

English 1102

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### Non-Traditional Narrative Elements in *Moby Dick*

In *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville often deviates from the traditional narrative format. For example, one might turn to any given page within the book and believe that they are reading an encyclopedia or a Shakespearean play. In addition, the subject matter of the chapters isn't always based on the main plot. Sometimes, Melville interjects certain passages that have very little to do with the main plotline, catching the infamous white whale that is Moby Dick. To this point, some critics believe that Melville's use of these different forms and subjects is a distraction from the main narrative. They argue that the book would be better off without these seemingly random additions of non-plot or non-narrative material. However, these additions, in fact, do provide meaningful information to the reader in ways that enhance rather than degrade the central narrative. In fact, while some claim that Herman Melville's use of non-plot related material takes away from the true story, it provides a more thorough understanding of the story and a stronger connection with the characters. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WabT1L-nN-E>. For example, if one were to click on this link and close their eyes, they'd feel like they were on the boat with Ishmael. A similar effect is achieved by the aspects of drama, cetology, and whaling within the book.

Throughout *Moby Dick*, drama is an effective tool for characterization within the story, giving the reader valuable insight into the characters. One of the most common aspects of drama

that Melville employs is that of the soliloquy, specifically that of the Shakespearean soliloquy such as in famous plays like *Macbeth*. One notable example of Melville's use of the soliloquy is that in Chapter 37, "Sunset", where Ahab displays a different side of his character that the reader had not previously seen before. Before his soliloquy, Ahab was portrayed as apathetic, a form of authority since he was the "Khan of the plank, and a king of the sea,... great lord of Leviathans" (Melville 107). Since the narrative form is limited to Ishmael's point of view, the narrative form might have not been able to efficiently display a side of Ahab that is anything but his outward appearance, what he wants the crew to see him as. However, through the soliloquy, we are able to see Ahab's inner thought process as he gives "a great speech of resolution," one in which he "clamps down upon [his] weakness of self" (Vogel 243). Indeed, the use of the dramatic form gives the reader a deeper insight into Ahab's character. The reader is able to better understand how the whale is his motive and makes him feel and what his emotions and thoughts towards his crewmates are.

In addition, Pip is a character that Melville uses for dramatization. Pip is a character who leaps out of the boat when the whale hits the boat, and, thus, is a portrayal of fear. When he gives his speech about the "big white God," he gives "the curtain speech of the act"(Vogel 244). He uses the characteristic of a curtain speech to define the "catalyst of conflict of character-fear"(Vogel 244), that fear being that of losing one's life to the sea that is so commonly held by each member of the crew. This curtain speech establishes the totality of this fear and gives the reader insight into the main fear of the characters. In addition, Chapter 40 is particularly similar to that of a play; it includes the roles of who is saying each phrase and where they are from. In this way, it establishes the international background of the crew, highlighting



each crew member. It gives the reader information about the crew that might have been difficult or awkward to portray in the form of the traditional narrative. Certainly, it would have been more difficult to incorporate dialogue from so many of the characters in a narrative form instead of a play form. This information about the characters is unique to the perspective of drama. If, instead, Melville was to stay in the narrative form and within Ishmael's perspective, these insights would have been lost. The form of drama is better suited to display information about the characters and different viewpoints than a narrative is. In this manner, the dramatic elements are an effective method of evoking emotion and characterization.

While Melville would stray from the narrative form with his use of dramatic elements, he also strayed away from the main storyline in order to discuss the importance and intricacies of cetology. One of the most significant chapters to discuss cetology was the aptly named chapter "Cetology". Many critics and readers of *Moby Dick* believed these chapters about cetology to be an "incongruous blend of formal exposition and traditional narration," finding it difficult to accept this unique use of nonfiction (Ward 164). These chapters give the reader the "effect of a long voyage" despite "the obvious fact that very little happens when on a whaling journey" (Ward 168). This gives the reader a more realistic sense of the story, "lending verisimilitude to the story" (Hilbert 825). As the reader is educated about cetology, the monotony and mindset of the whalers becomes more and more apparent. As the story mimics nonfiction, the reader begins to associate what is happening in the book with nonfiction, making the narrative seem more realistic. In addition to giving a more realistic sense of the dreadfulness and monotony of the journey, it also lends to Ishmael's characterization. It displays his values in education and his background such as displaying his knowledge of whaling or his childlike tendency to daydream

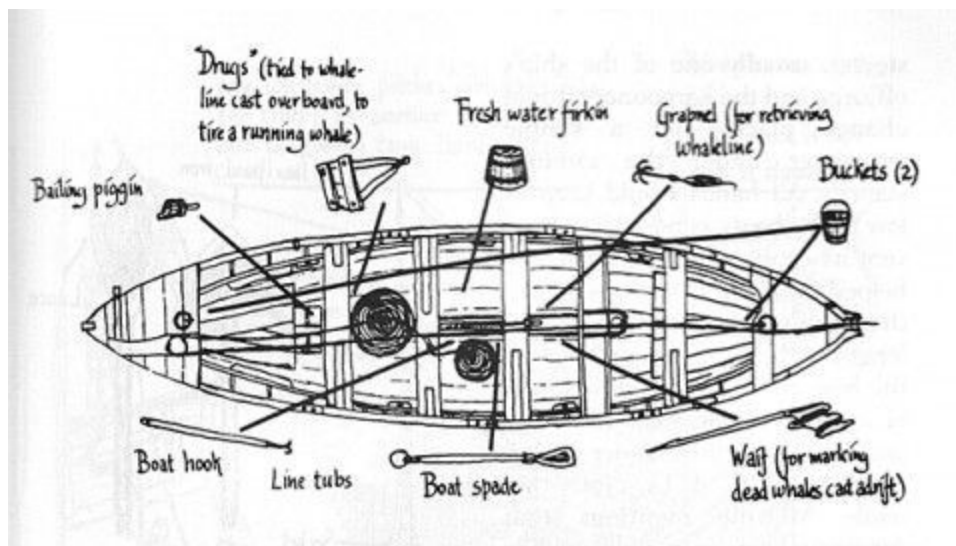
(Hilbert 825). While most narratives would forgo this information as it is unrelated to the plot, this addition leads the reader to better understand who Ishmael is. On a simpler level, the expository information provides crucial context to the reader about the story. Without this information, it is likely the reader would be left confused by the whaling jargon (Ward 168). One such example where the cetology gives crucial context to the story is when Tashtego falls into the head of the whale; the chapter before describes the anatomical and dimensional structure of the whale's head which allows the reader to visualize Tashtego's fall. In this way, the information from the nonfiction and the narrative work together to convey a clearer message to the reader (Ward 169).



The cetology in the book also gives the reader a familiarity with the whale, specifically the sperm whale, that wouldn't have come without such descriptions. For example, by the end of Chapter 32, the reader already has a visual image of the whale, one of the "largest inhabitants of the world" and that of an "Anvil-Headed Whale" (Melville 112). The analysis of the anatomical structures, social tendencies, eating habits and more makes the whale more comprehensible and understandable from the reader's point of view (Ward 170). This familiarity of the whale contrasts that of the mythical and fantastic nature associated with the whale, providing a larger, more developed view of it. Like that of the monotony of the journey, Melville's description of the whale drags it into the reader's world and makes the narrative seem that much more real. This connection and perspective of the narrative are unique to the combination of nonfiction and fiction. This analysis of the whale exists on social, physical, biological, and other different types of levels, developing the "whale as a frame of reference for the man" (Ward 171). In fact, there are several similarities between Ishmael's situation and that of a whale that this cetology chapter

points out. For example, as “evil is present in the world... the sharks snap about the whale” (Ward 171). This meaningful analogy between the whale and humankind is produced by this cetological chapter, adding to the narrative by providing a different perspective than would have normally been presented. While the whale might have been reserved to the archetypal antagonist in the story, the nonfiction creates this analogy and adds a different perspective of the whale that enriches the narrative. Thus, the cetological elements of *Moby Dick* are effective tools that Melville uses to enhance the main narrative.

In addition to the material about whales giving the reader information, the material about the craft of whaling gives the reader a perspective that would not have been possible otherwise. One such example, several versions of *Moby Dick* provide illustrations of several aspects of whaling itself. For example, this image details what the Pequod, the ship that Ishmael is on, look likes. While not relevant and necessary to the typical structure of a narrative, this image provides



great detail and context to Ishmael’s situation. It provides the reader with a view of what his life would be like, what it visually looked like. This is quite

fundamentally impossible with the typical structure of a narrative. Thus, this atypical methodology of providing information about whaling enhances the narrative well. While

Melville did not himself add the image, the editor added it as he/she felt it enhanced the narrative for the detail and context it provides to the readers and as it improved the narrative overall. His desire to use this aspect of nonfiction to provide the reader with a visual image of Ishmael's world displays nonfiction's value in improving the narrative. Also, the chapters in *Moby Dick* from around Chapter 75 to 100 detail in great length what the life of a whaler consists of, giving the reader a far more involved look into the lives of Ishmael and company. For example, the chapter "The Battering Ram" prepares "the reader to accept the power and apparent malignity of *Moby Dick*" which will seal the fate of Pequod, an unfortunate but possible part of whaling (Ward 174). This physical description of the risks that whalers undergo gives the reader the sense of fear and apprehension that many whalers live with constantly. This allows the reader to not only acknowledge the emotions of the characters but also empathize, as they can translate the characters' fears into their own life since it is nonfiction and more accurately portrays life. In this way, the nonfiction chapters about whaling in *Moby Dick* translate the emotions and ideas of Ishmael's world into the world of the reader, giving them a deeper and more intimate connection with the characters themselves.

In addition, the whaling chapters also give the reader a more personal understanding of Melville's personal views. Their venture into the real world allows for Melville to incorporate his philosophies and convey them to the reader. For example, the chapter of the "Mast Head" displays the monotony and troubles that manning the mast and looking for whales can have. While Melville displays the issues that Ishmael has with being on the masthead, he displays his views and "ridicules the subjectivism of transcendentalism" as it causes him to "mistake the appearance of things for the truth of things" (Ward 178-179). He does this by illustrating how



Ishmael's dreams while on top of the masthead distract him from the realistic world. In this manner, Melville cleverly integrates his personal views with the story. This deeper familiarity with the author contrasts the alienated position that he would have held if he had stuck to the traditional narrative style. In this manner, the chapters about whaling give the reader a view that supplements the main narrative elements.

These non-narrative elements of drama, cetology, and whaling give the reader a valuable understanding and connection with the story that acts to supplement the more traditional narrative elements. In this way, Melville can "represent both the materialist view through the familiar form of a veritable record and the idealist or visionary view through more figurative language" (Post-Lauria 306). This combination of forms provides the readers with a connection with the characters and author. It also "urges the modern reader to consider this matter of mixed form ... in every light" (Post-Lauria 316). Thus, these aspects of the book are valuable inclusions; to do without them would take from the meaning and journey of the book itself.

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