

Interview with Prof. Jeffrey Hole

February 2013

1. What did the Fugitive Slave Act represent that so mobilized and changed Melville's imagination?

A component of the Great Compromise of 1850, the Fugitive Slave Act strengthened a set of legal structures and practices that had developed historically with the institution of slavery in the United States. The 1850 legislation was particularly important because it intensified and extended the reach of previous fugitive slave laws, notably the Act of 1793, making it easier for slave owners to retrieve their slave property throughout the states and territories by placing the onus of recapture in the hands of the federal government.

As I explain in my research, the effect of the law had a way of further militarizing the public sphere. That is, the law not only required federal marshals and other officials to arrest suspected fugitives, using the full force of the federal government, it simultaneously mandated that U.S. citizens comply in this enforcement at the expense of being severely fined and jailed. After the passage of the Act, moreover, the practices of enforcement that extended throughout the North and other territories begin to approximate the martial powers of the South, where for decades many communities

The Fugitive Slave Act profoundly affected the politics, worldviews, and the aesthetics of writers of that time, including Melville's.

maintained armed civilian militias to secure themselves (their private property, their families, etc.) from the potential threat of rebellious or wayward slaves. Indeed, this form of enforcement had both national and international repercussions. We often understand the national problems associated with the Fugitive Slave Act, but I mention the international dimensions because the slave-holding interests of the U.S. wanted assurance from other nation-states—by way of treaties or claims of jurisdiction—that slaves who had escaped U.S. boundaries would be remanded to their owners. Slaves and freedmen as well as citizens in the North, South, and U.S. territories broadly felt the impact of the law, and it profoundly affected the politics, worldviews, and even the aesthetics of writers and thinkers of that time, including Melville's.

In fact, the law had affected Herman Melville's imagination in ways that he reveals subtly and ironically, especially in *Moby-Dick*, a work he had been composing during the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. As I note in my work, there is evidence that Melville had set out to write a whaling narrative in the spring of 1850. What emerged a year later, in the wake of the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in September, however, was something altogether different. The novel (if we dare call it that) is encyclopedic in scope: it makes allusions to previous literary works as well as classical and ancient mythologies; it recalls biblical stories, philosophy, and political theory; and it invokes scientific history and methodologies. Certainly there are elements of a whaling adventure story, but it's also much, much more than that.

After Michael Rogin, whose book *Subversive Genealogies* recalls Melville's vexed familial relationship to the law, my work is one of the first to trace out the strong connections between the crisis of 1850 and the philosophical and aesthetic concerns of Melville's novel. Let me explain. In April 1851, six months before Melville published *Moby-Dick*, Lemuel Shaw, then Melville's father-in-law and Chief

Moby Dick is a work that dramatizes the chase, or hunt.

Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court, despite his personal convictions and opposition to slavery, chose to uphold the constitutionality of the law, deciding in favor of slave-holding claimants that the fugitive Thomas Sims should be returned to bondage. This was an important case, and it not only strengthened the fugitive slave law as a means of setting precedence, it also prompted strong opposition to the law.

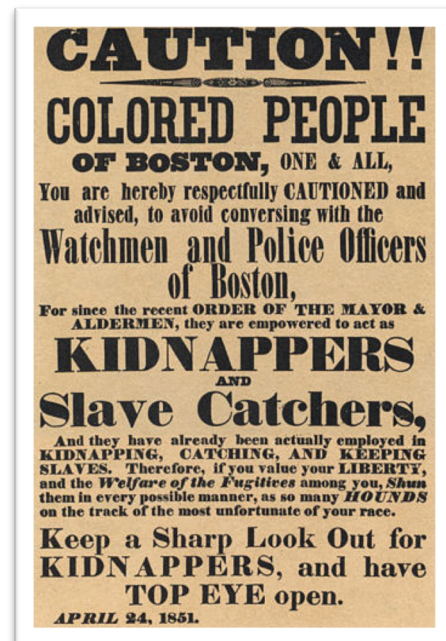
As I was reading and conducting research, however, I was intrigued by the way in which *Moby-Dick* not only recalls and subtly alludes to figures who have a fugitive status (Jonah, Pip, etc.) but how the novel dramatizes what had become a dominant set of relations established by the 1850 Act—that is, it dramatizes the chase or hunt. I would argue that *Moby-Dick* is not a work that explicitly voices opposition to the Fugitive Slave Act, but it does open up a number of important questions about 1850, about law and property, about imperial conquest, about religion and commerce, about the intelligence of “property” (including slaves) that can retaliate, as does the white whale.

2. How did his contemporaries react, in their work, to the Fugitive Slave Act?

In essence, this is the question that motivates my research.

When we speak of Melville's contemporaries, we often recall figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Margaret Fuller—writers and thinkers of the Transcendentalist movement and the central characters of F.O. Matthiessen's 1941 groundbreaking work of scholarship on American literature of the 1850s, *American Renaissance*. In truth, Mathiessen had very little to say about the Fugitive Slave Act, even though much of the literature he addresses follows in the wake of its passage. Over the last decade or two, a growing body of scholarship has examined the impact of slave law on nineteenth-century writers.

Regarding Melville's contemporaries, the Transcendentalist reacted somewhat belatedly. Although Emerson addressed the topic of slavery in his earlier 1844 lecture, “On the Anniversary of the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West



Poster in support of the Fugitive Slave Act

Indies,” it wasn’t until March of 1854, that he delivered his famous “Speech on the Slave Law,” repudiating the 1850 Act. Henry David Thoreau followed this in July with his now famous “Slavery in Massachusetts,” a speech protesting the conviction of Boston fugitive slave Anthony Burns. In the first edition of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* (1855), the poet narrator makes several references to slaves—particularly runaways—and specifically dramatizes an encounter with a fugitive: “The runaway slave came to my house and stopped outside, / . . . He staid with me a week before he was recuperated and passed north, / I had him sit next me at table . . . my firelock leaned in the corner.” Despite how this scene depicts the narrator’s assistance to the slave and thus a critique of the law, Whitman had maintained troubling ideas about race and the mixing of races, like many Transcendentalists. For instance, in 1858, as editor of the *Brooklyn Daily Times*, he asked rhetorically whether “Whites and Blacks can ever amalgamate in America” or whether African Americans can “become anything like an independent and heroic race,” to which he answered, “There is no chance for it.”

One of the more famous works at the time, of course, is Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. *The National Era* newspaper started serializing the novel in June of 1851—just a few months before Melville’s *Moby-Dick* circulated in England and the U.S.—and then John P. Jewett and Company published the novel in two volumes in 1853. I think when people recall the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, or broader issues related to antebellum slavery, Stowe’s novel is one of the first to come to mind. And for good reason. It sold more than any other literary work at the time, had been translated into thirty-seven languages, and helped shape the consciousness of a nineteenth-century audience by

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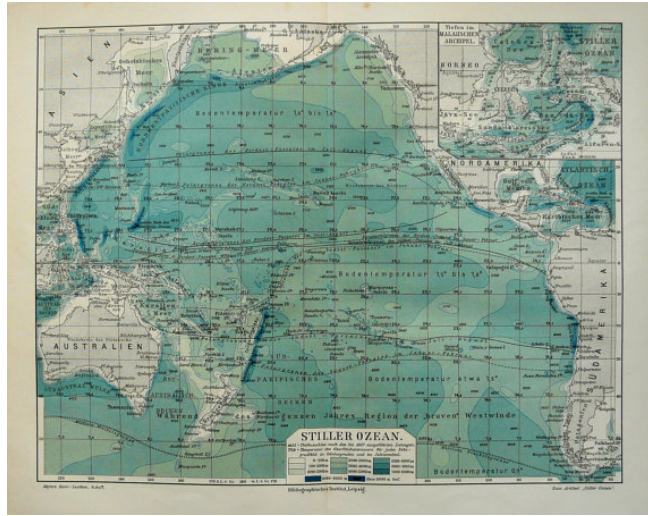
characterizing what Stowe called the “evils of slavery.” And so as a reaction to the Fugitive Slave Act, Stowe depicted the humanity of slaves over and against the brutishness and inhumanity of the slave business (the slave market, the traders, etc.), sentimentally portraying the destructive effects upon slave families and individuals, particularly Uncle Tom whose death resembles Christ-like martyrdom near the end.

Along with Stowe, the other giant of the era was Frederick Douglass. His *Narrative of the Life*, published in 1845, and the expanded and revised version in 1855, titled *My Bondage and My Freedom*, were instrumental in shaping the antislavery movement and formed a strong rhetorical argument against the Fugitive Slave Act. Melville and Douglass are almost exact contemporaries, and there’s a fair amount of scholarship out there now showing how their paths may have crossed on more than one occasion, though neither seems to have directly mentioned anything about the other. For instance, students and teachers might enjoy reading Robert Wallace’s *Douglass and Melville: Anchored Together in Neighborly Style*. While much of Douglass’s other work consisted of lectures and essays, in 1853 he published a novella, *The Heroic Slave*, recounting the 1841 slave revolt led by Madison Washington aboard *The Creole*, a slave ship bound from Richmond to New Orleans. My work on Melville’s 1855 novella *Benito Cereno* and Douglass’s *The Heroic Slave*, due out this summer in the journal *American Literature*, addresses how each author conceptualized forms of conflict by slaves as they resisted the effects of power exercised by the U.S. as a consequence of the new law.

While Douglass seems to get the lion's share of critical and scholarly attention, we have to remember that there are numerous, numerous works by slaves, former slaves, and freedmen who contributed to the antislavery efforts, who wrote narratives, autobiographies, poems, and other tracts responding to the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act—including William Wells Brown, William Craft, Harriet Jacobs, Hanna Craft, and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, just to name a few. Right now, for instance, I'm conducting more research on William Grimes, the first to write and publish a fugitive slave narrative in the U.S.

3. What radical changes and revisions did HM make to *Moby-Dick*?

I don't think there's any real argument among scholars now about whether or not Melville had revised *Moby-Dick*, it's just that it's difficult to say with any absolute certainty what he changed or revised while writing. Any record of the revisions comes from reading Melville's correspondences with his editors and other interlocutors between 1850 and 1851, including Richard Henry Dana and Nathaniel Hawthorne.



19th Century Map of the Pacific. America's expanding global power concerned Melville.

By describing the “radical” changes to the book, my intention was to show—as have other studies—that *Moby-Dick* emerged in 1851 as something quite different than what he described in 1850 to his editor. It's radical also because of the style, the complexity of the craft, because of the political and philosophical content. What makes it even more complex, for both practical and theoretical reasons, is that there were two versions, British and U.S. In the British version, which began circulating in October under the title *The Whale*, significant portions of the text had been edited or expurgated for various reasons. The U.S. version, published in November, shows significant alterations, including a different title (*Moby-Dick*). But it also included the “Epilogue” with the quotation from Job, “And I only am escaped alone to tell thee,” providing some explanation of how Ishmael had escaped drowning with the rest of the crew. Absent the “Epilogue,” Melville's book left British readers and critics wondering how a first-person narrator could perish while the story lived. That's really funny if you think about it!

“Whaling not respectable?” Ishmael answers, “Whaling is imperial!”

John Bryant has examined the textual differences, printed versions, and editorial influences more than anyone else, calling *Moby-Dick* a “fluid text.” It's an apt description. In other words, when we sit down now and read a copy of Melville's novel, we are reading, in one

sense, the creation of Melville's imagination and work, but we also have in our hands the cumulative effect of countless other influences that have gone into shaping and changing the book, both during and after its initial composition. In Bryant's words, "*Moby-Dick* (like any other work) is not a fixed text; it is a textual phenomenon."

4. You look at the central "heuristic" or motif of the hunt as vital to *Moby-Dick*. It provides the perfect structure for his tale, both in terms of plot and theme, and allows him a framework on which to hand his incredibly ambitious prose. What are other, similarly powerful, heuristics in literature to which we can compare this?

When I was writing the dissertation, I had been examining some larger questions about the role of literature. Even now these questions are important to me: what does literature do, how does it present an order of thinking that is perhaps different from other forms of knowledge and knowledge production, how does it allow us to know what we want to know? *Moby-Dick* seems an

Moby Dick seems concerned about knowledge—about knowing the world, narrating and ordering it ...

ideal text to begin with when asking these kinds of questions, principally because it seems to exceed the boundaries of established genres and, moreover, because it seems rather concerned about knowledge—about knowing the world, narrating and ordering it. Robert Tally has written much more about this topic in *Melville, Mapping and Globalization*.

So, yes, my work attempts to address the hunt or chase as a heuristic (or invention), by which I am referring to an older sense of the term, meaning to discover and to make—what the Greeks called *heuresis*. In other words, the hunt or chase is more than an allegory in *Moby-Dick*. What did Melville *discover* in writing about whaling adventures? The whale hunt had quickly turned into something else, something that opened up a way of understanding the mid nineteenth-century world by reflecting on the function of law, labor and capitalism, relations of power as stratagems and cunning, the development and practices of empire, among other topics.

While I haven't explored fully how other works of literature recall or make use of heuristics, the first that comes immediately to mind is "The Dynamo and the Virgin" in *The Education of Henry Adams*. I think this is one of the more powerful moments of the text. Encountering the hall of dynamos at the Great Exposition 1900, the young Adams begins to reflect on his own inadequacy for understanding the world he inhabits.

5. Did other authors similarly change their manuscripts in the middle of writing?

Yes. Absolutely. And they changed and revised afterwards, too. I mentioned earlier how Douglass composed, revised, and republished variations of his autobiographical *Narrative*. William Wells Brown produced four different versions of his novel *Clotel*. The list goes on.

To see how or if authors revised in the middle of writing, we usually need to get our hands on the original manuscript or multiple manuscripts. The recently discovered working draft

of Melville's *Typee* is a perfect example, showing us again, as John Bryant claims, how "fluid" the text is—how Melville completed large portions of the narrative but returned to it in order to flesh out other chapters and give it more weight. We're fortunate that we are now able to digitize and share these rare and fragile works, often accessing them online. Of course, if you want to see the real thing, you'll have to visit the New York Public Library.

Your question is one that motivates a whole discipline of literary scholarship called "print history" or "print culture," and I think my work only scratches the surface here. In fact, there are some really bright people digging through the archives, examining and reexamining manuscripts, making discoveries, and writing about various forms of print (newspapers, literary magazines, broadsides, slave narratives, novels, among other forms of print) that shaped nineteenth-century culture. For example, Lara Cohen and Jordan Stein have recently edited an exceptional volume on *Early African American Print Culture* that presents some groundbreaking research by a number of scholars.

6. When Melville writes in a letter to Hawthorne that he cannot write *Moby-Dick* the way he wants to – what is that way? What does he want to write that he feels "is banned" and "will not pay?"

Yes, this is an important letter that he composes in the spring of 1851. Writing to his friend, an intimate, he proceeds with the assurance, the sense of knowing that Hawthorne will understand him. It's touching, really. Scholars have generally interpreted this moment in his letter as a sign of Melville's distaste for the commercialism of writing—that is, writing purely for the market. And I think that's true. With the success of his first novel, *Typee*, Melville saw his reputation and the rest of his work being reduced to a single slogan: "man who lived among the cannibals."

What I'm drawn to in his letter to Hawthorne is how he speaks of his actions in terms of legal prohibition—that is, to do what "is banned." He seems to be referring to matters aesthetic, the ability to produce a work of literature that is not easily consumed by readers. But I also think that he was referring to a type of subject matter, topics that were not easily appreciated by his

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contemporaries or even his family. He doesn't say explicitly what these topics are, however. In my work, I'm trying to link this attempt on Melville's part to write what is "banned" to other political interests, particularly to his relationship with Richard Henry Dana, author of *Two Years before the Mast*. Dana, we might recall, was involved with the Underground Railroad and the Boston Committee of Vigilance specifically. Melville had met Dana in the summer 1847, and he seems to have shared many of Dana's political interests, including a strong critique of flogging, a common practice of punishment aboard navy ships. In a letter to Dana from May 1850, Melville mentions his progress on the "whaling voyage"—what he would publish over a year later under the title *Moby-Dick*—calling it then a "strange sort of

book.” As he does in his letter to Hawthorne, Melville notes the difficulties of writing: “the poetry runs as hard as sap from a frozen maple tree.” He tells Dana, moreover, that he’s “half way in the work” and is “very glad that your suggestion so jumps with mine.” We don’t know what Dana had suggested. Nor do we know how that suggestion “jumps with” Melville’s 1851 publication. But for me, it’s an important connection, one that I continue to explore.

7. How might Melville’s writings have been different if he had been a successful grocer, or a lawyer or a teacher, with no money troubles? How did his personal struggles reflect themselves in his writing?

This is an intriguing question.

I can identify with the Melville who is struggling to make ends meet, who has to tend to the real material pressures of making a living, who has to convince friends and other family members that writing, creating, and thinking are important, even when it doesn’t pay the bills—at least not directly.

Indeed, I think this component of Melville’s life and work, the fact that he did have to struggle at times functions as an excellent reminder for those of us who feel obliged to explain why we do what we do—why we read and write literature, why we study art or philosophy, why we take the time to learn the intricacies of argumentation and rhetoric. This isn’t to say that so-called successful professionals cannot produce great literature or art. After all, Wallace Stevens was an insurance executive. But I’m drawn to what Edward Said continually referred to as the “amateur”—the lover—over and against the “professional” modes of production and specialization. In both Melville and Stevens (among others), I see two figures stealing away in the night, after the labors of day, to write and think.

I also think we can see his personal and artistic struggles in a number of his works, but it’s particularly evident in “Bartleby the Scrivener.” In this short story from 1853, Melville provides a glimpse of how the individual’s intentions to create art, to write literature, are reduced to mechanical reproduction. He represents an order of human imagination and creation transformed into inhuman activity. The main character of the story is forced, after all, to function as a copy machine, reproducing documents for a law office on Wall Street. A number of issues come together in this story, but Melville specifically dramatizes the effects of commercialism, capital accumulation and wealth, property law and finance, as well as the destructive effects of this modern capitalist world on the creative potential of human life. I’m not sure that we can read “Bartleby” as autobiography, but I do think that Bartleby’s world reflects some of the conditions in which Melville found himself working and thinking, attempting to create.

8. Your premise is that, while others saw America’s growing global influence as a universal positive, Melville had concerns. What were those concerns? Did he think America would enslave Pacific Islands, or ruin Africa?

Before Melville had composed *Moby-Dick*, he had expressed concerns about the imperial ambitions of Europe and the U.S. to colonize the Pacific. In *Typee* (1846), he ironically notes the presence of a French naval fleet: “No description can do justice to its beauty; but that

beauty was lost to me then, and I saw nothing but the tri-coloured flag of France trailing over the stern of six vessels, whose black hulls and bristling broadsides proclaimed their warlike character.”

Ishmael, the first-person narrator ... seems to come and go throughout the book

In *Redburn* (1849), he coins the term “snivelization” to characterize the effects of Western imperial influence. In *Moby-Dick* he continues the critique, recalling (ironically, I argue) the way in which whaling helped open up the Pacific (its spaces and people). In Chapter 24, “The Advocate,” Melville recalls how the whale ships “cleared the way” for Christian missionaries and then navies. And again in Chapter 89, “Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish,” he catalogues a spate of imperial conquests—critiquing England’s domination of Ireland, Russia’s seizure of Poland in 1815, and the U.S.’s annexation of Texas in 1845, among other exploits.

9. Did Melville’s fears come true? What would he say about America’s influence today?

I think the answer is yes.

Of course, there are different manifestations of U.S. power that Melville could not have anticipated, but there are still a number of important connections that link the mid nineteenth century to our own present occasion. In writing the dissertation and now the book, I cannot help but to think about how the U.S. still projects or, more precisely, exercises power in such a way that recalls Melville’s moment. In fact, if we can learn anything from *Moby-Dick*, particularly the chapter I noted above, “Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish,” it’s that Melville took to task a whole host of exploitive practices and dramatized the connections between imperial conquest and capitalism’s destructive effects on people and the environment. Today, I think reading Melville allows us to understand better (historically, philosophically, and critically) the U.S.’s interest in securing the intricate commercial networks and markets, in shaping neoliberal policies or finance. I also think Melville’s work allows us to better understand the stories about and practices of warfare. While he could not have anticipated what the U.S. now calls a “global war on terror,” I think there are elements in Melville’s thinking and writing that critique the historical processes, the forms of exceptionalism, that supply the conditions for this type of conflict.

10. Pauline Kael wrote that Melville was, compared to his contemporaries, a crude writer who overcame his technical deficiencies to achieve greatness. Do you buy into that characterization?

If I recall the context of her comment, she was referring to Melville’s *Billy Budd*, yes? And she characterized him as the greatest writer, as the “American primitive,” who struggles to say more than he knows how to say. Something like that.

I am not that interested in categories of “greatness.” It’s a nomenclature that doesn’t seem that fruitful to me. However, I would agree with Kael that we do see in Melville the

evidence of “struggle.”

Melville’s writing evinces a mind taking shape over time.

I think Melville’s *oeuvre*, his entire body of work, shows how he experimented with style, with the “technical” aspects of writing. And there have been numerous arguments among critics about Melville’s craft, arguments I can’t rehearse here. What is more important, I think, is the fact that his writing evinces a mind taking shape over time, an imagination and intellect attempting to understand the world as he encounters it. But his is a mind that had drawn heavily on the works, imaginations, and intellects of others—both from his past and present. He was a voracious reader. And we’re fortunate enough to have record of comments or marginalia on a number of works from his library.

11. You imply that Melville’s writing was internally conflicted, or set against itself, and that this aspect lends it power. How and in which passages can a new reader of *Moby-Dick* best see this?

In Melville’s writing we see textual tensions or moments of “inconsistency,” as some critics and readers have called them. Melville’s style of writing presents a number of tricky moves that are sometimes difficult to follow. This is true in *Moby-Dick* as well as in other texts, including “Bartleby,” *Benito Cereno*, and especially *The Confidence Man*. What I want to suggest is that if we’re not careful as readers, we can easily misperceive the broader ironies of his writing, how Melville often

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tricks us into believing or seeing particular points of view only later to dismantle that view. The term irony, we may recall, comes from the Greek *eiros* or “dissembler.” I mentioned “Bartleby the Scrivener” earlier in the interview. This story, like *Benito Cereno*, can easily dupe readers into seeing what the lawyer and manager narrator wants us to see, but if we read it carefully we also see how the narrator’s view presents a number of flaws. And so the overall effect of the story should call into question the narrator’s motives, his worldview, his treatment of workers, his propensity to protect wealth.

In my reading of *Moby-Dick*, I have tried to show how there are important inconsistencies, particularly addressing the topic of empire or imperialism, the very focus of this journal. I mention above chapters 24 and 89, and I would recall them here again. First, readers of *Moby-Dick* need to begin by examining Ishmael, the ostensible first-person narrator. I say “ostensible” because he seems to come and go throughout the book. Yes, the first chapter, “Loomings,” opens with the famous passage, “Call me Ishmael,” but there are moments where Melville abandons Ishmael’s point of view, abandons the limited omniscience that a first-person perspective makes possible. In “Surmises” (Chapter 46), for instance, the book transitions to third-person narration, revealing Ahab’s inner thoughts and strategies.

On the topic of empire, the book seems to present two different and opposing views. In the chapter titled, "The Advocate," Ishmael attempts to defend the reputation of the whalers, but he does so through a peculiar and circuitous argument about empire, remarking how the whalers' labor is not merely a barbaric "butchering sort of business," as many people seemed to have viewed them, but is absolutely essential to modernity: "But, though the world scouts at us whale hunters, yet does it unwittingly pay us the profoundest homage; yea, an all-abounding adoration! For almost all the tapers, lamps, and candles that burn around the globe, burn, as before so many shrines, to our glory!" We have to remember that whale oil was the industrial revolution's version of our petroleum. It kept the world alight and lubricated the machinery. He then asks rhetorically near the end of the chapter, "Whaling not respectable?" His response to this question is important. Attempting to advocate for the whaler, he valorizes the business of whaling by noting its essential role in making possible the expansion of commerce and the rise of empire. "Whaling is imperial!" Ishmael boasts. In my work, I note how Ishmael confuses the distinction between the laborer and the function of labor in the inhuman world of whaling and industry. That is, in order to give value to the actual whalers he mistakenly elevates the practices of empire. Later in the book, in Chapter 89, "Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish," as I noted above, Melville delivers a critique of imperial conquest. It's not clear if Chapter 89 derives from Ishmael's point of view or the novel's, but it does seem to undermine or ironize Ishmael's earlier reflections on empire.