

Jeanne Taylor

Professor Jessica Pressman

ECL-522

17 December 2025

*Moby-Dick: The Novel That Teaches How to Read It*

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* is a unique novel in that summaries are ineffective to really understand what it is that the novel is saying—to read the novel is to fully experience it. It is certainly a dense novel, one overflowing with experimental and moving prose, prose that can be hard to decipher or make any sense of. However, this is no ordinary novel, no, this is the 'Great American Novel'! A novel so great that within its pages is the enchiridion for whaling, for American Literature, and for itself.

The earliest example of the novel hinting at its enchiridion can be found in at the arrival of Ishmael at the Spouter-Inn; in the second sentence of the chapter, an oil-painting is seen at the entrance of the inn and catches the eye of Ishmael. The oil-painting is in complete disrepair, covered over by the smoke and years passing it by. Ishmael, however, sees something within the oil-painting, "...it was only by diligent study and a series of systematic visits to it... that you could any way arrive at an understanding of its purpose" (Melville 13). Upon first glance, the painting is nothing more than a preview of the Spouter-Inn, and yet, there is something captivating within it, so much so that Ishmael continued to go back and look at the painting further. The novel has a similar draw to it, being incomprehensible at times only to make sense two-or-three-hundred pages later—some moments even call for a reread entirely! Of course, it is never obvious, but rather something that sneaks up upon the reader, surprising them with a sudden understanding and realisation that leaves them

pondering it for days, weeks, months, perhaps even years! In this reading, one would be remiss to ignore the usage of the second person, you, used by Ishmael as he describes the painting's strange allure, doubling as a reading of the novel itself: "Such unaccountable masses of shades and shadows, that at first you almost thought some ambitious young artist... had endeavored to delineate chaos bewitched. But by dint of much and earnest contemplation, and oft repeated ponderings... you at last come to the conclusion that such an idea, however wild, might not be altogether unwarranted." (Melville 13). By using the second person 'you', Ishmael is putting directly in front of the audience the attention of his language, and yet it goes almost unnoticed on a cursory read. Not until one analyses the language closely does the audience figure this out, that they are being put into the shoes of Ishmael, that it had become a self-insert adventure novel for just a moment's breath.

As one notices this use of language, one reads that much closer, finding every situation of which this can be found; the words lose all preconceived notions; the words no longer lay there to be read, but they become intentionally placed there by the author himself. This becomes the basis for the novel's self-written enchiridion in that the closer the audience reads, the more they will experience, the further they will find themselves untangling the mess of ropes, whencever it is they come or hail from, that is Melville's whale of a novel, *Moby-Dick*. John Bryant has stated in *Moby-Dick: Reading, Rewriting, and Editing*, "Melville was a writer's writer for whom writing was itself the projection of his being" (Bryant 89). Bryant speaks on editing and the different versions of the beloved novel, bringing about the conversation on how the author's words can create such vast meanings from such simple changes. By adding the word "doubloon" in Chapter 36 of the British version of the famed novel, not only is he hinting at what is to

come and having the audience understand the importance of Chapter 99, *The Doubloon* from the name only, but it also “reveals the degree to which Melville’s intentions shifted and how an artist evolves”, just as the novel continues to do as it continues being read (Bryant 93). The edits made to the British version of *Moby-Dick*, those of Melville’s, show his evolution as an artist, even within that small amount of time between American and British publishing. If the author and artist of the work can evolve and change so much in so little, then what of the work itself? Imagine how quickly the novel might change to acclimate to the current day, to ensure all readers are able to glean what it is that Melville set forth in front of Americans in 1850.

Chapter 15, *Chowder*. The audience is introduced to a wonderful bowl of chowder; inside the chowder are not only a couple of clams or a chopped up cod, but a new understanding and acceptance of who Ishmael is: as the other. It is here that Ishmael is confronted with a perceived threat outside the Try Pots establishment. Despite knowing exactly what it is he is looking at, Ishmael can't help but see the gallows within the trees and hanging rope. "...[T]wo of them," he writes, "...one for Queequeg, and one for me. It's ominous..." (Melville 73). Ishmael is now visibly queer as he and Queequeg walk through town. Two men, a Christian and a Pagan, walking together. Ishmael is being perceived and is fully aware of it, completely uncomfortable with the fact. For the first time, he is being othered and walking in Queequeg's steps—both metaphorically and physically in this instance. Ishmael seeing the gallows among the trees illustrates his anxiety with being considered the other. As someone who has othered Queequeg not that long ago, Ishmael is now fully understanding what that feels like, what it is he did to Queequeg, how he made him feel.

When they arrive at the Try Pots, they are asked what they'd like to eat: clam or cod chowder? Ishmael answers with a question completely rattled by the 'gallows' outside. Upon eating the clam chowder—and asking and eating cod seconds—Ishmael regains his confidence. When asked which he'd like for breakfast tomorrow, he boldly replies, "Both..." (Melville 75). At this moment, Ishmael is fully accepting his queerness, even going so far as to argue on behalf of Queequeg, arguing that Queequeg should keep his harpoon—a concern Ishmael had that first night they met. Ishmael realises that the harpoon is a part of his partner, and as such, does all he can to fight for Queequeg's right to have his harpoon overnight. Through his saying "Both...", Ishmael's mind is open for new experiences; no longer is he the closed-minded man who was fearful of Queequeg, but now a man who sees his partner for who he is, not what he is (Melville 75). When othered, Ishmael is fearful initially, but with his partner by his side, he realises that being the other, while initially devastating, allows one to live freely, to love openly—whether it be a Pagan harpooner or a damn good cod chowder.

The word choice given to Ishmael and Queequeg upon their arrival is extremely interesting, something is certainly being insinuated as they walk in together; "Clam or Cod?" (Melville 73). Both being a euphemism for body parts upon one's body, clam for women and cod for men, feels as though the novel is telling the audience something about preferences. As they arrive, Ishmael is forced into clam chowder as he understands nothing of her initial question. Ishmael eats with Queequeg and after having the clam, Ishmael sheepishly asks for cod. As they go to sleep, Ishmael now proudly says both, leaving behind his perceived preference for either, now fully embracing his want for both clam and cod.

It is here Benjamin Doty claims, in *Digesting Moby-Dick*, that through digestion is the key to existence and that both he and Melville are "...[grounding] philosophical speculation in the body" (Doty 92). Through *Chowder*, the audience better understands Ishmael and even Queequeg as they eat and how it is they react afterwards. Doty argues that "...food's vibrancy in "Chowder," which figures food's power to transform whatever ingests it" and it is through Ishmael eating the chowder day in and day out, he "...[literalizes] the mantra that "you are what you eat." (Doty 93). He continues by writing, "because food's psychological effects begin with its effects on the eater's body, Ishmael's question of whether the chowder has affected his head is bound to the question of whether it has changed his body" (Doty 93). Through the act of simply eating clam and cod chowder, Ishmael is beginning to wonder if the chowder will be affecting his body as much as it has already been affecting his mind. Ishmael is ground in the constant state of being, much like the novel itself, it is a liquid and living work. Applying this lens to Ishmael, the audience is shown a new person, one that is able to change and adapt through living, almost the ultimate chameleon. Through eating and digesting, Ishmael is able to grow into his queerness, changing his life philosophy with just a seemingly simple bowl of clam chowder, as Doty posits. If the splitting of tobacco, melding into one another's skin, and sleeping with one another has not bonded Queequeg and Ishmael, then it is here and now that the two truly become each other's through the act of digesting new experiences and food together. Bryant, too, speaks on the living state of the novel as a whole, stating "we think there is one and only one print version of *Moby-Dick*" (Bryant 90). There is a constantly evolving novel within the pages, not only from every publisher who releases their own version of *Moby-Dick*, but

from the written words to the audience, with every new set of eyes is a new adaptation of the novel, a new evolution, as it were.

This novel, like *Ishmael*, is one of complete change and evolution on every new read through, with each new reader, with every moment that passes. It is a novel that, within its very pages, has the key, the enchiridion to follow along and understand the novel; through close observation and readings, the novel opens itself up to readers, allowing them to use the novel itself as a road map of sorts to dig deeper into the novel. With time, meanings change, but so do people. The brilliant prose upon the pages of Melville's *Moby-Dick* allows the novel to change with the reader. As people change, so does the text, and though the meaning of the novel will not change, the novel and its enchiridion will to accommodate the changing times, the change in its viewer, all to lead to the Whale that is *Moby-Dick*.

### Works Cited

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