

Nature's Role in Democratic Societies: A Conversation Between Whitman and Melville

alyssa mendonca

Writing about seventy years after the 1776 Declaration of Independence and the 1789 American Constitution, both Herman Melville and Walt Whitman grapple with the viability of American democracy by presenting either a suppression or celebration of alternative visions. In Melville's *Moby Dick*, the multivalent relationship between man and nature is realized aboard the *Pequod* as its diverse crew takes different stances on the merits of Ahab's vengeful hunt. The novel details the suffocation of a democratic vision under the guise of a 'unified' mission that is ultimately exclusionary and despotic. Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" handles the same themes of man, nature, and the democratic principles of inclusion, diversity, and equality differently, creating an *actual* unified vision that maintains its integrity by absorbing and accommodating difference. Considering both authors' use of the body as a symbol and a syntactic relationship to alternative visions, Whitman's poem offers a critique of Melville's handling of these elements, suggesting that checking nature but not the ego will yield tragedy and tyranny.

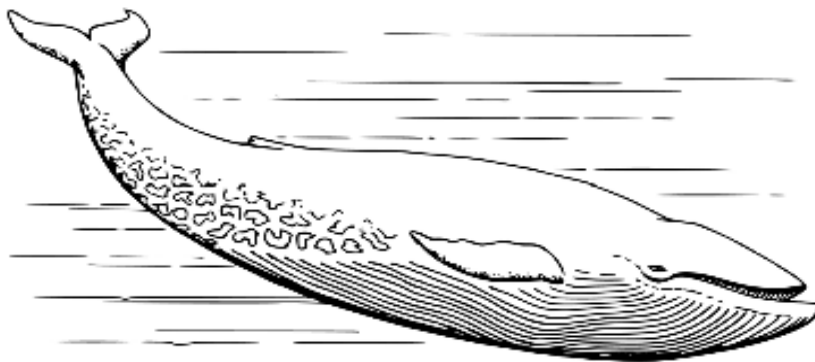
Thematic representations of the relationship between man and nature are captured in Melville's and Whitman's differing use of physical bodies as either a symbol of nature or *beyond* nature. The deformed bodies of Ahab and Moby Dick present the 'imperfect' body as an unnatural phenomenon, creating a destructive dissonance between humanity and nature. Ishmael describes Captain Ahab's prosthetic as "the barbaric white leg on which he partly stood... fashioned from the polished bone of the Sperm Whale's jaw" (Melville 139). It is a mark of the cruelty and danger of the whaling occupation—but it is *also* a neglected symbol of the symbiosis between nature and man. Without the natural elements at his disposal, Ahab would remain "dismasted" (139)—yet his vanity prevails. He conceives of the self as beyond the physical body to cope: "[E]ven with a broken bone, old Ahab is untouched; and I account no living bone of mine one jot more me, than this dead one that's lost. Nor White Whale, nor man, nor fiend, can so much as graze old Ahab in his own proper and *inaccessible* being." (571, emphasis mine). Any gratitude for the abundance of Nature is destroyed by a ruthless sense of triumph over its disasters. Meanwhile, Whitman's visceral reverence for the body as a natural—and thus perfect—expression of the Self firmly opposes this, suggesting that total union with nature is necessary for survival. His proclamation, "I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul" (Whitman s.21) promotes that the two are not separate entities, as Melville's

Ahab might suggest. The poet uses the symbol of the body as an extension of “[n]ature without check with original energy” (s.1) when he describes grass as “the uncut hair of graves” (s.6) that grows undisrupted from the buried dead, “every atom of [human] blood, form’d from this soil” (s.1). Furthermore, the relationship between man and nature is consummate: “I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked, / I am mad for [nature] to be in contact with me” (s.2). Both metaphors of a sexual union and a union in death between Body and Nature suggest that symbiosis between humans and the natural world ultimately produces a complete Self by transcending divisive binaries. The effect of reinforcing this false binary is seen in the de-naturalization of *Moby Dick*: “[L]o!—a sight more savage than the embattled teeth of sharks! Caught and twisted—corkscrewed in the mazes of the line, loose harpoons and lances, with all their bristling barbs and points, came flashing and dripping up” (Melville 569). The deformation of the whale’s body which makes it an unnatural entity is entirely due to human interference. Whitman’s poetry illustrates that the posterity of both man and nature relies on an understanding of their inevitable links while a dissonant relationship yields a tyrannical license to dominate over all other bodies and selves.

A ‘democratizing influence’ occurs in both authors’ syntax—a structure which widens the conceptual scope to accommodate alternative visions; however, Whitman’s steady form nurtures the democratizing influence, whereas Melville’s changing form indicates a corruption of it. Turning first to the queer and multicultural codes at play in *Moby Dick*, the *Pequod* acts as a miniature democratic society of equal, diverse individuals. Queequeg and Ishmael’s relationship is an embodiment of these codes: Ishmael’s fear of Queequeg as the ‘savage Other’ transforms into a deep love for the Other and for a man, informally ratified by their ‘marriage’ ritual in Chapter 10. This opening up of one’s perspective to include *all* parts of one whole—to include *every* individual in a democracy—is translated in Melville’s syntax as it transforms a singular experience into a metaphysical one. In “A Squeeze of the Hand” the practical process of refining whale sperm turns into an intimate homoerotic scene, then a metaphor for an inclusive society: “Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of human kindness” (433). The rapid sequence of semi-colons encourages a broadening of thought and acceptance. Whitman’s free verse similarly embodies the syntactic democratizing influence, unrestricted by conventional metrical parameters. Whitman echoes Melville’s syntax in section 15 of “Song of Myself,” a seventy-five line passage perpetually unfolding through a series of innumerable commas. He catalogs the expansive diversity of human society which coalesces into the unified tissues of the individual: “And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them, / ... / And of these one and all I weave the song of myself.” (Whitman s.15). Whitman too absorbs the Other into himself. Consider lastly that though Melville’s democratizing, prolix sentences make up most of the novel, these textual ‘soliloquies’ are majorly confined to Ishmael’s private, mental sphere whereas Whitman’s act as a public

declaration. Ishmael's *inward* democratic vision is suffocated by *outward* despotic reign, syntactically realized in Melville's use of play script such as "[*Enter Ahab; Then, all*]" (Melville 175) and Ahab's "(*Aside*) Something shot from my dilated nostrils, he has inhaled it in his lungs. Starbuck now is mine; cannot oppose me now, without rebellion" (180). The script acts as the syntactic twin of Ahab's dictatorship, indicating a layered corruption of the democratizing influence. One might argue that Melville's inclusion of different literary forms is a democratic act because it includes diverse styles, but it is clear that the verbal soliloquies and stage directions are reserved for Ahab's monomaniacal orations and cementing his tyrannical reign. Ultimately, Whitman's use of the universal "I" directly critiques Melville's dictatorial "I *only*" (557), illustrating that a functioning democracy *must be* a unified body of different human fabrics rather than a guise of unity under an exclusionary vision.

Considering that Melville's *Moby Dick* was published in 1851 and Whitman's "Song of Myself" was published in his 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, the texts seem to be in conversation with each other, Whitman's poem providing a solution to the problems highlighted in Melville's novel. *Moby Dick* is a cautionary tale about the dangers of exploitative democracy--Ahab's tyrannical quest to control nature ends in the destruction of the *Pequod*, a democratic society. Ahab's supremacy over his crew stems from his inability to even respect the basic, anatomical beings of life. Whitman's vision of democracy offers an alternative future where man is in harmony with nature, instead of treating it as an "othered" entity ripe for degradation. Whitman's vision of a society that respects the relationship between man and nature exposes the flaws in our continuously exploitative system. Heeding the warnings of Melville's novel and working to embody Whitman's democratic vision that includes all natural entities, we can visualize a future without destruction.



WORKS CITED

Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick*. Penguin Group, 2013.

Whitman, Walt. "Song of Myself (1892 version)." *Poetry Foundation*.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45477/song-of-myself-1892-version>.