*Making a believable argument*

*Conveying the message clearly*

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American Literature

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Moby Dick

Describing Colored Stars

In Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* the concept of whiteness contains no inherent meaning and is not analogous to any one specific thing. At the end of the chapter devoted to the whiteness of the whale, Melville teases the reader with constructs void of meaning, and the nature of whiteness is ultimately incomprehensible to the reader in the context of this chapter. Melville employs the concepts of whiteness and darkness throughout the novel, choosing to dedicate a considerable amount of the story to whiteness alone, which could perhaps lead a reader to speciously believe that on e has the ability to derive a definite meaning from this surplus of information. However, the only underlying significance in the mysterious nature of whiteness proves to be that there is no one significance, and although an indescribable meaning is evident, any definite connotation is simply incomprehensible to humans due to logical limitations.

Whiteness is a concept that proves to be absurdly ambiguous, sweeping, and nonspecific in the novel's entirety, but this equivocal nature is exemplified clearly in a single paragraph. The novel's narrator speaks to the cryptic nature of the whale and its whiteness throughout the text. Melville refers to the whale as an "inscrutable [and] unearthly thing" (132) in chapter one-hundred-and-thirty-two, describes it as "full of riddles" (29) at the end of the twenty-ninth chapter, and cites the quality of whiteness as "indefiniteness" (42) in the forty-second chapter, which is effectively exclusively dedicated to whiteness. From the last description alone, it can be safely concluded that whiteness is indeed a nebulous concept. Furthermore, after discussing the nature of whiteness for an entire chapter, Melville attempts to define whiteness in the final paragraph with a farrago of comparisons and other literary devices before stating, "and of all these things the Albino whale was the symbol" (42). Before even attempting to attribute any specific concept as analogous to whiteness, it becomes clear that whiteness is not certainly applicable to any one thing; the description is instead sufficiently vague and enigmatic, and moreover, it is without an easily attributable meaning (i.e. there is no clear analogy between white and another object or idea). Instead, Melville spouts a superfluity of dissimilar meanings that equate to essentially meaningless meaning because of how thinly spread the analogy becomes.

The complexity of whiteness in the novel does not end with simply its ambiguity; whiteness is described in ways that are logically impossible for media, and Melville describes the concept through a series of well thought out (yet ill-reasoned)[[1]](#footnote-1) paradoxes. At the end of chapter forty-two, entitled "The Whiteness of the Whale," the notion of whiteness is described through an impenetrable list of many diverse abstractions, and in the description of the idea using concrete objects, Melville defines whiteness in paradoxes and contradictory extremes. Whiteness is described as firstly, "not so much a color as the visible absence of color" (42). In the very next clause, Melville continues his description, saying that "[whiteness is] at the same time the concrete of all colours," and continues his sophistic structure in suggesting, "[whiteness] is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning" (42). In this complicating description that addresses the question of whether 'white' is a color, or whether it is rather the absence of color, the reader is purposely left without an answer to this seemingly essential question. Instead, Melville purports that whiteness is the two extremes: both of the answers to the binary question, which conceivably only accepts one answer. If one accepts this description of whiteness as it is, and furthermore the unmistakably implicit distinction between not color and all colors, the reasoning is fallacious in the system of Aristotelian (i.e. traditional) logic. The vast majorities of humans are taught and operate under Aristotelian logic, which adheres to a plethora of logical rules, most of which relate to Aristotle's system of two-valued, true/false logic. Because this logic informs reasoning, and if the reader accepts Melville's continued use of clear logical misconceptions, he is left with absolutely no attributable meaning apart from perhaps a vague and abstruse philosophical significance attributed to the 'color.'

The fact that the description of whiteness is ambiguous and seemingly full of meaning yet illogical suggests that perhaps the notion of whiteness is not simply ill-reasoned, it is incomprehensible by human reason. Colors are characteristically utterly visual. Without a visual representation or aid, it is perhaps impossible to convey the essence of a color in words or speech. True, one can convey one's own interpretation of a color (albeit crudely) through the medium of emotion, verbal art, or some similar device. However, to describe a color's physical nature to one who is blind (and does not know color) is impossible! Colors exist solely in the visual realm and outside of this territory colors are incomprehensible. Such is the nature of whiteness as exemplified in the aforementioned paragraph: full of meaning that is not unable to be perceived, nor is it able to be conveyed.

Although Melville characterizes the conception of white as both a color and non-color, he had at least established a similarity in this comparison. Although the two vectors had opposite directions, the magnitude of each was the same as the other, which therefore allowed for both to be considered in the context of color. Continuing the pattern of vague contradictions, the entire nature of whiteness seems to be wholly redefined when, in the final paragraph of the forty-second chapter, Melville suggests whiteness is actually much like "the great principle of light" (42), and not a hue at all. Instead of coloring (or serving as an absence of color) in an object, whiteness instead, "if operating without medium upon matter, would touch all objects, even tulips and roses, with its own blank tinge" (42). At present, whiteness does not contain any substance solely; whiteness is to be viewed as similar to light, something which brings forth meaning in other objects.

Light is a similarly visual entity and is likewise difficult to comprehend through non-visual means. Nonetheless, light and color have many fundamental differences, which create a stark contrast between the two proposed definitions of whiteness in the novel. Color (or the lack thereof) is a characteristic that is appreciated for nothing other than the color itself. Infrequently do colors make apparent visual (and superficial) meaning in other objects, rather, color is visual and superficial meaning bestowed upon an object. Unlike color, light is not something that can be seen, which is almost paradoxical considering light's visual nature. In a vacuum, light is not something that is easily comprehensible; if light existed in a vacuum, there would be no visible evidence of this fact. It is only when one aims this light at another object does one glean meaning from one's surroundings. Color and light, two inarguably discrete entities with clear fundamental differences, do however have a similar non-visually comprehensible nature, which Melville exploits in his attempted non-visual description of both. Adding to the comprehensively chaotic description, Melville creates logical paradoxes in the description of whiteness in using the two opposites of binary characteristics.

Whiteness is not emblematic of any one entity directly. A multitude of meanings can be attributed to the white nature of the whale because of its nebulous nature, its paradoxical description, and the fallacious portrayal of the color by the standards of traditional logic. The final paragraph of chapter forty-two could suggest that not only is the nature of whiteness incomprehensible to human logic, Melville himself believed this to be the case, which as is becoming typical with Melville, creates yet another paradox. Melville is seemingly governed by traditional logic, yet he purports the belief that the true nature of whiteness is unintelligible to humans. Although *Moby Dick* appears to be *riddled* with meaning in regard to whiteness, the search proves to be profoundly futile. The meanings proposed for whiteness are decidedly tangent on one another; each paradox leads into an opposite direction from past supposition. If one focuses on a single star in the night sky in an attempt to find meaning in that single light, the stars in the periphery merely grow brighter.

1. Ironically, this description of Melville's writing is intrinsically paradoxical. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)