Interview with Lee Quinby

1. Your premise is that Moby Dick captures a vivid portrayal of the two categories of evil: Ahab represents apocalyptic evil while characters like Queequeg, Stubb and Pip can be seen to deal with social or human evil. Where can young readers see these two strains of evil alive in contemporary stories?
Representations of apocalyptic evil thrive in popular culture--on television, and in films, fiction, comics, and video games. In religious oriented fiction, such as the best selling *Left Behind* Series for both adults and youth, we can see a traditional form of apocalypticism in which evil is portrayed through the character of Nicolae Carpathia, the Antichrist. He is seen as a cosmic force of evil, bent on seducing human beings to follow Satan. Those who do are in league with that evil force, which in the course of the plot of the Series justifies their destruction and eternal damnation, initially at the hands of the Tribulation Force and ultimately through the return of Jesus Christ to annihilate all but the Tribulation believers.

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This stark opposition between good and evil can also appear in secular fiction and media in which some characters have supernatural powers, drawn variously from a divine source or an alien force, which the *Halo* video games bring together, or wizardry, as in the *Harry Potter* books.

For the past few years, zombies seem to have become ever present in popular media and they often take on the role of evil in their destruction of human beings. Interestingly, in George Romero's early filmic representation of zombies, "Night of the Living Dead," the device of the undead was used to depict a market-driven culture, in which consumerism had overridden humanist values. Some contemporary zombie stories also aim at this kind of social critique. The novel *Zone One*, by Colson Whitehead, for example, provides a compelling critique of a culture in which thoughtless tasks and consumer branding have rendered human existence as zombie like. The novel is serious fiction, so those who are looking for a standard zombie story with lots of gory violence tend to be disappointed or bored, but it deserves to be read as an important assessment of our acquiescence to what Thoreau called "lives of quiet desperation."

2. Why did you like Gregory Peck's Ahab so much that you dressed up as Ahab in your back yard? What do you find so compelling about him? Why is he such a powerful character?
Part of that reaction was no doubt due to his powerful performance as Ahab! His portrayal emphasizes the magnificent suffering of Ahab's character as key to his desire to bend others to his will. As I reflect on it now, I can see where, as a 10-year-old girl in the 1950s, I wished for more power and drama in my own life. As an adult, I find Ishmael's capacity to grasp the complexities of our existence to be far more gripping. That includes Ishmael's growing understanding of Ahab's obsession and how he is able to gather others into his

monomaniacal dream of destroying the whale as vengeance for his lost leg by claiming how evil the whale is. In contrast to Melville's novel, the film version is more of an adventure story than a combination of adventure and deep philosophical reflection, so viewers lose the critique of seeing the world as Ahab does.

3. Can Ahab also be seen as a tragic hero? Can the whale also be seen as the villain?
Yes, I think Melville does cast Ahab as a tragic hero and, at least at first, prompts us to sympathize with his deep losses. But over the course of the novel we see Ahab becoming more and more obsessed with the whale despite all costs to others. I think at that point,

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Melville shows how Ahab's increasing fixity on revenge and willingness to jeopardize the lives of his crew is a kind of human evil at work. In that sense, Ahab's obsession leads him from heroics to a kind of villainy. The novel helps us to understand how one can become that way, in part by insisting that the whale is the villainous enemy who deserves annihilation and seeing oneself as righteous. But through Ishmael's eyes and discussions of whaling, as readers we come to understand that Moby Dick is just acting like a whale, albeit a huge and fearfully white one.

4. Faulkner and certainly other American writers like Steinbeck portray the social model of evil that you link to President Franklin Roosevelt. Do all stories have a villain? In a story like Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," there is no real villain – Emily herself is as close as we get. You could argue that the evil in a story like that is the general process of decay, or social change. Does a good story always need a good villain?
One reason I like "A Rose for Emily" is that it has it both ways. If she has indeed poisoned Homer with the arsenic, which is implied though never stated outright since the narrator can only surmise, murder qualifies her as a villain. What is interesting there is that there is no condemnation of her on the part of the narrator and the tone even carries a touch of sympathy for her loneliness and the humiliation of being left by this man who is from a class below hers. At the same time, the detrimental hierarchical dimensions of the social order of the South in terms of both class and race are also simultaneously exposed without being explicitly condemned. Perhaps the narrator is a member of the same dying off aristocratic family background that Emily represents. I don't think readers are led to justify Emily's actions because of the narrator's perspective, but it does lend ambiguity to the moral tone of the story.

A good story needs tension and conflict but that doesn't require a villain *per se*. That is why I admire the kinds of work that illuminate how social forces can be injurious and even prompt people to act villainously. Those kinds of works help us see that we, like the fictional characters, are shaped by social forces to hold prejudice toward others, rationalize cruelty,

behave selfishly and so on. At the same time, nuanced fiction shows some agency on the part of the characters, rather than an entirely determinative societal function.

4. What types of villains appear in today's American stories? What types of evil do they represent? Which do you find the most compelling?

Stories today that have dramatically drawn villains (whether in literature, film, TV, or video games) tend to be found in horror, fantasy or science fiction rather than portrayals of life as we experience it. For me, fantasy fiction includes the religious *Left Behind* Series that focus on otherworldly events like the Rapture or an Apocalypse. They continue the binary world view of the *Book of Revelation*, in which good is pitted strictly against evil in a cosmic warfare. This can be exciting to read or view but I don't think it provides insight into human behavior, instead placing the onus of evil on these dark forces that exist beyond human beings. That said, popular works like *Harry Potter* can prompt reflection on cruel or laudable actions that human beings (and not just wizards) undertake.

5. Another strain of evil you identify in American fiction is hedonism. Can we see this depiction of evil alive and robust today?

What I was trying to say in regard to the theme of hedonism is that religious fundamentalism sees it as a kind of evil. By demarcating strict categories of good versus evil, an absolutistic morality marks off certain behaviors as decadent because they challenge a strict set of commandments, which are believed to be divinely mandated. This kind of severe social control is part of the Puritan heritage of the United States, which writers like Melville and Hawthorne depicted in their works, mostly to expose the rigidity of such systems. Literature often challenges mores that others have accepted at a cost to personal freedom. We still see this kind of attack most often in strict religious circles that adhere to a literal understanding of scripture—hence derogatory terms like "Jezebel" are used against women who act beyond those strictures.

6. For general readers who like this subject, what other works can you recommend to them?

I recommend the novel *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides. It has a grand sweep of history, full of war and its brutalities, and an intricately drawn intersex narrator. In both cases, I think the novel gets at the complexity of life that Adam Phillips' points to when he asks, "What

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have we used the conflict between good and evil to stop ourselves thinking?" I quoted that question in my article because I do think that when we too quickly go to a binary like good versus evil we miss the beautiful ambiguities of ethical life. Eugenides portrays these and moves back and forth between humor and pathos in revealing ways.

I also like Alan Moore's graphic novel, *Watchmen*. It ingeniously plays around with the issues of good versus evil in its depiction of an alternative Vietnam War history and comic book

characters in ways that complicate motive and consequence. By using the combination of a superhero character with exceptional powers, like Dr. Manhattan, and human beings who rely on human traits to combat wrongdoing, Moore provides entry into the way we think about God, human psychology, self-righteous actions that are thwarted in their intention and result in damage, propaganda, wholesale slaughter of innocent civilians, and so on. It is a profound work.

7. One of the assumptions beneath your paper is that heroes and villains are linked, that every author presents a world view in which good and evil have specific values. Has that changed since Ahab? Is Ahab still an influential villain?
Yes, I think the two types are linked when they appear in popular fiction—that is, when a work presents a villainous character, there is often a hero who defeats the villain in the end. But over time, certain strains of fiction questioned such clear divisions. We see this in authors like Melville in the nineteenth century, modernist writers like Faulkner in the early twentieth, and now postmodern writers in general. In such works, moral ambiguity is the keynote. Characters are depicted as a mix of motives and their actions provoke unintended consequences. Characters who deem themselves heroic are portrayed as self-deceived and goodness can appear, as the quote from Auden at the start of my articles states, "among a crowd of faults."

8. If he were writing in today's world, how might Melville present evil?
This one I can't answer! Like any of us, Melville was of his time.