

Talking about Trauma: Failure of Catharsis in *Moby-Dick*

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It seems safe to say that in the popular imagination of *Moby-Dick* the central image that defines the story is that of Ahab and the white whale locked in violent contest. The climactic encounter between the whaling captain and his quarry only occupies the final three chapters of the novel, a proportionally small fraction of the wider narrative. The conclusion of *Moby-Dick* has come to stand outside its place in the narrative, as most current readers know of the destruction of the *Pequod* and its crew before ever actually touching the novel. Ishmael does foreshadow the sinking of his ship early on in his narration, but the commonly held focus on the concluding action distracts from the complex way Ishmael chooses to approach his narration's end. The reader's foreknowledge of coming destruction mirrors Ishmael's own narration: by retelling his story he must eventually come to describe his own destructive experience with Moby Dick. The inevitability of describing the sinking of the ship once Ishmael has embarked on a complete account of his experience raises the fundamental question of why he even chooses to begin his narration. The prospect of reliving his experience as the only survivor of the *Pequod* seems to pit several urges against each other within Ishmael's mind. Ishmael at once delays coming to the violent conclusion of the *Pequod's* story yet feels some compulsion to absolve himself of a sense of guilt for having failed to resist Ahab's destructive quest. By recounting his experience in a tragic mode, Ishmael seeks to show that he deserves pity from his audience rather than censure for his part in the ship's sinking, but he struggles to convince himself that his characterization of the past is true.

Although Ishmael puts off Moby Dick's physical entrance until the final chapters, the memory of Ishmael's encounter with the white whale overshadows his narration from

the beginning. In “Loomings,” Ishmael concludes with a vague vision of Moby Dick: “two and two there floated into my inmost soul, endless processions of the whale, and, midmost of them all, one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air” (22). His proleptic imagination draws the agent of the *Pequod*’s destruction out of its place in time, and the “endless procession” of whales heightens the sense that the encounter with Moby Dick recurs endlessly in Ishmael’s mind. For Ishmael, much of the distress caused by the encounter with Moby Dick lies in the aftereffects of the original event. The loss of the *Pequod* represents a traumatic event that acts as a pivot in time, for Ishmael equates the destruction of the ship with the loss of parents and the identity that such past associations entail. His entire narration takes place after his ship’s sinking, and all the voices in the text come only through Ishmael’s mediation and memory. When the *Pequod* sinks, it takes with it all the points of reference for the main plot. Left adrift in the sea, Ishmael must wrestle with his memory of what happened, and his final figuration of himself as an orphan emphasizes his sense of loss.

His description of himself as an orphan represents one of the few instances in which Ishmael comments on his own status after the sinking, and the specific term he uses begs further exploration to better understand the emotional response tied up in it. The 1828 edition of Noah Webster’s *An American Dictionary of the English Language* defines “orphan” as “a child who is bereaved of father or mother or of both” with the etymological root from the Ancient Greek *ορφανος*. Melville draws on the emotional valence of bereavement to explain Ishmael’s psychological state. Rather than simply identify himself as one whose parents have died, Ishmael stresses his emotional status as the only survivor of the crew. Once the *Pequod* sinks, he relates: “I floated on the soft and dirge-like main”

(427). Ishmael imagines the natural world to share in his bereavement, projecting his own emotions onto what ought to be distinct from his interior mind. The distinction between Ishmael's interiority and the world that surrounds him hints at the control he exerts over the world as described in his narration. His description of the "dirge-like main" links the physical ocean to the speech act Ishmael is performing (since the text is a lamentation for those who were lost). In his imagination, the ocean, the very medium on which the *Pequod* travels forward on its voyage, becomes the physical embodiment of his narration, which itself drives the ship onward. He seems, perhaps unconsciously, to realize that the act of narrating recreates the past, especially since as the sole survivor his account is all that exists to affirm any standard of what happened in reality. Ishmael explores the ability for his words not only to recreate the physical environment of the plot but also to recreate himself. His identity is inherently tied up in his past experience, so by reshaping his past Ishmael creates a new identity.

Ishmael's description of himself as an orphan suggests that he sees himself reborn to some degree after the *Pequod's* destruction, and his sense of bereavement seems to be connected as much to a loss of his sense of self as a loss of his mates. Another instance of "orphan" offers some insight into Ishmael's use of the word. In "The Gilder," the 1967 *Norton Critical Edition* of the text has Ahab speak: "Our souls are like those orphans whose unwedded mothers die in bearing them: the secret of our paternity lies in their grave, and we must there to learn it" (373). The 1851 first American edition of the text does not include quotation marks around the paragraph, suggesting that the words are Ishmael's. The editorial decision<sup>1</sup> to use quotation marks, which goes unexplained, to

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<sup>1</sup> In the 2002 *Norton Critical Edition*, editors Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford note that the 1967 edition of the text was the first time the editorial decision to use quotation marks was used.

indicate that Ahab, rather than Ishmael, is the speaker taken away from the text's original ambiguity. Without quotation marks, the text draws the use of orphan closer to Ishmael, foreshadowing his later use in the epilogue. Regardless of whether Ahab speaks (and his speech only comes through Ishmael's narration) or Ishmael does, the figuration of an orphan as being born parentless or born bereaved explicates Ishmael's description of himself as an orphan.

Having lost the ship and its crew, Ishmael imagines himself to be reborn as an orphan, for he casts the ship as a pseudo-mother. When the *Rachel* finally rescues him, Ishmael states that the ship is looking for "her missing children" (427). It is Captain Gardner who is searching for his son, but Ishmael's phrasing casts the ship itself as a parent figure, suggesting that the *Pequod* represents the sort of mother who would die in bearing an orphan, or sink and leave Ishmael born into a world alone. The destruction of the *Pequod* marks the birth of Ishmael, whose identity is only apparent through the narration he gives. As an orphan, Ishmael frames his emotional response to the ship's destruction in terms of bereavement and foregrounds his relationship to the ship's crew.

While the plot of the *Pequod* centers on Ahab's vengeful response to his first encounter with Moby Dick, the only view Ishmael gives to his own response to meeting the whale is in the form of his narrative. His decision to narrate the events leading up to the encounter reveals one of the most troubling aspects of trauma: its repetition across time continues to haunt the sufferer long after the initial event. Just after introducing himself, Ishmael situates his narration in time: "Some years ago—never mind how long precisely..." (18). The vague time setting suggests how the traumatic event distorts the sense of time and sequence of events. Ishmael may be appealing to the narrative trope of

fables through his vagueness, along the lines of “a long time ago there once was...”, but his engagement with the time that has passed since the sinking of the *Pequod* is consistent with the psychological effects of trauma. Since memories of the past event surface in Ishmael’s mind, the time that has passed from the original event to the present time of his narration seems to contract.

Although Melville wrote before the development of the modern psychological theory, the definition and study of trauma provide useful frameworks for understanding Ishmael’s experience. Exploring representations of trauma in dramatic performance, Patrick Duggan writes about the reliving of an original traumatic event: “This disruptive reoccurrence points toward a definition of trauma which moves away from a focus on the event, and the physical injuries it causes, to a focus on the psychological impact of it” (*Trauma-Tragedy*, 25). A traumatic event is one that repetitively exerts a negative psychological effect on the victim after the point in time in which the victim actually experienced the event. Such a definition of a traumatic event that focuses on the aftereffects of the disruptive event reflects the dynamics of Ishmael’s narrative, for in his meditations on whaling Ishmael focuses on everything except for the original event. Even if Ishmael does not have a physically apparent injury from the *Pequod*’s sinking, his experience still qualifies as traumatic due to its psychological impact. His identification of himself as an orphan most explicitly admits a negative emotional response to the experience, yet Ishmael reveals the psychological consequences of his trauma in more complicated ways through his narrative.

Despite its tangential musings, *Moby-Dick* represents the only evidence of an emotional response to the original event that Ishmael provides. Although he hardly speaks

of his own experience floating alone in the ocean, Ishmael describes Pip's similar experience alone in the water: "The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul" (321). His extensive psychological description of Pip's interiority suggests a degree of shared knowledge of the trauma caused by surviving being lost at sea. It is possible that Ishmael merely imagines how Pip would feel after such an experience without identifying or projecting his own emotional response onto Pip. Even so, Ishmael only talks about Pip's emotional response and avoids discussing his own. His interest in Pip's psychology runs counter to the attitude among the other sailors, who dismiss Pip as mad. The fact that Ishmael mulls over the reasons behind Pip's behavior suggests a deeper affinity or even understanding. Ishmael's narration may offer few explicit indications of his emotional response to trauma, but his meditations on the events leading up to the sinking indirectly demonstrate Ishmael's psychological response to his own experience. For Ishmael, the original event that sparks his narration is the sinking of the *Pequod*, but the plot of his narration rests on the psychological impact that Moby Dick's attack leaves on Ahab. Ishmael's traumatic event traces its causes to the original traumatic wound to Ahab's leg, which sets the captain on his quest that leads to the sinking of his ship. The ways in which Ahab and Pip respond to trauma offer points of comparison to better understand Ishmael's own response to his trauma.

While Ahab bears a traumatic physical wound, it is Pip that most closely resembles Ishmael in terms of traumatic experience. Pip and Ishmael each must endure being lost alone at sea, and their psychological responses are revealing in their similarity. Following Pip's rescue, Ishmael recounts how "from that hour the little negro went about the deck an idiot; such, at least, they said he was" (321). The qualification that Pip's madness is a

matter of popular opinion implies that Ishmael does not wholly believe its truth. His resistance to believing that Pip is mad seems caught up in his conception of his own consciousness. The crew believes that Pip speaks nonsense, and Ishmael is acutely aware that his own audience may not wholly believe the truth of what he is saying. Skepticism toward the veracity of Ishmael's narration is reasonable, since rather than offer a strictly factual account of the *Pequod's* voyage Ishmael describes scenes that he would have been unable to observe in reality. In her essay "Irreconcilable Differences: Voice, Trauma, and Melville's *Moby-Dick*," Tara Robbins Fee argues that, while Ishmael's imagined scenes would be out of place in a narrative intent on delivering facts, his straying from the truth "makes perfect sense if these fantasized memories are created and shared to displace the discomfort of his action and inaction in the events he actually experienced" (143). Fee identifies the function of the narrative as an attempt to offset Ishmael's guilt, especially in relation to Ahab. Although Fee recognizes the fictional aspect of the narration, it is not entirely clear whether Ishmael attempts to revise his own history through the narration or merely come to terms with what happened.

Fee argues that by narrating scenes on the *Pequod* that he could not have observed himself: "Ishmael rejects traditional sources of narrative authority, including his own physical presence" (143). Without being physically present as a witness to much of what he describes, Ishmael gives up any empirical authority and instead needs to appeal to a different sensibility. If he cannot claim empirical truth, he seems to appeal to sincerity of emotion. Since he is the only survivor, his authority rests on the emotional reaction to his experience, whether his emotional response rings true. Ishmael constructs scenes with imagination rather than memory, even if it is not immediately evident whether he projects



his own emotions onto the other characters or merely imagines them independent from himself. It is the rejection of his physical body that reveals how Ishmael responds to his trauma through his narration. The disconnect between Ishmael's physical presence and his mind represents one of the effects of trauma that Duggan references: "The psychic wound trauma inflicts can be seen to make the self absent from the body: we cannot be truly present in the moment of original trauma nor in the uninvited repetitions of it in our mind's eye" (*Trauma-Tragedy*, 29). The separation of body and self is a psychological state that both Ishmael and Pip find themselves experiencing after being lost at sea. Considered by the other seamen to have lost his mind, Pip seems to confirm their opinion by looking for his lost self: "Seek out one Pip. Who's been missing long...If you find him, then comfort him; for he must be very sad" (365). Pip's search for himself evokes Ishmael's own self-identification as an orphan after being lost at sea: Pip identifies his previous self as somehow distinct from his current, newly born identity. The sadness that Pip assigns to his lost self picks up on the emotional sense of an orphan as being one bereft. Rather than having gone mad, as the other crewmembers believe, Pip displays the psychological symptoms stemming from extreme trauma. If he were mad, it would be easy to dismiss Pip's seemingly nonsensical speech. His speech, however, provides insight into the psychological response to a traumatic experience in the same way Ishmael's wider narrative does.

Ishmael's status as the lone survivor of Ahab's vengeful quest casts him in a pathetic light, but the close parallel between Ishmael and Pip complicates any simple expression of pathos. When speaking about his past self, Pip also reveals a sense of guilt because he jumped from Stubb's whaleboat: "Queequeg dies game! I say; game, game,

game! but base Pip, he died a coward; died all a 'shiver" (366). His sense of guilt evokes Ishmael's own sense of guilt for failing to resist Ahab. After Ahab binds the crew to an oath against Moby Dick, Ishmael admits, "I, Ishmael, was one of that crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest" (152). Fee rightly characterizes his words: "His description leaves behind the casual, implied relationship between teller and tale, taking on the form of a confession" (145). Rather than presenting himself as an innocent victim of Ahab's tyranny, part of Ishmael blames himself for being complicit. Pip acts as a mouthpiece for Ishmael's response to trauma, since Ishmael himself does not explore his sense of guilt so explicitly. Continuing his condemnation of cowards, Pip says, "Let 'em drown like Pip, that jumped from a whale-boat" (366). His assertion that Pip has died suggests a wish to have avoided the aftereffects of his traumatic experience and to have perished in the original traumatic event. If Ishmael is crafting a new identity for himself through his narration, his act of self-definition serves as a means to distance himself from his previous self, whose cowardice in the face of Ahab is a source of guilt.

While Pip and Ishmael both undergo some degree of disassociation from their physical body, Ishmael makes a greater effort at fashioning a new identity after his trauma. After Ahab leaves Pip in his cabin, Pip soliloquizes, "Here he this instant stood; I stand in his air,—but I'm alone. Now were even poor Pip here I could endure it, but he's missing" (400). Pip's concern over the lingering presence of Ahab even after the captain's departure recalls Ishmael's admission that the image of Ahab still comes to him "in all his Nantucket grimness and shagginess" (127). Just as Pip stands alone speaking, so Ishmael as the lone survivor of the voyage gives his narration. Although Pip's phrasing suggests that a return of his complete self would make experiencing the reoccurrence of Ahab's presence less

distressing, Pip is unable to find his previous self. He asks, “Who’s seen Pip? He must be up here; let’s try the door. What? neither lock, nor bolt, nor bar; and yet there’s no opening it. It must be the spell; he told me to stay here...” (400). By wondering why he is unable to leave and pursue his search for himself, Pip explores the symptoms of his psychological state. He realizes that the obstacle to recovering his identity is not physical in nature; however, Pip does not believe that he has it in his power to begin a process of recovery. His belief that Ahab has control over him allows Pip to remain a passive victim who cannot independently begin a healing process, forcing him to continue experiencing his extreme symptoms of trauma.

In his imagination, Pip associates himself closer with Ahab’s destructive quest and distances himself from his own identity. When he addresses an imagined audience of sea officers in the cabin, Pip exclaims, “Well then, fill up again, captains, and let’s drink shame upon all cowards!” (400). When alone in Ahab’s seat, Pip imitates his captain. Pip’s appeal to his imagined audience to condemn cowards echoes Ahab’s earlier speech to his crew in “The Quarter-Deck,” a speech Pip must have witnessed with the entire crew being assembled, where Ahab binds them to an oath over a drink of grog: “Drink, ye harpooners! Drink and swear, ye men that man the deathful whaleboat’s bow—Death to Moby Dick!” (142). Pip’s imitation of Ahab’s performance suggests a sense of guilt for showing cowardice and a desire to conform to the standards set out by Ahab. Pip not only seems to overcompensate, but he also targets his former self. His reference to cowards evokes what he has to say about the old Pip: “he died a coward” (366). Pip’s attack on cowards takes on the color of Ahab’s search for vengeance on Moby Dick. Ahab turns his hate against the external agent of the whale to wrestle with his trauma, and Pip adopts that sort of hate but

turns it against his former self. Just as Pip believes himself unable to move due to Ahab's spell, he still cannot define an identity that is free from Ahab. Continuing his condemnation of cowardice, Pip exclaims, "I name no names. Shame upon them!" (400). His attention to names calls to mind the first words Ishmael utters: "Call me Ishmael" (18). There is no evidence that Ishmael is in fact his given name, but his decision to name himself stands in contrast to Pip's inability to do the same. Pip lives in a strange present where the name "Pip" applies to a person in the past, leaving Pip to speak only as an "I" that has no name for itself in its current state of being. By starting his narration and naming himself, Ishmael appears to make one step in redefining himself after his traumatic experience.

Pip and Ishmael share similar traumatic experiences that leave them physically unmarked, but Ahab differs from the other two in the nature of his trauma and his emotional response. When Ishmael describes the first time he saw Ahab on the deck of the *Pequod*, he remarks on the scar that Ahab bears: "It resembled that perpendicular seam sometimes made in the straight, lofty trunk of a great tree, when the upper lightning tearingly darts down it..." (108-109). The scar divides Ahab in two, physically marking his being as fractured in some way. Pip and Ishmael experience a split between their physical body and their identity, but Ahab experiences a different sort of split. Recounting Ahab's return voyage after losing his leg to Moby Dick, Ishmael states that in the course of Ahab's trauma "then it was, that his torn body and gashed soul bled into one another; and so interfusing, made him mad" (156). According to Ishmael, Pip's experience in the water "drowned the infinite of his soul" and preserved his body. In contrast, Ahab's traumatic

experience causes his body and soul to blend together so that both become an instrument of vengeance.

So intent on death for his quarry, Ahab offers a contrast to Ishmael's sense of rebirth after the sinking of the ship. Describing the nocturnal struggle that leaves Ahab in a sleep-walking state, Ishmael observes the dominance of Ahab's will over the rest of his being: "Nay, could grimly live and burn, while the common vitality to which it was conjoined, fled horror-stricken from the unbidden and unfathered birth" (170). The "unbidden and unfathered birth" to which Ishmael refers evokes Ahab's later comparison in "The Gilder" of souls to "orphans whose unwedded mothers die in bearing them," but Ahab's sense of being an orphan does not quite match Ishmael's own identification as an orphan. Ahab's trauma appears to have caused Ahab to be reborn in some sense, although what is reborn is hardly human. In a peculiar break into the present tense, Ishmael addresses Ahab: "God help thee, old man, thy thoughts have created a creature in thee; and he whose intense thinking thus makes him a Prometheus; a vulture feeds upon that heart for ever; that vulture the very creature he creates" (170). Ishmael characterizes the product of Ahab's rebirth from trauma as an inhuman, destructive animal turned against its creator. The rebirth Ahab experiences is one directed toward death again, with the orphaned will in Ahab set on destroying the person who created it or orphaning itself a final time. If Ishmael attempts to come to terms with his bereavement through his narration, Ahab seeks to make good his loss through destruction. Ahab's response to trauma avoids any healing process and instead drives toward a final traumatic act: rather than seek to rehabilitate his fractured parts, Ahab seeks the extermination of the whole.

Ahab seeks out Moby Dick all the while carrying with him the constant physical marker of his trauma in his missing leg. Ishmael in contrast carries a psychological weight that seems no less constant, and just as Ahab imagines the physical destruction of Moby Dick to be an answer to his physically-focalized trauma Ishmael pursues an answer to his own trauma through his narration. In his study of the dramatic performance of traumatic experiences, Duggan raises a fundamental complication in any attempt at recounting a traumatic experience: “Thus, there is no adequate representation or narrativization of the original event, but enough that the event persists in a cyclical, ritual repetition which perpetuates a disruption of linear time, memory, and, consequently, notions of selfhood” (*Trauma-Tragedy*, 27). If applied to *Moby-Dick*, Duggan’s characterization of the narrativization of a traumatic event suggests that by describing the *Pequod*’s voyage Ishmael re-experiences the disruptive impact of the original event. The range of modes in which Ishmael explores his experience of whaling resonates with Duggan’s observation, for by switching between dramatic scenes and his personal meditations Ishmael searches for a means of “adequate representation” for his traumatic experience.

When Ahab enters the narrative, Ishmael adopts the conventions of drama as one of the different modes in which he speaks about his experience on the *Pequod*. Many of the scenes involving Ahab that Ishmael presents exist outside what Ishmael could have seen in his capacity as a crewmember, introducing a degree of imagination to the narrative. The dramatic features raise the possibility that Ishmael seeks to achieve an Aristotelian catharsis through the performance of tragedy. In her essay exploring the precise nature of Aristotelian catharsis in tragedy, Eva Schaper writes, “For Aristotle, catharsis is the response to an imitation, to that which is presented as if it were real, to that which is

convincing and probable despite not being fact, to that which is complete in itself by virtue of conforming to some formal principles of art” (“Aristotle’s Catharsis and Aesthetic Pleasure,” 141). The imitative nature of tragedy that Schaper stresses calls to mind the fictional quality of much of Ishmael’s narration that Fee points out. For Schaper, catharsis is available to the spectator observing an artwork, so it is not clear whether Ishmael is capable of gaining catharsis from a narrative that he does not observe but rather creates. Ishmael also plays a role in the drama he creates, further complicating his relationship to the audience. He cannot stand outside the action as a spectator.

As the narrator of events he claims to have experienced, Ishmael would know to what degree he is making fiction and therefore not be able to experience the sort of catharsis that is available to a spectator who can be convinced of the narrative’s truth. Ishmael himself recognizes the importance of actuality, since he feels the need to defend the fact of his narrative: “For this is one of those disheartening instances where truth requires full as much bolstering as error” (172). His claim on narrative authority seems tied to his claim on pity, for Ishmael sets out to establish “the reasonableness of the whole story of the White Whale” but, significantly, “especially the catastrophe” (172). He is acutely aware that for him to deserve pity, the catastrophe he suffered must be convincingly real to his audience. Seeing that without more context landsmen might not believe the actuality of his story, Ishmael fears “they might scout at Moby Dick as a monstrous fable, or still worse and more detestable, a hideous and intolerable allegory” (172). Ishmael resists having his story seem a fable at least in part because of the separation such a characterization would place between his own experience and the story. If his story were

mere allegory, it would exist in an abstract space without the very real emotional consequences that Ishmael continues to suffer.

Aristotle's conception of catharsis developed from the tradition of Greek tragedy, and the difference in structure between Ishmael's narrative and Greek tragic tradition further strains any application of Aristotelian or dramatic catharsis to the text. When surveying the Greek tragic tradition, Raymond Williams observes, "The mainstream of the action is then seen as the isolation of this hero. But uniquely, this is choral tragedy. The specific and varying relations between chorus and actors are its true dramatic relations" (*Modern Tragedy*, 18). In *Moby-Dick*, the hero, whether it be Ishmael or Ahab, certainly becomes isolated either through a monomaniacal quest ending in death or an orphaning experience as the lone survivor of a wreck, but the chorus, which according to Williams is a defining feature of Greek tragedy, is absent from Ishmael's narration. Ishmael as the narrator partly serves the function of the chorus, but he is an individual rather than a group and a character in the action as well. The replacement of the Greek chorus with lone Ishmael emphasizes the absence of a community, which has gone down with the ship.

Any attempt to map the role of the hero onto *Moby-Dick* is especially fraught. Ahab dominates his plot line, but Ishmael is the only agent in the text that exists with any degree of certainty since the entire plot comes through him. The fact that Ahab dies and Ishmael survives comes into tension with what Williams identifies as the common trajectory of Greek tragic plots: "Certainly in almost all tragedies the hero is destroyed, but that is not normally the end of the action. Some new distribution of forces, physical or spiritual, normally succeeds the death" (*Modern Tragedy*, 55). The text concludes when Ahab dies along with the rest of the crew, with only Ishmael's epilogue following, standing in for the



last lines normally spoken by the chorus. The “new distribution” that Williams cites seems to describe Ishmael’s sense of being reborn, or orphaned, by the *Pequod*’s sinking. His entire narration stems from the new sense of identity engendered in Ishmael, disrupting the sort of linear plot presented in Greek tragedy.

The tension between Ishmael’s role as both narrator and character in the text reflects the psychological forces at play in his attempt to address his traumatic experience in tragic terms. Duggan presents a useful model of the tensions involved in engaging with a traumatic event in his triangulation of three competing factors: “the desire to forget the original event, the repetitive and uninvited intrusions of the fragmented memories of that event, and the necessity to consciously remember/relive/restage it in order to move beyond and eventually forget it” (*Trauma-Tragedy*, 26). By attempting to describe his traumatic experience, Ishmael holds out the hope of limiting the scope of his trauma within the confines of narrative. Narrative serves as a means of exerting control over a trauma that otherwise repeats itself incomprehensibly, for the compiling of Ishmael’s fragmentary scenes and meditations into a complete whole gives his memory some sort of overarching structure.

Ishmael casts himself as a “tragic dramatist” (127) in his portrayal of the crew and Ahab above all. When he foreshadows or hints at Ahab’s darker nature early in the voyage, Ishmael aligns himself with the sort of dramatist who would not “ever forget a hint, incidentally so important to his art, as the one now alluded to” (127). He follows his reflection on his portrayal of Ahab with a gesture to the man himself: “But Ahab, my Captain, still moves before me in all his Nantucket grimness and shagginess” (127). It is significant that Ishmael associates an act of memory with his artistic undertaking. Since he

is speaking about his own experience, his decision about what to include or not include is not just an artistic decision. Instead, his decision over what to include influences his own memory of what happened. Ishmael's reflection on the decision to hint at Ahab's tyranny comes immediately before he vividly recalls an image of Ahab, with "still moves" stressing the lingering visual memory. Ishmael's decision to describe Ahab dramatically in the narrative stimulates Ishmael's own memory of his experience. Rather than attempt to forget his trauma, Ishmael confronts it by writing about it.

Ishmael plays a dual role as both narrator and character within the narrative that expands the scope of his relationship to Ahab. Ahab might exert control over Ishmael the sailor, but it is not clear how much control Ahab exerts over Ishmael the narrator. Duggan's triangulation of impulses seems to be at play: Ahab moves in Ishmael's mind repetitively and beyond his control, yet Ishmael seeks to consciously restage Ahab through his narration, with the possibility of forgetting at the back of his mind. Ishmael's reference to Ahab is twofold, for "my Captain" may be in apposition to Ahab's name and also function as an invocation or exclamation, meaning Ishmael may either emphasize to his audience his relationship to Ahab or actually address Ahab directly. The only other points in the entire novel that a crewmember refers to Ahab as "my Captain" are when Starbuck begs Ahab to return to Nantucket in "The Symphony" and says farewell before Ahab's encounter with the whale in "The Chase—Third Day": "Oh, my captain, my captain!—noble heart—go not—go not!" (421). In the act of naming and invoking Ahab, Ishmael assumes the same mode of address as the first-mate who resists Ahab's quest. Starbuck was unable to break free of Ahab's control, and Ahab even in death enthralls Ishmael's memory. Through his narration of Ahab and his vengeful quest, Ishmael enacts his

psychological struggle to engage with the memory of his trauma, but his effort is problematic. The narration of trauma seems to run counter to any cathartic effort: Ishmael's narration forces him to relive his trauma yet fails to resolve the memories that pull Ishmael back into the past.

His self-conscious allusion to tragedy suggests that Ishmael attempts to convey some sort of pathos through his narration, but it is not immediately evident whether he seeks to have his audience feel pathos for Ahab and crew or for himself. If one of the effects of tragedy is the arousal of pity in the audience, Ishmael seems to be calling for pathos for himself as one of the characters in the drama. When he begins to sense that all might not be quite right with Ahab, Ishmael recollects: "I said nothing, and I tried to think nothing" (90). His admission that he did not speak up in protest stands in opposition to his decision to speak after the fact. While Ishmael cannot bring himself to speak against Ahab before the *Pequod* sinks, Pip has an influence over Ahab that Ishmael does not have. In "The Cabin," as Pip begs Ahab not to leave, Ahab tells him, "If thou speakest thus to me much more, Ahab's purpose keels up in him. I tell thee no; it cannot be" (399). Pip's ability to speak and hinder Ahab's quest contrasts with Ishmael's own inability to speak against Ahab at the time of the voyage. It is only after Ahab has driven the ship to its destruction that Ishmael begins to break his own silence, too late to save the ship but perhaps not too late to save his conscience.

Ishmael's sense of being unable to stop the voyage finds expression in Pip's sadness at being unable to stop Ahab. Pip's emotional reaction is evident when Ahab addresses him: "Weep so, and I will murder thee!" (399). Ahab rejects any feeling of pathos for Pip since he knows that such an emotion will hinder his vengeance. In the

context of a tragic framework, Pip's weeping calls to mind the expression of Aristotelian catharsis or purgation of emotion, but his weeping is unable to prevent the event that defines the broader tragedy, namely the sinking of the *Pequod* and the death of its crew. Since both Pip and Ahab have gone down with the ship, Ishmael is the only one of the crew who stands to gain from the audience's pathos. Just as Pip's confession of cowardice seems to be a more explicit expression of Ishmael's sense of guilt, Pip's frustration at not being able to talk Ahab out of his quest reflects Ishmael's own feeling that his narration cannot undo what has been done. Although Ishmael is not present in the scene, Pip almost stands in for Ishmael. "The Cabin" represents one of the dramatic scenes that Ishmael would not have observed in person, and therefore it tends more to what Fee defines as the fictional aspect of Ishmael's narrative. Essentially imagining the scene between Pip and Ahab, Ishmael comforts himself that, even if he had spoken up to Ahab, the captain would have still continued on his destructive path. Ishmael's imagination of Pip in pathetic terms lends a pathetic tone to Ishmael's narration. If any attempt at stopping Ahab had been doomed to failure, Ishmael would be an innocent victim rather than a coward who failed to act. By creating dramatic scenes, Ishmael works through his own sense of guilt.

In one dramatic scene, Ishmael seems to use Starbuck to explore his guilt in a similar manner to how Pip serves as an alternate mouthpiece for Ishmael. In "The Musket," Ishmael imagines another scene that he could not have actually observed, just as he imagines Pip and Ahab in the captain's cabin. When Starbuck goes to Ahab's cabin to report the ship's progress, his confusion over whether to kill Ahab reveals a psychology similar to other examples of trauma in the text. Passing the rack of muskets, Starbuck remembers an earlier incident between himself and Ahab: "The very tube he pointed at

me!—the very one; *this* one—I hold it here; he would have killed me with the very thing I handle now.—Aye and he would fain kill all his crew” (387). Starbuck experiences a repetition of his traumatic memory provoked by the sight of the musket with which Ahab threatened him. Reliving the traumatic episode, Starbuck wrestles with his responsibility to prevent Ahab’s destructive course in a similar way to Ishmael’s reflection on his failure to intervene. The sense of trauma repeating itself surfaces even when Starbuck imagines successfully preventing Ahab: “Say were he pinioned even; knotted all over with ropes and hawsers...I could not endure the sight; could not possibly fly his howlings; all comfort, sleep itself, inestimable reason would leave me on the long intolerable voyage” (387). His imagination evokes Ahab’s voyage home after his first encounter with Moby Dick, when he raves in a straightjacket and conceives his monomaniacal focus on revenge. In order to save the rest of the crew, Ahab would have to relive his traumatic voyage. Starbuck even projects some of Ahab’s traumatic symptoms onto himself, believing that he would share in a loss of reason on the voyage home. Starbuck is unable to free himself from Ahab’s control, just as Pip imitates Ahab in his cabin during his soliloquy condemning cowards.

Although “The Musket” lacks the dramatic stage directions and dialogue of the scene between Ahab and Pip in “The Cabin,” Ishmael still frames Starbuck’s deliberation at the intersection of trauma and tragedy. When debating whether to kill Ahab in his sleep, Starbuck evokes Macbeth’s approach to Duncan’s bedchamber. His speech carries all the trappings of a soliloquy, making his interior life public to the audience. When discussing Melville’s reading of Shakespeare, Charles Olson points to the influence of the playwright: “As the strongest literary force Shakespeare caused Melville to approach tragedy in terms of the drama” (*Call Me Ishmael*, 69). For there to be dramatic tension, the spectator must

believe that the actors do not know exactly the result of their actions. Ishmael imagines the dramatic scene knowing what happens to the ship. The parallel between Macbeth killing his king and Starbuck murdering his captain casts Starbuck in the role of the tragic hero, but Starbuck avoids committing the very action that catalyzes the Shakespearean tragedy. While Shakespeare founds his tragedy on the decision to kill, Ishmael traces the root of his tragedy to inaction. His knowledge of what is about to happen compromises the dramatic tension of the scene, although Ishmael's frustrated attempt at reimagining the past gives the scene an emotional tension. In his imagination of Starbuck, Ishmael attributes to the first mate the same sense of responsibility that he himself feels, and Ishmael creates a scene that dramatically performs his sense of guilt in tragic terms.

The turn to soliloquy to express guilt allows Starbuck to air his grievance outside the normal constraint on speech that Ahab wields over his deck. Drawing attention to the notion of censorship, Olson reports, "In his copy of the PLAYS, when Shakespeare muzzles truth-speakers, Melville is quick to mark the line or incident" (*Call Me Ishmael*, 42). Olson's observation emphasizes one of Ahab's most troubling effects on the crew, namely his ability to deprive his crew of an objecting voice. After Starbuck challenges Ahab's plan to hunt down Moby Dick in "The Quarter Deck," Ahab exerts his power over the subdued first mate: "Ah! constrainings seize thee; I see! the billow lifts thee! Speak, but speak!—Aye, aye! thy silence, then, *that* voices thee" (140). Starbuck's tragic soliloquy, created by Ishmael, stands as a point of resistance against Ahab's control over speech. The decision to speak, even if fruitless in terms of action, seems to be an act of greater significance than it would appear. Starbuck's soliloquy in some sense models Ishmael's entire narration, since Ishmael makes his interior meditations public through a

constant, unbroken monologue. By casting Starbuck in the role of a tragic hero, Ishmael appears to seek the pity that tragedy provokes in the audience for himself.

Although Ahab's search for Moby Dick is the basis for the narration, Ishmael fragments himself within his story. Not only does he physically come and go to narrate scenes from which he was absent, but he also switches narrative styles. Tragedy, while perhaps the most prevalent, is not the only mode in a text that accommodates a range of narratives and tones. Within his broader account of the *Pequod*, he inserts other stories that offer alternatives to the one Ishmael is telling. When talking about the *Town-Ho*, Ishmael offers what at first seems to be a tangential story that reveals a more light-hearted side to whaling. Rather than the grave tone of tragedy, the mood surrounding the *Town-Ho* inclines more toward comedy, with the characters meeting no tragic end nor provoking pity in the audience. While Ishmael's tragic experience hinges on the death of an entire innocent crew due to the crazed quest of one man, the characters of the *Town-Ho* all survive except for the one man who malignantly catalyzes the plot. The dramatic reversal of the conclusions between the *Pequod* and the *Town-Ho* draws the two stories into comparison. The fact that the *Town-Ho* also encounters Moby Dick seems to be the only relevant detail that motivates Ishmael to include it in his wider narration, but the story informs the underlying tension of Ishmael's role as narrator.

Ishmael frames the story of the *Town-Ho* by recounting how he reported the events to his drinking companions in Peru some years after his voyage on the *Pequod*, providing a rare reference to his life after the traumatic event. Before beginning, Ishmael connects his experience on the *Pequod* with the *Town-Ho*'s encounter with the white whale in terms of dramatic mode: "This latter circumstance, with its own particular accompaniments,

forming what may be called the secret part of the tragedy about to be narrated, never reached the ears of Captain Ahab or his mates” (199). His characterization of the story as a tragedy does not obviously fit, especially in comparison to the horrible tragedy of the *Pequod*. The only event that stands out as possibly tragic is the death of Radney the first mate, but his poor treatment of his fellow sailors hardly deserves pity. Ishmael’s definition of the story as a tragedy calls into question what he believes makes up a tragedy. Although Radney’s death hardly seems to qualify as tragic, Ishmael includes details about the *Town-Ho* that evoke what happens to the *Pequod*. When he briefly summarizes what happens to Radney, Ishmael calls to mind Ahab’s madness and seemingly unstoppable trajectory to a fatal encounter with Moby Dick: “but Radney was doomed and made mad” (202). The association between Radney and Ahab, constructed in an off-hand and brief manner, suggests how Ishmael takes the story of the *Pequod* and offers a less tragic version in that of the *Town-Ho*.

Radney’s disagreement with Steelkilt, the brawny Lakesman who mocks the first mate and refuses to scrub the decks, does not exist on the same plane as Ahab’s all-encompassing hate for the white whale. Neither does Radney’s dislike lead to the destruction of an entire ship’s crew. The fact that the *Town-Ho* is steadily leaking water offers a more straightforward and common sense of danger than the increasingly tense approach of the *Pequod* to its encounter with the whale. Ishmael explains the cause of Radney’s dislike for Steelkilt by referring to an instance when someone meets a “superior in general pride of manhood, straightaway against that man he conceives an unconquerable dislike and bitterness; and if he have a chance he will pull down and pulverize that subaltern’s power, and make a little heap of dust of it” (202). Radney’s feelings toward



Steelkilt recall how Ishmael characterizes Ahab's relationship to Moby Dick: "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" (156). Both Radney and Ahab appear to project their own internal anxieties onto the targets of their destructive intent, although the difference in scale between human Steelkilt and the monstrous whale suggests the difference in proportion of hate. While Radney is calm enough to lend Steelkilt some twine after their conflict, Ahab allows no diminishing of his determination to destroy the whale. By drawing on the same themes of madness, Ishmael sets the *Town-Ho* in contrast to what he actually experienced on his traumatic voyage.

Perhaps the difference of greatest significance between what transpires on the *Town-Ho* and Ishmael's experience on the *Pequod* is the outbreak of mutiny and a rejection of authority. In contrast to the crew's submission to Ahab, Steelkilt refuses to bend to Radney's hate. When Radney orders him to sweep the deck, Steelkilt does not give in to his superior's threats: "Mr. Radney, I will not obey you. Take that hammer away, or look to yourself" (204). The confrontation between the two men foreshadows the later confrontation between Ahab and Starbuck when Ahab draws a musket on the first mate and exerts his absolute authority: "There is one God that is Lord over the earth, and one Captain that is lord over the *Pequod*.—On deck!" (362). Besides the use of a weapon, the two instances share a peculiar context: the *Town-Ho* is leaking water and the *Pequod* has leaking casks. Steelkilt angers Radney by joking about Radney's investment in the leaky ship, and Starbuck's concern over the leaking oil provokes Ahab to exclaim: "Aye! leaks in leaks! Not only full of leaky casks, but those leaky casks are in a leaky ship" (362). Just

as Ishmael imagines Starbuck picking up the musket to kill Ahab, the confrontation between captain and mate is a scene Ishmael could not have observed. Ishmael narrates his experience on the *Pequod* after he tells the story of the *Town-Ho*, so while the similarities may be coincidental Ishmael places the two ships in contrast to each other.

The *Town-Ho* offers an alternative of what might have been in the place of the *Pequod*'s tragedy. After Starbuck backs away from his challenge to Ahab, the captain dismissively remarks: "He waxes brave, but nevertheless obeys; most careful bravery that!" (362). The entire crew obeys and fails to act against Ahab, allowing his hate to sink the ship. In contrast, Steerkilt raises a mutiny and then organizes mass desertion, even openly criticizing Radney: "You are a coward!" (210). His choice of insult stands outside the scope of the story. The charge of cowardice evokes Pip's belief that he was a coward, and Ahab's sarcastic remark on Starbuck's bravery comes close to calling Starbuck a coward. The two ships have an inverted dynamic: on the *Town-Ho* the person in power is the coward while on the *Pequod* it is the crewmembers who show cowardice. Steerkilt's insubordination represents what Ishmael's mates could not bring themselves to do. The effect of the story on the ship's crew suggests that the crewmembers felt some affinity with the events on the *Town-Ho*: "Nevertheless, so potent an influence did this thing have on those seamen in the *Pequod* who came to the full knowledge of it...that they kept the secret among themselves so that it never transpired abaft the *Pequod*'s main-mast" (200). Their decision to keep the story away from Ahab implies that they sensed the valorization of insubordination would hit too close to home.

The narrative link between the *Town-Ho* and the *Pequod* lies in the appearance of Moby Dick, and Ishmael's traumatic experience with the whale even affects his account of

the different ship. When his drinking companions ask who Moby Dick is once Ishmael introduces the whale into the story, Ishmael responds: “A very white, and famous, and most deadly immortal monster, Don;—but that would be too long a story” (211). At this point in the past, Ishmael avoids talking about his own experience with the white whale, yet he later chooses to begin the narration that constitutes the entire text. It is not entirely clear what has happened to allow Ishmael to begin to speak about his experience. When talking to his drinking companions, he is still unable to address his past trauma: “Nay, Dons, Dons—nay, nay! I cannot rehearse that now. Let me get more into the airs, Sirs” (211). The mere act of mentioning Moby Dick leaves Ishmael emotionally unsettled. His characterization of telling his story as rehearsing is peculiar. Rehearsing his story would mean most simply to recite it from memory, but Ishmael also associates the act of storytelling with practicing from some later performance. Webster’s 1828 edition offers one definition of “rehearse” as “to recite or repeat in private for experiment and improvement, before a public representation,” with the concept of experimentation being especially relevant in Ishmael’s narration. The idea of rehearsing picks up on the different modes Ishmael uses to address his traumatic experience as he explores different narrative techniques. The question remains what exactly Ishmael is hoping to achieve by rehearsing and finally choosing to begin talking about his experience.

In attempting to address his past trauma, Ishmael appears to seek a cathartic release from the repeated reliving of the trauma. If he was unable to rehearse the story of the *Pequod* earlier, he eventually does so to give the substance of the text. The verb “rehearse” carries within it the obvious sound of the noun “hearse.” The link evokes Fedallah’s prophecy to Ahab, which Ahab realizes when Moby-Dick sinks the *Pequod*: “The ship!

The hearse!—the second hearse!” (426). The association between the hearse and the end to Ahab’s crazed search for cathartic revenge suggests that Ishmael seeks a similar release through the act of storytelling, although the connection is troubling since Ahab understands that he is not in fact invincible and finds an end only in his own destruction. The *Town-Ho* story represents a less personal way to talk about Moby Dick and Ahab’s quest, a sort of transition from silence to a full account of Ishmael’s experience. Ishmael may be speaking about a different ship, but his relationship to Ahab still clearly influences the story.

The details of the story suggest what Ishmael might have done to save his ship and crewmates. In what at first seems to be a minor point, Ishmael explains Steelkilt’s precise relationship to Radney when Moby Dick surfaces: “The mutineer was the bowsman of the mate, and when fast was the fish, it was his duty to sit next him, while Radney stood up with his lance in the prow...” (212). Not only do both Radney and Ahab fall victim to Moby Dick, but Ishmael and Steelkilt occupy the same position in the whaleboat. Ishmael does not make it clear during the chase itself, and he oddly waits until the epilogue to describe where he was: “It so chanced, that after the Parsee’s disappearance, I was he whom the Fates ordained to take the place of Ahab’s bowsman, when that bowsman assumed the vacant post” (427). Ishmael’s removal of himself from the plot recalls his description of scenes he could not have physically observed. By removing himself from the moment of Ahab’s death and the sinking of the ship, Ishmael puts distance between himself and the traumatic event, reducing his own personal involvement in what happens. Ishmael and Steelkilt’s difference in attitude toward their mad superiors becomes more pronounced given their position at the time of their superior’s death. Steelkilt takes it upon

himself to act against Radney, while Ishmael does nothing against Ahab. Steelkilt represents what Ishmael could not be.

The story of the *Town-Ho* stresses the issue of truth that Ishmael confronts in his wider narration. As soon as Ishmael finishes the story, his drinking companions immediately question its authenticity: “Then I entreat you, tell me if to the best of your own convictions, this your story is in substance really true? It is so passing wonderful!” (213). The audience’s concern for truth addresses what Schaper identifies as the need for the tragic artwork to appear convincingly real to have a cathartic effect. Ishmael characterizes the story as a tragedy, yet his audience does not appear to have any cathartic release. Instead, his drinking companions have their emotions aroused to find out whether the story is true. Ishmael meets their skepticism by insisting on its truthfulness: “So help me Heaven, and on my honor, the story I have told ye, gentlemen, is in substance and its great items, true” (214). Previously Ishmael goes out of his way to emphasize that the story of the *Pequod* is not a fable or an allegory, and he has his own experience to support the veracity of the *Pequod*’s story. For the *Town-Ho* Ishmael must rely on the truthfulness of hearsay, although he expresses trust in what he has heard: “I know it to be true; it happened on this ball; I trod the ship; I knew the crew; I have seen and talked with Steelkilt since the death of Radney” (214). His personal connection to the actors in the story offers convincing proof. It is significant that Ishmael claims to have spoken with Steelkilt after the events of the story. If Steelkilt is worthy of the audience’s trust in his account of his experience on the *Town-Ho*, Ishmael seems to demand faith in his own account of what happens on the *Pequod*. Both Steelkilt and Ishmael survive their ship’s

encounter with the white whale, although Steelkilt has the rest of his crew to rely on for corroboration.

Relating the story of the *Town-Ho* does not give Ishmael a cathartic release from his past. The more comic, less tragic version of an encounter with Moby Dick fails to fully convince its audience, and Ishmael must even pause during the story to regain composure. Ishmael eventually chooses to speak directly about his own experience in a tragic mode, turning away from his experiment with the more comic mode. After narrating what happens to Steelkilt, Ishmael breaks from the internal frame of the story to describe his conversation about its truthfulness with his drinking companions. The epilogue of the text functions in a similar manner on a larger scale. To conclude the story of the *Town-Ho*, Ishmael says, “Where Steelkilt now is, gentlemen, none know; but upon the island of Nantucket the widow of Radney still turns to the sea which refuses to give up its dead; still in dreams sees the awful white whale that destroyed him” (213). The image evokes Ahab’s lament to Starbuck about his wife: “Aye, I widowed that poor girl when I married her, Starbuck” (405), as well as the final image of the main plot where “the great shroud of the sea” appears unaffected having just consumed the *Pequod* (427). By giving Steelkilt over to obscurity and focusing on Radney’s widow, Ishmael dwells on the emotional effect on the survivor, in this case a widow instead of an orphan. Even a more comic ending cannot keep Ishmael from returning to his sense of bereavement. The epilogue to the text lacks a conversation, but Ishmael still seems to anticipate the same sort of skepticism that his drinking companions display when he rhetorically asks and answers: “Why then here does any one step forth?—Because one did survive the wreck” (427). Although he employs a more tragic mode than that of the *Town-Ho*, Ishmael still feels the need at its end to

confirm its truth, and to confirm its truth he must confront the fact that he survived a destructive voyage he failed to stop.

In order to be convincing, Ishmael has to face his guilt over his role in the destruction that actually happened. In the epilogue, Ishmael reintroduces himself and describes how he came to survive: “So floating on the margin of the ensuing scene, and in full sight of it, when the half-spent suction of the sunk ship reached me, I was then, but slowly, drawn towards the closing vortex” (427). Ishmael’s physical position models his relationship to the text. He is at once an actor and the creator of the tragedy he presents, existing in the liminal space on the margin of the scene on the *Pequod*. The memory of the destruction of the ship threatens to pull Ishmael in, since he seemingly cannot escape the continual traumatic reliving of the event. The pull of the ship, however, does not drown Ishmael. Instead, he must linger “in full sight” of his loss, a spectator to his trauma. He survives his narration just as he survives the actual sinking. Despite his attempts to refashion or reimagine what happens in his past, he cannot escape the sense that the only way to convince himself and his audience of the truth of his story is to confirm his trauma and his guilt. By exploring his experience in a tragic mode, Ishmael realizes that he must be a spectator to his trauma even when he is the creator of the narration, unable to change what happened. Ishmael survives but only as an orphan. Speaking about his trauma does not release him from his bereavement. Rather than catharsis, Ishmael creates a new identity for himself in terms of his trauma.

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