

Circular Moby-Dick or, The Sphere

What is existence? Or meaning? Or life? How do we know? These are all questions explored in Herman Melville's literary triumph *Moby-Dick*, and the result of this exploration is more uncertainty. The defining symbol and encompassing entity of the novel is, of course, Leviathan, but Melville uses more than that to examine these complex questions. One prominent symbol that appears throughout the text is the circle. This concept appears both in the novel's imagery and diction, and being a recurrent motif, it is an important part of how the novel was meant to be interpreted. Melville's choice of a narrative structure, language, and images denoting circles and spheres serves to guide the reader in the very act of reading and interpreting the novel: as a circular rather than linear text with infinite facets. Furthermore, circles also point to the novel's overarching message of the ambivalence of meaning and existence, reflecting a conflict of worldviews and philosophies.

To begin, let us look at the ending. The fate of the Pequod is a terrible one, and Melville paints the scene in the last chapter of the book, specifically on page 623: "And now, concentric circles seized the lone boat itself...and spinning, animate and inanimate, all round and round in one vortex, carried the smallest chip of the Pequod out of sight." This image is very strong and vivid, particularly because of the use of emotionally charged words like "lone," "seized," and "vortex." The language is a very literal description of the ship violently getting sucked to the bottom of the ocean, but the Pequod is metaphorically used to represent the entirety of the story. All of the events and reflections of the novel are sucked into a vortex, a spiral that drags everything into oblivion. The very last line before the Epilogue reflects this as well: "[T]hen all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago" (624). Though it is still referring to the sinking of the ship, this section no longer mentions the Pequod

directly, but rather says “all collapsed.” The generalizing language evidences that the Pequod sinking represents the collapse and erasure of the whole story. On top of that, Melville writes that the “great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago.” The sea’s rolling movement serves to conceal or “shroud” everything that took place, and the universe continues. Interestingly, Melville presents this with a factual tone rather than an emotional one. Not good or bad, simply a universal truth. Everything that transpired or was important is a speck in the middle of the vast ocean, now gone forever in a vortex and therefore essentially meaningless. The language of “five thousand years ago” transports us back in time to when none of the things or people in the novel existed. This being the last phrase means that, ultimately, the ending of the novel brings us back to how everything was at the beginning, when none of this had happened. This is a structural choice that reflects the shape of a circle and circular motion, as the book has become something with no definite beginning or end. In other words, the reader is prompted to contemplate this truth of cyclicity in the universe, but also to go back and read this circular novel again.

This observation that the universe and nature move in circles is fundamental to American Transcendentalism. In his essay “American Scholar,” Ralph Waldo Emerson, leader of the Transcendentalist movement, defines the central concept of the piece:

“The scholar is he of all men whom this spectacle most engages. He must settle its value in his mind. What is nature to him? **There is never a beginning, there is never an end, to the inexplicable continuity of this web of God, but always circular power returning into itself.** Therein it resembles his own spirit, whose beginning, whose ending, he never can find,--so entire, so boundless” (I).

Emerson argues that being a scholar means, fundamentally, to be influenced by nature and the idea of its circularity that “resembles [our] own spirit.” In other words, a circular web encompasses the universe and ourselves in it, resulting in something interconnected and “boundless,” or eternal. To the Transcendentalists, thinking meant fully embracing nature and the way it moves in circles, which resulted in the highest form of connectedness and understanding.

Melville represents this sentiment in some of the most beautiful sections of the novel. In chapter 110, “Queequeg in his Coffin,” the reader encounters a scene of agony: “But as all else in him thinned, and his cheek-bones grew sharper, his eyes, nevertheless, seemed growing fuller and fuller...And like circles on the water, which, as they grow fainter, expand; so his eyes seemed rounding and rounding, like the rings of Eternity” (520). Closer to death due to his unexpected illness, Queequeg’s features started changing. His eyes are compared to “circles on the water,” which refers to circular ripples that disappear as they grow. This particular comparison of eyes and ripples points to the idea of becoming one with nature, but in this case, as a result of proximity to death. The eyes are also described as becoming rounder and likened to “the rings of Eternity.” This phrase unites the concept of circles with the spiritual concept of Eternity, and we can see the relationship in the very shape of circles, which essentially go on forever. So, the “rings” are just the visual representation of Eternity, which by definition also goes on forever. The image Melville gives us of the eyes becoming rounder and “fuller” indicates that they are physically more open and can see more things, which translates into a metaphor for enlightenment. This enlightenment is one of the mind and soul, which is being brought about by death and oneness with nature, and it is a scene full of circle imagery. The interaction of these concepts is clearly strongly influenced by Transcendentalism. The language in this section creates a positive and hopeful tone, albeit a bittersweet one; a step towards the achievement of

understanding is good but painful because it means a step towards death. We see this confirmed in this section further down:

“So that—let us say it again—no dying Chaldee or Greek had higher and holier thoughts than those, whose mysterious shades you saw creeping over the face of poor Queequeg, as he quietly lay in his swaying hammock, and the rolling sea seemed gently rocking him to his final rest, and the ocean’s invisible flood-tide lifted him higher and higher towards his destined heaven” (520).

In his agony, “poor” Queequeg is more enlightened than any “Chaldee or Greek,” who represent the “thinkers” of the world, men of religion and philosophy. We also encounter this image of “the rolling sea” again, now paired with the adverb “gently.” The circular motion of the ocean here is “rocking him to his final rest,” a very peaceful scene that almost personifies the ocean as a loving entity. This is in contrast with the ending of the novel, where the rolling, violent ocean sank the Pequod, showing how the same circular movement can have two different connotations. The “rolling” motion can either bring destruction or enlightenment and rest, which reflects the dual power of nature and circles. In this scene, the ocean is also lifting Queequeg “higher and higher towards his destined heaven.” The reference to heaven prompts us to recall the image of the rings of Eternity, once again reinforcing that circular motion is involved in reaching a spiritual state of eternity, the highest state of being possible. In summary, true enlightenment is achieved by becoming one with nature, and to do that we have to die, which in turn gives us access to Eternity, all of which Melville illustrates by using circles.

Evidently, Melville represents this circularity repeatedly throughout the novel, but while it seems Emerson and the transcendentalists regard the concept as purely positive, Melville seems torn in what it means to him. There is beauty in the circles, but there is also terror and

dismay. In the article “The Cartesian Vortex in Moby-Dick,” David Charles Leonard explores the concept of “Descartian vortices” as presented in chapter 35, “The Mast-Head.” The section in question is on page 172:

“But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch; slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror. Over Descartian vortices you hover. And perhaps, at mid-day, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever. Heed it well, ye Pantheists!” (Melville).

In an otherwise serene and reflective chapter, Melville uses Ishmael to explain the terror of falling to the vortical ocean below as one stands on the mast-head. He writes of this like an impending threat, a danger that comes unexpected (“at mid-day, in the fairest weather”), something that eventually becomes true as the Pequod ends up being taken by one of these vortices. Of this quote, Leonard writes:

“For Descartes and Melville, the primary law of nature is circular motion...To Descartes, this great circular motion is a sign of a great watchmaker God that keeps order and stability in a fluid universe. **To Melville, the great circular and vortical motion of the universe is a horror, as horrible and as real as the White Whale** and the white depths of the Milky Way. Thus, in Melville's Moby-Dick, stasis is as illusory as the colors of the universe” (5).

The terror of falling into the vortical sea is really a representation of the loss of self (“slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror”). Leonard claims that this “dream” state of Ishmael on the mast-head is an illusory stasis. He feels stable, one with nature in a trance-like state, until faced with the reality of the endless vortical motion of this same nature. This seems in

direct contrast with the serenity and enlightenment brought about by the circular motion in Queequeg's case later in the novel. This contrast, however, points to a bigger truth of the novel, which is that two things (or three, or four, or infinitely many) can be true at once. Melville is simultaneously fascinated and terrified by circular nature and movement, and throughout the novel he explores those resulting conflicting worldviews he holds. In essence, existence is ambivalent, undefinable, and multifaceted.

A section that reflects this coexisting tension and unity is in chapter 87, "The Grand Armada." When the Pequod finds itself surrounded by a school of whales with the peaceful calves in the middle, Ishmael is deep in thought:

"And thus, though surrounded by circle upon circle of consternations and affrights, did these inscrutable creatures at the centre freely and fearlessly indulge in all peaceful concernments; yea, serenely revelled in dalliance and delight. But even so, amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being, do I myself still for ever centrally disport in mute calm; and while ponderous planets of unwaning woe revolve round me, deep down and deep inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy" (424, 425).

Ishmael comes to a realization about these whales, and he is reminded of himself. The first part of the section is a description of the image he has in front of him, while the second half makes a direct parallel between that image and his own state of being. The language of circles is prevalent, with words like "surrounded," "tornadoed," "revolve," etc. but it is all either directly negative in connotation or paired with an image of torment. The phrase "surrounded by circle upon circle of consternations and affrights" is a good example to show that the fear comes from the circumference of the circles. However, at the center of the circle, the whales "serenely revelled in dalliance and delight." This shift in position from the circumference of the circle to its

center comes with a radical contrast of feeling as well, where the former one inspires terror, and the latter joy. This is mirrored in the second part, where Ishmael is now talking in direct reference to himself. He says that “ponderous planets of unwaning woe revolve” around him, but that he finds himself “still for ever centrally disport in mute calm.” The circular language, “planets” and “revolve,” is related to “woe,” while the central brings “disport” and “calm.” Also, the choice of “tornadoed” to describe his being recalls the concept of the all-destroying vortex, but now its center offers some salvation and even genuine bliss. In other words, at the center, it is possible to not just survive but to thrive. By talking of both the calves and himself, torment and joy, he is using syntax to create a structural balance in the section, which reflects the sentiment of the passage and the idea of finding the center. It is important to note that without a circle, it would be impossible to have this blissful center, and Melville knows this. The reflection does not remove or negate the terror nor does it eliminate uncertainty, all represented by the circumference. Rather, it balances them with the idea of middle ground (or sea). He concludes, “deep inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy.” The language of eternity is purposefully used once again, showing that Melville recognizes the concept is inevitably linked to circles, like the Transcendentalists believe. The circular movement of the universe is inescapable but it clearly does not bring only chaos, and it is necessary to interpret it by its many sides, much like the novel itself.

The inclusion of different feelings and perspectives regarding circular motion in *Moby-Dick* is a way in which Melville shows the multifaceted nature of the novel, bringing it closer now to a sphere in structure. These conflicting and complementary perspectives that are presented without any of them taking precedence is what instructs the reader to interpret the message of the book to be an ambivalence of meaning. In other words, defining the universe with

the endlessly contradictory information we have about it is a fruitless and pointless endeavor.

The point of it all is reflection and not definition, and acceptance that there can be no definitive conclusion, just as circles have no beginning and no end.

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