Authoritarian and Authorial Power in Herman Melville’s
*Moby-Dick*

Amy Knoll, author
Dr. Don Dingledine, English, faculty mentor

Amy Knoll graduated summa cum laude from UW Oshkosh in December 2013 with a B.A. in English and minors in business administration, creative writing, and French. She is a University Honors Program graduate and was selected for Who’s Who Among Students in American Universities and Colleges for her campus and community involvement. Amy wrote her paper on *Moby-Dick* for her Senior Seminar in English Studies class with Dr. Don Dingledine.

Dr. Don Dingledine teaches courses in American literature, history, and culture at UW Oshkosh. He earned his Ph.D. in American literature from Temple University in 1998, and has published on such topics as the depiction of African American soldiers in Civil War literature, *Moby-Dick* as a model for the interdisciplinary work of honors programs, and the transcendence of gender in the rock musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*.

Abstract

Herman Melville’s writing reflects his numerous experiences with despotic figures and his uncertainty regarding appropriate responses to them. Encountering oppression in his professional and personal life, Melville grappled with effective ways to challenge authority himself and to equip his readers to challenge it. In *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* (1851), Melville illustrates despotism’s dangers through Captain Ahab. Melville first shows readers how despots gain and retain power; he then illustrates potential responses to this power through crew members’ various actions. Ultimately, the crew’s failure to effectively oppose Ahab and his monomaniacal quest results in the crew’s annihilation. Simultaneously, Melville exposes his authorial control over readers, thereby mirroring Ahab’s control over the crew. As readers critique the crew for endorsing Ahab’s tyranny, Melville’s text highlights readers’ own propensity to submit to authority, thereby teaching them to resist would-be oppressors and to question authoritative figures. Further illustrating power’s complexity, Melville shows that authoritarian figures cannot fully obtain power without the compliance of those under them. Just as Ahab needs the crew to create his authority and to hunt Moby Dick, Melville needs readers to enable his authority as an author. Ultimately, Melville demonstrates, everyone is culpable in the creation of tyrannical authority and its devastating consequences.

Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* has baffled readers and critics alike for more than a century. Though a whaling story at its surface, *Moby-Dick* alternates between an adventure story and an encyclopedia. The detours include chapters composed in dramatic format and informational chapters on whales and whaling, including a chapter on cetology, the classification of whales. Ever since the book’s publication, readers have questioned the purpose and legitimacy of such digressions. Nick Selby details this confusion, writing, “Its stylistic and formal incoherence was read as a morally dangerous incoherence, certainly blasphemous, and most probably insane.” Yet readers return to the novel: some only once, others over and over again
throughout their lives. Each encounter leaves them wondering what captivates them about *Moby-Dick*, a massive and tangled tome more than 100 years old. The novel possesses a certain fascination, for Melville is a master at playing with readers. He pulls them into the novel through tantalizing promises, many of which remain unfulfilled and leave readers wondering why they continue to pursue the story. But pursue it again and again they do.

One of Melville’s most striking characters, Captain Ahab, reflects Melville’s rhetorical skills. Ahab is consumed by one goal: to find and kill Moby Dick, the whale that destroyed his leg. Throughout the novel, Ahab’s ability to manipulate his crew members is evidenced as he convinces them to chase Moby Dick across the oceans. Over the years critics have studied Ahab from drastically different points of view. Initial reception of *Moby-Dick* was highly critical and the novel failed to gain the popularity of Melville’s earlier works. However, during the Melville Revival in the 1920s, scholars reconsidered the complexities of Melville’s life and works. This renewed interest in Melville’s life led some critics to compare his “dubious ‘character’ as husband and father” to the character of Ahab. Other critics took the comparison even further, concluding that Melville “was insane (or Ahab) while writing the book.”

While scholars during this period were split on whether Ahab was the hero or the villain, after the rise of fascism he assumed new meaning as a master manipulator, and critics increasingly examined his authoritarian control over the crew. In these studies scholars have suggested parallels between Ahab and a variety of figures, including *Moby-Dick*’s narrator Ishmael, and King Ahab from the Old Testament. Though the scholarship on Ahab is extensive, a closer look at the tactical similarities between the character and his author is, I believe, crucial to understanding both Ahab’s role in the novel and Melville’s narrative strategies.

Although textual analysis is at the heart of literary studies, especially when examining narrative strategies, other fields of study can contribute valuable observations. The field of sociology, for example, suggests that the way Ahab gains and retains control over the crew mimics techniques used by despotic figures, such as cult leaders. Ahab knows how to manipulate his crew, and he uses strategies other dangerous leaders have used. A similar examination of the novel through literary techniques reveals that Melville also uses particular techniques to gain control of readers. Though one is a literary figure and the other an author, and although one manipulates crew members in danger of their lives and the other manipulates readers who voluntarily engage in the imaginative process, both show readers how susceptible humans are to manipulation and how powerful and dangerous that susceptibility can be.

An examination and comparison of the manipulative strategies that Ahab and Melville use, I argue, reveals that Melville does more than simply show readers his ability to manipulate them. He also reveals their susceptibility to manipulation and teaches them to resist authority figures. Significantly, Ahab and Melville both exercise authority, but their goals are diametrically opposed: Ahab works for his own gain, while Melville works for the greater good. Ultimately, Melville uses *Moby-Dick* to demonstrate the complicated power relationship between leader and led, thereby showing readers that they have the ability and the responsibility to resist despots.

Over the years critics have amassed information revealing how Melville was no stranger to struggles with authority. Carolyn L. Karcher is one such critic and has charted Melville’s biography extensively. Thrust into society’s capriciousness after his bankrupt father’s death, Melville was forced to face the reality of ruined social status. He attempted many odd jobs and eventually set sail, encountering conditions so brutal he abandoned ship and took refuge with the Typee, a Polynesian tribe. During this
time Melville sought appropriate responses to tyranny and began to question social mores. Karcher paints Melville as “a refractory conformist and a reluctant rebel,” for he neither condoned outright rebellion nor seemed content obeying unjust laws. Melville was also torn personally after his marriage to Elizabeth Shaw gained him Judge Lemuel Shaw as a father-in-law. Not only were Shaw’s beliefs regarding slavery contradictory to Melville’s, Shaw was a judge in two key pro-slavery cases. His ruling in *Sarah C. Roberts v. the City of Boston* in 1849 became a foundation for the ensuing “separate but equal” doctrine. Similarly, in the 1851 case of Thomas Sims, a fugitive slave, “Shaw became the first northern judge to order a fugitive returned to his master in conformance with the recently passed Fugitive Slave Law.” Because Shaw was pro-slavery and his rulings as a judge reflected this, Melville’s attempts to speak out against slavery were hesitant at best. Some critics regard Melville as less reluctant and more rebellious. Denis Donoghue, for example, argues Melville rejected the ballast of culture altogether, being “against all the conditions of life.” Whatever the degree, Melville’s discontentment with authority was strong enough to permeate his works, establishing a clear thematic pattern.

As a writer Melville was not content to bury his questions. Instead, he used his books to confront issues of authority he had encountered in different spheres of his life. Karcher notes that after Melville’s publishers cut sections they considered inflammatory from his first book, *Typee*, Melville resorted to more subversive methods of influencing audiences. Alternating between symbolism and realism, Melville struggled both to appease his public and to write the truth as he saw it. Finally, having given up hope of eliciting the change he sought, Melville began to write from the viewpoint of his audience, first establishing reader identification with the characters then revealing their villainy: “Mouthing their racist cliches, mimicking their social snobbery, echoing their pious platitudes, and exposing their sublime obliviousness to the suffering on which they fattened, Melville mercilessly anatomized the readers he had given up hope of converting.” Though written before these final creative years, Melville’s magnum opus, *Moby-Dick*, foreshadows his evolving tactics to reveal social wrongs and effect change through writing.

In *Moby-Dick* Melville personified his struggles with authority. By creating a despotic captain for the *Pequod*’s crew, Melville revealed the power of tyranny. Karcher recognizes this issue, arguing that in his works he “concentrate[s] on the moral issue of whether men in such circumstances may justifiably resort to violence to overthrow their oppressors.” She then connects this struggle to the issues of slavery facing America: “In *Moby-Dick*, Melville envisages several possible dénouements to the American crisis over slavery, along with various answers to the question of whether individuals (and nations) help to weave their own destiny into the warp of necessity or are entirely caught in the threads of Fate’s loom.” As Karcher continues to argue throughout her analysis of *Moby-Dick*, the *Pequod*’s crew must decide whether to rebel or obey. Their ultimate course of obedience, she concludes, results in the death of all but Ishmael. While Karcher focuses on the warning contained in the novel’s final pages, Melville warns readers throughout *Moby-Dick* by illustrating, through Ahab, the dangerous nature of power and the consequences of failing to question such power.

Though many critics have identified Ahab’s forceful character and the power he has over the *Pequod*’s crew, their arguments have led to different conclusions. That these critics see in Ahab a polemic force is not surprising, given the charisma with which he clearly manipulates the crew. However, their analyses overlook the parallels between Ahab’s and Melville’s manipulative techniques, which are equally intriguing and ultimately can help shed light on readers’ fascination with the work. Through Ahab,
Melville reveals specific psychological strategies for both gaining and maintaining authority over the *Pequod’s* crew.

“The Ruthlessness of State Formation,” by Antonio Giustozzi, illustrates some of these techniques. Giustozzi explores the role of violence in the early stages of state formation, looking at examples from various time periods and geographic areas. He sets up a model of oppressive state formation, which Ahab mirrors in some aspects as he uses psychological means to rally the crew around his cause. According to Giustozzi, while ideology alone is not sufficient to form an oppressive state, groups formed around ideology best enable “legitimization, the development of loyalty and cohesion among ‘the agents of coercion.’”

Ahab initially sets up this identification by asking his crew questions with obvious answers: “What do ye do when ye see a whale, men?” When they reply, “Sing out for him!” he asks, “what do ye next, men?” As crew members continue to answer Ahab they are astounded to find they become more excited without understanding why. Later Ishmael reveals that the crew members, himself included, have gravitated toward Ahab because of their ideological identification with his cause: “A wild, mystical, sympathetical feeling was in me; Ahab’s quenchless feud seemed mine.”

In “Charismatic Leadership, Manipulation and the Complexity of Organizational Life,” a study of organizational charismatic leaders, Iiris Aaltio-Marjosola and Tuomo Takala argue that this identification between leader and followers plays a significant role in the psychological creation of leadership: “The leader is important because they can ‘charismatically’ evoke this sense of belief and can thereby demand obedience.” The crew’s identification with Ahab is in part what has prompted critics to align him with oppressive leaders, such as Christopher S. Durer’s comparison of Ahab to Adolf Hitler.

After this initial identification with crew members, Ahab further gains control over them through their superstitions, using his leadership powers for his own ends. Aaltio-Marjosola and Takala align this kind of behavior with organizational leaders who use propaganda to influence their followers, *propaganda* being defined as “the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.” As dangers arise, Ahab strengthens his image as a god-like leader before the crew. During a violent storm, one of the shipmates, Starbuck, declares that “God is against” Ahab. When the crew members hear this, they “[fall] back in dismay.” This fear of Ahab only intensifies as the journey continues. After the storm, the members of the crew are again afraid when the ship’s compass stops working. Taking advantage of their fear and superstitions, Ahab explains the phenomenon: “Ere the first wild alarm could get out abroad among the crew, the old man with a rigid laugh exclaimed, ‘I have it! It has happened before. Mr. Starbuck, last night’s thunder turned our compasses—that’s all.’” He then proceeds to make a new compass, providing a solution to the crew members’ problem. Their responses evince renewed trust in Ahab: “Abashed glances of servile wonder were exchanged by the sailors, as this was said; and with fascinated eyes they awaited whatever magic might follow.” As Ishmael watches Ahab’s exaggerated motions he wonders if Ahab is making a show of fixing the compass. This also follows the pattern of psychological authority in leaders that Aaltio-Marjosola and Takala set up: “Charismatic leaders make efforts to manage their followers’ impressions of themselves by framing, scripting, staging and performing, which constitute the basic phases in this dramaturgical process.” Later, the crew hears wailing and again becomes fearful. When Ahab ascends to deck and hears the account, he laughs at the fears and explains the phenomenon: the wails are merely lost seal cubs. Through these scenes, Ahab’s propagandistic intent becomes clear. Though disdainful of the crew’s superstitions, he is ready to use them to gain more control.
Ahab uses other psychological means to gain power in the crew members’ minds. Ishmael recounts, “Ahab’s purpose now fixedly gleamed down upon the constant midnight of the gloomy crew. It domineered about them so, that all their bodings, doubts, misgivings, fears, were fain to hide beneath their souls, and not sprout forth a single spear or leaf.” Under Ahab’s gaze the crew members “dumbly moved about the deck, ever conscious that the old man’s despot eye was on them.” As the Pequod nears the waters in which Ahab hopes to find Moby Dick, his mania becomes increasingly evident. Ahab’s determination to hunt Moby Dick at any cost causes the crew to fear him. As Ishmael explains, “Now it was that there lurked a something in the old man’s eyes, which it was hardly sufferable for feeble souls to see.” Part of the despot’s power resides in his desiring a goal so strongly that the desire consumes all else. “Rigidity characterizes not only Ahab’s acts, attitudes, and purpose,” Joyce Sparer Adler observes, “but also his mode of thinking.” For this reason, he perceives “in the whale only a reflection of his thwarted ambitions and his deprivations.” As the “rigidity” and hatred that Adler notes in Ahab continue to grow, crew members find it increasingly difficult to oppose him.

Ahab continues to gain control over the crew and eventually begins to threaten crew members physically. This follows a pattern of manipulative leadership that Robert S. Baron, Kevin Crawley, and Diana Paulina identify in their study of cult leaders, “Aberrations of Power: Leadership in Totalist Groups.” Cult leaders, they observe, “increasingly have to maintain control of the group by relying on coercive or reward power as they will forgo their status as in-group prototypes.” While Ahab initially maintains control over Starbuck simply because the crew will not oppose Ahab, he eventually threatens Starbuck physically. During the storm Starbuck tells Ahab that the whale oil, the entire purpose of the journey, is leaking and they should protect it. But Ahab is unconcerned about the oil, and decides not to stop at a port to fix the leak. Starbuck continues to protest Ahab’s decision, citing the owners of the ship and the displeasure they would feel were they to know how Ahab was handling their property. Ahab at first is secure in his authority, but soon he must take extreme measures to retain this authority. When Starbuck continues to protest, “Ahab seized a loaded musket from the rack (forming part of most South-Sea-men’s cabin furniture), and pointing it towards Starbuck, exclaimed: ‘There is one God that is Lord over the earth, and one Captain that is lord over the Pequod.—On deck!’” Starbuck finally acquiesces, saying, “‘Let Ahab beware of Ahab; beware of thyself, old man.’” Though Ahab is ultimately able to regain his authority over Starbuck, it comes at a cost. For though Ahab gains control over Starbuck, he ultimately threatens himself by exercising his authority abusively.

Just as important as Ahab’s ability to gain power over the crew is his ability to maintain that power over them, and he accomplishes both through his knowledge of human psychology. While Ahab is initially able to get the crew worked up over hunting Moby Dick, he realizes their fervor will not last long. For this reason he decides to continue hunting other whales in the interim. In a long passage explaining the reasoning behind Ahab’s decision, Melville shows that Ahab controls the crew members through his understanding of them: “For the present, the hunt should in some way be stripped of that strange imaginative impiousness which naturally invested it.” Ahab knows that though the crew members became fervent for a moment, their fervor is not enough to sustain their obedience long term. The idea of hunting Moby Dick must remain in the background, where it will retain a sense of danger and excitement. For, remarks Ishmael, “when retained for any object remote and blank in pursuit, however promissory of life and passion in the end, it is above all things requisite that temporary interests and employments should intervene and hold them healthily
suspended for the final dash.” Ahab is calculating in his decision to continue hunting whales, for he knows the only way he can kill Moby Dick is with the crew’s help and he must therefore use his human weapons cunningly.

Ahab also continues hunting whales to fully vanquish Starbuck. When Ahab first inflames the crew, Starbuck speaks out against him. However, Ahab silences Starbuck then glories, “Starbuck now is mine; cannot oppose me now, without rebellion.” However, as Dan Vogel observes, Starbuck is not truly conquered, which Ahab realizes when Starbuck opposes him during the storm. In response, Ahab threatens Starbuck physically then vanquishes him mentally:

Starbuck’s body and Starbuck’s coerced will were Ahab’s . . . it might be that a long interval would elapse ere the White Whale was seen. During that long interval Starbuck would ever be apt to fall into open relapses of rebellion against his captain’s leadership, unless some ordinary, prudential, circumstantial influences were brought to bear upon him.

Indeed, Ahab does eventually triumph over Starbuck and this ultimate victory shows his power over individual crew members.

Another tool Ahab uses to control the crew is the gold doubloon he nails to the Pequod’s masthead to remind the crew of his quest. When he hammers it to the ship he again uses exaggerated actions, thereby investing it with greater significance. Ishmael relates how Ahab “advanced towards the main-mast with the hammer uplifted in one hand, exhibiting the gold with the other.” When Ahab announces that whoever sees Moby Dick first will receive the doubloon as a reward, the crew responds, “‘Huzza! Huzza!’ . . . as with swinging tarpaulins they hailed the act of nailing the gold to the mast.” As the voyage progresses, each crew member invests the doubloon with his own meaning, giving it a new kind of power. Whatever is most important to them remains before their eyes in the shape of the doubloon and drives them on to the hunt. Ultimately, Ahab claims the doubloon for himself, simultaneously claiming the power the crew has bestowed upon it. He exclaims, “the doubloon is mine, Fate reserved the doubloon for me. I only; none of ye could have raised the White Whale first.” In this way, Ahab successfully magnifies Moby Dick and himself in the crew members’ minds.

In the same way that Ahab’s control over the crew follows specific psychological patterns, Melville uses specific literary techniques that cause readers to acknowledge his role as author. Ahab’s control over crew members and Melville’s control over readers mirror each other in that both attain control through understanding the human mind. As readers come to see the correlation, they can begin to understand that they too must comprehend their own psychology in order to resist manipulation. Melville establishes initial identification between readers and Ishmael to draw readers into the novel. He then incorporates foreshadowing to further draw readers in, mimicking Ahab’s use of crew members’ superstitions to intensify his power in crew members’ minds. Melville maintains reader interest by strategically inserting important plot points throughout the narrative, just as Ahab maintains the crew’s interest by continuing to hunt whales.

Melville uses his chapter “The Doubloon” to set up his text as a parallel to Ahab and the crew. As crew members approach the masthead to which the doubloon is nailed, each interprets the gold coin differently. Stubb, watching each interchange, observes, “There’s another rendering now; but still one text.” Just as Ahab draws the crew into his battle using the doubloon, so Melville creates a figurative doubloon to keep readers coming back to the novel to interpret it and puzzle over it. However, the interaction between Melville and readers is more complex than that between Ahab and
crew members. Melville does not dominate over readers but instead reveals his role as author, ultimately encouraging resistance to tyranny.

Paralleling Ahab’s use of rhetoric to draw the crew into his hunt, Melville draws readers into the narrative using suspense. Yet Melville goes a step further by making readers aware of his maneuvers. In his classic analysis of narrative techniques, *Story and Discourse*, Seymour Chatman links foreshadowing and suspense, writing, “Though suspense always entails a lesser or greater degree of foreshadowing, the reverse need not occur.” His measurement of whether foreshadowing is suspenseful or not is, “If no threat looms for the hero, the anticipatory satellite may result in a more ‘normal’ event, an event of ‘due course.’” Studying Melville’s foreshadowing, readers see that it does present a “threat” for Ishmael and the entire crew. This foreshadowing leads to suspense, which serves to pull readers in. However, after using recurring images, themes, and characters to ground the beginning of the novel in the expectation of peril, Melville fails to fulfill that expectation later on. As a result, readers perceive the foreshadowing more readily than they otherwise would.

Melville sets up readers’ expectations almost immediately in Ishmael, simultaneously setting up identification between Ishmael and the readers, just as Ahab establishes identification between himself and the crew. As Ishmael expounds upon his reasons for going to sea, Melville incorporates extensive foreshadowing. “Doubtless,” Ishmael explains, “my going on this whaling voyage, formed part of the grand programme of Providence that was drawn up a long time ago.” He then expands on Fate’s role in his going to sea:

> Yet, now that I recall all the circumstances, I think I can see a little into the springs and motives which being cunningly presented to me under various disguises, induced me to set about performing the part I did, besides cajoling me into the delusion that it was a choice resulting from my own unbiased freewill and discriminating judgment.

Indeed, as Fate strings Ishmael along, so Melville strings readers along by using Fate to indicate impending narrative events. He ends the chapter by giving readers another moment of foreshadowing, this one grounded in a powerful image: “There floated into my inmost soul, endless processions of the whale, and, midmost of them all, one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air.” While Fate leads readers to expect significant developments on the *Pequod*, the image of a white whale creates the expectation that Moby Dick will cause those developments. In addition to specific images, Melville constantly places hints of death and destruction before readers. While the images themselves are not necessarily indicative, their continuous presence is. Melville envelops the *Pequod* in such images. The name itself carries with it a history of destruction. Melville’s first description of the ship renders it a “cannibal of a craft” because parts of it are made with whale bones. As the *Pequod* leaves for the voyage, it “blindly plunge[s] like fate into the lone Atlantic.” Because of these references, readers fear the same fate that overtook the Pequod tribe and the whales will also overtake those on the ship. Through these literary techniques, Melville, like Ahab, uses readers’ expectations of foreshadowing to draw them into his story.

Melville also creates suspense through the development of Ishmael and Queequeg’s friendship. When Ishmael begins his quest to find a whaling ship, he journeys from Manhattan to New Bedford. He finally finds an inn to stay at and agrees to share a bed with a harpooner. As he waits for the harpooner to return, the landlord plays with Ishmael, telling him, “To-night he went out a peddling, you see, and I don’t see what on airth keeps him so late, unless, may be, he can’t sell his head.” Ishmael does not understand why the harpooner would try to sell his head, and as Ishmael puzzles over this mysterious harpooner readers do as well. The bewilderment increases readers’
suspense. Eventually Ishmael realizes the harpooner is selling embalmed heads, and Ishmael then becomes uneasy as he imagines the person with whom he will be sharing a bed. Ishmael’s continued uncertainty furthers readers’ suspense. After Queequeg, the mysterious harpooner, appears, the next chapters chronicle the budding friendship between the two and powerfully climax in a symbolic marriage. The relationship’s progression implies that it will be significant throughout the story, but that does not prove to be the case. After the Pequod has set sail Queequeg all but disappears from the narrative, and readers are left with thwarted expectations.

After Ishmael chooses to sail on the Pequod, Melville continues to build suspense, hinting time and again at the fate the voyage will meet. As Ishmael learns more about Ahab, his—and readers’—suspicions grow. One of the Pequod’s owners, Captain Peleg, tells Ishmael that Ahab became troubled after he lost his leg to Moby Dick. But, Peleg claims, “that will all pass.” Yet as Ishmael leaves, he is “filled with a certain wild vagueness of painfulness concerning” Ahab. The mystery around Ahab continues to build as he refuses to appear before the Pequod sails. Ishmael is also accosted by the madman Elijah, who prophesies the voyage’s doom. Ishmael’s response to Elijah mirrors readers’ responses to Melville’s foreshadowing:

It seemed to me that he was dogging us, but with what intent I could not for the life of me imagine. This circumstance, coupled with his ambiguous, half-hinting, half-revealing, shrouded sort of talk, now begat in me all kinds of vague wonderments and half-apprehensions, and all connected with the Pequod.

Like Elijah, Melville creates uncertainty in readers through “half-hinting, half-revealing, shrouded sort of talk.” Once again, however, when the Pequod finally sets sail the foreshadowing moves toward the background. Thereafter the action diminishes through the remainder of the novel.

That Melville uses foreshadowing to build up reader anticipation is not unique. The significance lies in the fact that Melville does not fulfill all the foreshadowing. Though the Pequod does eventually encounter destruction, it is far more anticlimactic than the novel’s opening scenes suggest. The crew does not chase Moby Dick until roughly 110 chapters after the Pequod has set sail. Even then, the chase lasts three chapters and lacks any climactic moment to satisfy the expectations created by the constant foreshadowing. Melville does create some dramatic moments, such as “The Quarter-Deck,” in which Ahab incites the crew to hunt Moby Dick. After these scenes, however, the story lapses into observations on whaling and whales. Critics and readers alike have long been mystified by the long explanatory sections that, on their surface, add nothing to the action at hand. Even more mystifying are the unfulfilled foreshadowings, and critics have posited multiple theories to explain these discrepancies. George R. Stewart, for example, posits that Melville composed Moby-Dick in two writing phases, while James Barbour posits three. Critics in Melville’s time were also puzzled by the work. As Selby summarizes, “the most important critical appraisals of the book struggled to articulate their sense of its complex ambiguities, tensions and ironies.”

Perhaps there is reason to Melville’s madness. Because he sets up the story as a whaling voyage then frustrates readers’ expectations regarding the story’s arc, readers become aware that Melville manipulates their emotions to involve them in the story. As he thwarts readers’ expectations, they search for a cause and ultimately find Melville, thereby becoming increasingly conscious of his role as author. Melville uses these thwarted expectations to demonstrate the contrast between his purpose and Ahab’s. Rather than domineering over readers, Melville encourages them to interact with him and to understand his authorial role. As Karcher contends, “The reading habit formed
by plots organized around the exploits of epic heroes primes us to join rather than resist Ahab’s hunt. Hence, Melville must thwart this impulse if he is to liberate the reader from Ahab’s worldview. That is, Melville must teach alternative ways of reading.”

Read in this way, rather than being merely a product of an “insane” author, as some reviewers in Melville’s day wondered, the mix of genres serves to empower readers by encouraging them to actively participate in the reading process and to unlearn passive acceptance of authority.

Not only does Melville exhibit his control over readers through foreshadowing, he also retains reader interest, proving as adept at maintaining authorial power as Ahab is at maintaining authoritarian power. While Melville constantly deviates from the central conflict, the digressions are only temporary. The most infamous chapter in Moby-Dick is “Cetology,” in which Ishmael attempts to categorize whales into three “books” subdivided by “chapters,” ultimately expressing the impossibility of truly categorizing such a massive species. Though the chapter’s purpose in the novel has baffled many critics, some have argued that it serves to illustrate the futility of all such categorizations. For example, Karcher argues that it teaches the reader “by satirizing learned authorities and the arbitrary systems of classification they have erected, whether biological taxonomies or literary genres.”

While some readers easily lose interest in the novel during such lengthy detours, Melville bookends the chapter with scenes crucial to the primary plot. The chapter prior to “Cetology” uses a conversation between shipmates Stubb and Flask to foreshadow Ahab’s ultimate demise. Stubb divulges a dream in which Ahab is kicking him with the ivory leg. A merman approaches and tells Stubb to consider the kicks an honor, for “ye were kicked by old Ahab, and made a wise man of.” Stubb repeats this assertion, saying, “It’s made a wise man of me. . . . The best thing you can do, Flask, is to let that old man alone; never speak to him, whatever he says.”

Stubb’s dream links wisdom to suffering, an essential component of the Pequod’s destruction. One of Ishmael’s most well-known lines encapsulates the association between these two states: “There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness.”

Melville further explores the correlation between wisdom, woe, and madness in the relationship between Ahab and the young cabin boy Pip, who also goes mad. Pip presents redemption for Ahab, but in his anger Ahab rejects the healing Pip can bring, and this desire for revenge ultimately drives him over the dividing line between wisdom and madness. Though Pip’s suffering and Ahab’s injury offer the same wisdom, the Pequod’s crew dies because of Ahab’s choice. As “Queen Mab” ends, Stubb points readers to this danger and shows the sway Ahab’s madness has over him. From these hints of what is to come, Melville launches into the long chapter cataloguing whales and subsequent chapters relating traditions of hierarchy on whale ships. Yet Melville eventually draws readers into the story again.

Melville places “The Quarter-Deck” a few chapters after “Cetology,” thereby refocusing readers’ attention on the action. The chapters immediately following “The Quarter-Deck” continue to build an ominous tone. Beginning in “Sunset” Melville works in a dramatic format, giving the viewpoints of Ahab, Starbuck, Stubb, and finally the other sailors through dialogue, stage directions, and soliloquies. This “dramatic form,” Karcher argues, “removes the mediating presence of a narrator and confronts the reader directly with the actors. Clearly Melville chose to switch genres for that very reason, so that the reader could experience Ahab’s power as if on board the Pequod.”

This section climaxes with Ishmael’s musings on how Ahab is able to so effectively control the crew. Melville then explores Moby Dick’s significance in “Moby Dick” and “The Whiteness of the Whale.” Yet as soon as Melville has again immersed readers in Ahab’s quest, he digresses using a series of seeming side stories. For example,
he relates and explains whaling ship encounters, also known as gams, and discusses correct and incorrect depictions of whales in venues as diverse as art, scientific writings, and shop signs. Melville continues in this format throughout the work, moving between the main narrative strand and interruptions of that strand. Critics have posited many reasons for the nonfiction sections, demonstrating that they are not as purposeless as many readers believe. For example, Sheila Post-Lauria discusses the genre of mixed-form narrative during Melville’s time, arguing he adopted that narrative structure. Betsy Hilbert, on the other hand, claims he uses these sections to show readers the futility of stark categorizations. Regardless of Melville’s purpose, scholars agree that the text’s structure affects readers’ interpretations of the work—whether or not they realize it—because they are forced to confront their preconceptions and expectations as Melville alternately develops and interrupts the main narrative strand.

The understanding readers come to regarding their expectations, both in the foreshadowing and in the narrative interruptions, is crucial to the novel’s power, I posit, because it encourages them to move beyond contemplating merely the plot to also contemplating Melville’s role as author. Melville employed this interaction between author and reader in other works. In “The Encantadas,” a series of “sketches” first published in Putnam’s Magazine in 1854, Melville’s narrator overtly establishes his authority. The narrator recounts a tragic tale in which a woman is rescued from an island after seeing her husband and brother die. The narrator interrupts himself at suspenseful points throughout the story and withholds some details altogether. Melville further draws attention to his control as author when he writes, “Unwittingly I imp this cat-like thing, sporting with the heart of him who reads; for if he feel not he reads in vain.” Melville’s “sport” with readers is clear in Moby-Dick as he plays with their expectations. Kate Haworth explores the power of linguistic interaction in “The Dynamics of Power and Resistance in Police Interview Discourse,” writing, “Power and control are constantly under negotiation, and are always open to challenge and resistance.” Similarly, Melville and his readers constantly negotiate power through language. Melville’s authorial manipulations ensure that readers engage with the text to gain more from it. For this reason, part of the work’s significance lies in this interaction between readers and the text, supporting Stanley Fish’s argument that literature is more than words on the page. Indeed, Wolfgang Iser argues that through the establishing and breaking of expectations readers interact with a text and learn to orient themselves to new ideas. This process of establishing expectations in readers then breaking those expectations occurs constantly throughout the novel, making readers aware of Melville’s role as author. As readers see the crew succumbing to Ahab’s power, they also discern Melville’s manipulation of them throughout the text. Thus, readers are encouraged to perceive their susceptibility to manipulation.

Yet Melville does not let readers rest with the knowledge that they are susceptible to manipulation; he also shows them their responsibility to resist such manipulation. Through Ahab and the crew, Melville demonstrates the followers’ culpability in creating and maintaining authority. As Aaltio-Marjosola and Takala argue, in their analysis of organizational charismatic leaders, “The legitimacy of charisma and charismatic leadership is sociologically and psychologically attributed to the belief of the followers and not so much to the quality of the leader.” Therefore, charismatic leaders often emerge in times of crisis. Following this psychological reasoning, the crew ultimately gives Ahab the permission of power. Importantly, the crew members are not willing to go against Ahab, even when they feel something is amiss. Starbuck is the clearest example of this because he openly speaks against Ahab but goes no further than voicing his misgivings. However, Ishmael does the same thing: he expresses qualms of the voyage yet admits that he allowed himself to be swept up in Ahab’s
hunt. Even when other crew members sense they are on a doomed voyage, they do not oppose Ahab; they only fear him more. Ultimately, the crew chooses to invest Ahab with authority. As Patterson writes, “In short, the basis of authority comes down to a matter of belief and faith. Without faith (or confidence) in the voice of command and the unspoken rules supporting it, authority cannot exist.”78 Indeed, as Ishmael becomes swept up in the voyage, the readers do as well, and they too become implicated in the destruction that occurs. As readers come to see, without the crew’s—and their own—belief in Ahab’s power, it would cease to exist. For this reason, everyone has the responsibility to resist oppression.

Additionally, though Ahab understands how to manipulate the crew members’ emotions, they lack this understanding, and their ignorance better enables Ahab to use them. Again, Melville shows readers that they too are responsible for this ignorance. Though they at first identify with Ishmael and his lack of resistance to Ahab, they eventually come to understand Ishmael’s complicity in the events that unfold upon the Pequod. When Ahab first provokes the crew to hunt Moby Dick, Ishmael is caught up in the fervor but does not understand why: “A wild, mystical, sympathetical feeling was in me; Ahab’s quenchless feud seemed mine. With greedy ears I learned the history of that murderous monster against whom I and all the other has taken our oaths of violence and revenge.”79 Ishmael’s awareness of his emotions is not enough for him to understand their cause or to change them. He sees the frenzy, but is still caught in the madness. Thus, Melville shows, people must understand that they are being manipulated in order to resist.

As Melville challenged readers to resist authority, he found himself facing similar struggles as he attempted to balance writing with conviction and making a living. Knowing he could not write only for himself if he was to gain an audience, Melville expressed tension between his desires and audiences’ desires. In a letter to his friend Richard Henry Dana Jr., dated May 1, 1850, Melville reports on his work in progress, Moby-Dick, and reveals his determination to write the truth, regardless of popularity: “To cook the thing up, one must needs throw in a little fancy, which from the nature of the thing, must be ungainly as the gambols of the whales themselves. Yet I mean to give the truth of the thing, spite of this.”80 In referring to this letter, Selby notes the tension Melville clearly felt in his creative process, observing, “That Melville is prepared—albeit reluctantly—to ‘throw in a little fancy’ in his writing of Moby-Dick to ensure his continued popularity is an indication of the commercial pressures under which he felt himself to be working. Yet his letter also clearly indicates the unease he felt in writing for money.”81 This conflict between the things Melville truly wanted to write about and the things an audience wanted to read continued throughout Melville’s career. In addition to the interaction between Melville and readers, he also at times capitulated to publishers’ wishes. In Typee, writes Karcher, “Melville’s American publishers insisted on expurgating his attacks on the missionary and imperialist despoilers of Polynesia.”82 While Melville later regretted this decision, it is clear that he was aware of his need for readers’ and publishers’ approval of his writing if he was to have a literary presence. As he wrote to his friend Nathaniel Hawthorne, “‘Try to get a living by the Truth . . . —and go to the Soup Societies.’”83

Melville needed an audience to elicit the change he sought. Evidence indicates that Melville was trying to influence readers; but to have any influence, Melville was obliged to capitulate at times to readers and publishers. Melville’s changing literary tactics signal his desire to influence society. Though after Typee Melville no longer wanted to surrender to publishers’ wishes, he knew that he would not retain an audience if he wrote overtly against society. Thus, according to Karcher, “he started experimenting with increasingly elaborate strategies for subverting his readers’
prejudices and conveying unwelcome truths.” Melville’s desire to effect change is also indicated by his awareness of the political controversies of his time. Critics have seen Melville responding to these and have pointed to his political dissent with his father-in-law and mentor, Judge Lemuel Shaw. Critical interpretations of Melville’s political stance differ, some arguing he was warning against slavery and others that he was arguing against radical abolitionism. Regardless of Melville’s precise political affiliation, however, he clearly desired to influence his readers. And this idea, that literature possesses, as Jane P. Tompkins writes, “the ability to influence human behavior in a direct and practical manner,” requires readers. For without readers to engage in the work, it would have no one to influence. Therefore, Melville’s need to balance capitulating to authority and maintaining autonomy is clear and explains his many maneuvers to retain an audience. Ultimately, Melville uses his interaction with readers to show them a view of life diametrically opposed to Ahab’s. As Adler argues, “Were his imagination outreaching, like Melville’s, he would not see in the whale only a reflection of his thwarted ambitions and his deprivations.” To escape Ahab’s view of life, readers must learn to possess an imagination that is “outreaching” and flexible, rather than Ahab’s grasping and rigid imagination. Doubtless, Moby-Dick’s many readers would agree that the novel pushes them beyond their imaginative horizon, introducing them to a world as vast as Moby Dick and as impossible to define.

In the end, the Pequod’s destruction sends a sobering note to readers. If we are led astray as easily as the Pequod’s crew, will we also share their fate? Hostilities seem increasingly to confirm this: from John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry eight years after the publication of Moby-Dick, to the subsequent Civil War, the rise and fall of Hitler, two world wars, atomic bombs, and terrorism. Indeed, critics have drawn fascinating parallels between Moby-Dick and events such as the Vietnam War and 9/11. Yet Melville does not leave the picture entirely bleak. If the first step to resisting oppression is understanding it, Melville seems to have begun leading in the right direction. Though he may not have developed a satisfying response to the oppression he encountered in his own life, he paved the way for others to discover one. Power is beguiling to leaders and followers alike, but we do have the ability to resist it. Melville shows us a way to begin: recognize the inherent dangers of absolute authority, then learn to resist them one chapter at a time.

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Notes
3. Ibid., 420.
5. Ibid., 2551.

7. Ibid., 9.
8. Ibid., 10.
9. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 2551–52.
13. Ibid., 2552.
15. Ibid., 63.
16. See, for example, Mark Patterson, Thomas Woodson, Niels Werber, and John E. Keats.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 194.
22. Ibid., under “Charisma, Communication and Manipulation.”
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 562.
26. Ibid., 563.
27. Ibid., 563–64.
30. Ibid., 582.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid., 518.
38. Ibid., 231.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid., 179.
41. Ibid., 243.
42. Ibid., 231.
43. Ibid., 176.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid., 471.
46. Ibid., 595.
47. Ibid., 474.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid., 59.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid., 8.
54. According to the book’s explanatory notes, the Pequod, or Pequot, was “actually a Connecticut, not a Massachusetts, tribe, whose village was burned and the inhabitants slaughtered in 1637. The few Pequots that remained mingled with other New England tribes, so they may as well have been as ‘extinct as the ancient Medes,’ as Melville says.” Ibid., 639.
55. Ibid., 78.
56. Ibid., 115.
57. Ibid., 9.
58. Ibid., 19.
59. Ibid., 57.
60. Ibid., 89.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid., 103.
65. Ibid., 116.
67. Ibid., 143.
68. Ibid.
69. Ibid., 465.
70. Ibid., 144.
77. Ibid.
83. Ibid.
84. Ibid.
85. See Carolyn L. Karcher’s *Shadow over the Promised Land* as well as Charles H. Foster, Willie T. Weathers, and Alan Heimert.
87. Adler, “*Moby-Dick* as Symbolic Poem,” 68.
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