

The Sub-Sub-Librarian¹

One of the most fascinating puzzles in English literature is found at the very opening of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851). The book and the puzzle opens with the "Etymology" (derivation) of the word "whale." The person who prepared this etymology, the narrator tells us, is "a late consumptive usher to a grammar school," a sort of failed schoolmaster who spends his time dusting off his old books.

The etymology itself offers a quotation from the 16th-century British explorer Richard Hakluyt that stresses on the importance of the silent "h" in "whale." One dictionary, we are told, claims that the word derives from *hval*, the Swedish and Danish word for roundness, another says that it derives from *Wallen*, the Dutch and German word verb meaning "to roll." Then, follows the word for whale in thirteen other languages.

The narrator then presents "Extracts," that is, quotations from various sources in which whales are mentioned. This is where the narrator presents the "Sub-Sub-Librarian," made famous by his enigmatic obscurity. His function is merely to compile these extracts, which range from biblical passages to lines from Shakespeare and Dryden to descriptions from scientific treatises, explorers' accounts, songs, newspapers and popular literature. Their number impresses on us the wide range of things that the whale had meant to different people at different times.

By beginning with such dry scholarly materials – an etymology and extracts from various sources – Melville suggests that *Moby-Dick* will be more than a adventure novel. Not only is the novel based on a thorough study of mankind's attempts to understand the whale, but that it may even significantly add to what little we know about whales.

Most novels are prefaced with a single epigraph, stating its central theme and gives the reader a point of departure. *Moby-Dick's* extracts range from the sophisticated to the simple, the literary to the colloquial, making it difficult to make out any central theme.

The extracts' references clearly present before us what scholars call "intertextuality," that is, connecting what we read to other literary works. This may perhaps be Melville's strategy for establishing the literary worth of *Moby-Dick* in particular and American literature in general.

The extracts suggest that *Moby-Dick*, in a big way, encompasses and builds upon all of the mentioned works,. The novel presents a range of human experiences—from something as profound as man's quest for his soul, and the fall of man who defies nature, to something as mundane as school-books and serial stories.

The consumptive usher and the "poor devil of a Sub-Sub" – the compilers of the etymology and the excerpts – gives an air of pathetic, even comical, irony. They are a caricature of us, the reader, indeed for all humans – we, who are ever struggling for greatness but just as ever failing and doomed to mediocrity. We are the failed scholar, the mediocre librarian – this reflects the irony of the novel's learned but futile attempts to capture the whale even in words. Despite all this self-belittling, the heroism is in the author's effort in telling the story. And in our diligence in living it.

¹ For a related Reflection, "[Chasing the White Whale](#)," R351, 2014.

Our life is that puzzle we are born into from day one. We are the consumptive usher and the Sub-Sub-Librarian; we are never sure which, but we are really both. It's how we see ourselves, a vision we are never happy with. So we quest for the Great White Whale— a God-figure, an eternal soul, a passionate dream. But the Whale always eludes us – we think we are approaching it, but we can never catch it, much less harpoon it. The Whale is just a phantom, which even great religions and little ones fall for. So we are all in the Whale-chasing game.

We see the Whale in everything we can imagine: in our speech, our actions, our writings, our works of art, our music, our vision, even in the world around us. We put together words describing the phantom Whale, amazing stories, glorious words and all the miracles we can imagine. We even pretend to commune with the Great White Whale; we fantasize the Whale granting our wishes, protecting us, destroying our enemies, waiting for us at the horizon. But horizons are never reached. The future never comes.

So we sail on our Pequod² – we who have nothing on land, so we look to the seas, to far horizons. In time, we learn that the Pequod captain Ahab is drunk with a single quest, to wreak vengeance on that Great White Whale. It had taken away all that he had. Like Ahab, we, too, think that we are what we have. When we think we are what we have, and when what we have is taken away from us, what are we?

Ahab feels lifeless; so he seeks to regain his life by finding and killing that Whale. He has the notion that if the Whale dies, he will truly live. How can one death give another life? Only life gives life. When a warrior dies for us in war, we honour him. But many die for us in wars. And wars are caused by the selfish senseless powerful who fear to die, and let many innocent others, young and promising, die for them.

Which is better: a dead hero or a living guardian, parent, teacher and friend? The unsurpassed greatness of the Buddha is that he lived fully for us – so that we know the difference between pleasure and pain, and rise above both to joyful peace. He did not die for us, and no one killed him.³

Life is precious -- even a whale's. When we give life to someone, we love that person as ourselves. We would not think of harming that person even when he fails us or works against us. No greater love is there than this – that we love another boundlessly, and living all our life for that person, as long as he needs us. It is a mother's unconditional love for her only child.⁴

If the Whale could speak, it would say: "I took nothing from you. You left your own safe shores to encroach in my living waters, to hunt and hurt me. You do this because you think you have the God-given right to dominate me, to hunt me down, and kill me. Then, you think you have claimed the seas for yourself, as you have the lands."

"What are you to the oceans? What are the oceans to you? It may be that to surrender to the waters is to accept defeat, but it's a defeat better than many victories. In

² The ill-fated ship in which Captain Ahab sails to his doom with all his crew, except Ishmael, the narrator.

³ See Reflection, "[How the Bible made me a better Buddhist](#)," R43, 2008.

⁴ See **Karaṇīya Metta Sutta** (Khp 9,7 = Sn 149), [SD 38.3](#).

surrendering, letting go, you conquer yourself, far greater than victory over a thousand times a thousand in battle.”⁵

As we roam the seas after the Whale, we move ever farther away from home and love. So we beat on, a ship drawn by the winds of hope, swallowed by the waves of night and day, caught in the currents of our past. No matter how far we have pushed on, it is never too late to turn back. Or, we must simply keep on going – to the world’s end, if we must – until we come around to where we started. Then, we are – as land-sighting birds⁶ – home.⁷

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⁵ **Dhammapada** verse 103.

⁶ On the land-sighting bird, see **Kevaḍḍha Sutta** (D 11,85), [SD 1.7](#).

⁷ See [Nagara Sutta](#) (S 12.65), SD 14.2.