

# Moby-Dick and Melville's Anti-Slavery Allegory (American Literature Readings in the 21st Century)

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Pellar's *Moby-Dick and Melville's Anti-slavery Allegory* is by far the most complete, learned, and compelling reading of Melville's *Moby-Dick*. Pellar makes this reading from the perspective of a demonstration that this novel is what Melville called an "allegory" of the evils of slavery at the particular moment (1851) of the Fugitive Slave Laws. Those laws required all Northerners to return escaped slaves to their "owners" in the South. A number of other scholars over the

years have connected *Moby-Dick* with Melville's strongly held abolitionist views. Pellar's *Moby-Dick and Melville's Anti-slavery Allegory* is, among other things, an authoritative and comprehensive account of previous scholarship about this topic. Nevertheless, *Moby-Dick* is still not read or taught primarily with its secret allegory in mind. The publication of *Moby-Dick and Melville's Anti-slavery Allegory* will make it difficult for readers and teachers who "dive deep" into *Moby-Dick* any longer to ignore that allegory. Pellar's methodology of

interpretation is to focus in a given chapter on one or another episode in *Moby-Dick*; for example, the Spouter Inn chapter, or even to zero in on a separate word or phrase that recurs in the novel. That includes Melville's specific use of the word "allegory." Pellar then shows in each case how the detail in question links up with a wide and extremely complex system of other words or allusions. Examples are references to the Book of Jonah in the Old Testament, or to St. Paul's conversion in Acts, or to Hobbes' *Leviathan*, or, especially and in much helpful detail, to the arguments for and against slavery and the Fugitive Slave Laws in speeches (Garrison et al.) and in the media at the time Melville was writing *Moby-Dick*. Pellar seems to know the novel by heart, as well as Melville's letters (especially to Hawthorne) and his other writings. The result is an extremely powerful and comprehensive reading of *Moby-Dick*. That reading is focused, in chapter after chapter, not on abstract themes but on the multiple meanings of words or phrases that have both a literal meaning (details of Ahab's hunt for the white whale) and an allegorical meaning (Melville's covert insertion in his novel of a dramatized polemic against slavery and in particular, against the outrage of those Fugitive Slave Laws). Pellar's *Moby-Dick and*

*Melville's Anti-slavery Allegory* is an extremely important book. All those who want to understand *Moby-Dick*, as well as those who wish to understand the history of slavery in the United States or its post-abolition history should read it. The legacy of slavery continues to this day. A recent brief and compelling essay in *The Nation* by Patricia J. Williams ("The Rituals of Racial Killing") reports that "The front page of *The New York Times*' April 21, 2015, edition featured a story estimating that approximately 1.5 million black men are absent from daily life in the United States, mostly through incarceration or early death." <sup>1</sup> To a considerable degree we have in the United States these days substituted prisons and police brutality for plantations. *Moby*

*Dick* and Brian Pellar's allegorical reading of it in *Moby-Dick and Melville's Anti-slavery Allegory* are not just matters of literary history. They are urgent reading for today.

Preface In 1991, while doing research for a literary project, I read *Moby-Dick* for the first time. I had seen the Houston film several times on TV while growing up as a boy in Massachusetts, each view being just as exciting as the last. I remember being absolutely fascinated by the movie, particularly with the white whale itself. My interest in that film, along with *Star Trek* and all the other sea story/adventure films and books, undoubtedly had a major influence in my decision to join the Navy and see the world. I soon dropped out of high school at 17 and enlisted in the US Navy. I then spent two years aboard the aircraft carrier the USS *Midway* (CV-41), where I was awarded a high school diploma at sea in the ship's fo'c's'le, and took my first college class, "Oceanography," as I crossed over the Equator. After serving aboard the USS *Midway*, I then spent a year and half on the remote Pacific Island of Guam. Coming back to *Moby-*

*Dick* with a different perspective in 1991, one tempered by both the sea itself and my subsequent

university experience, I dove into the actual words of Melville anew. But as I read along, completely engrossed by the brilliance of the writing and the splendor of an ocean and shipboard imagery awash in the memory of my own experience, the term "black blood" unexpectedly sprang up at me from the page and dramatically altered the course of my life. At that crucial moment, when Ahab vented his need to drive his harpoon deep into the heart of Moby Dick, I felt instinctively that those two words seemed more than just a descriptive or symbolic "moral" term that Ahab was projecting in his immense hatred and need for revenge. Instead, what became instantly apparent was the strong covertly racial dimension that he seemed to have imparted to the image – that is, an albino whale that should be as black as the other black whales being hunted. And then remembering that Ishmael had compared the "gloom toward the north with the darkness toward the south" in the "middle" of the street, I realized that I might have discovered something quite interesting – particularly in light of Melville having written the book at the time of slavery, a divided nation, and the Fugitive Slave Laws.

Excited by my findings and not wanting to be influenced by what others thought, I wrote in a vacuum, staying away from all critical approaches to the book. After exploring these ideas on my own, I then went to the stacks and found that Weathers (1960), Foster (1961), and Heimert (1963) had also come to the same conclusion that slavery and the Compromise of 1850 were reflected within Moby-Dick.

2 However, they had mostly focused on Ahab as personifying, in order, Garrison, Daniel Webster, and Calhoun, and did not go too much further than this. Heimert, however, recognized the "Ship of State" motif and many other important details concerning Melville's attitude toward slavery.

In addition, I also later discovered Sidney Kaplan's (1968) essay, "Towards Pip and Dagoo: Footnote on Melville's Youth," as well as his (1953) essay, "Lewis Temple and the Hunting of the Whale." I also found Karcher's wonderful (1980) Shadow Over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race, and Violence in Melville's America, which strongly evidences "that slavery and race are crucial themes and that concentrating on them not only takes us to the heart of the text, but radically transforms our perceptions of its total meaning." I also discovered Morrison's (1989) essay, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," Berthold's (1994) essay, "Moby-Dick and American Slave Narrative," Otter's (1999) Melville's Anatomies, Delbanco's (2005) Melville: His World and Work, and several excellent essays on Melville and race by Bradley (1997), Levine (1999), Burns (2006), Fanning (2006), Oshima (2006), and Rampersad (1994). All of these explore aspects of Melville's attitudes toward race, and in some, attempt to expand on the anti-slavery themes of Weathers, Foster, and Heimert. All of these and others explore Melville and race/slavery, and, indeed, compliment and provide a foundation for my own work (particularly Rogin's and Karcher's books, which are solid in their approach to Melville's attitude toward slavery and the threat it posed to the Ship of State).

However, none of them identified Melville's allegory of man as whale and the Pequod as Ship of State engaged in a slave hunt, an allegory in which I found myself in completely uncharted waters.

3 In addition, I discovered a paper by Sidney Kaplan (1951) that discussed an 1852 boat named the Moby Dick that was involved in the Underground Railroad. It was this paper and a subsequent follow-up paper by Sandra Petrulionis (2002) that provided some additional links between Moby Dick the boat, Moby-Dick the novel, and the capture and freeing of fugitive slaves, and thus I added an extra chapter detailing these vital connections.

Soon after reading Petrulionis, I discovered Wallace's (2005) very penetrating "Douglas and Melville: Anchored Together in Neighborly Style." In addition to showing the parallel lives of these two great men and how they might have influenced one another, Wallace gives credible evidence of, and shows keen insight into, the anti-slavery subtext of Melville's work. To my surprise, I found that Wallace also mentions the schooner Moby Dick, though only briefly.

In 2007, I finished writing the book; however, several incidents occurred (including a very serious illness) that caused me to set it aside. It was only recently, with the encouragement of Professor Victor Mair (who had asked to read my manuscript) that I returned to update it with current scholarship. With renewed interest, I went back to the stacks and found to my delight that a lot has been written recently about the connection between Melville and his anti-slavery sentiments. The journal Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies published an interesting paper by Fruscione

(2008) called "What Is Called Savagery: Race, Visual Perception, and Bodily Contact in Moby-Dick ." Leviathan also published a series of papers that addressed Frederick Douglass and Herman Melville, which led me to Levine and Otter's (2008) Frederick Douglass & Herman Melville: Essays in Relation , a book that contains several papers that further explore Melville's attitudes of race and his anti-slavery stance. A paper by Gleason (2008) entitled, "Volcanoes and Meteors: Douglass, Melville, and the Poetics of Insurrection," demonstrates a strong connection between the metaphors of volcanism/fire and the institution of slavery, which strongly confirms my earlier findings and overall thesis, particularly as it relates to my understanding of Melville's self-professed claim in Moby-Dick of the "hell-fire in which the whole book is broiled" in (June 29, 1851 letter to Hawthorne). Other papers/books that I just recently found that corroborated Melville's anti-slavery stance included Kopacz's (2011) " Cultural Sweat: Melville, Labor, and Slavery ," Stuckey's (2009) African Culture and Melville's Art: The Creative Process in Benito Cereno and Moby-Dick , Decker's (2009) " Who Ain't a Slave?: Moby-Dick and the Slave Narrative Tradition ," Taylor's (2011) " Limbs of Empire: Ahab, Santa Ana, and Moby-Dick ," and Schuller's (2010) wonderful " Specious Bedfellows: Ethnicity, Animality, and the Intimacy of Slaughter in Moby-Dick ," which explores Melville's appropriation of cetacean intellectual and emotional capability in Moby-Dick – an appropriation that I feel gets to the "heart" (to borrow appropriately from Karcher) of the book: the symbolic connection in Moby-Dick between black whales and black men. Other excellent and more recent books/essays that deal with Melville and slavery/race include Christopher Freeburg's (2012) Melville and the Idea of Blackness: Race and Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century America , John Bryant's (2014) "How Billy Budd Grew Black and Beautiful: Versions of Melville in the Digital Age," Homer B. Pettey's (2003) "Cannibalism, Slavery, and Self-Consumption in Moby-Dick ", Erin Pearson's 2014 UC Irvine dissertation, Savage Hunger: Cannibalism and the Discourse on Slavery in the United States and Caribbean, Brian Yother's (2015) "Melville's Reconstruction: 'The Swamp Angel,' 'Formerly a Slave,' and the Moorish Maid in 'Lee in the Capital,'" and Tom Nurmi's (2015) "Shadows in the Shenandoah: Melville, Slavery, and the Elegiac Landscape." Lastly, and serendipitously, I recently chanced upon Bernard's (2002) essay "The Question of Race in Moby-Dick " (in a footnote to Fruscione's [2008] "What Is Called Savagery: Race, Visual Perception, and Bodily Contact in Moby-Dick "). Bernard also noticed a connection between black whales and black slaves. Though he couldn't go into very much depth in his 20-page paper, I feel that his keen insights into Melville's book helps confirm my own independent and earlier findings on the book's hidden allegory and helps to establish a strong anti-slavery theme that I feel is woven into Moby-Dick.

To return to that initial link that I had made between Moby-Dick and the allegory of the fugitive slave hunt many years ago, the more I thought about it and read the novel, the more this seemed to make both intuitive and empirical sense. I spent a considerable amount of time in 1991–1992 exploring and evidencing this anti-slavery allegory in my journals, and then a couple of years later while getting an MFA in English at UC Irvine. After reading my work, distinguished Professor J. Hillis Miller encouraged me to dive a bit deeper into this issue and publish my findings. This essay is the fruit of that labor. May it prove to be as exciting and enjoyable to you as it has been for me.

#### Acknowledgments

I would first like to thank Chief Hunt, my former chief from the USS Midway, CV-41, for letting me know, in that distinctive naval vernacular, that when tackling any kind of writing assignment, it's more noble to plow your own sea-lane. I am also grateful to the crew's library onboard the USS Midway – a small secluded island unto itself, that nourished the mind and soul amidst the hustle and bustle of swarming men and machines in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

I would also like to thank Araceli Penafuerte for her patience and support in the early stages of this book; William Calderelli, for his feedback and support; Dr. Scott Carhart, for his feedback and support, and who also coined his own wonderful term, "The Moby Code" for my project; Nadine and David Hall for their generous hospitality and gift of time to read; Pamo Oliphant, for all of her much needed help at UC Irvine's main library; Sandy Kancianich, for reading an early version of the manuscript and proofing it; Luka Li for her suggestions and encouragement; Professor Victor Mair, for his inspirational words and support; UC Irvine's Distinguished Professor J. Hillis Miller, for his feedback on my early

findings, his encouragement to continue with my research and to write the book, and his recommendations; Ryan Jenkins, acquisitions editor at Palgrave MacMillan, for believing in the book and taking that extra step; and last but not least, my parents, for without whom, as they say, none of this would be possible. Their encouragement and support, particularly in the latter stages of this project, was a blessing.

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that I had found independently.

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[Wallace came close, though, as will be noted later.](#)

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[1. Introduction](#)

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[Since the Melville revival of the](#)

1920s, there has been a plethora of assorted articles and books written about the symbols and alleged allegory that Melville embedded within Moby-Dick, and yet none, it seems, has been touted as offering up the definitive interpretation of the book. If anything, the fact that the book has meant so much to so many is now one of its lasting appeals. In many cases it seemed to have been a mirror for whatever novel or critical approach one brought to it. And in the light of these "projections from the mind of the interpreter" as H. A. Murray has called it ( [1992](#), 412), the search for actual structure and authorial intent has seemed to have lost its appeal and/or has become secondary to the textual theories that replaced it. Thus the truth of the book is still that "sacred white doe," as Melville himself called it ( [1967a](#), 542), that has only been glimpsed and written up in "snatches" and never quite fully grasped in the times that followed the publication of the novel, the later Melville revival, and lately in the multiple reflections of an indefinitely prolonged post-modern reading.

Though far from offering the definitive interpretation of the book – for which I'd have to defer to post-modern criticism with Melville's words, "it is hard to be finite upon an infinite subject" ( [1967a](#), 551), – in this essay I will explore Melville's writings with an emphasis on authorial intent, symbol/diction, and the historical backdrop surrounding Melville, all of which will help to illuminate the hidden allegory in Moby-Dick. That Melville consciously wove an allegory into Moby-Dick is quite clear from the evidence, particularly given his direct remarks in letters to both Hawthorne and Hawthorne's wife (which will be largely presented in the next chapter). Given his direct admission of an allegory, the question arises of what exactly does he imply by this admission?

As Baker notes, the use of allegory has a "curious history" ( [1994](#), 303). Quintilian remarked that it "presents one thing in words and another in meaning, or else something absolutely opposed to the meaning of words" (303). In the Middle Ages, it provided for narratives, such as those employed to great effect by Dante, who narrated the development of the individual in grace. In the renaissance, it was used primarily by

Protestants in the narrative mode (such as Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*). Its use soon declined, and it was dismissed largely by the romantics. According to Baker, "Victorians and Modernists continued largely to reject allegory, even though Americans persisted in employing it as a shape for accounts of their singular experience, as in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and in Melville's *Moby-Dick*" (304). More pertinent still, Baker remarked that as a strategy of understanding, allegory "seeks to render intelligible texts that a culture finds scandalous, illogical, or shameful" (303). It is this latter strategy that I feel Melville embraced. As Melville had hoped that his allegorical novel *Mardi* "might not, possibly, be received for a verity" ( [1982](#), 661), and as he believed that Hawthorne's use of symbol was "directly calculated to deceive – egregiously deceive – the superficial skimmer of pages" ( [1967a](#), 549), I feel that Melville set out to tell the truth of the horrors of slavery via the "great Art of Telling the Truth, – even though it be covertly, and by snatches" ( [1967a](#), 542). In the next chapter I will discuss why Melville felt it was necessary to employ the use of an allegory, as it would have been, among other things, scandalous and shameful given his close association with Chief Justice Shaw and others. Thus, I will attempt to show that Melville not only implied a racial dimension to *Moby-Dick* but that this was part of a large and powerful antislavery theme that governed the book from the first to last page. This theme contains the dominant allegory of the fugitive slave hunt, where he cleverly disguises black whales for black men. In addition to this larger theme, Melville employs a sub-allegory of St. Paul's shipwreck in *Acts* that works as an underlying structural framework that powers the plot of the novel. Melville also uses an assortment of plot devices/sub-allegories/symbols/puns that both reinforce his larger antislavery theme and his fugitive slave hunt allegory. Symbolism such as the abolitionist's use of fire/hell imagery to denote the institution of slavery is employed to great effect in *Moby-Dick*. For instance, the use of a simple image such as a skewer in the phrase "the skewer seems loosening out of the middle of the world" ( [1967b](#), 427) is turned into a powerful symbol that evokes to the astute reader in 1851 a complex association of political and moral meanings that includes the middle passage, the middle North–South divide of the Mason-Dixon Line, Garrison's "House on Fire," and other common fire imagery that symbolizes slavery (including Melville's remark of the "hell fire" that his book is "broiled" in) ( [1993](#), 196). This symbolism of the skewer, one of many that Melville employs strategically in helping to support and reinforce his larger theme of the injustices of slavery and his fugitive slave allegory, will be discussed in detail throughout the course of the book. These include the symbolism of the Ship of State, Calhoun's "cords," the politically symbolic "middle" and the "equator" that the Pequod sank on, Narcissus, and the hunting of black whales as black men and their link to Africa. In addition to his use of symbolism, Melville sometimes employs more direct references to the political landscape of his times. In his *Studies in the Theory of Ideology*, Thompson mentions, "There are empirical indicators that may be employed in argumentation, and it simply will not do to suggest...that the only way in which a theoretical discourse can be assessed is in terms of its own internal consistency..." ( [1984](#), 145). Thus, I will attempt to show that Melville also consciously used such overt indicators in *Moby-Dick* to pilot the reader toward certain political and abolitionist/slavery issues in 1851 (notably, "federated along one keel," the Portuguese city of "Cadiz," and the revealing, "clay reward for Pip," etc.). Furthermore, this antislavery theme forms the foundation for a larger theme of inequality and pride – that is, the fall of man due to his naming, defining, and thus imprisoning or binding " Me, a God, a Nature" ( [1993](#), 186). This is none other than a function of Melville's secret motto of *Moby-Dick*, "I do not baptize thee in name" ( [1993](#), 196). This idea of defining man, God, and nature is not only deeply rooted in Hobbes' *Leviathan*, which Melville sharply criticizes, but is also a function of the mind and reason, and not of the heart and spirituality that is in all people of all colors. And as a part of this larger theme, and deeper still, Melville, advocating racial egalitarianism, points out at a time of slavery the hypocrisy of the Founding Fathers' belief in "all men are created equal" not only by way of the institution of slavery itself (and their interest in Africa/Egypt as the birthplace of history and culture), but also by way of a contrast between the written two-dimensional "Word" and the three-dimensional "flesh" or "fruit" of the Word in action. I will then show the connection between "Black Blood," slavery, the whiteness of the whale, and *Moby Dick*, who, in a larger sense,

was also a reflection of Melville himself. This identification of himself with Moby Dick is seen in his last unpublished novel, *Billy Budd, Sailor* (An Inside Narrative), which I will demonstrate allegorically recounts how Melville's (Billy's) inability to speak directly to authority and his lashing out at the critics of *Moby-Dick* in his novel *Pierre*, ironically, had helped to sink his own reputation and career. Lastly, I will explore why an 1852 boat that was part of the Underground Railroad was named the Moby Dick. The evidence shows that certain written references to slavery and Jonah and the whale, a common correlation among abolitionists at the time, indicate that the captain of the Moby Dick must have known of the antislavery symbolism/allegory of the novel *Moby-Dick*. This might have been a strong factor as to why that particular name was chosen for his boat.

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10.1007/978-3-319-52267-8\_2 2. Melville's Motivations

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On April 16, 1851, in a

letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville starts to review Hawthorne's *House of the Seven Gables*, but soon gets sidetracked in his own philosophical musings. He ends the letter with a curious remark: "What's the reason, Mr. Hawthorne, that in the last stages of metaphysics a fellow always falls to swearing so? I could rip an hour. You see, I began with a little criticism extracted for your benefit from the 'Pittsfield Secret Review,' and here I have landed in Africa" ([1993](#), 186–187).

What is curious about this closing remark is that Melville, a man at the height of his literary powers, writing his greatest novel, *Moby-Dick*, chose not only in a half-hearted way to remark upon the need for a "Secret Review" but also those particular six letters, "Africa," to name a place that his thoughts had migrated to. In regard to the former, one might dismiss "Secret Review" as a fraternal way of expressing personal sentiments between two friends. But why the need to express those words in a private letter? It seems, rather, to hint of precedent and/or something familiar and already recognized between them. It resonates with an undercurrent of code, as though something else lay hidden beneath the words. And in regard to the latter, was naming "Africa" just an idiomatic or innocent expression of the times? Or was it something more? Was there something churning in Melville's mind at the time of writing *Moby-Dick* that either consciously or subconsciously piloted him toward "secrecy" and "Africa" in that letter to Hawthorne?

In a letter to Mrs. Julia Hawthorne dated January 8, 1852, Melville confides to Mrs. Hawthorne that "I had some vague idea while writing it [*Moby-Dick*], that the whole book was susceptible of an allegoric construction, & also that parts of it were – but the specialty of many of the particular subordinate allegories, were first revealed to me, after reading Mr. Hawthorne's letter, which without citing any particular examples, yet intimated the part-&-parcel allegoricalness of the whole" ([1993](#), 219). It is in this letter to Mrs. Hawthorne that Melville uses the term allegory directly in relation to *Moby-Dick*, but it's also made clear in this letter that he didn't quite understand the "part-&-parcel allegoricalness of the whole" until Mr. Hawthorne explained it to him. This all sounds fair and straightforward; and many scholars quote this letter to Mrs. Hawthorne as Melville's understanding of *Moby-Dick*. [1](#) But

was this admission to Mrs. Hawthorne actually reliable? Did Melville hold her in the same confidence as he did her husband? Or did Melville hold back his real understanding of the book to Mrs. Hawthorne because of fear of intentional or accidental dissemination? It appears he did. There is no indication in Melville's reply to Hawthorne after Hawthorne had read the book, and in Melville's earlier letters to Hawthorne, and in the pages of *Moby-Dick* itself, that Melville was working with "vague" ideas while writing the book. If anything, the evidence shows that he knew exactly what powered the plot of his novel. Hints of this are seen in an earlier June 29, 1851 letter to Hawthorne. Melville remarks, "The tail is not yet cooked – though the hell-fire in which the whole book is broiled might not unreasonably have cooked it all ere this. This is the book's motto (the secret one), – Ego non baptiso te in nomine [I do not baptize thee in name] – but make out the rest yourself" ( [1993](#), 196). This doesn't sound like a "vague idea while writing it" as told to Mrs. Hawthorne. These are confident words and a direct admission of something impelling and heating the whole book. Further, this passage gives the first indication of a "secret" motto that is indicative of that "hell-fire" allegory he alluded to. Another indication that Melville understood exactly what his underlying theme was about comes from the pages of *Moby-Dick* itself. In Chapter 104, "The Fossil Whale," Melville remarks on his choice to write about the leviathan, "To produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme" ( [1967b](#), 379). As "theme" denotes what a book is about, allegory included, the word "mighty" just doesn't seem to go well with "vague idea." A better understanding of this would be to flip the comparison, "To produce a vague book, you must choose a vague theme." Thus the idea of vagueness here just doesn't seem to fit Melville's written intentions at that time. Further, and more importantly, in that November 17, 1851 letter to Hawthorne in which Melville replies to Hawthorne's review of *Moby-Dick*, Melville never thanks Hawthorne for explaining anything to him about how the allegorical parts fit together into a whole (as one would think after reading his letter to Mrs. Hawthorne), but rather Melville can barely contain himself about how good he feels in that Hawthorne has "understood" the book, its allegory (his "paper allegories"), and the "pervading" thought that "impelled" it (it's important to note, however, that though Hawthorne understood and praised Melville's attempt at subtext, he actually didn't necessarily agree with Melville's antislavery ideas. Thus, Melville's significant remark, "you did not care a penny for the book"). Melville writes,

Why, ever since Adam, who has got to the meaning of this great allegory – the world? Then we pygmies must be content to have our paper allegories but ill comprehended. I say your appreciation is my glorious gratuity...Your letter was handed me last night on the road going to Mr. Morewood's, and I read it there...I felt pantheistic then – your heart beat in my ribs and mine in yours, and both in God's. A sense of unspeakable security is in me this moment, on account of your having understood the book. I have written a wicked book and feel spotless as the lamb...Whence come you, Hawthorne? By what right do you drink from my flagon of life? And when I put it to my lips – lo, they are yours and not mine. I feel that the Godhead is broken up like the bread at the Supper, and that we are the pieces. Hence this infinite fraternity of feeling. Now, sympathizing with the paper, my angel turns over another page. You did not care a penny for the book. But now and then as you read, you understood the pervading thought that impelled the book – and that you praised. ( [1993](#), 212–213) "Unspeakable security"? "your having understood the book"? "I have written a wicked book and feel spotless as the lamb"? "My flagon of life"? "infinite fraternity of feeling"? "pervading thought that impelled the book"? These statements along with the earlier "hell fire in which the whole book is broiled," and "secret motto" and "mighty theme" are all clear and strong examples that Melville knew exactly what he was writing about – an allegory "pervading" the whole of the book. His comment to Mrs. Hawthorne about a "vague idea while writing" *Moby-Dick* is not exactly accurate. It is clear that Melville felt comfortable in confiding in Mr. Hawthorne alone in his "fraternity of feeling" and his "Pittsfield Secret Review" insights. This comfort in Hawthorne alone is further evidenced by asking Hawthorne not to write a single word about the book to anyone – including, it appears, his own wife, for toward the end of that same November 17 letter to Hawthorne, Melville specifically requests, "Don't write a word about the book. That would be robbing me of my miserly delight" (

[1993](#), 213). In that letter to Mrs. Hawthorne, it is implicit that neither Melville nor Mrs. Hawthorne discussed in any way the “allegoricalness of the whole,” as though it were common knowledge shared between the three of them. In fact, on the contrary, Melville remarks on how he was “amazed” she “should find any satisfaction in that book” ( [1993](#), 218–219), which speaks to her not being either interested in, or privy to, its underlying themes. He then goes on in soft condescension about how Mrs. Hawthorne was incorrect in her assumptions regarding a chapter in *Moby-Dick*, that is, the “things which while you think you but humbly discover...you do in fact create them for yourself” ( [1993](#), 219). This letter and the subtext of it clearly show that Mrs. Hawthorne was not really “in the know” in regard to the real meaning and message of *Moby-Dick*. He admitted to her that there was an allegory in the book, but then hid from her the seriousness and full extent of it. It is clear that Melville placed a hidden allegory in *Moby-Dick* and that he wanted this “mighty theme”/“pervading thought” to be a secret, his “miserly delight.” But why would he do this? What would prompt him to shut out a large part of his readership – and a chance for his readers to fully understand the real issues he was grappling with? What would turn Melville toward trying to communicate covertly with only a select few who were either intellectually deep enough to discern his true intent on their own, and/or who were academically trained enough to look for the telltale symbolic markers denoting this hidden subtext? A hidden subtext that turned out to be so obtuse or so politically sensitive, that most of the reviewers in Melville’s age either missed entirely or only touched on it in part? Reviewers, one might add, who had the distinct advantage over today’s scholars in being awash in the rich social, political, religious, and intellectual climate of their day? It appears that there were several possible reasons for Melville’s turn toward secrecy and subtext in *Moby-Dick*. Whether alone or in combination, given the complexity of both Melville’s mind and the political/social climate, these reasons are more than enough motivation to propel him into secrecy. The first and simplest of these reasons is money. In that same June 1, 1851 letter to Hawthorne previously mentioned, Melville states, “What I feel most moved to write, that is banned, – it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the other way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches” ( [1993](#), 191). This is an admission that he felt compelled to weave into his writing deeper and more personal themes that go beyond the merely simple and vague ideas of commercial fiction. However, to do so would be a financial disaster – such as what had happened with the earlier, overtly philosophical and allegorical *Mardi*, which turned out to be a commercial failure. Thus, there was a financial incentive to write a large part of Melville’s new book in subtext, or hidden allegory, along with the added incentive to return to the intriguing theme of a sailor at sea – a very successful approach that had sparked his career with the earlier sea voyages chronicled in *Typee* and *Omoo*. At the time of writing *Moby-Dick*, Melville was several thousand dollars in debt and needed his new book to be a financial success. He was not only running a household that included two sisters, two servants, and occasionally his mother, but he also needed to attend to the general upkeep of the house. The house in western Massachusetts, which he called Arrowhead, was in bad repair in early 1851, and he embarked upon expanding the size and appearance of it (a new kitchen, wood house, piazza, etc.). This was at a time when Melville, as Parker put it, had a “crushing realization: he would need more money...” ( [1996](#), 825). Hence, finances appeared to be one of the key motivations in deciding to place a hidden allegory within *Moby-Dick*, a book Melville indeed felt “most moved to write,” but couldn’t do so overtly. In addition to a financial incentive, the second reason for Melville’s secrecy was his politically conservative family and friends. In the racially charged era that Melville wrote in, most of his family and friends were conservative Democrats [2](#) with negative feelings toward abolitionists and African Americans. Even his closest friends, such as Hawthorne and the Duyckinck brothers, the editors of the *Literary World*, were Democrats, as were most of his other colleagues in New York, a city solidly Democratic (Garner [1993](#), 22–27). Even Melville’s own grandfather, Peter Gansevoort, the “Hero of Fort Stanwix,” owned slaves and serfs, as did Peter’s brother and other Gansevoorts [3](#) (Kaplan [1968](#), 292–293). If Melville harbored any liberal thoughts, such as abolitionist or very strong antislavery feelings at the time of *Moby-Dick*, it was critical that he remain outwardly silent and reserved about his true feelings

around his conservative family and friends for fear of severing ties with them. It is well known, however, that Melville did indeed hold antislavery feelings, [4](#) for in Melville's earlier books such as *Mardi*, Melville directly states that slavery is a "sin...a blot, foul as the crater-pool of hell," and that the "master" will die "despairing; and live again, to die forever damned" ( [1982](#), 1192). In addition, in *Redburn*, the narrator ruminates on slavery and the slave trade after seeing four naked figures in chains at the base of Lord Nelson's monument and concludes with, "How this group of statuary affected me, may be inferred from the fact, that I never went through Chapel-street without going through the little arch to look at it again. And there, night or day, I was sure to find Lord Nelson still falling back; Victory's wreath still hovering over his swordpoint; and Death grim and grasping as ever; while the four bronze captives still lamented their captivity" ( [1983b](#), 170).

Even after the Civil War, in his supplement to his book of Civil War poems, *Battle Pieces*, Melville directly and forcefully stated that he had "always abhorred slavery" ( [2002](#), 369) and even included an amazing poem called "Swamp Angel" in which an avenging "coal-black angel" with "thick afric lip" (a Parrott gun) rains shells down on a Southern city and "dooms by a far decree." The poem ends dramatically by stating, "who weeps for the woeful City/Let him weep for our guilty kind;/Who joys at her wild despairing – /Christ, the Forgiver, convert his mind" (354–355). Yothers relates that the "image of the cannon is specifically designed to call up the history of slaves who escaped and were pursued in the swamp" and that the poem as whole "...points toward Melville's view of the fundamental immorality of the Southern cause and its continuity with a historic catalogue of human wrongs, sins that require a forgiveness that transcends ordinary human behavior" ( [2015](#), 65–66).

Melville included another poem in that collection called "Formerly a Slave" (Elihu Vedder) that again demonstrates no ambiguity concerning his strong thoughts on slavery – "The sufferance of her race is shown,/And retrospect of life,/Which now too late deliverance dawns upon...Her children's children they shall know/The good withheld from her" (357). What is revealing here are the words "now too late" and "the good withheld from her," which implies that Melville thought slavery should have been abolished years ago – that is, 1865 was far too late. Those words, along with "always abhorred slavery" (and the evidence that I will present in this book), point to strong antislavery feelings and to abolitionist tendencies in Melville prior to the Civil War (others such as Karcher, Castronovo, and Nelson, though, have noted a more conservative perspective in Melville regarding race during and after the war; But see Yothers, who recently questions "...the idea that the Melville of *Battle-Pieces* prioritizes white reconciliation over interracial justice" [ [2015](#), 64]). This makes sense, for after the Civil War it was socially okay for Melville to state publicly these feelings in a book of poetry, but in 1851, just after the Compromise of 1850 when tensions had run extremely high and talk of secession was heavy in the air, many people wanted to put that trouble behind. [5](#) Melville most likely felt he had to remain silent and remain loyal to his Democratic family and friends.

This idea of loyalty might seem a bit extreme to many of us today, but in the 1850s there was a family political loyalty that existed that was quite strong. As Garner notes in discoursing on Melville's political affiliation, "Whether or not it is fair to call Herman a Democrat, it is nonetheless true that he saw the events of the war largely through the Democratic eyes of his family and friends. Uncle Peter may have overstated the case when he said that Herman had 'always been a firm Democrat,' but if so he was not far wrong...families of that era formed political communities: one would not expect a Hoadley or a Griggs to be anything other than a Republican, for apostasy would have meant offending family and friends openly, brashly, ungratefully, and scandalously, and one would not expect the members of Uncle Peter's and Mother Melville's families – except for Kate Hoadley and Helen Griggs, wives who took the political coloring of their husbands – to be anything other than Democrats" ( [1993](#), 24). In addition to finances and political affiliations, a stronger reason for Melville's secrecy was Melville's marriage to Elizabeth Shaw, the daughter of Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw of the Supreme Court of the State of Massachusetts. Shaw was a politically conservative man, and of all people in 1850, he had the greatest impact on Melville's views toward the abolition of slavery as he directly ruled in favor of the newly strengthened Fugitive Slave Laws. He was also a man whom Melville and his wife strongly depended upon for financial help, and he was also a man who had been deeply in love

with, and whom had wanted to marry, Melville's aunt, Nancy Melvill. In terms of Judge Shaw's politics, as noted by Garner, "Given his [Shaw's] political origins, he should have made the transition to the Republican Party, but if so he was remarkably unorthodox. A judicial decision (in 1851) to return a fugitive slave to his master and another (in 1849) to uphold racial segregation in Boston Primary Schools could be explained as triumphs of legal principle over ideology, but a genuine abolitionist would have choked on such niceties. Finally, Judge Shaw's advocacy of renewed Northern enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act as a means of averting Southern secession...made him a bedfellow of the Democrats" ( [1993](#), 21). What is worth noting here is that these decisions by Shaw did indeed make a genuine abolitionist choke – William Lloyd Garrison. Garrison was not only the nation's conscience as editor of the Boston "The Liberator" for thirty-five years but was one of the founders of the American Anti-Slavery Society. He also figures strongly in Melville's thoughts and prose (as I will later show). In 1842, Judge Shaw was involved in another fugitive slave case – that of George Latimer. [6](#) When Judge Shaw went over to the jail to interview Latimer to see if there was any merit to releasing him through the state courts, Garrison was there to witness this encounter. Garrison wrote that Shaw's behavior during the interview struck him as "indifferent as if it were a case involving the ownership of an ox or ass," and then wrote that Shaw "had acted 'the part of Pilate' in thinking that a political calculation could 'make wrong right' " (Mayer [1998](#), 318). As Shaw then ruled that the state court couldn't interfere in this Federal case, Garrison wrote that "the forms of the law could not excuse the 'vileness' of reducing a human being to slavery," and he believed that Shaw should have resigned his position and "borne a testimony against 'legal diabolism' " (318). The Latimer case was finally set to rest when Wendell Phillips "caused pandemonium in Faneuil Hall when he declared that the spectacle of people trampling on their consciences at the bidding of a piece of parchment prompted him to say, 'My CURSE be on the constitution of these United States' " (319). The shock of his words caused Latimer to be released and set the stage for the passage of Massachusetts's personal liberty law by way of petitions with 65,000 signatures that the "abolitionists rolled like barrels into the state house" (320). Shaw's decisions, whether personally motivated or not – as he claimed his hands were tied by the Grigg's decision in some rulings, were deeply at odds with the general climate of abolition in Massachusetts, and he was deeply distrusted by the abolitionists. A hint, however, as to what Shaw's true feelings really were in regard to the Fugitive Slave Laws and race is seen a bit later in a letter written by Henry Dana, a good friend of Melville. Dana was the lawyer for the fugitive slave Shadrach, who had been apprehended in Boston in February 1851. Dana writes,

I prepared a petition for Hab. Corp. & went before Judge Shaw. He treated me in his worst manner, & refused the writ on a series of the most frivolous pretexts you can imagine. Judge Metcalf, who was present, was much hurt & exercised by his conduct. He seemed to forget his judicial character & duties entirely, & treated me precisely as if I had asked him to sign a Free Soil petition. The best reason he gave, wh[ich] was an afterthought, would have served him as an impeachment. The disposition shown by such men, our best citizens, shows, more than anything else, the extent to which the selfish spirit of N. England has run." (Parker [1996](#), 817–818)

Shadrach was soon freed, however, as a crowd of African Americans stormed the courtroom and led him to safety. It would seem, however, that if Shaw were indeed an unselfish man of conscience and had sympathies toward the fugitive slaves, state's rights, and slavery as a whole, that he would have found some pretext, even "frivolous" if need be, to rule on the side of Shadrach – as indeed such considerations are never truly black and white, but run the full moral, political, and religious gamut of the mind. More importantly, however, it was just after the Shadrach affair that Shaw got a chance to rule on the Sim's case, the first real case to test the recently strengthened Fugitive Slave Laws. Mayer gives a vivid overview of the events surrounding that case:

While the attorneys maneuvered, the abolitionists rallied, holding daily vigils at the courthouse and an open-air meeting on the common, at which Wendell Phillips allowed that it would be a disgrace if Sims was deported without crowds blocking the streets and halting the machinery of an oppressive government. The impetuous young minister Thomas Wentworth

Higginson talked with a few kindred spirits about a physical assault on the courthouse or hiring a privateer to intercept any Savannah-bound vessels, but nothing tangible materialized from such desperate fantasies. On Friday afternoon, April 11, 1851, the certificate of removal was issued, and before daylight the next morning a company of three-hundred policemen, armed with U.S. military sabers, formed a hollow square and slowly marched the weeping Sims down State Street to the Long Wharf and the ship hired to return him to bondage...One week later...Massachusetts learned that the United States Government had successfully returned Thomas Sims to Savannah, where he was given thirty-nine lashes in the public square. (Mayer [1998](#), 411–412) In deciding not to intervene on behalf of Sims, Shaw outraged not only Garrison and the abolitionists, but literally hundreds of thousands of his own fellow citizens from Boston and elsewhere in the northern half of the Union. This sense of this outrage is conveyed by Wendell Phillips, who spoke at Faneuil Hall in Boston one year after Shaw's ruling:

The judges of the Commonwealth...Did he not know, that he was making history that hour, when the Chief Justice of the Commonwealth entered his own court, bowing down like a criminal beneath a chain four feet from the soil?...There is something in emblems. There is something, on great occasions, even in the attitude of a man. Chief Justice Shaw betrayed the bench and the courts of the Commonwealth, and the honor of a noble profession when...he crept under a chain into his own court-room...Near five-hundred sworn policemen in and around that building, – what need for any chain? It was put there in wanton insult to the feelings of the citizens of Boston, – nothing else; in wanton servility to the Slave Power, – nothing else; in wanton flattery to Daniel Webster. (Foster [1961](#), 11–13) It was a mere five days after Sims was ordered to return to Georgia by Melville's wife's father on April 11, 1851, that Melville's mind wandered off track in his review to Hawthorne and he penned those words "and here I have landed in Africa" – his mind, it seems, like the rest of the Northern States, was still churning with the immorality of slavery and his father-in-law's decision. [7](#) The decisions rendered by Chief Justice Shaw, particularly in the Sims case, helped fire the American imagination and conscience. As a consequence, he was very much disliked by not only the abolitionists and intellectuals in the North but by the multitudes who did not want the Federal Government trumping state sovereignty and/or making them accomplices in the crime of slavery. As Shaw was the "Chief" cog in the "machinery of an oppressive government," Melville needed, by convention, to remain at least outwardly loyal to his wife's father, particularly since the Melville's depended upon Judge Shaw for financial help. In 1847, Judge Shaw had given \$2000 to Melville and his wife for a loan on a house in New York (Parker [1996](#), 553; Wallace [2008](#), 40). More importantly, however, in September 1850, seven months before Judge Shaw ruled on the Sims case and about the time Moby-Dick had originally intended to be finished, Melville and his wife were given another \$3000 from Judge Shaw for a house in Pittsfield, Massachusetts (Parker [1996](#), 778). Judge Shaw later helped Melville with another loan for \$500 and then gave Melville another \$1500 for a lecture tour. By today's standards, those loans would be equivalent to over \$240,000, which would seem to be more than enough incentive to keep silent concerning his personal views on his father-in-law's ruling on the strengthened Fugitive Slave Laws. [8](#) Judge Shaw's ruling on the legality of the Fugitive Slave Laws seemed to have affected Melville very much. A couple of direct references to slavery in Mardi and Redburn were one thing, but to speak out strongly against slavery and the Fugitive Slave Laws after Judge Shaw ruled on the Sims case when tensions were running very high across the whole nation, and at a time when he owed Judge Shaw approximately \$170,000 by today's standards, was another thing. It turns out that this ruling affected Melville so much that he did not make any direct mention about slavery until the Judge passed away in 1861. Even the complex short story "Benito Cereno" of 1855 was so couched in ambiguity that some modern reviewers have cited it as a pro-slavery piece. [9](#) It was only after his father-in-law's death and the political climate had cooled that Melville once again felt at liberty to directly state in the supplement to Battle Pieces that he had "always abhorred slavery." And to further complicate Melville's personal feelings and sense of loyalty to his wife's father, Judge Shaw was in love with Melville's aunt, Nancy Wroe Melvill, a relationship, no doubt, that must have been deeply etched in Melville's mind. In 1813, Judge Shaw was engaged to marry

Nancy Melville when she died unexpectedly. His love for her was such that when Judge Shaw died in 1861, they found two love letters from Nancy Melville in his wallet. Even though he had remarried, he had been carrying those two love letters from Nancy Melville in his wallet for over forty-eight years. This connection to Nancy was so substantial that Parker commented that those love letters “for a decade and a half had been linked in his [Shaw’s] mind with his love for his son-in-law” (Parker 2002, 467). Furthermore, and to complicate the picture still further, Melville had dedicated his first book, *Typee*, to Judge Shaw, an action that spoke volumes as to how Melville had truly felt about his father-in-law before the Sim’s case. \*

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This book unfurls and examines the anti-slavery allegory at the subtextual core of Herman Melville’s famed novel, *Moby-Dick*. Brian Pellar points to symbols and allusions in the novel such as the albinism of the famed whale, the “Ship of State” motif, Calhoun’s “cords,” the equator, Jonah, Narcissus, St. Paul, and Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan*. The work contextualizes these devices within a historical discussion of the Compromise of 1850 and subsequently strengthened Fugitive Slave Laws. Drawing on a rich variety of sources such as unpublished papers, letters, reviews, and family memorabilia, the chapters discuss the significance of these laws within Melville’s own life. After clarifying the hidden allegory interconnecting black slaves and black whales, this book carefully sheds the layers of a hidden meaning that will be too convincing to ignore for future readings: *Moby-Dick* is ultimately a novel that is intimately connected with questions of race, slavery, and the state.

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