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ECL 522

### Final Project: "Whaling Women of New Bedford"

In Melville's *Moby Dick*, the lacking portrayals of women serve as a critique of 19th-century gender roles. The absence of women and female figures, as named characters, in the novel reveals how female contributions to society are often diminished, highlighting misogynistic views of the 19th century and a greater undervaluing of women in a patriarchal society. Although women are not at the forefront of Melville's novel, the female presence of characters such as Aunt Charity, the nursing whale, and the personification of the Pequod and the ocean as female figures, prove that women still hold influence over the function of the whaling industry, the natural world, and in all things.

For my final project, I chose to write a collection of poems inspired by the absence of women in *Moby Dick* and also by many of the supplemental readings we were assigned throughout the semester. Because of how unsettled I felt by the absence of women in Melville's novel, I knew early on that my final project would likely be female-focused. With the few sightings of women in the novel marked by my pink ballpoint pen, as Bezanson explains, I "found a key word or metaphor" and I began to pick at it "as [I] would a wild flower" (Bezanson). Women pushed toward the outward bounds of the novel encouraged me to actively seek out female figures, question and analyze Melville's use of these characters, and appreciate their invisible labor and contributions within the novel.

The idea of the absence of women in the novel is supported by Emerson in the *American Scholar*. As he writes, "Books are the best of things, well used; abused among the worst", Emerson underscores the idea that books and literacy are political. For example, at the time, while some women went to primary school to receive an education, they were taught to read yet not expected to or often not taught to write. Women could not even attend the college where Emerson gave this speech. Thus, a lack of female authors and the censorship of women's narratives in literature contributes to the impact of politics on literacy. Melville's exclusion of depictions of women suggests how literature promotes male narratives that maintain patriarchal hierarchies, setting a precedent that dictates what voices (male) are the most meritable.

While Melville does not physically bring women to the forefront, their roles prove that women are essential to the story of *Moby Dick*. While the men are out at sea, the women who stay ashore run their households, contribute to the working economy, and infinitely more. For example, it was Charity who filled the ships with supplies for the whalers to last and sustain their

journey (105 Melville). The Pequod ship, referred to in feminine terms such as “she”, would protect the crew from the weathering of the waves and grant the men a place of comfort to sleep (77). The nursing whale willingly uses her body to create and provide for her pups, and her body is also used against her will as capital for the whalers (423). There is also Stubb’s wife and daughter who anchor Stubb, as he thinks of them in times of crisis on the whaling ship (591). While there are few, these female representations and invisible contributions in *Moby Dick* are important for the story and progression of the novel. Melville’s implementation of the absence of women emphasizes the greater issue of the undervaluing of women.

This project seeks to give voice to the female perspectives in *Moby Dick*, by presenting a series of poems that imagine the perspectives of women affected by the Pequod’s voyage. These poems will be paired with a close textual analysis that examines Melville’s reflections on gender and societal norms, and the unrecognized labor and emotions of women. As a minority woman of color, I will always feel strongly about and speak loudly for the equal opportunity of women, in all fields and spaces.

I am confident that I would not be anything without, specifically, the women who I surround myself with and the women who have come before me.

I have been so thankful for you, Dr. Pressman, and our *Moby Dick* class!

In “The Whaling Women of New Bedford”, I have created a series of six poems that celebrate and highlight the perspectives of six female characters or figures that could have a place within the realm of *Moby Dick*, New Bedford, and the whaling industry. My original goal was to create new perspectives of women in the realm of *Moby Dick*, however, I found myself very inspired by female mentions in the novel and wanted to further expand upon their narratives. Below I want to provide some insight into my poems and ideas, but hope to leave you with room to reflect on your own!

My collection begins with a poem named “Lady P”. This first poem is from the perspective of the Pequod. Within the novel, and in life in general, boats and ships are personified into female figures, as is the Pequod. The Pequod is viciously used by the whaling crew, yet receives nothing in return. The servitude experienced by the Pequod as the primary vessel of the novel comments on the expectations of gender roles in the 19th century, and the general exploitation of women. By giving the Pequod a narrative, I hoped to highlight the union and reliance of the male crew on the female ship and to give more of a voice to a vital part of the voyage in *Moby Dick*.

The second poem in my collection is called “Ode to Aunt Charity”. This poem is directly inspired by the brief mentions of Aunt Charity in Chapters 20 and 22 of the novel. Aunt Charity is an older woman, and Captain Bildad’s sister, who contributes significantly to the preparation of the Pequod before the ship’s departure. For the second poem, I chose to write an ode with a more comedic tone. As I imagine Aunt Charity supplying the Pequod, I picture her hustle and bustle, or rather “hither and tither” around the deck, like an elf running around Santa’s toy shop (105 Melville). However, while the poem holds comedic undertones and a fun rhyming pattern, Aunt Charity provides the Pequod and the whaling crew with vital supplies for their journey on the rough waters. Without her help and her preparation, the Pequod would have reached an early demise, even without the involvement of Ahab’s monomania. Through Aunt Charity, this poem works to highlight the unseen contribution that women provide to the whaling industry and reveals the sacrifices made even by those who remain on shore.

The third poem in my collection is called “Whalers Wives”. While this poem is not directly inspired by any female mentions in *Moby Dick*, it is a tribute to the many whaler’s wives who are left on land while their husbands venture out to sea. The poem explores the idea that these wives who remain on land must share their husbands with the sea. While not explicitly mentioned, I believe this poem highlights these women and their resilience. Their husbands venture out to conquer the sea, while their wives are restricted to the bounds of the land and pick up the responsibilities of providing for their families and maintaining the home. Wives and women might be excluded from the whaling ships, but are directly impacted by every departure. My intention for this poem was to give voices to the wives of sailors and explore the narrative of playing second fiddle to the Sea. I imagine the woman I write about sitting in a rocking chair in front of a fire and contemplating whether the life she is living is the life she deserves.

The fourth poem in my collection is called “Siren at Sea”. In Chapter 132, the viscous winds and the darkness of the sea at night induce an eerie feeling and create ominous sounds that mimic the sounds of sirens. This poem continues to describe the sea as a feminine figure and acts as a warning to whalers. Through industries such as whaling, and underwater mining, the ocean becomes impacted by pollution and the exploitation and extraction of species and natural resources. The poem works to rework the ocean as a feminine space and warns the men of the whaling ship of the dangers that may come of being lured into the Sirens and capitalizing on the ocean. With the voice of the Siren, I intended to grant more power to the sea, in the novel, and highlight the greater feminine forces and voices that have a role in the novel.

The fifth and final poem in my collection is called “Mother”. Inspired by your blog post on breastfeeding and the Grand Armada and the nursing scene within the chapter, I decided for my final poem to come from the perspective of a mother whale. This was my favorite poem to write, but it did feel the most painful. “Mother” explores the ideas of motherhood and the divide between what is above and below the surface of the ocean. Through this poem, I wanted to give

voice to the feminine power of motherhood. The piece highlights the emotional experience of love and loss, whether it be the passing of a child or the experience of an 'empty nester'. While motherhood is not something I have experienced myself, from my own experience with my mom, it is the greatest love I have been lucky to feel.

## **The Whaling Women of New Bedford:**

### **Lady P**

Lady P, made of oak and iron and keel.  
Arranged to marry a crew of whalers,  
a sister-wife with an ever-turning wheel.

Sails flap through the air, acting as they are my veil.  
My whimper so quiet, 'tis not heard through any storm nor gale.  
Planks with nails bound to the hull, enwrap me like a gown.  
A bride jailed to the ocean's surface, impossible to drown.

Ahab's gaze fiery and fierce, Captain's hand, icy cold.  
His quest for vengeance with the abuse of my body,  
a tale becoming overtold.

Battling typhoons, storm winds, and waters deep.  
Of their temptations I know, for their families I weep.  
I am the Pequod; Lady P. of the Sea,  
a slave to many men for all My eternity.

### **Ode to Aunt Charity:**

Always bustling, Never idle,  
Supplier of the P., it may be overfilled!  
An old lady, and her determined spirit,  
The ship fueled by her downright will.

They call her Aunt Charity,  
no lady provides such as she.  
If it were up to Bildad's sister,  
Nothing would be needed once off at sea.

She hithers and tithers 'til the sails must set,  
Preparing the ship, 'tis Her time to sweat.  
Foolish men off at sea,  
But no one else may be prepared as thee!

Aunt Charity, Aunt Charity, queen of the shore,  
Panties overflowing with pickles galore!  
Supplying the Pequod with the necessities of life;  
Aunt Charity, Aunt Charity, why are you no man's wife?

Bibles for prayers, night-caps to ease the mind.  
Nantucket, they may call home.  
The spirit of Aunt Charity, they leave her behind.

## **Whalers Wives:**

I am married to a man with a mistress.  
He introduced me to her, the Sea.  
Taking off on the shores of Nantucket  
on a boat with a three-time captain.  
Sweeping under his legs,  
the waves of his mistress.  
Pressing up against my chest,  
stiff bones and flexible baleen.  
A simple life, an independent Wife.  
I wave him off at the dock.  
Teased by her breath in the air.  
My lips land on his cheek,  
A taste of salt lingers.  
He says Goodbye,  
my heart sails with him on the Atlantic.  
Our children ask about their father.  
I trace a ship's path on my palm.  
Snow falls and the hydrangeas bloom,  
while my mind is lost at sea.  
Like solo boats that hang off the side of a whaling ship.  
Oh, on my own, in My home.

## **Siren at Sea:**

Too common, whispers of “women do not belong out at sea”,  
Wind wisps through my hair,  
lurking in the shadows of the clusters.  
It seems that they have forgotten about me.

Steadfast, South-eastward bond, Towards the Equator.  
A wooden sea-faring vessel, Greed personifies their captain  
his crew, naive sailors.

A. leads his crew fiercely, with both eyes blind.  
“The Cruise of the Pequod”  
Perched on my rocky islets, I wait.  
How many sailors will become mine?

Brave men who follow the Levanthian’s path,  
unbeknownst the severity of the Ocean, her wrath.  
Greed to conquer; To capitalize and embark.  
Moby told me he mocks them,  
Who do you think sends the sharks?

Twinkles of stars in the dark of the Sea,  
my eyes, they are filled with light.  
Whistles and whooshes and puffs of winds  
My hymns heard through the silence of night.

Back of the book, marked with a quote:  
It read it: “Sails of a Whaler”  
Whispers into the night, I entrance;  
Seductive tones of the wind, it may be.  
Or maybe, Wails of the Sailors.

**Mother:**

Cradled by Mother Ocean, yet no comfort I feel.  
Their shadows dark, long, sharp, fighting against My sun.  
Breaking the tension of the surface,  
the water ripples.  
The Harpoon touches.

Strangers to our world,  
A Man-made lake.  
Smells of death and greed, fresh on the surface,  
Soon I will have to breathe.

Sweet suckle, da Vinci's 'Final Supper'.  
Stay with me,  
I will nurse you,  
My Milk.

Umbilical cord, graze the hempen line.  
Stay with me,  
I will swim with you.  
My Blood.

You drift, your body disconnects from mine.  
I cannot carry the weight of an ocean doubled.  
My Tears.  
Mother Ocean stops singing.

The water is suffocating;  
it is cloudy.  
My Milk,  
my Blood,  
my Tears.

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