

MOBY DICK for Ninth Graders?

by

John H. Wulsin, Jr.

Moby Dick for ninth graders? Why rush the poor students into intellectual-ity? Why waste the profound riches, the deeps, on ninth graders? Let them save it for when their thinking can catch up with it, can do it justice!

Valid thoughts. Most of us would never imagine bringing *Moby Dick* to ninth graders. Who would be so foolish as to bring *Hamlet*, or *The Brothers Karamazov* to ninth graders? Common sense. Most of the questions in the first paragraph should in fact be applied to a common ninth grade book, *Huck Finn*. Its wit is too sophisticated for freshmen; their thinking needs to develop for them to become able to savor half the flavor of the book. But *Moby Dick*?

As far as I know, the intuition belonged to Christy MacKaye Barnes, long-time English teacher at the Rudolf Steiner School in New York. When she and her roommate, Carol Hemingway, used to pass time with their corn-cob pipes on the porch at Rollins College in Florida, a young man who visited would recite passages from *Moby Dick* to them. There young Christy first met the potency of Melville's language. The young man, John Gardner, married Carol, sister to Ernest Hemingway, and became the leader of both the Waldorf School at Garden City, Long Island, and of the Waldorf Teacher Training at Adelphi University.

Years later, Christy became concerned about the low level of vocabulary of her ninth graders at the Rudolf Steiner School in New York City. The best solution she could think of, to help expand their consciousness through language—*Moby Dick*. Not to teach philosophy; the ninth graders, and even really the eleventh and twelfth graders, are not ready for all the philosophy in *Moby Dick*, said Christy Barnes. She knew that Rudolf Steiner had recommended that ninth graders experience adventure, so she taught it as one of the greatest adventures. She had each student write a page from the novel, using alliteration, and turning adjectives into adverbs. She knew that using imitation was the key to teaching *Moby Dick* to ninth graders successfully, letting them imitate Melville.

The only way for an ignorant new Waldorf teacher in 1980 to test the apparent absurdity of Christy's notion, was to try oneself to teach it to ninth graders, at the Green Meadow Waldorf School. Twenty-two years later, having taught it twelve to fifteen times, with two colleagues, David Sloan and formerly Bonnie Chauncey, enjoying the experience as well, we find it powerfully and appropriately successful. Have we tried a different novel in its place? We have wondered, looked, considered, but we have not found any novel to come close, so far.

The Novel

Why? I think the wisdom behind having a ninth grade main lesson on the novel is as a balance to the other ninth grade English main lesson, the Story of

Drama. Whereas the history of drama objectifies the newly emerging soul-life of the adolescent, the novel, as a literary form, typically incarnates its readers in time and space. Especially the early English novel is consistent with the ninth grade, “contemporary” orientation. Typically the early English novel dwells neither in memory of the past nor in imagination of the future. Think of Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, Richardson’s *Moll Flanders*, or even Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. Even there, although Crusoe marks the days, yet he focuses on the present, the moment. Typically as well the world of the early novel is the familiar, known world of three-dimensional, physical space. Typically, England. Even in *Robinson Crusoe*, the footprint on the sand belongs not to a god, some supernatural being, but to a man, “Friday.” The characters typically are familiar, middle class, with an occasional criminal, but no lunatics, mad lovers, or poets, no characters going far beyond the bounds of normality. The typical early novel sanely orients the ninth graders, the “freshmen,” in the contemporary world.

However, might the novel do more as well, for the ninth grader? In fact, by the time of the early-mid eighteenth centuries, the English novel had in a way exhausted its material, its too sane, rational, prosaic, even materialistic limits. From what realms could new life enter the form of the novel? From the two raw, uncouth, sprawling worlds of savages and wilds, of many peoples—one to the east and one to the west—Russia and America. Within three decades, the 1850s, ‘60s, and ‘70s, America gave Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of Seven Gables*, Melville’s *Moby Dick*, and Poe’s stories. Russia gave Gogol’s *Dead Souls*, Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons*, Tolstoy’s *The Cossacks*, *War and Peace*, and *Anna Karenina*, and Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *The Possessed*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*.

What distinguishes these works from the previous, typical English novels? The new form of literature, the novel, becomes rejuvenated, even resurrected, through infusion of the spirit of the three original forms of literature, the epic, the lyric, and the drama. The ninth graders have been introduced to these primary forms of the human story in their earlier Main Lesson on the History of Drama. It’s important, as context for the study of the novel, for the freshmen to reawaken to the distinctive flavor of these original genres.

Epic, Drama, Lyric

The Epic, as in Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, typically tells the story of an aristocratic hero engaged in either a great battle or a long journey. The epic extends over long periods of time (ten years at Troy) and/or great distances (the whole known world of the Mediterranean). The epic in fact includes an almost encyclopedic knowledge of the whole known world. The human adventure is supported (or thwarted) by many levels of creature participating, supernatural gods and elemental beings of water and fire. The epic was usually sung in a third person narrative, “then the soldiers...”

The Drama, with its birth in the Dionysian Mysteries at Eleusis, originally portrayed characters struggling with fate, the action occurring in one day, in one place (Oedipus’ palace at Thebes). The gods, dominating the action completely in Aeschylus’ early *Prometheus Bound*, have receded by Sophocles’ *Oedipus*, to the background influence of Apollo’s oracle of Delphi, still pulling the strings of destiny though. The story is told, not in the third person, but

in the immediate dialogue, first and second person, I and you, communicating to each other, amplified by the chorus.

The Lyric, mothered forth (as far as our written records of western literature show) by Sappho, is essentially the song of . . .oneself. The “I” sings, using images of nature, to express a short version of a feeling or experience. “Swallow, swallow, Pandion’s daughter of wind and sky, why me/ why me?”

One of the many beauties of *Moby Dick* for this Main lesson is that the students can develop an eye and an ear for epic, dramatic, and lyric passages in the prose novel of the 1850’s. It can be good to ask each ninth grader to find and write in the Main Lesson Book at least two examples of each genre, from *Moby Dick*. It is then good for the ninth graders to write some lines imitating each of the three modes, epic, dramatic, and lyric.

In old Norse times, the thrones of the sea-loving Danish kings were fabricated, saith tradition, of the tusks of the narwhale. How could one look at Ahab then, seated on that tripod of bones, without bethinking him of the royalty it symbolized? For a Khan of the plank, and a king of the sea, and a great Lord of Leviathons was Ahab. (p. 130, Ch. 30, “The Pipe”)—An example of epic prose.

MALTESE SAILOR: Me too; where’s your girls? Who but a fool would take his left hand by his right, and say to himself, How d’ye do? Partners! I must have partners!

SICILIAN SAILOR: Aye; girls and a green!-then I’ll hop with ye; yea, turn grasshopper!

LONG-ISALAND SAILOR: Well, well, ye sulkies, there’s plenty more of us. Hoe corn when youmay, say I. All legs go to harvest soon. Ah! Here comes the music; nowfor it!

AZORE SAILOR [ascending , and pitching the tambourine up the scuttle.]: Here you are, Pip; and there’s the windlass-bitts; up you mount ! Now,boys!

[The half of them dance to the tambourine; some go below; some sleep or lie among the coils of rigging. Oaths a-plenty.]

AZORE SAILOR [Dancing]: Go it, Pip! Bang it, bell-boy! Rig it, dig it, stig it, quig it, bell-boy! Make fire-flies; break the jinglers!

PIP: Jinglers, you say?—there goes another, dropped off; I pound it so.

CHINA SAILOR: Rattle thy teeth, then, and pound away; make a pagoda of thyself.

FRENCH SAILOR: Merry-mad! Hold up thy hoop, Pip, till I jump through it! Split jibs! Tear yourselves!

TASHTEGO[quietly smoking]: That's a white man; he calls that fun: humph! I save my sweat.

OLD MANX SAILOR: Wonder whether those jolly lads bethink them of what they are dancing over. I'll dance over your grave, I will—that's the bitterest threat of your night-women, that beat headwinds round corners. O Christ! To think of the green navies and the green-skulled crews! Well, well; belike the whole world's one ball, as your scholars have it; and so 'tis right to make one ball-room of it. Dance on, lads, you're young; I was once.(p. 176, ch. 40, "Midnight, Forecastle.")— An example of dramatic prose.

Some days elapsed, and ice and icebergs all astern, the Pequod now went rolling through the bright Quito spring, which, at sea, almost perpetually reigns on the threshold of the eternal August of the Tropic. The warmly cool, clear, ringing, perfumed, overflowing, redundant days, were as crystals goblets of Persian sherbet, heaped up, flaked up, with rose-water snow. The starred and stately nights seemed haughty dames in jeweled velvets, nursing at home in lonely pride, the memory of their absent conquering earls, the golden helmeted suns! For sleeping man, 'twas hard to choose between such winsome days and such seducing nights. But all the witcheries of that unwaning weather did not merely lend new spells and potencies to the outward world. Inward they turned upon the soul, especially when the still mild hours of eve came on; then, memory shot her crystals as the clear ice most forms of noiseless twilights. And all these subtle agencies, more and more, they wrought on Ahab's texture. (p. 127, ch. 29, "Enter Ahab; to Him, Stubb")— An example of lyric prose.

Yes, it's good for our ninth graders, as budding scholars of literature, to understand how these original, primary forms of the human story have informed the novel, the "new" form of the human story, infusing its prosaic world of contemporary, linear time and three-dimensional space with the flavor, even the spirit, of epic, dramatic, and lyric language. However, this awakening scholarly activity has importance in other dimensions, on other levels, for the ninth graders. Rudolf Steiner has spoken of the epic, with its origins in Ionian Greece, especially Ephesus, as particularly serving the birth of a culture of a people, as not just reflecting but in fact even engendering the life patterns, the rhythms (right down to the breathing-dactylic hexameter), the habits of a people. He speaks of the epic quickening, engendering the life forces (esoterically speaking, the etheric body) of the singer, of the audience, and hence today, of the reader.[*Time Magazine*, July 26, 2004]

In a similar manner Rudolf Steiner speaks of the language of drama serving to quicken, to exercise, to develop the soul-body (or astral body) of the developing people, as together the Polis (the whole human community) struggles, through conflicts in relationships, to find and fulfill their destinies. Working explicitly,

consciously, with dramatic passages helps to quicken, to strengthen, to awaken the newly emerging astral bodies of the young high school students.

Lyric poetry Rudolf Steiner speaks of as exercising the individuality, of both the singer/speaker, and of the listener/reader audience.(see Speech –formation and the Dramatic Arts, Rudolf Steiner, 5-23 September, 1924, Dornach.) As our ninth graders are attuning their ears and eyes to the nuances, the distinct characters of epic, dramatic, and lyric passages in *Moby Dick*, they in fact are homeopathically awakening and artfully quickening their own growing life bodies, soul bodies, and emerging individualities. In fact, it can be enjoyable for everyone, after about a week, during roll call, for the teacher to ask each student to answer, “Aye, aye, Captain.” By addressing the teacher, the only mature I, and sounding, “Aye, Aye,” in response to their own individual names, the ninth graders are in fact unknowingly quickening their own I’s.

Reading: Doubloon

Yes, *Moby Dick* is a challenging book to read. But it turns out to be a book which all kinds of people can read. It is one of the great novels ever written. It enhances, empowers, transforms anyone who does read it. Practically, from a teacher’s point of view, *Moby Dick* is extremely flexible, like an accordion, in terms of how much of it to expect the students to actually read. No ninth grader should have to read the whole novel. Artfully omit chapters. Lengths of Main Lesson vary (usually three, four weeks.) We tend to assign no more than twenty pages of reading per night the first week, sometimes as much as thirty the ensuing weeks. The most appealing edition is the Arion Press Edition, with large print and superb woodcuts by Barry Moser (University of California Press). And *Moby Dick* offers, explicitly, one of the best images of the nature of the activity of reading.

In chapter ninety-nine, “The Doubloon,” Captain Ahab has nailed a sixteen-dollar gold piece on the mast, as reward for the first person to sight the white whale, Moby Dick. Around the rim of the circular coin are the letters, “El Quito, Ecuador.” In the sky, the sun shines, in the constellation of Libra. Below are three mountain peaks. On top of one is a flame, on another is a rooster, on the third is a tower.

Captain Ahab, beholding the coin, sees the flame as Ahab, sees the rooster as Ahab, sees the tower as Ahab; “all are Ahab.”(p. 441)” First mate Starbuck, with his melancholic foreboding, sees the three peaks embodying the Trinity, and focuses on the valleys between them, embodying the mood of the 23rd Psalm’s “valley of the shadow of death.” Buoyant second mate Stubb takes the sign of Libra as the start of a rambling, improvised, yet cohesive meditation on the signs of the zodiac as a picture of the stages of a human life. Pragmatic third mate Flask looks at the sixteen-dollar-coin and sees nothing more than nine hundred and sixty cigars. Black cabin boy Pip, who has lost himself while floating adrift one long day before being rescued, sees neither himself (Ahab’s reading) nor even the coin itself, but rather everyone else’s “reading” activity. “I look, you look, he looks. We look, ye look, they look.”(p.445) Every member of the Pequod’s crew reads the same golden doubloon differently. So any book speaks to each of us somewhat differently, although we may be, figuratively, on the same journey. At the beginning of the ninth grader’s high school and higher education, the golden doubloon as an image of reading offers an invaluable reference.

Does reading *Moby Dick* as a ninth grader rob a student of richer experiences reading it at a later age? No. This masterpiece only grows richer, every time.

Female/Male

“But there are no women in the novel!” except references to Ahab’s and Starbuck’s wives. How will girls make any connection to the story of this masculine world? In my experience girls are no less involved during the whole Main Lesson than the boys. The students who choose to read *Moby Dick* again the following summer are usually girls. Why? I’m not certain. But its success for twenty-five years at Green Meadow suggests that the story is humanly universal enough that it speaks to everyone. Christy Barnes at Rudolf Steiner School, and May Eliot and later Bonnie Chauncey loved teaching it at Green Meadow. *Moby Dick* is archetypal enough to include masculine and feminine dimensions, even if not feminine characters.

It was a clear steel-blue day. The firmaments of air and sea were hardly separable in that all-pervading azure; only, the pensive air was transparently pure and soft, with a woman’s look, and the robust and man-like sea heaved with long, strong, lingering swells, as Samson’s chest in his sleep.

Hither and thither, on high, glided the snow-white wings of small, unspeckled birds; these were the gentle thoughts of the feminine air; but to and fro in the deeps, far down in the bottomless blue, rushed mighty leviathans, sword-fish, and sharks; and these were the strong, troubled murderous thoughts of the masculine sea. (p. 543)

The scene of the shark massacre is memorably instructive for boys and girls about what can happen when a herd/group turns destructive. A school of sharks, originally focusing on the captured whale, starts a feeding frenzy, as whalers spear some of the sharks. “They viciously snapped, not only at each other’s disembowelments, but like flexible bows, bent round, and bit their own; still those entrails seemed swallowed over and over again by the same mouth, to be oppositely voided by the same gaping wound.”(p. 310) What could be a more potent image of the eventual self-destructiveness of gang-behavior, to which girls are no less prone than boys, though the forms may differ?

By contrast, beneath the sleek, “smooth, satin-like surface” of the water at the heart of a grand armada of whales, Ishmael describes an unusual sight from his whaling boat. “...As human infants while suckling will calmly and fixedly gaze away from the breast,...and while drawing mortal nourishment, be still spiritually feasting on some unearthly reminiscence;— even so did the young of these whales seem looking towards us...Floating on their sides, the mothers also seemed quietly eyeing us.” One newborn was still tethered by his

Year after year, ninth grade girls engage just as vitally, vigorously, imaginatively, and thoughtfully as the boys in the adventure offered by *Moby Dick*. Both the content and the dynamic are universally human enough to challengingly nourish both genders at that age. Anyone still uncertain about the value of *Moby Dick* for females need only go meet Mary K. Bercaw Edwards at Mystic Seaport. As a teenager she spent four years sailing around the world with her parents and sibling. Having written her doctoral thesis on Melville and *Moby Dick*, she delightfully shares her life-long love/work with anyone (including you) at Mystic Seaport.

Independence Parallels: United States Of America; Biblical Ishmael; Herman Melville; Ishmael; Ninth Grader

The ninth grader can become aware of concentric spheres of independence as context. Most early settlers came to the new world for geographic and religious independence. 150 years later they had to fight for legal and economic independence from the fatherland, to become the United States of America. Yet it took a whole lifetime longer, before the United States begin to experience artistic, literary independence, in the 1840s and '50s. Biblical Ishmael, Abraham's son by maidservant Hagar rather than wife Sarah, was passed over in favor of Sarah's son Isaac. Ishmael in fact was cast out into the desert, yet, through this premature, forced independence, Ishmael ended up becoming the father of a great nation, the Arab peoples. It's possible to imagine that dark Herman identified with Ishmael, compared to his golden-haired, silver-tongued brother, Gansevoort, the apple of their parents' eye, as Isaac had been. Herman Melville himself struck out for his own independence from his dependent, widowed mother and siblings, by embarking on a whaling voyage in 1841. Similarly Ishmael in *Moby Dick* leaves family and land, embarking on a whaler to see the world. All these ripples of independence resonate for the ninth grader, leaving the class teacher and the lower school, entering the new world of the high school, studying revolutions in history, and experiencing them inwardly in various forms. The ninth grader, newly interested in the world, begins correspondingly to have an increasingly conscious and hence independent inner life, leaving parents beholding, often bewildered.

Physically Incarnating Activities

For ninth graders studying the novel, *Moby Dick* offers a number of enjoyable, grounding, incarnating activities. First, geographically, it's good for the students to draw a map of New England Whaling ports, getting a sense of the coastline and the primary ports. Then they draw a map of the whole world, showing the routes of Herman Melville's own voyages, both "outward bound" through the southern Atlantic out into the Pacific, and "homeward bound," as well as the route of the Pequod, down around the Cape of Good Hope, through the Indian Ocean, the Java Straits, and into the China Sea.

It's good for the ninth grader to draw a whaling ship in detail, learning the names of the masts and sails, as well as where the foc'sle, the galley, the captain's quarters, the try-works, and the blubber room are. Of course it's best, if possible, to go to a whaling port. At Mystic Seaport, a reconstructed whaling village in Mystic, Connecticut, students can go aboard the *Charles W. Morgan*, the only remaining wooden whaling ship from the nineteenth century heyday of whaling. It happens to be the sister ship of Melville's *Acushnet*. At Mystic our students can stay two nights, sleeping on the 120 year-old Danish training ship, the *Joseph Conrad*. The students learn more detailed whaling history, they bend iron mast rings in the forge, they copper-rivet white cedar planks in the boat-building shop, they make hemp rope, they learn songs to raise the sails by, they climb the rigging, they heave an actual old harpoon, they carve designs in "simshaw" (a hard, ivory-like plastic), they hear stories enacted by historical role-players, they plot a course with charts and compass, they become better acquainted with the stars in the planetarium, they draw one of the actual ships, and they see original film footage of one of the last regular whaling voyages.

Although New England was the center of the world's whaling industry in the early 1800's, a number of former whaling ports are possible to visit: Salem, Gloucester, New Bedford, and Nantucket in Massachusetts, Greenport, Hudson, and South Street Seaport in New York, and San Francisco. The Baja Bay, south of California, provides the breeding grounds for many pods of whales. Even if one's school's geographical location may not lend itself to visiting an old whaling port, a visit to some kind of working fishing village may open up dimensions for land-bound, suburban students.

However, even if one can go to no port, rich possibilities remain, hardly leaving the classroom. Perhaps on the first day of Main Lesson, the class can walk to an old barn, and, settled high in the rafters, the teacher can speak or read the opening chapter. The imagination adapts. By the time in the book when the crew has lowered for its first whale chase, one can arrange eight students sitting on the floor, in three rows of two, with a harpooner "in the bow," a mate in the stern, having the mate call "stroke!" and having the six rowers move together, in rowing motion, well synchronized. Perhaps one of the whaling songs the students are learning lends itself to that rowing rhythm.

In addition to drawing maps and the ship, students love to draw a whale, and it's good for them to draw a character, perhaps especially Queequeg, Ahab, or Starbuck. It's also good to have three-foot lengths of rope, so students can learn and practice basic knots, which were essential to sailors then, and which will always be useful: the overhand knot; the square knot; the sheet bend (for tying two lines together); and most important of all, for safely mooring a boat, (and even for securing one's life while rock-climbing), the bow-line. It's good for students to draw these knots as well. One can even ask the ninth graders to be ready to tie any one of them, as part of the exam.

Moby Dick reveals a whole world at work. The Pequod is, granted, a microcosm, yet the physical facts of its structure, its movement across our globe, and the activities necessary to make it work, all guide the ninth graders into experiencing certain timelessly true laws of the physical world.

Vitally Engendering Language; Speech— Group And Individual

The language of *Moby Dick*, there's nothing quite like it. It's certainly not underwritten; the opposite pole from Hemingway. For ninth graders? One might dare to say that the language alone is reason enough for ninth graders to work with *Moby Dick*. I think its language is the most vital of any American novel. What difference does that make to ninth graders? First, simply on the level of vocabulary, *Moby Dick* offers an unusually rich, almost Shakespearean trove of words. "Ubiquitous, circumambulate, twain, succor, unctuous, scud..." For students to look up five words per night, and to add five words classmates put up on the board each morning, many of which come from the practical world of the whaling ship and its activities, expands the students' conceptual awareness richly. For Christy Barnes' initial impulse, to broaden ninth graders' consciousness, the language of *Moby Dick* works dynamically.

For the whole class to be learning together one of Melville's passages throughout the weeks of the course, for the students to be looking for epic, dramatic, and lyric passages, for each student to be looking for his or her favorite passage to learn by heart, all mean that the ninth graders are vitally, dramatically, artfully engaged in the "style" of the language. Certain chapters lend themselves especially to dramatic readings, involving the whole class, espe-

cially the “Quarterdeck,” and “Midnight in the Forecastle.” On the final day of the course, each student recites his or her own passage to the class, a pleasing “re-hear” for the whole class as the passages proceed in chronological sequence, and a quickening artful experience for the individual who has made those words part of life for many days and nights.

Humor

The ninth grader needs humor, Rudolf Steiner said, for the soul to grow healthily. *Moby Dick* is surprisingly permeated with humor. Not jokes. One’s not likely to hear readers laughing. But they’ll be smiling.

Nantucket!... There is more sand there than you would use in twenty years as a substitute for blotting paper. Some gamesome wights will tell you that they have to plant weeds there, they don’t grow naturally; that they import Canada thistles; that they have to send beyond seas for a spile to stop a leak in an oil cask; that pieces of wood in Nantucket are carried about like bits of the true cross in Rome; that people there plant toadstools before their houses, to get under the shade in summer time; that one blade of grass makes an oasis, three blades in a day’s walk a prairie; that they wear quicksand shoes, something like Laplander snow shoes... But these extravaganzas only show that Nantucket is no Illinois. (p. 64)

The play of language generates elastic delight of imagination, generates humour, almost like a fragrance.

And thus have these naked Nantucketers, these sea hermits, issuing from their ant-hill in the sea, overrun and conquered the watery world like so many Alexanders; parceling out among them the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian oceans, as the three pirate powers did Poland. Let America add Mexico to Texas and pile Cuba upon Canada; let the English overswarm all India, and hang out their blazing banner from the sun; two thirds of this terraqueous globe are the Nantucketer’s. For the sea is his; he owns it.” (p. 65)

Like Whitman at his best, Melville’s mock-epic, hyperbolic word-play generates imagination, generates consciousness, perhaps even creating, one might say, a living humour in the reader, a healthy life-force in the ninth grader, for resiliently riding through the tempests of adolescence.

Metabolic/Soul

Most ninth graders have entered puberty, the physical transformation which marks the beginning of adolescence. Physically, boys’ limbs have sometimes grown two to six inches in half a year. Girls become capable of generating, of reproducing life. Such astonishing metabolic/limb development eludes consciousness by and large for the ninth grader entering the broader world of high school. How conscious can we be in the midst of our greatest labors?

One way the Waldorf curriculum addresses this volatile, metabolic development in the early stages of the unfolding of the adolescent’s soul-body is through the study of the combustion engine in ninth grade

Physics. As a literary parallel, it is hard to think of a more apt natural image for the mysterious, powerful forces emerging within the adolescent, than the

mighty whale swimming in the huge, wild ocean, occasionally surfacing, offering great dangers and potential riches.

And yes, “freshmen” ninth graders reading *Moby Dick* experience that mere mortals can not only catch sight of that mighty king of the sea, but can even row, when working well together, row after such a mighty force, can meet it, match it, even overpower, master it. The directing, driving force of the chase is the captain. Although Ahab is obsessively egotistical, he nevertheless embodies the activity of the individuality, the ego, directing the mastery, the control over the potentially uncontrollable, destructive metabolic/astral forces. In fact, it is fair to say that the very obsessiveness of Ahab’s egotism is responsible for the deaths/destruction of the whole crew of the Pequod, with the exception of surviving Ishmael.

Fate, Will, Chance

Ninth graders dwell in several kinds of thresholds. With the beginnings of puberty, not only do their metabolic/reproductive systems become active in new ways, but, correspondingly, new capacities for abstract/conceptual thinking start to become available.

During the process of giving birth to a new soul-body (or astral body), the emerging individual begins to become freer than ever before from the influences, habits, intentions inherited from his or her family. At least the tensions become more pronounced between what has brought the ninth grader this far, and how the ninth grader is going to proceed into the future.

Consequently ninth graders experience the reality, as never before, of questions of the relationship between fate and free will. Earlier in the ninth grade year, in their Main Lesson on the History of Drama, the freshmen are likely to have studied Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King*, who, despite all his efforts, was unable to escape his pre-ordained fate. Later in that course, in a modern play such as Hansberry’s *Raisin in the Sun*, characters might have just as much challenge finding their way, feeling abandoned by the gods, or God.

In the opening chapter Ishmael wonders why,

I should now take it into my head to go on a whaling voyage . . . though I can not tell why it was exactly that those stage managers, the Fates, put me down for this shabby part of a whaling voyage, when others were set down for magnificent parts in high tragedies, and short and easy parts in genteel comedies, and jolly parts in farces— . . . yet, now . . . I think I can see a little into the springs and motives which . . . induced me to set about performing the part I did, besides cajoling me into the delusion that it was a choice resulting from my own unbiased free will and discriminating judgment. (pp. 6,7)

Soon the Polynesian harpooneer Queequeg puts his fate in Ishmael’s hands, letting him choose the Pequod, their home for three or four years.

Eventually *Moby Dick* offers the ninth graders the clearest picture perhaps in all literature of the relationship among the three primary forces of Fate, Free Will, and Chance, in chapter forty-seven, “The Mat-Maker.” During their many indolent hours off-watch, between whale sightings, the sailors pass their time

in a variety of ways: sleeping, telling stories, singing, carving scrimshaw, mending, doing macramé (knot patterns in string or rope), and weaving on a portable hand-loom.

Ishmael likes to weave in some of his free time. He starts to realize some larger implications of the process. The vertically fixed strings, of a certain material, thickness, color, Ishmael recognizes as embodying Fate, unchangeable once put in place on the frame, the basis of the tapestry, what the weavers call the “warp.” The weaver then proceeds with the “woof,” also called the shuttle, weaving horizontally whatever color of thread in whatever rhythmic pattern (over one, under two, over one, etc.) he wishes. At the end of one line across the warp (in fact, at any time), the weaver can continue with the same thread, change color, change the rhythmic pattern, or whatever he chooses, creating the particular dynamic of the design. This activity of the woof Ishmael recognizes as embodying Free Will. At the end of each line, Ishmael’s friend Queequeg, sitting next to him as they pass the time together, inserts a straight, wooden “sword” between the fixed threads of the warp, to push the newly woven thread of the woof back against the previously woven threads of the tapestry. Sometimes Queequeg holds that sword perfectly perpendicular to the fixed threads, as he presses it up. Sometimes the sword angles slightly up, or slightly down. Sometimes Queequeg presses the sword more firmly against the rest of the tapestry, sometimes less. In the unpredictability of the activity of the sword, Ishmael recognizes the activity of Chance.

Aye, chance, free will, and necessity—no wise incompatible—all interweavingly working together. The straight warp of necessity, not to be swerved from its ultimate course—its every alternating vibration, indeed, only tending to that; free will still free to ply her shuttle between given threads; and chance, though restrained in its play within the right lines of necessity, and sideways in its motions modified by free will, though thus prescribed to by both, chance by turns rules either, and has the last featuring blow at events. (p. 218)

It is simply powerful for ninth graders to draw “The Loom of Time,” with some portion of patterned tapestry on it, and a sentence or two explaining the relationship among Fate, Free Will, and Chance, a balanced, threefold picture they are likely never to forget.

Polarities

In relation to ninth graders, Rudolf Steiner spoke in a number of ways of the healthiness of working with polarities. On the one hand the emerging soul-body has the dual tendencies of swinging between sympathy and antipathy. Yet its extreme tendencies require balance for it to be healthy. A polarity implies an opposing tension, within a unity, a wholeness. Tragedy and comedy form the essential polarity of drama. Goethe considered black and white to be the polarity within which varying colors play.

Moby Dick is informed to an unusual degree with the dynamic of polarity. The initial, primary polarity is the relationship between common seaman Ishmael and harpooneer Queequeg: white and purplish-yellow; poor landlubber and is-

land prince; “Christian” and pagan; observer and man of action; the one who tells the story, and the one on whose body the story of the world is mysteriously tattooed.

The whole crew of the Pequod, “isolatoes” all, from all around the world, Iceland Denmark, France, Spain, Africa, China, Malaysia, Fegee, America, Isle of Man, are nevertheless “federated along one keel,” (the Pequod), a polarity of periphery and center. The whole crew is structured according to a major polarity between mates and harpooners, between “Knights” and “Squires.” The Knights” are all white, from New England, the center of the world’s whaling industry: Starbuck-Nantucket; Stubb-Cape Cod; Flask-Martha’s Vineyard. The “Squires” are colors, from across the world: purple-yellow Queequeg from the Pacific to the west; red Tashtego from Gay Head, Martha’s Vineyard, in the center; and black Dago from Africa to the east. The two most peripheral crew members are Doughboy, the pale white cook’s helper, and Pip, the black cabin boy.

Ahab himself embodies a polarity on one level; he walks on one leg of life and one leg of death (ironically, ivory), having lost it to Moby Dick. Yet as a character, Ahab exists in polaric relationship to several characters differently. Yellow, silent Fedallah, Ahab’s Parsee harpooner, knows Ahab’s fate; try as Ahab will, like Oedipus, to thwart his fate, Ahab will end up fulfilling it, as prophesied by Fedallah. They stood “still fixedly gazing upon each other; as if in the Parsee Ahab saw his forethrown shadow, in Ahab the Parsee his abandoned substance . . . Ahab seemed an independent lord; the Parsee but his slave. Still again both seemed yoked together. . . ., the lean shade siding the solid rib.”(p, 539)

First mate Starbuck tries to reason with Ahab, almost as Ahab’s conscience; Ahab’s obsessive will overpowers Starbuck’s human reason. “Stand close to me, Starbuck; let me look into a human eye. . . this is the magic glass, man; I see my wife and my child in thine eye. . . lower not when I do; when branded Ahab gives chase to Moby Dick.”(p. 545)

The clearest polarity develops however between Captain Ahab and cabin-boy Pip. The more concentrated Ahab’s obsession of self, the more dispersed becomes Pip’s lack of self. Ahab recognizes a kinship of insanity. “Here, boy; Ahab’s cabin shall be Pip’s home henceforth, while Ahab lives. Thou touchest my inmost center, boy.”(p. 525) “There go two daft ones now,’ muttered the old Manxman, ‘One daft with strength, the other daft with weakness.’”(p. 526) Ahab has of course the most distilled insight into the polarity between him and Pip. “True thou art, lad, as the circumference to its center.”(p 536)

The most potent polarity of course exists between Ahab and Moby Dick, the white whale himself.

The Double: Guardian Of The Threshold

In the early mid-nineteenth century numerous western authors explored in a variety of ways a mysterious phenomenon of human experience, known most frequently and simply as “the Double,” or the Doppelganger: William Blake-“My Spectre;” Mary Shelley-*Frankenstein*; Edgar Allen Poe-William Wilson; Nathaniel Hawthorne-*Young Goodman Brown*; Thoreau in Walden, “ I am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another”(“Solitude”); Whitman in *Song of Myself*,” I believe in you my

soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you, /And you must not be abased to the other.”(section 5); Fyodor Dostoyevsky– *The Double*; Robert Louis Stevenson– *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

Eastern traditions, notably Hinduism and Buddhism, had for millennia described and portrayed horrible monster/guardians at the threshold of enlightenment.

While the versions vary, most characterizations of the mystery include a tension, even apparent antagonism, between two versions of one’s “self.” Rudolf Steiner, in *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds*, speaks of two manifestations of the double, the Lesser and the Greater Guardians of the Threshold. In the “Lesser Guardian,” Steiner says that, “A thoroughly horrid, ghostly being stands before us.” Steiner portrays that being identifying itself.

Now your past actions are separating themselves from you, stepping out of your personality. They are assuming an independent form, one that you can see, as you can see the stones and plants of the outside world...Whenever you think or act wrongly, you will immediately see your fault as an ugly, demonic distortion in my appearance. My being will be changed and become radiantly beautiful only when you have made amends for all your wrongs and have so purified yourself that you become incapable of further evil. Then, too, I shall be able to unite with you again as a single being in order to bless and benefit your further activity. (pp186-187).

At the beginning of his adventure, immediately, in the cold, icy darks of the longest nights of the year, Ishmael meets a version of the lesser guardian of the threshold. Forced to share a bed with an unknown harpooneer at the Spouter Inn in New Bedford, Ishmael wakes in the middle of the night to the greatest horror he could imagine, a purplish-yellow tattooed cannibal with a tomahawk, saying, “Who-e debel you? You no speak-e, dam-me, I kill-e.”(p 125) Yet after the landlord explains, the two settle down, and in the morning Ishmael awakes to find the “horror of horrors” still asleep, with his arm across Ishmael’s chest. Queequeg sells shrunken heads in the street, worships his god Yojo, and celebrates his own version of the Muslim Ramadan. Within a day, this prince from the Pacific island of Kokovoko, (“an island...not down in any map; true places never are,”) “marries” the lowly first-time whaler, Ishmael. Queequeg touches his forehead to Ishmael’s, gives Ishmael half his money, and entrusts Ishmael to choose the whaling ship on which they will spend (and perhaps lose) their lives the next three or four years. Queequeg emerges as the closest character to a hero in the novel. The best thrower of harpoons, he saves several lives, including a rude country bumpkin who is knocked overboard into the icy December waters, and Tashtego, the Gay Head Indian who is trapped inside a sinking sperm whale’s head.

What Ishmael initially met as the most frightening and death-threatening of horrors, turned out instead to become the strongest ally of Ishmael’s own destiny. Queequeg’s tattoos turn out to embody “a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth.”(p. 490) Late in the story, when Queequeg, dying, has a coffin made, he remembers something he still has to do so he decides to live. He carves many of his own runic tattoo

designs on the coffin. That coffin, marked with signs of the secrets of the universe, becomes ironically the life-buoy of the Pequod. When, at the end, the ship goes down, the whirlpool spews forth Queequeg's coffin, which becomes the life saver for Ishmael, "who alone survived to tell the tale."

Teachers are unlikely to talk with ninth graders about lesser guardians of the threshold, but the students meet in Queequeg a potent and affectionate image of the mystery of the lesser guardian, one they're not likely to forget.

As apparently dangerous Queequeg turns out to be Ishmael's savior, so on a larger scale, the white whale itself, Moby Dick, serves a similar role for the whole crew of the Pequod. Not literally. They all die, except Ishmael. But in the imagination of the whole story, it is Moby Dick in whose light, one might say, the whole crew reveals itself. "Hark ye yet again," says Ahab to Starbuck in front of the whole crew assembled on the quarter-deck,

the little lower layer. All visible objects, man, are but as paste-board masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me. (p. 168)

"... to me the white whale is that wall, shoved near me." Object of fear for many of the crew, source of destruction, yet the white whale stands for an epitome of a terrible beauty, an embodiment, even a threshold to another reality. While the concepts of agent and principal may elude some ninth graders, the image of the "wall, shoved near me," is accessible and memorable to all.

On the one hand, Ahab, having long ago cast overboard his hat, hardly eating and sleeping, abandoning the normal instruments of earthly navigation, burns with an intensity becoming increasingly independent of earthly existence. On the other hand, Rudolf Steiner portrays the Greater Guardian of the Threshold as warning, "therefore I refuse to admit you to the highest regions of the supersensible world until you have used all your powers for the deliverance of your fellow world and fellow beings."(p 203)

Whereas the Lesser Guardian has the appearance of horror, the Greater Guardian emanates unbelievable radiance. So does the white whale. "A gentle joyousness—a mighty mildness of repose in swiftness, invested the gliding whale. Not the white bull Jupiter swimming away with ravished Europa clinging to his graceful horns; his lovely, leering eyes sideways intent upon the maid; with smooth bewitching fleetness, rippling straight for the nuptial bower in Crete; not Jove, not that great majesty Supreme! did surpass the glorified White Whale as he so divinely swam....On each bright side, the whale shed off enticings."(p 549)

But because Ahab has devoted all his and his crew's powers to his own self-obsession, rather than to "the deliverance of your fellow world and your fellow beings," just the opposite happens. The White Whale refuses Ahab entry to the supersensible realm, refuses to let Ahab break through the wall of the pasteboard mask, with the consequence of the destruction of, rather than the deliverance of, the whole crew, except Ishmael. Again, ninth graders experience the dynamic, without having to know anything of the concept of the guardians.

In fact, one individuality is so interested in every other individual on the ship that he himself almost disappears as narrator through much of the story. However he doesn't lose himself, like Pip. Nor though is he obsessed with himself, like Ahab. Through his selfless interest in each other, Ishmael finds himself. In mature Consciousness Soul fashion, Ishmael is able to let the other speak. Hence the true ego, Ishmael, alone survives to tell the tale, through which all the others become immortalized. Ninth graders don't conceptualize the quality of Ishmael's I. But they recognize it. *Moby Dick* is an adventure not all ninth graders must experience. But they can, and they become the mightier for it.

Reference: Melville, Hermann. *Moby Dick*, Berkley, California: Arion Press, 1979.