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Narrator, Character and the Spaces Between: An Exploration of Melville's Use of Narratology to Explore the Unexplorable

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Abstract

This study is an examination of the narratorial qualities of *Moby-Dick* and their effect on the mystic portrayal of the whale. *Moby-Dick's* eponymous whale has become a universal symbol of the unattainable and unknowable. This study examines the first-person retrospective narration of the novel and its role in enlarging the whale to its aphorical enormity. It concludes that Ishmael as character, through his actions, presents a more anthropocentric view of the whales, while the narrator, although undecided, betrays a larger sense of awe for the unknowability of the whales. However, it is the implications of his continued exploration, and the ambiguities embedded in the absence of conclusions to his musings that show how strange the stranger really is.

Keywords: Moby-Dick, Herman Melville, Narratology, Timothy Morton, Ecology

Introduction

Melville's *Moby-Dick* has since its rediscovery in the 1910's and 1920's been widely celebrated for its portrayal of the enormity of our universe through its descriptions of its eponymous sperm whale. Throughout the last century, the whale has been cast in numerous sets of meaning, many of which refer to the whale as an object of sublime proportions (Whitburn 38). How does one hint at this enormous set of meanings, without pointing directly at it, and thereby make it small and trivial? This paper argues that the relationship between Ishmael's dual roles as a narrator and a character empowers Melville to explore unexplorable ideas. To distinguish the difference between Ishmael as character and Ishmael as narrator, this paper will use Mieke Bal's *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, as it updates the touchstone methodologies, like Gerard Genette's *Narrative Discourse*, with advancements made since, making for the most up to date and thorough narratological methodology. To better understand the inner mechanics of the unexplorable, Timothy Morton's theory of the ecological thought (2010) will be used in order to direct the ambiguity embedded between Ishmael's narration and actions. More specifically, the things that will be taken from Morton are his ideas of ecological space, ecological time and ecological ambiguity, which then will be used to exemplify the meaning that can be gained from Ishmael's special character-narrator relationship.

The Two Ishmaels

Chapter 1 of *Moby-Dick* starts with one of the most famous lines in all of literature: "Call me Ishmael" (Melville 25), from here and for the rest of the narrative, most of the story is narrated by Ishmael, from his perspective and in a first-person past tense. In addition to the retrospective nature of the past tense narration, one way in which the difference in narrator

and character becomes apparent is when instances of Ishmael's motivation are narrated before it is expressed through his actions. An example is at the beginning of the novel, when Ishmael still has his feet solidly planted on land and the whales are but an abstract unknown. *Moby-Dick*'s first chapter famously opens with Ishmael proclaiming his restless nature, which prompts him to go to sea, although, this time, it is not enough to board the usual merchant ship. This time, "the invincible police office of the Fates" and his curiosity for and fascination with "the undeliverable, nameless perils of the whale" (Melville 29) drive him to board a whaling ship. In other words, Ishmael starts his journey allured by the mysterious and perilous otherness of the whale, yet he does not start with an antagonistic attitude towards the whale. He insists that he is "quick to perceive a horror, and could still be social with it - would they let me - since it is but well to be on friendly terms with all the inmates of the place one lodges in." (Melville 29) Ishmael is not one to write off others, not even the ones who he does not understand. Whether or not this self-assessment is contradicted by Ishmael's initial othering of and reluctance to sleep with Queequeg shortly after hearing of his dark complexion, it is safe to say that "the sociability with unknown horrors", which is proclaimed by the narrator, is not apparent in the actor's actions in the earliest chapters of the novel, especially because Ishmael and Queequeg will become friends soon enough. This characteristic of seeing the best in others, which he proves worthy of later, is an indicator of the difference between Ishmael as narrator and Ishmael as actor. Throughout, it is the almost prophetic narration and its implications which characterises the novel. In other words, Ishmael the narrator seems to characterise Ishmael the actor, not at the moment he sets out whaling, where he is seriously frightened by the otherness of Queequeg, but after the experience of the voyage. This means that instances might occur of Ishmael as narrator exploring topics, which will not have an immediate effect on the behaviour of the character of Ishmael. These topics might not have informed Ishmael before after the events of the story or at the very least later in the story, as evidenced by Ishmael's blooming relationship with Queequeg.

Another point where the difference between Ishmael as character and as narrator becomes apparent is in the seams of his narration and the liberties he takes in it. As to what this privilege of narration means in a narratological sense for Ishmael, it would be advantageous to start with one of the defining aspects which characterise the narrator: motivation. The aspects of the story, characters and locations that are described in the narrative text are no coincidence, they are all deliberate choices made by the narrator, and in these choices lies characterisation (Bal 2019, 41). Bal describes three extensions of narrative motivation: "Motivation is brought about by speaking, looking or acting" (Bal 2019, 42). The first layer of the three is looking, which is clearly defined by its focalisation (Bal 2019, 42). A character-bound narrator like Ishmael is motivated every time he turns his head and looks at something. Where he is and therefore where his gaze rests is highly motivated. The next extension of motivation: speaking, comes about in the act of describing what he sees to the reader of the text. In this action lies an embedded sorting process of what the narrator thinks is important enough to relay to us. The last: acting, tells us most about the actor side of the character-bound narrator (Bal 1981, 108-109). These three aspects happen in the three respective layers of the narrative. Acting happens in the fabula, the events, which come to define narrative, yet without aspects like focalisation or narrator. Seeing happens on a story level, as the act of seeing necessitates a focalised point from which the story can be told. Lastly, the act of describing happens at the level of the narrative text. Here, the character-bound narrator narrates the story in ways their subjective motivation motivates them to. This is also the level at which the receiver of the text comes into existence, for without a fully formed narrative there is no listener or reader, there are only events (Bal 1981, 109-110). It is

in these very layers that a clear distinction between Ishmael as character and as narrator is to be found. On the level of the fabula, the level of acting, Ishmael as character is in control. As we move from fabula to story, the character of Ishmael is merged and muddied by his retrospective self-narrative and narration of the other inhabitants of the Pequod.

Ecological thinking and its merits

Having established the difference between Ishmael as character and as narrator, to proceed we need a conduit for what we find between. Focussing on the whale as metaphor and what the reader is told about it through the narrative gap, Timothy Morton's *The Ecological Thought* describes, among other things, the aspects of the world that cannot be conveyed or understood directly, exemplified in non-human existence. In *The Ecological Thought*, Morton defines ecological aspects of fiction with examples from both literature and poetry. An important initial clarification, however, is that Morton does not see ecological thinking as a niche set of criteria that have to very specifically align in order to qualify. Rather, he sees ecological thinking as being embedded in everything, which is why he thinks it is such a highly infectious line of thought (Morton 2010, 4). Morton's ecological thought manages to take the understanding of non-human animals one step further by stating the obvious: we do not know everything, so we might as well know nothing. Therefore, the nomenclature he implements is that of "strange strangers": denoting the unknowability of others and "the mesh": a symbol of the interconnectedness of all strange strangers (28). It is important to keep in mind that Morton's ecological thought not only works as one way of thinking of non-human animals; rather, it links inanimate objects, diseases, animals, fungi, plants, everything (34-35). This is important to keep in mind, as this paper's use of the ecological thought is by no means a full exploration. It only focuses on two animals: humans and whales, which, in the larger picture of the mesh, is a very small and comparatively not a difficult-to-follow aspect. The ecological thought does not assume to know what is unknowable. Just like you can never truly know or feel what another human being feels, so it is with any other living being. By thinking with a flat mesh, with no room for hierarchical ranking of experience, the subjectivity of all the strange strangers is equal. In his article "Ecologocentrism: Unworking Animals", a preparatory article for what would become *The Ecological Thought*, Morton outlines the importance of dismantling nature and its inhabitants. Dividing the world into nature and non-nature creates an "over yonder" way of thinking about nature and the beings that inhabit it (Morton 2008, 73). By breaching this gap we bring the world closer in thought. It is to treat them with the same mystical wonder we do other human beings. The only truth we can know is that we will never truly know. The ecological thought is an embrace of that certainty in uncertainty. But how exactly does one embrace this uncertainty? "Thinking big" is the action of displacing ourselves as the centre of the universe and trying to take in the immense size and depth of everything around us. To elaborate, Morton draws on Kant and his description of the sublime as "the idea of bigness beyond any ability to measure or picture - magnitude beyond any idea of magnitude. In its profundity and vastness, this magnitude demonstrates the radical freedom of our minds to transcend our 'reality,' the given state of affairs (20). Like how a lot of Catholic churches are built as large and ornate as possible to humble its visitors, so does thinking big instil an almost religious awe and reverence for the unknowability of others. "Thinking big" not only helps us to understand the things we do not understand, it also reveals our ability to transcend our own subjective experience. By dislocating ourselves as the centre of our thought, we can try to see the world for its true greatness instead of our usual subjective view of things.

One of the defining aspects of ecological fiction which Morton highlights is the negative location of human beings. That is, how small and insignificant we are in the grander scheme of things and all the many places we are not present. By decentralising the humans from being the focus or centre of a narrative, the story takes on a broader perspective and makes the world that much larger than the human characters. Broadening the world from the local and human to the universal and ecological is the act of "thinking big", an instrumental part of ecological thinking. Instead of focussing on what we know or what is around us, seeing all of those things in a broader perspective make for a narrative, which can begin to take other existences into consideration (Morton 2010, 22). In Moby-Dick, Ishmael's narration takes the narrative to the perspective of the whale on numerous occasions. One such example is chapter 87, 'The Grand Armada', where the Pequod is simultaneously being hunted by pirates and hunting a herd of whales, drawing on the similarities in their situation, a perspective, which invokes empathy for the whales being hunted, both by the reader and Ishmael. By placing so much of the focus of the book, not just on the mental exploration of whales, but with the real-life whales of the story, Moby-Dick often places the reader far from humanity. Dashiell Moore's article 'Island Aesthetics and the Anthropocene in Herman Melville's Moby-Dick' analyses Moby-Dick concerning its description of the natural world that it takes place in. The paper analyses the book through its descriptions of islands, archipelagos and underwater natural structures. In other words, it deals with the post-anthropocentric ways the novel treats nature, as something much older and larger than humanity by resituating the narrative to its natural structures (Moore 2022). To treat the unbelievable size of the oceans, she quotes from chapter 13, 'Wheelbarrow': 'How I spurned that turnpike earth! – that common highway all over dented with the marks of slavish heels and hoofs; and turned me to admire the magnanimity of the sea which will permit no records.' (Melville 76) This well-chosen quote paints the part of the world which is uninhabitable for humans as so large that it "permit[s] no records", or in other words, is too large for human understanding. A more frightening example of a thorough display and examination of the immensity of the world is to be found in chapter 93, 'The Castaway'. Here, the cabin boy Pip falls overboard and floats in the sea for an indeterminate amount of time, before being rescued. Following Pip's isolation, he only talks in prophetic riddles and is considered, by the other members of the crew, to have lost his mind.

> Pip's ringed horizon began to expand around him miserably. By the merest chance the ship itself at last rescued him; but from that hour the little negro went about the deck an idiot; such, at least, they said he was. The sea had leeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely, though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it (Melville 398).

The wording of the quote above is particularly indicative of thinking big in terms of space. The ocean "expands" around Pip, it "drowned the infinite of his soul" and he has been exposed to the "wondrous depths", "ever-juvenile eternities", "multitudinous and God-omnipresent". All these are perfect descriptors of the expanse of space prerequisite for ecological thinking. Most important of all, is the "Wisdom, revealed" before him because of his exposure to the largeness of the ocean. Later in the novel, Pip starts to speak in riddles, which, to most except Ishmael, suggests that Pip has gone mad. Ishmael sees that Pip has

become overwhelmed by the immensity of the aquatic part of the world, the world that hitherto has been unknown to him.

Ecological thought is not just about the immense enormity and lack of a centre of space, it also hinges on the unbearing age and flow of time (Morton 2010, 42-43). Where "thinking big" in terms of human animals makes humans seem smaller in a spatial sense, "thinking big" when it comes to time, likewise, resituates human time as minuscule in comparison with the age of the planet, and even larger, the universe. In the context of the immensity of time on display in *Moby-Dick*, Moore has further insights. One is to be found in chapter 58, 'The Brit': "The first boat we read of floated on an ocean, that with Portuguese vengeance had whelmed a whole world without leaving so much as a widow. That same ocean rolls now; that same ocean destroyed the wrecked ships of last year. Yea, foolish mortals, Noah's flood is not yet subsided; two-thirds of the fair world it yet covers." (Melville 270) Another great example is the last sentence of the second to last chapter: 'The Chase - Third Day': "Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago." (539) By painting the world as much older than the people inhabiting it, Ishmael's narration achieves the quality of "thinking big". It resituates the anthropocentric view of humans as the centre of time and space to its appropriate minuscule scale. Morton put it well with his reference to Carl Sagan's documentaries which recount the entire history of the universe in an hour and only shows the dawn of man in the last fraction of a second of the documentary. (Morton 2010, 42-43) Together, the immensity of time and space situates Ishmael and the reader in a humbled mind-space, where the outlandish subjectivity of non-humans becomes easier to understand. Another major ecological aspect of *Moby-Dick* is what Morton dubs "coexistentialism". The term covers the confusing and often contradictory nature of coexisting with other beings, as well as the existential dread that can result from said coexistence. (Morton 2010, 47). To explain this phenomenon, Morton uses the Coleridge poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) as an example. The part of the poem which Morton references is when the mariner first hails and then shoots the albatross, only to regret it later. The meeting of the two strange strangers: the albatross and the mariner, perfectly encapsulated the inherent strangeness in strangers. The crew in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* goes from praising the albatross, to killing it, to attributing their successful navigation to it and ends at cursing it for leading them through mist to unknown waters. As hard as the mariner might try, the impenetrable strange stranger remains unknowable (Morton 2010, 46-47). In much the same vein, Ishmael forms part of Ahab's crew throughout the novel and aids the hunting of Moby Dick and other whales, so while Ishmael's goal of understanding non-human animals is noble, he is still aboard a whaler and is killing whales. Senseless violence and empathetic understanding are both stowaways of the Pequod. On the other hand, much like the ferocious exploration of the mariner, Ishmael changes his mind and has contradictory thoughts of whales throughout the novel. At first glance, the indecisiveness and no progression of Ishmael's thought of whales can seem like a meandering blunder plot-wise on behalf of the author, but through the ecological thought, we can see that this unfruitful exploration and uncertainty is an extension of the uncertain coexistence inherent in the mesh of strange strangers.

Time and Space between Ishmael, the Whale and Ishmael

The chapter 'The Whiteness of the Whale' starts with Ishmael lamenting the difficulties in expressing the "rather vague, nameless horror concerning him" (Melville 190), him being Moby Dick. He also notes the difficulty of understanding the whale by describing it as

'mystical' and the "despair of putting it in a comprehensible form." (190) Before concluding that "else all these chapters might be naught." (190) In the chapter 'The Tail', Ishmael explains that explaining the attributes of the whale are essential to understanding it (366). His analysis in 'The Whiteness of the Whale' starts by listing positive associations of the colour white, here among are precious objects like "marbles, japonicas, and pearls" (190), historical interpretations like the honourable Pegu title of "Lord of the White Elephant", the inclusion on flags of Hanover, the Austrian Empire and Caesar, the Roman superstition of a white stone bringing luck, the Christian symbolism of "The innocence of brides" (190), God embodying a white bull and more. Ishmael holds all of these examples as "sweet, and honourable, and sublime" (191), but he also warns of the negative connotations to come. These negative connotations take the form of other dangerous and white creatures like the great white shark and the polar bear, the spectral colour of ghosts and the tall pale man, a creature from European folktales and how some people are unsettled by the appearance of people with albinism. To further prove the unsettling nature of the colour, he sets up two hypotheticals: one is about a sailor, who, upon learning that his ship is sailing too close to one of the poles and is surrounded by ice-covered water and icebergs is disturbed and is not comforted before he is again sailing the blue sea, Ishmael deems that the fright comes from the whiteness, more so than from the fear of hitting an iceberg. The second story takes the perspective of a native of Peru looking out over the snow-covered landscape and despairing at the total whiteness and lack of detail which fills him with dread, much like the sailor of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. In the first story, Ishmael shows how unsettling it can be when what one usually associates with a specific colour is changed; this echoes the example of albinism in humans from earlier in the chapter. In addition, the example of being overcome with the agoraphobic fear of large places echoes the chapter 'Cast-Away', in which the crewmember Pip falls overboard and slowly loses his mind due to drifting around in the seemingly endless expanse of the ocean. Both of these instances paint the natural world, if unfiltered and untouched by man, to be frighteningly huge, enough to unsettle and change forever the ones who dare stare into it. At the end of the chapter, Ishmael is torn between the two extremes of his thought about the whale: "The very veil of the Christian's Deity (...) the most appalling to mankind" (195). Oxymoronic sentences and meaning are bountiful in the last pages of the chapter, right up to the conclusion:

> 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? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a colour as the visible absence of colour; and at the same time the concrete of all colours; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows—a colourless, all-colour of atheism from which we shrink? (195-196).

Again oxymoronically, Ishmael sees nothing while seeing everything in the whale. He sees an abundance of meaning, but he does not understand any of it. It becomes clear that the whale hides a world beneath its exterior and simultaneously that Ishmael will never fully understand any of it. Ishmael continues to use self-contradictory sentences: "dumb blankness, full of meaning", "colourless, all-colour", but they no longer convey his doubt as to whether or not the whale is good or evil. In these moments, while narrating, his language reflects a subconscious realisation of the strangeness of the stranger. Ishmael's methodology in this chapter is a great example of the ecological thought and how one might grapple with understanding the strange stranger. He alternates between naming all of the positive and negative things and concepts he associates with whiteness. When he digs deeper, the only conclusion he reaches again and again is the whiteness of the whale as non-meaning,

uncertainty, oblivion, creatures of Lovecraftian levels of incomprehensibility. Even when doing his best to find out if the whale signals good or evil, the only conclusion Ishmael can reach is that the stranger signals strangeness. Once again quoting Morton: "Thinking big means realising that there is always more than our point of view. There is indeed an environment, yet when we examine it, we find it is made of strange strangers" (Morton 2010, 57-58). This sounds very similar to the experience of both the sailor and the Peruvian. They both notice an environment and are terrified by the strangeness of it. Likewise, Ishmael reacts to the strangeness of the whale with feelings of a "rather vague, nameless horror" (Melville 190). What Ishmael finds horrifying about the whale is its whaleness (Seibel 2024), the things beyond comprehension to us humans. "It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me." (Melville 190)

One thing that seems important to touch upon is that only some of the ecological aspects of the novel are intended by Ishmael. The reverence with which he describes the space and time of the world is doubtfully something he himself intended to count towards a deeper understanding of the whales. This situation of Ishmael not being privy to the implications of his narrative mirrors when Ishmael as narrator acknowledges that the true meaning of the whale is far beyond Ishmael as character, at the end of chapter 41, 'Moby Dick': "all this to explain, would be to dive deeper than Ishmael can go." (Melville 188) So while the narrator is aware that the character of Ishmael has much to learn, we too see how much experience and contemplation it takes to reach those conclusions. The clear ecological elements in Ishmael's narration serve to create a world that is much larger and older than any human being can comprehend, or that can be conveyed in any one narrative. *Moby-Dick* manages through showing us the whale on the level of Ishmael's conscious experience and the implications of his subconscious disbelief in the very specific way he continues to fail to adequately describe the whale. One might be led to believe that these descriptions of the grandness of the whale as unknowable as an admitted defeat on Ishmael's part, either through what he experiences in the moment as character. This interpretation is contradicted in chapter 103, 'Measurements of the Whale's Skeleton', which, as explained in chapter 102, 'A Bower in the Arsacides', takes place years before Ishmael narrates *Moby-Dick* (426) and, from the context of Ishmael at the time having experience with whales, must have taken place after the main narrative of *Moby-Dick*. Here, after trying to map out the skeleton of the whale Ishmael gives up and exclaims:

> How vain and foolish, then, thought I, for timid untravelled man to try to comprehend aright this wondrous whale, by merely poring over his dead attenuated skeleton, stretched in this peaceful wood. No. Only in the heart of quickest perils; only when within the eddyings of his angry flukes; only on the profound unbounded sea, can the fully invested whale be truly and livingly found out. (431)

Here we see Ishmael frustrated by the inefficiency of objective analysis. He is especially frustrated by the loss of the whale as a whole that is caused by analysing its anatomy so minutely. A form of analysis so inherent to mankind, yet so ineffective in fully and deeply understanding the incomprehensibility that is life and its beings. Ishmael experiences here firsthand what Morton meant by "strange strangers" and "the mesh". The quote above, we are told, is of Ishmael's thoughts at the time. Only years after surviving the meeting with Moby Dick does he realise that dissecting the dead whales is unproductive when trying to understand the essence of the whale. As of narrating, the unknowability of others dawns on him. This is something the reader can infer from having access to both the character of Ishmael's experiences and his later narration of those experiences, as neither has come to the same realisation. This almost casts Ishmael in the role of tragic hero, forever

travelling the world and looking for an answer, which we know does not exist. It pivots the ending of the novel from a tale of survival, where Ishmael is the sole survivor of the whale, to a slightly more tragic story of obsession, where Ishmael never actually escapes the whale.

Conclusion

Throughout *Moby-Dick*, the character of Ishmael is trying to understand the whale. In numerous cetological chapters, he is meticulously detailing the minute anatomical characteristics and differences between different whales in order to reach any understanding of the creature within. At the outset of his journey, he has the expressed goal to "(...) see the watery part of the world" (25). Throughout the novel, he tries to do just that through the whales. These are shown to be the actions of his character, as they are expressed to be his thoughts at the time or his actions; i.e the "looking" and "acting" part of Bal's aspects of focalisation. Years after the sinking of the Pequod, Ishmael is still in his search to understand the whales. Although now he no longer tries to find the meaning of the whale in minute anatomical detail, as expressed in the monologue from inside the whale's skeleton of chapter 103, 'Measurements of the Whale's Skeleton', Ishmael has moved on to see the whale as a living and breathing creature that should be understood accordingly. The narrator's progressively abstract and symbolic musings on the whale betrays an understanding of the world and its creatures as larger and more unfathomable still.

Another way of portraying the nature of non-human beings is by exploring them through their own narration. One such example is Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* from 1903, which was critiqued from its release for the human aspects attributed to the non-human creatures of the story (Wills 2023). President Theodore Roosevelt and naturalist John Burroughs especially critiqued London for being a "nature faker" by misrepresenting the true nature of non-human animals in his fiction as too anthropomorphic. London responded by calling Roosevelt and Burroughs "medieval", referring to the idea of human exceptionalism by only attributing thought and certain behaviour to humans (Walch 139-140). The line between being realistic about differences in existence and faking nature proves a thin line to traverse. If showing the humanity, whether projected or actually part of the whale, has the effect of misrepresenting the whale, either by misconstruing what it is or by only seeing a part of the whale, then what is there to do, but to think along the lines of the ecological thought.

The whale in *Moby-Dick* is likened to entire continents, ecosystems and civilisations; hinting at larger and larger things. Where *The Call of the Wild* familiarises the reader with non-human beings, *Moby-Dick* mystifies and distances us from the whales. From Ishmael's cetological obsession during the hunt for Moby Dick, to the holistic analysis of his later years, a progression in his view of whales can be observed, a progression that goes even further if taking into account his narration. Through the novel's constant hinting at the ecological greatness and unknowability of the whale, shown through the perspective of a fittingly unknowing focaliser, narrated by a more aware, but still oblivious narrator, the novel paints a beautiful portrait of the sublime without it being in the frame. The metaphor of the whale is so loose a metaphor that by encircling nothing it encompasses everything. The text accurately conveys the enormity and incomprehensibility of what is discussed, furthermore it displays Morton's assertion that "Once you start to think the ecological thought, you can't unthink it: it's a sphincter - once it's open, there's no closing." (Morton 2010, 4) By showing how the ecological thought progressively tears at Ishmael's understanding of the world

throughout the story and into the narration, the novel has the potential to start that very process in the mind of the reader.

This paper has drawn a distinction between Ishmael's dual roles as character and narrator, what the differences are and what information the reader is given from each perspective. This information has been used as a way to categorise Ishmael's understanding of whales. One is the thoughts he thinks as of experiencing the story, and the other is the things he contemplates in his narration and is therefore still trying to understand as of narrating the novel. The character of Ishmael once and again seeks to understand the physical and anatomical parts of the whale, while the narrator is more so preoccupied with the essence, the meaning and the symbol of the whale. In his narration, he constantly brings out the size, age and ambiguity of the whale and the world, all essential aspects of Morton's ecological thought, a way of thinking that invariably leads to ecological thinking. Evidently, the dual role of Ishmael helps to convey the enormity and unknowability of the universe in a manner much more compelling and truthful than just stating it outright. By taking us through the layers of Ishmael's experience and reflections during the hunt for Moby Dick, his reflections after the fact and his reflections upon committing the entire tale to the narrative we are reading, we are simultaneously shown Ishmael's meeting with the cosmos, as well as how hard it is for him to comprehend the unknowability, strangeness and grandness of the world.

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Bionote

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