THE QUESTION OF RACE IN *MOBY-DICK*

Iustin SFÂRIAC

Rezumat

În *Moby Dick* Melville prezintă problema modalităţii de realizare a echilibrului psihic în relaţia cu universul. În final, introspectivul şi reflexivul Ishmael sprijinit de instinctul lui Queequeg realizează un balans delicat între sentimente şi judecată. În mod inconştient, el învaţă lecţiile tatuajelor, conţinând "o teorie completă a cerului şi pământului, o tratare mistică asupra artei de a descoperi adevărul". Queequeg, în mod inconştient, îl învaţă pe Ishmael modalitatea de atingere a acestui adevăr, precum şi evaluarea experienţei, totodată arătându-I locul individului în univers. Un om de suflet, Queequeg în mod instinctiv, dramatizează lecţia acestor tatuaje. Relaţia dintre cei doi este relevantă pentru atitudinea lui Melville faţă de alte rase decât cea albă.

The question of race in *Moby-Dick* used to be a controversial one. The dispute began in the early 1960s, when Charles H. Foster first "reinterpreted" the text as an indictment of the Fugitive Slave Law and the Compromise of 1850. Ever since Carolyn Karcher's *Shadow over the Promised Land* (1980), critics have agreed upon the fact that Melville, though occasionally expressing culturally ingrained racist stereotyping (Stone 355; E. Simpson 32), created in *Moby-Dick* a radically antiracist text (Morrison 18; Karcher 27). Ishmael's discourse often undercuts certain aspects of the myth of white supremacy; it claims that values may also be found outside western culture and that society's very survival may ultimately depend on how well the lesson of tolerance and fellowship has been learned.

Most readers have focused on the social/political aspects of race in *Moby-Dick*; no one has sufficiently linked the theme to the cetological natural history Melville offers in the book. To make such a connection is to demonstrate how thoroughly Melville undercuts two traditional hierarchies—the supremacy of white over non-white, and of human over animal.

In 1850, while Melville was writing *Moby-Dick*, one noted Swiss scientist, Louis Agassiz, wrote an article in the *Christian Examiner*, "The Diversity of Origin of Human Races," which purports to demonstrate with empirical evidence and inductive logic that black and other "colored" people are not Sons and Daughters of Adam and Eve (Agassiz 138)—that, indeed, they may even be different species than whites (140-41); cf. Gould, *Mismeasure* 46). Although he leaves it up to the reader to decide whether his findings have any connection with "the political condition of the negroes" (138), Agassiz in his disclaimer obviously implies that his "science" may be used to justify slavery (112).

Melville undermined such scientific rationalizations when he created the "colored" characters of the novel—especially Queequeg and Daggoo. Even if he did not read the article, he was certainly familiar with the school of thought Agassiz represented, which started from the assumption that "the white race" was superior to all others. Queequeg and Daggoo—even Pip and Fleece—all give eloquent testimony to refute Louis Agassiz and the whole school of scientific racism. In denying a hierarchic structure of races, Melville ironically comes closer to a worldview of modern natural history, which has supplanted the Scale of Nature, or

BDD-A2963 © 2003 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 05:24:51 UTC)

Ladder of Perfection, with the Tree of Life (Goudge 179; cf. Eisely 6-10; Gould, *Flamingo's* 281-90).

Agassiz (110-116) claimed not to deny the essential "unity of mankind"; he believed that it was possible for humanity to be "unified" even if the races had separate origins. His idea of unity is actually the Ladder of Perfection, with whites at the top rung of the human segment, just below the angels. He takes comfort in the observation that "men of the same nation" bond together in a recognition of "that higher relation arising from the intellectual constitution of man" (116-17). That he means to exclude blacks from this vision of brotherhood becomes obvious later when he puts them at the bottom of the ladder (143-44): "Are not these facts [that blacks are] submissive, obsequious, and inferior, suffering from a peculiar apathy, a peculiar indifference to the advantages afforded by civilized society…indications that the different races do not rank upon one level in nature?"

Queequeg represents all nonwhite races—he is presumably Polynesian; he has yellow tattoos; and he worships a black "Congo idol" (Eleanor Simpson even suggests that Melville conceived of Queequeg as "Negro"). So Melville has Ishmael become the bosom friend of Queequeg, refuting Agassiz in one way—by eliminating "rank"—and ironically demonstrating that the scientist's comments about white brotherhood perfectly describe Ishmael's relationship with dark Queequeg: "[W]ho would consider the difference in their physical features as an objection to their being more intimately connected than other men who in features resemble them more?" (Agassiz 117). Those who consider all other races inferior to whites "marvelled that two fellow-beings could be so companionable; as though a white man were anything more dignified than a whitewashed negro" (Melville 60). Ishmael's subjunctive mood here suggests that white people are merely whitewashed black people; the assumption, then, is that all humans were originally black, and evolution from black to white was not progressive.

Melville is not content merely to assert the equal humanity of nonwhite races; he often inverts the Scale of Nature, savaging the white man (e.g., Stubb) and elevating the "savage." One way he does this is by satirizing characters who treat "sons of darkness" like animals (to Captain Peleg, for example, Queequeg is no better than a quahog, or a clam [Melville 84]); another is to turn the tables by having the white man be the lower animal: Ishmael even imagines himself as a barnacle cleaving to the "noble savage" (61). It could of course be argued that Melville's participation in the Noble Savage myth is just as racist, say, as his occasional indulgence in "romantic racialism" (Karcher 25, 85). He seems compelled, however, to undercut the myth by creating the character of Fedallah, an ignoble pagan. Moreover, by the end of the book, Melville has revealed the essential savagery of the entire human race, regardless of color. While it may be true, he implies, that for every noble savage there is an ignoble one, it is also true that for every great white man (Ahab), there is a mediocre one (Flask). And for every civilized white man (Starbuck), there is a savage one (Stubb). Ishmael is a pagan Christian who constantly destroys dichotomies between white and black, Christian and cannibal, human and animal.

Daggoo provides a vivid example of this pattern. Ishmael describes this "imperial negro" (Melville 108) as a "gigantic, coal-black negro-savage" (107). Ranked third on the *Pequod* among the harpooners (behind the Poloynesian Queequeg and the American Indian Tashtego), Daggoo is already the victim of societal racism: the darker the color the lower the rank (cf. Agassiz 143-44). As he did with Queequeg, Ishmael deliberately nobilizes Daggoo to undercut this ranking, not simply to participate in romantic primitivism. At first, the African is described "with a lion-like tread… Daggoo retained all his barbaric virtues…erect as a giraffe" (Melville 107). These similes implying that the black man is bestial may seem racist

BDD-A2963 © 2003 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 05:24:51 UTC)

out of context, but in the context they are not; people of all colors are given animal characteristics in *Moby-Dick* (e.g., Stubb as shark). Moreover, having bonded with a savage, Ishmael is fully aware of the irony in his culture's view of the African as closer to the animals and therefore below even such a mediocre specimen of Caucasian as Mr. Flask, "who looked like a chess-man beside" Daggoo (108). Asserting Daggoo's imposing presence, Ishmael drops the animal similes and relates both white and black to inanimate objects: "a white man standing before him seemed a white flag come to beg truce of a fortress" (108).

Daggoo is later ("Forecastle.—Midnight") the victim of racist slurs from a Spanish sailor that lead to a fight, which is cut short by a squall. The Spaniard calls Daggoo "devilish dark" (153); then when another sailor thinks he sees lightning, the Spaniard says it is only "Daggoo showing his teeth" (154). The Spaniard equates the black man with a predator here, as do Melville's "stage directions": "Daggoo (springing)." But if the black is an animal, the white becomes a "mannikin" (154). This is more than "bottom dogs made pretty" (Olson 22); Melville suggests that all humans are animals, and all can be dehumanized. The sailors, moreover, equalize the fight by snatching the Spaniard's knife and forming a ring around the antagonists, now likened to Cain and Abel, brothers.

In *Moby-Dick*, black and white are not opposites but symbolically equivalent complements. Both can even signify death and nothingness (see chapter 42, "The Whiteness of the Whale"). As the "white squall" intensifies, Pip calls on the "big white God aloft there somewhere in yon darkness have mercy on this small black boy" (155). Like the Spaniard, Pip sees white as greater than black (though embedded therein). But Melville does not: later, when Pip is abandoned in the middle of the ocean, he comes face to face with God, like Ahab: "He saw God's foot on the treadle of the loom, and spoke it" (347). Pip is as great as Ahab, and as crazy. They are equals. Stone (351) suggests that Melville is racist when he has Ishmael relate black people to Tophet and "the blackness of darkness" (18). But when he later ascribes the same sentiment to the unsympathetic character of the Spanish sailor who crosses heroic Daggoo ("Aye, harponeer, thy race is the undeniable dark side of mankind" [153]), Melville undercuts this racist conception. Black pigment does not make one devilishly allied to metaphysical darkness, to evil. It is white Ahab who uses "black magic" (Olson 53), and "swart Fedallah" (187) is the dark demon he has conjured from his own unconscious mind.

While Melville was writing *Moby-Dick* he also composed the famous essay "Hawthorne and his Mosses," in which a very civilized white writer, Nathaniel Hawthorne, epitomizes "blackness ten times black"—the same Calvinist gloom that fills the "negro church" called "the Trap" in *Moby-Dick*, where a black preacher seems (like white Hawthorne) "the Angel of Doom" (18), not the devil. Dark Fedallah is the devil (275), but he is merely Ahab's "forethrown shadow," a fantastic figure clearly dissociated from images of actual nonwhite crewmen—Daggoo, Queequeg, and Tashtego (439).

Melville associates black and white even more profoundly in "Squid" (chapter 59). It is Daggoo in the main masthead who first sights the great white mass. He and Ahab both mistake "the phantom" for Moby-Dick (236-37). The squid appears to represent for Melville the primordial stuff of life to which all colors resolve—"a vast pulpy mass…of a glancing cream-color," faceless and frontless, "an unearthly, formless, chance-like apparition of life" (237). From Ahab's supernaturalist point of view, it is a "ghost" boding ill; even Starbuck utters the sailors' superstition that "few whale-ships ever beheld [the giant squid] and returned to their ports to tell of it" (237). Ishmael, to cross this view, also provides the naturalist vision: this is a primitive life-form, appearing by chance, its great undulating arms "a nest of anacondas." The Squid is the principal food source of the sperm whale (237). Queequeg, too, acts as a naturalist; he knows what the squid really portends: "'When you see him quid,' said

BDD-A2963 © 2003 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 05:24:51 UTC)

the savage…, 'then you quick see him parm whale"' (241). With the squid, Melville has Black lead into White (Daggoo first sees it). Next, the squid comes to represent the origin of all species in one pulpy leviathanic mass, one "primordial organic form" (a nineteenth-century definition of a species [Stanton 141]). Finally, Melville refutes the racist notion that "savages" are more superstitious than civilized people by having the ship's most civilized man, Starbuck, mouth the supernaturalist omen, while Queequeg is the naturalist: "If to Starbuck the apparition of the Squid was a thing of portents, to Queequeg it was quite a different object" (241). It was, ironically, the object of empirical observation, accomplished not by Starbuck but by Queequeg.

The "savages" in *Moby-Dick*, including that white savage Ishmael, provide a link between human and animal. But they do so in a way that implicitly denies the notion of rank. Agassiz (143-44) had clearly placed American Indians higher up the ladder of races than blacks; Melville, in vivid contrast, equalizes the colors by creating a trinity of Queequeg, Tashtego, and Daggoo. Our last view of them is on the three mastheads of the sinking *Pequod* (Melville 465—with Tashtego at the mainmast not because he is superior to the others but because he represents the Vanishing American, as the name of the *Pequod* itself does). Earlier, when Tashtego falls into the "cistern" (the decapitated head of a slain sperm whale), Daggoo attempts to save him but fails. Why couldn't Melville allow the "imperial negro" to save the Indian? Although it would have provided a perfect rebuttal to Agassiz, the symbolism would have been too race-specific. So Queequeg, epitome of all nonwhite races, comes to the rescue instead. In any event, all three harpooners are associated here with the inside of the whale's head, which we later discover contains "genius." Together they provide a link between human and whale.

But Melville relentlessly reminds white readers that they too are animals, sometimes no less bestial than the sharks. Indeed, to hunt the whale, as Captain Peleg reminds Ishmael, one must at least be able to "talk shark" (69) if not to be one, like Stubb, who is more of a shark than "Massa Shark himself" (254). The black cook Fleece is our authority here. He is perhaps the most controversial figure in the book: to many readers (e.g. Stone 356-58), he has too much of the blackface minstrel stereotype about him to be taken seriously as an anti-racist symbol. But his sermon, despite Melville's lamentable attempt at Black English Vernacular, is indeed the black response to white Father Mapple's sermon (cf. Vincent 234; Zoellner 222). Fleece presents a naturalist's vision to cross the theological one.

In the dialogue between Stubb and Fleece before and after the latter's admonishment to the sharks, Melville neatly turns the tables on "Massa Stubb." Though he may bark orders to Fleece, Stubb is revealed as a savage, preferring his shark steak tough and rare (Melville 250). Then he pretends a genteel objection to Fleece's swearing (251). Is Stubb savage or civilized? He's both, like Fleece, like all humanity. Indeed, after Stubb requests whale meatballs for breakfast (254), Melville offers "The Whale as a Dish" (chapter 65) to the reader as proof positive that white carnivorous humans are no different from cannibals:

> Go to the meat-market of a Saturday night and see the crowds of live bipeds staring up at the long rows of dead quadrupeds. Does not that sight take a tooth out of the cannibal's jaw? Cannibals? who is not a cannibal?

The first sentence vividly equates humans ("bipeds") with the animals they eat ("quadrupeds"—fellow mammals, after all), and the ensuing rhetorical questions, reinforcing the cultural relativism already evinced repeatedly in the book, lead Ishmael into a declaration of a sort of naturalist eschatology: if there is indeed a Last Judgement, "the Fejee that salted

BDD-A2963 © 2003 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 05:24:51 UTC)

down a lean missionary…against a coming famine" would fare better than some "civilized and enlightened gourmand" who nails geese to the ground to bloat their livers for pâté de foie gras (256). For the Fejee here, cannibalism is a matter of survival; but the gourmand (like Stubb with the whale) considers the goose so low on the ladder of existence as not to merit any respect as a fellow creature.

Melville has Fleece address the sharks as "Belubed fellow critters" to reinforce his theme that humans (regardless of race) are no less bestial than other animals. Fleece's exhortation to the sharks to be more civil in their devouring of the whale may seem to some readers comically absurd, a bit of blackface farce, but when it is juxtaposed with Ishmael's comment about the civilized savagery of the gourmand, it becomes a serious discourse.

One of the images with great relevance as far as race is concerned is that of the Stubb's whale and the monkey rope wedding . . .

The agent of the "wedding" is the so-called "monkey rope" tied round both their waists. Ishmael's job is to stand on deck while harpooner Queequeg's job is to stand half-submerged on the slippery, revolving whale to facilitate the blubber-hook and the cutting-spades in their mission of tearing and slicing off the blubber blanket. All the while, the ravenous sharks, in a feeding frenzy, threaten to dismember him. The monkey rope linking Queequeg on the whale to Ishmael on the deck serves as an insurance policy that lends a semblance of security—and a guarantee of faithfulness to the acrobat-on-the-whale. If Queequeg should slip between the whale and the ship, a yank on the monkey rope saves him from being crushed.

This perilous alliance gives introspective Ishmael good cause to ruminate on his situation. He might pay dearly for the missteps of another. Regreting this loss of "free will" (his words), philosophically he concedes that his situation is "the precise situation of every mortal that breathes". We all are dependent on someone else to protect us from harm.

It is this strong confidence, actually the entire relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg that undercuts the racist conceptions of the nineteenth century

In *Moby-Dick* Melville presents the problem of how man may achieve psychic balance in his relationship with the universe. By the end of the novel the introspective and reflective Ishmael, with the aid of Queequeg's instinct, achieves a delicate balance of feeling and judgement. He unconsciously learns the lessons of Queequeg's tattoos, containing a "complete theory of the heavens and the earth, a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth." Queequeg unconsciously teaches Ishmael how to attain the truth and evaluate experience, and showing him where to place himself in the universe. A man of feeling, Queequeg instinctively dramatizes the lesson of his tattoos. Ahab represents the Old Testament negative morality of "Thou shalt not." The New Testament ethic is love, a positive attitude, but mankind has been reared on morals and cannot make the leap to the positive ethic of love. Ishmael evolves from a man lacking self-identity and suffering from a feeling of chaos and a lack of kinship with the universe to a man who learns to practice the Golden Rule and follow the truths of the heart. Queequeg teaches him to be tolerant, to live one's religion, and to achieve the delicate balance between one's individual identity and the identity resulting from kinship with all creatures of the universe. The implicit statement is that values can be found outside Western civilization and contact with other races can and should be a source of meaning, enriching one's life.

BDD-A2963 © 2003 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 05:24:51 UTC)

Bibliography

Agassiz, Louis. "The Diversity of Origin of the Human Races." *Christian Examiner* 49 (1850): 110-45.

Eiseley, Loren. *Darwin's Century: Evolution and the Men Who Discovered It*. New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1958.

Foster, Charles H. "Something in Emblems: A Reinterpretation of *Moby-Dick*." *The New England Quarterly* 34 (March 1961): 3-35.

Goudge, Thomas A. "Evolutionism." In *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*. 4 vols. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973. Vol. 2: 179-89.

Gould, Stephen Jay. *Eight Little Piggies: Reflections in Natural History*. New York: Norton, 1993.

_____. *Ever Since Darwin: Reflections in Natural History*. New York: Norton, 1977.

_____. *The Flamingo's Smile: Reflections in Natural History*. New York: Norton, 1985.

_____. *Full House: The Spread of Excellence from Plato to Darwin*. New York: Harmony, 1996.

_____. *The Mismeasure of Man*. New York: Norton, 1981.

Karcher, Carolyn. *Shadow over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race and Violence in Melville's America*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980.

Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick*. 1851. Eds. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker. New York: Norton, 1967.

Olson, Charles. *Call me Ishmael*. New York: Grove Press, 1947.

Simpson, Eleanor E. "Melville and the Negro: From *Typee* to 'Benito Cereno.'" *American Literature* 41 (March 1869): 19-38.

Stanton, William. *The Leopard's Spots: Scientific Attitudes toward Race in America, 1815-59*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960.

Stone, Edward. "The Whiteness of the Whale". *CLA Journal* 18 (March 1975): 348-63.

Vincent, Howard P. *The Trying-Out of Moby-Dick*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949.

Zoellner, Robert. *The Salt-Sea Mastodon: A Reading of Moby-Dick*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973.

BDD-A2963 © 2003 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 05:24:51 UTC)