5.7: Student Sample Student Paper: Alyce Hockers's “The Slavery Metaphor of Moby-Dick”


The links that Alyce points out are perhaps less obvious than in other works about slavery, but the surprise of her argument is partly what makes it so successful. Many critics have discussed Melville’s construction of race in *Moby-Dick*, and Alyce draws on those critical voices to make her case. By linking ideas of race in the novel with ideas about the whaling industry, however, Alyce connects the central activity of the novel (hunting for whales) to a central social and political issue of the day, slavery.

Your Process

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1. As we’ve suggested throughout this text, these process papers will make more sense if you are familiar with the literary work under discussion. For this section, you should (ideally) read Herman Melville’s 1852 novel, *Moby-Dick*. *Moby-Dick* is a long novel, however. For an initial reading, you might instead consider Robert A. diCurcio’s “Nantucket’s Tried-Out *Moby-Dick*,” which provides a summary of the novel along with a selection of “core chapters” that will help you understand the broad strokes of the work. Before you get started, read diCurcio’s “Note to the First Time Reader” ([http://www.melville.org/diCurcio/bib.htm](http://www.melville.org/diCurcio/bib.htm)). Robert A. diCurcio, ed., *Nantucket’s Tried-Out Moby-Dick: Robert A. diCurcio’s Companion Reader to Melville’s Masterpiece* (Nantucket, MA: Aeternium, 1996), [http://www.melville.org/diCurcio/bib.htm](http://www.melville.org/diCurcio/bib.htm).

2. Again, keep the previous three papers in mind as you read this final peer paper. What points of convergence and divergence do you see among the four?

Alyce Hockers
“The Slavery Metaphor of Moby-Dick”

“Who aint a slave? Tell me that … [H]owever the old sea-captains may order me about—however they may thump and punch me about, I have the satisfaction of knowing that it is all right; that everybody else is one way or other served in much the same way either in a physical or metaphysical point of view” (Melville 23–24). The issue of slavery, although not discussed explicitly in Herman Melville’s Moby-Dick, is criticized subtly in a parallel of the industries of whaling and slavery. During the time that Moby-Dick was written, whaling and slavery were two of the biggest sources of economy in America, and it is therefore not surprising that the two had some striking commonalities. When readers of Moby-Dick in the mid-19th century picked up the novel, they were expecting a high-seas adventure tale about whaling. Instead they were subtly handed an interpretation of slavery, which was an incredibly debated topic, thanks in part to the recent publishing of the Fugitive Slave Laws, which was at the forefront of American minds during the period of the publishing of the novel. It is important for the modern reader to understand the subtle metaphor comparing slavery and whaling; not only does it help us grasp the history of both institutions, but it also helps us gain insight into the fact that Melville could very well have been against white supremacy. It was difficult to discuss views on the institution of slavery at the time period, so Melville may have been using his novel as a subtle message into his insights on the issues of the industry. Throughout the entirety of Melville’s novel, the business of whaling is used as an extended metaphor of slavery and the pursuit, capture, and killing of runaway slaves to help readers understand the brutal and unethical nature of the institution of slavery.

The chasing of whales through the vast oceans is analogous to the chase of runaway slaves after they had escaped from their masters. The chase was about dehumanizing the hunted group; in this case: the whales or the slaves. Although the whale is already non-human, men treated them like they were an object rather than a life form. Both whales and slaves were not only hunted mercilessly, but also all for profit. Whaling was an incredibly profitable enterprise if you survived the journey to bring home the spoils of the hunt. The hunting of slaves, albeit much less dangerous, was also profitable. Wealthy landowners gave extremely large sums of money (at least for the time period) in return for the capture and return of their runaways. Landowners needed their slaves, just as America needed sperm oil, and both enterprises would reward money to whomever could supply them with their means to their desired end. When looking for runaway slaves, wanted posters often gave descriptions of the runaways that included various scars and marks that were on the bodies as a means of identification. Fred Bernard comments that “[i]mportant to the capture of runaways were their various marks, some natural, others inflicted” (396). Slaves were scarred from many things, including various beatings by their masters. One advertisement said this in the description of a runaway slave: “has had the upper lid of his right eye torn, and a scar on his forehead” (Advertisement). The same can be said for whales. Many of the animals escaped after having been marked by whalers, but not entirely captured. “Not a few are captured having the deep scars of these encounters,—furrowed heads, broken teeth, scollop[ed fins]; and in some instances, wrenched and dislocated mouths” (Melville 349). This effectively gave them scars that could be used to identify them, most notably seen when the book is discussing Moby Dick. Captain Ahab repeatedly remembers every scar on the white whale, including his deformed jaw, and uses those to identify the whale to other men during his search.
There are also strong parallels with whaling and slavery in direct regard to color. Other than Moby-Dick himself, who is part white (the implications of which will be discussed in the subsequent paragraph), most whales are entirely black. The narrator of Moby-Dick comments, “blackness was the rule amongst almost all whales” (Melville 139). And Captain Ahab is considered, by most interpreters, to be white, as were most whaling captains of the time. This vision of whites (whaling captains) chasing blacks (whales) immediately conjures up illusions of slavery. With such an obvious parallel, Melville’s brashness with his views of slavery, during a time period in which the institution was highly debated, is quite surprising.

There is an obvious and glaring issue with the story of whaling as an extended metaphor for chasing slaves. Throughout this article, we have talked about whites chasing blacks. But in Moby-Dick, isn’t the Pequod a black ship and Moby Dick, notably, a white whale? Why is this all turned around? Fred Bernard thinks that it is because Moby Dick serves to represent a black trying to pass as a white, which makes him all the more pursued because of it (392). During the time, whites tried to keep blacks as completely separate from them as possible. Mulattos were frowned upon and tortured even though they were part white. Moby Dick, although often portrayed as white, is actually only partly white. His hump is albino while the rest of his body is black, like the rest of the members of his species. I think, at the very least, that the discrepancy in the metaphor only serves as irony and makes the metaphor even more profound. Everything is the same between whaling and the chasing of slaves. The chase, the torture, the killing, and the aftermath all have strong parallels in both industries. The only difference is that the roles have been reversed. What if it were the blacks (the black ship) chasing the whites (the white whale)? The irony gives more food for thought and attacks the ethics of the institution of slavery. I think that the switching of the colors of the chaser and chasee in Moby-Dick, rather than being a reason against the story as a metaphor, actually supports it. The metaphor itself makes you think about slavery, but the switching of the roles makes you evaluate the ethics of it.

Both the whales portrayed in Moby-Dick and the slaves of America fought vehemently against whaling and slavery, respectively, although the fight was unfair and seemingly futile. The whales that the Pequod would harpoon would drag the boats across the ocean for hours before giving up to capture. In the chapter “Stubb Kills a Whale,” the narrator comments that “whole Atlantics and Pacifics seemed passed as they shot on their way, till at length the whale somewhat slackened his flight” (Melville 256). And the vast amount of slaves that did run away from their masters is a testament to their “resistance to servitude.” Graham Russel comments of the implications of the wanted poster advertising runaway slaves: “First and foremost, runaway notices are evidence of slave resistance” (Russell xiii-xiv). There were steadfast rules regarding slavery and regarding whaling. The fast-fish, loose-fish rules were similar to the fugitive slave laws. If someone else caught a whale (or slave) that already belonged to someone else, they couldn’t claim it for their own (Ellickson 89). But, if no one had laid claim to that particular whale yet, it was fair game for anyone. This is similar to how blacks were plucked from Africa and used as slaves when they hadn’t been purchased yet. After a slave had already been purchased, though, another white man could not take the slave as his own. And even if the slave ran away, other whites were obligated to return them to their original master. “The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 mandated that states to which escaped slaves fled were obligated to return them to their masters upon their discovery and subjected persons who helped runaway slaves to criminal sanctions” (“Fugitive Slave Act”). Examples abound of court cases where slaves were awarded back to their masters after running away. Although whaling cases were usually settled out of court, the ideas were the same. An ironic intersection of the two industries occurred in April of 1851. Escaped slave Thomas Sims was brought to court and awarded back to his master. The judge that handed down the decision just so happened to be Melville’s father-in-law (Pisano 12–13). The relation between Melville and slavery at the time gives weight to the novel’s interpretation as an epic metaphor.
Slaves and whales were also only known superficially to their chasers during the time period. At the time, whites treated blacks as if they were a different species. They could describe them physically, but they didn’t know the true character of the race. The same can be said for the whaler’s knowledge of whales. Ishmael goes into great detail describing how whales cannot be accurately described because they can’t be taken out of their element without ruining what they really are. “The living whale, in his full majesty and significance, is only to be seen at sea in unfathomable waters; and afloat the vast bulk of him is out of sight … and out of that element it is a thing eternally impossible for mortal man to hoist him bodily into the air, so as to preserve all his mighty swells and undulations” (Melville 239). Africans taken out of Africa and turned into slaves weren’t the same beings as they were in their home country. They were out of their element and they had been changed, which is analogous to whales who are removed from their watery homes. Without water to hold them up, they are not the same and cannot be accurately understood or depicted. On the same note of the concept of foreign species, there was also a language barrier in both industries. There is the obvious language barrier between whales and humans, but blacks also spoke their own language, while it may still have been a version of English. We can see this notably when the cook, Fleece, gives his sermon to the whales using the slave dialogue of the time, which is in stark contrast to the tongue of the white man: “Cussed fellow-critters! Kick up de damndest row as ever you can; fill your dam bellies ’till dey bust—and den die!” (Melville 281). The communication barrier between the two allowed for hostility between the groups. Had the whales or the slaves been able to speak the same language as the whalemen or the white man, they may have been on more even playing fields and the group dynamics may have been less like predator and prey.

The ferocious capture and brutal killings of whales portrayed in Moby-Dick parallel the captures and killings of slaves during the 19th century before emancipation. In contrast to the aforementioned chasing being about dehumanizing the prey, the killing was about domination by the hunter. Although the exact details regarding whales and slaves aren’t the same, seeing as they were happening on completely different terrains, the big picture is extremely similar. Just as whales were chained to the sides of boats after capture, so, too, were slaves chained after being apprehended. Moses Roper, a slave, writes in his autobiography that a white man “chained me down in a log-pen with a 40 lb. chain, and made me lie on the damp earth all night” (13). The white man also chained him to another slave and, Roper goes on, “He kept me chained to her during the week, and repeatedly flogged us both while thus chained together, and forced us to keep up with the other slaves, although retarded by the heavy weight of the log-chain” (15). This was either in preparation for death or to be brought back to their masters. Also, as described before, slaves were mercilessly whipped as punishment for anything, an action which sometimes led to death. Whales were continually stabbed with harpoons to capture them and kill them. The abuse continues after the killing of the first whale aboard the Pequod. Stubb orders a piece of the whale to be cut away and cooked for him for dinner. David Cope comments that this “displays a tyrannical streak directly connected to [Stubb’s] role on the ship and indirectly to the assumption that, as a white man, he may abuse blacks without repercussion.” This is paralleled further as the scene goes on. As Stubb is physically abusing the whale by eating his flesh, he is also verbally abusing Fleece, an African American. He mocks this black cook as he devours the whale, strongly showing a correlation of the abuse by white men of blacks and whales (Melville 264–65).

The aftermath of the killings wraps up the ongoing whaling metaphor of slavery during the 19th century. After killing whales, the whalemen tied them to the boat as a symbol of their accomplishments. They also beheaded them and skinned them. The whale’s head was the most valuable piece of the creature’s body, so it was often hung by beams from a whaling ship, like the Pequod, not only to harvest the profitable pieces but also as a symbol of the domination of the ship and the men on board. Fred Bernard discusses a reward poster reprinted by William Lloyd Garrison in the Liberator, an anti-slavery proponent of the time period, in which a sum of money is offered for the return of a slave, but...
even more money is offered for the slave’s head. “Tying this analogue to Melville is the fact that these slave heads, like those of the sperm whale … were worth more than the mere bodies of the victims” (398). The head was a symbol of the creature’s life force; the part that identified the animal and gave it its essence. The white man taking control of the head was like taking control of the core of the creature, which both industries were aiming to do. In the end, both industries led to near extinction. The hunting of whales led to dwindling numbers and near extinction of the creatures. The hunting of escaped blacks led to uproar in terms of ethics, which ultimately and eventually led to emancipation: the extinction of slavery.

A discrepancy lies in the economics of both industries. Although both industries involved killings, one industry got their profits from a dead animal, while the other got theirs from live ones. This anomaly, rather than discrediting the validity of the metaphor, actually helps us understand the motivations of white hunters. Whales were more profitable dead than they were alive, but slaves were more profitable alive than they were dead. Indeed, an individual slave was more profitable living as a worker, but had slaves been allowed to get away with escaping from their owners, the industry would have quickly crumbled. Killing a runaway slave, although not initially a great monetary decision, sets an example for other slaves to keep their place.

Herman Melville’s Moby-Dick acts as an extended metaphor to parallel the whaling industry with the institution of slavery and the chasing of escaped slaves. We may never know Melville’s true views of slavery, but shouldn't we take a hint from the fact that Moby-Dick, analogous to a runaway slave, was the ultimate victor? During the 19th century, Melville’s possible views against white supremacy would not have been well received by the masses, so Moby-Dick could have been a front to subtly portray his thoughts on slavery. Although not as racially motivated as some other books of the time, or even other books of Melville’s, Moby-Dick has strong racial themes that, although not at first apparent, critique racial inequalities of the time and question the ethics of slavery.

Works Cited


