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Moby Dick Loves the Gays: An Analysis of Queer Representation in Moby Dick

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Abstract

This paper seeks to answer a series of questions revolving around Queer representation in Herman Melville's work, arguing that Melville's investment in queerness is evident in *Moby Dick (2009).* Engaging with the work of Stephen B. Herrmann, Kellen Bolt, Robert K. Martin, and Robin Shulman, I analyze both Melville's own life and the passages of his texts. I first analyze how Melville's personal life may have influenced his views of masculinity and sexuality. Next, I observe Melville's apparent disavowal of the Western, American way of life, and its relation to Queerness. Lastly, I turn to the pages of *Moby Dick* (2009) to show Ishmael's de-patriation from American nativism in clear view. The goal of this paper is to add to the discussion of Queerness in 19th-century literature.

Keywords: Queer literature, queer representation, Moby Dick, Herman Melville

While nineteenth-century literature is not the first place one might think to look for Queer representation, it is imperative that we do. Analyzing the past of 2SLGBTQ+ (afterward referred to as Queer) communities and media representation is a crucial step in understanding our history and securing our future. As one of the most famous authors in history, Herman Melville, intriguingly, does not appear to shy away from depicting same-sex relationships and interactions. In this paper, I ask the question: Does Melville say it is okay to be gay? To better answer this question, I engage with the work of scholars before me who have sought to answer similar ones. The time Melville lived in would have made it very hard for one to open a page of his book and find a passage stating openly and enthusiastically that homosexuality is acceptable, so this question requires both care and precise analysis of his work. Through close analysis of Melville's work–mainly *Moby Dick* (2009)–and relevant aspects of his personal life, I seek to inch closer to a question that has piqued the curiosity of literary scholars for decades. In a time where Queer rights and belonging are constantly being questioned, it is imperative that we continue this work. While much effort has been put into painting Queer people as an attack on 'American culture,' Melville's American classic offers itself as testament to both our belonging and our persistence.

Island Influences

Melville's early life was very typical for his affluent background. He enjoyed a comfortable childhood prior to his father's death in 1832, which financially ruined his family and left twelve-year-old Herman and his elder brother to pick up the pieces (Maxwell, 2026). By the end of his life, after enjoying success as an author until 1860, Melville was once again quite poor, working as a customs clerk and dying an irrelevant poet in 1891 (Maxwell, 2026). Melville's fast and loose relationship with high-class America had made him cynical. Writing became his outlet to critique the puritan values instilled in him by his father, using metaphor for deep-cutting social commentary while remaining wary of the watching eyes of his publishers and patrons.

After his father's death, Melville took to sea, first as a cabin boy and later as a whaler in the South Seas, where he would go on to abandon ship as Tommo does in *Typee* (1968) (Maxwell, 2026). Among Melville historians, it is widely agreed that this experience was formative for the author. As a white man deeply disgruntled with his country, exposure to a culture so vastly different from the busy-ness and shame he had come to know throughout his youth intrigued Melville; perhaps leading him to romanticize what he saw as a better way of organizing society. Melville's own sentiments appear to have been seeping into his character Ishmael when he wrote "here I prospectively ascribe all the honour and glory to whaling; for a whale-ship was my Yale College and my Harvard" (Melville, 2009, p. 121). It is difficult not to read this passage as Melville's own beating heart taking shape in his writing.

As such, I seek to demonstrate how Melville's time at sea and on the Marquesan island of Nuku Hiva served to influence his attitudes towards masculinity and homosexuality.

In his work "Melville's Portrait of Same-Sex Marriage in Moby-Dick," scholar Steven B. Herrmann (2010) uses the framework of Jungian psychology and collective psyche to dissect homosexuality and homoerotic symbolism in *Moby Dick*. Herrmann argues that "Melville's vision has everything to do with homosexuality from asocial, political, religious, and human rights [points] of view," asserting that Melville sought to make a social argument of sorts through his writing (Herrmann, 2010, p. 65). Herrmann (2010) dissects the characters Kory Kory and Marnoo as *tayos* (i.e. customary titles of gay men or closely bonded male companions) that serve as friends, aides, and partners. The two introduce Tommo,whom Herrmann takes to represent Melville's own experiences of homosocial bonds surpassing those of Western society (Herrmann, 2010, p. 73). Herrmann details an alternate first contact of sorts, where the foreign Melville meets a group of Indigenous Peoples and quickly realizes that the Typee people "enjoyed an infinitely happier ... existence, than the self-complacent European" (Herrmann, 2010; Melville, 1968, p. 207). Once again, it is difficult to imagine a young Melville at his desk, writing statements as bold as this without gritting his teeth. Herrmann (2010) makes the assertion that the same-sex relationships depicted in *Typee,* as well as in Melville's other works, are not to be taken as spiritual or symbolic, but "[speak] out of a core belief in the American psyche concerning the *inalienable rights of human beings to couple in sacred unions,*

regardless of one's sexual orientation" (p. 72). Herrmann places Melville's disavowals of Western thought within the parameters of American freedoms, an idea he later backs up with *Moby Dick*. Herrmann's perspective on Melville's Polynesian influences, however, is far from the only one.

In his study *Hero, Captain, and Stranger: Male Friendship, Social Critique, and Literary Form in the Sea Novels of Herman Melville* (1986), the trailblazing Queer scholar Robert K. Martin illuminates the importance of genre in *Typee*'s subversion. Martin (1986) explains the prevalence of the travel narrative in Victorian literature and culture, and how Melville was able to manipulate its conventions to his own ends. Furthermore, he shows how the travel narrative also served as a form of "genteel pornography" for the otherwise prim and proper Victorian society, as the anthropological aspects of these accounts thwarted reservations around depicting nudity and sexual themes (Martin, 1986). Martin (1986) argues that this tradition of travel novels and "the claim of authenticity permitted Melville to demonstrate the hypocrisies of the Christian missions and the arrogance of the colonizing impulse" (p. 19). Martin (1986) then takes a different stance on the role of Western and colonial ideas in *Typee*, arguing that Tommo is transported from his Western confines and shown a society in which close male friendships are uplifted. Instead of this foreign society and place being hostile, as originally expected by Toby and Tommo, it offers the protagonist a way to explore male relationships outside of the boundaries deemed acceptable by Western society. Melville's argument in *Typee* can be taken as one in favour of distancing oneself from Western ideals of bonds.

Herrmann (2010) and Martin (1986) offer different interpretations of the role that the Typee people played in informing Melville and Tommo's attitudes around homosexuality. Herrmann (2010) argues that freedom of sexuality is inherently American, and that religion has caused a "split" in the American psyche that allows the cognitive dissonance of preaching freedom and homophobia in the same breath. Regardless, the influence of Melville's personal life is explicit in *Typee*. The relationship between Tommo and his aide/bedmate Kory Kory diverges from the norms of "proper" Western society. I offer the scene in which Kory Kory "lights a fire" for Tommo as an example (Melville, 1968). Melville chooses to write this scene with Tommo observing Kory Kory as he first "mounts astride" of a large stick, "drives the stick furiously along the smoking channel, plying his hands to and fro with amazing rapidity" until "he approaches the climax of his effort," and "pants and gasps for breath" (Melville, 1968, pp. 186-187). Melville's (1968) subtle but highly sensual description of Kory Kory's handling of what he likens to a "little viper" is difficult to read as anything other than innuendo (p. 187). As Martin (1986) suggests, Melville utilizes the less-than-proper tradition of travel narratives to depict sexuality in a way that deviated from the heterosexual norms Western readers were accustomed to. The relationship between Tommo and Kory Kory remains obscured throughout the narrative, especially as the narrator's infatuation with Fayaway and his fear of remaining trapped in the valley muddy things for readers. That being said, the relationship between the white sailor Tommo and

Indigenous Kory Kory seems to replicate itself in *Moby Dick*'s (2009) Ishmael and Queequeg, implying that Melville had not yet finished exploring these ideas.

An All-American Myth?

As a nineteenth-century writer still championed globally in the twenty-first century, Melville represents both the literary prowess and the progressive attitudes that contemporary audiences seek. This progressivism can then be understood as a divorce from what was, and still is, seen as traditional American/Western ideals. Consistent among many of Melville's works, including *Moby Dick* , *Benito Cereno* (1855), and *White-Jacket* (1850) is the disdain they hold for systems of any kind. Why is it that this "all-American" writer, and his "all-American" myth, *Moby Dick*, seem to harbor so much disdain for their homeland? Is the overt and implicit Queerness found in Melville's work a fist raised against the American flag? Or is it as Herrmann (2010) says, that Melville saw the "split" in consciousness causing freedom of sexuality and identity to be excluded from American freedom? Melville was clearly no stranger to social commentary and criticism; through analyzing his work, it may become clearer what his intentions were.

Melville's habit of social commentary has long been linked to his tendency towards the phallic and Queer. Writing for *American Literature* in 1961, Robert Shulman brings to attention "The Serious Functions of Melville's Phallic Jokes" in his article on *Moby Dick.* Shulman (1961) gives an overview of the many harder-to-catch sexual/phallic jokes throughout Ishmael's narration, urging

readers not to assume that they are without purpose. He argues that "sexual jokes and imagery are ... a vehicle of social satire" (Shulman, 1961, p. 185) through which Melville explores antinormative views of society. Shulman (1961) takes the interesting stance that "Ishmael conveys his rejection of–and deliberate isolation from–social norms" (p. 184) through these jokes, purposefully aligning himself with homosexuality. Furthermore, he points to moments in "Cetology" and "Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish" to exemplify Ishmael's general distaste for systems, which he argues extends to "proper" contemporary views of fraternity and sexuality (Shulman, 1961, p. 183). The crux of one of Shulman's (1961) arguments is that Ishmael's rejection of systems in these ways is linked to Melville's own thoughts. In this model, the phallic jokes found in *Moby Dick*'s chapters "A Squeeze of the Hand" and "The Cassock" serve the serious function of allowing Melville an outlet through which to express his frustrations with both society and the creative process. Though Ishmael's own Queerness is given little outright discussion in the article, it does take the popular stance that Ishmael's sexuality is a form of commentary or rebellion against the ideals of Western society.

In her article "Squeezing Sperm: Nativism, Queer Contact, and the Futures of Democratic Intimacy in *Moby-Dick*," Kellen Bolt (2019) sets out on a similar path. Bolt (2019) rejects the "pessimism" of many Queer analyses of *Moby Dick*, asserting that Ishmael undergoes a "Queequegification" throughout his lifetime, distancing himself from American nativist ideals through interacting with Queequeg. She affirms Melville's "investment in Queerness" and Queer

futurity, showing how Queequeg and Ishmael's relationship can be read as a divorce from American nativist ideals around both foreignness and Queerness (Bolt, 2019 p. 297). She further argues that Ishmael's concept of a "joint-stock world" serves as an antithesis to nativist ideals, which serve to protect good, white, Christian families from foreign influence (Bolt, 2019, p. 306). Her argument is that Ishmael's introduction to Queequeg is a catalyst for questioning American nativist ideals, including those around same-sex friendships and relationships. Through this lens we can observe how Ishmael goes from a "good Christian ... born and bred in the bosom of the infallible Presbyterian Church" to seeing that "Christian kindness has proved but hollow courtesy" (Melville, 2009, pp. 68-69). Ishmael's initial reaction to Queequeg as a "terrible bedfellow" is shortly dispelled by his matrimony with the harpooner, giving weight to Bolt's (2019) argument that Queequeg is the one to spark Ishmael's "de-patriation" (Melville, 2009, p. 41). Through Bolt's argument, Queequeg's role in the story of *Moby Dick*, his relationship with Ishmael and Melville's intentions become clearer. That being said, Queequeg's endearment for Ishmael goes beyond the language used to describe them.

Another important aspect of Queequeg's character is his status as "Other" throughout the novel. Queequeg's Indigeneity and implicit queerness both shape his othering and his relationship with Ishmael. The intersection of these two identities makes Queequeg particularly interesting in deciphering the novel's attitudes towards contemporary American social norms. At the Spouter Inn, Ishmael is fed such tales about Queequeg;that through his own prejudices, he affirms "it was now quite

plain that he must be some abominable savage" (Melville, 2009, pp. 42-43). Queequeg becomes entwined in the dehumanizing cannibal narratives about Indigenous Polynesians that were incredibly prevalent in travelogues at the time, which also played a significant role in *Typee.* Marsha Vick (1992) notes in her paper "Defamiliarization and The Ideology of Race in '*Moby Dick*,' that Melville uses Ishmael's evolving relationship with Queequeg to discredit prevalent ideas of (white) racial superiority. Ishmael enters the Spouter Inn fully bathed in American hegemonic social norms and hierarchies, and leaves with Queequeg as a "cosy, loving pair," declared married by Queequeg himself (Melville, 2009, p. 70). Ishmael positions Queequeg to challenge white supremacy, humanizing him in a way "that Americans generally tried to keep from their awareness in order to maintain their personal equilibrium and the national status-quo" (Vick, 1992, p. 333). Ishmael's relationship with Queequeg becomes a way for him to question that status quo which placed him above his fellow man along colour lines, working towards more egalitarian ideals.

Ishmael's investment in a "joint-stock world" is intimately tied to his relationship with Queequeg and his questioning of hegemonic ideals (Bolt, 2019). As he leaves behind American soil to venture aboard the Pequod, Ishmael discovers ways of living and relating to others in a way that "replaces the mocking gaze of Americans, a gaze that polices the intimacies between men along racial and national axes" (Bolt, 2019, p. 306). In his nautical travels, Ishmael's encounters with the racialized "Other" and Queer sexuality leads him to question his Christian-American roots; this change in his

narration becomes visible as the novel progresses. The events experienced by the Pequod crew are far from 'normal,' but for Melville, the abnormal is a wealth of meaning.

Should We All Squeeze Sperm?

Perhaps the most overt of what Shulman (1961) calls "phallic jokes," the erotic scene in "A Squeeze of the Hand"–in which Ishmael and his fellow sailors passionately squeeze the sperm (whale oil) out of globules of whale blubber–is crucial to understanding Queerness in Melville's (2009) work. I found myself wondering when reading this chapter: what could Ishmael, and by extension Melville, have meant when he wrote "let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness" (Melville, 2009, p. 400)? This avocation for universal participation in what appears to be a circle of mutual masturbation intrigued me. Does Ishmael truly mean that the entire world should join each other in such activities? Does he mean that all men should explore their sexuality as he did aboard the Pequod? These are the questions that informed this paper. To conclude my argument, I analyze the text for any hints Melville may have left.

As Ishmael's partner, Queequeg plays an important role in my analysis and a formative role in the narrative of *Moby Dick*. After falling ill, Queequeg requests a coffin be made for him, upon which he later inscribes tattoos containing the "complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth" (Melville, 2009, p. 456). Ishmael does not fail to point out the irony of Queequeg being unable to fully decipher the meaning of his back tattoos, which were done by

a "seer of his island" (Melville, 2009, p. 456). Many consider Queequeg's tattoos and coffin to depict an interpretation of the meaning of life through the lens of his culture. If we are to accept the idea of Bolt (2019) and Herrmann (2010) that Queequeg plays a crucial role in influencing Ishmael's attitudes around society in general, then this coffin has interesting implications.

The Ishmael that survives the wreckage of the Pequod is vastly different from the Ishmael that first cuddled into bed with Queequeg at the Spouter-Inn. Having experienced "such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling" in the blubber room of the Pequod, Ishmael's introduction to Queequeg subsequently leads to a sense of unity among humanity through his experience of Queer sexuality (Melville, 2009, p. 399). Ishmael's survival by Queequeg's coffin—engraved with his "meaning of life"—is where Melville's investment in Queerness shines most (Melville, 2009, p. 540). Readers are presented with the final image of Ishmael atop the wooden coffin of his wedlock Queer lover which saved him from ruination. As the rest of the Pequod crew sink in the hearse whose "wood could only be American," Ishmael survives atop the coffin of his Polynesian companion (Melville, 2009, p. 583). Using Bolt's (2019) interpretation that Queequeg played an integral role in de-Americanizing Ishmael, particularly through their exploration of Queer sexuality, the image becomes clear. Melville (2009) leaves readers with a man who has been transformed by his exposure to the Queer and the "Other." No longer destined to sink with the American hearse, Ishmael is sustained by what Queequeg has shown him on their journey. As always, Melville's social commentary is molded

from the clay of metaphor. It may be impossible to say for sure whether Melville says "it is okay to be gay;" however, his elevation of Queequeg and non-orthodox exploration of sexuality imply partiality.

Overall, Melville's work will remain a topic of literary discussion so long as there are people to discuss it. I believe the importance of analyzing Queer representation in literature cannot be understated. *Moby Dick* is among the most well-known books in the world. Furthermore, both Melville and this work enjoy status as American icons, making critical reading a crucial tool in questioning American identities. Melville's lived experiences, frequent use of metaphor to question dominant narratives, and long history of Queer exploration in his writing all seem to point to a strong investment in Queer futurity. Such a reading of America's beloved novel stands to shake up an ever-revolving status quo. If Herman Melville was disgruntled with the America of 1951, he would surely retreat to the bottom of the ocean if he saw where it stands today. As vitriol is spewed at Queer people by their fellow humans, investment in a "joint-stock world" is more important than ever (Bolt, 2019). To understand the experiences of Queer people today, it is important to look to the past for representations and validations that we have always been here and always will be.

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