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# Nameless, Inscrutable, Unearthly: An Examination of Obsession in Moby Dick

Sarah K. Lingo

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NAMELESS, INSCRUTABLE, UNEARTHLY: AN EXAMINATION OF OBSESSION

IN *MOBY DICK*

by

Sarah K. Lingo

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors  
(English)

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## Abstract

In this project, I examine the operation of the sublime and the unconscious in *Moby Dick*. In the sublime, I locate the source of Ahab's obsession with, and Ishmael's interest in, *Moby Dick*. Through sublime experiences, these characters confront the limits of human understanding. Ishmael accepts this limitation, but Ahab rejects it, choosing to pursue *Moby Dick* in an effort to reassert order in an entropic universe. He blames his loss of control on the whale, which becomes his *objet petit a*: that object, according to Lacan, that distracts the obsessive from the true source of his anxiety. Employing Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, I compare Ahab's and Ishmael's reactions to the sublime, and how these reactions determine their fates.

For my parents.

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## Introduction

### The Whale-Line

Ishmael describes the whale-line, a rope which covers almost the entire ship, “twisting and writhing around it in almost every direction” (Melville 253). It is common, Ishmael tells us, for this line to entrap a whaler and drag him over the side of the ship to his death. At the end of the chapter, Ishmael explains that a whale-line entangles all humanity:

All men live enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters around their necks; but it is only when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that mortals realize the silent, subtle, ever-present perils of life. And if you be a philosopher, though seated in the whale-boat, you would not at heart feel one whit more of terror, than though seated before your evening fire with a poker, and not a harpoon, by your side. (254)

Ishmael impresses on his reader the frailty of human beings: the philosopher is just as aware of the “ever-present perils of life” as the whaler. This frailty is emphasized by the enormity of the whale itself. The leviathan Moby Dick leaves Ishmael feeling small: “For in the mere act of penning my thoughts of this Leviathan, they weary me, and make me faint with their outreaching comprehensiveness” (406). The experience of human vulnerability permeates *Moby Dick*, and I argue, is the primary cause of Ahab’s mad obsession.

As the immensity of the whale makes Ishmael “weary,” the immensity of *Moby Dick* should make the reader feel the same. As a hermeneutic project, *Moby Dick* is



substantial. The task of interpreting its ambiguous symbols and characters is reminiscent of the task of describing the appearance of whales, according to Ishmael: “For all these reasons, then, any way you may look at it, you must conclude that the great Leviathan is that one creature in the world which must remain unpainted to the last. True, one portrait may hit the mark much nearer than another, but none can hit it with any very considerable degree of exactness” (240). The word “unpainted” is polysemous here, indicating not only the whale’s refusal to be interpreted but his physical whiteness: “[S]o mystical and well nigh ineffable was it, that I almost despair of putting it in a comprehensible form. It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me” (168). This ambiguity invites an obsessive pursuit: for Ishmael, one of interpretation and for Ahab, one of revenge.

*Moby Dick*, as both whale and book, refuses to be interpreted. This ambiguity exists in several objects: the sea, the whale, and Ahab. Each of these objects presents a semiotic challenge to its interpreter. Often in *Moby Dick*, the interpreter, when faced with these objects, has a sublime experience and is reminded of the insufficiency of his senses. One response to a reminder that human perception is inadequate is awe, reverence, and humility. Another is denial, rejection, and arrogance. The first aligns with Ishmael’s reaction, and the second with Ahab’s. Though Ishmael does not become wholly obsessed with the pursuit of Moby Dick, he flirts with obsession, and his fanatical categorizing and describing of whales reflect this. Ishmael and Ahab exhibit different but not necessarily opposite reactions when faced with the immensity of whales and of the sea they inhabit.

Ahab’s reaction to the possibility that his senses may be inadequate, a consuming obsession with Moby Dick, is similar, in Lacanian terms, to the reaction of a castrated

subject, who loses *jouissance* and looks to the Other and the *objet petit a* to find it. It is my intention to examine Ahab's trauma and subsequent obsession through a Lacanian lens for this reason. However, I will first give an extended and close reading of *Moby Dick*, paying attention to the sublime and the unconscious, before turning to my psychoanalytic methodology. It will be necessary to examine dominant conceptions of the sublime and the unconscious in *Moby Dick* before relating these to Lacanian psychoanalytic theory.

## Chapter 1

### Melville and His Unshored Harborless Immensities

#### A Boggy, Soggy, Squitchy Picture of Whales

Ishmael experiences the incomprehensibility of whales even before he boards the *Pequod*. In the Spouter-Inn, he encounters:

a very large oil painting so thoroughly besmoked, and every way defaced, that in the unequal crosslights by which you viewed it, it was only by diligent study and a series of systematic visits to it, and careful inquiry of the neighbors, that you could any way arrive at an understanding of its purpose . . . A boggy, soggy, squitchy picture truly, enough to drive a nervous man distracted. Yet was there a sort of indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity about it that fairly froze you to it, till you involuntarily took an oath with yourself to find out what that marvelous

painting meant. Ever and anon a bright, but, alas, deceptive idea would dart you through . . . But stop; does it not bear a faint resemblance to a gigantic fish? even the great leviathan himself? (Melville 9-10)

Ishmael eventually determines that the painting is of “a Cape-Horner in a great hurricane; the half-foundered ship weltering there with its three dismantled masts alone visible; and an exasperated whale, purposing to spring clean over the craft, is in the enormous act of impaling himself upon the three mast-heads” (10). He admits that this is just a “theory . . . partly based upon the aggregated opinions of many aged persons with whom [he] conversed upon the subject” (10). The painting is indistinct, or as Ishmael puts it, “boggy, soggy,” and “squitchy.” The “indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity” of the painting follows Ishmael throughout his story, extending into his physical encounters with whales while aboard the *Pequod*. His impressions of the leviathan, like his impressions of the painting, are amorphous, indefinite. Ishmael’s opinion of whales seems in constant flux; as Carol Colatrella points out, “It becomes difficult to distinguish between victims and villains: is that whale a magnificently divine creature or a monster?” (Colatrella 166). Ishmael has not worked through his experiences before sitting down to write *Moby Dick*; *Moby Dick* is this “working through.” As Ishmael writes, he relives his experiences, hoping to shed some light on them not only for his reader, but for himself.

As Ishmael works to uncover the meaning of leviathans, he finds that it is just as elusive in direct encounters as in the Spouter-Inn painting: leviathans and the ocean they inhabit are unknowable. Despite Ishmael’s relentless quest for understanding, the futility of this quest is apparent and observable in those chapters dedicated to the scientific study of whales. Ishmael devotes much discussion to whaling history, whale mythology, and

four chapters on whale anatomy. Though Ahab is our most obvious obsessive case, Ishmael too exhibits an obsession, one which might be more apparent if it were not set alongside extreme Ahab: Ishmael is obsessed with understanding, and specifically, understanding whales. The purpose of Ishmael's comprehensive documentation of whale-knowledge, exemplified in those chapters dedicated exclusively to the cataloguing and anatomizing of whales, is ambiguous. Charles Olson in *Call Me Ishmael* suggests that Melville uses them to control the pace of the plot:

The body of the book supports the bulk of the matter on the Sperm whale—"scientific or poetic." Melville carefully controls these chapters, skillfully breaking them up: the eight different vessels the *Pequod* meets as she moves across the ocean slip in and out between the considerations of cetology. Actually and deliberately the whaling chapters brake the advance of the plot. Van Wyck Brooks calls them "ballast." (Olson 67-68).

While these extended pauses may be examples of narratological devices at work, they are also a symptom of Ishmael's experiences. Our first question should be, why does *Ishmael* tell his story this way? For Ishmael, reliving his experiences on the *Pequod* must be painful, and thus, one possible purpose for the cetology chapters is to intentionally delay reliving the final destruction of the *Pequod* and its men. *Moby Dick* is meant to be organic: not just a telling but a reliving of Ishmael's story.

Another possible reason for including these chapters is that Ishmael gathers knowledge as a way to understand his trauma; *Moby Dick* is a cathartic project. When Ishmael first interviews to join the *Pequod*'s crew, Captain Peleg asks, "Dost know

nothing at all about whaling, I dare say—eh?” to which Ishmael responds, “Nothing Sir; But I have no doubt I shall soon learn” (Melville 63). He must, therefore, learn what he knows about cetology and whaling history *after* his experience on the *Pequod*, which seems strange. Logically, Ishmael should want nothing to do with whales after losing his friends and fellow whalers to one. Moby Dick leaves Ishmael stranded in the middle of the ocean, an “orphan.” But Ishmael embraces whales, learning everything he can about whale anatomy and the exploits of other whaling voyages. Even before the cetology chapters, Ishmael begins *Moby Dick* by translating “whale” into thirteen languages and giving pages of extracts about whales from a variety of sources including the Bible and Shakespeare. Knowledge, for Ishmael, coupled with the cathartic experience of writing *Moby Dick*, is a way to possess his own trauma and control it.

Ishmael admits to the inadequacy of his account of whale anatomy and categorization in “Cetology,” and practically apologizes for not providing a more thorough examination:

Finally: It was stated at the outset, that this system would not be here, and at once, perfected. You cannot but plainly see that I have kept my words. But now I leave my cetological system standing thus unfinished, even as the great Cathedral of Cologne was left, with the crane still standing upon the top of the uncompleted tower. For small erections may be finished by their first architects; grand ones, true ones, ever leave the copestone to posterity. God keep me from ever completing anything. This whole book is but a draught—nay, but the draught of a draught. Oh, Time, Strength, Cash, and Patience. (128)

His own attempts to scientifically describe whales dissatisfy him. He eventually concludes that it is absurd to even try to understand the leviathan through a museum exhibit or anatomy book:

How vain and foolish, then, thought I, for timid untraveled man to try to comprehend aright this wondrous whale, by merely poring over his dead attenuated skeleton, stretched in this peaceful wood. No. Only in the heart of quickest perils; only when within the eddyings of his angry flukes; only on the profound unbounded sea, can the fully invested whale be truly and livingly found out. (405)

Although Ishmael has been “in the heart of quickest perils,” he still researches whales, believing that his experiences alone do not provide adequate insight into them. Though he exhaustively studies whales, he admits his inadequacy in penetrating their mysteries. If Ishmael, with his whaling experience and scientific knowledge cannot comprehend the leviathan, does his reader have a chance? As Ishmael’s encounter with the painting in the Spouter-Inn indicates, whales, and the water they inhabit, are unknowable.

In “The Sphynx,” Ahab expresses a similar desire to know the unknowable. He addresses the head of a decapitated and gutted sperm whale that hangs over the side of the ship, bobbing half in and half out of the water: “‘Speak, thou vast and venerable head,’ muttered Ahab, ‘which though ungarnished with a beard, yet here and there lookest hoary with mosses; speak, mighty head, and tell us the secret thing that is in thee. Of all divers, thou hast dived the deepest. That head upon which the upper sun now gleams, has moved amid this world’s foundations’ (279-280). Ishmael compares the head to that of the Sphynx, “hanging there in the midst of so intense a calm” (279). The

reasons for this comparison become clear as Ahab continues his address, speculating about what secret things the whale has seen in “that awful water-land”: murder, mutinies, the death-leaps of lovers, and the sinking of ships (280). Ahab perceives the whale’s home as a terrible wasteland harboring only death, yet he pleads with the whale to share history’s secrets: “O head! thou hast seen enough to split the planets and make an infidel of Abraham, and not one syllable is thine!” (280). He is only shaken from his apostrophe by a “Sail ho!” from the main mast head, at which point “whole thunderclouds swept aside from his brow” (280). Ahab ends his monologue and this short chapter saying, “O Nature, and O soul of man! how far beyond all utterance are your linked analogies; not the smallest atom stirs or lives on matter, but has its cunning duplicate in mind” (280). While this last exclamation is ambiguous, with no immediately recognizable reference to his recent speech, it seems likely that he alludes to the whale and himself, respectively, when he addresses “nature” and the “soul of man,” and also that he recognizes a chasm between these.

### A Strange Analogy

As illustrated by his speech in “The Sphynx,” Ahab perceives the whale to be a source of information on the inscrutable, unchanging sea itself. Not only has the whale seen unfathomable depths “where bell or diver never went,” these depths are his “most familiar home” (280). Ahab’s opinion of the sea here echoes an earlier assessment of Ishmael’s:

Consider the subtleness of the sea; how its most dreaded creatures glide under the water, unapparent for the most part, and treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure. Consider also the devilish brilliance of beauty of many of its most remorseless tribes, as the dainty embellished shape of many species of sharks. Consider, once more, the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began. (248)

In both of these analyses, the sea is an unknowable, dangerous entity, an obvious conclusion, supported by the fear sailors have of the sea: “Mark, how when sailors in a dead calm bathe in the open sea—mark how closely they hug their ship and only coast along her sides” (371). In Ishmael's analysis, not only is the sea dangerous, it is deceptive, concealing “dreaded creatures . . . beneath the loveliest tints of azure.” Its outward beauty, like the “dainty embellished shape” of sharks, is matched by an inner horror: an ongoing “cannibalism.” This terrible image of sea creatures consuming one another agrees with Ahab’s conception of the sea as a death-ridden wasteland. Though Ishmael’s analysis of the sea is similar to Ahab’s in that the sea represents some unknowable, malicious entity, these are different in a crucial way: Ishmael sees the brutality of the sea and the gentleness of the land as mirroring two forces within the human soul:

Consider all this; and then turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of



peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life.

God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return! (248)

In Ishmael's analogy, there is an island "full of peace and joy" in each soul that is surrounded by the sea, which conversely represents "all the horrors of the half known life." He suggests that one has a choice whether to venture from this inner island, and he recommends that one does not, because "thou canst never return!" While Ishmael recognizes the same conflict between the human soul and the sea that Ahab does, he sees this conflict mirrored within the human soul itself.

When Pip plunges into the ocean and subsequently goes mad in "The Castaway," he physically acts out the metaphor for madness that Ishmael has proposed. Pip wanders from the "verdant land," or in this case the safety of the row boat, and ventures into the "appalling ocean" where he encounters its terrors. Pip first leaps into the water after a whale jostles the row boat, in the "involuntary consternation of the moment" (370). As he leaps, he becomes entangled in the whale line, and as the whale swims away, it drags Pip along behind it. Tashtego cuts the line, thus saving Pip, but Stubb warns him that if he jumps a second time, he will not be saved. The second time Pip leaps into the ocean, Ishmael tells us, "Alas! Stubb was but too true to his word . . . No boat knife was lifted when he fell so rapidly astern" (371). The *Pequod* eventually saves Pip, but the hour he spends "bobbing up and down in that sea" drives him mad, and thereafter he goes "about the deck an idiot" (371).

Ishmael explains that while Pip is floating alone in the middle of the ocean, his soul drowns but his body remains afloat: "The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul" (371). He then qualifies the word "drowned":

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 heave 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 mortal 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. (371-372)

Ishmael implies that Pip sees what no mortal can see without going mad: "man's insanity is heaven's sense." Man cannot arrive at "that celestial thought" without first "wandering from all mortal reason." Consequently, the sea's secrets are destined to remain secret, because even if one man learns them, no other will believe or understand his "absurd and frantic" ramblings.

The sea in Ishmael's metaphor, and in Pip's experience, plays two roles at once. It simultaneously represents the physical terrors of the ocean and the terrors within the human soul. Pip faces both of these while he is lost at sea. Ishmael first attributes Pip's madness specifically to the loneliness he encounters: "Now, in calm weather, to swim in the open ocean is as easy to the practised swimmer as to ride in a spring-carriage ashore. But the awful lonesomeness is intolerable. The intense *concentration of self* [emphasis added] in the middle of such a heartless immensity, my God! who can tell it?" (371). The

phrase “concentration of self” is peculiar here, because it suggests that loneliness is defined by an abundance of self, not the absence of others. Pip only encounters himself while out at sea, and this encounter plays a part in driving him mad. Ishmael then attributes Pip’s madness to his encounter with external influence; Pip sees “God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom” and “the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heave the colossal orbs.” Thus, the underlying cause of Pip’s madness is uncertain. Does loneliness drive Pip mad, or does he go mad as a result of his encounter with nature or God? In other words, is the source of Pip’s madness internal or external? Ishmael does not let his reader accept one and exclude the other, and his elusive language reflects this: the seemingly contradictory phrase “joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities,” for example, demonstrates how difficult it is to assess with certainty any element of Pip’s experience. The possible interpretations of this experience are as “multitudinous” as the “coral insects” Pip sees. Pip’s madness seems to be a result of internal and external influences simultaneously. Whether the sea functions independently as an element of nature or God, or within Ishmael’s madness metaphor, it is equally ambiguous in each case. Out at sea, the human soul and nature intersect: Pip comes face-to-face with both the infinity of the sea and himself, and these in conjunction make him mad.

Ishmael’s analogy for madness, in which a person wanders from the island in their mind into the ocean, suggests that everyone has the potential to go mad. Each human being has an unknowable portion to his soul. The appearance of madness is determined by whether he wanders into this darkness. Ishmael makes this division explicit: “The sea had kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul.” We see this division

between body and soul later, in “Queequeg in His Coffin” when Pip takes dying Queequeg’s hand and says,

Poor rover! will ye never have done with all this weary roving? where go ye now? But if the current carry ye to those sweet Antilles where the beaches are only beat with water-lilies, will ye do one little errand for me? Seek out one Pip, who’s now been missing long: I think he’s in those far Antilles. If ye find him, then comfort him; for he must be very sad; for look! he’s left his tambourine behind;—I found it. Rig-a-dig, dig, dig! Now, Queequeg, die; and I’ll beat ye your dying march. (427-428)

Pip maintains that while his body was saved, his soul was lost: the essence of Pip is gone, presumably to some afterlife where the dying Queequeg might encounter him. Pip speaks as though his soul, having been drowned, is not only separated from him but dead. Pip’s experience and his subsequent madness embody Ishmael’s analogy in which one must wander from finite safety into infinite danger.

Ishmael’s metaphor for madness and Pip’s experience exhibit a characteristic of gothic stories: the representation of psychic states in landscapes. The land, and its extension the *Pequod*, represent safety and what is knowable. Conversely, the sea represents danger and what is unknowable. This distinction, which Ishmael carries over into the mind, is similar to the divide between the conscious and unconscious. Ishmael’s “insular Tahiti” corresponds to the knowable, familiar conscious mind, while the sea corresponds to the unconscious, “a special region of the mind, shut off from the rest” (Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* 345). The sea as Ishmael describes it is not a perfect depiction of Freud’s unconscious. For example, Ishmael seems to equate the

sea with madness itself when he says that one cannot encounter it without going mad. Furthermore, there is the added element of divine influence, or “God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom” (Melville 372). However, both share that fundamental quality of unsettling mystery, an inner one that is responsible, perhaps more directly to Ishmael and more indirectly to Freud, for madness. Two of our mad characters, Ahab and Pip, are mad as a direct result of their traumatic experiences in the water, the physical manifestation of the unfathomable, terrifying mystery within every human soul.

### Shoreless, Indefinite as God

I return to my initial observation that it is strange that Ishmael researches whales and goes on whaling voyages even after his experience on the *Pequod*. Given the terrors that Pip encounters out at sea, and the dangers that all whalers acknowledge, it seems especially strange that Ahab, too, would ask the decapitated sperm whale to share its secrets. For as terrible as the sea is, it does have some allure for Ahab and Ishmael, and is in some way, according to Ishmael, superior to the land. Ishmael says in “The Lee Shore,”

The port would fain give succor; the port is pitiful; in the port is safety, comfort, hearthstone, supper, warm blankets, friends, all that’s kind to our mortalities. But in that gale, the port, the land, is that ship’s direst jeopardy; she must fly all hospitality; one touch of land, though it but graze the keel, would make her shudder through and through. With all her might she crowds all sail off shore; in so doing, fights ’gainst the very

winds that fain would blow her homeward; seeks all the lashed sea's  
landlessness again; for refuge's sake forlornly rushing into peril; her only  
friend her bitterest foe . . . But as in landlessness alone resides the highest  
truth, shoreless, indefinite as God—so, better is it to perish in that howling  
infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were to  
safety! . . . Up from the spray of thy ocean-perishing—straight up, leaps  
thy apotheosis! (94-95)

Ishmael talks disparagingly of the land for being “pitiful” despite its “comfort.” He personifies the ship, investing her with the volition of a human being. She fights against returning home to the land and “seeks all the lashed sea's landlessness.” She yearns for the ocean because “in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God.” Despite the presence of madness in the ocean, the sea contains some truth for Ishmael that the land lacks. The sea is alluring, and the land is merely “all that's kind to our mortalities.”

Barbara Glenn labels this alluring quality of the sea, simultaneously attractive and repulsive, as the sublime, in her insightful essay “Melville and the Sublime in Moby-Dick.” Her primary source on the sublime is Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, a book Melville owned (Glenn 165). Glenn explains,

Melville makes use of nearly all the causes of the sublime which Burke enumerates in the *Enquiry*, embodying these causes in the very examples Burke cites. Burke's first example of sublimity, the sea, is the world in which almost the entire narrative of Moby-Dick is set, and that sea is

sublime according to Burke's exact prescriptions: a rugged and broken surface; an apparent infinity in the succession of its waves; a vast extension, particularly in depth; and most of all, a vast disorder, terrible, irresistibly powerful and obscure. (167)

The ominous uncertainty that Ishmael constantly associates with the sea corresponds with Burke's definition of sublimity. Furthermore, Burke's comparison of the sublime and the beautiful echoes Ishmael's comparison of the land and the sea. According to Burke's assessment, the sea corresponds to the sublime, and the land corresponds to the beautiful:

For sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones are comparatively small; beauty should be smooth, and polished; the great, rugged and negligent . . . beauty should not be obscure; the great ought to be dark and gloomy; beauty should be light and delicate; beauty should not be obscure; the great ought to be solid, and even massive. (Burke 550)

The land is "smooth" and "polished" in comparison with the "rugged and negligent" sea. The sea is "obscure," "dark," and "gloomy," while the land is "light and delicate." The land is beautiful because it is comfortable and contains "all that's kind to our mortalities." The sea, in contrast, is "shoreless, indefinite as God," just as the sublime is "vast in [its] dimensions." According to Ishmael's description of the sea and Burke's of the sublime, the sea is sublime.

Kant writes, conversely, that an object like "the vast ocean heaved up by storms" is not sublime, because it is perceivable by the senses: "nothing that can be an object of the sense is to be called sublime" (Kant 522). The sublime, by its definition, cannot be experienced by the senses. The sublime evokes the idea in a person that his senses are

insufficient for understanding: “[What happens is that] our imagination strives to progress toward infinity, while our reason demands absolute totality as a real idea, and so [the imagination,] our power of estimating the magnitude of things in the world of sense, is inadequate to that idea” (522). As he is contemplating the inferiority of his senses though, the person realizes his own “supersensible power” (522). Thus, the sublime is “the attunement that the intellect [gets] through a certain presentation that occupies reflective judgment” (521-523). The ability to acknowledge an inability to understand is a kind of knowledge, and so “sublime” describes those notions that bring that knowledge forward: “*Sublimity is what even to be able to think proves that the mind has a power surpassing any standard of sense*” (522).

The sublimity of the ocean and of the white whale, which encompasses the uncertainty, vastness, infinity, and obscurity inherent in nature, is a reminder to Ahab and Ishmael of the gap between humanity and nature. In other words, it is a reminder of nature’s complete power over humanity and the inadequacy of our own imaginations to comprehend it. Conversely, the beauty of nature reassures humanity that their world is comprehensible and in tune with human beings: “In the presence of the sublime in nature the mind feels *agitated*, while in an aesthetic judgment about the beautiful in nature it is in *restful* contemplation” (526). The painting in the Spouter-Inn is a perfect example of the sublime; it forces Ishmael, who describes the painting as “enough to drive a nervous man distracted,” to ask several other guests what they see in it. Ishmael is obviously annoyed by his inability to comprehend the painting, and his curiosity is a state of agitation. Kant compares such an agitation with a vibration that alternates between



“repulsion from, and attraction to” (Kant 526). Though Ishmael is bothered by the painting’s incomprehensibility, it entices him.

### Framed Sublimity

The sublime in *Moby Dick* is not reducible to the sublimity of the sea or of Moby Dick. *Moby Dick* contains a framed mystery that makes its depths especially difficult to plumb for all involved—Ishmael, Ahab, and the reader. Both Ahab and Ishmael are consumed by the mystery of whales and their environment, perhaps the former more than the latter, but Ishmael has an additional source of the sublime with which to contend: Ahab. Ishmael takes on Ahab’s quest of understanding whales and the sea, but he does this, perhaps in part, as a means to getting at Ahab. As Ishmael’s inconstant evaluation of Ahab’s nightmares shows, Ahab’s interior may be just as unfathomable as the sea. John Wenke closely examines Ahab, his unconscious and his motives in “Ahab and ‘the Larger, Darker, Deeper Part.’” He says of Ishmael’s analysis of Ahab, “No inquirer can appropriate the secret of another’s being: nor can one transcend the chronological fact of one’s own exile from a putatively primal, unifying self” (Wenke 704). Ahab is impenetrable, and in this way, his mind is the sublime.

Wenke distinguishes between the conscious and unconscious regions of the mind, where the unconscious region is the undecipherable one: “At the self’s deepest layers, Ishmael discovers an insuperable ignorance of the unconscious self” (704). In Ishmael’s metaphor, the “verdant land” corresponds to sanity, and the “appalling ocean” corresponds to insanity. This metaphor takes on new meaning in conversation with the

sublime. Just as one cannot penetrate the mysteries of the sea, Ishmael cannot penetrate the mysteries of the unconscious. Ahab's unconscious meets Burke's simplest criteria: it is "dark and gloomy," "rugged and negligent," and "vast in [its] dimensions."

Furthermore, beyond its impenetrable, gloomy mysteries, Ahab's unconscious evokes in Ishmael the same feeling of inadequate imagination that the sea evokes in Ahab, which recalls Kant's qualification that the sublime exists not in the object itself but in its reminder of the inadequacy of the senses. Wenke says, "Though able to affect a 'firm, collected front,' Ahab still 'in his hidden self, raved on.' The nature of this 'hidden self' looms among Ishmael's most vexing hermeneutical problems, for as Ishmael realizes, what he fathoms must be little more than a frustrating prelude to what cannot *be* fathomed" (Wenke 703). Ahab serves as a reminder to Ishmael that there exist mysteries that the human mind is incapable of penetrating.

The sublime appears in several distinct guises: the whale, the sea, and Ahab's unconscious. Each object possesses an inscrutable quality, one that leaves its interpreter at a loss for understanding. Ahab is Ishmael's "hermeneutic" project, as Wenke puts it, just as the sea is Ahab's. The reader is left then with at least three sublime objects to decipher: the sea, the whale, and Ahab. Ishmael is charged with the same task, and his interpretive eye simultaneously helps and hinders the reader's understanding. We are distanced from the initial objects of interpretation, the sea and the whale, through Ahab's perception and then Ishmael's perception of Ahab's unconscious. This framed sublimity makes *Moby Dick* particularly difficult to pin down.

## Chapter 2

### Is Ahab, Ahab?: A Loss of Agency

#### A Natural Fatality

In Chapter 130 of *Moby Dick*, “The Hat,” Ahab decides to take up the watch for Moby Dick by ascending the mast. Before he hoists himself up, “he look[s] round upon his crew, sweeping from one to the other; pausing his glance long upon Daggoo, Queequeg, Tashtego; but shunning Fedallah; and then settling his firm relying eye upon the chief mate, [and says],—“Take the rope, sir—I give it into thy hands, Starbuck”” (Melville 475). Ahab charges Starbuck with binding the rope so that he does not fall from his perch. Ishmael explains that the rope’s “fastened end on deck is always given in strict charge to some one man who has the special watch of it. Because in such a wilderness of running rigging . . . it would be but a *natural fatality* [emphasis added] if, unprovided with a constant watchman, the hoisted sailor should by some carelessness of the crew be cast adrift and fall all swooping to the sea” (475). After Ahab looks to each crew member, considering each of them (save Fedallah), he chooses to put the rope and his life in the hands of Starbuck: the one crew member who has challenged him. As if the reader is not already suspicious, Ishmael draws our attention directly to this choice:

[T]he only strange things about [Ahab’s proceedings] seemed to be, that Starbuck, almost the one only man who had ever ventured to oppose him with anything in the slightest degree approaching to decision—one of those too, whose faithfulness on the look-out he had seemed to doubt

somewhat; it was strange, that this was the very man he should select for his watchman; freely giving his whole life into such an otherwise distrusted person's hands. (475-476)

If Starbuck were to fasten the rope incorrectly, Ahab would surely die, and the act would likely not be perceived as mutinous; Ishmael makes a point to tell us that this kind of accident is not uncommon, calling it a "natural fatality." Ahab, who is always methodical and careful, gives Starbuck an ideal opportunity to drown him, but Ishmael does not give an explanation for this peculiar choice; he merely calls attention to it.

One interpretation of this strange gesture is that Ahab sees in Starbuck a potential end to his suffering. On the one hand, he knows that Starbuck is not quite capable of committing mutiny. In Chapter 36, "The Quarter-Deck," Ahab invites Starbuck to speak out against him:

Stand up amid the general hurricane, thy one tost sapling cannot,  
Starbuck! And what is it? Reckon it. 'Tis but to help strike a fin; no  
wondrous feat for Starbuck. What is it more? From this one poor hunt,  
then, the best lance out of all Nantucket, surely he will not hang back,  
when every foremasthand has clutched a whetstone? Ah! constrainings  
seize thee; I see! the billow lifts thee! Speak, but speak!—Aye, aye! thy  
silence, then, *that* voices thee. (*Aside*) Something shot from my dilated  
nostrils, he has inhaled it in his lungs. Starbuck now is mine; cannot  
oppose me now, without rebellion. (146)

Starbuck says nothing, and Ahab knows from this that Starbuck is incapable of opposing him. On the other hand, although he knows that Starbuck is too weak to commit mutiny,

he hopes that if put in charge of the rigging, Starbuck will be able to act on his mutinous impulses. This peculiar decision suggests that Ahab is not driven by a vengeful impulse alone; there exist two dueling interests that inhabit Ahab, one rational, the other irrational.

In his comprehensive yet concise book *Obsession*, Lennard J. Davis traces obsession from its historical origins to its current cultural relevance. He tells us that obsession is usually characterized by a contest between two “selves,” where “a compulsive self struggles with an observing self” (Davis 31). He explains that the Latin words *obsessio* and *possessio* describe two ways of taking over a city during war: “*Possideo, -ere* and *obsideo, -ere* are two phases in the assault. If you’ve obsessed a city, you’ve surrounded it, but the citadel remains intact; while if you possess the city, the walls have been breached and you’ve conquered the citadel and its citizens” (31). The words “possession” and “obsession” became popular during the third and fourth centuries to describe two different kinds of demonic infiltration: in the former, victims are oblivious to the devil’s presence inside them, while in the latter, victims are aware of the devil’s presence and can defend themselves, because the devil has yet to claim their souls (31). The religious origins of these words reveal a real symptom of pathological obsession. Davis continues, “[O]bsession means that the person is aware of the symptoms and possible cause of his or her behavior. This ability to know that certain behaviors are not controllable, but somehow are also not coming from within one’s own desire or will, characterizes the disease of obsession” (31-32). This capacity to recognize the irrationality of one’s behavior while simultaneously being unable to control it, as Ishmael’s description from “The Spirit-Spout” indicates, characterizes Ahab’s

monomania. Ahab has lost control of his actions, not to the external influence that has taken his leg, but to an internal one that he struggles to identify.

#### All the Horrors of the Half Known Life: The Origin of Ahab's Madness

Like Ahab, Pip is confronted by two daunting, potentially sublime objects: the vast and terrible ocean, which I have discussed in Chapter 1, and himself. Ishmael mentions the second so subtly and so briefly in comparison with his extensive description of the sea that it is easy to overlook: "Now, in calm weather, to swim in the open ocean is as easy to the practised swimmer as to ride in a spring-carriage ashore. But the awful lonesomeness is intolerable. The intense *concentration of self* [emphasis added] in the middle of such a heartless immensity, my God! who can tell it?" (371). Ishmael proposes that Pip encounters something in himself that is just as responsible as his encounter with the ocean for his madness. As I have suggested, this "intense concentration of self" is an appearance of the unconscious in Pip's trauma, and it participates in Ahab's trauma as well. In both cases, the internal terrors these characters encounter resemble the unconscious: an unknowable portion of the mind whose influence is uncertain.

Though Ahab is not lost at sea for an extended period of time like Pip, their initial traumas are similar. Both characters come close to death after an encounter with a sublime object, which forces them to acknowledge the frailty of their lives. Pip believes that Stubb will keep his word that he would not be saved a second time, and the hour he spends floating between ships proves enough time to contemplate his own death and drive him mad. Ahab undergoes a comparable period of contemplation during which he is

not sure if he will live or die, and he does not go mad the instant his leg is torn from his body; he only does so at the end of a period of uncertainty. As Ishmael explains,

It is not probable that this monomania took its instant rise at the precise time of his bodily dismemberment. Then, in darting at the monster, knife in hand, he had but given loose to a sudden, passionate, corporal animosity; and when he received the stroke that tore him, he probably felt the agonizing bodily laceration, but nothing more. (165)

Madness only emerges as Ahab lies in his cabin, suffering his whale-given wound: “Ahab and anguish lay stretched together in one hammock . . . then it was, that his body and gashed soul bled into one another; and so interfusing, made him mad” (165). Ahab is incoherent and violent, and his shipmates are forced to bind him in a “strait-jacket” (165). That Ahab does not go mad as soon as Moby Dick takes his leg indicates that Ahab goes insane only after reflecting upon his injury; the act itself was not enough to incite vengeful madness. This pause before madness suggests that some mental process, deliberation, or choice, must take place first before madness can establish itself in a mind.

Ahab’s transformation into a madman, like Pip’s, is reminiscent of Ishmael’s analogy in which one wanders from his “insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy” to encounter in himself “all the horrors of the half known life.” Ishmael suggests that the opaque and deadly ocean resembles an inner horror that one is better off avoiding. Although a split between a rational and irrational mind is observable in the mad Pip and Ahab, in Ishmael’s analogy of madness, involving the “verdant land” and “appalling ocean” of the mind, Ishmael suggests that this split exists in all people, and one’s decision whether to wander from one’s “insular Tahiti” ultimately determines whether

one is sane or insane. When one ventures from one's internal island, a knowable and safe place, as Ahab and Pip do following their traumas, "his torn body and gashed soul [bleed] into one another; and so interfusing, [make] him mad." If the bleeding together of body and soul, or of rational and irrational minds, leads to madness, then Ishmael is kind to advise his reader to stay on his island.

The ocean of Ishmael's analogy is physically represented in Pip's trauma, and so the relationship between his trauma and the analogy is recognizable; the differing landscapes in which Pip finds himself directly correlate to those landscapes in Ishmael's analogy (when Pip is on board the *Pequod*, he is sane, but as soon as he ventures out into the ocean, he becomes insane). Though Ahab's trauma does not correlate so exactly, the oceanic conditions mirror Ahab's mental state as he is locked in his cabin, and thus also visually depict the analogy: "In a strait-jacket, he swung to the mad rockings of the gales. And, when running into more sufferable latitudes, the ship, with mild stun' sails spread, floated across the tranquil tropics, and, to all appearances, the old man's delirium seemed left behind him with the Cape Horn swells" (165). As Ahab descends into madness, the ship rocks violently in the "howling Patagonian Cape." As he goes mad, "the mad rockings of the gales" swing him back and forth in his hammock and strait-jacket. Finally, when the ship encounters calm waters, Ahab seemingly regains his sanity. By all appearances, he returns to his former self.

Ishmael explains that this is not the case: "[H]e came forth from his dark den into the blessed light and air; even then, when he bore that firm, collected front . . . and issued his calm orders once again; and his mates thanked God the direful madness was gone; even then Ahab, in his hidden self, raved on" (165). Though Ahab seems once again sane



to his crew, his composure only masks his lingering insanity: “Human madness is oftentimes a cunning and most feline thing. When you think it fled, it may have but become transfigured into some still subtler form” (165). With Ahab’s return to pseudo-normalcy, the realization of his irrational, unconscious self is complete. Ishmael describes this simultaneous existence of intellect and madness, the former now a tool of the latter: “But, as in this narrow-flowing monomania, not one jot of Ahab’s broad madness had been left behind; so in that broad madness, not one jot of his great natural intellect had perished. That before living agent, now became the living instrument” (165). Ahab is the same “compulsive self struggl[ing] with an observing self” that Davis describes, because although his acumen is intact, Ahab has the capacity to recognize, but not end, his obsession. In religious terms of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, Ahab is aware of his own demon. It becomes clearer then why Ahab, capable of being both rational and irrational simultaneously, would put Starbuck, his only challenger, in charge of his life. He hopes Starbuck can do what he cannot: put an end to his obsession.

### Nameless, Inscrutable, Unearthly

In “The Symphony,” two chapters after Ahab puts his life in the hands of Starbuck, Ahab confides in Starbuck and explicitly states that he fears he does not govern his own actions:

What is it, what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what  
cozening, hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor

commands me; that against all natural lovings and longing, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time; recklessly making me ready to do what in my own proper, natural heart, I durst not so much as dare? Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm? But if the great sun move not of himself; but is as an errand-boy in heaven; nor one single star can revolve, but by some invisible power; how then can this one small heart beat; this one small brain think thoughts; unless God does that beating, does that thinking, does that living, and not I? By heaven, man, we are turned round and round in this world, like yonder windlass, and Fate is the handspike. And all that time, lo! that smiling sky, and this unsounded sea! Look! see yon Albicore! who put it into him to chase and fang that flying-fish? Where do murderers go, man? Who's to doom, when the judge himself is dragged to the bar? But it is a mild, mild wind, and a mild looking sky; and the air smells now, as if it blew from a far-away meadow; they have been making hay somewhere under the slopes of the Andes, Starbuck, and the mowers are sleeping among the new-mown hay. Sleeping? Aye, toil we how we may, we all sleep at last on the field. Sleep? Aye, and rust amid greenness; as last year's scythes flung down, and left in the half-cut swathes—Starbuck?

(481)

In this rare moment of lucidity, Ahab admits to feeling as though his actions are not his own. He distinguishes between the “lovings and longings” of his “natural heart” and those things a “hidden lord and master, and cruel remorseless emperor” orders him to do.

The query “Is Ahab, Ahab?” makes explicit his loss of agency. He finds the origin of his actions not in himself but in some “nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing,” words which exactly describe the mysterious sublime of the internal and external influences Pip encounters at sea.

Aside from this explicit reference to an ulterior controlling principal, there exist numerous more subtle hints at the presence of Ahab’s unconscious. For instance, when Ishmael compares Ahab’s living leg and dead leg, he distinguishes between a knowable and rational part of the mind, the conscious, and an unknowable and irrational part of the mind, the unconscious. In Chapter 51, “The Spirit-Spout,” the ship pursues a jet of water that appears at the boat’s bow, which the crew presumes came from Moby Dick:

The strange, upheaving, lifting tendency of the taffrail breeze filling the hollows of so many sails, made the buoyant, hovering deck to feel like air beneath the feet; while still she rushed along, *as if two antagonistic influences were struggling in her* [emphasis added]—one to mount directly to heaven, the other to drive yawingly to some horizontal goal. And had you watched Ahab’s face that night, you would have thought that within him two different things were warring. 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 man walked. (209)

Ishmael establishes a dichotomy here, where Ahab’s living leg and his whale-bone leg represent two forces, both internal, wrenching him in opposite directions, just as his ship is thrown both horizontally and skyward by the sea. He sees this internal conflict between

selves in the alternating thumps of the living and dead leg: one leg makes “lively echoes,” and the other “dead limb” makes a sound reminiscent of a “coffin-tap.”

Ahab’s peg-leg is the physical manifestation of his trauma, and it marks an exchange that takes place between Ahab and an external influence. Presumably, Moby Dick consumed Ahab’s leg, thus making Ahab a part of him. Ahab, in turn, replaced his absent leg with a peg-leg made from the jawbone of a whale. Ahab has thus wandered from his island in two senses: a physical one, where the external is now a part of him, and a psychological one, where the ominous ocean of Ishmael’s analogy has flooded Ahab’s rational island: “Ahab and anguish lay stretched together in one hammock . . . then it was, that his body and gashed soul bled into one another; and so interfusing, made him mad.”

Though Ahab’s unconscious becomes more pronounced after his trauma, Ahab is adept at concealing its influence. He is an accomplished actor. Ishmael is constantly reminding us of the “infinity of firmest fortitude, a determinate, unsunderable willfulness” of Ahab’s stare. However, Ahab’s dreams are another manifestation of his unconscious, showing that Ahab is not the master of his own self and that, while he is fully aware of his monomania, he cannot control it. Ishmael explains that the collected Ahab his crew sees during the day, the one who retires to his cabin each night, is not the Ahab who emerges in the middle of the night, tormented by nightmares:

[W]hen this hell in himself yawned beneath him, a wild cry would be heard through the ship; and with glaring eyes Ahab would burst from his state room, as though escaping from a bed that was on fire . . . at such times, crazy Ahab, the scheming, unappeasedly steadfast hunter of the white whale; this Ahab that had gone to his hammock, was not the agent

that so caused him to burst from it in horror again. The latter was the eternal, living principle or soul in him; and in sleep, being for the time dissociated from the characterizing mind, which at other times employed it for its outer vehicle or agent, it spontaneously sought escape from the scorching contiguity of the frantic thing, of which, for the time, it was no longer an integral. But as the mind does not exist unless leagued with the soul, therefore it must have been that, in Ahab's case, yielding up all his thoughts and fancies to his one supreme purpose; that purpose, by its own sheer inveteracy of will, forced itself against gods and devils into a kind of self-assumed, independent being of its own. (180-181)

The Ahab that emerges at night is the marionettist, the demon that simultaneously depends upon and manipulates Ahab's "characterizing mind" for its own ends. The external Ahab, which corresponds to the conscious, is a mere "vehicle" for the "self-assumed, independent" force that works the controls from within. Sleep, Ishmael says, is the sole opportunity for the second self to appear, because during sleep, Ahab's intellectual defenses are down; his "exhausting and intolerable vivid dreams of the night" take up again "his own intense thoughts through the day" and "carr[y] them on amid clashing of phrensies, and [whirl] them round and round in his blazing brain, till the very throbbing of his life-spot [becomes] insufferable anguish" (180). At night, the rational mask that appears after Ahab's several months of lunacy is torn away to reveal the pervading madness underneath. Ishmael's interpretation of Ahab's night terrors is in accordance with Freudian theory, which contends that unconscious desires emerge in dreams. Ahab's unconscious will asserts itself during sleep, and Ahab loses the façade of

control that he maintains during waking life. The unconscious then becomes not only the force driving Ahab to pursue the white whale, but one that robs Ahab's "characterizing mind" of sovereignty.

Apart from these instances, the *Pequod's* crew and the reader most often see a critically thinking, calmer Ahab: the rational disguise. This is what I mean by calling Ahab an actor: he maintains the mental alacrity to pursue his insane ambition by sane means. He is familiar enough with social conventions, human nature, and the whaling industry to manipulate his surroundings to suit the needs of the invading influence within: "Ahab plainly saw that he must still in a good degree continue true to the natural, nominal purpose of the *Pequod's* voyage; observe all customary usages; and not only that, but force himself to evince all his well known passionate interest in the general pursuit of his profession" (191-192). He is aware of the inconstancy of his crew, and of Starbuck's growing frustration, and knows that if he is not able to successfully distract his men and dissuade Starbuck, his quest will fail. In doing so, he acknowledges also the insanity of his own quest, but he still cannot stop himself. All the while, the intellectual part of Ahab suffers the horror of losing its agency; it is a mere tool. In this way, Ahab exemplifies the description Davis provides of the typical obsessive, where the obsessed person acts according to unknown desires and experiences a paralysis of will.

## Chapter 3

### The Function of the Other in Ahab's Obsession

#### The Whiteness of the *Objet Petit A*

Ahab first speaks about the whale in Chapter 36, "The Quarter Deck," after Starbuck speaks out for the first time against Ahab: "'Vengeance on a dumb brute!' cried Starbuck, 'that simply smote thee from blindest instinct! Madness! To be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab, seems blasphemous'" (145). Starbuck asserts that seeking revenge on a whale is foolish, because the "dumb brute" acted only out of "blind instinct." His wording suggests that Ahab thinks otherwise, that the whale decided to harm Ahab out of malice rather than instinct. Ahab's response to Starbuck corroborates this interpretation:

'Hark ye yet again,—the little lower layer. All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I

hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I  
wreak that hate upon him. (145)

Ahab explains that while the whale may seem insignificant, a “pasteboard mask,” there is necessarily a presence behind the mask, an “inscrutable malice” that gives the whale strength. Ahab recommends one “strike through the mask,” as a prisoner would break through the wall of his prison to escape. He does not believe the whale acts of its own will, whether by instinct or malicious intent: he believes that the whale is an instrument for an unseen, powerful force. If Ahab kills the whale, he trusts that he will injure that force. Ahab admits here that he knows the whale might not ultimately responsible for his injury.

For Ahab, the whale takes on greater significance than a “dumb brute . . . that simply smote him from blindest instinct” should. Ishmael explains,

Small reason was there to doubt, then, that ever since that almost fatal encounter, Ahab had cherished a wild vindictiveness against the whale, all the more fell for that in his frantic morbidness he at last came to identify with him, *not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations* [emphasis added]. The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of *all those malicious agencies* which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung . . . All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in



Moby Dick. He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of *all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down* [emphasis added]; and then, as if his chest has been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it. (164-165)

In Moby Dick, Ahab finds a home for the sublime mystery that terrifies him; he locates a threat to humanity in the whale, which is, unlike the threat it represents, destroyable. The whale's mystery stands in for the sea's mystery, and thus the whale in Lacanian terms becomes the *objet petit a*. In his essay "Filling the Void," Dennis Williams applies psychoanalytic theory to *Moby Dick* as a way to "explore the importance of the void," which Williams identifies as a fundamental element in both *Moby Dick* and Lacanian theory. He labels Moby Dick as the *objet petit a*, or the "object of desire, simultaneously marking, substituting for, and occulting the place of lack or void" (Williams 77). The whale, says Williams, "beyond the obvious fact of the revenge motif, continually emphasized throughout the novel . . . exerts a wholly disproportionate fascination for Ahab" (73). He thus finds Moby Dick "a phantasmatic object, a kind of fetish object at the center of Ahab's libidinal economy": the *objet petit a* (73).

The appearance of an *objet petit a* indicates that a reaction formation has taken place, a displacement of undesirable fears of the incomprehensible sublime onto something comprehensive: the whale. Ishmael describes the legendary whiteness of Moby Dick:

Aside from those more obvious considerations touching Moby Dick, which could not but occasionally awaken in any man's soul some alarm, there was another thought, or rather vague, nameless horror concerning

him, which at times by its intensity completely overpowered all the rest; and yet so mystical and well nigh ineffable was it, that I almost despair of putting it in a comprehensible form. It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me. (168)

In “The Whiteness of the Whale,” Ishmael struggles to explain the significance of the whiteness even as he calls our attention to it: “But how can I hope to explain myself here; and yet, in some dim, random way, explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be naught” (168). Ishmael explores the semantic associations of white with “new-fallen snow,” “the White Tower of London,” and the “White Mountains of New Hampshire” (172), explaining that these appearances of white differ from Moby Dick, because his whiteness does not signify holiness or newness, but absence: “Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows—a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink?” (175).

I have discussed a similar absence of meaning with reference to the sea. This absence, and Ahab and Ishmael’s simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from it, implicates the whale as another appearance of the sublime in *Moby Dick*. The gap between these two characters and the sea, and now between them and the whale, can be considered in Lacanian terms. White whale as sublime object becomes white whale as Lacan’s *objet petit a*. Lacan tells us that the subject is compelled to penetrate the Other, whom the subject perceives as containing elusive knowledge. This elusive knowledge,

the mystery of the Other, drives him to invest inordinate energy into an object, as Ahab does the whale—to become obsessed with it.

The secret the subject seeks to learn from the Other and the *objet petit a* are the same. Thus, in conversation with *Moby Dick*, it becomes difficult to determine whether the whale is the *objet petit a* or the mystery itself, assuming that these are mutually exclusive terms. Does the whale evoke in Ahab the infuriatingly unquenchable mystery that drives him, or is the whale Ahab's futile answer to a mystery previously evoked elsewhere? I suggest the latter.

The whale with his whiteness is certainly a sublime object, presenting its own self-contained mystery to Ahab, Ishmael, and the reader. Its whiteness is evidence of this sublimity: it is immense and unknowable. However, its sublimity lies not in its apparent meaninglessness (for something meaningless is not necessarily also sublime), but in its ability to remind one of the occasional failure of the human imagination to comprehend. This recalls Kant's qualification that "nothing that can be an object of the sense is to be called sublime (Kant 522). By Kant's definition, the whale would not be sublime, but its ability to evoke a feeling of inadequacy would be: "[What happens is that] our imagination strives to progress toward infinity, while our reason demands absolute totality as a real idea, and so [the imagination,] our power of estimating the magnitude of things in the world of sense, is inadequate to that idea" (522). Williams' discussion of the apparent meaninglessness of the whale's whiteness echoes Kant's definition of sublimity:

[W]e should avoid a precipitate reading that forces a "choice" between white as "meaningful" and white as "meaningless." It is precisely the ambiguity *itself* generated by these conflicting readings—ambiguity

“itself”—that, from one perspective, constitutes the very “meaning” of “whiteness.” And the phrase “the meaning of meaninglessness” signals precisely the aporia of self-cancelling logical deadlock involved here: if all things are evacuated of meaning, there still remains, as a kind of shadow or negative image, the meaning of that evacuation, the meaning of the assertion of meaninglessness. The psychoanalytic function of the “void” evokes precisely this tension and oscillation: any “meaning” or semantic depth necessarily supervenes upon the “meaninglessness,” the void, of the originary losses that constitute the subject. (Williams 75)

The ambiguity one confronts in not being able to determine whether *Moby Dick* is meaningful or meaningless, I see as akin to the struggle of one faced with the sublime. The problem in each case is not the immensity of nothingness itself, but the feelings, those of uncertainty and smallness, that it evokes in a participant. This subtle distinction between meaninglessness and the void is parallel to the distinction between the whale itself as sublime object and the *ambiguity* of the whale as sublime object; the first of each pair connotes comprehensibility, and the second connotes hopeless obscurity. Indeterminacy, aroused in Ishmael by the whale and in all others by the sublime, is unsettling, and while it is present in the latter, it is absent in the former.

Williams describes Ishmael’s account of *Moby Dick*’s whiteness as validation of “the Lacanian psychoanalytic emphases on the void and absence” (74). He continues, “the whiteness of the whale directly symbolizes nothingness, the emptying or evacuation of nature; the meaning of the whale is, in essence, meaninglessness—and these ontological pronouncements on the ultimate meaning of reality provide a kind of

philosophical basis, then, for understanding the psychoanalytic operation of the void” (74-75). The “nameless horror concerning” Moby Dick that Ishmael attributes to his whiteness is the absent-signifier, or what I have just discussed in terms of the sublime and the ambiguous. The whale itself is the present-signified, or as Lacanian critic Slavoj Žižek puts it in his book *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, an “objectification of the void” (Žižek 95). The distinction, then, between *objet petit a* and the mystery it embodies, in this case between the whale and its whiteness, becomes clearer. Ahab makes Moby Dick, however unwillingly, his *objet petit a* in a fervent, if unconscious, effort to simplify an immense and intimidating ambiguity, the void, which is present in all things. The whale happens to communicate this same ambiguity, making it an ideal obsessive object.

### The Case of the Rat Man

Ahab’s obsession with Moby Dick coincides with a symbolic and literal castration, which Lacan tells us leads to a loss of *jouissance* and a cascade of problematic desires. When a subject loses *jouissance*, he perceives this loss as the result of the Other’s influence, sometimes thinking that the Other harbors some secret that, if revealed to the subject, would give way to *jouissance*. In the interest of refining our understanding of *jouissance*, castration, the *objet petit a* and the Other in relation to obsession, I turn momentarily to a case study that includes discussion of these terms: Freud’s account of the Rat Man. Compared to Freud’s interpretation of obsession, particularly with regards to *jouissance*, there is a noticeable absence of sexuality from my definition, which is informed more by Lacanian theory than Freudian. However, while the sexual themes in

Freud's account of the Rat Man deviate from my Lacan-informed account of these terms, I believe it will be useful to include Freud's account as an example of the function of *jouissance*, especially before relating this term to *Moby Dick*. I will first examine the Rat Man's castration, and then relate Freud's interpretation of his experience to a Lacanian interpretation of Ahab's.

“Obsessional ideas,” says Freud, “as is well known, have an appearance of being either without motive or without meaning, just as dreams have” (Freud 186). Such was the case with the Rat Man, who sought treatment from Freud, complaining of persistent fears that some ill would befall either his father or his lady. In addition to these fears, the Rat Man experienced “compulsive impulses” and unfounded “prohibitions” (158). None of these fears, prohibitions, and impulses appear immediately logical. The Rat Man reluctantly relates to Freud the story that would give him his moniker: he has a reoccurring fear that a form of torture, first introduced to him by a fellow army officer, would be carried out on his father and love-interest. At this point in his story, the patient becomes very uncomfortable, and it is difficult for him to relate to Freud exactly what the punishment entails. Freud insists that he must know what the punishment is, and so the patient tries, with great difficulty, to explain: “. . . the criminal was tied up . . .”—he expressed himself so indistinctly that I could not immediately guess in what position—‘and a pot was turned upside down on his buttocks . . . some *rats* were put into it . . . and they . . .’—he had got up, and was showing every sign of horror and resistance—‘*bored their way in . . .*’—Into his anus, I helped him out” (166). The Rat Man is quick to clarify that in his vision of his father, his love-interest, and this torture, he is not overseeing the events: he is merely a remote observer, and these thoughts are “foreign and repugnant” to

him (167). Freud observes behavior that contradicts this claim: “At all the more important moments while he was telling his story his face took on a very strange, composite expression. I could only interpret it as one of *horror at pleasure of his own of which he himself was unaware*” (166-167).

The patient’s motives for obsessing over the rat torture, and imagining it done to his father and lady, are initially unclear. We are left with many questions. Why does the young man specifically imagine his father and lady? Do the rats have any significance beyond the torture itself? The motivation behind the patient’s obsessional thoughts, for Freud, concerns “a former wish which was now repressed” (180). A wish, says Freud, is the truth within every obsessional fear, as it is the truth within every dream. The obsession, then, conceals, like a dream, wishes that the obsessive deems unacceptable or repulsive. The flicker of pleasure Freud notices on the patient’s face as he recalls the “repugnant” thought is an indicator of this, revealing conflicting feelings towards his father and his lady. The purpose of the Rat Man’s obsession becomes clearer: it is an extreme reaction that is supposed to reverse an unacknowledged ill wish.

The patient, predictably, rejects the idea that he would ever wish such ill on his father. Freud asserts that obsessions concerning the well-being of others, in their extremity, arise in response to concealed yet equally strong contrary wishes. The obsessive quarantines a disagreeable thought, caging it within the obsession. In this way he controls the thought, thereby controlling his own impulses and himself. For what the obsessive fears most is a lack of control. Psychoanalyst Collete Soler, during a lecture for the annual “Seminar of the Freudian Field” described the obsessive in this way:

Let me provide an example of an obsessive subject . . . This particular man has a lover and what does he do? He calculates the precise moment at which he will make love to her and sees to it that another woman phones him at that exact time. He makes love with one woman and talks to the other on the phone, very calmly and collectedly at the same time. The essential point is not to stop making love while he is answering the phone. What is he doing? He is trying to prove to himself that there is no object capable of making him vanish. It is a strategy of mastery. It is as if he were trying to demonstrate that he is the master of his own desire . . . He tries to be the master of his desire, but also to always be thinking. (Soler 270).

The use of constant thinking as a means of distraction call to mind the Rat Man's strategy for warding off unwanted thoughts. When images of the rat torture being performed on his father and his love-interest enter the Rat Man's head uninvited, he responds with "his usual formulas," one of which is "a 'but' accompanied by a gesture of repudiation, and the phrase 'whatever are you thinking of?'" (Freud 167). For a moment, the Rat Man loses control of his own thoughts, and to regain control, he counters these initial thoughts with *more thinking* as if to remind himself that he is the primary authority of his own mind. Just as the lover in Soler's example uses thinking to distract himself from his own sexual fulfillment, so too does the Rat Man use thinking to counteract his own disagreeable instincts. In both cases, it is sexuality, or more specifically an intense desire for sexual fulfillment (*jouissance*), from which the obsessive consistently seeks distraction. As Freud tells us, a disproportionate attraction to *jouissance* characterizes the obsessive



(Soler 252). This attraction threatens the obsessive's otherwise highly-controlled self and surroundings.

The "incompatible idea" that the obsessive wards off is always linked with sexuality, in Freud's view. According to Soler, "Sexuality itself is divided by Freud into two component parts. There is the "incompatible idea" or "representation" of sexuality which Lacan identifies with the signifier. But there is also affect, the "quantum of affect" or sexual excitation itself. Affect is not an idea: It is something actual in the body" (251). This "something actual" is *jouissance*. Lacan defines two forms of neurosis, obsession and hysteria, by their relationship to *jouissance*. While both the obsessive and the hysteric respond to *jouissance* abnormally, their abnormal reactions are opposite. The obsessive has "too much primal pleasure," and this is the source of his obsession (Soler 252). In contrast, the hysteric maintains a distaste for sexuality. Put simply, *jouissance* attracts the obsessive and repels the hysteric. Soler makes an important distinction here: an attraction is not necessarily a fondness. While the obsessive is drawn to *jouissance*, the loss of control he experiences frightens him. His obsession serves as a defense against his attraction.

Freud sees the persistent thought of the rat torture as representing a struggle for the patient between his father and his lady. In this scenario, the father is an obstacle for the patient's sexual satisfaction—for *jouissance*: "The story of the rat punishment, as was shown by the patient's own account of the matter and by his facial expression as he repeated the story to me, had fanned into a flame all his prematurely suppressed impulses of cruelty, egoistic and sexual alike" (Freud 215). Freud postulates that the patient's infantile experiences fuel the hatred for his father that his obsessions conceal.

Specifically, he poses to the patient the possibility that his father interrupted him masturbating in his youth:

I ventured to put forward a construction to the effect that when he was a child of under six he had been guilty of some sexual misdemeanor connected with masturbation and had been soundly castigated by his father. This punishment, according to my hypothesis, has, it was true, put an end to his masturbating, but on the other hand it had left behind it an ineradicable grudge against his father and had established him for all time as an interferer with the patient's sexual enjoyment. (205)

The patient confirms Freud's hypothesis, recalling an incident from his childhood in which his father beat him for doing "something naughty" (205). If the father represents for the Rat Man a "primary defensive struggle," in which he opposes his sexual fulfillment, then it follows that the reoccurring thought that the father should experience the rat torture is not a fear but a desire (224). The thought that inevitably follows it wards it off, but it is too late: the repulsive thought has already been expressed. As Freud states, "In time the thing which is meant to be warded off invariably finds its way into the very means which is being used for warding it off" (225).

The Rat Man's obsession with the rat torture remains at the center of his treatment with Freud, but his obsessions extend far beyond this one thought. He is plagued by numerous thoughts of harm coming to his father. For each of these thoughts, Freud finds a link to the patient's sexual pleasure, or more specifically, a denial of it. Freud sees the father as a recurrent obstruction in the way of the Rat Man's sexual fulfillment, starting with the initial traumatic incident surrounding masturbation, and following the Rat Man

throughout his young life. Even when he is a young man, his father continually prevents sexual gratification: “Moreover, his father . . . had directly opposed what later became our patient’s dominating passion. He had noticed that his son was always in the lady’s company, and had advised him to keep away from her, saying that it was imprudent of him and that he would only make a fool of himself” (201). The patient attains *jouissance* only after his father’s death, further confirming, for the patient, that his father was the single preventative force keeping him from *jouissance* all along. Freud says, “Several years after his father’s death, the first time he experienced the pleasurable sensations of copulation, an idea sprang into his mind: ‘This is glorious! One might murder one’s father for this!’ This was at once an echo and an elucidation of the obsessional ideas of his childhood” (201). The notion that murdering one’s father will bring sexual satisfaction makes sense only within the confines of Freud’s theory in which the father is directly responsible for the prohibition of *jouissance*.

A question remains: why does the patient imagine the torture being done to his lady? This is not the first instance of an obsessional thought centering on his love-interest. Earlier, during a visit from the lady at his summer home, the Rat Man was plagued by an obsessional need to protect her. On the day she was to leave, he kicked a stone while walking in the road, and it occurred to him that his lady would be riding in her carriage several hours later and might come to some harm if the carriage struck the stone. However, once he had moved the stone, he was compelled to put it in its original place (189-190). This series of compulsions seems, at first, to be founded on an irrational fear, not on logic. On the surface, it seems as though a combination of love and fear

impels the first compulsion, and rationality impels the second. Freud, though, sees the second action not as one of rationality, but as one of hate:

A battle between love and hate was raging in the lover's breast, and the object of both these feelings was one in the same person. The battle was represented in a plastic form by his compulsive symbolic act of removing the stone from the road along which she was to drive, and then undoing his deed of love by replacing the stone where it had lain, so that her carriage might come to grief against it and she herself be hurt. (191)

Freud observes that compulsive acts in the obsessive individual often occur in "two successive stages," where the second defuses the first (192).

In the patient's mind, both his father and his lady are equally responsible for his inner conflict. Without one force, the other prevails, and the conflict is resolved. As Freud says, "The conflicts of feeling in our patient which we have here enumerated separately were not independent of each other, but were bound together in pairs. His hatred of his lady was inevitably coupled with his attachment to his father, and inversely his hatred of his father with his attachment to his lady" (238). *Jouissance* lies at the heart of the obsessional thoughts concerning the lady as well as the father, for who, in the patient's mind, is responsible for the patient's longing for sexual desire if not the one he desires? The patient tries to satisfy the wishes of his father, the wishes of his lady, and his own desire simultaneously. From this insurmountable task, anxiety and paralysis result. As Freud says, "If an intense love is opposed by an almost equally powerful hatred, and is at the same time inseparably bound up with it, the immediate consequence is certain to be a partial paralysis of the will and an incapacity for coming to a decision upon any of

those actions for which love ought to provide the motive power” (241). The patient cannot reconcile these conflicting interests, and his obsession develops as a defense against the loss of his agency over his own desire. The patient, a true obsessive, denies his own attraction to *jouissance* just as his father prescribed in his youth. He cannot dispel the attraction entirely, though, and from this failure arises the imagined conflict between father and lady.

### Comparing the Rat Man and Ahab: Who is the Other?

From what we know of the Rat Man’s story, he does not experience the sublime; thus, obsession does not necessarily develop out of sublimity. However, the Rat Man, according to Freud, does experience a loss of pleasure, a castration which removes his agency: this experience, I argue, links the Rat Man and Ahab as obsessives. Both men develop a pathological need for control out of an initial instance of trauma. The link between the Rat Man’s father and love-interest is initially uncertain, and Freud only discovers this link after uncovering a repressed memory: an original trauma. The Rat Man holds his father responsible for his loss of pleasure, and so his father is the Other.

In Ahab’s case, the Other should similarly be that thing that denies pleasure. I have suggested that the Other can harbor some secret from the subject; this is how it robs him of *jouissance*. According to Žižek, the secret the Other keeps from the subject becomes the *objet petit a*, that object with which the subject becomes enamored: “The fascinating ‘secret’ . . . is precisely the Lacanian *objet petit a*, the chimerical object of fantasy, the object causing our desire and at the same time—this is its paradox—posed

retroactively by this desire; in ‘going through the fantasy’ we experience how this fantasy-object (the ‘secret’) only materializes the void of our desire” (Žižek 65).

A preliminary examination might suggest that the whale is the Other for two reasons. First, the whale has taken Ahab’s leg, and thus robbed him of independence, authority, and pleasure. Second, Ahab sees in the whale a secret to be discovered, as evinced by his monologue in “The Sphynx.” However, I argue that while the whale is an *objet petit a*, he is not the Other; the Other is an ambiguous entity that hovers ominously throughout *Moby Dick* but never materializes outside of Ahab’s imagination. Though Ahab locates the source of his anxiety in Moby Dick, and Moby Dick becomes the *objet petit a*, the Other is, by Ahab’s own admission, not the whale itself but is the whale’s manipulator: “All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask.” If the Rat Man’s father prevents him from fulfilling his desire, then who keeps Ahab from fulfilling his? Who is Ahab’s Other?

#### Ahab’s Absent Leg

To answer this question, I will examine Ahab’s castration in the hopes of tracing it back to his castrator. Williams sees the moment when Moby Dick wrenches Ahab’s leg from his body as the initial trauma that corresponds to a loss of *jouissance*: “From a Lacanian perspective, this perhaps somewhat too literal gesture of castration signals the loss of primordial *jouissance*, the initial trauma, loss, or original ‘cut’ that then

precipitates the entire canopy of desires, defenses, and compensations that will mark the lifelong attempt to ‘fill’ this gap, to assuage this moment of initial trauma” (Williams 73). The loss of his leg plagues Ahab, robbing him of pleasure in a variety of ways. Moby Dick cripples Ahab by taking his leg, leaving him with a metaphorical and practically open wound, one which causes him continual trouble. Ahab’s prosthetic, for instance, nearly actually castrates him:

For it had not been very long prior to the *Pequod*’s sailing from Nantucket, that he had been found one night lying prone upon the ground, and insensible; by some unknown, and seemingly inexplicable, unimaginable casualty, his ivory limb having been so violently displaced, that it had stake-wise smitten, and all but pierced his groin; nor was it without extreme difficulty that the agonizing wound was entirely cured.

(Melville 413)

Even to maintain his balance, Ahab relies on a circular “pivot-hole” in the quarter-deck in which he props the leg.

In addition to these physical inconveniences associated with his missing leg, Moby Dick has castrated Ahab in a more significant, psychological way. This castration and its implications drive Ahab to hunt the white whale. The stolen leg results in a loss of agency and authority, and Ahab aims to reclaim these by killing Moby Dick. As the whale took Ahab’s leg, he also took his independence: Ahab must now depend upon his unreliable peg-leg and his pivot-hole. His reclusive behavior and appearance reflect a broken man, and while he is steadfast, he is weakened in the eyes of his crew. Because Ahab is confined to his cabin due to his weakened state, the crew, Ishmael, and readers

first glimpse him twenty-eight chapters and several days into the voyage. Ishmael tells us, “He looked like a man cut away from the stake, when the fire has overrunningly wasted all the limbs without consuming them, or taking away one particle from their compacted aged robustness” (108). Along with agency goes authority. In “Queen Mab,” Stubb recalls a dream to Flask:

You know the old man’s ivory leg, well I dreamed he kicked me with it; and when I tried to kick back, upon my soul, my little man, I kicked my leg right off! And then, presto! Ahab seemed a pyramid, and I, like a blazing fool, kept kicking at it. But what was still more curious, Flask—you know how curious all dreams are—through all this rage that I was in I somehow seemed to be thinking to myself that, after all, it was not much of an insult, that kick from Ahab. ‘Why,’ thinks I, ‘what’s the row? It’s not a real leg, only a false one.’ And there’s a mighty difference between a living thump and a dead thump. That’s what makes a blow from the hand, Flask, fifty times more savage to bear than a blow from the cane. The living member—that makes the living insult, my little man. (114)

The ivory leg poses no threat to Stubb, and its kick does not motivate him as one from a real leg would. It is rare for Ahab to appear as humorous and nonthreatening as he does here in Stubb’s dream. While *Moby Dick* has only taken a physical part of Ahab, Stubb’s dream indicates that Ahab has little authority on his own ship. As further support of this, at the start of “Ahab’s Boat and Crew. Fedallah,” Stubb and Flask argue about the usefulness of Ahab’s leg:



‘Who would have thought it, Flask!’ cried Stubb; ‘if it had but one leg you would not catch me in a boat, unless maybe to stop the plug-hole with my timber tow. Oh! he’s a wonderful old man!’ ‘I don’t think it so strange, after all, on that account,’ said Flask. ‘If his leg were off at the hip, now, it would be a different thing. That would disable him; but he has one knee, and good part of the other left, you know.’ ‘I don’t know that, my little man; I never yet saw him kneel.’ (206)

Ahab’s loss of authority, evinced by the flippant comments of his crew, derives from the loss of his leg.

In blaming the whale, Ahab is determined to discover what secret it conceals from him, illustrated most directly by his aforementioned plea to the head of a sperm whale for knowledge in “The Sphynx.” Ahab looks to whales, specifically Moby Dick, to fill the lack brought on by castration, just as the obsessive subject looks to the Other to answer his question: *What knowledge do you conceal from me that keeps me from fulfilling my desire?* This is a question asked in vain, though, because the Other is nonexistent; he is merely “a set of signifiers: language or speech” (Soler 267). The Other, therefore, is only the person that the subject imagines him to be. Because the Other does not exist, his secret cannot exist, and the subject cannot know it. Instead, the subject invents a secret in the Other, a secret that the subject believes, if only known to him, would bring pleasure. This invented secret and the quest to find it serve as the basis for an obsession.

Fueled by his fantasy, the subject pursues a singular object in the hopes of plugging up the hole left by castration, but to no avail. Soler tells us, “The first idea emphasized by Lacan is that no object will ever be able to fill the lack brought on by

castration. Thus desire is always desire for something else . . . but desire nevertheless always searches for the same thing . . . Desire is precisely determined in the fantasy where it is linked with an object particular to each individual subject” (Soler 271). Trying to learn the Other’s secret necessarily begets anxiety because the Other’s secret, an invention, cannot be known. To understand this anxiety, one might look to an example from Lacan. In this example, you have on a mask, but do not know what the mask looks like. Meanwhile, a gigantic praying mantis, a female, draws nearer to you. If your mask is not that of a male praying mantis, then you have nothing to worry about; however, *you don’t know that it’s not*. Soler explains that it is this uncertainty surrounding our relationship to the Other that leads to anxiety (268). In trying to fill the void left by castration, the obsessive always gets it wrong, believing one particular object will satisfy the Other and make up for his lost *jouissance*. For this reason, the obsession necessarily leads to failure. The obsessive, who invests his energy into the Other, does so unnecessarily; his pursuit makes sense only within the context of his own fantasy. Castration brings on a void that is met only with another void in the Other. “Tell me your secret!” demands the subject to the Other, but the Other simply stares. In response to this silence, the obsessive invents the Other’s secret and devotes himself to the impossible task of discovering it.

## If not the Whale, then Who is the Other?

Ahab considers the unseen Other to be the principle of his suffering, and in order for this to be true, this Other must have complete control over humanity: one may equate it with God. Several instances in *Moby Dick* support this conclusion. When Ishmael tells us that Ahab heaps “upon the whale’s white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down,” he suggests that Ahab acts on behalf of all of humanity against the same God that cast men out of the Garden of Eden. To Ahab, the white whale embodies this creator who is responsible for “all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them.” The white whale stands in for a creator who has abandoned his creations, indifferent to their suffering. Ahab, when his leg is torn from him, realizes that his God is indifferent. When Starbuck accuses Ahab of blasphemy, Ahab responds, “Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I’d strike the sun if it insulted me” (Melville 145). However, “blasphemy” does not adequately describe the seriousness of Ahab’s crime. Ahab does not merely disregard God; he actively seeks to destroy him. He believes that by injuring the whale he will injure his creator.

However, to unequivocally conclude from this that the Other in *Moby Dick* is God would be erroneous. I suggest that finding the sublime in God is yet another reduction of the unknowable as a way to know it. Ahab initially looks to the secret of whales, making *Moby Dick* his *objet petit a*. Let us recall momentarily the scene in “The Quarter-Deck” when Ahab expresses frustration in response to nature’s mysteries as he explains to Starbuck why he would seek vengeance on the whale:

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. (Melville 145)

Wenke says, “Like any Platonist, Ahab sees the material world as a sign of invisible forms. Unlike a Platonist, he believes that malice animates the ‘pasteboard masks’ of matter” (Wenke 706). Ahab’s analogy suggests that the prisoner can only “reach outside” by *attacking* the “pasteboard masks” (Melville 145). In other words, one can only get at the underlying malicious orchestrator of events by attacking “visible objects” through which it acts (145). Though Ahab is wary of physical objects, which take the shape of the sea’s “unshored harborless immensities,” he is more wary of the malicious presence behind these. For Ahab, if only he could absorb the knowledge of the sperm whale, the “visible object,” he could overcome its controller, and thus regain control over his circumstances and escape his prison.

Ahab suggests that the “unknown but still reasoning thing” that “puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask” is a divine being, one which is ultimately responsible for human suffering. He directly blames divine influence in “The Log and Line.” In this chapter, Ahab takes Pip’s hand, befriending him, and as he does this, he chastises the gods for their cruelty: “Oh, ye frozen heavens! Look down here. Ye did beget this luckless child, and have abandoned him, ye creative libertines” (462). When Pip tells Ahab he will not let go of his hand, Ahab responds,

Oh, boy, nor will I thee, unless I should thereby drag thee to worse horrors than are here. Lo! ye believers in gods all goodness, and in man all ill, lo you! see the omniscient gods oblivious of suffering man; and man, though idiotic, and knowing not what he does, yet full of the sweet things of love and gratitude. (462)

Ahab contrasts “omniscient gods” who are “oblivious of suffering man” with “idiotic” man who is “full of the sweet things of love and gratitude” in spite of his idiocy. For Ahab, then, the whale does not stand in for the terrifying “colorless, all-color . . . atheism” or the sublime; it stands in for God. However, God and the sublime are not synonymous, because the word “God” anthropomorphizes an entity that cannot be so reduced. Ahab refuses to accept that there exists something fundamentally unknowable about reality, and thus God becomes another *objet petit a* that separates him from the unfathomable infinite. Other possible interpretations of whale, including the Devil, are just as flawed as calling the whale “God.” The concept of the Devil, like that of God, can be apprehended by human consciousness and stands in for the inscrutable mystery we find impossible to express. Thus, God becomes yet another “pasteboard mask” or *objet petit a* and is, like the whale, an insufficient representation of the sublime.

## Conclusion

### I Know Him Not, and Never Will: Two Responses to the Sublime

I have alluded to Ahab and Ishmael’s different responses to sublimity, and how these determine why, despite their similar interests in the sublime, the former becomes

obsessed with Moby Dick and the latter does not. In my final comments, I will explore the reasons why their reactions differ so drastically.

Both Ahab and Ishmael pursue the white whale and engage in whale hunting despite previous traumatic experiences, and both pore over books, diagrams, maps, and other records in a futile effort to understand. They exhibit a simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from their mysteries and are obsessed with knowing the secrets of nature; however, their methods in pursuing this knowledge differentiate one from the other. Ishmael and Ahab exhibit two very different responses to that feeling of powerlessness that the sublime evokes in them. It seems likely that Ahab would have a similar degree of interest in the painting at the Spouter-Inn, but how would he have acted on this curiosity? Would he ask the patrons for their interpretations as Ishmael does, or would he thrust his peg-leg through the canvas?

I maintain that Ahab and Ishmael choose two separate paths after their encounters with the sublime; the first chooses the path that leads to insane obsession and the other avoids it. The conspicuous presence of Ahab's unconscious indicates that Ahab willingly hands agency over to this darker part of himself, or in Ishmael's terms, "push[es] . . . off from that isle" into "all the horrors of the half-known life." I alluded to the possibility that Ahab must have reflected upon his situation before he went mad, just as Pip spent an hour alone in the ocean before he lost his wits. I see the development of Ahab's obsession within this period of reflection. When Moby Dick takes Ahab's leg, Ahab experiences a traumatic encounter with the sublime, a castration that leaves him, as a sublime encounter will do, feeling feeble. This immediate reaction to a sublime experience, I argue, is where Ahab and Ishmael, on the same path previously, diverge to embrace different fates.

Two aspects separate Ahab and Ishmael. The first of these is an acknowledgement of the fallibility of the human mind. Wenke contrasts “Ahab’s fixed theory of reality” with “Ishmael’s multiple formulations,” arguing that Ishmael’s perception of reality is in constant flux, while Ahab’s is immovable (Wenke 706). Ishmael considers that his own current conceptions may be inaccurate or insufficient; his willingness to consult others after his encounter with the Spouter-Inn painting exhibits this. In “Selfhood and Others,” Paul Brodtkorb Jr. points out Ishmael’s rapidly evolving interpretation of Ahab’s nightmare episodes in “The Chart”:

The conceptual gist of this difficult passage would seem to be that, when asleep, Ahab’s soul, temporarily dissociated from what has insanely used it, rebels. Yet the judiciously analytic Ishmael faced with Ahab’s psychic profundities does not simplify this analysis to any such ‘gist.’ The passage is full of complex abstractions, qualifications, extensions, synonyms with subtle distinctions implied between them, and second thoughts. (Brodtkorb Jr. 672)

In this chapter, Ishmael adopts and rejects different hypotheses about the structure of Ahab’s mind, and he allows his analysis of Ahab’s nightmares to change; he accepts previous interpretations as incorrect as he adopts new ones. Brodtkorb Jr. says, “The whole passage . . . shows Ishmael unable to create and revise sufficiently quickly enough static abstractions to keep up with the shifting complexity that is his experience of Ahab (672-623). Ahab, in contrast, will not allow his fixity of purpose to waver; he cannot change his mind, because changing his mind would require an admission of error. As Wenke tells us, “Unlike Ishmael, with his expansive, flexible voice and sensibility, Ahab

articulates a philosophical rhetoric of narrow definition. His speech and actions usually generate from unwavering principles” (Wenke 706).

Second, Ahab and Ishmael are separated by an admittance of human weakness in the face of the sublime. According to Kant’s definition, no object is universally sublime, because sublime objects come about “not so much [from] the nature of external things that arouse them as upon each person’s own disposition to be moved by these to pleasure and pain” (qtd. in Caygill 379). Thus, what is sublime to Ishmael may not be sublime to Ahab and vice versa. Their reactions to a potentially sublime object determine the presence of obsession in Ahab but its lack in Ishmael. The former’s reaction is a rejection of the inferiority he feels in the presence of a sublime object, and the latter’s reaction is just the opposite: one of humility. Ishmael repeatedly expresses a great reverence for whales, elevating them at times even above human beings:

When I stand among these mighty Leviathan skeletons, skulls, tusks, jaws, ribs, and vertebrae . . . I am, by a flood, borne back to that wondrous period, ere time itself can be said to have begun . . . Then the whole world was the whale’s; and, king of creation, he left his wake among the present lines of the Andes and the Himmalehs. Who can show a pedigree like the whale’s? Methuselah seems a schoolboy . . . I am horror-struck at this antemosaic, unsourced existence of the unspeakable terrors of the whale, which, having been before all time, must needs exist after all humane ages are over. (Melville 408)

Ahab, in contrast, does not hold the whale in such high regard. He rejects the feeling of inferiority that the sublime evokes in him, and he denies that the whale has injured his



“proper and inaccessible being”: “Aye! and all splintered to pieces, Stubb!—d'ye see it.—But even with a broken bone, old Ahab is untouched; and I account no living bone of mine one jot more me, than this dead one that's lost. Nor white whale, nor man, nor fiend, can so much as graze old Ahab in his own proper and inaccessible being” (495). He claims that while the whale injured his leg, “Ahab’s soul’s a centipede, that moves upon a hundred legs” (497).

Ahab thus blames a “dumb brute” for his misfortune, and invests his energy into destroying him, even though he can never destroy the responsible cause: human vulnerability. He locates the loss of his pleasure in an object, the whale; the secret, the whale, and the *objet petit a* become interchangeable terms, as I have discussed. Having misrecognized the whale as the source of his anxiety, Ahab commits himself to a futile quest doomed to fail. How, then, does Ishmael avoid this fate? While he does not become obsessed with destroying the whale as Ahab does, the whale does become an *objet petit a* for him: he studies two other sublime objects, Ahab and the sea, but he is fixated on the whale. His flirtation with Ahab’s obsession, and his eventual avoidance of it is mirrored in the book’s final pages. At the novel’s close, the vortex created by the sinking *Pequod* nearly sucks Ishmael down into the sea; the ship “like Satan, would not sink to hell till she had dragged a living part of heaven along with her” (508). *Moby Dick* leaves him an “orphan” (509). In spite of Ishmael’s trauma, he does not become obsessed; he is not sucked into the whale’s vortex. I argue that by the end of Ishmael’s story, he has recognized the whale for an *objet petit a*, or, in other words, has realized the dangers of pursuing an *objet petit a*, of locating one’s loss of pleasure in the Other. This realization saves obsessive Ishmael from the fate of pathologically obsessive Ahab.

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### Author's Biography

Sarah K. Lingo was born May 15, 1990, in Youngstown, Ohio and grew up in Eliot, Maine. After moving to West Virginia with her family in 2005 and graduating from Greenbrier East High School in 2008, she decided to return to Maine to pursue an undergraduate degree in English and a minor in Ecology and Environmental Science at the University of Maine. She is a peer tutor in the Writing Center and a member of Phi Beta Kappa. After graduation, she plans to attend graduate school for literary criticism.