Males, Melville, and *Moby-Dick*: A New Male Studies Approach to Teaching Literature to College Men

K.C. Glover

The experience of males has rarely been conveyed, even in the great works of literature of the "dead white men." Tales of heroic exploits are many, but few touch upon the depth of the male soul. With the decrease in male enrollment on college campuses, many sodden with gender studies ideology in the classroom and the campus, it is of growing importance to understand the best ways to teach young men. It is posited here that the work of Herman Melville, explicitly here his novel Moby-Dick*, offers*

NEW MALE STUDIES: AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL ~ ISSN 1839-7816 ~ VOL. 2, ISSUE 2, 2013 PP. 62-67

insight into the "male experience" in a way that is lacking in much of literature. Melville gave voice to the Erotic and numinous in the life of the everyday man. Here it is offered as an antidote to the sex-obsessed and misandric views of the contemporary humanities.

Keywords: New Male Studies, male experience, Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

Introductory Note: Affiliated with the Modern Language Association of America, the Northeast Modern Language Association (NeMLA) hosts an annual conference primarily for scholars working in the northeastern United States and Canada. Papers are presented on topics concerning various languages, their literatures, and their pedagogies. In addition, NeMLA supports special-interest caucuses that both investigate certain challenges faced by those working in academe and organize conference panels that address these challenges. Among these groups is the Women's and Gender Studies Caucus that, according to its web page, "welcomes members interested in feminist scholarship, women's and gender studies, and the status of women in the profession at all stages of their careers." NeMLA does not currently maintain a men's caucus.

Following is one of three papers presented by members of the staff of New Male Studies at the 44th annual NeMLA convention held in Boston, Massachusetts, on March 22, 2013, hosted by Tufts University. The other two papers are included in this issue. Each paper offers practical examples of male-friendly strategies that enhance critical inquiry and teaching methods. They comprised a panel, "The New Male Studies in Praxis: Male-Positive Criticism and Classroom Practice," that was initially proposed by one of the presenters (Dennis Gouws) as either a pedagogy or a women's and gender-studies panel and was accepted as one among nineteen pedagogy panels. Twenty-eight women's and gender studies panels were accepted.

The development of a New Male Studies graduate program is currently being undertaken internationally with the development of a curriculum designed around male positive ways of pedagogy. This may come as curious, as I assume that most hold the belief that most things in society privilege males. However, as Professor Groth (see "The Learning Style of Males and How to Involve College Men in the Curriculum," current issue) has hinted at and others are increasingly writing about, our colleges and universities are losing male enrollment and it cannot be spun as merely a feel good story of increased female college enrollment. My purpose here is not to call out the various issues leading to the decline in male enrollment, but to offer a male-positive approach to teaching. My method of teaching in the New Male Studies way would be to resurrect the humanities from their ideological graves and to offer a safe place to look at the great literature and poetry of history. That Herman Melville was both arguably the greatest American novelist, especially with his leviathan tale, Moby-Dick, as well as unabashedly a lover of men, leads me to believe that a class based around his works would be intellectually stimulating while maintaining a male-positive approach. A close reading of his work, especially diving into the poetic world of Moby-Dick, would enrich students as well as provide valuable insight into a homosocial, male world. A brief history of Melville scholarship would also provide context for what has happened in the American university.

Herman Melville died unrecognized and poor in 1891, and is buried in an unremarkable grave

next to his wife in the Bronx. He never received the acclaim he thought he deserved, until the posthumous publication in 1924 of his novel Billy Budd, when there was a revival of interest in his work. Around this time Newton Arvin published his famous biography of Melville and D.H. Lawrence dedicated a chapter of his Studies in Classic American Literature to his work. The revival came to fruition after World War II with the creation of a Herman Melville society dedicated to preserving his work. These initial scholars focused on his literary quality and the grand scope of his novels, stories, and poems.

Starting at the dawn of the sixties the most pressing topic relating to his life became Melville's sexuality. The most notable contribution to this line of scholarship came from Leslie Fiedler with his Love and Death in the American Novel. His psychoanalytic look into Melville's work looked to find overt, covert, and latent homosexuality throughout. In our time the emphasis is still on Melville's sexuality, most notably his supposed homosexuality. Any questioning of this has led some to say, like Rictor Norton, that any attempt to dissuade others of Melville's homosexuality is homophobia and that Melville himself was "confused" and "closeted."

The starting point for a new understanding of the male in literature is a focus on experience. The point is to be radical, a to return to the roots. The soil in which these roots are planted is experience. Experience is a difficult term to discuss, as I do not merely mean "an experience" such as an IMAX movie. To badly paraphrase Aristotle: as sight is the soul of the eye, experience is the soul of the body. The New Male Studies approach would not reduce the male to biology or culture, but seek to understand his experience of both. It looks beyond behavior to the underlying experience. This is exponentially more difficult than the vogue methods of sociology, a discipline dedicated to quantitatively and qualitatively trying to identify patterns of human behavior. Behavior is deceptive and an inadequate way to understand one another; that sociology is so popular may be the result of our laziness in attempting to understand our fellow humans. Experience is something untasteable, untouchable, unsmellable, inaudible, and poorly conveyed by words to others. Moby Dick itself is that "white rush" of experience, leaving us like Leda, uncomprehending and bruised.

R.D. Laing, the psychologist and showman, once wrote, "The study of the experience of others is based on inferences I make, from my experience of you experiencing me, about how you are experiencing me experiencing you experiencing me..." Experience must be understood as relational and out-in-the-world. A male human is a unique creature in how he experiences the world through his body in relation to others. To understand the male experience is to draw inferences from the experience of that unique male as he tries to communicate it to us. Poets and novelists such as Melville have offered us glimpses into the male experience, capturing the microscopic moments lost amid the study of the male in history and sociology. This is Melville's great merit.

Moby-Dick is replete with insights into the male experience of the world. Simultaneously straddling the sacred and mundane, or shattering the line all together, Melville struck deep into the heart of existence through the eyes of whalers. Reflecting on existence he echoes Bob Dylan's All Along the Watchtower when he delivered the darkly existential claim, "There are certain queer times and occasions in this strange mixed affair we call life when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke, though the wit thereof he but dimly discerns, and more than suspects that the joke is at nobody's expense but his own." The relationships between men in Melville's novel are respite from

this joke. What small revelation would be offered to those young men struggling through shallow friendships or "bro-ships" to learn of Ishmael and Queequeg sharing their "marriage bed?" What understanding could we gain from taking an earnest look at the demonic Ahab, not as patriarch or oppressor, but as a man who would scorn the Sun and God in order to fulfill his fiery ambition? "Tell not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me." The complexities of Ahab's character are a truer vision of the male experience than textbooks a foot thick can offer us.

So let us look closely at two specific instances of the male experience, as attempted to be conveyed to us by Herman Melville in Moby-Dick.

(1) The relationship between Queequeg and Ishmael has long been discussed and dissected. A cursory look at their intimacy may lead us to quickly label them as homosexual. Usually using Melville's alleged homosexuality as a guide, some have envisioned his works as confessions or "winks" to readers from a time when homosexuality could only be written about in pornographic texts. I think that this has become the dominant narrative, no doubt a product of our times that focus so intensely on sexuality and sexual identity. Identity studies influenced scholars have also ideologically driven this climate of opinion. A more studious approach to Melville and his characters would reveal a different kind of intimacy between men that I think Queequeg and Ishmael embody as part of their characters. Queequeg is an embodiment of Melville's encounter with Polynesian culture, one in which bodily expression of all kinds were more permissive. Before Ishmael encounters Queequeg, much like before Melville encountered the Marquesas Islands, he experienced restlessness and a "damp, drizzly November in my soul." Both Ishmael and Melville experienced Polynesian culture as a kind of revelation, a liberation from the false courtesy of Christian nicety and bourgeois values. As Ishmael sits contemplating his pagan friend he experiences a great change, an ego orgasm as elucidated by the psychoanalysts D.W. Winnicott and Masud Khan. "I began to be sensible of strange feelings. I felt a melting in me. No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world. This soothing savage had redeemed it." Ishmael and Queequeg's joining is homoerotic and most expressly an enlivening of Ishmael's leaden, Victorian soul.

The homoerotic nature of Ishmael and Queequeg's relationship should be stressed beyond the merely sexual. By erotic, I refer to Eros, rather than erotica. That Ishmael and Queequeg "marry" and share a "marriage bed" is a higher kind of marriage as seen in Plato's Symposium, rather than in romance novels. It is no coincidence that after this ego orgasm that Ishmael experiences with Queequeg, Ishmael becomes more than another character in an adventure novel, taking to the high seas and bedding women. Instead he becomes a philosopher, contemplating the immensity of existence as it bombards him on the untamed seas in quest of the White Whale. That Moby-Dick is dedicated to Nathaniel Hawthorne, who I think Melville experienced ego orgasm with in his own life, sets a nice parallel between the creation of the book and Ishmael's philosophical adventure in the story.

(2) If Ishmael is the Orphic character of Moby-Dick, Ahab is the Promethean man, one of the more complex characters in literature. It might be easy to pass him off as a ruthless patriarch, uncompromising and brutally leading his whale ship on a doomed venture to conquer nature, but this caricature of Ahab and men is worthless for understanding them. Ahab's very body has been deformed in his quest for absolute knowledge and will to power, conquering the White Whale. He has lost his leg, a brutal castration that has left him mad, but imbued with a sort of divine or demonic

vision. He is both king and seer, a Rasputin of the high seas.

Ahab's relationship to his body is something that has not been stressed enough, for it is a level of experience sorely lacking in expression among males. Like a knight's suit of armor or our modern day body builders, Ahab made it known how he would see it fit for the male body to be made. "Imprimis, fifty feet high in his socks; then, chest modeled after the Thames Tunnels; then, legs with roots to 'em, to stay in one place; then arms three feet through the wrist; no heart at all, brass forehead, and about a quarter of an acre of fine brains; and let me see – shall I order eyes to see outwards? No, put a sky-light on top of his head to illuminate inwards." This great Golem of a man, wearing armor against all foes (and friends), is the character armor of the maniacally driven and blind ambition of the male soul gashed by outrageous fortune. No heart to be stopped by trifling emotions, no eyes to look upon the world, but a purely ascetic suit of armor to take on the world.

Though much of the novel sees Ahab fiercely goading on his crew to pursue the White Whale, many scenes of Ahab addressing his crew invoke imagery similar to footage of Hitler addressing the Third Reich, towards the climactic chase of Moby Dick we see Ahab become more contemplative. One of the last chapters before the fated chase calls to mind stories of samurai finding enlightenment on the battlefield faster than Zen monks who dedicate their life to it in monasteries. Amid the symphony of the quiet seas, Ahab's armor lowers for a time and experiences a bonding with the natural world around him. Ahab then peers into the eyes of his first mate, Starbuck, and experiences a revelation. "Close! stand close to me, Starbuck; let me look into a human eye; it is better than to gaze into sea or sky; better than to gaze upon God. By the green land; by the bright hearthstone! this is the magic glass, man; I see my wife and my child in thine eye." Ahab is able to experience a validation of his tortured humanity in the gaze of his companion Starbuck and is able to see the faces of all his loved ones there. For a time Ahab is able to rest from his fate, nearly freed by this brief universal vision, but then turns away from it, driven by his demons.

Man's place in nature comprises a large part of the text, whether contemplatively through Ishmael or menacingly through Ahab. Most importantly is Melville's attempt to ground man back in nature. Many passages that would commonly be filled with feminine nature imagery are substituted with the masculine. Our culture since Descartes has created a firm dichotomy with male/mind and female/body, which has been a disservice to both sexes. Seeing it as a disservice to only females is part of the soporific narrative of postmodern academe and requires deeper insight. Unlike others, who see Melville's attempt to masculinize nature as a product of his sexual anxieties and ambivalence, I see Melville as trying to give man a place back in nature, to see nature not just as a Mother Goddess, but more like Shiva, both male and female at the same time. Melville turned to Hinduism and it's paradoxes instead of Christianity and it's rigid categories. Moby Dick the whale is a hermaphrodite, supreme symbol of Melville's conception of nature. With his grasp of Eros, poetic Melville is able to grasp paradox more than scholars who emphasize sex. Melville's revival of the polymorphous perverse human body from it's puritanical shackling involves man understanding his place in nature, the great matrix from which he springs and falls.

Lastly, I think it is important to touch on those characters that aren't large players in the books greater drama. Melville is able to capture a legion of smaller characters in moments of glory, giving time to the normally unheralded men of the whaling ship. They are much like the unheralded

men of any society, those who do the dirty work that keeps the infrastructure of society running. The whale men, risking their lives to bring back the valuable whale oil to their homes, are the everymen of their day, not spoken of, but necessary for the very comfortable lives that we academics are leading while we sit in a conference about literature! Hence Melville shines a poetic light on the workers. "But this august dignity I treat of, is not the dignity of kings and robes, but that abounding dignity that has no robed investiture. Thou shalt see it in the arm that wields a pick or drives a spike; that democratic dignity which, on all hands, radiates without end from God; Himself!" The very fabric of democracy is in the loom of the common man.

This might be hard for us to swallow here, that the everyday man, that vile patriarch who upsets the fancies of academia this day, is shown in a noble light by Melville, a writer and poet, who himself traveled the seas as a whaler:

> If then to meanest mariners, and renegades and castaways, I shall hereafter ascribe high qualities, though dark weave round them tragic graces; if even the most mournful, perchance the most abased, among them all, shall at times lift himself to the exalted mounts; if I shall touch that workman's arm with some ethereal light; if I shall spread a rainbow over his disastrous set of sun; then against all mortal critics bear me out in it, thou just Spirit of Equality, which has spread out one royal mantle of humanity over all my kind!

Even in the late 1800's Melville felt the need to defend the everyman from the disgust of those who could not see the importance of their work. For the sins of those few men who have enough power to rightfully be called patriarchs, these men have suffered the consequences; have faced the resentment of the ill informed. However, these are the men that we need to be heard now so that the young men who will one day take their place feel welcome in this world. Writers like Melville, in Orphic contemplation, are the ones who can attempt to make their experiences understood to us.

K.C. Glover is the Assistant Editor of *New Male Studies: An International Journal*. He is also a social worker located in Brooklyn, New York. He can be reached at kglover@aimhs.com.au.