

Moby-Dick: A Variation on What Cannot Be Known

Farhad Radfar

Moby-Dick¹ is often read as a novel of adventure or obsession. Yet its enduring power lies elsewhere: in its staging of a confrontation with something that refuses explanation, mastery, or repair. The white whale is not merely pursued; it returns, imposes itself, and unsettles every attempt to stabilize its meaning. What Melville places at the center of the narrative is not a riddle to be solved, but an experience that resists being fully assimilated into knowledge.

The Whale and What Returns

The whale is not a simple symbol. Its whiteness does not reassure; it disturbs. White here is not purity but excess—too visible, too empty of contours, too resistant to interpretation. Moby Dick functions less as an object than as a presence that destabilizes those who encounter it. Each response to the whale reveals more about the subject than about the thing itself. This becomes most evident in the contrast between Captain Ahab and Ishmael.

Acting Out or Narrating

For Ahab, the whale condenses a personal offense. What cannot be understood must be attacked; what escapes meaning must be destroyed. His pursuit follows the logic Freud describes as repetition compulsion: what has not been worked through insists on returning, often in destructive forms.² Truth, here, is not discovered but enacted—played out through action driven by what remains unconscious and unassimilated.³

Ishmael, by contrast, survives because he does not seek to conquer the whale. He observes, digresses, narrates. Rather than closing in on the object, he circles around it, allowing language and distance to mediate the encounter. This stance resonates with Lacan's insight that certain objects do not deliver meaning or satisfaction but sustain desire precisely through their elusiveness.⁴ Moby Dick marks a gap that cannot be filled.

Force or Survival

¹ Melville, H., *Moby-Dick; or, the Whale*, London: Penguin Classics, 1851.

² Freud, S., "Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920)", *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVIII*, London: Hogarth Press, 1961.

³ Freud, S., "Constructions in Analysis (1937)", *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XXIII*, London: Hogarth Press, 1961.

⁴ Lacan, J, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book: VIII: Transference*, ed. J.-A. Miller, trans.B. Fink, Cambridge/Madlen: Polity, 2015.

The tragedy of Ahab lies in his refusal of this gap. By transforming what resists meaning into an enemy, he forecloses symbolic distance. Ishmael's narrative position suggests another possibility: living with what cannot be resolved or mastered without turning it into a target of destruction.

This tension extends beyond literature. In clinical practice, one encounters experiences—symptoms, affects, memories—that return insistently and resist interpretation. Some subjects relate to them in an Ahab-like way, seeking eradication at any cost; others, more like Ishmael, find ways to narrate and live alongside them. *Moby-Dick* thus leaves us with an open question: when faced with what cannot be fully known, is survival a matter of force—or of narration?