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Leviathans Passing at Night: Anthropomorphism as Existentialism

When we think of anthropomorphism, we believe it to be a simple psychological phenomenon; some would argue that anthropomorphism is an ancient method of understanding the world. It would also appear that few would categorize anthropomorphism as a language in itself. Beyond the collection of tongues, grunts, and moans, there lies something deep and authentic in every imaginable language. Plato[[1]](#footnote-1) would call this “target” the forms. Language is expressed through the particulars to be attempted to achieve some expression in the forms. Now we should orient ourselves towards the purpose of this assignment. Herman Melville uses anthropomorphism to identity and categorize metaphysical questions, and in the midst of doing so, Melville also uses animality to further draw out the answers we all yearn for. And while some may argue that anthropomorphism is not a key factor in that act, we must remember that Melville also uses animality and anthropomorphism to bridge the gaps between language and our unconscious sublime knowledge. Melville, in his magnum opus, *Moby Dick* details the existential pursuit of life as chasing the great whale. Perhaps the greatest annoyance that will come to the surface within this paper is the constant terminology debates we have within the philosophical sphere. For all intents and purposes, we will categorize the sublime, existentialism, absurdism, transcendentalism, and the rare instances of nihilism, all as ripples of the existential branch of philosophy. This paper will serve as an analysis and exploratory companion to further discover, understand, and appreciate *Moby Dick’*s existential truths, all through the use of anthropomorphism and animality.

**The Philosophical Conundrum**

           One of the issues that this thesis has in its DNA is the constant rivalry within the academic philosophical sphere. To best describe the premise of this paper, there must be two philosophical terms used. And while the two stem from the primary metaphysics branch, both terms seem to follow different paths. The first term we must discuss is classical “existentialism.” Most famously associated with Kierkegaard, the term defined under the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) is as follows: “A philosophical movement or approach which focuses on the analysis of human existence and on individual human beings as agents freely determining by their choices what they will become.” Existentialism as a term will be used in this paper to help examine that condition of human existence whilst being engaged to the constant symbolism of the whale. The next term that we will be using is absurdism. The OED describes absurdism as the following:

“The philosophy, first propounded by Albert Camus, that human beings exist in a purposeless, chaotic universe in which attempts to find meaning are futile.” We will use this definition of absurdism to further elaborate and dissect the idea of human existence being purposeless and any attempts being rendered futile. Existentialism will be used to develop the spiritual significance of the whale alongside its physical aspects. Noting that both the spiritual and physical are linked, they will be included in neighboring sections. We will use the absurdity to further examine the actual ironical elements of the pursuit, which will tie into the existential aspects of the paper. Both terms are similar in nature, but for the sake of organization and rationality, both concepts will be addressed as existential.

Another term that we must discuss is “sublime”. A word that is difficult to capture, mostly because the sublime seems to live in too many things, thus making a concrete definition rather difficult to achieve. Once again, we consult the OED, the sublime can be defined as; “Of a feature of nature or art: that fills the mind with a sense of overwhelming grandeur or irresistible power; that inspires awe, great reverence, or other high emotion, by reason of its beauty, vastness, or grandeur.” Defining the sublime is crucial to this paper, mostly because the nature of existentialism. A greater portion of the existential experience is anchored in our senses; and the best possible way to detail the phenomenon of our senses is with the categorization of the term “sublime.” Yet, in all honesty, it seems as if that definition simply does not suffice. And in the instance that the definition fails to bring us clarity I offer the words of Barbara Glenn[[2]](#footnote-2):

It is productive of the strongest emotions the mind is capable of feeling. The sublime is associated with solitude-"death itself is scarcely an idea of more terror" (p. 43)-and with the most extreme passions and sensory experiences. The beautiful turns on pleasure, and is associated with society, with love and the social affections, with the milder passions and sensory experiences. The power of the sub- lime is superior to the power of the beautiful, and the beautiful occurs only in the absence of sublimity (Glenn 166).

Once again, to reference my claim, the use of the sublime in this paper is to argue along side Melville, to further sharpen our understandings of the sublime and it’s intended use; and most importantly to appreciate the intricate weavings of the sublime into the novel.

Lastly, the term transcendentalism is used heavily in reference to the sublime and its existential prosperities, but more importantly afford us the chance to speak about Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson is widely credited as the father, or at the very least one of the major figures of transcendentalism. Transcendentalism can be defined as, “The religio-philosophical teaching of the New England school of thought represented by Emerson and others.” Many times, throughout Moby Dick, it feels as if we as readers witness instances of transcendence between Ishmael and Ahab. Those brief instances where our senses become stairways that leave us with a higher conscious and understanding of the world that revolves around us. Emerson’s school of thought allows us to appreciate and identify those segments in the novel, those brief vignettes where the words Melville wrote no longer act as words but as fragments of a higher conscious.

**Emerson as the Cornerstone**

In this paper, my best attempt to explain how Melville uses the whale as an existential figure will be broken into several parts. The main aspect that this thesis will touch on will be how the physical aspects of the whale transcend into spiritual qualities. In other words, I will be mapping how Melville uses animality and anthropomorphism to further draw on spiritual and existential awareness. The reasoning behind this stems from Ralph Waldo Emerson. The father of transcendentalism, Emerson, often viewed the physical world (or nature) as a mirror that reflects the spiritual. Emerson also believed that through nature, there would lie remnants of something divine. David Lyttle [[3]](#footnote-3)wrote an essay titled, “Emerson’s Transcendental Individualism”, and one of the beginning quotes summarizes Emerson. Lyttle writes, “However, he meant by the "self' far more than the ego; he added: "Myself is much more than 1 know, & yet 1 know nothing else"1 This "much more than I know" was for him the "infinitude" of the individual; and this infinitude was the Universal or "God." He believed, therefore, that there is an ineffable identity of the individual and the Universal” (2). And I presume, whilst one reads this paper, you may ask yourself how or why does the physical matter so much? Especially if this thesis is oriented towards something metaphysical or “spiritual.” For concerns as previously stated, I offer this Emerson quote; “Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact” (*Nature Addresses and Lectures* 1844). Through the description of Moby Dick’s physical presence, we will examine how those physical qualities experienced through the senses transcend into spiritual consciousness. And with this newly found consciousness, we then realize the existentialistic properties that Melville has created through the animality of Moby Dick.

**Moby Dick, Ishmael, and God**

Throughout the novel, Melville makes it quite clear that Moby Dick, the great sperm whale, is not merely a whale but a messenger or fragment of the divine. Yet, everything the whale seems to be and everything the whale is all lies in relation to Ishmael. In the very beginning, Melville sets the tone with the following:

Call me Ishmael. Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen and regulating the circulation. Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people’s hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball (Melville 1).

Before we further analyze, before we dive into the depths of both the whale, the externalism, and the Emersonian beauty that this novel entails, we first must understand the significance of the name Ishmael. The name Ishmael ties itself from the start into religious rooting that will further expand itself into the blossoming of externalism and animality. As we learn from the Society for Old Testament Study, the name Ishmael refers to the following:

In the biblical story, he is the son of Abraham (born when Abraham was 86) and Hagar, his Egyptian slave girl (Gen 16:4). He is half-brother to Isaac, son of Abraham and his wife Sarah. Abandoned in the desert, Ishmael is at the point of death until an angel of God rescues him by providing water Although Ishmael is rejected as Abraham’s heir, he still receives a blessing and a promise that he will be the father of a great nation (Gen 16:10)

The name Ishmael cannot be viewed as some mere coincidence, and for the mere fact that Melville begins his novel with an introduction to our narrator, in specifically naming himself Ishmael, we must understand that Melville begins his novel with reference to religious externalism. The name Ishmael affords us, both as readers and critics, a spiritual journey; the name Ishmael holds the same weight as a name like Odysseus or Job; you cannot ignore the choice of the name. The choice of name essentially sets the tone for the rest of the novel; it sets a tone of dread, a prolonged journey that feels grey and sickly. Think of salted air, the sickness of the sea, and the loss of identity, all in the means of chasing down the largest sperm whale. Ishmael as a name creates the sense of being outcast, being lost or alone in a world, and perhaps Melville purposely creates this tone; after all, I would find it rather difficult to imagine a more isolating area than the middle of the sea, underfed, dry at the mouth. Melville creates the sense of lost identity as the precursor of meaning. Without this start, the fruits of the existential journey would not exist. Without the biblical isolating presence, this whale would simply be a whale, but if we (Melville) begin the novel with this isolating sense, then we can find meaning through the whale hunting. In layman's terms, Ishmael and Moby are the same archetypes, two strangers wandering amongst a sea of emptiness.

While one is a great leviathan that wanders underwater, the other is a man tormented by his “rainy November” soul. It cannot be by mere coincidence that both Ishmael and Moby face the same isolation, in perhaps the greater outcome; they both end up alone. Disregarding any historical context of whaling, out of all aquatic creatures, the most prevalent (or assumed to be) great sea animal is the whale in terms of biblical significance. The same creature that swallowed Jonah is now being hunted across wooden ships and coastal breeze. Inside the Book of Jonah, it states, “The LORD sent a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights. 2:1 Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the stomach of the fish” (NET Bible 16). Here we see how God uses the whale as a prop or tool to convey his wishes and demands unto the world. Now, to further preview the thesis, we must understand that Melville uses the animality of the whale to act as a form to represent something much deeper, something more spiritual, or at the very least, something God-like: “If hereafter any highly cultured, poetical nation shall lure back to their birth-right, the merry May-day gods of old; and livingly enthrone them again in the now egotistical sky; in the now un-haunted hill; then be sure, exalted to Jove’s high seat, the great Sperm Whale shall lord it. (Melville 288).” This signifies that the same whale hunted, is perhaps not a simple aquatic animal, but remnants of the divine: something so divine and daunting that we as humans can never cease to behold it for all its infinite glory.

Is that not the purpose of Ahab’s death? A man who is so bitter and driven to no ends, to finally come to face with the great whale after so long, only to be dragged by the whale into the sea? We as humans will always search for meaning, do not deny that. But - and this is Melville’s greatest message—ultimately, we never want the highway to end. To summarize Melville uses both natural symbolism and animality to point to existential ideas.

**The Habitat and the Mind**

Throughout the novel, the growing biblical consciousness that arises within Melville’s writing becomes eerily clear. But before we continue and further analyze other aspects of the novel, we first must come to terms, or better yet, come to the realization of the specific context of the whale. Firstly, what is a whale? We’ve all seen it, whether it be held captured at some Floridan sideshow or for those fortunate in the wild, but we’ve all have become accustomed to what a whale is.

The whale, or “whale-ness,” must firstly be categorized by its surroundings. The whale is considered a mammal; they have warm blood and breathe air, just like you, just like me. Yet, the vast majority of mammals, excluding those aquatic mammals, all live on land. The reason being rather obvious, we need air and so forth. Yet, it must be noted that a whale somehow both has the encryption of humanness whilst being something foreign. The thing lives underwater and let us not forget that whales do not live-in mere streams or rivers like fishes. No, whales live in deep waters, waters where neither you nor I can visit. Therefore, to firstly categorize the whale, we first must recognize it to be a leviathan of the unknown. In 2020 it was estimated that 80% of the ocean remains to be uncharted and undiscovered (NOAA).

The ocean/sea in the psychoanalytic tradition is commonly referred to as the unconscious. Carl Jung famously referenced the ocean several times in his partially autobiographical book, *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections* (1962), but one quote that stood out is as follows, “The sea is like music, it has all the dreams of the soul within itself and sounds them over. The beauty and grandeur of the sea consist in our being forced down into the fruitful bottomlands of our own psyches, where we confront and re-create ourselves in the animation of the mournful wasteland of the sea.” (Jung 369). One of the more promising articles that reference the idea of the sea acting as a method of reflection is written by Gudrum Grabher[[4]](#footnote-4). Grabher writes,

“Lewis Mumford has identified Ahab with the eternal Narcissus in man. Like Narcissus, Ahab is a seeker. He searchingly scans the waters in order to grasp the "ungraspable phantom of life." He wants to "strike through the mask" (MD p. 262) in order to regain unity with the objects of thought. Like Narcissus, Ahab is looking for his lost identity in the mirror of the sea. But neither in this task nor in grasping truth does he, or Narcissus, succeed. As long as they are observing the object, their own selves, in the waters, the duality between subject and object is not dissolved. As soon as they dive into the waters, they are annihilated. "Self-delusion is the key to both Ahab and Narcissus," says Gerard Sweeney. They are unable to strike through the mask of their own selves. They remain self-ignorant and self- deluded until they are forever united with their phantom in death. (Grabher 168).

Ironically enough the sea acts both as a mirror due to its physical nature, with layers of transparency, but metaphorically as well. And this point will eventually tie into the Derrida sector that we will discuss further on. The sea acts as a mirror of the mind, inserting itself wherever it sees fit.

The correlation between both *Moby Dick* and the mind seems to be an unwritten rule in anthropomorphism; both within and without, the whale rules something far greater than the sea. What seems to be the most interesting aspect of the sea is that it truly is something of a blank canvas. When we think of anthropomorphism, we must realize those conversations are centered around the idea that we are attributing human characteristics to animals. And perhaps this is rather confusing, but this happens in almost two layers. Firstly, both Ahab and Ishmael (mostly Ahab) obsess over the great whale; why? Partly because Ahab has lost a part of himself to the great whale. Melville writes:

That captain was Ahab. And then it was, that suddenly sweeping his sickle-shaped lower jaw beneath him, Moby Dick had reaped away Ahab’s leg, as a mower a blade of grass in the field. No turbaned Turk, no hired Venetian or Malay, could have smote him with more seeming malice. Small reason was there to doubt, then, that ever since that almost fatal encounter, Ahab had cherished a wild vindictiveness against the whale, all the more fell for that in his frantic morbidness he at last came to identify with him, not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations. (Melville 152-153).

The whale no longer becomes some prize or slab of blubber; after the mere encounter, Ahab solely becomes obsessed with the whale because he sees a part of himself bonded with the whale. That whale is no longer an animal; in reality, the whale has slowly become something much larger than that. Perhaps we can categorize the whale as a thief, an animal who stole what used to be the life of a man. The loss of the leg indicates a loss of Ahab, and through his pursuit of Moby, he solely looks for himself. Ironically this vendetta (if we may even call it that) is almost like an addiction. If Moby were to be some ethereal being, then this brief and brutal encounter between both Ahab and Moby would be like seeing or feeling the wrath of God. And while that may seem as if something we would shy away from, we must consider the loneliness of these sailors. These men sail across the sea with no true sense of meaning, seeing nothing but waves and small archipelagos of land. And this one magical whale, one that comes flesh to flesh with you, it steals something from you, it changes you. It’s almost as if Ahab’s encounter with the whale was spiritual rather than physical, doesn’t it? Ahab’s obsession is not with a physical whale but this pursuit; this pursuit is nothing short of an attempt to talk to God one last time.

Moby is not described as some whales; animals are simple creatures. And while many may argue that animals are symbiotic creatures, they are merely unable to cross the bridge of the abstract due to their lack of consciousness. So, for example, a fox is not clever, but we view them as such; a lion is not brave; we simply attribute those traits to animals. In the same chapter Moby is described as the following:

With greedy ears I learned the history of that murderous monster against whom I and all the others had taken our oaths of violence and revenge…It was hardly to be doubted, that several vessels reported to have encountered, at such or such a time, or on such or such a meridian, a Sperm Whale of uncommon magnitude and malignity, which whale, after doing great mischief to his assailants, had completely escaped them; to some minds it was not an unfair presumption, I say, that the whale in question must have been no other than Moby Dick (Melville 148).

Here we see that Moby has been given aspects that are not natural to animals, such as “greedy ears,” “murderous,” “malignity,” and “mischief.” None of these are natural characteristics. Thus, the unnatural descriptions of Moby Dick are shortly in part of the anthropomorphizing process that the boat crew has given Moby. The waters in which Moby lives seem to act as a mirror or reflective waves of water for the crew members. Ultimately, the sea or bodies of water are prevalent to Moby Dick’s characterization because the crew throughout the novel does not describe Moby Dick; what they often do is describe themselves through Moby Dick.

Interestingly enough, one of the earliest anthropomorphic theorists, John Berger, often spoke on the dialectic between animals and the psyche of animals in relation to man. In “Why Look at Animals (2009)”, Berger says the following, “Animals first entered the imagination as messengers and promises. For example, the domestication of cattle did not begin as a simple prospect of milk and meat. Cattle had magical functions, sometimes oracular, something sacrificial.” (Berger 4). Then by this very mystique, the great whale is not necessarily a vessel of blubber and meat, but Moby has now become everything the crew has wanted. Ahab wants revenge, Ishmael wants a journey, Queequeg wants answers, and little by little, the whale shifts forms from an aquatic beast into something grander. Berger further attempts to define this transformation, “the animal is distinct, and can never be confused with man. Thus, a power is ascribed to the animal, comparable with human power but never coinciding with it. The animal has secrets which, unlike the secrets of caves, mountains, seas, are specifically addressed to man.” (Berger 5). I do believe this segment of Burger helps direct us to the spirit of the whale, and perhaps this is exactly why Moby is so desired. The damn whale is desired not because of its physical properties but because the men who salivate after Moby are essentially chasing fragments of themselves. This whole voyage that spans over hundreds of pages is not for a whale; it’s for themselves. These poor men covered in filth, and sea air will go to the depths of hell to find something about themselves, not the whale. This voyage, much like Odysseus, is solely about the soul and nothing else.

Through this epic prose Melville beautifully (let us not forget that) details how the animality of the great Moby Dick acts as a spiritual experience. And all the while, this spiritual consciousness begins to create a sense of externalism once both Ishmael and Ahab begin to realize how invisible they are, both literally and figuratively, in the eyes of Moby Dick.

**The Physical and Spiritual Whale**

As previously stated under the Emersonian section, this thesis will now commence shifting into more rigorous (if you can truly consider this to be rigorous) readings of *Moby Dick*. The “Physical Whale” section is my best attempt at capturing the sheer physical presence of Moby Dick. The whale itself carries a reputation for being the largest sperm whale the ocean has seen. The three striking physical properties of the whale are its color, its anatomy, and its habitat. And, like previously mentioned, every single physical aspect ties itself into the spiritual aspects of the whale; it is for this precise reason that Moby Dick transcends both the metaphysical and physical reality it was written in. And in those instances when I use the phrase, “transcend”, I do mean in reference towards Emerson. A nod to the idea that those physical senses, experiences, and anything that relates to the “forms” are then processed. And through that processing of the mind, we are ultimately able to garnish and expand our conscious. Without any of the physical properties mentioned, the whale would lose all spiritual relevance. Take for example the idea of heights, a purely physical thing. Your senses understand it’s height, you feel the wind blow with more anger, you see the altitude, whether it be the neighboring buildings, perhaps a rising or setting sun, but your senses create space for understanding. Now, it is also through those very senses that the mind begins to process and break down the reality of the situation. Without the senses, the mind would not have the ability to shift between reality, the imagination, and the grey space where they both lie. Once the senses have worked, it is then that the mind begins to transcend the reality it finds itself in. Only with your senses does your mind begin to understand the danger of standing on top of a tall building, only through your senses does your mind begin to whirl with anxiety; only once you are facing the Manhattan skyline, or only once you are face to face with a leviathan do you begin to understand how small you are in the larger scheme of things. The physical gives the mind the ability to process and transcend simple knowledge into growth of consciousness.

**The Whitening Face**

Ironically enough, Melville dedicates a chapter to the color of the whale. In those chaotic sermons, Melville seems to ask the readers more questions regarding the color white than his answers. Melville creates this dichotomy in what many may consider in a Hegelian manner. Firstly, Melville historicizes the color white, “Though in many natural objects, whiteness refiningly enhances beauty, as if imparting some special virtue of its own, as in marbles, japonicas, and pearls; and though various nations have in some way recognised a certain royal preeminence in this hue” (Melville 156). He adds further:

having for the imperial colour the same imperial hue; and though this preeminence in it applies to the human race itself, giving the white man ideal mastership over every dusky tribe; and though, besides, all this, whiteness has been even made significant of gladness, for among the Romans a white stone marked a joyful day; and though in other mortal sympathies and symbolizings, this same hue is made the emblem of many touching, noble things—the innocence belt of wampum was the deepest pledge of honor; though in many climes, whiteness typifies the majesty of Justice in the ermine of the Judge, and contributes to the daily state of kings and queens drawn by milk-white steeds; though even in the higher mysteries of the most august religions it has been made the symbol of the divine spotlessness and power (Melville 156).

Quite clearly, here, Melville begins to categorize some properties of whiteness. Whether that be through superiority, joyfulness, or some remnants of the divine, Melville does begin to categorize white as something (for all intents and purposes) majestic.[[5]](#footnote-5) So, we know what the color white means, in specific to the relationship of the color white and its majestic properties. Yet, Melville, in Melville fashion, further elaborates, “the thought of whiteness, when divorced from more kindly associations, and coupled with any object terrible in itself, to heighten that terror to the furthest bounds.” (Melville 157).

This begins to beg the question, how or in what ways would we categorize the sperm whale? In almost an Emersonian manner, we may view the whale and the color white to be a spectacle of the divine; in the same manner, we may see a white dove or a white fox. It’s an animal, but through the color of white, it somehow gains some majestic qualities. Yet, if we were to ask the likes of Ahab, the whale wouldn’t be something majestic; it would be pale and frightening. Melville touches on the phenomenon of the pale fear, “Can we, then, by the citation of some of those instances wherein this thing of whiteness—though for the time either wholly or in great part stripped of all direct associations calculated to impart to it aught fearful, but nevertheless, is found to exert over us the same sorcery, however modified;—can we thus hope to light upon some chance clue to conduct us to the hidden cause we seek?” (Melville 160) The “pale fear” acts both as a psychological projection of the mind and the body (visually/ the eyes). Melville goes on this tangent to show the dichotomy that is Moby Dick, whom can both be some spiritually majestic or somehow terribly frightening. Perhaps this seems to fall into the grander narrative that surrounds the whale. A larger-than-life figure (literally), that somehow transforms both what we deem to only be physical with something spiritual. Again, we continue with the topic of physical attributes beyond color. We spoke briefly about the physical aspects being larger than life, almost in a transformative manner where certain physical traits go beyond the senses, but perhaps the size of the actual whale seems to be something that neither Ahab nor the whaling crew can seem to comprehend.

**The Anatomy**

It’s a common expression for us to say that the eyes are a window to the soul. As humans, when we interact, there often seems to be a constant connection between both the physical and the spiritual, whether that be through the eyes, love, affection, and so on. Yet, there once again seems to be a bridge between the senses and the spiritual that Moby Dick affords the whaling crew. Faces are something we as humans are accustomed to seeing; we see them everywhere. Regardless of masks or whatever object, the face creates a sense of understanding; the face affords us some glimpse into the mind or other forms of understanding. One of the things we simply can’t comprehend is the face of a whale. Melville begins to describe the face of the whale as the following:

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, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there’s naught beyond. But ’tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I’d strike the sun if it insulted me (Melville 136).

Melville slowly begins to develop the face of the whale in what appears to be such an odd manner. And perhaps this does not apply to the whale, but all animals, where their glares meet our eyes, and perhaps we simply cannot understand nor comprehend what stares back at us. When humans lock eyes, we can imagine what could be staring back; emotions, thoughts, reason, but when we stare back into the eyes of an animal, we can merely imagine at best. When Ahab begins to describe the face of the whale, he describes it as a “pasteboard” mask, something so plain and diluted of emotion and characteristics, something so plain it infuriates. Why? Perhaps this relates to the bare truth of animality; we project unto the animal, hoping these animals share some fraction of emotions that we share, but the truth is we simply have no clue as to whether they do or don’t. And for a man like Ahab, this whale not only has taken part of his body, but it also has taken years of his life and layers of emotions from him.

Perhaps one of the more famous instances of the nature of the “gaze” is with Derrida and his cat. In Derrida’s essay, “The Animal That Therefore I Am[[6]](#footnote-6)”, Derrida says the following:

I often ask myself, just to see, who am I – and who I am (following) at the moment when, caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of an animal, for example, the eyes of a cat, I have trouble, yes, a bad time overcoming my embarrassment. I have trouble repressing a reflex of shame. Trouble keeping silent within me a protest against the indecency. Against the impropriety that can come of finding oneself naked, one’s sex exposed, stark naked before a cat that looks at you without moving, just to see….. one might call it a kind of “animalseance”; the single, incomparable and original experience of the impropriety that would come from appearing in truth naked, in front of the insistent gaze of the animal, a benevolent or pitiless gaze, surprised and cognizant. (Derrida 4)

In my best attempt to have a conversation with Derrida, my interpretations of Derrida and his necessities for Moby Dick are as follows. Here we see a similar instance, an instance in which the gaze of an animal, an innocent animal nonetheless creates a sense of projection. Take it this way, a mirror simply reflects what’s in front, in the same manner the gaze of a simple animal reflects into the eyes of man. It is only when man sees itself being seen that we begin to view ourselves in different lighting. Why? And asking why a greater question is perhaps, a great question that I perhaps have no essence in answering, but I shall attempt anyways. When we see the blank stare, the blank look of an animal, we have no other choice but to insert our own gaze into it. It is the same manner in which we have inserted ourselves into this world. It is a desire to spread ourselves across mediums, mediums where we are nonexistent. The human spirit is bounded by the desire to exist in every landscape, and the gaze of an animal is no different.

Ironically enough, as much as Ahab would like to view himself as the superior being, he willingly considers himself a prisoner, a prisoner under the rule of Moby, hence calling himself a prisoner who needs to strike and reach through the "wall." Towards the end of the quote, we see reference again to whiteness. And whilst this subsection is more inclined towards the analysis of the anatomy of the whale, it would be foolish to ignore the reference of "whiteness." It is rather clear that Ahab sees something within the color white. This whiteness is blinding, and perhaps this is what Ahab hates the most. Whiteness is rather mirroring; there's simply nothing to look at; it's simply voided. And with such rage and anger towards the whale, we can only imagine the frustration Ahab feels when encountering the whale. Of course, the whale cannot speak; it barely sees the ship, even less the miniature humans aboard. So, when we have a man enthralled in rage, it must burn to know that your great nemesis simply cannot register you, and Ahab is well aware of the whale's ability to not understand. This burning rage towards such a creature, a creature who has no knowledge of your emotional investment, burns Ahab. The whiteness reflects off Moby, and for such a vengeful man to stare into a simple whale, to only see whiteness, it melts the mind of Ahab.

**Staring God in the Face**

Without a doubt, the strongest physical description in the novel is as follows:

Now, from this peculiar sideway position of the whale’s eyes, it is plain that he can never see an object which is exactly ahead, no more than he can one exactly astern. In a word, the position of the whale’s eyes corresponds to that of a man’s ears; and you may fancy, for yourself, how it would fare with you, did you sideways survey objects through your ears. You would find that you could only command some thirty degrees of vision in advance of the straight side-line of sight; and about thirty more behind it. If your bitterest foe were walking straight towards you, with dagger uplifted in broad day, you would not be able to see him, any more than if he were stealing upon you from behind. In a word, you would have two backs, so to speak; but, at the same time, also, two fronts (side fronts): for what is it that makes the front of a man—what, indeed, but his eyes? (Melville 274).

We come back to the face of the beast. But in this instance, we do not merely focus on the face, but his eyes. I do believe this is Melville’s finest segment, merely because Melville captures what it’s like to stare into the abyss. Through the selected quote, we see the whalers speak in the eyes of the beast. The distance between the eyes of the whale is so large, so wide, that the human world is rather invisible. Without a doubt, this is the strongest instance in which Melville transcends the whale; Melville transcends the whale into the divine.

And when I say divine, largely it has very little significance to the idea of Christian divinity, but oriented towards the divinity we see in transcendentalism or pantheism. Somewhere or something that is larger than the physical nature of life, undomesticated by the senses. Something that causes curiosity because of its grandiose nature. In the simplest sense, Melville depicts something so large, something larger than life, and with such an experience, all that is left is to question your understanding of the reality you thought you were in.

Every aspect of the world that we know of is built off our senses, yet the world we have created through our senses is not merely big enough for the leviathan. The eyes of the whale are so distant that it cannot comprehend the world in which we live. Simply put, the confines of our world are too small for the great beast. And if we were attempting to stare into the eyes of Moby, we would simply fail. Those eyes are drifted far too wide, and if we attempted to stare into the eyes, we would fail. You cannot look into the eyes of God; it simply is not possible. It is through this humbling sensory vignette that Melville categorizes just how the whale’s physicality transcends our senses and shifts our consciousness. Without knowing the eye placements, without knowing the size of the whale, without knowing any of these irrelevant features that the leviathan carries within itself, we simply would not understand how small we are. And so, the largest, the whitest, the terrifying whale that has ever lived in the water has created such consciousness that almost humiliates anyone that stands in front of it.

This segment almost acts in a sense like ego death. To you, the reader, I ask you, when was the last time you felt completely small and pathetic? When was the last time you felt absolutely irrelevant? Perhaps you felt such a way when gazing upon stars; perhaps you walked through a busy street; those feelings of existential realization are the very same Ishmael and Ahab feel awakened to when they see Moby. This encounter, this confrontation with Moby Dick, is not a whaling exposition; it's not an attempt to earn money through whaling, no, don't be mistaken; this odyssey is simply an attempt to capture God. And why you may ask? To simply make some sense of the world. Again, we relay this sentiment to the idea of consciousness; it is impossible to look Moby in the eyes, you can never look God in the face.

**Conclusion**

Through this beautifully written epic prose Melville creates a spiritual journey. With peaks and valleys, Ahab, Ishmael, and you (the reader), shall begin to understand and feel the sublime that comes with the existential awakening. An awakening that can only be brought to light through certain experiences, and luckily for us, that catalyst has been Moby Dick; the largest sperm whale that has ever been. And lastly to close off in Melville’s words, let us not forget that our very own guide Moby Dick, is perhaps the only heir to “Jove’s high seat”.

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1. See Plato’s *Republic* for further analysis on the realm of forms and the realm of particulars. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Barbara Glenn’s essay, “Melville and the Sublime in *Moby Dick*” for further analysis on the principles of the sublime in *Moby Dick*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Lyttle’s essay “Emerson's Transcendental Individualism” for further briefing on Ralph Waldo Emerson. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Gudrun Grabher’s “Adding to the Myths of Moby Dick” for further psychological analysis on Ahab and other *Moby Dick* fragments. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Hubert Dreyfus’s lecture, “Melville’s Moby Dick” for further reference and analysis on Moby Dick’s existential properties. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Derrida’s “The Animal That Therefore I Am” for an in depth reading on the animal’s gaze. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)