--From David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

-on Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener":

- Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, p. 294:

He continued this militant reapplication of sensational devices in his first magazine story, "Bartleby, the Scrivener. A Story of Wall-Street." Much of the imagery in "Bartleby" is directly related to popular sensa-

tional literature. In particular, a series of sensational exposés about New York life by George Foster, a popular novelist in Melville's circle, are especially pertinent to "Bartleby." In *New York in Slices* (1849) Foster had portrayed Wall Street as a totally dehumanizing environment producing puppetlike people and universal misery cloaked by gentility. "Wall-street!" Foster writes. "Who shall fathom the depth and rottenness of thy mysteries? Has Gorgon passed through thy winding labyrinth, turning with his

smile every thing to stone—hearts as well as houses?"[35] In Wall Street, Foster continues, man has erected huge stone temples to "the one god—Mammon." Through the labyrinthine chambers of buildings rush throngs of people "as if they went whirling about in some gigantic puppet-show, while a concealed hand pulled convulsively at the wire." Every chamber has its "pale young man" who can lose his fortune in one quick business reversal, leaving him with "his position lost, and himself an outcast." Who can wonder, Foster asks, that this dispossessed pale young man in a "quiet and gentlemanly way" often "applies a razor to the jugular, and thus frees himself at once of earthly ills." Just after his section on Wall Street, Foster writes a depressing description of New York's famous prison, the Tombs, which he calls a "Grim mausoleum of hope! Foul lazar-house of polluted and festering Humanity!" Elsewhere in the volume Foster makes a harrowing contrast between Broadway alive with people at noon and totally deserted in the gray light of early morning. On Sunday afternoon, Foster says, Broadway is "a perfect Mississippi, with a double current up and down, of glossy broadcloth and unblemished De Laines"—but after hours it becomes "some Palmyra avenue, solemn and deserted." Later, pondering items in a New York pawnshop, Foster declares there is "no more melancholy thing" than to see all the possessions that once belonged to happy, prosperous people who are now dead or poor.

"Bartleby, the Scrivener" might be viewed as a literary version of several of Foster's central images. The confining, deadening Wall Street atmosphere Foster describes is symbolized by the blank walls that surround the office and that reflect Bartleby's total passivity as he loses himself in "dead-wall reveries."[36] The image of puppetlike workers is reproduced in the portrayal of Turkey and Nippers, whose nonhuman names and clocklike mood shifts underscore their drearily mechanical existence. The deadness of both the physical environment and the mechanical employees is reflected in the scrivener job itself; as the narrator says, copying law papers is "proverbially a dry, husky sort of business" and at times "a very dull, wearisome, and lethargic affair." When Foster writes that every building has its "pale young man" who quietly works and just as quietly sinks into ostracism and death, he seems to directly anticipate Melville's Bartleby, the "pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn" man who drifts to

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his solitary end with horrifying decorum and gentlemanliness. Foster's contrast between the "perfect Mississippi" of busy Broadway and the street "solemn and deserted" is similar to Melville's contrast between the "bright silks and sparkling faces . . . swan-like sailing down the Mississippi of Broadway" and the pallid copyist in his office "as deserted as Petra." Both writers use the Tombs as the symbol of final despair, and Melville's concluding speculation about letters in the Dead Letter Office, whose intended recipients are perhaps now dead or poor, is similar in spirit to Foster's comments about the former owners of articles in pawnshops.

None of the elements in "Bartleby, the Scrivener," therefore, were new to American fiction—they were a direct inheritance from dark city-mysteries fiction of the late 1840s. What is new about Melville's story is its formal innovations: the skillful use of the flawed narrator; the symbolic setting; the psychological and metaphysical suggestions. In Bartleby, Melville creates Wall Street's ultimate "pale young man" who reflects the mechanical lifelessness that surrounds him and who represents the hollowness at the core of this Wall Street existence. Even his "rebellion" is an extension of his lifelessness, for it is performed in a totally passive, unemotional way. Both in his dogged work and his passionless refusal to work he combines qualities of his fellow workers and of his physical environment: he possesses the quiet respectability of his employer, the machinelike nature of Nippers and Turkey, and the deadness of the blank walls.

Furthermore, Bartleby embodies all the ambiguities of the likable criminal. A social outcast finally imprisoned in the Tombs, he falls in a long line of American criminals who could not be summarily dismissed as wicked but rather were regarded as an ambiguous mixture of good and evil, normal and abnormal qualities. In a story so broadly representative of sensational popular culture as "Bartleby," it is not surprising that we find mention of two of the most notorious criminal cases of the antebellum period: the 1841 Broadway office murder of John C. Colt by Samuel Adams, who on the day scheduled for his hanging committed suicide in the Tombs; and the famous "gentleman forger" Monroe Edwards, who furnished his cell in the Tombs elegantly, like a parlor. These cases had been publicized in all the sensational literature of the day, and a public fascination, even sympathy with the criminals had grown. Melville has the lawyer, meeting Bartleby alone in his office, recall "the tragedy of the unfortunate Adams and the still more unfortunate Colt," who in a moment of understandable rage committed "an act which certainly no man could possibly deplore more than the actor himself."[37] Later, the grub man in the Tombs compares Bartleby with Monroe Edwards, noting that "they are always pale and genteel-like, them forgers. I can't help pity 'em—can't help it, sir." By mentioning two of the period's most notorious crime cases and especially

Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, p 297:

by underscoring the pitiable, likable aspects of the criminal, Melville shows he is drawing from ambiguous stereotypes in sensational popular culture.

As in *Pierre,* one of Melville's main reasons for using ambiguous sensational imagery is to undermine the Conventional. We view all the characters and events in "Bartleby" through the distorting lens of a lawyer who epitomizes bourgeois respectability. The narrator is genteel, pious, noncontemplative, mildly materialistic, passionless. He is another embodiment of the kind of decorous civility and bland conventionalism Melville had sharply satirized throughout *Pierre.* By his own admission, he is "an eminently *safe* man" doing business in "the cool tranquillity of a snug retreat" and priding himself on his "prudence" and "method." In the course of the story we witness the contortions of this Conventional sensibility as it is confronted with the inexplicable, the perverse. Melville's most disturbing message is that the normal and the perverse, the Conventional and Subversive are really two sides of the same coin. He had approached this realization at the end of *Moby-Dick,* in which Ahab, recognizing the underlying identity between the pious Starbuck and the blackly humorous Stubb, cries: "Ye two are the opposite poles of one thing; Starbuck is Stubb reversed, and Stubb is Starbuck; and ye two are all mankind[.]"[38] In *Pierre* he had again shown that the Conventional, when exaggerated, inevitably changes into its opposite. In "Bartleby," the Subversive ambiguities that exasperate and baffle the Conventional narrator are actually a reflection of

the narrator's own characteristics. Bartleby's decorous passivity is merely an extension of the lawyer's own genteel lifelessness, just as one of the blank walls outside the office window is "rather tame than otherwise, deficient in what landscape painters call 'life.' "[39] The lawyer says he would have violently dismissed Bartleby "had there been any thing ordinarily human about him"—but there is nothing ordinarily human about the lawyer, who prides himself on the "perfect quietness" of his passive strategy for getting rid of Bartleby. Melville brings together Conventional images (piety, prudence, charity, method) and Subversive ones (the likable criminal, urban dehumanization, the grim Tombs) to show how they blend into each other and form a gray middle ground of valuelessness and moral neutrality.

In "Benito Cereno" Melville again focuses on the psychological contortions of a Conventional narrator who is confronted with images from Subversive adventure: this time, images of piracy, murder, and slave revolt. Once again, Melville creates a psychological suspense story by recording the shifting reactions of a Conventional narrator to a mysterious, threatening situation. Amaso Delano is "a man of such native simplicity as to be incapable of satire or irony." His nature is "not only benign, but familiarly and humorously so."[40] Throughout the story he misreads the situation

Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, p 298:

aboard the *San Dominick* because of his inclination to pity sailors who are actually mutinous criminals. Melville once again returns to the paradox of the likable criminal, this time to gauge the distortions of perspective that result when the Conventional sensibility pities black criminals masquerading as obsequious slaves. Pity is misdirected right up to the crucial moment, for it is not until the piratical Babo leaps into his departing boat and tries to stab Benito Cereno that Delano discovers his mistake.

The conclusion presents a riddle that is as difficult to unravel as the Gordian knot the old sailor hands to Delano early in the story. Have Conventional values won the day, or have they been ironically exposed as blind and impotent? Delano insists that his good nature and charity suspended his distrust throughout his time on the *San Dominick,* therefore enabling Benito Cereno to leap on his departing boat at the end. But Cereno reminds Delano that his pity had been misdirected throughout and that his last act before the great revelation was to "clutch for a monster, not only an innocent man, but the most pitiable of all men. To such a degree may malign machinations and deceptions impose."[41] That is, until Babo showed his true identity, Delano had regarded Benito Cereno as a murderous pirate. Ironically, then, it is the wicked Babo, not Delano's beloved Providence, that brings about the climactic revelation. Even in the action that dooms him, the likable criminal governs the situation. In a sense, Melville does assign final victory to the Conventional (the mutineers are exposed and punished), but the victory is Pyrrhic, for the Conventional

has been shown to be so naïve and so easily deceived that the reader is, like Benito Cereno at the end, contemplating the dark mysteries surrounding "The negro"—both his bloody rebellion and his clever deceptions.

Both "Bartleby" and "Benito Cereno" signal Melville's rise from the philosophical depths of *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* toward the surface refractions and posturings of *The Confidence-Man.* In the earlier works Melville had invested his culture's paradoxes with metaphysical meaning and had heroically tried to confront and resolve this meaning. In the later works he turns from the problem of philosophical meaning toward the effects of stereotypical paradoxes on human psychology and behavior. "Bartleby" and "Benito Cereno" studied the angst of the Conventional mentality when confronted with Subversive mysteries surrounding pitiable criminals; *The Confidence-Man* would show that the Conventional mentality itself is a mere change of costume for the criminal. The confidence-man figure had emerged in the late 1840s in the sensational journalism and popular fiction of radical democrats. It was the ultimate Subversive stereotype of American working-class culture, for it grew from the bitter feeling that the knavery of hypocritical aristocrats could be outdone only by the wily manipulations of the justified criminal. Melville would take the confidence-

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--on *Moby-Dick*:

Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, p 288:

Melville had experimented so often with the paradoxical stereotype of the likable criminal that by the time he wrote *Moby-Dick* he could define Americanness and American literature in terms of the bristling polarities this stereotype implied. He himself had become a kind of likable criminal, a fully American metaphysical outlaw who could place a thief on the same level as George Washington. He could paradoxically proclaim himself the greatest democrat and the greatest misanthrope. As he expressed it in his June 1851 letter to Hawthorne: "It seems an inconsistency to assert unconditional democracy in all things, and yet confess a dislike to all mankind—in the mass. But not so."[24] Not so, we should add, because by 1851 to be a fully American democrat, one with a realistic vision of the world, was to be a justified pariah, a rebel against what seemed a corrupt society. The same radical democracy that drove Lippard to establish the Brotherhood of the Union, based on both intense disgust with America's foibles and patriotic devotion to her great promise, impelled Melville to assert simultaneously his democracy and his rebelliousness. Thus, in "Hawthorne and His Mosses" (1850) he could sound in one breath like a benign patriot, saying the American writer should "breathe that unshackled, democratic spirit of Christianity in all things," and in the next like a feisty militant, declaring that "we must turn bullies, else the day is lost."[25] He had arrived

--Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, p 289:

at the very core of the popular paradox that fused criminality and goodness, iconoclasm and patriotism. He was prepared to write a novel that he would describe to Hawthorne paradoxically: "I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb."

In *Moby-Dick* there are no longer schematic oppositions between the likable criminal and the oxymoronic oppressor, as there had been in *Redburn* and *White-Jacket.* True, we see residual signs of these familiar characters: the likable criminal appears in the interpolated "Town-Ho's Story," in which the wicked but admirable Canaller, Steelkilt, justifiably murders the oppressive mate Radney; and a typical oxymoronic oppressor appears in the person of Captain Bildad, the querulous Quaker and penny-pinching Christian. But in the main plot of *Moby-Dick* Melville creates great energy not by separating the oppressor and the criminal but by *fusing* them. Ahab is not only the oxymoronic oppressor, the "grand, ungodly, god-like" tyrant who lords over his crew; he is also the likable criminal, what Peleg calls "a swearing good man" who is on an insane yet justified quest for the whale that has wounded him.[26] The object of his quest is itself a magnificent fusion of opposite qualities: a glorious yet malicious, a beautiful yet all-destructive monster. And the *Pequod*'s crew is a gang of likable outcasts whose wild passions and demonic energy become absorbed into the captain's quest. No longer is a rebellious crew set against an oppressive

master. Both are fused in one mad, grand purpose. And what fuses them is Melville's democratic vision of interlocking paradoxes, a vision resulting from his broad absorption of working-class themes. When explaining that he will ascribe "high qualities" to the "meanest mariners, and renegades and castaways," he explains he is impelled by the "just Spirit of Equality," the same "great democratic God" who had picked up Andrew Jackson from the pebbles, hurled him on a war horse, and thundered him higher than a throne. Indeed, *Moby-Dick* is the literary culmination of the radical egalitarianism that had its roots in Jacksonian democracy and that had taken on paradoxical, devilish intensity in the working-class fiction of the 1840s.

Moby-Dick is the grand proclamation of the democratic writer's power to fuse the opposing forces of the oxymoronic oppressor and the likable criminal. As Ahab says of the crew, "my one cogged circle fits into all their various wheels."[27] When the opposing paradoxes are fused, they simultaneously turn inward and explode outward, so that both the inner and the outer world take on a paradoxical nature. Ahab is at once the towering self-asserter and the tortured self-consumer, one whose "special lunacy stormed his general sanity, and carried it, and turned all its concentred cannon upon its own mad mark." Other main characters similarly embody rich paradoxes. Queequeg is the humane cannibal. The mate Stubb, the

--Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, p 290:

figure closest to popular culture, actually speaks in contradictions: note the wild linguistic swing from the consoling to the fierce in his exhortations to his whaleboat crews: "Easy; easy; don't be in a hurry. . . . Why don't you snap your oars, you rascals?" and "[K]eep cool, keep cool—cucumbers is the word—easy, easy—only start her like grim death and grinning devils." The visible world is similarly imbued with resonant contradictions. The ocean has an outer "blue blandness" but an inner "devilish charm." The whiteness of the whale is at once "the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors"; it is the "colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink."

In this world of subversive fiction, anyone that does not participate in the overall spirit of contradiction or paradox is satirized or doomed to defeat. We saw that one reason Hawthorne used the figure of the reverend rake in *The Scarlet Letter* was that, in light of the universal attacks on preachers in sensational literature of the period, it was virtually impossible to generate interest or credibility in a conventionally virtuous preacher. A similar phenomenon governed Melville's description of authority figures. Given the precedent of popular paradoxical stereotypes, any mention of a *good* authority figure was almost automatically ironic. By having Peleg describe Bildad as "a pious, good man," Melville joins the ranks of the popular ironists, since Bildad (like many pretended religionists in popular

novels) is a hypocrite. Similarly, when Starbuck is described as a "good man, and a pious," he is relegated to ultimate powerlessness.[28] The "demi-god" Bulkington is mentioned early in the novel but then is left behind as an impossible ideal. Having entered the ironic world of popular sensationalism in his earlier novels, Melville can now deal convincingly only with swearing good men, justified pariahs, humane cannibals, and likable desperadoes—that is, only with paradoxical emblems of his newfound radical democracy. Through the character of Ishmael he announces his acceptance of these subversive paradoxes. Melville's earlier noble protagonists, such as Wellingborough Redburn or Jack Chase, had remained relatively detached, naïve spectators of Subversive people and events. Ishmael, in contrast, undergoes a kind of conversion to the Subversive. In Queequeg he finds a pagan with "no civilized hypocrisies and bland deceits," one who makes him resolve to "try a pagan friend, . . . since Christian kindness has proved but hollow courtesy." By befriending Queequeg, Ishmael takes radical democracy and radical Christianity to a new extreme: the protest against civilized hypocrisy is enacted in the embrace of a man who is both black and pagan. Later, Ishmael merges completely with the Subversive when he joins the swearing, carousing sailors in their demonic oaths against the white whale: "I, Ishmael, was one of that crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest; my oath had been welded with theirs; . . . Ahab's

--Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, p 291:

quenchless feud seemed mine." The disappearance of Ishmael as a visible presence in the novel is often regarded as a structural flaw, but in fact it points up the all-absorbing magnetism of the cultural paradoxes Melville is portraying.

Melville had absorbed all the energetic paradoxes of America's sensational popular culture but had found that the novel they produced was not widely appreciated or understood. Although *Moby-Dick* received predominantly favorable reviews, it did not sell very well and was not acknowledged for the distinctly American metaphysical masterpiece it became in later critical judgments. Before its publication Melville had predicted its poor reception when he had written to Hawthorne: "What's the use of elaborating what, in its very essence, is so short-lived as a modern book? Though I wrote the Gospels in this century, I should die in the gutter."[29] After its publication, his warm pride over Hawthorne's enthusiasm for the novel was diminished by the bitter realization that "not one man in five cycles, who is wise, will expect appreciative recognition from his fellows, or any one of them."

Melville was in an anomalous and painful situation. On the one hand, he had stated in "Hawthorne and His Mosses" that "great geniuses are parts of the times; they themselves are the times, and possess a correspondent coloring." In *Moby-Dick* he produced a novel that proved this

argument, because it fully embodied its times and its culture. And yet, the culture it reflected did not fully appreciate it. Melville's difficulty was one that Whitman would experience with *Leaves of Grass*: the fusion of variegated American themes produced a new kind of literary text that could not be comprehended by the very culture that nurtured it.

Melville's strongest animus was against the Young America literary movement and, in a larger sense, against Conventional writers in general. The leaders of Young America, fearing the volcanic disturbance in working-class culture, had increasingly emphasized refinement and smoothness in American literature. In "Hawthorne and His Mosses" Melville had tried to stem the tide toward Anglophile tameness by indicting "these smooth pleasing writers that know their own powers" and by calling for an explosive national literature based upon native wildness, even crudeness. In essence, he was trying to usher into the Young America movement the savage energies and scathing paradoxes of the radical democrats and their Subversive literature. *Moby-Dick*, as we have seen, was the full literary realization of these native energies and paradoxes. While it possessed the kind of universality and the imagery from past classics that the Young America group prized, it breathed the harsh spirit of radical democracy through classic archetypes so that it was both universal and fully indigenous. To paraphrase Ahab's words, its wood could only have

--Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, p 292:

been American. When this radically American novel was not generally appreciated, Melville became understandably cynical and vindictive toward the Conventional culture that misunderstood him.

In his subsequent major works of the 1850s Melville utilized the sensational images of radical democracy in a far more vitriolic, rhetorical way than he had in his earlier fiction. He repeatedly used dark themes and experimental devices from popular sensational literature to attack the Conventional. In *Pierre* he directly satirized the conventionality of the Young America group, and he enforced the satire in a notably sensational plot involving incest, murder, and suicide. In "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and "Benito Cereno" he assaulted Conventional narrators with gloomy, terrifying sensational images. *Israel Potter* applies rapid-fire adventure toward the subtle redefinition of legendary American heroes from the ironic vantage point of radical democracy. *The Confidence-Man* showed that a wholesale inversion of moral values and of stylistic norms could result when a highly Subversive stereotype, taken from sensational popular culture, was invested with Conventional attitudes. Melville's bitter aim of attacking America's Conventional culture with weapons from popular sensationalism produced some of his most memorable fiction.

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--Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, p. 472 ff:

Popular parodies of the new religious style had a direct effect upon the most famous comic sermon in major nineteenth-century American literature—the absurd discourse to the sharks by the black cook Fleece in *Moby-Dick,* which I have found to have been adapted from a very popular series of burlesque sermons by William H. Levison that ran in many urban periodicals in the late 1840s. Levison's persona, Julius Caesar Hannibal, is a Negro preacher who in the course of his many sermons preaches in a Southern black dialect with laughable familiarity about every conceivable topic. Given the stylistic innovativeness of black American preachers, it is understandable that a Negro preacher would become the most famous burlesque sermonizer in urban humor. It is also understandable that Melville noticed the humor column of a New York writer, Levison, who was in his circle and whose strongest supporter was Melville's editor friend Lewis Gaylord Clark. The colloquial sermon of Melville's Fleece bears the obvious imprint of the Julius Caesar Hannibal series. Most important for understanding Fleece and, indeed, Melville's overall use of secularized religious discourse is the remarkable liberties that Julius Caesar Hannibal takes with sacred topics, as evidenced by his willingness to play daringly with biblical topics and expand upon them by inserting jokes and anec-

dotes. He sermonized imaginatively, for instance, about all kinds of monstrous animals, including the whale. Melville may have taken special interest in passages such as this one from a Hannibal sermon, *"De Whale"*:

> De whale am 'mong de fishes what de elemfint am 'mong beastesses; de biggest lofer ob dem all. A fisherman, named Jona, swaller'd one once; but it ober loded he stummuck to dat degree dat in tree days he leff 'em up agin. It war too much ob a muchness for him. . . .
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> [Hannibal then digresses about whale chases, with a lively description of harpooned whales diving to the bottom, resurfacing, and then being killed, or "Sumtimes he hits de leetle bote, when all de men am in it, an' stabes it all to tunder, an' 'way flys de men up in de air, like man kites, an' kum down agin kerswat in de water."]
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> De whale am de big fish—de codfish aristocracy ob de sees, de same as de big bugs an' de codfish aristocracy ob de lan' but de former hab got de 'wantage ob de latter, kase, notwidstandin' de whale dewoures a good eel, he produces sumfin, but de lan' codfish aristocracy dewours ebery-ting, an' produces nuffin'.[52]

What is most notable about this passage is the way it freely departs from the biblical text, which becomes thoroughly desacralized by being rendered in Negro dialect, and also the way it imaginatively interprets the whale from a working-class perspective, making it a symbol of the "codfish aristocracy" of the sea. (Recent scholars who have sought egalitarian, working-class themes in *Moby-Dick* might consider that in the popular humor Melville was reading the whale was being compared with America's hated ruling class.) Melville may have noticed many other burlesque sermons in the Hannibal series, such as "Quackery," which contains this assertion: "Dere am a great menny different kinds ob quackery runnin loose all ober de komunity. We hab de quack doctor, de quack preecher man, de quack lawyer, de quack boot-black, and de quack lecturer." This theme of universal deceit in American culture, a theme that Melville would famously treat in *The Confidence-Man,* was even more baldly put in another sermon, "Deceptions," in which Hannibal declares: "Neber Trust to 'Pearances. . . . My frens, dis am a wicked world—full ob deceit and nonsense, big pumkins and bigger lies, and all such warmints. It seems to be a wonderful disease on de part ob eberybody, to seem what dey are not, and derefore humbuggery am de order ob de day." In Hannibal's burlesque sermons we see the sacred and the cynical brought together in the demythologized realm of popular humor.

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--Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, p. 541:

While popular nautical humor had prepared the way for Melville's use of the prankish, it helps to explain only a small part of the humor in *Moby-Dick*. The special Americanness of Melville's masterpiece lies in the breadth of native humorous idioms it incorporates. It was Melville's responsiveness to other forms of popular humor—particularly radical-democrat humor and urban humor—that most distinguished him from other nautical romancers of the period. Radical-democrat humor lies behind the bitingly subversive tone of *Moby-Dick* and behind the strongly egalitarian characterization of Queequeg, Ishmael, and Stubb. Urban humor directly influenced specific scenes, such as the cook Fleece's comic sermon to the sharks, and generated a fund of inventive reapplications of popular fads and movements throughout the novel. The humor of *Moby-Dick* has been called Shakespearian in its use, for instance, of the madman-fool relationship between Ahab and Pip, obviously reminiscent of *King Lear*. But the Shakespearian elements of *Moby-Dick* are, by and large, reconstructive devices used to enrich native humorous idioms that Melville was seeking to rescue from the savage or the merely perverse.

The importance of radical-democrat humor for Melville's literary development is capsulized in his portrayal of a central character in *Moby-Dick*, Queequeg. The Negro characters in Melville's earlier novels, such as Baltimore of *Omoo* or Mr. Thompson of *Redburn*, had been caricatured stereo-

more of *Omoo* or Mr. Thompson of *Redburn,* had been caricatured stereotypes who lacked Queequeg's unique combination of savagery and humaneness, principally because they had not been treated from a radical-democrat perspective. Melville arrived at the rich character of Queequeg after observing closely one of the most progressive tendencies of popular literature of the late 1840s. The broadening of his sensibility had resulted from his growing sensitivity to the combined grotesque humor and extreme egalitarianism of popular radical-democrat literature, which had depicted even the most fierce oppressed peoples and minority groups as more noble than secretly corrupt social leaders. In his characterization of Queequeg, Melville seems to have been particularly indebted to George Lippard, the most popular radical-democrat novelist of the day. Lippard's best-selling volumes *Blanche of Brandywine* (1846) and *Washington and His Generals* (1847) both had included memorable episodes involving a massive Negro soldier of the American Revolution, Black Sampson, who slashed through British lines with his tremendous scythe waving and his

--Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, p. 542:

dog "Debbil" by his side. The Black Sampson episode suggests both the positive and the negative sides of the radical-democrat imagination in its crude popular state. Throughout his historical fiction Lippard underscores the special heroism of common people—farmers, blacksmiths, and so forth—who during the Revolution showed their combined patriotism and working-class fervor by seizing instruments of their trade, such as hammers and axes, as they rushed into battle. This radical-democrat egalitarianism had special import in the portrayal of Black Sampson, who is not only poor but also a Negro savage haunted by memories of his former noble stature as the son of the king of an African tribe. Lippard makes an innovative contribution to American literature when he stresses that Sampson, a pagan Negro, was one of the proudest and best soldiers in General Washington's army. This extremely sympathetic treatment of a Negro character was a testament to Lippard's sympathy for oppressed groups. But, in typical fashion, Lippard allows the Black Sampson episode to degenerate into grotesque black humor. Sampson seizes his gigantic scythe and rushes into battle, decapitating and dismembering British soldiers with utter brutality and with obvious love of gore. He screams to his dog, "We am gwin' mowin' today," and indeed mows down every soldier in sight; Lippard's potentially refreshing humanistic message about the innate nobleness of Negroes is lost in his gleeful fascination with perverse violence.[31] This blackly humorous interest in sheer brutality is epitomized in a long digres-

sion in *Blanche of Brandywine* that includes the following grisly words: "Dark and mysterious are the instincts of man. . . . [M]ost horrible of all, is the instinct of Carnage! Yes, that Instinct which makes a man thirst for blood, which makes him mad with joy, when he steeps his arms to the elbows in his foeman's gore, which makes him shout and halloo, and laugh, as he goes murdering on over piles of dead!"[32]

In portraying Queequeg, Melville reverses the pattern of the Black Sampson episode. He begins with blackly humorous images but moves to a fully humane treatment of the noble black man. Lippard had concluded his episode with a fiendish picture of his Negro savage mowing down humans with his tremendous scythe. Melville begins with the image of the deadly scythe and then progresses through various blackly humorous scenes toward a consoling portrait of Queequeg's redemptive humaneness. When in Chapter 3 Ishmael enters the Spouter-Inn, he sees hanging on the wall several "heathenish" weapons, the most terrifying of which is "sickle-shaped, with a vast handle sweeping round like the segment made in the new-mown grass by a long-armed mower," making Ishmael wonder "what monstrous cannibal and savage could have ever gone a death-harvesting with such a hacking, horrifying implement."[33] Having initiated the Spouter-Inn sequence with this Lippardian image, Melville remains,

--Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, p. 543:

through this and the following chapter, in the realm of popular black humor: Ishmael learns that Queequeg is having trouble selling his head because "the market's overstocked"; we hear that the previous Sunday Queequeg had left the inn to sell a string of heads that looked like onions; when Queequeg leaps into bed next to Ishmael he screams, "Who-e debel you?" and Ishmael in turn yells for the landlord, Peter Coffin. To this point, the tone of Melville's episode is not distant from the end of Lippard's. The huge deadly sickle, the images of mowing and death harvesting, the references to decapitation and dismemberment, the word "debel"—all of these images place Melville's episode in the familiar arena of popular dark humor.

Melville, however, prevents the sequence from descending to the merely perverse. Rather than allow his savage character to become a grisly emblem of gleeful carnage, as does Lippard, Melville makes him an emblem of universal love. He is able to do so primarily because he is more open than Lippard to the *reconstructive* possibilities of the radical-democrat vision. He is able to lift Queequeg out of the mire of black humor primarily because he has him embraced by a narrator who has all the markings of that flexible American character, the b'hoy. In "Hawthorne and His Mosses" Melville had stressed the need for the American writer to "carry republican progressiveness into Literature" by seeking indigenous themes and characters.[34] He found such a character in the b'hoy, a character that

Melville's fellow New Yorker George Thompson had identified in 1850 as the most distinctly American of all cultural figures. The b'hoy had gained prominence in New York popular literature between 1848 and 1850, at precisely the moment when Melville was a struggling New York novelist churning out the popular-oriented *Redburn* and *White-Jacket,* novels with strong radical-democrat themes. Having inundated himself in the popular radical-democrat consciousness, he emerged in *Moby-Dick* with a narrative voice that was different from that of his earlier novels, one that profited greatly from the complex b'hoy figure. In the opening pages of the novel Ishmael is established as the indigent, loafing, acute, brash, genially wicked New Yorker who plays pranks, hates respectable jobs, and aches for adventure. Melville's contemporary readers surely saw the signs of the b'hoy in an unconventional narrator who boasts that he travels not with commodores and who abominates "all honorable respectable toils, trials, and tribulations of every kind whatsoever."[35] Ishmael's declaration "Who aint a slave? Tell me that" would have had a familiar ring to those aware of the great b'hoy leader Mike Walsh, who by 1850 had become nationally famous for his argument that both Northern wage earners and Southern chattels were equally slaves of the capitalist system. The capacity of the b'hoy to be simultaneously virtuous and wicked is echoed in Ishmael's

--Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, p. 544:

flexible spirit, as typified by his comment: "Not ignoring what is good, I am quick to perceive a horror, and could . . . be social with it[.]"

But in the process of adopting the b'hoy Melville reconstructs him. Ishmael was not the first b'hoy narrator in American fiction, but he was the first who was pressed as far as possible in the direction of the humane and the broadly tolerant. He is the b'hoy reconceived by a writer who recognized the universal, fully human potentialities of his own culture's popular images. The early chapters of *Moby-Dick* make clear that Melville was thoroughly familiar with the blackly humorous, cynical underside of radical-democrat humor; but they also show that he was more willing than any other novelist of his day to capitalize upon the affirmative, richly emotive possibilities as well. Ishmael is not merely the "Mose" or "Sikesey" of popular fiction and plays, the punchy b'hoy who mocks aristocrats and elicits snickers with his latest prank. He is also the flexible, loving youth who stirs our deepest democratic sympathies when he embraces a man he had previously feared as a bloodthirsty cannibal. Queequeg, for his part, is not another Black Sampson, the patriotic soldier who dissolves into a sanguinary demon of battle. At first he does seem a sanguinary demon, but he proves himself a fully realized embodiment of Black Sampson's best qualities. Whereas Black Sampson goes to perverse extremes as a member of George Washington's army, Queequeg is, as Ishmael declares, "George

Washington cannibalistically developed," a pagan savage who becomes admirable because of his tenderness and generosity.[36] The "marriage" between Ishmael and Queequeg has been interpreted by Leslie Fiedler and others as Melville's projected homoerotic fantasy. There may indeed be sexual overtones in the scene in which Ishmael awakes to find himself half buried in Queequeg's affectionate embrace. More to Melville's point than sexual fantasy, however, is the fully human version of his culture's stereotypes he achieves. He rescues both the brash b'hoy and the savage warrior from the barren arena of black humor by burrowing beneath the cheapened radical democracy of popular culture to a genuine radical democracy signaled by deep affection between two good-hearted human beings of different races.

The bond between Ishmael and Queequeg is not the only example in the novel of Melville's ennoblement of radical-democrat humor. Other key instances appear in his treatments of the mate Stubb and the crew of the *Pequod.* Stubb is described as "one of those odd sort of humorists, whose jollity is sometimes so curiously ambiguous."[37] This comically churlish, grinning mate is highly derivative of radical-democrat humor in its darkest form. We have seen that the irony of radical democrats often went beyond social criticism to dark generalizations about a world that suddenly seemed profoundly awry. The word "queer" had a special significance in the

--Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, p. 545:

radical-democrat lexicon, for it summoned up the skewed reality that these dark humorists perceived. George Lippard again stands out as the main popularizer of this word, for his writings are filled with sarcastic comments about the "queer" arrangement of things. "Queer world this!" exclaims a character in a typical moment in Lippard's *The Quaker City.* "Don't know much about other worlds, but it strikes me that if a prize were offered somewhere by somebody, for the queerest world a-going, this world of ours might be rigged up nice, and sent in like a bit of show beef, as the premium queer world."[38] So significant was this term to Lippard that in 1849 his weekly reform newspaper, *The Quaker City,* featured a regular column entitled "It Is a Queer World," which reported grotesque social injustices. Melville, who in 1849 probed social wrongs in his reformist novel *White-Jacket,* also came to view this wry word as especially descriptive of perceived reality. As he was in the final stage of writing *Moby-Dick* he wrote Hawthorne a letter in which he imagined the two of them sitting cross-legged in heaven, drinking champagne, and singing what he called "humorous, comic songs, 'Oh, when I lived in that queer little hole called the world[.]' "[39]

In *Moby-Dick,* this radical-democrat sarcasm is embodied in Stubb, whose favorite word is "queer." When Ahab strikes him and sends him below, Stubb mutters, "It's very queer. . . . It's queer; very queer; and he's

below, Stubb mutters, "It's very queer. . . . It's queer; very queer; and he's queer too; aye, take him fore and aft, he's about the queerest old man Stubb ever sailed with. . . . Damn me, but all things are queer, come to think of 'em."[40] In his midnight soliloquy on the forecastle he declares that "a laugh's the wisest, easiest answer to all that's queer," and his response to the doubloon is a dismissive "Humph! in my poor, insignificant opinion, I regard this as queer." The ship's carpenter sums Stubb up well when he comments that "Stubb always says he's queer; says nothing but that one sufficient little word queer; he's queer—queer, queer; and keeps dinning it into Mr. Starbuck all the time—queer, sir—queer, queer, very queer." In addition to parroting the radical democrats' favorite cynical word, Stubb is closely linked to the bizarre, nightmarish imagery of the popular subversive imagination. We have seen that much popular humor became so experimental in its kaleidoscopic imagery that it verged upon the presurrealistic. Two of the strangest moments in *Moby-Dick* pertain to Stubb's overactive, disordered imagination. In Chapter 31 he reports his "queer dream" in which he tries to kick Ahab, who, shockingly enough, turns into a pyramid, which Stubb pummels with his leg until he is approached by a humpbacked merman, who turns threateningly to show Stubb a back studded with marlinespikes and then, after advising Stubb not to kick the pyramid anymore, seems "in some queer fashion, to swim off into the air." The second bizarre moment is when Stubb tries to comment on the dou-

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--Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, p. 546:

bloon: his remarks are a strange tangle of shifting, circular astrological readings.

In his portrayal of Stubb, Melville captures with marvelous concision the leering sarcasm and nightmarish imagery of popular humorists, particularly extreme radical democrats. Stubb represents the centrifugal forces of popular dark humor, the forces that fly quickly into the cynical and the chaotic as a result of a disillusion with perceived reality. These centrifugal forces are also embodied in the *Pequod*'s crew, particularly in the picture in Chapter 40 of the crew's boisterous revel in the forecastle. The black humor of the radical democrats was often punctuated by scenes of orgies meant to reflect the wildness and savagery lurking below the civilized surfaces of life. In Lippard's *The Quaker City* there is the freakish scene in which drunken characters whip themselves into a frenzy reflected in incoherent exclamations, erotic oaths, and complete noncommunication. It is this kind of disorganized blasphemy that Melville re-creates in the forecastle revel. Like much American Subversive humor, it firmly dismisses the Conventional (the first Nantucket sailor exclaims, "Oh, boys, don't be sentimental; it's bad for the digestion!"[41]) and proceeds into an inconsequential succession of oaths and jests that include a Lippardian mixture of sexual and dark images, such as warm bosoms, dancing on graves, lithe limbs, and the brevity of life. Like so many scenes in popular Subversive

texts, this one culminates in sadistic threats between bloodthirsty characters who engage in a terrible brawl.

In addition to adopting savage radical-democrat humor, Melville incorporates in *Moby-Dick* techniques and images of urban humor. Melville had immersed himself in the new urban humor in his comic series "Authentic Anecdotes of 'Old Zack,' " which he had written in 1847 for Cornelius Mathews's pioneering urban humor periodical *Yankee Doodle.* Perhaps the chief strategy Melville had learned from the "Old Zack" series was that many phenomena of the contemporary cultural scene could be used with the zestful theatricality of the master-showman Phineas T. Barnum. He mentioned Barnum constantly throughout the "Old Zack" series, and surely the spirit of this great peddler of freaks and oddities lies behind many of the wondrous images in *Moby-Dick,* including the bizarre sights Ishmael encounters in New Bedford, the grotesque decorations that adorn the *Pequod,* and the overall interest in the monstrous and the outlandish. Melville seems to have been most directly indebted to Barnum in his conception of the crew of the *Pequod.* In 1849, the year before Melville began to write *Moby-Dick,* Barnum had publicized his lifelong plan for convening a "congress of All Nations," an assemblage of representatives of all the nations that could be reached by land or sea. He later recalled: "I meant to secure a man and a woman, as perfect as could be procured,

--Reynolds, ***Beneath the American Renaissance*, p. 547**

from every accessible people, civilized or barbarous, on the face of the globe."[42] What Barnum failed to do in reality, Melville came close to accomplishing in fiction, for representatives of numerous nations are gathered on the *Pequod,* whose crew, Melville stresses, is an "Anacharsis Clootz deputation from all the isles of the sea, and all the ends of the earth."[43]

An even more direct influence of urban humor upon *Moby-Dick* is visible in the portrayal of the black cook Fleece and the crazed cabin boy Pip. Both are variations upon the Negro preacher featured in William H. Levison's burlesque sermon series published in *The New York Picayune* from 1847 onward and later collected in two popular volumes, *Julius Caesar Hannibal* and *Black Diamonds.* Fleece's comic sermon to the sharks in Chapter 64 is an adaptation of the style and content of burlesque sermons by Levison's Julius Caesar Hannibal, the pedantic, ill-spoken black preacher who regaled antebellum humor readers with his darkly humorous discourses (called "black diamonds") on countless topics. Just as Levison's Hannibal inevitably began his sermons with blessings such as "Blubed Sinners" or "Helpluss Brutheren," so Melville's Fleece addresses his congregation as "Belubed fellow-critters." Melville's contemporary readers would have found a familiar amusement in the fact that Fleece uses sharks as his text, because Levison's Hannibal had preached funny sermons about many strange animals: the crocodile, the lobster, the monkey, the elephant,

the hog, and the whale. Nor would they have been surprised by Fleece's ultimately cynical message—the horrifying voraciousness of the sharks, symbolizing the universal cannibalism of humankind and nature—for Hannibal frequently emphasized human savagery. In a typical sermon on "Future Punishment" Hannibal stressed that the concept of an afterlife, though dubious, was necessary for preventing humans from becoming totally amoral; without some hope of heaven or fear of hell, Hannibal said, "man wouldn't stop to oney murder he feller man, but he'd sell de bones to de button factory and de flesh to de sassenger makers de same as dey do dogs in dese days," and "de kanal botes would float in de blood ob mankind, and all creation would stan palsied wid a fright."[44] This pronouncement is similar in spirit to that of Fleece, who talks about the afterlife to the bloodthirsty sharks, while Hannibal's image of all creation being "palsied wid a fright" is close to Ishmael's conclusion that "the palsied universe lies before us a leper."[45] It is not surprising that even some of Melville's most devilish reflections in *Moby-Dick* were thus anticipated in popular culture, for Levison was writing in the vein of subversive American humor. Fleece's conclusion that it was "no use a-preachin' to such dam g'uttons" would seem a natural piece of dark humor to readers of Levison's burlesque sermons.

Melville's adaptation of Levison's Hannibal not only produced Fleece;

--Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, p. 548:

it also influenced the portrayal of Pip, the black cabin boy who goes crazy after falling into the ocean and whose commentary on the main characters is a kind of insanely inspired chorus running through the late chapters of the novel. Levison had popularized "black diamonds"—that is, the darkly humorous sayings of Julius Caesar Hannibal. Melville took the further step of creating an actual black diamond: a character who emerges from the depths inspired with a dark wisdom that can be expressed only in mad laughter. The connection between Melville's and Levison's characters would have been immediately apparent to nineteenth-century readers, for when Pip is introduced he is compared at length to a diamond. Emphasizing that "this little black was brilliant, for even blackness has its brilliancy," Melville describes the increased brilliancy created by Pip's dreary nautical environment by noting: "[W]hen the cunning jeweler would show you the diamond in its most impressive lustre, he lays it against a gloomy ground, and then lights it up, not by the sun, but by some unnatural gases. Then come out those fiery effulgences, infernally superb; then the evil-blazing diamond, once the divinest symbol of the crystal skies, looks like some crown-jewel stolen from the King of Hell."[46] In time, Pip becomes a kind of living embodiment of the "black diamonds" Hannibal delivers in his lectures, for the darkest of Hannibal's reflections, pertaining to relativism

of all human viewpoints, are acted out by the insane cabin boy. A bleak undercurrent of the burlesque sermons of Levison's Hannibal is the suspicion that warring interpretations of God and the world invalidate absolute truth. In a typically cynical moment Hannibal declares that religious denominations "all tell you dat if you don't belibe jis as dey do, and come into de 'stablished church, you am lost obberboard in de big gulf ob sin; *all* de churches am 'tablished churches, and dey all tink de rode dey hab picked out trough de miserable thickets ob trouble, wexations, and odder grevences ob dis life, am de rite one, and de odders am all rong."[47] While Hannibal's perception of relativism is punctuated by the image of falling "obberboard in de big gulf ob sin," Pip's similar perception comes after he literally falls overboard and plunges to the ocean's depths, where he has a shattering vision of primal truths. The madness that overtakes him is most memorably expressed at the end of the scene in which he overhears the main characters' radically heterogeneous views of the doubloon. The kind of bemused bafflement that Hannibal expresses when he contemplates warring faiths is concisely communicated in Pip's relativist outburst: "I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look."[48] Melville has converted the "black diamonds" of one of his age's leading urban humorists, Levison, into a memorable fictional character whose insane wisdom shines luridly over the conclusion of his wicked novel.

Much of the demonic energy and subversive reflectiveness of *Moby-Dick,*

--Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, p. 549:

then, derives from Melville's openness to the dark radical-democrat and urban humor of his day. While these, along with nautical humor, were the predominant humorous influences on the novel, Melville did not neglect wild frontier humor of the Crockett-almanac variety. In the course of *Moby-Dick* he mentions three frontier heroes—Davy Crockett, Daniel Boone, Kit Carson—and in his characterization of Peleg and Stubb he captures the hyperbolic oaths and comic violence of frontier humor. Peleg's vow that he will "swallow a live goat with all his hair and horns on" and Stubb's boast that he will pull off the devil's tail and sell it as an ox whip are typical of frontier humor, as is the tinder-box pugnaciousness of these characters.[49]

Surveying the comic elements of *Moby-Dick*, we can safely say that this is the *only* American literary work of the antebellum period that incorporates *all* popular humorous idioms of the day. Ahab's symbolic outcry—"Its wood could only be American"—is particularly descriptive of the dark humor that Melville absorbed from popular American literature. In "Hawthorne and His Mosses" Melville defined the "American genius" as "that explosive sort of stuff [which] will expand though screwed up in a vice, and burst it, though it were triple steel."[50] This explosive force of American genius was felt particularly in the wild, often black humor that had surged into the urban literary market in the 1840s and that was fully represented

in *Moby-Dick*. The American Subversive Style, which had been most visible in the shifts and quirks of dark popular humor, helps account for the stylistic richness of Melville's masterpiece. The centrifugal forces of subversive humor give rise not only to many bizarre images, such as Stubb's dream or Pip's disjointed outbursts, but also to the overall stylistic flexibility and variety of Melville's masterpiece. This stylistic fluidity is captured in Ishmael's comment: "Out of the trunk, the branches grow; out of them, the twigs. So, in productive subjects, grow the chapters."[51] A novel so inclusive of centrifugal humorous modes as *Moby-Dick* naturally becomes stylistically experimental.

Here, however, a crucial distinction must be made between subversive humor as it appears in popular texts and as it is transformed by Melville. At least since he had written *Mardi,* Melville had been aware that to incorporate demonic humor was to risk sacrificing unity and depth. "Authentic Anecdotes of 'Old Zack,' " the one wholly humorous work he had produced, had been characteristic of popular humor in its disjointedness and tonal inconsistency. Stubb, the one wholly humorous character in *Moby-Dick,* is a living emblem of such tonal inconsistency, as is evidenced even in his most apparently spontaneous utterances, his exhortations to his boat crew during whale chases. Note the wild shifts from the softly consoling to the devilishly urgent in this Stubb command: "Easy, easy; don't be in

--Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, p. 550:

a hurry—don't be in a hurry. Why don't you snap your oars, you rascals? Bite something, you dogs! So, so, then;—softly, softly! . . . The devil fetch ye, ye ragamuffin rapscallions; ye are all asleep."[52] Stubb's schizoid commands are among the phenomena that lead Ishmael to describe him as "one of those odd sort of humorists" whose jollity is "curiously ambiguous." Stubb epitomizes a tendency toward the stylistically chaotic that Melville recognized was the final literary expression of the subversive energies of America's democratic culture. In *Mardi* he had described Mardi's great national epic, Lombardo's "Kostanza," as a dense but structureless poem which, in the words of the philosopher Babbalanja, "lacks cohesion; it is wild, unconnected."[53] In writing his own national epic, *Moby-Dick*, Melville knew that it was precisely such wildness and structurelessness that spoiled much popular humor and threatened to destroy the fully absorptive literary text. As a counterbalance to the centrifugal forces of popular humor, he introduced humanizing and structuring devices that rechanneled these forces toward the deeply philosophical and the fully human.

Throughout *Moby-Dick* every potentially anarchic image or character related to American black humor is fused with some counterbalancing image or character that prevents it from tumbling into the netherworld of thematic chaos. In the hands of a typical radical-democrat humorist, Queequeg would have quickly degenerated into an uncontrolled savage like

Lippard's Black Sampson, just as Ishmael would have become just another punchy Mose or Sikesey. Because he avoids such cheapening and discovers the *truly* democratic possibilities of the radical-democrat vision, he forges their "marriage," which humanizes them and mollifies their potential savagery. Such images of human interconnectedness or union can be seen almost everywhere in the novel: in the crew's adoption of Ahab's monomaniacal purpose; in Ishmael's joining the wild shouts of the crew after its forecastle revel; in the reference to the motley crew as "federated along one keel"; in the passage praising the "great democratic God" that unites all human hearts; in the image of the monkey-rope, showing the symbiotic relationships among all human beings; in the loving squeeze of hands in the sperm vat.[54] Blackly humorous images are never allowed a long life of their own, as they often are in the less structured popular texts. Instead, they are always reined in by contrasting images or levels of rhetoric. Thus, the bizarre Chapter 31, describing Stubb's queer dream, is immediately followed by the rational, expository "Cetology" chapter. The sharkish crew is counterbalanced by the practical Starbuck, the rambunctious Stubb and insane Pip by the tyrannical Ahab, and all the sailors are driven by the common incentive of winning the doubloon and the common goal of destroying the white whale.

Besides introducing these fusing devices, Melville generates depth and meaning by coupling nineteenth-century images with archetypes from classic literature and philosophy. Perhaps the best example of this strategy is the characterization of Ahab. In fashioning Ahab, Melville was confronted with a delicate problem. Driven by an instinct to carry what he called "republican progressiveness into Literature,"[55] he must forge a thoroughly American character who could reflect or absorb the energetic, often disturbing images of democratic culture. At the same time, he wished to make use of literary archetypes that would aid in giving control and depth to these images. The character he created is a fully American figure who nevertheless transcends American culture. Ahab's Americanness lies in his stature as an imaginative synthesis of many of the most visible stereotypes in American popular culture. Ahab is simultaneously the towering immoral reformer striking through the mask, the ungodly, godlike oxymoronic oppressor, the justified criminal taking revenge against a being that has injured him, and the attractively devilish sea captain of Dark Adventure fiction. He is not, however, *only* quintessentially American. He is also a literary figure of mythic stature: he is the evil Ahab described in I Kings; he is the doomed overreacher of Renaissance drama; he is Faust, Lear, Prometheus. Permeated with archetypal resonances, he represents the contemplative Melville who sets out adventurously on a philosophical quest for truth. The quest is ultimately self-destructive and truth remains tantalizingly elusive; but this ambiguity does not place *Moby-Dick* at odds with American culture, as is commonly believed. What distinguishes this novel from its many popular prototypes is that it absorbs numerous American images and treats them not frivolously or haphazardly, as did popular texts, but instead takes them seriously, salvages them from the anarchically directionless, and gives them new humanity and mythic reference. Melville's philosophical quest may be dangerous, but it is also exhilarating and finally joyful. Its joy lies in its unparalleled intensity. Upon completing the novel Melville could express his paradoxical feeling of danger and peace by writing to Hawthorne: "I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb. Ineffable socialities are in me."[56] Having written a novel that fully absorbed the subversive forces of his own culture, Melville could nonetheless feel warmly calm and loving because he had produced a lasting testament to the creative spirit of humankind.