yet another realm, that of the supernatural. The second is that these elusions to religion are Melville’s way of painting Moby Dick as a sublime figure that depicts humanity’s insignificance within the grand scope of nature.

The first of these implications is that Ishmael is unable to fully explain the whale within the confines of the physical realm; thus, he turns to supernature, and the divine. Moby Dick’s intensity and vengeance, and perhaps even the fury of nature itself in this context, is so terrifying and so powerful that it cannot be physically described. The language used instead, particularly angels and possession, implies that this fury lies in the realm of the supernatural. If the monster lives on the visible edge of the hermeneutic circle, as Cohen suggests, then there is no better example than this. That is, even in Melville’s driving action scene, full of movement and excitement; even when the whale is tangible, concrete, and situated in physical space; even in the moment where its identity should be the most clear—it still remains elusive in its overwhelming *presence*. The implications here are terrifying, as Moby Dick not only resists binary classification in terms of symbolic significance, but even in terms of embodiment itself. The whale refuses to exist in a single realm. Even when it is pulled out of the metaphorical and into the physical, it slips away into the supernatural, forever resisting attempts to pin it down, implying the coexistence of different existential planes. Another way to read this passage is through the lens of the sublime. The sublime, in Kantian terms, attends a kind of crisis in

confronting that which cannot be measured or understood. It is in part the encounter of our own limitations in the face of unfathomability—an object, event, or concept that “cannot be contained in any sensible form” (Kant, quoted in Shaw 2017, 105)—that renders something sublime. David B. Johnson, writing on Jean Francois Lyotard (himself following Kant closely), describes this as “the *presentation of the unrepresentable*” (2012, 120), and notes the “generative” (121) rather than stultifying nature of the sublime’s “humbling failure of the imagination before reason” (120). This recalls Cohen’s theory of category crisis, as it implies that which is so grand (or pure, or total) it cannot fit into our cognitive or epistemological nets. A common trope in the sublime is the depiction of the insignificance of man against the immensity of nature. Thus, in his first and only real appearance in the novel, Moby Dick’s power to affect remains in his immensity and unfathomability—so much so that Ishmael must describe him as teetering on the liminal space between the physical and metaphysical realm. The sublime is also present in the passages from earlier on in the paragraph, which describe the whale’s horrors that lay below the surface of the ocean and compare its grandeur to God. The passage referring to angels also evokes the sublime in another way, in that the monster is so grand and awe-inspiring that it forces Ishmael to push past the physical description of Moby Dick—so much so that his appearance becomes an afterthought, as even when Moby Dick breaches in one of the final chapters we still don’t get a sense of what he looks like in his entirety. While this is to be expected, as Ishmael’s experimental narrative juxtaposes all sorts of rhetorical strategies, including Romantic musings, it is still interesting to consider that Moby Dick’s physical presence is so terrifying that it necessitates a parallel to something that transcends physical reality. Moby Dick’s (meta-)physical immensity paradoxically calls into question his concrete form, and instead invites a more supernatural, metaphysical, or metaphorical reading. If the sublime is to be defined as feelings of awe from the grand vastness or moving beauty of nature, then Moby Dick’s physical immensity inviting deeper or more esoteric speculation surely evokes this.

The Kantian sublime, particularly in regards to the idea of fallen angels and religious imagery, also connects to another thesis of Cohen’s which I have not yet explored fully. Typically, feelings of the sublime will be a combination of fear and wonder. As Cohen writes in his sixth thesis, titled “Fear of the Monster Is Really a Kind of Desire,” monsters are “creatures who terrify and interdict [but] can evoke potent escapist fantasies” (1996, 17). In this way, there is clearly a parallel to be drawn between the monstrous and the sublime. Moby Dick in himself is, in many ways, fantasy-inducing, because of his resistance to



being caught, either physically or figuratively, in our epistemological “nets.” Ishmael describes Moby Dick’s fury as being possessed by angels who fell from heaven. To link Moby Dick primarily to a mere moral or immoral force would be too simply an expression of fear and darkness, whereas to describe the fury as indicative of fallen angles implies a purity and goodness that has been lost. The sublimity of this passage comes in its combinations of purity, deep wrath and fear, and our desire to confront such an object. Ishmael resists configuring Moby Dick as a kind of hammer of the gods, a moral police-monster, instead loading his angel metaphor with the same *amoral* ambiguities as the colour white. That Moby Dick is portrayed as both immensely embodied yet also ethereal when he is actually physically encountered at the end of the novel further establishes the idea that the monster complicates classification schemes, as the use of supernatural language and the exploration of the sublime cause a binary conflict for things like reality, realms of existence, physical nature, religion, fear, divinity and morality.

Through an inability to capture complete essence via rational knowledge, an exploration into the contradictory nature of Moby Dick’s iconic whiteness, and an array of complex implications from the characters physically encountering the great whale, Melville’s literary monster (his whale and his novel) anticipates Cohen’s idea that the monster brings category crisis and resists classification. Though Melville presents a near-compendium of information that should make the whale knowable and understandable—teaching us its anatomy, its place in history, its uses in culinary practices, its symbolic importance in religion literature, and myth, and so much more—the whale, like its signature hue, resists categorization. Melville shows that any attempt to understand the monster will innately result in the breakdown of classificatory schemes, as he essentially mocks the human quest for infinite knowledge as much as he valorizes Ishmael’s attempts to ‘present the unrepresentable’. He presents the monster as an essential lack, at the center of another compelling yet elusive reality, a metaphysical one that resists physical tangibility and our attempts to understand it. Even the musings on the nature of the whale are in themselves an attempt to understand it, as chapter 42 begins with, “What the white whale was to Ahab, has been hinted; what, at times, he was to me, as yet remains unsaid” (Melville 151). This particular passage suggests that the chapter on whiteness is almost a desperate attempt to understand the whale, as if its colour is all that can define it, yet definition still does not come, as the many implications of the whiteness only serve to make Moby Dick more incomprehensible. The whale exudes sublimity in its polysemy. It refuses to mean only one thing, and enticingly means all things. It requires “nonbinary

polymorphism” (Cohen 1996, 7). Melville’s uses the novel’s experimental, associative structure, juxtaposing different epistemological methods, the confounding motif of whiteness, and the multiple implications of the whale’s physical presence to challenge the fundamentalist modes we employ in seeking to understand our reality. In presenting his titular whale as a concept and an event that is too hybrid, too multiple, and too immense to yield itself to science, or religion, or artistic rendering, he encourages the power of sublimation as a way of understanding *something* of the human relationship to nature (and the cosmos). Melville simultaneously appeals to and repulses our desire for seeking truth and essences. In his elusive white whale, all possible interpretations coexist. Melville wants us to reconsider how we think about knowledge, because the monster is, after all, “a revolution in the very logic of meaning” (Cohen 7).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This essay was written for the paired English and Humanities course, “*Moby-Dick* and Its Ambiguities,” co-taught by Kristopher Woofter and Mikaela Bobiy in “Reflections” at Dawson College in the winter of 2019.

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