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Whale Oil as a Symbol for the Transition to Capitalism in *Moby Dick*

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Abstract

Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* is universally recognised as an allegory, in which characters and props are understood to represent deeper, symbolic meanings beyond themselves. Far too little attention has been given, however, to the symbolic meaning of the whale oil, which is supposed to serve as the motivating factor for the entire whaling industry. The whale oil arguably stands as a symbol for the quiet conflict between the fading agrarian world and the emerging capitalist world, which was also fought out much more violently in the American Civil War, roughly a decade after the novel was first published. Whereas the early Americans of the Protestant, pre-capitalist world understood Truth to be already fully revealed in the Bible, Ishmael's proto-postmodernist pursuit of Truth causes him to split up into three different figures who all fail to reach it: the omniscient narrator, the sailor on the Pequod, and the scientist of the Cetology chapters. This failure for Truth to be seized is reflective of the logic of capital, in which "all that is solid melts into air" in order to be reinvented.

Keywords

Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, Antebellum American Literature, American History, History of Capitalism

Herman Melville's *Moby Dick, or the Whale* is widely considered the greatest American novel ever written but continues to perplex readers due to its overt status as an allegory. Indeed, much of what has been written on *Moby Dick* since its publication has been dedicated to the task of solving the mystery regarding which deeper meaning each of the novel's symbols stands for. A particularly great emphasis has understandably been placed on the Whale itself, with some suggesting it to be fate, death, or even God. Far too little attention, however, has been given to the physical substance, which motivated the whalers to undertake the long and dangerous journey across the globe in the first place: the whale oil. Whale oil arguably functions as a symbol for the major historical transition that was underway in Melville's time: the transition to full-blown capitalism. Ironically, this transition ultimately devalued whale oil itself by replacing it with the "oil" better known today as petroleum.

The novel's publication date of 1851 set it right in the middle of the turbulent era of American History just before the breakout of the Civil War, roughly a decade later. Above all, the Civil War broke out into horrific violence, because no political solution could be found to mediate the irresolvable tensions between the very different economic systems upon which the North and South depended (McPherson 174).

It is well known that the agrarian plantation economies of the antebellum American South remained in a pre-capitalist state of development for most of the 19th century (Keegan 22). Whereas the North pursued industrial modernization (protected by tariffs) in order to sell manufactured products to domestic consumers (McPherson 29), the South remained committed to the archaic paradigm of exporting huge quantities of raw materials, such as cotton and tobacco, to foreign customers in Europe in order to raise the cash to pay for imported manufactured products from those same European nations (39) or from the industrialized states in the North (McPherson 91). Under such conditions, the American South had no incentive to develop a capitalistic, industrial economy, but instead remained in a state of technological backwardness so profound that at the time of the American Civil War, the South had no unified railroad system but instead operated a number of different short, ad-hoc lines (often constructed with differently sized tracks that could not be joined together) that served as nothing more than a means to an end to transport bulk shipments of cash crops from the rural hinterlands to a handful of port cities along the coast (Keegan 86-7).

In stark contrast, the North had been rapidly industrializing for decades, as a result of innovations, such as the construction of canals that reduced the time and cost to transport goods deep within the continent. As James McPherson noted, “Most American roads [in the early 19th century] were rutted dirt paths all but impassable in wet weather. The cost of transporting a ton of goods thirty miles inland from an American port equalled the cost of carrying the same goods across the Atlantic” (11). Despite the fact that Cincinnati, Ohio and New York City are relatively close to one another, the only economically viable way to transport goods from the former to the latter was to send them by river all the way down to New Orleans in the southwest, and then load them onto a ship all the way back to New York City on the Atlantic Ocean in the northeast. Even under the best of conditions, this would require “a trip of at least seven weeks” (11). As early as 1815, this suddenly changed due to a transportation revolution, in which “the Erie Canal” succeeded in “linking New York City to the Northwest by water and setting off a frenzy of construction that produced 3,700 miles of canals by 1850”. By 1860, America had more railroad than the rest of the world combined, but most of this was concentrated in the North, with Chicago alone serving as the terminus for 15 different rail lines (12).

Although the South attempted to maintain its status as a pre-modern, agrarian kingdom through literally fighting for it in the bloodiest war in American History, its outdated economic philosophy was already doomed from the start to be inevitably replaced by the industrial arrangements of capitalism that had already taken over the North. *Moby Dick*’s own context as a novel written some ten years before the Civil War allowed it to dramatize this same conflict between the old world and the new world, but in a form so subtle as to escape detection to most readers. While most readers tend to get consumed in the overt conflict between Captain Ahab and the Whale, they risk missing another much subtler and quieter conflict unfolding in the background: the transition from a pre-modern world to one fully immersed in capitalism. Coincidentally, this shift would ultimately be represented by two different kinds of oil.

Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* provides a uniquely fascinating example of a 19th century text about this transition from the agrarian to the capitalist worldview, because although it is a novel which is "all about oil," it is situated sufficiently far back in the past for the "oil" in question to still refer to the older, pre-fossil fuel meaning of that term. As crew members on a whaling ship, the narrator Ishmael and his comrades aboard the Pequod are portrayed as being willing to sail to the very ends of the Earth in pursuit of the "whale oil" used to light lamps in the era before the invention of the light bulb. Ironically, much of the economic demand for whale oil was driven by a circular logic, which will seem quite humorous in retrospect. A good deal of the whale oil was used as fuel for lighthouses situated along the coasts, which in turn were largely needed to enable the industry of whaling to go on by providing light to help its ships navigate the vast waters of the world's three main oceans.

In this sense, whale oil already exhibits the perverse logic of capital that would be observed by Karl Marx: just as one acquires more whale oil for the recursive purpose of gaining more whale oil, one acquires more capital for the sake of acquiring more capital. As Michael Heinrich explained in his *Introduction to the Three Volumes of Marx's Capital*, the most meaningful economic difference between traditional and modern societies is the following. In pre-modern societies, if an excess of material wealth were produced by slave labour, it would usually be consumed right away for the enjoyment of the elites, such as in lavish banquets or various forms of entertainment, such as chariot races, gladiator fights, festivals, or theatrical performances (15). Only in exceptional cases was that excess directly invested back into the feedback loop of enlarging the means of exploitation themselves, such as in spending gold to buy more human slaves. In capitalism, however, the latter is no longer the exception: it is the norm to immediately reinvest any surpluses of wealth back into enlarging the economic base in order to produce even more wealth. This circular movement goes on in a never-ending cycle that can no longer even be subordinated to the elites' pathological desire for consumeristic satisfaction (16). In Richard Heinberg's 2011 book *The End of Growth*, he explained Marx's view of capital quite succinctly: capital is not just wealth but "wealth . . . that has been set aside for [the] production of more wealth" (37). So too, whale oil is oil that has been set aside for the attainment of more whale oil.

On the other hand, the whale oil also enjoys some common ground with the older agrarian world that would soon be displaced by global capitalism. The Pequod's voyage was limited to the closed sphere of the Earth, because the rather modest amount of energy returned by burning whale oil did not yet make it possible for one to reasonably plan for the kind of open-ended space exploration which would later come to be taken for granted in the following century. The Pequod's circular journey around the globe is, however, a very strange kind of journey, because it only succeeds in manifesting the paradoxes inherent in Man's search for Truth in a proto-postmodernist world. The irony about Ishmael's trip to "see the world" is that it reveals that world to mostly consist of water rather than dry land, revealing the term "Earth" itself to be something of a misnomer (Melville 27). This water, however, is a very unusual substance, because no matter how much of it one might traverse, if one were to gaze into it, one would still find the same redundant image appear over and over again. No matter how many miles one had travelled away from home,

one would still find only oneself reflected back in the water, which is more like an elusive mirror displaying completely subjective illusions than a transparent window revealing all of Nature's secrets: "as everyone knows, meditation and water are wedded forever" (28). For this reason, Melville explicitly mentions Narcissus near the beginning of the novel when discussing the danger that one's pursuit of truth might morph into a suicidal encounter with death: "And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life" (29).

This return of the pagan archetype of Narcissus calls into question the comforting certainties of early American life. To the Protestant Americans of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, it was a given that the Truth did not need to be sought out in a reckless journey across the world, because it had already been preserved in its entirety in a single book called the Bible (in English translation). Melville's Ishmael found by his era, however, that the Truth had suddenly become far more complicated. Melville scholars have long noted that this disruption of the traditional notion of Truth is personified in the novel as a subtle conflict between the Calvinist pastor "Father Mapple" and the congregation of whalemens who attend his sermon before departing for the sea in the eighth chapter, titled "The Pulpit" (Herbert 5). This "pulpit" was memorably portrayed as being situated far above the ground level where the congregants sat in their pews, in accord with the pastor's certainty in the older social distinctions that were quietly dissolving as Melville wrote these very pages (Melville 68). At that time, the traditional social hierarchies that privileged clergymen as universally respected figures of authority and knowledge were already giving way to a secularized worldview, in which scientists would gain a monopoly over claims to know the Truth and meddling government bureaucrats would seize the power to regulate the population's behaviour on moralistic grounds.

Yet the novel does not only contrast Father Mapple's dogmatic view of truth with the scientific rationalism and political liberalism of the coming modernized West, for the main character whose views are contrasted with those of the pastor is Ishmael's friend Queequeg, a mysterious "savage" and "cannibal" from a "primitive" cultural background on a remote island (38). Father Mapple rests assured that the Truth is already complete, because it is all contained within the physical limits of a book called the Bible, which he himself did not write and has no freedom to change. Queequeg's personal god is a little wooden idol which also fits within the compact physical limits of his hand but interestingly contains strange new kinds of limits that are open to constant change (48). Queequeg is portrayed as taking a little whittling knife to the wooden idol whenever he has free time in order to modify his personal god to be more and more in accord with his own evolving ideas of the truth. For this reason, the narrator described Queequeg himself as "a creature in the transition state" (55). Nor does Queequeg ever claim that his god is the only god or that his truth is the only truth, for this open-endedness and acceptance of change within the ever-evolving limits of a finite object is a strange precursor to the logic of capital, which dissolves all national and cultural boundaries to make itself adaptable to all social contexts.

Father Mapple's beliefs representing the fading Agrarian Worldview were also contrasted with Ishmael's attempts to conquer the Whale, which cause him to split up into three different figures who pursue the more modern paths of open-ended linear exploration over the older model of repeating cycles and pre-established certainties. Melville scholars have long noted that "Ishmael" is actually three characters in one, for in addition to being the narrator who announces himself from the first words of the novel ("Call me Ishmael")(27), he is also just another sailor on the Pequod (101), as well as the mysterious cetologist who devotes entire chapters of the book to lengthy discussions of whales based entirely upon the modern standpoint of natural science (169). Despite pursuing the three paths of omniscient narration, physical travel around the world, and the modern science of Cetology, all three of these Ishmaels fail to conquer the Whale, because despite using methods which would seem to be the most up to date, the Truth continues to slip away. Truth, like "all that is solid" under capitalism, "melts into air" in order to be reinvented again and again (Marx and Engels 16).

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