

Locations as Characters,
A Look at Geography in *Moby-Dick*

Melville's *Moby-Dick* is a richly woven psychological masterpiece. Time and again concepts and characters are deftly paralleled and contrasted. The sheer density and breadth of references spans biblical allusions, a range of mythologies, as well as the geographical knowledge of a learned cartographer. One could easily argue there is too much for anyone to fully appreciate without at least a few careful read-throughs. Perhaps Melville's most commonly underappreciated device, however, is his complex use of geography. His locations don't only represent real world challenges but also states of emotion, metaphors for characters and relationships, and metaphysical beliefs. Melville not only uses the location and his active description of it to affect the audience, but deftly utilizes his readers' preconceptions and emotional reactions to these locations. Though examples are abound in the novel, I will focus on interpreting Cape Horn as an analogue for the physical and spiritual life of the whalers, and how this idea may be extended to other locations in *Moby-Dick*.

Melville's representation of Cape Horn exhibits an interesting dual nature, a place simultaneously filled with dread and death but evoking adventure and honor. Furthermore, this dual nature can be seen as an extended metaphor for the life and mind of the seafaring whalers.

As a place of danger, Cape Horn is presented in unambiguous terms. This is first seen in Chapter 3, *The Spouter Inn*, when Ishmael analyzes the oil painting on the wall. He sees a powerful ship, "...a Cape-Horner in a great hurricane; the half-foundered ship weltering there..." so named a Cape Horner because it's supposed to be strong enough to make the trip around the coast, though here instead it is destroyed and sinking in the storm. The ship's precise location is unclear—Cape Horn is the only geographical clue— and the description of the stormy combat scene with a whale in this environment is therefore painted geographically exclusively by Cape Horn. The description reinforces our association of Cape Horn with majesty and danger, especially for whaling crews who see much danger in their professions. This association is seen many times throughout the novel, Cape Horn is a place of violence and the epitome of a dangerous location for the whalers. For example in Chapter 49, *The Hyena*, Stubb exclaims "I've lowered for whales from a leaking ship in a gale off Cape Horn" as a kind of hyperbole to describe how the act of whaling is always dangerous. What is unclear though, is whether or not the statement is even a joke, or a way to make light of the real danger they exhibit themselves to.

Regardless, Cape Horn represents the standard of danger to these seafarers. Continuing the theme, it appears Melville also associates Cape Horn with Ahab's madness. In Chapters 19 and 41, we hear of "...that thing that happened to him off Cape Horn..." when "...his torn body and gashed soul bled into one another..." but upon leaving this part of the ocean "the old man's delirium seemed left behind him with the Cape Horn swells." The cause of Ahab's madness is clearly his fateful encounter with Moby Dick, but his emotions are tied to his location. While he is passing around the stormy seas of cape, he is mad for three days and needs to be tied down by the crew. The visual imagery of storms and waves raging while Ahab struggles is powerful; and when they move to calmer seas, so does Ahab's rage subside. The danger of Cape Horn is always present with the sailors, so much so that they seem to associate danger itself with the Cape, often using it as a metric to judge other situations.

The whalers' relationship with Cape Horn is not so simple as a place to fear though, instead the two capes, Cape Horn and the Cape of Good Hope, act as gateways to the world they want, filled with adventures away from land and the West. For these sailors, these capes are their escape. The novel seems to emphasize the mystery and excitement of the Pacific Ocean more than anywhere else. Europe and the United States are the known world, but also Africa and South America as continents are not treated with much excitement. Instead, the focus of adventure is on the whaling grounds and Islands in the Pacific Ocean. In the time of the *Moby-Dick* the two capes controlled almost all travel to the Pacific from the old world. The Suez Canal wasn't opened until around 1870, and the Panama Canal until 1914. Additionally the US Transcontinental Railroad wasn't built until 1869 (*The History Channel Website*). Thus, the two capes were the sole obstacles on the only path that separated the Old World from the New. In this sense, The Pequod's crew don't just fear Cape Horn, but see it as a sign of adventure and the connection between their worlds. We see in chapter 2 when Ishmael first sets off he "...started for Cape Horn..." and when he talks of Queequeg's homeland in chapter 10, it's "twenty thousand miles from home, by the way of Cape Horn, that is — which was the only way he could get there — thrown among people as strange to him as though he were in the planet Jupiter." Already we see the Cape as the divider between the known and unknown. In Chapter 16, Peleg criticizes Ishmael for this belief, "Well, what does thou think then of seeing the world? Do ye wish to go round Cape Horn to see any more of it, eh?" Finally, we see Cape Horn used in reference to all the brave adventures of the past. In chapter 24, "Until the whale fishery rounded Cape Horn,... scarcely any intercourse but colonial, was carried on between Europe... and the Pacific Coast." Similarly in chapter 101, Ishmael reflects on "...a fine ship, the Amelia... boldly rounded Cape Horn, and was the first among the nations to lower a

whaleboat of any sort in the great South Sea.” Here Ishmael emphasizes the adventure and honor of these brave early ships, and we see the crux of their adventures lie in rounding Cape Horn. Even in small ways throughout the novel, the words Cape Horn are used to describe adventurous and honorable endeavors. Perhaps the minutest of these, but a good example, is Ishmael’s reference to alcohol amounts in chapter 3 “so on to the full glass — the Cape Horn measure, which you may gulp down for a shilling.” The Cape Horn measure isn’t in reference to the fear of Cape Horn, on the contrary it appears to represent honor and manhood— the drinker is best measured by Cape Horn itself. In these passages and the context of *Moby-Dick*, we see that Cape Horn separates the world the sailors want to avoid from the stories they venture to make.

The contrasting dual nature of Cape Horn can be seen as a metaphor for the sailors themselves. Just as Cape Horn is simultaneously the bane of the seafarers and the gateway to their desires, so are the whalers simultaneously honorable adventurers as well as barbaric and flawed men.

On the one hand, the whalers are seen in many ways the pinnacle of humanity. As we’ve seen in the passages above, these crews are credited with opening up and exploring the world. In fact, chapter 82 is titled *The Honor and Glory of Whaling*, in which many revered heroes and gods are argued to be whalers in one way or another. Furthermore, in multiple chapters we see Ishmael describe the experiences of a whaleship’s crew as greater than someone on land is able to attain. References to the strength of the bonds, and even being “wedded” are seen during the whale processing chapters. In particular, in Chapter 94 Ishmael laments “Would that I could keep squeezing that sperm forever!... , I have perceived that in all cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity.... In thoughts of the visions of the night, I saw long rows of angels in paradise, each with his hands in a jar of spermaceti.” Again Ishmael indicates the superior experience of the seamen, whom in this chapter experience connections and serenity rivaling angels. Perhaps most importantly to the characters in the novel, it is whalers who are praised for hunting the greatest creature on earth. Though this happens throughout, we see whaling extolled particularly in chapter 24, *The Advocate*. Ishmael praises “I know a man that, in his lifetime, has taken three hundred and fifty whales. I account that man more honourable than that great captain of antiquity who boasted of taking as many walled towns.” It’s very clear that for Ishmael, and through him to the reader, that whaling is meant to be placed as a profession on honor and heroism, a profession of adventurers, conquerors, and heroes.

However, Melville also presents the opposing side of the whalers, the barbaric nature of their blood sport. The strongest realization is in Chapter 87, *The Grand Armada*. Here, instead the whale being presented as an epic beast, we see “suspended in those watery vaults, floated the forms of the nursing mothers of the whales... even so did the young of these whales seem looking up towards us, but not at us, as if we were but a bit of Gulfweed in their new-born sight.” We see now a different perspective of the whale; instead of a mythic beast to be conquered, they are serene and peaceful. Not only are they hunted by the whalers, but the young appear too innocent to even understand they should be afraid. Melville contrasts the serenity of this scene with the continuing battle nearby, which emphasizes the aggression of the human side. Furthermore, the way the whalers dispose of their prey also echoes barbarism. First the whalers skin blubber off of the whale while it hangs from the side of the ship where sharks chew at the carcass. The whale is then decapitated to drain the oil. The rest of the whale is then dumped into the ocean unceremoniously, even the edible meat. In contrast to other “savage” cultures, like the Native American’s, the whalers don’t appear to honor or respect the whale, or fully utilize it. Instead it seems, they often mount the head on their ship as a kind of trophy—a practice which Ishmael notes unbalances the boat at worst, or at best weighs it down. The evil of the whalers is perhaps best represented by Ahab, who blindly seeks revenge at all costs, with no regard for his crew. In this light, *Moby Dick* seems to spare *The Pequod* the first two days of encounters, before finally destroying the ship out of necessity, being given no other chance for peace. In another encounter, the *Pequod* crew tricks the inexperienced captain of the *Rose-Bud* into giving them the dead whale, which contains extremely valuable Ambergris. By the end of the novel, the reader should consider whether the antagonist is *Moby Dick*, or the whalers led by Ahab.

The dual nature of the sailors, whales, and locations add complexity to these characters, obscuring their nature from the simple binary of good and evil. Is Cape Horn a deathtrap for sailors, or a gateway to their dreams? Are the sailors the pinnacle of man, or murderers? Is *Moby Dick* the ultimate monster to be conquered, or is he there to punish men for their hubris? This complexity raises many questions in the reader, and is not limited to the examples we’ve seen.

Melville creatively combined locations with reader expectations and historic references to emphasize and highlight meaning. In particular, much emphasis is placed on locations important to whaling but not necessarily to the world as a whole. The novel often speaks about the Pacific Islands, oceans, locations like the Cape of Good Hope and the Sunda straits, which are otherwise unimportant

locations but that are central to Ishmael and Ahab's world. Melville thoroughly discusses places important to whaling, such as the Nantucket and the Isle of Man while locations that may be far more important to world at large go unmentioned. For example, the modern world around the Mediterranean is virtually unexplored in the book. Instead, the Mediterranean is mentioned only in relation to the Egyptians, Greeks, and most often the Bible. In this way the Mediterranean of old is far more important to the characters than the modern Mediterranean; it is what the Pacific Ocean is to the whalers— the center of the adventuring world. In the time of *Moby-Dick*, the modern Mediterranean in contrast has been conquered and doesn't loom large in the mind of these whalers. This premise of exploring how the whalers view different geographic areas is ripe for more analysis. For example, it seems most references to the far north use the ancient Greek mythology of "Hyperborea", a kind of paradise in the north. It seems most people would not associate the frigid ocean and ice of the poles with paradise, however, Ishmael uses just that description many times throughout the novel. This kind of respect cues the reader into the mindset of the whalers, and what they hold as important.

Overall, Melville's text is rich with devices that deepen the reader's understanding of the Pequod's voyage. In addition to allegorical and literary references, Melville commonly uses locations as descriptors, relying on the reader's preconceptions of these locations as well his own words to form more enriched imagery. Many times these locations take on traits of their own, such as Cape Horn, that allow the reader to see how the whalers relate to these locations and the concepts they embody. Though Melville may not have intended it, this relationship keeps evolving. After *Moby Dick* was published, with the opening of the Panama and Suez canals as well as the rapid decline of the whaling industry, his reader's preconceptions have developed differently than in 1851. The reader nowadays can look back with historical context on the coinciding decline of whaling with the declined use of Cape Horn to appreciate a different connection between the whalers and their "gateway to adventure". Many readers now may have no other associations to Cape Horn than whaling, whereas Melville's contemporaries would have known it as a passenger route, and the primary path for trading. As the reader's relationships to these locations keep evolving, so will Melville's ageless text.

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