

ENGL 127
Professor Caleb Smith

Not a Whole Body: Subverting the Slave-Master Tradition in *Moby-Dick*'s "The Cabin"

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Appearing as the personification of both extreme minstrelsy and subservience, Pip remains one of the most racialized characters in *Moby-Dick*. It follows naturally, then, that an initial reading of the first section of "The Cabin," in which Pip urges Ahab to use his body as an alternative prosthetic for the captain's leg, would interpret this exchange as one that further emphasizes the slave-master relationship encapsulated in interactions between Pip and the white characters in the text.¹ However, by using the language of physicality, substitutability, and dependency when navigating the negotiation between Pip and Ahab—all while emphasizing the physical distance and intimacy of the characters—Melville is able to disrupt, and ultimately destabilize, the racialized power dynamics that occur throughout the passage. To demonstrate this, I will first analyze how Melville subverts this dichotomy on the formal level by utilizing the form of a play; I will then discuss how dictional choices work to complicate the racial, social, and physical disparities between the characters.

On a formal level, a script format frames the passage, a notable departure from Ishmael's narration. With stage directions and dialogue in lieu of narrative description, it is difficult to tell at first where Ahab and Pip exist spatially, essentially creating the effect of hiding, on a

¹ Selection included in "Appendix."

superficial level, the physical distance and nearness of the two characters. This form creates a push-and-pull dynamic wherein the characters are free to move closer to or farther from each other, as if players on a prosaic stage.

We can begin tracing these movements at the chapter's opening, in which Pip is touching Ahab's hand: "[*Ahab moving to go on deck; Pip catches him by the hand to follow*]" (419).² The choice of "catches" implies a break in Ahab's movement; the physical contact between these two characters is sudden and unreciprocated, initiated only by Pip. Moreover, the use of "follow" seems to further emphasize the slave-master dynamic between Pip and Ahab, as Pip is merely submissive to Ahab's movement. This action is followed by Ahab's admonition of Pip: "Lad, lad, I tell thee thou must not follow Ahab now" (419). Ahab then instantly directs Pip to "sit here in [*Ahab's*] own screwed chair," suggesting that Ahab has broken away from Pip's hold and that the two characters are physically isolated. Simultaneously, Pip pleads for Ahab to "use poor [*Pip*] for your one lost leg; only tread upon me," imploring Ahab to let him remain by his side (420). Already, the tension between Ahab, who calls for greater physical distance, and Pip, who insists that Ahab will depend on his body, is palpable and apparent. At a superficial level, this disparity further enhances the imbalanced power relations between the two figures.

However, when examining Ahab's diction, it becomes clear that his exhortations for physical distance are not a result of his natural repulsion to his deckhand; rather, Ahab is *forcing* distance between himself and Pip. Ahab's commands to Pip are admonitions to stay away rather than strict condemnations: "Ahab **would not scare thee** from him, yet would not have thee by him. There is that in thee, poor lad, which I feel **too curing to my malady**" (420). Though at first read, Ahab's refusal of Pip's intimacy further enhances the slave-master dichotomy, Ahab's

² Emphasis added.

insistence that he “would not scare [Pip] from him” and depiction of Pip as a “cure” to his “malady” demonstrate that Ahab does not outright reject Pip’s advances; instead, he is drawn to Pip, as if Pip’s physicality were a force of magnetism. Moreover, Ahab’s placement of Pip in the captain’s chair (“sit here in my own screw chair”) is an attempt to fix Pip’s movement in stasis. Pip’s vocal rejection of these commands (“No, no, no!”) further complicates the dynamic between the two characters (420). Once thought to be Ahab, the character in control is ambiguous, as, gradually, the two bodies are drawn toward each other: “I remain a part of ye,” Pip insists (420). Working within the play form, these fluctuating movements elucidate that, despite the racial or occupational hierarchies that separate the captain and deckhand, the tension between Ahab’s calls for physical distance and Pip’s longing for physical intimacy permeates the text, imbuing the exchange between these two characters with a desire to reconcile their diverging movements.

After examining how the theatrical and spatial framework operates, we can analyze how the diction in Pip and Ahab’s dialogue—which shifts from deferential to imperative for Pip, vice versa for Ahab—works to unsettle their crew-captain, slave-master relationship. In the opening paragraph, Ahab’s first exchanges with Pip read like biblical commandments, both directive and authoritative: “thou **must** not follow” (419), “thou **shalt** sit,” “another screw to [the captain’s chair], thou **must** be” (420). Pip, still clinging onto Ahab’s hand in the opening, plays the role of the subordinate. However, at the second paragraph, in a sudden shift of language, Pip’s dialogue begins to take on the imperative: “... **do ye but use** poor me for your one lost leg; **only tread upon me**, sir” (420). Meanwhile, Ahab’s language becomes more deferential. Although he starts by distancing his state of monomania from Pip’s—“a black! and crazy!”—Ahab begins to close the ostensible social distance, marked by race, occupation, and seniority, between himself and

Pip by drawing comparisons between the two, going as far as to liken his own body and mania to Pip's. Ahab's maintenance that "like cures like," or that his current propensity to Pip "cures" both manifestations of their madness, becomes a concession that he is actually dependent on Pip. Pip becomes the antidote to Ahab's monomania; the captain's obsession with hunting Moby Dick, once as vengeful and direct as the course of the *Pequod*, "keels up" like a capsized ship as he nears Pip (420). Moreover, Ahab's command for Pip to sit in the screwed chair, "as if [Pip] were the captain," is ironic—a coercion of Pip to become the coercer, further complicating the presumed authoritative relationship Ahab has with Pip. With the reversal of these independent and dependent, directive and submissive roles, the question of which character has more authority—the one in the role of "master"—becomes nebulous.

Finally, by employing the language of exploitability and substitutability, and by interweaving conceits of whiteness and blackness, the two bodies of Pip and Ahab, once physically and socially separate, begin to merge into one. Ahab's earlier language likens Pip's body to an object: "There is that **in** thee ... too **curing** to my malady" (420). The use of "in" imagines Pip's body as something from which excavation is possible, and the notion of Pip as a "cure" to Ahab's madness suggests that Pip's body is available for a form of consumption. Moreover, after commanding Pip to sit in the captain's chair, Ahab compares Pip to "another screw to [the chair]" (420). At first, this objectification of the black body as something from which exploitation is feasible works to further separate Pip's blackness—or subordination—from Ahab's whiteness. Pip's body is an object available for exploitation and consumption; Ahab's is inviolable, made apparent by his initial spatial and dictional distancing of himself from Pip. In spite of this, the text uses this dichotomy to later complicate the characters' relationship of dependency. As Pip's language takes on the imperative, he *directs* Ahab to use his body as a

prosthetic. At first, this suggestion seems to further subordinate Pip, since his entire body becomes available for Ahab's exploitation; however, Ahab would become *dependent on* Pip for his survival. This suggestion develops Pip and Ahab's relationship into one of mutual dependency—as a deckhand, Pip reciprocally relies on Ahab's directives—rather than one of sole control and exploitation. Finally, Pip's appropriation and merging of blackness and whiteness serve as the ultimate subversion of the slave-master dichotomy: his “drowned bones now show white, for all the blackness of his living skin” (420). Here, Pip's incorporation of blackness and whiteness within his own body, as well as his suggestion to become part of Ahab's white body, work to collapse the social and physical distinctions between whiteness and blackness, a disruption of slave-master conventions.

By employing the form of a drama, which allows the characters to create spatial and figurative distances and intimacies, subverting directive and subordinate diction, and merging conceits of whiteness and blackness, Melville destabilizes the distinctions between white and black, the master and slave, and the commander and the commanded. “Thy hand—Met!” Ahab remarks as he and Pip reconcile at the end of the scene (420). At last, the tension generated throughout the text pays off both physically and figuratively as the two bodies, black and white, merge into one. This serves as a microcosmic example of how Melville often sets up these distinctions—between white and black, land and sea, Christianity and idolatry, civilization and barbarism—only to condense and collapse them, allowing for an interrogation of how arbitrary these dichotomies are within their social contexts.

Works Cited

“The Cabin.” *Moby-Dick*, by Herman Melville, Dover Publications, 2003, pp. 419–421.

Appendix: Selected Passage for Close-Reading

Excerpt from Chapter 129: “The Cabin”

[*Ahab moving to go on deck; Pip catches him by the hand to follow.*]

“Lad, lad, I tell thee thou must not follow Ahab now. The hour is coming when Ahab would not scare thee from him, yet would not have thee by him. There is that in thee, poor lad, which I feel too curing to my malady. Like cures like; and for this hunt, my malady becomes my most desired health. Do thou abide below here, where they shall serve thee, as if thou wert the captain. Aye, lad, thou shalt sit here in my own screwed chair; another screw to it, thou must be.”

“No, no, no! ye have not a whole body, sir; do ye but use poor me for your one lost leg; only tread upon me, sir; I ask no more, so I remain a part of ye.”

“Oh! spite of million villains, this makes me a bigot in the fadeless fidelity of man!—and a black! and crazy!—but methinks like-cures-like applies to him too; he grows so sane again.”

“They tell me, sir, that Stubb did once desert poor little Pip, whose drowned bones now show white, for all the blackness of his living skin. But I will never desert ye, sir, as Stubb did him. Sir, I must go with ye.”

“If thou speakest thus to me much more, Ahab’s purpose keels up in him. I tell thee no; it cannot be.”

“Oh good master, master, master!”

“Weep so, and I will murder thee! have a care, for Ahab too is mad. Listen, and thou wilt often hear my ivory foot upon the deck, and still know that I am there. And now I quit thee. Thy hand!—Met! True art thou, lad, as the circumference to its centre. So: God for ever bless thee; and if it come to that,—God for ever save thee, let what will befall.”