

“In Landlessness Alone Resides the Highest Truth”; or, At Sea with Honors

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The recent explosion on an oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico was a grim reminder of the BP disaster in 2010, from which Gulf Coast residents and workers are still trying to recover. We all must have responded to that disaster with a similar sense of outrage as we watched the live underwater video feed of millions of gallons of oil spewing into the ocean and saw images of oil-soaked wildlife, coastlines, and marshlands. Shared memories of Hurricane Katrina heighten our collective sympathy for the people whose livelihoods this disaster still threatens. At the same time, our individual responses are shaped by personal associations—such as relatives living in the Gulf, memories of a beach vacation, or a fondness for Gulf shrimp. As students and teachers, we also cannot help but view such events through our disciplines, our majors and minors, the books we read, and the courses we take and teach. I imagine the oil spill has already become a reference point in classes ranging from Microbiology and Environmental Studies to Economics and Public Relations.

As an English professor specializing in American literature and possessing a passion (often approaching obsession) for one nineteenth-century American novel in particular, I was thrilled when an article titled “The Ahab Parallax” appeared in the 13 June 2010 *New York Times*. It identifies striking parallels between the disaster at BP’s Deepwater Horizon rig and Herman Melville’s 1851 fictional account of death and destruction at sea as the crew of the *Pequod* hunts for whale oil, a valuable commodity on which nineteenth-century Americans were as dependent as we are on petroleum today. These echoes, Randy Kennedy writes, are “painfully illuminating as the spill becomes a daily reminder of the limitations, even now, of man’s ability to harness nature for his needs” (1). A former student emailed me as soon as he saw the article: “Melville always seems to get the last laugh somehow,” he wrote (Anderson). One reason I love to teach *Moby-Dick*; or, *The Whale* is the seemingly limitless ways in which it speaks to human actions and events in our own age. Melville’s novel has been used to comment on the rise of fascism, the War on Drugs, the War on Terror, and debates over Social Security and national health care. “Each age, one may predict, will find its own symbols in *Moby-Dick*,” a Melville biographer wrote in 1929. “Over that ocean the clouds will pass and

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change, and the ocean itself will mirror back those changes from its own depths” (Mumford 194).

In each instance I just listed, as in the *New York Times* article, the novel’s enduring relevance is anchored in Ahab’s overwhelming and self-destructive desire for revenge. Obsessed with destroying Moby Dick, the white whale that maimed him, the captain only destroys himself, his ship, and almost everyone on board. A fertile and pliable symbol, the character of Ahab, the peg-legged captain, has become a cultural touchstone even for people who have never read *Moby-Dick*. But few who have not studied the novel can tell us much about Melville’s narrator beyond his famous opening line: “Call me Ishmael.” Perhaps the most inspired and enduring aspect of *Moby-Dick*, however, is not its warning of the self-destruction wrought by humanity’s Ahab-like propensity for dominance and revenge but the alternative embodied by Ishmael, the *Pequod*’s sole survivor. I will return to the oil spill later, but for now I want to test this hypothesis in the context of honors education. To honors students I would say, I will call *you* Ishmael. The forces that attracted you to honors, I believe, are those that draw Melville’s Ishmael to the sea. And the qualities that ensure Ishmael’s survival are ones that will lead to success in honors and beyond.

The comparison might not seem very appealing at first glance. Ishmael in the opening pages of *Moby-Dick* is penniless, directionless, depressed, and suicidal. Portents of doom are unmistakable as soon as he sets sail: the gloomy *Pequod*, Melville writes, “blindly plunged like fate into the lone Atlantic” (115). Of the ocean’s awesome power he observes: “however baby man may brag of his science and skill, and however much, in a flattering future, that science and skill may augment; yet for ever and for ever, to the crack of doom, the sea will insult and murder him” (298). I doubt very many students would join an honors program if the invitation promised the kind of voyage Melville describes, and as stressful as the first few weeks in an honors program might be, I doubt students feel as down and out as Ishmael does at the beginning of *Moby-Dick*. But if I am right about what draws students to honors, they seek the “mystical vibration” Ishmael experiences as soon as he is “out of sight of land.” There he proclaims: “in landlessness alone resides the highest truth” (5, 117).

Ishmael fleshes out the meaning of landlessness: “all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore” (116–17). The real danger, in other words, is not the openness and violence of the unknown sea, which Melville aligns with “deep, earnest thinking,” but the illusory sense of safety and comfort promised by the shore, or by our traditional, accepted ways of living and thinking. The challenge is to resist those winds—be they generated by fear, practicality, parents, social norms, or self-doubt—that conspire to push us back to the known world of dry, stable ground. Any honest attempt to apply Melville’s imagery to honors programs must acknowledge that we tend to attract some of the university’s most

grounded and goal-oriented students. Fear of the C—here I mean that dreaded letter grade—sometimes prevents such students from taking risks. But even if its practical benefits first draw students to honors—it can steer them toward the right graduate program or help land an ideal job—it would be much easier and in a sense more practical for them to hug the shore, to concentrate solely on their majors and minors rather than taking on honors-level requirements and participating in more challenging courses. What then compels them to go sea with honors?

“You must have plenty of sea-room to tell the Truth in,” Melville wrote in praise of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s work (“Hawthorne and His Mosses,” 246). In praise of Ralph Waldo Emerson, another nineteenth-century iconoclast, Melville proclaimed: “I love all men who *dive*. Any fish can swim near the surface, but it takes a great whale to go down stairs five miles or more” (“To Evert A. Duyckinck,” 121). An honors curriculum invites students to dive deep and provides the “sea-room” in which to do so. Although honors curricula are designed to complement a student’s major course of study, they typically exist outside of all disciplines, departments, colleges, majors, and minors. They surround the rest of academia in the same way that the ocean surrounds islands and continents. Also like the ocean, they have the potential to dramatically enhance the value of the land they touch—transforming majors and minors, if you will, into beachfront property. With Ishmael’s journey in mind, perhaps it is more fruitful to conceive of honors not as the sea itself but as the vessel that carries us out to sea, out of our elements, away from familiar landmarks and reference points, and into the realm of landlessness.

When Ishmael signs on for a whaling voyage he casts his lot with one of his era’s lowliest, dirtiest, and most dangerous occupations, but, as he describes it, “a whale-ship was my Yale College and my Harvard” (122). The fact that Ishmael spends most of his time at sea not hunting whales, exactly, but thinking about them, deeply, transforms the *Pequod* into a floating ivy-league campus or honors program. Like most nineteenth-century Americans back on shore, his crewmates see the whale only as a commodity, as something to be exploited for profit and convenience. Some people today view an academic degree in a similar light. For Ishmael, however, the whale becomes what one literary critic calls “a test of the imagination” (Adler 64). Ishmael strives to comprehend the whale, its individual parts—its flukes, its flippers, its blowhole, its blubber—as well as its total being. Because this gigantic mammal is constantly in motion (John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* describes whales as “moving land”), and because neither a whale’s corpse nor a whale’s skeleton can ever approximate the reality of a living, breathing whale as it exists in the ocean, its meaning proves slippery. To grasp it, Ishmael must try out a range of approaches, traditions, and perspectives. He examines the whale in art, in literature, and in astronomy. He applies the tenets of science, religion, archaeology (taking a “fossiliferous . . . point of view”), legal history, and philosophy (which Ludwig Wittgenstein appropriately describes as “a leaky boat which must be repaired while at sea”)

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(Melville 496; qtd. in Evans 1). As he struggles to comprehend the mighty leviathan, Ishmael's mind grows in proportion to his subject. “Such, and so magnifying, is the virtue of a large and liberal theme!” he proclaims. “We expand to its bulk” (497).

Ishmael approaches the whale—which comes to embody all mysteries of life, time, and the universe, “the finite known and infinite unknown” (Adler 63–64)—just as you might approach such “large and liberal themes” as Truth, Beauty, Ethics, Revolution, and Science and Religion in the first required course of an honors curriculum, an interdisciplinary first-year honors seminar. For students as well as for the teams of professors who teach such a seminar, taking an interdisciplinary approach to big questions encourages and rewards a sea-faring flexibility of mind and a propensity for deep-diving thought. The goal is to reach a deeper, more nuanced and multifaceted understanding of the seminar topic by semester's end, but its ultimate meaning should elude our grasp. We should remain at sea, skeptical of anyone who claims to stand on firm ground with a definition of true Beauty or with one timeless and universal Truth. Melville, after all, manages to fill the 600-plus pages of his novel with more disciplines, traditions, and approaches than we might even begin to consider in one semester (or even in four years of undergraduate study), and still Ishmael's knowledge of the whale remains incomplete. “Dissect him how I may,” he confesses, “I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will” (414).

Ishmael's words might sound like an admission of defeat but they articulate a central theme of *Moby-Dick*, one that embodies the best practices of honors inquiry. Although not connected to any one department or discipline, honors programs acknowledge that successful students must commit to their majors and minors in order to master the assumptions, values, and methodologies of their particular fields; a solid grounding is essential to success in graduate school or in one's chosen profession. At the same time, honors curricula typically encourage students to remain open to other approaches and to alternative perspectives. This fluidity, this embrace of landlessness, enables Ishmael to survive when the *Pequod* splinters and sinks. Ishmael's relationship with a crewmate nurtures the flexibility of mind we see in his approach to the whale. Although he initially shrinks in fear from this tattooed stranger whom he assumes to be a heathenish savage (and possibly a cannibal), Ishmael grows to love and respect Queequeg. He learns to get out of his own skin and to question his cultural assumptions and prejudices through Queequeg's eyes (Karcher, *Shadow* 67–72). At novel's end, Queequeg's coffin, on which all his mysteriously symbolic tattoos have been etched, becomes Ishmael's life raft.

If Ishmael represents the potentially life-preserving power of a fluid and flexible mind, then Ahab illustrates the danger of becoming so committed to one way of seeing the world that your mind precludes all other possibilities. The goal of a whaling voyage, of course, is to hunt as many whales as possible. Ahab, however, is obsessed with tracking and destroying just one particular whale, which he insists on defining in only one way: he sees the white whale

as a malevolent affront to his own power and independence. Ahab's "monomania," as Melville calls it, is manifested physically in his literal inability to stray from course: carved into the ship's deck at regular intervals are holes to accommodate the captain's peg leg; like a plastic figure in a Lego play set, he remains rigidly anchored in place. Ahab goes to sea, we might say, but he is never really *at sea* (just as one might go to college but never really be *in college*). Unlike Ishmael, therefore, Ahab will never discover anything about the whale, the world, or himself. As Joyce Sparer Adler suggests, Ahab "does not really want to see more than he does, or to sort out complexities, subtleties, and interconnections" (68). Melville even dares to imply that one of America's most revered heroes (at least in the nineteenth century) approached his mission of exploration and discovery with a perspective as narrow as Ahab's: "we know the sea to be an everlasting terra incognita," Melville writes, "so that Columbus sailed over numberless unknown worlds to discover his one superficial western one" (298). Fixated on finding land and gold, Christopher Columbus skimmed over—without even considering—the undiscovered universes below him, worlds we still have barely fathomed.

"The only true voyage," Marcel Proust suggests, "would be found not in traveling to strange lands but in having different eyes, in seeing the universe with the eyes of another person, of a hundred others, and seeing the hundred universes each of them sees, which each of them is" (qtd. in Shattuck 103). A sperm whale's eyes are situated on two separate sides of its head, notes Ishmael. He therefore assumes that the whale "must see one distinct picture on this side, and another distinct picture on that side." "[I]s his brain so much more comprehensive, combining, and subtle than man's," he wonders, "that he can at the same moment of time attentively examine two distinct prospects, one on one side of him, and the other in an exactly opposite direction?" The placement of a human's eyes, after all, makes "it . . . impossible for him, attentively, and completely, to examine any two things . . . at one and the same instant of time; never mind if they lie side by side and touch each other" (360–61). The closest humans can come to achieving this is in groups, be it on a whale ship—"with look-outs at the mast-heads, eagerly scanning the wide expanse around them," reads one of the "Extracts" Melville collects at the beginning of his novel, a whale ship has "a totally different air from those engaged in a regular voyage" (xlix–l)—or in small, discussion-based honors classes.

Moby-Dick celebrates the fact that a typical whaling voyage brought together for a common purpose individuals from such radically different backgrounds—not only in terms of craft but also in terms of language, culture, nationality, region, religion, and race—that similarly diverse collectives would be impossible to find on land. The classroom is a diverse environment in less obvious ways, not just in terms of disciplines, majors, and minors (this is especially so in general education and interdisciplinary courses) but also in terms of experiences, values, and beliefs. Equally important, the discussion-based format of honors courses fosters a level of engagement with competing

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perspectives increasingly rare in our society. While Ishmael’s mind glides with ease from perspective to perspective, Ahab steadfastly refuses to consider any perspective but his own. Something similar occurs when characters interpret images on a gold doubloon Ahab nails to the masthead as a reward for the first crew member to spy Moby Dick. Each of the sailors discovers a different meaning in the coin, but they never discuss their interpretations with each other (as one would in a seminar). Might the crew of the *Pequod* have been able to challenge their captain’s authority, we must wonder—and to chart an alternative course for their voyage—if their search for meaning had been not a solitary, individual act but a communal one?

In *Common as Air: Revolution, Art, and Ownership*, philosopher and poet Lewis Hyde worries that marketplace values have turned certain ideas, discoveries, and creative productions into private property when they should be considered property we all hold “in common” (3). He proposes an alternative value system founded on the ideal of a “cultural commons,” which is rooted in “the humanist idea that creativity builds on a bounty inherited from the past, or gathered from the community at hand” (79). Hyde encourages us to recognize that “the creative self” is not “solitary and self-made” but “collective, common and interdependent” (Smith 43). Just as training in an individual major is strengthened by interdisciplinary work, especially when such work takes place in the realm of landlessness offered by an honors program, Hyde’s thesis suggests that the discussion-based classroom offers us the opportunity to do much more than plumb the depths of our individual subjectivities. Such an environment encourages us to discover and embrace a state of intersubjectivity—an ever-evolving identity defined not in isolation but always in relation to others. As Michael S. Roth points out in response to recent efforts to call into question the value of a liberal arts education (or even the practicality of higher education in general), interdependence was one of the “habits of learning” embraced by philosopher and psychologist John Dewey: “For Dewey, these habits included awareness of our interdependence; nobody is an expert on everything.” The contrast between Ishmael and Ahab again proves instructive. Ahab curses what he calls our “mortal inter-indebtedness” even as the ship’s carpenter crafts him a new leg (514). Ishmael, who at one point is literally tied to Queequeg as his companion dangles precariously over shark-infested waters, learns to embrace the reality that our fates—indeed our very identities—are inescapably intertwined. While Ishmael’s mind expands to accommodate his “large and liberal theme,” therefore, his identity simultaneously becomes as fluid, open, and expansive as the whale’s.

Dewey’s “habits of learning” also “emphasized ‘plasticity,’ an openness to being shaped by experience” (Roth), and recent work in neuroscience suggests that our brains are indeed malleable. Even a mature brain changes according to environment, stimulus, and use. Similar discoveries in the field of epigenetics posit that our “[g]enes and the environment are as inseparable and inextricable as letters in a word or parts in a car.” “Every day in every way,” David Shenk

explains in *The Genius in All of Us*, “you are helping to shape which genes become active. Your life is interacting with your genes” (27). Such theories are at once startling and reassuring. Shenk’s survey of world history, after all, identifies as many “achievement black holes” as “achievement clusters,” all fostered, he believes, by cultural landscapes (118). Focusing on our present culture, Nicholas Carr argues in *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* that our brains are being rewired by the Internet in ways that make it more difficult for us to think deeply and at length about subjects—to ponder the whale, for example, or to read *Moby-Dick*. “Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words,” Carr confesses, but “[n]ow I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski” (7). Carr’s critics emphasize the treasure trove of information now at our fingertips and suggest that multitasking and social networking might be reshaping our brains in beneficial ways. Author and entrepreneur Steven Johnson highlights these benefits in his critique of *The Shallows*, which appeared in the *New York Times* alongside a wonderful illustration of a big-brained octopus smiling broadly and grasping a different electronic gadget in each of its tentacles. (I won’t dare wade into this debate, but I doubt if any of us will spy a pod of whales—or a multitasking octopus—if we are up in the mast-heads texting our friends back on shore; that said, I will disclose that the former student who sent me the article that inspired this essay did so via his iPhone.)

Working with honors students and seeing the kind of work they produce in honors courses, we can hope for the future no matter what Google might be doing to our brains. Epigenetic research and theories of neuroplasticity suggest that, in joining an honors program and completing its requirements, students are not simply accumulating a storehouse of knowledge and strengthening their transcripts but are selecting an environment that might literally alter the landscape (or seascape) of their minds. Even more important, perhaps, such theories highlight the responsibility of those with the power to do so—program directors, department heads, deans, administrators, and legislators—to create and sustain environments that foster excellence, that nurture “achievement clusters”; this should be the core mission of honors programs everywhere. As Melville’s novel suggests, the best way to achieve such a goal is to embrace landlessness. A testament to the power of symbol, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* provides students, teachers, and directors with a rich and pliable metaphor through which to imagine and articulate the direction, shape, and value of honors programs.

When we shift our focus from imagination to application, a close reading of *Moby-Dick* suggests that an honors program can practice landlessness by maintaining its commitment to small, discussion-based classrooms and, above all, by demonstrating the value of interdisciplinary work. Landlessness benefits not just students but also instructors and departments (which can, after all, become too insular). The University Honors Program (UHP) at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, for instance, provides a much-needed opportunity for faculty from all disciplines to practice the values of landlessness by collaborating

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with each other in courses such as our first-year honors seminar. Small groups of students rotate between three instructors from different disciplines after an initial class session involving all students and instructors, but the instructors work together to establish shared goals and a common theme. Such collaboration between rotating, constantly changing sets of instructors ensures that the seminar's focus remains free-floating or landless; it will never be anchored permanently to one discipline or to one question or theme. The practice of landlessness is also at the heart of Culture Connection, the UHP's second core course, in which students develop “strategies for engaging deeply with cultural experiences and events” by researching, attending, and writing about such events (“Honors Core Courses”). No matter what their home departments or particular disciplines might be, Culture Connection instructors attend and engage art, music, and theater events alongside students, which is another practice of landlessness that can help an honors program build bridges between departments. Film critic A. O. Scott suggests a less obvious but equally important way a course devoted to cultural criticism promotes the values of landlessness as embodied by *Moby-Dick*: “Criticism is a habit of mind, a discipline of writing, a way of life—a commitment to the independent, open-ended exploration of works of art in relation to one another and the world around them.”

No matter how successful an honors program or college might be in creating an environment that challenges students while modeling for them the habits of mind essential to a successful and fulfilling life, the real challenge is to maintain hope even when we survey the more expansive and daunting sea into which students will sail after graduation, the one facing environmental disasters and economic calamities beyond the control of even the most dedicated honors program director. But with history and Herman Melville as our guides, we can discover reasons to be hopeful even in these uncertain times. Melville could never have written *Moby-Dick* if not for his grueling experiences at sea, laboring on a whale ship and learning to question the values and assumptions of his society back on land. And he never would have become a common sailor if his wealthy family had not lost its fortune. The literal definition of “landlessness” is “not possessing land” or “having no landed property” (“Landless,” def. 1). To be “landless” is to be broke. As much as I dislike attempts to categorize our students' generation (the kind of thing to which students are often subjected at graduation ceremonies and honors convocations), studies comparing the impact of the Great Depression with that of our recent economic crisis suggest generational patterns that reinforce the wisdom behind Melville's brilliant riff on the word “landlessness.” Sociologist Glen H. Elder, Jr. argues that the youngest children affected by the Great Depression grew up to fear change and risk. As students, they were described as “docile notetakers” (Zernike 1). But their older siblings proved, like Melville and Ishmael, more creative and flexible in navigating a world in which traditional assumptions and expectations could no longer be taken for granted. Our Great Recession, some believe, has already produced similar trends, with the current generation of students

becoming more civic-minded, more creative, and more willing to take risks. A proposed name for the generation to follow, the one comparable to the risk-averse youngest children of the Great Depression, is “homelanders” (Zernike 4), a label rooted in the age of homeland security but acquiring deeper resonance in the context of Melville’s evocative contrasting of land and sea.

However the current economic crisis might influence our personalities, mindsets, and actions in the future, the Gulf oil spill has already brought a greater sense of urgency to the search for alternative energy sources. To our modern sensibilities, it is difficult to imagine a more brutal and disturbing business than the hunt and slaughter of whales, but the words of a nineteenth-century whaling captain suggest that we might well view the source of much of today’s energy and many of our consumer products in a similar light. Explaining the title of a poem in which she re-imagines Ishmael as the sole survivor of an explosion on a modern-day offshore oil rig, Elizabeth Schultz recounts the captain’s words when he witnessed the gush from one of the first land-based oil wells: “By God, they’ve harpooned Mother Earth” (107). Unlike Ahab, this captain apparently learned to see the natural world with new eyes while at sea; like Ishmael, he came to see the world in a whale. A similar worldview is behind a recent breakthrough in green technology: inspired by the bumps on a humpback whale’s pectoral fins—a source of awe and wonder for Ishmael—a Canadian-based company named WhalePower has developed a more efficient design for wind and hydroelectric turbines (Greenemeier; “WhalePower”). These kinds of innovations are more likely to originate with thinkers who cross disciplines and embrace collaboration. Equally important, they follow the principles science writer Janine Benyus laid out more than a decade ago in *Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature*. We must study the natural world not in order to see “what we can *extract* from” it, she urged, but rather to see “what we can *learn* from” it (2). Such a shift in perspective demands the courage to question traditional assumptions and the creativity to imagine alternatives. It requires us to approach the world, its problems, and its mysteries as Herman Melville and the best practices in honors inquiry encourage us to—not by clinging to the “slavish shore” but by heading out to sea.

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