

EMBODIED *MOBY-DICK*: CONTAINER, TOOL, AND CANVAS

by

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(Under the Direction of Douglas Anderson)

ABSTRACT

This piece of scholarship is an investigation of Herman Melville's use of the human body in *Moby-Dick*. It explores the various means by which Melville manipulates and coordinates the body to achieve his artistic ends.

INDEX WORDS: Herman Melville. Bodies in literature.

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## DEDICATION

This Thesis is dedicated to Deebis.

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## CHAPTER 1

## CONTAINER

Reading *Moby-Dick* as a novel interested in the bodies of whales and humans may appear limiting to those more familiar with the complex political, cultural, and moral discourses threaded throughout every chapter. The body is central to the novel, however, as are the physical manifestations of consciousness that Melville is interested in interpreting. Ahab's body, particularly his brow and scar, is his biography; Moby Dick's physical form is uniquely meaningful, much like Queequeg's body, but equally difficult to decipher; and the structure of the *Pequod* and several species of whale are vital to the function of the book itself as a text interested in different corporeal "homes." Both Tashtego and Daggoo, as well as Fedallah's crew, are distinguished by physical features that invest them with identities. *Moby-Dick* is a sensuous, visual piece of art that offers many avenues of investigation, but this study focuses on the body as container, tool and canvas. Bodies in the novel are enclosed arenas of delight and sensation, but also cognition and discovery. As a tool the body is manipulated by Melville to demonstrate the contrast between consciousness contained within the body and its environment: the crew use their bodies as instruments of the *Pequod*. The body also functions as a canvas in the novel because marks and delineations are imprinted on the skin through injury, decay, and psychological duress. Our study of the body in *Moby-Dick* will gravitate around three words: container, tool, and canvas. This metaphorical apparatus affords us flexibility in our analysis. If

*Moby-Dick* is concerned with the limitations and opportunities apparent in the body, it is also interested in how bodies interact with an environment, and by that interaction become sites of legible “truth” or “revelation.” Andrew Dubois provides us with a perceptive discussion of how we must search for aesthetic principles in Melville’s writing:

What is also of interest is a third common feature, namely, the fact that this stylistic embodiment of extremity takes up, grapples with, sinks under, and rises out of Melville’s own aesthetics. Unlike Poe, for instance, to name another writer who has provoked intense responses, Melville made only scattered and sporadic statements on the subject of aesthetics. As often as not, his aesthetic positions and concerns must be derived from his aesthetic practice; that, at any rate, is how the writers under discussion approach the matter. There, aesthetic response breeds aesthetic response. One of the advantages of reading these critical oddities is seeing in them Melville’s often obscure aesthetic concerns mirrored more clearly, as if the reflecting glass had focusing powers. These concerns include, as we will see, the fundamental aesthetic dialectic of imitation and originality; the role of institutions as a perceived threat to art; and the connection of writing to mental and physical health and disease. (50)

The subject of writing and health will help us in our discussion of Melville’s use of the body in *Moby-Dick*. Many of the characters are unique hybrids of health and sickness. Queequeg’s illness is not long lasting, and Pip is stricken with pronounced mental changes after he nearly drowns in the sea. Yet these characters also possess lively strength and movement. The body as it relates to Melville’s aesthetics is not our primary interest, but we should keep in our minds the tendency to read Melville’s manipulation of the body as an aesthetic choice. I argue that Melville chooses to

arrange and compose distinct bodies for stylistic purposes, but I also suggest that the body operates in the novel as barrier that the reader must interpret for herself.

Many concrete containers in the novel are involved in whaling activity. The *Pequod* is the central container and is the most obvious “body” in the novel that contains things. Early in the novel the wheelbarrow Queequeg and Ishmael use to move their items down the street is an important container:

Shifting the barrow from my hands to his, he told me a funny story about the first wheelbarrow he had ever seen. It was in Sag Harbor. The owners of his ship, it seems, had lent him one, in which to carry his heavy chest to his boarding house. Not to seem ignorant about the thing--though in truth he was entirely so, concerning the precise way in which to manage the barrow--Queequeg puts his chest upon it; lashes it fast; and then shoulders the barrow and marches up the wharf. (61)

Here we see Queequeg interpret the function of this container and this is a pattern that follows many of the other containers in the novel. Although our focus is on the human body, we should give attention to these other concrete containers that allow us to enrich our study of the human frame as a container. The idea of containment is important to consider here because it seems that Melville is trying to make *Moby-Dick* a container itself.

Ishmael is the most important container in the novel because he carries within him the structure of the plot. Merton M. Sealts, Jr. writes about reading *Moby-Dick*:

To the degree that the Ishmaels of this world overshadow its Ahabs and White Whales, the anti-Ishmaelites do indeed have a point. But it also seems fair to say that in the final analysis the book is not the story of any one or even two of its

characters. The only feasible way *to* Ahab and at last to the White Whale is *through* Ishmael, Melville's necessary surrogate and the reader's veritable guide, philosopher, and friend; and *all three figures* are equally indispensable to the author, to his book, and to its readers. As for the question of unity or disunity, the real test comes in the very act of responsive reading. In Brodtkorb's words, "literary unity is in the mental set of the reader as much as in the literary work" (4), and in the case of *Moby-Dick* that "mental set" is powerfully influenced and shaped by Ishmael--favorably so, as for Beanson and his followers, or unfavorably, as for Cecil Brown. (70)

Storytelling is a physical experience characterized by human speech and the cadences of syntax as the book's famous sentence makes plain. Ishmael is a body speaking to us, and although he seems to disappear at various moments in the narrative, or explains phenomena that he could not have witnessed, the basic first-person voice guides us throughout the majority of the novel. Our first body contains within it every other element of embodiment we will consider. The metaphor of the container is used by Melville to depict emotional and psychological attributes with concrete imagery. The following description of Ahab is one example:

Though nominally included in the census of Christendom, he was still an alien to it. He lived in the world, as the last of the Grisly Bears lived in settled Missouri. And as when Spring and Summer had departed, that wild Logan of the woods, burying himself in the hollow of a tree, lived out the winter there, sucking his own paws; so, in his inclement, howling old age, Ahab's soul, shut up in the caved trunk of his body, there fed upon the sullen paws of its gloom! (131)

This passage can help us complicate the term container and alert us to the ways Melville often links Ahab and other crew members to the animal kingdom. Here Ishmael states that Ahab belongs to the Christian, civilized world in name only. He is an alien body, an outsider who is also near extinction as are “the last of the Grisly Bears” (131). Playing on the word “Grisly” is one metaphorical leap Melville makes that links Ahab and his counterpart species. Of course we are most interested in the phrase “the caved trunk of his body” (131). If we ignore the mention of the soul we can understand this passage as a description of Ahab’s isolation, self-destruction, and depression. These social and psychological traits are invigorated by the creative use of the metaphor of the body. Melville carries the body over various physical properties and phenomena in *Moby-Dick*. In the above passage age is connected to inclement weather and strong wind. The body is a container of traits that manifest themselves in physical symptoms. Although this passage appears to be a rhetorical device for giving the reader a unique perspective on Ahab’s monomania, it is also important that we consider Ahab alone as a figure unattached to the hunt for Moby Dick. We are interested in Melville’s linguistic and metaphorical artistry. Ahab’s grisliness is a vital part of the way readers must interpret his character and personality. Consider the way Melville uses a different container through which to depict Ahab’s social position aboard the *Pequod*: Over his ivory-inlaid table, Ahab presided like a mute, maned sea-lion on the white coral beach, surrounded by his war-like but still deferential cubs. (128)

These two passages give us three containers for Ahab: a tree, a bear, and a sea-lion. This technique of crossing over diverse subjects and species helps Melville expand the notion of a character’s body. The bodies in the novel are also bodies of knowledge, containers of phenomena, laws, and experience. A container is a structure that holds material together in an organized manner. Instead of allowing the container of the body to limit him, Melville invests his

characters in a network of interchangeable containers. The crew members are not shape shifters, but they are able to take on with metaphorical vividness the characteristics of other creatures and objects. Ishmael and Melville operate together in this manner as Melville is a container of Ishmael as Ishmael is a container of Melville. Both are creative manipulators.

Here is another example of Ishmael's use of the word "soul":

For as the soul is glued inside of its fleshly tabernacle, and cannot freely move about in it, nor even move out of it, without running great risk of perishing (like an ignorant pilgrim crossing the snowy Alps in Winter); so a watch-coat is not so much of a house as it is a mere envelope, or additional skin encasing you. (134)

The word "tabernacle" carries several definitions and shades of meaning, but it often means the tent used for the Ark of the Covenant by the Israelites during the Exodus until the building of the Temple. This is a container that protects the valuable soul within. Yet there is a nautical meaning in which tabernacle denotes a partly open socket or double post on a sailboat's deck into which a mast is fixed, with a pivot near the top so that the mast can be lowered. Letting these definitions guide us, it is interesting to note how Melville describes the tabernacle as a "fleshly" one, as if he is depriving the word of its spiritual connotations and replacing them with the flesh that ages and decays. Yet the soul is "glued" in this skin and is not free to move like the body. In this passage the soul is a wavering, mobile entity that must be contained within a body so it can be directed toward some end. Ishmael also only uses this simile to describe the nature and use of the watch-coat. We should remember that bodies are often layers of containment, and Melville provokes us to give attention to the passions, thoughts, and histories contained by the bodies on the *Pequod*. These characteristics are not commensurate with the soul, but they allude to the soul as an engine of will in the body. (This will is what Ahab finds fascinating about Moby Dick.)

The three passages we have examined describe the body as a container of moods, thoughts, and personal traits. Melville uses metaphor and simile to multiply the possible containers for some characters in the novel. However, containment does not always imply restriction. Although the soul is glued in its tabernacle of skin, this does not mean it is inert or inactive. The body as container is something that structures and organizes its contents. A good analogy is the storage of whale oil in the casks in the hold of the *Pequod*. The principle of order is important in thinking about how the body contains its contents so they can be accessed, utilized, and transferred from one body to another.

The body is not only a closed off container, but a porous one in which the soul itself is permeable. Consider Ishmael's description of the hypnotic influence the ocean has on the body:

But lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie is this absent-minded youth by the blending cadence of waves with thoughts, that at last he loses his identity; takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature; and every strange, half-seen, gliding, beautiful thing that eludes him; every dimly-discovered, uprising fin of some undiscernible form, seems to him the embodiment of those elusive thoughts that only people the soul by continually flitting through it. (136)

The localized body is abandoned in this passage; the watcher loses his identity and allows his thoughts to mix with the rhythms of the waves. This container is fragile, and the mind itself attaches thoughts to fleeting images and impressions. The “embodiment of those elusive thoughts that only people the soul by continually flitting through it” (136) is a method of containing these fleeting thoughts so they can be analyzed, understood, and witnessed. Bodies

operate as containers because they allow access to areas of the mind that are otherwise sealed away. So bodies are not only objects that contain meaning but they also transmit it through sense-perception and analysis. The watcher is in the position of the reader of the novel who watches several bodies that contain insights that he is usually unable to access. Melville uses bodies as containers to broaden perception and heighten the sensation of life he wishes to communicate to the reader. I suggest that Melville uses the body as a container which structures experience and thought. This passage tells us that these containers are not all closed systems.

We typically think of bodies as biological structures, but Melville does not focus on anatomy unless he discusses cetology. What often lies within the body is enigmatic. Ishmael makes this judgment about what he sees in Ahab:

Therefore, the tormented spirit that flared out of bodily eyes, when what seemed Ahab rushed from his room, was for the time but a vacated thing, a formless somnambulistic being, a ray of living light, to be sure, but without an object to color, and therefore a blankness in itself. (170)

This passage relates to the blankness of the sperm whale's face, a kind of void with no distinguishing features to offer a hint as to its contents. Ahab is presented as a container of living light, a pure source of energy or being, but with no entity to illuminate itself. Later in the chapter on the body as canvas we will focus on the surfaces and textures of the physical forms in the novel, but we want to link this "blankness in itself" to the soul described in the first quotation about Ahab being a "Grisly" bear with a "caved trunk" for a body. One question Melville wants to raise in the reader is whether the body is a proper indicator of the quality of its contents. What is within the physical frame breaks through as consciousness, language, movement, and sound. What the body ultimately contains is possibly infinite, and the physical extension of this limitless

complexity reveals only a fraction of this inner landscape. Melville's creative use of the body as a dramatic container means that this internal world can produce contradictory external manifestations. For example, before the chase begins in "The Symphony", Ahab vacillates between a cold, rude exterior and a confused father saturated with regret about his life as a captain. Melville alternately obscures and reveals the contents of his characters. What these bodies contain is often paradoxical and the reader finds it difficult to reconcile the contradictions that many characters exhibit. One such contradiction occurs when Ishmael notices Ahab's walk: "While his one live leg made lively echoes along the deck, every stroke of his dead limb sounded like a coffin-tap. On life and death this old man walked" (192). The body is also a container of life and death, or it is a potential representation of both states of being, at least on its surface. Although we have focused on Ahab as a body that contains many contradictory impressions, thoughts, and emotions, he is not the only character that is an example of how bodies operate as containers in *Moby-Dick*. Joseph Adamson discusses the role of the mask in *Moby-Dick* and in Ahab's "Quarter-Deck" speech:

The image of the mask in this passage is intimately related to shame and the themes of hiding and exposure. From behind the mask of the visible world, some "inscrutable thing" haunts Ahab. This mask, which in Ahab's paranoid imagination has the amplitude of the entire cosmos, is a most powerful image of the kind of loss of trust and estrangement from the universe that a recurrent subjection to shame can cause. "With every recurrent violation of trust," as Lynd puts it, "we become again children unsure of ourselves in an alien world" (1958, 47). And as this passage suggests as well, the mask in Melville is intimately connected to the idea of a resentful and treacherous turning of the tables, to

shamelessness and, as in *The Confidence-Man*, to an aggressive and resentful ridiculing and exposing of others. (162)

A container is also a mask in this context and Adamson's psychoanalytic reading of Melville's work provides us with some unique interpretations of the role the body plays in *Moby-Dick*.

The Sperm Whale is a central body in the novel, and as a container it functions as a meditation on life and death and how thorough excavation of the body does not reveal the life that governs or motivates it. The bodies of whales are used in this manner by Melville because the *Pequod* is a movable kitchen with the express purpose of reducing whale blubber to oil. An early quotation marks a moment during which the crew is united in its interest in the contents of whale bodies:

The red tide now poured from all sides of the monster like brooks down a hill. His tormented body rolled not in brine but in blood, which bubbled and seethed for furlongs behind in their wake. The slanting sun playing upon this crimson pond in the sea, sent back its reflection into every face, so that they all glowed to each other like red men. (232)

The whale is a body that can be examined internally because it is often hunted and killed as the novel progresses, so we see in this passage how important blood is to our conception of the body as a container of diverse materials. As Melville gives Ishmael opportunities to meditate on the psychological contents of Ahab, he provides a contrast to this abstract speculation by inundating the reader with images of the organs, bones, and fluid of the whale's body. The blood is attractive to the crew members because they recognize their own mortality, and their faces are all red in common because they are biologically united as equally vulnerable to suffering and death. These opened containers are all dead whale bodies, but the reasoning mind and voice of Ishmael

provides the reader with an inventory of the contents. Here is an example of the way Ishmael combines a gruesome act with humor:

In the case of a small sperm whale the brains are accounted a fine dish. The casket of the skull is broken into with an axe, and the two plump, whitish lobes being withdrawn (precisely resembling two large puddings), they are then mixed with flour, and cooked into a most delectable mess, in flavor somewhat resembling calves' head, which is quite a dish among some epicures. (242)

The container here is a skull which is exposed to reveal internal organs, in this case the brain. Melville wants the reader to understand that the body is a container for structures and systems that operate together to sustain life. Whale bodies are the supremely physical containers in the novel, and they provide a healthy contrast with the elusive inner worlds that Ishmael finds in the bodies of Ahab and the members of the *Pequod*. The passage above looks ahead to our discussion of the *Pequod* as a container of bodies that are processed in the Try Pots. What the body contains is not only important for improving the understanding of what the body can reveal, but it is also capable of being transformed into food.

One additional feature of containment in the novel is the way Melville uses language in unique ways. Maurice S. Lee in "The Language of *Moby-Dick*" addresses some of the challenges posed to readers of the book:

Even twentieth- and twenty-first-century readers accustomed to postmodern pastiche can, like early reviewers of *Moby-Dick*, find its heterogeneity confusing or laborious. This may be why some readers abandon the book one-third of the way through when Ishmael's first-person, plot-driven story becomes increasingly fragmented. The lack of unity is further complicated by multiple and not always

distinguishable narrative voices: an authorial perspective often associated with Melville, the intrepid sub-sub-librarian, Ishmael (for some critics, both a younger and an older version), and Ahab, who so dominates sections of the book as to pull the story into his orbit. Some early scholars have attempted to identify and track these various voices; and even recent poststructuralist readers who point to the indeterminate nature of language tend to view the novel as a dialectical struggle between Ishmael and Ahab. The difference between these two protagonists is not only ideological (classically, Ishmael's democratic pluralism versus Ahab's despotic absolutism). It is also one of dialect--of linguistic variation--insofar as Ishmael's ironic musings are drowned out by Ahab's bellicose rants only to resurface suddenly at the conclusion of the book. (396)

We should leave our discussion of the body as container aware of the human voice being a central feature of *Moby-Dick* that allows Melville to experiment with narrative and identity. In the following chapters we will further explore how Melville influences our perception of the body in literature.

## CHAPTER 2

## TOOL

Melville and Ishmael use bodies to advance the narrative, develop character, and invest the world of the novel with interdependent relationships. Ishmael is an important tool in the novel because he is the voice of the narrator, he provides us with a frame of reference from which to make judgments and assumptions about the plot and the development of the story. His body is also a lens through which we as readers are able to observe other characters and actions that are important to the structure of the book. Melville is a manipulator of bodies because he uses his characters to create tension and construct a dialogue of reactions to the world of the *Pequod*. Thinking of the bodies in the novel as tools is a good way of configuring a method of working through the complex movements and exchanges that occur on almost every page. Many of the bodies operate like pieces on a game board or constituents of an order that gradually becomes more disorganized and unpredictable as Ahab gets closer to the cruising grounds in the Pacific. The *Pequod* itself is one important body in the novel that is almost exclusively a tool but is also a container.

The first place we witness a collection of concrete tools is in the Spouter-Inn. Before Queequeg wields his harpoon at the breakfast table we witness this array of whaling tools:

The opposite wall of this entry was hung all over with a heathenish array of monstrous clubs and spears. Some were thickly set with glittering teeth resembling ivory saws; others were tufted with knots of human hair; and one was sickle-shaped, with a vast handle, sweeping round like the segment made in the

new-mown grass by a long-armed mower. You shuddered as you gazed, and wondered what monstrous cannibal and savage could ever have gone a death-harvesting with such a hacking, horrifying implement. Mixed with these were rusty old whaling lances and harpoons all broken and deformed. (27)

The collection of violent instruments in the Spouter-Inn gives us an introduction to the whaling industry as an activity that uses tools to extend the strength and flexibility of the body. This passage tells us how time has passed but these instruments outlast human life. The paradox of “death-harvesting” is an apt description of whaling in the 19th-Century, and Melville situates the reader as a witness to a distinct world that appears foreign and ambiguous.

Queequeg tells Ishmael why his harpoon is important:

I asked him why he carried such a troublesome thing with him ashore, and whether all whaling ships did not find their own harpoons. To this, in substance, he replied, that though what I hinted was true enough, yet he had a particular affection for his own harpoon, because it was of assured stuff, well tried in many a mortal combat, and deeply intimate with the hearts of whales. In short, like many inland reapers and mowers, who go into the farmers’ meadows armed with their own scythes--though in no wise obliged to furnish them--even so, Queequeg, for his own private reasons, preferred his own harpoon. (61)

This tool is the instrument Queequeg wields in the Spouter-Inn and it is an early instance of Melville’s depiction of a tool as an extension of the body. Queequeg’s body in this case is characterized by the harpoon because we can read his harpoon as an extension of one of his limbs. His tool is used in his daily life and is a part of his personality. Melville wants us to see the body as an entity that is attached to artificial tools early in the book.

The following is an important passage that will aid us in developing a set of principles for discussing the relationship between art and utility and the way Melville uses bodies as tools:

When Angelo paints even God the Father in human form, mark what robustness is there. And whatever they may reveal of the divine love in the Son, the soft, curled, hermaphroditical Italian pictures, in which his idea has been most successfully embodied; these pictures, so destitute as they are of all brawniness, hint nothing of any power, but the mere negative, feminine one of submission and endurance, which on all hands it is conceded, form the peculiar practical virtues of his teachings. (294)

Here Ishmael is the mouthpiece for Melville's interests in the art of representation and what features can or cannot be communicated to an observer of art. In *Moby-Dick* the tools we see are all fashioned with aesthetic care, but they are not static, and Melville places a lot of emphasis on the way the body moves and develops. The Italian pictures referred to above are tools for conveying only one aspect of divinity. Melville wants to create a set of tools for his novel, and like Michelangelo, he wants to convey as many aspects as he can using different methods of representation. Ahab of course is a central tool in the novel because he often functions as a magnet or center of gravity around which the crew revolves. The world of the *Pequod* is Ahab's world because he is the captain and he is searching for the whale that took his leg. Bodies are often tools in the novel because they are driven by motives which set them going in a particular direction. The most obvious case of this impulse in the novel is Fedallah and the crew members that Ahab uses to hunt Moby Dick. These bodies are extensions of Ahab's desire for revenge, and he attaches himself to the crew members so he can utilize them in his own way. Our discussion of bodies as tools will bring up the issue of power because manipulation implies control, but

what is often the case in *Moby-Dick* is that this control is unmoored at some point and the perceived controller abandons his tools, as it were. Melville is interested in conveying this tension between absolute control and surrender, a paradox which is most prominent in Ahab, but is also apparent in Ishmael as narrator and in Starbuck when he debates with himself whether he should murder Ahab and save the crew. He sees Ahab as the center which holds the bodies of the crew hostage to his own ambition. An interesting feature of human behavior that Melville experiments with is the way that bodies in the novel can be used as tools unconsciously. Labor, in this case in the operation of the ship, is a clear example of how a body becomes a tool and almost an end in and of itself.

Pip is the most elusive tool in the novel because he is used to break into the unstructured elements of the mind that Ahab sometimes exhibits but never fully abandons himself to.

Consider this description of Pip's experience beneath the ocean:

The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely, though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man's insanity is heaven's sense; and wandering from all moral reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God. (322)

Pip is a tool in this case for exploring elements of the world that Melville wants to include in his novel without leaving behind the concrete experience of the human body. Bodies enable Melville to explore metaphysical, abstract concepts without sounding as if Ishmael is complicit in this exploration. Pip is a good example of this because he is using his body the whole time he has his vision of God beneath the ocean. The living body is a tool for accessing insights which may seem to lie outside physical experience. Ishmael is used in the same way Pip is used because Ishmael is the witness who testifies about what he has seen and experienced on this whaling voyage with Captain Ahab. Ishmael sees many wondrous things that he reports back to us, but he also embeds his narrative in discussions of the human body and its various manifestations on board the *Pequod*. This passage about Pip is a kind of miniature voyage that Melville wants the reader to keep in mind when Pip and Ahab develop a bond that unites them in the latter part of the novel.

Pip's body is a tool that Melville uses to convey to the reader some of the abstract ideas he has about visionary experience. What I want to emphasize is that everything in the novel is embodied in some way, even if it is only through a simile or metaphor. Physical experience is the ground on which the novel operates, and Melville rarely flees from the presence of the body and the realities that accompany its growth and decay. The body itself is a vessel much like the *Pequod*, and as a tool it is an entity that Melville wants to examine in light of life and death. Bodies are tools that enable unity and cohesion. Consider the important passage about the crew squeezing sperm:

I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it; I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers' hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an

abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, 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)

The bodies in this passage are tools for accessing the unity of life. Sperm in this passage is a distillation of reproductive material, a condensed form of vitality that Melville wants to emphasize to the reader because life and death are the actual experiences of bodies in the novel. Reproduction is an important idea to relate to our discussion of the body as a tool because sexuality is an instrumental act that the body engages in to maintain the species, but Melville seems to subtract vulgarity from his notion of sexuality and focus instead on the unifying principle inherent in biological life, in the material itself which constitutes the human body and its processes. Tools are not only objects of manipulation but they can also be parts of a whole, and Melville tends to place Ishmael in circumstances in which he becomes enmeshed in an idea or activity larger than himself. The squeezing of the sperm is a concrete, embodied activity that produces an ethical and moral statement that Melville wants to express to his reader, but his use of the body to convey that message makes it unique, powerful, and complex. Life is a messy business, and so is whaling, and thus the *Pequod* itself and its members are the main tools or instruments of Melville's art. A long passage that we should analyze in full relates the individual bodies of the crew to the unified body of the ship:

The hatch, removed from the top of the works, now afforded a wide hearth in front of them. Standing on this were the Tartarean shapes of the pagan harpooners, always the whale-ship's stokers. With huge pronged poles they pitched hissing masses of blubber into the scalding pots, or stirred up the fires beneath, till the snaky flames darted, curling, out of the doors to catch them by the feet. The smoke rolled away in sullen heaps. To every pitch of the ship there was a pitch of the boiling oil, which seemed all eagerness to leap into their faces.

Opposite the mouth of the works, on the further side of the wide wooden hearth, was the windlass. This served for a sea-sofa. Here lounged the watch, when not otherwise employed, looking into the red heat of the fire, till their eyes felt scorched in their heads. Their tawny features, now all begrimed with smoke and sweat, their matted beards, and the contrasting barbaric brilliancy of their teeth, all these were strangely revealed in the capricious emblazonings of the works. As they narrated to each other their unholy adventures, their tales of terror told in words of mirth; as their uncivilized laughter forked upwards out of them, like the flames from the furnace; as to and fro, in their front, the harpooners wildly gesticulated with their huge pronged forks and dippers; as the wind howled on, and the sea leaped, and the ship groaned and dived, and yet steadfastly shot her red hell further and further into the blackness of the sea and the night, and scornfully champed the white bone in her mouth, and viciously spat round her on all sides; then the rushing Pequod, freighted with savages, and laden with fire, and burning a corpse, and plunging into that blackness of darkness, seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander's soul. (327)

This long passage is a rich storehouse of “tools” in the book. The last sentence refers back to our discussion of Ahab’s soul and the body as container, but here we see the *Pequod* both as an instrument or tool of Ahab’s soul and a series of “props” for Ishmael’s elaborate stage. The “material counterpart” of what is contained within his body is this vast enterprise floating on the water. Much like the sperm in the previous passage, the fire is the central object here that structures the arrangement of the stokers and the watch. The harpooners are laden with rhetoric that makes them assume the figures of devils or demons, but they are first and foremost using their bodies as instruments by working to aid the fire in turning the whale blubber into oil. The movement of the ocean is another body that we will consider in the next chapter when we discuss the body as a canvas, and in particular the movement of the ocean and Ahab’s ability to read a chart. This passage about the Try Pots is important for our purposes here because all the elements in this piece of writing become unified toward the end of the quotation. Bodies are tools but they are also linked together by their common abilities and features. Hands can squeeze sperm and they can also stoke a fire and stir a pot of boiling oil. If the *Pequod* is a tool for transforming blubber into oil, for taking a whale carcass and making a commodity out of it, then that is only possible because of cooperation of a group of smaller tools that enable the process to function.

Bodies are not only a function of the ship. To be a tool is to be used by someone or something else, but it can also mean to use yourself. Ishmael is an example of this self-use as are all the participants in the Try Pots passage above. The spirit of self-motivation and development is important to Melville because he sees this as a feature of human behavior that can be creative or destructive depending on the extreme to which it is carried. Ahab is an example of someone who sacrifices his body, his life, and his mind for a single act of revenge, which requires self-

motivation and development. But Ishmael is also motivated to improve his life, to change his environment so he does not become mentally or physically ill. In this way the mind and the body work together in the novel as tools for growth, but Melville seems interested in why many characters are comfortable using themselves as tools or instruments of someone else's motives. A danger lurks in the ability human beings possess to make their lives completely utilitarian, to neglect their reason and become simple, mechanical objects in the service of some other motive that is not personal to them. I suggest that Melville views the concrete, physical experience of the body as a means by which this kind of mindless death-in-life can be avoided or reduced. Many of the metaphors about transformation occur to remind us that physical life is not stagnant but always changing, and this can be applied to mental life as well.

The pagans aboard the *Pequod* appear to have the least trouble with Ahab and his quest for revenge, and they are also characterized in the novel more by their physical appearance than their verbal acuity or expression. Language is a tool of the body that Melville is absolutely interested in, but in the context of *Moby-Dick* he appears to distrust it by placing so much importance on the movement and dexterity of the human body. If the *Pequod* is the physical counterpart of Ahab's soul then we have to ask ourselves which is more revelatory, the Captain's soul or his ship? Are we not told more about the content of Ahab's spirit by the description above than we are by Ahab's own utterances? Ishmael suggests that Ahab is a riddle, both in physical and spiritual form, and I suggest that we have to look for embodied expressions of the paradoxes in the novel so we can attain a more nuanced understanding of Melville's use of different kinds of bodies.

In the next chapter we will discuss the role of the blacksmith and the carpenter in the later sections of the book, but we should consider the following quote in relation to the passage about the fire on the *Pequod*:

I do deem it now a most meaning thing, that that old Greek, Prometheus, who made men, they say, should have been a blacksmith, and animated them with fire; for what's made in fire must properly belong to fire; and so hell's probable. (359)

Fire is an important element of human history and is layered with too much meaning to fully investigate in this short essay; however, the relationship between Ahab as a user of tools and a blacksmith who uses fire as tool for constructing objects becomes very important at the end of the novel before Ahab chases Moby Dick. In the next chapter we will consider the body as a canvas and spectacle, a surface on which can be inscribed meanings which may or not be physically present. In the passage above it is unclear what Ishmael means by the principle that if something is made in fire it must belong to fire. Why is this proper? I suggest that we have to understand the body as a tool which is not always controlled by its user. This will help us consider how the body as a canvas offers a physical space for unique features of identity to manifest themselves.

## CHAPTER 3

### CANVAS

The canvas is a useful metaphor we can use to describe the body in *Moby-Dick*. A canvas is used to propel the ship, and a canvas is also a sheet of material that can be used for drawing and painting. I suggest that Melville also canvases the subject of whaling in the book and in the extracts, he makes a general survey of the subject and proposes specific details to his readers. But the body is a canvas because it is a physical place where representation is variable. Nothing on the body is fixed because of age and decay, so Melville uses bodies as canvases that can be used to create personalities and contradictions that move the narrative forward.

We will begin our investigation of the body as canvas in *Moby-Dick* with one of the earliest passages about human skin. Ishmael is discussing the face and body of Queequeg when he first sees him:

And what is it, thought I, after all! It's only his outside; a man can be honest in any sort of skin. But then, what to make of his unearthly complexion, that part of it, I mean, lying round about, and completely independent of the squares of tattooing. To be sure, it might be nothing but a good coat of tropical tanning; but I never heard of a hot sun's tanning a white man into a purplish yellow one.

However, I had never been in the South Seas; and perhaps the sun there produced these extraordinary effects upon the skin. (34)

A clear link between the body and various environments is made apparent early in the novel. Queequeg's legs are also described with exotic imagery that suggests the body is a canvas and tool used by Melville: "Still more, his very legs were marked, as if a parcel of dark green frogs were running up the trunks of young palms" (34). Melville introduces Queequeg's body as a product of a particular environment and recommends that the reader should engage with this unique body by interpreting the skin. Ishmael briefly assumes that Queequeg began life as a white man, but before any kind of cultural or historical markers situate Queequeg in some context, the reader experiences him solely as a physical entity. This is the demonstration of the human body as a canvas which Melville uses to present questions and ideas to the reader. Queequeg's body is also a tool in this passage because Melville uses it to disrupt the reader's unquestioned, unexamined notions of what constitutes an acceptable body. Before we further examine the above quote and the importance of its situation in the novel, we will consider another long passage early in the novel in which Ishmael discusses death and the body:

Yes, there is death in this business of whaling--a speechlessly quick chaotic bundling of a man into Eternity. But what then? Methinks we have hugely mistaken this matter of Life and Death. Methinks that what they call my shadow here on earth is my true substance. Methinks that in looking at things spiritual, we are too much like oysters observing the sun through water, and thinking that thick water the thinnest of air. Methinks my body is but the lees of my better being. In fact take my body who will, take it I say, it is not me. And therefore three cheers for Nantucket; and come a stove boat and stove body when they will, for stave my soul, Jove himself cannot. (45)

It is important for us to linger over this passage and relate it to Queequeg's skin. To think about the tattoos on Queequeg's purple-yellow skin is to perceive the canvas of the skin as a creative place. As an artist Melville produces images of bodies as places where the past can be inscribed. Both tattoos and scars can be visual reminders of what has gone before. These lingering marks are important to this exercise because by the end of the novel everything vanishes except Ishmael and Queequeg's coffin. Therefore, every meditation on the physical characteristics of the characters provides us with an opportunity to grasp what Melville wants to present in the various bodies he displays and puts into motion. This is why the early quote above concerns death and foreshadows the destruction of the "body" of the crew and the Pequod at the end of the novel. Ishmael claims: "Methinks my body is but the lees of my better being" (45). Lees refers to the remainder of yeast left behind after fermentation. This concrete metaphor emphasizes Melville's preoccupation with physical processes, but it complicates our analysis of the body as container, tool, and canvas. A primary focus of Ishmael's is what animates physical entities. Bodies are representations of this type of will that interests Ishmael. Instead of remaining vague and abstract about these metaphysical preoccupations, Melville intensifies his presentation of whale and human anatomy. In *Moby-Dick* the surfaces of bodies yield suggestions that are useful for us to examine as we move forward. By suggestion I mean a type of communication which is not communicable by any other means. The tattoos on Queequeg's legs that resemble frogs alert us to pay attention to signs and symbols conveyed on the surface of the body. For Melville, Queequeg becomes an unreadable "volume" by the late chapters of the novel. What is vital for us to recall is that Queequeg's appearance produces thought and doubt in Ishmael: the body acts not only as a container, tool, and canvas, but also as a catalyst for psychological change. This is most explicit in Ishmael's reactions to the bodies he encounters, but it is implicit in the relationship

between the novel's audience and the narrator. I suggest that Melville regards the act of reading and interpreting literature as an embodied, physical, and vivifying endeavor that is not passive but both physically and mentally active.

The following is one of Ishmael's unique interpretations of Queequeg:

With much interest I sat watching him. Savage though he was, and hideously marred about the face--at least to my taste--his countenance yet had a something in it which was by no means disagreeable. You cannot hide the soul. Through all his unearthly tattooings, I thought I saw the traces of a simple honest heart; and in his large, deep eyes, fiery black and bold, there seemed tokens of a spirit that would dare a thousand devils. And besides all this, there was a certain lofty bearing about the Pagan, which even his uncouthness could not altogether maim. He looked like a man who had never cringed and never had had a creditor. Whether it was, too, that his head being shaved, his forehead was drawn out in freer and brighter relief, and looked more expansive than it otherwise would, this I will not venture to decide; but certain it was his head was phrenologically an excellent one. It may seem ridiculous, but it reminded me of General Washington's head, as seen in the popular busts of him. It had the same long regularly graded retreating slope from above the brows, which were likewise very projecting, like two long promontories thickly wooded on top. Queequeg was George Washington cannibalistically developed. (55)

Reading the three previous passages together gives us an interesting perspective from which to think about the body as container, tool, and canvas. Queequeg is physically present in the novel more than he is verbally or mentally. His tattoos are read by Ishmael as significant markers, yet

Ishmael disregards the body: “take my body who will, take it I say, it is not me” (45). The imbalance presented here tells us that the body is an obstacle to Ishmael, but it is the only means by which he can connect with other characters and the violently physically labor of whaling in the nineteenth century. His use of the verb “bundling” is conducive to our reading of the body. Death is “a speechlessly quick chaotic bundling of a man into Eternity” (45). Used as a verb the word can mean “to fasten, tie, or wrap a group of things together to make (a group of things) into a bundle.” This physical word gives us an insight into Ishmael’s claim that death is a tying down or binding of the body. For all of Ishmael’s sudden dismissal of death and the body he remains bound to other bodies on the Pequod.

But Ishmael also states that the surface of the body is not a factor in recognizing honest or dishonest personalities: “It’s only his outside; a man can be honest in any sort of skin” (34). Yet immediately following this statement Ishmael refers to Queequeg’s “unearthly complexion” (34). These sections of unmarked skin interest Ishmael more than the designs on Queequeg’s body. The tattoos, then, are only an additional layer of readable material on the surface of the body. These decorative designs teach us how to think about the complexity involved in the levels of communication between bodies as they are interpreted and judged. The insinuation that the sun in the South Seas has altered Queequeg’s skin aligns with our metaphor of the container and the canvas. Melville presents the reader with questions about how environmental influences can become fixed within the human form. Bodies are places of exchange: qualities, limbs, and scars can all be gained and lost. This gives Melville another tool to use as he explores the capabilities and limits of the human body.

In the third passage cited above we learn from Ishmael that Queequeg’s face “had a something in it which was by no means disagreeable. You cannot hide the soul” (55). If the body

contains the soul, which cannot hide, then Queequeg is a contradictory canvas whose soul is not typical. Ishmael claims he “saw the traces of a simple honest heart,” but alongside “tokens of a spirit that would dare a thousand devils” (55). Queequeg’s head resembles George Washington’s so we can imagine how we perceive different bodies in various contexts. If Queequeg’s head is shaped like George Washington’s we can think of this similarity as a broader application of Melville’s use of the body as container, tool, and canvas. By comparing Queequeg to the first President of the United States Ishmael is pushing the reader toward imaginative territory which will influence perceptions of different cultural bodies. Melville wants to display Queequeg as the biological equivalent of the American Cincinnatus. Thus bodies are containers of culture in the historical imagination of participants in society. Queequeg is never presented as an outsider, as a body who is excluded from New Bedford or Nantucket. He is “at home” wherever he is, and this feature is most explicit in his mobile religious worship and his leadership. His body is the first corporeal home that operates in the narrative as container, tool, and canvas. Ishmael reads Queequeg as a variation on Washington to unsettle the reader, to imply that the common ground of all experience is the body, and the features we choose to consider in judging or interpreting others place us in a position to critique our own bodies and what they may contain.

Despite the commentary presented to this point in the essay I want to emphasize that even though our focus centers on the body as container, tool, and canvas, it is most important to understand that the body is the sole means by which the sailors narrate their unholy adventures. The movements and articulations of the body are connected to the navigation of the Pequod and to Ahab’s mental life. As we chart our course through the novel and the bodies which function within it we should remind ourselves that the principle of motion is paramount to our study. The

constant movement of the ocean will be important as we consider our next passage which relates the marks on a chart to the wrinkles on Ahab's forehead.

A central passage that demonstrates the above idea concerns Captain Ahab reading and marking a chart:

While thus employed, the heavy pewter lamp suspended in chains over his head, continually rocked with the motion of the ship, and for ever threw shifting gleams and shadows of lines upon his wrinkled brow, till it almost seemed that while he himself was marking out lines and courses on the wrinkled charts, some invisible pencil was also tracing lines and courses upon the deeply marked chart of his forehead. (167)

The passage treats Captain Ahab's forehead as a canvas that mirrors the chart he uses to navigate the Pequod across the oceans of the world. We observe our initial relation of the body as both a container of thought and an inscribable surface which allows Melville to occupy a space between Ishmael--the consciousness narrating the novel--and the crew. What is most interesting about the above passage is the use of light and shadow as writing instruments throwing "shadows of lines" upon Ahab's forehead. These shadows insinuate that the body is a place where a type of truth can be read but not always easily interpreted. The wrinkled charts Ahab acts upon are connected to the patterns of lines on his face. Of course the head is the seat of the brain and consciousness, and a general focus of *Moby-Dick* is on the internal and external features of whales generally and the Sperm Whale in particular. We can acknowledge a general trend in the novel that compares the wrinkled brow of Moby Dick with Ahab's wrinkles. Melville also returns to biology when the narrative becomes too abstract. The confluence of the lines on the chart and the lines on Ahab's brow can tell us something about the general human tendency to search for patterns in nature.

These patterns that form on Ahab's body alert us to a heightened level of his identity as a biological organism.

Such an observation is self-evident to any reader of fiction: human characters represent biological entities connected to other species. Yet Melville finds in the surface and interior of the body a rich source of material which he uses to dramatize a wide range of human emotions; the movement, change, and development of physical life pushes itself on the reader through Melville's manipulation of the body as a canvas. We should pay close attention to the variance between what a human body can physically accomplish and what the mind can imagine. Melville is interested in the limitations on the body, yet he is also questioning if cognition fits into physical life or is more capable of ranging across physical limits of time, space, and history. The body in *Moby-Dick* is the most concrete object that allows us to observe the experiments Melville performs. Ahab is engaged in a mentally demanding activity while he reads the charts and decides how best to navigate the ship. The lines on the chart are markings made by his ability to reason--they are a reflection of a part of his mind. Yet those lines on his wrinkled forehead are written not by this mental exercise, but by an external force: the rocking of the waves which moves the ship and causes the pewter lamp to swing. Thus we see a mind reading the ocean itself, using the principles of navigation, and deducing a course; but we also see that same entity moving the ship and causing light and shadow to produce lines and courses on the chart of his forehead. The question we must ask ourselves is why Ishmael designates Ahab's forehead as a chart: what kind of chart? Melville, I suggest, creates this chart as a mirror of Ahab's thoughts, of the physical effects of the mental strain, yearning, and confusion the captain exhibits throughout the voyage. It is the body which allows us as readers to observe this insight in a manner that is both concrete and suggestive. Thus Ahab's forehead is a medium for

conveying ideas, as well as a vessel of thought. Ishmael also discusses how Ahab's single thought of revenge affects his body:

His mad mind would run on in a breathless race; till a weariness and faintness of pondering came over him; and in the open air of the deck he would seek to recover his strength. Ah, God! what trances of torments does that man endure who is consumed with one unachieved revengeful desire. He sleeps with clenched hands; and wakes with his own bloody nails in his palms. (169)

This passage more emphatically links Ahab's cognition with his body. The bloody palms and clenched fists, the play on the word "nails" as well as Ishmael's description of Ahab as "consumed" all converge to illustrate Ahab's bodily suffering. In this example Ahab's body is a tool for Melville's allusive writing style to focus readers' attention on the crucifixion of Jesus, a bodily experience that depicts suffering as a physical sensation. Ahab also functions as a canvas in this passage for depicting the relationship between mental and physical deterioration. His single-minded purpose consumes his mind as well as his body, and this also suggests that the body is a container of malevolent and benevolent thoughts and sensations. Setting aside the other elements of the plot and the infinite variety of interpretations readers have developed of *Moby-Dick*, we should keep at the forefront of our attention the basic teleology of the novel, which is the destruction of a group of bodies. We should be sensitive to the meticulous detail Melville uses to depict the characters because every crew member except Ishmael dies; and death is the experience which is most alarming to our notion of the body in this study. Melville animates the bodies of his characters by portraying their abilities to serve as containers, tools, and canvases. He wants us to recover from this doomed voyage a sensibility attuned to the subtle details of the human body and what those features can tell us about the boundaries of life and thought. Paul

McCarthy in *The Twisted Mind: Madness in Herman Melville's Fiction* writes the following about Ahab's body:

A third and final stage in Ahab's madness begins with the traumatic loss of his leg. The most documented and involved, this stage includes early monomaniac hates and angers precipitated by the great "corporeal animosity" (p.184) arising from the loss, which, as Smith points out, is a physical cause or "external shock" contributing to insanity. This stage includes also months of suffering. The "final monomania" strikes Ahab as the *Pequod* rounds Cape Horn and his "torn body and gashed soul [bleed]...into one another; and so interfusing [make]...him mad" (p.185). This conception of the relationship of body and soul was neither original nor the received view in the mid-1800's, when most psychiatrists regarded the two, body and mind, as separate. The latter represented the traditional Christian view of the nonmaterial soul or mind as separate from the physical brain. As the soul or mind was regarded as eternal, diseases of brain or body could not affect it. Whether or not he pondered the matter, Ray doubted this immaterialist-materialist dichotomy, explaining that the mind and brain were interdependent and made for a "single, individual man" so that the mind, "which was the mortal brain functioning, would be diseased." This fairly advanced interpretation seems to have expressed Melville's general conception of the "interfusing" of body and soul. In the months following the amputation, Ahab's physical suffering clearly affected his mental faculties. (69)

We should recognize the link between madness and the body because it allows us to understand more of Melville's interpretation of why the body is so important to character in his fiction.

Ahab's internal world is available to us in his soliloquies, but we never receive a direct transcription of his suffering. Although this essay does not deal directly with mental illness, we should understand that Melville believed a healthy connection between physical and mental life is vital to living with stability and patience. Ahab's body is a physical representation of his mental anguish, and I think McCarthy's study is a good contribution to this important element of *Moby-Dick*.

The relationship between Ahab's chart and the lines on his forehead provides us with a concrete midpoint because we are charting a course through various examples of Melville's use of the body as container, tool, and canvas. The Pequod is a vessel, but it is unique in that it consumes in the Try Pots the blubber of sperm whales and stores the casked oil in her hull. According to this description the Pequod is a digestive object, a place where matter is transformed, so we can categorize the ship as a body with organic features--it is not inert. At the beginning of the novel Melville describes the Pequod as a ship possessed of a personality that resembles features of a human body. The ship is a tool of the whaling industry, but for Melville he uses the vessel as a consumer of bodies, a container which operates as a mobile kitchen on the seas:

Everyone knows what a multitude of things--beds, sauce-pans, knives and forks, shovels and tongs, napkins, nut-crackers, and what not, are indispensable to the business of housekeeping. Just so with whaling, which necessitates a three-years' housekeeping upon the wide ocean, far from all grocers, coster-mongers, doctors, bakers, and bankers" (89).

The Pequod is a corporeal home of the amenities necessary to the art of cooking, which involves mixture, concoction, and transformation. It and Moby Dick are the two largest bodies in the

novel which maintain their roles as gustatory systems: they are both tasters and eaters. The domestic necessities mentioned in the passage turn our attention to the interdependence of bodies in the ship and in the ocean. Each body is a container which fills itself with other bodies and lives on other lives. Eating is an activity related to our interest in Melville's use of bodies as tools.

In *Moby-Dick* bodies are the principal organizational tools that Melville uses to shape the narrative. The passages from the text we have read so far all provoke us to meditate on a vast range of bodily experience. We have examined how these passages fit into our schema of container, tool, and canvas. The Pequod is a place where whale bodies are cooked and transformed. The ship functions in the novel as a kitchen that energizes the narrative, it enlivens our sense as readers of what happens to the bodies of whales after they are killed. The mobile domestic world of the Pequod is an important body in the novel because it contains the features of a living body but without the animating will that interests Melville, Ishmael, and Ahab. At this point in the essay we should remind ourselves to keep the Pequod in mind. It contains many of the bodies we are considering in these pages. Melville situates the Pequod as a part of Ahab's mental activity that we observed earlier in the passage about Ahab's chart reading.

In our succession of quotes we have examined Queequeg, Ahab, and the Pequod as containers, tools, and canvases. Bodies are always undergoing change, they are active systems that depend on their environment and other bodies for sustenance. Ishmael's discussion of the ocean as a home of bodies means that we have to think of the Pequod and the ocean as separate and different entities. The physical boundaries and limits of bodies in the novel structure many of the relationships in the novel. Ahab and Pip both push their bodies into territory that influences their mental life. When Pip nearly drowns he changes dramatically and becomes dissociated

from his corporeal home; and Ahab's severed leg, as well as his scar, alters his perception and motives. His body is described by Ishmael as a tree struck by lightning:

It resembled that perpendicular seam sometimes made in the straight, lofty trunk of a great tree, when the upper lightning tearingly darts down it, and without wrenching a single twig, peels and groans out the bark from top to bottom, ere running off into the soil, leaving the tree still greenly alive, but branded. (109)

This passage complicates our three governing terms: container, tool, and canvas. Melville wants us to have an embodied sense of his characters and the world he portrays. Above all, Ahab's body is his own story, the scar, the severed leg, and his gray hairs--" 'Locks so grey did never grow but from out some ashes!' "(406)--all reveal and obscure his character. It is through the presentation of his body that Melville builds Ahab up as the proper leader of these bodies on the Pequod. Even Ahab himself is interested in bodies and their environments, particularly the diving of the whale when he addresses the whale's head in Chapter 41. Again, the body is a tool for navigating different parts of the world, and Ahab sees the body as the repository of the knowledge gained by exploration. This is another example of the body as canvas because it can portray its knowledge and experience in its appearance. Whether that experience can be read or interpreted with reason is another matter. Theo Davis in "Melville's Ornamentation: On Irrelevant Beauty":

The passage's focus shifts over to the question of how to analyze the mark, and the suggestion of Ahab's postmortem disrobing moves out from Ahab's core: if we were once interested in ripping the bark/skin off Ahab, now we are only interested in ripping off his clothes to look at his skin and the mark "on him from crown to sole." The serious question of the relation of self to body, and its

prospective analogue, the question of the relation of meaning to language, is neglected for a proliferation of supposition diffusing from bark to skin, out into the gossip of the crew. (35)

Davis discusses an interesting aspect of Melville's interest in the relationship between the soul and the body. I suggest that Ahab's body is a catalyst for speculation that allows Melville to diversify his narrative by including the voices of opinions of disparate personalities. Davis argues that the serious problem of the relation of soul to body is neglected, but I think the problem is merely a means to an end, and that Melville's use of this body in this sense is stylistic.

Ahab's self-consciousness about his aging body tells us that he is aware of a connection between his decay and his emotions. Ahab's interest in bodies is most evident in his conversations with the blacksmith and the carpenter late in the novel. We will examine a fascinating quote from that section to help us generate some final comments about Ahab's desire to create a particular body.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The novel's central environment is, of course, the ocean, which itself is described by Ishmael as a body: "these are the times of dreamy quietude, when beholding the tranquil beauty and brilliancy of the ocean's skin, one forgets the tiger heart that pants beneath it; and would not willingly remember, that this velvet paw but conceals a remorseless fang" (372). These metaphorical uses of the body allow Ishmael to articulate his thoughts and feelings about the world he describes in the novel. He must translate the opaque, watery monotony of his environment into embodied language that reveals the body as a tool for thinking through

problems and mysteries: bodies are instrumental. Both Ishmael and Ahab manipulate bodies with similar finesse and ease. The ocean is a large container, as is the Pequod, but so are the individual bodies aboard the Pequod. These three variations on containment function in tandem as a broad canvas upon which Melville can demonstrate the importance vast territories have on individual consciousness.

But why is the human body central to *Moby-Dick*? The most apparent reason is that Melville consciously focuses his attention on how containment operates as a principle that structures mental and physical life. The body of the Sperm Whale is an integral component of Melville's interest in discussing the transformations of matter from one bodily vessel to another. This is most explicit in the chapters on the physiology of whales, but the principle also operates in Ishmael's musings on the human body. In one passage Ishmael relates how the blubber of the whale produces oil, allowing the reader to imagine the vast scope of the creature's body:

Assuming the blubber to be the skin of the whale; then, when this skin, as in the case of a very large Sperm Whale, will yield the bulk of one hundred barrels of oil; and, when it is considered that, in quantity, or rather weight, that oil, in its expressed state, is only three fourths, and not the entire substance of the coat; some idea may hence be had of the enormousness of that animated mass, a mere part of whose mere integument yields such a lake of liquid as that. Reckoning ten barrels to the ton, you have ten tons for the net weight of only three quarters of the stuff of the whale's skin. (246)

Ishmael presents the notion that the vast scale of the physical world as constituted in individual bodies and the whole environment of life overwhelms consciousness. The whale's skin is specifically weighed out as an entity capable of undergoing physical and numerical change.

Whale bodies are animated even in death. We can compare this passage to the quote concerning Ahab's wrinkles on his forehead written by an invisible pencil by examining the similarities between how exterior forces influence the shape and texture of bodies. Compare the above passage with these words Ahab speaks to the blacksmith about an order for a human body:

Hold; while Prometheus is about it, I'll order a complete man after a desirable pattern. Imprimis, fifty feet high in his socks; then, chest modelled after the Thames Tunnel; then, legs with roots to 'em, to stay in one place; then, arms three feet through the wrist; no heart at all, brass forehead, and about a quarter of an acre of fine brains; and let me see--shall I order eyes to see outwards? No, but put a sky-light on top of his head to illuminate inwards. There, take the order, and away" (359).

When we read these two passages together we can produce some interesting ways to view human and whale bodies as containers, tools, and canvases. In the first passage Melville wants the reader to have a numerical representation of the size of the whale and the way its skin is divided in the production of oil. These units of measurement are connected to the reasoning Ahab uses to place marks and courses on the chart he uses to navigate the ocean in search of Moby Dick. Melville wants us to be aware of the scope of the whale's blubber and how it is not all used in the production of oil. Ahab also wants to create a "complete man" that will compare to a sperm whale but who will also be capable of withstanding the environmental violence Ahab has suffered in his life. The passage is almost humorous in its syntax and diction; but what is most interesting is that Ahab wants "a sky-light on top of his head to illuminate inwards" (359). We can connect this idea to the confusion Ishmael feels about Queequeg's tattoos early in the novel. Those passages were concerned with the external shape and color of the body, but Ahab is more

interested in possessing the ability to see the internal workings of the body or the mind. Ahab is interested in the creation of bodies, in how the various bodies in the world could possibly come out of a single creator or process. Consider Ahab's condemnation of the Carpenter and his ability to make an array of objects related to the body:

“art thou not an arrant, all-grasping, intermeddling, monopolizing, heathenish old scamp, to be one day making legs, and the next day coffins to clap them in, and yet again life-buoys out of those same coffins? Thou art as unprincipled as the gods, and as much of a jack-of-all-trades.” (395)

He is a tool maker, a shaper and molder of material which is then used for various purposes. This concerns Ahab because these bodies do not appear to contain any moral or emotional conflicts. Coffins are containers for corpses which are no longer capable of containing the will or life that animated them in the past. Bodily diversity is something that bothers Ahab. His problem becomes our problem as readers because we are face with an array of different bodies that seem to mix together in an odd manner, a manner that leaves us unsure of what questions we should have about the body as a container, tool, and canvas. We can argue that Melville aligns himself with the blacksmith and the carpenter because they are all makers, they construct things out of material, and Melville's language is the medium he uses to build his bodies. Melville uses bodily metaphors to create a moment between Ahab and heaven:

Tied up and twisted; gnarled and knotted with wrinkles; haggardly firm and unyielding; his eyes glowing like coals, that still glow in the ashes of ruin; untottering Ahab stood forth in the clearness of the morn; lifting his splintered helmet of a brow to the fair girl's forehead of heaven. (405)

This sentence reaches back to the earlier quote which we used to think about Ahab's forehead and the chart formed there in his wrinkles.

If Queequeg's tattoos provide an inscription which can be read no matter how opaque or mysterious; and if Ahab's severed leg provides opportunities for interpretations about his motives; the sperm whale is the creature in the novel which remains the most difficult to apprehend by appearance alone:

But the great Sperm Whale, this high and mighty god-like dignity inherent in the brow is so immensely amplified, that gazing on it, in that full front view, you feel the Deity and the dread powers more forcibly than in beholding any other object in living nature. For you see no one point precisely; not one distinct feature is revealed; no nose, eyes, ears, or mouth; no face; he had none, proper; nothing but that one broad firmament of a forehead, pleated with riddles; dumbly lowering with the doom of boats, and ships, and men. (274)

Yet the narrator also comments on the internal structure of the sperm whale, "one of whose peculiarities it is, to have an entire non-valvular structure of the blood-vessels, so that when pierced even by so small a point as a harpoon, a deadly drain is at once begun upon his whole arterial system" (282). Contrasting these two views produces a confusing image of the sperm whale as a creature vulnerable internally but not externally. The sperm whale is even described as a creature that provides its own fuel when it is cooked in the try pots:

In a word, after being tried out, the crisp, shrivelled blubber, now called scraps or fritters, still contains considerable of its unctuous properties. These fritters feed the flames. Like a plethoric burning martyr, or a self-consuming misanthrope,

once ignited, the whale supplies his own fuel and burns by his own body.

(326).

As a kitchen, the Pequod uses the whale to fuel its operation. Many of these overlapping uses of bodies in the novel gives us the ability to see how even bodies without any animating will or life are still useful.

The bodies in the novel we have studied throughout this essay are all significant containers, tools, and canvases. From Queequeg's purple-yellow skin and tattoos, to Ahab's wrinkles and his connection to heaven's forehead, we have seen how Melville uses the body to connect seemingly disparate elements in this encyclopedic novel. As readers we should now have a better appreciation for Melville's intense focus on the physical world. Many abstract ideas are discussed by Ishmael, but the concrete reality of biology and the earth's environments are never abandoned in the narrative. We should now have a clearer perception of how bodies serve Melville as miniature vessels he can use to structure his own artistic canvas.

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Moby-Dick is one of the world's great novels, whose richness increases with each new reading. A story of monomania aboard a whaling ship, Moby-Dick is a tremendously ambitious novel that functions at once as a documentary of life at sea and a vast philosophical allegory of life in general. Moby-Dick is obviously intended by Melville to be, on the merely physical level, a "whale among whales," one whose size, strength, coloration, and seeming intelligence and malignity put him in a class by himself. Beyond the physical level, however, Melville uses it as a touchstone to testify his characters' nature. However, on the one hand, this mystery in the novel is embodied by the description of the ocean. Moby Dick, novel (1851) by Herman Melville detailing the voyage of the Pequod, a whaling vessel whose captain is intent on finding the white sperm whale Moby Dick. The novel was not well received at first but is now widely regarded as Melville's magnum opus and one of the greatest novels in American literature. Moby Dick is generally regarded as Melville's magnum opus and one of the greatest American novels. Kent, Rockwell: illustration of Moby Dick. Moby Dick, illustration by Rockwell Kent for a Lakeside Press edition (1930) of Herman Melville's Moby Dick . Moby-Dick; or, The Whale is an 1851 novel by American writer Herman Melville. The book is the sailor Ishmael's narrative of the obsessive quest of Ahab, captain of the whaling ship Pequod, for revenge on Moby Dick, the giant white sperm whale that on the ship's previous voyage bit off Ahab's leg at the knee. A contribution to the literature of the American Renaissance, Moby-Dick was published to mixed reviews, was a commercial failure, and was out of print at the time of the author's death in 1891