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Project Mast Head: Captain Ahab's Weaponization of Race and Masculinity in *Moby Dick*

“Man, I see in fight club the strongest and smartest men who’ve ever lived,” Tyler Durden muses to his captivated audience in the cult classic film *Fight Club*. Weaving through crowds of men in a darkened basement, his tone becomes acerbic and smoothly malicious as his head droops in mocking disappointment. “I see all this potential, and I see *squandering*...” he hisses, “slaves with white collars...working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don’t need.” Brad Pitt’s magnetic speech, and his role as Tyler Durden, is a meditation on the futility of modern society, and the emasculation of what he deems “middle children of history, no purpose or place”. Clearly *Fight Club* has some soul searching to do. Anger, indignation, and vengeance drive *Fight Club*’s obsession with the system, yet Tyler Durden’s speech demonstrates his ineffectual struggle to fathom the system itself and subsequent choice chalking it up to an attack on masculinity. The system, however, is much more than slaves with white collars versus society — Herman Melville’s novel *Moby Dick* theorizes it as the largest living creature on the planet. Much of *Moby Dick* is dedicated to fathoming race as a whale, but Captain Ahab’s crazed speech in ‘The Mast Head’ narrows this by focusing on Ahab’s essential identity as a man. The nature of such an obsession, which stems from Ahab’s squandered life and the opportunities the White Whale robbed him of, speaks to a desire to regain his manhood. When Ahab fashions himself as the sole bulwark against the evil of the whale, he presents a challenge that draws the

crew into his futile mission, and by presenting the whale's power as a deeply racialized matter — its whiteness subsumes him as a man — he appeals to the crew's masculinity by presenting the whale as an attacker on it. Because the whale is fashioned as the incarnation of humiliation against man, Ahab's irrational obsession hides under the guise of poetic justice. The White Whale is often argued as an abstract entity of race, impossible to be rationalized, and yet Ahab attempts in his speech to do exactly that. "Who's over me?" he cries, attempting to equalize man with whale by declaring they are all creations of God. Ahab believes in his masculinity by virtue of it being under attack from an outside source. But his failure to articulate the white whale as an abstract obsession, instead choosing to believe it is mortal, is an important component to his idea of masculinity because it minimizes his fatal obsession with the whale in favor of an attack on the whale's mortality. It is this refusal to confront himself, his attack on the system, and his failure to realize the system that ultimately consumes him.

"If the white whale is the ideology of race, what Ahab has lost to it is personal dismemberment and family and society and his own place as a human in the world," Toni Morrison writes in *Unspeakable Things Unspoken* (141). Written primarily to analyze the white whale as the immutability of white supremacy, Morrison's words provide impetus for Ahab's mania. The whale must be racialized or made terrifying in some other way, because without its infamy the point of *Moby Dick* is diminished, or "lobotomized" (138). In Ahab's speech, where he rallies the men to his obsession on the quarter deck, he inserts notes of personal wrongdoing to up the emotion: "He tasks me; he heaps me..." he laments, prompting the crew to imagine a one-man struggle against the whale, which is made into a hulking monster as he continues, "...I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it" (Melville 168). Where can this outrageous strength be sourced from except for what Morrison describes as "whiteness

idealized” (143)? Ahab’s obsession stems from his inflation of the concept of whiteness, rather than race itself. And here this might present some logical gaps to the crew, who at this point are hooked on the idea that Ahab is fighting a battle that can only be won with an army of whalers. No one wants to fight an abstract battle, especially against something like race, which is so overarching it renders the whole mission pointless. Therefore Ahab must remind the crew of Moby Dick’s mortality. One is reminded of Tyler Durden’s other famous quote (he is quite verbose) while torturing The Narrator: “It’s only after we’ve lost everything that we’re free to do anything.” Ahab is not inflicting chemical soap burns on the crew, but the sentiment remains the same. Once Ahab is free of the white whale, the spectre of race as a concept that hangs over him, he will have lost everything he is. The white whale has to be fashioned into a one man struggle against not just a big fish, but a big white fish, in order to have any significance.

Such racialization is made more significant by the language of emasculation Ahab evokes in his speech. This has more universal appeal to the men — the racialization of the Moby Dick is evoked less as race and more as the effect of race subjugating men under its hierarchy. Compounding this, being at its mercy is inherently humiliating to a man’s identity, as Ahab demonstrates. “Hark ye yet again — the little lower layer,” Ahab commands (168), imploring the men to look beyond the simple whale and see it as a specter of race, but also fashioning them into the lower layer in question. In the style of Tyler Durden, Ahab would have the whalers believe that they are the slaves with white collars, because by joining Ahab in his mission they too are shackled by the whale. “All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks” entraps the men in the extended metaphor, from which the only escape is to “thrust through the wall”. Such extended metaphor is interesting because Ahab draws the crew into his own imaginative exercise to dispel the imagined concept of race that he originally invoked. The racialization of

the white whale is effective because subtlety counters subtlety (Morrison 144), this speech equating the inarticulate yet menacing concept of racialization with the other equally ineffable concept that the white whale is out to attack the ship's manhood. "Thrusting" through the wall is to assert one's masculinity, and triumph over subjugation in the lower layer. "Be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him," Ahab vows (Melville 168). This is an interesting 'he was so close, man!' moment of self awareness, because Ahab briefly realizes that the white whale is an 'agent' of Ahab's obsession. Even as the 'principal,' some power is conferred to the individual whale rather than the system. But the latter half of that statement, centering Ahab's revenge via reciprocal hate, quashes any hope of salvation. One might call it getting lost in the sauce of his own metaphor. While Ahab approaches the realization that the whale is an empty mission, his own mania bars him from fully conceptualizing this.

Who is Tyler Durden? The twist in *Fight Club* is that both the cowardly Narrator and Tyler Durden are the same person in one body, competing for ownership as the Narrator races to stop Durden's Project Mayhem. One flaw in explaining the white whale through a masculine lens is that it separates Ahab's male mania from the 'reality' where Moby Dick is just a big fish minding its own business (put in parentheses because all of *Moby Dick* is narrated by an unreliable source). It must be acknowledged that narratively, Moby Dick does deserve the notoriety — because Ahab believes him to. Ahab paints his struggle with the whale as racializing and emasculating in order to imagine the whale as mortal. This allows him to see the whale as competition — "There is ever a sort of fair play herein, jealousy presiding over all creations" (168). Recall his rhetorical question, "Who's over me?" In the context of this speech, Ahab's desire to be masculine manifests in a desire to conquer. Therefore Moby Dick is made into a

competitor because it is part of “all creations”, rather than the abstract concept Ahab builds up in his mind. This dissonance between ‘insidious struggle against divine power’ and ‘just a mortal whale’ is what fuels Ahab’s mania. On one hand, he inflates the whale’s reputation to give his mission some credibility. Yet the solution to breaking the whale is to believe the whale can be broken. Such realities cannot coexist. “Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I’d strike the sun if it insulted me,” Ahab brags (168). Quotes like this demonstrate Ahab’s forced bravado in the face of his contradicting logic. Surely if he can talk of fighting the sun, he can fight a whale, cheekily comparing the two as mere competitors. The unspoken: both can very easily be his demise. Readers can see through this — but the emotional quality of Ahab’s speech makes it difficult when he appeals to the base sense of the crew’s identities as men, as whalers, as the lower layer. As Tyler Durden and the Narrator must kill the other, the menacing and the mortal whale must too — but since they are both constructions of Ahab’s mind, this only portends his self-inflicted doom.

“Appreciate something. Look at me...My eyes are open,” Narrator Tyler Durden hisses, advancing on Tyler Durden with a gun in his mouth. Slow motion shots dramatically depict Tyler Durden staggering back from the force, falling with an echoing thump, and Narrator Tyler Durden falling (being pushed? It’s unclear) into a chair with a bloodied face. He had shot himself in the mouth to kill his alter ego, knowing that if he believed he would die, the other would really die. Narrator Durden only understands how to kill Tyler Durden once he comes to terms with the incompatibility of coexistence, or in easier terms the mortality of both. Ahab never attains this realization because in inflating Moby Dick to be his own deadly and mythical Tyler Durden, Ahab must compensate by in turn asserting his own masculinity, or his ability to fight Moby Dick. Such bravado is what draws the men into his deeply personal revenge tour, the isolation

and emasculation they face as whalers on the open sea being amplified by his crazed speech. Moby Dick is only made more potent by the idea that because the whale enslaves Ahab, it must hold sway over all of the crew. But the whale and Ahab cannot both be larger than life: there's not enough room for both. One may get a Pyrrhian victory in this show of mutually assured destruction, but the sheer delusion in Ahab's speech suggests it is definitely not him. Don't shoot the white whale in the mouth, or however the proverb goes.

Works Cited

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