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## Queering the Dick: Moby-Dick as Coming-Out Narrative

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**QUEERING THE DICK: MOBY-DICK AS COMING-OUT NARRATIVE**

An honors paper submitted to the Department of English, Linguistics, and Communication  
of the University of Mary Washington  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors

Ryan M Brady  
December 2016

By signing your name below, you affirm that this work is the complete and final version of your paper submitted in partial fulfillment of a degree from the University of Mary Washington. You affirm the University of Mary Washington honor pledge: "I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work."

Ryan Brady  
(digital signature)

05/09/17

Ryan Brady

ENGL 455J: *Moby-Dick* Seminar

Sponsoring Professor: Mary Rigsby

Queering the Dick: *Moby-Dick* as Coming-Out Narrative

*“Damn me, but all things are queer, come to think of ‘em.”*  
— Stubb, “Enter Ahab; to him, Stubb”

I first read *Moby-Dick* in my junior year of high school, around the same time I fell in love with my best friend. I had been familiar with the novel beforehand—I had purchased and devoured the Classics Illustrated edition when I was younger, and I had seen the 1998 television miniseries, the one with the dreadfully miscast Patrick Stewart as the fanatical Captain Ahab, a handful of times—but this was my first time encountering Herman Melville’s actual text. The timing could not have been more perfect. I immediately identified with the “greenhorn” Ishmael and the “savage” Queequeg; there was something about this tale of two men, one a self-exiled scion of an eminent family, the other an eccentric foreigner a million miles from home, finding refuge in the arms of the other that soothed my closeted soul. And in moody Ahab’s inability to articulate his monomaniacal malady, I recognized my own increasingly difficult struggle with feelings for which I had no language.

My teacher, predictably, failed to address of her own volition the implications of Ishmael and Queequeg’s unusually affectionate relationship. Without a doubt, she was thinking of the numerous angry phone calls she would get from irate parents if she dared to broach the subject of homosexuality in a room full of impressionable, uncorrupted young minds. The other students, however, made no attempt to censor themselves, and several of them made disparaging

comments about behind-the-scenes “buttsex” and wondered openly if Ishmael were a top or a bottom. The teacher, visibly flustered, responded to these disruptions with the stock answer, no doubt rehearsed in the mirror beforehand: intimate same-sex friendships were considered perfectly normal at the time Melville wrote *Moby-Dick*, and therefore there was absolutely nothing out of the ordinary about Ishmael and Queequeg spending an afternoon cuddling in bed together.

My classmates were not persuaded. I, however, was horrified. I had completely failed to make the connection between Ishmael and Queequeg’s blissful “heart’s honeymoon” and that which had been alluded to in the crude comments made by the other students. How could it be that I had identified with two men who, according to my classmates, were fags? I frantically reassured myself that what I felt for my friend was nothing like that—it was too pure, too innocent, too *good*. True, I could not tear my eyes away from him when he was undressing in the locker room before P.E., but what of it? That was nothing; all guys did that. Right?

I remained in the closet for another few years—never underestimate the power of denial—but Melville had pushed the key under the door, and so when I finally came out in my sophomore year of college, one of the first things I did was go back and reread *Moby-Dick* in full, taking care this time to slow down and linger over the parts that we rushed through or did not talk about in class, even the numerous chapters on whale anatomy—paranoid that, in my teacher’s haste, we had glossed over something that might reveal the answer to all my problems. I had just read Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl and Other Poems* and rediscovered Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* prior to my second reading of Melville’s novel, and they had sparked in me a hunger for queer literature. Those books taught me to accept myself. The other gay kids had

Beyonce and Lady Gaga; I had American literature. And at the same time, I could not help but wonder what would have happened had my old high school English teacher mustered the courage to address the elephant in the room at some point during those three fateful weeks in which we read *Moby-Dick*. Who knows? Maybe I would have come out sooner.

\* \* \* \* \*

Like my younger self, Ishmael, *Moby-Dick*'s loquacious narrator, has no one to help him cope with his unconventional desires. The words *homosexual* and *heterosexual* would not be coined until 1868, some eighteen years after the events of *Moby-Dick*; thus, Ishmael comes of age in a time when there was no language to express or even acknowledge same-sex attraction, and even if there had been, the rigid societal codes that regulated sexuality in the nineteenth century would have prevented him from doing so. Despite these disadvantages, Ishmael, through his "marriage" to Queequeg and, later, his admittance into the queer haven of the *Pequod*, not only manages to reconcile himself to his desires but also learns to celebrate unorthodox sexualities. I propose that *Moby-Dick* can be read as Ishmael's "coming out narrative"—a genre similar in style and substance to the *bildungsroman* (or "novel of education")—in that it depicts a protagonist who, through his initiation into an unabashedly queer community, comes to accept his sexuality and his identity as a queer man.

*Moby-Dick* begins with Ishmael fleeing the melancholy of spiritual imprisonment. His erratic behavior suggests depression: He "paus[es] involuntarily before coffin warehouses," finds himself "bringing up the rear of every funeral [he] meet[s]," and must often refrain from "deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off" (Melville 18). Like his biblical namesake, he is a forsaken son cut off from his birthright and doomed to

wander alone in the wilderness. To ease his troubled spirit, Ishmael resolves to “[s]ail about a little and see the watery part of the world” (18); hence, he sets out for the island of Nantucket where he intends to sign up for a whaling voyage. However, due to his arriving late Saturday evening, he must spend the following two nights in New Bedford on account of the ferry to Nantucket being closed on Sundays. At the Spouter Inn, where Ishmael endeavors to find lodgings, the innkeeper, Peter Coffin, whose name foreshadows the outcome of the novel but also anticipates the death of Ishmael’s former self—informs Ishmael that the “house [is] full—not a bed unoccupied” (27-28) but nevertheless gives him the option of sharing “a harpooneer’s blanket” (28). Ishmael is hesitant, but agrees on condition that the harpooner is “not decidedly objectionable”; however, Ishmael changes his mind after Coffin informs him that the harpooner is a “dark complexioned chap” (28). Aghast at the prospect of sharing a bed with a man of a different race, Ishmael’s protestations are laced with homosexual anxiety: “No man prefers to sleep two in a bed. ... [Y]ou would a good deal rather not sleep with your own brother” (29). However, after a mildly comical scene in which he and a doddering Peter Coffin attempt and fail to fashion a makeshift bed out of two uneven benches, Ishmael relents and decides to take his chances with the harpooner, declaring: “I’ll have a good look at him ... perhaps we may become jolly good bedfellows after all—there’s no telling” (31).

The “dark-complexioned” harpooner in question is Queequeg, a tattooed native of an uncharted island in the South Pacific who peddles shrunken heads on the streets of New Bedford, sports a stovepipe hat, shaves with his harpoon, and wields a tomahawk that doubles as a pipe. He also, it seems, is a cannibal. Ishmael is initially reluctant to share his bed with the “abominable savage” (34) but has a change of heart when he notices that Queequeg is “on the

whole a clean, comely looking cannibal” (36). Remarking that is better to “sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian,” Ishmael turns in and wakes up the following morning with “Queequeg’s arm thrown over [him] in the most affectionate and loving manner”—observing, “I never slept better in my life” (36).

To further add to the homoerotic subtext of this episode, the language in which Ishmael relates his tryst with Queequeg is rife with marital imagery. The bed they share just so happens to be the innkeeper’s marriage bed: “[I]t’s a nice bed,” Coffin assures Ishmael; “Sal and me slept in that ere bed the night we were spliced” (32). Ishmael, upon waking to find Queequeg hugging him in a “bridegroom clasp,” remarks, “You had almost thought I had been his wife” and muses, in language evoking the solemnity of a wedding vow, that “naught but death should part us twain” (38). The two even manage to symbolically conceive a child: “Throwing aside the counterpane,” relates Ishmael, “there lay the tomahawk sleeping by the savage’s side, as if it were a hatchet-faced baby” (38). Ishmael, understandably flustered at waking to find himself in such an uncompromising position, struggles half-heartedly to escape from Queequeg’s embrace and rebukes him for “hugging a fellow male in that matrimonial sort of style,” yet he cannot help but stare at Queequeg from the bed while the latter dresses, remarking, “[F]or the time my curiosity [got] the better of my breeding” (38). The use of the marriage-based metaphor throughout these events implies a burgeoning atmosphere of physical intimacy and attraction.

Nestled within this touching scene of queer domesticity is Ishmael’s unsettling account of what appears to be a scene of childhood trauma. Shortly after waking up, Ishmael, stirred by the “strange sensations” (37) that Queequeg’s “bridegroom clasp” (38) arouses within him, recalls a boyhood memory in which he is sent to bed early by his stepmother as punishment for “trying to

crawl up the chimney, as [he] had seen a little sweep do a few days previous” (37). He wakes up hours later to find his hand held by a “nameless, unimaginable, silent form or phantom ... closely seated by [his] bedside” (37). Ishmael describes the aftermath of this scene in vivid language:

For what seemed like ages piled upon ages, I lay there frozen with the most awful fears, not daring to drag away my hand .... I knew not how this consciousness at last glided away from me; but waking in the morning, I shudderingly remembered it all, and for days and weeks and months afterwards I lost myself in confounding attempts to explain the mystery. (37-38)

Ishmael leaves the particulars of what transpires during this scene deliberately unclear, but the implication is that he has either perpetrated or become the victim of some sort of sexual transgression. The exact nature of this transgression is ambiguous. One possibility is that Ishmael has caught himself masturbating in his sleep, in which case the “supernatural hand” (37) can be interpreted as a euphemism for his own penis. Tormented with guilt at having committed such a grievous violation of the Christian religious code, Ishmael represses and modifies this memory and mentally substitutes his penis with a “hand” as a coping mechanism. Another possibility is that Ishmael experiences some form of sexual assault, perhaps at the hands of his stepmother, who already has a history of abusive behavior.

Regardless of which interpretation one chooses, it is evident that his night with Queequeg has had a profound effect on Ishmael’s psyche. Robert K. Martin argues that Ishmael’s “[e]ntering [Queequeg’s] bed, and perhaps even his body, recalls [his] primal crime—only to exorcise the fear through the realization that the night with Queequeg gives rise to no crime” (Martin 78). Ishmael’s narration corroborates this assertion: “Now take away the awful fear,” he

muses, “and my sensations at feeling the supernatural hand in mine were very similar ... to those which I experienced on waking up and seeing Queequeg’s pagan arm thrown round me” (Melville 38). Something in Queequeg’s “bridegroom clasp” has altered Ishmael fundamentally, perhaps even irrevocably.

At the center of Ishmael and Queequeg’s narrative is Father Mapple’s sermon, which follows their first night of “lovemaking.” According to nineteenth-century standards, Mapple is a decidedly unconventional minister. He emphasizes storytelling over morality, rarely mentions hellfire, and, much like his inspiration, the then-famous Boston sailor-preacher Father Edward Thompson Taylor, Mapple connects with his audience by mingling nautical terms and figures in his discourses. At the heart of his sermon is a familiar message of self-abnegation: “And if we obey God, we must disobey ourselves; and it is this disobeying ourselves, wherein the hardness of obeying God consists” (49). This is a sentiment that will no doubt be familiar to many queer people, raised in religious households, who have been lectured time and again on the dangers of “acting on their desires”. However, despite Mapple’s unconventionality as a minister, the form and delivery of Mapple’s sermon is in keeping with the protocol of the Christian tradition. The congregation of the whaleman’s chapel does not actively create meaning from scripture but rather passively receives Mapple’s interpretation of the Word, which alone receives the designation of “Truth.” As an ordained minister, Mapple is licensed to act as a representative and mouthpiece for God, and it is through Mapple’s body that the congregation receives His commandments. In Ishmael’s words, “the pulpit leads the world” (47). Thus, Melville’s portrayal of Christianity is both phallogentric and distinctly heterocentric in that the congregation plays the role of the submissive female who, through Mapple, receives the Word of God, the dominant

male. Ishmael even invokes phallic imagery when he likens the minister's pulpit to the prow of a ship. And like the heterosexual pairing, the theology of the Christian church, represented by Mapple, has become encumbered by traditions, ceremonies, and rituals, and consequently has lost a good deal of its immediacy in the process.

Queequeg's benign animism is the antithesis of the phallogentric Christianity observed in Mapple's sermon. The former's brand of worship is introspective whereas the latter's is performative, corporeal whereas Mapple's is abstract, and wordless whereas Mapple's is discursive. And while Mapple's God is fixed and immutable, Queequeg shapes his God as he sees fit, represented by his "gently whittling away at his [idol's] nose" (54). In a pivotal scene following the Mapple chapter, Ishmael turns his back on his Presbyterian inheritance and embraces Queequeg's religion. Ishmael's embracing of Queequeg, sublimated through his rejection of phallogentric Christianity in favor of Queequeg's pagan idolatry, has a revitalizing effect. "I began to be sensible of strange feelings," he remarks in language that echoes the "strange sensations" he experiences upon waking that morning to find himself in Queequeg's arms. He continues, "I felt a melting within me. No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world. This soothing savage had redeemed it" (56). Ishmael has finally left the desert; by rejecting the self-sacrificing, dominant-submissive model of Christianity for Queequeg's sensual, egalitarian animism, Ishmael has ceased living in hostility toward his brothers and has become one half of "a cosy, loving pair" (57). The symbolic centerpiece of this episode is Queequeg's tomahawk, which is converted into a pipe with which Ishmael and Queequeg take turns smoking. In this way, a phallic weapon that previously connoted brutality and violence is transfigured into a symbol of peace and companionship.

According to Martin, the tomahawk “signals [Queequeg’s] role as the bearer of Eros liberated from [the] phallic aggression” of normative male heterosexuality “and thus free to engage in homosexual play” (79).

Now that Ishmael has submitted to Queequeg, their marriage ceremony is finally allowed to be complete: “[W]hen our smoke was over, he pressed his forehead to mine, clasped me around the waist, and said that henceforth we were married; meaning, in his country’s phrase, that we were bosom-friends; he would gladly die for me, if need should be” (Melville 57). Thus, “Ishmael the Presbyterian is joined to Queequeg the pagan, the New Englander to the South Sea Islander, the white to the dark, the head to the heart and body” (Martin 78). For Martin, “Ishmael’s ability to embrace Queequeg, and to overcome his own feelings of fear and disgust, show his worthiness to undertake the journey on the *Pequod*” (77), which will prove equally transformative.

Melville’s *Pequod* is an Eden without an Eve—an all-male utopia composed of motherless sons and husbands who, like Ahab, “widowed” (405) their wives when they married them. The feminine dares not encroach upon it, with the lone exception of Captain Bildad’s pious sister Charity (referred to as “Aunt” Charity, for reasons unknown), who briefly comes aboard the ship before it leaves port to distribute hymnals and advocate temperance. Here, embodied in Aunt Charity’s rheumatic frame, are two forces—religion and femininity—that historically have acted as some of the prime motivators for the subjugation and repression of masculine same-sex love. The list of injustices committed against queer men (and women) in the name of organized religion hardly needs to be recounted here, while the fear of femininity and the stigma attached to men who possess feminine characteristics have long inhibited expression

of masculine affection, both platonic and sexual. Tellingly, Aunt Charity's meddling is not well-received. The second mate, Stubb, in particular, does not take kindly to her covert attempt to induce sobriety in the ship's crew by persuading the steward to substitute spirits with ginger-water. It does not take Melville long, however, to eliminate Aunt Charity's noxious presence once her comic potential is exhausted, and the *Pequod*, unencumbered by any lingering vestiges of femininity, sets sail shortly after her departure, restored once again to all its manly glory.

Aunt Charity's role is small, but she nevertheless is significant in that she is one of only two female characters in Melville's novel. The other is Mrs. Hussey, a farcical parody of a New England housewife who, similar to Aunt Charity, exists for little more than comic relief. Two other unnamed women—Ahab's and Starbuck's wives—are fleetingly mentioned but never physically appear. Women, for all their virtues, are foreigners in the red-blooded world of the *Pequod*, simply for the fact that they are incompatible with its utopian vision.

The apotheosis of this vision occurs in the novel's ninety-fourth chapter, "A Squeeze of the Hand." Ishmael is tasked with squeezing the congealed globules of spermaceti, gleaned from a recently-caught sperm whale, back into oil. As the globules "richly [break] to [Ishmael's] fingers and [discharge] all their opulence, like fully ripe grapes their wine," he is overcome by "an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling" (323). In that moment, Ishmael muses, "I forgot all about our horrible oath; in that inexpressible sperm, I washed my hands and my heart of it" and "felt divinely free from all ill-will, or petulance, or malice, of any sort whatsoever" (322). Before long, Ishmael, caught up in the moment, finds himself "unwittingly squeezing his co-laborers' hands in [the spermaceti], mistaking their hands for the gentle globules" (322) and

looking up into their eyes sentimentally; as much as to say,—Oh! my dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill humor or envy! Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness. (323)

“This,” asserts Camille Paglia, “is Melville’s real heaven, an all-male platoon, each with his hand in someone else’s pocket” (699). “A Squeeze of the Hand” is Melville’s queer manifesto, a shameless celebration of male sexuality, communicated by way of that familiar tool of the queer artist: the metaphor—in this case, in the shared act of squeezing spermaceti.

As “A Squeeze of the Hand” attests, Ishmael does not shy away from the realities of the male body. *Moby-Dick* is peppered with bawdy allusions to male anatomy. The phallic joke, in particular, is one of Ishmael’s favorite rhetorical devices, and critic Robert Shulman contends that Ishmael employs these seemingly random witticisms “to satirize conventional religious, economic, and social values” (179) and to mock “the hypocritical, basically immoral code of the respectable community” (182). For example, Ishmael seeks to explain the whaling phenomenon that is the law of “fast-fish” and “loose-fish” by way of an analogy involving a court case in which a man takes his former wife’s lover to court on the grounds of adultery: “When a subsequent gentleman re-harpooned her, the lady then became that subsequent gentleman’s property, along with whatever harpoon might have been sticking in her” (Melville 309). Ishmael uses phallic humor, represented here by the harpoon, to highlight the absurdity of the assumption, perpetuated by institutional marriage, that women are “property” to be “claimed.” Likewise, in the chapter entitled “The Cassock,” Ishmael relates an incident aboard the *Pequod*

in which a mincer, a sailor whose job it is to finely chop pieces of blubber for the pot in the try-works, removes the skin of a sperm whale's penis, cuts "two slits for arm-holes" at the lower extremity, and proceeds to "lengthwise [slip] himself bodily into it" (325) as if it were a robe. "The mincer now stands before you," declares Ishmael, invested in the full canonicals of his calling. .... Arrayed in decent black; occupying a conspicuous pulpit; intent on bible leaves; what a candidate for an archbishoprick, what a lad for a Pope were this mincer" (325). Here, Melville, through Ishmael, "satirizes the outworn ritual of a genteel religion" and substitutes a "lifeless, orthodox ceremony" with an "unorthodox, life-giving one, which here centers on that most surprising source of life, the whale's 'grandisimus'" (Shulman 183). And in "A Squeeze of the Hand," which immediately precedes "The Cassock," Ishmael affirms a form of "Christian brotherhood," unconventional in its intimacy and sensuality, that suggests the presence of queer sexualities (Shulman 184). Thus, through Ishmael's rhetoric, the male body not only becomes something to be celebrated but a tool of subversion.

Ishmael's affirmation of the sensual is not relegated to the realm of same-sex desire. He also exalts a kind of queer heterosexuality that is radically different from the phallogocentric model of heterosexuality epitomized by Father Mapple's sermon and later by Captain Ahab's mad desire to "harpoon" the White Whale. In chapter 87, "The Grand Armada," one of the *Pequod's* whale boats inexplicably finds itself at the heart of an "enchanted calm" (302) while pursuing a "pod" (or herd) of startled whales. Here, Ishmael observes "young leviathan amours in the deep" and "the forms of the nursing mothers of the whales, and those that by their enormous girth seemed shortly to become mothers" (303). These whales represent a gentle, domestic variation of heterosexuality that emphasizes sensuality and tenderness over power and aggression, and

Ishmael contrasts the peace and tranquility of this region with the mayhem that prevails outside of it: “[T]hough surrounded by circle upon circle of consternations and affrights, ... these inscrutable creatures ... freely and fearlessly indulge[d] in all peaceful concernments; yea, serenely revelled in dalliance and delight” (303). Unfortunately, the peace is short-lived. A harpooned whale, having broken free from one of the other whale boats but still entangled in its whale-line, begins thrashing about and flinging the still-attached harpoon around, effectively “[w]ounding and murdering his own comrades” (304) and whipping the surrounding whales into a frenzy. The harpoon, a familiar symbol of male power, here becomes a destructive force that transforms this scene of domestic bliss into a whirlpool of chaos from which the crew of the *Pequod* barely escapes.

These three scenarios—the transcendent circle jerk of “A Squeeze of the Hand,” the subversive phallic puns of “Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish” and “The Cassock,” and the queer heterosexuality of “The Grand Armada”—depict an Ishmael that is remarkably more at ease with his sexuality than the greenhorn who “twitch[ed] all over” (30) at the thought of sharing a bed with another man. Through his “marriage” to Queequeg and acceptance into the queer community of the *Pequod*, Ishmael has recognized “the transformative potential of nonaggressive sexuality as manifested in male-bonding” (Martin 77) and begun the process of healing from the trauma and spiritual isolation of his youth.

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