

# **“We account the whale immortal in his species, however perishable in his individuality” An Exploration of Social Knowledge in Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick***

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Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick, or, The Whale* is a book about ways of knowing. The authority of experience is front and centre: the author had been to sea and several times and had seen great whales close up, and his novel places the reader in a whaleboat within reach of a whale’s powerful flukes. But *Moby Dick* opens with a long list of quotations, “higgledy-piggledy whale statements,” giving the reader fair warning that the author’s reading will be as important as his whaling. Bookish science blends with the practical knowledge of men whose job is to transform whales into a valuable commodity. Ellen Jamieson compares the collective, cultural knowledge of whalers to the behaviour, and culture, of whales, exploring the analogies, in some cases very deliberate, that Melville constructs. She concludes: “Perhaps by showing both the whales and the men as social units in their respective species, and subsequently depicting their interspecific interactions and responses to each other, Melville is anticipating an environmentalist claim about the importance of preserving the diversity of the natural world to the maximization of various forms of knowledge.”

—Dr. Bruce Greenfield

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**H**erman Melville’s novel *Moby-Dick* is well-known for being about a whale; however, the extent to which Melville dissects the whale both symbolically and physically cannot be understood without analysing the scientific content of the novel. Contrary to what the title suggests, *Moby Dick* is not the sole whale in the novel, or even the primary character. Indeed, Melville offers a detailed survey of the sperm

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whale as a species as well as the cetacean order as a whole, not to mention the inclusion of encounters with other marine animals such as the giant squid and the large groups of sharks. The scientific language and detailed descriptions of the natural history of whales seemingly contradict the philosophical questions of representation that the novel presents. This is a conflict between the objectivity of science and the subjectivity of significance and representation. Melville's examination of the natural history of whales, in terms of social behaviour, demonstrates the different approaches to knowledge that are often in conflict in this novel.

Melville establishes parallels between the complex social structures of humans, specifically the men on the *Pequod*, with the social and behavioural complexity of whales. Melville's anthropomorphic way of describing whales, and particularly *Moby Dick*, complicates the reader's view of Ahab's quest and the whaling industry in general, as one begins to sympathize with the whales and see them as ethical agents in themselves. In "How Is It Then with the Whale?: Using Scientific Data to Explore Textual Embodiment," Jennifer Calkins states:

The other animal in literature often plays one or both of two primary roles: it 'substitutes for human beings', and/or 'the other against which the human is constituted'. A third role for the animal other, a third way of reading this other, is that of her particular

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self...created through keen observation of the sensory, cognitive, and behavioral world of the species group within which that animal other is contained. (32)

Whales play all three of these roles in the novel: as anthropomorphized beings, as Ahab's antagonist, and also as specimens under scientific observation. There is a particular emphasis on the "species group," as individual whales, in this case Moby Dick, are only understood by observing the collective species. An examination of the parallels between the complex community of the *Pequod* and the social and behavioural intricacies of whales emphasizes the social nature of knowledge. Melville's descriptions of whale sociality, which are mirrored by the interactions of the crew, present concepts of cultural, moral, and empirical knowledge.

Cultural knowledge, as a result of social interactions, is depicted in both the whale groups and the men of the novel. The *Pequod* is a mosaic of different cultures, in terms of race, religion, and nationality. However, the ship is unified by the overarching whaling culture that comes to define the men's lives at sea. This whaling culture represents a unique form of knowledge, as Ishmael describes the techniques and terminology involved in the industry. The social knowledge of whaling is epitomized in the Gam: "A social meeting of two (or more) Whale-ships" wherein passing ships "exchange the whaling news, and have an agreeable

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chat” (Melville 198; 197). These Gams represent a form of social learning and intraspecific interaction that is further depicted by the group of sperm whales in Chapter 87, “The Grand Armada.” In his studies on sperm whales, Hal Whitehead explains that his “initial approach when looking for sperm whale culture was to examine the behavior of different sperm whale social units, looking for elements that are consistent over time” (27). This type of habitual cultural behaviour is observed both in the Gam tradition as well as in the migratory and behavioural displays of the whales. Melville makes direct parallels between whales and humans when describing the sharing of social knowledge that occurs in group living:

Had these leviathans been but a flock of simple sheep, pursued over the pasture by three fierce wolves, they could not possibly have evinced such excessive dismay. But this timidity is characteristic of almost all herding creatures...Witness, too, all human beings, how when herded together in the sheepfold of a theatre’s pit, they will, at the slightest alarm of fire, rush helter-skelter for the outlets, crowding, trampling, jamming, and remorselessly dashing each other to death. Best, therefore, withhold any amazement at the strangely galled whales before us, for there is no folly of the beasts of the earth which is not infinitely outdone by the madness of men (300).

This collective behaviour as a form of herd or mob mentality exemplifies the concept of social knowledge as an accumulation of individuals that act as information centres for the rest of the group. Group living enables cultural interactions such as the exchange of news and stories between whaling ships during Gams. Ahab's unwillingness to engage in the social Gams demonstrates his lack of social knowledge and perhaps foreshadows the *Pequod's* downfall, which results from an individual and subjective focus. He actively rejects intraspecific information from either his crew or other ships and therefore does not anticipate the chaos that follows.

While the *Pequod* demonstrates the weaving and merging of several cultures into one, the sperm whale encounter in "The Grand Armada" describes an encounter with an overwhelming number of whales as the coming together of several pods. This immense group of whales coordinates itself into a social hierarchy by forming concentric rings with the mothers and young on the inside. Melville describes the convergence of these separate whale pods:

The Sperm Whales, instead of almost invariably sailing in small detached companies, as in former times, are now frequently met in extensive herds, sometimes embracing so great a multitude, that it would almost seem as if numerous nations of them had

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sworn solemn league and covenant for mutual assistance and protection. (298)

The group dynamics of the whales suggests an overarching culture and a means of communication. They are united by a common purpose, the protection of their species, which is threatened by the social culture of the *Pequod*. It is interesting to note the title of Chapter 87, as Melville likens the large group of whales to a fleet of ships, thus further associating the social circumstances and dynamics of the *Pequod* to the defensive nature of the whale's social structure. The image of ritualistic, circular unity in a social group is echoed in Chapter 94, "A Squeeze of the Hand," when the crew of the *Pequod* must squeeze out the lumps that have formed in the whale's spermaceti. Ishmael becomes quite invested in this task and thinks to himself, "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). Ishmael captures the notion of cultural and spiritual knowledge that can only be attained via social interactions, even to the extent of physical contact. In addition, the homoerotic and sexual overtones in this passage create a sense of fusion and the image of a feedback loop of social knowledge and communication.

Further, Melville depicts whales as having the capacity for complex emotions such as commitment, loyalty, courage, and

intimacy, which emerge from social interactions and the sharing of social knowledge. Calkins confirms, “The current study of sperm-whale behavior validates much of what is described in *Moby-Dick*, such as extensive sociality with female-centered groups, fission-fusion grouping behavior, alloparenting by females and play” (32). Alloparenting and forms of altruism are prevalent in *Moby-Dick* in both the realms of the whales and of the men on the *Pequod*. These social behaviours demonstrate a form of moral or emotional knowledge that stems from a collective understanding of welfare and survival. Furthermore, the role of the parent or guardian is demonstrative of the relaying of knowledge between generations. The information that one receives from a parent, however, is subject to experience and could be defined as either learned or innate, again complicating the notion of objective versus subjective knowledge. Despite this ambiguity, alloparenting, or surrogacy, is observed both in the behavioural ecology of sperm whales as well as in the human interactions in the novel. In Chapter 24, Ishmael plays advocate for the whaling industry as he describes the discovery of Australia: “The whale-ship is the true mother of that now mighty colony. Moreover, in the infancy of the first Australian settlement, the emigrants were several times saved from starvation by the benevolent biscuit of the whale-ship luckily dropping an anchor in their waters” (99). This metaphor demonstrates a social altruism of providing for an individual or group other than one’s own. Australia’s adoption by

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a whale-ship mother is a form of kinship wherein groups of humans are interacting and sharing food and potentially knowledge. The ability to recognize suffering in others embodies the emotional knowledge that is generated through social learning. Melville depicts altruistic acts and feelings in both the sperm whales and the crew. In describing the group dynamics of whales, Ishmael explains, “Say you strike a Forty-barrel-bull – poor devil! all his comrades quit him. But strike a member of the harem school, and her companions swim around her with every token of concern, sometimes lingering so near her and so long, as themselves to fall a prey” (307). The capacity of the sperm whales for self-sacrifice in order to protect a member of their species reveals a proficiency in emotional understanding and communal signaling. However, this behaviour is observed only in female whales, thereby establishing a contrast to the inconsistent interactions between the men on the *Pequod*.

Indeed, Ahab removes himself from the sociality of the ship and focusses on the individual in a universe driven by social structures. Likewise, Moby Dick is isolated from his species group and bestowed a significance superior to that which an individual whale merits. Therefore, Ahab and Moby Dick are respectively the creator and the product of subjective knowledge, doomed by the lack of collective objectivity attained via social interactions. In *Comeuppance: Costly Signaling, Altruistic Punishment, and Other Biological Components of Fiction*, William Flesch



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comments on Ahab's moment of reversal in Chapter 132, "The Symphony:"

We can see that Ahab is human, that he has fellow feeling for his crew, and that human altruism might compete with the senselessly altruistic punishment of the whale. That punishment *is* senseless: Moby Dick is maddening just because he is opaque to human rage and human passion. This is what the excremental whiteness of the whale means. Ahab can signal to his fellow beings; he cannot successfully signal to the whale (94).

Ahab finally recognizes that social communication is vital to the welfare of the *Pequod* and humanity. His vengeful intentions were informed by an individual subjectivity and not a collective moral knowledge thereby creating a distinction between "Ahab's *transcendental* whale [and] Ishmael's *naturalistic* whale" (Zoellner 146). Perhaps by observing the sperm whale's social behaviour in nature, Ahab perceives the social aspects of their species and relates them to his crew. Ishmael's ecological descriptions of whale sociality conflict with the subjective philosophies of the novel. However, by reducing nature to its basic, biological components, knowledge can be perceived as something communal in addition to being empirical.

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Melville also describes social interactions of a more intimate nature, in the forms of friends and lovers that display intraspecific partiality and emotional awareness. As aforementioned, play is a prevalent behaviour in whales, a phenomenon that can be compared to the camaraderie between Ishmael and Queequeg. The intimate relationship between these two men is captured by their accumulation of interpersonal knowledge. Ishmael describes his feelings towards Queequeg:

How it is I know not; but there is no place like a bed for confidential disclosures between friends. Man and wife, they say, there open the very bottom of their souls to each other; and some old couples often lie and chat over old times till nearly morning. Thus, then, in our hearts' honey-moon, lay I and Queequeg – a cosy, loving pair. (Melville 57)

This personal exchange of information explores the realm of subjective knowledge of another human being. The image of the loving, monogamous couple is echoed during the *Pequod's* encounter with the whale cows and calves in “The Grand Armada,” where they witness, “young Leviathan amours in the deep” (303). This poetic portrayal of whale mating is juxtaposed to the objective scientific observation and industrial knowledge that belongs on a whaling ship. Melville further complicates this

contradiction in his footnote to this passage. He makes a direct parallel between the mating habits of whales and humans: “When overflowing with mutual esteem, the whales salute *more hominum*” (303). This is followed by the editor’s additional explanation: “*More hominum*: in the manner of human beings; that is, they face each other” (Parker and Hayford 303). Although these social interactions are on a smaller scale than those observed in the large groups of whales or on the *Pequod* as a whole, they illustrate how moral and empirical knowledge are unified in their stemming from intraspecific communication and contiguity.

Melville perhaps most effectively illustrates the significance of social knowledge by depicting group learning in the form of scholarly institutions in both the whales and the men. Indeed, Ishmael comments that the, “whale-ship was my Yale College, and my Harvard” (Melville 101). Ishmael likens the knowledge that he gains from the community of the *Pequod* to an empirical or logical education that he would receive from a university. This knowledge, however, is an amalgamation of social, moral, and scientific understanding that is contained within the collective of the crew. The image of scholarly learning in groups is echoed in the “bands [of whales] known as schools” (305). Social structures enable the exchange of information and the passing of knowledge from one generation to another or from teacher to student. Despite the analogy to educational institutions, Melville does not limit knowledge to solely a methodical or logical approach but depicts

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learning through social and emotional interactions.

Melville yokes poetic and scientific descriptions of group dynamics in both whales and humans as a way of exploring the social source of knowledge. His detailed observations of sperm whale behaviour capture various forms of understanding contained in the communal nature of a species and its interactions. Melville performs figurative ecological analyses of intraspecific relationships on the levels of immense pods, smaller schools of young whales, family units, friends and lovers, and mirrors these associations in the men of the *Pequod* in terms of the whole crew as well as more intimate relationships. Therefore, knowledge is presented as both the driving force and the product of sociality within a species. By showing both the whales and the men as social units in their respective species, and subsequently depicting their interspecific interactions and responses to each other, Melville is anticipating an environmentalist claim about the importance of preserving the diversity of the natural world to the maximization of various forms of knowledge.

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