

Unraveling the Truth: A Journalistic Perspective on “Moby Dick”

In an analysis of Herman Melville’s “Moby Dick,” English 19th-century writer D. H. Lawrence wrote, “At first you are put off by the style. It reads like journalism. It seems spurious. You feel Melville is trying to put something over you. It won't do.” While Lawrence seems to have held reservations against journalism as an industry, the investigative approach indeed lends itself well to reading Melville’s “Great American Novel.” “Moby Dick” remains a work of its own genre — ambiguously combining elements of fiction, nonfiction, and textbook-level cetology lessons, while exploring various narration methods and structures. Because of Melville’s unconventional composition, as well as his extravagant plot, one of the most common approaches to analyzing “Moby Dick” is challenging the ‘truth’ presented. One might question what is ‘real’ in the 19th-century literary classic, such as the likelihood of a prophet predicting almost an entire ship’s crew’s demise or the colossal description of the blood-thirsty white whale that inspired the hunt. The essence of journalism is the pursuit of the truth. Thus, when breaking down the lengthy novel, one might consider the three journalistic values of accuracy, objectivity, and ethics, to deepen their understanding of the text as well as their perception of the truth in Melville’s writing.

Arguably, the most crucial aspect of any reportorial pursuit is its accuracy. In his critique, D. H. Lawrence used the word ‘spurious,’ to mean false or illegitimate when describing journalism — yet the description is the exact opposite. While mistrust may be present in practice, the purpose of journalism is to accurately inform. Toward the beginning of “Moby Dick,” we are introduced to Captain Ahab — an extravagant man described as appearing to have been “cut away from the stake,” with severe burns and an amputated leg. He presents the legend of the white whale, Moby Dick, as the assailant that “dismasted” him, leaving him bitter and

“maimed.” When he rallies the crew members to join him on his quest for murderous revenge, he describes Moby Dick as having a “wrinkled brow and a crooked jaw... with three holes punctured in his starboard fluke.” However, later in the book and further into the journey, as Ahab’s fixation evolves into a “monomania,” the portrayal of the whale changes. He refers to Moby Dick as having “outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it.” The old English word, ‘sinewing,’ in this context, describes a force that animates the supposed malevolence of the whale. At this time, Ahab had not encountered Moby Dick since the incident, therefore there was no reason to assume his continuous exaggerations were justified. Later, on the third day of the final pursuit, Ahab exclaimed, “Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last, I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee... thou damned whale!” No longer is Moby Dick defined by any physical characteristic, but rather by his supposed targeting of Ahab and their ‘destined’ meeting. In the span of three years, a single whale became an “all-destroying” being, worthy of being the cause of his “last breath.” Thus, the question of accuracy remains. To what extent was Moby Dick full of “malice” or “damned”? Was it not possible that Ahab relished in the hyperbole and the crew’s subsequently enthusiastic reception? In a way, Ahab compelled the Pequod in the way D.H. Lawrence described journalism as “trying to put something over on you.” He had a single goal in mind and was willing to bend the truth in wondrous ways to achieve it. In the comparison to journalism, there is an element of trust that is lost when reality is warped. Both sides of the transaction are expected to partake in upholding the truth. It is the responsibility of the interviewee to present accurate information, and the responsibility of the interviewer to report on the statements in an impartial matter.

Hence, the second most important element of journalism is objectivity. Only the facts should be presented, without regard for the reporter's views on the matter, in such a way that the reader may be free to form their own opinions. Immediately, this method of interpretation does not bode well for the first-person literary structure, what with the need for perspective and narration from a single character. However, due to "Moby Dick's" overall complexity, as well as changes in narration styles, analyzing the novel on the grounds of objectivity may lead to a greater understanding of Ishmael as both a character and a narrator.

Early in the novel, when he is staying at the Spouter-Inn in New Bedford, Massachusetts, Ishmael offers the line, "Better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian," when reluctantly deciding to sleep in the same bed as Queequeg. The simple line establishes Ishmael as having preconceived notions against Christians who drink. However, it is important to remember that it is a fact of life that every individual is biased. Journalists have editors to catch their mistakes, and most articles are published with more than one source for the purpose of corroboration. Professionals spend hundreds of hours simply fact-checking their reporting. Ishmael, on the other hand, is only one person. Thus, it is an assumption that "Moby Dick" is presented by Ishmael as a first-hand account and no other narrators participate despite the unusual composition.

Another aspect of objectivity in journalism that has entered the public discourse in recent years is the consideration of mental health. Working in such a high-pressure and fast-paced industry can lead to several mental health concerns, including anxiety and depression. In terms of their work, journalists who are experiencing these negative effects might be subconsciously inclined to sway an article about disorders in a certain direction, for example. Additionally, those struggling with mental issues might not have the cognitive capacity to catch errors or notice their

biases. It was in this way that Ishmael discredited his narration abilities early on. On the first page, he describes how whenever “it requires a strong moral principle to prevent [him] from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people’s hats off—then, [he accounts] it high time to get to sea as soon as [he] can.” Although it is not explicitly stated as a mental illness, the suicidal thought of “stepping into the street,” paired with the nihilistic desire to cause aggravation in others points to the modern-day symptoms of depression. Ishmael effectively self-medicates by setting out to sea. Therefore, it is possible that his recount of the events on the Pequod is swayed due to his mental state.

As such, the unpredictability of tenses throughout may be congruent with his unreliability. Upon meeting Ahab, Ishmael provides substantial commentary, writing, “So powerfully did the whole grim aspect of Ahab affect me, and the livid brand which streaked it, that for the first few moments, I hardly noted that not a little of this overbearing grimness was owing to the barbaric white leg upon which he partly stood.” The explicit and sequential illustration in the first person was combined with the description of Ahab and Ishmael’s reaction to encountering him for the first time. Yet, Ishmael removes himself from the narrative entirely at times later on. When Queequeg is struck by a mysterious illness and begins preparing for death — and commentary is most expected from Ishmael, his closest companion — the reader is left with only a third-person, omniscient recount. There seem to be two possible explanations for the shift, which are that Ishmael’s emotional response is to retract himself, or that Ishmael is describing circumstances he was not present in. Though the first may better fit in the context of his grief, both impact his objectivity as a narrator. Revising history by eliminating his role in the scene is an obstruction of truth. Likewise, if Ishmael were shifting to an omniscient perspective to describe events that he did not witness, it would only further undermine his credibility as a

narrator. Nonetheless, as the reader knows that Queequeg did not survive the quest to find the white whale, it is possible that Ishmael felt it was justified to overstep the boundaries of the truth.

Thus, the third most vital element of journalism is a consideration of ethics. There is a responsibility in reporting, to maximize benefits and minimize harm. The integrity of a newspaper or outlet is dependent on its handling of sources, relationships, and figures of authority. There were many ethical concerns aboard the Pequod, namely in the relationships between Ahab and the crew members. Ahab, as already established as a monomaniacal and untrustworthy man, selected himself as the captain of the ship before the voyage began. As shown, his claims about Moby Dick were not consistent and likely inaccurate, yet he still felt it justified to impart the dangerous groupthink mentality upon his crew members. Ahab served as an autocrat aboard the Pequod, determining the needs of the collective on his own accord, and Ishmael, while still functioning as what might have been an unbiased narrator, was fully enchanted by the wild yarn he spun. Ishmael wrote, “Ahab’s quenchless feud seemed mine. With greedy ears, I learned the history of that murderous monster against whom I and all the others had taken our oaths of violence and revenge.” Independent thought was depressed through Ahab’s persistent sermonizing. Ishmael, along with the other crew members, adopted the monomaniacal fixation of killing the white whale at any expense and ultimately faced the consequences.

Certainly, in a practical sense, “Moby Dick” ‘failed’ all three tests of effective reporting. Ahab was found as an unreliable source, Ishmael as a biased correspondent, and the entire Pequod as an unethical operation. Therefore, it is still challenging to determine what was ‘true’ in the novel, and what was embellished, unintentionally fabricated, or “spurious,” as D.H. Lawrence wrote. Yet, relating the text to the three real-world values provided a broader context

for the experience of the characters and offered the reader the opportunity to better relate to them. Thus, weaving Melville's unconventional structure with these principles offered a compelling case for analyzing literature from a journalistic standpoint in the future.