

# Moby Dick and trascendental Decadence

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Alumno:

**Cristián Pino Morales**

Profesor Guía: Andrés Ferrada

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## Epígrafe

***Might and glory flaming for changing dawn Ancient power revealed of an iron crown Clear and cold and shining so far and bright Crush the world in one clash of your binding light***

***-Summoning - 'Might and Glory' – Oathbound***

## **Dicatoria**

*Thanks, thank you all This project is dedicated to the memory of those who lived before our time and whose departure is still grieved in our hearts, Eliana and Pipa, my guardian angels. You still live in us all*

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-To my father, who in his madness is still able to see the light

-To my mother, who is the strongest person I know. Her soul is so powerful that it could tear apart Moby Dick with a single swing of her finger

+ anybody who, in the years to come, by interest or curiosity, reads this humble research

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# 1.- Introduction

From immortal lands of perennial hunger and the frostbitten path of human kind, there comes a ghostly ship, sailing across the waves of oblivion, to penetrate our young and innocent minds of this inherited future.

We cannot run away from the past. It will haunt us on every bit and step. We are to look respectfully and contemplate the apparition in awe. Then, if we manage to keep our eyes open, we will witness the uncanny splendour of life itself, and the mystery of the continuity of human desire.

The past talks to us in many different ways, in an attempt to preserve the memory of those who lived before our time. It is a continuous cry carried by the wind of understanding, to reach our thirst of knowledge.

What would the forefathers of America think if they could see what became of their long-cherished dream? Probably, they would think that it is the work of Satan –the evil that men do– as a satanic device set to quench The Holy Creation.

And perhaps, they would be not so far from the truth. Maybe the true human nature is related to evil as much as they thought back then, and the mission of every human being is to try to gain the Divine Grace and get rid of all intrinsic evil. Or it might be that we humans, cannot really avoid evil and our only chance is to embrace our destiny, the inexorable path of destruction given to us by the Lord as a supreme gift in the form of Death.

It is most likely that if we were slightly aware of this, we would submerge into our epicurean activities and just let it be. In that case, we would certainly reach a state of decadence, when we get tired of every single game we have created and we find amusement beholding the suffering of our brothers and sisters.

And suddenly, all that is hypothetic and speculative becomes real. And we find America's rotten roots bleeding from a lost past, when the land was broken and fellow country men killed each other, for the struggle to preserve the privileges of a few.

And we find that Self Relience<sup>1</sup> has become the sole weapon against the tyranny of the epoque and that Civil Desobedience<sup>2</sup> is no longer possible in a dark world where everything is controlled by the interests of someone else, who is the owner of everything and sets the rules and the laws and can buy your own self convincement that you are wrong.

This is the world towards which the mariners in "Moby Dick" where headed. Herman Melville was labeled as pessimistic and probably, his contemporary critics did not realise the depth of his warning. They thought him as a dark-gloomy fellow, an alarmist at most, and they failed to understand that while they were sitting on comfortable furniture on their cabins, critisizing and adscribing to dominant morals and models, their world was slowly sinking, and water was flowing from everywhere, to cover the contemptuous society that believed to have found all the answers. They drowsed away while rivers of blood washed the soils of the country. When the lands cleared a bit, the filth was exposed and all could see their obscenity. But then, after many generations, they failed again to see what is obvious, and

<sup>1</sup> See Emerson's 1841 'Self Relience'

<sup>2</sup> See Henry Thoreau's 1849 'Civil Disobedience'

even today they cling to the old models, blind and unwilling to see the decadence of their fellacious prosperity.

Then we find the trauma everywhere. The traces of Civil War extend in all directions and reach nowadays. The desperate warcries of the dying soldiers shape the anthems to be sung in days to come, and the economic powers again command the lives of the sons of America, to march into battle and die without glory. We saw them march into the Great War when the century was young; We saw them carry their weapons into the second war, numb and proud, and then, unleash hell over civil population that was not guilty of the crimes of their leaders. They melted away under the firestorm, their skins became black shadows that paved the ground and their souls crumbled and surrendered to the empire almighty.

Victory was achieved over the decadence of others. But decadence is democratic and reaches all. Their next campaign took them to Vietnam, and then, in the less probable place, they found their ruin. Misery covered the coffins of many, who returned as mortal heroes to the land they sought to defend.

In the following years, America sent its soldiers to many other battles, breathing life, and saw them return home cold as the stone. In recent years we have witnessed how young Americans arm themselves with shotguns and knives and run like Berserkers killing any classmate that crosses their path. The innocent youth fall like fairground ducks under the emancipation of tormented spirits.

Too many years ago, Whitman lamented the killing of the heart of America in the form of young boys when he kept a strange vigil, taking care of a wounded corpse, weeping bitterly on the destruction of sacred life. And again, when Jim Morrison sings to us from a vinyl record "...and all their children are insane" we are left to wonder what happened inbetween these years. The answer is a gruesome one. Men went blindly marching on towards the abyss of decadence, running faster and faster to die, in the most unheroic, unnecessary and gloryless manner.

In "The Silmarillion", Tolkien refers to Death as "a gift" that men received from God, the relief that their weak souls could find. They could return to the Source of creation, for they have a purpose which is not yet uncovered. The Elves on their part, had to linger on the world for as many ages as peace would grant. They were immortal and bearers of unending beauty. But their destiny is set up from the very beginning; they shall sail across the sea to the land of the Gods where no man will ever enter. They go away in their white ships, leaving the land of men forever, and men, are left alone on the shadow, deprived of all beauty and the splendour of the old days. In a sense, this is very much the same that has actually happened to the "real" mankind during the course of the years, and Moby Dick was perhaps, a glimpse on a distant telescope, that a young man had almost by chance.

What is different from other periods of human history is that in any other dark age, there was always some portion of the world to be discovered. When the European civilisation reached its peak, they discovered a new world in which they could live their enlightenment. The world of the Greeks was a small one, open to new lands and discoveries; the world of the Romans held many secrets to be revealed. But today, the world is a whole. A place where there is no new land, where the soil becomes dry and acid rain falls from the sky and the hearts of men get black and hard, unable to share the less sympathetic feeling towards the other. We have found now the boundaries of our realm, and in the middle of the thickening air, we are impelled to escape.

Herman Melville was not just a late teenager, but a visionary man. Moby Dick in particular and his work in general, is a vehicle which brightly enough, expresses the

decadence of a time without hope and whose only light is the shining blade of the Angel of Death.

In this investigation, our concern shall lie on this apocalyptic perspective and try to determine how and to what extent the notion of decadence is present in "Moby Dick" and "Bartebly the Scrivener" by means of the concept of Death and its different manifestations in Melville's titanic opus.

The research shall be divided into several sections, which aim to characterise the notion of decadence in this novel and illustrate the use of different devices (both functional and formal) which constitute the structure of the book. In addition, we set the first steps for a further investigation regarding the relations between the literary creations of romantic and modern American writers, by means of looking for commonalities between Melville, Dickinson and Poe.

## 2.- Decadence: general (dictionary definition plus etymology)

### Decadence<sup>3</sup>

#### Noun

1. A process, condition, or period of deterioration or decline, as in morals or art; decay.
2. often Decadence A literary movement especially of late 19th-century France and England characterized by refined aestheticism, artifice, and the quest for new sensations.

#### Etymology

French *décadence*, from Old French *decadence*, from Medieval Latin *decadentia*, a decaying, declining, from Vulgar Latin *\*decadere*, to decay. See decay.

### Decay<sup>4</sup>

#### Intransitive Verb

1. Biology To break down into component parts; rot.
2. Physics To disintegrate or diminish by radioactive decay.
3. Electronics To decrease gradually in magnitude. Used of voltage or current.
4. Aerospace To decrease in orbit. Used of an artificial satellite.
5. To fall into ruin: a civilization that had begun to decay.
6. Pathology To decline in health or vigor; waste away.
7. To decline from a state of normality, excellence, or prosperity; deteriorate.

#### Noun

- 1a. The destruction or decomposition of organic matter as a result of bacterial or fungal action; rot. b. Rotted matter.
2. Physics Radioactive decay.
3. Aerospace The decrease in orbital altitude of an artificial satellite as a result of conditions such as atmospheric drag.
4. A gradual deterioration to an inferior state: tooth decay; urban decay.
5. A falling into ruin.

#### Etymology

<sup>3</sup> Decadence. Online. 23 December 2007 <<http://www.bartleby.com/decadence>> *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language Fourth Edition\_ 2000.htm>*

<sup>4</sup> Decay. Online. 23 December 2007 <<http://www.bartleby.com/decay>> *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language Fourth Edition\_ 2000.htm>*

Middle English decayen, from Old French decair, from Vulgar Latin \*decadere : Latin de- + Latin cadere, to fall; see kad- in Appendix I.

## 2.1.- Decadence: particular (operational definition)

Moby Dick has been regarded as THE proper epic novel of America and as such, it is likely to have a constellation of possible readings, interpretations, perspectives or subjects to analyse. The depth of its scope is far to be determined to a precise extent, and one can only witness it bit by bit, by means of a close and attentive reading. But still most of its complexities will remain hidden in the profundities of its imaginary ocean. Nevertheless, we ought to navigate through its waters with a clear course and a single vessel. With this in mind, we will attempt to characterise one underlying concept, drawing it from the intricacy of the conceptual landscape of Moby Dick.

This is the concept of Decadence, which we shall explore as much as the boundaries of this course allow us. Let us first, provide some insights or preliminary notions to depict our interpretation of decadence.

We shall primarily understand Decadence as a state or condition in which a living being, fictional or real, can be found. This extends also to objects and even to certain abstractions which embody the notion of group, particularly of human groups or societies. It also reaches the abstract ideas of paradigm and convention, but in the sense that such abstractions belong to the human mind and therefore, are heirs to the proper human decadence.

Decadence, in a strict sense, is perhaps a state only reachable by living beings or objects that suffer the consequences of the interaction with the natural world. But if we accept this heritage, this indirect development of decadence, then we can assume that a society or a paradigm are also due to decadence.

This state or condition of being decadent is not a simple characteristic, intrinsic or gained by the objects (let us include here among the objects anything that defers from the self) but it is a part or stage of a process. This stage is the final one in a chain of events that constitute the existence of the objects. Its culminating point or climax is reached when the definitive ending of the object occurs. Hence, Death is the herald of Decadence which dances on its banner.

Decadence, now in a narrow sense concerning a literary creation, can be found either inside or outside the text. In this particular case, our hypothesis is that Moby Dick (and Melville's work in general) is a manifestation of the decadence of a literary paradigm in the literature of the United States. Moby Dick could be considered as death itself for the romantic tradition, as it marks its ending. But the sense of death brought up by Moby Dick is not only limited to a certain tendency of writing, but also, to the western paradigm as a whole, and particularly to the model of the American society of the time. Moby Dick transports us from the living condition of the nineteenth century to the collective extermination and unmaking of the models on the twentieth century<sup>5</sup>. The model for the American society now runs blindly, as the hen that has its head cut and continues to run for a short while.

<sup>5</sup> Moby-Dick - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia Online. 10 December 2007 <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moby\\_dick#Post-Revival](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moby_dick#Post-Revival)>

Moby Dick is not just an overgrown book about an ambiguous character that has nothing better to do and tosses himself into whaling, to end up involved with tragedy, but it is also a warning, a token of skepticism and a call of distress about the state of decay of human affairs. It is also a desperate shout which seeks to alert us about our blind pursuit of moral ideals and the waste of time that has been occurring for generations immemorial. There is a Captain Ahab in every one of us, which unfatefully tries to find the answers to our individualism.<sup>6</sup>

As we have said, the novel portraits Decadence at two primary levels; the external which we have just characterised, and the internal, which is the main concern of this investigation.

Regarding Decadence as an internal phenomenon of the book, our preliminar assumption is that it is one of the main topics of the novel, although it is not explicitly discussed. And such is in our opinion, the value of this search for the evidence of Decadence. Melville continually explores different subjects at the end of good many chapters and these explorations are open, sometimes in the form of questions, which could perfectly account for the philosophic flavour that accompanies the novel. Melville is questioning himself (and with him, the reader) about many a thing and this allows us to take his questions further on, and so, find the mentioned notion of Decadence.

However, there are many other instances in which Decadence is present. We will attempt to provide with some insights in relation to these particular aspects of Moby Dick.

<sup>6</sup> Nattero Ferrero, Ángela: "Moby Dick": The tragedy of Absolute Individualism 1961 Instituto Pedagógico, Universidad de Chile, Valparaíso

## 3.- Decadence of Paradigm: Faith and conventions

The allusions to death are multiple and take many different forms in the novel, but one of the elements that links them all together is the mental state of the protagonist. He very often reflects on related topics and describes the events that he lives making reference to particular elements of Death.

The first chapter ‘Loomings’ could be regarded as an erotic passage (along with the third one, in which Ishmael meets Queequeg) because it starts with a title that suggest warmth and comfort, but above all, because it is the genesis of Ishmael’s adventure. The mind of Ishmael creates the sense of need for a voyage, for a quest on natural life. From this idea we label this chapter as erotically oriented, rather than thanatologically oriented. However, there are many references to Death, perhaps, as a way to express awareness of its presence in life:

***“Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet”<sup>7</sup>***

This is what the character explains as the circumstances that make him feel compelled to go to the sea. There is a state of generalised saturation in his mood, and soon he is eager to return to the Source of all creation, the matrix of the ocean.

This is the first piece of evidence to support our assumption about the decadence of the social model that originates the character. There are no surprises, no additional motivations, no reasons to stay. Instead, Ishmael wants to go far away, to a place where there is nothing except continuity. We shall find several similar instances depicting attempts to avoid reality in the pages of Moby Dick.

Then the narrator tells us about ‘Manhattoes’, the insular city, and refers to “the crowds of water-gazers there” which we interpret as the existence of other people with similar inclinations. They nostalgically look at the sea as if they were waiting for something. A state of meditation and contemplation, facing the ocean and giving the back to the city and civilisation, in other words, to their reality.

Melville assigns a magic character to water and states that every man feels a powerful and unavoidable attraction to it. “Meditation and water are wedded forever” the narrator says. A state of introspection, an attempt to commute with the private self.

Further on, the narrator provides us with many more examples, to lead us in the direction of understanding through intuition and mysticism:

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<sup>7</sup> Melville, Herman: *Moby Dick*, 1966 Harper & Row, PUBLISHERS, New York, pp. 1

***"And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned."***<sup>8</sup>

Back again with the idea of Death, Narcissus dies when trying to grasp the image of life. In the bowels of the novel, this could be read as an example of entropy, or the evanescent character of life and its realisation by the myth character.

And then, a reinforcement of the meaning of the ocean as a symbol:

***"But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all"***

Here the author compares life to an ‘ungraspable phantom’. A phantom is an spectral image of a dead person that appears in front of us. Life then, is something that can be seen, but it is impossible to reach. We can relate this to the temporal nature of life and the relation of man with time. Both time and life, pass on, and man is unable to control them, which puts him in an unadvantageous situation with respect to the abstractions he creates. Such is the dichotomy of human existence. The perfect abstractions that human mind conceives are out of grasp for the human body and its parent reality. And so the author exemplifies this by the use of this metaphoric device of water.

It is probably not a coincidence, but a deliberate artistic judgment to place a reflection on the nature of water at the beginning of the novel, considering that its later development will be amid the ocean itself, which serves as evidence for the symbolism of the sea in the plot.

Afterwards, we find one of the numerous instances of skepticism on the novel. Skepticism is another symptom of the malcontent towards the social conventions; it is the ultimate proof that something is not as right as it is supposed to be, and therefore, it is susceptible of change (hence, of dying). Ishmael refers to work and obedience to the captains and questions whether it is morally better to follow the tradition (of the puritans) of hard work and discipline or just disobey and avoid the indignity of being sent to sweep down the decks with a broom. In his skeptic tone, the author says through Ishmael:

***"Do you think the Archangel Gabriel thinks any the less of me, because I***

***promptly and respectfully obey that old hunk in that particular instance?"***<sup>9</sup>

He continues and asks himself “Who aint a slave?” and then goes on stating that everybody will be punished and hit, no matter if they obey or not. This is a glimpse of the notion of destiny. There is a certain predestination in all men, not to live a certain life, but to have assured suffering throughout it.

We can establish at this point some commonalities with “Bartleby the Scrivener”, Melville’s suffocating tale. The sense of suffering as a distinctive mark of human existence, the skeptical voice which softly tells us “I would prefer rather not to” and the subsequent questioning to the tradition and the belief of hard work as the key to paradise, are present in both, the tale and this short passage of the novel. The inquiry is the same, although expressed by different rhetorical devices and construction devices, forced, obviously, by the difference of format.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid; P. 3

<sup>9</sup> Ibid; P. 4

The Puritan precept of work and a sober life lead inevitably, to accumulation. Wealth is a proof of labour, and labour a proof of well-doing. But this is, in terms of the author, a contradiction:

***"The urbane activity with which a man receives money is really marvelous, considering that we so earnestly believe money to be the root of all earthly ills, and that on no account can a monied man enter heaven. Ah! How cheerfully we consign ourselves to perdition!"***<sup>10</sup>

It is mark of skepticism, but a mark of irony as well. The author ironizes on human nature, so aware of evil and yet so readily to embrace it, provided it is profitable. Thus, we are in front of a revision to the moral of the American society.

In a very subtle fashion, we then find a redemption of man sinner, in the form of predestination. Ishmael talks about "interpreting a brief interlude and a solo" regarding his departure on a whaling trip:

***"And, doubtless, my going in this whaling voyage, formed part of the grand programme of Providence that was drawn up a long time ago"***<sup>11</sup>

Here we find one of the traditional problems of puritanism: the fact that God has already decided all the details of the story for men. What then, can men do to avoid being sinners? And then, circumstances force us to believe that every action of us was free and premeditated:

***"...besides cajoling me into the delusion that it was a choice resulting from my own unbiased freewill and discriminating judgement"***<sup>12</sup>

After these reflections, which typically close most of the novel's chapters, as a stylistic device to mantain and provide with rhythm, we arrive at chapter two, which portraits some interesting details for our investigation.

The first one is the setting. The town of New Bedford is described, in a cold Saturday night of winter in December, as follows:

***"It was a dubious-looking, nay, a very dark and dismal night, bitingly cold and cheerless"***<sup>13</sup>

It is interesting the choice made by the author of time and place. The sense of cold and unfriendly weather helps to develop a mental state on the reader, which will consequently, follow the search for a warm and comfortable place. Hence, the character starts his journey in an unpleasant situation, forced to stay at an inn due to the early departure of the ship to Nantucket. Then, the character has to make a decision, in the middle of uncertainty:

***"...as I stood in the middle of a dreary street shouldering my bag, and comparing the gloom towards the north with the darkness towards the south –wherever in***

<sup>10</sup> Melville, Herman: *Moby Dick*, 1966 Harper & Row, PUBLISHERS, New York, pp. 4

<sup>11</sup> Ibid; P. 5

<sup>12</sup> Ibid; P. 5

<sup>13</sup> Ibid; P. 6

*your wisdom you may conclude to lodge for the night, my dear Ishmael, be sure  
to inquire the price, and don't be too particular*<sup>14</sup>

Darkness appears in all directions, the character bears a burden –the only visible, physical connection with his past –and he commits himself to acceptance. From this point on, we will find many other instances of acceptance, which build and tell us about the personality of the character and the use of him, as an exploratory device, by the author.

Following the line of darkness, Ishmael finds himself in front of more emptiness when looking for a place to stay:

*"Such dreary streets! Blocks of blackness, not houses, on either hand, and here  
and there a candle, like a candle moving about in a tomb"*<sup>15</sup>

Now the author compares the town to a tomb. Another figure resembling of death, of absence and lack of comfort. This is the state which Ishmael so eagerly wishes to run away from. He could have perfectly arrived at mid day, to see the laborious activities of the people on the streets. He could have asked some gentle old lady about where to stay, or else, Ishmael could have arrived in time to sail for Nantucket. But the choice is clear, Melville wants to show us this desert and ghostly place as a way to reinforce the previously mentioned mental state, and also, it is used to contrast with the atmosphere of the following chapters, more inclined to warmer and fleshy matters.

But regarding Ishmael as a trascendental explorer, in the following lines, we find him stumbling over an ash-box, which he calls “the ashes from Gomorrah”, and then he enters the building. Why does he do that? In the Christian tradition, Gomorrah was the city of sinners, destroyed by the Angels. And Ishmael, after joking about it, decides to enter that place. He is then, looking for warmth in the most unusual places. This is therefore, a symbolic spiritual search which is congruous with the main themes of the novel: the questioning of established morals and standards, and from thence, the questioning to the whole model of western society, by means of a revision of the spiritual concerns of the protagonist.

This searching and accepting attitudes of Ishmael lead him to a very weird situation. Instead of some low-budget hotel, he arrives in a negro church, which he had thought to be “The trap”, another cheap inn. The name “The trap” is again quite meaningful. Those inside the church are only black people “trapped” in a religious service. In several passages later, Melville revises the character of the savage man, the natural man, without the impossitions of Christian society. He asserts that the savage is somehow close to God, that he is a part of nature itself, and then his relation with infinity is less artificial than that of the white man. Then, the negroes at the church would be “trapped” by an oblivious model, submitted to a morality and a religion which is not that of their own. And they seem to be black on appereance but also in the interior:

*"...and beyond, a black Angel of Doom was beating a book in a pulpit. It was a  
negro church; and the preacher's text was about the blackness of darkness, and  
the weeping and wailing and teeth-gnashing there"*<sup>16</sup>

The images here suggest a blackness of spirit. The text of the preacher was “about the blackness of darkness”, which is opposed to enlighten images that usually accompany

<sup>14</sup> Ibid; P. 17

<sup>15</sup> Ibid; P. 18

<sup>16</sup> Ibid; P. 7

representations of prayer books in paintings and illustrations. Religion has led the blacks to weep and wail in a catharsis of oppression. They are not happy; they are mutually expressing their anguish. Another hint of decadence.

Then, Ishmael arrives at the “Spouter Inn” ran by Peter Coffin. The place is described as poor, badly constructed and “dilapidated”. The use of names and adjectives support the funereal flavour of the novel so far. This kind of “gloomy-world” is to be maintained until the whaling trip starts. After that point, the atmosphere of the novel varies depending on the specific facts that come with the plot. But the funereal flavour is reserved to the inland sections.

At the end of chapter two, we find an interesting comparison. Ishmael relates his body (his eyes) and soul to a house and its windows. The cold wind is nice to be enjoyed from the inside of the house, but being outside would be terrible. Ishmael says that the body is like a house that protects the soul. However, this living building is weak and cannot protect the soul from the frozen wind. This exemplifies the decadence of flesh, especially when confronted to the might of Nature. And from this decadence of flesh, we move to another instance of religious questioning:

***But what thinks Lazarus? Can he warm his blue hands by holding them up to the grand northern lights? Would not Lazarus rather be in Sumatra than here? Would he not far rather lay him down lengthwise along the line of the equator; yea, ye***

<sup>17</sup>

***gods! Go down to the fiery pit itself, in order to keep out his frost?***

First, the character identifies himself with Lazarus, somebody who according to tradition, was brought back to life by Jesus. Has Ishmael been brought to life somehow? The quest in which he wishes to go is perhaps this new life that he has been given. And after that, we find evasion again: “Would not Lazarus rather be in Sumatra than here?” Sumatra is an exotic place, with a tropical weather, uncivilised and savage. The idea of being better somewhere else is one of the motivations of his trip. The northern lights would not be of much help as they appear cold and distant in the winter sky. So Ishmael thinks about going to hell if necessary to get rid of frost.

It does not mean that Ishmael is ready to become a heretic and descend to the abyss but that he is able to consider it. And in a sense, he does. When he decides to go to warmer places on his whaling trip, he is somehow cruising hell itself (after all, everybody dies) So for him, being reborn is a chance for exploration, and this exploration will take him through “the fiery pits”.

“The Spouter Inn” could have been hell or whatever else, but Ishmael would not hesitate to enter it and escape from the icy wind. On the inside he finds many paintings done with imperfect techniques, to the extent that he finds it difficult to realise the meaning of the paintings. Melville here uses his enormous descriptive capacity and his interest to explore many different subjects through the eyes of his characters. But what is interesting about his depiction of the paintings is the fact that there was one that particularly called Ishmael’s attention. It was one showing a whale fighting against a ship. The painting is described as hard to be understood, and one could easily take it to be “the Black Sea in a midnight gale”, “The unnatural combat of the four primal elements”, “A blasted heath”, “A Hyperborean winter scene” and “The breaking-up of the ice-bound stream of Time” which shows us a curious use of adjectives, beyond the author’s intentions to depict the painting as a chaotic splash of colour over the canvas. In spite of the differences between the possible wrong

<sup>17</sup> Ibid; P. 9

interpretations, we can notice that they are all unfriendly and violent, which is an indirect way of characterising the real element on the painting: the whale. The characterisation of the whale, occurs at two levels: physical and metaphysical, and they are related in their presence on the life of humans. There are several physical elements that can be found many times in the novel, such as the white colour, the big sized animals and the pyramids. All these elements share the common characteristic of absoluteness. Men are small and brief in existence, yet the elements with which they interact are closer to infinity. White has a wide range of meanings in the book, but for the moment we shall restrict ourselves to say that one of its primary functions as a symbol is the representation of abstraction. White is the summary of all other colours and, as such, has the value of representing abstract notions, such as perfection, purity, freedom, Death and God. And it posses a dichotomy in human existence; for it is impossible to apprehend these abstractions wholly. It is also impossible to draw such abstractions out of human mind. They exist only as virtual representations of ideas that cannot even be wholly understood, except by the use of intuition. And so, as men can only understand ideal through intuition, the rest of the colours appear in our sensorial system to help us characterise our parent reality.

This is in a sense related to Captain Ahab's pursuit of Moby Dick. He is chasing the unchasable, in a most futile attempt to achieve redemption through glory. But we shall analyse this later on. Let us now continue with the minute revision of facts supporting our conception of decadence of a paradigm.

The place is described as "dusky" and there are some references to a chimney that had former better times. The setting is melancholic and dark. It continues with the description of the bar, made to resemble a right whale's head:

**"Within are shabby shelves, ranged round with old decanters, bottles, flasks; and in those jaws of swift destruction, like another cursed Jonah (by which name indeed they call him), bustles a little withered old man, who, for their money, dearly sells the sailors deliriums and death"<sup>18</sup>**

Not only the place is dark, but also the sailors embrace the slow death of alcohol in there. We have here a physical device to create evasion, but the irony of these lines is that the bar is designed as a whale's head. Mariners drink on the "jaws of destruction" while Jonah is untimely imprisoned inside the whale. Every construction that the author makes is meaningful. The sailors struggle against death on the open sea, to then, return to the port and drink; these are two thanatological activities, set at each extreme of the sailors' lives. Their actual lives would be then, the transition points between one instance of death and another. This makes us wonder about the deep meaning of Ishmael's rebirth as a whaling man. Is he really alive again, or is he a living-dead unable to find the way back to life? It is not easy to answer this question, and perhaps it will remain a mystery, because if we consider the ending of the novel, we will realise that Ishmael's existence is little more than a cycle.

Returning to the notion of Ishmael as an exploratory device, we are introduced to a sample of his morality, to show us what his convictions are:

**"No man prefers to sleep two in a bed. In fact you would a good deal rather not sleep with you own brother. I don't know how it is, but people like to be private when they are sleeping. And when it comes to sleeping with an unknown stranger, in a strange inn, in a strange town, and that stranger a harpooneer, then your objections indefinitely multiply. Nor was there any earthly reason why**

<sup>18</sup> Ibid; P. 11

*I as a sailor should sleep two in a bed, more than anybody else; for sailors no more sleep two in a bed at sea, than bachelor Kings do ashore. To be sure they all sleep together in one apartment, but you have your own hammock, and cover yourself with your own blanket, and sleep in your own skin”*<sup>19</sup>

So, Ishmael puts it very clear that he is not willing to share his bed with a stranger. Again, he has a matter of choice here. The author could perfectly have made the two men sleep together in the same room, but he decided to put them together in the same bed. This gives the setting a sense of warmth and privacy, but at the same time, of exposure and mutual discovery. Ishmael is determined to sleep somewhere else:

*“The more I pondered over this harpooneer, the more I abominated the thought of sleeping him him. It was fair to presume that being a harpooneer, his linen or woollen, as the case might be, would not be of the tidiest, certainly none of the finest. I began to twitch all over. Besides, it was getting late, and my decent harpooneer ought to be home and going bedwards. Suppose now, he should tumble in upon me at midnight –how could I tell from what vile hole he had been*<sup>20</sup>

*coming?”*

In this paragraph, the protagonist evinces that his morality is based upon prejudices. It is quite common to humans, but particularly common in western hemisphere, to be afraid of the unknown. Ishmael reflects this fear by concerning about the hygiene of the harpooneer and the sort of customs he might have in order to be returning home so late.

But after another paragraph of similar length, Ishmael decides to give the harpooneer's bed a try, after having attempted to sleep alone on an improvised bed. Need forced the character to soften his convictions, in spite of the ambiguity conveyed by the sequence. The rest of this chapter and the next one are among the finest examples of the transgression that Moby Dick implies. The white man, fully convinced of his values and morality, states that he cannot sleep with an unknown man, not even with a brother of his. Then, he decides to try, but he finds himself scared to death of sleeping with such a strange creature as Queequeg ends up to be. Ishmael rejects his bedfellow as soon as he sees him. Queequeg's skin, tattoos, clothing and actions seem unnatural to the protagonist, to the extent of wanting to get out of there as soon as possible. And then, after the sudden rush of emotions, Ishmael finds himself happy of sharing his bed with Queequeg:

*“Better sleep with a sober cannibal than with a drunken Christian”*<sup>21</sup>

How is that a white man with strong convictions decides so quickly to change his mind? This sympathy that Ishmael starts to feel towards Queequeg is a manifestation of the decadence of his social conventions. In fact, Ishmael continues to explore the world through his relation with the cannibal. What at first seemed to him unnatural and diabolic, after a short while changes into a sort of pagan dignity. This is to be further supported by the choice of the author in relation to the crew of the Pequod. Many of them are savages like Queequeg or have a foreign provenance. Ishmael is suffocated by the world of his peers, and goes on his quest for freedom, surrounded by people from unknown places, forced to put aside

<sup>19</sup> Ibid; P. 13

<sup>20</sup> Ibid; P. 13-14

<sup>21</sup> Ibid; P. 22

all prejudices and preconceived notions about men from those places and their respective customs and manners.

This relation between the two characters is transgressive at three different levels: first, the level of ambiguity, second, the level of society and third, the level of religion.

In terms of ambiguity, apparently sexual ambiguity, we find the use of adjectives such as "loving", "affectionate", "bridegroom", "matrimonial", "honeymoon" etc. Why did the author make such an election of words to characterise the scene? All of these devices build a superficial image of ambiguity upon Ishmael, who after having accepted the cannibal as a bedfellow, is not complaining about being hugged by him in such a way. Nevertheless, this sexual ambiguity is only apparent. Being as explicit as it appears, it surely represents something else. And that we can learn from the contrast made with the memory of Ishmael's nightmare. The arm of Queequeg reminded him of the worst night he ever had. But then again, it helped both characters to develop a sort of friendship. In deeper terms, this apparent ambiguity would be a manifestation of Ishmael desire for warmth. It is perhaps, not really a sexual approach, but an affective need. He is a young man, alone in the world, with the intention of killing whales. We know nothing else about him. It is quite plausible that his acceptance of Queequeg and his whaling quest share the same origin, a deeper, spiritual need, expressed by means of the actions of the character.

In terms of society, the whole sequence, plus chapter Ten and Eleven in which Queequeg and Ishmael share the bed again is transgressive to a great extent. If we think of the context in which these two characters are located, and the society which originated them, their relation would be interpreted as an extravagant act of a confused man. Queequeg is a savage, he speaks a cheap version of English, he believes in a different God, his skin (and even his face) is tattooed and he comes from a remote island which is not even in the maps. Ishmael is a respectable white man, on a protestant community, speaks good-modern English and there is nothing on his appearance which could make him an outcast to the eyes of his fellow countrymen. Sharing a bed with a cannibal, adjuring to his religion and becoming his friend is something that, to the time the book was written, not many people would have done. Therefore, this construction breaks the conventional codes of its time and place.

And finally, in terms of religion, and derived from the preceding point, there appears another instance of transgression. Ishmael reflects on the real meaning of worshipping God:

**"I was a good Christian; born and bred in the bosom of the infallible Presbyterian Church. How then could I unite with this wild idolator in worshipping his piece of wood? But what is worship? Thought I. Do you suppose now, Ishmael, that the magnanimous God of heaven and earth –pagans all included –can possibly be jealous of an insignificant bit of black wood? Impossible! But what is worship? –to do the will of God –THAT is worship. And what is the will of God? –to do to my fellow man what I would my fellow man to do to me –THAT is the will of God. Now, Queequeg is my fellow man. And what do I wish that this Queequeg would to do me? Why, unite with me in my particular Presbyterian form of worship.**

<sup>22</sup>

**Consequently, I must then unite with him in his; ergo, I must turn idolator."**

To become an idolator equals to be a heretic, a worshipper of false religion. So, with his analysis and his decision, Ishmael is crossing the line of what would be considered as acceptable. He is doing it because he needs more a friend than a thousand of unknown

<sup>22</sup> Ibid; P. 46

people judging him. But it is still a controversial act, and again, not many Christians of the time would have seen themselves worshipping a piece of black wood for friendship's sake.

It is certainly not a coincidence the election of a crew of savages and strange characters to go in the Pequod on the whaling trip. This election provides the novel with a sense of strangeness. Even though the ship is owned by white men, it is filled with people from remote places, which are quite responsible of the success of the enterprise. The white man, appears then, controlling the situation from a economic point of view, but the realisation of the quest depends upon many different men. It is this multicultural crew what creates the similarity with Babylon.

Strangeness is further portrayed in many other passages of the novel. Among them, a small reference to a mariner called Bulkington is made:

*When on that shivering winter's night, the Pequod thrust her vindictive bows into the cold malicious waves, who should I see standing at her helm but Bulkington! I looked with sympathetic awe and fearfulness upon the man, who in mid-winter just landed from a four years' dangerous voyage, could so unrestingly push off again for still another tempestuous term. The land seemed scorching to his feet. Wonderfullest things are ever the unmentionable; deep memories yield no epitaphs; this six-inch chapter is the stoneless grave of Bulkington. Let me only say that it fared with him as with the storm-tossed ship, that miserably drives along the leeward land. The port would fain give succor; the port is pitiful; in the port is safety, comfort, hearthstone, supper, warm blankets, friends, all that's kind to our mortalities. But in that gale, the port, the land, is that ship's direst jeopardy; she must fly all hospitality; one touch of land, though it but graze the keel, would make her shudder through and through. With all her might she crowds all sail off shore; in so doing, fights 'gainst the very winds that fain would blow her homeward; seeks all the lashed sea's landlessness again; for refuge's sake forlornly rushing into peril; her only friend her bitterest foe!*

<sup>23</sup>

There are two facts to be noted here. The first one is that the Pequod is sailing on christmas and the second one, that christmas occurs in midwinter. It is not necessary to detail the meaning of such celebration, or the connotations that it may have to the western world, especially in a Christian community. The sailing day was carefully selected by Captain Ahab and his decision conveys an enormous symbolic power. In other words, they are going away to nowhere during the day of the son of God. A rupture from home.

The second element is what justifies the quotation above; A description of a ship which is trying to return home. In a storm, the precious port becomes a terrible danger, because of the possibility of a clash against it. If we look at this from a literal perspective, it is plainly factual. But if we relate this to the previous notions that we have been discussing, it can be read as a representation of depression. In such state, everything that is warm and familiar, becomes oblivious and even dangerous. The individual, in the face of the conflict, chooses to escape.

Again on the subject of conventions and criticism, Ishmael does an apology of whaling, in chapter twenty four 'The advocate'. He defends the office in a most curious way: by contrasting it to men of war:

<sup>23</sup> Ibid; P. 94

**Doubtless one leading reason why the world declines honoring us whalers, is this: they think that, at best, our vocation amounts to a butchering sort of business; and that when actively engaged therein, we are surrounded by all manner of defilements. Butchers we are, that is true. But butchers, also, and butchers of the bloodiest badge have been all Martial Commanders whom the world invariably delights to honor.**

The world invariably delights to honor murderers, men who have killed men. This is a direct form of criticism, which enlarges the number of reasons which Ishmael might have had to feel uneasy in his social group. In addition, he regards whaling as a source of knowledge, "his Yale and his Harvard". The value of experience over the value of following a preconceived and irreflexive model, and also, criticism against violence. Then, another of Ishmael's opinion, which so seldom appear as corporeal:

***I never heard what sort of oil he has. Exception might be taken to the name bestowed upon this whale, on the ground of its indistinctness. For we are all***

<sup>24</sup>

***killers, on land and on sea; Bonapartes and Sharks included.***

A characterisation of human nature. 'We are all killers' Ishmael says, assuming the invariable destiny of man to slay man. This may be one of the answers that he has been looking for. The usual reflections at the end of most chapters seem to account for this fact. And as we have seen, Ishmael seems to be tired of many elements that composed his former life ashore. We know little of him, we see little of him. Even if we look for the interactions that he held, we find them all while being on the coast. After he goes on his journey to hunt whales, he slowly starts to disappear as a character and becomes more of an observer. Queequeg seems to be his stronger connection with the rest of the crew, but even this connection is slight, for their subsequent interactions are scarce.

In contrast to this 'loss of interaction' we are given some passages that illustrate the reactions and emotions of other characters, which Ishmael could hardly have come to know, unless he was a God or unless the narrator is placed outside the character. A good example of this comes in the form of chapter 37 'Sunset', a soliloquy of Ahab:

**Yonder, by the ever-brimming goblet's rim, the warm waves blush like wine. The gold brow plumbs the blue. The diver sun--slow dived from noon--goes down; my soul mounts up! She wearies with her endless hill. Is, then, the crown too heavy that I wear? this Iron Crown of Lombardy. Yet is it bright with many a gem; I the wearer, see not its far flashings; but darkly feel that I wear that, that dazzlingly confounds. 'Tis iron--that I know--not gold. 'Tis split, too--that I feel; the jagged edge galls me so, my brain seems to beat against the solid metal; aye, steel skull, mine; the sort that needs no helmet in the most brain-battering fight! Dry heat upon my brow? Oh! time was, when as the sunrise nobly spurred me, so the sunset soothed. No more. This lovely light, it lights not me; all loveliness is anguish to me, since I can ne'er enjoy. Gifted with the high perception, I lack the low, enjoying power; damned, most subtly and most malignantly! damned in the midst of Paradise!**

<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Melville, Herman: *Moby Dick*, 1967 W. W.Norton & Company, New York - London, pp. 125

<sup>25</sup> Ibid; P. 146

The importance of this section is that it shows us a suffering Ahab. His emotions make him human again; his suffering undo his image of an omnipotent pyramid, although only we are given the chance to see it. The crew is unable to witness it.

At a point like this, we can understand some of the criticism that Melville received when Moby Dick was published. The novel almost looks like a travesty, for it starts in a way, develops the story in another and yet include parts different in nature, which make it a kind of Frankenstein. But what was considered to be an offense to literature, we can now praise as a brilliant demonstration of talent. However, we must concede that it is a bit strange to come to Ahab's reflection without somebody to tell the story. Ishmael is apparently, not looking at him. It is given to us in a most shakespearean way. Again, a matter of choice. The author wishes to present Ahab in this fashion, which allows us to better comprehend his misery, and therefore, his decadence.

But on his own decadence, Ahab finds the strength to fight against destiny, against impossitions:

*'Twas not so hard a task. I thought to find one stubborn, at the least; but my one cogged circle fits into all their various wheels, and they revolve. Or, if you will, like so many ant-hills of powder, they all stand before me; and I their match. Oh, hard! that to fire others, the match itself must needs be wasting! What I've dared, I've willed; and what I've willed, I'll do! They think me mad-- Starbuck does; but I'm demoniac, I am madness maddened! That wild madness that's only calm to comprehend itself! The prophecy was that I should be dismembered; and--Aye! I lost this leg. I now prophesy that I will dismember my dismemberer. Now, then, be the prophet and the fulfiller one. That's more than ye, ye great gods, ever were. I laugh and hoot at ye, ye cricket-players, ye pugilists, ye deaf Burkes and blinded Bendigoes! I will not say as schoolboys do to bullies--Take some one of your own size; don't pommel me! No, ye've knocked me down, and I am up again; but ye have run and hidden. Come forth from behind your cotton bags! I have no long gun to reach ye. Come, Ahab's compliments to ye; come and see if ye can swerve me. Swerve me? ye cannot swerve me, else ye swerve yourselves! man has ye there. Swerve me? The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run. Over unsounded gorges, through the rifled hearts of mountains, under torrents' beds, unerringly I rush! Naught's an obstacle, naught's an angle to the iron way!*

From his own self-realised decadence, Ahab is able to stand in defiance against the gods, as he calls them. All institutions have failed, all love is anguish for Ahab and he has got nothing but his pride. Faith has dissappeared from the life of this captain who is willing to kill God himself in order to fulfill his purpose. And that purpose is maybe what distinguishes Ishmael from Ahab as mariners; Ishmael has taken the whaling trip as a way to find the meaning of his existence (a trascendental experience) while Ahab has a clear purpose. Ahab is a written book, Ishmael one that seeks to be written.

There are countless other sections, situations, events, pages, chapters, ideas where we could continue to look for evidence about the decay of the conventions that the author, and therefore, the characters lived, but it would be tiresome and would kill the joy of reading this novel. However, there is one last point that we would like to discuss here and it is the fact that Ishmael knows a good many things about a good many subjects and yet he knows nothing of what he seeks to know.

Ishmael is one of those characters that hold a tremendous amount of information. We are aware of the fact that it was the author, conscientiously and deliberately who included all the information he could gather about whales and their associated activities, but it is Ishmael who tells us all of this, nonetheless. Therefore, Ishmael knows a good deal of whales and other subjects which are detailed to an almost obsessive point. Even more, there is a strange passage of the book, which at first sight may seem irrelevant (and due to the length of the novel, it is most likely to be) but in the light of our present discussion, may get at least a bit of importance. That is the narration of an episode in which Ishmael was telling a story to some friends in Lima, Peru. What was Ishmael doing in Lima? It was certainly not the most common place to go for the young men of United States of mid nineteenth century, so Ishmael must have had a reason to do so. That reason might be a previous trip, during his service in the merchant marine. But he had some friends there, so probably, he had gone to that place more than twice. Then, we can infer, regardless of the cause that put Ishmael on that place, that the fact that he got there is another proof of his neverending thirst for understanding, and consequently, a casual demonstration of his alienation, which led him to seek for further knowledge.

Thus, we have two facts supporting our idea that social paradigms, at least for Ishmael, were collapsing and in due time for revision and substitution. The first one, is the fact that he has a compulsive desire to learn, which he applies to the whaling business. The second one, that he has travelled far and wide, to strange and distant places. And moreover, that in one of his travels he got involved in the wild hunt of a demonic whale who was fond of sinking ships and chewing quaker captains' legs.

### 3.1.- Man as an animal

We find necessary now, to keep the tidiness of this analysis, to introduce a separate subsection to deal with the symbolism of Queequeg. It is not a compulsory measure, for it could have been read among the lines of the general theme (and to some extent, we did) but we consider this to be a parallel element in the development of the plot (and of our postulates) which could lead to other fields of study and open new lines of discussion.

Quite a bit has already been said about the strangeness that Queequeg created on Ishmael and of the reactions of the protagonist, but there is a point to which we would like to refer now and use as an articulator of the distance between both characters: the return to nature.

Throughout Ishmael's behaviour we are told about the gap that exists between the natural, wild man, in a primeval state and the developed and artificial (and conventional) man of the modern society. These two perspectives clash against each other in the novel, and at an early stage, seem to be equal in strength. But throughout the development of the book, we can find evidence of distinctions between the two, proving that their existence on different human societies is not a simple matter of election, but a result of human actions. The "savage way" is the predecessor of the modern life style, and it is richer in terms of the connection with nature and the apprehension of the world as a total entity. The savage man is part of nature, as much as any other animal. The modern man is alien to nature and seeks to control it without considering the possible consequences of this action.

Literature is rich in terms of allegorical narrations on the subject, but two of the most famous ones are the myth of Prometheus and the story of Adam and Eve. These two appear

now as suitable evidence to our analysis, due to the use of both, Prometheus and biblical figures on the novel. The first one, Prometheus, tells us the story of a Greek hero who stole the Fire from the gods and gave it to men. This represents knowledge, and knowledge means power, which is used to control the environment, whether social or natural. In the case of Adam and Eve, they disobeyed God and ate from the forbidden fruit, which comes from the tree of wisdom, of good and evil. With this act, man acquires consciousness about his own existence, about God, the Earth, good and evil (It is similar to the differentiation between 'self' and 'other' that every human being experiences at the early stages of its development as an independent being) and, in other words, Adam and Eve acquire power by defying God. The two stories are similar; there is a forbidden element which belongs to a higher hierarchy of Beings. By a fearless and reckless action, it ends up in the hands of human beings. Then, the superior beings unleash their fury on the culprits. The difference perhaps, is that the consequences of the actions of Prometheus fell over him, while the rest of the human beings were able, thanks to him, to enjoy the benefits of controlling fire. But in the other story, Adam and Eve commit a crime for which all the rest of mankind is to be blamed for all time, and while Prometheus is devoured day after day by a monster, Adam and Eve are just expelled from a paradise of laziness and relax, to face the crude reality of hard work for survival. But that last point reflects only idiosyncratic particularities of the peoples which originated these myths. Apart from that, the two stories share analogue elements.

The relation of these two tales with our subject of concern here, comes in the form of Ishmael and Ahab. The former represents a model of society, of religion, of man. He is the ambassador of the western civilisation in front of the eyes of our abstract judgement. In that sense, Ishmael is one of those who attempted to control nature by the might of their knowledge. But he is not satisfied with all of this and so, he is directing his footsteps towards a new horizon. But we shall deal with this later on. The latter, is the incarnation of the most powerful energy that has moved western men during the last thousand years: pride. Ahab is pride made flesh and he attempts to dominate all the elements that fall into the threshold of human existence: his life, his destiny, his own nature and God. Ahab is beyond all of this and his function (after all, no matter how proud he could be, he is still just a character on somebody's novel) is to fight until the end. That is the reason why there is a Captain Ahab in all of us. The very essence of human life implies fighting against death. Every day of human life is a show off of the powerful desire for life that flows through our veins, until it consumes itself. Thus, our life is entropy.

However, we are different from Ahab because we are given (by the configuration of our parent reality) two absolute laws: one is that we are supposed to be spawned prior to be alive and the other is that, at some point after being spawned, we will irremediably die. But Ahab has never been spawned nor has he born. He was created at some point and then put into a novel (a projection of human emotions) And then he is given a destiny, which is to die trying to slay a ghostly whale. But then again, every time that we open the book –as in the movies –Ahab is “alive” again. So, the character is immortal, as long as its containing universe exists.

Pride then, is neverending, as long as those who are able to have it exist. We can examine it from different perspectives, and argue on different approaches towards what is Ahab exactly hunting, but one thing is for sure: his function as a character is to act as a mirror for the reader.

We are driven across the pages of this book by the void of Ishmael's inner self, into looking to ourselves in the mirror of Ahab. If we set our sight beyond the immediate image, we will see, as we are immersed in the same cultural model, that some conventions apply

to us as well. After this we can start asking ourselves a couple of questions on a good many subjects. Having in mind the enormous amount of introspection and soliloquy that these book carries, it seems to be almost obvious that a reflective reading was one of the intentions of the author. A trascendental discussion which crosses the boundaries of space and time. Quite romantic.

Back again on the idea of stealing sacred values from the Gods, Ahab himself is compared to Prometheus:

*Often, when forced from his hammock by exhausting and intolerably vivid dreams of the night, which, resuming his own intense thoughts through the day, carried them on amid a clashing of phrenses, and whirled them round and round and round in his blazing brain, till the very throbbing of his life-spot became insufferable anguish; and when, as was sometimes the case, these spiritual throes in him heaved his being up from its base, and a chasm seemed opening in him, from which forked flames and lightnings shot up, and accursed fiend beckoned him to leap down among them; when this hell in himself yawned beneath him, a wild cry would be heard through the ship; and with glaring eyes Ahab would burst from his state room, as though escaping from a bed that was on fire . Yet these, perhaps, instead of being the unsuppressable symptoms of some latent weakness, or fright at his own resolve, were but the plainest tokens of its intensity. For, at such times, crazy Ahab, the scheming , unappeasedly steadfast hunter of the white whale; this Ahab that had gone to his hammock, was not the agent that so caused him to burst from it in horror again. The latter was the eternal, living principle or soul in him; and in sleep, being for the time dissociated from the characterizing mind, which at other times employed it for its outer vehicle or agent, it spontaneously sought escape from the scorching contiguity of the frantic thing, of which, for the time, it was no longer an integral. But as the mind does not exist unless leagued with the soul, therefore it must have been that, in Ahab's case, yielding up all his thoughts and fancies to his one supreme purpose; that purpose, by its own sheer inveteracy of will, forced itself against gods and devils into a kind of self-assumed, independent being of its own. Nay, could grimly live and burn , while the common vitality to which it was conjoined,fled horror-stricken from the unbidden and unfathered birth. Therefore, the tormented spirit that glared out of bodily eyes, when what seemed Ahab rushed from his room, was for the time but a vacated thing, a formless somnambulistic being , a ray of living light, to be sure, but without an object to color, and therefore a blankness in itself . God help thee, old man, thy thoughts have created a creature in thee; and he whose intense thinking thus makes him a Prometheus; a vulture feeds upon that heart for ever; that vulture the very creature he creates .*

26

So, Captain Ahab is punished. He sought to control the fire in his soul, but it devoured him. The puritan, the captain, the strong-willed man, the finest example; everything is lost to the consuming desire created by his soul. Ambition turns power against its holder. The lesson is clear, but it has been repeating through the ages. The Jewes were aware of this and so

<sup>26</sup> Ibid; P. 174

wrote the bible. The Greeks told us about Prometheus. And America, the mighty America, tells us of Ahab. The lesson is clear, but it remains unheeded.

The book proposes a moral reflection developed on the monomaniac insanity of Ahab. It is a questioning, a depiction of something too real to be ignored. We could doubt about the existence of Moby Dick if we have never seen an albino whale. We can also doubt about the ferocity of whales, if the only whales we know are those friendly animals shown in pictures. But we cannot doubt the existence of ambition, nor the consequences of carrying it on until the end. We have seen those many times and it seems that we will continue to see them.

The nouns and adjectives selected on this passage tell us about a tormented Ahab. A man who is being consumed from inside, who suffers. But they also tell us about a Divine, who is trapped in a miserable body, sharing the slow decay of human flesh with an crazy old man. Ahab is therefore, a dual character, both a man and a god.

This divinity of Ahab (to which we shall return in the final part of this investigation) leads us back to the twilight of the gods which we were trying to introduce at the beginning of this subsection. We were discussing the reflections made by Ishmael regarding the will of God, of the protestant god in which he is supposed to believe. Being the crew of the Pequod a small Babylonia, it conveys a constellation of beliefs, some pagan, some dogmatic and some metaphysical, like Ahab. Moreover, there are several instances of supernatural events associated with the trip, like Elijah's prophecies or the mysterious men brought secretly into the ship by the Captain. This sets the story in a point where the traditional and conventional (thus accepted) God is not the only truth, but a small part of it. The author is brilliant portraying diversity of religion in the novel. But this diversity has also a function, which is to lessen the strength of the standard paradigms. A piece of black wood is a much a god as God himself as long as there is somebody to believe in it. Ishmael thoughts in this line are very meaningful, because they place God inside the minds of the believers, almost as a *software*, instead on outside, as a principle of construction of the universe. An interesting discussion about what is god as a mental construction can be derived from here, but it does not concerns us. What is of importance to us, is the fact that every manifestation of divinity is validated thanks to the structure and development of the plot (in terms of characters, their thinking and the imagery associated, such as Ahab's and Moby Dick's characterisations, which include divine components) and that supports the original assumption of the decadence of the paradigm –the religious one in this case.

But this subsection is called "The man as an animal" because of the role of Queequeg as an emissary of nature. In that sense, Queequeg would be closer to the primeval man, who had no god over his head and who roamed the land free from bindings and conventions. That man was in a *natural state* as Rousseau called it. We have seen that both Ishmael and Ahab are on the other end of the rope. But when Ishmael accepts Queequeg, he is accepting the savage that lives in himself. Ishmael is getting closer to the very essence of mankind, the unconsciousness of freedom.

Notwithstanding, there is a further element to be considered on this lecture. Ishmael is after all, getting closer to another man, not the spirit of nature, even if that man represents it. Therefore, Ishmael's embracing of nature is artificial. If it were not, the rest of the story would not have been necessary, and Ishmael could have lived happily ever after in the arms of the cannibal.

Ishmael is a motherless child. In chapter four, we are told that he was punished by his stepmother because he was bothering some insects. This is a first approach to the notion of power and hierarchical relations (from which the relation between man and god is the final

step) in which Ishmael is punished by a superior force. But after this, he suffers one of the worst experiences of his life: The nightmare.

In old times, people believed that when they felt a weight on their chests while sleeping, was due to a demon. This gave birth to the concept of nightmare, which eventually got another meaning (a bad dream only, not necessarily including any weight) Ishmael felt this oppression, which wedged him to his bed, after the incident with the bugs. Divine justice? Maybe, but also an instance to become aware of the loneliness of his life. This loneliness accompanied him to his adulthood. When he found Queequeg, he experienced a similar emotion; the arm of the savage seemed to merge with the bedclothes and its marks made it surprisingly unreal. But in the savage, Ishmael found a good friend and warmth. Thus, Ishmael also found redemption from a part of his suffering. Nevertheless, this encounter is not as powerful as to completely redeem him. So Ishmael still needs to go on sailing. What is Ishmael looking for when he embraces Queequeg? What is the ultimate pursue of his soul when he decides to go to the sea? A mother.

On the primitive surface of the young Gaia, there appeared a special liquid, a combination of certain elements which gave rise to life. This is analogue to the female construction, certainly a resemblance of the Earth itself. An organism must necessarily reflect the environment under it is born. So women carry in their wombs a synthetic version of this original juice, the womb's fluid.

What is then Ishmael doing when going awhaling? Returning (or trying to return) to the matrix, the mother of all creation. His affective needs make him go on an almost spiritual journey to find that part of his soul which is missing. But whether he succeeds or not, we cannot tell, for his hermetic personality will not allow us. If we consider the fact that the story is told after everything happened and that Ishmael is, at some points, "happy" when narrating the events of his adventure, we can infer two possible results: either Ishmael found what he was looking for and became a complete man or he finished in a disturbed mental state. That is to be answered by every reader of the book, according to his or her own thought. But we are inclined to think that the second alternative is more likely to be true, due to his obsession with details and information that, compared to the tragedy of his adventure, are meaningless and of little importance.

But outside the lines of the novel, the characters are given the emotions that the author allows and not a bit more. Hence, if Ishmael is unable to express in richer terms his feelings towards the circumstances of his tragic voyage, it is because the author did not grant any more information on the subject. This is both an achievement of the writer but also a failure. It creates a new paradigm of characters, but leaves the previous question unanswered.

## 4.- Flesh

The justification for a separate analysis of decadence in terms of flesh, is that it has a different nature from the decadence of beliefs and models; living beings belong to a different realm, the realm of the concrete, and because of that, their decadence can be witnessed, or seen. Decadence of abstractions (or, as we said before, of the systems that support them, and more particularly, of the elements that create those systems) occurs smoothly over time and sometimes it is hard to determine its exact boundaries. For this reason, that sort of decadence is subject to omission. Human beings are most likely to attempt to omit certain things which result unpleasant or sometimes they are just unable to understand the deepest meanings of the events that occur in their lives. Therefore, decadence of abstractions can be denied, sometimes in spite of the evidence of its existence. But decadence manifested through the changes on flesh, would hardly be regarded as unreal. Ageing is part of that process, and although some of us might feel inclined to deny its effects on our appearance, it can be noticed nonetheless.

Then we shall revise some instances of the decadence of flesh to provide with additional evidence to our assertions. We avoided making this kind of evidence the central part of our argumentation, because of the same immediateness of the subject. Such explicitness would have been rather vulgar and too easy a solution.

To begin with the account of decadence on fleshy matters, we shall develop a subject suggested by Professor Ferrada, which refers to the marks or *carvings* that the crucial characters have. This would constitute a subtle but spread sort of decadence. The first consideration to be made is related to the importance of writing. Historians have told us that History began when men created writing, and consequently, have made a division in the existence of the race. Everything before that, belongs to a savage period, to the un-civilization. After the invention of writing, men were able to record their experience, and won a couple of battles on their war against evanescence. We could say, from a psychological perspective, that a good deal of what makes us be what we are, is our memory. Without the precedent, we would repeat our mistakes more often. So the value of experience in the process of learning is unimaginable.

The role of writing is to preserve this experience, to keep the trace of knowledge and to set the foundations of our ever-changing societies. Everything we know that we have been as a global community is due to writing. We would hardly be able to refer to the Greeks as our past without their written legacy. It would probably have been lost in the short existence of oral language. Then, to some extent, writing represents a part of the existence, a part of ourselves.

Keeping this in mind, we go back to the idea of the carving over the characters. The first example introduced by the novel are the tattoos on the skin of Queequeg. They are meaningful, yet even Queequeg is unable to understand their meaning:

***With a wild whimsiness, he now used his coffin for a sea-chest; and emptying into it his canvas bag of clothes, set them in order there. Many spare hours he spent, in carving the lid with all manner of grotesque figures and drawings; and it seemed that hereby he was striving, in his rude way, to copy parts of the twisted***

*tattooing on his body. And this tattooing had been the work of a departed prophet and seer of his island, who, by those hieroglyphic marks, had written out on his body a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth; so that Queequeg in his own proper person was a riddle to unfold; a wondrous work in one volume; but whose mysteries not even himself could read, though his own live heart beat against them; and these mysteries were therefore destined in the end to moulder away with the living parchment*

<sup>27</sup>

*whereon they were inscribed, and so be unsolved to the last.*

There quite a lot of other instances of Queequeg's tattoos being mentioned in the book. Suffice to say, that as the narrator expresses, those marks could be read. They have the meaning of the secrets of the universe for a pagan tribe. They equal the bible for the judeo-christian tradition.

The fact that Queequeg could eventually be read has a deeper connotation. Ishmael is somehow "reading" the savage while striving to build their relationship. The question then, would be whether Queequeg can read Ishmael as well or not.

Captain Ahab is also marked. He has a scar that goes from his head to, apparently, his foot. He has got a mark and a missing leg, physical signs of history. But, is it not so easy to remember Cain and his mark? Both characters have betrayed God and sustain their actions in their blind pride. Maybe the difference is that Ahab died with his boots on, or at least, one of them.

But proud Ahab is also marked in another fashion, related to flesh, but abstract. His name is the name of a jewish tyrant. We can read his body and easily understand the suffering of his life, and we can read his name and make a little research. In our minds, every time we listen to his name, it will remind us of something bad, a betrayer of the faith. Also in his name, we find an indirect reference to predestination; in the case of Dracula, for instance, the name was Vlad, which has no satanic connotation as far as we know. Dracula was born a christian but he felt betrayed by God and abandoned religion. Ahab on the other hand, was baptized Ahab, so he has been the same all over his life. He was determined by external factors to become Ahab. Here we could discuss about the power of naming to construct realities. In linguistics, it is often heard that language configures the vision of the world for the different peoples. If this is true, the name would, to at least some extent, determine persons and characters in one way or another.

And what is a name? Something that can be read. It is a basic device to identify and distinguish one element from another and from all that surrounds them. A name is a piece of history, which tells us about a greater history, the history of existence. Even more, in the case of a novel, where the names are deliberately chosen, the fact that Ahab is named in that way, denotes the intention that the author had towards the character.

There two references to carving on the whales, particularly on Moby Dick, which is defined as marked with scars made by harpoons. Also, Moby Dick carries several harpoons attached on its back. The second reference, comes in the form of a whole chapter. In 'The blanket', the author describes the marks on the skin of whales and compares them to hieroglyphics:

*In life, the visible surface of the Sperm Whale is not the least among the many marvels he presents. Almost invariably it is all over obliquely crossed and re-*

<sup>27</sup> Ibid; P. 399

*crossed with numberless straight marks in thick array, something like those in the finest Italian line engravings. But these marks do not seem to be impressed upon the isinglass substance above mentioned, but seem to be seen through it, as if they were engraved upon the body itself. Nor is this all. In some instances, to the quick, observant eye, those linear marks, as in a veritable engraving, but afford the ground for far other delineations. These are hieroglyphical; that is, if you call those mysterious cyphers on the walls of pyramids hieroglyphics, then that is the proper word to use in the present connexion. By my retentive memory of the hieroglyphics upon one Sperm Whale in particular, I was much struck with a plate representing the old Indian characters chiselled on the famous hieroglyphic palisades on the banks of the Upper Mississippi. Like those mystic rocks, too, the mystic-marked whale remains undecipherable. This allusion to the Indian rocks reminds me of another thing. Besides all the other phenomena which the exterior of the Sperm Whale presents, he not seldom displays the back, and more especially his flanks, effaced in great part of the regular linear appearance, by reason of numerous rude scratches, altogether of an irregular, random aspect. I should say that those New England rocks on the seacoast, which Agassiz imagines to bear the marks of violent scraping contact with vast floating icebergs—I should say, that those rocks must not a little resemble the Sperm Whale in this particular. It also seems to me that such scratches in the whale are probably made by hostile contact with other whales; for I have most*

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*remarked them in the large, full-grown bulls of the species.*

This quotation shows how the markings are interpreted as readings, although their meaning remains hidden. The last part of the paragraph mentions a possible origin for such markings. If we sum them up, we have meaning on the one hand and experience on the other. Or to put it differently, experience is the vehicle to build meaning. Meaning in a deeper sense, is an answer, to a trascendental question, elaborated at a distant point in time. A whaling trip would be a fine way to acquire such marks and thus, to capture the meaning of existence.

The acquisition of experience and its subsequent understanding is related to the idea of controlling fire. Let us put it simpler: when a little child gets burnt he will learn that fire is dangerous, and in future situations will try to deal with it more carefully. Fire can leave marks on the skin of the child, who by looking at them, will always remember the painful episode. This experience shall also leave behind a mark on the mind of the child, a signal, a strong memory to help preserving the species. In “Moby Dick” we find those children that have suffered from fire. The difference between them in relation to this particular topic, is the way they react after it. Professor Ferrada also suggested that Pip may have got marked after falling overboard into the sea and watching a whale from a very close distance. He and Captain Ahab share a similar background then. But Pip has mental injuries, which place him in a sort of innocent stand. Ahab got physical injuries, which will remind him forever of the damage received. Consequently, Pip is out of his mind and fearful, while Ahab has developed a monomaniac case and attempts to destroy the force of nature that crippled him. These two characters are two responses to a similar question, the question of the suffering in life. However, Pip tells Ahab that he is going to stand by him until the end. Quite a curious reaction for a little boy. In his madness, the boy might be able to realise that he

<sup>28</sup> Ibid; P 261

alone cannot do anything against the whales, so he embraces Ahab as a kind of superhero who will avenge him.

These two characters are located at the opposite sides of the hierarchy. Ahab is a feared man and Pip is a fearful one. But they are similar in the dissociation of their personalities with the trauma of their lives. As the author says, there are two Ahab's, one that is an old captain, half-way gone into madness and one that is divine, that is immortal and that embodies the highest pursuit of the spirit. But there are also two Pips. Pip usually talks about the "coward Pip" as if he were another person, in fact, after Ahab accepts him in a closer relation, Pip says the following:

*Here he this instant stood, I stand in his air,--but I'm alone. Now were even poor Pip here I could endure it, but he's missing. Pip! Pip! Ding, dong, ding! Who's seen Pip? He must be up here; let's try the door. What? neither lock, nor bolt, nor*

<sup>29</sup>

*bar; and yet there's no opening it.*

Ahab and Pip then, are similar in their management of the conflict. Maybe the captain realises this and so he *adopts* the little boy. But apart from this, their relation is somehow connected to the relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg. Is there any difference between Ishmael and Pip when trying to find relief in other person? Both characters are incomplete; Pip finds a father in Ahab, Ishmael a brother in Queequeg, but the difference in quality is determined only by the difference in age. Ishmael in the last lines of the book defines himself as an orphan, which is another similarity between him and Pip. So, there seems to be a sort of common factor between all these characters, expressed not only by means of physical markings, but by means of something else, more complex and which is hard to determine at first sight: emptiness.

Finally, we would like to mention three other instances of this particular kind of decadence: The first one is constituted by the plaques on the church. Although they were made of stone and metal, they are put there to signal the absence of the body. There is an incomplete certainty regarding the departure of those lost mariners. One could easily think that they are dead, for it is not very likely that they could have survived amid the ocean. But as long as their bodies are not found, there always will be a slight hope, for that is the nature of human emotions. Other plaques were mere reminders of reported dead sailors. The decadence of flesh is present in the novel by means of elision. In the same line, Ahab's missing leg is "present" alike.

The second element is the corpse of every slain whale that appears from time to time. There are many instances of this explicit type of decadence in the book, so we shall just limit to mention them and to say that their value, lies on the building of the atmosphere. The mariners of the Pequod are surrounded by emptiness and the only realisation of their voyage is the hunt of whales, which implies blood and killing. Hence, the choices for those men range between the absolute naught of the sea and the butchery towards the whales.

The third and last element to be recalled here, has to do with death in particular instances. Aside from the names of dead sailors on the church's walls, there are many other deaths detailed in Moby Dick. These are explicit too and share a similar function to those of the whales, though the difference is clear, they are human deaths, and due to that, their emotional value is greater. In particular, the most striking example (and puzzling as well) is the death of the entire crew of the Pequod, save for Ishmael.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid; P. 437*

Further on, we could name the large number of death-related elements mentioned. The list is long, but to name a few we have: coffins, darkness, grimness, blackness, hell, misery and so on. The rich descriptions of places, circumstances and events empower the feeling of funereal atmosphere contained in this novel.

There is still one character missing: the protagonist. We have seen that in fleshy matters (including the brain here) most of the characters present markings. We have said that those marks represent their experience and background and we have also said that their marks correspond to some kind of cryptic writing. But we have not been able to recognise any such markings on Ishmael. Nevertheless, Ishmael possesses a far greater scar, and from this issue we will be derived into another part of this research. The mark of Ishmael is the novel itself. As we have noted before, Captain Ahab's revenge against Moby Dick constitutes an entropy. But the story of Ishmael is circular. Considering that it is told after it happened, the Ishmael that we are presented cannot be the, let us call him, original Ishmael. We behold the adventure of a man who is remembering it, therefore with some distance between the fact and the narrative. Of the original, primeval Ishmael we know nothing. We can just infer a couple of things about his motivations, but little else can be said. To what extent and in what ways the whaling catastrophe changed him, will remain a mystery. His opinions, his sensations, his emotions and his reactions prior the occurring of the events are unknown to us. Hence, the Ishmael that we know, is the Ishmael that survived, the one that is marked. If Queequeg presents a explicit marking in the form of a tattoo, Ishmael presents an implicit one, but so real that we can hold it in our hands and read it, as Ishmael himself read of whaling adventures on their very skins.

## 5.- Self

There is yet another expression of decadence associated to "Moby Dick". It is about a change on the form of the characters. This has to do with external factors, such as Melville's influence in the years to come, over the literature of his nation. We shall briefly discuss this, for its implications are far reaching and demand a separate study. Therefore, we will attempt to characterise this and propose a hypothesis, but without going much further on the search for exhaustive evidence.

Regarding decadence of self, there are two key concepts: white or whiteness and void. The white colour is perhaps the greatest symbolic element from the great number of such devices that the author uses. It has many possible lectures depending on the associated elements and characters, and since we have revised many of those and also that sort of analysis is rather abundant on literature, we shall not concern much with it, except to focus our attention on the pragmatic consequences of such election and its functions in the plot.

In this functional approach, we can say that as white is an empty value, it is most likely to be filled with information, provided that certain conditions occur. The most remarkable instances of white in the novel, are the skin of the whale and Ahab's leg. This has the effect of establishing a connection between the two characters. The fact that Ahab made his leg from a whale bone proves this to be deliberate. But beyond that, the function of the white colour is to present Moby Dick as a ghostly character. What do we know about this Moby Dick during a good many stages of the novel? Little in the form of specific information. Indeed, most of what he 'hear' about the leviathan comes from what some characters say. We do not see the 'real thing' until the book is about to end. We know the story of Ahab and his battle against the beast. We know some general facts that invest Moby Dick with god-like characteristics and we also know that the whale is a rare animal, one of a kind, which has gained notoriety around the world. But the whale will not tell us its story, nor get involved on a lengthy-shakespearean soliloquy. For the most part of the book, we have only external references of it, which builds the character from outside, drawing its contour, but filling it only with the reader's expectation. Such is the function of the white colour.

We could not say that Ishmael is a white character though. But he is also built as a contour rather than as a solid figure. The character is equivalent to a cut piece of a painting. We see its form, but we cannot see its content. This is the decadence of self, which created a new literary paradigm and which is the final breath of the romantic tradition. After Ishmael, the new generations of American writers had the chance to change their protagonists from subject to individual. Subjectivity died when Ishmael was born.

It is not that Ishmael has no opinions, but his development as a character is equivalent to first-person perspective in films. Melville took the paradigm to the extreme, and with his action he broke it and created a new one. Let us call it 'Ishmael'.

## 6.- Moby... Dickinson?

No, this is not a quixotic attempt at creating the most bizarre chimaira in the history of literary research. We are not trying to intermix a tiger and a lion to obtain a sorry creature unable to reproduce itself. What we intent to do here, is to establish some common points between Melville and Emily Dickinson, on the basis of their membership on a literary tradition. We have noticed some similarities *a priori*, and we would like to explore them a little bit, understanding that a society is a living organism, in which its parts interact with and influence each other, directly or indirectly. In the case of literature, we could say that it is a mirrored version of the soul of a nation. Who is Melville to the United States? Who Poe and who Dickinson? Are they not the sons of a time? Are they not the sons of civil war, of romanticism, of mystic and trascendental experiences, of madness? Is it just a plain coincidence that three of the most prominent literary figures of the brief history of America are so closely related to insanity?

There must be a connection between these artists' sensibilities and that we propose to explore by means of analising their main topics. We shall do so briefly here, to introduce the discussion, though its development will have to wait until somebody decides to pick up the glove.

We have selected, for the better understanding of our hypothesis, a few poems by Emily Dickinson, in order to illustrate the subjects that are found also in Melville and particularly in "Moby Dick".

### **A Word A word is dead When it is said, Some say. I say it just Begins to live That day.**

The existence of entropy in the book was discussed under the label of decadence of flesh, were we referred to marks and tattoos, and further on, to Ishmael's story itself. This poem by Emily Dickinson is another example of entropy, a process which contains both the beginning and the end in itself. What Dickinson tells us here could be summarised in the word 'realisation'. The first two lines contain the entropy, while the rest leave an open ending; the word starts to live, we do not see its end. We cannot see the end of Ishmael either.

This but a midget of an example. There are many other coincidences in themes and interests between the two authors:

### **XXXVII – Void Great streets of silence led away To neighborhoods of pause; Here was no notice, no dissent, No universe, no laws. By clocks 't was morning, and for night The bells at distance called; But epoch had no basis here, For period exhaled.**

In what point in time is Ishmael's adventure located? We do not know for sure, we only know that he was rather young. He was at the sea, where the only variation of time is marked by night and day. The rest is a timeless experience, in a time-suspended world (after all, during the whaling trip, the visible universe is almost completely reduced to the ocean and the ship) a void. We have seen that Ishmael and Moby Dick have values near to zero. They are voids to be filled by the readers.

With this, we do not intend to say that Melville influenced Emily Dickinson, and that her poetry owes something to The Whale, but what we intend to show is that three different writers, in a common time and place had similar interests, which made them explore similar topics. In other words, we aim to prove that the writers –as member of the literary tradition, and regardless of their stylistic differences –shared interests and questionings. These authors would be the symptoms of a state of the nation, without a defined name, but clear enough as to produce them.

But what might be mentioned as the most striking similarity between the three of them is their recurrent discussion of death. We have already seen with, minute evidence, the funereal flavour given to the early chapters of “*Moby Dick*”, we know that one of the typical themes on Dickinson’s poetry is death in all its forms (particularly that of her own) and we also know that death was a permanent guest at Poe’s table. Moreover, the use of certain symbolic features are common to the three:

In Melville:

*Nor even in our superstitions do we fail to throw the same snowy mantle round our phantoms; all ghosts rising in a milk-white fog--Yea, while these terrors seize us, let us add, that even the king of terrors, when personified by the evangelist,*  
<sup>30</sup>  
*rides on his pallid horse. Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way?*  
<sup>31</sup>

In Dickinson:

*Retreat was out of hope, -- Behind, a sealed route, Eternity's white flag before, And God at every gate.<sup>32</sup> Far safer, of a midnight meeting External ghost, Than an interior confronting That whiter host.*  
<sup>33</sup>

And in Poe:

*But there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow.*  
<sup>34</sup>

The evidence is given. It is our interest to develop this subject further on, and explore even more possibilities, such as the role of Melville and Dickinson as forefathers of the modernism in American literature. There is a common ground for them (and maybe for some others as well) which will sustain future investigations on this same line. For the time being, we can only speculate on the relation between mental disorders and the creative power. A recent study, carried out by Ramey and Weisberg, aimed to demonstrate if such relation existed, by conducting a study on the ouvre of Emily Dickinson. They analysed her periods

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid; P. 166*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid; P. 169*

<sup>32</sup> Loomis Todd, Mabel and Higginson, T. W. “*Emily Dickinson. Poems: three series, complete*” Project Gutenberg, 2004  
<http://www.gutenberg.net/>

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>34</sup> Poe, Edgar Allan. “*The narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*” Project Gutenberg, <http://www.gutenberg.net/>

of activity and the possible causal relation between depression and other issues and her prolific seasons. The results were interesting: it could not be proved that mental disorders would foster creativity. Then, we cannot assume that the mental cases of Dickinson, Poe and Melville (and others) are just a coincidence, derived from an already troubled mind. It is more likely that Dickinson's seclusion, Melville's depression and Poe's madness were related to environmental factors, in which case their surroundings played a fundamental role. Therefore, they developed their insanity and genius for the sake of America.

## 7.- Conclusions

As main conclusion we can say that we found a good deal of evidence to prove our original assesment: "Moby Dick" is a novel whose underlying theme is decadence. This decadence is related to the book internally and externally. Internally, this decadence makes the protagonist feel alienation, and that is the origin of the conflict. Externally, a similar phenomenon allows the writer to create such a novel. Even though he received bad critics during his life time, the novel succeeds in creating a new paradigm, inaugurating the new perspective of American literature in the twentieth century: modernism. This construction influences other authors such as Fitzgerald or even Hemingway. Melville acquires a higher status as writer, while brilliantly depicting through the efficient use of symbols, the decay of the conventions of his time. These conventions have been defined here, as moral standards, religious beliefs and anthropological perspectives. In fact it is remarkably the ironic sense used by Melville when giving such high values to the cannibals. It is not necessary to explain the reach of this ironic construction. Suffice to remember the line about the drunken christian and the sober cannibal. This reflects how the trusts have been changed, and through the exploration, the new man seeks to find a different model, in order to upgrade the already rotting roots of his society.

This new man is an orphan. Rather than being a new born, we could say that Ishmael is the last of a tribe, who desperately struggles to find a new one, to fit and fight for survival.

So far we have attempted to describe, analyse, contrast and characterise the way in which Melville achieves all the above mentioned setting. It may seem that at some points we were succesful while at some others we were not. But all we can say is that having this novel so distinct parts in nature and style, we could only –by means of our limited resources –try to follow the serpentine rhythm set by the author. Nevertheless, our intention with this research was to provide some insights regarding the complexities of "Moby Dick" and from that perspective, we believe that we managed to do so, at least to some extent. To accomplish this, we revised the different devices employed by Melville in the building of his book, trying to relate concepts from an associative perspective. It is through association that the different parts of a novel come together and acquire their meaning. Thus, semantic associations were established as much as it was possible.

We deeply agree with the statement of Angela Nattero's 1961 thesis, which said that no matter how hard one try at working with "Moby Dick" many of its secrets will remain hidden. Obviously, it was not our purpose to disclose every single symbol of this novel, but only to see to what extent those symbols evinced the presence of decadence.

The analysis of the book has been divided into functional fragments, in order to make its reading easier. However, it was not possible to keep a strict sense of order throughout all this investigation, chiefly because of time but also because we tried to follow the line of the book. So, when this thesis loses in tidiness it wins in fidelity to the order of the novel.

The procedure employed was to read at least half the novel before starting redaction. Notes were taken at every important hint or possible quotation, to prevent the loss of ideas due to lack of memory.

Contrasted with the critical essays that the Norton critical edition brings (included in the bibliography) we found many similarities and coincidences. The idea was to avoid the reading of critical papers, so to keep judgement as objective and uninfluenced as possible. And after comparing, we realised that there were many common ideas. We were satisfied at this, but at the same time we avoided excessive quotations from sources other than the novel itself, in order to grant the maximum possible number of original thinking.

There are a few passages which make reference to ideas pointed by professor Ferrada. We considered that it was fair to mention this fact as well. Also, the idea of the return to the communion with nature was suggested by Julie. We appreciate their collaboration and support.

In general, the objectives of this research were fulfilled in different degrees. However, due to the extension and complexity of the novel, we finish this research with the feeling that it could never be fully completed. Moby Dick has the property of allowing for more and more further lectures or interpretations, and that is one of the greatest achievements of its creator, no matter the considerations that we may or may not have in terms of form.

There is a final question to be answered (we are aware that there are others which have more than one answer or no answer at all) and it is whether this novel presents a nihilistic or apocalyptic perspective.

We are inclined towards the second alternative. Ishmael survived the voyage, in spite of how traumatic its consequences might have been. Consequently, Ishmael has another opportunity, to recover his life and start all over. Lazarus he calls himself, for he has come back to life from the very bowels of hell.

Therefore, as he survived, the approach of the end of the book has an apocalyptic nature. Most of mankind, here represented by the Pequod, dies, but a few special, selected ones survive (Ishmael) fulfilling in this way the apocalyptic conditions.

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# Appendix

Moby-Dick or, The Whale – Herman Melville

- Chapters: 135
- Words: 209.714
- ‘Whale’ : 1143 instances
- ‘Ahab’ : 512 instances
- ‘Sea’ : 434 instances
- ‘Pequod’ : 173 instances
- ‘God’ : 148 instances
- ‘Dead’ : (213) 91 instances
- ‘Death’ : 88 instances
- ‘Died’ : 20 instances
- ‘Dying’ : 14 instances
- ‘Jonah’ : 84 instances
  - ‘Moby Dick’ : 83 instances
  - ‘Leviathan’ : 83 instances
  - ‘Dark’ : (90) 58 instances
  - ‘Darkness’ : 32 instances
- ‘Love’ : 53 instances
  - ‘Heaven’: 50 instances
  - ‘Ishmael’ : 20 instances
  - ‘Hell’ : 16 instances
  - ‘Evil’ : 12 instances
  - ‘Hate’ : 9 instances
  - ‘Satan’ : 3 instances