THE NEW SCHOLAR
Leiden Student Journal of Humanities
Universiteit Leiden Humanities

Moby-Dick, or; the Day the Towers Fell – Reading the Great American Novel Through a Post-9/11 Lens

Jo ten Bolscher
Bachelor English Language and Culture

Abstract: The Great American Novel is a title without holder—though no book has had such an enduring and popular claim to it as Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. In the century since its "revival" and time in the American consciousness, *Moby-Dick* has undergone successive waves of interpretation and adoration, with its doomed voyage seen as representative of various aspects of America—from her diversity to her hubris. In the 21st century, *Moby-Dick* remains as relevant as ever—something this paper seeks to interrogate by reading the epic through a post-9/11 lens. By homing in on which aspects of the novel seem to find purchase in the aftermath of 9/11, this paper will show that *Moby-Dick*'s vision of a nation constantly at war with itself is not just relevant to post-9/11 America, but to the core of the nation as a whole.

Keywords: Moby-Dick, American Literature, 19th Century Literature, Herman Melville, William V. Spanos, Lawrence Buell, The Great American Novel, 9/11

Introduction

Once a topic of great import among scholars and public alike, the moniker "Great American Novel" (GAN) seems to have fallen out of fashion. According to Lawrence Buell, the GAN has "been killed off not once but at least twice," first due to "degenerat[ion] into … media cliché" and then academic cynicism viewing the GAN label as a "naively amateurish … pipe dream."[1] Nevertheless, the desire for, and idea of, a novel that captures the essence of America has endured, and perhaps no entry has been more promoted than *Moby-Dick*. Indeed, the GAN status of *Moby-Dick* seems relevant as ever in the wake of 9/11, with Buell noting examples of "[a] journalist compar[ing] … George W. Bush to Captain Ahab" and Karl Rove stating "'I'm Moby-Dick and they're after me.'"[2] As 9/11 so fundamentally shaped the nation, so too did it shape readings of one her most enduring works. Taking *Moby-Dick*'s place as GAN contender seriously, therefore, means interrogating what parts of the novel resonate so clearly in this post-9/11 world—and especially which aspects popular culture has chosen to omit.

[1] Buell, "The Unkillable Dream," 132–133.
[2] Buell, "The Unkillable Dream," 133.

George Bush, American

Of the myriad *Moby-Dick* comparisons, the one of American Presidents to Captain Ahab is among the most recognizable. 9/11 immediately stirred such comparisons, including when Columbia professor Edward Said compared Bush and his response to that of Ahab.[3] Often, these comparisons rely on Ahab being a uniquely dictatorial, domineering or steering force, as Susan McWilliam notes in the introduction to her essay "Ahab, American."[4] As McWilliams goes on to write, however, this assumption itself is faulty: "Ahab is … not a foreign force but part of a well-established class of American citizens."[5] In many ways, she convincingly argues, Ahab's "isolation and desire for domination" reflect "distinctively American qualities."[6]

The fact remains, however, that the comparisons between George W. Bush in the wake of 9/11 and Captain Ahab find justifications within the text itself. See Ahab's famous quarterdeck speech, where he declares unconditional, monomaniacal revenge against Moby-Dick, the whale that robbed him of a leg: "[B]e the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him."[7] "I will not wait on events, … I will not stand by. … Our war on terror is well begun, but it is only begun. … We will win this war."[8] So spoke Bush in 2002, not just a defiant cry of strength but a promise to shoot first and ask questions later. It mattered not whether Afghanistan or Iraq were "agent" or "principal," whether or not invasion would protect the nation: to the President, America had been attacked by people who hated "our freedom."[9] He found one recourse: war, at whatever cost.

Susan McWilliam makes the point, however, that in *Moby-Dick* "the captain 'gets his atmosphere at second hand from the sailors on the forecastle': 'He thinks he breathes it first; but not so.'"[10] Just as Ahab's way of thinking largely reflects that of the crew, so too did Bush's nationalistic belligerence reflect the sentiment of the American public. Quantitative research into attitudes in the hours post-9/11 shows that Bush's impassioned speeches "led only to temporary pause in the increase of anger."[11] Notably, while anxiety and fear quickly subsided, this anger did not—there was a "desire for vengeance which seem[ed] to require an outlet."[12] The day of the invasion of Iraq, 76% Americans supported war.[13] At home, Arab-Americans faced a marked rise in hate crimes, isolation and discrimination in the immediate wake of 9/11.[14] America needed a scapegoat, and they had found it.

Shadows and Presidents

The idea of scapegoating plays a prominent role both within *Moby-Dick* as well as in the criticism that surrounds it. The novel contains plenty of blame, notably with Ahab attributing evil itself to Moby-Dick. There is, however, the curious case of Fedallah, a "subordinate phantom" with "some sort of a half-hinted influence" over Ahab—"it might have been even authority"—who nevertheless acts mostly as a crewmate and assists in spotting, hunting and

[3] Leroux, "Wars for Oil," 424.
[4] McWilliams, "Ahab, American," 233.
[5] McWilliams, "Ahab, American," 235.
[6] McWilliams, "Ahab, American," 236.
[7] Melville, *Moby-Dick,* 182.
[8] Bush, "State of the Union."
[9] Bush, "State of the Union."
[10] McWilliams, "Ahab, American," 237.
[11] Back et al., "Emotional Timeline of 9/11," 1418.
[12] Back et al., "Emotional Timeline of 9/11," 1419.
[13] Newport et al., "Opinion on the War."
[14] Oswald, "Anti-Arab Reactions," 1775.

eventually dying to the White Whale.[15] He seems, however, more than simply an acquaintance Ahab snuck onboard; Stubb, a crewmate, even takes Fedallah "to be the Devil in disguise."[16]

These allusions fueled "the widely prevalent view of Fedallah as 'the tempter of Ahab,' an agent … ensuring his moral damnation" as Jean-Francois Leroux writes in his essay "Wars for Oil: *Moby-Dick*, Orientalism, and Cold-War Criticism."[17] Especially in the 1960s, critics saw Fedallah as Ahab's shadow, with whom Ahab merges and becomes "lost through his 'identification with Fedallah.'"[18] This interpretation effectively scapegoats the "oriental" Parsee and frees American Ahab of the responsibility for his actions. This, however, misreads the text for it is "the Parsee's shadow" that "seemed only to blend with, and lengthen, Ahab's";[19] as Leroux states: "Fedallah is damned and doomed only insofar as he too comes to … enlarge Ahab's shadow."[20] Instead, both are "yoked together, and an unseen tyrant driving them";[21] this tyrant "the mythopoeic, collective imagination or representation of violence and the sacred."[22] The text points towards a different reading, concludes Leroux, that of two men independently driven by zealous fanaticism, both obsessed with violence and both subtly scapegoating the other: "In the Parsee Ahab saw his forethrown shadow, in Ahab the Parsee his abandoned substance."[23]

Leroux expertly tackles the Orientalism that belied earlier readings of Fedallah, a fear and othering of the East that finds its mirror in the rise of Arabophobia post-9/11.[24] Yet, this story of scapegoating and unseen tyrants far more closely mirrors a different 9/11 idea, that of a "shadow presidency." More recently espoused in the 2018 film *Vice*, many see Vice President Dick Cheney as the true force behind the Bush administration's "worst decisions," with some going so far as to cast him the "Shadow President."[25] While Cheney was highly instrumental in shaping these policies, shifting the blame for Iraq, "enhanced interrogation" and Guantanamo Bay upon him, as Scott Mendelson writes for *Forbes*, inadvertently "lets George W. Bush … off the moral hook."[26]

Leroux notes that "it is Ahab, *not* Fedallah, who of course 'raises' the whale."[27] So too is it Bush, *not* Cheney, who signed the order legalizing torture.[28] And it is Bush, *not* Cheney, who signed the military order that authorized Guantanamo Bay.[29] The idea of an unseen shadow manipulating powerful figures—Fedallah corrupting Ahab, Cheney puppeteering Bush—has proven appealing, yet this framing exculpates these men, ascribing their actions to others ultimately in thrall to the same forces they themselves sought to perpetuate.

The *Pequod* and the United States

The actions of Ahab and his quest end on the third day of "The Chase" with Moby-Dick sinking the *Pequod*; "then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled

[15] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 252.
[16] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 348.
[17] Leroux, "Wars for Oil," 426.
[18] Leroux, "Wars for Oil," 427.
[19] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 351.
[20] Leroux, "Wars for Oil," 436.
[21] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 562.
[22] Leroux, "Wars for Oil," 437.
[23] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 562.
[24] Leroux, "Wars for Oil," 425.
[25] Heilbrunn, "The Shadow President."
[26] Mendelson, "'Vice' Review."
[27] Leroux, "Wars for Oil," 426.
[28] EOP, "Executive Order 13440," 40707.
[29] EOP, "Military Order," 57833.

five thousand years ago."[30] Here, as before, *Moby-Dick* prefigures American history in the ignoble ending America suffers in its "War on Terror": thousands dead, two nations broken and a consensus that the wars were both wrong and useless.[31]

This ending redounds throughout critical reflections upon the work: McWilliams argues that the sinking of the *Pequod* represents the "distinctively American … threat of an *isolato* culture,"[32] while Laurence Buell views the novel as "in between taking the prospect of … democratic-style heroism seriously and spoofing it as doomed from the get-go."[33] Buell views this fence-sitting as "problematic," returning to his view of the "forever incomplete" search for the Great American Novel and the inadequacy of *Moby-Dick* as one.[34]

Buell notes the disconnect between the popular reading of *Moby-Dick* as "effectively reduced to [a] face-off between Ahab and the whale"[35] and the critical "Ishmaelean perspective"[36] that reads Ishmael as the true hero of the novel. Indeed, William V. Spanos' wide-ranging *The Errant Art of* Moby-Dick focuses strongly upon Ishmael—yet squaring this with the popular deletion of Ishmael, as Buell puts it, is a task *Moby-Dick* itself undertakes. Ishmael "notoriously disappears for the last part of the text save the epilogue," something Buell himself views as a subversion of the observer-hero narrative, a renegotiation that caps an "equivocal macro-structure."[37]

It is a final declaration that cements *Moby-Dick* as a work that is constantly at war with itself: an epic without consistent genre with an observer-hero who disappears during the climax. Is it not remarkable that the novel nevertheless continuously finds such purchase within the American contemporary? Years before 9/11, Spanos remarks of *Moby-Dick*: "Melville's proleptic anticipation of the 'postmodern' destruction of the American errand in Vietnam, right down to its racist overtones, is astonishing in the exactness of its contours."[38] If one novel were to capture the essence of America, would it not be one that seems to foretell her every step?

Conclusion

Moby-Dick's diverse and heterogenous nature does not represent a novel unsure of itself; it merely reflects a nation often at war with itself. Since its inception, the United States of America has seen recurring cycles of conflict: from the Civil War and Jim Crow to Vietnam and 9/11. As the nation nears its semiquincentennial, it once again finds itself in the coda of a novel written but decades after its founding. The epilogue echoes America's final exit from Kabul as Ishmael is picked up by the *Rachel*, now "only … another orphan,"[39] just as it presaged the fall of Saigon decades prior.[40] It is this pattern that illuminates *Moby-Dick*'s perhaps most enduring legacy: a vision of a nation defined by perpetual struggle, awaiting the next Moby-Dick and its next Ahab to chase it. "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."[41]

---

[30] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 598.
[31] Jones, "Opposition to Iraq War."
[32] McWilliams, "Ahab, American," 238.
[33] Buell, "The Unkillable Dream," 149.
[34] Buell, "The Unkillable Dream," 137.
[35] Buell, "The Unkillable Dream," 149.
[36] Buell, "The Unkillable Dream," 146.
[37] Buell, "The Unkillable Dream," 146.
[38] Spanos, *The Errant Art*, 267.
[39] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 599.
[40] Spanos, *The Errant Art*, 275.
[41] Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 171.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank everyone who helped with the writing and imagining of this essay, in particular Prof. Morgan-Owens for her engaging seminars, inspiring feedback, and steadfast faith in my abilities.

References

Back, Mitja D., Albrecht C.P. Küfner, and Boris Egloff. "The Emotional Timeline of September 11, 2001." *Psychological Science* 21, no. 10 (August 30, 2010): 1417–1419. https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797610382124.

Buell, Lawrence. "The Unkillable Dream of the Great American Novel: Moby-Dick as Test Case." *American Literary History* 20, no. 1-2 (January 23, 2008): 132–155. https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajn005.

Bush, George. "The President's State of the Union Address 2002." January 29, 2002. United States Congress, Washington, D.C., United States of America. *Office of the Press Secretary*. Transcript, georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. 1925. Reprint, Chiltern Publishing, 2018.

Heilbrunn, Jacob. "The Shadow President." *The New York Times*, October 12, 2008, sec. Books. https://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/12/books/review/Heilbrunn-t.html.

Jones, Jeffrey M. "Opposition to Iraq War Reaches New High." *Gallup News*, April 24, 2008. https://news.gallup.com/poll/106783/opposition-iraq-war-reaches-new-high.aspx.

Leroux, Jean-François. "Wars for Oil: *Moby-Dick*, Orientalism, and Cold-War Criticism." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 39, no. 4 (2009): 423–42. https://doi.org/10.1353/crv.0.0049.

McWilliams, Susan. "Ahab, American." *The Review of Politics* 74, no. 2 (2012): 233–260. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0034670512000277.

Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick; Or, the Whale*. 1851. Reprint, Alma Classics, 2017.

Mendelson, Scott. "'Vice' Review: Strong Performances Can't Save Useless Dick Cheney Biopic." *Forbes*, December 17, 2018. https://www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2018/12/17/vice-review-dick-cheney-christian-bale-amy-adams-adam-mckay-george-w-bush/?sh=65756a63895f.

Newport, Frank, David W. Moore, and Jeffrey M. Jones. "Special Release: American Opinion on the War." *Gallup News*, March 21, 2003. https://news.gallup.com/poll/8068/special-release-american-opinion-war.aspx.

Oswald, Debra L. "Understanding Anti-Arab Reactions Post-9/11: The Role of Threats, Social Categories, and Personal Ideologies1." *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 35,

no. 9 (September 2005): 1775–1799. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2005.tb02195.x.

Spanos, William V. *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick: The Canon, the Cold War and the Struggle for American Studies*. Duke University Press, 1995.

United States, Executive Office of the President [George W. Bush]. "Executive Order 13440: Interpretation of the Geneva Conventions Common Article 3 as Applied to a Program of Detention and Interrogation Operated by the Central Intelligence Agency." *Federal Register* 72, no. 141 (July 24, 2007): 40707-9. www.federalregister.gov/documents/2007/07/24/07-3656/interpretation-of-the-geneva-conventions-common-article-3-as-applied-to-a-program-of-detention-and.

United States, Executive Office of the President [George W. Bush]. "Military Order: Detention, Treatment, and Trial of Certain Non-Citizens in the War Against Terrorism." *Federal Register* 66, no. 222 (November 16, 2001): 57833-57836. www.federalregister.gov/documents/2001/11/16/01-28904/detention-treatment-and-trial-of-certain-non--citizens-in-the-war-against-terrorism.